**The Week of Four Thursdays**

by **madmaenad**

### Summary

Humans don't have dynamics. Level D vampires only present as Betas. Vampires mature around age 50. Only one of these things applies to Kiryuu Zero. Now Yuuki, Kaname and Zero will have to learn to live with the aftermath

(A/B/O AU. In nature, the most dangerous animal is a mother with her young. Never forget that a vampire is a predatory animal at its core. Kaname/Zero/Yuuki, KZ, Omega!Zero)

Updates on a roughly monthly schedule but I am A Mess so we'll see

### Notes


Anime only compliant, plus borrowings from manga canon.

Warnings for: weird vampire genitals (born female alphas and male omegas have both sets), people who identify as male but have a uterus and indeterminate genitals getting pregnant, body horror/dysphoria/disassociation (I'm not joking okay), explicit sex of all combinations and flavors (probably poorly written and unrealistic, let's be honest), excessive bodily fluids (specifically: so much semen), Kaname’s lack of shame and morals, Kaname’s questionable kinks, bloodplay (vampires ya know?), unhealthy mind-body relationships,
attempted non-con not by a main character (it's an A/B/O fic okay), and significantly less
dubcon than standard A/B/O universe (real biology is weird but the usual trope is not an
evolutionary sound strategy so I messed with it)

"The week of four Thursdays" is a French idiom expressing an event that is impossible or
unlikely to occur; it is equivalent to the English "when pigs fly" or "once in a blue moon."
It takes weeks to clear away the rubble littering Cross Academy after the Rido Incident.

(Yuuki is gone. Zero feels like he needs to be scraped off the ground and carted away too. He wouldn't mind. His heart's been scooped out neatly with a spoon; knock on his ribcage and you'll hear a hollow ringing echo back.

This feeling never leaves him; he just learns to work around it like an old wound).

Eventually, once the chaos at the Association is sorted out, newly-minted Association President Cross sends him down to the research division for a full battery of tests. They need to know, he explains with concerned, yet kind eyes, just what has changed in his body now that he's completed his powers as a Hunter (murdered his twin brother).

So he submits to all the poking, prodding, MRI scans, skin samples, blood samples, spinal fluid samples - he's out of fluids to sample by the time the people in lab coats are through with him.

When he returns two weeks later to hear their results, the head researcher pulls him away to speak in private after they're through, then hands him one last folder to look at as she explains his condition.

Infertility. His body is unable to produce a single live sperm cell. They think, she explains to him with pity in her eyes, it's because he was turned so young, before his body and his reproductive system had time to mature, and after the 'disruption' things just didn't work the way they ought to. She expresses her condolences, and leaves.

It shouldn't matter. It should not matter.

But it does. It feels like he's losing his family all over again - like mother and father and Ichiru are cut open and bleeding out in front of him, and he's bleeding out with them.

He's always know he would never have a family of his own. He's a vampire; any children he fathered would be born vampires, and that is a fate he will never willingly inflict on another human being as long as he lives.

(Not that he lets himself contemplate exactly how many hundreds of years that may be, or compare how much shorter the lives of his remaining loved ones are.)

Not that he needed to think about children anyway. Zero was a vampire, and he would never be allowed to have access to a child as a single parent, even if Cross and Yagari supported him.

And thinking about a partner - it was useless. No hunter would even look twice at him; a sexual relationship with a vampire is the deepest taboo, even if he was born with the blood of a hunter the same as them, as ancient as any could claim, refined and tested for millennia through the Hunt.

Being with a human? No. Their lives are too different for understanding and connection. Zero does not want an empty relationship, or to raise a child in a place like that. And a human's life would be far shorter than his, a breath, while he stood unchanged in Time's flow. If he really loved his partner, Zero knows such a loss would destroy him.

And having a vampire as a partner - Zero cuts off that thought before it can finish (Yuuki was the only one he could ever love).
It really was best that Yuuki left him, wasn't it? Zero had nothing to offer her in the first place, except suffering as she watched him struggle against Level E and die millimeter by millimeter. Kaname could give her love, position, safety, wealth, acclaim, immortal companionship and joy - and now this was just one more thing the pureblood could offer her, and Zero could not.

It's not like someone whose inaction had killed his family, brought everyone who cared for him trouble, and hurt the one person he loved deserved anything else.

-Lilac eyes look down on him with hatred, accusations spilling from familiar lips, and a venomous final barb,

'It's your fault, brother... ...Tell me, did I taste good?'

- And Zero Kiryuu jerks awake, the scream on his lips suppressed through decades of practice in getting thrown out of apartments for disturbing the neighbors.

It's three-thirty AM, an hour and a half before he has to wake.

Zero doesn't really need an alarm; he hasn't slept through the night in over thirty years. He gets his rest in scattered snatches, three and four hour patches in between nightmares where all of his ghosts come out to remind him who and what he is. If he gets five hours of sleep he's being indulgent, and the following night will exact a price for being so weak. He wouldn't sleep in even if he could; that kind of peaceful, undisturbed rest doesn't suit a damned soul. Zero gets just enough rest that his Hunts' proficiency doesn't suffer, and no more.

This is his second nightmare of the evening; he won't be able to sleep again without wearing himself out first. So Zero gets up, lets himself out of his apartment, and goes for a run.

He doesn't need to change. Zero sleeps in his exercise clothing. It's more efficient than changing when he sweats through whatever he wears to bed, and they're suitable for more than one function. Pajamas are unnecessary; he owns exactly one pair to keep up appearances when sleeping at Cross' house or Kaito's apartment.

The neighborhood Zero lives in is caught in a downward spiral of the urban development lifecycle. It's bones speak of a once-wealthy residential district, now left to sag as it edges toward dismal neglect, the lonely trees with drooping crowns, dying or overgrown, the brown brickwork gathering stains, the concrete curbs crumbling at the edges without the city's money to repair them.

It's not a dump, and you couldn't call it the bad part of town, but anyone with money is starting to move if they can afford it, and the people left over are those who can't leave or don't have anywhere else to go.

Zero is both.

He needs to live close to his base at the Hunter's Association Central Headquarters for work, but in a town of Vampire Hunters, all the businesses and all of the residents could tell what was living next door to their children. It had been implied, when he inquired at closer complexes, that it would be best if he found accommodations elsewhere. Zero didn't hold a grudge. Trying to sleep when your Hunter Senses pinpointed a vampire nearby was like trying to ignore someone trailing a razor blade down your skin.

Eventually he found his current dismal lodgings in the next town over, with a human landlord. It
means he has an hour long commute every morning and evening, but it was cheap and Zero saw no reason to spare himself inconvenience unless it affected his work.

Zero alternates between jogging and short walking breaks until the eastern sky has the faintest hint of light to his vampire sight. To a human it would still be pitch black, but Zero needs very little light anymore. The thought is still tinged bitter, even after nearly fifty years of living as a beast in human form.

Tonight was only the second worst kind of nightmare - things that had already happened, rather than mistakes and betrayals - people - he might still fail, or dreams of how he could have failed them even more than he actually had in their past.

This means he only has to run until his feet ache, rather than needing to run until he's dizzy and nauseous, and he heads back to his apartment.

Master Yagari calls it his closet, which makes Zero laugh because it doesn't actually have a closet. He never laughs for long, because Master will glare at him with worry underneath and it makes him feel guilty.

It's a single room, no kitchen, with a tiny cubicle of a bathroom. The floors are a yellow-brown linoleum, and the walls a dirty white color. The less he asks about the stains on either surface, the better, but his vampire nose tells him in great detail whether Zero wants to know or not. The whole complex smells faintly of decay, age, sunk in human smells from the threadbare hallway carpets, and smoke from a small fire about a decade ago.

Zero strips out of his clothing and steps inside to wash off the sweat. The shower - no bathtub - is a tiny square of tile beneath a shower head that's barely large enough to turn around in without hitting your elbows. The water temperature never goes above tepid. It's fine - Zero doesn't need it.

Cool autumn winds have left him chilled, so Zero gives himself an extra two minutes besides his usual five. The heating in his apartment hasn't worked since he'd moved into the complex, and the room is cold. It's not a problem; the Hunter just spends more time at the Headquarters in the winter.

All of the furniture wedged in the room - a narrow single bed with a saggy mattress, a plywood shelf unit with his personal belongings, a battered wooden table, and a plastic chair - has seen better days. None of it matches, and none of it was bought new.

Zero crosses to the shelves, wiping his face with his single towel, and takes his clothes for the day to dress. Most of the space is occupied by his Hunting gear - spotless, rigorously maintained, and top quality. The rest is paperwork, the two weeks' worth of clothes he owns and his spare blanket. The only personal items in the room are framed photographs, carefully hung, dust-free and well looked after.

Once he's dressed, Zero makes the bed with military precision, pulling up sheets which might have once been blue, but were now faded grey. They're poor quality, and scratchy with age. To sensitive vampire senses, it's like sleeping on a burlap sack. Zero doesn't bother using fabric softener when he washes them once a month.

Then breakfast - cereal, the bland, whole-grain fiber kind that even health nuts couldn't pretend was appetizing, no milk, and exactly fourteen almonds. There's no refrigerator to keep milk in anyway. He owns a rice maker and a microwave, which is enough to make the balanced meals of brown rice, red beans, and steamed vegetables that he prepares for every other meal he eats, tucked into food containers he packs into his gear bag. Zero eats exactly how many calories are necessary
to maintain his body in top shape, and not a single one more. His body is the most important tool in his Hunting arsenal after all; it can't be neglected. This often leaves him finishing a meal with an edge of hunger, not quite reaching satiety, but it makes no difference to him.

(Zero allowed himself to cook exactly four times a year - on Christmas, and for Yagari, Cross, and Kaito's birthdays. He always makes sure he's on a long-term Hunt during his own)

Arming himself for the day is a little ritual of its own, a few moments when Zero reflects on his purpose and leaves him with clarity and focus, ready to begin the day.

First the chestpiece of light body armor, custom fitted to each individual Hunter. It wouldn't hold against a born vampire, but a Level D would need a few blows to do serious damage.

Then the weapons holsters, fastening around waist, thigh, ankle and forearm, snugged and tested to hold however Zero moved.

Now came the most reverent part. A dozen small daggers, perfect for throwing or for sinking into a weak spot. Then the Bloody Rose, ever faithful companion, most beloved. And last, against his thigh, his newest armament. Zero curls his hand around it a moment longer.

Winter, the recently rebuilt Cross Academy, Chairman's office. The fire flickers in the grate. Nothing is warm. Cross extends a hand toward him, holding Artemis' familiar handle.

"They were meant to be wielded as a pair."

Overtop all of that, the long pale overcoat, pockets filled with the rest of his kit - ammunition, basic medical supplies, a flashlight, and other necessities.

Then slinging his bag over his shoulder, Zero locks his door and makes his way downstairs to the well-worn but still serviceable motorcycle parked downstairs to make his morning drive.

His vampire does not like being out at this time of day; his whole body urges him it's time to sleep, the same way wakefulness comes easily to him in the night. The golden morning sunlight makes his skin prickle with discomfort; he's become more sensitive to the sun the older he gets, just like a real vampire. Zero ignores all of this with the ease of long practice as he strides into Headquarters.

Hunters may keep the late hours of their prey, but they're still human, and most of the staff still works daylight hours, which means there are plenty of people in the building who turn and watch him walk by as he passes through the halls.

Cross and Yagari have forcibly "retired" the filth left by the old president who saw Hunting as nothing more than sport, and anyone who would attack or demean him openly is gone, but no matter how many years pass the uneasiness bred in a Hunter's bones never goes away, and the eyes never stop following him, a constant reminder that Zero's nature makes him an outsider. A few of the old timers still glare silently. To the youngest ones he is a permanent fixture, allowed to pass into their world but not quite trusted or included.

The meeting he's attending this morning is a routine informational check in, so Cross and Yagari can get status reports on active missions, announce upcoming large-scale assignments and everyone can stay on the same page.

As always, Zero arrives early and stakes out an empty corner of the meeting room to stand in. Other hunters come in after him and gather together in knots or circle around the room exchanging greetings and news. There's a bubble of space around Zero's corner that nobody ever breeches, like
an invisible barrier no one can cross. Zero has acquaintances and other Hunters he's friendly with, of course, and they call out greetings or come by to say hello, but no one ever steps into his circle or comes close enough to touch him, crossing that last bit of space into intimacy.

Zero prefers it this way. It's better for all parties if they don't get involved with him.

The meeting starts exactly on time as his Master and the Chairman file through the door and take their places on the podium at the head of the room.

Master Yagari looks old. There's no way around it. Anxiety weighs heavily on Zero's shoulders every time the revelation hits him anew. Fortunate vampire genes leave all elderly Hunters well-preserved for their age, and Yagari has many good years in him yet. But there's more grey than dark hair on his head, and Zero's Master favors his left leg just slightly, the mark of an old injury.

Yagari has remained an active Hunter well into his sixties, who still insists on being given missions and keeps up with the younger hunters as though he was their age. Yagari's field retirement isn't far off though. As loathe as his Master is to admit it, he doesn't bounce back as quickly as he did twenty - or even ten - years ago.

Zero secretly follows his Master every time the man goes out, shadowing him from just beyond the range of his (but not Zero's) senses, so he can watch over the man who is a cherished guardian and an important person to him. He suspects Yagari knows what he's doing, but tolerates it for Zero's sake and peace of mind. Besides, Master did the same to Zero for every mission he went on, solo or not, until his parents were killed.

Cross, of course, looks no different than he had the first night he'd taken Zero into his home, except perhaps a few new lines around the eyes, or his sandy brown hair growing a touch longer.

Zero is called on halfway to report on his current assignment, investigating a smuggling ring trafficking Level-D Feeders and searching for the Pureblood supplier.

Cross hadn't wanted to give him this mission; Zero could tell from the worried glances Cross gave him as he'd handed the folder over. Perhaps he'd thought Zero would empathize with the defeated, hopeless faces of other Level Ds turned just for their blood and treated like property, sold to other vampires who wanted a reliable meal source and maybe a little "extra" their bodies could offer.

The pureblood would never be arrested. No vampire ever would be brought to justice for anything that happened to a Level D with the consent of their Master. From the legal perspective of the Vampire Senate, the pureblood owned those turned humans and could dispose of them however they saw fit. The most Zero could do was find the human collaborators collecting the sacrifices and exterminate any Level Es he found as a warning.

So far he's found promising leads, but he'll have to travel to northern Europe to investigate the source.

Yagari doesn't immediately dismiss the Hunters when they've all reported in, which brings a stir of speculative chatter among the crowd since there must be an announcement forthcoming.

"Quiet, quiet," Cross flails his arms dramatically to gain their silence (but not as embarrassing as the way he did when he wore his Chairman persona; Cross lets his Hunter out whenever he's inside Headquarters).

"As some of you may have heard, the young Ichijo heir has presented as an Omega. Two months from now is his formal Presentation Ceremony. If his courtship is successful, ten months after that
he'll hold a Rite of Bonding. This is the biggest event in vampire society since the Kuran wedding. We Hunters will be present to uphold our mutual treaty and most importantly, maintain our good relations with the vampires."

Yagari stepped up and continued in a drawl, "It will be all hands on deck, every spare Hunter we have assigned to keep an eye on the vampires, safeguard the peace and represent our strength. Don't do anything stupid and make us look like idiots. We'll update you with your specific assignment when we know. Dismissed."

As the Hunters file out of the room, dispersing to care for their assigned duties, someone too short to be seen over their heads is fighting against the flow, and heading straight toward him.

"Dr. Sawamura," Zero greets politely, as if that will make up for the weeks of avoidance and the inconvenience of dragging the doctor out of the medical center to seek him out personally.

The doctor is not dissuaded, and glares up at him, pushing her spectacles up her nose and dryly responding, "Kiryuu-kun. You've missed the appointment for your annual physical."

"My apologies Dr. Sawamura, I'm sure I'll make -"

"Three. Times." The elderly white-haired woman pokes him in the chest to punctuate her point.

Dr. Sawamura has ruled the medical staff with an iron fist as long as he's been alive, whether her position was official or not. Even with a pack of recalcitrant, stubborn Hunters as patients, not even Master Yagari dares to defy her.

She has also been his personal physician since he was a high-risk pregnancy in his mother's belly.

"How am I meant to look after your well-being if you won't come see me?" she scolds, then glares again.

"I've arranged for an appointment at this time. You have no missions assigned to you for the next two days. You will attend," she orders, and then frog marches him back to her domain.

Three hours later, Zero wobbles out of the medical wing dizzy, lightheaded, with shaking hands, and with his fangs aching something fierce.

Doctor Sawamura is supporting him with a hand under his elbow; Zero is embarrassed by the thought that the tiny old woman weighs two-thirds what he does and isn't breaking a sweat.

"The cell cultures will be complete in two to three weeks. If we find anything we'll call and let you know. I'm ashamed to admit that even if we did find something, we have so little data on your situation it wouldn't help. We can track any systemic changes but we don't know what they mean in practical terms. I don't mean to alarm you. Your body seems to be settling into adulthood nicely, from what I can put together."

She fixes him with a concerned gaze. "You called someone to help you home before we started, yes?"

"Yes," Zero lies. No need to bother anybody; Zero would just hide in the archives and wait it off until he could leave.

Doctor Sawamura shoots him a significant glance that tells him he isn't fooling anybody, then remarks casually, "I think I see them now."
It's Kaito, somehow, and Zero darts a suspicious look at the doctor who is still keeping him upright and bearing most of his weight.

"Heard you needed a ride, you babyfaced teenage ass" Kaito calls out mockingly.

"Do you kiss your wife with that mouth, old man?" Zero jeers back at him.

"The divine Misao knew what she was getting into when she married me. Not allowed to curse in front of the kiddies either. Gotta get my fun in where I can." Kaito rocks back on his heels, strokes his short beard and raises his eyebrows suggestively.

Dr. Sawamura none-too-gently clears her throat, and Kaito jumps to take Zero's sagging form from her, looping his pale arm over strong shoulders.

"Thanks doc!" his sempai calls over his shoulder as he drags Zero away like a vampire's nipping at his heels.

Zero shoots a pleading look backwards; Dr. Sawamura only sighs and calls out, "Don't drop him Takamiya," just as they turn a corner.

Once they are safely out of earshot, Kaito's brisk pace slows down. "Whew, escaped the dragon lady in one piece, did you?"

Zero frowns. "Dr. Sawamura doesn't like you, Kaito, she's not like that with everybody."

Kaito manages to look disbelieving.

They continue in silence for a few moments before Kaito looks at him sideways, seemingly makes up his mind and demands, "Why didn't you call me?"

Zero cringes internally. Trust Kaito to be so blunt.

"We're both adults now, and you have responsibilities as a team leader, a husband and a father. You don't need to be spending time taking care of me anymore, sempai or not."

"You do know that I take care of you because you're my friend and my fellow student and you're important to me, right? You're not a bother. Hell, you never ask for anything. Dunno if I should be insulted or not. Really. Shows a real lack of faith in my skills."

Zero raises an eyebrow. "What skills?"

Kaito ruffles his hair in revenge, and just like that the serious air is gone. Kaito starts rambling about some sports team and how his kids are even more terrible than they'd been at that age, the noise making a comfortable background sound against his tired mind.

It takes Zero a few minutes to realize Kaito's quiet again and is studying him, dangerously observant, offering a glimpse of the brilliant Hunter who will one day take up Master Yagari's position.

His friend licks his lips nervously before looking him in the eyes and quickly asking, "Do you need 'that'? You look a little peaky."

There was only one topic that Kaito wouldn't tackle head-on when it came to Zero - the 'needs' that came with leading a parasite's cursed existence consuming the lives of others.

Zero is proud to say that not a single drop of blood has passed his lips since Ichiru's, all those
decades ago. He subsists on blood tablets. His hungers are under control.

"No. I'm fine," Zero replies, and Kaito is kind enough to let the topic drop.

(Each pill is a struggle. Zero spent his formative years as a vampire denying his thirst so thoroughly, with such indomitable will, that his sense of hunger is permanently warped. He can't even recognize anything other than starvation; the sensation of normal hunger doesn't even register.

Then, when the need grows to a height where any normal vampire would have long yielded in desperation, torn open some human's throat and gorged on red heat, he pushes the ache a little further, always, because giving in without a battle means he's losing himself.

If he takes it when his hands shake and his muscles spasm and his body sweats and his throat burns in agony and his belly gurgles and he can't breathe because something is crushing his lungs-

- then he doesn't have to feel guilty. Then he's taking it not for Zero, but to keep everyone else safe from himself.

It's not bad at all, really. Zero has known the voracious, desperate, rabid thirst of the fall to Level E. The lesser hungers of a stable D-rank are nothing but sweet whims by comparison.)
Okay guys, we're getting into the the last of the setup before the plot really begins. Remember that I've messed with the usual mechanics of A/B/O a lot, so keep that in mind as you read.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The December moon hung low and full-bellied in the crisp night air, shockingly bright yellow-gold and large, veiled by bands of fog that gave it a striated halo.

Perfect hunting conditions.

Or they would be, if Zero wasn't stuck playing assigned Hunter monitor for a party full of bloodsucking beasts.

He's along the Northwestern Coast of North America, hunting a strange Level E the locals have given the moniker "Bigfoot". Unlike most Level Es, who stayed close to places where prey was plentiful like towns and cities, this one had escaped into the wilds of the Pacific Northwest, killing the occasional hiker or stranded motorist, then fleeing to a new hunting ground as far away as possible. He was wide-ranging and damned difficult to track through hundreds of miles of old growth forest and rocky terrain.

Zero had been called in because of the terrain and distance involved. To find Bigfoot, the locals required multiple search teams with dogs, while Zero possessed a vampire's sense of smell and was easily skilled enough to exterminate it with little fuss. If he did it, the Hunt was a one-man job.

He'd been in the field for nearly two weeks, crisscrossing back and forth over old faded scent trails, drawing closer and closer, tightening the noose, ever so slowly slipping the trap closed.

Alone, constantly tracking and alert, his conjoined Hunter's instincts and vampire's prey drive left him sliding into a trancelike state. Zero was like a racehorse wearing blinders or a scent hound locked on a trail. Only what was before him existed; all was the Hunt, all there had ever been was the Hunt. Every day the Hunt lengthened his focus sharpened and the savor of the Hunt deepened. He ate everything he could get his hands on and slept whenever he felt like it, deep quick catnaps. He found his movements growing more limber, his body sensitized to every air current and brush of leaves. The thought of being forced from the trail made him frantic.

Then six hours ago Zero had gotten a call from dispatch, asking him to fill in for a monitor at this wretched ball held in what had to be the most ostentatious mega-mansion on the west coast. He hadn't even had time to change. He would stink of days without bathing if not for the scent masking charms he's liberally applied to himself and his equipment, meant to allow a Hunter stealth by fooling a vampire target's nose.

Maybe, Zero could admit to himself, it was time to come back to civilization. A Hunter was not meant to fall into whatever delirium had taken hold of him. A hunt was ancestral duty, not sport to be enjoyed.
He still feels...strange.

Not bad, but not himself either.

Restless, unsettled. He's running hot - hadn't even noticed the winter cold - but his skin is dry. He keeps stretching his muscles like he's trying to soothe an ache, exaggeratedly arching his back while bracing himself against furniture and walls. He wants to bite something - not bite, with his fangs - but tear with his blunt human teeth, clamp his jaw down and toss his head, worrying at the flesh.

The lead Hunter had taken one look at him padding back and forth, loose-limbed, like a tiger in a circus cage, and sent him for perimeter duty.

Zero was grateful. Never the most social person, this evening's crowds leave him feeling claustrophobic and trapped, excessively suspicious of everyone.

But that wasn't the worst.

Zero's no stranger to being driven by unspeakable, monstrous urges. This particular urge is new.

He wants to grab the nearest warm, breathing, squirming, luscious, alluring body -

- and murder it.

Brutally.

With his hands.

Zero wants to feel arterial spray mist his cheek, watch the spill of grey intestine from gut slit screaming people, coat his hands in gore as he rips chunks of flesh off a body and feel the blood clot under his fingernails - he shudders and pushes the horrid urges away, feeling like he needs to vomit.

No, he still needs to throw up, nausea roiling his stomach in waves.

On his rounds earlier, Zero marked the most out of the way, vacant toilet on his mental map of the venue, and he barely makes it there in time to crumple over a marble sink and heave his guts.

Ugh, guts, and that reminder brings almost painful spasms in his stomach; Zero gags until he brings up nothing but a watery bile.

His reflection looks foul in the gilded mirror - pasty, dull-eyed and bedraggled. He feels disgusting. His belly feels like he's being repeatedly stabbed. The smell of his own sick is making him feel sicker.

Zero splashes some water on his face and washes out his mouth, then removes his scent masking charms and reapplys them for good measure. He can't imagine the odiferous mingling smells sticking to his skin right now and tries not to breathe.

Studying his watch, Zero returns to his post and checks in periodically until early morning, around four AM. The party's winding down, the guests are leaving, dawn is in three hours, and the lead hunter calls the monitors in to report and wrap up the night's work.

Zero is grateful to be summoned first and swiftly dismissed; he thanks the man for his leadership and his consideration of Zero's unfinished mission, accepts the offered gratitude for substituting on
short notice and walks out to retrieve his loaned car.

There's some kind of stir among the vampires as he slips out from the main ballroom through a servant's entrance, but even Zero's sense of duty and disregard for his own comfort aren't enough to make him pause for more than a few moments.

He extends his senses; their auras are nonthreatening. There's no energy signifying a noble's use of power. No one is emitting any bloodlust. They're shouting - something about an Omega - and gesticulating wildly; there's sudden excitement and surprise in their expressions. Zero concludes his assessment: no danger, just bloodsuckers making a fuss over some social faux pas. He leaves.

That night, Zero doesn't sleep. He doesn't sleep again until the full moon is waning once more and the vampire dubbed Bigfoot is ash scattered among the fallen leaves of the forest floor, his grave marker a skeletal yew tree.

The next week, as though making up for the manic frenzy of the last, Zero spends the whole thing in bed, tired, aching and still snappish.

He marks it down as some kind of vampire illness and returns to Headquarters on the next flight back.

He ought to have known better. No known diseases sicken a vampire, except one.

Interlude: A Party with the Royals

Kuran Kaname leans with relaxed elegance against the balustrade of a concealed balcony overlooking the grand ballroom, sipping a glass of pale yellow champagne and observing the mass of well-dressed people below him.

Once the glass is empty, Kaname takes a last long, searching gaze from one edge of the enormous, high-ceilinged room to the other, then pivots and enters the door behind him.

"How does it look, Kaname?" Ichijo Takuma calls out, standing in the center of the boudoir with a seamstress kneeling by his feet making last minute adjustments to a loose hem.

"About as we expected," the pureblood replied after consideration, easing himself down next to Yuuki on the plush cushion of a loveseat and placing the empty flute on the small side table.

It's just the four of them; the rest of Kaname's inner circle have been on the ballroom floor since the first alpha arrived, mingling, watching carefully and ready to report every detail to Kaname and Takuma afterwards. Seiren is guarding the hallway outside; her assignment tonight is to shadow Takuma everywhere he goes.

"Most of the alphas here are either monarchists and allied families we've asked to attend, or senate supporters who would love to bring the Ichijo fortune and influence into their camp and wrest you away from my circle."

"They can think again," muttered Takuma. "This isn't a marriage. An alpha has no legal control over an omega's assets, and if they think of using me, my friends, or my children for their own gain I'll kill them first," he said fiercely, the protective instincts of his new dynamic surfacing for a moment.

Takuma's characteristic cheerfulness and optimism have strained lately under the mountain of worries and obstacles his presentation as an omega have caused.
"I'd offer to help hide the body, Takuma, but it doesn't sound like there will be enough left to hide," Kaname says with a sly curl of his lips, and is rewarded when Takuma cracks a grin and Yuuki's tinkling laughter sounds beside him.

The relaxed mood doesn't last long.

"Have you seen Shirabuki yet?"

"Yes, drawing admirers like flies to honey and charming every gullible soul who falls into her web. She's holding court in the near right corner below the terrace. Yuuki or I will be beside you all night, and we won't allow her to be alone with you."

Kaname's true test tonight would be handling Takuma's most dangerous suitor, Shirabuki Sara. As a pureblood, she was the highest ranking alpha to seek his hand, but her murky reputation, questionable intentions and unsettling fascination with Takuma disturbed him. Kaname did not have a good plan for dealing with her yet; her rank prevented the other pureblood from simply ordering her away, and he had nothing to blackmail or bribe her with - yet - to convince her it was in her best interests to seek another omega.

Takuma hesitated, another question on his tongue.

"And them? Are they here?"

Kaname exchanged glances with Yuuki and reluctantly told the truth.

"They are."

His friend's hands clenched beneath his sleeves, though his face remained placid. Takuma's parents were a forbidden topic to everyone who knew him, leaving him to his manipulative politician grandfather to raise while largely pursuing their own careers and fame. To have them show up at their son's Presentation to claim credit for such a fine omega and be praised and cultivated by those trying to mate him was a slap in the face. Takuma was a good man in spite of his family, not because of them.

Yuuki, who couldn't watch anyone's distress without trying to help even if it meant ignoring social convention, one of the things Kaname loved about her, rose and enveloped Takuma in a hug; his body relaxed a little.

"I'm sorry," she said, but didn't let go, "you're probably not supposed to smell like an alpha right now."

"It's fine, you haven't requested an invitation to my Presentation and we went to school together. Your scent might even protect me a little if it reminds them I know a pureblood who will get very angry if they don't behave properly."

Takuma is even smiling mischievously; his precious Yuuki really is a wonder, Kaname thinks as his wife returns to his side.

"Ichijo-sama, the repairs are complete," says the seamstress, collecting her supplies, bowing, and leaving the room.

The Kuran siblings rise and go to their friend, each taking one of his hands in theirs.

"You look perfect, Takuma."
Kaname’s compliment is entirely sincere and well deserved. Takuma wears the traditional Presentation robes of an omega: a strapless tunic-like undergarment that laced closed in the back, clung to his torso and fell to his ankles, loose trousers underneath that, and overtop the outfit an off-the-shoulder, floor length, cross-collared robe with loose sleeves reaching to his wrists, closed with a wide sash wrapped several times around his waist and tucked in on itself.

Takuma had chosen a cerulean blue robe embroidered with cranes on the bodice and swans at the hem, traditionally cut to leave his neck, shoulders and collarbone bare, the inviting display of an unmated omega. His snowy sash had whitework in the shape of clouds; threaded through the sash was a latticed milky jade disk.

Completing the picture was a statement necklace drawing the eye to his throat. Irregular clusters of small blue topaz stones were set in a gold band, and in the center a teardrop shaped star sapphire dripping smaller sapphires dipped into the hollow of his clavicle.

The final ornament marks Takuma an an omega, one of the rare few with the right to wear it: the Hoseki, a forehead pendant suspended from a length of chain along the hairline which was hidden and clipped in the hair. The first pureblood to bond an omega gifted their new mate such a jewel as a mating present, and thereafter it became custom that only an omega, and no vampire of any other dynamic, was permitted to wear one. The Hoseki symbolized the position an omega held in the vampire world: the jewels of the night, precious and valued for their fertility and rarity.

Over the last two months, Kaname has grown used to seeing Takuma wear his favored Hoseki - a single flawless emerald - when he appeared in public. This new Hoseki is larger, made of six small blue gems arranged like the petals of a blossom around a central diamond, and rests on a gold chain.

Poor Takuma learned quickly not to make sudden movements when wearing his new mark of status. It would fly sideways and go crooked, needing to be removed and redone. But now, Kaname notes with pride, he's mastered wearing one with dignity, as capable and determined as he’s always been, every turn of his head displaying the flowing, birdlike movements the Hoseki requires.

A polite knock sounds on the door.

"Showtime," Yuuki whispers, squeezing Takuma's hand one last time before letting go and heading to open the door.

Aido Nagamichi, head of the Aido group and Hanabusa's alpha father, enters and bows to each of the occupants.

"We're ready for you Ichijo-sama."

"Thank you again for hosting my Presentation, Aido-san."

"No, no, it's no trouble. Madoka would have left me if I hadn't, I think. She certainly wouldn't leave another omega to face this lot by themselves."

"Still, I appreciate both you and your wife's support," Takuma beamed at his friend's father.

Kaname leads his friend to the door, and the three of them, with Nagamichi in the lead and the Kurans flanking the omega, head out to do battle for Takuma's future.

Kaname decides a break from relentless sycophancy and transparent attempts to manipulate
Takuma's courtship through him is in order, and goes to find his sister. She's still on the upper landing with Takuma, gazing out at the lesser alphas beneath her and keeping a sharp eye on the omega.

"Even after all this time, you're still looking for him, aren't you Yuuki?"

His sister freezes, caught, and then her shoulders relax as she turns her body to face him, expression open and honest.

"I've never lied or tried to pretend I wasn't. Zero has always held half of my heart the same way you do, Kaname, even when I stood right beside him and didn't realize it."

Kaname reaches out to take her hand, bring it to his lips and softly kiss the wedding ring adorning the slim fingers.

"I know. I've come to accept it. As long as I can have any piece of your heart the way I always dreamed of, as long as I know you love me as I love you, and as long as you chose to stay with me, then I can accept anything."

That did not mean Kaname liked it, or that it didn't make his possessive nature - the nature of a pureblood - burn with desire to obtain the whole and trample the pathetic D in his way, the child's toy she was supposed to have outgrown.

Yuuki tries to change the subject.

"I keep hearing rumors about a ghost omega who comes to balls and disappears like Cinderella."

"I've heard them as well."

The appearance of an omega was a significant event; omegas were crucial to the survival of the vampire nation as a whole. While beta females produced two or three children at most in a lifetime, a single omega could birth five or six children in a single century. Omegas were the only way the vampire population could expand or replace losses from war and conflict. Their rarity only increased their value; only one in a thousand vampire births produced an omega, and only ever among vampires of noble rank. At present, there were fewer than one hundred twenty living omegas. By comparison, one in forty births presented as an alpha, and strong C Rank vampires had also been known to sometimes present as one. Any scrap of news about a new omega was important enough to keep repeating, even two weeks after the phenomenon. That the incident sounded like some mysterious romance novel just added fuel to the fire.

His sister spins around and rests her elbows on the railing, asking a cheeky "Do you think there's any truth there?"

Kaname nods. "An omega's scent is not something any vampire, especially an alpha, could misidentify. Over a hundred people verified it. I had my sources investigate the matter thoroughly, and one of Seiren's people confirmed it as well; the omega present was in season and somehow avoided leaving a scent trail entering or leaving the room. It's quite a puzzle, but something like that cannot be hidden indefinitely. Our mystery omega will surface again."

Over his sister's shoulder, Kaname catches a flash of wavy, long blond hair.

"By the way, did Shirabuki approach Takuma yet?"

Yuuki makes a face that was definitely too undignified for a pureblood, turning back around to face the crowds.
"It was like eating a bag of cotton candy after drinking a dozen milkshakes. I can see why you don't want her to be Takuma's alpha."

"Indeed," he wryly agreed.

The formal name for tonight's party was the Presentation to the Four Winds. After this evening, Takuma's formal courtship period would begin, until it ended ten months from now when he went in season and hopefully bonded with the single alpha to be chosen out of the hundreds here in this room. It was Takuma who would make all the decisions in the coming months, but tonight was for the alpha's choice. Many more alphas had requested a suitor's invitation than the number who would progress to joining the actual courtship. First it was Takuma's turn to display himself to the alphas as the prize of this competition. This was their opportunity to meet him, judge if he suited their criteria and if proceeding was worth the costs. An alpha undertaking a courtship risked losing face if they were badly rejected or refused in favor of a rival; tonight the alphas were also here to scope out the competition and consider their chances. Much dealmaking, bribery and blackmail would go on behind the scenes of this outwardly pleasant party, as allied families picked their best candidates, intimidated other suitors and jockeyed for position to make the best first impression.

An alpha who survived this unofficial winnowing process and decided to forge ahead and court Takuma anyway had to inform the omega of their intentions in person and make the request. Takuma was not allowed to refuse anyone yet, and would present the alpha with a length of red ribbon as a token of his acceptance. It had to be worn at their next formal courting event, as it symbolized the bond the alpha hoped to forge there and reminded the wearer of the cords used in a vampire wedding ceremony. Not every omega who bonded with an alpha also married them, but a dual bonding and wedding remained the desired romantic ideal.

The Kuran couple stands a moment in comfortable silence, soaking in the sights and ambiance of the night. This is a true vampire celebration, meaning that it resembles nothing so much as a flamboyant costume ball. When they gather in the sight of humans, vampires must dress to blend in. For their private revels, each vampire could dress however they liked, picking the clothing of their favorite time period and place or mixing many together, giving such balls a strange and interesting mix of styles that spanned continents and thousands of years. There are vampires in modern suits and eveningwear rubbing shoulders with people in traditional kimono, three thousand year old court gowns from northern Europe, hundred year old military dress uniforms, ancient caftans and saris whose patterns date from before the Collapse, and even some fantastical costumes meant to resemble mythological creatures and gods. The lighting is soft and low, perfect for vampire eyes. The musicians playing unobtrusively in the background cater to the tastes of both young and ancient vampires. Blood is openly consumed; a few vampires even feed from partners and ex-human servants as the Kurans watch. Gauche and risque, but permitted.

Kaname has seen such sights a thousand times, but he never tires of looking on Yuuki's cherished form. Like Kaname, she had chosen to dress unobtrusively and wore a simple modern evening gown in red satin with her long auburn hair in a twist. With adulthood, her body has matured and grown from a girl to a woman, stealing the last baby fat from her cheeks and rounding her hips and breasts instead. Yuuki carries the beauty of Kuran Juuri in her face and her zest for life in her heart, the most fitting tribute imaginable to the mother who left little else behind.

On her best behavior for tonight's party, she's trying to project the air of authority, elegance, and arrogance expected from a pureblood. Yuuki's heart had to change too; no longer could she be the human, carefree student Cross Yuuki, forced by her blood into the duties, expectations, and pressures of pureblood status.

"Onii-sama," Yuuki begins - a danger sign - she only calls him that anymore when she's being
formal or feeling insecure. "I know you don't want to involve me in whatever you're planning to help Takuma-kun. But if you need me, I'm here."

Kaname swallows his guilt. "I know. I have control of the situation, Yuuki, you must trust me."

"I do," said Yuuki. The look in her rosewood eyes was resigned and a little sad.

Aido's household steward suddenly interrupts the two purebloods, apologizing profusely for the intrusion. Kaname is more concerned by the air of restrained alarm in his demeanor. Then he feels the aura of another pureblood nearby - a fourth one - and discerns why the man is panicked.

"There were only three purebloods confirmed to attend the Presentation this evening. Who has arrived," Kaname demands, letting a hint of sharpness flavor his tone.

It snaps the steward back to sensibility. "I apologize, Kuran-sama. One of my subordinates just informed me that we received a last minute inquiry about attending Ichijo-sama's Presentation tonight. It was not a formal request with a desire to court Ichijo-sama, so it was accepted and not reported to me."

Kaname snaps, "Who is it?"

The steward wrings his hands. "Shouto Isaya-sama."

Kaname's mind whirls. Shouto Isaya has been in Sleep for the past fifty years after the death of his wife and child; there had been no rumors of his Awakening. He has never met Isaya in this life, though he knew a few Shoutos as Ancestor of the Kurans, and found them to be the better sort of pureblood. Isaya himself has a nearly spotless reputation: no senseless killings, no abuse of a pureblood's power to command, no appetite for draining humans. Rumor said the wife had died turning the child human, and Isaya's grief left him inconsolable when the child died of old age.

Kaname might be able to use this.

A new piece has entered the board; one that may be sympathetic to his thinking and his goals. No, it was to early for that. Kaname needs to judge the situation for himself, and he must get to Shouto before Shirabuki did.

"Where is he now?"

"Greeting the elder Aido-sama," nervously stammers the steward.

"Request that Shouto-san join me afterwards - politely. Not here. Somewhere more private."

Leaving Takuma in Yuuki's care, Kaname allows the steward to lead him to a small drawing room off the main party, and as he waits, he plans.

Isaya Shouto, Kaname was unsurprised to observe, looked much like his ancestors. Repeated sibling marriage meant a new pureblood generation more or less copied the last. Shaded ash blonde hair reached his shoulders and his clear grey gaze observed Kaname evenly. Kaname detected a hint of what might be apathy or listlessness in Shouto's eyes, common in very old purebloods who've lost interest in everyday life. The younger pureblood's manner is admirable; even after being pulled away from the party just after arriving, Shouto is calm and unruffled.

It interested him that the pureblood wore a neat contemporary suit, rather than something from his life before Sleep, and Kaname chewed over the implications for a few moments as the other alpha
joined him where he stood near the mantle.

Did he make the first move, or did he let Shouto play white in this game? Better to set the tone of this meeting himself, Kaname decided.

"Thank you for joining me Shouto-san; may I offer you a glass of bloodwine?"

"If you could," the other pureblood accepted in a measured tone.

They savored their drinks for a few moments. In the games purebloods played, being too hasty left the impression of desperation and gave away weakness. Kaname is content to let Shouto make the next move; he's still frustratingly ignorant of his opponent's capabilities.

"I have not seen you since you slept in a cradle, Kuran Kaname-san. It grieved me to learn of my friends' deaths while I Slept. They were both remarkable people, and I am glad to see they live on in their children. I am told that Juuri also had a daughter; I hope I will be able to meet your sister this evening."

"Is that why you attended tonight?" Kaname inquired casually.

"More or less. I have been Awake only a few days, learning what has happened in the past fifty years. It seemed an expedient way to announce my Awakening."

As he spoke, Shouto held his wineglass by the stem, examining the way the deep red liquid glowed in the firelight without interest.

"I have too much time and nothing to do. Seeing Haruka and Juuri's children is something that gives me purpose for a little while. Did you know this is the first thing I've eaten since I Woke?"

Offhandedly, Shouto mused, "I think I will return to Sleep soon."

Shouto looked up at Kaname with the same collected expression he's worn during the entire conversation.

"You need not worry, Kuran Kaname. Whatever plans you think I intend to disturb, be at ease. I am a spectator on the sidelines, I cause no ripples on the surface."

Kaname lets himself take another sip of wine to disguise the frantic working of his mind, trying to see all the angles, consider possibilities, calculate risks. Perhaps everything is as it seems and Isaya is only a pureblood without purpose - a pureblood. A plan begins to take shape, a solution to his most pressing problem. It hinges on whether Kaname has read Shouto correctly, and if he is as truthful as he seems.

Kaname thinks of the risks to people he cares for, and gambles.

"Then perhaps I could ask a favor?"

"You may."

Having laid his cards on the table, Shouto has retreated back to polite disinterest. He'll see if it lasts after what Kaname will ask for.

"Formally request to court Ichijo Takuma."

Shouto brings his head up too quickly to pretend detachment; his eyes have sharpened to steel.
"I would not do such a thing without reason, even for the son of Kuran Haruka."

Ah, excellent. Shouto thinks Kaname means to harm Takuma. Feeling more sure of his plan, Kaname quickly reassures him.

"I mean only to protect him. Shirabuki Sara is here this evening and wishes to become his alpha. I cannot allow this to occur. I have reason to believe she has tried to kidnap him at least once before, and he has never welcomed her interest. But because of her rank, he cannot simply reject her without insult. Having another pureblood as a suitor would offer him an excuse and protect him from any retribution. You would need to appear to court him until Shirabuki could be politely refused, and perhaps a little longer for propriety's sake before you requested an end to the courtship. The omega will be able to choose who he wants, with his reputation intact and without attracting the ire of a pureblood."

"Then why do you not court the omega yourself, Kuran-san?"

It was a rational question. All purebloods presented as alphas when they reached maturity. If Kaname needed to block Shirabuki, then he ought to have been able to do it himself.

His marriage to Yuuki presented no obstacle. Purebloods married one another to preserve their blood's purity, but as alphas still desired a bond with an omega. And all rules bent when they met the desires of a pureblood. As one who possessed the purest vampire lineage, Kaname could both marry his sister and form a Trinity with a bonded omega if he pleased.

"Takuma and I were raised in the same house as children. Though he and I are close, I think of him platonically and my alpha instinct wishes only to protect him. I cannot even pretend interest in lying with him and would be unable to complete the bond. Yuuki's alpha takes its cues from mine because of our bloodbond, so she is also not a candidate as an alpha."

There had been many times in the past months when Kaname regretted his inability to court Takuma. Everything would have worked out with little effort on his part. Such a shame. If any omega deserved the privileges of mating a pureblood, it was Takuma; he lacked for nothing in personality, skill and beauty.

"And you would trust me to do this according to your will, without benefit to myself?"

Kaname sidesteps the question of trust.

"Not without benefit, Shouto-san. You told me you desire something to do, a way to fill the span of your immortal life. Even for a few moments. I offer you that, and more. Have you ever pretended to court an omega as part of a plot against a fellow pureblood? I doubt it. This experience will be new, and unique, and you may never have the opportunity again."

Shouto was silent for a long moment, studying Kaname's face. Kaname was careful to keep his expression as open and honest as possible; he judged that a man who offered honesty as easily as Shouto would appreciate honesty returned.

"I see the difficulty of your situation," Shouto admitted.

"However, I cannot accept - "]

Kaname began to think how to salvage this; at the least he needed Shouto not to reveal to Shirabuki his intention to sabotage her courtship, otherwise it would be impossible to shield Takuma from danger.
"- without first gaining the consent of the omega, Ichijo-san."

Kaname had chosen more truly than he thought; Shouto was perfect for this role. A wave of relief nearly makes him sag, if not for his impeccable self-control. Worry for Takuma has taken more of a toll than he'd admit. Takuma is his closest, earliest companion, the only one other than Yuuki allowed to offer advice and critique. Kaname allows a little of his gratitude to infuse his habitually controlled expression.

"Then please, accompany me and ask him yourself."

Returning to the ballroom, the crowds part before the two purebloods and they pass effortlessly through. Kaname can see the crowd bunched in Shirabuki's corner marking her position, and just the ends of her long honey blonde hair. The sight, he finds, is easier to bear when he has a solution at hand.

Yuuki and Takuma are right where Kaname left them, on the raised terrace meant for important guests who didn't want to mingle with lesser vampires. The position allowed fewer people access to Takuma, so Kaname had insisted that he perch there and allow the alphas to come to him instead.

Now Kaname is the one bringing a strange alpha up the staircase to introduce. This meeting will be critical. Takuma trusts him, so Kaname is really only worried about Shouto backing out at the last minute. If Shouto thinks Takuma isn't willing, he will refuse and Kaname will face the same unresolved dilemma as before.

Kaname had let his pureblood aura free as they approached, hoping it would give the terrace's occupants time to prepare. It was well done. Yuuki hovered unobtrusively by the banister on the side closest to Kaname, offering no distraction from the artful presentation. Takuma had arranged all of his people so they stood in an arc facing the staircase, ready to receive their guest, with the omega himself displayed in the center like an expensive gift nestled in wrapping paper.

Shouto stared for a moment at the picture Takuma made in his ceremonial robes: petal pink lips, golden blonde hair and those rich summer green eyes. The tempting scent of an unmated omega wafted thickly through the air. Kaname fancied the pureblood looked a little stunned.

"Welcome, my Lord. I am omega Ichijo Takuma. I thank you for attending my Presentation."

The omega executed a perfect bow, his practiced mastery of etiquette unfailing, even when confronting an unexpected pureblood as a guest.

Takuma meets Kaname's eyes as he straightens, studying his friend's expression for clues. His pureblood leader would not personally bring anyone here unless he approved it first. If Shouto was dangerous, Kaname would have found a way to warn Takuma ahead of time. The pureblood gave his lieutenant a small nod, trying to convey silent guidance. He can say nothing, or Shouto could suspect Kaname of influencing Takuma's decision.

Shouto greeted Takuma with his normal collected poise, and nodded his head in return.

"I am glad to attend Ichijo-san. I regret that I seem to have disturbed your party by coming - I assure you it was not my intention. I am Shouto Isaya. My rank, I think, you have already gathered."

Takuma blushed and chuckled in embarrassment, then sobered and locked gazes with the pale-haired pureblood.
"Are you here to court me, Shouto-sama?"

"Do you wish to be courted?"

Takuma's green eyes widen in surprise, and he looks at Shouto like he's never seen anything like him before.

"That's the first time this evening anyone's asked me that question."

With softer eyes and a touch of his usual openness, Takuma smiles a little and replies.

"I would like it very much, Shouto-sama, if you asked to court me."

Shouto gives the tiniest smile in return and walks a few steps closer to Takuma. Taking the omega's hand, he recites the traditional formula used when declaring an alpha's desire to compete in the most ancient ritual known to their kind. Takuma's Hoseki sways as he demurely lowers his eyelashes and grants his acceptance.

A servant carrying a basket of red ribbons appears by Takuma's elbow, and the omega takes a single scarlet length from the pile. Takuma is meant to simply lay the ribbon in the courting alpha's palm and step back, but he doesn't. The blond locks eyes with Shouto, and his fingers brush the pureblood's palm as he frees his other hand to slowly wrap the silk ribbon around the alpha's wrist, their gazes meeting the whole time, and tie it closed.

"Please keep this token until we meet again, Shouto-sama."

"I shall," returned Shouto, his voice imbued with a low, fervent tone.

Kaname could have praised Takuma right then and there. Such a magnificent performance! Shouto is thoroughly snared and charmed by Takuma's ploy. They'll have his help when and how they want it, and Kaname doubts he'll protest, what with the way Takuma baited his protective instincts.

A plan well executed, Kaname praised himself as he took another glass of champagne from a passing waiter. In four or five months, once Shirabuki was dealt with, Shouto could gracefully leave the courtship, Takuma could chose an alpha he wanted, and that would be the end of it.

Everything is going exactly as planned, Kaname thought with satisfaction.

Chapter End Notes

Kaname, you are ten thousand years old, you should know better than to jinx yourself like that. Cranes and swans are both birds that mate for life; Takuma's inner romantic was showing a bit here. And no, Zero did not go into heat this chapter. Next chapter things get dark, so be prepared.
A/N: Timeskip. Unfortunately, we won't see the rest of Takuma's courtship except in stories and maybe flashbacks, but I assure you the whole thing played out like a shoujo manga. Takuma was delighted.

This chapter is where the story earns its body horror warning. If graphic description of bodily functions and heavy injuries bothers you, skip that part or turn back now. Bit of dysphoria in here as well. The working title for this chapter was 'kick the dog' - bad things happen to Zero and he is Not Okay. I promise you that I love happy endings but my characters will have to work for it. On the positive, our trio finally comes face to face – sort of.

Kaname is somewhat cruel this chapter, and will be again in the future. This is entirely accurate with his canon characterization where Kaname and Zero are rivals. As early as episode two, Kaname goes out of his way to come over to Zero and taunt him about the fact he's falling to Level E and slowly losing his humanity by acting falsely concerned over his health. The two of them know there's no way Zero could be okay, and that Kaname is asking just to remind Zero he's the opposite of okay. But to everyone else watching, who don't know about vampires or that Zero is becoming one, it looks like Zero is being extremely rude and throwing Kaname's concern back in his face. So Kaname both gets the praise of those watching for his 'good deed' and to hurt Zero while making his rival look ungrateful and mean.

Thanks to everyone who left me such nice reviews. Special shout-out to reviewer Sancti Rei, who inadvertently reminded me I forgot the bloodlust and kicked off a 500 word revision. You were very helpful!

It was like fate, thought Zero, that he would find himself attending a vampire ball - which he previously avoided for decades - for the second year in a row, around the same time as last year's incident.

Whatever had happened seemed to have no permanent effects, except for the odd way Level D vampires always fixed on Zero first as a target, even if a human was bleeding in front of them. Zero habitually applied scent masking charms every day now, which kept their behavior normal. He hypothesized - not that he had any evidence - that his scent had changed somehow and marked him as the superior threat who needed to be destroyed first.

What Zero privately called 'the red haze' never returned. He'd been anxiously watching his body for any sign of those vile urges or strange restlessness and pain, but it seemed like, thankfully, it had been a one time deal. Last week was the one year anniversary of the end of the incident, and not a peep from his body. Zero had felt safe enough to return to active duty and stop hiding out in his apartment.

Zero ran a hand over his face and sighed. He should have just extended his leave and avoided this.
odious assignment altogether, but it couldn't be helped. Tonight was the winter solstice, the longest night of the year and the most significant holiday in the vampire world. Neither vampires nor Hunters celebrated human Christmas, but it resembled the dark solstice in many ways. Every noble with delusions of importance was throwing a party tonight, and headquarters was running on a skeleton crew as every Hunter who could stake a vampire was either out on patrol to deter bloodsucking revelers from getting cocky, or stuck here like him babysitting a party of leeches.

Zero knew which duty he'd rather draw, but all the patrol assignments had been handed out by the time his paperwork returning from leave had been processed. He avoided monitor duty so ardently for one reason: the Kurans might be attending. Cross must have known why, because he never pushed the issue, and had casually let slip that the guest list for his upcoming assignment held no purebloods.

Unfortunately Zero's pureblood free policy also left him in situations like tonight, with the strongest Hunter in the world guarding a collection of vampire society's C-list notables and most forgettable celebrities. He could be doing so many more useful things.

Their host tonight is one such pathetic person, a low-ranking noble of grandiose desires but little substance named Shoda. He'd clearly gained the favor of some pureblood, who'd gifted him a few stable Level Ds which he displayed as status symbols in plenty of degrading ways. One of them, dressed in little more than paint and scraps of fabric had met Zero's eyes earlier as she skittered through the servant's hallways near where the Hunters had set up their command center.

Shoda also seems to have problem with Zero's manner, a Level D who dared to look him in the eye like a equal. He's come by Zero's corner of the ballroom half a dozen times trailing hangers on and groupies behind him like a cloud of mosquitos, stinking of alpha musk and cologne and making insulting comments in his hearing. Shoda's unremarkable for a vampire, attractive but forgettable, except for his ridiculous goatee, cut and slicked with product into a long point. It gives the illusion that his chin looks twice as long and Zero imagines the fool resembles nothing so much as a nutcracker.

The effort of keeping his temper leashed, unfortunately, has blinded Zero to the fact that his rising temperature is not just because of his anger. The moment Zero looks across the ballroom and thinks about how many of these pathetic beasts he could kill before they stopped him is the moment he realizes he has made a grievous mistake.

The red haze surges up in his bones like it's been waiting for the very moment he noticed to break upon him like a storm.

It's worse than it was before, stronger. There's no pain or nausea like the first time, but the murderous urges run unchecked. His agitation makes him feel like he's crawling out of his skin. Every touch is magnified a thousandfold, the rasp of his clothing a burn. The crowds are too loud; he wants to clap his hands over his head because the noise, how is he the only one who can't bear this cacophony? Everyone's too close, he's being crushed in this airless room. Trapped, trapped, kill them, bite them, get out get out get out.

Zero's stuck where he is. He can't go anywhere unless he can convince the lead hunter to allow it, which he won't without a good reason, which Zero can't give because he doesn't know what's going on.

The Hunter doesn't know how much time passes. He stays still, rigid in his post along the south wall, focused on fighting off whatever fit has come over him, and it might have worked too, Zero could have made it out of this alright, if it wasn't for that prick Shoda deciding now was a good time to come toy with the upstart Level D trash.
He's brought his cronies and they've all had a few drinks; vampires have a high alcohol tolerance but the wine flowing tonight is as potent as any. Shoda himself is riding the high that came from a night full of vampires feeding his ego with flattery, the confidence of a bully with his gang facing a target forbidden from reacting unless his life was endangered.

For some reason, Zero's rage blossoms like a mushroom cloud and the discomfort of his body dims, the stink of this weak, unworthy alpha driving his beast into a still patience, the hunting crouch in the underbrush before the leap onto unsuspecting prey.

Shoda mouths off, postures, Zero ignores him. Bullies want a reaction. The noble tries again, the mouse poking a dragon who could kill him with the pull of a single trigger finger. Zero realizes the situation is escalating, that Shoda is just drunk enough to be both reckless and dangerous, and tries to excuse himself to end the confrontation. Shoda and his flunkies crowd into the Hunter's personal space, refusing to let the Level D leave - Zero startles himself when his mouth lets out a snarl. They ignore him, as they have ignored every cue he's given tonight that he'd much rather be left alone. A D should know their place and show even the lowliest born vampire due respect when granted the privilege of even the slightest attention.

The smell of a dozen alphas and betas permeates the space; Zero's grip on his beast wavers every moment that passes. It's coiled tight and struggling, quietly chanting *kill them, maim them, teach them we won't stand for this*. Zero is the only one who realizes he is close to doing something unforgivable. He expends his honed will to reel the beast in, lock it away, and is almost back on even ground -

Then Shoda *touches him*, touches him with his filthy hands, grabs his face and his upper arm hard enough to bruise and shakes him -

Zero has just enough sanity left to keep from eviscerating the insignificant, presumptuous braggart; Shoda bleeds like the pig he is.

They take him down to the wine cellar, underneath the dense bedrock, down a flight of stairs and behind a thick oakwood door. His fellow Hunters have Zero remove his weapons and gear; he's ordered to stay here while Lead Hunter Yamamoto sorts out the mess he's made.

And it *is* a mess; Zero's actions have endangered the treaty between their races by attacking a noble, unprovoked, at a party. There may be political consequences; the vampires will point to incidents like this one to claim that Hunters take advantage of the monitoring requirement and argue that it should be removed. It won't work; the Hunters will respond that Zero is a Level D and it's the fault of his vampiric nature. Still, damage will be done to their reputation and the Hunters will have to make political amends to the vampires.

Zero's entire career as a Hunter may be ruined. He's certain to be reprimanded, perhaps brought before a tribunal if the Senate demands it, but that's not the worst. He's spent decades trying to build trust with his fellow Hunters, to prove that he is stronger than his instincts, that he is *safe* to be around, and then he goes and opens someone's belly with his claws? What Hunter will want Zero to watch their back, or to be under their command when he might go rogue? Zero doesn't have words for how horrified and disappointed he is in himself.

Then they lock the door behind him, and retreat up the long staircase to stand guard. Against the vampires or against him? Zero wonders.

The triumph of striking Shoda faded like frost in sun almost as soon as he'd done it. In its place came the intense stabbing pain in his belly again, and each passing moment it worsens.
Clumsily, Zero uses a wine rack for support as he lowers himself to his knees and sits in the small open space just in front of the doorway. The room is in complete darkness, though not to vampire eyes. Zero's human side still longs for the comfort of light. It's chilly but not freezing, and his pale skin pebbles from the cold.

Zero is almost grateful for the distraction from the pain. His entire lower belly feels like a giant hand is squeezing his middle; when he puts the palm of his hand down to touch, all he can feel is hard muscle from the cramps. He's having trouble breathing, wheezing out high pained inhales because the taut muscles keep his lungs from expanding to take deep breaths. The primal panic of being unable to breathe sinks fear into his veins for the first time. He does not call for help; the thick walls and doors would block the sound of his voice from the human ears of his guards.

He doesn't know what's happening to him. He can't stay upright any more, and topples over to fall on his side, arms wrapped around his abdomen and gasping for breath. He wrathes and squirms like he's trying to escape. The pain is pooling, moving lower, deeper. Zero whimpers, still trying to keep quiet, the way he always deals with his pain. His body is moving faster and faster toward some cliff and he's afraid to find out what the fall will be.

It's worse. Down there, the pain settles between his thighs. Such a vulnerable, intimate place - Zero is terrified. A moment later, he learns all of this is just the preamble for what's to come, when the pain condenses his body snaps taut every nerve lights on fire and Zero screams.

Something is chewing through his insides trying to get out, boring a hole down down down through his organs rearranging his insides parting slick flesh and meat. He's not even trying to hide his terrified, agonized screams anymore. This is horror beyond his imagination. Then the pain crests, and Zero has a moment of terrified comprehension. Between his legs - oh god - he feels fragile. Open. He turns his head to the side and vomits. Then another wave takes him and his body thrashes - something like a membrane tears, and his thighs are soaked in a gush of thick blood and watery fluid.

But that's merely the beginning of Zero's torture; he has no sense of time; agony spreads through his limbs and the real changes ripple through his quivering, helpless flesh as his body remakes itself, alone in the darkness and the cold.

When his pelvis is broken and remade, he loses control of his entire lower body and his bladder empties; he can still feel every bit of his pain even when he can't move his legs. The throb of tissues being modified in his chest is nothing in comparison. Thousands and thousands of neurons in his head are being killed and replaced, the cerebral architectures reconnected and rerouted. His brain swells and presses against his skull; the pressure on his optic nerve leaves him blind for the better part of an hour, repeatedly seizing on the floor, completely aware of his body's convulsions and plagued by phantom sensations and images. He fractures his skull on the pavestones trying to knock himself unconscious.

One of his flailing limbs strikes the surrounding racks, and a few bottles fall and shatter, adding wine to the smells of blood, sweat, piss and vomit. His next fit grinds broken glass into his side.

The sound of his sobbing breaths is the only noise under that dark vault as Kiryuu Zero is taken apart and irrevocably changed. No part of him is safe, nothing in him is untouched, a nightmare of his Turning all over again. He has no control, his actions are useless; all he can do is lie there and wait to die or for this to impossibly end.

Gradually, the pace slows. His body is approaching exhaustion and is dangerously weak, struggling against dehydration, shock and blood loss. Kept perpetually at the knife edge of starvation by his refusal to feed, whatever energy reserves the vampire had are completely gone. Zero's body has
burned through every last one of his fat stores and is cannibalizing itself to fuel the rest of the process.

Zero really was unfortunate. For any other vampire - for any born vampire - this would have been short and mostly painless in comparison. Each one of them naturally possessed the framework it needed to complete this change. Zero's human body, on the other hand, had to tear down the whole house to the bare foundations before it could rebuild from scratch. It was entirely possible the process could have killed him.

The last to come is the replacement of his nervous system. It disjoints his limbs like a puppet, leaving him unable to move, speak, or do anything but blink and move his eyes, trapped in a straitjacket of flesh.

Of course, this is when they come for him.

"Kaname-sama, there has been an incident," Seiren unobtrusively bends close to her master's ear and quietly reports the news. He need not fear anyone else overhearing, even other vampires; his Shadow's professionalism is absolute. She had been chosen and trained to serve him since birth, after all.

Kaname's brow furrows, the only sign of displeasure he will allow himself, since tonight he is acting the part of the affable, gentlemanly head of the pureblood Kuran family.

The Kurans do not hold their own celebration on Winter Solstice; Kaname and Yuuki are scheduled to make appearances at nearly a dozen parties tonight, all held by important nobles or allies of Kaname's. Where the purebloods go, how long they stay there and who they talk to are all part of tonight's political games. If Kaname appears at some noble's party, they gain the prestige of being deemed important enough for him to spend his time on; it elevates their own position and acts as social currency. Even if it seems insignificant, the distribution of attention and favors helps maintain the alliances and networks he's built. Something as simple as a greeting and small talk keeps subordinates satisfied and makes them feel appreciated. Which means that he has work to do and a schedule to keep, and Kaname is not in the mood for wasting his time on drunken disturbances.

He excuses himself from his conversation partners with a smile and offered well wishes, slipping out with Seiren at his elbow for a moment of privacy. When he is certain they are alone, Kaname gestures for his Shadow to continue her report.

"A Hunter monitor has attacked the host of a party without provocation, seriously wounding him. Our assistance has been requested by the Senate to help settle the situation, as we are the closest with the authority and rank to speak with the Hunters' Association on behalf of the vampires."

Kaname narrowed wine colored eyes. The Senate was playing power games too; Kaname doubted they had no closer agents, they just wanted the pureblood to jump when they ordered. Nevertheless, such an incident was serious, and giving the illusion to the Senate that he could be controlled was still useful at this stage of play.

Kaname pinches the bridge of his nose. "Who was injured?"

"Lord Shoda; the injury was not fatal and he is expected to recover."

"Do we know anything about the Hunter or the circumstances around the injury?"

Seiren shakes her head, blank expression almost shamefaced. "Only what information the Senate
has given me. Shoda claims victimhood."

Kaname cannot ignore this. He publicly champions the coexistence movement and has long argued for better relations for the Hunters. Allowing the Senate to handle this will mean it becomes a major diplomatic matter and may cast doubt on his judgement.

"We'll go, but not until we are finished with our itinerary." He would comply, but on his own terms. It's late in the evening and only the two least important stops remain, but breaking off his engagements could still cause bad blood. Kaname will pare down his schedule to only those vampires most important to his plans.

"Please have the car ready in fifteen minutes, and call ahead to rearrange the schedule for half the allotted time while I find Yuuki and let her know our change of plans. And inform the Senate that I will arrive in two and a half hours, and that I alone will be necessary to resolve it."

True to his word - not that Kaname would ever allow such trivial difficulties to make him break it - their car pulls up to the doors of Shoda’s manor precisely two hours and twenty nine minutes later. Seirin slides into the shadows as soon as they enter; she has orders to perform her own investigation.

Kaname's mood worsens with every step he takes inside, following terrified servants who've never seen one pureblood before, let alone two. Shoda's faux ostentatious, tacky home tells him all he needs to know about the owner, and how much of a trial interrogating him will be.

Even at such a late hour, the house is still packed with guests who ogle the pureblood couple and whisper boorishly back and forth. He suspects they've stayed for the prospect of a good show. A mix of nobles whose thin blood could barely lay claim to the title, common vampires with a little wealth or fame in the human world and vampires who thought associating with such people would launch themselves into their ranks - people who lacked real power, but hungered so intensely that they would do anything for even a taste. Brought face to face with effortless, true power, they slavered after it.

Yuuki must feel his frustration through their bloodbond, because she takes his hand in hers, playfully swinging their arms back and forth for a few moments, then lets him gently pull his hand free and step back into his dignified pureblood persona. She is intensely uncomfortable, and Kaname tries to shield her with his body as best he can from the greedy stares until they are ushered into a side room holding half a dozen Hunters. Kaname can sense two more in an adjacent room. Excessive, for a single party without one person of importance attending. Just what was Shoda involved in?

The capable looking, middle-aged brunette who holds himself with authority approaches them and nods in greeting with his arms crossed over his chest. His rough features and stockier build speak of a recent human ancestor; he must be very reliable or skilled to have gained a leadership position with such diluted Hunter abilities.

"Yamamoto. I'm lead Hunter for this assignment. Kuran Kaname-san, Kuran Yuuki-san, thank you for your assistance. I sincerely apologize for pulling you away from your plans for the evening."

Kaname draws himself up and joins his hands behind his back.

"Explain the situation to me."

"One of my hunters injured Shoda-san, who hosted tonight's party. He bled heavily from multiple chest wounds but they've already healed with no complications. Shoda says my Hunter attacked
him as he passed by. My Hunter admitted Shoda acted aggressively but not enough to justify his reaction. We called for mediation because Shoda's demanding blood and the guests are looking for an excuse to make trouble. We want to settle this with no fuss."

"What is Shoda-san being investigated for?"

The Hunter's transparent surprise told Kaname his guess rings true. He clearly doesn't want to admit anything to a vampire, but Yamamoto gives the information as a peace offering a moment later.

"He's heavily involved in the human underworld. Drugs, arms dealing, smuggling, illegal wildlife trafficking, probably money laundering if we could get ahold of his books to prove it. Nothing we have jurisdiction over or the vampire law codes care about, but if we gather enough information we can hand it over to the human police. We want to see his operation destroyed even if we can't take Shoda down. Doesn't matter now, what my Hunter did means nothing we got tonight could be submitted in court."

"Who is the Hunter whose lack of control is at fault?"

Yamamoto can't help the nervous tell as he rubs his hands together and looks uncomfortable. Clearly the man hoped Kaname wouldn't notice the little detail he'd left out.

"Kiryuu Zero."

Kaname feels Yuuki stiffen at his side at the same time the gleeful anticipation of pleasure rises in his chest. He's been handed a golden opportunity to - what did he want to do? He could have Kiryuu's head on a platter, see that he never Hunts again. The opportunities abounded to crush his rival, and all unlooked for. What a happy Solstice present for himself!

Yuuki is shaking her head quickly back and forth. "No, Zero wouldn't do something like that for no reason. I want to see him."

Kaname catches his sister by the shoulders and waits until she squarely meets his gaze. "Yuuki. It has been a long time since we knew him. Zero may be a different person now. I don't want you to be hurt by getting your hopes up. Let me see him while you go speak to Shoda. We'll discover the truth of the matter and Kiryuu will either be cleared or have to face the consequences of his actions."

Kiryuu rarely lied and had already admitted fault. Kaname was looking forward to dictating those consequences.

Yuuki looks rebellious and like she still wants to protest.

"Please trust my judgement Yuuki. Given how you parted, Kiryuu may not want to see you at all."

Just like that, her shoulders sag, and Yuuki nods as she stares at her toes. Kaname gestures to Yamamoto and one of the other Hunters steps forward to lead her out of the room.

Yamamoto points with his chin at one of the walls. "He's in the room next door. We were keeping him in the wine cellar until you arrived."

Anticipation settles over Kaname's shoulders like a cloak; he must be smiling too broadly because Yamamoto looks at him askance.

"I have to warn you. Kiryuu broke a glass bottle and tried to commit suicide when he was being
held downstairs. He's a bloody mess and stinks of filth. However he did it, he can't move a whole lot either. And," here Yamamoto looks green, "he can't talk. Looks like he bit off the end of his tongue when the bottle didn't work."

Truly, Kiryuu must have grown into a weak man. Kaname can't wait for Yuuki to see how pitiful Kiryuu had become.

At first, Zero thinks the spot of light above him must be a dream. In his blindness, he hallucinated lightning bolts of color created by his injured brain. Or perhaps it's Death, high and remote, come for him at last. He would struggle, if he could twitch a single finger. Kiryuu Zero knows he is not permitted to die yet, not until every last drop of use is wrung out of him.

Then he hears voices shouting in alarm, and knows he hasn't failed Ichiru yet. He is not quite grateful.

He's hungry. Hunger is not a strong enough word for his desperate starvation, every cell crying out for sustenance, the thick liquid that will finish putting him back together and save him. He can smell their lovely blood, hear their hearts pumping it underneath thin skin, so easy to pierce. He's so, so hungry, and it takes everything Zero has to reign back his bloodlust until he's sure his eyes are not red.

Rough, panicked hands touch him - he would flinch away if he could. The added pain is inconsequential, but vampire instincts insist he is not meant to be touched. He is turned over and a woman's hands check for a pulse. Rapid discussion above his head. Zero is grabbed on either side underneath the arms and lugged like the dead weight he is up the stairs into better lighting, each step banging his limp legs into sharp stone edges, bump bump bump. The woman's hands return, professionally running over his limbs to check for injury. Zero doesn't feel like he's bleeding from open wounds anymore -

(except between his thighs no no no no back up back up calm. calm.)

There's more discussion - disagreement this time. A few more scent masking charms settle over his skin like cobwebs. Probably for the blood. The arms pick him up again, taking a handful of his dirty clothing, dried stiff with his own blood and fluids, and begin to drag him across the ground as his useless limbs trail behind him. Zero is pleased to realize that he can't feel any sensation at all right now; whatever is happening inside him has severed all his nerves. He blanks out - for how long he doesn't know, not more than ten minutes, and comes back to awareness as his body is finally deposited in a new resting place against a stone wall. Big hands adjust the boneless sprawl of his body as he slides downward, and his head is tilted upwards to look into the eyes of Lead Hunter Yamamoto bent above him.

The black eyes look furious, shaken and deeply disappointed. "Kiryuu, after all the trouble you've caused tonight, now this? Have you even thought at all about what you've done? No, you didn't. Because killing yourself won't solve this. You'll just be dead, and it won't satisfy the vampires or me. I told you to stay put. You've proven you can't be trusted to follow orders. If you can't follow my orders, I'll get someone to babysit you like a child. Bloody hell, Kiryuu. You've done the stupidest shit tonight, but that didn't mean you had to do that to yourself. Blood and scattered ashes!"

Yamamoto is a decent Hunter, through not of significant blood. He's solid and reliable by his reputation; the few times they've spoken he'd been neutral toward Zero. Zero's never worked with him before, and he doubts he'll ever get the chance again.
Zero wants to eat him, monster that he is.

Yamamoto straightens, shoots an order at Zero to stay where he is, and leaves the room. Left without other options, Zero stays exactly where he was put and punishes himself thinking over his shameful actions earlier this evening, whenever he has the capability to follow a coherent train of thought. His bloodlust comes in waves that take precious energy as he braces himself to withstand them; he's profoundly grateful his crippled body can't move, else he would leap on the first living being he saw. It's horribly reminiscent of falling to Level E.

His ordeal seems forgotten, put out of his mind in favor of his self loathing, consciousness curiously insulated out of some instinct to protect his psyche from thinking too deeply about the fact he is in a body that cannot move or feel, or perhaps start wondering about whether or not it was permanent.

Zero desperately needs medical attention. His lack of open wounds and reputation for invulnerability have fooled his fellow Hunters into inattentive complacency. He's a vampire who can regenerate like a pureblood; in forty years of Hunts he's never been so injured he couldn't take himself home. Their weaker human senses can't hear the struggling beat of his heart, the labored cadence of his breathing, or smell the sickness in his scent - not that any vampire could either, after so many scent dampening charms. His core temperature plummets; he doesn't have the energy anymore to keep himself warm. Mildly hypothermic, Zero's body still doesn't have the muscle control to shiver, or allow him to ask for help. He's not dying - yet - but that could change very quickly, if he's allowed to remain untreated. His fragile body has pushed itself to the limit; now it's struggling to keep him stable and alive, fighting exhaustion and ignorance of its needs.

Eventually his consciousness drifts again, only to come back to himself when his Hunter senses scream warnings at him. A pureblood - no, two. What is a pair of purebloods doing in a dirty pond like this one - oh. Him. It's Zero they're here for. Who would they send - no! That couldn't be right, but Zero knows his reasoning is plausible, even likely. He can't meet them here. Not now, like this.

Life has never cared about what Zero wanted, and the Hunter feels this keenly as Kuran Kaname steps past the threshold into his sight.

Why is it that Zero feels his greatest moments of humility in the sight of those claret eyes, alight with triumph? He cannot help his awareness of the distance between the two of them - one, Yuki's victorious husband standing above him, the vampire prince with his supernaturally perfect features and regal bearing, impeccably clothed in an expensively tailored black suit; the other, him, the imperfect human, neither properly Hunter nor vampire, slumped bonelessly with his disobedient limbs flung about, in cheap, dirty clothes stained with vomit and urine, covered in his own shame, soon to face the disgrace he has earned, easily discarded, worth nothing, soon to be nobody.

At the first hint of familiar, rich blood, the Level D lost the fight with his bloodlust and his eyes blaze crimson now, his traitorous body hopeful of a meal.

Zero lays helplessly in front of mahogany eyes that drink in every detail of his utter humiliation, and burns with his impotence and inadequacy.

If Kaname notices irregularities in Zero's condition, he overlooks them in favor of enjoying the Hunter's disgrace, or perhaps he thinks he misremembers the scent he hated for so many years.

"Leave us," Kuran orders the Lead Hunter in the same deep, silky voice Zero last heard the day his brother died. "I wish to see Kiryuu alone."

Yamamoto hesitates, looking between the pureblood and the injured Hunter. It would be like
leaving a bear and a baby bird alone together, which Yamamoto cannot in good conscience do as the one in charge of Zero.

"Enough time has passed that Kiryuu's body must be healed. His silence is simply his stubbornness."

This seems to make up the Lead Hunter's mind, since he nods, and leaves with a lingering frown at Zero.

Now that it's just the two of them, Kuran makes no effort to hide his delighted disgust. With his hands tucked elegantly behind his back, he slowly paces in a half-circle around Zero, as though taking in every possible angle of Zero's wretchedness, content to keep Zero waiting and let the silent apprehension build. Kuran finally comes to a stop, a cruel smile on his lips and eyes bright with delight.

"Look at you, Kiryuu. Humbled at my feet, where you always belonged. Should I let Yuuki see you like this, I wonder?"

Zero, of course, cannot reply.

"Still silent? Looks like you have learned something in thirty years. Pity it couldn't have been sooner. I had to suffer your insolent yapping all those times."

The Hunter's eyelids flutter rapidly, the only rebuttal his paralyzed body can make.

"I'm here to clean up your mistakes once more. You've already admitted guilt, and you've never been dishonest. If I hadn't already discarded you, the knight I carefully raised, then I would have no choice now that you've compromised your usefulness with your own hands. Chairman Cross and your Master will be very hurt by having to punish you, but the Senate will demand a price."

Kuran steps closer, taking what looks like a handkerchief from his breast pocket, and lays it flat over the skin of his palm. Then he bends just low enough to hook two fingers underneath Zero's chin, covered by the fine silk so not a millimeter of their skin touches - like Zero is something unclean - and tips his head back, coming close so the pureblood can whisper in his ear.

"It really is as it's always been - between the two of us, it's you, Kiryuu, who is a beast enslaved to his instincts."

Zero can smell that pure blood just centimeters from his lips, and his desire for the blood of a man he hates tortures him. Kuran must know it too, from his smile, Zero's eyes still betraying his bloodlust to his nemesis.

There's noises in the hall. Kuran straightens and steps back to a polite distance, refolding his handkerchief. One of the auras has the heavy, blanketing power that marks a pureblood, outshining the quiet Hunter signatures.

"I wouldn't kill you now even if Yuuki hated you. I think I'll just watch you fall," Kuran says, so quietly only the two of them can hear, and then -

Yuuki. Zero's heart clenches and he inexplicably wants to cry. He hasn't cried since he was sixteen years old, but the thought of her being before him, seeing him like this - she's gotten so tall and beautiful, her eyes still kind as she looks upon his unworthy self - it's almost worse than the way Kuran looked at him, because he doesn't deserve this unconditional goodness.

At that moment, two things happen:
Yuuki wails at the sight of him, streaked with blood, and rushes forward.

Zero's body finally reconnects his nervous system. Immediately, he loses consciousness, cries out and begins to convulse.

It lasts barely a minute. Zero, at least, is spared Yuuki's distress and the panic spreading among the Hunters.

When Zero comes back to himself his thoughts are confused. Zero can hear Yuuki somewhere nearby. She sounds upset. Has he done something to upset her? He thinks he feels her hands on him, but it's been so long he can't be sure he remembers the feeling. She shouldn't touch him. He's dirty. He'll spread filth on her clean hands and pristine dress. Someone speaks to him, trying to get him to respond, but moving is so difficult. His head weighs too much to lift; Zero wants nothing more than to lie down and sleep. Even his hunger can't rouse him.

This is the last straw for his laboring, strained body, already too long starved before pushing its regeneration ability to the limit. He blinks, staring into Yuuki's terrified face, a trail of blood dripping from his nose, and slips back into unconsciousness as his heartbeat slows.
I hope you're still with me after the bad things I did last chapter. This chapter is mostly 'people talk and make decisions whilst exposition happens', but I threw my readers a juicy 'what happened while Zero was unconscious' flashback bone? Please forgive me. I know it gets a bit dry in some places.

By the way, it's always so interesting to see you guys try to guess what's going to happen in your reviews. I'm writing 1-2 chapters ahead of what I post, so it makes me feel glad and sneaky to surprise you. Plus sometimes you give good ideas I add in or I go 'why didn't I think of that?' and marvel at how clever you people are.

Zero was not supposed to wake up that first time. To allow his body time to heal and recover, the doctors who initially treated him kept him heavily sedated. Any D Rank vampire should not, under any circumstances, have been able to regain consciousness with that amount of drugs in their system. Zero is no ordinary D Rank, but his body should have sought to remain unconscious anyway, the instinct of a vampire in a safe place to heal its wounds.

What nobody took into account, however, was that Zero may be a vampire, but he was also a Hunter. Vampires had instincts, and vampire doctors knew how to work around those instincts and avoid triggering them. Humans did not have instincts, but after two hundred generations of cutthroat natural selection, Hunters had ingrained behaviors that might as well be instinctive. And one of those impulses demanded you never lose consciousness in the presence of a vampire, especially when injured. Wounded, weak, and surrounded by dozens of vampire auras, Zero's survival instincts kicked in and fought against the medication, mistakenly trying to save his life and allow him to escape.

Zero woke screaming, shooting upright in the bed only to be brought up short by restraints around his wrists that crackled and sparked. Not in his right mind and heavily confused from the lingering sedation, the Hunter fought desperately but without any real direction, toppling off the bed and hanging by his wrists from the bedrail, still bound, yanking to free himself until his wrists bled and his shoulder dislocated. Whenever anyone ventured close, he kicked out with his legs and struggled harder, biting and screeching like an animal caught in a trap.

Eventually, half an hour later, the medical staff got close enough to administer another syringe of sedatives. Exhaustion and injury slowed his reactions and his struggles gradually weakened, body hanging limply from his restraints as he panted and finally stilled. Zero remembers the whole episode like a lucid nightmare, not quite real.

Technically, Zero also remembers the he second time he woke up, but as a hazy dream where all the events were soft-edged and blurry like a watercolor painting. The heavy drugs in his system - the doctors learning from their earlier failure - left his thinking syrupy slow. The way his body swayed, slung like a sack of flour over some vampire's shoulder while descending the emergency staircase, did not alarm him like it ought to, but it did make him nauseous. Zero inadvertently foil
his own kidnapping when his near-empty stomach coughed up bile on the floor, his captor slipped, and then triggered the fire alarm trying to stop his fall.

The third time Zero wakes because he is meant to, gently, slowly ascending upward into awareness, shedding veils of gauzy sleep one by one. Events slot back into place; the gravity of his situation presses down on his shoulders. Shying away from memories of agony, Zero deliberately decides to set aside his questions for more practical concerns.

Just as Master Yagari taught him to, all those years ago, Zero is careful not to let any sign in his face or heartbeat show he's awakened. He extends his awareness to feel for living beings around him: twenty vampires in the surrounding rooms, many more vampires on the floors above and below him, and a dozen Hunters nearby. He's laying on a mattress, and not dressed in his own clothes. He's thirsty - in both senses - and his body aches fiercely, from too many points to bother cataloguing. The red haze is gone and his senses are back to normal. There's the pungent scent of cleaning products, and a tang of blood in the air that no amount of scrubbing could remove. He can't hear any voices or loud noises, only muffled blurs; the walls are thickly insulated, as they are in all vampire built structures.

Zero hasn't been in a hospital since he was human. Finding himself alone in the room, he dares raise his eyelids the barest slit, the better to examine the cold metal objects around his wrists. A set of steel handcuffs - Hunter equipment made to restrict vampiric strength, layered with strengthening charms; Zero owns a similar set himself. He tests his bonds, gingerly so the cuffs don't activate and shock him. He is handcuffed to the left bed rail of his hospital bed; the bed rail and the frame have also had strengthening charms cast on them, to prevent the wearer from shearing through the metal and rendering the handcuffs pointless. Zero closes his eyes again, the sight too painful. The quantity of guards plus the thoroughness of his fetters can mean only one thing. He's been arrested, awaiting trial before a Hunter tribunal, the most severe possible punishment for infractions to the treaty.

A dull sense of despair lodges in his chest.

That's it then. There's nothing he can do. Kuran's words echo in his head. Zero won't even be useful anymore. And if he can't be useful -

When the door opens and a single set of footsteps comes toward him, Zero doesn't even stir.

"Kiryuu-sa….Kiryuu-san? Can you give me a sign if you're awake?, a small woman's voice tentatively asks. She sounds a little frightened, and both Zero's turmoil and the fact she's a vampire can't stop his impulse to comfort her.

"I am. Please don't be afraid, I won't hurt you." His dry throat makes his voice crack; Zero's doing badly at being comforting.

He swallows and tries again. "I know that I'm in a hospital. Are you the nurse?"

"Yes sir, I'm Nurse Itou. May I come closer so I can get you some water?"

Rather than speak again, Zero nods against the thin pillow, and the nurse helps him sit up in the bed. There's not enough slack in the handcuff chain for Zero to bring his hands to his mouth, and nurse Itou leans him over so he can drink himself, a surprisingly considerate gesture. She's a petite, mousy thing who nervously avoids eye contact, but she still helps him steady his cup when his hands shake too badly to drink without spilling water on himself.

"I'm sorry, but I can't remove the restraints. If you feel well enough, I need you to do some
exercises to check your responses to stimuli."

Zero nods again, and the nurse goes through a series of basic questions, checks his eyes with a small light, has him move his limbs in specific ways, and asks him to describe his responses to touch and pressure.

A little bored, Zero reaches out toward Itou with his Hunter senses and surprises himself by discovering she is a fellow D-Rank, lacking the volatility in her aura of one falling to Level E. He's intrigued despite himself. A stable D-Rank working here, in a vampire hospital?

Stable D-Ranks aren't that common in the first place; purebloods strictly guard their precious blood, and saving one insignificant human life isn't an important enough cause to shed it. It costs a pureblood nothing - socially or practically - to let a bitten exhuman die. There's billions of humans crawling around, after all, and another replacement meal comes easy.

Ex-humans who do receive their Master's blood belong to their Master, blood, body and life, and are often gifted to nobles as pets, but they receive some slight social protection from the pureblood or noble they serve. To work as a nurse, Itou must have a generous patron, or perhaps she was already trained when she was Turned. No wonder she's the one tending to Zero, she probably gets all the crap jobs that nobody else wants.

Any D-Rank without a Master was the lowest of the low, able to get work only from low paying menial jobs. Called Ferals by other vampires, most of them resorted to prostitution and other semi-legal avenues just to live. Zero himself was spared that fate only because his Hunter blood took precedence over his vampire status. Turning a Hunter was illegal anyway, earning the strictest penalties for the pureblood who bit them, and the Council of Elders hadn't cared enough about an unstable Level D who was falling to Level E to fight for jurisdiction over the illegal fledgling. Zero liked to think they regretted that decision, now that he was stable and very, very good at killing their kind. Whenever Yuuki wondered why he tolerated all the open hostility from the Association, Zero hadn't had the heart to tell her it was because that was far, far better than what he could expect if the Association abandoned him and he became considered a Feral Level D.

"How long have I been out," he asks Itou once they finish the tests.

She looks up from her clipboard like a mouse startled by a cat. "This is the third night you've been here, Kiryuu-san, counting the night you were brought in."

"Have they..." He had to wet his lips and start again. "Have they set a sentencing date yet?"

Itou hugs her clipboard to her chest, expression anxious, "I'm sorry Kiryuu-san, I don't understand."

Zero rattles the handcuffs. "Aren't I under arrest?"

"Oh! No, no, Kiryuu-san." The nurse waves her arms frantically and shakes her head.

"The doctors refused to treat you until you were...restrained. That's all! You're not in trouble. Promise."

She bites her lip and slowly asks him, "How much do you remember about when you were brought in. About what happened to you?"

"Nothing," Zero tells her truthfully. "I remember passing out at the Shoda mansion, then being here."

She looks pensive. "I'm not the right person to tell you about that. The Hunter Association
President left orders for you to be left alone until he could speak with you. I need to inform him that you're awake."

Nurse Itou walks back to the door, but pauses with her hand on the doorknob. Zero has only just noticed, but the blinds on all the windows are closed. Curious.

"I was on duty in the ER, the night you were brought in. I've never been so terrified, not even -" she brushes the side of her neck skittishly, " - but it was like the night poured in, and Kuran-sama was there."

Itou says the pureblood's name the same way a religious man said the name of his god.

"He told us that if you died, he would kill whoever didn't help you."

Then she hurriedly leaves, like she thinks she might have said too much.

"Zero, Zero!"

Yuuki has the Level D's upper body gathered in her lap, heedless of the way it stains her dress, and is trying to wake him. She's frantic, crying uncontrollably, all her poise lost when she can hear Zero's heartbeat stutter underneath her palm.

The Hunters are in an uproar, milling around uselessly. Yamamoto roars for silence, and like the good dogs they are, they all go quiet.

After that, while Yuuki's crying still fills the air, Kaname rounds on Yamamoto; he does not like being blindsided, especially when it upsets Yuuki.

"You said he tried to commit suicide."

Yuuki's voice chokes and rises with grief, and Kaname winces at how his words must have hurt her, but doesn't relent.

"We thought he did!"

"Did Kiryuu actually confirm it, or did you guess?"

Yamamoto looks uncomfortable.

"This is not blood loss. Vampires, even Level Ds, do not simply collapse without cause. Did he have access to a Hunter weapon?"

"No, I'm positive. We took his weapons, and what he gave us matched his official records."

Kaname considers for a moment; all of the evidence leads to one conclusion.

"Kiryuu had a seizure; his pulse is weak and erratic, and he's lost consciousness after acting out of character. It's likely he's been poisoned."

As Yamamoto sputters, Kaname casts a look behind him where Yuuki is cradling Kiryuu. She may have chosen him, but she never stopped caring for the Hunter. He will have to save Kiryuu again, for Yuuki's sake. If her knight died now, like this, she would carry the scar forever.

"When was the last time he fed?"
"Fed?" Yamamoto repeats like Kaname's said a dirty word. The pureblood allows himself half a breath to collect his patience.

Out of the corner of his eye, Kaname spots movement. Seiren stands just outside the doorway; if she revealed herself to the Hunters, she must need to speak with him urgently. Her blank face would fool anyone else, but Kaname can see she's nearly white and her eyes are widened with shock.

"Excuse me for a moment," the pureblood says, and walks out into the hall. Yamamoto is conferring with the rest of the Hunters about how to get Kiryuu to a doctor, but Kaname extends the courtesy anyway.

"Kaname-sama," Seiren starts to speak, but her voice fails her. She steadies herself, bows in apology, and begins a second time. "I investigated the circumstances, as you ordered, but I must have made an error. Things cannot be as I surmise."

Kaname is losing the last of his patience. "Seiren, your judgement rarely fails. Tell me what you have found."

"I discovered the place where Kiryuu was kept until we arrived. The whole room smelled...remarkable. Please confirm my senses are not wrong."

His Shadow hands over a cloth soaked in blood. There's a curious dullness to the scent; vampires can smell blood in the air like a shark senses a wounded animal bleeding into the water, but Kiryuu's blood simply gives the impression someone bled, without being able to pick out the normal markers of identity, condition and status. It's almost like the blood scent is anonymous.

Nonplussed, Kaname raises it toward his nose, and faint tendrils of the potent scent enfold him. Without conscious action, the alpha discovers his fangs have lengthened. The control of a pureblood is close to perfect, though their hungers plumb the depths of what it means to be a vampire, and Kaname's control above all others is nearly unbreakable. It's not bloodlust, but another hunger nearly as dark and deep.

He cannot stop himself from burying his nose and mouth in the cloth and inhaling deeply. The base note is the smell of Kiryuu's blood, almost familiar, but Kaname's memory of his youthful scent subtly differs from the matured bloom of adulthood. There's the musk infusing his skin, tremendously complex - the touch of warm, earthy human deafened by the rich spice of a Hunter's scent, layered with the cool, dark, shallow tone signifying a Turned vampire. Interlaced is a complimentary note - heady, sensual, and carrying just a hint of sweetness without being cloying. The accord between the two notes intoxicates the senses, lending an almost narcotic effect - just as it was meant to. The faint sillage would linger in the nose like a memory, long after its owner passed out of a room.

Kaname is staggered. Even a vampire as ancient as he is can still be surprised, he admits privately. Despite himself, he is a little awed. To witness the birth of a new thing is always wondrous. Even if it is that obnoxious Level D.

"Kiryuu Zero is an impossible being," Kaname muses slowly. "In ten thousand years, no Level D has ever presented as anything but a beta."

"You see why I wished to confirm it."

"Yes. Kiryuu Zero is an omega."
They stand in silence, allowing the weight of those words to rearrange what they thought possible. This discovery changes everything; Kaname is already adjusting his perception of tonight's events and how he will need to respond. After a moment of reflection, Kaname's manner becomes brusque, as though compensating for his uncharacteristic behavior by sweeping it under the rung.

"You've done well Seiren. Prepare to depart while I collect Kiryuu. You will escort Yuuki home and explain the situation to her."

Much as he would like to conceal Kiryuu's status from Yuuki, Kaname knows it will soon become common knowledge; an unbonded omega cannot be hidden. More importantly, Yuuki would see it as a betrayal if he kept it from her. Better to have it out and done now, then leave the matter hanging over his head.

After one more moment to compose himself, Kaname heads straight back inside to Yuuki and Kiryuu, announcing to the room, "My Shadow has found evidence regarding your Hunter's condition. Kiryuu needs to see a doctor immediately, or he will die. I will need to take him to a vampire specialist."

"Wait, wait, wait," Yamamoto breaks in. "You can't just take Kiryuu!"

"You want him to die without treatment?"

"Of course not, but you're a vampire. How can I trust you with his life."

Yuuki speaks up from the floor, earnestly pleading, "Please, Yamamoto-san, he's so cold. I'm afraid he'll die if you don't let us."

Yamamoto looks hard at his sister, considering, and the moment stretches.

"You're President Cross' foster daughter, right? You were raised with Kiryuu."

His sister nods hopefully.

Yamamoto looks at Yuuki's teary face, and blows out a breath.

"Okay, take him to your vampire doctor. I'll explain it to Yagari-san. What am I going to do about Shoda?"

"Shoda will not be a problem. I doubt he will trouble you much longer." Kaname says with certainty.

Kiryuu's scent had spoken of not just an omega - but an omega in season. When it became public knowledge that Shoda, himself an alpha, had forced his touch on an unbonded omega so aggressively the omega felt the need to attack him - not to mention been stupid enough to do it with the omega in season and hypersensitive to advances from an alpha - he would be ruined. Many alphas would see it as Shoda trying to steal the omega by cheating the courtship period.

If Shoda tried to press charges, they would be thrown out of court. Vampire law protected omegas for actions taken when defending themselves or their children; Kiryuu could have killed Shoda and been entirely within his rights. Endangering, harming or killing an omega was nearly as big a taboo as the one protecting purebloods. Omegas became the bondmates of society's most powerful and wealthy alphas, and powerful people did not like it when other alphas touched what was theirs or threatened the safety of their families.

Yamamoto's face remained skeptical, but he moved aside and barked orders for the Hunters to
pack up. Now Kaname faces the most distasteful part: he will have to touch Kiryuu. It can’t be worse than the way Yuuki looks at him with hopeful eyes, the Level D gently held in her arms. Kaname will touch Kiryuu if only to get him away from Yuuki.

Kaname carefully schools his face in a neutral expression and pushes down his revulsion as he reaches out to let Yuuki carefully settle Kiryuu against his chest. Kiryuu's limp weight is like a feather to a pureblood's strength, but Kaname thinks the Level D feels too light and not warm enough.

Whatever spell keeps Kiryuu's blood stripped of scent, it's not enough when the pureblood knows how to search out the hidden fragrance underneath, not when the source is so close, silver head lolling against his shoulder. His scent would not be so strong were he not in season, nor so compelling if unfamiliar. Kaname's instincts as an alpha stir, uncaring of the fact Kiryuu is his jealously hated rival or the discarded piece of an old game. How many times has he wished to tear apart the body he carries? The alpha only knows that Kiryuu is familiar, and omega, and sick, and needs to be protected. If Kiryuu still bled, the pureblood knows he would be red-eyed and murderous. Kaname wants - oh how he wants - to bend his neck and inhale the perfume straight from the Hunter's skin. Everything about the urge disgusts him beyond measure.

The pureblood holds onto that feeling of disgust to shore up his control. Saving Kiryuu is for Yuuki, and the exhuman is not out of danger yet.

"Yuuki, Seiren will take you home."

His sister begins to protest, looking at Kiryuu's pale face.

"I have far to go. I promise you I will stay until the other Hunters arrive. You need not worry."

Yuuki trusts him with this task; Kaname will not disappoint her, even if he would personally prefer that Kiryuu dies.

Hospitals built for vampires were rare. There is only one vampire hospital he can reach without passing over the ocean to the mainland. Most vampire doctors worked in small clinics and were occasionally summoned by noble households as private physicians. Vampires seldom required medical attention; they could heal their own wounds as long as they could drink blood and their perfect immune systems prevented human infectious diseases. Only lower ranking vampires needed semi-regular medical care; nobles required a doctor only for birthing, presenting during maturity, and palliative care for the most ancient elders. Kaname himself, as all purebloods, has never so much as visited a doctor. Kiryuu will need specialist care for a newly presented omega, and with the great distance involved, there is only one way to get him there quickly.

The atmosphere thickens and becomes heavy; the vampires in the mansion shiver while the Hunters tense. Kaname digs deep into his power and feels his consciousness disperse and spin out into many small points, his form, carrying Kiryuu, breaking apart into nearly a hundred black bats. The cloud of dark wings swirls for a moment in the room, then guided by one will, sweeps through the halls of the mansion before the astonished eyes of lesser vampires and disappears into the night.

Kuran Kaname is steadily working his way through an expensive bottle of claret, still in his stained dress shirt with the sleeves carelessly rolled to the elbow exposing strong pale forearms, and the ruined suit coat and vest discarded on a nearby chair, when his wife knocks on the door of his study.
He pauses with the bottle half-raised then knocks back another mouthful. Kaname's been expecting this meeting ever since he arrived home after dropping Kiryuu off at the hospital. The pureblood has already guessed why Yuuki's here to speak with him. Hence the alcohol.

He's always indulgent when it comes to his precious girl. Kaname will let her request whatever she wants of him, no matter what it costs to fulfill, so he puts the bottle down and calls out for her to enter.

She looks human again, with her makeup smudged by tears and wiping hands, and tendrils of her hair struggling free from pins and barrettes. Red-brown blotches mar her white dress, the same blood on his own clothing. None of it detracts from the distressed resolution showing in her face.

Her hands twist together, but Yuuki doesn't shy away from his gaze. They both know what she's here about, and that Yuuki knows that her brother won't like it, but she's going to ask regardless.

"Yuuki," Kaname says, his normal soft tone when talking to her, "You should have changed before you came to see me."

They both still smell of omega. It's as though Kiryuu is an invisible third presence in the room.

"Onii-sama, it was important so I came immediately."

She comes a few steps closer, earnestness straightening her spine.

"When Takuma Presented, you told me that he couldn't just stay by himself. That it was dangerous for an omega to remain unbonded. You said even betas couldn't be trusted because they might be working for an alpha. Takuma's the most powerful noble I know. He's the new leader of the council. He inherited his family's business empire."

Kaname turns away, unable to watch Yuuki's bright concern any longer, retreating to stand by the glass balcony doors.

"If Takuma can't be without a mate, then what about Zero! He's a Level D, and a Hunter, and he doesn't have any of those things. What happens to Zero?"

"Yuuki…" Kaname began. "Kiryuu lies under the Hunter Association's authority, so I don't know what the Association will want to do."

"But what I said before is true. Whether or not Kiryuu wishes it, he will either take a mate or be made to bond with an alpha."

Hearing his words, Yuuki has already made her decision, but she wavers a moment, knowing the weight of what she will say.

"Then…"

Yuuki screws up her courage, "Then I want to bond with Zero, as his alpha. I want us to court him, together. Please, Onii-sama, I can't let him be hurt."

Kaname hates Kiryuu for bringing this side of Yuuki forward so easily. He can barely get Yuuki to call him by his own name, no Kaname-sempai or Kaname-sama, but for Kiryuu she'll boldly face him and demand his help. For Kiryuu she'll ask, even when she knows it pains him to see her do it.

He knows he's fighting a losing battle, but Kaname tries to dissuade Yuuki from this course. He turns back toward his wife and advances, taking her hand.
"Yuuki, it doesn't have to be us. I can find an allied alpha who will treat Kiryuu well. You'll be able to see him whenever you like."

"Onii-sama, can you look me in the eye and tell me that Zero will be better off with another alpha? Can you promise me they will love him unconditionally, and that no one in the world will care for him better than we can?"

Kaname can't lie to her, and his pained face says as much. He tries a different tack.

"A pureblood attracts many enemies, Yuuki. It would be more dangerous for Kiryuu if he bonds with us."

"I thought I might watch Zero die in my arms tonight. He's a Hunter; he'll face danger whether or not he chooses us. At least if he's by my side I can make sure the danger has to go through me to get to him. I will protect Zero. That's what I've decided. Even if he doesn't want or need me to."

She smiles at him, undeterred. "Besides, you keep me by your side, Onii-sama. If it's so dangerous then why not send me away?"

"Because I am a weak, selfish man," Kaname murmured, bringing her body into the circle of his arms and burying his face in her hair.

"Then I'm selfish too," Yuuki retorts, "And even more selfish than you. Because I want to stay with you. And I want to be with Zero too. If we do this, than I can have both of the people I love in my life."

"Are you ready to care for his needs, and the needs of his children?"

"I don't know. But Zero probably doesn't know either. And right now he's alone, and he shouldn't have to do this by himself. I'm not good with books, but I'll read as many as I have to to figure out what Zero needs, and we'll learn together. And I hope you'll help me too."

Kaname holds her tighter, and closes his eyes.

"Onii-sama," Yuuki says gently, "Love is not a finite thing. It grows. I will never love you any less because I also love Zero, or Cross, or Juuri and Haruka, or whatever children we may have."

Kaname sinks down into a chair, and pulls Yuuki back against him. He has one last card to play.

"Can you bear it if he hates you?" he asks quietly, looking up into her eyes.

"Even if Zero hates me forever," Yuuki declares, holding his face in her hands, "I'll bear it, as long as it keeps him safe."

"When we parted, I didn't understand his feelings or mine. I could stay away from him because I thought it was better for both of us. He hates purebloods, and we belonged to different worlds. But now being with him isn't impossible. If I have to spend ten thousand years working for Zero's love, then I will. I'm a pureblood too, Onii-sama. I'm not letting what I want get away without taking hold of it with both hands and fighting as hard as I can for it."

"So be it," Kaname agrees, voice so quiet Yuuki can barely hear him, "We will take Kiryuu Zero as our Omega."

"Zero has to agree first," scolds Yuuki, "we can't get ahead of ourselves - we haven't even started the courtship yet!"
Then she peppers kisses on his face and nearly strangles him with a hug, and doesn't notice when Kaname says nothing in return.

Tucked away in their beds, the students of Cross Academy don't stir when a shrieking black wind howls through the trees and over the rooftops - a wind that blows through the open window of their Chairman's home, and reforms into a vampire in his study.

"Kaname-kun," Cross Kaien says from where he's seated behind his desk, perfectly unruffled, like vampires flew in through his windows every day, "please have a seat."

Kaname does, opposite where Yagari Touga is sprawled on an armchair like a lazy lion. Appearances are deceiving - Yagari's single eye glints and Cross' hair is down. Tonight he's speaking not to his former teachers, but to the co-presidents of the Vampire Hunters Association.

He matches their relaxed postures with his own, content to project the fiction - for now - that this is simply an informal courtesy visit.

"Thank you for seeing me, President Cross, President Yagari. I'm pleased to see you got my message."

Yagari speaks up for the first time, not losing his characteristic drawl, "Yes, about that. What exactly does the most powerful pureblood leader need to say to us, that he asks for an unofficial meeting that's completely off the books?"

"I think, Yagari-san, it's what you need to speak to me about."

Instantly, Yagari loses his laziness. "And what do I need to speak with you about, vampire?"

"Recent events, of a personal nature to you both, that may be outside your control but within mine," Kaname says carefully.

The two Hunters digest that statement.

"I think," says Cross, "it would be best if you spoke plainly, Kaname-kun."

The pureblood leans back in his chair.

"Kiryuu Zero is still unconscious, is he not?"

"Kaname-kun, your agents have already told you he'll be kept asleep until tomorrow night," Cross gently chides.

"Have you considered what happens when he wakes up?"

Cross steeps his fingers. "The Association has not decided on a course of action."

"Then perhaps I may offer my views on the situation?"

Cross and Yagari exchange looks; Yagari is scowling while Cross looks wary.

"Go ahead, Kaname-kun."

Kaname leans forward again. He needs to be diplomatic; his plans will go much more smoothly if the pureblood can gain their support.
"As humans, you may be unfamiliar with the politics of presenting as an omega. I doubt you have spoken with one, except for the at-that-time unpresented Ichijo Takuma, and now Kiryuu Zero."

Yagari’s weathered face tightens in a scowl at the reminder while Kaname continues.

"The vampire world has been content to let Kiryuu be considered a Hunter and to allow the Association jurisdiction over him - he held no value in the eyes of the nobles and the Senate. This is no longer true. He is now one of a protected, valued class of vampire, whatever his origins. They will seek to obtain him and bond him to an alpha."

"You now have three choices. One, you can hand Kiryuu over."

"No," Yagari growls, rejecting the possibility immediately.

Kaname graciously allows the objection to stand for the moment, and goes on.

"Two, you can imprison him in a place no vampire can reach, behind the wards of the Vampire Association Headquarters."

"Wouldn't work. Zero wouldn't be able to stand it," Yagari shakes his head.

"You're correct," Kaname confirms, "Its effects on his mental health aside, imprisoning Kiryuu is merely a temporary solution. It does not solve the problem. Kiryuu would have to spend the rest of his life, potentially hundreds of years, without ever leaving that building. And even that isn't infallible. The wards might someday be breached, or one of his fellow Hunters might betray him. Hiding Kiryuu presents similar problems."

"What is the third option?" Cross questions.

"If you truly want to deny Kiryuu to the vampires, then you will have to kill him."

"What!" Yagari roars and jumps to his feet.

Kaname ignores the one-eyed Hunter and continues on, holding Cross’ gaze.

"Which leaves you with only one remaining possibility, if you value Kiryuu Zero's life and health: he must be bonded to an alpha. When and how this happens is up to you. Know that the more you try to keep this from happening, the more likely an unscrupulous alpha will be the one to bond him, and the worse Kiryuu's situation afterwards will likely be."

"Hold on," says Yagari. "Doesn't an omega have to consent to a bonding? Zero won't agree. That makes him useless to you vampires."

"You're partly correct, Yagari-san, but your understanding of omega biology is limited."

"We've never been able to study one," Cross remarks behind sharp eyes. "If you could enlighten us, Kaname-kun."

"Very well. You are aware of the origin of purebloods? The true origin, not the fairytale vampires prefer."

According to history, purebloods originated 10,000 years ago during the strife caused by global warming. The vampires claimed they spontaneously arose from humans, but anyone with knowledge of the three dynamics and an ounce of logic could see the truth: the purebloods were the most advanced bioweapon ever designed by humankind.
They were not the deadliest; anybody could whip up a virus that killed a billion people. No, what the purebloods could do was infinitely more complex, and it could be argued, more useful.

A single pureblood, unkillable except by their own kind, could easily subdue enemy forces, Turn them and then incorporate them into their own armies, overpowering their will and controlling them with nothing but a word, without the possibility of betrayal or disobedience. If no enemy soldiers were available to be turned, a pureblood could simply breed an army instead through human females or vampire mothers, also populated by subordinates who could be perfectly controlled.

All purebloods were born Alphas, but their primal, deepest instincts were designed to respond to an Omega and rule over Betas. Which begged the question of why, if the other two dynamics didn't exist yet and were descended from pureblood-human couplings, did those instincts complement and mesh so perfectly? Because they were designed to. Because whoever made the purebloods also created the Omegas and Betas alongside them, tucked into the pureblood DNA code, in a feat of genetic engineering unequaled in the history of the world.

The Ancestor of the Kurans remembered little of those early years; he was perhaps three when someone wiser and more foresighted dropped a hydrogen bomb on the research facility. It was already too late. The immortal purebloods survived, but their creators and all of their research was left little more than slag and glass. Putting yourself back together from a few cells took time, and the purebloods simply wandered off when they had bodies again. Some of the lucky ones found homes with human parents, while others like Kaname remained alone, and the myth of spontaneous creation was born.

"We're familiar with it. What has that got to do with anything?" Yagari asks as he sits down again.

"Omegas arose as an answer to a problem accidentally caused by producing invulnerable super soldiers."

Kaname stands and begins to pace slowly back and forth as he lectures. "The problem itself was first identified among the early prototypes. Invulnerability to human infectious diseases requires an immune system exquisitely sensitive to foreign bodies and equally as good at destroying them."

"So what?"

Kaname gives Yagari a dry look. "A fetus, medically speaking, differs little from a parasite. The mother's body must keep her immune system from attacking her infant during pregnancy, or she will miscarry."

"So the first pseudo-purebloods could not reproduce." Cross looks fascinated.

"Yes. The designers found a solution, though not a good one. A vampire's body will gradually learn to 'recognize' a partner's genes as friend, rather than foe, and stop the immune system from destroying them. But immune tolerance between partners can take centuries. Even now, every live birth means many failed pregnancies came first."

"For example, Souen Ruka's mother is an alpha married to a beta husband, and she has been very publicly open about her difficulty conceiving even a single child. The problem worsens among purebloods, who must breed alpha to alpha - Kuran Haruka and Juuri spent three thousand years together and only had Yuuki and myself. Their parents were even older, and after millennia of marriage still produced just three children."

"The bonding between an alpha and an omega is a streamlined version of the immune tolerance
process allowed by their specialized biology. Completing a bond immediately and near permanently synchronizes the pairs’ immune systems through an array of biochemical markers - pheromones through scent and taste, sweat, saliva, blood, semen and so on - and guarantees a chance at a successful pregnancy.”

Yagari is squirming uncomfortably in his chair. Kaname gives him a thin quirk of his lips; the Hunter glares back like he guesses Kaname added those extra details on purpose.

"Once a year, an omega goes into season. If properly primed and attuned to an alpha, they will then go into heat. Only during those heats can an unmated omega bond, and an omega can conceive only with a bonded partner during their heat. As simple as it sounds, it's remarkably difficult. Heat is costly to an omega's body; it leaves an omega vulnerable and exhausts them, so their bodies won't go into heat if the conditions aren't perfect. When your lifespan lasts thousands of years, waiting another year for a good opportunity is better than becoming weakened during a poor one."

"Triggering an omega's heat requires precisely the right chemical sequence at exactly the right time. Their bodies require a minimum of nine months of exposure to a single alpha's pheromones to even begin the process. They must be healthy and well-fed. Stress hormones will disrupt the process, as will injury and trauma."

"One of the most vital heat triggers is intercourse while in season; without stimulation the omega's body believes it has no available partner and no heat will occur. An omega stays clear-minded while in season, but they are aggressive and as likely to murder an alpha as they are to mate with one. Raping the omega will block their heat, because it causes high amounts of stress hormones. Therefore, the omega must be a cooperative partner."

"To return to your question, Yagari-san, no, an omega does not have to consent to a bond. They only need to cooperate. Biology does not care if that cooperation was coerced or willing."

Kaname goes over to Yagari so he can stand over him while staring him in the eye.

"Do you know what happened to omegas in the time of the Ancestors, Yagari Touga?"

"There are always so many more alphas than omegas. Twenty or thirty would form an alliance, and together they would kidnap and capture a newly presented omega. Of course the omega wasn't willing! So they made the omega cooperative - by breaking their will first. Imprisonment, starvation, drugs, rape, torture - all of that and more to gain the obedient, unprotesting doll they wanted. Alpha instincts abhor harming an omega, but instinct can be overcome by avarice. Mostly, they got around it by spreading the task between themselves or ordering humans and betas to do the dirty work. Eventually, even the strongest omegas gave in after decades of abuse and torture. Then those alphas would bond the omega, once it was conditioned to helplessness and wouldn't fight them. Not all of the alphas would bond successfully, after such a sloppy process, only fifteen or twenty of them. When the omega birthed a child, as soon as it was weaned the alphas would take it away, forcing the omega back into season to carry another child. That omega would never see its children again. Most of them died after less than a century when their bodies gave out under the strain."

Yagari is white as a sheet, his single eye wide with horror.

"That…"

He has to lick dry lips to speak.

"That wouldn't happen to Zero. Don't try to frighten me. You vampires don't do that anymore."
"For calling us beasts in human form, Yagari-san, you're remarkably generous to us. It was the monarchy ruled by my ancestors that created the laws protecting omegas and their right to bond whom they wished. For thousands of years, forcibly bonding an omega earned a death sentence for the offending alpha and their children.

Under the Council of Elders and the Senate, those laws have been less strictly enforced. There have been questionable occurrences. Mysterious murders of newly bonded alphas, their young children also killed or suspiciously disappearing, any pregnancy conveniently miscarried in time for another alpha to bond the widowed omega. Courtships made into farce by death threats and blackmail against the omega's family by more powerful alphas unafraid of prosecution under the laws.

Not even a two centuries ago, a young omega and her sister disappeared from their family estate. The parents were not powerful or wealthy, and though they searched desperately, someone with both of those things was hiding their daughters. Five years later the sisters reappeared, with the omega bonded and pregnant. The omega claimed she had run away with the alpha in a love match; the sister reported she'd been held captive and her life had been threatened to force her sister to bond. The alpha's father, conveniently enough, belonged to the Senate and everything was swept under the table."

The Senate and Council had done most of Kaname's work for him, with their blatant corruption and gross cronyism. Conspiracy with the Hunters, once proven, destroyed whatever good public reputation remained in the eyes of neutral vampires. After that, even an adolescent pureblood could build a rival faction in fifty years, the opposition desperate for a leader to gather around.

"Enough, Kaname-kun. We understand that Zero is in danger."

Cross keeps his gaze fixed on the pureblood as he deliberately removes his glasses and places them on the desk.

"Why are you here tonight?"

"I know that you've contacted Shouto Isaya for help; I also know your old friend can do little. Shouto is already bonded, and he interferes little with politics, preferring to take no action. I am here to offer my help instead. I'm familiar with the Senate and have influence with the highest levels of vampire society, where the power of the Association does not reach."

"For what price?" Yagari snorts and crosses his arms.

Kaname returns to his chair, leaning back to place his hands on the chair arms and crossing his legs at the knee, before turning his attention back to Cross.

"You cannot stop Kiryuu's bonding. If you want what's best for Kiryuu Zero, I suggest you negotiate the circumstances of his bonding to his - and your - greatest advantage. Demand he be bonded - and married, for extra protection- to the alpha of your choice, in exchange for concessions from the vampires in the treaties between our races."

You ensure Kiryuu's future, the vampires can't complain you refused them, and the Hunters receive benefits from the deal, meaning Kiryuu will still be thought of as an asset and ally."

"And what will your role be in this?"

"I will help arrange the negotiations. As compensation, I would like you to refuse to use anyone but myself to oversee the meetings."

Cross tilts his head thoughtfully, "To ordinary vampires, it would look like the Association
distrusts the Senate; it will discredit them, while you alone appear to hold our trust and confidence."

Kaname says nothing, but makes a careless motion with his hands, like it was of little consequence.

"A courtship is traditional," says Cross.

"A courtship is easily manipulated without complete vigilance; better to avoid the risk."

"It could stir resentment from alphas denied a chance at an omega and put Zero in danger."

"Not if you chose a powerful enough alpha, for whom the victory would be assured."

Kaname was counting on that anger, anyway. Shirabuki would be enraged if she were denied a second omega in less than two years. Any hasty actions she takes leave him an opening; Kiryuu will be excellent bait.

Cross was staring at Kaname again, eyes hard and a hint of suspicion in his face. So he's realized where this is going.

"And who would we chose as his alpha?"

Kaname keeps his voice steady.

"Yuuki and I will bond with Kiryuu."

"Hold the fuck up!" Yagari shouts, pounding on the arm of his chair.

"You?! You think we'll trust you? In the first place, you want us to agree to an arranged marriage? Do you think Zero would want that? To be sold off like a cow? To have us make this decision for him? You think he'd want to marry a vampire? Have children with one? After what you beasts have done to him? Taken away his humanity and his family? Not to mention what you did to him personally, Kuran."

"Kiryuu can always choose to die if he doesn't like it," Kaname says offhandedly. "Since the outcome is inevitable, take the route that gives you the most control to achieve the result you desire. What better option do you have?"

None, and all of them know it.

"Why shouldn't Zero take a different partner?"

"No Level D has ever presented as an omega. Kiryuu is the first such case, and we don't know if his body is capable of fully functioning as an omega. As an ex-human, Kiryuu's fertility is uncertain, and he brings no power or wealth to a marriage. The best, more powerful potential partners won't take the risk. You'll be left with only weak alphas who know they stand no other chance at an omega. Becoming a pureblood's partner also offers him protection; no ordinary vampire would dare harm Kiryuu despite his status as a Hunter and a Level D."

"You and Zero have a history of not getting along, Kaname-kun. What reason do I have to trust you with his future?"

"I am not asking you to trust me; I am asking you to trust Yuuki. Yuuki loves Kiryuu and values his life. I love Yuuki and will do anything to keep her happy; for Yuuki's sake, no matter what my personal feelings are, I will protect Kiryuu's life and health, and Yuuki will look for his happiness.
You entrusted your daughter to me, Chairman Cross. Please entrust this matter to me as well."

"And Yuuki," Yagari asks skeptically, "has agreed to this?"

"She wishes to bond with Kiryuu."

If his sister wanted a hunting dog, then Kaname would present the mutt wearing a golden leash. Perhaps the circumstances will drive them apart; the pureblood can only hope.

Cross presses his fingers to his temples. "I would require assurances regarding Zero's treatment and his rights."

"I will require assurances regarding Zero's behavior as my spouse. We can work out those terms during negotiations."

"We will continue to seek other options."

"I would expect no less."

Kaname is not worried; he's already made sure they'll find no better offers."

"Then we are agreed?"

Cross closes his eyes. "I was prepared to kill Zero if he fell to Level E, all those years ago. I can do nothing less, now, for his life. I will propose your plan to him. What he chooses is up to him."

"Excellent. Please guard him well. I'm told there was a kidnapping attempt a few hours ago."

Slumped in his chair, Yagari buries his face in his hands.

Chapter End Notes

Let me know in the comments if there's anything you didn't understand about how omegas work in this verse, so I know what I need to explain more clearly in future chapters.

I deviated from the manga canon here about where purebloods come from, because I like my version better and Evolution Does Not Work That Way.

Immune tolerance during pregnancy is a real thing, by the way, and so is exposure to a partner's fluids preventing pregnancy complications. No, science has really suggested it helps! I can't make that stuff up.
I'm sorry this one took so long! This was the most difficult chapter yet for me to write, and I'd really appreciate some feedback if I handled the emotional buildup well. It kind of bloated and I got caught up in editing hell; I suspect that two chapters have turned into three and I had to recut. I'm still learning how to write stories and pace myself.

Anyway, I'm glad some of you liked the biology and pureblood origins in the last chapter! From an evolutionary perspective, A/B/O is not that great a system for long-lived, slow breeding mammals that practice complex courtship rituals for mate selection (cough cough us), and I'm glad I found a way to make it work.

To Guest Reviewer, who asked "Though in regards to female and male alphas (or just alpha females in general) having a hard time trying to reproduce there was no mention of surrogacy, is that not an option?"

Alpha females can both carry children and sire children, but are much, much better at siring them. Making sperm is pretty easy, but successfully creating a child in your body is a complex, precise, difficult task by comparison where everything must go right. Alpha females are less specialized than full females; their bodies can do it all, but they sacrifice some efficiency to get there because the male and female parts 'interfere' with each other. Once their bodies figure out how to carry a child they can repeat it, but it takes time, effort, and repeated failure. For example, Rima's parents are a lesbian couple; one of them is an alpha and the other a beta, and the beta carried their daughter without too much trouble. But Ruka's mother is married to a male beta, so she had to carry Ruka herself, and unfortunately she had an especially difficult time of it.

No, surrogacy is not an option for vampires for two main reasons. One, vampire biology in this verse doesn't encourage surrogates. It can take centuries for two vampire immune systems to 'learn' each other, unless they're an alpha/omega couple, and a vampire surrogate's immune system would have to 'learn' both of the biological parents. All three of them would have to live together and have sex for this to happen, which is essentially just a polyamorous relationship. With such a high chance of rejection, vampire surrogacy would be difficult, costly and almost certain to fail. Using a human surrogate would fail, full stop, because humans don't drink blood and can't process it like a vampire can, so a child with two vampire parents would starve. Two, vampires are obsessed with blood purity and bloodlines. It would be difficult to find a vampire surrogate at all, because they would want to have their own children and non-omegas will only have around two successful pregnancies ever. Nobles would be especially resistant, because their power comes from their purity, and they would want to have a child of equal purity of blood, further shrinking the pool of possible surrogates.

See the end of the chapter for more notes
Zero spends his time waiting for Cross anxiously awake, testing the limits of his mobility and reach, a little reassured now that he knows he hasn't been arrested. Not very much, but he holds onto the hope he'll be allowed to Hunt again, whatever may happen. Though still a little tired, Zero knows he won't be able to sleep any longer, and his active mind has much to ponder.

What had Itou meant with her curious statements? Was there something he didn't know? And Kuran, of all vampires, helping him? That answer Zero could guess. Kuran only helped him for one reason - Yuuki must have asked him too. Even when he knows she's a pureblood, his enemy, he's still under her obligation, isn't he? Zero's both glad and disappointed he could not speak with her. He thought he remembered her face, but the memories of those last few minutes were blanketed in fog.

What had happened to his body? Returning to those memories was like reliving hell, and he tries to think of them only in the abstract. Zero never needs medical attention, especially the serious kind from a hospital. Did the fact this was a vampire hospital mean anything? Or was he just deemed too dangerous for a human doctor?

Eventually, the Hunter turns away from increasingly wild theories, and occupies himself with more concrete concerns like planning his next steps. After injury and days of inactivity, his body must be out of condition; Zero will have to increase his training menu to compensate. Where were Bloody Rose and Artemis Rod? One of the other Hunters must have them; Cross may even return them when he comes to see Zero. Zero assembles a list of tasks he'll need to complete when he's released. He'll accept his reprimand without protest and take responsibility for his actions. If there's a tribunal, he'll take whatever punishment they deem fit. He'll need to make a public, formal apology to Yamamoto and the other Hunters on his team. Why had Yamamoto thought he'd tried to kill himself anyway? Zero wishes he could do something to salvage the Shoda investigation, but he's damaged so much already it's probably better to stay out of it. Zero's hit by a sudden thought - he might have to apologize to that disgusting vampire too. The mere idea appalls him, but Zero's the one who got himself into this, and if he has to lower himself to get the Senate off the Association's back, he'll grit his teeth and do it.

The Hunter still doesn't know what happened to him, but he feels more secure now that he has a path to follow, even though his deep disappointment with himself digs like a burr into his flesh. He doesn't delude himself that it will be easy; re-earning the Hunters' trust will be a long, slow process, but Zero is determined to work for it. He's thinking about a few friendly Hunters who might take a chance on him and work together on assignments, when he hears the sound of people just outside his room.

Hoping it's Cross, Zero tries to straighten his body, but the handcuffs make finding a comfortable position difficult, and he gives up. Being in this room is like being in a windowless monochrome box and Zero is looking forward to seeing Cross' familiar face.

It is Cross, and Master Yagari is with him, and when Zero sees them terror strikes him, because he knows something very, very bad has happened. Master looks his age, and even Cross seems ten years older; their faces are grim, and limned with exhaustion and something like grief or regret. Zero has seen Cross' face look like that only once before, on a bloody winter night when he was twelve years old and could still remember being human.

Zero can't speak, frozen by the sight of the most powerful Hunters he knows bearing the look of men who have fought a long, hard battle and lost. They each pull a flimsy plastic chair up to Zero's
bedside, and sit down. Neither of them look away from Zero, as though he's going to disappear in front of their eyes any second, though Master glares at the handcuffs when Zero shifts a little and they clink against the bedframe.

"Zero," Cross says just when the silence becomes so oppressive Zero is about to break it, "We need to speak with you. About what's happened, and what that's going to mean for your future."

Zero tentatively answers, "Is this about how I attacked Shoda? I know my actions discredited the Association. Does the Senate want me killed?"

He must have said something wrong, because Yagari looks crushed, and shakes his head.

"No, boy. Do you understand what happened to your body that night?"

Suddenly he's afraid, and a cowardly part of him wants them to stop speaking.

"No," he almost whispers.

Cross and Yagari look at each other like they're begging one another not to continue.

Cross loses, and reaches out to take his hand. "You presented, Zero," Cross says very gently. "As an omega."

A puzzled Zero frowns. "No? Level D vampires are only betas."

Zero's confused; Cross and Yagari should know better than to miss such an obvious mistake. Still, he's glad it wasn't really anything serious to be worried about.

Yagari is shaking his head.

"We know how crazy it sounds. But it's true - you really are an omega. We've confirmed it by every test we could run."

Disbelief rises in his chest, but both his guardians look so certain, and they wouldn't tell him a theory they weren't absolutely sure about.

Shock, and then numbness spreads through his heart.

"I'm sorry, Zero. We want you to know that it isn't your fault - it's not because of anything you did or didn't do - and you are not to blame yourself."

No, no, this cannot be happening. He thought he'd finally made a place for himself as a Hunter working in the Association - he wasn't happy but who gave a damn about that, who the hell needed to be happy anyway - and now his disgusting body - this disgusting vampire's body that has already betrayed him again and again - has changed him into *that* - and what filthy acts will it make him do this time -

"We'll be with you all the way kid, and we're going to make the best of this shitty situation we can."

They tell him more. About what happened that night after he passed out, and what happened while he was asleep, and they tell him if he wants to live any semblance of a normal life what he'll have to do.

What he'll have to fuck.
He argues, looking for a way out - they shoot down every objection with ease and impeccable logic, like they've had this conversation with each other hundreds of times, searching for any alternative.

His only other option is permanent sanctuary at the Association, but after some thought Zero rejects their offer. His presence would distract the other Hunters, and would use up manpower and resources which Zero cannot justify spending on a useless Level D. He could even put them in danger if a vampire attacked intending to kidnap Zero. Accepting would be unbearably selfish. And after the last Association President, Zero knows all Hunters aren't incorruptible either.

Once he's finally wound down, run out of protests and plans, denials and bargains, Master and Cross act like they aren't done. Like they're steeling themselves for something equally terrible. Something Zero isn't going to like - as if there could be anything worse than what's already happened!

Zero really isn't in the mood for more bad news.

"What else is there," Zero demands, uncharacteristically rude to his Master.

Yagari wants to shoot something, Zero can tell from the twitching motion of his hands; only a vampire makes him that cranky.

"Kuran Kaname" - Yagari's mouth twists like he's eating a lemon - "has made us, the Association, an offer. Since you'll have to bond with a vampire, he thinks we should use your bonding as a bargaining chip to amend our treaties with the vampires in our favor. And he will make sure those negotiations happen, as long as you marry him and his sister."

"As loathe as I am to admit it," Cross continues, "we have few options right now. We have made no promises. You can absolutely refuse. We are telling you only because doing this would protect you from the Senate, and of all vampires I thought that Yuuki might be the only partner you could live with."

Once upon a time, young Zero the Hunter thought his beloved parents were the most romantic couple in the world, and imagined shyly that perhaps some day he would find a girl as loving and strong as his mother to marry.

Was he allowed nothing? To have this choice stolen, after so many of his choices have been taken away? A marriage to the Kurans would be empty and meaningless. He had wanted - but it meant nothing now. He will burn this dream too, tucked in with dreams of human children that have his hair and his blurry love's eyes.

Kiryuu Zero thinks then, as he has a number of times in his life, about killing himself. He first learned that black soliloquy after a pureblood's fangs drenched his world in red madness, and it became familiar in the four years afterwards spent fighting Level E. Zero once found suicide a very comforting thought - not for his own sake, but because it was the surest way to stop his madness and hunger from destroying anyone else - though he had attempted to carry out his thoughts only once. Yuuki had stopped him then. If he decided he could not live as - as an omega, then it lurked as the silent third option Cross and Yagari refused to mention.

When the mad princess stole his humanity, Zero had fought his descent with every scrap of his will for longer than anyone believed possible. It was useless; death and madness waited for him no matter how he struggled. Why continue to fight, when giving in would have caused him less pain
and grief? Why not take his death into his own hands, regain the control over his body he had lost, make his own choice after a pureblood had taken his choices away?

It was the Hunt that stayed his hand. If Zero could save even one more human being by extending his life, then he would hold on, hold out until that final day he would join the vampires instead of killing them. Dying would have been more merciful, but Zero had never had mercy on himself.

When even the Hunt failed him, Yuki had protected Zero's life when he would not defend it himself, until he decided he couldn't make her cry anymore and had shown his Master he would struggle to the end, without taking the easy way out.

That path called Death was now further barred; No matter how much pain or suffering Zero encountered, Ichiru's last wish kept him chained to life. The gift of his brother's blood was a silent command that Zero must live, or else his brother's sacrifice was in vain. As long as Zero lived, then a piece of Ichiru lived too. Zero's desires meant nothing in the face of that; he could not destroy himself without destroying his brother. Even if his life were the most miserable existence on the planet, Zero could never harm Ichiru.

Zero could not chose to die now.

That left the choice in front of his feet.

Zero was raised as a Hunter, and they knew death and duty like they knew their own shadows. Every one of them made hard decisions, choices that haunted their nightmares, regrets they could not escape. But they made those choices because they were the only ones who could. Cross knew a Hunter's duty; he Hunted and Hunted until it sickened him so deeply he hung up his weapons for good. The man loved him as his own son, but he had been prepared to chain him up for his students' safety or to kill him if Zero fell to a Level E; Zero respected and trusted him for that. Kaito had executed his beloved brother, whose only sin was being bitten by a pureblood, with his own hands. His Master had sacrificed his eye to save Zero's life, and killed his own fiancee; Yagari, in his heart of hearts, had never wanted to shoot his apprentice or his lover, but he was also sworn to protect humans from vampires, and he would do what was necessary.

Zero would also do what was necessary.

"Would I be able to keep Hunting?"

"If it's important to you, we'll make sure it's included in the terms. Legally, you'll be considered a contractor. The vampires will demand your status as a vampire be permanently considered ahead of your Hunter blood. You will still be a Hunter, we'll have claim to you, but not as your primary identity and we'll have to cede legal jurisdiction."

Zero has one more quiet question.

"Did Yuuki agree?"

"Yes."

Yuuki, Zero knows, loves Kuran - not him. It was out of pity or lingering fondness she offered; it leaves a bitterness in his mouth. He will be Kuran's pawn again. And Kuran will not be kind.

Zero has disregarded his own desires, anything but his guilt and self-loathing, for far too long to begin listening now.

The Hunter gathers as much dignity as he can while handcuffed to a hospital bed wearing a flimsy
white gown.

"President Cross. President Yagari."

He gives each of them a nod, and then bows his upper body.

"I am a Hunter, one who guards against those who desire blood. My life, as it has always been, is
dedicated to the defense of humanity. If gaining those terms will ease our Hunt, then I agree to this
task."

"You will have to behave appropriately as a pureblood's spouse."

"As long as my Hunt does not end," Zero said with finality and worrying indifference as he
straightens.

"Kid," Yagari says, shaking him out of his reverie by putting a hand on his leg, "I need to know if
you're going to be okay doing this."

Zero lets his hair fall forward over his face, so neither of his treasured guardians can see the empty
look in his eyes, and turns his face away so they can't see his blank expression.

"I'll be fine, Master Yagari."

It's like Cross and Yagari's visit was some kind of permission everyone else was waiting for. Zero
has a dozen visitors in the space of an hour: half of his guards, to set out security protocols, Nurse
Itou, the hospital administrator, the head nurse, several of his doctors.

He makes a terrible impression: speaks too little, keeps his face blank, lacks the energy to act
interested. He doesn't care.

When he's alone, the enclosed hospital room is like an empty shell, a sucking silence. When
visitors come, everything is turbulent, overwhelming, and Zero wishes he were alone again.

Very quickly, he learns to prefer the silence.

Zero is a curiosity to these people, the strange Level D omega, and what seems like the entire
medical staff traipses in and out, doctors from every floor, eager to prod and poke and peer at him.

They all want the same thing - to pull down his blanket and lift up his clothes and pull apart his
knees and look between his thighs.

They don't ask permission.

Trapped in this cage, still manacled, he can't leave or move away. He can't even reach down far
enough to pull up the blanket when they leave. If he protests, they ignore him. Eventually he stops
trying.

He learns to flinch away from every touch of rubber gloves, from every brush of fabric and the
feeling of hands.

At some point, one of his doctors - his real doctors, the ones who are supposed to be helping him -
brings four or five medical students in with him just to stare, just to gape at what's become of him -
-and he says, "In real omega males, the testicles remain as vestigial organs, but here you'll notice
the patient has none. We think his body cannibalized them as fuel"-
Oh.

It's just one loss - violation - too much. His whole body stiffens and goes still, and Zero withdraws down, down, down into empty static and silence.

In a white building, in a white room, in a white bed, in a white gown, there is a pale boy.

He looks shrunken in on himself, curled in a ball with his knees and arms tucked up underneath his chin, and frail, the good bones under his papery skin too sharp, and washed out by all the whiteness, silver hair bleached to pale ash and skin drained the pallid bluish color of corpses by the harsh artificial lights.

He is not here.

He is drifting awake, dreaming, of things that were and will never be again.

That body, there on that bed?

Vacant. No one lives there. It wouldn't belong to him. He is elsewhere.

He is -

- with Mother and Father, drinking hot tea after coming in from the cold. Ichiru is next to him, happy, flushed. Master, not a grey hair on his head, has just come through the door, and Kaito the stroppy teenager is stamping his feet to shake off the snow behind him, already clamoring for his own tea -

Were you looking for someone?

I'm sorry. There's no one in right now. Perhaps you could come back later?

They let him go the next night. Zero has not spoken in eighteen hours. No one seems to notice.

He manages to surface long enough to thank Nurse Itou. She's shown him more consideration than anyone else in this white prison, and he owes her for that.

He doesn't remember how he got his clothes on. There's a blank spot; he's lost time. The mind protects itself from things it isn't ready to face.

Kaito arrives near dawn, leading another dozen Hunters to escort him back to Association Headquarters and the safety of the wards there. The guards have foiled seven different kidnappers in four days; Cross isn't taking any chances. If Zero didn't feel like he was watching events from very far away, he might be concerned. It's good Kaito is the one who came; his friend's accustomed to Zero's aloofness and isn't offended when he ducks away from the hand placed on his shoulder.

Kaito gives him a cloak with a deep hood. Zero dons the garment when instructed, and lets Kaito pull the hood forward until Zero's face lies in shadow, hidden, so the photographers and other spectators milling in the early morning light cannot see his features when they leave through the side door.

A solid push from Kaito against his side shoves him into the back of a minivan, and more of the Hunters pile in behind him; the rest crush themselves into a blue van with a 'recycle' bumper sticker, and some kind of delivery vehicle with the logos covered by duct tape, all three clearly
borrowed. Vampire hunting doesn't pay well, since keeping your existence secret makes convincing people to give you money difficult. Luckily, the governments of the world write the cheque, but the margin is slim and budget cuts outnumber the raises.

Zero tucks himself in the corner, pressing his body against the window to avoid touching the other occupants, and sits in silence, keeping his hood raised so the other Hunters can't see him, and he can't see the way they must be looking at him. Halfway back, it starts to snow, the thick grey clouds blocking the sun and giving the morning a gloomy atmosphere.

By the time the mismatched convoy pulls into Headquarters, hours later, the glare of the noonday sun off heavy snow drifts blinds the ex-human's photosensitive eyes. Zero waits for the other Hunters to leave the car, holding onto his solitude just a little longer until he's the last one seated and Kaito is waiting by the door.

Zero deliberately pulls down the cloak's hood when he's standing in the chilly air. If nothing else, Zero is stubborn; he won't lower his head in the sight of his peers. Contemplating the colonnaded entryway, it feels like he's been gone decades, rather than days, as though the Zero who left is not the Zero who came back. *What a ridiculous feeling*, thinks the Hunter as he strides through the door following Kaito, feeling the wards react to a vampire's aura and his taming mark flare in response, allowing him entry.

Zero keeps his eyes fixed on Kaito's back. There are too many people coincidentally passing through the halls near them, or lingering in the entrance hall speaking quietly to one another, their eyes flicking toward the vampire in their midst too often for casual glances. Hunters are too experienced to forget a vampire's enhanced hearing and speak openly where Zero can hear, though sometimes he can catch snatches of a conversation resumed when they think he's out of earshot. It's actually quite positive, or at least neutral, speculations on what the vampires might be willing to give in exchange for a vampire's bitch, that's what he is. All they do is keep popping out babies. *Gross.* / *But they let whoever fuck them right? Turn over and beg for it? Man, I wish I tasted that ass before it was off limits. I always thought he was frigid, you know? / Humans don't act so shamelessly. Only beasts offer their cunt to the biggest cock they see. I always knew what you were, vampire's whore. Nobody with that sweet mouth doesn't know how to use it.*

(The Hunters have always been disgusted by the needs and functions of his body. They disgust him too.)

"You'll be staying in the emergency barracks," Kaito tells him as they go deeper into the bowels of the building. "Master Yagari and President Cross have made it off limits to everyone, and rekeyed the local wards so only you have access. I took the spare key you gave me to your place and got your stuff. It's there. You already know the drill: don't leave the building, that would be dumb, don't leave your room without me, Master or Cross, buddy system applies, don't trust anything if you don't know where it came from, no exceptions. It'll mostly be me keeping you company. The co-presidents are gonna be tied up in the negotiations soon."

Kaito stops at an unremarkable grey door, hooking his thumb over his shoulder. "This is you."

Zero moves to pass Kaito and go inside, but his friend bars his path with an arm across the doorway, probably remembering the way Zero refused his touch earlier, and levels an earnest gaze at him.

"Hey. I know you told Master you were fine, but don't think I bought that. You *always* say you're fine. I'm shit at feelings, but I'm here. If you need to talk, we'll talk about whatever you want, as long as you need. I got tissues and my teenage daughter snots on me every time we watch a sad movie. I'm prepared. Nothing you could say would make us not friends. If you want me to not to
ask any questions right now and bring you beer and chocolate, then I know a convenience store. But I won't let you get away scot free. You're like a snail in a shell. If I don't pry you out, you'll hide your soft underbelly forever. Got it?"

Zero startles himself with the ghost of a laugh, almost painful. "Yeah," he says, "I get it."

"Good," says Kaito, "now get some sleep," and this time he lets Zero go in and shut the door.

The emergency barracks remain vacant except during natural disasters and war; as such, they're just as spartan as Zero's apartment, and better heated. Zero picks the bottom bunk bed as far from the door as he can get, out of direct line-of-sight. A cardboard box just inside the door holds most of Zero's worldly possessions, including, Zero is pleased to see, all of his confiscated gear, Bloody Rose, and Artemis Rod.

Zero will need to speak with Kaito about paying the rent on his apartment; the Hunter knows he will never live there again, but the stubborn part of him isn't willing to let it go, because that would be like admitting defeat. Left with nothing else to do, Zero unpacks and explores the attached shower room and toilets, until finally he can't put off sleep any longer with petty tasks.

He goes to bed in his day clothes. He refuses to think about why. Eventually, he drops off into uneasy sleep.

The pair of young silver-haired twins skip hand in hand through the snow, identical as two reflections, perfectly indistinguishable down to the last eyelash and freckle -

- a gust of cherry blossom scented wind breaks them apart, tearing his hand away, and when he opens his eyes again his twin is older and not so identical anymore, but the same face looks back at him. He reaches out to touch the cheek underneath matching lavender eyes-

- to find his fingers touching only cold glass. In the mirror, Ichiru smiles sadly. Cracks spiderweb the glass; Zero cries out and jumps back, fearful it was his touch that broke the mirror-

- but no, the darkness shifts, and he was wrong, it's him in the mirror and Ichiru looking on outside with pity, he's breaking into pieces, fragments of flesh snapping off, he cradles the shard of his other eye in his palm, the doubled gaze frozen in horror as the fragile edifice erodes shard by shard, his mouth too splintered to scream-

And his body wakes, sweating his terror to the fast rhythm of fear beating through his veins. Zero sweeps his bangs back and swings his feet over the side of the bed; his feet are freezing on the tile floor, and outside the humid air of his blankets the room is chilly. Zero cares for none of it; the dream still lingers, and with hurried steps the Hunter enters the shower room.

The showers in the emergency barracks are communal; shower stalls line the walls, and a row of sinks bisects the center of the room. Across from the door, high frosted glass windows line the upper part of the wall. They let in the moonlight now, giving the room a bright glow when the light hits white tile and mirrors.

Zero stands in the doorway, holding still, breathing shallowly, but begins moving again, deeper into the room with deliberate steps. He removes his clothes piece by piece, starting at the hands and feet, and moving inwards. He does not look down or lower his chin; his body moving by touch and instinct, until he stands nude, transfixed, in front of the single full length mirror in the center of the room.

He's lost so much weight is his first thought, keeping his eyes from going any lower. His ribs stick
out; his belly hollows inward, his clavicle juts outward. He's always been thin, but now all of his bones show, no longer hidden behind muscle and fat. It's easy to find the new curved shape of his pelvis, where before it was angular. The shape of his nipples has also changed: enlarged, rounded, softened. The skin of his cheeks is as smooth and as hairless as it was in childhood; Zero hasn't had to shave since he'd woken up, though it had been days. Some essential character in him has changed - there's a new androgyny in the planes and proportions reflected by the mirror.

Zero follows the lines of protruding bones with his fingers, traces the shape of his hips beneath his palms, runs his hands over his arms, across his cheeks, and down his belly like it's foreign soil, like he's learning himself, still shying away from one part of his body.

He must do this; he cannot run forever.

Zero takes a deep breath, and lets himself look at the place he's been avoiding, the dark hollow between his thighs. He's thoroughly average for a male human. Had been. He tries to explore this part the same way he had the rest, dispassionate and clinical, but inquisitive hands freeze in the air just when they're about to touch. He chokes, gags, shakes, compromises, widening his stance so he can see farther in the mirror and holding his hands up and away from his body like a surrender. There's no scar underneath the base of his penis. Somehow he expected a scar, proof of his half-castration. Just beyond, in shadow, there's the merest suggestion of a split in the flesh, and suddenly Zero can't do this anymore.

This is supposed to be his body, pale-skinned, the right hair, the right eyes.

Who is this ghost in the winter moonlight, watching him from the mirror?

He doesn't know that pale boy.

Zero was wrong. The person who left on the mission that night is not here, in this room. The person who came back is a stranger.

There is a vampire in the mirror.

_This is us_, it tells him. The places in his brain that map his body were rewritten, that night, to match his new parts. Nothing is physically wrong with his body, the vampire says. _We are as we should be._ The human objects.

He's wearing the wrong shape, sewn into someone else's flesh, a stranger in his own skin. It's wrong - the hands, the arms, the shoulders, the feet, the legs, the torso, the - all of it!

He wraps his arms around himself, pressure tightening like a band around his chest, breath quickening. His eyes burn.

When he was Turned, Zero thought there was no way his body could betray him any further, then by making him one of _them_. He holds a hand up in the moonlight, turning his tainted flesh this way and that.

It's disgusting. He hates it. Hates that person mocking him in the mirror, pretending to be him.

With a yell, Zero surges toward that hateful doppleganger and screams at the figure in the mirror, slapping his palms against the wall on either side so hard the tile cracks. Again and again, until his hands bleed and he needs to take a breath, letting his forehead knock the freezing glass.

There is the sound of someone crying, bitter choked sobs echoing off moonlight and porcelain.
Ichiru, if you saw me now, in this body that is no longer human, would you regret saving me?

Kaito is right. Cross and Yagari are soon buried in negotiations, and the duty of bringing his meals and taking him out for walks falls most often on Kaito. His guardians come when they can, and visits are always brief, but Zero treasures the effort. Kuran came through with his promise; negotiations were arranged almost as soon as the Co-Presidents requested them. That consoles Zero; at least what he is about to do will not be worthless.

Zero spends his time outside his makeshift quarters, escorted by his ever-present shadow Kaito, in one of two places: the training rooms, or the archives. He memorizes the times when the rooms are mostly empty and the other Hunters aren't around to stare, and drags Kaito behind him to early morning research sessions and midnight spars.

Poor Kaito! His sempai already spends too much time away from his family, and now Zero is adding to his burden. Kaito seems to be taking his revenge by stuffing Zero with so much homemade food (not by Kaito, thank Orion) that he will gain back all the weight he lost. It makes Zero feel nauseous and sick, accustomed to small, austere meals that barely eased his hunger, but if it makes Kaito happy he'll stuff himself to bursting. He promises himself he'll eat properly again once Kaito's satisfied.

Zero wants to return to peak condition as soon as he can. It's a pointless endeavor - what does he need to regain his fitness for? Zero cannot Hunt, but it gives him a goal - however meaningless - to strive towards, and an outlet for his restless energy and frustration. Life as a prisoner grinds on him; training works as a remedy to his depression and listlessness. The single-minded focus required when handling weapons blocks thoughts of anything else; the world narrows down to the needlepoint of a single moment and one's course becomes simple, a matter of action and reaction, like water flowing down a hill. The exercises remind him that he is Hunter, and that he is good at something, and that his skills cannot be taken away from him, no matter what. On the worst days, Kaito takes one look at him and somehow knows, and they go down to the gun range so Zero can take comfort from the straightforwardness of hitting targets he can reach.

But mostly, like today, they spar together on the practice mats, Kaito with a bamboo staff and Zero with Artemis Rod. Artemis has never come to his hand as easily or willingly as Bloody Rose, though it has never shocked him or betrayed him since Cross placed it in his hand. Once, it even unveiled its scythe form to save its life; Zero rubs fondly over the handle whenever the memory comes to him, as if thanking it. The Artemis Rod is an ancient, potent weapon made with unmatchable craft, and the Hunter wants to wield it with all the skill it deserves. He does not feel he's achieved that state yet, and future opportunities to improve his mastery could be rare.

It's when they're sprawled panting together after a spar, over four weeks into the treaty meetings, that Kaito loses his patience waiting for Zero to talk and ambushes him.

"So," he says after gulping half a water bottle, "you're some kind of special shiny vampire now. How does that make you feel?"

Zero resurrects his famous glare - wattage fully restored after the recent slump - and lets Kaito know exactly how impressed with the situation he is by taking up Artemis Rod and moving into a ready position.

"Okay, if it makes you feel better to kick my ass while we have this conversation, my ass is presented for kicking," Kaito says as he falls into the same stance.

Zero scowls and admits, "I feel the same way I did when I was Turned, except better because
nobody died."

The ex-human begins a flurry of blows that clack as their weapons connect, until Kaito pins his staff in a lock. "I'll pretend your standards aren't shit. So you're crushing all your feelings down and making yourself push us away - don't get distracted," the elder scolds, driving Zero back against the wall with a series of strong strikes, bearing down with his greater weight.

Zero grits out a response,"What's your point? I need to deal. You all won't be around anymore anyway. I'm moving in with the bloodsuckers I whored myself out to."

Kaito's voice goes breathy with strain as Zero challenges the pin, but he hangs on.

"One, a pack of bloodthirsty vamps won't be able to keep us away from you, cause we're Hunters, so just get it out of you head that we're going anywhere. You're stuck with us. Two, your choice was mature, and practical, and will help lots of people, and in no way, shape or form makes you a whore. Who the fuck told you that crock of shit?"

Kaito lets Zero up, Kaito's first win of the day, but he doesn't look satisfied. Before he can say anything further, a voice interrupts.

"Takamiya, Kiryuu," the weaponsmaster calls out, "you're needed in the President's office. Clean up and go."

The negotiations are complete.

The news brings a choking feeling in his throat. Zero is staring into an abyss, one he's willingly walking above, balanced on a narrow plank, and the way back is gone. He has no choice left but to go forward.

Over the past month, Cross and Yagari had brought him armfuls of papers to go over, wanting his opinion and counsel over the personal terms of Zero's arrangement. He always told them the same thing: if it bought better agreements, Zero would give it to them. He suspects they disregarded his words at least some of the time; it touches him deeply just how concerned they are for him, painstakingly outlining every detail and contingency. The Hunter left the larger public treaty provisions to his superiors; they knew what would do the most good and where the greatest need lay.

He just needs to know one thing.

"Was it worth it?"

Cross looks at him over his spectacles, "We received modest yet meaningful concessions as part of the terms of your marriage. The Senate wouldn't touch the core rights and obligations, but we expected that. Mostly we got things that are important to us but don't matter to the vampires, things we would have needed to bargain away other vital rights to gain under normal circumstances. Plenty of other small alterations in our favor - expanded scope of offences, higher penalties, more freedom to intervene. Our greatest gain is the right to prosecute actions where it can be inferred with a high degree of certainty that a vampire is indirectly endangering human lives. We could go after Shoda now with the cooperation of the vampires - because of his arms dealing, or possibly the drugs if we could link him to overdoses - without needing him to personally harm anyone first. We'll have to test the limits of how far we can push our authority, but it's more than we ever had before."

"I don't know if you could say that's worth it, Zero. I can say good will come of this, but even
knowing that’s true I hate what you had to sacrifice in exchange. I think I might even trade our gains, despite knowing lives could be lost, if it would spare you.”

Zero nods, and that's answer enough.

They go through the terms Zero will abide by one last time.

The Kurans are not allowed to inflict any mental or physical harm on him, including through neglect, or passively allow him to be hurt by others; neither is Zero allowed to threaten or harm his new spouses; the same terms apply to Zero's children for both parties. He cannot be denied any of the normal rights of a bonded omega or a married partner because of his Hunter blood or Level D status. He cannot be forbidden to Hunt, unless with child or in season; the Association may only ask, not order Zero's cooperation. In return, he is required to conduct himself as befits a pureblood's bondmate and spouse and fulfill the necessary duties and obligations to the best of his abilities. His legal status is permanently changed to fall under the vampires’ authority before the Hunters'.

There's much more detail - the Hunters have even set agreements for what happens to Zero if both the immortal Kurans die before him - but those are the most important points.

Now all that remains is the treaty signing - the same act that will seal his fate and bargain away his future.

If humans belong to the day, and vampires own the night, then what of a Hunter, who moves beneath both sun and moon?

Now is their time, thinks Kuran Kaname, the dusk and the dawn, where the night of the vampire and day of humanity mingle, ephemeral, fleeting, slipping like water from a sieve or grains in an hourglass.

The signing ceremony amending the treaty is being held in neutral territory - the human world - at a very high profile remote mountain resort catering to the elite and the wealthy. The human operators were always puzzled when a large number of well-dressed, important looking, inhumanly attractive people gathered together, but there was only so much that could be done to disguise that many vampires and neither side would agree to meet in a more hidden place controlled by their uneasy co-conspirators. Established ahead of time, the quota of people both parties were allowed to bring also had to be equal and fair, so neither party could overpower the other, another precaution merited by experience.

The scenery had been beautiful during the long car ride winding up switchbacks and narrow mountain roads, a necessary bit of window dressing when moving in the human world. As he viewed mountain vistas and picturesque forests suitable for an ink painting from the brush of a master, Kaname had the leisure to contemplate his future plans after this stage of his labors ends.

The ample time and pleasant sights had also granted the pureblood a chance to unpick his feelings about his own star role in this evening’s events. There's the satisfaction of a plan come to fruition, and of his victory over Kiryuu, but also the irritation and jealous anger of knowing Kiryuu is equally the punishment of that success.

When Kaname resolved to achieve Yuuki’s desire, he spared no effort or expense, working tirelessly first for the negotiations, and then to arrange the ceremonies to bind Kiryuu to her side. The pureblood has more or less resigned himself to dealing with the exhuman for the near future, and the thought brings him only exasperation, anger and disdain. Kiryuu is the last omega Kaname would have chosen for himself. At least his patience only needs to last a few centuries. D-rank vampires never lived past three or four hundred, their thin human blood unable to extend their
lifespans any further, going brittle and snapping like dry deadwood.

Acquiring Kiryuu is not without merit. The white knight is a powerful piece, and Kaname has uses for him. He will be Yuuki's guard again, permanently. His enemies will fear that Kaname now wields a notorious Hunter as an anti-vampire assassin. Kiryuu will be tempting bait for both the Senate and Shirabuki Sara, or anyone else who tries to strike at him. Such a pity that his utility is lessened as an omega; he can no longer be played so freely or inconspicuously.

Kaname can admit Kiryuu has his virtues. He can be trusted, unequivocally, with Yuuki's safety and well-being; there are vanishingly few people Kaname trusts with his most precious person, and Kiryuu is one of them, for all they despise one another. Kiryuu resists manipulation no matter the source, so his enemies will find Kiryuu difficult to use against him. And Kiryuu is not a plotter, so if the ex-human did try to betray him, Kaname can be certain the challenge will come head-on.

For the next ten months, Kaname has resolved to do whatever is necessary to bond Kiryuu, and he takes on the burden of the D-Rank's presence only because he knows how happy it will make Yuuki. After that, Kaname can put Kiryuu aside and ignore him, unless his wife wishes them to interact. Yuuki is free to use Kiryuu - or not use him - as she wishes; it doesn't matter one way or another to him.

After all, this what young couples who want practice for their own children do - they buy a dog. Yuuki's silver hound, Kaname hopes, will distract from the...deficiencies in their own marriage.

(A tiny part of him wishfully imagines that bringing Yuuki and Kiryuu together will resurrect those days when she laughed and fought playfully, exuberance and vigor spilling over in every movement.)

Yuuki had wanted to attend today's ceremony too, but it requires only the Head of the Kuran Family to be present, and Kaname intends to put off the meeting between Kiryuu and his wife until unavoidable. She knows it was Kaname who suggested today's events, but not quite the persuasion necessary to achieve it. Yuuki believes Zero willing, when Kaname knows the ex-human is merely desperate.

Speaking of said ex-human, Kaname has not seen him yet, though the public reading of the amendments is nearly finished, after which Cross, Yagari, the Senate delegates and himself will all sign the official copies. Zero is not required to sign or witness anything, though he is the catalyst that brought all these important people together in one room. Perhaps he prefers not to watch as his guardians sell him off to the vampires and he loses the last of his autonomy.

The Senate delegates sign quickly, swift strokes of the pen covetous and eager. Today they deny the Association their best Hunter as well as acquire a new omega, and even better if he turns out to be defective and their pureblooded adversary is stuck with him.

Kaname is careful to keep a serious, neutral expression as he puts pen to paper, his signature flowing elegantly from the nib of the fine ink fountain pen he's bought just for today, inscribed with the date, a momento of the moment he acquired Kiryuu Zero for his own.

Yagari clenches his jaw as he signs in a messy scrawl, pressing too hard on the paper like he can harm to the vampires in front of him through sheer will and sympathetic magic. Cross signs slowly, as though he's waiting for a miracle to charge through the doors and demand he halt. It doesn't come, and Cross slowly puts down his pen, like he's just signed his foster son's death warrant instead of his consent to a political marriage and bonding. The gathered Hunters and vampires clap politely; each side has gained something it desires and will be pleased to walk away with the spoils.
Not yet though. The terms of the treaty amendments have already been voted on and ratified by the Senate; the new version came into force as of the moment that both parties authorized it. But one last formality remains tonight.

"Kaname-kun," Cross says quietly at his elbow, eccentricity and vigor hidden today behind gravity and resignation, "We will be waiting for you in half an hour at the mountaintop room."

Snow-dusted stone lanterns illuminate the steps ascending the steep mountain path, unneeded by vampire eyes, and the sun is just the barest fingernail of orange fire on the horizon when Kaname, clothing changed to dark formal ritual attire, climbs toward the lonely building perched at the top. The pureblood is flanked by retainers wearing black robes bearing the nine orchid kamon of the Kuran family on both sides of the chest and the middle of the back. A crowd of vampires flows behind them, hushed with excitement.

Surrounded by sacred forest, their destination is built in the traditional style with raised wood floors, paper sliding doors and a tile roof, lit by the gentle light of paper lanterns, easier on sensitive vampire eyes than electric lamps. The stunning view of the valley below, green and thickly forested with evergreen conifers blanketed in snow, and of the stars above, skies winter crisp and clear of city lights, cradles the wooden structure between earth and sky, an architectural masterpiece.

Kaname strikes the bell suspended from an ancient tree three times, letting each ringing echo go quiet before striking bronze again with the mallet. Afterwards, he may step onto the porch, slide open the paper screen, and enter.

The Hunters are gathered at the far end of the room; there is no formal uniform for a Hunter, but each wears their best hunting gear, all vaguely similar in trousers and a good overcoat, weapons polished to a deadly shine. Kaname has no eyes for them - the unerring instinct of an alpha has drawn him to the lone omega in their midst.

His new intended looks healthier, though still thin; this appeases the alpha, whose last memory of Kiryuu was handing an ill omega over to other hands. The pureblood's instincts, confused because Kiryuu has fed from his throat, seem to think he's courting the Hunter. Thankfully, Kaname cannot smell Kiryuu, and the alpha stays silent; the Hunter must have cast many layers of those charms to hide his scent.

Kiryuu wears an obviously new, expensive cream wool overcoat buttoned up to this throat, and an enamel pin with the Hunter crest affixed to the folded lapels; pale grey tailored slacks peek out from underneath the coat's hem. The coat must be a gift; Kiryuu would never buy such a thing for himself, as careless as he is of his own appearance. Probably Cross and Yagari jointly gifted it; the good taste speaks of Yagari, while Cross has more than enough money to live comfortably, a side effect of long life and good management.

Gathered together like this, it's easy to observe the common characteristics that mark them as Hunters. They're taller than average, but no so much that it's noteworthy; Yagari Touga towers over his peers with his atypical height. Overmatched in every physical way, it was speed and stamina, not strength, that led to a Hunter's victory, and their body shape naturally tended toward a trim, functional efficiency lending a sinewy strength. Cross and Kiryuu both embody that type - lean, slim, wiry, with a light frame and dexterous hands. Like endurance athletes, when Hunters put on muscle it packs on subtly rather than making them bulky. Yagari again has a heavier build than normal for a Hunter - Kaname suspects he has mid-content rather than high content Hunter blood, though from his looks you would call him high content. Purebred Hunters, far from any recent human ancestry, are often unusually attractive, but lack the unnaturally perfect vampire beauty.
Beyond the physical, it was in the controlled way the Hunters moved and held themselves, keenly alert and observing everything around them.

Surrounded by Hunters in browns, greys and blacks, Kiryuu in his cream coat emitting a vampire's aura stands out to both the eyes and the senses of all the spectators watching. He is like a lone white stag grazing in a field of muddy cattle, a snow-colored gyrfalcon perched among plainer brown hawks, an arctic wolf circled by a pack of grey wolfhounds.

Kaname has admitted to himself, both now and in the past, that Kiryuu is unusually attractive, even for a vampire. A D-rank gained a little beauty when turned, but Kiryuu has been indistinguishable from a noble rank vampire since before he was sixteen years old. The most critical eye could find no fault with his even, fine features and the clean shape of his jaw, or see any flaw marring his white skin, luminescent like moonglow. His coloring is unique among both Hunters and vampires; even the Ancestor of the Kurans has never encountered purple eyes before, except glaring out at him from a Kiryuu's face. The Hio are known for their white locks, and some vampires like Seiren and Kurenai Maria inherit grey hair, but no born vampire can boast that shade of silver.

All vampires possess beauty, a flawless allure meant to lure human meals into letting their guard down, a pretty trap for the unwary fly who confused beauty with goodness. But in Kiryuu it was intensified, made aching and sharp. It was the fault of his human ancestry; the mere possibility of flaw made the absence of any imperfection more shocking. The beauty of a born vampire was a given; the sun set, water flowed, rain fell, a vampire's form was perfect. But what was mundane in a vampire became a miracle in Kiryuu's face. How many humans had to be born before such a rare specimen appeared? Millions? Billions? It was like creating flawless diamonds in a lab, and then finding a raw, perfect gem spit from the molten core of the planet in a pile of dross. Or like growing a thousand cultured pearls - even, round, and perfect by design - and then prying open the mouth of a wild clam to discover the natural pearl lying inside, nacreous sheen a quirk of chance, only providence creating such a perfect orb, after opening ten thousand empty ones. Its birth was a miracle; its existence an impossibility that defied fate. This quality, a faint trace of uplifted humanity, gave Kiryuu a matchless, exotic air.

Kiryuu meets his gaze squarely, turbulent emotion and challenge behind his habitual impassive aloofness, and their eyes lock. Neither of them blink until they are forced to break gazes as Zero is led to a low lacquered ebony table in the center of the room and seated between Cross and Yagari, who are standing in for Zero's mother and father. Kaname steps forward to seat himself on a cushion on the opposite side, his status as Family Head granting him a place at this table.

"I am Kuran Kaname, Eldest of the Kuran bloodline. I request of Kiryuu Zero's family to accept our offer of marriage and let there be a joining between our two lines."

"We accept the offer of the Kuran Family and release our ward into your guardianship. Please treat him with care."

"Then our betrothal agreement is sealed, and the courtship of Kiryuu Zero has ended."

Kaname gestures one of his retainers forward, and they kneel by the Hunters' side of the table, offering a silver tray covered by a black cloth.

"As a gesture of goodwill and a token of regard, I wish to offer the omega who will become part of my house gifts to express my esteem."

The betrothal ceremony ends with an exchange of symbolic gifts between the two families. The omega's family offers nothing, their child considered their unmatchable, priceless gift to the newly betrothed alpha. The gifts offered by the alpha's family strive to match that value in some small
way, a purely symbolic gesture acknowledging (but never paying off) the alpha's permanent debt to the omega's parents, and are enormously costly. The ability to afford such an expense is a sign of the alpha's status and ability to provide for their spouse, and can add up to the equivalent of several million dollars. As a pureblood vampire and a member of the most powerful pure-blooded family who once ruled the vampires as kings, Kaname's array cannot be anything less than impressive.

Because Kaname and Kiryuu are acting as representations of the vampire nation and the Hunter's Association, many of the offered gifts are actually meant for the Association and not for Kiryuu personally, the matrimonial pair merely a conduit and a pretext for the return of valuable artifacts in a way that avoids political fallout. Kaname hands over nearly fifty Named anti-vampire weapons, either stolen or looted, as well as over two dozen significant artifacts, all of which would cause Uncomfortable Questions to be asked if the previous owners admitted the provenance.

After the handover of political materials, they move to Kiryuu's bride price and trousseau. Because many of the customary gifts are representative or symbolic, Kaname departs slightly from the traditional wording to explain to the Hunters what they mean. A bonded omega requires an entirely new wardrobe, for example, and a red silk robe represents a promise to provide it. A gold-tasselled rice paper scroll with an ink painting of a house represents the home Kaname owns that Kiryuu will live in. A golden bowl filled with pomegranate seeds represents fertility and the promise of providing children to fill that home. A triad of painted fans, one in gold with a phoenix in flight and two in white with twisting dragons, represent the companionship and faithfulness of the spouses. A red lacquered box intricately carved with trees, vines and flowers holds many compartments filled with small cakes and delicacies for good luck, joy and long life.

Outlined during the negotiations, Kiryuu's wedding garments are still being sewn and will be ready for him to wear next month at the wedding. Normally, the clothes would be completed already and have pride of place at the betrothal ceremony, but with so little time to prepare Kaname must offer an embroidered silk ribbon in their place. The bride price itself is presented with special flourish, in a red envelope tied shut with gold and silver threads; Kaname enjoys watching Yagari and Cross' eyes bulge at the amount, one of the largest ever offered for an omega.

Then Kaname rises and comes forward, followed by the last three attendants carrying covered trays, and the shocked Hunters refocus their attention back on the ceremony.

"The final gift of a betrothal ceremony is presented directly to the omega. If Kiryuu-kun could come forward, please."

Kiryuu, called on for the first time tonight to have any effect on the proceedings, comes towards the pureblood with what looks like reluctance, wariness, and partly relieved boredom. If Kaname could not smell the tantalizing thread of Kiryuu's scent now that the omega stands in close proximity, he would swear it was the same ex-human Hunter as always, Kiryuu sending him a hard look as if to say, 'I'm here, vampire. Now what do you want?'

Kaname allows himself a pleased, superior smirk and Kiryuu's face tightens in return.

"There is one representing each of the partners, and you are meant to wear them now as part of the ceremony."

The first attendant kneels down at Kaname's side, head tucked down and eyes locked on the ground with his tray raised above his head. At the pureblood's signal another one darts forwards and whisks away the covering.

In a case of black velvet rests a Hoseki. It is good-sized, but not so large it overwhelms the wearer's
forehead, made in the shape of a circle composed of a crescent moon with its horns tipped upwards to embrace a rayed sun. The sun is made of carnelian and iridescent fire agate gems set in gold, while the moon is made of flashing white opals set in platinum; the moon's underbelly is fringed with tiny seed pearls.

Kiryuu refuses to lower his head when Kaname takes the Hoseki from its case; the pureblood has to clip it into soft silver hair with Kiryuu's gaze boring a hole into the side of his head. The alpha rumbles with pleasure at touching Kiryuu even so briefly. The Hoseki suits him, drawing attention to his eyes without weakening their strength.

In the next velvet box is a ring, meant to personify Yuuki as the Hoseki symbolized Kiryuu. Vampires did not exchange engagement rings, but Yuuki requested her token take that shape as a reminder of the human traditions she and Kiryuu were raised in. It's a simple, tasteful design with a very masculine feel, a white gold band studded with a circle of small, evenly spaced diamonds set in a channel running through the middle of the band.

Kaname slides it onto the fourth finger of Kiryuu's right hand, jealous of the fact his wife is presenting another man with a ring even by proxy, the same way she gave him the yellow gold marriage band with three large square diamonds Kaname wears on his left hand. Kiryuu's expression is inscrutable, and he simply stares at the ring before curling his left hand around his right to hide it.

"You'll need to remove your coat," Kaname orders, jolting Kiryuu out of his contemplation.

Kiryuu shrugs out of his overcoat slowly, clearly unwilling, material pooling at his elbows as he grudgingly peels off his hunter identity; Cross comes forward to take it from his foster son. The fine white cotton shirt underneath, with its high boat neck and long sleeves, just barely satisfies dress standards for an unmated omega.

The pureblood's next expression must give something away, because Kiryuu's eyes suddenly sharpen as if he suspects the item being unveiled in the last, largest box Kaname has prepared.

Kaname's offering is a necklace. The choker is as wide as four of Kiryuu's fingers, covering most of his throat when worn, the band a flexible lattice of gold links and tiny faceted rubies, diamonds and emeralds. Just under the chin, the top is lined with rounded ruby finials, and at the bottom edge dangle more pear-shaped rubies like drops of blood. At the center is a square plaque, like a buckle, with a large ruby in the center and a smaller diamond at each pole.

It's a collar. A golden, begemmed, extravagant dog collar.

Kiryuu glares openly, heedless of the crowd and the gross transgression he commits by turning such an expression on a pureblood by their inferior.

Kaname ignores whispers from the watching vampires horrified and angered by the exhuman's disrespect. They understand nothing, incapable of reading the message sent by his gift. They see only the expense and the beauty. But Kiryuu can see it, understands what Kaname is saying, and he's white with his blind rage, clenching his hands and shaking with it as Kaname latches the necklace shut around his neck.

Kiryuu Zero with Kaname's collar around his neck - Kaname is high on the taste of victory, the image marred only by the taming brand on the side of his neck. Perhaps the next year will be bearable after all.

Then Kiryuu locks eyes with the pureblood as he deliberately brings Yuuki's ring to his mouth and
kisses it, and suddenly Kaname is struggling against his own rage.

On occasion, even the Ancestor of the Kurans is wrong.

Chapter End Notes

I hope I explained Zero's decision making process well enough.

Thank you guys for all of your support. Please let me know if you have any more questions, I am happy to answer them!
There's a roaring in his ears, like being deafened after standing beside a ringing bell sounding the midnight hour.

"What is this?" Zero asks dully, staring at the ritual paraphernalia laid out in the room.

"Kuran wants us to take off your taming mark," answers an unfamiliar Hunter drawing out the ritual circle for the protective wards.

Zero covers the side of his neck protectively. "What for?"

Taming was not a gentle process on a vampire. The Hunters who applied Zero's mark had to hold him down so his thrashing didn't ruin the work, and it took hours to ink such a large tattoo, stopping to layer in the taming and control spells. Then they set him free, his execution sentence written on his throat.

Each time he went to Headquarters it felt like everyone's eyes were staring at it, a visible mark of his shame and disgrace in front of his peers, the evidence of his tainted body, his loss of humanity, his otherness. They could look at his branded neck and know what he was.

Whenever he looked at himself in the mirror, and his eyes caught on the stark contrast of black ink on pale skin, his subconscious whispered 'ah, I am a vampire', and then the memories of that night rose up from the black, lurking like a thief in the dark. It was a whetstone for his hatred, a constant painful reminder of what he'd lost, and what he could dread losing in the future, the reason the mark was needed.

Zero avoided mirrors.

He'd grown around its heavy weight, like a tree around a stone. The mark is part of him now. Zero doesn't want to lose any more parts of himself, even the painful ones.

"Why do I need to do this?"

Zero holds Cross by the wrist before he's realized the man was trying to touch him. Cross' eyes are wide and a touch startled as Zero hastily releases him and moves away to wrap his arms around himself.

"Kaname-kun requested we remove it because the taming mark restricts vampire powers and
controls your vampire side. He's concerned how it might affect your body...and your children. As a vampire, I think Kaname-kun also doesn't like the idea of restricting any vampire's powers. It's a legitimate concern. We can't tell him no without good reason. I convinced him we can alter it instead of completely removing it. We'll have to strip out everything but the protective functions that allow you to pass through Hunter wards and spells unharmed. The tattoo ink itself will fade without the preservation spells, but you can keep part of the underlying spell if you want, Zero."

"I want to keep the whole thing," he persists stubbornly.

Cross leads him into the corner, and lowers his voice. "I know Zero, and I'm sorry, but I have less room to make demands now. This isn't all bad. You'll still be welcome here and able to enter the Association whenever you like. It won't make you less of a Hunter. And...maybe it's better, if the vampires aren't reminded of your origins so obviously. I want you to have the best chance at happiness you can, Zero, and if you can't be happy I want you to be content, or at least not in pain. And we both know that wasn't true before all this happened."

Zero bows his head in shame. He'd tried to hide it from Yagari and Cross - his pathetic life, pared down to the bone. In his guilt, he allowed himself only what was absolutely necessary, and he denied himself all else as punishment. Penance - exacted from his body for his weakness, his failure, for his existence. For being the last alive, when everyone else was dead.

"Alright," Zero meekly accedes, "but I will never be happy with vampires," and refuses to look up so he can't see Cross' hurt expression.

The Hunters don't have to hold him down this time. He's not twelve years old anymore, and he's tasted entirely new grades of pain since then.

Zero armors himself in his bitterness and loss, anger still running hot from his recent humiliation at the betrothal ceremony, and clenches his muscles so tightly he doesn't even flinch at needle and spell.

Afterwards, Zero flees to the Archives to avoid speaking to Cross again, pressing the heel of his hand hard against the angry, inflamed skin of his neck, hoping to lick his wounds in private.

One good thing to come of the betrothal ceremony - Kaito has been relieved of his babysitting duties. It's a good thing too; Zero thought he might die of overeating if Misao kept trying to feed him, Kaito's wife generous despite how the duty obligated her husband to spend so much time away from his family. She was a good woman, and she calmly kept Kaito in line with ease. It gladdens him that Kaito found someone like her; if he can't watch over his sempai any longer, at least Zero leaves him in better hands. And Zero could tell it healed something in Kaito to exorcise his childhood by giving his children all the love he'd been denied.

According to his Master, by holding the public betrothal Kuran essentially 'staked a claim' on Zero, and no ordinary vampire would dare touch a pureblood's property, especially not someone who belonged to a Kuran. Zero was now off limits to anyone without a death wish. The two of them had identical disgusted expressions the entire conversation. Zero still can't leave the Headquarters building, but he has gained more freedom to move around and can go anywhere he wants without an escort. It improves his mood just a little, until he thinks about how his wedding is coming inexorably afterwards, nothing left but to count down the days.

The Hunter, as always, feels calm wash over him at the smell of leather, paper and dust as he pushes open the oiled doors of the Archives without a sound, chasing away his dread and worries over his future.
Zero has loved the Archives ever since his parents took him and Ichiru as tiny five-year-olds to see them: room after room filled with rows and rows of towering bookcases reaching all the way to the ceiling and crammed into every empty space. To this day the archives hold the most books Zero's ever seen in one place. Their parents had often left the twins here for an hour or two while the adults attended meetings or reported to the President, and the Archivists had doted on the polite, quiet young Hunters, sneaking them mess-free candies and finding them children's books to read. As he grew older, Zero continued to visit, coming to read after training ended or whenever he felt bored; he suspected much of his academic success in school came from the good reading habits his parents sneakily encouraged. Of course, all that changed when he was Turned. Zero hated coming to the Association and facing the other Hunters' scorn unless he needed to, and those visits to the Archives stopped.

Zero had planned to hide in the stacks, but the Hunter's hopes for solitude end as soon as he steps inside and spots the man wearing an Archivist's badge puttering around the front desk.

"Archivist Fong," Zero greets without rancor; he's very fond of the elderly librarian, and time spent with him is never regrettable.

"Zero-kun!" The elder replies, raising his voice as much as he can without breaking Archive rules for quiet.

Archivist Fong earned his retirement long ago, but had neither wife nor children, and was so devoted to maintaining the collections he would probably keep working until he couldn't. Zero suspects the man is nearly ninety; he's surprisingly spry, and strong-voiced, at odds with his wispy white hair and fragile frame.

Zero owes the man a personal debt, and tries to visit him as often as he can, making sure he's in good health and taking care of himself, buying him small gifts for Christmas and offering well wishes on his birthday. It was Archivist Fong's help that allowed Zero to keep studying the Hunter Arts after he was Turned. Most of the books can't be taken from the Archives, but the kind man had made copies of the most important parts and delivered them to Zero by meeting him in the town below Cross Academy. It was a rough, incomplete guide, but it let him advance his skills without a Master and keep honing his abilities, giving him a connection to his heritage and another much-needed source of purpose.

Zero owed the Archivist even more gratitude today. For the last month, when the ex-human had liberty and the elder had spare time, Archivist Fong and Zero had collected new study materials. Zero had no idea when he might be able to return to the Association, and a Hunter's skills were complete only when they were dead; there were always techniques that could be learned and improved upon. As a security precaution, all the materials were, of course, encrypted in a dozen codes and cyphers whose keys existed only in the memories of the Archivists and Hunters who learned them, so any vampire reading his papers wouldn't be able to understand the knowledge contained within.

"You look well, Archivist. Shall we continue our project today?"

"Actually, Zero-kun, I have something to show you, if you'd like."

Archivist Fong looks hopeful and serious, proud but also cautious, like he isn't sure Zero will like his work. The Hunter is intrigued by such a mystery, so of course he agrees, and follows the other man deep, deep into the Archives where hardly anyone goes without a purpose.

As they walk, Archivist Fong tries to explain himself. "When you first came, Zero-kun, we looked for anything we could find on omega vampires, and came up nearly empty. We have genealogies
and histories that mention them, and that's about it. No anatomies, no firsthand accounts of births or matings, no diaries, nothing personal or intimate at all. Nothing that explains what an omega's life is really like. They stay safely ensconced in the vampire world raising their children, and Hunters don't encounter them, except to observe them while monitoring gatherings."

"But after the betrothal ceremony, I had an idea. We hadn't looked for any specific omega vampires, just general information. I backtracked through the Kuran genealogies looking for omega vampires who married into the family. It turns out that the Kurans prefer to marry each other and don't traditionally bond with an omega. In fact, as best I can tell, they've only done it once before, possibly discounting the Original King. Records that old are spotty, you see? Perhaps the most important pureblood in history, and we know so little about him!"

Zero's eyes crinkle at the edges, amused by the Archivist's enthusiasm and his arm-flailing excitement, and gently prods the man back on track. "So what did you find?"

"Ah, yes," the old man starts to walk quite quickly, "wait till we get there and I'll show you what I've found."

He takes the two of them to a study table hidden in a blind alley near the 'vampire culture - cuisine' section, piled high with perhaps twenty books at Zero's quick estimation. The Level D raises an eyebrow, and Archivist Fong grins, claps his hands together in front of him, and goes on with his story.

"You see, around six thousand years ago, the Second King and the Second Queen of the Kuran bloodline had been ruling the vampires for three thousand years, and they had yet to have any children, though they wanted them very much."

"What were their names?" Zero interjects.

"You know, I can't remember. If you look in the right book you can find them, but the vampires have a taboo on referring to their rulers by their personal names when they die. A king is a king forever, even when dead, and you don't call a king by his name without permission. So all vampire history books just say 'Second King', 'Third King' and so on. The custom actually caused the loss of the Original King's name altogether. We've no idea what it was. Such a pity, but anyway, back to the Second King."

"After ruling a nation for three thousand years and keenly feeling his empty nest, the Second King had a bit of a midlife crisis. And instead of buying a fancy car, that vampire bonded a young, nubile omega girl instead. Second Queen doesn't seem to have favored her much. All three of her children from the first one hundred years of their marriage were fathered by the Second King. And only three children? For an omega, that's quite a case of neglect by both her spouses, poor thing."

"Because, you see, Second King and Second Queen finally managed to have their own children. Three of them, one right after another. And everything was going so well, so of course that's where everything goes wrong. Four days after the birth of their third child, when Second Queen was still exhausted and weak, the pureblood Sato Clan rose up in rebellion, intending to take the crown for themselves. They were destroyed down to the last man, woman and child by the Second King, but he was killed in the battle. Second Queen was devastated, and withdrew into seclusion for the rest of her life, leaving the throne vacant and the vampires without leadership. Except, of course, for the royal omega."

"Who was she?" whispers Zero, enthralled and trying not to break the story's spell.

"History knows her as Ruling Consort Aileya, the most beautiful omega of her time with her
bronze hair and green-gold eyes, who ruled the vampire nation as Regent for nearly a century while raising three young purebloods and carrying six children of her own.

"She's legendary among the vampires," the Archivist says, turning away to flick through the books on the table. "There are books written just about her and her life. Any vampire noble with significant power is related to her - the young Ichijo omega is a direct descendant. After Second King's death, Second Queen relied heavily on Aileya for comfort and stability, became very fond of her, and sired another six children on her omega before passing the crown to her adult children and leaving to end her life."

"What happened to Aileya when she didn't have an alpha anymore?" Zero asks, genuinely curious, knowing how dangerous that is.

"Second King and Queen's children bonded her and fathered her last nine children. They couldn't let her power and skill pass out of the family, you see? Too risky."

"But wasn't she sort of their mother?" Zero sputters.

Archivist Fong looks up for a moment. "Zero-kun, purebloods practice incest between full-blooded siblings. A little legal incest between family members is nothing in comparison."

Chastened, Zero blushes and nods, then his brow furrows.

"Archivist Fong, you said her 'last' nine children. Aileya would have been less than five hundred years old. Why were those her last children?"

His age-lined face falls, and the Archivist's voice gains a sad timbre. "Because of her influence and power as the Third King's main advisor, forces in the royal court assassinated Aileya while she was pregnant with her nineteenth child. The third, youngest son was so devastated he went into Sleep and remains, to this day, in the Kuran crypt. Vampire historians speculate that Aileya's loss and the cost of the throne to their family drove the Third King and his siblings to end the monarchy's reign. Aileya's rule also proved the vampires could exercise the rule of law without a King, but the Council of Elders and the Senate were very different institutions then."

Zero bears a contemplative expression. "May I borrow some of these?"

Archivist Fong beams. "I've already signed them out in my name. If you need a breather, try some of the art books. Some of the art is - ah, rather suggestive," the old man says as he smiles fondly, and leaves Zero absorbed in his reading.

"Get dressed. The nicest clothes you have. We're going outside today."

Zero looked up at his Master from the last few pages of his book, regretfully resolving to finish it later. Master Yagari always did have the worst timing.

"I thought I wasn't supposed to leave the wards?"

"You're not. Today's the exception."

"What's the occasion?"

"You have a visitor."

Curiosity piqued, Zero bundles together a change of clothes, but lingers in the doorway examining
his Master, who has started to flip idly through one of Zero's borrowed books.

"Who is it?"

"Dress and find out," Yagari narrows his single eye in warning and makes a shooing motion. Zero knows when he's pushed his luck far enough, and only comes back once he's wearing the same clothes he wore to the betrothal ceremony. Master Yagari is staring at the open book with an expression that strongly suggests he'd like to lose his remaining eye.

"What the bloody hell is this?!"

Zero leans over his Master to see. "A book on Ruling Consort Aileya I borrowed from Archivist Fong."

"No, that old pervert gave you vampire porn," Yagari objects as he flips another page and his face contorts with fresh horror.

"It's art, Master. Vampires like to paint her."

"Blood and ashes, then why is there so much fucking? I don't even want to know what's going on in that one!"

Zero peers over his Master's shoulder. "That one? According to vampire histories, while Aileya was...indisposed in heat, the Council tried to steal her position as regent. Unfortunately for them, her wife got her pregnant and she went out of heat earlier than they'd planned. She got up, went straight to the Council meeting and put them in their place. According to this artist, without, um, bathing first or putting on underwear. So that's...the fluids...probably artistic license..."

Zero tugs the book from Yagari's unresisting fingers. "Maybe we should go, Master?"

Yagari adjusts his hat with a motion that would be called a nervous fidget if anyone else did it, and beats a hasty retreat.

Zero's quiet amusement lasts all the way to the edge of the wards, where his smile slips away and he halts, hesitating. As much as he hates his enforced idleness and captivity, Zero has learned enough about what happens to unprotected omegas that he knows the value of those wards shielding him, and enough sense to feel trepidation at the thought of leaving.

His Master stops too, expression understanding. "Come on boy," he reassures Zero softly in his gruff way, "don't keep him waiting."

Zero touches Bloody Rose under his coat, and steps forward, pushing through an invisible barrier; at that touch, the outline of Zero's fading, blurry taming mark glows as if it were still clear and permits his exit.

As they approach a black, understated sedan at the curb, the driver - a vampire - exits the driver's seat and comes to stand by the rear passenger door. Inside is another vampire, of noble class by the feel of their aura, and something else Zero can't pinpoint, which fades after a moment. Yagari climbs into the passenger seat, and the driver holds the back door open with a murmured 'Kiryuu-sama', a clear invitation to get inside. Trusting Yagari wouldn't trap himself anywhere he couldn't escape from, Zero slides in after him.

"Kiryuu-kun, it's good to see you looking healthy."

"Thank you for your concern, Ichijo-sempai, you look well too."
Ichijo Takuma smiles his carefree smile, the one as golden as his hair, and continues - to Zero's surprise - petting the head of the large dog in his lap.

Out of all the Night Class vampires, Zero liked Ichijo the most, as much as any Hunter ever liked a vampire. His conduct was perfect: he never got involved in spats with the Prefects, his self-control and adherence to the blood tablet diet modeled the coexistence ideal, and he used his position as Vice President Dorm Leader to keep things running smoothly and responsibly herded the more unruly students into line. From Zero's impression when they interacted on school business, Ichijo also seemed to have a pleasant, polite personality. With those thoughts in mind, Zero doesn't object to meeting his old classmate and accepts being in close quarters with the noble without fuss.

As the car pulls away from the curb and heads into the commercial district Zero casts around for something to say.

"Congratulations on your bonding, Ichijo-sempai."

"Thank you, Kiryuu-kun. I would return the sentiment regarding your upcoming marriage, but I don't think you want to be congratulated."

"No," Zero replies sourly.

Ichijo responds with a strained smile, and muses as he strokes his dog's flank, "Most omegas would sell their soul to marry into the Kuran family and gain their power, wealth and position. Not to mention how pure their children's blood would be."

"I don't care about those things."

"No, you don't," Takuma affirms, sounding as though he was talking more to himself than to Zero. Then he focuses again on his guest and flashes another smile filled with something like approval, "You really haven't changed at all, Kiryuu-kun."

Zero feels inexplicably embarrassed. Was that meant as a compliment? Changing the subject, the Hunter asks, "Where are we going?"

"I thought we might have lunch, or just tea if you've already eaten."

Zero had forgotten to eat, and his belly grumbles as the reminder awakens his hunger. "Lunch is fine." Zero's cheeks pink a little.

Ichijo is polite enough to cover his smile. "I saw a nice western cafe on the drive in. Would that suit?"

"Ah, no. Perhaps somewhere different?" Zero hopes he's hiding his discomfort convincingly.

"Then how about the traditional restaurant off the main road?"

"If you don't mind, Ichijo-sempai, I'd rather eat something else."

"The noodle shop with the pig mascot looked quaint?"

"Maybe another time."

Ichijo has a considering air, then his face lightens as though he's solved a problem. "You don't need to worry about the cost, Kiryuu-kun; I've invited you out and I insist on paying."
"Thank you, sempai." Zero keeps his expression very controlled.

"Now," the blond says as he scans the street, "maybe something closer."

"Ah!" Ichijo points out the window, careful not to upset the dog lying on him. "A curry shop. Perfect!"

Zero knows he's in trouble.

"I'm sorry sempai, not there either."

Ichijo turns toward Zero with a frown of concern. "Kiryuu-kun, if you don't want to eat with me, that's fine. We'll just talk and you can return to the Association. I understand that we don't know each other well."

Master Yargari is twisting around in his seat until he can watch the back of the car, reading correctly that the changing situation might need intervention.

"No, Ichijo-sempai, it's not that," assures Zero, mortification and shame rising in his belly. He's really not hungry anymore, and he wishes he hadn't been stupid enough to agree without thinking first.

Thoughts racing, Zero carefully says, "This is a Hunter town, Ichijo-sempai."

"Yes?" Clearly puzzled, Ichijo doesn't understand what Zero has delicately tried to insinuate. Yagari does, and his face goes stony.

Desperate not to explain, Zero tries again. "All the people who live here are Hunters."

"I know, Kiryuu-kun."

Zero sits ramrod straight, hands flattened on his thighs, and stares at the back of Yagari's seat. He feels utterly humiliated, the emotion hot and thick in his belly.

"We can't eat there, Ichijo-sempai…But Master Yagari could."

Ichijo Takuma is the scion of the most powerful Noble family in the world. He's so exorbitantly wealthy Zero can't even contemplate the amount. He's the leader of a branch of the vampire government. Even in the human world, with his good looks and charm Zero doubts anyone has ever denied Ichijo anything. Right now, the vampire looks as though the very concept has flown over his head, as though someone has just told him the sky is green.

Zero waits patiently for Ichijo to finish processing his shameful admission, keeping his gaze resolutely fixed on the pebbled black leather seats and the greying back of his Master's head.

"They refused you?" Ichijo asks, an underlying sharpness in his tone.

Some of them, but Zero wasn't about to let the Association lose face in front of Ichijo. He picks his words carefully, and keeps his tone neutral and factual. "It was discreetly made known to me that I made people uncomfortable, and it would be best if I went elsewhere for service."

There is silence in the car. Then Ichijo states with that same slight sharpness, "You are the best Vampire Hunter in the world."

"President Cross is more experienced."
"If you are not already the best, you will eventually be the best Vampire Hunter in the world. Possibly in the history of the Association."

"It's an understandable request. Almost everyone here has lost someone they loved to a vampire, and most active Hunters don't retire from old age. They retire because their crippling injuries keep them from Hunting anymore - the curry shop owner? She lost a leg to a C-Rank. Can you imagine how she feels when she senses my aura nearby? And she's one of the lucky ones who didn't die. I bring up everyone's bad memories when I'm around."

"And what about you?"

"I'm just one person, Ichijo-sempai. It's fine."

After a moment, Ichijo speaks again, but the sharp undertone is gone. "I apologize, Kiryuu-kun, I have been a poor host. I should have asked my guest to choose where we will eat. Perhaps you could suggest somewhere."

"You have nothing to apologize for, Ichijo-sempai. You've done nothing wrong."

Zero dares a fast glance at the noble, who is calm and stroking the dog again. "Do you want to bring your dog in?"

"Yes."

Zero wets his lips. "I may know a place. But we'll have to sit on the patio, and the bill will come out double the prices on the menu. I don't know anywhere else that will take both dogs and us."

"That's acceptable," replies Ichijo, and Zero gives instructions to the driver that take them to a small, nearly vacant restaurant in a back alley. As Zero predicted, they're seated on the patio, despite the cold and the empty tables inside. Luckily they're all dressed for the weather, Ichijo wearing a long grey overcoat and gloves. The food here is mediocre, and the proprietors, a husband and wife couple, keep sending the vampires outside suspicious stares through the windows, but the food is hot and the service only a little slower than usual. Yagari refuses the couple's offer of a seat inside, and takes up a guard position nearby, smoking, just far enough out of earshot to offer Ichijo and Zero privacy. Ichijo's driver takes a similar position, leaving the two of them alone, with the dog curled around the feet of Ichijo's chair.

It's larger than Zero thought, some kind of long-legged, heavy-headed sighthound, lean but robust, and very handsome, with a long, wavy, silky coat, a thick ruff at its neck and a long feathery plume of a tail. Its underbelly, legs and ruff are pure white, with a white stripe running down its muzzle, while its back and the sides of its head are a light bluish grey color, and it has striking, spooky grey eyes that look back with an intelligent gaze. When it moves, the hound looks as though it's floating over the ground, and though Ichijo hasn't even collared it, it stays right by his side without straying. It never barks or makes noise, almost perfectly silent.

The dog is obviously unnatural; all animals feared vampires as though they were death itself. Just being in proximity to a vampire left them fearful and panicked, instinctively sensing the predator nearby, and the reaction increased for more powerful vampires. Dogs in particular disliked vampires, so Zero is curious to know why this strange one enjoys Ichijo's touch.

Ichijo asks the waiter for a bowl of water for the dog, and orders another meal as if the pet was a third lunch companion. When Zero asks, Ichijo tells him only that, "My bondmate sends him with me when he isn't by my side, and he is very dear to me." The noble feeds the dog from his own hand, and calls him Isa. If the dog was a present, no wonder Ichijo treats him fondly.
Zero is content to eat in silence after the earlier disaster, and let Ichijo decide when to explain the reason for his visit today. Halfway through the appetizer and the first pot of tea, the Noble sets his cup down with a clink and an expression of dissatisfaction aimed at the china. Lacing his fingers together and resting his chin on them, green eyes take Zero's measure; the Hunter returns the searching gaze.

"Kiryuu-kun. I won't insult you by denying that Kuran Kaname asked me to meet you; he wants me to teach you the social etiquette you'll need to know for the formal events before, during and after your wedding. However, that is not why I'm here today. You may not believe me, but I would have come to see you regardless of Kaname's request."

"I know you must have questions. I'm here to answer whatever you feel comfortable asking me. Or maybe you just want to talk to someone who's been in a similar place not so long ago. Either way, ask anything that comes to mind. Don't be embarrassed by the topic; I won't refuse to answer anything unless it would invade someone else's privacy."

"Will I have a period?" Zero blurts out the first thing that comes to mind, and buries his face in his hands, face red from more than cold. "I just...the Hunters don't really know how my body works, so..."

Ichijo shows surprise for a moment, but then shakes his head. "No. Vampire women don't have periods either. That would waste too many eggs, and the bleeding...well. It doesn't work with our diet, shall we say. I should have guessed you wouldn't have access to even that basic information. I can have a messenger bring you a book on omega anatomy, if you want it by tomorrow, or I can deliver it myself, should you allow me to visit you again."

"I think it would be fine if you wanted to visit me, Ichijo-sempai. I'd appreciate company and the chance to leave the wards."

The noble said Zero could ask him anything, so, "You're pregnant, right? What's it feel like?"

Ichijo chokes on his tea. "What gave you that idea, Kiryuu-kun?"

"You bonded your partner, so you had a heat and...slept with him. Isn't that what happens?"

"Not all the time. I did have a heat, but not all heats are fertile. Sometimes an omega's body successfully goes into heat but doesn't send the right signals to release an egg. Those are called fallow heats, and they're very common for an omega's first maiden heat. They're only three days long, rather than the usual five-ish, and the symptoms are weaker. So no, I'm not pregnant."

"Can I do that on purpose? Or is there some kind of birth control I can use?"

"A fallow heat happens by chance. And vampires don't use birth control, since it's so difficult for most of us to get pregnant. Human drugs aren't effective; your body will burn them off or they won't work at all, and during a heat neither of you are aware enough to use physical methods. The only thing that works is not to trigger a heat by avoiding your partner - or partners - while you're in season. If you enter a fertile heat, and are bonded to a pureblood, conception is guaranteed. With a less pure alpha, it's still highly likely."

Disappointed, Zero lapses into silence for a while as they eat.

"Kiryuu-kun," says Ichijo with caution, "I don't mean to embarrass you, but there is one more thing I can think of that you probably don't know. Just in case you try to, ah, take care of yourself."

Zero tries not to laugh or cry or show how nauseous the very idea makes him feel; he didn't even
masturbate when he had his own body.

"We're a little different from female omegas. For male omegas like us, everything is formed from scratch. To protect the uterus while our insides are being rearranged and the birth canal is being formed, our bodies create a membrane blocking off the entrance. It's not at all like a woman's hymen; it has no holes, it's very deep inside - just below the womb - and it's too thick and tough to tear naturally from exercise. So just in case you feel pain, or some kind of blockage, that's what it is. I'm sorry to make you uncomfortable, but I didn't want it to alarm you if you found it yourself and didn't know what it was."

Zero is quite sure that won't happen, but he thanks his sempai anyway. They are nearly finished, and it's almost time to leave, by the way Yagari keeps watching the angle of the sun and the lengthening shadows.

"May I ask you a few personal questions, Ichijo-sempai?"

Ichijo nods, smiling encouragingly, and gestures for Zero to continue. "Did you want to be an omega?

Ichijo adopts a contemplative air, and stirs the dregs of his tea. "My grandfather was an alpha. I wanted more than anything to not be like him, and hoped to stay a beta. To tell you the truth, omegas are so rare that I never thought about presenting as anything but an alpha or a beta."

"Then do you regret it?"

"I used to, sometimes. Not anymore, now that I've bonded. If being an omega gave my story a good ending, than I can't regret that it happened."

"Were you frightened, when you presented - you don't have to answer that if it makes you uncomfortable, sempai."

"I was raised to expect a possible presentation, so I wasn't frightened at first, just disappointed because I thought I was presenting as an alpha. I panicked when I realized what was actually going on. It was painful, of course, but not enough to frighten me. I was only afraid afterwards, when I thought about having to mate."

One last question.

"Do you love him?"

"Irrevocably."

Staring fixedly at the tabletop, Zero's heart clenches, and he feels a guilty surge of envy.

When long arms encircle Takuma's body, who was previously the only human occupant in the car's backseat, rather than scream or struggle, Takuma closes his eyes with a sigh and relaxes into the hold with a fond expression.

"Isaya..."

The stately hound is gone, and in its place is Takuma's alpha and bondmate. The familiar's animal shape has shifted to his creator's well-loved human form now that they are alone.

"Every time you tell someone you love me, I think to myself that I cannot possibly be so lucky."
"Mmm, luck had nothing to do with it. I chose you, and you chose me."

The ends of Isaya's ash blond hair tickle Takuma's forehead as the pureblood leans down to brush a chaste kiss to his temple.

"Kiryuu Zero was fascinating. Selfless, loyal, strong - he seems perfect. His looks are as exotic as rumor hinted. And you two seemed to get along well."

"He's even more fascinating in person. He'll act as bold with a pureblood as he does with any vampire. We worked together a few times on minor tasks. He once even attended my birthday party. Kiryuu-kun dislikes vampires, though he's polite unless you bait him. But he hates purebloods with a passion, which is why I asked you to watch through your familiar today."

"Even if he hates purebloods, why does Kuran Kaname-san dislike him so much? The Hunter is honorable. Kiryuu would make anyone a fine omega, even with his blood status."

Takuma stays silent.

"I do not ask you to betray anything held in confidence -"

"No, it's not that. I was trying to think of a way to explain without implying criticism of a pureblood."

"In every respect, Kaname behaves like the pureblood archetype. That includes the intensity of his feelings. What he loves, he loves more than anything, and everything else will be sacrificed for the beloved person or thing. And he possesses a very strong alpha instinct. He doesn't tolerate any infringement on his territory; he comes from a line of royals, after all. Kuran Yuuki and Kiryuu Zero were raised together after Zero's parents died, and are emotionally close. And Kiryuu, as a Hunter, does not follow vampire customs regarding purebloods."

"Ah, so Kuran-san fears the loss of her love and the deepening of his wife's attachment to his disrespectful rival."

"Precisely."

Isaya watches the scenery pass by the window, and Takuma watches his bondmate, admiring his profile, and still reexamining his meeting with Kiryuu-kun. A question gnaws on Takuma's mind, and before he can stop himself he's already blurted it out.

"Were you disappointed that my first heat was fallow?"

It hangs in the air, and Takuma self-consciously fingers the leather of his gloves in his lap, too well trained for any other sign of uneasiness to show.

Isaya's face is composed. "I will welcome all our children, Takuma. But I must admit that a part of my heart was relieved. The pain of my son's death has not faded. I fear the loss of another child. Did you wish that you conceived during your maiden heat?"

Takuma wrings the gloves in his hands. "I don't know. Maybe. What do I know about parenthood, after spending my entire childhood without any? I know I have to eventually produce a child. We can't put it off for more than a few years or people will start asking questions."

Isaya inclines his head in agreement, and offers his hand palm up to his omega; Takuma takes it and laces their fingers together, and nothing more is said until the couple arrives home.
Zero begins a strange split existence. For half the day, he lives among the Hunters, much as he always has. For half the night, Ichijo teaches him what he'll need to know to survive in the vampire world and act as a pureblood's spouse: books and books on etiquette, dossiers on both Kuran's friends and his enemies he must memorize, ancient, crumbling scrolls inked with the words for pureblood rituals, genealogies and histories of the Kuran family, instruction manuals for new omegas, handwritten rather than printed, even a few on pregnancy and childrearing. Zero puts those aside for last, hoping he'll run out of time to read them.

Zero applies himself diligently to his studies and learns as much as he can. He will honor the conditions he has agreed to; it will not be Zero who breaks the accord with the Kurans, for the Association's sake. It helps to think of it as research for Hunting, some kind of long-term mission that requires extensive knowledge of the target's habits. And there's so much new information that Zero - as a researcher - is curious for purely intellectual reasons; Archivist Fong would be ecstatic to have access to even a fraction of this.

Ichijo's grandfather, it turns out, kept a small house near the Association as a meeting place where he plotted with the traitorous former President. Ichijo furnished the empty building, and now it serves to host their nightly study sessions. All their time is spent in the comfortable living room, with Zero sprawled on a rug or the squishy couch, Ichijo sitting properly in the chairs, his strict upbringing showing in his perfect posture even while relaxed, and Isa the hound lying by his feet. They never go out again for food; perhaps as an apology Ichijo had the house stocked with food, and his driver or his guards cook for the pair of young omegas.

Ichijo asks Zero to bring his single Hoseki to their second meeting, where the noble passes over the promised anatomy text with the relevant pages bookmarked, and helps Zero learn to secure the jewel in his hair. He'll have to wear a Hoseki every time he goes out in public or appears in front of any guests, Ichijo tells him as he suggests Zero practice putting on and taking off his Hoseki twenty times every day, and to wear it in his spare time for extra practice.

The damned thing shifts every time Zero so much as breathes; it's distracting to someone with a Hunter's instincts and wearing it for very long drives him up a wall. Flow like water, Ichijo tells him. Don't move suddenly, or it will jerk; think elegant thoughts. Keep your head level. Be graceful as the crane. Once he figures out which movements to use, Zero's precise control of his body earned from his Hunter's training makes it simple to adopt them. Ichijo praises him for learning to wear a Hoseki faster than he did.

Zero resents that the vampires can mold him, change him, bend him, with nothing more than a trinket. Perhaps sensing Zero's anger, Ichijo is carefully diplomatic when making requests of him. After Zero's anger simmers rather than burns, Ichijo takes him on a trip a few days later to a tailor for the new wardrobe he was promised during the betrothal ceremony. The woman fawns over Ichijo, and sneers dismissively at Zero when the Council leader steps out to take a business call. She tries to ignore the ex-human, but Ichijo relentlessly consults Zero's opinions and preferences, expertly bringing him into the discussions without appearing awkward or obvious.

When Zero asks why he couldn't just wear his old clothes, Ichijo has the grace to refrain from mentioning how worn out and plain they were.

Examining two bolts of satin, the blond nods toward the one on the left, and then gives Zero his attention. "For Kaname's part, it reflects poorly on him if he can't keep you clothed to the highest standard. We are both being displayed as prizes and displaying our own elevated rank and desirability."

"As omegas, social expectations and standards of propriety dictate that the way we dress follows
certain codes. Vampires have an image of what an omega looks like. An unbonded omega shows off the neck and shoulders to advertise their availability; a bonded omega dresses more conservatively, because now showing off for another alpha is inappropriate."

"You're not yet bonded, Kiryuu-kun, but after your marriage you'll be socially considered as a bonded omega. Everything you wear from now on will need a high neckline, hems down to your mid-calf or ankle, and wide sleeves long enough to cover your hands past the tips of your fingers. This is all so another alpha cannot touch you and leave their scent on your skin; that would be inappropriate and an act of provocation on their part. Alphas have been known to battle one another over such an insult."

"You'll notice that I don't dress like that when I meet you. In the human world, the standards are relaxed a bit - you can wear gloves instead of the sleeves, for example. My everyday clothing is quite different. There are also allowances because we were sexed male at birth, so there's a bit of latitude as long as we follow basic guidelines. If you wanted to wear pants underneath, or make the outer garment a coat or a robe, that would be perfectly fine. But we are expected to look a little androgynous, if not outright feminine."

So many things are wrong with those statements that Zero doesn't even know where to start. In the end, he says nothing, because he esteems Ichijo enough that he won't argue with him while other people are watching, and because the finality in Ichijo's speech tells him this is one place he cannot fight and win.

At least he can hide his body behind his clothes; Zero knows he couldn't take other people staring at him in some skimpy outfit when he can't bear looking at himself fully clothed.

Ichijo takes care of the specifics, navigating confidently through a dizzying array of fabrics and technical jargon. Somehow, Zero acquires more clothing than he's owned in his entire life. The sleeves are going to be a problem, Zero can already tell.

Just before they leave, the tailor and her assistants take Zero's measurements. Staying still as hands touch him all over shakes him so badly he can't think clearly again until they've left the shop and are on their way home. He doesn't dare think about why (or about the invasive touches he soon must bear from his new spouses, who will surely want him to complete his duties. He saves that for his nightmares).

After that, the days blur into one another, the only sign of their passing the steady fading of his taming mark; Zero can feel his time slipping out of his hands, crossing off the days like a prisoner waiting for his execution date. The wedding preparations have both the Hunter and vampire worlds in a frenzy of activity and commotion. At least the vampires are excited - the Hunters are, shall we say, unenthusiastic they have to participate in a vampire wedding.

Zero finds, to his consternation, that he is starting to like Ichijo. As a person, not the way Hunters favored some vampires more than others because they obeyed the codes. And that was not permitted. When a Hunter lost their objectivity, they hesitated, and when they hesitated they became useless. Indecisiveness got people killed.

Still, Zero can't deny that having another omega around as a mentor has taken a weight off his mind. Ichijo has done more for him than any vampire ever has, seemingly for no gain of his own; the noble has duties he must be neglecting to spend so much time teaching Zero. And Ichijo's presence calms his vampire instincts, telling him that it's safer to be together. So Zero accepts their growing rapport.
One night, as Zero wades through yet another book explaining why he should be polite to people he doesn't like, a dozen strangers' auras surround the house; Isa's grey ears swivel and he springs from the living room into the foyer, barking a booming warning to the guards. There's the sounds of battle, and Zero, ever the Hunter, instinctually rises and follows Isa, intending to join, when Takuma takes his arm. Zero immediately shakes him off but still pauses.

"Wait," Ichijo says, listening to the noise outside, "I know you're used to protecting people, Kiryuu-kun, but now you and I are the ones being protected, and if we go out there we'll only get in the way. There are some medical supplies in the kitchen just in case. We'll get them out and ready ourselves in case the guards can't handle them."

Only five or ten minutes later, Isa trots back into the kitchen, nails going clack clack clack in time on the tile floor, tail bouncing with every step. He leaves bloody pawprints on the floor behind him, and politely offers his feet one by one to Ichijo, who cleans them with a dishtowel. There's more blood staining the white in his fur, and Zero insists on looking him over for injuries, despite Ichijo's assurances that the hound is unharmed. Self-possessed and aloof, the hound favors only Ichijo, so this is the first time Zero has ever touched him, but Isa stands patiently still with what Zero would swear is amusement as Zero combs through his silky fur feeling for wounds.

"Why do alphas want omegas?" Zero asks idly in the kitchen afterwards over a cup of hot tea - Ichijo loves tea, there's as much tea in the house as there is real food; every meal is served with a pot of tea. Zero suspects all of his employees have memorized Ichijo's preferred way of taking his tea - with rose jam.

Ichijo half-lowers his teacup, inhaling the steam rising off the top, before he explains.

"An alpha is naturally drawn toward an omega. Any Alpha will instinctively protect and care for us, even if we aren't bonded to them; it's an even more powerful instinct when the omega is pregnant. But alphas want to bond an omega for more practical reasons.

"Bonding an omega brings status and notoriety, elevating the alpha's social position and therefore often increasing the alpha's wealth, as well as guaranteeing their bloodline will continue. To present, omegas must have very pure blood and be strong enough to survive the change, which is why male omegas are slightly rarer than female ones - presenting is a greater risk, and the genes stay dormant if the vampire would die during the process - so the alpha's children will also be pure and powerful."

Zero crosses his arms over his chest. "Well, why do they want me than? I'm a Level D."

"As for why, specifically, they want to get to you now, it's because now is their only chance. Omega can only bond during the first heat they spend with an alpha, then not again until all their alphas are dead. If they don't get to you now, they'll have no chance later. They're very stupid to even try; Kaname would hunt them down."

"But even with your origins, you're still highly desirable. An alpha has four chances or less every century to court an omega, and for every omega born there are twenty-five alphas. An individual alpha's chances of bonding with an omega are incredibly low. Being a Level D makes your prospects of a good match lower, but you still would have found an alpha if the Kurans hadn't stepped forward. And if nothing else, there's the...sexual attraction you posses for an alpha. Since they can't knot except with a bonded omega, popular belief holds that an alpha will never be fully satisfied without one."

It's only Zero's burgeoning trust in Ichijo's honesty and discretion that allows him to tentatively ask his next question without meeting Ichijo's eyes.
"Are omegas drawn to alphas too? During my betrothal I...I noticed which vampires were alphas. Even the male ones."

Even that bastard Kuran, but Zero will admit only under heavy torture the way his instincts had preened over the attention paid to him by the most powerful alpha in the room.

Ichijo has understanding eyes as he leans back and runs his forefinger on the rim of his porcelain cup.

"That's quite normal, though our draw is weak compared to the attraction felt by an alpha for us. Whatever your preferences were before your presentation, they changed with the rest of your body."

Pushing down the revulsion caused by that reminder, Zero says "Is that...allowed among vampires? Or is it just because I'm marrying a pureblood?"

"It's perfectly fine - dynamic overrides birth sex. Is that a problem, for you as a Hunter?"

"Oh. No, it isn't." Zero shouldn't be surprised Ichijo doesn't already know, but the noble's knowledge seems limitless. "As long as your partner is consenting, of age, and not a vampire, Hunters don't give a damn. You risk your life in the Hunt, you do whatever you want. Not all the countries we live in are friendly to our attitudes, but inside the community they can get married if they want and we legally recognize them as spouses. It doesn't really matter who you marry anyway. All Hunters follow the preservation program, so some of your children won't be blood related to you even if a couple can have them naturally."

Ichijo's eyes widen more and more as he speaks. Even Isa has lifted his head and seems to pay attention.

"...is that so? Well, vampires don't have standards for casual sex, but serious relationships are another matter. Any marriage between two people of roughly equal blood purity that can produce children is acceptable. But a marriage between, say, a noble and a Level D, or between two alpha males or beta females would be forbidden - which is why your planned marriage to the Kuran purebloods has created such a storm in the vampire world. Not everyone approves."

Zero opens his mouth to respond, but one of Ichijo's vampire guards is standing silently by the open door, clearly waiting to be recognized, so he gestures for Ichijo to go ahead.

"Ichijo-sama, Kiryuu-sama, we've cleared the surrounding area. It's safe to return Kiryuu-sama to the Association Headquarters now."

"We should retire for tonight, I think," says Ichijo, rising from his chair. "We still have two weeks, and we won't get anything more done after the commotion."

Another scientist offers well wishes on Kuran-sama's wedding - Kaname nearly curses her instead, but he's had a great deal of practice pretending he wants nothing more than to keep that damned ex-human. Instead he nods and genially accepts, before continuing through the largest biotech facility owned by the Aido group, where Aido Hanabusa works.

Nearly two months ago, Kaname himself delivered a package to Aido with strict instructions inside, and ordered the noble to say nothing about this project to Yuuki when he tutored her. Yesterday, the blond noble contacted his leader that the results were ready, and while Yuuki was out visiting Ruka, Kaname had left the estate to see Aido.
"Kaname-sama," Aido shrieks and rushes toward the sliding glass doors as soon as he spots the pureblood, skidding and nearly smacking into the glass as he hits the release button, puppylike with his perky enthusiasm and sparkling eyes.

"Aido," Kaname greets him with a hint of amused warmth, "you saw me yesterday at the estate."

"Anytime Kaname-sama comes to see me is special!" insists Aido, hearts still in his eyes as Kaname steps into the room. The door hydraulics hiss as the room relocks.

"Everything has gone well, I hope? You said you wanted to speak with me in person."

Falling into place beside and slightly behind the pureblood, Aido nods, adopting a more suitable workplace demeanor. For an alpha just past fifty - the first in his family and therefore the heir - Aido has already climbed high, becoming the facility's head scientist and making great strides in his research. Silly and childish as Aido still was, the scientific community acknowledged his brilliance, and Kaname often made use of it, as he did today.

"I followed the security protocol you requested. Only I am aware of the project, only I worked on it, no one else saw or handled the data, at no point did I leave it unattended, and it was secured on a private, secret server at all times disconnected from the mainframe."

"Good. Is this room secure?"

"Yes, Kaname-sama. This is my private lab, which only I have access to, and I swept it before you came."

While Aido boots up the terminal at the room's workstation, Kaname stands at rest with his hands grasped in a relaxed hold behind his back. "What have you found, that you could not simply tell me in writing?"

"Well, when I tested the blood and tissue samples you gave me from Kiryuu's hospital stay, first I looked into how weirdly pale Kiryuu looks. He's not an albino, by the way."

Aido groans and dramatically lays his hand across his forehead. "Ahhh, I wish I could publish a paper on him! I had to look really hard to find the right gene - we've never seen that mutation before! He has a dominant form of leucism, so everything works, it's just turned down really low in his skin, hair and eyes. As far as I can tell, it's harmless. His children will be fine," Aido made a face, "but some of them will look as pasty as him, rather than handsome like Yuuki-hime and Kaname-sama!"

"I thought I was almost finished, so I wrapped up with a round of genetic screening. He turned up totally free of single-gene inherited genetic disorders - sickle cell, cystic fibrosis, that kind of thing. Then I ran a full workup on known gene variants for conditions caused by more than one gene, and Kiryuu came out nearly clean."

Good, that had been a concern of Kaname's. He could not allow Yuuki's children to become ill because of Kiryuu's blood. Vampires looked down on the occasional child born with a sickness, leftover from their human DNA, or those born with a weak body. In the time of the Ancestors, such children would have been smothered or left to die. But this is a gentler age, and now those children are allowed to live, merely kept hidden and not spoken of. Kurenai Maria had been right to fear the students of the Night Class would look down on her for her weakness. Before strengthening herself with Hio Shizuka's blood, other vampires outright avoided her, and she had no prospects for marriage at all, every possible partner fearing that her weakness would pass on to her children.
Aido's expression becomes more serious. "The results were too perfect. I'd seen plenty of human DNA samples when we created the blood tablets, and none of them looked like that. Normal human DNA is littered with potential problems and places where imperfections crop up. But I had seen results like that before - from vampires. So I decided to look deeper. I sequenced Kiryuu's entire genome, and cracked open the medical history records you got from Cross."

Aido darts a glance at Kaname, like he's waiting for the pureblood to punish him for sticking his nose somewhere it wasn't invited. Kaname, for his part, is a little annoyed that Aido went further than he asked, but decides that if Kiryuu is going to cause more problems, it's best to know ahead of time and grants the noble clemency. "Go on, Aido."

Aido gives a jerky nod, and runs a hand distractedly through his hair. "Kaname-sama, do you know the last time vampires studied Hunter biology? The seminal studies are nine thousand years old. The last major work was over six thousand years ago, and there's only been a few minor papers since then. Common wisdom says that Hunters are just humans with a few handy tricks - an extra sense, a few weak spells, a little healing ability. After all, as long as we follow the treaty, they leave us alone; we aren't interested in them, not the way Hunters are interested in us."

Kaname is losing patience with Aido's floundering. "Why should the Hunters interest me, Aido?"

"Have you ever thought about why Cross Kaien can live for over two hundred years and still look like a human in his thirties? How can you achieve that age without needing to drink blood? And Cross isn't the only one - the Twin Curse occurs because Hunters carry vampire blood. And Kiryuu has always been odd; first his twin survives birth, the first pair of Hunter twins to ever survive, and then he resists Level D longer than any case we have records about - over four years, when most don't even last months."

Suddenly, Kaname is very, very interested.

"I had to confirm it wasn't a fluke, so I contacted Cross and asked for more Hunter samples - don't worry, I told him it was for more research fine tuning the blood tablets and I wanted to study their digestive systems compared to normal humans. He could only find three Hunters willing to donate, but one of them was himself and that was enough."

"Every last one of them - it was like looking at a vampire genome, with a giant hole cut through it where the genes for obtaining and processing blood would be. Everything we thought we knew about them is wrong. We vampires have stayed the same for the last ten thousand years, but the Hunters haven't. They've bred themselves Hunter to Hunter, increasing the vampire content of their blood, over hundreds of generations, producing a monster like the Vampire Without Fangs, Cross Kaien. And from his old records, Kiryuu's blood naturally contains as much vampire DNA as the Chairman's. If Kiryuu hadn't been turned, I think he would've shown an extended lifespan too."

"It's like, if normal humans are cars, and pureblood vampires are jet planes, then Vampire Hunters are like gliders - they have no engine, but they're still designed to fly. But a glider needs a more efficient design to achieve even a fraction of what a plane can do, so Hunters appear human even with really high amounts of vampire DNA, and their abilities improve but don't really change. But when Kiryuu was turned, the virus in a pureblood's bite mutated those few parts kept human, and gave him the ability to process blood for energy. And Hio Shizuka-sama's blood made more changes - more than I can account for, actually. I'm not sure you can call him a Level D at all; I think that's why Kiryuu could present as an omega. The vampire content of his DNA was so high he had all the necessary genes. It was drinking from a pureblood that tipped him over the edge, because it made his healing good enough he could survive the process."

"If you had to assign him a rank," Kaname asks slowly, "what would you call him."
"Ah, I can't say exactly. A significant portion of the Hunter genome doesn't match any known in vampires or humans - I think they must have eaten a pureblood without any vampire offspring, or maybe they're mutations unique to Hunter bloodlines."

"Estimate for me," Kaname orders.

"If we consider the unknown Hunter and known vampire genes equivalent, then a very high ranking noble. You only need to look at Kiryuu to see that he isn't very human."

"I need your help, Ichijo-sempai," Zero requests as he slides into the noble's car four days before the next new moon - and his wedding.

"Of course, Kiryuu-kun. Whatever you need," Ichijo immediately agrees, green eyes worried.

"I need to sign some paperwork ending the lease on my apartment, in person. Kaito tried doing it for me, and he's already cleared out everything except the furniture, but they said I would have to sign it myself. Do you mind if we go there first, before the office closes?"

"It's no trouble. Give my driver the address; I'll let the security team know our arrival time has been pushed back."

Zero does not want Ichijo to see the crumbling, dreary neighborhood he lived in, or the sad, pathetic state of his tiny apartment, but with no choice either way, he endures the anxiety and embarrassment as Ichijo accompanies him inside to sign the papers, alongside the faithful Isa. The Hunter does not like the measuring, considering look the blonde gives his surroundings, or the way he gazes at Zero after they go upstairs with the supervisor, soft-eyed, but with compassion, not pity, as though he's just understood something.

It's only when the pair of omegas are back in the car and halfway to the house, that they realize they have been too complacent.

Ichijo is frowning at a message on his phone, typing out a response, and Zero is offhandedly staring out the window at the empty stretch of road, sheltered by a copse of trees on both sides, when he sees a single pair of headlights approaching in the distance. Zero almost dismisses it - but then his senses tell him the driver is also a vampire. Not unusual, but his instincts keep pricking him, and given the deserted location…

The Hunter almost convinces himself it's just paranoia. Then the oncoming car speeds up, just as it comes into range.

Instantly, Zero is releasing his and Ichijo's seatbelts, Ichijo looks up from his phone, a question on his lips, but there's no time, and Zero pushes him down into the footwell between the seats, dislodging Isa from Ichijo's lap and trapping him underneath the noble. The hound, thinking Zero is attacking his master, growls, sinks his teeth into Zero's arm and shakes his head; Zero bites through his lip with the pain.

"Avoid them!" Zero shouts to the driver, but there's nowhere to go, hemmed in by trees on both sides. The car swerves, brakes - then there's a crunch of impact, the screech of ripping metal, a shockwave Zero can feel through the floor, and the world spins, tumbling over and over as the car rolls, before a final neck-snapping jolt, as the sedan comes to rest, upside down, against the trunk of a tree.

Braced in the footwell, Zero and Ichijo are bruised and shaken, but otherwise nearly unharmed. Ichijo calls out to the guard and the driver. No one responds.
In the forest around them, the night is full of lights - a hundred eyes glowing red with bloodlust.

Chapter End Notes

Kiryuu Zero is the Hunter equivalent of a pureblood fight me.

Isaya's familiar is taking the shape of a Borzoi dog. Very elegant, you should google them.
A Covenant Sealed in Blood: Prelude

Chapter Notes

A quick clarification: Zero is the Hunter equivalent of a pureblood, yes, but remember that in vampire terms, he equals a very high-ranking noble. He is the most powerful kind of Hunter they can possibly produce, but vampire power rankings have an even higher category - a pureblood is simply so powerful no single Hunter could hope to match them. A pureblood casually killed Zero's parents, who were supposed to be the strongest Hunters at that time, without any effort, which should tell you what kind of terrifying opponents they are.

My gratitude to those of you who offered palace name suggestions last chapter, consensus seemed to be 'something with roses' so I went with that. I hope you don't mind, Sancti Rei, your suggestion didn't get chosen but it did end up repurposed in a significant place. :)
Zero drags the vampire out after him by his jacket, laying him out a safe distance away if the car catches on fire. From Zero's quick examination, the driver has a broken left leg from being hit by the attacker's car, and a serious head wound from the crash, but he'll probably live.

Ichijo comes up behind him, lowering Zero's phone from his ear, Isa at his heels. "It will take at least half an hour for help to get here. They're tracking the GPS tag in your phone to our location."

"We don't have half an hour," Zero says, shaking his head, "maybe a minute and a half until they're on us. If they coordinate their attacks we won't last five minutes. Can you get the guard out if I keep them occupied?"

"I'll try. The damage is worst there. Isa will help you buy time, but what do we do after that? It's too dangerous to stay near the car, but it offers us more protection than running through the forest carrying injured men."

Zero eyes the hound doubtfully, but continues on. "The map says there's a village half a mile down the road. We should retreat that way; I'm less effective with these trees restricting my gun range and there's probably a clearing there. I don't want to endanger humans but it's the only strategy I can think of."

Ichijo nods decisively, and worms back through the driver's window, just as the first pair of red eyes appears through the trees. Staying clustered together will help Zero's ability to defend all four of them, so Zero grabs the driver by his shirt and pulls him backwards toward the car, firing as he goes, so precise that each shot equals one kill.

Despite the certainty of their loss, a hot streak of joy wells up in the Hunter, with familiar weapons in his hands and a battlefield full of targets before him. At least he'll get to kill a bunch of vamps before he dies. Threatened by imminent death, Zero feels better than he has in months.

The enemy forces are strange; a few Level Es, yes, but mostly unstable D Rank ex-humans and almost as many C Rank commoners, all acting starved by bloodlust, or else the instinctual drive to protect not one, but two omegas should have kicked in.

Quickly, Zero realizes that their current position is dangerous. The car is right against the treeline, and while plenty of vampires are charging straight across the open road, the cleverer ones are circling around the sides to attack from the cover provided by the trees.

"We need to move, Ichijo-sempai!" Zero calls behind him as he squeezes the trigger and another Level E turns into ash.

"He's trapped - I have to destroy the car to free him. I need another few minutes, and he's badly injured," comes the muffled reply.

There's a snarl, and a strangled scream as a vampire who made it past Zero meets its end at Isa's jaws. Zero falls into a pattern, picking off most of the vampires with long range shots, while the grey and white hound, thick fur now spattered with blood, falls on the few who make it past the Hunter with his size and sharp teeth. Never has Zero been more grateful that Ichijo's dog isn't a natural animal.

Encircled, outnumbered, and forced to the edge of his abilities, Zero confronts an unending stream of enemies; with no safe direction, the world spins too fast for anything except reaction.

His training surfaces, the state of mind the Hunters call mushin, no-mindedness, free from thoughts of anger, fear, or ego, where actions flow without direction, and the body freely responds to
intuition's call. In *mushin*, time is irrelevant; only the present moment exists; your opponent moves, you perceive it, and react without hesitation even before the strike ends. The division between Hunter and weapon is an illusion; both are one instrument, forged from the same vampire's blood, for the sake of one purpose: to kill all vampires who believe themselves unkillable.

The vampires are massing in the trees, Zero registers calmly; when they attack, all will end.

At that moment, something strange happens. The tattered pieces of Zero's mark burn; the world freezes. And just like that, the Hunter knows precisely where every vampire in this clearing is, what path they will take when they attack, and the perfect trajectory to end them, if Bloody Rose could break the laws of nature and fire quickly enough. Peaceful inside *mushin's* serenity, Zero readies himself for one last stand - when Isa steps in front of him.

The hound, who seems suddenly larger, turns his head silently to meet Zero's gaze with eerie luminous grey eyes. Shaken, *mushin* shatters, thought rushes back in like a wave, and the moment is broken; Zero's perception returns to normal just as their attackers sweep forward.

Isa stands firm, and the dust at Zero's feet begins to swirl, faster and faster, as the mass of snarling, red-eyed vampires - around forty of them - charges forward. Perhaps the hound barks, but Zero feels it in his bones like the sound of thunder, and he covers his ears. The wind shrieks, slicing forward like a hail of arrows, and before it parts flesh, bone, metal, wood - the air fills with shrapnel. When the dust clears, the treeline starts a full ten paces back, a wreckage of sheared stumps and ash. The car with Ichijo inside is untouched.

Even the attacking vampires are silent. Isa sighs, suddenly normal size again, and the light in his eyes goes out.

"Thank you," Zero says politely, and the hound nods back. In the trees, the vampires watch but move no closer, fear of death overriding their hunger, though it fades minute by minute.

Finally, the guard is free, and Ichijo reappears from the wreck, a bruise purpling his cheekbone and his blond hair dusted with fragments.

"I don't need my hands to fight, I'll carry them," he gasps, vampiric strength proving useful as the noble slings the guard over his shoulder and hooks his arm underneath the driver's belly. Many of the eagerest attackers are dead; there's a lull as the more patient ones watch from the trees and circle around their target.

"Can you use your power to break through, Ichijo-sempai?"

"Yes, that way?"

Zero nods, still catching his breath, and keeps scanning the trees for the next attacker. Ichijo makes no gesture or sign, but suddenly begins to run forward at a blurring speed, and Zero follows, scattering the vampires behind with a few parting shots. Four or five vampires leap into the road ahead of Ichijo, before freezing with looks of horror as layers of skin, muscle, fat and bone crumble away in a powdery dust, limbs slowly losing cohesion and breaking off, fully aware as their bodies dissolve around them, before the head and core finally collapse inward as though they were made of loose sand. Zero feels a shiver run down his spine - matter disintegration, what a terrifying way to die. Ichijo-sempai was a kind person, to prefer the sword instead.

They run following the road, trailing the scent of blood behind them as a lure, like an injured gazelle fleeing a pack of hyenas. A small, abandoned barn surrounded by overgrown fields and a dirt yard provides them shelter and refuge; Zero takes a shooter's perch on the roof and Ichijo
guards the injured vampires from below.

Stymied, the pack of hungry vampires and the two omegas hold their stalemate for long minutes, but eventually their attackers find confidence again in their greater numbers and surge forward to storm the building. Zero can hear Ichijo fighting below, and a sound like a gust of wind as Isa's deep bark rings out, but the Hunter is too busy firing at his own opponents to help them, long out of bullets and relying on Bloody Rose to siphon off his energy into petal-bladed attacks that tear through the low ranking vampires like a scythe through wheat.

Something crawls across his foot, but Zero doesn't look down, furiously fighting for his life and possibly his freedom. Then another, quite heavy and large. And one more. The Hunter dares to take his eyes off the battle for a millisecond.

A spider, the size of his spread hand, and colored black with a red hourglass on its abdomen, is standing by his right foot. Then a flash of movement out of the corner of his eye; Zero raises his gun and fires at the oncoming Level D, but not before he realizes - the roof is covered in spiders, a black, many-legged carpet of them.

They surge forward, crawling up his trouser legs, clinging to his shirt, climbing over his face as he screams and struggles, trying to dislodge them, but the world turns black.

A soft, sweet voice asks him, "Are you alright, Kiryuu-kun?"

In what seems like no time at all, Zero finds himself clinging to a thick blue rug in a warm room lit by a flickering fire. In front of him is a woman dressed in a pretty pink gown with long, wavy blonde hair and light blue eyes, lit with concern now. She could be mistaken for an angel with the ethereal beauty of her delicate features - if Zero could not sense that she was a pureblood.

Zero runs through the catalogue of living pureblood vampires in his head.

"You're Shirabuki Sara."

"Yes," she smiles gently, "I saw through my familiars that you and Takuma-kun were being attacked by vampires, and I was able to rescue you."

Zero's suspicious nature is not dissuaded. "Where am I, and where is Ichijo?"

"I could only reach one of you, but Takuma-kun's security arrived soon afterwards to help. You're in a small retreat I own, about fifty miles away."

"Thanks for your help," Zero says, aware that the threat in front of him is far more dangerous than any pack of lesser vampires, "but I think I'll be on my way. The Association will know by now that I'm missing, and I need to go."

"Kiryuu-kun," Shirabuki says, her voice hurt and face sad, "have I done something to make you distrust me?"

"I'm a Hunter. I don't like any vampire." Zero gets to his feet, observing that the room is rather...frilly and girlish. "And I really do need to leave."

"Oh, that's such a shame...I'm not a patient woman, little Hunter."

Zero finds himself pinned to the wall by one delicate hand tipped in razor sharp nails, painted red as blood.
"You really should have played along. It would have been better for you."

The Hunter grinds the muzzle of Bloody Rose deeper into her side. "I'd let me go, if I were you."

Something like anger mixed with satisfaction twists her pretty features, and Shirabuki lets him go very slowly, slicing her claws through his neck so thin rivulets of blood trickle down the skin. She turns away, but makes a show of cleaning her nails with little kitten licks.

"I thought about killing you to ruin Kaname-kun's efforts with that treaty," she tells him, like they are friends discussing the weather. "Or maybe raping you, and sending the mess I made back to his sister, dear Yuuki-chan. A male omega's second virginity is quite the prize, you know; I'd love to ruin one of Kaname-kun's things he hasn't even gotten to enjoy yet."

"You're mistaken," Zero retorts, voice thick with anger, "I'm not one of Kuran's things."

The beautiful pureblood settles herself in a wicker chair decorated with ribbons, arranges her skirts, and smiles pleasantly at the Hunter. "Which is why I think the two of us can work together after all. Come sit down with me, and we'll talk about it."

"What goal do you imagine we have in common?" Zero refuses to move any closer to the duplicitous pureblood, and stays in the center of the room.

Shirabuki claps her hands and nods with approval, "You are as resistant to a pureblood's control as I've heard. You'll work perfectly." Taking a sip of tea, she smiles over the cup's rim, showing her fangs. "The goal we have in common is that we both wish to bring down Kuran Kaname."

"I may be a Hunter, but what makes you think I want to destroy Kuran, or that I'd help a pureblood with anything?" Zero asks sarcastically.

"Because you hate him more than anyone. I can offer you the revenge you want for how he's treated you."

Zero crosses his arms. "If I was still a teenager, I might say yes. But Kuran is the head of vampire society. He keeps the rest of you bloodsuckers in line. Killing him would destroy that balance. Not to mention I just promised, in writing, I wasn't going to harm him."

"Who says we're going to kill him?" she says archly, "There are other ways of destroying a man."

"Like what?" Zero demands suspiciously.

"You're going to marry him. Just by being near him, Kiryuu-kun, you'll have access to many of his secrets, things he doesn't want others to know. You'll be in a position to learn his weaknesses, the moments he's vulnerable. All you need to do, Kiryuu-kun, to take revenge on the pureblood who has belittled you, hurt you, and now trapped you in this sham of a marriage you don't want, is to tell me what you learn, and I will take care of the rest."

Shirabuki spreads her hands, and smiles her most saccharine smile, "And if you decide you want to kill Kaname-kun after all, then I promise you I will let you drink my blood and gain my power."

"Oh," she says, giggling behind her fingers, "it looks like your watcher came faster than I expected. Such a pity, but I think we'll have to say our goodbyes. Do remember what I've told you, Kiryuu-kun."

Then Shirabuki dissolves, nightmarishly, the pretty blond girl becoming a pile of hairy spiders that scuttle every which way, escaping through cracks and holes, until Zero is left standing alone in the
In through the doorway flies a raven the size of an eagle, with eyes like dried blood.

"Was that supposed to kill me?" Kaname inquires nonchalantly as a bullet embeds itself in the doorframe where his head used to be.

Kiryuu Zero lowers his gleaming gun, "We both know neither of us is capable of killing the other. I did find it very satisfying."

Kaname's raven familiar takes flight from its perch on the mantel, unspooling itself into ribbons of sheer black smoke, the piece of power embedded inside merging with its master and sinking back into his skin with a shiver like the touch of fog.

"That's twice I've saved your life since you presented. I suppose I can't expect someone like you to be grateful."

"Grateful?" Zero spits, incensed. "What do I have to be grateful for? That you saved me because you would look bad if you didn't? Because you need me alive for your plans? Don't feed me that bullshit and expect me to believe it! You saved me for your own goals. You have never saved me because my life meant anything to you on its own!"

At the end of Zero's outburst, he faces flushes and his chest heaves with the force of his anger. How nice - Kaname almost smiles.

"Why have you come back to meddle in my life, after thirty years of being happy to leave me alone?! Don't you get it? You! Won! Yuuki chose you, and I was one one left alone! Why did you damned purebloods have to come back into my life?!"

"You've proven you have new talents, Kiryuu, and you helpfully put yourself right at my feet. Otherwise I was content to let you disappear."

"Oh, how could I forget. You used me and threw me aside, and now that I'm useful again, here you are!"

"Of course. Why else would I tolerate you?"

"You liar. You jealous bastard, you've never 'tolerated' me, you just refrained from killing me because Yuuki would hate you if you did. Even after she chose you, you stupid fool, deep down you are so afraid of losing her .-"

Kiryuu chokes helplessly for air, the plaster broken and shattered from the force when Kaname threw him into the wall. The pureblood squeezes tighter, feeling the cartilage of his windpipe creak beneath his fingers, and lets the Hunter suffocate satisfyingly for a few more seconds before loosening his grip, letting the insolent boy gasp and sputter.

His instincts scream at him - no no no omega omega no hurt no hurt protect protect protect - ruining the image of Kiryuu sagging in his grip, his neck decorated with a collar of bruises from Kaname's hand, unspoiled except by the barest remnant of the ex-human's taming mark, a nearly invisible ink wash. He had done well to order it removed.

To cover his confusion, the pureblood immediately lets Kiryuu drop to the floor, still coughing painfully, and steps back to gain some distance from the cause. It disturbs Kaname to find himself genuinely distressed by his alpha nature; he is never at the mercy of his instincts - Kaname rules
every part of himself with flawless control, tested only by Yuuki's blood.

Kiryuu glares weakly up at him with watery eyes, shifting in a way that brings the scent of the Hunter's blood to his nose, and something else.

Someone else.

Striking like a snake, Kaname crowds the Hunter back against the wall; Kiryuu shouts and tries to attack him, slicing his forearm open shallowly with a hidden dagger before the pureblood can disarm the Hunter and pin his arms against the wall above his head, gentler this time. The silver-haired Hunter struggles futilely, but Kaname ignores him, caught up trying to identify that stranger's scent. Kaname knows this person's smell, and Kiryuu is covered in it from head to toe.

He accepted us. He is ours, snarls the alpha. We drove off the spider woman who wanted him. How dare she touch him!

Shirabuki. Kaname's eyes flare red before settling back to their usual rusty color, and he lowers his head to nose against Kiryuu's throat, scenting the tender, soft skin there. The open wounds brought the fragrance of blood close to the surface, but the pureblood could tell Shirabuki had placed her bare hand on Kiryuu's neck.

Kiryuu was supposed to be bait for her. He planned for such a circumstance to happen. This scenario was expected, positive even. Kaname can use this.

Her scent still enrages him.

"Did you just smell me?" forces Kiryuu, tone incredulous, with great difficulty from his broken voice.

"Why did Shirabuki Sara plan your abduction and leave you unharmed?"

"She rescued me. We chatted," the ex-human rasps out.

A portion of truth, but not the whole. There will be time later to pry it out of Kiryuu.

Kaname considers for a moment. "You stink. Before your escort arrives, you will bathe."

"No!" the Hunter croaks, and begins to struggle again.

Kaname slams him against the wall, stunning him - his damned instincts wail traitorously. "You will clean her stench off your skin, or I will strip you naked and do it myself!"

Kiryuu recoils, a little fear in his eyes, and nods resentfully.

The brunette drags the Hunter roughly through the house, hand clasped around his arm like a shackle, past room after room filled with lace, floral prints, velvet upholstery and irritatingly quaint landscape paintings.

The alpha protests unhappily, Gentle, must not hurt mate.

He is not mate, Kaname thinks viciously. He is a tool.

We gave him our blood, didn't we? And alpha-mate gave him her blood too. We watched over him for so long, just to keep him safe, make him strong. Pretty, sweet-smelling omega accepted our courtship and promised himself to us. We will make him ours when we mount him and fill his belly
Gritting his teeth, the pureblood pushes down the alpha and ignores his ridiculous, irrational instincts.

Finally Kaname discovers what looks like a guest room furnished neutrally enough to avoid offending his sense of taste, and shoves Kiryuu through the door ahead of him.

Still moving from the force, it takes Kiryuu a few more quick steps to keep from falling, and the Hunter turns to glare over his shoulder. Kaname, of course, ignores him to search the suite for a bathroom through the adjoining door. Shirabuki must meet her lovers here; the full bath almost equals the size of the bedroom next door, and it's fully stocked. Stubbornly, the Hunter hovers in the doorway with his arms crossed in front of his chest and refuses to enter.

"Kiryuu, it is your choice how this happens, but one way or another you will do as I wish."

The pale face twists indecisively, lavender eyes measuring the distance between them and the hallway door, before Kiryuu's expression becomes coolly impassive and he approaches Kaname and the enormous pink and white marble tub in the dead center of the room.

"Maybe I will, but not with you watching."

"Why not?" says Kaname, just to see how far this obedience goes. "We're going to be married. I'll see the little you have sooner or later."

"But not yet," replies Kiryuu, eyes steady, and he patiently watches without budging until the pureblood closes the door, leaving a gap between the door and the frame.

There's the rush of running water, and Kaname calls over the sound, "You won't be wearing those clothes back to the Association. I'm going to look for something else while you bathe. And I will know if you aren't thorough."

Searching through the wardrobe and dresser tells Kaname more than he ever wanted to know about his fellow pureblood's tastes, but he does find a silk robe and matching pajamas in wine red that Kiryuu won't throw a fit about wearing.

Kaname pauses in front of the door, pajamas in hand; the bathroom is quiet, except for a faint splash. Without examining his motives too closely, and without knocking, the pureblood swings the door open and goes inside. Kiryuu is just sliding under the water, surface opaque from bath salts - Kaname catches a slip of white back before his rival is up to his neck in milky water. The room smells like jasmine and the blood Kiryuu is washing off his neck.

"You did understand the purpose of this was to make you not smell?" the pureblood remarks, as Kiryuu startles, splashing water over the sides, and narrowing his eyes in a glare.

"I don't give a damn whether you do or not, now leave!"

"Gladly," he drawls, "as soon as I ensure I won't have to endure your nudity before I have to. You don't imagine that I find your skinny body attractive, do you?"

Much to Kaname's chagrin, now that Kiryuu is an omega, the pureblood is in fact hardwired to find him attractive. But interest is not desire, and just as he never gave a thought to Kiryuu's body when the boy was young, he doesn't care to sleep with him now.

"I don't give a damn whether you do or not, now leave!"
Placing the clothes conspicuously next to the bath towel laid out on the counter, Kaname withdraws under a lavender glare.

While he waits for Kiryuu to finish, Kaname dials the head of Takuma's security, learning that the cleanup took longer than expected, but the security team is on their way following Kaname's cellphone beacon, minus Takuma, who has been returned to the Shouto estate in his bondmate's care with a non-threatening injury to his side. The Hunters have been informed of the situation, and are sending their own team to rendezvous with the vampires and provide extra protection. Kaname will still send a familiar, of course. Yuuki will be distressed to learn they had such a close call.

A cloud of steam, jasmine and orange blossom soaps - Kaname does not turn around, finishing his call. Kiryuu is wearing those ill-fitting pajamas with the ends of his wet silver hair sticking to his flushed skin.

Kaname circles the ex-human speculatively, surveying the Hunter's form. He looks for the vampire blood; it's not hard to find, flowing close to the surface. Other Hunters have been turned before. None are like Kiryuu. Containing the power gained from drinking from three purebloods would have ripped them, and any average Level D, apart. Kiryuu thrives, his skin warm with the power humming beneath.

He will have to endure Kiryuu much longer than the lifespan of a mere Level D, perhaps as long as thousands of years, though eventually Kaname will outlive him. And the likelihood he will be fertile has increased. That means Kaname's plans have had to change. While he can still ignore Kiryuu, a modicum of cooperation is necessary.

"Takuma has a mild injury, and is on his way home. An escort is coming to collect you, but we have some time before they arrive. I had planned this conversation for after we married, but shall we discuss our options now?"

"Options for what?" Kiryuu inquires, almost pleasantly, the lassitude and warmth clinging from his bath making him compliant.

"I despise you; you loathe me. We will be married within days. We must live with each other, for Yuuki's sake, as peacefully as possible. Therefore, you and I must come to an arrangement."

"I don't see why we can't avoid one another."

"Tempting, but not always practical. You will, of course, abide by the terms you have agreed to regarding your public behavior. I will punish you if you misbehave in public, I promise you, and you will regret your actions. I wish to make that crystal clear."

Kiryuu glares, insulted into anger, "I keep my word once I give it. You don't need to remind me what I've agreed to."

"Then that leaves our private life. In order to begin the bonding process, the three of us must spend a significant amount of time together. How will we deal with that?"

"I'll behave if you do, Kuran. No more choking me, or ordering me."

"You'll be mine to order, Kiryuu, but think I can agree to a reciprocal agreement. Civility, and noninterference in each other's matters beyond what is necessary. The details will come later, once we speak with Yuuki."

"Now, I cannot send you to the Hunters looking like this." In a flash, Kamame catches Kiryuu by the elbows and pushes him down on the canopied bed. Kiryuu shouts and fights, tangling himself
in the bedsheets, real fright giving him an eelike slipperiness and tenacity.

"Hush, Kiryuu. Hush! I am not trying to force you -" but the Hunter only shouts louder and redoubles his efforts. The pureblood gives up and lets the Hunter exhaust himself, unaffected by his struggles and futile fight against Kaname's greater weight and strength.

"Kiryuu," he says with exasperation when the Hunter finally stills, "I swear to you, I will not force you unless it is necessary or you leave me no other choice."

"What are you doing then?" Kiryuu demands.

"Your bruises haven't healed yet, and a pureblood's saliva has healing properties. It may surprise you to discover, but I do in fact have some limits."

"I don't need it," insists Kiryuu, trying to throw Kaname off again.

"It doesn't matter; I can't have the Association see you injured like this."

"Says the man who strangled me!"

But Kaname allows no more protests, and using one hand to hold the Hunter's wrists still, the other bends Kiryuu's jaw back to expose his neck.

A truly impressive collection, the bruises darkening his throat in greens and browns bring the scent of blood close to the surface, though the surface wounds have closed and Kiryuu washed the clotted blood away. A pity Kaname must erase them.

This is merely business, as it was when Kiryuu drank his blood, so Kaname doesn't draw it out, lapping broad strokes over the dark handprint across the center of Kiryuu's throat. The Hunter freezes like a rabbit pinned by a wolf when he feels the first wet touch, face crumpling in disgusted consternation. Fresh from the bath, the skin is clean of the Hunter's taste, except for a hint of the soap he used. Kiryuu's adam's apple bobs when Kaname licks over it, the only sign he makes until the pureblood draws away, the colorful marks already lightening as his saliva encourages healing and regeneration.

The alpha croons, violence earlier erased and forgiven, pleased after being allowed to care for and heal the omega. *Now he smells like us, as he should. Next time we should scent mark our mate properly.*

Kaname cannot *wait* to dump Kiryuu on someone else and leave here.

"I hear car doors. Try not to make any more trouble for the next few days until after the wedding; I won't allow you to leave the Association until then. I have too much work to do already."

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The vampires come to collect Zero at precisely five in the evening on the night of the new moon.

He fell into an exhausted sleep a few hours ago, mind relentlessly turning in circles from terrified distress and apprehension. Nightmares have haunted him for days: himself, stripped naked in a circle of Hunters who spit on him and throw stones while they shout things like whore and slut, some where Master, Cross, his parents reject him, call him vampire and turn their faces away. Sometimes a bundle is placed in his hands, and a voice tells him it's his child, but when he lifts the swaddling, a hideous monster lies underneath. Most are of Yuuki - she stalks and shows her fangs, sometimes he catches her murdering humans, other times it's her face he sees instead of Shizuka's, slaughtering his family (and some where she pushes him down on his back, naked, and he fights,
and she - he hurts, while her brother watches).

He will see her soon. He will be married to her soon. What will he do? Will she be anything like the human he remembers? Or will only the pureblood be left?

Maybe if he could think, he would know, but he has been sick to his stomach frequently, his terror feeding his nausea, his head aches, and he just wishes he could sleep. Worries follow him into the daylight, biting his heels. When he joins the night of the vampire forever, what will his life be like? Will the vampire eat the Hunter, and leave nothing left? What is he supposed to do if he turns out to be fertile after all? And blood and ashes, Zero cannot help but fear tonight; the vampire would break it when it suited his plans. (There are rumors, among the Hunters, about a pureblood's tastes in bed - animalistic, bloody and violent, with talons and teeth. Sometimes, whisper the Hunters, they break the lower classes they take to bed, like children with dolls, rip off limbs, shatter hips with their strength.)

Zero feels like a coward, so disturbed by something as silly as a marriage. His marriage. He rests his forehead in cold, shaking hands. Please, let this be a dream. Let him be mad, let everything be a delusion, let this not be happening!

The tile of the bathroom stays the same, and the water from the showerhead still cascades over his head. Reality, then.

Zero steps out of the stall, towel wrapped around his waist, and the three female beta attendants sent into Headquarters by his escort outside avert their eyes.

"Kiryuu-sama, please allow us to assist you as you dress," requests the eldest as she curtsies, an ancient vampire by the lines on her face and the grey in her hair.

"That's fine, as long as you don't touch me without warning me first. And you don't have to call me that. Kiryuu-san is fine."

Breaking into a flurry of movement, one of the women begins to comb his hair, while the other has a nail file and a determined look on her face.

"I'm sorry, Kiryuu-sama, but I cannot follow your request; as an omega, you outrank nearly all other vampires, and it would offer you disrespect to call your name as I would an equal. We will be quick, sir, this is just to neaten you for our arrival to the palace; you will be readied in your wedding clothes there."

The eldest woman brings a large white cardboard box, tied shut with a ribbon; when Zero opens it and folds back the tissue paper, there lies his first set of clothing for today's ceremonies.

There's no fooling anyone - it reminds one of a dress. But it's also the most expensive garment Zero has ever worn, including the coat Cross and Yagari bought him for his betrothal. It's colored a deep blue-black, with swirls and clusters of tiny golden beads the size of strawberry seeds forming an abstract pattern Zero can't quite make out. The thin, translucent material leaves nothing to the imagination, clinging to his upper body, then flowing in luxuriant folds to his feet, and pooling in an expansive train that fans out behind him. Underneath - thankfully, given the February weather - is a jumpsuit in the same color made of a warm, soft material, cut to match the rounded square neckline just below his collarbone, and brushing the ends of his shoulderblades, leaving the top of his back bare, as well as showing glimpses of his pale arms through the beaded netting of his full-length sleeves. The supple leather of the thin-soled, matching shoes is dyed the same deep blue.
They clip a new diamond Hoseki into his hair, and apply a little paint to hide the circles underneath his eyes, some blush to liven his pallid cheeks, and a layer of concealer on the remnants of his taming mark.

"Wait," says Zero.

By the door, his possessions sit packed in a set of brown leather suitcases, one more gift sent by his betrothed, the cardboard boxes thrown away. Zero goes to the smallest case, cracking open the lid, and retrieves Yuki's betrothal gift, the diamond ring.

The head attendant nods approvingly, like Zero is making some gesture when he slides it on his finger, but it does match his Hoseki, and that's all.

The maids gather up his trailing dre...the train's material. More vampires come to take his luggage, and then they urge him outside, leaving his temporary lair for the last time. What seems like every Hunter in the Association is lined up in the entry hall; most of them are attending tonight either for work or as guests, dressed in their best clothes. Zero ignores their gazes for the most part, eyes firmly fixed ahead of him.

"Zero-kuuuuun!"

Even hampered by his clothes, he neatly sidesteps Cross' flying tackle hug, and glares down at the man sprawled in a dirty pile of slush.

"So mean to daddy! What is a parent to do when their cute children have all flown the nest? Today the last of my babies is getting married" The President breaks down in noisy, messy tears, loudly drawing the attention of everyone close enough to hear. Zero tsks and moves toward the circle of cars where more vampire signatures wait. Cross does it on purpose, Zero knows; better to inject levity and laughter into a scene and distract everyone watching than let the real doubts and unhappiness in.

Ahead, Zero spots a familiar blond head, speaking to a woman with his back turned, and nearly breaks into a run; the maids have to rush to keep up with him. "Ichijo-sempai!"

Green eyes search for the caller, and catch Zero's form approaching; Ichijo breaks into a crinkled smile. The Hunter gives the noble a quick worried once over, searching for lingering injuries.

"Ichijo-sempai, are you alright? I'm so sorry, I would have come to see you, but I wasn't allowed to leave the Association."

"No, no, Kiryuu-kun. I knew what I was getting into, and Isaya made sure my wound healed days ago. I'm perfectly fine," and his eyes dance with cheer. "In fact, it was quite exciting."

There's an absence by Ichijo's side, Zero realizes with worry. "Where is Isa? He wasn't injured, was he?"

"A guard was unnecessary today," answers a calm, unfamiliar voice from over Zero's shoulder, "but you will see him again."

Zero spins on his heel; nobody ever sneaks up on him, especially not a pureblood, even one examining him so serenely with an inoffensive air. He's as tall as Master Yagari - much taller than Zero - and has a cool, dark blond hair color, but somehow in the way he holds himself, Zero observes a resemblance to Ichijo's hound. And those eyes - the same pale grey eyes.

Zero follows his instinct. "Thank you for saving us the other day, with that wind. I apologize for
"You are most welcome. I am glad to see you safe. But Takuma makes his own decisions, and if anyone is to blame, it is those who planned it."

Zero can't hold in his curiosity any longer. "How does it work? Are you Isa or - ?"

"Isa is a piece of my power taken form; he has autonomy, though I am faintly aware of him at all times, even without looking through his senses. Please be assured, your conversations with Takuma were as private as I could make them; I had no intention of invading your privacy, but your safety and Takuma's safety were paramount."

Ichijo can't help himself, and bursts into a peal of laughter. "It was an accident, technically, but Kaname's actions were the catalyst."

"Somehow, I'm not surprised. You are Shouto Isaya?"

"Yes," affirms the blond man evenly.

"Does he treat you well?" Zero questions Ichijo, pointedly looking away from the pureblood.

"Better than my family ever did."

Zero scuffs his foot in the snow, and examines Shouto with his arms crossed. "Then you're alright in my book, for a pureblood."

"Thank you, Kiryuu-kun. That is high praise, coming from you."

"Oh," exclaims the woman Ichijo was speaking with, as though she realized something, "You're the one Hana-chan fought with at school."

Like Ichijo, she is dressed in the same blue-black color of Zero's clothing. Both of them will assist in the first wedding tradition Zero must take part in today, leftover from the ancient days of vampire kind. Before the law protected them, unbonded omegas were always in danger of being snatched, even on their way to their own wedding. So in ancient times, they were brought to their new partners escorted by other omegas, so that if the wedding party was attacked, the attackers would be confused which omega was the desirable one, and which were the decoys trying to lead the pursuers on a false trail. The tradition has no practical purpose anymore, thankfully, but the vampires still practice a ceremonial version. The three of them wear similar clothing, and travel in
separate cars - like a shell game, Ichijo explained - just as though they were really trying to fool watchers.

"You too, Aido-san." Zero nods his head in return.

One of the Kuran servants, with the purposeful bearing of one in charge, approaches the four of them. "I'm sorry to interrupt, Shouto-sama, honorable omegas, but we must depart in order to remain on schedule."

Aido Madoka rocks back on her heels, gives Shouto her respects, and bounces off to the last car in the line.

Shouto rests a hand on his mate's shoulder; standing intimately close with their bodies turned toward one another, he whispers something into Ichijo's ear. Ichijo murmurs an answer to the pureblood's bent head, covering Shouto's hand with his own, before they untangle themselves and Shouto moves toward the front of the caravan.

The sight leaves Zero with a pang in his chest as Ichijo comes closer, concern etched on his face.

"How do you feel, Kiryuu-kun?"

"Tired. I just want this to be over already." Zero raises a hand to scrub his eyes, but remembers he's wearing makeup just in time and settles for flicking his bangs out of his face.

Ichijo reaches out to Zero, giving him a moment to accept the intention and chose to remain still, then takes Zero's hands in his own. "Whatever happens today, or tomorrow, or the next day, Kiryuu-kun, I have faith that you will overcome it. And I will help you if I can."

Zero bites his lip, but voices none of his doubts. "Thank you, sempai."

As the noble is turning away, Zero makes a split second decision. A Hunter always follows their gut.

"Ichijo-sempai!" Zero calls.

A questioning expression on his face, Ichijo pauses.

"Among Hunters, we have a saying. A man who risks his life to save yours, without gaining anything, is someone you should trust. I wouldn't mind if you called me Zero."

Ichijo smiles, slow and genuine. "Thank you, Zero-kun. I'm honored. Please use my name too."

"Takuma-sempai," Zero tries it out on his tongue, "I'll see you when we get there."

The blond nods, still smiling, and follows Shouto's path. Zero goes to the car in the middle, followed by the maids holding the train of his clothing. The eldest woman opens the car door for him, and takes out one last item from the back seat. "This was sent along for you, Kiryuu-sama," she says, and shakes it out.

The cloak's dark material resists the wind, plain but thick, and the maid has him stand still while she throws it around his shoulders and fastens it with a brooch. The inside is lined with soft, warm black fur - rabbit, the maid informs him - and just like that Zero knows Yuuki had this made for him. She knows how much Zero dislikes the cold, but not because he was sensitive to it - in fact, Zero was rather indifferent to cooler temperatures - but because he hated winter, and the memories the cold brought with it.
As the maids help him into the car, arranging the skirt around his feet, Zero draws up the hood, and turns his cheek into the soft fur. He has the whole backseat to himself, with the maids sitting across from him.

"If you would like to rest, Kiryuu-sama, we have a long drive. We'll wake you in time for to straighten yourself before we arrive."

Carefully, Zero eases himself down to stretch his upper body out on the seat. Nestled in the warm fur, the cloak's weight feels like an embrace. Without meaning to, Zero drifts off into a restful sleep, and for the first time in days, he dreams of nothing.

..... 

"....Kiryuu-sama."

He stirs, not quite waking, unwilling to leave his gentle rest.

"Kiryuu-sama, please wake. We will arrive at the palace in twenty minutes."

Petting the cloak's fur one last time, the Hunter shakes off the last of his grogginess, and gets up; the maids immediately swoop in to tug his clothes back into place, fix his hair, and retouch the paint on his face.

"The palace is coming into view, if you will look out the windshield, Kiryuu-sama," calls the driver.

They're still fifteen minutes away, so at first Zero thinks the driver must be mistaken. The cars are passing along a wide, two lane road cut through thick forest in a valley encircled by mountains on three sides.

Then, Zero spots it - a low, flattened hill with steep sides, rising above the treetops in the distance, encircled by a stone wall, with a large building rising behind it. The true scale becomes apparent as they come closer; the enormous size of the hill and the buildings atop it which keep looming larger and larger the closer they come.

"The Kurans were raised here?" Zero asks.

"No," answers the elderly maid, "Kuran-sama and Kuran-hime were born and raised at the White Orchid Residence, the oldest and smallest of the three royal palaces, which was traditionally the heir's home. The Residence's grounds also contain the Rose Sepulchre, the crypt housing the Kuran mausoleums and the resting place of those who choose Sleep. Kuran Haruka-sama and Kuran Juuri-sama closed the main residence when the rule of the monarchy ended, but Kuran-sama had it reopened."

The road broadens in the last stretch as the gatehouse comes into view, made of concrete foundation and mortared grey stone walls, and roofed traditionally in tile. The wooden eaves and lintels are carved with roses, and in the center of the gate is the nine orchid Kuran crest. Then the gatekeepers wave the cars ahead of them through.

"Welcome to Rosehill Palace, Kiryuu-sama, the former government seat and residence of the vampire monarchs. It's nearly ten thousand years old."

Watching through the car windows, Zero can't help but feel impressed. The grounds spread out in every direction, dotted with gardens; ancient trees line the road, and water splashes from fountains in the rectangular lake leading to the courtyard of the main building.
Made of grey stone, the palace has a shape like a three-sided rectangle, with the square main building as the shortest, widest side, and two longer arms framing a sunken inner courtyard with lighter grey pavestones. The palace is two stories high, and has terraces on the second floor; posts and lintels support the large, gently sloping traditional roof of fired tiles, with eaves that extend to cover the upper floor's terraces. A wide staircase takes visitors from the inner courtyard to the ground floor's high-roofed entry hall.

"This is the administrative state palace," explains the woman. "The residential palace is farther back on the grounds, separate from the state palace, with the famous rose gardens in between them.

At least it's a beautiful cage, Zero thinks.

Chapter End Notes

Please, keep asking me things you don't understand! I know there's a lot of worldbuilding in this. As the author, I know all the answers, but sometimes I forget that you don't and I need to explain things. You guys make this story better when you point out holes I've left unfilled.

Rosehill Palace, by the way, is based on the two main Japanese imperial residences (particularly the mixed style of the Tokyo palace) while the look of the state palace in particular was based on the Tokyo National Museum.

Things to look forward to in part two: finally Yuuki's POV, what are Hunters anyway?, married married married.
Yuuuki rises at five in the evening, an hour late enough she can finally stop lying awake, pretending to sleep, when she's really listing all the tasks she needs to check on to make sure tonight's ceremony will go perfectly.

She feels like a shaken soda pop can, bubbles of excitement and worry all mixed up in her chest like she'll explore any minute. In her own bedroom tonight, rather than the master suite with Kaname, Yuuki doesn't put on her wedding clothes just yet, but something she can move freely in while remaining appropriate to greet any early guests. Sliding open the door to her room, Yuuki tries to stay quiet, taking off her shoes and tiptoeing across the wooden floors as she passes Kaname's door.

Onii-sama. He made love to her last night with more desperation than usual and twice the care. She left when they finished; they always sleep apart, and Yuuki thinks he won't want to see her get up tonight anyway, off to finish preparing the arrival of someone he hates. He is unhappy, and she hates and blames herself for causing it when she owes him so much. But she won't go back on her promise to protect Zero.

Yuuki finds Steward Inukai, head of the palace staff, directing the final adjustments to the decoration of the Ceremonial Hall in the state palace, after avoiding the house servants and slipping out a side door to cross the gardens.

"Kuran-hime." The ancient white-haired noble offers a bow, his monocle glinting in the evening light.

Every time one of the ex-Night Class, or servants, or nobles calls her that, Yuuki feels like she ought to look over her shoulder for the real Kuran-hime. Yuuki is just plain Yuuki; sometimes she wonders when all of these people will realize the princess they bow to is just a girl playing pretend.
"I'm here to check on the preparations," she says instead, concentrating on staying collected and projecting the authority expected of a pureblood.

(This is Kaname's beautiful house, and his servants, and his world. Yuuki knows she could never hope to meet everyone's expectations, a second-rate pureblood beside her brother's effortless embodiment of the ideal. Worse, she isn't sure she wants to.)

"Shouto-sama and the wedding party departed three and a half hours ago to bring Kiryuu-sama to Rosehill; they will arrive around eight, and we have already prepared the facilities in the main building for him. His wedding outfit has been laid out, and the relevant staff assigned. You and Kuran-sama will be needed for the greeting ritual then."

"And the guests?"

Yuuki already knows every detail of the wedding events; she planned it herself, after all, down to the last tablecloth (red linen), cutlery pattern (heirloom, gold-plated) and flower arrangement (roses, of course). She didn't want to impose on Kaname-sama any more, after needing him to carry out the negotiations, so Yuuki took up the responsibility for the wedding arrangements herself, and her brother had not cared to inquire further, except to approve whatever expenses were incurred.

Right now, Zero is hurting, and angry, and neither he nor Kaname-sama wants to be here, but Yuuki hopes someday they will look back on today as an important memory. So in the hope that the three of them will find happiness, and that such a day will come, she's worked her hardest to make today meaningful, and beautiful, and worthy of the two men she loves.

It had been tricky, balancing the demanding traditions of a pureblood wedding to an omega with the Hunters' customs, but she hopes her choices match Zero and Kaname-sama's tastes.

"The guests will begin arriving at ten; the ballroom where they will refresh themselves and wait will be open. The Hunters have a different receiving room, as you suggested. At eleven, I will announce the opening of the ceremonial hall, and request they seat themselves."

"We will be waiting in the Hall's anteroom," confirms Yuuki, "and after a Hunter ritual, the wedding ceremony will begin at midnight."

The next hours pass in a blur of last minute panics, corrections and sudden changes of plan, with Steward Inukai and Yuuki fixing and adapting as they go, until he politely suggests she return to the family quarters and change to welcome Zero.

Yuuki does, but not before she checks that Zero's new suite in the residential palace has been cleaned and readied for his arrival; she thought Zero might want a private space to himself, and she knows he won't want to sleep in the same room as two pureblood vampires, even if he is married to them. Even if the Hunter once slept with his head resting on her shoulder, Yuuki remembers with a pain in her chest.

Zero will occupy the omega's suite, built as a wedding present for Consort Aileya and empty since her death, which is tucked near Kaname's master suite and Yuuki's rooms. Yuuki already knows he won't like it. There's nothing she can do; there isn't a single room in this building he would feel comfortable in or would feel like anywhere he's lived before.

Living in Rosehill is an adjustment, she knows from experience. It reminds her of living in a museum, surrounded by priceless artifacts, trying to be careful all the time not to break anything, and pretending that you belong here - that you have always belonged here - and fit in effortlessly among them. Even her own room looks like some picture in a magazine, the kind of perfect,
managed, balanced decor she would never have created on her own. Zero would never recognize it, compared to his last memory of Yuuki's mismatched, disordered childhood bedroom at Cross' house.

Knowing she's expected back in the state palace soon, Yuuki hurries to get dressed. Her first set of clothes tonight is an unrelieved black, plain except for the black lace at her wrists and neck, lacking even a speck of another color, and her matching necklace and brooch is carved from jet.

Stripping off her clothes, Yuuki slows for a moment in the bathroom. What would Zero think when he saw her? He knows she's an alpha, because she's a pureblood. Just like male omegas, when female alphas presented their bodies transformed to fulfill their new role. Would he be disgusted by the cock underneath her skirt?

It doesn't feel strange anymore - to look and see her body like this, changed from when she was a child. When she presented, it felt right, like this was how she was meant to be all along. Kaname took her to bed for the first time that night, and showed her just how much he appreciated her, whatever was in her panties. And it pleased Yuuki to know for certain her husband enjoyed it when she did the same things to him.

But Zero was born human, and a Hunter, and he was new to vampire dynamics. What if he….but no, she's forgetting that it's Zero. Zero has never been a cruel person, even to people he hates. If he feels disgusted, he will try to hide it to spare her feelings. But Zero will only need to sleep with her until they bond, and then if he wants she'll never touch him again, Yuuki promises.

What is she doing? The pureblood smacks her cheeks with her hands, trying to shock herself back into the present and dislodge these thoughts. She can worry later. Right now she needs to hurry, because Zero will be here soon!

(Yuuki's mind is like the ocean. Near the surface, the sun warms the shallow water, brightly-colored fish dart between the corals that grow there, and seals and dolphins sport playfully. But down, down, deeper, in the cold black depths, lurk thoughts with teeth and memories with strangling coils.)

Yuuki hums to herself as she finishes dressing, and ignores her dignity as a pureblood to rush through the lavish halls of the palace, following the tug of the bloodbond to Kaname-sama.

Vampires performed a bloodbond when two alphas married, to reconcile their instincts to one another as partners rather than rivals. Yuuki rarely found it useful, except for times like this; after the ritual, she can always sense which direction to find Kaname, no matter where he is. Sometimes she can feel echoes of his emotions too, but Kaname hides those from her as much as he can. Being shut out of their link always hurts, but Yuuki tries to respect his desire for privacy.

She finds him waiting by the door, attired similarly in all black. He offers his arm with the gentle smile reserved only for her, and together they stroll through the gardens, enjoying the last bit of peace they will get this evening.

They make it to the courtyard just in time; with her pureblood sight, she can spy the distant line of cars winding up the road to Rosehill. Zero is down there, Yuuki thinks, and soon I will be able to see him, and this time he will be himself and he will look back and see me too. She sneaks a glance at Kaname's neutral expression; he's always so careful to hide what he really feels from the world, but his eyes always give it away.

"Thank you, onii-sama," she says sincerely, as the cars come to a stop.
"Anything for you," her husband says, and Yuuki knows he means it, and she must never, ever take it for granted or be careless with her desires. If he will not think of himself, Yuuki must bear it in mind for him.

The wedding party, led by Shouto-san, shouts joyously in welcome, leading three identical hooded, cloaked figures up to the stairs to the Kuran's waiting on the landing, surrounded at a respectful distance by the entire palace staff and others hired to work on the preparations.

"Kuran-san, Kuran-hime," calls Shouto, "why do you wear black, and bear such a gloomy air?"

"Our nights are pleasant, dear and dark, but we dreamed and saw the light of myriad stars, and we cannot forget that desire," Kaname answers.

"It is well then, dear cousins; we have searched, and brought you a starlit night."

The first cloaked figure comes forward, and pulls down their hood to reveal a mischievous Aido Madoka.

Shaking her head, Yuuki says, "You have brought me a fair night, but it belongs to another, and I do not see my stars."

The second cloaked omega approaches, and underneath this hood is Ichijo Takuma, smiling like he has a secret.

This time Kaname responds, "This night is lovely, and they have bright eyes, but it is not my night, with the stars I yearn to see."

There is only one person left, and as he slowly ascends the stairs, his train spreads out behind him on the steps, tiny gold beads on dark blue unfurling like the night sky.

Yuuki's breath catches in her throat, and her heart feels like it's going to beat right out of her chest.

He raises his shaking hands, takes the fabric of his fur-lined hood, and slowly lowers it, revealing Zero's silver hair and familiar face, diamond Hoseki glittering like a fallen star on his forehead.

"This is my night, and these are my stars," Yuuki completes the formula, mouth dry; she cannot tear her eyes away from his face. "You have found the dream we longed for, our hearts' desire, who has fallen from the skies above, and gathered up the starlight in his eyes."

Yuuki and Kaname link hands, and each hold out their other empty hand toward Zero, who eyes them and steps forward, hesitantly completing the circle.

Yuuki clasps Zero's hand tightly as everyone claps and cheers.

Zero. Oh, Zero. You're here now. I won't let go again.

It meant nothing. The words are traditional. I don't really matter at all to her, not like that, Zero convinces himself, pacing afterwards in the room they have given him to bathe and change in.

It's very nice, a pleasant mixture of traditional and western styles, with the high ceilings every room in the palace seems to have, but Zero appreciates none of it, too caught in his heart's turmoil.

Yuuki had looked every inch the pureblood she was, strikingly beautiful as a vampire, with her eyes more red now than brown, and a new maturity to her bearing. She hadn't faltered at all underneath the attention, and - (Yuuki's eyes are a vampire's, but her gaze when she looked at Zero
was as kind and tender as always).

The door knob clicks; Zero whips around, expecting another one of Kuran's servants, but it's Master Yagari instead, closing the door behind him.

"Master?" Zero questions tentatively. He struggles with the train of his clothes, trying to slide past the furniture. Yagari huffs a laugh and gathers up an armful of the filmy material, then tows Zero over to a fainting couch and presses him down, carefully arranging the folds until they fall properly over the side.

Yagari plunks himself down on the couch's backless side, hatless and looking unusually dapper in his suit the same iron grey as his hair.

"I'm bad at this sensitive stuff. I want to tell you that you look good," his Master says, running his hand through his hair like he'd rather be fiddling with his missing hat instead, "but I don't know if I call you handsome or beautiful now, and if you don't like wearing the dress would telling you that you look nice in it fuck the compliment up?"

Zero almost smiles; Master Yagari claims he's an insensitive man, but his heart is always in the right place.

"Vampire consensus is that you can describe anything better with florid poetry, but in a pinch call an omega beautiful. And I don't mind the dress, Master. I've worn things like this before. Heck, I even crossdressed once."

Joking like this with Yagari comforts Zero; it's familiar and relaxing, which is probably why Master came. Yagari's salt-and-pepper eyebrows rise and his deep forehead wrinkles bunch. "What? When have you done this before?"

"Well, the first time I lost my luggage during a river crossing when I was Hunting in the Pacific Islands, so I wore a sarong for two weeks until the job was finished and I could buy pants. And then again, by choice, on the worst Hunt of my life - a pair of level Ds skulking around the fringes of the largest bloody desert on Earth. The sun was awful, even though I'm more resistant than a born vampire; my skin was a burned, cracked mess, so I bought a robe and a turban off the desert nomads and I've never been more grateful to have any piece of clothing.

His Master's eye narrows. "Don't give me the run around, boy. When have you cross-dressed before?"

Zero flushes red, and tries to prevaricate. "Ah, it was Ichiru's fault. We were young so it doesn't count…"

Yagari gives him the warning look that means 'spit it out, my patience is dead.'

"We were ten, and Ichiru had his first girlfriend. He wanted to practice taking a girl out on a date, so…he convinced me to help."

"Be glad I'm not that brat Kaito, or you'd never hear the end of it."

Zero nods furiously. Kaito must never find out, or the blackmail material will last forever.

"You're not wearing your earrings," Yagari remarks offhandedly. Master is studying his face with a contemplative expression.

"No, they had me remove them," Zero says softly.
"Sometimes I forget how old you really are," Master says nostalgically. "After fifty years, you still don't look any older than a teenager, even though you'll be getting married today."

"Zero," Yagari reaches out to cup the back of his neck, telegraphing the movement so Zero isn't startled, and guides Zero close, bending down until their foreheads nearly touch. "If you do this, if I must hand you over to the world of darkness, then you must do something for me in exchange."

Zero nods, and Yagari searches Zero's face.

"Do what you have to do, and never feel guilty about the things you will do to survive. We all have our ways of living with the choices we make, but you won't have as many choices now. Don't be hard on yourself for that. And if you find an arrangement you can live with, don't question it. Don't ask yourself if I or anyone else would approve. Take it, and don't look back."

"Truth be told," his Master confesses, letting go to cover the back of Zero's hands with his own gnarled fingers, "I'm a little relieved. I've always been afraid of what would happen to you when we're gone - who would protect you, who would watch over you. I don't want you to be lonely like Cross, living among us short lived humans, getting attached only to watch us get old and die. I didn't realize until I was old, but there's a comfort in being known, and in being understood without having to explain yourself. And that goes beyond friends or enemies. That's the companionship of memory. Like going to a foreign country, and finding someone else who speaks your language. You don't have to like them, you just want to hear another voice who speaks the same words."

"This isn't the solution I wanted for you at all. Never, Zero. But I believe Cross' daughter will protect you, and that's more than I can promise you anymore."

"And I want you to know something." Master Yagari reaches forward again, big, callused palms coming to rest on Zero's cheeks. He tilts his apprentice's head so Zero meets his misty eyes.

"I've never had any children, but I never needed them. You and Kaito are my sons, in every way that matters."

"Master..." Zero chokes on a sob.

"And I know," the older man continues, stroking Zero's face with his thumbs, "I've always known, that whether they were human or vampire, yours or not, any child you raised would have your good heart. My grandchildren will be so beautiful."

Zero collapses into his Master's arms, burying his face in Yagari's shoulder like he's a child again, and his Master softly strokes his hair as Zero's tears soak his jacket.

"They're ready for you, Kuran-sama."

Yuuki wants to fidget, lick her lips in nervousness, anything to bolster her calm facade, inferior beside Kaname's cool stoniness nearby.

"Thank you, Steward."

Side by side, the Kuran couple steps forward; Kaname looks at Yuuki one last time, as though asking if she's certain she wants what they are about to do. Yuuki nods firmly; the servants open the heavy wooden double doors, and together they enter the Ceremonial Hall.

The Hall is one of the largest rooms in either of Rosehill's palaces, cavernous and bare, except for rings of concentric seats surrounding a central raised dais. The Kurans pass through one of the two
walkways through the room, their steps silent on the carpets laid out for them. Above, one can see
the moonless night sky and the stars through the glass roof, mirrored below their feet in the floor of
shining black stone flecked with quartz and gold. In the shadows cast by lampflame, the obsidian
walls make the edges of the room disappear into darkness, like the occupants stand in a fragile pool
of light encircled by endless blackness.

But Yuuki appreciates none of this. No, her gaze is drawn to the dais like a lodestone pointing
north. Keeping her pace regal and steady is all she can manage.

Because Zero is up there, ahead. The man who holds the other half of her heart.

And he is so incredibly magnificent.

He stands with all the pride of the heritage he represents, shoulders strong and spine straight, chin
raised high. His blank features show a stoic indifference, but there's a hint of his old defiance in his
direct gaze. Standing alone on the central platform with all these people watching him, Zero
reminds Yuuki of the fairy tale heroines of her childhood, princesses chained to altars as sacrifices
to terrible monsters, brave and unafraid; Zero certainly looks like ancient royalty in his wedding
robes.

The Hunters and vampires had fought over every aspect of today's ceremony, but none more than
Zero's outfit for the wedding. The trouble came from conflicting traditions. Hunters wore white for
weddings - but for vampires, pale colors reminded them of ash, what remained of their bodies when
they died. White was worn during funerary services; white for a wedding was an insult, implying
that the wearer saw their wedding as their funeral.

Bright red was the auspicious color for a vampire's marriage, just like the robes Yuuki and Kaname
are wearing, embroidered in gold thread with shimmering Kuran crests and rose vines. This was
equally unacceptable to the Hunters, since red was the quintessential vampire color; one of their
own, however tainted by vampirism, couldn't marry dressed in it.

Their compromise yielded wonderful results; Zero could wear white, as long as another color
balanced out its inauspicious nature. So Zero's heavy, many-layered silk wedding robes are also
lined, edged and patterned in violet, the same color worn by royals, appropriate for the marriage of
vampire ex-royalty. The design, its only other ornament a single strand of amethyst and silver
beads, is simpler than typical vampire style, reflecting Hunter aesthetics instead. The colors suit
him, as does the amethyst teardrop Hoseki he's wearing. Zero often hides behind his bangs, but an
omega has to part the hair on their forehead to wear a Hoseki, which exposes the Hunter's lovely
lavender eyes.

Yuuki's only felt like this once before, on the day she married Kaname - awed, and blessed, and full
of wonder. How can this be? Surely nothing she has done could earn this. But there Zero stands,
and Kaname is at her side.

Zero bows his head to his intended spouses, and all three of them take their places on the dais, after
Kaname helps her carefully step up. Zero is in the middle, with Kaname on his right, and herself on
his left. Yuuki spies Zero out of the corner of her eye, but his expression stays impassive, and he
doesn't look at her.

"We thank those of you gathered here today for attending, both our guests who are vampires and
those who are Hunters. It has not always been an easy road to achieve coexistence, but I hope that
through today's ceremony, our two races will create one more tie between them, and take another
step down the path to our goal." Kaname's voice rings out in the silent room, and Yuuki takes pride
in his dedication.
"Because Kiryuu-san is a Hunter, before we begin our ceremony the Hunters will first perform their own rituals to prepare for a marriage. Cross-san, Yagari-san, I ask you to continue."

Just as they'd practiced, Kaname and Yuuki take a seat on the cushions prepared for them, while Zero steps off the ledge to the ground. He cannot remain standing on the same surface where they are seated, because he would appear to loom over his pureblood spouses, which could not be allowed given the difference in rank.

"Thank you, Kuran-san," Cross says. "We also wish to express our dedication to improved relations and peace between the Association and the vampire nation. Tonight we celebrate the union of the Kurans and Kiryuu Zero, but we Hunters also mourn the loss of one of our own. Kiryuu-san is the last living Hunter to carry that name; when he marries, the name Kiryuu dies out among the Hunters."

"I wish those vampires with us tonight to understand both what that means to us, and the depth of our loss. Kiryuu Zero possesses a Thousand Red Peony Bloodline, meaning he carries the name of one of the original Hunters; for ten thousand years, it has been passed down in a direct line from parent to child, from him to his father to his grandmother, and beyond. They are almost as rare now as your pureblood lines. Kiryuu-san's purity of blood is also unquestionable; for over three hundred generations, his ancestors have married Hunter to Hunter. We tell you this to demonstrate our sincerity, and the esteem that we feel for the Kurans, that we entrust such a precious person into their hands."

"For all these reasons, but most of all for his strength, integrity and loyalty, we wish to honor him before he passes out of our ranks forever."

The President gestures, and from the doors comes a line of Hunters, led by Yagari, their arms full of large round flowers with rows of clustered, lush petals - a thousand red peonies to mourn the death of a bloodline. They lay them at Zero's feet, a glorious heap of cut flowers, and the sweet smell rises in the air.

Zero bows deeply at the waist. "Thank you for your kindness and the honor paid to my line. But it would grieve me if our bloodline would end along with our name. Is there nothing that can be done?"

Cross is handed a leather portfolio of papers by an adjutant Hunter. Yagari answers, "You have inherited the rights to the Kiryuu germline. At this time, the storage vaults contain genetic materials from the last four generations of the Kiryuu, excepting you and your late brother, who were too young for collection. It is your right, if you wish, to alter your family's agreements with the Association and allow their use to create future generations of Hunters who carry your family's blood."

Zero inclines his head to Yagari, and his Hoseki sways. "It is my wish. I request only that my father's samples never be used, and that future descendents do not carry the Kiryuu coloring mutation."

"We can comply with those requests."

Cross interjects with an explanation for the vampires watching, "Hunters maintain gene banks of cryogenically frozen samples - eggs and sperm - to ensure the preservation and quality of our bloodlines. Those materials undergo extensive genetic screening to select for desirable traits before being used. Over half of all Hunters are born from stored materials by means of assisted reproductive technologies - often through surrogate mothers."
"Have you chosen a name for the successor of the Kiryuu?"

"I have, President Yagari. As the Kiryuu fall, the Kiryuuin rise."

"Let it be done," intones Yagari, and Zero signs the papers Cross offers him. The Hunters take the portfolio and tuck it away carefully, treating it as though it holds sheets of gold instead of paper.

"There remains one final formality before the ceremony can begin," announces Cross. "For the last ritual, we ask that all of our vampire guests consume at least one blood tablet before we begin. It requires the shedding of blood, and it would be a shame to ruin Kuran-san's wedding with any incidents."

Hunters circulate through the room carrying trays with tiny individual cups the size of shot glasses, each holding a blood tablet dissolved in water. Four more Hunters descend on the open space before the dais, seemingly left unused just for this purpose, and remove the carpet covering the black stone floor. Then they produce calligraphy brushes and canisters of ink mixed with blood, and begin to draw out complex patterns and figures, with a quick, efficient air suggesting familiarity. The completed design has three large interlocked rings surrounded by triangles and squares holding the working together with borders of runes. As the Hunters create the ritual outlines, the vampires consume the requested tablets, Yagari overseeing the distribution and freely using his glare to intimidate holdouts.

Cross, even now a teacher, explains to the audience what they can expect. "We are about to perform a affinity test between Kiryuu-san and the Kurans. We do not intend this as an insult to anyone; this is legally required before a Hunter can marry someone who is not another Hunter. We aren't testing the compatibility of personalities; an affinity ritual only tests the compatibility of two bloodlines, because most humans can't have children with Hunters. Their bodies reject the trace of vampire DNA in our blood. As our history says, 'Ten thousand humans drank of the night, and relinquished their humanity, passing down into darkness, but only two thousand Hunters lived to see the dawn."

"We're ready for you, Kiryuu-san, and your intended spouses," interjects a female Hunter with brown skin and coiled, closely shorn hair who is kneeling at one of the compass points of the square enclosing the entire ritual area. "Please stand in one of the circles, with Kiryuu-san in the center."

The vampires take their places, replicating their earlier arrangement with Kaname on the right and Yuuki on the left. She hopes again that Zero will look at her, but the Hunter focuses intently on the steps of the ritual and ignores both of the vampires beside him.

"Normally, you will feel a moment of warmth and the Hunter participating in the ritual will hear a woman's voice who answers if the partners are compatible. Occasionally the phenomena will manifest differently, so do not be alarmed if the ritual changes form. Are you ready to begin?"

"We are," Kaname answers, studying the ritual warding patterns with a keen interest. Yuuki cannot make heads or tails of the drawings; onii-sama always seems to know so much, she thinks with a familiar resignation at the reminder of her inadequacy.

Each of the four Hunters at the compass points has a shining anti-vampire weapon laid across their thighs - a spear, a rifle, a crossbow, and lastly a sword for the ritual leader - and at the leader's signal, they draw another dagger across the palm of their hands, allowing blood to drip through their fingers and splash onto the metal. Some of the vampires in the crowd have reddened eyes, but the blood tablets do their work, and none of them do anything but shift restlessly, fixed on the bleeding Hunters.
"Now the three of you, starting with Kiryuu-san," instructs the Hunter woman leading the ritual. In their turn, the vampires prick a finger with their claws, and let the blood fall; it darkens to look black as the ink drawn on the pitch stone floor. The scent of pure blood fills the room, though little was shed; now it's the the Hunters who watch uneasily, the vampires agitated and predatory with desire.

"She needs more," Zero says suddenly, as though listening to a speaker no one else can hear, and opens the vein of his wrist. Blood pours out, but Zero is careful to keep his sleeve rolled up, and the white silk unstained.

The air presses down and turns hot as the Hunter weapons consume the blood offering of their wielders; an invisible string tied to Yuuki's breastbone is being pulled taut, drawing her gently toward Zero at her left. By Yuuki's feet, the blood-infused ink writhes and rewrites itself into new glyphs and figures, the three circles joining into one great ring enfolding the three vampires.

Zero's blood does not fall; each crimson droplet quivers suspended in mid-air, defying gravity. Then the beads rise and draw together, forming a shimmering outline, vaguely humanoid, but becoming clearer and clearer every moment. Yuuki looks at Zero for some clue; he looks surprised, but not shocked. He wasn't expecting this, but he knew it could happen. Yuuki relaxes; if Zero isn't panicking, then everything is fine.

Yuuki settles down and marvels as the blood mist takes the shape of a woman in a hooded cloak, with the perfect beauty of a pureblood in her face and her braided hair thrown over her shoulder. There is a sudden jerking movement from Kaname, before he stiffens and goes still, eyes a touch too wide. The vampires in the audience are completely silent, thrown by this turn of events, and begin to murmur.

Yuuki is shocked when proud, unbreakable Zero gets down on his knees and bows in a graceful obeisance. She has never, ever seen him kneel to anyone; Zero's respect was earned, and few received it. But this kneel to this pureblood - who was she?

"Ten thousand years of blessing on you, honored grandmother, and on your children also ten thousand years."

"Please rise, cherished grandson," the hooded woman smiles and gestures upward quickly. "It is good to see you, and to see all of my other grandchildren gathered here tonight." Here she surveys the room, still wearing a fond smile; the Hunters all bow as her gaze falls on them. They act as though they are celebrating: crowding closer in excitement, straining on their toes to see from the back, shooting each other animated glances and gesturing energetically.

Yuuki is even more befuddled. Grandson? But the Hunters are human; they can't be related to a pureblood, or they'd be vampires. What is going on?

"I have wished for many ages to speak with a Kiryuu again. It is a shame, Kiryuu Zero, that I can achieve my wish once, and never again. I will miss you and your ancestors. No line has shown greater dedication to my goals and desires. I was especially fond of your progenitor, the first Hunter of your line."

The blood mist morphs from the image of the hooded woman, to show a scene in a grubby, worn camp with the ground churned to mud - a memory belonging to the pureblood. The hooded woman, seated on a pile of empty wooden crates as though they were a throne, looks down on a filthy, barefoot human child with black hair and eyes, perhaps eight or nine.

The child studies the vampire with an unnervingly direct stare. "You're the vampire. The one in the
main tent, where people go in and mostly die. The adults say you're going to save humanity. I heard you're really an old lady even though you look young. Are you?"

The hooded woman raises an eyebrow, bemused. "I'm older than any person in this camp. Where are your parents?"

"Who knows," says the child with a shrug of their thin shoulders.

"What's your name, boy?" she asks.

"Kiryuu," he answers. "Maybe. I showed up here like the stray scavenger dogs do. Nobody brought me or knew my name. But the tag in my clothes" - he pats the dirty, adult-sized coat he wears - "says Kiryuu. Might not belong to me though."

"If you give it to me," offers the vampire, "I can tell you."

The boy hands her the garment, stiff with sweat and dirt, and the hooded woman holds it for a moment in her hands with a distant look in her eyes. "No," she whispers softly, "it's not yours."

"Huh. Guess that answers it then." The boy seems unperturbed, while the vampire's sadness spills over her tears.

The blood mist shimmers; now the hooded woman sits on a stool in a stained tent, and the boy leans against a table of medical equipment.

"Why are you helping humans. You eat us right?" the boy asks, as unconcerned as if he asks about the fate of cattle or birds.

"I do. But I think it's wrong to kill you, and it would be wrong to enslave you and rule over you. Absolute power corrupts absolutely. To have a healthy society, the vampires need a force that can counter and mediate their power. My research has all been focused on finding a solution to that problem. This - the creation of pseudo-vampires through consuming pure blood to near poisoning levels - is the best I have so far. But it isn't enough. I can't make you strong enough without killing you. And I can't figure out how to threaten the purebloods' invulnerability." She runs a hand through her hair. "I don't know how to complete the scenario yet."

"Hey," says the boy, looking up, "why can't you just stab one?"

"Normal weapons don't work; only a pureblood can harm a pureblood. I would have to stab a pureblood with a weapon made of another pureblood - " the hooded woman freezes, thinking intently, and some realization spreads through her face.

The boy wanders over to where the hooded woman is lost in thought. "Old lady vampire. I've decided. I want you to give me your blood."

"You could die," she objects.

"All humans die. No 'could' about it. If it's today or tomorrow, the worms will be at my corpse either way. Just a bit faster or slower. Not like I have anybody to make a fuss anyway."

"The authorities will be angry that I chose a child."

"Don't worry. I'll probably die, and nobody cares about one more body for the grave pits."

"Tell me why you want it, and I'll consider it."
"Humans die easy. To you, we must be like bugs crawling on the ground. We're weak, we're everywhere, we get squashed underfoot. I may be a maggot, but I want to be more than nothing. Give me the power to bite the hand that crushes me before I die."

"Alright, if that's what you want," she finally agrees, fetching a knife and rolling up her sleeve. "If you die, I, at least, will miss you."

The boy grins. "Thanks. I'd return the feelings but you're kinda immortal. And I have a request. I saw you bleed for a human once. You fed him until he started screaming. When you do it for me, don't stop until I'm not screaming anymore."

The hooded woman of the present comes back into focus. "He lived, of course. Did you know he was the first Hunter to kill a pureblood? I was gone by then, but my spirit lives on in the blood of the Hunters and I still watch over all my descendents."

The first Kiryuu is older now, in his early teens, and he carries a slightly curved sword with a rounded guard. His one odd, noticeable feature is his hair; he's grown it out into a long ponytail, but the color at the roots is silver now, with a shock of black at the end, like a paintbrush dipped in ink.

The young Hunter stands with his back to rows of fluid-filled cylindrical tubes, each with a fetus floating inside the liquid, reaching as far as the eye can see in a massive, windowless concrete bunker. Zero's ancestor has a mulish expression on his face Yuuki instantly recognizes.

"We can't fight a pureblood!"

"We're not abandoning the lab. There are ten thousand half-grown Hunters here, and these are the last uterine replicators in the entire world. We need to produce at least two hundred thousand fighters to have the slightest chance at winning, and we're not leaving before then. We'll send off the nonessential personnel and the newborns to the nursery camps just in case, and we'll move the lab to a new hiding place if we survive, but we aren't going anywhere yet."

"This is madness! Do you have a plan?"

"Do you know what kills the biggest number of people? Not vampires. Not war. It's disease. A bunch of tiny animals, all banding together to kill a bigger one. That's what we'll do now - take them by surprise, overwhelm them with numbers. They don't expect us to fight. They've never fought humans who could fight back."

The Kiryuu steps back and addresses the other Hunters, "Do you know what humans are really good at? Fucking shit up. We fucked up a whole planet, and hung on when most other species died off because we're tenacious and clever and there are lots of us. We can win, if we're willing to sacrifice enough."

Shivering, the mist clouds, then clears, and the first Kiryuu buries his sword deep in the heart of a half-burned pureblood, who stares up with a confused, horrified face at the Hunter with the eyes of a madman.

"Do you like my fang?" he asks playfully, grinning like a shark, but the pureblood's body breaks up into crystals before any reply comes. Throwing his head back and thrusting his arms in the air, the Hunter laughs, high and howling, his dancing feet kicking up glittering dust. The light of the moon illuminates the shards of lavender in his irises, and with his shining uncanny hair flying out behind him, the first Kiryuu looks more like a vampire than a human.
"I hope you can see this, old lady. This is the first link in your chain. Parent and child, all wrapped up in it. It'll just take disciplining a few bratty children first."

"You really aren't similar," observes the hooded woman, "except perhaps your stubbornness. The vampires know him best as the signer of the first accords between our races."

Another scene rises from the mist. The first Kiryuu is older now; his hair grown so long he's coiled it on top of his head like a silver crown, with the splash of black at the end left to hang loose. A single, enormous raven with eyes like dried blood caws beside his feet.

"President, are you sure about this?" asks an anxious young Hunter. "This could be a trap."

"Nah. He's not like the purebloods we've faced before. If he wanted to kill us, we'd already be dead. All of us, without him even breaking a sweat. There's a reason the vampires call him king."

The silver-haired Hunter gestures across the plain to a vortex of ravens circling a distant figure. The wind unfurls their black coat and ruffles dark hair, the red-brown color just barely recognizable at this distance.

"We don't need to make peace with them! We won't be safe until we wipe them out!" shouts another Hunter.

"It's humanity's fault they exist in the first place. It's not very fair to kill a parasite for being itself, you know. Everybody's gotta eat."

"If we're finished complaining, I'm going to go see what our guest has to say." The Hunter grins with his hands in his pockets, and turns away, sword at his side, facing the vampire who must be the Original King, the Ancestor of the Kurans - her ancestor. "If I don't die, I'll see you later, brats."

The wind unfurls their black coat and ruffles dark hair, the red-brown color just barely recognizable at this distance.

"Forgive my digression - the wanderings of an old mind. You may have already guessed, but your blood is more than compatible with Kuran Yuuki and Kaname. If you have children, there will be no conflict of bloodlines."

"Will my children be Hunters?" Zero questions hesitantly, a fragile look in his eyes.

The hooded woman's sad expression makes no words necessary, but she still answers Zero. "Your womb is a vampire's womb, Kiryuu Zero. The children carried in that womb will belong wholly to the night."

Zero bows his head. "I see. Thank you, grandmother."

"Now, my time grows short, but I wish to speak with the three of you before I go."

"Of course, grandmother," replies Zero. The hooded woman comes as close as she can to Zero without her ephemeral, misty shape touching him, and brings her mouth up to his ear, whispering quietly. With her lips hidden behind her hood, Yuuki can't read her words, or hear them with her vampire's hearing; the Ancestor speaks to Zero for a few minutes, then straightens, leaving Zero with a pensive, confused look.

A shadow passes over Kaname's face as the hooded woman comes next to him; she speaks to Yuuki's brother for a short time, and then the traces of some inner turmoil are swept behind his
normal mask as the hooded woman approaches Yuuki last.

Her gentle face smiles, as if reassuring Yuuki that she means no harm, then she lowers her head.

"Thank you for caring for my dear Zero all those years. But if you want to protect both the people you love, you must ask the questions you've held silently in your heart. Kaname confuses ignorance and innocence, and keeps you away from his affairs. Neither of you recognize how much you have grown. You are stronger than you think you are, Kuran Yuuki. You only need to discover that strength."

The pureblood woman, Ancestor of the Hunters, returns to the center of the circle, the edges of her form already thinning and dimming.

"You will never pass out of my protection and my thoughts, Kiryuu Zero. Do as thou wilt, with my good will. I bless your union."

And then she goes, her power flickering out like a candle; droplets of Zero's blood fall to the ground and the Ceremonial Hall feels suddenly cooler.

Only her brother's insistence that his wedding proceed as scheduled resettles the gathered vampires and Hunters after such a shocking visitor. After a brief intermission to clean the floor, all participants stand in their allotted places at the stroke of midnight.

For her part, Yuuki's thoughts keep turning to the words the Ancestress of the Hunters spoke to her. It's no mystery to her what they mean, but she is afraid to overturn the fragile balance of her relationship with her husband. She married a man she loves, but hardly knows. If she pushes him to reveal the secrets he keeps from her, what will she find? Will she drive him away from her?

For now, Yuuki pushes down those thoughts into the darkness; today is for Zero, tomorrow she will consider her choices.

Tonight's wedding ceremony follows an obscure, rarely used formulation for two married purebloods taking a third, omega partner and forming a trinity. It is a marriage of a social inferior to their superiors, and every aspect acknowledges the inherent power differential. By completing the ceremony, in theory, the omega hands himself over into the care of his pureblood alphas in an act of profound trust and surrender, and the alphas accept that submission and return such absolute trust with complete devotion.

Yuuki's first wedding to Kaname-sama used an entirely different ceremony very similar to normal vampire weddings. Vampires follow no gods, and hold only vague spiritual beliefs, so the wedding ceremony functions as a publicly witnessed contract between adult spouses who enter into the marriage of their own free will. Romance was absent from the standard ceremony; vampires considered marriage a rational friendship and partnership, rather than a bond of love. Fickle emotions changed and faded, but vampire spouses would spend centuries and millennia beside one another; divorce was socially damaging and almost never sought. Nobles in particular married to maintain blood purity or to cement a business arrangement, though love matches often happened alongside practical agreements.

There is no officiant; the three of them will conduct the ceremony themselves, kneeling beside one another on thick red cushions before a brazier burning incense.

Yuuki catches Zero casting a glance at her for the first time as they kneel, and has to hide her triumphant smile in her sleeve at his surprised blinking when he finds her head comes higher up his
shoulder than he remembers. She's taller than when she last saw him, undoubtedly her favorite side effect of unlocking her vampire blood. Not even close to Zero's height, but every centimeter counts.

"Kiryuu Zero," her brother begins, using his resonant public voice, "You have come here today in full knowledge of what will occur, and without the use of force or compulsion?"

"I affirm I am present out of my own free will, without coercion, and enter into this union according to the terms we have agreed upon," replies Zero.

"Then we shall begin, with those gathered here today to stand as our witness."

There are three cups of wine placed on the dais, one in front of each of them. Yuuki takes the carved bloodstone cup in front of her, filled to the brim with rich dark wine, and raises it, before speaking the first blessing and taking a sip of the dry, full-bodied vintage. "Let our union be blessed with longevity."

With the taste of wine still lingering on her tongue, Yuuki passes her cup to Zero, who raises it, repeats the blessing and also drinks. Then he hands the cup to Kaname, who recites the blessing for the third time, consumes the wine, then returns the cup to Yuuki.

Next Zero raises his cup of rock crystal, and offers the next response. "Let us be blessed by the birth of many children." After he drinks, the three of them repeat the same sequence of passing the cup and echoing the blessing.

The third blessing comes from her brother, raising another bloodstone cup. "Let our aspirations be united, so we act as each other's strength when fulfilling our responsibilities."

The three of them repeat the same sequence nine times, passing and drinking from each other's cups while seeking the same blessing.

"Let us love and cherish each other."

"Let us receive companionship and faithfulness."

"Let us give one another comfort and place of rest from our burdens."

"Let us enjoy prosperity and good luck."

"Let us have ten thousand years of joy and harmony together."

"Let us remain beside each other to the end," Kaname finishes, and then each of them raises their cup one final time and empties it to the last drop.

For a moment, with Zero and Kaname beside her, Yuuki can feel nothing but an intense, overwhelming sensation of guilt. It is her fault that the two of them are here today, making promises they don't want to give. It was only her desires, and her brother's want to fulfill her wishes, that produced this marriage.

It has always been this way. Standing beside these two people dearest to her, Yuuki's mind and heart are torn in two; every step she takes toward one of them only causes the other pain. Yuuki often wondered what was wrong with her, that she could do nothing else, and why people kept believing she was worth their sacrifice and pain. But as long as they wanted her to stay, she would, unable to deny them anything she could give. She sees the good in both Zero and Kaname, and the loneliness, and she loves them equally. Perhaps it is selfish, but she cannot choose, and she cannot let them go. They remain in her heart forever.
Please, let it come true, if nothing else, let me stay with them.

They put aside the empty stone cups; next is the exchange of tokens. Vampires do not traditionally use rings; rather, it is the choice of the couple what form their tokens will take, often objects of personal significance. Yuuki and Kaname's rings were the tokens they chose. For a pureblood's marriage with an omega, the symbols of that binding are more strictly set down.

Kaname brings forward a large bowl of beautiful reddish-brown wood, marbled with black spider lines, and a smaller bowl carved of ebony which is filled with water. The contents of the larger bowl he sprinkles with water using a graceful twist of his wrist.

It's made of rosewood, Yuuki realizes, when the bowl comes to her; it has a recognizable floral fragrance, reminiscent of roses with a distinctive sweetness. How like Kaname-sama! He must sense her fondness through the bloodbond, because he breaks his serious mien to glance softly at her.

Placed flat inside the bowl are four carved hardstone bracelets, two each in the shape of a dragon or a phoenix, curled so the head just touches the tail. Symbolizing blissful relations between husband and wife, the dragon and the phoenix are pre-Cataclysm symbols representing the union of two complementary powers. Yuuki repeats Kaname's gesture, dipping her fingers in the ebony bowl and flicking them over each bracelet.

Zero takes the bowl when Yuuki offers it to him, and carefully dries all four tokens with a linen cloth. Then Kaname-sempai reaches over Zero's folded legs and takes the rightmost dragon bracelet, formed from almost pure black onyx. Pricking his forefinger with his thumb, he anoints the head of the black dragon with the sanguine bead that wells up from the wound.

Water to purify and blood to bind the couple; for vampires, blood is a person's essence, so the person who shed that blood always remains symbolically nearby.

"I pledge you will always find shelter under my roof, and protection underneath my hand. I pledge my steadfast faithfulness and support to you and your children. I will cherish and honor you always. Take this token as a sign of my devotion and my care for you," her brother says, and slips the bangle over Zero's extended right wrist.

Yuuki picks up the leftmost dragon bracelet; the carving is beautifully rendered, so detailed she can run her finger over individual scales and claws, and vibrant with a sense of movement, as though the mythical creature would writhe awake at any moment. The tiny garnet eyes glitter like fire in the lamplight as she paints her blood on the stone.

"I pledge you will always find shelter under my roof, and protection underneath my hand. I pledge my steadfast faithfulness and support to you and your children. I will cherish and honor you always. Take this token as a sign of my devotion and my care for you," Yuuki vows with all the sincerity and strength she has, and slips the bangle over Zero's left wrist.

Zero meets her gaze for the first time, and the pureblood tries to convey her intentions through her eyes, giving a meaningful weight to their held gaze.

Zero returns her look for long seconds, searching her face, before his eyes drop back to the two remaining phoenix bracelets. The bloody phoenix the Hunter offers her is made of pure white jade, skillfully fashioned down to the last feather with lifelike vitality.

"I pledge my unfailing loyalty to you. I pledge to conceive and give birth to our children, and to nurture them with gentleness and love. I take you into my heart and my affection. Take this token
as a sign of my devotion and my care for you," Zero promises with his eyes lowered and his face carefully impassive.

Yuuki runs her thumb over the phoenix's amethyst eyes, struck by the urge to cry - in happiness or sadness?

Her alpha pipes up, *Is this mate?*

*Yes. We have promised to protect him. I love him.*

*He is the one whose scent we keep?*

*Yes,* says Yuuki. She has hidden away the cloth Seiren soaked with Zero's blood, wrapped protectively in plastic so the scent does not fade. Yuuki takes it out sometimes, just to have a piece of Zero nearby. But only when she knows her husband is gone, because she cannot bear to wash Zero's scent away, and Kaname-sama gets a crease between his brows if he catches the smell.

The alpha is searching her memories, rising up and looking out from the back of her mind at Zero, who has his back turned and is presenting Kaname with another bloodied phoenix bracelet.

*He was our companion before alpha-mate. Faithful. Strong. Caring for him drew us out of our own darkness. And we sustained him, let him feed from us, long ago,* it says, then suddenly its focus sharpens.

*It is his blood we have hungered for, ceaselessly, endlessly, torturously, never sated, the first we drank, the taste we cannot forget.*

*Yes,* affirms Yuuki, and her fangs ache.

The alpha surges restlessly, fixing on the white neck beneath silver hair, want turning liquid, sinking lower. *We have seen him half-clothed before? He is lovely. He will be lovelier now he is omega, with nice wide hips for us to clutch as we mate him,* remarks the alpha with pleasure. *We must keep our omega well-guarded until he is fat with child and everyone can see how he belongs to us,* and Yuuki fights to keep her cheeks from flushing.

When Zero, still stoic, finishes his last pledge to Kaname, the two pureblood alphas rise, and lead their omega by the hand in a clockwise circle three times around the dais.

They remain standing in the open space as Zero takes the braided red wedding cord that symbolizes their binding, and ties their hands together, the alphas' palms above and below, enfolding the omega's hand in the center. The ceremony is completed while their hands are tied, Yuuki and Kaname-sama speaking the last words together.

"We are bound together with a tie that cannot be severed. Kiryuu Zero, you are as essential to me now as my own life. May you live happily with us for ten thousand years."

Zero bows his head. "I am sealed in marriage unto you, for all the days of my life."

The full feeling in her chest wells up like her heart's blood. They are complete.

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Kaname's past and his present were never meant to intersect; the sight of *her,* the woman who became the Ancestor of the Hunters, here, after all this time rocks the foundations of his psyche. *Her* words will return to him often in the coming days, intruding into his thoughts during moments of stillness and silence. He has a little time to compose himself after the ceremony, while the
servants prepare the banquet hall, but he lacks privacy, still wearing his public mask with the
effortless calm and control demanded by his position.

Kiryuu leaves to change his costume, and returns with his wedding robe's sleeves replaced,
typical of the first ones, except now he wears the full length, wider sleeves of a bonded omega.
The outfit was designed with this change in mind, the detachable sleeves cleverly held together by
threads that could be pulled and removed. He looks unhappy, and Kaname is spitefully glad that he
isn't the only one.

Yuuki's poorly hidden, conflicted joy is gratifying, and spreads among the three of them, easing
the atmosphere. She has a way of getting anyone to see the bright side of things, and just being
near her improves Kaname's mood at any time.

The wedding feast, all five hours and ten courses of it, Kaname finds more difficult to navigate
than normal. He ought to be in his element; this is an unmatchable opportunity to survey the state
of the board: what the servants overhear, who talks to who, how long, about what. Hundreds of
guests - far more vampires than Hunters - and all the most powerful players of both societies have
attended tonight to witness the historic event. The heavily political nature of the marriage means
the air is thick with intrigue and dealmaking, both inter-factional and between the Hunters and the
vampires. Less of the latter; the Hunters are still smarting from being burned the last time one of
their own got too friendly with their nemesis.

Everything is decorated in red and gold, all the way down to the flowers, tablecloths and
silverware. For Kaname, the exquisite food provided by the palace kitchens makes the meal worth
attending, other than seeing Yuuki beautiful and radiant in wedding colors, recalling Kaname's
happy memories of their true wedding.

Other than eating and drinking - much drinking, the wine and alcohol freely flowing all night - the
entertainment comes from speeches by important figures on both sides, and performances by
musicians, dancers and other artists.

Kaname and the newlywed spouses are otherwise occupied. Sitting at their private table raised on a
platform above the crowd, the entire evening is one long performance; everyone can watch the
three of them interact, and even the tiniest gesture or change of expression will be measured and
weighed. Vampire society still has many questions about the Kurans' marriage and its
circumstances they want answered.

The Hunters have done their part, and other than Kiryuu's guardians, Kaname needs to spend little
thought on their reactions. Kiryuu Zero, not the treaty, was his objective, and now that Kaname has
the Hunter, the rest of his kind may do as they like so long as they don't interfere with his plans.

Before the wedding feast is over, the three newlyweds must greet and speak with every single
guest, which will be Kaname's opportunity to make small talk and advance his pieces in the
ongoing games. Seiren and Steward Inukai will be present, one for each of his spouses, to feed
them names and relevant facts for each guest; Kaname wants no insults to come of this evening.

After the third course - whole roast peacock, presented in its feathers - the first guests approach the
high table, in a predetermined order by seating arrangement, and present the wedding gifts they've
brought in return for wedding favors handed out by the omega. The gifts are small, but of high
quality, and deliberately lack intimacy, a multitude of trinkets and other rarities. Seeing the
members of his inner circle lets the purebloods relax a touch, and Kaname doesn't need to feign
being pleased to see them.

All of the guests barely hide their curiosity over the Kuran's new consort. They politely use his
new title when they address him, but many of them - monarchists and senate supporters alike - show their disapproval below the surface, snubbing him in discreet, nearly imperceptible ways: a shift in tone, a slight turn away, facing the purebloods instead of when Kiryuu they address him. A deep current of bad feeling exists regarding a Hunter marrying two purebloods, and Kaname has not cared enough to counteract it, as long as the disapproval was aimed at Kiryuu alone.

The Hunter fulfills his given role, though Kaname can see through his frozen impassiveness the boy's increasing emotional and physical exhaustion. Duty and pride, he guesses, are what's keeping Kiryuu afloat. As the hours pass, the Hunter grows paler and paler, eating little and leaving his wineglass untouched. He has his hands clasped together in his lap and speaks little beyond what is enough to seem interested and polite. Only when Takuma and Isaya offer their congratulations does Kiryuu perk up and take a genuine interest.

The guests may revel and drink as they wish, but the main players have not finished their roles. One long, final round of toasts when the last guest has been received, and the last course finished - to their happy future, and more children than can fit in a palace - and the two alphas and their new omega can take their leave for the evening. The guests throw handfuls of tiny white flowers on Kiryuu as they leave the banquet for their wedding night, a fertility symbol more ancient than the vampire race.

Kiryuu casts one last look at the party of Hunters, Cross blowing his nose loudly, Yagari standing beside him with heavy glance and a nod to his apprentice, and then the three of them leave for the residential palace.

The proper name for it is 'The Palace of Prosperity,' but even the servants call it by its purpose. The household palace's exterior draws heavier influence from traditional sources than the state palace, built with more wood than stone, painted wood pillars holding up the traditional tiled roof, and covered, raised verandas surrounding the small courtyards enclosed inside the building. Tonight a red banner hangs across the doors of the house to celebrate its masters' wedding, and the entire household staffs bows and welcomes Consort Kiryuu to his new home.

The Hunter hesitates when the maids lead him ahead to the wedding suite, prepared just for this occasion, but goes without looking at either of the Kurans.

"I expect the morning briefing at the usual time," Kaname informs Steward Inukai, who shows surprised uncertainty, but he has served the Kuran family long enough to know better than to question his orders. Kaname has work to do, and he is not wasting time in bed with Kiryuu; the pureblood would rather not bed Kiryuu at all, frankly.

With lanterns and drums, the servants form a wedding procession for the two alphas, escorting them all the way to the guest wing; the household staff depart with respectful goodbyes when the Kurans stand before the double doors of the wedding suite. Yuuki and Kaname don't move from the hallway until their footsteps are gone. Yuuki stares at the golden door handle shaped like a lion's head; neither of them speak, and the moment stretches.

"Thank you, onii-sama," she finally says. "For giving this a chance. For giving us a chance."

"We shouldn't keep Kiryuu waiting," he reminds both of them.

The maids arranged Kiryuu on the edge of the enormous, canopied bed, made up with brand new red bedsheets. He is dwarfed by his wedding robes - the longer sleeves make him look as though he's a child dressing in a parent's clothes, his hands lost in the pool of fabric. On a side table, little light dishes of nuts and fruits, and pitchers of wine and water have been arranged; a bowl piled high with pomegranates has pride of place in the center. A pair of bedside lamps are lit to symbolize the
addition of children to the family, the only lighting in the windowless suite.

The omega doesn't look at them; he keeps staring straight at the opposite wall, even as the purebloods approach the bed. He is barely breathing by the faint, shallow rise and fall of his chest. The tendons of his jaw stretch tight with the clench of his teeth the closer the Kuran siblings come.

"Zero?" Yuuki says hopefully.

"Kuran-hime," he responds, voice dull and distant. "How may I serve you?"

Yuuki wavers, tries again. "You don't need to call me that, Zero. You always have permission to call me Yuuki."

"I should not address you so informally, Kuran-hime."

"Zero," she says, coming close enough to stand beside him, "are you okay?"

Zero's shoulders jerk when she tries to touch him, and he turns his face away. His breathing picks up, quick and fast; both purebloods can hear the rapid tattoo of his heartbeat. "I know what my duties are, Kuran-hime. I'm fine."

Yuuki's expression is upset. "Zero, it's alright if you're not okay. What's wrong?"

Kiryuu's detachment is starting to show cracks, some emotional storm battering down his defenses as Yuuki's gentle concern taps on them from the other side.

"It's been made clear to me what I'm supposed to do," he says stiffly. "I won't cause any problems."

His wife keeps trying to suss out the problem, and forgetting their current circumstances, sits down on the bed next to Kiryuu, a familiar scene from their shared past.

Kiryuu jumps, and looks as though a viper has sat next to him instead, inching backwards on the mattress away from her, with the whites of his eyes showing as he stares at the two purebloods.

"Please," he says raggedly, breaths coming faster and faster. "Please. You don't have to pretend. You've bought and paid for me. Just take what you want already, I can't -"

Kiryuu doubles over, trying to take in air as he hyperventilates, his whole body shaking with the force of his fear; his body topples over backwards, still trying to get away from them.

"Don't touch him!" Kaname orders, as a terrified Yuuki tries to reach out and help the Hunter.

"- not trying to break the agreement, I just, I can, in a moment -" but then Kiryuu chokes again without breath, and dry heaves - once, twice, three times.

The sight of Kiryuu, pitiful again in Yuuki's sight, is not as sweet as it once was. Kaname cannot pin down why. Probably because Kiryuu's misery feeds Yuuki's alarm.

The scent of an omega's distress makes the alpha whine and fret. Mate is upset, afraid. Why do we not comfort him?


Slowly, Kiryuu calms, and his breathing evens out. But he's still shaking, curled in on himself,
robes crumpled and face turned into the duvet, as if blocking the sight of his new spouses will make them go away.

"Kaname," Yuuki states, hands half-raised like she doesn't know what to do with them, "we can't do this."

"The marriage seals the treaty. It has to be consummated," Kaname argues. He hardens his heart against his instincts; they can be overcome, if he wishes.

On the bed, Kiryuu shrinks further into himself, away from Yuuki.

"Zero, we would never, ever make you do anything you didn't want to do," she pleads with the Hunter, and the tender, loving expression on her face sends ice down his back.

Yuuki turns to her husband, completely serious. "I promised I would protect him. I won't hurt him, even for the treaty. Can't you feel it's wrong?"

Kaname weighs his options. He is not opposed to what she wants - he doesn't want to watch his wife sleep with someone else, in front of him. He can pass up the opportunity to torment Kiryuu to keep Yuuki to himself a little longer. And just by itself, without those considerations, the idea isn't appealing to him; Kaname is not one of those disgusting alphas who enjoys breaking an omega. He has seen the aftermath of that too many times, and wrote the laws demanding the offender's execution himself.

"There is an alternative. But given Kiryuu's history, I assumed he would prefer the traditional method. The Hunter treaty doesn't demand the marriage be consummated at all. And for vampires, there is only one thing considered more intimate than sex."

Yuuki gives him a questioning look. The pureblood watches Kiryuu's shoulders tighten; he's already guessed the answer. "Blood, of course. Blood is life. Our lifeblood contains our essence."

Watching Kiryuu struggle between two fears gives Kaname a shot of sadistic pleasure. The violation he knows and fears, or the yet-to-be-experienced defilement, perhaps even worse.

"The blood," he chooses, voice soft and tired. Kiryuu neither moves nor turns toward them.

"It will have to be both of us," Kaname tells him. "From the throat."

"Fine," Kiryuu agrees without inflection.

On the bed, Yuuki watches Kiryuu's back; it is painfully apparent she wishes to reach out and comfort him, but isn't sure of his response.

"Yuuki, you go first," Kaname allows. "I understand you've fed from him before." Before she had drank from Kaname, even, a fact that Kaname holds a grudge over to this day.

"Zero, is that okay?"

"If you would like, Kuran-hime."

"Is it alright if I touch you, Zero?" Yuuki asks, getting on her hands and knees on the duvet; the golden pendant earrings she wears sway with the motion.

"I don't have the right to tell you what to do with me, Kuran-hime."

Yuuki makes a pained face. It's completely true, at least in this situation. Sexually satisfying his
spouses was one of his duties; Zero could not refuse either of them his body. "That may be true, but I still want to know if it's okay with you first."

"...you can touch me."

As though she's handling a wounded bird, all fragile bones and feathers, Yuuki reaches out to place her hand on Kiryuu's shoulder; he tenses, but he lets her turn him over onto his back.

They lock eyes for a moment; with the promise of blood, hot from the vein, both of the purebloods reveal the sharp alertness of a predator sensing a meal. The Hunter, by contrast, is limply yielding as Yuuki curls an arm around his waist and lifts him up, supporting his head with her other hand; he has the exhausted acceptance of a prey animal underneath a large carnivore, waiting for the deathblow.

She releases his waist to open his collar wider, exposing the pale base of Kiryuu's throat to their hungry eyes, and tips his head back so every ridge and valley, every vein and tendon stands out in relief, displayed for their pleasure. Yuuki groans, fangs already descended and nakedly eager, the barest sliver of her soul-deep hunger visible in her complete absorption with the figure in her arms. She bends her head to prepare the place she will pierce on the right side of his neck, scenting his skin first, slowly, just to take it in, and bathing her chosen spot in small swipes, leaving the anesthetic in her saliva to dull the coming pain, lingering to wring every drop of pleasure she can from this visceral act.

Kiryuu's heartbeat hums like a rabbit's, and the whites of his eyes show again around the edges; he must be exerting every part of his will to keep from struggling. The ex-human watches Yuuki without blinking, as though he's trying to remind himself of who she is not.

"Zero, I'm going to do it now. Don't tense up, or it will hurt you more, okay?"

Resting the tips of her fangs on his throat, Yuuki slowly bears down, breaking through the thin barrier of the Hunter's skin. Kiryuu arches his back, but Yuuki's grip is iron, instinctually refusing to let her prey escape. At that first taste, Yuuki's pupils are completely dilated, and she shakes with the struggle for control, panting open mouthed. She lets not a single drop escape, withdrawing to lap at the trails dripping from the wound, before returning to sink back into his neck, deeper than before.

Gripped by the hard focus of bloodlust, it's the only thing in the room Kaname can see - Yuuki, his beloved wife, feeding so voraciously, eagerly embracing her nature. Even the jealousy of watching her fangs inside another's neck isn't enough to ruin the image. Kaname values the gentle human part of her the most, but the vampire with her mouth smeared with blood is Yuuki too, and Kaname loves every part of her, even the ones that exist because of his failure to protect her precious humanity so many years ago.

Yuuki draws away after drinking deep and long, cleaning away the last specks of blood with her tongue; she's not sated, but Kaname also must drink from the Hunter tonight. Petting Kiryuu's silver hair and murmuring nonsense into his ear, she lowers him gently to the bed, and feels the holes left by her fangs to make sure they've clotted.

"You did so well Zero," she praises, smoothing his bangs. "Do you feel okay? I didn't hurt you did I?"

"No. It can hurt much worse. You're gotten even more gentle," he says softly, colored with surprise.
"Are you ready to let Kaname-sama have his turn now, or do you want to let your body recover a little first?"

"...now," Kiryuu answers, and Yuuki gestures for Kaname to join them on the bed.

As she cleans her mouth with her fingers, licking up the last bits, Kaname kneels on Kiryuu's other side, and looks down on the Hunter sprawled there, studying the pureblood right back, eyes half-lidded. He's calmer than Kaname expected, all things considered, but he has done this before with Yuuki, from both positions. Kaname expects his turn to go less easily.

"Just do it already," mutters Kiryuu, blinking irritably up at him.

Well, if the ex-human insists. Curling his arms around Kiryuu, Kaname levers the warm weight of him up to a comfortable height. It helps that Kiryuu is taller than Yuuki; Kaname doesn't have to bend over as far. But Kaname intends to drink from Kiryuu no more than necessary to bond him, and never again, so that fact barely matters.

Holding Kiryuu using one hand, casually displaying their difference in strength, Kaname feels the right side of his neck, pressing down with the sensitive pads of his fingers. The Hunter tattoo on this side is invisible now, Kiryuu's neck snowy pure and once more unmarred - to the eye. Kaname can feel the spells dormant underneath, and he marks out the shape of the brand, searching for one particular spot.

Kiryuu has gone still and stiff, and his heartbeat increases despite his blood loss. The ex-human swallows, and Kaname feels the ripple of it against his hand.

"Are you ready, Zero?" Yuuki questions; she can hear Kiryuu's shallow breathing too, see the fine tremors, read the shadow of fear in his face.

"Do it," the ex-human manages through his dry throat.

So Kaname does. It means nothing, at any rate. He desires only Yuuki's blood; he's not in love with the Hunter like she is, and the thin blood of a level D is even less appetizing than a human.

He swipes his tongue across Kiryuu's white skin, and nearly chokes; Kaname has just ingested a mouthful of omega pheromones, and his instincts rear up from his subconscious, sharpening his anticipation and bringing his predatory instincts to bear. He is aware now - of the prey in his arms, their movements, their weight, the sound of their heartbeat, pressed into his chest.

Sinking his fingers more deeply into Kiryuu's hair, and tucking his body more firmly against Kaname's own, the pureblood finishes preparing the bite area, letting the chemicals laced in his saliva do their work.

As he sets his teeth into skin, Kaname feels Kiryuu inhale with shock. His fangs are pressed right into the center of the taming mark - right above the punctures where Hio Shizuka pierced his flesh, guided into the exact spot by the placement of the brand. Kiryuu opens his mouth to protest, but Kaname doesn't let him.

One swift movement, just the right pressure, a pop of tension, and Kaname is sheathed in Kiryuu's neck up to his gums. Hio's mark on the ex-human's flesh is gone, overwritten by Kaname's fangs. Kiryuu cries out and tries abortively to thrash, but Kaname's grip is sure, and inescapable.

Then the blood wells up from the wound, pumped out by the Hunter's heartbeat, and Kaname feels as though he has taken a blow to the stomach, all the air forced out of his chest as it flows down his throat.
The corporeal taste of blood, physically tangible to the tongue - thick, wet and coppery - stayed the same no matter who a vampire drank from. Everyone's blood served the same purpose in the body, after all. Tiny chemical differences in the blood's composition meant one could discern the difference between human and vampire, or between different ranks of ancestral purity.

Layered overtop was the true sustenance: the power contained in the blood, the ghostly imprint of another mind, and the rush of emotions and memories sometimes granted when taken straight from the vein. A vampire drank the quintessence of another being, another lifetime distilled down into the vital liquid that nourished them and kept them alive; the ancients were right when they believed that blood was power.

When vampires spoke of desiring a certain flavor of blood, it was that quintessence they hungered for, that meant no other blood would do. Satisfying the hunger of the body was simple; the hunger of the spirit was another thing entirely.

Flayed open and defenseless, it was Kiryuu's essential nature that Kaname drank down, searing its taste into his senses. Drinking another pureblood was like swallowing liquid lightning, or like consuming the liquid mantle of the sun; the power burned all the way down to your belly. Humans were more like comfort food: soothing, substantial, nutritious, filling, but simple, plain and easily digested.

The Ancestor of the Kurans has never blooded a Hunter before. By law, it was forbidden, and among the greatest violations of the ancient treaties. Most Hunters who lived before the treaties existed committed suicide rather than be captured by a pureblood. It was the deepest cultural fear they had, to turn from friend to enemy in one moment, one press of fangs. Did they all taste like this, or was it just Kiryuu?

Kaname takes deep pulls, trying to puzzle out the complex balance of flavors. It's like drinking autumn, the pureblood finally decides. It doesn't burn; every mouthful spreads a slow warmth through his chest and limbs. There's a spiciness he's never tasted before in any blood, the same spice in the Hunter's scent. The omega pheromones leave an undertaste of sweetness, but the natural sweetness of fruit instead of syrupy cane sugar. It reminds him of mulled wine and spiced cider, or drinking sips of anise liqueur. And the power laced through his blood is like sparks on his tongue; they burn just a little, but the feeling heightens and complements the taste of spicy sweetness, like enjoying dark chocolate with chilies.

He pulls at Kiryuu's hair, ordering him to bend his head back and display his throat more prominently. Left no other choice with the vampire's fangs in his vulnerable neck, Kiryuu obeys.

Kaname drinks and drinks, greedily gulps the liquid down, but the taste is never enough. And now he's deep enough in Kiryuu that a connection between them forms, forged by exchange of blood, emotion flowing out along with his blood. Fear, he realizes. Terror - the Hunter is terrified. The image of Hio Shizuka comes into his mind, her red eyes and cruel smile, bent over and above him as though he was smaller, and weaker. Flashes of blood on snow, blood on white skin, blood stained white kimono - these are Kiryuu's memories of his turning, called up by Kaname's actions.

Kaname feels the tiniest shred of conscience; sharing blood often leads to unwanted empathy while the connection is open between the donor and the drinker. Even so, the pureblood gentles his grip in soft silver locks, kneading at the Hunter's scalp in a way he hopes is reassuring. The fear wanes just a fraction. Dead, empty lavender eyes - brother, or father? - is the next memory.

Kaname realizes that Kiryuu's heartbeat is slowing, his skin feels cool, and the Hunter stopped fighting long ago. The pureblood forces himself away from the Hunter's throat, drawing back after lapping at the closing wounds one last time. Kaname drank far more than he thought he would. He
has left Kiryuu precariously balanced between awareness and unconsciousness, suffering the effects of blood loss; Kiryuu may not be feeding enough.

As dazed lavender eyes look into Kaname's own red, burning with bloodlust, the alpha speaks up.

*This is fate. From the moment he tasted our blood, he was ours. He has always been ours. It was our hands that shaped his hate. Our hands that fashioned his purpose. We set the wheels of his destiny spinning into motion. We made him into what he is today. It was our blood that woke this part of him, the soft omega, sleeping quiescently in his breast. We could never have let another touch him, see him like this.*

"Onii-sama, what did you do?" demands Yuuki, holding Kiryuu's lax hand in her own. Kaname licks into the corners of his mouth, over his incisors and teeth for more of that warm taste. There are tear marks on the boy's cheeks; his eyelashes flutter as he slips quietly into senselessness.

"He will be fine, with sleep and a few blood tablets. Put him to bed; we can sleep on the other side tonight."

He has made a mistake, the Ancestor of the Kurans realizes, letting Kiryuu's body drop. Kaname had lost control the moment the first taste of Kiryuu passed his lips. No blood except Yuuki's should affect him so strongly; Hio's pure blood, with all its power, had not enthralled him half so much.

Omega - Kiryuu is an omega. An omega his instincts consider his mate. What a fool he has been! Kaname has set this trap for himself, he realizes. His own actions dismantled his defenses - the feeding, the caretaking, the closeness, the long association, the courtship - and the alpha had let Kiryuu right into his head, led him right to where he was most vulnerable. Kiryuu's entire body is a lure for any alpha, pumping out chemicals to intoxicate and ensnare, his blood his most potent weapon of all. And Kaname is not just an alpha, but a pureblood, and an Ancestor; no living vampire has deeper, strong instincts than his own. Kiryuu is designed, like a key to a lock, to fit the shape of Kaname's weakness.

That night, with a belly full of sweet, addicting omega blood, Kaname vows that such a slip will not happen again. Until he can be certain his self-discipline is iron, he will keep away from Kiryuu, and make sure Yuuki does to.

*Chapter End Notes*

Please don't lynch me - I didn't promise any sex right? Believe me, you didn't want it. Zero would have had a horrifying time. He's too frightened for his body to cooperate and become aroused, and the Kurans would have ended up hurting him unintentionally. Even Kaname would've been scarred by having an unresponsive partner in pain who cried silently the whole time. Everyone would've felt soiled by the whole experience, and you'd have to wait even longer for them to do it again.

I tried to make up for it with the most suggestive blood sucking I could possibly write. Drinking blood is a metaphor for sex, yes?

*Current situation, a summary -*
Zero: freaking out, Not Okay

Yuuki: I love them, I want to help them

Kaname: I'm definitely not interested in that stupid Hunter

Yuuki & Kaname's alpha instincts: We're definitely Very Interested, yes. That ass. Woah. I claim this territory in the name of the Kuran family.

Steward Inukai is based on that unnamed old vampire who shows up teaching the night class in episode one and we never see again.
Thank all of you for your responses last chapter. I'm always so touched by your outpouring of support for this story.

Remember that I've only ever watched the anime, so if you notice any differences from manga canon/events, that's why. Reader ben4kevin has been my awesome manga resource and it's thanks to them and the VK wiki that I've been able to work in manga tidbits.

To my reviewer who asked about influences on the wedding ceremony, I believe the 'bride' being escorted by a large party as protection is a Middle Eastern custom, but honestly I don't quite recall if there was any Arabic influences. The main inspirations were Japanese Shinto and Chinese weddings; I started out with a few definite ideas, like the cords, but I went on a giant wiki walk and read a bunch of articles to flesh out the rest.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Where am I?

The room is dark, only the slightest crack of light coming from somewhere across the room. Zero's thinking is slower than it ought to be; his thoughts ooze like honey, and his emotions, thankfully, are also dulled. He snuggles more deeply into what feels like the most comfortable bed he's ever slept in, with a mattress like a cloud, and the finest sheets, warmed by the heat of his body. Everything is soft and warm and good, and then Zero remembers how he came to be sleeping in this nice bed.

This is my wedding bed. Last night was my wedding night.

The Hunter curls himself more deeply in the sheets and bunches the cover in his fists. Miraculously, the Kurans had left him intact - if you could call intact draining their meal into unconsciousness. Zero has not been spared defilement; it has merely been deferred. He can already feel fear creeping up on him - what if they change their minds and decide to come back through those doors and finish what they started? It would be completely allowed by their agreements. At least he knows for certain that they aren't interested in his body that way, except as a duty, a pity fuck whose only purpose is to pop out baby vampires.

The rush of alertness called up by those memories is fading; Zero's still recovering from his blood loss, and he falls back into sleep. His last coherent thought is to marvel at how he could sleep for so long without suffering his usual nightmares. Perhaps if he was ill all the time they would go away for good, but he can't do that, because his ghosts would leave him, and without them wouldn't he really be alone?

(What Zero does not realize is that earlier in the evening, he was sleeping on the opposite side of the bed. Sometime after his spouses left, the omega rolled over to where they had lain, nestled
himself in the warm spot left by their bodies, and slept through the night in a dreamless, restful sleep, surrounded by the potent scent of alpha, instincts comforted by the familiar smell.)

Zero wishes he could remain asleep longer, but his body physically won't let him. He's lost track of the time, since there are no clocks in this room (the partners are meant to enjoy themselves without worrying about schedules), but he knows from the grittiness of his eyes and the heavy feeling in his body that he's slept the day away, and possibly the next night.

Zero nearly pitches over when he tries to rise. He's so dizzy, and his stomach flips with a combination of hunger and nausea. The wedding robes he's still wearing, thank the Ancestress, aren't helping with their sheer weight and volume. Thoroughly creased, and stained with blood at the collar, he wonders if the silk is even salvageable at this point.

The Hunter manages to stagger over to the table full of dainties and drinks, but his hands shake so badly that he doesn't dare try to pour a glass, and drinks the lukewarm water, all the ice long melted, straight from the pitcher, slopping some down his chin and onto himself. Then he wolfs down the easily edible sliced fruit, and forces himself to crunch down on the nuts because his body needs the protein.

(Unknowingly, Kaname had miscalculated Zero's condition. If Zero had normal feeding habits, such a large, but safe amount of blood loss would have been easily recoverable. Starving, malnourished Zero is far more heavily affected.)

Adding a headache to his symptoms of fatigue, nausea and dizziness, Zero gets himself back to his spot in the bed, and huddles there until some of the mental fog clears and he doesn't feel so much like he's been hit by a truck.

And he keeps hiding there until the servants come to check on him, probably on Kuran's orders, and he's kicked out so they can clean. Politely, of course. They don't order him; they merely suggest heavily that Consort Kiryuu might wish to rise and examine his new quarters, where a change of clothes is waiting. They also manage to imply disdain both for his laziness and his current state of disarray. Zero can see the resemblance to their master.

The servants also hand him a letter, which he reads as he stumbles through the house, following behind one of them traveling just the slightest bit faster than he can manage with dignity in his current state. His sense of balance is gone, and the words written in Yuuki's neat print swim before his eyes.

To Consort Kiryuu,

From the events last night, we guessed that you would prefer not to see or speak to us when you woke. Therefore, we have instructed the staff to see you are taken to your rooms, and that your every need is seen to. Please do not hesitate to ask them for anything you need. If you wish, we will avoid you until you are settled and feel more secure.

With you in our thoughts,

Kuran Yuuki. Kuran Kaname.

Kuran's signature is the most ridiculous, curving, perfect piece of calligraphy Zero's ever seen, and it fits the egotistical bastard. It's exactly what Zero would have imagined, if he spent a single watt of brain power thinking about something so stupid.

When Kuran said 'rooms' Zero expected a bedroom, closet and bathroom, maybe with an entry if
they were especially large. What the servant ushers him into is more like a small palace within a palace. The Hunter might have been touched, if he didn't know this suite belonged to him because of tradition rather than favor. It's still more than a little exciting to know that these rooms once belonged to Consort Aileya, and have been preserved unchanged ever since.

Zero's new rooms are decorated marvelously in nothing but art objects and antique furniture. No more pre-fabricated, self-assembled dressers for him, Zero observes wryly. It's undeniably dated, but still pleasing. Aileya's spouses must have treasured her very much, to build her such a grand place to live, he thinks longingly, running his hands along polished wood and cool silk.

The first entry room doubles as a guardroom and a room for servants to wait before being called, quite simple compared to the rest of the suite. The next chamber the servant calls the Nobles' Room, a receiving room where Consort Aileya held audiences. The suite also has a private sitting room, a family dining room, and a study. Farthest away from the guardroom and the public spaces are his bedroom, decorated in cool green, white and gold, a full bathroom, a nursery, and a playroom; through a connecting door in the playroom is the hallway leading to the older children's bedrooms. This suite, and the children's bedrooms next door are positioned as the most protected rooms in the entire palace. All of his rooms are arranged around a modest central courtyard containing a garden and a pond with a fountain.

Past his bedchamber, through a door on the far wall of the bathroom, is a strange, windowless room with no furniture except a second, more enormous bed. The room itself is positioned in the far corner of the courtyard square. Zero is quite perplexed by the need for two beds, and next to the guardroom it's the plainest chamber in the entire suite, but filled with rugs, curtains and cushions. Too exhausted to inquire with the servant about its purpose, he later finds out that this room is called a nesting den. Here an omega gives birth, sleeps while in season, and spends their heats.

For now, the Hunter requests a meal, to which the blank-faced servant bobs her head, and leaves Zero to paw half-heartedly through his meager belongings. Finally in private, he can shed the outer robes, and carefully puts aside his Hoseki and Yuuki's engagement ring. He has thirty-one calls on his cellphone, all from Yagari, Cross, and Kaito. Zero taps out a text to all three of them, telling them that he'll call once he gets a chance.

The meal takes too long. Zero's hands shake when he finally locates his bottle of blood tablets; he really should take three or four.

Zero dry swallows one, and retreats back to bed until he has to eat.

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High above from a balcony of the state palace, hand resting lightly on the railing, Yuuki watches Zero explore the grounds of Rosehill.

'He will not wish to see us after last night, Yuuki. We should leave Kiryuu alone while he gets used to his new home,' Kaname-sama had said the night following their wedding, after slipping out before Zero woke.

Part of her had agreed; Zero had acted so terrified of them, curled up in their wedding bed and reduced to frightened compliance. Zero was brave, an experienced Hunter who never backed down from anything. But he had been afraid of her, even as he forced himself to stay still and fulfill his 'duty.' Yuuki never wanted her touch to frighten him so badly ever again. If it meant she forced herself to keep away from Zero, then she would endure the separation.

Another part of her knew her brother did not suggest this course of action just for Zero's benefit. Their animosity was well known in Cross Academy, and neither of them made any secret of it to
Yuuki. It may also be true that their absence would put Zero at ease, but Kaname-sempai mostly wanted an excuse to keep the purebloods away from their newly wedded Consort. Whether it was just because Kaname-sama disliked Zero, jealousy for her affections, or some other reason, her brother did not confide in her.

It was easy to agree with him; Yuuki was desperate to please her husband, now more than ever. If it made him happy, and it was better for Zero, then why not take that path?

And Yuuki wanted time to understand her feelings before she faced Zero again. When Zero was far away from her, and in danger, Yuuki could put aside her feelings for the sake of protecting him. But now that the Hunter was beside her, and safe, everything came rushing back, threatening to pull her under the surface.

Every time she imagined meeting Zero again, Yuuki had felt anticipation and joy, even when Zero had been a Hunter, and no omega, and would have pointed his gun at her - his enemy - if they did. Seeing Zero at the wedding - their wedding - Yuuki's chest had overflowed with those warm feelings.

But she had not foreseen the pain, welling up like a spring deep in her heart. Zero had been distant, cold, formal, and refused to meet her eyes. And Yuuki had expected that, on some level, and prepared herself for the certainty that their relationship could not simply take up where they had left it. They were far apart from each other for over thirty years, in mind and body; how did one experience such a rift and not find themselves estranged?

But what surprised her was the old pain of their parting. Yuuki had left him. Left Zero alone. And she held crushing, soul deep guilt for that action. But there was also Yuuki's pain, that Zero had inflicted with his own actions. He had rejected her, because she was a pureblood vampire, and no pain she knew of matched the rejection of a loved one. Zero had promised to kill her, the next time they met. Even after such a cruel promise, Yuuki did not hold it against Zero - it meant reunion would come again. But to have Bloody Rose pointed at her chest, and lavender eyes look at her with cold anger, after knowing nothing but protection and affection from him - pain was not a strong enough word. Agony unbearable, wrenching her world off its axis more than the forbidden thirst for his blood.

What would she have chosen, if Zero had opened his arms and welcomed Kuran Yuuki into his embrace? The question has kept her awake in bed, many, many times. The answer is a secret even Yuuki does not know.

Leaving with Kaname-sama had been a simple matter, after that. When one side of a balanced scale lost its weight, the other side naturally fell. Yuuki owes her brother a debt of obligation that she will never repay, not if she stays by his side for the rest of their immortal lives. Kaname-sama had taken her and taught her when she needed to know, living beneath the moon in the night of the vampire. He had been patient with her errors, and protected her from the nobles and other purebloods who would try to use her for their own ends.

How much more had he sacrificed for her, and she didn't even know? Kaname-sama had been a child himself when Papa and Mama were killed by their uncle. Her brother had sacrificed every last bit of his childhood protecting her, forced to act as an adult before his time, making sure her life would be better and safer than living the way he did, in a house of nobles thirsting for his blood and hungry to make him their puppet. Perhaps some of the secrets he kept were about that time, and he wanted to spare her the guilt of knowing.

She tried not to burden him with her feelings of dislocation, wrenched without warning from her old childhood world, and the grief of her losses - of her humanity, her old life, her friends, her
guardian, and her remembered parents, still fresh in her recovered memories.

And Yuuki had repaid her brother's kindness with cruelty. Who married a man when you could not promise him your entire heart? Yuuki had. She had forced Kaname-sama to accept that half of her heart belonged to him, and the other half held firm to Zero. And miraculously, he had. Yuuki had offered to let Kaname-sama leave her, but he chose to stay. Her only comfort was that she had at least been honest with him, once she unraveled the tangled feelings she held.

So she tried by any other means she could to atone for her sins against him. She strove with every ounce of her ability to become the pureblood Kuran princess everyone expected, to match her brother's ability and aura of control, dignity and authority. She learned the most complex protocol and etiquette under Ruka's tutelage, and pursued her education as a vampire with Aido. She dressed in the elegant and feminine clothes he bought her, wore the heels he liked. Steward Inukai taught her the skills to run Rosehill's palaces, and she attended every soiree at her husband's side, watching how he handled the nobles and trying to imitate him.

Kaname-sama mourned her humanity, and her innocence; he blamed himself for their loss. He wanted most of all to see the carefree smiles of that time return. Yuuki had tried to give him that too, hoarded the scraps of that time and fashioned it into a garment she wore. It had not been hard; she missed that time too.

But her efforts had led to failure. Her very best had not been enough. Yuuki could not push herself to equal his abilities. In great or small matters, there was no place she excelled his talents at the same age. Kaname-sama held himself and his feelings away from her. He blocked their blood bond. He kept secrets, important ones. He trusted his subordinates more than his own wife. Yuuki was never invited to play a part in his plans, always gently and indirectly excluded from their meetings. He was protecting her because he cared for her; she knew that. But she wanted to be a person who could protect people too. And Kaname-sempai was also someone she wished to protect.

Yuuki had not been wholly content, if she was being her most honest. But she had accepted the way things were. She could have lived that way for many, many hundreds of years - perhaps thousands - and not wanted anything more. She has been happy with Kaname; together they have experienced many joyful moments. That happiness was not false. Only when the cracks showed in their bond did she feel unsatisfied.

Yuuki loves Kaname unconditionally, whatever may come. She had accepted that her brother may never trust her, and it was not her place to push him. She had no desire to hurt him or force him to give her any more than he already had. Whatever he wanted to offer her, she would gratefully accept.

But now the holding pattern Yuuki and Kaname have been maintaining for thirty-five years is starting to falter. A new element is stirring the currents. A storm is building, and everything might be swept away by the force.

She should be afraid. She isn't.

(Yuuki thinks she might feel an edge of anticipation).

At first, grateful for any reprieve after weeks of stress and apprehension, Zero is pleased to be ignored by the Kuran couple. He stays in the consort's suite for another day while his body finishes recovering, and allows himself to hide for a third, before venturing out, feeling like he inhabits a small island amidst a sea where the stars were strange.
Zero spends hours calling his small Hunter family to reassure them he's alright; they don't believe him, but they know him too well. He keeps the details of his wedding night a secret, except to convince them the Kurans had not harmed him any more than necessary. He wouldn't have told them at all, but Zero couldn't come up with a convincing excuse why he didn't answer his phone for a full day. Master Yagari is a man of few words, and Kaito has a motormouth but also has work to do, so it's mostly Cross' usual antics taking up those minutes.

Zero has never lived like a vampire before, sleeping away the daylight hours and waking at sunset. It makes him uneasy, as though he's giving in somehow, and the Hunter makes a point of going outside sometimes during the day, just to feel the sun's burn on his skin. But his body takes easily to the new schedule, with something like relief. A film of exhaustion, carried so long he forgot this wasn't the way he was meant to feel naturally, leaves him.

Wearing the bonded omega's wardrobe Zero finds in the expansive closet of the consort's suite is not as much of an imposition as the Hunter feared. The clothing owes much to Takuma's good taste and consideration of Zero's personality, and it's well made and comfortable. Amusingly, wearing the full skirts and sleeves makes him feel like he's dressing all the time as a character in a historical drama. He has new shoes as well, house slippers and fitted boots of tooled leather and sewn fabric. His tennis shoes are consigned to the back of the closet, worn only for Hunts.

The wide, enveloping sleeves were exactly as much of a pain as Zero thought they would be; more than once, Zero has found himself sweeping knickknacks off the tabletops when he forgot what he was wearing. The broken objects frustrate him; as a Hunter whose bodily awareness has been trained and honed since birth, Zero ought to know where he's placing his limbs down to the tiniest movement.

When he dares to leave his rooms, the household steward himself guides Zero on a tour of the smaller residential palace, every bit as lavish, elegant and beautiful as his first glimpses promised. His favorite is the ancient library, of course. Only Zero's navigation practice as a Hunter prevents him from becoming hopelessly lost anytime he leaves his suite. On his own, Zero explores small sections of the palace grounds adjoining the residential complex.

True to their word, Zero sees no trace of the Kurans. They do not call for him, or happen upon him when he leaves his suite. As far as Zero knows, he and a handful of servants are the only people inhabiting this building.

The first week, Zero calmly accepts this state of things. He keeps up his training in the suite's courtyard, calls his guardians once a day, and keeps himself occupied. He even tries his fighting exercises in the plainest omega clothing he has; the skirts leave him a comfortable range of movement, and are short enough he won't step on them; the sleeves can be folded up. Zero hopes he will never have to fight in them, but the results are encouraging.

To his surprise, Zero finds that the strength of his charms has increased by a noticeable margin and spends many hours testing his new capability until he is confident he can compensate. Was this what the Ancestor had meant, with her cryptic message?

But then the silence, and the loneliness, start to wear on him. The Hunters still call every day, but cannot permanently devote so many hours to talking with Zero. His days have no distinguishing features; he goes where he likes, does what he pleases, takes his meals when he wants. No one expects him. No one needs anything from him. His existence makes no difference to anyone; if he disappeared, only his guardians and Kaito would notice. When he gets up in the evening, there is nothing different from the day before; every night of the rest of his life stretches out in the same featureless, meaningless blur before his feet.
When Zero's resolve starts to falter, worn away by his increasingly grey mood, the staff's behavior starts to bother him.

The servants all wear uniforms with the Kuran crest on their livery, even the Steward. While most of them are C Rank, more than a few are B Ranks who could claim membership among any gathering of aristocrats. Only a pureblood would have nobles as servants, Zero thinks dryly. Most of them have served the pureblood Kuran family their whole lives, and are descended from ancestors who spent their lives seeing to the needs of those same sworn masters. This generations long association has bred extraordinary loyalty and protectiveness of the Kurans in the household staff.

And Zero has fallen afoul of that loyalty, since before he even arrived at Rosehill. On the surface, there is nothing Zero can complain about - they address him by his title, speak politely, and their professionalism is impeccable. They never shirk fulfilling their duties even when it is abundantly clear they do not like him. Their rebuke and resentment is more indirect, carefully displayed in ways that would be difficult to prove, and sound foolish when said aloud. It's the way they say his title, rolling it around in their mouths like it's a dubious joke, or something distasteful to be gotten out of the way as quickly as they can. It's in the twist of their lips when they ask if Consort Kiryuu requires anything further, tone making it clear they would prefer a negative response. The way they turn their bodies away when speaking to him, or refuse to meet his gaze, as though they're looking right past him. He can sense them, staying outside in the hallway when he requests things, just so he waits a little longer. The servants cut corners, or deliberately make small mistakes - never anything that damages the Kuran's property - just to inconvenience him. Zero knows saying anything would be wasted breath, and would give them an imagined grievance to persecute, so he stays silent.

At first Zero had ignored their distaste, uncaring in his exhausted physical and emotional state what a bunch of vampires thought of him. But it started to hurt, when the only living beings he sees for days on end treat him with disdain laced with contempt. The Hunter couldn't figure out what he had done to offend them; he'd been in the palace for less than a day when the first servants he'd met acted as though he was unwelcome.

He finds his answer once he begins exploring, and comes upon the servants in mid-conversation, exchanging rumors with one another. They're not alert or trained in stealth, and since Zero covers himself in scent masking charms out of habit, he can easily unintentionally sneak up close enough to overhear.

...how bad do you think that D has to be, that Kuran-sama and Kuran-hime wouldn't even touch him?

I heard he begged and cried his way out of it, that the dishonorable coward refused his real duties.

I heard he's disfigured, that he's hideously ugly naked because he's not a true omega.

I heard our Masters are too disgusted to sleep with him, because he allowed all the Hunters to use him like a loose slut, even though he'd been promised to the Kuran family.

He finds them everywhere, like they're watching him, even when he stops casting the scent charms. No matter where Zero goes, he always uncovers one of the servants nearby, peering at him.

...such a shame Consort Ichijo was not compatible. He would have been a worthy omega for the Masters, not the dirty-blooded Level D poor Kuran-sama has to endure. Shame about how weak the children will be...
...who does this Hunter think he is, to refuse them on their wedding night, after all they did for him? Thinks he's too good for our Master and Mistress? After demanding to bond them? Kiryuu is nothing but an upstart social climber who wants to use them...

...I bet that Level D is barren. That's why his alphas rejected him. At least the Hunter's whore will be able to give the Masters a good fuck, with all the practice he's had.

His interest in exploring his new residence wanes; he neglects his training; he eats less, sleeps more, or just lies in bed when the insomnia and nightmares keep him awake. When he goes out, Zero tucks himself into other hiding places, sometimes for hours.

The whispers still follow him.

Fourteen days after his marriage, Zero is slumped behind a stone bench in the rose gardens when he gets an emergency Hunt summons. Now that Zero is married, Cross explained to him, he would be able to Hunt less frequently. Only the jobs that Zero alone could do, or that would be extremely dangerous for a lesser Hunter, would be given to him, for political reasons. It looks bad if the Hunters rely on someone who is now considered a vampire to help them all the time.

So the Hunter is alarmed and surprised to receive a request from dispatch so quickly. According to their message, Zero has been activated only because he is the closest Hunter to the incident, and because the life of a hostage is at risk. A Level E vampire has kidnapped a child from a family in a small countryside village, and the Hunters must act quickly for a chance to save the vampire's young victim.

The Hunter tries to leave word of his departure, but the Steward informs him that the Kurans are out this evening at a soiree. Zero hadn't even known they were gone.

He borrows a car and pushes it to the limit, racing the clock, hoping the fallen E had taken the time to savor its meal. Despite the grave situation, it's a thrill to finally leave the palace, and the Hunt has always been his sanctuary, something Zero could take pride in for his skill.

Zero makes it, just barely. When he finds them in an abandoned train station, the Level E is bent over the child, so young he can't even tell if it's male or female, just sinking its fangs in. A single shot to the head from Bloody Rose is all it takes to dust the vampire, distracted by its meal.

The child bleeds out in less than thirty seconds, living just long enough for Zero to hold the child in his arms as it dies.

Smaller prey are harder to safely feed from, and the Level E was hurried and incompetent.

Zero sits with his head bowed until the corpse cools. Then he covers the tiny body with his coat, and numbly contacts dispatch. He keeps watch over the body until the cleanup crew and the other Hunters arrive, to find Zero seated nearby with his back to the wall, bare-armed in the cold March night. His cold, stony expression, and his shirtfront soaked in dried blood keeps the other Hunters at a distance.

Objectively, Zero realizes it's not good that his first return mission ended this way; the other Hunters might believe he intentionally allowed this, given his new conflict of interest. They will question every action he took this evening, judge whether he was distracted, neglectful, incompetent; there will be concerns about using him again at all. At the moment, Zero can't summon anything but apathy.

The Hunters whisper too. They might know Zero can hear them; they just don't care.
We shouldn't be surprised; Kiryuu failed to support the treaty too. Couldn't even lie on his back and spread his legs properly. And purebloods will fuck anything.

Except Kiryuu, another Hunter jeers.

When Zero goes back to Rosehall, no one meets him at the door. If not for the guard at the gate, no one would know he was back at all.

The servants who cleaned their wedding suite must have talked, for the news of Zero's failure to have reached the world outside the estate. And if even the Hunters know, than he can be certain the entire vampire world also has intimate knowledge of his failure. Cross and Yagari and Kaito must know - have known for days - Zero realizes with horror.

He wants more than anything to go scrub himself until he bleeds, just to clean the child's blood from his skin, but the chief maid for his quarters stops him just outside the door. She casts her eyes over Zero, taking in his stained clothes and lack of Hoseki, and reminds him that it reflects poorly on his spouses if he cannot properly attire himself. Then she informs Zero that one of the maids has accidentally broken something that belongs to him - a palm-sized glass horse that his father gave to his mother before they married.

Zero asks for the pieces.

They've already been thrown away.

He asks to be shown where; it's the kitchen garbage, where all of the refuse from the entire household goes before being taken away.

Zero spends the rest of the night painstakingly digging through heaping piles of trash, hoping in what he knows is a useless hope to find some fragment of his mother's prized possession, in front of the eyes of most of the staff, oozing satisfaction behind him, who have gathered to gawk at the sight of a pureblood's consort doing something so filthy and dirty. The child's blood is still on his clothes; it feels like it's sinking into his skin.

Zero searches through the entire heap, and can't find a single piece of glass.

In his bath that morning, Zero lets himself slip underneath the water's surface. As he lays at the bottom of the tub, staring out of the water blankly, Zero holds himself underneath until his body screams with the need to breathe. He starves himself of oxygen until he's light-headed and dizzy, and the water presses down on his lungs, and his mind is emptied by the near suffocation.

Kaname casts his arm over his face, vainly trying to cover his eyes against the noon sunlight streaming through the window of his study. He ought to be in bed, asleep; he has a full night of meetings ahead of him, both with his business managers and with a few council members.

Yet here he is. The pureblood has not even summoned the will to close the curtains against the bright sun. He's disheveled, stripped down to his shirtsleeves, hair mussed from running his fingers through it in agitation. Leaning back in his chair, Kaname reluctantly gives in and admits the reason he's unfocused: Kiryuu Zero is a damned distraction.

Denial is a wonderful thing. Kaname has poured his very best efforts into pretending the Hunter doesn't exist and his house is blissfully omega free, and consigned any strange memories of a second wedding or the haunting taste of hot, spiced blood to the equivalent of a padlocked safe in the back of his mind.
But it seems like every little thing is conspiring against Kaname to constantly remind him that yes, he has saddled himself with an omega. Not the least of those reminders is Yuuki. She constantly asks after Zero to the household staff; Kaname ordered them to watch Kiryuu the first night he arrived, both for her peace of mind and for his own; Kiryuu has a habit of stumbling into trouble. Any time Kaname seeks her out, his wife can be found with the omega nearby, and he can’t tell if it’s purely accidental or if she’s deliberately sticking to the letter, rather than the spirit of their resolution. And Kaname may keep his end of their bloodbond clamped down, but Yuuki allows her feelings full reign to pass through it, and she has been agitated and on the edge of hunting focus for almost two weeks now.

Once he finally gave up on pretending the Hunter didn’t exist, Kaname examined every interaction with Kiryuu he’s had since the Hunter shocked everyone by presenting as an omega, down to the most minute detail. Somehow his self-mastery has cracked and given way to weakness; Kaname has never let another mind bend his will without intending to allow it. He has never reacted so strongly to an omega before, not in ten thousand years of life. What is it about Kiryuu that has his alpha complaisant? Kaname has identified nothing, no reason whatsoever, after spending days grappling with the problem. Kiryuu is the same irritating, hot tempered, rude, disagreeable Hunter he’s always been.

In frustration, to preserve his daily unruffled demeanor, Kaname decides to shelve that part of the problem and work out how to fix his alpha's uncontrolled behavior instead. Kaname concludes, after deep thought, that while the alpha objects to physical harm done to Kiryuu, especially in close proximity, he can still contemplate mental forms of injury and punishment from afar, and the alpha cannot touch Kaname's personal feelings of dislike toward the Hunter, only override them temporarily. So as long as the Kurans see to Kiryuu's physical needs and well-being, Kaname's alpha will keep quiet and stay under control.

With the problem of his alpha solved, Kaname ought to feel at ease. He just wants his disordered thoughts to let him rest. But it isn't enough. With a groan, the pureblood drops his forearm, exposing his eyes to the sunlight. The stabbing brightness is a good counterpoint to the painful memories of his life as the Ancestor that come upon him in unguarded moments. Memories of her.

He hadn't loved the Ancestor of the Hunters. But between the two of them was a nebulous sense that if they had wished, they could have loved one another. The two Ancestors had been allies who held similar views, working toward the same goal. But the pain of their final meeting and quarrel, and her self-sacrifice to create the anti-vampire weapons, left the Ancestor of the Kurans with a deep well of regret from that time.

To have seen her again felt like an undeserved act of grace. And she had spoken to him, recognized him after all this time. The comfort given by her words sets some of those memories at rest, and once again he replays the moment in his mind:

_I am grateful that we can see each other again, after so many millenia. I feel I owe you an apology for how we parted, but I do not regret my choice. Your heart was not made for the fire, Kaname. Your heart was made for this, and for her - and I hope, someday - for him too. Please, take care of my Zero; he deserves much better than he has received. I don't believe I will ever see his equal again, even if my children endure for ten thousand more years. And remember, the darkness in your heart is not as deep as you believe it is. Trust the light in their hearts to illuminate yours. If you need me, I am always beside you, Kaname, in my children. Be well, dear friend._

The pureblood sighs. He can hardly disregard such an earnest, final request, now can he? That would feel ungrateful. And Yuuki would beg the same of him if he asked. Kaname will do as they wish - as he has done for Yuuki before - and look after Kiryuu. That probably means no more
choking or throwing into walls. Or pretending he doesn't exist. Pity.

But the idea that he might someday love Kiryuu - what a ridiculous thought! Certainly, that will never happen.

Why is is that both Yuuki and her are so fixed on that ex-human Hunter? Kaname doesn't see anything special about him.

Mate is special because he is ours, says the alpha matter-of-factly.

Kaname covers his eyes in frustration.

Zero is sleeping down the hall in the consort's suite; Yuuki can feel the pull of him as she lies half-awake in her bed. The hour has passed midnight. She has tossed and turned for hours, thrown off her sheets trying to cool her overheated body; her nightgown is rucked up on her thighs and hangs off one shoulder.

Staying away from Zero had been a complete failure. The house is crisscrossed with his scent; Yuuki has caught herself following the trail absently when she's lost in thought, or come to her senses stopped in place inhaling deeply to bring the fragrance over her tongue. No matter how she tries, Yuuki finds herself hovering in Zero's vicinity, just beyond where he can sense her.

Leaving Zero space and time to come to terms with his new world sounded like a good idea, in theory. Except the part of Yuuki that knows Kiryuu Zero, her human heart, keeps whispering that they shouldn't leave Zero alone. Zero is a lonely person, and leaving him in solitude may be what he prefers, but given Zero's habit of brooding on his problems, is not always healthy. She has been on the cusp of breaking her resolution for days, hovering indecisively in halls and doorways, Kaname-sama's disapproval and Zero's rejection the two fears holding her back.

That's not the whole truth, hisses her vampire in the back of her mind. Halfway between sleep and awareness, the pureblood comes upon her, a cloak of night freed from the restraints Yuuki places on it in her waking hours.

That is not the only reason you are afraid. That is not the whole reason you stay away from him now, her pureblood whispers in the back of her mind.

"I love him. I want to protect him," she insists.

Those things are undeniably true, says her pureblood self.

But you also want to consume him.

The dark seed of obsessive desire, planted in the blood-soaked, black soil of a pureblood's heart, sleeps in your breast too.

Yuuki squeezes her eyes shut. It's true. The moment his blood touched her lips, it birthed a craving that could never be satisfied except by that unique, exquisite taste. Only Kaname's blood can inspire the same endless, ravenous hunger. If she were ever denied the blood she craves, the blood of her beloved ones, Yuuki knows she would go mad with tortured thirst.

The night of their wedding, all of her darkest urges came roaring back from the deep, woken by her second taste of his coveted blood. She wanted to drain the Hunter until his body lay on the precipice of danger, an addict denied her sweet, warm drug for an eternity. Even now, sated from her last feeding, Yuuki aches for their blood, to sink her fangs through skin and drink down the
nectar beneath.

*Not just his blood,* reminds her pureblood self.

*You want all of him - blood, heart...and body.*

*You want to know what his warm, slick insides feel like, clenching around you. You want to keep him in your bed for days, and know what noises he makes when he cries out in ecstasy. You want to fill him with a new family, reparation for the ones you both lost. And then you want to do it all again.*

Yuuki shudders, and shakes her head futilely. It feels wrong; Zero will never welcome such desires. Why can't she be satisfied with what she has? Kaname-sama is more than generous when they're together. Except...there is one thing he has never suggested, never hinted at the possibility. Yuuki wants to know what he feels when he penetrates her. She's never been invited to reciprocate that act. Yuuki would never, ever ask of her own accord; the very idea of making such a request of her cool, imposing brother is anathema. But a desire disregarded and suppressed does not go away.

*Why do you reject these desires?*

"They are inhuman. I shouldn't want those things!"

*Does that make them wrong? You are what you are.*

"The people I love value the human part of me the most. And how can I want those things, when Zero doesn't?"

*Do you intend to carry them out without his consent?*

"No! Never!"

*Then what is the harm?*

Yuuki says nothing.

*You fear the depth of your desires. You avoid him because you fear you will lose control and harm him. You wish to protect him. Can you protect him from yourself?*

Yuuki thinks for a long time, examining her feelings from every angle, taking them apart, naming them, and then studying their structure.

"Yes," she answers her vampire.

"I love Zero. And love is the selfless desire for the good of another person. If I act on that love, rather than my selfishness, I will not willingly hurt him. There's a part of me that wants to cage Zero, bind him to us so he can't ever leave. I chose to set him free instead. I will struggle against my ugly selfishness so I can stay by his side. After we bond, if he decides he doesn't ever want me to touch him again, I will obey his desire. No matter what. Even if I have to sacrifice myself to all my ceaseless hungers, I will protect Zero."

The pureblood projects acceptance, and submerges itself back into her mind. Finally at peace with herself, Yuuki rests.

She waits until mid-morning, when Zero will be awake and hopefully have left his suite, too eager...
to wait any longer. Yuuki hasn't seen Zero up close in two weeks, and now that she has chosen to
go to him, every fiber of her heart aches with yearning to end their separation, to see for herself he
is well.

Yuuki doesn't want to enter his living space yet; let the consort's suite be a place of refuge for Zero
if he needs it, where his spouses won't venture. She finds her quarry in the back of the library, of
course, stretched out on a velvet divan, half-heartedly flipping through a heavy, leather bound
history book.

Zero's Hunter senses are unequaled; the ex-human probably knew she was approaching him before
she could even sense his quieter Hunter's aura. Yuuki made no effort to hide her presence, or her
destination. If Zero wanted to avoid her, he could. She was not going to trick him or fool him into
accepting her.

She knows immediately, just from looking at him, that Zero isn't well. She should have come to
him earlier, so she could protect him like she promised. Yuuki won't make that mistake again.

Her alpha whines. *Mate is hurt?* It doesn't always understand complicated emotional situations like
this, but it knows that Zero in pain is unacceptable.

Zero's face is drawn, posture exhausted, and there's a dull, pained look in his eyes she would give
*anything* to ease. The black color of his clothing just enhances his wan paleness. Despite his state,
Zero still presents a striking image in a long black undergarment paired with a matching breast-
length jacket that has a folded fur collar and cuffs. To Yuuki's delight, she recognizes the same
diamond Hoseki he wore for the greeting ceremony of their wedding.

Holding up a book, Yuuki asks, "Do you mind if I join you?" Her tone is inquisitive, the question
genuine.

"It's a library, Kuran-hime. It doesn't belong to me," replies Zero carefully, sitting up now and
watching her warily.

"It does belong to you. You are our Consort, Zero - this house is partly yours now. And you always
get to decide if want company or not. I'd like to sit with you. May I?"

"If you want to read, it wouldn't bother me," he allows.

Ostensibly, Zero returns to his book, though Yuuki can tell he's not paying full attention. She sits in
a nearby armchair, and opens her book to a random page, not even pretending to read, drinking in
the sight of Zero instead.

Just as it had before, the raw hunger for Zero had leapt like a flame in oil the moment her vampire
cought his scent. It rages under her skin as she sits there, urging her to get up and pin him down so
she can consume him properly. With Kaname, when she feels such desires, Yuuki knows he could
resist her if she lost control. But the only thing keeping Zero safe is Yuuki's self-control, the
restraint of her will.

"Do you need something, Kuran-hime?" Zero meets her gaze, and the two study each other for
several moments.

She takes a risk, and tells Zero the truth.

"If I wanted to hug you, would that be alright?"
sputters, the alpha inside her gone still and intent while its mate decides if he will accept their touch.

Yuuki feels her heart crack when Zero puts his book down and stands up, nodding once while looking at his shoes rather than at her. She won't waste such a precious offer. She's found some vulnerability already in him, a secret grief he needs soothed away; Zero won't yield so easily when he isn't in such pain.

Yuuki is careful to move slowly and carefully, and not to tighten her grip so much he would feel trapped. The pureblood wants to squeeze him tightly and refuse to let go, push him down on the divan and block out the rest of the world with her body until the hurt in his face goes away. His sweet scent, rising from his skin close by where her head rests on his shoulder, tempts her.

The undertow of her darkest hungers tries to pull her under, but Yuuki stands firm. It isn't easy - she wants to eat him so badly the hunger is like torture - but her resolution is enough, and she marvels that she can hold him and know he is safe from her darkness. Maybe someday - if Zero wants - Yuuki will unchain those desires just a bit, and let herself slake her appetite. But for now, she listens to the beat of his heart under her ear, fur soft against her cheek, and savors this tiny victory.

He's too thin, Yuuki realizes. There's less of him than there should be; she can feel Zero's ribs underneath her hands; Yuuki immediately plans to order a mid-morning tea and cajole Zero into eating when she orders 'too much.' But he's right there, inside her arms, and she hopes that whatever comfort she can offer is helping Zero's grief.

"I've missed you," Yuuki whispers. Zero doesn't answer, but his arms come up to barely touch her back.

*If I spend ten thousand years working just for this,* she thinks as her alpha purrs in her chest, I will do it without regret, then spend ten thousand years more working even harder to gain your love, Zero.*

Chapter End Notes

If Zero and Kaname's plot arc turns around their relationship with one another, then Yuuki's turns on the decisions she makes to grow into the relationships she already has.

I want to make clear that Yuuki and Kaname love one another romantically in this story. Their relationship is genuine and good, but it could be deeper and more fulfilling for both of them. The core problem with the Kurans' relationship is that each of their personality flaws dovetail in such a way that they deadlock and can't move past them to improve it. Kaname's flaw is his desire for control and his habit of keeping secrets. Yuuki's flaw is that she feels intense self-guilt for things (that are not always her fault) and a reluctance to challenge the way things are. Kaname won't reach out, and Yuuki won't push him. Kaname likes to talk about Zero's obligation to Yuuki, but Yuuki feels an even greater an obligation to Kaname. Luckily, dear Zero has no problem fighting Kaname and has always been Yuuki's best coach.
Next chapter: Yuuki takes a page out of Kaname's less-than-virtuous playbook, Zero learns more about what it means to be an omega, and after 75,000 words we finally get the three of them in the same room doing things together. Hallelujah.
This fanfic now has fanart, thanks to the wonderful KazeKayze and pixeled! Please go check them out, they're both very wonderful and give them some praise!

Alternate version of Zero's wedding outfit by KazeKayze- http://pinky-candydive.tumblr.com/post/158203407339/so-this-is-zero-from-vampire-knight-this-was

Omega Zero by pixeled (Mild spoiler for ch. 11)- http://sarsypants-blog.tumblr.com/post/158095583159/and-its-done

To Senja844, who asked why Zero didn't drink Yuuki and Kaname's blood like they drank his blood. It's because the Kurans are purebloods, and their blood is considered nearly sacred by vampires. Demanding their blood, for any reason, is a very strong taboo, which is partly why they are allowed to create unstable Level D vampires and don't have to feed them their blood. So Zero doesn't need to drink their blood to seal the marriage; it's not a marriage of equals in the minds of the vampires. As long as the purebloods drink Zero's blood, the consummation is legally satisfied according to vampire laws.

A tip when you're reading the Yuuki portions: pay attention to how she addresses Kaname. In chapter two Kaname tells us that she calls him onii-sama when she's either being formal, or when she's feeling insecure. Kaname-sama and Kaname-sempai are different comfort levels as well, and all three of these convey a sense that the speaker holds a lower position, with progressively shorter amounts of distance. She almost never calls him Kaname, without an honorific, as an equal. I believe she has only done so once. Which one she chooses says things about her state of mind. Also remember that there are many things that we, the audience know, that she does not - like the fact Kaname is the Ancestor.

When Yuuki took lunch with her brother, Kaname-sama had not commented on the scent of Zero lingering on her clothes, but neither had he looked disappointed or angry. Yuuki would have gone to Zero again anyway, whatever his reaction, but her brother seemed oddly contemplative today.

After they have eaten, Yuuki summons Steward Inukai to her study.

"Consort Kiryuu looked unwell today. Has something happened?"

The elderly vampire bows and replies, "Last night, Consort Kiryuu informed me that he had been requested for a Hunt, and returned in the early morning. The guard reported that the Consort had blood on his clothing, but it was not his own. That is all the information I can give you, I'm afraid. Except for when he sought me out, I have not seen Consort Kiryuu in the past few days. If you wish, I can question his chief maid about his state of mind?"

"Please do, Steward. I am certain something is wrong, and the Consort will not confide in me."
Zero had refused to say anything at all, except to tell her it was nothing, and he was fine. Yuuki can spot Zero brooding from a mile away, and this has all the marks of 'not fine at all.' If Zero won't tell her anything, then Yuuki will have to get to the bottom of this herself. His wellbeing is more important than preserving his privacy; Zero hides his pain and won't ask for help otherwise.

Yuuki has wracked her memories for any hint of what might trouble Zero, but she has frustratingly little to work on. Her fear that she would hurt him, and the Kurans' promise to leave Zero alone, meant that she has physically seen him only a few times in the past two weeks, all from very far away. Zero possesses such strong Hunter blood that he can sense vampires from across significant distances, so Yuuki, with her powerful pureblood aura, needed to remain three or four hallways over - close enough to follow his scent trail, but never to catch sight of him - except at night, when she was allowed to sleep nearby. She has received news of Zero secondhand from Kaname-sempai and the servants' reports, but that doesn't tell her any intimate details. She knows, for example, that Zero has gone outside exploring less frequently than in the beginning, but she can't tell if that's boredom or a sign of something more serious.

While Steward Inukai goes to seek out the maid, Yuuki turns to her next source of information: she calls Chairman Cross.

"What can I do for my adorable Yuuki-chan today?" Cross chirps, drawing out the last syllable; Yuuki can imagine him dancing around his office in the frumpy shawl and glasses of his deceptive chairman's disguise. It's late enough at night the pureblood hadn't been sure Cross would still be awake, but it looks like Cross picked up anyway.

She tilts the phone against her ear and tells him. "I need you to break Hunter protocol for Zero's sake."

"What do you need?" Cross asks, voice lower and lacking playfulness.

Now that she is speaking to the President of the Hunter Association and not her embarrassing ex-guardian, Yuuki tucks a lock of hair behind her ear and explains the situation.

"Zero went on a Hunt last night. This evening he was upset and looked terrible. He won't tell me why. So please, if anything happened to him, I need to know."

"While the list of vampire eliminations and each target's justification is publicly available, I am not technically supposed to release information on any specific hunt without legal subpoena, to protect the Hunters involved. If I were to hypothetically tell you that Hunter Kiryuu's last mission ended with the death of a kidnapped child, then that would be skirting the boundaries of confidentiality, and would be forbidden."

"Ah, I see." Yuuki's throat feels tight. No, poor Zero….

"Well, thank you for your time anyway, President Cross."

"Yuuki." Cross' voice keeps her from hanging on.

"I've done what I can on my end to squash any talk and punish those who keep spreading it, but for Zero's sake we need to be careful. It isn't good if the rumors keep spreading. People make up what they want to believe, in the absence of truth. I don't know what game Kaname-kun is playing, but his inaction is eroding Zero's position. Remind him that a slip like this shouldn't happen again."

Her forehead pinches - what is Cross talking about? Yuuki opens her mouth to question him further, but Cross hangs up before she can speak. Yuuki is left staring at her phone, thoughts
racing, until a knock sounds at her door.

"Come in," she calls.

The Steward opens the door, but doesn't have his usual air of professionalism and calm. Inukai is absolutely white, and a trace of fear hides in his eyes. Instead of coming to stand in front of her desk, the vampire kneels down on the carpet, and bows his head.

"Steward Inukai, what is this?" the pureblood questions.

"Kuran-hime. I fear that I may no longer deserve the position of the Steward of Rosehill. Those under my authority have committed a grave misdeed under my watch, and I did not prevent it. I am not sure I deserve your trust any longer."

Thoroughly alarmed, Yuuki barely manages a curt response; she wants to shake the information out of him if it has anything to do with Zero's pain. "Tell me what has happened, Steward."

"First, Yuuki-hime, it might be best if you use your power of command to ensure I speak only the truth."

When she speaks, Yuuki's voice has a new resonance and power, pitched lower than usual, and ripples through the listener's bones. "As you wish. You will speak only the truth to me, Steward Inukai, regarding this matter. Tell me what you have discovered."

"When I questioned Consort Kiryuu's head maid, at first she insisted that the Consort went straight to bed after returning. I thought her manner uneasy, and she was reluctant to discuss the matter. When I pressed her heavily, she admitted that one of the Consort's maids had broken an object that belonged to him - a glass horse."

Yuuki interrupts, "Was it the size of my hand, on all fours, with its mane and tail blown by the wind?"

Inukai shakes his head. "The size is correct, but I don't know any other details."

"Go on then, Steward."

"The maid threw out the pieces, and informed her supervisor. And I thought that was the end of it - a mistake, one that deserved a deep apology to the Consort, and nothing more. But the head maid wouldn't admit it happened at first, which was suspicious, so I questioned some of the other servants."

Steward Inukai has to gather himself; he looks deeply ashamed. "And it was their answers that horrified me, Kuran-hime. Consort Kiryuu did not go back to his suite. He went looking for the pieces of his broken horse - in the kitchen trash heap. And not one of the staff who saw him did their duty and helped him. They stood and watched their masters' consort dig through garbage for hours and did not lift a finger to stop such a thing. It should never have happened. It was outrageous and unconscionable. I know how you treasure him, Kuran-hime. I have seen how hard you have worked to prepare for his coming. As a servant of the Kuran family, I am ashamed that I could not prevent your own servants from harming a person so precious to you."

Steward Inukai bows down until his forehead touches the floor, and he is kneeling in a full obeisance on the carpet of Yuuki's study.

Crunch!
The phone in Yuuki's hand is a mess of crumpled metal and broken glass.

She drops the corpse of her phone, and looks down; her hands are shaking. She makes a fist, and drives her nails into the palm of her hand so hard she nearly breaks the skin.

Yuuki tries to think past the white noise in her head, but it's no use. She feels such incandescent rage she's incoherent, her mind a constant scream of *How could they? How dare they?*

Steward Inukai is very, very lucky that the Kurans teach themselves never to wield their power in anger. The Hio are known for their madness, the Touma for their bloodthirsty impetuousness, but the Kuran pride themselves on their stability and control.

So Yuuki breathes through her nose and concentrates on not drawing her own blood until the rage burns down to a simmer.

"Bring me the two maids. I will know why a servant of the Kuran would harm their Masters," the pureblood commands.

Before Steward Inukai's eyes is the pureblooded princess of the Kuran, her eyes fiery and face implacable, seated regally with the utmost conviction he will obey her orders. What could he do, faced with such a sight, except flatten his body further to the floor and reply, "I will do your will, Kuran-hime."

"Yuuki! What a surprise," Kaname welcomes his wife as she marches through the door of his office, pleased that Yuuki has come to visit him at the Kuran business offices, "A very nice surprise. What brings you here?"

"Cancel whatever you have for the afternoon, unless it's an emergency," she tells him, without rising to his invitation for playful banter.

Kaname frowns. "Yuuki, is something wrong?"

"Yes," she replies sharply, and doesn't say anything else while Kaname calls his secretary to make the arrangements. While the pureblood speaks, he makes some quick calculations about what Yuuki might have learned, to show up unexpectedly in his office now. Only one thing makes her so upset: Kiryuu.

Yuuki must have discovered that the events of their wedding night were leaked to the public - a leak Kaname deliberately allowed. The pureblood wanted to engineer a test of the servants' loyalty, and create an excuse to issue a number of strict privacy orders and if necessary, purge some of them. Alphas were expected to be irrational when it came to their omega; even the temperate Kurans would not be blamed for using their power of command if they believed it protected their mate.

Kaname had intended to test his staff since before Cross Academy, but Kiryuu provided the ideal excuse. That information was essentially useless, but seemed important enough that his enemies would be fooled and expose their agents. And revealing what happened would pose little threat to Kaname and Yuuki, since it reflected poorly only on Kiryuu. If the Kurans were human, that might be a different story, but no vampire was foolish enough to believe two pureblooded alphas couldn't perform sexually if they wanted.

Kaname's plan blatantly violated the terms of their marriage treaty: the Kurans are not allowed to inflict any mental harm on Kiryuu, including passively allowing him to be hurt by others. But Kaname could get away with it because it would be impossible to prove in court that he
deliberately allowed Kiryuu's reputation to be damaged, and Kaname would never testify about his own culpability. The pureblood had felt a twinge of guilt, on Yuuki's behalf, but it hadn't stopped him taking advantage of such a perfect opportunity. And Kiryuu's reputation could always be rebuilt.

"What is this about, Yuuki?" Kaname questions, leaning his hip on the edge of his desk and crossing his arms over his chest.

Yuuki turns on her heel, strides to the door of his office and knocks twice. The door cracks open, and she tells whoever is outside, "Bring them in."

Kaname recognizes Kiryuu's head maid, but not the second woman, as the pair are pushed through the door and forced to their knees.

"Tell Kaname-sama everything you told me," Yuuki commands them, standing behind their kneeling forms in a position Kaname might describe as threatening, if it were not his gentle Yuuki.

As the pair speak, Kaname comes to a slow, increasing awareness that he has severely miscalculated.

"Let me make it clear to you what you have done," he says slowly, once the confession stumbles to a halt. "You deliberately destroyed one of the Consort's possessions - one you guessed held meaning to him, by its careful storage - and then you scattered the pieces in the garden so they couldn't be recovered," he accuses the junior maid. "And then you," he gestures to the head maid, "took advantage of the situation to deliberately arrange his humiliation in the eyes of the other servants, and spread the news yourself to attract other people to the spectacle."

"And both of you, and most of Consort Kiryuu's personal servants, participated in a campaign of premeditated, organized neglect and cruelty, designed specifically to torment our consort because of flaws and failures you blamed him for, without our permission, knowledge, or encouragement."

"Is my understanding correct?" Kaname finishes, the cadence of his low voice dangerous.

"Yes, Kuran-same," sob the women, reduced to tears.

Kaname turns away, pinching the bridge of his nose. How had this spun out of control so quickly? Kaname had known some of the staff were predisposed to dislike Kiryuu, and the pureblood had predicted and not minded that they would likely treat him poorly. But he had expected the occasional snub, not this systematic persecution.

It was true, he realizes, that he had refused to hear anything about Kiryuu from his informants while he tried to pretend Kiryuu was not his new spouse; his avoidance created a lack of information. Kaname's deliberate ignorance and nonexistent monitoring of the situation had prevented an intervention before circumstances reached this point.

Yuuki breaks down when the maids are taken away, crying bitterly while Kaname holds her; her body stays stiff like she doesn't believe she deserves the comfort. "How could I not notice? How could I let this happen?"

"This was not your fault, Yuuki. I miscalculated." I caused this.

"And we had good reason to give Kiryuu some peace. You could not have known -"

"I should have! I should have guessed something like this might happen. I realized, at the wedding feast, that some of the guests didn't like Zero, but I didn't think the servants might feel the same
way. I entrusted Zero to people who hurt him! And then I wasn't around to notice! What kind of spouse am I?"

"Yuuki, nobles are always bigots when it comes to blood purity, and half of them were enemies of the monarchist faction anyway. You're young, you're still learning -"

"You saw it! You're not much older than me - I should have seen it too!"

"Yuuki…" Kaname trails off. He can't exactly explain to her that his skills are not a fair comparison because he's her 10,000 year old Ancestor. it will take many, many more centuries before she can read a truly experienced vampire politician as easily as a book.

So he lets the issue drop and moves on. "When you feel calmer, we'll return to Rosehill. We have work to do, to make sure this does not happen again."

Gathered in the atrium of the state palace, Rosehill's staff mill around and whisper curiously to one another. Why had they been gathered together, down to the last laundress, gardener, cook and guard? The uncertainty gives the gathering an undercurrent of tension, but none of them seem to suspect what is about to happen.

Good, Yuuki's vampire thinks, unwary prey is easy prey.

With Steward Inukai one step behind them - already cleared of all complicity in the plot - Kaname-sempai and Yuuki enter the room side by side. The crowd quiets, eager to hear whatever news awaits. Not for long.

Yuuki walks forward, her usual feminine dresses abandoned in favor of something more dark and severe, and addresses the crowd. "The Kuran family has always valued the faithful hard work of its servants. With your support, we have been able to fulfill our family's mission to assist in the stable governing of the vampire world, however we can. Your service is invaluable to us, both in our personal and public lives."

"Which makes it all the more painful that some of you have betrayed us," her brother finishes.

The servants erupt into loud disarray, with shouts of shock and horror.

"Yes," he says, and the room falls instantly silent once more. "Twice over have we been betrayed by those we trusted most intimately."

"First, our trust has been betrayed by those who passed information about our private lives - the events of our Consort's first night at Rosehill - to people outside of the estate."

"Second," Yuuki states, hands fisted at her sides, "we discovered that we have been further betrayed in the treatment of our consort. We trusted you with his care and well-being, and instead he was subjected to planned neglect and torment. We know about what happened last night. The servants of the Kuran family deliberately arranged to cruelly humiliate one of their masters! Did none of you think you should have stopped it? Did none of you feel any shame, watching him?"

Some of the servants are shifting uneasily in the crowd, expressions fearful or guilty.

"We cannot tolerate such cruelty," Yuuki continues, as the two maids are dragged into the room, crying and wailing.

The head of the family, her brother, approaches the pair, coming close enough only to be clearly
heard. "It is the decision of the Kuran family that your employment with be immediately terminated, and you are forbidden from ever returning to Rosehill again. You will have no further contact with Consort Kiryuu. Do you have anything to say in your defense?"

Zero's ex-head maid immediately starts to beg. "No! Please, Kuran-hime! My family has served loyally for generations, please consider our service and forgive me!" The younger maid just sobs more loudly.

"You confessed to deliberately harming my mate. There is no forgiveness for that," Yuuki tells her. *She is lucky we do not tear out her throat,* says the alpha, hackles raised.

Two suitcases are thrown at the maids' feet.

"You have heard our judgement," her brother commands, "now obey."

The women get to their feet, still wailing - at least they know better than to keep begging - collect their belongings, and unsteadily slink away.

The alpha is radiating vengeful satisfaction. It's not enough, after what they did to Zero, but Zero would not want them hurt, even after the maids were so cruel to him.

In the heavy silence, Kaname-sempai continues. "Kiryuu Zero was not forced on us. The Hunters' Association does not have enough power for that. We requested to bond him," her brother attests."Our consort is an extension of us, ladies and gentlemen. So everyone is perfectly clear, we expect you to treat Consort Kiryuu as you would treat either Yuuki or I."

It's not enough. Yuuki has to make sure they understand. "Kiryuu Zero is the only omega I will ever bond with, now or in the future. There is no other omega I would chose. I would not care if he was barren. I would not care if he had partners before us. I have never cared about the purity of his blood. I want only him, and no one else, except Onii-sama, ever again," Yuuki declares with the utmost conviction, passionately meeting the gazes of the crowd, as if if she can make them understand by sheer will.

In the terrified, thoughtful silence, Kaname-sempai brings things to a close. "We will be conducting a series of interviews involving the entire staff, to understand how this happened and who bears responsibility. You will be called when it is your turn. Dismissed."

Kiryuu, of course, took the opportunity to slip away while the staff were occupied, trained to distrust and avoid them. None of them know where he is, and with his quiet Hunter's aura, the Kurans decided it would be best to search for their spouse themselves instead of riling the staff so soon after their shocking rebuke.

Kaname finds him when they're combing the gardens - not the rose gardens, but the little used, less famous botanical gardens - crumpled like an abandoned doll on the stone rim of a dry fountain. He must have lain there for some time; he's covered in bits of dead leaves and other leftover winter detritus from the wind. The pureblood allows his bloodbond with Yuuki to open, confident that the emotional spillover will draw his wife to them.

Kiryuu must know he is there; if nothing else, Kaname can admit he is a superb Hunter. The sight of Kiryuu leaves him oddly conflicted. The boy is certainly pathetic, wallowing in his feelings, but there is a hint of something else mixed in with Kaname's emotions, making the pureblood's mood unsettled. Surely it's irritation - he doesn't have time for this, now that Kaname's schedule has become unexpectedly packed; with all these interviews to conduct it will be weeks before things
As Yuuki comes up and stands behind his shoulder, Kiryuu finally raises his head. The lavender gaze studying them contains nothing but apathy; Kiryuu does not care why they are here, or what they plan to do with him. Kaname misses the normal glare, just a little. Very few beings will do something as bold as glare at a pureblood vampire. Not that he cares at all about what Kiryuu wants or does. Kaname just misses the entertainment; taunting Kiryuu is a favored form of diversion. That's all.

If Kaname feels a little tense, that's just residual urges from his alpha instincts, set off by the same old biological impulse to protect an omega. It's only because he needs to return to work to that the pureblood leaves the gardens when Yuuki kneels down at Kiryuu's side, like a supplicant, and starts speaking to him in a soft voice, and not for any other reason. If a tool gets a little damaged when it's used, what of it?

(Kiryuu Zero has been humiliated and beaten down. Kaname has gotten exactly what he always wanted and found no expected victory; the taste is bitter as ash on his tongue.)

"Kiryuu-sama! A messenger just delivered a note from the Master and Mistress to you!"

Nibbling on a sticky rice dumpling as he eats his lunch in the dining room of the consort's suite, Zero calls out, "Bring it here, please."

One of the younger maids skids through the door, face shining with excitement, and hands the letter over to his new head maid, Sasaki-san, the same elderly vampire who collected him from the Hunter's Association for his wedding. Sasaki uses the envelope to bop the girl on the head and shoo her out the door, then lays it beside his plate.

Zero hides a smile at the maids' antics."Thank you, Sasaki-san. You may return to the anteroom if you like."

"I'll stay in case you need something, Consort."

His entire staff have been replaced since Yuuki discovered their contempt of having a Level D master, either reassigned or fired by the Kurans. Most of them had been assigned to Zero because they were fairly important in the servants' ranks - not important enough to serve the Masters, but distinguished enough to be chosen to serve their consort. Zero's new servants have been chosen entirely based on their attitudes toward him instead of their rank. All female betas - since anyone who could be considered a rival to his alphas is not allowed in his rooms - he can tell they aren't quite as polished or experienced. But his suite is so much more lively with them around! Zero doesn't know what the Kurans told his new staff, but they have been almost terrifyingly attentive of his needs, anticipating his desires almost before he can ask.

He doesn't want for company anymore, either. Zero sees Yuuki and spends time with her every day now, mostly in the library, but sometimes other places like the gardens. They don't talk much; they're both avoiding past wounds between them. But just having someone by his side has given him a more optimistic feeling about his future here.

Every time Zero thinks about how much effort Yuuki has put into making him comfortable, he feels a glowing ember warm in his chest. She had even offered to replace his mother's glass horse, though Zero refused. The horse itself meant nothing; it was its history that made it important, and that could not be remade.
It was nice to have someone show that they cared for you, even if it's just fondness for the memory of a friendship. Their marriage may be empty, but at least it's not unbearable.

The message on heavy cream paper is written in Kuran's distinctive, old-fashioned hand.

"Sasaki-san," Zero calls, "do you know what it means that I'm supposed to dress for dinner? I've been invited to dine with the Kurans tonight."

The normally tranquil maid's eyes widen, and she looks like she has questions she would very much like to ask, if not for professional standards. "I can show you what's appropriate, yes. If I may inquire as to the venue, to better dress you for the weather?"

"I'm not sure," Zero admits, "But I don't think we're leaving the house. I'm meeting them in one of the formal dining rooms, I think? The western dining room."

"The Master and Mistress have never invited you to eat with them before." Sasaki looks curious, but doesn't pry. "That's a good sign, Kiryuu-sama. After you've eaten, we can look through your closet together for something you can wear. I'll do my best, but you really should ask Kuran-hime to buy you the full wardrobe for someone of your rank."

Zero almost chokes around his food. "More? I already have more clothing than I need. And I think every single piece of it is nicer than anything I've ever owned before too."

Sasaki looks amused, and shakes her head. "What you own is hardly adequate, Consort. As daywear it's suitable, but since you were married so quickly there wasn't time to create a full range of clothes. You have no formalwear, unfortunately."

"Kuran-hime has already spent too much money on me - I don't even want to imagine the amount. And I've caused her enough trouble."

"Oh, I doubt Kuran-hime will mind at all," Sasaki's lips twitch like she's trying not to smile. "She is impossibly fond of you. I think she might enjoy it if you imposed on her."

Shaking his head confidently, Zero corrects the maid. "Kuran-hime feels a lingering attachment to me, but that's all. She is kind, and always feels she's guilty for things that aren't her fault. She just feels a sense of responsibility for what happened after I came here."

Sasaki studies him seriously. "I think that Kuran-hime is much more deeply and genuinely attached to you than you believe, Consort Kiryuu. Some might even call that love."

"Well," she claps her hands, "We'll do our best. Please call me before you go to the library this afternoon."

The Hunter stares at his meal, less hungry than he was a moment ago, then he sighs and presses the heels of his hands into his eye sockets. Zero knows better than to delude himself with thoughts like those. Yuuki is kind, and he shouldn't confuse that kindness for something it is not. She has always been in love with Kuran, with Zero second best in her heart. He was glad to have a place in it at all. He doesn't need any more than that, Zero tells himself.

It will take some time before Yuuki becomes accustomed to seeing Zero in an omega's clothes, designed to both highlight and conceal his figure, when everything she saw him wear in their school days were loose casual clothes and uniforms. She seeks him out every day now, but those simpler, comfortable outfits are nothing like what he's wearing tonight. The pureblood is certain she owes both Takuma-kun and whoever dressed him this evening a favor. Or five. Yuuki realizes
that she has cut off halfway through a conversation with her brother, distracted by the sight again, and gives him a quick apology, but can't stop drinking in Zero one more time.

He looks like winter in white and silver, still adolescent slim and all clean lines in an outfit that clings to every part of his body, rather than the heavier coats and layers of loose fabric he's hidden behind so far. When Zero turns to accept a glass of wine, his flaring lower sleeves fall back to expose the bones of his wrist, and his skirts bell out in a graceful arc and twist around his ankles; Yuuki's eyes trace the line of pearl buttons from the nape of his neck to his tailbone. A belt of silver links draws the eye to the way his waist tucks in before his hips curve outward. If that gentle curve gives Yuuki bad thoughts, then not even a sworn celibate would blame her.

See? What did I say? says the alpha. Our omega has such lovely hips - think how easily he'll birth our babies!

It's the sheer incongruity of the picture that fascinates her. This is Zero's body now, the familiar changed into something new and wondrous. She would find Zero attractive no matter what he looked like - it's Zero she wants, not anyone else. Whatever shape either of their bodies took, even when their bedroom roles were reversed, Yuuki wanted him. But now with the extra push from her instincts, that desire seems more intense. Which makes her, in turn, feel guilty, because Zero clearly isn't comfortable with the idea of his body being desirable - perhaps he's not comfortable with his body at all - and doesn't wish to be touched. Which is why Yuuki will look her fill, politely, and content herself with that.

She thinks she understands now what Kaname-sempai feels when he sees her in a nice dress - the desire to surround someone under your protection in the nice things you want to give them. Zero deserves to be dressed like a prince. There are lots of things Zero deserves, but Yuuki will start with the ones he might accept, and work her way up.

Kaname-sempai leads Zero to his chair so they can start dinner, and pulls it out for the omega like a gentleman - Yuuki never thought she'd see the day. This was a fabulous idea. Kaname-sempai was just going to summon Zero to his study and get down to business, but Yuuki insisted that they at least spend some time with their omega that wasn't just about practical things. She hopes Zero enjoys the evening at least a little; Yuuki instructed the kitchen to produce their finest work, but made sure that all the food would be recognizable and fit Zero's tastes. Her husband may think she's coddling Zero, but they need Zero as relaxed as they can get him. No more panic attacks.

Zero is mostly silent, and Yuuki is the one who does the bulk of the work keeping the conversation going, but she has them both in the same room, and they haven't fought yet. They've been relatively civil. That's a win by her standards.

Kaname sips the last of his wine, and unobtrusively gestures for the servants to begin clearing the table; the pureblood ordered them beforehand not to return unless called. Yuuki and Kiryuu are still engaged in conversation about their guardian's latest antics, but Kaname is ready to begin this evening's true purpose.

Yuuki senses his intentions from his watchful silence, and brings their conversation to a close as the last few plates are being cleared. Kiryuu's expression - ever the consummate Hunter - turns observant and shifts between each of the Kurans, studying them in turn.

Once they are alone, Kaname put down his empty glass, and faces Kiryuu from his position at the head of the table. "We did not ask you here tonight solely for your company, Kiryuu."

"I gathered," the Hunter replies dryly.
"Soon, our current arrangement will no longer be sufficient. We have just over nine months until you come back into season in December. By then, we will need to fool our bodies into believing that the three of us are in a committed relationship, so your heat can be induced and the bond can take hold."

"Vampire children are demanding and require high amounts of care; our extended childhood means that a single parent would struggle to raise a child on their own. So your biological imperative is to find a dedicated mate who will provide constant support and care to ensure that your children survive. To begin the bonding process, we need nine months minimum of prolonged exposure to each other's pheromones. Which means that the three of us will be spending a great deal of time together. The question becomes how do we wish to spend that time?"

"We want you to feel like part of the decision making process, Zero," Yuuki tells the Hunter from across the table, who is showing the beginnings of discomfort.

"We will essentially be mimicking the process of an omega's courtship. The nobles dress up the ritual in civilization and tradition, but what a courtship is designed to do is to make sure an omega receives the minimum necessary amount of stimulation to have high odds of bonding a partner."

"It will not just require proximity - but also intimacy. Intimacies of the body, Kiryuu." Kaname meets the Hunter's gaze meaningfully; Kiryuu has gone pale but doesn't shrink back or look away. "An omega's body needs to recognize all parts of their partner's bodies. You will eventually have to bed us, far sooner than nine months from now. We can allow another few months of leeway, but earlier is better because it makes the bonding more certain. In the meantime, seeing one another every day, and spending time near one another is the minimum requirement."

"I thought we might eat together at least once every day, to start with," interrupts Yuuki.

"Eventually scent marking and sleeping in the same bed will also be necessary. After that we will move to blood drinking."

"Okay," Kiryuu concedes, hands clenched in his lap, "We'll do what we have to. Thank you for letting me know."

That's barely an agreement. Kiryuu can do better, so Kaname lets a taunting lilt slip into his voice. "Kissing is the first, most common intimacy used in a vampire courtship. Shall we finish our evening by showing our resolve?" Kaname challenges Kiryuu.

Now Kiryuu is showing off his famous glare, irritation washing away his compliance and docility. "You aren't going to go back on your intentions, are you?"

"I think you're confusing the two of us," Kiryuu shoots back, pushing back his chair and getting to his feet. "Fine. I'll kiss Yuuki first."

The Kurans exchange glances. "Actually," Yuuki says carefully, "You'll have to kiss Kaname-sempai first. Bloodbonded alphas can coexist because their instincts have decided a stable pecking order between them, otherwise they would kill each other when the omega they're sharing went into heat. Kaname-sama is the stronger, more senior alpha between us, so my instincts defer to him when things like this happen."

Kiryuu is back to fear again, eyeing Kaname and licking dry lips before asking, "Is that true for...other things as well?"

"You mean will I have to be the first one to sleep with you?" Kaname replies, enjoying the Hunter's
"But don't worry about that now!" Yuuki interjects hastily, "That's when you're ready, and a long
time from now. Kaname won't hurt you and I'll be there too!"

"In fact, why don't we agree now that our level of intimacy will move forward only when all three
of us are together," his wife says. "I want all of us to be comfortable with one another, and favoring
one partner isn't fair. I don't want anyone to think that they're cheating or being cheated on."

That stipulation, Kaname knows, is his wife's attempt at reassuring him that their relationship won't
be pushed aside in Kiryuu's favor.

"Fine," says Kiryuu, arms crossed protectively over himself.

"I have no objection," Kaname agrees smoothly. He certainly doesn't want to court Zero without
Yuuki acting as a buffer between them.

"Back to the original matter. I trust you haven't decided to back out, Kiryuu?" Kaname asks, rising
from his seat, and moving toward the Hunter; Kiryuu scowls in warning.

Kaname does not ask this on a whim; the Kurans decided beforehand that they would try to receive
this small gesture from Kiryuu, if he was willing. If they needed to work up to the vital physical
aspects of their relationship, as their disastrous wedding night suggested, then the purebloods
needed to start early and small. Kissing is ubiquitous during a formal courtship, the easiest, first
step to building a bond while still weeding out suitors, and this was the place they would start.

"If you would come here, Kiryuu," the pureblood gestures. "We'll need to be a little closer than
this."

The Hunter just stands in the dining room, without moving, confusion poorly hidden behind his
anger. Kiryuu clearly has no idea what to do with his limbs, so the pureblood sighs and goes to him
instead, taking one of Kiryuu's hands and placing it on his shoulder; the white of his clothing
makes a pleasing contrast to the black of Kaname's suit. Kaname can feel the anxiety radiating
from Kiryuu's body through his tight grip.

Then he takes the Hunter's jaw in one hand, because if Kiryuu is as inexperienced as he seems,
Kaname will need to make sure they don't mash their noses together instead of kiss. Kaname leans
forward, close enough to catch the entrancing scent of omega; Kiryuu is stiff under his hands, tense
with discomfort. His whole body leans slightly away and his eyes are closed. The pureblood guides
their mouths together in a gentle press of lips - the chaste kisses of an omega's early courtship, still
soft and casual.

After a few moments to appreciate the sensation, Kaname draws back. Those lavender eyes are
staring up at him, unimpressed. *Is that it, vampire? Is that all you can do? You're not as amazing
as you think you are.*

Well, you asked for this, little Hunter.

When Kiryuu opens his mouth to make an insolent remark, Kaname takes advantage and attacks.

The second kiss Kaname gives the Hunter is searing, hungry, showing every bit the nature of a
pureblood to conquer and consume, and so is the third and fourth and fifth. Kiryuu makes little
prey noises and gasps for breath, too startled to gather his wits and bite Kaname. His fangs descend
and the pureblood nicks his tongue so the kisses taste faintly of blood, further distracting Kiryuu
from his proper horrified reaction. When Kaname slips his tongue between pink lips, Kiryuu's grip
on his shoulder is the only thing keeping the Hunter standing on shaky legs.

Drawing back, finally satisfied by reddened lips and wide lavender eyes, Kaname spills Kiryuu into Yuuki's waiting arms. His wife scolds him with a pointed look - this was definitely not what they planned - but wastes no time in taking her turn, bending Kiryuu's head down and starting with harder, deeper kisses, then returning to gentling and calming kisses as she coaxes the Hunter back to coherency, as careful as Kaname was to keep her hands above his chest. Kaname has taught his wife everything she knows about kissing, and he is a very good teacher; Kiryuu won't know what hit him.

With one last press of her lips, Yuuki guides Kiryuu into his chair; the Hunter collapses into the cushion, diamond Hoseki askew on his forehead, still a little breathless and with eyes the size of dinner plates. The Kurans can't hide the slightly predatory self-satisfaction of seeing their omega in such a pleasing state, their alpha instincts fully awoken and prowling.

"You cheated," the Hunter accuses Kaname, furiously blushing.

The pureblood smirks, licking the taste of wine and blood off his lips. "I think you enjoyed it."

When his driver opens the car door to the backseat, Zero hears a very welcome voice.

"Zero-kun! It's so good to see you. I'm glad you could come." Takuma smiles and gestures around them. "Welcome to the Ichijo Estate. I hope your journey went well?"

"Takuma-sempai, thank you for inviting me," Zero replies. "Everything was fine - I was glad to leave Rosehill for a while."

"Come in, there are some friends of mine I'd like you to meet. We waited to have tea until you arrived."

"I thought you would live at the Shouto estate," Zero confesses, studying the house and the grounds as they walk side by side up the drive.

"I do, but I conduct business and other public matters at the Ichijo estate. Isaya likes our privacy, and I like being able to keep those things separate."

The Ichijo estate, built in a style that strictly adheres to the principles of traditional architecture, is not as grand as Rosehill, but Zero suspects nothing in the vampire world will be - it's generally frowned upon to have a nicer house than the king. Somehow, Kuran's raven has beaten Zero to the estate; Zero glares at it where it's perched on a low branch of an ornamental tree by the entryway.

Zero brushes his fingers over his lips once they're inside, fighting his embarrassed impulse to blush, as he has every time he remembers what the Kurans did to him after their first dinner together. Kissing, Zero had discovered, did not frighten him the way the mere thought of anything else intimate did. No one kissed him in his nightmares - it didn't humble him or hurt him. Zero had seen his parents exchange kisses often in his childhood, and pressed childish familial kisses onto his brother's cheek. Kissing was for people who loved one another, and he had harmlessly imagined himself kissing his future spouse in his young daydreams of love and family.

The Hunter scowls a little. That didn't mean he wanted Kuran kissing him whenever he felt like it! And Kuran had cheated! Zero hadn't been ready! That was why he'd been so flustered and made what he was sure was a stupid face, if it gave Kuran that conceited smile. Next time he wouldn't let that bastard pureblood do as he pleased!
...but it had been a little nice, to kiss Yuuki. She could kiss him again, if she wanted to.

"You must be thinking about something good, to be blushing so hard," Takuma teases him, and Zero snaps his head up, furiously trying to lower his flush.

"Sorry, Takuma-sempai," Zero apologizes once his face cools.

The blond laughs, "No, it's fine. We've all been there before, wrapped up in a new partner. I'm just glad to see you're less troubled than you were before your wedding.

Zero's mood falls. The Kurans kissed him because they had to, not because they wanted to. Zero needs to remember that. This is not his daydream. In reality, he doesn't mean anything to them; he's the unnecessary third in their relationship.

But he's not about to trouble Takuma with those thoughts, so Zero says nothing in reply, and keeps following the elder omega through the halls of the house, until they come to what must be the largest tea room in the back of the house. Takuma slides open the paper doors, and smiles reassuringly while gesturing for Zero to follow him inside.

The four omegas inside, kneeling on cushions around a low table filled with pastries and tea supplies, look up at the newcomers. Zero recognizes Aido Madoka, who gives a little wave and smile in a high-waisted pink chiffon gown that makes her look like a fairy princess, but the other three are new to him.

"Everyone, this is Kiryuu Zero, the Kurans' Consort," Takuma introduces him.

"Zero-kun, you've already met Aido-san. Next to her is Takiyama-san," Takuma says, and the woman to Aido's left, also in western style clothes with puffy sleeves and full skirts, smiles broadly and nods her head. "She's Touya-san's maternal grandmother."

Zero can't see much of resemblance, with Takiyama's brown hair and relaxed, welcoming air, except for her eyes - perhaps Touya takes after her father's side?

The omega sitting on Takiyama's left presents a very different image, in his patterned black silk robes that don't look out of place in the tearoom with its tatami mats and views of cherry trees. His black hair is fashioned in a complex knotted updo, decorated with chiming hair sticks, and must be quite long when let down. Everything about him screams elegance and dignity, and the weight of great age.

"This is Azai-san," Takuma tells him in a respectful tone. "He bore Aido Madoka-san, Kain-san's father, and Souen-san's mother, which makes them cousins."

"Technically they are half-cousins, since Madoka and Takehiko were sired by a different alpha than Izumi," Azai's smooth voice gently corrects.

Takuma bows his head in acknowledgement, and gestures to the final omega on the far right, in a long, loose tunic and skirt, with her black hair in a multitude of tiny braids. She is one of the most unusual nobles Zero has ever seen because of her dark golden, almost brown skin.

"This is Consort Shoshana; her bondmate is Ouri-sama. Other than the two of us, she is the
only pureblood's consort currently alive."

The omega inclines her head, her fierce dark gaze enhancing the impression lent by her thin, sharp cheekbones and aquiline nose.

If Azai was of great age, this woman seemed ancient even in comparison. While she appeared physically in perfect health, she seemed also somehow transparent, insubstantial, and fragile.

"Now, shall we have our tea?" asks Takiyama, and after seating Zero next to Consort Shoshana, Takuma goes about serving each of his guests.

The talk is light and casual as the omegas enjoy the good green tea offered by Takuma. Zero learns that he and Takuma are the youngest in the room by far, with Takiyama over a thousand years old, and Azai over two thousand, probably reaching the last half-century of a noble's lifespan.

Later, Takuma tells him in confidence that Consort Shoshana, who watches attentively but speaks little, is believed to be over five thousand years old, and is the oldest living non-pureblood. No one knows how she came to live twice as long as her natural lifespan, but everyone suspects that Ouri had something to do with it. Only a pureblood knows the full extent of their powers, and purebloods keep the secrets of their kind.

Ouri is engaged to Shirabuki Sara, Takuma also tells him, but everyone knows the match will never happen. The only reason he is still alive and even vaguely engaged in present events is his consort, to whom he is completely devoted. When Shoshana finally dies, Ouri will likely follow or wait for death to come to him.

Zero, who is quite sure he is making a terrible impression, manages to put his foot in his mouth not once, but three times. First he asks Takiyama if her granddaughter takes after her father's side, and discovers that no, Touya takes after her other, alpha mother's side; the Hunter apologizes repeatedly while Takiyama laughs and waves away his attempts.

Then he inquires if having two alphas at once is unusual, and is surprised to find that it's quite normal, though in the past few hundred years it's become more common to take a single partner for the first bonding. Bonding more alphas gives your children that many times more resources, and keeps the gene pool larger. Takiyama also has two alphas, while Azai has three, and claims he has bonded a pair of alphas twice before.

Thoroughly puzzled, since bonds with an alpha were only broken by death, Zero makes the mistake of asking how that was possible. The average age difference in an alpha-omega bonding, Aido tells him, is at least 1,500 years - Azai outlived his first four alphas and is on his third set of bondmates, notoriously not marrying a single one. Even Aido Madoka is married to a man 1,000 years older than her.

Zero embarasses himself again when he discovers that Azai has over a hundred children, and can't disguise his open-mouthed, horrified shock.

"We live longer than any other vampire except purebloods. To be an omega is to influence the entire vampire race and bend the arc of history in your favor. We have our power too," Azai tells him.

Thankfully, the nobles seem more amused than angered by his ignorance, and talk turns to news from their everyday lives. They seem familiar with one another, and hold little parties like this regularly, from the sound of it.
Zero listens and nibbles on teacakes, gradually realizing that what he is witnessing is not some harmless gossip session. Aido mentions a problem with a bureaucrat obstructing a patent for the new blood tablets; Azai says he will speak to one of his sons in government. Takiyama worries about some distressing rumors of the Senate's movements; Takuma replies that he is holding a meeting in a few days with the Council. They are planning, under the guise of a few omegas holding a harmless tea party. These are the most powerful and influential omegas in Kuran's circle of influence - and they have invited Zero to join them.

"I think you may have the wrong impression," he finally speaks up when the conversation pauses. The other omegas look puzzled, and the Hunter tries to explain, "I'm not like all of you - I don't know anything at all, and I don't have any power. I don't know how I can help you."

Takuma puts down his teacup. "Zero-kun, four times a year all of the omegas come together at a special soiree, only for us, to exchange news and see one another. You aren't expected to come to the spring gathering, but you will have to attend the summer gathering. No one is absent without a very good excuse."

Aido Madoka examines her tea and remarks, "The omega gatherings are less a party than one long political powerplay, a constant maneuvering for status and influence. If you don't know anything now, then we'll have to teach you."

"Yes, but how does that make a difference? They can't expect much from me. I'm more a Hunter than I am a vampire."

Azai tells him, "Vampires maintain a relative peace between predators by insisting on a strict system of ranks. By custom, omegas stand at the top of vampire society, but we have our own shifting hierarchy between us, measured in a complex calculus of age, ability, wealth, influence, personal power, and the power of our alphas and children. There is, however, an exception to that rule: a pureblood's consort outranks all other omegas."

"And within the consorts," Takuma continues, "our rank depends on the age of our bondmate. So Consort Shoshana is considered of higher rank than me, because Ouri-sama is much older than Isaya."

"In practice, Consort Ichijo and I are treated nearly equal, because of his personal power," the other consort speaks up in her low voice.

"So I rank below Takuma-kun," Zero reasons.

The blond shakes his head. "Actually, Zero-kun, there is one more exception to the rule. A royal consort cannot be of lower rank than their fellows. And even without their title, the Kuran family remains the bloodline of kings."

"By marrying the Kurans, you are now the most powerful omega in the vampire world."

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Am I sure I want to do this? Yuuki asks herself one more time, looking out across the grounds from the bank of windows in the archive of the state palace.

If she wants to carry out her plan, the pureblood may not have another perfect opportunity. Zero has left Rosehill for the first time since he arrived, to meet Takuma-kun; Kaname-sama is tending to their holdings at the business offices. And most importantly, her target's visit coincides with her spouses' absences, which is vital to maintain secrecy. If she wants to keep her efforts unnoticed for as long as possible, the first thing onii-sama will notice is any changes in her schedule.
So this is it. What does she chose?

*if you want to protect both the people you love, you must ask the questions you've held silently in your heart.* The Ancestor of the Hunters warned her, and now Yuuki has experienced it first hand: ignorance is dangerous. Her ignorance allowed Zero's pain. Kaname's secrets, Yuuki senses, are many times deeper and more damaging

This is Kaname's house, and his servants, and his world. But Yuuki needs to make this world hers too if she is going to protect Zero the way she intends to.

She's still wracked with guilt. It feels like she's betraying her husband, because she doesn't trust him to tell her his secrets when he's ready. But knowing Kaname-sama's secrets will allow her to protect him too.

Yuuki knows she decided on this course of action the moment she began planning it in earnest. She's just having doubts and second thoughts. It's time for her to look for answers.

"Yuuki-hime! Are you ready for today's lesson?"

Yuuki turns away from the window and manages a tight smile. "Hanabusa-senpai. Actually, I thought we might do something a little different today."

The blond nods furiously, always ecstatic at being useful. "Of course! Why don't we sit down."

Yuuki takes a seat opposite the noble at their usual study table, where Aido teaches the pureblood more about the long and complex history of the vampires. Aido was the perfect choice for this. He's known Kaname-sama for far longer than Yuuki has, and along with Kain acts as her brother's right hand. With his energetic, sometimes childish antics it was easy to overlook his sharp intelligence, deep curiosity and observant nature.

"What did you have in mind?" Aido enthuses, flipping through the pages of a book while he leans his head on one hand.

Yuuki takes one last deep breath, and lets the mantle of the Kuran princess fall over her shoulders.

"First, you need to to agree to my terms."

"Naturally, Yuuki-hime." Aido is looking at her now, distracted from his book by her strange request.

"You will have your memories of this conversation erased, and even your memory of my request erased. I need some information. You may refuse to provide it, either now or once you hear what I want to know. If you agree, I will use my power of command to order you to tell only the truth, or things you suspect are the truth. Whatever you chose, I will still remove your memories. Can you abide by those terms, Aido Hanabusa?"

The noble gulps, but tells her, "I respect you, Yuuki-hime, and I believe you would not ask me without a good reason. May I ask what you want to know from me?"

Yuuki sits back in her chair, the line of her shoulders eased by his cooperation.

"I want to know about Kaname."
Consider for a moment all the things Kaname probably hasn't told Yuuki, and how blissfully ignorant he is of how that might change.

They don't count as OCs if a character must logically exist in canon, right? And I needed a reason for why Ouri is still alive, so…*cough cough*

Don't worry about the long timeline; there will be lots of time glossed over and only the important events will be focused on.

Kaname and Yuuki have accidentally stumbled on the one form of intimacy (besides hugs) that Zero will actually accept because A) kissing has only positive associations for him and B) it doesn't trigger his dysphoria and disassociation from his body.

To reviewer 'A Guest', who asked for some refs for Zero's clothes...I actually don't have any. I can't find anything that fits the image in my head for Zero. As a male omega, Zero's clothing straddles the line between feminine and masculine, which is why I avoid calling them dresses and go for for neutral words. Zero tends to go for multiple piece outfits (overcoat with stupid long sleeves, ankle length tunic, pants/leggings) that are as masculine as he is allowed to get, but he has plenty of things that don't fit that description. Clothing for an omega is really flexible, and that's on purpose. Vampires live thousands of years, and fashion changes constantly. And vampires live all over the world. So there's a whole range of clothing in many cultures that would be appropriate for an omega to wear, as long as they satisfy certain criteria (Hoseki, skirts down to the ankle, sleeves reaching or past the tips of the fingers, and a neckline that at least touches the collarbone). There isn't even a basic garment. And omegas are supposed to show themselves off, so their wardrobes can include many different styles, like Zero's does. The inspiration was clothing from the Heian Period of Japan,specifically the junihitoe, if that helps.
A note regarding Azai's children: An omega may have a lot of children, but noble rank vampires live to be really, really old, so it works out to not be as many as you think. I don't think we know exactly how long nobles live in cannon, but easily a thousand years, and less than Isaya's three thousand is the range I figured out, so I settled on about 2,000, with omegas living slightly longer at 2,500-ish. Azai is reaching the end of his lifespan and only has a few more centuries left before he dies; even with over a hundred children, that's still only one child every 15-20 years.

Kaname didn't punish the servants more harshly because he doesn't like Zero, and also because he knows the situation was somewhat his fault. It serves his purposes to be seen as a more lenient sort of pureblood to his followers. Also Yuuki would definitely not let him kill anyone.

In my story, bloodbonds don't work like you may have read in other fanfictions. They have nothing to do with regular blood drinking. They are only created by completing a ritual between two vampires that involves a spell and an exchange of blood, and cannot be created unwillingly. They are modeled on the bond between alpha and omega, but work very differently. The bond's powers aren't impressive; it only allows the transfer of emotions and the ability to find one's partner wherever they are. It's always performed between two alphas who marry or are bonding the same omega, to mark each other as partners rather than rivals, because it establishes a permanent hierarchy between them so they don't fight. So Zero and the Kurans will form an alpha-omega bond, not a bloodbond.

Yuuki phrased her command to Aido in a deliberately broad fashion, and Aido tells her *everything* he knows, or suspects he knows. In some ways, Aido's stories and theories only confirm suspicions she already held. Kaname-sempai was kind and gentle to her, but with others he was often cold and strict, and occasionally cruel. He manipulated people in ways Yuuki was not comfortable with and sometimes found horrifying.

Aido spills almost forty years of plots and plans he and the rest of Kaname's inner circle assisted in executing, much of which Aido had pieced together only after Kaname-sempai finished his games. Her brother had destroyed people's lives and reputations for the sake of his goals, and there had been casualties along the way - people had died because of his actions. All of this Yuuki had guessed, but to hear the count laid out before her is a different thing - heavier to bear when you knew the full cost. But she's already seen him kill in front of her, and loved him no less; Yuuki has accepted that part of her husband.

But Aido tells her the cost could have been worse - if Kaname-sempai had cared for nobody and nothing, then he would have abandoned many of the people he used in his schemes, instead of planning for them to survive and be spared. He may use people, but he wasn't heartless. He
avoided inflicting unnecessary death, pain or suffering, unless he disliked them.

Kaname-sempai did not care about the average person, simply because they were a person. He was indifferent to any individual until he came to like them or be responsible for them, and then he would protect them. He was vindictive and sometimes petty, and had done terrible things, but he was not blind to those truths.

Aido works backward in time, speaking for hours, and Yuuki sits and forces herself to remember every single word. When she knows everything she will decide how she feels and what she wants to do. Before she even began, she knew that whatever she learned would never make her stop loving Kaname, but it had the possibility of damaging their relationship for a very long time.

Then, when they reach the events of their exit from Cross Academy, Aido stops.

"I think it will make more sense if I start from the beginning."

"Then tell me how you think it should go," Yuuki gives him permission.

It's fascinating to hear about Aido's childhood meeting with her brother; she's secure enough in her relationship not to be jealous of his childhood crush on her husband. But it's sad to hear how much his personality changed from before their parents' death compared to after it. Listening to some of the things Aido suspects her brother endured pains her heart.

But Aido's stories of Cross Academy are the worst, because he tells her about what Kaname-sempai probably did to Zero. Her brother had enjoyed subtly tormenting Zero with his vampire status before the night class ever realized what Zero was; Aido attributes it to jealousy over his closeness with Yuuki. Aido is nearly certain that Kaname was using Zero as one of his pawns in the plan to protect Yuuki, because of Kaname's interference through Seiren when they found Shizuka's body.

Zero hated his rival enough that he may very well have known it. Zero may hate purebloods, but hate was an unnatural emotion for him - yet he held a special antipathy for her brother.

And Kaname had killed Hio Shizuka. Killed her so he could drink her blood and absorb her power. That one fact makes Yuuki more horrified and angry than anything she has learned so far, because the Senate had believed Zero killed the mad pureblood instead, and they tried to kill him for it. Zero could have died. And Kaname had been responsible the whole time! He had protected Zero not out of compassion and a desire to preserve the academy's peace, but because he knew for a fact that Zero was innocent. Aido thinks if Zero had not been loved by Yuuki, Kaname might have let him die.

Kaname had known what really happened, and refused to acknowledge the truth when Yuuki tried to tell him. Not just that; he had treated her like a child insisting that an imaginary story was real, when he knew perfectly well she was right. At the time, she had felt insultingly patronized. She had refused to speak with him again until he admitted that Zero had not killed Hio - and he had already known! Kaname had ruthlessly used Zero to protect himself, and to protect her. How did Zero even stand the sight of them?

"I think that there's something else Kaname-sama is hiding," Aido says, staring contemplatively at his joined hands on the tabletop. Aido had treated their talk more like a welcomed confession and brainstorming session than an order from a pureblood, voluntarily offering many speculations and conclusions not covered by her order.

"Kaname-sama once told me, after your parents were murdered, 'I thought for a moment I would
have to kill you, if you knew something else.' I always thought that the 'something else' was the secret of their murder, but why would he have to kill me for knowing that? He willingly told me, years later in Cross Academy. I think that there's a secret Kaname hasn't told anyone, and that he's been keeping for a long time."

"It's just - there are inconsistencies in his behavior, sometimes. Times when I can't predict how he'll act, times when his actions make no sense to me, because he is motivated by some factor that I don't know yet. People call me a genius, but I've never been also to understand Kaname-sama's thoughts. He's a prodigy that surpasses anything I can achieve, to be so skilled at such a young age. But I should still be able to predict some of his actions. So why is he so unfathomable?"

"And there are inconsistencies in Kuran Rido's death too. Why did Kaname-sama not simply kill the man himself? I know he was powerful enough to do it. Hio Shizuka wished to kill him too - why not just work together and help her? Why did he need her power?"

"Somehow, he couldn't do it himself. But I don't understand why. There's something I'm missing, and I can't explain it with the facts I have. But I am certain that he couldn't kill Kuran Rido. Kaname-sama would never risk your life unless he had no other choice. And I think that he needed Kiryuu as his executioner. He allowed Kiryuu more leeway than anyone but you; Kaname-sama hated him, but still protected him. He brought all of the players in Hio Shizuka's death together on purpose - she was meant to stabilize Zero before she died, but that failed. He wanted - needed - to make Kiryuu into a Hunter powerful enough to challenge a pureblood, because any vampire would be subject to a pureblood's command."

Aido looks away from Yuuki. "I don't know...how far he might have gone to achieve that. What he might have done to shape Kiryuu into what he needed."

Yuuki's expression must give her away her deep anger at the idea, because the noble frantically holds up his hands and shakes his head. "I don't know for sure that the two are connected, either. I'm only guessing at this point."

The noble looks down at his watch. "We've run out of time, and that's all that I know, Yuuki-hime. I swear it. When you alter my memories, change the story to be how I let you have a self-study session because you were too distracted to focus. Kaname-sama will believe that whatever upset you happened before you came to see me; it'll throw the trail off for a little while."

"Why are you helping me?" Yuuki asks.

"Because you deserved to know all this. You deserved to have your husband tell you these things a long time ago. I'm just setting things right."

It's too much, all at once. She's going to have to look her brother in the eye at dinner. When did you start keeping things from me, Yuuki? But she's too hurt and angry right now to feel guilty about what she's done.

"I don't think that Kaname-sama has told anyone in his inner circle whatever it is he's hiding. The only person I can think of who might know more is Takuma-kun; he's always been Kaname-sama's confidante and closest person, after you. Vice dorm president was never as deferential as the rest of us, and Kaname-sama often discussed things with him alone. If Kaname-sama's instincts had not proved unable to see him in a sexual light, there would be rumors about the nature of their relationship, now that Takuma's bonded. But there's no way you can question him and erase his memories - he's Shouto-sama's bondmate. Takuma-kun is nearly impossible to get to now...I'm sorry I can't be more helpful."
"That's alright. You've done so much for me already. Thank you for everything, Aido-sempai," Yuuki tells him earnestly, and then lets him smile at her for a moment before she reaches out to touch his forehead, and forces him to forget.

This was not how she expected things to end - with answers, but just as many questions. She can't confront Kaname until she knows the full extent of his secrets, after she's either confirmed or rejected Aido's suspicions, because her husband will bury whatever she hasn't found. But she can't answer that question without more information, and asking Takuma directly carries the risk he might tell Kaname; since he's pureblood's bondmate, she can't erase his memories without making an enemy of Shouto. Yuuki's also reluctant because she would be horrified to have another person do that to Zero. But Aido's right - Takuma is her best bet. She's going to have to think about what her next move will be.

At dinner afterwards, Yuuki makes sure that she acts as normal as she can, even though her thoughts are still swarming like a nest of hornets. She can't afford Kaname finding out what she'd done until she knows more, and she needs time to plan her next move since she's hit a wall.

The pureblood keeps herself occupied questioning Zero about this outing with Takuma today; it's good to hear he's made some possible friends, and it sounds like he's been invited to regularly attend their little group.

Can she even trust Kaname with Zero's well-being? Her husband hates Zero, and now she knows that Kaname's hate has not been idle or without consequence. When she thought she was protecting Zero, had she instead exposed him to the greater danger? No; Kaname has protected Zero's life because of Yuuki. That imposes limits for how he may use Zero.

At least now she knows she was right - Kaname's secrets are unspeakably dangerous. If anyone knew that Kaname had killed another pureblood, even he might not be forgiven. Blaming Zero had been the course that steered danger away from him; even if she wanted to tell the truth, she can't without the Council and Senate asking risky questions about the real killer.

Kaname tries once or twice to catch her attention, but Yuuki just plunges back into occupying herself with Zero. She knows she is acting cold to him, but Yuuki can't help but want Kaname to feel as bad as she does right now, just a little bit.

"Are you troubled, Yuuki?" Kaname asks his wife, once Kiryuu has been sent off to bed after being granted his goodnight kiss - Yuuki insisted that they continue the tradition every night. Only the chaste kind, after Kiryuu protested and Yuuki made Kaname promise. Kaname allows it because Kiryuu's disgust is palpable every time they touch, and the amusement is worth the distasteful necessary kiss.

"Onii-sama, is there anything you'd like to tell me?"

The pureblood shuffles through his most recent misdeeds and secrets. Has he done something to Kiryuu that Yuuki doesn't like?

"No, Yuuki. Not really. Is this about Kiryuu?" Kaname asks, and thinks that he sees disappointment flash in her features for a second, but his wife has become harder to read after years spent observing and copying his skills.

"I see. Never mind then. I think that I'll head to bed."

"Will you come by my suite later tonight," he asks, lowering his voice to a deep rumble.
"No," Yuuki retorts angrily, and shuts the door with a snap.

"Are you sure you're finished, Consort Kiryuu? You didn't eat very much," remarks the maid who has come to take his dishes.

"I don't usually eat very much," he reassures her. "I'm trying to keep in shape now that I don't get as much exercise."

"Do you not like sweets either? Kuran-hime is very fond of them, but I've never seen you eat more than a bite of dessert."

"No, I don't really have much of a sweet tooth."

Zero's stomach feels empty, but it's a necessary pain if his plan is going to be successful.

The Hunter had realized, after speaking to the other omegas at Takuma's estate, that he cannot allow himself to have a baby. The idea of himself as the most powerful omega is insane. He's going to have all the other omegas after him because of his position, trying to pull him down and take his place - and Zero doesn't even want the power! The bloodsuckers are welcome to it!

And Zero didn't even know such a position existed, let alone the complicated reasoning that bestowed that rank on his shoulders. Zero may have entered the night of the vampire with his eyes open, but he's still so ignorant of how this new world works - how is he supposed to raise a vampire child when he cannot teach them how to survive as a vampire?

A child who would be called Kiryuu, not Kuran. Though Zero is married to the Kurans, his children sired by them will carry his name, not theirs. Only a pureblooded child was allowed the name of a pureblood family - mixed blooded children are not even granted that connection, shown their separate nature and disavowed by the denial of their father's name, subjected to inequality from the very beginning of their lives. And when his children married, they would take the name of their spouse, unless they beat the one-in-forty odds and presented as an alpha; the Kiryuu bloodline would be overwritten by others, his family name erased for a second time among the vampires, after being extinguished among the Hunters.

In the eyes of society, Zero's children would always be inferior to any pureblood children produced by Kaname and Yuuki. Zero could be pushed aside like Aileya had been, when her alphas had their perfect pureblooded family. Zero didn't care about his own fate, but what would happen to his children then? Would they be made to feel second-rate and worthless beside their siblings, because of their Level D mother?

And what kind of life could he promise them? Zero has learned just what the vampires think of someone like him - their Hunter enemy and a Turned ex-human Level D with dirty blood - and how far they will go to let him know about it. What kind of cruelty would they inflict on his child, if they hated him so much for his filthy, tainted blood? Just the idea gives him the urge to rage and cry.

Yuuki would try to protect his child, but Kuran hated Zero, and Zero couldn't even protect himself from being used by the pureblood. What if Kuran made Zero's child into another one of his pawns, or threatened to hurt them because Zero was their parent? The Hunter refuses to subject his child to a miserable, painful life, so his only choice is to never allow it to happen.

But Zero can't just refuse to spend his heat with the Kurans; he's still bound to complete the terms of the treaty because of his duty as a Hunter. By any means necessary, Zero needs to force his body
into a fallow heat, which would solve both problems at once - he could bond the Kurans while avoiding a pregnancy. After the problem of his bonding is resolved, the Kurans can go back to loving each other, and Zero will refuse to spend another heat in their bed.

The public will crucify him, of course. There is no greater humiliation for an omega than barrenness, or to be put aside by their alphas as Consort Aileya once was. But Zero will gladly take their scorn and hatred as a worthless failure of an omega before he will allow any harm to come to his children, even if that means they will never exist.

So Zero had searched the library for a solution, and found a glimmer of a chance. Female human athletes sometimes stopped having a period if they trained too much, ate too little and had low body fat, meaning they couldn't get pregnant. Zero can imitate this formula, but he can't push his body to the extreme - omegas would not enter a heat if their bodies were in bad condition. The Hunter needs to go into heat, just not become fertile.

Zero can see the slim possibility here. If he can keep himself in good enough condition to trigger a heat, but lean enough that his body doesn't want to waste an egg on a probable failure, than he may be able to artificially produce a fallow heat cycle. He'll satisfy the treaty, be out of danger from other alphas once he's bonded, and keep himself from conceiving. It's a long shot, but it's all he has.

So for the past few weeks, the Hunter has been gradually increasing his training and conditioning, and decreasing his food intake. Zero has gained some weight since he presented and ate normal people's food, which he needs to drop. The Hunter knows he's walking a more dangerous edge now; he must guess his condition instead of measure it precisely.

It's also more difficult to control his diet now, compared to when he lived alone and made his own meals. If he doesn't eat around the Kurans, they might get suspicious and find out what he's planning, so his only choice is to eat normally when he's with them, and eat almost nothing when he eats alone. It's not a good solution, and a messy one, but he can't afford mistakes.

He's also decreased his blood tablet intake again. Blood is even more important than food to a vampire's health, so he needs to lessen that dependence as well. His hands are a little shakier, but nothing he can't compensate for.

It's not like he's starving himself. Zero just needs to make sure he's balanced on the edge between healthy and underweight, that's all.

(It's so satisfying to punish his body for what it did to him, and it feels good to feel in control of his body again.)

"What is this about, Kuran?" demands the Hunter as he stands insolently in Kaname's study and presumes to order a pureblood to obey.

It's been nearly two weeks. The servants are starting to become a little afraid of Kaname's heavy aura.

Yuuki won't look at him. She won't spend time with him, except for their normal meals and public appearances. She's aloof, she's distant, she holds herself apart from him. She refuses to confide in him, or tell him what's wrong.

She's shut tight her side of their bloodblood, so not a trickle of emotion seeps through; in desperation, Kaname has opened his end wide, in an ironic reversal of their normal situation.

She won't feed from him, and she's utterly refused to let him drink from her; they've both resorted
to blood tablets after years of nothing but drinking from each other.

Her distance hurts; every second drives him into a greater fear that he is losing her. She's slipping out of his fingers, and he doesn't even know why.

Except he does know why. Kiryuu is the cause of this - the rotten Level D has said something to her, done something to separate them on purpose.

And Kaname will know what.

The Hunter denies everything, of course.

Still feeling out the restrictions of his alpha instincts when dealing with Kiryuu's omega status, Kaname is delighted to find they don't even stir while he and Kiryuu argue. The alpha instincts are sensitive to anything threatening Kiryuu, and when he's in distress, fear, or pain they will respond strongly, but Kaname is free to express his dislike and anger with Kiryuu as he wishes.

Kaname tries to wear the ex-human down for over an hour, but the stubborn cur still insists that he doesn't know what's going on, and that he has nothing to do with it.

"Why don't you ask yourself what you've done to make Yuuki angry, pureblood, instead of dragging me in here?" the Level D spits, and Kaname has to remind himself very firmly that tearing him apart into gobbets of flesh would make Yuuki angrier at him.

"Fine then. Get out," the pureblood hisses, but then he pauses. Since this is Kiryuu's fault, the ex-human can offer Kaname a little compensation. A smile cuts across his face. Yes, the Hunter owes them his body, after all. And Yuuki is out this afternoon, so...

"On second thought, come here."

Kiryuu considers disobedience for a second, thinks better of it, and inches closer, intractable and glaring angrily at the pureblood. "What do you want now, Kuran."

"Your blood," Kaname replies with relish. "You might as well serve some use in my house, if you're going to be an expensive, unwanted parasite here for the rest of your life."

Kiryuu knows as well as Kaname does that the pureblood could bend him over his desk right now and rape him while he screamed, and no one in this entire house would stop it, because Kiryuu's body is the property of the Kurans now.

So the Hunter comes to stand on the other side of Kaname's desk, grinding his teeth and avoiding Kaname's eyes. As enjoyable as this is, Kaname really is hungry, and blood tablets don't sound appetizing when he has a squirming prey he can drain instead. He grips Kiryuu by the shoulders, so he can immobilize the ex-human while touching him as little as possible.

The pureblood isn't tender, and he doesn't bother preparing the bite area with more than a single lap of his tongue, sinking his fangs into the Hunter's throat without warning, deeply enough to puncture the cartilage of his wind pipe. Without good preparation, Kiryuu must be in considerable pain, but other than the crinkled corners of his eyes, the Hunter bears up and keeps it hidden.

Kaname loses himself in the hot heat, gives in to his hunger for that spicy sweet, unique taste - Kiryuu may not be as satisfying as Yuuki, but his Hunter blood is richer than any human or vampire Kaname has ever sampled. Without having to share with Yuuki, Kaname can drink twice as much as he did the first time and satisfy his appetite - so he does, time washing out under a rush of pleasure released by the act of feeding.
When the pureblood roughly withdraws his fangs, he pushes the ex-human away from him, displeased by their closeness. The silver-haired Hunter stumbles back against Kaname's massive oak desk, his knees buckle, and he slides down the side to fall in a heap on the carpets. The Hunter's gaze is unfocused and wandering, unable to alight long on any one object after his sudden bloodloss. Kaname thought he took less than that, though he can admit that much of the feeding passed in a thoughtless, blood-fueled haze.

After consuming so much blood, his hunger retreats, and the pureblood feels both a renewed sense of clarity, his mind temporarily free of his muddled anxiety and worry, and an underlying unfocused, dizzied feeling.

For a vampire, human recreational drugs are ineffectual, but drinking blood causes a similar natural euphoric high after a feeding, the body's way of rewarding the vampire and encouraging it feed again soon. The blood of an omega has an even more narcotic quality when drunk by an alpha, suffused with chemical compounds to hook and ensnare a protector after luring them in with their intoxicating scent. Kaname, especially susceptible as a pureblood, is past buzzed and quite drugged after drinking over a quarter of Kiryuu's blood, his natural inhibitions now loosened in the same way as a human consuming mind-altering substances.

That was not treating mate gently. If we are hurting him, mate will look for another alpha who will care for him better, and we will have to to kill our rivals. No one but us is allowed to make our mate flushed and kissed. Mate is hungry. We need to feed mate, insist his alpha instincts, alarmed by the near-violent feeding and the sight of an omega, crumpled and weak by his feet.

Riding the pleasurable high, it feels like the muscles in his shoulders and his back have lost their near permanent tension from the last two weeks; it must be this relaxed, pleasant feeling that makes Kaname turn and find the pillbox with the blood tablets in his top desk drawer.

The alpha hisses scornfully. Are we so weak? Hold him in in our arms and cover him in our scent, guide him to our throat so he can taste our power, our virility, how we can protect him and sire strong children on him. How can he waste himself with an inferior mate when he could have us?

"Do you like brandy? I'm afraid I don't have any water," he asks, shaking away those irritating thoughts, taking one of the cut crystal tumblers he keeps for guests and pouring out the amber liquid from the decanter, then adding two blood tablets to the glass. The liquid tints a ruddier shade.

It's hard to think about being angry with Kiryuu right now, or remember that ten minutes ago Kaname wanted to kill him. Vulnerable to the pull of his instincts after consuming so much omega blood, it has the same effect as heroin on Kaname's pureblood body, his powerful instincts making him its most sensitive and responsive possible target.

"I've never had brandy," Kiryuu muses absently; there's just a hint of a slur in his words. "A few beers when I was out with other people, and wine with you and Yuuki. Master Yagari said only stupid Hunters get drunk."

Kaname bends at the waist to offer Kiryuu the brandy - he may be intoxicated and sedated by the omega's sweet blood, but there's no force in the world that could force him to kneel before the Hunter. Kiryuu stares at the glass for a moment before his body reacts and he accepts the brandy with violently shaking hands.

"Don't get it on my carpet," Kaname orders him with a trace of ire, but his body is processing more and more of Kiryuu's blood, and his system is flooded with this omega's natural chemical cocktail to soothe and enrapture the drinker. Even if he wanted to be angry at Kiryuu, Kaname isn't sure if
he could manage it.

Kiryuu hesitantly sips the brandy, chokes and makes a face, then gulps down the entire glass in one go, coughing at the burn. Kaname snatches the crystal glass before the omega can break it; he would hate to replace the set.

"I don't get it. Why are you being such an idiot about Yuuki," says Kiryuu, once he's calmed. Perhaps giving him alcohol was not a wise idea. "So she's not telling you every little thing. So what? You don't either. Why do you expect Yuuki to extend you more trust and courtesy than you give to her?"

"Give her space, or give her an equal amount of honesty. We both know you keep too much from her," the Hunter says, weakly glaring; the effect is ruined by the fact Kiryuu is having difficulty keeping his head upright and facing Kaname, so he's actually glaring at Kaname's ear.

"If I give her space, am I not letting the distance between us grow greater? Letting her go farther and farther away from me through my inaction?" Kaname asks.

Kiryuu gives a shake of his head. "I don't understand why you're so insecure. Do you not trust Yuuki to stay? She chose you. She loves you. I don't know what more you want from her."

That answer is too telling; even riding the wave of euphoria and relaxing pleasure granted by an omega's blood, Kaname cannot admit that he is afraid she won't love the darkness of his worst parts. The real him, he sometimes believes.

"Why did you not try to keep Yuuki from leaving Cross Academy?" he asks instead.

"Because she chose you, and she wanted to," he answers like Kaname has said something stupid.

The Hunter must read his puzzlement, because he sighs in exasperation and goes on. "I always knew, from the very beginning, that she would chose you. She always thought of you first, wishing you would return her love. I knew I didn't mean the same things to her; when I drank from her, I could feel it was you she would prefer was drinking her blood. I was something else in her life - a companion or a friend. But I wanted Yuuki to be happy, even if that meant I wouldn't be the one that made her happy. Even if she chose a man I hated. If you're what she wanted, then I wasn't going to stop her."

Kaname would like to accuse Kiryuu of lying. No one can be that generous and selfless. But everything the pureblood knows about the Hunter, and the fact that Kiryuu had gone through with the action, tells him that what Kiryuu is saying is nothing less than the absolute truth.

Kaname would never, ever have been able to let go of Yuuki like that. If Yuuki had not loved him in return, Kaname suspects that he would have done terrible, terrible things to keep her by his side anyway, perhaps gone mad entirely.

It galls him, but Kaname is begrudgingly forced to admit what he has always known but never allowed himself to acknowledge - Kiryuu Zero is a far better person than he is, stubbornly virtuous without requiring any reward, even when the consequences hurt him. Because once Kaname admitted that fact to himself, he might begin to feel the pangs of conscience for what he's done to Kiryuu that the Hunter has not deserved. Compassion for Kiryuu would be inconvenient.

The Ancestor of the Hunters had been right, when she called him a light to Kaname's darkness. Kiryuu is Yuuki's white knight to Kaname's black king. Kiryuu has always been a man Kaname feared - felt jealous of - for precisely that reason. It was only natural that Yuuki was attracted to
Kiryuu's goodness; the true miracle was that she loved Kaname as well. What if Yuuki realized one day that Kiryuu is a better person than Kaname, with his selfishness and greed and darkness, and left him for Kiryuu's light?

But if they bond Kiryuu, Kaname realizes, Yuuki will never be able to leave him, because the only other place she would go to is Kiryuu's side. Bonding Kiryuu as their omega would also bind Yuuki permanently to Kaname. If Yuuki and Kiryuu stay near one another, true, the risk she will realize Kiryuu is better for her and stop loving him increases, but at least she won't be able to physically leave him.

"Is that why you encouraged her? So she would be happy?" Kaname remembers a chocolate thrown to him on St. Xocolatl's Day, many years ago.

This entire conversation is surreal - have they ever been so honest or civil before? And all it took was both of them to be out of their heads on bloodloss and alcohol, or high on omega pheromones.

"More or less. I'm not trying to sabotage your relationship with Yuuki, Kuran. I haven't told her anything. I won't lie to her if she asks me directly, but I'm not out to ruin your marriage."

Kiryuu raises a shaky hand to point accusingly at Kaname. "I trust you with exactly one thing, pureblood: Yuuki's safety and wellbeing."

"So why don't you go do something useful and fix this? Quit talking to me, and go plot one of your stupid schemes. Act like the manipulative bastard we both know you are. Go apologize dramatically to her for whatever you've fucked up this time, and mean it, and don't do it again. And if she doesn't accept your apology, take it like an adult and back off until she's ready, instead of sulking and avoiding the issue. She loves you - got it, stupid pureblood?"
Cross gives a small, secretive smile that doesn't fit his chairman persona. "You and I had a lovely meal and a talk, then I pulled out my collection of 149 photo albums full of cute photos of you, and kept you late while I reminisced over your childhood."

"And yes, the emergency underground shelter has an extensive set of wards. Why do you ask?"

"Can I borrow it? There's something I need to practice, but I need a place that will hide my power."

Cross takes off his glasses and polishes them on his apron thoughtfully while he looks at her. "As long as you don't do anything too large, the earth and the wards should shield you. I'll take you through the school, which will hide our destination."

A pureblood's potential power is immeasurable, capable of doing almost anything they could imagine. A pureblood's actual power did not equal that potential; it took many years of practice to acquire the skill and control to actually wield that power, which was why the oldest purebloods were the most dangerous. Some abilities ran in families, and were easily learned, like the Kuran telekinesis or the Hio power over plants. But for the most part, it was up to the individual pureblood to shape their own power and learn what seemed most useful and natural to them.

Of all pureblood abilities, the most difficult are those that require the vampire to split off pieces of their own power - pieces of themselves - so the creator and the fragments could function independently. Both the creation of a familiar, and the ability to travel by dividing the entire body into many familiaris, require the pureblood to master simultaneous existence first.

There was a trick to it, a splitting of attention, suddenly feeling one mind and body become more than one, but Yuuki has yet to master it. Kaname, of course, has been able to divide his consciousness and power since Cross Academy, and Yuuki envies his ease and quickness.

She wants to learn how - Yuuki wants to create her own familiars, more than anything. If she could split her power, then she could watch over Zero all the time and no one would be able to hurt him without her knowledge. And Yuuki wants this for herself too. It's become a symbol to her - if she can master the creation of a familiar, after struggling and failing to succeed for so long, then she's proven that she can overcome her weaknesses.

Once a pureblood managed to create a familiar, it could not be used immediately; it still took practice to control a body with another shape, and each new form taken by a familiar needed further practice to master. The first manifested form is always the most natural, and the easiest, but with enough practice the familiar could take any shape the pureblood wished. Yuuki hopes her familiar's natural form is something small and portable. Now that she has a place to practice, she can come back however often she wants and keep working.

In the cavernous empty space, Yuuki closes her eyes, exhales slowly, gathers her power, and concentrates.

"This was not what I meant, Kuran, when I said do something besides angst about your wife being upset with you."

"This is for your benefit, Kiryuu. You shouldn't complain," Kaname chides and luxuriates in the feeling of getting everything he wants.

Kiryuu snorts and crosses his arms, but obediently tilts his head to the side when one of his maids makes a last minute adjustment to his clothes - they're used to the poor attitudes between the two,
and they know not to talk.

"We both know you aren't doing any of this for me, but I'll play along. How does this help me?"

"Because of the leaked rumors, the public's opinion of you has not been favorable. Right now the rumormongers are free to say whatever they want, because they have no other conflicting information. So tonight is important. The three of us are making our first public appearance together after our wedding, and we have our best chance to dispute their version with our own counter-narrative. Which is why everything must be perfect."

If Yuuki is displeased with him, then Kaname needs to do something to show he is willing to change his behavior for her. Playing gently with their new hound puppy, instead of yanking his tail, always makes Yuuki happy. Helping to rehabilitate Kiryuu's reputation was the most drastic, out of character thing he could think of to offer her. Today's plan should help get Kaname back in Yuuki's good graces and has the added benefit of pissing off Kiryuu. It will be tedious for Kaname, but not as uncomfortable as Kiryuu will find it. And Kaname can admit that he does owe Kiryuu a little for his misstep with the servants; tonight will wipe the debt clean.

Kaname has planned every aspect of this evening down to the tiniest, most insignificant detail - where they will go, what they will do, who they will see. It had taken significant work, but after two days all his preparations were complete. The excuse had been the easiest - a little query to Kiryuu's head maid revealed that the Hunter's wardrobe was inadequate for someone of his rank. Yuuki would never pass up a chance to buy things for Kiryuu, even if she realized the timing was not coincidence, and Kaname had an ironclad excuse to come along, since Kiryuu's appearance reflected on his reputation as well. Once he had a reason, it was easy to spin the outing into a full evening and dinner together with Yuuki. Kiryuu would also be there, as his excuse, but Kaname could work around him for a chance to make amends with Yuuki.

"Are we ready to go?" Yuuki asks, sweeping into the room and smiling wholeheartedly at them. She has been distant, but she never pretends that she doesn't love him even when she's angry.

"I have one last gift for you both, the final touch for the evening, and then we'll be ready," Kaname replies, taking three shallow square boxes from a side table, their size obviously marking them as jewelry.

"Seriously, Kuran?" Kiryuu says in disgust, pulling off the lid and examining Kaname's gift the same way he would a severed hand. The pureblood has given him a very feminine collar of black ribbons and lace, with a golden tag hanging from the center displaying the Kuran family's nine orchid crest picked out in tiny gems.

Another dog collar for Kiryuu, with helpful instructions - 'if found, return to the Kuran family.' The sight of it encircling Kiryuu's white neck provides the pureblood great satisfaction. If Kaname thought he could get away with it without ruining their evening, the tag would have read 'property of Kuran Kaname,' but that would be too much of a provocation for Kiryuu to resist without shooting him.

"A picture is worth more than words. Our appearance tonight is the most important visual cue for how people think of us together," he replies instead. "This will help reinforce it. I have one too," Kaname tilts his box so Kiryuu can see his cravat pin with the same shape and the Kuran crest, "and so does Yuuki." His wife's gift is more of a dignified choker than a collar, but Kiryuu won't appreciate the distinction.

That's why Kaname insisted the three of them wear corresponding outfits. The visual similarity links the three of them as a united group in the minds of observers; Kaname wants everyone who
sees them to think that they fit together well. The outfits Kaname and Yuuki wear, black with red as the secondary color, and Kiryuu's red with black accents, suggest complementary personalities, as the bond between alpha and omega was meant to be. All three of them are wearing the dragon and phoenix bracelet tokens from their wedding, another visible tie and claim of belonging.

Kiryuu's clothing in particular Kaname loaded with symbolism; Yuuki and himself wore outfits they already owned, but the pureblood ordered Kiryuu's made specifically for this occasion. Vampires felt more comfortable the more feminine an omega looked, so Kiryuu is dressed in a gown tonight, not his usual long tunics and robes. Kiryuu is doubtless displeased, but his critics will find less to complain about. The silken velvet, suitable since April nights can still be quite cold, is colored the shade of blood; Kaname wants everyone to see a vampire, not a Hunter.

Besides the Kuran crest on his collar's tag, and the elaborate Hoseki given at Kiryuu's betrothal, the velvet itself adds another Kuran symbol to Kiryuu's clothing. The fabric was woven with different heights of pile to create a three-dimensional pattern of roses and twisting vines, that shimmers and shifts color as the wearer moves and the light changes. Using a velvet so obviously custom made and expensive implies value and care for the wearer, and Kiryuu's gown requires large amounts of the fabric, his distinctive omega sleeves widening just below the shoulder and the tips falling to his knees. The inner sleeves, hugging Kiryuu's pale arms and spilling over the backs of his hands, are made of the same black lace as his collar. An omega ought to look alluring, and this touch of black lace hints at Kiryuu's charms without becoming crass, as does the band of black lace cinching his waistline.

Taken as a whole, this display is meant to send one message: he is part of us and we care for him. Humans and vampires were shallow creatures; as things appeared, so they must be.

"Whatever our feelings and problems in private, none of that can show tonight. In public, we are a happy, content couple who enjoy domestic tranquility and have chosen to take things slowly with our new omega. Kiryuu, that means do disgusted faces when we have to touch each other, and no arguing. If I can manage it, I'd hate all of this to be ruined by your inability to play along."

"I'll behave for Kuran-hime's sake," Kiryuu agrees, looking at his wife for approval. Yuuki has a gleam in her eye that makes Kaname feel like things may not go as smoothly as he hoped.

"I was thinking about that actually," she says, with a disarmingly innocent smile. "If we want people to believe that we're normal, isn't it a little weird that Zero calls us by our last name and uses formal honorifics?" She claps her hands together and nods decisively. "Yes - if we're going out tonight, the rule is that we can only call each other by our first names, with no honorifics. Why don't you two practice now?"

Abruptly, Kaname realizes that he may have had too much influence on Yuuki. The pureblood casts a sideways glance at Kiryuu, and find his horror and reluctance mirrored there. But he is ten thousand years old, and his plan to placate Yuuki is not about to be stymied by such a simple thing, he tells himself. If his wife wants this, Kaname can do it.

"Zero," Kaname chokes out. Ugh, and he has to do this the entire night.

"Yuuki," the Hunter complains; his wife smiles again and urges him to try.

Kiryuu looks like he's about to vomit; Kaname can't get the taste out of his mouth either.

"Ka-, Kan-, Kaname," Kiryuu finally spits, like he's just uttered the foulest curse.

"That was very good from both of you! We should do this from now on when we're in public,"
Yuuki suggests cheerfully.

Kaname almost decides to turn back now. When had his wife gotten so clever?

Their visit to the tailor lasts the entire evening, but it's also the easiest part for Zero. He is asked to do very little except try sample pieces on, describe his preferences as the man takes notes, and give his opinions on one thing or another. At least this tailor is more polite than the woman Takuma took him to see for his first fitting; Zero's never giving her another penny if he can manage it.

The tailor and his assistants act carefully deferential and avoid invading his personal space in the presence of the Kurans - probably the 'no touching omegas in front of their alphas' rule. Not that the Kurans are his alphas, except socially speaking.

When it comes time to take his measurements again, Zero freezes up, remembering being frightened and unable to move while strangers pawed him. But he needn't have worried so much. When Takuma said that no one but Kuran and Yuuki would be allowed to touch him intimately, he was right; only if Zero's life or health were in danger was that rule allowed to be broken.

As the assistants give directions, Yuuki is the one who takes the measuring tape and comes close. She's considerate, doing nothing without asking permission first or allowing him time to brace himself, nothing like the abrupt, uncaring assistants from before. Zero is still afraid, but Yuuki has spent so much time with him recently that it's easy to bring up those memories to fight the nightmares and horrible fears of her hurting him. The Hunter tries to hide his nervousness and uneasiness, tries to keep from flinching away, but Yuuki notices, he can tell. Zero can't hide things from Yuuki. Even Kuran, when they give him a second measuring tape, is uncharacteristically careful. They're slower than the professionals, but Zero must learn how to bear their touch anyway. He can't escape these hands.

(Both of their alpha instincts are howling with distress as Zero recoils and rejects their touch. But they are still touching their omega, and wouldn't they rather use more than a stupid tape? They'd kill anyone else who put their hands on him like this. Their scents are all over his body now and everyone will be able to smell their claim.)

The vampire run and owned restaurant where they eat lunch around one in the morning oozes wealth and exclusiveness. It's a place to see and be seen, where the elites of the vampire world come to show off. They have the nicest table in the entire dining room, positioned so the other guests can see them clearly, but far enough from the other diners to give the false impression of privacy. He tries to ignore the way every eye in the restaurant is fixed on them, and how every whispered conversation with quick glances in their direction is about them.

Kuran is surprisingly helpful, a master actor directing their little theatre production. He coaches Zero and Yuuki in quiet, relaxed asides how to shape their body language and facial expressions, when and how to move. Yuuki requires little help, taking all the attention due to a Kuran princess in stride, composed and obviously familiar with this routine. Tonight's outcome rests on Zero's abilities.

They don't have to order; the staff knows exactly what to bring to their table, and the pureblood distracts them by explaining what each dish was and how it was made, little tidbits of their history and origin. All of the courses come artfully presented in small portions, so they can taste more dishes; Zero recognizes almost nothing, but tries it all anyway. He's interested, despite himself, in Kuran's descriptions of the cooking process, his long neglected hobby still a passion. Did Kuran get lucky, or did he know that Zero liked to cook?
After dinner is the real test tonight - a cordon of reporters waiting outside the restaurant for a picture and a scoop on the Kuran's scandalous new omega, tipped off by an anonymous source that the purebloods were here tonight. Zero was surprised to learn that vampires had their own media, accessible only through secret, hidden websites and publications for safety, but since they loved to gossip and plot so much the Hunter can understand why.

Zero gets to stand between Yuuki and Kuran, each with an arm around his waist, and pose for the media as Kuran spins an outrageous yarn about their earnest desire to make this alliance work, and how the three of them have decided to take their time getting to know one another. Kuran never mentions sex, but it's quite easy to read as the explanation for Zero's untouched state. But staying so close to two purebloods Zero has fed from, along with his new diet, creates an unexpected side effect.

"Kuran, my eyes are going red," Zero whispers, turning his head bashfully away from the cameras, the tingle in his eye sockets giving his bloodlust away. Kuran's mouth betrays his anger for a split second as he looks down, then flattens out to relaxed neutrality.

"If you'll excuse us," the pureblood genially tells the crowd, tucking the Hunter close to his side, and maneuvering so Yuuki shields them further. "I think my omega is getting cold."

"Next time keep better track of your feeding schedule, Kiryuu. You nearly ruined everything," the pureblood snarls once they're safely in the car and Zero has willed his eyes back to lavender.

"I apologize," he replies stiffly, only because he was the one at fault, but Yuuki intervenes to smooth ruffled tempers before anything escalates. The drive to their last stop, a jeweler who specializes in producing Hoseki and other commissions for vampire aristocrats, is completed in silence.

Kuran engages the owner in conversation as soon as he can, clearly impatient to leave, after telling Zero that an omega needed at least ten Hoseki, compared to the paltry three he currently possessed, and they would leave when he had at least that many. Zero is tempted to buy the most expensive pieces here to retaliate, but Kuran is so wealthy whatever he could find wouldn't even cost a drop of his total wealth.

The staff flocks to show Yuuki their favorite pieces, seeking the sales commission and the validation of assisting a pureblood while Zero browses the glass display cases in relative peace, stopping when something catches his eye. Yuuki will find more than enough jewelry to outfit him, Zero suspects, so whether he finds anything or not doesn't matter.

Zero is examining a ruby arrow when one of the staff notices his interest. "Do you have something similar, but not in red?"

"I have a citrine copy in the back, Consort. If you would follow me?" offers the sales assistant.

But what Zero finds waiting for him is no jewel.

"Kiryuu-kun, you clean up better than I thought," says Shirabuki Sara, seated primly on a stepladder, hands clasped together in her lap - or likely some kind of projected image, since Zero can't sense a pureblood aura. "Maybe I should have stolen you for myself."

"Shirabuki-sama" - the honorific grates but if he's playing Consort it's necessary - "I don't think it's appropriate for us to be alone."

"Unusually shy of you, Kiryuu-kun. Aren't we partners?" pouts Shirabuki.
"We didn't come to an agreement, as I remember."

"My offer doesn't have an expiration date, Kiryuu-kun. Cooperation is it's own reward, don't you think?"

"I don't know why you want my help. Kuran doesn't tell me anything at all. He doesn't tell anything to anyone," observes Zero.

"It's his most frustrating trait," Shirabuki sighs. "But Kaname-kun can't be everywhere and do everything himself. He has pawns he uses to help him - like your friend Takuma-kun." When her lips form that name, for a moment her rapacity and avarice is unmasked, before she covers it with the saccharine, girlish sweetness. A shiver runs down Zero's back on behalf of his absent friend. "I think you may find them more talkative. And Yuuki-chan trusts you, doesn't she?"

The blond pureblood reaches out with an earnest, imploring expression. "I can't do this without you, Kiryuu-kun. All I want to do is give Kuran Kaname exactly what he deserves, to give him the justice he's earned."

The pureblood leans forward, like she's revealing a secret. "He's still using you, you know. He uses everyone. Even dear Yuuki. The man just can't help himself. A scorpion is a scorpion - you can't expect his nature to change. How long will it be until his schemes hurt someone you care about?"

"Now, I think it's time you head back," she orders as the assistant presses a box into his fingers.

"I've bought you a gift. If you need to contact me, you'll be able to attract one of my familiars by pricking your finger and smearing a drop of blood on the coin hidden inside the lining of the box. Write me a message and my familiar will deliver it."

Zero wraps his hand around the box, pressing the corners into his palm. "Thank you," the Hunter replies, smiling at the pureblood. "I think I know exactly what I'm going to do."

Chapter End Notes

See Kaname? You can use your Machiavellian powers for good when you try!

Sara is making a reference to a fable called 'The Scorpion and the Frog.'

This chapter and the next chapter are companion pieces, action and reaction: 'What You Do in the Dark / Will Be Brought to Light. I know that not much seems to happen here, but think of this chapter as watching someone shake a soda bottle - a fragile, increasingly unstable situation that only needs an outlet to explode.


Zero's new collar was suggested by reviewer Sancti Rei. I really do read what you write about, and sometimes things just happen to work out the right way and I get a lucky opportunity. Please continue to leave me your thoughts!
"What do you mean it wouldn't work?" protests Zero with his arms crossed, interrupted from his pacing halfway across the floor.

Takuma sighs and looks apologetic; he's still kneeling at the low table where the two omegas were taking tea together, before Zero's agitation drove the Hunter to his feet. "It would be your word against hers. Even if you are Kaname's consort, the testimony of a Level D means nothing against a pureblood's word."

"I have physical evidence! Shirabuki suggested that I kill Kuran and offered to help me, right to my face. The Council must care about that, at least!" Zero argues.

Takuma grips the porcelain cup tighter, the cheerful blue birds painted on the sides at odds with their conversation. "I know, and I believe you're telling the truth that Shirabuki-san approached you with the intent to harm Kaname. But purebloods set their own rules, except when their actions endanger the vampire race as a whole, as they did when Hio Shizuka's attack on your family violated the treaty. Shirabuki-san could easily claim that she was testing your fidelity to Kaname;
she will say that she offered you that deal to be certain you were trustworthy, and that she didn't really intend to plot against him. That's also why we can't feed her false information - she could use it to blackmail you by accusing you of trying to harm him. Vampires will accept any excuse, no matter how flimsy, to avoid investigating a pureblood."

"Even if you turned your evidence over to the Council," the blond continues with a serious mien, "and provided testimony about your meetings with Shirabuki, there is no way the Senate would remain uninvolved. And many nobles in the Senate would welcome Kaname's death - and perhaps even a few left on the Council would as well. Instead of protecting his life, you might unite his enemies instead. The investigation would be a farce - they would never look deeply into a pureblood's affairs - and ultimately all the inquiry would accomplish is making you look publicly weak and foolish."

"What is the point of having laws if the people enforcing the laws won't do anything?" the Hunter gripes, turning on his heel to continue pacing.

"Shirabuki hasn't actually committed a crime yet. And if we outlawed plotting," Ichijo points out, hiding his smile, "I'm not sure there would be any nobles left outside the prisons."

Zero huffs, and casts himself down on the squishy mat of cushions laid out where the moonlight streams through the windows. "Fine. I won't give the evidence to the authorities. But I won't do nothing with it! I know the Hunters don't have jurisdiction, but there must be something I can do!"

Takuma looks as though he's weighing his response; finally the noble puts his cup down deliberately, gets up, and lies down next to Zero on the pile of cushions, hands folded on his stomach as he studies the moon through the skylight. The Shouto Estate is old and a bit drafty, but somehow it feels more like a home to Zero than the carefully manicured and arranged Ichijo estate ever did.

"Have you considered speaking to Kaname?" Ichijo asks, voice carefully neutral.

"Why would I do that?" Zero mumbles into the pillow his face is buried in.

"Kaname puts hard work into appearing omniscient," Ichijo responds with a laugh, "But it's not as easy as he makes it seem. He misses things sometimes. On the slim chance Kaname is ignorant, you probably need to warn him, in case Shirabuki finds another assassin."

Calming down from his anger, Zero says, "Sorry that I was rude earlier. I don't mean to lump you in with the rest of them. You may be the Head of the Council, but you would help if you thought it would do any good."

"I know. I didn't take it to heart - you were just frustrated," Ichijo replies.

"I'm worried that Shirabuki mentioned you," Zero admits quietly. "She looked...hungrier, when she said your name. It disturbed me when I saw it."

"Shirabuki Sara courted me after I presented. If Isaya had not come for me, I would not have been able to escape bonding her."

There's a tone in Takuma's voice that Zero doesn't like; he turns his head so he can study the elder. "I assume that means you didn't want to bond with her. She hasn't done anything since you refused her, has she?"

The noble's body stiffens.
"Takuma-sempai," Zero urges, angling his body to face the blond.

"There have been times when I see her familiars nearby." Takuma confesses. "And someone sent me an inappropriate gift, with an unsigned note in her handwriting."

Truly alarmed, Zero says "You've the one that got away, and Shirabuki's not the kind of person to let a loss go. You need to be careful, Takuma-sempai. Have you told Shouto?"

"Isaya doesn't need to know," Takuma says tersely. "I don't want Shirabuki-san to hurt him if he confronted her. And we were speaking about you and Kaname, not Shirabuki and I," he counters. "Are you going to tell him what happened?"

"I'll tell Kuran about what happened with Shirabuki, if you tell Shouto about how she watches you sometimes. That's not safe, Takuma-sempai. He needs to know."

Isa, who had been sleeping in the room next door, must have awakened; in the silence, the two omegas can hear the click of the dog's nails on the wood floors as Takuma considers Zero's bargain.

"Zero, do you wish that Shirabuki succeeds with her plan, and Kaname dies?" asks Takuma, eyes still fixed on the moon floating above.

"No, I don't," the Hunter admits so quickly he doesn't even need to think about it. "I know you were raised with Kuran, but I hate him. That fact doesn't mean I want him to die. Not to mention that Yuuki really loves him - she would be devastated if that happened. He's my enemy, but I need him to stay alive."

"Then I accept your deal," says Takuma, offering his hand to Zero, and the two shake on it. "Now, you haven't eaten anything at all. How about some cake?"

"Takuma-sempai…"
Kaname is just settling down to work on some financial papers - Rosehill does not fund itself, not that money means much to the pureblood, except as a tool - when he catches Kiryuu studying him out of the corner of his eye. Kaname lets the corners of his mouth turn down briefly, and waits for Kiryuu to air whatever thought is brewing in his dull brain.

"I assume you already know Shirabuki Sara contacted me?" the Hunter says tonelessly, without any inflection or direction, and without meeting Kaname's eyes - as though he's speaking to thin air rather than the pureblood in the room.

"But of course," Kaname drawls, equally bored and dismissive. "Shirabuki is not as discreet as she thinks she is, though she outdoes most. Unfortunately for her, I'm her opponent this time, and she won't dethrone me so easily. Sneaking you away while I was in the next room was a little too bold for me to overlook. The overconfidence of youth - she'll improve if she lives long enough."

"Shirabuki is older than you," Kiryuu reminds him. "You talk as though the same warning doesn't apply to you."

Kaname controls his expression of annoyance - being with Kiryuu requires fewer masks than usual, and the pureblood relaxed his guard too much.

"I know she gave you something - we left with one more box than the amount we purchased. What was it?" Kaname asks, changing the subject.

Kiryuu raises an eyebrow, questioning Kaname's avoidance of the earlier topic, but goes along with the flow of the conversation.

"She told me it was a coin, but I don't know for sure; I never opened her box. I buried it in the gardens as soon as I could. With purebloods, you never know everything their powers are capable of."

"That was probably a wise decision. The Shirabuki family specializes in poisons and drugs, among other things. Never drink her blood if you can help it," Kaname warns.

The pureblood steeples his fingers and studies Kiryuu. "I find it interesting that you are telling me this. Would you not prefer that I am blindsided by her attacks - or better yet, launch your own?"

Kiryuu gives him a disapproving look, shaking his head. "I'm not you, Kuran. Just because I don't like you doesn't mean you deserve to die. You may be a bastard to me, but you do care about Yuuki, and you care for the vampires under your control. So I can't allow you to be hurt. There's more at stake here than my need to gratify to my feelings."

Curious, Kaname persists. "You didn't consider working with her, even for a moment?"

Kiryuu snorts, struggling up to sit properly in his chair. "Not a chance. I hate you for personal reasons, but Shirabuki Sara is a professional enemy. I worked a case in northern Europe - about a year and a half ago, now - cracking a human trafficking ring dealing in Level D feeders. There were over a thousand victims identified, and probably many more we didn't find. We couldn't prosecute, but the Hunter upper ranks are certain that she was the one Turning them."

"Shirabuki's favorite targets are young, attractive girls who are insecure enough that she can manipulate them into voluntarily being Turned. Those make the most money when they're sold, because if someone doesn't want a feeder, they might still make a purchase for uglier reasons. She once victimized an entire girls' school - Turned every single child there, and we couldn't do a thing except stand aside and watch, because she'd broken no laws according to the Treaty."
Kiryuu leans forward, watching Kaname intently. "I would turn myself to ash before I would lift a finger to help Shirabuki Sara. I've seen with my own eyes what happens to her victims, and between the two of you, your brand of manipulation is the one I prefer."

The Hunter rises, and advances step by step toward where Kaname is seated, intense lavender gaze not flinching away, "So instead, Kuran Kaname, I offer you an alliance. Shirabuki Sara is a threat to both humans and vampires. Should the opportunity arise, I will work with you to Hunt down our mutual enemy and eliminate her.

Kaname had not expected such a boon, and minutely inclines his head. "As the head of the Kuran family, tasked to ensure the stability of the vampire world, I cannot turn aside such an offer. I accept your alliance, Hunter. May your Hunt end in victory."

"Zero," Yuuki asks quietly one night when the two of them are returning to their rooms after dinner. "Do you think I'm being unfair to Kaname?"

The Hunter casts a sideways glance at Yuuki, walking side-by-side down the palace halls with him, the morning sun just beginning to break across the horizon.

"Since I don't know why you're mad at him, I can't say for certain. But I know you. You're always soft on that bastard. For reasons I cannot fathom, you respect and love him. Whatever shit he pulls, you let him get away with just a slap on the wrist. If he did something bad enough to make you stay angry with him for three weeks, then I probably would have shot him by now," he responds bluntly.

Yuuki can't suppress an unladylike snort - she's bone tired from practicing her powers at Cross Academy again without any real progress, and exhausted by this emotional stalemate, her halfway house between trust and doubt - and tries to mask it with a cough.

"He just looked...very forlorn tonight, don't you think?"

"Kuran is a manipulative person." Zero says flatly. "I don't trust anything that he says or does unless I know he's getting something he wants out of it. How am I supposed to believe he's not acting and trying to manipulate my emotions?"

Yuuki bites her lip; she's been asking herself similar questions about trust lately, and she knows now just how few boundaries her brother respects. What he's willing to do for his desires. But she wants to believe Kaname would be honest about his feelings with her. She wants to believe. Is that her love moving her, or her reason?

"How can you call this unfair, anyways? I can hardly tell you're angry with him; you two do the same things either way. You say goodmorning, you have dinner together, and you politely ask each other about your day, the same as always. You and Kuran don't shout or fight, you just avoid talking about things and don't have sex."

Yuuki winces, both at the accuracy and the embarrassment of having Zero notice her and her husband's celibacy.

"Onii-sama doesn't allow himself to be close to many people. I feel like I'm letting him down," she defends, but her heart isn't in it.

They've stopped walking entirely, paused by a wall of east-facing windows. Vampires or not, Yuuki and Zero were sun worshippers by nature and habit. Yuuki has to squint, but the pinks and oranges brightening the eastern sky are too pretty to look away from.
"Can I ask you a rude question?" Zero says, earnest and open, the antithesis of her brother once again.

"Anything, Zero."

"Why do you two have separate bedrooms?"

Blunt as always. The pureblood can feel her cheeks heating, but she doesn't have to keep up her composed Kuran princess act around him, so she lets the flush bloom. She knows that if she refuses to answer, Zero will accept her response without holding it against her. Whatever she chooses, whatever she tells him, it won't change his opinion of her. And that thought gives her the courage to tell him the truth.

"I was ashamed." Yuuki thinks of her untouchable brother, above her and out of her reach for so many years when she was human. "I wanted him to see Kuran Yuuki-hime, the pureblood princess who wouldn't look out of place by his side. I couldn't let him see the Yuuki who drooled on her pillow and woke up with her hair a mess, or who left toothpaste stains on the sink. He didn't ask me to stay, when I told him I wanted my own bedroom. So I thought that's what he wanted too."

Yuuki contemplates the dawn. "Do you mind staying a little longer? Just until the sun comes up."

Zero's lavender eyes are tender, patiently understanding as he watches Yuuki wipe at her watery eyes, and he nods.

Witnessing this slow hollowing-out of Yuuki's marriage is like watching a line of stitches sewing someone else's wound being cut, one by one. Even when they aren't holding your flesh together, you wince and grit your teeth out of sympathy, as though the thread is being drawn out of your own skin. A raw, red empathy that flows as freely as blood.

If you had asked Kiryuu Zero how he would feel about Yuuki's marriage to Kuran atrophying down long-buried fault lines, he would have told you something about how pleased it would make him, or how his fondest wish was coming true.

The reality, Zero finds, is far different.

He feels pained and sorrowful, because Yuuki values what she has built, and she is finding out that it isn't as strong and durable as she thought. His hatred of Kuran is a pale and weak thing in the shadow of that hurt.

It would be easier if they did shout, Zero often thinks. But no - the Kurans don't talk about it. They edge cautiously around the hole as the edges crumble and the hole widens into a chasm, crippled by their own fears of that very thing happening. And the wider the hole made from all the things they won't say grows, the farther and farther apart the Kurans stand on opposite shores.

Neither of them would ever end their marriage, Zero can tell, but if this decay doesn't halt, then all that's left will be a hollow shell. They'll sit down to the same dinners, and make the same public appearances, but everything they say to one another will be the empty, meaningless conversation of acquaintances.

Zero does not know exactly what caused this break, but it's likely the result of his introduction to the situation. Guilt - in part because he knows he unintentionally broke their fragile balance - has come creeping into his thoughts. If Zero was the cause, and Yuuki and Kuran cannot fix this on their own, then it falls to him to intervene.
"Kiryuu, are you going to watch me all night, or are you going to leave?" Kaname does not invite the Hunter inside his study. There is nothing for them to discuss, and the pureblood has no desire to speak to him.

Leaning against the doorframe and back in his usual plainer robe and undertunic tonight, Kiryuu doesn't rise to the bait; he just continues to watch Kaname with that assessing, considering look.

"From your mood, I'm guessing that your newest plan to apologize for whatever Yuuki is upset about failed?"

Kaname narrows his eyes, temper spiking dangerously; his grip on the pen in his hand tightens just short of snapping it, but the pureblood's control is not so weak that one ex-human can break it - conveniently overlooking for the moment all the times it already had. There was no plan anymore; Kaname's emotions are simply disordered enough to escape his control.

Kiryuu asks in a dry voice, "Did you even try actually apologizing to her - with words - rather than doing it in some underhanded, silent way that she's just supposed to figure out on her own?"

Kaname's silence and increasingly poisonous stare seem answer enough.

Kiryuu exhales and lowers his head. "Forgiveness is given, not earned. You can't just do things and expect Yuuki to forgive you because you did them. That's trying to buy forgiveness."

Kiryuu pushes off from the doorframe and comes inside, ignoring Kaname's unwelcoming attitude. "When did Yuuki stop going to the human world, and break off contact with Wakaba Sayori?"

A little thrown by the change in subject, Kaname has to think for a moment about the answer. For some reason, the pureblood doesn't simply throw Kiryuu out of his study and go back to what he was doing before. Boredom, perhaps. The desire for a distraction. (The wish to not feel lonely.)

"Yuuki hasn't visited the human world in quite some time, I believe. Years," Kaname answers. "She visited Wakaba a few times about a year after she came to Rosehill, but they broke off contact at some point."

"Why do you think that is?" asks Kiryuu, helping himself to a chair, much more graceful now after nearly two months of practice managing his wardrobe.

"Why should she still have any interest in the human world, since she is no longer human? I would guess that Wakaba and Yuuki decided that their interests no longer matched and drifted apart."

Kiryuu shakes his head. "Wakaba still wanted to maintain their friendship, even with the difficulty. It was Yuuki who stopped seeing Wakaba. Do you know why?"

Is this some kind of power game, where Kiryuu mocks him by holding information Kaname doesn't have above his head? Kaname is finished being amused. "No," he snaps.

But Kiryuu doesn't look triumphant, now that Kaname has admitted his ignorance. Rather, Kiryuu is studying him again. "Yuuki misses her visits to the human world very much. It's the place she feels most at home in - she was raised there, after all."

The Hunter leans forward, his intent gaze meeting Kaname's. "She stopped because of you, Kuran. You wanted her to be satisfied staying only by your side, in the sunless world of the vampire. And she loves you, so she tried to please you, and cut her ties to the world of humans. Wakaba was Yuuki's best friend, and Yuuki let her go because she felt like she wasn't supposed to belong with
humans anymore. Because you implied that she wouldn't."

"You say you love her, don't you? What have you sacrificed for Yuuki, in exchange? She lives in your world, following a pureblood's rules. She gave up her entire human life for you, relearned the rules she lived by and remade herself in the image vampire society demanded from her. When was the last time you made yourself vulnerable or uncomfortable for her instead?"

The Hunter rises, but his eyes are still meeting Kaname's shocked stare. This was not the conversation the pureblood expected.

"I know we hate each other, Kuran, but we both want Yuuki to be happy. The current situation can't go on. You need to figure out how to repair it, and make sure that it doesn't happen again in the future. So I hope that you'll think about what I've said."

When Kiryuu leaves Rosehill again in a Hunter's coat and gear, a few days after their conversation, Kaname opens his hand and sends forth a raven to follow behind, winging its way out to a meeting site where Kiryuu encounters a man that Kaname believes is Takamiya Kaito, and five strangers - three female and two male.

So many Hunters, including one of Kiryuu's caliber, indicates either a very powerful opponent, with whom the Association is taking no chances, or a nest of ex-humans. Since four of the unknown Hunters are young teenagers, Kaname guesses that Kiryuu has been called out as backup to clean out a swarm's nest.

One of the male Hunters, who has an ugly, twisting, ropey scar across his cheek, mutters slurs at Kiryuu when Takamiya has his back turned, issuing last minute instructions to the younger Hunters - *have those leeches taught you to spread your legs like a good bitch yet* - but Kiryuu remains impassive, taking the abuse in stride.

Without the feedback of Kiryuu's scent and aura, Kaname's alpha instincts react very little when Takamiya enfolds Kiryuu in a backslapping embrace that Kiryuu steps into, rather than away from. The freedom is enjoyable. If Kaname could, he would only interact with Kiryuu through a familiar, to better keep his ridiculous impulses in check.

The swarm have chosen their nest well - a remote, long-abandoned industrial complex, rotted down to its shell, now a verdant half-wilderness reclaimed by the forest. Piles of rusty equipment and dumped garbage tower over the Hunters' heads, made even more precarious by the vines creeping and winding their way through, a green carpet disguising any pitfalls or weak spots. Any of the Hunters could easily twist an ankle or take a bad fall if they put a foot wrong. To help offset this danger, the Hunters are making their entry in mid-afternoon, right when their quarry will be the most tired and unwilling to leave the dark.

Kiryuu takes point in the treacherous terrain, aided by his hearing and faster reflexes to pick a safe passage through the rubble, likely following the paths marked out by the very vampires they are hunting. Once they enter the striated shadows of the inner core of the main building, walking on carpets of moss and grass, the Hunters split into groups of two and three, each with an older Hunter to lead, methodically clearing the building of half-awake Level Es. It requires little of Kiryuu's specialized skills; the other Hunters would have been adequate, but utilizing Kiryuu is safer.

The Level Es flee rather than fight the Hunters, surprised and scattered, until they are trapped inside the mostly intact, pitch black room they used to hide from the sun. In one last burst of furious struggle, like any animal caught in a trap, the Hunters and the Level Es clash as the Hunters storm the doors.
Kiryuu moves untouched through the fray - and then one of the Level Es, still human enough to think clearly, pulls a knife that sparks and burns when he grasps the hilt, and flies at the unprotected back of the scar-faced Hunter.

But Kiryuu saw it too, somehow, and pushing his speed to the limit, interposes himself between the Level E and his fellow Hunter. Then Kiryuu hesitates oddly for a fraction of a millisecond, and a strangely distant expression flashes across his face.

The Level E takes his chance.

By saving the scar-faced Hunter from a knife in his heart, Kiryuu barely has time to ensure his own safety, and though the strike fails, it is not harmless. The Level E's knife skates across Kiryuu's ribs as the two vampires fight to control the weapon, before Kiryuu's training prevails and he wrests the blade from the E's hand.

Where did a Level E get an anti-vampire weapon from, anyway? Even in the blackened room, Kaname's raven can see the dark line spreading down Kiryuu's side. The Level E got lucky, finding an unarmored weak spot instead of being deflected. Fortunately for Kiryuu, his chestplate protected his vital areas and belly from the dagger sinking deep. Not a glancing blow, but not a fatal one either.

The Hunter with the ugly scar doesn't even thank Kiryuu, or help him tend his wound. Ungrateful bastard; Kaname would have let him die, were he in Kiryuu's place. Takamiya is the one who wraps Zero's side in a layer of gauze as the Hunter lifts his shirt and complains that he will heal soon enough, and the dressing is a waste of bandages. Kiryuu is correct, but Takamiya stubbornly continues to wind bandages around his fellow apprentice's waist.

Kaname would know, even if his raven were not gliding behind on the road, the precise moment when Kiryuu returns to Rosehill. That strange, impersonal scent of blood spreading over the estate, brought to his nose by the wind currents. The scent is too heavy - fresh, still bleeding, not the tang of old dried iron. Even under powerful scent-dampening charms, that can't be hidden. Kaname frowns imperceptibly.

When Steward Inukai comes to report Kiryuu's return, he finds Kaname on his feet, unsettled and restlessly stroking the feathers of his raven, watching the blood-red glow of the setting sun. The house is quiet; the staff are just beginning to wake and begin the day. Yuuki is likely still asleep. The smell of blood is making the vampires stir earlier than normal; Kaname orders his steward to control their agitation if necessary. Why has Kiryuu not yet returned to his suite? The Steward cannot tell him.

A niggling unease has taken root in the back of his mind, a pattern half-glimpsed through smoke. What the pureblood ought to do is ignore it, go back to bed for a few hours, and wake up to see Yuuki at breakfast before completing his plans for the day.

Even stripped of its omega sweetness, Kiryuu's blood teases him, like a red ribbon undulating sinuously in the wind, brushing his cheek.

Without quite understanding why, Kaname dispels his familiar with a clench of his fist, fingers passing through once-solid feathers like mist. And then he tips his head back, scents the air, and follows the smell of blood, beckoning him forward the same way the smell of freshly baked bread would tempt a human to come taste. When the ribbon of scent leads him outside into the sun, the pureblood hesitates, but presses on; the blood trail is getting stronger.

The silver-haired Hunter has tucked himself away in the gardens, hidden off the paths in a knot of
trees; beneath the thick canopy of branches, Kaname comes upon Kiryuu curled in the hollow of their roots, with his back against the largest tree's trunk. Were it not for the blood speckling the dirt, the scene - with its dappled shadows and cool greens, pale Kiryuu like a snowdrift - would be fit for a painting of some forest spirit.

Both of Kiryuu's hands are pressed against his side; his forehead is lined with pain. He's removed his overcoat and chestplate, leaving him in his undershirt. All of it - the bandages and his shirt - is soaked through with wet red blood.

The sight is disturbing. Even with an injury caused by an anti-vampire weapon, Kiryuu should have stopped bleeding by now, especially since his Hunter ancestry gives him some resistance.

Kiryuu is watching him, frozen motionless and staring unblinkingly at Kaname through the break in the trees, a wounded stag watching the tiger come prowling, drawn by weakness to consume. A good Hunter knows not to provoke his prey's instincts; Kiryuu has dragged his body to face Kaname rather than show the pureblood his back, likely as soon as he sensed him draw close.

The two rivals survey one another, neither one breaking that shared gaze, lavender to russet; the wind shakes the trees with a shushing sound, ruffles silver and dark auburn hair; the moment lengthens, draws out their frozen tableau.

Kaname could turn his back and walk away, right this moment, without consequence. He doesn't even know why he's here in the first place - one of the servants will follow the blood scent and find Kiryuu soon enough. The Hunter's life is not in danger.

Kiryuu expects nothing from Kaname; ignoring the Hunter's injury would not change that. Nor would it harm Kaname's reputation - Kiryuu would say nothing to anyone, even Yuuki. His wife would never know. No one would have to know that Kaname found Kiryuu, and left him bleeding in the dirt without lifting a finger to help him.

But Kaname would know. Kiryuu would know.

"I'm not you, Kuran. Just because I don't like you doesn't mean you deserve to die. So I can't allow you to be hurt."

The pureblood grits his teeth, and his jaw tightens.

Kiryuu would have helped him, if their situation was somehow reversed. Kaname knows that for certain. Kiryuu is crouched here bleeding in the first place because he helped someone who despised him, selflessly and at risk to his own life.

Yuuki would be disappointed in Kaname if she knew what he was considering. Yuuki would want Kaname to do something for Kiryuu. And she asked him to care for her descendant, as well.

Kaname hates feeling in someone else's debt.

Kaname hates the idea of Kiryuu being superior to him in any way.

(Kaname is also pretty damned tired of feeling guilty for his actions. He may pretend he doesn't have a conscience - a deeply buried, selectively sensitive one - but that doesn't stop him from knowing he's at fault, even if he feels no regret for what he's done.)

Without realizing it, Kaname takes a step forward. Kiryuu's lavender eyes widen in surprise, and the pureblood has to look down at his own feet to confirm that yes, he has in fact moved.
With that first step, a second one isn't so difficult, and Kaname strolls over to Kiryuu at a leisurely pace, as though it simply caught his fancy to hunt down recalcitrant, missing Hunters in broad daylight, at an hour the pureblood ought to be asleep.

He raises a questioning eyebrow at Kiryuu, and the Hunter glares back. A satisfyingly normal exchange, but then Kiryuu's face falls and the Hunter winces. How much blood has he lost by now?

"It won't - I can't get the bleeding to stop," admits the Hunter.

Kaname says nothing in response, hands laced together behind his back, examining Kiryuu with his normal composed expression. This seems to signal Kiryuu to keep talking.

"I saw your creepy raven following me, so I know you already know what happened. I didn't want to come in the house smelling of blood, so I thought I'd change my bandages. But I didn't realize it was worse than I thought."

"I don't think I can get up," Kiryuu confesses, avoiding Kaname's gaze and staring at the dirt by his feet. Admitting weakness to his rival must be painful.

If Kaname doesn't want to help Kiryuu, than Kiryuu probably doesn't want Kaname to help him either. Therefore, Kaname justifies to himself, helping Kiryuu would be going against the Hunter's wishes. Kaname wouldn't be doing anything out of the ordinary then, he convinces himself. Just one more way to torment the Hunter - entirely natural and normal. So it wouldn't mean anything, if the pureblood were to assist Kiryuu now. Reservations satisfied, Kaname happily goes for the kill.

"What are you doing? Put me down, you fang-licking bastard!" Slung over Kaname's shoulder, Kiryuu shouts and struggles, beating at Kaname's back with his fists, but unless the Hunter uses an anti-vampire weapon on him, Kaname won't release his grip around Kiryuu's waist. It would be wiser to stop fighting; Kiryuu is merely reopening his wound, and Kaname is far too strong to overpower. His struggles dwindle and stutter as Kaname enters the house, either giving up or losing strength after so much blood lost.

Kaname sighs; the shoulder of his suit is thoroughly ruined; Kiryuu is bleeding into the fabric now, his wound pressed against Kaname's shoulder and jostled every time the Hunter bucks against his hold. Without Kaname's immense self-control, the pureblood's eyes would certainly glow red by now.

Of course, with Kiryuu so close, and the wind no longer dispersing the scent, Kaname can now pick up the hidden traces of Kiryuu's natural smell underneath the scent-dampening charms. Kaname is holding an omega - a bleeding omega - and his lagging instincts are now realizing that fact, triggering one of the most primal biological responses in an alpha vampire to defend a threatened omega. And Kiryuu isn't just any omega - Kiryuu is an omega he is technically courting. A rumble builds in his throat.

"Mate is bleeding. Someone has made their omega bleed."

Intending to deliver Kiryuu to the consort's suite, Kaname swerves toward his rooms instead. He can't leave their mate to be tended by others, now can he? Mate must be kept nearby, safe and protected, so the pureblood can slaughter anyone who would try to harm him. Kaname's prized control collapses - he doesn't stop himself from turning his head and inhaling the heady fragrance open-mouthed; his eyes burn vermillion, and his mouth shows the tips of his lengthened fangs. The servants in their path dive and scatter like mice.

"Kuran, where are you taking me? Are you even listening to me?!" Kaname tips the Hunter off his
shoulder into his arms, where he can restrain the omega more easily from hurting himself. This position is better anyway - without putting pressure on it, his mate's wound will bleed less.

"No! You lying bloodsucker! Don't!" shouts the omega, scratching and punching at Kaname's chest when he sees the massive bed in the master suite, a last ditch, frenzied attempt to break the pureblood's iron hold. Kaname lets the omega fight to exhaustion, grip carefully gentle, but immovable; their mate must be very frightened to fight so hard. But the wetness against his side worries the alpha, so he lays the omega down on the scarlet coverlet to get a better look.

Immediately, their mate throws himself away from Kaname and kicks out, forcing the alpha to climb overtop him and pin the omega motionless on his back. The smell of distress and terror only grows more deafening, drowning out everything but the scent of blood. Kaname shushes the omega, nuzzling him, confused why their mate thinks he's going to be hurt. He must be disoriented by his wound, the pureblood decides. When the distressed scent ebbs, and the omega's body goes limp, Kaname carefully releases him, pausing to see if their mate will continue his struggle.

When the omega doesn't move, Kaname starts to peel away the blood-drenched shirt from his skin, and then uses one sharp nail to gingerly and delicately cut away the equally sodden bandages. A happy rumble escaping his lips at all that bare skin revealed, Kaname surveys the damage; the omega's left side has a clean, curving slice that goes all the way down to the bone, stopping just before the ribcage ends.

Kaname leans down to fit his mouth on the lower edge and licks at the ripped skin, working his way upward, urging the wound to close and heal. He resists the temptation to seal his mouth to the cut and suck, contenting himself with laving the wound to apply as much healing saliva as he can, and cleaning the surrounding skin of blood. Just this taste of omega pheromones isn't enough to produce the same high as a feeding, but they are pleasant nonetheless. After a few minutes, the injury begins to clot, and the delicious blood's source dries up. Kaname wants to chase that taste, but mate is healing and can't afford to lose any more blood.

With the stimulus gone, Kaname begins to return to his senses and come down from his instinct driven frenzy. The pureblood is not sufficiently restored yet to care about the bloodstains everywhere, the fact that he is in bed together with Kiryuu, or to be appalled at his lack of control and primitive urges. There will be time later for those unpleasant revelations, when his hormones aren't running so high.

But his reason returns enough for him to pull his mouth away from Kiryu's skin, cleaning away more blood from the pale expanse, and to shape a question that has been troubling him since he saw the Hunter.

"Why couldn't your body heal?"

Kiryuu studies the pureblood with bewilderment and wariness, likely thrown by Kaname's temporary spell of madness. "Are you back to normal now?"

Kaname rolls his shoulders in a shrug. He can't tell the difference; he's still hazy and his inhibitions are in pieces.

"I don't know why," the other man hedges, looking away from Kaname. He's lying, but no matter. Kaname has more important concerns.

"You need to feed," the pureblood states matter of factly, and smears more blood on his stained shirt front as he unbuttons his collar.
None of those nasty blood tablets this time, triumphantly crows the alpha. We will feed him properly, as our mate lies in our bed, surrounded by our scent and safe in our den. The only thing he will feel, smell, taste, is us. Won't he see how well we can care for him? Taste how pure and strong we are? Perhaps he will even invite us to mount him!

The only way this could be better would be if Yuuki was with them, but if Kaname opens up the bloodbond - just like that - she will feel his welcoming summons and come join in.

"No," Kiryuu flatly refuses. But Kaname can see the tinges of red in his lavender irises, and it won't take much to overwhelm his control.

"Come on, Kiryuu," the pureblood coaxes, lowering himself down on knees and elbows, one hand on the back of the Hunter's neck guiding his mouth up to Kaname's throat, and the sound of his heartbeat rushing underneath.

The Hunter shakes his head emphatically, trying to turn his face aside, but Kaname's other hand puts a stop to that, pressing soft pink lips to his vein in a parody of a kiss. Kiryuu's mouth refuses to open, though his eyes have turned red and he's biting down so hard he might crack a tooth.

Kaname sighs. "Stubborn as always, Hunter," and slices his skin with a sharp nail, right above where Kiryuu's mouthing his neck. His pure blood flows down to touch the ex-human's lips, the divine smell and taste so close - and Kiryuu's control snaps.

The Hunter makes a high noise like a whine, and sinks his fangs in like a child, no skill or finesse. At the first taste, Kiryuu gives needy little cries and takes desperate, messy gulps, like a dying man in a desert overwhelmed by the taste of water.

While nothing can match the high of blood drinking, being fed on has its own kind of sensual allure as well. Rather than pure pain, when done willingly in the right state of mind, a vampire's body can find sharp pleasure in having another drink their blood. Such an intimate act of offering nourishment often leads to sexual arousal between partners, and Kaname is no exception, savoring the delicious mixture of pleasure-pain as only a pureblood can.

The feeling of his blood being drawn, the brush of lips on his flesh, the little sounds of his partner's enjoyment, the aroma of another's skin, the warmth and weight of a companion's body, the bliss of touch - all of these lull the pureblood into a pleasant trance, the closeness to an omega satisfying the alpha instincts, purring happily in his mind.

"Good boy, Zero," he praises, as though he's watching someone else form the words. This position, with the Hunter underneath his body, has served its purpose, but now that Kiryuu isn't fighting to get away, they can move to a more comfortable position. With one hand still on Kiryuu's neck, and the other on his back, Kaname flips them over so the Hunter is sitting on his thighs, and he can rest his back against the pile of pillows at the headboard. The Hunter whines to protest, before going back to his drink. Just like a puppy. "Such a sweet boy," his mouth murmurs, carding his fingers through silver hair.

"Kaname. What did you do?" In the doorway, still wearing her white nightgown, Yuuki displays a kind of horrified terror at the bloody scene before her eyes - Kaname, Zero, and the bed are are liberally coated with gore, white shirts turned brown, both their faces streaked red. The whole room reeks of it.

"My dear wife," he welcomes her, "come join us."

"Did you hurt him?" she demands, stalking over.
"No," he tells her, reveling in the lightness of complete honesty. He's rather surprised about that himself.

Zero pulls away from Kaname's throat, disrupted by the intrusion. "No, you're not finished yet," he scolds. "Not until you're full."

"Go on, Zero." Leaning over, Yuuki touches the Hunter's cheek and gently bends his head back down. "It's okay to take what you need. We want you too," she pleads earnestly.

The Hunter whimpers, shaking, his pupils blown wide, and buries his fangs again in his sloppy child's bite. Yuuki strokes Kiryuu's back, rubbing reassuringly, and he settles back down to feed.

"What happened?" she asks more calmly.

"Kiryuu went hunting, and suffered a moderate injury from an anti-vampire weapon. I found him as he returned, and he was still bleeding," Kaname explains. "So I closed his wound and convinced him to feed from me."

"Convinced?" Yuuki asks, heaving herself onto the bed and sitting down next to Kaname. Their thighs press together, and the pureblood kicks his mind back to the safer topic of her question.

"Perhaps not convinced," the pureblood allows. "But it wasn't hard - like getting a starving man to eat."

The two purebloods watch Kiryuu finish drinking in a comfortable silence, like their weeks of distance and silent separation had never happened.

"I'm really proud of you," Yuuki tells him, watching fondly, one hand resting on each of her spouses' bodies.

The glow in his chest is almost enough to make up for all the ridiculous hormone-fueled things he's just done - and the reality that Kaname allowed Kiryuu to feed from him again, this time in front of Yuuki.

Kiryuu is swallowing more slowly now, and when the Hunter draws away a second time, Kaname does not stop him.

"Full?" asks Yuuki, smiling and wiping away a smear of blood at the edge of Kiryuu's mouth with her thumb.

Blinking at the two purebloods like he doesn't understand where they came from - or how he came to be in bed with them - the Hunter nods.

"That was a considerable amount. When was the last time you fed, Kiryuu?" inquires Kaname without really wanting or caring about the answer.

"Mmmmmmm. Ichiru," mumbles the Hunter, sleepy and sated, slumping forward to go limp on Kaname's shoulder. Clearly the Hunter's not in his right mind either, because if he were, he'd never do that. Imagining Kiryuu's future reaction to learning this fact is priceless.

"Ichiru?" Yuuki repeats, a sad look on her face. "He's been gone a long time, Zero. When after that?"

Kaname does some swift calculations. He thought that he'd simply taken more blood than he meant to, when he drank from Kiryuu. But the servants reported Kiryuu's poor recovery time after their wedding night as well. And there was the incident with Kiryuu's inconvenient bloodlust. And now, the Hunter's inability to heal from what should be a simple injury - his blood could not even clot properly.

"Do you mean to tell me that you haven't fed in over thirty years!?!" demands Kaname.


Then the Hunter promptly falls asleep.

"How are you not dead?" demands Kaname of Kiryuu's slumbering dead weight on his shoulder.

Aido is called to the house, as the only skilled researcher Kaname trusts.

Kiryuu tried to hedge and deny his admission when he woke, but not convincingly enough that Kaname or Yuuki believed him, and eventually he caved and returned to his first story.

Frankly, Kaname would have preferred to ignore the matter, but Yuuki raised a fuss, and being back in her good graces was too great a prize to resist. Kiryuu gets a full medical exam - agreeing only after a temper tantrum and Kaname reminding him that his body belonged to the Kurans - and Aido leaves with strict secrecy instructions and a medical case full of samples.

"I knew Kiryuu's biology was odd, but I never guessed it was this bizarre," Aido tells him as Kaname escorts the noble to his car. "I mean, the blood tablets are meant to deliver the same nutrition as real blood, but they were never designed for such long-term use. Even when we tested them, the study's subjects were supplemented on rare occasions with real blood. It will take me several weeks, at a minimum, to get preliminary results. But I'm so curious to see what that Hunter's hiding in his DNA!"

The blond's expression becomes more serious. "In the meantime, like I told Yuuki-hime, feed Kiryuu as often as you can. If his eating habits caused long term damage to his body, it will take work to reverse that. If he's miraculously unharmed - which for all we know, thanks to his Hunter blood, he might be - than the overfeeding won't harm him."

"I'm fine, really - I don't need any more so soon after feeding from Kuran." Zero's nose wrinkles in disgust. "I'm not even hungry!" Zero protests.

"Aido said that we can't trust your instincts to tell you when you need to feed, if you can ignore them so easily," Yuuki counters, sitting beside him on the library couch.

"I don't want to feed," the Hunter objects. Any other vampire would have jumped to pierce Yuuki's pureblood neck at the barest hint of an offer to obtain her blood. Except for Zero, who has to be bullied into drinking the most desirable blood in the world.

"Do you - do you not want my blood, Zero?" Yuuki asks tentatively with a wounded, uncertain expression, shoulders drooping as though he's hurt her.

Zero wilts, immediately contrite. "No - I mean yes - I mean that's not what I meant!"

He runs a hand over his face, frustrated by his inability to explain. "I didn't mean to hurt you. It's just - you know that I don't like feeding. It reminds me that I'm -"

"- a vampire."

Yuuki gathers up her dark auburn hair, and pulls it aside, exposing her neck as she tilts her head invitingly - to vampires, a very provocative gesture meant for spouses and lovers.

"Please just try to drink, Zero. Even if it's not my blood that you want," she pleads.

"That's not true," he tells her, feeling his face heat with a blush, but continues to speak. "I do want your blood. Your blood is the only blood that's ever really satisfied me. It's the blood that I want to drink, more than anything."

"Then please," Yuuki says, watching him, and flushing pink as well, "go ahead and take it. Drink from me like you used to, when I was human. I want you to. Please, Zero."

It's hard, with Yuuki tipping her head back, but they hold each other's gaze as long as they can, until Zero has to break their connection when he bends down to Yuuki's throat. She shivers when she feels his breath fanning over her flesh, and again when he licks over the place he's chosen to bite.

There's a nostalgia between them, but at the same time a feeling of newness and discovery, as though they are doing this for the first time. Zero guesses that Yuuki decided to offer her blood now, when Kaname was out of the house, to avoid fueling his jealousy - not that it would help much - but he's not bitter or resentful because of that. He values her generous gift, however she chooses to present it, and Zero has dreamed of Yuuki's blood as long as he's known her. His whole body feels alert, sensitive, seeking out nourishment with all the predator's fixation his vampiric nature bestows.

"I'm out of practice," the Hunter apologizes preemptively, when he can't draw this moment out anymore with the excuse of preparation. "I'll probably hurt you."

"It's okay. I don't mind if it's you," Yuuki says; Zero can feel her skin move over the muscles of her throat when she speaks. The stimulation is too much, and he opens his mouth with his fangs already lengthened, resting the tips on her skin, as though he's waiting for her to refuse him.

But Yuuki only brings her hand up to rest on the back of his head, and he can feel her heartbeat under his lips. "Go on, Zero."

So he does, a careful tensing of his jaw, just the right amount of pressure. He marvels at that - he has so much more control when he isn't hovering perpetually at the edge of starvation. Then Yuuki's blood hits his tongue and Zero unashamedly groans.

"Is it as good as before?" Yuuki's voice quavers and breaks halfway through her question, like she's about to cry, and trying not to.

Sensing that this is important, Zero withdraws just long enough to speak, head fogged by the scorching power and rich taste. "Yuuki still tastes like Yuuki. It's so good. Such warm feelings..."
at the endearing sight.

Aido told them that Zero's first near-coma nap after feeding from her brother was nothing to be worried about. Zero's body was just trying to recover by shutting down to process his desperately needed meal, and it might even be a good sign that Zero is healing more quickly. After such a terrifying revelation about Zero's health, Yuuki hardly wants to let him out of her sight, and she'll take whatever positive news she can get.

Her whole body sings with satisfaction. The alpha is pleased simply because their mate fed eagerly and willingly, and they left their scent clinging to him.

But Yuuki is happy because Zero accepted her blood again. Zero still wanted her blood! And he still thought it tasted good!

Yuuki had been deeply afraid that Zero wouldn't find her blood appetizing anymore, now that she was a pureblood. What if he only wanted the human Yuuki's blood, and found the vampire Yuuki's blood a poor, miserable tasting substitute, yearning for something she could not give him anymore? But her fears were groundless, and she feels light as a bird, despite how her training and investigation have stalled lately.

"Here, you should take him," the pureblood says as she stops short of entering Zero's personal rooms, but she doesn't move Zero from his resting place. "I don't want to invade Zero's space without permission. Zero needs to have his own place to retreat to, a sanctuary that Kaname-sempai and I won't enter unless he asks."

Sasaki's eyes soften but her mouth quirks, as though she can't settle on one emotion to feel. "You are very considerate of your Consort's privacy, Kuran-hime, but I don't think Consort Kiryuu would mind as much as you think. At any rate, it wouldn't be a problem if you came as far as the Noble's Room - that's considered a public space for the Consort to have visitors, not a private one."

Yuuki considers for a moment, weighing her desire to respect Zero against how good it felt to hold him. Sasaki is an experienced elder vampire - she probably knows best, Yuuki tells herself, and nods to the maid, following her into the ornately decorated Noble's room, and reluctantly setting a sleeping Zero down on a green and gold divan.

Sasaki bows to the pureblood when she turns to leave. "If you would, Kuran-hime, please allow me to serve you on behalf of Consort Kiryuu. My master would be disappointed if I did not see to your needs, and he would not wish you to be exhausted by his hunger. Please refresh yourself by taking a little food and drink before you go."

Truly, Yuuki feels like she could use a blood tablet or two, and to be allowed the chance to do so while also being able to watch over Zero a little longer as he slept? That is priceless, so she assents to Sasaki's suggestion, and sits down at the small tea table in the room to much on the light snack the maids bring her.

"This is a wonderful recipe, Sasaki-san," compliments Yuuki. "Please give my compliments to the staff; I don't think I've had this before."

Sasaki beams. "It's my own mother's creation, Kuran-hime. I asked the kitchens to make it for Consort Kiryuu, but he hasn't much of a sweet tooth."

"She must have been a wonderful cook," Yuuki says as she takes a third treat.

The older woman nods, a nostalgic look in her eyes. "She was that, Kuran-hime. I'm not a legacy
servant; I'm from a small village in the north. I used to visit my mother there, before she passed. I miss her very much, and I still visit my birthplace now and then. Sometimes it's good to go back to your roots. Our beginnings make us what we are, after all."

Yuuki pauses, biscuit halfway to her mouth.

"Kuran-hime, are you alright?" Sasaki asks with concern.

"I'm fine," the pureblood reassures her. "I just thought of something. A solution to a problem I'm having. Nothing important." Yuuki smiles, and bites into the biscuit with relish.

"I'm taking Zero to visit Kuran manor," Yuuki announces to her brother that evening in his study, as the fire crackles and he goes over the intelligence reports from their agents monitoring the Senate.

Kaname stops cold, and pushes his papers aside to give her his full attention. Yuuki makes certain that none of her doubts and insecurities show in her controlled expression. He can't be allowed to suspect anything, not now that she has a new lead and possible answers to her questions. If he perceives even the tiniest part of her plan, her brother will destroy all possible evidence left at the estate.

"How long do you think you'll stay," he asks, a cold stiffness in his face.

"Only a few days. Certainly not much longer than a week," she replies, smiling a little to show that she isn't trying to leave him, and that his fears are unnecessary.

Her brother's face relaxes. "Are you certain?" Kaname asks with concern. "You haven't been there since Juuri turned you human."

"I think I'm ready," she tells him with as much confidence as she can muster. "And I want to show Zero the place where I grew up before I came into the Chairman's care," she argues.

Yuuki isn't really sure that she's prepared to see the place where their parents were murdered. But returning to the place where everything began is the best way she can think of to search for more clues regarding Kaname's secret. And if she brings Zero, Kaname won't want to come along, and she has a plausible excuse to visit somewhere she's never wanted to return to before. She needs her brother far away if she's going to search for answers. Yuuki feels a twinge of guilt, but reminds herself that this is what she's chosen, and it's for the good of all of them.

Nearly a minute passes while Kaname considers Yuuki's plan. Let him believe that Yuuki is simply trying to put more distance between them in her anger. Let him suspect nothing.

"If you're sure it won't upset you," her brother finally says, eyes burnished red in the firelight. "I'm afraid that I won't be able to accompany you; I need to keep monitoring events here."

Yuuki smiles tightly. "I'm sure you know what's best. It's just a little trip; Zero and I will be fine on our own."

Chapter End Notes
If Zero hadn't gotten caught here, his plan to force his body to have a fallow heat would have absolutely worked, even if he could only manage it for three or four months. But it would have wrecked his health pretty badly. He could still possibly have a fallow heat, because new omegas - especially male ones - often haven't settled into their hormone cycles yet. But since he got caught early enough, he has a chance at still being fertile.

Appreciate, for a moment, that the one time Kaname isn't a terrible human being to Zero, he manages to singlehandedly ruin Zero's most important plan. And that the whole thing happened because Zero did something selflessly moral in the first place. Two different kind acts, and they accidentally preserved their chance at a baby neither of them want. Such irony.

Next chapter: two truths and a lie.
Chapter Notes

A note on Yuuki's character arc, and human Yuuki vs. pureblood Yuuki. Yuuki definitely starts out in this fic as a more human-like Yuuki who has learned elements of the pureblood Yuuki's skills, because Kaname has kept her overprotected and ignorant in many respects. Her character is gradually shedding more of her fears and insecurities, but that's not a linear process. She backslides, she has moments of weakness when she returns to the old Yuuki who wouldn't fight for herself. She's trying, and she's learning. I don't think that all of human Yuuki's traits are weaknesses, either. She's moving towards a more 'pureblood' type character, but I want this process to happen in a healthier way than in canon, because Yuuki makes her own choices, and not because events force her. So try to keep that in mind as you read.

Yuuki still needs to work out major things in her relationships with Kaname and Zero. With Kaname, it's asserting herself and his stopping secret keeping. With Zero, the big thing hanging between them is Zero's rejection of her pureblood self. She loves him. She is desperately afraid he will reject the pureblood vampire Yuuki again. That's why she acted very 'human' last chapter when he was drinking her blood. Zero is Yuuki's strength, but also her weakness. For the moment, they're stuck in their old pattern of more-than-friends-but-not-lovers and 'what do I mean to you?'

Waiting on the driveway for Yuuki to settle the last minute details of their sudden trip, Zero is an island amidst a sea of baggage, all of the things to be loaded into the car - including himself, he thinks wryly - left in one convenient place. Most of the luggage, the Hunter is embarrassed to admit, belongs to him. Stupid omega wardrobe; before now, Zero had been a strict one-bag traveler.

Yuuki had come to his suite the night before last, to inform his maids they needed to start packing for the journey to Kuran Manor, but she had been very vague about the reasoning behind her sudden desire to leave. Her explanation was entirely plausible, but Zero can't help but feel that something was off, though he can't put his finger on it.

His Hunter senses jangle a discordant warning; it looks like he's not getting away without seeing that damned Kuran first. Pity. Zero's looking forward to whole days without having to glimpse the pureblood's smug face. He's still reeling from the embarrassment caused by feeding on Kuran; Yuuki said that Zero fell asleep on the stinking pureblood's shoulder. Zero feels disgusted just thinking about it, which isn't helped by Kuran's appearance now, looking his normal arrogant, well-heeled self.

Clustered by the entrance with the other servants, his maids bow to the pureblood, then dart glances between the two of them and giggle as he approaches Zero. Sasaki swats more than a few before they politely turn away, leaving Kuran and himself to their unwanted privacy.

"Good evening, Kiryuu," Kuran says, with a pleased cast to his mouth that means he has something
nasty planned for Zero.


"I've come to see Yuuki off," the pureblood says. "And you too, I suppose."

Zero's glare sharpens a fraction more. "Then you should wait for her here," he suggests, and steps away, intending to wait with the servants. But Kuran catches his wrist, yanking him to a halt.

"We won't be seeing each other for quite a while. I thought we might spend a little quality time together before you go."

"Doing what?" Zero asks suspiciously.

But Kuran doesn't reply, only pulls him by his trapped wrist out of the luggage sea, past the servants, and into a sheltered nook in the entrance hall.

"You took quite a quantity of blood from me; you will return the favor before you go."

Zero's gloved hands tighten into fists. "I can't stop you, but if you think I'm helping you, you're wrong."

"Suit yourself," Kuran says, and pushes Zero against the wall. "Take off your coat."

"You do it, if you want my blood so much," Zero spits.

"Fine," Kuran grinds out with his eyes narrowed.

Zero realizes the flaw in his plan about the same time as Kuran does, when the pureblood's hands hover a moment before settling on his coat's ornamentally knotted cord ties.

As Kuran nimbly unfastens the diamond quilted, misty grey overcoat of Zero's traveling outfit, the pureblood remarks absently, "You look nice today." They both freeze, startled, and Kuran hastily abandons his task, merely pushing the thick material down Zero's arms and away from his throat.

"It was habit. Must keep up appearances," Kuran explains, then grabs Zero's wrists with his hands and roughly pushes them against the stone above the Hunter's head, holding Zero pinioned in his grasp.

"You better not ruin my clothes, I don't have time to change," Zero orders, searching for anything to distract himself from the thought that they're right in the middle of the entryway, where anyone could come see, and Kuran has him pinned against the wall like a cliche movie vampire.

Kuran hums to show that he's heard, and tightens his grip on Zero's wrists as he prepares his bite area; Zero flinches at the first wet stripe of his tongue, and bites down on his lip when Kuran's fangs bury themselves inside his neck, so not a single sound escapes his mouth. It doesn't matter - every vampire nearby can smell his blood, and knows exactly what they're doing - but Zero has his pride.

Kuran presses his full weight on Zero's body, a reflex trapping his prey further against the stone. Normally, an omega should react with anger to an alpha behaving so aggressively, but Zero's weak instincts stay quiet. He might even feel a little relaxed.
"Hurry up," he says, wincing as Kuran takes an even larger mouthful. "Yuuki will be here soon."

"Too late," Zero hears, and from his position with his head turned to the side, he can just see her arms crossed over her chest and the flinty expression on her face. Kuran's in trouble, Zero thinks with glee. To actually get angry with him, Yuuki must be furious.

"Kaname," she demands, bristling in her pink coat, "are we, or are we not trying to get Zero healthy?"

Kuran hastily pulls his fangs out of Zero's neck, quickly enough that Zero unwillingly makes a noise of surprise and pain; Yuuki glares harder as Kaname begins to seal the punctures on Zero's neck and releases his wrists.

"I won't risk Zero's recovery, not even a little," Yuuki tells her husband. "A taste is fine, but I know that you've drank much more than that. No more until Aido-sempai allows it after considering Zero's health. Promise me, Kaname."

Kuran actually looks contrite as he draws away, and refastens Zero's coat with swift fingers like he thinks he can hide the evidence. Yuuki isn't fooled. "Your promise, Onii-sama."

"I promise I will not feed deeply again from Zero without a doctor's permission," he obediently gives. Yuuki scrutinizes her husband to judge his sincerity, but eventually nods and accepts his promise.

Looking past Kuran, Yuuki addresses her words to Zero alone. "I've had the car loaded. It's time for us to leave."

Kuran interjects, "I've brought Kiryuu a present, before you go." The pureblood reaches into his suit jacket and pulls out what looks to be a folded length of white silk. When Kuran shakes it open, Zero can see that it's a scarf - but what is this for?

At Zero and Yuuki's incomprehension, Kuran explains, "The immune tolerance process works most effectively with continuous reinforcement. Since I will not be joining you, Kiryuu will take this item with my scent instead, so his body thinks I'm nearby. Eventually we'll all use something like this."

Zero eyes the silk, then sighs and snatches the scarf from Kuran's hands. Ugh, he's going to need to shower off the smell later, he thinks as he winds it loosely around his throat; the distance doesn't help - he can still smell Kuran.

"I'm taking it off in the car," Zero announces as Kuran escorts them to the idling vehicles.

Kuran ignores him, speaking softly and holding Yuuki by the elbows as he kisses her goodbye.

"You forgot Zero, Kaname-sempai," she reminds the pureblood as he's turning away to go back in the house. Zero whips his head around to stare at Kuran in the same way the pureblood's staring at Zero. "You give him a goodnight kiss every day," she points out, "but we'll be missing you for the next few days, so shouldn't you give Zero a goodbye kiss?"

Reluctantly, Kuran leans down to touch their lips together. After doing this so many times, being kissed by Kuran inspires less outrage than that first kiss - it's nearly boring at this point - but Zero still doesn't like it. Both of them make the same offended face as they separate, though Kuran is more subtle about it.

Yuuki giggles; Zero glares weakly at her. If she was going to punish Kuran, why did Zero have to
"I'll see you when you return," Kuran says, and the two of them pile into the car for the long trip ahead.

Kuran Manor is everything Yuuki imagined a vampire's lair would be when she was a small, fearful human child: a brooding, intimidating presence in the landscape looming over the gloomy, thick forest around it. Yet now, as an adult, she can recognize that the house also has a regal air, and carries the weight of its age with dignity. When it was a royal palace, Kuran Manor had been named the White Orchid Residence, and the white stone it's built from makes the name well-given. What kind of person had her Ancestor been, she wonders, to build this heavy gothic manor to live in?

Ghosts walk here. Even after fifty years, Kuran Manor is tainted by the invisible imprint of those terrible events. The house had been closed after its masters' deaths, when her brother went to live with Ichijo Asato. Most of the rooms have lain undisturbed for all the years since, the furniture covered by dust sheets, the curtains and shutters closed, attics packed away and the staff pared down to a skeleton crew of caretakers. Her parent's personal possessions have all been left untouched, like Juuri and Haruka merely left for a moment, and will return any second to take up their old lives.

Yuuki remembers almost nothing of the upstairs floors, so she recognizes the heavy pall cast over the place when she steps inside, but feels only dull pain rather than sharp anguish. She has flashes sometimes, sense memories - the feeling of trailing her fingers over the dark wallpaper, the way her small bare feet sank into the thick carpets, the familiar taste of the honey tea the cook makes her when she can't sleep one night.

She can't fault Kaname for avoiding the manor; his memories of their parents are certain to be far more painful than her sparse recollections. Instead, she feels guilty for bringing his loss to the surface again, which makes her doubt her course of action - was all this secrecy really worth the truth? - but Yuuki persists. It is her right to be here, whatever her purpose. Is she not the daughter of the Kuran family?

Truthfully, her anger at Kaname's lying and dismissiveness had faded long ago. Yuuki had suspected the shadows Kaname hid, and loved him anyway; knowing with certainty does not change that, though she's going to give him a piece of her mind for trying to withhold so much from her. But even though her anger has ebbed, Yuuki has been forced to maintain the distance between them lest Kaname discover her continuing investigations. If she yielded and allowed him to feed from her, what might he learn in her blood?

The only thing she can't forgive him for is what he's done to Zero. That anger has not faded. Kaname risked Zero's life twice - first as his assassin, and then as his scapegoat. Even if it's her brother, he won't get away so easily with threatening Zero's life.

Zero himself is a balm, sensing when Yuuki needs company and a distraction, refusing to leave her alone with her thoughts. He's both her companion and her friend, providing a willing ear and helping hands to sort through all of her parent's things. Yuuki doesn't know what key she's looking for to unlock Kaname's secret, so they have to search everything, under the pretext of discovering more about her parents. It's not wholly a lie. She learns little about Kaname that helps her, but Kuran Manor stores a rich trove of important items and documents that belonged to her parents, between the attics, the basement, and their bedroom and study.

It has been good to come, Yuuki realizes now, if for no other reason than to allow her this time for
discovery and closure. Unable to leave her basement, her family had led secret lives above her head, mysterious and only dimly understood through their stories. Now she's pulling back that curtain to peer behind at the hidden recesses. More than ever, she feels that she understands who they were not just as parents, but as people, what it felt like to live in their world.

She treasures most of all the stories the staff tell her of her parents' lives; she listens to them for hours and whole evenings, imagining Juuri and Haruka vibrant and alive. In her sleep she dreams of them, a small child again in her memories; at night Yuuki walks along their paths, retraces their steps.

In the master bedroom she finds a bottle of cologne smelling of woodsy citrus and ambergis, which she wraps carefully and packs in her luggage; when she buried her face in her father's neck, this was the scent she remembers. The clothes hung in the closet all have a hint of lilac and vanilla; one of the silk dresses spills through her hands like water, as soft against her cheek now as it was when she first fell asleep resting her head against it. The pale blue silk goes in her suitcase too.

It's not just her parents that linger here; there are artifacts of even older owners too. Yuuki stumbles on a portrait gallery of her ancestors, and spends nearly an hour studying them, reproductions of earlier works time rotted away. She'd never even seen pictures of her grandparents before. Sometimes she feels like she's the one intruding in this shrine of memories, like one of the pale ghosts of her ancestors will drift past her in the hallway, solid enough to touch.

She avoids the basement for now; it's enough to know that her father died on the ground she walked over when she first arrived. But she will have to confront those memories before she leaves. Yuuki doesn't want this place to grow into something she's too afraid to face.

The days pass. Yuuki hardly notices. Time does not move forward here, anchored inescapably to the past. She wishes it had been snowing when they arrived, to perfect the illusion, but Yuuki doubts she is strong enough yet for that. But someday, when she is ready, she will look on the white walls and turrets of this house under a blanket of snow.

"Yuuki, were you daydreaming? You've been staring out the window for ten minutes. I'm not sorting through this for myself, you know," Zero says, popping his head out of the antique oak chest he's busied himself with. "At least pretend to admire my discoveries."

Today, the two of them are in the farthest room of the storage attics, high above the forest canopy, searching through the heirlooms kept there.

Yuuki shakes herself, and turns up the corners of her mouth as she attempts a smile for Zero. "Sorry, I was thinking about snow."

Zero is giving her a considering look, silver hair falling across his eyes. "Well, I found something better to think about," he says, obviously trying to distract her. "Look!"

He triumphantly presents Yuuki with a photograph. It's a tiny Kaname, from before she was born, dressed as a proper little master, a miniature adult in knee shorts with a ribbon in his collar. It's adorable. Yuuki presses her hand to her mouth, trying not to laugh.

"I found a bunch of stuff from Kuran's childhood here - old clothes and toys," Zero announces with glee, grinning like a shark. "I can't wait to find all the best blackmail material!"

"Let me see!" Yuuki eagerly asks.

Together they go through the trunks, sitting together on the ground like children, enamoured with
the feeling of finding something forbidden. Secretive, impish smiles easily passing between them, all it takes is for one of them to hold up a stuffed wolf or a tiny sailor suit, and Yuuki and Zero are howling with laughter, doubled over with tears leaking out of their eyes. It wouldn't be half so funny if Kuran wasn't such a dignified adult, who took himself very seriously and would rather disappear into a cloud of bats than appear 'cute'.

"It's a little weird that all this stuff is here, don't you think?" Zero remarks offhandedly when they're both lying on the floor, trying to regain breath after discovering a plastic duck bath toy.

She turns her head toward him, pretending at indifference. "What do you mean?"

"Why is all this here, buried all the way in the back of the attics? I mean, we already found Kuran's baby things downstairs. Why put everything from the time he's three all the way up here instead? Wouldn't you want to look at it sometimes? But it's hidden away instead with old paintings and extra furniture," Zero says.

That is rather odd, now that Zero mentions it. According to the servants, her brother had been very mature for his age, reading and writing earlier than usual, with a strong grasp on his powers for a child. Her parents were very proud of him; they should have kept his old outgrown things close by.

The Hunter snaps his fingers. "I got it! Kuran was burying the evidence that he wasn't born an adult. No one must ever know the scary pureblood played with stuffed animals!"

"Yeah, that's probably it," Yuuki replies, contemplative.

They're in such a good mood that evening, playfully teasing and pushing one another as they make their way downstairs to shower away the dust, that when Zero asks what they'll have for dinner, Yuuki tells him, "You'll make dinner."

Zero sputters and complains about her audacity in deciding that he'll cook - but Yuuki can tell that he's charmed by the idea. Zero enjoys cooking, after all, and it's been quite a while since he's made anything; the servants at Rosehill prepare all their meals. Zero argues that the staff will think it's inappropriate for them to make their own dinner, but Yuuki overrides his protests with the fact that she's their mistress, and if she wants to trample on etiquette, send them away for one night, and make her Consort cook them dinner, then she can do as she likes.

They meet back up in their pajamas and slippers, dignity put aside in the name of comfort. Zero makes them salted ramen and omelette rice over the stove with his sleeves rolled up, while she attempts to help and he drives her away with a glare and a dishtowel. Yuuki eats until she feels like she'll explode, sitting side-by-side together on stools at the kitchen table.

There's an undeniable nostalgia between them; they talk about old friends and treasured memories, fight for the last piece of meat. Yuuki feels more at ease than she has in a long time - she feels like herself - stripped of all her masks and the need for pretending. It's this feeling that she wants to give Kaname: the feeling of being understood, precisely as you are.

When dinner is over, they linger over the dishes, reluctant to return to their own rooms and sleep for the day, until Zero suggests they stay up for a while in the sitting room, with the curtains closed and the fire burning out in the hearth.

They sit on the couch together, knees tucked up childishly beneath them as they pore over old photo albums of her parents, happy and alive, the tragedy of their deaths put aside for the night. It's a good thing she sent away the servants, Yuuki thinks, because everything they've done tonight
would scandalize their watching eyes. Zero's not even wearing his Hoseki, and Yuuki's sprawled ungracefully on the couch next to him in her most comfortable, threadbare pajamas. Eventually they get sleepy, carefully put aside the albums, and slouch all over the couch, relaxed, yawning and watching the fire flicker.

"Does Kaname feed from you often?" Yuuki asks, her mind wandering to her brother, left out tonight at Rosehill. She misses him.

"Only a couple of times," Zero replies, wrinkling his nose cutely.

With her full belly and the heat of the dying fire sinking in her bones, it's easy for the words to slip out. "I was really jealous when I saw him drinking your blood."

"You're his wife Yuuki, you don't have any reason to be jealous of me. Kuran loves you more than anything," Zero reassures her.

Yuuki shakes her head, straightening up; Zero looks up at her from where he's supported by the couch arm, sensing the serious turn their evening has taken.

"I wasn't jealous of you, Zero," she tells him, fixing him with a heavy, meaningful gaze.

"I was jealous of Kaname-sempai."

Zero's stoic face breaks into incomprehension. "Why would you be jealous of him?" he asks plaintively, like he really can't understand.

"Kaname-sempai got to taste your blood again," she tells him. Why wouldn't she be jealous? She hasn't drank from him since their wedding, and what a wonderful taste it was. And all this time, her brother was feeding from their Consort without restraint! Now she doesn't dare, for Zero's health, but oh, how Yuuki wants to.

"Why would you want my blood when you have Kuran's?" Zero's brow wrinkles with puzzlement as he asks, genuinely confused.

Yuuki stares at the Hunter for a second, all traces of sleepy relaxation gone. Why does any vampire want another's blood? But Zero is a Hunter, she reminds herself, so she answers him seriously.

"I desire Kaname's blood, and I can't imagine living without it, but only drinking from both of you satisfies my cravings to the utmost."

"But why do you need mine too?" Zero questions, still clearly perplexed.

"Isn't it obvious? Because I hold the same strong feelings for both of you, I want to drink your blood."

Zero seems to understand now, nodding, his expression turning satisfied. "That's true. Vampires often feed from their close friends and family members. People they're close to."

The pureblood stares at him, wanting to throw her hands in the air. How can he misunderstand her so badly?

"No, Zero. Vampires do enjoy drinking from friends and family, but that's not why I desire your blood more than anyone but Kaname."

Yuuki reaches out to take Zero's hand; the Hunter looks vaguely uneasy as the sudden intimacy.
"I desire your blood so deeply my soul thirsts, Zero, because I love you - romantically, the way I love my husband. You own half my heart."

"You don't - you don't think about me that way. You never have," the silver-haired Hunter insists, deeply spooked. "Yuuki, you don't have to force yourself to think of me that way now that we're married. You're not obligated to love me. I'm okay with not being loved - I'm a duty you didn't ask for, after all. Being allowed to stay by your side is enough for me."

Yuuki shakes her head sharply. "I understand my feelings now. I love you, Zero. I have since before I left Cross Academy."

Zero's eyes widen, the whites showing at the edges, all his expectations shattered. He shakes his head frantically and pulls his hand out of her grasp, backing away until his back digs into the arm of the couch.

"You're confused, Yuuki. It's just the situation clouding your feelings. You're in love with Kuran, not me. You feel responsible for me, because you're a kind person, and you want to make me happy. That's all. I won't let you ruin your happiness for this."

She studies him, taking the time to consider his objections and organize her thoughts. "I've held back, because I didn't want my feelings to frighten you. But if holding back made you believe I didn't want you, then that was a misstep on my part."

The pureblood prowls forward slowly on her hands and knees, until she's right beside him on the couch, trapping Zero in in the corner.

"There is no part of our marriage that is a duty to me," she tells him, rosewood eyes catching his shocked gaze.

Yuuki leans toward him; her skin thrills, just from being so close. "I am an alpha, Zero, just as much as Kaname." She lets him see the hunger - the undisguised, ravenous want of her pureblood nature. Zero shivers; the predator in her breast licks its lips.

"Every time I see you, every time I catch your scent, every time I think of you, I ache with desire. I love every part of you; it takes all of my strength to restrain myself."

She bends her head to murmur in his ear, "Do you know how it tortures me that Kaname will be the one to take your omega's virginity? I would kill for that prize, and my brother doesn't even care! When he treats you badly, I want to claw him."

Leaning more heavily over him, one hand bracing herself on the couch arm by his head, Yuuki cradles his cheek with the other; shocked lavender eyes watch her bring their faces close. "I love you, in all the ways one human being can love another. You never have to return my feelings, but I won't be satisfied until you accept them as true."

Then Yuuki gives in to her hunger, and crosses the last space between them, cutting off his denial with the long, deep, thorough kind of kiss that lets all of her uncountable feelings and desires speak for her.

Breaking off the kiss when the heat in her belly stirs dangerously, Yuuki tells him, "Goodnight, Zero. I'll see you in the morning. Remember that I love you," and hastily leaves Zero to collect himself before she does anything the Hunter isn't ready for.

Zero is like a mouse smelling a cat the next morning at breakfast, flighty and nervous. They're both
wearing their normal roles again, Yuuki in her pureblood's elegant dresses and Zero in his omega's robes and Hoseki. Yuuki takes care to behave exactly as she did the day before, keeping their interaction as normal as possible. Nothing has changed in her; Zero needs to see that the Yuuki who loves him is still the same Yuuki as always. He doesn't have to fear that her confession has turned her into a dangerous stranger.

Gradually, Zero relaxes enough to talk and joke with her as he always does, still eyeing her occasionally when the Hunter thinks she's looking away.

"What are we doing today?" Zero asks when he's finished eating.

Yuuki pauses. Their time at Kuran Manor is coming to an end. Yuuki is running out of places to hunt for her brother's secret; only a few rooms remain that the pair have not searched thoroughly.

The pureblood closes her eyes for a moment, then opens them and turns to Zero. "I thought that we'd explore the basements today."

Zero touches her elbow. "Okay," he says, "If you're ready, then we'll go."

They're beautiful rooms - roomy, well-lit and bright even without windows, done in blue, grey and white. With beautiful art hung on the walls, and outfitted with fine furniture, their quality can hardly be distinguished from the manor upstairs.

There is her bed. Those are her clothes in the closet, her picture books in the bookcases, her toys in the playroom.

These are the rooms from her memories of love and family, where she lived for the first six years of her life, happy and cared for. Her parents tried so hard to surround her with comfort and light and joy, wanting only to keep her safe. She can see it with her eyes - they loved her so much.

The sob she can feel choking her throat finally breaks free when she finds the room with faint bloodstains soaked into the wood floor. If she strains, Yuuki imagines she can still catch a faint, familiar scent with a tang of iron.

Zero rushes to her side as soon as he hears her crying, but she shakes her head and waves him away; Yuuki wants to be alone with her grief.

On her knees by the floor stained with her mother's blood, ugly cries shaking her whole body with anguish, Yuuki howls out her pain and her guilt, never truly given voice before now.

Mother, Father, how was my life worth both of yours? Why did I deserve to live when you died? I'm sorry. I'm so sorry.

She comes back to herself some time later, curled on her side, just shy of touching the rusty mark on the ground. Her chest rises and falls, inhale and exhale, her mind emptied of emotion by the violence of her outpoured grief.

She touches her chest lightly, just above her heart. Some wound inside of her has been purged of infection, and washed clean by her tears; it will scar, but now it can heal.

She breathes more easily. Her body feels lighter. So she gets up on her knees again - she's tired, but that's not enough to stop her - and reaches out to rest her shaky hand on the the place of her mother's death. She's out of tears, or she would cry again. But she bends her head and summons the memory of her love for them, the tribute only their daughter can offer, and bows to kiss the ground.
Thank you, Mother. Thank you, Father. I'm glad for the world I saw as a human. I miss you, but I have things to care for here, too. So I hope you don't mind if we don't see each other for a while.

"Zero?" she calls out softly. Her voice cracks, sounding more like a frog's croak after all that crying, and her nose is stuffed; she sniffs a few times trying to clear it.

There's a noise from the far wall; Zero stands up, and comes up behind her. Yuuki looks over her shoulder at him, and gives a slight, tremulous smile. Zero smiles gently in return, and offers Yuuki his hand, helping her stand on unsteady legs.

"There's a hidden door to an escape tunnel somewhere in here," Yuuki says, voice still rough. "Can you help me find it? I want to go for a walk,"

Zero's clever fingers find the latch, and the two of them walk until they come out the other side, in a green clearing where the cicadas sing under the moon. Yuuki feels freed.

Rather than return through the tunnel, Yuuki and Zero walk back to Kuran Manor through the forest. Without Zero's navigation skills as a to Hunter guide them, Yuuki would have been hopelessly lost.

When she returns to her basement, this time to search in earnest, the rooms are just rooms now. The ghosts have been put to rest, sleeping peacefully in her heart.

Now Yuuki can tell Zero about her Okaa-san and Otou-san - how beautiful and lively Juuri was, how calm and gentle Haruka was. How she liked to have Kaname read to her, and how she brushed her mother's hair while her father gently smoothed a brush through her own. She shows him her collection of dolls and stuffed animals, and throws a pink cat at his head when he raises an eyebrow at the dark brown bear hand-sewn to look like Kaname.

When the hour grows late, Zero leads her out the hidden door, through the basements - and Yuuki stops, halfway to the staircase.

"What is it?" Zero asks, craning his head back.

The pureblood points towards a hallway. "What's down that way?"

"The servants said the wine cellar and a few more rooms are down there."

"Can we go look?"

Zero thinks for a moment, and then nods. "We have time before dinner."

Yuuki asked mostly on a whim; she's not quite ready to ascend back to normality yet. They wander together through a few hallways and storage rooms, before entering a wider passage more grandly decorated with intricate stonework; the Kuran crest repeats over and over in the carved patterns. Shooting each other curious glances, Yuuki and Zero follow the corridor until it ends at a pair of heavy double doors, marked in the center with another Kuran crest.

"I think I know where we are," says Zero, "This is the Rose Sepulchre, the resting place of the members of the Kuran family who chose to Sleep. I've been hoping we'd find it; I'd like to see Kuran Nagisa's tomb - Consort Aileya's spouse who went to Sleep after she died. Do you mind if we go inside?"

There's a faint, familiar smell in the air here. A blood scent that Yuuki knows as well as her own.
Why does the crypt behind this door smell like Kaname?

"Yes, let's see," replies Yuuki, and pushes the doors open for Zero. They're made to be so heavy only a pureblood has the strength to open them, and if any pureblood without the blood of the Kuran family tried to enter, the mesh of spells protecting the whole crypt would attack mercilessly, causing great injury. Yuuki has to carry Zero over the threshold, grumpy and blushing, when the defensive wards, like an invisible wall, prevent him from taking one step further past the door. The purebloods Sleeping here are completely vulnerable, so Yuuki can understand why her ancestors created so many defenses.

The Rose Sepulchre is built from the same white stone as Kuran Manor's facade, and has all the beauty and grandeur Yuuki has come to expect from her family's homes. Filled with stone sculptures and scenes of everyday life, this is not a monument to the dead, but a place of rest and recovery for the living. Leading off the main room are the individual chambers, cut from the bedrock underneath the house just in case they ever became needed.

Zero finds not just Kuran Nagisa's sarcophagus, but two more tombs nearby belonging to the Third King and Third Queen, covered in the strongest wards Zero has ever seen. All three of them are empty.

"Where did they go?" Yuuki wonders, immersed in the puzzle of the missing purebloods. "Kuran Nagisa is supposed to be here, but I've never heard that the Third King and Queen planned to Sleep. Supposedly they passed over their power to the Council and the Senate, and committed suicide together because they were weary of living. Was this an earlier plan they rejected?"

While Yuuki frowns at the tombs of her grandparents, the Hunter paces around the stone sarcophagi, examining the inscriptions. "Why would they need such strong wards?" he wonders, "Did they expect to be attacked?"

At this, Yuuki startles. "Kuran Rido. He was their son too, wasn't he? Rido killed his siblings - my parents. What if he killed his parents too? What if they meant to Sleep with their brother, but Rido murdered them first?"

Zero touches his chin, considering her proposal. "What about Kuran Nagisa?"

"Maybe Rido murdered him too?" Yuuki suggests, but something about the scenario doesn't quite fit. And the smell of her brother's blood is still tickling her senses.

"I'm going to go look around a little more," she tells a distracted Zero, occupied with studying the structure of the wards.

The deeper she goes into the crypt, her footsteps echoing off bare stone as the eyes of the statues stare back at her, the stronger the scent grows, and the plainer and rougher the crypt becomes.

The scent of Kaname's blood intensifies in front of another door, identical to the one at the Sepulchre's entrance bearing the Kuran crest. The air here is musty, dry and smells of age. She pushes with all her strength, and the doors swing open with the rusty shriek of hinges unoiled for hundreds of years.

Someone has been here recently; there's rust flaked from the hinges on the floor, and footprints in the dust. But Yuuki gasps when she sees the plain stone coffin in the center of the bare room, the only object here.

She has seen this coffin before, in Kaname's memories. A coffin with a terrifying monster inside.
Moving closer to the sarcophagus, Yuuki can see a faint, worn carving on the wall; she can't quite make it out, but she traces the shape of the lines with her hand, and underneath the dust she finds a raven collared with a crown around its neck. She uses her palm to wipe away more dust; the faded red paint in its eye shines brighter.

"I recognize this place."

Yuuki shrieks and whirs around - but it's just Zero. She sags with relief.

"I've seen it before, in Kuran's memories."

"So have I," Yuuki says, coming to join him by the coffin.

"I wonder why he would think of this when we drank from him?"

"I don't know," she tells him honestly. "There's no inscription here that tells us the name of the person inside. And it's not as though there are many Kurans to chose from. We're not a large family."

"It's been opened recently," Zero says, "Look at the scrapes on the lid; they match the ones on the floor. And the dust has been disturbed, so it's not from when whoever this is went to sleep."

"It smells like blood in here," she offers, and Zero draws the air deep his lungs.

Then he sneezes sharply, so hard his Hoseki flies askew. "It does, doesn't it? But let's head upstairs for dinner. I'd like to be able to breathe again."

Once they leave behind the subterranean world hiding the Manor's greatest secrets, the banality of their surroundings reassures Yuuki enough to ask Zero the question she's wanted to ask him since her conversation with Aido.

"Zero," she starts; the Hunter looks over his shoulder curiously; Yuuki grabs her courage and presses on. "Has Kaname ever said or done anything strange?"

Zero gives her a look, and Yuuki laughs. "Okay, my brother does a lot of strange things, but I mean like - especially strange."

The Hunter considers her question seriously for a few steps. "Mmm, the strangest thing Kuran has ever said to me was after he released your pureblood side. He looked up at me and told me 'If I had been born her real brother, I would have been much happier.' I think he was high off tasting your blood, honestly."

Yuuki stops dead in the hallway and tries to fake a laugh, "That is a strange thing to say."

The genealogy books they search after dinner are useless; they can't solve the mystery of the lone occupant of the Rose Sepulchre. There are too many 'disappeared to commit suicide' tales to discern which of her ancestors changed their mind and now sleeps beneath their feet. Eventually, Zero goes to bed, leaving Yuuki to doggedly read on as her vision blurs and her eyelids flutter. The hard-edged books are an uncomfortable bed, but sometime past one in the afternoon she loses the struggle against sleep. And Yuuki dreams.

She's deep in the crypt again, in the room with the unmarked stone coffin. The raven on the wall draws her like a magnet; hypnotized, she puts her feet down, step by step, until she stands before the drawing. In the dream, her footsteps make no sound.
The red eye, now more like a raw ruby then faded red paint, glints in the light as through the bird is watching her. The raven is alive, she realizes, as it cocks its head to the side, studying her as she looks back at it. Then the lines peel away from the stone, and the skeletal drawing of the raven, empty outline filled with nothing but air, lands on the crypt floor.

The coffin is not unmarked, she realizes, as the bird hops onto the lid with a flap of its gaunt wings. The inscription of its owner was there all along, right in front of them.

Who are you? She asks the raven. The raven's beak opens -

- and she is standing on a plain. A living, feathered raven with eyes like dried blood caws at her feet. In the distance a vortex of ravens circles around a single figure, too distant to make out, except for his dark red-brown hair. If she goes to that person, she will know who they are. She takes a single step forward -

- and another enormous raven, identical to the first, fixes ruby eyes on her and mantles its wings, harshly cawing. A pale hand strokes its black feathers, soothing the agitated bird.

Dark coat flapping in the wind, Kaname caresses the raven perched on his arm, eyes the same deep vermillion as his familiar, and smiles at her.

Yuuki bolts upright, breath short and whistling in her throat, Half-expecting to see a raven perched nearby, she clutches the fabric of her nightgown above her heart; it beats furiously, like it's trying to beat right out of her chest. The pureblood holds her head in her hands, trying to find the boundary been dreams and reality. Everything had felt so real.

'If I had been born her real brother, I would have been much happier.'

She sucks in a ragged breath, painful with her dry throat. There's something hovering just beyond her fingertips, linking the events of her dream together. What is it?


Yuuki shakes her head, pressing her hands over her eyes. What connection is she missing?

Aido's suspicions about her genius, prodigy brother's inconsistent behavior. The strange circumstances of Kuran Rido's death. Zero's role. Kuran Nagisa's missing body. Kuran Rido's presence in the crypt. The smell of Kaname's blood in the crypt. The recently opened, occupied coffin, identical to the memory from Kaname's blood. The raven with a crown carved on the wall. Kaname's raven familiar. The hidden things from her brother's childhood, stored separately from his baby things. Kaname was unusually mature as a child, the servants say.

'If I had been born her real brother, I would have been much happier.'

How did the Ancestor of the Hunters know that Kaname had secrets? She exists in the blood of her descendents, Zero told her, and sees through their eyes. The Ancestress should know only what the Hunters know. Perhaps she had watched Kaname through Zero's eyes. It didn't fit; the Ancestress had sounded like she knew Kaname's habits well, and spoken of him fondly. Perhaps it was nothing - but then there was Kaname's reaction to the sight of her. He never showed unintended emotion in public, but he hadn't been able to cover his strong reaction to the sight of the Ancestress. There had been turmoil in him, his normal composure broken even before the Ancestress spoke to them. Kaname had recognized her.

Three ravens. One in the tomb. One in the Ancestress' memories. One perched on her brother's fist.
Three memories, strung like pearls on a cord.


‘If I had been born her real brother, I would have been much happier.’

Yuuki tests the words in her mouth. They fall like stones in the silent air, casting ripples.

"Kaname is not my brother."

The phone dials, beeps as the connection goes to voicemail.

"Hi Kaname-sempai, it's Yuuki. I know I've been distant lately, and I'm sorry for that. But I really miss you. Can you come out to Kuran Manor and stay for a day or two? It's the weekend, and you don't have to work tomorrow. I thought that we could spend the evening together, just the two of us. Let me know if you can. Goodbye."

Click.

Ablaze with light, Kuran Manor glows like a bright beacon in the dark forest; it's Yuuki who gives it light and life, just as her mother and father did before her. Kaname adjusts his cravat one last time before stepping into the luminous aura of the lamps; as his wife requested, he's wearing his best formalwear for their dinner. Unfortunately, he hadn't been able to come any sooner, but Yuuki had sounded pleased over the phone and told him that it was perfect timing.

With the servants bowing behind her, Yuuki is waiting by the door to welcome him, all the charms of her youthful maturity and beauty on display. Like a field in spring, sprays of pink blossoms cascade down the single shoulder of her white dress, twine around her bodice, then spill across her skirt. Her long auburn hair ripples unbound down her back, held by a gold hairband shaped like woven boughs of flowers, matching the gold blossoms and vines circling her throat.

Yuuki holds out her hands to him, smiling brightly, and Kaname takes them, pulling her in close for a kiss.

"You look divine, my dear," he compliments her honestly, drawing away to admire her efforts more thoroughly. "But I wonder what I have done to earn this?"

Her rouged lips break into a teasing smile. "Perhaps I just felt like it. Let's have dinner now. If you like, we can talk later."

Following her into the formal dining room, Kaname can't resist asking, "Plum blossoms? The sakura is more suitable for May, I think."

Yuuki looks back sharply and admonishes him, "I like plum better. The plum braves winter to flower early, and few appreciate its beauty; the sakura waits for spring, and is loved by everyone. We both know why I won't wear a dress with sakura blossoms. Please refrain from ruining our evening, Kaname-sempai."

Wisely choosing to let the subject drop, Kaname tries a different tack. "Where is our Consort this evening? I don't sense him nearby."

"I had Takuma-sempai pick him up for a sleepover. He'll be safe there, and Shouto-san didn't mind. I thought we could use a night to ourselves," she tells him, gesturing for a servant to uncork the
"How have you liked staying at the manor?" Kaname asks once the first course is served, a seasonal selection of light sashimi.

Yuuki considers her answer for a moment; a lock of dark hair tumbles over her shoulder. With an elegant flick of her hand, she brushes it back again.

"I can't say that it's always been easy, but I've come to enjoy being here. I've learned many things," his wife replies, meeting his eyes as she closes her red lips around a choice morsel.

"I wouldn't like to stay all the time - Rosehill is my home now - but I wouldn't mind using it as a retreat now and then," she continues.

Kaname's hand tightens around his fork. Kuran Manor is a tomb to him, a reminder of his powerlessness and failure. He came only for Yuuki; he will stay only for Yuuki.

"If that's what you want," he says tonelessly.

But she catches him, her bright eyes marking something in his face. "Don't hold things back, Kaname-sempai. If the idea of being here makes you uncomfortable, say so. I don't think that it makes you weak, to say what you really feel. So tell me the feelings you have spilling over in your heart."

He's close to snapping his silverware in two, ill at ease underneath her gaze - he knows full well that he can't admit his feelings without exposing himself - when Yuuki finally looks back down at her meal.

"How have things been at Rosehill while I've been gone?" she asks him, allowing the conversation to move back on more comfortable ground.

Kaname takes the opportunity to fill the air with more convenient topics as they work through the next courses: simmered vegetables and tofu served with rice, miso soup, chilled, lightly cooked vegetables and a flame-grilled fish.

"Did Okaa-sama and Otou-sama ever do this?" Yuuki asks, gesturing between them with her spoon as they eat the dark chocolate cake prepared for dessert.

Kaname pauses. "This?"

"Spend time together!" Yuuki laughs, shaking her head at him.

"Is that what this is?" Kaname asks mildly. "Well, Juuri and Haruka often did romantic things together. They were very affectionate, even in public. It could be a little ridiculous sometimes. I remember that they liked to go for walks in the rain and share an umbrella." He goes a little distant at the memory of his descendants, taken unfairly before their time through his negligence.

Yuuki's voice breaks through his thoughts. "Mmmm. Onii-sama, why do you call our parents Juuri and Haruka?"

Kaname freezes, ever so slightly, and sweeps his gaze up to evenly meet her rosewood eyes.

"A habit I picked up when I lived with Ichijo Asato. Calling our parents by their names helped me to put some distance between my emotions and my loss." The pureblood picks up his glass and takes a careful sip.
"Ah, I see," his wife accepts.

"Did you know that we found your old toys? There are many interesting things in the manor," she says, mirroring him, glass in hand. "Zero wanted us to see Kuran Nagisa sleeping in the Rose Sepulchure."

Kaname barely remembers to smile. "I wouldn't suggest it; the crypt is old and dusty. Certainly its occupants don't wish to be disturbed."

"Like you didn't want to be disturbed, Ancestor of the Kuran Family?"

Every glass object in the room shatters in a spasm of uncontrolled power; Kaname stares at his wife in shocked horror. How did she know? Who told her?

Yuuki watches him over the jagged rim of her broken glass; wine drips down her hand like blood. Neither of them were touched by a single sliver of glass; Yuuki's skill with her powers has grown.

The candles flicker in the breeze let in by the shattered windows. Yuuki puts the remains of her glass down, wipes her hand with the napkin from her lap, and returns his gaze evenly.

"So I was right then; I still wasn't sure if you were Kuran Nagisa or the Ancestor. There's only one person sleeping downstairs, but the body in your tomb isn't you. You moved Kuran Nagisa's body into your coffin to hide your Awakening."

Kaname's jaw tightens; it's too late to play this as a joke or a misunderstanding. Yuuki knows - or has guessed - too much to hide now.

How had this happened? This day was always meant to come, but only when Kaname willed it. How had he lost control so quickly?

His throat tightens, and his meal sits heavily in his churning stomach. An ocean of fear surges in his chest, threatening to drag him down, where the weight of black despair and loneliness will drown him. If she rejects him, he will have nothing left. The madness nips at the corners of his mind, tickling his brain with its spindly claws, old bloody plans rising afresh.

At the same time, as the old mantra rises - we'll be alone she's going to leave us she's leaving us alone - the Ancestor of the Kurans feels a trace of relief. He can throw away that mask called 'brother' now, one less part to play. This may destroy him, but at least his worry and fear of this day can finally end. The worst has already happened, after all.

Kaname raises his head and straightens his shoulders. "Yes. Kuran Yuuki, daughter of Juuri, you are correct - I am not your brother. I am the last and greatest of the Ancestors, the only one left who remembers those days. I am the first of your line, the Deathless King. I am the Ancestor of the Kuran."

Finally, the words he's wanted to tell her for so long. She's looking at him now, for the first time. The real him, stripped of lies and pretense. There's pride and power in finally naming himself, beside the resigned acceptance of her sure rejection. How can she not? She does not yet know the greatest of his sins against her.

The wind makes the candles flicker as his wife accepts his revelation, her eyes wide, and a touch of something like awe in her eyes. Finally she speaks. "I still don't understand everything - how this happened," she gestures at Kaname's body, "I know Rido probably caused it, and that Sleeping purebloods are vulnerable to malicious spells when Woken. But I don't understand how you came to take my brother's place. Will you tell me?"
Kaname tries to buy time. "The servants will come soon, to investigate the noise."

"No, they won't." Yuuki tells him tersely. "I gave orders that if they heard a disturbance, they were not to interrupt us unless called. We will have our privacy."

Her hands grip one another tightly. "Kaname, if you don't want to tell me everything now, that's fine. But you will have to tell me eventually. I won't let lies and half-truths stand between us anymore."

"Just - please." Yuuki's voice breaks, and her body strains toward him across the table. "The nearest I can reason is that you're possessing my brother's body, like Hio Shizuka with Kurenai Maria, and Rido with Shiki-sempai. I just need to know if he's still in there. Please, if nothing else, just tell me one thing. Is my brother in pain?" Yuuki's eyes are dark with desperation.

Kaname closes his eyes, chest weighed by despair.

"Kuran Kaname, the son of Haruka and Juuri, is not in pain. I am not possessing your brother, Yuuki. He died the night Rido awakened me from my slumber."

"Oh." Yuuki says in a small voice, choking back tears. "I don't know what I hoped to hear. I'm glad he's not hurting or in pain anymore. I don't know what I would have done if you told me he was still here, inside you. But I think part of me already knew he was gone. You're many things, but you're not the kind of person who would imprison someone in their own body. Then, is your name really Kaname?"

"Yes. By a terrible coincidence, Juuri and Haruka named their child after me. It was what gave Rido the idea to Wake me in the first place."

Now that Kaname's started to speak, he finds that he can't bring himself to stop, the whole story spilling out like a confession written in blood. Yuuki will inevitably leave him when she knows, but he can't stand the idea of drawing out this terrible fear any longer. Better to fall now and let the despair take him, than be tortured by hope.

Kaname rises to his feet, and Yuuki copies him, coming around the table to join him as he sags against the mantelpiece, watching the fire flicker. He keeps his back turned; Kaname cannot bear to watch her expression change when he reveals what he's done.

"I lied to you earlier; I made it sound as though his death had nothing to do with me. But your brother was alive when he left his uncle's hands. Rido drew his blood to lure me Awake, but it was I who quashed his struggles and drained him dry. I could not stop myself - I burned with the unquenched thirst of thousands and thousands of years. I did not even realize it was a child I held until I looked up into his dying eyes as he turned to ash. I murdered your infant brother, Yuuki, with these very hands. And then I dared to touch you with them."

He stares down at his palms, and then runs a hand through his hair, exhaling heavily. "Rido intended to gain my power by offering your brother to me as a sacrifice, then binding me as his servant. Once he became my Master, he wished to drink my blood and take my power. But he did not fully understand the binding of Master and Servant; I attacked him too, after killing your brother, draining Rido and wounding him so deeply it took him over a decade to recover. But even feeding from both of them was not enough to restore me; I needed more blood. Rido was protected as my Master, but without enough blood to sate my hunger, I would have gone into a frenzy and likely killed Juuri and Haruka too."

"So instead, I chose to take a form that I could support without harming anyone else. Consuming
your brother's life gave me enough strength to change myself into a being of similar size, so I turned my body into a child of the same age. Such a form could not withstand my memories or my power yet, and I suppressed them until my body was capable of surviving it. That's how I came to take your brother's place. I expected Juuri and Haruka to kill me - I had just murdered their son, after all. How could they not hate me for it? But instead they cared for me like I was their own child, without pretending I really was their son. They told no one of what Rido had done, or of my terrible act. They even allowed me to touch you, their second child, after my stained hands snuffed out the life of their eldest.

Even now, their actions were nearly incomprehensible to Kaname. But he was grateful to them, for giving Yuuki into his care, and for loving him as their own son.

"I failed their kindness - I let them die at Rido's hands. I should have taken care of him sooner. Their deaths were my fault. And I never dared to tell you. I let you believe that I was your brother all this time, when I was really the one who killed him, and who allowed your parents' deaths."

The pureblood lowers his head. He's finished; now his wife knows everything. He waits for the judgement he deserves.

Kaname's tense shoulders jerk with surprise when he feels the touch of a delicate hand.

"Kaname," she says, her voice soft, "you never meant to drain my brother to death, did you? Or for any of that to happen?"

He jerks his chin in a denial.

"Then what happened was not your fault - it was Rido's. Our hunger can't be denied; I can't even imagine what it must feel like to starve yourself like that, for thousands of years. You didn't intend to kill my brother, and you saved my parents' lives when you realized what was happening. You were a child; you shouldn't have needed to save them. And after they died you protected me, and you made sure that Rido was stopped."

He ventures a question, disbelieving. "It doesn't bother you that I ate a child, like an animal, to save my own life?"

Yuuki's hand on his shoulder tightens. "The Kaname who was the child of Kuran Juuri and Haruka is someone I never knew. It may be wrong of me, but he's more like a dream or an idea to me then a real person. I do wish that I had a chance to know him, but the Kaname in front of me is more important than any dream."

Yuuki pushes at Kaname's shoulder until he turns to face her; she takes his jaw in her hand and forces him to meet her gaze.

"You may not be my brother, but you are my Kaname. And the Kaname I know is real. You lied to me about a lot of things, but I don't think you lied to me about your nature, or about your feelings for me."

"No, never," he denies, horrified at the thought.

She smiles gently, and her eyes are fond; their blood bond unfurls like a flower, finally open again, showing Kaname her sincerity. "You are my husband, and I love you. I will not stop loving you, even if the 'you' changes. The only 'Kaname' for me is you."

Bathed in the love flowing across the bond, how can he doubt her?
Then Yuuki's eyes sharpen. "That said, I'm angry and disappointed that you didn't tell me the truth for fifty years. It will take time before I can completely trust you again. But I'm mostly sad that you had to carry this pain alone all this time. I'm sorry I condemned you to not being understood for so long."

"It was my fault, Yuuki," Kaname insists. He can't allow her to believe she's done anything wrong. "You've done nothing but offer me your love. You have nothing to apologize for."

Kaname doesn't think Yuuki believes him yet, but she looks thoughtful.

"I have so many questions to ask you," she tells him.

"Then ask my blood," he says, going to remove his cravat and unbutton his collar. Yuuki's hand stops him.

"No, not like that - at least, not yet. First I want to hear your memories in your own words. The world you see is different from the one I see. If you show me your memories through your blood, my eyes will see the same things, but I still won't see that world. So instead, explain to me the world through your eyes. Help me understand. Please."

"As you wish," he tells her, and lets his hands fall away from his collar. "I suppose now we must consider our arrangement," Kaname says, loathing the very idea. "If you prefer Rosehill, I will make the Manor my primary residence." He would hate it, but Kiryuu's words come back to him about asking Yuuki to sacrifice too much.

"I don't understand, Kaname," Yuuki says, her brows drawing together.

"You may still love me, but you will undoubtedly prefer not to share a roof with me, right now. The sight of me cannot be pleasant."

"Oh Kaname," Yuuki says, shaking her head, "You don't have to be so afraid I'll leave you."

"A fear is not so easily conquered," Kaname replies, finally achieving a modicum of his normal composure. But the pressure in his chest uncoils a little.

"Then where do we go from here?" he dares to ask, honestly uncertain. Yuuki has defied all his expectations for how this conversation would go. He expected to find himself deservedly alone; Yuuki has stubbornly chosen to stay by his side.

"We can't go on like we did before; I won't accept being shielded and kept in the dark this time. I'm serious, Kaname, you can't hide important things from me anymore. I'm not a child any longer, and you can't treat me like one."

His wife pauses in thought. "Maybe we should reevaluate our relationship. Take a step back in our intimacy. Not start over; we're married, and we love each other, and I won't change that. But I need time to get to know you - your true self. Little by little, I want us to understand each other. To trust each other. For real this time."

"I can accept that, as long as you promise me one thing."

"What?" she asks, curious about what could be so important.

"Call me by my name. No Onii-sama, no Kaname-sama, no Kaname-sempai. If it's you, I want to hear you speak only my name."
"Alright. I promise, Kaname." They both exchange small smiles, and the bond between them echoes hope.

"Have you already told Kiryuu?" Kaname asks, belatedly remembering that there is technically one more member of their marriage now.

"No. That's your right - and your punishment," Yuuki grins at him. Perhaps she was angrier than he thought; the idea of allowing Kiryuu to know his identity burns, but he nods and submits to her terms with poor grace.

She tugs on his arm, pulling him toward the door. "Sleep here today. You can take Zero's room, and tomorrow we'll go back to Rosehill together."

Yuuki stands on her balcony in the early morning sunlight, resting her forearms on the railing. The sunlight prickles her skin, and she's emotionally exhausted, but she feels too good right now to go back inside and shut herself in the dark.

Behind her, Kaname is asleep in the house, as are most of the servants; she owes the ones who cleaned up the broken glass and taped over the dining room windows an apology tonight. And she will need to pack before they leave for home. But all that seems very far away right now, with the way the bright beams illuminate the green of the forest and warm her face.

Things are not settled between her and Kaname, not by a long shot.

Realizing what a fundamental lie their relationship was based on had given her a sense of profound hurt and betrayal, at first. Did Kaname ever trust her? Was she just too weak to know? Would he have ever revealed it if she had not forced him? Those feelings of guilt, inadequacy, failure, and anger could have overwhelmed her - except -

But she loved him too well for that uncertainty, anger and horror to last long. Yuuki knows her husband. He is not always a good man, but neither is he heartless. After decades together, Yuuki knows some of Kaname's fears. It was too easy too see that he kept his secret not because he thought her unworthy or distrusted her, but because he feared her reaction. They were more alike than she realized; had Yuuki not also hidden parts of herself she thought would disappoint him? With that realization, Kaname didn't seem quite so far away from her any longer, so high out of her reach.

A secret is a terrible weight for its keeper, not just the person it's being hidden from, Yuuki came to realize after her own month spent keeping secrets. What she wants now is healing, for both of them. Kaname has been punished enough by the burden he chose.

But part of her is still angry. Yuuki has not forgiven the way Kaname hurt her yet, but someday, inevitably, she will forgive him. She knew that Kaname's secret was not enough to drive her away, or stop her loving him, as soon as she realized it. Yuuki loves Kaname, and that truth has not changed. She believes that as long as they both desire to move forward, someday they will move past this, and be better for it.

He'll have to earn her trust again, but for the first time since Yuuki went searching for the truth, she can see a way forward through this tangled forest, and out the other side.

These feelings of hope and accomplishment swirl in her chest, warm as blood and sweet as honey. A whim strikes her; why not? She will try, one more time.

Yuuki holds out her hand, cups a handful of golden sunlight inside. Breathes in the scent of the
morning dew, the freshness of a newborn day.

*Out of one, many. Out of many, one. Singularity is an illusion; all things are one,* she reminds herself.

Just a tiny pinch of power; let it spill over, like a bead of water from a cup.

And she feels the sun on her face - and she also feels the cage of fingers closed around her body, shielding her in darkness; two points of light, a tug passing between them, as though she's in two places at once, a ticklish doubled feeling of cool/hot.

Yuuki holds her hand up, opening her closed fist just wide enough to see a flutter of movement inside, without letting the creature escape.

As the new day dawns, her smile is as radiant as the sun.

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**Chapter End Notes**

My version of how Rido woke Kaname goes differently than it does in canon. In case you were wondering, in this universe Rido arranged to have the Kiryuu couple kill Shizuka's human lover, but Kaname was not the one who released her.

Did you think the memories the Ancestor of the Hunters showed didn't mean anything? I bet you forgot all about her. For a refresher, she appears in chapter eight. I'm a lazy author; I never write anything that isn't necessary. Or fun. One of the two.

Kaname was making a dig at Zero with the flower joke; sakura blossoms are traumatic for him, for obvious Shizuka related reasons. Plum blossoms bloom in January/February and have many similar customs attached to them as Sakura blossoms do, while Sakura season ends in May, thus the 'sakura would be more appropriate' line.

Next chapter is the last of the second arc; we're back to our usual tricks at Rosehill, and there will be more Zero hopefully. Thanks for reading!
"Something important is going on. I'm certain of it."

Takuma sighs and gives Zero his undivided attention. "Zero-kun, Yuuki-san and Kaname are just having dinner together. I thought you would be pleased - you've encouraged them to reconcile, after all."

The Hunter thoughtfully touches his lower lip with a forefinger. "I know, and I do want them to kiss and make up already. But I'm worried. Yuuki had her thinking face on, and she kicked me out of the house. She's up to something."

"Your Hunter's intuition again?" Takuma teases, but Zero nods seriously.

"A good Hunter always trusts their gut. For us, it can be the difference between life and death. And my intuition tells me there's something underneath the surface here. Something significant."

The blond noble considers this statement. "If it's you, Zero, I believe you. There are all sorts of stories about the uncanny things the greatest Vampire Hunters could do. Impossible things, like tracking their target even without a trail, or perfectly predicting what a vampire will do when cornered."

Isa pads over to Zero, and noses the Hunter's hand, inviting him to scratch the dog's ruff and play with his ears as an outlet for his uneasiness. "Those are just stories. All we do is make an educated guess. Anyone can do that with enough experience."

Takuma sighs, Zero's practicality, as always, stomping on his love for a good story. "I see. Well, there's nothing we can do now. We have to let events between them take their natural course."

The noble gestures toward the dossiers and papers on the table in front of them. "You're doing very well memorizing the people you'll need to know for the next omega gathering. Next time we hold a tea with the others, we can try testing you on your retention. How about we take a break, change our clothes, and do a little sparring? I haven't had much time to practice my swordsmanship lately, and a good partner is hard to come by."

Zero nods, mind clearly elsewhere, and the two omegas get up to leave.

"If it's important, I'm sure they'll tell you when they're ready," Takuma says. "It will be fine. It's Yuuki and Kaname - how bad could it be?"

"What the fuck, Kuran."
Once his surprise fades, even Zero is surprised by how fast he moves.

The sensation of his fist punching Kuran Kaname's smug, insufferable face, and the crunching sound the vampire's nose makes as it breaks is the most satisfying feeling of Zero's entire adult life, shortly followed by the way Kuran's ribs crack under a blow from his elbow.

"You lying bastard, you had one job, one, and you fucked it up!"

If Kuran had lied only to him, it would have just been business as usual. But Yuuki has always been Zero's weakness, and he won't tolerate Kuran hurting her; lying about his entire identity was an enormous, flagrant violation of her trust, and of the only bit of trust Zero extended to the pureblood.

Kuran's nose is already healing - fucking purebloods and their fucking healing factor. Zero's frustration mounts as the vampire wipes his face.

His knee to the groin is disappointingly blocked; Kuran holds onto Zero's ankle without any sign of releasing him.

"Stop trying to hit me, Kiryuu. We both know I'm the stronger and faster one."

Zero has built his professional reputation as a cool, controlled Hunter whose temper rages quiet and focused. Normally, Zero bled off his anger and frustration in frequent Hunts and cooled down by spending time alone. But 'Consort Kiryuu' is never allowed to be alone in Roschill, and his recent Hunts have caused more turmoil than they released. Denied his normal coping mechanisms, and subject to more stress, upheaval and denial of his agency than at any time before in his life, Zero hits his breaking point.

"Hell no! You almost broke Yuuki's heart, so I'm going to almost break your goddamn face!" Zero shouts, incensed beyond reason now, and employs a Hunter trick to dislodge Kuran's grip, forcing the pureblood to choose between letting go and breaking his wrist.

The Hunter retreats, putting some distance between them; the first strike was lucky, but damn him if Kuran's not right. Zero will lose, but he's going to do the bloodsucker some damage first. His weapon of choice is the Bloody Rose, but his ire only grows when he realizes that this too is denied him - his promises and the treaty forbid Zero from threatening Kuran with a weapon that could actually kill the pureblood. At least the bastard's office has all these nice projectiles. Zero can improvise.

Zero picks up some kind of antique silver jug, and lobs it at Kuran's head. The leech blocks it, of course, but that was a screen for the glass vase behind it, which shatters satisfyingly on the bastard's upraised forearm.

Zero grins, and hefts a heavy clay pot.

"Yuuki, bring your dog to heel," orders Kuran, earning himself a quick dodge and another broken object. Zero hopes it was expensive.

Chin resting on her palm, the pureblood in question is watching the show from the couch. Utterly engrossed by the sight of an enraged Zero, she shows no signs of getting up, or intervening any time soon, entirely content to be a spectator. At her husband's order, Yuuki frowns and tells him reprovingly, "Zero is not a dog, Kaname. Don't call him that."

Zero is entirely undeterred, and continues his rampage through Kuran's office. Another crash; a crystal decanter lies in pieces by Kuran's feet. The rest of the set follows soon after, each flung with
an icy precision fueled by Zero's focused rage.

"This is domestic abuse, you know," Kuran objects, avoiding the death of another china plate.

"We're not in a relationship," hisses Zero, and throws the teapot.

"This is against the terms of the treaty," the vampire tries again.

"Oh, don't even start with me, Kuran. I haven't even shot you. Just shut up. Shut. Up."

Yuuki follows this whole exchange with great amusement and entertainment, giving off a strong impression she would appreciate some popcorn to enjoy alongside the spectacle of Zero trashing her husband's hallowed study.

Zero's finally run out of breakable things, but Kuran looks unhappy with the carnage, so it's a victory in his book.

Zero stabs his finger accusingly at the pureblood's face.

"Who even does that? Who the fuck marries somebody and doesn't even tell them - 'no, I'm not your brother, I'm really a creepy weirdo posing as your brother' - for thirty years!"

He rolls his eyes and throws his arms in the air. "No wonder you're such a fucking headcase."

Yuuki chokes, hand over her mouth, trying to hold back the noise of her laughter.

Zero paces furiously back and forth, with his arms tightly crossed over his chest to take away the temptation of punching Kuran in his irritating face again.

"I cannot believe you, Kuran. How could you do that to someone you love? You based your whole relationship with Yuuki on a lie - that's misrepresentation, verging on coercion. And then you lied to her, repeatedly, every day of your lives together. In what universe is that even remotely okay?"

Zero stops, and faces Kuran, who is leaning casually against the desk, trying to ignore his wrecked study with his usual cool stoicism. "Were you ever planning on telling her?"

On the couch, Yuuki straightens and looks serious.

Were he a lesser man, Kuran might have looked uncomfortable, but the pureblood is unreadable instead. "I was always going to tell Yuuki."

"When?" demands Zero.

Now Kuran looks a little less sure of himself. "When the time was right; when Yuuki was ready."

"And when was that going to be? When you were sure she wasn't going to drop your ass, you bloody coward?"

Kuran doesn't answer, only narrows his eyes.

Zero tskks, and drops heavily onto the couch beside Yuuki, covering his face with his hands; she pats his back sympathetically.

"What about you," he asks her through his fingers. "Are you okay with this?"

"I am," Yuuki replies. "Even if Kaname's not my brother, I do love him. Though I would have liked
to know earlier - do you know how much time I wasted agonizing over my incestuous relationship with my brother?"

"And you're not pissed at all?"

"I am," Yuuki tells him calmly, "but I also know you, Zero. I guessed you'd do a much better job being mad at Kaname then I could." She surveys the damage. "Although I wasn't expecting your anger to be quite so...impressive."

Zero sighs, then turns toward Kuran, who's cautiously making his way closer through the shattered glass and porcelain. "Whoever you are, you're the same sneaky bastard as before. I don't really give a damn; I'll despise you the same as always."

"How reassuring," deadpans the pureblood.

Zero thinks for a moment, the Hunter part of him working double time through the ramifications of Kuran being an Ancestor. "Hold on a minute, Kuran. You're the first vampire king, correct?"

"Yes," he replies, raising his chin.

The Hunter glares with hard eyes. "Do you intend to make yourself king again? Is that what all this - working to gain power and fighting with the Senate - is for?"

Kuran snorts. "Not a chance. I'm perfectly happy ruling from the shadows, letting them believe they're the ones wielding the power. As long as I can achieve my goals, I don't care about titles or thrones. Being king is more trouble than it's worth, frankly; you have power, but you also have people expecting impossible things of you, constantly bringing you their petty problems to solve, and laying the blame for anything that goes wrong at your feet."

"I guess I can believe that," Zero says. "The only way I'd ever take Cross' job is if all the Hunters forced me too. Fat chance that would ever happen, though."

He sighs and leans back. "So I guess we just pretend everything is the same as before?"

"No, not the same." Yuuki rejects swiftly. "In public, yes. In private we're not going to pretend we don't know who Kaname is. But we can't talk about it openly unless we're completely certain no one can overhear. And there's one more thing."

Yuuki stands up, goes to Kuran's side, and looks Zero in the eyes, touching her husband's sleeve. "We're asking you not to reveal to anyone, ever, that Kaname is the Ancestor of the Kuran family. Kaname has explained his reasons, and I agree. We shouldn't allow that knowledge to become public."

Kuran speaks up, "In this age, the Original King is a legendary pureblood vampire. People would expect a myth. A savior. I could never live up to those expectations, and their disappointment would turn on me - and all of us, by association. It would attract the wrong kind of attention, and likely complicate our lives. Some would wish to steal my power, especially other purebloods; it would make all of us less safe."

"I won't betray your secret," Zero promises, threading his fingers together. "I can see the wisdom of keeping silent, for all our sakes."

"That's settled then," Yuuki says with relief.

Zero keeps his voice and face carefully blank when he asks Yuuki. "So Kuran's thousands of years
"Yes," Yuuki tells him, catching the glint in his eye and happy to be in on whatever trick Zero's about to play.

"Over ten thousand," Kuran provides.

"Mmmm. And you and I are just over fifty."

"That's right," says Yuuki, beginning to catch on but trying not to give the game away. Kuran is looking back and forth between them, suspicious.

"So that makes you a cradle-robbing, perverted old man, Kaname." Zero says, looking the pureblood dead in the face.

Kuran's expression is priceless.

When Zero arrived at the library for his usual mandated bond-building session with Kuran, he's unexpectedly met at the door with an invitation to walk in the gardens. Kuran has never suggested anything besides reading or working in silence before, staying just close enough to satisfy the requirements for proximity and catching each other's scent.

Zero's suspicious, especially when he discovers that Kuran has already sent for a light cloak to keep off the night wind, and even more suspicious when Kuran behaves like a gentleman and helps Zero into it. Does Kuran want something from him? Is this courtesy just an attempt to relax Zero's guard? Is the pureblood planning some kind of vengeance for the old man jokes Zero has gleefully added to his repertoire of insults?

The only thing that's changed between them is Kuran's identity, Zero reflects as they wander through the private, high hedges of the maze-like east gardens. And that changes everything and nothing. Zero doesn't care who Kuran is - one pureblood or another, he's still a bloodsucking leech - but that does explain a lot about Kuran's skills, background and character. Kuran is still a paranoid bastard, but he suddenly makes much more sense, and the threat he poses has increased a thousandfold. An unsettling sensation indeed.

Kuran guides them ever deeper into the maze, and Zero's training as a Hunter starts to raise an alarm the longer they go without sensing another person nearby. Kuran wouldn't take him somewhere alone and murder him. Probably.

"I thought you might appreciate a little privacy for our conversation tonight." Kuran says when they reach the maze's center, a grassy, open clearing with a pond and a little island in the center. The two vampires cross over a bridge into the small gazebo built on the island. If Kuran wants a place this private, supposedly for his benefit, Zero suspects that he will find their choice of topics very unpleasant.

Rather than explain what's going on, Kuran seems content to watch the wind ripple the water and sway the lily pads. Zero is no amateur; he can recognize an interrogation technique when he sees one. Kuran is trying to make Zero so nervous that the Hunter will make the first move, beginning their conversation as a petitioner begging for information. Zero's not falling for that. Silence is a familiar companion to him, and he'll stand in silence all night before he gives Kuran what he wants. Now he knows that Kuran is infinitely more dangerous than he thought, Zero can't afford to make any mistakes.

Sensing Kuran's growing irritation beside him, Zero sticks to his resolution, and makes no sign or
sound that he notices. Finally Kuran makes his opening salvo, perhaps a touch more direct than intended.

"I received a visit today that might interest you, Kiryuu."

Zero makes a noise to show he's paying attention, following the sway of lily stalks with his eyes.

"Aido Hanabusa came to me with the results of your physical. And he had some *interesting* conclusions."

Zero snaps his head toward Kuran in shock, fear rising in his chest.

Kaname smiles; there's the reaction he was looking for. Kiryuu's lavender eyes below his swinging Hoseki are wide with surprise, and the pureblood can hear the increased beat of his heart. Kaname's fangs ache a little with hunger, and he slaps the impulse down.

"What do you know?" Kiryuu says, studying Kaname carefully, shock hidden behind a mask of neutrality and forced calm. Kaname has to admit that Kiryuu is more controlled than many of his Hunter brethren. Still so honest though; he cannot fake emotion, only hide it. It's almost refreshing to find that trait in a vampire, but terribly dangerous in the wrong circumstances.

Rather than give Kiryuu more information, Kaname continues to speak. "I cannot hide Aido's results from Yuuki, but I might be able to convince him to leave a few things out."

Kiryuu frowns. "Really, Kuran? You just told Yuuki that you kept the biggest possible secret from her, and now you want to convince me we should keep more secrets? Have you learned nothing?"

The pureblood raises an eyebrow, confident in his proposition. "Would you rather she know what you did to yourself? She'd be so upset, Kiryuu. It would make her terribly sad." There were few ways to reliably manipulate Kiryuu, and the greatest of those was Yuuki.

Kiryuu struggles visibly for a few moments, but shakes his head no, very slowly, looking down at his feet.

"Since we both have things we'd rather not become known, then perhaps you and I can come to an agreement."

Kiryuu looks back up at Kaname, brow furrowed. "What do you have left to hide?" he accuses.

"I'd like our interactions to remain private between us. Yuuki doesn't need to know about our dealings at Cross Academy, or our conflicts between then and now. That would hold for any future interactions as well."

His past offenses against Kiryuu remain the only loose end to be tied up; Kaname suspects that in some ways, Yuuki would forgive them less easily than his sins against her. Anything that might disappoint her - choking Kiryuu, among other things - could cause more distance between the two of them. Therefore, Kaname couldn't let this opportunity pass.

"Fine. I wasn't planning on telling her those things anyway," Kiryuu says, chin raised in defiance.

Kiryuu is equal parts amusing and annoying, Kaname thinks ruefully. Were he any other vampire, Kaname could simply have ordered him not to say anything. But Kiryuu would fight him if Kaname used his power of command, and the Hunter might even win. Truly unique, even for a Hunter. There have been other Turned Hunters who could fight a pureblood's command, but only
Kiryuu had such a strong natural resistance that grew even stronger as he learned to withstand the compulsion. Part of Kaname wants to crush that resistance, but the greater part can't help but encourage it. The novelty of an untouchable existence outside his own pureblood charisma, he supposes.

Silence falls; the wind stirs the water lilies again. The garden scene before them is peaceful, and the May breezes are perfumed with flowers.

"What did Aido tell you," Kiryuu says quietly.

Kaname looks sideways; Kiryuu's studiously watching the pond, with his hands lightly resting on the rail. The moonlight picks out the glint of his Hoseki and silver earrings, and turns his hair into a bright sheet of platinum.

Perhaps he can blame the night air for his generosity. "Next time, ask that question before you enter into an agreement, or don't ask at all. You offer your opponent a weakness by admitting ignorance. Ask in order to gather enough information to decide, if you must, but asking afterwards brings you no benefit."

Kiryuu's hands on the railing tighten. "Tell me what he said."

The Hunter pauses, fighting some inner battle. "Please."

Kaname cocks his head, intrigued; Kiryuu's given away just how important this is to him, and it seems like this could be about more than just Yuuki discovering his actions.

"I will tell you what I know, if you answer my questions in return."

Kaname may not care about Kiryuu, but Kaname does mind events he did not predict occurring in his domain. He's turned over the facts in his mind, and he's certain he knows the immediate trigger. But he can't puzzle out what underlying reason would drive Kiryuu to do it; Kiryuu is not a weak person.

Kiryuu bends his head forward, so his hair covers his eyes. Kaname takes that for agreement. "Tell my why you did it; the words sit on the tip of his tongue. When Aido gravely handed over his results, Kaname had felt something stir when he read over the words. The alpha had whined and roared, protective instincts rising to the surface, but Kaname had tamped them down long enough to shape the situation to his advantage. But now that the two of them are alone, Kaname's purpose completed and Kiryuu's scent temptingly close, the urge to pull Kiryuu close and check him over still remains, as if injuries to the mind would be visible on the body.

"How long have you had an eating disorder?" Kaname asks instead.

"I don't have an eating disorder," Kiryuu insists, offended.

"By vampire standards, you have the worst eating disorder Aido's ever seen. Your body bears the marks of long term privation, in every way - not just as a vampire, but as a human too. It's true that you're not starving, but you're far from healthy. You ate enough calories, but your bones tell the story of how malnourished you really are - low iron, low calcium, no fat reserves to speak of. Your body is muscle and bone, and nothing else. Your self-control is impressive, but your self-preservation is abysmal."

Kiryuu is silent, anger and shame warring in his eyes, his truth ruthlessly exposed before the pureblood by Aido's instruments.
"Aido is nearly certain that you're stunted your vampire traits because of your extreme blood starvation, and with regular feedings you should notice an increase in those abilities. I doubt you know this, but your presentation as an omega was highly abnormal. Your two-year, partial presentation should never have happened; in normal cases, presentation happens immediately. But you were so ill, had so few reserves, that your body aborted the attempt - those were the pains you felt in your stomach. Your body was quite determined to become an omega, though, and likely spent the entire next year building up the strength to complete the change. You were very lucky you didn't die, even with that."

"How much are you going to tell Yuuki?" Kiryuu asks quietly.

"I cannot conceal the depth of your blood deprivation and disordered feeding habits; she already knows you haven't fed in the past few decades. Nor can I conceal your recent attempts to starve yourself of food under our care. But I can convince Aido to keep secret how long that's really been going on, if I invoke your right to privacy and tell him that you requested he tell no one else. If he knows I have spoken to you, and will address the problem, he will accept the order."

Kiryuu considers this. "That's about what I expected." He finally turns to look at Kaname. "I suppose I should thank you, Kuran."

The shock of having Kiryuu thank him - without force, though clearly reluctant - lets the words slip out.

"Why did you do it?"

Kiryuu stares at him. "Why deny yourself food while you were still nothing but a Hunter," the pureblood clarifies.

"The blood was because you hate the fact you are a Level D vampire, and refusing to drink blood was a way of rejecting that reality. The recent effort at starvation was probably an attempt to sabotage your fertility; I went through your recent reading material - you had an interest in fallow heats and infertility in humans - and had Aido question the servants and cooks to confirm that you ate normally with Yuuki and I, and refused food when eating alone."

Kaname rests one hand on the railing, and turns to face Kiryuu, who looks immersed in thought.

"But why did you eat barely enough, poor quality food during your years as a Hunter? I've dismissed the normal culprits; it wasn't for weight or body image issues. You're not that boring, and you had enough sense to preserve your ability to Hunt."

Kiryuu's face closes off. "I don't owe you an answer, Kuran. Everything you know about me, you've used to manipulate me to your advantage. Satisfy your curiosity with someone else's life."

And Kiryuu brushes past him to storm away, leaving Kaname behind with a sensation that might almost be disappointment.

Yuuki is proud of herself; she doesn't cry until later, when she can shut the curtains and send away the servants for the day, and even then she muffles the sound of sobbing into her pillow as she cries herself sick. If Zero knows she's hurt, then he'll feel guilty and responsible for her pain, and Yuuki would never want that. She fails anyway; whatever face she's making, Zero looks stricken when he sees it. She squeezes their Consort's hand to comfort him, sitting beside her on the couch in Kaname's study, tries to smooth out her expression, and looks back at Kaname.

Her husband is still lecturing in front of his desk, gesturing occasionally. "Kiryuu's Hunter blood
was not enough to prevent significant damage to his body after living on nothing but blood tablets for thirty years. The experimental data is priceless, but it proves that the current formula is not a perfect nutritional substitute. Any vampire without Kiryuu's extremely pure Hunter blood would have died over a decade ago. Aido believes that Kiryuu was spared this fate for two reasons.

"One, his Hunter traits give him a thrifty, efficient 'metabolism,' of sorts. Since Hunters cannot take in energy through blood, only produce their own, they seem to both process and use energy through hyper-efficient methods. A Hunter's body can extract every bit of energy from the nutrition they receive, they use that fuel with almost no waste, and their abilities require very little energy to use. By comparison, vampires need much more energy to accomplish the same task. Aido used the comparison of gasoline efficiency in cars; Hunters are an economy car running on the equivalent of used cooking oil, while vampires are performance cars that need jet fuel to work."

The pureblood's gaze settles on Zero. "Second, Aido believes that Kiryuu's body suppressed its vampire abilities, except for his healing, as a survival mechanism. His body kept his vampire abilities undeveloped to save his body the expense in energy. That's why in many respects he's indistinguishable from a Level D."

"The good news is that Aido thinks the damage is entirely reversible, given regular feedings. Aido suggested we keep going with our current schedule - once every three days from one of us - for the time being. It's even possible his vampire abilities may begin to develop from their immature state if Kiryuu continues the long term improvement to his diet."

"That is good news," Yuuki tells her husband. She's so relieved; if all it will take to make Zero well again is her blood, she'll happily give him as much as he needs.

Kaname - is hesitating? She recognizes some of the gestures he uses to buy time, and he's using one now, straightening his shirtsleeves with a single efficient tug.

"There is more Aido told me," her husband begins.

"You've said enough, Kuran. I'll tell her," Zero interrupts, tearing his hand out of her grasp. Zero won't meet her eyes; the Hunter's face is unreadable, set like stone. Yuuki feels ice gather in her veins, foreboding heavy in her belly.

"Tell me what, Zero?" Yuuki asks slowly; she tries to take his hand again, but he moves beyond her reach, abandoning his seat next to her. After a moment, the pureblood brings her outstretched hand back to her lap, and stands up as well.

Yuuki had thought that she'd moved beyond painful secrets. But it seems she was wrong. And she had not expected to learn that Zero - of all people - was the one keeping secrets. But why should she be surprised? When Zero kept secrets, it was always to spare the people around him, instead of protect himself. Just like the secret of his vampirism, Zero hid his pain like a wild animal hiding a wound.

Zero's whole body pulls into himself; he keeps his gaze hidden behind his silver hair, staring at a point on the floor between the two purebloods.

"What Kuran was about to tell you, is that Aido discovered something else when he was investigating my blood. He found out that I - that I was refusing to eat. On purpose, so my body would become weaker."

Yuuki can't breathe. "Why - why would you do that," she barely manages to form the words through nerveless lips.
Like he can hear her, the Hunter finally raises his eyes. "You couldn't have realized; I hid it from you on purpose. I made sure to eat normally in front of you, and only changed that when you couldn't see me."

Kind Zero, already trying to reassure her that she isn't at fault. Trying to preempt her guilt. Impossible, useless effort, but kind.

She finds her voice again, low and rough. "Why did you feel that was necessary? Why did you do that, Zero?"

He looks away again, like he's ashamed. Of all the people Yuuki's ever met, Zero has the least to be ashamed of. "I needed to reduce my weight and body fat. I was trying to - I wanted to induce a fallow heat. So I couldn't get pregnant," he says hollowly.

She can't cry; all the water in her body is ice. She can't breathe; the horror has stolen the air from her lungs. She's a pureblood, she can heal from anything - but the spike of pain impaling her insides isn't going away.

Kaname is utterly still and silent. He already knew, didn't he?

Yuuki brings her fist up to cover her mouth, closes her eyes. "You really felt that strongly, that you would hurt yourself rather than -"

She's not going to cry. She's not going to cry.

The alpha whines. Mate is rejecting us? Our omega doesn't want to be our mate?

She's not going to cry. She's not going to cry.

Somehow, she finds her voice, queerly pitched from the knot in her throat. "Is it because you don't want a child?"

Zero shifts uneasily. "I don't know what I want." That has a ring of frustrated honesty to it.

She swallows. "Was it - was it us then? Did you hate the idea of having our child? We can figure something out, if you really don't want to be with us -" That's as far as she can get before her throat closes up.

Our omega wants to mate with another alpha? Yuuki's alpha ripples under her skin; Yuuki might feel agony at the thought of Zero's rejection, but the alpha contains her more primal feelings. Our omega wants another alpha to court him? To touch him with their unworthy hands? To hold him open on their puny knot and fill his belly with their weak seed? To grow fat with their babe, not ours? The alpha roars. No. Never. He is ours and we will kill every other living alpha on this planet if we must, if only so he can chose none but us and alpha-mate.

But Zero's head goes up with alarm, and he's already shaking his head in a denial. "No, no, Yuuki, it's not you, it's got nothing to do with you. It was me, all me."

"Then why?" she asks desperately.

"It's not that I don't want a child. It's that I can't allow myself to have a child," Zero says.

Yuuki runs this through his head slowly. "So it's not you, and it's not us."
Zero nods.

She curls a stand of her hair around her finger. Yuuki thinks for a moment more, now that her chest has space for something other than horror. "Can we go somewhere else to talk? I want to be close to you," she says, looking around at Kaname's office, still bare from Zero's rampage. Zero won't be comfortable here, and Yuuki needs him to speak more freely than his usual reticent self.

"Alright," Zero agrees softly, as though she's the one hurt, as though it was Yuuki who has revealed something painful. Yuuki can't stand it, so she circles one hand around his wrist, and then collects Kaname with the other, pulling them behind her.

Her alpha instincts are still close to the surface, urging her to take her mates somewhere safe, and Yuuki instinctively heads to her rooms, tugging Zero over the threshold when he hesitates before entering her bedroom. Kaname got to take Zero into his den, so Yuuki can bring them all into hers if she wants to.

Getting both of them into her bed - not quite as large as the one in the master suite, but still sizable - is a challenge, but Yuuki is persistent and both of them are willing to please her. She tumbles Zero onto the mattress with little fuss, but Kaname goes with mutinous reluctance, and tries to force Yuuki into the center spot until she pins him down and arranges him to her liking with heavy nudges and pushes, Kaname's front supporting Zero's back.

Then Yuuki climbs in bed after them, facing Zero, pulling on Kaname's suit jacket until they're pressed together, with Zero trapped - cradled - in the center. On the cusp of summer, it's warm during the day, but cool enough at night she can tolerate the heat of their bodies, the three of them tucked away together like seeds in the earth.

This close, Yuuki's skin-hunger for her spouses simmers lower, but she still wants to touch every millimeter, run her hands down the long planes of their bodies just to feel their warmth and closeness, satisfy some primitive fear with their nearness. Yuuki especially wishes she could touch Zero's whole body, check for injuries, feel for his bones, ascertain his solidity - and she just wants to be closer, so much closer, until their souls touch.

Having all three of them together in her bed fulfills a long-held fantasy, but there's too much pain and need right now to enjoy it - god, Zero had hurt himself on purpose. She takes his hand and holds it against her cheek, connecting them skin to skin, as if that touch could open up his mind and pour out his thoughts into hers. Her alpha finally settles down, soothed, but still on the edge of agitation.

In this warm, intimate space, his lavender eyes can't escape her gaze. "Can you explain it to me?" she asks. "Why you felt you needed to starve yourself."

Zero's eyes flick to the side, the briefest quick movement. Yuuki frowns. "Kaname has to be here; he's part of our marriage too. I know you don't trust him, but he needs to be included in this conversation. Kaname won't say or do anything to hurt you right now. Think of him as a - a body pillow or something."

Zero gives a bark of startled laughter. "I wish I could see his face right now."

Yuuki grins ruefully back. Kaname seems unruffled, but Yuuki catches hints of the offended look hiding underneath his composure. He's likely jealous right now, but Yuuki doesn't have the emotional space to worry about it until she knows what's hurting Zero.

"So help me understand, Zero. Please," she prompts.
The Hunter lets his head sink down on her pillows, eyes distant. "There's a lot of reasons. I guess that's part of what helped me decide I couldn't have a child."

"Like what?" Yuuki asks, relaxing into the bedding beside him, hand sliding down from his cheek to rest on his neck.

Zero hums. "Well, for starters, it seems like a bad idea for me to have a vampire baby when I'm not really a vampire. When I was young - when I was human - I could imagine what life would be like when I got married and had children. But I don't understand anything about how this" - the Hunter gestures at all of them - "would work."

"You are concerned that your ability to care for a vampire child would be lacking. That you would be a poor parent," Kaname says.

Zero startles, as though he really had forgotten Kaname was there, and nods.

"Ignorance can be fixed," Kaname continues. "There are many books you can read, and Yuuki and I will be nearby. If it concerns you that deeply, there are many omegas you can ask for advice; we could find you a mentor of some kind, if necessary." Kaname sounds as if the matter is settled, but Yuuki isn't so sure.

Zero bites his lip, and his body tenses. "That's only a small part of it. If reading and advice would fix everything, I wouldn't have done what I did."

Kaname looks exasperated, but Yuuki gives her chin a shake and he subsides. "What more is there, Zero?"

The Hunter buries his face in Yuuki's pillow; his voice is barely a whisper. "Just being what I am makes me a bad parent. I can't fix that."

The line of his spine stiffens and the muscles in his shoulders go taut. "You know what people think of someone like me. I'm a Hunter and a Level D vampire. Whether it's the vampires or the Hunters, I'm not - not welcome. I'm not something they want. It upset you when your servants snubbed me and called me names. That's not the worst thing anybody's ever done to me. Not even close. And if people will do things like that to me, can you imagine how people might react to the child of a Hunter and a pureblood? Or even just the child of a pureblood and a Level D? My child would always be tainted in their eyes because of my blood. How much cruelty would they have to endure because of me? How could I do that to an innocent child who didn't ask for any of this?"

"And even if my child's life was miraculously perfect," Zero continues, "what happens to them when you have children, Yuuki? The life of any vampire means less than the life of a pureblood. In the eyes of society, my children would always be inferior to yours because of their impure blood. You'll have your perfect pureblood child, and mine will have to learn that their blood makes them worth less than their siblings, because of their Level D mother." Zero's shoulders slump with dejection.

Zero turns his head to look beseeingly into her eyes. "I don't want my child to be punished because I'm it's mother. So I decided that I could never allow it to happen. I don't care what happens to me; I'll gladly take everyone's scorn and hatred as a failure of an omega, but I refuse to subject a child to a painful, despised life. Even if that means I can't ever have a family."

Yuuki closes her eyes and sets her teeth against the pain. Every word leaves a whip-mark; her heart tears and bleeds for him. No pain hurts more than the shared pain of a loved one. And Zero's fears are not groundless - he's considered this seriously. What can she say to that truth?
In the background, she is dimly aware of her alpha speaking. *What a good omega!,* it says, enamored and fond. *We haven't even mated with him yet, and he already worries about our children. He will be such a good mother.* What a bitter irony, Yuuki thinks, since there may be no such child for exactly that reason.

Kaname unexpectedly provides an answer for Zero. "I think you underestimate the effect of having us as their sire, Kiryuu. Vampires always seek to curry favor with a pureblood; if we clearly, publically show we favor your child, they will avoid mistreating it. And much of the stigma against you will go away if you manage to produce children like a typical omega. As of now, most vampires believe you will prove barren. Show them they are wrong, and they will begin to think of you as 'omega' before 'Hunter' or 'Level D'. I have no doubt you will notice an improvement in your reputation and treatment if that happens."

Yuuki reaches out and pulls Zero even closer in a one-armed hug. '"And don't ever believe that I'll love your children any less than I'll love my children with Kaname, or that I'll treat them any differently. I may not be able to change what the outside world thinks, but inside our house our children will be raised and treated like equals. And they will have you, and me, and Kaname to tell them that they are worth every bit as much as a pureblood.""

"I know you would, Yuuki," Zero says into the skin of her neck. His body tenses, and he hesitates, before finally deciding to speak. "But it's not your reaction I'm afraid about."

Behind Zero, Kaname goes still, an unidentifiable emotion flashing across his face before the neutral mask descends.

"You don't trust Kaname," she says, dizzy with the realization.

Zero ignores the man at his back, and forges on as if they are alone. "*You* would protect my child, but Kuran hates me, and he holds a grudge. The sins of the father pass to the son; I can easily believe that my child would inherit Kuran's hate. And I can't risk the consequences of his hate. He's powerful and influential; there's no way I could stop him. There's no way you could stop him. What if Kuran used my child as one of his pawns, or as leverage against me, or hurt my child because I was their parent? Even if he just tolerated my child, rather than hurt them, he wouldn't act to protect them. People would notice that indifference, and take it as permission to harm my child."

How Yuuki wishes she could protest without a thought. But she knows Kaname, and Zero's right - his personality can be vindictive and petty. She wishes she could insist that Kaname would not hurt a child, but Zero had been a child, and that hadn't stopped Kaname from using him either. Yuuki can't refute any of it. There's only one person who can.

Kaname's expression is completely unreadable. Yuuki watches her husband, but he avoids looking at her face.

*He doesn't protest Zero's charge.*

Yuuki isn't surprised; she's just disappointed.

"So that's why I decided I needed to force my body into a fallow heat. Eating less was just the method I chose," Zero finishes grimly.

Kaname's conspicuous silence has done Yuuki's cause no favors. She can't change Zero's mind on her own; any such effort to change his mind would fail. There's only one option left.
Yuuki nods, and locks gazes with the Hunter. "I understand now, Zero. But I can't accept the method you chose. So make a deal with me. Most male omegas have a fallow heat naturally when they bond during their first heat. It's very likely - especially since you came to us in a bad condition - that your first heat will also be fallow. Just this one time, take a chance and let things happen naturally, and I promise you will never have to spend another heat with us again, unless you want to. The odds are strongly in your favor that you'll get what you want. But in exchange, no more starving, and no hurting yourself. That includes allowing yourself to be hurt." She ignores Kaname, and hopes very fervently that he'll stay quiet.

Zero considers her offer with a blank expression. Yuuki holds her breath.

"Alright," the Hunter agrees.

Yuuki gives a gusty sigh of relief. "Do I need to monitor your eating habits all the time, or can I trust you to eat normally and stop trying to hurt yourself?"

"I swear to you that I will keep my promise, Yuuki," Zero says. "I don't want to hurt you anymore."

Zero never gives his word lightly, and he always tries to keep his promises. Yuuki can trust that.

Speaking of Zero, Yuuki realizes that the Hunter's watching her with an odd expression, toying with the coverlet in a restless motion.

"Do you want a child?" he blurts out, and his cheeks color. "Kuran would rather have me turn out barren, but I don't even know how you feel about having a baby."

Yuuki considers her response before speaking very carefully, "I don't want my feelings to affect your decision, Zero."

"But how would you feel if it happened, against all the odds?" he presses.

That's easy.

Yuuki smiles gently. "I told you, Zero. I love every part of you. That includes your children."

_I want a family with you. I want it so badly. I want to give you a baby more than almost anything._

But she's very careful to keep those thoughts from her face.

And she doesn't cry until she's alone. Yuuki's very proud of that.

Chapter End Notes

I said there'd be more Zero this chapter, and it turned out mostly not Zero again. Sorry?

This chapter was not originally supposed to end this way, but Kaname never does what he's told to, so blame him. Now that we wrapped up the loose ends from the second 'arc' of the story, we're going to start some new games next chapter. Summer is here, and the world outside Rosehill won't stay outside forever.
Can anyone tell me if we have canon birth dates for any of the main three? VK Wiki has failed me. Even just a season or month would help.

So I realized that our trio has been on exactly one date together, and it was kind of terrible, and I should probably change that. I've been bouncing around some ideas, trying to figure out how to work it into the plot, but nothing's really stuck out to me. So if you guys want to suggest some places Kaname, Yuuki and Zero might go on a date, what they'd do etc., or even just bonding activities they might do together, I'd love to hear them?
Hello everyone! This week is a very short update. I'd committed to producing some content for another small fandom who was having a week-long event last week, and it's put me rather behind schedule on my word count. It won't be a regular thing, and I'll be back to business as usual next week, but I decided that you guys deserved to get something this week too.

A big thank you to all of my reviewers who suggested date ideas. Feel free to keep sending them if you have them; if I couldn't use your idea in one chapter there's always the possibility it could show up in the future. Also thanks to ben4kevin for giving me an idea I used in this chapter.

It is a peculiar sensation, to know that the person you love most believes without question that you would take cruel revenge on a helpless infant.

Yuuki hadn't even tried to defend him.

Kaname isn't sure he should have been defended.

The Ancestor of the Kuran knows he is a man with a heart in darkness. Behind him is a past full of shadows, and before him the certainty he will cast more, long and dark, with claws that grasp. In public, he keeps up a facade of respectability, virtue, a reputation for goodness and morality. He's widely admired for his restraint and temperance, his respect for the wills of lesser vampires. Ask any of his subordinates, or any vampire off the street, and they will sing his praises. But in the eyes of the two people who know him without any masks or secrets, who know the dark places he hides, they unhesitatingly believe him a monster who would not flinch to have the blood of a child on his hands.

Confronted with such a stark and terrible reflection, the questions stalk him unceasingly. No longer can he turn his head away from the mirror and pretend that the mask is the man. Is he the sort of man who wants to make parents afraid for what he'll do to their unborn children? Will he really use anyone, no matter how innocent? Is that the kind of person he wants to be in the eyes of the only people who really know him? Does he want to be a man who will exact petty, unjustified revenge on those who are weaker and more helpless? The kind of man who takes out his anger on a person's loved ones out of spite? Whose prejudice is unjustly earned by parentage? A villain who would harm children without thought?

Kaname's deeply buried, mostly insensitive conscience squirms like a pale worm exposed to sunlight. He's ashamed of the person he is in Yuuki's eyes. And he feels guilty, the little-used emotion like a stone weighing heavy in his chest. Guilty because of Kiryuu, and though the pureblood tries to ignore or deny it, he cannot.

Inconceivable. If Kaname feels anything for Kiryuu, it should be rage. Kiryuu has exposed the
black pit of his heart, cut through gleaming cages of bone to wet red chambers, and mercilessly bared the flayed parts to the cold air and pitiless light. Kiryuu, with his pure white heart, his selflessness so great it extended to willing sacrifice for dim undreamt-of tiny lives.

Kiryuu's offspring, up to this point, had been a vague, far-off possibility that Kaname hadn't seriously considered becoming real. Confronted by the question, the pureblood can't decide what to think. Kiryuu's children would also be Yuuki's children. Could he ever bring harm to something she really loved? But they would belong to Kiryuu too - the Hunter he envied and despised with every fiber of his being - and they would steal more of Yuuki's attention and time from him. Kiryuu was correct; the Hunter's children would also present a unique opportunity to torment and manipulate him. Yuuki's love is the only thing preserving Kiryuu's life, but that hasn't stopped Kaname from inflicting anything short of death on the Hunter. Would that be true for Kiryuu's children as well, or would his dormant conscience shield them? With only the hypothetical to mull over, without the test of a real situation, the conflict cannot be resolved.

None of it - the troubling questions, the nagging guilt, the ugly shame of his soul's nakedness - will leave him in peace any longer. Kaname catches himself thinking of it every time his thoughts drift from their disciplined paths. Whenever his eyes fall on Kiryuu - at breakfast, passing through the halls, in the library with Yuuki - a tugging sensation in his chest needles at him. Crushing the feelings down doesn't work. Nor does looking away, and he'll be damned if he ruins his pride by avoiding Kiryuu.

If Kaname can't suppress the feelings, then he must appease them. How exactly is he expected to do that?

The one time he tries to speak with Yuuki, his wife stops him as soon as he brings up the issue. "Kaname," she says with her delicate hand covering his mouth, "I'm not the first one you should be having this conversation with. My feelings aren't important. I'm not the one you hurt. Do you understand that?"

Kaname doesn't, actually, but he heeds his wife's request to let the topic drop. He can see what she's suggesting, and he refuses to talk to Kiryuu. Kiryuu is irrelevant, even if Kaname grudgingly admits his guilt is caused by what he's driven the Hunter to do.

His alpha instincts have been more indigently overactive than they've ever been in ten thousand years, outraged by the idea that the omega they're courting doesn't trust them enough to want their offspring, and convinced that this can be fixed with enough feeding and displays of strength. Every time he sees Kiryuu, the alpha starts yammering about omegas and sweet smells and pretty eyes and how they need to care for mate properly - a mess of hormone-driven tripe.

The primal impulses are making him more aggressive than usual, warping his iron control; every time Kaname spots Kiryuu in the company of another alpha, his instincts are insistent that their poor care is driving Kiryuu to look for a different knot to fuck himself on. While Kaname the rational pureblood may say good riddance, his alpha makes him snappish and short every time one of his business partners compliments Kiryuu's appearance, or one of the house staff bends over the Hunter's shoulder to serve him dinner. He takes Kiryuu to a cocktail party with Yuuki, and the host startles a short laugh out of the Hunter; Kaname nearly beheads an important ally when his instincts conjure a picture of Kiryuu on his back underneath the senator, his knees spread and a pink flush on his cheeks, raising his skirts to lewdly present himself. When Kaname behaves rudely, all of them seem to discern that the cause is territorial jealousy, give him understanding looks, back away and offer him their apologies, and Kaname hates that too. Who gives a damn if they look at Kiryuu? They can fuck the skinny bastard on top of his desk for all he cares! (Lies -
Kaname would kill them before they could do more than glimpse Kiryuu's bare white ankle).

He's biologically hardwired to make a fool of himself for an omega, the same way he instinctively finds them attractive. If his mind produces stupid pictures of Kiryuu with other alphas, it's only because he hasn't had the pleasure of his wife's company in over a month. Kaname hasn't spent so long alone in his own bed since he married Yuuki. Forced celibacy doesn't suit him, and he's reaching out to fill that gap through nearby surrogates. That is not actual interest or desire.

The cumulative effect of all this tension - with Kiryuu and Yuuki on the outside, and his instincts and conscience on the inside - is that Kaname's life feels rather like it has fallen out of his control. Self-doubt stalks him; he feels as though he doesn't really know himself, even after thousands and thousands of years. As though he's walking and the earth is crumbling beneath his feet.

Not the best state of mind to visit his double father-in-law, so of course that's when Cross invites them.

"50% off spring perennials today only!" crackles a cheerful recorded voice over the speaker.

This had seemed like such a good idea at the time, Yuuki reflects mournfully. The plan was to bring the Chairman a present for their first visit since Zero's marriage, partly as a bribe, partly to distract him from the inevitable tears, excessive photography, dramatic proclamations and attempts to get them - yes, all of them, son-in-law Kaname too now - to call him father. The problem was the Yuuki's idea of good presents for the Chairman were handmade coupons, and Zero rejected that idea halfway to Cross Academy, leaving the three of them with no gift. Putting their heads together, Yuuki and Zero had analyzed their knowledge of the Chairman's hobbies, and their solution led them to their current circumstances: at a garden centre, searching for an addition to Chairman Cross' prized, meticulously kept grounds.

None of them have any idea what they ought to buy, and they're definitely going to be late, but at least Yuuki can enjoy this opportunity to see Zero and Kaname look so out of place.

Compared to the other customers, Kaname sticks out like a cat among pigeons in his spotless, tailored, expensive suit, with his handsome features and regal bearing. A little old woman keeps peeping at him from behind a wall of potting soil, trying to make eye contact and licking her lips. Kaname is studiously ignoring her, while also trying to surreptitiously stay as far from the plants as physically possible. Otherwise, a stray bit of his power could burn all of them to crispy ash; Yuuki'd once seen Kaname dispose of a flower a Day Class girl gave him that way. The nearest flowers look a little withered already, proof of Kaname's well-hidden irritation and annoyance letting his power slip out.

It's a good thing that Zero and Yuuki are dressed more casually than Kaname, with Zero in gloves and human clothes instead of his usual Consort's wardrobe, otherwise even more people would be staring at them. They're causing a scene just by coming inside, and Yuuki is caught between laughter and embarrassment. Everyone in the store is staring at the three of them together, making the other customers murmur about models and movie stars, unabashedly staring but trying not to be caught watching. Several of them have taken out their phones to take pictures. There are murmurs of autographs and a few brave souls are drifting closer.

Zero is glaring at everything he sees as though it's done him a personal wrong, scaring off all the salespeople who might be able to help them. One of them, fleeing in terror, had yelped and tripped backwards over a pyramid of plastic pots, scattering the whole pile all over the floor; the employee is now scrambling around on all fours like a crab trying to catch them as they roll away. More employees have come to help contain the disaster, only to slip and fall as well, creating an ever
widening circle of destruction as more and more people loose their footing.

It looks like Yuuki will have to save them.

"That one," she says, pointing at the nearest thing with flowers.

Cross cries and promises to keep it forever and ever and ever, declares it his third child, happily names the flower 'San', and installs it in the kitchen. Yuuki shrugs. Close enough.

Hunters, much like stray dogs, never come alone. Where there is one stray, more of the pack will gather. Besides Cross, Yagari Touga and Takamiya Kaito have invited themselves to this little visit.

Yagari, looking remarkably well for a man his age, though far older than he had while teaching the Night Class, disappeared with Kiryuu as soon as the three of them had greeted Cross, dragging him off to the shooting range in the basement after claiming that he needed to make sure his student had been keeping up with his training. The warded basement, that Kaname can't spy on. Clever man, but inconvenient and irritating for the pureblood's purposes. At least his instincts are staying quiet; Yagari is too old to read as a threat.

That leaves Kaname and Yuuki to make small talk with the Chairman and Takamiya. A task the two of them are not making easy or pleasant.

He's never been able to tell if the Chairman's mask of idiocy was entirely faked, partly true but exaggerated, or the real Cross under the Hunter training. Is the man a brilliant actor or has he gone somewhat mad after a few centuries? Either way, it is trying Kaname's patience.

The Hunter that Kaname guessed was Takamiya when he shadowed Kiryuu through his raven is officially introduced to him under that name. Takamiya is slightly past his prime, with age lines around his eyes - a better measure of a Hunter's age than their looks - but still in good health, lacking serious old injuries, and quite fit. An excellent Hunter to have retained active Hunting status so long, Takamiya is rumored to be next in line as Cross' co-President and his reputation speaks for itself. From the way the brunette eyes him, as though Kaname were a form of newly discovered refrigerator mold, it's not difficult to guess how he feels about Kiryuu's circumstances or perhaps purebloods in general.

"So, when was the last time you ate a human?" Takamiya inquires, tone casual and nearly drawling, but watching the two purebloods on the opposite couch with sharp eyes. Cross is bustling around in the kitchen, leaving the three of them alone.

Serious grudges against purebloods must run in the family, Kaname thinks sourly, and lets his teaspoon clink on the saucer as he abandons any effort to drink it. Yuuki rests her hand on his thigh, trying to calm both of them; her practiced public face may have fewer chinks now, but he can still see she's slightly hurt by Takamiya's question.

"Thirty years or so, since I married Yuuki," Kaname replies, as though the question is perfectly harmless and ordinary.

"How about you, vampire-hime?"

"Never," Yuuki tells him.

Takamiya shifts from his slouched position lounging on the couch. "Ah, is that so? Living that way must be awfully confining."
"Not at all," Yuuki responds calmly. "I only desire the blood of two people, and have been blessed to drink from both."

"Is one of them Zero?" the Hunter asks, casual demeanor stripped away, body snapping arrow-straight and leaning forward.

"Yes," she says, meeting his gaze directly.

Leaning back again, hard expression not giving away his thoughts, Takamiya flicks his fingers against the rim of his cup so the porcelain rings. Then the Hunter does it again, and again, and again; given his rank and experience, Kaname would wager Takamiya knows exactly how irritating the noise is for a vampire.

Speaking in a casual tone, the Hunter says, "Did you know that Zero calls us every other day? Sometimes he'll tell us things about his life. My fellow apprentice isn't very talkative, but you learn how to read between the lines."

Takamiya stops playing with the cup, and the ringing quiets. His eyes don't blink. "I know what it means when a vampire desires another's blood. Why is it that you desire his blood, Kuran Yuuki, yet Zero has never sounded happy when I speak to him, not once?"

"It's good to see you, Master," Zero says when the door is closed and the wards are up, embracing the man who helped raise him. Yagari is a gruff man, but he doesn't push Zero away at the display of affection. Both of them know they have precious few opportunities left to see each other, considering Yagari's old age and Zero's new position.

"How are you holding up, Zero?"

"Okay," Zero replies, breathing in the nostalgic smell of smoke clinging to Yagari's coat.

His Master gives him a little shake. "No sugarcoating things for me, boy."


"You found yourself a price for survival you can live with?" Yagari asks.

Zero pauses, burying his head deeper and muffling his words. "Maybe. I don't know. Everything so far I can live with. But I also know I haven't gotten to the worst yet."

Yagari rumbles an acceptance in his chest, and squeezes his student tighter, then loosens his arms enough Zero can escape.

"Retirement from active field assignments seems to have left you in good shape," Zero says, trying to lighten the mood as he draws back.

Yagari snorts. "I was persuaded that it was in the Association's best interest if I stopped charging into anymore vampire nests. Wouldn't give back my rifle though - they can have it over my dead body. I suspect my lack of a 'silver shadow' has something to do with Cross deciding it's time I left Hunting to the next generation."

"I'm sorry Master -"

"Not your fault, boy. Don't you apologize." Yagari says, drawing his brows together in a glare. "I've had a longer career than many other Hunters. I'm grateful that I could keep going as long as I
"How has Kaito taken it?"

"Relieved I'm not going to break a hip, probably. He's stepped into his new responsibilities well; I'm not worried for him."

"So what did you need to show me, Master?" Zero asks, reluctant to move the conversation along, but knowing that their time is limited before Yuuki comes looking for him.

His Master taps a stack of files placed on the counter for cleaning guns. "We need your skills, urgently. We've seen a rapid increase in Level E cases - over a thousand percent in some areas. Cross and I just wanted to warn you ahead of time."

Zero flips open the folders; there are hundreds of papers inside, each with a different name and birth date, sometimes with a photo paperclipped on. Skimming rapidly, he says, "If there's an increase in the local D populations, that means that somewhere there's a pureblood Turning them. Do we have a suspect?"

Yagari crosses his arms and shakes his iron grey head. "Not yet. We have a few possibilities, but nothing more."

"Have you looked into Shirabuki?" Zero asks, remembering his own encounters with the woman. "She's been stirring some trouble lately in vampire circles."

"Of course," Yagari huffs. "But she's been on her best behavior since we busted her feeder trafficking ring. We can't link anything to her. We can't link anything to any of the purebloods at this point; they're damn near impossible to keep surveillance on because of their powers."

"It's not either of the Kurans," Zero assures his Master. "Yuuki's never bitten anybody that I know of, and Kuran has too many commitments already. Whoever's doing this is sinking a lot of time into the project, and I can account for a significant portion of his day."

"Didn't think it was either of them," Yagari agrees. "But the high number concerns us. It's too many victims to dismiss the cause as hunger, or a beast enjoying the excitement of hunting. Somebody had to put real work into creating this many new Level Ds."

Zero pauses his rapid survey, running a hand through his bangs. "The victim choice is strange. If I didn't know they were connected, I wouldn't have guessed. Sex workers, runaways, the homeless, migrant laborers, refugees, residents of shantytowns - people that the authorities can't track. People that the system won't miss, because they don't leave records; if they go missing, almost nobody would notice. That's not a normal feeding pattern for a pureblood. They're picky eaters - they like their prey young and beautiful. A pureblood doesn't want to put their mouth on a homeless man who probably hasn't washed in days," he says, pointing to the top paper in the open folder.

"You're correct," Yagari says, leaning against the table edge and rubbing his fingers together the way he does when he badly wants a cigarette but can't smoke. "And there's only one cause for this distinctive victim pattern that fits."

"Someone's making an army," Zero whispers.

His Master nods. "Or it's a diversion, to make us think they're making one. Either way, the choice isn't random. This pureblood is picking only these kinds of people so the humans don't get suspicious; the new Level Ds are intended to die as expendable cannon fodder. But who is the target? Is this vampire politics spilling over into the human world, or is this the beginning of a new
anti-Hunter war?"

Zero contemplates this for a moment. "No way to tell. And the pureblood must know we're looking into this. There's no way they could expect to hide the disappearances for long, which will make them harder to find."

"Exactly. You'll be given the request by dispatch in the next couple of days."

His Master gestures to the unloaded gun on the table. "Now, I wasn't joking about that test. On with the safety equipment and show me how you've improved."

"Kaito, what did you say to them?" Zero demands, pulling the other man aside as they're leaving. Cross has trapped the Kurans at the door, leaving Zero free to question his fellow apprentice.

Yuuki's been acting strangely preoccupied and quiet; Zero knew as soon as he walked into the room that Kaito had done something to stir up trouble.

Kaito spreads his hands and grins. "Nothing. We just had a nice storytime together, that's all."

After sitting so long with suspicions and questions bursting under his skin, Zero is in no mood for banter. "Now I definitely know something is up - you used your 'how could you think it was innocent little me?' smile. I know you to well for that to work."

The older Hunter shrugs. "I asked your purebloods some questions about themselves and how you three were getting along."

Zero frowns, "Kaito, I'm serious."

"So am I. You're more of a brother to me than my own family, Zero. You may be fine with living like a shadow for the rest of your life, but I won't be satisfied until I know you're happy with them. And if that means I have to flip some tables first, then I will."

With a sigh, Zero says, "You're too reckless, Kaito."

Kaito raises a grey-flecked eyebrow. "That, coming from you? You hunt B-Rank vampires solo. You don't get to tell me I'm reckless."

"I'm only reckless with my own life," argues Zero.

"Careless, more like," Kaito scoffs. "That's why I have to look out for you."

Zero just shakes his head and says nothing. Neither Yuuki nor Kuran speak to him on the drive home, and he slips away before anyone can stop him.

The knock on his door comes around eight in the morning, after Zero's sent away the servants to sleep for the day. Zero considers ignoring it, but then heaves himself out of bed, yawning, and opens the door to see a sneaky looking Yuuki with her brown hair pulled up into a knot. She gives him a conspiratorial smile. Instantly, it's like the two of them are children again, trying to avoid waking Cross as they sneak out of bed.

"Did you know there's an outdoor pool? I thought I'd go for a swim before it gets hot. Want to come with me?" she says, holding up two towels.

Zero grins and leans against the doorpost. "Let me change."
In the early morning sunlight, the two vampires flit from shadow to shadow, following a path Yuuki is clearly familiar with. Probably by design, the pool is covered by a thick canopy of trees, so even pure blooded Yuuki can soak comfortably in the shade.

This early in May, the songbirds are still singing their best to attract a mate; Zero watches a courting pair flutter and chirp in a nearby tree while Yuuki strips down to a functional two-piece navy swimsuit with a short skirt. She tests the water with her toes, then wades in with a shiver. Zero lingers near the steps, sitting on the rim of the pool until his legs and feet adjust to the cooler temperatures, watching Yuuki float on her back.

"Hurry up and come in," she says, flicking water at him. He holds up a hand to shield himself and huffs.

"Okay, okay," he teases, and begins to tug the hem of his shirt up so he can pull it over his head. There's the sound of Yuuki splashing, and suddenly she's right beside him, her hands stopping his from rising any further.

"Yuuki?" Zero says, voice rougher and more unsure than he intended. His heartbeat drums faster in his ears. She's right up close to him, breathing quickly from her dash to stop him. Zero can see a strand of her hair has come loose from its knot, and her brown eyes have a fascinating burgundy corona around the center, picked out by the morning sun. The faint scent of her perfume hasn't washed off yet. Her hands are warm.

The pureblood blinks, watching him right back. "Don't take your shirt off - you're not wearing anything underneath it, are you?" she says breathlessly. When Zero shakes his head no - he's wearing nothing but a pair of swim trunks and a white undershirt - Yuuki draws in a long breath, and her gaze feels heavier; it makes the back of Zero's neck prickle.

"You're an omega, Zero," she tells him. "You can't go topless anymore. Taking off your shirt in front of anyone is like me showing my breasts. It's very...sexual."

Zero stares at her, suddenly understanding her intense study, and swallows, slowing letting the hem of his shirt fall. He tries very, very hard not to think about Yuuki’s perfect breasts; the utter mortification of realizing he almost stripped in front of her helps. "Got" - he clears his throat - "got it. No more shirtless swimming and training."

"You train shirtless?" Yuuki says faintly; her pupil is beginning to swallow her iris, and she lets him go, looking like she would much rather pull him closer, hurriedly backing into safer territory and returning to the water.

Zero, desperate to change the atmosphere, jumps into the water and swamps Yuuki in a miniature tsunami. The pureblood shouts and retaliates by splashing water right back; the two of them chase each other around the pool, kicking and splashing until both of them are thoroughly soaked, tussling and pushing each other under the surface after the tension between them has been thoroughly broken. When neither of them can do anything but pant and try to dislodge the water from their ears, Zero and Yuuki call a truce and enjoy floating quietly near one another, soaking in the sun, morning air, and birdsong from the corner with the darkest shade.

"Mmmm, Zero?" Yuuki says, draping herself over the side of the pool, resting her head in her arms and turning her face to the side as she watches him. Zero splashes a little to show he's listening.

"Are you happy here, with us?"

The Hunter flails and his head goes under the water before he can stabilize himself. "Why do you
"Because I love you, and your feelings matter to me," she tells him. "You don't have to worry about offending me. If you're unhappy, I only want to know so I can help fix it."

Zero hedges. "That's not an easy question."

"Why not?" Yuuki asks, tilting her head curiously.

"I mean, people can be generally unhappy with their lives but still feel happy sometimes. Or feel happy on the surface, but be in pain underneath. Like Ichiru was," he replies, hurting at the memory of his twin. Yuuki considers this. "Then what about you? How do you feel?" she repeats.

Zero laughs. "I don't think I've been happy, except for a few short moments, since my parents died. I can barely remember the feeling." At Yuuki's stricken expression, Zero admits, "I felt happy most often when I was with you."

Yuuki settles down, musing, half to herself, "That's sad, Zero. I think I was happy - really genuinely happy - when my parents were alive too. Maybe being happy only happens when we're children. Then we grow up and learn how painful life can be. I was happy with Kaname too, when I wasn't thinking about it, but it was...complicated. More complex, less easy. I thought Kaname was happy then, but now I think he might not have been really happy at all."

She turns around, slipping back into the water, and comes close; her bare shoulders glisten, and her hair is dark with water. "How can I make you happier, Zero? What can I do?"

Zero remembers that he once told Cross he would never be happy living as a vampire. The idea still feels impossible. But he wishes he could be happy, for Yuuki. "Just stay with me," he finally tells her. "You can't fix my problems, Yuuki, but having you around makes them seem less important."

"Okay," she agrees, and wraps her arms around him, warm body pleasant after the cool water and the chill of the morning breeze on damp skin. "Whatever you need."

Zero nestles his chin in the crook of her neck, and breathes.

"You can come out now," Yuuki tells the raven half-hidden in the underbrush. In the same way their bloodbond allows Yuuki to always find Kaname, even blindfolded, Kaname can never hide his familiars from her. It carries such a tiny piece of her husband's power that Zero may not have even noticed the familiar was there, but it was never wise to discount his Hunter senses. Zero has already gone inside, after reminding her that he has a Hunt tonight and needs to rest.

Kaname lets the raven land beside where Yuuki is dipping her feet in the pool, and reshapes it into a projection of his own body, feet neatly folded underneath him.

Yuuki leans back into his light touch, letting her eyes fall closed. They sit together quietly for a few minutes, until Yuuki's eyes flutter open again and she says, "Have you ever been completely, totally happy, Kaname?"

The pureblood doesn't reply, a distant look in his claret eyes. She laughs. "Aren't we a trio? All chasing after happiness and none of us know what we're searching for anymore."
"I think I may have felt happy during my second childhood," Kaname offers, expression perfectly smooth. "When I had suppressed my memories. When I believed I really was their son, and after you were born - I believe I came the closest I have ever known to happiness. I have been happy only when I did not know myself."

Yuuki can feel her face twist, aghast at the pain betrayed by Kaname's words. "You've never known happiness before then? Not once in ten thousand years?"

Kaname does not look at her; his tone falls even and measured, clinically factual. "Never. Happiness, contentment - sometimes those things came close for a little while, but they always departed, and I was alone again with nothing but my despair for company. The longer I ruled, the further from happiness I was. To this day, I am surprised that I chose Sleep; in my despair many feared I would destroy myself. I think it was only my apathy that saved me."

Yuuki pulls him into an embrace, and squeezes Kaname as firmly as she dares, knowing the feeling will ghost along the real Kaname's skin, wishing that she could provide greater comfort. Zero would know what to say, but all she has is herself.

She doesn't dare ask if he's happy now.

After a while, Yuuki sighs. "You were right, you know. I wasn't ready to take on Zero's needs. I'm still not certain what I can do to help him. You can't force someone to be happy anymore than you can force them to love you."

"You regret it then?" he asks, stirring again.

"No, I would have done it anyway. After seeing how people treat him, I still believe our power can protect him the best. But I would have done things differently," she replies thoughtfully.

"Come on," she says, holding out her arm for the familiar, a raven once more. "Let's go inside before I burn. Please watch over Zero tonight, Kaname."

Yuuki wishes she could do it herself, but her control over her familiar isn't good enough yet; she's close, perhaps a few more weeks' practice away from her goal, but she won't risk Zero for 'almost good enough.' Kaname can keep watch until Yuuki can relieve him. It may not be enough, but whatever Yuuki can do, she will do.

Chapter End Notes

This is a short chapter, because it was actually a section from a much longer original one. So you know that date I promised? It has now ballooned to three dates. None of our trio cooperated with me and I've written 6,000 words and have only gotten through one date. I decided that I was going to chop it and post the short chapter because it was the best place to break before the fluff. So much fluff guys. Be prepared.

Next time: Kaname embarks on a hasty course of action that he might regret, Yuuki wants to do some proper wooing, and Zero would like a vacation, preferably one where he kills vampires, thank you very much.
Between the Dog and the Wolf

Chapter Notes

Happy late Easter to my readers who belong to Christian denominations. We’ve broken a new record in chapter length, whooo 19,400 words! This chapter is the cutest thing I’ve ever written. So much fluff.

I may need to emphasize this more, since one of my reviewers asked about it, but Yagari’s aging is not a mistake. Kaito is aging ‘correctly’ for a Hunter, and will continue to look stubbornly middle-aged for a while. I figure that Hunters live to be 100-120 years most of the time, and they do age, but more slowly (so Cross' 200+ and not-aging can still make sense as being really abnormal). The answer why Yagari isn't aging as well is all the way back in chapter 5 - in my story, Yagari is a Hunter of mixed blood, unlike Zero and Kaito. One of his recent ancestors was a full human (I think maybe a grandmother? But haven't decided for sure), and that's why he doesn't look as much like a typical Hunter. His Hunter traits are still quite strong, and his mixed blood doesn't prevent him from being a superb, respected leader. But Yagari won't live as long, making this fact rather tragic for both Zero and Kaito. Hunting is very dangerous. Most good Hunters die because their prey got lucky; all it takes is one mistake. Generally Hunters retire as soon as their bodies can't keep up anymore, if they haven't already due to major injury. So Yagari decided to retire even though he is still in pretty good shape.

Thanks for reviewing and enjoy the chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Kiryuu's Hunt lies far to the north, over the cold, raging sea, in the wildest and northernmost island of the chain; it's a land of plains and mountains, with fertile farmers' fields and the remnants of ancient, untouched forests. There are worse places to go Hunting - or to stalk a Hunter, in Kaname's case. Judging from the duffel bag full of supplies, Kiryuu will likely stay here for a few days.

Because of the greater distance and time, Kaname must invest a significant amount of power in Kiryuu's watcher if he wishes to be able to intervene. The pureblood does so, grudgingly, shadow-spinning this master familiar only because he has promised Yuuki that he will guard Kiryuu, and he will not break his word to her.

Watching Kiryuu work, interviewing locals to gather information and methodically investigating potential lair sites, Kaname can appreciate the Hunter's superb skills and technique, as one predator to another. Never shy from admitting your enemies are skilled, lest you underestimate the threat they pose.

Experience has honed Kiryuu's art. He's a far different Hunter from the boy he was at sixteen, a clumsy half-trained puppy tripping over his own large paws. He's properly prepared now, well-taught by his elders rather than relying on a mix of instinct and self-taught skills, a seasoned and experienced wolfhound grown into his pelt. Every movement is purposeful, confident and efficient. Kaname is much reminded of Yagari in his prime by his cool and focused attitude, attentive yet
oddly relaxed, as though Kiryuu is more at home during a Hunt than outside of one.

Good Hunters are always unsettling to ordinary people, but fixed on a trail Kiryuu is at his most off-putting to the humans he comes across; on an instinctive level they flinch away from a predator, even a friendly one.

As Kaname's workday drags on though an endless string of meetings, the familiar's consciousness nests in the back of his mind. Through that faint awareness, like hearing a voice call from the next room, Kaname observes as Kiryuu ranges back and forth, eventually picking up a trail that leads him into the wilds of the island's interior.

Lately, whenever he realizes he is being followed, Kiryuu will evade Kaname's familiar to avoid being watched. Kaname must keep far enough away not to be seen, but close enough not to lose the Hunter. Beneath the thick tree canopy and the rough underbrush, tracking Kiryuu is becoming difficult for Kaname's raven.

The last of his meetings finished, Kaname moves to his study, needing to focus his attention more closely to keep the raven following Kiryuu, but the poor visibility means the raven has to repeatedly circle above the trees, and it loses sight of Kiryuu several times. Tracking by sight may be difficult, but Kaname has other ways of keeping up.

Directing the raven to land, Kaname reaches out to unite the two of them, and with his mind centered in the raven's body, draws on his power to reshape the familiar into something more suitable. The trees shrink as he becomes taller and larger, and a new world of smells unfolds, his new sense as potent as sound and sight. Kaname lopes off into the underbrush, easily following the line of Kiryuu's scent, long legs regaining lost ground until he's shadowing the Hunter right outside the boundary of his Hunter senses.

Kiryuu's path weaves back and forth, as though he's searching for something, and he doubles back several times when the going becomes too rough. Then, coming to a halt in a clearing, Kiryuu freezes and stiffens.

"I know you're there. Come out if you don't want to get shot, vampire."

Kaname goes still. Is Kiryuu guessing? He's certain his familiar is outside the limit of Kiryuu's sensory range. Have Kiryuu's abilities increased?

"Don't think that because I can't see you, I can't find you. I can sense your aura. You have until the count of ten before I shoot. One."

Kaname weighs his options. Kiryuu is suspicious now; he knows he's being followed. If Kaname retreats or disperses the familiar, Kiryuu will be on the alert and Kaname may not be able to track him any longer. This would make Yuuki unhappy, because Kiryuu is very good at getting into trouble.

"Four."

But if he reveals himself, Kiryuu might just shoot the familiar, which leads to the same outcome. Either way, his watcher's ability has been compromised. One other possibility exists - if Kaname lets Kiryuu discover his familiar, Kiryuu won't be pleased, but he might leave it alone once he recognizes his watcher. It's his best option, though Kaname is loathe to admit that Kiryuu has caught him.

"Seven."
Kaname, in his familiar's body, nonchalantly pads forward, as though he simply decided to reveal himself of his own violation. His ears catch the sound of Kiryuu shifting his grip on his gun, and knows that the muzzle is pointing squarely at his body, even though Kiryuu cannot see him. Kaname stops just short of the open clearing Kiryuu's standing in. His dark color disguises him in the thick, shadowy underbrush.


So Kaname does, one paw at a time. Whatever Kiryuu was expecting, it wasn't this; he blinks in puzzlement, but his gun never wavers.

"A dog?" The Hunter shakes his head. "No, a wolf." Kiryuu hasn't shot him yet, so that's a good sign the familiar may escape destruction after all.

"I know you're a familiar, but who do you belong to?" Kiryuu pauses and looks at Kaname, as though he'll speak and give an answer. It's fairly obvious, given his coloring; familiars always reflect their masters, no matter what form they take.

"I thought you had black fur, but you're really a very dark brown that looks black, unless you're in sunlight." Kiryuu observes, stepping cautiously closer. "And dark red eyes. The eyes always match the maker, and only the Kuran family has eyes like that. But you're not that bloodsucker Kuran's familiar - he has a raven."

Is Kiryuu playing ignorant? Or does Kiryuu really not know that familiars can have more than one form? The Hunters aren't always well-informed about pureblood powers, given their rarity and versatility. And most purebloods never bother training to have more than one form - each new shape requires as much practice as the first. Kaname runs through his memories, and realizes his familiar has never changed shape in front of the Hunter. He doesn't think Shouto's familiar has more than a single form, either.

"Which leaves...Are you Yuuki's familiar?" Kiryuu asks, curiously hopeful, all the hostility flowing out of his stance.

Kaname stills in surprise; it seems Kiryuu really does believe he's Yuuki's familiar. Yuuki has never mastered the skill - but that means Kaname can take advantage of Kiryuu's ignorance. This could be a magnificent opportunity; if Kiryuu believes he's Yuuki's familiar, Kaname can spy on his rival with ease. Kiryuu trusts Yuuki - think of all the secrets he must tell her, things he would hate for Kaname to know! If Kaname's form had hands right now, he'd be rubbing them together in glee. What a stroke of luck!

(Kaname's sluggish conscience prods him. This is not an action in good faith. This could hurt Kiryuu, and part of him still feels guilty for pushing Kiryuu to desperate measures. Has he not just struggled with the consequences of how he treats Kiryuu? Looked inward and found himself shameful and base? But it's easy to fall back on old patterns, to pretend that nothing has changed, to ignore his disordered feelings. If Kaname acts the same as before, then everything will go back to the uncomplicated time when he could despise Kiryuu without a qualm. Right?)

Apparently taking Kaname's silence as confirmation, Kiryuu lowers his gun, and approaches Kaname's wolf. Luckily, familiars have no genitals, so closer examination won't give Kaname away.

"Yuuki," Kiryuu scolds, "you shouldn't have followed me. I know you worry, but Hunts can be ugly things to watch. And I can take care of myself just fine."
This won't work if he makes Kiryuu suspicious. To complete his disguise, Kaname will have to make his familiar act exactly as Yuuki's would. Kaname lowers his head, lets his ears droop, and he whines, miming contrition.

"You need to go back, Yuuki," Kiryuu tells him seriously, kneeling down on the forest floor.

Think like Yuuki, Kaname reminds himself, so he growls and then whines.

"Yuuki -"

Kaname needs to stay near Kiryuu if this deception is going to bear fruit. His wolf rears back on its hind legs, towering over Kiryuu, and barks.

Kiryuu sighs and shakes his head. "Alright, but you can't interfere at all. I'm serious Yuuki - I don't want you to have to kill anyone. I'm raised to do this, but you shouldn't have any more blood on your hands. Can you promise me that?"

Easily. Kaname simply wants to uncover the Hunter's secrets; Kiryuu can get himself out of any trouble he gets himself into. His wolf bobs its muzzle and barks again.

"Okay," Kiryuu smiles, and reaches out to ruffle his fur. Kaname barely controls his impulse to dodge away, reminding himself he will need to allow many degrading things like this to convince Kiryuu to trust him. His wolf finds the sensation pleasant, Kaname discovers to his irritation.

Kiryuu returns to tracking his quarry, but this time Kaname's wolf trots openly alongside him, moving easily, agile in the wilderness. They cover much ground, and return to Kiryuu's lodgings at midmorning to sleep away the rest of the day. Kaname eyes the somewhat shabby surroundings and swishes his tail, looking meaningfully up at Kiryuu.

"Don't look at me like that, Yuuki. I'm not even getting paid a full Hunting commission anymore," the Hunter scolds. "We have to stay at places I can afford."

Does Kiryuu not realize his rights as their Consort guarantee him a generous stipend? Not that Kaname wants Kiryuu to spend more of his money, but they can't have him staying in rundown hostels and hotels if other vampires can find out; the Kurans' reputation would suffer. And if it means Kaname will have to sleep in places like this through his familiar, Kaname will spend the money to put Kiryuu in a decent hotel.

The Hunter smuggles Kaname's wolf in after distracting the hostel manager at the reception desk. "One more day and we can go back," Kiryuu promises, holding the door to his room open.

"I've narrowed down the area where they have their hideout, but I don't want to move in without being fully rested. You should know that my targets aren't Level Es this time, Yuuki. They're criminals who've killed people, but they're still themselves. Are you still sure you won't stay here?"

His wolf gives a low growl and quietly barks his refusal. Kaname already knows Kiryuu's mission here; the Council and the Senate had to approve the execution request beforehand. Some pureblood with a taste for mayhem Turned a local gang, and the gang members have taken their new powers and used them to perpetrate a crime spree of theft and murder. Kiryuu's targets have been deemed a danger to the vampire race because their actions risk exposing the world of night, and were unanimously approved for extermination. Truly a despicable bunch; Kaname won't waste any regret on their deaths.

Kiryuu slips out for half an hour and returns with a premade meal box for himself from a convenience store, and a pile of raw chicken cuts for Kaname's wolf from a local butcher. It's odd
to be treated so nicely by Kiryuu, when Kaname expects his usual glares and hostility. Kiryuu's whole demeanor is softer and gentler, and he's always considerate. His mouth even has a hint of a smile, sometimes.

(The guilt comes creeping back whenever that happens, until his willful blindness buries the certainty he's adding to his sins.)

"Here you go, Wolfy," Kiryuu says, face relaxed, and a slight curve to his lips, presenting Kaname with a morsel that his familiar drools over. "I made sure I didn't get anything with bones you could choke on."

Kaname pushes down the wolf's mind and glares at Kiryuu as best he can in his current body.

"Calling you Yuuki feels weird," explains Kiryuu. "And Shouto told me that the wolf is part of you, but it's also a separate being with its own thoughts. It can act without your orders, so it needs its own name. Until I think of one, you can be Wolfy."

It's only for a short time, the pureblood reminds himself, controlling the impulse to bite Kiryuu and abandon this gambit. Kaname growls, but lets the wolf snap up the offered chicken liver. Kiryuu leaves his wolf alone to eat, and only when he's licking his lips does Kaname realize where the Hunter went.

In a cloud of steam, Kiryuu steps out of the bathroom, towel draped over his shoulders. His hair is wet, and Kiryuu has stripped down to a pair of faded sweatpants and a short sleeved t-shirt. Kaname can't tear his eyes from the pale skin of the Hunter's bare arms. In the back of his mind, the alpha watches appreciatively, an image of Kiryuu underneath the falling water bubbling up - *We do not need to think about Kiryuu naked*, Kaname orders it sternly. *Naked mate is the best kind of mate*, the alpha stubbornly insists.

"Come on, Wolfy. Time to sleep." Kiryuu pats the other side of the bed.

Kaname deliberately settles down on the bare floorboards.

Disappointment dims the Hunter's lavender eyes. "Okay. That's fine too. Ah, you should know that I'm a restless sleeper. So just ignore me if I make noise."

Kiryuu starts to shift and twist in his sheets just three hours later, groaning and letting out soft distressed noises. Kaname had been asleep himself, his familiar little more than a quiet presence in the back of his mind, but he wakes when Kiryuu's heartbeat accelerates, centering his mind back in the familiar and lifting the wolf's head from its paws.

*Mate is distressed. Help mate.*

The wolf form, Kaname discovers, has some drawbacks. A raven has almost no sense of smell, but a wolf's nose is exquisitely sensitive. His wolf can smell Kiryuu's alluring omega pheromones, which means Kaname can smell them too, and his alpha instincts react powerfully to that stimulus. Right now that omega scent is laced with sour fear. Kiryuu is having a nightmare.

*Mate doesn't want us because we don't care for him properly. Help mate*, his instincts insist more forcefully.

But before Kaname can do anything, Kiryuu shoots upright in the bed, breath leaving his body in a sob. The pureblood has never seen Kiryuu cry, he realizes. Kiryuu masters himself quickly, hugging his arms around his body until his breath slows, then running a hand through his hair and
falling backwards onto the pillows.

See, Kaname tells his instincts, _nothing to be interested in._

Kiryuu eventually falls back to sleep, and so does Kaname. But a mere two hours later, Kaname realizes that he can hear the same noises again. Another nightmare, worse than the first one.

"Don't. Don't," Kiryuu whispers brokenly.

_Help our mate_, says the alpha. _Help mate. Help mate now. We must help mate. Mate needs us._ _HELP MATE._

Just to shut up his damned instincts, Kaname gets up and pads to the bed. The alpha isn't satisfied, so Kaname jumps up on the mattress in a neat arc, landing lightly. Kiryuu doesn't stir, entangled in the nets of his dream. Unsure what his instincts want, Kaname noses at Kiryuu's arm, accidentally waking Kiryuu with his wolf's cold wet nose.

The Hunter jumps at the sensation, draws in a sharp breath, and then sags into the mattress. "Thanks, Yuuki," Kiryuu says quietly, and rolls over, winding his bare arms around Kaname's neck and burying his face into the wolf's thick fur.

_surprised_, Kaname stands stock-still, caught in the sudden unexpected sensations. He knows Yuuki would allow Kiryuu to use her for comfort, so he doesn't move, permitting the Hunter to come close, but doing nothing else. Kaname dislikes it, of course, but the wolf finds the contact enjoyable, even pushing closer.

They stay like this for a few minutes, Kiryuu silently stroking him, hiding his face until his composure returns. Kiryuu's weight and scent and warmth remind the pureblood of feeding from him, Kaname realizes, and afterwards it becomes easier to encourage Kiryuu's embrace until the Hunter releases him and his wolf jumps back to the ground.

Kiryuu doesn't go back to sleep, and he doesn't mention the nightmares that evening. Kaname prefers it that way; he's not here to let Kiryuu cry on him or be his therapist.

He can tell from the way Kiryuu arms himself, distant and solemn like a sacred ritual, that tonight a vampire will meet death. Even interacting with the familiar he believes is Yuuki's, Kiryuu's mind is elsewhere, already ahead walking the path to the Hunt's climax.

When they find the ex-human gang members, holed up in the hidden caves of a mountain valley, the fools don't even know what Kiryuu is. They don't know their deaths have already been sealed by the deadliest predator of their kind. Filled with arrogance and confidence by their new supernatural abilities, Kaname watches from the side as they attack Kiryuu without discipline or a plan, shouting and haphazardly rushing forward all at once. There are over twice the expected number, but it makes no difference. The Hunter does exactly what he was trained to do: by bullet and blade, cut down without mercy the vampires who believe themselves above the law. Bloody Rose proves its name tonight; a bunch of thugs armed with pipes, chains and bats are easy pickings.

Despite himself, Kaname admires Kiryuu as he Hunts. Alone this time, Kiryuu cannot escape being the sole center of Kaname's focus. Removing the lesser Hunters clears away distractions from Kiryuu's mastery the same way a virtuoso soloist is better enjoyed without mediocre accompaniment.

The scent of blood mixes with gunpowder as Kiryuu offers himself up to Awaken the Bloody Rose,
the ancient weapon savagely striking out with swift silver vines to protect its master. One thug meets his death after another, as Kiryuu darts back and forth, a pale shape dancing in the moonlight, light flashing off his silver gun barrel and the whips of its vines. He dodges underneath a bat hammered with nails, then steps chest to chest and puts a bullet straight through the D's heart with an efficiency and grace that is truly impressive, even to his rival. This an executioner's ballet, death elevated to macabre beauty, the ancient, terrible epitome of a Hunter's Art. The last hiss of ash is somehow both satisfying and disappointing.

It is no wonder we have chosen him, whispers the alpha. Do you not see? Though he was not born to the Night, he is a predator who Hunts in darkness, no less than we are. We have seen other omegas like him before - exquisite, matchless, incomparable, unequaled by the lesser alphas who courted them. Our kind took those worthy ones to wife, and sired legends on them. Can you not imagine it? The unspeakable, unsurpassable pleasure of lying with this beautiful, deadly creature, burying yourself to the root in the soft, sweet vulnerability of the most dangerous night-Hunter that has ever lived. Deny all you like; we shall never relinquish him.

Kiryuu isn't himself again until they're riding the ferry back home, finally coming down from the high of a good Hunt, the well-earned exhaustion showing in his face. Kaname is little better, shaken by the sight of Kiryuu dancing like death in pale moonlight, and the worshipful conviction of his alpha's response.

But he needs to pull himself back together; his scheme lies in jeopardy. Last night, Kaname realized a flaw in his plan to impersonate Yuuki's familiar: Kiryuu will mention this encounter to Yuuki, and discover that the wolf does not belong to her. Lacking his usual resources, Kaname spent the night pondering how to repair the hole, and he thinks he may have a solution. Acting now is his only remaining chance to preserve this masquerade. Kaname hasn't learned anything useful yet, but he's certain future work will bring rewards. He does not examine any new potential motivations for this desperate gamble.

Barking to gain Kiryuu's attention, Kaname whines and gives Kiryuu his best sad dog eyes. Demeaning, but he has little to work with.

"What is it, Wolfy?" Kiryuu asks, leaning down tiredly.

Kaname begins to trace characters with his forepaw. Please...wolf...secret.

Kiryuu's brow crinkles, and he rubs a hand over his face. "You want me to keep your familiar a secret?"

Yes, spells Kaname, sweeping his tail back and forth.

"Alright. I guess Kuran doesn't know?" Kiryuu asks.

Kaname shakes his head, confirming the lie.

Kiryuu nods. "Then I promise I won't mention it unless you bring it up first. And be careful about mentioning it in front of me. Kuran's been following me with his creepy raven, so he might overhear." The Hunter hesitates, then offers, "If you want to come, I'll have another Hunt soon. It was nice spending time with you even if we can't talk."

Perfect. Kaname lets the wolf rush forward, licking at Kiryuu's hands and nuzzling him in gratitude. In his real body, Kaname smiles. This deception may require a little discomfort, but it will end with him victorious.
Barely three days later, Association dispatch contacts him again requesting another Hunt. If they need Zero so soon, the Level E situation must really be overwhelming their resources. Zero hopes Kaito and Master Yagari will be alright, and Cross will be able to keep Master from returning to the field.

When Zero tells Yuuki this, she looks down at him on the floor, forehead creasing in thought, draped upside down over the side of the library couch. Zero starts to sweat; when Yuuki wears her thinking face, trouble always follows.

"You'll be spending a lot of time on missions for a while?" she asks, nose wrinkling. She doesn't want him to leave, and Zero feels warm inside at being missed.

"Probably, yes," he replies cautiously.

"Okay. But since you'll be gone more often, I want to spend time with you when you get back. Maybe you can come with me when I go out to run errands," she tells him, turning over on her belly, but doesn't look satisfied. "How about you take us on a date? We've only been on one so far."

"I don't want to take Kuran on a date," he protests. Having Kuran along would ruin the experience.

"We're married. We can't leave him behind," Yuuki points out reasonably.

"He won't want to come," Zero counters.

"Leave that to me," she tells him, grinning. "He'll come, I promise."

"Well, why does I have to be the one who arranges going on a date?" Zero asks, searching for a way out of Yuuki's plan.

She rests her chin on her folded arms. "You have a good point. We'll just have to do three dates, so each of us has a chance to plan one. That's fair."

Zero resists the urge to cover his face in despair. He should have just agreed with the first suggestion; now he has to sit through three dates with Kuran. But also with Yuuki, the Hunter reminds himself, feeling that warm glow again. Besides, Kuran will be just as uncomfortable. He can put up with some awkwardness to wallow in Kuran's irritation. Right?

"As long as you make Kuran hold his end of the bargain," Zero says, already feeling the impending doom, "I'll plan a date for us and attend both of yours."

Yuuki hugs him, and nearly falls off the couch. "I'll help if you need, since you're busy. And it doesn't have to be right when you get back. I'm going to miss you," she says, wistfully gazing into his face. "Remember that I love you, and I'll be thinking of you until I see you again."

"So will I," Zero replies, and reminds himself how Yuuki's wolf will make that absence easier to bear for both of them.

So far, he has not been able to argue Yuuki out of her conviction she is in love with him, and says nothing more in response to the sentiment, wishing to leave on a good note. Hunters teach one another never to part regretfully; there will be better times to speak up.

Kuran pulls Zero into his study just before he leaves, and presents him with a credit card and paperwork confirming the existence of an account in his name, while informing him that the money belongs to him by right and will be added to every month. Zero neither needs nor wants Kuran's money, and the Hunter tells him so, but Kuran won't let him return the card, insisting that
he will look like an inadequate alpha if he denies their Consort financial support. Unable to argue any longer without missing his flight, Zero leaves with the card in his wallet, and no intention of using it.

Yuuki meets him at the door, determined not to let Zero slip away without saying goodbye.

"I told you I wouldn't let you sneak away again," she says, squeezing him tightly in a hug. Zero strokes the long loose silk of her head and squeezes back, still amazed at being allowed to do such a thing after the way he hurt her.

She senses the darker turn of his thoughts and yanks on his coat, pulling his head down where she can reach his lips, kissing him warm and soft with an edge of possessiveness, coaxing Zero to kiss back. "Stay safe," she whispers against his lips, "and come back to me, because it's the only way I can stand to let you go. And remember that I love you."

His heart lurches; he's never stopped loving her, but staying silent is for her own good. Zero simply nods, touches her hand one last time, and goes to load his gear.

When Rosehill is out of sight behind a bend in the road, Zero pulls over and waits. Just as he hoped, his Hunter senses tingle, and he sees a flash in the underbrush. Yuuki's familiar steps into the road, a great dark wolf as magnificent and beautiful as it was the first time he saw it, the sun setting the red undertones of its fur ablaze. It's enormous - as big as the largest dog he's ever seen, almost taller than him when he kneels down - and it holds itself with a kind of majesty that knows its own power. The thrill of admiration rises again in his chest at the sight. He's always known that Yuuki was extraordinary, but now he can see and touch proof in this wild creature her power has formed.

Zero grins. "Hi Wolfy. Glad to see you're coming along." It's still difficult to associate Yuuki with her familiar; though stunning and gorgeous, somehow this form doesn't seem to suit her at all. Perhaps Zero doesn't know her as well as he thought anymore, he reflects as he opens the back hatch of the car.

"We'll have to fly this time, so hop in," he tells her.

The wolf takes one look at the dog crate, and plants its rear on the ground, growling.

"It's either this or you stay behind," Zero says, fully enjoying this bit of payback for the date idea. "I got you the biggest crate I could find. And it has a big, squishy cushion to sleep on!"

The familiar growls louder.

"This is the fastest way to Australia," Zero points out. "I'm not going to miss my flight, so you need to chose now."

The wolf looks as offended as a canine face can manage, but leaps smoothly into the crate, and broods angrily as Zero latches it shut.

Wolfy looks even grumpier ten hours later, spilling from the crate and getting to stretch out for the first time since Zero checked the familiar into baggage. Zero made sure not to let the familiar out until they reached the pet-friendly hotel he's upgraded them to with Kuran's money, wary of possible revenge. Wolfy shoots him a surprised look when it sees how their accommodations have improved, but it's not like Zero has anything else to spend money on. At least by paying for a nice hotel he can spend the money on Yuuki, in a roundabout way. Maybe he'll take her shopping for their date; Kuran can trail along and hold the bags.
With that happy thought, Zero drags their luggage (and one wolf) upstairs, feeds them, and beds down for the night. Wolfy wakes him up again from his nightmares, giving his face a wet, slobbery lick that Zero shoots it a disgusted look for. The familiar looks smug, and Zero's irritation helps him forget the way his Master's blood felt spilling over his hands as he died in Zero's arms. Yuuki's always good at distracting him. He's embarrassed she has to know about his nightmares, but if anyone has to know, Zero would rather it be Yuuki. The wolf's presence is a comfort, and the way it lets him use it like a giant stuffed animal helps him get over his nightmares without having to run for miles until he exhausts himself.

So Zero feels more rested than usual, and decides it's time to give Yuuki her present before they have to go Hunting tonight. Honestly, it's not to his taste, but he knows Yuuki will like it.

The wolf takes one look at the pink collar with a heart-shaped name plate, and howls a furious rejection with its ears pinned flat, shaking its head and growl-barking every time Zero comes close until the Hunter gives up and backs off. Zero's more than a little hurt, and hides the collar in his suitcase.

Then he tries to reason with her, puzzled. "Yuuki, there are leash laws. Your familiar can't wander around without one. Animal control will take you to a shelter."

Wolfy growls contemptuously at this thought.

"If I buy you another one, will you wear it?" he asks.

The familiar thinks for a moment, then nods reluctantly.

And that's how they find themselves in a pet supercenter, shopping for a collar half an hour before closing time. The salesgirl, a young teenager wearing braces on her teeth, ambushes them at the door.

"Hi, can I help you and your…." she trails off weakly eyeing the wolf at his side. Zero doesn't blame her - he wouldn't want to meet Yuuki's scary looking familiar at night in a dark alley.

"Sled dog mixed breed," Zero answers firmly.

The salesgirl brightens. "Can I help you two find anything today?"

"Yes," says Zero, a handful of Wolfy's ruff in his hand, as insurance the familiar won't run away. "I just adopted her, and I need a collar. Nothing pink."

The wolf rejects everything nylon, cheap or not in plain colors. Zero has to buy it the most expensive collar in the store, made of supple, good quality leather in dark mahogany, with gold colored metal fittings and a matching leash. The wolf looks good in it, but Yuuki's choice surprises Zero; he never expected she would pick that one. In hindsight, it was foolish of him to expect her tastes hadn't changed since Cross Academy. Yuuki's daily wardrobe fits her role as an adult pureblood, so this tasteful, understated choice matches her mature self.

Pacified by picking its new collar, Wolfy behaves that evening, pacing calmly through the streets by his side as Zero searches for the nest he's meant to exterminate. The Hunt would be more pleasant if it weren't winter right now in the southern hemisphere, but rain or snow, a Hunter never turns aside for any obstacle. The Hunt goes on until one of them - Hunter or prey - is dead.

"You need a name," Zero says, resting on a park bench around three in the morning, breathing on his hands to try and warm them. There's no snow, but it's chilly and the wind off the sea is sharp. The familiar eyes him, aloof at his feet; Wolfy treats the leash as though it doesn't exist, pointedly
staying close enough Zero is never doing more than holding the loop, no pressure exerted on the collar.

"Takuma-sempai got to name Shouto's familiar, and I'm the first to know about yours, so I claim naming rights," he tells the wolf, satisfied at the thought of denying Kuran the opportunity.

"How about Black Rose?" he suggests, a twinge of sadness at remembering the last animal he named, dear White Lily.

The wolf growls, turning its head away to ignore Zero. Zero's becoming very familiar with that sound. Does being in this form make Yuuki cranky or something?


No, no, and definitely not. Zero sighs, rubbing his hands together one more time. "I'll think about it," he promises, getting up to head back on patrol.

"Zero said we should dress for the weather," Yuuki reminds Kaname, eyeing his suit. The pureblood's only concession to Kiryuu was to remove his waistcoat, otherwise he's dressed as normal in slacks and a suit coat. Yuuki, on the other hand, has taken Kiryuu's instructions quite literally, in a white cotton sundress with a border of happy smiling orange and yellow suns.

The heat of the summer's day lingers, rising up from the ground. It's just on the edge of dusk, and the sun is nothing more than a halo on the horizon. Kiryuu had been very specific about the place and time the Kurans were to arrive for their date, but the Hunter has yet to show. Kiryuu better not have stood them up.

But alas - or fortunately - Kiryuu appears right on time, lugging a large picnic basket with him. He matches Yuuki in his wave-patterned, summer weight overrobe and loose trousers, with an aqua colored gem as his Hoseki.

"Ohhh," says Yuuki, bouncing on her toes. "Are we going on a picnic?"

"Yes," replies Kiryuu, slightly out of breath. "Follow me," he tells the Kurans, pace not even slowing before plunging into the gardens.

"A picnic?" Kaname questions skeptically as they follow Kiryuu.

"Yes, Kuran." Kiryuu bites out, a scowl in his voice. "I didn't have a lot of free time for anything more complicated. I hope your ancient majesty doesn't mind."

"Did you cook?" Yuuki jumps in, wisely diverting Kiryuu's attention just as Kaname opens his mouth to retort.

"I did," Kiryuu tells her, sounding pleased. "You should appreciate it. The head chef here guards her kitchen like a bank vault; I had to practically beg before she let me touch anything."

"And what did you make?" she asks excitedly, trying to peek inside the basket.

Kiryuu darts ahead and hugs the basket protectively. "Uh-uh. Not until we eat," he scolds.

Kaname seriously doubts Kiryuu is capable of making anything he would want to eat, let alone something the pureblood would want to eat a second time. But if Kaname lets Kiryuu drink his blood for Yuuki's sake, he can stand choking down whatever mess Kiryuu's created.
The garden Kiryuu's picked for their rendezvous - not a date, Kaname reminds himself - seems unremarkable and plain. Summer has turned the plants a rich green, but there are no flowers blooming in this garden, not even in the tall border hedges or the ornamental pond. Rosehill has extensive gardens famous for their beauty, and this is the best Kiryuu could do? This evening is turning into even more of a disappointment then Kaname expected; Kiryuu could at least find lovelier scenery for them to look at as they force down his tasteless, inedible food.

Yuuki helps Kiryuu spread a blanket on the ground, and they sit down as the last light fades in the west and night falls.

"Are we waiting for someone?" Yuuki asks, puzzled when Kiryuu does not move to hand out plates or pour the tea in its thermos.

The Hunter checks the time on his phone, tucking it back in his sleeve. "Not someone, something," he says, and then his eyes light up with delight. It's attractive.

"There it is. Watch!" he instructs them.

What is he meant to watch? The bare garden? Kaname thinks scornfully. But then, out of the corner of his eye, he catches a hint of movement and a flash of white.

Impossibly, right in front of his eyes, the whole garden is flowering, green buds unfurling into huge white blooms. Like magic, the vines wrapped around the hedges, the leafy trellises above their heads, and even the green beds beside the garden path become masses of white flowers as he watches, fascinated by the display. The blooms' pleasant, heavy fragrance spreads over the garden, now covered in white.

Kiryuu is watching the two of them with a small, secret smile on his mouth, eyes sparkling with pride. This is why he brought them here - to witness this fleeting spectacle of natural beauty, found in a place which minutes before had been unremarkable and drab.

Yuuki's voice is hushed with awe, still watching the last of the flowers open. "They're so beautiful. Thank you, Zero."

"They're called moonflowers," he tells them, tilting his head to the side as the moonlight catches in his hair, and reaching out to cup one of the flowers. "They only bloom at night, after the sun goes down, and they'll close again before morning. The waterlilies are a night blooming variety too, but they don't open as fast. We can watch them as we have breakfast."

Yuuki and Kiryuu exchange smiles. They don't look at him.

Kiryuu has prepared a seemingly endless supply of boxed lunches, green tea and other delicacies. "I didn't know what you'd like, so I made some of everything," the Hunter says, rolling up his sleeves to show his bare forearms, and bustling around arranging the dishes and handing out utensils.

The food looks surprisingly attractive, arranged neatly and garnished with thin carrot slices shaped into flower designs, with each dish cut evenly into bite-sized pieces. Bemused, Kaname realizes he may have underestimated Kiryuu. Someone had to keep Cross and Yuuki alive and fed, and it wasn't Cross' questionable food experiments.

While Kiryuu is watching, Kaname tries only a few tiny pieces, with feigned reluctance, but once Yuuki and Kiryuu are distracted by their conversation, the pureblood sneaks tastes of almost everything laid out to eat.
And it is quite an amount: pickled cucumbers, boiled quail eggs, rice and vegetable stuffed tofu sushi, seared beef slivers, fish cakes shaped like flowers, tiny omelettes rolled in the shape of tulips, grilled, breaded octopus, braised carrot and burdock root salad, two flavors of rice balls, and for dessert, red bean mochi, arranged in the box like the petals of a flower.

The ingredients are ordinary, the dishes are simple, and nothing here is fancy. It's all portable finger foods suitable for picnics, but Kaname discovers that everything he tries is well-made and tasty; Kiryuu is a surprisingly good cook. Kaname eats far more than he expected, left to his own devices and sneaking seconds.

"And then Kain-sempai turned tail and ran! Ruka's mom is really scary; I think I would've run too!" Yuuki finishes her story.

"Are those two really going to get married?" Zero asks, raising an eyebrow as he takes a sip of his tea.

"We have an informal bet going, if you want to try predicting when. No money, just for fun." Yuuki tells him cheerfully.

The two of them have such an easy camaraderie between them, Kaname reflects. In school, their friendship ignited his jealousy for exactly that reason. And now things have come full circle, Kiryuu returning under impossible circumstances to thwart him again. His misgivings were right after all, he thinks wryly. Well, only most of them - Yuuki inexplicably, miraculously, is still by his side.

Kaname does not have the gift of putting people around him at ease, and that too makes him jealous. People aren't comfortable in his presence; on the contrary, he has the opposite effect. When he walks in the room, people usually fall silent, and pick up their conversations when he leaves. What a bitter memory for such a beautiful night, he chastises himself, and chases it away with another rice ball.

"You make a very good wife, Kiryuu," Kaname remarks, examining the sausage cut like a flower speared on his fork. There is a tiny bit of pickle in the center like a stem; Kiryuu has an eye for detail. "Perhaps I should keep you in my kitchen all the time."

The Hunter colors and glares. "I'm not your wife, Kuran. Make your own meals."

"Mmm, I think not."

Yuuki pipes up, "It's because Kaname was spoiled by Okaa-san and Otou-san as a child. I'm not sure he can cook."

Kaname frowns. "I can cook, Yuuki." In fact, he can cook, thank you very much, but only very simple things from his first childhood. After that he acquired servants, since he didn't enjoy the task.

"Okay, so when did you learn to cook?" challenges Kiryuu.

The pureblood considers lying, but the hint of curiosity in both their faces gives him pause, and he remembers his promise not to hide things from Yuuki any longer. Kiryuu can be trusted not to use the information against him. His belly is full of good food, and his mind is relaxed by the thick scent of moonflowers. So Kaname tells them the truth.

"When I was made, I simply ate what I was given by the scientists who engineered us. After they were gone, I didn't know how to acquire food that wasn't given to me. I was lucky to be a
pureblood. I couldn't die from starvation like a human. At first I scavenged food, and ate it raw. Eventually I taught myself to cook. I can cook beans in a can, and dry rice. Only over an open fire. I can cook meal cakes buried underneath, wrapped in leaves, and small animals on a spit. I don't know how to use a stove. We didn't have stoves for a while after the Cataclysm. By that time I had servants to cook for me."

"Then...have you ever been on a picnic? Or a flower viewing?" Yuuki ventures tentatively.

"No," he tells them, still examining the flower sausage, thoughtful, then pops in in his mouth.

"Where were your parents?" Kiryuu asks, boldly meeting Kaname's eyes. Kiryuu needs to work on his sense of self-preservation, Kaname reflects.

"I did not have any. I was far from the only one. There were many other children like me," he says, understanding only after experiencing the care of a parent why Yuuki and Kiryuu have such sympathetic, sad expressions. It's rather revolting, so Kaname casts his eyes instead to the night-blooming waterlilies, now an explosion of pinks, purples, and reds adding a bright blot of color to the white moonflower garden.

"So you raised yourself?" Yuuki asks quietly.

"Yes. I had to be careful, and keep to myself, or else the humans realized I did not age correctly." Kaname dislikes the memories of those days, skulking at the edges of society like a scavenging animal picking through trash.

Kiryuu has a strange look in his eyes. "Did you know what you were?"

Kaname schools his face to keep an even expression. "I did not have a name for what I was. I knew there were others like me, but not why I did or needed certain things. Why the terrible hunger for blood," he says, uncomfortable at admitting such weakness and ignorance, and regretting his truthful impulse.

Hastily, he goes on, "It was a long time before I met any others of my kind again, and we named our race. I found them largely revolting. Many of them had turned into monstrous, greedy beasts, or had fallen into madness and delusions of godhood."

"But you didn't," Kiryuu says, a thoughtful statement of fact. Kaname stares at him; Kiryuu isn't glaring, and instead is scrutinizing him, eyes sharp. "Our history says that you helped the Hunters stop the worst vampires, gathered up the decent ones, and supported the creation of treaties between our races. You could have conquered humanity and made us your slaves. Why didn't you?"

Suddenly feeling like he needs to be back on safer ground, Kaname gives himself time by taking a drink of his tea.

"It's not what you think, Kiryuu. I'm not like you. Random people don't matter to me. I don't care about people simply because they exist. My loyalty is earned, and belongs to a select few. But humanity did not deserve to be enslaved by us. They valued their short lives no less than ours, with our ugly unquenchable thirst. I could see that allowing it would be wrong, and cause terrible suffering. And a friend of mine cared deeply for humans, much like the two of you do. Creating the world she desired sustained me, once she died. She would have wanted me to help them."

Kiryuu considers this. "A female pureblood who cared for humans, and who died. You knew the Ancestor of the Hunters?"
Kaname swallows painfully. "Yes. She was an extraordinary woman."

Kiryuu lets the subject drop, kind even to his enemies, and a comfortable silence falls as the three of them watch the moonflowers bloom in the starlight.

"Stop the car!"

Takamiya Kaito slams on the brakes, throwing Kaname's wolf forward and spilling him off the back seat where he'd been lying, stretched out on his side. Scrabbling for footing, Kaname jumps back up, circling around and sticking his head between the front seats to make his ire known to Takamiya.

Takamiya is knocking his head on the steering wheel. "Zero, please….

"We completed our Hunt ahead of schedule," Kiryuu says firmly. "We'll be there on time. And I can't leave him - what if he gets hit by a car? He has a collar, so he belongs to somebody. I'm just going to return him."

Another stray dog. Kaname has discovered in the past few weeks that Kiryuu, the obnoxious white knight, rescues everything. Lost dogs, stray cats, loose horses (Kiryuu seemed particularly fond of them. On one memorable occasion, Kiryuu had delivered a skinny, beaten horse he found to a policeman with video evidence of its abuse). Wildlife trapped in fences and tangled in nets. Baby birds fallen from their nests. Cats in trees. Balloons in trees. Lost children, parents looking for their children, little old ladies needing help carrying heavy bags, people who were nasty to him, and on and on. Kiryuu will rescue everything except vampires (except Kaname).

Kaname, in the body of his wolf, sighs heavily. Takamiya gives him a look of intense understanding and camaraderie as Kiryuu goes to lure the dog with a bag of treats kept in his Hunting gear specifically for this purpose.

If someone told Kaname he would feel any kind of sympathy for Takamiya a month ago, Kaname would have educated them verbally, at length, exactly what he thought about Kiryuu's Hunter friend, and taken a chunk of their self-esteem with it.

'Wolfy' and Takamiya's first meeting had been a disaster. The alpha instincts had thrown a fit when the two Hunters embraced - Kaname had to explain to the alpha that Takamiya was brother, not rival, so stop shouting already about mate being stolen away - and the misunderstanding had left Kaname ill-tempered even before Takamiya reached out and ruffled his fur. Kaname puts up with a great deal of humiliation to preserve this disguise - never let anyone say he isn't completely dedicated to his own schemes - but being petted like a common dog by that insolent, rude Hunter was one step too far. Kaname sank his teeth into Takamiya's hand and refused to let go until Kiryuu promised Takamiya would never, ever try to pet him again.

Since then, the two of them have worked out an arrangement: Takamiya treats Kaname's wolf with the fear and caution he deserves, and Kaname doesn't bite him. It helps that Takamiya makes peace offerings of the homemade deer jerky he brings on Hunts, and relations have much improved.

Takamiya fishes out the bag of deer jerky, chomps down on a large piece, and offers Kaname's wolf another slice, which the wolf daintily takes in his teeth and gnaws on as they watch Kiryuu coax the dog closer. The little brown terrier takes to Kiryuu easily, tail wagging and squirming as it's picked up. Kaname and Takamiya finish off the last of the dried meat as Kiryuu returns the dog to the address on its collar.
An elderly woman answers the door, takes one look at Kiryuu, with his strange hair color, earrings and intimidating air, snatches the dog from Kiryuu's arms, and slams the door in the Hunter's face. It's not the first time this has happened. Children and animals adore Kiryuu, but adults often take one look at the strange-looking young man holding something small and vulnerable and assume he's up to no good. Kiryuu gets back into the car with no sign that he minds her reaction, unruffled as ever.

They're going to have dinner - breakfast for normal humans - with Takamiya's family before Kiryuu goes back to Rosehill. Kaname hopes they don't linger. Already the thin morning light promises a scorching summer day, and though Kaname's familiar bears sunlight better than his true body does, it feels uncomfortable nevertheless, and takes more concentration and power to keep the familiar manifested.

Summer for vampires is much like winter is to humans; the weather is uncomfortable so you stay inside, spend time with those close to you and hold the occasional party while you wait it out. That means that summer tends to be less active for vampire Hunters as well, under normal circumstances.

Kaname's eyes narrow. In the past few weeks, there have been far too many Hunts. Kiryuu is not supposed to Hunt so often, which means that if he is called out, he is badly needed. Someone is making Level D vampires at an unsustainable rate. Kaname has already started his own investigations, though whoever is doing it is hiding their tracks very skillfully.

The purpose of this deception has been an absolute failure, otherwise. Using his wolf has brought Kaname not a single piece of useful information. Kiryuu is careful never to speak of Hunter business, and he is taciturn about personal matters even with Yuuki. Kaname ought to have abandoned this strategy when he realized it brought him no gain, but he had not, even after enduring endless insults to his dignity while masquerading as Yuuki. Kaname can stand the embarrassment only because no one knows the wolf belongs to him, otherwise preserving his reputation would have demanded he exact revenge to save face.

Watching Kiryuu has been...not entirely uninteresting. It's almost as though Kiryuu is two different people. One person with Kaname - the angry, hostile, defensive, suspicious Kiryuu - and another with the rest of the world - the calmer, tolerant, generous Zero.

And a third person, who suffers from constant nightmares he keeps secret, the weak, vulnerable Kiryuu who's at the mercy of his own mind. Kaname wakes Kiryuu as soon as his nightmares begin now. His screaming alpha instincts have worn away at his resistance, and they bother him less the more quickly he acts. Kiryuu acts so grateful to be woken, but Kaname always returns to his own sleeping place, refusing to stay in Kiryuu's bed. The twinge of guilt every time he leaves Kiryuu alone hasn't gone away yet, but Kaname has faith that eventually it won't make his icy heart feel a thing.

For Kaname, centering his mind in the wolf has become a form of relaxation. The wolf has a simpler intellect, and few worries. Letting the wolf instincts reign makes fooling Kiryuu even easier; the wolf bears no grudges, and the wolf likes Kiryuu, who feeds him and pets him and grooms his coat. It's nearly embarrassing how much the wolf loves trailing behind Kiryuu, except that Kiryuu fully returns the adoration. Kaname's wolf still has no name, but he does have his own traveling bag, always filling with new things Kiryuu's bought for him: a bowl for drinking, dried meat treats, his leash and collar for when they're in public, several brushes and combs, and an embarrassing number of toys. Kaname refuses to use them, but that doesn't stop Kiryuu from trying.
'Wake up Wolfy, we're here," Kiryuu says. Kaname gives him a withering look, and braces himself for dealing with Takamiya's spawn. They're as grabby as their sire, but Takamiya keeps a vigilant eye out and doggedly intercepts their attempts to pet him. Kaname is satisfied; Takamiya has shown his own lesson well-learned.

The house is more crowded than Kaname expected; Takamiya, it turns out, has five children and seems to be babysitting several of his wife's young nieces and nephews, all of whom call Kaname's wolf doggy and throw table scraps at him, as though he is a dumb animal desperate enough to eat off the floor. A small toddler in a high chair even throws handfuls of cereal into his fur.

_I am the most ancient and powerful pureblood in existence_, he reminds himself, the mantra he has perfected over the past weeks. _I allow these pathetic mortals to live because it serves my purposes to do so_. Kaname's new, long-suffering patience has been hard learned while he worked to maintain this deceit, and that practice comes in handy now; Kaname restrains himself to glaring and the baby Hunters all live to Hunt another day. Kiryuu finally notices Kaname's torment and shoos away the children, taking Kaname aside to pick cereal pieces out of his fur and praising him for his tolerance. Kiryuu keeps the wolf next to his chair for the rest of the visit, far away from Takamiya's obnoxious spawn. Kaname lays his head in Kiryuu's lap - to maintain his disguise, of course - and lets the Hunter pet his ears as a reward.

Takamiya pulls Kiryuu aside after breakfast, under the pretense of seeing his fellow apprentice out to his car.

"Somebody tried to kill you today," the brunette says, leaning against the side of the car with his arms crossed.

Kaname's ears perk up. The alpha snarls inside his head, protective instincts rising.

Kiryuu tsks. "They always try to kill us, Kaito. We're Hunters."

Takamiya shakes his head sharply, anger rising in his tone. "Don't play dumb with me, Zero. There were almost three times as many Level Ds as our information said there should be. And don't tell me dispatch just made a mistake. Our intelligence division double-checked before sending us in, and there's no way they missed so many vamps. Where there are Ds, there's a pureblood Turning them. And only one of us makes sense as a pureblood's target."

Well, it seems Takamiya isn't as stupid as Kaname thought. This evening's Hunt is the fourth time Kiryuu has been sent into a situation where his enemies have been far greater than predicted.

Kiryuu, to his credit, does not try to persuade Takamiya he's wrong. "They aren't trying to kill me. They're testing me. That will come later, when they're certain they know my abilities."

Takamiya throws his hands up in the air. "And what happens then? You let them kill you?"

"I have Yuuki," Kiryuu gestures toward Kaname's wolf. "And they won't find me easy prey, Kaito." Kiryuu's voice hardens. "But for now, I won't accept any more group Hunts. And we're not Hunting together for a while, until I can sort this out. I'm not putting you in harm's way - you have people to take care of."

"And you don't?" demands Takamiya.

"It doesn't really matter if I'm killed, because the treaty will remain in force. And there are other Hunters who could do my work." From his relaxed attitude, it's as though Kiryuu isn't discussing his own death.
"You idiot, your life matters for more than that. You've got the Kurans now, haven't you?"

Zero shakes his head. "Yuuki has Kuran, and she would survive my death. Kuran would probably dance on my grave and then spit on it."

Takamiya runs his hands over his face in frustration. "Fine, Zero. I can tell you're being stubborn about this and I'm not going to convince you."

_We won't let mate die_, insists the alpha, remembering Kiryuu's Hunting injury. _We'll kill anyone who would try. Mate is strong and deadly and beautiful. We will protect our mate, and he will choose us and be ours forever._ Kaname licks the back of Kiryuu's hand, tasting the pheromones on his skin, just like Yuuki would.

Blowing out a breath, Takamiya tries to calm himself. "Can I tell Misao that you're coming to Midsummer like usual?"

Kiryuu hesitates, his shoulders slumping, and says, "I don't think Kuran would allow it. He won't let me attend an obviously Hunter celebration."

Kaname lifts his head. Among Hunters, the summer solstice was as important a holiday as the winter solstice was to vampires, or Christmas was to humans. Spending the day alone, with no celebration, would be pitiful.

"It's fine," Kiryuu says, trying to offer a weak upturn of his lips. "I'll visit after Midsummer and bring your gifts then."

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"Why do all of your plans require me wearing woman's clothing?"

Kuran gives one of his slow, infuriating smirks as his eyes trail all the way down Zero's body, and then back up. "You don't think it suits you?"

Zero glares, scowling furiously.

"We're in public, Kiryuu. Pretend that you don't want to shoot me unless you want to add to the rumors," Kuran remarks. "I can't be blamed this time. The theatre we're attending has strict dress codes. Yuuki and I have to follow them too."

That's hardly a fair comparison. Kuran gets to wear a masculine black kimono marked with the Kuran nine-orchid crest, tucked into hakama trousers, while Yuuki looks lovely in her coral kimono with bright floral patterns. Nice, normal clothes, if more formal and expensive than impoverished Hunter Zero's used to.

The outfit delivered to the Consort's Suite, on the other hand, is anything but normal. Heavily modified to conform to the standards of suitable clothing for an omega, the deep forest green kimono woven with pine trees and a gyrfalcon is still recognizable as a furisode. It's beautiful, there's no denying, and costly, but Zero still feels uncomfortable wearing a woman's kimono - and a kimono for _single_ women no less, what was Kuran thinking? - in front of all these people. Thank the Ancestress for Sasaki, or else he would have never been able to get all of these layers on, let alone tie his black obi with maple leaves. All the same, Zero thinks, at least it's an improvement over the last outfit Kuran made Zero wear. He's ruefully fond of the pattern; the animated air of the gyrfalcon, beating wings upraised and red eyes fierce, appeals to him. So Zero counts to ten and tries to force his face back to neutrality.

"Better," Kuran approves, and goes back to socializing with the elites of vampire society as they
wait in the theatre lobby for the house to open.

Watching Yuuki in public always reminds Zero of how much she's grown; she's has a mature, refined air, and truly plays her role as a pureblood with power and influence. It's as though she's two people - the regal, authoritative pureblood princess who vampire society respects and admires, and the cheerful, sometimes silly Yuuki who sits with her knees tucked up underneath her on the couch and accidentally wears her underwear inside out.

Zero has little to do except watch the Kurans, look like a respectable pureblood's Consort, and not glare at anyone. Most of the vampires the Kurans speak to would rather pretend Zero was an expensive escort or an oddly shaped lamp. Yuuki at least makes an effort to include Zero in their conversations, but he's not very enthused about talking to these people either.

For dinner, Kuran had booked a private dining room at a five star restaurant where the three of them ate before leaving for the theatre. If Zero hadn't known better, he would have thought Kuran was being oddly considerate. The room had been quiet and discreet, with a soothing waterfall flowing from the wall; the reassuring white noise of splashing water had kept him from becoming overly anxious and tense at the thought of going out in vampire society again. Zero draws on that well of calm and the satisfaction of a full belly to get through being either ignored or stared at for a good fifteen minutes before the doors open and the trio can be shown to their seats by black robed ushers.

The Kurans courteously seat Zero between them, and help him arrange himself to avoid sitting on his kosode's excessively long sleeves. As the only purebloods attending, the Kurans, plus Zero by association, had been the first to be seated (purebloods did not wait on other people), and they have nothing to do as the other audience members are seated except watch the other patrons or talk with each other.

The crowd hasn't a single empty seat in the entire house, except for one to the right and one to the left of the Kurans. Most of the people in this crowd aren't here because they love traditional theatre; they're here to kiss-ass with the pureblood Kuran family. How does Yuuki stand being around these people all the time?

The voices go quiet as the theatre manager enters the stage, bowing deeply to the audience. "Good evening, lords and ladies. We thank our esteemed guests for attending our special performance this evening, commissioned by Kuran-sama, who has graciously honored our unworthy efforts by attending tonight."

Kuran inclines his head in acknowledgement, and Yuuki gives her measured princess wave. The audience claps appreciatively, and the house lights go down.

For Kuran's outing (not a date, Zero insists), the pureblood has taken them to see a kabuki performance at a theatre owned by the pureblood Hanadagi family, who are currently in Sleep. The acting troupe performing this evening is exclusively composed of vampires, as is the audience and the other theatre workers. Zero has never attended kabuki before, but he has no optimism that Kuran's taste in plays with be anything but boring and old.

But once the curtain rises, and the players take the stage, Zero finds himself intrigued by the experience. It's definitely not his normal entertainment, but the measured pace, the traditional music, and the distinctive white stage makeup all have a certain novelty to them. Pre-Cataclysm plays are extremely rare, and artistic traditions like this were rarely preserved. It's amazing to think that Zero's watching something that's even older than Kuran. Except for rocks and mountains, of course. The Hunter is careful to hide his smile in his sleeve.
The plays themselves tend to be quite short, and are performed in a sequence to create a full program, so if Zero finds himself bored by one scene, the performance soon moves on. His favorites are the dance pieces, where he can admire the precise movements of the actors, as one trained professional athlete to another, but some of the comedy stories even manage to get a laugh out of him. The main play this evening is 'Yoshitsune and the Thousand Cherry Trees', whose plot revolves around the main character's journey to hunt down three rogue generals. It has some fighting scenes and plot twists, and manages to hold his interest.

By the half-hour long intermission, Zero is stiff and ready to go for a walk, but he isn't miserable and bored the way he imagined he would be. His estimation of Kuran's taste in entertainment has risen from 'terrible' to 'old-fashioned but watchable.' Kuran is an old man, so Zero shouldn't act too surprised when he likes old things.

Emerging from the theatre into the busy nightlife is like popping a soap bubble; the bustling hubbub, bright streetlights and noise shocks the senses after the silence and enclosed darkness of the theatre. Zero blinks and internally tenses when he spots the paparazzi waiting for them. Kuran reads the tiny stiffening of his shoulders before he forces them to relax.

"I've requested that the press keep their distance this evening. They won't disturb us, and we will have a measure of privacy," Kuran tells them.

Zero gives him a disbelieving look. "I've never met a polite celebrity photographer before. It's like finding a polite lion."

Kuran chuckles, and moves them down the street, a guiding hand on his and Yuuki's elbows. "They are vampires, and they know that there are some forces it is wiser not to challenge."

This is a vampire shopping district; Zero has patrolled similar places before as a Hunter. Most of the businesses here are run by vampires, and they stay open until sunrise, so even after midnight the streets ring with voices, laughter and the footsteps of shoppers. The pedestrians in their path stop and move politely to the side, lowering their heads until the Kurans (and Zero) pass by. It's kind of creepy, actually, but neither of the Kurans act like this is anything out of the norm.

"Is there anyplace you would like to go?" Kuran frames the question as though he's speaking to both of them, but he's only looking at Yuuki when he asks.

"Not really." Yuuki answers. "We haven't got too long before intermission ends. Zero?" she asks, but he gives a shake of his head, and she turns back to Kuran. "Let's just see if anything catches our eye."

The three of them stroll the boulevard in silence for a few moments.

Deciding to indulge his curiosity, Zero asks a question that's been tugging at him since they arrived. "Kuran, do you really enjoy going to the theatre, or is this just part of your public persona?"

"I have a great fondness for the theatre," Kuran replies easily. "It's an extremely useful diversion for political purposes as well, but I never have to feign enjoyment. Acting is the natural impulse of a storytelling species, as ephemeral an art as music or dance."

Yuuki smiles at her husband, and darts a quick look around to see if anyone is close enough nearby to overhear. "Do you recognize any plays from your earliest years?"

She means Kuran's first life as the Ancestor, Zero realizes.
Kuran's easy air turns to unnatural blankness. "We did not have plays then. We could not afford to waste resources on something so useless. There was little beauty in those days."

Yuuki's face falls, and she goes to apologize before Kaname waves the words away, his rigid mask relaxing a fraction.

"Do not be sorry. The experience of famine makes us appreciate satiation. I enjoy the pleasure of art more deeply because I know how poor the world is in its absence."

The silence falls again, less comfortable this time.

"I hope the two of you are enjoying the performance?" Kuran inquires, like a host trying to make conversation. Yuuki makes positive noises. Kuran turns to Zero, expecting an answer.

Kuran had asked politely - and has been less annoying than usual lately - so Zero replies honestly. "More than I expected. I've never been to a kabuki play before. The last one - Heron Maiden? - that was the best one."

Kuran smiles the way he does when he's spotted an opening, tucking his hands in his pockets, and Zero's eyes narrow.

"Funny you would pick that one. The performer was a very famous onnagata - a male performer playing a woman's role. I suppose you would be familiar with wearing female costumes by now."

That smug look pisses him off. Just looking at Kuran's stupid pureblood face makes Zero want to knock that self-satisfied smile right off it.

And before his brain can catch up, Zero looks Kuran dead in the eye, and calmly announces, "Yes, I am. You're not the first man I've crossdressed for, Kuran."

Kuran's smile falters, and his eyes widen, the equal of bug-eyed, open-mouthed shock on anyone else. Ha, he's rattled Kuran, and the satisfied glee overrides the horror because what stupid thing has he just said.

Yuuki looks half-stunned, staring at Zero with glassy eyes, and she wets her lips. "When was this," she asks faintly, with the face of someone who's had their entire world turned on its head. And the new world is golden and full of Zero in women's clothing. Oh Ancestress, I may have made a mistake, Zero thinks, the gravity of what he just did hitting him between the eyes.

"We should head back to the theater, intermission will be over soon," Zero rushes to say a touch too quickly for believable casualness. He spins on his heel, almost stepping on the hem of his kimono in his haste, when two hands clamp down around his biceps, and pull him off balance.

Yuuki pulls him down so his ear is right against her mouth. Her low voice sends a shiver down his spine. "Don't think you're getting away so easily. You're going to tell me exactly who my rival is when we get home. I will hunt you down if you try to run, Zero. And once you're ours, you're going to show me exactly what I missed. Understand, my Consort?"

Zero swallows, and flees with as much decorum as possible.

Kuran keeps giving him considering looks until the theatre lights go down. Zero sits very uncomfortably for the rest of the performance, Yuuki's hand resting possessively on his thigh.

Kuran catches up with Zero the next day, calling him aside after dinner to speak privately in his
study. Yuuki, true to her word, had wrung the story of his childhood crossdressing out of him as
soon as she could trap him where he couldn't run. And the hungry looks she gave him after his
confession implied that her earlier promise was still in force, rival or no rival (But it had been a
little nice that she was jealous). So Zero is more than a little leery of Kuran doing the same.

The pureblood lets Zero sweat for a few moments while he considers his words.

"I believe the summer solstice is coming up on the twentieth?"

Zero keeps his expression unmoved, but Kuran's surprised him. The pureblood wanted to talk
about this, of all things?

"Yes," he confirms, adding nothing further until he knows what Kuran wants. Hopefully the
vampire will give him some clue.

"The summer solstice is the most important Hunter holiday, correct?"

"Yes," the Hunter confirms again, his stomach sinking. Kuran is going to forbid him to go, just as
Zero feared he would.

"You may attend if you wish, but I need to know beforehand so I can preempt the rumors it will
cause," Kuran says, fingers steepled.

Zero watches the pureblood closely; this doesn't seem to be some kind of trick or test.

"Really?" Zero asks.

"That is what I have said," Kurans replies with a touch of asperity. "Do you wish to go or not?"

Zero doesn't need to be told three times. "I want to go," he says quickly, in case Kuran is about to
change his mind.

The pureblood nods. "Very well. My familiar will escort you to and from the celebration. Let
Steward Inukai know your travel plans."

Kuran goes back to his work, clearly dismissing the Hunter. Zero lingers by the door a moment
longer. Attending Midsummer is an important tradition, and he would have missed seeing Yagari,
Cross and Kaito deeply.

"Thank you," Zero blurts out, and flees down the corridor before he can hear Kuran's response.

True to his word, a raven escorts Zero to the Midsummer bonfires, and waits in the trees until Zero
is ready to leave, strangely polite and considerate.

"He's been acting like less of a cold-blooded fang-licker than usual," Zero confides to Yuuki's wolf
a few days later, holed up on a stakeout with Wolfy lying across his upper legs like a furry blanket.
The familiar is so large that Zero's lap wasn't big enough, and he's starting to lose the feeling in his
legs.

Kuran has been strangely tolerable for the last couple of weeks since Midsummer. Zero is almost
suspicious that he's up to something. "I mean, he hasn't really been nice, but he hasn't been as much
of a bastard either. I think Kuran might be ill."

The wolf huffs, swishing its tail like it's sweeping away Zero's words.

"I know, I know. Purebloods can't get body-sick, I know. Head-sick is what I meant. Maybe the
old fossil's brain is finally calcifying?"

Yuuki's familiar growls.

"Alright, I'll stop. But you're supposed to be picking a name, so pay attention this time," Zero scolds, hefting the heavy botany volume propped up on the wolf's back.

The wolf huffs again, and Zero decides to interpret that as a yes.

"Family Solanaceae. A family of flowering plants that include potatoes, tomatoes, eggplant...hmm. Wolfberries, that would be a very funny name."

Wolfy gives him the 'questioning your intelligence' look.

"Also includes petunias? How about that?"

The wolf yawns.

"No?" Zero runs his finger down the page. He's going to find a flower name the wolf will accept, and he'll do it if he has to read this entire book. "African violets - violet?"

Rejected again.

Slipping the wolf another treat, he reads out loud absently, over the crunching noises. "These are no good. Mandrakes, Angel's Trumpet, Deadly Nightshade -"

The wolf raises its head, and looks interested.

Zero shakes his head back and forth. "Oh no you don't, Yuuki. Calling your wolf 'Nightshade' is such an embarrassing vampire cliche. Literally every part of this plant is poisonous."

The wolf's stare bores into his soul, and it bark-howls.

"Nightshade? Really?"

Yes, really. Yuuki's wolf won't budge.

Zero sighs and gives in, gratefully shutting the book and wiping a hand over his eyes. "Alright," he says, a fond smile creeping over his lips. "Nightshade the wolf it is."

"You know," Zero teases, taking the wolf's chin in both hands and tipping its face up until they're both nose to nose, "I think I understand now why your familiar's form is a wolf. It didn't make any sense to me at first - although you are very fluffy, Nightshade."

The Hunter bops their noses together, chuckling at the wolf's indignant huff. "Don't deny it, Yuuki. Your familiar is a scary fluffball who somehow manages to be cute."

"But I think your wolf form makes sense. Wolves normally live in packs with their parents and siblings, and then they go off on their own to start a new pack. A wolf by itself is a wolf without a family, and they get lonely."

"But it's okay," Zero says, smiling brilliantly in the way that transforms his face for anyone watching, tender concern, care and affection in his soft gaze, "You're not alone anymore."

(In the shriveled, coal black, frozen lump that passes for Kuran Kaname's heart, something shivers and cracks open)
As soon as Zero walks into the atrium, Yuuki's mouth is on his, kissing him thoroughly and deeply, only pulling away when he desperately needs to breathe. Zero knows how to kiss back now - Yuuki kisses him like this every time he leaves for a Hunt; he kills vampires with the taste of her in his mouth and the murmur of 'I love you, be safe' still ringing in his ears, reminding him that he can't act so recklessly anymore. Every time she says it, it gets a little harder to convince himself that she doesn't really mean it, because Zero desperately wants it to be true.

"Good evening," she sings, "You look so good, Zero! I haven't seen you in jeans since we were in school together."

Zero gets enough breath to speak. "You look good too. Will you let us know where we're going yet?"

"No, that's a surprise until we get there," Yuuki answers mischievously, spinning in a circle that makes her skirt flare - then skidding to a halt to stare at Kuran.

Zero stares too, because Kuran is in dark, well-fitting jeans like an ordinary peasant, my god. He looks five years younger, just like this. Blood and ashes, what did Yuuki have to do to get Kuran to shed his suits? Zero's almost convinced the man sleeps in them, like a snail in a shell. The pureblood's still in a button-down shirt, but that's far more relaxed than his normal attire, even if it isn't as casual as Zero's t-shirt.

Kuran's doing his best to pretend that what he's wearing is completely normal, and that Zero and Yuuki aren't staring at him like some apparition from the dead has appeared, but Zero is starting to get a sense of Kuran's real moods behind his collected, untouchable mask. This mask is for 'I'm uncomfortable but I won't show it.'

Yuuki makes much of her husband, praising him for being adventurous and wearing the new clothes she bought him, and then, with a flourish, presents him with a map.

"I'm still not telling you where we're going tonight, but the location is here," she says, pointing to a point near the coast. "Can you take the three of us there with your bats?"

Kuran studies the map. "I believe so. You'll have to be touching me," he tells Zero with a hint of his old smugness.

But Kuran's been almost polite lately, and Zero finds it easier than usual to ignore him. Yuuki has clearly put a lot of effort and thought into planning her date, and Zero won't mess up tonight by getting into a pointless fight with Kuran. Whatever the pureblood does to provoke him, Zero won't let himself respond. And by now he's learned to just go along with the Kurans' weird desire to cover Zero's body in their scents.

After Kuran sets them down and their bodies are solid again, Zero can smell the brine scent of the sea nearby, mixed with the smells of cooking food, and hear the crash of waves underneath the sound of many voices. Hundreds and hundreds of lanterns chase away the darkness of the early July night. The three vampires have manifested at the edge of the lights, just beyond where the people are milling around the edges of canopied wooden stalls.

"A festival," Kuran observes, with a hint of curiosity, examining the paper streamers lining the edges of the festival grounds. "I am only familiar with vampire holidays. What is being celebrated today?" the pureblood asks with a hidden air of quiet embarrassment.

"It's called Tanabata," Yuuki tells Kuran, taking their hands and beginning to walk toward the
festival lights. "Celebrating the reunification of the celestial lovers, after spending a whole year apart. They're stars whose father tried to separate them by diverting a river into the sky - the Milky Way - that was too fast to cross without a bridge. Only once a year does the river run low enough for them to see each other. And that's today! I thought if anyone was meant to celebrate Tanabata, it would be us."

The crowd is thick enough it's good that Yuuki is linking the three of them together, or the flow would have quickly torn them in different directions. There are booths selling the food Zero smelled earlier, all kinds of fried snacks, noodles and desserts. Other booths have carnival games where players can test their skills and win prizes. Crowds gather at the most popular places, which Yuuki helps them weave around.

"Where do you want to go?" she asks, raising her voice to be heard above the crowd.

Zero's stomach growls just as she asks, and Yuuki throws back her head and laughs.

"Food," she says, "Come on, I want to eat everything! We can share what we buy."

"Oh! Before I forget," Yuuki says, pulling something from her purse. With a grin, she holds up two coin purses, each bulging at the seams and shaped like a frog with a fat, full belly, handing one each to Kaname and Zero. "We aren't allowed to leave until these are empty, one for each of you. So no brooding and playing cool! Tonight you're supposed to have fun."

Kuran holds his frog purse like it's some kind of alien artifact, but the pureblood's always been rather thrown by Yuuki's love of cuteness, his desire to please her clashing with his need to maintain his imposing public reputation. The pureblood projects perfect confidence and composure, as always, but Zero gets the sense that he feels a little out of place and unsure what to do, dressed in his strange civilian clothes and incognito in a crowd full of humans. How many festivals has Kuran been to before, Zero wonders, in his surprisingly empty, vast lifespan?

Yuuki has chosen a less famous location for them to attend, with little chance of encountering another vampire. There is no need for Kuran's usual masks here. There are no lackeys, and no enemies. No one to impress or intimidate or persuade. Kuran, Zero has noticed, is a nearly perfect actor, but put him in an unfamiliar situation where he doesn't know the right role to play, and his body language gives away tiny hesitations and uncertainties that show his true feelings, his body accidentally honest if you know what to look for.

It's easy for Zero to let his flash of empathy guide him. He arranges the set of his body insolently and calls out, "Hey old man, there's a stand selling fried octopus. Don't think I didn't notice when you ate all the ones I made. You can stuff your face with these instead."

Kuran raises an eyebrow, the familiar arguments coming easily, "I seem to remember three people present who ate them, not one; it was hardly my fault if I attempted to be polite and eat your mediocre cooking, Kiryuu."

But they end up buying the octopus anyway. Kuran examines the octopus-on-a-stick with something between consternation and affront, as if to say 'am I really expected to eat like this, or is this some kind of joke?' It's hilarious, and Yuuki and Zero aren't even trying to hide it as they eagerly chomp their own octopus skewers. Kuran delicately tries to eat neat bites off the sides, loses several piece of octopus when they fall off the stick, then finally gives in and copies Yuuki. When he's finished, Yuuki hands her husband a napkin like she's giving him a trophy.

Needless to say, Yuuki and Zero develop a sudden appreciation for foods served on sticks for the rest of the evening. The two of them enjoy Kuran's skepticism about pretty much everything as
they forcibly introduce him to the wonderful world of festival food. Gradually, Kuran seems to relax and become more comfortable trying things without worrying about his dignity. Kuran draws the line at the choco banana for dessert, unfortunately, and they compromise with an assortment of fish-shaped, filled taiyaki pastries and an ungodly amount of dango to satisfy Yuuki's sweet tooth. The trio wander between food stands until even Yuuki can't eat another bite, trying everything and anything that looks appetizing.

"I think I need to walk off that last dango," Yuuki groans.

Zero clicks his tongue. "Shouldn't have eaten it then."

Yuuki mock-glares and punches Zero's shoulder gently with a fist. "I'll never surrender!" she declares. "No one gets left behind!"

Kuran observes their exchange silently; he's spoken very little this evening, other than to charm some of the stall vendors with his charisma, seemingly out of habit.

The three of them stroll along the rows of booths, Yuuki in between the two rivals, content to take in the bright and cheerful atmosphere as they digest. Many of the booths sell toys or games and other festival souvenirs.

"Cover for me," Yuuki hisses into his ear, and abandons Zero and Kuran together as she darts into a booth they just passed. Zero eyes Kuran. Exactly what does Yuuki expect him to do? But it's for Yuuki, Zero reminds himself, so he opens his mouth and asks the first thing that comes to mind.

"Are you having a good time?" Immediately, Zero curses himself for such a pointless question; he doesn't care if Kuran enjoys himself or not as long as Yuuki's date goes well for her.

Kuran is his usual, arrogant, irritating self now, early uncertainty dispelled; it makes him much more annoying to deal with. "Of course. Even having you along hasn't managed to ruin it."

Zero opens his mouth, an insult on his tongue, and reluctantly swallows it back down. He promised himself he wouldn't ruin Yuuki's date, and he's supposed to be distracting Kuran.

"Well sorry for that," he says sarcastically. "I guess human festivals aren't on the approved list of places vampire royalty can visit."

"Not especially, no," Kuran agrees, hands in his pockets. "It's been quite interesting to see what humans have created while I was Asleep. They've risen a long way since their fall, and learned something from it, I hope. Their ingenuity in the face of their powerlessness is fascinating."

"Everyone must seem powerless compared to you," Zero says bitterly, unconsciously touching his throat.

"Yes," Kuran says, in a conversational tone, "Though they created me, it would take me no more effort to kill everyone here, than it would take you to crush an insect."

Even with the summer heat, Zero feels cold. Kuran isn't boasting. Kuran isn't threatening. He's simply telling the truth, stating the facts without any exaggeration.

"There really isn't anything they could do to stop me. Only a Hunter weapon or another pureblood can kill me, and the dwindling purebloods of the present are nothing compared to the monsters that were their Ancestors."

"Then I guess," says Zero, raising his head and meeting Kuran's gaze without blinking, "It's a good
thing I brought my gun."

"But I won't need it, because you're so goddamn old you'd probably break a hip or something if you tried."

Kuran's mouth twitches into an almost-smile; Zero's managed to genuinely amuse him.

Goddamn purebloods. Zero sighs. "If you're going on a power trip, I'm taking you to go see the goldfish," the Hunter announces.

Five minutes later, as Kuran seems to be contemplating the merits of goldfish scooping, Yuuki sidles up beside the two of them, something hidden in a bag behind her back.

"Found anything fun?" she asks, overly cheerful, with a wicked edge to her sunny smile.

Kuran gestures at the goldfish pond.

"A vampire," Zero answers. "But I didn't get to shoot him, so it wasn't fun."

Yuuki gives Zero a look, playful eyes inviting him to take part in whatever game she's come up with. Zero grins; when has he ever passed up a chance to mess with Kuran?

"You know, Kaname," Yuuki begins innocently, "we found some interesting things when we cleaned out the attics in Kuran Manor."

"Yes," Zero continues nonchalantly, "Yuuki's parents stored a lot of your childhood stuff up there."

Kuran is beginning to look faintly worried about the direction this conversation has taken, his eyes flicking from one of them to the other.

"I thought you might be missing some of your old belongings now that we're at Rosehill," Yuuki chimes in, "so I bought you something."

Kuran gives the plastic bag a suspicious stare, and he looks almost nervous. The pureblood opens his mouth, but Zero rushes in before Kuran can speak.

"I had no idea you were such a cute child!" Zero enthuses, and the pureblood looks like he's swallowed a lemon.

Yuuki nods furiously, rocking on the balls of her feet, "Yes, you really were! So here you go," she says, shoving the package into his hands.

Kuran unwraps the plastic and pulls out a stuffed wolf toy with white fur and blue glass eyes. The pureblood just stares at it for a moment in consternation, then his cheeks dust faintly red and he shoves it back in the bag, showing a rare face of embarrassed discomfort.

Yuuki and Zero look at each other for a minute, then double over laughing.

"Kaname, it's just a stuffed animal! Don't you like it? The house's servants said you took your wolf everywhere with you when you were a child," Yuuki asks between bouts of laughter.

"The little master and his favorite toy. You named it Blackie," Zero crows.

"It's unnecessary. I've outgrown such things," Kuran grinds out, trying to give the toy, hidden in its bag, back to Yuuki.
Yuuki can be quite stubborn when she wants to be; the white wolf is tucked under Kuran's arm, and there it stays for the rest of the night.

"Should we play some games?" Yuuki wonders afterwards as they're walking back along the booths, shaking Zero's mostly empty frog coin purse.

Zero snatches it back protectively. "These are all human games, so wouldn't that be cheating?"

"Not if we compete against each other!" she replies. "Come on, just one?"

Zero remains unmoved.

Yuuki goes for the easy target. "Kaname, let's see who'll win between us. I bet I can!" she asks, already dragging him to a ring toss booth and putting down her money. A good choice by Yuuki; Zero always won all the shooting games, but Yuuki has a good wrist and she's practiced on this game before. Zero roots for Yuuki, and the match score is even, each of the Kurans throwing cleanly and hitting the target, until a gust of wind throws both of their rings off course.

Yuuki wilts, crestfallen, and Zero sighs, putting down the money to earn himself into the competition. Purebloods may have mind powers, but Zero throws knives for a living, and his skill helps him throw ring after ring that settles solidly around the target, until the booth owner begs a loss because he doesn't have any bigger prizes. Zero lets Yuuki pick, and she walks away with a bear half as tall as she is.

The bear she gives away to a crying child and their parents. Then Yuuki leads them to a quieter, more out of the way corner with a table set up next to a bamboo grove.

"For Tanabata," she explains for Kuran's sake, "It's tradition to write down a wish, and hang it up to make it come true. But it has to stay secret! So let's write down our wishes. I have one last surprise, and then we'll go home."

Each of them take a pen and a strip of colorful paper, much like the paper the festival's decorations are made from, and reflect for a little while before writing down their wish. Yuuki finishes almost as soon as she sits down to think, folding the strip of paper and threading the string through the ends. Kuran's pen hovers motionlessly for a long while, then swiftly and decisively he writes down his wish.

Zero stares at his own blank wish paper. What does he wish for? Zero doesn't even know what he wants. He can't leave it blank. What do normal people wish for? Health, good fortune, happiness - a memory, Yuuki, asking him the last time he was happy.

'I wish to be happy' - the ink flows from his pen with no more thought. A foolish wish, Zero tells himself, as he savagely crosses it out, and replaces it with 'I wish to discharge my duties well, and for those I love to be safe.' Zero folds the paper over so he doesn't have to look at the words for a second longer. He should know better. Reach too high and you'll be disappointed, the Hunter reminds himself as he hangs his wish paper near Yuuki's and Kuran's.

Yuuki takes both of their hands again, leading them away from the festival lights, toward the smell of the sea. At the pier is a small boat, its captain already at the helm with the engine humming. Once they board, it pulls away from the dock, skipping through the darkness on the wave-crests, but they don't go far. The captain stops the motor and shuts off the running lights once they're a little ways out from shore, but he stays in the wheelhouse. They are a little floating island, a universe of three underneath the great night sky, and the sounds of the waves and the shorebirds are the only noise. The bannered sky full of stars is far brighter away from human lights.
It's peaceful, in the warm dark with the deck rocking back and forth underneath their feet. When Zero licks his lips, he tastes the salt spray misting his cheeks, thrown up by the wind.

Yuuki holds her hair out of her face; in the night, her smile seems brighter than day to her spouses’ vampire eyes. "This is my night, and these are my stars," Yuuki repeats the words of their wedding. "I've found the dream I longed for. The two of you are my heart's desire."

Then she kisses them, warm and slow, but without heat, only affection and admiration in her lips. They trade kisses like secrets, the scent and taste of each other commingled in their mouths, too drunk on the sea and the stars and the fragile magic of this moment to care who is kissing who.

Yuuki leans back, tugs on his sleeve, "Look up, Zero."

A crack like a gunshot, and a dozen flares of light arcing into the sky, blooms of yellow and green light like anemones against the velvet black.

"Fireworks," he murmurs, and settles back to watch the show, a powerful weight of nostalgia on him.

Like instinct, their hands seek each other out, shyly inquisitive, before linking together like the edges of a puzzle. Yuuki pulls them all closer, heads tipped back to watch the sky, then breaks the chain to push Zero and Kuran nearly chest to chest, and taking each of their hands in her own, she unites them. Then she fits herself back into place, the third side of their triangle again, and enthralled by the bright bursts and light, they watch in contentment. Zero watches the way the colors look spilling over Yuuki's face as much as he watches the sky.

"Do you know what I wished for?" Yuuki says above the snap and spark of the gunpowder, eyes fixed on the fading trails of a starburst.

"I wished for us to always be together, like this."

Sometimes the prey runs.

Kaname and the wolf like it when the prey runs. They are both predators, after all, and a pureblood is a predator of predators; to hunt is to live, and the feeling of the chase and the catch is the most primal thrill.

The wolf's body is not invulnerable like his own; its power is limited to teeth and jaws without his aid. It make the chase all the more intoxicating, the need to strain and strive and the possibility that the prey may slip out from between his jaws to live another day. Kaname has never experienced defeat before. This the wolf has taught him.

Today, the prey is a pair of Level B, put to flight and running hard. Kiryuu is just ahead of him, weaving through the trees, but keeping a steady pace. Long hunts are good, but nothing beats the climax of the end, when both the Hunter and the hunted are pushed to the edge of their strength, culminating in that final life and death struggle. It will come soon; the prey is tiring.

Kaname's paws strike the earth in a rhythmic beat, savoring the coil and snap of his limbs; each time his hind legs touch down, he pushes off ever harder, propelling himself forward to the smell of bruised pine needles.

Drawing level with Kiryuu, a silver streak in the night with the ends of his coat fluttering like wings, Kaname bark-howls in exhilaration. Kiryuu does not have breath to waste on a response, but he laughs and his eyes dance and his mouth smiles like he knows tonight he is death and blades.
and he smells of gunpowder and tender sweet musk.

In the entire world, he is the being most dangerous to us, admires the alpha. Is he not magnificent? Is his strength not peerless?

They've brought their quarry to bay, the vampires slowing to a stop up ahead. Kaname reigns in the wolf, circling around while Kiryuu goes for the kill. The bolder vampire meets him swinging an axe; Kiryuu blocks and spins away, leaving a dagger in the vampire's shoulder, payment for his reckless charge.

He was meant for us, exults the alpha. It was our blood that woke him. Do you think our proud Silver One would stand being mounted by a sire weaker than him?

The first Level B dies in a burst of ash, clouding the air for a split second. And in that moment, the second vampire attacks.

But Kiryuu turns to meet the vampire too slowly, with the same strange hesitance and distant expression Kaname recognizes from the Hunt where he took the wound to his side - the one that drove his alpha into a frenzy. The same thing will happen again here, in a moment, when the vampire's claws meet Kiryuu's back, and the Hunter's blood will spill.

Kiryuu hesitated.

Kaname and the wolf do not.

The vampire screams as his ribs snap when several hundred pounds of wolf crash into his side; his whole body is thrown sideways to the ground, away from Kiryuu, who is waking up from his daze. The body underneath Kaname thrashes; the taste of blood in his mouth, and the vampire's screams die away into gurgles and wheezes from the ruins of his throat. Kaname doesn't move away until the vampire is dust, letting the jets of blood coat his face and coagulate in his fur; against the black, you can hardly see the blood.

Kiryuu stands silently beside him, expression agonized. "I'm so sorry you had to do that, Yuuki" Kiryuu's voice wavers, and he folds to his knees, putting his arms around Kaname's neck, uncaring how the blood from his fur smears and stains the Hunter's coat. "I'm sorry I wasn't strong enough to keep you from having to take another life. This is my fault."

Kaname feels nothing from taking a stranger's life who was justly marked for death, and he shakes his head, growling; Kiryuu's remorse is wasted on him.

The Hunter forces a tight smile; Kiryuu thinks Yuuki is putting on a brave face to make him feel better. At times like these, Kaname's false identity can be frustrating.

"I promise I'll tell you what's going on later. But we need to get cleaned up first. We look suspicious and we smell like a slaughterhouse," Kiryuu bargains, and Kaname is curious enough that he complies without complaint.

The water of Nightshade's bath is neither cold nor hot, a comfortable temperature just above lukewarm that makes washing the blood out of his dark fur easy. Before Kiryuu changed out of his own blood-stiffened clothing or did anything but put his gear carefully out of the way, he ran Kaname's familiar a bath to soak out the clotted blood matting his fur in knots and clumps.

Now Kiryuu is on his knees by the side of the tub, sleeves rolled to his elbows and coat gone, painstakingly working the dried blood out with his hands. The Hunter keeps patiently to his task, though he must be tired, gentle and careful not to pull too hard. The feeling of the Hunter's fingers
carding through his coat is blissful; Kaname's body translates the sensation as someone running their fingers through his hair and stroking his scalp.

The expected outrage and offense does not come to him. Purebloods rarely receive the pleasure of human touch, especially prolonged contact given so casually. Lesser vampires revere them; equals are their enemies. Sacred things are not to be touched, and nothing is more distant than a king of vampires to his worshipers, Kaname remembers bitterly.

"Close your eyes, Nightshade, I don't want to get soap in them."

Kiryuu's hand cups the familiar's chin and pours handfuls of water over its bloody muzzle. Even without sight, Kaname can imagine how vulnerable the wolf must look. He lets Kiryuu do it anyway. Kaname doesn't even need to remind himself anymore to allow it because Yuuki would.

Maintaining his usual attitude of disdain and spite with Kiryuu has been difficult for some time now. Even pretending to dislike accompanying Kiryuu on a Hunt has become a chore. Kiryuu is neither a fool nor a toady, which makes him more pleasant company than many of the people Kaname must spend time dealing with. The Hunter has acted cautiously polite as Kaname's interactions with him have become less hostile. If Kaname no longer wishes to continue their feud, Kiryuu will likely allow it to stand as their new status quo.

"You're clean, Nightshade. Can you stand on the bath rug while I dry you off?"

The wolf likes being dried off; the rubbing feels like petting, and the wolf is infatuated with Kiryuu as much as the alpha is. Kaname cannot pretend he does not understand why, after watching Kiryuu for the past two months. Kiryuu is as sincere as he seems. He does good because he wants to do good, not because he wants to be praised for doing good. Kaname is reminded inescapably of her, the Hunter's Ancestress.

Kaname had not needed to stop that vampire. Kiryuu would have been injured, but the Level B never had a hope of killing him. Why had Kaname jumped without thought to stop that vampire, and then savaged him beyond need?

He could blame the wolf or the alpha, but Kaname is old enough to know it's unwise to lie to himself any longer. Shedding his fears that Yuuki would reject his real identity or abandon him for Kiryuu, his guilt and shame at being shown the consequences of his vendetta, and coming to know Kiryuu ever more intimately and personally - all of those things have knocked away the foundations of his vengeful loathing.

Kiryuu does not deserve to be treated like an enemy. His actions are proof enough of that. Can Kaname let go of his jealousy and fear?

He already has, the pureblood realizes. Is what he did tonight the act of someone who feared and envied Kiryuu? Kaname is not kind to his enemies, nor does he care particularly for strangers. He had not thought of his promises to Yuuki, and even if he had, those promises did not cover simple injuries. There had been no other excuse.

"Do you want me to groom you, or do you want to go straight to bed?"

Kaname shakes his head. Kiryuu hasn't bathed yet, and he stinks. The Hunter may brush him when he's clean. Kaname goes to lie down on his cushion on the floor next to the bed, resting his head on his paws as he thinks.

This last month especially, treating Kiryuu with his normal dislike had taken effort, no longer a
rewarding reflex. And even then, Kaname could tell that incidents with Kiryuu happened less often and more harmlessly. Kaname no longer wishes to torment Kiryuu - well, not torment him seriously in order to hurt him. Annoyance isn't off the table. No one else will fight with him like Kiryuu will, and Kaname likes prodding him just to see his reaction.

This realization doesn't mean Kaname has suddenly started to like Kiryuu. Kaname respects Kiryuu's skill and personal character, but that's a neutral feeling far from the strength of his emotions for Yuuki. The two of them will need to coexist for at least a millennia, and that time will go much more smoothly without acting on old grudges. And it will please Yuuki if he behaves better toward Kiryuu. Kiryuu might willingly allow the Kurans near his body if Kaname acts less ill-intentioned.

"Hey," Kiryuu says, sitting down cross-legged on the floor next to Kaname's bed. "I promised you I would explain what happened earlier." The Hunter looks unsure, and buries his hands in the wolf's thick coat, seeking the connection to reassure himself.

"Lately, my power has gone...strange sometimes. I've noticed that my Hunter senses and charms have gotten stronger, but this is more than that. I don't know what's happening."

The Hunter closes his eyes, and hugs the wolf's neck. "Honored Grandmother - the Ancestor of the Hunters - told me something at our wedding. I've been thinking about it a lot lately. She told me that her power might begin to stir in me, now that I was an omega and an adult, full vampire. And she told me that she would come to me, if that happened and I needed her. But I don't understand what she meant."

Kaname's ears go flat. That could mean many things. A situation like this has never happened before. He will need to think on this.

"She said she was proud of me," Kiryuu adds shyly, like he's telling Kaname something more secret than everything he's already admitted.

"Well, you know everything I know, now. Don't worry about me too much; I can handle these episodes fine. And thank you again for helping me. Goodnight, Nightshade," Kiryuu yawns as he scratches the black wolf's soft ears.

Kaname wakes up around midday, his body sensing the start of Kiryuu's nightmares. The wolf can hear Kiryuu panting through a mouth dry with fear, and his heart beating with the same quickness as when he runs, but the worst parts of the nightmares come just before he wakes, so Kiryuu doesn't smell heavily of pain yet. Mindful of his new decision, Kaname heeds his instincts and goes to wake Kiryuu, butting his shoulder with the top of his skull.

Kiryuu never needs more than a second to realize where he is, superb Hunter that he is. And he always thanks Kaname with a quick pat or a scratch. Tonight, the Hunter gives him a sleepy, grateful smile, one of the secret soft ones that lighten his eyes and face. "Hey, thanks," Kiryuu says, sloppy and fond, reaching up from where he's lying on his back, just like he would if he were being woken by a lover.

Kaname lowers his muzzle to receive the caress, and lays down next to the Hunter.

Kiryuu's face creases in half-awake puzzlement. "You're not going - Oh. I'm glad," he murmurs, and scoots over closer, curling himself around Kaname, and falls back to sleep, breathing deep, even breaths next to the wolf's ear.

No more nightmares trouble his Consort for the rest of the night, lulled peacefully to sleep by the
warmth and familiar, safe scents. Kaname stays awake a little longer, until he too rests.

It's peaceful, like these last few months. Of course it doesn't last.

Chapter End Notes

I had previously established that Kaname was on his own in a post apocalyptic world via nuclear bomb around age two or three. Now that he's being more honest, we get to consider some frankly disturbing consequences of that fact.

A reminder about Kaname's POV. He lies to himself frequently about his own motivations. And his feelings manifest in subtle ways. Like really subtle. He plays roles, and those roles dictate certain actions and words. Pay less attention to what he tells himself to believe, and more attention to the little things he does, the gaps in his roles that give himself away. Take for example the clothing he had made for Zero. The first outfit was very feminine, and full of lace and roses, and had a collar that symbolized ownership, like Zero was an object. This second outfit is still feminine, but is actually quite respectful in comparison. There's no more collar, the colors are fairly masculine, and the pattern on the kimono has a gyrfalcon - a species of white falcon. I think you can draw the parallels yourself.

If you have time, you can go to youtube and watch the kabuki play Zero liked by searching 'Sagi Musume'. Skip to the last part to watch the climax if you don't have a half hour. The actor also wears a furisode kimono in the middle section

This is not the real life Tanabata legend; after 10,000 years it's a slightly different story after being retold so many times.

A big thanks to all of my reviewers who suggested date ideas for this chapter! Special thanks to Kid and Gotten, who had some very detailed scenarios I couldn't help but use. All of you had some really great input to give me, and this chapter wouldn't be as good without you.

Next chapter: happiness is fleeting, more very bad things happen to Zero, and Yuuki endures her own rite of passage in cruelty
Hello again everyone! I hope you've all been well. Sorry again for the long wait. I was out of town for four days, and got exactly zero words written during that time.

I'm very sorry, but the update schedule will be more irregular from here on. We've caught up to the ff.net version, and I haven't been able to keep up weekly updates.

Zero's dreams last chapter were mostly like the ones from chapter one, just fears combined with bad memories and imaginings. They don't really have any significance. And he's not losing his powers; the Ancestress warned him that they might change now that he's no longer just a Hunter.

Chapter title refers to Hades, the realm of the underworld, rather than Hades the Greek god.

WARNINGS FOR THIS CHAPTER: explicit graphic violence and borderline torture

"You'll be fine tonight, Zero," Yuuki says, fussing with his clothing. "Kain-sempai only invited our allies and a few unaligned families sympathetic to Kaname's goals. This is the friendliest crowd you'll ever face at a soiree. They'll be curious, but they should be polite about it," the pureblood continues, as though she's trying to convince herself.

Zero catches her anxious hands. "Yuuki, I've attended these things before. As a Hunter monitor, not a Consort, but it's not that different. I'll be okay, and if I do get cornered, you and Takuma-sempai will help me. Besides, the worst these people will do is talk."

"That can be the most dangerous thing of all," Kuran remarks offhandedly, leaning against the doorframe in his formal suit.

Yuuki's mouth tightens. "Stay next to one of us, or Ichijo-sempai, okay? Just in case."

When Zero acquiesces, Yuuki threads their arms together, leading him to the door where Kuran stands, observing them. The pureblood takes Zero's other arm, bookending the Hunter in between his spouses, a visual message of support and unity.

When they enter the ballroom, the gathered nobles bow in respect. The gesture isn't meant for him, but to Zero, a Hunter raised in a society of relative equals, simply observing the act discomforts him, and he can tell from Kuran's glance he isn't hiding it as well as he should. Zero focuses on smoothing his expression; it seems to satisfy Kuran, who turns his attention elsewhere. The weight of all these eyes feels like a heavy touch bearing down on his shoulder. His Hunter's instincts shout warnings, sensing ill-intent; not all of these gazes are friendly.

Kuran accepts a few greetings, but guides the trio over to where his inner circle is gathered in a loose knot on the edge of the crowd. Zero surveys Kuran's nobles, curious and wary both, and they return his scrutiny more unobtrusively. Both sides have a history of conflict, but this is new
territory between them. Kuran has kept Zero away from his supporters thus far, preferring they not meet until Zero was less likely to offend someone or break important social rules. Neither side seems willing to do anything but observe, except Takuma, who effortlessly breaks the ice with one of his wide, cheerful smiles as he comes forward to take Zero's hands and welcome him.

With the acceptance of one of their own, the other nobles in Kuran's inner circle relax and offer their own short greetings. Thirty years is nothing to a vampire; every one of them, like Zero himself, doesn't look more than a year or two older than they did in school, their maturity visible in their eyes and bearing more than their faces. Touya's changed her hair, and Aido's filled out so he doesn't look quite so gangly anymore, but if not for that, they could be meeting at Cross Academy's student ball.

Zero thanks Kain for hosting them his evening, and the noble accepts with his characteristic laid-back manner. The Hunter suspects that Kain's fiancee Souen was the real organizer of tonight's event, but Kain shouldn't be discounted. According to the Hunters' best information, Kain and his cousin are Kuran's highest lieutenants, and all vampire nobles play games of influence. Speaking of Kain's cousin-

"Dance with me!"

Zero gives Aido his most unimpressed look; the noble stands blocking his path with his fists clenched and feet planted, refusing to move or take no for an answer.

"You're an alpha. Wouldn't that be inappropriate?" he asks, refusing to go quietly.

"I'm sworn to both the Kurans, and I already danced with Yuuki-hime," Aido says, like that answers his question.

Zero exhales; Aido will pester him all night if he refuses. Zero can outlast him, but he's not in the mood to waste that kind of effort. "Fine."

The weight of unfriendly eyes follows him as Aido puts one hand on Zero's wrist, and the other on his shoulder, leaving plenty of space between their bodies, and starts to lead him around the dance floor. An omega vampire like Zero never leads, and an unbonded alpha like Aido never touches him below the waist or skin to skin. Thus the strange dance hold and the very slow, measured dances common at vampire gatherings.

"You're weirder than I ever thought you were, Kiryuu" Aido says, peering at him closely. "I can't believe that I went to school right next to you for years and never tried to study you before. So much time wasted," Aido mourns.

Feeling like one of the noble's science experiments, Zero raises an eyebrow and says nothing in reply. Is he supposed to thank Aido? Was that some kind of compliment?

Casting around for a different topic - any topic at all - and still rather new to the art of making conversation, Zero stumbles and asks,"Do you admire your mother?"

Aido's surprise is obvious; he misses the dance's timing and startles hard enough to jerk Zero's upper body.

"You have similar hairstyles," Zero observes, surveying the crowd. Yuuki's assessment had been basically correct; most of the nobles are either supportive of their pureblood leader's decision to marry Zero, or respect the Kurans enough to be polite in public and restrain their disagreement to private conversations. There are a few, though, staying at the edges of the crowd, who glare
venomously when his gaze sweeps over them, finding himself already the target of their stares.

"People say I get my looks and my loyalty from my father, and my brains from my mother," Aido observes, following the direction of Zero's gaze, and spinning them around so they dance out of sight.

"Don't mind them. They're loyal, and they'll come around to Kaname-sama's decision sooner or later," Aido speaks in a low voice just above a whisper.

"The ones you really need to look out for belong to the Senate's faction. We're already monitoring a couple of nasty plots in their ranks against you. But it's nothing for you to worry about," Aido rushes, like he's just realized telling Zero people are out to get him isn't a good idea. "Kaname-sama has it well under control," the noble tries to reassure him.

Zero, about to disagree, feels a tap on his shoulder, and Yuuki cuts in to steal Zero for a dance before Aido can say anything more.

"Tell me who this is," Takuma invites Zero, holding up a photo of a curling, dark-haired, brown-eyed man with a haughty expression.

"Senator Abe's husband Juan, one of the three omega 'queens' of the Senate. He's proud, and has a vicious tongue. His wife is the most influential party leader in the Senate, and they have a reputation as a power couple."

"Good, now this one," Takuma prompts, tapping another photo of an unusually tall, thin blond woman wearing expensive, slightly tasteless clothing.

"Kaneko Madeline. She's related to Shirabuki Sara. Her wife is the wealthiest person who currently holds a Senator's seat. Known for her love of expensive anything. Her influence is based mostly on her wealth, and she'll follow whoever's most powerful, but I shouldn't discount her."

"And last, but not least," Takuma flips over a photo of another dark-haired woman, with a round face, a small, neat nose, and black eyes narrowed in a sharp, calculating expression.

"The queen bee herself. Noguchi Sada. She's mated to the vice-chairman of the Senate, and she's the unofficial leader of the omega vampires who support the Senate's faction. Her husband's position is owed in part to her skills and backing. She's almost as old as Azai-san, and I need to be the most careful of her."

The blond noble claps. "Very good, Zero-kun. The Jeweled Court isn't being held for another two weeks, and you're already off to an excellent start. You'll be ready with plenty of time to spare," he praises, taking a sip of his teacup.

A Jeweled Court is the formal name for the omega gatherings Takuma's tea group had warned him about. The next one, the first one Zero is expected to attend, is set for the last week of June. Zero isn't looking forward to it, but Takuma and the other tea group omegas have helped him prepare extensively for the event, and Zero is reasonably certain he knows enough not to screw up without realizing it.

The hair on the back of his neck stands up, and his Hunter's senses tell him that someone dangerous is watching him. Zero tries to conceal his examinations of the terrain surrounding the cafe patio they're sitting at, concentrating on pinpointing the direction of the presence, but can't find a strong enough sign.
"Takuma-sempai," asks Zero quietly, "has Shirabuki caused any trouble for you lately?

Takuma leans back in his chair, cradling his cup, "No, not at all. Isaya caught one of her spiders, and he insisted on going to speak with her. I was terrified, but whatever my husband said to her, she hasn't sent anything else since. I'm so glad you convinced me to speak to him - it's been a weight off my shoulders. Why do you ask?"

"No reason," Zero lies, and ignores the prickling feeling of constant malice in between his shoulderblades.

Kaname shifts in his chair, careful to pretend he's paying attention to the figures and charts projected on the screen as the presenter drones on. Truthfully, he'd looked them over before the meeting, and the man hasn't said anything in the past forty minutes Kaname didn't already conclude on his own. Keeping up the illusion of interest is a struggle; it's late afternoon, and Kaname's body clock insists that he's meant to be asleep right now, but the pureblood can't avoid occasionally attending daytime meetings like this when interacting with humans.

The pureblood stifles a sigh, and gives in to temptation, settling more deeply into the mind of his raven familiar, looking for entertainment. The bird is perched outside an ice cream cafe, in one of the mixed human-vampire shopping districts closest to Rosehill, with enough human customers to be open during the day, and enough vampires around that Kiryuu must wear his Hoseki and be properly covered for propriety's sake.

Yuuki and Kiryuu must have stopped to eat before continuing their errands. She's gotten into the habit of taking Kiryuu with her as company when she leaves the house, as long as it isn't for social events. This morning his wife had insisted on rising at the same time he did, and she likes to go out during the day occasionally, so he isn't surprised to find them here.

Kaname is glad to see her enjoying herself, and with Kiryuu around, he doesn't have to worry so much about Yuuki. Kiryuu, Kaname has discovered, is a bit of a mother hen, and his Hunter training has only exaggerated that characteristic by training him to be ridiculously prepared for any possible situation. Before taking Kiryuu with her, she'd frequently forget her parasol and come home with painful sunburn after going out during the day. Now Kiryuu will bother her until she remembers to bring it, and he sneaks a spare sunhat in the boot of the car anyway.

The pureblood's new resolution to treat Kiryuu as an ally, rather than an enemy, has been easier to enact than Kaname thought it would be. Putting aside his old role as Kiryuu's rival and accepting Kiryuu's presence has been nearly painless. If he's being honest, Kaname's relieved he doesn't have to force himself to act on those expectations anymore, and his behavior toward Kiryuu is much improved.

Kiryuu throws minor insults at him, and gives the pureblood odd looks when he expects abuse that Kaname doesn't provide, but the Hunter is carefully polite otherwise, treating Kaname with a neutral, guarded air that is starting to relax the more time passes and Kaname doesn't act spitefully. The current situation with Kiryuu satisfies the pureblood. Kiryuu is tolerable, even when Kaname is in his own body rather than Nightshade's.

On the cafe patio, Yuuki claps her hands together in excitement as the waiter delivers a parfait and a coffee to their table. Kaname hides the twitch of his lips behind his steepled hands. Yuuki's enthusiasm is always endearing. Kiryuu sips his coffee, eyeing the mountain of whipped cream, fruit and custard-like ice cream askance as Yuuki digs in. The Hunter has little taste for sweets, while even Rosehill's staff know about Yuuki's ravenous sweet tooth. As his spouses eat, Kaname watches the crowd of shoppers flow past the ice cream shop, idly amusing himself guessing their
Kiryuu gets up from the table after finishing his coffee, glancing at his phone's clock before pausing to speak to Yuuki, who licks the spoon in her mouth and nods, waving her hand in a gesture to go ahead.

Kaname's raven flies after the Hunter even before Yuuki shoots it a meaningful look, the pureblood's curiosity getting the better of him. The Hunter walks quickly and purposefully, some destination already in mind. The little shop, tucked back from the main thoroughfare, has a plain wooden storefront and gold lettering that says 'Uyeda Jeweller.' The shop's bell tinkles when Kiryuu presses the door open and slips inside.

Curiosity only heightened, Kaname's raven can't enter the building itself, and he's forced to take a post on a nearby streetlamp instead, growing more interested as the minutes tick by. Perhaps ten minutes later, Kiryuu comes out with a small bag, a froth of tissue paper tucked on top hiding whatever it is he's bought. Taking out his phone, the Hunter dials and puts it up to his ear; Kaname flutters closer to overhear what's being said.

"It's a surprise, Yuuki, I'm not giving you a hint." A pause, and Kiryuu's voice drips with sarcasm. "You're not going to die of curiosity."

The Hunter covers his eyes, stepping into the shade and rubbing at his temples. "No, you go ahead. I feel a little nauseous and I'm getting a headache. I'm going to head back to the car. Finish your last errand and then meet me there. I'll call the driver to let her know I'm coming back early. No, I'll be fine already, quit worrying. I've got Kuran's creepy raven. Okay, I'll see you later. Enjoy yourself."

Kiryuu tucks his phone away and starts to walk, more slowly this time, keeping to the shadows and avoiding the main roads. A few times he touches his head and winces; Kaname himself doesn't get headaches, so he can't relate.

Kiryuu walks far slower than a bird can fly, so the raven glides along over the rooftops until it's slightly ahead of the Hunter, lands to wait until Kiryuu catches up behind it, and then flies ahead to find a new perch, repeating the pattern. Going from perch to perch, Kaname's raven, shadowing Kiryuu, is slowly traveling the most direct route to the car park.

Then, Kaname's raven perches on the head of a statue, past a short tunnel where the surrounding buildings arch over the street, just out of the Hunter's sight, and he waits for Kiryuu to pass by.

Kiryuu doesn't come.

Kaname waits a little longer. Kiryuu doesn't come. Kiryuu's headache must be making him slower, the pureblood thinks.

And he waits a little more. Kiryuu doesn't come.

In his real body, Kaname sits forward, concerned, attention no longer split between the presentation and his familiar. He takes flight, circling back to the street behind the tunnel, swooping down to land on the pavestones.

The road is deserted. There's nothing but empty air - Kiryuu is nowhere in sight.

Kaname debates with himself. Kiryuu has deliberately avoided being followed by his familiar before. Perhaps he abandoned the raven on purpose now. But Kaname has an uneasy feeling he can't shake.

The pureblood hesitates a moment longer, then takes wing to find Yuuki. She has a cellphone;
she'll contact Kiryuu and scold him for losing Kaname's raven. The disquiet in his breast is nothing but paranoia. Kiryuu is probably fine.

The world is shaking. It makes his head throb and his stomach roil.

Why is the ground under his cheek moving? The ground doesn't move.

The movement is important. It means something.

So does the ache in his head, concentrated on a sharp point at the back of his head. Zero fights the unnatural slowness of his thoughts, clawing for vital clarity.

There are voices, above his head. And a low thrumming noise, matching the vibration in the floor. He shifts minutely, and his shoulders feel oddly stiff. He can't move his hands.

I'm tied up, Zero realizes, and that insight is enough to kick his fight or flight response into high gear, the rush of chemicals dousing his brain like a bucket of cold water.

Memory rushes in. Walking back, a tunnel; inside the tunnel, a door in the wall that opened as he passed by, hands that dragged him in, muffled his mouth to quiet him. He'd felt too sick, been too slow to fight. Someone had struck him in the head to stun him, and then there'd been a prick in his arm.

Drugs of some kind, Zero realizes grimly. Some kind of sedative. And the convenient timing of his illness is too much of a coincidence. He's been drugged twice - probably his coffee - and Ancestress knows what they gave him.

The vibration is from an engine; he's in a car, being moved. That's bad. If they move him from the scene of his abduction, whoever comes to look for him may not be able to find him. Yuuki, at least, will try to find him.

All of this took planning and preparation. Zero feels sick, and not just from the drugs. Those feelings he's had lately, of being watched...a suspicion, more like a certainty, rears up in his mind. The Hunter kicks it down with professional ease, practicalities asserting themselves; think, don't feel. Feeling doesn't help him right now.

Master's training had kicked in the moment he woke in unfamiliar circumstances; Zero hasn't given any sign to his captors that he's awake, and they aren't paying him any attention. They're not professionals, then. Very strange.

It does him no good. His body's so debilitated by their drugs - his muscles like water, limp and unresisting, and his head a vise of pain - that he couldn't do anything if he wanted to. Whatever they slipped him before the attack is growing stronger, the nausea and lightheadedness settling into his cells. It feels almost alive, like a snake worming its way deeper in his veins, tunneling through to his core. Zero cracks one eye open the tiniest bit, and immediately closes it, regretting the attempt as his vision skews crazily. He lies still and tries to breathe through the dizziness, concentrating on not throwing up and not letting his captors know he's awake.

The cool, hard weight of the Bloody Rose is gone, he realizes. And the holster for Artemis Rod isn't strapped around his thigh. They've stripped him of his weapons. Zero spares a brief moment to worry about what they've done with them - a Hunter's weapons are an extension of their own body - before he wrenches himself back on track. He doesn't have time to worry about them when he needs to worry about himself first.
How long has he been unconscious? Zero wonders, with a cold feeling creeping through his limbs. Minutes? Hours? A day or more? It matters, because the longer he's been out, the farther they've been able to take him from his abduction site. The farther they've been able to take him, the bigger the area Yuuki have to search. And the smaller the chance she'll find him.

Before he has a chance to think further, the car's vibration changes, and the ride becomes bumpier. Gravel, they're on some kind of gravel drive. A pit opens in his stomach. Wherever they're taking him, they've arrived.

The van - it has to be a van, the back is large enough to hold an adult man lying on his side - grinds to a stop. Rough hands grab his bound arms, heedless of the white hot strain it puts on his shoulders, and begin to drag him out of the car, uncaring if his head or knee hit the side of the van.

When he feels sunlight warm his face - is it the same sunset, meaning he's only been unconscious a little while? Or the more frightening possibility, it's a different day's sun and he's been unconscious over twelve hours? - Zero makes the mistake of opening his eyes. The world spins and warps, and he panics enough to thrash, or offer some kind of resistance, because one of the people dragging him strikes his temple hard enough to leave a ringing in his ears; his body goes limp, and he's dragged unresisting back into cooler shadow.

A building - large and cavernously empty, because the sounds of his captors' footsteps echo. Some kind of warehouse? The gravel had ripped the fabric of his skirts and then torn through his loose trousers, and now the concrete flooring they're dragging him along is scraping his bare knees and shins, releasing a faint blood scent in the air, a dangerous lure for any vampire. The dread in the pit of his stomach deepens as his captors slam him into the ground, abrading a new scuff on his cheek. Zero curls in on himself under a rain of blows, further disorienting him.

"Has the first dose been in his system long enough?" a low male voice queries.

"Yeah, should be reaching peak efficiency," replies another male voice, obnoxiously self-satisfied.

"Then cut him loose!" urges a third, eager voice.

Footsteps, then someone is sawing at the duct tape wrapping his lower arms together. A snap, and a release of pressure; Zero brings his arms in close, underneath himself, glad to be relieved of the persistent strain.

That's the only good news; they're confident enough to release him, and they're letting him hear their voices. Zero could identify them now. Fear bubbles up like tar in his belly before he buries it down deep. These people don't intend to give Zero the chance to identify them.

He lies where he is, taking a moment to catch his breath before trying to lever his torso upright. But his hands shake, and he can't maneuver his hands underneath his body to push upwards at the right angle, or keep his arms straight, or convince them to bear his weight. Frustrated, Zero tries again and again, each time slipping back clumsily to hit the floor, and someone in the background laughs.

Zero grits his teeth. His muscles aren't responding properly. His chances of surviving this are looking slimmer and slimmer. Whatever poison is floating in his blood, it's stripping him of any chance to fight back. They're amateurs, but with first-rate tools and meticulous planning. Incongruous and unlikely; at least one of them must have experience doing this.

He angles his head toward the voices and risks opening his eyes again; Zero needs to see what the odds are against him. The dizzy lurching is just as nauseating, and the colors warp and and bleed,
turning his stomach, but Zero grits his teeth and waits for his vision to clear. Every time his moves his neck, his vision tilts and his head spins, like his brain has to realign itself.

As his sight returns to him, the vague blurs finally resolve themselves into the shapes of people, watching him closely with ugly emotions twisting their faces, clearly waiting for him to respond. There's five of them; his stomach sinks a little more with each new enemy. All of them are male, and all of them are very young, around his own age. Zero's last hope dies when understands they're freely letting him see their faces.

These people are here to kill him. That's the undeniable conclusion of everything Zero's seen so far. They've poisoned him and taken his weapons so he can't physically fight back. They've taken no precautions against Zero identifying them, and they've kidnapped him and removed him to a remote location far from witnesses or help. No one would be foolish enough to kidnap a pureblood's Consort for ransom. Omegas are supposed to be inviolate, protected from harm. All except for him, Zero thinks bitterly.

But these people don't just want to kill him. If they only wanted his murder, Zero would have died as soon as they pulled him through that door in the tunnel. No, these men went to all this trouble because just killing Zero isn't enough. They want Zero to die in a way that satisfies the disgust and hate in their eyes, exacting his pain as their price. The bile rises up in his throat. Their eyes don't promise him an easy death.

Weaponless and crippled by their drugs, Zero has nothing to fall back on. He is going to die, and the grim certainty spreads through his limbs like ice, but he'll do what he can to avoid making it easy for them. His body may be unable to fight, but he still has a few Hunter charms he can use.

Zero reaches for his Hunter Arts - only to rebound as though he's hit a glass wall between him and his power. Increasingly frantic, Zero tries again. And again, and again, but each time he finds his power slipping out of his hands like water. Panic clouds his thoughts. The vampires have invented a drug that blocks Hunter powers. His people are in danger, and he's going to die without being able to warn them, he thinks frantically.

"Realized it yet, you filth?" taunts a cruel voice.

Zero raises his head with difficulty, horrified.

There are five vampires in front of him, and he can't sense a single one.

Yuuki lays a hand over her heart; through the bloodbond, she can feel Kaname's concern and unsettled worry. Something is not right, says her husband's emotions, and Yuuki's mouth tightens in worry, her meal sitting heavy in her belly. Those particular feelings are rare; Kaname is always so controlled, and he cares for very little.

She taps the empty parfait glass with her spoon, a hollow chiming ring, and jerks in surprise, dropping her spoon with a clatter when Kaname's raven lands like a thunderbolt on the table next to her. It mantles its wings and caws loudly, catching her eye, then flutters a few feet away, turning to look at her again. 'Follow me' it means, so Yuuki does, shoving a handful of bills on the table without looking to see the amount, grabbing her purse and slamming the door open in her haste.

As Yuuki hurries after her husband's familiar, nearly running, she tries not to think about how she's heading in the same direction as the car, where Zero is supposed to be waiting for her. It could be a coincidence, she reminds herself, but the raven...
The familiar finally stops in a deserted street, quite close to the car park.

"Where is Zero?" Yuuki demands.

The bird caws again, and Yuuki's fumbling in her purse - when did her hands start shaking? - until the cool plastic of her phone smacks her palm. It takes her a few extra seconds to dial, with the tremors in her fingers, but soon the pureblood's putting the phone unsteadily up to her ear, listening to the dial tone and tapping her fingers on her arm.

There's faint ringing, like the sound of a phone, coming from the tunnel ahead.

Yuuki lowers her phone very, very slowly. In the white silence in her head, the dim noise echos like the tolling of a bell.

When the ringing stops, she numbly enters the number again, and staggers toward the sound on heavy feet. It leads her to a wooden door; the work of a moment and Yuuki's torn the thing off its hinges with her bare hands, splinters lodging in her skin. In the back of her mind, someone is talking about property damage, and breaking and entering, but that voice is very far away, behind glass that won't break, under a layer of ice a hundred feet thick.

She doesn't feel anything when she slides bonelessly to the ground, fingers reaching out to hover above the shining barrel of Bloody Rose, speared in a shaft of light cast from the broken door.

Behind her, Kaname's raven has become a man; he's intently examining the scene with a clinical detachment and coolness Yuuki wishes she could imitate.

But she can't take her eyes off the Bloody Rose, abandoned and cast away, a glowing silver beacon in the darkness.

Kaname comes up to stand at her shoulder, something clenched in his hand so hard the knuckles whiten. The set of his shoulders has snapped tight. "He's not here."

"Zero," she says, and her voice cracks, "Zero would never leave Bloody Rose behind."

"No," Kaname agrees, some leviathan swimming underneath his hollow tone. "He wouldn't."

Yuuki pries his hand open. Glittering gold in the low light is a small, flat rectangle, pierced with a ring at one end. In elegant cursive, someone has inscribed the word 'Nightshade' and a tiny Kuran crest.

Just like that, a dam inside her bursts. Yuuki doesn't know what this tag means, but Zero meant it as a present for her. She presses the heel of her hand to her chest, hard. Something is swelling inside her, rising like magma. The cold and the numbness are mixing with volcanic heat, churning and bubbling.

Yuuki takes a fold of her dress and picks up the Bloody Rose, carefully storing it in her purse, and then finds Artemis Rod before doing the same. Zero will want these returned to him.

She walks to the center of the street. The setting sun has turned the sky a bloody red; everything is creeping shadows and russet light. Kaname is watching her from the shelter of a building. Let him watch.

The anger, the fear, the abominable pain of Zero's absence - Yuuki lets herself feel all of it, and thinks about how Zero could leave her, forever, and the molten mass builds and builds and builds, and the power in her blood bubbles and burns hotter and higher, and she lets it, she feeds it on the
meat of her body and the flesh of her soul, she fans the flame higher, ever higher, until she feels like an incandescent flame, and then she boils over -

- and in her hands is a butterfly. At night, in the darkness, its wings look a soft velvet black, and its hard chitinous body shines obsidian. But under sunlight, you can see the wings' real color, faint ghost markings like a black leopard, veins and eye spots of deep red-black shining like stained glass.

Another butterfly, identical to the first, lands in her hair, fanning its wings slowly. And a third flutters past her face, brushing her cheek with its wings. And then one more, and one after that, and another, and another, and another; the air is choked with them, the street and the walls and the buildings are covered in them, there's not a speck of stone or concrete left without crawling darkness, everywhere are black and red-black leopard butterflies, a living carpet of wings and feelers and eyes, thousands and thousands of eyes.

"Find him. Find the heart that was stolen from me," she commands, hands knotted into fists with effort, mind brimfull of tiny pinpoints of light, her vast power partitioned out into these tiny extensions of herself.

Kaname is looking at her through the sea of butterflies, black powder on his cheek and hands from the brush of their wings. Shock and new awe rests in his face, and part of Yuuki feels grim satisfaction. The rest of her doesn't care, not when she doesn't know if Zero is alive or dead.

The vast flock of butterflies takes wing, turning the sky black, a streaming darkness sent off into the gathering night. And Kuran Yuuki bends her power to this task, and hopes.

Breathe, Zero reminds himself, stomach clenched with fear at this revelation and his helplessness.

Inhale. Exhale. Keep your breaths long and even. Ignore the stone settled in your throat, choking you. Maintain control. Keep a level head.

Whatever you do, don't panic. In a fight, the first one to panic dies. Zero gives himself one more breath to put aside his terror, settle lightly into the battle-calm, right on the edge of slipping into mushin, and then he can look evenly into the faces of his abductors. He can still think. His Hunter abilities may be impaired, but he is not helpless yet.

"I didn't think the Senate would act so recklessly," he comments, finally propping his upper body on his hands.

Immediately, Zero knows it was the wrong thing to say when the vampires' expressions turn to enraged fury. The blow to his cheek comes as no surprise, knocking him on his belly and sending pain through his jaw. A rough hand in his hair drags him upright, forcing him close to one practically foaming at the mouth; Zero's eyes are still having trouble focusing, and the sudden movement makes his stomach turn.

"Do we look like those greedy Senate lackeys to you?" the vampire demands, the same eager voice from before laden with anger. "Watch your mouth and keep your filthy insinuations to yourself, D!"

Zero can't tell any difference, but is careful to look contrite and beaten, and the vampire drops him to the floor. He can't brace his body, so the impact jars through his bruised frame and makes his head throb.

"Who are you, then?" Zero questions cautiously when he's sure he won't vomit.
The same vampire who grabbed him by the hair, clearly the leader, gestures to the other vampires with a proud air. "We are the devoted servants of the purebloods, the true rulers of our society, and of the monarchy that Kaname-sama will surely restore."

Disbelief spreads in his mind. These are monarchists - Kuran's followers? Did the pureblood order him killed? For some reason, Zero's instincts tell him that Kuran isn't behind this.

"Then if you're not Kuran-sama's enemies, why have you kidnapped me?" Zero asks, mindful to speak of Kuran more respectfully than usual.

"For Kuran-sama's sake, of course," a weedy, nervous vampire bursts out, looking at the leader for reassurance. A lackey of some kind, following the leader's stronger will.

The leader nods emphatically, lacing his hands behind his back and pacing back in forth, dangerous gaze never wavering from Zero. "Kaname-sama is so noble - he took something like you, a dirty-blooded Level D, into his home for the sake of keeping the Hunters satisfied."

"We may not know how you did it," sneers a tall vampire who oozes smarmy, self-satisfied confidence, "but somehow you managed to fake an omega's status. You're a D, and D scum are always betas. This is some Hunter plot against us to sully our bloodlines. You're just a false omega, made to infiltrate our world and work against us by taking advantage of your nature. That's the only way Kaname-sama would lower himself to touch you, trash."

The leader turns sharply, rounding on Zero. "And then, you slut, you couldn't even keep your whorish nature from dishonoring the Kuran name! You spread your legs for anyone who looked at you! We've all heard about your exploits in depravity," he accuses, revulsion layered thickly in his tone.

"Kaname-sama can't even stand to touch your dirty body," the lackey vampire spits, eyes trailing down Zero's form, expression disgusted.

Beginning to pace, the leader gestures expansively, turning his back on Zero and facing the other vampires. "We saw you at the soiree, prancing around so self-satisfied, showing yourself off to every alpha in the room. Proud of how you'd gotten away with everything. We knew then, that whatever the cost, we couldn't let Kaname-sama be victimized by you any longer," the leader rages, speaking to his followers more than to Zero, whipping them into a frenzy. There's a chorus of agreement, a rising emotional pitch feeding between the vampires.

"You, a filthy Hunter, and a lowly Level D, joining the bloodline of the purest and greatest vampire kings? Never! The nobles can never allow such a taint to spread." The leader stalks closer, threat in his eyes, "So we need to cut it off, right at its source."

Zero freezes, feeling ice sliding down his back like the fingertips of Death. Very calmly, keeping his face impassive, he says, "There will be diplomatic consequences for your actions."

The lackey vampire scoffs. "Getting rid of you won't end the treaty, D. You're just one Hunter. Would the Association President really risk the lives of his Hunters for a vampire? You were just a vehicle for the concessions they wanted. They'll abandon you now that they can't use you anymore."

Zero clenches his jaw, but tries a different tack. "Kuran-hime will be displeased if you kill me."

A low-voiced, muscular vampire answers calmly. "Kuran-hime is confused by her upbringing among the humans. Kaname-sama will show her this is for the best."
The smarmy vampire speaks up, slightly patronizing, "Poor Kuran-hime. It was one of you Hunters that taught her to be so weak, compared to her brother."

"Yuuki is stronger than any of you," Zero spits, incensed by their dismissal.

The fifth vampire, a barrel-chested monolith, thus far silent, beats Zero down for his cheek with one ham-sized fist and a spark of glee in his eyes. Angry on Yuuki's behalf, Zero doesn't feel the least bit sorry, and levers himself onto his hands and knees with the help of his rage, spitting blood where he's cut his cheek on his teeth.

"You must know," he tells them, pushing aside the Consort's docility and letting the grim, implacable Hunter rise, staring them straight in the eyes, one by one, "that the Kurans and the Senate will have to execute you if you murder me. They will need to save face in front of the Hunters and the other nobles."

"They will," agrees the leader, the sick light of fervent conviction shining ghastly in his face, "but seeing our world cleansed and the purity of our blood and society protected are more important than our lives. We've committed ourselves to the judgement of history and doing what's right."

The narrow, uncompromising, uncritical moral purity of youth. Zero is unpleasantly reminded of himself, thirty years ago, before he realized that there were bigger, more important things than his own pain. Though he would never have contemplated killing Kuran this way.

Well, that's it, he realizes, closing his eyes, a hollow feeling sinking in his gut. Zero has nothing left to try. These people will not be bargained with. They don't want money, or fame, or power. They want nothing except his death. They are devoted to their cause and cannot be convinced that they are wrong - a pack of young radical fools who have already accepted their own deaths as glorious and necessary to protect the vampire race from the scary, dirty D and his Hunter cronies. He's too crippled by their drugs to defend himself. He has little hope of rescue; Yuuki will try, but she doesn't even know he's been taken, and Kuran - well, Zero expects little help from him, however polite he's been recently.

He will die. Zero breathes out, and calmness settles over him. When he opens his eyes slowly, an impassive expression firmly in place, he raises his chin and lifts his gaze to meet the eyes of his killers.

He is a Hunter, and the last of the Kiryuu - a more ancient lineage than any of these nobles can claim - and he will not give them his fear. He will meet his death with dignity, and without yielding to the blood-drinker who kills him. That is a Hunter's pride.

Zero's stoicism unsettles and angers his killers, who shift uneasily as his gaze passes over them, or narrow their eyes and clench their fists. Their leader is one such person, angered perhaps by Zero's denial of his control, and eager to reclaim the flow of power in the room. He needs Zero to conform to his narrative, and rather than begging and crying like the base, lying whore they tell him he is, the Hunter has instead chosen silence and serenity, and refused to play his villain's role. Zero can see the muscles in the leader's jaw jump, and fury burning in his eyes rises higher.

"Unrepentant to the last," the leader snarls, shaking his head. "We'll just have to teach the D his place ourselves."

The smarmy vampire gives a half-smile. "I know just where to start. We can't let a pretender steal the marks of a rank he doesn't deserve, right?"

A tendril of fear squirms in Zero's belly, and he fights to keep his face blank, and not to shy away
as the vampires close in, chuckling with nasty smiles.

Hands grab at his clothing, ripping and tearing, and the instinct to curl in on himself grows too strong to ignore. It just spurs them on more. A vulgar hand snatches his Hoseki, still clipped to his hair, and yanks; Zero cries out once, pain shooting through his scalp. He thinks the vampire might tear a chunk of his hair out, but the fragile gold chain snaps first, a blessed release from the sharp sting.

The vampires leave him in rags, the remains of his trousers just barely preserving the last of his modesty. Zero was born a male human, but the way they look at him, leering and staring at his half-naked form - the meaty giant crudely licks his lips - makes him want to scrub his skin off, and never let another human being touch him again. He just barely stops himself from trying to cover his bare skin with his hands. If he survives this, he doesn't think the sick feeling inside him will ever go away.

"Is this the part where you rape me?" he asks, going for disinterested, like he's watching this happen to someone else from deep inside him.

The smarmy vampire sneers. "Spoken like a true whore, you filthy D. Eager for anyone's cock no matter what."

Zero bites his tongue, and lets his hair fall over his eyes. They've stripped him and stared at him with undisguised lust. What else is he supposed to think?

The biggest vampire looks toward the leader, his whole body perking up at the suggestion. Zero is disgusted by the idea of being touched by them, and very pointedly avoids thinking about Yuuki. The vampires have always done as they pleased with his body, he bitterly reminds himself. Rape of his body can't be worse than rape of his humanity.

The calm vampire with the low voice, who has spoken very little, moves forward and places a hand on the biggest vampire's shoulder. "We're not going to rape you, Hunter. Whatever your conduct, you belong to Kuran-sama, and we respect him enough not to usurp his possessions."

Zero, offended but seeing the offered escape, bites his tongue again and says nothing, eyes flicking to the leader, who nods, reinforcing the command. His shoulders relax the tiniest bit. He's about to die, but at least they aren't going to shame him first. Pain is far easier to face.

"Besides," drawls the smarmy vampire, "I'm not fond of putting my cock where everyone else's been. I can buy cleaner whores. Probably tighter too."

The others laugh, but the lackey licks his lips, looking at Zero with unabated hunger. "Hey, if we can't fuck him because he's Kuran-sama's, what about his blood? It's not like Hio Shizuka-sama didn't drink him first. And he's a Hunter. That's a taboo for them, right?"

Zero's stomach drops, and ice floods his veins. No. He'd almost rather they rape him.

Something of Zero's fear must shine through his eyes, because his face is a rigid mask, and the leader leans forward with a considering look. " Hunters don't willingly let anyone feed off of them. And Kaname-sama wasn't the first."

"They say the filthy Hunter's drank Kuran-sama's blood," adds the biggest vampire, and Zero holds very still as they all pin him with sharper, hungrier stares.

The lure of even secondhand pure blood is too strong; Zero can see the leader cave to the temptation, prowling forward. "We can't let the D keep blood he stole and doesn't deserve," the
leader rationalizes. In his peripheral vision, Zero can sense the other vampires draw closer, circling like predators.

"No mess. We can't afford to draw attention with too much blood," cautions the calm, rational one, as they draw closer and Zero's memories flash winter and bloody death. He digs his nails into his palms, weakly, still without much control over his own body.

And the vampires descend in a pack, snatching and pulling at his limbs, fighting over choice spots. Everything's a blur of limbs and teeth to his unsteady vision. He fights as much as he can, but his training is useless when his limbs won't heed his brain; the poison's done its work too well.

He shouts as the first vampire's teeth drive deep, scraping bone, careless and sloppy, like he doesn't merit better. And another, a third, a fourth a fifth in all of his limbs ripping open his skin and tearing unwilling gasps and cries from his throat. It's a waking nightmare for Zero, reliving his greatest fear again and again, the obscene yield of his flesh to fangs sinking into his skin. Some of them withdraw and push back inside, just to cause him more pain and wring out more noises. Zero bites through his lip just to silence himself. None of them feed from his neck - a courtesy to the Kurans, no doubt.

They force him to bear the violation for long minutes as the vampires feed greedily, pinning him down under their weight so Zero can barely move, all the breath crushed from his lungs. Staring up at the ceiling with blank eyes, the memory of his pollution playing in his brain, Zero's breath whistles from his raw throat like quiet sobs. He can hear them breathing, hear the swallows of their throats, the quiet moans, smell their rank sweat and cologne, feel their weight pressing down on him. Dry heaving, he chokes on bile.

It goes on forever - he can feel his psyche coming apart at the seams. It's only his imagination that conjures the phantom pain of Shizuka's virus spreading and burning in his blood, but it drives him to thrash and flail anyway. His attackers' grips won't slip, and he earns himself more blows and bone-deep bruises from their hands.

Finally - finally, because he feels he's gone mad during the eternity - they release him when his blood pressure drops too low, when his thoughts crawl and his heart struggles to pump what little fluid they left in his body through his veins. Their fangs tear out big chunks of his flesh as they withdraw, ragged gaping holes that barely bleed because he's so drained. Zero's vision swims, and he pitches to the side, barely holding himself up, reminding himself to breathe.

He can feel the holes, all of them, like brands in his mind. Zero stares dully at the aching, open punctures on his forearm, too tired to move. Zero's healing has been boosted by Kuran blood, but the missing chunks of flesh don't heal. They don't even scab over. Why isn't he healing? The drugs, he realizes dimly, nausea building in his gut. This time Zero gives in, turning his head to the side and spitting up the liquid in his gut.

Voices above his head, distant, like noise heard through water. "I did the research. The masks should work. As long as we can't smell an omega, our instincts won't react, and we won't feel the urge to protect this trash."

Sunk in his own horror and despair, it's almost a relief when they begin to beat him.

Vampire strength can crack concrete. Zero's seen what it can do to flesh. It pulps soft tissues, turns bone into splinters, makes bodies into crushed meat. He can feel fluids pooling in all his cavities, a slow steady drowning in his own body, robbing him of breath. It will kill him soon, now that he's reduced to human healing. The wet, fleshy sounds of his tissues caving in, the crack and snap of his bones - they can't even rouse him to fight.
But he wants to, Zero discovers with surprise. A few months ago, Zero would have fought to live only for the sake of his duty, so he could keep Hunting. His own life had no intrinsic worth, except what he could use it for. But Zero has things he wants to do now - things to live for. Zero wants to live for himself. Yuuki has taught him to want such a thing, the Hunter realizes with a tinge of warmth in his chest that doesn't come from ruptured organs. Such a shame, to discover such a precious truth when he's already run out of time, he thinks regretfully.

Zero clings to his pride as long as he can. Eventually, he screams when they start bending his joints backwards, tearing them free of the cartilage. The big vampire takes Zero's back in his hands, and bends and bends it, horribly, and Zero can hear the sound his spine makes when it breaks in two. He doesn't think he'll ever forget it. He screams, suddenly lifeless below the waist. Vampires can heal, but Zero was born human, and he instinctively fears mutilating injuries. The big vampire gives him just enough time to catch his breath, take deep gasps of air, before he does it again, higher. Zero's scream, an agonized animal sound, could shatter glass.

They get bored when he can't feel pain anymore. He's almost grateful to the vampire that broke his back. The edges of his vision are starting to blur as the vampires withdraw. Zero doesn't have long left.

No one has come for him. He'd expected that.

"Should we blind him?" questions one of the vampires.

Zero's hearing is too far gone to tell which one, but he discovers unpleasantly that some things can still make him afraid, the terrified chill blending with the natural coldness of his dying body.

"No," decides another - the leader, probably - "I have better plans," and a hand fists itself in his hair, pulling his head back painfully. A noise escapes his throat. "Can you still hear me, D?"

Zero blinks rapidly, the only answer his body has enough motion left to make. They already broke his jaw and ripped out his tongue.

A face comes close, forcing Zero to meet their eyes and see their ruthless smile. "Good. I want you to know what's going to happen next. We're not going to kill you ourselves. That would be too good for you."

The vampire gives Zero's head a shake, and his hearing blinks out for a moment. The vampires have left his head and skull mostly intact, so Zero could process the pain of what they did to him. It wouldn't do if he passed out or died before his punishment was complete.

"You see," says the vampire, "my comrade here has a useful power." He smiles cruelly. "Fire. We're going to set this building on fire, and then we're going to leave you inside to burn alive.

"Hunters are buried when they die. But you, D - you won't leave a body. You'll turn to ash like the rest of us. But you'll never be buried next to your precious family, not even as ash. When this place burns to the ground, they'll be so much ash that nobody will be able to tell you died here at all."

Zero's empty mouth makes a noise that might have been 'Ichiru.' The leader smiles again, rakes his claws through the ruins of Zero's face, and drops him.

He blanks out for a while, mercifully, waking up to the crackle of flames and the smell of burning plastic. The darkness at the edges of his vision creeps wider. Hot gusts of air singe what little of his skin he can still feel, and his lungs can't find any air.

His dying brain plays tricks on him, makes shapes out of the shadows and flickers of light cast by
the fire. There's a roar as part of the building collapses, little more than a meter from his supine body. Zero wishes death would come collect him already, and as his eyes slip closed for the last time, he imagine he can see Death's black form looming out of the smoke.

_Forgive me_, he thinks, and Zero's heart beats once, twice, and then -

-stops.

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Velvet blackness. Stifling silence.

A heartbeat, nearby, strong and fast.

Movement.

The taste of volcanic, liquid heat. The warmth spreads and chases away the cold, but it _hurts_. It hurts so bad, the agony of a soul being torn in two, like a living death, a howling, screaming loss.

And love. Such rich, deep love. He could weep, because it's meant for him.

(Faintly, the sound of two heartbeats.)

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Chapter End Notes

I hope everybody came out okay?

I lulled you into a sense of security last chapter, and now I'm punching you in the gut with feelings. I'm so sorry guys.

As always, remember that whatever I break I promise to fix, and as an added incentive, after this arc (2-3 chapters) we're finally getting to what I've been referring to in my head as the 'sex arc.'

Alright, the hurt is mostly done. Let the comfort begin. I promise cuddles, Kaname reconsidering his priorities, Yuuki's berserk button being repeatedly smashed, and Zero meeting a guide of sorts.
Hello again everyone! Tormenting Zero got quite a strong reaction - I'll definitely have to do it again some time.

To Mayb: The vampires who attacked Zero moved him to make him harder to find and disrupt his scent trail, so the Kurans couldn't find him. Assume that as vampires they know basic precautions to take to avoid being tracked. Kaname was very far away, Yuuki was inexperienced, and their bloodbond is with each other, not Zero, so they can't use it to find him. And I didn't know pure blood could do that, that's why I didn't think about using that, haha!

My favorite character is Zero, so it hurts me to torture him too (but thinking about Yuuki torturing him is giving me Bad Thoughts). I thought you might like seeing Yuuki's familiar :) In my imagination, Yuuki's first priority in such a situation would be Zero, and only after she found out what happened to him would she think about anything else. You'll see more of her emotions in this chapter and the next one.

I assume that Kaname surviving 1,000 years without a heart is a special pureblood power, and if a regular vampire's heart stopped for long enough, they would probably die. *shrug* Purebloods just do what they want?

To Kid: Don't worry about the length of this arc vs. the next one. I never said how long that long-awaited arc would be, now did I? Full disclosure, I'm not even sure I can get Zero to let Kaname and Yuuki see him naked in less than a chapter. Shy, sweet child. Baby steps, but hopefully I can set the stage for that necessary increasing intimacy.

The noise Yuuki makes when the smoke clears and she can see the outline of Zero, collapsed on the ground, is barely human.

Eyes blind to anything but his vague shape, Yuuki hurtles through the ruins of a warehouse at the edge of the industrial district, ignoring lingering sparks and hazardous twisted girders and beams. Yuuki's powers had torn this place apart as soon as she realized Zero's blood trail led inside, putting out the fire and throwing debris to the sides, careful even in her maddened frenzy not to crush anyone inside. Flitting at her elbow is the soft black butterfly that guided her here by sampling the taste of Zero's blood.

The scent of her beloved's familiar, desired blood overwhelms the smells of smoke and melted plastic and metal; it's all her brain can fix on, coating her senses and making the dark pureblood nature surging in her blood overshadow everything but her need to find Zero alive.

Oh god. A wailing, screaming keen is wrenched from her chest, and it goes on and on as Yuuki collapses on her knees beside his broken body. The alpha howls ceaselessly in her mind, grief-
Zero's elbow isn't supposed to be facing that way, she thinks with horror, her gorge rising. And there's something wrong with the way his legs are splayed. Parts of his ribcage look dented - mashed-in depressions where his ribs and torso have caved in, like he was struck with terrible and malicious force. And his face - his dear, beloved face! - the flesh is in ribbons, the clean lines of his jaw misaligned, chunks of his nose missing; it clearly bore the brunt of whoever did this.

Tears stream down her face, unheeded. Yuuki couldn't stop them if she tried, shaking in horror.

The pureblood's hands hover over the mess, wanting to gather Zero up, but she can't find any place that looks safe to touch without harming him further. The need to confirm Zero is alive overwhelms everything else - god, she can't see his chest rise and fall - and Yuuki searches the mostly-unhurt skin of his neck for a pulse, holding her breath until she finally feels a weak thump.

But she can't feel a second heartbeat.

Crying in earnest now, uncaring and unashamed, great ugly sobbing heaves, Yuuki scrabbles at her clothes. Blood, she can give him her blood, blood heals everything for vampires - why isn't Zero healing does that mean he's too far gone is he already - blood, she has pure blood to give him, and Yuuki's never been so grateful in her life for that fact, ever.

Finally she tears away her sleeve, cutting straight to the bone with her claws in blind terror, and she doesn't feel a thing, except relief. Yuuki holds her bleeding arm over Zero's mouth, forces herself to maneuver open his mangled jaw, and lets her blood drip down, hoping that's enough, because she doesn't think he can swallow.

The pureblood closes her eyes, and murmurs a litany of pleas, over and over again, trying to force as much vitality as she can into his blood, her feelings, her desperate hope that this will save him. Her alpha whimpers and whines, calling for its mate, but Yuuki has nothing left to soothe it, consumed by fear and balancing on the knife-edge of uncertainty. She claws at her wrist every time the flow lessens, pouring more and more of herself into her offering. The only reason she's holding herself together right now, grasping weakly at sanity, is that she knows Zero will die if she can't.

Yuuki hiccups, and tries to breathe deeply, but all her air is taken by her sobs. It's not working, she fears, doubts creeping in, and the longer Zero's heart stays silent, the greater her grief grows. Yuuki presses her ear against Zero's chest, above his heart, still feeding him her blood, desperate for any sign, her whole body taut with fear.

A heartbeat, weak and faint.

She sags, the tightness in her chest eases, and her frightened sobs turn to relieved tears. She covers her face with one hand, letting herself cry freely and appreciate the miracle of Zero's survival for a few minutes. Zero's heartbeat strengthens a little, and when it steadies she allows her wrist to heal.

No, she's not supposed to cry, she reminds herself. She's being a terrible, undignified pureblood, so she bites her fist, trying to stem her tears and cry more quietly. Yuuki throttles her sobs down into sniffles and whimpers, but the occasional heaving shake of her shoulders shows the lie.

A little calmer, and with Zero out of immediate danger, Yuuki finally takes in the details of Zero's condition. To someone who loves him, the evidence of such deep hate feels like a spike driven into her back. Someone did this to him, Yuuki thinks with horror, disbelief and a deep, profound anger. How could anyone do this to another living being, let alone to Zero, the gentlest, kindest person Yuuki knows?
She ventures to touch one of the cratered depressions in his chest. It feels like the pulpy, liquid bruises on a dropped peach; the squishy texture holds the indentations of her fingers. Yuuki covers her hand with her mouth and chokes, closing her eyes against the sight. When she reaches up to close Zero's open mouth, and realizes someone ripped out his tongue, Yuuki loses the battle to her nausea and just barely makes it in time to throw up in the opposite direction, shock and horror triggering the nausea again every time the bloody, grotesque image surfaces.

This is her fault, Yuuki realizes, hunched over and shuddering with the taste of stomach acid and sweets coating her mouth, her body still fighting to expel an empty stomach. She was the one who wanted to go out today. She was the one who wanted to eat at the cafe. She left him alone, left Zero's side, left him defenseless, and whoever did this took him while he retrieved a gift for her. Yuuki starts crying heavily again, still trying to control her dry heaving, berating herself for her uselessness and inability to do anything but cry. Wasn't she responsible for protecting him, as Zero's mate and wife? All of her old anxieties and self-doubts about her worth return. This is the worst, most painful failure of her entire life, and she cannot ever let this happen again - Zero might not survive a second mistake. Whatever she must do to stop this, she'll do it, Yuuki promises Zero silently.

Drying her face, Yuuki wipes her mouth with the back of her hand, and crawls back to Zero's side, obsessively checking his heartbeat and breathing. As she tries to straighten Zero's limbs, a black flicker in the corner of her eye heralds the arrival of Kaname's familiar.

Yuuki needs his help to get Zero out of here, and to a doctor as soon as possible. Using his bat familiars to fly will be far faster than driving by car. Yuuki doesn't dare try traveling with her butterfly familiars; she's never done it before, and with Zero in this state she could hurt him. Kaname is experienced enough that he could safely move the Hunter.

But Kaname doesn't like Zero, Yuuki reminds herself with a sinking feeling in her stomach. Though lately, Kaname has seemed like he's coming around to the idea that Zero is permanently part of their family. Yuuki clenches her fists. Zero needs this. She's going to get it for him, whatever it costs to her.

"Kaname, please," Yuuki begs through her raw throat, turning to his raven and stretching out a beseeching hand.

"Please. Help me. Help Zero, and I'll do whatever you want, be whatever you want," she promises, blood rushing through her ears as she panics anew, because she almost lost Zero, he almost slipped out of her arms, out of her reach, and she doesn't know if she can keep Kaname's spite from hurting him again.

A swirl of smoke, and Kaname's human familiar catches her by the shoulders, a rare expression of discomfort exposed behind his collected mask. "You don't have to promise me that, Yuuki. If it's something you want, all you have to do is ask, and I will do it for you."

Yuuki can feel relieved tears coming, and she nods, swallowing and concentrating on staying calm until her sore eyes stop prickling.

"My real body will be here soon," the familiar promises, stroking her hair, "and we can take him home. I've already contacted Aido, and he'll be waiting for us. Kiryuu will be fine."

Yuuki shakes her head, unable to tear her eyes away from Zero's still form. Her black butterfly is sitting on his thigh, next to a jagged, suspiciously shaped wound. "They bit him," she says, abruptly filling with rage, her pureblood's hunger and possessiveness roaring forward.
Those filthy animals touched him and stole from him, drank down the sweet, divine liqueur in his veins, that only we are permitted to taste, the pureblood parts of her observe with quiet lethality.

Yuuki tries to soothe herself with Zero's scent, but it's layered with pain and blood, and it just drives her alpha to start wailing again.

The familiar's arms tighten around her. "We'll make sure whoever did this pays the price. We can't allow anyone to defy us like this."

"No, we can't," Yuuki affirms, gently touching the ends of Zero's silver hair, eyes dark.

For the next seven days, as Kiryuu Zero lies unconscious in a coma, gravely wounded and refusing to wake, Rosehill becomes a tomb whose center is the ill omega lying in Yuuki's bed.

Yuuki barely sleeps - mostly when Kaname presses her to - and eats only so she'll have enough strength to give Kiryuu more of her blood, downing blood tablets by the bottle. Kaname drains himself just as deeply, refusing to consider why he's so willingly opening his veins for Kiryuu. It's just to take strain off of Yuuki, he tells himself.

But Kaname can't deny that he's concerned for Kiryuu. The attack has shaken him to his core with its unexpectedness. Kaname strives so hard to be the one in control, to hold all the cards and know everything going on, and yet he had caught no hint from his agents of what the Senate planned.

Kaname has put up with Kiryuu for years without being allowed to kill him, and he's not about to let someone else succeed where he failed. No one is permitted to kill Kiryuu unless Kaname allows it. And he won't, because Kiryuu's death belongs to Kaname, and Kaname alone...but the Hunter is a good man, and the pureblood can admit that it would be a shame if Kiryuu were to die. Certainly, a part of Yuuki would die with him, and Kaname fears what the consequences would be.

Neither of the Kurans have left the house since Kiryuu's attack, sending vague excuses to their previous appointments. Their instincts scream every time their 'mate' leaves their sight. One of them stays protectively in the same room at all times, day or night, and while one alpha sleeps, the other watches over their omega.

No one is allowed in the room with Kiryuu, or even near it, except for Sasaki-san, the beta doctor, and once, fleetingly, Aido, and only when they're caring for Kiryuu. When a few of the servants wandered too close, Kaname found himself showing his teeth and snarling until they retreated to a safe distance. It's all instincts, he assures himself. Weak and defenseless and wounded, Kiryuu would never survive a second attack.

Rosehill's halls are unnaturally silent as Kaname breezes through them on quiet feet, the servants speaking in whispers and tiptoeing around as they fulfill their duties. Kaname made sure that the news of both Kiryuu's attack and his survival will not leave these walls; he's grateful that their ranks have been purged of spies (through the truth of how reminds Kaname of his guilt). But it's a bandage on an open wound; better that the wound had not been inflicted in the first place.

The pureblood's hand clenches in his pocket around a warm, square piece of metal, and Kaname withdraws Nightshade's collar tag in between his fingers. The gold glints under the candlelight. It's real, and remarkably well-made; Kiryuu hadn't stinted on cost or craftsmanship, generous in nature as always.

For some reason, Kaname's kept it constantly in his pocket since Kiryuu was attacked, taking it out sometimes to turn it over in long fingers as he thinks. It's not that he's attached to it, Kaname
reminds himself. It's penance, a reminder of his profound failure, one that has hurt Yuuki down to her soul and nearly killed Kiryuu. He'll return it to Kiryuu once the Hunter wakes, Kaname promises himself. It's not comforting or anything. He could give it to Yuuki right now if he wanted.

(He couldn't. Keeping the tag is like a promise that Kiryuu will wake up. As long as Kaname has Nightshade's tag, Kiryuu will drag himself back from death out of sheer obstinacy to berate the pureblood for touching his things.)

Yuuki blames herself for Kiryuu's attack, but Kaname knows he's the one who is really culpable. He failed to prevent this. He relied too heavily on his intelligence networks for warning. He let Kiryuu out of his sight when Yuuki trusted him to watch over their Consort. And Kaname's underlying failure is that he let things build to this point at all. Kaname was the one who was responsible for Kiryuu's reputation being destroyed. By letting everyone know his indifference and antipathy towards Kiryuu, he sent the nobles the message that harming Kiryuu was acceptable.

It is not. That's clear to him now.

Kaname's footsteps quicken; he's been away too long, and the urge to see the silver Hunter breathing quietly in his wife's bed overwhelms his other purposes. He can't think of anything else, the alpha instincts making his skin crawl and his heart beat faster. Anything could have happened to mate while he was gone, Kaname scolds himself. His instincts, and Yuuki's, are a hair from the surface these days, deeply rooted as the urge to protect an omega - their omega - is in their natures.

Only when he sees the pale, heavily bandaged face, framed by silver hair, lax in sleep, with the sheets tucked up to Kiryuu's chin, does something in his chest loosen. Kaname steps into Yuuki's bedroom, a rumble building in his chest to let alpha-mate know he's returned.

Yuuki is pacing by the bedside, arms crossed; at the noise, she looks up and gives Kaname a flat attempt at a smile, her fingers tapping restlessly on her arms. Unless she's touching their Consort, Yuuki can't hold still these days.

They're both on the knife-edge of feral, completely incapable of being calmed by anything but the presence of the omega they're both attuned too. At any given second, with the smell of their mate's blood still in the air, Kaname and Yuuki are standing on the precipice of violence, needing only a trigger. The logical part of Kaname is aware he's not functioning normally, but with that sweet, addicting fragrance of omega blood in the air, the pureblood doesn't care.

"How has he been?" Kaname asks, coming round the bed.

"No change," Yuuki reports. "We need to warm him again; he's getting cold."

Slipping under the covers, the two alphas settle on either side of the Hunter, in a pale mimicry of their position months earlier in this bed, as the three of them spoke of trust and children in intimate safety. They can't hold him close as they wish, for fear of disturbing Kiryuu's injuries. All of the Hunter's limbs are splinted, and hardly a sliver of flesh is left unbandaged. Kaname carefully noses the Hunter's neck, and lets his tongue flash out to taste the skin as Yuuki mirrors the gesture on the other side.

"You know," his wife says, a burning light in her deep red eyes, "I've been thinking. If we kill all the vampires, Zero will be safe. And we can take our time to mate him, when he's ready, because no one will be pushing us and all the other alphas will be dead, so they can't steal him from us."

Her hands clench the comforter; she hasn't left this room in a few days, smothered under the smell
of wounded omega with Kiryuu's lifeless, still body lying next to her. With Yuuki's nightgown falling off one shoulder and her hair in knots, his wife looks as disordered as her emotional state. "Then he'll let us fill him with babies, once he knows they'll be safe," she concludes happily.

Kaname considers this; to the alpha, it seems a perfectly reasonable solution. "I don't believe that would work," he says, though he can't quite remember why right now. The image of their mate, healthy and swollen with their child, is the most beautiful, alluring thing he could imagine. Kaname lowers his head to nuzzle at their mate's hair, breathing deep.

If anyone was around to see Kaname, they would notice that he's quite disheveled himself, lacking a coat or a waistcoat, his dress shirt wrinkled and the cuff buttons undone, and his trousers heavily creased. There's a few spots of blood marring the creamy white fabric of his fine linen shirt, from the last time he fed Zero. Speaking of feedings, it's time for the Hunter's next one.

Since his cuffs are already undone, all Kaname has to do is push his sleeve back and roll it up, tucked out of the way.

Yuuki, noticing the familiar routine, starts loosening the bandages holding Zero's jaw shut so they can open his mouth wide enough to drink. "Tell me how this works again," she prompts.

Kaname already knows where this conversion leads. "You can't help me, Yuuki, as much as you want to. This skill takes a great deal of practice and control."

"I didn't say anything about helping," she protests without conviction. "Just explain it for me, one more time."

Kaname sighs, but begins to speak as he slices a neat line on his wrist with his index claw. "We are immortal because a certain class of our cells can divide and replicate themselves identically an infinite number of times. When a lesser vampire drinks our blood, it is these cells that bestow increased power. They linger in the new host's bloodstream, continuing to replicate themselves until the host's death."

Drop by drop, his blood falls on Kiryuu's lips, coating them in bright red. The Hunter makes no movement or sign he can taste the richest, most coveted blood in the world. "Those cells are still part of us, and we can manipulate them if we wish. The virus that alters a human into a vampire has similar properties. That is why a D cannot disobey the Master who Turned them."

Kaname reaches out, carefully cupping Kiryuu's broken jaw to avoid further damaging his face. No matter how careful he is, Kiryuu's pale skin underneath the bandages will bear mottled green-blue bruises in the shape of his palm, so fragile and delicate his body is right now.

"Focus on the bloodbond, and I'll show you the necessary state of mind and level of attention."

Out of his peripheral vision, he sees Yuuki shake her head up and down, fascinated by this display, and then Kaname's consciousness sinks down, reaching out with the tiniest, thinnest possible tendril of his power into Kiryuu's body.

Feeling his blood rushing through Kiryuu's body is intimate and strange at the same time, like Kiryuu is part of him, a newfound phantom limb. Pushing away the shivery feeling, Kaname gathers his lingering cells together, and directs them towards the area he wants to focus on tonight: finishing the rebuilding of the Hunter's tongue.

He submerges himself in the microscopic world inside the Hunter's body, closing his eyes and narrowing his attention to guiding one cell atop another, following the perfect pattern fixed in his
head. Kiryuu's body already holds the blueprints to repair the damage, hidden dormant in his DNA; all Kaname has to do is show the Hunter's body how to retrieve that information. He's not healing anything, exactly; with his cells, he's creating a scaffolding for Kiryuu's own healing to fill in.

"Finished," Kaname announces with satisfaction nearly an hour later, sagging a little; such extended concentration is taxing. "It's a perfect, functional replica of the original. He may not even realize losing it actually happened."

"Incredible," breathes Yuuki, wide-eyed with relief.

Just for safety's sake, the pureblood checks the sites of his previous work. In the past week, he's already shored up several vital organs, safeguarded the Hunter's brain, and now rebuilt his tongue. The only thing left Kaname can do is strengthen the quick, early repairs he made to the two breaks in Kiryuu's spine, just so they didn't heal wrong.

The pureblood almost breaks the connection, but hesitates, and then, with an illicit feeling like he ought to be looking over his shoulder, he gives into temptation and fleetingly caresses the omega's womb, whole and miraculously intact. This part of his mate's body exerts a pull on Kaname, endlessly fascinating him - it's a visible sign of Kiryuu's changes, and proof of Kaname's new reality. To see it, and almost touch it...It's ridiculous, but the idea that it might be the first home their children ever know...doubly ridiculous. Kiryuu wants no children, omegas don't often conceive in their first heat, and he's likely infertile anyway. That's his instincts talking, certainly not his logic.

Kaname shakes himself, and withdraws into his own body again. The ghost feeling of severing the connection with his cells in Kiryuu's body makes Kaname feel halved, lessened. It will fade with time, but he hates the feeling of missing something, like he's lost something important.

"There are limits to this technique, and I'm walking them," Kaname cautions Yuuki as she rewraps Zero's bandages. "The number of cells we can use is small, and a lesser vampire's body can only be pushed so far. This method is unnatural for him; it prioritizes one area at the expense of the rest of the body. I'm using it to speed up repair on the most critical injuries, and when it no longer becomes worth the strain, I will have to let the rest heal on its own."

Aido assured them all of Kiryuu's injuries would heal, eventually, but that whatever substance was fouling Kiryuu's blood was inhibiting his healing to near-human levels. The noble is still analyzing samples of Zero's blood, and they hope to determine what it is and how long it will remain in his bloodstream before breaking down.

Kaname already has a guess about what the 'drug' is. No human drug or poison could fight his pure blood and powers it bestows. There is only one substance that can do that.

Only another pureblood could have done this, and Kaname suspects the same pureblood who has been Turning enough humans to build an army and testing Kiryuu's strength as a Hunter for months.

This circumstances of the attack are puzzling, however. Why not make sure of the kill? Any pureblood should know better than leave Kiryuu alive. There were multiple attackers, easily visible from the teeth patterns in the bite marks. Was the pureblood not one of them? What kind of grudge motivated their savagery? And Kiryuu is an omega, an obvious target for rape, but he was sexually untouched. Whoever attacked him bore him a personal hatred, but not enough to sexually assault him.

He shakes his head, dismissing his speculations. Kaname's sent his agents out to search for clues;
Yuuki begins tending to the Hunter's surface injuries, removing the bandages and lapping at the wounds so her saliva can dull his pain. By now the ritual is familiar and almost calming for both of them, to be able to tend to their omega in some small way. Kaname settles back down next to Kiryuu, and pulls the covers back up over them, patiently watching and waiting.

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Zero drifts.

The dark river underneath his back, bearing him up, is cool and clean. Its sluggish current tugs at his hair and limbs, and Zero lets the waters take him.

He drifts for a long time.

Darkness above his eyes, darkness below his back. Nothing disturbs him, not questions about how he came to be here, or where he is, or where he's going. He's content to let the current float his body where it will.

He closes his eyes in the peaceful quiet. There's an echo in his ears. Caught up in listening, Zero sinks beneath the surface; the dark waters swallow him without a ripple.

"He's waking up!"

The voice is familiar, but unwelcome. Pain is pressing back into Zero's world. He longs for the river again, struggles against the pull toward the sound.

"Zero, Zero!" calls the voice.

Drawn by that voice, despite the pain, Zero settles back into his body, just for a moment, but his spirit is loosely tethered to his flesh.

"His eyes moved! Zero, Zero can you hear me?" asks a woman urgently. The voice is good. He wants to do as the voice asks, but weak as the tether is, Zero can only twitch his fingers.

"Did you see? He moved again!"

A warmth and a strong, good scent comes up close. "Zero, this is very important. We need to know who attacked you. Do you remember the attack?"

This time, Zero's fingers twitch involuntarily as the memory returns to him against his will, but it seems to make the voice happy; her warmth shifts, pressed up against his side.

"Can you tell me who it was?" the voice asks. But Zero's limbs are all weighed down, and the far away, tenuous connection to his body won't move. He can't feel much of his face, but all his body is sending him is pain, bombarding his synapses unceasingly.

"Zero, if you can't speak, would you let me drink your blood to see the memory?" The terrified fear shocks a spasm out of him, and a noise from his clenched throat. No, no, no, no more fangs.

"Just a mouthful," coaxes the woman. "And I'll be as gentle as I possibly can."

Zero is afraid, terrified, but he wants to please that voice so badly. And the dissociation from his body is helping him be less afraid. Frightened, but trusting the voice on a deep, subconscious level, he curls his fingers the tiniest bit.
The voice sounds relieved. "Just think hard on what happened, and we'll do the rest. We want the people who hurt you to be apprehended, so they can never hurt you again."

She kisses his neck, and Zero makes a little gasp of surprise. Then the wet of her tongue, soothing strokes that make the place they touch hurt less. She's right; her fangs are the smallest, gentlest pressure that part his skin and slide in smoothly. His heartbeat forces blood out of the wound, and the woman staggers back, with the sound of a muffled scream. Hurriedly, she returns to his side after a moment, and licks the wound closed, murmuring in between strokes how brave he is, how she loves him, how glad she is he's woken.

"That's good, Kiryuu," says a masculine voice, with another scent that makes him feel safe rather than scared. "You can go back to sleep."

So Zero does, diving back down to the dark river, retaking his place floating in the endless dark amid the sounds of lapping waves.

For Kaname and Yuuki, it's like the fever under which they labored for the past week has broken, dispelled by hazy lavender eyes. They can think clearly, get up, and dress properly for the first time in days. Kaname is relieved to be back to his normal self-control and spotless appearance, savoring the clear-headedness and the feeling of crisp, fresh starched shirts. Yuuki remembers to brush her hair, eats more, and sleeps through the night, but is far from her old self, still spending most of her time at Kiryuu's bedside. The separation anxiety and the fear don't go away, but they do ebb enough that the purebloods can venture further from Zero's side for short periods.

Right now, the Hunter is alone, asleep, and the Kurans are in a nearby receiving room so they can strategize without disturbing his rest. Kiryuu is not unguarded; the hallways around his room are littered with ravens and butterflies, and the black wolf is curled against his side. Should anything happen, both of them can be at his side in an instant, with plenty of forewarning.

Kiryuu is not Kaname's concern at the moment. He studies his wife's profile against the moonlit window askance, thoughtlessly straightening his right shirt cuff. The straight line of her spine and her crossed arms communicate tension and the desire not to be disturbed. The pureblood freezes when he realizes his uneasy gesture, and wraps one hand around his wrist instead to keep still.

His wife has never been an unknown quantity before; from her infancy, Kaname studied Yuuki's proclivities and pressure points with a dedication that others might find invasive (Kiryuu would probably call him creepy, he reflects with amusement). Over the years, Kaname has taken advantage of that knowledge in ways that could easily be called underhanded.

But there was always one action forbidden to Kaname, one sin he knew if committed would destroy everything between them: killing Kiryuu. Yuuki will tolerate all slights against her, but if Kaname eliminated Kiryuu she would hate him forever. Now someone has trespassed that borderline, and Kaname is not sure what will happen when Yuuki is pushed to the edge of her heart's endurance.

Yuuki's appearance this evening is making him uneasy - she hardly resembles herself. Gone are the ruffles and pastels and slight air of femininity, exchanged for a stark black pantsuit overtop a white blouse, without lace or frills. The jacket's cut is severe, emphasizing the hard line of her shoulders. Yuuki's hair is pulled back tightly into a high, militarily precise knot. Most worrying of all are the stiletto heels that could put a man's eye out, and the slash of bright red lipstick on her mouth, matching the red color of her nails. He's never, ever seen her wear this outfit before, and it eerily mirrors his own clothes. Kaname doesn't know what to make of the possibility she's learned more of his habits than he intended to teach her.
As long as Kiryuu's illness occupied her, Yuuki gave no thought to anything else, consumed by fear, guilt and the desire for his healing. With proof of his recovery, now she's had time to think about how the Hunter came to be in this state. Those people tortured and nearly killed half her heart, and purebloods love deeply, completely and without compromise or moderation. Kaname knows what he would do, if something like this were to happen to his dear wife. A pureblood's rage is a terrifying force of nature to those swept up in its path. Therefore, as much as he would like to know, he's leery of asking Yuuki what she saw in Kiryuu's blood. He's seen more of what Yuuki is capable of in the last few months than he would have believed she could contain.

"Would you say you know everyone involved with the monarchist faction?" Yuuki asks suddenly, still with her back turned.

Containing his confusion, and furiously searching for a reason Yuuki would ask such a thing, Kaname replies in as neutral a tone as he can manage, "In all likelihood, yes. Perhaps not some of the ones who hide their affiliation in public, but I make a point of knowing my own arsenal."

Yuuki uncrosses her arms, half turning toward Kaname without meeting his eyes. "I don't. I know hardly any of them. But I intend to change that, in the future. I've neglected the nobles' political struggles in the mistaken belief I could let you handle them and everything would be fine. But I'm a pureblood princess of the Kuran family, and it was foolish to believe I could stay out of things. You will teach me everything you know about how to play those games."

"As you wish," Kaname accedes slowly, regretting Yuuki's choice. It was his wish to shield his dear girl's bright nature from the grimy darkness such games create, to preserve the human Yuuki of Cross Academy and her heart born under the sun. He encouraged Yuuki to pursue other interests on purpose, assuring her that he could safeguard their interests on his own. Another failure on his part.

Kaname scrutinizes her profile again, judging the wisdom of his next words. "If I may ask, what brought you to make this decision?"

Her eyes flicker to his face, and then away again. The set expression on Yuuki's face looks unnatural.

"I will show you the memory Zero gave me - if you promise you will not go over my head, Kaname. You won't shield me from this, and I won't let you take this away from me."

Seeing no other option, Kaname agrees. Yuuki presses the nail of her forefinger into her opposite palm, drawing a single bead of blood; she's proven adept at some of the mind manipulations. She holds out her palm, offering Kaname the first taste of her blood in months. He takes her bloody palm in both hands, bringing it up to his mouth as he holds her gaze, and parting his lips, licks up the droplet.

The memory contained inside knocks him sideways, and he staggers back a step before regaining his poise.

*Kill them,* snarls the alpha. *Kill them slowly and cruelly, as they wished to kill our beautiful mate! How dare they say such things, to presume to lay hands on him, and claim to serve us!* In the back of his head, Kaname's instincts feel like a pacing tiger, raging and roaring in anger. Even the pureblood part of him feels like something is rising from the abyss of his nature, black and threshing.

"You know them?" demands Yuuki, grabbing a handful of his suit coat.
"Yes," Kaname hisses between his teeth, eyes narrowed, rapidly calculating the hows and whys and the
depth of his personal failure. He never even considered an attack planned by his own followers.
The pureblood's jaw clenches. How short-sighted! Has he become some sloppy, careless fool from
his Sleep?

Kaname sees his anger reflected in Yuuki's face, their matching red-brown eyes turning redder and
bloodier as their vampiric natures rise.

"Show me," Yuuki orders, and Kaname willingly shares the knowledge of their enemies through
his blood, taking pleasure in how decisively his wife's fangs tear his palm, and the feeling of her
mouth lapping at his blood as her red eyes look up at him.

"We can find them easily. They haven't even bothered to hide," Kaname remarks with disgust. "I
will -"

"No," Yuuki rejects, "I will find them. They think my anger is meaningless? I will teach them - all
of them - that they can't dismiss me. I may be weak, but I'm strong enough for this," she promises,
fists clenched in anger.

Looking at her unwavering, determined face, Kaname gives in. "Take Seiren with you. She can
help - she knows where to find them."

Yuuki nods, and turns on her heel to leave - but pauses.

"Zero," she says to herself, "I can't leave Zero alone."

She turns, slowly, to face Kaname, and her calculating, distrustful expression leaves him cold.
"You can't be trusted with Zero. You implied it yourself, when you didn't deny the possibility of
hurting his children because you hate him."

Kaname's tongue feels leaden. "I -" he says, stopping, trying to decide what he wants to tell her.
She's clearly torn between two competing desires, to stay or to go, and Kaname knows Kiryuu will
win out, however much she desires vengeance. He could say nothing, let her stay, and carry out
their capture himself, preserving the old order. Or…

It's difficult to speak through his dry mouth. Kaname licks his lips, trying to wet them. "I...no
longer bear ill will toward Kiryuu. And I no longer wish to harm him."

Yuuki studies him, every part of her but her eyes absolutely still. "As an omega your instincts want
to defend?"

"As a person," Kaname admits, the response reluctantly dragged out of him.

His wife puts a red painted fingernail to her lips, thinking. "You felt worried, when you knew he
was gone," she says slowly.

Yuuki's eyes meet his, staring intensely without blinking. "Will you swear to me, on the thing you
believe most holy, that you are telling the truth, and that Zero will be safe and cared for if I leave
him with you?"

Kaname swallows, uncomfortable with admitting such a thing, but knowing that telling Yuuki the
truth is the only way forward. "I swear to you, on your life and my love for you, that Kiryuu Zero
will come to no harm by my hand, and I will allow no other hand to harm him."

Yuuki studies him, in a long, drawn-out moment, and inclines her head, accepting his vow. "I will
be back as soon as I can. Don't forget what you promised me," she tells him, turning to go.

"Will you kill them?" Kaname asks.

Yuuki stills with her back to him, and the muscles tense. "Not yet."

Seiren drops from a tree to kneel at Yuuki's feet, unobtrusively allowing her to continue studying the mansion in the distance, past a tall metal fence and a rolling lawn.

A wise choice, not to draw the attention of a hunting pureblood. Yuuki is the ponderous, slow rotation of a typhoon, right before the storm condenses. Her jaw aches with the desire to bite the man hiding just beyond these petty barriers. There is no wall that can keep her out, and there is no safety for these people, not after what they have done. She will hunt them to the ends of the Earth, such is her fury.

Yuuki clings to her control with ragged, broken fingernails, wresting power away from her rage and anger. Patience, she counsels herself. It will be better if she does it this way. Killing them now would be too kind.

"What did you find, Seiren?" Yuuki asks when she's firmly leashed her pureblood and alpha instincts, and corralled her dark emotions.

Her husband's Shadow bends her neck lower, deepening her submission. "My Mistress, I found the target in the family's residential wing, but he was not alone."

Yuuki considers her plans. "Then we will wait. I require complete discretion, and I don't want anyone to know we took him until the time is right. Return, and when you can, capture him and bring him to me, without being seen," she orders.

Seiren indicates her obedience, and flashes away as quickly as she came. Yuuki is relying on Seiren for this task; her noble's aura does not attract the attention Yuuki's would, and she's far more experienced. Yuuki suspects that if she took up the task herself, she would kill Zero's attackers in the fury of her attack, incapable of gentling herself to let them live.

Thankfully for Yuuki's self-control, the pureblood doesn't have to wait long. At her feet, Seiren deposits a writhing, blindfolded bundle, shouts muffled behind a gag, with the satisfaction of a cat presenting a mouse to her owner. At Yuuki's gesture, Seiren removes the gag.

"How dare you lay hands on me! Don't you know who I am!" shouts the vampire Zero identified as the leader. Yuuki doesn't care to learn their names, and has begun referring to Zero's attackers in her head with the names he assigned to them.

Dead men don't need names.

"Don't you know who I am?" she asks sweetly, letting her pureblood aura free just a little.

The vampire freezes, and when Seiren unties his blindfold, his face turns worshipful. "Kuran-hime," he sighs, voice full of adoration and eagerness. "Are you here to kill me?" he asks hopefully.

Yuuki wants vomit in disgust. If she did kill him, she's certain he would be pleased. "No, I'm not," she says. "I'm here to make sure you pay for what you've done."

His face becomes puzzled, with an edge of worry. "You aren't pleased?"
"You betrayed Kuran-sama and I," she tells him, letting her anger show.

The leader's face falls, and his eyes grow wet. Is this fanatic going to cry? While the display disgusts Yuuki further, the deep anger simply burns hotter. If she had rebuked him for harming Zero, she's certain the leader would have been pleased instead.

"And traitors get what they deserve," the pureblood tells him, driving the knife deeper.

The leader recoils, shaking his head in denial.

"I did it all for you!" the vampire insists, before Seiren replaces the gag.

"You did nothing for me. What you did, you did for yourself," Yuuki cuts in. Let him turn that over in his mind as she hunts down his fellows.

The lackey cries snotty, terrified tears. The big vampire sweats and stares at her in confusion, like a dumb pig going to the slaughter. The smarmy one Yuuki has to break first, cutting down his obnoxious confidence one word at a time, until he sits hollow-eyed, wordless throat working nervously. The calm one has some dignity, at least, taking his captivity without that insulting surprise some of the others have shown, and willingly allowing Seiren to bind him.

Having them thrown into the cells under Rosehill's state palace does nothing to satisfy her anger, her desire to tear them apart after she brutalizes them, but Yuuki keeps to her plan with raw will and tenacity.

Soon, the pureblood promises herself. She won't give these disgusting men one ounce of satisfaction from what they've done.

Yuuki's captives shift in fear when she smiles at them, mind imagining their reactions to what punishment will come. She'll get her blood soon enough.

"I trust you were successful?" Kaname remarks, looking up from his desk, somewhat surprised not to see Yuuki return soaked in blood.

His wife smiles tightly; there is no real warmth to it. Stalking forward, her heels sink into the carpets, and she bends down to tuck a lock of silver hair behind Kiryuu's ear.

"Should he be out of bed?" she questions, a reprimand waiting on her tongue, gesturing at Zero's form laid out on the chaise lounge, a new addition to his office.

Kaname lets his papers fall, giving her his full attention. "Aido stopped by while you were out. As long as he can lie flat, it doesn't matter what surface he's on."

Yuuki hums in reply, and pulls the blankets a little higher. "Let's talk outside. I don't want to disturb him."

Sighing, the pureblood gets up, forms a familiar to keep watch, and follows Yuuki down the hall, asking a nearby servant to make sure they are not disturbed. Leaning against the windowsill, Kaname watches Yuuki pace back and forth, her palms rubbing her arms like she's scrubbing something off them.

Finally, Kaname can't stand the wait any longer, his patience warring with his need to know whatever news Yuuki brings, good or ill. "Did something happen?"
Yuuki raises her eyebrow, well aware of Kaname's uncharacteristic lapse of control. "Nothing bad. Everything went perfectly. We have five new guests in our cells. And Seiren was not seen." She returns to her pacing.

"Then why are you upset?" he ventures, in as inoffensive a tone as he can manage. Kaname can feel the current of violence sitting just underneath Yuuki's skin through their bloodbond, and he is wary of disturbing it. He's impressed by the restraint she's shown, with such volcanic emotions running through her heart.

Fingers tightening on her arms, Yuuki paces more forcefully. "They were disgusting. The way they look at me - at us. No one should look at another human being like that. Like some kind of god. I meant to interrogate them, but I couldn't stand to look at them for another second, so I came to see Zero instead."

"And all I could think about," Yuuki continues, "when I looked at them, was 'this is what Zero saw as he was dying. And then I thought about how nice their blood would look pooling on the floor, and splattered all over my face. How hot and satisfying it would be. It was - difficult, to let them be taken alive."

Yuuki looks away; there are surely bruises on her arms now. "I am frustrated by my hate," she bites out.

"You are a pureblood," Kaname observes, as though that explains everything. To him, it does.

Yuuki grimaces, then quickly says, "What did Aido-sempai tell you."

Kaname steeps his hands in his lap. The good news first, he decides. "Aido believes our Consort will make a full recovery, given enough time. The poison should work its way out of his body in the next week, albeit not without side effects."

"And?" Yuuki asks, sensing the unfinished news.

"His healing won't return to normal for some time, especially since I confused and stressed his body by using my cells. After consulting with the doctor, they have ordered Kiryuu to abstain from heavy physical activity for at least four months. And Hunting may be unwise for much longer."

Yuuki exhales, covering her eyes with one hand. "Okay. He won't like it, but as long as Zero gets better...as long as he's okay..." He shoulders shake once, suppressing a sob. Kaname politely pretends not to have seen her calm crack.

The pureblood feels his face harden. "Aido also had some interesting things he learned when he analyzed Kiryuu's blood."

Calmer now, Yuuki cocks her head, indicating she's listening.

"There were two substances in his blood. The second one was an injected sedative. But the first one," he says grimly, "was a poison, distilled from pure blood."

His wife seethes, eyebrows drawing down in rage, fists clenching at her sides until the skin is bloodless. "How dare they!" she grinds out.

Kaname's own anger surges in echo, their twin rages rebounding down the bloodbond to reinforce each other. He can feel the cold desire for retribution and the purplish bruised hate in both their breasts, and the prospect of hunting with his mate thrills Kaname, drawing a blade of a smile from his lips.
"It was almost certainly Shirabuki. The family is known for producing drugs and poisons synthesized in their own bodies. And she has shown interest in Zero several times before now."

Kaname curses his incompetence once more, scalded by being shown the increasing depth of his lapse. Shirabuki's visits were a warning sign flashing right in front of his nose. With adequate warning, he should have predicted that Shirabuki's interest in their Consort boded ill.

Yuuki's face turns toward him, the slow movement of a predator stalking prey. "When was this," she asks, enunciating every word slowly and distinctly.

Kaname freezes, the motion nearly invisible, realizing that his little deal with Kiryuu meant that Yuuki did not know of the Hunter's encounters with Shirabuki. Keeping his expression as calm as possible, Kaname deliberately relaxes against the sill. "Shirabuki contacted Kiryuu with the intention of convincing him to spy on us." He almost withholds the last part. "Twice."

The slow boil of anger, easily perceptible through the bloodbond.

Yuuki shakes her head. "I should have done this after we discussed having children with Zero. Another one of my mistakes that has cost him," she remarks. In their bond, resolution forms alongside the anger.

Yuuki fists her hand in Kaname's sleeve, and drags him into the nearest empty room. Kaname must follow along, or else tear his suit coat. The feeling in his chest is a novelty, and the pureblood is slightly distracted examining it before Yuuki pushes him down into a chair. Trepidation, he decides, without the lingering fear of loss.

His wife turns to face him, arms crossed and face hard. "You need to tell me everything you've ever done to Zero. I want to respect your privacy, but you use social politeness to keep people from asking questions you don't want to answer. And Zero would protect you, because he knows I love you, so I can't ask him. I can't let you keep your relationship with him secret, because you just use that to hide the ways you've hurt him," Yuuki announces, not quite confident enough to issue an ultimatum, but less wary than ever before of offending him.

Kaname would approve, except he's suddenly trying very hard not to sweat. Yuuki is not going to like what she hears at all. Perhaps he could lie?

"No lying, and no lying by omission. I will fact-check," Yuuki warns, as though she'd read his mind.

She's been married to him too long, Kaname decides, if she can read him so easily through their bloodbond. Kaname swallows. He's not nervous, he reminds himself. Merely uneasy, because he knows Yuuki will be...very unhappy with him.

His mouth is dry again, but Kaname begins to speak anyway, haltingly at first, carefully repeating only the facts. He keeps secrets like other people keep treasures - sealed deep and forbidden to anyone except himself. It makes Kaname feel irrationally naked, and he averts his eyes from her face before too long, finding it easiest to speak to the ground at her feet, as though he were simply listing his sins to thin air. Yuuki prompts him at first, and pries for details if he glosses over an incident too much. Kaname finds it's better to give more detail over less, so Yuuki has to ask for as little as possible.

As he speaks, his wife's face goes stonier and stonier. Hurt, disappointment, pain, and a trace of aghast horror leak through the bond, before Yuuki shuts her side. After weeks of the bond freely open between them, the implied unhappiness is its own rebuke. Her attention never wavers, no
matter how long Kaname talks, and her distress never weakens.

When he trails to a stop, voice gone a little hoarse and daylight creeping across the carpet, Yuuki asks in monotone, "Is that all?"

For some reason, Kaname feels embarrassed, though he quickly covers the feeling. "All of the major incidents, and illustrative minor ones. Repeating the full number of minor ones would be tendious."

"Tedious," Yuuki repeats flatly. She closes her eyes, bowing her head and rubbing her eyes like she's smoothing away tears. "I can't believe Zero could stand being near me. It would have been better for him if he had left. How can he stand the sight of us now? How could ever agree to marry us? How could he ever lo -." She clicks her teeth shut. The bloodbond speaks of guilt, and despair.

Kaname rushes into the fray, anxious to reassure her. "I was responsible, Yuuki. Don't blame yourself. There was nothing you could have done to stop me. You had no information, and that was by my design," he tries to convince her.

But she just shakes her head, as she waves away Kaname's words. "You had better keep your promise to me. No more of this, Kaname. No more," she tells him, willing away her angry tears.

Kaname's jaw tightens, reluctant to say anything further.

The two purebloods remain in silence, absorbing the impact of Kaname's confession.

"We will need to inform the Hunters of this incident," Kaname eventually remarks, moving back to practicalities, glad for any excuse to move away from self-examination, shifting his weight to his other hip.

Yuuki looks at him in horror. "How am I supposed to tell Cross that Zero almost died. He trusted me, and I -." Her shoulders slump, and she hides her face in her hands again.

Kaname gently rests his hand on her shoulder in sympathy.

(He isn't allowed to touch either one of his spouses that night….

...It's lonely.)

Chapter End Notes

The outline for this chapter included the phrase 'Yuuki and Kaname have a come to Jesus confession about Zero' and I just wanted to show you the kind of author you're dealing with. That is all.

I will be traveling oversees during the end of May and beginning of June, and I can't bring my laptop, so the break between chapters will likely be longer. But I should be able to post one more chapter before I leave, bringing this arc to an end. I'll be writing with pen and paper after that, old school!

Next chapter, in part two, we get to the fun parts. REVENGE!
"What do you think, Yuuki-hime?" Ruka asks, stepping back from the vanity desk where Yuuki is seated on a velvet stool.

Yuuki traces her finger down the reverse braid running down the back of her skull. It reminds her of a spine, and lends her face a certain severity and hardness.

"It's perfect," Yuuki says, her mouth pulling into a smile. The large oval mirror reflects it back to her; Yuuki considers the effect. The dark red-purple coloring her lips makes her fair skin even paler, and draws the eye to her shockingly white teeth and fangs. Yuuki decides she likes it.

"Thank you, Ruka-sempai," the pureblood says, getting up to go, and smoothing down her skirts. "I appreciate your help. You're much better at this than me."

Ruka shakes her head. "You're a tomboy at heart, but you've learned more than you think. All of this" - she gestures at the brushes and colors on the counter - "is just a kind of art. When we master it, we create the person other people see. And what people see, they believe."

Ruka bows deeply at the waist. "A woman's armor is paint and powder. You're wearing your armor, Yuuki-hime. Don't let anyone convince you otherwise."

Yuuki smiles again, the genuine expression conveying her respect.

"I won't," she promises.

The doorman of the Ichihara family stumbles back, and only hitting the mansion's wall keeps him from falling to the floor.
"Gather the household," Yuuki orders, ignoring the doorman and sweeping past him into the foyer. "All of them, down to the last servant. I will speak to them."

The butler, nearby, nods and leaves at a terrified run. Yuuki clasps her black-gloved hands together, and waits. She is keenly conscious of the picture she presents, a single lone figure in the atrium, back straight and completely still.

Slowly, the people filter in, arriving in hurried twos and threes as the butler informs everyone who crosses his path of Yuuki's order. The servants and other workers remain completely silent, staring at her in fascinated terror. Many of these lesser vampires have probably never seen a pureblood up close.

Yuuki bears their eyes with the ease she imagines Kaname would feel, confident that paying attention to her appearance has lent her enough gravitas to pull this off. The dark, nearly black purple of her dress shows well against her pale skin and the silver jewelry she chose. Purple for dignity, and a reminder of her royalty.

Yuuki breathes deep, counting to ten as she inhales and exhales. She must be completely confident. No hesitation, no mistakes. She chose this house, the home of the current chairman of the Senate, as her first destination on purpose.

Chairman Ichihara, the current leader of the Senate, is her husband's chief rival for power - not than any lesser vampire can really rival the Ancestor of the Kuran for either power or skill. Nevertheless, after the death of Ichijo Asato at his grandson's hands, Ichihara is now the most powerful non-pureblood vampire. Before he rose to power, the Ichihara family were a middle-tier noble family that had neither ancestral wealth nor prestige; all of their current good fortune comes from relying on their eldest son's charisma, intelligence, and political savvy.

Speaking of the chairman, there he is now - strolling casually into the room, still slightly out of breath from how quickly he ran to get here, but doing an almost perfect job of hiding it. Yuuki wants to smile, but abstains by sheer force of will. She's beginning to understand why Kaname likes cultivating his air of 'intimidating pureblood.'

Ichihara is a handsome man, even slightly past his prime. The noble has a powerful frame with strong shoulders, and presents absolute confidence in his every movement. With his thick black hair turning grey at the temples, slicked back tastefully with a hint of product, and the power of his dark gaze, Yuuki can see why the man is the object of many a noblewoman's admiration. Chairman Ichihara, however, is notorious for having remained persistently unmarried, despite his eligibility as a bachelor.

Kaname suspects it has something to do with his other unusual trait - Chairman Ichihara is a beta, making his younger alpha brother the head of the Ichihara family. While not a strict rule, most high positions of authority in the vampire world are held by alphas. Alphas are expected to be more assertive and unwilling to follow others, and generally more competent, more ambitious, and more suitable for leadership. That Chairman Ichihara has attained the second most powerful position of authority in the vampire world speaks to a strength and competence so great even ingrained dynamic stereotypes could not overlook it.

"Kuran-hime, welcome to my home," the noble greets her, bowing exactly as deep as propriety demands, and not a hair more, and then straightening with dignity, his eyes raised to watch her the whole time.

"Chairmen Ichihara," Yuuki replies evenly, giving no hint of her purpose.
Ichihara doesn't let that uncertainty throw him. His voice is smooth and his manner remains unruffled. "I have gathered my household, as you requested." The vampire gestures toward the mass of people behind him. "We eagerly await the pleasure of your words."

Yuuki's mouth twitches slightly at the nimble lying flattery. The Senate dislikes anything that threatens its power, and the purebloods are the most threatening force of all. But she lets the lie stand. Yuuki has other business today.

Inclining her head a tiny bit, Yuuki sweeps forward, making sure her skirts flare dramatically behind her. Kaname likes flashy entrances. "I am here to issue an invitation, Chairman - and a warning."

Yuuki raises her voice, assuming her pureblood's mantle of authority and power. "You are requested to attend an execution at Rosehill Palace on the evening of the last day of the month."

The chairman is experienced enough he doesn't openly show his surprise, and merely bows again. "May I ask what deserved execution I will witness?"

"No," Yuuki replies sharply, "you may not."

There is a flicker of unease in Ichihara's face for a split second; he thinks he is being ordered to attend his own murder.

Yuuki feels an ugly satisfaction; this man has caused her family enough trouble she doesn't care if he spends the next month in fear.

"And to the rest of you," Yuuki continues, still using her resonant public voice, turning to the crowd in just the right way so her skirts swirl elegantly around her ankles. She walks forward a few steps, letting her eyes skim over the closest vampires. They avert their eyes or cringe, trying to make themselves smaller and avoid her attention.

"Know this: no one is to harm Kiryuu Zero. Those who break this order I will kill. If someone orders another person to harm Kiryuu Zero, I will kill them both. If someone assists those people, I will kill them too. If someone knows of that person's plans, but says nothing, they will also die."

Yuuki lets her emotions bleed through her regal mask - she is not Kaname, and she cannot mimic his cold, deliberate anger. Yuuki feels intensely, and her emotions drive her actions, for good or bad. Let them know that for Zero she will not feel even a grain of hesitation or mercy. Let them see the rage frozen on the cusp of explosion, and the certainty she will keep her promises.

"If someone ever manages to kill Kiryuu Zero, I will not just kill that person. First I will destroy the cause they loved, and everything they worked for, and take away everything they valued. And then I will kill their family, down to the most distant relative, and their accomplices' families, and then their accomplices, and finally I will kill them, once they see with their own eyes what they have done."

Absolute, terrified silence.

"This is your only warning, and this is my binding promise," Yuuki vows, and then turns on her heel, pushing open the house's gargantuan doors without touching them in a display of her powers, and then slamming them shut behind her.

The pureblood nods, satisfied. Calling a cloud of butterfly familiars to surround her, she moves on, the home of the most powerful noble in the monarchist faction her next destination.
Now the whole vampire world will see what Kuran Yuuki's anger really means.

Throwing back his head, Kaname laughs in delight. Is his lovely, dear wife not wicked and terrible in her own right, a true daughter of his blood as she shows the whole world her seed of dark desires?

Caressing the head of his raven, and still chuckling a little, the pureblood decides that tonight is too enjoyable to go back to work. Even with Yuuki still terribly angry at him, his mood remains buoyant. Perhaps a stroll in the gardens will please him instead.

But when Kaname passes by Yuuki's door as he goes to change, he hesitates. His wife has left Kiryuu in his care once more - purely out of necessity, with extreme reluctance after Kaname's confession of his offenses against Kiryuu, and only after demanding Kaname renew his vows to protect their Consort.

Perhaps he will just look in on the Hunter before he goes out for his walk. Yes, Kaname reassures himself, that's a sensible thing to do. Throwing a glance to the left and to the right down the hall, Kaname leans on the handle and quickly opens the door, shutting it quietly and padding into the bedroom.

Lying next to the heavily bandaged Hunter on the bed, Nightshade lifts his head from his paws, and sweeps his tail back and forth in welcome. Yuuki's butterfly fans its wings on the bedside table, watching over its creator's mate in her absence. Only Kiryuu doesn't stir, lying unconscious on his back in the center of the bed; he hasn't woken since he gave Yuuki the memories of his attack. Looking down his his Consort, Kaname marks some signs of healing. The Hunter's wounds are still ugly and open, but there is a little more color in the pallid blue-white of his skin.

Duty satisfied, Kaname reminds himself that he can leave Kiryuu alone now. The pureblood lingers instead, watching Kiryuu's chest slowly rise and fall. The quiet and calm of the room is pleasant, now that the stifling, deathly air of a tomb has lifted. Breathing in the smell of his omega, Kaname's omnipresent, subconscious anxiety of being away from their mate for even a single second lessens, and a knot in his chest relaxes. His alpha purrs happily in his chest. Perhaps he can stay a little longer, the pureblood thinks.

Kaname loses track of time, letting his thoughts wander as he watches the fascinating flutter of Kiryuu's long silver eyelashes in sleep, and listens to the steady noise of his breathing. He's so deeply intent that the pureblood startles when Nightshade whines quietly, ears pinning back. Kiryuu's skin is warming against the cold wet of the wolf's nose, and his breathing is beginning to quicken.

It's probably nothing more than a bad dream, but Kaname casts a glance at Yuuki's butterfly. She's doing so magnificently, and he doesn't want her to return home for a false alarm. So Kaname blocks the familiar's view of Kiryuu with his body, and holds out his hand to let the butterfly climb into his palm. The soft little brushes of its feet tickle, and Kaname smiles at it, imagining Yuuki watching on the other end.

"I'll sit with Kiryuu for a while. Would you mind watching the halls?"

The butterfly beats its black wings faster, and hovers above Kaname's palm. Yuuki's fragile work of art. Kaname politely lets the familiar out of the bedroom, and closes the door after it.

Just in time. Kaname can hear Kiryuu starting to moan in the bedroom, and the Hunter is struggling feebly against the sheets when he comes back to the doorway. Kaname freezes, hovering
indecisively. Perhaps he should call the doctor, or Aido, or Sasaki to tend to Kiryuu?

Nightshade whines louder, and Kaname's body makes his choice for him. The pureblood is beside Kiryuu in three long strides. Pushing his hand under silver bangs and resting his fingers on Kiryuu's skin, the pureblood's brow furrows; the heat radiating off the Hunter is definitely a fever. Not high enough to be dangerous, but still concerning.

Underneath his palm, the Hunter twists, as though uncomfortable or in pain, and shakes his head, murmuring low under his breath. Something Aido told the pureblood catches at the edges of a memory.

"The poison," Kaname realizes, smoothing back silver hair from Kiryuu's forehead. "Your body is starting to purge the poison."

Kiryuu whimpers and starts to thrash, his trembling limbs smacking weakly into Nightshade's body.

The pureblood fears Kiryuu will reopen his wounds again, and reaches out to gently restrain the Hunter. But the angle is poor, and Kaname's attempts have little effect. Clicking his tongue, Kaname urges Nightshade off the bed, hoping that the larger space will make his task easier. The wolf whimpers, but obeys with his tail tucked between his legs. Kaname takes pity on his familiar and dismisses it into ether, still occupied with Kiryuu, who has tangled himself in the sheets.

Again, Kaname thinks of summoning the doctor to care for Kiryuu. But Aido told him that nothing could be done to help, and Kiryuu would simply have to be left alone to let his body cleanse itself. Such was the potency of a pureblood's poison.

What to do?

Kaname throws a look at the doorway. Yuuki will be gone until daybreak. Her familiar is outside. The servants know better than to come near here. Visitors will be turned away. Kiryuu will not wake.

No one will see him.

Very, very carefully, Kaname puts aside his jacket, rolls up his sleeves, takes off his shoes, pulls down the comforter, draws back the sheet, and slips underneath the blankets with Kiryuu.

The Hunter, exhausted and snarled in his own blankets, has fought himself into surrender, and his chest heaves as he try to regain his breath. Gently, Kaname untwists the sheets from around Kiryuu's pale, bandaged limbs, and straightens his body again.

He should stop there, but part of Kaname wants more, even without the alpha urging him on in the back of his mind. He watches the doorway again, warily, as though someone is waiting to catch him committing some crime.

No one is there, he reassures himself. The pureblood is alone with Kiryuu.

Kaname rearranges the pillows against the headboard so they'll be more comfortable to lie against, and edges further down under the blankets, propping his head up on one hand to watch Kiryuu. But Kaname still carefully maintains a gap on the bed between Kiryuu and himself that he refuses to cross.

This arrangement is fine for a while. But Kiryuu makes small noises and his eyes flicker rapidly behind his eyelids. He isn't sleeping well, and his distress is only growing.
"Help mate, says the alpha. Why do you deny that you care for him?"

Kaname flinches, grimacing at the thought although no one but him can hear it.

"I don't care for him. I respect him, but I merely tolerate him."

"When he hurt, you hurt too. That is caring."

Kaname struggles with himself. The edifice of hate and malice he built is crumbling beneath his feet into dust - as it has been for months. He chose to ignore the increasingly precarious structure, a stone castle turned to a castle built of sand, being worn away by the waves, but Kaname can't turn away any longer. Kiryuu Zero has reached inside him and hollowed it out with his gentle hands and kind eyes.

"Perhaps he is more like one of my followers," Kaname allows. "I care for their well-being too."

"If you lost them, it would only hurt for a little while. When you thought mate might be dead, you knew it would hurt forever, says the alpha. It made you afraid."

"I feared for Yuuki," he objects.

"You thought about never being able to see him smile at you again."

Kaname's mouth hangs open inelegantly, and he almost gets out of bed and leaves the room in angry refusal. Then his body goes slack, and he runs a rueful hand through his hair. Kaname hates being caught out, even in front of himself.

"I suppose Kiryuu is a little closer to me than I thought."

The alpha is dissatisfied, but it lets the statement stand.

Kaname sighs, and a noise at his elbow draws his attention back to Kiryuu, who is beginning to struggle again. The Hunter is so weak that he's doing little more than batting at his blankets and making little mewls.

"You really are just like a kitten," Kaname says, and he hates the way his voice is so gentle and fond, like the voice he uses just for Yuuki.

Something gives way deep inside him, something old and diseased collapses, and it feels so natural to cross that last little space between them, and gather Kiryuu up in his arms. The Hunter has lost whatever weight he regained, and feels entirely too light on top of his chest. Kaname tucks Kiryuu's head against his shoulder, and frowns at the tremors wracking the Hunter's whole body.

"You'll be alright, Kiryuu. You have to take me Hunting again - I haven't found anything else as relaxing to do during my free time."

The Hunter stirs, moaning.

"I hope you're happy. I threw myself out of a third story window on your behalf. And I embarrassed myself quite thoroughly in front of a roomful of human businessmen by running out without an explanation. I'll have to think of a suitably tragic excuse, so they look bad if they complain."

Kaname begins to stroke his Consort's hair, enjoying the sensation of soft sleekness slipping through his fingers. Even when he hated Kiryuu, that silver hair always made him envious.
Kaname is physically flawless - he's a pureblood - but Kiryuu's hair was far more unique than Kaname's dark red-brown. Only the Hunter's strange lavender eyes were more fascinating than his hair.

"I remember...when I was a child - young, young enough to be pitied - there was a kitten in one of the refugee camps. White, with one blue eye and one green. It was a friendly little thing, and everyone loved to pet it."

The pureblood's hand stills, and his eyes go distant. Unconsciously, he pulls Kiryuu against his chest a little tighter. "It would let everyone pet it, except for me. Animals hate purebloods. They fear us more than anything. I think sometimes they're more perceptive than humans. Running from a predator in human skin is the only sensible response."

"I had never petted a cat before. No cat would let me touch it. Everyone said they were soft, softer than anything. I was so envious. I wanted to know what softness felt like."

Kaname tucks his chin into Kiryuu's silver hair, and his voice grows quiet. "So one day, before it could run away from me, I held it down with my powers and made the kitten let me pet it. It really was soft. It was so afraid. I could feel its little heart beating under my hand. When I let it go, it clawed my hand and ran away. And it ran away every time it saw me after that, hissing and spitting. The humans got suspicious. I had to leave the camp."

The pureblood shakes himself out of his memories. "I don't know why I thought of that. I haven't thought of that cat in millennia. Foolish."

And for a long while, Kaname lets himself think of only the present.

Kiryuu grows more restless. He moans more often, louder, and his face becomes creased with stress and hurt. Destroying the poison lingering in his body cannot be easy or painless.

"There, there, poor child. This will pass soon," Kaname murmurs over Kiryuu's noise, stroking his silver hair again. "So one day, before it could run away from me, I held it down with my powers and made the kitten let me pet it. It really was soft. It was so afraid. I could feel its little heart beating under my hand. When I let it go, it clawed my hand and ran away. And it ran away every time it saw me after that, hissing and spitting. The humans got suspicious. I had to leave the camp."

The tremors begin to shake Kiryuu's whole body, in waves that run from head to toe. Kaname doesn't know what Kiryuu is seeing behind lavender eyes, but it must be violent and fearful, from the way his face tightens and his eyes flicker violently.

When Kiryuu's eyes tear up, and his skin goes searing hot, Kaname knows the poison is peaking. The heat means Kiryuu's body is fighting with everything it has to clean out his blood. Kaname is left with a crying, sweaty omega trying to tear himself loose from his arms with strength he can't afford to waste. When his omega isn't panting with his body's heat, he's covered in cold sweats with his teeth chattering next to Kaname's ear. Kaname can feel it when Kiryuu's muscles cramp - the Hunter's whole body goes stiff, then when they relax Kiryuu tries to shake himself apart instead.

"No, please, I can't," sobs Kiryuu against his neck. Kaname's never seen Kiryuu cry, and the thought that it was Shirabuki who brought him so low with her poisons drives him into a high rage.

"It's not real, sweet boy," he reassures Kiryuu.

An idea strikes him. "Go back to sleep, and dream gentle dreams," Kaname orders, using his power
of command. Perhaps when Kiryuu is vulnerable, it will have more effect.

Without Kiryuu awake to fight it, the command seems to work. The Hunter's face lightens, and his movements slow. Against Kaname's ear, the puffs of hot breath are breezes instead of gusts.

Kaname strokes down his Consort's spine, long firm strokes, letting his alpha's simple pleasure at helping their mate flow through him.

"I've been a poor alpha, haven't I? If one of my followers had treated their omega like I treated you, I would have censured them long ago, or perhaps had them quietly murdered. I promised to protect and cherish you at our wedding. I promised you honor and devotion. I lied to you then. But you knew that."

Settling against Kaname's shoulder, Kiryuu sighs. What is he dreaming of?

"Good boy, Zero. You're doing so well." The words slip out unconsciously, and Kaname freezes.

But Kiryuu just cuddles closer, and in the throatiest, most plaintive tone Kaname's ever heard, moans, "Alpha," right against his ear.

Kaname is suddenly hyper-aware that he has an armful of sleek, attractive omega, sprawled on top of his body.

He's never been painfully hard so fast in his entire life.

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Zero doesn't like the river. The river is scary.

Sometimes it's made of lava, and it burns horribly. Sometimes it's like liquid ice, and it slices down to his bones. There are scary monsters in it who try to catch him and eat him, and their teeth and claws hurt.

Zero doesn't like the river. He had to swim in it, until the island came. It lifted his body out of the water, and gave him a dry place to lie on, away from the pain and hurt.

Zero likes the island a lot. It makes him feel safe. It's warm, but not hot. It smells so nice. It's soft and firm all at once. Zero likes to push his face into it, and curl up tight so the monsters can't snatch him away.

He sighs happily, and nuzzles his cheek against the ground again. Then he blinks in confusion. There are shoes in front of his nose. He's not wearing shoes.

Zero tries to think around this problem. Someone not-him is wearing shoes? Someone else?

There's someone else on the island now? That can't be right. Only Zero can be here.

Zero stares at the shoes, but they don't go away, so he tilts his head to look up. A woman, with light hair caught in a braid, wearing a hood.

A hood?

His breath hisses out. The Ancestor of the Hunters?

Zero scrambles upright, nearly falling off the tiny island until Honored Grandmother catches him by the arm and steadies him.
"My apologies for disturbing you so suddenly," she says, with the same compassionate eyes he remembers from his wedding.

Zero stares at her. "This is some kind of dream. A near-death experience. This can't be real."

The Ancestress shakes her head. "This dream is as real as any thought you've had, Zero. It happened, and existed, but not in a tangible way."

The Hunter is a little too ill for existentialism and complicated philosophy, and keeps watching her with wide eyes.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to confuse you," she says, genuine in her apology. "I have waited a long time before I could see you, my beloved child. Even now," she says regretfully, "I cannot stay long."

Zero lets his mind work, trying to understand what her presence here means. "You said you would come to me, if I needed you."

The Ancestress nods, giving Zero a warm smile. "Yes. I didn't mean to take so long. The connection was more difficult to forge than I anticipated. I had to wait until now, when you were most vulnerable, to reach out to you. But now that we both know the path, we can meet again."

"When you said your power could begin to awaken in me," Zero says, "what did you mean? Why is my power becoming so unstable?" he asks, desperation leaking into the last few words. The mystery has gnawed on him these past months as the instability increased, and the Hunter became reluctant to depend on his own power.

His Ancestor's face becomes serious. "That's why I needed to speak with you. You've already noticed the increase in the strength of your Hunter abilities. But I believe that what you are experiencing is more than that."

"Vampires of very pure blood - you call them nobles - inherit special abilities from their pureblooded Ancestors. Your friend Aido's ice manipulation, for example."

Zero raises an eyebrow at calling Aido his friend, and the Ancestor of the Hunters half-smiles, before returning to her explanation.

"The Hunters carry my bloodline, but since they cannot process blood for energy, they can only access the weakest of my abilities. Now that you are a full vampire, and you carry very pure Hunter blood, I think you might be on the verge of awakening one of my special abilities, derived from my blood."

"What should I expect?" Zero asks. He's uncomfortable with the notion of his body and power coming to resemble a born vampire even more - not that there's more than a few scraps of human left in him, thanks to what's between his thighs - but he needs answers, and he knows that Honored Grandmother means him no harm.

The Ancestress shakes her head. "I can't know exactly what might happen. Some nobles inherit variations of a pureblood's ability, rather than a perfect copy. If I tell you what to expect, I might be giving you bad information and you could miss the real signs. I want you to see things as they are, not see what you are expecting to see. I will tell you that none of my abilities, if suddenly awakened, will harm anyone except you."

Zero's jaw tightens, but he accepts the assurance with a murmur of agreement.
"You need to go now," says the Ancestress, peering at the river boiling around them. "Close your eyes, and think about waking up."

Zero nods, and starts to follow her instructions - then she catches him by the sleeve, an earnest expression on her face.

"I meant it, when I said I was proud of you, Kiryuu Zero."

Zero's throat closes up, and his eyes feel wet. "You said my children would be marvels, if I chose to bear them," Zero blurts out, curiosity and the sudden surge of emotions breaking his self-control.

The Ancestor of the Hunters smiles, and shakes her head. "Your Yuuki is right. The decision of whether or not to have children is yours alone, and I don't want that knowledge to influence you one way or the other. Chose what is best for you, Zero. Right now, your heart is uncertain and afraid. If you decide you might want children, then ask me your question again, and I will answer."

"Then I will see you again?" asks Zero.

"Of course," the Ancestress says, smiling again. "When you need me, I will come."

Zero groans, and twitches - and then he freezes, because the tiniest movements are agony. Even breathing brings hot pain, and Zero concentrates for long minutes on finding which way to inhale so it hurts the least.

Steady, shallow breaths, Zero reminds himself. Whatever he's laying on smells really nice, the Hunter notices absently.

Now that he's thinking about it, it's also moving up and down. Kind of like the bed is breathing. It's probably a bed, since it's so comfy. Zero could open his eyes to look, but then it would hurt again.

This floaty feeling is really relaxing, Zero thinks, half-asleep, as someone starts petting his hair. The Hunter goes boneless, enjoying the sensation.

Wait, someone petting his hair? Zero almost panics, but then he realizes it must be Yuuki. That's fine, he thinks, and relaxes again with a sigh.

Big, long-fingered hands comb gently through his hair and lull him back towards sleep. Zero's still very tired and not ready to deal with the pain in his body or how he got this way yet, and he willingly allows the gentle touch to pull him deeper into rest, ignoring the niggling feeling in the back of his mind.

"That's right," murmurs a deep voice that rumbles underneath his body, through his bones, "rest easy, little Hunter."

Suddenly, Zero is completely awake, and with horror he yanks his head up to stare at Kuran Kaname's shocked face.

Who Zero is lying on. And who is wearing red silk pajamas. Really soft red silk pajamas. Which Zero knows because he's put his face on them. Did Zero mention he's in bed with Kuran Kaname?

Zero can feel his face flaming, and the same mortification reflected in Kuran's face. He almost wants to laugh at the whole situation - he's never seen Kuran this surprised and embarrassed before.
But Zero really shouldn't have moved that fast, because now there are shooting pains in his neck and head, and he collapses back down onto Kuran's chest, trying to breathe around the pain and the dizziness.

"Are you alright, Kiryuu?" Kuran asks, not quite able to hide his hesitation. Count on Kuran to try and pretend their situation is completely normal.

Zero's cheek is pressing right against Kuran's pectoral muscle. "Yes," Zero wheezes in a strangled tone.

Kuran swallows; Zero can see his throat bob. "Good," he says.

Why is the pureblood being so nice? Shouldn't he have pushed Zero off by now? Kuran is acting almost concerned about him, and it's weird. But Zero doesn't have time to wonder - the needs of his body are making themselves known.

"Water," Zero rasps. He's so thirsty.

"Blood," Kuran disagrees, slicing open his wrist with a claw.

Zero doesn't have the strength to lift his head after his sudden shock, so Kuran has to turn him over, brace Zero's head against the pureblood's shoulder, and hold his wrist up to Zero's mouth so he can lap messily at the wound.

But Kuran's right; the blood restores him a little, and some of his aches recede. Thinking a little more clearly, Zero lies back and allows Kuran to arrange him in a more comfortable position. He's still on top of the pureblood, but Zero is rapidly running out of energy to be offended with. He almost died - sleeping on top of Kuran isn't worth getting upset over compared to that. And Kuran really is comfy - Zero smacks down his inner monologue and concentrates on thinking sensible thoughts.

"Yuuki?" the Hunter croaks.

"Out on important business. Otherwise she rarely leaves this room," the vampire replies smoothly, his hands raised as though he doesn't know where to put them. Kuran settles them gingerly on Zero's belly, slowly enough that Zero could probably protest. He doesn't, and Kuran awkwardly leaves them there.

Pros of the situation: Kuran is uncomfortable. Cons of the situation: Zero is lying on top of Kuran. Kuran is touching him. Zero is uncomfortable.

Musing on those facts, Zero comes to a conclusion. He can't exactly move away. If Kuran is uncomfortable, than Zero should enjoy it now and savor the memory next time Kuran is being a bastard.

"When?" Zero asks after a little while.

"July 26."

"Shit," Zero swears. He's supposed to attend his first Jeweled Court tomorrow.

Kuran seems to read the direction of his thoughts. "We sent your apologies several days ago. You needn't worry about the Court. We were concerned, since Takuma won't be able to attend the next one in October when he's in season, but for some reason Noguchi Sada and the Senate omegas suggested that the summer Court be postponed. They must be very confident they have the upper
hand, but we can't do anything except take advantage of the opportunity and watch for traps."

"Ah," Zero replies, unsure what he's supposed to say.

A ringing from somewhere off to his left startles a flinch out of Zero that leaves his muscles cramping and wrecks his whole body with pain. Hissing, the Hunter waits for Kuran to throw Zero's body aside to answer the phone - it will surely hurt just as badly. But Kuran just lifts his hand, and a slim black cellphone floats through the air to deposit itself in Kuran's palm.

He hates purebloods and their stupid flashy powers, Zero grumbles enviously.

Kuran frowns at the number flashing on the screen. "The gatehouse? I ordered them to turn everyone away, and I specifically asked not be disturbed unless Yuuki returned."

Zero imagines Kuran's expression right now as he answers the call - eyebrows drawn together, with a frown on his face that means nothing good for the person on the other end of the line. Kuran, Zero knows from experience, hates it when his pieces don't move the way he wants.

"I hope you have an excellent excuse for me, Gatekeeper," the pureblood says, ice layering his words.

Silence, as Kuran listens to the guard speak. Zero can't see Kuran's face from where he's lying on top on him, but he can feel the pureblood's anger turn to disbelief, and then...was that dismay?

"Hold on just a moment," Kuran says, and brings the phone forward so Zero can see him press the speaker button. "Now, repeat what you just said to me."

"Kuran-sama," says a bewildered male voice that clearly knows his career in on the line. "The president of the Hunter's Association, and two other Hunters, have arrived and are demanding to enter. The President says that he is your father-in-law, and is simply here to visit his son. I did not want to cause a diplomatic incident by turning him away without receiving orders first."

"Kaaaaaame-kuuuuuun! Daddy's here to visit his precious children," shouts a distant voice, loudly enough to be heard over the speaker. The vampire guard chokes at the informality and disrespect.

"I brought our family photo albums, all 307 of them!"


The gatekeeper continues, "When we asked if they would be willing to turn over their weapons, an elderly Hunter in the backseat with a rifle across his lap said he would shoot us if we tried. And the young Hunter driving the car threatened to run us over if we didn't let them in. They don't appear concerned by the fact they're outnumbered four to one."

In the background, a car horn honks, the button held down obnoxiously for over a minute.

"I think they intend to fight their way in if we refuse them. But I'm not sure we can guarantee Rosehill's safety if these Hunters are to be our guests," the gatekeeper pleads.

"No, they can't stay here," Zero groans. "Cross will fuss and make a fool of himself."

Kuran says, very slowly and regretfully, "I do not believe your family will take no for an answer."

Then, raising his voice so the gatekeeper can hear him, Kuran says "Please let them in, and inform
Steward Inukai to greet them and arrange rooms."

"I want to be unconscious again," Zero announces to the room, mourning his impending doom.

Then Zero thinks for a moment.

"You better put some damn clothes on, Kuran. If they see you in your jammies, in bed with me, Cross is going to cry about how you made me a man, and Master is going to shoot you."

Kuran doesn't say anything, but Zero can perceive a profound air of regret in his silence.

When Yuuki finds Zero and Kuran in the guest bedroom they've been hiding in, she takes one look at the tableau, and jerks her chin imperiously toward the door.

"Out, Kaname," she orders.

Getting up from his armchair, Kuran, with a chastened air, obeys.

Zero's mouth drops open, and his eyes nearly pop out of their sockets. Did that just happen?

The Hunter has never seen Yuuki like this before. There's a hard edge to her appearance, an immovable air; she's dressed like a queen in deep midnight blue. Standing in the doorway with her arms crossed and her shoulders stiffened, Yuuki looks almost intimidating. She looks like a pureblood - and Zero's heart doesn't hurt anymore at that thought.

...but seeing her like this does things to his insides, Zero realizes, and his cheeks color as he looks away in embarrassment.

If Zero didn't know this was the same girl who once leaned over the bridge rail so far that she fell backwards into the lake at Cross Academy, then he would have never thought it was the same Yuuki as always.

Once Kuran is gone, Yuuki shuts the door, and hurries to the bed, anxiously taking Zero's hands as her whole intimidating aura melts away into gentle affection and concern.

"I'm sorry I wasn't there when you woke up, Zero. I would have come sooner if I'd known," she says, throwing a glare at the closed door.

"Did something happen between you two?" Zero asks. He should have guessed Kuran's pleasant manner was unnatural. The pureblood is always nicer to Zero when Yuuki is angry with him.

"Yes. We argued," Yuuki says, declining to elaborate. "But that doesn't matter now. How do you feel?"

"Bad," Zero admits. "Everything hurts, but at least I'm alive. Kuran had to carry me here. I remember -" Zero's throat closes up, and has to start over again. "My legs...will I be able to walk again?"

Horror crosses Yuuki's face, and she hurriedly assures him, "Yes, of course, you'll be fine - you're just weak because everything is healing right now. I promise you will Hunt again, Zero, but it may be a long time - Aido and the doctor think it will be at least four months, minimum."

Zero closes his eyes. An active person his whole life, being unable to walk, let alone Hunt, is almost unthinkable. He already feels restless and useless. If Zero can't Hunt, then what is he supposed to do? Burden everyone around him by having them take care of him instead?
"Tell me how things have gone since I've been asleep," Zero asks, trying to hide his pain from Yuuki with his light tone.

His wife isn't fooled. And Yuuki, in an unusually perceptive move, sits down on the bed next to Zero, and gently takes him in her arms.

"You'll be okay, Zero. We'll help you get better, and you'll be able to help the other Hunters soon enough. Please let us take care of you until then."

"You don't need to do that, Yuuki," Zero says.

She brings one hand up to cradle the back of his head. "You're our precious person, Zero. Taking care of you is a privilege, not a chore. I want to be able to help you, just like you always help me."

Gratitude and love swell in his chest, until Zero feels like he might overflow with it, until liquid light suffuses every corner of him.

But he doesn't deserve her kindness or her care, Zero's guilt reminds him. "I'm so sorry," Zero says, and buries his face in her shoulder.

Yuuki doesn't struggle to hold up his weight. She just holds Zero tighter, still so careful of his injuries. It makes his throat close up, and his eyes prickle.

"What for?" she asks, sounding puzzled.

"I didn't believe you, and the truth was in front of me the whole time."

Even more confused, Yuuki asks, "What truth?"

Zero struggles to speak past the weight in this throat. "When I was dying, I felt it - you were the one who saved my life. It was your blood that made me live. And all your feelings were right there, bared in front of me, and I'm sorry because I know you hate that, but I could taste your love, and it was-" Zero has to stop for a moment. "It was beyond everything. So strong. So deep."

He tucks his face in tighter to her neck. "I'm such an idiot. I told you you didn't really love me. I said you were confused, that you didn't know your own feelings. I dismissed you - your honesty and your feelings - because I was afraid to believe them."

Zero pulls back weakly, so he can look into Yuuki's face. She has to help him with his unsteady balance and shaking limbs, but this is too important not to say. Zero has to do it, right now, because he can't stand one more minute without Yuuki knowing, no matter what happens. He's not about to waste his second chance.

"I was afraid to accept your love, because that would mean you returned my own feelings," Zero tells her, dropping his stoic mask, raw honesty in his voice and his eyes.

Yuuki stares at him for a moment, eyes widening as she understands what he means. "Zero," she says, quiet and reverent, bringing her hand up to his cheek.

Zero covers her warm, steady hand with his shaking, cold one, and turns his face into the touch. "I love you, Yuuki," he tells her, looking into her brown eyes, and how long has he wanted to do this? He's not even afraid the way he thought he would be - even if she were to tell him she never wanted to see him again, this moment feels right. Zero doesn't have to keep this hidden away in his heart anymore. He can have this, have her, the way he wanted but never dared to dream - a Turned Hunter and a pureblood princess? Impossible. But Yuuki tugged him away from behind his walls,
tunneled underneath them and sneaked overtop, the same way she lured his heart out of its shell so many years ago, and it's belonged to her ever since.

Yuuki's eyes are tearing up, and her honest smile from the bottom of her heart is watery and lopsided and everything Zero ever wanted to see.

Now that he's finally said it, Zero can't stop the words from coming. "I loved you as Cross Yuuki, and I love you now as Kuran Yuuki. Whether she's called Cross or Kuran, I love the person called Yuuki."

The Hunter grasps weakly at Yuuki's hand, face darkening with self-disgust. "And I am so very sorry, and more ashamed then I can put into words, about the way I treated you, and the cruel things I said when you left Cross Academy. I think about the moment when I rejected you as a pureblood often. It's the greatest regret of my entire life."

Yuuki waves her free hand, shaking her head back and forth. "No, no, Zero. It's fine. I forgave you for it as soon as it happened. You were seventeen years old, and the purebloods had ruined your life -"

"That's not enough," Zero insists fiercely. "What I did hurt you. Even if you already forgave me, I need to apologize for what I did, and acknowledge between us that what I did hurt you and wasn't okay. I was an idiot who judged you because you were a vampire. I knew that you hadn't made me think you were human on purpose. Even if I was young and hurt, that doesn't excuse what I did or make it less wrong."

"You rejected the real me," murmurs Yuuki, and Zero can hear an old wound there, and his whole chest goes tight with remorse and mirrored pain.

"I did," he says, voice hollow.

"Those warm eyes that welcomed me, turned away," she remembers, and then looks back at Zero again. "I was glad when you said you would kill me, because it meant that I'd be able to see you again. Being able to see Zero one last time," she tells him, looking into his eyes, "would be the best way to die."

"No, no," Zero groans, in soul-deep pain. "I could never have done it. Never. I would have let you kill me first," he says, unable to bear even the thought. Perhaps the relentless Hunter of before could have crushed his heart and pulled the trigger, but to the Zero of today, so changed by the past months, the thought of raising a hand against Yuuki is anathema.

Yuuki smiles at him. "I love you, Zero. When the people we love hurt us, we can forgive them because we want to stay by their side."

"Thank you, Yuuki," Zero says unsteadily. "I don't deserve your forgiveness. But I want you to know that I love the pureblood Yuuki and the human Yuuki just the same. I'd love you," he says, trying to keep a straight face, "even if you were a blue cat alien."

Yuuki's face contorts with amusement at the image, and the two of them double over in laughter. It's a stupid joke, and it's not even very funny, but the two of them laugh and laugh, like by their mirth they're purging a poison. Whenever one of them stops, the other will start to chuckle, and soon the two of them are at it again, leaning helplessly on Zero's pillows.

Zero only stops because his ribs really, really hurt, and his throat is sore and laughing this hard had been a really bad idea, but both of them had needed it somehow. Now that the rush of emotions is
ebbing, Zero sags, suddenly exhausted. He's been through a lot today, and his body has decided to remind him of that fact.

Yuuki, vigilant to Zero's needs, spots Zero's exhaustion at once. "I stressed you too much," she scolds herself, pulling up the blankets from where they've fallen.

"This was important. We needed to clear the air between us," Zero tells her, clicking his tongue. Yuuki feels guilty for everything, and this is Zero's fault, not hers.

"I'm kind of glad we did," she confesses, smiling at Zero again. The air between them now is free and easy, without the unsaid words hanging between them from these past months. It's refreshing. Zero almost wishes this had happened sooner.

Zero sloppily pats the bed next to him. "You want to climb in?"

His wife nods eagerly, her braid swinging with the movement, and scoots under the covers, careful not to let the warmth escape.

"Kaname said there were some things he knew about you that it wasn't his place to tell me," Yuuki confesses, snuggling closer. "Will you tell me someday?"

Zero's face closes off. The thought of telling Yuuki about his self-destructive habits before their marriage is difficult, and it makes him feel ashamed. But hasn't keeping secrets only hurt the both of them in the long run?

"I'll try," he tells her, and she seems to accept that.

"You know," she says, fitting Zero into the spaces of her body, "if we don't show up for dinner, Kaname will have to entertain Chairman Cross by himself."

"Let him," Zero says with satisfaction, and closes his eyes to rest, with the woman he loves, and who loves him back, curled up next to him. What better place in the world to be?

"Now that we've finished dinner, gentlemen, would you like to retire to my study for drinks?" Kaname asks, his perfect politeness disguising the fact that he would very much like these Hunters to refuse.

"Of course," gushes Cross. "How could I stay no to catching up with one of my dear ex-students?"

Takamiya shrugs. "I've never said no to free booze in my life."

"Yagari-sensei?" Kaname inquires politely, turning to the third man at the table, who has yet to say a single word this evening, or do anything but glare venomously and clutch his rifle.

The Hunter grunts, his glare sharpening.

Taking that as a yes, Kaname continues his duties as a host, onerous as they've been this evening. The Hunters are terrible guests, he laments. If they're not suspicious, disrespectful, and trigger-happy, then they're...whatever Cross is.

Vampires are predictable - they're rule-bound and traditional above all else, and they follow strictly enforced, complex social rules that make them easier to control. Hunters, on the contrary, obey a handful of principles and seem to enjoy breaking social conventions for fun. It's very stressful for Kaname, who despises interacting with what he cannot predict.
Kaname had assumed they would continue this charade after dinner, but once his study door is closed and he pours the brandy, he turns around to find Cross with his glasses off, studying him the way a falcon studies a mouse.

The pureblood is not shaken. He's the wolf who eats the falcon, after all, though being studied so intently by a man as dangerous as Cross makes him wary. Offering the Hunter a glass by his fingertips, Cross accepts it without breaking his scrutiny.

Then Yagari lights a cigarette, and Kaname sighs, the tension broken. "Yagari-sensei, please do not smoke in my house. Vampires have a keen sense of smell, and the habit is offensive to us."

"I know," Yagari says, and deliberately takes another puff, exhaling the smoke in a showy white cloud.

"Where is Zero?" demands Takamiya, refusing the offered brandy.

Kaname takes a drink of the glass instead. No sense letting good brandy go to waste. A man like Takamiya who drinks nothing but beer wouldn't appreciate it anyway. So impatient, to cut short their opening moves, but Kaname can adapt. At least Yagari and Cross understand how these games are played.

"Asleep," Kaname replies. "Yuuki is with him. You can see him tomorrow."

Takamiya's jaw clenches, clearly unhappy with Kaname's answer.

"I take it you already know that we are unhappy, to say the least, with Zero's current situation," Cross says, swirling the brandy in his glass.

Yagari breathes out more pale smoke. "We agreed to the marriage because you promised us Zero would be safe with you. We're beginning to think that you're not as reliable as you claimed to be."

"You were supposed to care for Zero, not let him nearly die on your watch. Not to mention it was your own people that tried to kill him," Takamiya accuses.

Such a pity that his metabolism can't let him get drunk, Kaname mourns.

"I have learned there were more blind spots in my networks than I thought," Kaname admits. "But I assure you, the people who did this are already being dealt with."

"You have a lead?" asks Yagari, watching him with hooded eyes.

"I have them sitting in my cells," Kaname replies.

"Well, that's different, Kaname-kun," Cross says, straightening and putting down his glass. "What did you learn?"

Kaname barely stops himself from grimacing. Yuuki had been right about how unpleasant those cretins were. "They confessed the whole plan. After acquiring the right drugs to disable a vampire - they weren't even certain they would work on a Hunter like Kiryuu, by the way - the conspirators waited for an opportunity. Kiryuu ordered an item from a jeweler, and had to make an appointment to pick it up once it was completed. The jeweler's apprentice was sympathetic to their ideals, and tipped them off that Kiryuu was guaranteed to show up at a specific place and time. One of the conspirators can create illusions, and used his power to sneak into the kitchen of the cafe where Kiryuu and Yuuki were dining, and added the drug to Kiryuu's drink. After that, they waited nearby, and scouted ahead of Kiryuu's path until they found a good opportunity. Then they
ambushed him, stabbed him with a sedative, and moved his body to confuse his scent trail so they had time to do their work."

"Sloppy, and liable to go wrong at any point," Yagari says in disgust. "I'm surprised it worked. You arrested the jeweler's apprentice?"

"Of course," Kaname returns, offended by the implication he's that incompetent.

Cross and Yagari exchange glances, silently communicating with one another. Then, Yagari moves back beside Takamiya, and Cross takes the field.

"We're willing to offer our assistance, and the impression of legitimacy when you deal with Zero's attackers."

Surprised, Kaname studies him. "On what condition?"

"My son's safety does not require conditions," Cross tells him, brown eyes hard. "We cannot break the laws governing the Hunters, but anything else is fair game. These are the kind of vampires we wish we could Hunt. Making sure they don't escape justice is a suitable action."

"Then I think your services will be needed," Kaname says, toasting with the last of his brandy, and downing the bitter drink.

"Yuuki said that you wished to speak with me, Kiryuu?" Kaname asks, coming to stand in the door to the consort's suite.

Lying propped up on a mountain of pillows on the couch of the noble's receiving room, and swallowed by his loose, modest nightshirt and robe, Kiryuu's eyes narrow. It makes the wounds on his face, red and angry, crinkle and bend, reminders of his recent brush with death every time Kaname and Yuuki see them. Needless to say, Kiryuu has been very spoiled, as their alphas try to make up for allowing their mate to be hurt.

"Yes," Kiryuu says, his words clipped. "Yuuki and I had a talk about some things you confessed to her."

The Hunter leans back, and raises an eyebrow. "You know, at first I was angry when I realized the way you played me. You let me believe for months that Nightshade was Yuuki's familiar, not yours. I thought about the way you must have laughed at a gullible fool like me, who welcomed your spy right in and then fed it."

Kaname's stomach drops, though his composed face doesn't move a hair. He had hoped that Nightshade's real creator would remain secret a while longer. He will...regret not being able to accompany Kiryuu on Hunts any longer.

"Then," continues Kiryuu, "I thought about the fact that Kuran Kaname had to eat out of a plastic bowl and pee in the bushes."

Kaname almost chokes.

"This must have been one of your worst plans ever. I thought about it, and you really didn't find out anything useful. I mean, I didn't tell you any Hunter secrets. I knew that you were a familiar, so I didn't let you see me naked or tell you anything I didn't want Yuuki to know. So I guess I really don't understand the point," Kiryuu concludes with a shake of his head.
The pureblood considers his response, opens his mouth - and nothing comes out.

Kiryuu's mouth quirks. "I got to make you wear a leash. And I covered you in smelly flea and tick spray that made you sneeze. And there was that one time on the metro that you got a lollypop stuck in your fur, and I had to cut it out with scissors."

Kiryuu unsteadily spreads his hands. "I think in this case, success is its own reward. Yuuki's already mad at you - again, you really need to work on that, Kuran - so I think I'll let this go. As long as you give me Nightshade to keep, as my permanent guard. I miss him, and it's not his fault his master's an ass."

Hardly able to process the sudden turn of events in his favor, Kaname blinks for a few seconds, before shaking himself out of his stupor, and calling forth the huge dark wolf.

Who shakes his tail wildly back and forth, completely ignoring his master, and barrels forward to lick excitedly at Kiryuu's hands.

"Hello there, Nightshade," Kiryuu welcomes him, and strokes the wolf's neck and thick ruff. "No wonder you're as handsome as you are cute. You're not Yuuki's familiar at all."

The wolf bark-howls, staying carefully still under Kiryuu's hands, seemingly aware of the Hunter's fragile body and injuries.

"Look at what I have for you," Kiryuu tells the wolf, pulling out Nightshade's collar from under a fold of his gown. Jingling in the center is the square, engraved gold tag that was the cause of all this.

Nightshade, that traitor, eagerly whines and holds perfectly still as Kiryuu slips the leather around his neck. But the Hunter's hands can't manage the buckle, though he tries a few times, clearly frustrated.

"Here," Kaname says, crossing the room, "I'll do it."

Glaring at the collar, and at Kaname, Kiryuu grudgingly allows Kaname to slip the end through the buckle, and tighten it.

Nightshade droops his ears and gives a drawn out whine.

Kiryuu begins to pet him again in apology. "I'm sorry, Nightshade. I'm angry at myself, not you."

"There is no need," Kaname tells him, without understanding why. "Your inability is not your fault. And your injuries will mend."

Kiryuu just shakes his head, and stays quiet, refusing to explain.

"Was this worth it?" Kaname asks curiously, finger ing the tag on the wolf's collar.

Kiryuu stares at him.

"Worth what happened to you?" Kaname clarifies.

The Hunter's face clouds. "What kind of stupid question is that? They would have tried to kill me if I was picking up milk from the store," he says with irritation. "It's a dog tag. I bought it for him, it looks good on him and it matches his collar, so he might as well have it. What else is there to say?"

Kiryuu points accusingly at the pureblood. "You think twisty thoughts too often. And Yuuki's
started saying things that sound like you'd say them too. So stop doing that."

"Zero-kuuuuun!"

Kaname can almost hear the hearts and sparkles tacked on at the end. "Cross is coming to visit you this evening, I take it?" he says.

Kiryuu covers his face. "On your way out, do me a favor and kick him in the face for me."

Kaname just chuckles.

Master Yagari moves first, while Kaito and Cross are still frozen in the doorway.

"What have they done to you, boy?" he says, gruff voice softened at the edges, delicately touching Zero's chin with his calloused fingers,

Zero tries to smile, but he's sure he just contorts his mangled face instead. "That bad, huh?" he says, trying for levity. "You should have seen me before they sewed me back together."

His attempt falls flat, too honest for real humor, Cross frowns, face concerned, dropping the chairman persona. Seeing Cross serious for once makes Zero feel even worse about the situation.

"Well, at least they won't call me pretty boy anymore," he jokes.

Kaito snorts, and crosses the room to throw himself in an armchair opposite Zero's couch. "Please, your Yuuki is hot for you however your face looks. That woman is thirsty as hell. You better watch out for your maidenhood, kouhai."

Zero relaxes at the familiar teasing, proof that some things have stayed the same. Thank goodness for Kaito, he thinks fondly, always reliably irritating.

Cross is still watching them from the doorway. Zero can't see his eyes behind the shine of his glasses.

That won't do.

"Do you want to come in, Chairman?" Zero asks.

Zero's ex-guardian looks even more distressed. "I feel as though I have failed you, Zero," he confesses.

Zero groans. "Cross, not you too. It's nobody's fault but the bloodsuckers who cut me up."

Cross gives a shake of his head, wry smile creasing his lips. "Not that, Zero. For putting you in this situation. You told me you would never be happy living among the vampires. Is that still true?"

Zero huffs a fond laugh. "I didn't count on Yuuki when I said that. Even Kuran is occasionally tolerable. I think I'm going to be okay," he tells the three of them, looking over with an honest gaze.

Master Yagari nods approvingly. "So you found an arrangement you can live with? Good," he says, taking a seat on the sofa, "now I can die in peace."

"Don't give me that look, brats," Zero's Master says, catching the expression on his apprentices' faces. "If I have my way, I'm hanging around until you two have to off me yourselves. But I've got
too much human blood not to be realistic."

Yagari points at Zero. "So if you're going to give me grandchildren, boy, you'd better get a move on. Get that wife of yours to do you properly. Just lock the door on the other one."

"Oh my god," Zero mutters, blushing heavily, looking up at the ceiling like he wants to disappear.

"That's right, my cute son!" Cross joins in, clapping his hands together and cackling madly.

"Actually," Zero says, tone lowering, "That reminds me. I need to tell you something, President Cross."

Instantly serious, Cross folds his hands together, and leans forward in his chair.

"The drug the vampires gave me, that's supposed to disable vampire powers - it also worked on my Hunter abilities. Yuuki thinks that it's because I'm a level D, and that's what she told Kuran. But I believe that it worked even without my vampirism as a factor."

The three Hunters are grim at the news. A Hunter is far weaker than the vampires they take as prey. Without their abilities, they cannot identify their enemies, or wield anti-vampire weapons skillfully enough to destroy them.

"It blocked your access completely?" Cross questions, eyes sharp behind his glasses.

Zero nods. "I could feel my abilities, but I couldn't reach them. The drug is distilled from pure blood - specifically the pureblood Shirabuki family's blood. Since Hunters were created by pure blood, there's no reason to think such a thing wouldn't affect us."

"Shirabuki Sara is the last one alive, so at least they can't mass produce it," Kaito says. "That's something. But this drug could still be used strategically. Do the Shirabuki know what they have?"

Master Yagari shakes his head. "I doubt it. Turning us would be the easier, logical method to control us. Our origins are poorly known, and the vampires don't bother to study us. Until Zero, we've never been a threat to purebloods before."

Cross steeps his fingers under his chin. "As long as it stays secret, we're safe."

"So that's why you sent your purebloods and their familiars away," Kaito realizes. "You didn't want them to know."

Zero nods. "I needed you to know about this, for security, but otherwise I don't think we should talk about it. Even among ourselves, to keep it as secret as possible."

"Agreed. None of us are to speak of this again, without dire reason," Cross orders, and Zero and the other Hunters give their agreement.

"That's all I had to tell you. I'm sure the Kurans have told you everything else you wanted to know."

Cross waves his arms wildly in refusal. "Zero-kun, we haven't seen you in months! You have to tell us all about your sweet romance with Yuuki-chan and Kaname-kun!"

Zero glares at Cross for a moment, and then deliberately faces Master Yagari and Kaito. "I don't know if you've eaten, but if you're hungry, you could eat a late dinner. There's a dining room in this suite," Zero offers.
Kaito whistles. "Fancy. You've moved up in the world."

"You're just jealous I don't have to do my own laundry," Zero retorts.

The brunette makes a rude gesture. "I've seen your wardrobe, Kiryuu. I'm not the one dolled up in fancy tailored dresses."

"While you two are moving your jaws, I'll take that dinner," Master Yagari interrupts.

Zero reaches for the bell. "Let me call the servants." he says, and then curses when he knocks it off the couch with his clumsy hands. The small, engraved silver bell rolls against Zero's foot with a ting, and his face heats in embarrassment. "Can one of you pick that up?"

The Hunters are silent for a moment.

"You can't get it yourself?" finally ventures Kaito.

Zero fists his shaky hands in his skirts, staring down at the embroidered feather pattern in silence.

"How good is your coordination?" Master Yagari asks, leaning forward, face carefully wiped of emotion.

Zero grits his teeth, refusing to look up from the blue thread looping across his knees. "I can't lift a spoon well enough to feed myself," he says finally, ashamed of having to admit his helplessness in front of the men he respects most.

He bows his head lower, and startles when a hand touches his shoulder. It's Cross, with a gentle look in his eyes.

"You can't walk, can you, Zero?"

His shoulders tense, and he shakes his head. "The doctor says I'll heal. He doesn't know how long. He's never encountered a case like me before," Zero says.

Kaito speaks up from his chair. "You know that's fine, right?"

"I do," Zero replies.

Zero is a Hunter, and mutilation and traumatic injury are a reality all Hunters live with. The longer you Hunt, the more certain it is you'll end up crippled. Everyone in the Hunter community knows someone who survived the loss of a limb, or an eye, or a leg, and went on to live full lives no less satisfying than before. It was an adjustment, but not much of a surprise or a problem. You made changes, and you moved on. You may not be able to Hunt, but there were plenty of other valuable things you could do.

"I don't mind the injury," Zero tells them. "But I'm too bound to the Hunt."

"Ah," Yagari nods in understanding. Most Hunters ended up fine after career-ending injuries. But some of them belonged so strongly to the Hunt that they were never the same afterwards. Their lives were tied up in Hunting, and cutting them loose just left them adrift, lost.

Kaito was the kind of person who would be able to move on. But Yagari was like Zero, and the Hunt went too deep in their blood to let go.

These three know Zero better than anyone else. It's a relief that he doesn't have to explain the way being unable to walk or use his hands well makes him feel useless, and restless, and helpless. Or
how he wants to be alone sometimes, and needing people around to help him all the time exhausts him.

It's only that affection and familiarity that lets Zero say the next part. "And...the vampires aren't helping. Severe, permanent injury is normal to us, but it freaks the vampires out. Even though I'm going to heal, they all look at me like a zoo animal, or like I'm contagious and they're going to catch my disease. You knew Kurenai Maria. You know the kind of stigma this has."

In the silence, Kaito scoops up the bell at Zero's feet, offering it to his near-brother with a sharp grin. "Lucky you're a Hunter then, Kiryuu. You'll show these leeches what being one of us means."

"Are you sure you're okay with seeing those people again, Zero?" Yuuki asks anxiously.

"You're with me, so I'll be fine," he says, smiling slightly in the way that makes the wounds on his face sting less.

At the reminder, Yuuki can't stop herself from incessantly running her hands across Zero's body, satisfying her alpha with the physical proof that her mate is alive. She's placed Zero on a window seat, and crowded him up against the wall with not a centimeter of space between them. She's protecting her omega with her own body from anything that might threaten him, and it still isn't enough. She wants to hide Zero away from everyone, keep him to herself, safe and protected and all hers, greedy for the least scrap of his attention. Struggling with herself and her instincts, Yuuki breathes in the fragrance of his skin, and his sweet omega pheromones, burning in the flames of her own desire.

Zero patiently tolerates Yuuki's need for closeness, letting her touch him and move his helpless body the way she needs - perhaps his own instincts quietly teaching him how to calm an alpha. But then, trying to reassure her, Zero turns his head and presses a kiss to her cheek - and Yuuki, starving, catches his chin before he can turn away, in her ravenous hunger seeking out his mouth and kissing him deeply, her violence leashed so she can take her fill as long as his fragile body can stand it, and not a second more.

Good, the alpha says, that is how to treat mate when he is hurt. Now if only we could teach alpha-mate....

"You okay," Zero gasps.

"I should be asking you that question," Yuuki says, pulling back only enough to speak, pressing their foreheads together.

"I'm fine," he tells her, his breath still short.

"I want to take you back to bed and hide you there," she confesses. "I can't stand being out of your sight."

"You said you wanted to do this," he reminds her.

Yuuki struggles with herself. Finally, her determination wins out, and she picks Zero up, one arm underneath his knees and the other supporting his back, and begins to carry him down the stairs to the holding cells.

His long skirts fall all the way past his feet, making Zero look less like he's being carried for medical reasons and more like he's just wearing fancy, impractical clothing. Yuuki had a whole new wardrobe made for Zero to help him look more dignified while he has to be carried around as
he heals. She rather likes the way they look together, and the drape of fabric over her arms. Plus, having Zero stuffed into pretty things always makes her happy.

And of course, being needed by her omega makes her alpha instincts even more happy, as much as Zero hates the necessity. It's Yuuki's secret, guilty, pleasure. Yuuki's become addicted to the weight of Zero in her arms, the closeness, and the intimacy of being relied on by her partner for something so personal. Being able to remain at his side all the time is all she's ever wanted, but the wanting tortures her so sweetly. However much Yuuki has of Zero, it only feeds her hunger for more.

Yuuki can feel Zero's body tense as they get closer, and she tucks him against her body more securely. Zero should never fear when he's in her arms - her pureblood's strength could hold him for days and never tire.

"Open the gate, please," she orders the guard, and the cell door swings open.

Six filthy nobles in torn, dirty clothes look up - Zero's attackers, and one informant, the vile worms that tried to kill her heart.

Yuuki almost snarls, disgust welling up in her - but Zero's sweet weight reminds her why she's here. He's tense, and she bounces him a little, nuzzling his hair to remind him he's in the safest place in the world right now.

"Kuran-hime," the nobles greet her, and prostrate themselves face down on the ground.

As they should, Yuuki thinks. "Your execution, traitors, is tomorrow. I suggest you reflect on your crimes tonight, if you have the sense to understand them."

Yuuki gentles her voice. "It's them, right?" she asks Zero, who nods, eyes fixed unblinkingly on the vampires who almost succeeded in killing him.

"Sucked enough dick to please them yet, you filthy whore?" the smarmy, arrogant one shouts - then he chokes, his fingers scrabbling at the invisible hand cutting off his air and close to breaking his spine.

Yuuki watches the vile man spasm until he begins to foam at the mouth, his lips going blue.

A touch at her wrist - Zero, gently reminding her that he doesn't give a damn what vampires say about him. Yuuki smiles at her consort, and the vampire is allowed to gasp in a breath.

Her voice cracks out. "I will not hear such filthy lies out of your mouths again. Am I understood?"

The six vampires fall over themselves to promise a pureblood anything she wants. Yuuki's lip curls.

"Since your thick heads don't seem to understand why I'm angry, I thought a demonstration might help," Yuuki tells them.

Her light, almost cheerful tone makes the criminals shift and look uneasy.

Yuuki smiles happily. "Go ahead, Zero."

Zero looks at her one more time with his beautiful lavender eyes, making sure Yuuki really means it. The terrible wounds on his face - now more wound than whole skin - pink and puffed, tracing across his flesh, make her certain, and she tips her head back in invitation. Her red dress, worn
specifically for today, has an open, square collar without any lace or trim.

When Zero bends his head down to her neck, the nobles begin to understand what they're about to watch.

"No," shouts the leader, straining at his chains in horror. "Kuran-hime, you mustn't!"

"You presume to order me?" Yuuki asks with a vicious satisfaction over the noises of their dread and disgust

Zero is lapping at her neck, preparing the area he will bite, trying to angle his body so the vampires have a good view. He is a Hunter, after all, Yuuki thinks fondly.

"I'm ready," she says, nudging him on. These worms don't deserve the sight of Zero any longer than necessary.

Yuuki shivers at the feeling of Zero's fangs, delicately pressing against her skin, and keeps her eyes fixed on her enemies, wanting to watch this moment.

At the smell of pure blood, the nobles cry out, revolted by the sight of a filthy Level D feeding so naturally on sacred pure blood, of his dirty fangs polluting her revered, untouchable skin. A vampire would do anything for even a drop of pure blood. It's the most forbidden blood in the whole world, and every single one of these nobles are salivating in desire as it's shed right in front of them, dreaming of being allowed a taste.

And instead, Yuuki is making these scum watch as she gives her powerful blood to Zero, the man they scorned, tortured and nearly killed. Some of them are crying, begging her not to debase herself, Yuuki observes with glee. How silly, that something like this can reduce grown men to tears.

Yuuki feels nothing but the satisfaction of being able to sate the hunger of her beloved. She feels powerful, blessed to be able to do this, never degraded. Feeding Zero is a precious moment that Yuuki treasures, and she shows them her eager participation, her willing surrender, her full enjoyment.

Yuuki's voice cuts through their meaningless noise. "To me, your actions are the greatest crime anyone could commit. I love Kiryuu Zero more than my own life. You are nothing and he is everything."

Zero withdraws his fangs, and cleans the wound with a quick swipe of his tongue before her pureblood healing vanishes it without a trace. The Hunter isn't really hungry; Yuuki and Kaname feed him so often that he doesn't even have time in between feedings to properly digest the last.

"Kuran-hime, please," begs one of their prisoners. "He's deluded you somehow. You've been lied to!"

She's made these vile scum watch a mockery of their world order, rejected their deepest held ideals, taunted them with her pure blood, and driven them into despair, all without lifting a finger. Yuuki is finished here.

Deaf to their pleas, the pureblood sweeps out of the cell, attention locked solely on the man in her arms. Time for a bath for both of them, and then she will kiss every wound on Zero's body, Yuuki decides, the faint pleas behind her no more meaningful than the noise of the wind.
Nearing midnight, a thick, dark veil of clouds covers the stars and the thin face of the moon. Winds bend the summer grasses, and shake the leafy trees, dispelling the heat and the sticky humid air.

It's a good night for an execution.

Tonight, the ballroom of the state palace is crammed full of people, wall to wall, as though the wealthy, powerful people gathered here tonight have come to pay their respects to the Kuran monarchs one last time.

Nobles have been flooding into Rosehill all evening. Yuuki demanded the attendance of the entire upper ranks of the aristocracy. And no one dares disobey a pureblood, let alone a pureblood demanding blood.

None of them are certain what will happen tonight, and that nervous state infects the air, passing like contamination from one sweating, anxious vampire to the next. Their six conspirators succeeded in their haphazard plot largely because they told no one of their plans, which means no one but the Kurans and their servants know the circumstances that brought the nobles here tonight.

From Yuuki's ultimatum, the nobles have gathered that tonight's execution has something to do with Kiryuu. Some of them have even noticed the disappearances of the conspirators. But with over a dozen plots currently running against their Consort, no one is certain which plot has incurred the wrath of the Kurans. So a significant number of the people here tonight think they might be about to die.

Really, Kaname couldn't have done it better himself.

A slight smile on his lips as he dismisses the bat familiar spying on the nobles, Kaname catches Yuuki's eye. She inclines her head, hard-eyed, fingering the phoenix bracelet around her wrist. Then, watching him in return, Yuuki lifts their wedding token to her mouth and kisses the white jade feathers.

The stroke of midnight - the waiting aristocrats jump as the doors of the ballroom swing open with a bang. Mirror images of each other in black, with their eyes and hair proclaiming their lineage, the Kuran couple stride through the doors side-by-side, effortlessly holding the eyes of the entire room captive.

"Good evening, ladies and gentlemen," Kaname intones quietly; such is the silence that he need not even raise his voice to be heard in the farthest corners of the cavernous room.

Surveying the crowd, Yuuki says, "I'm pleased to see you've accepted our invitation to attend tonight. We'd like to make sure that everything is conducted with the proper formalities. Chairman Ichihara? Step forward please."

Absolutely calm, and seemingly indifferent to the fear saturating the air, Ichihara comes forward from his place at the edge of the crowd, and makes his bow. "Kuran-hime, how may I assist you this evening?"

Kaname has to admit, if Ichihara was a pureblood, he would be a difficult opponent. Ichijo Asato and Ichihara hated one another with equal fervor, but Ichihara survived his rival precisely because he was more cautious, not because he was less ambitious. Ichihara knew greater powers than him existed, and he hated them, but he didn't delude himself into thinking he could reliably control them.

Exactly as they discussed, Yuuki tells the Chairman, "We require you witness the punishment of a
"Of course, Kuran-hime," replies Ichihara. "What crime has been committed?"

Yuuki raises her voice, and speaks to the crowd, "Our race observes two unforgivable crimes. The first is to harm a pureblood, or to demand their blood."

The crowd surges, aghast that such a thing may have happened, but Yuuki raises her hand for silence. "The second is to harm an omega, rare and honored above all other nobles as the mothers of our race."

The crowd shifts, looking around uneasily at one another as though the guilty party bears some mark.

Kaname's voice brings their attention back to the Kuran couple. "Vile and unnatural nobles have attacked our Consort, wounding him severely and nearly succeeding in killing him. We have brought you here tonight to affirm the legality of our actions and to act with transparency as we claim our right as his alphas to destroy this threat."

Chairman Ichihara bows once more. "By the laws of the Senate, you are indeed fully within your rights to execute such deviants. We are honored to witness your justice, Kuran-sama."

Kaname nods, and without either of the Kurans making any sign, a side door opens. Servants bearing the Kuran crest on their livery drag the six culprits into the room in chains.

A few of the crowd members erupt in shouts and cries as they recognize their missing family and friends.

Behind the six vampires walks Cross Kaien, smiling with his glasses off, and Yagari Touga, taciturn and scowling at the crowd.

The nobles whisper even more fiercely as they recognize the co-Presidents of the Hunters' Association.

"Don't mind us, please," Cross announces pleasantly. "We're here at the request of Kuran-san, as the Hunter monitors this evening."

It cannot escape any of the watching nobles that Kiryuu is the apprentice and ex-ward of these two powerful Hunters, and that their presence is anything but accidental. Cross and Yagari are a message: 'Kiryuu Zero has powerful backers. Attacking him is unwise.' And it reminds the vampires that Kiryuu is a powerful Hunter himself, and a dangerous target in his own right.

The Kuran servants deposit the criminals at the feet of their masters, and remain to unobtrusively monitor their charges. Blinking in the sudden light, the six nobles, ragged, filthy, and stinking after days without bathing, cower together in a huddle in front of the callous eyes of their peers. Veterans of all kinds of power struggles, the nobles recognize a sinking ship when they see one.

At a gesture from Yuuki, one of the Kuran servants hands Chairman Ichihara a scroll. "You will find the names of these criminals written here. As for me," Yuuki says, "I will not lower myself to utter them, and they shall not pass my lips."

Kaname moves no closer to the pile of wretched vampires, addressing them indifferently from a distance. "Tell these respected nobles of the vampire race your crimes."

Terrified, and still obedient to the purebloods they adore, the plot comes spilling out as one by one,
the six confess their complicity. The weight of their fellow nobles' judgement, and the gravity of the situation stamps out their defiance and their certainty. With all their pride crushed out of them, they are a pitiful sight.

Across the bloodbond, Kaname and Yuuki share the same satisfaction.

Chairman Ichihara intervenes, cutting the conspirators short, perhaps trying to curry favor with their families. Probably a futile effort - these six come from impeccable monarchist backgrounds, taught from infancy to revere the purebloods and to gladly obey them.

"Kuran-sama, Kuran-hime, the testimonies of these criminals match your accounts," the noble says.

"It seems that we need only one other participant before we can begin," Kaname tells him. "The injured party."

Yuuki didn't want Zero to be present at his attackers' execution tonight. It was only after long arguments, and appeasing her alpha instincts with some very pleasant cuddling that Zero got her to relent. She was only trying to protect him, Zero knows, but this is something he needs to do.

Kaname, on the other hand, had simply surveyed Zero once from head to heels, and given his agreement. The pureblood probably just didn't care, but perhaps he understood Zero's need to appease his pride. Show a predator your fear, and they never forget it. Zero did not cower when he was about to die, and he won't cower now that he's going to live. He's a Hunter, bone and blood, and he'll be damned if any vampire intimidates him enough to hide his face.

Even when his face looks like it was shredded with a carving knife. Zero's not exaggerating - it looks bad, with the only saving grace that his eyes were unharmed.

Without being able to walk, Zero had to settle for being carried into the room in a small curtained palanquin. It will betray his poor mobility, and probably be taken as an indication of weakness, but he has no other choice. Let them see how little he fears them, whether whole or crippled.

The sway of the palanquin as the carriers begin to move makes his stomach lurch. Zero clutches the edges as best he can with his weak grip, and concentrates on looking dignified, even when he doesn't feel it.

The sound of the palanquin being carried on tile - Zero can tell from the sharp footsteps of the bearers. The rush of air from a door, opening silently. The heavy silence of an empty space, the echo of feet on stone. A gentle thump, felt through the frame as his palanquin is placed on the floor. A pale, long-fingered hand parts the curtains.

"Consort Kiryuu, thank you for joining us," Kuran Kaname says, inclining his head the barest increment.

Zero returns the gesture, deeper, obeying the protocol perfectly. "Husband, as you asked, I have come."

Kuran coached Zero ahead of time on what to do and say, and how to carry himself. Now that the nobles know about the murder attempt, it's Zero's job to make sure that he gives them nothing to justify it with. His behavior this evening must be spotless.

Seated, pinned in place by his useless legs and exceptionally long skirts, and framed by the curtains of the palanquin, Zero feels like an expensive doll on the shelf. He tries not to let the
impression overwhelm him, but Zero feels more vulnerable than usual without the ability to defend himself. Instead, he tries to anchor himself in the illusion they’re trying to build tonight, one specifically designed by Yuuki (and Kuran, Zero was surprised to discover) to protect him. Zero’s not about to let Yuuki’s feelings go to waste, so he straightens his body the best he can, and meets the eyes of the watching vampires with his usual stoicism and indifference.

Yuuki comes up behind Kuran's shoulder, and takes Zero's hands. The twin dragon bracelets, exposed as his sleeves fall slightly, complement the phoenix bracelet on Yuuki's wrist, an observation none of the nobles will miss.

"As always, the sight of you bring us joy," Yuuki tells him; the edges of her eyes crinkle as she fights not to break character.

Zero's affection for her surges in his chest. Through his ragged wounds, Zero gives his best attempt at a smile, hoping that his love shines through his eyes. "Seeing you makes me feel exactly the same way."

Yuuki steps to one side, allowing Zero to see a huddle of filthy men on the floor. She seems to expect Zero will be traumatized if he sees his attackers, but Zero's fought enough people who tried to kill him that one more near-miss isn't going to bother him much.

To the condemned nobles, Zero must look like an omen of death in his heavy, pure white robes, with his pale hair and skin. White for ash and white for death. Zero appreciates the symbolism.

"Consort," Kuran says, "we regret the need, but can you confirm that those are the criminals who attacked you?"

Zero gives them a quick glance. "Five of them, yes. I'm told that the other assisted in the plot."

"Correct," Kuran replies, hands tucked behind his back, pacing slowly in an arc around the frozen nobles.

A hunting gesture, Zero recognizes from experience. Is it unconscious, he wonders, or is Kuran doing it on purpose?

"In your confessions," Kuran begins, addressing the huddle of prisoners, "you claimed to have committed your crimes in our interest, using our names as your justification. I want to make clear, here and now, that nothing you did in our names we wanted, supported, or endorsed. Consort Kiryu, as my wife has told you all, is not to be touched."

Yuuki joins the loose hunting spiral with Kuran, lazily continuing. "Because of the nature of your crimes against us, we decided that you needed a special punishment, to show anyone dreaming of following your example the consequences of their actions."

A coiled energy animates the Kurans' footsteps now, a liquid threat in every line of their bodies. Every eye they meet flickers away in submission as soon as their gazes touch. Zero makes a point of holding their eyes whenever they glance his way.

Gesturing toward their prisoners, Yuuki smiles. "It is slightly inaccurate to call tonight an execution, although tonight all six of you will die."

Her face hardens, and Yuuki's rage gives her voice a frightening edge. "Hear me, all you gathered tonight. I condemn the memory of these six traitors. Let their names never again be spoken in public. Let them be struck from the official records, and from the records of their houses. I strip them of name, and rank, and dignity. Every trace they ever existed will be erased. They are no one
they never existed."

Someone in the crowd is silently weeping, hands pressed over their mouth. The rest of the nobles are pale and showing the whites of their eyes.

It's an apt punishment. To be erased from history, and from memory itself, strikes at the heart of his attackers' desires for recognition and glory in the eyes of their peers. Nobles prided themselves on their lineage and the purity of their blood. To be stripped of rank and title and identity in one fell swoop, Kuran explained to him, was akin to shattering their psyches with a hammer.

Kuran's liquid voice flows through the air. "As for the bodies of these wretched scum, who have ceased to exist, they will not go to waste. You see, the Hunters keep a few Tamed Level D vampires they have marked with a taming brand. And acquiring blood for to feed those Tamed vampires can be difficult."

The prisoners, who had been stunned to shocked, disbelieving silence, begin to understand what Kaname means, and their expressions turn to horrified weeping.

"Therefore," Kuran continues with a savage pleasure, "the blood of these nameless criminals will be donated to the Hunter's Association as a gift, to help mend the treaty they endangered. Their bodies will feed Tamed vampires and provide a permanent blood source for the next few thousand years."

For a moment, Zero feels pity toward the vampires who tried to kill him. To be turned into blood slaves, after considering yourself a noble far above such dregs of society - these men have lost everything that was ever important to them. Stripped of their privileges and families, they have fallen far from their lofty perches at the top of vampire society, reduced to the level of the people they ruled over. Now it's their turn to experience everything that the Turned vampires and Hunters they detested have to endure.

Surveying the broken expressions of the new blood slaves, Yuuki isn't finished. "We are not without mercy, unlike you. In a century, prove to your keepers that you repent and regret your crimes for their own sake, not because of your punishment for them, and I will allow you the mercy of death by over-feeding."

"Until that time comes," orders Kuran, the resonant power of command in his voice, "you are forbidden to escape, or commit suicide."

Turning their backs on the broken men behind them, Yuuki and Kuran seem to forget their slumped bodies are even there. Instead, it's Zero who holds their attention, and they come to stand beside him, one on each side of his seated form.

Zero straightens, cocking his head in question. This wasn't part of their plans.

A faint hint of reassurance in Yuuki's face is all Zero needs to settle back and enjoy whatever show is going on. He trusts Yuuki is looking out for him, and Zero even trusts Kuran the faintest bit.

Kuran takes one of Zero's hands, and turns it over, palm up. Zero is startled to see a phoenix bracelet on Kuran's wrist too, and he darts a quick look at the pureblood's face.

Kuran looks steadily back at Zero with his wine colored eyes, bends his head, and kisses the palm of Zero's hand, as the Hunter stares frozen in surprise. "This is my Consort, and I am well pleased with him. I will be satisfied by none other than he, for the remainder of my immortal life. I will take no other omega than Kiryuu Zero."
Yuuki, on his other side, gently takes up Zero's left hand, and gives his palm a lingering kiss. "I will take no other omega than Kiryuu Zero," she promises, "I swear it on my own life. What you do to him, it is as if you do to me."

Zero feels then, as he will many more times, a sudden flash of insight, imagining what the nobles before him must see.

Such an inexplicable sight! A fragile half-breed creature, of no particular value, maimed, broken - not even beautiful or dangerous! - being sworn loyalty by the two most powerful beings in the world, gods who could have anyone they wanted, but who willingly wear his marks and offer devotion to him in the carefulness of their touch and the gentle look in their eyes.

With their joined hands, Zero reaches up to touch his chest, right over his heart. The feeling inside him is pleasure, he realizes.

"Kuran-hime," Sasaki calls out, bowing, "Kiryuu-sama is ready for bed."

In one of her summer nightgowns with her hair braided back, Yuuki bounces past the servant into her bedroom, a look of eagerness on her face. She's still riding the excitement of their victory over Kiryuu's attackers earlier this evening.

Kaname, more mindful, dismisses Sasaki, and goes to say goodnight to his wife and their Consort.

Kiryuu has been dressed in his own nightclothes, and lies in the center of Yuuki's bed, chatting with his wife as she slides in next to him. Once he realized that Yuuki was sleeping in a guest room, Kiryuu felt guilty for stealing his wife's bed, and offered to share it with her. Yuuki had accepted before Kiryuu could finish getting the words out, and hadn't missed the opportunity a single night since.

Kaname is just fine with his (cold, empty) bed all to himself. Really.

Yuuki has scooted right up next to Kiryuu, and plastered herself against his back. There are limbs everywhere, like an octopus, and the two of them only use a tiny fraction of the bed. What a waste of space. If you have all that room, you might as well use it, Kaname thinks.

In his own nightclothes, Kaname tells Yuuki goodnight, and turns to leave for his own bed.

"Wait," Kiryuu says.

Kaname looks over his shoulder and raises an eyebrow. "What is it, Kiryuu?"

But Kiryuu doesn't seem put off by Kaname's exasperated tone, and his face is strangely blank. "You know Yuuki, I've been thinking."

"About what?" Yuuki asks from behind him, chin resting on top of Kiryuu's shoulder.

Kiryuu's eyes have a suspicious gleam. "What if Kaname is like Nightshade?"

Yuuki blinks. "I don't get it, Zero."

A smile starts to curve the Hunter's lips. "Nightshade is a wolf. And wolves don't understand they've done wrong when they chew up furniture or pee on rugs. They're wolves - that's what they do. If you scold him, he doesn't get it. What you have to do is reward him instead, when he does something you want him to do."
"So when he pees outside, you give him a treat." Yuuki says, thinking hard.

Kiryuu nods. "Exactly. And Kuran is Nightshade's master, so there has to be some similarities. Maybe if we reward Kuran when he does good things, he'll do them again. And Kuran was good tonight, wasn't he?"

"Oh yes," Yuuki agrees, mischievous as an imp. "Kaname was very good tonight."

Kiryuu struggles to free one arm from Yuuki's hug; Kaname knows from experience she's very tenacious. The Hunter pats the sheets in front of him. "If you want, Kuran, you can sleep with us tonight." Perhaps realizing how he sounded, Kiryuu scowls. "Just sleeping. Nothing perverted, vampire."

Kaname considers for a moment. His pride says refuse and go sleep in his own bed. His body is remembering how warm Yuuki and Kiryuu are when he holds them. His heart is thinking about how good not being lonely would be.

The pureblood wavers, but breaks in the end. He moves around the end of the bed to slide in behind Yuuki.

"Uh uh, Kaname. This is my side. Yours is the other side," she tells him.

Kaname reconsiders his course of action, but yields and peels back the covers in front of Kiryuu. Their body heat has made the bed nice and warm, he notes as he swings his feet underneath the sheets.

"Closer, Kaname," Yuuki orders. "We're not strangers."

Kaname takes one look at Yuuki and Kiryuu in their ball of limbs, sighs as though he is very put upon, and settles himself a mere inch from Kiryuu, draping his arm over Kiryuu so he can touch Yuuki.

Kiryuu rolls his eyes, and Yuuki groans, but they accept Kaname's arrangement, and settle down to go to sleep.

(In the morning, the three of them wake tangled together, not a hint of space separating them.)

Shirabuki Sara simpers and tosses the ringlets of her blond hair. "I'm surprised that you invited me to dine with you, Yuuki-chan. Not that this isn't the pleasant kind of surprise. We purebloods must stick together, now that so few of us are left."

Yuuki controls her dislike at the honorific by taking another sip of her tea. Kaname would probably spend another half-hour on polite small talk and subtle verbal maneuvering, but Yuuki has neither the patience nor the skill. And whether or not Shirabuki would admit it, Yuuki suspects both of them know why they are dining together today at this expensive upscale cafe.

"There was a matter I wanted to discuss with you, Shirabuki-san," Yuuki says, returning her teacup to her saucer with a clink, and focusing her gaze on Shirabuki.

"Oh?" the other pureblood asks, placing her teacup on her own saucer and raising an eyebrow. "What might that be?"

"The attack on our Consort -"
"Oh, I heard about that! How terrible for you and poor Kaname-kun!" Shirabuki interrupts, placing her hand on her cheek in exaggerated concern.

"During the attack on our Consort," Yuuki continues, not allowing the faintest flicker in her expression at the interruption, "a particular, unique poison was used."

She stares straight into Shirabuki's blue eyes, determined to watch the effect of her words. "A poison created by the Shirabuki family."

Shirabuki's eyes widen theatrically and she covers her open mouth with her hand. "So that's what happened to it! How awful!" Shirabuki leans forward, and takes Yuuki's hand.

Yuuki has to use all her strength not to slap Shirabuki away. Instead, she stays perfectly still, counting to one hundred in her head and concentrating on keeping her breaths slow and even.

Lower lip quivering, Shirabuki is the very picture of contrition. "I'm so sorry Yuuki-chan. One of those men visited me some time ago, and was quite interested when I mentioned that I practice our family art of poison making. So I showed him some of my equipment and my laboratory. It was only after he left that I realized one of my poisons was missing - stolen, of course. The man was quite the earnest admirer of our kind, so I thought he just wanted a souvenir of our meeting."

Shirabuki squeezes Yuuki's hands and her face becomes earnest. "I swear to you, Yuuki-chan, if I had known what he intended to do with it, I would have stopped him. I create poisons to continue our family traditions and practice our knowledge, not for them to be used. I feel so regretful that something I made was used against your poor Consort!" Shirabuki shakes her head, and her eyes dampen.

The other pureblood is probably not lying, Yuuki knows. The poison probably was 'stolen', but Yuuki would bet her entire wardrobe that Shirabuki Sara knew exactly what it was for and instructed Zero's attackers on how to use it. She may not have lifted a finger, but Shirabuki's help was the reason those scum could attack a helpless Zero at all.

Yuuki feels a deep hate well up from the black, pureblood parts of her soul, and the alpha hisses and spits. This woman almost killed Zero, Yuuki thinks, as she watches Shirabuki release her hands and take another drink of tea.

This woman will have to die, Yuuki decides quite logically.

"Perhaps it's a good thing I've lost my chance at an omega twice," the blonde pureblood reflects, a coy expression on her face as she watches Yuuki. "After all, they are terribly fragile things, aren't they?"

Seeing the glint in Shirabuki's eyes, Yuuki reads clearly the implied threat. A chill passes down her spine, and her stomach boils with rage. But Yuuki simply hums a neutral response, and takes another drink. She really is getting better at this, Yuuki reflects, smiling politely as Shirabuki giggles, and begins to plan how to destroy her.
Thus ends the current arc. Bechdel test pass ftw.

Zero and Yuuki, at least, understand each others' feelings better now. They trade off being the big spoon when she and Zero cuddle, by the way.

Next chapter: Summer draws to a close as Zero, still struggling to heal, enters the Colosseum of the Jeweled Court. And the seasons are not the only thing changing as our trio draw each other closer.
I hope everyone is having a nice summer. My trip was very pleasant, though fourteen hour jet lag is Not Fun. Thanks for being patient for the new chapter, I'm back in my home country, and have returned to my normal update schedule. I appreciate the continued outpouring of support and enthusiasm from my readers and reviewers.

This would have been ready earlier, but I ended up doing a series of fairly deep rewrites and revising the plot outline of this arc, because I don't want to rush things; I want to do it properly, and I know everyone's been looking forward to this arc after all this build up.

In which Kaname thinks deep thoughts, Yuuki experiences deep disappointment, and Zero wades a little too deep.

Across from him, Yuuki shifts, makes an odd 'mrr' sound, and settles back into her mussed blankets to sleep.

Lying awake in their bed, Kaname doesn't need any clock to know the twilight hours are beginning. Like all vampires, his body instinctively attunes itself to the sun - a bitter mockery, the better to seek out the night, the safest time for their kind.

Purebloods don't need sleep the way humans do. Kaname himself sleeps a few hours a night, at most, and when pushed, has gone weeks without it. If he goes sleepless long enough, his abilities begin to suffer, but an equivalent human would be pushed into a mental breakdown.

Yuuki sleeps the same seven or eight hours she did as a human, a relic of her upbringing. Sleep is one of her enduring human habits. The biological act comforts her, convinces her she isn't quite as inhuman as she believes she is. And even purebloods find sleep enjoyable and pleasurable, so many of them sleep more than is strictly necessary. His wife is an active sleeper, Kaname has learned, spilling bits of her dreams into the world as she shifts and mutters in the daylight.

Kiryuu sleeps like a Hunter - sparingly, with his body silent and still, easily woken at the slightest change or hint of danger. Or he did, when the nightmares didn't plague him and Nightshade curled around him in his hotel room beds. Now, with his fragile, broken body, their Consort spends most of his time in bed, cocooned in the slick, silken scarlet sheets with added thick blankets to keep his body warm and comfortable. Tonight, just like most nights, Kiryuu lies boneless against his side, tucked between himself and Yuuki, deaf to the world and deep in exhausted rest.

Kaname has had a great deal of time to study his spouses' sleeping habits. Somehow, instead of sleeping in Yuuki's bed, the three of them have migrated to the larger bed in the master bedroom - Kaname's bedroom - and Kaname can't see any sign this is a temporary affair. After the Hunter's 'redecoration' of his study, his bedroom had been his last private space free of any trace of Kiryuu, where Yuuki had never dared to intrude. There's something symbolic in that, he thinks now,
acutely aware of the pressure of Kiryuu's body against his flesh.

Kaname can't disentangle either of them, his wife or his Consort, from his life anymore. They are there when he goes to sleep, breathing warmly in his bed after he works late into the morning hours to avoid them. They are there when he awakens, Yuuki under the silver spell of her dreams, Kiryuu's chest quietly rising and falling. Yuuki is at his side during his nights, learning to manage their followers and navigate vampire society, and through his familiar he feels as though Kiryuu is present too, as if Kaname just needs to turn his head to see Kiryuu in the room. Their joined smell lingers stubbornly on his skin. Not even washing can keep the memory of it from lingering in his nose, a ghost of scent. People have started to comment on it.

For his eternal life, Kaname doesn't know what to make of all this. He has almost no secrets left from them. They know him, in ways he has never allowed anyone else. Intimacy of this breadth and depth is a complete enigma to him. His existence has stood above the rest of humanity, separated from the lives of others for so long - first in childhood, than in kingship, and finally in Sleep, and then secrecy. Even when he loved Yuuki, they had not been close. Between them had lain barriers, steep and slick, like a black glass mountain.

Now everything has changed. The two of them, Kuran Yuuki and Kiryuu Zero, are closer than any living being has ever come to him, and Kaname is at once uncertain and desirous, like a feral animal that hungers for the touch of a gentle human hand, and yet fears it.

No, the pureblood corrects himself, not fears it. That was not the metaphor he should have used.

A gentle chime interrupts his thoughts, and Yuuki stirs against Kiryuu, reaching out and smooshing him more closely against her side. Kaname notes that without Kiryuu flush against him, the air is a little cold. Not that purebloods need fear such things, but he will speak to the servants about turning the heat higher tomorrow.

The chime continues to ring. Yuuki's braid came undone during the night, and her face is buried in her pillow somewhere beneath a wild nest of hair. She groans and finally approaches consciousness when the noise refuses to go away. A hand appears from underneath the covers, and the corners of Kaname's mouth turn up as it blindly gropes its way to shut off the alarm. Still refusing to face the evening, but too awake to simply fall back to sleep, Yuuki's arms venture out again in the cooler air and reach for Kiryuu like a favorite toy.

The whole time, Kiryuu doesn't stir, continuing to lie limply and let himself be handled like a doll. The line of Kaname's mouth flattens. He's not worried, of course - Aido and the doctor insist Kiryuu is healing well - but such a drastic change in Kiryuu's sleeping habits says more than the Hunter ever will about his state. Kiryuu never complains, and he remains stubbornly stoic when it comes to his own pain, but he gives himself away with small telltales like that.

Mate is strong, consoles the alpha. Mate will heal and be well. We will take care of him.

Yuuki has finally summoned the will to force her body in an upright position, and is tucking the covers back around Kiryuu with one hand as the other combs knots of hair out of her eyes.

"I'm showering first," she yawns, and stumbles out of bed, pureblood's grace the only thing saving her from going nose-first into the carpet when she trips on a fold of bedding.

As the water turns on, Kaname rises and sees to his own morning routine, leaving Kiryuu to sleep in the leftover warmth of the bed. And if he makes sure the sheets cover Kiryuu all the way before he leaves, Kaname certainly doesn't need to make excuses for seeing to the needs of his own Consort.
Kaname rose, washed and returned to bed before Yuuki woke. All that's left is to finish dressing and touch up his appearance, tasks he completes in little time, leaving him to wait in the sitting room as his wife prepares for her day. Sipping tea in an armchair with one leg crossed over the other, and flipping through the morning reports Seiren left for him, Kaname has line of sight into the bedroom and can watch for any signs of Kiryuu waking. But the Hunter stays stubbornly insensate, curled up on himself now that he isn't sharing warmth from the purebloods on either side.

"Kaname," Yuuki asks, her dark hair bundled in a towel, threading cufflinks through the sleeves of her dress, "I have a meeting first thing this evening, and I need to leave soon. Can you call Sasaki-san? I know you're working at the house today, but I want to feed Zero before I go."

Since the attack, the Kurans never leave their Consort alone in the house. One of them will always stay at Rosehill, in case someone foolish tries to test their promises. It had taken Kaname many oaths and reassurances before Yuuki was willing to leave Kiryuu in her husband's care longer than a few hours. By now, he has passed enough tests to earn her cautious confidence, and he need not reswear his old oaths every time she leaves for the day.

When Kaname nods, Yuuki whirls back around into the bedroom, and the hair dryer goes on. He chuckles - some things never change - and picks up his phone. Yuuki's request fulfilled, the pureblood returns to the reports, considering every word with care, eyes narrowing now and then as he reads particularly unwelcome news.

A knock at the door, and Kaname swings the door open with a touch of power rather than break his concentration and answer it himself, only raising his head when the newcomer stands respectfully beside him.

"Kuran-sama," Sasaki greets him and curtsies, spreading the skirts of her house livery.

Kaname nods, and calls out to Yuuki, who sticks her head out of the bathroom door, manner halfway between 'dignified pureblood princess' and 'ragamuffin with bed hair who didn't want to get up this early.'

"Sasaki-san, sorry we're earlier than usual. Let me get Zero up for you," Yuuki says, moving toward the bed, running her hand over the dark wood of the ornately carved headboard.

Sasaki curtsies again. "It's no trouble, Kuran-hime. A servant of the Kuran should at least be able to do this much."

The beta vampire makes no motion to enter the bedroom. A sensible move, not to invade an alpha's territory when their injured, sleeping omega is occupying it.

Yuuki sits down on the edge of the bed, mindful of creasing her skirts, and reaches out to gently pull the bundle of sheets surrounding Kiryuu close, unwinding them little by little to reveal their slumbering Consort, still insensible and breathing deeply, silver hair hiding some of the ragged wounds on his face.

"Zero, wake up," Yuuki calls, and kisses him, shallowly and gently, until Kiryuu's eyes flicker open, bleary with sleep, and he begins trying to kiss back.

"Ew, you have morning breath," Yuuki teases, and Kiryuu swats at her weakly, mouth pulling into a sour expression.

"Shush, stupid pureblood," he grumbles, lavender eyes sharpening every second with awareness.
Swift wakefulness was another piece of his Hunter training he retained even as badly injured as he was. "You don't even get morning breath any more, you cheater," he complains, trying to pull himself upright.

Yuuki laughs, and helps Kiryuu prop himself up on the decorative pillows. "Can you leave the room for a moment, Sasaki-san?" she asks, and when the servant obeys, unwraps the decorative scarf tucked around her neck.

Kiryuu knows his part in this routine, and his eyes are soft and fond as he reaches out to skim the bare skin above her jugular with the tips of his fingers.

Yuuki shivers - Kiryuu probably doesn't realize how intimate that gesture really is for vampires - and hurriedly guides Kiryuu to her neck, helping him support his upper body. The scent of her blood has him salivating, and the sounds of Kiryuu drinking do not leave his body unmoved.

Something has changed between the two of them in the past few weeks, Kaname knows, watching Yuuki's back from the doorway. Whatever chasm lay between them when Yuuki left Cross Academy doesn't keep them apart any longer. Kiryuu and Yuuki have crossed the final space dividing them, keeping them apart, and Kaname feels conflicted - a familiar mix of envy and jealousy, and fear that the two of them becoming closer will necessarily mean Kaname is left standing farther away. His natural reaction would be to revenge himself upon the source of such feelings.

But Kaname knows now that however it might satisfy him, acting on his jealousy will not solve the source of his problems. Punishing Yuuki would hurt him as much as it reassured him he would not lose her, and he has no appetite anymore for harming Kiryuu.

The pureblood has even allowed Kiryuu to injure his pride many times since the attack, and not once has Kaname exacted revenge for it. Every time Kaname tries to contemplate a swift, humiliating consequence when Kiryuu challenges him, the image of Kiryuu near death will rise up in his mind, and the urge leaves him. So Kaname, bewildered at times, has let his pride be trampled on by a mere Hunter. At least Kiryuu has the sense not to challenge him in public, or then Kaname really would need to reply in kind.

Yuuki lowers a satiated Kiryuu back down onto the pillows, scattering kisses over his cheekbones and forehead as she goes, paying special attention to the worst of his scars. To Kaname's eye, his wife is rather obviously trying to control her breathing, and carefully keeping her lower half away from contact with Kiryuu. With one final kiss, she hurries into the bathroom, calling Sasaki back as she rushes to hide from temptation, shutting the door behind her.

Kaname struggles not to laugh. Yuuki need not be so concerned. Kiryuu's injuries mean her primal instincts in certain areas are being naturally suppressed in favor of protecting their injured omega (though when Kiryuu is healthy again…).

"I'll see you at dinner, okay Zero?" she calls through the wood, and Kiryuu makes an indistinct response, flustered by the kisses.

Kaname has mercy on his wife, and approaches the bed, and Kiryuu. "Are you ready to get dressed?"

Kiryuu regards him levelly, with a dignity that would not suggest he was lying helplessly on his back in his nightclothes. "Yes, thank you."

Kaname, in a single practiced motion, scoops both Kiryuu and the sheets off the bed. Bundled up in
his arms, the Hunter looks up at him with those lavender eyes, always refusing to back down in shame, and Kaname meets that gaze, before moving for the door and settling Kiryuu's weight securely in his arms. Sasaki falls into step behind him after collecting Kiryuu's nightrobe and slippers, and they make their way to the Consort's suite in silence.

No one meets them in the Hall; the servants know better than to risk seeing Kiryuu improperly dressed. Who knows if such a sinner would be allowed to live, one who saw a bare shoulder or a slipping neckline, who sought out any sliver of white flesh not meant for impious eyes? Even the idea that someone might witness their Consort's bare feet, the shy strong toes curling in thick carpet, makes Kaname's alpha snarl and spit. Every part of Kiryuu is theirs, and only theirs; Kaname tightens his grip on the thin body in his arms. Kiryuu doesn't move, only slumps without resistance against his chest. Still exhausted, Kaname notes, reminding himself to instruct strict attendance on Kiryuu by his maids today.

Even the Consort's suite is empty, waiting for its master to summon the rest of the maids. But first, Kiryuu must bathe and dress, a delicate operation when he can't stand, yet no one is allowed to see him nude. Kaname climbs the short stairs, deposits the bundle of omega and blankets directly into the empty bath, and goes to the opposite end of the suite to wait.

It has become the custom in Rosehill, to accommodate Kiryuu's injuries, that its masters take breakfast in the dining room of the Consort's suite, instead of the formal dining rooms. Kaname allows the servants to prepare his meal here again this morning, though only the two of them will be eating.

After perhaps forty minutes, Sasaki appears silently in the doorway. That's Kaname's signal to rise, and enter the bathroom with a coil winding in his stomach. The air is damp, and smells of bath oils, herbal essences meant to speed healing and soothe pain. Kiryuu's back is straight, and rests against the side of the white porcelain basin as he stares fixedly at the wall, trails of water dripping from his wet hair. The omega is covered from neck to knees in layer upon layer of thick towels that hide even the suggestion of a body beneath. It's Kaname's task to lift the whole mass up, modestly wrapped underneath by more towels, place the Hunter who is stubbornly ignoring him onto the bed, and then leave again, as Sasaki bows him out.

Another forty minutes later, as Kaname is closing the last of the morning reports, Sasaki appears one final time to invite her master's alpha to collect him for breakfast. Usually Yuuki will take care of Kiryuu's needs in the mornings, but from time to time it falls to Kaname as the two of them strive to bring their followers to heel, for certain this time.

Kiryuu's eyes flick to the door the moment the hinges creak, waiting expectantly on his unused bed dressed in a dark umber brown overrobe with cream and black striped hems. When not subject to society's expectations or fulfilling Yuuki's requests, Kiryuu's clothing in private remains simple and masculine. He prefers dark, rich colors and minimal extravagance - not so dissimilar from Kaname himself, the pureblood realizes in surprise.

When Kaname holds his husband, all bony ribs and shoulders and knees and the teasing, firm press of thigh against the healthy muscle of the pureblood's belly and chest, Kiryuu no longer flinches away like he expects Kaname to drop him. For some reason, that little sign of security makes Kaname's alpha feel satisfied.

Almost as satisfying is learning the shape of his Consort's body through such close, innocent touch. Or knowing that he spends every night in their bed, that no other upstart alpha can sneak in to meet him. But nothing satisfies the alpha like their mate marked by their scents, refreshed each time Kaname or Yuuki carries him.
Kiryuu begins eating his rice as soon as Kaname settles him into his chair, piling on the pickles and grilled fish as though nothing out of the ordinary is taking place, and his shaking hands aren't leaving stray grains fallen on the table.

It has surprised Kaname on many occasions how well Kiryuu has taken to the limits imposed by his injuries.

Kiryuu doesn't try to pretend it isn't difficult. There are many times when Kiryuu becomes frustrated, but he never takes it out on anyone but himself, asking for a little privacy before returning to his habitual stoicism. And he always seeks to improve, with a dogged persistence that whatever indignity he suffers, he refuses to be made ashamed. Perhaps it is this will to survive that led Kiryuu back to Hunting after he became one of the very beasts he Hunted. Cross explained the Hunter perspective on such things, but Kaname cannot conceive of the injuries, let alone how one might be conditioned to accept them.

Kaname has regenerated his whole body from a few cells, lost limbs that regrew in instants and taken hurts that no Hunter would survive with complete indifference. But such injuries are never real to purebloods. They have no consequences, so they may as well not have happened. 'Crippled' - Kaname can no more fathom the concept than a human can understand the eternal thirst for blood. Through Kiryuu, the pureblood is peering through a window onto the surface of an alien planet, a brief taste of that humanness he has envied since his creation.

"Are you not going to eat?" Kiryuu asks, gesturing toward Kaname's untouched meal.

"I was thinking," the pureblood replies, and begins to consume his food, barely tasting the forkfuls of vegetables he mechanically brings to his lips.

Is Kiryuu not ashamed, to need help with simple tasks? Is he not disgusted with himself, and with his body for failing him? Kaname's pride could not bear a single day in Kiryuu's place. Is this also a kind of strength? Or some kind of concealed weakness? Why does Kaname feel again like Kiryuu is a better person than himself?

"Master Yagari is visiting again next week," Kiryuu tells him, trying to make conversation in the silence Yuuki usually fills. "Cross wanted to come too. I told him to do his damn work."

"Really," Kaname replies, sipping his miso soup, the salty taste pairing well with the rice. "I will make a note."

Trying to remain unnoticed, the pureblood studies Kiryuu, who is entirely concentrated on the physical process of eating. Coordinating his hands at the same time he has to fight against his long sleeves falling forward seems to require great effort, and the food often falls off his fork. Yuuki is concerned that Kiryuu is not eating enough because the act causes him difficulty. Kaname makes a note to mention it to Sasaki, who has both the means and the opportunity to correct it.

"Hello there, Yuuki," Kiryuu says out of nowhere, pausing his battle with his meal, and Kaname understands when the Hunter lifts his hand. Dark against the pale skin is one of his wife's butterflies, antennae twitching and fanning itself with the secret spots on its wings.

Kiryuu is mostly finished, and Kaname's appetite has flown, so he asks, "Where will you be today?"

Kiryuu pauses to think, and once he decides says, "The library. Drop me off and I'll leave you alone until lunch."
Kaname waits patiently as Sasaki helps Kiryuu to the toilet after breakfast, and then fulfills the Hunter's request to spend the evening in the library, leaving Nightshade behind him before returning to his study for a late start.

With Yuuki a second shepherd tending their flock, Kaname has found himself with time left in his schedule, enabling lazy days like this. And with the extra hours, Kaname has also found time for some...side projects. And no task is more demanding than plotting the demise of another pureblood. Eliminating Shirabuki Sara isn't a simple thing - it may take years to succeed - and Kaname has much to consider before he can devise even the faintest outline of a plan.

Kaname works steadily, reviewing what he already knows and strongly suspects, calling Seiren occasionally to give his Shadow orders to pass on to his information network. While Kaname is certain Shirabuki was involved in the attempt on Kiryuu's life, the most urgent question is her involvement, or not, in the army of Level Ds, and the questing tests of Kiryuu's abilities. It could be one pureblood at fault, or the intersection of several pureblood plots.

Shirabuki's first meeting with Kiryuu is suspicious because of the Level D attack that preceded it, and certainly engineered by her, but it is not proof. Many purebloods use Turned humans as disposable pawns. All Kaname can do is continue searching for information, for any clue to hint at the army's master and purpose.

The pureblood leans back in his chair and pinches the bridge of his nose. Then he breathes out, drops his hand to his lap, and reaches out to the presences in the back of his mind. Yuuki is focusing intently on something, so Kaname decides not to distract her with his attentions, carefully muting his end of their bloodbond.

The other point of awareness cannot be muted, sending the pureblood countless sensations and images every second. Kaname touches it lightly, and receives the feeling of a hand resting on his back, and the sound of a page turning. Seeking the connection more fully, Kaname closes his eyes, and opens them again to see dark umber cloth. He tilts his muzzle upwards, and there is Kiryuu's familiar face, with its terrible scars, relaxed and distant as he reads.

Kaname should have realized, when he promised Nightshade to Kiryuu, just what he was getting himself into. Even when Kiryuu isn't present, his existence burns all the time in Kaname's mind, just the way Yuuki does, shadowing him wherever he hides. The pureblood finds himself looking up during meetings with the echo of low laughter in his ears; in empty rooms he sees the whisk of skirts out of the corner of his eye; he bends his head to a flower and receives salty, clean sweat instead.

Before, in secrecy, Kaname spent only a few days in Kiryuu's company through Nightshade, and then barely saw the Hunter while he stayed at Rosehill. Now Kaname spends his nights sleeping next to the real Kiryuu, and his days standing by the Hunter's side as Nightshade.

Kiryuu has been pressing into his senses for weeks, an assault of stimuli on every front - the omega-sweet smell of him, the soft tenor of his voice, the guilty sight of his scarred face, the shaking touch of his hand, and Kaname's returned touch on his body, even sometimes the taste of him, when Nightshade licks his hands in play.

Being able to watch someone he has claimed at all hours of the day and night appeals to Kaname's obsessive and possessive nature, and his alpha heartily approves. But counterpoint to the pleasure, there's a lingering sense that this is Kiryuu, a leftover habit of avoidance and distaste, continuing on its own momentum without Kaname's intention.

And there's so much detritus. From his spying, Kaname already knows which psychic levers and
triggers he needs to move Kiryuu. He knows Kiryuu is a good man, who loves Yuuki, and who cares about his fellow men in sticky, sappy ways Kaname will never feel himself. Anything extra is unnecessary.

What is Kaname supposed to do with his increasingly specific discoveries - the way he knows how Kiryuu takes his tea, or the way Kiryuu just huffs when he hits his shins on furniture. What do people do with this kind of minutiae? What is it for, when Kiryuu is neither his love nor his subordinate, but some murky, undecided position he hasn't fully recognized? What does Kaname want from Kiryuu Zero, if it's not suffering or indifference?

The most important butterfly whispers, and Yuuki runs, clattering through the halls of Rosehill in her heels, heading straight for one of the small courtyard gardens. She wouldn't stop now if Kaname and heaven itself commanded her.

*Hurry, hurry*, the alpha chants, pacing in the back of her mind.

Chatter, and the plink of falling water as she breaks into the moonlight, traveling at the blurring top speeds her pureblood body can produce. The cluster of maids in her path shatters like a flock of doves, and Yuuki throws herself to her knees on the pavestones.

"Are you hurt, Zero?" she asks, fear caught in her throat, hands going out to test his healing back for re-injury. The image her butterfly had sent her was Zero, twisted on his side as he hit the ground. His green, loose overcoat - one she bought for him - is dirty on the shoulder, proof that her familiar told her true, though his maids have helped straighten his body.

Resting his head on his forearms, and seemingly unperturbed, Zero shakes his head. "I'm fine, Yuuki. I just overreached and fell, that's all."

Laid out on his side, Zero winces as he shifts his weight.

Yuuki frowns at him, and Zero's cheeks flush.

"Maybe a few bruises," he admits, looking chastened. Zero tries to lift himself up with his arms, and it seems like he might succeed, but after a few seconds they shake and collapse under his own weight.

Her Consort almost falls again, but Yuuki catches him lightning-quick, pulling his body into her lap. He's bigger than she is, but anything can be accomplished with enough determination, and Yuuki wants her body between Zero and another fall.

*And touching mate is always good*, the alpha reminds her.

"Are you sure that's all?" she questions him again, using her thighs like the seat of a chair as she arranges Zero's position, draping his legs off to one side and turning his body toward her.

Zero is blushing again, and it's cute. "I am. Nightshade protected me from a hard fall. He moved so I hit his body, and then rolled onto the ground. My dignity and I are bruised, but everything else is fine."

Yuuki's gusty, relieved exhale makes Zero's bangs fly crooked. She hangs her head, and the muscles in her back loosen.

"Could one of you bring Consort Kiryuu some ice for his bruises?" she calls out to the maids. "And tea," she adds. "My tea, not the caffeine free ones Consort Kiryuu is allowed to have. And
something for him to eat as well."

Zero's maids all volunteer at once. Sasaki-san clicks her tongue for silence and taps two of them to fulfill Yuuki's request; the women hurry off to obey.

"Thank you," Yuuki says, relief creeping into her bones now that she knows Zero is safe. "Could the rest of you leave the two of us alone. I promise my Consort is in good hands."

Sasaki murmurs acknowledgement, and the maids curtsey and file out in a neat line.

Zero's wolf approaches now that the maids aren't hovering, whining anxiously until Zero pats him on the head.

"Thank you too, Nightshade," Yuuki says, envious again of Kaname's magnificent familiar. She loves her butterflies, and she's proud of them, but they aren't as useful in situations like this. And Zero can't cuddle with part of her power the way he can with Kaname's, she adds childishly inside her head. Kaname doesn't even appreciate it.

The wolf seems to sense the serious atmosphere, and retreats again to sit watching the two of them a few paces away, his tail curled around his paws and his head cocked sideways.

"Zero," Yuuki says, catching his eyes as they're face to face, "you were lucky you weren't hurt. Why didn't you ask for help instead of trying to reach for the pen yourself?"

Zero's expression goes flat, and he lowers his chin so his silver bangs hide his eyes. "I wanted to try. I should be able to do something so simple for myself."

Yuuki pulls him forward to rest his chin on her shoulder. It makes Zero, with his greater height, have to lean farther than she knows is dignified, but he makes no complaint.

"It's been over a month," he mutters. "Nothing's changed."

"You are getting better," she reminds him. "I can see a difference already. You can stay awake longer, and your open wounds have mostly healed. They said it would take months. It will come back to you."

"I know," Zero sighs mutinously.

"It makes me afraid when things like this happen," Yuuki confesses into his soft hair. "Please, next time ask? For me?"

"For you," Zero promises.

Yuuki rubs his back to reassure both of them, then urges Zero up to look at her again, a sudden impulse breeding an impetuous decision. "Can I ask you something serious? Something I've wanted to ask you for a while now."

Zero's brow creases, and he considers her face for a moment. "That's fine," he finally says, and she lifts him up onto the wide stone bench in front of the courtyard's fountain, dusting off the side of his gown, and then her own knees and seat.

Yuuki stands, wringing her hands with nervousness as she starts to second-guess herself. Why did she pick a place like this to ask? She was hoping to find the perfect time, but the request just slipped out all of a sudden. But she can't stop now. She has to follow through!
"Yuuki," Zero says with a hint of humor, "it's fine. Go ahead and ask."

Feeling like a teenager again, Yuuki smacks her cheeks to focus herself, then tucks her nervous hands behind her back and takes a deep breath, drawing her shoulders back, and letting the words escape in a rush.

"Zero, will you bloodbond with me!"

"What," Zero says.

"Maybe I should kneel? This seems like a kneeling thing," Yuuki says to herself, so she does, getting down on one knee.

More slowly this time, she looks up into Zero's face and says, "I'm asking you to bloodbond with Kaname and I, Zero. I almost lost you. That's helped me see things more clearly. Things that I need to change. And things that I want, things that matter to me. And what I want is for you to be part of me the same way Kaname is."

Yuuki takes his hand without resistance. "And if we bloodbond, I'll be able to find you anywhere in the world, and you'll never face such danger again."

Zero doesn't look overjoyed - Yuuki's first warning that this isn't going how she planned - but he presses his lips together and considers her request seriously. "What would that mean?" he asks, voice distant. "You told me about what your bond with Kuran is like. Would a second bond change that?"

The pureblood shakes her head. "My bond with Kaname won't be affected. Adding a third person is like turning a line into a triangle - you draw new lines to fill in the gaps, without erasing the first foundation line. And the nature of your bloodbonds with us won't be like the one between Kaname and I. As two alphas, our bloodbond was meant build a stable hierarchy, but you won't be part of that. You'll still feel the usual emotional echoes and the direction sense, but that's all."

Looking at their joined hands, Zero says, "How much would Kuran be part of this," the words not quite a question.

"Kaname would be fully involved, the same as our marriage," Yuuki replies, feeling cautious somehow. "I'm bonded to him. Any future bloodbond I form has to include him as an equal partner."

"So I have to also bond with Kuran, to bloodbond with you," Zero says, tone casual, but his eyes are steely when he looks up.

That's the moment Yuuki knows she's lost. "Yes," she says, feeling papery-thin, with a ball of tears in her throat. "The new bloodbond will fail if we don't."

The Hunter cradles Yuuki's hand in both of his, and his kind eyes just make her feel more like crying. "When I asked Takuma-sempai why most alpha couples don't form a full bloodbond - or why most vampire couples don't bloodbond at all - he told me that it's so intimate that you don't do it unless you are absolutely, totally sure that's what you want, and even then you should stop to think again before you try. Because you can't undo it, and it won't work unless you really, completely want it to. Being in someone else's head all the time - it's not for everyone."

Zero tugs Yuuki to her feet, and she doesn't resist the pull, looking down at him with uncertainty.

He squeezes her hands as he looks up to meet her eyes. "Yuuki, I know you love me, but I'm not
sure if you're doing this because you want to protect me or if you really are ready for this. And I
sure as hell don't want Kuran permanently in my head. So I'm sorry, but I can't accept your offer.
But that doesn't mean my feelings for you have changed. I love you, the same as I always have."

In the background, the maids clatter into the room with ice and tea and food. Neither Yuuki nor
Zero notice, but Nightshade is crouched down on his belly, ears pinned flat against his skull,
looking as flat and small as possible for an animal of his size.

She's disappointed, but Yuuki understands his reasoning. "Thank you for telling me your feelings
honestly," she says, and closes her eyes so she doesn't make Zero feel guilty at the dampness.
A shadow writhes and lengthens; Kaname stalks toward Kiryuu wearing the familiar that was, a
few milliseconds ago, Nightshade. He cannot quantify the emotion running white-hot in his veins,
but he knows that he needs to see the Hunter in person.

Yuuki has gone, the maids have been sent away, and his Consort is alone, staring into a cup of tea -
caffeenated tea, that his doctor has ordered him specifically not to drink - like he is attempting
some form of meditation. Kiryuu looks stone-faced, stoic as his most inscrutable moods.

Kaname does not make a sound, yet Kiryuu looks up anyway as the pureblood closes in, no
surprise on his face. At the sight of Kaname, the corners of his mouth tighten slightly, and his
posture turns wary and suspicious.

"Why are you here, Kuran," Kiryuu says, keeping his voice even, with a hint of tension
underneath.

"Why did you refuse Yuuki?" Kaname demands instead, whatever emotion rules him bubbling up
in his chest. Somehow, that was not the question he meant to ask, but he can't grasp the real source
of his turmoil.

Kiryuu looks back down at his cup. "You heard why," he replies, again in that irritatingly even
tone.

Kaname allows himself a lapse in control.

The porcelain cup shatters into powder against the far courtyard wall, Kaname's pureblood strength
making it an easy feat.

Startled by the way the cup whisked itself out of his grasp without harming him or spilling a single
scalding drop, Kiryuu tries to find something to do with his suddenly empty hands. He settles on
tucking them up in his sleeves. "I wasn't going to drink that," he says with a voice clean of anger or
fear.

Kaname bares his fangs. "Would you really deny Yuuki something she desperately wants, just
because you hate me?"

"I don't hate you," Kiryuu replies in the same calm manner as before, complete contrast to
Kaname's whirlwind. "And don't pretend that saying no to Yuuki was easy for me."

"If you don't hate me, then why use me as an excuse?" Kaname argues.

Kiryuu inhales and makes a small shake of his chin. "You've acted decent to me lately, Kuran. But
one month of indifference doesn't outweigh a lifetime of spite. I don't trust you. You've never given
me a reason to trust you. I'm still not sure this sudden niceness isn't part of some scheme - you do
like to build your opponents up before you crush them. You're the last person I would trust to know what's going on in my head."

Kaname tightens his fists until the bones creak.

"Why did you starve yourself when you were a Hunter?" Kaname shoots the question at Kiryuu, desperate to provoke a reaction.

With his first hint of anger, Kiryuu replies, "You're not entitled to know everything about everyone, Kuran Kaname, just because you want to." The Hunter challenges him with an unblinking gaze. "Please leave, husband."

And without understanding why, Kaname does, turning on his heel andStorming away.

Zero should be grateful. Ancestress knows things could have been much worse. His spine was broken twice, yet Zero can still wiggle his toes and feel every sensation below his waist. Other injured Hunters would weep to be so blessed. Other Hunters would be glad just to be alive. It's a miracle - but Zero, with the impossible, unthinkable promise of full recovery dangling before him, wants what he should never have been able to dream.

His miraculous recovery is possible only because he is not human, with a human's weakness and freedom. Zero's mind is fighting that truth, though it's written more concretely on his body than ever. When he sits alone in his bath, the only privacy permitted to him, he turns his limbs around and around, searching in the slopes and valleys of his body like he's looking for his lost mortality as he watches the way fatal wounds seal over, leaving horrendous scars that will soon also fade.

Sitting alone on his bench in the predawn hours, watching the flow of the fountain splashing into its bowl, Zero tilts his head back, and lifts his hands to block out the stars. Kiryuu Zero is a vampire. I am Kiryuu Zero. Therefore -

He leans back too far, concentrated on stilling the little twitches in his fingers, and nearly overbalances. Zero cries out, and pulls his hands back down to quickly clutch the stone edge of his seat, fearful of another fall.

No one comes to investigate the noise. The maids and servants Yuuki sent away. Yuuki and Kuran have come and gone, and Kuran took Nightshade with them. If one of Yuuki's butterflies is nearby, Zero can't sense it. Zero is really, truly alone, for the first time in a long time.

Since he was Turned, acceptance always hinged on what Zero could accomplish with his tainted body; he earned his place because of what he could do with his hands and feet. All of that means nothing now. Zero's worth lies in the rare vampire uterus inside him, the sole reason people keep taking care of him now. Zero finds it strange, the way they attend to his every need; Zero has never had other people take care of him so much. He once compared himself in this state to a doll, but he's more like an infant, incapable of doing the smallest thing for himself.

That's why he tries to push himself sometimes, but as he shifts and his bruises sting, he is reminded of how badly that failed. Yuuki's request startled him, but Zero knows he gave the right answer. It doesn't feel like it. The guilt of hurting someone he loves, again. Zero clenches the fabric above his heart. He's helpless on his own, and now he's disappointed Yuuki and angered Kuran.

Zero can't hold his back straight without support any longer, so he has to flop down on the bench to rest. He closes his eyes. His new bruises don't mean much. Zero is always in pain now. Pain when he moves, pain when he lies still. It hurts to move, it hurts to rest, it hurts to speak or eat or wash or
breathe. It's the pain of knitting tissues and regenerating nerves, but pain nonetheless. It ebbs when he feeds, and threatens to swamp him when he goes too long without medicine, but it's always there. Zero's forgotten what life feels like when you can move without burning aches and stabbing cramps.

Slowly, Zero realizes that he has no way to call for anyone. He's too weak to move from his seat, exhausted by his fall, and he's far from the bell the servants are trained to answer. Without familiars, or servants, or his own abilities, all Zero can do is lie here, on this bench, and wait for someone to remember him.

He comes to this conclusion calmly, without panic - there's too much Hunter training in him to panic over a small thing like this. Perhaps he could attract someone if he made enough noise, but his pride stops him, unless there's a real emergency.

So Zero lies there, and he thinks. He thinks about how reliant he is on Yuuki and Kuran for his physical survival. How weak he is, how needy. How they must be tired of dealing with him right now, after he's upset them.

It makes him afraid.

He wonders, the self-doubt and the physical suffering of not having fed since dusk warping his thoughts - what if they just leave him here for a few hours, as the sun rises? Leave him outside for the heat of the day to punish him, to scorch his vampire's flesh, to make him more pliable, more grateful, less of a troublesome Hunter, more of a good, obedient Consort.

Zero huddles underneath the cloth of his wide sleeves, like a bird sheltering itself under a broken wing, and waits, because he has no other choice. He needs an answer to his doubts - to know, one way or another, how things turn out. Perhaps, raised by his exhaustion, this is the ghost of a twelve-year-old boy speaking, one who saw almost everyone he knew abandon him the first time his body betrayed him.

He waits.

And they come.

Together, with their mirrored ruby eyes and dark red-brown hair, they come for him when it's time for dinner, and the sky is still cool full-dark and dappled with stars. They don't leave him for the sun, helplessly trapped on his bench as the burning orb rises.

They scoop him up with a flurry of apologies, realizing their error, dismayed and full of self-reproach. He gets to lap hot, burning blood from his husband's throat, as much as he wants, and is carried nestled like a child with his warm, full stomach to be fed mortal foods. His wife presses small pieces of the best portions on him, feeding him with her own hands, and he eats everything she offers him with relish, the taste rich and satisfying.

They have good reason to be angry with him, but both purebloods still step forward when it's time to carry him to bed. They settle on taking turns, and Zero lets them pass him back and forth, from one pair of arms to the next without fuss, accepting each new offered security without shame.

Fighting his long sleeves, Zero curls an arm around each of their necks, like a yoke - or a collar - and feels the fear inside him go quiet, and shrink, just a little.

Chapter End Notes
As usual, it's Kaname's fault. Yuuki took a piece out of his hide when she realized he picked Dramatic Exit instead of using his head.

The last three sections take place one after the other, so it's implied that Yuuki left Zero alone with Nightshade after he declined her offer to form a bloodbond, and soon after Kaname took over Nightshade, re-formed him into his own shape, and spoke with Zero, then stormed out without thinking, which left Zero alone. The actual time that passed from Kaname leaving to the Kurans returning was less than two hours - Zero's sense of time in his POV isn't reliable in this case.

Next chapter I promise we'll finally get to the Jeweled Court, but first I needed to fill a plothole pointed out to me by a lovely reviewer who prefers to remain private, and we needed to see where are trio are after such a long gap of time.
Para Bellum

Chapter Notes

This chapter ended up quite long. Please enjoy it!

To the guest reviewer who asked, Yuuki didn't give Zero the tea with caffeine. It was Yuuki's tea, but she didn't really touch it. Zero took it from her when she left and just kind of kept it because it made his hands warm.

If you missed the clarification I added last chapter: The last three sections take place one after the other, so it's implied that Yuuki left Zero alone with Nightshade after he declined her offer to form a bloodbond, and soon after Kaname took over Nightshade, re-formed him into his own shape, and spoke with Zero, then stormed out without thinking, which left Zero alone. The actual time that passed from Kaname leaving to the Kurans returning was less than two hours - Zero's sense of time in his POV isn't reliable in this case.

A vampire would not use the term 'blood bond' to refer to the relationship between a pureblood and the humans they turn. That's a master-possession relationship, vs. the blood bond that establishes a tie of equals. Blood bonds can only be formed through a ritual by a fully consenting pair of individuals.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"Then you understand what I'm asking?" Kaname says, leaning back in his desk chair, hands steepled in front of him.

Kain Akatsuki, slouched with his hands in his pockets, replies, "I do. I'll round up a few of the others who wouldn't mind helping out. I understand you want this done without attracting attention, but that means I can't promise we'll be thorough."

"That is not my intention," Kaname informs him. "I just need to even the odds. I may make suggestions, from time to time, but how you focus your efforts is largely up to your discretion."

The noble slouches even further, and lightly asks, "Should Ruka know?"

"She can," Kaname says, reading the request behind Kain's words. "But I would prefer that no one but the two of us know I suggested it. Let them think you acted on your own initiative."

"Got it," Kain says, and hearing the silent 'Gang Leader' hanging afterward, Kaname's lips quirk upward.

"I trust your abilities in this, Kain," the pureblood says, rising to indicate that their conversation is finished. Yuuki is out of the house today, by design, and it's time for him to collect Kiryuu for lunch.

At the first clock chime, Yuuki comes fully awake.
She's hardly slept, but tonight there's no rolling over or lying in bed for another few minutes. Tonight is too important for wasting time. Vital even, in the way few things really are.

Tonight, Zero faces the Jeweled Court, taking his place at the top of their hierarchy, and there's no way his rivals are going down without a fight.

Sliding out of bed, she spies Kaname, already impeccable, at work in one of the plush chairs of the sitting room. He looks up, meets her eye, and smiles, before gesturing at the bed behind her and returning to his reading.

Yuuki steels herself, reminding her reluctant mind that sometimes things like this are necessary, and goes to wake Zero.

Last night, they went to bed hours earlier than usual - and though Zero wakes swiftly when she shakes his shoulder, and doesn't complain, Yuuki can still tell the early hour is a trial his healing body doesn't appreciate.

She kisses his hair in apology, and helps him up, tilting her head back and offering her blood, and the limitless vitality flowing in her veins, all for her beloved. Asking Zero for the bloodbond had been selfish and rushed; she hasn't mentioned it since, but she keeps trying to apologize to him in small ways like this.

Zero noses her throat, recognizing by now the best places to bite, and licks at the spot he's picked.

Yuuki's anticipation rises, but she also knows they're on a schedule, and presses him forward with the hand on his back.

Zero huffs - Yuuki can hear 'pushy pureblood' in her head, and has to smother a laugh - but he bites down anyway.

The shock of it passes quickly. After being forced on the intensive feeding schedule his body needs, Zero's bite has become more practiced: neater, quicker, and better positioned at the vein so he takes less time to drink enough blood. Kaname personally tutored Zero's technique - fed up, Yuuki suspects, with the ungainly childish attempts marring his neck.

Personally, Yuuki thought Zero's baby vampire bites were cute, and didn't mind Zero's inefficiency and mouthy, honest hunger. It meant they could stay close for longer, just like this, as Yuuki nourishes him with her existence, the only union allowed to her.

The swallowing stops, and ignoring the curl of heat in her stomach, Yuuki allows Zero to close the wound - better not to have pure blood flowing freely, even if the staff are used to it.

She makes eye contact with Kaname, who's watching blank-faced and unreadable from the side of the bed, and slides sideways so he can switch places with her. Today is a special day, so Zero gets a double feeding to make sure he's in the best possible condition.

Zero's still licking her blood off his lips with the tip of his tongue when Kaname kisses him to steal the rest. Yuuki's alpha rumbles in her chest, warning her alpha-mate that the blood is meant for their omega, not for him.

Kaname just looks smug; Yuuki flashes her fangs, and rumbles again, reminding him that he may be the stronger alpha between them, but she's no pushover.

Her husband isn't cowed, but he does settle down to business, unbuttoning his collar to make space for Zero.
Yuuki's jealous when anyone else touches Zero - even Kaname, just a little. Only someone who adores Zero as much as she does should be allowed to touch him, she thinks to herself as Kaname's blood wells up, and Zero begins drinking.

The pureblood closes her eyes and draws the blood-scent over the roof of her mouth, to distract herself from the sudden stab of hunger.

It isn't that she lacks satisfying blood. Kaname and Yuuki feed from one another - she's forgiven him enough to allow that, and it's simply more practical. The two of them couldn't live on blood tablets forever, and leaving each other sated with blood makes up for how they still aren't sleeping together.

But that doesn't stop Yuuki from finding the sight of her husbands feeding from each other - bodies tucked close, dark hair falling into silver as one sips from the neck of the other - the kind of sight that inspires all kinds of hungers, especially when everyone is wearing that edge of hard focus.

Kaname keeps telling her that she doesn't need to be careful, that her instincts won't react to an injured omega. Kaname doesn't get it.

Yuuki's pureblood, with its ravenous, possessive want, and the alpha's single-minded drive to claim its omega - those primal parts of her have quieted, yes. But it has never been about those things. Not for Yuuki.

Yuuki wanted Zero before she was a pureblood. And she wanted him even when she was an alpha and he was a beta. It is Yuuki, the person, who wants Zero - has always wanted Zero - and that part of her desire can never be silenced. That's not instinct. That's affection, and choice.

Yuuki doesn't need her instincts to want Zero, and that's why she's still cautious not to frighten him by revealing that desire.

But Kaname's instincts are the only parts of himself that feel anything toward Zero, so of course it works for him, and not Yuuki.

Yuuki claims the right to carry Zero to his bath, shooting a quick glare at Kaname as she hefts her bundle of omega. She's still a little irritated that Kaname helped himself to Zero's meal.

Once her Consort is safely deposited in Sasaki's care, she hurries back to her own room to dress. Yuuki needs a chance to calm down, away from any trace of their scents, in a space she doesn't associate with Zero. Otherwise she won't be ready to handle what comes next. Yuuki breathes evenly, and tries to keep her mind on the present, not letting anticipation stir her.

It doesn't do any good. The curl of heat in her belly stubbornly refuses to go away. Yuuki feels it keenly as a servant informs her that Consort Kiryuu needs to see her before he can finish dressing.

It doesn't do any good. The curl of heat in her belly stubbornly refuses to go away. Yuuki feels it keenly as a servant informs her that Consort Kiryuu needs to see her before he can finish dressing.

She's not the only one; the sheen of Kaname's eyes proves he isn't as unmoved as he pretends to be, and a roving energy makes him carry his shoulders tighter than usual. Yuuki smiles at Kaname, just to show him she's seen what he's hiding, but that leaves the moment she sees Zero.

Sitting on his bed in thin trousers and a long-sleeved, ankle-length black undergarment, missing the heavier outer layers, Zero looks ill and pale, body strung tight as he watches the Kurans approach, as though he's preparing himself for something painful.

Yuuki's heart tears, and she goes to Zero's side at once, folding him in her best, most reassuring hug. "Everything will be okay, Zero. We won't hurt you, and we won't let anyone else hurt you either," she promises.
Today is the first time Zero will leave Rosehill since those scum almost killed him. It worries all of them, even without the Jeweled Court looming. Having Zero out of Kuran territory brings memories of the terrible events a month ago, and Yuuki fears that Zero leaving again may end with him dead this time. The idea keeps Yuuki awake at night, and makes her alpha pace and roar in denial, driving her to protect their mate in any way they can.

Even worse, the rules of the Jeweled Court prohibit alphas from attending, and that means the Kurans can't even send their familiars. So Zero will be away from his safe place, and from the Kurans, who he has relied on to protect him and take care of them since he was injured. Zero tries so hard to be self-sufficient, and he'll never say anything, but Yuuki knows he's frightened by the idea of going alone into a house of vampires when he can't protect himself.

"I have an agent inside the Court," Kaname reveals unexpectedly, settling a hand on her shoulder. "They will contact you if necessary. And you are not without allies among the other omegas. Takuma will be sitting beside you the whole time, and others you know will be nearby."

Yuuki grins into Zero's neck. Whatever he insists, Yuuki knows that Kaname won't be doing any work today. Yuuki and Kaname are already fighting separation anxiety that screams 'every moment he is not with us could be his last' and Zero hasn't even left yet. The only thing filling their minds while Zero is out of their sight will be a restless counting of the moments until they can see him again.

The Hunter, always conscious of his duty, says, "I know, Kuran."

Trying to lighten the mood, Yuuki pokes his shoulder with a finger. "Zero, you broke the rules again."

It seems to work. The Hunter glares at her, and then glances at Kaname, who has an expectant air. Sighing, and rolling his eyes, Zero finally gives in. "I know, Kaname. I appreciate your concern."

Yuuki giggles, and forces her body to unstick and let go of Zero. Yuuki's new rule is that everyone is on first-name basis when they're in the bedroom. She's hoping that it will make Zero and Kaname more relaxed around one another, but Yuuki knows that she can't force them to actually like each other. It's up to them to repair their relationship, if either of them even want to.

Zero's watching her now, flash of levity gone and expression serious. "I'm okay, Yuuki. You should go ahead and start. We can't be late."

Yuuki frowns. "If you really oppose it, you should tell us. I don't want you to accept it because you think it's your duty."

"He'll be safest if we scent mark him," Kaname disagrees, lowering Zero down with one hand wrapped around the nape of his neck, and the other supporting his spine. "Since we haven't lain with him, and we can't be physically present, we need to leave the strongest possible claim. This is my condition to let him leave the house alone."

Zero looks up at Yuuki, laid out on his back against the blue-green duvet. He says nothing, just holds his hand out to her, a hint of a blush visible between the scars on his pale cheeks.

The curl of heat smoulders in her belly. Yuuki struggles with herself, her wish to respect Zero's boundaries and his clear tension and reluctance colliding with her own desperate wish to scent him.

Frankly, Yuuki never stood a chance the moment Zero offered himself up to her. The pureblood takes her Consort's hand and settles herself on the bed beside him, with Kaname sitting on his other...
side. The similarity to their sleeping arrangement is undeniable, and it makes Yuuki's mind imagine things she puts a hasty stop to, before the wanting can ruin what she has.

Letting herself smell the line of his throat, Yuuki hears her voice go rough and hushed. "Where do you want us to start, Zero?"

She can feel him swallow under her lips. "You both have to touch me - everywhere, right?"

Yuuki kisses Zero's neck. "Everywhere you're comfortable, Zero. Our scent is strongest at the wrists and throat, so that's how we'll mark you."

*Mate should let us mark him the proper way*, laments the alpha.

What Yuuki told Zero is true. Below the jaw and wrist are places where alpha bodies naturally produce more scent, for exactly this kind of reason. But marking a precious omega mate needs even more potent signs. Her body's strongest place with her scent is her cock, and a proper scent marking would leave Zero dripping with their spend, further proof of their claim remaining deep inside his core as the heavy smell of sex and alpha musk warns their rivals of the powerful, virile alphas who have mated him.

It's a nice fantasy, except Zero's far from ready for that kind of thing. So Yuuki will accept gratefully and humbly what he has offered, and be content.

Aware of Kaname focussing his attentions on Zero's hand and wrist, Yuuki decides to start with something Zero knows already, and moves upward from his neck, drawing the join of her jaw and neck along his skin, right where the scent glands are. She sniffs her handiwork, just to make sure the scent is thick enough atop the blue veins of his neck and the sweet blood flowing beneath.

Crooning to soothe her mate, who still looks nervous, Yuuki strokes his face, and indulges herself with a long kiss that has no purpose in marking him, except to distract him as she runs her hands through his hair. Yuuki gives him a second to breathe before she kisses him again, slipping her hands behind him and feeling down the muscles of his back blindly, until the tension of his body warns her she's strayed too close to the swell of his ass.

Yuuki pulls back, self-control needing a moment to recover, to find Kaname flush against Zero's side. Kaname's pulled Zero's undergarment down to expose his shoulder, and her husband is nibbling at Zero's collarbone.

"Kaname!" she cries, outraged.

"You were enjoying yourself. Am I not allowed to?" her husband replies, blowing at the damp skin. Zero shivers, and all three of them feel it.

"Maybe we should...just be practical about this. No messing around," Yuuki says when she can trust her voice again.

Zero is still trying to gather his wits, a temptation too beautiful to resist, thoroughly mussed and the curve of his shoulder exposed, his clothing parted to show his skin.

Kaname's chest is rising slightly faster than normal, and his eyes have gone dark, the red overwhelming the brown. "Perhaps you're right."

The two alphas switch places, and this time show more restraint, only allowing their touch and eyes to linger on Zero's skin.
Zero pretends to be unmoved. But sharp pureblood eyes catch the little twitches in his expression, the flickers of his eyelids. They feel his muscles shiver under their hands at the merest hint of touch. They hear the times he breathes too fast, and the times he barely breathes at all. Marking him with their throats is the most fun - the way he chokes when they rub up against him like cats is especially rewarding.

Then the purebloods run out of safe areas to touch, leaving just Zero's forbidden places, his front, and his thighs.

Yuuki takes Zero's hand. "Will you show me how far I can go?" she asks, pressing her cheek to the back of his hand, and Zero makes a noise, nodding in lieu of speech.

He nervously places Yuuki's hand on his belly, still trying to keep his expression blank, and when she doesn't move, Zero lays his hand on top of her smaller delicate one, tentatively guiding her along the waistband of his trousers.

Yuuki wishes there was no cloth between her hand and Zero's skin, but bends every bit of her attention to the experience of Zero showing her his body, raptly treasuring the bravery and trust he's showing her.

Then he stops.

Startled out of her focus, Yuuki glances at Zero's face; the brow is knotted in intense though.

"Zero? Is everything okay -"

The Hunter jerks up the hem of his undergarment, and lifts Yuuki's hand. Before she can process what's going on, Yuuki feels something smooth and warm under the skin of her palm. She freezes, mind stuttering to a halt.

She has a hand up Zero's shirt.

Her fingers spread out, and she notes that this patch of skin, perpetually hidden from sun and wind, is very soft. She strokes it, moving her fingers inward and outward.

Yuuki's hand is up Zero's shirt.

"I don't want you to touch any lower. I hope this is okay instead," he says, eyes lowered with embarrassment. With his trousers, Zero's still completely clothed. Yuuki just has her hand up his long tunic-thing.

Yuuki thinks she squeaks, and then furiously nods, petting Zero's bare belly more boldly.

Oh god, don't get hard, she tells herself, knowing she's fighting a battle she's going to lose. This isn't even that sexy, she tries to convince herself. It's just this little strip of skin. But it's Zero, and she wants him so much.

Again, Zero takes Yuuki by the wrist, and shows her the places she's allowed to touch, sweeping up and down his stomach, and even wrapping around his sides. From his waist, he guides her off the middle parts, muscles softened by injury, onto the bony peaks of his ribs, still too prominent for Yuuki's satisfaction. Here and there she finds knots of scar tissue, which she touches extra gently with only the pads of her fingers. Her thumb gets to brush the end of Zero's sternum, just below his chest and nipples; Yuuki has enough self-control not to whimper, barely.

The pureblood wishes this moment could last forever, but soon enough, Zero tugs her hand up, and
Yuuki knows that's her cue to end. She pulls her fingers back with reluctance, cradling the limb with her other hand once she's free.

Yuuki can't read the expression on Kaname's face, but she knows her own is starry-eyed and pleased.

Zero sticks his hand out. "Fair is fair. Give me your hand, Kaname."

Her husband's eyes widen a fraction, but he doesn't hesitate to offer his hand.

Kiryuu, blushing even more heavily, pulls up his garment again and shows Kaname the same soft places he just revealed to Yuuki.

Yuuki is irrationally jealous, but also somewhat aroused.

When Kaname's turn is finished, Zero pulls his skirt back down, and tries to put his clothes straight.

Yuuki and Kaname watch. Yuuki suspects they're too stunned to think properly.

"What are you two hanging around for? You did your weird vampire thing and I smell like you. Get out so I can finish getting dressed," Zero says, looking away and hiding his face like he can't believe what he's just done.

"Have a servant come get me when you're ready," Yuuki says, knowing she's heading back to her room. She's going to have this memory playing nonstop in her head until she can deal with her lingering arousal.

The atmospheric pressure changes, reassembling Zero's body so he can breathe again; as the clicks and squeaks of the bats fade, revealing an unfamiliar countryside, the Hunter plasters himself against the chest carrying him, creasing the pressed linen shirt.

He's outside, and everything is too much - the feeling of wind, the sounds of the night animals, the mixed, unfamiliar smells, and the creeping fear and helplessness they inspire.

Zero's world, in the past month-plus, has become very small. He sees Kuran's bedroom, where they sleep, and his suite, where he bathes and dresses, they eat meals, and he spends time. Then there's the library, a few courtyards, and the occasional dining room for variety.

The point is, Zero hasn't been anywhere new, or without walls, in some time. And the last time he was outside, people hurt him. Momentarily overwhelmed, he refuses to open his eyes, huddling against Kuran's chest, and locking his arms around the vampire's neck.

"Kiryuu, I believe this is within your abilities."

Zero opens his eyes involuntarily, startled.

Kuran Kaname looks down at him, stately in his charcoal suit, face unreadable and not a hair out of place. Perhaps Zero imagined that he spoke.

Zero recalls himself, and is immediately ashamed, loosening his grip and looking away to compose himself though his heart is still rapidly beating in his chest. He could have ruined all their preparations without Kuran's foresight to arrive in a place hidden from view.

The Hunter busies himself adjusting his posture into something more imposing, twitching his skirts
into place and cursing the long, heavy train of his robes.

A stream of butterflies coalesces, and Yuuki builds herself back into normal space piece by piece. Yuuki's improved at shifting through space after practice, but is still far from safely transporting a passenger.

Like Kuran, she's tastefully stylish in a dark day dress, both outfits fine but simple, with little to attract the eye, chosen carefully to avoid outshining Zero.

"Is Zero ready?" she calls. "We're running up against time."

Kuran looks at him again, raising an eyebrow. Zero scowls; no need to be so skeptical. He's a Hunter, and something like this is hardly the worst he's faced.

"I'm ready," he says, taking a deep breath and running through the mental exercises Master Yagari taught him as a child. His breathing and heartbeat have slowed, and he has one foot in mushin. Like he's about to walk into combat, almost, and Zero is reassured by the notion. He's walked unfamiliar battlefields before.

Yuuki doesn't insult him by second-guessing his resolve; she just smiles at him, and squeezes his hand, making a few final adjustments to the fall of his mantle and the set of his Hoseki.

Then she takes her place at Kuran's right hand, and they begin to walk, coming in full view of the estate's gates once they pass the treeline and leave their leafy shelter.

A Jeweled Court is meant to be a neutral zone, and is usually hosted by one of the few families who are aligned with neither the Senate nor the monarchists. The Senate faction's price for postponing the Court until Zero healed was for one of their members to host it instead. Those gilded golden gates belong to the home of Kaneko Madeline, one of their chief members and the wife of the current richest Senator. This is hostile territory, where Kurans' opponents have the advantage of terrain and numbers.

Zero's not impressed - Takuma has more money and better taste. The whole manor screams 'I have more money than I know what to do with'. It's not ugly, exactly, but it's very busy, without restraint, as though someone thought to themselves, 'how can I make this fancier' and then did everything that came to mind, stacking flourishes on flourishes without regard to effect. Zero thought Rosehill was fancy, but this place makes him profoundly glad he lives there instead.

Kuran, they decided ahead of time, would be the one to carry Zero. He's the elder, and the larger, and if Zero has to make a first impression while he's unable to walk, Kuran makes the most imposing backdrop.

The arrangement turns out to be quite useful - no one tries to stop them from entering, questions Zero's right to be here or bothers asking for an invitation. The gatekeeper offers to have a car take them up the drive; Kuran politely deflects.

"They'll know we're coming. Don't let your masks slip. The guards will have called the house, and your enemies will be waiting for you, Kiryuu," Kuran says as they walk.

"My enemies?" Zero replies skeptically. He's never met most of these people.

Kuran bends his head closer to Zero's ear. "For all intents and purposes, yes. Our enemies are your enemies now. Triumphing against you is the same as besting us. That is why they will not hold back against you, even if you have done nothing to them." Kuran's voice is even, and from his face they could be discussing the weather.
"I know you prefer to avoid politics. That is no longer an option. I don't expect you to suddenly become a statesman, but you must understand that your position reflects on Yuuki's efforts."

Zero matches the soft tone of Kuran's voice, wiping his emotions from his face. "And yours. I know - I told you, didn't I? Your work helps keep vampire society stable and peaceful. I won't endanger your efforts. I remember what you said. Today is about establishing my authority and reputation. At the very least, I need to avoid losing face."

"Good. I wanted to make sure you understood," Kuran says, straightening and looking ahead.

Zero's position as the Consort of the Kuran family makes him the highest ranking omega. What that actually means is entirely up to Zero, and his personal ability to command allegiance and build alliances among the other omegas. Zero's voice is the deciding opinion in matters that cannot be resolved, and has greater weight than anyone else's, but actually exacting obedience is another matter. At the least, the omegas are required to show him respect, and defer to him.

According to Takuma-sempai, bringing the Court to heel will be like trapping and muzzling feral dogs. Consort Shoshana, who has been the highest ranking omega for nearly three thousand years, largely left the Jeweled Court to their own affairs, only intervening when matters became unacceptable. Tending to her pureblood husband, who was becoming increasingly aimless and disinterested in living, was the greater focus of her attention and time. So the omegas are used to having their own way in things, and will need to be reminded what having a more hands-on leader is like.

If Zero is in fact capable of doing it, which he doubts.

Takuma could have accomplished it, no question, once Consort Shoshona either retired or passed on. But now Zero is the new Head Consort, and the situation has become uncertain. Much hinges on the outcome of today's session.

Yuuki's tug on his sleeve draws Zero out of his thoughts. They are ascending an excessive number of pink marble stairs to a manor that resembles a small baroque palace. He straightens his posture, and lifts his chin, conscious of the admission he's making by being carried, and refusing to allow his physical weakness to give anyone cause against him.

At the top of the stairs is a blonde woman wearing a Hoseki and a formal omega's costume in yellow, surrounded by plainer dressed figures. That must be his host, Kaneko Madeline. With her unusual height, and the dark repeating pattern on her robes, Zero can't help but think that she resembles a giraffe, all legs and spots.

Kaneko turns to the nearest servant, who jumps in surprise. "You! Show Kuran-sama and Kuran-"
hime to the banquet hall!"

Kuran gives Koneko one last smile, playing off his charisma, and the three of them follow the servant into the house.

"Was that really necessary?" Yuuki mutters under her breath, looking disgruntled.

Zero feels Kuran shrug, and jerks a handful of his suit jacket to remind him he doesn't appreciate extra movements.

"Not precisely," Kuran replies."But you never know when a little good will can make a difference."

Yuuki snorts quietly enough the servant can't hear her.

Something tickles at the edge of Zero's Hunter senses.

"Get rid of the servant," he hisses into Kuran's ear.

Kuran stiffens, but makes no other sign he's heard. Zero thinks that Kuran's ignored him, until the pureblood calls out to the vampire walking ahead of them. "Thank you, we can find the way from here. You may return to your duties."

The servant bows - a suggestion is never anything less than an order, from the mouth of a pureblood - and swiftly retreats.

Zero focuses on pinning down the familiar feeling. "Straight up ahead," he directs.

Yuuki shoots a curious glance at him, but starts to walk, resuming her regal air. The purebloods don't have to wait long to discover what's attracted Zero's attention.

"Lead Hunter Ilesanmi," he raises his voice to carry down the hall. "I never got to thank you for directing the affinity ritual at my wedding."

The Kurans should recognize the dark-skinned woman with closely shorn hair who turns her head, and approaches them with measured footsteps and a Hunter's observant, watchful gaze, clearly cautious when dealing with purebloods.

The other Hunter is using the blank face they're trained to employ when dealing with vampire senses. Zero tries not to be hurt. It's wise of her to be so guarded when she doesn't know where his loyalties lie anymore, and she's never met him personally.

Lead Hunter Ilesanmi gives Zero a brief nod, her black eyes surveying his current condition, not missing a single detail. "It was my honor to witness the Ancestor of the Hunters appear to you," she says.

The Jeweled Court, like all vampire gatherings, must employ Hunter monitors. But omegas are very picky about which Hunters the Association sends - all of them must be experienced, proven, sensible, even-tempered, safe with children, and lacking a penis. The same team of eight female Hunters is employed every time, it's difficult to become one of their number, and they're notoriously tight-knit.

Zero, who spent most of his time in the field, doesn't know any of Ilesanmi's team, but it would be helpful if he could establish a relationship. Zero needs allies badly. The Hunter monitors are impartial in vampire conflicts, but having the Court's monitors trust him could give him an
Zero has no intention of asking them to do anything inappropriate; no matter how much he needs help, there are some things he won't compromise, and the reputation and livelihood of another Hunter is one of them. Zero was surprised Kuran hadn't suggested trying, but perhaps the pureblood knew the angry rejection he would get. It certainly wasn't out of respect for Zero's principles or anything like that, Zero knows.

Inspection finished, Lead Hunter Ilesanmi meets Zero's eyes. "I thought the reports of your injuries were exaggerated. It seems they were not. You look terrible, Hunter Kiryuu."

Zero laughs, conscious again of his scars pulling as he moves. "I know. Awful, aren't they?"

Her brows lift in amusement. "Truely. You are going to the hall?"

"Yes," Zero confirms.

"I will escort you," she offers, and before hearing Zero's acceptance, Ilesanmi begins walking, taking a different route than the servant. Kuran carries him along without complaint, and Yuuki doesn't seem to want to interrupt Zero's encounter with another Hunter.

"News of your attack has earned you much sympathy at Headquarters. I think some Hunters imagined you were off living a fairytale," the Lead Hunter remarks.

Zero chokes, words failing him in his utter disbelief. "A fairytale? Did they miss the part where I traded my body for a treaty in an arranged marriage, otherwise I'd get kidnapped and raped?"

Ilesanmi has stopped, and her dark eyes gage his reaction, flicking toward Yuuki, who is shifting uneasily next to them, keeping herself from interrupting. Kuran holds himself perfectly still, like he's pretending to be part of the furniture.

The dark woman watches a moment more, and then resumes her efficient walk. "I cannot say. But you are more favored in your absence. Your actions have brought much benefit, more than expected. If you wished to visit, I think you would be welcomed."

Zero's jaw tightens, and he says nothing.

Lead Hunter Ilesanmi leaves them when they reach a set of double doors with gold fittings and gilded panels. Behind the doors is a low roar, the sound of many voices raised together in speech.

Zero swallows.

"You are not one of them, and even if you pretended, you would fail," Kuran says, feeling the tension of Zero's body. "You are an outsider, and you live by different rules. Use that to your advantage."

Zero turns, trying to see the pureblood's face. "Are you telling me to forget all those etiquette lessons Takuma-senpai gave me?"

Yuuki shakes her head, and laughs. "Kaname means be yourself, Zero."

By his ear, Kuran sighs. "That is not what I meant, Yuuki. If you're ready, Kiryuu, we'll go in."

"Yeah. Time for a dramatic entrance," Zero announces, half-sarcastic, half-serious.

Even Kuran cracks a smirk; Zero can see it out of the corner of his eye.
And then Yuuki yanks open the double doors, and every voice in the banquet hall goes silent.

Zero lets his Hunter's pride fill him, and the quiet of *mushin* steady him, giving him the dignity to face this crowd of strangers as a grown man carried by another grown man, a foreign pretender displaying his weakness where everyone can see.

He knows the Kurans, at least, look good. There's Kuran and Yuuki, supernaturally perfect, paragons of vampire beauty and grace, their unique eyes containing the mysteries and secrets of their kind; Kuran in his charcoal suit and slacks, Yuuki in her dark gown and diamonds, a perfect pair.

Less impressive - himself, frail, scarred and healing, in his black mantle that glitters when the light hits it, strewn with shards of polished jet like chips of black eggshell. There's a stir when the crowd gets a good look at his mutilated face. Zero layers steel in his spine and refuses to flinch.

He can feel the eyes of nearly a hundred and twenty omegas, assorted children, eight Hunters, and a multitude of servants, all following their progress toward the three chairs at the head of the room, set apart on a dais.

The other omegas are seated at tables arranged in layered rows shaped like an empty three-sided square, all facing toward those three chairs. One of them, the chair on the far right, is occupied.

Ichijo Takuma, seemingly immune to the thick silence, rises with a friendly smile, and gathers his skirts to descend the dais.

Just like Zero, and every other omega present, Takuma is attired in the formal costume of a mated omega, very similar to an unmated omega's presentation garb. On top of slippers, loose trousers and a long-sleeved, fitted underdress, he wears a cross-collared robe, with the typical wide sleeves that extend past the tips of the fingers. Takuma has chosen a robe of pale green, stamped with abstract, interlocking patterns in a dark forest color that suits the emerald of his eyes.

The robe is belted with a broad sash that ties in the front, meant for easier breastfeeding. A sash tied below the breasts means the omega is pregnant; Takuma's cream sash is tied at the waist, showing his belly is empty.

Thrown over Takuma's shoulder is a long rectangular shawl, also cream colored, made of fine, soft material. This cloth is meant to cover an omega's breasts when nursing in public, or it can to swaddle a baby, and form a sling for carrying children. Since Takuma is neither nursing nor pregnant, his shawl is tucked into his sash.

And one last significant addition; instead of the gem and chain of his normal Hoseki, an elaborate circular headpiece is laid on Takuma's blond head, made of white gems linked by chain and a costly emerald dangling from the center. Only a pureblood's Consort is permitted to wear one of these elaborate pieces, a special display of their status.

"Zero! I'm so pleased to see you again." Takuma welcomes Zero with enthusiasm, as though it's been more than a month or so since they've last met.

It's not an act; Yuuki and Kuran were feeling too territorial to let anyone near Zero until now. Zero can see the unfeigned relief in Takuma's eyes, and feels a surge of affection for the elder omega.

"I'm sorry it's been so long, Takuma-sempai," Zero says, compelled to apologize.

Takuma waves his hand, skirts swishing around his ankles as he approaches. "The circumstances were extraordinary - think nothing of it. And what's a little absence between friends?"
The blond noble gives his attention to Yuuki and Kuran for the first time, laying one of his sleeve-covered hands on his old friend's arm. "Kaname, it's good to see you too. And you as well, Yuuki-san; I've heard you've been busy lately."

"Not busy enough that we would miss escorting Zero today," Yuuki says, with a slight smile and a shake of her head.

"We won't stay long; we know the Court will start shortly," Kuran adds.

No one mentions Zero's injuries, for which Zero is grateful.

"I'll show you to your seat, Zero-kun," Takuma offers, "then Kaname and Yuuki-san can go about their day."

"Thank you, Takuma-sempai," Zero says, and Kuran follows Takuma to the center chair.

Somehow, Takuma achieves the impossible feat of making Zero feel like he's not being carried like an invalid, giving anyone watching the impression that everything happening right now is perfectly normal.

Once Zero is seated - Kuran using his effortless strength and grace to settle Zero in the most dignified manner possible - Kuran steps to the side, and Yuuki whisks off Zero's mantle, showing the robes underneath.

The black silk of his robes and underclothes throws Zero's pale complexion in stark relief, unmercifully flaunting his numerous scars, some straight and deep, others rambling and shallow, the thick scar tissue still healing pink and red.

His Consort's Hoseki is a diamond net of rubies, with three smaller rubies suspended on his forehead and trailing down the bridge of his nose in a triangular pattern, right over a pink line of scar tissue. As always, Zero wears his wedding tokens around his wrists, the pair of onyx dragon bracelets, to match Kuran and Yuuki's white jade set.

But Zero's robe is the real masterpiece; it had taken a dozen seamstresses months to prepare, and stands as an artwork in its own right. The black silk has no pattern, only a single central figure picked out in skillful embroidery, a bird with many names and many legends - a great phoenix, sewn in all the colors of a flame, so huge its whole body covers Zero's robe from shoulder to floor.

The bird's head and crest lie against Zero's right shoulder, the crane-like neck twining around his arm, wings outspread and wrapping from his torso to his left shoulder, and the magnificent tail feathers covering his skirts and train, each like a tendril of fire, the long peacock-like filaments capped with a crystal 'eye'. The firebird's true eye is a cabochon of red amber, its beak and claws are gold wire, and sewn throughout its body are more crystals no bigger than a grain of rice, making the bird glitter and throw light as Zero moves, as though it really did burn.

The sash around his waist and the shawl thrown over his shoulder are deep amber silk, shot with more gold thread, giving the cloth a metallic sheen and an attractive radiance that compliments the black phoenix robe.

Zero lets the vampires look their fill, with his purebloods framing him on either side, displaying himself for the court he is supposed to guide. He looks in the crowd, and finds the faces he's memorized, the leaders of the Senate faction who will oppose him.

Zero meets each of their eyes. I have watched my world burn before, and I lived, he thinks. What can you do to me, after that?
"We're lucky I came early," Takuma says in an aside, once the Kurans have departed and the Court has settled down, whispers flying fast and sharp.

"The original arrangement had the Consorts shoved in a corner, at the same level as everyone else. I convinced the servants to rearrange the furniture before only a few others arrived."

The first trap avoided, thanks to Takuma's persistence. Zero would bet that the servants left feeling that Takuma had done them a favor, and was a stellar person to boot.

"You saw Noguchi Sada?" Takuma asks, smiling and taking a sip of his drink. Every movement the two of them make is being watched; the arrangement of furniture makes that unavoidable.

"Yes," Zero says, still skimming mushin, knowing better than to trust his hands with his own glass. He'd made eye contact with the Senate Vice-chairman's partner during his entrance. "I saw Koneko Madeline on the way in, and Abe Juan is seated to our right."

"Good," Takuma replies, placing his glass down and giving Zero another smile, this one smaller and more for his benefit. "It's nearly noon, and we'll be starting soon."

For the convenience of its members, the Jeweled Court is scheduled around lunchtime, squarely in the middle of the night. Omegas are foremost mothers and wives, and small children don't like to stay up late or wake up early.

Zero casts a sideways glance to the seat on his right, still conspicuously empty.

"Don't be worried," Takuma assures him, "Consort Shoshana always arrives at the last moment before the Court starts. It's not good to leave Ouri-sama alone for longer than necessary."

The blond noble's prediction holds true - there is Consort Shoshana now, in a robe the color of ripe persimmons, a circlet around her brow.

Zero's brow creases faintly. There's something circling at the edge of his senses, something heavy, like the stormcloud you feel hovering on the horizon, just beyond sight. No - the tremor of an earthquake through the bones of your feet.

Barely moving his lips, he murmurs to Takuma, "Is that…?"

"Yes," Takuma confirms, watching Shoshana approach.

The weight at the edge of Zero's range is unmistakable - Ouri, barred from the Court but waiting at the minimum acceptable distance for his Consort to return.

"Every time," the elder omega says. "She is his last link to the world."

Zero feels a little chilled - is this what happens when a pureblood loses their purpose? Kuran is around twice as old, he remembers. That relic better not forget his purpose is to make Yuuki happy and keep the other side of the bed warm, or Zero will kick his ass until Kuran is his usual irritating self.

As Shoshana takes her place to his right, the conversations in the room trickle away, and the nannies and caregivers filter in to collect their charges and receive last minute instructions from their employers.

Because children are so rare and valued, vampires cherish the chance to be a mother, and vampire
mothers care for their children personally, no matter how wealthy or busy. Babies and young toddlers attend the Court alongside their bearers, and omega mothers bring trusted nannies as surrogates for the few hours they are occupied.

Takuma gives Zero an encouraging look.

Gathering his breath and determination, Zero raises his voice. "I welcome all of you. The summer session of the Jeweled Court is now open."

The rules of politics are not dissimilar to a Hunter's rules for dealing with vampires: don't fidget, don't look away, don't show your back, speak with confidence, make eye contact, show no fear, and never show a predator weakness.

Zero won't show weakness. "As I'm sure you have all heard, I am Consort Kiryuu, newly married to Kuran Yuuki and Kuran Kaname. I'm glad to finally join you, and I thank Kaneko-san for hosting on such short notice. And I thank all of you for your patience and flexibility in an unusual situation."

Beside him, Shoshana speaks up, pooled dark gaze passing over the rows of seated omegas. "Consort Kiryuu is your new Head Consort. I gratefully relinquish the title. I have rarely been the Head Consort the Court has needed, and I believe he will lead you better than I have ever managed."

"We know you must have questions, and that you'd all like to welcome Consort Kiryuu, but let's save that until after we've eaten," says Takuma with his trademark diplomacy and natural friendliness. "Ah, and if you would all please introduce yourselves to Consort Kiryuu during the greeting ritual?"

Row by row, the omegas of the Jeweled Court file forward and offer their greetings and well-wishes to the three Consorts.

Zero knew about the Court protocols in advance, but even now he's unused to the deference the vampires offer him just because he services a pureblood cock. Or will service. Eventually. Two of them. Zero backs away from that line of thought.

There's a framework for the responses. The omega comes forward, sinks down, bows their head, and wishes each of them fertility and long life. And Zero is supposed to thank them by name, and return the wish for blessings.

Some of the Senate omegas refuse to abide by those rules.

Zero's not surprised when the omega with a sneer on his lips and dark, curling hair refuses to offer obeisance. "I am Abe Juan. Many centuries and many children upon you, Consort Kiryuu." From the man's tone, the words could be a curse.

At his right hand, Consort Shoshana taps the arm of her chair. "Abe Juan, your wife may be party leader, but that does not exempt you from the rituals of the Jeweled Court. Repeat it again."

This time, Abe bends his knees. But Zero doesn't miss the resentment.

Abe is not the only one to make his dissatisfaction known, though he is the most daring. Kaneko makes her greeting with her nose in the air, as though she's humoring him. Others are dismissive, rude, or insulting. A few are disgusted. Zero finds the ones who act bored or those who recite the words mechanically the most insulting. Even many of the monarchist omegas look displeased, reluctant or doubtful when they stand before him.
Zero leans back in his chair, responds to each omega with the correct name, and watches everything that goes on with the same impassive face the Night Class would recognize.

Noguchi Sada is the most interesting. She is neither offensive nor dismissive; the whole time she speaks before him, she studies Zero back. Zero's Hunter instincts shrill warnings whenever he meets her eyes.

"That went...well, that was a better scenario than many others," Takuma remarks once a table has been placed in front of the Consorts, lunch has been served, and the clatter of plates and voices covers their speech and fractures the room's attention.

"Short of completely refusing to acknowledge me, yes," Zero says dryly. He's hungry, but today he eats sparingly, and only the large, solid things he's sure he can keep on his fork.

"It worries me that they dared to be so open," Takuma continues, picking at his roasted potatoes.

Shoshana speaks without looking up from her plate. "Consort Kiryuu is an unknown. That makes some people bold."

A brunette maid comes with a pitcher. "Consorts, may I offer you more water?"

It takes every drop of Zero's self-control not to let his expression change.

Takuma meets his eyes, then looks up at the maid with a smile. "Yes, please."

He shouldn't draw attention to her. "I'm fine, thank you," Zero says, studying her out of the corner of his eye.

Kuran's Shadow is extremely skilled. Even with his familiarity and close association, Zero finds Seiren almost unrecognizable between the hair dye, the contacts, the resculpted nose, skillful costume makeup, and a complete change in demeanor. She's even thrown her voice and changed her dialect. Zero is professionally impressed.

Takuma waits nearly five minutes after Seiren leaves to pass on her message. "There is a problem with the meal."

Poison. The food weighs in Zero's stomach like lead. Vampires don't catch disease, but a handful of poisons are effective enough to kill them.

"Anything I should avoid," Zero manages, instead of the 'what is wrong with you people' bouncing around loudly in his skull.

Takuma takes a sip of his glass, hesitating before he replies. "Not that I know of."

Something has been poisoned, but Seiren doesn't know what.

The servants bring the next course, clearing away his mostly uneaten food. Zero looks down at his duck in orange sauce, served in a silver dish.

Is this how he dies, after everything? The Hunter feels his pulse speed up in his throat and wrists, earning a cautionary glance from Takuma. He stares at his plate, forcing his body to calm down.

Zero knows two kinds of enemies - the beasts in front of him, and the beasts in himself. This invisible, hazy threat, like the scent of wildfire - Zero has no pattern for how to deal with those.

Seek calm, his Hunter's instinct tells him, so he does. With all the malice-stained vampire auras
pinging his Hunter senses, Zero's been sinking in and out of his battle training since he set foot on this estate. Finally submerging himself in mushin, with the intent to remain, is like feeling the coolness of Rosehill's pool on his skin after baking under a hot sun.

Mushin is free of thoughts, or fear, or anticipation. Mushin is. Only the fluid response born of training and instinct remains.

And the memory comes to him, full-formed, lacking a boundary between recall and remembrance: his Master, much taller and larger to his child self. 'Don't watch the weapon, boy. You'll move too late. Watch me.'

So Zero does. He watches Noguchi, and Abe, and Koneko, and every one of the omegas he marked as unfriendly when he met them. He notes their body language, the tiny flickers of an eyelash, the angle of a wrist, the flare of their auras. Most importantly, he watches those who watch him back. There's a headache building in his temples, but that's irrelevant in the flow of mushin.

And without noticing, Zero looks down and finds he's consumed everything on his plate. "The duck is very good," he says.

Takuma is watching Zero with a hint of something like disquiet in his eyes, underneath the friendly relaxation and enjoyment he's projecting for the Court. The noble knows better than to ask in public if Zero is alright, but his silence speaks for him.

"It's not me," Zero tells him, trying to explain. "They're not watching me. Except for Koneko, but she's not holding a blade."

Takuma's expression deepens with confusion and grows more worried.

The next course comes. Zero breathes against his burgeoning headache.

Something has changed. Koneko is watching him with her whole attention. But it's not the single-minded focus for a murder, he understands from the undertow of mushin.

Something snaps into place, and Zero comes into awareness when he hears a squeak.

His hand is curled tightly around the rim of a silver tray, held by a red-faced maid with terror in her eyes.

Without Zero's hand stopping it, the contents would have slid down the tray's side, straight into his lap. His clothes would have been ruined, and Zero would have been publically embarrassed in front of the entire court.

At her table, Koneko is half-horrified, half-frustrated. Zero reads the intent - this was meant to look like an accident, a mistake by an innocent servant.

"Please be more careful," Zero tells the girl without anger, and the maid flees back to her mistress, her sabotage a failure.

Even Shoshana sends him a look, though she continues to eat her meal in silence.

"That was very lucky," Takuma says with false cheer.

"You should try the soup," Zero tells him, some kind of thick cream sauce and seafood dish beyond his current coordination.
Zero ignores his own unlucky soup bowl, and keeps watching. Koneko's attention was a distraction. Where is the strike coming from? Where is the bunching of muscles, the careful stillness, the exaggerated relaxation?


His headache builds. Though he's still taking in images with his eyes, Zero shakes away what his body sees, and allows thoughts to well up inside him instead.

Breath. There are only a handful of people with the daring and resources to attempt poison in a place as sacrosanct as the Jeweled Court.

Breath. An enemy who expects an attack is a difficult enemy.

Breath. When attacking, seek weakness.

Breath. They are not looking at Zero.

Breath.

His head is killing him.

"Takuma-sempai, can you contact her?"

The noble doesn't ask who Zero means. "Yes," he says, looking at the scallop perched on his spoon.

"It's not me," Zero tells him.

It feels like someone is driving a stake through his head; the pain is making the world feel slow and blurred, like watching a movie with the frames played at the wrong speed. Zero squeezes his eyes shut. Not now, he thinks.

"Or it is me, but it's not me."

Takuma radiates concern by his elbow.

His Hunter senses roil, making him feel queasy. Ah, that's why - his powers have gone strange again. Zero was about due for another bout. Unreliable and difficult as they've been in the past few months, Zero should have known better than to sink so deeply into mushin.

Zero struggles to concentrate, thoughts moving slowly. "Who of our allies is the most vulnerable? Someone linked strongly to me. A substitute. Attacking a Consort...that would be solving a problem by creating a bigger one."

Takuma is silent as he thinks. "Aido-san's husband is about to close a large business deal, and her son is close to Kaname. Takiyama-san's last child just started attending school. Azai-san is four weeks along - " Takuma cuts himself off, frozen in horror.

Zero can see it happening, like it's in front of his eyes: Azai collapsing and falling into spasms on the floor, slowly going still as his life and his child are strangled cold, his long black hair knocked loose and spread around him like a shroud.

But that image feels wrong.

"They're not going to kill him," Zero mutters, half to himself. "This is a punishment. For him, and
for me, and for anyone who thinks of opposing them."

Zero's eyes flick to meet Takuma's. "They're going to kill his child."

There, that is the right scene: Azai collapsing in the middle of the Court, elegance fled, the front of his robes turning slick with blood as he screams, weeping as the life inside leaves him.

Both Consorts struggle to stay relaxed, and not give themselves away to their enemies. The life of Azai's child depends on it.

"Hurry, and tell her," Zero says tersely.

"We still don't know which course," Takuma reminds him.

"The last," Zero says, certainty ringing along his bones, though he can't explain it.

Or maybe that's his headache? There is a tiny man banging a hammer on the inside of his skull.

Zero loses mushin somewhere inside the pain, and the full scale of his agony rushes in, flooding his consciousness. After that there's a little time missing, as Zero rides out the waves of pain.

A hand appears by his elbow, holding two little white capsules. "It's done," Takuma says.

Zero takes the pills gratefully; his hands are shaking so badly he dry swallows them both rather than risk a spill.

Within ten minutes, the pain starts to ebb, and the lunch is down to its second-to-last course.

The release of pain means Zero can't hold onto things like worry and tension; his shoulders are too slack with physical relief.

He still watches, of course, but when a perfect chocolate mousse is placed in front of him, somehow Zero is certain Seiren has succeeded, even before Azai takes his first bite and nothing happens.

Zero pops another spoonful in his mouth, savoring the looks of surprise and confusion on his enemies' faces. Two down, one to go.

After lunch, the Court breaks for half an hour, so the babies can be nursed and young toddlers checked on by their mothers. After that, the afternoon session begins. It's a chance for omegas to exchange news, discuss important issues, and make decisions as a community. Zero is certain to be the main topic of interest today.

The Court's afternoon session is the reason vampire society still observes the tradition. Originally, the Jeweled Court was a security measure against an omega being imprisoned by their alpha. You attended the Jeweled Court, no excuses, otherwise certain questions were very loudly asked and people came looking for you. And absolutely no alphas allowed, and no unnecessary betas. Omegas needed a place where they couldn't be watched by a controlling partner or their replacements, just in case.

Omegas still observe strict attendance rules - the threat of abuse has never gone away - but the Court has evolved into a competition for prestige between omegas. This is where the real battles for influence happened, in the forum of public opinion before the eyes of your peers.

Considering his body, Zero can't leave, of course, but after Takuma 'goes to the toilet', he looks
more tranquil when he returns.

"Azai-san has been warned," the noble says, taking his seat. "Are you feeling better? You're going to be facing a veritable interrogation."

"My headache's had mercy on my skull," Zero tells Takuma, giving him a playful grin.

His opponents will need to take advantage of their last opportunity to discredit him until the next Court. Zero is unconcerned. The Senate faction can rake him over the coals all they want. The important thing is that no one is in danger anymore.

Poisoning Azai was their big plan; if it had succeeded, the Court would have been forced to halt. But they failed instead. The Court wasn't supposed to last this long. Everything from here on out is the Senate faction making it up as they go along.

Zero has prepared for his upcoming questioning the best he can. Kuran and Takuma guessed at the likeliest questions, and Zero rehearsed most of the answers with Takuma - after Kuran vetted his responses at Takuma's insistence. The rest will be up to his wits, his quickness and his limited political savvy.

But Zero's performance isn't going to be judged in vacuum. Everything the other omegas know about him - or think they know - will be weighed and considered. His damaged body is going to count against him. So will the many rumors and stories about him, and his reputation as a Hunter. Luckily, the Kurans' vow to never take another omega has given his reputation and status a lift - if Zero is valued by his pureblood alphas, that makes him more likely to be heeded.

But ultimately, this isn't going to matter much. Zero will be labeled a barren, defective omega because he refuses to have children, and he'll lose whatever esteem he gains here. Everything he does today is just pushing back that outcome a little further.

As the omegas begin heading back into the banquet hall, Zero spots Lead Hunter Ilesanmi at her post, leaning against the far wall, and he nods politely.

She measures him with her dark eyes, and makes the hand signal for 'all Hunters in place, begin assault when ready'.

The corners of his mouth turn up before he can stop himself.

Consort Shoshana was one of the first to leave, and is the last to come back. She smells of alpha; she must have visited Ouri.

"Are we ready to resume?" Zero asks once everyone has returned to their seats. When no one dissents, he continues. "Then the afternoon session is open."

"Does anyone have any news they'd like to share?" Takuma invites beside him, leaning forward in interest as though everyone here is an old friend.

After a moment, one of the omegas breaks the ice, recounting the marriage of a child, and after that there's a flurry of others sharing things of interest, from the small to the significant.

Zero lets Takuma lead the discussion. The noble is a natural at handling people, and his talents are on full display here, as his friendly nature prompts shyer omegas to speak up, and his empathy moderates old grievances with a frown or a sympathetic ear. Truly and honestly, Takuma is far more suited than Zero to the duties of Head Consort. Zero regrets that chance has set him about his friend; Takuma deserves a position where people can give him credit for his skills.
As if he can hear Zero's thoughts, Takuma looks over at him.

Zero hastily wipes his expression - though he's certain his poker face hasn't fallen - and Takuma looks away again.

There's a sense of waiting in the air; all of this is leading up to the main event. And at least a few of the omegas, from their expressions, are becoming impatient.

Good. A Hunter knows that impatience is costly. Now, is it better to invite the confrontation, or let his opponents betray their eagerness and perhaps make a mistake?

The choice is made for him when Abe Juan slams his hands on the tabletop, an echoing snap that cuts off a red-haired man going on at length about his daughter's terrible new boyfriend.

The dark-eyed man snarls. "Enough! We all know why we're here today, and it's not for this blithering nonsense!"

At Zero's elbow, Consort Shoshana straightens. "Abe Juan. This is the second time you have disrupted the Jeweled Court today. Do not be rude."

Abe deflates, but doesn't back down. "My apologies to Muir-san, but I am not the only one concerned. After all, this affects all of us, does it not?" The man's eyes go hooded, and in an arch tone, he continues, "Even you, Consort Shoshana - you've been replaced. You're no longer Head Consort anymore, are you?"

Zero decides to step in. "I assume you're talking about me?"

Instantly, the room's attention falls on him.

Having a sense of the low stakes is doing wonders for his stress levels. Nobody's going to die, and he's going to screw up eventually. Zero doesn't have much riding on this, which is why he adds, "And don't insult Consort Shoshana. We all follow the traditions of the Court - or at least, those of us who respect them." And then he looks at Abe, just in case someone missed the implied insult.

The noble presses his lips together so hard they go white, but before he can open his mouth and dig himself deeper, the Senate faction's leader intervenes.

Noguchi goes to her feet, and inclines her head so her black eyes are hidden behind her dark hair. "Consort Kiryuu, please forgive Abe-san. He is too zealous, but he is not wrong when he says that some of the Court are distressed at the idea of a new Head Consort. Consort Shoshana is well known to us, but you are unfamiliar. It is only to be expected."

Takuma gives his most disarming smile. "I'm sure Consort Kiryuu would be willing to answer some questions if that would help."

"Yes," Zero confirms, reminding himself to mind his body language and doing a last minute survey of his position. The Hunter lets one of his sleeves fall back, displaying Yuuki's dragon bracelet. "Do you have specific concerns?"

The Senate faction pounces. "The Kurans rejected you on your wedding night! What right do you have to call yourself Head Consort?"

He begins the memorized response. "Our marriage was legally consummated with my blood -"

"Then you really refused Kuran-sama and Kuran-hime on their own wedding night?" An angry
voice cuts Zero off, from the monarchist faction this time.

Zero frowns. "Do you really think I could deny two purebloods access to my body if they really wanted it? I agreed to the treaty; I wouldn't put that in jeopardy."

"Then they did hate the idea of touching you?"

"Is it because you're deformed?"

"Be quiet," Zero commands in his Hunter voice, the one that cracks out like a whip, full of threat if the listener doesn't obey immediately.

The Court freezes - even Takuma.

Zero experiences a dizzy sensation of disconnection. These people are omegas, protected and prized, most of whom have probably never been physically threatened, or killed anyone with their own hands. What does he really understand about their lives? How can they conceive the arc of his?

With the taste of displacement in his mouth, like rust and soil, Zero continues in a softer voice. "I did not reject them, and they did not reject me. Kuran-sama has explained our choice not to physically consummate the marriage that night, on several occasions. We decided to take our time and get to know one another first. If his words cannot satisfy you, then mine won't do any good."

"Didn't you already know each other, from before?" asks another omega in a pointed tone.

Zero nods. This is an easier one to answer. "Yuuki and I were both fostered by Cross Kaien. Kaname and I attended the same school for a few years, but we weren't close. It's been a long time, and we've all changed since then. We judged the extra time necessary, since I didn't have a Courtship, and Hunters don't practice arranged marriages."

"Why did Kuran-sama chose you?" That question comes from Noguchi, who is watching with a considering look on her face. "To seal the treaty, he could have offered you to any alpha of a high enough rank. Yet he chose to enter a bond with you personally."

With the sense that he must tread carefully, Zero considers his answer. "You would have to ask him yourself. Because of our upbringing, Yuuki holds some affection for me. Perhaps it was on her account."

"Weren't they disgusted by your lovers?" Abe again, face set in an ugly expression.

Zero is really coming to dislike the man. "What lovers are those?"

Abe makes a languid gesture. "All the Hunters you played wife for. The stallions you rode - or perhaps they mounted you. You get the idea."

"There were no lovers," Zero asserts, brows coming together.

"Not even when you sneak away from the Kuran estate?" Abe insinuates with a sneer.

Zero regards the vampire levelly; the key here is not to get angry, no matter what he's accused of. "The Kurans know whenever I leave on a Hunt. That's hardly sneaking. And I haven't got any lovers. I'm married, and I take that seriously."

A monarchist omega asks next, emboldened by Abe's contempt. "Is it true you still haven't given
yourself to your alphas?"

"That's private, and between the three of us," Zero answers, but the damage is done. By refusing to answer, he's as good as confirmed it. Damn, they hadn't expected anyone to be so brazen.

"How do you expect to run the Jeweled Court when you can't even fulfill the most basic duty of a Consort?" demands another monarchist.

Groping for his answer, Zero refuses to look at Takuma for help. "There are many things I'm still learning. Until I settle into the duties of a Consort and a spouse, I have the advice and guidance of Consort Shoshana and Consort Ichijo to rely on. I think we can all agree that my fellow Consorts are impeccably qualified."

"You don't deserve to sit in Consort Shoshana's chair, you murderer!"

Zero's head snaps around, and Lead Hunter Ilesanmi takes a step away from the wall. Takuma has a crease between his eyebrows as he studies the young woman in a maidservant's uniform standing in the door with her fists clenched.

"I've watched you try and fool these honored omegas, but I can't stand it any longer!" she says, marching into the banquet hall toward the Consort's table.

Takuma shifts in his seat; Zero grabs his wrist with a shake of his head. She's not a danger, but she is dangerous.

"I've killed many people," Zero tells her, "but never without an execution request or legal cause."

"Liar!" she spits, eyes hard. "You murdered my brother! He did nothing to deserve it!"

This is not the first angry family member Zero's dealt with. People don't want to believe that their loved ones have done terrible things. "What you're alleging is a serious breach of treaty. If you believe I have committed a crime, it should be reported to either the Hunter's Association or the Senate's officers, who will investigate it."

"Can you tell us your name?" Takuma interrupts.

"I'm Ono, Consort Ichijo," says the maid. "And if I reported it, no one would investigate it! The Hunters don't prosecute their own!"

"Actually," Zero tells her, "there have been numerous Hunters brought before a tribunal for exactly that. So why have you not reported it to the Senate, if you believe I've broken the treaty with an unsanctioned Hunt?"

"You're a Consort! They can't investigate you!"

"Are you suggesting the Kurans would interfere in a Senate investigation to ensure a miscarriage of justice?" Zero says slowly, hardly able to believe it.

The Court doesn't breathe. Nobody speaks ill of the vampires more akin to gods, let alone the Kuran family, who built their society.

The maid Ono sputters and goes white, frantically trying to deny it. "No! I would never dare! I just meant - they wouldn't want the dignity of the Consorts tarnished."

"Dignity or not, you should have reported it. Rank is not supposed to prevent accountability." Zero
does a few calculations. "I've only been a Consort since March. Are you saying the incident occurred after that? Otherwise I would have been a normal Hunter, and you would have had no problem reporting it."

Ono shakes her head yes. "In June. You murdered him near his home in Iwa, on the night of the second."

"How do you know that?" Zero asks, in his most professional manner. "Did you witness it?"

The woman grows angrier. "No, but I have a witness who told me what you did!"

"And what did that witness tell you?"

"He told me that you murdered his friend!"

"No," Zero says. "What did he say actually happened? Describe the weather, the place and time, the relative positions of each person, and the exact events."

Ono sputters again, her anger overwhelming her coherence. "What does that matter? He saw you, a Hunter with silver hair, shoot my brother with a gun and watch as he bled to death on the street outside his home!"

Zero rests his chin in his hand. "Then he lied. One, I never waste bullets, and I don't miss. He would been dead instantly if I shot him. Two, my Hunt on June 2nd was nearby, that's true. But the only vampires I killed that night were D rank. And my witness is reliable."

"Really?" Ono challenges him, her eyes fiery. "And who's that?"

Zero leans back in his chair. "I was accompanied from the moment I left the house by my husband's familiar. Kuran Kaname is my witness."

Ono's mouth hangs open. "But, but, you killed him! It had to be you!"

"Ono-san, I suggest you question your brother's 'friend' again about the events of that night," Zero says. His hand itches strongly for Nightshade's fur.

"No! That can't - you, you!" Another maid takes Ono by the arm, hurrying her toward an exit.

This has all the hallmarks of a hasty plan to discredit him. Zero is lucky they threw this together without a chance to iron out the wrinkles. Giving Ono proper coaching would have made her more persuasive, and the Court and the public might have been thoroughly convinced he was a criminal. Zero raises his voice. "Koneko-san, perhaps in the future you could train your staff more thoroughly."

The blonde noble colors and stiffens. Abe looks both sulky and furious, which makes him resemble a toddler who wanted a lollipop. Noguchi merely watches, contemplative but with her face otherwise free of emotion.

"This seems like a good place to end for the summer," Takuma says brightly. "It's gotten rather late, and I know many of us have responsibilities."

Zero wants to go home and sleep for a week. He sneaks a look downward, and spots his hands shaking badly against his robes; he tucks them under the table. Just a little longer.

"I agree. The summer session of the Jeweled Court is now closed. We will resume again in
"How did it go?" Yuuki asks, running ahead of Kaname to fuss over Kiryuu.

Kiryuu's complexion is almost grey, and he sags in his chair, listing to the left as if he doesn't have the strength to straighten.

Shielding Kiryuu from the rest of the room - the few remaining omegas and the bustling servants - Takuma tells them,"Some good, some less good. I'll be waiting at Ichijo Manor to report. Take him home and put him to bed. This was too much for him, too soon."

All it takes is a few moments to scoop Kiryuu up - if possible, he feels lighter than he did a few hours ago. The Hunter's body lies slack in his grasp, and his skin feels cold when Kaname sneaks a hand up his sleeve to his wrist.

Kaname feels his protective instincts surge, and the pureblood pulls Kiryuu's silver head against his shoulder.

"You did well, little Hunter," he whispers quietly enough Kiryuu probably can't hear him.

Yuuki crowds the two of them, laying her hand against Kiryuu's cheek, and tsking at his his temperature.

Kaname isn't blind to the curious eyes around them; there's a story here, but Takuma will tell him later.

"Let's go home."

(They don't make it. Kaname drops them in the middle of nowhere so they can feed Zero immediately, without the scent of their pure blood subjecting the Kurans to the coarse bloodlust of weak vampires.

Takuma doesn't say anything when Kaname's late - he just smiles and offers him tea.)
Si Vis Pacem

Chapter Notes

It was wonderful to hear all your responses to the last chapter. Thank you for your continued interest in this story!

We haven't talked about mushin for many chapters, and the technique's explanation is back in chapter 7. I hope that helps if you were a little confused last chapter, sorry!

This chapter is a bit of a mixed bag, but as promised, here's your fluff and UST.

ALSO: Please take a look at the story warnings in the first chapter again before you read this, just to remind you what you're getting into.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Zero's condition backslides for almost a week after the Court. With the last of his energy, Sasaki helps him strip off his elaborate robes and slip into a nightshirt, and then Zero doesn't get up for nearly three days.

Confined to bed, exhausted and wrung out, Zero sleeps, drifts in semi-consciousness, then sleeps again, caught in the cycle of his body's weakness. The only thing he remembers clearly from that time is the constant strength of a solid body at his back, and huddling against it for warmth whether it was rounded and soft, or angular and hard. If the Kurans hadn't spoon fed Zero soup and rice congee, forcing him awake and doing most of the work, then Zero wouldn't have eaten for a day or two afterwards, just continued to sleep and lain in a stupor.

After his fast progress, this relapse seems to scare them (if Zero can use 'frightened for his health' and 'Kuran Kaname' in the same thought). Even Kuran, Zero half-fancies, handles him with unusual care in the days afterward, even when he can sit up and eat under his own power. Zero has a vague memory from those first few days of being cradled like a baby while long-fingered hands held cool water to his lips.

It's strange - a month and a half ago, Zero thought waking up beside Kuran, *in his arms*, was crazy and embarrassing, but now he starts every morning that way, no big deal, perfectly normal. Not to mention he's kissed the vampire at least twice a day for months. Strange how things can change that much, and you barely even notice.

The same surreal feeling hits Zero when they're having a civil conversation over lunch, without Yuuki playing referee, and when he accepts Kuran's offer to spend a few hours reading on the chaise lounge in the pureblood's study, a convenience he's used many times before.

"What are you staring for?" Kuran asks when Zero spends too long pondering his new realization.

"I was thinking," Zero tells him, too exhausted to plausibly lie or play one of their word games. "How did we get here?"

Kuran raises a brow. "I carried you. Have you already forgotten?"
"No," Zero says, feeling short-tempered. "I'm not being sarcastic. I mean, how did we get into this situation."

Kuran's face tightens, and the pureblood half-smiles without opening his mouth. "I often wonder that myself."

Zero lets his book slip off his lap, and lays his head on the chaise arm. "I'm tired."

"Would you like to sleep here or in bed?" Kuran asks, rising and coming to stand by the side of the chaise.

Zero stares at the dark material of Kuran's slacks. "Bed."

Kuran bends, and Zero feels the muscle of his arms slide underneath his knees and back. Relaxing into Kuran's hold is second nature to him now, after hundreds of times, maybe thousands, where he's found security and safety as this pureblood carried him.

In the beginning, Zero feared Kuran would let him fall, and every step was full of anxious dread, his body tense against the anticipated pain. But the more time that passes without his fears coming true, the longer Zero waits, the harder it is to remind himself to be vigilant, be wary, remember that this time Kuran could take advantage of his dropped guard to hurt him. It's exhausting.

Zero closes his eyes, already half-asleep from the rocking motion and the reassuring scent of a familiar alpha, the pure male who protects him and takes care of him, the one he's promised as a mate. He yawns, and his head droops down.

"If only you were such a good kitten all the time" Kuran tells him, voice amused.

Zero swats at Kuran, and yawns again, waking up a little more when he's tipped onto the mattress and protests sleepily. Something soft and furry worms its way underneath his arm.

"Nightshade?..." he murmurs, squeezing the furry thing.

The wolf blows warm air against Zero's face, and his tail beats against the bedspread.

"Yuuki will wake you for dinner," Kuran says.

"Why are you being so nice," Zero slurs into his pillow, but Kuran must already be gone, because no one answers.

Once Zero can stay out of bed longer, one of the purebloods is always buzzing around nearby like a horsefly, and there's a sudden surge in the local raven and butterfly populations. After he announces at the breakfast table that creepy stalkers will be shot with Bloody Rose, they're a little more careful to hide.

On the positive side, Zero's little excursion means they have no more excuses to keep him from leaving Rosehill. Yuuki and Kuran absolutely refuse to let him anywhere they don't directly control, with people they don't trust - which Zero understands, much as the restriction chafes at him, and the Hunter doesn't push. In practice, that means he's allowed to go maybe five places, but that's still more than he could before.

The tea group omegas are happy to have him attend again, and Zero is greeted with a celebration worthy of a conquering hero. There's so much food, and Takuma pours endless cups of hot, fragrant Oolong, which Zero drinks as the others discuss the outcome of the previous Court.
The general consensus is that results were mixed, producing with neither triumph nor catastrophe. Zero made the best impression his condition allowed, and things ended on a high note for him and his allies, but it was not the impression of health and strength he would have preferred. His opponents acted far more openly hostile and combative than expected. And while none of the Senate's plots succeeded, Zero's first session was disrupted several times, and they barely avoided disaster. Kuran's allies kept the upper hand, but none of the omegas at the Court would believe they did it easily, or that things couldn't have gone in the Senate's favor instead.

"We were profoundly lucky that Ono was inexperienced and the Senate faction rushed too much. If they had prepared her, or investigated thoroughly and found someone with a more believable story, the accusation would have been a deadly serious matter, with enough weight to destroy Zero's reputation and land him in serious legal trouble. Fortunately, the Senate won't be able to use the same tactic again, now that everyone's understood they were behind something so sloppy," Takuma concludes.

"They'll try something different at the fall session, that's for sure," Takiyama says.

Zero crunches down on one of the tea cookies she brought; they're a little sweet for his taste, but he's made sure to eat a couple anyway. Touya's grandmother keeps trying to feed him, and Zero is far too well-raised to refuse.

"But it will be held by one of the neutral families next time. We won't need to worry about poisonings or rogue servants. The families are extremely vigilant about preventing incidents like that - their reputations depend on it," Takuma adds, probably for Zero's benefit.

Aido Madoka sighs, crossing her arms and shifting on her cushion. "That means things will get nastier, if the only attack left is words. They already started going after Kiryuu's legitimacy. Even all the monarchists may not be on our side."

"Abe is the most obvious problem," remarks Takiyama, inhaling the scent of her tea, her permanently laid back demeanor the foil to Aido's relentless energy. "He's become even more daring."

"Noguchi is the one who concerns me," Azai disagrees. "Abe is predictable. He insults, he insinuates. He's aggressive, with a sharp tongue, but he's earned himself many enemies that way. No one genuinely likes him. Noguchi is different. Her words are carefully chosen, and she's much less abrasive. Abe picks the ugliest rumor, Noguchi picks the most plausible."

"I hadn't expected her to ask Zero such a personal question," Takuma says, shaking his head. "Zero-kun didn't know how to respond, so he told the truth. If she wanted to know the foundation of their relationship, the answer may have been more telling than we wanted."

Zero frowns. "Sorry."

Takuma waves his hands, shaking his head harder and making his Hoseki swing at the end of its chain. "No, no, Zero, it's nothing for you to be sorry about. It was my oversight."

No one mentions the other mistake Zero made. He still blushes when he remembers accidentally giving details of his (lack of) sex life to all of vampire society. The other omegas politely avoid speaking of the matter, though Zero does get some curious looks.

After business is finished, the others aren't stealthy about making excuses to leave Zero and Azai alone. Zero is shocked when the elder presses his forehead to the floor, with his hands flat on either side of his head.
"Consort Kiryuu," Azai says, his hairpins chiming as he touches a hand to his belly, "thank you for saving my child. I am indebted to you beyond my ability to repay."

Uncomfortable with the obeisance, Zero tries to protest. "Azai-san, it was also Takuma-sempai and Seiren -"

"I know." Azai says, "And I have offered them my profound gratitude and thanks. But it was you who realized the Senate faction's intentions in time to stop them. And it is you that I wish to thank this way. I am old, and my few remaining pregnancies are precious. Anything that you desire of me, I will obey."

Zero looks down at Azai's bowed head, speechless. "Azai-san...if that's what you wish, I won't deny you. But I did not save your child with the intention of making you feel you owe me."

Azai raises his head, meeting Zero's gaze. "I know. That's why I'm here."

Zero leaves Ichijo manor with much to think on.

Besides Takuma's residences, Zero is only allowed to visit the homes of Kuran's inner circle. If not for Zero's frustration at the slow pace of his recovery, and the stir-craziness of an active man forced to stay still, than Zero would have never become desperate enough to agree.

So that's how the Hunter finds himself eating dinner at the Kain residence, opposite Kain himself and his unofficial fiancee Souen, with Yuuki and Kuran by his side. The affair is less awkward than Zero expected it would be; he's met them once before as 'Consort Kiryuu' at the single soiree he attended. Trying to make polite conversation with the same vampires he regularly fought with at Cross Academy is tricky, but possible because all of them want to get along. The food is good, and the evening isn't a disaster, though two Nobles send Zero thoughtful looks when Kuran treats his Consort the polite way he has since Zero was injured.

One moderately civil dinner turns into visits once or twice a week, not just at Souen's or Kain's homes, but also with the Aido family and at Touya's residence. Shiki is the notable exception, but Zero knows just enough about the vampire's twisted family situation to understand he wants no part of that ball of worms.

It's different meeting Kuran's inner circle as an ally, one who is married to their leader and a vampire ranked above them. Kuran's closest followers call Zero by his title and seem to accept Zero's elevation in status, though Soen takes the longest. Zero marks it down to their incredible loyalty to Kuran, and Yuuki by extension. Zero also suspects that Takuma has put in a few words on his behalf.

Those brief tastes of the outside world are enough to settle Zero's restlessness - for a little while. Then one evening over breakfast, Kuran butters a piece of toast, looks over at his spouses, and says, "You mentioned the other day that the weather was starting to feel like autumn. Shall we go on a vacation?"

"We've never been on vacation before," Yuuki says, surprise in her voice.

"We should try something new every few years," Kuran responds serenely, still focussed on his bread and dairy products. "Perhaps southern Europe?"

Zero looks at Yuuki. Yuuki shrugs.
Zero looks back at Kuran. "Somewhere on the coast," he says, remembering a boat bobbing in the darkness and shared kisses under summer fireworks.

Kuran hums. "I'll see what I can do."

Suspicion creeping into her tone, Yuuki says, "Isn't Europe Shirabuki's territory?"

"It's her base of operations, yes, but she has no claim to the territory," Kuran replies with obvious self-satisfaction.

Now suspicious himself, Zero asks, "Are you planning something?"

Kuran has a hint of a smile around his mouth. "I've planned nothing. But she'll think I have, and she'll order her people to hide accordingly. It will put quite a damper on her plans, and her more sensitive operations will likely need to shut down. I'll gain significant information however she responds."

Zero chuckles. "So basically, we're going on vacation just so you can screw with Shirabuki's head at the same time. You're unbelievable."

Kuran raises his brows and leans back in his chair, hiding his smirk behind a bite of toast.

Kuran does not actually know what 'vacation' means.

Zero realizes this very quickly when things go from the three of them traveling somewhere nice, to the three of them plus Kuran's inner circle, to the Kurans holding a Night Class reunion by renting an entire luxury hotel and sending out invitations in the space of half a day.

"Does Kuran understand that being on vacation means not working?" Zero grumps into his glass of fruit juice, the only thing from the hotel bar his doctor's orders will let him drink.

Touya and Shiki, holding hands on a nearby loveseat, watch him without blinking or changing expression. They're his current babysitters after Zero got tired of being the stone in the river the ex-Night Class vampires had to flow around, and retired to this corner.

The Kurans are off somewhere doing host and hostess things, Takuma is enjoying himself thoroughly across the room, radiating happiness and the joy of friendship, and Kain and Souen are playing through one of their slap-slap-kiss routines and Zero hopes they just goddamn kiss already.

Yes, he's sour. Zero didn't want to spend time with all these bloodsuckers, he wanted to enjoy his first trip away from Rosehill, just him and Yuuki - and Kuran, since he can't get rid of the bastard. Instead he's stuck attending a bunch of parties with vampires he has a bad history with, and he hasn't gotten to see much of the city. He can't even wear human clothes because he has to dress appropriately with all these vampires around.

Not to mention Kuran told the hotel that Zero was his 'wife' (and Yuuki his sister). The staff have been calling him Mrs. Kuran Zero this whole time, and staring at his scarred face like he's some kind of zoo exhibit. It's driving him crazy, and he can't even have alcohol to make things tolerable, Zero mourns.

Admittedly, if Zero has to be stuck somewhere, this hotel is incredibly beautiful. The whole building is like a palace (and Zero would know. He lives in one) with exposed beams, marble columns, dramatic staircases, historic frescoes, antique furniture, and gorgeous views across the lagoon and canals.
Though it's warm inside, Zero can feel the cool evening breeze off the water through the open veranda doors. The Hunter shivers, a little chilled.

A cloak is held out in front of him. Zero snatches the thick wool garment, and snaps his head up to glare at Kuran, who regards him without reaction.

"We're finished for now. Would you like to go out before the human shops close?"

Across the room, Takuma bobs his head and waves at Zero encouragingly.

Zero's glare heats to scorching.

Takuma doesn't seem to notice, and continues to smile and gesture, urging the Hunter to accept.

"Only if Yuuki's coming," he tells Kuran.

The hotel has a private pier, where a long, shallow boat waits for them. Yuuki is seated in the center, waiting, with the oarsman at the stern. When she sees the two of them, she stands, holding out her arms to take Zero from Kuran's hold. Zero is settled into a hollow at the bow, filled with pillows and lined in lambswool and velvet fabrics, while Kuran takes a seat beside Yuuki, facing Zero.

The oarsman begins to row, taking them down the canals and the brightly lit streets full of tourists and revelers. Propped up on the pillows, Zero's temper cools and his disappointment lessens. Part of the problem is that he wishes he could see the city under daylight, like a human or a Hunter, and he knows he can't live that way any longer. But under moonlight, Zero imagines he can understand the charm of a vampire's view too.

"Where would you like to go?" Kuran asks, looking at Yuuki.

"The main plaza?" she suggests, turning to Zero for approval.

He nods, and Kuran turns his head to speak to the oarsman in the local language.

Yuuki smiles down at him, holding out her hand for Zero to take. "Sorry this turned out to be more work than relaxation."

Zero breathes in the night air, and listens the splash of water in the canal. "We'll make the best of what we have," he tells her.

"Are you sure you don't want to go back to the hotel? Yuuki and Souen-san will be shopping for a while," Kiryuu says, fixing him with a doubtful look.

"We'll wait," Kaname says, examining the crowd in the plaza next to where their boat is moored.

He is here to make contact with one of his human agents, and waiting for Yuuki is merely a pretext. The sunglasses he wears do little against the late afternoon sun, and his skin feels hot and tight, consuming his dwindling supply of patience.

Kiryuu examines him with a critical look. "At least come sit down in the shade. You can't be comfortable. You'll end up looking like the dried up old man you are at heart."

"So you would be disappointed if I lost my beauty, Kiryuu?" Kaname remarks, momentarily amused, turning on his heel to seek out a patch of shadow next to Kiryuu's bench.
Kiryuu snorts, crossing his arms, and without missing a beat replies, "I'm looking out for Yuuki's interests, stupid. With your personality, she should at least have something nice to look at."

"But you admit I'm attractive," Kaname presses.

"I admit that Yuuki and your fans find you attractive," Kiryuu counters. "But I know what a bastard you are, so I don't care what you look like."

Dissatisfied with Kiryuu's answer, Kaname lets the conversation lapse into silence.

"Why did you choose to marry me, instead of pawning me off on one of the Night Class alphas instead?" Kiryuu asks suddenly, his eyes on the flocks of pigeons pecking for food in the square.

*None of them are worthy. Mate is too magnificent to be mounted by any of those weaklings, asserts the alpha. We woke him with our blood, so he belongs only to us.*

Kaname ignores the thrill of anger and possessiveness that runs through him at the idea. Has Kiryuu set his eyes on one of the Night Class? His Consort has been friendly with the less politically interested Night Class members, like Rima and Senri. Kaname's rational brain knows Kiryuu is ridiculously in love with Yuuki, but his primal instincts are urging him to track down the likely alphas and kill them, just in case.

"Your answer to Noguchi Sada was well reasoned. I tried to persuade Yuuki to allow another to have you, but she refused."

*We are lucky alpha-mate was more perceptive than us, the alpha says. We almost missed claiming our beautiful mate because of our foolishness.*

Imagining a scenario where Kaname ignored Yuuki's wishes is easy: Kiryuu in his wedding robes, pledging himself to a stranger that knew their master despised him. A stranger who would carry out Kaname's jealousy and envy, who would have no mercy, who would hold the Hunter down and rape him on his wedding night, starve him of blood and dignity, and torment his mind and body as they knew their master wished. And the Kaname of that time would have been *pleased* by it.

Kaname feels sick because he recognizes those scenes as truth - he would have chosen the worst alpha he could get past Yuuki. It's like looking in a mirror and recognizing the hideous stranger in his own skin. What makes him any different from the disgusting alphas his own laws are meant to stop?

The alpha cries out in denial. *No! We would not hurt our beautiful mate.*

That's true; Kaname has decided he no longer wishes to be that person. The pureblood closes his eyes as he sees once more the memory of Kiryuu nearing death.

When he opens them, Kiryuu looks distant. "I see. That's what I thought."

Kaname feels his alpha instincts stir. *Go to mate and tell him that we want him, they say. Court him and cradle him so he feels desired, so he feels safe. Take such good care of him that he wants to stay by our side and spread his thighs in our bed.*

Kaname does none of that. He looks back out at the plaza, still finding no trace of his agent. They're over an hour late; the sun is a sliver in the west.

He thinks about the way Kiryuu looked earlier this evening, the red light of sunset from the tall bay windows staining the bright white sheets and his Consort's innocent white nightclothes. He thinks
about how he drew back that white sleeve, and bruised that pale inner wrist with his teeth, and how he could see his mark right now if he dared reach out and take his husband's hand.

"Let's return," he says, and if Kaname holds Kiryuu a little tighter than before, and arranges his Consort's blankets so Kiryuu is snug and warm in the bow's hollow -

It doesn't mean anything, of course. Alphas are expected to nurture their omegas. It's only natural.

"Your wife is very beautiful," says the boatman, fingering his mustaches as they wait for traffic in the narrow canal to pass.

Kaname raises a skeptical eyebrow. In the bow, Kiryuu is watching the boats and paying no attention to their talk. The pureblood speaks enough of the language to carry passable conversation, a skill he learned for his business interests, but Kiryuu doesn't know a word.

That makes Kaname bold enough to call the man's lie. "Almost no one would call my wife beautiful."

The boatman shakes his tanned face. "I do not mean fashionable, sir. I mean - I do not know the word in your language. The memory of her will stay with me, sir. Her soul is not far from her skin. You love her?" he asks, using the word for romantic love.

"No," Kaname says. "We were enemies. I resented her and disliked her when we married." Perhaps now the human will be silent.

As he begins to row again, the boatman considers this. "Sir, forgive me, but tonight you hold her gently in your arms. Do you want to love her?"

"Not in the least," Kaname answers. What does Kuran Kaname want from Kiryuu Zero, if it's neither suffering nor indifference? If Kiryuu is neither his love nor his subordinate, what is he?

"Ah," the boatman says, shaking his head as if he's understood something. "I have known such marriages before. You stay because she knows even the worst of you. You are friends, partners, yes?"

Kaname's hand resting on the lip of the boat curls into a loose fist. "No. I do not think she would call us that."

The human's eyes are compassionate and knowing; it makes Kaname wish to crush him. The pureblood turns away, and the journey back to the hotel is spent in silence.

Life resumes its usual rhythm once they return to Rosehill. After all the work she put into their first vacation, Yuuki really wants another, but life and political realities mean there are always fires to put out, relationships to maintain, and causes to work for.

She may not be able to take Zero and Kaname away, but there are little things she can do. You see, Yuuki has a sneaky plan. If she can get her husbands in the same space, behaving politely to each other, and then reward them by doing fun things, Yuuki can reinforce the idea that tolerating one another is pleasant and good. Just like when Zero trains Nightshade!

And she has plenty of opportunities. Zero is feeling stronger and beginning to test his limits; the scars on his face are fully healed and fading a little more every day. His coordination and balance have improved enough to handle small tasks, though his hands still shake. Best of all, he's sleeping
less and can hold himself upright nearly all the time now. That means he has the stamina for longer outings, and the two of them have made it their mission to educate Kaname on modern human culture. It's hilarious.

Taking him to the greasiest fast food restaurant they could find ended in failure. Kaname refused point blank to eat anything in the shop, but he made the best facial expressions watching Yuuki and Zero happily eat breaded chicken strips and deep fried potatoes smothered in ketchup.

Introducing Kaname to the concept of a musical goes far better. Takuma won four tickets to the newest music adaptation of one of his manga, and happily gifted Yuuki the extra three when she explained what she wanted them for. Kaname has his doubts about the artistic merit of the thing, but all three of them settle down to watch actors sing and wave magical swords for two hours, and leave feeling entertained.

Inspired, Yuuki takes them to a movie theater next, certain they're in for a good time. Kaname disdains anything involving masses of unwashed humans, sticky floors and faux velvet seats. At school, Yuuki dragged Zero to secretly watch sappy romance movies, and full of fond memories, she picks the movie with the cutest, happiest ending.

In the theatre, Yuuki sits in the middle and gets to hold hands with both of her spouses, but Kaname is no fun; it turns out he's the sort of audience that likes to point out parts of the plot that get people arrested in real life. She's banned him from all future romance movies; Yuuki will just take Zero instead. Maybe a historical drama will work better next time, she decides.

They don't always go out. When Zero feels well enough, he practices cooking again with the two of them as his assistants. It helps build up his weakened muscles without requiring him to stand, and produces delicious results. Kaname won't admit it, but Yuuki knows that he looks forward to Zero's home cooked meals; nothing tastes as good as food made just for you by a precious person.

"I know Yuuki will burn water, but let's see if that's Cross' fault or yours," he tells Kaname when her husband complains about being required to participate. (It's Cross' fault. No one except the Chairman is surprised.) Kaname's never going to be a master chef, but he has more culinary skill than Yuuki, and Zero has consents to teaching the pureblood a few simple recipes.

Today Zero is making a simple milk bread, slightly sweet and doughy the way Yuuki likes it. He's trying to build up his stamina and the muscles in his arms, hands and back with the kneading. Relegated to fetching and cleaning, Yuuki (and her alpha) is content to watch Zero's back flex and stretch as he works the dough.

"No, not like that, we're not beating it, the point of this is to make the dough more elastic." Zero wipes a flour smudge on his cheek, surveying Kaname's efforts on the second loaf. "Come here and let me show you."

The sleeves of his dress shirt neatly rolled past his elbows, Kaname complies, taught by experience to take Zero's advice rather than ruin his work through pride.

"Press and stretch with the heel of the hand," Zero explains, kneading in example as he talks. "Then fold it over, flip it ninety degrees, and repeat."

With a sly look, Kaname catches Yuuki's eye. "I think I'd understand better if you showed me with your hands."

Yuuki chokes when Kaname comes around behind Zero, leaning over him so they're pressed front to back, and Kaname can just see over Zero's shoulder. Her envious alpha bristles further when
Kaname takes Zero's hands and slides them underneath his own, so their arms are aligned. "Show me like this."

*Don't be jealous, it's good that they're bonding with each other,* Yuuki reminds herself as Zero demonstrates the technique again, and Kaname's muscles mirror Zero's movements.

The pureblood has to bend over pretty far since Zero's seated, and it makes his well-shaped rear feature strongly in her thoughts until he straightens and returns to his own station.

Kaname smiles at her like a cat in the cream. "Please be patient, Yuuki. You'll get to eat soon,"

Yuuki's eyebrow twitches.

Perhaps it's because of some unique adaptability, but Kiryuu's healing speed is improving more quickly than the doctor expected - one more strange thing to lay at the feet of his Hunter blood.

Kaname can admit feeling a tinge of relief when he heard the news that Kiryuu showed every sign of being able to walk again. The doctor suggested that Kiryuu start swimming as part of his physical therapy; the water's buoyancy would support most of his weight and allow him to focus on strengthening the muscles he hasn't used in three months.

Yuuki latched onto the suggestion with determination, and the three of them have been taking dips in the outdoor pool at least once per day, which recently increased to twice a day. After Yuuki or Kaname lay him on the steps, Kiryuu will go chin deep in the water, clinging to the side of the pool, and practice moving his legs to warm up. After that, he's taught himself to tread water using his arms to keep himself above the surface, and Kiryuu will keep that up until he's exhausted, always trying to push his body a little further. Then one of the Kurans will take his hands and lend balance, while Kiryuu keeps his feet on the bottom, helping him mimic standing.

Kaname only goes along to make sure neither of them drown. The excuse sounds thin in his own ears, and Yuuki laughs every time she hears it. Getting to see his spouses wet and sleek, glinting in the sunlight is enough of a reason, as is seeing Kiryuu's bare calves under his swim trunks, their Consort finally confident while stripping off his usual layers.

As Kiryuu heals, Kaname and Yuuki's alphas have begun to stir and show interest once more in the omega's body. The daily intimacy of their routine has become less innocent, and laden with heavy gazes and meaningful atmosphere. Yuuki, who loves the Hunter anyway, is particularly affected; Kaname is older and his self-control is strong.

Yuuki has guiltily admitted that she's going to miss their Consort being so dependent on them, and giving the regular care and touches Kiryuu needed. Privately, Kaname feels much the same. Kiryuu may hate the necessity, but to the Kurans' alphas, seeing to Kiryuu's every need is pleasurable and natural.

"Kaname! Come quick!"

That's Yuuki's voice coming from the courtyard, fast and urgent. Fearing some emergency, Kaname goes to her in a rush, abandoning his work. But there's only Yuuki and Kiryuu in the corner; the rest of the courtyard is empty and peaceful, and nothing seems amiss. Puzzled, Kaname comes toward Yuuki with the intention to question her.

His wife looks over her shoulder, beaming with her whole face and bouncing on her toes in excitement. "Kaname, look! Zero's standing!"
So he is! Wonderful - the Hunter is using one hand to balance against the wall, but he's on his own two feet without any other aid, face creased in concentration and sweat gathering on his forehead as he grits his teeth. There's the tightness in his jaw that signifies pain, but Kiryuu works through it, tenacious as always.

"Can you move your feet at all?" Kaname asks when he draws even with Yuuki's shoulder. In his chest is a warm feeling. Admiration, he decides. It's good Yuuki called him; it would be a shame to miss seeing her joy.

Kiryuu's shoulders shrug carefully so he doesn't unbalance himself, his attention intensely focussed on his body. Slowly, ever so slowly, his right foot pushes forward, sliding against the pavestones. When he stops, the distance is only half the length of his foot, but even that much is a victory.

Yuuki thinks so too, squealing and clapping her hands - then yelping when Zero starts to tilt off center.

But there's no danger; Kaname already has an arm around their Consort's middle, easing him down into a chair. A laugh escapes from his chest.

Yuuki's feverish excitement overwhelms her; she throws herself at Kiryuu and kisses him hard, mouth seeking hungrily until he needs to breathe again.

Not one to be left out, Kaname cuts in, turning Kiryuu's chin to meet his lips and indulging himself in a long, open-mouthed kiss, seeking the familiar taste of his Consort's mouth.

Kiryuu looks dazed by his success, quiet with breathlessness and exhaustion; his manner is full of peaceful relief and the pleasure of hard-earned achievement.

Denied more kisses, Yuuki is dancing around in a circle laughing with joy. "I'm so proud of you, Zero, you've worked so hard! Let's have something special for dinner to celebrate!"

Kaname realizes that his mouth is smiling, a soft curve of his lips. The pureblood hastily wipes the accidental expression from his face, but for the rest of the night his chest has an inexplicable lightness.

They eat Kiryuu's tomato soup and a rum cake Yuuki scrounged up from the kitchen in the Consort's Suite. Yuuki, filled with pride, presents Kiryuu with a beautiful cane in pale wood, inlaid with mother-of-pearl and capped in silver.

Kiryuu is asleep as soon as his head hits the pillow, and Yuuki not long after, but Kaname keeps watch long into the daylight, carding his hand through moon-colored hair.

Then he gets up, mindful not to wake either of them, and goes into the next room, closing the door behind him.

"Seiren," he calls, and in a blurred motion his Shadow is kneeling before him.

"There is something I need you to do for me."

Watching Kiryuu take his first steps flips a switch in Kaname and Yuuki; like a serpent stirring from hibernation, their alpha instincts have nothing to restrain them anymore, and their desires rebound even stronger for having been suppressed.

Those lingering looks and touches that lasted just a little longer than necessary, have turned to
unabashed staring and ever more daring liberties. They're increasingly suspicious of other alphas; visitors are met far from the Consort's suite, just to prevent a stranger seeing a single silver hair. Instinct drives them to scent mark him almost every day, to feel and hold his body as close as they can.

Their mate draws them like a lodestone, bodies drifting to face him whenever they're in the same room, every centimeter of their skin sensitive to his living energy, his breaths, his scent. His lavender eyes are an inexorable draw, and their desire for him no less than the pull of gravity.

Yuuki is the most strongly affected, but her affection for Kiryuu is like a choke collar, and she assiduously observes their Consort's boundaries. She pins him down in their messy sheets and feeds her hunger with furious, urgent volleys of kisses until she's shaking with effort, but never crosses that edge. Kaname is little better with his unconscious caresses, compulsive marking and near-stalking through Nightshade.

Something has to give. And it does, on an evening a few moons shy of October, with just a hint of autumn chill.

Kaname hears the door to their bedroom slam. "Yuuki?" he calls, putting down the phone he was about to dial. "I thought you were cooking with Kiryuu -"

Yuuki stumbles through the doorway, and the pureblood inhales sharply. She's wide-eyed and panting, with a high flush in her cheeks. She clutches the doorway like it's the only thing holding her up, and she has a dazed, glassy look in her eyes; Kaname doesn't think whatever she's seeing is in front of her eyes now.

He draws close enough to scent her, breathing into the crook of her neck. Yuuki shivers.

Kaname's face splits into a sharp smile, and he brings his mouth close to her ear. "My dear wife, whatever has brought you to such a state?"

Yuuki's mouth works for a moment, trying to speak. "He, Zero, we were making, and I got - he licked it off my finger."

Kaname gets caught up in the image, and a sympathetic heat lights in his belly. "Just like that?"

Yuuki nods, swallowing.

"What did it feel like?" Kaname croons, just to tease her.

His wife moans. "Good. Really good. I had to leave, I was just so - I need to borrow the bedroom."

She tries to break past him, but Kaname bars the door with his arm.

"Kaname! I'm not in the mood," she protests, frustration making her short-tempered.

Kaname lowers his voice and catches her eyes. "My dear," he says, "are you sure I can't help you?"

And he presses his palm firmly against the front of her skirt, finding the line of her hard cock underneath. She chokes and moans again, and Kaname's body takes a more serious interest, keen after many months of celibacy.

A spark of awareness breaks through her desperate arousal. "Kaname, if we do this now, are you going to get angry if I think about him? If I call Zero's name?"

Kaname stops for a moment, the question serious enough to pause the game. "I suppose," he
answers slowly, his own arousal clouding his thinking and making the idea of 'no' insane, "that if I'm going to be his first cock, you're allowed to have your fantasies."

Yuuki bites him, punishment for bringing up the thing she's most jealous of, and Kaname smirks, both hands sneaking up Yuuki's skirt to feel their way to her straining sex, knowing by touch the fastest way to free her.

At the first touch of his bare hand, she groans, and throws her head back to knock against the wall, her eyes rolling back into her head and her hips thrusting against his hold.

Kaname's never seen her so desperately aroused before, and he's equally hard now, straining against the front of his slacks. They've never had sex with an open bloodbond, and he's feeling her echoed desperation and lust, his own body's heat mounting and spiraling to join her. What a missed opportunity, he mourns, allowing himself to grind against her hip while he kisses her throat, the hand wrapped around her cock teasing her with its light grip.

"Not going to last long," she gasps, trying to chase his hand and the friction she desires.

But Kaname isn't finished playing yet, a little revenge for how long he's had to tend to himself, and he loosens his grip further.

Yuuki whimpers in frustration. "Kaname!"

He nibbles at the curve of her ear. "Are you imagining him? Our chaste little Consort, who was wicked enough to make you a mess just with his tongue around your finger?"

Yuuki's inhale sounds more like a sob.

Kaname presses his grin into her hair, and allows her a few firm strokes all the way down to the ring of her soft knot at the base, the way she's leaking into his hand making things slick enough without help.

If he took his hand out of her skirt right now she'd either cry or kill him, and the idea makes Kaname's cock twitch and his pulse pound faster.

"Are you thinking about those clever, dangerous Hunter's hands wrapped around your cock, Yuuki? Or are you still thinking about that pink tongue?"

His wife pants, robbed of speech by the solid cage of his fist around her cock, rocking her hips to match his motions.

"I was - I, I, it feels so wrong, like I shouldn't -" she manages to wring out, wisps of hair pulled loose from her braid sticking to the sweat on her reddened face.

Kaname experiments with the pace and strength of his strokes, trying to draw back and gain more control. She's so responsive, and the bloodbond shows him her real, unfeigned reactions;

Kaname has to lick his dry lips to go on. "But you did think about it, didn't you? You thought about how it would feel if he put his pretty lips around you to taste your come. About what he would look like if he lapped up your cock and played with the knot you're going to stuff inside him."

Yuuki snarls, and her hand shackles Kaname's wrist until the bones creak, forcing him to keep moving at the impatient pace she wants so her husband can't tease and play anymore. With her other hand she forces Kaname's hip more firmly against her thigh, so the pressure against his cock becomes almost painful.
It's the most arousing thing she's ever done in their bedroom. Yuuki has *never* been assertive during sex before, always letting Kaname dictate how their encounters went. Kaname was always careful to act the gentleman in bed, maintaining his masks to the last detail. And he would have never dared to taunt her with fantasies of another man.

All this stimulation - the freedom of showing his real identity and unchaining his own desires, the lust looping between them from the bloodbond, and the way imagining Zero with a mouthful of cock drives the alpha's lust to new heights - it's too much temptation for Kaname, and his self-control cracks down the center. He's just as worked up as Yuuki is; inquiry and investigation give way to single-mindedly chasing the high of orgasm.

Everything is lost except desire as the two purebloods tear their pleasure from each other. There's no more speech, just heavy panting and moaning, the groans that spring from Kaname's belly as a change in angle gives him pressure right where he wants it, the rustle of Yuuki's skirts and the high noises she makes when Kaname's wrist twists just right, everything rushing together in a tightening coil everything bleeding together into hands and sweat and *more more more*!

Only a little more. Only a little more, and Kaname stops kissing Yuuki long enough to rasp, "Just like that - that's how he'll suck your cock when he's heavy with your baby."

That does it. Yuuki comes with a wail, her body jerking forward and clacking Kaname's teeth painfully as her skull connects with his jaw. Sagging for a moment against his shoulder, she scrabbles blindly for the zip of his trousers, but her hands shake too much, and it only takes a little heavy petting before Kaname is coming too, the orgasm wrung from his body, long and strained like he's held it back too long.

The whole time, Kaname's mind is full of that last image of Kiryuu, kneeling naked with his knees spread wide to accommodate his gravid belly, his body filled with the most primal claim of all, pretty lavender eyes looking up at him and glossy lips wrapped around his cock.

They breathe in each other's air for a few minutes, staggered by the force unleashed by Yuuki's fantasy and their doubled lust, letting the sweat cool as their intellect catches up with their groins.

"That was -" Yuuki says.

"Yes," Kaname agrees.

"Wow."

"Indeed," Kaname says. "But I'm not quite satisfied." He looks at Yuuki in sly invitation. "You'll need to practice more, if you want to drive the other women Kiryuu's fucked out of his head."

Yuuki's eyes narrow and her brows draw together. "I won't let him think about anyone else ever again. He's our*.

Kaname smiles, his purpose achieved. "I'm happy to help. But perhaps next time I might…?" His hand between her thighs delves further back, dipping into her woman's folds, and the untouched dampness there. A pureblood's desire is not quickly or easily satisfied.

But Yuuki catches his wrist, pulling him back against the silken skin of her thigh. "No."

"No?" he repeats, letting his timbre go husky. "I shouldn't satisfy my beloved wife?"

"No," she tells him again, eyes hard and determined. "You can use your mouth or your hands, but I will not let you put your cock in me."
Not sure anymore if this is a game, Kaname tries one more time. "And why is that, Yuuki?"

"Because," she says with a smile curling one side of her mouth, "right now, your cock is meant to please just one person, and that's Zero."

Kaname stares at her, dumbfounded.

Yuuki's grin broadens, and she rests the heel of her hand against his half-hard sex. "If you want pussy, Kaname, the only person you'll get it from is our precious Consort, because we promised him the right to our cocks. Remember our marriage vows?"

She presses her hand down harder, and her voice goes husky. "So I want you to think about him, to wonder every moment what it will feel like to slide inside his perfect body. I want you to desire him like you've never desired anyone else. And if I have to make you hungry to achieve that goal, I will."

"Yuuki," Kaname begins hurriedly, "that's really not necessary - "

"But if you really meant it when you said you wanted to help me, I'd like your mouth next." Yuuki looks him straight in the eye as she says it, without a single doubt she'll get what she wants.

Then she falters, horrified at her own temerity as her brain catches up to her tongue. Yuuki has never demanded anything sexual from Kaname before, let alone almost ordered him. That was never the dynamic of their relationship, in bed or out of it, and just committing such a radical act leaves her frozen at her own daring.

"No no no," Kaname stops her, putting a finger to her lips. "Don't back down when what you desire is within your sight, Yuuki. Now, look me in the eye and tell me what you want."

She takes a breath, and forges straight ahead in a steady voice laced with a slight questioning undertone. "Kaname, I want you to put your mouth on my cock."

Kaname brings her hand up and kisses the back of it, swirling his tongue on her skin to tempt her. "Of course. I can't deny my dear girl anything."

"Do you ever get tired of being treated like an expensive diamond in a display case?"

With a half-tipped teapot in one hand, Takuma freezes, just shy of pouring. He stares down at the antique teacups on the table in front of them, and then lifts his chin to match Zero's gaze.

"There are many times where the restrictions of being an omega have frustrated me," he tells Zero carefully. The noble sets the teapot down with a quiet thunk, easily heard in the silence.

Isa is sleeping in the courtyard, soaking up the day's leftover warmth. Nightshade was banished from Zero's side in a fit of irritation, and he sent his maids away from his suite after Takuma arrived.

"Do you feel like you're a treasure kept for display?" Takuma asks in return, expression deliberately neutral.

Scrubbing his hands over his face, Zero tries to pin down the source of his aggravation. "I don't know. Most of the time I'm fine, but yeah, sometimes I do. When I'm reminded how helpless I am, the things I can't control - my body, the duties I have to perform, all of this omega crap."
Staring down at his lap, so he avoids looking at his friend, it's easier to admit his weakness. "I'm supposed to be be 'The Kurans' Consort.' I need to look the right way, and act like everyone expects, and do the right things. Now people who would have spit on me in the street for being a filthy level D fawn over me instead. They wouldn't give a shit about me if I wasn't an omega married to the Kuran family. Or they're like Abe and they hate me because I don't match their image of what a Consort should be. The vampires treat me so nice for something I had nothing to do with."

Zero's throat tightens. "I feel...choked. Like all of these things are making it hard to breathe. And the parts that make up who I am are always at war. The vampire, and the Hunter. My omega's body and my human's mind. My duty and the things I want. No matter what choice I make, it's never a good one.I don't know what I'm doing. I can't reconcile anything. And I can't even run away because my body is too messed up to move faster than a shuffle," he concludes bitterly.

Takuma considers this. "Your introduction to an omega's life has been very brutal. I can't imagine being in your place. You've been denied so many choices you never expected to lose. There was no way you could prepare for any of this, and yet we expect you not just to handle it, but to excel. I'm sorry to have added to the burden placed on you. It's your right to feel however you want to about things."

Zero exhales with a gust. "Takuma-sempai, you don't have anything to apologize for. You're not responsible for any of this, and you've been more supportive of me than almost anyone else. I consider you a good friend. I'm sorry for complaining and being dramatic about stupid things."

"Talking about your feelings is not complaining," Takuma gently tells him. "And I think, if anything, you are minimizing your circumstances rather than exaggerating them."

Zero grunts, but doesn't press the point.

Takuma finally gets to pour his tea, after boiling a new pot of water on the little portable hot plate included with the tea service. Zero watches the water bubble and tries to gather some peace from the quiet atmosphere and Takuma's steady, practiced movements.

Every impossible step I take makes me feel like a real vampire, he thinks, but doesn't say aloud. The implications are insulting to any born vampire, and Zero doesn't feel like screwing up his one remaining platonic friendship today (Kaito doesn't count - he's a stupid older sibling).

But the words are true. Zero's lived the past thirty-odd years as though he were a Hunter, albeit one tainted by a vampire's curse. Everything about his vampirism he ignored and shut away. It wasn't realistic and it wasn't healthy, Zero knows. But it was so easy to pretend - pure-blooded Hunters aged slowly, and when he didn't drink real blood, and looked away when his flesh healed too fast, and pushed away the pain from the sun and Hunter spells, Zero could imagine he was simply some Hunter who had committed a heinous crime that exiled him from the Hunter community. And someday, he would earn forgiveness, and everyone would accept him back.

The last year has taken that self-deception from him, in drips and torrents. The first thing it took was his ability to feel comfortable in his own body, and last thing it stole was his mobility and ability to escape through Hunting. He can never go back. Never. Zero has to face that. It would be so much easier if Zero could abandon the Hunter, and live only as a vampire. But he can't. He would destroy himself first. And the vampire won't abandon him. This is stupid. Why can't he just stop being upset about this? Why can't he get over things and move on? Is he going to spend the rest of his unnatural life fighting with himself? Is there no truce, only a constant series of defeats?
Zero just wants to feel comfortable in his skin. Just once. But he can't remember, the same way he can't remember what it felt like to be human anymore.

A hand crosses into his vision, outstretched and offering fragrant green tea. "Thank you, Takuma-sempai."

"You looked like you could use a distraction. Do you want to talk about anything?" The blond blows over his own tea to cool it, deliberately looking away from Zero to allow him privacy.

Zero stares down at the cup. What he means to say is no. What he says instead is, "Yuuki and Kuran are sneaking off to have sex."

Takuma almost spits out his tea. "...you saw them, Kiryuu-kun?"

Zero shakes his head. "No, but Yuuki's really bad at hiding stuff like that. We lived together; I know what her 'embarrassed-about-sex' face looks like." Poor Takuma. Zero's given him the unenviable job of showing proper respect to a pureblood while also being sensitive to a friend.

The nobles does his best, valiantly straining for nonchalance. "They are married. Is this...unusual for them?"

"Yes," Zero replies, staring a hole through his teacup. "I'm not sure, but it's been...at least since May?"

"Ah," Takuma says, red staining his cheeks."That's...good."

"I think it's my fault," Zero tells him."Because I haven't fulfilled my duty, they had to find an outlet. They've been - very alpha, since I've been getting better."

Takuma chuckles knowingly. "The scenting, the touching, the stalking? They look at you like they want to throw you down and tear your clothes off?"

Flushing, Zero nods.

"Does that upset you? Either the alpha behaviors or the fact the Kurans are doing things together."

Zero frowns, and buys himself time by taking a drink of his tea."I know it's all instinct for them. I've accepted their courtship, but we haven't consummated it, so they're being driven to finish their claim, and the urge gets stronger the more time passes. I just feel like I've failed, because they had to take those feelings out on each other. I'm supposed to do my job being the one getting fucked and I've screwed that up."

Zero is also a tiny bit jealous that Yuuki is sleeping with Kuran, but he doesn't mention that to Takuma. And feeling left out is juvenille, dammit, because fucking each other's brains out isn't the same as not being invited to go on a date.

"I do like the kissing, and some of the other things -" Zero really likes some of the other things, and just thinking about them makes him warm - "but when I think about actually having sex, it freaks me out. I know if I don't fix this I'll be harassed again by the Jeweled Court, and the vampires and the Hunters are already wondering what my problem is."

"Is there one? A problem, I mean," Takuma asks over the rim of his cup.

"I've thought about it, and with Yuuki sex seems less intimidating. I could do it if it was just her, because I love her and I trust her and I want to give her everything she wants. But with Kuran...I
don't trust him, and the idea of letting him see me vulnerable like that makes my inner Hunter break out in hives. He's been acting nice since I got hurt, but there's no guarantee this isn't some public act, or a trick, and once he gets what he wants he's going to hurt me or go right back to being the same bastard as always."

"So you're reluctant because you can't trust Kaname's intentions?" Takuma says with a look of deep thought on his face.

"That's the most immediate problem," Zero hedges, because Takuma does not need to know about his troubling relationship to his body and his complete inability to deal with his new genitals.

Takuma taps his nails on the table, and turns back to Zero with his green eyes full of uncertainty.

"Zero, I'm not trying to change your mind about Kaname, and I'm not trying to get you to like him. But if I brought someone to talk to you, would you listen?"

"Yes," Zero tells him. What could it hurt?

Flashing him a smile, Takuma says, "Wait here for a bit, I think there was a strategy meeting today," and the noble leaves in a rush.

Zero pours himself another cup of tea, and tries a little light meditation to soothe his feelings, closing his eyes and concentrating on his breathing. There are birds singing in the garden, fattening up on autumn bounty before winter sets in. He hears four voices, but imagines there are more birds, for some reason.

There - a flare in his Hunter senses, two auras headed towards this room.

Zero opens his eyes once they get close. "Takuma-sempai?" he asks. "Why have you brought Kain-san to see me?"

"Tell him what Kaname ordered you to do," Takuma commands over his shoulder as he settles back into his chair.

Kain looks startled, amber eyes going wide. "How did you -"

Takuma smiles. "I know you, and whatever you say, you didn't come up with the idea on your own. That leaves just one other possible person, who I also know quite well."

"I'm not allowed to discuss it -"

"Kain, I would not ask you if I did not believe it was important. Zero needs to know."

The noble gives in, sighing and running a hand through his hair. "Kaname-sama asked to see me around mid-August. He told me that the Hunters had found a suspiciously high number of new Level Ds and Es, and he wanted me to look into it."

"What did he find!?" Zero demands, jerking upright in his seat. Kuran looking into Hunter business...Zero shouldn't be surprised, but Kuran's goals for doing so are murky and probably not in the Association's best interest.

Kain shrugs. "Not much, honestly. My orders were to round up some other nobles and eliminate as many Es as possible, especially in places where they gathered in large groups. And Kaname-sama ordered me not to say that he had anything to do with it, and to keep things as quiet as I could."

"So you just killed Level Es," Zero states. Surely there has to be more?
"Pretty much. Seiren passed me locations sometimes." Now that the secret's out, Kain's returned to his usual laid-back personality. Zero has eaten enough dinners at his house to judge that he's not lying.

"Why did he want you to keep it a secret?"

The noble shrugs again. "Kaname-sama didn't say. He told us to bring down the number of Level Es, and that's what we did."

Zero looks a Takuma, hoping for clarification, but the other omega just shakes his head. "I don't know either. I only guessed what Kaname was doing in the first place. I don't believe Yuuki knows about this."

Tipping his head down and letting his bangs fall forward to hide his eyes, Zero tries to make sense of this. Kuran claimed his goal was information, but in practice this sounded like nothing more than a Level E cull. Why would Kuran care about eliminating dangerous Es? It's not to hamper a pureblood enemy, because killing level E vampires was like trying to empty the ocean with a bucket - the pureblood could easily make hundreds more. The only people it benefitted were the vulnerable humans and the overextended Hunters.

The Hunters...Could this be for maintaining their alliance? But Kuran didn't tell anyone about it, so it didn't gain him any favor with the Association. Then why do it, when it cost him resources he could spend elsewhere and the pureblood gained nothing?

Coming from Kuran, this almost looked like altruism, but Kuran's brain didn't work like that. It was the handful of people he liked and cared for that were his motivation, as well as his own desires. After that, a second tier of abstract moral principles covered any situations the first two motivations didn't touch. But none of this explains the current situation.

"Why now?" Zero thinks out loud. "The Hunters had been battling the Level E surge for months before Kuran ordered you to take action. There's no way he didn't know."

Across the table, Takuma's shoulders jerk, and he chokes on his first sip of fresh tea. Doubling over and covering his mouth, he tries to cough the liquid back up.

Zero blinks in confusion. Had he said something strange? "Takuma-sempai?"

Kain seems to have caught on to whatever startled Takuma. He's giving Zero a very peculiar look, and keeps shifting from foot to foot like he wishes he could leave.

Finally straightening, Takuma's coughs have turned into spasms that resemble laughter instead. "Zero," he wheezes, "what happened in July?"

The Hunter tries to process this, a creeping disbelief. "Takuma-sempai, there's no way Kuran sent his nobles out to pick up the slack when I couldn't Hunt anymore. He hates me. There has to be another explanation!"

Takuma's smiling so broadly his cheeks must be sore. "I'm sure it wasn't completely unselfish, but can you come up with a better reason?"

Zero glares at both the nobles, because he can't. But something will come to him if he thinks hard enough.

Kain holds his hands palm up, protesting his inclusion as a target of Zero's ire. "I'm just going to go, Ruka is waiting for me?"
"Thank you, Kain. You've been very helpful," Takuma chirps as Kain beats a hasty retreat. Then his demeanor turns serious, and he leans toward Zero, reaching out to take his hand.

Zero is a sucker for Takuma's earnestness and pleading look - for a vampire, Takuma is just too nice - and his glare thaws.

The noble squeezes Zero's hand in thanks. "I meant it when I said I wasn't trying to convince you to like Kaname, or to change your mind about him. I know very well Kaname's flaws. I just ask that you keep an open mind. You did almost die - maybe this time, Kaname really isn't planning anything underhanded. Maybe he is being honest. Please just keep the idea open, okay?"

Zero snorts, and that's the end of it. Soon after, Takuma returns home.

But the possibility Takuma planted there has already stealthily taken root. Zero thinks over the circumstances of Kain's task many times in the following weeks, but can't come to a satisfying answer. One strange coincidence is not real evidence.

Zero wonders what Kuran Kaname tastes like when he isn't lying.

Chapter End Notes

I hope no one minded the spontaneous hand job. I've never written sex before, and this chapter was a test drive to start figuring out the mechanics. On a more character driven perspective, having Kaname and Yuuki finally start having sex again was a prerequisite for bringing Zero into the mix, and necessary for their own relationship. Pre-Zero, the Kurans' marriage was not so great. They held a lot back from each other, and that included during sex. Don't get me wrong, it was good sex - Kaname is very skilled - but it wasn't completely satisfying for either Yuuki or Kaname. It didn't happen that often, was pretty basic, and they went their separate ways afterward. They were both so busy maintaining the image they wanted each other to see that it lacked both passion and honesty. This is part of their communication they're working on now.

The titles of the last two chapters combine to make a famous Latin phrase that means 'If you want peace, prepare for war.'

Next chapter: 'Reparations,' Takuma makes a choice, and Zero faces the Jeweled Court for a second time.
Reparations

Chapter Notes

Sorry this was a few days later than I wanted. Fun story - my eight-year-old laptop's hard drive failed, and fixing it would almost be the cost of a new one. I didn't lose any writing, because I switched over to google docs the first time I had a computer scare, but a big chunk of this chapter was written on my smartphone.

Anyway, to the guest who asked, Zero threw a temper tantrum when Kaname told him he was now Kaname's "wife", but eventually accepted it, because Kaname had legitimate reasons. The lie explains to ordinary humans why the three are so close. A sexual relationship between three people is illegal and wrong under human law, and saying they're family is an excuse for why they can sleep in the same room, kiss etc. It's easy to tell that Kaname and Yuuki are blood related, but I don't think anyone would believe Zero is their brother, so he becomes Kaname's wife instead. And with the way he dresses and his pretty face, humans might accept Zero is just a masculine woman. This is actually a normal vampire cultural practice with male omegas. When vampires interact with humans, they have to explain somehow why "men" are pregnant and have children with other men without giving away their secrets. So when a omega who was born male goes out in human society, they pretend to be female. The vampires even create false birth certificates and other records so the male omega's children can be correctly listed as their own. The Night Class would have expected Kaname to follow this practice as well. Thus, Zero becomes a woman and Kaname's wife.

Also, remember to take Kaname's imagined scenario last chapter with a grain of salt, because it involves Kaname's self-perception and beliefs which aren't always accurate.

And yes, my other Guest reviewer, you did inspire that slight change to the finger licking scene. I'd already planned it, but you had such a good suggestion I just had to tweak the scenario and use it. Gold star for you!

Aido slams his hand on the chair arm. "How many does this make!? Fifteen?"

"Sixteen, actually," Takuma corrects, face disgusted at the waste of life.

Kaname's mood is little better. In the last month and a half, sixteen of his agents have disappeared in Europe, including the one who never met him at the plaza while he waited with Kiryuu. Most - or all of them - are probably dead. They may have been human, but Kaname regrets the futility and waste of their deaths.

"There's no doubt Shirabuki-sama is hiding something," Ruka reflects angrily. "This is too thorough. She is being careful not to let a single piece of information slip out."

"Ahhhh!" Aido musses his hair wild in his fury. "I just don't get it. What do any of these places have to do with each other?!!"
Kain, leaning against the wall and so far silent, nods to Ruka and looks at Kaname. "What would you have us do, Kaname-sama?"

The pureblood leans back in his chair. "The epitome of madness is repeating the same action and expecting a different outcome. Human agents have proved inadequate. Perhaps it is time to risk a more significant piece. Seiren."

His Shadow appears, kneeling by the foot of his study's desk, not a grey hair out of place. "Yes, Kaname-sama?"

"Have you completed the request I made?"

"Yes, Master."

"Then I am sending you to Europe, along with Aido. The human agents have shown us the locations Shirabuki guards most closely. Begin there, but prioritize your safety. I want no more losses."

Seiren bows her head. "Yes, Master."

Kaname looks to Aido. "Is this mission any problem for you, Aido?"

"Kaname-sama..." The blond's eyes are glassy and on the verge of tears. "To be trusted to much by Kaname-sama..."

Aido pumps his fist, "I'll do my best! You can count on me, we'll find out what she's up to!"

Kaname chuckles. "Thank you, Aido. Your enthusiasm is always appreciated."

"A little hungry today, are we?" Kuran laughs as Zero pushes him down on the bed.

Leaning over the pureblood's chest, Zero searches for his favorite place to sink his fangs, a wide vein that won't wastefully bleed more than Zero can swallow. Honestly. Talking is a really stupid thing for Kuran to do right now, because Zero's fangs are unsheathed next to the pureblood's jugular. One ill-timed twitch from Kuran and his ambrosial blood will soak the sheets red, irresistible bait for every vampire on the estate.

Zero bears down with his weight, reminding Kuran not to be careless. Zero's reaction time hasn't recovered enough to prevent accidents if Kuran feels like being dramatic today.

Besides, that's Zero's and Yuuki's blood! No wasting it on teasing Level Cs and causing problems for the laundry staff!

Not when it's the second best thing Zero's ever drunk, so rich and hot and the taste - human languages have no words. 'Taste' is not a strong enough word for a substance you feel with all your senses, that quenches more than the sweetest drop of springwater, that burns in your belly as it courses through every last cell and changes your very nature. Kuran is a bastard, but his blood is a temptation beyond rational thought, a ruby siren's song of bliss and power.

As Zero feeds, swallowing greedily and flicking his tongue out to clean up stray drops, Yuuki drapes herself over Zero's back, seeking contact and absent-mindedly scenting him, smoothing her hands over his shoulders and back.

Even carried off by the rush of pure blood, Zero doesn't let go of his resolution. He's slacked off
too much; he needs to be stricter with himself, even if the idea makes him squirm uncomfortably. He's a Hunter of the Kiryuu line - surely he can do this much?

That's why, when Yuuki's hands come to rest at the small of his back, right in the dip above his ass, Zero takes his courage in a white-knuckled grip, reminds himself that he's fifty-two years old, dammit, and raises his head. "You can go further if you want."

It's as though Yuuki doesn't understand him for a moment. "What did you say?"

The Hunter sighs, feeling the warmth in his cheeks rise, but Kuran's shocked face below him is enjoyable enough that Zero can power through. "You can touch me. Lower. On my - rear." Now he's certain he's wearing a full-fledged blush. "If you want too."

From the tension suddenly coursing through her body, Yuuki is paying Zero her full attention now. "Are you...sure, Zero?"

Zero blushes even more heavily. Do they really need to talk about this? "Yeah."

The Court is coming up, and Zero needs to start making some progress pushing through his stupid physical hang-ups. It's time for him to do his duty and provide what he promised. (And if he still can't look at or touch himself, that doesn't matter, because all he has to do is spread his legs and stare at the ceiling while Yuuki and Kuran find their pleasure. It's not hard. Being so frightened is ridiculous.)

"Okay," Yuuki whispers, reminding Zero where he is and what he just offered. "Thank you, Zero, for trusting me."

She rubs his back soothingly, with a deep pressure that pushes him against Kuran's chest, and teasingly moves lower, and lower. Then, deciding to charge forward as usual, Yuuki's touch disappears, and Zero feels her soft, small hands each grab a firm handful of his ass.

He makes an undignified noise, despite his resolution to remain stoic.

Kuran is making a ridiculously smug expression, so Zero shoves his hands in the pureblood's face, smacking Kuran and blocking his eyesight. The pureblood's protest is also muffled; Zero pretends he hasn't heard.

Yuuki squeezes gently, like she's testing how his flesh feels.

Zero wishes he could see her face; she isn't saying anything. Is his ass too weird? Is it bad? Oh Ancestress - is she comparing him to Kuran? Is Zero losing to that crusty bastard again?!

"It's softer than I imagined..." Yuuki groans dreamily against his ear. She sounds almost drunk, and she gives another solid squeeze, sighing happily, as though all her dreams have come true.

Zero feels irrationally defensive. "I've been out of training! My body's not in good condition!"

Kuran has finally pried Zero's hands off his face. "Let me feel," he tells Yuuki, and she reluctantly slides her palms up so Kuran can take his own handful.

Kuran's hand is much bigger, and heavier. Zero glares intensely at this bold, pushy alpha, the high of blood drinking now fully worn off.

Hold on - Zero makes a swift examination of his feelings. There's anger and embarrassment, yes. But even having Kuran touching him doesn't feel bad or uncomfortable as he feared. This is okay,
and Zero relaxes minutely, once he understands that he's found another safe threshold.

"You could bounce a coin off Zero's butt in school," Yuuki informs her husband, who is squeezing the flesh of Zero's abused bottom with gusto. Then he gives it a small smack, like he's testing the bounce.

Zero jumps, offended, and considers punching the pureblood in the face.

"Really?" Kuran asks, patting the flesh to take away the sting.

Yuuki nods against Zero's back, happily kneading her soft, round prize. "Some of the Day Class girls dared each other to try it. I think there's video somewhere."

"Mmmm," Kuran replies, still preoccupied with discovering the wondrous properties of Zero's hind end. "A bit lean. He's still too thin; we need to keep feeding him."

"Firm is nice. But soft is really, really, really, great too," Yuuki gushes, still sounding drugged. "I like Zero's butt no matter what."

"You two are the worst," Zero grouches, glaring at thin air. Damn alphas.

"You're a bit grouchy today, Zero-kun. Are you sure you're fine?"

Takuma's green eyes are wide and concerned, and just make Zero squirm deeper in his pillow nest in embarrassment. "Yes," he mutters.

Takuma raises an eyebrow for a moment, sighs, and gives up, going back to his manga.

The moonlight streaming through the windows of the Shouto estate is bright white, illumination almost as blinding as day. It leaves Zero too restless to settle and read his book - a full moon like this is a Hunter's boon. Were he still unmarried, Zero would be spending every second of precious nights like these in pursuit of his most dangerous prey.

Zero tosses and turns on his cushions, rolling one way and another. "Takuma-sempai, I'm sorry, but can we do something else tonight? I can walk a little further now with my cane, if you wanted to go somewhere, but I'm really slow."

The noble looks fondly on Zero, shutting his book between his palms. "Perhaps a little mental stimulation? We could go over more scenarios for the autumn Jeweled Court. I'm sorry I won't be able to attend, but omegas are dangerously aggressive when in season."

At the reminder, Zero grimaces. "Maybe just a few. I'm convinced they're going to string me up either way, but it couldn't hurt."

Takuma quizzes him for nearly an hour, a game they have often played where Takuma acts as the opponent and his questions fly thick and cutting, forcing Zero to think on his feet and come up with a good response. When Zero's brain feels like a wrung-out dishtowel, Takuma orders a tea break, and the room falls into a comfortable silence.

"Takuma-sempai...." Zero ventures, playing with the tassels at the edge of his pillow. "In light of what the Court brought up last time, may I ask a really rude, personal question?"

"Go ahead, Zero," Takuma invites him without needing to think.

Zero heaves a breath. His shoulders are tensed up by his ears, and he almost chickens out, but the
Hunter can't afford to keep shying away from this problem. "Does doing...you know, with a pureblood, hurt?"

Takuma blinks, bemused by Zero's request.

Rushing to explain, the words trip over his tongue. "It's just, there are rumors, among the Hunters - and most of them are pretty ugly."

Takuma sips his tea. "What do the Hunters say about lying with purebloods?"

Mindful that Takuma was raised by Kuran's side, Zero tries to find a polite way of phrasing things. "The nicest rumors say purebloods prefer things violent and bloody. The worst say most lower classes don't live to tell the tale, and their families are left to bury the pieces."

The noble's brow furrows. "There is truth to that," he admits slowly. "Some purebloods will commit such acts. Kuran Rido was notorious for needing replacement partners after they endured his 'attentions'."

Takuma turns suddenly to Zero in understanding and asks, "Is that what you thought would happen to you the night you married Kaname and Yuuki-san?"

Zero says nothing, but turns his face away.

"That's why you were so pale that night. Oh, Zero, I'm so sorry," Takuma says, reaching out to rest his hand on Zero's arm. "You must have been terrified, but you were terribly brave to face things anyway."

Uncomfortable with Takuma's compassion, Zero shifts uncomfortably. "It was fine, Takuma-sempai. I didn't think they would kill me."

Unsatisfied, Takuma shakes his head, but goes on. "Under normal circumstances, sex with purebloods is no more painful than with an ordinary lover. Their strength can sometimes cause bruises or minor injuries if they forget themselves, but you need never fear. You are an omega, and their mate; their instincts won't allow them to physically harm you by accident. Hurting on purpose," he says with a blush, "can be arranged if the partners wish."

Zero matches his sempai's blush, and nearly upsets his cane leaning against the table. "Then, the actual...you know, sleeping together, doesn't hurt?"

"Not unless you're doing it wrong. Properly prepared, you shouldn't feel more than some discomfort, and afterwards you may feel some aches."

Takuma meets his eyes, face schooled to a more businesslike air. "There is one exception. Remember I told you male omegas have a protective membrane sealing off the newly made womb?"

Zero nods. "You said it was very thick and tough. I would assume tearing it hurts?"

"Quite badly," the Noble admits, stirring his cup. "Breaking a male omega's seal and opening his womb takes effort on the alpha's part."

"But that's just the first time, and never again!" Takuma hurries to reassure Zero, realizing belatedly the effect of his words.

Well fuck. Zero scrubs his hands over his face. So he has to lie still and meek while Kuran tears
him open. His stomach ripples with nausea and Zero regrets the tea.

"Zero..." Takuma begins, but the Hunter really needs to think about something else right now.

"How did you and Shouto consummate your relationship? How does it usually work in a courtship, I mean, you don't have to give me...details?" Zero wants to know what he's going to be compared against - hopefully he won't fall too short - and maybe get an idea of what he ought to do.

Examining the Hunter for a long moment, Takuma decides to let Zero avoid the topic for now.

Zero breathes a sigh of relief.

"Come here, Isa," the noble calls. The grey and white hound is splayed like a fluffy rug on his back with his paws in the air, but comes immediately to his master's side, silent as always.

Welcoming him with one of his happy smiles, Takuma plays with the dog's silky ears, and Isa's tail whips back and forth a few times. "That's a bit of a story, because I didn't really do things the usual way."

Tucking his hands under his chin, Zero cocks his head to the side, prompting an explanation.

Takuma laughs, rubbing the back of his neck. "Alright, I'll tell you. It's embarrassing - I think I was reading too many manga at the time and it made me do something silly and dramatic. Usually, an unbonded omega doesn't have sex until the final stage of their courtship, when they've narrowed down the pool to the final handful of candidate alphas. They'll take some or all of them to bed, and it's very showy, and formally announced when it happens. If they intend to bond more than one, sometimes the omega will test them by sleeping with them simultaneously."

"Anyway," Takuma continues, smile leaving his face, "you know the trouble I had refusing Shirabuki Sara, and how Isaya only joined at first to help me block her. But you may not have heard about the scandal late in my courtship. Kaname discovered that some of the alphas were courting me under bad faith. They had gathered bets about who could sleep with me first, and significant sums of money were wagered on the outcome."

"I was devastated - some of them had been very eager and persuasive. I thought they really cared about me, and that was why they kept pushing me for more than I was comfortable giving. More than anything else, I wanted affection in a partnership. I didn't want to be like my parents, who tolerated each other only long enough to produce me, and then went their separate ways."

"Gambling on the outcome is completely against the ethics and spirit of a courtship, and I had those alphas expelled and blacklisted. But then I did something stupid - I listened to Shirabuki-sama, and I believed her."

"What happened?" Zero asks, leaning forward.

Takuma smiles wanly. "They kept records of everything - which alphas bet money, how much, and when they expected to 'collect' it. But the name of the alpha who wagered the largest sum was blank. If I had been thinking clearly, I would have realized it was probably Shirabuki's scheme. But I was so torn up, in such shock and misery, that when she implied it could be Isaya, I believed the worst. I could only imagine that she was right and I really had been thoroughly betrayed."

Isa whines and shoves his head into Takuma's lap, trying to comfort his master as forcefully as possible. Zero doesn't doubt that Shouto is with them right now, present in his familiar.

Takuma smiles down at the dog, and continues. "That's when I did the ridiculously dramatic thing I
A knock, long past sunrise. Isaya looks curious to find his noble host at his door, blond hair brightened under the early morning light, wearing an unusually long, thick robe for the heat.

"May I come in?" Takuma asks, and perhaps it's the dark circles under his eyes, or his pale, drawn expression, but Isaya lets him in.

The same fit of anguish that drove Takuma here still holds him in its teeth. He only knows he needs to do something, to purge this, or it will eat him. And so this mad fit was born.

"Takuma-kun! What are you -"

Takuma's robe slips to the floor, and the omega stands naked in front of Isaya's eyes, trembling and feeling like he's about to shake himself apart.

Isaya looks stunned, grey eyes transfixed by the bare golden idol offering himself, gaze drifting despite himself to stare at the illicit sight of an omega's untouched sex.

"If Isaya-sama desires entertainment," Takuma announces with exaggerated politeness, refusing to watch the pureblood, "then Isaya-sama should do as he likes. That way he can end this boring charade he agreed to, and return to Sleep as he wishes."

Grey eyes meet green. "Is that what you think, Takuma-kun?" The pureblood looks sad, no longer spellbound by the omega's glorious nudity; Takuma might as well be wearing a sack for all the notice Isaya takes.

Doubt creeps in; Takuma tries to push it away with more fury. "This is all you wanted, isn't it, my lord? Please just take it so you can go!" Takuma shouts, angry and confused, hurting and wanting his fears confirmed so he can crush his hopeless wish.

Because even if Isaya wants nothing more than to use his body and leave, Takuma still wants to give that to him. No matter how, even if it's just for a single moment, Takuma wants Isaya to touch him so they are as close as two people can become. Because Takuma's feelings for Isaya, his secret affection for the kind, gentle, thoughtful man who helped him, won't go away no matter how hard he tries to remind himself that Isaya feels nothing but friendship in return.

Isaya's eyes, if possible, become more pained, and an answering pain shoots in Takuma's breast. Tears begin to prick at the corners of his eyes, and he feels keenly his nakedness and shame at such a desperate, hysterical plan.

The pureblood comes toward Takuma with one of his own nightshirts in his hands and no judgement or anger in his face, just gentle hands that help Takuma pull the garment over his head and cover him from neck to ankles. It's too large, and the sleeves fall over his hands. Takuma feels somehow comforted.

"I think you have mistaken my intentions, Takuma-kun," Isaya says quietly, guiding the noble toward the bed. "But tonight, just rest. We can talk about things in the morning."

"I should go -"

"No. Wandering around a house full of alphas in this state isn't safe, Takuma-kun. Please let me take care of you tonight."

"...yes, Isaya-sama."
Takuma lays there quietly while Isaya puts on his own nightclothes, and then climbs into bed beside him. Like they’re married, Takuma’s mind provides, and the heartache is too much, because Isaya’s feelings mean that hope will never be reality.

"I’m sorry," Takuma says, beginning to cry, but trying to stifle the sounds. "I’m just so afraid. I don’t know who I can trust anymore. What if I make the wrong decision? How do I know the other alphas aren’t going to lie to me like they did?"

Isaya’s arms come around him, and Takuma finally feels secure enough to release his stress and pain and fear, crying openly into the pureblood’s shoulder.

"Such things would never have happened in the past. I am sorry you had to suffer like this, Takuma. You deserve to be treated with reverence by your alpha, like the treasure you are." Isaya rests his cheek in Takuma’s hair. "I wish I could spare you all pain," he whispers like he doesn’t mean to be heard.

Takuma sniffles. "I’ll be fine, Isaya-sama. When you return to Sleep, you don’t need worries about me disturbing your rest."

"I no longer wish to Sleep," Isaya says with certainty. "I have rediscovered what having purpose feels like. Remembering the past still pains me, but I have found things worth remaining for. As long as you allow me your companionship, Takuma-kun, I would like to enjoy it."

"I’d like that too, Isaya-sama."

"So you stripped naked in front of the alpha you were in love with, hoping he would be madly overcome with lust and have sex with you, like dangling meat in front of a starving lion? And he just dressed you and put you to bed?"

"Yes," Takuma admits, burying his face in his hands. "I told you it was ridiculous."

"What happened the next morning?"

"Isaya escorted me to my room, and handed me over to my attendants wearing his clothes and covered in his scent, but still completely untouched. I think they assumed I had tried to confess to him, and been rejected. I was confused, but I had enjoyed being allowed so close to him. So I went back the next day."

"You went back?!"

Takuma nods, as though that was the logical thing to do. "Yes, although this time Isaya didn't give me the chance to take off my clothes. He had me change in the bathroom, and then we went to bed. When I showed up for the third day in a row, I don't think he was surprised; he just handed me a nightshirt and let me in. By the fourth day, Isaya came to collect me from my bedroom; he didn't want me wandering around without protection."

"I thought this was the story of how you two decided to bond?" Zero says.

"It is. I'm getting to that part," Takuma explains. "We did this for almost two months, as my courtship drew close to the point where I needed to make a final decision. Everyone believed it was some kind of platonic comfort thing, and assumed Isaya had remained to watch over me. Remember, we both thought that neither of us had any feelings for the other except friendship, and that our love was unreturned. We thought the idea of a bonding was hopeless. All of that changed the night Isaya told me he loved me."
Takuma shifts in bed, trying to tilt his head so he can see Isaya's face, but they're tucked together so closely he can't move. "Isaya-sama?"

"Yes, Takuma-kun?"

"You know, you don't need to remain a part of my courtship if you don't want to. I appreciate that you're trying to protect me, but I hate making you go to the trouble of pretending to court me." The idea of Isaya leaving hurts more than tearing his own heart out, but Takuma needs to think of Isaya's good. He's already been very selfish to let things go this far.

Isaya goes rigid. "You believe I am pretending to court you?"

Takuma frowns. "You joined my courtship so I could evade Shirabuki-sama's advances without offending her. You don't really intend to bond me."

Isaya's body doesn't relax. "Do you wish for me to leave?"

"No! No, Isaya-sama, you don't have to go. I just, I don't want to trouble you when you've already done so much for my sake." Takuma buries himself deeper against the pureblood's body, seeking the warmth that will soon leave him. He'll have to spend his nights in another alpha's bed, with just these memories as comfort.

"Takuma-kun." A pale hand raises his chin, until Takuma can meet storm-grey eyes, holding more intensity in that gaze than Takuma has ever seen before. "I have not been pretending to court you for a very long time. And I am exactly where I want to be. I will not leave unless you tell me to go."

Eyes widening, Takuma searches for some way to make sense of those words. Surely he must be wrong! Isaya can't really mean he wants Takuma to choose him! "What about all of this?" he asks, gesturing between them. "When I came to you, why did you refuse me?"

Isaya smiles. "I wanted to stay with you however I could. And you were clearly distraught that day. I could not in good conscience accept." The pureblood sends Takuma a long, heavy look. "However much I wished to."

Takuma feels dizzy at the realization, resting his head on Isaya's chest. Isaya cares for him - may even love him! The man he loves wants to be with him. They can stay like this, forever. "Kiss me. Prove that you mean it," he dares.

And Isaya does, giving him the lightest, gentlest kiss against his lips, before tucking the omega back against his chest.

Takuma's heart throbs with joy.

At such a precious memory, Takuma's whole manner has gone soft and relaxed. "I went back to my room that night, canceled all my plans, and did nothing except think about what I wanted for my future. And I made a choice that I would seek out what made me happy, without being afraid of the consequences."

Zero teases, "And this is part where you decided to bond with him, right?"

Laughing, Takuma's cheeks pink again. "You're not wrong. When he came to get me that night I was in the same heavy robe I first wore and nothing else. Everyone was shocked the next morning to find that Isaya had stolen the prize out from under them. Of course, I was very happy to be stolen."
Framed by the doorway, Takuma looks alluringly beautiful, even with all his charms hidden away except his plush lips, enticing eyes, and sweet omega scent. "Will you come in, Isaya-sama?"

The pureblood's throat bobs as he swallows, something predatory peering through the eyes of the normally genial and calm man.

"Takuma-kun, I am doubtful that is a wise idea."

"I know," Takuma replies boldly. "I'm asking you anyway."

Nostrils flaring as he tries to take in as much scent as possible, Isaya never takes his eyes off the omega as Takuma closes the door and bolts it shut. When Takuma comes close enough to touch, Isaya inhales and brings their bodies just shy of contact.

"Isaya-sama," Takuma whispers, rising up on his feet to reach the pureblood's ear, "I would like it very much if you aren't noble this time. Please take advantage of me in every way an alpha takes advantage of an omega who loves him."

Isaya groans and traps Takuma in an unbreakable grasp, "How is it possible for you to love me? You would freely give me this gift?"

"Yes." Takuma affirms, with absolute certainty.

Isaya's hands tighten around the omega's upper arms, and he closes his eyes to try and calm his want. "Do you understand, Takuma? If you do this, your courtship will end today. In the evening I will drive the others away with claws and fangs, if they do not leave when I command it. I will never allow another alpha to share you, to even think of touching you. If I lay one hand on your skin, Takuma, I will kill any alpha who thinks they can contest my claim. You will be mine, and only mine."

"Good," Takuma replies with satisfaction, as he loosens Isaya's grip, and guides the pureblood to the ties on his robe.

Such a perfect invitation is too much for Isaya's control, and he groans in lust as he begins to cut the ties with his claws, one by one. "As my mate wishes. I love you, you know, no less than I loved my wife. Does it bother you, that my heart cannot wholly belong to you?"

"No," Takuma says through his dry throat, robe gaping further open with each tie destroyed. "I would never ask you to forget her."

"Too generous, my sweet Takuma. My summer's night, my gentle sun," Isaya murmurs, urging the omega to begin undressing him as well.

"My heart's blood, my reason for living. I will never Sleep so long as you live," the pureblood promises, leaning down to kiss Takuma's collarbone as the last of their clothes fall to the floor, leaving not a single barrier between them.

Isaya surveys his prize with hunger. The pureblood may have height, but he is lanky instead of overly thick or broad, and the length of him is proportionate to his size. Takuma can feel the wet tip brush against his belly, and a hunger rises in his core.

"You have done this before?" asks the pureblood, backing toward the bed, drawing Takuma after him though pure hunger for touch.

"A few times," Takuma admits. "My grandfather bought me a pair of courtesans when I turned
fifteen, and insisted I learn. But I felt dirty, like I used them, and the idea of doing it again for pleasure...I could not."

Isaya snarls. "If the man were not dead, I would kill him myself."

Takuma rises up on his feet to soothe his alpha. "It's fine now, Isaya-sama."

"Isaya," the pureblood insists, tumbling down on his back. He pulls Takuma down after him, until the noble is straddling his waist, Isaya's reddened cock brushing between golden thighs.

"Never call me Isaya-sama again. To you, my love, I am only ever Isaya. That is the name I want you to call when we join," the pureblood requests, running his thumb over Takuma's bottom lip.

"Isaya," Takuma breathes obediently, throwing back his head, his lover's hands guiding his hips. "Isaya, ah, ISAYA!"

"So that's how it happened?"

"More or less," Takuma replies, patting the top of his hound's head.

Zero considers this, before leaning back and crossing his legs. "Are you going to trigger a heat while you're in season this year?"

Takuma's smile strains at the edges, and he shakes his head no. "I can't decide. This is only our second time that I'll come into season. Now that we're already bonded, I don't need to enter a heat unless we want to try for a child. I'll probably send Isaya away and let it pass. I don't want to remind him of the family he lost."

"Have you discussed it with Shouto yet?"

Takuma shakes his head again, shamefaced. "I do want a child. I'm just not sure now is the right time."

Zero shrugs. "Shouto is stupid in love with you, and pretty decent for being a pureblood. I'm sure you'll choose what's best for the two of you right now, and he'll support you whatever you choose. But Takuma-sempai, to tell you the truth, I'm really envious you have this chance. I'll probably never have a child."

Takuma tries to interrupt, but Zero shakes his head, a deeply sad look in his eyes. "If I were in your position, I think I know what I'd choose. Anyway, I should probably go."

Zero gathers his cane, and Takuma offers him an arm for balance as he stands. As Takuma helps the younger omega to the car with slow steps, each one careful and laborious, Isa patters along ahead.

"I don't think we'll get the chance to see each other again before you're in season, Takuma-sempai. I'll be fine, so don't worry about me," Zero tells him once he's in the car, gripping Takuma's hands. "Focus on taking care of yourself, alright?"

Once Zero is out of earshot, Takuma taps Isa's muzzle. "I think it's time you and I had a talk."

"There's somewhere I'd like to visit," Zero announces at dinner that night, savoring the experience of using a spoon more-or-less neatly. His hands have become much steadier, though his legs are still shaky.
"I'll go with you if I'm free," offers Yuuki. "Who's house are you going to?"

Zero sets his jaw. "The Hunters' Association."

As expected, his alphas completely disapprove.

"Zero," Yuuki objects, "it isn't safe! Because of the wards, our familiars won't be able to follow you there!"

"Master Yagari will be with me. I've already arranged it. You'll drop me off at Cross' house, Master will collect me, and he'll drop me off again when I've finished my business."

Kuran has his hands steepled in thought. "There is a further concern. You are our Consort. The vampires may consider it inappropriate."

Zero glares at Kuran, offended. "I am a Hunter. It is my right. I will not stop visiting the Association because your snotty nobles disapprove of my background."

"And if the Hunters no longer wish to see you?" Kuran asks, playing devil's advocate as always.

Zero's mouth tightens. There is a fraught silence, and Yuuki shoots Kuran a chiding look for bringing up such a painful possibility.

"Lead Hunter Ilesanmi seems to think I will not be turned away. I am not asking you for permission, husband. I am informing you to be polite," Zero tells him, going back to his soup to show the conversation is finished.

They don't stop trying to dissuade him, but Zero is stubborn when he's set on his goals.

That's how, despite the Kurans' best efforts, Zero ends up in the passenger's seat of Master Yagari's car late one October afternoon, smelling heavily of alpha from a fresh scent marking (not that human noses could tell). For his visit, Zero's worn his Hunter clothing, that same cream wool coat Master and Cross bought him for his betrothal ceremony, the better to avoid looking like an outsider.

Zero stares out the car window, watching the columned entrance of headquarters. The world outside Rosehill has embraced autumn, bedecked in red, orange, and cold. Without Zero noticing, the world has kept turning.

Unbidden, the memory of the day he returned from the hospital comes back to him. Once again, Zero is a stranger returning to a familiar place - first as an omega, now as a Consort. In the old days, after a woman married she might never return again to the place of her birth, forever becoming part of her husband's house. How lonely. Zero can return home, but does home really want him back?

Slowly pulling himself out of the car, Zero swings his legs over the seat, and uses the car door and his cane to take his weight until he's steady. Master waits politely, smoking and doing Zero the courtesy of not offering to help. Zero wants to return on his own two feet, dammit. He has his pride as a Hunter.

A sharp wind cuts at his cheeks and sluices down the back of his neck, a touch of the approaching winter chill. Zero pulls the collar of his coat tighter with the hand not resting on his cane, and begins stumping up the steps with determination.

At the questing touch of the wards, Zero's neck tingles, the remnants of his taming mark granting
him entrance just as Cross promised. Relief sweeps over him, mimicked by the warm air of the building relieving the chill of the autumn air.

Already, Zero and Master Yagari are drawing eyes, and the whispers fly thick and fast, forgetting in their enthusiasm Zero's vampire hearing.

*Look at his face, woah!/Looks like the rumors of his attack were true/I heard he couldn't walk at all for a while, but look at him now. Vampire healing really is frightening/Kiryuu still hasn't bonded with them yet/or boned them, I heard!/Even with his face, he looks kind of hot/hush, don't be disrespectful of Hunter Kiryuu*

"I want to visit Archivist Fong. And I should probably see Dr. Sawamura," Zero adds.

Yagari grunts. "We'll go find that old pervert then."

The elderly archivist is overwhelmed with excitement when he spots Zero, carrying his student off to the archive break room to ply him with coffee and a tin of Archivist Grey's imported digestive biscuits.

Zero is glad to see Archivist Fong acting as energetic as ever. After being away for so long with little news, Zero had feared the Archivist's age might have finally taken a toll on his health.

Once Zero has reassured the fragile old man he's alright, and told him a carefully censored summary of his life since he's married, Archivist Fong insists that Zero report any new information he's learned so it can be added to the archives, and takes careful notes in his spidery hand.

Leaving Archivist Fong beaming with enthusiasm and clutching a sheaf of notes on omega vampires, Zero ventures down to the medical center.

Dr. Sawamura looks Zero over from head to toe, pronounces herself displeased with his condition, and orders Zero to scold Yuuki and Kuran in her stead. Then she takes him to her office, shuts out Master Yagari, and asks him if he needs any medical help or advice, because she's bound by doctor-patient confidentiality and she doesn't have to inform President Cross if Zero needs something he can't let the Kurans know about.

Zero sputters this thanks, but firmly assures her there's nothing he requires.

Dr. Sawamura squints at him, determines Zero isn't lying, gives a decisive nod of her head, and kicks him out of her territory once more, informing him to visit again next time he's at the Association.

Standing outside the medical center after collecting Master Yagari, Zero checks the time. "That was everything I wanted to do this afternoon. We're early, but do you mind if we head back?"

Zero's vampire body is protesting having to rise so early in the day, and he wouldn't mind leaving now to rest. He still ought to be asleep, dreaming softly between Yuuki and Kuran in their ridiculously large bed.

"Actually," Yagari says, hands making the twitching motion that means he wants nicotine but isn't allowed to smoke, "there are some people who would like to talk to you, if you want."

Zero taps the head of his cane, considering the request. If Master passed it on, then it means they have Master's approval. Anyone Master approves of will be worth the time to speak with. "I'd like that, Master."

Yagari takes them toward the upper rank offices, holding open the door to what looks like a sizable
lounge. Scattered around the room on the mismatched couches, armchairs, stools, benches and a single beanbag chair, is a pack of older Hunters, all experienced veterans in good standing.

Zero recognizes a fair number; there's Ilesanmi, Yamamoto and over a dozen others he's worked under at one time or another. Kaito waves from a corner, and Master Yagari goes to stand next to him, lighting a cigarette. The room fills with the scent of smoke.

"Lead Hunters of the Association, what can I do for you today?" Zero says, limping to the center of the room. He'd love to sit down, but won't until he's invited. Politeness counts a lot for these people.

"Hunter Kiryuu, please take a seat," Lead Hunter Albrecht invites him, gesturing to the sole empty seat facing the room.

Zero lowers himself onto the chair, still poker faced and studying the assembled Hunters. He can't figure out what they want him for, but with Yagari and Kaito in on it, it can't be something too bad.

Lead Hunter Suzuki shakes his cup, swirling the sake inside. "Actually, Hunter Kiryuu, we've asked you here today because we want to know what we can do for you."

Zero's eyes narrow. "I'm not sure I understand."

Ilesanmi speaks up. "I told you the last time we met that your actions have brought us more benefit than expected."

"Yes, I recall."

"Well, it's true," interjects Lead Hunter Santos. "It's like the floodgates have opened up and gold is raining down on us. We thought the treaty was the end of it. Don't get me wrong, the treaty changes may be small, but they've made a world of difference to us."

Lead Hunter Nguyen laughs. "Turns out having a Hunter married to pureblood royalty comes with perks. Especially when those purebloods have gone on record to say anyone who threatens their husband is going to die."

Pushing her glasses up her nose, Lead Hunter Nasrallah explains for Zero's benefit. "We're seeing levels of cooperation from the vampires we've never witnessed before. Red tape disappears in weeks instead of months. Bureaucrats are suddenly willing to push our requests to the front of the line. We're receiving anonymous tips, and we have access to vital records and tapes. Even ordinary witnesses are more willing to talk to us. Our investigation speed has increased by significant margins. We've actually been digging into the most important cold cases while they're so willing to give us the help."

Zero's been in their position; he knows what a difference unwillingness and obstruction make in a Hunter's job. But the news startles him. Zero believed his reputation was so bad that being associated with him would hurt the Hunters rather than help them.

"Not to mention the six ex-nobles living in our basement," adds Suzuki.

Nguyen laughs again. "The Kurans solved our blood supply problems and terrified the entire B class. That's a pretty good two-for-one, I'd say."

"Hunter Kiryuu," Albrecht says, "we want to support you by whatever means we can. We know we may not be able to offer much, but you are helping us immensely, simply by remaining close to the Kurans."
"I don't know how long I'll remain in favor," Zero admits. "I doubt I will produce a child, and that's the kiss of death for an omega's influence."

"Doesn't matter," Kaito pipes up from the back. "We'll take as long as we can get. It's still more than we had before."

That's the pragmatic Hunter mentality talking. Kaito can say that, but it would still work best if Zero can keep that favor for as long as possible.

Zero's resolve hardens. Whatever it takes, Zero needs to do everything necessary to make sure the Kurans and vampire society remain happy with him. But until he can...

"There is something you can do for me, Hunters."

Cracking her jaw in a wide yawn, Yuuki emerges from the bathroom in her nightgown and her hair braided for sleep. "This was a good idea, Zero," she says as she climbs into bed. "It was relaxing to get out of Rosehill for a day. I almost don't want to go back tonight."

Body stiff from a combination of anxiety and fear, Zero attempts a smile from where he sits in his armchair, trying to act unconcerned. "Kuran said he'd never been to Nikko. The autumn foliage is quite famous, and I thought we could use a daytrip."

"Mmmm," Yuuki agrees, fluffing her pillow and yawning again. "Aren't you going to get ready for bed?"

Zero's hand on his cane tightens in a death grip. "In a little bit," he says in a light tone. "I'm not tired yet."

"Kay."

Zero needs to get a damn grip on himself, or they're going to notice something and his plan is going to fail. He shuts his eyes until he can take control of his breathing, forcing his body into a semblance of relaxation. He is an adult. He has a duty. He needs to push past this crap and get on with it.

Kuran slides the balcony door shut, padding into the bedroom in his stupid silk pajamas. It's like that pureblood bastard doesn't even feel the cold, and Zero latches onto that irritation, using it to disguise his real state of mind.

Raising an eyebrow at Zero's fully dressed state, Kuran says, "Not coming to bed tonight, Zero?"

Zero tsks. The 'first names in the bedroom' rule still applies in borrowed bedrooms, according to Yuuki. "I'm tempted, now that you're in it, but I guess I'll go get ready."

Using his arms to push himself out of his chair, and then relying on his cane, Zero retreats to the bathroom.

Once the door is safely closed, Zero stares at himself in the mirror, taking in the way the whites of his eyes show at the corners.

All the preconditions are satisfied. A little preparation and a lot of mental stubbornness, that's all he needs now, Zero urges himself as he changes his clothes.

"Zero, is everything okay?" calls Yuuki. "You're taking a really long time. Did you need help
reaching something?"

"No!" he responds hastily, nearly knocking his cane to the floor. "I'm fine, I'll be out in a minute."

*Don't fuck this up, Kiryuu,* he reminds himself. *This isn't about you. Don't let your hangups get in the way of what needs to happen.*

Cracking open the door, Zero peers out. Neither Yuuki nor Kuran are paying attention. Good.

He ventures further, using the doorframe and the furniture to keep himself upright, wobbling dangerously a few times when his arms need to reach a longer distance. It's necessary; his cane isn't suitable for this.

Yuuki finally looks up, and her jaw drops. "Ze-Zero! What are you doing?" she sputters, eyes roving over every inch of his body.

Kuran's head jerks up, and he blinks too fast to be normal. "Where is your shirt?"

Zero grins. "I hope you don't mind. I was feeling a little warm," he replies, nearly amused.

His wife looks like someone hit her over the head, eyes glued on Zero's nudity, and Kuran is trying and failing to disguise the same obsessive alpha drooling beside her.

This part is okay, Zero realizes when his heartbeat doesn't increase. His upper torso may look different now, but men go shirtless all the time, and Zero did most of his training this way. Taking off his shirt in front of his spouses still feels comfortable, even with the added sexual interest.

Alright, step one was more successful than Zero expected. Now to set the right bait, he thinks uneasily as his stomach squeezes and flips. But then Zero loses his grip on the sidetable, accidentally pitching headfirst into bed

Shaking off the daze caused by Zero's bare chest, Yuuki lunges forward to catch him, and hooks an arm under his knees to lift his legs onto the mattress.

This wasn't part of the plan, but having Yuuki with an armful of half-naked omega could be to his advantage. Zero just needs sufficient determination to overcome the sickening fear when he thinks about what he needs to do next.

"Zero's nipples are such a cute pink," Yuuki murmurs to herself, bending down so her nose is almost touching them. Then she jerks her head back up, looking abashed. 'I said that out loud, didn't I?"

"Yes," Kuran says with interest. "They are quite a light color, aren't they? Perhaps because he's so pale."

There's a curious curl of pleasure when Zero thinks about their regard, which he files away to think about later. It flickers out when he remembers what his aim tonight is.

Yuuki mmms in agreement, then freezes and tries to back away from Zero.

Zero can feel what he suspects is Yuuki's penis against his lower back. She's being thoughtful and careful with him, but Zero needs her to act on her desires if this is going to work.

Overcoming his paralysis, the Hunter catches her by the arm. "You don't have to hide that you're interested in me, Yuuki," he tells her, gathering his courage for his next move.
Zero tries to hide the way his hands shake as they fall to his waistband, and he begins sliding his pants down.

Like a striking snake, Kuran's hand snaps around his wrist, stopping him cold. "Kiryuu. What are you doing."

Trying to keep up his act, Zero swallows. "Aren't you paying attention? I'm taking off my clothes."

"I can see that, Kiryuu. Why is the question." Yuuki is starting to catch on too, the haze clearing from her eyes as she frowns, concerned by Zero's strange behavior.

Zero knows they can hear his pulse beating rapidly in his throat. "How else are we supposed to have sex."

The Kurans exchange a look. Turning back towards him, Yuuki asks slowly, "Do you want to have sex, Zero?"

"Of course! I'm trying to seduce you!" Zero insists weakly, hearing the lie in his own ears. Dammit, they were supposed to jump him when he got naked, not ask him what he wanted!

Clawing for mental balance, Zero knows somewhere he's gone wrong, but he's too stubborn to back down now. "I'm not wearing any underwear!" he blurts out.

Instead of being overcome with lust, Yuuki looks even more troubled, and Kuran has a slight line between his eyebrows. The mood is thoroughly ruined, and Zero hangs his head, ashamed.

"Zero, please look at me," Yuuki pleads in a gentle tone.

Never able to deny her, Zero lifts his chin but still can't meet her eyes. He's failed again, and in such a humiliating way. He shivers with the autumn chill, wrapping his arms around himself like he can hide.

"Kiryuu, it's clear you did not actually wish to have intercourse with us. What is this about?" Kuran asks, surprisingly free of mockery.

"I know you've been sleeping together," Zero admits. "I just - everyone expects us to have done this already, and I know it's my fault we haven't. I was just trying to fix things."

Yuuki and Kuran look at each other again, communicating something silently, and Kuran comes around to Yuuki's side of the bed, sitting beside their wife. "Zero. I am the pureblooded Ancestor of the Kuran. I do not care what 'everyone else' wants or expects. The Kuran family will do as we wish, and it is vampire society's job to accept that without complaint."

And somehow, Kuran's complete certainty that he will bend the whole world to his will makes Zero feel calmer. Arrogant bastard, Zero thinks almost fondly.

"And there is nothing to 'fix', Zero," Yuuki adds. "We're happy if you're happy. Kaname and I are married, so we're used to doing that kind of stuff. That is not a reflection on you, or our satisfaction with the relationship between the three of us."

"We decided we were going to wait until you are fully healed before we attempt anything more physical," Kuran offers. "Provided you are willing, and it does not come at the cost of your mental health. If that means it takes another year to bond, then so be it."

Yuuki lunges forward to grasp Zero's hand. "Treaty or not, we don't expect you to push yourself
into anything you aren't ready for. We're not going to force you or hurt you. I swear it. We want you to honestly desire this, Zero. To desire us."

Zero looks at the two of them, judging their honesty and commitment to those promises, and accepts them without question, his gut telling him this is the absolute truth. The tangle in his chest eases, and he feels relief at the burden suddenly lifted from his shoulders.

"So please go put your clothes back on, so we can go to sleep," Kuran says.

"I'm leaving my shirt off," announces Zero, stubborn to the last.

"It's cold," Yuuki points out.

"Then you better cuddle closer so I can put my cold hands down your back," he tells her.

Yuuki sticks out her tongue.

"By the way, was that really your best effort at seduction?" Kuran says, a devilish gleam in his eye as Zero turns away toward the bathroom. "That was pitiful. I can't believe your past lovers fell for that."

Zero is very glad they can't see the sudden stiffness in his expression.

Though nothing came of it, Zero's failed seduction emboldens all of them, as though acknowledging the unspoken issue has broken a dam. Nobody has to pretend anymore, at least, and they can talk about things openly.

Yuuki and Kuran stop hiding their trysts, and their carefully leashed desire for Zero. They don't pull away at every accidental brush against him, or bother to hide the arousal that results from their long kissing and scenting sessions. They're also less mindful of their nudity when bathing or changing, and more careless about Zero seeing the aftermath of their lovemaking.

And some contrary, screwed up part of Zero's brain decides now is a good time to start thinking about stuff like that.

Being told he isn't allowed to have something makes Zero start to wonder if maybe he does want it. Knowing that he's safe makes him bolder, makes him curious, gives him space to explore.

Zero can't stop remembering what the two of them looked like together, when he stumbled on Yuuki and Kuran after they'd made love in the bedroom. They were like two white marble statues - no, too cold, like some painting of old gods, beautiful, immortal, eternally young - the folds of the red silk sheets twisted artfully to display fair limbs and just a hint of sin, without spoiling the mystery beneath - the side of Yuuki's porcelain breast, the edge of Kuran's hip. The sleepy-eyed way they looked at him, their slow, satisfied movements, their rosy flushed skin, and the residual heat in the air. And the smell, the heavy pheromone tang cloaking the room, made something instinctual and omega in Zero's brain quiver, and open his mouth so he could fill his lungs with it.

Zero had backed out of the room, knowing he'd seen something he shouldn't have, with a hot tingle in his belly he realized didn't just come from the omega. The servants changed the sheets, but it took Zero a long time to fall asleep that night anyway - he imagined that the smell lingered in the mattress.

That memory always conjures a mix of curiosity and jealousy, and a faint heat. Doing that is something Yuuki and Kuran share, but Zero doesn't. Zero doesn't want to be left out, and he wants
to give Yuuki whatever she wants. And Kuran hasn't been so bad lately either. The two of them certainly enjoy it, or they wouldn't do it so often. Maybe Zero would enjoy it too?

But Takuma said it would be painful at first. And the first one has to be Kuran, not Yuuki, and Zero doesn't trust the man. And Zero would have to face some of his issues with his new body first; every time Zero's tried pushing that far, it ended with terror and paralysis. His mind shies away from even imagining what has to happen, and leaves a nauseous feeling in his stomach.

But then Zero remembers the alluring way Yuuki and Kuran looked together after they were through...

Torn one way, then the other, Zero struggles to decide what he wants.

Yuuki should probably get up and wipe the cooling sweat from her skin, but lying here with her head resting on Kaname's chest, as their heartbeats slow in unison after making love, is too decadent to forego.

And she knows that moments like these can be lost, so why hurry through them when one day they might not be there anymore?

"We didn't have anything to do this evening, right?" she wonders.

"Not in particular." Kaname's voice vibrates through her cheek, and Yuuki giggles at the sensation.

"Aido sent his first report from Europe. I'd like you to read it when you have time."

"Mmmkay," Yuuki agrees, still in no hurry to get up.

"By the way," Kaname continues, "I would like to borrow Zero tomorrow after dinner. Do you mind leaving us undisturbed for an hour or two?"

Kaname mentioning Zero is no shock; they speak of him often when they make love - before, during, and after. But Kaname wanting to spend time with Zero alone is an unusual action.

Yuuki cannot see her husband's face, but she hears the change in tone he almost conceals. This request matters to Kaname, for some reason. "Is this about the orders you gave Seiren, the one you asked me not to ask questions about?"

Kaname doesn't answer, but that might mean anything. He's taught her to use that trick himself, to let the listener fill in what they want to hear.

"If it matters to you, then I'll leave you alone. You better take care of Zero though."

Chuckling, her husband rests a hand on Yuuki's head. "I will. I thought he was going to burst into flames the day he accidentally walked in and realized we were naked under the blankets."

Yuuki grins into Kaname's chest. "I know! Poor Zero, he looked so embarrassed. And he didn't even see anything!"

We could change that, reminds her alpha, sighing forlornly in her subconscious. Just let him catch us, and surely he will wish to join in!

Things don't really work that way, Yuuki thinks, rebutting her instincts. Her smile falls, and she grows serious. "Do you think Zero's okay?"
"What do you mean?"

"That time he tried to seduce us, he was really insistent, but he didn't want that at all. Zero always
tries to deal with everything himself. I guess I'm worried that if something is wrong, Zero wouldn't
tell us about it."

Yuuki wishes she could enjoy that memory without reservations: her first sight of Zero's half-
naked new body, all that fair skin, his smooth stomach, and the softened chest and puffy nipples
bestowed by his omega nature. The alpha enjoyed it, no question (mate will nurse our babies as
easily as he'll birth them!), and all that new territory has featured heavily in Yuuki's new fantasies.

But something had been troubling Zero, and he was trying to bear the burden alone again. Yuuki
still isn't confident they pulled out the root cause.

"Perhaps you are right," Kaname replies, deep in thought. "I will keep an eye on him."

"That's all I ask," Yuuki says, and settles down to enjoy the last of the afterglow.

Clutching the handle of his cane, Zero eyes Kuran and his outstretched arms with undisguised
doubt. "Where are we going?"

"Somewhere without level roads. You're not surefooted enough yet that I want to risk a fall," Kuran
replies evenly, arms rock-steady.

Zero is certain the pureblood won't take no for an answer, so he sighs, hikes up his heavy wool
skirts, and steps into arms' length. A moment of weightlessness, and Kuran swings Zero up into his
arms like a fairytale princess. How irritating. Zero hangs onto the cane Yuuki gave him, and loops
his elbow around Kuran's neck. "You can go now."

In a rush of motion, Kuran begins to run, and Zero's eyes tear up from the wind; he hides his face in
Kuran's suit jacket, grateful that the pureblood warned him to wear warm, outdoor clothes tonight.

"We're following the path through the back gate," Zero hears Kuran speak over the wind. That
means they're going deeper in the valley, away from the mountain pass that cuts through the
mountains hemming Rosehill for privacy and defense. Was there anything back there? Zero's never
heard of anything significant beyond Rosehill's walls, and never ventured out himself. Where is
Kuran taking him?

There's the spicy smell of rotting leaves, and when Zero dares lift his head, he can see the forest in
autumn colors whipping past his eyes, as Kuran speeds by at a pureblood's blur of a gait. When the
cold wind bites at his face, Zero burrows back into Kuran's warmth, and relaxes into the familiar
position of being carried.

After Zero counts to sixty around twelve times, the pureblood begins to slow. Curious, Zero peeks
out. Above the trees, still some distance away, a white stone dome rises out of the red and gold
forest canopy. In the early predawn glow, it shines like new, clean of any fallen leaves or the stain
of time.

The narrow, unmarked trail widens into a true path, with stacked stone boundary walls on either
side topped by golden lamps. Kuran breaks into a clearing not twenty meters later, the boundary
wall widening to enclose a perfectly square, paved courtyard of impressive size for a mysterious
stone building surrounded by forest, out in the middle of nowhere.

Whatever this place is, it has a remarkable beauty. The dome Zero saw through the trees is the
crown of a large building, with two lesser domes on each side topping the left and right wings of the structure. Built to each side of the arched, tall doorway is a stone watchtower, as though this place was precious enough to be guarded. The whole edifice is made from a white stone that gives brilliant contrast to the autumn colors of the surrounding forest, and has been carved with symbols and bas-relief friezes.

"Where are we?" Zero asks, spotting the Kuran nine orchid crest repeated throughout the design, mixed with other symbols and inscriptions he doesn't understand.

Striding through the courtyard and up the stairs, Kuran replies, "The mausoleum of Royal Consort Aileya."

Zero almost loses his cane, he's so shocked to hear he's visiting the burial place of his role model and predecessor. The sounds of Kuran's feet echo hollowly inside the domes, and Aileya's resting place carries an air of sacredness and reverence. The chill crawling through Zero's bones is eased by the warmer air inside, from the fire lit in front of the altar, and the scent of fresh incense tickles his nose.

Kuran places Zero carefully on his feet beside the flower covered altar. "Aileya was not a Kuran by blood, so she was not permitted to be buried in the catacombs beneath Kuran Manor. She was deeply loved anyway, and her children were so devastated by her loss that they built her a grand memorial, close by so they could visit and remember her every day. Succeeding generations have honored their wishes that her memorial never be abandoned or forgotten. To this day, it has been rebuilt twice, and is cleaned and maintained every day by Rosehill's staff."

Zero stares into the fire. How wonderful, to be honored in such a way by those you loved. Consort Aileya was truly held in high esteem; Zero wishes he had half her talent and skill.

At the same time, building such a grand home for the dead seems a little sad. Like the living couldn't let go of who they lost. "When I die," Zero says slowly, "you will make sure Yuuki doesn't do something hasty, right?"

Taking Zero by the shoulders, Kuran looks nearly exasperated. "Must you be so selfless all the time? You will have to live, Kiryuu - I cannot promise anything. Anyone else but you, I could. But you are her love, and half her heart. Should she lose half that heart, I cannot know what that might drive her to do."

Turning away, Kuran heads into one of the wings, "Come, have a seat. I wish to speak with you, and this seemed the right place to do it."

Their game has entered a stalemate. Kaname understands that clearly. And Kiryuu is unwilling to advance their game to the next phase. Kaname has given him no reason to lift his hand; games require trust that both players will abide by the rules. If Kaname leaves the next move up to the Hunter, their stalemate will become permanent.

The question then becomes: is Kaname content with this state of affairs? Should he stand aside as they enter an eternal lacuna, as the opportunity to escape stasis slips further and further away? No. For Kaname, stalemate is no worse than defeat. Meaningless effort, neither victory nor gain.

And Kaname may not understand what Kiryuu means to him, but he knows he is dissatisfied with their current truce. Kaname does not know what he wants from Kiryuu, but he does know he wants more than he has now. Kaname is a selfish man. For his greedy desires, he will shatter their
deadlock and discover what mysterious metamorphosis lies beyond.

But how? Kiryuu will not be moved, stubborn as the bedrock beneath a citadel. Kaname knows the Hunter's openings intimately well, and could strike them to force Kiryuu to act. But it would solve nothing. Kiryuu would turn circles, and they would return once more to this impasse, stasis only built deeper.

No. Kiryuu must move though his own will. Nothing less will suffice. The opening move rests, therefore, on Kaname.

But that is his current problem. None of Kaname's preferred strategies will give him the result he desires. Kiryuu is not a subordinate, an enemy, an admirer, or a toady. Kiryuu is a Hunter who knows Kaname's real identity and true personality, and his Hunter blood lends him immunity to Kaname's pureblood charisma and power of command.

Kiryuu cannot be bought, fooled, ordered, threatened, coerced, persuaded, or bribed. All Kaname's wealth, his power, his status, his physical appeal, his skill, his charm - Kiryuu cares for none of it.

Kiryuu Zero is an anomaly: a virtuous man, a genuine white knight with a compassionate heart, a spine of steel and a will like diamond. Kiryuu cannot be broken without breaking everything he is, and Kaname rejected the idea in the same breath he thought it, with a strange pain in his chest. That would destroy the game itself, and what Kaname desires is to continue play.

An unconventional opponent requires unusual tactics. Of course, Kiryuu being Kiryuu, Kaname has been forced to employ the one he hates the most: honesty.

If Kaname wants Kiryuu to engage, the only viable path is through Kiryuu's better nature, much as Kaname grits his teeth at the thought. If Kaname wants to obtain the result he desires, Kaname must offer something Kiryuu values. To Kaname, Kiryuu's price is dearer than crude wealth, petty favors or simple influence.

And Kiryuu is the only opponent with whom Kaname would consider using this method - that ridiculous sense of fairness ensures Kiryuu will not share his weakness with others, even if Kaname fails. (The irony. Kiryuu distrusts Kaname, but Kaname trusts Kiryuu without exception, so long as his actions satisfy Kiryuu's morals)

Seated on the opposite stone bench, Kiryuu stirs, warming his hands with his breath.

Kaname recognizes that quilted grey coat, he realizes, the phantom taste of spicy blood on his tongue. Except for the stiffened, upright collar and the quilting, the clean shape is reminiscent of Kiryuu's Hunter coat; Kiryuu insists on being himself, stubbornly.

The brightness through the glass skylight reminds Kaname that morning is drawing near, and his purpose for choosing this time and place.

"Look," Kaname gestures toward the luminescent glow, "this is called the Children's Chapel. It's designed so the light strikes that statue every morning."

Kiryuu looks up at the beautiful woman on a pedestal, with her arms outstretched in welcome. "It's Aileya, isn't it?"

"Yes. I'm told you are fond of her."

"That's true," the Hunter admits, plainly surprised Kaname would care about such a small detail, but again falls silent, leaving the conversation to peter out.
Kaname's move. The pureblood leans forward, fostering the impression of intimacy, but he can't use too many tricks. Success hinges on being as straightforward as possible. Kiryuu won't respect theatrics.

The pureblood meets Kiryuu's gaze, stripping away his defenses and leaving his expression as open as possible. Kiryuu returns the scrutiny with a faint curiosity mixed with strained patience, soon to become annoyance if Kaname doesn't explain his intentions soon.

"I want to renegotiate the terms of our initial agreement," Kaname tells him, beginning simply and going straight to the point.

"Agreement?" Kiryuu repeats neutrally, face taking on its familiar stoicism.

"Yes, our agreement," Kaname says, lacing his fingers together.

"Ah yes, I remember now. The one where you strangled me," Kiryuu remarks in an offhanded tone.

"That did happen beforehand," Kaname agrees. He can hardly deny it, now can he? And Kiryuu would not believe or accept expressions of regret. At the time, Kaname enjoyed it very much.

"On what point does our previous agreement not meet your expectations?"

Kaname shifts to recapture Kiryuu's gaze, refusing to let the Hunter's attention drift. "Our needs have moved beyond civility and noninterference. And the preconditions that were the foundation of our first agreement are no longer true."

"Explain," the Hunter requests, eyeing Kaname.

"We have achieved civility, thanks to Yuuki's persistence. To continue our noninterference in each other's affairs ignores reality and the benefits to be gained if we work together. We are involved, whether we like it or not. Your work with the Hunter's Association and the Jeweled Court, and my work with the monarchists and the Senate faction - both can be improved by assisting one another, rather than ignoring the possible benefits to preserve the status quo."

"I see," Kiryuu acknowledges. "I can't say I don't see your point. You've already helped me with the Court. What did you have in mind?"

"An alliance. A cooperative union born from mutual interest. We are married, after all," the pureblood proposes.

"And the second part?" Kiryuu asks, eyes unfocused as he considers Kaname's proposal.

Unacceptable. Reaching out, Kaname tips Kiryuu's chin up so those widened lavender eyes have no choice but to meet his rusty red-brown. Satisfied with the result, Kaname settles his hands back on his thighs.

"Yes. Those invalid preconditions. To put it simply, I no longer despise you."

Oh, that's a good face. After the initial shock, Kiryuu is working himself into a nice outrage. Inwardly, Kaname labels this expression as the 'angry kitten face.' "I'm not lying to you, Kiryuu. Do your instincts tell you I'm being truthful?"

The Hunter's brow furrows in concentration, sharp eyes studying Kaname's features.

"Is a change of heart so difficult to believe? Have I acted lately like I despise you?"
"No," admits the Hunter, "you haven't. I don't think you're lying."

We're not lying! chirps the alpha, happy that Kaname is finally setting things straight. We like mate the most! Seeing mate, we think good thoughts like feeding and mating and getting blood all over by killing alphas who look at him!

Kaname senses the opening. "Then you agree to my proposal, and accept the renegotiated terms?"

Kiryuu's stoicism doesn't waver. "Answer me something first. Why did you order Kain to hunt Level Es?"

That's a surprise. Finding himself at a loss and set back on his heels, Kaname stalls for time to think. "How did you know I was involved?"

"How could you not be? He's one of your lieutenants," Kiryuu rebuts, not taking the bait. "Why did you do it?"

Kaname wavers, caught between the desire to lie, and the knowledge that any untruth will destroy his efforts, and this gambit will fail. If he wants the prize, Kaname cannot lie to Kiryuu. This conversation must be absolute truth. Kiryuu won't accept or respond to anything else. The pureblood settles on a dodge. "You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

"Try me," Kiryuu challenges, glaring fiercely and crossing his arms.

Breathing out, Kaname knows that he's evaded as long as he can. He allows himself a partial truth. "The Hunters are my allies, as much as any vampire can claim. If they are overwhelmed, it lessens my strength."

Undaunted, Kiryuu's glare sharpens a notch. "My intuition says that's not the whole reason."

Kaname cannot tell him the whole reason. It would be disastrous, and he would make a fool of himself. So he remains silent and impassive.

"Kuran, if you don't tell me the truth, I will assume it's bad and walk out of here right now," warns Kiryuu.

Tell mate the truth, urges the alpha. We want mate to stay! Telllll hiiimmmmm.

Mouth tightening, Kaname wavers back and forth, debating with himself which is the lesser evil. In the end, the lure of victory is too much. He already allows Kiryuu to tread on his pride more than any being save Yuuki - what's one more time?

"...I did not want you to worry."

Kiryuu's mouth drops open, and he struggles to form a response. "Wh-, what? Why would you - No, that's a good question. Why would you care about me. You said that you despised me, but you don't now. Why? What changed?"

And it may be the way Kiryuu looks at Kaname with those wounded, angry lavender eyes expecting to be hurt, or the way his pale skin glowing in the dawn gives him a fleeting, luminous divinity, or the shrine itself, reminding Kaname of the last Kuran Consort's tragic fate, and how the only thing standing between Kaname's Consort and that same end is himself, because what slips out is -

"I nearly saw you die."
The words are too raw, and painful to pass off as a joke. The alpha whimpers, and fills Kaname with the urge to sweep his Consort up and hide him away.

"Oh." His husband's features soften, that native empathy and compassion extended even to those who harmed him and hated him. Sweet little fool.

It's not that simple, but Kaname could not explain in words the matrix that guided him to this outcome. His feelings are a complex mix of selfish and selfless, personal and political, pragmatic and instinctive - appetite for the political gains brought by Kiryuu's skills and influence, acknowledgement of Kiryuu's admirable nature, the certainty that Kiryuu did not deserve to be hurt, unquenchable urges driven by the lustful, possessive alpha instincts, envy of Kiryuu's closeness with Yuuki, the greed of wanting more intimacy, the desire to have his own fascination and admiration returned - all of that, and more.

Kaname would like to go Hunting again with Kiryuu, that's all.

"Things became clearer to me. You need not fear. I will not seek to harm you again, and I will prevent anyone else from harming you. The possibility of your death is an unacceptable outcome. Any injury to you is also unacceptable."

Kiryuu is still struck silent, disbelieving, with that soft, wondering expression adorning his features.

Kaname bristles. "Don't misunderstand, Kiryuu. I may not hate you any longer, but neither do I like you. In point of fact, I find you irritating. And Yuuki's good is my primary consideration in this decision. I know our difficulties have negatively affected her relationship with you, to her loss. I wish to mend what I have helped disturb."

There. Now Kiryuu looks more normal, pink mouth twisted in a scowl.

"To that end, I have prepared something for you. Will you come with me to see it?"

What the hell is going on. Has Zero stumbled into some mirror dimension? Is this a hallucination of his dying brain, and he's really bleeding out as those crazy pureblood groupies dance around his corpse?

"Keep a hold on me, Kiryuu. The path here is steep," Kuran tells him, grip tightening on his body as he navigates a tricky stretch.

See? That's what Zero means. Kuran is supposed to be an asshole. That's how the world works...though not the past few months. Damn. Zero's gut thinks Kuran wasn't lying, either.

According to Zero's Hunter training, Kuran is taking Zero toward the very back of the valley; they've left the eaves of the forest behind, and are moving through a grassy foothill region sparsely dotted with trees. The pureblood crests one last hill, and Zero looks down on a wide, sloping meadow, glazed with frost. Nestled in the meadow is a long, low structure built of stone and wood, with a taller square annex at one end that looks like a house.

Zero casts a glance at the pureblood carrying him, but Kuran's face is impassive and completely unhelpful when Zero is trying to figure out what's going on.

Descending the slope, Kuran's feet make crunching noises as the frozen grass beneath his shoes snaps like spikes of glass. "Are you familiar with the legal concept of reparations?"
"No," Zero tells him. He's a Hunter, not a lawyer. The only laws he knows are the ones he's sworn to obey.

"Put simply, reparation is compensation for a previously inflicted loss by the offender to the injured party. It is neither a gift, nor a bribe."

The pureblood stops, and gestures at the meadow around them with the fingers of his hand, careful not to unseat Zero. "This is my reparation to you."

Zero twists to look at Kuran's face in disbelief, but those russet eyes regarding him contain no hint of levity or mocking. "When you say 'this', what exactly do you mean?"

Continuing to move in the direction of the low building, Kuran picks up his pace. "Everything in this area - the land, the buildings - all of it belongs to you, legally valid and in writing, with the caveat that it cannot be sold, and will return to the possession of the Kuran family after your death."

Mouth dropping open, Zero hastily surveys Kuran for any falsehood. Nothing. Kuran is being serious. "What is all this for, Kuran?"

"You'll see," the vampire replies, knocking on the door of the taller annex. A human, of all people, opens the door with a slight bow toward Kuran, and leaves just as quickly once Kuran nods in return.

"Let me get a few papers from the office, and I will show you the rest," Kuran says, placing Zero on his feet and holding his shoulders until the Hunter's balance steadies, leaning on his cane. Kuran strides away, disappearing for a few seconds.

"A human, Kuran?" Zero calls when the dark-haired vampire returns. "That seems like a risk, given our respective conditions."

"A necessary one," the vampire replies, pushing his hair out of his face as he thumbs through the the binder in his hands. "There are living quarters upstairs, and my orders are not to leave this building after dark; this entire structure has Hunter wards, for the protection of its inhabitants."

Now even more bewildered, Zero sucks in a breath. Hunter wards are no small thing, and the cost to pay Hunters to set them must have been staggering. "Kuran, why would people live here? What is this place?"

Holding up a hand, Kuran asks Zero for silence. "You'll understand when you see. Come, and I will show you the last part of your reparations."

Subsiding for the moment, Zero follows Kuran down the corridor, curiosity eating at him badly enough not to protest further. His cane thumps against the pavestone floor, and then freezes when a familiar smell meets his nostrils. No way, Kuran wouldn't possibly -

Zero pushes past Kuran, silhouetted in the doorway, and stops short, bringing a hand to cover his mouth.

A friendly nicker meets his ears, and a soft pink muzzle pokes through the closest stall door. Curious, intelligent eyes regard Zero with interest.

Holding out his hand, Zero doesn't breathe, his chest tightening with nostalgia and pain. The palomino horse, a bright golden color with a stripe down its forehead, lips at his palm like it expects a treat, but allows Zero to scratch under its chin with a sigh.
"You bought me a horse?" Zero says, hardly believing this is real; his chest is full of sharp fragile things.

"I bought you three horses," Kuran corrects him. "Yuuki mentioned once that you raised a horse called White Lily at Cross Academy."

"Yes," Zero admits, his heart squeezing. Shuffling closer to the palomino, he tries to bury the old hurt under the smell of horse and the warmth of its body.

Voice careful, Kuran admits, "Seiren discovered that she was killed when Rido's Level Es invaded the academy, along with all the other equestrian club horses."

Zero squeezes his eyes shut. "Yes." White Lily was just one more thing he lost that day, but she had been innocent of blame, shut in her stall and easy prey for frustrated, hungry vampires. Zero had found her on her side, in a pool of congealed dark blood with a hole in her throat. He had never entered that stable again, unable to bear the memory.

Kuran shifts; Zero hastily opens his eyes, making sure his back was turned.

"White Lily had a half sister. This horse is her great-great-great-great granddaughter, and so are the other two horses. I cannot return your horse's life, but I hope you can accept this one as compensation for her loss."

Turning his head to stare at Kuran, Zero is embarrassed to feel a prickly feeling in his eyes, and he snaps his head back to look at the palomino mare. She's small, with four white feet, a fine head, and good carriage, a lovely little saddle horse This is a precious remnant of White Lily, he thinks, warmth centered in his chest.

Stumbling down the aisle, Zero goes to the next stall, and comes nose to nose with a dark bay mare lifting her head out of her hay. She has a lopsided snip of white on her nose, turning her left nostril pink, and she nibbles his sleeve when he offers his hand. A little overweight, and a heavier, cobby build than the first mare, fuzzy with her winter coat.

"This horse is restitution for the figurine my servants stole and smashed, the glass horse that belonged to your mother," Kuran tells him from the doorway, keeping his distance so he doesn't frighten the horses with his pureblood aura.

"And this one," Zero asks, blindly overwhelmed and guiding himself by touch to the last occupied stall, a spotless black mare who regards him coolly from the corner of her stall. She's the most expensive, if Zero guesses right, some kind of tall sporthorse. She ventures out to sniff him, tickling Zero with her velvet nose.

"She represents acts I've committed since we married that go against the spirit of our vows," explains the vampire. "This stable and the land I built it on are recompense for any acts occurring before then."

"You are the full, sole legal owner of both the land and the horses. My only condition is that Yuuki or I accompany you whenever you visit. We are very far from help if someone decided to attack you."

Huffing, but seeing Kuran's point, Zero shakes his head yes.

Kuran holds up the binder full of papers. "In here, you'll find financial statements for bank accounts showing your name as the sole account holder. Those accounts contain enough funds that the accrued interest alone will support your property's expenses and upkeep."
Zero tries to breathe, leaning against the stall door as he absorbs the impact of the past few minutes. "Anything else I should know," he squeaks out. The black mare butts her head against his shoulder, and Zero absent-mindedly rubs her neck.

Kuran's expression flickers, and Zero catches him squaring his shoulders. "I investigated White Lily's background. According to her breeder, she was a 'pasture accident' when a rare, pure white racehorse at a neighboring stud farm jumped a fence. I have found that stallion's male descendents with the same white mutation. If you wish, you could breed Lily's grand-nieces to one or more of those stallions, in the hope of a white foal."

Zero covers his face, his cane the only thing keeping him upright. "I don't know... I'll need to think about it."

"The stud fees have already been funded in a separate account, whatever you decide," Kuran informs him.

"You told me once that you cannot buy forgiveness. But what I have done here is not about forgiveness. At the time, I felt no remorse, and I do not regret that it led to the present outcome. I offer you reparation for my conduct with the intention of putting our past interactions to rest. I treated you poorly - I do not intend to do so again. I want our proposed alliance to begin on even ground, with the possibility we could come to have confidence in our shared work."


Kuran pretends he doesn't hear, the dramatic bloodsucking bastard. "Will you agree to my proposed alliance, and accept the renegotiated terms?" The pureblood's expression remains composed, as if Zero's choice doesn't matter to him, despite the manifest evidence to the contrary. Kuran built him a stable, for Ancestresses' sake!

"Trust can be earned," the Hunter muses, feeling the black mare's hot damp breath on the back of his neck.

Zero tips his head back to stare at the ceiling, considering everything Kuran's done in the past few months. Yuuki was not the only one to stay with him when he was sick, or punish the vampires who harmed him. "You didn't drop me. Not even once," he tells the empty air.

Kuran says nothing, and Zero can't watch his response.

"Alright," Zero accepts, turning to the pureblood at the stable door, "We'll try this alliance thing. But this is your one chance - mess up, and we go back to the way things were."

The pureblood gives a slow, elegant nod, the morning light catching the shards of ruby in his eyes.

"And also," Zero interrupts as the pureblood begins to turn away.

Kuran tilts his head in question, and Zero smiles, breathing deep the smell of hay, leather, and horse. "Thank you, Kaname."

Chapter End Notes
Kaname finally Does A Good Thing, and everyone is stubborn.

I told you that Takuma and Isaya's courtship was shoujo manga level, right?

Anyway, most of this chapter was not supposed to exist. Yet here we are anyway. Someday my writing plans will go perfectly and I'll end up with what I meant to write. We will get the Second Jeweled Court next chapter, I swear.

Thanks for being patient again, guys. Hopefully I will work out the computer situation.
Hello to everyone! I've solved my computer problem, thankfully, and am now the owner of a refurbished laptop replacement for my dearly beloved old computer. Special thanks to those of you who reviewed last chapter. Here's the promised Jeweled Court chapter.

If you notice inconsistent first name/last name usage in this fic, it's intentional. I put a lot of weight in names - public and private, and even how character refer to one another in their own thoughts.

To the guest who asked about adding other POV sections then KYZ, I might do so in the future, but for now I really want this claustrophobic focus on our three main characters. The main plotline is their relationship - outside things from the 'bigger plot' break into their little shared world, and I think that mimics what the characters themselves experience, but that actually isn't the primary story I'm telling.

To reviewer blaze: Zero and Yuuki could still have sex as their human roles, where Zero would penetrate Yuuki. But Yuuki's powerful alpha instincts wouldn't be satisfied by that, since the alpha wants to mate with Zero like an omega. And some of their biological changes mean it would be different than before. But it's certainly still an option for them.

Of course the first thing Yuuki wants to do when she hears what Kaname's done for Zero is visit the ponies. Kaname can't keep that kind of thing from her and expect she'll just carry on like normal!

This is wonderful! Kaname and Zero are working to repair their communication, their hearts reaching out to touch each other in the spirit of goodwill and friendship! Such a stirring resolve! It makes Yuuki swoon just thinking about it! She's almost jealous that she didn't think of it herself! (And she's definitely jealous that Kaname got Zero's undivided attention...)

When she's in private, Yuuki rolls around on the bed, squealing and squeezing the white wolf plushie she bought for Kaname. Victorious! On to the next battle for the sacred cause of love and harmony!

When she gets up that evening, even after their late bedtime, Yuuki is still floating on a cloud of happiness. If Zero and Kaname can learn to tolerate each other, surely pigs can fly and horses will grow horns! Nothing is truly impossible!

"You are not wearing that, Zero," her husband sneers, crossing his arms with a lofty expression.

'That' being a pair of butt-hugging riding breeches Zero borrowed from the human groom. Yuuki pauses to appreciate the way it clings and outlines each individual butt cheek, sighing happily.

Zero grinds his teeth. "I'll wear what I want! And I'm not wearing the robes! There's no way I can
"Well you can't go out in public like this! You're our Consort, and those clothes are only fit for a strumpet!"

"I don't even know what that is, but if you don't like this, too bad. I'm not getting thrown because I'm weighed down by six yards of fabric and the flapping sleeves spook my horse!"

"It's such a nice evening," Yuuki announces, skipping into the bathroom.

A compromise is reached when Yuuki discovers the existence of something called a 'riding habit', and Kaname beats his possessive alpha instincts down long enough to accept Zero having to show off a few curves.

When they head out to the stable, Zero wears divided skirts cut for riding, hastily manufactured by Sasaki and the other maids, with the breeches Kaname loathes underneath. Zero's combined this with the clothing he wears in human spaces, the gloves and shirts with fitted long sleeves.

Kaname still isn't happy, but Yuuki practically bounces as she carries Zero, her heightened anticipation giving poor Zero a bumpy ride. Really, she's curious to see what Kaname came up with on his own, but mostly she wants to see Zero smile the way he did with White Lily.

"Do they have names?" Yuuki asks, peeping around the stable door so the horses can't see her or sense her pureblood aura. White Lily hated her because she could tell Yuuki was a pureblood, even with her blood sealed. Yuuki likes horses, but horses don't like her, she laments regretfully.

Zero pauses as he scratches the black one's nose, his brow furrowing. "I'm sure they do, I just don't know what they are. Kaname" - the word is clumsy on the Hunter's tongue - "where did you put their paperwork?"

"Back into the office records," their husband replies, also keeping his distance the way Yuuki is, "but I remember their names. That one is registered as 'Darker than Black Magic' on her papers."

"That's poetic," Yuuki comments. "Who's the dark brown one?"

Kaname shrugs. "I wasn't informed. She's not registered, and the man I bought her from never even trained her to be ridden, just had her out in a field running around. He was happy to have me take her off his hands."

Zero dips his head, pleased, but then his head snaps up suspiciously. "Hold on. You didn't pressure anyone into selling them, did you?"

Kaname looks self-satisfied. "Not in the least. Black Magic's rider was eager to sell once I offered her enough money, and the palomino was already listed for sale."

"Oooh, what's her name? She's such a pretty color!" Yuuki asks, sneaking another look into the stable.

"Goldilocks. She belonged to a child who wanted to purchase a competition horse instead."

Yuuki and Zero stare at each other, then burst into laughter.

"Really?" Yuuki chokes out. "Goldilocks? That's a little morbid."

"Who names a child's horse after a little girl who killed and ate three bears?" Zero chuckles.
Kaname blinks, though his face is as unruffled as always. "That is not the version I'm familiar with."

Yuuki and Zero look at each other until Yuuki shrugs.

"Which one are you going to ride, Zero?" she asks, leaning far enough into the doorway that Black Magic snorts uneasily, so Yuuki shrinks back again. "And what are you going to name the brown one?"

"The ancient relic bought her, so he ought to name her," Zero says offhandedly, eyes darting to Kaname, who just raises an eyebrow.

"It's been so long since I've ridden, I think I'll start with Goldilocks. My leg strength isn't great, and Black Magic might be a little too much for me right now," he replies to her first question, going to gather his gear.

Yuuki watches with fascination as Zero navigates a number of straps, buckles and fasteners as he saddles and bridles the good-natured golden mare. The horse has taken a shine to Zero, the same way every animal Zero meets seems to sense that 'here is a good human.' Yuuki and Kaname back out so Zero can lead the mare to a fenced area.

The groom boosts Zero into the saddle, and Zero has the biggest smile on his face as he settles into the saddle and adjusts to the sudden change in his point of view. As he walks the mare in circles, just looking for his rhythm, Yuuki pillows her head on her arms atop the fence rail, feeling nostalgic at the familiar sight.

She casts a look sideways, at Kaname who is observing Zero advancing to a trot with interest. This was an extraordinarily thoughtful gift, which must have taken planning and time to accomplish and keep secret.

"I know it's none of my business, but you did well, Kaname," Yuuki tells him under the noise of the wind. "Thank you for giving him this."

Only the flicker of Kaname's eyelids tells Yuuki he heard her.

It's enough. Yuuki settles down into the cradle of her arms, the chilly air nothing compared to the warmth inside her.

The best part of Zero wearing those lovely tight breeches was getting to peel them off his fine rear when he's finished horseback riding. Well, Yuuki's sure it will be, once Zero decides he's okay with that.

In the meantime, Yuuki is very happy to make out with Zero while he's wearing nothing but those tempting, form-fitting pants and not a single stitch else. Kaname is busy sucking bruises onto Zero's neck, and the two of them are dueling over who gets to squeeze Zero's ass.

Yuuki is losing, but only because she's distracted by the way Zero's stiff nipples are rubbing against the front of her dress. She really, really wants to touch them, but Zero hasn't allowed them to touch his chest yet.

So Yuuki is being sneaky, and pushing her chest forward so the lace trim catches on the little pink peaks, swallowing down the small shocked noises Zero keeps making, like he didn't realize being touched there would feel good. The warm swell of lust it gives her every time she does it means she's straining against her underwear already.
"Zero," Yuuki says, eyes glued to the red flush dappling Zero's chest from the growing heat between their bodies, "I'm warm. I'm going to to get a little more comfortable."

"Mnnnn?" Zero inquires with hazy eyes, but he doesn't miss Yuuki for long; as she steps away, Kaname spins Zero around to take her place, gleefully finding the unmarked places under his jaw and distracting their Consort as Yuuki makes a few adjustments.

The pureblood enjoys listening to Zero's gasps as she twists around to undo the zipper on her dress. Zero's always so quiet and hushed, barely making any significant noise, but that just makes Yuuki and Kaname more eager to tease and tear each cry and groan from his lips. Finding the final clasp, Yuuki lets the garment fall to the floor, leaving her in a slip, modesty shorts, and her undergarments.

Yuuki's forehead wrinkles as she considers whether to remove anything else.

All of it, insists the alpha. Let mate see our glorious body, the better to satisfy him with!

The shorts will stay, of course - Zero wouldn't be comfortable seeing her naked yet, Yuuki guesses. But if Zero can take off his shirt, so can she! Besides, Yuuki can't fall behind if she wants to impress him more than his previous lovers. Yuuki boils with jealousy just thinking of other women with Zero. Zero is hers!

Right! Mind made up, Yuuki shucks off the white cotton slip, and unhooks her bra, throwing it on the tumbled pile of clothing, leaving her breasts bare and the line of her arousal visible in her shorts.

Zero will be so surprised! she thinks with excitement, prowling behind him and catching Kaname's attention.

The devilish gleam in Kaname's eye brightens, and her husband smiles wolfishly into Zero's white neck, bruised purple with his marks. "Zero, don't you think my dear girl looks delicious like this?" he purrs into the shell of their Consort's ear, lips brushing the rim.

Puzzled by Kaname's sudden shift, Zero catches his breath for a moment, then peers behind Kaname's shoulder to look for Yuuki, sharp instincts scrambled after being practically devoured by the pureblood.

Laughing would ruin the surprise. Yuuki bounces on the balls of her feet, eager for Zero to discover their trick.

When Yuuki fails to appear, Zero's Hunter senses kick in, and their unsuspecting Consort casts a curious glance over his own shoulder, only for his jaw to drop and his eyes to widen the size of dinner plates.

Yuuki preens, posing with her best angle just for Zero, hoping she looks attractive to him, her bravery wavering as old human insecurities crop up.

Zero sputters, swallows wrong and chokes, wrenching his body around so he can face Yuuki as he coughs to clear his airway. Even as he doubles over, Zero doesn't blink or look away for a single second, and Yuuki's confidence bounces back.

"You look like you've never seen a woman's chest before," she teases. Zero just looks so shocked, with wonder in his eyes. All the worry about being inadequate melts away. Yuuki feels like a goddess just from the worshipful way he looks at her.
The Hunter swallows, blushing so hard Yuuki thinks he might pass out. "It's always been Yuuki for me. Nobody else."

A savage affection swells in her breast. Her pureblood's bottomless hunger writhes in her belly, that dangerous obsession straining at the chains she binds it with. She wants to consume him, to crush him to her breast and drown him in the void of her unquenchable thirst.

"Nobody else, my love?" Yuuki says, stalking forward until she can scent Zero's blood in the bruises on his throat. When she pulls back, there's an itch in her eyes that tells her the irises are bright carmine and ruby. Her fangs ache and her throat burns, hungering for Zero's precious blood, the nectar she has not tasted in months. Yuuki's control strains and shakes, feuding with the animal raging inside her.

But Zero meets her gaze without fear - a Hunter who recognizes a predator on the edge, but surrenders himself with perfect acceptance. Zero would let Yuuki drain him without lifting a finger to struggle.

And looking in Zero's lilac eyes, the abyss steadies. Walking the tightrope above that deep pit in her soul is as effortless as setting foot on solid ground, the torment of her desire as bearable as the brush of a cool summer breeze.

"No one else, ever," Zero tells her, reddened and bashful, but without hesitation. "Only Yuuki. I didn't want anyone but you."

"Oh, Zero," the pureblood groans, and pulls him down to kiss her.

Kaname's alpha rumbles with pleasure at all the delectable sights - his dear wife's perfect curves and ravaging heart, his Consort's splendid affection and sweet submission, both twisted around each other, all belonging to him.

But he's still clear-headed enough to parse through the implication of the words Kiryuu just spoke.

It cuts straight through his arousal, like a shot of adrenaline, the mere possibility spinning him in circles, threads of possibility weaving themselves ever more tightly into a rope of suspicion, past encounters taking on a new light.

Kaname's already in his loose shirtsleeves, so he unbuttons his collar, trying to dissipate some of the heat building up at the back on his neck. Licking dry lips, he touches Yuuki's shoulder, knowing better than to interfere with her omega when a pureblood's possessiveness is raging.

Impatient at being disturbed, Yuuki jerks her head up, raising her upper lip to show her fangs, but stops short at Kaname's contemplative demeanor, the cold rain of rationality choking her blaze.

Kaname tugs at her arm, and she reluctantly unwinds herself from their Consort, stepping away to put some space between their bodies.

The Hunter gives the two purebloods a quizzical look, seemingly unaware of what a brazen invitation he is, standing there with his slim form covered only by those indecent breeches, showing off his taut rear and widened hips. How little it would take for him to break their control.

Kaname leans forward. "Zero, when you say 'nobody else, ever,' do you mean that you've never lain with anyone before?"

Yuuki's breath stops; Kiryuu freezes like a rabbit, wild eyes darting from Kaname to Yuuki and
Kaname can see the Hunter deciding whether or not to lie. Catching Kiryuu's eye, the pureblood holds the gaze steadily. *Honesty in exchange for honesty*, he urges.

Slowly, Kiryuu shakes his head.

"You have never had sex with anyone? Or sexual contact any kind, not just penetrative sex?" Kaname presses. There must be no more room for misunderstanding.

Kiryuu looks uncomfortably at his feet. "...No."

Yuuki breaks out of her stunned paralysis. "But, but - you're more than fifty now! I know you were never interested in anyone at Cross Academy, but that was over thirty years ago! You must have found *somebody* in the decades since. You must have known other Hunters and humans you liked. You weren't...you weren't alone all those years."

Kiryuu's silence speaks for itself, and he shifts uncomfortably.

Yuuki covers her eyes, guilt clear in her face.

"It didn't matter to me," Kiryuu assures her, holding up his hands. "I had Master, and Kaito and his family. And Cross. I just didn't need anything like that. So I just...didn't."

Kaname could kick himself for his foolishness. In hindsight, the truth is obvious. Hunters felt physical intimacy had emotional significance, and did not sleep with one another merely for pleasure or amusement as vampires did. Kaname knew the rumors of Kiryuu's promiscuity were completely false, but had assumed that somewhere in the mists of those years apart lay at least one or two lovers.

But Kiryuu had always been singularly devoted to Yuuki - even after she left to marry his rival. In her absence, despite her rejection, Kiryuu's devotion never wavered. Of course he never slept with anyone - he would have considered it being unfaithful to the woman he loved.

The pureblood's eyes narrow. This is another mistake Kaname made because he allowed his emotions against Kiryuu to blind him. His dislike and avoidance meant that Kaname neglected to explore Kiryuu's history between Cross Academy and his presentation as an omega, uncaring as long as it didn't directly affect Kaname's plans. If Kaname had been thinking rationally rather than ignoring his new spouse, he would have investigated Kiryuu's history more thoroughly, and realized that judging Kiryuu's probable sexual experience by vampire standards was mistaken.

Kaname sets his teeth. A failure of knowledge and imagination, caused by his own carelessness and scorn.

"Why didn't you tell us?" Yuuki asks quietly.

The Hunter remains stubbornly silent, but betrays himself when his eyes fall on Kaname, and his expression stiffens.

Kaname knows Yuuki caught the motion when her body tenses as well, and she shoots him a look of mixed frustration, anger, and disappointment.

The pureblood's jaw clenches. Kiryuu made the correct choice. At the time, Kaname would have used that information against him, perhaps even have done reprehensible things to inflict more distress on his new Consort.
His stomach churns. If Kaname had convinced Yuuki to allow another alpha to claim Kiryuu, one who heeded Kaname's hate against the inexperienced, frightened Hunter….How badly would Zero have been hurt?

Mate must never be hurt! We don't want mate to hurt, says the alpha plaintively. Mate is safe with us.

Kaname gives a slight shake of his head, trying to knock the image out of his mind - a pale, brutalized body, with the blackened bruises of repeated rape on his hips and wrists.

No. That did not happen, and Kaname will never allow such a thing to happen. Never.

We will be gentle and careful with mate when we teach him how to be mounted? asks the alpha.

Yes, Kaname thinks. The alpha is an animal, and animals cannot comprehend concepts of virginity the way people can, but it vaguely understands the idea that its omega is inexperienced, and that means mating frightens him.

But mate is ours, ours, ours! the alpha chants happily. Mate belongs only to us! Always and forever! Our blood made him, so it's only right that mate kept himself just for us and alpha-mate! We're the only ones who will feel his delicious, tight hole. Won't it be good, better than anything?

Kaname takes a step toward Kiryuu, and then another, thoughts swirling and coalescing.

Kiryuu eyes him, wary and uncertain, as Kaname comes close.

"How typical," Kaname chuckles, curling a forefinger under their Consort's chin, tipping his head up. "Must you always be so literal, Zero?"

The Hunter blinks up at him with those unique lavender eyes.

Kaname's lips curl into a smile. "Yuuki's white knight. I should have guessed."

His voice drops an octave, and he runs the pad of his finger along that pale cheek. "White for unsullied purity."

The touch turns into a caress. "White for perfect innocence."

Zero is still as a hare under the gaze of an eagle, mesmerized by Kaname's dangerous regard.

Kaname leans closer, voice rumbling in his chest. "Tell me, Zero. Was I the first to even lay a lustful hand on your skin?"

Lavender eyes go wide, caught helplessly beneath the pureblood's intensity. Kaname's smile broadens.

"Do you have any idea how impossible a thing you are? An adult omega who has preserved a stainless virginity for his alphas? Untainted by any touch but ours?"

The idea thrills him. Kaname has sampled virgins before - the distinction appealed to his possessiveness - but never has the mere idea inflamed him so.

Kaname smiles with satisfaction, cupping Zero's jaw in his palm. "Truly, you are worthy to be the Consort of the Kuran family. In power, in beauty, in virtue, in purity, you exceed all others of your kind."
Yuuki, watching their encounter intently, lifts her head and rumbles in her chest with agreement, clasping Zero's hand tightly.

"I assure you," Kaname purrs, "I intend to savor every bit of your tender virgin body as it deserves, to dismantle your purity piece by piece. I will teach you such pleasure that you will beg me to divest you of the last scrap of your innocence by driving my cock into your chaste little quim."

"I, I - I will not," hisses Kiryuu, breaking away from Kaname's grasp, outraged by such casual depravity.

But Kaname can see the hint of curiosity there. Though not convinced by any means, the Hunter is not immune to his body's appeal. Kaname's wicked smile splits his face in two as he shrugs out of his dress shirt.

Yuuki has already divined his intent, and is frantically running her hands down their Consort's body, the furious focus of her desire, and growling possessive affectionate nonsense in his ear.

"I'm afraid we'll be late for lunch today," Kaname remarks without remorse, and dives in to join her. His sweet virgin will need more marking to show their claim before he's allowed to leave their room. Just to be certain.

If Zero thought the Kurans were possessive stalkers before, it's nothing compared to their obsessive, hovering surveillance now they know he's...well. Even more unclaimed than they thought.

Zero doesn't get the appeal. It's embarrassing and weird, not sexy!

But Yuuki and Kuran seem really into it. Every time Zero lets his guard down, he's being pinned against beds, chairs, trees, walls, doors - anything vaguely flat - so his possessive partners can mark him again. Meticulously.

Zero startles, and almost yelps. "That better not be your hand, old man. I need to finish getting ready for the Court, and you're not helping." Zero scowls. They had their chance to scent mark him earlier, it's Kuran's fault if he's not satisfied!

Kuran squeezes Zero's rear once more, before casually picking up his suit coat and heading out into the sitting room.

Zero huffs, glaring into the mirror. Unsurprisingly, Kuran is a shameless pervert with weird fixations...but he hasn't used Zero's inexperience against him, like the Hunter feared. Kuran's been behaving like he really intends to make their alliance work.

"Do you need any help with the make-up, Zero?" Yuuki asks from the bedroom.

"I think I've got everything hidden," Zero replies. "Would you come check?"

Yuuki pops her head in from the bedroom, giving Zero a thumbs up when she doesn't find any spots he's missed.

Zero's facial scarring has faded into thin, pale lines that almost disappear if you look from far enough away. But Kuran insisted that making Zero look completely healed was vital for the Jeweled Court; hiding Zero's faint remaining scarring with concealer was the easiest method.

Checking his appearance in the bathroom mirror one last time, Zero heads back into the bedroom to
finish getting dressed, where his outer robe, sash and shawl are laid out.

The tailoring of this robe is more structured than his first phoenix robe, to emphasize Zero's shoulders and make the line of his chest sharper. More strength and severity this time, less shapeless softness to hide his weight loss.

The color is a vibrant, autumn red to add vitality to Zero's paleness and pick out the hint of pink in his cheeks, with silver needlework in geometric patterns cascading down his skirts, and thick bands of the same silver embroidery edging his sleeves, neckline and hem. Lastly, a silver-white sash and shawl with the same embroidered trim add a touch of winter to the costume's effect.

The Consort's headpiece settled on Zero's hair is a ring of cloudy white diamond and garnet chips, forming a flower where his Hoseki rests in the center of his forehead. Well, Zero thinks it resembles a flower, but really it's more of an abstract shape around a circular center.

Zero likes the headpieces because they stay in place more readily than a normal Hoseki, but they're too fancy for his own tastes. He can't get used to wearing things that cost his entire salary for a year.

As Zero dresses, he can hear Yuuki and Kuran discussing business in the sitting room.

"I read Seiren and Aido's new report, but nothing sticks out to me." That's Yuuki's voice, sounding slightly frustrated.

"Storage facilities, safe houses, transportation hubs, a couple of drug labs. Nothing that can't be explained by her black market businesses in slaves and drugs." Kuran's tone has an edge of the same frustration.

"Maybe we're wrong, and there isn't anything she's hiding. Maybe she's just tightening her security."

"There are still a handful of high security locations with an unknown purpose. Aido insists they need more time," Kaname muses. "Perhaps I will allow him to have his way. He's always been both clever and curious enough to find what I wished to hide."

Zero is curious himself - he knows two of Kaname's nobles are on some kind of assignment - but he needs his focus today on tackling the Court.

"I'm ready to go," he calls as he tucks the ends of the sash in, leaving the bedroom at his slow, halting gait.

"You're not bringing your cane?" Yuuki asks, watching from her armchair in concern.

"No," Zero tells her. "I'm trying to show them I'm healed and back to full strength. I had to be carried last time, and I need to compensate for that now."

"Are you certain you won't fall without it?" Kuran asks. "Falling would be far more damaging than admitting weakness up front."

"I think I can do this without my cane," Zero tells them, trying to project as much confidence as possible.

"Very well," Kuran says, holding out his hand. "Shall we go?"
This time, Zero was one of the first omegas to arrive. If he wants to project an aura of strength, better that as few people as possible see the snail's pace his physical limitations force him to use.

As Takuma promised, their hosts from the neutral families greeted him politely with the deference due to his position, took him to the banquet hall, and showed him to his honorary center seat.

Zero's watched the rest of the Court drift in, making careful observations of any new details he notices, and rehearsing his script. Without Takuma, Zero can only rely on his own knowledge of biographies, etiquette, and Court protocol to rescue himself. Seiren won't be here either; even if she wasn't on assignment, the neutral families vet their servants too thoroughly for Kaname to sneak her in. Zero is truly on his own tonight.

The Hunter's mouth quirks up. He feels like a squirrel in the face of an oncoming car, honestly. He might make it through without getting squashed, but there's no way to avoid a good brush with disaster. Zero chuckles - with his luck, he'd be some kind of weird albino squirrel.

A few of the gathered omegas glance up at the Consort's table and give Zero odd looks. All alone next to Shoshana's empty seat, it's hard not to feel exposed, but Zero doesn't let himself quail at the scrutiny he can feel on all sides. He's marked the positions of his most vigorous opponents, and the mood of the room is volatile, with an erratic energy. From the whispers and glances, it's clear they think Zero is an open, vulnerable target without his greatest allies.

That might be true, but Zero intends to go down battling. All of this is a useless effort since Zero refuses to prove himself by producing a child, but he'll push back that outcome until he can't fight it any longer.

A few minutes before midnight. Zero's grip tightens on his chair arm, underneath the tablecloth where no one can see. He has the sole attention of almost every eye in the room, even Ilesanmi and her Hunters in their positions. Everyone watching and waiting to see what he'll do.

Although Zero knows it's unwise to tap his unstable Hunter powers, *mushin* wells up without him quite consciously noticing. He doesn't allow it to enfold him, but just having his body settle into the familiar breathing rhythms gives him steadier mental footing.

Zero's job tonight is simple: don't catastrophically screw up, prove that he can be competent without Takuma, and show some sign of physical improvement.

Simple things. Right. Zero wants to laugh again, but doesn't allow his impassiveness to crack.

A tremor in his Hunter senses announces Ouri's presence.

Shoshana is right on time, slipping in before the clock strikes and taking the seat on Zero's right, signaling the other omegas to send the last few children away with their nannies as conversation dies down.

Zero hopes Shoshana is well. She always has that strange transparent, stretched-out look to her, the thin fragility of something well-preserved but ancient, but today she seems tired, her fierce dark gaze muted, and perhaps a little more frail than usual.

Whatever her condition, the eldest vampire of noble blood gives Zero a firm nod when the time comes to open the autumn Court session.

The silence is not friendly. There's tension in the air. Most of the omegas are still withholding judgement on Zero's ascension to Head Consort, but his opponents have been the vocal about their objections. Everyone expects blood.
It's too bad for them - Zero's used to the sight of his own blood. "I welcome all of you. The autumn session of the Jeweled Court is now open."

Things go wrong almost immediately.

Six omegas in, one of the Senate faction omegas refuses to perform the greeting ritual, an act of utmost disrespect to a Consort. This is a complete refusal of Zero's authority, which Zero cannot ignore if he wants an ounce of respect from anyone in this room.

Luckily, this is one of Takuma's scenarios, and Zero has a range of options to choose from.

Shoshana shifts, about to intervene, but Zero stops her with a slight shake of his head, examining the Senate omega before him, the defiant posture and the anger in her eyes.

In his most reasonable tone, Zero says, "Sugiyama-san, I'm not the kind of person who enjoys having people bow for me, and I recognize you may have reservations about my position as Head Consort, but I would ask you to respect the traditions of the Jeweled Court and complete the greeting ritual."

Instead of placating her, Zero's words only intensify the Senate omega's anger. "I utterly refuse," she spits.

Zero considers his next move, now that appeals to tradition and politeness have failed. He didn't think it would be that easy - Sugiyama risked much by being the first to challenge him. "On what grounds?" Zero asks, hoping for a clue how to proceed.

"I can't accept someone like you as Head Consort!" she says, her disdain clear in her voice.

Idly, Zero wonders whether it's being a Hunter or a D Rank she means. Whatever happens now, he can't allow his face to show any offense or hurt. "I hope that as we come to know one another better, I can change your mind," he tells Sugiyama. "At the same time, your acceptance is unnecessary. I am Head Consort, whether or not you like it."

Her face twists. "I refuse to offer obeisance to someone I cannot respect. Having you as Head Consort is an insult to your honored predecessors, and to all of us who must bow their heads to you!"

Zero can feel mushin lapping at his heels, and sinks down into that calm focus, just to spite her by using a Hunter technique. "Sugiyama-san, I think you have a fundamental misunderstanding about this ritual. Allow me to educate you."

The woman sneers. "You educate us? When this is merely your second Court? Go ahead then," she challenges him mockingly.

Sugiyama can't even scratch his battlefield calm; Zero's nonchalant body language reads to the watching omegas that her objection is trivial and insignificant. "Why do we perform the greeting ritual?" he asks the room.

"To show our respect to the Consorts," answers Sugiyama with irritation at such an elementary question.

Zero gives a hint of a smile. "Wrong."

The woman looks taken aback, and opens her mouth to angrily protest.
"We don't perform the greeting ritual for the sake of the Consorts," Zero says again. "What have I done to earn my position? Have I shown some special skill or knowledge that would be invaluable serving the Court's interests? No. I've done nothing worth being appointed one of your leaders."

Zero sweeps his gaze over the silent, watching omegas. "A Consort is merely a placeholder. Why does a Consort hold their title?"

He lets the question sit in the heavy air for a moment before he answers, "Because they are the chosen beloved of a pureblood."

Zero looks back to Sugiyama, who is beginning to lose her defiance as she realizes her error. "You are not bowing to me, Sugiyama-san. You are bowing to my husband and my wife, who bear the name Kuran, and in whose veins run the purest blood in existence."

The omega blanches, terrified as she realizes she's broken the most inviolable vampire taboo of all, and done something that could be construed as an insult to not just one, but two purebloods. "Forgive - please forgive me, Kiryuu-sama! I acted without thinking!" Sugiyama pleads, throwing herself to her knees.

"Ignorance is forgivable," Zero tells her, serene in mushin's hold, "As long as the mistake is not repeated."

The prostrate omega blubbers her agreement, hoping that earning Zero's forgiveness will extend to the purebloods she unwittingly defied.

Zero tilts his head to the side. This incident has cost too much time already. "I suggest you complete the ritual now. I would hate to inconvenience our hosts by delaying our meal."

"That was well done," Shoshana remarks as they're finishing lunch.

"It was Takuma's strategy," Zero tells her as he scrapes his dish clean. He hadn't meant to eat the whole thing, in case tension made his stomach nauseous later, but the delicate cream cake was well-made and not cloyingly sweet.

"But it was you, not Takuma, who made it successful," Shoshana replies, looking out at the other omegas. "You often belittle your own accomplishments. I thought at first it was humility, but you just see yourself as holding little value."

Zero fights to keep his face emotionless, conscious of the watching crowd.

Shoshana observes Zero's response out of the corner of her eye. "Do you know why some of them hate you so much? Beyond the obvious points of your heritage, your rank, and your political affiliation?"

"Personality?" Zero offers weakly.

The elder Consort smiles in amusement, leaning back in her chair and interlocking her fingers. "Jealousy," she corrects.

Zero blinks, not quite understanding.

"With a few exceptions, everyone in this room envies your fortune. You may see little value in your position, but any other omega would murder, betray, bribe, or commit whatever sins necessary to stand in your shoes. Or to take your place," she adds significantly.
"Purebloods have become rarer. Few ever take a Consort. And only one omega before you has joined the Kuran family."

The elder Consort tilts her glass, watching the light refract through the dark wine. "Power. Wealth. Position. The purity of royal lineage. For one like you to receive such prosperity, Kiryuu Zero, this they cannot accept," she tells him.

Consort Shoshana is more apt to listen than speak, but when she does, it's wise to listen. Zero knows this, so he asks, "How do I fix it?"

She chuckles once. "The Court accepted Ichijo-san because they knew he stood so high above them they could never reach. You, they will never accept."

Zero toys with his fork. "What do I do then?"

"Outlive them."

He looks up at Shoshana to check if she's joking, but the Consort returns his glance evenly. "Become an immovable object. One whose absence is unthinkable. No one remembers life before there were stars in the sky. Make your existence just as constant and undoubtable."

Her words have the weight of personal experience. No one knows - or remembers - how Ouri came to bond Shoshana, but for whatever reason, Shoshana had been in Zero's place millennia ago.

"I see," Zero says as the servants remove their plates.

At the half-hour recess, a few of the monarchist omegas wander over to speak with Zero; he does his best to show them the Consort's persona they want to see. The tea group omegas also drop by to inquire after Takuma and pass him bits of gossip they've heard, far more welcome guests.

Zero wishes he could go speak to Ilesanmi and her Hunter team, unobtrusively stationed against the walls, but he can't break his Consort's persona and remind the Court so obviously of his origins. He does catch her eyes once or twice, but with so many vampire eyes watching Zero doesn't dare do anything more.

The effort of keeping his public face intact means Zero doesn't get a chance to rest before his looming interrogation once the session resumes. Under the table, his hands clench in autumn-colored fabric at the reminder. Every time Zero thinks of facing their questions, hot anxiety and dread fill him. He has something he's trying to gain now, and he feels as inexperienced as a child in these wars of words.

Winning the confrontation during the greeting ritual gave Zero a foothold. But that didn't stop the insulting dismissiveness, the doubt, the rudeness, the reluctance, the anger and disdain - from both factions. Zero saw the resentful spite in Abe's eyes, and the cunning surveillance in Noguchi's. This will be their only chance to release all those feelings against Zero. Nothing about him or his past will be out of bounds.

In the face of that weight, such forceful emotions and expectations, Zero can only brace himself. The tea group planted monarchist omegas with orders to ask safer questions, but Zero can't rely on such a slender reed.

Time is growing short, and the coil in his belly tightens another notch.

Shoshana slips back into her seat, returning from her visit to Ouri. Zero's throat tightens.
Instinct for looming battle urges him toward mushin, and Zero reaches for it like a child with a security blanket. If that fluid awareness aids him during fights, why not also here?

Balanced and ready to react in any direction, Zero feels reassured and shakes away his nervousness, probing out with his Hunter senses to test the vampire energies in the room. His Hunter powers feel limber and light, as responsive as they did before he started having those strange episodes.

Zero marks the last few stragglers returning to their seats. "Shall we begin?" he asks.

No one seems inclined to protest - on the contrary, he's faced with sharp, anticipatory gazes. The curiosity that makes people gawk at accidents, Zero surmises. "Then let's open the afternoon session. Who has news they'd like to share with the Court?"

Silence. The omegas shift and look at one another, but no one steps forward.

"Would anyone like to announce a pregnancy?" Zero tries instead, and this time a few omegas tiptoe forward to share their happy news.

Through mushin, Zero can sense the bulk of attention still rests on him, but at least there's stilted chatter now. Takuma's conversational skills are sorely missed; Zero sits there in silence and makes the occasional comment, rotating through the list of approved topics and trying to burn as much time as he can before someone takes a swipe at him. Every moment of faux normalcy helps Zero support the idea that the Jeweled Court has nothing to fear with him as Head Consort, and that under his leadership business won't be disrupted.

He feels remarkably clear-headed, his Hunter powers functioning seamlessly and improving his reaction time as he bats the conversational ball back and forth. Zero's pleased to see his senses are less rusty than he expected after lying unused for almost two months - almost improved, actually.

This is a good place to change the pace - Zero's nearly run out of delaying tactics. This time, Zero won't wait and let his opponents chose the battlefield.

He breathes evenly, overlooking the room. "If there's nothing else the Court needs to address, I thought I might speak some more with all of you, so we can come to know each other better."

Zero can almost imagine his opponents sharpening their knives. "I'd be happy to tell you about the lovely trip we took recently to Europe."

Noguchi Sada rises, curtseying. "Consort Kiryuu, I would be delighted to hear of your travels. But I know some of the members like Sugiyama-san still harbor doubts about you. If we may, could you allow them to speak their minds freely? I'd like for their hearts to be put at ease so the Court can be at peace again."

Inviting the cow to the slaughterhouse, how polite. "If you think that will help, I'll do what I can to return tranquility to the Jeweled Court," Zero tells her.

"Have you bedded your spouses yet?" someone behind him immediately shouts.

Zero's mouth tightens. Right for the throat. "I don't see what business of yours that is."

"Kiryuu-sama," Noguchi curtsies again. "Every vampire wishes for the comfort and care of our honored purebloods, none more so than Kuran-sama and Kuran-hime. When they ask you such an indelicate question, they are merely concerned that Kuran-san and Kuran-hime's needs are not being met."
Zero bristles, insulted, and struggles to keep mushin. How dare they! It wouldn't rankle so much if Zero hasn't thought the same thing once or twice. He has been unable to fulfill his obligations for the treaty and to give his body to the Kurans. That doesn't mean he wants his failure brought to light, and in such a subservient way. Zero may have promised them his life and body, but he's still a Hunter and his purpose isn't to slavishly serve the Kurans.

"I appreciate your concern, but they are more than capable of making their needs known to me. As I told you before, we have our own reasoning behind deciding to take our relationship slowly."

One of the monarchists taps his chin thoughtfully. "They are said to be much in love with one another. I suppose it makes sense that they wouldn't be interested in an outsider they didn't want."

Oh, that shaft strikes home alongside Zero's insecurities, but he refuses to react, sensing that this volley isn't finished.

"Aren't you concerned?" Abe Juan laughs, tossing his curly dark hair.

"About what," Zero says calmly, knowing already he won't like the answer.

Abe adopts a tone of false concern, betrayed by the ugly look in his eyes. "Well, they don't want your body, but obviously they want a little novelty. So they must be taking their lusts to other beds. I'd be eager to serve Kuran-sama and Kuran-hime if their own omega won't satisfy them."

Abe leers with satisfaction as a chorus of agreement breaks out across the room.

Zero clenches his fists under the table, Shoshana's warning about jealousy ringing in his ears. Mushin collapses, and a mass of hot instinct and emotion rises up. Yuuki and Kaname are his, and he's not going to stand aside as one of these bitches tries to steal his alphas.

"I will shoot the first person who tries," Zero snarls, showing his fangs. It was his strength and skill that attracted them, it was him they courted. The only omega Zero's powerful, seductive alphas are allowed to mate with is him. Zero won't allow their attention to wander - all that fertile, pure seed will sire his beautiful babies, not be wasted on some weakling Zero could tear apart in moments.

Shoving the omega back down, a little shocked by his outburst - was that really him, and how badly did Zero just screw up? - Zero regains his senses. "You know, Abe-san, after how interested you were in my nonexistent lovers, and now this, I'd be starting to wonder about your character if I didn't know what an honest, likeable person you are."

A few omegas chuckle; Abe's expression darkens at the insult.

"Let's move on," Zero says, "I won't speak any more on the subject."

"Aren't your alphas bothered when you go Hunting?" Koneko jumps in. Not much finesse in that one, to be so straightforward.

Zero picks a favorable interpretation. "They are concerned for my safety. That's why they send a familiar when I go out."

"But you're a vampire killing other vampires, isn't that disturbing for them?"

Zero pauses, trying to find the right response. "The Senate issues execution requests for vampires deemed a threat to society's secrecy, and for those who have broken its laws. The Kurans
understand the necessity better than anyone." At least Kuran does, since he used to rule these bloodsuckers himself, Zero amends silently.

"It doesn't bother you at all?" one of the monarchists breaks in, shocked.

"Whatever my feelings, I have a job and a duty, as my ancestors did," Zero deflects, knowing they're pushing him in a dangerous direction. Getting Zero to admit he was anything but horrified and disgusted would be a victory for anyone who didn't like him - it could be spun into any number of disastrous rumors about the callous, sadistic Hunter Kuran-sama married.

"And the Hunters aren't opposed to this?" asks Aido Madoka, chin perched on her hands.

Zero smiles. Saved by Aido's mom. "Why don't you ask them?" he says, gesturing at the Hunters stationed in the corners of the room.

Madoka is more than happy to satisfy her curiosity and yank the Court in a new direction. "Lead Hunter-san? Would you mind commenting?"

Ilesanmi steps forward, manner admirably professional. Zero's favor - to assist him in taming the Jeweled Court - is already proving its worth. "The Hunter's Association appreciates the sacrifices Kiryuu-san has made for the sake of both humans and vampires. We are grateful that Kuran-san and his wife have allowed us to keep using Kiryuu-san's skills, and we hope this tie between us continues to improve the relationship between the Senate and the Association."

"There you have it," Madoka says, sitting back now that the Hunters have shown their approval.

"Of course they would support him!" shouts one of the Senate faction. "They've set up one of their own as a puppet!"

"No," Zero says. "Kuran Kaname has chosen me, knowing that his choice would make me Head Consort. That result is not something the Hunters could force. That choice means Kaname believes I am not a puppet or a danger, unless you believe I am capable of fooling him, or that Kaname would deliberately sabotage the Court."

"I did not mean to suggest any such thing," the omega corrects hastily. "I just question their influence over you, Consort Kiryuu."

Zero accepts the alteration with a nod. Sometimes it's helpful that vampires will tiptoe around any hint they're criticizing a pureblood. Bootlicking always overrules attacking Zero. "I'm capable of making my own decisions. And I'm sure the Court will exercise its own influence," he adds dryly.

"Kiryuu-sama."

Noguchi again, with a look Zero doesn't trust. "If you don't mind me speaking freely, I believe this issue is a sticking point for many in the Court. You are an omega, but you also continue to claim you are a Hunter. If some future event brings those two identities into conflict, they want some assurance you will put your position as an omega first."

Zero breathes deeply, knowing he's fallen into a trap. He can't promise that, and Noguchi knows it.

His heartbeat quickens with the sense of danger, and Zero dives back into mushin, making himself empty so he can keep his voice steady. "In such a situation, I intend to put the good of the greatest number of people first."

A non-answer, but Noguchi lets it stand, knowing she's proved her point to the watching omegas.
Zero is conflicted because of his divided identity. Zero can't be wholly trusted.

Things are spinning out of his control. Zero can feel himself breathe more deeply, giving more oxygen to his muscles as if he will suddenly need to fight. Mushin fluctuates queerly.

"Thank you, Consort Kiryuu. Then perhaps you might address a few other concerns I've heard among the Court?" Noguchi inquires as politely as a spider with a fly in her web.

"Such as?" Zero says, knowing she has him.

"I don't wish to embarrass anyone, so I won't name any names," she says. "I don't hold with such opinions, but I wanted to make sure you were aware of them."

How nice of her, to make sure everyone else could hear them too. "That's fine," Zero says, instinct telling him to brace for the blow. Everyone else can feel it too - the room has fallen utterly silent.

"You're what the Hunters call a Level D - a Turned human, correct?" Noguchi begins.

"Yes." The word feels like it's dragged out of him; Zero clamps his teeth down when it escapes, like it might return to dwell in his throat.

Noguchi nods. "Well, no omega has ever held less than noble rank - thralls and servants are betas. If such a thing has never occurred, some of the omegas feel, isn't it likely you are barren? And they feel that an omega who will never experience the role of mother - can they really be a competent leader and representative of the Jeweled Court?"

"Noguchi Sada, you go too far!" Azai objects, going to his feet.

She shrugs, demurring, "I'm merely reporting to Consort Kiryuu the things I've heard. That doesn't mean I agree with them, Azai-san."

Zero lets the painful feelings trickle away, sinking deeper in mushin, the clean focus of the present moment. "We don't know whether I can conceive. I haven't even had my first heat yet."

"And it is not a requirement that the Head Consort is capable of pregnancy," comments Shoshana. "Otherwise I could not have held the position."

The Court gives a collective shocked look toward Shoshana, who easily admitted such a horrifying thing. There was public knowledge Shoshana hadn't carried a child in over two thousand years - likely a side effect of her unnatural age - but to say it aloud!

It was the same as admitting to some terrible, hushed secret, like having an incurable disease. An omega's fertility was almost sacred, and the idea of losing it unthinkable.

Though as shocked as the rest of them, Noguchi quickly recovers. "That's an excellent point, Consort Shoshana. But some in the Court have other concerns about Consort Kiryuu's blood status."

"Go on then, Noguchi-san," Zero tells her. He doesn't have a choice. Either now or later, everything will come out.

"Thralls can't attack or disobey their Masters. But it's rumored Kiryuu-sama did both. And that he killed Hio Shizuka-sama, his Master." Here Noguchi pauses significantly, and the Court murmurs.

"Shizuka was never my master, Zero wants to say, but beneath mushin his instinct knows those
words would damn him. A terrible anticipation holds him frozen.

"And it's even rumored that Kiryuu-sama murdered his own twin brother. So Consort Kiryuu must be something unnatural indeed, to break so many laws of nature and decency."

Zero stops breathing. He feels hollow and empty, crushed beneath old guilt and loss. Ichiru. How could they. How could they!

*Mushin* crystallizes.

The world goes brittle; one tap and it might shatter. Sound reaches Zero's ears from very far away.

The Hunter spell in his neck burns. They can touch him, but not Ichiru. *Never* Ichiru.

Wound tight, worn thin, something in Zero's head snaps.

-and he can *see feel taste touch smell sense* all at once, everything in a howling flood, he *knows* - the man behind him is scratching his nose, disturbing tiny air particles as he moves, the faint sounds are servants moving behind the walls, the chemical taste on his tongue is emotion, the odors of glee and triumph, under the table Azai's baby is fluttering inside him, and he could pinpoint every last person within these walls, count them, measure their strength, but that's not all, so much, too much -

"Sit down, Abe Juan," Zero's voice cracks out.

"I have not asked you to speak," Zero continues, inexplicably certain Abe just opened his mouth to spew more filth.

The others will think Zero's guessing, or lucky, but Zero isn't, he *knows* it's true - even though Abe is seated behind him. Where Zero can't physically see.

Time feels...flexible. To Zero's mind, every second seems elastic, brimming full, crammed to bursting with so many stimuli. And the world in front of him has changed - the same people, the same place, but overlaid by something new, something deeper. It's like opening his eyes in the light for the first time - like before now everything was under a dark veil, misty and half-glimpsed, and now the veil has lifted. Or watching the world reflected in a mirror your whole life, and thinking that you could see everything as it really was. But you turn around and everything you thought you knew was backwards.

Zero thinks he might fly apart any moment. His mind feels saturated, like a sponge soaked in water. Any more and he'll spill out in all directions, and how could he gather up the fragments of his consciousness then?

With something like terror, Zero decides to consider this insanity later. Right now, he needs to defeat the opponent in front of him.

Noguchi is harder than Abe. Words aren't like movements, she can say anything - he struggles, the paths are twisted.

Zero picks his way through by touch. "I would rather have died myself than see Ichiru's death," he vows. Honesty is a weapon with these people - so rarely offered that they believe it when they see it nakedly unashamed before their eyes.

Zero waits, judges the ripple of feedback, lets this strange sense guide him. Calmer now. Less emotion. Play the role to the hilt. "Thank you for telling me this, Noguchi-san. It's good that I can
correct such misinformation before it spreads, though I think the members of our esteemed Court would know better than to repeat such offensive slander."

Noguchi shifts, realizing the control has passed out of her hands.

"You see, It was Kuran Rido who dealt the blow that caused my brother's death. So I killed Rido by putting a bullet through him." Zero smiles tightly. Let them think on that.

Utter, dead silence. Zero just casually admitted to killing one of their gods. Is there any other way to take that except an implied threat?

But at least Zero can be sure no one will repeat that accusation. An easy association to establish in their minds - the rumor offends Zero. Zero killed the last man who deeply offended him. It would be best not to repeat that rumor, for the sake of their well being.

"I think we're finished." Zero announces brightly, hiding the fatigue pulling him down. His brain might be overflowing his skull. "The autumn session of the Jeweled Court is now closed. Thanks for coming. I'll see you all in January."

The vampires flee. There's really no other word for it. Zero can feel glances being thrown his way, and furious whispers breaking out once they pass the door.

Shoshana exchanges a nod, before hurrying away to join Ouri. Zero would like to go thank Ilesanmi, but contacting her now is unwise. Instead, he makes eye contact, and forms the hand sign for 'objective complete, gratitude' instead.

She twitches an eyebrow, then breaks away to avoid detection. No one is watching them, Zero's instincts and strange perceptiveness insist. His vision tilts. Is his mind is breaking into pieces?

Zero doesn't move, ignoring his fellow omegas. All his energy is being sucked away. Whatever this hallucination is, Zero needs to stop doing it, otherwise he's going to end up collapsed on the floor. But how?

He presses a hand to the side of his neck, above the spot where his taming mark used to be. Maybe he simply needs to let go, like mushin? Could the solution be that easy?

It is, thank the Ancestress - holding on is far more difficult. His expanded state of mind pops like a balloon, whitening out his vision; Zero is left with a splitting headache and an exhaustion that penetrates down to his bones.

Zero slumps in his chair, and sighs. Looks like he's waiting here until Yuuki comes to get him. Again.

When he sleeps, Zero dreams of Ichiru.

It is not a memory. This Ichiru, standing teenaged and healthy, has his hair pulled back with Hio's bell. Rather, it might be called a desire.

Zero cooks his twin dinner in the first house they remember living in, the one that was so tiny their room only fit a single bed. Ichiru sits facing Zero at the dining table as they eat, and he smiles without bitterness. His brother's mouth moves, but Zero can't hear what Ichiru is saying; the sound is like speech through water. Even so, the ambiance of the dream is peaceful, with a delicate, dusty nostalgia.
When Zero closes his eyes, and the dream blurs, changing - as dreams do - he sighs.

"Honored Grandmother," Zero says, opening his eyes again. "You came."

The Ancestress smiles at him, warm and fond. "How could I not?"

They are kneeling on thick grass, under starlight. Zero looks neither left nor right. This place exists only for their conversation, and dreams go away when you stop looking at them, like billows of cloud before a breeze.

"You know what happened tonight?" Zero asks.

She nods, her braid swinging with the movement. "I was watching. Please tell me what you think happened, in your own words first."

Zero considers the earlier events as dispassionately and rationally as possible, as if he were making a report to a Lead Hunter. "I believe your power awoke in me. I saw - felt - impossible things. I don't know how to describe it, but I think I accidentally accessed a state of altered consciousness through mushin, in response to feelings of stress and threat, that was very similar to what I experienced when Takuma-sempai and I were attacked. It was your special ability, wasn't it?"

His Ancestor nods again, "You confirmed a long-held theory for me tonight. But what you experienced was not the full depth of my ability...perhaps you might call it a side-effect, a minor manifestation. I'm curious to what degree you're capable of accessing my gifts, now that you're healed."

Just a side-effect? There's more than that? Zero's apprehension twists in his gut.

She must catch the fear brewing in his face, because the Ancestor of the Hunters holds up her palm to halt him before his thoughts can spiral any further into panic. "Be at peace, my beloved child. You will master this. I'm certain of it. You already proved you have the tools. You identified the cause, you harnessed the flow, and you ended the episode without being overwhelmed. You can learn to do it again."

Not entirely free of doubt, Zero asks as he twists his body around to sit cross-legged, "You said you had a theory?"

The Ancestress has a scientist's gleam of enthusiasm as she responds. "Yes. About Hunters and their abilities. You see, I was created in the first generation of Ancestors, when the scientists were still experimenting with our abilities and gifts. As a child, I could perceive things beyond my physical senses - see without my eyes, hear without my ears, and so on. The scientists called it extrasensory perception."

"You're psychic? For real?"

His Ancestor's delighted laughter rings out. "Yes, for real. I was designed to specialize in information gathering, but later purebloods were optimized for pure combat ability. Kaname was the most gifted of the combat type. But I was unique - my gifts were never replicated, and since I had no biological children, they were never passed to the noble rank vampires."

She teases him, cocking her head as she says, "Did you know that Kaname wanted to sacrifice himself in my place?"

Zero's eyes go wide with shock. "No...he definitely didn't mention that!"
"He wouldn't. He doesn't like to admit failure or compassion," she says with a resigned sigh. "But it was for the best I succeeded. I was the only one who could have become the Ancestor of the Hunters."

"I don't understand," Zero says.

The Ancestress meets Zero's gaze. "Zero, have you ever considered why the Hunters can be successful, when they are weak pseudo-vampires who cannot process blood for energy, fighting fully powered vampires who sometimes possess special abilities?"

"Training and anti-vampire weapons," Zero replies with certainty.

"Those are vital factors," the Ancestor agrees. "But I mean on a more pragmatic, individual level. You are essentially humans with a few weak abilities fighting super-powered predators. Even a low-rank vampire is capable of moving so fast the human eye can only register them as a blurred object. That means the human brain cannot process enough pictures per millisecond to produce a clear image. How can a Hunter shoot something they cannot see?"

Zero eyes her, a suspicion starting to form.

As she speaks, the Ancestor gestures in her passion. "You have heard the stories before, haven't you? Of legendary Hunters who could do strange things. Impossible things. Tracking a vampire without a trail. Predicting perfectly how a nest of Es will attack. Detecting an ambush on nothing more than a gut feeling. Sometimes that's simply experience and luck. But you proved tonight that sometimes it isn't - sometimes my descendants could openly access, just for a moment, my extra sense. Hunter's intuition is not just a myth. All Hunters, on some level, are psychic. They can aim at a target their eyes can't track because my ability can see it."

Speechless, Zero drops his head, staring at his hands as he considers the possibility. It lines up frighteningly well with anecdotal evidence, and Zero's own experience. If a Hunter's intuition really is the power of the Ancestor manifesting….

"What do I do now?" Zero asks, still preoccupied by such a staggering reorientation.

"Practice," she says, gathering his hands. "You have a strong foundation in your Hunter training. It's designed to help you access your abilities, and this is only an extension of what you have already mastered. You can do this," his Ancestor tells him, squeezing his hands and smiling in reassurance.

Zero nods his head, mind already racing ahead to plan his training.

"Once you master this level, we might be able to experiment with more advanced levels," she continues, though Zero's mind is elsewhere.

The Ancestor of the Hunters pauses, as though she's listening to something far away. "I'm sorry Zero. I have to go. This is all I have the energy for."

"Do I just repeat what I did last time? Close my eyes and think about waking up?" Zero asks.

She smiles and claps, delighted that Zero remembered. "Exactly!"

"But Zero," the Ancestor says, face growing serious, "my beloved child, the cruel things they said last night at the Court - do not listen to them. Your worth lies in yourself, not what you are or what you can do. And I feel very honored that you continue to count yourself as one of mine."
Zero's heart squeezes the same way it did when she told him she was proud of him. "Thank you, Honored Grandmother. Until we meet again."

A body knocks into Kaname's side, jolting him awake. He tenses, relaxing when his senses tell him Yuuki and Kiryuu are the only beings nearby - then he scents the air, and tenses again, pulling the breath deeper over his palate.

Kaname grins against his pillow. He would know the smell of Yuuki's arousal anywhere.

And there's a faint tinge of something heady, something faintly sweet. Utterly addicting.

Omega.

His alpha uncoils in his chest, with Kaname in complete agreement. Search out the source of that delicious scent, the one that Kaname would seize like a beacon even in a room full of omegas, he's so sensitized to that unique perfume after months of exposure.

Kaname's first sight that evening is Yuuki pinning their half-naked Consort to the bed, furiously kissing him senseless. Kaname can feel the heat building between them from all the way over here, and it inflames his jealousy.

_Naughty alpha-mate! _scolds the alpha. _She started without us!_

Kaname chuckles, winding an arm around Yuuki's waist and pulling her back.

"Give our poor Consort a chance to breathe," he reminds her. "He'll need it when we play with him together."

Yuuki barely listens, attention entirely stolen by Kiryuu's breathless gasps. "Not my fault! Zero woke me up with a kiss. A really good kiss. I don't mind getting out of bed if it's for Zero's kisses," she protests.

"Oh?" Kaname says, narrowing his eyes at the silver-haired man lying against their pillows wearing just a pair of black sleep pants making a lovely contrast against his white skin.

Kiryuu looks innocently back up at Kaname with those lilac eyes, unknowingly seductive.

A suspicion takes root in Kaname's mind. Kiryuu never initiates. When they collected him from the Court last night, the Hunter was exhausted, and went straight to bed after some pampering and coddling. Did something happen at the Court?

"And what are you up to, my sweet boy?" Kaname asks, teasing with an edge of seriousness.

Kiryuu glares mutinously.

That glare is quickly broken when Yuuki pulls her nightgown over her head, leaving her in slightly boyish cotton underwear.

It's always so gratifying, the way Kiryuu looks at their wife. Part of it's never intimately knowing a woman's body before, but the rest is just because Yuuki is Yuuki, and Kiryuu loves her more than anything.

"A little innocent lamb should know better than to tease the wolves," Kaname muses. "Why is the little lamb being so bold, hmm?" He tickles a finger down their Consort's ribs and thin sides.
There's the angry kitten face Kaname was hoping for. "No reason. Now, are you going to make out with me, or should I go back to sleep?"

Kaname's alpha growls. Cheeky omega! We'll show him!

If Kiryuu wants to play, Kaname will show their omega how it's done. The pureblood spots a prime target - a lovely open spot on Kiryuu's neck that's begging for an alpha's mark. Kaname leans down to oblige, pressing his lips in a kiss against soft, thin skin, then ruthlessly licking and sucking until a lovely dark bruise forms.

Kiryuu's swift vampire healing has only one drawback - it erases his alpha's marks soon after Kaname and Yuuki litter his body with them. Difficult to show off one's claim like this, but Kaname is nothing if not dedicated.

"You can squeeze, if you want," Yuuki says, sounding deeply aroused and fascinated at once.

Kaname's head snaps up, feeling the blood go rushing to his cock.

Yuuki is guiding their Consort to cup her breast in his inexperienced, tentative hand, urging his fingers closed around her flesh, a perfect handful topped by a rose-colored nipple.

Kiryuu is flushed, embarrassment and arousal mixing in a potent cocktail as he absorbs the weight and heft, the feeling of touching warm, satiny skin.

Obedient, still watching Yuuki for permission, Kiryuu squeezes lightly - Yuuki moans, eyes fixed on their omega's unsure, blushing face.

Kiryuu startles, and Yuuki pushes him down by the shoulder, eagerness overwhelming her as she strokes and kisses every part she can reach.

Kaname's own arousal heats, and he blankets their Consort's body on the other side, a solid weight bearing down on him, hip to hip with Yuuki and fighting for territory.

Kiryuu can only lie there and make quiet noises, eyes wide and shocked, betraying his purity with every motion.

Kaname hadn't expected to find Kiryuu's virginity so arousing. But it's all he can think of. Every time he touches the boy's body, Kaname searches greedily for the tiniest sign. Fantasies of despoiling him haunt his thoughts. The Hunter belongs to them, utterly, completely, down to the last part of him.

"You can - you can touch my chest," their sweet virgin gasps, and Kaname's mind blanks, going hot and frenzied.

Zero's always so quiet. Yuuki's learned to read the rhythm of his breaths instead, and way it hitches when she plays with his nipple tells her she's doing very, very well.

Every time Yuuki tweaks Zero's little pink bud, he shudders beautifully, his whole frame going taut and his mouth gaping open the slightest bit. His chest is softer now that his breasts are meant for nursing - slightly swollen, a subtle swell of pillowy white. Yuuki loves the way it feels under her hands, yielding and warm, with those wide pink nipples as a special treat.

Yuuki is 100% sure she's harder than she's ever been in her life. It's painful, how much she wants it. Everything is skin sliding past skin; they're all down to their underwear, the Kurans teaming up
to torment poor Zero's tender, sensitive chest.

And best of all, Zero feels that same desperation - Yuuki can see the shape of him through his shorts.

And there's a lush smell in the air, tickling the inside of Yuuki's nose that makes her alpha go crazy, throwing itself against her control. She doesn't recognize the scent until Zero squeezes his thighs together as Kaname licks the areola he's claimed, breathing raggedly.

"Zero?" Yuuki groans, her voice going husky. "Are you wet?"

Zero jerks, startled, as though he didn't realize it.

Of course not, Yuuki's rational brain supplies. Zero's never been in bed with anyone but them.

Yuuki's not listening to her brain - she's got her head bent down, worshiping Zero's chest and the nipples that are going to nurse their babies, overwhelmed by lust and instinct. Mate needed to be wet so they could mount him, after all!

And Zero is glassy-eyed, shaking, barely able to breathe as Yuuki and Kaname attack him in turns, kissed and caressed and licked their mate into incoherence.

Things are reaching the point where Yuuki and Kaname need to pull back, let Zero calm down, and leave to take care of their own arousal, when their Consort chokes out, "Don't go! I want - want...something else."

"What else, little Hunter?" Kaname asks, nibbling Zero's neck.

Zero throws his head back, eyes rolling as he struggles past the sensual haze. "I don't..I don't know. More."

Yuuki swallows as her belly clenches and her cock throbs. "What's okay, Zero? Should we touch you more?"

"No!" he rejects, unease burning through the heat, until Kaname shushes him and soothes him with a deep kiss.

Yuuki considers this; thinking around a hard-on is slow going. "Do you want to touch us?"

"Maybe," Zero groans, twisting in their bed.

"Take off our clothes?" she tries.

"No," he says again with trepidation.

"Then what does our Consort want?" Kaname croons.

"I don't know," Zero says, sounding frustrated. "You're my alphas. I want...I want to satisfy you."

Yuuki feels her cock jump when Zero calls them his alphas. Panting, she leans over Zero's body, resting her head against his shoulder, itchy with pent up lust.

Kaname finds the answer. "You want to make us orgasm, without taking off our clothes or touching you any more than we are now?"

"Mmmm," Zero says, squeezing his thighs together.
Kaname lowers his head to Zero's ear. "Would you like it if I worked myself against your thigh until I came, Zero?"

Yuuki nearly blacks out with the force of her arousal.

Zero quivers. "Okay." His voice sounds very small.

It makes Yuuki's heart crumple with tenderness, counterpart to the raging heat below her navel.

"Tell me if you get uncomfortable and I'll stop," she whispers with the last of her restraint.

Then Yuuki's doing it - sliding herself in her underwear along the outside of Zero's clothed thigh. A dream, she thinks dizzily. This must be a dream. Her panties are wet enough with her fluids that she can grind against Zero's silken white thigh with almost no effort. It's so good.

"You're my alphas," Zero says fiercely, out of nowhere.

He curls a hand around the back of Yuuki's neck, and the other around Kaname's shoulders, his body shaking as they grind against his thighs. He's clearer-headed now that they're not assaulting his weak points. "You wouldn't - I won't let you into anyone else's bed."

"No," Yuuki gasps, "I promised. Only want you two. Zero! Just you." Her rhythm picks up - she's trying to draw it out, but she can't help herself. She buries her nose in Zero's throat, licks his skin until he's all she can smell and taste.

"Zero, Zero," - Yuuki's almost sobbing, the quick hard thrusts warning her she won't last long.

"Why would I want another when I have my virgins?" Kaname growls. "My sweet boy and my dear girl..." From the brokenness of her husband's voice, it won't be long for him either.

Zero's watching her face now, fascinated and not unaffected himself.

That does it - Yuuki looks Zero in the eyes and comes, flooding her panties with the evidence of her desire for him.

Dimly, she feels Kaname's body lock up beside her in a mirroring orgasm, but she's riding out the aftershocks. Her cock blurs another string of come at the memory of Zero's face, and the realization that she just came against his thigh. He might even be able to feel her semen seeping through the fabric.

"It was good?" Zero asks nervously, stroking Yuuki's back tenderly where she's collapsed against his side in a sex-fueled stupor.

She feels her cheeks flush immediately, bashful now that she's not so desperate.

"Better than anything," she tells him honestly. "You're okay? We didn't go to fast?"

Zero matches her incandescent blush. "No, I'm fine. I like - like seeing you enjoy yourself."

"Do you want anything from us?" Kaname asks, his head propped up on his fist like a lazy tiger.

Zero shakes his head. "No, it's enough for me to know you're satisfied."

"For now," Kaname rumbles, giving the two of them a heavy-lidded look.

Then his cellphone rings.
Kaname curses under his breath, leaning over the side of the bed to scoop up his phone. He looks at the display, and his face darkens, before he accepts the call and puts the phone to his ear.

Zero and Yuuki make themselves comfortable, cuddling together affectionately as their bodies cool.

They don't stay relaxed for long, as Kaname's face grows grim and stormy.

"I see," he says, "I'll coordinate. Do what you can; I'll speak to you soon."

"What is it, Kaname?" asks Yuuki, concerned by the display as Kaname puts down his phone.

"That was Seiren. Aido has gone missing."

Chapter End Notes

*cackles*

I hope the 'Kaname and Yuuki find out Zero is a virgin' scene was as epic as it deserved. I'd been foreshadowing and hinting at it for quite a while now.

A proving ground is a military installation where military tactics, weapons, or other military technologies are tested.

See you all next time!
Thanks for your support everyone, I love hearing from you! Please enjoy the new chapter.

Mayb: I realize that in the manga, Seiren is a Level D, but it was never mentioned in the anime so I assumed that she was another noble. Since the rest of the Night Class never treat her any different from them, the way you would expect if she was a Level D, and Seiren has impressive skills in memory erasing and other spells, I think it makes more sense for her to be a noble, or at least a Level C.

Anyone who knows Zero realizes that the rumors of him being promiscuous and having many lovers are completely false. Kaname and Yuuki don't buy them for a second. But Zero is also a fifty plus year old man. Would your basic assumption be that a man over fifty is a virgin? No, most people would assume the opposite, unless they had evidence. And as Kaname's POV shows, vampire culture also doesn't prize virginity and encourages casual sex for pleasure. So they have even more reason to assume the opposite.

You and I can see Zero's state of mind from the inside. We know Zero's circumstances better than anyone. But Zero hides all that from the people in his life. He doesn't talk much, and certainly not about himself. Yagari or Kaito may have figured out he's never had sex, because they've known him the longest, but Zero's tried to hide his pain and unhealthy habits from them too, so they may not know how deep the problem goes. But Hunters and vampires don't communicate, so the two sides aren't sharing notes. That information isn't being passed on. If Kaname noticed Zero acting virginal, he could easily believe it's because of Zero's scary changes as an omega, and inexperience in the 'woman's role'.

Ester Shadow: The rumors that Zero was a whore were mostly prejudice and lack of communication. Among the vampires, Zero's status as a Level D earns him a lot of scorn, plus he's one of their best Hunters. So they already don't like him, and rumors that Zero slept with a bunch of Hunters plays into their ideas of what someone like him should be. So the rumor appeals to them, and it gets believed and spread. And the Hunters and the vampires don't exchange information, so it's not like the Hunters are telling them they're wrong. Conversely, among the Hunters the rumors aren't strong at all, because quite a few of them have worked with Zero in the past and know he's not that kind of guy. But Hunters aren't really familiar with omegas, and their ideas about omegas are pretty much 'will sleep with anyone' so there's a bit of a question if Zero's changed now.

Please reread the story warnings for this chapter; there's a brief moment that deserves a mention.
Within the hour, Zero and the Kurans are on a plane to Europe.

Kuran's tastes being what they are, their ride is a private plane owned by the Kuran family, all gleaming interiors and real leather upholstery. No waiting in line or rows of squashed commercial seating for a pureblood. Kuran's plane has a comfortable sitting area inside, like someone transplanted one of Rosehill's drawing rooms into the belly of a plane. Decadent as it is, Zero's grudgingly appreciates the ability to lay flat as he naps, trying to avert jet lag (Purebloods, Kuran informs him, don't suffer bodily disruption from changing time zones. Damn leeches).

The Kurans and Zero aren't the only ones on the plane. Souen and Kain met them at the airport, clutching three suitcases - "One for Aido", Souen insisted. Zero had gotten the impression they'd hang onto the outside of the plane by their fingernails if Kuran refused them passage. Luckily for the nobles, Kuran didn't even blink, betraying his complete lack of surprise as he casually informed them he'd already arranged accommodations for six.

Despite Kuran's usual cool, unruffled air, Zero can detect a hint of concern for his subordinate underlying the mask. The pureblood really is concerned for Aido, one of the few long-time, deeply trusted members of his inner circle. If Zero dared, he might say Kuran is even worried. Yuuki is openly anxious; Aido is her friend and tutor, and she's known him for nearly forty years by now.

Zero decides he can't be the only one sitting around doing nothing, and calls a few Hunter acquaintances he knows from the operation targeting Shirabuki's feeder trafficking ring, asking them to see if anybody's heard anything in the last day.

The plane, it turns out, is for the rest of them, not Kuran. Kuran discusses the current situation and search strategies with Yuuki, the nobles, and Seiren on a conference call for about an hour. Then Kuran steps into a side compartment, opens a window, transforms himself into a stream of bats, and flies ahead to survey the situation. Yuuki watches her husband leave with wistfulness - she hasn't had enough practice to travel such a vast distance yet.

Due to the time difference, they arrive in the middle of the night. They're met on the tarmac by a pair of discreet black sedans, who whisk them away to a townhouse nearby, one of Kuran's properties he keeps for just this sort of emergency.

The house has been recently cleaned and stocked, but the faintly stale air, without having enough time to circulate as the house was aired out, shows what a rush the whole affair was, however composed on the surface. Without any servants, Zero cooks the five of them dinner once Kuran returns in bat form through an open window, with nothing but information to show for his efforts.

Kain and Souen are gratifyingly surprised by Zero's culinary skills, but even good food isn't enough to alleviate the worry from their brows. The atmosphere remains gloomy.

"Our window of opportunity is short," Kuran tells them. "Seiren timed their investigation while Shirabuki would be in North America for three nights. Aido is one of my inner circle. Shirabuki would love to get her hands on him, both for his value to me and for the information she would gain. Aido knows he must not give his name if he's captured, so hopefully the news won't reach her before we can locate and rescue him."

If he's still alive, but no one points out the omission.

"Seiren has uncovered Aido's last known location - one of Shirabuki's high security facilities, an industrial factory of some sort. Our problem," Kuran says, elegant even as he scoops a forkful of stir fry, "is that we're having difficulty determining if Aido has been moved or not."
"The property is extensive, and heavily guarded. Seiren can't get close enough to sense Aido without alerting the guards, which might endanger Aido's life. Nor can Yuuki or I - our abilities are sufficient, but our pureblood auras are too noticeable, and would alert Shirabuki to the fact she has something I want. That would give her leverage over me, and an interest in Aido. His life is far safer if he can avoid drawing her interest. Shirabuki likes to play games," he finishes grimly.

Zero lifts his eyes from his plate. "I could do it."

The vampires stare at him with varying degrees of skepticism and calculation - or worry, in Yuuki's case.

"I'm a Hunter," Zero reminds them. "Our lives depend on our ability to find targets before they find us. Sensing vampires is the one thing a Hunter can do better than an actual vampire, and we're bred so our auras are difficult to detect. Get me to the boundary, and I can tell you if Aido's there."

Kuran steeples his fingers, a crease forming between his eyes. Yuuki is more straightforward. "That's too dangerous, Zero!"

"Not any more dangerous than my part-time job," he reminds her, sitting up straighter.

Yuuki presses her lips together. "I don't like it. If what Kaname says is true, then we couldn't even be there to protect you."

"Luckily, I brought some options," Zero says, reaching into his long, wide sleeves. He places each object he's hidden inside on the table with a heavy thunk and a flourish.

Souen and Kain stare at Bloody Rose and Artemis Rod like Zero's set loose a pair of poisonous snakes on the dining room table, uneasy at the sight of such familiar and notorious anti-vampire weapons.

Kuran has a look of consideration in his eyes, though the rest of his face is impassive.

Sensing his chance, Zero addresses his next words to the pureblood seated at the head of the table. Kuran wants Aido back, or he wouldn't have dropped everything and headed to Europe. "I haven't been in the field in months, it's true. But my hands are steady and I've kept up my shooting practice. If something happens, I won't miss."

"Do you have a plan in mind?" Kuran asks, expression still shuttered.

Zero inclines his head. "I've packed suitable clothing, and I'll change after dinner. You'll take me tonight to the place Seiren found. Have your Shadow meet us there. She'll lead me to the edge of their perimeter, I'll search for Aido's presence, and then she'll escort me back to where you'll be waiting. In and out, done."

Kuran is silent.

Zero decides to push just a little more. "The more time you waste here, the more dangerous it is for Aido."

As the silence stretches longer, Zero starts to think his appeal has failed.

Finally, the pureblood unlaces his fingers, and let his hands fall to his lap. "You'll take a familiar," Kuran tells him.

Zero would feel triumphant, under better circumstances. Instead, he just nods, and takes his plate
into the kitchen, pausing in the doorway on his way back out. "Yuuki and Kain have kitchen duty," he calls. "Souen-san?"

The noblewoman lifts her head in surprise. "Yes?"

"I can't take this dress off by myself. Will you help me until my maids arrive in a day or two with the rest of our luggage?" Zero asks. It's embarrassing to ask, but Souen is a beta female that the Kurans trust, the perfect chaperone and someone who might be permitted to see Zero partially unclothed.

"If Kaname-sama wishes," Souen says, looking with uncertainty to the pureblood at the head of the table for orders.

When Kuran doesn't disagree (Yuuki looks peeved about something though?), Zero takes that as agreement and leads Souen to his room.

Anticipating the necessity, Zero packed his outfit at the top of his suitcase - a set of his Hunter clothes in a dark camouflage pattern. All Zero needs is help undoing the many hooks and buttons imprisoning him in the clothing of his female human persona.

Souen was a good choice; she moves confidently and quickly, her deft fingers making short work of the dress. Soon, Zero is stepping out of the fabric pooled at his feet, modesty preserved by his underclothes. He thinks again how grateful he is for the fact an omega is required to hide their body - no one can see him and he doesn't have to look at himself.

"Do you need anything further, Kiryuu-sama?" Ruka asks. She's become more comfortable over the last month when she addresses him by his new title, though there's still hesitation and strangeness between them.

"Thank you, I'm fine," Zero replies, bending over his suitcase to collect his change of clothes.

Souen steps toward the doorway, then stops, turning back to Zero.

Zero raises an eyebrow in question, mind occupied by laying out the last few details of his plan.

Her face twists with indecision. Hesitantly, Souen tells him in a quiet voice, "My cousin's gotten in trouble before, but this time I'm worried he's gotten in more trouble than he can handle. So...Thank you for helping Hanabusa."

Zero blinks in shock, his coat half-unfolded in his hands.

Then, before Zero can come up with a reply, Souen whirls and rushes out in a swirl of skirts.

"You're welcome?" he says to empty air.

---

Zero crouches next to Seiren at the treeline, hidden from discovery by underbrush and shadows. Kuran's Shadow is perfectly patient and still, keeping a lookout for any watchers as Zero observes their target. Above them, Kuran's crow is perched in the branches, motionless except for the blinking of its eyes.

Full credit to whoever designed this place against infiltration - Shirabuki's facility would be almost impossible to sneak inside. There is nothing taller than Zero's thumb between here and the high chain link fencing, anchored by guard towers, that encircles the facility - a distance of over a hundred meters. Then there's another fifty meters from the fence to the buildings themselves. This
space is just as empty, and swept periodically by searchlights. It almost reminds Zero of a prison, though according to Kuran it's a factory of some kind. What are they manufacturing that needs such stringent security?

Well, that's for Kuran to figure out. Zero's just here to search for Aido. He breathes out, shifting his weight into a more comfortable position, then reaches for mushin. It slips out of his hands, trepidation and fear of losing control weakening his resolve.

Zero grits his teeth. *Mushin* requires concentration and intention. He hasn't dared test the technique since his weird mind-bending episode. With doubt in his heart, Zero won't be able to grasp it.

Closing his eyes, the Hunter bows his head. Aido's life is in danger, and Kuran needs to know if he needs to storm this place or cross it off his list. They don't have time for Zero's fear. Hardening his will, Zero reaches again, and this time *mushin* settles over him like a cloak.

Nothing overwhelms his mind - his senses sharpen, but stay stable and within the limits of Hunter powers. Zero's shoulders lose some of their tension, and he lets out a long, slow breath, posture slumping.

Holding *mushin* and examining his own experience so minutely, Zero can't fail to recognize how the quality has changed. Mushin feels...deeper? Larger? Less like a pond, and more like swimming at the surface of an ocean, Zero decides, with currents and tides tugging and pulling at you, no boundaries to either side. There are layers beneath him. He can reach those shadowy places, if he wanted. All Zero would need to do is swim down.

His stomach clenches. That's too precarious a drop.

Zero concentrates on staying near the surface, without being pulled deeper, and gingerly reaches out toward Shirabuki's factory. His Hunter senses obey his direction, however unsteady Zero's commands, and he finds the C Rank vampire guards manning the watchtowers with ease.

Pushing further, Zero tries to correct his balance and firm his control, but he only slides deeper into *mushin*, toward that strange extra sense. Backpeddling towards steady ground, Zero allows himself a moment to pause before he resumes the struggle.

Beside his body, Seiren says nothing about the delay, but her head swivels constantly to watch their surroundings, on alert against ambush.

Perhaps fighting is the wrong reaction. Extending his senses again, this time Zero doesn't struggle against the creeping descent, allowing whatever stray impressions and sensations it sends to strike him. Gentle, light movements, he cautions himself - you don't fight the water, you let your body float with the flow.

There, that's the right method, Zero realizes, as he smoothly extends his Hunter senses, not even straining from the distance. Many more vampire auras are inside the buildings, still mainly C Rank, with eight B Rank individuals mixed in. Honing in on the nobles, Zero examines them one by one, searching for the single familiar aura he wants to find.

Seiren's attention snaps to Zero as he opens his eyes, shaking his head. "He's not here. I can tell Aido was here, but not for a while."

A dead end. The muscles in Seiren's impassive face tighten for an instant, before smoothing out again. Kuran's shadow taps Zero's elbow, and the pair begin picking their way back to Kuran for extraction.
Kaname doesn't raise his eyes from the orders he's writing to one of his spies, ignoring his Consort standing behind him, reading over his shoulder.

Don't ignore mate, reprimands the alpha. Mate is good and beautiful. We like looking at him. If we ignore him, he will go away. Make mate stay!

Kaname ignores the alpha instincts. "Was there something you needed?" the pureblood says when he's finished writing, folding and sealing the paper in a practiced motion.

Kiryuu crosses his arms in Kaname's peripheral vision. "I put out a request for information through the Hunter networks, and got a hit. Somebody thinks they saw something, and they're willing to talk to us, unofficially. I need you to take me to the meeting location."

See? Mate is helping! boasts the alpha.

Kaname contemplates the request as he unfolds a new sheet of paper and begins his next missive.

Since Kiryuu and Seiren confirmed the previous night that Aido has been moved from his last known location, all Kaname's attempts to track his lieutenant have failed. He has bent his entire information network - human and vampire - to this single task, and every promising clue has turned up fruitless. It's as though Aido disappeared into thin air, and Kaname is running out of time and leads.

Kiryuu waits patiently as Kaname finishes his letter, the scratch of his pen the only sound in the hushed atmosphere of their temporary residence.

It's times like these Kaname appreciates the limits of a pureblood body. Three days without sleep is nothing - Kaname hasn't lost a moment and his effectiveness doesn't slip. He can write as many of these as he needs until he finds the single clam with a pearl inside.

The pureblood puts down his pen, and seals the letter. "Alright," Kaname allows as he places it in the tray for outgoing correspondence, "I will escort you."

Perhaps the Hunters will have something new; Kaname cannot afford to overlook the smallest detail when it might yield answers. "Where is the location?"

Kiryuu's address brings them to a hotel, clean but aged and sagging at the edges, full of worn carpets and wallpaper a few decades out of fashion. Hunters always pick cheap accommodation, Kaname observes with disdain, remembering the first hotel Kiryuu and Nightshade stayed in.

"You'll need to stay here," Kiryuu says in the lobby. "A Hunter won't be comfortable with a pureblood listening in, and they asked to stay anonymous."

"Fine," Kaname agrees, ignoring the alpha's protests, and finds the least-stained chair in the waiting area for a seat.

Kiryuu's eyes narrow suspiciously at Kaname's easy agreement, but he shrugs, turns away and walks off, seemingly putting the pureblood's atypical behavior out of mind.

The moment Kiryuu is out of sight, Kaname opens his hand. Out flies a familiar shaped into a bat, formed from the tiniest wisp of power. Kaname’s mouth curves, and he sends the small animal fluttering after Kiryuu's retreating back, careful to stay high and just within spotting distance. Call it paranoia at Aido's disappearance, but Kaname isn't taking any chances by letting something he possesses leave his vision.
Kaname's bat almost loses its target when Kiryuu ducks into an elevator, but Kaname finds a laundry chute in the nick of time, and the bat peeks out into each floor until it spots the tail of Kiryuu's cream-colored Hunter coat disappearing around a turn. Squeaking once in victory, it hauls itself out on its little wing claws, and flaps after its target.

Kiryuu stops in front of a hotel room door - Kaname hides his familiar in an ornamental light fixture with a burned out bulb, peeking over the rim to spy. His Consort knocks, and when the door opens, Kaname experiences an unpleasant moment of deja vu.

Kaname knows that man - the thick, twisted scar marring his cheek is hard to forget. He was another Hunter assigned to the mission where Kiryuu received the injury to his side, the one Kiryuu was too starved to heal.

Without understanding why, Kaname stands up, and catches the elevator that's about to close, pressing the button for the fifth floor.

Kiryuu was surprised to see the scar-faced Hunter too, though only someone who knew him well would catch the flinch in his expression. Clearly Kiryuu remembers how this man spent the whole mission insulting him and treating him with contempt. The scar-faced Hunter hadn't even been grateful when Kiryuu injured himself saving his life.

The two Hunters exchange small talk, before scarface invites Kiryuu inside. The bat's ears perk up and swivel, but when the door closes it can feel the anti-vampire wards springing up around the room, muffling all the sounds inside and hiding the Hunters' auras.

Kaname frowns. Hunter wards to keep an off-the-books meeting private aren't unreasonable, but he has a sense of misgiving nonetheless. The pureblood reaches out to his bat familiar, taking deeper control, and glides down to the crack between the door and the carpeted floor. The deeply worn fabric and a slight warping of the doorframe has left a gap just large enough for his tiny familiar to wedge its head into, if it squirms and wiggles.

The door suddenly shakes, like something heavy was thrown into it, and Kaname's bat squeezes its nose through the warded barrier, almost brushing the heel of Kiryuu's shoe.

"Feel that? Not so strong when you're trapped by taming spells, are you bitch?" boasts the scar-faced Hunter.

The alpha snarls, and Kaname's brows draw together as the other passenger gets off at the second floor, leaving him the elevator's sole occupant. Kaname holds down the button to close the sliding door. He's in a human area, likely under video surveillance. Kiryuu is in trouble, but it sounds like the scar-faced Hunter wants to brag, and that gives Kaname time.

The door shakes again above his familiar's head. Kiryuu's voice sounds breathless, like he's speaking with little air. "What are you doing this for?"

"You stupid whore, don't play dumb with me!" The door shakes again, and his Consort grunts like he's been hit.

Kaname frowns. The alpha snarls again, longer and deeper.

"Think you're better than me, do you? You're just Cross' favorite. I don't need your help!" scar face shouts, and Kiryuu grunts again.

Third floor - two more to go. Kaname begins to pace back and forth along the doors.
"I always thought you were just a faggot, waiting for a real man to teach you right, but you were really a bitch all along, just like the rest of them. And I'll teach you your place right now," scarface leers, his tone suggesting his disgusting desires.

"I bet those leeches taught you how to spread your legs and treat a man like he deserves. I can't wait to use your bitch hole, but first I want to shut your chatty mouth. Down on your knees, slut."

Kaname roars, his mind blanking red as his alpha instincts take over, sensing the threat, howling and thrashing in the back of his mind. His beautiful mate is in danger, being threatened by a disgusting human! He must go protect mate now!

The elevator pings.

Kaname tears the doors open so violently he leaves handprints in the steel. He's reached the flimsy wooden door blocking his way to his mate before the time it takes his heart to beat, rage bleeding into every pore. The pureblood tears the door clean off its hinges, roaring again, his eyes glowing scarlet and his fangs bared.

The scar-faced Hunter jerks his head up, stumbling back in shock and falling to the floor. Kaname is savagely glad to see the terror in this filth's eyes, and how his mouth gapes open, cowardly in the face of greater strength.

The pureblood lashes out with his power, tearing through the paper-thin wards binding his omega's powers, and his sweet mate staggers backwards, keeping his gaze locked on the scar-faced Hunter. "I was fine, Kuran, his wards didn't restrict my Hunter powers -"

Mate gasps when Kaname seizes him, clutching him against Kaname's chest so nothing can take his mate away. The warm, tangible body in his arms reassures the alpha, and he squeezes as tightly as he can without hurting mate.

But the threat is still here, right in front of him, and Kaname snarls as he prepares to rip the scar faced Hunter's body apart with his power.

"Wait, wait, Kuran, you can't - he's a Hunter!" Mate twists and struggles in his arms; Kaname rumbles, confused. Mate wants to leave him?

"I'm okay, he didn't do anything yet!" his omega shouts. "Kaname, you can't kill a Hunter for this, you'll be charged with his murder!"

Mate squirms until he's face to face with Kaname, shivering for some reason when he sees the pureblood's face. "You're not in there, are you? Okay, let's try this…"

Mate's eyes go big and wide, and he rubs his cheek against Kaname's chest. "Alpha, take me somewhere safe, please? I don't want to stay here."

Kaname rumbles, happy that mate is calling to him so trustingly. But there's still a nasty rat to crush before he can leave, a rat that dirtied his mate. It will only take a moment to tear it into tiny, bloody pieces. Kaname tries to lean past his omega to look at the cringing filth on the floor.

But his mate blocks his vision, rising up on his toes and thrusting himself in Kaname's space. His voice is urgent, full of stress. "Kaname, no! Look at me! Focus on me!"

Mate is frightened and upset; Kaname abandons his goal, trying to soothe his omega with nuzzles and soft caresses. He snuffles at silver hair; mate smells so good, so delicious.
"That's right, that's good Kaname," mate tells him, rubbing his arm. "Now will you take me somewhere safe, and stay with me until you feel better?"

Kaname shoots one last hateful, poisonous glance at the scar-faced Hunter, but hoists his mate into his arms, hiding his sweet omega's body behind his own.

Safe, mate wants to be safe, so Kaname takes them to their temporary den. Alpha-mate is gone, but Kaname hides their omega away in their bed, so mate can smell her on the sheets and feel more secure. Piling pillows and curling his body around his omega, Kaname creates an unbreakable barrier between the outside world and his mate.

Mate strokes his body and tells him he's doing well; Kaname purrs and buries mate deeper under pillows and covers and his own body.

Time blurs underneath the satiated pleasure of instinct, but gradually, Kaname comes back to himself, awakening to a creeping horror in his veins.

The scar-faced Hunter had intended to rape Zero. Kaname's mind cruelly plays the outcomes he's imagined before - the wounds and the hurt and the broken pale body - and his muscles draw tight. The images cycle in an endless loop playing in his head, repeating their terrible contents again and again.

Kiryuu must feel his tension, because he stirs, turning his head to glance over his shoulder.

"Kaname? Are you okay?"

The pureblood's spine pulls tighter. Kiryuu Zero is the most ridiculous person he has ever met. Why is he asking Kaname that question?

Kaname feels keenly his inadequacy, the same feeling that drove him to envy, hate, and fear Zero. He still can't find Aido, and now this. He presses his forehead into the sheets. "I feel like I'm going insane," he admits, those ugly, plausible might-have-beens circling around and around his mind, joining the worry that he might not make it in time, that Aido might already be dead, another person he'll lose because of his own failures.

His Consort hesitates, but reaches out anyway, touching Kaname's shoulder. "What do you need?"

Oh, but that makes everything even worse, Kaname realizes with faint bitterness. "I want to touch you - your bare skin," he orders.

The Hunter doesn't even protest, just shrugs out of his coat and pulls off his shirt, offering himself for the needs of others - for the abuse of others - the same way he always does.

Kaname rolls his Consort's body over with a twist of his shoulders, avoiding looking into Kiryuu's face, and buries his face in the milky skin of his husband's back, unmarred and soft, breathing in the perfume of his skin, satisfying his touch-hunger with the unprotesting flesh of the man beneath him.

This moment now, this warmth and closeness - Kaname could have squandered it all away. Kaname almost wasted everything.

"Turn over," he orders, and Kiryuu does, still with that unprotesting obedience and hint of confusion. Kaname urges Kiryuu to slide higher up the bed, and then to open his thighs with a light touch to the knee; the Hunter flinches, but obeys.
Then Kaname settles himself in between Zero's spread legs, with his head resting on Zero's belly, in the soft hollow that might one day grow with their child. Kaname's whole upper body shields the place that animal tried to plunder.

Anyone seeking Kaname's treasure will have to fight through the black dragon guarding it - after all, the white knight is the prize of his hoard, rarer than diamonds and willingly surrendered to his monstrous claws.

"Can you hear me, child?"

Zero opens his eyes to a tiny meadow under stars. This is the dream place he once met the Ancestor of the Hunters, but tonight there's no one present but himself. Yet Zero heard her voice, he's certain of it. "Honored Grandmother?" he calls.

A ghostly, transparent shape flickers in the spot the Ancestress sat, a soft feathery light like a mirage. "Here, Zero."

Blinking, Zero tries to think of a gentle way to point out her state. "Ah...are you alright, Honored Grandmother? You're a bit...formless"

Her voice laughs. "Yes. It takes time for me to build up enough power to manifest. This is a compromise, since I visited you so recently."

"I didn't expect to meet you this soon. Has something happened?" Zero asks, settling cross-legged on the grass.

"I was watching. Are you alright?" Her voice has the same gentle, reassuring strength as always, however faint her form.

Zero grimaces as he rolls his eyes. He's only just escaped the overprotective purebloods babysitting him - Kuran told Yuuki about what happened when she returned, and she'd flown into such a rage that Zero had barely been able to persuade her not to go looking for the bastard.

Both of them had fussed over Zero for the rest of the evening, driving Zero half-crazy with the weird cuddly alpha thing. They'd taken turns licking his bruises to heal them, and washing his skin clean of any scents before initiating a tenacious marking session. Zero hadn't even been allowed to leave the bedroom or feed himself, and he suspects he's stuck at the house for the foreseeable future.

"For the last time, I am fine. His wards were top notch, but he didn't even take my weapons!" Really, it was kind of embarrassing. Zero scowls. "And I've already reported him. He'll be taken off active duty and censured by a tribunal for inappropriate conduct, if Master Yagari has his way."

The Ancestress' tone is teasing. "And it wasn't nice at all to be rescued, was it?"

"No!" Zero insists, blushing with horror. She's right; Kuran will never let him live this down when he comes back to his senses. The Hunter groans, burying his face in his hands.

"But Zero," she says, her voice losing its lightness, "you know, it's alright to not be okay. You're allowed to admit if you're afraid. You're not a burden when people worry about you."

He can feel his face close up. He's not lying. Mostly. Everything had been fine when Zero thought the bastard was just going to beat the stuffing out of him. He knew how to deal with that, blindfolded and hands tied behind his back, wards or no wards, out of condition or not. Pain or
dying caused him little concern.

But…

When the bastard had starting saying *those things*, there had been a moment when Zero just froze, a moment when Zero stopped feeling in control of the situation and just felt terror, in this body that still doesn't feel like his own. He's been trying very hard not to remember that moment.

"I'm fine," Zero says again, more firmly.

He gets the impression that the Ancestress would reach out to him if she could.

"Why did you bring me here tonight?" he asks.

Her voice quickens with urgency. "I know your friend Aido is missing. I think I can help find him."

"How?" Zero demands. Had the Hunters really uncovered something after all?

"Not how you think," she says. "This is too soon, and carries too much risk. But I knew you would want to know."

She seems to hesitate, but presses forward. "I told you about my abilities, didn't I? That when I was young, I knew things I couldn't explain through any of the senses recognized by science."

"Yes," Zero says, catching on. "But you said that was a 'minor manifestation'."

The feathery light bobs, like it's nodding. "As I grew older, I learned to extend my perception much further than that. And I think you may be able to do something similar."

"You do?" Zero says, dread tingling under his skin.

"I think I can guide you to access deeper levels of your power - just this once, until you've trained enough to control them on your own. You can use that to search for Aido."

"There's just one problem. I can't control it," Zero reminds her.

"You don't need to. I'll be in the driver's seat, so to speak. I'll provide the knowledge and control, and you'll provide the power and energy. But you should know this carries risks. You'll be forcefully tapping into your powers - that may have side effects."

"Like what?" Zero asks, already guessing he's not going to like the answer.

The feathery light dips lower. "I can only guess. You could blast your mind wide open, rendering you permanently unable to function. You could accelerate the awakening of your powers, leaving you with premature abilities you're not ready to control. Or nothing could happen. I just wanted you to be aware of all possible consequences before you decided."

Zero weighs this. He's extremely reluctant to dig deeper into the power he inherited from the Ancestress, but he *had* controlled his access when he scanned the factory for Aido. The Ancestress will be the one in charge anyway.

And Aido's running out of time.

Blowing out a breath, Zero nods. "Alright, let's try this."
The light of the Ancestress' form pulses. "It's not so simple. You're not a pureblood, Zero. You don't have the same amount of power I did. Your range and energy are limited."

"What do I do then?" Zero says, feeling a little frustrated.

"You need a target. After two days. Aido could be anywhere on the planet. There's no way you can search all that. You need to narrow down the area somehow."

"Alright," Zero says, already focussing on his new goal. "I hope Kuran can come through for us."

There's a dull thunk as Yuuki's head hits the desk. "Nothing again," she groans.

Tracking down all the vehicles that have passed through the area Aido disappeared is getting them nowhere. It's trucks, trucks and more trucks, but none of them have turned up with vampire cargo, and none of the drivers know anything.

Her shoulders slump. Their three days are almost up. Somehow, they have to find Aido before Shirabuki does. But nothing is working! What can Yuuki do to help? She doesn't have spies like Kaname, or Hunter contacts like Zero. All Yuuki can do is help Kaname sift through the threads his spies turn up.

A hand holds out a glass of water. Mindful of her papers, Yuuki takes the water, puts it down, and then reaches blindly sideways to catch Zero's waist and bury her face in the side of his stomach. Some Hunter creep went after him, she's allowed to be clingy, she reminds herself.

"Not going well?" he asks, stroking her hair.

"No," she grunts. "Why do you even need this many trucks?"

"How should I know?" Zero says, being irritatingly logical. "It's in the middle of nowhere. You'd think there wouldn't be that many."

Yuuki hums her agreement. Stupid trucks and their stupid cargo of - she drags her face out of Zero's belly - their stupid cargo of flour.

...wait. This is a wilderness area. Where's the flour coming from?

Struck by a sudden impulse, Yuuki shuffles through the other reports. Concrete mix, fertilizer, more flour, bags of sand - why are trucks dragging this stuff out of a forest?

"What does Shirabuki's factory make?" she asks out loud.

"We don't know," replies Zero, leaning his hip against the back of her chair.

"We don't know because nothing except people has left the factory as long as we've been watching it." Yuuki chews reflectively on the end of a pencil. "Trucks with materials go in. The factory works at all hours. Where does the product go?"

"Storage?" suggests Zero.

Steeping her fingers the same way Kaname does when he's thinking, Yuuki tries to pull her thoughts together. "Aido's not at the factory. But we can't find him, and we can't figure out how he was moved."

Zero waits patiently as Yuuki struggles to put her thoughts into words. "What if he wasn't?"
"Wasn't what?" Zero asks.

"Wasn't taken anywhere. He's not at the factory, but what if there's somewhere else nearby? A second facility."

Zero draws in a quick breath. "That explains the circumstances, but wouldn't we have found it by now?"

Yuuki slumps. "You're right. Seiren searched the area. There isn't anything else. Forget it, it's a stupid idea."

"I'm going to take a nap," Zero tells her, a strange tone in his voice.

"Okay, have a good rest. I love you," she says, already turning back to her task.

Zero tries imagining the meadow, and suddenly he's seated in the familiar dream space, knees cushioned by green grass. "Honored Grandmother! Ancestor of the Hunters!"

Her light is even weaker than before. "Zero? Have you found something?"

He shakes his head up and down in affirmation. "We need to search the factory again."

"But Aido wasn't there," she replies, puzzlement in her tone.

"Yuuki thinks there's a second facility nearby for transport," he says.

The Ancestress' light flickers. "If you're willing to take the risk, then I'm willing to try. You're certain?"

Zero licks his lips, mouth dry. He was over-exaggerating. This is really nothing more than a guess. But with nothing else, even a guess is worth a shot. "Let's try. What do I need to do?"

"Nothing. Just stay very still, and don't fight me. I can't take control against your will, and I don't want anything to go wrong. Your cooperation is vital."

The light draws closer. "Try entering mushin. Even in a dream, you should be able to find it."

Closing his eyes, Zero looks deep inside himself. And just like the Ancestor of the Hunters promised, mushin is waiting for him. He draws it over himself, all the extraneous worries and fears falling away as he sinks deeper. Cushioned by perfect calm, Zero breathes evenly, and holds his mind still.

A touch, like a hand on the back of his neck.

Zero leans into it, perceiving somehow that it means no harm. I'm ready, he thinks. It feels like he's standing at the edge of a diving board, facing backwards. He can't see where he's about to land, but he doesn't need to. Beneath him is a deep darkness. All Zero needs to do is let go.

Breathe in.

Breathe out.

In.

Out. In.
And out.

Zero feels a push, and he bends with the pressure, spine curving back in a perfect arc. His feet leave the ground with a sense of weightlessness, and he's falling, falling - he hits, but without feeling a shock. It's like something heavy is peeling away, left behind at the surface, but Zero is diving deeper, deeper, down down down.

Where? Who knows? His guide is the steady pressure in the back of his mind, sure and unshakable.

Deeper, deeper, down into the depths - and then the world crumples inward, and they fly.

He thinks he tries to cry out. This isn't seeing or feeling or hearing. This is something new, all of them at once, something that leaves Zero over-sensitive and reeling, overwhelmed by the bombardment of stimuli.

He almost panics, but the hand on the back of his neck squeezes, lending him a point of focus.

Zero tries to breathe. Zero has no body, he realizes, and almost panics again. Did something go wrong? Is he dead, has he lost his body? Blood and ash, he's a floating invisible consciousness!

Zero feels dizzy suddenly, like the world is dissolving.

The hand on his neck squeezes insistently.

Slowly, Zero calms, repressing the fear, reminding himself of his purpose and how the Ancestress is wasting her energy every moment he can't get his head on straight. His panic just now almost destroyed their rapport.

Though he has no way of communicating, somehow she knows when Zero's back on mostly-even footing. Zero's view begins to change, whipping along above a forest canopy - well, they're moving, but Zero doesn't have anything physical to move? How does this even work?

The sensation of being like this - Zero's mind can't quite grasp it, it's so out of alignment in some indefinable way with his normal awareness. He struggles to name it, before giving up and settling on 'the moment when you wake up in a storm, and for an instant, you don't know if you're asleep or awake.'

The Ancestor of the Hunters brought them right near Shirabuki's factory, Zero realizes when he sees the fence. 'He' passes right through the fence like it isn't there - like he isn't there - moving across the empty yard in an instant. They halt right above the largest building, and Zero waits for instructions.

The pressure in the back of his mind becomes encouraging. Look, it seems to say. Reach out. Open your mind. What do you See?

Zero has no body he can center himself in, just his naked mind and his uncertain heart. To bare himself in such a way seems recklessly dangerous. He crouches down behind his mental walls, unable to push himself further. All of this is too much. He's not a vampire, and he doesn't want more power that makes him even less human. His mind is the last place Zero has left.

On the back of his neck, the hand is still gentle, not pushing him to reconsider his refusal. We could go back, Zero understands. He doesn't have to do any of this.

But he does. All Zero's fear and reluctance is disguising how incredible this is. His body is
kilometers away, yet he can sense the people walking below him as though he were standing here in the flesh. There are so many ways his extra sense could make Hunts safer and quicker. Zero may not want this gift, but he can use it the same way he used his vampirism. No matter how it came to him, he'll take this ability and make the best of it.

His heart settles and his mind empties as Zero gathers himself. This is the gift of the Ancestor of the Hunters, his Honored Grandmother. He need not fear - she is holding his hand, walking by his side. She has never abandoned him, and she's still helping him now.

Reaching out, Zero surrenders.

If he still had breath, Zero would scream. But the Ancestress is there, channelling the deluge, sorting and discarding just as rapidly. All Zero has to do it endure the flow, just a little more, just a little longer...

A blink - they've jumped, and the Ancestress has brought them above the trees again, but the flow is being choked, and his awareness dives down, past the leaves and the branches and the trees, passing into the earth. The darkness and crushing weight of rock are not things that can touch him when his mind is untethered and roaming free. So Zero curiously watches the layers of earth move past, and then they break into empty space.

The hand on the back of his neck strokes once, and the world becomes narrow again, all that impossible awareness shrinking back down to a dull sense of nearby things.

They've found a tall concrete passageway with shallow water rippling at the bottom, some kind of repurposed water supply tunnel. It looks old; maybe even as old as the Cataclysm, when they built great technological marvels that modern humans still can't replicate. For all its age, someone has been in the tunnel recently; there are new rails built on raised pylons above the water and artificial lights brightening the gloom.

You don't have to move linearly when it's just minds and wills. You just let your vision blur around the edges, blink once or twice, and then Zero can see a brighter light, a faint dot at the end of the tunnel. It feels like they've gone kilometers, all in the tenth of a second, an eyelash. It's so queer; Zero suspects the Ancestress was making allowances for his inexperience earlier.

Ahead, Zero senses people, vampire and human, many of them, their pulse of their auras and the sound waves of their hearts beating, their digestive systems churning away, their lungs breathing. The thermal heat of engines. The empty echos through soil of caverns and underground chambers. This is Yuuki's shipping facility, he realizes.

They pass many doors, until they peer out the tunnel exit into a warehouse. Ghosting through doors and walls until they find daylight, they leave the innocuous storage building and find a single-lane dirt road circling around a blue water lake. The Ancestress takes them high so Zero can survey the terrain, locking the landmarks into his memory. Then they blink back to the warehouse room with the tunnel entrance. The door's not open any longer, cleverly disguised behind a false wall. Zero retraces the route back out, until he's committed that to memory as well.

This information is valuable, but the most important question hasn't been answered yet. Is Aido here? They phase through the hidden door, sinking back down into the tunnel system. If Aido is being kept here, then below ground is the most likely place.

Zero's consciousness comes to rest in a busy central room; the guards and workers pass right beside him and through him, hefting sacks and crates. They don't seem to feel a thing. Zero doesn't either, like he's just imagining his presence here.
Another squeeze on the back of his neck; Zero understands, and reaches out again.

The Hunter still wants to scream, but the flood is the tiniest amount less overwhelming. It's like he can feel everything, all at once, without stopping.

The Ancestress cuts the flow, and darts away into one of the nearby tunnels, moving slowly enough that Zero can mark their route. He feels hope rise in his breast. Does this mean…?

Rooms and rooms piled full of the sacks Zero saw the workers moving earlier, but nothing else, until finally they reach a metal door with a brand new digital locking system. The aura shining behind the door is unmistakably B Class, even if Zero didn't recognize it for its familiarity.

He's found Aido - alive.

A door can't stop him, bodiless as his consciousness currently is. The cell is dark, but Zero's moved beyond the need for sight. Aido is crumpled in a corner, filthy and bloodied. Zero perceives the wounds, and the bleeding under his skin. Evidence of torture, he thinks with disgust. But vampires are tough, and Aido has the purity of his noble blood keeping him in good shape. Though that won't last forever, if they keep hurting him.

Zero knows his time is up; he can feel his body becoming heavier and heavier, being pressed back down to the earth.

_Show me the way again_, Zero pleads, hoping the Ancestress will hear him. She must, because they retrace their steps one last time, marking the defenses, reinforcing his memories of numbers and routes, finding the levers for the hidden door.

He's pushed it too far. He feels so tired. So tired. Zero tries to weakly project gratitude toward the Ancestress' presence, but before he can do anything further, everything fades out.

"Yuuki," croaks her Consort's voice, and Yuuki is snapped out of her daydream, the pen in her hand clattering to the desk.

"Zero?" she calls, spinning around.

Her husband is clinging to the doorframe like his body is made of noodles, all limp and floppy. His face is bloodless, with bruises under his eyes; he looks like he hasn't slept for a week.

"I thought you were resting!" Yuuki says, hurrying over to hold up Zero's weight.

"I know where Aido is," Zero says, out of nowhere.

Yuuki nearly drops him. "What?"

"Give me some paper and a pen; I need to sketch some diagrams while they're fresh in my mind."

Rather than taking Zero back to bed like she and her alpha want, Yuuki helps (drags) him over to her desk and folds his body into the chair.

Zero immediately seizes her abandoned pen, and starts scribbling on the back of a report. His shaky penmanship is nothing like his usual clear hand, but Yuuki can make out what he's written.

"Zero," she murmurs, "where did you get this?" It's so detailed, down to the camera angles and guard rotations.
He pauses, hand freezing above the paper. "A Hunter friend passed on the information," he says vaguely. "Call Kuran - call Kaname. And please, can you find me a map of the area around Shirabuki's factory?"

Yuuki nods, grateful but perplexed by Zero's odd behavior. "Shirabuki's factory? I might have one, but it's marked up. What do you need it for?"

"You were right," Zero tells her. "There is a second facility, linked underground to the first. That's where Aido is being held."

How does Zero know all of this? Something doesn't add up, but they're running out of time. Yuuki can get Kaname to pump Zero for information later, after Aido is safely back with his friends.

She pulls out her phone. "Kaname, we figured out where Aido is…"

Really, the waiting is the worst. Zero's never appreciated that before. He's always been on the front line, the one leading the charge as both the most skilled and the most expendable.

If he had the strength, he would pace, but Zero still feels wrung out. Why don't nobles feel this exhausted every time they use their special abilities? Kuran's inner circle could fight whole battles before they were worn out. Does Zero just have the most difficult, high maintenance power? Is throwing fire around easier than whatever psychic thing the Ancestress does?

Zero runs his hands over his face. Speaking of 'that psychic thing', eventually somebody isn't going to accept his excuses for how he knew where Aido was. Zero's information was suspiciously specific. No way a random Hunter would have known that, unless they were working for Shirabuki themselves.

Zero hasn't figured out what he's going to tell people when that time comes. He knows he should probably confess to Yuuki what's been going on, but it's only been four days since Zero knew about his new ability himself. It's a lot to take in and wrap his head around, and Zero knows he's going to sound pretty crazy if he tries to explain it to someone else. 'Yes, my mind slipped out of my body and went for a walk' - that's going to sound very sane.

Glancing at the clock, Zero's mouth tightens. Kuran is late. He was due over two hours ago, hopefully with Aido in tow, but he hasn't even sent a message. Something has gone wrong with their rescue.

A weak twitch in his overused Hunter senses gives warning. Zero straightens, glancing at the window; Yuuki looks up beside him on the couch where she's tucked her feet up underneath her.

"They're coming back," she says, and she scrambles to open the window for the horde of bats circling outside.

"Don't!" Zero shouts.

Too late.

The bats begin to reform; piece by piece a figure reveals itself. Tall, impeccably dressed, with an air of confidence and self-possession - and blond.

Shirabuki Sara smiles at them. "I hope you don't mind. I thought I'd drop by for a visit."

Yuuki draws herself up, her tension vanishing under her polished mask. "Shirabuki-san, it's a little
late at night, don't you think?"

"But we have things to talk about," Shirabuki pouts, clapping her hands together. "Do you mind if I sit down?"

Yuuki and Zero look at one another. Kuran and the nobles could be back any minute. They need Shirabuki out of the house, or they need some way to signal it's not safe to return. It would be dangerous to give Shirabuki information of any kind. In their best case scenario, Shirabuki still knows nothing, she hasn't learned Aido was captured, and she doesn't find out about this incident, leaving them holding all the cards.

Perhaps it would be best to play along, and see if Shirabuki can be convinced to leave.

"If you like," Yuuki replies neutrally.

Shirabuki smiles sweetly, and perches on an armchair. Zero's going to have to burn it when she leaves, he thinks regretfully. Maybe the whole set, just for good measure.

"I heard you came to Europe quite suddenly," she says. "I'm sorry I wasn't in town, I would have liked to show you around."

In spider-lady's dreams. Zero wouldn't beg a penny from her.

"Kaname had business," Yuuki says. "I'm afraid it wouldn't have been possible."

"What a pity!" she exclaims, sounding enthusiastic but not very regretful. "Will you be staying long?"

"I doubt it," Yuuki says. "Kaname hopes to conclude his business soon."

Zero tries not to scowl. Shirabuki isn't put off by Yuuki's curt answers. Can't the woman take a hint?

"And Kiryuu-kun, how are you enjoying married life?" Shirabuki asks sweetly.

"I've had worse years," he says, deliberately giving a non-answer. If you count near-death experiences, this is only in the top five. In terms of sheer crap happening, top three. But it's only October, Zero reflects. There's still time for this year to work its way up in the rankings.

"You know Takuma-senpai, right?" Zero says, not missing the way Shirabuki misses a beat when he says the name. Time for a little indulgence in his favorite hobby: pissing off purebloods.

"I hope our marriage will be as happy as his and Shouto-sama's. They're so in love, you can just see it every time they're together," he gushes, playing up his enthusiasm.

Shirabuki isn't looking quite so cheerful anymore. Just a little more pushing.

"Did you know he's in season right now? Maybe he and Shouto-sama will try for a baby this year!" Zero says brightly, and Shirabuki isn't even trying to hide her wrath; one of the chair arms breaks off beneath her clenched hands.

"I don't want to hear that man's name any longer," she hisses between her gritted teeth.


The pureblood clenches her teeth. "That man who stole Takuma from me! Takuma was supposed
to be mine!

"But Shirabuki-san," Yuuki says, tone innocuous, "you told me the other day you were glad you didn't have an omega. Fragile, you called them."

Zero glances at Yuuki, who's stayed out of the spider baiting so far. Not bad.

Shirabuki struggles to present her saccharine, caring mask, her face jumping until she can regain her control. "I did, yes," she tells Yuuki, smiling again like the last few minutes never happened. "But I've also seen such wonderful relationships between alpha and omega, that I can't help but want that for myself sometimes."

"Ah, I see," Yuuki says, hand folded demurely in her lap. "My husband will be home soon, and I need to get Zero ready for bed. If there's nothing further, we'll see you on your way, Shirabuki-san."

"Yuuki-chan is so responsible," coos Shirabuki. "Through according to rumor, not so responsible in bed." Her eyes flick to Zero, and it's clear she's making a dig at his virginity. Zero tries hard not to react. Creepy, sex-obsessed purebloods.

Yuuki shrugs, as though she doesn't care much.

"But I don't think I'll be leaving yet," Shirabuki says. "Didn't I tell you? We have things to talk about."

"Such as?" Yuuki inquires.

"Well," Shirabuki begins, a nasty look in her eyes, "I leave for a few days, and I come back to find something interesting has tangled itself in my web."

Tensing subtly, Yuuki's face stays impassive. "That's fortunate."

"Yes," the blonde says, smile becoming fanged. "I'm told I snared a little ice mouse, nosing around where he didn't belong."

Zero curses in his head. So much for the best-case scenario. On the bright side, Shirabuki seems to have headed straight here, instead of going to Aido's prison.

"While I'm happy for you, Shirabuki-san, what does this have to do with me?" Yuuki asks, keeping her calm. Zero's deeply impressed that she can keep up with Shirabuki despite having less experience and malice.

Shirabuki giggles, leaning back in her broken chair. "Oh, Yuuki-chan, don't play dumb. It doesn't suit you. I have your toy. I want to know what you're willing to give up to get him back."

Yuuki's spine straightens. She looks straight at Shirabuki without flinching and says, "It's not wise to brag before you check your traps, Shirabuki-san."

The elder pureblood's eyes narrow. "It's not very bright to provoke me, Yuuki-chan."

Yuuki leans back into the arm of the sofa, raising her chin. "You haven't offered me any proof of your claims, Shirabuki-san. For all I know, Aido could walk through that door any minute."

Shirabuki's laugh has a cruel edge. "Naive little princess. Don't you know when you're beaten?"

"I don't feel like I've been beaten," Yuuki replies evenly.
Downstairs, they can hear the door open. Zero tries to stretch his Hunter senses, but he's so burned out he can't reach further than a few meters.

"Perhaps Kaname-kun will be more sensible," Shirabuki says, smiling in victory and tapping her painted nails on the intact arm of her chair.

Footsteps. Zero counts them. The door closes. Kuran can't fail to have noticed the foreign pureblood aura upstairs. He'll take the necessary steps. Zero can count on that.

More footsteps, climbing the staircase. No one has called out.

Zero, Yuuki and Shirabuki are all sitting here, waiting to see what happens by introducing a new player. Yuuki looks as unruffled as Kuran's persona. Zero is blank-faced. Shirabuki is insufferably smug, certain she's won.

Kuran doesn't bat an eyelid at the sight of Shirabuki and his spouses having a chat together in his sitting room. "Shirabuki-san. It's rather late for company."

The blond simpers. "I just couldn't wait to see you and Yuuki-chan!"

"That's kind of you, Shirabuki-san, but perhaps another day. I'm quite tired."

"Come, Kaname-kun!" she says, waving her hand, "just a little chat. Perhaps about your Aido, hmmm?"

Kaname's unruffled expression doesn't budge. "Aido?" he says in a bored tone. "What's he done now?"

Shirabuki is starting to get a little angry. Kuran isn't playing her game how she wants. "I'm talking about how I captured him, Kaname-kun, and how we need to begin our negotiations for returning him. Or not, I might keep him if he's a fun toy," she adds cruelly, her real personality naked in her face.

Kuran raises an eyebrow. "That's strange. I saw Aido with his cousins a few minutes ago. Are you sure you're not mistaken, Shirabuki-san?"

"What?" Another crack, and the second arm of Shirabuki's chair is gone. Zero bets she has trouble doing interior decorating, with her temper.

Her eyes dart back and forth, calculating if Kuran's lying. Then Shirabuki's expression settles; she thinks Kuran's trying to bluff. She smiles. "I'm certainly not mistaken, Kaname-kun. I confirmed it myself. Your Aido is well-known, after all."

"Well, that's strange," Kaname replies, cocking his head to the side. "Aido, would you mind coming here for a moment?" he calls.

More footsteps, quick and high, from a light person with great energy.

"You needed me, Kaname-sama?" Aido sticks his head around the doorway. He bears no trace of the wounds Zero observed; his hair is neat, and his collar unwrinkled and clean.

"No," Kuran replies, not breaking his gaze from Shirabuki's shock. "That's sufficient. You may go."

Aido looks between the purebloods like he wants to ask what's going on, thinks better of it, and
leaves.

The room is silent. Shirabuki's eyes are bulging with her rage and shock. "How - how did you - "

"Like I said, I believe you were mistaken," Kuran says smoothly. "Perhaps you should leave, Shirabuki-san, since there's nothing further to discuss."

Shirabuki clenches her jaw. "I'll see myself out," she says, but Zero hears the underlying message: this isn't over.

No one moves until the last bat has flown away.

Yuuki slumps to the floor, sliding straight off the couch. Kuran looks like he wants an entire cellar of wine. The armchair is completely wrecked.

"I can't believe that actually worked," Zero says.

Only once everyone's cleaned up and had their wounds treated does Zero ask the question that's burning in his mind. "How did you do it?" he says, glancing at the nobles in the dining room as he butters another piece of bread for more sandwiches, adding to the pile on the plate in front of him.

"I can't believe you threw me in a lake!" huffs Aido, spraying crumbs from his turkey and cheese sandwich (NO crusts, white bread NOT wheat, ONLY smoked turkey, cheese MUST be imported) as he eats with the graceless abandon of a starving lion.

"You were on fire," protests Kain - who eats anything Zero puts in front of him without protest, think the Ancestress.

"And who's fault was that!" Aido cries. "Countless lovely ladies appreciate my charm and good looks - you almost burned my eyebrows off!"

"You were filthy," says Souen, wrinkling her nose. "I don't know where the paddleboat came from, though." She takes another contemplative bite of her chicken salad croissant.

"I'll never look at dairy products the same way," Kain says.

"Llama," Souen says, and all three of the nobles shudder.

Kuran's Shadow, leaning against the wall, is completely unperturbed, and had also declined Zero's offer of a sandwich. Someday Zero's going to wear Seiren down, he promises himself.

"Kaname?" Zero repeats, trying to catch the pureblood's attention.

Kuran's lost in thought, staring at his empty glass of wine, but turns his head when Zero calls his name. "Yes, Zero?"

Zero passes him the bottle, and Kuran pours another healthy glass. "How did you fool Shirabuki? Aido looked like he had never been captured."

Kuran chuckles. "A bottle of blood tablets -"

"Which were really gross," Aido complains in the background.

"- a good feeding from both Ruka and Kain, an invigorating swim, a flight by bat - which seems to function adequately as a blow dryer - a comb, and a promise he could have the next fork I bent for
"He looks worse under his clothes," volunteers Kain, licking mayonnaise off his thumb. "Ruka slapped some concealer and a clean shirt on him, and told him not to show anything below his neck."

"I wasn't that badly off," Aido complains, "the guards fed me blood tablets and I gave them a fake name when they questioned me, so they didn't know I was valuable. And I made sure I cried a lot, just like Kaname-sama told me too!" the blond beams proudly.

"I take it things didn't go according to plan?" Zero prompts, looking to Seiren.

She shakes her head. "Your information was completely accurate. The three of us, with Kaname-sama waiting outside sensory range, entered the facility without detection. But Aido was not in the cell you marked, though the scent of his blood was still in the air. We split up to search for him. I found Aido being loaded into a transport vehicle, but Kain was seen, and the guards raised the alarm."

"And then we chased this idiot half-way across the country," Souen says, gesturing with her sandwich at Aido, who has his cheeks stuffed with sandwiches like a hamster with nuts.

Aido makes a protesting noise, and chokes on his food, more crumbs flying everywhere.

Sighing, Zero starts cutting the crusts off the next sandwich.

Yuuki looks up from where she's working through her tower of nutella and banana sandwiches. "Did you find out anything?"

The entire room looks at Aido. The blond inhales the last of his sandwich, and chokes again, hacking until he drinks a glass of water Kain passes him.

"I did one better," he says, puffing out his chest. "I got a sample."

"Of what?" a skeptical Souen asks.

"Whatever they're making," Aido replies. "Some kind of white powder. It's a pharmaceutical manufacturing facility Shirabuki's hiding out there. I don't know what the end product is - they ship the processed substance somewhere else."

"So it's just more drugs," Zero says, disappointed. They already knew Shirabuki made money off designer drugs. All this effort and so many people putting their lives on the line, wasted.

"I won't know until I test it. Maybe she's made something new," Aido says.

Kuran shifts, "That's for another time, Aido. Get some rest and finish healing. We'll return home tomorrow night."

"Yes, Kaname-sama!" the blond chirps, digging into another sandwich.

Zero watches Kuran and Yuuki discuss business at the dining table, speaking in quiet murmurs audible only to vampire hearing out of consideration for the sleeping nobles. They don't seem to realize Zero's there as they shift reports around, writing notes on one or two. If Zero leaves them at it, they'll be sitting here until they step into the car leaving for the airport.

Kuran won't be satisfied without rearranging his affairs with Shirabuki, Zero knows, but Aido's not
the only one who needs to rest. Neither of them have been eating or sleeping much - Zero hasn't personally seen Kuran sleep in three days, actually - and it's time they slowed down.

The Hunter feels a little thrill as he makes his move, slipping silently into the room. Baiting vampires is always a risky ploy. The Kurans will sense him, but Zero doesn't want to be stealthy.

"Zero?" Yuuki says, lifting her head and blinking dully at him. "What's wrong?"

"It's past one in the afternoon. We have a flight in the evening," he reminds them, coming close. "You need to sleep."

"Later," Kuran says, already turning back to his plans.

Zero isn't going to be put off so easily. Kuran is the problem; Yuuki will fall into line if he can crack their husband's resistance. So Zero drifts around beside Kuran's chair, upping the ante. "Are you sure, Kaname?"

"Yes," the pureblood says without looking up.

Zero swings his leg over the side of Kuran's chair, settling lightly into the pureblood's lap. "You won't reconsider?" he says, straddling his husband's thighs and wrapping his arms around the pureblood's neck. Zero's clean and smells nice, and he's wearing the silk robe Yuuki told him was her favorite.

Kuran's redwood eyes look amused, but at least now he's paying attention. Zero presses closer, tracing the skin beneath pureblood's collar. "You haven't come to my bed in three days, husband. I'm worried that I've lost your interest. Maybe I should try my luck with Aido?"

A spark lights in Kuran's eyes, and his hands snap to Zero's hips, trapping the Hunter where he is. "I see your point, but you'll do no such thing."

Zero can hear Yuuki hurriedly cleaning the table, pushing their papers into a messy pile before she slides behind Zero, sitting on the wood. "We've neglected him, haven't we Kaname?"

Kuran makes a noise of agreement, peeling away the silk to bite at Zero's shoulder.

"Uh-uh, not yet," Zero says, grasping a handful of red-brown hair to hold Kuran still, until the pureblood has to look at him. "First you're going to go shower and change for bed. Then we'll -" he blushes - "do things, if you want. And then you're going to sleep until it's time to go, understand?"

"Ah," Kuran says, with a predatory smile, "there's my innocent little lamb. I wondered where he'd gone, but he was just hiding behind a wolfskin, shivering and waiting to be devoured."

"Can you even hear what comes out of your mouth?" Zero says, embarrassed on Kuran's behalf.

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Tentatively, Yuuki rubs her hands down Zero's back. "With what happened, are you going to be okay if we 'do things'?"

Zero groans. "I've told you guys, one arrogant ass with a chip on his shoulder really wasn't all that scaring for me. I was thrown for a moment, yeah, but I was never in a situation I couldn't get myself out of, and that makes all the difference. I could've beaten him up with my bare hands if I needed to."

"Besides," he admits, hiding his face in Kuran's suit jacket, "I - I like it when you enjoy yourselves."
Zero really, really had, the other day when he'd gotten to watch their pleasure, surprising himself at the intensity. Making Yuuki feel good, and watching the bliss she received just from such a simple act had felt incredibly satisfying. Zero wants to keep being able to do that for her, to give that to her.

And even watching Kuran, the way he squeezed his eyes shut and his whole body tensed - it had an appeal, watching such a controlled, private man come undone. Yuuki was more uninhibited - louder, more free with the evidence of her pleasure. For Zero, being able to focus on his spouses without having to deal with his own body had prevented his normal anxieties associated with sex, and made the experience very attractive. One he wouldn't mind repeating.

Kuran hooks a finger under Zero's chin, tilting his eyes up to meet the pureblood's smirking face. "You liked it, did you? Then we'll certainly have to repeat it."

"Come on Yuuki, grandpa gets cranky when he doesn't get his nap," Zero says hastily, dismounting ungracefully from his pureblood-shaped seat.

Kuran does the subtle twitch that means he's displeased, but seems resigned to Zero's willful defiance by now, making no remark. Zero suspects he gets amusement from the novelty. Though Kuran does punish Zero with a swat to the rear, when Zero looks away.

Zero whirls around and glares, but relents when Yuuki gets in a squeeze of her own while his back is turned. "Perverted purebloods," he grumbles without heat. "Come on, I've run you a bath. Go get cleaned up; I've already laid out your clothes for bed."

"And then we get to the fun part?" Yuuki says hopefully

Zero colors again. "Maybe," he hedges, "if you're good and don't try to work anymore today. You've found Aido. Everything else can wait for tonight, okay?"

The Hunter bends down to give Yuuki a chaste kiss, and presses his lips to Kuran's mouth in an equally gentle manner. Then he leads them by the hand into the bedroom, shutting the door quietly behind.

Chapter End Notes

Be afraid, Kaname. Zero's figuring out how to use the power of his sexiness against you.

Also, Zero can convert anyone through the power of his cooking. It's a fact. Feeding equals friendship.

Manga readers may get an extra bonus from this chapter, if they read carefully.

Next chapter: Rosehill gets a houseguest, Zero sidesteps, dodges and otherwise runs away from his problems, Yuuki plans a birthday party, and Kaname is the same nosy pureblood as always.
I hope everyone enjoyed a nice summer, I can't believe it's already fall. No warnings for this chapter. Thanks for reading, everyone!

As of now, I don't intend to explain Aido's rescue operation in more detail. Please feel free to use your imagination to construct the most ridiculous, hilarious sequence of events possible.

To reviewer asanokatsuya10: Don't worry, you haven't forgotten anything. Zero hasn't revealed his reason to the Kurans for his unhealthy habits yet. Stay tuned.

"Aiieeee!"

Zero claps a hand around the struggling vampire's mouth. "Blood and ashes, stop screaming, you'll wake the servants and attract the guards," he hisses.

The vampire in his grasp goes limp, the whites of his eyes showing.

"If I let go, are you going to do something stupid?" Zero asks.

The figure shakes his head no.

Slowly, Zero releases the noble, who reels back with a highly wounded expression, clutching the kitchen counter in an offended manner.

"What are you doing here at three in the afternoon, Aido?" Zero asks, pinching the bridge of his nose until he realizes he's copying one of Kuran's tells, and hastily drops his hand.

"What are you doing here at three in the afternoon?" the blond noble huffs back, crossing his arms.

It's a fair question; by all rights, Zero should be in bed with Yuuki and Kuran at this hour. "Kaito is overseas. I wanted to call at a more convenient time for him." It was true. Zero had called Kaito for about fifteen minutes, two hours ago. "Now, what are you doing in my kitchen?"

"Food!" Aido says, gesturing wildly at the empty room and the fridges. "I was up late and wanted a snack, and then you sneaked up on me out of nowhere!"

Zero raises an eyebrow. "Pay more attention to your surroundings. I wasn't even trying," he says, circling around Aido to reach the fridge. "Has Souen brought you some clothes and stuff?"

"Yeah," Aido huffs with his arms still crossed, peering over Zero's shoulder to find what food he wants. "I'm still waiting for my equipment to be delivered. I haven't even been able to start analyzing that sample! If I can't take it in my lab and study it, why can't someone else?"
"Because it's secret," Zero says matter-of-factly, snagging a banana. "And you know why you can't leave."

Aido is in a dangerous position. Not only had the noble caught Shirabuki's attention, but he'd been the instrument of her humiliation by Kuran and Yuuki. Shirabuki, like all purebloods, held grudges, and she might seek to harm Aido or deliberately recapture him. Kuran did not want to take any risks. Until Shirabuki lost interest, or her attention was drawn elsewhere, Aido was Rosehill's guest for the foreseeable future. Kuran's orders were absolute; Aido is not allowed to set one toe outside Rosehill's walls, for any reason.

"So, human or vampire," Aido says, his arms full of food, popping a leftover meatball from dinner in his mouth.

"What?" Zero replies, genuinely confused as he peels his fruit.

Aido leans his hip against the counter, munching on the container of cold spaghetti. "Your spy."

"My spy," Zero repeats, eyeing the blond out of the corner of his eye.

"I saw your information. No Hunter could have made it inside with so many guards," Aido says, swallowing and fixing Zero with an uncomfortably intelligent gaze. "Therefore, the Hunters must have a traitor on the inside passing them intel."

"Think what you like," Zero says, turning away a little too quickly and taking a bite.

"I know you're not saying everything you know about my rescue, but I'm not trying to press you," Aido says. "Kaname-sama might, though. I just wanted to warn you."

Then Aido blinks, and looks at Zero again. "What are you wearing?"

Zero looks down. He's just wearing his training outfit: some sweatpants and a white cotton shirt. "I went for a run," he says, "I couldn't sleep."

Zero leaves out the part where the run lasted for about two hours, and that this is the third time this week he's snuck out to do extra training after shaking off various familiars, in addition to the workouts the Kurans know he does during the evening hours. They wouldn't like the intensity, but Zero needs to be back in fighting condition as soon as he can.


Aido makes a noise like a dying animal. "I'm going to die," he whimpers. "I touched Kaname-sama's Consort."

"Calm down, Aido. I'll tell them it's my fault," Zero says.

"Yuuki-hime's going to kill me," Aido wails, knocking his forehead against the kitchen counter.

"Yuuki wouldn't kill you," Zero says, resisting the urge to roll his eyes. Aido's getting a bit too dramatic.

Aido looks up with watery eyes. "Yuuki-hime would crush anyone who looked at you weird. And I touched you. She's going to tear me into tiny pieces and feed me into a paper shredder!"

"Um, okay then," Zero says, not quite sure how to respond. Yuuki wouldn't really, would she…?
"We can fix this," the Hunter says, his common sense kicking in. "We get rid of the evidence either of us were here, we both go shower, I sleep alone tonight, and no one has to know we had an accident."

"Okay," Aido says with watery eyes, shaking his head frantically. "You're right. There's no reason anyone would know."

It takes Yuuki only seconds to smell the alpha challenger whose touch has soiled their mate's skin - a trace of heavy stink clinging to that spicy-sweet omega perfume. Barely perceptible, but Yuuki would notice even the tiniest change when it comes to Zero.

*Someone touched mate!*

Her lips peel back from her teeth, and she explodes into motion, bounding across the dining room to take their Consort by the wrist, gentle with him even in her fury.

Zero jerks back, obviously alarmed; his Hoseki and the sleeves of his overcoat swing wildly as his Hunter instincts kick in and scream to avoid the charging vampire. When Zero tries to yank himself free, Yuuki loosens her grip even further, but doesn't let go.

Kaname is right behind her, breakfast forgotten in the instinctual drive triggered by such an affront. Taking Zero's dirtied hand in his palms, Kaname draws back the bell sleeve of pale blue lambswool hiding their Consort's skin.

"You tried to wash it off," Kaname says, raising Zero's hand to his lips and delicately scenting the Hunter's palm. The calluses on it are new and red, looking puffy and inflamed as they heal. Zero's thrown himself into his rehabilitation a little too hard, Yuuki thinks protectively.

"A sensible plan," Kaname continues, still almost-touching Zero's hand in that teasing manner. "That would have worked with any alpha, except those of pure blood. We are exceptionally sensitive to our mate's smell." When Kaname breathes against Zero's palm, the Hunter shivers.

Yuuki's instincts lead her thoughts toward more pleasurable hungers, but her anger is unabated. "Who was it?" she demands. "You didn't come back to bed last night. Who tried to steal you? Who dared touch what is ours!"

Zero's expression tenses. "No one tried to steal me. It was my fault. I was careless."

Kaname is still holding Zero's hand; he takes another deep breath, drawing the air in deeply. "Aido," he says contemplatively, after a moment. "I thought it was familiar."

Yuuki bristles. Aido? How dare he touch his master and mistress' Consort! They trusted him! They let him stay in their home, for Night's sake! And this is how they're repaid? Her anger boils in her chest, and she almost storms out of the room, except that would mean leaving Zero.

Zero reads Yuuki's ire from her face. "Yuuki, I swear, there's no reason to be angry at anyone but me. I made a mistake and touched him without thinking."

"Aido will be appropriately punished," Kaname promises, plotting something really terrible from the devilish glint in his eyes. Yuuki nods in approval.

Zero tries again to yank his wrist from Yuuki's grasp, becoming more frantic. "I told you, you don't have to! If you have to punish someone, punish me!"
"Aido deserves his punishment," Kaname tells Zero. "He knew his transgression, yet he tried to hide instead of confessing it to us."

"Don't hurt him!" Zero cries, struggling now in earnest.

Yuuki's alpha is agitated by seeing their mate so upset. Both the Kurans crowd in close, trying to soothe Zero through nearness, and restrain him so he can't harm himself.

"Hush, little Hunter. Aido will not be punished beyond his ability to handle," Kaname croons.

Out of Zero's sight, Kaname shakes his head at her, mouthing the word 'later'.

"First, let's take care of this stench, shall we?" he says aloud, turning Zero's hand palm up and offering it to Yuuki.

She ducks her head down and licks a quick stripe along Zero's skin, just barely leaving it damp. The pureblood wrinkles her nose and sticks her tongue out. Bleh, icky alpha musk. Zero's flavor is heavenly in comparison, which makes the combination barely tolerable.

Kaname pulls Zero's hand a bit higher and takes a taste of his own, a slight wrinkle in his mouth giving away his displeasure.

Yuuki smacks her lips, trying to work the taste out of her mouth, but gives up. Getting Zero clean of another alpha's scent is worth leaving a nasty taste in her mouth. She'll do her best, she tells herself, and gives another big swipe, determined to have Zero free of the tiniest contamination.

Beside her, Kaname methodically begins to do the same, and they alternate until Zero's palm smells neutrally only of himself. Then they turn their Consort's hand over, and bathe the other side of his hand for good measure, zealous about lapping between his fingers and getting every last part clean.

Zero doesn't seem to know what to think, though he allows the cleansing without protest. "I thought washing didn't work?" he finally says.

"Chemicals in our saliva," Kaname explains, rubbing Zero's palm against his cheek as Yuuki laps at one last spot on the other side.

"You understand that scent-marking by another alpha is a serious insult, an act of provocation when done deliberately, and a significant breach of propriety even by accident?"

"I know," Zero says, turning his head away. "I told you, it was an accident."

Watching Zero become distant makes Yuuki unhappy, and she tugs at Zero's skirts until he looks at her again. "We understand that accidents happen, Zero. But having you smell like another alpha...it made my instincts go crazy. You're ours, and no one else's. So next time just tell us. We'll believe you, no matter what."

"Okay," Zero says. Yuuki doesn't feel like he's convinced, but she doesn't know how to fix it. So she kisses him instead, letting Zero feel how well their bodies move together. When they finally part, several deep kisses later, she's driven thought from both their heads under a tide of heat.

Jealous Kaname muscles in, catching Zero's lips in another kiss to distract him. Lifting Zero by the thighs, he moves their Consort across the room to the gargantuan oak table where their breakfast is
cooling. Zero catches on halfway, but doesn't get the chance to protest before he's seated on the edge of the unused, empty half.

Zero looks around himself, and raises an eyebrow. "The dining room table? You really are a perverted old man, Kaname."

Their husband chuckles, turning Zero around and placing him on his hands and knees. "How's this then? Yuuki adores your pretty ass. Would you like to be a good boy, and please her cock with it? Let her rut against you until she comes?"

Zero throws his head back, instinctively offering his throat, and squeezes his thighs together. "Okay. Let's do that," he says breathlessly. Yuuki can see how his pupils are blown wide.

She prowls forward, eager for the tasty treat presented so generously for her. Petting a hand down Zero's spine, Yuuki says, "Maybe you can let us touch you too, this time?"

Zero gives a hard shake of his head. "No, this is good. I don't want any more."

"Alright," she acquiesces, leaning down to kiss the nape of his neck. But the idea keeps niggling at the back of her mind, even as she loses herself in his body.

Even after she's sitting down to a re-heated breakfast afterward, with Zero's lingering warmth underneath her skin, Yuuki can't help but feel a little...dissatisfied.

"I have brought the information on Kiryuu Zero, Kaname-sama," Seiren announces, bowing and presenting the report he requested.

After that recent, exquisitely pleasurable revelation that his Consort was a pure virgin - even now, the thought drives him past madness - Kaname resolved to finally investigate Kiryuu's past, especially the last thirty-odd years. No more surprises, no more secrets. This time, Kaname wants to be prepared for whatever he finds.

Kaname shuffles through the documents Seiren has procured, glancing at each page's contents before moving on the the next. For a fifty-year-old, this amount of material is nothing. Birth information, a slew of childhood addresses as the parents moved for work, police reports and death certificates for the parents and brother, legal guardianship papers for Kaien Cross, various school transcripts. Kiryuu went to university, Kaname discovers with some surprise; the pureblood would have said Kiryuu was too focussed on Hunting to take time off for higher education.

Senate reports on Shizuka's death, Rido's attack, and other incidents at Cross Academy are among the most detailed items. After that, there's a sparse patchwork of execution requests and correlated sightings. Hunters are notoriously tight-lipped about which individual Hunters carry out which missions, for security reasons. There's almost nothing personal after Kiryuu left Cross Academy, and no known close associates beyond Takamiya, Cross and Yagari.

"This is much lower than your usual standard, Seiren," the pureblood comments without censure, reshuffling the papers into a pile on his desk.

His Shadow bows in apology. "Forgive me, Kaname-sama. Our information network does not penetrate beyond the fringes of the Association. We do not have access to archived Hunter materials. All I could acquire were human and vampire documents.

Leaning back in his chair, Kaname holds up his hand and shakes his head. "That's no complaint against you, Seiren. I expected no less. After the scandal with the previous Association president,
the Hunters have become much more careful. Leaks are more severely punished now."

Kaname taps his fingers atop the pile, contemplating the picture they present. Many of the early
documents he's seen before. When he first chose Kiryuu as his tool, Kaname had probed every
facet of the Hunter's life he could before he allowed the D near Yuuki. His resources at the time
had been quite limited; Kaname is surprised to find little more information has been added even
with the resources of his present network.

And the questions he most keenly wants answered will not find closure anywhere in this ink and
paper. If Kaname cannot access Hunter records, he needs personal testimony from people who
knew Kiryuu. Human lifespans being what they are, many of those people are already dead. The
rest are probably Hunters, and they won't speak to a vampire about one of their own. A tangled
complication indeed, he thinks, shaking his head. How typical of his problems with Kiryuu.

"Let's start with something simple," Kaname says, thinking aloud as he sorts back through Seiren's
papers. The pureblood slides a single sheet out the of pile, indicating the name printed at the top.
"This is Kiryuu's last place of residence. Go there in the morning, and find out what the humans
knew about him - habits, how he lived, his possessions, what his room looked like. Even the
absence of information tells us something."

"Will you be joining me, Kaname-sama?" Seiren asks.

"No," Kaname replies, steepling his fingers. "I already have an appointment tonight. I've promised
to take Kiryuu to see his horses. He's insistent on riding daily."

"I will execute your will, so please enjoy yourself, Kaname-sama," Seiren says, and disappears in a
blur.

Kaname smiles into the empty room. He's anticipating whatever he finds out - how will the game
advance? What will his opening move discover?

Zero only needs to see him, and he knows.

Painful joy lances through his chest, and he smiles through the feeling. "You're pregnant," he
whispers, and Takuma smiles and nods with a gentle hand on his belly.

Coming forward to take Takuma's hands in his own, Zero swallows past the lump in his throat.
"Shouto agreed?"

His friend nods again, still with that soft smile on his face. "Isaya told me that he didn't want the
past to overshadow the future. That he was here, awake, because he wanted to stay with me. And
he wanted everything he could have while we were together. If I was ready, so was he."

"Are you happy?" Zero asks.

"Very much," Takuma says, his face bright.

Zero's eyes prickle. "Good. That's the most important thing. I remember when Kaito was having
his first kid. He was over the moon. Both of them were. You're way smarter then that idiot, so
you'll do fine."

"Thank you, Zero," Takuma says, squeezing Zero's hands and pulling him toward the house. "Let's
go meet the others. You were last to arrive."
"I guess you'll be wearing skirts and answering to Mrs. Shouto for a while?" Zero teases as they walk.

Laughing, Takuma says, "You're right. I should see my tailor this week!"

When vampires interacted with humans, they had to explain somehow why "men" were obviously pregnant and giving birth to children without giving away their secrets. Their solution was simple - when an omega who was born male appeared among humans, they pretended to be female. To perfect the deception, the vampires even created false birth certificates and other records so male omegas could claim their children as their own.

Zero has his own set of fake identification cards with an 'f' in the gender box from their holiday to southern Europe. Much more embarrassing is the marriage certificate that legally makes him Kuran Kaname's wife. He wanted to be Yuuki's wife, not that old lecher's, dammit!

...Wait, no, that came out wrong.

"I guess we won't be sparring together for a while, since you're pregnant," Zero says as an afterthought.

Takuma laughs again. "Hardly. We can practice after the meeting if you've got time."

"Really?" Zero says, looking sideways at Takuma.

"Yes. Activity is fine until I'm so big that it makes me uncomfortable. And we're not using live blades so it isn't dangerous."

Zero must look doubtful, because Takuma laughs once more, the sound full of mirth. "We're omegas, Zero-kun. For us, staying pregnant is as easy as getting pregnant. Unless you're starving or badly injured, you'll carry the baby full term. I've never heard of an omega having a natural miscarriage."

"Oh. Well, I'll stay after and we can have a session," Zero replies, but is interrupted by a loud caw. The Hunter glares at the raven in the tree, which begins to preen his feathers.

"What was that about?" Takuma asks as they go inside and make their way to the tea room.

Scowling, Zero glares at empty air. Kuran knows he trained this morning; he'd better skip the evening run before the pureblood got suspicious. "Who knows? Kaname's probably just being possessive, or mad that I'm staying out longer."

"Are you sure?" Takuma says. "If it's better that we didn't, I don't mind."

"No, no, I want to spar together while we still can," Zero says hastily.

"Consort Kiryuu!" calls Aido Madoka, looking up from her conversation with Takiyama and Azai, who both wave hello.

Consort Shoshana, sipping her tea quietly, makes eye contact and offers a faint smile. She looks in better health than she did at Court, for which Zero is glad.

Takiyama frowns. "Consort Kiryuu, you look tired. Are you well?"

Beside Zero, Takuma gives him an assessing look. "You do look a little worn."

Zero keeps his face stoic. He's exhausted and his body hurts, but it's a necessary step if he wants
his body back in pre-injury condition. He'll stop feeling the strain soon. "I'm fine, just didn't sleep well," he says, kneeling down on a pillow. "Should we start?"

"Really, Consort Kiryuu, I think you made quite an impression last time," Takiyama begins once Zero and Takuma have been served. "Handling the Court didn't seem to phase you." She offers Zero a teacake in the shape of a leaf, taro flavored from the purple color.

Zero almost laughs as he accepts the sweet. He cheated on that one, not that Takiyama knows it. "What kind of reception has the last Court received among the nobles?" he asks instead.

Azai and Aido look at one another. "I don't know if they're more impressed or angry that you threatened them," Aido replies.

"More like scared spitless," Takiyama snorts into her tea.

"The trick where you reprimanded Abe was a good touch," Azai says with satisfaction.

Zero laughs nervously, avoiding a reply.

"I can't believe he had the gall to suggest sleeping with Kaname and Yuuki-san in front of you," Takuma marvels.

"Did I mess up there?" Zero asks. "I got a bit touchy." Just remembering it, Zero's skin heats with rage and he wants to grind his teeth.

"Well, we're not really supposed to act primal in polite company. But it was entirely understandable after such a shameless provocation. I don't think people can criticize you for it," Azai replies. "They might even approve. No one likes Abe."

Aido Madoka makes a fist and shakes it. "If Abe-san said that to me, I would've clawed his ugly face off!"

Everyone, including Shoshana, pauses to stare at her, tiny and fierce in her shimmery, pastel pink organza dress encrusted with white roses.

"Well," Takuma prompts, picking up the teapot to pour a round of fresh tea, "I heard there was some trouble with the greeting ritual?"

"Sugiyama refused. Consort Kiryuu educated the Court on her error," Shoshana provides, the beads in her hair clicking as she tosses her braids over her shoulder.

"Your solution proved very elegant, Consort Ichijo," Azai compliments. "I've spoken to a number of monarchists who were highly impressed by Consort Kiryuu's nuance, depth of understanding and respect for tradition."

Takuma beams. "Thank you. It sounds like Zero-kun did very well."

The praise feels unearned. "I think Noguchi backed me into a corner pretty badly," Zero corrects. "And Koneko led me in a bad direction. That time, Aido-san's help was the only thing that rescued me. In the end, I could only gain the upper hand by threatening everyone."

The other omegas pause. Zero gets the impression they were going to ease into the less good parts.

"Koneko's line of questioning was inevitable," Azai finally says. "You'll be pressured with your actions as a Hunter in the future. The important thing is that you avoided a significant stumble this
Aido Madoka leans back, blowing out her breath. "Noguchi is the big problem. She didn't just back you into a corner - she made sure you took a beating while you were there. In the last Court, she didn't actually do anything except make you admit the truth, but that successfully dealt your authority a lot of damage. Not to be blunt, but the core problem is that you do have a conflict of interest between your Hunter and vampire identities. When you couldn't deny it, Noguchi proved to the Court they have good reason not to trust you. Now they'll doubt you even more, especially when the Hunters come up."

Takiyama takes up the explanation. "Noguchi also deliberately incited the nobles who don't like your Level D status and impure blood. We'll have a few years before your fertility becomes a serious issue, so you needn't worry on that account. But the attitudes she encouraged are a problem."

"And there are the things she insinuated about your relationship with Hio Shizuka. Noguchi linked you to the deaths of two purebloods. That's the opposite of good," Aido Madoka finishes tersely with her arms crossed.

Zero can tell that she's curious, but the Hunter remains stubbornly silent. He's not talking about Shizuka just to satisfy her curiosity. You don't bleed old wounds for fun.

The silence draws out until Takuma, sensing Zero's reluctance to continue, gives Zero an escape. "All of that is in the past now. We can't change what happened, but we'll work on repairing the injuries at the next Court. Now, would anyone like more tea?"

Takuma really is a good friend, Zero reflects as the noble bustles around filling cups and passing sweets, lightening the mood and drawing the room's attention away from Zero. Talk turns to lighter subjects, but Zero keeps brooding on his failures at the last Court. The omegas probably think he's a violent barbarian now - Zero wasn't exactly hesitant about acting like the Hunter he is. Another mistake.

And they brought up his physical relationship with his spouses again. His chest tightens and his gut twists. Zero needs to try harder. He's allowed himself to let things settle into a pattern, because it was comfortable and made him feel safe. It's just - it's hard. Things are fine this way. Yuuki and Kuran are satisfied, and Zero is fine.

"I can't remember the last time we had two pregnancies at once," reminisces Takiyama, patting Takuma's arm.

"Who knows, maybe in January we'll be expecting three," she says, smiling at Zero.

He tries to smile back, but his mouth just twitches. A lump rises in his throat. "Probably not," Zero manages to reply.

"If you're here for Zero-kun, you're late. He's already returning home." Takuma wipes his face on a towel, and leans against a wooden pillar, flashing a familiar smile in Kaname's direction.

"It's good to see you," Kaname says, returning a faint smile of his own. The gravel under his shoes crunches as he steps into the courtyard. "I wanted to speak to you alone."

"You've heard, of course," Takuma says, combing his damp hair off his face.

Kaname's mouth quirks up. "A bird told me, yes. Congratulations." The pureblood surveys his
friend. Dressed in athletic clothing and cooling down from his sparring practice with Kiryuu, Takuma looks no different from the man who attended Cross Academy - the same handsome face, friendly air, and skill with a sword.

An illusion. Nothing is the same any longer - Takuma belongs to Shouto now. The speck of life in his belly was the last knot left to be tied. From now on, Takuma's children will draw him even more strongly toward Shouto, away from Kaname's side. That bond was instinct, stronger than any loyalty or friendship Kaname could claim.

No need for this moroseness, Kaname reminds himself. This was the appointed outcome from the moment he knew could not bond Takuma. Today is merely the inevitable conclusion of their separation.

"When are you due?" Kaname asks, picking up Takuma's blunt practice sword to examine it.

A quirk of vampire biology - due to their hybrid nature, vampire pregnancy length varied dramatically. Purebloods carried a child for nearly two years, while human pregnancy took only nine months, and vampires of mixed blood fell somewhere between. The purer the blood, the longer the pregnancy lasted. The accepted rule was to take human pregnancy time and add a month for every class purer the mother's blood was. But that was only a general guide; in practice, studying family history was a more precise estimate. Omegas also tended to carry longer than their beta counterparts.

Shrugging, the noble replies, "We're not sure. There's never been an omega in my family. At least the usual year, perhaps a little longer. Closer to thirteen months."

It took two infusions of pure blood before a family was classed as noble rank. The Ichijo family could claim four. Nobles of such blood purity were rare - Kaname knew of only three families - which meant omegas carrying such pure blood were almost unheard of.

Takuma spots Kaname handling the practice sword. "You were quite good if I remember. You're welcome to join me again sometime. Zero prefers the staff, and I would appreciate the chance to duel another swordsman."

"It would be inappropriate," Kaname objects, putting the weapon back down.

"With anyone else, yes. But our shared history puts our actions above reproach."

Kaname gives him a wry look. "You mean, my inability to be sexually interested in you."

"Precisely," Takuma smiles.

"I will consider it," Kaname allows.

"So what did you need from me?" Takuma prompts, turning away and hopping up on the edge of the wooden porch.

"What makes you think I need something, Takuma?" Kaname deflects, despite it being completely true. Habit makes him reflexively deny his opponent an opening.

The noble laughs, green eyes alight with mirth. "Kaname, we've known each other too long for that. You don't do anything without calculation. Go ahead if you'd like, we don't need to spend time on the usual protocols."

Kaname slips his hands in the pockets of his slacks. "I want information."
"On what?" Takuma asks, crossing one leg over his knee.

The pureblood's expression remains steady. "On Zero. I'm having difficulty locating sources who can tell me about the time period before his presentation. According to the building manager at his apartment, someone matching your description was with him the day he ended his lease."

Takuma's tone is fond as he nods. "You're right, I was there."

Kaname dips his head in acknowledgement, pleased at finding at least one person who has the information he wants. "You worked with him. He must have told you other things."

"A few," Takuma says, "but Zero keeps to himself. Much like you do."

"I'd like to hear what you know."

Takuma tips his head to the side. "Is that an order?" The gentlest of reprimands, delivered with barely any sharpness - Takuma's specialty.

Kaname considers this. "I've had little luck with my normal methods. It can be an order, yes."

Takuma's forehead wrinkles in thought. "Unusually heavy-handed for you, Kaname. I will freely offer you two of my memories. Please leave Zero-kun the rest of his privacy."

"Only two?" questions Kaname. "That's not much incentive."

"I don't know much that will be helpful to you," Takuma confesses.

Weighing Takuma's offer, Kaname asks, "What memories?"

"The visit to Zero's old apartment, and the first time I met him after he presented. If you want more information, you'll need to approach one of the Hunters he's close to. Or ask Zero-kun himself," reminds Takuma.

"Very well. I agree," Kaname says. "I'll need your blood. Will Shouto object if I graze you?"

"I'll do it." Takuma pricks the pad of his thumb with his fang; a single bead of blood wells up, then another. Kaname breathes the scent, but his bloodlust barely rises. Any blood but his dear Yuuki's seems so dull now.

"Nu-uh! Mate's blood is just as tasty as alpha-mate's blood! You want mate's delicious blood too!" disagrees the alpha, outraged by the lie; Kaname crushes it down.

"Just a quick flick of the tongue," Takuma instructs, extending his hand. "Try not to touch me any more than necessary, please."

Kaname makes sure he touches nothing except Takuma's wound; he owes his friend that much consideration in return for his help. The pinprick heals instantly when it comes into contact with pureblood saliva, cutting off the flow, but the amount is just enough.

Staggering backward a step, Kaname absorbs the memories embedded in Takuma's blood.

What a miserable hovel! Kiryuu lived there? Did Hunting pay so poorly that he couldn't afford better? The boy's meager possessions from his old life made much more sense in that context.

"More of a prison cell than a home," Kaname remarks offhandedly, still analysing and cataloging his impressions.
"That might be more truthful than you meant it," Takuma says to himself in an undertone.

Kaname is too preoccupied to pay much attention. "No kitchen..." Odd, since Kiryuu enjoyed cooking. It did put a new light on the question of the Hunter's diet, though it did not answer the why.

"I'm not surprised at Zero's treatment by the other Hunters," Kaname tells Takuma, pacing a few steps as he tackles the next memory.

"Really?" replies Takuma, surprise in his face.

"Hunters regard us very differently than we think of them. Their lives revolve around Hunting vampires, from birth to death. But for us, Hunters and their existence are largely ignored, unless we have reason to deal with them directly. Many vampires will never speak with a Hunter in their entire lives."

"I see," Takuma says, eyes narrowing in thought.

As he explores the memory further, Kaname's mouth pulls into a curve, despite his intentions. Kiryuu's ignorance was very amusing, and the little Hunter acted so embarrassed Kaname couldn't help but find his Consort charming. "He asked you if he'd get a period?"

Takuma's face lightens. "Yes, poor Zero-kun. He knew less than a child. I'm glad I could help him."

Kaname chuckles. "Thank you, Takuma. Your memories have proved their worth. I still have questions, but you've helped me a great deal."

"You could talk to Zero-kun," Takuma reminds him.

"Cross has always been very helpful to me," Kaname says instead, already calculating his approach when he contacts the headmaster.

Takuma sighs. "Good luck then."

"Zero! How was tea with the others? You stayed pretty late," Yuuki says, smiling as she pokes her head into bedroom of the Consort's suite. Zero is just changing into his workout clothes, which are much baggier and less fun than his riding clothes, unfortunately.

"I was with Takuma-sempai," Zero replies, pulling his shirt over his head.

Yuuki shamelessly admires Zero's pose until he's decent again. "You're going for another run?"

Zero shakes his head. "Agility and core strength training. I'm still not fast enough to react to quick movements."

"You're being careful, right?" Yuuki asks, twisting the hem of her shirt in her hands. "You've been throwing yourself into your training pretty hard. You only just got back on your feet. And you're still recovering from not drinking blood for so long."

Zero glances up, then gathers his clothes off the bed to put them in the hamper. "I'm fine, Yuuki. I'm feeding regularly, and my recovery time is better than it's ever been."

"Alright," she says, accepting his assurance. "You know your limits better than I do. I just worry. You're at it for hours, at least twice a day, plus the horseback riding. I love you and I only want to
make sure you're not hurt."

Zero hums in response, his back facing Yuuki.

"Actually, I came here because I wanted to ask you something," Yuuki says, flopping down on Zero's bed.

"What?" he asks curiously, glancing over his shoulder.

"I want to train with you," Yuuki says. "You're the best at what you do."

Zero opens his mouth to argue.

"You are, Zero!" she insists. "And I want to get better too!"

"I don't mind if you join me," Zero says, "but I'm curious why."

Yuuki frowns, scooching up on her elbows to rest her chin on her hands. "Things are getting troubled. Shirabuki, the Senate, the people who hurt you, whoever is making all those Ds - I don't want to be missing skills I might need."

Zero's stopped moving, and his expression is set in his normal stoicism. "Go change. I'm going to work you hard."

Yuuki grins happily, and jumps up, scrambling through the door. "I'll do my best," she calls out behind her.

Are you not hungry, Zero?" Yuuki asks over dinner, the very picture of loving concern.

The Hunter curses himself, shifting in his seat to take pressure off his sore muscles and one particularly nasty bruise. His body is finally taking revenge for all the strain he forced it to endure today. That last session with Yuuki pushed Zero too far. If he eats anything, the heavy nausea in his stomach will punish him by throwing it up. Looking at his wife, Zero shakes his head, which only makes his dizziness worse. "I had a snack earlier," he says. "I think I'm just too full for dinner. Sorry."

"I'm starving!" Yuuki says as she shoves a forkful of grilled eel in her mouth. "You should have shared with me!"

Zero fakes a laugh. "If I did, there wouldn't have been any left for me."

Yuuki shoots him an angry look, and shoves more rice in her mouth.

Kuran raises an eyebrow as he watches the two of them. "I take it you had a good evening?"

Yuuki shakes her head in an enthusiastic yes. "Zero and I trained together! It was just like Cross Academy again! Except I practiced my powers, instead of using Artemis Rod."

Kuran gives Zero a shrewd look for some reason. He's been looking at Zero oddly all this evening, the nosy leech. "That sounds nice," the pureblood says.

Zero covers the way his hand shakes as he drinks his third glass of water, trying to soothe his persistent thirst.

"Oh, before I forget," Yuuki says, putting down her fork. "Zero, your birthday's the twenty-fourth. 
I know it's a little late to plan anything big, but what do you want to do to celebrate?"

"Nothing," Zero says, breathing around the dull throbbing ache in his body. "I don't do anything to celebrate it. It's just a normal day, Yuuki."

Yuuki pulls a face. "Zero! We have to do something! It's your birthday!"

"No," he tells her.

"Come on, a small party?"

"No."

"Please?" she begs, looking at Zero with big, sad eyes. "Dinner and a cake. We'll invite Cross and Yagari-san and Kaito? And the inner circle?"

Zero sighs, knowing he's beaten. "I guess we'll be eating dinner anyway. Pick a time that's convenient for Master and the others, okay?"

"Yes!" Yuuki celebrates, clapping her hands.

"And you're not cooking," Zero tells her.

She glares.

"And no presents."

"Zero!" she complains, slumping against the side of the dining table.

"I'm serious," he says. "You already buy me enough things. I don't need any more."

"You're not used to having things, are you Zero?" Kuran remarks out of nowhere, with an indecipherable look on his face.

Zero glares, because Kuran's being more creepy than usual this evening, and extra cryptic too. "No presents," he repeats.

"There's nothing you want?" Yuuki tries one last time.

Opening his mouth, Zero almost tells her no. Then he glances at Kuran, still giving him that weird look. "Actually," he says, changing his mind and pointing at their husband. "He owes my horse a name. That's what I want for my birthday." The sudden motion was a mistake; it makes Zero feel light-headed again.

Yuuki looks displeased. "That's not fair, why does Kaname get to give you a gift!"

"Fine," Zero says. "You can get me one gift too. But no more presents after that, okay?"

"Okay," Yuuki agrees as she bounces in her seat, satisfied by permission to buy him something.

From the gleam in her eye, Zero gets the feeling he's miscalculated.

Mindful of Kuran's scrutiny the night before, Zero deliberately slacks off his training routine the next day, halving his morning workout. It doesn't trouble him; he has other plans for that leftover time.
The Hunter decides to begin a few hours before lunch; he's usually left alone in the early evenings while Kuran and Yuuki work, and Zero wants privacy. He picks the conservatory for his purpose, rejecting the garden after some thought. If something goes wrong, Zero wants to be found as quickly as possible, or have people nearby if he's able to call out for help.

Pushing open the door, Zero breathes in the scent of wet earth and living things, and slips inside. It's especially dark tonight; the glass roof allows light in, but the moon is just a sliver, and starlight only a luminous, thin glow. When he gazes up, Zero can see the dark shapes of scudding clouds against the sky.

Picking his way around the potted plants and shrubs, and bending to smell the flowers in bloom, Zero stumbles on a few pieces of wicker furniture with thick cushions, meant for the comfort of the conservatory's visitors. The temperature here is noticeably warmer than the rest of the house, and Zero shrugs off his outer coat, laying it down on a nearby chair. More comfortable in his undertunic, Zero spots the daybed he remembers from his exploratory visit, and lays down, folding his hands on his chest.

Now, how to start? Meditation, Zero decides, not quite willing to dip into mushin yet. Focusing on his breathing, Zero closes his eyes and slips into a light, relaxed state that helps him settle his thoughts and center himself in his body.

Armed with that foundation, and far less anxious than he began, the Hunter enfolds himself in mushin, already so calm that he can't even perceive the moment he passes from one state into the deeper stillness waiting for him. Don't fight the flow, Zero reminds himself. Just breathe, and let your mind be drawn deeper.

Quietly, inexorably, that strange sense unfolds like a flower. The sensations wash over him a little at a time, a gradual creeping growth of his perception - nothing like that first traumatic burst. A dawning appreciation of tiny cues Zero overlooks in his daily life - like the precise weave pattern in the silk touching his skin, and how it differs from the cotton of his undergarments. Zero can feel each thread, and the unnoticed weight of his clothing. Tiny air currents stirred by the ventilation of the room touch his bare cheek from a nearby vent. The noise of air moving past itself, the tiny shushing sounds as the breeze flicks the leaf tips. Taste and smell cross over each other; it's not just wet earth and green anymore. Zero can disentangle the notes: sap, chlorophyll, pollen. Roses - the scent he's drowning in is the roses. He can taste it, the rich loam those roses are potted in, and the plant matter decaying at their roots to feed them.

It's easy, when Zero lets it be. After the painful torrent Zero endured with the Ancestress' guidance, this enhanced awareness is manageable by comparison. Zero senses that he's restricting his own powers. This range of stimuli is strongly limited compared to the array he experienced during the Jeweled Court. It also helps that his eyes are closed; 'seeing' with his powers and with his physical eyes at once is dizzying, like having double vision. Reconciling the two may be too difficult a task right now.

Time loses meaning; like mushin, there is only the now, and the endless fascination of Zero's senses. He could lose himself in the infinitesimal growth of a flower, in his own heartbeat and the drawing of breath.

Only when his own exhaustion draws close does Zero release mushin. Confined to his physical senses, the world feels duller in comparison, less rich and bright. A narrow place, washed out in his remaining awareness. Zero fights the sudden wild urge to resume mushin.

Opening his eyes, Zero stares up at the crescent moon in a daze until the servants come looking for him.
Cross was useless; the man talked and talked, but never revealed anything about Kiryuu's past, skipping around the questions Kaname asked. Cross knew far more than he was saying, Kaname was certain of it, but Cross had fallen nimbly back on his Chairman's persona to misunderstand or divert Kaname's attempts at inquiry. Instead of gaining useful information, the pureblood had been subjected to several hours of gushing and crying over childhood photo albums and teary laments over Cross' empty nest.

Kaname will have to try either Yagari or Takamiya, but his chances of getting them to talk are like wringing blood from a stone. And the pureblood has no easy way to contact them. Kaname turns the matter over as he returns to the residential wing. Kiryuu's birthday party - he'll try approaching the two Hunters then. He'll have access, a pretext to discuss Kiryuu, and hopefully a little goodwill.

Was that Kiryuu now, entering the Consort's suite down the hall? Kaname pauses with his hand on the master suite's door. The Hunter is staggering a little, leaning against the wall for support; his shoulders droop with exhaustion and his overcoat isn't properly buttoned.

Kaname's tolerance for his Consort overworking himself finds its limit. Once Kiryuu leaves his sight, Kaname turns on his heel and returns to his study instead, where he summons Sasaki. According to her testimony, Kiryuu trained this morning for half as long as usual, and spent the past few hours in the conservatory, alone.

Kiryuu showed no signs of exhaustion during breakfast. The training must have been more difficult than usual, if Kiryuu is still reeling now. Frankly, Kaname is pleased that his spouse had the sense to stop early. He'd thought Kiryuu had just pushed himself too hard, finally giving Kaname an excuse to confront him over his excessive training. But since Kiryuu showed he had the sense to stop, a reprimand is no longer necessary.

Innocent enough, Kaname concludes, and goes on with his day. But the pureblood cannot shake the feeling he's missing something.

"I'm going to win this time, Zero!" shouts Yuuki, and tears at the packed earth underneath his feet with her power, just as she releases a cloud of familiars to blind him.

Zero jumps, but not quickly enough - his movements have been oddly sluggish today - and loses his footing just as he's hit by a swarm of black wings. Surprised, the Hunter holds his forearms up to shield himself, falling back as he tries to clear his vision. But Yuuki is waiting for him, and her claws prick his throat.

"Your win," Zero tells her, holding perfectly still to avoid a slit throat.

Yuuki frowns. She hadn't really expected to best Zero. She wants to think that she's won by improving, but that was far too easy. Withdrawing her hand, Yuuki helps Zero to his feet, still unsatisfied by her victory.

"That's a good place to end for today," Zero says. He's moving stiffly, and without his usual quickness. "You fight less like a pureblood, and more like a human. Remember that you don't have our weaknesses, Yuuki, so don't impose them on yourself. Kuran may be able to teach you better than I can right now."

Pressing her lips in a line, Yuuki follows Zero back to the household palace in silence. She'd
thought he was taking it easier on himself by cutting back his training, but Zero's condition is getting worse, not better. Kaname may not have noticed - lately he's been away from Rosehill often- but Yuuki's been training with him. She can tell. And Zero keeps leaving their bed at night, or coming back at late hours.

"Hey, Zero?" Yuuki ventures, staring at his back.

"Mmm?"

"Why do you want to get back to Hunting so soon?"

For a few steps, Zero doesn't reply. "This sudden rise in Level E numbers is putting pressure on the Hunters. I need to help out Master as soon as I can."

"Is that the only reason?" Yuuki asks. Zero won't lie to her, but he'll still conceal truths he wants to hide by avoiding them.

Again, Zero doesn't respond at once. "I'm a Hunter," he finally says. "That's the purpose I was born with. If I can't fulfill my purpose, what good am I?"

"That's not true!" Yuuki shouts, planting her feet on the ground and balling her fists.

Zero turns around to look at her, puzzled by her sudden outburst. Yuuki doesn't even understand it herself.

"Zero's purpose is to be happy! That's what Zero is meant to do!" she cries. "As long as you're trying, then you don't need to worry about things like that!"

Yuuki looks at Zero's shocked expression and feels the fight go out of her. Pressing Zero will only make him retreat further. Zero doesn't share his problems, he hides them behind the high walls around his heart.

"Let's take tomorrow off," Yuuki says in a quiet tone. "Your birthday's in a couple of days. I don't want you to be too tired to enjoy it."

"I will," Zero promises, still looking shaken.

"Sleep in my bed tonight," she tells him, pulling Zero into a hug. "You've been gone a lot recently. I miss you." Yuuki doesn't know how else to reach him, with whatever he's keeping to himself hanging between them.

He rests his cheek against her hair. They don't speak for a while.

That night, when the two of them are kissing, Yuuki asks Zero one more time if she can offer him some form of pleasure. Zero only repeats his insistence that he's fine. Ardor gone, Yuuki bites the inside of her cheek, and somehow convinces Zero that she doesn't feel like going further tonight.

If Zero doesn't want to be touched at all, Yuuki doesn't mind. But she can't enjoy her selfish pleasure anymore without being allowed to offer him something in exchange.

When Zero just lies there, letting them do what they want, and Yuuki is the only one receiving satisfaction, then it feels like Yuuki's treating Zero no differently than a toy. Yuuki loves doing physical things with Zero, but she could never take pleasure in the idea of using him. Zero is her beloved, and Yuuki would rather not touch him at all than treat him in ways that demean him.
Maybe Zero just needs a little help building his confidence, Yuuki thinks. Perhaps the right opportunity...

Bowing in front of Kaname's desk, Steward Inukai waits patiently to speak until the pureblood looks up and nods in acknowledgement. "Kuran-sama, will you or Kuran-hime be collecting Consort Kiryuu for dinner, or shall I have one of his maids summon him?"

Kaname puts down his pen. "Thank you, Steward. I will fetch my Consort this evening." Kiryuu's birthday is tomorrow, and the pureblood hasn't seen much of his spouses today. Yuuki is finishing the preparations for the party first thing tomorrow evening, and Kaname suspects she will be late. Kaname may as well go collect Kiryuu himself.

His steward informed him that Kiryuu is alone in the courtyard of the Consort's suite, sleeping, so Kaname finishes putting away his work, and returns to the residential wing. Gesturing the maids to silence as he enters, Kaname passes into the Hunter's rooms on quiet feet. Sneaking up on Kiryuu's senses is impossible, but the pureblood doesn't have to make it easy for him.

Then Kaname looks out into the courtyard, and his breath catches at the sight of his Consort. Laid out beneath the moonlight, his sweet boy is deep asleep, gilded silver by the stars. He looks so much younger this way, at rest, with his face unlined and his hands loose on his breast. The full skirts of his gown cascade over the side of the divan - one of Yuuki's favorites in lilac, the same color as his lovely eyes. Kaname thinks of fairytales and bespelled, sleeping princesses and he feels something oddly warm stirring beneath his breastbone.

The gentle rhythm and soft movement of his Consort's breathing is at once entrancing and reassuring. Kaname drifts closer, closing the door without a sound. He thinks Kiryuu is still asleep, his approach undetected, until the boy speaks.

"I saw you coming," his husband says, his mouth barely moving. There is something odd in his tone.

"Did you?" Kaname replies, brushing the silver fringe from his boy's ivory cheek. He's cold to the touch. "Your hair is getting long. You haven't cut it since July."

"I saw you," Kiryuu says again, like he hasn't heard Kaname at all. "I did."

Kaname pauses, a sense of wrongness replacing the soft feeling from earlier. "It's time for dinner," he finally says.

"I've been watching," Kiryuu continues, making no sign he understands. "Tell the gardener that the azalea is getting sick. Fungus. You can't see it yet, but it's there. I know it is."

Now alarmed - Kiryuu sounds drugged, not sleepy - Kaname pulls the Hunter up by his shoulders.

Kiryuu's body stays limp, and his head droops backwards; he offers no resistance when Kaname supports his neck and forces him to look up at the pureblood. "Kiryuu, open your eyes and look at me."

Kiryuu makes a noise, which is the only way Kaname knows he's listening. "Eyes?" he murmurs, like he's forgotten what Kaname means. "Mmm, eyes." The Hunter's eyelids creep open a sliver. "Kaname," he says. "Where are...?"

The Hunter's confusion only disturbs him more. Kaname pulls open one of the boy's eyelids to check his body's reflex. Kiryuu remains passive, and his pupil isn't reacting properly to the light.
"What did you do, Zero? You have to tell me what happened," Kaname orders him. His hands tighten, creasing the material of Kiryuu's gown.

"Can't tell you," Kiryuu says, still in that dreamy tone.

A spike of annoyance makes Kaname curt. "Kiryuu, this is not a joke." The pureblood shakes him once, trying to provoke a response. "Explain what this is!"

Kaname freezes as he's struck by a feeling of deja vu. He's been in this situation before, he's certain of it. The pureblood tries to remember, urgently rushing through millennia of memories as his Consort's body remains slack in his grasp. Something is prodding at him, from far back in the beginning of his immortal life.

A pale-haired woman wearing a hooded cloak, looking up at him with the same distant gaze.

'Kaname, there's a settlement to the west, I'm certain of it....'

In a flash, Kaname remembers a long-ago conversation Kiryuu had with Nightshade, where the Hunter revealed the possibility he might inherit his Ancestress' power. How could Kaname be so stupid? When nothing seemed to come of it, Kaname had assumed that the Ancestor of the Hunters was mistaken.

A cloud of black butterflies descends, and Yuuki rushes into the courtyard, summoned through the bloodbond by Kaname's alarm. "Kaname!" she shouts. "What's wrong?"

Shaking his head, the pureblood slaps their Consort's cheek lightly, trying to help Kiryuu anchor himself in his body, even though the alpha cries out in protest.

"Kaname!" Yuuki shouts, jerking his arm away.

Pulling himself free, Kaname rebukes her. "Yuuki, let go! Zero's psychic senses have overwhelmed his mind. His grip on his body is weakening, and we need to bring him back before he goes too deep, or we'll lose him!"

Yuuki's face turns white with fear, and she stumbles backwards.

Kaname forgets her presence for the moment. Pain isn't sufficient, and Kaname doesn't know what methods to try next. Except, perhaps...

He looks up at Yuuki, hovering anxiously. "Cut yourself," he orders.

She looks at him like he's gone mad too.

"The connection between his mind and body is nearly broken. The scent of your blood should help guide Zero back to himself. We need some way to ground him, and blood is a vampire's greatest hunger."

That's all Yuuki needs to hear; she tears through the sleeve of her dress, not even caring for the shreds of torn fabric and lace. The thick scent of pure blood surrounds them, and the two vampires wait anxiously to see if Kiryuu can stabilize himself.

Finally, their Consort stirs, awareness returning to his slack face as he licks his fangs. "Yuuki," Kiryuu whispers. Though his voice is weak, the Hunter's gaze has its usual power when Kaname checks his pupils again. "What are you doing here?"

Enraged, Kaname slaps Kiryuu hard enough to turn his head. "You stupid Hunter! Do you have any
idea how dangerous that was? Noble rank powers are not a joke!"

"Kaname…" Kiryuu begins, but the pureblood has heard enough.

"You didn't just test them alone, without anyone to monitor you - I would wager you didn't even tell anyone you acquired them, did you? What would you have done if I hadn't come? If I hadn't been lucky enough to realize what was happening? You almost didn't make it back to your body. You would have become a living corpse, Zero, a body without a consciousness! Can you imagine what that would have done to Yuuki?"

The Hunter is speechless and shamefaced, hunching his shoulders and staring into the ground.

"You lecture how I shouldn't keep secrets, Zero, but you aren't any different, are you?"

Kiryuu flinches like Kaname slapped him again.

"You will never try that again by yourself, do you understand?" Kaname demands, shaking the Hunter's shoulders.

"I won't," Kiryuu promises.

"Swear it to Yuuki," Kaname demands.

Zero looks offended. "I'm not lying to you! I won't practice anymore by myself."

Kaname gives him another shake. "Remember that promise. You may not be so lucky a second time."

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Zero doesn't go to dinner.

Instead, he hides in his rooms, stinging from the thorough chewing-out Kuran gave him. Zero knows he deserved it. When he dares look in a mirror, his cheek has a red mark from Kuran's hand like a badge of his shame.

Zero hadn't even realized it was possible to get lost in the sensory input from his powers, through in hindsight the addicting nature of those feelings should have been a clue. He's been allowing himself longer and longer sessions, not even stopping until he's pushed straight through his exhaustion. The next-to-last practice, Zero couldn't even stand when he was finished.

He's a goddamn adult, and he should have known better. Zero has no excuses. He hates to admit it, but Kuran was right. Those words he said about keeping secrets… Zero's nails dig into his skin, and he grits his teeth at the burst of pain.

As the sun comes up, and the house goes to bed, the Hunter frets and paces in sudden fits of anxiety, burning through the last scrap of his energy. Zero thinks briefly of trying to sleep as well, but he knows in his bones he'll wake in a few hours, screaming from a nightmare. He wants Nightshade. He wants the Ancestor. He wants to be in bed with Yuuki and Kuran, tucked between them as he goes to sleep.

Zero is beyond exhausted. He doesn't even know how he's upright anymore - some kind of manic energy fueled by his emotional turmoil, if he had to guess. His eyes feel gritty and he has a dangerous, strung-out feeling in his head. He's not making good choices or thinking clearly.

He wants to go to bed. Kuran and Yuuki must be mad at him. He can't go to them. He wants to. But
he can't. They're asleep by now. Zero shouldn't wake them.

The Hunter makes a whimpering, groaning noise, wrapping his arms around himself and sinking to the floor.

Yuuki isn't hungry. The fear of losing Zero makes her never want to eat again. She can't sleep either. The lights in the master suite are all left on, as bright as possible. Kaname is doggedly pretending to work in the corner. Yuuki's given up any pretense, staring at the door and tapping her fingers against the table.

Zero didn't come to dinner. That must mean he doesn't want to see them. Yuuki shouldn't disturb him. But every part of her - Yuuki, the pureblood, and the alpha - wants to leave and go find Zero. Yuuki needs to resist the urge, and give Zero the privacy he needs.

The tempo of her tapping speeds up.

"Kaname," she says, giving in, "Are you sure Zero is fine? Shouldn't someone stay with him? If there's some kind of relapse, I don't want him alone."

Yuuki thinks she detects a hint of gratefulness in the way he puts his reports down. "You're correct. We ought to go collect him."

The Consort's suite is dark. When he hears the door, Zero looks up where he's curled on the floor, his lilac skirts twisted around his knees. "I'm sorry," he gasps with desperation, clawing himself upright on a couch, knocking his side painfully. It hurts Yuuki to watch Zero stagger towards them, supporting himself from one object to the next. His eyes have a glaze of misery, and he reaches out like he expects to be thrown away.

Yuuki would never, ever do that. She catches Zero by the waist and holds him up, taking all of his weight with ease.

"I'm sorry," he gasps into her hair. "So sorry, I didn't mean to, I was wrong, I'm sorry, sorry, please..."

Kaname shushes him, but Zero shakes his head sharply. "No, you were right. Keeping secrets just keeps hurting us." And Zero confesses the whole thing, down to the last detail - the Ancestress, his early signs, his first episode, her visits, and the business with Aido's rescue. Zero's incoherent and nearly asleep by the end of it, his body shutting down to rest despite his racing emotions.

"No, I need to...there's more, not yet," Zero insists in confusion, but Yuuki and Kaname just pet him and nuzzle him and remind him that his birthday is tomorrow and he needs to rest, and can't he just take a short nap?

And that's enough; Zero's finally at peace. Yuuki looks up from the man asleep in her arms. "You didn't mention this," she says to Kaname without accusation.

"Believe me, I regret that now. I thought the disruptions were only adjustments to his Hunter powers," he replies, running his hands over his face.

"Was this one of those things you didn't feel it was your place to tell me?"

Kaname snorts. "No, I just didn't find it relevant at the time."

Yuuki allows this to sink in, rocking back and forth to gentle Zero's rest. "I can't deal with any
more until tomorrow. Let's go to bed."

Kuran presents Zero with a list of new rules first thing that evening. It's written on good stationary in Kuran's calligraphic hand, and details exactly what Zero is forbidden from doing when he trains. The restrictions aren't onerous, just common sense and basic safety guidelines that Zero should have been following in the first place. Number one on list is that Zero is not to do anything without supervision. Zero accepts the list without complaint, and promises to abide by the terms.

When he woke up, Zero could hardly bear to look either Kuran or Yuuki in the face. It's Zero's fault that the air between them now is so strained. After last night's disaster, he's lucky they allowed him to sleep in their bed. He's lucky they want to see him at all. Zero's guilt is even more overpowering because he knows he's messed up Yuuki's preparations for his birthday party as well. Zero must be the most ungrateful person on the planet.

Though Zero technically won't be a year older until midnight, his party is being held at a more convenient eight p.m. for his guests, breakfast time for vampires and dinner time for humans.

Yuuki was so thoughtful with the arrangements, which only makes Zero feel worse. She even picked an outfit Zero wouldn't feel uncomfortable wearing in front of the Hunters, in a very dignified, masculine style with a high, upright collar, colored plain black with a few details picked out in red crystal, and just enough tailoring flourishes to make it a semi-formal garment.

Avoiding one another as they move around, the three of them dress in silence, until Kuran decides he's had enough.

"You look pathetic, Kiryuu," he says with a hint of challenge in his tone, sprawled in a chair buttoning up his vest. "Are you going to look this gloomy all evening, or shall I send the guests away now?"

"I'm sorry," Zero apologizes, unable to raise his eyes as he feels another rush of self-loathing. "I'll try not to ruin the party."

Yuuki sighs. "Zero, it's your party. We want you to have a good time. We were angry last night because we were afraid, but you already explained what happened, and we know it was an accident. You haven't known about your power for very long, and I understand why you might not have wanted to tell us yet."

Kuran stretches obnoxiously in his seat, tucking his hands behind his head. "Though I doubt the Ancestor of the Hunters expected you to ignore your body's warning signs when she told you to practice. She cares about you too deeply to have intended this to happen."

Zero squirms, his guilt written on his face.

Kuran takes one look at Zero and shakes his head. "I don't even need to bother punishing you, Kiryuu. You're fully aware of your error, and you blame yourself completely. Nothing I could do would match the self-condemnation you already feel. I've never seen a man so eager to punish himself."

"Please, Zero," Yuuki pleads, taking Zero's hand, "try and have a good time this evening." She slips something over Zero's finger, and he inhales sharply, holding his hand up to the light. It's his engagement ring, Yuuki's gift, her care wrapped around his finger in white gold and diamond.

Zero's eyes widen, and he stares into Yuuki's face with his heart too full to speak.
His wife smiles in reassurance, and tugs him down for a gentle kiss. "I love you so much," Yuuki whispers against his lips before drawing away.

Kuran continues watching from his chair, allowing them space for their reconciliation, but when Yuuki steps back, he rises and takes her place. "I am at fault for some measure of your distrust," Kuran says, tipping Zero’s chin up until their eyes meet. "I regret how that lack of trust endangered you. For that, I apologize."

Zero studies his husband’s face, not knowing how to reply. Did Kuran really just…?

"So stubborn," Kuran says, and kisses Zero in turn, nipping at the Hunter's lower lip as he withdraws. "I told you. Your death is no longer acceptable to me."

There's a far lighter mood as they finish dressing, and they even indulge in a little teasing.

"You broke the rules again, Kaname!" Yuuki flashes her husband an impish grin, silly in her relief that they've talked things out.

Kuran groans theatrically. "Here I was hoping you might have overlooked that little slip."

"Nope!" she replies cheerfully, popping the 'p' for effect.

Kuran pretends he hasn't heard. "Come on," the pureblood says, gathering his suit coat and holding open the door. "It's a party. Let's have a little fun."

It's a good party, despite its inauspicious beginning. Kaname is pleasantly surprised. Yuuki stayed well clear of anything that might cause arguments, and her care has paid off. Even with a guest list that includes two purebloods and six Hunters, the traditional enemies have put aside their differences for one evening to coexist peacefully, united by their regard for Kiryuu and their desire to celebrate his existence.

Everyone shows up more-or-less on time, partakes in the finest meal Rosehill's kitchens can offer, and not a single drop of blood is spilled. There are a few uncertain moments, but the conversation keeps a steady flow, and both sides join in the discussion. Kaname and Cross both steer the topic in more friendly directions when necessary. The three tier chocolate cake receives an excellent reception and proves to be a superb distraction for their guests. Afterward, the company retires to a drawing room for tea and the chance to mingle more informally.

The Hunters brought gifts, even when their invitation requested they didn't, and they decide now is a good opportunity to present them to Kiryuu. It almost causes an incident - the vampires look rude if they're the only ones who brought nothing - and Kaname has to soothe tempers and anxieties for over ten minutes before the actual gift-giving is allowed to continue.

"I haven't been able to come to Zero's birthday party in like forty years or something, there's no way he's getting away without an embarrassing gift," Takamiya announces in that obnoxious way of his. Kaname is certain this ruckus is that insolent Hunter's fault.

When Aido's curiosity gets the better of him, Cross explains while weeping tears of joy that Zero has refused to celebrate his birthday since he was twelve. Kaname is not terribly surprised, but makes a note. Yuuki overheard Cross' story, and next year she's going to demand a spectacle. Perhaps a ball.

While his attempts at information gathering are a bust, Kaname finally meets Takamiya's wife Misao in person - how that rude hooligan convinced a woman like her to marry him, Kaname
cannot divine. There's also another Hunter that Kiryuu introduces as Archivist Fong, who scribbles into a small notebook and asks odd questions but does no other harm.

Yuuki, consciously or not, has been shadowing Aido as he moves around the room. The noble was allowed to return from his exile in the Senate Palace for this one evening, just long enough to attend the party. Kaname makes sure he catches Aido's eye, then smiles broadly, just to watch the noble's eyes get watery. Ah, satisfaction.

Kiryuu seems to be enjoying his party as well, if his relaxed stance and supple body language are any guide. Kiryuu also makes sure the guests know their nice evening was due to Yuuki's efforts, which is gratifying for Kaname to see. The three of them see off the guests at a good hour, and though the vampires are a little sore about the gift etiquette, morale seems high. Kaname can only marvel. This may have been a successful enough experiment that everyone will come back again next year.

"You haven't asked about our presents," Yuuki prompts when they've finished acting as the party's hosts.

"I was hoping you'd forgotten," Kiryuu replies, wearing his most inscrutable Hunter expression.

"No such luck," she informs him cheerfully, and hands Kiryuu a box. "You can have my gift now, and you'll get Kaname's gift later."

The box is flat and long, but not particularly large. Even Kiryuu is not completely immune to the pleasure of a surprise gift, and his curiosity peeks through his stoicism. Pulling the ribbon's lace to untie the knot, the Hunter opens the lid of the box. "Yuuki, this is lovely, thank you!" Kiryuu says, and pulls out a night blue scarf with silver threads in blended cotton and silk.

"I'm glad you like it," she beams. "Look underneath."

Digging into the box, Kiryuu pulls out a card printed on expensive stationary, and reads the first line. "Yuuki, you were only allowed to get me one gift," he says in exasperation.

Yuuki smiles like butter wouldn't melt in her mouth. "I did get you one gift. That's the scarf. But it would be a shame if you didn't have anywhere to wear it, right?"

Kiryuu gives her an very unconvinced glare.

Always merciful, Kaname decides to help his dear wife. "We're taking a couple of days off. After everything that happened with Shirabuki and Aido - and now last night - I think we need time away."

The Hunter rolls his eyes, shrugs, and surrenders. "Where are we going?"

"Into the mountains. I've rented the use of a small, private onsen with a natural hot spring. We're leaving as soon as we change. It's cold, so you should bring the scarf."

Kiryuu glares at the two of them. "You just want to see me naked."

"Possibly," Kaname admits, and Yuuki nearly keels over laughing.

Chapter End Notes
If you need a refresher, the memories Takuma gave Kaname are from ch. 6. Refer to ch.1 if you want a more in-depth description of Zero’s apartment.

Being fair to Zero, I have to point out that Kaname's secrets are more often things like 'I'm really your brother, and we're engaged', 'actually I lied and I am your great-something grandfather instead, still probably incest though', 'I'm starting a war in a convoluted plan to kill all the purebloods' and 'I'm ending the war by committing suicide and leaving the clean-up to you guys'.

An onsen is a communal bathing facility. So yes, you bathe naked together. Usually, the bathers are gender segregated, but really nice onsen have rooms with private baths, or you can reserve private time for families and couples. I didn't mean to be so cliche but Yuuki was desperate and ready to try almost anything, and if it works in anime it's worth a shot right?

I have a vague idea about how Kaname and Yuuki punished Aido, but it's more fun to let you guess and see what you come up with.

Next chapter: Zero smacks headfirst into his body issues, Kaname tells a story, and Yuuki wants to upgrade her relationship, so, so much.
Hello everyone! I'm sorry for the delay, but I really struggled writing this chapter. In many ways, this chapter ties together pieces of the story going all the way back to chapter one, and I wanted to do it justice. Which required two separate rewrites of large portions of the chapter, and ended up being nearly 17,000 words long. Please enjoy the final result!

A kotatsu is a low, wooden table frame covered by a futon, or heavy blanket, with a table top above and a heat source underneath.

Leaning his forearms against the balcony rail, Zero shivers as he looks down into the valley where the first winter snows have already covered the ground in a blanket of white. Their room at the onsen has a mountaintop view that takes his breath away, but the wind's chill makes him glad for his new scarf. A vampire-run inn catering to wealthy nobles, with luxury no less impressive than Rosehill - Zero doesn't want to consider how much it costs for just one night in such a beautiful place.

Shivering again, Zero ducks back inside, shutting the balcony door with a snap to spare Yuuki and Kuran the icy breeze. "Not that I want to be ungrateful, but didn't we just go on vacation?" the Hunter asks, diving underneath the kotatsu for warmth. Nightshade pads over and sprawls next to him, easily confused for a fur rug decorating the inn's wood floors.

Flopped on her belly under the kotatsu's skirt, Yuuki raises her head from her arms. "Aido's rescue doesn't count. I didn't sleep more than six hours in three days! And southern Europe was a work holiday. I spent most of my time practicing politics or playing hostess."

Ever conscious of his image, Kuran is the only one sitting properly on a cushion with his feet folded underneath him. He's also the only one who hasn't changed into the clean yukata they're supposed to wear while they're here, still in his business suit. "We visited Nikko," the pureblood reminds Yuuki, leisurely preparing a fresh pot of tea from the kettle of boiling water the onsen staff provided.

"Daytrips don't count," she argues, collapsing back on the floor.

Kuran just hums in amusement, the line of his spine relaxed.

This feels nice, Zero thinks sleepily as he curls into Nightshade's side for warmth. "Thank you both. For everything."

"You're welcome Zero," Yuuki says. Rolling over, she leans on her elbow and rests her chin in one hand. "We want you to enjoy yourself. It's your birthday, officially, now that it's past midnight."

Zero meant more than just his gratitude for this trip. They're being so nice to him, even after his
mistake. It makes Zero feel guilty all over again. "How long can we stay?" the Hunter asks, scratching the black wolf under the chin.

Kuran begins pouring the tea. "Not counting the half-night today, two full nights."

Zero's chest warms, and he smiles a little. What an unexpected luxury. Their time is the most expensive gift Kuran and Yuuki could give Zero. The two of them are always so busy, carrying out the duty of the Kuran family to guide and stabilize the vampire world. Spending two and a half days with Yuuki when she doesn't have to leave for meetings and work will be heavenly.

The Hunter scoffs at his own thoughts - he sounds like some kind of housewife, not an active Hunter with his own jobs - and busies himself with reducing Nightshade to a drooling puddle of bliss.

"Would you two like to bathe before dinner, or after?" Kuran asks.

Every muscle in Zero's body snaps tight. His heart whirrs, earlier ease crushed beneath the panic coursing through his veins. "After," Zero says, a little too sharply.

An onsen expects their guests to bathe together, completely naked. Kuran and Yuuki would see Zero naked, without any clothes hiding what's between his legs. The prospect is both intimidating and terrifying, and Zero wants to get up and flee as far away as possible.

Kuran and Yuuki are both watching him. "If you're uncomfortable, Zero," Yuuki tells him, "you don't have to do things the traditional way. We can compromise."

Nightshade grumbles because Zero's stopped petting his ears, and the Hunter distracts himself by rubbing even more vigorously.

Zero needs to face this. This is one of his duties. Didn't he promise himself he would push further after the last Court? Zero's time in season is coming up, and he needs to overcome this requirement if he wants to trigger his heat. And the Hunter owes Kuran and Yuuki for their tolerance and forgiveness. Zero doesn't need to cause more trouble.

"No, I'm fine," he says past the knot in his stomach.

The onsen staff serve their dinner in the traditional style, an array of artfully presented small dishes with portions for each diner brought to their room on trays and then presented theatrically.

Zero doesn't taste a single thing, preoccupied and terrified by the idea of having to strip naked in front of his spouses - maybe even with strangers. His breathing is just a little too fast. So is his heartbeat. Zero drinks glass after glass of water, but his mouth still feels dry every time he answers his spouses' queries, trying his best to conceal his discomfort.

It all goes too fast - dinner, desert, gathering their bathing supplies, the walk down to the indoor bath. One small mercy: the three of them won't be disturbed. Kuran called the front desk and reserved the bath ahead of time. Zero feels a little foolish for believing even for a second that those possessive purebloods would allow any other eyes to glimpse his nakedness. At least no one else will see...

The changing room has shelves lined with wicker baskets; you're meant to take your clothes off and store them here before you go into the bath. Face to face with his fear, Zero's jaw hurts from how tightly he's clenching it. Right now, somewhere off to the side, Yuuki and Kuran are stripping out of their yukata, the same way Zero is supposed to be removing his right now.
Staring straight ahead, the Hunter swallows, his hands frozen on the belt of his own yukata, holding so tightly he fears he'll tear the material. Zero reminds himself that this is necessary. This is his duty. His hesitation is stupid. He just needs to let go of the belt, and force his fingers to undo the knot. Then the robe will fall, and they'll see his - his wrongness. The parts that aren't him.

Zero's throat closes up.

He can't breathe. He can't breathe. His head is swimming and his chest is tight. He feels the heavy dread of the condemned, crawling in his stomach and thick in his lungs. Zero tries to suck in a breath. He can't. He can't do this. But he has to do this.

A hand, large and warm, seizes Zero's wrist.

The Hunter startles badly, jerking back a step and staring at the immovable grasp around his arm, his mind still blinded and lost in fear. But Zero can breathe now. The touch shocked him out of his paralysis. Slowly, Zero turns his head, following the pale hand to the arm, up the sleeve to the shoulder, then the throat.

It's Kuran, fully clothed. The claret eyes are carefully free of emotion as the pureblood studies Zero. There is no pity on his face. Zero couldn't have stood it if there was.

Zero turns his head just a bit more. Yuuki is right beside Kuran. She's wearing all her clothes too. She takes Zero's other wrist. He didn't realize his skin was so cold.

They lead Zero out to the bath lounge, cozily lit and full of couches and chairs. Kuran pushes Zero down into the closest chair, then stays to guard against escape.

Yuuki brings Zero a glass of cold barley tea, left for overheated bathers relaxing after their dip in the hot spring. Zero drains the glass in a single pull. It's foul. Zero really hates barley tea. Kuran takes the glass, leaving Zero's hands empty of distractions, and places it on the side table. The Kurans stand shoulder to shoulder, wearing the same implacable expression, and watch Zero.

Zero closes his eyes; this is the part where they order him to explain what just happened.

"You will stay here with Nightshade while Yuuki and I bathe. Then we will remain here, outside the door, as you go and bathe. You will not move from this spot until we return. Do you understand?"

Zero opens his eyes, disordered gaze falling on one, then the other pureblood as he struggles to understand. Finally, the Hunter nods.

Kuran summons his familiar, and the Kurans go back into the changing room, leaving Nightshade behind. The black wolf is stubbornly cuddly, and insists on laying his head in Zero's lap to have his ears rubbed. Just how much of Kuran is in Nightshade, Zero wonders for the thousandth time as he scratches the familiar on his belly. But the warmth and familiar comfort do their job, just as Kuran probably intended. Zero's shoulders relax, and the coiled tension in his body drains away drop by drop.

In the bath afterwards, Zero is no better than a limp noodle. If the water was any deeper than his waist, he probably would have drowned. Hiding from the purebloods standing guard outside, Zero soaks in the bath until his fingers prune, and the warmth feels like it's boiling his reddened, overheated skin.

A knock on the outer door. Yuuki's voice. "Zero, you've been in there a long time. Are you okay?"
Zero shifts in the bath, sinking down to his chin. "I'm fine," he says, "I'll be out soon."

"Okay, I'll be waiting outside then."

What is Zero doing? He's a Hunter, damnit! Hiding in here like a coward, isn't he ashamed of himself? Zero swamps the tile floor with water as he surges out of the pool, and stamps back into the changing room. He dries himself roughly, and layers himself back into his clothes, then continues riding his surge of determination out the door.

In the lounge, Yuuki and Kuran are discussing something beneath the range of Zero's vampire hearing, but turn to watch Zero when he pulls aside the cloth flap.

When Zero sees Yuuki, he falters. Away from the steam of the bath, the cold outer air is like reality hitting him in the face, and his bravery drains away.

Yuuki pats the open couch seat beside her. Reluctantly, Zero drags himself closer and settles down. But Zero doesn't look away from their faces, or try to hide. He doesn't want to talk about this, but he's not going to run away. That's his pride as a Hunter.

"Are you well?" inquires Kuran, the way he would ask a guest at a dinner party.

Zero crosses his arms. "Yes. Get on with it, you relic."

Kuran looks amused, like he knows Zero's bravado is the frailest of reeds, and insulting the pureblood is the only way the Hunter can keep up the facade.

Yuuki touches Zero's wrist, seeking his hand. The Hunter allows his wife to untangle his crossed arms, and entwine their palms in her warm grip. Yuuki squeezes, and gives Zero an encouraging smile. Zero can see the concern in her eyes, and his posture softens. He feels very tired.

Kuran takes the inquisitor's role. The relaxed line of his shoulders is meant to conceal the sharpness of his focus, but the disguised scrutiny makes Zero's skin prickle. "Why did you lie about being comfortable bathing together? The idea clearly troubles you. You almost suffered another panic attack. Why force yourself to endure such distress, when we have repeatedly told you we have no desire to force your boundaries?"

"It's necessary," argues Zero. "My time in season is coming up in December, and we still haven't physically consummated our marriage. We can't afford to wait any longer. We have a duty. I appreciate your concern, but we can't stop moving forward just because I can't get my emotions under control."

Kuran shakes his head. "I don't even know where to begin. If you had your way, it sounds like you would rather we treated you like a spoil of war, a captive bride. And your lack of concern for yourself is especially troubling. If you are bent on doing this, Zero, you require our cooperation. You want us to behave like monsters without humanity. And we refuse."

Zero begins to protest, but Kuran merely raises his voice. "Nevertheless, you do have a point. We are willing to deepen our intimacy, Zero, if that is your desire. But we will do it on our terms."

Zero is considering this when Yuuki strokes the back of his hand, and he turns to face her instead. "We thought it would be less scary for you if we tried going a little bit at a time. So you could learn that there's nothing to worry about - because we'll take care of you, and we won't let you be hurt."

Yuuki tucks a lock of hair off his forehead, and Zero leans into the touch. "We'll try it your way,"
he allows. At least some progress is better than none, and the Kurans have dug their heels in every
time Zero's tried to push.

"Which is more comfortable, being touched or touching one of us?" Kuran asks objectively, his
hands folded in his lap.

That's easy. "Touching Yuuki," Zero replies immediately. Was that his imagination, or did a
muscle in Kuran's face jump?

"Then we'll work toward that goal first," Kuran says. "But for tonight, we will return to our room
and sleep."

"Don't forget you owe Zero his present," Yuuki interjects.

"We'll go back, ready ourselves for bed, and then I'll tell Zero what his horse's name is," Kuran
dutifully corrects himself.

If Kaname hadn't spent his entire life trying to be as authoritative, collected, and unreadable as
possible, he might admit to feeling a little exposed right now. Was his choice too personal?
Inappropriate, considering the circumstances? If he were the Kaname of a year ago, merely having
to ask that question would be answer enough. Nothing was worth leaving himself exposed and
unguarded, even if that meant keeping Yuuki away. But everything has changed so much since
Kiryuu came.

Kaname shakes his head. How foolish, to be so concerned over a name for a silly animal!

The pureblood lingers by the wardrobe, watching Yuuki and Kiryuu turn down the futon. While
the three of them were in the spring, the staff discreetly cleared away the dishes and set out their
bedding. In a traditional inn like this, guests sleep on the floor in the same room they ate dinner.
Not an unfamiliar experience for the Ancestor of the Kuran. Mind you, when he slept on the floor,
it usually didn't involve bedding, and certainly not anywhere this warm or comfortable.

Clearing her throat, Yuuki burrows further under the duvet and shoots Kaname a significant look.
He sighs fondly, and goes to the opposite side, whisking the duvet over his legs so he doesn't let
the pocket of warm air out. Even with three adults, the onsen easily accommodated their need for
an oversized sleeping area and futon; the Kurans were not the first guests who brought their omega
on holiday.

Propping her head on her fist, Yuuki doesn't even wait for Kaname to settle before she eagerly
says, "Come on, Kaname! Tell us!"

"I'd think it was your birthday if I didn't know better," he scolds lightly. "Patience is a virtue."

Yuuki sticks out her tongue, but subsides.

Beside him, Kiryuu is not without curiosity of his own, watching Kaname with those intelligent
lilac eyes.

Kaname likes it when that gaze doesn't waver. "I've thought over the matter like you requested,
Zero."

"And what have you decided?" the Hunter asks.

"I would like to name your bay mare Saya," Kaname tells him.
Kiryuu thinks this over. "I'm not opposed," he says. "I'll accept your choice. Thank you, Kaname."

Kiryuu doesn't seem inclined to inquire any further. Smiling just the slightest bit, Kaname relaxes into the mattress, flipping off the light switch with his power and preparing for sleep.

Just when Kaname thinks he's gotten away with it, Yuuki pipes up from the other side of the futon. "How did you decide on Saya? It's a nice name, but I was kind of expecting something more...unpronounceable? Longer, at least."

Feeling the impulse to lie, Kaname reminds himself that he wants to keep his promise to Yuuki. He knew his choice might require explanation, and he owes his wife this story sooner or later. "I named Zero's horse after someone I once knew. I was fond of her - I suppose we were friends. I don't know what became of her. I could only confirm that she died while I slept beneath Kuran Manor."

"A vampire?" Kiryuu prompts.

"Yes. She was a pureblood, and one of my followers."

"So like Ruka-sempai," Yuuki comments.

Kaname winces. "No, not quite like my relationship with Ruka...You see, she and I were lovers."

"Lovers?" Yuuki repeats, a hurt edge in her tone. "You loved her?"

"No!" Kaname hastily corrects. "No. Lovers only in the physical sense. Both of us had other partners. Ours was a business relationship that included sexual benefits. Such things are common in the vampire world. It's easy to tell you're both Hunter raised - vampires never assume a link between sex and love." That was the reason Kaname had been reluctant to explain in the first place. To Kaname, his actions spoke only of fondness, but Kiryuu and Yuuki might see it differently.

"We were never anything more than friends. It was physical pleasure, a diversion for bored immortals, just another entertainment. Saya and I shared a sense of loneliness, and casual sex was a failed attempt at a deeper connection we already knew we lacked."

"So you named my horse after your ex-lover?" Kiryuu says in a dry tone, with an amused lift of his brows.

Kaname doesn't rise to the bait. "Saya was more important than just being one of my lovers, Zero. Besides a valuable ally and a good companion, Saya was the Ancestress of the Kuran, and Yuuki's direct foremother."

Kiryuu eyes Kaname with something like disbelief. "You named my horse after your ex-wife?"

Kaname covers his face with his palm. "No. Yuuki is my first and only wife. Saya and I never married, or had an official connection of any kind, besides king and advisor."

"Really?" Yuuki says, and it hurts Kaname to hear the tremble of doubt in her voice.

"I neither loved nor married her," he affirms. "We worked well together, in bed or out of it, but there were no feelings except fondness."

Accepting the reassurance Kaname is offering, Yuuki's curiosity overwhelms her. "What was she like?" she asks in an eager tone.
Staring at the ceiling, Kaname thinks for a moment. "Very loyal to the causes she chose. Reliable, competent - she was a trusted lieutenant while I was building my support, then she was one of my royal advisors. Saya was not a scholar, but undoubtedly one of the sharpest people I've known. Quite reserved, but an excellent conversationalist. Unusually sensible for a pureblood, not one for spasms of passion. Out of duty and need, we had two children - just enough to continue the line. My despair and disinterest were growing, and it was becoming clear that I would eventually be unfit to rule. For the sake of stability, I needed an heir. If the purebloods fought over my throne, it would likely have triggered another Blood War as the conflict spilled into the human world. Saya was not a motherly sort of person, but she raised them well. I always hoped that she would find happiness elsewhere."

"Was she like you? Ahh, did she look like you, I mean," Yuuki asks.

Kaname can see the image in his memory. "Saya had brown hair, a lighter color than mine - quite like yours, actually - quite wavy, and extremely long. Pale and lovely, as all purebloods are. Though she was considered short for a pureblood. But Saya had the most striking eyes, a kind of icy, electric blue. I always admired them. Now and then one of my descendants will inherit her blue eyes."

*Like Kuran Rido* goes unsaid between the three of them.

Then Yuuki squirms in excitement, yanking the blankets to the side. "Ooh, Zero has blue eyes too! Maybe we'll have blue-eyed children!"

Kaname examines Kiryuu's obviously lilac eyes, then raises a dubious eyebrow in Yuuki's direction.

"Quit looking so skeptical," Kiryuu complains, yanking on Kaname's sleeve. "Yuuki isn't wrong. Underneath the Kiryuu paleness, my eyes are blue, just like my hair is dark. Our condition causes any color to be diluted, so dark hair gets turned into silver and my eyes look purple, because of the way light passes through them. My grandmother's eyes looked red."

"Fascinating," Kaname comments, entirely sincere. He was no scientist like the Ancestor of the Hunters, but given his origins, he has more than a passing interest.

Turning to Kiryuu, Kaname asks, "Is the name still acceptable to you? I meant it as a memorial to my companion. I owe her a debt for helping bring Yuuki into being, and restoring my sense of purpose."

"If you don't mind my chunky, lazy horse borrowing it, then I'd like to use your friend's name," Kiryuu replies. His Consort's eyes have a softness to them, and he's tipped his head to watch Kaname where it rests on his pillow.

"Then Saya she will be," Kaname announces. "Happy Birthday, Zero."

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It was one of those perfect mornings where Zero woke up slowly, after the perfect amount of sleep, and without any particular hurry, knowing he had nothing urgent to do, his whole body loose and easy, comfortable and free of pain with his heart at ease.

All three of them had slept in, and Zero is the only one awake yet. He lies for a while and luxuriates in the feeling, soaking in the relaxation and pleasure. Even the shame of last night's failure has been thrown off. Presently, as Zero stares up at the ceiling, it seems that he should get up. Zero knows if he leaves the futon, he will disturb the slumbering, paranoid purebloods on
either side. Well, if they've got to wake up, he'd better do the job himself, Zero decides. Feeling mischievous, he picks the most fun method.

"Yuuki," he whispers, rolling so his head faces her pillow.

She makes an 'umphhh' sound and buries her head deeper in the stuffing.

Well, Zero will just have to make Yuuki want to wake up! He rolls the other way, not surprised to find Kuran's russet eyes open, watching him. The pureblood is a notoriously light sleeper.

"Come on," Zero whispers playfully, "I bet we can wake her up." Kuran deserves a reward for the trust he showed Zero and Yuuki last night, freely confessing another piece of his past.

So Zero wriggles sideways, off the center of the mattress onto Kuran's side. The pureblood allows Zero to do as he pleases, probably out of curiosity at first. Zero kindles even more curiosity when he slides on top of Kuran's body, and scoots up to straddle the pureblood's belly, the duvet pooling around his hips.

Zero's usually the one underneath Kuran; turning the tables like this is a rush. Having the pureblood on his back, looking up at Zero with his dark hair tousled on the pillow - an illusion of vulnerability, but an enjoyable one to a Hunter of vampire kind.

Experimentally, Zero squeezes his thighs. Kuran's body is firm underneath him, and barely gives at all. Now the pureblood looks too bloody smug, so Zero goes on the attack, and bends down to lazily kiss him. Kuran tries to press forward, but Zero backs off until Kuan yields to his pace, and their touches remain slow and shallow, nearly chaste.

Zero can feel Yuuki watching them, and he pulls at his husband's yukata, widening the robe's opening until he can brace himself against Kuran's bare chest. Showing off for Yuuki, he rubs his palms in shallow circle motions until Yuuki breaks and gives a plaintive cry.

She's awake, but still too relaxed to get up, lying on her back and giving Zero her best sad puppy eyes.

He huffs, trying not to laugh, and half-crawls, half-slithers over. With Yuuki's pureblood strength, she doesn't even budge when Zero climbs atop her, just greedily strains up to receive her share of kisses.

"What are we doing tonight?" he asks Kuran in between breaths.

"Breakfast, served here. If you want to hike or train, we can do that in the early evening. Lunch, then perhaps a bath, reading or lounging until dinner. I'm strictly forbidden from working today," Kuran says, voice rich and amused.

Reminded he has an entire day without interruptions, Zero is determined to spend as much time as possible with Yuuki. Much to her disappointment, the Hunter gives her one last kiss, then stands up to get dressed. Zero is allowed to wear human clothes the whole time they're on vacation, and he plans to make the most of it.

During their hike, Kuran complains that he could travel the distance in a fraction of the time using his bat familiars, but Zero and Yuuki insist on the experience of traveling like normal humans, slowly and on foot. The snowy mountain scenery more than makes up for the inconvenience, even with the cold.

Both of the Kurans keep a close eye on Zero when he's allowed one hour of conditioning training
after breakfast, and one half-hour run before dinner, fully disclosed and monitored as per the new rules.

Zero spends the rest of the afternoon reading a romantic novel Takuma sent along for him - not even his usual nonfiction - and losing to Kuran at card games. When she gets bored, Yuuki begs a tablet from the onsen staff and watches a few episodes of a new drama she's found, which Kuran dutifully sits through until dinnertime.

After an inactive day - by Zero's extreme standards - the heat of the baths feels more indulgent than the fine meal beforehand. They try the outdoor hot spring this time, a picturesque spot ringed by trees; the bath itself is a large stone basin carved from the bedrock. Without discussion, the three of them repeat the arrangement from last night. While the Kurans bathe first, Zero is happy to walk around the garden and let Nightshade sniff and explore until it's his turn.

When Zero finally sinks into the clear, hot water, it's like the last built-up tension flows out of his limbs. Reduced to a state of utter relaxation, Zero floats until their time is up. If he were any more boneless, Yuuki would have to fish him out with a net and roll him back to bed.

Today was as perfect a day as Zero can remember in - well, Ancestress knows how long. After pushing his body so hard, Zero is finally well-rested and feels good. Despite his emotional upheaval last night, those feelings were wiped away by today's perfect mix of beloved companionship and peaceful solitude.

So perhaps Zero, unused to such bliss, isn't quite himself when he lifts his fangs from Yuuki's neck, licks his mouth clean of her heavenly scarlet life, and tells her, "Drink from me next."

Yuuki blinks, astonished at the request. "Are you sure?" If they weren't kneeling on the futon, Zero thinks she might have keeled over in amazement.

Behind them, Kaname's footsteps cut off as he comes to a standstill, before swiftly crossing the room to Zero's side.

Zero can understand their shock. After all, the last people to feed from him were the monarchists who tried to kill him. But he can't summon up the energy to be afraid. The powerful lassitude saturating his veins is blocking his fear. He trusts Yuuki, and his attackers didn't touch his neck. If Yuuki feeds him, it's not fair that Zero doesn't reciprocate. And Zero is fully recovered from his injuries, so there's nothing holding Yuuki back. Zero reminds her of those things now.

Yuuki doesn't look quite convinced. Zero turns to Kuran, certain he'll find an easier audience. Instead, Kuran looks just as skeptical.

"Please," Zero pleads, using his last weapon, "there will never be a better time than this to try."

How can Yuuki deny Zero something he sincerely asks for, when she desires it with every fibre of her being?

His beloved Yuuki treats him so carefully, prepares his bite area so thoroughly, that Zero hardly feels a thing when her fangs pierce his flesh. His relaxation trembles a little when she begins to feed, but Zero can see her auburn hair out of the corner of his eye, a tangible sign that he's safe.

He never realized before how intimate this could be, Zero thinks as Yuuki bends over him, his head fuzzy from the buzz of pure blood in his belly. It's satisfying, knowing he can keep Yuuki alive with his own thin blood, the same way she succored his teenage self. Yuuki takes only a few mouthfuls, barely enough for a taste, sealing the punctures shut with a gentleness born from care.
When Yuuki checks his condition, Zero kisses her to affirm he's completely well.

Zero keeps waiting for Kuran to barge in and take his turn, but the pureblood doesn't disturb the two of them. Finally, Zero turns his head to see Kuran out on the balcony, his back facing the scene of Yuuki feeding from Zero. Kuran must have been upset by the sight, Zero concludes.

"He's being polite," Yuuki says, catching Zero's gaze. "You didn't invite Kaname to feed, just me, so he's giving us privacy. He thinks he's not welcome."

Oh. "Go get him, please," Zero requests.

Flashing Zero an enormous smile, Yuuki bounces over to the balcony door, hooks her fingers in Kuran's sleeve, and skips back to the futon, dragging their husband behind her. "Got him!" she announces, shoving Kuran forward.

"You kept me waiting," scolds Zero, and tips his throat back in offering.

Kuran stiffens, kneeling next to Zero in an instant. Much to Zero's surprise, Kuran is almost as thorough as Yuuki when he applies the anaesthetic, a startling reversal of the pureblood's near-violent, painful early feedings. A curious detail, but Zero puts it out of mind and focuses on remaining pliant and easy as Kuran takes from the vein. Just like Yuuki, Kuran only sips at Zero's blood.

"We can work up to larger amounts," the pureblood explains once Zero's neck is healed. "No need to risk your health."

Even having Kuran feed from him hadn't provoked a negative reaction; Zero is nearly giddy with success. Though that might just be the pure blood, bubbling in his belly like an electric charge to an empty battery. Feeding always makes vampires a bit drugged.

"I'm too awake to sleep yet," Zero says. "Let's watch the sunrise on the balcony."

Yuuki coaxes hot chocolate from the kitchens, scandalizing the entire staff when a pureblood waltzes down to collect her own refreshments. Zero and Yuuki have a good laugh about it as dawn's pink light peeks over the mountains. Their cocoa is the real thing too, not instant mix, good and rich and made with so many marshmallows they spill over the rim. The chocolate joins the sweet blood warming Zero's belly, and radiates heat beneath his limbs, making his skin feel flushed.

Laughing and talking between themselves, Yuuki and Zero watch the sunrise arm-in-arm, with Kuran commenting here and there from only a handspan away. Watching them, the comfortable atmosphere and the ruddy cast warming their faces, Zeror feels...lucky. Even with so much pain and misfortune, this moment still exists, and it feels good. Zero's heart is struck once more by Yuuki's beauty, the dawn's red flush brightening her auburn hair to red. Even Kuran - well, Zero can admit that he's objectively attractive - the sunlight picks out the scarlet in his eyes, and deepens the hollow of his throat.

Maybe Zero's pushing too fast, but it just slips out as Yuuki lays her head on Zero's shoulder. "Can I see you, in the light?"

Yuuki gives him a puzzled look.

Zero's cheeks warm. "All of you, I mean. I bet you'd be beautiful. Even more than usual."

Drifting up behind them, Kuran touches Yuuki's shoulder. "Zero wants you to take your clothes off..."
for him, my dear."

Yuuki blushed too. "Will you be okay? You didn't take the idea of naked me very well last night."

"It was mostly that I didn't want you to see me naked," Zero explains. "If it's just you - I mean, if you're fine with that - then I think it'll be okay."

Yuuki fixes Zero with a gaze that's more suited to her serious, pureblood princess self, as though she's examining him down to his bones.

Zero shivers, feeling exposed, but doesn't recant.

Then his wife smiles, and her eyes dance. "Let's go inside, Kaname. We'll open the drapes, and show our Consort what belongs to him." Yuuki captures a handful of Kuran's sleeping yukata, and pulls him behind her, her gaze lingering over her shoulder.

Kuran gently stops her, pausing at the door. "To be clear, Zero, you would prefer I that remain clothed?"

On an impulse, Zero tells him, "If you want to get naked, then go ahead." Fair was fair; Zero was supposed to treat them equally intimately, after all.

As Zero settles on a cushion, his husband and wife make quick work of their yukata, loosening the belts and letting the cloth fall to the floor, leaving the pair in their underclothes. Both the Kurans wear simple cloth undergarments to bed that hide enough to make Zero comfortable. Zero's seen this much of their skin before, but he appreciates the opportunity now to admire them again.

He's not blind; vampires are beautiful monsters, and purebloods no less than perfection made flesh. Thick, silky auburn hair, striking scarlet eyes, elegant proportions, flawless symmetry in their features, clear, even-toned fair skin, the perfect amount of softness and muscle - not a single thing about either of them is lacking. It's enough to make Zero self-conscious whenever he thinks about it, even though he doesn't care much for appearances.

If examined closely, their bodies betray their inhumanity. Their skin is unnaturally smooth; they don't wrinkle, and they don't carry calluses. Neither of them have a single scar on their bodies - even their umbilical cord stumps heal into clean skin. They naturally don't have any hair under their arms, on their legs, or on Kuran's chest either; a tiny, tiny voice in the back of Zero's head wonders if they match down there.

Preening in her underwear, Yuuki turns slowly in a circle; Kuran puts one hand on his hip, slyly amused by Zero's scrutiny.

Zero glares. "Don't look at me like that. You're the pervert here, old man."

Kuran raises an eyebrow, and then peels off his underwear in one quick motion.

Zero squeaks, and slaps his hands over his eyes before his brain can register the image. "What was that for?" he demands.

"I have nothing to be ashamed of," Kuran says. "Have you never seen anyone naked before, Zero?"

Yuuki giggles. Zero just knows the bloody leech is laughing at him too. "Of course I have!" Just, not so...meant for him.

"Shall I put them back on?" Kuran inquires, as casual as if he weren't talking about his stark naked
Zero did ask for this. "...just let me prepare myself." The Hunter takes his hands away, but with his eyes still closed. Zero takes a deep breath. On the count of three. One. Two. Three!

Zero makes a sound he can only describe as 'eep'. How, what, why - his thought processes are all gibbering as his poor brain tries vainly to process. Dimly, his subconscious confirms that Kuran's hairless upper body does match down below. And yes, those are Kuran's 'assets'. Um. Just - woah. And he's supposed to - ?

He's going to die, Zero groans to himself. Death by sex. It's too much - It won't fit! Blood and bloody ashes, light blind him, Ancestress save him!

Kuran's parts aren't comically large, they're just...porn star size. Generous, yes, that's a good word. And oddly shaped compared to Zero, that must be the alpha bits. His knot, the bulb of flesh right there at the base of his...

I am not intimidated by Kuran Kaname's penis, Zero reminds himself, and tears his eyes away to look at Yuuki.

Who is biting her lip, still wearing her own underwear, and suddenly looking less confident. "If it's weird seeing me like this, just tell me and I'll cover up," Yuuki says. Before Zero can ask what she means, she's bending over and stepping out of her undershorts, and Zero is blown away by a whole new impossible sight.

This time, the sound is more like 'meep'. Zero can definitely see, ahem, the 'family resemblance'. Is this normal? Are all alphas like this, or just purebloods? Even Yuuki is much bigger than him, Zero's poor masculine pride mourns. Actually, thinking about it, Zero's rather proud of her. She's much shorter than Kuran, but scarcely any smaller.

"Is it...is it okay?" Yuuki ventures. Her shoulders are drawn tight, and hunched down, like she's trying to stop herself covering up. The line of her mouth is tight and unhappy.

Zero's brow furrows. What does she mean? Yuuki looks beautiful, even if Zero's having to adjust to meeting her new, very impressive addition. Oh! That must be it. Yuuki must be afraid her changes will make Zero uncomfortable. Does she feel the same way Zero does about his new genitals? Was it hard for her? Zero's heart squeezes. Yuuki should never be afraid of Zero's opinion.

"Just like I thought," Zero tells Yuuki, looking up into her eyes so she can see his love and sincerity, "all of Yuuki is really beautiful."

His wife blushes to the roots of her hair, and her posture straightens as every drop of her fear and tension disappears. "Really?" she half-teases, still a little unsure.

"You look good," Zero tells her with perfect honesty. The changes in her body look natural, the transition between male and female parts smooth and balanced. Her male sex is elegant, in its way, and her female sex is hidden demurely behind it. Yuuki's natural beauty is only enhanced, not marred. It makes Zero's body feel tingly to see Yuuki entirely nude, after pining for her all this time.

But Zero is also curious, seeing another body as fundamentally altered as his own. "Do you...do you like having that?" the Hunter dares to ask.

"Yeah," Yuuki says immediately, stepping closer. "It felt like being complete, like it was a missing
piece. Is it different for you?"

Zero gropes for a response that won't betray him. "The vampire in my head feels the same way."

"And the human part of you?" Kuran prompts, catching Zero's lie of omission.

Zero's speechlessness says everything he can't. The Hunter wraps his arms around himself, feeling suddenly vulnerable.

Just that little sign of discomfort, and suddenly Zero's spouses are kneeling beside him, ignoring their own nudity out of a desire to comfort him. Which means Zero abruptly finds himself much closer than expected to a lot of sizeable pureblood junk. Flushing, the Hunter yanks his eyes back up to safer places.

"I'm so sorry," Yuuki says, her expression contrite. "I didn't think. That's why you panicked last night, wasn't it?"

"I just didn't want you to see," Zero says lamely.

"What can we do to help you overcome your fear?" Kuran asks.

"I don't know," Zero replies, his distracted gaze drawn like a magnet to the awkward bits flopping around everywhere. Neither of the Kurans are circumcised, he notes absently.

Kuran catches him looking, and slyly smiles, radiating a smug atmosphere. "Like what you see?"

Zero immediately wants to punch him. "Don't you think showing off like this is a little shameless?"

Kuran's grin belongs on a shark. "However could it be shameless, my sweet virgin? We're married, aren't we? We're the only ones allowed to be immoral with you. In fact, we're just fulfilling our duties to you. Anyone else who tried, now that would be shameless."

Zero can't stop himself making a scandalized face, then catches himself and glares.

Kuran laughs. "You're not the first one to be impressed, little kitten. The Kuran family is rather gifted, even among purebloods. Yuuki inherited my superior genes in that respect."

Grudgingly, Zero admits that a pureblood alpha's excessive size makes sense. The purebloods were designed to create armies, either by Turning humans or breeding hybrids. 'Built for the job' - ugh, gross. That was not the mental image Zero wanted stuck in his head.

"Okay, I'm done for the night. Put some pants on already," Zero says, looking away and waving his hand.

Chuckling, Kuran bends over to pick up his yukata, obnoxiously showing off the way the muscles in his ass flex.

"You don't even exercise," Zero complains.

"I don't need to. One of the perks of being a pureblood - I don't lose muscle tone from inactivity. Convenient, isn't it?" Kuran replies with relish.

Zero and Yuuki look at one another. Zero rolls his eyes. Yuuki shrugs helplessly, then gets up to put on her yukata.

If the world was a fair place, Zero reflects, Kuran's overinflated ego would be compensating for his
tiny dick. Instead, Kuran's penis is better described as 'ridiculously large.' Zero shakes his head. There really is no god.

Trapped in bed by two sleeping, stubbornly aroused purebloods, Zero wonders yet again what he's done to deserve ending up in these awkward situations. Yuuki snuffles, and presses closer to Zero, completely insensible that she's also pressing something else harder against him. Kuran may be asleep, or he may be awake and tormenting Zero for fun by pretending to sleep. Hard to tell. Either way, Kuran isn't even twitching, except for a certain part.

Zero's current circumstances are only made worse by the memory of last night. Zero really asked Yuuki to take off her clothes for him, like some teenage fantasy! Ancestress help him, he's so embarrassed! That's a shameless thing the Hunter would have expected Kuran to do - Zero must have been high under the influence of pure blood or something. Especially since he'd been so calm the whole time...even a little intrigued.

Maybe he'll talk to Takuma, Zero decides after a little while. The noble said it wasn't supposed to hurt; maybe there's a trick to it. Or maybe the Kurans are just freakishly huge. Could go either way, with his luck.

Zero lies there a bit longer. Don't think about them naked, he tells himself. Don't think about them naked. Don't think about how they probably look different now that they're aroused.

...damnit. Okay, time to get up, no matter how embarrassing. Zero starts to slide upward, only for an arm to reach up and seize his waist. Zero almost jumps out of his skin before he realizes it's Kuran, and sags back into the mattress to calm his racing heart.

"You took everything rather well last night. I'm surprised," the pureblood whispers in the faintest undertone.

"I'm not scared of any bloody leeches, least of all you," Zero hisses. He's not fragile, and he's not going to die if he sees a naked body.

As though he hasn't heard, Kuran continues his musings as he stares up at the ceiling. "Upon consideration, your reservations are natural. You are a unique case. It is reasonable that you would have more difficulty adapting then a born vampire."

"Do you intend to push your sexual boundaries further?" Kuran asks, finally tipping his head to watch Zero's face.

"Yes," Zero whispers as fiercely as he dares. "For the sake of the treaty and my duties."

Kuran's unreadable eyes study his face. "Then you will eventually have to face your distaste for your own body. And it will go much easier if you tell Yuuki and I your difficulties directly, instead of waiting for us to guess them. You are no longer a lone Hunter, Zero. That too requires adjustment, and change. It is something I have also had to learn."

Those words have the ring of experience; Zero is reminded that he is speaking to the Ancestor of the Kuran, an ancient vampire who has lived for an unimaginably long time.

Yuuki shifts against Zero's back as she listens; at some point, she must have been awakened by their talk.

Kuran glances at Yuuki, then looks back at Zero. The pureblood smiles, his demeanor losing its seriousness."Our dear Yuuki is suffering. Would you like to try something new?"
"Like what?" Zero says, feeling wary. He doesn't have the easy relaxed confidence of last night; the prospect of pushing their intimacy further seems immeasurably more daunting.

The pureblood's grin turns wicked. "Would you like to watch as I tend to her?"

Zero's mouth drops open. "No! I'm not into voyeurism, you pervert!"

"Then you'd like to help?" Kuran says, clearly enjoying this.

Biting his lip, Zero wavers, before he shoves up his resolve and gives a quick nod. Zero doesn't want to back down. As long as he's partially clothed, and doesn't have to deal with his own body, it should be fine. The idea of touching Yuuki's bare sex is unspeakably embarrassing, but not uncomfortable. Besides, Zero can frame it as going just a little further than before to give her pleasure, which Zero enjoys.

"Hold on," Yuuki objects, putting her chin on Zero's shoulder. "I'm not comfortable with Zero doing things for us without getting anything in return. I feel like I'm using him as an object, instead of treating him like a person."

"It doesn't bother me," Zero tells her. "I like seeing Yuuki enjoy herself. And I can't - the idea of being sexually touched below the waist makes me uncomfortable. Right now, I want to see if I can do this. Will you let me try?"

Yuuki thinks for a bit. "Okay. When I think of it like that, it seems like we're considering Zero's wishes and just treating him in a way that makes him comfortable."

Zero kisses her and gets a crick in his neck, because Yuuki is too wonderful and he doesn't deserve to be her husband.

"Problem solved," Kuran says, sitting up. "Now, Zero, was that a yes earlier?" the pureblood teases.

Glares, Zero says, "Yes, I want to try touching you-" his face goes red, "...your penis. I know you're hard too! Don't think I can't feel it!"

"It would be nice if you 'helped' both of us," Kuran agrees, shrugging out of his yukata and throwing it to the side. Yuuki's already chucked her robe clear across the room. "Unless you want to stain your clothing, I suggest you take yours off as well."

Zero gulps, but loosens his belt as Kuran suggested, letting the chilly air touch his skin. Yuuki's warm hands eagerly strip the Hunter down to his underwear, dropping kisses around his shoulders that leave a buzz of heat underneath his skin. To settle any remaining doubts, Zero takes a few deep breaths and reminds himself how satisfying it feels to watch her come, and know he's the source of her pleasure - this isn't any different now.

Hot breath against the back of his neck; Kuran runs a possessive hand along Zero's thigh. "You've never touched another man's cock, have you, sweet boy?"

Zero shivers. Yuuki's watching his face with hungry eyes. "No," the Hunter gasps, feeling Kuran's hand take his wrist, guiding Zero's hand behind his back. Yuuki traps the other wrist, catching Zero's eyes as she draws Zero's palm along her belly, and then past the waist of her panties.

Kuran growls right in Zero's ear. "This innocent body - I'm going to enjoy marking all of it."

Zero's fingers come into contact with something hot and velvet-sleek, rigid, heavy and unyielding.
At the touch, Yuuki's eyes flutter closed, and she moans; Kuran's breathing hitches against the Hunter's ear.

Zero feels a full-body shudder from his head to his toes. He's suddenly boiling in the cold air. Experimentally, he curls his fingers; both of them are too big to wrap his fingers all the way round.

Yuuki's eyes shoot back open, a glazed look in her eyes.

"Let me see?" Zero asks her, and she hurriedly claws out of her panties with her free hand, shredding them in her haste. If Zero thought Yuuki's penis looked intimidating before, that's nothing compared to how threatening it looks now, pink and engorged, pointing straight up menacingly with the foreskin drawn back. The Hunter almost whimpers - is it even larger now?

Feeling like the timid virgin in Takuma's romance novel, Zero just stops and stares, paralyzed by inexperience and sudden nerves.

"Are you alright?" Kuran whispers in Zero's ear.

Zero makes an indeterminate squeak.

"Do you need help, or do you need to stop?"

Not knowing what else to do, Zero squeezes again, trying to get his fingers around the girth.

Kuran groans against Zero's ear, and the wet tip of the head brushes against Zero's back. You know, considering that Zero has a hand around the vampire's penis, maybe he should try thinking of him as Kaname instead of Kuran. Thinking about his husband being the same asshole Kuran from school is not helping Zero normalize this experience.

"Help me a little," Zero gets out past the dryness in his mouth. He licks his lips, and Yuuki's face goes a funny color. Zero freezes again - with that intent look on her face, she looks like she wants to eat him.

Zero feels another palm settle on top of the hand he has wrapped around Kuran's penis. Yuuki mirrors the action against Zero's front. "I'll guide you," Kuran - Kaname says, before biting Zero's shoulder to leave his marks.

Then, slowly at first, the two of them start to move, just a little at first so the velvet skin brushes Zero's palm, then bolder, longer strokes.

Zero learns the feeling and heft of an alpha's cock: the dip where the crown meets the rest of the shaft, the slick feeling of their arousal spattering against the back of his hand, the bump of their soft knot, and the jolt as he comes to a halt against their belly.

At first, Zero lays his head back against Kaname's shoulder as he absorbs the feelings and sound of his first real sexual act. Then Zero makes the mistake of looking at Yuuki, and is spellbound. Blood and ash, the sight of her delicate, slim fingers fisted around her rigid cock as she guides Zero to slide up and down her shaft is the most obscene thing Zero's ever seen.

Both of his alphas growl when the scent of their omega's wetness wafts through the air; it only makes Zero squeeze his thighs harder.

Kaname buries his face in the crook of Zero's neck, and his tempo speeds up. So does Yuuki, panting from her open mouth with a dazed look that holds so much pleasure it's nearly pain. Under Zero's fingers, they're twitching and drawing up, and Zero shivers, recognizing the signs.
"I can't hold it back any longer," Yuuki groans. "Zero, can I please - ?"

"Zero," Kaname grunts, "I want to mark you. Want to show everyone you're ours."

"Okay," Zero gasps, "go ahead, Yuuki - I love you, I love you - ."

That was all his wife needed. She screams, her length jerking, and paints both of them white with the force of her orgasm. Kaname follows just behind her, his teeth clamped down on the back of Zero's neck to muffle his groans as he covers Zero's back in his come.

Quivering with the aftershocks, still spurting little weak pulses of come, Yuuki and Kaname slump against Zero for support, heedless of the mess they're smearing across his skin.

Zero is stock still, shaking and breathing fast. The back of his neck throbs in time with his heartbeat, and his lungs are full of thick alpha musk. He can feel their semen dripping down his skin. Buried deeply in Zero's mind, something primal and alien raises its head, scenting the air. Zero looks down at the warm, spent pureblood alphas sheltering against him - strong, fertile alphas who care for him so well, who will nurture his precious babies the same way - and a compulsion takes hold.

Raising both his hands, dripping with the seed of his mates, Zero examines them curiously for a moment. Then he flicks his tongue out once, then twice, tasting the salty spend left on his skin. Hmmm, not really that tasty, but tolerable. Zero takes another swipe. There's a weird aftertaste in his mouth. Zero wrinkles his nose. Well, that's life, and the omega calmly swallows down every last drop of seed he can clean off his hands.

In the sudden silence, Zero realizes that Yuuki and Kuran have their eyes glued to his mouth. Yuuki's eyes are nearly bulging out of her skull, though Zero has no idea why. Against his back, Kuran's penis begins to harden again.

"No, you insatiable bastard, I need a shower," Zero complains, glancing down his front and the semen drying on his chest. Ugh, the futon too. Sex was kind of messy.

Zero's stomach growls. "Can we order breakfast?"

Yuuki and Kuran just stare.

"It's so disgusting," Kiryuu complains, his hands plastered to his face from his complete and utter mortification. "I don't know what I was thinking, because there's no way I would ever want to touch your gross - stuff," the Hunter says, reduced to incoherence and juvenile euphemisms by the sheer depravity.

Kiryuu is precious like this, Kaname reflects happily. He's been torturing the Hunter about his risque behavior all morning. If Kaname keeps it up, Kiryuu might just die of shame for besmirching his honorable Hunter lineage.

Besides getting a stunning orgasm out of the deal, Kaname's morning has been quite enjoyable. After a good breakfast and a nice bath, he's gotten to watch his Consort wander around with Kaname's most intimate scent smeared all over his skin. With Kiryuu's weak nose, the Hunter might not even realize what a sexual advertisement he is right now. Kaname is certain the staff who delivered their breakfast could tell, from the state of the room if nothing else, but every vampire nearby can smell Kiryuu had sex with a pair of purebloods. The alpha, of course, is over the moon, making self-satisfied, happy little comments all morning.
We marked mate, we marked mate! it celebrates. Now we just need to mount him, and he'll be ours!

Kaname's smile goes unseen as he walks behind Kiryuu, heading into a little garden bower near the onsen.

Kiryuu's suggestive act this morning is not a sign of temporary madness or an immodest personality - in fact, the Hunter isn't to blame at all. To build immune tolerance and allow the formation of a bond, an omega needed exposure an alpha's genetic material - their sperm - as well as other biochemical markers.

Under a normal courtship, the three of them would have already had sexual intercourse, satisfying those needs. Finally given any opportunity, Zero's omega instincts drove him to obtain the material he required in whatever way he could. Compulsive semen consumption was a rare manifestation of omega instincts, but an encouraging one for the progress of the Kurans' courtship. If Zero's weak instincts push him to crave their seed, it means Zero's omega has accepted Kaname and Yuuki as worthy mates.

Kaname has no intention of explaining this to his wife or his Consort. Kiryuu admitted last night that his omega characteristics make him uncomfortable. The last thing Kaname wants to do is make the Hunter fear his omega instincts are taking over his mind the same way Level E did. Now that Kiryuu's omega has gotten what it wanted, it will probably never happen again. Better that Kiryuu dismiss the incident as a momentary fit of insanity.

"What are we here for anyway?" Kiryuu finally asks, looking around at the trellises and wooden bench.

"The reason I didn't allow you to train this morning," Kaname tells him, sitting down. "I want you to practice your extra-sensory perception as I watch."

Kiryuu crosses his arms, immediately all business. "Is that safe?"

"If I'm here, yes. With an experienced monitor, you won't accidentally slip too deep." Kaname knows if he refuses to let Kiryuu practice at all, Kiryuu will be tempted to break the rules and go off on his own. Allowing this opportunity is the only way to make sure Kiryuu does nothing foolish.

"Alright, so what do I do?"

Kaname pats his lap. "Come sit down."

Shooting Kaname his most scandalized look, Kiryuu refuses.

His little virgin is so sweet. Too bad Kaname has the upper hand. "Need I remind you that after this morning, you have very little dignity left to protect?"

Wilting, Kiryuu glares with his angry kitten face, and reluctantly sits down on Kaname's lap. The Hunter refuses to rest his full weight on the pureblood, and balances right at the edge like he's about to leap off.

Kaname sighs, resists the urge to grope him, and pulls Kiryuu back until the Hunter is securely pressed against his chest. "There, that's better. Rest your head against my shoulder."

Kiryuu glares again out of the corner of his eye.

Kaname chuckles, and places his palm over those accusing lilac eyes until Kiryuu leans back. The
alpha purrs in appreciation. "Now, do as you normally would, and tell me when you've succeeded accessing your senses."

Breathing evenly and matching his cadence to each of his Consort's breaths, Kaname waits patiently as Kiryuu's body relaxes and his head goes limp against Kaname's shoulder.

"I'm there," Kiryuu says. His voice is distant, and curiously dispassionate. Now that Kaname knows the cause, it's hard to overlook the symptoms.

"When I speak to you, you must answer. If you stop, or answer too slowly, I will break your concentration and you will let go of your extra sense. Am I clear?"

"Yes." Another quiet, distant answer.

"Reach out, and tell me about the wisteria vine wrapped around the trellis above our heads".

Kaname makes various requests, testing Kiryuu's range, depth, and ability to focus on multiple stimuli at once. Kiryuu is still in the beginner's stage of his training, at least a year or two from mastery, but what he's already achieved is quite impressive. His basic Hunter's training has given him a strong grasp of the fundamentals, and once Kiryuu gains experience learning the methods, it's only a matter of practice and time.

"That's enough for this session. Return to your normal state of mind, and verbally confirm when you are no longer using your powers."

Technically, Kiryuu doesn't need to inform him - pressed so closely together, Kaname can feel the rhythms of his Consort's body change - but Kaname would rather keep that fact to himself.

"I'm finished," announces Kiryuu, wiggling on Kaname's lap with his eagerness to get away.

Kaname doesn't budge, and Kiryuu finally surrenders, resigning himself to his present position. They pass several minutes in a shockingly companionable silence, Kaname's alpha purring happily in the background.

"Kuran, I've been thinking about what you said this morning," Kiryuu says.

"And what have you concluded?"

Kiryuu wets his lips. "Would it be possible to stay here another night, if it became necessary?"

Kaname does a few calculations. "The two of you could. There are matters I cannot leave unattended for long, but I would still be able to eat and sleep here. Why do you ask?"

The Hunter fidgets. "I was thinking about telling Yuuki some things. If she reacts badly, I want her to have time to recover in private before she needs to work again."

Considering his recent investigations, Kaname can guess what those 'things' might be. "Ah, so that's it. What are you planning to confess? Your self-destructive eating habits? Your determination to overwork yourself? Your difficulty sleeping alone? Your old hovel? Your treatment by the other Hunters? Or just your general reckless endangerment of your health and safety?"

Flinching, Kiryuu curls in on himself.

Kaname's alpha howls, upset at inflicting its mate's distress. Sighing, Kaname gives up on words, and rocks back and forth, stroking his Consort's silver hair until his omega relaxes. "Hush, sweet
boy, that was cruel of me when you were trying to be brave. Wait and tell her after lunch, so I have a chance to speak with the staff."

"Yuuki, do you remember Kaname told you there were things about me he didn't feel he should be the one to tell you?"

No, that's not any good! Zero slumps against the bathroom sink, trying to figure out what he's going to say. Whatever words he uses, Zero knows he's about to hurt Yuuki terribly. He shrinks back from inflicting such deep wounds on the person he loves most; his heart wavers every time he imagines Yuuki in pain. But whenever Zero kept secrets from Yuuki, they pained her even more when she discovered them herself. Yuuki hated it when the people she loved suffered alone.

"Zero, are you okay in there?"

Zero's face closes off. "I'm fine Yuuki."

In the mirror, the Hunter examines his stoic mask. Now is his last chance to decide whether to carry this through. Telling Yuuki about his self-destructive habits before their marriage will not be easy. Zero has never told a single soul - not Kaito, not Cross, and not Master Yagari. Before he's spoken a single word, Zero already feels ashamed. But hasn't keeping secrets only hurt all of them?

Practically speaking, Yuuki will find out eventually. The only reason she doesn't already know is because Kuran helped Zero conceal the truth. Yuuki is tenacious, and single-minded when she's focused on her goal. Working alone, his wife single-handedly unmasked the Ancestor of the Kuran; Zero can't hope to withstand her. Better to confess now.

But does it have to be now? Would another time be better? Not away from Rosehill, maybe -

No. Stop. These are just excuses. If Zero accepts his own excuses, he will never find the right time. Zero promised Yuuki that when he felt ready, he would try and tell her. He promised. Zero won't break his promises to Yuuki.

Staring in the mirror one last time, Zero turns on his heel and goes out. In the main room, they've moved the kotatsu near the windows, and the Kurans are seated around it sipping another pot of tea.

Yuuki glances up briefly when she hears the bathroom door open, but hardly takes any other notice. Kuran's acting almost as impassive as Zero is, already bracing himself for the fallout.

Zero is briefly grateful that Kuran arranged a comfortable place and some drinks, but it's not entirely altruism. The pureblood loves Yuuki too, and he's probably curious himself what Zero plans to say.

"Yuuki," Zero calls, standing in the doorway. "Can we talk? I don't want any more secrets between us. I want you to know everything."

Damn her dignity. Damn her image as an untouchable, regal pureblood princess. Yuuki cries, because it hurts too much not to.

As Zero kneels in the center of the floor and lays out his long years of self-destruction, Yuuki begins sobbing as soon as she understands what Zero did to himself.

Her husband's account of the past thirty years of his life is factual, stripped of supporting emotional
detail: I didn't eat enough blood tablets, I lived in shabby places on purpose, I avoided things I liked or that felt good, I hurt my body by forcing it to live as a human. Zero doesn't talk about how anything felt. He doesn't mention his emotions. He doesn't say a word about how it must have hurt his body. And he doesn't explain why he did this.

Zero doesn't even sound like he's talking about his own life. He could be reciting a report from memory; his face is impassive, his back perfectly straight and his hands flat on his thighs. The whole time, his tone has no inflection. There's a dispassionate distance Zero maintains, as though the events happened to someone else.

It gets worse when Zero explains how he lied to her. How Kaname's tests showed the marks of long-term malnutrition and privation. How Kaname helped Zero conceal it, in exchange for Zero's silence about Kaname's cruelty against him. Zero allowed himself only enough to eat that his body could function at its physical peak, and not a single bite more. He turned himself into nothing but muscle and bone, whose only purpose was to Hunt.

Yuuki has to clap her hands over her mouth to muffle her heartsick sobs. She can't stop, sickened to the core by this bloodless account as her imagination fills in the blanks. Unable to see past her own tears, the pureblood doubles over, clutching her chest, drowning in the anguish and guilt and betrayal.

Yuuki left Zero alone, and this is what he did to himself. Yuuki can't say she was ignorant. She knew what Zero was capable of. After all, she was the one who stopped him from clawing his throat until it bled when they were children in Cross' house. And then she went off with Kaname and assumed Zero would find happiness with someone else, someone not a vampire? Yuuki can see now how ridiculous her happy imaginings were.

And Kaname, to hide something this critical from her! He should have known better than to keep anything about Zero's health a secret. Kaname knew Zero had harmed himself for a long time, yet he chose to ignore it, and then lied to Yuuki to protect his own dirty secrets. What if Zero had started hurting himself again? Yuuki wouldn't have known to look for the signs. Unforgivable. Kaname's selfishness exposed Zero to danger. If Yuuki knew Zero still held such a self-loathing for himself, she might have caught his overtraining more quickly, and even prevented his accident. But she didn't know, and that's Kaname's fault. She'll deal with him later, Yuuki promises herself.

The pureblood raises her head, wiping away her tears and clearing her runny nose. She must look awful, but Yuuki has never cared less about her appearance than this single moment. Zero deliberately hurt himself. Knowing that, how can Yuuki give a damn about anything else?

Zero is watching her anxiously, his stoicism fallen away, leaving clear fear and guilt in his face. His body leans toward Yuuki like he wants to leap up and comfort her.

Zero, Yuuki also notices, is wearing the scarf she gave him as a birthday present. That little, insignificant realization is enough to tip her over the edge, and Yuuki collapses into a fresh wave of tears.

Why does this keep happening? Why is Yuuki always the last to know? Why can't she stop things like this? Beneath every secret, there are always more secrets. Yuuki is so tired of secrets that feel like barbed wire, that tear and bleed as you pry them out of your skin.

A confused bubbling, festering brew of anger and pain begins frothing in her chest. Through her tears, Yuuki looks up at Zero once more.

The Hunter's last piece of composure has shattered; utterly broken by watching her pain, his shame
and remorse is visible to anyone who sees him. "I'm sorry I couldn't tell you before," he whispers.

Why is love such a painful emotion? But she loves him so much. Yuuki loved Zero before she
know what that feeling was. And no one deserves to be loved more than Zero, dear Zero with his
beautiful, kind heart. So why won't he love himself more? The pureblood stumbles to her feet,
carried on a wave of emotion.

As Yuuki stalks toward him, Zero shrinks further with trepidation, even a hint of dread. The
pureblood doesn't know what she's doing - just acting on her swirling, volatile feelings.

Yuuki reaches out - Zero braces himself like he expects a slap - and yanks her most precious person
into her arms. "Why doesn't Zero understand!" she rages. "This is the most valuable body in the
whole world, because it belongs to Zero. It deserves to be pampered and treated gently, because
that's how Zero's soul stays in the world."

Tucking his silver head firmly into the crook of her neck, Yuuki sinks to the floor, feeling tears
threaten. "Zero is so fragile. I won't die, but anything could break Zero, and then Zero would be
gone. And then I'd die too, because I love Zero. I love Zero's life more than my own life." Her
breath catches on a sob. "Why won't you take better care of yourself?"

Zero doesn't say anything in reply, and Yuuki gets a little frustrated. "If you don't like this body."
she says, forcing Zero to meet her eyes, "then give it to me. Because Zero takes care of things that
belong to other people. And if this body is mine, he won't allow anyone else to hurt it, either."

His vulnerable lilac eyes widen, and Zero's breathing goes high and quick.

Yuuki immediately feels remorseful that she upset him, and pulls Zero into her lap to she can hold
him tightly against her chest. "I love you," she says, feeling another bout of tears coming as her
alpha whimpers. "I love you, I love you…"

When Yuuki can breathe again, after she's cried herself out into the front of Zero's shirt, the
pureblood feels calmer, like she's purged some of her pain. "I'm not mad," she reassures Zero,
tracing the lines of his face. "Or disappointed. After all, I didn't ask, did I? And people don't
confess things like that lightly. But I'm really glad that you trusted me enough to tell me, Zero."

Her husband looks so terribly vulnerable, pale and exhausted after so much emotional tension.
Yuuki wants to wrap him up and hide him away from the world, and never leave him alone again.
"Kaname," she orders, "pull the bedding out of the cupboards. I don't want Zero to get cold." And
she wants to be close to Zero for a while, somewhere comfortable where she can satisfy her alpha
that Zero is alright.

Her husband, who's been suspiciously silent, obeys. All three of them settle underneath the duvet,
and things are quiet for a while.

"Why did you do it?" Kuran asks, startling Zero out of his light doze.

"Do what?" he grunts, trying to think past the emotional exhaustion of the last hour.

Kuran has the look of a man determined to obtain his goal. "Why did you deny yourself food,
comfort, sleep, and adequate shelter, among other things? Why cultivate habits you knew were
unhealthy and self-destructive?"

Yuuki's breath catches, and she lifts her head to watch Zero too.
Zero looks away, trying to overcome his reluctance to reveal something so private. He knows, on some level, that his thoughts and feelings were not normal or healthy. Telling Yuuki the facts of what he'd done was much easier than confessing the why. To be honest, Zero can't quite untangle all the factors himself.

"It sounds stupid when I say it out loud," Zero says.

"I'm listening, and I won't laugh," Kuran replies, not about to be diverted when Zero's finally convinced himself to talk.

Wetting his lips, Zero tries to find a place to start. "It was a lot of things. When we were in school, denying myself blood was something I fought for, something I was proud of. It was a habit, and living on a bare minimum of blood tablets was the next logical step. That's where I think the idea came from. As for the rest...it's complicated. I'm not sure I understand myself. Partly, it was punishment. For being the one left alive, for my failures, for my inaction, for being weak...for other things." To punish his body for his cursed existence, to punish the vampire living inside his skin, but Zero lets that go unsaid.

Yuuki tries to speak, but Kuran touches her wrist, and shakes his head.

"It was penance too. Atonement, for hurting Yuuki and hurting Ichiru. For killing him. It wasn't something I thought about - I didn't sit down and reason through all this until later. I just felt things. I did it because it made me feel...not better, but - in control. Like I was doing something about it, when everyone I owed was dead or out of my reach."

"And that was why?" Kuran prompts.

Zero shrugs. "Having me around was troublesome for the Hunters. It was easy to withdraw, which made it easy to hide how I lived, even from Master and Kaito. And I had this stupid idea in the back of my head...Do you know how monks live? They live apart, practicing austerities for purification, in order to free themselves from earthly desires. Their asceticism is a tool to achieve liberation from the world. I admired that, and I think I took it unconsciously as a sort of model. But I didn't need a religion, because I already had one. Mind and body, I had devoted myself to the Hunt since I was twelve. After Yuuki left, I just took that devotion even further. Whatever was unnecessary - everything that didn't improve my Hunting - I refused it. Heating that worked, bathing in warm water, cooking, celebrating my birthday - I didn't need those things to live. If denying myself extra food or sleep made me more focussed, if tolerating physical discomfort meant I could hunt while wounded or practice until my feet bled, then why not? It's not like I had anything else to live for."

And it played into Zero's persistent wish to be accepted back into Hunter community. Zero could imagine that enduring privation was part of his trials to earn forgiveness, and someday his effort, sacrifice, and skill would outweigh his pollution.

"If you hadn't presented as an omega, what would you have done?" Yuuki finally brings herself to ask, fearing the answer by the look on her face.

Zero can't reassure her. "Continued the same patterns. Devoted myself to the Hunt until I was killed, whether that was ten years, a hundred years, or a thousand years from now."

"I won't let that happen," Yuuki vows fiercely, squishing Zero against her side, and the Hunter feels a surge of affection for her.

"Are you satisfied now?" Zero asks Kuran.
The pureblood's eyes are distant, but he nods.

"I'm so tired," Yuuki groans. "We're the worst at vacations. I have to work tomorrow."

"Kaname arranged for us to stay an extra day," Zero tells her.

"Thank goodness," she groans, flopping down on the mattress. "Now let's have a nap before dinner. I'm exhausted."

Honored grandmother is a tiny wisp of light, barely larger than a firefly. "I'm sorry I couldn't come sooner, but I wanted to make sure you were alright," she whispers, her voice no louder than the wind.

Once more, Zero feels like the worst person in the world. The Ancestor of the Hunters must have spent almost all of her strength helping Zero find Aido, and how did he repay her? By abusing her gift.

Zero bows his head. "I'm so sorry, Honored Grandmother. What happened was my fault."

The firefly blinks. "Don't be heavy-hearted, my dear child. It was the result of my instructions. If the student falls into error, then the teacher is at fault. I should have warned you that you could become lost in your extra sense."

Zero still feels unspeakably guilty. "Kuran made sure that I returned to my body intact. It's because of him that I'm alright."

The Ancestress seems pleased, pulsing more brightly for a moment. "Kaname has grown so much. I'm very proud of him. And very proud of you too, Zero. What you did tonight was more dangerous and brave than going on a thousand Hunts."

"Thank you," Zero says, though he doesn't feel he deserves praise for making Yuuki cry so much. He would rather Kuran slapped him again.

"Growth can be painful," the Ancestor of the Hunters says, as though she'd read his mind. "But your Yuuki only hurts because seeing you in pain is the worst wound she could suffer. I can't interfere in the lives of my descendents, but I'm so happy when they find people who care for them. More than anything, Zero, I want you to live a happy, fulfilling life."

The Ancestress' brightness dims. "I have to go, Zero. But I'm here if you need me. Please, let the people who love you help you."

"Will you do something for me?" Yuuki asks after Kuran leaves for work, and the two of them are just sitting down to their breakfast.

"Anything," Zero tells her, picking up his chopsticks.

She looks so earnest. "Stay with me today. All day. Don't let there be a moment when I can't see you."

His heart clenches in his chest, and Zero bows his head so his hair falls over his eyes. "Of course," he replies.

When Zero raises his head again, Yuuki is beside him. "Let me," she says, and takes the chopsticks
out of his hand. When Yuuki offers Zero a bite of egg, obviously meaning to feed him, the Hunter hesitates, unsure if she's being serious. But one glance at her face and Zero knows this isn't just some game.

For Yuuki, anything. Zero opens his mouth, and accepts the food.

Zero knows he's done the right thing when his wife smiles broadly and claps her hands together, her expression easing. Sitting in Yuuki's lap as she feeds him the rest of his meal, Zero feels like a chick being fed by its mother. To his surprise, he discovers the experience is quite comfortable, once they maneuver a bit to account for Zero's greater size.

Perhaps it's just vampire instinct, but any act that brings Yuuki close enough to touch, close enough he can smell the scent of her shampoo, feel the warmth of her body behind him - that's something Zero holds dear. How many decades did he believe he might never speak to her again? Yuuki loves him, and Zero is allowed to be near her. That's more joy than he ever dreamed he might gain.

This must be caused by his confession yesterday, Zero reflects as he chews. Yuuki is making personally sure that Zero is well-fed and healthy, and it makes him feel...cherished, he supposes, though it must look strange to an outsider. As long as it makes Yuuki happy, Zero doesn't care what anyone else thinks.

"Zero, you said your body makes you feel uncomfortable - the parts of you that belong to an omega. I've been thinking about that," Yuuki says after breakfast. "I buy you dresses to wear. Have I been making you uncomfortable? I'll stop if you want."

Shaking his head, Zero tries not to laugh, because Yuuki's trying to be considerate and he's not going to disrespect that. "Yuuki, crossdressing is the least upsetting thing about being an omega. To be honest, except for the sleeves I hardly mind at all. I've done it before willingly. And I know it makes you happy, so keep buying me nice things, okay?"

Chuckling, she says, "The next time you complain, I'll remind you that you gave me permission."

"Fair enough," Zero sighs. He's weak and he knows it, but Yuuki just looks so happy when she sees him in silk and delicate gowns. "What are we doing today?" he asks instead.

"Whatever we want," Yuuki replies. "What do you feel like doing?"

"How about a nice walk without that cranky old man complaining the whole time?"

Yuuki bounces on the floor. "Deal!"

"Stop making that face. I've bathed and I'm not smelly anymore!" Zero complains as he dries his hair.

Yuuki gives him a doubtful look.

"Purebloods may not sweat much, but I remember human Yuuki stinking pretty bad after Cross' training," Zero reminds her, sitting down at the kotatsu across from her.

His wife sticks her tongue out at him.

In the end, they decided to make of picnic of it, and raided the kitchen for food before eating lunch on the mountainside, with a silvery winter expanse below them in the valley like frosting on a wedding cake. The whole time they wandered through the woods, Yuuki insisted on holding hands
so she didn't lose Zero. Of course, Zero didn't mind one bit. The hand Yuuki held felt so much warmer that way.

Yuuki bites at one of her fingernails, a nervous habit from childhood. Zero's only seen her do it when they're alone together; it's probably on the list of things purebloods aren't allowed to do.

"Tea?" she asks, holding up the pot of oolong.

"Sure," the Hunter replies, trying to figure out what's making her fidgety.

"Zero," Yuuki says once she's poured, putting down the pot and folding her hands on the table. "I've been thinking. Would it be easier for you to accept your body if we treated things like they used to be? You as the Hunter, me as the human?"

Zero raises an eyebrow. "I don't see how we'd do that."

Her cheeks pink. "In bed, I mean. You on top, the way we'd have done it in school. Just ignore the alpha and omega parts for now. So you'd be the one penetrating me. It's possible - everything still works. Kaname and I used to have sex like that."

Tapping his fingers on the table and ignoring his tea, Zero considers Yuuki's proposal. He tries to imagine how it would work, ignoring the jealousy that comes from the mention of Kuran. Slowly, Zero says, "In the past, I thought about us being together that way. But now it seems wrong. We are different. I don't know if I could pretend that I don't see the ways you've changed, Yuuki. I don't want to ignore half of what you are for the sake of some fantasy...would you rather pretend I've got something different in my trousers?"

"No!" she cries. "I mean, I want you the way you are too. But if you feel wrong in your body, I thought it might make you feel better to pretend?"

Zero scrubs his hands across his face. "If I could pretend, maybe. But in the back of my mind I'd know I was different, no matter how I tried to convince myself. I'd still like to try sometime - um, the penetrating part without the pretending. If I can ever manage to get my clothes off," he says in a voice thick with self-deprecation.

"Um, yes. I would too. Like to try," Yuuki says, unable to look Zero in the eye without going crimson. She stirs her tea briskly, trying to collect herself. "What can we do to make you feel more comfortable then?"

"I told you, I don't know," Zero grumps into his teacup.

"Well, what have you tried so far?" Yuuki counters.

Zero goes cold, the warmth of the springs fleeing his skin. The Hunter swallows. "Nothing much." His voice comes out pinched.

"What things in particular make you uncomfortable?" his wife asks, blunt as she always is when she's after something.

"...everything," Zero confesses, burying his face in his hands.

Yuuki blinks. "What does that - "

"Everything!" Zero insists. "Looking, touching, thinking about - and before you ask, no I haven't touched myself sexually!"
Yuuki shrinks back, a little hurt at his vehement response, and Zero feels bad for having shouted at her. "I'm sorry, Yuuki. I know you're trying to help. I shouldn't have gotten angry."

The pureblood winces. "I probably deserved that - I was a little insensitive. But really, everything? I didn't think it'd be so serious."

Zero drops his head in his hands again.

Yuuki shifts, looking uncomfortable again. "Zero, I hope you don't mind me asking, but if you feel so uncomfortable with your body, are you sure you really want to have sex?"

"Of course I -"

Her gaze grows steely. "Sex because you want it, not because of duty or the treaty or any other reason. Do you feel sexual desire that you honestly want to fulfill with another person?"

"I want to be with Yuuki, in every way I can," Zero says simply. "I've only ever wanted that with you. I'm frustrated that my head is so messed up that I can't even do that right."

Yuuki reaches out to take Zero's hand, and smiles. "Then it's worth trying to overcome. I want to be with you too, Zero."

"Then what do we do?" Zero says.

She snaps her fingers. "You're a virgin! Maybe it would help if you looked at someone else first?"

"Looked at someone else? You want me to watch porn?" Zero says, raising an eyebrow.

Yuuki doubles over laughing. "Zero, we're married. I have a vagina. You'll look at me of course!"

Zero finds the idea dubious. And it sounds perverted, but if Yuuki insists...He sighs. Once Yuuki gets an idea in her head, she won't let go until she's seen it through. "When do you want to do it?"

"Right now!" Yuuki says, already yanking off her clothes.

Zero blushes to the roots of his hair. Staring at Yuuki naked seems so dirty, but at the same time Zero's had fantasies about Yuuki since he knew he loved her.

Now that he's not so shocked, Zero discovers that he kind of likes the contrast between Yuuki's curves and softness, and the well-endowed alpha sex she hides like a secret. Maybe that's the omega, or maybe it's just Zero being completely, irrevocably in love with her and everything she is. Either way, when Yuuki helpfully lies down on her back, and spreads her legs, Zero feels a thrill of arousal as she offers herself up to him without a stitch of clothing.

Swallowing, Zero rests his hands on Yuuki's knees, and creeps forwards until he's between the vee of her thighs. She giggles when his fingers brush a ticklish spot on the underside of her knee, and nearly kicks him.

"Hey!" Zero protests, but the mood is effectively broken, and he's much clearer-headed this time as he approaches her dual sex with plenty of curiosity. He's seen Yuuki's penis before, but not with the leisure to really study it. Zero is especially fascinated by her foreskin, after seeing it fully drawn back yesterday when she was aroused. Hunter tradition calls for males to be circumcised as infants, so Zero himself doesn't have one. Yuuki is patient with his staring, but scolds him not to play with it when Zero finally summons up the courage to handle the thick organ in his unpracticed hands.
Under Yuuki's impatient gaze, Zero knows he shouldn't take any more detours from their goal. Moving her shaft to the side, Zero can finally see the opening underneath, the female labia hiding all but a peek of the rosy flesh within.

Fascinated and beginning to become aroused, Zero slides down to lie on his belly. Working moisture into his dry mouth, he asks, "Can I touch you?"

"Mm-hmmm. Anything you want." Yuuki seems just as fascinated by his scrutiny.

Hardly breathing, Zero dares to part her folds, revealing more of her rose-colored sex. Yuuki's nipples are nearly the same color; something in Zero's belly tightens at the thought. His finger feels a little damp, and Zero realizes it's the same wetness that collects when he's enjoying Yuuki and Kuran's attentions the most.

But it's her channel that draws most of his attention, a petrified enthrallment of mixed uneasiness and desire. In the back of Zero's mind lies the shadow of his own feminine sex, overlapping his view of Yuuki as he explores. Zero dips his finger deeper, just to test, and Yuuki lets him touch, confirm the elastic way her body parts to accept it, the same way his will.

"You've had sex with Kuran like this, right?" Zero muses.

"Mm-hmmm. So it is possible, I promise. I was intimidated at first by the size, so I understand how you must feel since there's two of us."

Zero snorts his laughter. On her thigh, Yuuki's penis is starting to fill with blood. Zero should stop before this goes too far, he decides, and reluctantly backs away, scooting back from his position between her thighs.

Zero stares at his wet finger for a moment, then pops it in his mouth. Not really any flavor at all. A hint of salt? Much better than semen anyway.

"Zero," Yuuki whimpers, staring at him. Glancing her way, Zero sighs. So much for keeping this platonic. Well, he's not too mad. It's his fault for arousing her anyway.

"Sorry," Yuuki apologizes. "Just, you looked so cute, like an innocent kitten who didn't know what to do, I couldn't help myself. I wonder if Kaname would be jealous if we - ?" Yuuki makes a significant motion, and her eyes flick downwards.

Zero grins. "Let's find out."

Matching Zero's grin, she leans up and runs a hand down Zero's belly. "Maybe I can do some touching too?"

"Why do you want to touch me so much?" Zero asks, honestly puzzled why Yuuki keeps circling back to the subject.

Yuuki shoots Zero an exasperated look. "Zero, I love you. I've wanted to have sex with you for over thirty years, and I want you to enjoy it. Of course I want to touch you - and I really, really want to know what Zero's sex face looks like," she whispers, leaning forward to kiss him thoroughly.

"Not today," Zero says when they part, cheek to cheek with his wife. "But soon, I promise."
"Let's take it slower this time," Yuuki answers, guiding her husband down on his back.

A splash in the baths, then Zero calls out, "Yuuki! Kaname! Will you come here?"

The two purebloods eye each other. Zero made it very clear he did not want to be seen naked, yet he was clearly still soaking in the hot spring. But if Zero needed them…

Yuuki tentatively enters the changing room with Kaname behind her, only to find it empty. Zero must still be bathing - maybe he just forgot his towel and wanted Yuuki to leave it at the door? "Zero?" she says, raising her voice, "Did you need something?"

"Come in here, please," the Hunter insists, and Yuuki hears another crash of water like he's moving around.

Yuuki looks at Kaname again, but her husband's face is nearly unreadable, except for the curiosity betrayed by his eyes. "Should we?" she whispers.

"Why not?" he answers, and holds open the cloth flap giving the baths privacy.

Huddled near the edge, Zero is spectacularly naked, but Yuuki can't see much. He's sunk down to his neck in water, with his knees drawn up to hide himself.

The alpha perks up, drooling in the back of her head. Mate called us to see him naked! Mate is so pretty!

Over the noise of the water flowing, Yuuki asks, "Everything okay?" as she's drawn toward him, unsure if her approach is welcome.

The Hunter lifts his head. "Fine. Pull up one of the bathing stools if you'd like a seat."

Kaname does at Zero says, but Yuuki follows more slowly, still trying to understand what's going on. Zero has never let them see him nude before. Everything tantalizing is covered by the water, but still, her Consort is sitting naked not more than a few meters away. Don't think about Zero naked, Yuuki reminds herself, remembering their derailed exploration earlier.

Zero still seems nervous, but his shoulders are slowly beginning to relax. "Talk to me," he orders. With his back to Kaname and Yuuki, they can't see his expression. "Tell me about your shady vampire plots or something. I don't care."

"Zero, what is this about?" Yuuki tries again. It's a mistake, because Zero's body language tightens again, like a snail hiding in its shell.

"Are you trying to seduce me?" Kaname deadpans, sounding amused.

Whipping his head around, Zero glares, forgetting his self-consciousness in the need to trample the offending vampire. "No, you leech! Is that all you think about?" Then Zero's expression becomes more thoughtful. "If I am, would you have sex with me?"

"No," Kaname says, crossing his legs and leaning back. "I would not, little Hunter. I would never take your maidenhood here."

Eyeing the pureblood suspiciously, Zero asks, "Why not?" The Hunter almost sounds offended; Yuuki tries not to laugh.

Kaname smiles, and leans forward to lift Zero's chin with his fingertips. Zero goes wide-eyed,
suddenly shy and showing the sweet inexperience underneath his daring.

Capturing Zero's startled gaze, Kaname's voice goes deep and honey-sweet. "It's not because I don't ache for you, sweet boy. I desire your innocent body to the point of madness."

Possessively, Kaname's grip tightens. "When I breach your chaste cunt, and spill myself inside your pristine flesh, you'll be in my bedroom, laid out on the sheets of my bed, so every night as we go to sleep you'll remember the feeling of my cock plundering your virginity."

Zero makes a tiny, helpless noise, frozen still by such a filthy image being presented to his inexperienced mind. Caught in Kaname's web, wide-eyed and trembling, Zero just lets Kaname stroke his jaw as he tries to process the lewd implications.

Watching the two of them, Yuuki finds herself breathing hard, and shifts unobtrusively on her stool.

The movement breaks Zero out of his daze, and he shakes off Kaname's seductive spell by shoving the pureblood's hand away and submerging himself in the water, resurfacing far enough away that Kaname isn't close enough to reach him.

Watching Zero glare poisonously at their husband, Yuuki clears her throat. "Ah, I don't mean to interrupt, but I'd really like to know why I'm here."

As Zero turns to Yuuki, his body language softens, and his gaze flickers first to Yuuki, then back down to the water. Nervously, the Hunter sinks deeper like he's trying to hide. "I - I thought it might help. Like we were talking about earlier. Nothing's covering me, but I still feel like I'm hidden by the water. A compromise. If I can get used to this, maybe I'll be able to get out of the water. And then you can see me, Yuuki."

Yuuki doesn't mean to cry again, but she can't stop. Zero did this for her, made himself uncomfortable because he wants to give Yuuki all of himself. "Oh Zero," she says, "thank you. You don't have to, because I love all of you no matter what. But thank you."

Yuuki wipes her eyes clean of tears, and smiles, determined to help Zero however she can, even if it's just distracting him from his own anxiety. "Let me tell you about the show Kaname and I watched yesterday…"

Chapter End Notes

Yuuki and Kaname's alpha instincts don't really understand abstract concepts very well, including time, so they're not as upset by Zero's self-abuse as they are upsetting things in the present, and they don't react as strongly.

Like I said in the author's notes, I was pretty worried about how this chapter came out and I'd really appreciate some feedback from my readers about how the effect came out. Thanks everyone!
You Hunted Me Down

Chapter Notes

Thank you all for your responses to the last chapter! I can't put my gratitude into words. Sometimes it's just nice to know that you guys are still out there, still reading and enjoying TWOFT even though we're nearly 300,000 words in and close to thirty chapters. Thank you guys sincerely for being my readers.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Welcome back, Kiryuu-sama," Sasaki and the rest of Zero's maids chorus as he enters his suite, still in his human traveling clothes. Sasaki comes forward and bows. "Consort, would you like us to lay out your daywear?"

"No, thank you, I'm going to the stables with Yuuki. I need to check on my horses," Zero replies. "I hope you've been well, Sasaki-san. Could one of you please find my riding habit?" Zero's closet is a mysterious well of unending new outfits; even if the Hunter ventures inside, there's no way he can find a specific item by himself.

The maids chatter away as they help Zero dress, gossiping about what he's missed while staying at the onsen. But they're acting rather oddly, giggling too often and sending Zero hidden glances when they think he can't see. The Hunter has no idea why his maids are suddenly acting like schoolgirls, and flees as quickly as possible when Yuuki rescues him from an enthusiastic interrogation about his vacation.

"I don't know what's gotten into them," Zero tells her, patting Saya's nose as she nearly bowls him over searching his pockets for treats. Untrained as she is, ground manners are another concept they're working to teach her.

For some reason, Yuuki chokes and looks shifty. "I'm sure it's nothing serious."

Eyes narrowing, Zero reminds himself to do a little interrogating of his own later. "Anyway," he continues, "I know you're working today. Do I have time for a ride?"

"A short one," his wife replies, fidgeting with the cufflink of her business suit.

Now that Zero is healed and working toward peak condition, he's finally dared try riding Magic, and the black mare has proven herself talented enough to deserve her high purchase price. Even a short session leaves Zero feeling more accomplished, with a nice tiredness in his muscles as he returns to his suite alone to change clothes.

Zero's maids aren't the only ones behaving strangely - other servants stare like they've been startled, or give the Hunter second looks as he walks past, though they always drop their eyes if Zero returns the scrutiny. Now edging past curiosity into worry, Zero can admit he's rather distracted as Sasaki helps him don a fur wrap against the late autumn cold.

"Kiryuu-sama, is there something the matter?" Sasaki asks him, straightening his lapels and
smoothing down the fur.

Zero hesitates, but Sasaki has proven herself trustworthy so far. "I'm not sure. People have been acting strangely around me this evening."

The woman beams at him so hard the corners of her eyes crinkle. "They're pleased that you, the Master, and the Mistress are getting to know each other better."

"What?" Zero asks, completely in the dark.

"In a more intimate way," Sasaki replies, politely implying her meaning. "The way an alpha is meant to know their omega."

Zero's jaw drops. "How did you - how did you guess that?"

His head maid's brow furrows as she thinks, then flies upward as though she's figured something out; Sasaki stares at Zero in surprise. "Consort Kiryuu, can't you tell?"

Zero stares back, completely confused. "Tell what?"

Sasaki gives Zero an apologetic look. "Your scent, Kiryuu-sama. It's mixed with Kuran-sama and Kuran-hime very...carnally, so to speak."

His eyes open wide, and Zero's face warms. "Thank you, Sasaki-san, that will be all until lunch," the Hunter says faintly.

The whole evening, Zero can hardly concentrate on his book. Every time his thoughts wander toward that conversation, his mind floods with embarrassment. Finally, Zero gives in and presses his nose to his skin. Maybe a faint hint of something? But Zero's Level D, comparatively poor sense of smell isn't keen enough to tell what the scent is, even if his brain already knows. The Hunter groans silently to himself - another awkward omega thing. Just what he needed!

The Hunter-raised part of Zero resents being treated like an object that can be owned, but the vampire in his head is almost proud, and feels reassured by the claim. And Zero himself? Well, everyone knowing he had sex is embarrassing, but hardly the worst. Zero will just have to make sure he washes more thoroughly after their...sessions. Not that it will help much, he remembers from his accident with Aido.

Groaning aloud this time, Zero buries his face in the cushion of his settee and doesn't move - until a maid arrives to inform him that Kuran-sama is requesting his presence for lunch.

Occupied by this thoughts, Kaname only glances up as Kiryuu is guided into the outdoor pavilion where the pureblood is seated, awaiting his Consort's presence.

Yuuki must have spoken to the Head Maid before she left - Kiryuu is wearing one of his dresses, rather than his normal robes and tunics. Kaname must admit, his wife has a good eye for these things. Kiryuu looks particularly comely tonight in cobalt velvet and blue-grey winter mink, his cheeks pink from the cold. The pureblood especially likes the silver beadwork at his Consort's collarbone, drawing attention to the graceful throat. Inescapably, it reminds Kaname how good the Hunter looks wearing his marks, his neck encircled by Kaname's collar.

Underneath his skin, the alpha ripples.

It's easy to understand why Yuuki is driven to pay extra attention to their Consort. Whatever the
Hunter believes, Kaname is not indifferent to Kiryuu's confession. As the Hunter settles into the opposite chair, Kaname can feel the urge brewing under his skin, telling him to draw his omega closer, to safeguard his mate's well-being with his own hands. The pureblood finally got his answers, but he did not like what he found; Kiryuu's self-loathing exceeded all his expectations, in ways that bode ill for the Hunter's mental health and state of mind.

"I've never been here before," Kiryuu comments, looking at the garden spread around them, full of maple trees, mossy lawns, and koi ponds.

"It seemed like a nice change," Kaname remarks. "When you reach my age, change is a necessity for the sake of one's health and sanity."

When Kiryuu tilts his head to the side, his pearl and lapis Hoseki glints in the moonlight. Yuuki really did a good job with him, Kaname thinks again. "I would imagine too much change can have the opposite effect," the Hunter remarks.

"That is true," Kaname allows, taking a sip of his wine. "But an excess of most things goes ill for the mind." Kiryuu is following one of their older scripts tonight, the pureblood observes, one from their days as rivals. Such caution is no longer necessary, but entertaining nonetheless.

Face perfectly unruffled, Kiryuu merely nods in acknowledgment.

"I thought we might eat more formally than normal, to celebrate our return," Kaname says. Still no reaction from Kiryuu. "What will you be having to drink?" he asks, signaling the servant waiting out of earshot.

"Lemon soda," Kiryuu says, probably just to be difficult. The servant scampers off to fulfill the request.

Now that the two of them are alone, the Hunter's face hardens. "You don't just invite me to nice lunches, Kaname. What is this about?"

"I wanted to speak with you, at your leisure. This seemed a convenient way to do it," Kaname tells him.

"About what?" Kiryuu persists, his lilac eyes cool.

Kiryuu is being unusually hostile. A puzzling response, unless considered through the lens of the past few days, and the revelations they contained. What's Kiryuu expecting Kaname to do with his new information?

"I think there may have been a misunderstanding," Kaname says, gesturing with his wineglass. "I wanted to speak with you regarding the past few days, but not with malicious intent."

The Hunter - and Hunter he is, revealed now in his dangerous glory as his hand tightens on his steak knife. "You often mean well," Kiryuu says, "but that doesn't mean you keep anyone's best interests at heart, except your own."

"A fair criticism," Kaname admits easily, "but not one that applies right now. You made yourself vulnerable before us. I won't spit on your trust for petty gain."

"But you would do it for significant gain?" Kiryuu questions, raising an eyebrow.

The pureblood laces his fingers together. "I can't think of a significant enough gain to make it worthwhile. I was serious when I said I wanted an alliance, Zero. I won't violate that intention..."
As the servants arrive with Kiryuu's lemon soda and their first course, both of them fall silent. His Consort, Kaname notes with amusement, receives an extra slice of bread with his soup - the servants are never blind to the affairs of their masters. Following the pureblood's calculations, they eat in silence until the second course is served. Wiping his mouth, Kaname puts his linen napkin aside.

Kiryuu straightens, sensing the change in mood. Hopefully, the Hunter will be more amenable with some food in his stomach.

Meeting his Consort's gaze, Kaname says, "May I speak frankly, Zero?"

"I don't think you know how, but go ahead," Kiryuu responds dryly.

Nodding, Kaname says, "Though it no longer matters, I want you to know that if I made the choice again today, I would refuse to conceal your deliberate self-starvation. At the time I neither realized the true scope of the problem, nor cared to discover how deeply it ran. That was my error."

Kiryuu shifts in surprise before he can conceal his response.

"And even if I had known, I would have used the information to blackmail you further into doing what I wanted. At best, my intentions stemmed from apathy; at the worst they were driven by malice. I don't blame you for keeping silent," the pureblood finishes.

Now Kaname lets a hint of steel creep into his tone. "But you should know - I will not allow any of your old habits to continue. Not in my house, ever again. You will accept every comfort you are offered, and ask for everything you need. For Yuuki's sake, if nothing else. Do you understand?"

Behind Kiryuu's stoic mask, some deep emotion is storming. "Yes," the Hunter answers. Then unwillingly, like the word is dragged out of him. "Why?"

A reversal of positions indeed. "Because that is my will," Kaname replies.

"And why do you want that?"

"I told you. Your injury or death are not acceptable to me."

Kiryuu slams his palm on the table. "And so what? My choices involved none of those things!"

"Injury of the mind is still injury," Kaname says, losing his calm.

"You don't even like me! Don't pretend you care, as long as I'm still useful to you," Kiryuu hisses. "Who are you to tell me what I can or cannot do?"

Kaname finds himself on his feet without deciding to move. "I am your husband, and your alpha!" he barks. "Your health and well-being are my natural concern!"

"Yes, how could I forget? I'm your prized possession, your rare bird in a golden cage," Kiryuu snarls, his fingers digging into the tablecloth. "Did you like having me walk around like an idiot, while every vampire I met could smell you blew your load on me?"

So that is Kiryuu's grievance. The pureblood's tone goes silky, and he stalks toward his mate like the predator he is. "Yes, I did. Every part of you is mine. Everyone who meets you should know that. Unlike you, I am not ashamed of my alpha instincts. Nothing satisfies the beast like knowing
I've publicly claimed you. You have no idea how much more I want to do to you, little Hunter."

Kiryuu quails before Kaname's naked desire, but he doesn't step back. Brave but foolhardy, to give his opponent an opportunity. Kaname snakes his arm around the Hunter's waist, bringing their bodies flush, their faces so close he can feel Kiryuu's breath on his cheek. Studying lavender eyes, Kaname says, "I have acquired a certain fond tolerance for your insolence. And I respect your dedication to your principles. Is that sufficient reasoning for you?"


"No." And Kaname lifts Kiryuu off his feet, whisking his Consort back to Kaname's side of the table.

"What are you-"

"Finish your lunch," Kaname orders, settling his mate on his lap and signaling the servants to bring the next course. His Consort's weight and closeness are agreeable, reassuring; the pureblood presses closer, flattening them together chest to back, and his instincts rumble in pleasure.

"What about you?" Kiryuu protests when the servant only brings a single plate.

"My hungers require different food," the pureblood says, both arms chaining Kiryuu in place. "Now eat."

The Hunter hesitates, but after a few moments the quiet clatter of knife and fork return.

Kiryuu has put on muscle, Kaname realizes as he strokes his cheek against silver hair. "Does carrying Yuuki's scent really upset you?" Kaname inquires.

Kiryuu's fork freezes halfway to his mouth. "I understand it's instinct, and it offers me protection. But I resent being treated like a thing. And it's humiliating when people stare."

"To vampires, what we have done carries no shame," Kaname explains, breathing in his omega's scent. "It is a thing of pride and honor. They stare because they are happy for us, or because they envy you. Wait until the other omegas catch our scent on you - I promise, you'll find it entertaining."

Kiryuu chokes a laugh. "Are you trying to get me knifed?"

Kaname noses the soft stray hairs at Kiryuu's nape, licks at the warm skin there, and his arms tighten. "You're safe. They know what I'd do to them."

Kiryuu stiffens, but continues his meal. Kaname amuses himself by blowing against Kiryuu's neck, tickling the skin, and peeling back Kiryuu's blue gown to nibble at a smooth shoulder.

Once half-emptied, Kiryuu tries to push away his plate, but Kaname insists that Kiryuu finish every bite. *It's good when mate is full*, the alpha pipes up. *Sleek, well-fed omegas birth big, healthy babies.*

"You know, I don't hate you," Kaname breathes against silver hair, kissing the skin below his Consort's ear and feeling the pleasant tingle of all the omega pheromones he's consumed.

"You said you didn't despise me any more," Kiryuu corrects.

"That is also true. I've let go of those feelings. Have you understood what that means for you?"
A servant brings dessert as Kiryuu thinks. "Are you being cryptic on purpose? Just say what you mean."

Kaname can feel Kiryuu's heartbeat where they're pressed together, through the vulnerable barrier of his rib cage. "I am no longer a danger to your children. If I won't allow you to be hurt, then I won't allow anyone to hurt your children either."

The Hunter has frozen stiff in Kaname's arms. Kaname would pay dearly to know what's going on inside his head. "That doesn't mean they'd be safe. You might still use them as pawns," Kiryuu replies tersely.

"I use everyone," Kaname admits easily. "But I don't use everyone the same way. And there are some things I am incapable of sacrificing. I swear on Yuuki's life I will not hurt your children, Zero."

"If you think telling me this changes anything, it doesn't." Kaname wishes he could see Kiryuu's face, wonders if it would match his rough voice, the tension in his body.

Kaname shrugs, forcing himself to be casual. "I thought you deserved to know. You deserve to know. " Yuuki wants children with Kiryuu; it does no harm to strengthen her hand. And Kaname is curious what kind of beings the two would produce together.

Kiryuu eats his cake; Kaname sates his own hunger with strokes over velvet-covered flesh and the taste of his Consort's skin.

"I'm going out on the thirty-first," Kiryuu says suddenly. "It's the Ancestor's Festival. I'm not missing it - that would be disrespectful to the dead. At the very least, I need to clean my family's graves and make offerings to their memory."

Mortality. Forbidden fruit for a pureblood, a poison apple Kaname long desired and envied. But something Yuuki said is tugging at his memory.

"Zero is so fragile...anything could break Zero, and then Zero would be gone..."

Kaname goes cold. Zero is mortal, just like his ancestors. Someday Zero will be laid out beside the graves he tends every year. No, he's a vampire - not even a body, no grave, ash and dust scattered to the wind. Yuuki will be devastated. He should remind Zero of that.

"Please make an offering on our behalf," Kaname says instead.

Though he isn't sure why - probably to avoid Yuuki's ire - Kaname refrain from antagonizing Kiryuu the night before the Ancestor's Festival. When their Consort leaves at sunset for the Hunter burial grounds, Kiryuu is distant, aloof, as cold-faced as they've ever seen him, staring off into some misty space that holds his beloved dead.

By mutual agreement in the somber atmosphere, the Kurans split up and tend to their own affairs separately for a few hours. Their unplanned trip extension has left plenty of work to catch up on. Lunch is conducted with little conversation in one of the cavernous formal dining rooms, the heavy mood from earlier still present, before Kaname and Yuuki leave for the Kuran business offices.

Caught together in the backseat of the car, the tension deepens, and the silence makes Kaname's skin prickle. Yuuki stares out the window as though she's alone. For days, there's been an unacknowledged cold distance between them. Kaname knew Kiryuu's confession would damn him in her eyes, but Yuuki's anger is still deeply unsettling, resurrecting his old doubts about their
relationship and his fear of abandonment.

Yuuki has yet to bring up Kaname's newly discovered sins against their Consort, but as much as Kaname dreads it, anything would be better than this agony of waiting. But that is Yuuki's privilege; Kaname hasn't dared broach the issue. In the meantime, he will have to-

"Kaname."

The pureblood brushes away his thoughts, lifting his chin from his palm.

Yuuki's posture is collected, confident, a perfect pureblood mask, and she's watching Kaname with a bland expression on her face. Their bloodbond burns like acid, his wife's betrayal and anger eating away at his insides. Yet her voice remains perfectly even. "I want to make something very clear. If you ever lay a hand on Zero, ever again, I will leave you. I will take him away and leave you. Do you understand, Kaname?"

Kaname swallows, working moisture into his dry mouth. "I understand," he says, tone placating, as submissively as he knows how.

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Yuuki doesn't blink. "You will never keep anything so vital - anything about Zero's health or safety - secret from me, ever again."

"I will not," Kaname promises, and looking in her unwavering rosewood eyes, realizes he means it.

Hard-faced, Yuuki's accusations fall one by one from her lips. "Zero starved himself for years. You knew about it. You didn't help him. What if Zero had started hurting himself again?"

"I can offer no redress," Kaname admits. "I acted selfishly. I can only tell you that I regret my action deeply, and I would not do so if I were offered the choice now."

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Yuuki breathes, and looks away to the window. "I can't forgive you for exposing Zero to danger," she finally says. "I want to, but I can't. Not yet."

Yet the anger in their blood bond is easing into tiredness; a tendril of love creeps through as Yuuki brushes their hands together

"I can accept that," Kaname replies with difficulty.

Yuuki touches his cheek with her fingertips, pain in her eyes. "I love you," she tells him. "No matter what, I love you."

Closing his eyes, Kaname presses his forehead to her hand. "But less than you love Kiryuu."

"Differently," his wife corrects him. "Not less. I love you both, but you're different people. My love for you and my love for Zero aren't shaped the same." The surge of affection through the bloodbond leaves Kaname no doubt that Yuuki really cares for him.

"How can I gain your forgiveness?" Kaname asks, above the hum of the car engine.

Yuuki waits until Kaname lifts his chin to look at her, a smile hinting around her mouth. "You already have it. I've forgiven you for everything you did that hurt me, all the times you lied or kept things from me. If I hadn't forgiven you for most of the shit you've pulled, Kaname, I wouldn't be sleeping in your bed right now, and you wouldn't be enjoying regular orgasms."

Kaname's eyebrows lift, amused by her unusually frank language and even more relieved to hear
Yuuki say it aloud.

His wife’s eyes turn away, and she picks at the threads in her skirt. "But Zero... Zero is different. Because I love him, he's a special case. I care for him so much. People who hurt him are much harder to forgive." As Yuuki turns back to him, her expression is so earnest. "You're the same, Kaname - I can't easily forgive things that hurt you, either. Please, just give me some time."

Jealousy is an old friend, but Kaname has learned to resign himself to sharing Yuuki’s heart, and his envy merely twinges before the pureblood pushes it away. "Of course," he says. "Whatever time you need."

"Thank you," Yuuki sighs, relief clear in her tone. This must have been weighing on her heart too. Bottling things up is never good for her, but now that she's said what she needed to say, she'll consider the matter resolved, and their relationship will be restored to usual. "We'll work through this, I promise."

Kaname has no doubt, not when their bloodbond burns so brightly with their mutual love. Bringing Yuuki's hand to his mouth, Kaname kisses it. "I am very lucky to have you," he murmurs.

"Not as lucky as I am to have you," Yuuki replies, laying a hand on his knee as she smiles up at him.

The Ancestor's Festival - a solemn day of remembrance for the dead, when Hunters ate no meat from sunset to sunset, gathered with their living relatives to visit the graves of their ancestors, and mourned the newest lives lost, lighting candles, burning incense, and leaving offerings of food, drink, and flowers to comfort their family's ghosts.

Yuuki knows it's one of Zero's bad days as soon as she catches sight of him, skin bluish with cold and exhaustion dogging every shaky step. The distant look on his face earlier has hardened to icy desolation; blank-faced with lifeless eyes, Zero's withdrawn inside himself to escape from his pain.

It's not a relapse, she ascertains, taking Zero's face in her hands; he's just overwhelmed, and will be fine in a day or two. But Yuuki still worries at each sign, and her alpha frets with anxiety when its mate is so deeply distressed.

"I hope I didn't worry you," Zero says - those are the first words out of his mouth, and Yuuki marvels again at Zero's ability to ignore his own pain for other people's needs. Not tonight though. Tonight it's Zero's turn to be taken care of.

Yuuki and Kaname have prepared everything. First is the hot bath, smelling of aromatic oils and herbs. Yuuki chatters with Zero as he soaks, resting his head on his arms, and Kaname tells amusing stories. Zero's laugh is a weak, shriveled thing startled out of him by accident, but anything is better than that tight, hollow look. Once Zero is smothered in thick, fluffy towels, she brusquely dries his hair, and then ushers him over to their bedroom, where dinner is waiting.

Kaname thought Zero might like to eat in bed, a rare indulgence when Rosehill's traditions demanded strict adherence to propriety.

Obeying Hunter custom, the meal is nothing more than grain and vegetables, with not a drop of sweetness. Even using such limited, simple ingredients, Rosehill's kitchens made nothing less than their usual high standard of fare. And Yuuki asked the cooks to follow a few extra criteria: all the items are little bite-size finger foods, things that won't drip or spill.

"Go on Zero," Yuuki urges him, hand in the small of his back. Zero clambers up on the bed
without resistance, then folds in on himself, curling up in his center spot.

Yuuki follows, being careful not to upset the trays laid out at the foot of the mattress. Kaname's enormous bed has plenty of room for three adults plus their meal, but they don't need a careless accident when Zero's in this condition.

Kaname is already waiting for them. Right away, he scoops Zero into his arms and begins carding his hand through their Consort's hair, working out the snarls. After so long without being cut, Zero's hair is almost long enough to tie back - like Ichiru's hair was, Yuuki realizes with a lurch.

"Zero, do you feel like eating?" Kaname murmurs.

Zero barely stirs. His eyes are open - at least the half of his face Yuuki can see - but he isn't watching anything except the ghosts in his head, staring blindly ahead like he'll find the answers he needs.

"They say the dead come visit the living tonight." Zero's lips barely move, and his voice is no more than a whisper. "For a moment, I thought I saw him - Ichiru, sitting on his grave."

Zero closes his eyes. In a voice layered with pain, he confesses, "He smiled at me."

"Why do you do this to yourself? Return, year after year, if returning causes you grief?" Kaname's question has an academic quality to it. Yuuki almost rebukes him, except Zero's eyes show a spark of life, and their Consort summons the embers of a glare.

"I'm the last. There's no one else. Do you know what it means to be the last of something?"

Kaname's hand freezes, half-buried in silver locks. "I do. I am the last living Ancestor, after all."

Zero lifts his head. "Then you know what I mean. If you don't remember, no one else will. If you don't settle those debts, protect those achievements, guard their reputation, there isn't anyone else left for the task."

"And you feel obligated to do those things?" Kaname inquires, too amicably, something more dangerous hidden underneath.

Zero's hands fist in the sheets. "It's the least I can do. I couldn't - I couldn't carry on the line. Ten thousand years of Kiryuu Hunters, one of the last Thousand Red Peony bloodlines, and I'm the one who fucked everything up. Our line will end with me. Ichiru was the last human Kiryuu, and I killed him. And I -" Zero stops, and takes a deep breath. "I'm...I couldn't - still can't - have children. The doctors told me..."

Laughing bitterly, Zero shakes his head. "Well, it's fine that the omega ripped off my balls. I was already defective anyway."

"Shizuka's actions were not you fault," Yuuki reminds Zero, shifting close enough to lay a comforting hand on his shoulder. "And you're not defective. Not ever. Don't say that about yourself." Yuuki will be disappointed if Zero can't carry a child, but that's unimportant compared to Zero's happiness and health, and it doesn't have anything to do with his worth.

"Besides," Kaname adds, shifting his weight, "even if you were infertile before, that may no longer be true - your body has changed since you presented as an omega."

Zero shakes his head, and presses the heels of his hands into his eyes so hard Yuuki panics and pulls him away by the wrists. The blend of hopelessness, failure and exhaustion in his eyes makes
a stabbing feeling lance through her chest. "Will you eat something?" she nearly begs, desperate to erase that look from Zero's face.

He yields - entirely for her consolation, Yuuki suspects. But she'll accept it, take any chance she's allowed to care for him. Kaname brings a plate of something wrapped in dried seaweed, little packets of sticky rice and filling.

Picking one up, Yuuki turns to Zero, who catches her intent and obediently opens his mouth, too heartsick to care for things like dignity or social expectations. Yuuki slips the food past Zero's lips with little ceremony, and her fingers catch in the wet of his mouth, sending a jolt through her bones. Tonight is not the time, she reminds her body; Zero's in no fit state of mind to start anything.

But Yuuki is content with this; Kaname too, from the soft, intent way he watches Kiryuu accept his offerings. If the first time Yuuki fed Zero had been intimate, doing it with nothing but her bare hands deepens the experience a thousandfold.

Zero eats mechanically, consuming whatever his spouses give him, offering not a word of complaint or request. The Kurans eat too, but their own hunger is vastly overwhelmed by the appeal of feeding their omega, though the experience is dampened by the circumstances and Zero's heartache. Only when every last grain is gone do Yuuki and Kaname allow Zero to curl against them and go limp.

"Go to sleep, sweet boy," Kaname says, an edge of command underlying his voice.

But their husband still seems preoccupied. So Yuuki kisses Zero's forehead, and he finally shakes off whatever dark thoughts cloud his mind, slipping into a fitful doze.

Slouched in the doorway, Zero counts the seconds, curious how long it will take for the vampire muttering to himself and scribbling in his notebook to notice he's there. Quite long, it turns out. Aido is extremely observant, but also prone to hyper-focusing on things that interest him, to the detriment of his situational awareness. Around the four minute mark, Zero loses interest, and clears his throat.

The blond yelps, jerks his head up, and throws a handful of ice at the door, which Zero dodges by a nose. "Aido," the Hunter grits out, "if you don't want visitors, maybe don't leave the door open."

"You can't be here!" the vampire wails, half-falling from his chair, and taking shelter behind a table full of bubbling glass apparatuses. The whole room smells of burnt chemicals and cleaning product.

"As far as I know, you're forbidden from coming to the household palace. No one said anything about me being allowed to come to the Senate palace," Zero observes.

Aido is pulling at his hair. "What if Kaname-sama sees! What if Yuuki-hime finds out!"

Zero is beginning to regret this. Can't Kuran have less irritating minions? "I won't move from this spot, alright? I was just about to go visit Takuma-sempai, to return a book I borrowed, and I wanted to know if I could pass on any messages."

"Oh," Aido says, manner relaxing. "No, just tell him congratulations from me about the new baby. I always thought Ruka and Akatsuki would be the first, but nobody really expected the Ichijo to produce an omega either."

Nodding, Zero is just about to leave when Aido calls out, "Wasn't last night the Ancestor's
Typical. Aido doesn't notice when Zero parks himself in his doorway, but he can keep track of the Hunter calendar. Zero tries to be polite. "Yes. Kaname thought it would be good for me to visit a friend." After Yuuki and Kuran's coddling, and plenty of sleep, Zero felt steadier when he woke up this evening, but that's none of Aido's business. And then, because he's not a saint, Zero asks, "When are you allowed to leave?"

Heaving a dramatic sigh, Aido collapses into a chair. "Who knows? Kaname-sama's agents have been watching Shirabuki, and she hasn't done anything suspicious. But Kaname-sama thinks Shirabuki is just biding her time."

"Kuran is usually right about these things," Zero says, much as it pains him to admit. "Ahhhhhh!" Kicking his feet like a child, Aido lets out a shout. "I know, but I'm so close to a breakthrough! The sample I got is really interesting - I've never seen anything like it before, except for the poison I found in your blood. But I need more equipment to finish my analysis - equipment I can only find at my lab. It's so frustrating! I tried to get Kaname-sama to let someone else analyze it, but he said it would be a security risk to let anyone know we had a sample."

Zero is a Hunter, not a vampire therapist. "I'm sure it will work out," he offers. "I just want to go somewhere," Aido whines. "Anywhere that's not here - not that being near Kaname-sama all the time isn't wonderful!" he hastily adds. "But would it really hurt if I just slipped out for a little bit? Shirabuki has bigger things to worry about than me."

Frowning, Zero says, "Don't do anything stupid, Aido. Kaname would kick your ass."

"I know," Aido whines, thunking his forehead down on the table. "Thanks for coming by," he says, and waves Zero out.

Walking up the path to the Shouto estate, Zero sighs. Visiting Aido was just a poor attempt at putting off his departure. He's returning the romance novel Takuma lent him, that's true, but - his cheeks heat - Zero also promised himself he would ask the elder omega about sex with purebloods. Again. There is no way this won't be incredibly embarrassing.

It takes two cups of tea before Zero can summon the nerve, as the two of them lounge in Takuma's sitting room.

"Takuma-sempai, can I ask you something?" Zero ventures, and his voice is tentative enough that the blond immediately gives the Hunter his full attention.

"Of course, Zero-kun," Takuma says, marking his place in his book. "What is it?"

"Um," the Hunter begins. Very intelligent. "Ah - it's about something private."

Hazarding a guess, Takuma says, "Is this about your relationship with Kaname and Yuuki-san?"

Relieved he won't have to explain, Zero answers, "Basically. While we were on vacation, we did things together. But I'm a little anxious about going any further. I just need you to answer some questions I have, in as much detail as you're comfortable with. Books are good, but they don't answer everything, and you have personal experience so..."

Takuma gives his sunniest smile. If the noble weren't so well-bred, he'd probably congratulate Zero
on his progress. "What would you like to know first?"

Zero sincerely hopes Takuma won't regret this later. "Penises," the Hunter says, with as much of a straight face as he can manage. "Are alphas supposed to be really well-endowed?"

Blinking, and rather bemused, Takuma asks, "How large do you mean?"

Zero holds his hands out.

Takuma's eyes widen. "Not usually *that* large, no. But they're always sizable."

Thus follows the most embarrassing hour of Zero's life. The Hunter asks everything he hadn't dared before - about what sex as a virgin will feel like, about how alpha bodies work, about the mechanics of sex and pleasure, and especially about his own body's responses.

Both their faces are near-permanently red, but Zero gets his answers, and comes out feeling much more reassured than before. Zero's had the crap beaten out of him and nearly died several times; the potential physical pain of losing his virginity is nothing compared to the injuries he's endured as a Hunter.

It doesn't make his emotional discomfort with his body go away, but any way Zero can demystify all of this, he considers progress.

A man with less control of himself would pace. Kaname merely carries his excess tension in tightened shoulders, and rigorously keeps himself still, counting out the seconds between breaths.

Through the eyes of the familiar shadowing his current targets, Kaname receives confirmation they've arrived at their destination.

His window of opportunity is short, a few hours at best. If Kaname chooses this course of action, he needs to go now, while both his spouses are out of the house. Determined to Hunt again, Kiryuu has returned to the Hunter Association for the physical he must pass to be approved for active status. Yuuki has gone with him, and is waiting outside the boundaries for their Consort until he's finished.

Leaving Kaname temporarily alone, and unobserved.

The pureblood pinches the bridge of his nose. This idea occurred to him the night they returned from the onsen, but the ambition itself only took form after the Ancestor's Festival. Even now, Kaname hasn't committed to the risk. Revealing his desire is like offering his opponent a weakness, an avenue for leverage, a pressure point he can be manipulated with. But the reward…

A flapping of wings, and Kaname soars among his ravens. He permits himself no further debate - indecision causes dangerous error. Now to see what comes of it.

The ravens leave him on the slopes of a rocky, treeless mountain, where the elevation is high that the air feels thin - no trouble to his pureblood body. There is a palace complex built into the side of the mountain itself, square structures with sloping tiled roofs jutting out from shelves cut in the rock like rice terraces. According to legend, not a single stone was mortared to construct this estate - the rock itself flowed into the shapes commanded by its makers. Fitting, for the home of a pureblood.

The servant who opens the door bows, but does not ask Kaname's purpose; Kaname has not dampened his aura, and he can only be here to see the estate's master. Led silently through
corridors and up staircases, they take winding paths past rooms filled with furniture covered in dust cloths, and pass by entire wings of closed doors. The whole time, Kaname only spots one other servant disappearing around a corner. Compared to Rosehill, this place is almost abandoned. Finally, the servant stops in front of a double door with two auras inside - one pureblood, one noble rank.

Breathing in, Kaname readies himself, settling into the ruthless cunning needed to succeed in vampire power games. There is no more dangerous opponent than another pureblood, even one like this. Yuuki's kinder, gentler Kaname can't survive here - to wrest victory, he needs the Ancestor of the Kuran, that manipulative cruelty and ancient will. Pushing open the doors, Kaname strides inside to meet this empty palace's lord.

The two occupants, seated side by side on a brightly striped divan, don't seem surprised by Kaname's visit. Surprise would require interest.

"Welcome to our home, Kuran Kaname-san." Ouri's voice has a raspy undertone, like he hasn't used it often, but it's still low and booming, strength not entirely gone. Most of his body is hidden beneath a heavy, high-collared cloak, except for his hands and face. Ouri has his family's black hair, though Kaname does not remember Ouri's Ancestor having such bright green eyes. The other pureblood's face, like his voice, shows no strong emotion. Kaname's impassiveness is a mask, but Ouri's blankness is an absence.

Beside him, Consort Shoshana smiles faintly, her mouth turning upward. Her dark hair is unbound beneath a veil, even longer than usual when released from her customary braids. Beside the dark color of her husband's clothes, the vermilion of her Hoseki, tunic and puffy trousers seem all the brighter. "Mint tea, Kuran-sama?" she asks, gesturing to the small round table in front of them, where a silver teapot and colored glass tumblers wait.

Nodding, Kaname allows the servant to take his long coat, and finds himself in a quandary. The divan is pushed against the far wall; the only available seat is next to either Ouri or his Consort. Another servant, arriving with a matching wood-framed cushion - rather like a low stool - solves his problem, and Kaname takes a seat opposite his hosts. Shoshana pours Kaname's tea in a curious circling motion, then pushes the blue glass tumbler in his direction. Appreciating the aroma, Kaname takes the glass in his hands, but doesn't drink.

Kaname knows less about Ouri than he does Shouto. The Ouri family have a mixed reputation, but the current lord is so ancient he predates available records, and his early history disappears into obscurity. It doesn't help that Ouri has been a shut-in for the last several thousand years; the only reason Ouri leaves his estate is to accompany his Consort, meaning very few living vampires know anything helpful. According to rumor, Ouri's devotion to Shoshana is his only remaining motivation, and the sole reason he's still alive.

One of the few facts Kaname knows for certain is that Ouri is engaged to Shirabuki Sara, and has been since she was a child. Before now, that possible alliance with his rival made Kaname too suspicious to approach Ouri. But Kaname's observations today have significantly lessened those suspicions, and increased his confidence in his course of action. Every piece of evidence Kaname's seen - Ouri's clear disinterest in Kaname, the lack of servants, the empty house - supports the rumors: Ouri has succumbed to his pureblood lifespan and grown weary of life, the engagement with Shirabuki isn't serious, and the only reason he remains vaguely engaged with the present is his Consort. Even this room speaks of Shoshana's taste, not Ouri's - the intricately woven wool rugs on the floor, the furniture, the geometric tiles on the walls, the potted plants flourishing in the corners.

Kaname's hosts remain content to drink their tea in peace, with eyes only for each other, ignoring
the stranger in their midst. Kaname realizes Ouri and Shoshana do not particularly care for the
polite small talk expected of a host.

"I hope I haven't come at a bad time," Kaname begins, not because he believes he's interrupted
anything, but because at least one of them needs to start the necessary pleasantries before they can
get to the point of his visit.

"No," Ouri says, and holds his glass out so Shoshana can pour more tea.

"It's a pleasure to finally make your acquaintance," Kaname tries again. "You're the eldest of our
kind - you must have seen a great many things in your life."

"Yes, my pleasure as well," Ouri agrees, meeting Kaname's eyes before his gaze drifts back to his
Consort.

Kaname's hand tightens around his glass. Is this what Kaname was like during the worst of his
despair? Dull-eyed and lethargic, his hair a touch overgrown and his clothes disheveled? No, Ouri
has a Consort - without Shoshana his apathy would be far worse, and Kaname's despair must have
been even more disturbing. Skin prickling, Kaname moves away from those thoughts. He hates to
remember that emptiness.

At least Consort Shoshana appears to be paying attention; Kaname catches her watching out of the
corner of her eye. "Your Consort has been an excellent mentor to Zero," Kaname says with a spark
of inspiration, trying a new strategy.

His spine straightening, Ouri sits up and places a hand on his Consort's arm with the first hint of
emotion Kaname's seen on his face. "Yes, Shoshana is rather impressed with him. You are very
fortunate to have gained such a worthy companion, Kuran-san."

"I didn't appreciate Zero at first," Kaname admits, seizing the opening. He can see a path to his
goal, but it will require candor and revealing some very private aspects of their life. "I hated him,
and I behaved very cruelly."

Ouri's face darkens. "Consort Kiryuu is the most precious gift you will ever be given. Don't waste
that gift, Kuran-san. You will regret it for the rest of your life."

Interesting. Is Ouri speaking from experience? Kaname inclines his head. "I understand, Ouri-san. I
already regret my actions - Zero never deserved how I treated him. But my feelings toward him
have changed very much."

Once, in his deepest, blackest depression, Kaname had punched a hole through his own chest, put a
hand around his heart, and squeezed. Just to see what it might feel like to die. It was the greatest
agony the pureblood had ever known, black spots dancing before his eyes as his invulnerable body
screamed in fear of death.

In the moment Zero finally confessed his self-abuse, drawing back the curtain hiding his pain, all
the terrible details given concrete form, something in Kaname's chest had hurt - squeezed, ached,
bled - and too many thoughts and feelings had passed through Kaname's head to understand any
single one.

Kaname raises his chin, meeting Ouri's eyes. "He is - I will not allow Zero to be hurt. I can't accept
any harm happening to him."

For the first time, Ouri seems completely present in his own body; those green eyes have fire and
focus. "Good. Guard him well, now that you understand his value."
Do it now, before Ouri's attention slips away again. "That's why I came here today, Ouri-san," Kaname says, making his body language entreat ing, his hand outstretched, palm upward. "I need your help. I want to protect Zero, but there are forces beyond my knowledge I cannot yet stop."

Consort Shoshana, who has been watching her husband attentively, tenses, shifting against her Ouri's side.

Kaname gestures toward her. "A noble rank vampire can expect to live around 2,000 years, and no more than 2,500. But Consort Shoshana is over five thousand years old, more than twice her natural lifespan. I want to know how you accomplished this. Will you tell me, Ouri-san?"

Faintly surprised, Ouri looks at Kaname - really assesses him - for the first time, buying himself time to respond.

Kaname holds himself still, and waits for Ouri's conclusion. Being blunt was not his intention for this meeting, but Kaname isn't sure how long he can hold Ouri's interest, and adaptation has proved necessary.

Shoshana is studying Kaname with even fiercer scrutiny, her finger tapping against her thigh. "I never expected you to ask that question, Kuran-sama. I thought perhaps Shouto-sama, in a few centuries. But never you," she admits.

Here is the real test. If Kaname can convince Shoshana, Ouri will offer whatever information Kaname wants. But if Shoshana disapproves, Kaname will leave empty handed. The pureblood feels his focus sharpen as he begins the familiar dance of words, delicate and perilous. "I understand your surprise, Consort. But as I told you, my feelings have changed. If it is possible to extend the lifespan of a pureblood's consort, then I must learn how."

"And what are your current feelings on the matter?" Shoshana inquires casually, the sharpness of her eyes growing flinty.

Kaname gives the easiest answer. "Yuuki loves Zero, deeply and completely. If our consort dies I fear what will happen to her. I'm willing to do what is needed to protect Kiryuu Zero's existence."

"Then your attempt to extend his life will fail," Shoshana tells him, and Kaname controls his instinctive anger at being denied. "For my husband's method to succeed, intention is key. You must desire your Consort's well-being for his own sake, not as a tool for another person's happiness."

She folds her hands in her lap and leans forward. "I ask again, Kuran-sama. Why do you deserve to know my husband's secret? Why should he tell you anything?"

Understanding this is his last chance, Kaname gives himself a moment to think before he replies. "Kiryuu Zero is the first D-Rank vampire to present as an omega, and there are many unknowns about his body's inner workings. If I let nature take its course, Zero may live a D-Rank's lifespan and die as soon as three hundred, or at best, five hundred. Either way, Zero would never live to see his grandchildren born. If I can prevent that - even if your method can only give Zero a few more centuries - then I need to know. Zero is the most selfless man I've ever met, and his existence makes the world a better place. It's not a question of me deserving anything."

Ouri and his consort exchange looks. "What is Kiryuu Zero to you?" asks Ouri, voice returned to its even cadence.

That question again. Kaname hesitates, though his expression never flickers. "I don't love him, if
that's what you're asking."

Ouri shakes his head. "Love isn't necessary. Only sincere desire that Kiryuu remain alive."

Interesting. Kaname finds the truth difficult to admit, nonetheless. "He is - Zero's life is precious to me. My desire is selfish, but sincere."

Shoshana's eyes brighten, and she nearly smiles. "That will do."

"You are bloodbonded to your wife, are you not?" Ouri asks, manner suddenly friendlier.

"I am," Kaname says. "Is that a problem?"

Shaking his head, Ouri answers, "Not precisely. But your bloodbond means that both of you must participate if you want to succeed."

"So Yuuki will need to know."

"Yes," Ouri confirms. "Your wife will need full knowledge of what you intend to accomplish."

Unfortunate, but not a serious setback. "Will Zero need to know?"

"No," admits Ouri, and Shoshana shoots him a glance that says she'd prefer Ouri had lied. "Your Consort is a passive participant. You need not inform him at all, if you wish."

Kaname lowers his head. That's immensely helpful - the pureblood is almost certain Kiryuu would refuse. All he needs to do is convince Yuuki. She will want Kiryuu to chose, but if Kaname stokes her fear, and appeals to her selfishness, he may be able to convince her to act without Kiryuu's cooperation.

"For now, that's all I can tell you," Ouri says. "Discuss it with your wife, then come back if you both decide you wish to proceed, and I will explain further. And please bring her along if you do return."

Inclining his head, Kaname acquiesces. "Of course. Thank you, Ouri-san." The servant returns his coat, but just as he's about to leave, Ouri stops him.

"One more thing." Ouri's expression is serious. "Bending nature to your will does not come without a price. Decide what you are willing to sacrifice to preserve your Consort. How much weakness are you willing to accept on Kiryuu Zero's behalf?"

Kaname's throat tightens, and his mouth thins into a line. Of course it wouldn't be so easy. Sacrifice something to ensure Kiryuu lives? Even if he respects the Hunter, even if he's fond of him, why should Kaname do that?

"You don't need to answer now, Kuran-sama," Shoshana tells him. "Please just consider the question."

Unable to decide what to reply, Kaname merely nods, and turns on his heel, striding away before they can say another word.

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Yuuki's low-key pre-planning for a 'spontaneous' celebratory dinner turns out to be a good idea when Zero passes his physical and begins the process to return to active duty. She hates the idea of Zero being in danger - of him deliberately putting himself in danger - but she's not about to skip an opportunity to celebrate Zero's health and reward him for taking better care of himself.
Kaname was a little distant at dinner, but Zero's enthusiasm is too infectious for Yuuki to really worry about anything. It's probably just Kaname brooding over Zero's impending return to duty, for the same reason Yuuki isn't completely happy - the Association has already promised Zero a Hunt next week.

Yuuki isn't pleased that Zero will be risking his life so soon, but the prospect has done wonders for Zero's attitude. There's a confidence in the way he holds himself tonight, and a lightness that resembles relief. Yuuki should probably be concerned that the prospect of death, trauma and injury makes Zero so eager, but it's nothing she didn't already know.

"Kaname," Yuuki complains, spotting her husband sneak-reading more reports when she comes out of the bathroom. "Didn't you work all evening? Come on, put it away. Zero learned some great news today! So please relax, and spend some time with him."

The pureblood makes a peculiar expression. "I did work earlier, but you know how it is. Problems pile up if you're not diligent."

Yuuki huffs. "You definitely qualify as diligent, Kaname. Now please come to bed."

There's a splash in the bathroom - Zero must be getting out of the tub, but Yuuki has more pressing concerns, like how her husband is overworking himself. "Come on," Yuuki insists, teasing Kaname with her smile. "Clothes off."

Kaname gives his wife an arch look. "You're dressed," he observes, referring to their new habit of sleeping in the nude.

Crossing her arms, Yuuki retorts, "I'm going to bathe after Zero's finished." She can hear the Hunter rustling around behind her, probably drying off and dressing.

"Very well," Kaname gives in, and the two of them gather up anything sensitive that needs to be secured for the night, hand it off to Seiren, then settle into armchairs to wait for Zero.

To pass the time, Yuuki tells Kaname about the Hunter Association headquarters. Not useful things, just small details that might have been part of Zero's daily life, like how the people dressed or what things smelled like. As a pureblood, Yuuki wasn't allowed to enter the town, but she remembers visiting it during her time as Cross' ward.

"I'm ready," Zero's voice calls from the doorway.

- and Yuuki forgets everything, loses the very ability to speak, to breathe.

There is her beloved Zero, watching them with dark eyes, and he is luminous from the bath, all sinewy limbs and wiry strength, with his most intimate secrets poorly hidden, half-covered by a cream towel. A stray water droplet from his damp hair plunks on the floor, and Zero's grip on his towel loosens.

Yuuki sees the whole thing in slow motion - the tortuous unwrapping of cotton from its loving embrace around Zero's hips, revealing the pale perfection of his thighs, and hipbones she wants to rub her thumbs over cradling his sweet shaft, pale and pinkened like the rest of him.

Her breath feels punched out of her body. Her mouth waters. Such a cute cock, hanging shyly between muscled thighs with a tuft of silver hair at the base, embarrassed at its naked crown, absent balls and modest size. Yuuki engraves this moment into her memory - her first sight of Zero's pretty cock, hiding something even more secret behind it.
Yuuki's alpha writhes covetous, ravening, emitting such concentrated want the pureblood trembles. "Oh, Zero," Yuuki says, the awe in her voice better suited to a church, laden with such unadulterated worship any pious soul would cry blasphemy.

Zero's eyes skitter away as he makes an attempt to cover himself, before shyly peeling his hands from his sex. Yuuki's brain claws for a foothold. "Are you alright?" she says, unable to remember why she needs to ask, but certain that she needs to know.

"Yes," he murmurs, gaze drawn to her face and mesmerized by whatever emotion he can see there.

At her side, Kaname glides forward, and Zero takes an instinctive step back, expression taking on an uncertain edge.

"May we look at you?" Kaname requests, faux affable - greedy, covetous, but Yuuki wants it too, wants Zero laid out just for them as she savors this sight. And more than anything, Yuuki wants to see her omega's untouched cunt, the place that belongs just to them. The alpha in her chest thrashes, chanting its mantra of oursoursours.

Their pretty virgin's eyes are so wide as he looks from one alpha to the other, naive to the instincts he's stirred with his innocent nudity. "If you want," he ventures. Zero's hands twitch again; he looks so vulnerable.

Yuuki wants to devour him.

Kaname backs their omega up, step by step, until his knees hit the edge of their bed, but Zero's balance is too well-trained to fall backwards. So Yuuki reaches out, the hard line of his collarbone beneath her palm, and shoves him inexorably down, further, even lower, until Zero lies recumbent, the whole milky expanse of his body displayed for their eyes - thighs, soft cock, belly, chest with its pebbled nipples, silver and white and pale pink and all belonging to them.

She's so hard it hurts, and she hasn't even touched him yet. Her voice is low, throaty - Yuuki's never heard herself make that voice before. "Please," she begs, "I want to see you," and massages the inside of Zero's knee, staving off her desperation and giving him time to decide. They have to go carefully, or Zero won't want to trust them again.

His face twists as he fights some inner battle, before his expression smooths into impassiveness, and Zero nods, loosening his muscles in an invitation.

Wetting dry lips, Yuuki nudges Zero's thigh open, feeling his muscles bunch and tighten as her fingers glide over the soft, smooth inner skin. The pureblood wants to rub her cheek against such dense, satin-covered strength, but contains herself. Not ever Zero's wonderfully thick thighs can distract her from tonight's real prize. Kaname's breaths have kicked up a notch as he mirrors Yuuki, inching Zero's legs open little by little, mindful of the increasing tension, giving their omega one last chance to refuse.

But Zero doesn't, and finally - finally - their Consort is spread wide, every last part of him exposed. Yuuki presses a hand against her cock, feeling the shaft pulse with her heartbeat, and tries to stop herself from coming straight into her underwear.

New-made, Zero's hole is so delicate. No one seeing it now could mistake it for anything other than virginal, bare and framed by small labia folded tightly shut. Only the tiniest bit of inner pink peeps out from Zero's demurely closed sex. Just that color by itself, the palest shell pink, gives off an air of perfect innocence.
It's so small, Yuuki thinks with mingled glee and horror, comparing the girth of her own cock. She's going to split him open when she takes him, destroy this pristine, unblemished view - and she will, Yuuki promises herself as boiling heat bubbles in her belly. Oh, she will.

"Zero, down here you're so pretty," Yuuki breathes worshipfully, inching her hand higher up Zero's thigh, burning so bad with the need to touch.

Giving a full body shudder, Zero stares at her, shocked. "No?" he says. "It's not - it's just an omega birth canal."

"Hasn't anyone ever told you what a pretty boy you are?" Kaname purrs, and Zero makes a little noise, shaking his head helplessly.

"Please, I'm not - It's gross, you don't have to -"

"Oh no," Kaname disagrees, stroking Zero's other thigh, "whatever anyone told you before, they must have been blind not to see it. You're very beautiful, Zero, with your lovely features, your exotic eyes and hair, and this body...do you have any idea what a temptation you are, stalking around like a leopard, all lithe and fierce?"

Zero is shivering, his eyes darting back and forth like he doesn't know what to do.

"Fools, all of them," Kaname mourns, shaking his head, hand tightening possessively on their omega's leg, "We'll just have to prove it to you," he finishes, leaning down to kiss Zero's inner thigh.

"Everyone we meet is so jealous, because I've got the most gorgeous mate of all," Yuuki says just for the pleasure of watching Zero's cheeks heat. "You're so sexy it drives my stupid caveman alpha crazy." Yuuki savors the way Zero's breath catches like he's never been complimented before and his bewildered lilac eyes.

Kaname bites at Zero's inner thigh hard enough to make their mate squeal and twist up to watch, propped up on his elbows and spooked again.

"Shhh, I won't go any further. Let me mark you a bit," Kaname soothes, petting Zero's hip and enlarging his tooth marks into a large purple bruise, so close to the tip of Zero's cock that his breath fans against the head.

The air carries the barest hint of Zero's arousal - and Yuuki's had all she can stand. She fumbles underneath her skirt for her cock, yanking her underwear down, and has a hand around herself furiously stroking before she can think.

A jingle of metal from a belt buckle - Kaname must have his own hand down his pants like a desperate teenager. Even the Ancestor of the Kuran's never seen anything as sexy as Zero, and damn if that doesn't make Yuuki hotter.

"Fuck, Zero" she groans, staring at Zero's perfect cunt, imagines spreading that virginal sex wide around her, the look on his face as she buries herself deep. "Let me come on you," she begs mindlessly, her brain blinking white, "please, Zero, I want you so much, want to have you."

"Yes," Zero agrees, utterly rapt as he watches Yuuki touch her cock, and the smell of omega desire thickens.

Sobbing, Yuuki turns her skirt up so Zero can see her fattened cock poking obscenely from her panties, so Zero has proof of how much he's wanted, needed. She gasps, twisting her hand in just
the right way, and Yuuki is lucky her cock is facing the right angle, because with a wrench, a snap, she's coming, splattering all over his pale thighs, his cock, even pearly droplets of her come clinging to Zero's labia. His sex clenches at the sensation, and the little pearls drip down, smearing Yuuki's essence on his new-made hole. Her alpha radiates satisfaction, while Yuuki is left toying with renewed arousal.

And then Kaname groans and adds his spend, coating Zero's folds in more thick seed, until all the chaste pink is covered in white, not a hint of innocent flesh visible under its lewd covering.

Imagine her own seed, the alpha says. He'll look just like this when we finally claim him, even better! Yuuki is a little mad Kaname got to mark Zero's cunt, but with their rawest scents combined, Zero smells right for the first time

Zero seems calm, though that might just be shock, dipping his fingers into the mess pooling in the crease of his thigh. Such a mess, Yuuki's alpha gloats - Zero's pristine sex coated and soaked, more thick come running down his thighs, his own cock swamped by his alphas' potent seed, his fluttering chest and quick light breaths, the thin flush on his limbs. But his lilac eyes never leave either of his alphas.

Staring absently, Zero doesn't protest when Yuuki and Kaname scoop him up, cradling his body effortlessly as they run him a second bath, nor when they all climb in the tub together. The alphas take turns holding Zero between their legs and washing him, all three of them naked together for the first time.

The purebloods stroke him and keep him close, sensing their omega needs reassurance, and keep up a steady flow of praise - they tell him how brave he was, how good and calm he's being, how sexy he looked, how he needn't be frightened of how good it felt, and that he doesn't need to fight the omega. He's their precious mate - of course he feels safe and satisfied when he's marked by them.

Zero begins to stir, responding with weak nuzzles as his gaze sharpens. They allow the Hunter to dictate how much contact he wants as he returns to his normal self-possession and aplomb. Embarrassed and a bit grumpy, Zero glares at Yuuki when he sees the white silk nightgown laid out, muttering about cold November nights and horny purebloods with weird fetishes, but only shoots a proper glare when he realizes there's no matching underwear.

Yuuki smiles ear to ear, completely unrepentant. She only just got him naked, and she has plans when they wake up tomorrow evening. She needs to equal Kaname's claim on her new favorite part of Zero, after all.

Zero's first Hunt after his reinstatement was supposed to be easy. That was before the backlog of Level Es meant the Hunter's Association was short of capable, fresh Hunters to take on Zero's normal missions. Simultaneously their most expendable and most powerful active Hunter, Zero specialized in completing the most dangerous assignments - the kind no one else would touch because without vampire speed and healing, they were probably a death sentence.

Tonight, by comparison, isn't so deadly: a single B-rank vampire has earned himself an execution warrant from the Senate. Only a handful of Hunters in the world are capable of solo Hunting a noble, and Zero is one of them. Someone needs to pull the trigger, but the Senate doesn't bother with anything that didn't concern them directly - that leaves the Hunters. Out of consideration for Zero's injury, the surveillance has already been done for him. All Zero needs to do is flush out his quarry, and take him out.
Standing on the roof, Zero watches his target turn into the alley where he's set his trap, pleased that his plan is coming together so well. Wearing his Hunter coat and armour, with the night wind on his face and Bloody Rose at his hip, Zero feels complete for the first time in months.

Twitching with the eagerness to spring, Zero stalks to the edge of the building, shadowing his prey on silent feet. Nightshade cautions Zero with a quiet growl, and Zero scratches the wolf's ears in silent apology. It's taken several hours for their target to leave his luxury hotel room and give them an opportunity to strike. Within sight of his chance, Zero's heartbeat rushes loudly in his ears, every cell alert and straining.

It wasn't spoken of in public, but all good Hunters loved what they did on a deep, primitive level beneath human morality, the same animal way a hunting dog loved the work it was bred for. It was only natural, ten thousand years of the same orders resonating in the blood: seek, find, kill, survive. Taking pleasure in the kill was a dangerous path, but enjoying the Hunt itself was permitted. When you killed things that looked and spoke like humans for a living, you didn't get fussy about ethics.

When he was young, Zero's Hunts were driven by sloppy rage, and the desperation to kill as many vampires as he could before he was the name on the execution list. Older, they were just dry duty and rote repetition - stalk, kill, then rinse and repeat until you don't get up anymore.

Now everything is different. Zero's body feels energized - for the first time he's Hunting well-fed and healthy, with the knowledge he has something to go home to. No reward without risk; Zero wants to live, and it makes everything feel sharper and dearer at once. Zero can feel the clarity and anticipation, the animal joy churning in his belly.

Patience, Zero cautions himself, crouching down at the roof edge. Beneath him, his prey drifts deeper into the back alley. Almost far enough. Not quite. A few more feet, let the prey walk deeper into the ambush, draw him further away from the humans. Barely breathing, Zero slips into *mushin*. And then, right when the vampire is perfectly positioned, Zero drops from his perch directly above.

Something *crunches*, and the vampire screams when Zero's weight drives him into the pavement. Immediately, Zero jumps clear, putting some space between himself and the noble, not waiting for a counterattack at close quarters, where he has a disadvantage. Drawing Bloody Rose in one hand, Zero can hear Nightshade following behind, metal clattering as the wolf jumps between balconies to descend the building.

Wavering between fight and flight, the vampire hears Nightshade too, and decides attacking Zero before the Hunter's backup arrives is the better choice. The noble charges, his arms thickening and bulging, his fists engorging and becoming twice normal size. A strength enhancement ability, just like Zero's information said. Taking a single blow would turn the Hunter's body into liquified meat - instant death if the vampire hits anything vital.

Zero gets off one shot before he's forced to dodge away, and the vampire powders the concrete where he just stood using one giant fist. Fine concrete dust flies everywhere as the noble continues attacking with flurry of punches Zero knows better than to take, and Zero wastes another bullet to force more distance.

Now his opponent's legs are swelling up too, bursting through the vampire's expensive trousers and increasing the noble's speed. Already tall and muscular, all that added bulk makes the noble look like a miniature colossus. Now fully powered, the vampire attacks Zero with even greater fury, but the Hunter just keeps darting out of the way, refusing to allow his target close. As the Hunter dodges, his opponent overshoots and blows past like a freight train, bringing down an entire brick wall without any sign of pain.
Zero's razorblade grin belongs on Nightshade - a challenge! Taking aim, Zero shoots a hole in the vampire's right bicep; roaring in pain, the vampire takes a swipe at Bloody Rose. Zero's vampire rejoices in the scent of blood, twining round his Hunter prey drive, the two working in concert to urge Zero forward. The fight flows back and forth, and Zero rises with it, sustained by the rush of adrenaline and barbaric joy of the Hunt.

The big vampire is reeling, resistance winding down as he loses blood and wastes energy trying to pin Zero down. The Hunter dances away every time, searching for his kill shot. Finally Zero spots his opening, and feeling almost reluctant to give up such a satisfying fight, allows the vampire one last charge. Zero doesn't dodge; instead he lines up his sights, and pulls the trigger. Bloody Rose gives one sharp retort, and the enhanced noble drops like a rhinoceros, his momentum carrying him a few more meters before his body turns to ash.

The smell of gunsmoke in his nose, Zero lowers his barrel, blood still thrumming in his veins. Nightshade pads up, tail swinging behind him as he inspects Zero for injury. The Hunter smiles, counting down the seconds.

His Hunter senses ping two powerful auras bearing down on him. Chuckling ruefully, Zero waits until his observers blur into view. Zero's not the least bit surprised to see his spouses - stalking is practically a Kuran family tradition. Breath steaming in the cold night air, the Hunter calls out, "I really don't need babysitters," just to see Kuran's reaction.

Kuran ignores him, russet eyes intent as the pureblood bears down on him. Yuuki has the look of a woman on a mission.

"You weren't subtle," Zero adds, not that either of them really tried to hide how they've been shadowing him this whole time. The purebloods may have stayed out of his his sensory range, but Zero knows the feeling of being watched.

Catching the Hunter by the shoulders, his spouses meticulously examine Zero for injury, getting in a good grope along the way. Luckily for them, Zero is still riding the aftermath of a successful Hunt, warmth lingering beneath his skin alongside the chemical high of cheating death.

"You okay?" Yuuki asks for confirmation, concluding that Zero is not about to bleed out. Kuran dismisses Nightshade in a swirl of smoke.

"I'm fine. A few bruises, that's all," Zero tells them, restlessness heating his blood alongside confident satisfaction. He's tired, but too hyped up to rest yet, his heart still beating a little fast. "You can head back if you want. I'm going for a run." Zero has always trained off the post-Hunt euphoria before, and he's not about to go back to Rosehill like this. A house full of vampires will just unsettle him.

"Let me heal your bruises first," Yuuki insists. Her eyes are brighter tonight, color high in her cheeks, even with the cold. She peels back the Hunter's sleeve, eyes fixed on his reaction as she laps at his sensitized skin. Zero's belly tightens, heat pooling under his navel. Everyone has their rituals after a Hunt; Zero inherited his habits from Master Yagari, but Kaito and most other attached Hunters sing the praises of post-battle sex. With Yuuki looking up at him like that, Zero can suddenly sympathize.

Mmmm, Zero thinks, surveying Yuuki and Kuran in their human clothes, predatory vampire nature kicking in. Maybe Zero ought to experiment. In his element, at home in his Hunter role with a dead man's ashes on his skin, this seems like a perfectly good idea to Zero's adrenaline-driven brain.

"Kaname," Zero calls, feeling the tingle of Yuuki's kitten licks vibrate through his skin. The
pureblood raises his eyebrows in that typically arrogant and self-possessed way, and Zero yanks him by his cravat into a messy kiss so hard their teeth clack, pushing into his husband's mouth and demanding his full attention. Kaname fights back, gripping Zero by the jaw and fighting him into surrender, biting and lapping with ferocious hunger. Zero can't even catch his breath before Yuuki yanks him down to be kissed deep and hard, again and again, until his body sinks gasping into Kaname's arms, yielding to her intensity and the need to breathe.

His purebloods stare down at Zero with burning, starlet-stained eyes, starving predators with a tender snared prey, ready to pounce. Pinned beneath those dangerous twin gazes with his blood full of heat, something slots into place at the root of Zero's psyche. A surge of tight need washes through his body, and Zero whimpers in the back of his throat, dizzy with the force of his arousal. "Please," the omega says, squirming and showing his throat to the alphas who've proved worthy.

Their faces go taut, gazes sharpening. Yuuki's open mouth shows her fangs as she pants, and Kaname's powerful aura warns every vampire nearby to flee. Zero is whisked up to a rooftop garden nearby, hidden from onlookers by a high fence. Sensibility intrudes for a brief moment. "In public?" Zero protests, before being distracted by Yuuki's mouth on his throat.

"I rented the penthouse, we can do as we like," Kaname gasps, undoing the buttons on Zero's coat.

"Creepy bastard, stop following me," the Hunter whimpers. Yuuki's teeth press just shy of breaking skin, and her hand under his shirt feels like a brand, teasing the skin beneath his waistband. With Kaname's heat against his back, and the way his skin burns, the winter chill seeping under his clothes is welcomed.

"You were so hot tonight," Yuuki groans, her breath washing over Zero's throat as she kisses his pulse. "I just wanted to kidnap you and do bad things to you. I'm going to touch you, Zero, unless you tell me not to."

Zero shivers at the open desire twisting her face, heart racing. He's uneasy, but underneath the weight of lust and the lingering thrill of the Hunt, that's a small thing. Zero wants to please her, and Yuuki won't hurt him.

Kaname spreads the wings of Zero's coat, and Yuuki's delicate hands find the button of his trousers, undoing his zipper with torturous care. "Lick," she tells Zero, holding out her hand, and he does, mouth bruised and wet from their kisses. Zero whimpers again, and nearly writhes out of Kaname's grasp when her soft hand settles around his penis. Oh god. *Oh god oh god Yuuki is touching his cock.*

"I love you," she says, looking him straight in the eye and giving his shaft one long stroke from root to crown.

It's been so long since Zero touched himself that he nearly comes right there, hanging on with nothing but willpower and stubbornness as Yuuki does it again, still watching his face. Zero can't stop the noises bubbling out as she plays with the sensitive head, rubbing her thumb over his slit. Zero feels every pulse of pleasure like a blow, only remembering to take a shaky breath when his lungs burn. He's going to burst just from the stimulation. Kaname corrupted her, because how else does Yuuki know the perfect pressure to bring Zero to the screaming edge and the perfect rhythm to hold him there?

"Please," Zero begs with his eyes closed, knowing if he sees Yuuki's intent face, he's going to snap and come embarrassingly quick. Kaname's arm around his middle is the only thing grounding him, and he counts the breaths against his back as a way to steady his control.
"Open your eyes, Zero," Yuuki coaxes, her clean hand touching his cheek. "I know you've been denying yourself. Come for me, and show me the cute face you make, okay?"

Kaname's hand pets his belly; Zero cracks his eyes open feeling even more embarrassed and aroused.

Yuuki grins fondly, and delivers one last agonizing stroke. Zero doubles over, teeth clenched on a sob, his release almost painful after holding it in so long, toes curling and cock jumping in Yuuki's hand as he comes dry. Her soft fingers milk him through his orgasm, fondling his cock as it softens.

Burying his face in her wool coat, Zero waits for his heart to slow down, but the itch is still there under his skin, still unsatisfied. The sensation of orgasm felt different compared to before - more hollow, good but not enough, leaving tension still strung out in his limbs. Zero squeezes his thighs together, abruptly aware of the dampness there, and resents his body anew.

"Ah," says Kaname's voice, "I thought this might be the case."

Zero shoves his face deeper in Yuuki's coat, squirming and frustrated.

Yuuki's hand settles in his hair. "If it helps, I can't come the way I used to either, Zero. I'm happy with only having my cock touched, but I want both when we start with penetration."

"Would you like some help?" Kaname offers, voice amused.

Zero glares upward with all the force of his sexual frustration - baleful, sulky, and about to crawl out of his skin.

"We're serious, Zero," Yuuki says with her most earnest expression. "Please consider the idea. I don't like leaving you like this - I can smell you. You're so desperate."

Zero can't stop himself making a circling motion with his hips, and forces his breath out through his nose, or he'd probably whimper again.

Exchanging a glance, Yuuki and Kaname switch places, Yuuki now the one keeping Zero's weak legs from giving out.

"Please Zero," she pleads against his ear, lacing their hands together. "Let us make you feel good. Let us help you."

Zero struggles with himself. His needy body is eager and willing; his vampire urges him to follow his natural instincts, but the shards of human left in his psyche hold him still.

Turning his face to the side, Yuuki's scent envelopes him, the cool, deep darkness of a pureblood vampire, her clean, dry smell tinged with woody alpha musk. "What would you do to me?" Zero ventures, caught between fear and desire, the alienation of his mind to his body.

"Fingering?" suggests Kaname, fitting a thigh between Zero's legs. "Yuuki says you've never touched your cunt. You could slide against me until you come."

"No!" Zero shakes his head sharply, rejecting the idea at once. "Nothing inside! And I won't touch myself. I'm not going to."

A slow smile splits Kaname's face, and his voice goes smooth and liquid. "Well then. Shall I use my mouth on you?"
Against his will, Zero's thighs clench at the filthy image: Kaname's dark head in between his legs, his proud ex-enemy using that clever, cruel tongue on him, one of the vampires' sacred purebloods lowering himself to service a lowly Level D. The nobles would scream at the very idea.

"Why you?" the Hunter persists, trying to deny his physical reaction.

"Experience," the pureblood purrs; his eyes say he's caught Zero's interest, and has unspeakably dirty plans of his own.

"Kaname is very good with his tongue," Yuuki promises archly. "He's agreed to teach me - if I can find a volunteer to practice on."

Zero swallows, conscious brain almost blacking out with the surge of lust. Oh Ancestress, he's lost hasn't he? Even his feelings that his body is wrong can't win out against that.

"Go ahead," Zero says in a wobbly voice, marshaling his strength of will and determination. "Let's see if you're as good as you say you are, bastard."

Kaname's smile, while triumphant, is softer at the edges; the pureblood's hand on Zero's thigh feels gentle.

"Wait - let's move, I want to see," Yuuki demands. Zero is positioned on a cushioned bench, with his head and shoulders propped up on Yuuki's lap, and his legs parted to make space for Kaname, who's lying on his belly between them.

Resting on his back in such an open position, Zero feels vulnerable, and his fingers seek out Yuuki's hand to quiet his second thoughts. Yuuki grips it tightly, and reminds Zero that she loves him and how much Zero means to her, as Kaname unbuckles Zero's equipment, stripping away Bloody Rose and Artemis Rod and setting them carefully to the side. Zero tenses as he feels his trousers slide down his legs; Kaname kisses his hipbone as the pureblood pulls them free.

One last barrier - Zero's stomach tightens with combined lust and fear as Kaname hooks his fingers in the waistband of the Hunter's underwear - and then slices them off with his claws. Zero squawks, outraged by the wanton destruction of his clothes and the cold air hitting his sensitive parts. "I didn't bring spare underwear!" he hisses.

"I know," Kaname replies, resting his chin on Zero's belly and smiling like a fox in a henhouse. The Hunter's eyes narrow. "You better replace those, you pervert!"

"I've always wanted to see you in lace panties," the pureblood says brightly, and before Zero can open his mouth and spit the retort on his tongue, Kaname is running a forefinger down Zero's soft cock, and the Hunter's words dissolve in a shiver. He hasn't recovered yet from his first orgasm, otherwise he'd definitely be sporting another erection.

Kaname, in no hurry to relieve Zero's desire, kisses around the Hunter's cock from one point of his hip to the other, each touch a spark under Zero's skin. Zero bites his lip to avoid making those embarrassing noises again, and freezes when he realizes Kaname's watching him with displeasure.

"Yuuki," the pureblood orders, laying one forearm across Zero's hips and pressing down, "play with Zero's nipples until he begs you to stop."

Zero senses more than sees Yuuki's anticipation, her intent coiling heavy in the air as her hands snake up his sides, finding their targets with unerring accuracy. She caresses the little swells of flesh, tracing circles around his areolas with her thumbs. His chest is so much more sensitive now;
Zero opens his mouth and moans, hoping for mercy.
"She's barely even touched you yet, and I can smell you getting wetter already," Kaname says with relish.

Yuuki takes that as a signal to begin massaging and squeezing Zero's chest, and Kaname, the cheater, leans forward to exhale hotly against Zero's sensitive labia. In the cold air, the temperature difference sends pleasure sizzling straight to his groin, and Zero shudders from crown to sole, only Kaname's grip on his thigh holding him in place. Zero can't stop watching Kaname move between his legs, though he's not positioned well for it - probably on purpose, so Zero can't brace himself against Kaname's teasing.

The pureblood nuzzles the crease of Zero's thigh, inhaling again. "You smell like us here, but inside your scent is purely your own, clean and virginal."

Yuuki tweaks Zero's nipple, and Zero's gasp is high and loud in the night air.
"Do you want to be ours, precious boy?" Kaname asks, rubbing his cheek against a white inner thigh. "Do you want me to desecrate your insides? Defile you with my touch?"

Yuuki's attentions slow, like she wants to give Zero enough clarity to answer, but his brain is so thoroughly scrambled by his wife's hands on his chest that Zero can only whimper.
"Well?" Kaname draws out the word, his red eyes almost glowing.

"Yes," Zero finally says, mindless as Yuuki plays with his nipples. But he can't imagine how his current pleasure is only the beginning.

Kaname's face disappears, and Zero feels warm fingers tease his labia. The muscles in his belly clench as the pureblood traces the seam, drawing out his anticipation, and then Zero feels cold air rush into his most intimate place as his labia are peeled back. Without warning, a tongue licks up through Zero's folds, once, twice.

Zero screams, his back arching as he bucks against Kaname's hold, and every nerve in his body lights on fire with sensation. It was better than having a hand around his cock, Zero realizes in shock, collapsing back down. Everything that was missing from his orgasm earlier - and more - all from that single touch.

Kaname raises his head, grinning up at Zero. "Like that, kitten?"

Slumped into Yuuki's hold, Zero makes an incoherent noise, staring at the pureblood between his thighs with huge eyes. Accustomed to nothing but pain, the Hunter never knew his body could offer such sheer pleasure. It's a little frightening how his body can still keep such secrets from him.

Chuckling, Kaname says, "You're an omega, sweet boy. Your whole body was rebuilt for one purpose, and if sex didn't feel good, you wouldn't keep doing it." Then he darts back between Zero's thighs, and the whole world dissolves into bursts of pleasure.

Kaname ruthlessly holds him open like he wants to wrench every last bit of pleasure from Zero's
body. If his purebloods weren't restraining him, Zero would've thrown himself to the ground with the force of his thrashing. When Kaname starts humming and tracing patterns against his sex, Zero loses the last of his composure. His eyes go wet, and his hips strain upward as he chases his pleasure; his clawed hands tear through the cushion underneath him, and his voice cracks with the force of his cries.

Oh, he's so close, he can feel it, something slow building in his belly. Kaname curls his tongue, then flicks it, and Zero needs just a little more, just a little…

Without warning, Kaname thrusts the whole length of his tongue into Zero's hole, just that small part of him being spread open. Zero can't even describe the noise he makes, eyes going wide and every muscle locking, his ankles dragging Kaname even closer. Orgasm washes through him, slower and deeper as Zero's inner muscles quiver and his hips grind into Kaname's mouth. The pleasure goes on and on, while Kaname coaxes every drop from Zero's flesh, and when at last it starts to ebb, the pureblood cleans Zero up with his tongue before finally, with one last lick, letting him free.

While Zero recovers, Kaname slides back up and begins petting Zero's hipbone with the most self-satisfied smile on his mouth, lips shiny with Zero's slick. Catching Zero's blurry gaze, the pureblood grins, then licks his mouth clean in slow swipes.

The nerve, Zero grumbles, as the heat in his groin sparks again. He's only slightly mollified by the way Kaname's penis is tenting his trousers; at least it proves Zero can affect the pureblood too. Eyes fluttering shut, Zero tries to absorb his new experience, wallowing in the lingering satisfaction. If male orgasm is like a snap and a fall, female orgasm is like a wave, thorough and rolling.

When he surveys himself, Zero feels physically tired, but in a good, relaxed way - probably the orgasm - and he would really like to lie here and maybe sleep for a while. Emotionally, he's much better off then he thought he'd be, a little nerdy but not panicked or distraught. Accepting his body's pleasure didn't scar him or break him; it was as gentle an introduction to his new sex as Zero could hope for. He's faced part of his fear, and damn if it didn't feel shockingly good. Though Zero's probably going to freak out later when all the happy chemicals wear off and everything catches up with him.

"Do you like having my mouth on you?" Kaname asks, once Zero has his breath back.

"Mmmmn. How?" groans Zero, his neck lolling as he tries to control his limbs, all of which feel like jelly.

"How does it feel so good when you lack a clitoris?" Kaname chuckles. "You're an omega, sweet boy. Your entire quim is a mess of nerve endings, which means every centimeter is exquisitely, deliciously sensitive. I could put a toy in you and leave you tied up and helpless, and eventually you'd squeeze yourself to orgasm. Pleasant, isn't it?"

Zero may have just whimpered in defeat.

"It helps that I'm very, very skilled. The only thing I dislike about oral sex is that I can't tell you how pretty you look, wrecked by my mouth. Come taste him, Yuuki."

Yuuki - whose arousal Zero can feel underneath his back - slides out beneath Zero, and settles between his legs, pressing a quick kiss to his ankle. Zero groans when her tongue catches on his damp inner sex, still sensitive from orgasm, and opens his eyes to glare.
His wife, smacking her lips with a dreamy look on her face, ignores him.

Huffing, Zero says, "Can I get dressed now?"

"Did I say we were finished?" Kaname replies, raising an eyebrow.

Zero freezes, blinking rapidly, and gets the feeling he may have miscalculated.

Kaname smiles and tickles Zero's inner thigh. "You told me I needed to prove myself. I suppose two orgasms are enough to begin with."

Zero is going to die.

Chapter End Notes

Poor Zero doesn't know how to deal with Kaname and his 10,000 kinks. For the record, Kaname did not plan that last scene. He's just thorough and paranoid enough that his setup worked out perfectly for the occasion.

Shoshana's unnatural age is actually mentioned in chapter ten, the first time she's introduced. Sometimes it takes a lot of chapters for a single detail to become relevant.

The Ancestor's festival is based on the Japanese Bon Festival, with a dash of western Halloween. Since the founding Hunters' only universal trait was 'didn't die after drinking pure blood', most of their unique customs are spliced together from many different traditions.

Next chapter: Zero plots, and Kaname and Yuuki take on the case of the Level E vampires
Climb the Peaks, Descend the Valleys

Chapter Notes

I'm sorry the update schedule keeps slipping. I promise I'm not losing interest, autumn has just turned out to have very busy weekends, which means I have less time to write. Thank you for your patience, and please enjoy the chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Kaname pinches the bridge of his nose, resisting the urge to roll his eyes. "Aido. I leave for one night - one - and you decide to disobey my direct orders to remain at Rosehill. Why is that?"

Collapsed on the floor of Kaname's study and quivering like a leaf in a gale, the blond noble looks like he's about to cry. "I'm so sorry Kaname-sama!" Throwing himself face down on the carpet, the tears begin to flow, and Aido blubbers his explanation in fractured heaves. "I had a breakthrough analyzing the Shirabuki sample - and I needed the equipment in my lab - I, I got too caught up and decided it would be okay since it was important - and I'd only be gone for a few hours - so I went!" Further explanation dissolves into more wailing and garbled apologies.

Despite Aido's infraction, Kaname is finding it difficult to summon true anger. His whole body is suffused with the afterglow of their tryst last night, and all Kaname wants to do is sit at his desk and savor the memory - Zero's sweet cries and the way he shook and came apart as they played with his lovely, innocent body. And the taste of him - Mother Night, Kaname can still remember Zero's taste on his tongue, the heavenly flavor of him! Kaname licks his lips, greedy for more. It makes heat drip down his bones, and awakens a desire to hunt his Consort down and repeat that night all over again. The pureblood never thought he'd enjoy their encounter so intensely.

*Mate is strong and beautiful, of course we will love his sweet, delicious hole!* scoffs his alpha. Now tell alpha-mate about -

Kaname waves his hand, cutting off the flow of nonsense both inside and outside his head. Yuuki does not need to discover Ouri's offer when the terms are unacceptably steep. "Aido, just tell me what you discovered."

Aido jerks upright, his nervous enthusiasm temporarily overcoming his remorse. "Ah, about the sample...I was right, but also wrong at the same time. The sample bears clear similarities to the poison I found in Kiryuu-sama's blood. It was definitely made by the same person - someone with the same facilities and knowledge of Shirabuki family techniques."

The noble's voice loses strength, and he begins to fidget with his hands. "But the resemblance is...superficial. The two are kind of like isomers - their composition is similar, but the structure is different. Except our drug is missing the critical ingredient that made Shirabuki's poison so deadly - the substance distilled from pure blood. The sample I stole is a new designer drug, and nothing more. But if you want to get really high..." Aido trails off under Kaname's narrowed eyes, 'eeping' and cowering down in terror.

"So it's useless to me," Kaname bites out. "You went only to the lab, and nowhere else?"

Aido nods furiously. "Yes, Kaname-sama. I borrowed one of the estate's cars, went straight to my
lab, and returned as soon as my analysis was complete. I made no other stops, and followed our secrecy protocol to leave no traces in the lab. I did say hello to a few colleagues, but I did not mention my errand."

"I think you will forgive me if I find it difficult to trust you right now," Kaname replies with ire, gathering power in his throat. His next words have the ringing tone marking his pureblood power of command. "Is anything you have told me in this conversation a lie?" Kaname dislikes compelling lesser vampires, but is incensed enough by Aido's disobedience to make an exception. Shaking his head, Aido swallows, his eyes watery as he looks up at the pureblood. "No, Kaname-sama. Everything I told you is the truth."

"You were lucky not to encounter Shirabuki's agents," Kaname says, hands relaxing on the arms of his chair. Aido's response proves he is not being controlled by another pureblood. Any order set by a pureblood's power of command can be overridden by a succeeding order, with the exception of Master and Turned thrall, where the Master's order always takes precedence. If Aido had been compelled to lie, that order would have broken under Kaname's newer, conflicting command.

Kaname may be relieved nothing came of this escapade, but his anger is not yet spent. "I cannot afford to rescue you a second time. I trusted you to follow my order willingly, but you've proved my trust was ill-placed, and I can't allow any further risks."

Aido flinches.

Summoning his power of command again, Kaname orders, "You will not leave Rosehill until I lift this prohibition."

Showing the whites of his eyes, Aido shivers as the command takes hold.

Letting the power fade, Kaname continues in his normal tone. "As insurance, I will assign you a watcher. You will remain in their presence at all times. Am I understood?"

Aido nods dumbly, and when Kaname's brows furrow, the noble hastily gives a positive response, knowing better to argue.

Kaname rubs his temples, "Get out, Aido, and tell Steward Inukai to assign one of the guardsman to the task. And for Night's sake, don't do something so foolish ever again."

The noble backs away, still on his hands and knees, and when the door shuts behind him, Kaname is left with blissful peace.

Now where was he? Ah, yes, Zero's - Kiryuu's pink little cunt, and the taste of his slick on Kaname's tongue...

As the shower spray cascades down Zero's back, he presses his face harder into his knees and closes his eyes, trying to block out his circling thoughts. Zero fled the master suite as soon as he could, pretending to sleep until his spouses left, and then hiding in the Consort's suite like a coward until he was sure Kuran and Yuuki had gone for the day.

Why did he do that? Zero was fine last night. Everything went perfectly - there were a few scary moments, but Kuran stuck to Zero's rules, Zero loved being able to connect more intimately with Yuuki, and everything they did to him felt really, really good. And Zero was okay with what happened! He was! Or thought he was, until he woke up this evening and compulsively froze when he heard Yuuki moving about.
Why is he being so stupid? Zero finally made some progress, and if screws this up by acting frightened, there's no way Yuuki will allow them to consummate the mating this year. The Hunter tightens his grip on his shins. What's wrong with him?

A lock of sodden hair slips over his forehead; when Zero inhales reflexively, the air is thick with steam. Before Zero came to Rosehill, when was the last time he had a hot bath, or even allowed himself a warm shower?

Maybe, Zero reflects, that's part of the problem. Maybe he's avoided any form of comfort for so long that pleasure itself frightens him, the way rain frightens young infants raised in a desert. The Hunter breathes out, forcing himself to examine his feelings.

Zero feels...Zero feels dirty. Last night he allowed a pair of pureblood vampires to touch him - had asked for it, even. What would Zero's parents think, if they could see him now? The last Kiryuu, a skilled and respected Hunter, on his back and moaning while he allowed filthy bloodsuckers to play with his body? Zero has said he's a whore before, but now he really is, isn't he? Paying the purebloods who bought him with his body. The other Hunters must think he's disgusting.

But Zero could ignore all that, drown out the condemnation from his Hunter heritage, if it weren't for how much Zero enjoyed it too, how he squealed and writhed in mindless pleasure like a sow.

Zero never wanted to be like this! He never, not for a moment, wanted to be living inside this omega's body. And now, to learn this body demands he play the omega bitch, or stay unsatisfied...It feels like a betrayal of himself, a betrayal of his own identity, the way he bucked and panted and chased his second orgasm. And his changed flesh is so grossly sensitive, quivering and lustful and weak! Now the memories from last night just make Zero feel guilty for giving in to his urges.

It would have been easier if the sex had been dull, if it had hurt, if Zero had hated it with every fibre - anything but the truth. Zero liked it. And some part of Zero wants more. The Hunter is so disgusted with himself he wants to claw his skin off. This body doesn't even belong to him! If Zero didn't want this body, he shouldn't want this body's pleasure either. If it feels wrong to look at himself in a mirror, it must be wrong to enjoy having those parts.

Letting his hand fall between his legs, Zero tries the same experiment from before, intending to brush a single fingertip against his omega parts. But his heart starts hammering and his skin goes cold and his hand freezes, just shy of contact. Zero surrenders, taking his hand away and letting his head tip back to stare at the ceiling.

What does he do now? Every effort Zero makes to ignore this body, it refuses to stay quiet. But as his failure just now proved, Zero can't face it directly either. The Hunter doesn't know how to reconcile this. If Zero were still on his own, he'd go running until he collapsed. But he's forbidden from punishing himself that way anymore.

Dragging himself out of the shower, still preoccupied with his mental struggle, Zero searches his closet for the plainest, most masculine set of robes he owns. Throwing the robes on - an unrelieved black - he waives, considering what to do next. Best to make sure he's alone in the house, he decides.

Casting his Hunter senses out, Zero is surprised to find Kuran still in his study, his pureblood strength burning clearly in the Hunter's mind. Zero's speed and precision using his normal Hunter abilities have all been improved by Kuran's training. Perhaps, if Zero isn't allowed physical training, Kuran will let Zero exhaust himself with a session testing his new powers? Worth a try, even if Zero cringes when he thinks of looking Kuran in the eye again.
Zero wavers as he knocks on the pureblood's study door, and nearly flees when Kuran calls out, "Come in."

Hand tightening on the doorknob, Zero swallows. What if Kuran is cruel or vicious or mocking, now that he's gotten a taste of what he wants? Better that Kuran do it now, instead of with Yuuki nearby, Zero tells himself, pulling the door open.

Kuran looks up, his dark hair falling around his russet eyes, and gives one of his more genuine smiles. "Zero. This is a surprise. What can I do for you this evening?"

When he smiles like that, Kuran is a little bit attractive, Zero concedes, taking a step into the room and shutting the door behind him. "Maybe I just wanted to see you."

The pureblood raises an eyebrow. "Come now, kitten. You never seek me out unless you need something."

Old enemy or not, Kuran is right. Zero feels intensely ashamed and guilty for treating another person that way, and immediately abandons his earlier plan. "No," the Hunter says, coming closer to Kuran's desk. "I don't need anything right now. Can I - can I stay here for a while?"

Studying Zero for a minute behind an impassive mask, Kuran finally inclines his head, and his expression relaxes. "You may."

"Thank you," Zero replies, wondering exactly what he's gotten himself into as he heads toward the couch.

"No, not there!" Kuran corrects, a suspicious grin creeping onto his face.

Zero eyes him with sudden misgiving. "Then where can I sit?"

Kuran's smile widens; Zero's look deepens into a glare. Nothing good comes of that stupid smile.

The vampire pats his thighs. "This seat is free."

Zero's glare kicks up a notch. The sheer audacity of this perverted fang-licker!

Kuran, the bastard, just continues waiting patiently, acting like Zero is jumping at his offer. Still, Zero did say he wanted to spend time with Kuran. It would be cruel to back out now...

"You better not tell anyone about this," Zero demands, striding across the room and dropping his whole weight ungracefully into Kuran's lap.

Kuran just smiles, wraps an arm around Zero's waist, arranges the Hunter's legs more comfortably, and goes back to his work.

The room is quiet, except for the soft scratching of Kuran's pen, and the rustling noises of papers. Even the normal ambient noise in the hall is absent; the servants avoid walking past Kuran's study in order not to disturb their master.

It's a little lonely, actually, Zero reflects as he leans his head back to rest against the pureblood's shoulder. Zero tries to breathe louder. Just to irritate Kuran, that's all.

"I thought you were working from the company offices today," Zero finally ventures, after ten minutes of watching Kuran's neat calligraphy bloom onto paper, an oddly fascinating and almost meditative exercise.
"An unexpected piece of business cropped up," the pureblood says casually, without looking up. "One that necessitated my presence here."

"Ah," Zero replies, and falls silent.

This is actually not completely terrible, Zero reluctantly admits to himself - not that he'd ever tell that to Kuran. The pureblood is firm and warm, and smells like safety to Zero's vampire. Zero is relaxed, but engaged enough not to be bored. And somehow, all the awkwardness he expected hasn't appeared. It's like last night - well, not like it never happened. But like Zero never fled, like he woke up in their arms and they stayed tucked together until forced to part. Zero drapes himself more restfully over the pureblood, laying his cheek on the wool of Kuran's suit jacket. Time slips away; Zero drifts, his thoughts wandering.

Without planning it, Zero hears himself saying, "The Hunters...they don't really know anything about omegas. Our lore says omegas are so desperate for sex they'll fuck anyone with a dick. Even animals. We think of them as hypersexed, slutty broodmares, basically."

Kuran's hand pauses, pen hovering above paper. Then he lays the pen aside, and his arm around Zero's waist tightens. "The stories have a grain of truth. Society emphasizes an omega's childbearing duties because they are vital to the future of the vampire race. But omegas are not naturally driven to frequent, casual sex, except by personal inclination. They only lose control during heat - though when you're bonded you'll become more responsive to our arousal even outside those times."

Zero senses that Kuran is looking at him, but doesn't turn his head to check.

"Your reactions last night were completely normal, my sweet boy. You needn't fear you are turning into some sex-crazed monster, or that you are unnatural in any way. You're still my innocent virgin." Kuran's voice is full of fondness, and a broad hand comes to rest in Zero's hair.

Lips brush the shell of Zero's ear, and the alpha croons, "Only two cocks will ever sheath themselves inside you, my Consort. I am a jealous man - I would slaughter nations if anyone dared violate you. And if you willingly invited another into your bed, I would murder your lover and tear humanity to the ground."

Squirming, Zero feels each word like a crackle in his groin. His vampire really likes it when Kuran acts possessive, showing off how powerful an alpha his suitor is.

"Oh, what's this?" Kuran chuckles into his ear. "Did you enjoy that? Shall I tell you what else I would do?"

Zero swallows. With that deep, throaty voice in his ear, the Hunter's worries seem very far away.

"I was a king, Zero. In the old days, that would have made you my Consort-Queen. If you had been mine back then, my sweet boy...I would have ordered my followers to kneel before you, would have made them kiss the ground you walked on and worship you like a deity. I would have made you famous as the greatest beauty of the age and forbidden anyone to look upon you, hidden your beauty away in secret palaces and behind silken veils."

Zero can imagine it - he would have utterly hated such a life. But the idea of being so profoundly wanted makes him feel tingly. Zero turns his head to make sure Kuran is joking.

But the pureblood's eyes burn hot, and his smile deepens when Zero meets his gaze. "Although, you wouldn't have liked that, would you Zero?" Kuran continues knowingly. "Perhaps I would
have shown you off instead, made you my lovely, deadly Hunter Queen. I would have paraded you around draped in my treasures and neglected my duties to linger in your bed. I would have taken you to battle at my side, my silver knight, and never left your presence whenever your womb was full of my babe."

Zero feels a wrench in his stomach, longing and desire both, and his thighs reflexively tighten. "Stop playing around, Kaname."

"I'm not, kitten." Kuran nibbles at Zero's throat, and his hand strokes Zero's lower back, just above the muscles of his ass. "Hasn't anyone ever praised you before?"

Not really - just some silly human girls who didn't know better. To Hunters he was a vampire, and to vampires he was a Level D. Kuran must be joking. "Yes, but that's just the vampire allure!"

"No," Kuran disagrees, "it's because you are a rare, extraordinary, beauty with an equally unstained soul. Shall I teach you how desirable you are, Zero?"

Zero hears himself whimper when Kuran's hand slides up his thigh. "You're hard," he says, feeling the organ twitch against his ass.

"I've been thinking about you all evening," Kuran rumbles, and tangles Zero in a kiss the Hunter feels down to his toes. Arousal seeps into his blood, and Zero feels himself start to get wet when he thinks about that skilled tongue in other places.

"You're not in your pretty dresses tonight," Kuran purrs when they part, "Yuuki will want to see you in something nice. I'll help you out of these clothes, shall I?"

Zero wants to feel good again, the way he did last night, but his earlier doubts stab at him. "Is this - is this really okay?" he blurs, warring with his mind and body.

The pureblood pauses, catching Zero's face in one hand and aligning their gazes. "You don't need to feel guilty for what your body naturally enjoys, Zero. Accept what good it can offer you, even if it's not what you want."

Permission given, Zero nearly sobs with relief, going limp in Kaname's hold, some part of him easing. It's not healing, nor absolution, but Master Yagari's words from before his marriage echo in his mind - Zero should do what he needs to survive, and not feel guilty for it. If learning to enjoy his new body aids Zero's integration into his new life, and eases his dissociation, Zero doesn't need to fight it.

"Zero?" Kaname calls, testing Zero's state of mind.

Narrowing his eyes, Zero squirms very deliberately against the hard bulge beneath him, feeling a spark in his groin when the shape nestles in the valley between his thighs. "Weren't you - if you're going to do something - "

Kaname swiftly regains his hungry look, and picks Zero up by the hips, showing off his effortless strength - the pureblood kind that makes Zero's vampire swoon - as he turns Zero around and drapes them chest to chest, tweaking Zero's peaked nipples so the Hunter squeaks. This position is an unusual choice for Kaname; Yuuki and Zero almost always make love face to face, but Kaname prefers Zero underneath him or in front of him. But Zero feels...glad Kaname chose this instead.

They kiss slowly and deeply, in ways that make Zero's cock fill and his underwear dampen, until Zero extracts revenge for Kaname teasing his nipples by palming Kaname's cock through those expensive wool slacks.
The pureblood groans into Zero's mouth, the scent of aroused alpha thickening, and teaches the Hunter a new trick: how to part his thighs and straddle his alpha's lap so Zero's cock and Kaname's ridiculous penis slot together, fully aligned through their clothes.

Zero's breath hitches when Kaname bucks up and their lengths press together.

Kaname looks devilishly pleased. "I'm going to ruin your robe," he announces, "It's not lovely enough to suit you." Then Kaname repeats that devastating roll of his hips, except this time Zero's hole grinds against the pureblood's solid thigh at the same time their cocks rub.

Zero's core throbs at the double stimulation, and he tries to clamp his thighs together to relieve the want - but Kaname's solid body braces his legs open, and Zero can only shiver in frustration.

"Leave me something to wear," the Hunter protests when he can string words together again. He doesn't care about the robe, but even with arousal swimming in his blood he's not shameless enough to walk around naked!

Stupid Kaname just smiles, and rips the fabric of Zero's tunic from the hem of his skirt to his crotch, giving himself easy access to Zero's sex.

Blushing so heavily he fears he might faint, Zero tugs the remnants to each side, rather than protest. Thankfully, Kaname doesn't destroy Zero's trousers, just slides them down until Zero's cock springs out, straining and eagerly erect. A nice, warm hand wrapping around the base distracts Zero while Kaname frees himself from his slacks, and the pureblood's heavy cock rises up, fighting gravity to swat Zero's equally naked sex.

Zero bites back a moan - the contrast between him and his alphas is always so shamefully arousing, so satisfying to his primal beast. Zero's cock is a blushing pink, ordinary in every way, but Kaname's cock is thick enough Zero needs two hands just to wrap around it, and it's even longer erect than soft, flushed furiously red with the foreskin peeled back to reveal its bulbous head. Without the puffy swell of Kaname's knot at the base, meant for plugging come inside a mate, Zero's cock seems bare and immature. And Kaname's cock looks even more powerful with the round, smooth, testicles beneath it, full of potent seed ready to conquer whatever womb they fill.

And all of it belongs to Zero! His alpha has already proven when a good sire he is, the omega remembers with glee. And just now, alpha said he wanted to make babies together!

Mesmerized by his instincts, Zero reaches out and loosely grasps the two cocks, so much heat and firmness twitching against his palms, pressing them even closer to stare. Beside Kaname, Zero looks so small - Zero's cock doesn't even come up to Kaname's crown - and Zero shivers when the velvety skin slides together. The pureblood grunts, and closes his fist around Zero's hands, urging Zero to add more pressure. The Hunter pants as the sensation intensifies, and the heat in his belly flares. Oh, that's even **better**.

"Do you like that, pretty boy?" Kaname murmurs. Balancing Zero with one hand on the Hunter's shoulder, Kaname begins moving his hips, using Zero's cupped hands like a tight sleeve to pleasure their cocks as Kaname and his thrusts provide steady motion. Kaname's tip is leaking so freely they don't even need anything to ease the way.

Zero throws his head back, enjoying the slow waves of pleasure - then his eyes roll back into his skull and his body spasms, as Kaname uses his free hand to slip underneath and stimulate the omega's hole, pressing the flat of his hand into the slippery, wet slit.

"Not inside," Zero manages, before another dual thrust and stroke render him a speechless mess.
The pureblood's fingers tease and skim, dipping into the dripping slick from his hole, but they don't go any further, and Zero gradually relaxes enough to put aside his vigilance and enjoy every moment.

This is so much slower, so much more deliberate than last night; Kaname draws every moment out, and it's driving Zero mad. He draws a sobbing breath; isn't slow supposed to be more manageable? But it's worse, the way his lust builds but never quite peaks, until Zero's mouth is half-opened as he heaves desperate breaths, thighs shaking, trying to squeeze more tightly around their cocks so Kaname will have mercy and let him come. His mind is wholly occupied with the overload of touch, concentrated on the twin feelings of Kaname stroking his hole and its sensitive outer folds, and every millimeter of his cock gliding achingly slow against Kaname's length.

Making a pleading noise, Zero kisses Kaname to distract him, a silent request for the pleasurable torture to end.

The pureblood laughs, and his touch between Zero's thighs firms, turns to harder presses with the heel of his hand. The Hunter is so close to orgasm he shudders almost immediately, and feels the slow relief of release spread through his lower half as his hole spasms. His cock jerks, triggered instantly by his orgasm into a second, steeper release, and Zero's vision whites out.

When Zero regains his senses, there's something damp soaking through his robe that smells musky. Kaname is kissing his neck and murmuring about what a good boy Zero was, and the pureblood's half-hard cock is tucked back in his slacks.

Even with the satisfaction of release, arousal still hovers in Zero's blood like smoke, as though having built for so long Zero needs more than one orgasm to rid himself of it. His cheeks flush; Yuuki and Kaname taught him last night how he can manage more than one now, didn't they?

Zero stirs, feeling a single streak of seed drip down his cheek. Alphas release so much more semen than a human male; Takuma says it's even more when their omega is in heat. But not a single drop of come mars the pureblood's clothing; only Zero got the brunt of it. Typical. At least he dripped slick all over Kaname's hand, the Hunter consoles himself.

"Let's get you dressed," Kuran leers, pulling Zero's loose trousers up to hide the Hunter's genitals.

Ugh, his sodden underwear sticks in unmentionable places. Hurriedly, Zero wipes his face clean of Kaname's release, mindful of being seen. Not that it matters, he thinks with resignation - the smell alone will give him away, even if the vampires can't see Zero's ruined clothes.

Lifting Zero with an arm underneath his knees, Kaname's grin widens as he says, "I'll pick something that will make Yuuki burn to ravish you, shall I?"

As Zero pops come-wet fingers in his mouth, his body tingles with interest.

The Ancestors must have something against her. Yuuki has Zero half-stripped, on his back and looking up at her with dazed eyes - when Kaname's phone chimes.

_Not now, silly alpha-mate! We have mate begging for us, and it's our turn to mount him_, complains her alpha, sounding very much like a toddler denied candy.

"Kain," her husband mouths when Yuuki shoots him a dirty look, hurrying into the next room.

It's no use; Zero's back to full awareness, sitting up to watch Kaname leave. "Help me dress, please," the Hunter says as the cadence of Kaname's voice quickens.
Yuuki sighs - the alpha mutters sullenly in the back of her head - and is just doing up the last of Zero's tiny, innumerable mother-of-pearl buttons when Kaname returns, excitement buzzing in the high set of his shoulders.

Immediately crossing the room, Kaname tells them, "The Level E disposal group has found an anomaly - six Turned vampires that match our unknown pureblood's victim preferences, including one teenager who matches a missing persons report filed within the last two months."

"The key here," Kaname continues, yanking open the wardrobe and exchanging his suit jacket for a trench coat, "is that two of the vampires are still Level D, and we might be able to get information from them. This may be our opportunity to discover who their master is."

Yuuki and Zero look at each other, then turn back to Kaname. "We're coming with you," Yuuki says, making it clear from her tone she's not accepting anything but agreement.

Zero nods emphatically; Kaname just pinches the bridge of his nose, and waves his hand in surrender. "I am leaving in ten minutes. If you're ready, you can come."

"Then come get me out of this dress, husband," Zero demands, gesturing at the many buttons Yuuki only just finished doing up.

Yuuki sighs once more, and hurries to change.

"One of the Ds is useless to you," Zero says, opening his eyes and straightening from his crouch.

Yuuki shifts curiously, glancing at Kaname, whose face hasn't changed except for a slight tightening of his jaw.

"How so?" Kain asks, hands in his pockets and seemingly immune to the cold night air.

Another noble mutters under her breath, doubtful of Zero's assessment. Yuuki lets displeasure tinge her expression, and the noble quickly subsides, but Kaname seems content not to intervene. Tonight, the Kurans are here only to watch, unless interference becomes necessary. As few people as possible should know they're involved.

Their semicircle of nobles, purebloods and a single Hunter is positioned on a small hill screened by trees, far enough away from the Level Es to remain undetected. From this distance, the pursuers can watch their targets, but not much else.

Except Zero, with his powerful Hunter senses, who finds the distance no obstacle and can discern finer details from vampire auras than anyone else Yuuki knows. Burrowing his chin into the collar of his long coat, Zero replies neutrally, "The vampire is still technically a D, but they're close enough to Level E they won't be mentally stable, except during lucid flashes. You'll be able to identify that one by behavior - they'll probably charge you. The other D will fight smarter."

The nobles look unwillingly impressed. Yuuki's chest fills with pride, and she bumps Zero's shoulder, smiling up at him.

Zero's serious air recedes long enough for him to smile briefly back, but he's deeply immersed in his Hunter training and all his focus remains targeted at the Level Es nearby.

"Thank you, Kiryuu-sama," Kain says, turning to the nobles. "Now, while you deal with the Es, I will seek out the D-"
"My apologies, Kain-san, but it would be best if I went after the D," Zero disagrees, rubbing his gloved hands together and shifting from one foot to the other.

"Any particular reason?" the noble asks in his laidback manner.

Like he's reporting to a Lead Hunter, Zero explains, "I don't mean to insult your skills, but live capture missions are trickier than executions. I have experience, and I am the best choice to track the D if they run. Plus, if you need to interrogate them, the element of surprise may be crucial."

Kain shrugs, glancing at Yuuki and Kaname for orders. Kaname remains impenetrable, and Yuuki keeps her own face clear. She's not going to stop Zero doing what he feels is right, even if she'd rather bundle him away to safety.

"Alright, we'll do it like that," Kain agrees, pulling the other nobles away to give more specific instructions.

Resting his hand on Bloody Rose, Zero waits patiently with the calm watchfulness of someone who expects a sudden attack. Yuuki's heard the stories - vampires are extremely dangerous prey, and that vigilance must have saved Zero's life many times before.

*We should steal him*, says her alpha.

Yuuki can't steal Zero! That would be wrong!...unless Zero wanted to be stolen, Yuuki mentally amends. Or kidnapped?

*Mate does too many dangerous things. Mate could get hurt again. We should steal him*, insists Yuuki's alpha, stubbornly sticking to its logic. *Then we wouldn't get interrupted during mating!*

Yuuki fights very hard not to groan or smack her face in front of the nobles. Luckily, the hunting party moves out before Yuuki's alpha can say anything more.

She settles beside Kaname to watch, her gloved hands curling into fists and her eyes remaining fixed on the silver flash in the darkness. He's circling around behind to flank the Es, while the nobles approach from the front and draw their attention. Kaname lays his hand on Yuuki's shoulder just as a roar of flame signals battle has been joined.

A single Level E is not much threat to a noble. They have ferocious hunger and tenacity, but not much cunning. An unstable Level D still has self-control and the ability to plan, which means Zero is facing the most unpredictable opponent tonight. Yuuki's fists clench tighter when she hears someone scream, and tastes ash on the wind.

"Zero's control of his new sense has improved, Yuuki," Kaname reassures her. "Even with enhanced speed, the last noble-rank prey could not even touch him. This D is no threat."

Kaname is right, but that doesn't stop Yuuki from worrying. Oh! Someone is running in their direction, with an aura too weak for a noble - and loping easily after them is Zero, his silver hair shining in the moonlight! Relief dizzies her, and Yuuki releases a gust of breath.

That first vampire - an older, shabby looking male carrying a long metal pipe - must be the Level D, unknowingly stumbling towards a greater predator in his rush to flee. Yuuki leans further out to watch as the D slows. Zero shouts something, drawing Artemis Rod from the holster on his thigh. The D snarls, and shakes his head. Zero tries again, but this time the D turns and advances with his fangs bared and hungry, hefting his pipe like a club.

Zero doesn't flinch, just extends Artemis Rod to meet the charge and deflects his attacker with a
solid shove, sending the D skidding. There's never any doubt Zero is completely in control of the encounter. Artemis Rod whirls in gleaming arcs as Zero deals light blows with the butt of the staff; the D only lunges or tries to run, his attacks forceful but unpracticed.

The way Zero moves around his opponent is almost beautiful, in a way - like dancing. His expression never wavers from confident focus. He's allowing the D to attack and exhaust himself, while Zero searches for a disabling hit. One more strike, and the D howls, dropping the pipe and clutching his hand.

Zero levels Artemis Rod at the D's throat, cold and implacable, the killing intent tangible even from this distance. Beneath the winter moon, as though the pale light has stripped his soul to bone, Yuuki can see a Hunter beneath Zero's skin. Every line of his sinewy body is steel, the planes of his face hardened to icy alabaster, purple crystal in the orbits of his skull. It's the moment before an executioner lets his sword fall, frozen perfectly in time.

Yuuki's heart flutters - this deadly killer is the same as her gentle Zero. Watching it with her own eyes feels different this time. In the last Hunt against the deadlier noble, Yuuki was too terrified to think until Zero was safe. Now she can see how Zero's potential matured into this merciless creature. The knowledge shakes her, knocks her over the head, and settles into the weave of her being.

Yes, Yuuki thinks to herself, watching the killer in her bed lower his weapon, and choose life instead of death, this is Zero too.

Sauntering into his study, Kaname has all the smug satisfaction of a snake digesting a mouse, oozing with good humor and charm in a way that says his plans have gone stunningly well.

"You know who it is!" Yuuki exults, jumping up from the couch where she'd been waiting. "Your plan worked!"

"Doesn't it always?" her husband replies, chuckling and pouring two glasses of wine.

"Of course, unless the plan involves Zero," Yuuki teases as she takes the glass. She can't remember a time Kaname didn't get exactly what he wanted, when he wanted it, even when they were children. There was a good reason Yuuki idolized her 'brother' as the better pureblood for so long.

"Well, tell me who!" she says, dragging Kaname onto the couch beside her.

Leaning on his elbow, Kaname smirks. "The current Lord Touma."

What? The eldest three purebloods of the family are currently in Sleep, so that just leaves…"Isn't the eldest son like, forty-something?" Yuuki says.

Kaname leans back, still smirking. "You're correct. Touma was careless enough he didn't even compel his thralls to silence. The D told me everything I wanted."

"Is the D alright?" Yuuki asks, not seriously expecting a negative reply. Zero insisted on questioning the D himself, alone. To Zero, his fellow Level D was a victim, not a criminal. After all, the D hadn't asked to be Turned or done anything wrong.

"He's received food, blood tablets, and medical treatment. Currently, the D is being kept in a cell below the Senate Palace, to prevent any escape attempts, but his cell is our most comfortable one. Zero is too kind for his own good," Kaname says, leaning back and downing the rest of his wine.
Yuuki smiles, and laces their hands together, "Isn't that why you always call him your 'sweet boy'? You like Zero more than you let on."

Kaname makes a disbelieving noise in his throat, and gets up for more wine.

"What do we do now?" Yuuki asks, allowing Kaname his escape.

"I'm going to pay the young Lord Touma a visit," Kaname says, and bares his teeth in a smile.

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The Ancestor of the Kuran unfolds himself from the screeching darkness - shoulder, eye, leg, teeth.

"Good evening, Lord Touma," he croons poison-sweet to the young pureblood in the armchair, dark clothes fading into the shadows where the firelight can't reach.

Touma sits up. "Don't just walk into my house, Kuran!"

"We have business, you and I," Kaname says with perfect composure, uncoiling from the shadows and gliding toward Touma.

The young pureblood scoffs, enraged enough to hurl his empty glass into the fire. "There's no business! You may be a Kuran, but you're only a decade older than me. So don't forget that! And don't get arrogant because of that name. You're no king - the Kuran aren't anything anymore."

Kaname raises an eyebrow without humor. "Lord Touma, I am merely here to discuss your recent unwise behavior."

"Oh? And what do you mean, Kaname-san?" Touma replies, sprawling back into his chair and tucking his hands behind his head in mockery.

Kaname's mouth curls up at the edges. "The Senate will not be pleased to learn you've been making so many level Ds, Lord Touma."

The younger pureblood stills as a frisson of unease runs down his spine. He's old enough to remember what happened to Kuran Rido.

"I have a witness," Kaname tells him, and delights in the flash of dismay on Touma's face. "You were in a small coastal hamlet on September 1st, where you Turned four humans. Three of them have since been reported missing. That's quite a lot of furor."

"Turning humans is our right, Kuran-san. I have done nothing worth your threats."

"I'm not threatening you," Kaname says gently, just to confuse him. "And you are quite correct. Turning humans is not illegal - in moderation. But you were also in Higashi on the 7th, Nishigawa on the 12th, the Urals on the 14th -"

"I may have been in Higashi and Nishigawa, but I'm not the one who Turned those other humans!"
Touma blurts in a fury. Then his eyes widen, as he realizes what his temper's unwittingly given away.

"Oh?" Kaname breathes, lifting his head, eyes glinting dangerously in the firelight. "Then who was, Touma-san?"

The other pureblood wavers, face emptying as he calculates costs and weighs which rival he is more afraid of. Kaname hopes the deliberation will come out in his favor. Breaking Touma could be messy; he would rather not waste time with this irritating child.

Touma licks his lips. "Probably Shirabuki Sara."

"Why do you think that?" Kaname asks, easing off on the intimidation now that Touma is willingly answering his question.

Waving a hand, Touma says, "I don't go near Europe. That's all her territory." The pureblood youth's arrogance is already returning - he thinks Kaname is no longer a threat. How amusing.

"That's not your real answer, Touma. Tell me why you suspect Shirabuki."

"I'm not lying -"

Kaname waits patiently for the screaming to stop. When the blood scent fades, he continues in his usual calm tone, "Please don't insult my intelligence, Lord Touma."

Touma laughs, raising his blood-streaked face with the first hint of respect. "Didn't think you had it in you, Kuran."

Kaname's face does not flicker. "Do not confuse restraint for inability, Lord Touma." Such a pity; the Touma always insist on doing things according to the old ways. Vile barbarians, all of them.

Grinning, Touma wipes blood out of his eye and replies, "Shirabuki Sara came to me in May, and asked if I was interested in something fun. The Shirabuki play such lovely, nasty games - so I said yes. Shirabuki didn't ask for much. She just wanted me to have some fun with the humans, make a little mess, and she'd remember the favor if I helped her. I didn't need half an excuse to sharpen my blades, even on things so easily squashed. And it's so boring, playing by the rules. So I did what I wanted - I drank my fill and sowed a little chaos."

"Do you know what Shirabuki intended with her request?"

"Nope." Touma shrugs. "But I know she's playing a deep game. And there's bloody violence in the offing. I can't wait!"

Kaname controls his disgust. "Then I will be off. My advice, Lord Touma, if you want to make your problem go away - perhaps take up a different hobby."

"I'm getting bored anyway," Touma drawls, waving his hand. "Too much work."

Kaname's voice lowers. "And one more thing. The Senate doesn't need to know about your business, Lord Touma, but in order to keep these things between us, I may require you to repeat that testimony to other interested parties."

Kaname spreads his hands. A bit of blackmail is nothing between purebloods. "You understand, of course?"
The younger pureblood leans his chin on his fist and grins. "You're less of a prissy gentleman than you let everyone think you are, Kuran. I was betting on Shirabuki, but now I think you might actually stand a chance."

"Thank you for your praise," Kaname deadpans. If only the boy knew who he was talking to...

Kaname is magnificent tonight. Power sits lightly on his shoulders, and every gesture is overlaid with graceful poise. His porcelain cheek flushes with confidence and triumph. The depths of his eyes hold secrets, and flash with good humor. When his smooth voice speaks, every ear in the room strains to listen. Any chair he chooses becomes a throne. On nights like these, Yuuki can imagine Kaname as he was in his youth, the legendary vampire king surrounded by his court.

Tonight, Rosehill is hosting Kaname's most trusted followers to discuss Shirabuki's recent actions and the Kurans' strategy going forward. The inner circle is here, minus Shiki and Rima, who had a sudden engagement, and Takuma, who had Council business, but the inner circle knew everything beforehand anyway. The remaining dozen guests are Kaname's most prominent and useful subordinates: the staunch monarchists, the business titans, the moderate leaders, the scholars, the celebrities, the politicians.

"So now what?" Zero asks quietly enough only the three of them can hear. He's been reserved all evening; Zero greeted the inner circle and has been politely responding to conversation, but otherwise he's been content to slip into the background. Their friends may be used to Zero, but to the other vampires he's still Kaname's strange Hunter omega. Yuuki also thinks Zero is uncomfortable being the only omega at a table full of mostly alphas, but that's the nature of power in the vampire world.

Kaname gives an easy half-smile, a wineglass held loosely between his fingers. "With Touma's testimony, I can request an investigation by the Council of Elders. It won't come to anything, of course - Shirabuki will see to that. But it gives me an opening, and I already know where to look. With official blessing to meddle in another pureblood's affairs, I'm bound to find something incriminating."

He leans back, crossing his legs. "It won't be short or easy, but I have a path to an endgame now, when before I had nothing but suspicion."

"And the Level D?" Zero asks, picking at his plate with a forced neutrality.

"I've told you, there's nothing more I can do for him," Kaname says in a tone that implies they've had this discussion before. "I cannot let him go because he is our only witness. I'm not his Master, so I cannot stabilize him, nor can I force Touma to do so. I have no legal claim to him, and neither do the Hunters until he falls to Level E."

Zero's hand tightens around his fork, the knuckles whitening from the pressure, and he says nothing else for the rest of the meal. Yuuki also finds herself more quiet than before. Zero is right about the injustice of the D's situation, but what Kaname says is also true - there's nothing more the Kurans can do.

When the party spills out to admire the gardens after dinner, everyone except the three of them is in high spirits, laughing and talking with an air of celebration. The guests spread out, wandering among the hedges and orchards as they sip coffee or tea. In time, Kaname will draw each of them away to catch up and give private instructions.

Aido Nagamichi has his arm draped over his son's shoulders and is propounding at length about
some political philosophy to his captive offspring; Aido mouths 'Yuuki-hime' and makes the puppy dog eyes.

Yuuki shoots him a cheeky grin and waves as he's dragged away. Serves him right for doing something so dumb and risky! Yuuki wants her friend and tutor to stay rescued, dammit, not put himself in more danger!

Instead, Yuuki finds herself drawn to Zero, taking him by the arm and guiding him toward the distant iris garden, now dormant in winter. "Are you okay?" she asks once they're alone, strolling beside a pond rimmed with ice.

Zero shrugs, casting his eyes downward. "I know the realities of the situation better than anyone. I don't expect Kaname to rock the boat for a single D. But we're using him as a bargaining chip, and we can't even give him his freedom. That bothers me. I know what it's like to fall, Yuuki. It was the darkest time of my life, and I can't help but -." Zero breaks off and shakes his head.

Pulling them to a stop, Yuuki gives her Consort time to collect himself.

Lifting a hand to ruffle his hair, Zero catches himself and traces the chain of his Hoseki instead. "I'm trying not to get involved. I haven't gone to see him, except for that first time. I don't even know his name. If Kaname can't help him there's no way I can -" He shakes his head and runs a hand over his eyes. "I'm sorry, Yuuki. I know I'm poor company tonight. Maybe I should just leave early and go back to my suite."

"If that's what you want," Yuuki tells him, offering a small smile. "But I don't mind. I like you even when you're being all distant and broody."

A laugh escapes him. "No, I think I'll head back."

"If that's what you'd prefer," the pureblood agrees. Her alpha is pleased that Zero will be away from all these other rivals and their greedy eyes, and isn't it a little romantic to have Zero waiting for them in bed, all warm and willing?


Zero leans down and kisses her instead. "I'll find Kaname and say goodnight to him too," he says against her lips.

"Just like this?" she asks, stealing her hug anyway and holding Zero tight.

"Mmmm," Zero agrees, squeezing her back, humor twitching his lips.

Yuuki smiles. "He'll like that."

"Kaname?" Yuuki calls, peering into her husband's darkened study. She's just finished speaking to Steward Inukai, and their guests are long gone. Kaname should be waiting in the master bedroom, with Zero, but her bloodbond is tugging Yuuki toward what ought to be an empty room. Why is Kaname here? And why are the lights not on?

"Kaname?" she calls again. "Is everything alright?"

A dark figure stirs, seated at her husband's desk. Kaname's eyes crack open, little shards of bloody glow shining out at her.
The skin of her arms prickling, Yuuki reaches out with her power and flips the lights on.

"Hello, dear girl," Kaname says, a curious lack of inflection in his tone. He's slumped loosely in his chair, only remnants of the power and grace from earlier clinging to his frame. There's a glass tumbler by his elbow, filled with ice, but the bottle is untouched. Kaname tries to smile for his wife, but it falls flat. Yuuki doesn't think she's ever seen that expression on his face before.

As though remembering it's there, Kaname's hand loosely grasps for the bottle, but instead of opening it, the pureblood stares at it instead, and deliberately puts it back down. Lacing his hands together and leaning back, Kaname makes a better attempt at a smile. "Back to square one, I'm afraid."

Yuuki takes a step forward. "What do you mean, Kaname?"

Kaname's expression returns to its normal composure, but somehow it feels forced. "The Level D is dead. Someone killed him. Tonight, during the party."

Yuuki's hands fly to her mouth. Who could have? They were so careful about security - Kaname handled it himself! "How?" she asks, sweeping forward into the room.

"I wish I knew," Kaname says with unnatural lightness, still too relaxed. "The cells have one entry, and are a restricted access area. All of the staff are accounted for, and I have questioned the guards on duty using my power of command. None of them killed the D. The physical guard was doubled tonight, and electronic surveillance shows no breaches. I do not believe anyone entered or left Rosehill. If no one came in, and the local suspects are eliminated, that leaves only one option."

"One of our guests murdered him," Yuuki whispers. "But they are -"

"Yes," Kaname cuts her off, too calm for comfort. "One of my most trusted has betrayed me."

She feels chilled. "I don't mean to accuse anyone, but Aido…"

"I considered it. He denied it under a truth command. It cannot be him."

She frowns. "We'll need to question the rest of the guests too."

"That may not be a good idea," Kaname says shaking his head. The gesture lacks his usual precision.

"Why?" Yuuki asks, feeling young and stupid for not understanding.

"For one, it will let too many people know what happened. I cannot look incompetent in the eyes of my most vital allies. Showing such blatant distrust would not earn me any loyalty, either. Better to keep this as quiet as possible."

"Couldn't we order them to forget?" Yuuki ventures, remembering her trick with Aido.

Kaname shrugs casually, and then his shoulders droop again. "I suppose I could question them and make them forget, but it would pose an enormous risk. I've built my reputation on my refusal to force obedience. If they discovered my indiscriminate use of power, those relationships would be permanently damaged. Certainly, their trust would never recover. Remember, Yuuki. A pureblood's power will force compliance for as long as the command lasts, but loyalty will gain willing obedience a thousand times."

"What do we do than?" Yuuki says, out of her depth.
"Investigate quietly. Look for anything suspicious."

"And Shirabuki?" Yuuki ventures.

Kaname seems to sag. "I have no evidence against her anymore. Touma will do nothing without threats."

"Oh." Yuuki was expecting Kaname to have some clever plan, some brilliant strategy to snatch victory away from his enemies and make them sorry they even tried. But behind his masks, Kaname just looks tired.

It flies against everything Yuuki knows. Kaname always wins. Always. He's been the watchful shadow at her side since before she was born, a presence she cannot imagine her life without, always the strongest, the smartest, the most powerful. Kaname succeeded with an ease and confidence Yuuki strained to emulate. No opponent could even threaten him, let alone beat him. It was a certainty in Yuuki's world, as reliable as the moon and stars. Seeing him like this now….it frightens her a little, to know Kaname is not as unbeatable as he pretends to be.

That was the image Kaname deliberately crafted, the mask Yuuki lived with for fifty years. Yuuki thought she'd abandoned her idolization after she discovered who Kaname really was. But she hadn't really, had she? Brother or not, even with his murky morals Kaname was still the standard Yuuki measured herself against. And he remained a little untouchable in her mind, someone she could help, but who didn't really need her. Part of Yuuki still expected Kaname to push her away, to lie, to pretend; that conviction was frayed, but unbroken, a relic left to sink unexamined below her surface thoughts. Until now, when Yuuki stumbled on his unintentional vulnerability, this unexpected human part of Kaname.

"This is a setback, but I will eventually find another way," her husband continues. Now Yuuki can hear how Kaname is talking to himself, just as much as he's reassuring her.

"I'm sorry," Yuuki says.

Kaname blinks, surprised, and his exhaustion and frustration shine more clearly before he catches himself.

Her chest tightens, and she comes toward him. "I'm sorry I made you feel it was better to sit in the dark alone, instead of letting me see you like this."

Yuuki reaches his desk, and circles around until she can stand beside him. Kaname has gone very still, watching her like he wants to argue. "I said I wanted to be your equal, but I've been letting you carry most of the burden. I'm sorry for that too."

She reaches out; Kaname takes her hand, allows Yuuki to pull him to his feet. He doesn't seem to know what to make of her; wearing a look of bemused puzzlement, he's examining her like some strange new creature.

Yuuki meets Kaname's gaze, draws him closer. She doesn't know how to explain her epiphany. She's not good with words like him. There's only one thing Yuuki knows how to say. "Please. Let me help you, Kaname."

"If you wish," he agrees, going along easily with her wishes, as he always does.

That's alright. Words aren't everything. Yuuki will just have to prove her resolve.
Kuran sleeps in the middle of the bed that night, with Yuuki clinging tenaciously to his back in an adorable attempt at being the 'big spoon,' and Zero pressed into Kuran's chest with an arm draped over the pureblood's side to touch Yuuki.

It's only the next night that Zero understands the significance. He's not going to pry into a matter that is obviously private, but something between Kuran and Yuuki has shifted. And Yuuki is the epicenter, the one sending ripples of change through their routine.

She keeps acting strangely solicitous toward the elder pureblood - Yuuki asked Kuran if he's feeling alright, for crying out loud! Kuran, the manipulative bastard with a limited emotional repertoire!

Okay, Zero isn't being fair, but it's still weird to watch. The little changes take longer to notice. The way Yuuki begins to hold herself more easily in Kuran's presence, how she reaches out now to touch him without hesitation, the new candor in the way she speaks. She even pays more attention to Kuran in bed.

Zero watches as Yuuki steels herself and charges straight into Kuran's previously untouchable bubble of personal space, tearing apart his aura of cool impassiveness with her single-minded characteristic stubbornness. Things that were 'Zero and Yuuki' gradually become trio events, and Kuran finds himself dragged into all kinds of situations because Yuuki refuses to let Kuran hold himself aloof any longer.

While it's annoying to share more of Yuuki's attention, it's not without benefits. Kuran spends considerably less time brooding, and Zero grows used to the sensation, after a while.

As for the D's murder, the investigation is creeping along at a snail's pace. Kuran's inner circle were all cleared, but none of the other possible traitors have acted suspicious enough to raise alarm. Zero mourns the waste of life, but experience has numbed him to such things. While he tries to do what he can, he's too old to expect miracles, and he's learned to harden his heart. Very few Ds ever receive the pure blood needed to stabilize them. Odds were, the D would have been executed after falling to Level E. That still doesn't make his murder any less wrong.

Zero finds himself especially troubled by the circumstances. The D's death was calculated to occur at precisely the moment it would cause the greatest damage. That requires an opponent with knowledge, skill, and opportunity. Any one of those things would be dangerous, but all three together? Kuran must have similar thoughts; he's recalled Shiki and Touya, and he's making preparations to weather whatever is coming.

And there is a storm coming; Zero can feel it bearing down on them. The flow of Level Es may have slowed, but after comparing Hunter records to reported disappearances, one thing becomes certain: Shirabuki has created a large number of thralls that cannot be accounted for. Zero's Hunter instincts warn of an unseen ambush, waiting around the corner.

So it's best that Zero makes his own preparations, isn't it? There's one last loose end waiting to be tied up.

Zero visits Master and Kaito first, for reassurance and familiarity. He visits Takuma second, for advice and companionship. Then Zero dons one of his most formal outfits - layers and layers of silk with sleeves that almost touch the floor, and the Consort's circlet he wears by the privilege of his rank - and he calls Steward Inukai and Head Maid Sasaki into his suite.

Seated on the couch of his receiving room, Zero raises his chin. "Thank you for coming tonight. I need your help..."
Kaname is surprisingly good at talking Zero out of his harmful thoughts. Or not so surprisingly, since he's good with words and very motivated to keep Zero coming back to their bed.

I had to play with Touma's canon age a bit because I needed him younger than fifty, so in the TWOFT universe, he's actually younger than Yuuki rather than older.
"You're still here," Zero murmurs, watching Kaname with his cheek turned into the pillow. His eyes are clear and bright, free of any trace of sleepiness. "Usually you're up and dressed by now."

Running a hand through Yuuki’s sleep-tangled hair, Kaname nods and returns to studying the ceiling.

Zero - Kiryuu - is correct. Because Kaname requires less sleep than either of his bedmates, the pureblood habitually rises and spends a few hours working, before returning to bed to watch them wake. But lately Kaname has found his routine changing. Reluctant to leave, he’s spending hours longer in bed as he meditates on the pleasures of touch and warmth and this silent feeling of affection.

But Kaname tells none of that to Kiryuu. "Yuuki rolled on top of me around three in the afternoon. I'm quite thoroughly trapped, and I didn't wish to wake her."

Kiryuu grins, the expression unguarded in ways that vanished after he had time to build his waking mental fortresses. While their Consort normally sleeps in the middle of the bed, the trio have fallen into the habit of switching who takes the center position when the need or whim struck them. The previous day was Yuuki’s turn - until she decided Kaname made a more comfortable mattress.

Leaning over the slumbering Yuuki to kiss Kaname good morning, the Hunter taunts, "Good luck escaping, bastard. I'm going to shower while you can't squeeze my ass."

Wistfully, Kaname watches that fine rear escape his grasp and retreat into the bathroom, and sighs when he hears the water begin to run. "Yuuki, time to wake up," he says, trying to coax his wife awake without any real hope of success.

Kaname had forgotten Yuuki’s finely tuned Zero sense - somehow, she always seems to know when Kiryuu's left the bed. Stirring, his wife makes an indeterminate noise, her face smushed into Kaname's chest, right above his left nipple.
Feeling those light touches brush his skin has fueled Kaname's persistent low arousal since he woke. He's not quite hard, but certainly halfway there. With an effort of will, Kaname puts aside his physical state, and concentrates on working out the tangles in Yuuki's long auburn hair.

"Feels nice," Yuuki slurs, her breath tickling Kaname's throat as she shifts.

The elder pureblood smiles. "You're lucky your hair is so straight, otherwise I'd have to cut the tangles out, with your bird's nest every morning."

Yuuki giggles, stretching her legs out beneath the duvet, and pecks a kiss on Kaname's mouth. "It's your turn to pick what we eat for breakfast. What are you in the mood for?"

Kaname hums, considering the matter. "Traditional, I think. I feel like rice. And fried egg, rather than fish."

"Mmmm, I'll call the kitchen," Yuuki says, but makes no move from her position on his chest. Her chin is pressing uncomfortably against his collarbone, but Kaname would bear much worse just for the way she looks at him with such soft love in her eyes.

The warmth in his chest needs an outlet, so Kaname bends down to kiss her, and Yuuki tips her head up to meet him. "Want to know a secret?" she whispers mischievously when they part.

Kaname's mouth curves. "Oh? My dear girl has secrets? I am all ears…"

She leans closer, and her eyes have the same mischievous sparkle as she says with great satisfaction, "I was awake when I rolled on you."

"When did my Yuuki become so wicked?" Kaname muses with false disbelief, summoning the most wounded face he can manage when all he wants to do is let his mouth turn upwards in a smile.

"It's the company I keep," she says, shaking her head. "I've been corrupted. Zero says so."

"Does he?" Kaname teases, poking her side in a ticklish spot.

Yuuki shrieks and curls up to protect her belly, and Kaname slides out from beneath her, slipping out of bed. "If you'll excuse me, I have another innocent to corrupt, one with a very tempting ass that escaped my attentions earlier."

"Do your best, Kaname!" Yuuki cheers, propping herself up her elbows as she fishes for her phone on the bedside table.

"I can hear you!" Kiryuu shouts irately from the bathroom.

It's a good thing they ordered breakfast delivered to their rooms, Zero thinks when not one, but two naked purebloods peer through the glass shower door.

The Hunter pauses, stilling. There's a thrill of excitement in his belly as that barrier swings open, taking away his last fragile protection from their hunger. His vampire knows what that predatory gaze means, and his Hunter instincts sharpen whenever he's cornered, giving a delicious thrill beneath this illusion of danger and vulnerability.

Yuuki takes Zero by the wrist, pulling him out from beneath the spray into the bathroom; Zero's hair drips onto the rug as she kisses him.
Stepping backwards, Zero smacks into Kaname's bare chest. "You have a schedule," Zero reminds them despite how pleasant as this encounter is.

"With plenty of time to take you apart," Kaname rumbles into Zero's ear, nipping the lobe.

It's suddenly harder to breathe in the humid air when Yuuki gets down on her knees. As his wife tucks her auburn hair behind her ears, her rosewood eyes flick up to look at Zero, then down to his cock.

The shock of arousal goes straight to his groin, and Zero whimpers, trying to deny the implied intent, because there was no way Yuuki really meant to -

Zero jolts up on his toes, and a high, startled noise is wrenched from his throat when Yuuki kisses the tip of his cock.

She pets his thigh, laying her cheek against Zero's hip, and gives the Hunter a pleading look. "Can I?" she says.

Zero makes a burble of speech that might be 'yes' or 'please'.

Yuuki's head goes back down, and she smiles, looking up at Zero with pure affection. Then she opens her mouth, and very slowly takes his cock all the way down her throat.

Zero shakes silently, the image of Yuuki's lips wrapped around the root of his cock burned indelibly into his brain, and comes hard enough he nearly tears himself free of Kaname's grasp.

Blushing so hard his face feels hot, Zero settles back into his own skin with the ache centered lower between his thighs still throbbing. "Sorry," he groans, covering his mouth, mortified that all it took was the soft wet heat of her mouth and he'd spent himself. "It was really good..."

Sliding off his softening cock with a satisfied pop, Yuuki chirps, "I've had practice," and licks her lips.

Zero's brain nearly fries. He blinks, forbidding himself from considering who that practice was done on or he'll get unspeakably jealous, and simply says, "Oh."

Yuuki grins, amused by his plight. "I'll finish taking care of you in a moment. Next it's Kaname's turn."

Zero lets her promise bank the heat between his legs, and ducks back into the shower to turn off the tap. When he peeks out curiously, Zero has to squeeze his thighs together at the picture the two of them make, Kaname's hand resting atop Yuuki's hair as she struggles to work around a generous mouthful of his cock. No wonder she swallowed Zero so easily, if she learned on Kaname first!

They make such a beautiful matched pair together, his alphas, so uninhibited in their pleasure. Yuuki can't take Kaname in her throat the way she can with Zero, but she's making a valiant effort, choking a little every time she pushes too far. The muscles in Kaname's thighs twitch as Yuuki enthusiastically uses her hands to play with whatever her mouth can't part wide enough to fit.

Kaname is breathing hard, as unkempt as Zero's ever seen him, groaning a little and muttering a stream of filthy encouragement - "you're doing so well, yes, just open your mouth a little more, you look so wanton like this, my dear, no one would believe my innocent girl if they could see you now..."

When Yuuki reaches down to fist her own cock, Zero bites down on the inside of his cheek, feeling
a wetness that is not water slide down his inner thigh. Zero hasn't been brave enough yet to put his mouth on Yuuki's cock, but he's thought about it, and knows someday he'll want to please her too deeply to hesitate. The scent of alpha arousal is filling the room and blanketing his senses; Zero swallows, the thick smell almost a taste in the back of his throat.

Kaname throws his head back, the tendons under the pale skin of his throat going taut - and Zero decides he wants to bite that arc of muscle, so he steps out of hiding and does exactly what he imagined, working his teeth into the vulnerable skin until he can taste a drop of pure blood on his tongue, the taboo act only driving him higher.

At the prick of fangs, Kaname groans again, pitched lower this time, and shudders. He seems to enjoy a little pain during sex, and Zero bites down harder, just to see, just to push his husband further.

The alpha snarls, and Zero finds himself torn away from the pureblood's throat so Kaname can ravage his mouth, biting and seeking hungrily, overwhelming his scattered resistance.

Yuuki must do something delicious to the pureblood's cock, because Kaname abruptly stiffens and pulls away. "Change of plans, my dear," he says, voice tight enough to betray his arousal.

Yuuki shoots their husband a look that's equal parts question and impatience. The corners of her mouth are wet with spit and come, and her lips look a little swollen.

Zero's mind flashes back to the image of Yuuki swallowing his cock, and his breath catches. Then Zero hears Kaname chuckling, and there's a dizzy moment of weightlessness.

Zero finds himself slung over the pureblood's shoulder, bare rear jutting out to shamelessly expose the slick folds of his female sex, his spent penis rubbing against Kaname's skin. Lifting his head, he glares over his shoulder, mortified beyond reason at his current position.

Completely ignoring Zero's ire, Kaname says, "Our virgin is too impatient to wait, I'm afraid," and runs a finger across Zero's hole, gathering sticky wetness.

The Hunter shrieks and kicks, finally getting stimulation where he wants it desperately.

Breathing hard, Yuuki isn't taking her eyes off either of them. Zero blushes harder, because she must be able to see everything - even a little bit inside his passage, with the way Kaname is spreading him open.

The pureblood's voice goes throaty and full of promises. "While your mouth is on my cock, I will tend to our Consort. We could make it a challenge. Shall we see if you can get me to come before Zero orgasms twice?"

Zero whimpers. Yuuki gives him a speculative glance, her face screwed up in thought. "Okay. As long as Zero's interested."

Both of them look at Zero. Zero whimpers again, flushed and knowing he's getting Kaname's front wet with how much he's dripping. Stupid Kaname and his stupidly fantastic oral sex!

Kaname's free hand strokes Zero's ass, smearing the slick on his fingers into the Hunter's skin. "You're going to look so pretty when you writhe for me, aren't you?" The pureblood's hand slips back down to Zero's needy opening, forefinger toying between his folds. "Will you cry if I coax three orgasms in a row out of your little hole? If I make you come five times, will you pass out?"

"No," Zero protests weakly as Kaname's finger presses the slightest bit deeper inside him. He's so
achingly sensitive it's like he can feel every millimeter, every little motion.

"Yuuki deserves a reward too, for making our sweet boy feel so good," the pureblood continues thoughtfully.

Yuuki perks up, giving both of them pleading puppy eyes.

Kaname chuckles. "We'll postpone our competition. Zero, would you like to help me give our dear girl some relief?"

Zero shifts, suspicious but interested.

Kaname smiles, completely impervious to shame. "I'll suck her off while you finger her cunt. You liked watching her rosy pussy spread around that toy, didn't you, Zero? You wonder if you'll look so obscene stretching around Yuuki's fingers."

Making a horrified noise, Zero almost uses one of his Hunter tricks to escape. Last week, Yuuki tried letting Kaname put a plastic cock inside her while Zero watched in stunned, terrified fascination at the way her body opened around it. He hadn't dared touch, or even participate, but he couldn't tear his eyes away. Kaname was not supposed to notice Zero's curiosity!

Zero realizes both his spouses are watching him with rapt attention, and his mouth goes dry. A belated escape attempt gets him nowhere, and he hangs like dead weight as he's carried back to the bedroom.

"If Zero prefers not to, I will simply assist Yuuki myself," Kaname says, his touch skimming Zero's folds again

Zero screeches in surprise, and Kaname radiates smugness. "I am capable of giving my dear girl far more pleasure anyway."

Zero's head whips around. The pureblood may be more experienced, but that doesn't mean Kaname gets to say shit like that! "Like hell you are, you dirty-minded old relic!" Zero hisses.

"Prove me wrong then," Kaname says, pleased that Zero has fallen so neatly into his trap.

Zero's eyes narrow, and he clicks his tongue. But his irritation dissipates when he sees Yuuki sitting on their bed, stark naked and so impossibly beautiful, willing to accept whatever answer he gives.

In Zero's mind, Yuuki's female sex has always been linked with his own, a locus reflecting his displaced anxieties about his own body. By touching her in an unmistakably sexual way, Zero must also face some shallow ghost of his own fear and self-disgust. "I'll try," he agrees softly, a blend of curiosity and apprehension churning in his stomach. If touching Yuuki like that becomes too much, Zero trusts his spouses will allow him to stop - even Kaname.

As Kaname lays Zero on the bed with careful, gentle hands, the omega senses a shift in the mood. Yuuki pulls Zero up, winding her arms around his neck as they kiss. Zero feels only a spark of arousal, but that's alright. This isn't truly about sex anymore.

His purebloods seem to feel the change too; every touch is more relaxed, languid, a slow easing toward release. They touch each other just because they can, because the touching itself pleases them, each press of skin fully savored, more lewd acts interspersed with slow thorough kissing.

Unfolded like a gift, Yuuki's body is an invitation, one Kaname and Zero could never ignore.
Spreading her thighs a little wider, their wife makes room for the two of them to lie side by side, their shoulders and sides pressed against one another in the cramped space.

Beside Zero, Kaname is solid, confident strength, uncomplaining when Zero leans his weight against him. Laid out before her husbands, Yuuki is all smiles and love and encouragement, offering her support in a more invisible way.

As Kaname worships Yuuki's sex, Zero turns his face into his husband's shoulder and breathes the muddled smell of them together, feeling the echo of Yuuki's movements through Kaname's body, the three of them linked together, triune, three-in-one.

Something golden and warm is brimming in Zero's chest as Kaname takes Zero's hand and traces the bulge of Yuuki's cock through the pureblood's cheek, setting the Hunter's skin alight as their eyes meet, meaning passing between them without words.

Zero inhales sharply - Kaname intends for them to work as partners, caring for Yuuki's body together. He nods, and Kaname pulls back to breathe, expression oddly serious.

Caressing Zero's side, the pureblood takes Zero's hand and guides his fingers down, skimming Yuuki's balls to touch the hot damp place mirroring his own.

"Go ahead if you're ready," Yuuki murmurs, stroking whatever part of Zero she can reach.

Zero swallows, unsure, but Kaname doesn't abandon him, lacing their fingers together until Zero is ready to continue. He leaves it up to Zero whether or not the Hunter wants to press inside, but once Zero tentatively pokes his fingers deeper, Kaname crooks Zero's wrist to show him a place that makes Yuuki jump. Inside, she is muscular sleekness, clamping down around the Hunter's fingers as he timidly explores her channel.

At first, instead of looking at the place he's touching, Zero watches Yuuki's face twist with pleasure as he strokes that special spot, Kaname's hand reassuringly curling round his own until he gains confidence and begins sneaking glances down, shocked at the easy way Yuuki takes his fingers, how she welcomes each slide of his hand.

Zero knows his inexperienced fumbling can't be wildly pleasurable, but he keeps at it nonetheless, adding whatever sliver of pleasure he can as Kaname returns his attentions to Yuuki's erect cock, already bobbing and glistening from the pureblood's earlier efforts.

He can feel Yuuki's heat against his hand, and Kaname's warmth against his side. Zero sinks into the melody of Yuuki's body - her breaths and gasps, little muscle tremors and spasms - and the countermelody of Kaname beside him - the wet noises from his mouth, quick breaths through his nose, the rhythmic flexing of his shoulders.

When Yuuki pulses around his fingers, and then sighs, her body relaxing into the sheets, Zero eases his hand out of her, licks his wife's taste off his fingers. She watches him do it with the sleepy eyes of a sated lioness, curling her leg around his back.

"Love you," Zero whispers, and Yuuki purrs happily.

At his side, Kaname straightens in one graceful ripple, wiping his mouth on a corner of the sheets.

Zero goes to him, drapes himself over that strong back. "Thank you, alpha," Zero whispers into dark auburn hair, and kisses Kaname's cheek. "It's your turn. How would you like me?"
Yuuki doesn't know how Kaname can be so casual, sitting there eating breakfast when a half-hour ago his head was buried between her thighs.

Yuuki doesn't know what Zero did to earn being hand-fed in Kaname's lap either - but it must have been very good, if the way Kaname keeps lavishing their Consort with attention and calling him pet names is any indication. Zero just blushed and looked away when Yuuki asked. No fair, Yuuki wants Zero to do whatever he did to her too!

Really, though, Yuuki's just glad her husbands seem to have worked out some of their differences. There's true affection in the way Kaname cups Zero's face in his hands and kisses him - Yuuki is certain of it. Kaname feels more secure in his relationship with Yuuki, and it's spilled over into his willingness to openly show Zero more care.

Ever since Yuuki resolved to treat Kaname more mindfully, and take her share of the burden, Zero's relationship with Kaname has changed too. Yuuki didn't realize Zero was so sensitive to her actions, but Zero seems to take Yuuki's behavior toward Kaname as a guide. He's mellowed toward their eldest, losing some of the native suspicion he's always treated Kaname with. Perhaps it's his omega sensing the healing rift between its chosen alphas, but it feels like Zero is extending his trust toward Kaname.

And seeing Zero like this, allowing himself to be taken care of more easily, is a welcome sign too. Everything's so fragile and new, but Yuuki couldn't be happier.

"What do you think, Yuuki?"

"Hmmm?" she mumbles, raising her head with a light wince at being caught unaware.

Kaname chuckles, and Zero ducks his face in shared sympathy. "The Consort's suite hasn't been redecorated since Royal Consort Aileya's time. Now that it belongs to a new occupant, Zero should change it to match his tastes."

"I think that's a wonderful idea!" Yuuki enthuses, plans already forming in her head. They have more furniture in storage; perhaps Zero will prefer the walls repainted?

"Wait, hold on," Zero protests. "It's fine the way it is. Consort Aileya had excellent taste."

"There's nothing at all you would change?" Yuuki presses, knowing Zero's propensity to short himself.

"Maybe a few small things..." he admits, playing with the ties of his dressing gown and pressing closer to Kaname. "But I have something else to request from you," Zero says, looking up as his tone strengthens.

Yuuki straightens, swallowing her bite of rice. Zero so seldom asks anything for himself, Yuuki can't help but find herself interested in what Zero might want. "Anything."

Her Hunter scowls. "Don't promise something before you know what it is!"

"But it's Zero - of course I want to!" Yuuki insists, feeling her face curve in the most infatuated grin.

Forcing out a breath, Zero surrenders to Yuuki's superior logic and returns to a more serious mien."Takuma-sempai is holding a soiree at the Ichijo estate on the 25th. I want to attend."

"Yes, I'd heard," Kaname remarks, holding Zero's waist as he leans forward to place their empty
plate on the trolley. "Takuma intends to announce his pregnancy. Unprecedented, but Takuma can afford to break tradition as a pureblood's Consort."

Given the delicate nature of vampire pregnancies, they were always, always kept secret for as long as possible. This was partly for safety, so your enemies didn't know you were vulnerable, and also because the majority of vampire pregnancies ended in miscarriage. You didn't want your family to expect a new child when the odds were those hopes would be dashed.

After their gravid state couldn't be hidden any longer, vampire women simply disappeared from public view, and no one remarked on the absence. Like a superstition, vampires rarely spoke of an ongoing pregnancy, as though drawing attention would invite disaster.

Omegas, as always, were the exception - their recurring heats meant pregnancy couldn't be hidden, and they flaunted themselves when carrying, assured of a healthy child, though they observed some normal customs out of habit and respect for tradition. Announcing a pregnancy would be far outside the norm.

Zero's voice is steady, and so is his gaze, sitting with a dignity that deserves jewels instead of a silk dressing gown, his spine stiff and straight. "I asked Takuma to host it, as a favor. I have unfinished business with the Jeweled Court. I intend to show off our strength, and I want you to help me."

Yuuki and Kaname exchange looks. Zero, planning a political show of force? Perhaps Kaname is influencing Zero more than they think. "We'll do whatever we can to help," Yuuki agrees, and Kaname places a hand on Zero's shoulder.

Zero inclines his head, but he isn't finished. "Also, I want us to spend time together on the night before the party. Come home early."

"That should be doable," Kaname agrees, looking to Yuuki for confirmation.

Nodding, Yuuki agrees. It will require some quick rescheduling, but anything for Zero.

"That settles it," Kaname concludes, settling back in his seat.

Yuuki frowns, doing a quick count. "Feed yourself too, Kaname!" Yuuki scolds, and offers him a piece of egg on her fork.

Kaname eyes the food with a pinched look, entertaining the thought of refusal.

Yuuki narrows her eyes, and tries looking as stubborn as possible.

As Kaname's dignity dies a swift death, Zero just laughs.

"Did you try the technique I suggested?" Takuma inquires as the two of them examine the sample bouquets for his upcoming soiree, a hint of slyness in the quick flicker of his eyelids.

Zero laughs until his sides hurt. "I did. I tested it on Yuuki first, just to be sure. You should have seen Kaname's face when I called him alpha!"

"I trust you enjoyed the results," Takuma continues in an arch tone, a hint of a smile around his mouth.

Blushing, Zero checks to make sure none of the florist's employees are nearby. "It drove them both wild. Does that happen every time?"
Chuckling, Takuma nods as he examines a bundle of white lilies. "It's instinct for an alpha to respond with enthusiasm when an omega calls them so intimately. I reserve the title for special occasions, otherwise Isaya would wear me out even more than he already does."

If possible, Zero blushes harder, and hastily changes the subject. "Thank you for helping me with this. I'm sorry to ask so suddenly - I didn't realize a soiree required this much planning and preparation."

Takuma waves a hand, dismissing Zero's apology and setting the bells on his bracelet jingling. "It's my pleasure to help a friend and fellow omega. And the Jeweled Court is a problem for both of us. I've held soirees before, and I'm happy to do the work for the potential benefits."

The blond holds up his choice, and a florist bustles up to bow and whisk the bouquet away. Takuma takes Zero's hands with a jingle, and leads him off to the side, lowering his voice. "Have you discussed your plans with Kaname and Yuuki-san?"

Zero's expression goes blank. "Only what they need to know."

The noble just looks concerned, which makes Zero feel slightly guilty. "You know how Yuuki worries. If I decide to scrap that part of the plan, it's better they don't know."

"It's your choice," Takuma says carefully, linking their arms and guiding Zero out of the shop. "But for what it's worth, I'd tell them as soon as you feel able."

Then both the omegas fall silent, because two furry heads rise, and Isa and Nightshade come trotting up to meet their masters with their tails swishing in happiness. Even discounting his thick fur, Nightshade is significantly larger and heavier than Shouto's familiar, which always makes Zero snort - Kuran's giant ego displayed in fluffy form for everyone to see. Still, Zero reflects as he scratches the wolf's ears, it does mean Nightshade is extra huggable.

Zero's used to people staring when he wears his Consort's robes. But as the two of them stroll arm-in-arm through the upscale shopping district - bustling and full of vampires at three in the morning - his Hunter senses are telling him they're attracting far more attention than usual. Perhaps it's the two pureblood familiars pacing beside them, guarding them from the crowds, the enormous regal wolf and the tall grey-and-white hound?

As the two of them complete Takuma's errands, the scrutiny keeps intensifying. Even on busy streets, the vampires part around them, giving the Consorts and their pureblood familiars a wide berth as they walk past, whispering and staring openly, making Zero's Hunter reflexes twitchy and anxious.

Gritting his teeth, Zero hisses at Takuma, "Why are they doing that?"

Takuma smiles politely, his tone not slipping from its relaxed cadence. "Besides the novelty of seeing two Consorts at once in public, I suspect I'm responsible for this fuss."

Reminded of where they are, Zero tries to match the noble's level of decorum. "I don't understand."

Raising his wrist, Takuma shakes his bracelet so the small golden bells ring loudly. Several vampires nearby flinch or jump.

Befuddled, Zero looks at Takuma, who chuckles. "You wouldn't know - it's been nearly a thousand years since anyone wore bells. This" - Takuma rings the bells again for emphasis, and the vampires repeat their strange, fearful response - "is the most dangerous sound a vampire can hear."
Zero stares at his friend, waiting for him to admit he's joking.

Takuma merely smiles, and urges Zero forward until he begins walking again. "That sound is a warning, and a promise. It means 'the pureblood whose child I carry will annihilate any threat against me.' An alpha with a child on the way is constantly on the edge of violent aggression. The bells warn unaware vampires to avoid doing anything stupid."

"You haven't worn them before," Zero points out, recalling their other meetings since Takuma's heat.

"I don't wear them all the time. Only when I'm in public among strangers, and Isaya isn't with me," Takuma explains. "Non-consorts wear them too, and not always as bracelets - I inherited these from my beta great-grandmother. Even humans have worn bells - though I think you'll be the first Hunter."

"Vampires are weird," Zero says with bluntness, making Takuma release a peal of laughter. Zero's never going to have a child, so he won't need to wear bells, but adds this knowledge to his mental file on vampire customs anyway.

"Now," says Takuma with a gleam in his eyes and a significant glance at Nightshade. "If you intend to achieve your goals, you're going to need a few things."

Resigning himself, Zero allows Takuma to lead him forward.

"I didn't know being a pureblood required so much paperwork. And reports - so many reports," Yuuki gripes, stabbing at her udon.

"The price of knowledge," Kaname counters loftily, enjoying his dinner.

"I should have paid more attention in school," Yuuki continues morosely. "If I knew I'd need all that composition practice, I wouldn't have slept through class so often."

"Zero had a good time with Takuma today," Kaname relates, just to see the exasperated looks Kiryuu and Yuuki shoot at him.

"Nosy pureblood," his Consort grumbles. "If you're so smart, tell me how your search for the Level D's killer is going."

Kaname feels the furrow in his brow. Well, he probably deserved that for teasing.

"Nowhere, if we're being honest," Yuuki divulges, propping her chin on her fist. "Everything is suspicious when you're looking for suspicious things. Can we not talk about it? Tell me about your day instead."

Kiryuu pins her with that penetrating Hunter gaze, smiles tightly, then graciously accedes to the request. "Takuma is doing well…"
calculation doesn't add up. First Zero asked them to come home early enough for dinner, and now they're met with mysterious instructions. What's going on?

Fidgeting until the car stops, Yuuki throws herself out the door, not even waiting for the valet to open it. Her smouldering anticipation makes her yank on whatever clothing is laid out, and for once Yuuki beats Kaname to the agreed-upon meeting place.

The servants are nowhere to be seen, and the halls were empty earlier; only the necessary staff were present to help the purebloods and unload the car. Every new, strange circumstance only makes Yuuki more curious, and by the time Kaname arrives in a new dinner suit, Yuuki is practically bouncing with suppressed curiosity and the desire to see Zero.

But there Zero is now, accompanied by six servants bearing paper lanterns suspended on poles. The candles inside flicker and give off a soft glow through the colored paper like fairy lights.

"Thank you for waiting," Zero intones politely, gathering up his flowing skirts and smiling. "I've made dinner and arranged to have it served in the gardens. Will you join me?"

A home cooked meal from Zero? This evening is going to be awesome! Kaname and Yuuki look at one another, then back at Zero, and without speaking each of them takes one of the Hunter's arms and links it through the crook of their elbow.

"Lead away, my Consort," Kaname says, in a dramatic manner intended to provoke their spouse.

Rather than hissing and spitting, Zero just nods with a touch of amusement and guides them outside. The servants travel along beside them in two rows, lighting the way and providing a festive air to the evening.

Yuuki takes the time to admire her dinner companions. Kaname is handsome as always, and - is that a new outfit Zero's wearing? Yuuki doesn't remember buying this pale gold tunic, or that unusual waist-length, high-collared coat in bottle green.

"You planned ahead for this. What's the occasion?" Yuuki asks, bumping Zero gently with her hip. He smiles, a hint of tension in the corners of his mouth. "Dinner first, then we can talk."

That response gives Yuuki pause. Something is bothering Zero, and she can't figure out what. Things have been quiet lately; Takuma's soiree is in two nights, but Yuuki doesn't think a simple party would phase him. Wait - Zero visited his Hunter family recently. Could that be it?

In the distance, Yuuki sees firelight, and a dark shape in the garden she doesn't recognize. How delightful! Zero's made them a little outdoor dining room, the table and chairs sheltered by a canvas tent and warmed by small braziers ringing the edge.

Zero dismisses the lantern bearers with quiet gratitude, and ushers the Kurans inside.

"You really went all out for this," Yuuki says with admiration, warming her hands above one of the braziers and admiring the way the bright colors of the tent look against the brown winter garden. Some unseen servant has already laid the meal out, steaming underneath metal covers. Yuuki gives a deep sniff, trying to guess from the aroma what mouthwatering dish Zero's prepared.

"Thank you," Zero replies with his back turned, closing the tent flap to keep the heat in. "I want you to enjoy yourselves. Why don't you both sit down?"

Putting aside her earlier concern, Yuuki devotes herself to enjoying the delicious meal and the
company of her two favorite people in the world. Zero will talk when he's ready, and tonight he obviously wants Yuuki and Kaname to have a nice dinner. He's even cooked some of her favorites - and respected Kaname's secretive preferences too, resulting in Kaname's not so hidden surprise when he discovers the fried breaded octopus on his plate. It makes Yuuki giggle, while Zero just smiles slyly.

As dinner draws to a close with only the last few bites of parfait left in etched glasses, the light, carefree atmosphere becomes expectant. Zero has his best poker face on, obstinately scraping every last morsel from his plate, drawing out the meal.

Finally, Zero wipes his mouth on his napkin, places it to the side, and leans back in his chair. "I have a proposal for the two of you to consider."

Yuuki and Kaname exchange glances. "We're listening," Kaname remarks, eyes sharp.

Zero breathes carefully in. "I told you how I intend to deal with the Jeweled Court at Takuma's soiree. There's something else I want to do, but I will need your help." The Hunter pauses, takes another careful breath. "I want to disprove the worst rumors about me. Takuma told me some things, and I think this will work."

Looking at each of the Kurans in turn, Zero's voice holds nothing but resolution when he announces, "I want you to take my virginity tomorrow night, and then I want to show off what we did at Takuma's soiree the next evening."

Yuuki's mouth drops open. "Wha - what?" Mate wants us to mount him! shrieks her alpha joyously.

Zero continues stubbornly, "If I don't wash, everyone will be able to smell it, right? Takuma said since male omegas have a barrier inside that gets torn, you can smell when they have sex for the first time."

Yuuki is still stuck back where Zero said 'I want you to take my virginity', and everything after that has gone in one ear and straight out the other.

"That's true," Kaname manages, slightly better composed, "but using your own inexperience as a political tool is wildly uncharacteristic."

Zero crosses his arms and counters, "Everything else about my body has been used for political ends. Why shouldn't I use it to my advantage this time?"

Kaname's brow furrows. "This rather sudden, Zero."

Zero shakes his head. "Not to me. I've been thinking about whether or not I wanted to do this since I first proposed the soiree plan to Takuma. I didn't have to go through with it, and I could have backed out at any time. I've decided this is something I want to do."

"Why?" Yuuki croaks, brain lurching back on track. "You haven't even felt comfortable enough to allow anything inside you. How do I know you aren't walling off your heart again? How do I know this won't hurt you?"

Zero runs his hands over his face. "I know how this must seem. It's just - we could go slow and take our time like we've been doing so far, and eventually we'd get to the part where we actually have sex. But with everything that's happened, I don't want to wait. The situation is calm now, but I know you can feel how unstable this lull is. We have enemies, and those enemies are just biding their time. I want to do this now, while we can still enjoy it without having to worry. And if something bad happens in the future - at least...at least I'll have this."
Kaname and Yuuki digest this in silence. Sniffling, Yuuki rubs furiously at her eyes. "You could have told us earlier. I wanted our first time together to be special."

"You have a whole day and night to prepare whatever you like," Zero points out. "I'm sure Mr. Ancestor over here can help you make arrangements."

Nodding, Yuuki gets up and catches Zero in a strangling hug. "I'm holding you to that. If this is what you want, I'm in. We'll try this. But if you have another panic attack, there's no way I'm going through with it."

His hands come around to rest on her back. "That's fair. So you agree, Kaname?"

"I have reservations, but I can't deny that I've been dreaming of despoiling your pretty cunt for months," Kaname replies, arching a suggestive brow.

So have we, interjects Yuuki's alpha, deliriously happy. Mate wants us, mate wants us! Mate wants our cock and our babies! We're going to finally claim mate!

"Remember, sweet boy, I expect you to beg," Kaname continues, "I keep my promises."

Zero's grumpy face says exactly what he's thinking. Helplessly, Yuuki muffles her laughter into his shoulder.

"What's this?" Zero yawns, sitting up and stretching out the stiffness in his muscles from a day of sleep.

"Breakfast in bed!" his wife replies, relentlessly cheerful, and plunks a tray down beside Zero with a shining enthusiasm better suited to a Christmas morning.

Enjoying the warmth of his tea mug, Zero spots Kuran out in the sitting room, seated right beside the bedroom door - rather like he's guarding something, actually. The Hunter quirks an eyebrow at Yuuki, hoping for an explanation. The two of them should be heading out to their daily business meetings, not hanging around their bedroom.

"We're taking the day off," Yuuki explains, grinning from ear to ear.

Zero hides his blush by ducking his head down and gulping his tea. The Kurans do important things every day, with powerful people who don't appreciate being told to reschedule at the last minute. That Yuuki and Kuran were willing to do something so inconvenient for Zero...A little candle flame of warmth in Zero's chest lights and glows.

Kuran looks up from his reading. "We're going down to the stable after breakfast. Wear those breeches Yuuki likes."

Zero swallows his bite of toast. "You have something planned?"

"Of course!" Yuuki says, bellyfloppling down on the bed to watch Zero eat. "Today we want you to understand how much we care about you -" her head whips around. "And don't make that face, Kaname! Denying your feelings doesn't make them go away."

Kuran makes a dismissive noise and buries himself in his papers, pointedly ignoring his wife.

Expression smoothing out, Yuuki turns her attention back to Zero, "Anyway, whatever happens after we go to bed in the morning, we're going to have a nice night together. Okay?"
Zero's smile must be ridiculously besotted, because Yuuki pulls him down for a kiss, then another, and a few more after that, each kiss flowing seamlessly into the next.

A warm hand rests on Zero's back, and a voice rumbles above his head. "Not yet, my dear. Patience. Delicacies are best savored."

Pulling away is like asking the sea to part from the shore, or the earth from the sun. Somehow, Zero manages it.

Breathing hard, Yuuki watches Zero with half-lidded eyes, a hot intensity weighting her gaze as she surveys him with bold desire.

Kaname gives that rich velvet chuckle, the one that makes Zero's skin buzz, and nibbles the omega's throat, right in the soft hollow.

The flush beneath Zero's skin deepens, brewing a slow aching to be touched - an ache that rises every time that night his hand brushes another's hand, or two gazes meet.

Biting his lip, Zero dares to tip his head back the tiniest bit further, subtly offering himself. Kaname's breath stops, and Zero finds himself pressed back into the pillows, skin being laved and lavished with attention, familiar heat in his veins.

"Minx," scolds Kaname's roughened voice as the pureblood tears himself away and staggers back from the bed. "Tempting your alphas like that."

"Yes," Zero agrees, trying out the words, "after tonight, you'll be my alphas, won't you?" Zero knows exactly what thin edge he's walking when he stretches again, exaggerating the arch of his spine.

"Dress," orders Kaname in a strained tone, retreating back to the outer room with as much decorum as possible, dragging a protesting Yuuki behind him.

Zero lies still for a moment, shocked at his own daring - and inside the deep, instinctual place in his mind, pleased by the way neither of the alphas could resist him - before getting up to obey.

They wander together in the valley, no particular destination in mind, with Zero on horseback and the Kurans walking at either side. The vampires leave enough distance that Zero's horse is not afraid, but stay close enough they can still hear one another.

Sunset turns the snow drifts gleaming bright white - bright enough that the purebloods' sensitive eyes must suffer, but neither makes any complaint. Zero guides them beneath the trees into pools of shadow, cooler and easier on vampire eyes. The bite of winter air slicing his face is intoxicating.

Zero doesn't want this to end - this feeling of freedom and companionship at the same time. But eventually Zero's mare tires, and they must return to the house, leaving his horse in the care of her groom. "What now?" Zero asks over the wind, carried in Yuuki's arms as the two purebloods run.

"Kaname has a surprise next, and then it's my turn," Yuuki reveals, enjoying the chance to be mysterious. "Dress like a human."

The advice is well given. When the bats from their travel dissipate, Zero and the Kurans are among tall, gothic stone buildings, standing in an empty city square with the fading scent of humans about them. The sound of hearts beating is faint - the nearby buildings must be nearly deserted. Wherever they are, this place is a poor hunting ground for a vampire. Zero doesn't recognize this city, but the
air feels ancient. And it's falling into ruin, judging from the cracked, worn pavestones and eroded faces of the guardian gargoyles.

"This way," Kuran says in an undertone, placing a hand on Zero's forearm. Even once he has Zero's attention, the pureblood doesn't pull away.

Zero casts a sideways glance through his eyelashes, hyperaware of that weight and touch even through the heavy material of his coat.

He doesn't push his husband's hand off.

Kuran leads them through narrow, winding alleys, twisting back and forth - if Zero were any less of a tracker, he would be hopelessly lost - until Kuran knocks on a heavy wooden door, tucked back from the street. A balding human man with darting, nervous hands lets them inside a cramped atrium whose only light is a single lamp. Kuran and the man exchange a few words, until the man nods and leaves through the nearest open doorway.

"Close your eyes," Kuran whispers.

"Where are we?" Zero asks, eyeing his husband with a hint of suspicion. Old habits die hard.

"You'll find out," Kuran says, impassive face giving no hint of their purpose - strangely, Zero imagines that Kuran looks disappointed.

Zero feels Yuuki take his hand, and squeeze it reassuringly. "I'll lead," she promises.

Zero studies Kuran one more time, those red-brown eyes gazing steadily back at him. He takes a breath, and shuts his eyes tight. "Don't run me into a wall."

In the darkness behind his eyelids, Zero counts steps and breaths, judging time and distance - and then, deliberately, he stops. After that, time is weightless, except for the feeling of Yuuki's hand in his own.

"We're here," says Kuran. "Open your eyes, Zero."

Zero cracks his eyes open the tiniest bit, and his breath goes out of him. "Is this - is this real?" he asks, spinning around, feeling a smile curve his mouth.

"Of course," Kuran smirks, smoothing down the lapels of his long black coat. Yuuki has her hands tucked behind her back, grinning at Zero's obvious delight.

"This is the oldest archive in the world, preserved from the Cataclysm only by virtue of its religious heritage. I thought you might find it of interest," Kuran continues, a hint of gloating alongside the genuine pleasure in his voice.

Zero knows he must look foolish, so wide-eyed and stunned by nothing except walls and walls of books, going up for what must be three stories - four, Zero corrects himself, counting the staircases. There must be more in the nearby rooms too, the Hunter realizes, peering through the doorways as he makes a circuit of the central room, still taking in the vast wealth of knowledge hidden in this crumbling, dying city.

"Is this how you normally seduce people?" Zero asks dryly, trying to downplay his openly emotional response.

"Seduction is not formulaic. It plays on the desires of the one being seduced," the pureblood
replies, intention coloring his tone.

Zero flushes; both of the Kurans are wearing the same hungry smile, aimed squarely at him.

"Usually this collection is not open to the public," Kuran continues. "I had to pull a few strings to arrange a private visit. Do you like it?"

"Yes," Zero admits without qualm, running a hand along the ancient titles. "This place is incredible." Kuran considered Zero's preferences when he planned this, and that deserves honest appreciation.

The pureblood's lips turn upwards. "We have a few hours. You are allowed to handle anything in this room, as long as you're careful."

Anything after that is lost in a haze of discovery, and periodic frenzies of excitement as Zero finds yet another copy of a 'lost' work. Only Yuuki's hand on his shoulder, hours later, startles Zero out of his single-minded daze.

"Yuuki," the Hunter says, blinking up at her and letting the book in his lap snap shut as the circumstances of their visit come rushing back to him. Of all the times to become so single-minded! "I'm so sorry! I didn't mean to get caught up - you should have told me I was ignoring you too much!"

His wife shakes her head, her beautiful hair flying around her shoulders as she laughs. "No way! I could see how much you were enjoying yourself. You're really cute when you're being such a bookworm."

As Yuuki probably intended, Zero glares at the insult. Good student or not, Zero is very touchy about the image of stoicism and intimidation he makes such an effort to cultivate. "Even so Yuuki, we're supposed to be having a good evening together."

"No, tonight is about you, and what you want," his wife corrects with mock severity, offering him a hand to stand up. "If that means we spend a few hours reading in a really really really old library, then that's what we'll do."

Accepting her hand, Zero can only smile. If that expression of support doesn't make Zero feel pleased and happy, then nothing can.

Reflecting their personalities, Yuuki's planned surprise couldn't be more different from their husband's. This time, even before Zero opens his eyes, he can smell the salt, hear the waves rolling in, and feel the tropic heat.

"Let's have some lunch," Yuuki cheers, pulling Zero and Kuran toward a white sand beach and moon-glazed waves.

They strip off their winter clothes first, the sudden equatorial heat leaving all three nightdwellers sweltering in their layers of wool and down. Yuuki provides swimwear - matching, of course. Zero receives black swimming trunks with a red rose on his hip, marking a subtle claim. This proves to be a mistake, because a topless Zero is too distracting for the Kurans to stop staring at long enough to eat more than a few bites.

Zero milks their fascination for all it's worth - really, he blames Takuma and his romance novels for giving him all these ideas. The Hunter is only merciful enough to put on a shirt when the servers bring their meal, deeply discomforted by the idea of a stranger seeing his chest. After being taught for so many months that it's a sensitive area, Zero only wants Yuuki and Kuran to see him
like that. Perhaps living as a vampire is conditioning him too quickly? But Zero doesn't mind. Those parts belong to Yuuki - and Kaname too, the Hunter allows.

"This is nice," Zero remarks past a mouthful of orange sharbat. "Not really a place you'd expect to find vacationing vampires. Have you two been here before?"

"No," Kuran says, stirring his own glass. "We never left the country on the handful of occasions we vacationed together. I understand humans are very attracted to tropical beaches, but this is all new to me."

"This place is extra special," Yuuki insists, licking her spoon. "If you're done, I can show you!"

Zero looks at Kuran, pushing away his glass. Kuran shrugs, and gets to his feet.

Yuuki hums the whole way down to the shore, skipping and picking up seashells to bring back and show Kuran. The tide is low, and the sea is motionless under the still air. Yuuki frowns at the damp sand, skidding to a halt and circling back. "Zero! Come here!"

Zero doesn't understand what any of this is about, but goes forward to stand beside Yuuki anyway.

"Okay," his wife says, "now please step forward. Just once!"

Zero blinks at her, then picks up one foot and places it down. Underneath his sole, the sand flares like blue fire.

"Holy -" Zero shouts and jumps back. Left behind in the sand, outlined in glowing, cold blue light, is an imprint of his foot.

Spinning around to stare at Yuuki, Zero sputters, wide-eyed and wondering how this is possible.

Yuuki laughs in delight, gesturing around her at the innocent looking sand and rocking on the balls of her feet. "It's natural, I promise. You showed us those really cool flowers that bloomed at night, remember Zero? I wanted to find something equally beautiful, except the wind isn't cooperating with me today. Try it again!"

With more caution, Zero draws a line with his toe, and the glowing blue light springs up behind him. Fascinated, he crouches down and draws shapes and characters, using his fingers like a brush. Everywhere he touches that blue glow follows; it's a mesmerising effect, like the trail of a youkai.

Deciding that Zero's being too cautious, Yuuki grabs his hands, dancing out onto the wet sand to play chase until the two of them are winded and spinning in foxfire circles.

Kuran is examining the phenomenon with a critical eye, poking at the sand and not having enough fun, so Yuuki and Zero drag him out to join their dance. The three leave bright arcs behind them like the burning paths of comets in the night sky.

Now Yuuki shows them a new fun trick - the water glows when disturbed too! Zero draws glowing blue swirls in the water, and Yuuki pushes Kuran waist deep in the sea, until the two of them are playing with the light together, winding around each other and splashing, flinging glowing blue droplets in the air to shower down like raining magic.

Finally, after the three of them have wound down, exhausted and drunk on such ethereal earthly enchantment, the wind begins to pick up. Zero and the Kurans watch as the crest of each approaching wave glows and froths that same bright blue, each swell a line of light driven toward the shore to crash and break, spilling more glow at their feet.
When even that becomes tiresome, the three of them lay in the sand right there, within reach of the salt spray and the seafoam. With his toes dipped in the glowing blue, feeling the sand against his back, Zero watches the stars wheel above them.

He is warm and full and content, and says to no one in particular, "I think I'm ready to go home."

Some things weren't worth hiding from the servants. Tonight is one of them - their preparations haven't exactly been subtle. What does Kaname care? Let them speak of how Kaname honored his Consort by escorting him to dinner beneath the most magnificent pavilion in Rosehill's gardens. Let them gossip about the extravagance and expense of the preparations, chatter about the Kurans' care for every detail. All of that is according to Kaname's plan.

Plan or not, the knowing looks and giggling from Kiryuu's maids are beginning to get on Kaname's nerves.

"You look like you're about to bite someone," his wife murmurs, hooking her hand in the crook of his arm and rising up on her toes to whisper in his ear. "Relax. They just think this is romantic. I don't like the attention either, but it doesn't do any harm."

Kaname clicks his heel sharply on the ground. "This may be a spectacle, but I expect Kuran servants to have better discretion."

"Shh, I think Zero's coming!" Yuuki says, elbowing him in the side. "Be nice!"

"Oh," she sighs, all the breath going out of her as Kiryuu ducks out of his suite, doe-eyed and hesitant.

Kaname is not unaffected himself - Kiryuu has gone to extra lengths to look his best tonight. He's fresh from the bath, and the smell of herbal oils clings to his skin. Someone has even buffed the chips out of his nails and added a hint of gloss to his lips. The white of the Hunter's thick robe, held closed with a silver tasseled rope, gives his skin and hair a healthy glow. Under starlight, Kaname knows his Consort will be luminous, and so blindingly bright - so bright the very sight of him will make Kaname's chest ache even more than it does now.

Mate is the most beautiful mate ever, sighs Kaname's infatuated alpha. Kaname is in too good a mood to argue.

"Zero, you look so handsome for us," Yuuki praises, reaching up to accept a kiss.

Kiryuu's smile is quietly pleased. The simplicity of his adornment - his silver earrings and the single large diamond dangling from the chain of his Hoseki - only enhances the Hunter's natural good looks.

"You wore white and silver the first time I kissed you," Kaname says, taking Kiryuu's hand and kissing his palm now, right over the warm metal band of Yuuki's engagement ring. "Do you remember?"

Kiryuu has a lovely flush high on his cheekbones, and the pureblood's husband nods, sweetly shy. Charmed by the display, Kaname kisses up to his Consort's wrist, unobtrusively scenting the skin there, testing the omega's pheromones to gage his mood. "Was I the first to kiss you, sweet boy?"

Instead of replying, Kiryuu makes his angry kitten face and ducks down behind his hair. It's longer now, at least as long as his twin's was when he died - no, even longer than that, softening the line
of the Hunter's jaw. Kaname likes the effect, and seeing more of that rare silver color is a nice bonus.

The Kurans keep their omega tucked in between them all the way to the pavilion. Since Kaname and Yuuki saw him, they have not allowed a single moment when he isn't being touched by their hands, his attention hoarded and the sight of him denied to any onlookers. Besides satisfying Kaname's alpha instincts, this has the additional benefit of shielding Kiryuu from the attention they've attracted, easing the pressure on him to perform his public role.

That's just one piece of Kaname's strategy. Tonight requires careful management if Kaname wants affairs to culminate spectacularly in their bedroom. Kiryuu may be convinced he's ready to advance their physical relationship, but Kaname doesn't believe things will go so easily - at least, not without help. To avoid a repeat of their wedding night disaster, Kaname has bent all of his considerable skills toward making sure his Consort is in the right state of mind to yield himself, delicately arranging every detail to coax Kiryuu into a receptive, relaxed state.

The brightly lit, lavish pavilion was chosen for the public spectacle rather than the preferences of the diners themselves. Since tonight's end goals are political, Kaname is hoping to attract notice by employing a touch of pageantry. Even with the formal trappings, the three of them enjoy themselves, satisfied after their night exploring the world together.

Throughout the sumptuous meal, Kaname keeps a careful eye on Kiryuu's wine glass, topping it off every time the Hunter drinks while limiting himself to a single glass. The pureblood absolutely does not want Kiryuu drunk, merely intoxicated enough to relax his normal limits. Kaname intends to influence the Hunter's mind through the vessel of his body, and a little alcohol is only the beginning.

It begins with touch - brief, fleeting, significant - enough to tease, but not enough to satisfy. A press of fingers to the inner wrist, a hand on a shoulder, a whisper in the ear. Kaname smiles when his Consort starts pushing into the touches, and his belly smoulders with heat when the silver Hunter begins offering touches of his own - all so innocent, so honest, so unknowing.

Kaname's greatest ally is the omega sleeping within Zero's skin. Awaken those instincts, and they may be enough to overcome any emotional jagged edges leftover from his humanity. Zero probably can't smell the pheromones he's beginning to exude: receptive, happy omega trying to attract a mate, aware of its own desirability and approaching fertility, teased by the nearness of its accepted mates.

The scent of Kaname and Yuuki's answering arousal response is stronger, winding through the air and unlocking the burning that's kept churning in their blood all night. There's a heavy anticipation and significance in every act. All three of them know how tonight is intended to end, and it shapes even the smallest gesture.

Yuuki laughs when she offers Zero an oyster held by the tips of her fingers - but she stops laughing when Zero takes the food between his teeth with deliberate slowness, lips brushing her skin, handling it delicately while he looks up at her through his eyelashes.

"I think I've eaten enough dinner," the lavender-eyed man says when he swallows, licking at her fingers to clean them, stunning Yuuki thoroughly speechless.

Kaname wonders if Yuuki's mouth is as dry as his own. Zero may be a little more drunk than he intended.

"Do you mind if I take off my robe? I'm a little warm." The Hunter is already loosening the girdle
at his waist, easing the white robe off his shoulders.

Kaname doesn't see where it lands. He's caught up in the sudden bounty of milky skin revealed to their eyes - Zero's hidden undertunic is entirely backless and sleeveless, held up by a twist of fabric at his throat and nothing else, gaping open at the sides to offer little glimpses of his chest through the opaque white cloth.

"This is a nice surprise," Kaname rasps, knowing very well that his sudden, raging arousal is evident to anyone with a nose.

Zero leans back in his chair, reaching his arms above his head and stretching in a showy motion. "I bought it for you," he says with the ring of honesty, those lavender eyes somehow still clear and innocent. "Do you like it?"

Seduced by a virgin, Kaname's subconscious crows. He owes Takuma something nice for arranging this.

Yuuki makes a choked noise, erection obviously tenting the front of her dress, and nods once.

Zero smiles, a little bashful. "Good. I felt pretty silly about wearing it tonight."

"Not silly at all," Yuuki manages, blushing with whatever remaining blood in her body hasn't gone to her cock.

"I want to go for a walk," Zero dares, tone halfway between a question and an order. "To work off dinner. I ate too much and I feel fuzzy."

"Even looking like this?" Kaname asks, hand sneaking underneath the tunic in search of a nipple to torment. "What if someone unsavory is wandering my garden tonight, and they saw you, sweet boy? They'd never be able to resist such a temptation."

Hand snapping out in an impressive display of reflexes, Zero catches Kaname's wrist and holds it in place, letting his husband stroke his skin but go no further.

"You'll be with me, won't you?" Zero says, a hint of a blush on his cheeks, making Kaname's alpha puff up. Mate knows we will protect him! And we will, we won't let anybody hurt mate!

"Please. Just for a little bit," Zero coaxes, sensing his opportunity. "I've worn sensible shoes," Zero adds - as though that will make a difference, his Hunter training showing once again.

Putty to Zero's whims, Kaname and Yuuki find themselves taking an unexpected stroll in the gardens. Zero flits ahead of them like a wraith beneath the half-moon, full of unrestrained energy as he darts this way and that in the garden, skin pebbled with cold and shivering in his flimsy tunic and trousers.

For their part, the purebloods are constantly strung out and hypervigilant. Kaname's alpha alternates between fretting about the chill, and raging that anyone seeing their omega in such flimsy clothing must die. Kaname knows Zero made this request purposely stressful - the Hunter watches curiously as the two of them shadow his steps like a pair of sheepdogs, and snarl at every snapped twig and rustle of wind. This is a very good sign; Zero's instincts are testing his suitors and their desire for him.

Perhaps it's time to make the next move, Kaname thinks as he watches Zero eel out of Yuuki's reach. His wife has Zero's robe in her hands, and is attempting to convince their Consort to wear it against the cold.
Zero is having none of it, reveling in his stubborn, fey mood. Caught up in teasing Yuuki, the Hunter can't stop Kaname from pouncing, catching Zero by the waist and pulling his Consort tight against his body. It feels oddly right to have this strong, male form in his arms - but Kaname avoids dwelling on the implications, content to run his hands against the Hunter's muscled back and up the ridges of his spine, counting the vertebra as Zero throws his weight backwards trying to break free. Kaname allows the play fighting, and extends the game by loosening his grasp before Zero begins to struggle in earnest.

Zero takes advantage of the opening, just as Kaname intended, and flees away out of range, before stopping to look over his shoulder, his heavy-lidded, quizzical glance inviting pursuit.

Yuuki heaves a breath, and her focus sharpens. She takes a step forward, gaze fixed on Zero, and stops short. Kaname can feel her restraint fraying, and so can their Hunter-born lover.

Zero leans his weight backwards, balanced on the balls of his feet, ready to run. There is something in his eyes that makes Kaname think of the young Hunter boy who tried to stab him with a butter knife - a wildness, a ferocity.

They all stand frozen, balanced on the edge of motion. Kaname barely breathes, remaining perfectly still. But the quivering energy in Zero is too strong, and the Hunter whirrs, off like a shot.

The purebloods catch up with him easily, Zero's speed nothing in comparison, and Yuuki brings their lover down, cushioning his fall with her own body while Kaname pins him from above.

Zero doesn't struggle any more. His eyes shine bright, and he shivers in Yuuki's arms like he's going to pieces.

"Trying to run, little Hunter?" Kaname croons, trapping Zero's wrists with one hand.

Zero's eyes just become more glazed, and the pureblood realizes - Zero's omega instincts have finally come to the fore, surfacing strongly enough to initiate a play stalk-and-chase. Excellent.

Leaning down, Kaname begins kissing the column of the Hunter's throat; beneath him, Yuuki is already bruising the nape of Zero's neck with her own possessive affections.

"White for purity. Did you do this on purpose, I wonder?," Kaname muses as he scatters kisses, breathing in the clean scent of his Consort.

Kaname knows exactly how much wine he drank tonight - purebloods can't even get drunk - yet he still feels intoxicated, running out of control as he rushes ahead. "Didn't they tell you not to wander the woods at night, little Hunter? There are monsters out there, my sweet virgin, and monsters love innocent things."

Zero's body tenses, and he clenches his teeth to smother a groan when Kaname finds a sensitive spot and sucks over the Hunter's pulse.

"But you don't fear that," the pureblood continues, mouthing Zero's collarbone. "The Hunters sacrificed a virgin to the monsters, and you willingly delivered yourself up." Kaname tugs aside the white tunic, finds the little swells on Zero's chest. "An innocent lamb before wolves."

Zero whimpers; Kaname grinds his cock against his Consort's thigh.

"Mine. All mine," Yuuki snarls, biting into Zero's naked shoulder and licking the blood that wells up.
Kaname takes his chance, and guides Zero up to his throat. It takes little coaxing for the omega to clamp down and being drinking greedily. Playing with the ends of Zero's silken hair, Kaname praises him for each gulp of pure blood. Blood drinking will bring Zero's strongest vampire instincts to the fore; while Zero is basking in the height of instinct and the high of satiation, only then will Kaname take him to bed and breach his maidenhood.

Kaname tries to breathe, his mind full of his fantasies and the warm, breathing reality that surpasses all of them. "Done, sweet boy?"

Zero hiccups, face buried in the warmth of Kaname's neck. "Cold, alpha. Can we go inside?"

"Of course, Zero," Yuuki replies lovingly, and holds him close the whole way back to their bedroom, distracting Zero with petting and kisses until he hardly knows where he is. She doesn't even lay Zero down on the bed, just tumbles down with their Consort still in her arms. Kaname leaps up with more grace, still radiating his most terrifying aura to warn away intruders - they hadn't seen a soul the entire way back.

"I've been wanting to do this ever since I saw you wearing it," Yuuki declares, and cuts off the opaque white tunic with her claws, careful not to nick Zero's skin, peeling the ruined fabric off like wrapping paper hiding the most beautiful gift in the world, then balling up the cloth and throwing it off the bed.

Zero is wide eyed, stripped down to his underwear, with a smear of blood at the corner of his mouth, and he shivers again.

"Someday," she promises, taking Zero's ankles and spreading them wide, "I'm going to dress you in something fancy, and then I'm going to lift up your skirt and eat you out while you watch yourself come apart in a mirror."

"We'll add it to the list," Kaname says in an undertone as his wife settles between Zero's legs exactly according to plan, and begins working his underwear down. "Remember, quick and hard."

Yuuki waves him away, far more captivated by the erect cock and plump folds revealed - as well she should be. Their lovely omega needed to be taken care of. What could be more important than that?

Kaname listens to his wife bring Zero to his first orgasm of the night as the pureblood methodically strips out of his clothing, trusting her to prepare their precious spouse for his deflowering, to work Zero wet and relaxed enough to accept his cock.

"You've gotten so good at this," Kaname praises, resting a hand on their wife's shoulder. Zero is too incoherent to beg, lost in the pleasure Yuuki is giving him. With her mouth otherwise occupied, she gives no reply, but applies herself with even more fervor to her task. And exactly like Kaname asked, when Zero comes his spine bends like a bow and he nearly screams, sagging back bonelessly to the mattress with his mouth open as he tries to get enough air.

Kaname waits for some of the haze to clear, ignoring his own painful arousal and smoothing back Zero's hair from his sweaty forehead. He can hear a thump as each piece of Yuuki's clothing falls to the floor, and the noise of her rustling around in a drawer. "Zero? Can you talk to me?"

Zero's eyes lazily roll upwards, but all that comes out of his mouth is low broken noises.

"If you want something, you have to ask for it," Kaname reminds him gently, stroking his Consort's cheek and resisting the urge to dip his fingers in the wet of Zero's open mouth.
Zero's jaw works silently; he swallows, and his voice is hoarse with pleasure and hazy embarrassment. "I want your - I want both of your - you know what I want, stupid pureblood!"

"You have my cock," Kaname teases, wrapping Zero's limp hand around the organ in question, letting him feel the steel hardness Zero's display has caused. "It already belongs to you, remember. What should I do with my cock, Zero?"

A little more awareness is seeping back into Zero's eyes, and the Hunter's blush intensifies. "I want alpha to come inside me."

Oh, that was more than Kaname expected, and he feels a wicked smile bloom as the inferno in his loins soars. "As my Consort wishes," he says, moving into place between Zero's spread thighs.

Yuuki's strength grinds the bones of Kaname's arm together, and beneath Zero's hearing she hisses, "Don't you dare hurt him any more than you have to. Don't you dare. He deserves gentleness, Kaname. You treat him like the miracle he is."

"I want to make this as good as I can," Kaname says aloud to both of them, running his hands down the thick muscle of Zero's milky thighs. "But you know it will hurt a little, Zero. Because you're my sweet virgin, aren't you?"

Zero makes a disgruntled face, and Kaname is helpless before the desire to lean down and kiss him, tasting his prize. This feeling in his breast isn't tenderness, the pureblood tries to convince himself. "You know I have to be your first, but Yuuki and I have discussed it, and I think we can bend the requirements to let Yuuki play a larger role. Will you trust us to take care of you?"

Big, trusting lilac eyes look up at him, and something in Kaname's chest twists when Zero bobs his head, obviously nervous but trying so hard to do what makes him afraid. Kaname kisses him again - how could he not? Yuuki seals the compact with a kiss of her own, and holds Zero's hand as Kaname turns his attention to Zero's virgin opening.

Yuuki has done her work well. Zero's folds are swollen with his arousal, and the pale pink has flushed darker, the delicate little opening licked into lewd readiness. The lush smell of omega slick saturates the air, proof of Zero's orgasm, and his cunt is glossy and his thighs are wet with how much he's dripping.

"You really do want my cock inside your innocent little quim, don't you?" the pureblood teases, pressing the tip of his finger inside to test the slickness and give. Kaname has never lain with a presented omega before, but all the virgins he's fucked needed to be thoroughly prepared or they couldn't handle his size. That won't be a problem with Zero - omegas produce excess lubrication for exactly that reason, but if Zero is too tense Kaname might unintentionally hurt him.

Zero stiffens at Kaname's touch, squirming away before he catches himself and holds still. Just as Kaname feared, Zero is furnace-hot inside, and so rigid with anxiety Kaname doesn't think he could even penetrate him without tearing him.

Casting a glance at Yuuki, the pureblood gives Zero's cock a significant look, and she hurries to give it a few strokes, settling into a rhythm meant to distract the Hunter as Kaname tests again.

This time, Kaname's fingers slide easily inside, and he groans at the feeling of Zero's walls around him. Mother night, Kaname marvels, mind blanking out with lust as he strokes the plush insides of his mate.

Zero squeals, and clamps down, making Kaname's cock jump. The pureblood hasn't even touched
Zero with his cock, and he's already mad with lust. Key to lock, Kaname reminds himself. Everything about an omega is meant to appeal to an alpha. It doesn't mean anything more significant.

"Ready, Zero?" Kaname asks, withdrawing his fingers and licking off the delicious taste.

Zero pales, but nods, resolved to finish this.

Yuuki's eyes flick to meet his, and Kaname can see the yearning in her eyes. "Take care of him," she tells her husband.

Kaname touches her elbow in apology. Yuuki accepts it, and goes back to easing Zero into penetration with every trick she's learned from the Hunter's body.

Kaname doesn't sink into Zero immediately. He takes his time admiring his omega's body first, biting love-marks on Zero's thighs and rubbing those slick folds as Yuuki plays with Zero's chest. If Kaname tried to take his Consort now, when Zero is anticipating pain, the tension of his body would ruin the experience and intensify his hurt. Much better to make Zero forget what they're about to do, to allow him time to lower his guard. Long minutes pass, but Kaname feels no rush. He's quite content to pleasure his Consort this way, for as long as it takes.

Finally, Kaname feels the clenched muscles beneath his fingers slacken, and knows now is the proper time. Even so, he doesn't rush. Taking his cock in his hands, Kaname parts the folds hiding Zero's hole and nestles his cock in between them, admiring the way his omega's cunt is dwarfed by his intimidating length. Sliding his shaft up and down Zero's sex, the alpha imitates the act that is about to take his mate's virginity, providing delicious stimulation to Zero's sensitive labia from the way his Consort writhes.

"I wish you could see yourself like this," Kaname tells him, making sure every millimeter of his cock is coated in the slick Zero's leaking everywhere, and guiding the tip where he wants it most.

Zero gasps when the swollen crown nestles snugly against his opening, and Yuuki pauses, looking to Kaname for guidance.

Kaname cannot tear himself away from the way Zero is looking up at him. The knot of emotion in his throat is choking him. Why does this feel the same way it did when he took Yuuki's virginity - sacred, like the sealing of a vow?

This was supposed to be a moment of triumph as Kaname ruthlessly conquered his rival. But Kaname knows the moment he presses inside, he'll be the one surrendering to Zero instead. Overwhelmed, the pureblood presses his forehead to Zero's chest, trying to regain his balance, but it's too late. Everything inside him has already succumbed; like roots growing through stone, Zero has taken possession. Kaname has lost a game he didn't even know he was playing.

"Go ahead," Zero whispers, arching his hips to meet Kaname.

The alpha has never wanted anything more. Willingly, he sinks into the embrace of Zero's body, and the tightest, most perfect cunt he's ever touched.

The cock pushing inside him feels enormous. Zero plants his feet and tries to breathe around the way his body is straining to accept it. The slick head hasn't even passed the clench of his hole yet, despite persistent pressure. Kaname is rolling his hips trying to work his way inside, and it aches.

The pain is good, something physical Zero can hold onto, something to help crush his anxieties and
sense of wrongness at this act. He's tried to show a determined front, but this decision's left him twisted up inside, warring against himself. Zero doesn't care. This body is his, dammit, no matter how it's shaped, and if Zero wants to fuck his husband and wife, he's going to do as he pleases, and damn his issues to hell.

"Tell me how you're doing, Zero," Yuuki's voice comes from outside his concentration.

"It's too big," he protests blindly, arching his back, seeking a better angle. "Too wide. It won't - it won't fit."

"Loosen up for me, sweet boy," Kaname grunts. "Your body knows how to take a cock. Just let yourself accept me."

Breathing deep, Zero exhales slowly, concentrating on the lower half of his body. "Harder," he demands, bracing himself against the headboard.

Beneath a ruthless assault, his flesh slowly and reluctantly parts to let Kaname enter, each nudge opening him up a little wider. Zero clenches his teeth at the raw burn, throwing his head back and sucking in air as his thighs shake.

Yuuki tries to help, twisting her hand around his cock to distract him, but every grain of Zero's focus is between his thighs, where Kaname is opening him up little by little, forcing him wider and wider. Until all of a sudden, the head pops inside and Zero bites down on a scream of surprise and shocked pain.

God, how was he supposed to give birth if his body couldn't even take one penis? Zero lies there shuddering and trying to breathe. He doesn't know how he feels, except unsteady and off balance.

"Shhh," Kaname soothes. "Sorry kitten. I need to get all the way in. Bear down - the rest will be easier."

And it is, marginally. Zero whines and sobs as Kaname works his way inside, battering at his virgin walls with his girth until Zero's body yields and allows him deeper. The omega's channel is so sensitive he can feel every millimeter of that cock filling him deeper and deeper, pushing against every part of his passage and stretching him so wide.

"I can feel you," Zero whimpers, his eyes rolling back in his head as Kaname nudges something inside Zero that twinges, something that's blocking him from going any further.

Yuuki grip on Zero's hand tightens; the sound of her heavy breathing mingling with Zero's strained inhales and rushed exhales.

Kaname pushes his hips forward, prodding at the seal on Zero's womb. "That's your barrier, precious boy. When I break that, I'll claim your maidenhead."

"Kaname," Yuuki begs. "Can I, please, like you said?"

"I'm going to pull out of you, Zero," Kaname says, and suddenly Zero is empty as his first cock slides out of him. He whimpers, aching and somehow missing the brutal stretch, that newly learned fullness satisfying his deepest primal instincts.

"Yuuki wants to feel your virgin cunt, precious, before I take you," Kaname explains, rubbing Zero's hip. "Will you let her?"

Blind to anything but the empty ache inside him, Zero shakes his head in a furious yes. He wants
Yuuki too, wants both his alphas inside. Why did alpha stop? Is Zero not good enough? He whines, offering himself with a shake of his hips and spreads his legs wider.

Warm hands caress his skin, and Zero settles with a happy noise once he feels another cock nudging at his opening, just as wide and thick as the first.

"What do I do?" Yuuki asks above his head.

"You're fine, dear girl. Follow your instincts. You're wearing your cockring?" Yuuki must gesture an answer, and Kaname continues speaking. "Go slowly, and pay attention to your partner."

"Alpha?" Zero calls, seeking reassurance and wiggling. "Please, alpha?"

"I love you so much," Yuuki groans, and slides into Zero's loosened passage. It's still a struggle to cram anything larger than a finger inside, but this time Zero forces himself down on the thick organ, panting and welcoming the fullness.

Yuuki catches Zero's hip and holds him still when her tip strikes the thick barrier deep inside him, giving Zero another nasty twinge. Yuuki has her other hand over her mouth, staring at the place they're joined like she's seen god, or the devil.

The dwindling human part of Zero feels a burst of tenderness, but the omega part whose influence is growing stronger every second whines in frustration. It's not enough - there's more fat cock resting outside his sopping cunt, and an itchy emptiness in the back of his channel that he hungers to fill. "Yuuki," he begs in a voice he would never believe came from his throat. "I want more."

"Fuck," she says, swallowing and clinging to her control. Her pupils are blown wide; she's so close to giving in and ramming Zero's channel bloody - except a snarling Kaname drags her backwards by her arm.

Zero wails when another cock jerks out of him, flinging droplets of slick in the air as the tip springs upward. Kaname's cock is crammed back inside his hole, the force of the alpha's thrust splitting him open and ramming the stubborn barrier inside him, which weakens but does not break. Zero has tears beading at the corners of his eyes from the pain, and calls in distress.

"Sorry, precious, once more will do it, bear with me," Kaname murmurs, his gentle thumbs drying Zero's eyes.

Picking herself up, Yuuki shakes herself off like a dog, blinking and looking around her.

"Help me ease him," Kaname orders, and she springs into motion, taking up Zero's flagging erection.

The extra dose of pleasure is numbing Zero's discomfort, and his shoulders unknot. "Alpha," he begs again, the omega swamping his thoughts, squeezing the cock inside him with muscles he didn't know he had.

Kaname throws his head back and groans. "Where did you learn that, sweet boy? Do you like the way my cock is stretching your little hole so wide?"

Zero circles his hips and whines, desperately seeking what he needs.

The pureblood bends over his body and grabs Zero's waist with both hands. "Remember to breathe," he says, nuzzling beneath Zero's ear and nipping the skin.
Then he draws back, and slams inside with every ounce of strength in his hips.

Zero screams in earnest as his seal breaks and a pulse of agony shoots through his loins. The scent of blood fills the air - and Kaname's thick, heavy cock settles against the gate of his womb like it was made to fit inside him. It's like having an iron rod rammed in his sex - unyielding, pressing outward against every part of his walls, forcing his insides to cradle it and massage its huge girth.

Zero's eyes roll back into his head as he absorbs his very first proper penetration, his virginity lost to the alpha cock spearing him open. Kaname's knot is crammed against Zero's entrance and almost parting his folds, hinting at an even greater fullness, and the pureblood's balls brush against his inner thighs. The combined sensation is overwhelming; Zero can feel it pushing his body apart, the air punched out of his lungs by the sheer size of the cock claiming him. Taking sobbing breaths, he struggles around the pleasure-pain radiating out from every millimeter of his cunt.

Yuuki and Kaname are petting him, giving him time to come back to himself, but every time Zero shifts the tiniest bit his whole cunt flares with sensation and he's lost, brand new places in his brain sparking for the very first time and overloading.

"Please," he cries, beyond rational thought and running solely on instinct - instinct which demands he mate with the worthy alpha mounting him. The cock inside him draws back - Zero cries out - and slides back inside to knock against his cervix, right where it belongs.

His mate's cock fucks him in smooth, easy glides, each thrust unleashing a white cascade of pleasure in his belly that Zero rides higher and higher. He's leaking so much that each movement makes an obscene squelch as his alpha crams himself inside Zero's overstuffed slit. Zero throws himself into the pleasure with complete abandon, letting out the most uninhibited noises as his mate's width rubs his entire channel at once.

The heat curling in his stomach pushes away the ache and painful strain of being breached for the first time, and all too soon Zero is digging his heels into his alpha's back, yowling and chasing the peak he can feel tightening beneath his navel. The fainter pleasure from his cock is a welcome addition, pushing him just shy of the edge.

"My perfect omega," Kaname pants brokenly above him. "You were made for this, your little pink cunt was made to be fucked red and swollen by my cock. Go ahead, precious boy, I have you, I have you -"

Zero sobs, and clutches his mate close, and the muscles of his cunt flutter, trying to tighten around the sheer size of the cock inside him. "Ahhh," he hiccups, words failing him, and lets go as the best orgasm of his life rushes through his body, turning the world upside down.

When he comes to, Kaname is still thrusting inside him at the same steady pace, and Zero's sore cunt is feeling a little raw. Enough sparks of pleasure remain to enjoy the feeling, but the third time he comes weakly as his cock jerks, the pleasure dim in comparison to the ecstasy of Kaname between his thighs.

"One more," Kaname says, not letting up his assault on Zero's tender slit. "One more time for me, precious boy, and you'll get what you want."

Yuuki's mouth is tonguing his nipples, plucking at the stiff buds and giving Zero another point of focus as he claws his way towards a fourth orgasm, pleasure bleeding and mixing with pain. Kaname's strokes sharpen, and the alpha begins driving his cock into Zero's body over and over and over again, until everything begins to bleed together, the pleasure and the pain and time itself.
"I'm going to leave my baby in your virgin belly, little Hunter. Would you like that?"

Zero involuntarily squeezes the cock inside him, hungering for that impossible promise. At the first rush of warm heat, Zero's body locks up, and he comes his brains out, catapulted instantly into orgasm. He can feel each individual pulse rushing from the tip of Kaname's cock, and the way that cock stays lodged in place as firmly as Kaname can grind inside, soft knot pulling at Zero's outer cunt as Kaname unloads himself into Zero's pristine depths, flooding his insides with potent seed.

It must be a huge amount; their joining goes on for long minutes and Kaname's cock keeps jerking and spraying inside him the whole time. Zero has gone completely limp, his instincts content to allow his mate to mark him, and he stays pliable as Kaname finally finishes and carefully withdraws from Zero's battered, well-used cunt. A flood of seed leaks out behind him, soaking Zero's thighs, and Yuuki is there with a pillow to prop Zero's hips up and keep all that come inside him. He doesn't want to look between his thighs; down there he feels open, wrong, every part of him strained and exhausted.

But there's something damp prodding Zero's thigh. Something velvety and unyielding, with a heavy smell that makes his omega surface once more. Zero tilts his head, purring when he spies his younger mate's cock pointing toward his needy cunt. Yuuki, he wants Yuuki so much. Wants to please her and give her his body too. Her laser-focus gaze is intent on his opening, staring down at the join of his thighs with a jealous hunger.

Zero rolls his hips, enticing his chosen alpha to mount him. "Please, alpha," he calls to his younger mate, letting his thighs fall open invitingly. "I want you. Come take me?"

All it took was one taste. Just one brief blissful thrust, and Yuuki is addicted beyond salvation. She could stand in a room with a thousand naked omegas, all in heat and presenting for her, and her cock wouldn't even twitch. It only wants Zero. Yuuki's going to spend the rest of her life buried inside Zero's snug warmth. No objections, no arguments. It hugs Yuuki's cock so perfectly, like it can't bear to let her go. Yuuki can't make Zero's pussy lonely!

Zero, Zero, Zero. Wonderful, beloved Zero who feels like scorching silk inside. She's denied her desires so hard, tried to be generous as she watched her Consort accept Kaname. And now he's beckoning her, inviting her to do the thing she wants most.

Yuuki doesn't take her eyes off him, crab walking sideways. Her cock bobs painfully with each motion, denied release by the gold ring at its base, nearly purple from all the blood trapped inside. The shaft glistens with the clear slick Zero is gushing, just like Kaname's cock is covered in cloudy pinkish film from their mixed juices.

Yuuki has never felt such pure, concentrated, poisonous envy before the moment she watched Kaname shove his cock inside the virgin she loved and adored and deeply wished to have as his first partner. There's a crater in the mattress from her hand tearing out a divot of padding when Kaname tore his seal. Not that watching Kaname with Zero hadn't been mind-blowingly hot - don't think about it, Yuuki reminds herself, trying to breathe and control the raging heat below her navel, her sheer, overwhelming arousal edging into pain.

But it doesn't do any good. Zero is just too beautiful, with his hips propped up to keep Kaname's seed inside and his formerly delicate, chaste cunt dripping the evidence of his deflowering. His labia don't quite fold shut anymore, stretched out after taking such a huge shaft. Yuuki wonders if she can make Zero even more ruined - she's just as wide as Kaname. The thought makes her cock pulse painfully with each heartbeat; somehow she grows impossibly more erect.
Yuuki licks dry lips as Zero lifts his head and stares up at her past the length of his nude body. Her hand is shaking as she takes her cock in hand. She's too eager - her cock slides into the crevice of Zero's thigh instead of his pert hole the first time she presses forward.

Kaname's hand wraps around her own. "Shall I help you again?" he chuckles against her ear.

She shoves him away. No touching! Alpha-mate already had his turn mounting their omega! Yuuki grinds down into Zero's hip and the mess of fluids there, self-control shot and so hard she can't think straight through the fog of arousal.

Guiding herself back down to the crux of Zero's thighs, Yuuki bites her lip in concentration, and slots her cock right in the center of that little gape. Her hips jar forwards, testing the give. God, Kaname really did open him up. Her control fractures and cracks - all that's holding her back from brutalizing Zero's sweet pussy is her ironclad determination not to hurt him.

Slowly, slowly, slowly, she chants to herself, sinking back into that velvet heat. *Must not hurt mate*, her alpha agrees. *Must not hurt Zero*, the human part of her corrects.

Yuuki's eyes roll back into her head as she slips the last few millimeters in, bottoming out against Zero's cervix, finally - finally - every part of her cock buried inside the person she loves. Stars pop in her vision at the sheer pleasure of being buried so deep her knot grinds against her lover's entrance, the ring of muscle at Zero's entrance tightening snugly around the base of her cock, Zero's hips nearly flush with her pelvis. This perfect pressure and heat and *everything*, so good, too good, oh god.

Yuuki tries to breathe, reaching down to trace the taut ring of Zero's full cunt; she can feel the strain in his rim as he struggles to take her cock.

The enraptured expression on Zero's face is matched by the awe in her own. Yuuki shifts, accidentally pulling back, and Zero moans. His pink insides cling to her cock as she leaves his hole; Yuuki can't take her eyes off the lewd way Zero's body accepts her cock.

"You feel so good like this," the pureblood tells him, her alpha pleased to see its mate so well claimed.

Zero's hot insides grip her harder, if possible, and he blushes.

She can't stop herself from adding, "Want to keep you just like this, wrapped up and safe, full of my cock and my babies, all *mine.*"

It's an unspeakably arousing mental image, and Yuuki can't hold back any longer. The velvet walls surrounding her cock clench convulsively as she hoists Zero's thighs up, and begins slamming into his sloppy cunt, fucking Kaname's seed out of Zero to make space for her own. Kaname may have claimed mate first, but *Yuuki's* seed will fill him up.

Zero wails, and takes her cock like he was made for it, squeezing and rippling around her. If not for the cock ring, she would have painted his insides white the first time her balls slapped his ass. Her heavy, unpracticed thrusts lack Kaname's experience, but she's determined to make her mate come on her cock, and stubbornly keeps pounding his cervix until Zero's shaking and squeezing, exhausted but still willing to chase another high to please her.

When Zero's hot sheath clamps rigidly tight, Yuuki pushes Zero down even further, impaled to the root on her cock, and enjoys the fluttering of the muscles she's embedded himself in.

The look on his face is ecstatic, and a little glazed. Kissing Zero's slack mouth, Yuuki claws at her
cock ring; the metal crumples, and Yuuki creams Zero's newly deflowered cunt until her vision blacks out, grinding down and trying to get impossibly deeper.

When she comes back to herself, draped over Zero's chest, Yuuki's cock hasn't softened at all, remaining stubbornly hard and lodged in its new favorite place. Nor has her desire flagged one bit. Yuuki wants to have Zero again, in every imaginable position, and to never leave his hole empty again. Instead, she grits her teeth, and tries to convince herself that Zero will be sore and tired in the evening as it is, and another round is not in the cards.

"Come, my treasure, you can't stay inside him all night, pleasant as it is," Kaname reminds her, sympathetic after tasting Zero's heat himself.

"Zero's ass is mine. And so is yours," Yuuki grunts, pulling out and regretfully allowing her cock to slide free of its impossibly tight sheath. "I'm staking my claim."

If Zero's cunt had been filled full before, now it's a pool of come, milky-pink and gushing out of him. The bedding is soaked through, and Zero is covered in a mix of seed and slick. With his ass in the air, propped up by the pillow, Zero looks as though he's offering himself. The sight makes Yuuki want to slip back inside him and sate herself again.

"You look ruined," she marvels, dipping her finger into the mess they're made. Zero's hole flutters, trying to clamp tight again, but their cocks have stretched him out so much it just twitches; his opening gapes obscenely wide. Yuuki feels a perverse sense of pride, and immediately resolves to keep Zero this way permanently, through dedicated efforts.

Zero makes a low, incoherent noise; they've fucked him too exhausted to care he's filthy and full of come. He's more than half asleep as Yuuki and Kaname clean him off with warm, wet cloths, careful to preserve the come inside him as evidence of tonight's lovemaking. Mindful of his reaction, the alphas pull a pair of underwear up Zero's thighs and tuck him into bed, curling around him and willing away their persistent arousal.

"Did we do okay?" Yuuki whispers, reaching out for Kaname's hand.

"We'll find out, won't we?" Kaname squeezes her hand in return, and they drift off to sleep together just like that, hand-in-hand as they cradle their Consort.

Chapter End Notes

I hope everyone enjoyed the long-awaited scene. Somewhere Cross is crying about how Kaname's deflowered both his children...

The glowing ocean is a real phenomenon caused by tiny bioluminescent algae. Watch some of the videos if you have time, they're very beautiful.

Next chapter may take a while, but I promise I will keep working on it!
Kuran Kaname, the Original King and the Ancestor of the Kuran, cannot sleep.

By itself, this is not much of a hardship. With the inhuman endurance granted by his cursed, pure blood, he will not suffer when he rises in the evening; likely, no one will notice.

Nevertheless, it is worrisome. After glutting himself in his Consort's virgin flesh, Kaname ought to be basking in the flush of pleasure from a good fuck just like his alpha.

Wildly beyond his expectations in every way, Kaname lusts just remembering the tiniest detail. Even now, it makes him shift restlessly, seeking to escape the heat beneath his skin. It was delicious to finally taste the delights Zero's body has to offer, no doubt about that.

Kiryuu. Kiryuu's body.

Kaname scrubs a hand over his face, gritting his teeth. There lies the source of his insomnia - Kaname's inexplicable emotional reaction during their most intimate sexual encounter. He's lain with virgins for amusement many times before, and except for Yuuki, never felt a flicker of profound feeling. But with his Consort…. Kaname realizes there's a warm, buoyant feeling rising in his chest.

The pureblood grinds his teeth. These slips - this inability to compartmentalize - have been growing for a while, if Kaname is being honest.

For the life of him, Kaname cannot figure out how this happened. At what point did tolerant fondness become - whatever this is.

Many of his recent lapses can be laid at the feet of his damnable alpha instincts, certainly. But the alpha is an animal; complex emotions are largely beyond it. The gaps, the inconsistencies that Kaname cannot explain away - those trouble him.

And that strange reaction, that feeling of surrendering - the alpha does not know surrender. It
triumphs, it submits, or it dies. Nor does the alpha understand sacredness. Nothing is holy beyond its own primal drives.

Those must have been Kaname's feelings, impossible as the logic sounds. The pureblood is tempted to dismiss the idea, but his paranoia and pragmatism won't allow him to ignore the possibility. Thus, the insomnia.

Kaname attempts laying out the facts as he knows them. He is fond of Kiryuu. He tolerates things from Kiryuu he would never allow from a subordinate. He cannot abide harm coming to him. He felt panic when he believed the Hunter's life was in danger. He will not allow Kiryuu to harm himself. He insists that Kiryuu's needs are met, even beyond what is strictly necessary for public appearances or appeasing Yuuki and his instincts. He went to considerable effort and expense to arrange the archive visit when he could have taken Kiryuu to any notable historical library. He experienced feelings during sex that only Yuuki has inspired in him.

...perhaps Kaname feels more affection toward Kiryuu then he believed, the pureblood slowly admits to himself.

At this point, Kaname would have violently rejected his new conclusion, then resolved to distance himself from Kiryuu at all costs - except the body he's cradling starts to shake.

Zero can feel himself fraying at the edges. He keeps as still as possible, because every motion stirs the visceral throbbing ache of foreign tissues, an invasive reminder of the truth he's striven for almost a year to reject.

Don't think about it, the Hunter reminds himself. Light-headed and dizzy, Zero sucks in shallow breaths and wishes he could go back to sleep, hide in his own oblivion (After all, sleep is the closest you can get to death). His stomach is a pit of curdling nausea. He can taste bile in the back of his throat. Zero can't escape what he's willingly revealed - every bruise, every mark is proof this is reality.

Zero shies away, jumps on what he thinks is a safer path, concentrates on how his body feels similar to the aftermath of a difficult workout or a long, hard Hunt. Yes, that's easier, frame it like that. Zero doesn't think he'll be able to stand up to dress. Every shift is painful, and the lower half of his body is one sharp ache - all radiating from that place, that wrongness, the proof that this body isn't him, where he still feels sloppy and open.

Zero gags into his pillow, trying to keep himself quiet. He can feel their spend sloshing around inside, and remembers he's supposed to face the sneering, hateful nobility tonight, while he's still feeling like this - disgusting, filthy, inhuman.

Get it together, Kiryuu, he snaps at himself, failure weighing like a stone in his chest. His spouses made last night perfect for him, and he's ruining everything. He was supposed to be fixed! Why is this happening now? All the old self-loathing is rising up in him, and the urge to destroy himself is twitching beneath his skin. Zero clings to one single determination like a shipwrecked sailor to a driftwood spar: don't wake them up. Don't let Yuuki see you like this.

Oh Ancestress. What does Yuuki think of Zero now, after she saw him like that, completely out of his mind under the vampire's influence? Zero's memory gets hazy, but last night confirmed every fear he's harbored about the nature of an omega. Those instincts cushioned his mental state, true, but they also compelled him to act in ways he'd never rationally allow. Zero knows he hadn't been in control of himself once he'd got his first taste of cock, reduced to nothing more than an animal begging to be fucked (a vampire whore, just like they all said).
Cold. He's so cold.

Zero realizes his body is shivering. He locks his jaw to keep his teeth from chattering, and thinks *don't throw up don't throw up* until he can push the self-disgust down.

Touching his Consort's shoulder, Kaname feels bone-deep shivers wrenching Kiryuu's body, as though the Hunter were encased in ice instead of underneath heavy blankets and heated by two purebloods.

Kiryuu flinches away from his touch, and something in Kaname's chest pinches. No need to guess the cause of the Hunter's distress; Kaname expected some form of fallout from his Consort's first bedding. The pureblood loops an arm around Kiryuu's front, pulling him away from a sleeping Yuuki and onto his own chest.

Turning his face away, Kiryuu curls tighter on top of him, a turtle hiding in a shell.

"Zero," Kaname murmurs into his Consort's ear, gentling his voice but adding an undertone that warns he will not be ignored.

The Hunter's body tenses; a feeling like pain fills Kaname when Kiryuu hides his face against Kaname's breastbone.

"Sorry," Kiryuu croaks quietly enough not to wake Yuuki. "I didn't want to - didn't mean to wake you. I'm sorry - please just go back to sleep."

Kaname contemplates this. "As always, I am stunned by your complete lack of concern for yourself. And I was already awake."

Kiryuu says nothing in return. Minutes pass, and the tremors shaking the Hunter's body worsen; his breathing is shaky and uneven, and Kaname suspects Kiryuu is on the edge of passing out, or tearing himself apart.

The pain in Kaname's chest is still there.

"What's wrong, sweet boy?" Kaname finally asks, unable to stop himself from stroking a hand down his Consort's back, long firm passes from the crown of Kiryuu's head to the small of Kiryuu's back. It's strangely soothing when the Hunter goes limp, like a wounded bird hanging from the mouth of a cat.

"Nothing," Kiryuu lies raggedly, "I'm fine."

Curling a hand around the back of the Hunter's neck, Kaname wants to shake him. Even now, after all this, his Consort is still trying to hide from him. "If you're going to lie, make it something less obvious."

Kiryuu stiffens, and Kaname regrets his hasty words. Yuuki's breathing stays even and steady; they both listen for a few moments before Kaname tries again. "I spoke too sharply earlier. Will you tell me what's troubling you, Zero?"

The Hunter's body winds tighter, if possible. Then Kiryuu takes a sobbing breath, and his shoulders start to shake silently.

Bolting upright with Zero's body in his arms, and the scent of anguished omega replacing his boy's normal sweet smell, Kaname panics. This is a situation for Yuuki to handle - Kaname doesn't know
what to do with a Zero who may be crying into his chest.

Comfort mate, stupid! prods the alpha, upset by its omega's distress.

"Shhh," the pureblood says, rubbing the Hunter's back again, trying to remember what Juuri and Haruka did for him as a child. "It's alright, precious boy. You're alright, you're safe here. I'm here, I have you…"

"Zero!" Yuuki cries, jerked awake by her omega's distressed scent, crawling over in her underwear to sandwich Zero into a hug. "What's wrong? Did we hurt you?"

Zero doesn't reply, caught up in his own misery, so deep even Yuuki's love can't cure it. Slowly, Zero's shaking eases down to fine trembling and little hitches of breath.

This would bring Kaname great relief, except Kaname is lost trying to remember when Zero's new nickname crept onto his tongue. Kaname mouths the word to himself. Precious? When did he start calling the Hunter his 'precious boy'? Then Zero lifts his head, and Kaname forgets everything at the look in the Hunter's eyes. They're glassy, and completely dry, and filled with such emptiness Kaname fears what Zero might do to himself if left alone. (Zero should never, ever look that way again.)

"I'm not hurt," Zero says, and the words are like brittle husks.

"Your ridiculously understated definition of hurt, or ours?" Kaname snipes, unable to stop the words leaving his mouth.

Zero recoils, expression closing off.

"Kaname!" Yuuki snaps. "You're not helping."

The pureblood feels his face turn to stone, the conflict inside him denied its usual outlet.

His wife turns away, and curls her fingers around Zero's wrist. "Please, look at me Zero," she pleads, stroking the skin.

Stoic mask in place, the Hunter obeys, twisting his body to face hers and sliding off Kaname's chest.

Kaname doesn't miss the weight. He doesn't.

"Are you hurt?" Yuuki continues, whole manner sincerely concerned.

"The entire lower half of my body is sore," Zero admits easily, which means Kaname and Yuuki did him too much damage to conceal, and he's probably in not-insignificant pain.

"Shouldn't Zero have healed by now?" Yuuki asks in concern, looking toward Kaname for answers.

"Shirabuki's poison may still be slowing his healing," the pureblood offers. A worrisome possibility, especially since Zero is currently accepting Hunting assignments. Or the Hunter's body could be prioritizing serious wounds over cosmetic injuries, shepherding its until-recently limited resources. No way to know without calling a doctor, which Kaname fully intends to do after the soiree.

Yuuki nods, and gathers up her hair. "Drink my blood, Zero. It should help."
For some reason, Zero freezes, then shakes his head violently to refuse.

"Zero, please - "

"No," he insists. "I don't need it."

"Zero-"

"I don't need it!" the Hunter insists more loudly, a wild look in his eyes.

A suspicion slots into place. Kaname lays a hand on Zero's shoulder, and the Hunter jerks at Kaname's touch, the whites of his eyes showing.

"I will not allow you to destroy yourself for the sake of denying your own nature." Kaname says, low and intent. "You swore to Yuuki. You will not starve yourself again in my house, Kiryuu Zero."

Zero's gaze darts between the two purebloods, and that frantic energy flows out of his frame. The Hunter sags down into the bed, dull misery in his eyes. "I'll feed," he agrees quietly.

While his Consort laps at his wife's neck, Kaname tries to sort himself out. He needs to be focused and clear-headed to salvage this situation. If things go badly this evening, all their efforts will go to waste. And Kaname doesn't want to ruin this experience for Yuuki...and Zero.

The Ancestor of the Kuran contemplates his feelings. Yuuki is his beloved, his dear girl, the treasure of his heart. He loves her more than anything, deep and dark and dangerous. His wife is his anchor to this world, the one person who keeps his despair and apathy at bay. She makes remaining in Sleep unthinkable. She makes him want to be a man worthy of her. Yuuki brings his gloomy world into sunlight.

Kaname's feelings may be confused, but Kaname is certain he doesn't feel the same depth of emotion for Zero, and that reassures him enough to restore his emotional equilibrium. Yes, he may be unexpectedly fond of Zero, but his love for Yuuki is unmatched. Yuuki remains his most important person, but Kaname can allow Zero to have significance, the pureblood decides. That would be acceptable.

Now, how can he convince Zero to relinquish whatever troubles him? Untwisting each thread of possibility, Kaname ponders in the silence as his husband finishes feeding. Yuuki is watching over Zero, but every now and then she'll glance over and study Kaname when she thinks he won't notice. Kaname can guess at what might be troubling her - his own behavior - but hopes he can make amends.

"Have most of your injuries healed?" Yuuki asks gently, cupping Zero's cheek as he looks up at her wide-eyed. Silently, the Hunter bobs his head. "Can you tell me what's wrong?" she asks, stroking his skin.

Zero closes his eyes. He looks exhausted, and he hasn't even begun the day. "Sorry. Last night was really nice. I didn't mean to freak out. Everything just seemed so permanent, all of a sudden."

"Permanent," Yuuki repeats, biting her lip. "Do you regret what we did?" she ventures tremulously.

"No. I don't regret giving myself to you," Zero replies immediately. Kaname can hear the truth in his words. "This felt like a good time for us - maybe not the perfect time, but there was a lot about last night I enjoyed. You didn't do anything wrong, Yuuki. My problems are personal."
The two purebloods digest this in silence.

"What did you mean by 'permanent'?” Kaname finally asks, both curious and needing more information.

Zero looks contemplative. "Real. Everything suddenly felt real. Sometimes I feel like the last year must be some kind of dream or nightmare, and someday I'll wake up and everything will be just the way it was. But I woke up this evening, and I could feel the evidence of my body, and I - I know I can't go back to how things were before, but sometimes - " Zero trails off.

"Do you want to?” Yuuki whispers, her head bent down to hide this glisten of her eyes. Her lips barely move as she says, "Would you rather go back to the way things were before?"

The Hunter doesn't answer at once. He breathes, and his spouses wait to hear what he decides.

"No," Zero finally says, voice tinged with surprise and wonder, "I don't think I do." He rolls on his back, and touches one pureblood, then the other gently with his fingertips. "I don't want to be anywhere else."

Kaname takes his husband's hand and kisses it, light as a butterfly's wing, gladness spilling over inside him.

Yuuki has tears in her eyes as she clutches Zero's other hand to her heart, and kisses his mouth with love's fervor. "I know there's a lot you don't enjoy about our life, but I'm happy to hear you say that."

Zero smiles in return, but not all the lines in his face have smoothed out.

Kaname takes a risk. "That's not everything that's troubling you, is it?” he prompts. Stirring up unneeded trouble, perhaps, but letting things fester might be worse.

Zero answers with wary stoicism, those lavender eyes studying him with a hint of suspicion. Kaname's sudden contrary behavior has damaged their newly-built trust.

While Kaname usually finds the novelty of being denied entertaining, this time he regrets the rift between them. Hoping to earn back Zero's regard, he continues, "I don't mean to pry. I ask because last night was...significant, for me also, and I want you to feel comfortable after our experience together."

Studying him a moment longer, Zero melts and yields, his body relaxing as his native sweet, trusting nature wins out. Kaname experiences the irrational impulse to gather those fragile limbs up and hide his boy from all the vampires who would take advantage.

The Hunter runs a hand through his hair, hiding his eyes for a moment. "I guess I wasn't as reconciled with my body as I thought."

Evasive and vague - Zero is learning well. Kaname leans over Zero, who's lying supine on his back, and lifts the hand hiding the Hunter's face so Kaname can look down into his husband's reluctant eyes. "Can you tell me what in particular upset you? Yuuki and I would hate to unwittingly trigger an episode next time we're enjoying one another."

"The usual." Zero's expression is ambivalent, and his gaze slides away from Kaname. "This body still doesn't feel like it completely belongs to me, but the vampire is perfectly at home. I had trouble accepting that."
Yuuki is looking between the two of them, allowing Kaname this chance to pry information out of Zero. She's learned the value of silence, and her sharp eyes are picking up the undercurrents in Zero's tension. She knows, as Kaname does, that Zero is withholding part of the truth.

"You don't have to feel fine all the time, Zero. And that's the only thing that distressed you?" Kaname coaxes, lowering his voice and tucking Zero's hair behind his ear.

His sweet boy stares up at him, unwilling to answer but equally reluctant to lie.

"Zero?" Yuuki entreats as she places a hand on his shoulder, adding her influence to overcome Zero's hesitation.

The Hunter swallows, shame overshadowing his features like a raincloud. "I'll tell you, if you want. Can we get closer first? I'm cold."

Kaname and Yuuki are more than willing to fulfill Zero's request; they edge closer, pulling up the duvet until all three of them are cocooned in warmth, wrapping their arms around Zero to keep him close. The tension in Zero's body ebbs, and his eyes flutter closed. "I like being in bed with other people," he murmurs. "I sleep so much better this way."

Yuuki nuzzles his shoulder, yawning herself. It's late afternoon, and both of them should still be asleep.

Reminding the pair about their interrupted discussion, Kaname says, "What did you have to tell us, Zero?"

All his ease evaporates, and Zero's breathing picks up. He twists - first one way, than another - as though trying to escape himself.

Kaname feels his brow furrow. Zero does not easily become this shaken.

Yuuki puts a hand out to still him; Zero stares at it, then meets her gaze. "Last night…" he begins, then loses confidence, or perhaps searches for the right words. "I acted differently last night, didn't I? After dinner, and then..." he trails off.

Kaname draws in a breath. Of course - Kaname lured those omega instincts to the surface. Zero may never have experienced them so strongly before, and Zero lived with a horror of being consumed by his vampire hungers. That horror was so strong he would have welcomed execution to stop himself from hurting others. Kaname avoided letting Zero realize the extent of the omega's influence for exactly that reason. If Zero fears the omega will control him…

Kaname needs to uproot this fear immediately - but dear Yuuki is one step ahead of him.

"Did you do anything you really, fundamentally didn't want to do?" she says, worry hiding beneath the matter-of-fact tone in her voice. Unsaid is her real fear - did we rape you?

Zero turns this over. "No, I don't think so," he allows, "but I know I wasn't myself."

Yuuki cocks her head to the side. "Was it your vampire?"

Grimacing, Zero says, "Yes, but different. I think it was my omega instincts. It made me lose control. I acted like a slut -"

"What makes you say that?" Kaname steps in as Yuuki opens her mouth to make a heated denial.
Zero flushes and glares. "I just - I wanted it so much. I begged. I displayed myself. I was shameless. Lewd."

"Is that a bad thing?" Kaname asks in his mildest tone.

"Yes! I wasn't in control - I did things under that influence I wouldn't consciously do -.

Kaname interrupts. "If you felt strongly that you didn't want to act, could you have stopped yourself?"

Zero stops short, and grows solemn. "I didn't - I don't remember struggling." His gaze turns inward, more analytical and detached, the Hunter training taking over. "The impulses were much weaker than Level E. If pushed I could probably resist it." Hearing the words aloud seems to reassure him, but then his gaze flickers to Yuuki. "Seeing me like that - do you think less of me?"

"Never. As long as you want and enjoy it too, I think it's fantastic. If you don't mind me saying so," she adds, cracking a smile, "last night you were insanely sexy."

Rather taken aback, Zero eyes Yuuki like he doubts her sanity and might need to flee at any moment.

Then Yuuki touches his wrist, losing her smile."Your vampire is part of you too. Zero. You accept the pureblood part of me and the human part. Can't I do the same? I love you no matter what. Every part of you."

"Thank you," Zero says, not entirely convinced but looking more at peace.

Zero inhales deeply, and the breath eddies in his lungs until his chest hurts. Then he releases the trapped air, and it flows out of him with a rush of relief. He's not cured - far from it - but his turmoil feels manageable again, dialed down to functional levels. He can get through tonight, he tells himself. He has too (Even though his stomach flips and twists when he remembers the remorseless scrutiny he'll endure).

Hunter practicality reasserts itself. Yuuki's blood was a blessing, burning reassuringly in his belly, but Zero is still going to be limping tonight without more assistance, if the sharp, full ache in his hips is any guide. He glares, taking refuge in anger when an unwise shift sends a pang shooting through his sore insides. "I better be able to walk this evening," he grumps.

Kuran gets a smug, gleeful air and doesn't even bother hiding his smirk. Even Yuuki looks sheepishly proud.

Zero's glare could melt steel. "Fix it, stupid pureblood."

"Of course," Kuran purrs, and disappears underneath the blanket.

Zero barely stops himself from shrieking when he feels hands touch his thighs, and a brunette head pops up. "What are you doing, you dirty old man?!" he demands.

"Helping," Kaname offers like butter wouldn't melt in his mouth.

"How!"

Kuran grins. "Pureblood saliva has healing properties, remember?"

"...you're going to lick me," Zero deadpans.
"Nowhere fun," the pureblood responds, like that makes it better. Zero gapes, then fumes, working himself into a good rage.

Kuran must take that as permission, because he disappears back down under the duvet. The wet catch of his tongue on Zero's thigh produces a flinch, quickly disguised for Yuuki's sake.

Kuran must feel it anyway, because the pureblood smooths a hand down Zero's hip. "Easy, sweet boy."

Zero's jaw tightens; Kuran has his palm on a mass of handprint-shaped bruises. Yuuki catches Zero's flinch this time, and frowns. "I'll help too," she says, and ducks down to join her husband.

Now there are two blanket covered lumps and Zero's thighs are spread as far as they can go. Increasingly bewildered, he watches his spouses wiggle around beneath their bedcovers, utterly undignified.

"Sorry," Yuuki's voice is muffled, but her remorse is easy to hear as she touches the dark marks left by pureblood strength.

Zero bops the lump he thinks is Yuuki's head. "Don't say dumb stuff. I don't mind a few bruises. Hunter, remember?"

She stops protesting and settles down into a reluctant silence. As they tend to him, both lapping wetly at his skin, Zero's aches are slowly soothed. He relaxes - and incredibly, feels a hot spark kindle in his stomach.

Now is obviously not the time; Zero cynically wonders what's wrong with him, that his body is physically interested even when he's twisted up inside. Lost in his dark thoughts, Zero realizes the soft wet touches have stopped. Even after a few moments, neither of his spouses move. What are they-?

"Are you sniffing my crotch?" the Hunter demands, his face burning.

A guilty shuffle under the blankets. "Zero smells really good like this," Yuuki's voice pipes up. Kuran makes a noise of agreement, and a nose shoves into the cotten of Zero's underwear, right in the center. Both of them sound drunkenly enthralled.

Zero wants to incinerate on the spot. "Bloody alphas."

"How do you feel?" Yuuki asks as Zero limps gingerly into the outer room of the master suite, returning from his own rooms. Yuuki and her alpha were a mess the entire time he was gone, and only Yuuki's knowledge that Zero won't appreciate the attention keeps her from fussing over him.

When he gets to an armchair, Zero stares at it for a moment, then sits down gingerly, careful with his lower half.

Her alpha feels immensely proud of how thoroughly they mounted mate; Yuuki can hear it congratulating itself in the back of her mind. She shoves it viciously down. Even for something like this, Yuuki hates hurting Zero.

And she was utterly terrified when she awoke to find Zero in that horrible state of agony. She's still worried Zero hasn't improved, just mastered hiding his hurt.

"I ache less," Zero replies, ignoring his mental wellbeing and answering the easier half of her
question. "The licking helped." Now he's blushing again with that angry, embarrassed look on his face that makes Yuuki want to eat him.

*Ravish mate again*, the alpha says. Yuuki sternly tells it off. Now is not an appropriate time. *We will ravish mate later*, it allows, undeterred.

"How are you today?" Zero asks, taking a slice of toast and distracting Yuuki from her battle of wills with her stupid instincts. The kitchen staff sent a massive breakfast this evening, conspicuously matching the newly-deflowered Consort's taste. Word travels fast in Rosehill.

"Good," Yuuki replies, playing nervously with the hem of her dress. She's already wearing her outfit for the soiree - all of them are leaving early to help Takuma finish preparing and discuss any last-minute changes to their strategy. Seated nearby, pretending not to be listening, Kaname is missing only his coat and vest, while Zero remains in his under robes to avoid any accidental damage to the elaborate outer layers of his costume. Tonight their aim is formal simplicity - it wouldn't do to outshine Takuma at his own celebration.

"You went back to sleep okay?" Zero continues, examining the jams. He probably feels guilty for waking her - that would be just like him.

"Yes," the pureblood chokes out, hoping he's too distracted to notice. It's true that she went back to sleep - eventually.

Seeing Zero laid out in front of her, all that creamy pale skin and sleek muscle, and then touching all the places she carnally marked, the proof of Zero's claiming, his wonderful smell - well, Yuuki was far too aroused to sleep. She lay awake until Zero dropped off, then snuck out of bed to jerk off in the bathroom of her little-used personal suite until Kaname, equally frustrated, joined her. Yuuki pushed him down on the floor, wrapped his hands around her cock, and rode him until they both fucked the edge off, three or four orgasms later. Pureblood stamina applied to a lot of things, it seemed.

"That's good," Zero responds sincerely, "I would hate to have kept you up."

"Mmmm," she agrees, feeling the tips of her ears redden.

"Can I ask you both something?" Zero says suddenly, putting aside the uneaten half of his toast.

"Is that all you're going to eat?" Yuuki says, eyeing Zero's unfinished meal, wise to Zero's bad habits and in the mood to spoil him.

"There will be food at the soiree," Zero counters, "I'll eat later."

"What did you want to ask?" Kaname interjects, proving he's been listening the whole time.

Zero jumps on the offered distraction. "It's personal. You don't need to answer if you don't want to."

Kaname and Yuuki exchange a look. "I'll answer anything," Yuuki volunteers, crossing her legs.

"It's just - do your instincts ever make you do things? Feel things?"

Yuuki blinks. "Well yeah, all the time. Dumb stuff, mostly."

Zero's answering blinks are slightly bewildered. "Like what."
Yuuki relaxes into the arm of her chair. "Well, just recently the alpha wanted to steal you - I mean kidnap you - and hide you away cause you do dangerous things all the time. I could come up with more if I thought about it, but it's pretty much all like that - embarrassing things I'd never want to say out loud. Mostly about sex," she adds. "My alpha adores you and thinks you're the hottest thing it's ever seen, so we get along pretty well."

"The omega's instincts didn't do much before now. Except make me violent," Zero shares.

"An alpha's instincts are naturally hyperactive in comparison. It's like reproductive drive personified," Kaname comments, scorn dripping from every syllable.

"Do yours make you do stuff?" Yuuki asks her husband curiously. They've never spoken about it before, but Kaname is always so much better at vampire things. Maybe Yuuki's alpha is just weird?

Kaname waves a hand, dismissing the subject. "I ignore the alpha entirely. Ridiculous foolishness not worth repeating."

Raising an eyebrow, Yuuki resolves to pry a better answer out of him later.

Obviously trying to distract her, Kaname quickly says, "Shall we give Zero our present now?"

Zero's skirts rustle as he sends Yuuki a questioning look, leaning over to put his teacup aside with a poorly hidden wince. "You didn't need to get me anything just because we - you know."

"I wanted to, whether or not anything happened," Yuuki replies honestly. "It was Kaname's idea, actually," she shares, darting a sneaky glance in her husband's direction.

Zero pauses, staring at an inscrutable Kaname whose face gives nothing away. "Really?"

"Yes," Yuuki confirms with relish, enjoying the chance to rat him out.

"It wasn't specifically for sex," Kaname argues. "Now was simply an opportune moment to reveal it publically."

"What is it?" Zero is clearly puzzled by the cryptic answers.

"Let me show you," Yuuki interjects. "Stay right there and don't move, okay?" She speeds into the bedroom, and returns with a large white cardboard box held shut with a velvet ribbon and wax crest. "Here," she says, holding the box out to Kaname. "You thought of it, you should give it to him."

"You needn't make such a production, Yuuki. It's a political gesture, nothing more," Kaname says as he accepts it, looking peeved at being caught doing something nice for Zero.

Yuuki holds in her laughter, and settles on the arm of Kaname's chair for a front row seat.

Breaking the wax seal in one swift motion, Kaname removes the lid to show the tissue paper underneath. It crinkles as Kaname folds it back, displaying the contents to Zero - a heavy omega's robe with rectangular, pendulous sleeves in the ancient formal style. Underneath the outer robe, Yuuki knows, is a matching sash and shawl. It's exactly the simple, masculine garment Zero favors, with panels of alternating black and white silk bordered in gold trim. Stamped on each breast and in the center of the robe's back is a gold kamon, the stylized round crest possessed by each noble family.

"It's beautiful, but I don't understand," Zero murmurs, touching the silk.
Kaname tries to explain the significance. "A noble family receives a *kamon* as a gift from their pureblood ancestor. It is a mark of rank, and deeply prized. Each one is unique - they're even kept in a registry. And this one," Kaname says, reaching out to trace the golden roundel, "belongs to you."

"To me?" Zero repeats, looking at the mark with new eyes.

"Yes," Yuuki confirms. "They have to be approved by the Council of Elders before being entered in the registry. Kaname pushed the approval through extra quickly with Takuma-kun's help. It means you are the equal of any noble, Zero. It's recognition of your place and your importance. It's a mark of legitimacy, and it will be inherited by our children. We'd like you to wear it and show it off tonight."

Zero's eyes are softer as he runs his hand over the seal. "A peony?" he says, tracing the petals.

"The mark of a purebred Hunter," Kaname agrees. "I thought it would be fitting."

"It's perfect." Zero's face shines as he smiles quietly at Kaname.

Kaname looks blinded; Yuuki feels like a cat eating cream. "Look at the trim," she urges, her face splitting into a smile of her own.


"Yes," Yuuki says, going to stand beside him and sliding her hands over his shoulders. "United. Everyone will see it. They'll know what it means."

God help anyone who disrespected Kiryu Zero.

"I can't wait until everyone realizes the Jeweled Court was presided over by a virgin," Kuran gloats. He has a glass of wine in hand and a predatory set in his shoulders. While Yuuki, escorted by Seiren, is off catching up with Souen, Kuran and Zero are visiting Takuma, who is still receiving guests in the atrium of the Ichijo estate.

Zero is not so sanguine. Hidden inside his sleeves, his hands clamp down around his wrists, but his impassive expression remains fixed on his face. So far, his telltale scent - mixed sex fluids, he's told, with a certain hint of tissue and blood - has garnered even more notice than they anticipated. Catching his smell, passing vampires have stopped short to stare; servants have tripped and fallen; guests have dropped plates and shattered glasses. The Hunter can feel eyes following him anywhere he goes, heads lift to sample his scent as he departs, and behind every hand darts whispers of his newest scandal. From the lowest servant to the highest lord, *everyone* knows the details of Zero's intimacy, and it shames him to parade that fact in front of vampire society's noses just to prove a point, to callously display himself even when he knows the purpose.

He's lost count of the times the Kurans have openly been congratulated for fucking him. Zero can feel the reminder every time he takes a step - in the ache that shoots through him, his omega's longing awareness of its emptiness, and the continual, strange, ticklish feeling of wetness oozing out.

Takuma watches the Hunter with knowing eyes, and mildly intercedes on Zero's behalf. "Perhaps we should let them come to that conclusion themselves, Kaname. We don't want to make Zero uncomfortable."
"That might be a little heavy-handed," Zero's husband allows, glancing at the Hunter before gesturing at the waiter for another full glass.

"I hope I didn't overwhelm you earlier," Takuma continues, placing a reassuring hand on Zero's arm.

Zero chuckles. "You were fine, Takuma-sempai. It's not you knowing that bothers me." When Takuma first laid eyes on Zero, he'd made a sound suspiciously like a squeal, and rushed over to inspect Zero for damage. When Zero laughed and smiled back at him, Takuma had engulfed him in a hug, ushered him over to be fed, and gently fished every last detail out of Yuuki's retelling, beaming like the sun throughout.

"Who are we missing?" Kuran asks, lowering his voice and swirling the dark liquid in his glass.

"Most of the Senate heavyweights," Takuma replies. "Noguchi and Abe from the Court. We aren't allowing messages to pass out of the estate, so they should have no warning of the situation here."

A slow smiles spreads over the pureblood's face, and he guides Zero back toward the sound of violins with a hand in the small of the Hunter's back; both the Kurans been touching Zero at every opportunity. Leaning down so his mouth graze's Zero's ear, Kuran murmurs. "Let's give you something to do. A test."

"What kind?" Zero replies cautiously, intrigued despite himself. Probably a sign of how badly he needs a distraction from his aches and thoughts.

Kuran smiles against his hair. "A test of your training, and how well you've learned to sort through stimuli. Open yourself to your extra sense. Limit your focus to those guests near you as we move through the crowd. Block out anything else. Drop out before you become overwhelmed. I will be here if you need me to ground you."

Swallowing, the Hunter debates his readiness. His control is far better, but they've never tried an environment as busy as this. And if Zero knows anything about how Kuran's twisted mind works, assessing his confidence is also part of the test. Damn pureblood knows Zero won't turn down a challenge from that irritating vintage vampire he's married to.

Zero hardly needs mushin any longer. Rather than wading slowly into deep water, now it's more like the rush of a clean dive, holding mushin for an instant, then slicing straight down with barely a ripple and sinking through the depths.

"Eyes open," Kuran reminds him.

Zero's eyes flicker open just as the world gains new dimensions, washing over him with that halo of awareness, existence suddenly taking on strange colors and forms. He wobbles; Kuran's hand on his back steadies him. "Thanks," Zero says absently. The new striations of pain his extra sense reveals and the bright chorus of his body's protests are fascinating.

"Zero," the pureblood's voice warns. Zero reminds himself not to get caught up in small sensations. There's a bigger picture that needs to occupy his attention.

Kuran wraps his arm around Zero's waist, pulling the Hunter flush against his husband's side. "I'll handle the conversation. Concentrate on processing what you sense, and controlling your expression."

Zero nods, and Kuran pulls him into the swirling crowd. Vampire vampire vampire, his Hunter senses shrill. Zero struggles to narrow his focus, just concentrate on the ones talking to Kuran, but
it's hard when feedback bursts from every side: 'someone's watching me,' 'malevolent attention' and audible fragments from dozens of shifting conversations.

Picking at any single thread from the coruscating maelstrom is difficult, keeps sliding out of his hands. Zero clings to the familiar instead - the distinct signature of the vampire carrying his weight, whose identity Zero would know anywhere.

Purebloods have a unique smell, Zero's discovered: cool, clean and deep. It reminds the Hunter of a fresh, crisp, heavy snow - the kind that blankets the earth in white and gathers in thick drifts. Yuuki is different, more like the clean mountain air above a glacier. Kuran's personal scent overlays it, something dry and woody from his cologne that makes Zero think of evergreen forests in winter. Balanced within his unearthly perception, Zero can almost taste Kuran's power, like the tang of icy steel.

"Consort Kiryuu," drawls a male voice.

Zero's power snaps tight, given an immediate threat to center on. "Abe-san," he replies neutrally, through a world like cut crystal. This was the confrontation he desired, the reason for tonight's soiree; confidence, he reminds himself.

The omega is not alone. Noguchi is watching shrewdly beside a sneering Abe, while Kaneko looms behind looking like she'd rather flee. Or perhaps Zero's sensing it? Difficult to unwind the telltale pattern when no cue is hidden before Zero's power.

Kuran's grip around his waist tightens, but Zero's perception gives him no clues. No one is harder to read then Zero's husband. Aura, heartbeat, breathing, posture, expression - his tells are so subtle, so well hidden Zero can barely catch them. A side effect of knowing the Ancestor of the Hunters and her powers, no doubt. For now, other than accepting their greetings Kuran seems content staying out of the confrontation.

Abe's voice rings over-sincere. "It's so good to see you, Consort. Especially looking so well." The noble's heart changes pace, and only settles when he finishes speaking. Odd.

"Thank you," Zero says, knowing full well Abe means the opposite of what he says. "Kaname and Yuuki are very considerate. Their care is the only reason I recovered so quickly from my injuries - and from more recent exertions too," he adds belatedly. No need to hide when they already know Zero finally took a cock.

While Abe wipes the pinched look off his face, Noguchi slides in. "How wonderful. The whole court will be pleased to hear you've taken up your duties." She's a picture of serenity, even when she's backhandedly implying - again - that Zero's been derelict in his duties by waiting to sleep with the Kurans. Her body's rhythms flutter as she speaks too, just like Abe.

Zero wants to frown, but keeps his face still through an act of will. He can sense so much now, and that mysterious intuition guides him well, but he often doesn't consciously understand what it means except in flashes of insight.

"And the kamon you've chosen for him is beautiful, Kuran-sama!" gushes Kaneko. Unlike the others, she stays constant in Zero's extrasensory perception. Truth, his gift whispers to him.

"Yes, I'm pleased with the outcome," Kuran demurs, and the hand around Zero's waist slides up to trace the outer circle of his new crest, resting right above his heart. Attuned to the omegas before him, Zero catches tiny shifts in their body language and expression as Kuran moves.
What is Kuran doing? First leading Zero straight to his toughest critics, and now being handsy in public? Trapped as he is before polite society, Zero can do nothing except carry on, keeping the conversation light and feeling his way forward. "It's good you could all attend. I know Takuma-sempai appreciates it. He's been so excited to share his news."

More tiny changes in the omegas before him; Zero catalogues tensing muscles and split second tightened eyes. Hold on - did those patterns mean jealousy? Earlier, when the Senate omegas repeated the same signals, had they been jealous of Zero? His gut instinct confirms the guess; Zero can feel the innate rightness of his conclusion, even if he doesn't understand their motivation.

Then Kuran nuzzles Zero's ear, and Zero reads even clearer the jealousy lurking in the three omegas before him. Intuition strikes like lightning.

They want his alpha.

A bolt of anger shears through him a moment later. Shoshana told him, didn't she? The power, the privilege, the proximity to sacred blood. Now that Zero's looking, he can see it everywhere in the faces of the vampires watching him - the cadence of their words, the curl of their mouths, the length of their glances.

Well, Kuran may be a shady, petty old bastard with more secrets than an entire government, but he's Zero's problem now. And damn them all if they think Zero's going to let anyone take Kuran away. They're his, Yuuki and Kaname both. He won't surrender them, not to these weaklings and toadies.

Now that he recognizes the sensation, Zero can feel the omega rear up, a miasma of aggression and possessiveness in his thoughts, and he embraces it, rides that dangerous edge. Hunter that he is, Zero pounces ruthlessly on the newly bared weakness.

Laying a hand atop Kuran's, Zero gives his most besotted smile to Abe and his allies. "I've been pretty, ah, 'occupied' with Kaname and Yuuki recently. You know how it is with newlyweds. So I'm glad I was able to be here and support Takuma-sempai tonight."

Abe looks like he swallowed a fly. Kaneko stinks of nervousness and desire, and Noguchi has a fixed, polite expression on her face.

"I really hope we'll be holding a celebration of our own soon. If our baby is close to Takuma's child in age they could play together," Zero continues brightly, relaxing into Kuran's embrace to lay it on as thickly as he can. Kuran willingly obliges, pulling Zero even closer. "Of course, it might be nice to have some time to ourselves too. For other things," he emphasizes, his tone implying heavily those things would happen naked and aroused.

Then Zero feigns concern. "Oh, Abe-san, you must be so embarrassed. I'm terribly sorry that you ended up in this position."

"What position," the dark-eyed omega grits out. Noguchi has a hand outstretched toward his shoulder to keep him from falling into Zero's trap - too late.

"Well," Zero points out, playing the wide-eyed innocent, "you said all those things in front of the Jeweled Court about my lovers. Now that everyone knows better, I'm worried you might look a little foolish. As leaders of the Court, we have to be careful about believing rumors, Abe-san. We wouldn't want to lead anyone astray."

Abe has gone purple with rage, and might possibly be on the edge of a stroke. Satisfied for the
night, Zero turns to Kuran and says, "Yuuki is expecting us to return soon."

Kuran nods sagaciously. "You're quite right. Allow me to escort you," he says, holding out his arm like a gallant storybook knight.

Zero barely keeps himself from snickering at the ill-matched image as he accepts. "Thank you, husband," he replies, using the title as one last swipe at the Senate omegas, and they sweep away.

That was the most satisfying thing Zero's done in ages. Kuran's eyes are lit with equal enjoyment; they share a secretive, triumphant glance.

Zero raises his chin and straightens his back as they move through the crowd, aware of the curious onlookers who will spread news of that confrontation and in the mood to show off. The omega wants to display its victory too, and ward off opportunistic rivals sniffing around the alphas it's deemed worthy.

For a moment, Zero considers suppressing the instinct - and then leaves it alone. For now, the two of them are in agreement, and his ability to identify the omega's influence reassures him. He will allow the instinct to function.

For now.

"I really do like the crest you chose," Zero remarks, fingers tightening possessively around his husband's arm. "Thank you again." It means a great deal to him, in truth. He's had to sacrifice so much to fit in. The peony kamon is an integral scrap of his Hunter identity and a symbol of his bloodline's greatest pride, transformed to fit his new status instead of being cast away or abandoned. Zero treasures the gesture; he touches the golden mark again now in affection.

"It's made quite an impression on the aristocracy. Pairing your bedding with awarding that crest has sent a powerful message."

"And what's that?" Zero asks as Yuuki comes into view, surrounded by Kuran's inner circle and a school of adoring nobles.

"You are ours now, in body and law." Suspended inside his power, Zero doesn't dare look too closely at the meaning beneath those words. But he senses the weight of Kuran's eyes anyway.

At the noise of struck crystal, the crowd begins to quiet, and Aido jumps and spills an entire flute of champagne down his front. The noble yelps, frantically looking around for nonexistent napkins. Finding none, he murmurs in Yuuki's general direction something about the toilet, and escapes quickly enough to pretend he doesn't hear Ruka's protests.

Conscious of her dignity, Yuuki tries not to giggle as Ruka mutters under her breath and the guests turn toward Takuma and Shoto, holding hands in the center of the room. Poor Aido. Let out of jail for one night, and he runs into more bad luck.

"We thank our esteemed guests for attending our gathering this evening," Shoto begins, bestowing a light inclination of his head to the crowd. "My Consort and I wish to make an announcement." The pureblood has a light, relaxed air as he gestures Takuma forward.

The blond omega wears a content smile that warms the heart of anyone who sees it. "We're happy to say that I conceived during my last heat." The crowd breaks into steady applause; Takuma is well-liked, and most of the guests are genuinely pleased to hear the official news of his pregnancy.
The blond holds up a hand, and the room gradually goes silent again. "We realize that holding a celebration for this announcement goes against tradition. But this is a special circumstance," he entreats, holding a hand to his belly. "Our child will be the first noble to have five pure blooded ancestors. You all know the significance of that achievement."

The guests cheer wildly. With fewer purebloods to provide an infusion of power, human blood has been creeping back into the vampire families. Adding Takuma's child and its extremely pure ancestry will help stem the erosion of the noble bloodlines. Quite literally, Takuma is helping guarantee the aristocracy's existence.

Out of the corner of her eye, Yuuki spots Zero pushing toward her with an urgent expression. Seeing its mate, her alpha settles, but Yuuki herself tenses. With sudden disquiet, she turns and begins moving toward him, keeping half her attention on the speech.

Now that the crowd is firmly on his side, Takuma smiles again. "Our child belongs just as much to the community as it does to us. That's why Isaya and I felt this is a landmark worth celebrating alongside all of you."

The guests begin cheering and clapping again. Zero draws close and seizes Yuuki's sleeve, yanking her closer. There is real alarm in his eyes; Yuuki feels dread well up in her belly. Beneath the noise of the crowd, the Hunter tries to speak. "She's here, Yuuki, I can sense her. We have to let Takuma-sempai know -"

"Congratulations, Takuma-kun." A sugary sweet voice cuts through the crowd, and Yuuki's stomach turns to ice.

Takuma stiffens for a half-second before his expression gentles back to contentment. "Thank you for coming, Shirabuki-san," he says through the dead silence, speaking as though the pureblood intruder was an invited, welcomed guest.

The nobles melt away, trained never to obstruct the path of a pureblood, and Shirabuki's deceptively angelic form comes into view. She cocks her head to the side, a gleam of malice in her eyes, and her blonde curls spill over her shoulder. "Really? I didn't receive an invitation."

"I'm always happy to host one of my own rank," Shoto steps in, saving Takuma from an answer. The elder pureblood moves forward, putting his Consort behind his shoulder. "Please excuse the oversight, Shirabuki-san."

Shirabuki gives her soft, girlish giggle. "My misunderstanding entirely, Shoto-san." She gestures toward their audience. The nobles know something dangerous is going on, and remain frozen, watching the struggle play out. "Please don't stop on my account. I'm just here to have a nice evening out."

Slowly, the party picks up again; the orchestra begins to play, and guests go back to their conversations.

"Seiren," Kaname orders tersely, and his Shadow disappears, obeying the implied order to monitor Shirabuki Sara. The inner circle exchange looks, even sleepy Shiki and expressionless Rima.

"Go mingle. Stay in pairs. Report if you see anything," Kaname raps out, calculating the new playing field.

"Aido is in the toilet," Kain says.

"Find him first," her husband amends without losing a beat. "And take Ruka. Report back so I
know you've joined up."

As Kain and Ruka hurry away, Kaname turns toward Yuuki. "You and Zero will remain together, within sight of the Hunter monitors. I want someone who Shirabuki cannot influence with their eyes on you."

"You think that will be necessary?" Yuuki murmurs, feeling a chill.

"I can feel several of her familiars in the area," Zero says quietly.

Yuuki angrily stews over this as Kaname leaves to find Takuma. What is that woman doing here? What does she want? Even with Kaname saying a word, Yuuki knows their carefully managed evening is in shambles. She bites her lip in frustration. Now everyone will be talking about power struggles between the purebloods or Shirabuki's continued interest in Takuma instead of the news they wanted rumors to focus on. Zero's revelation will spread, certainly, but it will be competing for attention.

Yuuki feels a hand enfold hers, and she tries to clear her mind. She's so frustrated! Zero pushed himself so hard for this, and now it didn't even work!

"Hey," Zero says, voice soft.

Yuuki looks up, and he's smiling that small, private smile. "I'm not sorry I did any of this, even if it didn't turn out like we expected. I'm glad we could finally be together."

Like Zero probably intended, Yuuki smiles, her spirits immediately lifted. "If you liked it, maybe we could do it again sometime?" she teases.

Zero's nose wrinkles. "Kuran is responsible for teaching you this, I just know it."

Yuuki makes her saddest face, and the Hunter rolls his eyes. "Fine, but let me recover a bit first if you're going to be so enthusiastic."

Yuuki laughs, and the leftover apprehension leaves. With her emotions settled, Yuuki goes back to her pureblood princess role, acting the political performance she needs. Ruka comes back with Kain and Aido in tow and mingles for a little while before wandering off. Yuuki keeps a hand on Zero the whole time, conscious of the threat circling the ballroom. But nothing happens, and the trouble seems to have passed. Yuuki begins to imagine they might escape further chaos.

Then Zero's head whips around, and Yuuki knows trouble's come to meet them instead.

"How are you this evening, Yuuki-chan? Enjoying yourself?" Shirabuki inquires with a sparkle in her eye. She's enjoying herself, knowing she's disrupted the party.

Yuuki puts on her best pureblood air, and regally inclines her head. "Very much, Shirabuki-san. Takuma has thrown a lovely soiree."

A spark of anger lights in the blonde's eye. "Yes, although Shoto's guest list leaves something to be desired."

Yuuki says nothing, though Zero tenses beside her.

Shirabuki shakes off her ire, again acting the sweet, solicitous sempai. "I wanted to see you, Yuuki-san. You and I haven't gotten together recently - I hope I haven't done anything to offend you?"
"Of course not," Yuuki lies. "I've been busy."

Shirabuki waves a beringed hand; her fingers are tipped in soft pink polish, matching the cherry blossoms on her lacy white dress. "Entirely understandable. You've been taking care of Zero-kun - that's terribly important!"

Making a vague noise of agreement, Yuuki grips Zero tighter out of Shirabuki's sight.

Malice tints the blonde pureblood's smile. "It's a good thing I didn't fuck him when I had the chance, isn't it?"

Yuuki's lips tighten. Her alpha roars, clawing and biting; she keeps her composure only by a hair.

"What chance was that?" Zero comments in a bored tone. "I seem to remember having my gun shoved in your gut."

Shirabuki's wrath burns through her mask. "Do not push me, little D. I no longer require your cooperation."

"Do not threaten my Consort, Shirabuki Sara," Yuuki says hotly, "You are being ill-mannered."

The blonde regains her mask, back to smiling tranquility. "Of course, Yuuki-chan. How silly of me! Actually, I was about to leave. Would you mind passing on a message to darling Kaname-kun for me?"

Yuuki isn't bothered when Shirabuki uses her familiar name without permission, but every time the woman uses that suffix for Kaname she hates the disrespect it implies. "I'd be happy to pass a message to my husband."

Shirabuki smiles. "Remind Kaname that he isn't as smart as he thinks he is. He's brilliant, but I'm the one with more experience in these matters. I just thought it might make him feel better."

Waving a hand, Shirabuki laughs as she leaves. Over her shoulder she calls, "Nice to see you, Yuuki-chan, Zero-kun!"

"Did she seem desperate to you?" Zero whispers in her ear.


"As if she was in a rush," Zero clarifies.

Yuuki just shakes her head, feeling the gathering cloud of misfortune.

Casting his mobile onto the bedside table, Kaname rubs his eyes. He's taken every possible precaution, but purebloods are fiendishly difficult opponents to guard against. There are too many weak points when your enemy is an immortal with infinite potential power, and Shirabuki's preferred strategies are especially insidious. Whatever she's done, Kaname will need simple quickness to counter it.

"Can one of you help me?"

There's Zero, silhouetted in the light of their bathroom and looking adorably unsure, wrapped neck to knees in a white cotton towel - and just like that, the erection Kaname's been struggling to suppress all evening breaks free with a spasm of raw need.
Knowing Zero was wandering around that fancy party, leaking Kaname's seed while his scent shouted to every greedy vampire present how Kaname was the first to mark those untouched walls, fill that virgin womb -

Kaname has to close his eyes against the force of his lust, sinking liquid into his bones. "What do you need, Zero?" he asks, opening his eyes once he has a measure of restraint.

Yuuki sends him a shrewd glance. Zero's nose is poor, but she can smell the smothering lust he's giving off - just as he can scent Yuuki's answering arousal.

Zero looks mortified. "I can't - I need to clean up you-know-where, but I still can't touch myself. Can you - I mean, can you..." Trailing off, Zero looks like he wants to flee.

Across the room in a blink, Kaname soothes him, one hand on his shoulder. "Zero, I hope you realize what you're asking. If I get my fingers inside you, precious, this won't stop until you're bouncing on my lap."

"Oh," Zero says faintly, once more the panicked innocent. "I, um…"

Then Kaname's nose twitches. "You're getting wet," he rumbles, delighted, and catches Zero's jaw so his husband can't look away.

Zero is slowly going red, his throat working as he tries to swallow.

"You are," Yuuki marvels, stalking closer.

"We left so much inside you. Have you been a good boy and kept our come right where it belongs?" Kaname inquires, tipping his Consort's chin up.

Yuuki makes a hungry noise, running her fingers down Zero's arm. "Did you think about how we put it there?"

The Hunter finds his voice, glaring from one starving predator to the other. "Damn you, Kuran Kaname, for teaching me to want. I - I feel - the omega part of me feels so empty. Like there's a deep place inside me that wants to be full. And I didn't even know it until you -"

"Decide what you want," Kaname rasps, his thumb rubbing curved bone while his other hand grasps Zero's towel.

"I'm not confident enough to have sex again," Zero admits in a moment of candor. Then he casts a heated glance at Yuuki, and watches Kaname through his eyelashes. "But I want to be a dutiful Consort and serve my husband and wife properly."

"Counter offer," Kaname purrs. "I finger your filthy, messy little pussy as our seed drips down your thighs until you scream and cream yourself all over my hand. Then we'll clean you up and you'll help us mark your skin anew with our come."

Zero chokes, but the scent of his arousal grows heavier and his towel slips through loosened fingers.

Snatching away the flimsy barrier, Yuuki growls triumphantly. "Could you tell, Zero? Everyone lusted over you tonight, envied us the chance to have a virgin omega. They wished you were theirs, but they can't have you. You're ours, and tonight all those alphas could smell who made love to you. I want you covered in my scent, Zero. I'm not going to stop until your whole body screams how much you're mine," she promises, already fisting her cock.
Kaname sneaks his hand up Zero's thigh, enjoying the shiver as he sinks two fingers inside hot, slick heaven. Briefly, he mourns that his cock will not taste the same satisfaction, but not for long. Running the pads of his fingers along Zero's sleek insides, Kaname crooks his fingers.

The Hunter gasps and whines, his legs opening wider. Kaname uses the opportunity to sink his fingers even deeper, and Yuuki steals the resulting pleased cry with a kiss.

"I have to keep you nice and loose for my cock," Kaname explains gently, ruthlessly stimulating Zero's sensitive walls. "Your body will heal until you're tight as a virgin if you don't practice."

Catching Zero's utter, horrified shock, Kaname muses, "I admit, that might be an enjoyable game, but I doubt I could resist your pretty pink hole long enough for it feel real."

Rocking back against Kaname's fingers, a wet-eyed Zero makes a high noise.

"Exactly," Kaname groans, wrapping his other hand around his neglected cock. "Such a good, sweet boy for me…"

The phone calls start coming around five p.m. Kaname gets out of bed to take the first few, trying to avoid waking Yuuki and Zero, but soon they come too swiftly to bother.

"There's been a major incident at the business offices. Someone has publicly released our secrets," he explains as they dress. "Client lists, personal information, long term expansion plans, patent details, algorithms - all highly sensitive, critical data. Stock prices have collapsed, our competitors have enough information to steal our markets, and we're fielding fierce public relations backlash."

"How?"

"We believed it was a digital attack at first, but our experts have found no trace. I maintain a human staff specifically to prevent another pureblood using their power of command to damage our business interests, but money and fear are universal motivators." Unspoken is the likely culprit of this disaster.

"How bad is it?" Yuuki asks.

"Our financial losses will number in the billions, but we will eventually recover, given a half a century or so."

Yuuki feels the same ice from last night chill her bones. The money is nothing, but the scale...

Around eight, Zero's phone rings. As he listens, his face loses color, and when he hangs up, Zero stares at the ceiling for a moment, gathering himself. "Six Hunters are dead. Ambushed earlier this evening clearing a Level E nest. Right now the Association believes an entire rural village is either dead or Turned."

He looks at Yuuki with that steely Hunter stoicism. "I've been called in. This needs to be handled immediately, before it grows. An incident this huge risks our secrecy."

"You're going, aren't you," Yuuki states, the words not really a question.

"They believe this isn't the only outbreak," Zero says simply, beginning to dress in his Hunter gear.

"This is Shirabuki's doing, isn't it." Yuuki's anger boils high as she finally speaks the words. Last
night's taunt was nothing less than a declaration of war.

"Yes," Kaname replies. "This has all her hallmarks. Manipulate and persuade to gain an advantage. Then cause so much simultaneous chaos we're forced to divide our strength to contain the damage."

Reasoning through what she knows of purebloods, Yuuki says slowly, "She's going to go after one of us, isn't she?"

Kaname pauses. "That is also my guess. Something must have happened to accelerate her timetable. This gambit is hasty and ill-planned, too direct - almost transparent by her normal standards."

"Gives us more openings for traps of our own," mutters Zero, crossing his arms.

"Zero will be vulnerable when he goes Hunting. We can't let him go alone," Yuuki argues.

"Which is why you'll be going with him," Kaname responds. "I'll send Nightshade as well. The balance of power between the three of you is close, and the eldest vampire has the advantage. Separated, Shirabuki could overcome each of you individually. But together you could drive her off, perhaps even harm her. She won't risk that."

"Hold on," Zero says. "I need to go, but there's no reason Yuuki should risk herself."

"Hey!" The pureblood pokes his chest. "Weren't you listening, dummy? I'm not letting slimy spider woman get her hands on you again. That's my job."

Zero holds up his hands in surrender and goes back to packing.

"Wait," Yuuki protests, "what about you, Kaname? If Zero goes with me, you'll be on your own," Kaname laughs darkly. "Precisely. I doubt she'll dare, but if she does -"

"Accidents happen," Yuuki cuts him off. "You need backup."

"An overconfident, spiteful child is no match for me. But I will take Seiren if it eases your mind."

"And one of my familiars," she counters, narrowing her eyes.

"Seiren and a familiar," Kaname agrees.

"You're awful relaxed while your business empire lies in ruins," Zero comments, sighting down the blade of a sharpened knife and sliding it into a concealed sheath.

"Trust and reputation are things that once broken, you do not easily regain. I am extremely unhappy, make no mistake." Kaname's low, dangerous timbre leaves no doubt of that. "But my anger is reserved for Shirabuki herself."

"Ah," Zero says, clearly thinking bloodthirsty thoughts himself.

Kaname chuckles. "We're not personally in financial danger, if that's what you meant. The Kuran fortune vastly predates this hiccup. I built much of the business within the last thirty years, and I can amuse myself doing it again."

But Kaname shouldn't have to, Yuuki thinks silently. This is all Shirabuki's fault. But this is about more than just corporate sabotage. This is only the beginning. Shirabuki wants her political rivals..."
out of the way, and to do that she'll strike at the heart of everything they've built. She nearly killed Zero once. That can never happen again. Yuuki renews her silent promise to neutralize her enemy, but she knows her power may not prove equal to the task.

"Are you ready to go, Yuuki?" Zero asks, doing one last check of his equipment and buttoning up his pale Hunting coat.

"Yeah," she replies, looking at Kaname.

"I will be fine," he assures, coming up to kiss her. "I'm more worried about you, my dear."

Yuuki kisses him back desperately, squeezing him with a hug. "I just don't want to lose either of you." Her heart hums like a bird's wings. All of them understand they're walking a dangerous path.

"Let's go," Yuuki says, pushing open the door. Her boys follow along behind her.

A howl echoes over the treetops, coming from the edge of the village. Zero bolts, plowing through snow churned to mud. The lead Hunter lets him go without a word; now only the dead reside here, ash and corpses both.

"Nightshade!" Zero shouts, bloody and filthy and freezing.

Kuran's wolf howls again, and Zero haphazardly slips into mushin, goes deeper, tracking the sound with the radiant awareness it gifts. The dark wolf is pacing before a tiny house whose aged wood shows the roots of its age, but Zero's swift probe reveals nothing inside. Trusting Nightshade's call, Zero pushes the door open wide enough for his wolf to enter.

Nightshade leads him to a kitchen table. On that table is a lonely mobile phone.

Zero stares at it for a long time. The horror of recognition is too much. Nightshade whimpers, nudging the phone with his nose.

His hand hovers over the plastic, then snatches it up and cradles it to his chest. Struggling not to vomit, Zero strains and reaches out with his senses, imagines he can taste smell hear an echo of bright presence.

"She would never have willingly left me alone," he whispers, closing his eyes in pain. Please, he begs whatever deities exist, let Yuuki be safe.

Zero reopens his eyes, looks down at the unnaturally intelligent gaze watching him. "Hurry up, Kaname."

They have a war to wage.

Chapter End Notes

Nothing terrible has happened to my characters lately, I said to myself. I should fix that.
I would have written a more lengthy sex scene, but I thought the mood whiplash was a bit too mean even for me.

ETA on next chapter still unknown right now. Fun fact: most of this chapter was handwritten on smuggled notebook paper.
Hello again! I've missed you all. Here is the new chapter for your enjoyment.

I have assumed that the Kuran business interests are similar to a conglomerate - one large parent company with many diversified branches and brands under its supervision. For perspective on Shirabuki's sabotage last chapter, to have a company considered 'large' by the stock market, it needs to have over 10 billion USD worth of market value. So a company can lose several billion dollars in value and still be worth a great deal, even heavily damaged.

If you're having trouble imagining Zero's kamon, there are a bunch of examples on wikipedia if you search the term.

"How could you let her go!" Kaname roars with his hands balled into fists.

"Don't you think I'm asking myself the same question!" Kiryuu shouts back, agony in every syllable.

Kaname lowers his voice, mindful of the Hunters loitering outside the house they've borrowed for their 'discussion.' Only feeling his wife through their bloodbond, the steady, undisturbed pulse of her life, is keeping him sane. "Explain the facts to me," the pureblood snaps, tone still dangerous.

Kiryuu lowers his eyes, tightens his crossed arms. "After we cleared the village, Lead Hunter Albrecht called me away to report. Yuuki was helping with the survivors, and we were close enough to see each other. We were both inside the Hunter defenses. We thought it would be fine. But-" He chokes, tries again. "But about ten minutes later, Yuuki was gone, moving too fast for me to follow. I found her phone inside a house, and I just knew -" the Hunter breaks off, ducking his head, a catch in his voice.

"And?" Kaname replies coldly, tucking his hands behind his back and turning away.

"One of the apprentices saw Yuuki speaking with a human girl just before she left. But when we questioned the other survivors, none of them recognized the girl's description," Kiryuu says, still staring at the floor. "We can't find the girl anymore. She must have slipped away after that."

Closing his eyes, Kaname pinches the bridge of his nose, cursing himself and Kiryuu's foolish, predictable nobility, easy meat for anyone ruthless enough to exploit it. "Shirabuki hid her servant among the real survivors, trusting that the Hunters - and you - wouldn't suspect a human. The servant was meant to contact Yuuki, which she did. There was no sign of a struggle?"

"No," Kiryuu admits, looking defeated. "I don't know why, but Yuuki seems to have willingly left."

The old, ancient madness - the darkness the Ancestor of the Kuran chose Sleep to escape - is
creeping in, eating at the edges of Kaname's vision. Desperately, the pureblood cleaves to his anger. Anything to fill the void that Yuuki's presence keeps at bay. "It's not difficult to surmise," he says scornfully, "There's only thing that would move her so effortlessly - threatening you."

Kiryuu's head snaps like he's been struck, and he watches Kaname through pain-bright eyes. "What," he says quietly, voice paper thin.

Kaname's chest aches in shared pain. But his voice is steel-hard when he says, "You heard me. Yuuki left because Shirabuki threatened you."

"Why would Yuuki believe her?" Kiryuu asks desperately. "You said together we'd be able to hold her off."

"Yuuki has always been irrational when it comes to you," Kaname replies, lifting his shoulders in a shrug as he feels his empty despair crawl up his spine, constrict around his heart.

A ripple unfolds in his consciousness, and the pureblood traces the link to his familiar. Watching briefly through the wolf's eyes, he slides back to his own skin and says, "Nightshade has found a body."

Kiryuu blanches - then relief sinks in as he realizes it can't be Yuuki, otherwise there would be no corpse.

Grabbing Kiryuu by the arm, Kaname pulls him to the door, choosing to focus on action rather than his gnawing demons, the spectre of loss at his shoulder. Once outside, Kaname ignores the dozen or so Hunters clustered protectively nearby, all of whom are sending him speculative glares. If anyone is going to stab him, Kiryuu has first rights.

Nightshade has found the girl spy's remains in a clearing a few minutes' run from the Hunter temporary headquarters. There is not a mark on the corpse - for all Kaname can tell she just dropped dead. But the girl's face is twisted in agony, and the ground around her is torn by thrashing feet and hands. Cooling blood leaks from her nose and eyes, and white foam flecks her lips.

The culprit is no mystery. Kaname's lip curls in disgust - Shirabuki and her poisons. Did the spy die simply because she knew too much, or was the girl's death part of something more profound? No way to know. Even more troubling, Nightshade found the body by tracking Yuuki's scent. Their wife was here not long ago, and by the overlapping scent trails, she was here at the same time as the girl. Was the spy alive or dead by then? Fighting his growing fear, Kaname says none of that in front of the Hunters as he argues futilely for control of the autopsy, all the while giving Kiryuu silence and indifference.

"Can you find her?" Kiryuu ventures when the Hunters and the corpse are gone. "With your blood bond. Yuuki said she could do that."

Kaname pauses, his back to his Consort. "I can. She is somewhere west of us, growing further away. The feeling is faint; she is blocking me as hard as she can."

Kiryuu is silent. "Can you tell if she's alright?" The words are hushed, nearly inaudible.

"I am blood bonded to her. I will know the instant she dies. The rest.." Kaname does not want to believe Yuuki could be hurt and her pain go unnoticed, that she could bleed while he felt nothing. The idea of his dear girl injured, and himself ignorant - no.

"Perhaps if she were injured too badly to hide any longer..." The pureblood cuts himself off. Truly,
Kaname doesn't know. Distance dims the bond's impressions, and it's not as though he's experienced this before.

Then Kiryuu's phone rings.

Both of them freeze. The timing is too much of a coincidence, and only a handful of people have Kiryuu Zero's personal number.

Kaname twists, whirling to face the Hunter. Holding the phone in his hand, Kiryuu is staring at it like a poisonous scorpion. Kaname takes him by the wrist, tilting the screen to see: unknown number.

"Answer it," the pureblood orders. The ground under his feet feels unsteady. There is no leverage he possesses over Shirabuki that can equal Yuuki's life.

Kiryuu's hands are shaking as he stabs the button to answer, lifts it to his ear.

With his vampire senses, Kaname can hear perfectly the weighted silence on the other end of the line.

"Hi Zero."

The tension relaxes a fraction; Kaname briefly closes his eyes. She's alive. Praise Mother Night, she's alive.

"Sorry about leaving you so suddenly." Yuuki's voice has a curiously restrained cadence, a measured quality absent from her usual speech.


"I'm going to be gone for a while. You and Kaname take care of each other while I'm away, okay?" The formal air of her pureblood persona, with an undertone of strain. Kaname drives his nails into his palm. Shirabuki is nearby.

"Yuuki, you need to tell me where you are so we can come get you," Zero begs.

Yuuki hesitates. A rustle of cloth in the background. "I'm going with Shirabuki-san. She reminded me the other day that I haven't visited lately. I'll be staying with her, so don't come get me. Okay?"

"Yuuki, please-"

"Promise! Promise me that you won't come find me unless I ask. Kaname too. Swear it to me."

"Yuuki…"

"Please. Please Zero, give me this. I wouldn't ask if it weren't important."

Zero looks at Kaname with wide, helpless eyes. Kaname has nothing to offer him. Yuuki can be as selfless as Zero for those she loves. She would only ask this promise if she believed it would protect them.

"I swear," Kaname says past the ashen taste in his mouth. For now, he will trust Yuuki.

Zero's breath hisses out of him. Defeated, he hangs his head, nodding once before he realizes Yuuki can't see him. "I promise." The words are faint as the wind.
"Thank you," Yuuki says, her relief palpable. "I need to go. I love you both."

"Yuuki!" Zero protests sharply, but the line goes dead.

Kaname spends one long moment wrangling the impulse to burn through everything between himself and Yuuki, then turns on his heel. "Home," he says tonelessly.

"We're not really going to let this happen, are we?" Kiryuu demands, scrambling along behind.

Kaname grits his teeth. "For now, Yuuki knows more than we do. We will wait."

"We cannot just-"

Kaname rounds savagely. "Do you not understand? We are not 'letting' anything happen. Yuuki is Shirabuki's hostage! If we disobey, Yuuki will pay the price. Shirabuki holds our strings, you fool, and we dance to her tune until we can find a way free."

"So we're helpless."

How bitter a truth. "For now."

"You did well, Yuuki-chan. I'm so glad we get to spend time together! You're far more pleasant company compared to your brother, precocious as he is."

Shirabuki means that Yuuki is easier to control. Safer. No threat. Careful of the winds battering Shirabuki's opulent private plane, Yuuki swallows her resentment and sets her china cup down with a clink. "Thank you, Shirabuki-san."

The blond pureblood smiles behind her own cup. "Hopefully your husbands will follow your request. It would be a shame if I had to hurt you."

Behind her smooth mask, Yuuki shakes with anger and disbelief. She hates being used against them as a bargaining chip, but she has no choice. Mindful that more fates than her own depend on her behavior, she chooses each word carefully. "Was it necessary to kill the girl, Shirabuki-san?"

The blonde tosses her head. "Naturally. Would you be so compliant now without the demonstration?" A sweet smile lifts her lips. "Now you can imagine it vividly, in perfect clarity - the exact expression on Zero-kun's face as he dies the same way."

Yuuki nearly throws up, because she can see it in her mind, the agony and violence, Zero's shaking hand reaching up for help as his lilac eyes go dark. She controls her gorge by shutting her eyes tight until the spasm passes, and thinking as hard as she can about the three of them playing in a glowing sea.

Shirabuki's eyes have a satisfied glint as she snaps her fingers and a level D servant comes to refresh the tea. "See? But as long as you do as I say, the poison in his blood will stay dormant, and darling Zero will live."

Yuuki knows the minefield she's picking her way through. The risk she's taking by putting herself into her enemy's hands. But if she wants to save the life they've built, the only way out is to discover what Shirabuki's done. Every poison has an antidote, and Yuuki has wagered that she can find the one she needs if she stays beside Shirabuki Sara.

But god does the weight of another life in her hands terrify her.
Yuuki is gone: the words echo unceasingly in the back of Kaname's mind, filling the silence between heartbeats. Yuuki is gone.

(People who leave Kaname never come back.)

The pureblood clutches the metal of his fork, collecting himself only when Kiryuu sends a wary look across the dining table.

Dinner has been conducted in complete silence. Rosehill's servants must have sensed their twin dark moods; even Steward Inukai didn't protest when Kiryuu sat down in his stained, filthy hunting clothes to eat. This is nothing more than a facsimile of normality, and Kaname participated only out of habit.

"Kaname?"

"What is it," he replies with disinterest. The pureblood puts his fork down. He has no appetite, and his body requires only blood to function. A meal is unnecessary distraction.

"I was wondering where I should sleep tonight." The boy's voice is even, but uncertainty lurks beneath.

Kaname pushes his chair back, rises without looking at his dining companion. "Yuuki is not here. Your presence is unnecessary."

"I see," his Consort replies as the pureblood strides away.

(There is a twinge in Kaname's chest. He ignores it.)

His dark mood settles around his shoulders, weighing him down. Kaname heads for his study, refusing to face the master suite and its happy memories with this spectre of loss biting at his heels.

With the study door safely closed, Kaname pours himself a glass of the strongest drink he has - a pitiful, futile effort at numbness - and holds his head in his hands, grinding the heels of his palms into his eyes.

What a costly failure. *Costly?* Kaname gives a hollow laugh. There is no word strong enough to describe his defeat. His beloved Yuuki is gone. He's lost his heart, his north star, his one driving purpose. Cut loose from his center of existence, the pureblood feels adrift in his burgeoning despair, familiar black demons coiling round his brain.

Kaname can already see the changes in himself - the creeping apathy, the desperation, the aimlessness. He relies completely on Yuuki for his emotional sanity. It is monstrously unfair to demand so much of another living person, but when has Kaname not been monstrous?

(He feels more like the Ancestor of the Kuran than he has in years.)

He should be planning his next move, advancing some plot to return Yuuki to his side and regain the upper hand. Instead, Kaname can only sit crushed beneath his dark thoughts, the memories of previous losses - the Ancestress of the Hunters, Haruka and Juuri, so many more - and listen to that haunting whisper: *Yuuki is gone.*

Running his hands through his already disheveled hair, Kaname tears off his coat, throws it to the side, begins to pace. Trying to anchor himself, he turns his thoughts aside - but each time they creep back, and he wonders - fears - what Yuuki is enduring right now, what Shirabuki has done to
her. Kaname knows how a mind can be broken without taking a life, and he knows the reach of Shirabuki's depravity. The images torment him - Yuuki bleeding, Yuuki empty and hollow, Yuuki slowly falling to dust...

No use. Kaname sags against the side of his desk, fighting the itching urge towards some desperate madness - Kaname has no limits when it comes to those close to him. War and destruction are nothing. No price is too high to pay.

But Yuuki wouldn't like it, he reminds himself, sinking down on the chaise. Both of them would look a him with disappointed eyes.

Kaname lies there listlessly, letting his thoughts drift. The bloodbond pulls endlessly west. Time passes. But something is pricking at Kaname's mind, pulling him back, tying him to the present, refusing to cast everything loose.

...both of them?

**Zero.** Kaname straightens, tenses. Where is Zero right now?

The Consort's suite, he realizes, flashing back to his careless words at dinner. It's late - the servants will have retired for the morning, leaving Zero alone by himself. Panic bubbles up, cracking through his apathy. Kaname did not post any extra guards - he didn't even leave Nightshade - and Zero is exhausted and asleep, an easy target if Shirabuki sends an assassin.

Now Kaname's mind is full of Zero's death, Zero's pain in a thousand variations, a kaleidoscope of thorns. He swallows the hot, frenzied feelings, to no avail. His mind is spilling over, churning out infinite scenarios where Kaname loses his husband, each one skewering through his heart.

A torrent of longing strikes him, leaving behind a deep ache. The alpha howls; more terrifying, his pureblood nature *hungered.* (The blood of a beloved is the most satisfying taste of all. Yet Kaname's hunger arises from even greater depths.)

Kaname is tired of making the same mistakes. The people he loves always pay the price. And he is tired of being alone.

*Go to him,* his darkness whispers. *He is essential to us.* There's still time. He's not too late.

Kaname finds himself on his feet. He sways forward, takes a first step. Freezes.

Pride and denial war with need and *something else.* Something he dares not name. His hands clench, and his eyes burn red.

In the end, the choice is easy. Kaname does not want Zero to die. That makes it simple, straightforward even. Focus on the present. Ignore the complicated parts. Don't think. Don't examine things too closely. If it has no name, is isn't real.

Kaname runs. Wringing every drop of speed from his frame, he blurs through hallways brightening with morning light, skirting the thin shadows. His pulse jumps; his heart lodges in his throat. His steps tap out a rapid tattoo in time with winter birdsong.

Doubt assails him. A corner of Kaname's logical mind is still stranded back in his study, wondering what he's doing - but the greater part is reminding him that the weight crushing his lungs is imaginary, and seeing Zero will make this terrible pressure go away, all the while frantically calculating the chances some disaster has taken Zero away.
Heedless in his need to prove Zero alive, the pureblood bends his enhanced senses to the task, searching for a heartbeat, a breath, anything. There! Soft rustlings, then a gasp. Alive.

Alive, and caught in the grip of a nightmare, tossing beneath the covers and groaning softly. But instead of soothing Kaname's ardour, each soft inhale and exhale only fans the flames of his desperation to see and touch his husband.

Like a man possessed, Kaname's strength crushes handprints into the door handle as he flings open the Consort's Suite with a crash. The splintered, twisted ruin lodges in the wall, but Kaname has already whirled away. The atrium, then the outer rooms flash past, but Kaname's attention is bent wholly on the precious occupant of the bedroom, hidden away in the rear.

Tearing the bedroom door from its hinges - he's forgotten how to use the handle when he can hear his Zero beyond - Kaname catches an anti-vampire knife two millimeters from his right eye, smiling fondly at the sleepy, confused Hunter sitting bolt upright and fondling a second knife. His nightshirt is rucked to one side and his fringe is mussed; the little-used linen sheets, smelling of the laundry, have been kicked off; the shadows under his eyes are deep, and grief lines his face.

The very sight of him makes Kaname's heart leap, his mouth water, his fingers twitch with longing. He sucks in desperate mouthfuls of that sweet-spicy omega scent, and the fragrance soothes his beasts. Kaname wants to wrap himself up in it. The jagged void of Yuuki's absence is still bleeding and festering, but standing in the doorway, staring at his Hunter, even that becomes more bearable.

More. Kaname wants more. He crosses the room slowly, holding Zero's gaze without blinking. Each footstep sends tremors through his world. The silence between them has unspoken words. Without understanding why, Zero has gone still, instinct serving him well when dealing with pureblood thirsts.

Kaname's boy trembles when the pureblood touches his cheek ever so gently with the pads of his fingers, like he would stroke the velvet petals of a rose.

Zero doesn't understand what has happened, poor child. Doesn't realize Kaname's very soul shook at the same touch. Doesn't understand what he's become. Doesn't know what Kaname will do to keep him at his side. But he must realize Kaname's turmoil, and his gentle nature drives him to salve the wound; Zero reaches out and takes Kaname's hand in his own two, his slim fingers closing round to offer the pureblood comfort.

Kaname's madness abates; the cutting whispers are hushed by the touch of callused hands. The pureblood kisses his boy's palms, then forehead, then takes that pink mouth and lays claim to Zero's whole being with every fibre of his ancient, possessive soul.

"The error was mine earlier," he whispers as their lips part. "It isn't safe for you to be alone."

Zero's thoughts hide behind his controlled expression as he considers Kaname's change of heart. He looks at the ruined door, then back to the pureblood. "This bed isn't made for two," he finally says.

"We will make do," Kaname replies as he begins taking off his clothes and laying them over the dresser, not dissuaded. He will accept no excuse to leave Zero's side; his sweet boy will simply have to resign himself.

Zero sighs as Kaname slides in bed beside him, stripped down to his underclothes, but he doesn't protest when Kaname pulls their bodies flush, stemming the pain of loneliness by pressing their wounds together in the dark.
Just like always, his boy settles when he's in bed with company. Kaname wraps his arms around that narrow waist, inhales the warm smell. His beasts settle, quieted by being nestled beside the half of his world he can reach.

Half asleep, his Consort murmurs, "It feels so good to fall asleep and know you're not alone."

Yes, Kaname mouths against the nape of his neck.

Shirabuki Sara's castle is nothing like Rosehill. There's a patina of similarity - its age, remoteness, history, grandeur - but the air of restrained wealth tempered by tasteful, traditional simplicity is missing. Tucked away within thick forest, Shirabuki's ancestral home overflows with artifacts meant to elevate the status of their owner: the furs of extinct beasts, one-of-a-kind antiques, famous sculptures that ought to be in museums, paintings by old masters, lost works by great artists, and rarities of all kinds. Yuuki gets the impression most of them were added recently.

Most jarring is their reception. The castle overflows with light to welcome the mistress home, and what looks like the entire staff lines up to bow and call out cheerful greetings in an eerily synchronized display. Every face glows with cheerfulness and reverence while Shirabuki gushes praise. Yuuki finds the whole ceremony offputting.

There are so many servants! The halls teem with bustling maids and houseboys; every room has its own appointed caretaker. There are servants for any task, no matter how small: to take your coat, open doors, remove your shoes when you sit down, to offer food and plate it, hold drinks, help you dress, and more. There are even bathroom attendants who - well, Yuuki doesn't know, because she dismissed them as soon as she realized they intended to stick around while she did her business. If she lived here, Yuuki would never have to lift a finger again.

Walking behind her captor, Yuuki finally pins down exactly what bothers her as they pass two maids who curtsey until their knees touch the parquet floor, then watch the purebloods with worshipful eyes until Yuuki passes out of sight. Kaname expects competence, respect, and a certain discretion from their servants; Shirabuki Sara demands absolute adoration from hers. Everywhere she goes, she surrounds herself with a little court of her own followers. They flutter around like birds now as Shirabuki stops and gestures. "This is your room, dear Yuuki-chan, right beside mine."

Yuuki smiles and thanks the pureblood politely. This is a much nicer prison than she expected.

The blonde simpers, clapping her hands together; her lace shawls slips down her shoulders. "I'll leave you to settle in, but I wanted to make sure you remembered the rules first."

Smiling again, Yuuki nods vacantly. All her focus is bound up in slowing her racing heartbeat.

The woman's blue eyes sharpen. "You will not attempt to contact anyone or influence my servants. Disobey, and I kill Kiryuu Zero. Escape attempts will earn the same result. Take your own life, and Zero-kun dies the moment you succeed. If I die, or if you try to kill me, the poison in his blood will activate automatically and your little omega will perish in agonizing pain. Understand?"

"Yes, Shirabuki-san," Yuuki agrees meekly. If her enemies see a weak doll, all the better for her. Let Shirabuki forget what happened to the last people who threatened Zero's life.

"I would prefer no unpleasantness between us," Shirabuki says earnestly, placing a hand on Yuuki's lower arm, her manner softened back to her usual girlish charm.

Yuuki's skin crawls, but her face stays placid.
"I have plans, you see. You could be of great help to me."

Never, but Yuuki needs Shirabuki to believe she might succeed. So she lowers her eyes, and nods.

"Well, I'll leave you for the day. I'd like a little relaxation before bed. Feel free to make yourself comfortable," Shirabuki says, and then goes, taking her coterie of servants with her.

Shirabuki keeps a collection of pets, young Level D girls and boys hand-picked as the most pleasing and beautiful of all. The walls aren't soundproof; after the first night, Yuuki has no illusions about what exactly they're used for.

Yuuki pretends not to notice the smell of blood or the hovering servants, and watches the sunrise through a gap in the curtains. Her fist clenches in her dress, right above her flesh and blood heart.

Her real heart is thousands of miles away, one half with each of the men she loves, and Yuuki longs to go where it rests. Not yet, she reminds herself. She promised to protect Zero, and Shirabuki intends harm to Kaname too. She'll just have to endure it.

With one last look, Yuuki turns away from the dawn's light, and goes into the darkened bedroom to steal what sleep she can.

"My spies have found Yuuki," Kaname announces at breakfast that evening, putting down his phone.

Now back in his hoseki, Zero's dull eyes brighten, and he raises his head. "Where is she? Is she alright?"

"She's been taken to the ancestral Shirabuki estate in Eastern Europe. More than that, I don't know. Seiren can't get very close. I don't want to alarm Shirabuki when she's explicitly warned us away."

"Thank you for telling me," Zero murmurs, and continues picking at his food.

Flicking a glance across the table, Kaname considers his present circumstances. With Yuuki located and his bloodbond's assurance she lives, urgency has been tempered by caution.

Kaname hasn't left Zero's side since he barged into the Consort's suite. As long as he remains in Zero's presence, the pureblood feels clear-headed enough to act like himself. Deliberately, Kaname does not consider what that might mean. He does, however, begin crafting several plans to keep Zero there permanently. Perhaps getting him pregnant?

What have I been telling you? huffs his alpha. Fill mate with babies and he will be ours forever.

"I have been thinking," Kaname says, carefully putting aside the idea for later examination. "We lack information. I want to reexamine the murder of the Level D. If we can find Shirabuki's conspirator, they may know something that can help us."

Zero stirs his breakfast, looking pensive. "That sounds like a good start. We don't have much else."

Kaname crosses his arms. "Something is troubling you?"

Putting the spoon down, Zero laces his fingers together. "I keep remembering what happened at Takuma's soiree. I was using my extra sense all night, and there was something different about Shirabuki when she arrived compared to when she left. I keep going over it in my head. I think - I think she just came to cause trouble at first, but I can't shake the impression she was upset when
Tapping the table, Kaname closes his eyes. He trusts Zero's instincts. Something changed that night for Shirabuki. What was it?

As soon as he thinks it, Kaname knows what happened. "She met her agent - the one in my circle who's passing on information about us," he says, confirming the idea aloud. "The entire upper nobility was there. She made contact, and her spy told her something that made her panic."

Breakfast forgotten, the pureblood rises in his excitement, rounding the table to seize Zero's hands in his own. The thrill of the chase is a riptide rising in his blood. Kaname smiles, and knows his fangs are showing. "No wonder his gambit isn't her style. Remember Touma's Level Ds, and the attempt to assassinate you? Shirabuki prefers using proxies to keep any risks away from herself, and her traps are always subtle and laid out long before they snap shut. This kidnapping is an unplanned necessity. We've overturned her plans somehow, and she's been forced to use more crude means."

Zero has a certain wariness in his eyes. "What does that means for us?"

"We need to find her spy more than ever," Kaname replies.


Kaname swings their joined hands. "This time is different. I can be straightforward and use my power of command. The nobles would resent being so harshly questioned over the death of one near-Level E. The disappearance of a pureblood is another matter entirely. I'll wager they will even let me wipe their memories willingly."

Zero's frown deepens, likely at Kaname's remark about the Level D.

"Another thing," Kaname continues. "We don't have the luxury of time. This standoff is not sustainable. There are too many witnesses to what happened - the Hunters don't talk, but the news will leak. Shirabuki doesn't have long. She'll need to move as soon as she can."

Eyes sharpening, Zero carefully disentangles their hands. "I'm going to go train."

Shirabuki has prepared Yuuki's prison well. She has no phone or internet she could use to contact the outside world, and she is never allowed outside the castle's walls. She isn't even permitted to leave her rooms without Shirabuki's permission, and she is always escorted by a chaperone who follows her everywhere she goes. The spiders are everywhere, and Shirabuki herself is never more than a room away.

As a further precaution against a pure-blooded captive, all the vampires Yuuki has contact with are Level Ds. If two pureblood commands conflict, the more recent takes precedence. The sole exception, which Shirabuki is taking advantage of, is that a Level D's master always has the greater power over those they've Turned. Some pureblood families prefer D Rank servants for exactly that reason. They're more reliant on their benefactors, and less able to be suborned by other purebloods' power.

Nothing terrible happens. Shirabuki seems genuine when she says she would rather use Yuuki than break her. She enjoys keeping Yuuki nearby like a trophy, alongside the sycophant multitude Shirabuki surrounds herself with.

Yuuki hates it. Every moment is layered with tension, a coil twisting tighter and tighter around
Yuuki's insides, slicing and cutting. Her appetite is nonexistent. She sleeps little. She's always on edge, always afraid. Shirabuki could kill Zero on a whim. Shirabuki could change her mind and do to Yuuki the things she sees in her nightmares. Shirabuki herself delights in dropping hints, playing little mind games when they're together. Yuuki feels like screaming when she's finally away from her captor, just to expel her tension. But good, obedient dolls don't do that, so she stays silent.

"Is it good?" Shirabuki asks, peering at Yuuki as she picks at her meal. The look on the other woman's face is more than nosy curiosity. There's something academic in the way Shirabuki picks up Yuuki's hand and examines the base of her fingernails.

Yuuki's stomach drops. "Yes," she says, lacking other options.

"Purebloods are immune to my family's poisons," the blonde comments. "But I hope you don't mind. I have a few formulas of my own creation I'd like to test. Who knows? Perhaps I'll succeed."

Yuuki looks down at her uneaten plate. Her hand shakes. Then, she deliberately takes another forkful, puts it in her mouth, and chews. Another. She tastes nothing. Another. Another. The plate is empty.

Shirabuki shrugs. "Ah, well. I have others."

As soon as she gets back to her room, Yuuki runs to the toilet and vomits.

When Kaname rounds the corner, Zero is standing in the courtyard of the Consort's suite, wearing his training outfit and holding a mobile phone to his ear. His boy's forehead is wrinkled, and the Hunter is massaging his temple. As Kaname lets himself into the courtyard, he catches the end of Zero's conversation.

"I never thought I'd say this, Master Yagari, but I agree with Cross." Zero paces a few steps. "You can't get involved in this. You are Cross are co-presidents of the Hunters' Association, and this is a fight between purebloods." A pause. "Where it happened doesn't matter. It gives us an excuse to take an interest, but that's all." Scrubbing his hair away from his sweaty forehead, Zero digs his heels in. "At least promise me you'll keep Kaito as far away as possible. He doesn't need to ruin his career for my sake." Zero closes his eyes; Yagari must have yielded on that, if nothing else. "Alright. I understand. I'll call if anything changes."

Zero hangs up, and his shoulders slump. He takes a deep breath, and faces Kaname. "Since Master Yagari is semi-retired, he's decided to take a vacation in Eastern Europe."

"I wish him happy travels," Kaname replies, raising an eyebrow.

Zero's eyes flicker down to the object in Kaname's hand. "What's that for?"

Kaname hefts the blunt practice sword. "I thought I might join you, if you allowed."

"Go ahead," Zero says, gesturing limply. "How is your evening going?"

"Without Yuuki? A minor circle of hell," Kaname replies, unsheathing the sword from its scabbard and putting the sheath aside. "I have used my power of command on every guest present when the Level D was murdered. Not one of them is guilty. So I questioned the staff again. Nothing. None of them committed the act. I am at a loss to explain what happened."

Extending Artemis Rod, Zero assumes a ready stance. "You cross-referenced the guest list with the nobles who attended Takuma-sempai's soiree?"
The pureblood clicks his tongue. "Who do you take me for? I cleared every member of the inner circle as soon as we left that night, and every likely suspect since then."

Talk is abandoned for the clash of steel. Kaname is familiar with the handicap necessary to spar with weaker vampires, and carefully softens his blows. They fight until Zero is doubled over, steaming in the cold night air.

"A familiar?" he pants.

"Not through Rosehill's defenses," Kaname counters, as unruffled as he was when they started. "An intruder, perhaps. Though Shirabuki has no Shadow serving her, and no known servants possessing such skill."

Zero slams the butt of his staff on the pavestones, and his face crumples. "Then we're no closer than when we started," he mutters. Abandoning the spar, the Hunter slumps down on a bench, hugging Artemis Rod to his chest.

Kaname circles cautiously, retrieving his scabbard and drifting closer as he sheathes the blade. Zero's despair is uncomfortably close to his own moods, and Kaname is not the sort of person people turn to for comfort.

"Can you give me an honest answer?" Zero says, stonefaced as he watches Kaname through his fringe.

"As you have pointed out before, I am rarely honest." Kaname tells whatever truths best serve his ends; when a lie leads to victory, why not use it?

"You're not helping."

"Ask the question, Zero," the pureblood says, which is not precisely a yes.

Laying Artemis Rod on his lap, Zero scuffs his hands through his hair. Resting his elbows on his thighs, he slumps forward with his head in his hands. "It's my fault Yuuki was taken, isn't it?"

"Yes," Kaname says without a flicker of guilt as he takes the offered opportunity. Hunting is such a dangerous profession. It would be better if Zero stopped of his own will. "There are other Hunters who could have handled the situation. If you had been thinking rationally, you would have remembered that. Instead your good intentions put both of you at risk."

Zero curls tighter with misery.

Kaname rests a hand on his Consort's back. He is not being fair. What happened was Shirabuki's fault, and she would have kidnapped Yuuki at the first opportunity whether or not Zero took her bait. But Zero's nobility is far too easy a weakness to exploit. For Zero's own protection, Kaname must make him cautious. "You cannot think of yourself as a simple Hunter any longer. You have other roles now. Your importance to us means you can accomplish so much more, if you take the opportunity."

"I understand," Zero says, lowering his head. "Thank you for being candid."

"Any time," Kaname replies, his hand tightening possessively on Zero's shoulder.

Near the end of her second day in captivity, Yuuki grows too exhausted to suffer such intense fear any longer. The caution remains - Yuuki knows the stakes of her behavior, after all.
Sipping her poisoned tea, the words she's been thinking for weeks now slip out. "Why are you doing this?"

Shirabuki looks up from playing with her pets, hand feeding her pretty young boys and girls grapes like schooling carp in a pond. "Hmmm?"

The words come out with more conviction. "Shirabuki-san, I don't understand why you're doing this."

"Doing what?" the blonde says, enjoying the chance to dangle her bait.

"Any of it," Yuuki replies honestly. "This whole situation with Zero and I."

Shirabuki faces Yuuki squarely, letting the grape fall from her fingers back into the bowl. "Now that's a complicated question, Yuuki-chan. Are you asking me for the long answer, or the more immediate cause?"

"All of it," Yuuki says, going out on a limb. Kaname always tells her truth is more valued when it's unexpected.

When Shirabuki says nothing, only watches her, Yuuki thinks she's blown it. But then the blonde smiles, and Yuuki knows Shirabuki has thought of a new game to play. "I'll tell you, but it will cost you. Nothing in life is free, Yuuki-chan."

Yuuki nods, keeping the bitterness out of her tone. "I know. What is your price?"

Leaning forward, Shirabuki gestures toward the scantily clad pets kneeling at her feet. "Pick one and kill it. Then I'll tell you your answer."

Yuuki draws out the silence. Not because she can't decide, but because she's ashamed her answer lept so quickly into her mind. Waiting patiently, Shirabuki strokes her favorite pet's head and watches with cruel curiosity.

"How do you want it done?" Yuuki finally says, raising her eyes and hating herself. She could try justifying it. These are the servants of her enemy, and therefore also her enemies. But Yuuki knows it wouldn't matter who the stranger was, if she did it for Zero and Kaname's sake.

Shirabuki's eyebrows rise. "Why Yuuki-chan, that was almost something a pureblood would say. I didn't know you had it in you."

_I am a daughter of the Kuran, and a pureblood no lesser than you_, Yuuki wants to say. The anger helps her feel less disgusting.

"I don't want the carpets ruined," Shirabuki says. "Otherwise, do as you like."

Yuuki swallows, gets up. For her own peace of mind, she picks the oldest looking one. The boy cowers fearfully at her feet, gold paint outlining his eyes.

She's killed before, but never without cause. Only in defense of her own life, or the lives of others. Self-loathing pools in her belly.

She makes it quick. Her arms whip out, twist. A snap of the neck, and the Level D boy is dust. Yuuki will never, ever be able to forget the feeling of his throat under her palm, the terror in his eyes as she loomed over him, or the sound of his bones popping.
Guilt lodges in her soul - but not regret, and as Yuuki settles back in her armchair she knows she would do it again, for less cause.

She feels filthy. "Please explain it to me," Yuuki says, a hint of steel in her voice.

Shirabuki nods approvingly; Yuuki is flooded with shame. "Power. Really, that's all it boils down to, sweet Yuuki. Kaname has greater power than I. To obtain the power he possesses, I need him out of the way. Everything I have done is a means to that end."

'Out of the way' - that means dead. Yuuki glances at the ash-dusted carpet beneath her feet. "That's all?," she says, keeping her voice light. "I took you for a more complex person, Shirabuki-san."

The pureblood shrugs, waving a hand. "Of course, I can't deny it's a bit personal. There was a time when Kaname let me believe there was a mutual empathy between us - I haven't forgiven him for the false familiarity. And he has cost me the omega I was pursuing. That just makes victory all the sweeter."

"I suppose," Yuuki replies. She just killed a boy for nothing.

This is the kind of despair that destroys souls. Yuuki wonders if any of her own soul will survive this.

"Zero, are you finished?" Kaname calls through the bathroom door. When it swings open, Kaname's jaw drops. "Zero - you -"

"I thought about what you said last night," Zero says, lavender eyes all steely resolve, fingering the ends of his shorn hair. "I've been slacking off. Sasaki-san helped me trim it."

With his newly shortened hair, Zero is a mirror of the Cross Academy prefect from Kaname's memories. Privately, Kaname mourns his boy's longer hairstyle - it softened him, marked him as Kaname's Consort - but he can't deny Zero is lovely no matter what.

"Now, what are we doing about Shirabuki Sara? You must have some plan."

Kaname tickles the soft silver ends of Zero's hair with his fingertips. "I do. It will take me a day or two to arrange, but I will have it ready." Complicating Kaname's counterattack is the fact that Kaname cannot use any of his own forces. If Kaname acts overtly, Shirabuki might harm Yuuki. His only option is to manipulate a third party into acting for him.

"Can I help?" Zero asks, swatting away the ticklish touch.

"Indeed you can." Kaname smiles, envisioning blood. "If Shirabuki can strike at my finances, it's only fair I cripple hers in return. My businesses are legitimate, while she makes the vast majority of her fortune through the black market. There are many, many people who will be willing to act on my behalf, not the least of which is law enforcement. I need you to pass information to the Hunters on vampire related crimes."

"Seiren's been working overtime, I see," Zero comments. "I could do it, but I can actually think of someone better."

Kaname lifts an eyebrow. "Who?"

Zero's smile is positively devilish. "Yagari-sensei is in Europe, isn't he? Who better to present your information than the Association co-president?"
"Oh, that's very good," Kaname praises.

Zero straightens under the approval, and Kaname's heart flips. Then his Consort frowns, and Kaname feels the equally irrational urge to wipe it away. "But what about the spy? Won't Shirabuki learn what we're planning before we can act?"

Oh, his boy is clever as well. "I am counting on it. If we maintain strict secrecy, and divide up duties so only a few people know about any single target…"

"Then whichever one fails, that will tell us who the spy is," Zero finishes for him with a triumphant air.

"Precisely." Kaname offers his arm. "Will you keep me company as I work?"

"As you wish," Zero acquiesces, and rests his hand atop Kaname's forearm. Kaname feels the weight keenly all the way to his study.

Yuuki understands now how profoundly lucky she's been. She's always had Zero and Kaname to rely on for help. Before that Cross and her parents protected her with their lives. In this place, Yuuki has only herself and her wits. If she's going to learn anything, she has to trust her own abilities.

That's why, on the third day, when Shirabuki invites Yuuki to join her in her laboratory, Yuuki accepts.

Yuuki keeps one cautious hand on the bannister as they wind down into the bowels of the castle, following behind Shirabuki and her lone lantern. Surprisingly, the depths are dry, cool and clean, not the dank pit of her imagination.

The laboratory itself more closely matches Yuuki's expectations. Liquids bubble and fizz, giving the air a tang that is acrid and sweet by turns. The walls are lined with great vats, in which the essences of herbs and flowers are distilled. The worktables have a multitude of glass instruments, all of which are mysterious to her, shaped into beakers and curled straws and spigots. There are knives and cutting boards and flasks and canisters full of ingredients scattered everywhere. In one corner are cages full of rats and small animals; in another is a cage full of Level Ds who displeased their mistress. Shirabuki makes no distinction between the two.

Yuuki's hands stay tucked behind her back. She knows better to touch anything in the lair of a poisoner descended from a notorious line of poisoners.

"You can sit there and watch me work," Shirabuki instructs. Yuuki obeys. Shirabuki has been almost friendly today, and she doesn't want to endanger the good mood.

Very quickly, Yuuki learns what the bucket at her elbow is for. Watching a man's internal organs melt is not for anyone with a weak stomach or the ability to empathize with another living being.

Is this how purebloods are expected to behave? Shirabuki doesn't even act like her subjects are people at all. Was this callousness and casual cruelty what Kaname learned for thousands of years? Not for the first time in these past few days, Yuuki is finding much more of Kaname's behavior comprehensible than ever before.

"Yuuki-chan. Bring me a glass of ice water, if you please. I'd like to have a break," Shirabuki calls.

Leaping out of her seat, Yuuki's hands shake as she pours, slopping water onto the worktable. "You
seem very knowledgeable," Yuuki says, casting around for anything at all to say that won't get Zero killed.

"I am one of the youngest to have mastered my family's skills," Shirabuki says, smiling as she accepts the water. "We practice the discipline like an art, rather than a science."

"Oh, really?" Yuuki says in her calmest voice. She needs Shirabuki to talk about her poisons, to let slip any clue about how to help Zero. "What's that like?"

"We draw out the hidden natures of substances, using our own blood as the catalyst. That is too intimate to be called a science, don't you think?" Shirabuki pauses to drink. Thinking furiously, Yuuki nods. "Does everything have a hidden nature?"

Lifting her head, Shirabuki smiles. "Yes. We have a saying: 'In every living thing lies its own destruction.' Did you know that humans use drugs derived from venom to treat their illnesses?"

"No, I didn't," Yuuki says, pouring her captor more water. "That's impressive."

Shirabuki swirls the water in her glass. "My family has a great respect for nature's poisoners - though we are hardly a family anymore. I am the last." Her blue eyes flick up to meet Yuuki's gaze. Yuuki feels a chill go down her back.

"Let me show you something," Shirabuki says, with a smile that means nothing good. She puts down her glass and goes to retrieve an embossed casket. Lifting the lid, Shirabuki takes four small, stoppered vials and places them on the table. The fluids inside are luridly colored reds and pinks, and the liquids flow easily when Shirabuki tilts them.

She twists off the stopper, and withdraws a small brush from the casket. Dipping the brush inside the brightest red, Shirabuki starts to paint Yuuki's nails.

At first Yuuki's muscles ache with the effort of holding still, but as Shirabuki does nothing threatening, Yuuki's body gradually relaxes. Yori used to do this for her, and Ruka still does. It brings Yuuki a calming familiarity to watch the slow strokes of the brush - and for Shirabuki to casually do that now for her hostage? What's going on?

Yuuki is dumbfounded by the surreal experience, so when Shirabuki hands her the brush and presents her own hands, Yuuki numbly begins to return the favor.

As Yuuki begins painting the blonde's right hand, her fellow pureblood admires the red polish on her finished left. "I make these polishes myself, using a recipe of my own creation."

Yuuki makes an interested noise, wholly focused on painting as perfectly as possible. She may not know Shirabuki's intent, but it's better not to give the blonde any cause for anger.

Shirabuki watches Yuuki work for a moment, painstakingly smoothing the coating before it dries. "You think I poisoned Kiryuu Zero when I helped those young monarchists, don't you?"

Her hand jumps. Yuuki stops breathing. There is a ringing noise in her ears. "Didn't you?" she says past the catch in her throat. Her fingers clench around the brush.

Surveying Yuuki's response with satisfaction, Shirabuki's smile widens as she shakes her head. "No." The pureblood leans back in her chair, holding up her hand to admire the bright red color of her nails. "I poisoned him the first time we met, actually. I didn't intend to use it - it was supposed
to be insurance in case he betrayed me. Unfortunately, Zero-kun turned out to be too stupid to be useful." Shirabuki tuts, shaking her head.

Yuuki wants to claw Shirabuki's eyes out. But she needs information, so instead she viciously imagines the scene, and says, "We didn't even realize. You must have done something very clever to slip past Kaname."

Laughing, Shirabuki preens. "I consider it my best invention because it was so difficult to synthesize. I needed the poison to withstand drying while still retaining its potency, then to linger unnoticed in the bloodstream until the moment I woke it."

She lifts the little glass bottle of red polish. "We vampires are already venomous creatures, dear Yuuki-chan. I just took the next logical step. Really, getting the color right was almost as difficult."

The paintbrush slips from Yuuki's nerveless fingers. She stares in horror at the innocent glass bottle, and the liquid red as blood.

Shirabuki inclines her head, showing her white teeth. "Exactly, Yuuki-chan."

Lifting up her hands, Yuuki recognizes the bright red poison coating her nails - the same poison in Zero's blood.

She almost doesn't make it to the bucket in time, heaving out her insides while Shirabuki giggles. Her skin crawls, and she's covered in a cold sweat.

Shirabuki makes her wear the poison until they go to bed.

Kaname and Zero have continued sleeping in the Consort's suite. It feels disloyal to use the master bedroom without Yuuki, as though she were never coming home. Nor do they touch lustfully for much the same reason, indulging only in gentle, sweet kissing for comfort.

Zero wears his devotion in the delicate confections of lace and ruffles and soft pastels that Yuuki would have swooned to see him in. No less fervent is the care he takes with Kaname - the meals he brings prepared by his own hands, all the times he presses his husband to rest, to take a respite from his labor, to care for his appearance. He is Kaname's solace, tending ceaselessly to the ache of Yuuki's sundering and asking nothing in return.

When Kaname is difficult, Zero gently reminds the pureblood how he promised Yuuki he would take care of their husband, and Kaname can do nothing except yield with a bitter ache in his throat. Zero does none of this for Kaname's sake - only for Yuuki, ever Yuuki - and it burns. Kaname wants even a sliver of his regard returned when he looks in those lilac eyes. How he wishes Zero would experience those same desires! Kaname wants to run his hands over the sharp bones of Zero's face, touch the plump pink of his lower lip, entwine their hands and walk beside one another.

The sole advantage of Yuuki's mandate is the way it makes Zero accept Kaname's attentiveness without a single hint of suspicion. Her words alone, her wish, is enough to rule them from afar.

"I don't understand you," Zero says in the dark of their bed when Kaname holds him tight, "You want to be close to people, but then you push them away. You never let them know who you really are. But you don't let them leave either."

Kaname says nothing in return. Sometimes a truth can be spoken in darkness that would disappear like smoke in the light.
"When you decided to Sleep, what kept you alive?" Zero asks that morning in bed, propped up on his elbow. He has the distant gaze of a man lost in his own memories. "I keep thinking about Yuuki, and it just makes me afraid -" He closes his eyes, turns his face to the side. "Ichiru. It was Ichiru for me, the second time I lost everything. I couldn't make his death worth nothing."

"And the first?" Kaname asks, entwining their fingers beneath the blankets.

"First I had revenge, and then I had Yuuki," Zero whispers. He has a painful, blank look on his face.

Kaname kisses it away until Zero is breathless, than whispers words into silver hair. "I think it was mostly apathy that kept me from suicide. Apathy, and a buried thought that if I were, by some mischance, to wake again, I would be just as alone in the future as I was in the present. But perhaps next time there would be someone..."

Zero tangles his fingers in the hem of Kaname's shirt. "You are not alone now."

No, he is not. Twice blessed. The pureblood kisses his boy again. "We are close," Kaname reminds him. "Our trap is almost ready. Yuuki will be with us soon."

Like Yuuki has passed a test, the next evening Shirabuki brushes Yuuki's hair until it shines, and offers one of her pets for Yuuki's pleasure.

Yuuki declines politely. "Thank you, Shirabuki-san, but after enjoying a virgin omega, I'm afraid everyone else is disappointing."

Shirabuki would have pressed the point, but a servant appears at the door bearing a sealed envelope, and the blonde pureblood quickly leaves the room.

Folding her hands in her lap, Yuuki strains to hear any sound from the hallway. Shirabuki has been like that all evening - distracted, passing in and out, leaving Yuuki alone with her chaperone more often than not. Even the spider familiars' many eyes look elsewhere. There could be an opportunity tonight, if Yuuki can snatch it. She hasn't found an antidote, but perhaps she might be able to pass a message. It's vital that Kaname at least learns of Zero's danger.

Yuuki gets her chance when Shirabuki sends her back to her room alone, and she stumbles on the first Level C she's encountered since she arrived fixing the plumbing of the guest toilet she had intended to us. The workman in his uniform bows, gathering his tools in a rushed panic that means he knows they aren't supposed to meet. No wonder the usual bathroom attendants had been missing.

Yuuki's mind races. She will be risking Zero's life if she is caught. But Shirabuki is distracted, so she might overlook a spark of power. And Yuuki's watcher is two rooms away behind thick soundproofing. If the pureblood can move quickly, then return to her own suite, no one need know they met.

She is still cautious, winding no more power than needed around her throat. "You will deliver my message to Kuran Kaname," Yuuki orders, feeling the weight of the quiet command tickle as it passes her lips. She is already planning ahead, what words she will send to Kaname, except -

The servant nervously bobs his head, and says, "I'm sorry, Kuran-hime. That is not allowed."

Yuuki's jaw drops. That - she must have bungled the technique. Again, with a hint more power.
The servant shivers, muscles in his neck twitching, and nervously wrings his hands. "Kuran-hime, it is forbidden."

Yuuki stumbles back, unsteady as the world shifts beneath her feet. This servant is not Zero with his Hunter blood, nor a D yielding to his master. Why, then?

Desperately, Yuuki tries one last time to right her reality with as much power as she dares. "Obey me!"

This time she can watch as the C rank's body jolts and shakes, a battlefield for the forces tearing it apart. She watches as her own power buckles and ebbs, the command already laid on the servant swallowing her own.

Impossible. This can't be happening. But Yuuki can see the evidence right in front of her eyes. When given to an ordinary Level C, her new command should have nullified Shirabuki's old order. But it hadn't. Instead Yuuki's command had been the one overridden. What on earth is going on?

The Level C servant makes a nervous movement backwards, reminding Yuuki she has no time to work out what's wrong.

Lunging forward, Yuuki claps her hand over the servant's mouth to silence him. What does she do now? She's practically killed Zero with her own hands. If Yuuki lets the servant live, he'll tell Shirabuki and she'll kill Zero with her poison. If she kills the servant, Shirabuki will know what she's done. Tears prickle at the corner of her eyes. Yuuki just wishes she could go back in time and make this never happen - wait.

She bites her lip. Yuuki can't undo her actions, but she knows she has the power to make it appear so. Purebloods can alter memories, like her mother blocked hers. Yuuki has no earthly idea how, but it's the only option she has.

She closes her eyes. Tries to breathe, to put herself back in the training room under Cross Academy. Reaches out. It's like sinking her hands into thick gelatin. Desire and intent, she reminds herself, threading her power with the delicacy she uses to create her butterflies. Under her hands, the Level C goes limp, his eyes open but unseeing. Yuuki shivers, and concentrates harder. Make the last few minutes disappear, she tells her power, bending her will to the task, and has the disembodied sensation of her power sinking in, being absorbed, and dissipating, its task done.

Yuuki hesitates, unsure if she really succeeded. The servant stirs. She realizes her suspicious position, and hastily props him against the wall, fleeing to the outer room. But she can't leave without being sure, Yuuki realizes when her hand is on the door knob. Pulling on her best pureblood air, she turns around and sweeps back toward the servant, spying past the door. He has pulled himself together, rubbing absently as his temple as he goes back to his repairs, unconcerned.

Her shoulders relax. Somehow, impossibly, her mad attempt worked. Perhaps if her mother could do it, it's one of the Kuran family talents, like being able to move things with her mind? It doesn't matter; Zero is safe.

Yuuki returns to her chaperone like nothing happened, and spends the rest of the night shut up in her room, worrying and pacing. What happened with the Level C servant should have been impossible. When used on any born vampire - any vampire higher than D Rank - the power of command can always be overridden by another pureblood.

She can come to only one conclusion. Shirabuki must have done something that made the Level C unable to disobey, and that terrifies Yuuki as much as anything else that's happened. This changes
everything. All their precautions, all their discretion - none of it means anything. Shirabuki could have spies anywhere, even in the heart of their power. Nowhere is safe, because no one can be trusted.

Feeling the walls close in, Yuuki curls up in her bed and hides for a while. The walls of her cage are even tighter than she imagined.

When Shirabuki invites her to dinner, Yuuki's blood turns to ice. She knows, Yuuki thinks fearfully, struggling to keep her pulse even.

The world seems spun cloud-thin as Yuuki follows her instructions and dresses in the high-waisted red satin dress she finds in the wardrobe. When she moves, it ripples ominously beneath the candlelight like blood. The pureblood hopes she's imagining things.

When Yuuki is escorted inside the dining room, Shirabuki has already taken her seat at the head of the table. The glass eyes of mounted deer and boar heads gleam in the light of the fireplace, which lends a sinister air to Shirabuki's angelic beauty. Yuuki is seated without discussion at the elder pureblood's left hand, and the meal is delivered silently.

Shirabuki says nothing as they begin to eat, only smiles and gestures for Yuuki to begin. The servants are especially attentive tonight, fawning ceaselessly and fearful of their mistress' wrath. While Shirabuki's posture is loose and confident, there's something buried underneath that troubles Yuuki. It reveals itself when she moves - too abrupt, too sharp, too explosive.

"How are you this evening, Yuuki-chan? Find anything interesting to do?" Shirabuki begins after her third glass of champagne.

Yuuki's hand jumps; she puts her utensils carefully down, smooths her napkin to hide the way her hands shake. Is this dinner a theatrical way to reveal Yuuki's punishment - a flashy, dramatic stage for Zero's death?

"Not really," Yuuki replies. "I'm fine. Just wanted to have a quiet day."

"I envy you, my day has been quite busy," Shirabuki pouts, finishing another glass of champagne. "I suspect Kaname-kun has been up to some naughty hobbies in your absence."

Yuuki must tense, because Shirabuki laughs with an ugly edge in her voice, and takes another glass.

"Shirabuki-san," Yuuki says, searching for a distraction, "I'm surprised you've never questioned me, not the whole time I've been staying with you."

The blonde laughs again, her delicate hand covering her mouth. "Kaname-kun trusts nobody, not even you. He's carefully kept you away from any hint of business and politics. You don't know anything I couldn't find out myself, Yuuki-chan."

Yuuki feels inexplicably offended, but she isn't stupid enough to correct the mistake.

"But if you want to be questioned, I suppose a host should indulge their guest." Shirabuki leans forward, her face losing its mirth, heavy with intent. "Tell me, Kuran Yuuki, have you answered the pureblood's dilemma yet?"

"I'm sorry?" Yuuki offers, completely confused.

Shirabuki pulls back, disappointment sitting heavily in her features. "Too young. I thought you
might understand."

What does Shirabuki want from her hostage that would make her disappointed when she doesn't get it? "Try me," Yuuki insists in a fit of inspiration. "Explain it to me."

The other woman must be driven by deep need, because she sighs, running her fingers along the rim of her glass. "We are purebloods. We have eternity. The question each of us must answer is the pureblood's dilemma: what do you do with eternity?"

Yuuki says nothing - she has the feeling Shirabuki doesn't want an answer.

"My fiancee's answer is no mystery. When his Consort" - Shirabuki spits the word with hateful envy - "when Shoshanna dies, Ouri will be as good as dead. Just an empty ghost waiting to join her. My parents were weak too, just like him. They failed to find their purpose - committed suicide together when I was young, the same way we thought Kaname's parents did. The trick, Yuuki-chan, is to find yourself a purpose that is not so easily weakened, that is lofty enough to sustain immortals like us. I have dedicated myself to such a purpose."

"And your answer is power?" Yuuki murmurs, recalling the feeling of her hands around a fragile throat.

Shirabuki gives a sharp shake of her chin. Her eyes nearly glow with fervor. "Not just power. My dream is not so small. I will unseat the uncrowned king, and become queen of the vampires in his place."

The fire crackles and throws sparks; Yuuki digests Shirabuki's pronouncement. Part of her wants to laugh. This ambitious, desperate pureblood overthrow the Original King? Shirabuki is mad if she thinks she'll succeed. With her hand around Kaname's heart, she has an edge, but once Yuuki is dead Kaname will simply crush her like a bug. Shirabuki Sara will never win, but maybe that's the point. An impossible goal ensures you never have to decide what you do when you finally achieve it.

"It will be a considerable feat," Yuuki says, realizing the silence has dragged too long.

Shirabuki lifts her shoulder, the corner of her mouth turning up. "Anything worth achieving is, Yuuki-chan."

Yuuki's neck prickles with unease. Shirabuki has been acting almost friendly tonight…

Ah, Yuuki realizes, relaxing into her chair. Everything she's seen over the last few days - the endless parade of servants and their flattery, the artificial bustle and noise, the way Shirabuki makes herself the center of attention no matter what - all of that and her obsession with Takuma leads Yuuki to one strange conclusion. Shirabuki, in her own twisted way, hungerings for companionship. Perhaps that is why she's restrained herself from anything other than cruelty toward her hostage.

Yuuki feels not a shred of pity. There is no softness inside her for anyone who harms Zero and Kaname. But this may be something she can use.

Shirabuki presses one of her pets into Yuuki's stiff arms after dinner in a manner that makes it clear that Yuuki has no room to refuse. Yuuki knows what she's meant to do with the pretty, doe-eyed girl dressed in filmy scraps of silk, and the very thought of touching the girl's body disgusts her.

An idea blooms. Yuuki coaxes Shirabuki into giving her some privacy with an excuse about her prudish human upbringing.
Her first attempt at altering the girl's memory is a failure. Creating a convincing memory remains beyond Yuuki's current skill. Stitching the pieces together leaves an even worse jumbled mess. Just like she did with the workman, Yuuki wipes the D's memories and tries again.

The second attempt produces much more promising results. Yuuki discovers that blurring memories is much easier than creating them from whole cloth. First, Yuuki has the girl put on a show. "Show me how you'd have sex with me," she says, not that the raunchy display inspires anything in Yuuki except boredom. All it takes are a few careful alterations to make the imagined scenario seem real.

Once the girl is unconscious, Yuuki stages the scene carefully down to the last detail, just like Kaname would. Getting herself to masturbate is the hardest part, and it leaves her feeling filthy, but so has everything she's done in Shirabuki's house.

As she lets herself out of the bedroom and calls for the servants to clean up, Yuuki wonders what she's becoming.

When Kaname confesses his suspicions, Zero goes still, silhouetted against the snow.

"This was the result of your trap?" his Consort questions cautiously.

Pulling the cloak higher around his boy's shoulders - the one one Yuuki gave him before their wedding, lined with soft rabbit fur - Kaname's grim countenance doesn't change.

Zero's eyes flick away to the snow-covered gardens. Perhaps he understands now why Kaname insisted they speak outside. "I can't believe it. But you wouldn't tell me if you weren't sure," he murmurs, sounding winded.

Kaname feels winded himself. How could he have not seen? But his sense of betrayal, cutting and deep, is held at bay by his mounting confusion. "No other conclusion makes sense. But that cannot be right."

Zero turns into his husband's body, trying to escape the wintery gusts. Kaname crowds him closer, more than willing to share his body's unnatural heat. "I know," Zero says. "Logically, he cannot be our spy. You questioned him using your power of command. I remember it."

Kaname nods, bowing his head and taking comfort in the scent of Zero's hair.

"Have you talked to him?"

"No. I was hoping we could go together."

But when they arrive, the rooms are empty.

The next evening, Shirabuki hovers halfway between a very good mood and a breakdown. Yuuki treads carefully, more than willing for the woman's attention to stay fixed on whatever disaster Kaname has orchestrated. And from all the shouting, it is a disaster. Yuuki buries her satisfaction as deeply as she can, and cultivates patience.

It helps her keep a straight face when Shirabuki rages into the room, takes Yuuki by the arm, and dislocates her shoulder throwing her into the wall. Luckily, she's not wearing any makeup, so when Yuuki cries she doesn't have to worry about smearing mascara everywhere.
Chest heaving from the exertion, Shirabuki says nothing. The blond just stares silently, her face flushed red and rage in her eyes.

Yuuki clutches her cracked ribs with her good arm, tries to make herself as small as possible, and doesn't take it personally. She is simply the closest surrogate target for Shirabuki's anger and desperation, and a reminder that her jailor can still snatch a chance at victory.

After a few moments more, the other pureblood leaves without a word. One of the servants helps Yuuki pop her arm back in its socket. Yuuki hates herself for flinching every time she hears Shirabuki in the hallway for the rest of the night.

Yuuki is woken by her chaperone around mid-morning. Blurry-eyed and with the memory of their last meeting so close to the surface, Yuuki still doesn't forgive herself for jumping when Shirabuki storms into her sitting room, fully dressed while Yuuki is wearing nothing but her nightgown and robe.

Every line of the blonde pureblood's body screams danger, and carries the cruel focus Yuuki's learned to fear. Shirabuki's blue eyes burn bright with something Yuuki is afraid to place. "I've brought you a present, Yuuki-chan," she croons in a high voice. "He was a good little spy, but since he's no use to me any longer, I'll leave him in your care. Consider this an incentive to keep up your best behavior. Remember the lives that depend on you."

And then the door slams open, and Shirabuki's guards push Aido Hanabusa through, looking half-dressed himself, with bruises spangling his cheekbones, blood on his collar and eyes full of despair. Thrown at her feet, Aido pleads for forgiveness silently, looking up at Yuuki on scraped hands and knees.

Aido worships Kaname - he would rather die than betray him. Yuuki has no idea what's going on, but she remembers the Level C her voice held no power over, and thinks she has an inkling.

Shirabuki tosses Yuuki a mobile phone. Staring at Shirabuki, Yuuki uses both hands to catch it and still fumbles, nearly dropping it.

"Use it," Shirabuki orders tersely. "Call Kaname-kun and tell him he needs to be in the air within the hour. I think it's time your negligent husband visited you, Yuuki-chan."

Her heart drops to her toes, and Yuuki freezes, dread crawling up her veins. *I will unseat the uncrowned king* echos in her head like she's imprisoned beneath the surface of a icy pond.

Shirabuki wants Yuuki to lead Kaname into a trap. Huddled on the floor, Yuuki sees her own horror reflected back in Aido's eyes.

Shirabuki notices her hesitation. "Yuuki-chan, would you rather I kill Zero? Use the lovely poison I've left in his blood?"

Yuuki shakes her head frantically, feeling tears prick at her eyes. How can she chose? What can she do? This is Kaname, she reminds herself. Kaname will know it's a trap as soon as the words are out of her mouth. He'll take precautions. And Zero won't let him come alone. Yuuki's job is to buy time.

She will just have to trust the men she loves, Yuuki decides, wetting dry lips. And she's not going to stand around doing nothing, either, no matter what Shirabuki thinks.

Her hands still shake as she dials.
Zero stirs awake when Kaname carries him in his arms off the plane. Kaname thought his boy would struggle, but Zero lies their obediently, head on Kaname's shoulder.

This is not the first time Zero has indulged Kaname in the last few agonizing days. Zero believes he is Yuuki's replacement. Kaname has not had the courage to disabuse him of the notion.

"My apologies," Kaname says instead, stepping onto the dust of their next battlefield. "I know you need the sleep, even if I don't. Rest while you can."

Humming, Zero's eyes flutter shut, and he tucks his head back against Kaname's shoulder.

Both of them are too experienced to ignore the feeling of death looming. Exactly whose death remains to be seen.

"You'll be careful, won't you? Shirabuki hates me, but you're the one she wants to control," Zero says. When he exhales, his hot breath brushes Kaname's throat.

Of all the lives at stake tonight, Kaname least fears for his own. "Only if you exercise the same caution."

Zero hums again. He falls back asleep once they're in the car, and Kaname is left with his own thoughts. The desire to see Yuuki tears at him - the bloodbond is so much more alive when they're close. They'll stop to prepare, and then Kaname will finally go to Yuuki, as he's wanted to for days.

It's good that Zero is asleep. Kaname doesn't want his sweet boy to see the red, dark thing rising in his face.

Chapter End Notes

If I've done my job right, I've given you enough clues in the previous chapters to figure out some of what happened with Aido. And yes, I knew Shirabuki poisoned Zero all the way back in chapter seven.

Shoutout to the one (1) clever reviewer who figured out the spy's identity without even having the most damning piece of the puzzle. I salute you! And also apologize for my attempts to lead you off the scent XD

Is there a single pureblood without Serious Issues? No. Definitely not.

Next chapter: 'Flashpoint'
Good day to my dear readers! He is the penultimate chapter of TWOFT's first plot arc. I needed to clear up some details and work through my plans for the next sequence, so please accept my apologies for the lateness. I feel much more confident now that I've had a chance to revise a few things.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The wait is excruciating. Yuuki desperately wants a word alone with Aido - an explanation, an excuse, a confession, anything. But Shirabuki is clever. The two prisoners are never alone - never left with fewer than three people, in fact, and often many more, including Shirabuki herself. Yuuki can only furtively try and meet Aido's eyes, which rarely leave the ground, and wish she could pry open his mouth in privacy.

Aido seems well enough physically - at least as far as Yuuki can gauge his health through sight. Yuuki pities him, bundled in his chair in the corner of the room. He cringes like a beaten dog whenever someone comes close, and has the pallor of an unloved houseplant. Even his golden hair seems dull and brittle, the blue of his eyes washed out.

The hours tick by. Yuuki refuses to sleep, and spends her time watching her enemies and contemplating her mistakes. More than anything else, she is frustrated with herself. She is burdening the people she loves, just like always. She wanted to be stronger. Is this the best she can do? Is this the limit of her abilities? Like curdled milk, dissatisfaction sits heavily on her tongue. She hides her fisted hands in her skirts, and accepts the agony of impotence as a fitting punishment.

Tiredness tugs at the corners of her eyes. Yuuki pushes the desire to rest violently down. Kaname can go days without sleep and stay as sharp as always. Yuuki can endure one night awake; as a pureblood, Yuuki can do at least that much. Perhaps, Yuuki reflects, that's her problem. Her humanity is her strength, but also her weakness. If she wants to play Shirabuki Sara's games, Yuuki the human will keep losing. Perhaps she needs to let the pureblood rise.

Yuuki considers this carefully, turning it over in her hands. She counts the costs, weighs the wisdom. Whittle away more of her humanity? This place already makes her feel inhuman. It will take little to rouse her native limitless darkness and hunger.

But first, she needs a plan.

Yuuki strikes when the guard thins to three.

Drawing her pureblood nature over her mind like a shroud, she never entertains a single doubt she can handle the difficult feat. Hiding her power from Shirabuki is her only concern; a pureblood fears nothing from these Level D underlings scuttling round her feet.

Instinct serves her well. She has merely to will, and her power obliges. A needlepoint of power, driven deep and fast, and the guards' eyes go cloudy, their consciousness stilled until Yuuki decides they will wake missing memories of this lost time.
Opposition now disposed of, Yuuki's gaze whips to the only other conscious person in the room, but Aido shrinks away from whatever he sees in her eyes. "Explain. Quickly," the pureblood snaps, making no accommodations. Aido witnessed Yuuki condemn Zero's attackers. He should be no stranger to her fury.

Her once-tutor recovers after a beat, habitual obedience opening his mouth to smoothly answer. "Shirabuki can bind born vampires to her commands the same way she can bind her ex-human thralls. Her method doesn't fix the weaknesses of forcing obedience, so she combines it with memory suppression commands to create sleeper agents. They act normally, and carry out her commands without any knowledge they're being used."

Yuuki curls her hands until her nails cut white half-moons in her palms. "How," she rasps. Even within this towering rage, her mind stays clear as glass.

"That factory," Aido stumbles over his words in his haste. "The drug she's making there is the catalyst. She's hiding it inside tainted blood tablets. I ate several while I was her prisoner. But the drug doesn't do anything by itself. She needs to give you an order or it's meaningless."

"When did she -" Yuuki snaps, sitting straighter. How far back does Shirabuki's advantage go?

Aido's chagrin is clear. "Shirabuki caught me the day I left Rosehill without permission - in the car as I left the lab. She ordered me to lie about what I'd discovered, to act only if Kaname found something that threatened her, and to forget until I needed to know. But then Kaname used his power of command to keep me from leaving Rosehill. Shirabuki couldn't reach me, and her commands didn't allow me to ignore Kaname's order, so I wasn't as useful as she wanted."

Aido's complexion is chalk white, and his desperation shines through his eyes - desperation born not of a desire to save his life, but to be believed. "I killed the Level D. The only other thing I did was make contact with her the night of Takuma's soiree and report. I swear, Kuran-hime."

Yuuki can feel precious seconds slipping through her fingers as she rushes to consider the implications. A raised voice outside the room reminds her she cannot afford to be caught, and she can digest the information later at her leisure. She relaxes her hold on the three Level Ds, and they blink and continue without pause, picking up right where they left off.

The pureblood can feel Aido's eyes on her, but she resolutely pretends not to notice.

Zero insists they drive. "If you're too injured for your weird pureblood bat-travel, we're going to need an escape route I can use," he maintains, his jaw stubbornly set as he tests the fit of his holsters.

Taking his hands out of the pockets of his dark trench coat, Kaname shrugs his shoulders, and acquiesces to Zero's proposal. It's a reasonable precaution, and they are running ahead of schedule. The longer Kaname can delay this meeting, the more time his backup plan will have to prepare. And the way Kaname's alpha radiates pleasure at fulfilling even the smallest of Zero's requests doesn't hurt either.

While Zero completes his own preparations, Kaname has been keeping watch. They're stopped at a small country inn, and Kaname's protective instincts are on overdrive. Earlier, the innkeeper gave their driver trouble while renting a room - suspicious of foreigners who showed up long after dark - and If not for the utterly unacceptable idea of Zero changing in public, Kaname would have left.

Even with Zero fully clothed, the current view is practically indecent, Kaname laments, eyes
lingering on the snug fit of Zero's Hunting outfit. His Consort tightens the strap holding Artemis Rod to one taut thigh while Kaname watches with wistful admiration.

Catching Kaname's line of sight, Zero glares without any real heat. "I can't believe you," his husband mutters, rubbing his hands to warm them.

The familiar scene plays out half from habit, half for the sake of distraction. They're so close to seeing Yuuki; at all times, their focus pulls toward that promised future like a compass needle pointing north. Chatter is meaningless when the present is nothing more than intervening time, like chaff.

"We're going to get her back," Zero reminds him, guessing where Kaname's thoughts have wandered. "I'm not suffering through being in season with just you for company."

"What a greedy boy, demanding two pure-blooded alphas to satisfy you," Kaname teases, unable to resist the barb even when neither of their hearts are in it.

Zero's glare this time is withering. The snow under his feet crunches as he stalks past Kaname and yanks open the car door. "Who's driving?"

Kaname raises an eyebrow. "Your proposal, thus your responsibility."

A beat. Zero narrows his eyes, then a corner of his mouth turns up. "You don't know how to drive, do you?"

Kaname maintains a dignified silence, and pointedly avoids looking at Zero by fixing his gaze on the snow drifting down.

"I knew it! How can you not know how to drive? You're older than dirt, it's not like you haven't had time."

"With my powers, it's hardly a required skill," Kaname returns with a lofty air. "And if I need a driver, I have you for that, don't I?"

That startles a laugh out of Zero, and once he's started, the Hunter can't seem to stop until he's doubled over and breathless.

Kaname's chest throbs pleasantly. Even in such freezing temperatures, he feels warm.

"Come on, grandpa," Zero says, recovering his breath. "Get in. We're going on a road trip."

Yuuki crosses her legs at the knee, and frowns. Aido is on the verge of doing something well-intentioned and brave, and she needs to stop him because he's not doing a very good job hiding it. He's gone all twitchy and jumpy, plus he's not-so-subtly eyeing their watchers in a speculative manner. Yuuki considers her options, exhales, and decides earthquake is best.

"I'm not going anywhere," she tells him bluntly.

Aido jerks his head up and stares. "Yuuki-hime -"

"Shirabuki-san will use her poison to kill Zero if I leave or break her rules," she continues, bulling her way obstinately through any objections. "So don't make me do something I'd regret."

"Poison." Aido squeaks faintly. He's milk pale again.
Yuuki nods.

The noble's expression sharpens. With the air of a man who's just realized something, Aido laces his fingers together, and pierces Yuuki with a meaningful gaze. Then his eyes flick to one of their chaperones, and Yuuki gets the message.

With a moment's concentration, their watchers are frozen. "It's safe to talk," Yuuki confirms, and Aido straightens.

"Is the poison created from Shirabuki blood?" he bursts out. His fists are balled, and he's half-rising from his seat.

Yuuki glares. Satisfying Aido's scientific curiosity isn't worth risking Shirabuki finding out about her power. "Yes," she grits out. "She told me so."

A thought occurs to her. If Shirabuki can order nobles like Aido around as though they were Level Ds, she can't tell Aido anything she wouldn't want the spider woman to know. Drat. But Aido's next words blow that caution away.

"Then I know what the antidote is."

Yuuki surges to her feet, hope rising in her. "How do you know?" she says, cautioning herself. Aido is compromised - this may be Shirabuki's cruel trick.

"I've studied two of her family's special poisons - the one in Zero's blood that blocked his healing, and the one in my blood that makes me vulnerable to her orders. They have the same weakness," Aido insists, not a shred of dishonesty in his manner.

Yuuki bites her lip. She can't keep their conversation hidden from Shirabuki for long, but she needs to know. "Tell me, please," she urges, stumbling over the words in her haste.

Aido hesitates. "It's probably impossible to get," he cautions

"Tell me anyway," she insists. If it's for Zero, Yuuki will move heaven and earth, and freeing Zero means Shirabuki won't have any control over Yuuki, and which means their enemy will lose her leverage over Kaname, keeping him out of danger too.

So Aido does.

The longer Aido speaks, the more certain Yuuki feels that his information is real. It fits, and Shirabuki hinted at it herself, didn't she?

Doubt is gone. Left in its place is determination and hardened will. Resolutely, Yuuki begins to consider what she needs to do.

The grey towers jutting up from the smooth, featureless dark green of the forest remind Zero of grim childhood folktales, lending weight to the veneer of dread overlaying his professional focus and unrelenting guilt.

The closer they come, the harder Zero tries reaching out to find Yuuki, hidden away behind the castle's stone walls. But the distance is still too far, and while he's driving he can't resort to his special perception. But what he does find confirms his intuitive alarm.

"Kaname?"
"Yes."

"Do you remember how the number of Level Ds Touma claimed to have Turned didn't match the number of abducted humans?"

"I do," Kuran returns with misgiving, surveying their surroundings.

"I think I just found the missing Es." The castle is a crawling mass of vampires to his Hunter senses - so many Zero can't make out more than a blur - but the overwhelming impression is of many, many rank Ds and Es, a smattering of born vampires, and the heavy power belonging to an A Rank.

"Shirabuki was making herself an army after all," Kuran muses. "Good. I can use that as justification to the Hunters and the Senate. Can you sense Yuuki's location?"

Zero shakes his head, eyes watching the road. "I'd need to get closer."

"You haven't asked me what's going to happen when we arrive," the pureblood observes. Zero shrugs. He hasn't trusted himself to ask. "I know you've had Seiren staking out the place, and you must have something up your sleeve. As for me, I'm going to find Yuuki and leave Shirabuki to you. I'm not confident in my ability to handle her on my own. When I've fought purebloods before, I've been lucky or gotten help. I'm not pushing it unless I have no other choice."

Chuckling, Kuran leans back in his seat and folds his arms. "Very sensible. Though I'm surprised you're not keeping a closer watch right now. Aren't you concerned she will attack us now?"

"Not in the least," Zero snorts. "Purebloods are dramatic bastards, and she's put way too much effort into arranging this. My gut says she'll wait until we come to her."

"Perfect." Zero can see Kuran's toothy smile from the corner of his eye.

Bowing his head beneath the weight of his failure, Zero promises himself that this time will be different.

"Yuuki-chan!" Shirabuki sings. Her whole being radiates bright energy, and she beams with confidence. She's regally dressed, and the circlet around her brow keeps every hair on her golden head in place. "It's time."

Yuuki raises her head, letting her loose hair fall away from her eyes. In the corner where Shirabuki can't see, Aido goes still, warned by whatever he sees in Yuuki's face.

Shirabuki doesn't seem to notice; Yuuki wipes her expression clean, hides the fire in her eyes behind empty politeness. Rising, she smooths her wrinkled skirts, taking the chance to finish concealing her feelings. In comparison to her enemy, Yuuki is bedraggled, lacking rest and dressed in borrowed clothes. It makes no difference.

"Thank you, Shirabuki-san," Yuuki says, raising her gaze to meet those blue eyes. "I'm ready."

Stepping out of the car, Zero barely needs his Hunter senses - the sensation of malice and danger is as sharp as needles driven into his skin. He shivers, hoping the motion will be dismissed as the
shock of winter's touch, but that hope is futile.

With a predator's keenness for vulnerability, Kuran comes to investigate, drawing close and touching Zero's arm with a considerate air. Mindful of watchers, Kuran's face is impassive and the line of his mouth unyielding, but Zero is close enough to see how his eyes are soft.

Zero doesn't deserve that look. Guilt swirls in the Hunter's belly. Disguising the motion as an affectionate nuzzle to Kuran's throat, Zero leans in and whispers, "She is watching us, isn't she?"

The pureblood hums, his mahogany eyes like dried blood beneath the moonlight. "We have been watched since we arrived. Within her home, her familiars scuttle beneath every leaf."

Zero's arms pebble with gooseflesh, remembering the phantom feeling of all those spider legs crawling over him.

Kuran hushes him, winding an arm around his waist and pressing Zero's head into the pureblood's shoulder.

Zero cannot refuse the comfort, even if it's meant for Yuuki. He feels like a wretched thief for stealing affection meant for her - affection he's receiving only because his mistakes took Yuuki away.

The past few days have been nothing less than surreal. Kuran has been so gentle, unguarded and affectionate in a way Zero has never seen before. There is no doubt in his mind that Kuran truly loves Yuuki, but experiencing for himself the extent of Kuran's devotion has made Zero respect the pureblood a little more.

If Kuran needs to use Zero as the target of his displaced affection, Zero won't protest. But every allowance leaves him wretched with self-loathing. Accepting Kuran's consideration is a punishment by itself, one Zero inflicts to remind himself of his culpability. In Yuuki's place, he can only atone by caring for Kuran as she would.

To escape his thoughts, Zero surrenders himself to his extra sense, stretching out as hard as he can beneath the bombardment of stimuli. "Yuuki is on the ground floor with Shirabuki, close to the front entrance."

He strains further, consciousness flickering under the strain, seeking more widely for threats. His control is still shaky; when his breathing stutters, Kuran rests a hand on his back to steady him.

The new information is worth the risk. Zero swallows, seeking purchase in the snow. "The level E swarm feels like it's beneath our feet. And they're moving in our direction."

"There must be underground rooms where she's hidden them," Kuran replies quietly. "If I was really as young as she thinks I am, commanding the swarm to overrun us wouldn't be a bad plan."

No individual Level E could overpower a pureblood. The mere idea was impossible. But with their creator Shirabuki nearby as the swarm attacked, they didn't need too. In this battle between purebloods, the swarm was a distraction, an obstacle manufactured to give Shirabuki an advantage. In great enough numbers, the swarm might force Kuran to leave openings Shirabuki could exploit. It was a familiar Hunter strategy - in the face of an overwhelming opponent, create your own trap - moments of vulnerability when the difference in ability could be overcome. All you needed was to get lucky once, and even the strongest vampire would die.

Zero does not believe Kuran would fall to such a tactic. But Yuuki will be there too, and if there is anything that the two of them can unanimously agree on, it's that Yuuki's safety is primary.
Therefore, allowing the Level E swarm to interfere is a risk neither of them can accept.

Even so, Zero hesitates, Kuran's warning ringing in his mind. Is he making the same mistake again? He is here to bring Yuuki home. If Zero goes looking for the Level Es, is he letting his Hunter nature distract him from his true priority?

As though he can hear Zero's thoughts, Kuran continues, "You'll need to be the one who deals with the ex-humans. Frankly, this is probably for the best. Splitting my attention between two people's protection is not ideal. This way Yuuki can be my sole focus."

The self-doubt lies heavy yet in Zero's breast. "Are you sure?" Zero says. Right now, he trusts Kuran's judgement more than his own.

"This is not like last time," Kuran assures him. "You're not going out of your way to look for trouble, you're cutting off the enemies already moving against us. But I'm not satisfied sending you by yourself. Seiren will accompany you - she can do little against a pureblood - and Nightshade as well."

"Very well," Zero says, taking one last breath, inhaling the smell of Kuran's cologne and their shared warmth. There's a choke point he spotted while he was surveying the building. If he stations himself there, Zero can hold the swarm at bay while ensuring he only faces a few Level Es at once. Zero has armed himself to the teeth for exactly such a scenario.

Kuran's arm around his waist tightens. "You are buying time, not trying to stop them. If you are being overwhelmed, retreat. Nothing is more important than your life. Do you understand?"

"Yes." Yuuki is Zero's most important person. If her protection means Zero leaves this place without exterminating the swarm, he can always have the Hunters return to sweep up the rest. "You'll find her, won't you?"

"I will." Kuran still hasn't released Zero from his hold.

Pressed up against Kuran's chest, Zero pulls against the pureblood's arm. Kuran frees him with what seems like reluctance. By the time Zero turns his head to peer into Kuran's face, Kuran looks as unperturbed as always. Zero shakes away the impression. He's just mistaken - they're both on edge and anticipating their confrontation with Shirabuki.

"I'm off," Zero says, turning his back and striking off toward one of the castle's side doors.

(Zero doesn't look back. If he had, he would have seen Kaname's hand outstretched toward him as he walked farther and farther out of the pureblood's grasp.)

Shirabuki taps her fingers on the arm of her carved chair while she speaks with the servant who's come to report Kaname and Zero's arrival, ignoring Yuuki who stands at her right hand.

"Let the Hunter do as he wants. He is unimportant, as long as Kaname-kun is coming to meet us as I've planned. Show him here when he enters."

The servant bows and withdraws, leaving Yuuki alone with her enemy. The two of them are waiting in the castle receiving room that's been prepared for her husbands' arrival. Matching velvet upholstered chairs are scattered in a semicircle around Shirabuki's larger, more ornate seat. The rest of the room is empty, save for a few tables placed against the wall where drinks and food have been prepared, and the thick carpets laid over the castle's wood floors. Instead of lamps or candles, the room is lit with natural moonlight through the wide glass windows lining the outer wall.
"Now, one last thing," Shirabuki croons, resting her chin in her palm and leaning toward Yuuki, who has not been offered a chair.

"Yes, Shirabuki-san?" Yuuki offers neutrally, sensing the ill intent and instantly on guard.

"Give me your blood," Shirabuki brazenly requests, smiling sweetly as an angel, "and I won't kill Zero-kun."

Yuuki gapes - to so brazenly demand something she has no right to! Yuuki was not raised with the normal pureblood reverence toward her own blood, but even she is shocked by such a blatant shattering of the most sacred vampire taboo.

Checking to see if Shirabuki is serious, Yuuki realizes by the hard glint of her eyes that Shirabuki meant every word. Her brain kicks into high gear. Shirabuki would gain more power if she drank Yuuki's blood - that absolutely cannot happen.

Casting around for a solution, Yuuki thinks quickly. She considers everything she's learned about her enemy - Shirabuki's assumptions about Yuuki, the other woman's upbringing and worldview - and feels her expression harden as she decides to call Shirabuki's bluff.

Anger lends her focus. Yuuki lifts her chin, and meets Shirabuki head on. "Shirabuki-san, do you imagine that I would offer my blood for the life of one ex-human, omega or not?"

Shirabuki laughs regretfully, and waves her hand as though clearing the air. "No, I would never. Still, you cannot fault me for seeing if you would be so foolish."

Yuuki smiles tightly past the tension in the air as the two women eye each other. For a moment, their masks have fallen away, and both openly study the other. Yuuki knows they are both considering the same possibility, and coming to identical conclusions. Shirabuki could try and take Yuuki's blood by force, but it would be a titanic battle, and Shirabuki might not necessarily succeed. Even if she did, breaking that taboo would damn her in the eyes of their peers.

"Of course not," Yuuki lies, dipping her head and reminding herself to stay meek and soft.

After all, it's not time yet.

Kaname lingers in the snow, instead of seeking out Shirabuki immediately. The delay has purpose; this way he can loosen his guard and follow Zero wearing Nightshade's pelt, sprinting beside the Hunter through the castle halls.

Kaname trusts Zero's experience to find the most advantageous place to fight, so Kaname needs to delay until Zero can get into position. Every advantage must be in place. A battle between purebloods is no ordinary fight, and nothing to be entered into lightly. Even for Kaname, it carries a level of risk, through Shirabuki's threat is nothing compared to those carefully orchestrated matches against Rido and Shizuka.

Through their link, he can feel Nightshade skid to a halt, standing guard beside Zero. The Hunter's found some kind of high-ceilinged, square open gallery, with no windows and one lone door on the opposite wall.

Recognizing his signal, Kaname begins to walk toward the castle doors, quickening his steps once Seiren slides effortlessly into the room alongside Zero as though she's always been there.

Observing Seiren's ability can give one a headache, if one pays attention too closely. Watching her
warp the space between points, to be *somewhere* one moment and *elsewhere* the next, is not something even a pureblood's brain can accept with ease. Not quite teleportation but a type of movement ability, it makes Seiren an outstanding Shadow when combined with her multitude of other talents, and Kaname could ask for no better fighter at Zero's side.

Nightshade's ears swivel, and he growls low in his throat. That's all the forewarning Seiren needs; she takes a ready stance, while Zero has already drawn Bloody Rose

Footsteps echo behind the closed door, and maddened shrieks rise between the panting groans of hunger. Nightshade catches the scent of blood, and the awakened Bloody Rose twines silver vines up Zero's arm, enfolding him like armor.

The door begins to shake in its frame, pounded on by unnatural strength.

Zero raises his gun, sighting down the muzzle. "Drop back," he calls out, "I don't want to hit you by accident. I'll take out as many as I can while I have a clear line of sight. Can you handle the leftovers?"

"I can," Seiren replies, taking position on the opposite side of Nightshade. This corridor is an excellent battlefield to maximize Zero's talents; it resembles nothing so much as a shooting gallery. Conceivably, the three of them could halt the Level E advance here until their stamina runs out.

There's a screech as the door hinges give. The wooden door splinters and falls inward, and the mad rush of starving Level Es streams into the room. Within the same split second, Bloody Rose thunders, and ash bursts where flesh once stood. As fast as Zero can pull the trigger, another ex-human leaps to take its place.

"Welcome, Kuran-sama. Please come this way," the butler attending Shirabuki's entry says, and Kaname lets his connection to his familiar fade, Zero's focused fury the last image he holds in his mind.

His Consort has things well in hand. Kaname need only concern himself playing Shirabuki's game. What a curious feeling, to have a heart torn in two directions, between two beloveds, to wish to be beside both and yet incapable.

Kaname hates it.

Yuuki, he thinks, and his longing overcomes him. Nearness makes her absence more apparent. But Kaname will see to it that Yuuki goes free, he promises himself. No matter what.

As the butler leads him through the doorway, Kaname staggers when he catches sight of his dear wife. She is the first thing in the room he lays eyes on, and the only thing that matters. Seeing her alive and whole, relief pours through the pureblood like cool water in a desert. The unforgiving pain in his chest eases and love takes its place.

But more than that, it's the shock of his wife's appearance that makes him stumble.

She is placed like a servant at Shirabuki's shoulder, but no one with eyes would mistake her for servile, not even wearing plain, mussed clothes and with unbound hair. There is a predator watching through his wife's eyes, and waiting patiently beneath her skin.

No, a *pureblood* - there, in the cool reserve, the watchfulness, the slight arrogance and hard won maturity beneath her diffident mask. She is resplendent in her hidden wrath, commanding and sublime. How can Shirabuki Sara not look in Yuuki's eyes and know her downfall stands before
Belatedly, Kaname notes the presence of Shirabuki and an unexpected guest - Aido, shuffled off to the corner like a naughty schoolboy. So this is where he's run off too. Kaname indulges himself, narrowing his eyes in irritated warning when the traitor dares lift his gaze off the floor.

Aido makes a noise like a small animal being stepped on and flinches away.

"Kaname-kun," Shirabuki gloats - Kaname can barely contain his disgust, nor his rage when he spies the anti-vampire dagger with its hilt wrapped in cloth that she's using to threaten Yuuki - "so nice of you to -"

"Where's Zero?" Yuuki speaks up as though Shirabuki had said nothing; her words are calm on the surface but carry an undercurrent of urgency. "Is he here?"

Both elder purebloods stare, Kaname curious, and Shirabuki enraged at how Yuuki's ruined her introduction.

"He is," Kaname replies. Aido's expression seems relieved, for some reason. Curious - and suspicious.


Kaname's body stiffens, all his expectations dashed - and Shirabuki's too, by the look of it. His first reaction is refusal. Leave Yuuki? Kaname wants to reject the very idea. It feels wrong to leave now, just when they're finally, finally reunited. Kaname yearns to go towards her, not farther away. He wants more than anything to embrace her, sweep her up and leave this place.

Something is clearly wrong - Yuuki would not demand Zero without reason. But still, how can he leave her behind? Kaname has always protected Yuuki. Always. How can be abandon her now to danger? And yet - and yet. How can he betray her trust? She is resolute. There is no chink in her flawless conviction. She would not ask unnecessary things. Bringing Zero must be both dire and vital.

Shirabuki twists in her seat, angling the Hunter dagger toward Yuuki, and Kaname quickly replies, "As you wish." He will have faith that Yuuki's path is correct. And there's always his failsafe...

Yuuki's expression relaxes minutely from its calm mask, and a smile's ghost passes over her face. "Go, don't stop, and come back with him as fast as you can. I love you."

"Yuuki-chan," Shirabuki grits through her smile, fingering the wrapped dagger, control cracked by her vexation. "I am the one giving orders here. Have you forgotten why?"

Yuuki's poised confidence never wavers. She surveys Shirabuki, completely indifferent. "I have not, Shirabuki-san. But we should have all the stakes in once place, shouldn't we?"

Kaname hears no more, hurrying to obey Yuuki's will. As he turns on his heel, Kaname makes a subtle hand gesture toward the windows once his body shields the motion from Shirabuki's sight. Then he dissolves, and takes flight.

"Alright, Yuuki-chan. Perhaps I'll allow this. After all, it's better if you have the chance to see what you might lose. But it will cost you."
Yuuki is still watching Kaname's bats stream away, longing to follow. Only when the last wing is out of sight does she turn her head.

Shirabuki’s anger is poorly hidden, and her malice overshadows her beauty. "Nothing in life is free. Aido Hanabusa is your friend, isn't he?"

After a beat, Yuuki nods. After Ruka, Aido is the one she is closest to within Kaname's inner circle. He has been her tutor and her confidante, once he made peace with her natural place closest to Kaname's side.

Aido is eying the two women from his corner, body loose and balanced on the balls of his feet. He's already caught on to whatever Shirabuki is hinting at.

"Indulge me," Shirabuki simpers, steepling her hands. "Between your friend and your Consort, which would you rather allow to die?"

Yuuki feels her face settle in a blank mask; silence blankets the room. She doesn't dare look at Aido in his corner. Feeling her way forward, she tries to detour around the dangerous topic. "That isn't necessary, Shirabuki-san. Kaname will be back soon, and we can continue on as before."

The blonde tsks, and shakes her head, sending her golden waves tumbling. "Take responsibility, Yuuki-chan. It was you who sent him away. It falls to you to entertain me during this unscheduled lull." A threat leaks into her voice. "So go ahead."

Yuuki stares straight ahead, wishing she could make time go faster. How far has Kaname gotten by now? She hopes Zero is close.

"I'm waiting, Yuuki-chan." The threat is less well hidden this time.

Should she lie? No, there isn't a right answer. Shirabuki has already decided what she's going to do, and she'll interpret Yuuki's answer however she wants. Yuuki can't change her mind; all she can do is stall until Kaname returns. Drawing herself up Yuuki takes a deep breath, and admits, "I would let Aido die."

Flinching, Yuuki can't take back the words hanging bluntly in the air. She dares a peek sideways at Aido. The noble doesn't look surprised, or hurt - simply resigned. A flush of anger begins to burn in Yuuki's chest.

Shirabuki claps, giggling under her breath. "There, was that so hard? Now," he voice hardens to steel, "if you want the chance to see Zero-kun alive, kill Aido Hanabusa."

The words throw Yuuki back on her heels. She lowers her eyes, scrambling for a solution. Kill Aido - clever, silly, loyal Aido?

Yuuki wants to be sick. She squeezes her eyes shut, clutching handfuls of her skirt.

"Yuuki-hime," Aido begins, but his voice trails away uselessly.

"Well, Yuuki-chan?" Shirabuki's voice pries. She's enjoying this, the bitch.

Yuuki recognizes her own truth. Yuuki would do it for Zero's sake. For Kaname's sake too. It would be a thousand times harder than it was with Shirabuki's boy, but for the sake of their happiness, Yuuki would sacrifice Aido's life. Anyone's life, so long as she received her happiness.

I really am a selfish person, Yuuki thinks, and opens hard eyes.
"Aido is a valuable servant, and not one easily replaced," she says, turning faint disapproval on Shirabuki's indifferent mien. "While I understand your boredom, isn't this a bit much for such a trivial game, Shirabuki-san?"

Shrugging, Shirabuki remains unmoved. "Perhaps you should have thought of that before inconveniencing me. I have to return the insult somehow, and losing a useful servant should suffice. Nothing personal, Yuuki-chan."

Yuuki smiles as if she understands, counting the minutes since Kaname's left. "Sorry, Aido-san," she says without looking at him. "It looks like things turned out this way."

"I have always been honored to serve Kaname-sama, and now you." Aido's voice is fearless, and completely earnest. "I don't regret it. Please don't hold it against yourself, Yuuki-hime."


Yuuki drags her feet, taking one slow step at a time toward Aido. The noble watches her come closer with nervous trepidation, but he doesn't try to run. "It's been good to know -"

"Hold on," Shirabuki's voice slices straight through, as menacing as Yuuki has ever heard her. She's risen from her chair, and her eyes are blue ice.

A chill runs over Yuuki's skin. Time's up.

"Why did you really want Kaname-kun to fetch Zero?" Suspicion laces her tone. "All that effort, just because you wanted to see him?" The woman steps closer, within striking range. "A little unusual, don't you think?"

"I do want to see Zero," Yuuki says truthfully.

"But that's not the only reason you called for him, is it?" Shirabuki counters shrewdly, seeing past her miscalculation. "I didn't think you were so clever. What's your little plan, Yuuki?"

"Don't be so familiar without invitation," Yuuki grits out, her irritation as being treated like an inferior grating on her patience.

"I'll do as I like," Shirabuki declares, striding toward them with rage clear in her features and murder in her eyes, knuckles whitened around the dagger handle.

Yuuki braces herself, but never has to follow through.

BAM!

The window shatters inward, and Shirabuki screeches, crumpling forward to clutch her right shoulder, wailing in agony. The anti-vampire weapon skitters away with a clatter.

The scent of pure blood fills Yuuki's nose; Aido claps his hands over his mouth as a crimson rose blossoms on Shirabuki's dress, growing larger and darker.

Shirabuki isn't healing, Yuuki realizes in shock. Hunter. Darting a hopeful glance over her shoulder, she's disappointed by empty treeline, the shooter already fled.

Drawn out by blood, a mad wildness rises up in Yuuki like a storm. She bares her fangs, sensing her enemy's weakness, her pureblood nature goading her on. Shirabuki is stronger, but her enemy is wounded, and will bleed out if that wound isn't treated.
A second, larger boom rocks the castle with a roar like an avalanche, knocking dust and mortar loose from the ancient stones. Yuuki cracks open their blood bond, and is met with Kaname's satisfaction, tinged with relief, shifting now to haste and focus.

He's found Zero. Good.

Yuuki seizes her advantage. She doesn't care about things like honor or looking good. Even if Shirabuki's already wounded, Yuuki will strike her without a qualm. People who intend to harm Kaname and Zero deserve nothing less. Shirabuki Sara nearly killed Zero, and brought Kaname here tonight to exchange Yuuki's life for his. By any means, whatever the opportunity, fairness be damned, Yuuki won't have any mercy.

Shock, and stunned pain still fill Shirabuki's uncomprehending face as Yuuki steps forward. The pureblood has probably never faced a Hunter before - never suffered a wound she couldn't heal instantly. Never faced anyone who could kill her.

Yuuki smiles. "You're wrong, by the way," Yuuki informs the crumpled blond.

Shirabuki just stares with wide, pained eyes, like she hasn't understood the sudden reversal. "Killing Kaname won't make you queen," Yuuki tells her gently.

A spark of understanding lights in Shirabuki's eyes, and she sluggishly tries to straighten. "Of course it will," she slurs, using her chair and her good arm to lever herself to her feet.

Yuuki smiles wider, spreading her hands, gathering her power. "Kaname is the uncrowned king, like our father before him. But I am the vampire queen. To take my place, you'll have to kill me."

Shirabuki stares for a moment, so incandescently enraged she cannot move. Then she throws herself forward, screaming in fury.

"Thank you, Kaname-sama," Seiren says, crouching elegantly next to her master's side as the three of them survey the rubble past a thick cloud of ash.

That's Zero's signal to tear into Kuran, now that the swarm's vanguard is buried beneath several tons of rock that Kaname pulled down. "What are you doing here? Where's Yuuki?"

"The Level Es will find a way around this," Kaname says in lieu of an answer. "We need to go. Yuuki needs you."

Zero gestures wildly. "For what? You saw her and you left without her?" Each word is successively more enraged.

"No time," Kaname demurs, every passing second a century, and grabs Zero's waist. "Seiren, follow."

"Yes, Kaname-sama." Both master and Shadow ignore Zero's struggles. Seiren blurs into motion just as the edges of Kaname's vision break apart, and all he can see is wings.

There's pain leaking through the bloodbond. Kaname is no believer, but even an atheist can pray.

Normally, Yuuki would have lost within the first few blows. Shirabuki is older by over fifty years, and that is an insurmountable gap for a pureblood of Yuuki's tender age, even one possessing the
strongest bloodline.

Thanks to Kaname's stratagem, that gap has been temporarily bridged. To a vampire, blood is power. Each second Shirabuki bleeds, more of her strength leaves her. She won't die - only a blow to the head or heart could do that - but she weakens, and that's keeping her from using the full breadth of her power.

That's also kept the damage contained to only one wing of the castle. The windows and doors were destroyed long ago, and the stone walls are more hole now than barrier. The servants have fled, or been used by Shirabuki as shields. Aido is huddled behind a slab of the roof, wisely keeping out of their way.

Yuuki and Shirabuki's clothes are in ribbons, the trappings of civility abandoned as the two vie against one another with all the rage and loathing they possess. The anti-vampire dagger has been thrown away in favor of their natural weapons - claws and teeth and raw power. Locked in combat, eyes blazing red, the two purebloods tumble over one another, claws tearing and ripping, sinking deep.

Shirabuki shrieks when Yuuki claws her face; the marks stay, her healing slowed by the bullet fragments lodged in her shoulder.

Her satisfaction short-lived, Yuuki screams in return when acid bubbles up beneath Shirabuki's touch, burning through skin, meat and muscle, all the way down to the bone. Leaping back, trying to recover from the agony, Yuuki reaches out with her power, grasps whatever debris is lying nearby, and hurls it at Shirabuki with the force of a cannon.

Chunks the size of boulders fly at the blonde, but Shirabuki is on guard, and dodges the larger ones, dissolving the smaller rocks into a spray of foul mist that froths and hisses when it meets the floor.

The wood underneath Yuuki's feet becomes a pool of burning, toxic sludge. Her eyes sting from the noxious fumes, but she pushes against the ground with her power, keeping herself suspended in the air until her back comes to rest against safe footing; she twists, using the wall for leverage, and launches herself back at her enemy, snarling.

Yuuki can feel her own blood mingled with her enemy's slicking her hands. She's high on adrenaline and hate, always on the attack, her combat training with Cross and Zero serving her well. Each narrow escape drives her single-minded frenzy wilder. The knot in her heart born of compressed hate, fear, resentment and anger has been cleaved open, and in her savagery she is relentless.

She can push herself to the edge without reserve, because Yuuki doesn't care whether she dies. The only thought left is the drive - no, obsession - the obsession to keep Shirabuki here and not allow a single free moment to activate her poison.


Dodge. Faster, always faster.

Shake the hair out of your eyes. Strike again.

Again. Savor the feeling of claws parting flesh.

Spit out the blood. Breathe, then **attackattackattack**.
Yuuki is vaguely aware of the gruesome wounds littering her body: the poisoned, blackened flesh sloughed off her bones, the heavy acid burns, the charred smell of burnt auburn hair. Locked in a sustained madness, all her pain is dampened by her loosed rage and the chemicals her body is pumping out to keep her on her feet.

But whatever sad shape Yuuki is in, Shirabuki is no worse. Besides the steady blood loss of the elder's shoulder, Yuuki has spared no mercy. Her enemy's body is covered in deep gauges reaching all the way down to the viscera, and her shattered bones are slow to heal. Great chucks of her golden hair have been lost to Yuuki's claws, and a lucky blow has temporarily left her without one ear and one eye.

There, an opening! Beneath Yuuki's next attack, Shirabuki falters, twisting to evade and retreat instead of meeting her strike.

Yuuki howls in joy, her predatory darkness triumphant. Beneath the blonde's fury and spite, Yuuki can sense the sweet fragrance of her enemy's doubt and fear.

In the back of Shirabuki Sara's mind, Yuuki knows, there's a new thought taking shape, and it goes something like, 'I really might die.' Yuuki has been human, and humans risk death with every breath. In every battle Yuuki has ever fought, she was the weaker, and it never stopped her before. But Shirabuki has never fought a true threat, her careful plans keeping her distant and untouchable, like a god before her followers' awe.

That's why Yuuki intensifies her efforts even further, using every trick, taking every risk, holding Shirabuki's attention with every bit of her strength so the elder cannot safely leave, cannot escape, knowing that every second counts.

Yuuki tears as the ground beneath the woman's feet, throws Shirabuki's body around like a doll, crushes waves of spiders with her power, blocks every new wall of poison or accepts the damage without giving an inch, driving Shirabuki back, further back, blinding her one good eye with clouds of her butterflies.

Yuuki's vision narrows. Pain means nothing, exhaustion means nothing; this vengeance is an insanity that will drive Yuuki to victory or death, until her body gives out or the flesh beneath her claws falls.

Distantly, her body screams warnings at her. She pants, unable to distinguish if her skin drips with sweat or with blood. Her throat burns with thirst; her fangs ache; her tendons feel like snapped strings.

She's reached the precipice of her abilities, Yuuki realizes. How disappointing.

Yuuki steps forward anyway, determined to battle Shirabuki until the last dregs of her strength burn.

Now the two of them are grappling at one another, snapping with gleaming fangs. Even boiling with all their mutual hate, neither of them can make any move to advance or retreat. The fight has devolved into messy contests of endurance and tenacity, when the first one to break loses.

Grimly, Yuuki swings with every ounce of her faltering strength -

- and Shirabuki is ripped away from her hold.

Yuuki smiles. Closing her eyes in relief, she sinks to the ground, the chirping and wingbeats of bats in her ears.
Kaname strides up behind her, one arm upraised as he crushes Shirabuki to the ground with the force of his will.

Yuuki lets her affection and relief wash through the bloodbond; Kaname answers with a wave of concern. He must have sensed her exhaustion. She tries to project confidence, and draw a veil over her body's painful sensations.

"Yuuki!" Zero's voice is full of fear.

Yuuki turns her head to reassure him, pasting on a lopsided smile, realizing she must look frightful.

Zero doesn't appear convinced, but it doesn't matter. He's here, and Kaname made it in time. Their enemy is trapped beneath Kaname's overwhelming power. This conflict is decided.

Yuuki sighs, and heaves her weight on her shredded palms. She's not finishing this on her knees. Zero's hands hook under her arms, helping her to her feet. Yuuki staggers a few steps, until her healing flesh can bear her weight again, then advances toward Shirabuki.

The blonde glares with her single visible eye, her cheek forced against the ground, struggling futility against Kaname's hold. At Yuuki's approach, she stills and bares her teeth.

Yuuki doesn't crouch, just looks down on her defeated tormentor. "I think it's time we talked, Shirabuki Sara."

A particular blend of pride and shame suffuses Kaname as he watches a battered yet narrowly victorious Yuuki take the lead and engage Shirabuki on her own ground.

It was remarkable, and a testament to Yuuki's will that she survived this episode, which is a colossal failure on Kaname's part. Even weakened and horribly wounded, Shirabuki likely outmatched her. There's blood crusted on Yuuki's skin, and her dress is so stained he can only see traces of the original color - proof he didn't imagine her pain earlier.

His beloved wife exudes a different air than the woman who stood before his eyes only a few days ago. Now Yuuki carries her mantle of authority and assurance without flinching. Last year, Kaname would never have imagined it could look so natural on her shoulders. She flies beautifully, he thinks with equal parts joy and grief.

"I think you're overestimating your position, Yuuki-san," Shirabuki coaxes. "I still hold Kiryuu Zero's life in my hands."

Kaname's alarm spikes, and he darts a quick glance at Zero, who looks back with equal surprise. The Hunter is worn from his earlier fight, but seems whole.

Shirabuki's visible blue eye flicks from one Kuran to the other, satisfied cunning plain in her gaze. Kaname's alpha raises its hackles and screams about maiming until the pureblood tamps it down.

Yuuki chuckles and crosses her arms. "No, I don't think so." Kaname wishes he could see her face, but the stubborn line of her shoulders is all he can make out. "Every poison has an antidote, even the one in Zero's blood."

Kaname's brow creases deeper, truly shocked for the first time tonight. How on earth had he missed that - and how did Yuuki find out?

Spider woman wants to hurt mate, the alpha hisses, trailing off into a desire for carnage. Kaname
doesn't disagree.

Shirabuki laughs long and hard. "That's your hope? I've never made any antidote for that poison, Yuuki-chan. It doesn't exist. Release me, and I'll allow Zero-kun to live a little longer."

"Your original intent was to kill Kaname, wasn't it?" Yuuki asks out of nowhere. "To trade Zero's life for mine, and my life for Kaname's."

Unsure where the question leads, Shirabuki stays silent. That would be a dangerous answer to confirm, through undoubtedly true.

"I thought so," Yuuki murmurs, and her spine stiffens with anger. "I know the antidote to the Shirabuki family's poisons. And you're going to give it to me."

"Impossible," Shirabuki says, a trace of alarm in her voice, "I told you, it doesn't - "

"It does exist," Yuuki cuts in. "Aido Hanabusa confirmed it for me, and he is one of vampire society's most prominent biochemists. He's studied several examples of your work, and I trust his expertise."

Shirabuki's mouth tightens. She's probably regretting that she allowed Aido to live right now. Kaname increases the pressure crushing her to the ground purely to salt the wound, and revises Aido's planned punishment to something less horrifying.

Yuuki begins to circle Shirabuki at a deceptively lazy pace. "You hinted at it yourself," she begins, tucking her arms behind her back. "'In every living thing lies its own destruction.' That's what you told me, wasn't it?"

Shirabuki has gone quiet and tense, discomfited by Yuuki's presence in her blind spots. Kaname's taught her well.

Yuuki halts, turning to face Kaname, Zero and Aido while hemming Shirabuki's prone body between them - likely so she can watch Shirabuki's reaction at the same time. She's confident, Kaname infers, but not certain of her conclusion. With these theatrics, she intends to goad Shirabuki into confirming her answer.

Yuuki's lips part in a smile. "You had good reason to be confident. After all, the antidote to the your special poisons is one of the rarest, most valuable substances in the world - the pure blood of the Shirabuki family."

Shirabuki cries out and jerks against Kaname's hold. Going stock still one moment while the whites of her eyes show, the next she claws and writhes in paroxysms of rage.

"Yes," Yuuki says implacably above the din, "you're going to give your blood to Zero."

Shirabuki howls - and behind Kaname's back, Zero gives a soft, choking sound.

Kaname can't turn to look, but Yuuki's horrible wail, Zero's pained noises, and the sound of his Consort's knees hitting the floor tell him enough.

Kaname struggles to master himself and his spike of innate raw terror, to keep from losing himself in his darkest thoughts. His alpha claws against the restraint of his will, roaring incoherently.

The next instant, Shirabuki flows out of his hold, severing herself into hundreds and hundreds of tiny spiders to escape.
Kaname's upper lip curls, and he bares his fangs. That uncapped, deep well of hate fuels him as he methodically snares every tiny spider in his mental grasp, and sutures them back together, one piece of Shirabuki's body at a time. He makes it as painful as possible - having one's form forcibly reconstructed is both invasive and frightening, as he knows from experience.

Yuuki rushes past him intent on Zero, trusting Kaname to hold their prize. He can hear Zero holding in screams behind his teeth, and adds extra savagery to the next piece of Shirabuki he sews into place.

 Appearing at his shoulder with Zero's spasming body in her arms, Yuuki storms toward the half-reformed Shirabuki with an implacable look in her eyes.

Obligingly, Kaname forces Shirabuki back into human form with one last burst of effort, leaving their enemy dazed and gasping on the floor.

Yuuki doesn't give the pureblood a moment to rest, laying Zero gently on the ground and then seizing the blonde by her ragged hair.

Sensing the imminent threat, Shirabuki struggles in a last ditch effort to escape, and it takes Yuuki all her remaining strength to wrestle their enemy's arms behind her back, using her weight to pin Shirabuki beneath her lower body. "Kaname, hurry, get Zero!" she orders.

Kaname is already falling to his knees beside Zero, whose nails are scrabbling against the floor as he tosses and turns. The Hunter's chest heaves as he coughs and chokes, eyes misty with pain and tears. "Burns," he breathes out as Kaname lifts him into his lap, supporting his head and neck.

"Hush, precious," Kaname soothes, pushing sweat-soaked hair of of his boy's eyes. "I need you to stay with me." His eyes meet Yuuki's, equal terror and resolve reflected there. A simple taboo means nothing in comparison to Zero's life they silently agree, and Yuuki half-drags, half pushes Shirabuki's body, thrashing and shouting the whole way, over within Zero's reach.

"Stop moving or I will rip your limbs off," Yuuki promises coldly, and Shirabuki goes limp, except for the resentful, disbelieving look in her eyes.

"The power in my blood might tear him apart," she coaxes reasonably. "Let me go and I'll stop the poison instead."

"No," Yuuki rejects, positioning Shirabuki's throat above Zero's mouth like a sacrificial goat awaiting the knife. "Zero has survived more than your pathetic blood, Shirabuki Sara. You're a liar, and I'm not letting you hold his life over our heads anymore."

"Are you serious?" Shirabuki says at the touch of Zero's fangs, as though she can't understand what's about to happen, her voice rising in mixed panic and disbelief. "I'm a pureblood! You'd offer me up - for a Level D? For a Hunter? You'd shed my blood for that?"

"Always," Yuuki says, and slaps Shirabuki to shut her up. "Zero, can you drink for me, please?"

An outburst of pain escapes from Zero's lips - he may not even understand Yuuki is speaking to him. He breathes with difficulty, in shallow, uneven bursts, and his skin holds a grey cast.

Kaname tilts their Consort's head to study his glazed lavender eyes, peppered with burst veins, and a trail of blood leaks from Zero's nose.

The movement startles a pained cough from the Hunter, and a bloody mist spatters Shirabuki's cheek. The pureblood's nose wrinkles in disgust.
"That's fine, Zero," Yuuki continues in a voice like iron, "I'll do it for you." Then she takes one sharp claw, and slits Shirabuki Sara's throat down to the bone. Shirabuki thrashes, and a red waterfall gushes down onto Zero's open lips.

Kaname strokes his Consort's soft throat and jaw, encouraging him to swallow. After the first taste of hot blood, Zero strains upwards with an opened mouth and swallows as fast as his throat can bob, licking the mess off his cheek and lips.

Through the agony of waiting to see if the poison is flushed clean, Kaname reaches out and touches Yuuki's shoulder, reassured by her solid strength. He keeps up his gentle stroking, and studies Zero for any sign of improvement.

"Is he okay?" Yuuki asks, watching Zero as though she's afraid he'll disappear.

Slowly, the lines creasing Zero's face ease, and he gains more pink in his cheeks beneath the coating of blood. His heartbeat steadies and evens out, and the pain fades from his scent.

"It seems so." They exchange smiles brimming with affection and relief.

_Mate is so alluring covered in blood_, Kaname's alpha chirps. Kaname would like to clean Zero with his tongue, but tasting Shirabuki's ghastly ichor is too disgusting a thought to imagine.

Zero relaxes with a little sigh, sinking back into Kaname's hold and ignoring the blood still dripping sluggishly over his face from Shirabuki's healing throat. His hunting clothes are ruined - yet another wardrobe casualty this evening - and Kaname vows he will buy Yuuki and Zero a dozen more apiece, awash in the relief of knowing both of them have survived, blissfully whole. Zero will need to see a doctor immediately, and Yuuki needs to feed as soon as can be arranged. But first...

Kaname's eyes light on Shirabuki, and flick to Yuuki, who returns the scrutiny. He nods, giving her the choice of what happens next.

"We need to kill her," Yuuki says bluntly. Shirabuki shrieks and jackknifes underneath her - evidently her throat has healed enough to make noise again.

Kaname raises an eyebrow, not disagreeing. "When a pureblood dies, there are always difficult questions. How will we explain this to the Senate?"

Yuuki scoffs. "Easy. She was planning to feed a mind control drug to the entire vampire population through the blood tablet supply and enslave them. Pureblood or not, the Senate won't take that well. And she's got a level E army in her basement. Does that cover it?"

"That would do it," Kaname agrees, pressing a hand to his temple. Mother night, what a mess. What has his information network been doing? Skip-rope and marbles?

"And Aido?" Kaname says, a dawning realization overcoming him.

"It's just what you're thinking," Yuuki confirms, digging her knee into Shirabuki's back. "He's been under her orders for a while."

Damn. He probably owes Aido an apology, doesn't he? Kaname sighs, looking down at the cause of all their trouble.

"We could give Aido her blood too, to neutralize the compulsion drug…?"

Kaname is already shaking his head sharply. "Saving Zero's life is one thing, but Aido would never
be forgiven for forcibly taking pure blood. But you have a point about the vampires she's controlled."

"Kuran-sama?" Aido squeaks, emphasizing the formal mode of address.

Kaname tilts his head to the side and raises an eyebrow.

"With Kiryuu-sama's help, I might be able to synthesize an artificial antidote. Barring that, he now possesses the antidote in his blood, and drinking a D's blood isn't forbidden—ack!" Aido scrunches up his shoulders and tries to look small beneath the acidic glares both Kurans are sending him. "Or not that second part...I'll definitely create an antidote for Kaname-sama!"

"See that you do," Kaname sighs. The pureblood digs into the pocket of his overcoat, and tosses Aido his phone with Seiren's number already dialing. "Go outside and stand watch. And please tell Seiren to send a cleaning crew. I want anything dangerous destroyed before the Senate's dogs get here."

Aido clutches the phone, eyes shining brightly at being given an important responsibility. "Yes, Kaname-sama!"

The three purebloods maintain silence as Aido's footsteps fade away.

"I appreciate your attempt at privacy," Shirabuki says. Kaname can detect no hint of dishonesty in her tone. On the contrary, the only thing he can read from her face is self-deprecation.

Yuuki tightens her grip in warning, but Shirabuki makes no move to escape.

Kaname checks Zero's pulse, then lifts the Hunter up, moving him away from Shirabuki's reach. Zero seems to have entered some kind of reverie as his body heals from the poison and tames the power gained from Shirabuki's pure blood into equilibrium within himself. The Hunter's eyes flutter open, but his gaze is vacant; Kaname smiles and soothes him anyway.

Laying Zero down at a safe distance, Kaname wipes any trace of affection from his face, and turns back to their execution.

"I suppose there are worse deaths," Shirabuki says. Yuuki has cautiously kept up her vigilance, but even as Kaname approaches, the blonde gives no sign she intends to fight. "Better to be killed in defeat than kill yourself in despair. Yes," she reflects, a shadow passing over her face, "I strove for the heights. I knew when I brought you here it might not end as I hoped."

"It was a good plan," Kaname acknowledges. "You were simply overmatched. You never would have succeeded, but if you had managed to box me in, I probably would have traded my life for Yuuki's as you wished."

Shirabuki shrugs as best she can. "At least I won't have to see Takuma grow with that man's child. I should have killed him first." Bitterness and the glint of frustrated obsession lie in her face.

"I would never have allowed it," Kaname says. "Yuuki, can you pull her torso up? I need to reach her heart."

Yuuki challenges him instead, her grip tightening on Shirabuki's wrists. "No. I'm going to kill her."

Kaname blinks, and takes a second look at his wife. "You're not usually willing to kill anyone. You dislike it."
"I hate it," she says. "But this is an exception. She tried to kill you and Zero. This is my desire, and something I've resolved to do."

Weighing her words, Kaname delays judgement. If doing this will harm her spirit, he needs to prevent it. But looking in her stern face, he bows to the will he sees written there. "Switch with me. I'll restrain her."

Shirabuki makes one last, serious attempt to flee as Kaname approaches her, knowing that she won't escape his hold. Yuuki grimly hangs on, refusing to be thrown off no matter how hard Shirabuki kicks and screams.

Kaname plucks the defeated pureblood out of his wife's hold, one hand holding her wrists behind her back, the other holding her aloft by the neck. Shirabuki yields, deprived of the chance to bite and scratch, her power still held in check by Kaname's greater strength.

That doesn't mean she goes quietly. "Killing me won't end your troubles," she taunts. Kaname can hear the smirk in her voice. "This was only the first step in my plans. Alive or not, I've set too much in motion already. Not even my death can stop what's coming."

"Whatever you've done, we'll face it together," Yuuki promises.

Shirabuki tilts her head in supplication as Yuuki steps close. "You don't even want my blood, Yuuki-chan? You could add my power to your own."

Yuuki looks Shirabuki right in the eye. "I don't need it."

Kaname wishes he could see the rage in Shirabuki's face, though he can feel it in the way her body goes taut.

"Goodbye, Shirabuki Sara." Yuuki draws her hand back, and drives her claws through their enemy's heart.

Shirabuki makes a noise like all the breath's been punched from her body. The overpowering aroma of blood settles heavily in his nostrils, and Kaname releases his grip on her throat, letting Shirabuki's body drop to the floor. Shirabuki collapses, making no effort to save herself from the fall.

The two of them stand and witness as bit by bit, Shirabuki Sara disappears from this world. One single blue eye watches them to the end, still full of malice. The death of a pureblood is strangely beautiful, a transformation of flesh to diamond glass, scattering into the ether. Left in her place is a cloud of glittering dust, and a pool of dark blood.

"It's done," Yuuki pronounces.

She seems subdued, and Kaname willingly indulges his desire to hold her. They stand together like that for a long time.

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Yuuki has taken Zero to recover somewhere more comfortable, draped in Kaname's overcoat to cover her ruined clothes. Seiren has taken it upon herself to corral the remaining castle staff, and Aido is waiting in the foyer to meet Kaname's cleaning crew when they arrive.

So Kaname is alone among the ruins when he hears the crunch of glass under heavy boots. He shakes off his contemplation, turning to meet his visitor. Their eyes meet across the battlefield, and Kaname has an inkling the two are recalling the same forbidden deal.
"Interfering this way is beyond illegal. Why would I take that risk for you, pureblood brat?"
Slouched against the wall, Yagari puffs on his cigarette and rolls his one remaining eye.

Kaname, wearing his human-form familiar, stands straight in his immaculate overcoat and turns his palm up in a beseeching gesture. "Zero's presence will explain any traces of Hunter activity. And you are experienced enough to conceal your trail."

"Don't sidetrack me. We don't ever, ever get involved when purebloods start trying to kill each other. You think I'd break thousands of years of Hunter safeguards for a squabble between you and Shirabuki? You're not stupid."

"I am not asking you to kill her - in fact, I am specifically asking you to keep her alive," Kaname counters. "You are insurance. If I have my way, no one will ever know you were there."

Yagari snorts. "Details, Kuran."

Lifting his chin, Kaname regards Yagari evenly. Hunters required different tactics than vampires; Zero has taught him that, and Yagari is much like Zero. "As for why I believe you will help me, it's because I know the difference between you and Cross," he finally says, settling on the particular form of truth he will use.

Yagari's brows come together, and he takes the cigarette out of his mouth. "What?"

"Zero has impeccable instincts. While he trusts you completely, he's never quite extended Cross the same unquestioning trust. You both love Zero as a son. But Cross Kaien loved Juuri and Haruka too, and he carries their shared dream. Cross believes in our mutual coexistence and has dedicated his life to that goal. Given a choice that pits Zero and that dream in conflict, I am not convinced Cross would chose Zero's personal good over the good of many."

The Hunter's mouth tightens. Grinding his cigarette under his shoe, Yagari squares his stance, spoiling for a fight.

"You, on the other hand...It wouldn't even be a question with you, would it?" Kaname allows a smile to play along his mouth. "You've had many students, but only two apprentices. You would do anything for them, wouldn't you?" Seemingly by accident, Kaname's fingers brush his temple, invoking the spectre of Yagari's missing eye and lost fiance.

Yagari has gone dead still. Kaname allows the moment to tick past, content to wait. Then the corner of Yagari's mouth turns up. "Hmmm. We're not so different, are we ex-student?"

Kaname blinks. "I'm sorry?"

That's enough to set Yagari laughing uproariously. The Hunter waves his hand in Kaname's direction. "I hope I'm there when you finally realize what I mean. You have a deal. Send me the gear and the data, and I'll be in position at the right time."

Feeling as though he's missed something crucial, Kaname nods a quick farewell and allows his familiar to dissolve, withdrawing to his own body.

"I'm returning this," Yagari says, hefting the sniper rifle case off his shoulder and placing it gently on the ground.

"Thank you," Kaname says. "I will make sure it's repatriated to the Hunters as part of the investigation into Shirabuki's death. Your involvement will not be known."
"Zero and Cross' girl?" the Hunter grunts, his directness betraying his care.

"Both fine. Things become considerably more complicated than we initially thought. Zero can tell you later. For now, you need to be far away when our supporters arrive. Zero will be angry with me if he knows I involved you."

Yagari laughs, for some reason, and looks considerably more at ease afterwards. "Take care of them, Kuran."

"I will," Kaname replies to Yagari's retreating back. The truth feels odd as it passes his lips.

Zero claws his way back to consciousness, fighting every step of the way, and surfaces in a haze of dim memory and certainty that he needs to help with - something?

He takes inventory of his body while his mind sorts through scattered impressions. All his limbs are accounted for, and someone has removed his chestplate and coat, but left his weapons and holsters. Beside the expected dull pain, there's a strange sensation that Zero recognizes but cannot place, an over-full, an electric buzzing feeling coursing through his veins.

Then memory clicks in place, and a moment of sheer panic hits him - the last thing he remembers is confronting Shirabuki with Kuran.

"Ssshhh," a woman's voice soothes, and a hand strokes his hair.

"Yuuki," he croaks. His throat feels raw, and he coughs. Where is Shirabuki? Where's Kuran?

"You were poisoned, but everything is fine now. I killed Shirabuki."

What? Zero cracks his eyes open. It takes a moment for his blurry vision to focus, and he blinks to clear the gunk out of his eyes.

"You cut your hair," Yuuki says fondly. She's seated beside him, beautiful as ever, dirty but unharmed.

"Yeah. Seemed like a good time," Zero mutters, wishing he currently had the motor skills to touch her. He squints. "What happened to your hair?"

Yuuki touches the hacked-off ends of her auburn hair self-consciously. "Um. Quite a lot of it got burned off, and I decided to just even it out. Kaname says there's a trick to growing out your hair but my control isn't good enough yet." She puffs her cheeks out childishly and fluffs her hair. "I kind of like it. I haven't had my hair this short since Cross Academy."

Zero huffs, his eyes falling closed again. "...I feel weird. Different."

"We can talk about that later," says a new, deeper voice. Kuran. Another, larger hand touches Zero's cheek. "Rest now. We'll be going home soon."

"Fine," he says mulishly. "But I'm getting pretty tired of this damsel in distress routine."

A low, rich chuckle and a high pealing laugh interweave.

"Noted," Kuran says. "Though I think our sweet boy makes a lovely rescued princess, don't you agree my dear?"

Yuuki makes an enthusiastic noise. Probably dreaming of the outfits she'd make Zero wear. If Zero
had any energy, Kuran would be getting the stink eye right now.

"Enough pouting. Go to sleep. Yuuki will stay with you." Then Kuran must do something, because Zero suddenly feels very heavy, and easily slips down into dreamless sleep.

Chapter End Notes

And there we have it. I hope this was a satisfying conclusion to everyone's most detested villainess, and I'd love to hear your impressions and feedback, especially if you think I could have improved anywhere. This is still my first story, and I'm still learning.

To be honest, when I first outlined this story, the original plan was for Shirabuki to survive, but as I was writing the chapters I realized that didn't fit anymore. So I decided to take a chance and follow what my characters were telling me. Fear not! Shirabuki's influence on this story is far from over, and our trio will be feeling the shadow she's cast far in their future.

For the record, I do not believe that Sara is a natural psychopath. To me, she is what happens when absolute power is taught that it is above the rules, and that other people aren't really worth considering - that they don't even count as people at all. A poisonous kind of self-centeredness taken to its logical extreme.

The pureblood power of command is very similar to a fairytale geass. Once given, the order is absolute unless cancelled out by a new command. The only exception is that an ex-human will always obey a command from their master before obeying a command from another pureblood. Kaname tells Yuuki that it's better to rule through loyalty than the power of command, and he's right. A pureblood's power of command has a significant loophole - its effects depend on the exact wording used when issuing the command. The receiving vampire must carry out the order, but they interpret on their own how to do so. Very abstract commands can have unpredictable results. The more precise the command, the less wiggle room, and the more likely it is the issuer will gain the result they desire. Plus, a command doesn't necessarily change the target's feelings - unless ordered not to, they may be able to deliberately turn the results more or less favorable.

Take for example a seemingly simple command: bring me a sandwich. The receiver could make your favorite sandwich with their own hands. They could steal one, or buy one. If they hated you, they could bring you a sandwich made of toenail clippings and mouldy bread. This is why Kaname tends to use precise short-term orders, and also why Shirabuki used commands to forget on her agents. The power of command is also very poor when used to alter emotions because a command is all or nothing, and the new emotional state is obviously imposed.

Next chapter: the porn you all deserve. Yuuki recovers from her captivity. Kaname cleans up the mess from Shirabuki's death and reconsiders his conversation with Ouri. Zeo stares down the barrel of his upcoming time in season.
I'm terribly sorry to have worried you all. This chapter is about the length of a chapter and a half compared to my usual word count, so it took me a bit longer to finish.

Yagari taught ethics to the Night Class in the original VK manga, so that's why Yagari called him his student last chapter. Yagari still has no idea Kaname is the Ancestor of the Kuran, so by Yagari's reckoning he's the elder.

This chapter references events from chapter 5, so if it's been awhile you can always go back and refresh your memory before you start reading.

"Things are proceeding well," her husband says, effortlessly holding the room's attention without raising his voice. "What is our progress purging Shirabuki's tainted blood tablets?"

A European operative Yuuki doesn't recognize stands and begins to report. Seated at Kaname's right hand, Yuuki surveys the conference room at the Kuran business offices, spotting many foreign faces and making a note to introduce herself later.

Truthfully, her attention has been wandering the whole meeting. The way everyone looks at her - Rosehill's staff, Seiren's spies, their allies, even the inner circle - it's changed. Yuuki's caught them standing straighter as she passes, studying her when they think she's not looking, retaking her measure.

They don't dismiss her as Kaname's less-skilled wife anymore. By killing Shirabuki Sara, Yuuki is no longer an afterthought. Now they regard her with respect in their eyes. And it's not just the nobles. Kaname defers to her more often, seeks out her opinions, glances at her before making decisions on their behalf. Being taken seriously, as a force in her own right, is something Yuuki finds both gratifying and bewildering. Part of her - and not just the pureblood part - savors the acknowledgement. Yuuki understands now. This is something she's wanted for a long time.

So she sits straighter, and bends herself to the the task of committing every detail to memory, storing up questions for Kaname later so she can be taught the finer points of how the game is played.

Now that their joint ruler is dead, European vampire society and Europe's criminal underworld are in chaos. Kaname is directing resources toward smoothing transitions of power, but even he can't prevent the human and vampiric turf wars breaking out. Seiren's network is stretching itself to the limit, and the human authorities are having a field day dismembering the black market contacts they've discovered. Adding to the strain, Kaname's agents keep finding more boltholes where Shirabuki's stored her nasty surprises.

For now, their focus has been on pacifying Shirabuki's servants, a large number of whom have been rounded up and held until something can be done with them - if anything can be done. Shirabuki's ex-servants still lie under their mistress' thrall. A pureblood's commands remain in force after their death, and Shirabuki's drug makes her orders unbreakable by another pureblood.
And all that is just the easy part. The Senate has been quiet so far, preoccupied with information
gathering and grabbing any stray advantages from Shirabuki's death. Kaname thinks they're
deciding how to proceed, but the Kurans will need to deal with the consequences of killing another
pureblood soon.

Yuuki frowns unconsciously, and their police liaison darts a nervous glance in her direction. She's
more careful to keep her thoughts off her face after that, and the meeting ends with no more slips.

"Yuuki-hime." Ruka curteys for their watchers, even through neither of them care for the
formality. Ichijo Takuma has charisma, but Ruka's mastery of protocol has always been her
strength. "May I speak with you?"

Ruka must have planned this, because she knows exactly which empty conference room to drag
Yuuki into. The noble doesn't speak until the two of them are ensconced in comfortable chairs, and
Yuuki's kicked off her shoes and tucked her feet up underneath her.

"I thought you could use a break. How have you been?" Ruka opens, offering Yuuki a melon soda
which Yuuki cracks open immediately as a way to delay her answer.

"Zero is -"

"Yuuki-hime, I asked how you are," Ruka delicately reminds her and adds, "And I'm asking as your
friend."

Yuuki worries her bottom lip between her teeth. "I'm having fewer bad dreams."

It makes her feel small and weak to admit she isn't perfectly fine, that she hasn't recovered as
quickly as she pretends - to admit that there is any damage beyond the physical to recover from at
all. A few times, Yuuki has been going about her day, and suddenly something she experienced
with Shirabuki will come flooding back, and she can't help it - a panic overtakes her, and she'll
stand stock still, sweating and hyper aware until the memory passes. But Zero and Kaname rarely
leave her alone, and a great deal of cuddling and spoiling has helped the memories recede and
those incidents happen less often.

"That's good to hear." Ruka says, sincere and firm at once, taking a sip of her tea. "You do
understand it's fine to admit it?"

Yuuki makes a face where Ruka can't see her. "Not in public." She's meant to be invincible. She
won, they won, and killing Shirabuki should erase her past fear and helplessness and pain.

"Not in public," Ruka agrees, "but that's why I'm asking you here."

Yuuki gulps her soda, reveling in the chance to be graceless. With Ruka, who's seen her at her
clumsy human worst, Yuuki never has to worry about ruining her image. Ruka enjoys the same
privilege with her in return.

"Sometimes I think I must have dreamed all this," she gestures around herself, "and I'm still back in
her house. I did things - said things - I can't undo."

"Do you wish you could?" Ruka says the words without judgement.

"Not exactly." And that's the problem. Yuuki treated Shirabuki's servants just like dolls, just
like Shirabuki treated them, carelessly manipulating their very minds. And she's not sorry, and she
knows she'd do it again. So what does that make Yuuki?
"How is Aido?" Yuuki asks, catching herself touching the ends of her short hair. The feeling still surprises her, like her mind hasn't quite caught up to her body.

Ruka shrugs, going along with the change of subject. "Holed up in his lab, working on creating an antidote. You know him."

Yuuki flushes with guilt. In a cruel inversion of his earlier bounds, Aido has been avoiding Rosehill. Like all the vampires Shirabuki's drug controlled, they can't know if she buried any more hidden commands in Aido's mind. Until they can be certain Aido isn't compromised, he's effectively cut out of the Kurans' secrets. "Is he okay?"

"He's not unaffected, but he's burying his feelings in his work."

"Oh."

"You should talk to him," Ruka suggests neutrally.

Yuuki runs her hands over her face. "I know, Ruka-sempai, I just don't - what do I say?" She'd told the truth when she said she'd choose to kill Aido. How were you supposed to work past something like that?"

"Hanabusa is your friend too," Ruka points out. "Your actions saved his life. And you both know that was not a normal situation."

Yuuki shakes her head. "That doesn't mean it didn't count."

"I'll come with you, if you want."

"No. But thank you." Aido deserves to hear it from Yuuki alone. She's finished running away because she's scared.

"If you want to talk, I'll listen," Ruka says. "But if not, I brought cake. Would you like some?"

"What kind?"

"All of them," she replies, proffering a very large bakery box and a hamper of silverware, utensils and napkins. "Surely Kaname-sama can do without you for a little while?"

Despite herself, Yuuki perks up. "You're a good friend, Ruka-sempai."

When Kuran steps into the lunarium, Kaito is already drawn up tight, glaring with his hackles raised.

Zero sighs. Kaito hasn't forgiven the Kurans for deflowering Zero, revealing it publically and then leaving the Hunters to deal with Cross' weepy dramatic breakdown. Now he's even less enthused after Zero's most recent near-death experience.

Completely unaffected by Kaito's animosity, the dark-haired pureblood acts as through Zero is the only one here. "May I join you?"

"It's your house," Zero says, yanking on Kaito's sleeve to remind him not to do anything dumb. "Where's Yuuki?"

"Visiting with Ruka. She'll join us later," Kuran replies, trailing his fingers through green fronds.
Suppressing the instant stab of worry, Zero reminds himself that Yuuki will be fine by herself, she's not going to be snatched away again, and she killed the last person who tried. It doesn't help much, and he knows his answering smile is tight.

If Zero isn't mistaken, from the slight tension in his husband's shoulders Kuran feels the same. "How are you feeling tonight?" the pureblood inquires.

Zero keeps his tone light. "Well, I've stopped breaking everything I pick up - I forgot that adjustment after the last time I drank pure blood. My headache is only punching me instead of stabbing my skull. Plus I managed to get out of bed and I only sort of ache. I'd say I'm doing great."

Zero dreads testing his extra sense, because all his vampire powers have been kicked up a notch and it's going to be a painful process to rebuild his control, but he's not going to mention that in front of Kaito. His almost-brother worries too much.

"That's good to hear," Kuran says with genuine warmth, taking Zero's hand and kissing his knuckles. "Thank you for staying with Zero, Takamiya-san. May I speak to him alone for a moment?"

Kaito's eyebrows furrow, and he opens his mouth to refuse - he's been spending too much time with Master recently - but he reluctantly yields when Zero gives him a sharp poke with his elbow. "I can defend my own honor, and Misao will be mad if I don't return you in one piece."

"Fine," Kaito snarls, and gives Kuran another glare for good measure as he brushes rudely past.

Zero rolls his eyes, the throbbing in his temples making him short-tempered. He winces when the door slams, and rubs his forehead, trying to relieve some of the ache. "What did you need?"

Kuran doesn't seem to hear, preoccupied with surveying Zero's current state. "I am beginning to understand why Yuuki likes seeing you in nice clothes. Your current rags are distasteful."

Unbelievable. "These pajamas are comfortable. Misao bought them for me when she heard what happened, and it would be rude not to wear them." Even if they are oversized and hideously patterned, Zero doesn't treat other people's gifts without care.

"I prefer you in silk." Kuran seems completely earnest, not a hint of teasing at all.

"Why are you such a pervert," Zero grits out, pinching the bridge of his nose.

"I like seeing you wear things that are worthy of you. Is that so wrong?" Kuran says, kneeling at Zero's feet, catching Zero's hands and looking up at Zero through his eyelashes.

Zero flounders, completely out of his depth. "It's creepy when you're nice."

Kuran raises one eyebrow.

"You're being really weird," Zero blurts. It's true. Kuran has kept the soft, indulgent attitude that began while Yuuki was taken, and it's so strange. The two of them have worked up to a semi-friendly rapport, and a certain measure of trust, but nothing like this - whatever this is. Zero expected it to stop as soon as Yuuki returned, but if anything Kuran's behavior has gotten more incomprehensible. Zero can't figure out why the sudden change, though he suspects Kuran is doing it to make Yuuki happy. That's the only explanation that makes sense. Wait, Zero's going into season soon. Maybe this is an alpha thing?

It must be both, Zero decides in shock when Kuran wraps both arms around Zero's waist and
nuzzles Zero's hip, taking deep breaths of Zero's scent while half-draped over Zero's lap.

"You are my Consort, Zero," Kuran says. Like that explains anything. Does Kuran mean he's acting this way because he's expected to?

Zero flounders for a moment, then tentatively rests one hand on the back of Kuran's head, the same way he would with Yuuki.

"Pureblood hungers cannot be quenched. They drive us, make us who we are, but their depth also makes lesser vampires uncomfortable. Even with Yuuki, displaying affection in front of others must always be restrained. Appropriate. We both have to remain dignified and controlled, as befits our rank and power."

Kuran tilts his head up to meet Zero's eyes, a slight smile on his lips. "But you are the exception. With our omega, people find it natural that we lose control. They understand alpha instincts, and it reassures them to know we are no different in that respect. I can be as indulgent as I wish with you, and no one will bat an eye or take it as a sign of weakness. On the contrary, the Kuran family is well known for being fond of their omegas - Kuran Nagisa once cut off his sleeve rather than wake Aileya, who was asleep and resting her head upon it."

"I understand," Zero says, fingers settling more firmly in Kuran's hair. If this is something Kuran needs, Zero can reciprocate. The Hunter won't reject Kuran's efforts to maintain his reputation or satisfy his alpha instincts. Zero's body belongs to the Kuran family, and they've been more than accommodating toward his problems. It's only fair Zero return the favor. "What did you need to talk about?"

"Yuuki's birthday is coming up on the 25th."

Zero's hand pauses. "I thought you two don't celebrate your birthdays?"

"We don't," Kuran chuckles. "Not our real ones. I don't know mine, and I refuse to use the birthday of Haruka and Juuri's son. Yuuki knows her true birthdate, but she feels more connected to the day Cross chose for her when he didn't know the actual date."

"Oh," Zero murmurs, feeling warmth bloom. "I assumed she'd stopped."

"The memories are too dear to her," Kuran assures him with a smile.

"So we're doing something for her?"

"Of course, purely informally. I thought you might have some ideas?"

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"I heard you had something to discuss with me?" Yuuki says, going up on her toes to kiss her husband.

In return, Kaname pulls her against his body in a firm embrace, as though making up for lost time. "I did, yes," her husband chuckles, nipping at her ear, "but I am finding it difficult to remember."

"Think harder," Yuuki teases, them flushes when she realizes the unintentional innuendo.

Kaname smirks, but doesn't rise to the bait. "Your unofficial birthday dinner. Since Zero will be in season before the 25th, possibly as early as the 14th, I thought we might celebrate this weekend. It could double as a victory celebration."
Yuuki steps back, disentangling herself. "The one gift rule still stands. You buy me too much stuff already."

"As you wish," Kaname agrees easily. He always cheats and gets her more gifts anyway, insisting that normal presents don't fall under the rule. Really, Yuuki just wants to make things fair since Kaname doesn't have a designated day when she can spoil him.

"I'll hold you to that," Yuuki smiles, taking Kaname's hand and squeezing it. "Can we go out?"

"Anything you please. Shall I invite the inner circle, and perhaps have Cross attend?"

Yuuki's nose wrinkles. "Maybe a family dinner one night and a private dinner the next? Just for the three of us?"

"Of course," Kaname assures her. "Allow Zero and I make the arrangements."

Yuuki feels a grin sneak over her face. Kaname eyes her - is that a touch of apprehension she spies? A giggle bubbles up in her belly. "Speaking of Zero…"

Unhidden to Yuuki's scrutiny, Kaname's apprehension turns to full wariness - she's too experienced at picking out Kaname's moods behind his collected expression.

"Don't think I haven't noticed the way things have changed between the two of you!" she teases, swinging their joined hands.

Uncharacteristically, Kaname is silent, and Yuuki pauses, studying him. "Did something happen?"

"Not between us, no," Kaname answers brusquely, turning away. He releases her hand, and begins shuffling the papers on his desk. "I realized a few things. Nothing more."

Yuuki hazards a guess. "Does that...disappoint you?"

Again, Kaname doesn't answer. But his posture stiffens at the remark.

Debating whether to push, Yuuki decides it's better now to keep silent - any interference risks Kaname backing away from his feelings. Yuuki knows she's blunt, and she doesn't want to crush this delicate bond between her husbands underfoot as if she's trampling through a flowerbed. She needs to think about this new development. For now, she can barely keep herself from cheering - Kaname came this far by himself!

"There is one more thing you need to know," Kaname says. "I haven't told Zero yet. This afternoon we received an official request from the Senate to testify before them on the matter of Shirabuki Sara's death."

"What?" Yuuki's body jerks, and her stomach flutters with nerves. "When?"

"I haven't given them an answer. We need the inquest over as soon as possible, but first we need to consolidate the cleanup. I thought perhaps Tuesday?"

Crossing her arms and becoming serious, Yuuki nods. "I agree. That should give us enough time to prepare."

"Then I will send the response," Kaname says, lifting a letter stamped with the Kuran seal. "Our next issue is to settle our strategy. We have yet to make a full public statement regarding the incident."
Yuuki makes a face. The Kurans have already hammered out a rough story outline. All that remains is the details, carefully crafted down to the last touch.

"Zero still refuses to omit the fact he drank her blood." Yuuki can hear her own frustration reflected in Kaname's voice.

On that point, Zero has refused to budge, no matter the consequences to his public image. Lifesaving or not, pure blood was not something one drank freely. Death was no excuse - unstable Ds died all the time from a lack of pure blood. Zero drinking Shirabuki's blood would be one more thing that counted against Zero in vampire society's eyes.

Yuuki feels it fair to remind Kaname why. "Zero's right through. For an antidote to be developed quickly, Aido will need help, which means the antidote source can't stay a secret."

Kaname gestures as if to appeal to the heavens, then pinches the bridge of his nose. "Too honest by far. Lying would save him grief."

"I'm not happy about it either," Yuuki agrees, touched by Kaname's hidden worry for Zero. "But we'll protect him, and keep the focus on how it was our decision, not his."

"It will not be easy."

"Protecting the people we love never is," Yuuki agrees, laying a hand over Kaname's arm.

There's no way Aido is unaware of Yuuki, whether or not he keeps his back stubbornly turned toward her. She's standing not ten meters behind him in his lab with its glass doors and shining machines. She even saw the secretary pick up the phone to call Aido as a nervous assistant led her here.

She clears her throat, and Aido startles. Not quite sure how this encounter is going to go, Yuuki tries going for something neutral. "You haven't been to visit us at Rosehill in a while, Aido-san."

Aido's back draws tighter. "I know. Thank you, Yuuki-hime, but I just can't bring myself to see you and Kaname-sama until I have a working antidote."

Squinting dubiously at Aido's white labcoat, Yuuki says, "I'm not really sure how this works, but couldn't that could take months or years?"

Aido covers his face with his hands. "Yes. I know."

"Why?" Yuuki asks, honestly confused. She'd expected Aido to be angry or afraid, not apologetic, almost ashamed.

"I - I betrayed Kaname-sama, and you," Aido confesses in a fragile voice.

Yuuki's heart hurts, and she wishes she could kill Shirabuki all over again. "No, you didn't. That woman's power took away your choice. She forced you to do things you didn't want to do."

"But I still did them, and I can't take that back. I betrayed the trust Kaname-sama placed in me, and your trust too. I could still be betraying him, for all we know. Yet he hasn't even punished me, or disfavored me."

"I let you believe that I would kill you," Yuuki confesses in a rush. "I was cold and unfair because I didn't even wait to hear your explanation. I was a bad friend and a terrible person."
Aido finally spins around in his chair, startled enough to come to her defense. "No, Yuuki-hime, I told you it's nothing -"

"Then come to my birthday dinner," Yuuki blurts out in a stroke of inspiration. "If everything is fine, come spend the evening with us. You saved Zero's life, and that's priceless to me. So don't - don't push your friends away."

Aido gapes at her, speechless as his brilliant brain searches for a rebuttal.

"I'm sure Kaname would like to see you too," Yuuki wheedles, knowing she's won. "You wouldn't like to disappoint him, right?"

Shaking his head furiously, Aido sits up straighter. "Never! I'll be there, Yuuki-hime!"

Yuuki claps her hands in victory and grins. Maybe she has been spending too much time around purebloods...

It's the best birthday Yuuki's ever had. Better than anything she's dreamed.

The sight of her Hunter family and her vampire family coming together at the same table very nearly brings her to tears. She and her guests toast her birthday, stuff themselves on the finest Rosehill can offer, then go outside and burn handfuls of sparklers in the gardens. Cross cries the whole time, of course, and Aido nearly sets himself on fire when Kaito eggs him into burning an entire handful at once.

Kaname spends the whole party with a small, serene smile on his lips, wearing the flower crown Yuuki wove for him out of dark winter roses. It matches the one Zero is wearing, enhancing the fairytale impression of the Hunter's many-layered tulle gown, and it finds its other match in the lopsided crown resting on Yuuki's head. She goes to sleep at peace, sheltered between her husbands.

The next night, Kaname and Zero take her into the human world. She eats the most expensive ginger pork stir fry of her life in a place where no one recognizes her name and Zero can dress like a human. It's intimate and precious, and she treasures the time more dearly now that she knows how close they came to losing it.

"I hope what I got you is okay," Zero tells her, a low nervous tension in his body as he hands a tiny box across the table. "If it's too personal, I apologize."

Yuuki shoots Kaname a quizzical look. The pureblood is unreadable and just nods towards the box, so Yuuki unties the ribbon, and opens the lid. Inside is a single sheet of folded paper. Yuuki glances at Zero, who looks almost vulnerable, and unfolds the paper.

Her eyes burn, and her voice has a catch in it when she says, "This is Yori's phone number and address."

Zero nods, unsure if Yuuki is upset. "Cross helped me. You don't have to do anything with it. I just - you were good friends, and I thought you might want to talk to her again."

"I don't know," she confesses, scrubbing at her eyes. "It's been so long, she's probably forgotten me by now. But thank you, Zero."

Zero doesn't quite seem convinced, so Yuuki reaches across the table and pokes him. "I'm not mad. This is very thoughtful of you, so please stop looking so scared."
Zero puffs up under the teasing, just like she hoped he would, and Kaname chuckles as he hands over a larger, flat box of his own. "Happy birthday, my dear."

Yuuki makes grabby hands, and tears through the wrapping. "Oohh, chocolate. What's this?" she says, pulling aside the tissue paper to find papers underneath.

"A deed," Kaname says, resting his chin on his folded hands. "Do you remember the beach you took us to, the one with this shining water?"

"You didn't," Yuuki breathes, feeling her eyes going wide. She hastily scans the document in her hands, and breathes out in relief. "I thought you might have bought the whole island or something."

Zero muffles his laughter in his hands. "He tried. I told him it was too much. I suggested a vacation house instead."

"We compromised. I bought you the resort," Kaname says casually. "It was very pleasant to get away, and the place holds fond memories. Besides," he adds in a completely normal tone, "I have never tried beach sex before."

Yuuki, despite her better judgement, finds herself eying Zero hopefully. So is Kaname.

"No. Just no." Zero shakes his head.

"It's my birthday," Yuuki tries, and gives him the sad eyes.

Zero endures for about thirty seconds before he breaks. "I'll consider it."

Her alpha purrs. Kaname and Yuuki exchange identical wicked smiles.

Ignoring the flutter of nerves in his belly and the low heat in his blood, Zero puts the final touches on himself, turning one way, then the other in front of the mirror. He's determined to follow this through - he nearly lost Yuuki, nearly lost both of them. He wants this.

"Zero, are you okay?" Yuuki calls from the sitting room in the master suite. "Your heart is beating really fast."

Zero shivers, and makes a few quick adjustments. "I'm fine," he says. Quickly, before he can change his mind, he slips into the bedroom, his bare feet silent on the carpets. He positions himself in the doorway - Yuuki and Kuran are both preoccupied with something, but when they catch Zero's heated scent they turn to look.

Zero holds himself still, feeling the silk and cool air against his skin. He knows they can see every inch of him through the transparent material of his thigh-length negligee - every inch, because he's nude beneath it. He'd stroked himself to arousal earlier, and he knows he looks obscene, skin flushed and his hair tousled, a lewd bulge beneath the material from the shape of his hard cock. Zero strokes a hand down his hip, drawing their eyes to the only ornament on the plain silk: a Kuran crest stitched directly above his groin. So everyone can see who owns this body, who despoiled its purity. Who's seed it's going to be gushing when they're finished with him tonight.

His alphas' reactions are worth the embarrassment of buying it. Yuuki's jaw drops and her eyes go wide. Kuran's nostrils flare appreciatively, and he gives Zero's body a long look. Zero can smell thick alpha pheromones explode into the air and the atmosphere takes a predatory turn.

"Happy birthday, Yuuki," Zero squeaks. All the blood in his body must be in his cheeks. Or in his
sex. He stumbles over the next part, because even in his head it sounds like a bad romance novel.
"Come unwrap your present."

"Zero," Yuuki rasps. She doesn't take her eyes off him the whole time she prowls toward him. There's a spark of vampire crimson in her brown eyes, and the deep, omega part of his mind radiates satisfaction.

Zero can feel himself start to drip between his thighs, and he knows a damp spot is forming on the silk. He swallows.

Yuuki takes his head in both hands, pulls him down to her height, and kisses him and kisses him until he can't breathe and his mind his spinning. "I love my present," she whispers, and bites at his throat.

As many times as they've pleased each other, Zero still gets embarrassed when he hears the noises coming out of his mouth. Somehow, they stumble to the bedroom, unable to keep their hands off each other.

Kaname has already stripped himself bare and turned down the sheets, and he tugs Yuuki away long enough to whisk off her dress and her jewelry. The rest Yuuki shucks off in haste, the seams ripping and tearing, and then Zero is caged beneath her body again, his negligee pulled up to his belly as they slide against each other.

"Wait," he gasps. "Not like this." Zero wriggles away, putting a hand out to stop her from kissing him again, his scattered wits reminding him he has plans tonight.

Yuuki makes a desperate noise, and squeezes the base of her hard cock as she backs away. They haven't slept together since before Yuuki was taken, and all three are on edge. Even Kaname is breathing hard, and he's barely touched either of them.

Zero decides he needs to take the edge off his alphas first, and then they can try the real goal for tonight. "Come here," he says, laying on his back in the center of their bed. "No touching."

They do exactly as he orders, and Zero feels a powerful thrill as he wraps a hand around each of them, their cocks grown thick and full with their lust, rubbing his thumb over the exposed head. He's gotten good at this now, and it's not long before Yuuki and Kaname are both coming, dousing the thin silk in come, plastering his negligee to his body and turning it wet and clinging and even more revealing.

Both of them are a little calmer, their fires banked, but Zero is so ridiculously turned on he thinks he's going to burn up. The smell, the feeling - he shivers, and licks at his hands, knowing he's just making it worse by taking in the alpha pheromones designed to arouse him.

But that's good, that's exactly what he needs. He wants the omega to rise up, to take control, because tonight he's not stopping until Yuuki and Kaname are inside him again, and if he has to blank out his human brain to do it, so be it. He has conquered himself and his body once before, with their help. He will wear down his fear the same way he wore down his soft child's heart, through time and practice.

He feels so vulnerable beneath them, but safe at the same time. His omega is telling him what good alphas these are, so strong and powerful, so gentle and nurturing. He loves Yuuki, and is not without friendly affection toward Kaname. He wants this, wants to be connected as intimately as possible. He wants to give them all of himself.
So Zero lifts his arms above his head and stretches out, showing off the arc of his body and the strength in it. "You've been so slow and gentle and thoughtful with me. But that's not what I want right now."

He takes Yuuki's hand, and runs it through the come drying on his chest, looking up at her through his eyelashes. "Touch me in all the ways I know you've dreamed of, with all the hunger your alpha desires. Despoil me," he moans, and throws his head back, baring his throat.

Both his alphas growl, and Zero feels his core throb. "Touch me here," he says, blushing but too aroused to care as he pulls up the hem of his skirt and spreads his thighs, showing off where he wants them. "Touch every part of me. Take me until I lose count of all the times you've had me."

He grasps his cock through the silk covering it, and his alphas lean closer. "I know what it means now when I ache and clench around nothing when I think of you. Do you know how much it makes my omega want, to know you killed a pureblood to have me, to keep me? I'm your prize now. So enjoy me any way you want."

They spring on him, hands and teeth and mouths and cocks, and Zero drowns under a rising tide of pleasure as they consume him. It's so hot, everything feels so good. He reaches out and holds them against his body and refuses to let go. They are his, and he is theirs.

Yuuki is underneath him now, and Kaname holds him close as his husband opens his folds and guides Yuuki into his body. Zero's walls strain against the impalement, and his body resists the penetration. Zero whimpers. Oh, he's too tight again.

"I told you," Kaname's strangled voice says in his ear. "It takes practice. Your sweet cunt heals if we don't take you often enough. We must change that."

Zero sobs, clinging to Kaname's arm around his waist as gravity and the alpha's relentless strength force his body down, bit by bit, until he's impaled deeper than ever before. He cries and hiccups and shakes - her softened knot is being forced up into his channel, and it's so much, so much, so good. It hurts so good.

"More," he begs, and Yuuki fucks him with a manic energy, each stroke sending electricity up his spine and feeding the ball of lightning in his stomach. Kaname helps, his strong hands on Zero's waist pulling him up and down Yuuki's cock, and Zero feels impossibly close to them, viscerally connected. He reaches down between his splayed thighs, and feels Yuuki solidly joining her body with his body, her cock slippery with his slick, the two of them as close as two people can be to each other. Two into one. At that image, Zero tightens and comes, and Yuuki fucks him through his orgasm, until he's over-sensitive and so blissed out he barely realizes when she comes inside him too, splashing his insides without softening at all.

Her eyes are dark as she bares her teeth and starts pummeling his channel again, each thrust hitting with a squelch and sending more seed dripping from Zero's full hole down onto her hips. Ignoring the burn, Zero spreads this thighs wider, seeking the satisfying fullness of their union. Kaname is bruising Zero's shoulder purple and his hands barely leave Zero's nipples and chest; the alpha's already come once against Zero's back, cock sliding damply between Zero's cheeks.

Zero greys out sometimes after his fourth orgasm and Yuuki's third. When he comes back to himself, Kaname is beneath him, ravaging his hole in smooth strokes and striking his cervix on each thrust, and Yuuki is the one rutting against his back.

He's so sore, and a dull red heat between his legs warns him he's pushing his endurance. But Zero's not in more pain than the pleasure can drown out, so he clamps down harder, feeling his insides
ripple deliciously along the contours of his alpha's cock. The rational part of his brain notes how
his improved healing is making Zero's body keep up so much better now. Then Kaname makes a
sharp thrust up against Zero's walls, and everything but pleasure flies out.

Zero lets his head loll back to rest on Yuuki's shoulder as more sticky warmth coats his back, and
floats on the sensations as he surrenders.

He pays for it the next night, of course. There's the obligatory panic attack, thankfully briefer and
less awful than the one he experienced after the first time he had sex. He even manages to hide the
worst of it before Yuuki wakes up, and talk her out of spending the day at his side. Encouraging
signs of progress.

He also discovers, to his chagrin, that the persistent rumors about pureblood stamina are true. Zero
spends the day confined to his bed, trying his best not to move his lower half. After he kicks the
Kurans out with orders to go make themselves useful, the servants are happy to wait on him hand
and foot, and Zero endures more than his share of winks and amused looks. The most irritating part
is that his best efforts hadn't even managed to sate one bloody pureblood - his body had given out
before the either Kuran's appetite was satisfied.

From that humiliating episode comes the birth of the 'two orgasm rule.' Namely, purebloods are
allotted two orgasms involving Zero's genitals per day except on holidays and significant occasions
(qualifying days to be decided only by Zero). Zero likes walking without hobbling, thank you very
much.

The Senate moves locations every century or so for secrecy. Its current headquarters, like all those
before it (so Kaname says), is tucked away in a part of the city that is busy enough to hide many
people coming and going, but not central enough to draw more eyes than necessary. Hiding in plain
sight with its forgettable exterior - modern, but not too cutting edge - its only notable feature is the
central dome of the Senate chamber capping the top floor.

The Kurans look neither left nor right as they sweep into the atrium followed by their entourage.
Yuuki makes sure to straighten her shoulders and raise her chin, striding arm in arm with Kaname.
They make a good matched pair to the watching aides, senators, and onlookers, of whom there are
quite a few. The dark grey wool of her full skirt and jacket is identical to the material of his suit, as
is the cream silk of her blouse and his cravat. Even the crimson of his cufflinks and cravat pin and
the rubies at her throat, like drops of blood, echo each other. It will help draw the eye to their
physical resemblance, and remind the watching vampires what bloodline they belong too. Yuuki
designed it that way. Tonight is all about performance.

Zero is safe with Yagari and Shouto - who seemed to tolerate one another worryingly well, when
introduced - and both Kaname and Yuuki left familiars. His job tonight is to stay as far from here as
possible. Zero does not need to draw the Senate's attention any more than he already has.

"Do you remember what I told you earlier?" Kaname murmurs once they're out of sight in the
elevators, among their own staff.

She nods. Her secondary assignment tonight is to watch and observe every detail she can,
memorizing everything she sees so Kaname can quiz her later.

"Remember," he says, lowering his voice further. "Do not make the mistake of thinking the Senate
is a monolith. There are divisions and factions among its members, and we can take advantage of
those. Aid does not come just from your allies."
Do not forget why I allow the Senate to exist, Kaname had told her earlier. Yuuki nods again, and then the elevator doors open. The Kurans are ushered through a lobby, and then a tunnel. At the end of the tunnel is light, and the droning noise of many voices.

Yuuki has never seen the Senate floor before. It's built like an amphitheatre; above her is the dome she glimpsed from the ground and many tiers of seating circled around a central podium. The Senate floor itself is where the most senior senators and the chairman sit, and the upper floors are reserved for junior senators and guests. The senate sessions are never open to the public. You needed a senator to vouch for you to gain access, which limits observers to press and other nobles. Today Yuuki and Kaname have seats on the Senate floor set aside for distinguished visitors, as do the other significant guests attending the session.

Takuma rises with a smile, offering a bow as the Kurans are shown to their chairs. For something as important as an inquest into a pureblood's death, the entire Council of Elders has chosen to observe today's proceedings. In a sea of black and grey, Takuma gleams shockingly bright in his blue and white robes. Yuuki takes careful note, because Zero would like them; they're a sleek, clean style with flowing lines and a masculine edge. The omega sleeves have a clever two-part construction made of an outer panel that hangs from Takuma's shoulders like a cape and brushes the floor, and a shorter, true inner sleeve covering his hands.

Takuma is drawing many looks from the Senators shuffling in to take their places, which he ignores with practiced ease. He stands out in more ways than one. Not only is he the only omega in a room of mostly alphas, he is a pregnant omega. The Ichijo heir's ancestral position flies in the face of traditions which keep omegas away from the heart of politics and mostly in their homes, their influence felt indirectly through their children and mates.

"Good to see you, Kaname," the blond remarks warmly as he settles back into his seat on Kaname's left, sending a smile toward Yuuki. There are only three people permitted to use Kaname's first name without honorifics, as Takuma so delicately reminds their watchers. "The session should begin soon."

Yuuki watches, marks how the Senators mingle like tides, trading influence and favors for support. Many of their eyes return her scrutiny, only to flick away once their gazes meet. No matter how much they might envy her power, when face to face the Senators are as susceptible to the allure of a pureblood as any vampire. Dissension must be saved for privacy.

When Chairman Ichihara takes the podium and the room falls quiet by degrees, Yuuki sits up. Kaname cautiously respects this man, which is noteworthy enough that she's reassessing her previous dismissive impressions of him.

Like Takuma, he is notable for his dynamic. Betas rarely rise to such high positions, and make up - at best - one-tenth of the Senate. Ichihara was Senate chairman many centuries ago, before the rise of more openly extremist ideologies pushed the centrists into a dwindling minority. Ichihara won his second appointment after the debacle with Rido, when the Senate cleaned house and purged some - but far from all - of its uglier elements. By Kaname's account, Ichihara was appointed because of his moderate views and the way his political acumen allows him to mediate between opposing parties and keep the Senate more or less functional. He is no monarchist, and will protect the Senate's independence, but he can be worked with. Not an ally, but not necessarily an enemy either.

Yuuki saves her most careful scrutiny for Vice-chairman Noguchi. Grey-haired with age, Noguchi is notorious for his scheming and hews most closely to whatever party brings him power. Beneath his reserve, the noble has a sharp hunger to him.
Senator Abe she finds sitting in the first row. The majority party leader is sneering as Chairman Ichihara gives the opening speech, an ugly expression unsuited to her pretty face. A devout anti-monarchist, by all accounts she is well matched to her husband in temper. Yuuki dislikes her immediately.

The Senators in their balconies above her head begin clapping; Kaname touches her inner wrist, laying his fingers underneath her phoenix bracelet. Yuuki smiles as graciously as she knows how, then rises to gracefully take the podium. Perhaps she ought to feel more nervous. But it's a matter of perspective - she survived these events and triumphed over her enemies, so why should she be afraid of talking about it now?

Yuuki's testimony sticks to the true events, slightly tailored for public consumption. She glosses over the parts they don't need to know - things that are too private to speak of, like the exact events of her captivity. She needs to strike a careful balance between sympathy and looking pathetic, so Yuuki gives just enough details that the nobles can draw an unmistakable conclusion without laying out her heart. The only time she outright lies is to hide her new memory altering powers. She wants the nobles to respect her, not outright fear her, and the similarity to Shirabuki's drug will not go unnoticed. Yuuki doesn't want anyone to the think she's anything like Shirabuki Sara.

The revelation that Zero drank Shirabuki's blood draws an audible gasp from her audience. Yuuki blurs the truth, tells the story as a pair of maddened alphas with their omega dying in their arms, who in their madness went to insane lengths. That is far safer than the cold, willful rage of the real decision. Acting in defense of an omega is excusable, understandable, even permitted as a temporary loss of sanity.

The corners of Kaname's mouth are upraised when she finishes; Yuuki knows she's done well. She returns to her seat beneath whispers and polite applause. As her husband passes beside her, Yuuki returns the gesture and brushes his phoenix bracelet as a silent show of support. The crinkle of Kaname's eyes as he takes the podium, effortlessly regal as always, is a private secret between them.

Kaname's part is to fill in the blanks. His testimony explains how their investigation discovered the tainted drug, and their efforts to manage the fallout since Shirabuki's death. The mystery shooter who wounded Shirabuki remains unidentified. Yuuki herself does not know. Kaname believes - and Yuuki agrees - that it's better if one of them can honestly say they don't know who it was.

As for the unknown gunman's weapon, Kaname has traced the rifle's history thoroughly. Looting over three hundred years ago, it was the celebrated trophy of a now extinct anti-monarchist family. During their downfall it disappeared, only to resurface in the hands of several assassins and other figures in the human underworld. Kaname suggests that the shooter may have been sent by Shirabuki's black market rivals, perhaps the bratva or the mafia. It's not hard to read between the lines - Kaname passed them the information. The timing was too convenient for it be coincidence.

There are no questions permitted from the onlookers. The Kurans are here today as a courtesy, and the Senate does not have the power to interrogate them. As much as many of the Senators hate the biological hold a pureblood possesses over lesser vampires, that instinctive fear and awe still has power over them.

From the reactions Yuuki can observe, the Senate knows Yuuki and Kaname have done them a favor. Shirabuki was a threat to the vampire world's way of life. Her appetite for Level Ds risked their discovery by humans, and making the entire vampire population slaves to her whims is understandably horrifying to anyone, let alone the anti-monarchists of the Senate. They'll still try to make trouble over it, because Shirabuki's threat is dead and they will draw every possible
advantage they can over the Kurans.

Now more than ever, the Kurans are the Senate's chief rivals. Because the pureblood families have dwindled and weakened, the Senate's ascension has seen little opposition. Shouto and Ouri avoid politics, and are both the last of their line. Touma is young and feckless, and his sister even younger. The elder Touma members and the entire Hanadagi family remain in long-term Sleep. The Shirabuki family is extinct, and the Hio cling to existence through rumors of a single Sleeping male relative. That leaves only the Kuran family and their young heir to contest the power of the Senate.

Now more than ever, the Kurans will be marked as enemies. They are the descendents of mythological kings and queens, who possess the praise of the common vampires. And the current Kuran family is led by a young prodigy of remarkable skill and power, whose strength will surely grow. Most worryingly, that young prodigy has been involved in the deaths of three purebloods - three! - all of them far older and stronger. The Senate is right to be terrified of Kaname and his power, and with no other purebloods left in his league, the Senate's undiluted attention will be fixed completely on him. They will try to destroy him, if they can.

Yuuki watches and keeps smiling as long as she's within their sight. The Senate will not find Kaname easy prey. She will ensure it.

Before now, their lovemaking has always been sporadic and initiated by mutual desire. After offering his virginity, Zero seems to have gotten it into his head that by consummating their union, Yuuki and Kaname are entitled his body now, every night, without exception.

Absolutely not.

There are days when Zero is not in the right headspace to have penetrative sex. There are days where he cannot bear to be touched below the waist. And that's fine. Yuuki wants whatever Zero is able to give, and no more. As time goes on, those bad days are becoming fewer and fewer. Yuuki has hope that one day, they will be rare enough to be unusual. But for now, Zero is still trying to 'make up' for days he misses, like Yuuki is keeping score.

To Yuuki's sadness, Zero tries to undermine the two orgasm limit almost immediately. Whether Zero intended it or not, the rule protects Zero's physical health. The horror stories Hunters whisper about bedding purebloods are not without truth - completely satisfying one pureblood libido would leave him screaming in pain. His body needs time to recover and rest, or they'll hurt him.

Yuuki is very proud of Kaname. He refused without a shred of hesitation when Zero pressed them to take him a third time after they skipped sex the night before. Kaname insisted it was because he enjoys enthusiastic partners, not obligated ones, but Yuuki hopes Kaname realizes he isn't fooling anyone.

Yuuki thought Zero was getting better at valuing himself more, but it looks like she has work to do. She doesn't want sex to be a duty for Zero. She wants him to feel like he can refuse, and to feel safe doing it. And she wants him to value his health and well-being over his duty and satisfying her wants.

When she tells Zero this, he insists that she doesn't need to hold herself back for his sake, completely missing the point.

Yuuki reminds him she's restraining her beast from draining him dry every time she catches his scent, so losing control is probably a bad idea.
Zero has no answer to that, which is not the same as agreement.

Zero sinks down until the hot water reaches his chin and heaves a contented sigh, letting all his tension leak out of his shoulders. This is one vampire tradition he could get used to.

He hears a patter of feet, and the curtain shielding his bathing area flutters. Some shift in the air, maybe the pattern of breaths, or perhaps the weight of the steps whispers to his newly enhanced senses. Zero already knows who it is when Takiyama calls out, "Consort Kiryuu? Are you alright? You've been in there for quite a long time."

Takiyama's relaxed tone sets Zero at ease, and he rolls over to rest his arms on the rim of the stone basin. "Mmmm, I'm fine. I'll be out soon." It takes him a few more minutes to pour himself back into his yukata and shorts, but soon Zero is leaving behind the steam from the baths.

The tea group omegas are in Azai's home tonight, the only one with a traditional bath complex suitable for tonight's rituals. Tomorrow Zero enters seclusion as he prepares for his time in season, and he will not leave Rosehill again until he's bonded or his yearly chance has passed. By Zero's reckoning, they're starting preparations nearly a week earlier than he went into season last year, but omega heat cycles are can start up to a week early or a week late, especially maiden heats.

The other omegas are gathered in the anteroom, still in their bathing robes, chattering and tending to their toilette. Zero takes a seat, and Aido Madoka immediately attacks him with a hairbrush. Shoshana is doing the same for a visibly pregnant Azai nearby as Takiyama serves everyone cool water. Takuma nudges Zero's feet out from under the hem of his robe and begins to attack the Hunter's calluses with a pumice stone.

Zero is thrown by the attention at first, but having his own maids has weakened the boundaries of his personal space, and he settles into tranquility as he is primped and pampered by the other omegas. It soothes a deep, instinctive part of himself, and he drifts, bending as requested, emptying his mind until it shines like a sheet of glass.

His Hunter senses reach out and mark the vampire auras ringing this space, protectively enclosing Zero and his omega companions. They are the bonded alphas of his attendants and his own intended mates, fulfilling an ancient rite of protection. They will not disturb Zero and his fellows, only guard against his theft, remaining sleepless and without rest until Zero's chosen alphas come to claim him from their care at sunset the next evening.

Shoshana takes him by the hand when his hair shines and skins glows pink, and leads him to the banquet prepared for him. Zero is meant to eat his fill, to build his strength for the trial ahead. Zero has never seen so many foods meant to enhance fertility in one place before, and dutifully swallows down what he can. The rest of the feast is the kind of food elderly grandmothers give you second servings of, heavy and meaty, full of rice and noodles and rich sauces. Zero eats and eats, and after he's full the others press more snacks on him throughout the night. Heat is hard on the body, and he'll lose at least three kilos by the time it's finished.

Zero's feelings toward his body going into season are complicated. A part of him just wants to get this over with so he can go on with his life, such as it is. He's only willing to trigger a heat the single time necessary to bond, and it feels a little dishonest when the other omegas make such a fuss over him. But he also wants to approach this experience honestly, so he tries to enjoy himself. And they're so happy for him, as if they couldn't imagine anything else.

Zero wishes he could feel the same way. But his repugnance toward his vampire instincts and his new body make this feel more like a looming nightmare. Most of all, he's worried that he won't be
able to trigger a heat at all. Kaname assured him it would be fine if they waited another year, but the possibility feels like another failure.

"Pick one, Consort Kiryuu!" Aido Makoka urges, holding a bronze bowl filled with pomegranates, the fruits swollen and pink-red on the threshold of over ripeness. The other omegas give excited cries, and circle around.

"A maiden's augury," explains Shoshana in an undertone as Zero selects a smaller fruit from the bottom. "For how many children you'll have."

The omegas help him peel the pomegranate - Takiyama displays a startling flair with knives - and they painstakingly count the seeds inside.

"837! A good number," Azai congratulates him as they clear away the pith, licking sticky pink juice off their fingers.

Zero can only imagine the face he's making, because the others burst into laughter..

"Don't look so sour, Zero-kun," Takuma teases him, hiding his smile behind his hand. "No one really has that many."

Zero's certain his expression could curdle milk. Yuuki must never hear of this. Blood and ash, he thought over a hundred children was an insane amount!

"One more," Azai says, bringing out three bone disks from a velvet bag and pressing them into Zero's palm. "For predicting what your first child will be."

Suddenly, Zero feels sick, the bone disks in his hand clammy from sweat. A hint of his feelings must escape, because Takuma is gently slipping the disks out of Zero's grasp and passing them back to Azai with a shake of his head.

The others have gone quiet, and Zero's guilt fills the empty space with a lurch. "I - I'm sorry," he manages. His tongue feels thick and clumsy in his mouth.

Takuma rests a hand on his forearm, and flashes a smile. "Perhaps now is a good time for the gifts?"

An omega on the cusp of their maiden heat receives two symbolic gifts from their fellows, and the omegas scramble to produce the pair meant for Zero.

"Current fashion leans toward the ornate, but I thought you might appreciate a functional piece instead," Takuma says, sliding a case covered in red silk toward Zero. The knife is beautiful, plain except for the silver wire inlaid in the hilt and his name inscribed on the blade. It's perfectly balanced when Zero picks it up to test it. Wickedly sharp too.

Zero tests it with a quick twist of his wrist, flipping the blade and snatching it out of the air. "Thank you, Takuma."

"Use it to stab unwanted suitors," Aido Madoka suggests helpfully.

A blade from the youngest bonded omega present, and from the eldest….

"I will understand if you do not wish to receive my gift," Shoshana tells him. Her dark eyes contain no judgement; only she would be bold enough to suggest they skip the custom entirely.
Zero swallows down the bile in his throat. He's already disturbed them enough. Besides, he's going to have to face this sooner or later. "No, please go ahead."

Shoshana shrugs as she hands a small case over. "Very well. It will not help, either way. The Court will whisper it is ill-fated to receive this gift from one such as myself."

Zero accepts the box like he would a poisonous snake. It feels heavy in his hands, and he opens it quickly. That doesn't stop the surge of bitterness in his heart when he sees the silver baby rattle molded in the shape of a blooming rose.

He looks up at Shoshana, who mirrors his feelings with her own bitter smile. She has not borne a child in over a thousand years, and only a few in the three thousand years before that. Zero is no different - even if Zero would allow himself, he would likely struggle to carry just one child.

"Thank you," Zero says, because that's what you say when someone gives you a gift.

"You needn't mention it," Shoshana demurs, and Zero can see she means it.

Zero's party winds down around noon. Some of the omegas find places to sleep, bedding down among the lounges and cushions. Madoka and Takuma are immersed in a game of shogi. Zero spares an extra glance at Shoshana; she lies motionless in sleep, exhaustion stealing the falcon sharpness from her features.

Azai drifts up behind Zero, and signals with a flick of his eyes he'd like to speak with the Hunter out of the room. Zero drifts behind him, curious what the elder might want.

Weaving through the halls, Azai brings them to a small, comfortable sitting room with only a low table, two cushions, and a few painted screens filling the space.

As Azai methodically begins to prepare matcha tea, Zero admires the long spill of his black hair over his shoulder, nearly knee length unbound.

"You are not familiar with our customs, Consort Kiryuu, which is why I wished to approach you with my proposal before I spoke to Kuran-hime."

Zero sits up straighter. "Kuran-hime? Not Kuran-sama?"

Azai shakes his head, an amused lilt to his mouth. "This concerns her directly, but matters to Kuran-sama only obliquely as her family head."

More perplexed than ever, Zero takes a seat and accepts the warm porcelain Azai offers him, enjoying the scent but not taking a sip.

Azai drinks slowly; long minutes pass in comfortable silence. As the noble pours himself another, his eyes rest on Zero. "Do you know Kuran-sama's Shadow, the one called Seiren?"

"Yes?" Zero answers, the word coming out more like a question than a certainty.

"Kuran-hime has no Shadow of her own to serve her," Azai continues, placing the empty pot down. "Do you know Seiren's origin?"

"No." Zero also has no idea where this conversation is going.

Raising his cup, Azai stares into the pale green depths. "Shadows are taken in as infants by the pureblood family they serve, to be raised and trained as companions to their master. Though a
Shadow is always of noble rank, they cast away their family name when they enter service - it is a matter of loyalty. I know you will find it cold, but we consider having a child accepted to be a great honor, and Shadows are treated well. Of course, only one class of vampires has so many children they can afford to give one up for training."

Zero inhales sharply, his mind springing to the conclusion Azai is hinting at.

"Yes," the noble confirms, setting his cup down with a click, and folding his hands in his lap. "I want to offer Kuran-hime the child I carry as her Shadow."

Zero's mouth drops open, his Hunter sensibilities aghast at the thought of willingly giving up a child. Longing weighs in his bones. "You would -?"

"I know you will think me a bad mother, but this decision feels right. I have spoken with my alphas, and we are unanimous. This child," Azai puts a hand on the swell of his belly, "this child is already tied to the Kuran family. It lives because Seiren helped to save it. Without her, I would never have known my child at all. I am old, and I have birthed many children. I can feel it - this one is special, and meant for something different."

"If that is your choice, then you can talk to Yuuki," Zero says finally, still unable to wrap his head around the idea but accepting this is one of those vampire things he will never understand.

Azai bows formally, his belly making him clumsy. "Thank you. Consorts have been known to cause trouble for young Shadows they did not accept. Knowing your situation, I wanted to make sure having a child around would not anger you."

"No! Not at all," Zero hastily assures him, waving his hands. "I'd be honored." His heart shivers in his chest. If he cannot have a child of his own, perhaps helping raise Yuuki's Shadow will give him a measure of peace.

The first thing Yuuki does when she returns to Rosehill is visit Zero in the library. After a night of dull office work sorting through earnings reports, his presence is a joy. He is a little restless now that he's confined to Rosehill, but nothing a good gallop can't fix. She will take him out riding in the morning before the light gets too intense.

It will be his last chance for a while. His cycle hasn't hit early, and they are on track for last year's midwinter date. Yuuki knows Zero is nervous, but her alpha does a happy wiggle every time she thinks about seeing Zero through his heat - which she will trigger, absolutely.

The second thing Yuuki does is see Kaname in his study, to discuss the day's work and their plans for tomorrow. They've been trying to get as much done as they can before Zero's cycle makes them unreachable - not that Yuuki minds. A three to five day sex vacation with Kaname and Zero...Yuuki sighs dreamily, her alpha similarly pleased. She's had so many fantasies about Zero in heat...

"A courier delivered the signed contracts for your Shadow today," Kaname says, startling her out of her increasingly dirty thoughts. He is staring at a sheaf of papers, pen in hand, but he hasn't flipped a single page since Yuuki arrived. Her eyes narrow; Kaname has been acting preoccupied since Zero began his seclusion, but he hasn't confided what's bothering him.

"That's good," Yuuki replies slowly. It's official then: Azai-san will raise his child until it's old enough to walk, and then Seiren will take over the child's training.

She can see the utility of having her own Shadow - Seiren is tremendously capable, but even she
can't be in two places at once. Seiren's workload is already high, and as Yuuki becomes more involved in vampire power struggles, it will serve them better to have someone to help her.

Despite its logic, the idea of reserving a person's services before they're even born makes Yuuki uncomfortable. But the agreement is not inescapable; the Shadow contracts offer the bound vampire two chances to refuse their service, one at sixteen and the other at fifty. So the child will have a choice.

Yuuki's choice was made when she realized Zero wanted this chance, wanted to have a child in the house. It was plain from his veiled wistfulness as he spoke of Azai's offer, and the way his eyes lingered on the silver rattle's case. Meeting Azai and seeing for herself the depth of his conviction was reassuring, but if Yuuki is being honest, she would have agreed just from the knowledge Zero desired it.

Kaname has gone silent, and stares down unseeing at his documents. Yuuki frowns - she expected him to be more pleased at the addition to their strength.

"Kaname?" she says, the question laden in her voice.

Except the flicker of his eyelashes, her husband doesn't move. "Yuuki," Kaname says. His lips barely move. "You will be angry with me, but there is something you need to know."

He's right - she is furious to discover he went behind her back and met with Ouri. But her heart leaps at the possibility of keeping Zero alive. There's no question she will pay the price. But for Kaname to admit this possibility…

"You would not tell me this could be done if you weren't willing to do it," Yuuki reasons.

Kaname does not meet her eyes - his hands are covering his face, blocking her view of his expression.

A suspicion strikes like a thunderbolt. "You wouldn't sacrifice anything significant for your inner circle, not even for Takuma. But you would do it for me."

Kaname's hands tighten.

Yuuki pronounces the truth sitting like a stone on her tongue. "You are in love with Zero."

The dark head bows under the weight of despair, and his knuckles clench white.

Yuuki settles back on her heels, crosses her arms. "You're in love with Zero, and you don't want to admit it."

More silence.

Yuuki's frustration overwhelms her. She's done with Kaname running away. "You do realize he's not romantically interested in you?" she continues ruthlessly.

Kaname's flinch needs no words to understand.

"Zero's kind. He's mostly forgiven you for what you've done to him. He cares for you - the same way he cares about everyone he's close to, with more physical stuff thrown in. He thinks you're becoming friends. But I know you. You want more. I'd want more too - I'd want everything."

She pokes his forehead. "So do something about it. Court him, make him think of you as a
romantic interest. *Quit being dumb.*"

Message delivered, Yuuki spins on her heel, leaving Kaname behind. "And when Zero's heat is over, we're going to see Ouri," she throws over her shoulder.

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Zero is a ball of nerves as he draws closer to the beginning of his cycle. He reads, he goes riding, he distracts himself with his maids' company, and it helps at first. The tidal changes in his body are the embodiment of many fears, and he cannot help his apprehension.

But he feels the first true flicker of worry when midwinter night comes, and he still hasn't come into season. Kaname and Yuuki, at his insistence, attend their usual round of parties and appearances. Zero sees them off with a smile that quickly disappears when the car goes out of sight. He spends the night full of anxious energy, pacing in his suite.

Yuuki assures him they're not worried. It's normal for an omega's cycle to have variation, and some omegas will cycle up to a week later than they did the previous year. So Zero settles, and waits.

And waits.

And waits some more.

Another week passes. His body stays stubbornly sterile and cold, no trace of the warmth from the last two years in his veins.

That's when the whispers start. The servants know better than to say anything in his hearing, but Kuran cannot keep Zero from contacting Cross, and the Hunter president keeps himself well-informed where the rumors of their targets are concerned.

It's nothing Zero hasn't heard before, and it still burns, caustic and ugly, settling deep and persistent in his psyche before scabbing over and breaking open at the slightest brush. Dirty-blooded, false omega, unworthy of a pureblood. Barren, filthy Hunter's whore. Shameful failure. Worthless trash.

Zero trains, and trains, and trains. He has nothing else. To map the expansion of his vampire powers, he forces his mind out until his consciousness shivers on the edge of breaking, until the boundaries of his mind bleed.

Seeking a trigger, he insists Kuran and Yuuki fuck him again and again - they indulge him at first, after trading worried looks, but start refusing after Zero misjudges his healing and tears bloody inside. He settles for having them scent him over and over, until the maids tell him they can't smell a hint of omega.

Nothing helps. The new year comes and goes, without a flicker of change in Zero's treacherous, repulsive body. The window for any reasonable delay in his cycle has long passed. Something is wrong with him.

Zero can feel the scream building in his throat with every waking moment. One last bitter failure. *Why.* Why is this happening? Why can't anything go right? What has he done wrong? Why does his body betray him against his will at every turn, and now Zero that *needs* this it won't even stir?

The winter session of the Jeweled court is coming up in mid-January. Zero contemplates the humiliation of attending without having managed to come into season, and spends the next hour vomiting into his toilet. His helplessness claws at him. He eats little, choking on the acid flavor of desperation, and rarely leaves his suite. His fleeting, fitful sleep is plagued by strange,
incomprehensible dreams that he forgets upon waking. His extra sense torments him with its exquisite oversensitivity; he suffers splitting headaches where every light leaves colors dancing in his vision, and every sound echoes like thunder.

Zero knows he's pulling away from his spouses, but he can't help his overwhelming shame. After everything they have gone through for him, he's proved a useless failure. He aches with the desire to Hunt, to spend himself doing something he's skilled at - but he can't even leave the grounds.

The desire to punish his body tingles in his fingertips and sits heavily beneath his skin. Barely - just barely - Zero resists the impulse. He pictures Yuuki's face when he confessed his self-abuse the first time, and his guilt swamps the itch.

Kuran delicately mentions seeking a medical opinion. Zero's hellish memories of the vampire hospital rear up, and the force of his terror fuels his utter refusal. His odd dreams turn to shrieking nightmares of silence and white and trapped and gloved hands always touching prodding stop stop stop-

Zero only lasts three days before his desperate shame and his desire to be useful cracks his resistance. Zero has to beg before Yuuki and Kuran will agree - he gave away too much fear last time.

The female beta specialist Kuran consults is not a doctor Zero recognizes. Kuran tells him she is not a doctor at all, but a Midwife, and the way he speaks the title is layered with significance. Zero doesn't care as long as she can fix him.

She is quick, respectful, and professional. She warns Zero when she is about to touch him, asks his permission, and when Zero flinches away she gives him space.

Zero still spends an hour after his examination having a breakdown in his bedroom, trying to erase the memory of ugly curiosity and clinical touches on his skin.

Yuuki stands outside his door the whole time - nearly breaks it down - until Zero has the presence of mind to let her in. Zero's shame only sharpens when he sees her misery, and the marks of his stress mirrored in her face. She doesn't push him for an explanation, but Zero finds himself giving one anyway as she holds him and cries. Kuran is there too - has been nearby the whole time. He kneels on the floor beside them, strokes Zero's back and watches Yuuki cry with a mixture of sorrow and rage.

The experience makes Zero realize how much he's been shutting them out, and his self-loathing reaches its peak. In the coming days, he spends more time with his spouses for no other reason than to enjoy their company without the crushing pressure of expectation.

The vampire hospital sees a discreet purge of its medical staff. The Kurans would have been more vicious, but that would cause Zero's private humiliation to become a public matter. So a quiet disappearance or a shameful, sudden retirement will have to do. Many distinguished doctors suddenly find their past sins coming to light; they will never treat another patient again. Half a dozen medical students will never receive their licenses at all. The mouths of the aristocracy are occupied with other scandals than Zero's, for a little while. Not a single offender's memories survive intact - Yuuki excised them herself, putting Seiren's spies to good use.

Oddly enough, it helps. Watching the doctors who treated him like something inhuman receive Yuuki and Kuran's swift vengeance exorcises another old demon. It fixes nothing, but it feels good to know he's cared for so deeply. It reassures Zero, but he knows better than to believe the fallout
of his failed heat will blow over quickly.

That's why he goes to visit Kuran a few days before his next Jeweled Court.

At the knock on his study door, Kaname lifts his head, scenting the air, his lips already curving in a subtle smile. "Come in."

An inrush of Zero's sweet-spicy scent tinged with Kaname's own alpha musk, and Zero slips into Kaname's office like a nervous doe into a forest clearing. "Good evening, husband."

Pleasure rises up in Kaname's chest at the address, and his alpha murmurs happily. The pureblood's fondness overwhelms him, and Kaname gestures toward the settee. "Take a seat. I was just about to call for some tea. Would you care for any?"

Zero purses his lips, then nods. His lilac gaze is distant.

Kaname watches his Consort out of the corner of his eye as he gives their order to the kitchen. Understandably despondent after his missed cycle, Zero has spent the last few weeks wearing the omega equivalent of sweatpants. Tonight Zero's robes would not look out of place at a soiree. Much can be extrapolated from that detail.

"I hope I didn't interrupt your work," Zero says stiffly. His back is ramrod straight and his hands are twisting his skirts.

"Not at all," Kaname lies.

Zero throws him a sharp look. Strengthened by another dose of pure blood, Zero's power can spot direct lies with insulting ease.

In truth, Kaname is struggling with a significant problem. Yuuki beheaded their dragon, but the corpse keeps thrashing. Shirabuki spent more than fifty years laying the groundwork for her insurgency, only to die during the first act, leaving behind an unknown, but probably significant number of proxies, all of whom are unknowingly executing her orders at this very moment.

Beneath the fog of altered memories, Shirabuki's pawns don't even know they've been compromised, making them untraceable until they act. Aido thinks he might be able to identify them by drug traces in their blood, but that is not an easy solution when vampires prize their own blood so dearly. For the present, Aido's time and priorities are best spent working on the antidote. Kaname has organized a second, independent research team as well - just in case Aido carries any more latent orders that might sabotage the work. One of those avenues will hopefully bear fruit soon. Until then, identification will remain a temporary solution.

Drinking tea with Zero is a welcome diversion, if unhelpful to Kaname's current quandary. He senses it may yield other surprises. Zero came here for a purpose, and if Kaname is patient and keeps savoring his tea, Zero will reveal the matter to him.

Until then, Kaname is utterly content watching Zero - admiring the sweep of his shoulders, the splayed elegance of his fingers, the strong tendons of his wrists. The pureblood wets his lips, a spark beneath his navel tingling with his alpha's roused interest. His fingertips twitch with the desire to touch. Zero is very much like a drug - the more Kaname tastes, the more he wants.

It had been an easy decision to reveal Ouri's offer, in the end. Long before his final resolution on the night of Zero's maiden heat celebration, Kaname's subconscious already knew his choice. Awareness had stolen over him quietly, secretly, the sudden break of dawn heralded by the first
blushing pink in the east. When an entire night without the sight of Zero ached with emptiness, and even Yuuki at his side had not been enough to satisfy, Kaname knew. Zero cannot be permitted to die.

The chill of such a black thought robs Kaname of his poise, and he finds himself setting his teacup on his desk and striding over to Zero. His boy's guarded eyes look on, offering no resistance as Kaname tips Zero's chin up, stroking a pale cheek tenderly. Kaname touches his fingers to the dark shadows beneath Zero's eyes, proof of sleepless nights. Then he traces over a sharp cheekbone, and his eyes narrow - Zero has lost weight again.

"What troubles you, sweet boy?" Kaname coaxes, gentling his voice.

"I need you to be honest with me again," Zero tells him. The even tone of his voice only comes through great effort. "It has to do with what the midwife told us."

"I see." Kaname makes a quick decision, and swings down into the seat beside Zero.

The news had been bad. A young, healthy, fertile omega should never have irregular or skipped cycles. Even sick or injured omegas still followed regular cycles, albeit weakly or for reduced periods. Only very elderly omegas reaching the end of their lifespan showed such extreme symptoms, and in all cases it signified poor fertility. The midwife's opinion was that Zero was unlikely to ever conceive a child.

They could seek a second opinion, but she is a highly respected member of her profession, referred by Takuma, and like all midwives a C-Rank with no aristocratic affiliation that might motivate her to lie. Furthermore, Kaname is unwilling for Zero to reexperience his trauma a second time unless utterly necessary. Kaname spares a moment of anger for his old self who allowed the violation to happen. Pity he couldn't kill Zero's tormentors now. No matter - Kaname has a two hundred year long plan to make that dream a reality.

Zero shrinks away from Kaname, hunching in on himself. "Everyone already knows how I didn't come into season. They'll know what it means soon enough."

"Yes." Respecting Zero's wish, Kaname does not soften the truth.

"I'm a liability now, aren't I? For you, for Yuuki, and for the Hunters."

Choosing his words carefully, Kaname says, "Obtaining you was the rationale for the treaty. They will seek to use it against us."

Zero runs his hands over his face. "The Senate is going to get rid of me, aren't they? Now that they can prove I'm not useful."

"They cannot contest the legality of our marriage without our cooperation. But they can make choosing to keep you costly. There are other methods they will use to pressure us," Kaname admits.

Zero seems to test his next words before he says them. "I need to know. Would it be better to remove myself before that happens?"

Kaname is suddenly, violently angry and he seizes Zero's arm, forcing his Consort to look up. "Enough. Do you want to leave?"

"No! But the treaty -"
"Damn the treaty!" The words that tumble out of Kaname's mouth are laced with his alpha's growling undertone, the two of them in complete agreement. "Do you think the Senate can stop me? Do you think they will be able to take you away, now that I have claimed you?"

Kaname loves the stunned look on his sweet boy's face. Rage turns deeper, sweeter, sinks lower in his blood. "Do you think I will abandon you at the first obstacle?"

The doubt in Zero's eyes says everything.

Show him, whispers the alpha. Make him see we will never leave him alone. Impress the truth into his body, into his blood.

Kaname licks the points of his fangs. "Then I must prove my words. Let me show you my devotion," he entreats, and runs a hand along the bare skin of Zero's arm, hidden beneath the long sleeves and meant only for his touch.

The catch in Zero's breath is tiny. Kaname feels it down to his bones. His boy's pink tongue darts out unconsciously to wet his lips, and the slow heat in Kaname's skin rises higher, his cock taking an interest and beginning to fill.

Zero blushes, his abilities revealing plainly Kaname's lust. Kaname merely smiles, and his touches turn light and fleeting.

Draw our prey in, step by step. Let him yield himself willingly, the pureblood part of him murmurs. Until we devour him.

Zero's blush darkens, and he squirms, well-trained by the Kurans to know what those caresses mean. Kaname's pride swells along with his cock. Half a year ago, his virgin would have fled in terror. Now beneath their hands Zero's innocence has been shaped into this sinful creature. And what a beautiful sin indeed, Kaname marvels, sweeping his eyes over his flustered Consort's body, intent clear in his gaze.

A hint of Zero's arousal creeps into the air, and Kaname knows he's won. Kaname smiles, turning Zero's hand over and kissing the palm, mouthing and licking between the webs of Zero's fingers. "Do you think I will leave you to starve?" he says between filthy sweeps of his tongue, suckling at Zero's forefinger in a lewd imitation.

Zero has a hand covering his mouth to stifle his moans, scarlet to his collar. Still so sweet, so innocent, even now.

"I will satisfy all your hungers, precious boy. Even the ones you refuse to speak aloud."

Lilac eyes widen, sensing the truth and perhaps frightened of what that means. Kaname gives no chance to reflect, catching his Consort's mouth in a deep kiss and taking two lovely handfuls of Zero's rear. With a quick movement, Kaname has Zero up and is carrying him over to the edge of his desk, relishing the chance to squeeze and knead his boy's firm flesh.

Zero finally breaks their kiss to breathe, and his chest heaves as he rests his head on Kaname's shoulder. Kaname hears his Consort snort when he realizes where he is. "Pervert," the Hunter mutters into Kaname's throat. "You work on this desk."

"I do," Kaname agrees, nibbling Zero's ear. "To my great shame, I haven't been able to break it in properly yet. I want to remember this moment every time I sign documents for the Senate," Kaname tells him, getting in one last lingering squeeze before running his hands up Zero's thighs, pushing them apart and settling between them.
Zero just chuckles, which turns to a choked-off moan as Kaname grinds his cock into Zero's core through the layers of their clothing.

His alpha rips free from Kaname's restraint, desiring its omega's willing cunt, so close to its prize but cruelly thwarted by thick cloth. Kaname snarls, and taking hold of Zero's collar, he rends the bodice of Zero's robes from throat to groin using nothing but strength alone.

Zero cries out in shock, but Kaname and his alpha roar triumphantly and peel away the ruined fabric. It feels like tearing away Zero's barriers around his heart too, a curtain of indiscriminate kindness and impersonal concern. The pale sweep of Zero's chest is exposed, and Kaname places a hand over Zero's heart. If only - Kaname shakes away the thought, and slices away Zero's underwear with the utmost care.

Now he can finally admire the pink hole he desires, shiny with a hint of slick and still puffy and open from their lovemaking this morning. Hungry, Kaname drops to his knees and licks at his treat, spreading Zero wide and using the flat of his tongue on every tender inner place. Zero tastes so good, just like the way he smells, and Kaname can't get enough. Licking mate's hole is good for other things - it mates sure mate is healed inside. Even through his lust, remembering how Zero tore makes Kaname sick. Kaname never wants Zero to bleed again, never wants his pleasure to bring his boy pain.

Reminding himself that now is his chance to show his devotion, Kaname aims higher and takes Zero's cock in his mouth, at first mouthing along the shaft and then swallowing Zero whole. The pureblood can hear papers scatter and pens hit the floor, knocked aside by Zero's flailing hands, and hums in satisfaction, earning a shriek from Zero. When Zero's toes curl and his legs kick the desk every time Kaname's tongue curls around his cock, Kaname judges his sweet boy is ready.

As Kaname frees his own cock, he kisses Zero's knee, a quick burst of tenderness, then rises up, covering Zero with his body. Kaname wants to fill Zero's vision, so that Zero can only look at him, can never look away.

And Zero is looking up at him, waiting with a thin sheen of sweat on his brow for whatever Kaname decides comes next. Kaname cups his jaw and kisses him again, unable to resist. "You keep forgetting," Kaname tells him, taking Zero's wrists and pinning them above the Hunter's head. "Your job is not to worry about what the Senate will do. That is my task, and Yuuki's task. Your only worry is taking care of yourself, and your duties as our Consort."

Kaname angles his hips, feeling the silken folds of Zero's opening catch the tip of his cock. "Understand?"

Zero bites his lip, nodding frantically as he tenses.

No, not yet, Kaname decides, and changes course, leaning down to kiss his precious boy's cheeks, eyelids, mouth. "Drink from me," he coaxes. Much can be tasted in the blood that cannot be said in words. And this is part of his devotion, to offer Zero his blood when no other has that privilege save Yuuki.

The slight pain of fangs breaking skin feels like the sweetest pleasure. Groaning as Zero draws blood, Kaname shifts and offers his Consort a better angle. Lowering himself until they are chest to chest, Kaname's arms take his full weight as he grips Zero's wrists. Only now does Kaname enter Zero, thrusting his hips forward in one smooth glide.

He breaches Zero easily, those hot walls clinging and squeezing but not resisting, sliding right into place where he belongs. Kaname has carved the shape of his cock into Zero's insides, taken him so
often that even Zero's swift healing cannot keep pace. Just thinking about it drives the pureblood mad, his possessive nature rearing up. If a lesser alpha dared steal Kaname's mate, they would find his omega's cunt loose and stretched out, his body capable of giving Kaname alone pleasure. Kaname's hips twitch sharply and a pulse of heat shoots from his groin.

Mouth pressed against Kaname's throat, Zero stutters and moans, rhythm thrown by unexpected pleasure.

Kaname grinds deeper into slick heat, bottoming out until his knot spreads Zero's folds, and is rewarded when Zero's muscled legs wrap around his waist, agile strength pulling him flush against Zero's hipbones and affirming their joining.

Licking the pureblood's wounds closed, Zero throws his head back, wincing when he meets solid oak. One calf tangled in Zero's ruined skirts nudges Kaname's back. "Hurry up."

"No," Kaname replies, and draws back, taking his time to leisurely stroke Zero's cunt with his girth before sharply hilting himself again, shocking Zero with sudden fullness.

Zero goes breathy, rewarding him with a sharp cry and dazed eyes.

Kaname smirks, and assaults the same place again, keeping up the pattern of slow, then sharp thrusts. He makes full use of his position, crouched over Zero like a predator, face to face and gazing down at Zero with every motion. Kaname can't take his eyes off the honest faces Zero makes during sex, the way his mouth drops open to gasp, how his expression crinkles with every thrust, the way he bites his lip. Their bodies slide together uncomfortably, Kaname's clothes sticking to Zero's damp chest and Zero's wet cock pressed into Kaname's stomach, but Kaname cannot bear to stop. The closer Zero comes to orgasm, the hotter and tighter he grows inside. And as Zero clamps down around his cock and comes, Kaname picks up his thrusts, shaking the heavy desk with his strength.

How frustrating to touch Zero's body and know all Zero's affection is given away to others, the kindness he shows for strangers identical to the gentleness shown to Kaname. Kaname wants Zero to look at him the say way he looks at Yuuki - Kaname wants to be special to Zero.

Kaname wants, and the wanting breaks his control, makes words begin spilling out. "I will never leave you," he promises Zero, who is flushed pink and breathless and so unspeakably snug and slick inside. Kaname fucks him harder so Zero can't think, can't realize the jagged honesty underneath his words.

The pureblood finds his Consort's gaze and refuses to look away, grasp tightening around Zero's wrists. "If you tried to leave me, I would hunt you down and lock you away," he rasps, thrusting so hard Zero's body shakes and only Kaname's grasp holds him in place. As Kaname shudders and spills, he makes sure he sinks as deeply as possible, so Zero will take every drop of his seed, and snarls, "You're mine, Kiryuu Zero."

Zero whimpers, and his thighs tighten around Kaname's waist at the wet feeling of his husband's come.

Kaname rolls his hips, chasing the last shreds of pleasure, and his clasp finally goes slack, freeing Zero's hands. The pureblood sinks down, gathering Zero in his arms, and hides his next words in Zero's hair. "I care about you the same way I care about Yuuki," Kaname confesses, reveling in the way Zero's arms come around his back, returning the embrace.

They stay locked like that as their bodies cool. Kaname is still hard, sheathed inside Zero's channel,
but Zero doesn't ask him to pull out, and Kaname does not try to renew their coupling.

"You don't need to push yourself," Kaname finds himself saying. "Yuuki does not love you less because we did not bond. And she loves you regardless of whether you can have a child."

Zero's arms tighten around Kaname's shoulders, but he does not speak.

"Nor does it make a difference to me. We chose you for your own sake, Zero. If you never experience a heat and we never bond, we are still your husband and wife. You are still our Consort. That will never change."

Kaname draws back, so he can look into Zero's face. Zero's expression is splintered open, cracked, and Kaname realizes once more how his boy must have suffered these past few weeks.

"Be at peace," he murmurs, nuzzling Zero's temple in lieu of breaking their embrace. "We are together, and that is all we need. If you want a child, you will have Yuuki's shadow to raise. Let us protect you, and give you what you need."

Pressing his forehead into Kaname's collarbone, Zero breathes raggedly, but Kaname can feel him nod. "I'll try."

Chapter End Notes

Kaname that's the most vague, backhanded, easily misunderstood love confession ever. 0 points for Slytherin.

In my defense, I promised my readers porn. I never said it was the porn you wanted.

No spoilers for the next chapter, sorry everyone. You'll have to wait and see.
Impossible. Kuran cannot mean what Zero had imagined the vampire implied. Kuran has spent the last fifty years making his hatred of Zero indisputable. Zero *must* be misunderstanding the pureblood's words somehow.

'I care about you the same way I care about Yuuki' could mean anything - wanting to protect Zero as a spouse, perhaps, or wanting to see Zero's physical needs taken care of. Or maybe Kuran meant that he holds a simple fondness toward Zero, or a desire for the Hunter's casual companionship. After all, people care for others all the time without it meaning anything serious. Zero himself cares for his friends, for his fellow Hunters, and for Yuuki, though not all the same way.

Zero curls tighter, hiding in the sheets of their bed. Kuran had carried him back to their bedroom wrapped in his own coat to protect Zero's modesty and keep him warm against the winter chill. Then he'd run a damp cloth over Zero's skin, and redressed Zero in a warm, soft robe, even though Zero had maids who were paid to do exactly the same tasks. During the whole process, Zero's power had sensed that Kuran was wracked by strong emotions, but the pureblood's hands remained gentle. Then Kuran had summoned Nightshade, tucked the two of them beneath the blankets, and left. Zero hadn't said a word the whole time, and neither had Kuran.

You didn't confess meaningful feelings during sex, not mention it afterwards, and then leave your partner alone without saying anything if the confession was true. Maybe Kuran was lying?

But Zero rejects that thought as soon as it forms. Zero's extra sense can recognize the truth, and nothing Kuran said to him while they were joined was anything except the purest honesty. Zero could stake his life on it.
People said things during sex they didn't mean, his mind counters. Perhaps Kuran felt his words was true in the heat of the moment, but didn't really mean them once his brain caught up?

But Kuran only said those words after he'd finished, not during the sex itself. And Kuran has so much experience in bed, Zero has trouble believing he'd say something unintended even at the height of pleasure. It's not impossible though.

Zero buries his head in a pillow. If Zero couldn't feel Kuran's spend leaking between his thighs, he could make himself believe he'd imagined their encounter. It's just unthinkable that Kuran might not-hate him. Ridiculous. It could never happen. Zero has ample evidence of Kuran's hostility, though it may have lessened in recent months. He can remember vividly the feeling of Kuran's hands around his throat as he struggled to breathe. That sentiment is unmistakable.

Maybe Kuran has deluded himself into honestly believing he more-than-likes Zero? Kuran must be wrong, of course, but why would the pureblood do that? Could Kuran have confused his alpha's desires with real feelings? Or perhaps he unconsciously fooled himself to make Yuuki happy?

No, it makes more sense that Kuran just said something ridiculous and embarrassing while being overcome by pleasure. Leaving without a word must be the pureblood's way of saying he wants Zero to forget it happened. That must be the answer, Zero realizes, relaxing into the mattress. Fifty years of contempt does not vanish into thin air.

The suite door opens. Nightshade perks up, looking toward the door, and Zero calls out, "I'm in here, Yuuki."

"How do you keep doing that?" Yuuki teases, her footsteps nearly silent without shoes.

"I'd always know it's you," Zero assures her, although it's not far from the truth. His powers are stronger now. He only needs mushin for strenuous tasks; little uses like truth-reading and aura sensing come to him these days as easily as breathing. His extra sense permeates every waking thought, and revelation washes over him without effort.

The bed dips as Yuuki clammers up beside Zero and touches his shoulder. Nightshade rolls on his back, begging for attention, and Yuuki absently scratches his belly. "Do you know why I just got a frantic phone call from Kaname asking me to check on you?"

"Frantic?" Zero says, raising an eyebrow.

"Well," she amends, "it was more like 'I may have miscalculated, please look in on our Consort,' but that's as close as Kaname gets to frantic unless one of us is in danger."

Zero snorts, curving his body to make room for Yuuki. "He's being dramatic. We had sex on his desk. He shredded the new clothes you bought me." Then the Hunter laughs, because Yuuki's severe jealousy is transparent.

"I wanted to tear that robe off you!" she fumes, shaking a fist.

Giving a suggestive roll of his hips as he faux-stretches, Zero looks up through his eyelashes. "I'm still wet inside. Would you like to make it even?"

Yuuki shakes her head, holding her body stiff with single-minded focus. "No way I'd settle for that. I'm going to outdo him. Still interested?"

"I only want to serve my wife as she pleases," Zero demurs, shivering when Yuuki's hand slips down the collar of his robe and her thumb brushes his nipple.
Then Nightshade whines loudly. Zero sighs. "Can you put him outside?"

"No," Yuuki refuses, pushing Zero's robe down his shoulders and bending over his chest. "I want Kaname to watch what I'm about to do to you."

Zero looks at her for a moment, realizes she's serious, and sighs. Well, it's not the weirdest thing the Kurans have done. Bloody alphas.

Strangely enough, Zero finds it easier to breathe in the days before the winter Jeweled Court.

Kuran and Yuuki make special efforts to assure him their affection remains constant, that Zero's missed cycle has changed nothing between the three of them unless Zero wants change. He doesn't spend a single moment without one or the other beside him, coaxing him to rest, to eat, to sleep, to rebuild his strength. Yuuki seeks him out for a tear-filled conversation where she renews her promises she will love him no matter what.

Zero believes her - how could he doubt, when her agony was a lance in his own chest? But Zero finds himself lacking, wishes he could make himself worthy of such love. Wishes he could fulfill the secret wish his wife deserves to have granted. Yuuki deserves better than a broken omega.

After reflection, Zero has concluded that Kuran is right. Zero should only focus on his current mission, and not on realities he cannot change. So he shapes his plans for the the winter court, studying with Takuma so intensely he has no time for unneeded thoughts.

The Court is going to rake him over the coals because of his missed heat. Shoshana may be barren now, but at least she'd borne children in her youth. An omega incapable of carrying children was a useless existence who could not even be called worthy of the title. The rumors have been vicious, and the Jeweled Court will fight Zero's control to the bitter end.

Zero has made peace with the idea. He can endure whatever words the nobles sling at him, and he never wanted to lead the Court anyway. They will make Takuma the unofficial head consort, and Zero will step back from political matters. It's the only path forward that Zero's failure has left open.

Kuran hasn't brought up his odd words again, and Zero has tried to put them aside. Zero is almost certain his conclusion is correct and Kuran got caught up in the moment, but without a clear answer, some ambiguity remains. The incident keeps distracting Zero from his work at inconvenient moments, and preparing for the Jeweled Court tomorrow requires his complete focus. For Zero's peace of mind, perhaps the Hunter should ask Kuran to explain himself.

Speaking of Kuran, Zero's Hunter senses tell him that his husband is approaching their bedroom at his swiftest speed. Zero is sluggishly dressing for the night, after another day full of restless sleep and dreams he never remembers. The evening is dedicated to last minute preparations for the Court, which he cannot face without trepidation.

Those plans are dashed when Kuran swings open the outer door and orders, "Hurry and dress. We must go now." Kuran's voice is stern, and filled with thunder. He's not wearing a suit, but his long dark coat instead.

Something terrible has happened. Zero knows this at once, intuiting in the supernatural way his perception tells him secrets. Something so dire that Kuran himself never imagined it could happen. Something that has filled him with despair.

"What's going on?" Yuuki says, hurrying to finish her breakfast. Zero shuffles on a robe and belts
"Last night, an unrecorded Level D Hunter tried to assassinate Consort Shoshana."

"Is she alright?" Zero interrupts, putting aside his horror at the news of another forcibly Turned Hunter. A pureblood must be involved, if their chosen pawn was a Turned vampire.

"For now," Kuran says. His eyes are hard. "Her husband saved her life, but at great cost. Ouri is dead."

Zero sucks in a breath, his hands falling still and his mind racing as he struggles to process the news. Blood and ash, another murdered pureblood. Vampire society is going to lose its collective mind. As much time as he's spent with Shoshana, Zero has never met Ouri in person, only glimpsed him from afar or recognized the pureblood's aura as a familiar earthquake tremor nearby. But he seemed devoted to Shoshana, and she to him, and that makes Zero mourn his loss.

What happens to Shoshana now? And if the assassin is a Hunter, even a Turned one, the Hunter's Association will be dragged in as well. Zero will need to make a call before they go.

Yuuki looks shattered, which surprises the logical corner of Zero's mind. He'd thought they hadn't even known one another.

"We have to go now," Kuran continues. "Consort Shoshana is refusing to allow anyone inside until Yuuki and I arrive."

The wind off the mountaintops is cold and sharp. Ouri's home, remote and surrounded by unspoiled nature, must be very peaceful under normal circumstances. Not now. Raised voices echo through the valley, punctuations of grief and anger. Donned in haste, the crowd is shrouded in mourning white. Another bloodline is dead, and the vultures and pilgrims are gathering around the corpse.

Kuran leads the way, cutting through the throng milling outside. A translucent golden barrier, blindingly bright to Zero's Hunter senses, blocks the open doorway and keeps the Senate's subordinates from entering Ouri's household.

Behind the golden barrier is Shoshana, slumped against the doorpost of her home and looking halfway to death herself. Shoshana has always had an ill, transparent look to her. It's far worse now. She raises her head as the Kurans and Zero approach and makes the proper obeisance. The only thing keeping her on her feet must be devotion, or perhaps rage.

Zero cannot take his eyes off her. He has never seen Shoshana wear white. Shoshana's colors were always bright - marigold, turquoise, emerald, poppy. White makes the hollows under her sharp cheekbones deepen.

Shoshana's barrier sputters away, and Zero darts forward to catch her by the arm and pull her to her feet, giving her as much dignity as he can. He senses she is different - something in her aura is gone, stripped away, a fundamental part of her missing Zero hadn't realized belonged to Ouri instead.

Offering Zero a gracious glance, Shoshana straightens, the braids in her hair swaying as she dips her head. "Kuran-sama, Kuran-hime, thank you for your haste. I wished to have my husband's peers here for the investigation, to make sure he is treated with the proper respect due to a pureblood. I know you will seek justice for his murder."

Zero's stoic mask doesn't shake, but inside he winces. He knows enough to realize the Senate will
be furious with Shoshana’s public snub and reliance on the Kurans instead.

Shoshana leads them to a sitting room dappled with late evening light, the sunbeams turned smokey by the ash in the air. On the floor is more ash, and a dark cloak lying crumpled where it fell. Pinned to the ground beneath another amber glass barrier and two of Ouri’s servants is a honey-blonde young girl, clawing and scratching and screaming like an animal, her blue eyes rolling wildly.

Zero would know her as a Hunter with one look. His stomach turns - the girl's natural quiet Hunter aura is silenced beneath a Level D's signature. The greatest nightmare of their kind. Zero wouldn't wish this experience on anyone.

While the Senate representatives and the Kurans forge ahead, Zero falls behind, feeling his senses twitch and tug at him, information flooding his brain. His breathing picks up, and he guides Shoshana over to a couch, putting a hand to his temple and closing his eyes.

"Consort Kiryuu, are you well?" comes a distant servant's voice.

The world feels too sharp. The taste of ash is gritty on his tongue. Zero coughs, trying to clear his throat, draw in air. The girl's screams reverberate in his brain, too loud too loud too loud.

He retreats into mushin, slipping down into stillness and quiet, and opens his eyes, feeling the world focus and unfold.

The crowd is gone. There is no ash, or shrieking young girl assassin. The room is empty, except for Consort Shoshana, dozing on the couch. Zero accepts these things with the calm equanimity of mushin, and keeps watching.

The assassin creeps inside, her anti-vampire weapon quiet in her fist, recognizing its wielder despite the poison in her blood. The Hunter girl is skilled, slipping silently to Shoshana's side without alerting her, resting her dagger against the vampire's throat for the final strike.

Zero has never met Ouri. But this tall, black-haired man in front of his eyes, Zero knows, is the dead pureblood whose ashes lie scattered across the room. Ouri bursts inside with a wild, desperate scream, green eyes blazing madly - and the assassin's strike falters. She knows she's too close to Shoshana for Ouri to attack carelessly, and she takes Shoshana hostage, using the Consort to shield her own body.

Ouri throws himself at the threat, grabbing the assassin by the arm and pulling her away. Hunter training asserts itself, and the assassin twists, aiming for the new enemy. But it's pure chance that the blade slips into Ouri's heart instead, killing him instantly.

The vision ends. Mushin implodes and Zero clutches the jagged ends of his consciousness, feeling his head split open and energy gush away like blood from a wound.

Kuran's voice booms thick and heavy with power, and shocks Zero back into the present. He's folded over the divan, his vision spotty and greying at the edges, sweating like he's run a marathon. Shoshana has a tight grip on his arm, keeping him from sliding to the floor, and she pulls his limp body down to sit beside her, shooting a look at her servant and shaking her head.

Zero’s fit somehow escaped notice; everyone's attention remains on the Kurans as they question the Hunter who killed Ouri. Given reprieve, Zero makes a shaky attempt at composing himself. What on earth just happened? Zero is certain he just watched Ouri die, which cannot be possible.

Unless...the pure blood he consumed from Shirabuki. The changes it wrought must be more
profound than Zero realized. But the Kurans and their entourage are coming back this way - Zero can explore this new twist later, when he's not in front of so many people.

Kuran appears unmoved, but Yuuki's frustration is more apparent. "The girl will not accept my commands to speak," Kuran says, the epitome of control. "But I believe she was ordered to kill herself afterwards, to destroy the evidence. That is why she keeps struggling."

Zero doesn't let himself react, meeting the announcement with the stoicism it deserves in front of an audience. "Shirabuki Sara arranged this."

"Yes." Yuuki is crisp and to the point.

Zero works through the angles. "To what purpose? Wasn't she supposed to marry Ouri?"

"Killing Consort Shoshana would have removed any excuse not to fulfill the engagement," Kuran muses.

"No," Yuuki rejects. "Shirabuki despised Ouri - she thought he was weak. I think she gave up on their engagement a long time ago. She even sent an assassin who looks like her."

"So Ouri was the real target," Zero concludes. "With his Consort gone, I don't think he would have struggled when a second assassin came for him."

Shoshana's shoulders buckle. Zero winces, realizing through his Hunter-trained mission focus how callous his words must feel to Ouri's widow. He places an apologetic hand on her arm. "I apologize, that was thoughtless of me."

She shakes her head, sending her braids flying. "Do not apologize for the truth." Her eyes rest on the Senate's representatives. "I cannot avoid reality."

The most pompous representative steps forward as if on cue. "Shoshana-sama, we do not wish to rush you, but the Senate is the guardian of our precious remaining purebloods and their legacies, and certain inventories must be made."

Shoshana's hands clench, and Zero's forehead creases, ignorant of the underlying meaning but sensing greed from the Senate's lackey and grieving loss from Shoshana. "What happens to Consort Shoshana?" he asks Kuran, lowering his voice in an aside.

A quick glance at Shoshana, and Kuran replies, "Because a Consort is not an equal of their spouse, vampire inheritance law treats their marriage differently. To be blunt, Consort Shoshana inherits nothing from Ouri's estate except her own personal effects and whatever she brought with her into marriage."

"Nothing but the clothes on my back," Shoshana tells them flatly. "Will I be permitted to keep the account holding my stipend? I dislike the idea of relying on the hospitality of others."

"The hospitality of others?" Zero repeats, darting a quick look around. "You're throwing Consort Shoshana out of her own home?"

"The estate belongs to Ouri's bloodline," the appointed Senate mouthpiece lectures. "If he has no pureblood relations, it falls to the closest noble relative."

Zero stares around in disbelief. "Are you serious? This must have been her home for thousands of years, and now you're just telling her to leave?"
"Shoshana-sama's next alpha will have the funds to pay for her upkeep. The Senate will be willing to pay any expenses incurred during the Courtship, of course." More than one alpha in the Senate delegation examines Shoshana the same way a butcher studies a cut of meat.

Zero's stomach turns, imagining himself in Shoshana's place. "Show a little compassion! Her husband's just died, and we're in the same room as his ashes."

"My Consort has a point," Kuran cuts in just as the Senate's representatives begins to argue. His voice slices straight through the discussion, freezing the room. "It seems rather disrespectful to have Consort Shoshana marry immediately, without observing a mourning period. It would give the impression that Ouri's death was unimportant, and easily brushed off - particularly since there is no other pureblood available to bond her. A pureblood's treasured possession should not be sullied so quickly by those of lower rank." Kuran casts his gaze over the room, making it clear exactly who he means.


Yuuki and Kuran exchange a significant glance. Zero's gut tells him there's something going on here - something significant - and it's being kept secret from him. That's fine. Zero trusts Yuuki will tell him when it matters.

"Yes," Yuuki says, stepping forward toward the door in an invitation to leave. "Zero, will you be okay here?"

"I'll be completely fine," Zero assures here. "Someone needs to be here when the Hunters arrive."

"Hunters?" says one of the Senate representatives. "This is no -"

"Yes," Zero says, raising his voice. "I will be keeping an eye on things until at least one Lead Hunter arrives to take this woman" - gesturing toward the writhing Hunter on the floor - "back to Association Headquarters."

"She's just murdered Ouri-sama! We will not allow it!"

Zero drags a slow, sweeping glance over the crowd, letting steel firm his shoulders. "Yes, you will. Turning Hunters into vampires is illegal. Shirabuki Sara broke the treaty, then drugged her victim and controlled her into killing Shirabuki's fiance. This woman had no choice but to obey. She's an unstable D whose master is dead. She's been punished enough. And as my case shows, a Level D Hunter stays under the Association's authority."

While the nobles are fumbling for a rebuttal, Zero reaches into his robe and finds what he's searching for by touch. The assembled vampires go still and nervous when Zero places Bloody Rose on his lap. He grins. "I'm glad we have an understanding."

This is a disaster. This is the absolute worst thing that could have happened, because Ouri is dead and so is the knowledge to keep Zero alive, and Yuuki feels like such an idiot, because if they'd just gone to see Ouri when Kaname told her -

She draws in a ragged breath, frustration and anger making tears prick at her eyes, and startles when Kaname's hand rests on her shoulder. He squeezes gently, offering support, and Yuuki smiles gratefully at him.

"I know why you came here," Shoshana says, trailing to a stop ahead of them and gazing out of a
window. The three of them are isolated, in a hallway far from the sitting room and its audience.
Shoshana has lost her fierceness, but her exhaustion remains. "I may be able to help you attain your
goal. I will need something in return."

"What would you exchange for the knowledge Ouri promised me?" Kaname asks, a dark lilt in his
tone.

"I have two conditions," Shoshana says tersely. "First, I need you to make sure our servants find
employment. I cannot afford to pay them any longer."

"Done. And the second?"

"I want one year. One year to mourn my husband, Kuran-sama, one year where the Senate will not
insist I begin another Courtship for a new alpha."

"Only one?" Yuuki says. Kaname says good things never come with cheap prices.

"That's all I need." Shoshana turns, her dark eyes dull. "I am dying. I will be ash before next spring.
I have been dying for years, despite my husband's efforts. There were centuries of failed
experiments before he finally succeeded in extending my life, and when he performed the final
ritual I had only a few years left. That is the first thing you should know. The ritual will not give
Consort Kiryuu immortality. It only changes how time flows around him."

It makes no difference. Even a little extra time with Zero would be worth any sacrifice, but Yuuki
is disappointed to learn Zero will still leave them one day.

"We agree, of course," Kaname says, and Yuuki shoots him a grateful smile.

"You do not wish to know what price the ritual will demand?" Shoshana asks, cocking her head
and studying Kaname.

"It's irrelevant," Kaname tells her, and Yuuki loves him fiercely in that moment.

Her alpha rolls with glee. *Mate is the best and most wonderful and must be protected no matter
what. We are so very proud of alpha-mate for finally seeing that!*

A smile flickers briefly on Shoshana's face. "Good. Follow me," Shoshana says, and drags herself
back into motion. "The ritual asks a twofold sacrifice of those things most precious to a pureblood -
power and control."

"What about Zero?" Yuuki interjects. She must be certain doing this will only protect him.

"The omega pays no price for the extension of their life."

Yuuki bites her lip, another question on the tip of her tongue.

Shoshana casts a glance backwards. "My body was damaged long before Ouri performed the ritual.
Since I am the only omega ever to receive the gift, I cannot promise with certainty, but I believe it
should not affect his childbearing ability."

Yuuki starts with surprise. Permanent injuries are rare among vampires, and nobles could usually
heal from any crippling damage. What happened to Shoshana that her body remains wounded
thousands of years later?

The noble turns, and picks up the pace. "I do not know how the ritual works. Ouri created it, and I
was unconscious as he performed it. But he kept notes - not organized ones - enough you may be able to piece together the process. You need to take them now, before the Senate does."

Down one hallway, then up another, and then the noble throws open a wooden door. Inside is a mess of books and papers, all covered in thick dust. "Here, this is all of it. I made sure after Kuran-sama's visit, in case my husband needed to revisit his notes."

Kaname pauses, studying the chaos. "You have not demanded proof we can convince the Senate."

"I don't need it. You are married to Consort Kiryuu. His character is noble, and you both love him. I trust that affection to guarantee your word."

"Come stay at Rosehill." The words are out of Yuuki's mouth before she registers them, her hope burgeoning in her chest. Surely the key to saving Zero must be in here somewhere!

Kaname stares at her. Shoshana stares at her. "Just until you're ready to find a new home," Yuuki amends. "Aido's not staying in the Senate palace any more. We have room."

The noble bows her head. "I appreciate your gracious offer, Kuran-hime, but -"

"Zero could use a teacher," Kaname says speculatively. "There's still much for him to learn."

Shoshana considers this. It's not creating a debt if something is gained in exchange. "As you wish, Kuran-sama."

"Good," Yuuki says, clapping her hands, eager to look at Ouri's notes. "How are we going to smuggle a roomful of paper out without the Senate noticing?"

Kaname lifts an eyebrow, and the books begin flying from the shelves, stacking themselves neatly in rows on the ground. Loose papers bundle themselves up, drawers flying open and spilling their contents, and are piled atop the books. Yuuki is terribly impressed, and suffers more than a twinge of envy - Kaname's control is always incredible to watch. In the maelstrom of ink and paper, not a single sheet is harmed, every piece going exactly where Kaname intends.

When the room is bare, and every last scrap of information lays piled in a heap at their feet, Kaname touches the mound with both palms, his outline already breaking up into shadows. His voice echos oddly. "I will transport these to Rosehill, Yuuki. You have the skills to keep things under control here."

Yuuki sets her jaw. "Go ahead. Make sure you call Ichijo-sempai about Consort Shoshana's request."

As Kaname, carrying Ouri's work, fades away into shrieking bats that swirl through the halls, Yuuki turns to Consort Shoshana, and imagines Zero in her place. "Do you need some time for yourself? Zero and I can handle the Senate."

Shoshana says. "Our union has lasted for more than half a millenium. I do not know how to exist without him anymore."

Yuuki remembers the pureblood's dilemma, keenly aware of her own situation. "Please get some rest. We will take care of everything."

The winter Jeweled Court is canceled without argument. It's too late to reschedule, and holding any celebration the day after the death of a pureblood would be deemed wildly offensive. Proving
himself indispensable yet again, Takuma is the one who has the presence of mind to send the notifications. Zero's hands are full between keeping the Hunter girl Shirabuki Turned out of the Senate's hands, and moving a subdued Consort Shoshana and her belongings to Rosehill.

A large part of him is relieved to escape facing the other omegas when his disgrace is so fresh. But his reprieve should never have come at the cost of Ouri's life. If Zero lost Yuuki like Shoshana lost her husband...god, he doesn't want to imagine it. Zero would even regret Kuran meeting a similar death - the two of them have an understanding now, and Kuran is not without redeeming qualities. In one of those perplexing moments that are becoming more common, Kuran had warned Zero to be careful in the future whenever he's outside Rosehill, and to always remain armed.

Zero will need to keep a closer watch on both his spouses. If Shirabuki created a Hunter assassin to kill one pureblood, she will have kidnapped, Turned, and drugged more Hunters to target the rest of her enemies. The Association is already searching their records for any missing, presumed dead Hunters who she may have Turned, but Hunting is a dangerous profession. The MIA lists are long, and they don't know how far back to look. If Shirabuki stabilized some of the Hunters she Turned, she could have been kidnapping Hunters for over a century with the Association none the wiser. But there must be something else Zero can do to help. Zero won't accept other Hunters being used like him as pawns for a pureblood's game.

Zero's alphas cling to him that night when they come to bed, long after Zero has crawled beneath the cold sheets to attempt rest. Unable to sleep, Zero lies awake and worries until he feels the bed dip and the mattress squeak. He only drifts into purposeful slumber when he feels an arm slip around his waist, and another thicker arm wrap around his chest from behind.

"You called for me, child?" says a gentle voice.

"Honored Grandmother," Zero murmurs, lifting his cheek from the soft grass of their dream meadow.

The Ancestor of the Hunters smiles down at him, her braid hanging over her shoulder. She's nearly solid looking, her strength recovered from channeling Zero's power. "It brings me joy to see you again. I see you've mastered walking the path to come here - it's your power that bridged the space between us. Well done!"

"I wasn't sure this was going to work," Zero admits, righting himself and straightening. "I need your help. Today I met another Level D Hunter, and I think Shirabuki Sara has created more. Can you help me find them?"

The Ancestress' face falls, and she closes her eyes in pain, giving a single shake of her head. "Not if they are alone. My ability to watch over my descendents relies on the blood connecting us. I can find a lone Hunter only when our blood tie rings strong and pure. When the blood is thin so is our link, but quantity can substitute for strength if at least two Hunters are present. Do not worry, child, I have always been able to watch over you," she reassures Zero, catching his unsettled shifting.

"Shirabuki knew I could fight a pureblood's command," Zero mentions abruptly. "She'd want to minimize the risk her assassins could disobey her. She would have chosen victims from low-content bloodlines."

"But they would need to have the skill to take on strong nobles," the Ancestor of the Hunters comments thoughtfully, lacing her fingers together. "That combination is rare and should narrow your search. I cannot give you current locations, but I know at least two likely victims. Hunter Noah Karahan and his apprentice from the North American branch were recently attacked together
under suspicious circumstances, and both passed out of my sight."

"I'll let President Cross know," Zero promises. "But that isn't the only thing I wanted to ask you tonight."

"This is about the incident with your powers?" she guesses, a twinkle in her eye. "I have a theory, but please tell me your impressions."

"Did I have a vision of the past?" Zero blurts, still rather shaken and unable to make sense of the images. "I'm certain Ouri died exactly as I saw, but I had no way of knowing those details."

The Ancestress shakes a mischievous finger at him. "Ah, but I believe that you did have a way. You've been having unusual dreams lately, haven't you? Dreams you never remember when you wake up."

Zero's jaw falls open, and he stares at the Ancestress for a moment before reminding himself not to act a fool, closing his mouth.

"I think you were remembering an event you'd already seen. If I'm right, your mind has been wandering in your sleep for quite a while, and yesterday you watched Ouri's death," she says. "You weren't very surprised when Kaname told you, were you?"

"No," Zero croaks, pushing his bangs off his forehead.

The Ancestor of the Hunters smiles kindly. "Shirabuki's blood augmented your powers beyond your current ability to control, and they've been slipping free as you sleep. Your body is still integrating that new strength, and your control should improve with time as it settles."

"I'm relieved," Zero says, slumping down and feeling exhaustion pull at him. "I thought I was going crazy."

"Not in the least." The Ancestress' smile turns serious. "Zero, did you want to talk about anything else?"

Zero's missed heat lies unspoken between them. Lowering his eyes, Zero imprisons the words behind gritted teeth. "No, Honored Grandmother," he lies, and they both hear the falsehood.

Her gaze is sad. "If that changes, I welcome you to walk the path between us whenever you wish."

Zero bows his head beneath his shame, and nods.

Watching wistfully as Kaname pours himself hot sake, Takuma sighs, takes a sip of his herbal tea, and turns away to look out over the gardens of the Ichijo estate.

Kaname pours himself an extra drink when Takuma looks back again, because he is a jealous man and if his best lieutenant and oldest confidante wants to get married and have Shouto's child, Takuma is entitled to reap the full consequences.

Takuma merely raises an eyebrow, which conveys precisely the right mixture of amusement and reprimand to make Kaname relinquish his petty protest and stop drinking his alcohol in such a pointed fashion.

Knowing better than to speak, Takuma accepts his victory with easy grace, and swallows another sip of his tea.
"You've taken my advice," the pureblood remarks, gesturing toward the sword propped beside the table.

"Your suggestions were sound. Convincing Isaya to remain at home was harder," Takuma remarks, tracing his sword hilt.

Kaname watches the noble over the rim of his cup. "Have you received another token?"

Takuma stills, hand on his weapon. "No. Just the roses and note on the day Ouri was murdered."

Before her death, Shirabuki Sara ordered lover's gifts sent to a bonded omega, and now Shirabuki's ghosts are out killing her enemies, following unbreakable orders from a pureblood who can no longer revoke them. Shouto Isaya is the next obvious target for assassination as the alpha who took what Shirabuki desired. Takuma and Shouto are taking preventative measures, but Kaname can tell Takuma feels deeply shaken.

The noble has good reason to worry. Shirabuki's captured Hunters are a difficult tactic to counter. Nobles have great power, but rarely the military grade training every Hunter receives from infancy. For infiltration, for stealth, and for experience in clean, quick killing you couldn't do better than send a Hunter.

"Speaking of Ouri, I was not expecting the Senate to be so bold," Kaname remarks, long fingers touching the scroll between them.

"They had no choice if they wanted to placate the commoners," Takuma says, frowning. As has become his habit, he places a hand on his flat stomach as though soothing the child inside. "Six purebloods have died in the last fifty years. The Senate claims to act as the purebloods' guardian - it derives its authority from that very purpose - and four of those deaths can be laid directly at the Senate's feet. Veneration toward those of pure blood has always been stronger among the lower ranks. The commoners' confidence and trust in the Senate's governance is already at historic lows - a crowd gathered outside the Senate building itself when the news broke. The Senate dispersed the crowd quickly, but discontent is building."

"Convincing them to allow Consort Shoshana a year of mourning was almost doing them a favor," Kaname chuckles. Shoshana's presence is nearly imperceptible at Rosehill; her grief and poor health means she keeps to her rooms, and the Kurans have gained considerable prestige for their perceived kindness.

Takuma shares a brief smile, but it's fleeting. "Perhaps that instability is what motivated them to open a commission reexamining the recent pureblood deaths. A commission means investigators asking many, many questions, and we both know that revisiting those incidents is really about investigating you. You're too popular, Kaname. They want to implicate you in any way they can, and your involvement in so many deaths is suspicious. You have too many secrets they might stumble upon."

"I have taken measures," Kaname replies, tone impassive.

Takuma tries to smile again, but the effort fails. "I know, but I worry. I'll do what I can from my end. Be careful."

Hanging over the back of the library couch, Yuuki leans forward at a precarious angle and pokes Zero's shoulder.

With his nose buried in a book, Zero ignores the vampire trying to get his attention.
Yuuki pokes him again. Then twice more, for good measure. "Hey. I want to talk to you but it's going to make you uncomfortable. Where's a good place to do it."

Snapping his book shut, Zero stares at the cover in thought. "Take me riding. We can talk afterwards."

So Yuuki does. Those sinfully tight riding breeches make a reappearance, but Yuuki works hard to keep her mind on business. It helps that all Zero's winter riding habits are made from thick wool and the layered skirts hide his shapely rear. She watches from behind the fence as Zero works Magic, making quite a stunning pair with the black horse. Yuuki knows little of horses, but she appreciates the harmonious picture the two of them create together, silver and dark.

When the horse is cooled and stabled, back inside the warmth and hay and animal smells, Yuuki sits in an empty stall across the aisle, peeking through the open door.

Zero's hoseki glints in the dim light as he bends to stroke the horse's nose. He's seated in the straw with his dozing horse's head in his lap, an open, relaxed expression touching his face. When he's near, the horses will even bear Yuuki's terrifying aura and relax, trusting their rider will keep them safe. Yuuki can relate.

"I think I'm going to ship one or two of the mares out to be covered this spring," Zero tells her. "I've already made inquiries at a few of the stud farms. I figure we have a few years until Azai's child is weaned, and I won't have time to look after a foal if there's a baby in the house."

"I remember baby White Lily," Yuuki says, cheered at the image of a new fluffy white foal prancing through the fields. "She was really cute."

"I remember her too." Zero bends his head, hiding his sorrow in the horse's mane. "What did you want to talk with me about?"

Yuuki hesitates, thinking second thoughts before she goes and breaks Zero's peace. Her alpha doesn't approve of upsetting her mate, but Yuuki believes in her own resolution. She brushes straw off her skirts, flattens her hands against her thighs, and looks directly across at Zero, firming her voice. "I really, really enjoy it when you keep our come inside you after sex."

Zero's mouth quirks, cheeks stained red as he lifts an eyebrow in amusement.

"But I know you don't do it because you enjoy it," Yuuki continues. "The only time I've ever seen you touch yourself between your thighs is when we're having sex and it's an accident because you're actually trying to touch my cock."

All amusement fled, Zero's face hardens into a stoic mask.

"I know your body makes you uncomfortable. I'm not saying you need to be able to finger yourself or do anything sexual. But it's not healthy if you can't even clean yourself up. I want to help you become more comfortable with your body, Zero, comfortable enough to manage basic hygiene."

The horse shifts, butting Zero's stomach, and Zero remembers to start scratching again. Some of the tension in his spine leeches away. "You sound like you have a plan."

Yuuki nods furiously, knotting her hands in her skirt. "What if we work on decreasing the distance a little bit at a time? We'll start by having you touch as close to your cunt as you can feel comfortable right now, push past that limit by a hair, then stay at that distance until you feel comfortable again. Then we'll move a little closer. We don't need to try every day, just when you feel you can handle it."
"We?" Zero says.

"I'm not making you do this by yourself! And there'll be a reward!" Yuuki gestures wildly in her enthusiasm. "For every attempt, I'll put aside extra time to do one activity together. Whatever you want - but nothing sexual, this is to get you feeling more comfortable with your body only."

Stunned into silence, Zero blinks at Yuuki with his perfect poker face in place. Then he shrugs. "It couldn't make things worse."

"Good! When should we start?" Yuuki enthuses, scrambling up. She was expecting more resistance, but she's made preparations just in case.

"No time like the present," Zero says, nudging the horse off his lap and straightening.

They chose Yuuki's room for their attempt. In case it goes poorly, Zero spends no time there and has no associations with the space.

"I know why I'm taking off my clothes," Zero says, undoing the ties on his underdress, "but why are you?"

Yuuki unclasps her bra, sliding it down her arms and flinging it onto the bed. "It only seems fair that we're both naked. I promise I'm not going make any advances. Besides, isn't it kind of weird being naked when someone else is dressed?"

Zero makes a muffled noise that might pass for agreement, pulling his dress up and over his head.

Yuuki feels gooseflesh pebble on her arms, and goes to turn up the heat, wanting Zero as relaxed as possible. When she comes back, Zero is stealing the pillows and extra blankets off the bed, piling them on the floor in front of the room's large standing mirror, their other reason for choosing Yuuki's bedroom as their setting.

Zero eyes her with disdain when she deposits a large fur rug in their nest of blankets. "I'm supposed to sit bare naked on that?"

"Yes," Yuuki defends, "it's comfortable."

Her husband clicks his tongue, but seats himself gingerly on the thick pelt, knees drawn up toward his chin as he faces the mirror. Zero's more nervous than he wants to admit, his whole body caught within sight of the glass' maplewood frame.

Yuuki settles behind him, wrapping her arms around his waist and sitting up on her heels so she can watch the two of them together in the mirror. She draws on her patience, resting her chin on his shoulder until she feels his muscles ease.

"Match your breaths to mine," Yuuki says, inhaling slowly and deeply, letting the quiet peace and physical closeness soak in and relieve her longing for Zero, the longing that never relents. She kisses the Hunter's shoulder, moving slowly and within sight of the mirror so Zero knows the kiss is coming. He sighs, hands coming to rest atop Yuuki's arms encircling his waist.

"Can you let me see you?" Yuuki requests, keeping her voice soft and even.

The skin around his eyes tightens, and under his hands his pulse jumps. But at her prompting, Zero lowers his knees and opens his thighs, leaning back to display the omega's sex between them, pink and perfect.
Yuuki buries her nose in the crook of Zero's neck, scenting for distress. Zero's watching the two of them in Yuuki's mirror, but his eyes slide away from himself and his most despised part.

"Have you ever really looked at yourself?" Yuuki murmurs.

"No," Zero replies shortly, "It's ugly."

Yuuki frowns, rising up on her knees so their eyes are level and she can press a chaste kiss to his cheek. "You're not ugly, Zero. You're beautiful - the most beautiful person I've ever seen."

Zero doesn't openly disagree, but his expression seems discontent.

"I love you," Yuuki says, "so you'll just need to accept I know better than you about this." Reviewing her plans in her head, she says, "Maybe it would be better to wait before we start pushing your comfort zone.".

"I want to," Zero insists, but Yuuki can feel his unease as he's pressed up against her.

"Show me how close you can touch and still feel comfortable," Yuuki says, choosing to give Zero control of their pace.

"Here," Zero says, touching the skin of his waist when the edge of his underwear would fall.

"And how far can you go before you feel any discomfort?"

Zero's hand twitches down slightly, curling under an imaginary hem.

Yuuki blinks. It seems they have quite a ways to go, but as long as the effort is made for Zero's sake the difficulty doesn't matter. "Keep you hand there, please. We won't go any further today. When you feel comfortable and relaxed touching yourself here, you can move lower."

Zero nods. His eyes fall briefly on his reflection, then skitter away. The tightness stays in the carriage of his shoulders.

Worrying her lip, Yuuki ducks behind Zero's shoulder and presses closer. How can she make this experience more positive?

_Mate with him_, the alpha insists. _It makes him happy when we mount him. He looks so pretty sitting on our - _

Yuuki's _not_ using sex as a distraction. That's the opposite of helpful.

_Fine_, grumbles the alpha. At least touching mate was allowed.

Yes, Yuuki thinks to herself, rubbing the join of her chin and neck against Zero's shoulder to scent him. She contemplates slipping her hands out from underneath Zero's grasp, and instead interlaces their fingers, using their joined hands to pet Zero's sides. Already Yuuki can feel Zero settle beneath her touch, trusting her support along his back to keep himself upright.

An impulse seizes her; Yuuki lets it lift her up and carry her in its wake. "I need something to keep me occupied. There's a list I've been planning to compose. Do you mind if I work on it now?"

"A list," Zero repeats absently, watching the two of them stroke his body in the mirror. "Go ahead."

Yuuki hides her grin. "It's called 'the thousand reasons I love Zero' list. There's many more reasons than one thousand, but I thought brevity would be preferable to completeness. It's going to take a
lot of work to pick out the best thousand!"

"Yuuki," Zero says, the pink flush on his cheeks accentuating the bashful dip of his gaze.

Possessiveness and sharp, searing adoration cleave through her. "I love the way you smile and how it makes you look even more beautiful," she begins, kissing Zero's shoulder. "I love how animals can tell how kind you are." Another kiss, this time to his throat. "I love how when you get angry with people you love you try to glare but it ends up looking cute instead…"

Zero squirms and blushes for each new reason. He's criminally unused to people telling him how beautiful and desirable he is, and he never believes Yuuki when she promises she loves him no matter what. Yuuki will fix that - she suspects she'll be doing this often in the future. Best of all, he's forgotten he's naked and what all this fuss is meant to accomplish.

Yuuki keeps scenting Zero and touching him, pouring her love out with every word, content to be the distraction her husband needs as he takes his first step toward self-reconciliation.

Courting Zero has resulted in utter failure.

Kaname has sent a garden's worth of flowers. He's engineered numerous candlelit dinners where Yuuki found sudden excuses to leave the two of them alone. He's bought presents and chocolates of the finest quality. He's escorted Zero wherever the Hunter needed to go; they've kissed, held hands, walked along the beach, endured every last romantic trick in Kaname's arsenal.

Nothing. Zero smiles and accepts all Kaname's gifts with profound gratitude, the same way he would treat anyone's thoughtful gesture. He's polite and pleasant during their private dinners, but acts no differently than he does while eating with Yuuki. He reciprocates Kaname's kisses, allows the hand holding, parts his thighs and offers his body twice a day for Kaname's pleasure; in the eyes of the world they appear an alpha and omega besotted with one another.

All illusion, nothing more than silver plating hiding lead. Zero never initiates, never reaches out, never gives any hint he regards Kaname as more than a duty. There is no spark, no lingering touches nor weighted looks between them. Just Kaname and his longing. Zero remains oblivious to the fact Kaname desires him, stubborn to the last.

Kaname is left at a loss. He's never had to charm someone who was romantically indifferent toward him. A pureblood has their pick of vampire partners, and even fellow purebloods fought to bed the vampire king. Little has changed in Kaname's second life; nobles still beg and plead and fight one another for a single night in his bed. Kaname's handsome looks, wealth, and gentlemanly mien ensure any human ignorant of his status will still pursue his favor. Only a Hunter would deny him, and until now Kaname had other uses for Hunters than romance.

Kaname broods, remembers the Ancestor of the Hunters, and counts might-have-beens. He cannot bring himself to confess his affection through words twice, instead trying to speak through his actions. It doesn't work. Kaname can touch Zero's body as much as he pleases, but achieving his true desire seems as far as the moon.

To have everything and nothing is a particularly cruel fate.

"You're watching Zero again," Yuuki remarks in an undertone, drawing him away from the other theatregoers. The two are strolling arm-in-arm through the lobby during intermission while Zero visits with the few omegas attending. From his posture it's not going well, but his stance lacks true distress.
Kaname lifts his shoulders in a shrug. "He's my omega. I'm expected to watch him."

Yuuki clicks her tongue, seeing right through Kaname's excuse. "That old line? You didn't even pretend to watch the play."

"How did Zero fall in love with you?" Kaname asks instead, stroking her inner arm. If Kaname wishes to win Zero's affection, logic dictates he ought to learn from the one person who's managed to succeed.

Shaking her head, Yuuki says, "I don't know. I've never asked. It might sound stupid, but I felt like if I asked Zero's reasoning it would make him realize loving me was a ridiculous idea after all."

"And what about you?" Kaname says, a gentle chime announcing intermission is over. "How did you come to love Zero?"

Yuuki wears a rueful grin, and gives another shake of her head. "I can't remember an exact moment where it happened, where I went from to knowing him to loving him. I didn't even understand I loved him until after I left. Falling in love with Zero was never supposed to happen, Kaname. We didn't mean to do it, and we certainly didn't try on purpose. Maybe one day I just woke up and hungered for him, needed him like air and water and half my soul."

Kaname watches no more of the play's second half then he did the first. His eyes always stray back to Zero, and every time they do Yuuki's final words run through his head, and Kaname's chest aches.

The sex that morning is satisfying, but somehow not quite enough.

Raising the stakes for their wedding anniversary, Kaname plans Rosehill's first grand ball in centuries. It must be as magnificent and glorious as any soiree ever held during the monarchy; there must be no doubt that the Kurans rejoice in their new union. Kaname will not give the nobles more room to castigate Zero for things that are not his fault.

The pureblood throws himself into the preparations, working long hours to perfect every detail. He feels as though it's his last chance to impress Zero, one final opportunity to win Zero's love. The logical part of his mind knows this isn't true, but Kaname is desperate and his yearning outweighs his sense.

Kaname's vision of the night incarnates as though drawn straight from his dreams. The February evening comes cold and clear, and the Senate palace is alight with candles and cooler halogen light, making the guests' jewels and finery glitter. Kaname has hired high class performers to entertain his guests: fire-eaters, ice sculptors, illusionists who bring visions to life and cast bright fire-flowers in the air. The highest tier of vampire society from all over the globe crowds eagerly around laden banquet tables and dances to the sounds of the ear is delighted by music, the nose with perfumes and the palate with savory delights. The costumes themselves are a feast for the eye, each beautiful immortal vying against their fellows to shine the most brightly.

The three hosts have throne-like chairs set above the crowd where they reign over their invited guest. Kaname's spouses are radiant at his left and right hand, as richly dressed as any of their guests, and Kaname basks in the satisfaction of knowing the two most beautiful people in the room are seated at his side. He envisions the regal image the three present, and it pleases him. The only reason Kaname would take up the crown again would be for the pleasure of seeing Yuuki and Zero enthroned as they deserve.
In the dawn's light, after their guests have gone, Yuuki draws her husbands among the sleeping rosebushes. There they pledge their fidelity once more and renew their fateful consummation, sealing their promises in one another's blood. Stray scarlet drops stain the snow, nourishing the roots of the dreaming roses.

"I'm glad you're both here with me," Yuuki says, one arm around each of her husbands as they trade copper-tinged kisses.

"This is more than I ever thought I'd have," Zero confesses. "I thought I was walking into a nightmare. I was so afraid - I - but what we have now, it's good. It's really good."

Kaname curls the hand wearing his wedding ring around the nape of Yuuki's neck, beneath her auburn hair, and rests his cheek against Zero's temple. "I never wanted this marriage. Yet now I cannot conceive how I ever lived before this. I am more fulfilled then I have ever been in ten thousand years."

"Are you happy?" Yuuki asks him, watching his face intently. She's so much braver now, to ask that question when she didn't dare before.

Kaname closes his eyes and breathes in the cold clean air, the scent of blood, Yuuki's alpha musk and Zero's omega fragrance. The feelings in his chest well up, as though they might overflow if he added another drop. "Yes," Kaname says, and tugs her close to kiss her senseless.

Yuuki smiles into their kiss. "That makes me so glad to hear. Did you want to talk with Zero for a while?"

The Hunter shifts beside them, his eyes gentle as he watches their wife.

Kaname wishes that gaze would turn toward him. "Yes," the pureblood answers.

Licking blood off her fangs, Yuuki tilts her head playfully. "I'll see you both when you're finished. The party may be over, but we're not done with our own celebrations."

Zero sends Kaname a questioning glance as Yuuki disappears between the hedges.

Kaname must kiss his boy, of course, because Zero looks exactly like a curious kitten and Kaname is very poor at denying himself what he wants. Mastering himself, the pureblood takes his consort by the hand, leading him deeper into the dormant rose garden.

The long wine-colored train of Zero's gown fans out behind them on the snow, its crystals glowing white beneath the sun. Zero is draped in gems: tiny ones sewn into his gown, priceless heirlooms hanging from his ears and wrapped around his throat, a hoseki that's nothing less than a work of art. All of them are only a pale imitation of the silver Hunter's beauty.

"Yuuki and I have discussed our financial matters in light of Consort Shoshanna's situation," Kaname begins, releasing Zero's hand with a pang. "We would like to transfer a fourth of the Kuran assets to your name. We would never want you to find yourself in circumstances where you had to rely on others to live."

The Hunter's eyes go wide, and his mouth opens in shock. "A fourth? That's...I don't know how much money that works out to be, but it's too much, Kaname."

"A fifth then," Kaname replies. He would have suggested one-third of their fortune if he'd thought Zero would accept it, but even one-tenth is more than enough money for several lifetimes. "I cannot gift you any of the ancestral Kuran properties, but we will find you a small estate of your
Zero shakes his head, eyes still startled. "I lived in a tiny shitty apartment, Kaname, what would I do with an estate?"

"Grace it with your presence," Kaname answers, lifting Zero's hand and kissing it. "We want to ensure you are cared for, no matter what happens."

Kaname finds himself with an armful of beautiful omega as Zero throws himself at the pureblood's chest. "I told you, it's too much and I'm never going to need that much money. But thank you both for thinking of me."

*We're always thinking of mate,* Kaname's alpha chimes in. *All the time, even when we sleep and eat and go to boring meetings.*

"You know," Kaname murmurs, tangling his fingers in silver hair and shoving aside his alpha, "I meant it when I said that I care for you."

Zero doesn't raise his head from where he's buried his face in Kaname's tunic.

"If I died, would you mourn my loss?" Kaname wonders, half to himself, not expecting an answer. *Would you mourn me as Shoshanna mourns Ouri?* he does not say, allowing himself to hope.

But Zero lifts his head, and earnestly answers, "Of course. Yuuki loves you, and we're allies and partners. I think maybe you and I could even become friends someday."

Friends perhaps. No more. The brittle smile on Kaname's face cracks and the unsatisfying taste of his own blood coats his mouth. "That would be ideal," Kaname manages.

Yuuki is alarmed when Kaname leaves as soon as Zero is asleep, but whatever expression she sees on his face keeps her from arguing.

Pushing aside the cloth covering the doorway, Kaname ducks into the izakaya where his hastily arranged appointment is set to take place. With one sweeping glance to locate his target, Kaname crosses over to the bar and takes a seat against the wall where a single empty chair has been wedged, easily overlooked in the loud, busy atmosphere.

"Stop calling me. I'm not your damn therapist, vampire," Yagari Touga grunts, throwing back his head as he swallows his beer.

"Good evening, Yagari-sensei," Kaname says, surprising himself with the honest amusement tinging his voice. "You've chosen an excellent location. I could almost imagine that you wanted to see me." The compliment is paid truthfully. Because it straddles the edge of a seedy district, the izakaya patrons are a mixed crowd; the office workers drinking here at night ensure that Kaname draws no notice in his suit, but the clientele has enough suspicious characters that Yagari and his eyepatch don't draw a second glance.

A server brings Kaname a warm moist towel to clean his hands, which the pureblood politely uses.

Yagari leans back. "What are you doing here Kuran? I hear half the nobility is sleeping off the hangover from your party last night."

"You told me once that we weren't so different. What did you mean by that?"
The Hunter snorts, lighting a cigarette and adding to the thick smoke in the air. "That's what you called me out here to ask?"

"No," Kaname allows. "But I was curious to see if you would answer."

"I told you. Think about it hard enough and you'll figure it out." Yagari crosses his arms, holding his smoke between his fingers.

They both fall silent as Kaname is presented with an appetizer of cold edamame, and the pureblood orders sake. Yagari eats his karaage as they wait for Kaname's drink to be brought, and Kaname gathers his thoughts.

"I have reached an impasse in my relationship with Zero," Kaname begins, leaving his food untouched.

"Then talk to Zero," Yagari snorts, and takes another draw on his cigarette. "I'm not solving your marital problems for you."

"I have already talked to Zero." Kaname chooses his next words carefully. "I called you because you know him well and I am too close to the problem to be objective."

The Hunter shoots Kaname a shrewd glance. "I don't tell tales. Ask if you want, but I doubt I'll answer."

Folding his hands together, Kaname breathes in, counts to ten, allows the words to flow out with his exhale. "Do you believe it is possible that Zero might eventually come to love me?"

Yagari takes his cigarette out his mouth and places it on the ashtray, really looking hard at Kaname for the first time tonight. "So you finally figured it out. I told you we were more similar than you thought."

"That was what you meant?" Kaname questions, bemused but wholly preoccupied by his earlier unanswered question. "We're similar because we love him?"

"Obviously." The Hunter is silent for a moment. "I think Zero is tremendously forgiving and has a deep capacity for love. The real question, Kuran Kaname, is this: can you be satisfied if Zero doesn't love you the way you want? What if he loves you as a brother or a friend instead of a lover?"

Staring straight ahead, Kaname's impassive mask comes close to cracking.

"Because you can't force somebody to love you, pureblood. And I'm afraid of what you might do to Zero so you can get your way."

Kaname knows the starving abyss of his soul, and he cannot deny the accusation. After all, he had influenced Yuuki toward his own courtship using coercive methods and had even resorted to removing her other suitors. And Kaname knows he would have done worse if her heart had chosen differently.

A server arrives with Kaname's hot sake. The pureblood drinks to give himself something to do.

"Look, Kuran." Yagari scrubs a hand over his face. "You must have realized that you love Zero pretty recently. Give Zero time. Genuine feelings don't spring up out of nowhere."

Kaname signals for his bill. "Have you ever considered becoming a vampire, Yagari-sensei?"
"Not on your life, Kuran," Yagari scoffs, shaking his head. "I'm perfectly happy as I am."

"Your thinner Hunter blood means you won't live past a century," Kaname points out, eyeing Yagari as he drinks.

Yagari levels a glare of pure disgust. "Don't even try that hook on me. Vampirism is not a gift. It's a disease with a terrible price, and I've seen what it can do to good men. I never want to look at another human being and think of them as food. I refuse. And don't tell me I could live off blood tablets - accidents happen, we both know that. The addiction to blood eats at people. I've lived my life as a Hunter, and I won't betray my ideals at the very end just for a few more years. I want to feel the sun on my skin as I die."

Kaname inclines his head with genuine respect, and a glimmer of slyness. "I only offer because Zero would be devastated to lose you."

For the first time during their meeting, Yagari shows true anger. "I will not be emotionally manipulated, leech. Zero is a fifty-year old grown adult who can take care of himself, and he's surrounded by people he can rely on. The same goes for Kaito."

Holding up a hand in a placating gesture, Kaname says, "My apologies, Yagari-sensei. Allow me to pay for your meal."

"No." Yagari turns his face away so his missing eye is the only one facing Kaname, dismissing the pureblood.

The stubbornness of Hunters. Kaname rises, accepting that their conversation is finished for now. Handing the server enough bills to cover his cheque, the vampire turns to go.

"Kuran."

Kaname pauses, hand on the back of his chair.

There's a glint smouldering in Yagari's single blue eye. "Humans may die quickly, but a pureblood is only as immortal as his heart."

Kaname feels a muscle in his cheek jump. Yagari cannot know, but his research into extending Zero's life is going poorly. Without answering, Kaname twists on his heel and leaves.

Outside, Kaname stands beneath the red paper lanterns, watching the bustling nightlife and oblivious humans stream past. Anonymity is a rare privilege for him, and he allows himself to be another face in a crowd.

His breath mists in the cold as he exhales heavily. Give Zero time? Kaname has time, for now. He can be patient. And he is not out of options. Perhaps what he needs now is a change in tactics.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you didn't think I'd make it easy for Kaname? As suave and charming as Kaname is, it's not like he's been romantically successful with the exception of Yuuki. And his courtship of Yuuki mostly involved stalking, presents and tormenting Zero.
So that's my justification for the current state of affairs.

The trio's wedding anniversary is February 26, to give you an idea of the timing. One whole year of marriage for those three! I'm so proud of them.

An izakaya is an informal Japanese restaurant very similar to an English pub or tapas bar where you can purchase sake, beer and light dishes that are meant to be shared.

I couldn't resist adding another scene with Kaname and Yagari. Kaname spends most of his time surrounded by people who either want to flatter him for his favor or who love him and will soften difficult truths. I think that's why he went back to Yagari. Yagari is perceptive, doesn't like him except for Zero's sake, and will tell Kaname what he doesn't want to hear.

I have some flexibility in the upcoming chapters, and if anyone has any particular scenarios they'd like to see during Kaname's courtship of Zero you're welcome to make suggestions in the comments. I value reader input, but as always please keep in mind that I can make no promises any specific suggestion will be used. Thanks for reading!

Next chapter: 'A Hostage to Kindness'
Yuuki drags Kaname aside as soon as he sets foot over the threshold.

"I need a favor," Yuuki begins immediately, capturing his gaze and foregoing small talk. Kaname's abrupt flight has rattled her; she carries a touch of manic energy and tension in her frame that Kaname mistrusts. "Zero trains with me twice a week. Can you take my place during one of those weekly sessions from now on?"

Kaname strokes her cheek gently, his wife's warmth chasing away thoughts of city smog and dirty, frozen slush. Disguised as a favor, Yuuki is offering him both a priceless gift and an opportunity. Her generosity should not be wasted. "It would give me great pleasure. And what will you be doing?" he asks, more out of habit than curiosity.

"Secret," Yuuki insists. "I'll be at Cross' if you need me."

"Using the training rooms there, are we?" Kaname teases, his spirits lifting after his meeting with Yagari. "Working on your butterfly travel so you can take Zero somewhere alone?" he continues, making a shrewd guess.

Yuuki feigns ignorance, looking away pointedly with her nose in the air. "Secret. I just need you to distract Zero for a few hours a week."

"It will be no trouble," he assures her, a contemplative cast to his thoughts. With hindsight comes clarity. Excluding Yuuki from his courtship was Kaname's first mistake. Yuuki is half of both Zero and Kaname, and has ever been their bridge and middle ground. Their beloved wife has supported them all this time, and it only brings things full circle that she remain their companion as Kaname pursues the final transfiguration he desires. But Kaname's realization comes late, and he knows that Yuuki has suffered as she's watched Kaname yearn.

"All will be as you wish," Kaname promises, leaning down to kiss her forehead, smoothing her bangs down.

She squints up at him, and gives him a lopsided smile. "You worked really hard on the anniversary ball. I have a special surprise for you if you're free at sundown tomorrow?"

"For you, always," he promises, soaking in her affection and appreciating anew her support.
"I'll send you the details," Yuuki promises, spinning away and crinkling her nose. "Why do you smell like a bar, anyway? Your jacket reeks of smoke."

Kaname winces. "An unavoidable hazard, I'm afraid."

Yuuki shoots him a dubious look, crossing her arms suspiciously.

He sighs. "Please excuse me. I believe I need a change of clothes."

Watching Kuran's face as the blindfold falls provides Zero with an unexpected sense of gratification.

The pureblood is speechless, his throat working as he looks up at the pink, red and white plum blossoms with their strong, sweet fragrance drifting on the breeze. Inviting rest and refreshment, a picnic basket and a blanket are laid out beneath the flowering plum trees, whose dark branches drip with flowers, petals scattering down to alight on the melting winter snow. The garden paths are scattered with more blooms, crushed underfoot by admiring feet. Under a full moon, the plum tree gardens are lit up bright as day, a cool white radiance chasing away the shadows, giving the three vampires plenty of light.

"You said that you've never gone flower viewing before," Yuuki says, taking their husband's hand and leading him forward.

Kuran is drawn meekly behind, head tipped back to take in the blossoms. There are thousands of plum trees in this garden, and each one of them is in full flower, blooms spreading out as far as the eye can see.

Zero hesitates, then slips his fingers into the curl of Kuran's free hand, not quite leading or tugging, but making his presence felt.

"No," Kuran says with a crackle in his voice. "I haven't. I'm surprised you remembered." His hand tightens convulsively around Zero's fingers. "Putting aside time to do nothing but admire flowers… I remember years when there were no flowers, and winter never lifted."

Zero watches Kuran from the corner of his eye as they slip off their shoes and sink down onto the blanket, trying to imagine the paucity of the pureblood's early life, this man who has everything money can buy and yet lacks so many of the simple things Zero takes for granted. His intuition makes Kuran's emotions all the more tangible, and the Hunter's empathy trembles like a live bird in his chest.

Settling his hand more firmly in Kuran's grasp, Zero patiently bears his alphas fussing over him, keeping still as they pull his skirts straight and arrange his limbs. It gives Kuran a retreat, time to settle himself back into his normal equanimity, and it doesn't hurt that Zero likes their gentleness, the feeling still so foreign at times.

Zero finds himself with his head resting on Kuran's shoulder, curled up in the man's lap while Yuuki places a possessive hand on his thigh. Watching the wind shake the petals free, it's easy to unspool the tension in his shoulders, loosen his joints and breathe. "I'm not blocking your view, am I?" Zero asks, feeling heavy and content.

"My view is exquisite," Kuran says, a rich timbre to his voice. It's filled with layers upon layers underneath; Zero could unpick their meaning if he reached out with his power. He doesn't, too comfortable and lazy to care.
They drink umeshu and eat the snacks Zero has prepared - nothing fancy, simple temari sushi and hanami dango. His alphas feed him by hand, their favorite way of taking a meal, watching each bite disappear between his lips as though they were tasting it themselves.

Zero savors the sharp tang of pickled plum and the heaviness of his full belly; the lassitude coating his limbs deepens. He yawns, catching the scent of Kuran's cologne and tantalizing pure blood rising up from his husband's skin.

His eyes drift shut. Being held like this is comfortable, and he can feel Yuuki's hand resting reassuringly on his leg. He can let go, his omega murmurs; his strong, kind alphas are here to watch over him.

Zero sleeps. As always, he dreams.

"This was extraordinarily thoughtful of you," Kaname murmurs, keeping his voice below the edge of human hearing. There are pink petals scattered in his hair; Yuuki has refrained from telling her husband, lest he brush them away.

With Zero sleeping on his shoulder and flowers in his hair, Kaname looks as young as he pretends to be - like a youth with his sweetheart from some charming romance, Zero looking innocent as a maiden in his lace and pastel tea gown, Kaname boyish with his sleeves rolled to his elbows and coat abandoned.

As he pours himself another splash of umeshu, Kaname eases the stopper out silently and keeps his movements restrained and slow.

Yuuki appreciates Kaname's own thoughtfulness. Zero is a sensitive sleeper; any loud sound or sudden movement will jerk him out of sleep. "You've been working hard," she explains, matching Kaname's quiet tone. "I want to take care of too, Kaname."

His hand shivers, nearly overfilling the cup, and Kaname's eyes flick to Yuuki's face - a startled flash of childish wonder - before hastily turning back down.

Feeling the bite of guilt, Yuuki settles for touching his shoulder, trying to convey her tenderness without upsetting his glass or waking Zero.

Kaname covers her hand with his own, tipping his head to rest his cheek atop them. Never taking his eyes off her, he drinks in the sight of her face, as enthralled now as he'd been with the blossoms.

"Did you ever see the original garden this one is based on? Kairakuen garden?" Yuuki asks, curiosity overcoming her as she gestures around them at the trees.

"No," he says, closing his eyes. "The plum trees of Kairakuen perished long before I was made. When the gardeners fled, the trees were left to nature. Drought followed flood, and flood followed drought. Little endured."

She bites into another snack, avoiding the necessity of speech, torn between the desire to avoid old wounds and the wish to understand Kaname more.

"There is somewhere I would like to take the two of you," Kaname says suddenly, a deliberate air to his words. He bows his head, looking down at Zero, who shifts restlessly in his sleep. "A place connected to my history. It will take me a few weeks to arrange."
Swallowing hastily, Yuuki nearly chokes in surprise. "Really?"

"Yes," he replies easily, putting aside his glass. "It is time. I know there are things you want to know about me. I cannot promise you answers - there are many memories I avoid. Some things I wish to keep private. But I want to offer you what I can. Will you come?"

"I will," Yuuki promises, breathless with the understanding she is being offered a rare, precious act of trust. She scatters kisses on his cheeks, tastes the wine of his mouth as she entices him with a deeper kiss.

"Careful," Kaname cautions her, smiling against her lips. "You'll wake Zero."

As though he can hear his name, Zero groans, then startles bolt upright, his eyes darting back and forth like a frightened horse until his memory returns.

"Are you alright?" Yuuki asks, concerned and not sure if touch will make the situation worse.

Zero's teeth grind, the sound full of bitter anger mixed with sorrow. "Something bad has happened at Association headquarters. I think Hunter Petrovna - Shirabuki's assassin - is dead. She's been trying for weeks to carry out Shirabuki's final order. My gut tells me one of her suicide attempts finally succeeded."

Yuuki doesn't doubt him. At first Zero only experienced deja vu and flashes of recognition, but with Kaname's tutelage Zero has begun remembering scraps of his dreams. They've tested his information, and thoroughly verified its accuracy on every count. So far his ability seems limited to places and people he knows, and only concerns large, significant events, but Yuuki suspects Kaname must be calculating the advantage it will give them in the future if Zero can hone his sight.

"Oh, Zero, I'm so sorry," Yuuki says, taking his hand.

Shaking his head, Zero replies, "Natalya was one of us. Every active Hunter, even a green rookie like her, accepts the risks of our work. We all know someday we'll go on our last Hunt and meet the vampire that kills us. I just hate what Shirabuki did to enslave her."

Yuuki's grip on his hand tightens hearing him talk like that. Steal him, presses her alpha. Steal him and hide him away forever. "No, you won't. There will be no last hunt for you. I will break the world if I must to make it so."

Zero cannot see it behind him, but Kaname's eyes hold a hint of blood red, and the promise of murder.

The Hunter doesn't seem to hear her. "I don't want this to go on any longer. Kaname, when we establish the other Ds' identities, will you use your network to help us find them? If we locate them first, before they act, there might be a few we can save."

Yuuki might laugh or cry. Kaname would sell his soul to please Zero, to coax the slightest smile from his lips. And Zero hasn't the faintest inkling - he still believes Kaname might refuse.

Kaname buries his face in Zero's hair, kissing the Hunter's temple and trapping him firmly against his chest. "For you, of course I will."

"Thank you," Zero breathes, and hits Kaname with a slight, honest smile.

Yuuki can almost touch the lust in the air. She's hard too - Zero's rare smiles are the most beautiful, pure, precious thing.
"Such a tease, kitten," Kaname purrs, and Zero squirms, recognizing the heat in their husband's voice.

Yuuki's alpha growls, jealous because their alpha-mate already has their silver omega in his arms. Alpha-mate never shares!

"I wonder," Kaname continues, "if you would let me have you right here, where anyone could see us. Just let me hitch up your skirt and sink inside you."

Yuuki drools just thinking about it, rubbing Zero's thighs and giving him the sad begging eyes.

"No!" Zero denies furiously, waving his hands as his face flames. "Pervert! We're in public, haven't you any shame!"

Chuckling, Kaname catches Zero's wrists, bending down to whisper right in his ear. "But you would do it, wouldn't you? Because you're my good boy, and you want to please us."

"No!" Zero denies hotly, petulant and sulky because he's been found out.

Kaname tsks, nipping Zero's ear as punishment. "Don't tell lies, my Consort. You want to be so very good for us, don't you?"

Zero is shaking his head sharply, utterly flustered, but he isn't struggling. "Don't say it that way! We're not doing that here, it's illegal. Someone might see us!"

"You're wearing pants under your dress," Yuuki chimes in. "We just need to pull them down a bit, and your skirt will hide the rest. Don't you think making love beneath the flowers would be very pretty?" Yuuki adds, playing with the hems of Zero's gown.

If anyone sees mate naked, we'll just kill them! her alpha chimes in cheerfully.

Zero's jaw drops, and he simply stares at her for a moment. Then his head bows, and grimacing as if he has a headache, he croaks, like he can't believe what he's saying, "Fine. Go ahead."

Zero's underwear don't survive her eager claws, but it's the work of a moment to sneak her hand up his skirt and tug his pants down below the curve of his ass. And it only takes one more second to free Kaname's erection, as Yuuki grins at their eldest over Zero's shoulder.

"Tonight is Kaname's special surprise," she explains to Zero, who seems rather betrayed not to have Yuuki first. "So please treat him well." Their husband's familiar thick length is in her hand, throbbing and hot with blood, and she squeezes just to see Kaname's composure crack a little. The catch in his breath satisfies her enough to guide his tip inside the wet, snug cavern they both love.

Zero whines as Kaname sinks home, rising up a little as if to escape, but Kaname still has him trapped by the wrists in his lap. Beneath the fabric, it's difficult to tell, but Zero is hard now too, and she can smell how his slick melds with the sweet scent of plum blossom.

Kaname begins to move, slow, rolling thrusts that grind every bit of his length and girth inside Zero's full pussy. Yuuki thinks about the way it must look, flushed and used red, hidden under Zero's skirt, and hastily takes out her own cock.

With one hand around herself, and the other wrapped around Zero's length, her strokes are sloppy and rough without slick to ease the way. Her eyes stay glued to her husbands' faces as they rock together, absorbing every sign of pleasure, every trace of satisfaction. Zero is biting his lips, trying to keep quiet, and his cheeks remain red with embarrassment, while Kaname has a focused
euphoria shining through.

"You really do want to be our good boy, don't you Zero?" Kaname prods, never one to accept a victory quietly, especially not when victory means cramming Zero full of cock. "I can't believe you're letting us fuck you in public."

"Shut up," Zero growls, yelping when his sensitive channel is jabbed sharply as punishment.

"Though I know you only allowed it because we desired it - desired you, just like this. What a generous gift," he continues, voice going rough with effort as he fucks up into Zero hard with nothing but the strength in his hips.

"What a perfect omega," Kaname praises, and Yuuki doesn't miss how Zero stiffens and his eyes glaze as he bounces with Kaname's thrusts. "Our precious mate, our sweet boy. We're going to take such good care of you."

Zero cries out, his back arching as he comes, forgetting to stay quiet. Kaname bares his teeth and stiffens, the tendons in his neck straining, and Yuuki knows he's claiming Zero with his seed.

Yuuki allows herself to peak too, muffling her own cry in her shoulder and imagining Zero's hand instead of her own. No matter. Tonight was for Kaname, but she'll have her turn.

Kaname should have realized that Zero would require an unconventional courtship. How foolish of him, to employ the same tactics he used for his sexual conquests and expect Zero to also be won. A willing body could be convinced with a smile and a few words, but his charisma slides off Zero like rain. For his trouble, Kaname is more likely to receive sarcasm than a smile.

So Kaname sets out to lay a new path, one he hopes will lead to Zero's heart. Zero has always appreciated smaller gestures more than large ones, so Kaname tries to provide them - a book he knows Zero wanted to read, extra time taken out of a busy day, space when Zero needs to be alone. He doesn't stop the romantic dinners, but Yuuki stays beside them this time. Kaname knows that Zero still doesn't feel completely comfortable when the two of them are alone, and Yuuki is a buffer to ease the distance.

An offering of Kaname's trust is also necessary, but that must wait until the trip Kaname has planned. He dreads the very thought of it. It is a gamble, one that requires he expose himself. It had been a split-second choice to even offer, and it still feels as though he may have made a mistake. But once set, the course cannot be altered; backing out now would prove his distrust.

The power of touch is Kaname's final card. Intimacy of the body leads to intimacy of the mind - touch promotes nearness and strengthens trust. People feel that if they can trust someone with their body, affection must naturally follow. And Kaname desires for Zero to feel comforted by his touch, to relax whenever he is near.

Zero's omega instincts give Kaname a natural advantage now that he's been accepted as a potential mate, but Kaname wants Zero's conscious, human mind to agree. So Kaname backs away from physical displays, paying careful attention to only offer them when Zero's body language signals he wants to be touched. Kaname burns every time he denies himself, but the cautious welcome he receives in return is precious.

"Tell me your favorite fantasy, Yuuki," he prompts one morning after sex, when the three of them are still awake and warm, but easing toward sleep.

Their wife raises her head, propping her chin on Zero's shoulder to look over at Kaname. "Hhhhm?
What kind of fantasy?"

Kaname raises an eyebrow, and gestures between them at the rumpled sheets and fucked out omega glaring grumpily - Zero already suspects his intentions. "Sexual fantasy, of course. You must have some."

"Well, yes." Yuuki thinks for a moment, then glances at him with a familiar wicked gleam in her eyes. "I can't just pick one favorite. After all, I've got two husbands. For Zero, it's him in sexy outfits or chained to my bed. Or getting him pregnant, that's a really good one. But I've got one involving you, Kaname, I've been thinking about for a while."

"What is it?" Zero asks, catching on to Yuuki's mood and always willing to drag Kaname over the coals.

She grins. "Wouldn't Kaname look divine being fucked? He wouldn't be able to keep his cool if we kept him from coming as we opened him up and then both had his ass. He'd get all squirmy and red - I bet he's never even let someone else touch his prostate."

Kaname feels both eyebrows rise. She's not wrong - he'd never felt comfortable with allowing someone else so much control. But for Yuuki...perhaps. "Think again, my dear. Neither of you have the faintest idea how anal sex works, and I'm hardly going to let you experiment with me."

"We can fix that. I was promised Zero's ass too," she points out. "You'll teach us, and then we'll return the favor."

"Something to discuss another time," Kaname dodges. "And what about you, Zero?"

"Me?" Zero repeats, hunkering down as though he's trying to hide.

"Please?" Yuuki wheedles, drawing the word out.

Zero sighs. "I didn't really allow myself to have fantasies. I thought I was going to die young and mad. The few times I indulged, I always thought about Yuuki. They weren't even about sex, just ordinary romantic things. Kissing, holding hands. After Cross Academy I just stopped letting myself imagine."

"Oh." Yuuki's face falls. "But you must have more ideas now, right?"

Burying his face in a pillow, Zero makes a garbled reply.

"Hmmm?" Kaname coaxes, stroking his shoulder. The pureblood's true objective is at stake; he hopes to learn what pleases Zero in bed and utilize the knowledge in his courtship.

Zero raises his flushing face enough to mumble, "It's really messed up. Something is wrong with my head to even think about it."

"Nothing is wrong with you," Kaname assures him. "What we enjoy during sex doesn't make us bad people, so long as our partner is willing too."

Even the tips of Zero's ears are red. "Hunters have some peculiar ideas about sexy scenarios, and mine are even weirder since my vampire instincts get mixed up in it."

"It's okay Zero, you can tell us. We just want you to enjoy it when we have sex," Yuuki reminds him.
So Zero, utterly embarrassed and barely able to get the words out, does.

Really, Zero has nothing to be ashamed of. Kaname's heard and participated in far wilder trysts. It's sweet that their consort is still so innocent, and Kaname will reward him later for being so brave.

"We'll try them sometime," Kaname promises, petting Zero's soft hair, which is starting to get long again after three months since his last haircut. Kaname has gained good material for his continuing physical courtship, though using it will probably have to wait until after their trip.

"Thank you for not thinking I'm screwed up," Zero says with a quiet relief.

"Never," Yuuki promises, settling the blankets around them.

Kaname finds Zero's hand under the duvet, a silent offer of support as they fall asleep together.

Zero arrives late to their meeting point, his single duffel bag with three days' worth of supplies bumping against his hip. Saya was distraught to see her stablemates loaded into horseboxes this morning, both off to the stud farm for spring foals next year, and Zero needed to assure himself his youngest mare would be fine while they're gone.

He feels even guiltier for leaving Shoshana. The elder omega's health has stabilized but not improved; she's still bedridden and frequently asleep. She must also do without his regular visits until his return.

Kuran makes no comment when Zero comes into sight, giving him a once-over in silence as the pureblood's fingers tighten on his crossed arms. Zero would think the vampire is angry with him if his power didn't whisper the truth in his ear - Kuran is wound tight with self-doubt and trepidation.

Zero still doesn't know where they're going - Kuran has refused to divulge a single detail - but he knows it must be far away. Zero's maids are beginning to air the spring kimono now that the weather is warming, yet Kuran advised Yuuki and Zero to bring their heaviest winter clothing for their journey. That means either somewhere far north, or far south.

Without a word, Kuran offers both of them a black-gloved hand. Yuuki places her hand in their husband's immediately. Zero hesitates, feeling as though he is being offered a choice, one much larger than whether to go or stay.

Kuran's redwood eyes offer no clues, watching Zero evenly, the tremor in the muscles of his handsome face visible only for a nanosecond to Zero's power.

Finally, Zero reaches out to bridge the gap, grasp tentative and light. Kuran wraps his fingers around Zero's palm, his eyes never leaving Zero's face as he holds tightly. And then Kuran whisks them away on the breeze with a phantom sensation of disconnection.

Zero recognizes the taiga spreading out around him, though he has never been this far north. The larch trees are stunted, and scattered widely apart, and the rest of the frozen ground is covered with lichen. Winter reigns here even in March, and he shivers and huddles in his fur-lined coat as a blast of north wind catches his hood and snatches it back.

Yuuki shivers too, mostly out of old human habit, but Kuran does not so much as flinch. He has his eyes on the horizon - he'd released their hands as soon as their feet reformed - and appears lost in his own thoughts. "Come," he tells them. "The cabin is close."

Cabin is a generous description. At odds with Kuran's usual taste in luxury, the building is a squat,
concrete rectangle with scarred steel doors. Inside it's slightly more appealing; the air is warm, with the hum of a generator always in the background. There's a small bedroom, a postage-stamp sized kitchen, a single bathroom, and an empty room Zero might call a sitting area if not for the steel door built into the floor.

Zero examines that door as Kuran and Yuuki settle into the bedroom, measuring the thickness of the steel. "This is a bunker, isn't it?" he calls out.

"Please put on your coat. We're going back outdoors for a moment," Kuran replies instead from the doorway.

They trek back out into the cold and walk until Zero's bones feel like ice.

"There," Kuran says, stopping them short. "Do you see it on the horizon?"

Zero squints. There's a small ridge up ahead, curving in the distance and cutting straight across the landscape.

"Ten thousand years ago most of this area was vaporized after a hydrogen bomb exploded," Kuran explains, pointing at the ridge. "That's the edge of the blast crater, or what little is left after millenia of wind and water."

Making a few calculations, Zero swallows. The explosion must have been gigantic to leave such an impressive scar.

"Do you mean...?" Yuuki ventures, mouth dropping open.

"Welcome to the cradle of the vampire race." Kuran gestures around them at the barren, frozen land, irony weighing his tone. His voice lowers, turns quiet. "The place I was created, though nothing is left now. I doubt even a single pebble of the original landscape remains."

Kuran's back is turned away, distant and untouchable. Yuuki and Zero exchange a glance, deciding who will approach first, but Kuran spins and begins trekking back to the bunker without another word. Zero and Yuuki have to hurry to catch up, and Kuran maintains the punishing pace all the way to the steel door in the living room floor.

Only now does Kuran pause, staring downward with an intensity that the featureless, scuffed metal door does not earn. His expression is so empty, like he's been hollowed out.

Yuuki and Zero glance at one another again. Zero's gut is shrieking at him to act, sensing Kuran's conflict roil and peak. Yuuki has her hand outstretched, about to touch Kuran's shoulder when the vampire stirs, stepping away to open the door with an ugly screech.

Yuuki's hand falls back to her side, curling into a fist.

Kuran doesn't appear to notice as he descends a staircase into a concrete hallway. Lights flicker on as his movement triggers an unseen sensor. "Records of the time before the Cataclysm are prized relics of humanity's golden age. Less valuable artifacts from the Cataclysm period itself are comparatively rare."

Following behind him, Zero perks up, his scholar's interest piqued, finally getting something resembling an explanation of why they're here.

"For the next three days, you two are free to examine anything in this building," Kuran continues. "If you need something translated or explained, come to me. Otherwise I will not be joining you
down here."

"What will you be doing?" Yuuki dares ask as they pass door after door.

"Making your meals," Kuran replies in a clipped tone. "When you're tired come sleep upstairs. Do not expect me to join you."

"Where are you sleeping?" Zero asks, guessing Kuran's answer when the pureblood does not respond. Kuran isn't going to sleep until they go home, relying on his immortal body's endurance to deny his own rest. Zero can guess why - he knows what it's like to have bad dreams.

"That is the main room," Kuran says, halting without warning and gesturing at one of the doors. "You'll find the collection's catalog in there if you need to find something specific. Now, if you'll excuse me…"

Yuuki and Zero stare after their husband as he edges past them and retreats without a single look their way, face still more like a carved mask than flesh.

Yuuki will wear this exact worried expression for the next three days. "I don't think being here is good for Kaname."

That is an understatement. Whatever memories this bunker is stirring in Kuran, it feels as though the pureblood is shutting himself away to escape. "We'll be gone soon," Zero reminds her, pushing the door open and settling into research mode. It was Kuran's choice to bring them here, and there are answers waiting at their fingertips.

When Yuuki and Zero stumble upstairs, Kuran is gone. On the kerosene stove are two plates with unsweetened, flat meal cakes, pickled canned beets, and boiled, bitter greens. The food is dismal. Kuran may have picked up a few skills from Zero's tutelage, but his knowledge is rudimentary and there's nothing in the bunker's pantry that doesn't come from a sack or a can.

Going to bed curled around Yuuki alone feels unsettling - Zero blames his latent omega instincts expecting three instead of two. Only the steady burn of Kuran's aura assures the Hunter that Kuran is nearby and alive; Zero monitors that aura like a pulse, keeping track for Yuuki's peace of mind.

Breakfast is tasteless rice porridge with a sprinkle of dried fruit. Kuran is absent again.

Zero lasts an hour flipping through documents in the bunker's archives before he hisses in frustration and stomps upstairs to go search for Kuran. The pureblood is stupidly easy to find, seated on a rock a half-kilometer from the bunker and staring off into the distance. There's a thick layer of snow on the vampire's shoulders and head, which means Kuran has been absolutely still for hours. Zero's frown deepens and his glare turns icy.

Kuran does not react to Zero's approach, though he must be aware of it.

Zero, true to his profession, goes for the throat. "I spent nearly fifty years waiting to die. It was a lot longer for you, wasn't it?"

Moving stiffly - Zero can hear the joints crack from disuse - Kuran twists at the waist far enough to watch Zero out of the corner of his eye. A fragment of awareness surfaces through the fog of Kuran's distance.

"Why did you come here if you weren't ready?" Zero continues.
Kuran's eyelids flicker. "It's been ten thousand years, Zero. I've had plenty of time to forget. It's all in the past now."

"But that's not true," Zero insists, his instincts screaming lie lie lie. "It still hurts you, no matter how long ago it was."

Kuran turns his face toward the horizon again.

"Yuuki's going to be mad when she knows you left without your coat," Zero tells him, looking pointedly at the pureblood's bare arms.

The corners of Kuran's mouth twist down.

"She's going to fuss, and you're going to hate it because that means you made her worry." Zero keeps talking, the words spilling out at the urging of his intuition, "But you're also going to enjoy it because you know it means she loves you and not many people in your life have ever done that."

Kuran is finally facing him, all the snow knocked off his shoulders. The sudden, exclusive attention is unnerving.

Zero kicks the hardened soil, tucking his cold fingers in his pockets. His hands feel nakedly vulnerable without the wide omega sleeves he wears constantly, and perhaps that distress is what leads Kuran to stagger up, his normal grace absent.

"Will you fuss over me too?" Kuran asks, and something is strange because this isn't a joke. Kuran means the question honestly.

A frisson ghosts over the back of Zero's neck, and he ducks his head, feeling a blush crawl over his cheeks. Why is he feeling embarrassed? He shoves down his senses and replies, "I'm your Consort, of course I will."

If Zero didn't know better, he'd say Kuran is disappointed. But that would be silly.

Once Kaname is warm - Zero and Yuuki sit on him until his hands feel proper room temperature again - they traipe back down to the basement and start over. Kaname guides them to the best exhibits, far more relaxed than before, and Zero looks like he might be considering absconding with several Hunter journals he found written in an outdated cipher.

Yuuki knows why Kaname is doing this. Completely paranoid and addicted to his secrecy, Kaname feels more comfortable letting his personal history slip out in pieces rather than all at once. Bringing Zero and Yuuki here is a starting point, opening a door into his past without forcing him to confess the bared whole. Little by little it trickles out; the more questions Zero and Yuuki ask the easier his stories flow.

"The date is wrong - I remember the battle actually happened two days afterward - and the whole thing was an incompetent mess."

"Don't trust anything he wrote - he had a flair for exaggeration. I had the misfortune of meeting him twice..."

"I was lucky enough to see those ruins before the earthquake that destroyed them, and they were well worth the praise..."

"Oh yes, I knew her. Let me tell you about the time one of my lieutenants accidentally proposed
Kaname remains stubbornly mute when it comes to his childhood and early years, but he gives freely tales of his travels and rise to power and kingship, withholding only those last centuries when despair lay heavier than responsibility on his shoulders.

But it's more than just his own past Kaname wants to unveil. He's trying to show them the world he knew through whatever scraps remain, to help his spouses observe a vanished world through his eyes. To feel the shape of the mold that formed him.

Yuuki was never much of a student, and finds her attention wandering after the fifth hour. Digging through the replicated volumes, she gives a cry when she finds a book full of hand-drawn sketches. They're all kinds of plants and animals, and she thumbs through them, admiring the animated poses, before she pauses on a particularly impressive illustration. "Kaname? Is this one real? Bears don't come in this color."

"It's quite real, I assure you," their husband chuckles, forefinger pointing to a foreign word in the caption underneath. "Hokkyokuguma. Polar bear. I met one of the last living animals - it had paws larger than your head, and was twice my height when it stood on its back legs. They lived in the north when the arctic was colder."

"I wish I could've seen one. That sounds incredible!" Yuuki enthuses. "Kaname?"

"Yes?" he replies, studying her book.

"I've never seen you look at the translations. Are there any languages here you don't read?"

Kaname shrugs. "A few. People are easier to convince when you know their language. I mistrust interpreters and I like to know what people are saying when they think I can't understand." He pauses, long pale fingers touching the picture of the great extinct bear. "And I...I was not taught to read until I was nearly twenty. I value the privilege."

Another piece of Kaname's puzzle slots into place. "Oh," Yuuki replies, remembering his insistence she continue her studies, and covers Kaname's hand with her own, looking down at the white bear snarling between their fingers.

A whole world, gone like it never existed except for a few rooms full of stone and metal and recopied texts, originals long rotted away to dust. Only Kaname and his memories left behind, Kaname and his ghosts, Kaname and his mouth full of dead words no one but him understood anymore.

Yuuki swallows, seeing her future stretched out in front of her.

"Tell me about the first Kiryuu," Zero says when he cannot stand reading any more death tolls and accounts of burned cities. War was endemic during the Cataclysm period, conflicts blurring into each other without any real end - the only change was human-human conflicts turning to human-vampire - but he hadn't realized the true scope. The Hunters prioritized saving the records of their own history, while the archives here contain far more expansive and wide-ranging sources. Archivist Fong would thrilled to peruse it.

Leaning against the wall, Kuran chuckles. "A singular individual with a peculiar way of explaining his worldview. Possibly a little mad. More bloodthirsty than would be acceptable in a modern Hunter, yet also the loudest opponent of completely exterminating the vampire race. As he put it, he was content to leave the wolf alive so long as it avoided the sheep. I wouldn't believe he was
your ancestor if I couldn't see the Kiryuu coloring you share."

"The Ancestor of the Hunters said much the same thing," Zero agrees, watching Kuran stiffen out of the corner of his eye. He knows he's treading on shaky ground, but Kuran confessed to knowing her and she obviously meant a great deal to him. Tonight they are leaving the bunker, and Zero has no more chances. "How did you know the Ancestress?"

"She was a friend." A careful, non-committal answer meant to seem casual.

"She was more than that, wasn't she?" Zero presses, seeing right through the deflection. Yuuki has put down her book and watches silently. "You told us you created the world she desired after she died. You don't do that for people you're just friends with."

Kuran's eyes narrow. "Why do you want to know."

"I've met her, and I know you." Zero keeps his tone light. "I'm trying to figure out how two such different people connected."

Turning away, Kuran begins to pace. "I met her at the lowest point in my early life, after the last attempt I made at pretending to be human failed miserably. She is the only living being I have ever felt understood me. And the last words I ever spoke to her were in anger, and she died because I was not fast enough to stop her. Is that enough?"

Zero opens his mouth to apologize, bowled over by the sucker punch of Kuran's agony, but Kuran doesn't give him a chance to reply.

"I'll be upstairs waiting when the two of you are ready to go." Kuran leaves Zero and Yuuki staring at one another.

"I'm sorry," is the first thing Zero says, empathy shining clearly in his eyes. Kaname wonders if he's sorry for asking, sorry Kaname left, or sorry Kaname's past happened. Perhaps all three, the sweet, foolish boy.

Seated in the kitchen, Kaname runs a hand over his face. His ironclad control has strained under the weight of returning to a place he never wanted to set foot near again. This was supposed to be just another tactic in his courtship. Now everything has spun out of his hands until he's here, wondering how he ever thought he could return and not splinter into pieces.

The world of the Cataclysm feels so close here, the line between past and present thin. The Ancestor of the Kuran imagines he would only need look down to see the three-headed bane curled at his feet named despair and madness and loneliness.

Shaking away memory's shroud, Kaname says wearily, "If I wished to keep silent, I should not have brought you here."

"Did you love her?" Yuuki asks, not unkindly but with more than a little jealousy underlying her words. Such is the nature of a pureblood's heart, to envy even those thousands of years gone. Kaname is the same with those he loves, and bears no animosity for Yuuki's question.

"We were never lovers," Kaname answers instead. "She loved me as a brother and a friend and a comrade. She was devoted to her work and her ideals, and chose to sacrifice herself to achieve them."

Kaname looks down at his hands. "I told myself for a long time I didn't love her, but I could have if
I allowed myself. I was lying - I loved her even knowing it was hopeless."

"We won't ask anymore questions," Zero promises. "We can tell it hurts you."

Shaking his head, Kaname pulls a docile, pliable Zero into his lap, scenting his Consort's throat to anchor himself. "I loved her the way you love a star - distant and unattainable."

He smiles at Yuuki, and draws her in until she's balanced beside Zero, both of them held in his arms. "But I have loved you as yourself, my dear girl, and all the greater for it."

And Zero he loves yet a third way - Yuuki's love drew him back from the brink, but Zero is the love that lured him in until he could no more deny it than he could renounce himself. The words are on Kaname's tongue, crowding out the bland affection he'd intended to offer.

Kaname swallows them down. "Are you two finished? I've put the luggage together."

"I'm done," Yuuki says. "I want to sleep in our own bed."

"Go get those Hunter journals you've been fondling," Kaname tells Zero. "I can't read the ciphers anyway. Perhaps the Association will get some use from them."

Springing up, Zero hastily complies, pleasure hiding behind his stoicism. The boy probably remembers exactly where they are, and shouldn't be gone long.

In the meantime, Kaname tilts his wife's chin so she looks him in the eye. "You needn't hide your jealousy. I've never concealed my own. It is simply your nature, as ingrained in your blood as it is in mine."

Her hands form a ring around his throat, gently pressing against his windpipe. Yuuki smiles, leaning in to nuzzle his hair. "I'm not hiding anything. I don't need to feel jealous. I'm the one you're blood-bonded to, and that's something no one else can claim. You've shut me out ever since we set foot here, but I can feel you now. You're mine, Kaname."

They both hear Zero's footsteps in the living room, and Yuuki's hands loosen around his throat, slipping down to his shoulders.

Zero squints suspiciously at them, books tucked under his arm. From his angle, it probably looks like the two purebloods have been kissing. "I should've known. We haven't had sex in three days, and you're an incurable pervert."

"We'll fix that as soon as we find a nice bed," Yuuki trills. "Or carpet. Or wall."

"A bed would be best," Kaname disagrees. "His little cunt will be so sweet and tight after staying empty. We'll need to open him up again if we want him to take a nice thick alpha cock."

Zero has an exquisite look of pent-up rage. The Kurans pause to admire.

"Just shut up and let's go," Zero mutters, stomping out and leaving the luggage behind. Kaname and Yuuki are more than happy to follow, making plans the whole way.

None of those plans happen.

His lovers spend hours kindling a slow, purring heat in Kaname's bones to chase away the ice. Kaname's fingers nestle beside Yuuki's as they prepare Zero together, his slick leaking out for a perfect, easy slide and Kaname thinks he might break if they keep this gentle sacred air.
His spouses lay Kaname out on his back and take turns making love to him, the slow rise-and fall of their hips keeping his length securely cradled inside their bodies as they embrace him and exchange lazy kisses.

Later, Kaname lies awake with Yuuki muttering in her sleep on his right, and Zero slumbering quietly on his left, and wonders if this is what expiation feels like.

It's going to be an ugly summer.

Zero understands this with grim certainty as he packs his Hunting gear. It's only April, and the death toll for the year has already outstripped last year's entire casualty count. Born vampires are more active in the winter while the nights draw long, but Level Es attain a particular insanity when the temperature rises and the nightly hunting period shortens.

Zero remembers that fever in his own body with a clarity that makes want to starve himself until he can pretend he's human and then claw out whatever's not.

Click-click-click go nails on the wood floor, and when Zero doesn't react Nightshade butts against his hip. Reminded again just how enormous Kuran's familiar really is, Zero squats down and scritches Nightshade's thick ruff until the wolf's eyes are half-closed and his tongue lolls happily.

"Would you like to come Hunting with me?" Zero asks, intending the question for the pureblood he knows is watching.

The keen intelligence dwelling in Nightshade's gaze brightens, and the dark wolf dips his muzzle. Zero catches displeasure alongside the acquiescence, which his gut tells him is not focussed toward him. Kuran's concern is puzzling, but it's probably an alpha thing.

"It's not Cross' fault," Zero argues. "We're still dealing with Shirabuki's leftovers and what might be a new organized wave of Level E attacks. It's getting harder to hide the traces, and the deaths are starting to add up. The human governments are being pressured by their people, which means Cross is being pressured twice as hard to fix the problem."

Nightshade yawns, communicating an utter disdain for Cross' problems.

The corner of Zero's mouth twitches upward, and he scratches under the wolf's chin. "Besides, the Level E is a secondary target. We're after something far more dangerous."

Shoving his head into Zero's hands, and cocking his ears, Kuran silently demands an explanation.

Zero obliges. "Under Shirabuki's orders, the Lin brothers have been Hunting their way up the mainland coast assassinating important vampires. We don't know their next target, but we have a lead on where they might be hiding. I've been ordered to attempt their capture."

"Who else is capable of fighting a Hunter with vampire abilities?" Zero reminds him, turning back to his packing.

The wolf lets out a whining howl.

"I'm not going to abandon them," Zero disagrees, bemused by this odd one-sided conversation where his intuition leaps to fill the blanks. "We've confirmed that Shirabuki gave her Hunter assassins her blood - probably so they'd stay useful to her. Since they won't become Level Es, we
can free them once we have an antidote to her drug. But we have to find them first."

Ignoring Kuran as he sulks in the corner like a cranky fur rug, Zero continues folding his clothes, the repetitive action and familiar pre-Hunt ritual settling him into the right mind space. He's stronger than he's ever been. At his sharpest, at his best, he has no doubt he'll prevail no matter how long the trail runs.

That does not mean this will be easy.

"Can't you make yourself smaller or something?" Zero mutters in an undertone, pulling down the hood of his ragged sweatshirt to hide his hair. "You're attracting too much attention."

Kaname tries to make Nightshade's body hunch down, rather offended but ceding the point. Well-fed and impressive, his wolf familiar draws eyes when Zero needs to remain unnoticeable, just one more Level D in a crowd.

It's been decades since the pureblood had cause to visit a Level D slum, but the poverty and squalor haven't changed. The Hunters call them blood colonies, while vampires dismiss them as thrall pits. Either way, as the pureblood families shrink so do the number of ex-human slums, but enough of the families still deal in blood slaves to supply the slums with cast-offs.

Crumbling apartment buildings, gambling dens, brothels and bars betray the desperate situation of its inhabitants. Many are unstable Level Ds waiting to die, former feeders or prostitutes sold as disposable merchandise whose owners abandoned them as their bodies broke down. Very weak vampires sometimes ended up in the slums as well, eking out a living beside the ex-humans. Vampire society prizes purity and strength, and despises those vampires who dilute their blood until they're barely different from humans. The slum's remaining residents are its core members, the caste of stable Level Ds most vampires call ferals.

Ferals - Level Ds with no master - existed in a grey area. Subject to vampire laws the moment they were Turned, after being rejected by or escaping from their master they became invisible to the Senate unless being punished. Without a master, few opportunities were available to a stable Level D in vampire society. They could turn to the human world, but the Senate policed the secret of vampire existence mercilessly, and most Level Ds could not afford to keep purchasing new identities in the human world to hide their unnatural lifespans. That left only low-paying or illegal trades open to them in either world. The Level D slums exist as a natural consequence of that condition.

To Nightshade's sensitive nose, the air reeks of sewage and rotting garbage and fouled blood, rust and mildew and mortar dust. He pushes against Zero's thigh, fruitlessly seeking the imperceptible trace of omega perfume hidden beneath scent masking charms.

"You can always tell when you're in an ex-human colony," Zero mutters, patting his head, distracted as his Hunter senses search out his target. "You never see children, and everything smells like blood."

Human and vampires push past each other, the humans unaware how close they come to death as they seek whatever desire brought them to a place where anything can be bought for the right price. Zero frowns, clenches the fraying rope serving as Nightshade's leash, and ducks to the right, hurrying down an alley and emerging on a less busy street lined with tenement blocks.

Kaname dislikes the slums. They remind him of the refugee camps of his childhood - the taste of desperation coating the air, the look in everyone's eyes. As Nightshade pads through the filthy
streets, Kaname allows his consciousness to ease back into his real body - which unbeknownst to Zero is not in Rosehill, but at the five-star hotel room he's booked for his boy. With such high level targets, neither Kaname nor Yuuki could rest unless at least one of them was close enough to protect Zero, even if it angered him.

Kaname's memories blur until he's imagining how Zero could have ended up on these streets if Cross had not managed to convince the Association to harbor him. Zero is, after all, technically a masterless Level D. Diving back through his connection with his familiar, Kaname growls low in his throat, unaccustomed to unwanted empathy, and gives a whole body shake as if to cast it off.

"Hey you, with the dog," a voice drawls at them.

Zero stops, looking over his shoulder at the gang of Level Ds beginning to surround them. "Yeah?" he replies with a casual air.

Kaname shows his teeth, but otherwise doesn't interfere. Zero's awareness of his surroundings is excruciatingly precise - better than his own by far - and even distracted by his search the Hunter would have sensed ill-intent. The fact Zero didn't simply avoid the ambush means they must be close to their target.

"That dog looks pretty expensive," the thugs' leader says, "No way you could afford a purebred like that. Why don't you give him to us and we'll let you go."

Zero's grasp of the local language is poor, but the intent of the Ds is clear from their threatening posture and the way they stare greedily at Kaname's familiar. Looking completely unaffected, the Hunter shrugs, the threadbare clothes of his disguise hiding the weapons underneath. "Okay."

Kaname starts, a little offended by his Consort's ready willingness to abandon him, but Zero just kneels down beside him on the dirty street and begins removing the wolf's makeshift rope leash.

"I found what I need, but we should stay out of sight," Zero murmurs in their own language so the thugs won't understand. "Follow my lead, okay?"

Kaname licks his hand, and Zero smiles, running a hand through Nightshade's fur before rising and facing the leader. "Husband's gift," he says as if he doesn't understand what's happening. "Good dog choose where he go."

Some of the ex-humans look uneasy with Zero's strange relaxed behavior, perhaps close enough to sense the Hunter's aura underlying the signature of a Level D. But Zero just leads Nightshade toward the leader, smiling like a fool the whole way.

The thug's eyebrows are furrowed, but he seems to lack suspicion since Zero isn't resisting. That is the precise moment Zero decks him right in the solar plexus and bolts, dodging shocked gang members with insulting ease. The Hunter is halfway down the street before any of them even recover enough to shout.

Kaname is only a moment behind him - he'd used the leader's body as a springboard, knocking him to the ground with one jump and using the D's stomach to launch himself after his boy. The thugs are torn between aiding their leader and chasing the escaping wolf; chaos reigns, exactly as Zero intended. Back in his human body, Kaname laughs, and pushes his familiar to take longer and faster strides until he's side-by-side with Zero again.

Zero shares a look with Kaname-as-Nightshade, eyes bright with pleasure and exhilaration, not even winded as they dodge pedestrians and leave the angry bellowing behind them.
Kaname is struck by the knowledge that Zero knows exactly who he is now, that Zero knows it's Kaname and yet he still wants to share his Hunt like this, and Kaname can barely contain the surge of love.

They hide in an alleyway until their heartbeats slow, and if the wolf becomes a man who desperately pulls his husband into his arms to kiss him, well, there's no one else there to see it.

This Hunt ought to be magnificent, a true challenge Zero can savor. Freed from the heavy necessity of an execution, against opponents who know the same tricks and carry a resistance to Hunter charms, Zero will be able to really test himself. Zero anticipates being pushed beyond his usual methods into improvisation and a clash of technique where mastery is the key to victory.

The Lin brothers deserve the reputation they built before their disappearance. Individually middle-strength, when paired together their mesmerizing coordination verges on telepathy, allowing them to successfully Hunt far stronger opponents. When he returns to the colony with backup, Zero's ambush falls through as soon as Lin Xingjian spots his watcher and warns his elder brother. Both of them bolt into the warren, Zero in close pursuit and the other Hunters fanning out behind them, tightening the net.

What follows is a contest of stamina peppered with short spurts of combat. The Lin brothers attempt with every move to escape capture, while Zero and his fellows seek non-lethal resolution, armed with tranquilizer darts instead of bullets and as many low damage weapons as possible.

Both men are resisting Shirabuki's orders - Zero can tell every time they clash that the brothers are battling to stop from spilling a fellow Hunter's blood. Though still dangerous, their legendary coordination is a half-second off. Lin Xingjian's hand jerks and shakes every time he aims, while Lin Juyi's dao falters sometimes when he strikes. Both of them are sweating too heavily and their faces are twisted with pain as they fight the compulsions laid on them.

All those signs only build Zero's determination to give them a chance. He trusts Aido to succeed with the antidote, and as stable Ds they don't have to fear madness and execution. Zero won't let what Shirabuki did to them end their lives.

They catch Lin Juyi at the border, immobilizing him with a leg wound and surrounding him, only to watch the Hunter put a bullet through his own heart as Shirabuki's order to avoid capture forces his hand.

His younger brother circles nearby, weeping and fighting Shirabuki's command until Lin Xingjian can only scream and claw at his head, before finally submitting and turning to run.

Zero follows with a heavy heart, stoic mask hiding his grief and regret. Nightshade howls, reminding him to keep his eyes on the target in front of him. Knowing Kuran is right, Zero sets his jaw and pours his frustration into body, lengthening his stride and giving extra force to his jumps.

The Hunting party is more cautious the second time, learning from their first failure to lighten the pressure on their target and give Shirabuki's command the impression escape is possible. Lin Xingjian doesn't fight at all, wearing himself out as they drive him forward like wolves with a deer. The intent is simple: to exhaust him and slow his reactions enough that a single successful strike can immobilize him before Shirabuki's command activates.

Zero finally brings the Hunt to a close in a small courtyard, drawing close and tackling the diminutive man from behind to pin him against the brick. Lin Xingjian bucks and fights until Nightshade lays down on his legs, giving one of the supporting Hunters the chance to inject him
with the heaviest sedative they have.

Zero stumbles back as the surviving Lin brother goes limp, and the other Hunters swarm in to secure their target. He startles when his back hits the wall, then starts again when he feels Nightshade's nose touch the back of his hand.

Feeling dazed, a knot formed in the pit of his stomach, Zero can't stop watching until Lin is taken away for transport to the branch headquarters. The other Hunters give Zero space - perhaps understanding his mental state, or perhaps uneasy around a pureblood's Consort.

Zero's not distracted enough to miss the sudden surge of power beside him, or the pureblood aura that appears afterwards. The entire courtyard freezes, every head snapping toward them as sound abruptly cuts out.

"Don't mind me," Kuran announces in that irritatingly unruffled, elegant way of his.

With some hesitation, and a few hissed conversations, the remaining Hunters go back to work, though many a wary eye falls on Zero and his husband.

Tipping his head back, Zero searches for stars he cannot see past the city lights. "I knew it wasn't likely we would succeed," he says to anyone listening, "but I really wanted…"

"I know," Kuran murmurs in an undertone. "Are you finished here? You keep insisting we'll Hunt that Level E tomorrow night. You'll need rest."

Zero checks in with the Lead Hunter, who releases him after a long stare at Kuran. His husband is waiting at a polite distance from any activity, hands in his pockets and his aura still and quiet. Zero appreciates how Kuran's not being a jerk about this and is avoiding any trouble, because Zero's really not ready to deal with smoothing over any tempers right now.

As Kuran reaches out to take Zero's arm - probably to whisk them back to their hotel - Zero shies away, pretending he doesn't notice the flicker in Kuran's expression as he does. "Can we take the long way?" the Hunter asks.

"As you wish," Kuran tells him, offering his arm for Zero the way a gentleman would escort a lady.

Zero blinks at him for a moment, because only Kuran would do that in a dirty city courtyard when Zero is filthy and exhausted, then sighs and takes it. Just like Kuran promised, they walk the whole way back.

The universe takes with one hand, and gives with the other. Zero's Hunt the next night is nearly flawless. No casualties, no injuries, no witnesses, no complications he can't resolve. The E evades just well enough to give Zero a challenge, but it isn't inventive enough or blood-crazed enough to present a true danger now that Zero's intuition is mostly under control and sharper than his knives. Even the weather cooperates; though the sky threatens rain, a cool breeze keeps the humid air moving.

Zero will never admit it, but Kuran is a good Hunting partner and Zero prefers his company to Hunting alone. As their fight against Shirabuki proved, when Zero and Kuran are pointed at the same target they do pretty well together. Too bad the same can't be said for the rest of their shared time.

The main reason Zero will never, ever, ever admit this fact is because Kaito will give him shit
about it until he dies. Hunting together is the most romantic act possible between Hunter couples - it's practically a rite of passage, a vital test of compatibility and their ideal act of courtship. Humans date, vampires drink blood, Hunters kill things together. The fact that Zero is Hunting with Kuran-as-Nightshade is not an opening for ridicule Kaito will let slide.

Zero is almost disappointed when his last bullet falls the E and his work is finished. His blood thrums hotly in his ears; he's warm but not tired - maybe he'll go for a long run to work the adrenaline high off.

That is, until Kuran slides behind him and curls a hand around the nape of his neck, a familiar gesture that sends a rush of heat down Zero's spine. "Would you like to play, my Hunter?"

Zero swallows, the humidity suddenly stifling. He suddenly recalls the fantasies he'd confessed in front of Kuran, and his knees almost buckle under the white-hot flash of arousal. "Depends. What'd you have in mind."

Kuran chuckles, seeing straight through Zero's faux casualness, and licks a stripe up the Hunter's throat, the damp mark chilly on his skin. Thunder echos in the distance. "I thought we'd test the waters and pick the tamest one."

Zero forces himself to breathe through his nose, heartbeat accelerating. His skin tingles, post-Hunt hyperawareness making every brush of clothing feel like a stroke against his cock. He's experienced enough now to recognize his own want. And oh, how he wants - Kuran is a very, very satisfying lover and undoubtedly the handsomest man Zero has ever met by virtue of his pure blood.

The thunder booms again, and Zero teeters on the edge of temptation. They're in a large park, and his extra sense tells him they are alone. Lightning cracks the sky, and before the afterimage fades Zero is shrugging out of his coat, shedding any equipment he doesn't want ruined.

Kuran has a stupid smug smile on his face, which irritates Zero. So Zero elbows him in the nose, and streaks for the treeline.

He can hear the pureblood grunt in outrage before giving chase, igniting the familiar thrill of the Hunt, but Zero has no intention of playing prey. He turns sharply - Kuran is faster but that means the pureblood overshoots - and draws Artemis rod, extending the weapon.

Kuran is there in an instant, and Zero's intuition blares warnings as Kuran sweeps his claws through the place Zero was standing a millisecond ago, the pureblood's deadly force restrained just short of mortal danger.

Exhilarated by the counterattack, Zero aims for the place he knows Kuran will be, and is rewarded when his husband snarls, drawing back as Artemis rod sparks.

Never one to take an insult, Kuran's next move drives his fist through an entire tree trunk as Zero throws himself to the side to evade.

Zero pants, aroused by the show of strength. Ancestress, he's already getting hard, and the first heavy blow Zero takes to the jaw, a sharp bright shock that blooms over his nerves, only makes it worse.

This is a Hunter game, blurring the edges between fighting and fucking, between pain and pleasure. Zero likes being taken care of - guiltily. But he's a Hunter, a people who don't even treat their own bodies with gentleness, not when so many lives depend on their abilities. They build
themselves up so they don't break, and the dull aches of bruises and sharp slice of training wounds are a daily companion. They learn to appreciate that kind of pain, to savor it as proof they can endure, a badge of honest strength. And fighting - they were good at it, and it got the blood hot, and that led to wanting other things.

Zero won't lay a hand on Yuuki in violence, but Kuran - with Kuran violence is their native coexistence.

So Zero meets his husband strike for strike, each movement seeking to wound, both kept only by shared martial skill from risking true injury. Excitement ratchets higher in Zero's belly with every rough touch. Kuran is hard too - Zero can see the shape in his slacks, and the wind blankets him in alpha pheromones when it shifts just right. This isn't vampiric animal violence, but a tightly choreographed battle with a side of heavy lust.

Zero is thrown into trees, dragged through the dirt, punched, kicked, clawed, has his lip split open. He goes back for more every time, pain a white curtain in his brain silencing thought, the world wiped clean of everything except their battle. Every near miss is exhilarating, the greatest rush, better than any drug.

Kuran is covered in burns and fading bruises from Artemis Rod, but his eyes have a hot sheen to them, feral smile slipping out from behind his gentlemanly persona.

Zero can feel a matching smile split his own face, then his ankle gives out from under him and Kuran has him pinned to a tree before he can blink. Their teeth clack together as they kiss; Zero feels himself get wetter when Kuran licks the blood out of his mouth from his split lip.

"Is this what you wanted, boy," Kuran growls, the points of his teeth sharp. "To affirm your existence by fucking in the ashes of your enemies?"

Zero can't answer, both hard and wet between his thighs, the duel sensation making head spin. He groans instead, and tries to headbut Kuran.

The pureblood slams him against the tree again; Zero's head knocks against the wood, leaving stars in his vision. He gasps for breath, and Kuran steals it again with a kiss.

"What do you want?" Kuran lilts, sounding pleased. "Fingers or cock, little Hunter?"

"Quick talking you bloodsucking bastard and fuck me," Zero hisses, rising up on his toes to align their cocks and finally slide together for sweet friction.

Kaname's fingers are rough as he yanks at Zero's belt, snapping the leather and popping the button off. Zero scowls, pushing Kaname's hands away and kicking off yet another pair of ruined pants. Bloody pureblood always makes sure his clothes are perfect, he just likes ruining Zero's.

The first thrust feels like being punched in the gut, a cacophonous rush of pleasure-pain. Zero's more used to sex now, but his body still gives token resistance before yielding to the assault and then he's full full full, split open wide.

Kaname doesn't pause, just pummels Zero's insides as he keeps a bruising grip on Zero's hips.

Thoughts in shreds, Zero clings to bloody stubbornness and slams his hips down, squeezing his inner muscles vengefully. This is no different than fighting - give and take, ebb and flow. A raw, violent rhythm Zero can anchor himself within.

The rough tree bark raises welts on Zero's back, and he tightens his grip on Kaname's shoulders,
grimacing and concentrating on the waves of ecstasy inside him and the way his cock rubs against Kaname's belly. There must be crescent marks on the pureblood's shoulders from Zero's nails, but Kaname doesn't react, continuing his relentless assault. His face is a picture of concentration, intent on their contest, but he never takes his eyes off Zero.

As Zero clamps down and soars through his orgasm, familiar wet heat fills him, and he sighs, going nearly boneless in his husband's arms. He's learned to savor this part - he likes knowing he's satisfied his partner, that he's done well, and the omega loves being rewarded with its partner's seed.

The satisfaction doesn't last long. "Kaname..." he groans, hiding his face in his husband's neck and feeling the aches of their battle flooding back in. He likes the fighting, but doesn't enjoy the aftermath. What did he even do to sprain his ankle?

"Hush," his husband croons, taking Zero's weight and laying him against the pureblood's chest. "Drink from me. I can smell you're in pain, and I can't stand it."

"Only if you do," Zero counters, knowing he scored more than a few good blows.

Kissing the crown of Zero's head, his husband chuckles. "You first."

Zero's fangs are already extended, and he admires porcelain skin and the web of veins underneath, using the pureblood's lessons to choose a prime spot. Sinking his teeth in feels like sex all over again, andZero swallows until his pains begin to fade, sighing in relief.

"Now you," the Hunter insists, tongue flicking out to catch the last drop. "Was using Artemis Rod too much?"

Kuran shakes his head, leaning in to admire Zero's throat. "A Hunter weapon knows the will of its master. I am hardly even singed - Yuuki won't even notice when we return tomorrow night."

Zero's response is drowned beneath a crackle of thunder, and he follows Kuran's touch, tilting his head to the side and holding still for the slow slide of fangs. Flush with pure blood, he hardly even notices the gentle drain. What a difference from those first few times Kuran drank from him, when the pureblood ripped and tore and threw Zero away like trash afterwards.

Another lightning flash, and nipping at its heels the sound of thunder. Zero squints distrustfully at the sky through the trees, and is proved right when rain begins to drip through the branches. He taps Kuran's shoulder; the pureblood withdraws. "Let's find shelter and you can finish, I need to rescue my gear."

"No need," Kuran says, sly smile touching his lips, and the pureblood goes back to burying his fangs in Zero's throat.

Zero blinks, irritated that Kuran would treat his most important possessions so lightly. Then he realizes the sound of rain has gone quiet, and he's entirely dry.

"Oh." Awe chokes his throat. The raindrops in the clearing are floating, suspended in the air, blown glass droplets defying the sway of gravity. Beneath the lighting they flash white-yellow, earthbound constellations constructed by the man nestled against Zero's throat.

The Hunter part of him shivers. What a terrifying display of power - the sheer control required to grasp each individual raindrop and hold it in place - a true marvel worthy of the Ancestor of the Kuran, the Original King. Zero is reminded again that he lives only because Yuuki's affection spared him Kuran's fury. Unleashed, Kuran could have torn him apart with a no more than a
thought.

The vampire part of him wants to grovel and show its belly and then fuck Kuran again.

But the fragment of Zero's human self finds the sight very beautiful, and for some reason Zero does not feel afraid.

Kaname can taste the wonder in his Consort's blood, light and airy and bright, tinged with wariness but not a hint of distrust. Utterly splendid.

Licking the taste of Zero's wonder off his lips, blood euphoria is perhaps the reason why Kaname makes such a grievous mistake.

"What did you say." The words are flat, the tone cold. Zero's body has stiffened, and his expression closes off.

Kaname feels something in his chest crunch, like china ground under your heel. "I love you," he repeats.

"You love me," Zero parrots, face frozen in a mask. With a single, hard push Zero shoves Kaname away, his cock slipping out of the warm haven of Zero's body into the unforgiving night air.

Refusing to come within arm's reach, Zero circles around Kaname and goes straight to the pile of his Hunter equipment.

Kaname follows helplessly. "I'm not lying. Your power makes me incapable of lying to you."

"I KNOW THAT!" Zero screams, glacial calm flash-boiling away in an instant, replaced by fury. He begins angrily dressing himself, trying to salvage his clothing.

(This is the scene Kaname imagines: a butterfly lands on an ice-rimmed, cracked branch. The branch breaks. Black roses bloom inside his skull.)

"I love you," Kaname begins, somehow keeping his voice light and even, "but you don't love me."

Zero looks over his shoulder, calm and impassive. "No, I don't. I love Yuuki."

Kaname thinks about cracking open the rotten chrysalis of his ribs, and tearing out the blackened, cancerous heart inside to offer up to Zero. The monster inside him writhes and convulses, the shrieking of a pureblood's obsessive love spurned. His next words have an eerie, echoing disharmony. "Why not?"

Zero's nostrils flare, and he sets his jaw. "I don't need a reason. I am not obligated to love anyone, Kuran Kaname. Not even if they already love me."

Moving brusquely, the Hunter resumes his redressing. "A year ago you thought less of me than a stray dog. You would have happily killed me in the most horrible ways you knew how. And now you've changed your mind and you expect me to just fall into line and obediently love you back?"

Buckling on his weapons, Zero turns away, cutting off Kaname's response. "This is insane. I don't even understand how this happened. You've always hated me. You told me you didn't regret what you did to me. You took pleasure in the idea of my humiliation."

*I never wish to see you hurt again*, Kaname wants to say, but that's not a denial.
"Don't let me see you until I get home," Zero orders, still with his back turned. "I'm going back to the hotel. Sleep somewhere else if you don't want to fly home yet."

Kaname's eyes burn. Everything is red, red, red. The beast is bursting through its cage. He wants to consume, to crush, to entrap, to eat until he is never denied again.

In the struggle, Zero leaves. Kaname is alone.

(He follows Zero the entire way back just to make sure he's safe, fighting the pureblood part of him, starving and crazed with rejection.)

Chapter End Notes

Well that went poorly.

Hanami 'flower-viewing' is a traditional Japanese activity in the spring, though it is usually done with sakura flowers. Given Zero's history with sakura I thought he might prefer the more ancient tradition of plum blossom viewing instead.

Since polar bears might very well go extinct in my lifetime due to climate change, I figure they probably wouldn't survive the cataclysm either.

Next chapter: 'As your nature demands.' Kaname loses his mind, Yuuki just wants a little peace in her home, and Zero can't escape the Jeweled Court any longer
So. Long story short, the chapter got too long and had to be cut in two so it doesn't cover everything I promised from the teaser. My apologies friends & readers, you'll get your due next chapter, cross my heart. Without further prevarication, enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Zero goes straight back to his hotel, collapses on the bed, accidentally breathes in a lungful of Kuran's scent because the bastard's been sleeping on his sheets, panics, packs his bags, and takes an exorbitantly expensive four AM cab all the way to the airport, where he sits on the curb for three hours as his brain screams incoherently and replays Kuran's confession until the terminal opens.

As soon as the automatic doors unlock, Zero rushes to the first open desk, forking over another ridiculous sum to book the next available flight home, and he's soaring over the strait by midmorning. Deprived of the need to focus on practical matters, he presses his forehead against the window and curses his stupid decision to take a daylight flight; the sun's reflection off the clouds is killing his light-sensitive vampire eyes, and he really desperately wants to sleep but knows he can't put off his incipient breakdown anymore.

"What the hell."

An old lady glares at him. Zero slumps down in his seat, and raises the hood of his jacket.

"What the hell," he whispers to himself with heartfelt sincerity. His seatmates give him odd looks, but Zero really doesn't care. Kuran just declared his love for Zero. Kuran. A love confession. Those two things don't have any business near each other. This is some romance novel shit that Zero was not prepared for.

But to be honest, Zero didn't feel completely surprised when it happened. With his Hunter intuition, there's no way his subconscious didn't have some inkling of Kuran's feelings. Zero just buried the revelation deep, because his conscious mind couldn't deal with the impossible evidence. He still has no idea how to reconcile this, how to straighten things to make sense again before he has to go home.

Shit, that's about five hours from now. What is Zero supposed to do?

"Can I get you anything sir?" one of the flight attendants asks with a charming smile.

There is a black speck outside Zero's tiny window. He squints at it, and realizes that it looks rather like a bird. Perhaps a raven.

"Alcohol," he croaks. "The strongest you have. Four or five of them."

The flight attendant stares in alarm. His fellow passengers stare in alarm. Zero feels rather alarmed himself. "Make that six, please."

Praise the Ancestress and vampire metabolism, six drinks over two-and-a-half hours is not enough to keep him plastered for long. He staggers into the terminal sober enough to drive, gets in his
borrowed car and nearly has a nervous breakdown at the wheel because the idea of going back to Rosehill terrifies him.

He rejected Kuran. What if Kuran punishes him for it? A cold sweat breaks out on the back of his neck. Zero didn't give Kuran what the vampire wanted, and there's no incentive for his husband to play nice any longer. Kuran could do anything - isolate him, pressure him, manipulate him, fuck around with his head until Zero genuinely believes he's in love.

Overcome by panic, Zero speeds out of the parking lot, hardly even aware of where he's going, consumed by one worsening scenario after the other. When the edge of the town built around Association Headquarters comes into view, his shoulders relax and he shakes off some of the anxiety. Driving the familiar route, his heart slows down, and when Zero knocks on Master Yagari's door, he's almost calm.

Master takes one look at him, still wearing pieces of his Hunter gear and smelling of gunsmoke and ash, and gestures him inside. Zero feels guilty for intruding - his master was clearly asleep - but still feels a measure of calm wash over him as the elder Hunter shuts the door.

"I'm retired from the field and haven't got anything but desk duty tonight," Master Yagari reminds him, his gruff tone allowing no argument. "Now, you feel like talking about whatever brought you here, or would you rather sleep on it and talk this evening?"

Meekly, Zero replies, "Can we talk now?"

Yagari nods. "Come sit down in the living room." His Master rummages around and drops a gun cleaning kit in front of Zero on the scarred coffee table, then produces an excessively large pile of throwing knives and begins to sharpen them.

As Zero begins disassembling Bloody Rose, the sound of steel on a whetstone brings childhood memories to mind - watching his parents maintain their equipment when he was barely old enough to understand what a Hunter was, sharpening training blades for the weaponsmaster side-by-side with Ichiru, Kaito's voice in his ear teasing him for treating his own knives as devotedly as a lover.

His hands know the motions, and Zero's mind begins to drift. Master taught him to clean his weapons any time he uses them - a way of thanking the weapon for lending you its power, acknowledging the strange half-alive way powerful anti-vampire weapons behaved. It's a private post-Hunt ritual, one Zero takes care to keep hidden at Rosehill, knowing that disapproving eyes are everywhere.

Master Yagari doesn't push, but Zero finds the story spilling out anyway, grounded in the familiar routine. When he's finished, the two Hunters sit together languidly finishing their tasks.

"I was telling the truth. I don't love him romantically," Zero says quietly. "I know what it feels like to love someone, and that's not how I feel when I think about Kuran. That's why I had to get away. If I told a vampire that a pureblood confessed his love to me, and I refused him...Well, you know what kind of influence purebloods have. They'd say I was insane at best, ungrateful or cruel at the worst."

"You're not wrong," his master growls, then his voice calms. "Do you want to love him?"

Zero shakes his head helplessly; he doesn't have an answer.

The bloodbond tugs at her; Kaname and Zero are home early.
Yuuki straightens from where she's bent over a stack of paperwork, and frowns. They must have fought again; hours ago Kaname shut his end of their bloodbond so tightly nothing has seeped through.

She sighs and gets up to finish arranging the furniture in her new study, her long overdue personal project that's finally complete. Can't those two get along for five minutes?

Well, no matter. They'll come see her whenever they're unpacked and she can sort out whatever argument caused the spat this time. Maybe the three of them can go out for a midday snack afterwards. She calls the kitchen and cancels her solitary meal, deciding to wait and ask her husbands' opinions before making a restaurant reservation.

Kaname's presence draws closer as Yuuki continues her work. She's rushing to finish quickly, which is why she jumps when Kaname's voice floats from the doorway.

"I have wanted to see you for days."

Yuuki yelps and spins around, freezing at what she sees. Kaname's clothes are crumpled and muddied, and his hair is tangled in elf-knots. His expression has a static quality even if his mouth his smiling. He stares without blinking; his eyes have a horrible dead look in them.

"I have missed you so deeply, my dear," her husband continues, stepping closer. On the surface, Kaname's words seem light, spoken in a soft tone, but underneath his voice is flat, like a poisoned meringue. His hands twitch, desperate, covetous. A muscle in his cheek jumps. He smells like Zero, and sex.

"What happened," Yuuki demands, jumping straight to the worst scenario. "Where is Zero?"

Kaname's shoulder jerks in a shrug, all his elegance stripped. "Somewhere in the Hunter Association's residential district. My familiar could not follow him inside. The warding is nearly as heavy there as it is around headquarters."

Her mouth drops open. "What? Why would he go there? What happened Kaname?"

Her husband's jaw works, but nothing comes out. His eyes flicker around her study, and then he recites what Yuuki doesn't doubt is a word-perfect script of events.

"Kaname," Yuuki says when he is finished, laying a hand across her eyes, "when I said you should confess to him, this is not what I meant."

Then Yuuki's mind - or the part of it Kaname's been training - kicks into overdrive. She considers his appearance, and horror dawns.

Madness is the only unforgivable sin for a pureblood. A broken mind cannot control limitless power. For a man who never lost his composure and never appeared less than perfect, Kaname's rumpled, careless despair looks crazy.

And right now, the Senate is seeking any excuse to destroy Kaname. Yuuki cannot give them the chance, as they did with Shizuka.

She seizes his ragged sleeve. "Kaname, did anyone see you like this?"

"Zero didn't want to see me. Why should anyone else matter?" Kaname responds listlessly.

"Kaname, please," she says, throttling the urgency in her voice. "I love you, and I need you to
answer my question. This is important."

As she'd hoped, that gets Kaname to pause and think. He's not blind to her intent, but his broken-hearted apathy means he simply doesn't care.

They are lucky. He stayed out of sight while stalking Zero, and only a pair of maids saw him enter Rosehill. Yuuki grimly exacts a promise from Kaname not to move until she returns, then tracks the pair down, interrogates them to confirm they didn't gossip, and then wipes their memories.

Task completed, she returns to find Kaname brooding at her desk with that heartbreaking, hollow look in his eyes. His mental state terrifies her, and she needs to find somewhere safe, away from the Senate's eyes, to try and figure out what to do - for both her husbands' sakes.

Thanking Kaname's paranoia, she digs out an unregistered burner phone from their emergency cache and dials a familiar number.

"Hello, this is Chairman Cross!"

Yuuki can almost hear the hearts in her guardian's cheerful voice, and feels the urge to cry. "I need a favor. Can you make a big deal about being sick? Just a cold or something, so everyone knows it's not serious."

Cross' voice loses its silly playfulness. "I can. Are you able to tell me why?"

"You'll see. I need you to call me right back on my official phone and convince me you need me to come over right away to nurse you. I'm bringing Kaname."

"And Zero?" Cross asks.

Yuuki's hand tightens on the phone. "I'm still figuring that part out. Can you do it?"

Exactly as she'd asked, Cross calls her back five minutes later, and Yuuki lets herself be talked into a temporary stay until Cross is no longer in danger of death by spring cold. The rest is simple - she calls the inner circle to explain her change of plans and appoint proxies for her responsibilities, then calls the business offices for much the same reasons, and finally she leaves instructions with Steward Inukai to have their luggage packed and delivered later. Only Takuma seems to sense something is wrong, but he knows better than to ask questions.

Kaname is desperate to please her, and Yuuki easily talks him into staying at Cross' house.

Safely hidden in her childhood bedroom, her husband sent to clean up, Yuuki stares at the relics of her human past and tries to figure out how she's supposed to fix this. She can't blame Zero for his feelings, but she also can't abide Kaname's pain.

Stymied, she goes and looks for a clean change of clothes for Kaname. Zero's old clothes won't fit Kaname's broader figure properly, so Yuuki approaches Cross. On the whole, he's been rather restrained about the situation, but Yuuki knows it won't last long.

When she pokes her head in the kitchen, Cross is humming a song thirty years out of date and mixing a suspicious mixture in a glass bowl.

When she asks him about the clothes, Cross frowns. "I keep plenty of cosplay in your size and Zero-kun's, but I don't have anything in Kaname-kun's size." Snapping his fingers, Cross brightens, a suspicious shiny gleam flashing on his glasses. "I have the perfect solution for Kaname-kun, and - " Cross beams in Yuuki's direction - "Yuuki-chan can try a super cute cosplay daddy's
been dying to see you wear!"

Yuuki stutters, realizes she has no other clean clothes until her luggage arrives, and gives in.

On his way out, her former guardian pauses, face losing its levity in a rare flash of seriousness. "What else can I do to help you, Yuuki?"

"You've done enough," Yuuki assures him. "The rest we'll need to work out ourselves."

But how? She paces the empty kitchen, then goes back upstairs to find Kaname stepping out of the bath. Heedless of his nakedness, she opens her arms wide, offering a hug.

Kaname goes to her at once, stepping into her embrace and patiently allowing her to squeeze him. Despair and longing are still carved deeply in the lines of his face.

Yuuki counts to twenty and concentrates on breathing evenly so she doesn't cry. "Kaname, I know it hurts, but remember that I love you, okay? Please don't ever doubt that."

"You're so good to me, my dear, beloved wife." His chin droops against her shoulder. "I can feel the madness reaching for me," he tells her lightly. "We all go mad eventually, and for nothing so much as love."

A sob escapes her. "Don't let it reach you. If you went mad, I'd -"

"Shhhh," he soothes, arms wrapping around her. "Fear not. As long as I have you, even the madness of a pureblood's nature will not reach me. Your love holds my despair at bay."

Yuuki quietly rests her cheek against his chest, self-loathing brewing at what she's about to do. But she needs him functional enough to fool the Senate. Raising her head, she looks Kaname in the eye and lies. "Zero told me he didn't love me too. Just because he said that now, doesn't mean it will always be true. If you're patient, Kaname, someday he might fall in love with you. After all, your feelings changed, so why can't his?"

Her husband nods thoughtfully, the wild, obsessive look in his eyes flickering like a candle in high wind. "That is true. Zero is ours, and he cannot be taken from us. I laid him out beneath me and breached his maidenhood myself. No one else will ever know him as we do."

Yuuki makes herself nod along, feeling sick in the pit of her stomach. "We'll give Zero some time to himself, and then I'll call him so we can talk. Okay? So let's go get dressed."

Kaname smiles gently at her, and allows himself to be ushered along.

Zero rings the doorbell to Cross' house, and panics.

Blood and ash, what is he doing? He'd come with a plan - he'd stayed up all day agonizing over what to say - and now every single prepared word has fallen right out of his head, leaving nothing but stupid thoughts bouncing inside his skull.

Maybe he should have stayed the night at Master's too? Given himself more time? Dammit, he's not ready!

Zero's hysteria is cut short as the door opens, and he gapes, words failing him as he staggers back a step.

Yuuki lowers her eyes self-consciously, and dusts the skirt of the white Night Class uniform she's
wearing, the scarlet ribbon at her throat a slash of blood. With her hair short again, the evocation of their youth is uncanny.

It makes something unpleasant in Zero's chest tighten. "Yuuki…"

She rolls her eyes. "Cross," she explains, and doesn't need to say anything more.

Zero scowls, and thinks about kicking his former guardian in the face for arranging this, all his hesitation disappearing as he stalks inside.

"He has one for you too," Yuuki warns him as she shuts the door.

Like hell. Zero would go ass naked first. Zero sweeps through the living room and kitchen, but Cross is nowhere to be seen, sensibly hiding from Zero's wrath. Target fled, Zero swings back into the living room, outrage petering out.

Yuuki is watching him, hands flat against her thighs, stance too square and balanced to be anything except a deliberate pose hiding tension.

Seating himself on the couch to show he's not leaving, Zero takes a deep breath, trying to match her calm. "Kaname is here too," he observes, the heavy agitated pressure of a second pureblood aura upstairs weighing on his senses.

Yuuki inclines her head, picking her words carefully, voice free of blame. "You told him you didn't want to see him until you got back to Rosehill, so he's staying in my room while we talk."

Guilt spikes in his gut. Zero shakes his head. "This is between the two of us. Can you go get him?"

As soon as the words leave his mouth, a door slams, and Kuran is there, seeming to appear from air.

Witnessing the feverish hunger in Kuran's eyes, Zero almost overlooks the black Day Class uniform the pureblood wears. But his shock can't disguise the obsessive way Kuran stares at him, or the other cracks in his husband's impassive, controlled manner - the muscle jumping in his neck, how his body strains toward Zero, barely held in check.

"May I touch you? Please," Kuran says softly.

Bared to Zero's senses is the desperate, pleading undertone beneath his husband's request. The alarm Zero feels is akin to watching someone teeter on the edge of a cliff, and he yields without a thought.

Kuran is on his knees at Zero's feet in a heartbeat, hands petting Zero's thighs as he spreads them, before diving between Zero's legs and pressing his face against the crotch of Zero's trousers, breathing in great mouthfuls of their joined scent.

"You didn't wash," Kuran rasps, relief poorly hidden. "Your cunt still smells of me. Of our sex."

He is afraid you are leaving him, Zero's intuition whispers. The Hunter has to close his eyes as guilt savages his insides. "Of course I wouldn't wash away your smell. I want everyone to know the alphas I have chosen."

Zero settles his hands softly in Kuran's damp, windblown hair. "I haven't changed my mind about that. I'm not going anywhere. I just needed some time."
Kuran slumps into the cup of Zero's thighs as Zero begins smoothing his hair. Zero takes care not to jar him so the alpha can keep drawing in Zero's intimate scent.

Offering silent support, Yuuki kneels down beside Kuran, hooking her arms around their husband's waist so he's sandwiched between her body and Zero's.

Some of the fevered tension in Kuran's body seeps away, though his eyes remain wild and guarded. "Why would you still desire that? Given your lack of feelings for me."

Zero allows himself time to think, working the tangles out of the dark strands, before he feels confident enough to answer. "I don't love you romantically. I've gone back over my memories and I'm certain of that."

Kuran flinches, lifting his head and pulling away.

Zero hurriedly continues, "But I still care about you, Kaname. I care deeply about what happens to you. I want you to be happy and I want to protect you. When you took us to your birthplace - that cemented those feelings for me. You trusted us with your secrets, with the parts of yourself you don't let other people see. I want to guard those parts of you and keep them safe for your sake."

Kuran is looking up at him with open surprise and soft vulnerability on his face. Zero's heart twists. "You're not an inscrutable mystery anymore, and I can't turn away and pretend I don't understand why you act the way you do, even if I find it reprehensible."

"And," Zero continues relentlessly, shame curling in his belly, "I want to apologize to you. I was unnecessarily abrupt when I rejected your feelings. That was cruel of me. I could have handled that better and let you down more gently. I'm sorry that I hurt you."

Kuran laughs bitterly, shaking his head in Zero's lap. "I have hurt you far worse. You said nothing untrue."

"You have hurt me." Zero doesn't try denying it. "But that still doesn't excuse me for treating you that way."

"Is my love so terrible?" Kaname asks, and oh, the pain beneath those words.

"People don't choose who they love, or who they don't love. We know that pretty well by now," Zero reminds him. He'd never meant to love Yuuki the way he did. He'd tried to dedicate himself to revenge alone. But his heart couldn't help reaching out to her anyway. And Kuran, it seems, has found himself unwillingly attached to Zero.

Another bitter laugh, and Kuran raises his head, a dark shadow in his eyes as he looks up at Zero. "Is my love without hope? Could you come to love me?"

Zero almost lies, but at the last moment he shakes his head. "The current me is incapable of loving you."

Kuran jerks, then snaps to his feet, shrugging Yuuki away and beginning to pace. The same dark shadow twists his face as he says, in a voice like black velvet, "Care to elaborate, my Consort?"

Adrenaline spiking, Zero rises as well, Hunter senses perceiving the threat. "I can, yes."

Zero watches the pureblood out of the corner of his eye, feeling the flow of the room, setting himself adrift on it, allowing his instincts to rise. He speaks the words as they come. "The fault lies in the foundation of our relationship. I cannot love someone I do not completely trust."
"Trust?" Kuran tastes the word, hands tucked behind his back. "You trusted me well enough last night during our game."

"I do trust you - most of the time," Zero agrees. "I trust you with Yuuki. I trust you with my body. I trust you when we work toward a common goal. My conscious mind, seeing your behavior toward me in the last half-year, understands that your intentions toward me have changed. The problem is my subconscious."

Zero extends a palm toward Kuran. "Deep down, I am afraid. I am afraid that if I trust you, you will hurt me. It's reflex to flinch away from a known source of pain. That expectation has been beaten into my body from the time we have first known one another."

Kuran's face goes dead white, and he sways, bracing himself against the arm of the couch.

"You may have hated me, but you have always trusted me, Kaname. I was your pawn, Yuuki's faithful knight. You knew I would never willingly hurt Yuuki, and I was not supposed to pose any threat to your plans."

The Hunter shakes his head. "My perspective could not be more different. You had Yuuki, and you tormented me anyway. You made sure my reliance on your blood was as bitter as possible. You reminded me as often as you could what a monster I was. Those memories are like a callus in my heart, a dead place with no feeling. That is why I cannot escape my doubts now."

Zero continues inexorably, knowing that no matter how much the words hurt to pry away from his fear, he must say them. "All this time I've held myself back from you. I've built walls of detachment in my mind to keep you out, turned my face away when I understood I felt affection toward you. Do you know that I still think of you as 'Kuran' in my head?"

The pureblood's face is a rictus of agony. The couch arm is a shredded ruin.

A small, ugly part of Zero feels vindicated. "I've never allowed you into my deepest heart. My doubts are always whispering in the back of my mind. 'I can't rely on any of this,' they say. Feelings change. People fall out of love with each other. Better to protect myself and be prepared when your heart changes too, and we go back to the way we were before."

"I cannot," Kuran whispers hoarsely, sliding to the floor. "Humans might, but I cannot stop loving you. Purebloods never let go. I mourn a woman ten thousand years dead. How can I do less for you?"

Zero shakes his head. "I told you. My fear is not rational. The root of our relationship is hate, and our foundation is built on distrust. Once trust is broken, how can it be fixed?"

Kuran is bent over, shoulders hunched, fingers knotted in the carpet. Zero can feel the horror emanating from him.

It brings him no pleasure. Zero just feels tired. "I think we should step back from our sexual relationship for a while."

Yuuki stirs from her frozen heap on the floor, both hands covering her mouth. "Zero…"

"Not forever," he assures her. "I'm not trying to go back on my word. And I'm not trying to punish anyone. I just need things to be less complicated while we figure out where we go from here."

"As you wish," Kuran says tonelessly. His dark hair hides his expression, and his bowed head does not look up.
"Thank you." Zero crosses over to the doorway, then looks back at the scene of devastation he's caused. Neither of them have moved, and Yuuki is visibly trying not to cry. This is his fault. He's failed again, ruined whatever was good between them. They should never have loved him.

"I'm sorry," Zero says, and flees.

The keening in his mind won't stop. Monstrous shapes form in the darkness behind his eyes. Sleep is unthinkable, rest unreachable, peace untouchable as a star. "I must have him," Kaname groans. "He cannot leave me."

He is pushed against a soft chest, and a beloved voice shushes him. "He isn't leaving us. Don't give in to despair, Kaname. If you love him, then you can't give up."

No, she is right. He cannot let go, cannot abandon his love. "Mine. Always mine."

The voice falters. "Yes, yours. Zero can be yours. But you need to pull yourself together. You can't win him this way."

Yes...much can be done to alter a mislead mind, if one has the resources and no qualms against using them. Eventually his love will come to understand...

As though sensing the direction of his thoughts, he is taken by the shoulders and shaken roughly. "It has to be honest, Kaname. No plots, no manipulations. If Zero loves you because of a lie, he will eventually find out. And then he will be beyond your reach, forever. You don't want that to happen, do you?"

He shakes his head, rocking back and forth. No! No! He cannot lose him!

"Then use your head. Be patient. Practice self-control. Live in hope, for however long it takes. Can you do that for me?"

Yes. "Yes," Kaname whispers, feeling the fog of despair lift from his bones a little. He can try.

"We'll stay until you're better. Then we can go home, and you can see Zero. You can try winning him over again," Yuuki promises.

Kaname clings to that promise, allows it to become his purpose, drawing him back up into the land of the living.

The next week is excruciating for all of them.

The three of them dance gingerly around each other pretending everything is fine, trying to keep up appearances for ever-watchful vampire eyes. They keep their daily routines, sleep in the same bed, make the same public gestures - but their interactions are stilted, perfunctory performances. Their kisses and touches lack something essential, and a sharp enough eye will see the rents.

Yuuki, Ancestress bless her, holds the whole sham together, keeping Kuran focussed and managing his emotional state. The one time Zero took her aside, bracing himself for rebuke, she didn't try to convince him he was wrong, or that he should recant. She still hasn't shouted at Zero, even though he deserves it. Zero almost wishes she would, because the guilt is eating him alive.

Zero doesn't know what to do. This is his first relationship, and no one except Yuuki has ever seriously confessed their love to him. Even his intuition cannot offer an easy solution - he can
perceive the wreckage in minute detail, but the remedy is too complex. Nonetheless, Zero believes he was not wrong to tell the truth. Lying to Kaname would have been both cruel and unethical, dishonest in the extreme.

But Zero is afraid his honesty has broken any peace that could exist between them. He curses his traitorous heart, because wouldn't all of this be fixed if he could just give Kuran and Yuuki what they wanted? He isn't trying to punish anyone, but he doesn't know if staying away from Kuran will cause more agony or diminish it. He waits for some sign, but Kuran simply repeats the same old romantic gestures with increasing desperation.

The pureblood's behavior is beginning to frighten both Zero and Yuuki. Kuran has never quite recovered from Zero's rejection. There are - to put it politely - lapses in his control, episodes of instability - and sooner or later Yuuki won't be able to explain why Kuran has suddenly entered seclusion.

Without falsely accepting Kuran's love, Zero doesn't know how to help. He forbids himself from leaving Rosehill as punishment, even to ride his mares - two of whom are newly in foal - only allowing himself an escape when he visits Shoshana.

Her improving health is the one piece of continual good news. Able to leave her bed for increasing periods of time, Shoshana's condition seems to have reached a balance. Her midwife believes she may even be able to attend the next Jeweled Court at the end of April if the elder omega wishes.

Zero would rather consign the whole affair to the frozen circles of hell, but sadly does not have the option. The tea group omegas have made it clear his missed cycle and infertility will invite open rebellion.

"I suppose it's time I acted like your mentor. And I owe you an apology. Come, we will discuss the Court," Shoshana says as though reading his mind.

Zero's surprise must show in his face, because Shoshana laughs, a low rough noise. "You wear a particular pained expression when you think of those jackals."

"You don't owe me anything," Zero tells her, pulling up a chair beside her daybed.

"I hope you will say so in time," she replies cryptically. "I have been selfish at the least."

That makes Zero stop and stare. She meets his gaze, dark eyes giving nothing away, then looks away. "I know more secrets and scandals of the Jeweled Court than anyone living. I would hate for that knowledge to pass away with me when it can be put to good use."

Eyebrows nearly climbing to his hairline, Zero chokes. Shoshana is offering to share the entire Court's dirty laundry so he can blackmail any troublemakers.

Zero loves messing with nobles almost as much as he loves taunting purebloods. A grin breaks over his face, and he mock solemnly places a hand over his heart. "I promise not to waste it."

"Good," she murmurs, a matching gleam in her own eye.

"Do you think you'll go to the inner circle meeting today?" Yuuki ventures, glancing over at Kaname. He's sprawled on a settee wearing the same shirt he wore yesterday, confirming her guess that he hasn't slept.

Her husband gestures vaguely, staring off into the distance with burning eyes as he broods. The
movement isn't quite crisp - he's on the edge of one of his melancholic episodes, and Kaname is always erratic when he's trapped in the grip of his broken heart.

It's painful to see him this way. But his melancholy is still saner than his pureblooded hunger, the times when Kaname paces and paces, fighting the urge to twist Zero into obedience, the bloodbond crying out with unsatisfied appetite, his craving that cannot be quenched left to fester and turn on itself until he burns with it.

"Please try and come. We can't lower our defenses when the Senate investigation is being so persistent," Yuuki reminds him, trying one last time to reach him.

"How I envy you, Yuuki." The strength of Kaname's voice shocks through the silence like an arrow leaving the bow. Yuuki stiffens, freezing as his wandering attention targets her.

"He sleeps right beside me, but he may as well be a thousand miles distant. You have him, all of him, and the way he looks at you...If I did not love you more than the stars and the moon, more than my own soul, I would kill you for that - for possessing the one thing I desire."

Under that wild gaze, Yuuki doesn't flinch. She is a pureblood too, and jealous of her loves. She bares her teeth, her beast rising in her breast. "If he doesn't love you, it's because of your own actions."

Kaname recoils, fever turning inward as his eyes light on empty air. His hands go slack, drifting to his thighs. Falling into reverie, he seems to forget she is there as the tide of his mood changes and he takes refuge in waking dreams.

Yuuki turns away, swallowing down the guilt and fear. The inner circle should know that Kaname will not be joining them today.

Kaname's alpha is very displeased. His instincts have been quiet for months, glorying in the attainment of everything his alpha has ever wanted - exclusive sexual access to the most beautiful, deadly omega it's ever seen, and being accepted as that omega's potential mate. Now his achievement is undone, the alpha is sour with sexual frustration, and Kaname is being stung with irritating, terrible ideas for making amends during his dwindling lucid periods.

Such as now.

Bring him something shiny, the alpha prods at him, completely ignoring the diagrams and figures Kaname is meant to be focussing on. Really shiny. And big.

Ill-advised as they are, the alpha's complaints are better than the dark moods his monstrous pureblood nature torments him with. They overwhelm him for hours and leave him clawing for a foothold in reality. He can feel one lurking in his temples now, a black fugue where sanity will be as whispy as a cloud, and fantasy bleeds into hallucination. It is difficult to care. The wound is bloody and ugly and infected, a refrain of lovemelovemewhynotwhynot.

Those are the times when Kaname's demons tempt him, conjure delusions before his eyes - the splendid curve of Zero's waist under Kaname's hands, earnest affection in his lilac eyes, his pink lips smiling and curving around around that forbidden word, love. All those things which he desires become real in those moments, only to be snatched away like smoke. The yearning, the wailing greed - ah, that alone could drive him mad.

And in his weakness it seems such a small thing, such a small price he could pay to have Zero - all Kaname would need to do is give in and break his resolve to Yuuki. He could make Zero love him,
and Zero would believe it was his own idea with the right manipulation, the right cruelty, the right pressures. It worked with Yuuki, and she's forgiven him.

Sensing Kaname's mental state through their bloodbond, Yuuki sensibly brings the business meeting to a close. Kaname lets her, consumed under the tide of his aching emptiness and apathy. He scrounges up enough poise to see their allies off, but he knows his performance is ever so slightly off.

*Maybe if we dump mate's enemies at his feet and kill them very dead, our pretty omega will let us mount him again?*

The alpha would grovel and pile pretty things at Zero's feet for his forgiveness. Kaname is very close to giving in.

"You shouldn't get careless just because they're human," Yuuki remarks, shutting the boardroom door behind her, leaving the two of them alone in the room.

Kaname looks at his wife, her concern projected in every line of her body, and experiences a fierce surge of total and complete love. Unable to put adequate words to his feelings, the pureblood embraces his wife, wrapping her smaller body - shorter even in three inch heels - within his arms.

She returns the hug just as fiercely, hiding her face in his suit jacket. "You need to talk to him."

Drinking in her scent, Kaname shakes his head. "What good would it do? His rejection stems from deep scars - scars that words alone cannot heal."

"Well it couldn't hurt," she retorts, frustration making her words sharp. She squeezes him in apology, and they fall silent.

The warmth of her body is pleasant, and moves Kaname's mind in less innocent directions. Denied its usual hit of omega pheromones, his body's lust is set to a hair-trigger.

Yuuki wiggles against him, picking up on his change in mood. "I'm not the only one who misses regular sex, am I?"

Heat spikes in his groin. "No," Kaname rumbles, voice deepening. "Shall we help one another out?"

"I'd love to, but here's not a very good place," she replies, glancing around the sparse boardroom, nothing but four walls, a long table and chairs.

Kaname tsks, going down on his knees and sending a suggestive look up at his wife. "I'm sure we can come up with something suitable."

Her eyes darken, and she moistens her lips, unconsciously shifting her stance wider.

Running his hands up her stocking-clad thighs, Kaname sets out to enjoy himself.

He's too desperate to draw this out, so with only the briefest brush of his fingers against the silk to tease her, he rolls down her hose and untucks her from the special panties she wears to smooth any telltale bulges.

Kaname pauses - just for the briefest moment - to breathe her in, then takes her in the warmth of his mouth, opening his jaw and loosening his throat to accept the thick weight of her on his tongue. Her groans, the taste of her all he can think of, and forces himself further using nothing but his grip
on her thighs and the muscles in his throat.

Her thighs shake and tremble, and she melts backward against the conference table. Breathing shallowly, Yuuki covers her mouth with one hand and fists Kaname's hair with the other, hips twitching forward.

Pulling back off her cock, Kaname steals a quick breath before diving in again, lifting her impressive length to the side and licking at her cunt underneath. Not the nectar his alpha desires with its punch of addictive omega pheromones, but irresistible to Kaname all the same. He lavishes her cunt with his tongue, coaxing it wetter and lapping up any stray drops, her muffled groans driving him just as much as the unsatisfied heat between his legs.

Kaname's teasing licks finally goad his wife into action. Yuuki yanks his head up, smearing his cheek with her fluids as she jerks his face toward her cock. Kaname gladly goes back to sucking her shaft, enthusiasm and experience and his exquisitely skilled tongue shoving her over the edge into orgasm in hardly any time at all.

The satisfaction as she fills his mouth is enough to tamp down the urgency of his own lust. Kaname swallows, and licks Yuuki clean, putting her clothes to rights with a thoroughness born of practice.

"What about…?" his wife squeaks, still flatteringly flushed, orgasm-useless fingers pawing at his belt.

Shaking his head, Kaname demurs, giving himself a sharp squeeze. "Later perhaps." Pleasing Yuuki leaves him buoyant and full of glorious clarity, the black cloud of his looming mood chased off. He will save her indulgence for when he may need another fleeting reprieve.

Tugging his waistcoat straight, he allows their breathing to settle, and hearts to slow, willing down his erection.

Yuuki hums in thought as they ruminate in comfortable silence. "Kaname. I think I have an idea."

Yuuki looks down at Zero, seated naked on his pile of duvets and furs in front of their usual mirror, and hopes she's doing the right thing. "Are you sure this is okay?"

Stoic expression not changing a hair, Zero nods. His ribs rise and fall in an easy in-out rhythm, but when he glances toward the door Kaname is waiting behind, the whites of his eyes show. He's spooked, and trying not to show it, but he isn't fearful enough that Yuuki feels the need to pull the plug.

When Yuuki suggested bringing Kaname into their usual sessions, Zero had agreed almost at once. Yuuki suspects it was mostly out of guilt, and probably duty as well, but she hopes at least a tiny part of their Consort wanted Kaname here for his honest support. Even as Zero slowly becomes more comfortable with his body, there are lines that Yuuki's support alone cannot help him cross.

"Remember that you can stop this at any time, and if you don't want Kaname to come again, that's your right, and you don't need a reason," Yuuki tells him, palm on the door handle of her suite.

With one last glance at Zero, who draws his limbs close to his body but doesn't otherwise respond, Yuuki cracks open the door, confirms Kaname is alone in the outer room, and ushers him quickly inside her bedroom.

As Kaname strips off his clothes, Yuuki goes down on her knees beside Zero, judging his tension
from a few quick rubs on his back.

Tonight her role is to keep Zero comfortable and safe, and she takes that responsibility seriously. Bringing Kaname in absolutely must not undo Zero's progress, and if Zero shows any sign of regressing she'll throw Kaname out at once.

Zero uncurls a little at her touch, and his limbs loosen when she strokes down his spine again. But once Kaname enters within sight of the mirror, pale skin bared and flawless, some of the uncertainty creeps back in.

"We're okay. You're doing well," Yuuki reminds him, cupping his cheek and turning his gaze to watch her instead. "Can you show Kaname how far you've come?"

A light of pride enters his eyes, and Zero dips his hand, the tips of his fingers resting in the crease of thigh and groin, still resolutely not brushing any part of his female genitals but so much closer than when they started.

"That's my brave, sweet boy," Kaname praises, folding his legs underneath him and settling beside Yuuki. "Can I hold you as we sit?"

"Yes, if you want," Zero replies with the slight uncertainty that's underlain all their interactions since Cross' house.

"I want nothing more," Kaname assures him, nosing their Consort's throat, and whisk Zero into his arms, grasp neither loose nor constraining.

Zero leans back, out of habit resting his weight against his partner, and Kaname's expression turns delighted.

"I meant it, you know," Zero mutters stubbornly, chin touching his chest. "I really do care about you. Just not the way you want."

Time for Yuuki's surprise. She leans in and pats Kaname's shoulder. "I forgot the most important part when I told you about your job, Kaname. I use this time to work on my list of 'one thousand reasons I love Zero'. Since you're here now, you need your own list. And I'm not letting you steal my work, so go on." She makes a shooing motion. Springing this on Kaname is for his own good. If Kaname had time to think he'd come up with something polished and poetic, but Zero needs rough honesty more.

Zero seems rather bemused, and for the first time he has a smile hiding in the creases of his eyes.

Kaname watches the picture the three of them make in the mirror, resting his chin on Zero's shoulder. "Well, I hate to disappoint. Let me see…"

Don't screw this up, she urges him mentally.

"I think the first thing I admired about you, even before I loved you, was the way you held firm to your principles. I could not break you, and that is an exceptionally rare trait." Kaname holds Zero's gaze in the mirror, affectionately nudging Zero's temple with his cheek. "Your pureblood Ancestor was very similar."

"When you feel ready, will you tell me more about her?" Zero ventures.

"Whatever you wish," Kaname promises, arms tightening around Zero's waist. "You know, I never meant to fall in love with you - I fought against it with everything I had. I think when I realized
how you were kind even to your enemies, how little you enjoyed hurting anyone, my animosity began to fail."

And so it goes for another half hour. Yuuki feels like rubbing her hands together and laughing madly. She doesn't imagine that she's solved any of their problems - nothing between Zero and Kaname is ever *that* easy. But a stepping stone, a starting point...perhaps she can give them that.

Chapter End Notes

I take full responsibility for any broken hearts. Please accept this complimentary pack of tissues and my condolences.

Shoshana is referring to her deal with Kaname and Yuuki. She has not told Zero that his alphas are searching for a way to extend his life. She relies on the Kurans for protection from the Senate, and as much as she likes Zero she isn't going to disobey their implied wish for discretion.

Next chapter: 'As your Nature Demands', for real this time. We finally get to the spring court!
In the way of all things one would rather avoid, the spring Jeweled Court arrives in a rush, far sooner than Zero would wish. The fights will be brutal, and not just because of the scorn his barrenness has earned.

Shoshana has regained enough strength to attend, and Zero knows that without Ouri's protection the Court will tear her apart. He's not about to stand aside and let that happen, though it will certainly earn him more enemies. Takuma will lend them what aid he can, but their intent is to make him the de facto Head Consort. Zero has insisted that if necessary, Takuma must leave them to fend for themselves to make himself a more acceptable authority figure. Reluctant but knowing what's practical, Takuma has agreed.

The night before the Court, Zero jerks awake in the middle of the day, restless from anticipation and overheated by the tangle of bodies that are his spouses. It's easy for the Hunter to slide out from underneath the sheets without waking either of them.

Kuran is sleeping in the middle, as he has since Cross' house - true sleep, insensate to the world. He sleeps almost as much as Yuuki now, recovering from his daily emotional discord, and taking the center position seems to steady him. Yuuki and Zero realized quickly that his episodes are less frequent when he has significant non-sexual intimacy and physical contact, and have worked out ways to satisfy his need, keeping Kuran in a more balanced frame of mind.

Both Zero and Yuuki have noticed Kuran's mental state improving since Kuran joined them during Zero's touch sessions, and Zero has felt comfortable enough to invite him back more than once. It's his peace gesture, an apology and a silent attempt to show Kuran that just because Zero doesn't love him they can still be close.

And truthfully, it's also because Zero is curious. Hearing their relationship explained through Kuran's eyes fascinates him. He wants to understand what made Kuran relinquish his hate. What mysterious thing Kuran sees in him that could drive him to the edge of madness. And each new session, held in his husband's arms with Kuran's voice in his ear, Zero thinks he may be starting to grasp it, just a little.

Zero tucks the blankets around Kuran's body, checks to make sure Yuuki is breathing peacefully, and slips silently out of the bedroom.
Deciding he's too unsettled to sleep, Zero snatches up his lightest silk robe, wrapping himself in its voluminous folds for propriety's sake, and journeys to the Consort's suite. He paces for a few minutes in the courtyard, trailing his hand in the cold fountain. But the afternoon sun makes the courtyard stones emanate heat, and soon Zero ducks back inside, trying to cool off.

The residential palace is mostly silent at this hour, the servants still abed and only the guards on their rounds passing through the halls. Zero decides against going back to sleep, mind already energized and alert even with so little rest, and occupies himself instead with some paperwork he's been putting off, hoping to lull himself into further dreams.

To no avail - soon he puts aside his pen, and wanders through his suite, shedding his robe on the back of a chair in the dining room. Passing through his bedroom, he goes into his bathroom, intending to soak in the tub - but pauses, looking at the door on the opposite wall which is nearly always closed. On a whim, Zero goes inside.

The windowless nesting den is pleasantly clean-smelling and cool, empty except for the massive bed - dwarfing the one in the master suite - covered in countless cushions and fabrics, just as Zero remembers from the few times he'd looked inside. Reminiscent of the room's name, the bed is sunk slightly below floor level, with the ground forming a shallow lip around the edges. Zero's toes sink into the thick rugs, and he wiggles them, melancholy hitting him. This room's very existence is a rebuke - an omega's nesting den that Zero may never use if he can't manage to force his body into heat. Feeling his face harden, Zero spins on his heel and shuts the door with unnecessary force.

The maids are startled to find Zero watching the sunset from his sitting room window, bare arms crossed and a thunderstorm in his eyes. They bring him the pale blue formal costume chosen for him and a tray with an early breakfast. Zero falls on the food like a starving wolf, eyes the garments critically, and asks a hastily woken Sasaki if there's anything else he can wear.

The head maid takes a lingering look at Zero, gauging his current volatile mood, and disappears into Zero's bottomless closet. She returns with an armful of tissue-wrapped fabric, and shakes out each individual piece with solemn ceremony.

The whole outfit is colored a rich, deep indigo, which attracts Zero immediately. The undergarments are deceptively plain, with only a scattering of gold embroidery, but the loose trousers and long-sleeved, fitted underdress both emit an understated elegance that bespeaks quality.

Only the cross-collared outer robe bears any significant ornament. The chest and wide, draping omega sleeves are embossed with a shining gold fishscale pattern, and a kirin with the same golden scales gallops on the skirts. The shawl is woven of thin, sheer shot silk that shifts silver-gold in the light, and matches a sash of the same gauzy silk. Paired with the costume is a heavy gold necklace made of triangular pieces arranged to point outward, reminding Zero of arrowheads, and a lapis consort's headpiece to match, its jutting points like a spiked crown.

"I'll wear this one, Sasaki-san" Zero tells the Head Maid, feeling pleased, his restlessness appeased for the moment. She bows, leaving him alone to change into the first few layers.

His maids are putting the last few touches on his costume when Zero feels the two pureblood auras down the hall beginning to stir. Dismissing the women, he avoids his spouses by hurrying to the Senate palace, a deep-rooted stubbornness animating him. He feels fresh, focussed, and he doesn't need his overbearing alphas hovering and directing.

In plain mourning white, Shoshana meets him with the quiet, grim humor of the condemned. Reflecting her changed circumstances, her simple hoseki is a plain silver chain with a single white
quartz dangling on her forehead, instead of a consort's circlet like the one Zero wears. She must notice Zero hasn't been scent marked by his alphas, but follows without comment when Zero offers his arm for support.

With her fragile health in mind, the two omegas are traveling by car. Just as they're helped into the back seat, Zero sends one of Shoshana's attendants to his spouses with word they're leaving early. He's still stubbornly reluctant to see them, and unwilling to analyze the impulse while the Court looms.

When they arrive, Zero leaves his phone behind him on the car seat, blinking with unread messages.

As early as they are, the two Consorts have the meeting hall almost to themselves. Only Ilesanmi's team has already arrived; Zero nods to her politely, and receives the same gesture in return.

When Shoshana is directed to a seat among the common omegas, Zero makes a nuisance of himself until the host lays a third place at the Consort's table and Zero helps her frail form sit. Still spoiling for a fight but placated for the moment, the Hunter forces himself into his own chair and into stillness, wrathful air keeping the arriving omegas gossiping and staring at a distance.

But no distance is great enough to stop his power, or to insulate him from the cruel rumors. The whispers flow into his ears, no matter how silent or hidden, and all Zero can do is listen.

*Does he expect us to respect him, barren as he is? He's humiliated his alphas and their allies - why I'd never show my face in public again!*  

*Why is she still there - the two of them thinking themselves above us, what a joke!*  

*Can you just imagine that slut waiting and waiting to come into season, and then realizing he can't? Oh, I wish I could have seen his face.*  

*Bitch finally got what he deserved. I can't believe Shirabuki-sama's blood was wasted on him...*  

*I always knew that dirty cunt would be a failure. A fake. Poor Kuran-sama and Kuran-hime. I'd love to 'console' them, if you know what I mean...*  

*Zero's hands tighten on the arms of his chair, and his jaw clenches until he fears his teeth might crack. The omegas do little to hide their glances and scorn, brazen before his certain loss of face, and Zero can read exclusion in the way they avoid the Consort's table.*  

*Zero wishes he could match Shoshana's apathy - if not for her widow's robes and the lines of illness in her face, he could tell no difference from her eye or comportment.*  

Not everyone respects their isolation. Abe soon slinks up to sink his fangs in. He smells weakness, seeking a chance to humiliate his former superior, and revenge for his last meeting with Zero.

*Zero's lips curve upward at the memory. Proving his virginity to the Court means nothing compared to his skipped cycle, but damn it if wasn't satisfying. Kuran, that bastard, knows precisely when to drive the knife.*  

Shoshana remains immovable and indifferent, perfect composure holding firm.

"I was sorry to hear, Kiryuu-sama, that you won't be holding any celebration soon," Abe sneers, gaze lingering significantly on Zero's abdomen. "Looks like Ichijo-sama's baby will need to play with someone else's child."
Abe always deals in low insults. Zero knows this, and yet the mocking remembrance of their last encounter is almost too much for his temper. "It's no trouble. Azai-san's child is due in July. I'm sure you've heard that the child has been promised as my wife's shadow."

There's the jealousy Zero was hoping for - Abe's nostrils flare and his lips press together; he wants the prestige of a Shadow contract for himself. Stung, the omega switches targets, offering a shallow smile. "We were all surprised to see you here, Shoshana-san."

"Consort," Zero interrupts. "She is Consort Shoshana to you."

Abe affects distress. "But Kiryuu-sama, she is hardly a Consort now that her husband is dead!"

Shoshana flinches. "Until she marries again, she is Consort Shoshana, and you will speak to her with the proper title," Zero disagrees, voice soft and low. Whatever Abe sees in Zero's eyes makes the omega hastily agree, muttering insincere agreements and apologies.

"One more thing," Zero says, intuition knifing through him white-hot. "During her stay at Rosehill, Shoshana has been teaching me the history of the Jeweled Court. After all, I ought to know everything about my subordinates, shouldn't I?"

Abe sneers again, not understanding Zero's drift.

The Hunter smiles, slow and mysterious. "In the future, you will all find me far better informed regarding personal matters." Zero places emphasis on the last words, and leaves the implication plain. Shoshana's mouth curves upward too.

Zero can almost see Abe's thoughts - what did Shoshana tell him, what does he know - and Abe hastily scuttles away to the nearest knot of gossiping omegas. By the time the Court opens everyone will hear the rumors, and everyone will be wondering the same things. The vicious satisfaction is poor salve for Zero's wounds, but he contents himself with what he can.

Shoshana lightly touches his sleeve. "You've been through enough. I'm not letting them have you," Zero answers, scanning the crowd, already intuiting her reserve.

Fondness crinkles the corners of her eyes. "I know you well enough that I will not try to convince you of the difficulties of your choice. But I want to thank you nonetheless."

He offers her a wan smile, but the encounter has set his teeth on edge. He remains on his guard; there will be many more such attacks.

Other omegas drift up to test him, some probing and cautious, others with sharp voices coated in poison. Sly, false condolences to Shoshana, two-faced reassurances to Zero. Zero ripostes with pointed allusions to the secrets Shoshana's taught him - hidden infidelities, old grudges, thefts and betrayals - and they draw back.

It makes him feel dirty. Zero's constitution abhors the need for these underhanded moves. If Zero employs these tactics, how is he any different from them? But he has no choice. His opponents have multiplied; many undecided omegas have come out against him after his missed heat. Zero needs to neutralize as many enemies as possible before the Court itself, to make his enemies think twice before striking, to fear his retribution.
The Court hasn't even started, and Zero is already tired and frustrated and sick of being humiliated.

Takuma enters with great fanfare from the gathered omegas, a full six months pregnant and with his sash tied under his breasts to indicate his gravid state. Glowing and golden, he attracts an entourage full of flattery and lies, all seeking to curry favor. They trail along, grasping for his attention until he dismisses them with a few polite words and comes to Zero.

"Are you alright," the noble whispers, grasping Zero's wrist and smiling as though they're exchanging pleasantries. "Kaname called and said you left without a word this morning. I barely talked him out of storming here himself."

Irritation pricks at the reminder. Zero scowls. "I'm fine. Just wanted to be early."

Takuma looks as though he'd like to press, but remembers his audience and sighs. "Please call both of them during the break. They worry about you."

Grudgingly, Zero nods his assent, but he's saved from further guilt by a shift in the conversational tempo and a flurry of movement. The noon hour is dawning and the opening of the Court is at hand.

He should probably feel more nervous. He's facing another grueling test to prove himself.

Zero just feels angry.

He's sick of being forced to play these futile games, to hide and bend and make himself acceptable, to cater to the expectations of people he doesn't respect. Of trying to wrest the least scrap of politeness and acknowledgement from vampires who look down on him for his blood status and ancestry. Damn the lot of them - his wretched body decided he'd lost before he even walked in. So he's finished - finished trying to make them not-hate him, finished making their submission easy for them.

The Hunter leans back in his chair, and rests his chin on his first. He breathes out, counts to ten until the heat of his anger is banked. "I welcome all of you. The spring session of the Jeweled Court is now open."

In the back, Ilesanmi straightens, recognizing a Hunter's eyes in Zero's face.

"Before we start, let me make this very clear," Zero warns, narrowing his eyes. "During the year of mourning for Lord Ouri, you will all refer to Consort Shoshana by her proper title. Those who refuse disrespect the late Ouri-sama, the Senate, and the Kuran family."

Mutinous silence. His power has already picked out a few who intend to test Zero's resolution. Others are thinking twice, fearful of incurring the consequences Zero promises.

"That's all I have to say on the matter. Let's start the greeting ritual."

It's a farce. A mockery. Zero sees the cruel pleasure lighting the faces of those delighted with Zero's failure and Shoshana's fall, the dismissal of those who feel them worthless, the rudeness heaped upon those helpless to avenge it, the disgust of the ones who have always hated his Level D and Hunter roots, the indifference and disappointment of the monarchists, hurrying through the words since Zero's favor means nothing. The tea group omegas are a reprieve, but Noguchi's cool satisfaction as she performs a perfunctory bow wipes out any trace of reserve.

A knot forms under Zero's breastbone, each new offense displayed flayed open under his hypersensitive intuition. Like winding steel wire round and round a stony knot, the tangle grows,
irritation building to agitation. Zero seeks *mushin*; his search fails, self-discipline interrupted as some new barb lodges itself in his flesh.

Slow wrath diffuses through his veins like blood in water; his head goes still and quiet. During lunch, Zero picks at his food, anger stealing his appetite, frustrated by a desire to move and forced to be still.

He does not call Yuuki or Kaname during the break. The idea of hearing their voices galls him when he can taste this rage on his tongue. Takuma sends him disappointed looks; Zero ignores him. The noise, the crowd, the heat of the room - all wear at him. He can't settle. *Mushin* evades him still.

Underneath the table, Zero's nails dig into his palms when everyone begins returning to their seats. His face could be stone for all the expression he shows as he calls the afternoon session to order.

Both Shoshana and Takuma seem worried. Zero wishes he could reassure them, but he still can't submerge himself in *mushin* past the anger boiling under his skin.

A tumult of voices rises when he opens the floor to discussion. Without any real interest, he wonders which will win - their outrage that they can't drag Shoshana down to their level, or the chance to parade his failures in front of him.

"I really must protest, Kiryuu-sama!" A surprise - Hirono, one of the monarchist faction, rises to her feet, and her shout carries over the rest of the Court's noise.

"Protest what?" Zero asks, voice coming out perhaps a touch too sharp.

"This is highly irregular! Consort Shoshana cannot retain her title - it isn't proper, and goes against the rules of this body!"

Zero's jaw tightens. He needs to make an example of her, however much it turns his stomach. Shoving down his self-disgust, he leans back in his chair, letting the vicious red anger rise. "I'm surprised at you, Hirono-san. Given the low means through which you acquired your wealth, it seems a little hypocritical of you to object."

She blanches. "How dare you slander me without any evidence!"

"Is that what you think? You might be surprised what the resources of a pureblood family can uncover," Zero replies, his words too barbed too pass as casual. "I have a set of financial records in my possession belonging to the late Nagao-san that say otherwise."

The watchers titter. Hirono's tawdry ascension is a poorly-kept secret, but has never been officially confirmed - until now. They understand the message: Zero is aware of their scandals. The next omega who pushes him too far may find a less public secret exposed.

Zero narrows his eyes, sweeping his gaze across the Court. "There is no precedent for a Consort outliving their spouse - not since the most ancient Blood Wars. Therefore, I am making a new rule now, in the spirit of the decisions made by the Senate and the Kuran family. Consort Shoshana will be treated as a Consort until she bonds again. This is not up for discussion. You're welcome to air your protests if it makes you feel better."

And they do, at length, jealous and greedy as they are, wanting to pull down whoever stands above them. The Senate faction is pleased to have proof that Zero is ruining the Court's traditions. The monarchists, while they support Shoshana as a Consort, disapprove less vehemently for the same reasons.
Takuma makes a valiant attempt at smoothing tempers; Shoshana demurs to the intentions of her patrons, the Kuran family, and the protectors of her late husband's caste, the Senate.

Zero stews in silence, letting the omegas work themselves into a good frothing outrage. His hands twist restlessly beneath his sleeves. He feels stifled under all these layers. He wants to be elsewhere, wants above all else to go Hunting, to run in solitary freedom.

Finally, the outrage winds down, the omegas recognizing this matter is out of their hands. And now it's Zero's turn, as the person that made the loathed decision. Noguchi Sada rises, and her movement makes the room fall effortlessly quiet.

A pulse of bitter jealousy makes Zero's hands ball into fists, and he raises his head, the hard stone of anger in his throat not allowing words.

Noguchi shows every outward sign of respect, and that makes her words all the more hateful. "Our condolences on your missed cycle, Consort Kiryuu. Truly unfortunate. I know all of us were hoping that Kuran-sama and Kuran-hime might know the joy of a new child. But it seems that is not to be…"

The lancing pain is still fresh; Zero struggles to show none of it, intuition warning worse to come, balancing on the point of his perceptive clarity.

"But this does leave the Court with a problem. If Kiryuu-sama cannot come into season, he cannot trigger a heat. He cannot bond properly with Kuran-sama and Kuran-hime."

"That remains to be seen," Takuma interrupts, casting a glance at Zero. "A delayed cycle does not necessarily mean Consort Kiryuu is incapable of heat."

"Be we must, unfortunately, consider the possibility. I speak only out of concern, Consort Kiryuu - you must know that some of my fellows are still concerned about your ability to lead us if you never understand what it means to give birth to and raise a child."

"I recall," Zero manages, when Noguchi pauses expecting an answer.

She nods, a clever gleam in her black eyes. "If you were never able to enter heat, and therefore to bond your alphas, I am unsure if you would be able to properly claim the title of Head Consort. The Court might fall into chaos if you appeared to be nothing more than an official mistress."

The Court erupts in whispers; Takuma nearly objects, holding his tongue only because Zero grabs his wrist, sensing the protest will help nothing.

Noguchi isn't finished, talking over the noise until she has the Court's silence. "But the greater concern is Kuran-sama and Kuran-hime's comfort. The greatest joy of an alpha is union with an omega. If you can only enter heat sporadically, bonding you denies them that complete fulfillment." She lowers her voice, tone taking on a kindly, gentle air. "Perhaps it might be better if you declined to bond with them, in favor of an omega who can satisfy all their desires."

The blood pounds in Zero's ears. The words he has so often thought as he doubted himself hang in the air. His intuition reads the agreement of the room, the complete surety that all Noguchi says would be for the best.

"In another century, the Kurans can obtain the next omega that presents. The treaty can be preserved by having the marriage annulled and you can bind yourself to another significant alpha." Noguchi seems so reasonable, so sure. The Court scrambles to support her.
Zero's chair scrapes the floor with a loud shriek. He slams his hands on the table once he's on his feet, shocking the omegas into silence. He's shaking so hard he can't speak past the red haze of his rage, broken open and bleeding inside him. How dare they - how dare they try and take his husband and wife away from him! He wants to put his hands around Noguchi's throat and choke her, squeeze the life out of her and then make the rest of these spineless vampires bleed...

"Zero?" Takuma whispers at his elbow. The noble has gone white, and there is a trace of fear in his voice. "Are you...are you in season?"

Zero freezes. A quick glance at Shoshana reveals similar caution in her posture as she scents the air. The Hunter's weak nose can't find any difference in his smell, but the dry feverish flush he can feel in his cheeks tells him something in his body has changed.

Now recognized, the beast in his belly rises, and shakes free of its chrysalis, rampant nature fanning out in all its savage glory. As Zero's body welcomes adulthood and its mantle of copper-tinged hunger, the red haze suffuses him, sowing murderous whims in his blood.

The Hunter and the omega halves of him embrace one another, predators both, united in deadly purpose; Zero cannot see it, but they lend a sinuous, disconcerting fluidity to his movements, all his jagged pieces finally moving in harmony.

Zero watches the way his scent blossoms and spreads; each new row of watching omegas flinches and cringes as it sweeps over them, his scent a warning triggering their instinctive fear.

An unbonded omega is a supreme bait for any alpha who wishes to trigger their heat and claim them. Knowing both their own painful vulnerability and newborn allure, they rage wildly, leaving bloody destruction behind in their drive to defend themselves. There is nothing more dangerous than an omega in season, and no omega more dangerous than an unbonded maiden. Unstable, with no calming influence from a bondmate, a maiden omega's aggression is set to hair-trigger, inexperience making them twice as vicious.

Zero's gaze swings, weighs heavily on his gathered rivals. His lip curls, showing his fangs. These are his competitors? Soft, all of them, with blunted fangs and claws. It would take no more than a moment to tear out the throat of any one of them, like a hungry falcon loosed among shivering hens.

Raising his head, Zero feels his own power course in his veins, the pride of the strongest beast, the confidence of his desirability and repugnance of any chains. He wants to maim, to bite, to claw, to break free from this close room with too many strangers in it, but his rationality forces a tight rein on his instincts.

Shaking off his robe and shawl, Zero begins pacing through the rows, his beast savoring the fear and knowledge of their own weakness flowing in his wake. These omegas know intimately the waves of violence buffeting him, and fear any slip in his control. Yes, this will do...

"Perhaps we should end the Court early?" Takuma suggests with his eyes lowered submissively, proving himself the bravest one in the room. The noble need not fear - he is the brother of Zero's courting alphas, and no rival. Zero will protect him and his growing offspring with all his strength.

"I think not," Zero replies, fingers tapping at his thigh, twisting beneath his restlessness and urge to slaughter. "I won't have anyone claiming that I ran away, or cheated the Court a full session."

The room stays silent, disappointment and new terror keeping them silent.
"Come now," Zero says, voice halfway between purr and growl. "You all have so much to say
normally. We're not leaving until I've heard everything."

And for once, Zero gets what he wants. They don't dare antagonize him, and each mundane
announcement is made with the same terrified hesitation. Idly, he considers how many he could
kill before they could stop him; Zero may be a novice to the Court, but he is a masterful Hunter,
and his rivals remember it now. All eyes flick nervously toward him as he circles the room, beating
back his agitation, restless hands clenched on his upper arms to keep himself still.

Zero draws it out at his beast's urging. Let them remember this moment, when a greater predator
breathed on their necks and then turned away. They will hate him for it, but perhaps their fear will
paralyze them.

And they will never try to steal what belongs to him, ever again.

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Yuuki nudges Kaname's knee, reminding him to remain focused as the presentation drags on.

This strategy meeting with their business partners could not be rescheduled on such short notice,
not even when Kaname feels halfway to a breakdown. Shirabuki dealt enormous damage to their
holdings - the true extent of that damage is only now being fully realized - and plans must be
finalized for the trajectory of the recovery.

If Kaname were his normal self, he would be waist deep in the rebuilding process, challenging
himself to complete the recovery in the least time possible. Instead, his agile mind is replaying
every interaction he's had with Zero in the past week, trying to uncover his error. Zero didn't even
speak to them this morning. Didn't even let Yuuki touch him, let alone Kaname. Yuuki and Takuma
tried to convince Kaname it was the Court's influence, but Kaname's scarred, starving heart is not
appeased.

His phone vibrates for perhaps the third or fourth time in the last half-hour. Kaname shuts it off. It
is laborious enough to keep his attention centered in the present; additional distractions are not
needed as he struggles against the mire of his despair.

Despite his dear wife's efforts, Kaname knows outsiders are beginning to catch on to his mental
state. During tonight's meeting, it is vital that he appear sharp as ever; among their business
partners number many of Kaname's strongest allies, the monarchist faction's wealthiest and most
influential. Positive testimony from them would do much to counteract any rumors.

A stir echoes outside the room. Kaname ignores it, his attention eaten up by the effort it takes to
force himself to behave normally. Yuuki looks at the door curiously, as do a few other nobles. But
when the noise quiets they, too, turn themselves back to figures and projections.

Then the door swings noiselessly wide, and Zero prowls through. Kaname finds the breath stolen
from his throat - he has seen his boy like this only in scattered moments beneath moonlight when
Zero holds silver death in his hands. Kaname lacks the poetry in his soul to do Zero justice - can
only think in metaphors of sleek-coated leopards padding on noiseless paws.

Zero is lean and slim in his underskirts, deep blue with a flash of gold, and scandalously bare-
headed - those pale, deadly fingers flexing on air like they wish to wrap around throats and dagger
handles. His lilac eyes flash, flicker from target to target, settling nowhere, staring out from his
flushed face beneath tousled hair. Wildness lies coiled in the lines of his body, the compressed
strength of his frame stoked to readiness. The carved alabaster curve of his throat bewitches as he
tosses his head, and the fine bones of each delicate ankle tease with a glimpse at every nimble step.
And the way he carries himself! The beast beneath Zero's skin knows he is deadly, knows that no eye can fall upon him and not desire him with every fibre in their soul. And yet Zero remains himself. All the wily intelligence of the Hunter gleams in his eye, unspoiled by the blind instinct twisting beneath his skin. The the icy crust of reason reigns over the beast lurking below - the omega in all its fury leashed by steely will.

There are no words worthy of the savage beauty before Kaname - it assaults, it blinds, it snares all who see it into obsession. Kaname feels as one awakening from a long, dull dream in grey, kindled incandescent with how he burns.

Shying away from the alphas seated around the table, Zero shivers, as though shaking something off.

A fragrance falls around them - scent masking charms, provides Kaname's newly agile brain - urgent, heavy sweetness and heightened, sharp spice, familiar complexity given a new narcotic potency. The scent reaches out and presses bare fingers into the primal parts of the pureblood's brain.

His skin pebbles - Kaname indulges himself, opening his mouth and drawing the air over his palette. His eyes roll with pleasure and his belly grows hot; the alpha howls, shaking off its chains. An unbonded omega in season - their omega. Their beautiful silver mate.

Yuuki's eyes flash scarlet, echoing the greedy, possessive rumble in his own chest. All now becomes clear. Kaname has made no offense. His sweet boy is only behaving naturally, avoiding contact with any alphas - many omegas show such symptoms before their cycle can be detected.

Zero watches beneath lowered lids, fixing the two purebloods at the head of the table with a feverish intensity, a challenge in the stiffness of his spine. Not taking his gaze from either of his spouses, he begins running his hand along the back of each occupied chair, bare skin almost touching the foreign alpha.

Mate is almost being scented right in front of them! Yuuki snarls, the loud sound improbable coming from her small frame.

The other alphas in the room are universally frozen, trying not to be the one to draw the Kurans' ire, leaning forward as much as possible to avoid the fatal offense.

Satisfaction enters Zero's expression. "I've never been to the business offices. I thought I would surprise you."

Peering around the doorway, an apologetic Takuma mouths 'Sorry.'

Kaname would shrug, except every mote of his attention is fixated on the agonizingly short distance between the tip of Zero's fingers and the back of another alpha's head. The muscles in his shoulders bunch beneath his suit with the effort of keeping still.

The rational part of Kaname distantly analyzes the situation. Zero is in season, and he is following his instinct to taunt his courting alphas, to test their strength and dedication.

The less rational part would kill at the crook of Zero's little finger, happy to give Zero a tithe of blood if he desires. Kaname's allies will be difficult to replace given their stature, but Zero is his beloved, and his precious boy may have anything he wishes.

Even gripped by instinct, Zero is too gentle to want anyone harmed. He deigns to let his hand fall unsullied back to his side and steps away.
The room visibly relaxes. A few of the relieved alphas are even amused - common wisdom says the wilder an omega while in season, the wilder they are being bedded in heat.

Kaname flashes his fangs, advising his subordinates to wipe away those thoughts, and the alphas school themselves back to politeness.

"I saw your offices," Zero says innocently.

Kaname's cock throbs. His office will be blanketed under the thick pheromone cloud of omega-in-season; now Kaname must sit and work teased by Zero's invisible hand. The very idea excites him, but they must tread carefully, carefully. Here is where courtships are made or broken, in the final dance between instinct and reason.

"Your fellows must have made you quite jealous," Kaname remarks, lacing his fingers together to stop the urge to touch his lovely Hunter. "But you needn't fear, kitten. If I wanted any of them, I would have simply reached out and taken."

"We have eyes only for you," Yuuki promises, licking her teeth as though chasing the taste of Zero's scent in her mouth. "Only ever for you."

Zero tosses his head, mood quieting. He eyes them all suspiciously - omegas in season rarely venture outside their territory. No doubt he is feeling exposed and prickly in the presence of so many alphas. "Don't bring strangers into my house," he says, and flies from the room.

Takuma makes brief eye contact with Kaname, and follows. Kaname owes his second for acting as Zero's guardian; Takuma's pregnancy and incompatibility with the Kurans makes him an inoffensive companion during Zero's cycle.

Pinching the bridge of his nose, Kaname breathes out, head clearing now that his husband's distracting scent is not so close. Had Zero come into season in the middle of the Jeweled Court? Surely a first in the Court's history; Kaname would give much to have been able to watch the chaos.

From a personal standpoint, now is the absolute worst time for Zero's cycle to happen. Zero's trust in Kaname and Yuuki is at its lowest ebb, and their relationship is in tatters. In the current climate, they risk failing to bond.

For an omega, going into season causes a violent repulsion toward all alphas, a defense against attempts to forcibly bond them. They will suffer neither touch nor scent, and loathe even the sight of an alpha. Instinct incites them to drive off any over-bold suitor who approaches - always bloodily, sometimes lethally - and to jealously guard their territory and freedom. The savagery of such expulsions was legend - alphas gutted or maimed, torn to pieces and bled dry. You dealt with an omega in season at your own risk, as that fool Shoda learned.

An omega's rational mind could restrain those instincts either from fondness or fear. Thus the institution of courtship, meant to allow a heat to be triggered as easily as possible. The familiarity of courtship moderates the omega's instinctive rejection, allowing courting alphas to approach closer and be tolerated to some extent.

But courtship was not a guarantee. Sometimes even accepted suitors were attacked. A few had even been murdered. If the omega doubted, if the fear or fondness ran shallow...it had happened. And with Zero's rejection of his love, Kaname very much fears it will happen again. Zero's display tonight may have been for Yuuki alone.
"Gentlemen and ladies, we may need to reschedule," Kaname says, wrenching himself to the present. "I believe my wife and I will be otherwise occupied for the foreseeable future."

Zero finds being in season shockingly pleasant.

Kuran had been right; the violence sits simmering in his blood, but Zero is still in his right mind and capable of refusing if he chooses. Granted, the omega's instincts seem to strip away his inhibitions, but all the omega wants to do is eat, sleep, patrol its territory, and kill invading vampires - perfectly acceptable to Zero's Hunter-bred sensibilities. And if the omega occasionally drives Zero to embarrassing lengths, well, he can't currently feel any shame about it.

For example, his nesting den. Zero nestles deeper into his bedding, crooning happily. Zero likes his nice, soft nest and his pleasant shadowy den. It's insulated and quiet and good for napping. He's filled the recessed bed with extra blankets and pillows he stole from the empty guest bedrooms, so the hole is filled nearly to the top with thick duvets and luxurious cotton sheets. The walls enclosing his bed are lined in springy padding that makes his nest feel like a fluffy cocoon. Zero can hide in the bed's hollow or prop his head and shoulders on the raised shelf around the edge to look out.

Best of all, it only smells like him! Zero doesn't want his nest to smell like stinky alpha. He scowls and touches the grip of Bloody Rose, hidden under his favorite squishy pillow. Zero never noticed before, but alphas smell really awful, like teenage boys wearing too much cheap body spray. He can't imagine how he stood in a whole room full of them without snapping and carving a swath of destruction - he must have been really, really jealous! Or maybe it was because he hadn't fully entered his cycle yet?

Anyway, Zero doesn't think he could do it again. He knows he's supposed to trigger a heat and bond, but right now he can't imagine suffering the company of a single alpha, not even Yuuki. The smell alone raises his hackles, and spotting an alpha inspires immediate rage. The thought of mating with one is utterly revolting - they'd have to kill him first.

Zero flings himself lazily into his pile of soft things and yawns. The Hunter reaches out with his senses, marking the nearest vampire auras - all clear. Now is a good time for a nap...

The soft breeze tickling the grassy meadow cools his blood. Zero puts his head in his hands, the haze lifted from his brain for the first time in a week. But it hasn't vanished - Zero feels it lingering in the margins of his consciousness, reminding him that when he wakes it will fall heavily upon him again.

Blood and ash, he's in season. Fear overtakes him. "What am I going to do?"

"All will be well in the end," the Ancestor of the Hunters promises him, gentle with sympathy as she reaches out to him in entreaty. "Kaname and Yuuki will not let harm come to you."

Zero shakes his head back and forth, speechless. He'd been prepared back in December, but to have this sprung on him suddenly - what if he fails again, what if he can't trigger a heat, what if he doesn't bond properly - oh god, what if he gets pregnant?

His breathing thins and quickens; anywhere but dreamspace, he'd be hyperventilating.

The Ancestress, alarmed, takes Zero's shoulders and looks into his face. "Be at peace, child. Whatever comes, I know you will meet it with dignity and strength." She pulls him to her side, and rocks him, humming. "Hush, you are not alone. Those who love you will help you."
Zero quiets, and his mind empties, fear petering out like water from a broken dish.

"Is there something wrong with me?" he asks quietly, the words plaintive. "Is my body broken?" He hesitates. "You said - you said my children would be marvels. But everyone says I'm probably…” He stops, throat closing up. Even if Zero can't allow himself his wish, deep in his heart he wanted a family.

Sorrow fills the Ancestress' eyes, wet with the shine of tears. "Oh, Zero. I'm so sorry. Perhaps I was wrong. When you performed the ritual to summon me at your wedding, I was able to perceive your body with great clarity. Everything inside you is perfectly formed, I promise." Her brow furrows, but she does not look away. "I have thought much on this. The culprit may be your human blood - your hybrid's body may lack the instructions to make your omega biology function properly."

"Oh." Zero sits and considers this. He's vampire enough to violate his body and ruin his life, but not give him anything he really wants. Zero puts a hand over his eyes until the twisting in his chest ebbs.

Then, because he has never shied from shedding his own blood, he says, "Marvels - all children are miraculous to their parents, but you meant something different when you used that word." His intuition weighs on him, and Zero turns toward her, impelled by a rush of understanding. "You thought my children would have been different somehow."

The Ancestor of the Hunters stills, placing her hands in her lap as she gathers her thoughts, and studies Zero's face before she replies. "I did. You are unique, Zero: a surviving cursed twin and a purebred Hunter from a Thousand Red Peony bloodline, who is also a stable Level D that has consumed four purebloods. The world has never seen anything like you before, and likely never will again. To cross your Hunter blood with the most powerful pureblood line - from a scientist’s perspective, observing the outcome would have been fascinating."

"Why would that matter, since we owe our abilities to your pure blood? Zero asks, his own scholar's curiosity piqued.

The Ancestress smiles and holds up one hand, palm facing inward. "The pureblood Ancestors were designed with the best knowledge and technology of pre-Cataclysm humanity. They are limitlessly powerful, near-perfect beings who can marry their siblings because their DNA has no errors, and it copies itself perfectly forever. But that perfection is stasis. Their bloodlines remain identical to their first Ancestors. And the long lifespans of their mixed descendants mean that lesser vampires also have few opportunities for their genes to change. The vampire race as a whole is genetically stagnant."

Then she holds up her other hand, palm facing the first but held apart so space remains between them. "The Hunters are the opposite. They take in compatible new blood from humanity, and over hundreds of generations natural selection has pushed them to change, to become more efficient, and more adapted to the Hunt. The Hunters of today are far, far more powerful than their progenitors. Your eyes, for example," she says, touching Zero's temple, "are capable of night vision that is twice as good as a normal human's. Most intriguing of all is the thrifty Hunter metabolism. You survived for thirty years without blood, Zero. You pushed beyond the limits of what was considered possible, because of your Hunter ancestry."

The Ancestress of the Hunters joins her two hands together, interlacing the fingers. "So what happens when humanity's artificial perfection meets nature's messy, volatile efficiency, when the most powerful Hunter line joins the most powerful pureblood family? I cannot deny that I would be curious."
Then the Ancestress takes Zero's hands in her own, cupping them together like she's trying to shield him. "I tell you this because you have asked me and I will not lie to you. But please don't take it to heart. Do not dwell on the idea. My curiosity is nothing compared to your stability and comfort, and your worth is not changed by your ability to carry children. So enjoy your present happiness with your spouses who love you. Do whatever you think is best for yourself, Zero."

They both know her plea is useless. This knowledge will only deepen Zero's sense of failure. "Thank you for telling me," Zero says, then shivers like a phantom hand has run down his back.

The meadow begins to dissolve at the edges, and the beast rushes back into his blood. His senses jangle - danger! Alpha! Kill! Claw! Fight!

And Zero roars awake, leaping up in a single ripple as he launches himself out of the room.

Steward Inukai's voice is smooth on the surface, with just a hint of hysteria beneath. "Consort Kiryuu is on the roof again, Kuran-hime."

"Again?" Yuuki repeats, the word cracking in the middle under her disbelief. "How does he keep getting up there?"

*Mate is scary and good at killing things?* offers her adoring alpha.

The Steward's eyes show white around the edges. "We aren't completely certain, but one of the gardners believes he saw Kiryuu-sama climbing the wall bare-handed."

Kaname, the traitor, laughs, and leans back in his chair with a smile still curving his lips.

Crossing her arms, Yuuki glares at him and squashes down her alpha. "It's dangerous, Kaname!"

"No more dangerous than fighting a Level E," her husband replies, waving his book. "I'm impressed - that climb must be at least three stories high."

Yuuki narrows her eyes at him.

*Mate will give us such terrifying babies,* chirps her happy alpha. Yuuki sighs in defeat, and slumps down in the empty chair beside Kaname's.

Kaname chuckles, but takes a more conciliatory tone. "We really should have expected Zero's behavior to have some quirks."

A hysterical laugh bubbles up in her throat. Most omegas stick close to their nesting den when they're in season; a few even develop a severe fear of open spaces and refuse to leave their houses at all. Zero has spent the last week ranging over *the entire valley* and its surrounding area - kilometers of forested, rough terrain - popping up like a ghost in unexpected places and terrifying the servants with his ability to sneak up on them. He's also run circles around every watcher or familiar dispatched to keep an eye on him.

Besides his athleticism and ridiculous stealth training, Zero's been using his Hunter senses to cement his status as the scariest omega alive. Zero can remotely track every vampire in Rosehill, which means the few alphas employed at Rosehill have been physically unable to leave the staff quarters without Zero chasing them back inside like a dog treeing a squirrel. Even Yuuki and Kaname have needed to temporarily relocate to the Senate palace because Zero wouldn't come near his nesting den when he could sense them sleeping down the hall.
On the plus side, Zero's ability to avoid other vampires has prevented any opportunity for hormone-driven violence. Yuuki is glad; Zero wouldn't want to hurt anyone because of his vampire instincts.

But her omega's elusiveness also means Yuuki has not even spotted Zero's shadow in days. 'Hunger' is too weak a word for Yuuki's desire to see Zero. She aches to see him, to confirm with her own eyes instead of second-hand reports that Zero is okay. But her beast is adamant, seizing her by the throat when her thoughts drift to seeking Zero out. They must wait, and let mate come to them, or mate will be angry and run.

"Does Zero seem well? Is he still eating enough?" Yuuki inquires anxiously, turning back to Steward Inukai.

The steward relaxes, back on easier ground. "Consort Kiryuu's appetite is robust. The kitchen clears every two hours to give Kiryuu-sama the chance to eat, just as you ordered."

She breathes a sigh of relief; a healthy omega is supposed to gorge himself on as much food as possible. An omega's time in season is a trial of their ability to support a child - a test to determine if it's worth risking a heat. Only if the omega is healthy and secure, with plenty of food and blood available will they have the slightest possibility of entering a heat.

Kaname chuckles again. "Thank you, Steward. That will be all."

Steward Inukai bows and shows himself out while Kaname rises to his feet and dusts his slacks. "I'll be downstairs on a conference call with the inner circle. Should we succeed, I want to have contingency plans in place."

"Of course," Yuuki murmurs, and lifts up on her toes for a kiss, before she turns back to her work.

Kaname has been his old self since Zero crashed their business meeting like angry sex on legs - he's poised, he's strategic, cunning, back in control of himself and everyone around him. Yuuki suspects the idea of possessing Zero in the most essential way possible is suppressing his despair. Only time will tell if the old demons return, but Yuuki is holding out hope that bonding Zero may soothe the worst of Kaname's abandonment issues.

Establishing a successful bond will tie the three of them together for Zero's lifetime, unbreakable and undeniable. Zero will never, ever be able to leave Yuuki and Kaname after that. They will be under his skin, in his blood, the most intimate delights of his body keyed to them alone.

Yuuki shivers, her skin prickling with want, her pureblood nature stirring under her skin with the soul-deep hunger that never fades, never lessens. Yuuki needs to see Zero soon, or she fears her own breed of madness.

Like her thoughts conjured him, the primal part of her brain yanks her head up, toward the door - and there is Zero.

He is hanging back in the doorway, jaw clenched and trembling, warring instincts fighting against staying still in the presence of an alpha. But his eyes are clear, no matter the wildness in them, and Zero does not move his gaze away from her.

Yuuki drinks in the sight of him, heart singing Zero Zero Zero and beating so hard she can feel her pulse thunder in her throat. He looks healthy, and unharmed; long-held fear eases from her mind.

God, he's so beautiful. He's wearing a loose nightgown, modest as a maiden with every bit of skin covered from neck to ankle, but she can't tear her eyes away.
Yuuki's alpha has drawn up quiet in her chest, a watchful intent coiled tight, waiting for some sign. Yuuki breathes in, the now familiar heaviness in Zero's scent flooding her nose - and a new note underneath lights her body on fire.

Zero's eyes darken, and he stalks forward a few steps. He moves like water, and his hips swing in a way that makes Yuuki's mouth water and her cock stand up.

"I was slick between my thighs when I woke up tonight," he murmurs, head held high as he studies her. "I've been tossing and turning in my nest for hours, fighting the desire to kill you. Try not to make any sudden moves."

Yuuki swallows. There is one final condition for an omega to surrender to a heat; they must prove to their bodies they possess a high-quality mate as a sire. Which means they need a good fuck while fighting the desire to murder the alpha fucking them. A touchy process, to satisfy an omega's lust while they're still enraged by any alpha's advance. Any mistakes and she'll have claws in her throat.

"I've missed you," she says as Zero circles closer, keeping still and relaxed in her chair. She will gladly risk her blood for any glimpse of him now.

Zero smiles, the gentle one that's her favorite, and her heart flutters. "I've missed you too. I love you, Yuuki. Now stay absolutely still, and don't try to touch me."

Her cheeks color, and she nods eagerly, gripping the arms of her chair.

Zero chuckles, his omega's instincts temporarily driven back by his will, and darts forward with the same sensual grace he showed before, quick hands divesting Yuuki of her tights and underwear.

A teasing fingertip runs down the length of Yuuki's cock, collecting the fluid beading there, and she gasps, hands tightening.

Tensing and baring his teeth, Zero flees back to a safe distance as he collects himself, the omega flaring in his blood. He fights against his beast's urge to violence and repugnance of alpha scent, breathing hard and pacing the length of the room.

Yuuki waits, hardly even breathing. The alpha is a stream of praise and entreaties in her head - come here pretty mate, clever mate, we won't hurt mate, come let us mount your sweet hole, we'll be so good to you, get you so very round and heavy -

Slowly, Zero approaches her again. He's nearly vibrating with tension, shoulders and back stiff. "Sorry," he apologizes, "I'm still figuring this out."

Trying to project harmlessness, Yuuki relaxes into her chair and nods. In the books she's read, the first mounting is the hardest.

Zero sighs. "Thank you. Stay just like that, okay?"

Yuuki would respond, but then Zero pulls up his nightgown and he's not wearing any underwear - okay Yuuki, don't come before he's even touched you, breathe. She hasn't made love to Zero in weeks, and here he is wandering around their house all open and ready, with the folds of his cunt shiny-slick and his blushing cock straining against his belly. Guess that explains the loose clothing, her hysterical mind points out.

The omega's weight settles in her lap; wood shrieks as Yuuki clenches the chair's arms and struggles not to touch him. She can feel the folds of his pussy sliding damply over her groin and
she sobs because she wants him and it hurts and he's so close and she - Can't. Touch. Him.

His hands settle around her upper arms, nails biting into the meat. Zero's chewing his lip and fidgeting, ill at ease and trying to figure out what to do. He's never been the aggressor - it's always his spouses who consummate their union, spearing him again and again as soon as he spreads his thighs. Their sweet, innocent boy.

Swallowing, Yuuki wets her lips, and the motion catches Zero's eye.

A spark of killing intent lights, and his nails bite more deeply into her arms. "Don't move," Zero reminds her, tipping his head back and taking a deep breath. Then he rises up on his knees, and his hips circle, fruitlessly searching for the head of her cock. He whines, the sound high with frustration and an edge of real threat.

"Zero," Yuuki whispers as calmly as she can. "Do you need help?"

Zero's head whips down, and he growls. His hips jerk again, his belly rubbing against her breasts and grinding his wet slit fruitlessly along her shaft.

She twitches, alpha instincts urging her to just pull her mate down on her cock and claim him. "Zero, I know you don't want to touch yourself. Let me just…"

"No! I want - I want to do it," Zero insists stubbornly. "I want to be with you more than anything. Let me show you." Somehow Zero claws his instincts down, taking one hand off Yuuki's arm and fitting the head of her cock against his hole with an urgent cant of his hips.

Yuuki's hips rise reflexively, and she groans because Zero hasn't taken a cock in weeks and she can barely part his cunt he's so tight. Like he's virgin again, she thinks furtively, and feels a savage joy in her belly as her cock pulses.

"I love you, Yuuki," Zero pants, shoulders rolling under the strain of forcing his channel to sheathe her cock. His pink walls grip her like a vise, and her sheer girth must burn and ache but he keeps taking her, doggedly sitting on every millimeter until he's stuffed with it, choking on it, the bulge of her soft knot kissing his pink lips like a promise.

They can't move fast. Zero's body refuses to part with Yuuki's cock now that she's embedded the whole length of it in his belly. He's so tight it makes her see stars; she breaks both chair arms with the first stroke inside him, never withdrawing but making shallow little thrusts, unwilling to leave Zero empty or separate from him.

Yuuki regrets that Zero's instincts won't allow a kiss, but their breaths fan across each other's cheeks like the brush of lips.

"Yuuki, I'm hungry," her omega demands, a dazed look in his eyes as their hips grind together. Zero's close, his cunt tightening in a familiar fluttering rhythm.

Baring her throat to him is all it takes for Zero to strike, a sloppy bite that spatters blood on his chin.

Yuuki tears her dress as her hands fist in the material, Zero's greedy mouth finally on her throat. Her hips arch and she hilts against her mate's womb, jetting semen in long spurts into his most secret depths. Her world narrows down to those two points - the rush of blood from her throat and the gush of seed into her mate's cunt.

Long minutes pass before she comes back to herself, Zero clenching and rippling around her as he
uses her cock to reach his own peak. Yuuki aches to hold him, but settles for resting a protective hand on the curve of his hip, hoping the motion is too small for him to notice.

Zero's hands shift on her upper arms, and his back sags as he comes to rest in her lap, instincts abating for a few moments. His expression has relaxed too, the first coupling taking some of the fury out of him. "Did I hurt you?"

"Not at all," Yuuki assures him, wishing she could cup his cheek for comfort. "I'm more worried about you. Did you bleed at all?"

"I can't tell," he confesses, wincing as he shifts on her cock. "You're really big. Maybe."

Yuuki can't stop the proud grin taking over her face.

Zero huffs. "I'm going to need to go soon. The omega won't let me stay."

Her face falls. "You told us you don't trust Kaname. Are you two going to be okay?"

Zero doesn't answer, silent as he levers himself off Yuuki's cock except for a grunt of pain. He staggers, bow-legged, as he touches the floor, and lets his nightgown fall and cover the mess leaking between this thighs. One last look back, and then he's limping away.

Yuuki lets her head fall against the back of her chair, squeezes her eyes shut, and breathes in the scent Zero left behind. She believes in the bond they're built. Whatever happens next, it's out of her hands.

Zero drags himself to the nearest empty room with a shower, turns on the spray, and collapses into the bathtub. With his thin, stained nightgown sticking sodden against his skin, he feels like nothing so much as a wet cat, ears pinned back and instincts lashing beneath his skin.

Zero reeks of stinky alpha, and the smell's going to stick to his body no matter how much he scrubs. His nightgown stinks like alpha too, and it's got semen stains on it. Zero makes a face, and sinks lower in the tub, groaning when it makes the pain in his groin spike. Shit. He's definitely bleeding. Riding his wife's gigantic Kuran dick after weeks of strict celibacy and no prep was a stupid plan. If Zero weren't so screwed up and could actually touch himself, he might have been able to prevent his pain or clean himself up now, but instead he's going to stay here until his healing kicks in and hope the water carries away the worst of the mess.

Resting his cheek against the porcelain, Zero broods and drifts on his thoughts. The dull, itchy tingling between his legs when he woke up this evening has made the rage fogging his mind thin; his thoughts are clearer, more capable of contemplation in this temporary reprieve.

He meditates on his next goal. Zero loves and trusts Yuuki, which made allowing a stinky alpha to touch him bearable. Kuran is another matter. That foundation is full of cracks and his omega instincts remain wary. Allowing Kuran to take him will be difficult, and require all his will.

Zero shuts his eyes, falling into a light doze while Yuuki's blood churns warmly in his gut, the tickle that makes his thighs squeeze together throbbing persistently on the edge of his mind. This isn't heat, thank the Ancestress, so his mind is fully his own, but it's damned annoying to wander around with this irritating lust scratching at him.

In the fogged darkness of his mind, his beast is like a shadow circling in the water. Zero's eyes slide half-open, and he snarls, climbing out of the tub as the omega rises to the surface. He's been in one place too long. It's time to hunt.
The halls of the Senate palace are nearly empty. The servants take one look at him and flee; Zero curls his lip and tastes their terror with satisfaction. Leaving a trail of water behind, he stalks deeper, lower, searching for something.

His rational self knows what his omega wants; Zero circles fretfully around the pureblood aura even darker and stronger than Yuuki’s. But he does not seek it out. His heart bears doubt, and the beast knows that.

Frozen at the crux of a hallway, Zero shivers, damp skin pebbled with cold. Go or stay? Closer or farther?

The Hunter knows his duty. But the beast does not care about duty. The beast has stripped away that excuse. The beast recognizes only fear and want. One or the other must suffice.

Zero wavers, unable to chose. Chose? He nearly laughs. What choice does he have? This consummation has been promised for a year. He’s never been able to choose.

No. That doesn't mean anything. Zero's decision is not meaningless, even if foreordained. Acting according to his will has weight, has worth.

Does Zero want Kuran Kaname? Zero knows that he does not love his husband. Does he want to remain with the pureblood regardless? This will be forever. There is no undoing this.

Zero takes one step, then another, until he is running with no thought to where. His nose fills with the scent of alpha and he makes his aura go quiet, his footfalls silent. The omega spits and hisses, repulsed and angry; Zero must force one foot in front of the other. He creeps closer, shying from the voice he hears behind the door.

One last chance to turn back.

Zero pulls the handle, and slips inside.

Kuran was forewarned by the blood bond; the pureblood is facing the door, and dismisses his underlings with a few words and the click of a button.

They stare at one another; Zero feels that russet gaze like the touch of a hand, and hisses, skittering to the side and approaching the alpha indirectly. His omega balks, seeking flight or murder; Zero grabs a firm hold, and drags that weight behind him with each step.

Kuran smirks, but has the sense not to move or cause other insult.

"Back up," Zero orders. The long hardwood table in the library is a heavy thing, and well made. It will do.

Kuran obliges in a leisurely fashion, seating himself on the tabletop as if obeying his own whims. Without the slightest hint of shame, the pureblood even unzips his slacks and pulls himself out - already half-hard, the bastard - lounging indecently with the utmost relaxation while Zero makes him wait.

Zero considers giving in to his omega and castrating the bastard, but reins himself in. "Don't try to touch me," he warns. "And let me do all the work."

Faster is easier when it comes to keeping his omega from murdering his spouses. Zero leaps up on the table, and shimmies into Kuran's lap, wet clothes and all.
The pureblood's eyes burn crimson, the only sign of his struggle to remain still, and he gives Zero a lewd appraisal.

Zero's omega shrieks and fights against his will, sensing danger. Fuck, this is harder than it was with Yuuki. Making a quick concession, Zero's omega instincts roar with satisfaction as Zero wraps his hands around Kuran's throat, applying gentle pressure and a silent threat to snap his neck.

Kuran inhales, clearly aroused.

Pervert, Zero thinks, and strokes the vulnerable arch with his thumbs while the omega whispers to draw blood. His husband looks well: no shadows beneath his eyes nor lines in his face. Kuran seems unburdened, without the misery Zero caused him clouding his gaze. Yuuki has taken good care of their husband. Far better care than Zero could. Maybe they would be better off without him, after all.

"Do you want me?" Zero ventures, the words out before he can take them back.

"With every piece of my wretched soul," Kuran promises, voice low and fervent.

Resonating with the force of that truth, Zero reads the darkness of the abyss in Kuran's face, and it is like recognizing a familiar dream. There is Zero's real husband, behind the charm and polite facade. There is the monster that belongs to him. The heaviness between Zero's thighs grows, and the Hunter squirms in Kuran's lap.

Kuran's mien softens, howling hunger joined with tenderness and a warm thing that might be devotion. The pureblood opens his mouth, then a reserve overtakes him, and the words quiver unspoken in the air.

Zero's intuition rings in sympathy. Do you want me too?

His hands tighten in warning around his husband's throat. In love or not, whatever old scars and old sins lie between them - Zero has worried about Kuran, had feared his time in season would worsen the pureblood's malaise.

"Stupid pureblood," Zero grumbles, rising up on his knees and hitching his nightgown up. "I told you I'm not going anywhere."

And it's worth it for the way Kuran's eyes go wide and he looks at Zero like a devout man praying to his god.

Zero blushes, and circles his hips, cursing how difficult this is to do this by himself. The length of Kuran's cock skims against his inner thigh, large and a little frightening now that Zero knows there's more mysteries between their bodies. His potential heat looms large in his mind. His alphas will plunge deeper than ever in his body, joining three lives together. If all goes well, Zero will take his first knot, tying his body together with his alphas as they attempt to breed him. He wants it and fears it both.

Missing its target once more, Kuran's cock slides uselessly against Zero's ass, and Zero nearly curses in frustration.

Kuran, an indulgent smile on his lips, snaps his hips just so, and neatly impales Zero's opening.

The Hunter lets out a high whimper. Fuck, fuck, fuck. Still not loose enough, but his eyes roll back in his head with how perfectly even the tip presses against his sensitive insides. He feels raw, but forces his body down anyway, sweating and breath whistling in his throat.
His eyes are wet when he's finally flush with Kuran's thighs - even Yuuki's come wasn't enough to ease the way. The omega scratches at Zero's insides, protesting the painful affront, but it's a distant thing. Zero wants to feel connected, and he gets his wish, thickness splitting him to his core, sore insides parted once more around the cock that fucked the virginity out of him.

Looking down at his husband - who no longer pretends to be unmoved, breathing hard with adoring lust shining in his eyes - Zero's breath hitches, and he unsteadily raises himself. He's missed Kaname too. "Let me stay with you," he begs, working his body back down the thick shaft, taking Kaname in as deep as he can.

Kaname's red mouth is parted, and his bottom lip shines with spit. "Always," he promises.

Zero wants to bite him, the feral urge making his fingers clamp down in earnest on Kaname's windpipe.

When the pureblood feels his breath catch, Kaname's hips jerk, sending a painful pang through Zero's insides. Kaname wastes his remaining air on a ragged laugh, a pleasured flush rising on his cheeks.

Stupid, Zero thinks, and gentles his grip. The pureblood's cock seems even larger and fuller now, Zero's body overfull and straining. No matter how it burns, Zero rocks his hips harder, pushes himself down like he's trying to take Kaname's knot early. Between his omega instincts trying to kill Kaname instead of fuck him, and his abused insides, Zero knows this must be quick.

But Zero wants this to be pleasurable for Kaname. Wants to be good for him. This is special - this is their real marriage, between just the two of them alone - and it shows in moments of tenderness, even with the near-violent pace. Though Zero's body shakes from each brutal thrust, Zero and Kaname hold one another's gazes without looking away.

Zero's fangs begin to ache, distracting from the burn between his legs. Zero knows what his beast wants. "Kaname, your blood," he stutters, grunting as another thrust slams home inside him.

"Take it," the pureblood groans, claws leaving gouges in the tabletop as he skewers Zero with another precise thrust right against Zero's most sensitive spots.

Zero squeals, caressing Kaname's throat and clenching taut inside. Kaname's brought Zero close to orgasm, dragging the spiral in his belly tight. Zero's throat burns with thirst; ducking his head down, Zero bites until he feels sweet blood on his tongue, whining with the delicious satiation.

Their rhythm goes choppy, Kaname's powerful thrusts alone keeping Zero bouncing on his cock. They're joined tight, the movements only stirring and pressing against Zero's walls. Zero whimpers, sensation sparking and melding, and the blood finally draws a shallow climax out of him. Pain keeps it from being truly spectacular, but the rush is still pleasurable.

Kaname's hips keep moving; Zero can feel the swell of him still unsatisfied. Letting Kaname's wound close, Zero squeezes his inner muscles with a grimace; he's torn again. "Come inside me," Zero urges, shifting his angle.

Kaname's rhythm stutters, and then the pureblood explodes in a final frenzy of thrusts, before releasing hot and wet inside Zero, stinging his walls.

Zero sighs. It's done. The only thing that remains is to wait and see if they were successful - to see if he enters heat or not.

Knowing it's only a matter of time before his omega drives him away, Zero allows himself a
moment of fondness as he studies his husband's elegant face, carving this moment into his memory.

There's no going back now. Zero will spend his entire remaining life by Kaname's side. He's chosen Kaname. Chosen to stay. That counts for something.

Perhaps...perhaps it's time Zero tries destroying some of the walls he's constructed between them.

Uncurling one hand from around his husband's neck, Zero fists his fingers in dark auburn hair, pulling Kuran's head back.

The pureblood bends with Zero's urging, good-natured with the aftermath of his orgasm, displaying his throat. Kuran observes Zero's actions with slight curiosity, but remains placid to avoid tempting Zero's omega to violence.

Zero sparsers his fingers over the thin skin, feeling Kuran's blood pulse underneath. Kaname, he tells himself, not Kuran any longer. Zero can't hold anything back anymore. This stupid pureblooded stinky alpha fossil half belongs to him now.

His omega snarls in the darkness of his psyche, beginning to stir. "Don't do anything dumb to yourself until I get back," Zero instructs his husband. Kaname, he reminds himself. Kaname from now on.

The pureblood in question inclines his head with royal grace and embarrassingly evident infatuation in his eyes.

Ducking his head, Zero suspects his cheeks are warm with more than exertion.

The Kurans haven't seen Zero in almost three days. Once they finished coupling, the beastial instincts animating Zero drove him away as his omega aggression returned full force.

This second separation is easier for Kaname to bear, because Zero has promised to stay. He's sworn by the oath of their joined bodies that he will never leave Kaname, pledging to belong to Kaname and Yuuki alone for as long as he shall live.

Kaname will make certain that Zero's life will endure as long as eternity - the pureblood vows on his ancient black soul he will see it done. Within eternity, surely Kaname can teach Zero to love him!

To his wife's relief, Kaname's demons have lost ground; staying afloat in his own mind has been no struggle. Kaname cannot allow his despair to overwhelm him when Zero has given him such hopes.

As if summoned, Zero slinks through the study door with murder in his face. The Hunter sends a disgusted glare at the computer screen where a significant number of Kaname's subordinates are watching through video link, stalks up to Kaname, glares like the pureblood has just mortally insulted him, drops into Kaname's lap, curls up with his head on Kaname's shoulder, and then promptly falls asleep.

There is a moment of silence as Kaname and his inadvertent audience digest this.

"Congratulations, Kuran-sama," says a grey-haired alpha who owns close to fifty percent of the country's manufacturing capacity. "My Reisi was much the same on the cusp of his first heat."

The other aristocrats offer similar congratulations, but Kaname hardly hears them. Hands shaking
with joy, Kaname tucks a lock of hair behind Zero's ear and kisses the crown of his boy's head, thoughts daring to turn toward hope. Zero's omega has accepted them. Soon their precious boy's body will heat and cry out to his alphas, and once joined no one will be able to sunder them again.

Kaname throws open the blood bond; Yuuki will know what his joy means. He gathers Zero's slumbering, loose-limbed form close, scenting him almost desperately with the glands under his jaw. If he were alone, Kaname would throw Zero's strong thighs open and check that his mark still lingers on his boy's pink hole, but no one except Yuuki and himself will ever be permitted to behold the altar Kaname worships at.

Suspicion blossoms, and Kaname glances askance at the alphas watching through the screen. "You have your instructions. Discharge them with faithfulness in my absence," he commands tersely. Then he ends the connection with the press of a single key, and the screen goes dark.

Kaname turns his attention back to the omega in his lap, rumbling happily in the back of his throat as he continues his frenzied marking. His jubilation bubbles warmly; Kaname needs to be closer, skin-to-skin; no one must ever mistake Zero for unclaimed.

Zero grumbles when Kaname jostles him awake as the pureblood's stripping him naked, but settles back to sleepy boneless obedience when Kaname picks him up and lays him on a nearby sofa.

The door slams; Yuuki is here too, face alight with elated bliss that Kaname reflects back through their bond. She kisses him; they're both smiling like fools as they admire the naked omega before them, who's shaking off his nap and blinking.

Maybe it's his alpha instincts, or the pureblood part of him, but Kaname blinks and realizes his hand is frantically stroking his cock, and Yuuki is in the same state beside him.

Zero yawns, pink mouth opening up as a tiny noise escapes. The omega isn't aroused in the least, his scent utterly uninterested - he's not yet in heat, and until then won't permit any advances.

But Zero will go into heat now, they've ensured it, and that's the only thought Kaname needs to gush thick and heavy over Zero's perky little nipples and the flat plane of his belly over his empty womb.

Yuuki lasts longer than Kaname did, biting her lip as she stares at the mess Kaname's made of their Consort and tugging frantically at her cock; just before she breaks, she tugs Zero's ankles open so their pretty boy is lewdly exposed and every twitch of her hips leaves another pearly string of come marbling Zero's sinewy thighs and open cunt.

Zero just shivers a little, sleepy trust in his eyes, and submits obediently when Kaname and Yuuki rub their semen into his skin until their scents hang around him like a blanket. It will make him feel safe, and accelerate the changes beginning in his body, the slow chemical march toward receptiveness. The first switch has been flipped; now the changes will begin cascading through his flesh faster and faster, preparing him for a bond. Kaname and Yuuki's task now is to usher that change in, and care for Zero while he reaches that peak.

Every need Zero has, Kaname and Yuuki tend to. He is tucked away safe and protected, never left alone by himself where he would need to worry about being stolen away. In the evening, they dress him with their own hands, have him lift his arms as they pull a clean gown over his head and lace him up in the back, tie his robe sash and slide slippers on his feet. In the morning they bathe him, fill the master bath and wash him clean with soft cloths, spreading scented soaps and lotions over his milky skin, then lifting him out of the warm water to towel him dry, running their fingers through his silver hair to detangle any knots. Afterwards Kaname and Yuuki take turns washing his
skin clean of any scents before marking his body again.

They feed him constantly - Zero will eat almost nothing once his heat rages, subsisting on water and his mates' blood alone - and he needs to gain weight immediately, because he's fighting-form lean and unprepared for his heat. No matter how full his stomach is, Zero always opens his mouth when Kaname and Yuuki bring him more, accepting every bite of food with clear delight and happy noises as they press their boy to eat.

Now that Zero willingly allows the Kurans in his nesting den, they pull the sheets off their bed so Zero can nestle embraced by his alphas' scents as he sleeps. Their boy steals warm jackets and other clothes straight off their bodies so he can bring the fabric close to his face and inhale the stronger, fresh alpha musk. Zero craves contact, cuddling up beside them; the alphas press him closer, hungry for every touch.

Zero is soft, pliable, trusting in every way as they handle his body and shape his schedule, but whenever strangers venture close the fury in his blood reasserts itself, and he becomes a snapping, snarling animal. Kaname and Yuuki try to keep those incidents at a minimum; they adore Zero loose and relaxed and sweet.

Zero remains mostly in his nesting den, venturing out only in the arms of his alphas, who are never far. He's tired, mind turned inward absorbing the changes sweeping through him. He speaks little but always looks to his spouses for comfort. If Kaname did not already love Zero he would be helpless now before the force of his devotion thundering against his breastbone.

Each day that passes, Zero's honeyed receptive scent intensifies, reaching out to hook in the primal parts of Kaname's brain. His alpha and his rational self have never been in closer rapport, their ecstasy equal and dual possessiveness in full flower. Kaname can feel himself edging closer and closer to rut, aggression and lust roaring like wildfire in his blood.

Rut does not consume an alpha the same way heat swallows an omega, but the drive is still a powerful force. Kaname catches himself holding his mate close and pouring out the alpha's devotion, crooning all those foolish promises Kaname once scorned. Their silver mate will leave his heat thoroughly knotted and bonded, with their babe in his belly and their seed leaking from his cunt. And then Kaname will take good care of his mate and his babies, forever and ever.

That time is coming soon. Zero started refusing food almost twelve hours ago, and left the nest by himself for the first time in five days to prowl the family wing for threats. There's a febrile, entrancing tinge in the air when Kaname draws breath, but no tease of fertility. Zero may not ovulate at all during his maiden heat - such fallow heats are the norm. His body is preparing itself for aligning his immune system with a new mate, and if the effort takes too great a toll his body will not attempt a pregnancy.

The fever in Zero's body has risen in the past few hours, and their boy has grown restless, unable to sleep. Whimpering, the omega rolls and stretches like he's trying to soothe an ache, exaggeratedly arching his back while bracing himself against the nest. Despite the pheromones pouring off his skin, he's leery of alpha touch, sensing instinctively that he must wait until his body is prepared for knotting or he'll be torn apart.

Kaname cannot wait to claim this last piece of his boy's innocence. Kaname has spied the swollen, fat lips of his boy's cunt and the glaze of slick coating his reddened hole. As Zero's body floods with hormones, the muscles of his cunt are relaxing, turning pliable and soft, making room in his body for a thick alpha knot to pop his cunt wide open.

Feeling the sharpness of alpha lust, Yuuki entwines their fingers, reminding Kaname to curb his
desire until Zero beckons them. They have prepared well. The cabinets hidden in the nesting den's walls are filled with supplies - food, medicine, spare towels and blankets. They are ready.

Zero huffs, and kicks the he-alpha away, rolling into a cooler corner of the bed. He soaks up the coolness, until the heat in his skin saturates the sheets again. Hissing in frustration, he leaps up and crosses into the bathroom, shedding his clothes and pressing naked against chilly tile and porcelain.

There's a burning feeling writhing in his belly; the core of him throbs, heavier with every heartbeat; Zero feels dazed and stupid with it. He needs - needs what?

Between his legs, something tightens and a lightning strike darts fire in his veins.

Lifting his head, Zero pants, a flush dappling his chest. Hazy thoughts swim in his brain, then flicker out and coalesce down to a single tide of hunger. A gush of slick coats his thighs, and the omega cries out with the ancient cry of his beast's desire.

An answering roar echos from the nest in the next room. Then a second, higher. They rattle Zero's bones and send a delicious hysteria racing down to his needy core. Another flow of slick wets his inner thighs.

Zero trills - his alphas are here, ready to mate with him! But first Zero must lure them between his legs, make himself an irresistible fuck. He wants to snare their strength for himself, bewitch these alphas into seeding his belly and nurturing his babies. The omega's hips sway loose and liquid as he glides back to his nest, eyes half-lidded and lips parted, his body sensitized to the slightest touch.

Their red eyes light the darkness scarlet; Zero shuts the door behind him and preens, running his hands over his flesh and moaning from the pleasure. His breasts are swollen from his heat, and he feels his hole get even wetter as he plays with his nipples.

She-alpha is riveted, and her engorged cock bobs as she swallows. But he-alpha, older and more seasoned, isn't lusty enough yet, holding himself back with a thread of control.

Not enough! Zero wants them both ready to fuck him hard. Zero licks at the underside of his wrist, stimulating his scent glands, fanning out the smell of sex and pure want, and the male's eyes darken.

Watching he-alpha from beneath his lashes, Zero tilts his throat in a submissive gesture and opens his cunt with two fingers so his alphas can see how easily his fingers sink inside. Look alpha, look how hot and wet and ready for you I am!

And just like Zero wanted, he-alpha breaks, exploding from Zero's nest with a snarl that shakes the walls as his power snaps out of his control.

Zero purrs his victory as he's bourne down on the floor of his nest, bouncing from the force. He-alpha is the oldest and strongest alpha in the world, and once his knot locks into Zero's aching cunt he will belong to Zero, his seed reserved for Zero's womb alone.

Zero's purr deepens in his throat as he-alpha looms above him with a feral glint in his eyes. Zero admires the alpha's powerful muscles and licks his lips when his eyes fall on the impressive cock dripping fluid on his belly.

Squirming out from beneath his suitor, Zero flips over on his hands and knees. The position makes a new wave of need cloud Zero's mind, heat radiating from the urgent, empty clench of his hole.
Sweat dews on his skin and his legs shake a little as he lifts his ass high and spreads his knees, showing he-alpha the swollen-hot place that aches for cock.

One large, strong hand comes down between Zero's shoulder blades and pushes until the omega's chest is rubbing the mattress, presenting his rear even higher. Zero whimpers, and opens his legs wide around the alpha's hips, the display of strength making his hole clench and the need in his belly flare hotter.

His mate's cock rubs against Zero's soaked slit, but doesn't rut inside; Zero mewls with frustration, clutching the sheets in his hands and shaking his hips back and forth, hoping to entice his mate.

He-alpha growls, hands stroking down Zero's spine and settling on his hips, thumbs tracing the jut of his hip bones.

The heat of his mate's touch is a brand, and Zero knows he couldn't break free from the alpha's strength if he tried. That certainty stokes the fire in his belly hotter, and Zero whines, arching his back even higher, tears beading on his eyelashes as his empty cunt drips and throbs.

"I'm going to claim you now, Zero." His mate's voice is gravelly and rough, and that wonderful cock is pressing against his cunt, parting his folds just shy of entering him.

"Please, please alpha, take me, knot me, make me your omega!" Zero begs, his heat pulling him under. His thighs quiver and he bucks his hips, craving the slightest bit of relief. "I'm so empty. Please, I want to be full of you, full of your baby!"

The male's grip tightens on Zero's hips.

That's Zero's only warning before the whole enormous length plunges inside his channel, hammering straight against his womb.

Zero screams; his toes curl in a white-hot orgasm, and he's gone.

The searing heat of his mate's cunt is going to boil Kaname alive. Kaname fucks those plush velvet walls like an animal, spearing his omega with single-minded ferocity, wanting deeper, always deeper, to mark and claim this beautiful omega as his mate. No matter how brutally Kaname thrusts, mate begs eagerly for more, hips lifting off the bed to chase after Kaname's cock.

Mate's insides part so easily for him; his hole is so unresisting and slick, opening up so desperately for Kaname's cock. It's the blood fever making mate's cunt so welcoming, Kaname knows, and his own blood thunders as the knot at the base of his cock begins filling, instinct taking hold. Kaname feels his cock sliding in once more, then with a surge of his hips he sinks to the root with a squelch, his pelvis striking mate's thighs for the first time as the omega's distended rim swallows his hardening knot.

Mate cries and writhes, maiden cunt impaled on the true full length of an alpha's cock as Kaname forces the new penetration deeper. His omega is senseless except for the way Kaname is fucking him, and he shrieks even louder at the first catch of Kaname's swelling knot against his channel.

Frightened of his first knot, Kaname's omega panics, feeling the enlarging, swelling flesh being rammed inside his tender opening grow wider. He cries and struggles as Kaname pins him down and savagely reams his cunt like the alpha intends to batter his omega's womb open.

Kaname sinks his teeth into mate's shoulder as the knot grows and grows, pressing hard against mate's walls and keeping Kaname from withdrawing fully, only able to grind against the slick
muscles clamping down around him.

The omega begins to cry, eyes glazed and confused, hiccupping and jerking his hips as the tie firms and locks them together, his cunt sealed tightly shut by Kaname's knot.

The thought pleases him. Warmth swells at the base of his cock, and with one hard thrust, lifting his mate's ass until his toes barely brush the bed, Kaname comes, snarling like a beast, fingers digging into the smooth skin of mate's thighs as he floods his boy's womb, cock twitching in long, drawn-out pulses as it marks his territory. Marking mate as his. His!

His cock spills and spills; not a single drop of seed escapes past mate's knotted hole. Kaname rolls his hips absently, incandescent with pleasure; no fuck has ever felt as incredible as this; he feels suffused with joy, glowing with the force of his satisfaction. He kisses and licks at the bloody wound on mate's neck, the taste of sweet blood making something new in his body fall into place. This is his omega now, Kaname instinctively understands. Mate belongs to them and only them, and they belong to mate.

Mate sniffs, shifting and testing the tie; Kaname growls, warning his mate not to hurt himself. Shifting his hips, Kaname traces the swollen, reddened rim clutching his knot, marveling how that little hole could open up so wide, swallow down his huge girth. The alpha rocks his hips absently, pumping more seed inside his boy; mate smells enticing but not fertile, and the tie does not last long past when Kaname's heartbeat calms.

Kaname nuzzles his new mate once more, crooning to soothe him, and withdraws as gently as he can from mate's ravaged opening. Kaname wonders if alpha-mate could fit her whole fist in the fucked-raw, gushing maw of their omega's knot-split cunt. He bends to sniff at the soaked flesh - mate's smell is already beginning to shift to 'bonded omega' - but alpha-mate's nails lodge in his arm and rake hard enough to draw blood.

Kaname backs away as her eyes flash and she bares her teeth. Leaning over, alpha-mate begins tending to the still form of their mate, who's sobbing quietly from the pain of Kaname's withdrawal.

The omega's legs remain wide open, displaying his wrecked, gaping sex; at alpha-mate's touch he seems to recover himself, and lifts his hips once more, swaying his bruised hips to display his sloppy, claimed hole for her, leaking thick streams of Kaname's seed.

Alpha-mate roars, hands clamping on mate's hips, and the come beading on the angry red tip of her cock drips down the crack of mate's ass as she rubs against him.

Their mate whines, needy and pleading, and she rewards him by slamming her whole thick length into his messy cunt, expelling a flood of slick and seed from his come-filled hole.

Kaname floats on the echo of her pleasure through the blood bond as alpha-mate drives their omega into the bed with the force of her thrusts, impaling him with wild abandon and the single goal of rutting her knot inside his tender, swollen channel until mate chokes on it.

They are beautiful together. Alpha-mate is feral and covetous of their omega's body; her breasts heave and her auburn hair flies around her; the muscles of her thighs and back ripple; her face remains locked in a rictus of ecstasy. Her balls and the root of her cock glisten with his juices, her cock hardly leaves his fucked-out, fluttering rim before she hilt's it inside again, unwilling to leave her slick prize.

Mate's hands tangle in the bedding and his mouth drops open, little whimpers forced out by the
girth inside him, slamming his hips back like he was made for it, made to be fucked and loved on
their cocks, beautiful and needy and perfect, moon-pale and blade-silver with gentle man-killing
hands.

Alpha-mate's breaths heave and stutter as she picks up her pace, knot swelling too large to do more
than grind harder into mate's stuffed cunt. Mate arches under her, pressing his hips back, his whole
body shaking from the force, and for a moment as alpha-mate snarls and bites down on his
shoulder, painting his insides white, the curve of his stomach looks like he's swelling, his belly
already filling up with them.

They stay locked like that as alpha-mate finishes releasing, her seed spurting in thick hot ropes;
mate shivers with each one, wide-eyed and trembling. Alpha-mate hooks her hands around mate's
chest, careful not to tug where they're tightly joined, and laps at the blood beading again on his
shoulder. Their omega whimpers, full of so much seed he's uncomfortable.

Kaname rumbles deep his his belly, crawling forward to stroke his pretty mate. Mate trills back
with an edge of distress, and Kaname purrs, slicing his palm and offering his pure-blooded strength
before his mate's pink lips. The omega licks Kaname's hand clean, the wound already healed, and
Kaname's getting erect again. Alpha-mate repeats the same gesture, coaxing their omega to drink a
little blood drawn from a cut on her arm.

Mate hums when he's finished, then squeals when alpha-mate pulls out, her half-soft knot dragging
against his battered walls and releasing a new river of come from inside him. He sniffs, his
abused insides a pool of fluids, and collapses on the bed, lilac eyes already fluttering closed with
exhaustion.

Alpha-mate rumbles an apology, then massages mate's thighs as she takes a corner of the filthy
sheets and begins to clean him. Kaname rests his cheek against their mate's temple, purring softly
to soothe him into sleep. They have knotted his cunt and tasted his blood; his scent is not the only
thing changing now inside him. Mate will sleep for a long time, until his body will react only to
them, will recognize only them. And then the red tide will come in, and the heat in their bodies will
surge again in earnest, and they will mate and mate until the heat burns out.

Kaname rumbles happily, smiling at alpha-mate, who beams back at him. Oh yes, it will be very
good.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoyed 'Porn: the chapter.' I don't think anyone but me was expecting
things to end this way. I feel compelled to mention that since no one is capable of
giving consent due to compromised mental state, the sex in this chapter is technically
dubcon, but everyone consented extensively beforehand and knew what they were
getting into so... *shrug*

Credit to Ao3 reviewer lillithschild for coining a particularly good turn of phrase I
borrowed for the blackmail episode.

Next chapter: Not as much porn as you might expect. Zero reacts to being a 'married'
man. Sara Shirabuki's ghost begins her next game.
It's the holiday season and I'm a mess. My thanks for the wonderful and continued support of my readers!

I need to scream a little bit, because Rose_Ryuuki drew fanart of Shoshana, and it's shockingly close to the image of her in my head. Please give them some love over on their tumblr yaoionpaper: post/179316183918/the-week-of-four-thursdays-this-is-how-i-imagine

I may have been slightly inaccurate when I wrote this chapter's preview, but I hope you don't mind too much.

They are starving beasts, and he is the feast laid out before them. Time passes in an orgy of flesh; there is no part of their omega they don't claim: touching, sucking, licking, biting, fucking with the infinite stamina of a pureblood. Thick in the air is the scent of mate's heat, and their own come. They fuck him full of it, until it's spilling out of him in thick runnels and gushes, drenching the blankets of his nest and bloating his belly with the sheer volume.

The only constants in Yuuki's memory are the pumping of her hips as she splits her mate's cunt, and the bestial lust that drives her. They breed mate against the walls of his nest, on his back, on his belly, bouncing on their laps, against walls and doors, and on one memorable occasion, the floor of the bathroom when his heat overtakes them halfway through cleaning him up.

It's not all crazy sex marathon; there are long lucid periods interspersed between couplings. An omega would die if they really had sex for five days straight, and most omegas sleep for sixteen or seventeen hours a day just to cope with the physical demands. Whenever Zero is sleeping and his scent calms, Yuuki and Kaname surface shallowly from their own pheromone-driven mania. Their rut leaves them just enough sanity to physically take care of Zero and themselves in the brief reprieves between bouts of sex, until their omega rouses, yowling and shaking his hips, seducing them back down into red darkness.

The first few nights go smoothly - alpha-mate and herself mount their omega so many times! Pretty, sweet omega is so good for them: he presents himself to be mounted, so hot and wet and perfect, opens his mouth for blood when they stroke his throat, stays calm and still when knotted, goes pliable when they rub ointment inside his sore hole and allows them to run damp cloths over his skin.

But at the end of the third night, mate's scent changes - richens, deepens, gains a thousand new notes. Yuuki's eyes roll back in her head and her lips curl whenever she tastes that overripe, fecund tinge. Mate's rolling and displaying gains a new urgency; his whines and cries slide into a sharper pitch, full of desperation.

An omega's first heat is said to be their worst. Awash with hormones, they're still building the
mating bond's tether, skimming atop the waves of their fever like an anchorless boat. But Zero's first heat frightens Kaname; Yuuki can feel it through their own blood bond.

It should not rage through him until his skin sears to the touch, until he refuses water, refuses sleep. The urge to fuck should not consume him until nothing is left but a whimpering, howling addict. He screams and begs, curling around his stomach with tears in his eyes whenever his alphas don't service him fast enough. Seed in his belly cools the inferno for a little while, but the burning always creeps back to lick at his veins.

Ordinary pain means nothing; Yuuki could drive a nail through his hand and Zero would only plead harder for cock. The heat numbs Zero to any sane limits of what his body can endure; he pushes past bruises and blood and wrenched tendons and dislocated limbs, past hunger and thirst and a raging fever so high his skin burns, until Kaname and Yuuki have to pin him down and force him to drink, until he can't even rest without a cock in him.

Their omega's need is a noose around their throats; his distress an equal shackle. They abandon their patrols around the nest to tend to him; Zero's appetite is unquenchable, and the heat will not end until he conceives or his body gives out. After five nights, Yuuki increasingly hopes for the second - heats take a terrible toll on an omega's health.

Mate is a frothing, spindly, skeletal creature, any newly-gained bulk burned away by his fever. Yuuki can count every one of his ribs and the knobs of his spine, trace the sharp angles of his cheekbones and naked ankles. His cracked, chapped mouth is empty of words, only animal whimpers and shrieks; his bloodshot eyes remain permanently glazed by delirium, vacant except for pleading need. His skin is no longer milky pale, instead turned a stark map of fever-flush and a rainbow of gruesome bruises.

Yuuki licks at one especially ugly bone bruise on mate's hip, tucking him against her side with her greater strength as he struggles weakly. Alpha-mate purrs comfortingly, coaxing their omega to drink just a little blood, just a few drops.

But poor mate's burning blood is unrelenting. He squirms, looking from side to side as though confused where he is, and why his alphas are not using his raw, puffy cunt. Cracked noises issue from his lips, growing increasingly distressed; his scent spikes with pain.

Yuuki and alpha-mate exchange a look; it's better to mount him before the need leaves him in agony, no matter how the strain wrecks their efforts at healing his fragile body.

Alpha-mate shifts in the nest, slipping between mate's shaking thighs which are desperately spread as far as they can go. His long fingers spread open mate's gaping folds, sliding inside with a lurid liquid noise to feel their omega's walls and test if the most recent tears have healed. Withdrawing his fingers with a pleased expression, alpha-mate licks at the mix of pearly seed and clear, tasty slick and nods to her.

Yuuki bounces, pleased in return. They've had an especially long reprieve from mate's heat; they're all clean and mate has healed properly inside. Now their omega is lifting his head and sending them inviting eyes, arching his back and offering his hungry cunt with regained vigor.

The pulse of Yuuki's cock as she sheaths it inside mate's channel matches the hitching gasp of his breath as their omega finally clenches around the cock he craves. He's so loose inside from days of hard fucking and knotting. But his body is still sucking at her cock greedily, pulling her deeper with a tortuously slow ripple.

Yuuki pins him down fondly and begins to work herself forward, the light brush of his swollen
walls and his scorching heat all the reward she needs to remain careful. But she makes sure she pushes firmly against his cervix; mate's cunt needs to drink her come down to plant a baby like she wants, and he'd look so perfect as a mama!

She’s so enthralled with him, with his slick cunt and his scent, blind to all else except the image of him ripened and fat, that when mate's cries rise again in distress, firm rear gyrating to plead for more, Yuuki is left blinking in confusion, the tempo of her hips forced to slow. She slams home for a few strokes, bottoming out against his womb, but mate only sobs, seeking more than Yuuki can give, watery eyes begging her and alpha-mate both.

"He's prepared enough, and soaked," alpha mate growls, voice rough. "We can give him more."

Yuuki cups mate's rear and pins him to her chest, then reverses their positions with a quick roll that leaves her on her back and forces her cock hilt deep inside his hole, his loose rim swallowing her knot in the most delicious way.

Mate's thin chest heaves and he pants, some inkling that his alphas are going to give him what he needs calming his heat long enough for alpha-mate to guide the blunt head of his cock to mate's dripping entrance, brushing against Yuuki already speared inside his sloppy hole. Then alpha-mate begins to press forward, feeding his equally thick cock into mate's cunt, already stuffed to the brim with her own girth.

The sound their omega lets out is high, punched-out, raw; his silver head tips back in a perfect arch. Every muscle in his cunt spasms around the girth of two pureblooded alpha cocks. Despite how the tender opening has been fucked wide open to accept a knot, it's not enough; every space in his body is squeezed taut around the invasion, and yields grudgingly, by fits and starts.

Yuuki touches mate's flat stomach, imagining she can feel a bulge from the sheer size of their twin shafts pressed together. Alpha-mate's cock rubs and drags perfectly against her own, and the pleasure is so incredible she feels stars pop in her vision, sweat breaking out on her skin. They can barely thrust, and only in turns, slow torturous withdrawals and slides into their omega's depths. Mate writhes and moans in their arms, voice rough from abuse. His breathing is uneven; rocked to the core he's a mess of sweat and desire, the fire inside his belly searing them all.

A new wave of rich heat scent rolls over them, sparking something primal deep in their bodies. Yuuki and alpha-mate snarl and sink their teeth into their omega's pale neck and shoulders, gripping him tightly as they increase the pace.

Mate whimpers, the same tremor shaking him down to the root; his hands tangle in alpha-mate's hair, curl against her hip. He's near his peak, rippling and clenching inside.

Yuuki is consumed by the desire to see him fat and full of milk, carrying her seed kicking in his belly. Her hands force mate to lift his hips higher, spread his legs wider, open and defenseless for Yuuki's taking.

Clamping down and screaming, mate's face is a mask of pleasure so fierce it looks like pain as he rides out his orgasm, a wash of slick making the slide of their cocks suddenly easy.

Roaring triumphantly, Yuuki and alpha-mate dig their nails into mate's flanks for purchase, each snap of their hips brutal as they rut. Yuuki wants to feel mate tighten and bear down around her cock again, wants to make sure his cunt will ache afterwards with the imprint of their breeding.

So she draws the fuck out, teeth bared and cock nearly painful from the effort as her knot hardens
outside the hot clench of her mate's cunt and knocks unsatisfied against the rim of his swollen hole.

And with a little gasp, mate's body jerks between them once more, and a startled flutter of his walls massages their flesh.

With one last vicious thrust, Yuuki slams home against his womb and marks her claim, painting his hungry depths with torrent after torrent of her seed. Alpha-mate's cock jerks and twitches against her own as they learn the intimate feeling of breeding their mate together.

Mate quivers with each new spurt, mouth falling open and high breathy sounds the evidence of his dazed pleasure. Yuuki admires the necklace he wears of their bruises and exchanges filthy kisses with alpha-mate over his shoulder.

They stuff mate to bursting, the slick of their seed pooling in what little space is left around their flesh. Yuuki can only think of her omega stretched out past capacity, so big he can barely walk, tiny new breasts filling out his clothes. She hums and plays with mate's nipples as she floods his cunt, drunk on the thought of him fertile and full.

They are not tied by a knot, but it takes them a very long time to separate. They tilt mate's hips up high, at the perfect angle where their come will pool inside their omega's empty belly, and root their seed deep in his womb.

Purring, Yuuki entwines her hand with alpha-mate's, satisfied by such a through breeding. Mate's heat has been quieted for now. They've earned themselves a reprieve. She dozes off, lulled to sleep by animal dreams.

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Zero remembers little of his heat, except for the gossamer spiderwebs of sense memories pressed into his skin: hands squeezing his flesh, weight draped over his back, blood in his mouth, alpha musk drawn into his lungs. Reaching back into the mists of such hazy animal need is like piecing together tattered lace, but some moments he remembers with utter clarity.

Mostly, he remembers the knot.

The delicious, addicting feeling of all his inner places being stroked at once, sweet pressure suddenly becoming more, his body yielding, his insides shifting to allow even greater fullness, deeper, so deep he doesn't think he'll ever forget the feeling.

The slight press against the walls of his entrance, subtle at first - swelling wider, it fills and fills, pinching and forcing him further open, wider, wider, so impossibly wide! Tensing and shaking, he tosses his head and cries out; it hurts, it hurts so much, it hurts so good, it's everything he's ever needed, yes, he wants it, wants more! Beneath his alpha's weight, he can taste the distant excruciating pleasure beneath the pain, the pleasure his body was broken and remade to know.

But it's too much, too frightening to embrace yet; he squeals and instinctively scrabbles at the hands pinning him, fleeing the hardening bulge stuffed rudely inside his tender hole. His alpha offers no mercy, thrusting into the very root of Zero's belly, lodging himself hilt-deep with such force Zero's body shakes. And the knot grows and grows, inexorably wedging itself tight.

He screams like a dying animal when teeth break his skin, blood streaming down his shoulder and pooling in his collarbone. The knot is embedded inside him, all his awareness pared down to the tiny movements it makes as it grinds against his walls. He sobs, tears rolling into the sheets, and lets out weak little moans as his alpha continues thrusting.

One last, titanic thrust, pulling and dragging against his trapped hole, and a torrent of liquid heat
pours into his belly. Zero trembles as his alpha shifts again, a tingle running up his spine; the steady pressure and wet slosh in his stomach leaves a sense of rightness and satisfaction. Animal reflex urges him to relax and go limp, but Zero is still wide-eyed and frightened, and attempts to disengage; a twinge inside of his stuffed hole warns him just as much as his alpha's growl not to move.

The second knot is better, and so are the many knottings after that. Familiarity eases his fear, and once he's loosened properly for a knot it's easy to glory in the instinctive pleasure, to drool for each enormous impalement, one after the other, to forget how he ever found release without hanging helplessly caught on his alpha's knot. Nothing but the feeling of a cock beating inside him makes sense any longer, and the lightness of relief as the knot catches at his walls.

The heat-fever drowns him. His intuition drifts unguided, the cloud of his awareness expanded and flickering unsteadily; he suffocates under the pleasure of his alphas, mirrored and inverted inside his own, his senses buckling under the unchanneled myriad stimuli.

What little awareness is left narrows down to one singular drive. Deadened to the strain on his body and mind, Zero spirals out, and out, and out, and out...

There is faint, distant birdsong. He listens to the notes with a mind like a pane of clear crystal.

Sensation penetrates gradually through the haze of his consciousness. His body feels heavy. Like he's been sick for a long time. He's laying on something soft, underneath something warm.

Zero cracks his eyes open.

Color, cut into wooden squares. The glint of gold leaf.

The thought swims slowly up through Zero's consciousness: this is not the ceiling of his nest.

….Nest?

Fuck!

His body jerks, and the cracked scream that tears through his raw throat as every muscle, bone, and nerve in his body seizes in agony brings the sound of voices and running footsteps. Zero struggles to breathe around the stabbing pain, helplessly waiting until the torment quiets to a throb and he can register anything beyond his immediate misery.

"Shhh, Zero you're okay, we're here, just stay still and let your body heal…"

Yuuki. Yuuki's here. Zero's eyes slide shut in relief, and he sags into the bed. Yuuki will protect him. His alpha is here, so he can relax….Wait, alpha?

Zero conducts a quick inventory of his body, and flips through the pieces he can remember of the last however many days.

He shies away from most of the red-tinged, carnal parts - Zero can feel himself at the precipice of a very bad breakdown and extended dissociative episode, but he intends to push it away as long as possible. He's still left with an extreme sense of physical disconnection and the urge to throw up whenever he thinks about anything between his legs, but at least he's vaguely functional.

A cool touch to the Hunter's lips startles him enough to twitch, and Zero moans when the pain reverberates through his flesh again.
"Sorry, I'm so sorry Zero!" Yuuki's voice stammers. "I thought you might want some water."

Zero tries to make an encouraging noise when he has control of his limbs again. The cool feeling returns, and Zero groans with relief when cold water drips down his dry throat.

"Where?" he whispers, voice cracking.

"The bedroom of the Consort's suite," Yuuki explains. "Your nesting den is a mess and we didn't know if you were ready to sleep with us in our bed."

Zero hums, wishing he could assure his wife how deeply he longs for exactly that, could express how much he's missed her. "Date?" he manages after a few tries.

"May 15th," says a new voice. It's Kuran - Kaname - and Zero relaxes even further knowing both his alphas are nearby.

A deep, instinctive fear his omega has carried for over a year melts away, and Zero feels lighter and safer. He doesn't need to keep up his constant wary vigilance - he can't be taken away from his alphas anymore, and Yuuki and Kaname won't allow anyone to hurt him. Opening his eyes, Zero whimpers, his omega wanting comfort.

A large hand touches his cheek, and begins stroking gently. Another slimmer hand slips under the sheets and curls delicately around his fingers.

"Your heat did not go according to plan, Zero," Kaname tells him, voice low and steady. "Rather than the fallow heat we expected, you experienced a full, fertile heat. But your heat was unnaturally violent as it raged through your body, and it took a heavy toll. Your condition frightened us enough that we called a midwife to attend to you. We've kept you asleep for two days to recover, and you're still quite weak."

"The way you look might be a little shocking to you," Yuuki says reluctantly, "You've lost twice the normal weight for a heat...and since I know your normal feelings about your body aren't good, it might be better not to look beneath the blankets right now."

Zero's throat closes, and his fingers tighten around Yuuki's hand as he fights down a tidal wave of panic and self-disgust at his own flesh, the mantra of notmenotmybodynotme drumming in the back of his mind.

"Did we...?" he croaks, desperate to know if all of this was for nothing.

"We're bonded," Yuuki assures him, the happy warm tone she uses soothing the ragged edges in his mind.

Despite the pain, the corners of Zero's mouth curl upward. Warm, golden love floods his chest and buoys him up. In that moment, he is perfectly happy because he can be with the woman he loves for the rest of his life. Just for that, all this pain is worth it, to achieve that impossible joy.

"Love you," he rasps, and Yuuki lays a soft kiss on his chapped lips, murmuring the same words against his mouth. They'll celebrate when he's better, Zero promises silently. He'll take Yuuki out into the human world. Zero hasn't spent enough quality time with his wife recently.

Out of the corner of his eye, Zero sees Kaname's expression twist, reminding him that Yuuki isn't the only one of his spouses in the room.

But Zero doesn't know what to say that wouldn't cut the pureblood's wounds deeper. "Kiss too," he
demands instead, his dry mouth making the words slur.

Kaname's face lightens, and he bends to feather another kiss against Zero's mouth. "Precious boy, you already know you possess my love."

Sighing, Zero blinks, exhaustion beginning to drag him down again. His alphas exchange a worried look over his head. "Go to sleep," Kaname tells him with a thrum of power in his voice, covering Zero's eyes. "We can finish our discussion later."

When Zero wakes, a terrible, gnawing dread consumes him. His rapid-fire heartbeat and unsteady breathing rouses the two purebloods cradling him in their arms.

"Zero?" asks Yuuki as she searches for a sign.

Even with the pain that shoots through him at the motion, Zero shakes his head, closing his eyes and counting seconds while he tries to steady his breathing. There's no soft veil of exhaustion between reality and himself this time, no lingering chemical cushion to lessen the blow.

It doesn't matter - Zero has to know. "I feel different," he begins - then swallows, hesitating as he tries to ease the raspiness in his throat. His eyes flicker open, falling on Yuuki's expectant face and the worry lining her forehead.

Zero's guilt almost silences him. He stumbles onward anyway. "Am I -" But the Hunter cuts himself off, unable to speak the forbidden word.

"No," Kaname tells him quietly. "You are not pregnant. The midwife has tested your blood repeatedly over the last few days. We wanted to be certain."

Zero's shoulders shake, and he chokes on a broken exhale. "I see."

He should be happy - he's gotten what he wanted. Zero was correct when he said it's best he has no child.

(Then why does it hurt so bad?)

"The midwife thinks your body may be unable to regulate your heat cycles properly," Kaname continues after a moment of silence. "To spend a fertile heat with two purebloods and go away unbred...we could try again, if you wished, but the likelihood of you conceiving..."

"It doesn't matter," Zero lies past the numbness blanketing his brain. "It's for the best. I'm sorry to worry you both."

Not fooled in the least, Yuuki hugs him, careful not to squeeze his aching body. Kaname kisses his temple and pulls him closer against his side.

Zero breathes, and floats. If he pretends everything is fine, eventually it will become true. The death of a fantasy that was always impossible should not hurt him.

But as the days pass, Zero's deep sense of disconnection says otherwise. He's disinterested when Yuuki brings him his half-read books, or when Kaname discusses his physical rehabilitation; all Zero's emotions feel distant, like pale copies of real passions. His genuine, radiant joy at being bonded is overshadowed by that cold, smothering feeling, like a cloud veiling the sun.

Zero knows he should tell someone - Yuuki, Master Yagari, Takuma-sempai - but Zero is tired of
burdening other people with his problems, especially after how much he's disrupted their lives with his surprise heat. The Kurans are working long hours to catch up from their unscheduled vacation, and Zero is fed up with being one more thing to add to their labor. He just wishes he could stop being a mess, and he feels especially guilty because right now dealing with his body is a monumental struggle, which leaves sex completely off the table.

His wife and husband so good to him anyway, patient and considerate. If they're disappointed by his malfunctioning uterus, they don't give any sign in his presence. The bond has made them more possessive - Zero doesn't know if it's a pureblood thing or an alpha thing, but their hands are always on him, and their eyes follow him as though he's the only thing in the room. His intuition reads their longing - how they abhor any absence, and every time they release him from their hold a dark impulse seizes them to clasp harder and never let go.

Zero needs to do something for them too. So he rests when he's told, and painstakingly obeys every rule for his recovery, because he can see the way Yuuki and Kaname worry. Zero eats whatever is given to him even when he feels nauseous, because their eyes light up every time he takes a bite. He keeps his words indulgent and fond, layering his voice with warmth, and remembers to call his spouses 'alpha' - he can see the way it soothes their instincts. Zero even allows himself to be carried around and nestle quietly in their laps as they work, and he pushes himself to offer as much physical affection as he can stomach, as an apology for their current celibacy.

Zero suspects it's his omega, but he feels just as needy and clingy for their attention in turn, which sits poorly with his sense of independence and just deepens the division between his body and mind. Zero wants to be surrounded by their strength, to bury himself underneath their bodies until he forgets what it's like to have no one to rely on except himself. There's no trace left of the violence from his cycle; Zero just wants to cuddle and nuzzle and purr. The Hunter part of himself rises in rebellion at the mere idea. The inside of his head is once again at war, with no truce in sight.

The Midwife who was called to attend Zero after his heat isn't the same one Takuma referred to the Kurans before. She wears the same half-pomegranate enamel pin on her lapel, the mark of her profession, and she's a C-Rank beta female too, but she's much older, the iron grey in her hair overwhelming the brown. She's supposed to be a specialist for older omegas with fertility problems, but Zero never bothers learning her name - the Midwife never speaks a word to him unless the Kurans are in the room, and his power makes plain the disdain she attempts to conceal.

That's just one more reason Zero forces himself out of bed within a few days, determined to drag himself back to normal routine as soon as possible. His body is far from recovered - he's burned out every physical reserve he has, and he's off the active duty list until he rebuilds the weight and stamina he's lost. But at least he can start fitting himself back into his life.

The apathy and stifling feelings in his heart don't go away. Zero only puts a name to his emotions when he happens upon Takuma meeting with Kaname. The blond has a hand on his swollen middle and the brightest smile lighting his face - at the sight, Zero's heart crumples.

As Zero hurries away, the Hunter bites the inside of his cheek. The weight in his chest is called grief, cold and heavy and bitter, and regret for what he cannot have. Even if Zero never intended to have a child, at least he could have consoled himself with the possibility. Now Zero has nothing.

Shoshana finds Zero hiding in the rose garden with his hands cupped around a fallen blossom, the white petals darkened with black soil. She tilts her head to the side and studies him, her dark eyes fathomless.

"I have not yet visited Royal Consort Ailey's mausoleum," she tells him. "Would you like to join
Zero straightens his shoulders, affecting indifference, and casts the fallen rose back into the dirt. "Sure." Kaname and Yuuki are busy, and he could use the walk.

Zero carries Shoshana most of the way; the path is rough, and he's not risking her health. By the end he's sweating and breathing hard, reminded that his own body isn't in peak health either. But better himself than Shoshana - he'll recover faster.

They offer incense before the altar still covered with fresh flowers and garlands, and stand in silence for a few moments to pay their respects. Shoshana drifts into one of the outer wings, and settles on a bench with a tiny noise of relief. Then she turns expectant eyes on Zero, and her bracelets chime as she indicates the place beside her.

Zero smiles and obliges her, relieved himself at the chance to get off his feet. This wing is Ailey's resting place itself; in its center lies a white marble sarcophagus capped with a statue of the Consort herself, carved as though asleep. Zero laces his hands together and sinks into his own thoughts.

"I thought I might have a talk with you," Shoshana requests quietly.

"Of course."

Shoshana breathes out, and lifts her chin. "Ouri-sama was not my first alpha, but Night willing, he will be my last. I always regretted that my body was too broken to give him more than a few children."

Zero stiffens and watches her from the corner of his eye, but Shoshana's gaze is fixed upon Aileya's likeness.

"I want to tell you some of the things I have experienced as a barren omega. You've encountered some of the stigma yourself. You know vampiric society does not look kindly on people like us. I believe it's better you hear what to expect from me now. And if you'd like, you can tell me your thoughts in return."

An offer, not a necessity. Zero understands it for the gift it is. "Thank you. I'd be honored by your counsel, Consort Shoshana."

She offers him the barest hint of a smile, and presses her cool fingers against his hand.

"All clear," Yuuki's husband whispers, the hoseki on his forehead catching the moonlight as he opens his eyes.

Yuuki giggles, still awed by the realization that Zero is finally really theirs, and the two of them dart to the edge of the pool, stripping down to their underclothes. In the darkness, the water is ink sprinkled with stars, the moon a bright pearl of light that ripples with the breeze.

"Stop staring," Zero chides without needing to look over at her as his robe falls, revealing pale bare shoulders.

"How can I stop staring? You're here," Yuuki counters, mouth curving in the most besotted smile as her heart beats ZeroZeroZero and her alpha chants oursoursours. She wouldn't be able to take her eyes off him if she tried.

Sighing, Zero surrenders and continues to undress.
Yuuki thinks she deserves a little credit for self-awareness. She knows her relationship with Zero crossed the boundary of obsession a long time ago. The raw force of her love bleeds from the pit of famine in her soul, as her pureblood nature demands.

But bonding Zero has taught Yuuki whole new depths of ravenous need. Yuuki thought she was obsessed before? Her instincts scream if Zero's out of her sight for more than two seconds. She can smell him everywhere, the tiniest little trace like a neon sign for her nose, and the resulting bloodlust is insatiable. She wants to cuddle Zero and pet him constantly, touch his hair and smell his neck and stuff his dirty underwear in her purse so she can take it out to get drunk on his pheromones while he's gone. Yuuki wants to do dirty perverted things to Zero too, but mostly her alpha wants to forget what personal space means and sniff him a lot.

Yuuki knows this is the point where most people take out a restraining order against you for stalking. She also knows Zero will let her get away with almost everything, so she's trying very, very hard to contain herself. She may want to keep Zero in her lap all the time and carry him around like a doll, but she knows Zero would hate being treated as a pet or an object, and has been trying to give him his space. She's forced Kaname to do the same, cranky and frustrated as it made them both.

So Yuuki is really, really happy that Zero invited her out today for this short, private outing, because it's a chance to spend time with Zero on his own terms.

"Wait," Yuuki asks as they wade into the water, "I want to try something I've been practicing."

Squinting in concentration, Yuuki forms a loose cup with her hand, and carefully extends her power. Her continuing practice has improved her control by leaps and bounds, but gentle and sustained effort is harder than violence.

Zero yelps when his feet leave the ground, but relaxes once his body begins to float effortlessly in the water. "Yuuki!" he calls, a delighted lilt to his voice.

"Pretty neat huh?" Yuuki boasts as she bobs beside him, neither of them expending the slightest effort to stay afloat.

Zero swims a few laps around the pool while Yuuki dives and treads water, content to focus on smoothing out the unsteady flow of her power. Zero's stamina is still poor, so he comes swimming up beside her before long.

"This is nice," Yuuki says, floating on her back as she watches the stars. "I've missed doing things like this, just the two of us."

"So have I," Zero admits, reaching out and taking her hand. Keeping Kaname sane has meant they couldn't afford to leave him alone. Yuuki doesn't begrudge Kaname their care, but the stress of keeping Kaname's situation hidden has weighed on both of them.

Tipping his head back, Zero contemplates the white river of the Milky Way, and the two of them drift side-by-side in comfortable silence.

"I don't think I'm going to want any of our sessions for a while," he admits, voice hushed beneath his shame.

Yuuki frowns, because Zero has no reason to be ashamed. "Alright," she says, "but remember that it's only natural for your comfort level with your body to be affected by your experience being in heat. I'd never be disappointed with you for that."
Zero flinches. "I want to do things with you - but I can't right now. I'm sorry."

Yuuki squeezes his hand as hard as she dares. "I'd never be disappointed with you for that either. When you're ready, you're ready."

"And the fact that I can't give you a child?" he murmurs, voice barely rising about the breeze.

"It's something I've always wanted," she admits honestly, "but having you at my side is more important. Having you safe and happy is more important." She rolls on her side, the water lapping at her cheek, and cups his jaw.

Yuuki can see the sadness lingering in his eyes, but Zero has kept his mourning private, and Yuuki wants to respect that. She'd be lying if she said she wasn't hoping for better news after Zero's heat. But Yuuki is satisfied to finally posses the two halves of her soul - one by bloodbond, one by omega bond.

Zero is the one who leans closer to complete their kiss. They float and leisurely taste one another with lips and tongue, breathing in one another's breaths as they bathe in starlight.

Pulling back, Zero rests their foreheads together as he catches his breath. "Thank you," he tells her.

She's transfixed by the way their eyes meet. The need to touch him is unbearable. "I love you," she says instead of the thousand other things she means.

But Yuuki thinks Zero understands anyway.

"A toast to Consort Kiryuu to celebrate his bonding!"

The tea group omegas salute one another and sip their *mugicha*, cold glasses sweating in the muggy heat. Summer is quickly approaching, as is the end of Azai's pregnancy. It's likely this will be his last trip outside his own home before he gives birth.

"How are you finding things after your bonding, Consort Kiryuu?" Takiyama inquires, offering Zero another crustless cucumber tea sandwich.

Zero gulps it down, and replies with a blush heating his cheeks, "Fine. The books say that the dependence will eventually tone down?"

"It will," Takuma assures Zero, passing him another sandwich with an amused twinkle in his eye.

Azai folds his hands over his heavy belly. "Your instincts have been focused on finding a worthy mate and defending yourself. Now your future depends on making your bond with your alphas as strong as possible. A sensitivity to their moods and a desire for contact encourages a solid foundation."

Takuma's smile is reassuring. "I promise you that Kaname and Yuuki are feeling just as needy as you are. There's no shame in it."

Zero stuffs his mouth with more food to avoid having to reply. The faster he gains weight, the sooner he can go Hunting. "Do I really smell different?" he asks instead. "I can't tell."

The others know he's dodging, but don't object to Zero's change of subject.

Crossing her arms, Aido Madoka's nose scrunches up, which makes her look adorably intent. "Not exactly different. You still smell like you, but the intensity is lower. You're not shouting to
everyone around you how sexy and available you are anymore. Bonding makes your own alphas hypersensitive to your specific pheromones, so they won't be able to tell a difference in your scent. But they won't be responsive to any other omega's scent anymore either," she concludes with satisfaction.

Zero idly wonders how much destruction would ensue if Aido Nagamichi ever let his eyes wander, and decides it's best the world never know. "I guess we should talk about the spring Court."

Shoshana's low voice laughs while the others flinch or grimace.

"I almost peed myself when you were stalking around behind me," Aido Madoka admits with a complete lack of self-consciousness.

Takiyama chokes on her *mugicha*, and coughs until Takuma pounds her on the back.

"Aido-san," Azai reprimands with the weary air of a man who expects nothing to result.

"Don't act like I wasn't the only one!" she huffs, crossing her arms. "You all were thinking it." She glances over at Zero. "You're a whole new level of scary when you're not feeling merciful. We forget you're a Hunter sometimes. It's one thing knowing you can kill us all, but another to actually believe it."

Zero stares down into his empty cup. What can he say? It's uncomfortably true. Even weaponless Zero could tear through them like paper.

"The Court is going to make me pay for what happened, aren't they," he says instead.

"Absolutely," Takuma answers without hesitation. "But they're going to think very hard before they try and cross you in the future, and most of them will decide it's not worth the risk."

Rubbing his hand over his face, Zero snorts. "If I'd known it was that easy, I would have done it ages ago." This didn't solve anything - the Court's inevitable retribution is going to be painful, and everyone has tactfully avoided mentioning Zero's increasingly certain barrenness. But those are problems for his future self. Right now the night is warm, the food is plentiful and delicious, and Zero's going to enjoy the company while he can.

When the teapot is empty and there's nothing left but crumbs, the tea group parts amicably, a quiet sense of jubilation lifting their spirits. Takuma escorts his guests to the entryway, where they wait as the cars are pulled around.

"Consort Kiryuu," Azai murmurs, darting a look at their companions. "I wonder if I might speak with you for a moment."

"Sure," Zero replies, his intuition kicking into motion. Pausing to tell Shoshana he'll be along shortly, he leads Azai further away from the others, sensing the noble prefers privacy.

"Given your background, would it be fair to assume you know very little about Shadows?" Azai begins, raising one dark eyebrow.

"Next to nothing," Zero admits.

Azai nods to himself. "The terms of a Shadow contract require that a witness representing the Kuran family be present during the Shadow's birth - to prevent us from cheating our patron, and substituting another child."
Um. Zero's eyes go wide. Not for the first time, he wonders what the heck is wrong with these bloodsuckers. "I...did not realize," he stammers.

Amusement lights golden eyes. "I'd like to invite you to to act as that witness. Don't worry - you'll be able to wait outside the room until after I've delivered the child. Given your newness to your dynamic, I believe it might be educational for you to be present. Perhaps it will even help ease your mind."

Once he overcomes his surprise, Zero considers the offer seriously. "I'll discuss it with my spouses," he says, uncertain how he feels about the idea.

"That's all I ask, Kiryuu-sama," Azai replies serenely, tucking his hands into his sleeves.

"You should go if you want to," is all Yuuki will say on the subject, sprawled over the library couch with her head pillowed on her arms. "Azai-san wouldn't have suggested you go if it was inappropriate."

Pacing the floor, Zero lowers his head, tracing the gilt letters on the spines of the books. "I don't see the point. It won't ever be useful to me."

"Then don't go," Yuuki answers, catching his hand as he goes past her, and guiding him to perch on the arm of her couch.

"I am a little curious, I admit, but the idea feels...intrusive?"

"Vampires do things differently than humans," Yuuki recites by rote, kissing up the back of his hand.

Zero snorts, his stomach light and fluttery from the way Yuuki is looking up at him through thick, dark eyelashes.

"I've been thinking..." she begins, voice low and throaty.

The Hunter groans theatrically.

"Hey!" She rises up on her elbows without letting go of Zero's hand. "I know you're not okay with how we usually have sex right now. And that's not a problem. But how do you feel about doing things the opposite - you penetrating me? It feels wrong that we've been married for over a year and you haven't had a chance to try it."

The jolt Zero feels in his belly is answer enough. He coughs, embarrassed at his own reaction.

Yuuki's expression sharpens, predatory and hungry, and she smiles knowingly.

Feeling himself color, Zero sputters, "I - are you sure? I don't know how to do anything, and you've been with Kaname like that before. It's probably going to be really bad. The two of us can't even be physically satisfied that way without...extra help."

"If it's Zero I want to do it," Yuuki declares, surging up.

"Okay," Zero says, helpless not to give her everything he can offer. "We can try."

It's awkward and fumbling and messy, and that doesn't matter one bit to Zero because it's the two of them together, Yuuki on her back below him arching her hips and guiding him forward with darkened eyes.
Being inside her is perfect, just like he'd always imagined, and it heals something in Zero to know that he can still have this gift. He breathes out and closes his eyes, afraid this might be some dream, but Yuuki's hand on his cheek stills his trembling.

"You're okay," Yuuki reminds him, her auburn hair falling across her cheek.

Zero feels his eyes dampen, and he kisses her desperately, his limbs so uncoordinated he feels like a teenager again. He noses her pulse, shivering and falling apart with every touch.

In the end, just as Zero feared neither of them manage to find satisfaction. Zero's thighs are smeared with slick, and Yuuki's cock leaks proudly against her belly. Zero brings her off against his hip, and sidesteps the question of his own pleasure entirely.

"You've never done that before, right?" Yuuki asks afterwards, curled naked in his arms as sticky things dry in uncomfortable places.

Zero shakes his head, flushing to the roots of his hair. He's unfavorably comparing his own awkward performance to that stupid sex-savant Kaname when Yuuki giggles and bops his nose.

"Don't make that face! We have lots of time to practice. I'm really happy though - I got to be Zero's first at something!" Genuine delight brightens her face, and she beams like all her Christmases have come at once.

Lowering his head beneath a throb of guilt, Zero murmurs, "I'm only sorry I can't give you more. I know our arrangement has been unfair to you."

Yuuki's eyes narrow. "I won't say I'm not jealous, because I am!" she returns, "but I love you, and I love Kaname, and in the end it only matters that we can be together."

Seizing Zero's waist, Yuuki squeezes aggressively, burying her face in his chest. "Besides, Kaname loves you too, so I'm not as mad now."

Zero can't figure out how that makes a difference, but he prefers to enjoy the feeling of holding his wife instead of arguing.

Yuuki lifts her head, and discerns Zero's doubt with a single look. "Kaname appreciates his privilege the way he should now. If he'd been indifferent, if it didn't matter to him at all - I think part of me might never forgive that. You deserve to be touched by people who love you, Zero."

Zero squeezes his eyes shut, the breath squeezed out of his lungs beneath agony. He remembers Ichiru, and love eternally tinged by bitterness. What does he know of love? The touch of gentle hands still sometimes catches him unawares, alien after so many years of loneliness.

"Thank you, Yuuki," is all he can manage.

Yuuki pulls him even closer. The silence speaks between them, all the words they don't need.

Strong arms settle around Kaname's shoulders, and the pureblood breathes out, feeling the dark haze weighing in his mind scatter.

"I made steamed pork buns. You'd better eat them," Zero grumbles.

The oddly grounding scent of the barbecued pork curls in his nostrils. "What a good kitten," Kaname muses. Even with Zero's extra sense taken into account, it's uncanny how adroit his
Consort is at catching Kaname's bad episodes before they grow serious. Likely it's a side-effect of their bonding - Zero's omega becoming more sensitive to its alphas' moods.

Kaname estimates his mental stability appears normal to the average outside observer. His self-control and abilities are restored - even his old sleeping habits have re-established themselves. Unbreakable assurance that the two people he loves cannot walk away from him has been a balm, soothing the most despondent of his moods.

But Kaname knows those needy, greedy broken parts still exist. The fault lines are deeper, less easily triggered, but still unhealed. There are times his mind feels unsteady, like he's walking blindfolded over broken ground. Somehow, Zero keeps seeking him out whenever those episodes flare.

"What are you doing?" Zero's voice asks in his ear, leaning his full weight on Kaname's back in a bid to be irritating.

"Planning how to make a great deal of money, so I can buy you and Yuuki more pretty things." Kaname glances over his shoulder, unable to resist the urge to tease. "I've decided that next time we visit Yuuki's resort I want to dress you both in nothing but strings of pearls. Since I am a jealous man, keeping you decent will require many, many pearls."

Zero hisses, and dumps a tray in front of Kaname, crinkling his papers. "Eat your food, you fossil."

Kaname is more than happy to comply, but he's not letting an opportunity go unused. "Only if you share," he teases, cupping a feel of his boy's lovely rear. His alpha purrs under his skin - *mate made them food, good mate should eat first!*

Zero narrows his eyes, then savagely stuffs a whole bun in his mouth, using a sharp motion of his chin to demand Kaname comply.

Kaname laughs - Zero's cheeks bulge, rather ruining his fierce look - and picks up one of the warm, fluffy buns himself. Zero's renewed interest in his hobbies is an encouraging sign that their Consort is well on his way to recovering from his post-heat malaise.

Perhaps that is a sign Zero is ready to tackle greater challenges. "There's something I've been meaning to discuss with you, actually…" Kaname begins.

Slouched against the wall of the Hunter's Association headquarters, Kaito's bored expression morphs into a positively evil grin when Zero begins ascending the stairs toward him.

"Whatever you're thinking, don't say it," Zero nearly begs.

"What, I can't congratulate my dear kohai for enjoying a sex marathon with his hot wife?" Kaito waggles his eyebrows.

Zero shoves his fellow ex-apprentice back with a hand to Kaito's face, and any more embarrassing words are temporarily muffled.

The reprieve doesn't last long, unfortunately. Kaito catches up with him after a few steps. "Master wants to know if he's supposed to send presents, or if that would be rude. I know a great place to buy some sexy underwear!"

"Please go away," Zero groans, the tips of his ears pinking; his intuition tells him everyone in staring.
"No can do," Kaito gloats. "The rest of the Lead Hunters are waiting for you," he adds in an undertone.

Zero's expression firms, and he grips the strap of the leather satchel slung over his shoulder. They walk in silence until the hallways grow less crowded.

"Are the Kurans are still treating you right?" Kaito asks, shoving his hands in his pockets.

"Yeah. They're really good to me," Zero tells him honestly.

"I'm glad," Kaito tells him quietly. "We were worried when we heard from Illesanmi about the Court. I would've killed to see the looks on those bloodsuckers' faces though!"

Zero grins, throwing his arm around Kaito's shoulders. "Whatever she told you, it was even better."

The elder Hunter cackles, knocking a friendly elbow against Zero's side. "Always knew you had it in you!"

Zero chuckles, and touches the pair of dragon bracelets hidden under the sleeves of his summer coat. "Kaito," he begins, sending his fellow apprentice a sideways look, "you don't need to worry about me anymore. Yuuki and Kaname won't hurt me. Not on purpose."

Kaito snorts, stepping ahead a pace. "I've told you before. We're your family, stupid. We're always going to worry."

Zero stops, staring at Kaito's back. Then he smiles and hurries after his almost-brother.

It's been months since Zero has returned to headquarters, to these familiar streets and halls. It's nostalgic, but not as painful as Zero thought it might be. Zero's bonding has effectively finalized the division between himself and the other Hunters. It's an ending, and a loss, but Zero knows he's gained valuable things in return. He's healthier and more stable than he was a year ago. He still has his Hunter family, and Rosehill is becoming his home, even if his heart will never forget his heritage.

That's something Zero intends to make clear to the Hunter's Association today, and part of the reason he requested this meeting.

The Hunters' chosen venue gives Zero a cautious optimism. It's one of the formal meeting rooms where all the chairs match, and the entire back wall is painted with a historical mural. Zero recognizes the woman in the mural immediately, an old nursery rhyme ringing in his head: 'hair black as night, skin white as snow, lips red as blood' - Mina Van Helsing, the first surviving Cursed Twin. She wields her sabre Dracul, the length of the blade burning with red fire as as her blood Awakens it, and her dark eyes hold a flicker of red in them.

It's almost a compliment to Zero, if he thinks about it. Mina was a superlative Hunter, but her contemporaries weren't always sure what to make of her power, or her uncomfortable vampiric resemblance. But Mina was just the first result of the drive toward more potent Hunter abilities. Seven thousand years after her death, every living modern Hunter traces their bloodline through Mina - Zero's own maternal line directly descends from Mina's youngest daughter. Surviving Cursed Twins are less rare now, as Hunter bloodlines dance closer to the line between Hunter and vampire. Cross Kaien, yet another Cursed Twin, is perhaps the epitome of that ideal - the Vampire without Fangs.

Speaking of the Chairman, he's seated in the front of the room, waving like an idiot. Beside him is Master Yagari, who's examining Zero with the post-Hunt intensity of a man searching for wounds.
Zero inclines his head respectfully toward the Association Co-Presidents and the other Lead Hunters gathered in the room, some of whom wave or call out greetings. Kaito points Zero toward a chair, and then disappears into the crowd.

Zero's power slides neatly into place as he surveys his audience, taking in the atmosphere - curiosity, anticipation, doubt tempered by pragmatism, distaste - along with a flood of other less useful information. Lead Hunter Miura has at least four cats. Lead Hunter Singh recently broke off a long term relationship, and hasn't taken it well. Lead Hunter O'Flannery was recently injured - lower left arm, mobility of the hand impeded, necrosis of the soft tissues, bones probably crushed.

Placing his satchel on the ground beside his chair, Zero shakes his head, trying to stop his intuition from completing its rather gruesome reconstruction. Blinking as he sees double for a moment, Zero takes a hefty sheaf of papers from his bag, leaving the Hunter journals Kaname gave him where they are, wrapped neatly as a present for Archivist Fong.

"Good evening, Lead Hunters of the Association." Zero gives a slight bow as he takes his seat. "I appreciate your time."

"Always a pleasure, Hunter Kiryuu," Lead Hunter Eijiofor's rich voice booms. "Nothing involving you is ever dull."

"Thank you," Zero replies drily. "I haven't been given assignments as often recently. I hope that means our situation has improved?"

Lead Hunter Machado crosses her arms. "Meh, more or less." She shrugs. "We're still cleaning up after bloody Shirabuki Sara and her nest of rats. It's been a damn swamp."

A serious-looking President Cross adds, "We believe we've finally reduced the Level E population to normal thresholds. But we're still short-handed. You'll get another assignment as soon as you're approved again for active duty. Our casualty list has already exceeded last year's entire total."

Zero grimaces. It's not even June yet, and last year's toll wasn't light either.

Master Yagari shakes his grey head. "We have more complicated problems. The human governments are angry after so many deaths and disappearances. We're doing our best to mend fences, but the surge has lasted over a year. They're starting to lose patience."

"And there have been unusual activity patterns in the blood colonies," Lead Hunter Nasrallah interjects. "The slums are always chaotic, but recent rumors have carried a great deal of discontent toward the Senate. The situation is unsettled. I still believe it deserves more of our focus."

That has the ring of an old argument. Zero frowns. It's probably beyond their jurisdiction, but Nasrallah is Intelligence Division and it's worth consideration.

Before Zero can consider that further, Lead Hunter Albrecht steers them back on topic. "A discussion for another time. You told us you had a proposal, Hunter Kiryuu?"

"More like an invitation," Zero replies, crossing one leg over the other.

"Congratulations on your bonding, by the way," Lead Hunter Suzuki says, toasting Zero with his sake cup.

"Yes. Thank you," Zero replies, caught flat-footed, and prays that Cross won't do anything embarrassing until afterwards. "I've come regarding a matter that interests both the Hunter's Association and the vampire nobility."
Zero leans forward, pulling their attention toward him. "The Kuran family believes it's time for us to reclaim the Hunters that Shirabuki Turned. To that end, they are prepared to offer a full partnership, not just cooperation - access to intelligence networks, manpower, intercession with local governments, the first successful drug antidote samples their labs produce. Whatever we need."

There is a long, fraught silence. Every face in the room is blank, wiped of any telltale reactions - not that Zero's power misses a single microsign. They're intrigued, but they don't trust easily.

"The advantage to us is clear," Zero continues. "The forced enslavement of even a single Hunter is unacceptable. And every Level B one of them assassinates is another reason for the Senate to demand execution instead of capture. We don't know what other orders Shirabuki might have given them, but allowing those Turned Hunters to complete them can't end well."

"And what," Lead Hunter Ilesanmi asks, "does the Kuran family expect to gain in return?"

The question weighs the air, and Zero can almost see their suspicions beginning to ferment.

Zero takes a slow breath. "Stability, most importantly. The nobility is in uproar over the killings, and the surviving B-Ranks are fighting over whatever power and influence the dead held. Right now the nobles are all afraid they'll be the next one to die. They're more likely to react in extreme ways to normal provocations. That's dangerous for both the vampires and us."

"Plus, the Kuran family has staked a lot of social capital on this alliance. Having a bunch of Hunters running amok technically breaking the treaty is not helping them. But if they can get rid of their problem.." Zero pauses, letting his listeners come to the correct conclusion. "They gain trust, and keep their reputation from further damage."

The Hunters consider his argument for a moment. Zero feels a current of interest stir in the room. They distrust altruism when it comes from a vampire, but self-interest is perfectly reasonable.

"Hunter Kiryuu, how certain are you that Kuran Kaname is committed to partnering with us?" asks a Lead Hunter that Zero doesn't recognize.

"Completely certain." Zero promises. "They'll support this project until we've found the last of Shirabuki's victims." That, Zero does not doubt.

Lead Hunter Yamamoto frowns. "I've met Kuran-san. If you'll forgive me, he seems like someone who always acts in his own best interests. The political climate may not always be so favorable. How can you promise full cooperation?"

Zero hesitates, trapping the words behind his teeth. His instinctive answer sounds arrogant even in his own head. He licks his lips, knowing the longer he delays the less credible he looks. Would they even believe him if he tells the truth? Their shifting and murmuring warns him he needs to come up with an answer they'll accept, and quickly.

Zero abandons himself to the flow of his intuition, and finds the fragile, delicate truth leaving his lips. "Because this project is important to me, and Kaname and Yuuki want to make me happy."

Zero's intuition whispers the deeper heart of that truth: They will give you anything you desire. Anything. You only need speak, and they will see it done.

In the silence, the Hunters eye one another; Zero perceives their disbelief as clearly as daylight.

"I know it sounds ridiculous. But it's true," he tells them, unconsciously twisting one of the dragon
bracelets hidden on his wrist. "They're purebloods. They exist above the usual politics. And they
care about me more than they care about political utility. If I ask them, they won't withdraw their
support."

"Hunter Kiryuu, I'm sorry but that that sounds a little...fantastic."

"I know," he says, hardly able to say the words with a straight face himself. *They're in love with
me,* he doesn't say. Zero doesn't need his power to tell him what a bad idea that is.

Instead he says, "I'm their omega. I can't justify it in human terms, because it relies on vampire
instinct. You'll either need to trust my assessment, or decide you're not interested."

Rising, Zero leaves the sheaf of papers behind on the seat of his chair. "They don't expect an
answer now. Whatever you decide, I've been instructed to give you these."

His gaze sweeps from one end of the room to the other, measuring. "They're intelligence reports
regarding the missing Hunters. One of Kuran's informants has confirmed Hunter Rajapaksha's
identity, so we can add another name to our list."

There's a burble of interested noise. With no way to know exactly who Shirabuki targeted - or even
how many - the Hunters have been building profiles from scattered sightings, trying to match
descriptions to names. Even one more addition is promising.

For the moment, Zero avoids telling them he was the informant. He'd known Rajapaksha, and with
the Ancestress' help his dreams had led right to his fellow Hunter's location. Zero hopes it's enough
to help retrieve him.

"I'll leave you to your deliberations," Zero finishes, running his eyes over the room and judging the
arguments to come require his absence. "President Cross, Lead Hunters, thank you."

And then Zero walks out, with the weight of their eyes on his back. He ducks two hallways down
before slumping against the wall. Releasing a shaky breath, Zero runs a hand over his face and
allows his tight grip on his power slip away.

They'll agree. The certainty is settled in his bones.

But it had been a shock to look through their eyes and be confronted by the way he was linked to
the Kurans in their minds now. With his bonding, Zero had known he was inevitably considered
their representative now, by the nature of his position. His divided loyalties are something both the
Hunters and the vampires have had to come to grips with.

Pushing away from the wall, Zero wanders toward the library, intending to find Archivist Fong.
Zero hopes he'll enjoy the journals - Zero himself doesn't know some of the ciphers, and he's
hoping the library may hold answers.

A high, shrill shout echoes down the hall, and Zero's stomach drops as his extra sense *screams* at
him.

Turning without a thought, Zero begins to run, bursting into the cafeteria packed with Hunters. No
one turns around, even though his vampire aura must warn them - they're crowded in complete
silence around a television set that's seen better days, their food left to cool.

Zero advances step by slow step. The dread in his belly ices over when he realizes the channel's set
to the news.
"Turn it up," someone in the front demands, and the newscaster's voice abruptly blares from the screen.

"We have confirmed twenty-seven simultaneous attacks so far, but reports are still coming in from national capitals around the world and that number may rise. The prime minister's office will release a statement in one hour regarding the assault on the Ministry of Records, which is believed to have resulted in over fifty deaths. The delay is due to the fact that the prime minister, along with a majority of other world leaders, is currently on the mainland attending the Global Economic Conference. The timing is believed to be deliberate, but no nation or organization has stepped forward yet to claim responsibility."

"Shit," one of the others curses, finally breaking the stunned horror.

More Hunters are gathering behind Zero, but his eyes are glued to the screen. What little information known is this: at precisely 10 pm this evening, around twenty masked individuals had driven straight up to the Ministry of Records and proceeded to slaughter everyone inside, before disappearing without a trace. The same action had been repeated more or less identically in twenty-seven other capital cities belonging to the world's largest, wealthiest, and most influential countries, with frightening coordination and precision.

The newscasters suddenly break out in a flurry of excitement. "We are about to show footage captured at the beginning of the Parliament attack…"

A low murmur breaks out among the watching Hunters. Whoever these people are, the way they move and handle their weapons says they're amateurs. All except for one - a man in the back who seems to be in charge. He's clearly professionally trained, and he moves like his gun is an extension of his arm. While the others rush inside, the lone professional methodically destroys the room's security cameras, before pausing oddly to roll one of his sleeves up to his elbow. Then he raises his gun, pulls the trigger once, and the recording ends.

Zero frowns, because his power is tugging at him, urging him that something is not quite right. The Parliament footage starts playing again, but it's just as strange the second time around. How did a bunch of amateurs manage to be so effective? And their identical timing...such perfect coordination would be complex even if you used elite soldiers.

A stocky woman in the back shoulders through the crowd, pointing at the attackers' leader. "Blood and ash, I know that man!"

Zero jolts, and the room collectively stares.

"You can't even see his face!" a voice calls.

"I don't need to," the woman retorts. She must be around Master's age, but has a certain smooth agelessness to her face that bespeaks high-content ancestry. "Look at his arm, the bare one. See it? He's got a sort of wonky hook shaped scar on his forearm. I remember that scar cause I was there when he got it. That's Campbell - David Campbell, from the European branch. Hunter Campbell's supposed to have been dead for twenty years!"

Zero's mouth opens before his brain catches up. "Was he from a low-content bloodline?"

"Yeah," the woman who identified him replies in a shaky voice.

"Fuck," a voice chants. "Fucking hell, fuck, fuck, fuck!" The room descends into chaos, with Hunters shouting and arguing, rushing from the room in haste.
Caught with no duty of his own to complete, Zero presses his lips together. There's only one reason a dead low-content Hunter is showing up now, inexplicably alive and attacking a civilian target: he's one of Shirabuki Sara's victims.

If Zero guesses right, Shirabuki would have repeated the same pattern for each attack. One Hunter to plan and lead the assault, plus enough cannon fodder to cause as much death as possible. Those unskilled subordinates were probably vampires too. Vampires don't need training against ordinary humans - they're fast enough and strong enough to cause damage by themselves. And Pureblood commands explain the discrepancies between their inexperience and their precise timing and coordination.

And the perpetrators' universal disappearance...Zero suspects Campbell executed the other vampires when they were finished. Humans would be expecting flesh corpses, not ash, so the signs would be easy to hide, and a single Hunter had the training to easily slip out in the chaos. There were Hunter charms designed to hide more than scent, and with a change of clothes and the right story, any Hunter could do it. Campbell wouldn't have been ordered to destroy himself - any Hunters that Shirabuki successfully Turned would be far too valuable to lose.

Twenty-seven different locations, over two thousand deaths...this won't be taken lightly by the world. People will demand answers, and the human governments will need to provide a believable explanation that hides the existence of the world of night, one that can withstand every assault by a relentless media hungry for a scoop.

Zero swallows. The sheer scale of the task - how much evidence needs to be fabricated? How many people need to be telling the same lies? This is too far too enormous for their usual concealment tactics to succeed. Even if the Senate aids them, the Association may fail. And then the whole world will know vampires exist.

There could be a new Blood War.

Abandoning his plans, Zero heads back the way he came. President Cross may need an envoy.

"Shirabuki Sara was a fool," Kaname hisses, feeling his eyes burn red.

Every vampire in the room shivers at the icy venom in his voice, cringing away for a millisecond before they catch themselves - even his inner circle.

Kaname pays no mind. Even gripped by rage he holds himself in perfect stillness. "There are reasons we hold ourselves apart from humanity. Yet that foolish child believed she could disturb that balance without consequence?"

His nobles are beginning to cower a little. Kaname closes his eyes, practicing forbearance as he attempts futility to calm his temper.

What had Shirabuki been thinking? Had she been seeking more power in the human world, taking advantage of the chaos? Had she been trying to establish her power among the other purebloods, assuming that she had already killed him? They'll never know, but how Kaname wishes he could pay her for this mistake.

"Tell me how the Senate is responding," the pureblood orders instead.

The lesser vampires eye one another, still wary of his temper. Still wary, despite all Kaname has done to make it clear he does not punish the bearer of ill news. Another tendril of shadow worms through the cracks in his psyche.
Finally, Ruka steps forward. "They've sent representatives to the global economic conference on the mainland, Kaname-sama, but the humans' reaction has not been good. No agreement regarding how to respond has been reached, and we believe the talks have reached an impasse. The Hunters' Association is doing damage control to hide any traces of vampire involvement, but they're stretched too thin to spearhead the coordinated misinformation campaign we will need. It falls on the Senate and the human governments to act."

Yuuki's dear voice rises from the doorway. "I just spoke with Takuma-sempai. He has the Council of Elders in line, but the Senate is still fighting about how to proceed. That's why everything they've suggested in the negotiations so far hasn't been effective. Chairman Ichihara will eventually bring them around to give up the necessary concessions, but I'm worried the situation will have spiraled out of our hands by then."

So is Kaname. They have perhaps twenty-four hours before the lack of information provokes an outcry. The faster all parties can settle on a narrative, the more comprehensive the deception they can build, and time is of the essence. The longer the rumors are left to grow, the more impossible they may be to uproot.

The charms on Yuuki's phone jingle as she comes to him, the worry she hides in front of their nobles reverberating through their blood bond.

Kaname lifts his hands to cradle her face, brushing her hair away from her cheeks. His beloved, dear wife. Kaname's eyes trace every familiar feature of her countenance - her pert nose, feathery brows, rosewood eyes, the bow of her mouth - and tender love overwhelms him.

Hidden beneath that love festers acrid fear. Kaname is so close to gaining everything he's ever wanted. He has Yuuki and Zero at his side; Yuuki returns his love, and in time he will certainly earn Zero's love too.

If the vampires' existence is revealed, violence is certain to follow. Humanity fears what it cannot control. The Kuran family will become a target - Yuuki and Zero will become targets. Yuuki is young, and inexperienced. Even for purebloods, accidents happened, like with Ouri. And Zero's persistent morals could come between them, if Zero sided with humanity over his lovers. Kaname could lose both of them.

No. The darkness in his mind coils tighter. Never.

The current peace must be maintained at all costs. Kaname needs things to stay exactly as they are.

(Kaname's mental stability had never quite recovered from being denied by his beloved. When his greatest fear strikes true, the equilibrium of his mind shivers and quakes. And the monster in his soul claws its way free.)

"Inform the Senate that I will correct the situation myself."

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was not supposed to end on a cliffhanger, but I was already so late posting I resigned myself to the necessity. Sorry everyone!
Mugicha is a tea-like drink made from roasted barley grains. The drink has a smooth, nutty flavor that's not as bitter as tea, and it's also caffeine free. In Japan, it's often consumed cold in the summer.

Me: you have too many OCs. Stop making more.

Also me: adds 15 different Hunter OCs I created specifically so they could show up once and never appear again

Dear readers - Yuuki's new Shadow needs a name, and I thought you guys might enjoy having some input! Suggest baby names and I'll choose whichever one I like best. Traditionally names for Shadows tend to be short, and 'appropriate' for their station, but don't always necessarily follow those guidelines.

Next chapter: Kaname isn't the only one picking the nuclear option. Let's see what breaks, shall we?
Happy New Year and welcome to 2019! Wishing all of my readers a wonderful upcoming year. We've passed TWOFT's second anniversary as well. It's been a pleasure to come to know you all. Thank you for your continuing encouragement, patience and support!

I've received so many wonderful suggestions for the new baby's name that I've decided to name Takuma's baby using your suggestions as well. Please drop any more suggestions you have in the comments before next chapter.

Kaname slides a golden cufflink through his sleeve as though impaling an enemy, then folds his cuff down with a viciously precise twist of his wrist. Soon to receive the same treatment, its mate sits on the counter beside a lapel pin of similar design, the nine orchid kamon imprinted on its surface buffed spotless and shining.

Something has been set free in her husband. Yuuki can't quite put her finger on what, because she's seen him angry and threatened, and this is different. Similar, but more distant: older, deeper, flowing unrestrained. Their bloodbond is volatile - a well of pure will, freezing and sinking and razor sharp.

Yuuki is slightly concerned - or she would be, if she hadn't already shot past that stage when she learned thousands of people were dead and the vampire world is in danger of discovery. "Kaname, where are we going?" she asks as she drops her day dress into the laundry, asking more out of habit than curiosity.

Her husband smooths his hands down his waistcoat - a beautiful thing, woven with a subtle pattern that makes the colors shift like bloodwine swirled under candlelight - then tucks away his pocket watch on its chain. "To the Hunter's Association first. I must allow time for the Senate to get out of our way."

"And then?" Yuuki asks, yanking a brush through her hair as quickly as she can.

A cold light enters his eyes, and Kaname smiles mirthlessly. "I have not played our game to this stage, only to see the board upended now."

There is a great darkness at his back, carrying him forward. Yuuki dimly receives the impression of a shadowy creature looming above her, and shudders like a claw has run down her back. This is worse than his anger. This is a clear sky as a typhoon bears down on the coast, a high and towering fury crackling just out of sight.

Yet she is not afraid. Yuuki knows that fury will pass over her without ruffling a single hair on her head.
"What should I wear?" she asks, settling on a more innocuous question.

Resplendent in his black three-piece suit lined in blood-colored silk, her husband considers his reply. "Something unquestionably modern, that will also proclaim our nature to those with the knowledge to see."

Yuuki's anxiety is too tightly wound to parse Kaname's cryptic hints. "A dress?"

Kaname chuckles. "Yes. Something that will satisfy human tastes but remains appropriately vampiric. A little theatrically will serve us well. And add gold jewelry - it wouldn't hurt to remind of our position."

She nods, heading to her closet, already having something in mind. The red one trimmed in black - red to match Kaname - with the uncomfortable stiff collar, deep neckline, and puffed sleeves, and those black lace cuffs that fall over the backs of her hands.

But before she can leave, Kaname catches her hands, kneeling down before her. "My dear, permit me a discourteous request. Tonight, I ask that you allow me to speak for both of us, and follow my lead. I mean no insult to your abilities. Your political skills have grown by leaps and bounds, but you are still new to such matters, and in such a delicate situation I have the greater experience."

Yuuki doesn't need Kaname to tell her she's in over her head. It stings her pride, but she's relieved she doesn't have to hold sole responsibility for fixing this. "Is whatever you're planning going to endanger you?"

"Nothing is without risk," Kaname replies a little too calmly.

Yuuki chews her lip. Sometimes you have to be direct when Kaname uses too many chess metaphors. "Are you planning on sacrificing yourself?"

Kaname's lips twist, and his chin lifts in contempt. "For such a small thing? Hardly."

Yuuki considers this, then shrugs. "Then go ahead, but you're not leaving me behind. And you're explaining everything to me later."

"But of course," Kaname replies, still on his knees before her. "I intend for this to be a lesson of what you'll be capable of in the future."

Even with her stomach knotted in worry, Yuuki likes the sound of that.

A bomb going off outside headquarters would have caused less panic.

Zero is sequestered with the Lead Hunters when his Hunter senses flare, and a pair of black suns descend on their doorstep.

He is tearing through the halls before he can think, heart in his throat. Why are they here? Was Rosehill attacked? Does Kaname have some plan, or is there more misfortune to share?

"Hunter Kiryuu!"

Zero jerks free of the hand on his arm and keeps running, because no one is permitted to touch him except his spouses, and they are waiting for him outside

Skidding to a stop outside the entry hall, the Hunter is cognizant of a crowd gathered inside, the hum of anxiety and raised voices. Cross and Master Yagari are already present as Zero begins
pushing through the crush toward the outer doors. Once the Hunters realize who he is, they begin parting around him, leaving the bubble of space that Zero remembers - he's the lone vampire in the room, always trapped at the periphery.

Clenching his teeth and nodding to Master, Zero steps past the threshold, the Co-presidents at his back. Behind them, the crowd spills over the landing and the steps, right down to the boundary line of the wards themselves, leaving a wide arc of space around their visitors.

Kaname is waiting for him, Yuuki at his shoulder, both dressed like blood and midnight and showing off their deadly elegance without shame, all their vivid pureblood beauty praised by the stars. Yuuki is shaken but strong, bearing up with her bravery, but Kaname -

Zero's intuition leaps at him, overtaking him in a sudden rush, and Zero halts, looking down.

That look on his husband's face...that isn't Kaname, not his Kaname. This is something far older, steeped in cruelty and ruthlessness and madness.

When the Ancestor of the Kuran meets Zero's eyes and smiles, his fangs gleam in the faint light. Heart in his throat, Zero descends the steps. Each footfall sets off a shockwave in his chest. Is he afraid? Is this regret?

Above him, Zero vaguely realizes that Cross and Master have come to a stop half-way down, leaving Zero to continue alone. He runs out of strength after the last step, the wards a paper-thin barrier between Kaname and himself - he could reach out and brush a black wool sleeve, the porcelain skin of his husband's cheek.

"Kuran-san," - Zero jerks, because he's never before heard Cross give Kaname that honorific - "to what do we owe the honor?"

Kaname makes no gestures of respect, only tips his head to the side. "Presidents of the Hunters' Association. I thought it courteous to inform you in person. I will be handling our current situation personally."

"Personally?" Cross' voice rises, and a ripple passes through the crowd. Zero's eyes dart to Yuuki, who nods infinitesimally.

Zero lowers his gaze uneasily to the ground. That's - that's like crushing a tick with a sledgehammer. It's always a sign of great forces moving when a pureblood takes an interest. For Kaname, the ancient Original King and last of the Ancestors to take action…

Kaname makes no sign to show he's caused such a stir. The polite, slightly amused lift of his mouth never wavers. "Yes. The Senate has proved inadequate to the task."

And they're going to hate that, Zero knows. The Senate will fight Kaname even harder, even more bitterly. This is the first open rift between them, Kaname showing off how effortlessly he can usurp them with barely a word. Zero's power strains, spinning out potential futures in front of his eyes. More conflict, a new stage of enmity - open war between the monarchist faction and the Senate.

Cross is a little pale under his glasses. Vampire conflicts always spill over into Hunter domains. There'll be trouble for all of them in the future. "I see. A conversation for another time. You are confident you'll succeed?"

The darkness in Kaname's eyes could swallow up the night. "I never rely on just one fail-safe,
President Cross."

Zero fights the urge to draw his husband back out of whatever pit in his head he's sunk into.

"There is one more thing, before I go," Kaname says, the easy tone of his voice taking a blade's edge. "My wife and I will be occupied for the next few days. I ask that my Consort be sheltered here behind the Association's wards until I return to claim him."

Master's expression looks thoughtful for some reason, while Cross's face hardens. "Shall I assume, Kuran-san, that if anything happens to Zero-kun something equally terrible will happen to us?"

Just for a split second, both his spouses twist into fury, then Kaname carefully paints his mask back on. "That would be a reasonable assumption, President Cross, but it seemed unnecessary to mention. I would hate to burn this place to the ground and salt the earth where it once stood."

"We'll take care of Zero," Master Yagari promises over the crowd's angry hisses, speaking for the first time. He's not relaxed, but neither is he stern like Cross. Zero blinks - when has Master ever trusted Kuran Kaname?

"Thank you," Kaname replies respectfully, furthering Zero's confusion.

Yuuki opens her arms hopefully, and without thinking Zero steps through the wards into her embrace as the remnants of his taming brand tingle. She pulls him down and kisses him hard enough to make his mouth bruise.

"Be safe," he begs her. Yuuki only kisses him harder in reply. "Don't let him lose himself," he whispers only for her ears, and her arms tighten around him before gently pushing him away.

Then Kaname catches him up, cradling the back of his head and taking Zero's mouth like he owns it. Zero forgets how to breathe until his husband releases him, head spinning from the lack of air.

For a moment, Zero regrets not having sex with them in so long. At least then he'd have that sharp ache in his core and bruised hips to cling to while they're gone, their touch pressed into his skin. Later, the Hunter promises himself. He'll tend to them properly when they're finished - he'll make a holiday of it, refuse to leave their bed until he's too sore to walk and can't.

Perhaps his resolution shows in his face, because Kaname softens, here in this place, even in front of all these watching Hunters. The pureblood takes Zero's hand, pressing a gentle, worshipful kiss to his palm like Zero is a novel heroine. Zero's heart flutters. The Ancestor of the Kuran has endured millennia of loneliness, yet he finds Zero worthy of bending his pride for.

Another ripple passes through their watchers. Possessiveness is expected between Zero and his spouses. But tenderness in a vampire, much less a pureblooded beast in human skin? That is transgressive, practically blasphemy.

And yet Kaname was willing to go to such lengths for Zero. That show of value will protect Zero, heighten his influence as much as it will divide him from his fellow Hunters.

Zero is too honest to allow such a show of care to go unanswered. And even if there's nothing else, there is one thing he can do. "You'll need power for your plan, won't you?" His voice makes the tableau fall completely silent.

The Ancestor of the Kuran studies Zero, fathomless eyes prying out every hidden part of him. "Yes."
Zero swallows, fists his hands, and steadies his courage. "Then take what you need." His shaking hands pull his collar open, fumbling on the buttons.

The silence from the watching Hunters turns his stomach. What Zero proposes is beyond disgusting - offering to let a vampire feed on you? Willingly feeding a vampire in front of other Hunters? There isn't anything more depraved and repulsive he could do.

And yet. This is reciprocation. This is a declaration. This is surrender. And as Zero leans back and offers his throat, the emotion he feels is not regret.

Breaking his body into chittering pieces of power, he slips past guards, past walls and gates, his dear wife fluttering behind him, and reforms himself piece by piece before his newest pawns.

There are screams, and the sound of guns brought to bear, but the Ancestor of the Kuran does not deign to open his eyes until the last shard of his body is gathered neatly into place.

He raises an eyebrow at the soldiers in their heavy body armor, then dismisses their existence as they shout demands at him. The Ancestor takes a moment instead to send approval through the blood bond. As instructed, Yuuki is remaining out of sight, her butterflies clustered in the corners and on the ceiling, a thousand eyes watching and measuring.

This stark, coldly lit place is likely a bunker; the lack of windows, stagnant air and thick concrete walls suggests somewhere underground. An uninspiring stage, but the Ancestor will make do, and the contrast of his own splendor with his drab surroundings pleases him.

Sounds have a harsh quality here, reflected off nothing but concrete and metal, and the domed roof above. The humming of frightened human pulses, speeding rabbit-quick, echoes in his ears louder than the hum of the electrical generators. Even sated, flush with the richest of bloods, primordial hunger twists in the Ancestor's gut, the nature of a beast that eats and eats, consuming everything it touches.

But glutting himself as a beast in human skin would bring no relief - at least, none greater than the bounty already warming his belly. The awful energy of his beloved's blood courses in the vampire's veins, tracing hot red lighting behind his eyes as it froths and sparks. Self-assurance radiating from every pore of his body, the Ancestor allows himself to bask in phantom affection. His precious boy was generous; he could do anything with this kind of power.

Allowing a glint of ruby to seep into his gaze, the Deathless King surveys humanity's most powerful leaders, the attendees of the 114th global economic conference. The frozen, terrified humans huddle before him like so many mice in a burrow.

He barely spares a glance for the few vampires in the room. They are irrelevant to his purpose. The unhappy handful of Senate representatives, sent to forge a failed consensus, have fallen to their knees at the sight of him. Without his acknowledgement, they are forced to remain kneeling.

"Good evening," the Ancestor says in a tone like black silk, beginning his performance. "My apologies for startling you. We have not been introduced, but you may know of me. My name is Kuran Kaname."

With an immortal's patience, the Ancestor waits out the uproar. Of course these humans know who he is - anyone with the faintest knowledge of vampire society knows the Kuran family and their significance - but offering politeness and false modesty salves sensitive human egos. And it never hurts to remind each and every one of these humans what his breed is capable of, and how their
lives rest on his tolerance.

This time, when he steps forward the soldiers let him pass.

The Ancestor of the Kuran faces humanity's most powerful appointed leaders - presidents, prime ministers, premiers, chancellors, princes, kings, sheikhs and assorted heads of state. Whatever their titles or importance, their grey hair and lined faces, they are little more than children in his eyes. He would like their cooperation, but he can complete his designs without it. Yet if he winds his words around them just right, they will bow to his will, and his course will be smoother.

"You know why I have come," the Ancestor begins, schooling his face into something suitably young and earnest. "The world of night stands in crisis. The secrecy enacted and maintained by our predecessors has been profoundly threatened. The one who forced us to this point is dead, but her bloody legacy lives on. I presume the representatives of the Senate have told you that much."

He waits for a general murmur of agreement, but does not look at the kneeling vampires, a subtle snub he knows the human leaders will see. If the Senate has offended during negotiations, the Ancestor intends to set himself up as an alternative.

"The vampire race values its cooperation with your respective governments," the Ancestor flatters, taking a moment to project sincerity as he sweeps his gaze over the room. "The arrangement keeping our worlds separate has served us well for many millennia. Our race realizes this uproar must have been highly troubling to our partners. Therefore, I intend to offer a suitable gift in apology, one that will also solve our current situation."

He waits for the interested whispers to fade before continuing. "The chief obstacle to resolving these attacks has been our lack of a suitable surrogate culprit. These attacks are too widespread and well-planned for our usual excuses - terrorists, rebels, dissenters, gangs, serial killers, and the like. But there are entities with the necessary resources to provide a believable explanation."

The Ancestor of the Kuran spreads his hands, allowing his voice to build. "There have always been nations driven by ideology to reject the world order. You call them rogue states. As a token of our alliance, I offer the destruction of one of those enemies."

Smiling tightly, he lowers his hands as the room descends into chaos. If humanity wants a war, the Ancestor of the Kuran will give them one.

"Do you really expect us to believe a crazy idea like that?" quarrels a particularly self-important looking old human.

Judging from all the medals on his chest, the human is probably someone noteworthy - or would like to think he is - but the pureblood doesn't care enough to inquire. The Ancestor favors the rude human with a smile that says 'let me treat you to a detailed examination of your entrails.'

Turning white, the elderly objector ducks down in his chair and closes his jaw with an audible snap.

Little appeased, the Ancestor of the Kuran curls his lip in a way that exposes all this teeth. "A reasonable question, if rudely phrased."

"A sacrificial lamb must be properly prepared before slaughter," the pureblood allows, clasping his hands behind his back and slowly pacing the perimeter of his stage. "I guarantee I will find plenty of willing collaborators among their ruling elite. Places like that are always wracked by corruption. If not for money and promises of amnesty, I have other, unique persuasions."
The Ancestor's lips twist. "Few humans will refuse a few extra hundred years added to their lifespan, even when they know the price. Anyone who does refuse will have their memories altered. With enough officials under our control, manufacturing the necessary evidence to paint their government as the culprit will be simple. We may need to depose their leader, but our collaborators will be happy to provide a replacement. Touching off a power struggle will also provide a convenient rationale behind the attacks."

"From there, it becomes necessary to convince our target state's population. Any media or access to the outside world will already be heavily regulated by the regime's leaders. A few rumors, soon backed up by official propaganda, and we convince our lamb of its guilt," he concludes, letting his hands fall to his sides.

A woman with short, greying hair rises to her feet. "Mr. Kuran, I find your choice of scapegoat plausible. But the reason that rogue states still exist is because they're nuclear armed. We avoid provoking or destabilizing them for our own safety."

The Ancestor can work with such cautious politeness, and rewards her with a slight nod. "I understand your reluctance. But I have promised to deliver your enemy to your feet, and I have already considered how to overcome that particular obstacle."

Reaching out, the pureblood crooks a finger. A phone belonging to the disagreeable human who interrupted him earlier flies up and hovers in the air before him.

The room gasps.

Smirking - it takes so little to impress humans - he allows the little device to float for a moment, lighting up the screen to show it functions. Then the Ancestor nonchalantly begins to disassemble it, piece by tiny piece. Each individual component hovers in the air nearby, until a constellation of chips, wiring and casing surrounds him.

"Any bomb is useless if you destroy the ignition device," the Ancestor states, as if bored. "Your intelligence agencies will know where their arsenals are located, and our collaborators will lead us to anything your spies have missed. I will complete the disarmament myself. I am at no risk from either radiation or accidental ignition."

If anyone questions the Ancestor's ironic smile, they take the wiser path and say nothing.

He raises a hand, and the tiny parts begin to reassemble themselves, a smooth linear rebuilding the Ancestor makes look fluid and easy. Only the Senate's representatives understand how impressive this demonstration really is. Limiting himself to a tiny thread of power, and the precise delicacy required to handle electrical components is possible only after great practice.

When he's finished, the Ancestor lights the screen to prove the device still functions, and then sends it back to its owner with a sweep of his hand. "Once we have our lamb laid on the altar, you will issue a joint broadcast denouncing our chosen culprit, and our agents will make sure it reaches every television, radio and news website around the world. What you do after that is your own affair - destroy them if you wish. I have no doubt your citizens are crying out for blood."

A younger human slams his hands on the table, and jumps to his feet. "You're a real bastard. Do you know how many innocent people will die if we do this? Whoever we choose won't even be guilty. It's you people who did this."

The Ancestor of the Kuran nearly laughs. He's barely scraping the surface of his capacity for selfishness and cruelty. "Do you have a better idea? Pity for your enemies is admirable, but will do
you no favors. Consider which will serve you better. A messy, ugly revelation that will likely end with bloodshed in your own streets, or a simple, patriotic, just conflict on foreign soil. Which do you think will boost your approval ratings?"

The human scowls, but stays silent.

This time, the Ancestor of the Kuran laughs aloud, and circles back to the center of the room, holding every eye captive. Turning, he lifts his hands once more, and hardens his voice. "Now tell me, human, which of your enemies would you like to destroy?"

"You really believe this will work, Kaname?"

"Believe? My dear, I am certain we will succeed. Surely you don't think I told those humans everything?"

"Those bloodsuckers work fast," comments a young apprentice, rising up on her toes to catch a look at the television screen over the crowd's shoulders. "It's been what, twenty hours?"

The television commentators continue breathlessly speculating what the upcoming press conference will reveal. Zero watches the clock in the corner of the screen tick down, a feeling of ominous trepidation weighing his shoulders. It's almost enough to block out the less-than-friendly looks he's receiving from some of other Hunters.

One of the friendlier faces, Hunter Niemi - another active Hunter Zero's worked with before, though she's getting on in years and will probably retire soon - calls out, "Hey Kiryuu, you got any idea what's going on?"

"Not a clue," he replies, stomach clenching. Yuuki and Kaname haven't called. They're probably just insanely pressed for time as they rush to avert a crisis - or trying to shield him by leaving him truthfully ignorant - but Zero desperately wants to know they're okay. Kaname's state of mind worries him most of all. Zero doesn't believe either of them will come to physical harm, but when he thinks about what course of action Kaname might condone…

"Guess they just wanted a snack before they left." Quartermaster Kudou laughs with a cruel undertone as he marches up, flanked by Takagi from the intelligence division. "I'm sure if they'd had time they'd have stopped for a fuck too." His dark eyes rake Zero from top to bottom. "Not that I understand why."

"Fuck off Kudou," shouts someone from the other side of the room. "We're trying to watch the announcement."

"You all saw what he did," scowls Takagi, raising his voice and squaring his burly shoulders. "Right in front of us, like he was proud of it. I can't think of anything more degrading. We're Hunters - we don't make ourselves meals for those monsters. And now he has the balls to show up like he didn't just betray us."

"That's going too far, Takagi!" Hunter Niemi is on her feet, a look in her eye that says she wants to punch something.

"Betray you?" Zero repeats in disbelief, stoic mask settling over his face. The other Hunters - his comrades - avert their eyes, but his extra sense can still read the traces of their agreement. Zero broke a deep-laid taboo. The only thing he could have done worse was sink his fangs into a human right in front of them.
Zero twists his hands in the hem of his shirt, just barely stopping himself from a more obvious gesture of pain, but Zero knows his hurt is written in his eyes, no matter how blank his face. He swallows past the rasp in his throat. "I've been married to the Kurans for over a year. What did you think would happen? That I would be able to keep them from ever feeding from me? That's ridiculous."

"No," Zero continues, anger rising up. "You knew exactly what I would have to do. But as long as you didn't have to see it, you decided to ignore it. And now you're pissed because you can't pretend anymore."

Takagi looks uncomfortable, shifting uneasily like he'd rather leave.

But Zero isn't finished, turning his glare on a new target. "And you, Kudou!"

The quartermaster flinches.

"If I'm a whore for sleeping with them, then the Association is my pimp. Because I remember you all spending weeks haggling over terms before allowing the vampires fuck me."

Zero faces the room and lets his voice carry. "So you don't get to be the morally superior one. You don't get to be disgusted by what you all agreed to. And you don't get to dictate the terms of my life anymore, because you've already bargained that away."

Unable to face his comrades any longer without saying something he'll regret, Zero glares one last time and marches out of the room, heading for his temporary quarters. Throwing himself down on the bed, Zero exhales and buries his face in the pillow.

Dammit. He'll just have to find out what the announcement was later.

Although...Zero considers for a moment, and then slips into mushin. Carefully extending his sight and hearing alone - still a new, barely tested refinement of his power - Zero's consciousness finds a crackle of static in one of the medical division offices, and leaves his body breathing evenly behind him as he settles in to watch.

Seeing without your eyes is a difficult experience to wrap your head around. There are no blind spots - it's rather like a sphere surrounding the point 'you' are in any direction. Zero amuses himself by poking around and listening to the nurses gossip while they wait.

Something brushes against Zero's intuition so lightly, so delicately it's almost invisible. Like the touch of a cat's whisker.

Or, Zero realizes with a dawning sense of horror, like the brush of a raven's feather.

That raven's feather whispers against his senses again as the cameras switch to a dour-faced Prime Minister and his colleagues. And then, as the man opens his mouth and begins telling a story about a terrible, cruel dictatorship and the depravities they've committed in the name of preserving power, a single black feather floats gently down from the ceiling. No breeze disturbs it as it falls, slow and inevitable, and when it touches the ground it dissolves like a snowflake touching warm earth.

And then it begins to rain.

Handfuls of inky black feathers, covering the floors like a quilt, blocking out the sky in curtains. Zero isn't the only one who senses something amiss - the nurses have drawn weapons and are watching the corners of the room with wild eyes. But no one mentions the feathers - Zero alone can
see them.

The Hunter gasps, and jerks upright in his own body, dropping out of mushin like it burns. But the raven feathers are still there, forming a phantom snowdrift around his body. Zero brushes them away with shaking hands that pass through nothing except air. His palms tingle, while his Hunter senses warn 'vampire, vampire,' too heavy and insistent to be anything but the work of a pureblood.

The shouting in the halls has reached the pitch of panic. Zero shuts his eyes and grinds the heels of his hands against them until white spots bloom.

Kaname, what have you done?

The reports roll in from central Asia, from Africa, from Europe, from the Americas. As far as the Hunters' Association can determine, whatever Kaname is doing covers the entire planet.

And that titanic flow of power has remained actively steady for the past six hours, with no sign of lessening. To complete such a massive working for even a few moments would be considered an act of monstrous power. To maintain that vast hold for so many hours without faltering? What Kaname has done was considered beyond impossible. Nobody believed a pureblood existed who could be capable of such magnitude.

Not that they've officially confirmed it's Kaname - yet. Everyone suspects, but Zero hasn't been able to bring himself to confess, and Cross has mercifully avoided asking. It's a futile act of protection, but Zero feels guilty for withholding information nonetheless.

The Hunters have always known age increases a vampire's power, but the reality is beyond Zero's imagining. The sheer scale of what Kaname's done is enough to make some of the senior Hunters need to sit down and breathe through the panic, because the Hunters possess no possible way of countering it. They're utterly helpless to do anything except watch and wait.

This is a nightmare scenario for the Hunters, mitigated only by the fact that this cloud of power appears to be having no noticeable effect. Not on the Hunters, not on the handful of tamed vampires the Association keeps, and not on the Level D vampires in the slums.

The uncertainty is making everyone short-tempered, and Zero has retreated back to his guest room. Curled up on the bed, Zero clutches his useless phone - silent of a single response after so many calls - and eventually dozes off.

A gale sweeps him up, and calls in the Ancestress' voice. "West, child. Search west!"

Raven feathers shroud his vision, but Zero sends his spirit forth desperately, seeking the smallest sign. He follows the currents of heavy power in the air, questing relentlessly. And by casting off his body, his eyes have finally opened.

There are voices in the air - or rather one single voice laid atop itself, a susurrus overlapping like the sound of rain as the sky sheds feathers. Zero perceives clearly now. Those raven-dark feathers are not meant for Hunters, nor are they meant for vampires. They are whispers in the ears of humanity, planting a single suggestion: believe. Believe this clever lie, take things as they seem. Close your eyes, look no further.

It is, Zero understands as he looks further, not correct to call this power coercion, nor true forced belief. It could be resisted, if one had the determination. But in the absence of firm conviction, it's like giving someone a push while off-balance. Like planting a seed, but the soil itself determines if it takes root.
There! His intuition guides him. There is the source. Climb higher!

So Zero does, straining desperately at the current boundaries of his strength. Let me see them, he begs, even just once. Let me know they are alright!

The black feathers give way to snow, and a mountaintop. And there is Yuuki, steely determination writ across her face as she watches the horizon from the high ground, holding a staff in a guard position.

Below her, kneeling in the snow, is Kaname. His eyes are hooded and distant, gaze bent toward far-off inner horizons, the dark abysses of his soul where only the dead walk. There is strain in his shoulders, and in the clench of his jaw, the way this throat works, and in the way his fingers twitch as though struggling to hold onto something that fights him.

They hold that frozen position for hour upon hour, Zero keeping unseen vigil alongside them. The shadows draw long; the sun sets bloody in the west, tingeing the snow sanguine. The moon rises and sets bone-white; the stars wheel overhead.

The weight of his own strength wears Kaname down fragment by fragment. It is a terrifying thing to watch - his proud shoulders drawing inward, spine bent lower and lower until he's bracing himself upright in the snow on his hands and knees. The heavy breaths, the rapid flutter of his eyelashes, dark against cheeks holding less color than the snow around him.

Many times, Zero watches Yuuki bite her lip and look down, longing to help, to offer comfort. But at the last minute her determination always stays her hand, and she returns to her watch, leaving Kaname to his own task.

Yuuki's role is vital. If Kaname were to be attacked now...someone might actually be able to kill him, while his power and attention are so wholly caught up in this delicate onslaught. Only the power of another pureblood could shield his vulnerable body. Yuuki must not waver for a single moment.

Zero's strength pours out sooner than he'd expected, but stubborn to the last, the Hunter watches over his spouses until the very last moment. Beneath his dwindling strength, it's like clinging to a cliff by his fingernails, until the sheer effort tears him away back to his body.

Zero wakes up in the medical wing, and endures his scolding without complaint. A genuine fear for his health shows in the other Hunters' eyes now.

Zero is valued by a pureblood whose power is so vast it can blanket the planet. It is not wise to test the limits of that value.

Confined to bed, Zero watches the broadcast loop over and over as black feathers sink softly to the ground at the edges of his sight. Topple a government and manipulate eight billion people. Just a normal day's work for the Kuran family.

Zero should probably feel angry. People will get hurt, and Kaname's solution is completely unethical. That kind of arrogant manipulation is exactly what he despises most about vampires, especially purebloods.

But compared to some of the scenarios Zero imagined, the damage from Kaname's plan is moderate. Zero may not like Kaname's methods, but he can't change what's already happened. His emotions have settled on resigned acceptance instead of anger. Zero knew what Kaname was capable of when he bonded him. What's one more offense to tolerate?
But that worries Zero too - is he losing his own sense of right and wrong? Zero doesn't have a good answer for that, and he knows the thought is going to cause him many sleepless nights to come.

The beacon of power burning in the west blinks out around two hours later, almost twelve hours after it first began. Zero senses it crumble around him, watching the last few raven feathers break and melt.

Yuuki and Kaname are probably fine. Cold fear still clenches in his chest.

Six more days pass before Zero sees his wife and husband again. Six days with no word, and no rumors from either vampire or Hunter.

Zero bears their separation the best he can, because he understands the necessity. A pureblood must never appear less than flawless and invulnerable. Kaname cannot resurface until he's recovered from his exhaustion and can act unaffected by his labor. With the revelation of his power he walks a narrow line between awe and terror; the knives turned against him will be numberless. There will be other political matters the Kurans must smooth over too, and it's better that Zero remains safe so they don't have to worry.

Zero understands all this. But his omega doesn't.

At first, it's only his heartbeat speeding a little too fast, making sweat gather beneath his collar. Then he begins spending more time alone, shying away from close quarters and accidental touch. Each day his paranoia and anxiety ratchets higher. The Hunter only realizes something's amiss when he catches himself spending the day in bed, burrowed underneath multiple blankets as an acute sense of anxiety keeps him from rest.

It catches him by surprise - Zero's omega instincts are normally so weak, after all. He can't remember any mention of this happening in the books he's read, but he knows newly bonded mates aren't meant to be separated for long periods of time. Constant touch and mutual co-dependence is supposed to continue until all partners have settled. Zero's guessing, but perhaps his omega has taken neglect as a sign of abandonment?

It hurts, knowing that day after day his alphas' claim fades from his skin. His instincts insist he's vulnerable, like being naked in front of strangers. He's not safe if no one can tell he's bonded. A jittery feeling under his skin makes him long for the quiet darkness of his nest - some omegas retreat there in times of stress, though Zero has never before felt the need.

Zero conceals any sign of his discomfort, forcing himself to keep up appearances with the Association. It's not Yuuki and Kaname's fault, and Zero won't allow anyone grounds to criticize them. But pretending makes the anxiety and distress pull tight around his throat, the gnawing need to hide worse.

Zero used to go weeks, months even without significant touch. Now Zero starves after a few days of isolation. How weak, he scolds himself, and holds his need down with the same self-control he used to starve himself until he couldn't recognize the feeling of hunger.

His reunion with Yuuki and Kaname unpleasantly mirrors their parting - on the steps of the Association headquarters, surrounded by a hostile crowd, with Cross at Zero's side.

His omega whimpers and claws, wanting only to be wrapped in the arms of its alphas until it feels secure again. Zero crushes the desire for reassurance, surveying the scene with detached stoicism.

Kaname still carries more of the Ancestor of the Kuran reflected in his bearing than Zero would
like, but Yuuki has kept her promise not to let him drown. Cross is not wearing his glasses, and the other Hunters are armed. Fear and suspicion thicken the air.

Zero judges an intervention is necessary.

As Cross steps forward and opens his mouth, Kaname lights up like he expects a verbal battle. Before either of them can get a word in, Zero shoulders his way past Cross, and glares at his missing spouses.

"I haven't heard from you in a week!" he hisses. His extra sense whispers the correct role to play, and Zero bends to fit, vibrating with the feedback from his audience. The aggrieved spouse, irritated but fond underneath. "You could at least have called, bastard."

Come on, Kaname, Zero urges silently. Take the opening and play human. Prove there are chains you'll allow. With vampires, giving ground would be weakness. For Hunters, watching a bloodsucker display humanity is reassurance.

His husband's face remains perfectly blank. Then Zero watches him shake off the last of the Ancestor and Kaname's brows raise in amusement. "I apologize, I've been occupied. The error is ours. I shall have to make it up to you, my Consort."

Somehow, Zero suppresses the desire to simply step forward and allow himself to be carried away. No one needs to know unnecessary things. "You better, stupid pureblood." He aims a weaker glare at Yuuki for good measure.

His wife wilts, ruining her regal aura, just as Zero'd hoped.

The Hunter snorts, and crosses his arms. "At least I've been able to catch up with Master while you've been gone. While I'm thinking of it, we haven't visited the Chairman recently."

Like a lion promised flesh, Cross perks up at Zero's elbow, his serious Hunter persona abandoned before the prospect of having his adopted daughter visit. "Daddy would love for his precious children to come see him!"

"There you go," Zero says, ignoring the rain of invisible hearts he's unleashed. "I'm sure we can clear time in our schedules."

Kaname doesn't do anything visible like sigh or pinch the bridge of his nose, but his manner implies he'd very much like to. "Something can be arranged," the pureblood replies.

Narrowing his eyes, Zero sends his husband one more glare for their audience's benefit. The tense atmosphere has sputtered out and died a quick death. It's hard being intimidated by someone whose father-in-law is Chairman Cross, which is exactly what Zero wanted.

Zero really needs to finish this, because he's not sure how much longer he can hide the needy omega part of him. "Fine. You can both talk then." He holds out his arm with clear expectation as he steps outside the wards.

When they reappear in front of Rosehill's residential palace, Zero is shaking in Kaname's arms with sheer relief, nose buried in the crook of his alpha's neck, pressed as close as possible. "I missed you both," he says in an attempt to deflect suspicion.

Kaname kisses him - or rather, attempts to consume him, the Ancestor's greed still close to the surface. Yuuki snarls and tears Zero out of his hands, carrying him back to their bedroom like a war prize.
"Please," Zero begs, clinging to her neck and driven past his endurance. He needs them to prove he's wanted, needs them to write their claim on his body until his safety is promised by the marks they leave. "Please, please, fuck me, take me, please." Until he doesn't feel empty, until he's driven out the loneliness.

He arches, rubbing mindlessly against them as they strip him bare, each piece of his Hunter disguise falling away until he's soft and naked and defenseless. He knows they can smell the slick leaking out of him, how easy they'll slide inside and soak his walls.

That's good, Zero's body is all for them. They can use him however they want. They're his alphas, and he won't let them go.

"Is he asleep?" Yuuki murmurs in an undertone, belting on a robe.

Kaname presses his fingers briefly over Zero's forehead, stroking their Consort's silver fringe and whispering too softly even for pureblood ears to discern.

Yuuki's heart thumps, the ache of separation still recent, and her stiff posture softens. Zero seemed slightly off-balance earlier, but perhaps it was just her imagination. She'd been distracted by the desire to hug him until he squeaked...and then fuck him until he cried.

"He's asleep," Kaname says as the lines in Zero's face smooth out. No doubt the pureblood pushed Zero further into rest with a nudge of power.

Nodding, Yuuki tucks the blankets under Zero's chin, then moves toward the outer sitting room of the master suite.

Completely shameless as always, Kaname follows her - completely stark naked - and pours himself a glass of wine. Lifting the bottle, he makes eye contact with Yuuki, who shakes her head.

Shrugging, her husband takes his place in an armchair across from her, crossing his legs in a way that does nothing to shield his nudity.

Yuuki is unfazed. If Kaname wants to have a serious conversation naked, so be it.

While she lines up her thoughts, her eyes unconsciously search Kaname's body for leftover marks of his ordeal. But Kaname's bearing remains impeccable as always. Only her memories exist to remind her it happened.

Yuuki will never tell another soul about the days she spent hiding Kaname's drained form. He'd been unable to stand, ashen-faced and hollow-cheeked, sleeping and feeding viciously by turns. Yuuki had swallowed bottles of blood tablets just to keep up. As terrifying and world-shaking as it had been to see Kaname physically brought low, Yuuki treasures the memories. It's the most intimate experience he's ever gifted her, far more secret than sex. Kaname guards his vulnerability like a miser guards his gold.

Mind turning back toward those days, Yuuki murmurs, "More than ever, I realize the difference in strength between us." How much weaker Yuuki is, no matter how hard she's been working to improve. "But I have a request."

Kaname frowns, letting his wine glass dangle from his fingertips. "As I've said before, don't let the opinions of ignorant nobles influence you. They believe us to be roughly similar in age, and judge your achievements beside mine. You and I know that's not true. I am the oldest vampire in existence, and you are barely past childhood. Our strength is not comparable. I promise, you will
eventually be capable of anything I can do."

Yuuki says nothing, waiting for Kaname to come around to her intended point.

Her husband shifts, conceding that battle until another time. "What request, Yuuki?"

"I don't think we're using our resources effectively," Yuuki states, bracing her arms on the back of a chair.

"How so?" he asks, russet eyes narrowing.

"We're ignoring the most important, time-sensitive problem we have right now."

"Which is?" Kaname questions, tilting his head. He's surprised Yuuki is questioning his strategies, but he's curious, not reluctant.

"The ritual to extend Zero's life," Yuuki states, eyes straying towards their bedroom. "Consort Shoshana is dying. When that happens, all of her knowledge will be lost and we'll lose our opportunity to examine her body. We've been spending all our effort on the Senate and Shirabuki, but compared to Zero's life those problems are meaningless. So I have a proposal."

Kaname is rapt. "Go on."

Yuuki experiences a surge of vindication. The pleasure of being taken seriously still warms her. "We split our problems between us. You need to be the one who researches the ritual, because I don't have the knowledge. You can let Steward Inukai handle the estate for a while, and you can step back from our businesses so you have fewer distractions. You'll still need to occasionally help with the Senate - I'm getting better at politics, but I'm not up to your level."

"And what will you be doing?" Kaname inquires seriously.

Yuuki bares her teeth. "I have a score to settle with Shirabuki Sara. I won't be satisfied until every last one of her plans is crushed beneath my feet."

"Well then, how can I refuse?" Kaname's expression is as bloodthirsty as her own. "It's a good plan. I assume you'll be overseeing Aido's progress on the antidote as well?"

"Yes," Yuuki confirms, mouth settling in an unhappy line. 'Progress' is overstating things. And everything the researchers achieve is bought with constant offerings of Zero's blood for study.

"If you're taking over day-to-day operations in the business offices, I'll loan you Seiren too," Kaname offers.

"That would help," Yuuki accepts. "If that's settled, let's go back to bed." She's already turning toward the bedroom. She's not especially tired; she just wants to cuddle with Zero more.

Swallowing the last of his wine, Kaname follows behind her, and Yuuki gets her wish for the rest of the day.

Takuma's pregnancy has lent a regal ponderousness to his gaits, Kaname observes as they make their way down one of the open verandas of the Ichijo estate, sheltering from the rain.

The open sides of Takuma's sleeveless overcoat emphasize his stomach, though he is not especially large yet. The blond's height and sturdy frame, inherited from his father, make him well-suited to the weight of a child, though that is an unwelcome realization to the pureblood.
"While I am happy to see the potential breach of our secrets resolved so effectively," Takuma muses, green eyes glancing over at him. "I wonder if perhaps other methods might have exposed you to less risk."

In other words, Kaname has overreacted and done something unnecessary. Takuma is far too well-raised to directly criticize a pureblood, but had long ago perfected the art of telling a pureblood they've done something stupid without seeming to do so.

"Other methods might not have solved the problem so neatly. There is little chance the humans will overcome the suggestion I planted." Kaname argues without conviction.

"That may be so," Takuma allows serenely, folding his hands into his sleeves.

Both of them know Kaname is making excuses. There had been a range of responses available to the pureblood, and he'd jumped straight to the most radical and personally damaging. With one act, Kaname has provoked the humans, Hunters and vampires, and drawn so much attention to himself that his every move will be closely scrutinized.

The other unavoidable consequence of his actions is open conflict with the Senate. Kaname treated their actions as insignificant and exposed the fragility of their power. They have no choice but to contend with him if they wish to preserve their authority.

Kaname may have definitively solved one problem, but he's created a dozen more to take its place, making enemies and inviting the jackals right to his door. In view of the consequences, allowing others to shoulder some of the risks would have been better than taking sole personal responsibility.

But the die is already cast, and Takuma allows the moment to pass without further censure. The pair admire the summer-green gardens for a few moments amid the steady thrum of rain.

"You've given the Senate proof you are hiding something." Takuma's tone is light, belaying the seriousness of his words. "Many inconsistencies can be explained by your reputation as a prodigy, but not displaying your power on such a scale. You bent the entire human race beneath your will, Kaname." The noble sounds as though he can barely believe it now, an echo of awe in his voice. "What you accomplished was supposed to be impossible."

Then Takuma adds, with a quick flick of his eyes, "Isaya confessed that he couldn't begin to match your power."

And Shouto is supposed to be the eldest remaining pureblood. Kaname curses the madness that made him so rash. Now Shouto will suspect him as well.

Takuma turns toward him, meeting Kaname's gaze. "There will be fear and suspicion directed toward you. Not just by the Senate, but by the Hunters and humans too. When they ask me, Kaname, I can say truthfully that I know nothing for certain. But Rido was mad, and who knows what he let slip in his madness. We have erased as many memories as we could. But can we guarantee that we silenced everyone?"

Kaname keeps his expression indifferent, only a flex of his fingers betraying his unease. His identity is his most deeply guarded secret. If it should be discovered...

Takuma notices, though he says nothing. Looking out over the wet gardens, the noble's voice is hushed, barely audible above the sound of soft summer rain. "It hasn't been announced officially yet, but the Senate's investigators have closed Shirabuki's case."
Takuma means the committee investigating pureblood deaths. Ouri's case was only recently completed. Ending the inquiry into Shirabuki's death seems premature, especially when it could potentially be used to discredit the Kuran family. "What do you know, Takuma?" Kaname demands.

A moment passes, then Takuma lifts his eyes to meet Kaname's gaze. "The Senate is going to call Kiryuu Zero to testify regarding Hio Shizuka's death," the noble answers grimly.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading everyone! hope watching Kaname in action was satisfying. Just to give you a better idea of Kaname's plan, he basically suggested pinning everything on TWOFT's equivalent of North Korea.

Until next time, my friends!
Hello everyone. It's your shameful author here, dashing in with a super late chapter. Sorry to have worried anyone. February has been a mess and I have been distracted with a side project. Expect the next chapter to also be delayed, but TWOFT remains my main focus, and will until I finish it.

I'm a little surprised nobody in last chapter's comments so much as mentioned Kaname being shameless and lounging naked while drinking wine. That's peak Kaname right there, my friends.

"I don't understand why you're upset," Zero drawls lazily. "So what if the Senate makes me testify? I'll lie and tell them I killed Shizuka." Zero had wanted to kill her, anyway.

He shifts on his pureblood throne, sprawled over both Yuuki and Kaname's laps while laying on his back. His omega instincts are purring quietly, pleased to have his alphas' attention focused on himself. He's been nearly inseparable from his spouses and disgustingly needy for over a week now, as though his omega is protesting their absence by being extra demanding.

With that thought, Zero nuzzles his face into Yuuki's soft stomach, 'accidentally' letting the collar of his robe fall open to reveal his naked shoulder. He's not wearing a stitch underneath.

Yuuki has the expression of a woman exerting great self-control not to molest him. Zero shoots her a smug look, acutely aware he's full of so much seed it's leaked down his inner thighs all the way to his knees.

Kaname places a hand on Zero's calf, a considering glint in his eye. Indulging his instincts, Zero opens his thighs a little wider, just to see how far he can push.

His husband blinks, visibly drawing himself back and clearing his throat. Past the warm twist in his gut, Zero is touched - they try so hard to keep his body's limits in mind.

"Having the Senate interrogate you is different than your bouts with the Jeweled Court," Kaname replies, tearing his hand away from Zero's skin and busying himself with the remains of the snacks Zero polished off on the side table.

"As the Head Consort, you possess a position of authority. You can set the pace, and the Court's traditions limit avenues of attack. If you testify before the Senate, the cross examination could go on for hours - days even - and every question will be meant to entrap you. The Senate does not operate beneath the silken veil of politeness the Court demands."

"What do we do then?" Yuuki questions as she plays with the sleeve of Zero's robe.

"Refusing to let Zero testify will set public opinion against him," Kaname states contemplatively, hand unconsciously drifting to Zero's thigh. "But allowing Zero to be interrogated in an open
Senate session is equally unfavorable. As much as you've improved, you will eventually be goaded into admitting something they will spin into an attack. What we need is a middle ground. Something that gives the impression of compliance, but abides by limits we set."

Yuuki hums. "Zero is our omega. Can't we use that fact as justification?"

"Leverage 'protective alpha' stereotypes to force concessions?" Kaname sips his tea. "It could work, especially if we demand privileges due to our blood status as well."

Grinning, Yuuki sing-songs, "We wouldn't want a pureblooded alpha's protective instincts stirred up, now would we? Who knows how violent we might get."

Zero snickers - Kaname's self-control is practically unbreakable, but the aristocrats won't know that. Just imagining a bunch of arrogant nobles sweating nervously is satisfying.

His wife wears a matching grin, swooping down to peck a kiss on Zero's nose. "Since it involves Zero, I'll ask you to help out, Kaname."

Kaname's hand sneaks up Zero's leg underneath his robe. "Of course. Anything for our precious boy. That goes without saying."

Zero's chest holds a warm, squishy feeling. He puts a hand to his cheek, the heat of a blush meeting his fingers. Embarrassing. Utterly embarrassing. "Today is a holiday," he mutters, giving tacit permission to the hand creeping up between his thighs, edging closer and closer to forbidden places, cheeks burning so hard he's sure he must be tomato-red.

Yuuki giggles, and Zero muffles his squeal in his sleeve as Kaname's fingers slide inside him. Pinned on his back, he stares wide-eyed up into identical predatory faces, and that's the last clear thought in his head for the rest of the night.

Following Shirabuki Sara's steps is like winding through the tunnels of an anthill. You could hear things moving in the walls, feel the weight of the mound pressing down, but all you see is the single, winding tunnel under your feet.

Tracking her network of spies is much the same. No matter how many drones you catch, all you find is whispers in the wind. A single order or a fragment of information is all Yuuki gleans at best. Only the hive's dead queen knew the true intentions behind her orders.

Most of Shirabuki's servants are under the effects of her mind-control drug, meaning distinguishing fact from fiction is impossible. Many of them aren't even aware they're following her orders, their memories wiped after being unwillingly recruited.

The prisons holding Shirabuki's servants while the antidote is developed are beginning to burst at the seams, and Yuuki is no closer to holding answers than she was before.

Walking away from another useless interrogation, Seiren at her back, Yuuki bites down the nagging suspicion that Kaname could have done better.

They caught the latest agent in his home, an apartment building in a well-off vampire neighborhood. Others have been found in the slums, among the households of the nobility, and from every walk of life. Shirabuki's influence reaches deep, from the highest towers to the lowest bowels of the vampire world.

Alerted by the commotion, the apartment building's residents are opening their doors and peering
out. Upon seeing Yuuki, their faces shine with disturbing admiration, and they fall to their knees, bowing until their foreheads touch the ground.

'Kuran-hime, Kuran-hime' - those words surround Yuuki, making her skin prickle. The common vampires have always revered the Kuran family, but this is a new level of awe. In the eyes of most vampires, the Kuran family has just saved their world, acting decisively to preserve their way of life when the Senate failed. Dissatisfaction with the Senate has only grown, and Kaname's vast power makes them whisper - stories of the old monarchy, of their ancestors, and of the Original King.

Yuuki accepts their cries and respectful obeisances because she wants to be polite, but it makes her uncomfortable to see. Purebloods have always been sacred existences in the minds of ordinary vampires, but those expectations would be impossible to live up to.

"Tell me what you think of the situation, Seiren," Yuuki orders when the car door shuts, and they are alone again.

Kaname's shadow reflects for a moment. "Through her drug and pureblood commands, Shirabuki Sara created an extensive spy network whose sole purpose was to manipulate public opinion in favor of purebloods. Finding any single agent who knows anything useful will be a matter of luck."

Dissatisfaction strikes Yuuki again, and she bites her lip. "Seiren, please have time set aside in my schedule every other day for training."

"As you wish, Yuuki-hime," the other woman replies, inclining her head without a single flicker of expression.

Yuuki lowers her eyes, folding her hands in her lap. Kaname treats her more and more like an equal, like someone who can help him. But the more he treats her like an equal, and the more other people take her seriously, the more Yuuki really wants to become Kaname's equal. Kaname's equal in skill. Kaname's equal in power. But the gulf between them is so wide. If Yuuki can close that gap, even just a little…

"Seiren," Yuuki amends. "Change my schedule to have at least an hour of training each day."

With the size of its members' egos, Zero imagined the Senate building would look more impressive. From the outside it appears deceptively ordinary, blending seamlessly into the cityscape like just one more average corporate office. The structure's only unique feature is the domed roof over the Senate chamber on the top floor.

Except right now, the crowd gathered in front the building's facade at two in the morning is abnormal enough to draw suspicion. The sullen Senators and their staff have all been drawn up in the front, forced to greet the Kuran family in person no matter how much they resent Kaname's forceful actions.

Behind them, held back by a line of security personnel, is a mob of C-rank vampires cheering and waving, even falling to their knees and bowing. Zero finds the devotion uncomfortable - Hunters never hold such devout adoration even toward their heroes - but Kaname and Yuuki seem unmoved by the pious praise.

The three of them are bundled into the building as quickly as the Senators can manage. The Senate came out looking bad in the last crisis, and with their already poor popularity they obviously don't want the reporters mixed in with the crowd to get any more unflattering pictures.
The Senate building's interior shows all the opulence Zero was expecting - crystal chandeliers, thick pile carpets, architecturally unnecessary pillars, and gold gilding everywhere. Zero won't get to see the Senate floor itself. Through Kaname and Yuuki's negotiations, Zero will give testimony only to the investigative committee itself.

While the rest of their attendants are escorted away to wait, Zero and his spouses are led deeper into the building, entering a restricted access wing containing the Senators' private offices. Zero is not walking in blind. Kaname has coached Zero's responses for weeks, and the Senate is forbidden from asking about anything except Shizuka's death. But Zero would really, really like to be somewhere else right now.

Unfortunately, it seems Zero hasn't been granted a convenient escape. Entering an especially heavily decorated, deserted hallway, their escort raps on the only door in sight. A male voice replies, inviting them inside. Their escort holds the door open for the three of them and then shuts it after they pass through, leaving Zero and the Kurans alone with the room's single noble-rank occupant.

This vampire has a distinguished air, and holds himself confidently. He's handsome enough for Zero to remark on it, with a high forehead and round face. His sleek black hair holds just a hint of his silver at the temples, hinting at his real age. There's intelligence in his gaze, and even standing politely in the center of the room he gives off a strong presence. Zero is somehow reminded of Takuma.

"Kuran-sama, Kuran-hime," the noble murmurs, executing a precise bow.

"Chairman Ichihara," Kaname replies, voice distant.

Zero's eyebrows raise, and he takes a second look. So this is the Senate's leader? Ichihara is said to be very capable.

Ichihara does not lift his eyes, remaining folded into his bow. "My deepest apologies for not greeting you personally when you arrived. Last-minute preparations prevented me from paying my respects."

Half-truth, Zero's intuition informs him. The preparations really hindered him, but he's not sorry about it.

"Then I am sure your arrangements will be impeccable, since you take such care with your duties," Kaname responds, the tone of a voice a clear warning if the pureblood finds anything unsatisfactory.

Ichihara's bow deepens. "Of course, Kuran-sama. As you requested, only the committee members and myself will be personally present during Kiryuu-sama's interview. A separate viewing room has been arranged where you and any other interested Senators may watch remotely through video."

Unseen by the bowing noble, Kaname's lips press together in a disdainful line, before smoothing out into unruffled calm.

After Kaname allows Ichihara to straighten, the two discuss small details for a few minutes - Kaname's demeanor is cool and terse while Ichihara remains exhaustingly respectful without acting obsequious. Yuuki observes closely, though saying nothing.

Left to his own devices, Zero paces the office in a slow circle, pausing to examine anything that
catches his eye. Ichihara's office is conservatively decorated, almost spartan, and completely lacks any family photographs or personal objects. An antique desk stacked with papers and a few leather-upholstered chairs are the focal point of the room. Shelves of law books and filing cabinets line the perimeter, and a few paintings depicting previous Senate residences decorate the walls. The chairman seems to be a man focused on his work, to the exclusion of all else.

Glancing back toward his spouses, Zero watches the interplay between Kaname and Ichihara unfold, sorting through the information his extra sense imparts. Kaname holds a certain regard for Ichihara, but they're not friends, and not precisely enemies. Truthfully, Zero can't tell whether they like or dislike one another. They're certainly not at ease in each others' presence. Ichihara is always maneuvering carefully, each word precisely chosen.

Zero lets his intuition flare, and tastes the noble's fearful caution like a burn scar. Considering Ichihara once more, Zero's brows furrow.

"Then we will leave Zero in your care, Chairman," Yuuki says, the words more like a threat. Zero startles, realizing time has slipped has away from him.

Ichihara's expression does not waver, and he bows once more. "I will bring Consort Kiryuu to the committee's room at the proper time. Until then, I invite him to wait here."

Neither of Zero's spouses are happy, but when a muscle in Kaname's cheek jumps, instinct sends Zero straight toward his husband. Understanding without words, Zero wraps his arms around Kaname, feeling something unsteady with ragged edges inside the pureblood that needs to be soothed. This happens sometimes - that Zero knows something is wrong with Kaname. If Zero had to describe the feeling, it's like seeing a cat with its fur fluffed up being stroked against its fur.

Zero lays his cheek against his husband's shoulder, going pliant and allowing Kaname to passively scent him. "I'll be okay. Come find me when we're done."

The bunched muscles beneath Zero's cheek gradually relax; Zero knows that Kaname has regained his inner balance, and steps away. Yuuki receives her own lingering hug. Zero allows himself to luxuriate in her affection one last time, like a man drinking water at the edge of a desert.

Then their escort returns, and Yuuki and Kaname leave with their perfect pureblood masks back in place.

Left alone with a stranger, Zero eyes Ichihara doubtfully, but the noble shows nothing except placid politeness. "You make take a seat if you wish, Kiryuu-sama. Please make yourself at ease," Ichihara invites, sitting down at his desk and gesturing toward one of the chairs placed in front.

Zero decides that accepting the invitation is better than deliberately spiting the man. While Ichihara takes out a fountain pen and begins annotating one of the many documents stacked on his desk, Zero does a passable job arranging the heavy silk of his formal robes without creasing them.

The scratch of the pen's nib on paper is the only sound in the room. Zero tries not to stare as Ichihara works. He was expecting some kind of malicious gesture once the Kurans left, but Ichihara does not offer a hint of offense.

"Thank you for allowing me to wait with you," Zero blurts, desperate to understand why Ichihara hasn't even insulted him.

Ichihara pauses, the pen in his hand halting as he raises his head. "It is my privilege, Kiryuu-sama. It's the least I can do since the Senate's request is inconveniencing you."
The tone of those last few words makes Zero's power twist and leap. "You think having me testify is a really bad idea," he blurts, half-incredulous though he knows it's the truth.

Chest rising in steady breaths, Ichihara watches him for a moment, then puts down his pen. "I have made it privately known that I believe any further testimony is unnecessary. But I carry out the wishes of the Senate as a whole, and whatever my personal opinions, this is what the majority had decided."

"Why do you disagree?" Zero continues, his gut urging him to spill the question.

Ichihara pauses for even longer this time. "Kuran-sama clearly treasures you. And you have been questioned once before. I ask if there is any long-term gain worth the potential conflict that raising the issue again may cause."

What a careful, unsatisfying answer; Ichihara's reputation as a mediator is well-earned. Ichihara believes that going after Zero to indirectly attack Kaname and Yuuki won't be worth it, because Zero himself is someone they won't allow to be harmed, and will provoke them into a more vicious response. How perceptive of the man to identify one of Kaname's true triggers.

"It's nearly time," Ichihara demurs, rising and circling around beside Zero's chair. He offers Zero an arm. "May I escort you?"

Feeling off-balance, Zero eyes the man, hesitating to accept the help. Ichihara is the Senate's Chairman, and thus supposed to be his enemy.

Ichihara waits patiently, hand outstretched and the picture of unruffled calm. "You need not be reluctant. As you can tell, I am a beta. You are a very beautiful member of your dynamic, Kiryuu-sama, but my tastes lie toward unattached noblewomen my own age."

What a strange man, Zero thinks as he allows himself to be lifted out of his chair, fighting the weight of his robes. A silver-tongued politician who, as far as Zero's intuition can tell, spends most of his time telling the truth.

Zero watches Ichihara out of the corner of his eye, still off-balance. Ichihara keeps their pace relaxed to accommodate him. The heavy layers of Zero's black formal robes slow him down, and the panels of his silver peony patterned sleeves nearly reach the floor.

"A word of advice," Ichihara says suddenly when they reach a pair of heavy double doors. Behind them, Zero's senses catch voices and a current of anticipation lighting the air. This must be the committee's room. "Try crying. A roomful of alphas can never resist an omega."

Zero just stares at the noble. He simply doesn't know what to make of the man. "Thank you," he settles on.

Ichihara makes a gesture of acknowledgement, and then the two of them are striding into a low-ceilinged, close room packed with far too many alphas. The stuffy, still air is a swamp of aggressive pheromones and animosity.

Zero hardens his stoicism, remaining defiantly unmoved despite the way his stomach churns sickly. There are two empty seats in the room beside each other; Ichihara settles Zero into one, and takes the other himself. Looking out at the unfriendly faces lining the walls - standing room only - the Hunter feels his belly twist, his omega gnawing at his nerves.

And after a few opening words from the investigative committee chair, the interrogation begins.
"Consort Kiryu. Did you kill Hio Shizuka-sama?"

"My actions led to her death," Zero replies, skirting the truth just as he's been coached. "It was within my right to do so, as a Hunter enforcing the treaty laws."

"But you are not just a Hunter. You are Hio-sama's thrall, and it is forbidden for a thrall to attack their Master. The penalty is death. Do you deny this?"

Zero chokes, mind racing. He's never been judged under vampire law for his actions, though the Senate had tried. Now that his legal status has changed, written into the very treaty he used to defend his actions…

Shit. He doesn't know enough to judge if that's legally viable. And with just that, Zero is left off-balance and unprepared, easy prey.

You held malice toward your master, did you not?

Did you intend to kill Hio-sama when you saw her that night?

Then you admit that the situation did not require her death

You were capable of capturing her then?

But you killed her, even when why didn't need to, correct?

Tell us why, Kiryu-sama

Tell us more, Kiryu-sama

Explain yourself.

Incriminate yourself for us.

Zero defends and defends, the events of that night twisting out of recognition. He's forced to repeat himself over and over, every detail dug out like a corpse and presented in the worst light.

Kaname was right. This is nothing like the Jeweled Court. His heartbeat skyrockets and his palms grow sweaty, folded inside his silk sleeves. Even Zero's weak nose can smell the scent of distressed omega rising from his skin. A few of the alphas shift uneasily, but press harder, forcefully suppressing their instinct to protect.

The moments seem to expand, voices echoing queerly, time twisting and distending in Zero's brain. His vision narrows, panic rising in this throat. This - what is this?

Stumbling over his words, Zero realizes the crushing feeling in his gut comes from his omega. It's always been a violent, fearless beast, but it has never made him feel like an animal in a trap before. Yes, a trap - instinct desires the blood of the alphas threatening him, but his omega feels as though its back is against a wall. It's caught, caution warring with rage.

He wants Yuuki and Kaname, wants his alphas - where are they? They're supposed to be here. Why aren't they protecting him?

Zero's hands tighten inside his sleeves, and his scent spikes with distress; all the alphas around him scrutinize him. A few of them have a mean, pleased, sharp look in their eyes. Mouth dry, Zero's breathing goes unsteady and uneven, the panicked taste of bile on his tongue.
Their voices are spears, seeking blood.

Zero bleeds, and bleeds, falling back.

Just as his panic mounts to unbearable levels, and his stoic mask is on the verge of fracture, a hand touches the fabric of Zero's sleeve.

Dazed, Zero turns his head to find Ichihara at his elbow, expression unmoved. "Let us pause for a moment. I will take Kiryuu-sama out to rest for a few minutes."

Zero has no idea how they get to the tiny office nearby. He has just enough presence of mind left not to crumple into the couch in front of Ichihara, but he still needs to sit and breathe until the scent of angry, threatening alpha coating his senses thins.

Once his thoughts slow, Zero's eyes find Ichihara watching him from the center of the room.

Ichihara simply says, "I could not allow the situation to continue. Kuran-sama would have slaughtered the Senate."

Truth. Zero swallows, sensing the twin disasters bearing down on their position. The rage contained within Yuuki and Kaname's auras frightens and reassures him by turns. His alphas are here, and he will be safe. Not abandoned.

Zero speaks not a word of protest when Yuuki sweeps him up and carries him straight past the crowds.

In the last moment, as the car pulls away from the curb, past his muddled emotions, Zero imagines a spark of something familiar brushing his Hunter senses.

"I hoped I might find you here, Kuran Kaname-san." As Shouto Isaya stands upon his castle's grand staircase, his grey eyes glitter like frost, and when he speaks his tone mingles request and order. "Come enjoy a drink with me. We have not spoken in some time."

A flicker of Kaname's eyelashes hides a flood of calculation.

So it has come to this? How polite, waiting until Kaname's quarrel with the Senate is contained to a rude simmer. Prudent, too, for Shouto to wait until he's thoroughly prepared and the sword of his logic is all the sharper.

Kaname revealed the extent of his powers; this confrontation exists as the inevitable result. Only another sufficiently ancient pureblood could comprehend the true depth and breadth of the Ancestor's feat, and how utterly, utterly impossible it would be for Juuri and Haruka's real son.

"I will gladly accept your hospitality, Shouto-san." Until he can discern how deep the pureblood's suspicions run, Kaname will play along.

Once ensconced in a nondescript receiving room, Kaname accepts a glass of blood wine, mind unwillingly drawn back to the last time the two of them played such games and Takuma gave away his heart.

Pouring his own glass, Shouto offhandedly mentions, "I hope Consort Kiryuu is well."

Only Kaname's hard-won control preserves his indifference.

The pureblood swallows his wine without tasting it. "Zero is as well as could be expected."
It is more or less true. His instincts brought to a crisis from stress, Zero has remained for days in his nesting den. When he's not sleeping like the dead, Zero can't be pried away from his alphas' company, demanding their constant presence, and he's fed desperately from both Yuuki and Kaname several times. Allowing Shoshana's company has helped somewhat to ground him, for which Kaname is grateful, but Zero is still not his normal self.

Kaname himself is elbow deep in a legal quarrel over Zero's right to execute Hio Shizuka - which Kaname will eventually win, because arguing Zero's new treaty-imposed legal status as vampire foremost should be retroactively applied to the legality of his previous actions as a Hunter is ridiculous. The Senate has been making the most of things, of course, using the controversy and publicity to their advantage.

Frankly, the Senate stands within a razor's edge of Kaname wiping the field clean and killing them all. Threatening Zero or Yuuki is intolerable. However, eliminating the Senate would require Kaname to take over the government himself, which would displease him. He needs to devote his time to courting Zero and teaching Yuuki. As long as the Senate saves him the trouble, Kaname will reserve slaughter as a last resort.

"I wish to emphasize once more, Kuran-san, that I have no interest in interfering with your affairs," Shouto begins. "I lack interest in anything except Takuma and my child slumbering in his belly. I am content to support his political work from a distance, without becoming involved myself."

The pureblood's expression goes cold, and he gives up any pretense of drinking. "But I will protect my family, Kuran-san. I will never allow them to be taken from me again, even if they desire it. So please understand. I cannot protect them when I do not know the danger. You will either need to explain yourself to my satisfaction, or I cannot permit Takuma to associate with you any further."

Kaname's grip tightens just short of shattering the glass in his hand. He may understand Shouto's reasoning, but being offered an ultimatum tries his temper. "I assume you have eliminated the easy answers?"

Shouto's expression stays cold. "I have. I was surprised to find the other pureblood families remain completely intact. I thought you might have consumed one or two of the Sleeping clans to boost your power."

"It wouldn't be enough," Kaname replies, testing Shouto's knowledge.

"No. But it would have been something," Shouto rebuts. "Your strength should be impossible for a pureblood your age. I can produce no explanation for your power."

If it were anyone else, Kaname might have been able to manufacture a suitable lie. Unfortunately, Shouto knows pureblood powers too intimately to fool. That leaves two possibilities.

Kaname could leave now and refuse to tell Shouto anything. That means he will lose Takuma and make an opponent of Shouto. If necessary, Kaname would probably be able to kill Shouto, but it would be arduous. Shouto is among the eldest living purebloods, and therefore nearer to Kaname in power.

On the other hand, Kaname can't predict how Shouto will respond if Kaname reveals the truth. Shouto could become an enemy anyway, and still remove Takuma from Kaname's circle. The vampire's promises aside, Shouto could also reveal Kaname to the Senate, or the other purebloods - either side would immediately attempt to eliminate him.

Kaname is not so sunk in his deliberations that he allows his unruffled mask to slip. Downing the
last of his wine to delay, he places the glass aside, weighing his options.

If Shouto pursues this further, how long could Kaname honestly block Shouto from discovering Kaname's origins? Yuuki found out, so why not Shouto?

Kaname trusted Shouto Isaya once before, and Takuma gained a beloved alpha. Should Kaname trust him again?

The Ancestor of the Kuran almost scoffs. Really, he's been spending far too much time around Zero. Decision made, Kaname allows a hint of his mirth to creep into his gaze.

Shouto, feeling the shift in the air, furrows his brows.

I can always kill him later, Kaname consoles himself. "Very well. If you wish to know so badly, I'll give you the opportunity. But I will have your silence, Shouto Isaya, or I will have your heart."

Shouto agrees immediately. "Acceptable. As I said, I will not interfere, but I promise nothing regarding your association with Takuma before I can accurately judge the risk."

"Also acceptable." The smirk on Kaname's face widens. "My name is Kaname, and I bear the Kuran bloodline. But I am not Haruka's son, nor Juuri's child."

The puzzled look on Shouto's face is wonderfully entertaining. Kaname can almost see the flicker of his thoughts, colliding and connecting.

Minutes pass. Shouto becomes more and more agitated, fingers tapping against his arms as he thinks. As the royal line, the Kuran family is especially well documented and its members are carefully accounted for, but guessing Kaname's identity still isn't simple.

Kaname decides to throw Shouto one last clue. "I remember the beginning of our race. Perhaps I will also witness our end."

Shouto rears back, his shock apparent. Stumbling against a table, his wineglass shatters as it's knocked to the floor.

The Ancestor of the Kuran laughs, stalking forward. "I see you understand. Now tell me, Shouto Isaya, do I have need of your death?"

Shouto falls to his knees, eyes fixed on Kaname's face. "Ancestor of the Kuran. Your majesty, I will not expose you."

"Good." Kaname places his hand on Shouto's throat, tipping the vampire's head back. "It would displease me to orphan Takuma's child."

Zero comes back to himself slowly. Now twice betrayed, his omega eases back under his control with great reluctance. When he feels secure enough to have visitors, Shoshana urges Zero to allow himself what he needs, no matter how shameful.

So he does.

With Zero so needy, it's almost like another heat, all three of them isolated together in the warm soft darkness of Zero's nest. The omega teaches Zero how to use his sweet scent and pitiful mewls to make Kaname and Yuuki indulge his tiniest whim. Nuzzle at a throat, and they fall over themselves to feed you. Cling to their hand whenever they try to leave, and they climb right back in
and let you sleep on top of them. Whine, and they will take you in their arms and lay claim to your body right there, marking you so well.

After Zero feels safe enough to roam the estate, they remain in a kind of self-imposed isolation, refusing visitors and invitations. But it can't last forever, and eventually Kaname and Yuuki must leave him behind. Zero remains at Rosehill, out of sight, while Kaname fights the Senate for his safety, and Yuuki hunts down Shirabuki Sara's legacy.

They - one two three points of a triangle - slip off into the human world whenever the desire to be together grows strong. In the world of night they attract too much attention, forcing them into yet another scripted performance, while the humans' bright world is shapeless and faceless, easy to lose themselves in.

Zero pulls up the hood of his raincoat, while Yuuki and Kaname walk arm-in-arm beneath the eaves of a cheap umbrella they'd bought from a street vender, too small to fit all three of them. They'd flown across the sea to sample one of the famous night markets, then been caught in the rain. Hair damp and clothes wind-blown, they wander until the market closes, then sightsee until even the nightlife sleeps.

Ducking beneath a flickering halogen sign, Kaname and Yuuki introduce Kaname to the wonders of terrible all-you-can-eat buffet food, the only thing open at four in the morning. Yuuki and Kaname cooperate in a dastardly plan to stuff Zero like a goose - really, Zero doesn't need the help. His appetite has been healthy lately, and he's put back on the weight he lost during his heat.

They can't always avoid vampire eyes - they've been caught once or twice, cold reminders of reality as they drift within the cities' soft mortal tides. Nevertheless, they cannot resist the chance.

The rain may be chilly, but the night is good.

Zero tries to project confidence as Kaname draws up the hood of his brand new coat. "I know what I want for Midsummer," Zero ventures, testing the waters.

Yuuki presses an umbrella into Zero's hands firmly - he's been more sensitive to sun since their bonding - and tips her head sideways in interest.

Pinned between two purebloods who will pounce on the tiniest opportunity to spoil him, Zero fumbles. "I, ah...seem to remember Yuuki…"

You're a grown adult, who already decided you wanted this, Zero reminds himself, the nervous heat in his belly jumping.

"...staking her claim on my ass."

Yuuki makes a tiny 'ah' noise, then claps her hands together with sparkling eyes, a fox welcomed into the chicken coop. "Really? Now I wish you weren't going to the solstice celebration!"

Zero buries his face in his hands, cursing his own boldness and persistent curiosity. This was probably a terrible idea. But Zero couldn't stop thinking about it - couldn't stop imagining it - and he doesn't take the words back now. This is something Zero has wanted to give Yuuki for a long time, a piece of himself that she alone will hold. The idea appeals to him, and felt safe when he prodded at it.

Kaname chuckles, prying Zero's palms away from his face, and husks into Zero's ear. "So bold, little Hunter. Such a pretty invitation. Shall we leave you a little anticipation to savor while you're
Yuuki yanks Zero's coat lapels, pulling him down and kissing the daylights out of him. "We'll be ready when you get back," she promises, breath fanning against his lips. Then with one last nip to Zero's reddened lower lip, Yuuki flutters away, nearly dancing on her toes she's so excited.

Zero coughs, attempts to straighten his clothes, and flees. He's no untried maiden any longer, and he understands the slight damp feeling between his legs.

That touch of warmth in Zero's blood distracts him from the coldness some of the other Hunters treat him with. But Zero loves seeing Misao and Kaito's kids, and spends the Midsummer celebration visiting with Yagari-sensei and stuffing himself on Misao's cooking.

When the celebration draws toward sunset and the bonfires burn low, Zero's lucky no one asks why he's checking his clock so often, because the promise of going home hums like a constant, gentle anticipation under his skin.

Just like last year, Kaname's raven escort waits patiently in the trees until Zero leaves. After Zero passes the boundaries, the bird glides down, perching on his offered wrist while he waits for Kaname. Despite the heat, the Hunter shudders beneath the breeze. He's more excited than he expected.

The next moment, Zero raises his head to find wine-colored eyes fixed upon him. A shivery feeling washes over him as he accepts Kaname's hand.

"She's waiting for you, precious boy," Kaname whispers, and whisks them away while Zero's skin is still covered in goosebumps.

Kaname is the master of ceremonies today, and delivers Zero straight to the eaves of their bedroom where Yuuki waits, dressed plainly like a human and bearing no marks of her status, the same way Zero wears no hoseki or robes.

"I'm really happy. I've wanted this for so long - wanted you for so long, Zero." Yuuki confesses. The soft, open longing and desire in her face twists his heart.

Her auburn hair, tucked behind her ears, come loose and falls forward as she extends her hand, waiting for Zero to take it. "Will you let me show you?"

"Anything," he promises, and goes willingly.

She noses his throat, pressing her lips against the soft skin of his pulse until Zero relaxes, understanding she won't bite. "Here are the rules for tonight," she murmurs. "Kaname will not touch you unless you invite him. And you will tell me no if I do something you don't like."

Not trusting himself to speak, Zero kisses her in reply. The slow, syrupy feeling in his blood thickens. The kiss is leisurely and slow, crystallized sweetness and affection. That feeling persists as Yuuki and Zero undress each other, and as they lead one other to bed. Zero is glad for it. Every inch of his skin feels sensitized, and his nervousness earlier is a distant memory.

This is Yuuki. Nothing in this moment is worth his fear.

"I've got a plan. Made some preparations," Yuuki tells him, peppering kisses down his collarbone.

Zero gives a noise of agreement mixed with a moan, arching his back for more. They've learned this rhythm, worked out together through practice. Kaname has settled on the edge of the bed,
watching the two of them intertwine with a hard bulge in his slacks, but Zero and Yuuki don't need
him to mediate the flow between them. They can do that all on their own.

Zero draws his hands down her shoulders, fingers rubbing the points of her hipbones and the curve
of her ass.

"Ah - don't distract me," she pants, and Zero sends her a smug look.

"I've gotten some toys for us, to make things easier," Yuuki says.

Zero is distracted by the way her mouth moves, memories of what she can do with that mouth
jolting his arousal. "Mmm?"

His wife hums, kissing behind his ear. "I'm going to start with the smallest toy, and then we're
going to work our way up, until by the time I slide inside you, you won't feel anything except
really, really good. Okay?"

Zero feels a shiver wrack his body from skull to tailbone. Slick pools heavily between his legs in
the flushed heat there. "I don't think I've ever wanted anything more."

She grins, and Zero sees the girl he's always loved. "Good. This is going to take a while."

Yuuki puts Zero belly-down in their marriage bed, his knees splayed open as she eases herself
between them. Her gentle touches to his thighs and hips are meant to reassure him, but Zero doesn't
feel a shred of anxiety. All his issues are centered lower; this is something he would always have
been willing to share with Yuuki if she'd wanted it, and he is happy to give it to her now.

Lube is weird. Even warmed by Yuuki's hands, it makes Zero jump when his ass is suddenly wet.
He's an omega, so they've never needed it before. His body always produces so much slick he
soaks even Yuuki and Kaname's ridiculous porn star cocks.

"Touch yourself," Yuuki orders. "I want to appreciate you properly."

Obediently, Zero reaches down and fists himself, slow strokes from root to tip.

Yuuki squeezes and pets, cupping each cheek and enjoying his body in such a delighted way that
Zero nearly buries his scalding face in the bed. When Yuuki first touches his hole, Zero startles,
but settles quickly when she does nothing more than rub at his entrance for nearly a minute,
spreading the lube and playing with Zero just like she promised.

Beneath the stimulation, Zero wiggles, lifting his rear higher in unconscious invitation. Only then
does Yuuki press the tip of one finger inside.

"Yuuki…" Zero complains, barely feeling anything at all. His wife has tiny, slender fingers, and
he's not made of glass.

She smacks his rear with her clean hand, and dumps more lube on Zero's hole. Learning his lesson,
Zero quiets, quickening his hand on own cock for more stimulation.

With Zero properly distracted, Yuuki slides two fingers inside him as deep as she can go.

Zero grunts, and digs his toes into the bedding, finding the sensation curious but not bad. It's
different than between his legs. He's less exquisitely sensitive, and his instincts don't jump
immediately to label the feeling as pleasure. But Yuuki is gentle and patient, working Zero open
and yielding while his body tries to work out what's being asked of it.
The lube gives an embarrassing squelch when Yuuki tries three fingers, crooking her wrist and rubbing at his inner walls, but her fingers are too short to find his prostate.

"I'm going to switch over to the toys now. You ready?" she asks, lifting the first one, thicker than her fingers, and longer, but far from the girth of her cock.

"Go ahead," Zero affirms, and grunts when it slides home. He's used to having things inside his body now, so it isn't too strange, but plastic feels weird compared to a real cock.

"Now," Yuuki says, "time for your first orgasm, and then we'll switch to a bigger toy."

Zero's brain catches up with him. "What." There are what - three, four more of the toys laid out? The Hunter swallows, feeling his brain leaking out his ears. "Yuuki, are you trying to kill me?"

Kaname - who has stripped down to nothing but his trousers - laughs.

His wife gives an angelic smile. "I'm claiming the other half of Zero's virginity. I want to make sure you remember this."

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The first time, Yuuki rolls Zero onto his back, and rides him just like that, with the toy pushing deeper and deeper inside his ass every time she rocks her hips. Her alpha howls and snarls, insisting they should be the ones taking, but Yuuki pushes it deep and locks her beast away.

Yuuki and Zero have made love enough times to recognize when the other is close to release, and when to stop and provide the extra push each of them needs to orgasm. Zero uses his hands to coax Yuuki into coming all over his belly, while Yuuki sinks two fingers deep in Zero's pussy until he quakes inside.

Zero's ass is lovingly fingered open again, and receives a new, larger toy. This time, Yuuki gets down on her knees and licks his cunt until Zero can't hold back his cries, kicking and squealing as he's tipped over the edge.

Kaname is allowed to pleasure Zero while their husband's body accepts the third toy - just his mouth alone, choking down Zero's cock. Kaname really, really enjoys it, but he also isn't allowed to come before Yuuki sends him back to his corner of the bed.

With the fourth and largest toy, Yuuki teaches Zero how good his prostate feels, pinning him down and holding him still with a hand on his back as she draws out the torture for a good hour.

Slowly, Yuuki opens Zero up, and when at last she places her cock at his stretched hole, he's so soft and relaxed he doesn't bleed at all. He just softly sighs and accepts her length inside him, his face streaked with tear tracks and replete with satisfaction, turned toward Yuuki with dazed adoration.

"I love you," she tells him, desperately reminding herself not to come, even if Zero is snug and hot and wrapped around her cock like heaven. Yuuki is the first person to ever feel this part of Zero, and he's so perfect. She has to carve it into her memory forever.

"Love you too," Zero sighs. His face is completely unguarded, his body so full of pleasure she wonders if Zero can even feel discomfort. "Go ahead, Yuuki."

She's careful until she can't stand to hold back any longer. Then she cracks. When Yuuki comes she's crying, and Zero accepts it all, squeezing and rippling around her. She loves him so much.
When Yuuki softens and slips out, her come drips out after her, and she admires Zero's opening for a while, rubbing and pulling his hole open to look. No blood - her seed is still white against his pink insides.

When Zero recovers enough to become lucid again, he feels around until he touches Kaname, and then sleepily guides Kaname inside his cunt. Their husband barely lasts a few strokes before creaming Zero's insides a matching frothy white.

Kaname withdraws, and the two purebloods take in the sight of Zero, open and claimed by both of them, his loosened holes dripping their seed down his thighs and the crack of his ass.

By all that is sacred in this world, Yuuki loves him.

In her dark pureblood's heart, something in Yuuki goes to sleep, finally satisfied.

The messenger arrives flustered and out-of-breath, escorted by a passel of Zero's maids all squealing and fluttering. She kneels, and announces, "Consort Kiryuu, Azai-sama is returning from a long journey, bringing a guest, and asks if you will come and await their arrival."

Zero's heart jolts, and he flies to his feet. Azai is in labor! Vampires are so superstitious they won't directly say someone is 'giving birth.' Even omegas won't disregard the taboo, because birth is the most dangerous time for them.

Shoshana's shoulders raise despite her weariness tonight, and she gestures with a faint smile toward the messenger. "You'd better go, Consort Kiryuu. Make sure you feed or take blood tablets before you leave."

Zero licks his bottom lip. He drank from Yuuki only a few days ago, but now that's he's thinking about it, stopping by Kaname's study sounds appealing. "I will."

The journey passes too slowly to satisfy Zero's anxious excitement. Having a foreign alpha nearby would distress Azai and his alphas, so Zero must go by car.

When Zero arrives, every light in Azai's estate is ablaze, and every servant seems to be fetching or preparing something; the whole house is like a prodded beehive. Zero has entered Azai's home once before under less happy circumstances - Azai hosted the rituals before his missed heat - so he finds his way indoors himself.

In the foyer, a well-dressed male alpha waits with tightly clasped hands. "Consort Kiryuu," the nobleman says as soon as Zero's silhouette appears out of the night. A tenseness to his posture warns Zero's omega that this alpha is on hair-trigger.

Zero nods politely, craning his head back to look at the taller alpha. He's well-built, with chiseled features, and has dark brown hair with a faint copper tone to his skin.

"I'm Sousuke -" the noble begins.

"You're the father!" Zero blurts as his extra sense knocks him over the head with a sudden burst of intuition.

The two vampires stare at each other awkwardly, before Sousuke coughs and mumbles something about bringing Zero to see his bondmate.

Zero follows the fleeing alpha straight to Azai's nesting den, where he briefly meets Azai's other
two bondmates. Both of them are built from the same pattern: muscular, impressive-looking male alphas with unexpectedly sweet personalities. All three alphas are close to climbing the walls with leashed defensive aggression. Normally they would already be sequestered with Azai, but the necessity of greeting Zero requires their presence.

Wanting to keep the disruption as small as possible, Zero exchanges a few quick words before being ushered into the nesting den. It's nearly identical to Zero's own, except Azai's bed is on a raised platform against the far wall. Azai, wearing a loose nightgown and assisted by his midwife, is sitting upright amid a ring of pillows. The scent of omega-in-pain smothers the room, making Zero frown.

"Consort Kiryuu," Azai rasps, "thank you for coming." Sweat makes the wispy hairs escaping from his braid stick to his temples.

Zero regards the omega's rounded stomach with fascination and deeply-buried envy.

"Are you well, Kiryuu-sama?" the midwife asks.

Overcoming his faint embarrassment, Zero shakes himself free of his paralysis and darts closer. He knows his task already. As witness for the Kuran family, Zero must affirm that Azai has no substitute baby hidden in the room, and then he'll wait outside before confirming the birth.

Zero's searching the cushions on the bed when Azai's hand darts out and clamps down on Zero's wrist so hard his bones creak.

"Don't look so frightened," the other omega scolds. "I am not afraid. I have done this many times." Azai presses Zero's hand to his belly, and Zero freezes, mind distantly taking in ripple of muscle under his palm. The Hunter's throat closes up, emotions too muddled to understand.

Zero pulls his hand free as gently as he can. "I'll tell your bondmates to come in," he says, and bolts.

A vampire's birth is a community affair. In the old days, blood in the air would have drawn the family's enemies and attracted opportunists seeking weakness. Azai's children and relatives arrive soon after Zero, and all their servants remain alert and on duty. Following custom, they circle the house beating pans and striking rods to frighten away misfortune, and scatter heavy-smelling flowers and perfume sachets in the halls for luck.

As hours pass, Azai's servants fritter away their nervous energy by bringing their guests food and entertainment. Zero eats absentmindedly, attention focused next door. Zero cannot tell how the labor goes - the walls of Azai's nest are built to muffle sound - but the midwife sends her apprentice with periodic reports.

"Consort Kiryuu?"

Zero looks up to find the little apprentice beaming at him.

"Azai-sama is asking for you."

Zero's body feels light enough to float away. He's dizzy when he stands and stumbles after the girl.

Azai has been washed and redressed in a clean gown, black hair shaken loose down his back. He's curled around a squirming bundle of blankets with his alphas leaning over him in a protective ring.

"A boy for Yuuki-hime," Azai announces triumphantly, lifting the bundle and offering that
precious weight for Zero to take.

Tears prick at Zero's eyes as he accepts the child with the easy motions of habit; he's been Uncle Zero to every one of Kaito's children.

The newborn boy is a reddened gremlin with a scrunched-up face, fussing and squalling. Zero's power whispers in his ear; the boy has his bearer's eyes, and he'll be a beta when he's grown. "He's inherited his father's power," Zero says out loud, keeping the rest to himself. "What's his name?"

Azai smiles past his exhaustion. "This is Habiki."

"Hi there," Zero says, and has to hand to baby back to Azai to wipe his eyes.

Zero has hardly been able to tear himself away from Habiki's cradle, but the child will be seven days old soon, and Zero needs a suitably lavish gift for his Oshichiya celebration. Vampires postpone their pregnancy celebrations until after a successful birth, so the party for Habiki is like a gigantic baby shower and naming celebration put together. Habiki's Shadow contract with the Kuran family will also be formally affirmed then, and Zero is in charge of showering Azai and his family with gifts.

Unfortunately, vampire superstition insists that baby gifts never be bought before the birth - that's bad luck and invites a miscarriage - so tonight Zero and Takuma have descended like a whirlwind of retail fury on the nearest vampire shopping district. Takuma knows the protocol for gift-giving and has plenty of experience, so Zero is letting him place the orders and mostly tagging along to open doors. Thankfully all the shops deliver directly to Rosehill, otherwise Zero would be playing mule too.

The chime of Takuma's bells ensures the two omegas are left unbothered except by the shopkeepers. And the three familiars escorting them stay at a discrete distance so the two omegas can chat and catch up. All together, it's a pleasant evening.

Once their shopping is finished, they find an empty bench so Takuma can rest before returning home. Zero buys them milk tea as a treat, and they chat some more while sipping their drinks.

"You sound very fond of him," Takuma observes after Zero relates yet another cute thing Habiki did.

"I know that it's stupid to get attached so soon," Zero confesses to his friend. "Azai-san will raise Habiki until he's weaned. It will be another few years before - " Zero's gut somersaults, Hunter senses snapping crystal clear.

Someone is watching them.

Placing his drink calmly on the bench beside him, the Hunter lifts his head, studying the passerby out of the corner of his eye. At the same time, he eases his senses open, sifting through the auras around them. In a place like this, there are so many vampires nearby that Zero limits his range to only the closest proximity.

C-ranks, a few B and D ranks, and the faintest tinge of...

"You already know I've found you. Why don't you come out?" Zero challenges, knowing his observer can lip read.

A blur descends from a nearby rooftop, and the D-rank vampire straightens from his crouch.

"Hunter Kiryuu," the man returns without surprise. Though dressed in nondescript clothes, Evan Campbell stands out with his height and clearly Western European features. Combing a hand through his shorn, murky blond hair, the Hunter's bare forearm displays the distinct scar used to identify him as one of Sara Shirabuki's victims.

Isa has taken up a guard position in front of Takuma, a low snarl tearing from the hound's throat. Nightshade is silent, but his lips raise to show his teeth, and he is sunk down on his haunches ready to spring. Yuuki's butterfly flutters beside Zero's shoulder, help already summoned.

Campbell holds up empty hands to show he's unarmed. "I'm not here to hurt anyone, Ichijo-san. I'm only here to deliver a message." He winces, seeming to struggle against something unseen. "Your last messenger failed. The consequences are...unpleasant, to say the least."

Trusting his gut, Zero hooks his hand through Nightshade's collar, holding him back. "Others will be here soon. Hurry."

Nodding, Campbell faces Takuma. His expression contorts again, and when he speaks the cadence is eerily lighter, and more feminine. "Takuma-kun. I hope you liked the flowers I left for you. I've brought more." From beneath his coat, Campbell produces three long-stemmed roses, tied by a red ribbon, and holds them out apologetically.

Isa's growl deepens; Takuma looks at the flowers with horror.

Campbell opens his hand, allowing the blossoms to drop to the ground, and begins backing away. "I've prepared another surprise, so be careful tomorrow, Takuma-kun. I hope you enjoy it."

Takuma recoils, and Campbell retreats further, keeping his attention split between the two familiars.

Zero cannot let him leave like this. "We're trying to find you all, Hunter Campbell, and we'll keep trying. We haven't given up on you. Pass that on to the others."

"I will," Campbell replies, and melts into the crowd with one last swift glance.

Takuma's hands protectively cover his child, and his complexion is pale. "I thought she had left us alone. I - It didn't seem important at the time, but someone tried to break into my personal estate on the night Shirabuki attacked the humans. The guards chased whoever it was away. Nothing was left behind, but now, I think perhaps..."

"Takuma-sempai, it's time for you to go home," Zero tells him firmly.

Kaname scrambles to warn the human governments, and the Kurans place their own agents on high alert, poised to counterattack as soon as they identify Shirabuki's next targets.

And that's why, when the real blow comes, they are caught completely unprepared.

Shirabuki's next step is not to spill blood, but ink. Thousands and thousands of pages, released anonymously on the web. All of them documents incriminating members of the Senate.

The Senate promptly implodes.

Within twenty-four hours, nearly half of its members are mired in major scandals; the assembly
devolves into a storm of finger-pointing and damage control. Chairman Ichihara, who passed through the deluge with only minor scrapes, does his best to bring order. But it's Vice-Chairman Noguchi who finds the one topic that can unite them: blaming Kaname for their troubles.

"But we haven't done anything!" Yuuki protests.

That desire for fairness proves her good heart; Kaname strokes her hair fondly. "Shirabuki Sara is dead. We can prove nothing," Kaname reminds her.

Yuuki's mouth tightens.

"The Senate will certainly target us for retaliation, but we will endure," Kaname assures her. "I am more concerned with Shirabuki's actions. We did not predict her movements, neither this time nor last. First the human governments, now the Senate?" Kaname shakes his head. "Even if she meant to expand her power, it's too much, too soon."

Tangling her fingers together behind her back, Yuuki pauses. Her eyes widen, and she turns to Kaname. "What if we were wrong? We thought Shirabuki meant to gain power in the human world. What if those attacks were just a means to an end?"

"I don't follow."

Yuuki waves her hands wildly. "Shirabuki Sara once told me exactly what she intended. I just didn't think…"

Kaname takes Yuuki by the shoulders, trying to help her focus.

Yuuki stares up at him with wild eyes. "Shirabuki Sara wanted to become the Vampire Queen. Every action she planned was meant as one more step toward that goal." His wife raises a finger. "If she had killed you, she would have destroyed her main obstacle and rival among the purebloods. Who's left after that?"

Kaname's eyes narrow, and Yuuki nods. "Exactly. The Senate. Shirabuki attacked the humans to discredit the Senate in front of the Hunters and the human governments. Now she's taking the fight directly to them."

Kaname reflects upon this. The logic is undeniable. "Then Shirabuki will go after the Senate again in the future."

"Yes."

Kaname closes his eyes, and pinches the bridge of his nose.

Yuuki glances hesitantly at Kaname. "Does this mean we have to protect the Senate, even though they hate us?"

"Unless you want the vampire world dissolving into chaos, yes," Kaname replies.

Yuuki contemplates this for a moment. Chaos in the vampire world means chaos in the human world, and therefore chaos among the Hunters. "This is going to suck."

Wordlessly, Kaname hands her a glass of wine.
Chapter End Notes

A big thank you to reviewer Blemm-chan on who came up with the name for Yuuki's Shadow! I had so many good suggestions that it was difficult to choose. But Azai is a bit of a traditionalist, and Habiki means 'echo' which makes it extremely appropriate for a Shadow. Thanks again to everyone who suggested names for the baby, and remember that Takuma's child will also be named using your suggestions!

Next Chapter – Zero seeks to help Shirabuki's victims, Kaname and Yuuki attempt the most thankless job ever, and Sara's ghost advances once again
Coughs* Late is better than never right? I hope the new chapter satisfies.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The inner circle is even less happy about the situation than Kaname and Yuuki, but they obey, fanning out and wielding their influence to shore up the Senate's crumbling foundations.

The common vampires have always known the Senate was corrupt. Within the strict hierarchy of their society, the Senate's nepotism and greed was simply an accepted feature - a mere quirk of the system. After all, it wasn't like the Senators were elected. The Senators themselves selected any replacements to their ranks. No one expected them to be the pinnacle of virtue and self-sacrifice.

As long as the Senate's corruption didn't prevent it from functioning as a semi-effective government, dissent remained quiet, and complaints were only whispered in hushed corners. But after decades of careless rule, the debacle with Rido, the mess with the humans, and now the true, ugly depth of their corruption being ruthlessly exposed to their subjects, ordinary vampires had finally reached a point where they could neither ignore nor tolerate the current Senate. Even the nobles couldn't ignore massive public outcry forever, and more than a few Senators are toppled in the revelation's aftermath.

Kaname allows most of the damage to fall where it may. He'll act to preserve the Senate as a whole, but he made no such promises to save any individual Senators. If their actions begot their downfall, let them reap what they sow. After targeting his precious Consort, they deserve far more than mere loss of face; Kaname has a target list and long-term plans in place for appropriate punishments. Immortality has its advantages.

The Senators don't accept their downfall quietly, striking back at Kaname with the strongest weapons they have. Bureaucratic sabotage at its finest, their ire is felt in a hundred tiny ways. Kuran businesses mysteriously fail inspections; applications sit unread on some minor paper-pushers desk; they find themselves the target of innumerable investigations - for malpractice, for insider trading, for copyright infringement, money laundering, drug running, bribery.

Nothing can be done in the current climate, except to store up grievances for later vengeance. Kaname and Yuuki restrain the monarchists' enthusiasm, make public appearances and statements in support of creating a cleaner, more accountable Senate, and generally work to calm the situation. And at first, it seems like the furor might blow over.

Then the riots start.

The smoke from Yagari's cigarette makes the projector's light billow in the cloudy air. In the darkness, two dozen high-ranking Hunters watch the recordings in silence, only pausing to change clips.

Zero doesn't need the folders stacked in front of him; he knows the faces he's searching for by heart. Only around twenty of Shirabuki's stolen Hunters are left - the rest mostly dead, a bare few
retrieved. Zero flicks through the images, reciting the list to himself silently: Campbell, Rajapaksha, Karahan, Watanabe, Anwar, Ojinnaka, Zhang, Shengelia, Baek, Podlaski…

"There's been another riot in the blood slums," someone calls out.

Zero isn't the only one whose lips curl in a frown. Whether organic or stirred up by Shirabuki's agents, the damage has ripped through aristocratic estates, residential neighborhoods, shopping districts and the human world alike. And in all the riots, in every report the Association has gathered, Shirabuki's Turned Hunters feature prominently - instigating, coordinating, leading the charge. When before the Hunters could barely catch a glimpse of their stolen comrades, now they have too many targets at once.

The riots have also triggered another round of assassinations, leveled directly against the Senate. Those losses are another sign of weakness, and another proof of the Senate's impotence. The Senate cannot, at any cost, allow the insult to stand. Shirabuki's stolen Hunters will be pursued with all the rage and fury the nobles can muster. No doubt the Senate will use them as a scapegoat for the riots as well - 'preserving public peace' or 'punishing the instigators.'

Time is running out. The Hunters' Association has far more limited resources than the Senate. In a head-on contest for the same quarry, they will lose if they do not concentrate their forces.

A choice must be made.

It is the responsibility of the men and women gathered in this room to make that final determination. Zero is here only as liaison and advisor; he does not envy their burden. When the deliberations are finished, he will take the final priority list to Kaname and claim the help his husband promised. Trust between vampires and Hunters is slow to come, but necessity has forced the Association's hand.

"Fuck - the bloodsuckers got Podlaski!" another Hunter says, watching the streamed footage live on a laptop. Zero hears the sound of ripping flesh echo through the speakers, and his belly floods with nausea when the screams start.

It takes a long time for the video to go quiet. The shaky, pale-faced crowd gathered around the screen disperses; someone retches into a wastebasket; another name is crossed off.

Zero too feels queasy; he sees himself reflected in the other Turned Hunters so easily. To steady himself, he stands and takes a turn around the room, watching the others weigh and measure out lives. He pauses beside Chairman Cross, peering over the president's shoulder as Cross lays out and rearranges photographs. However often Cross reorders and discards, there is one picture he never touches.

The teenaged boy in the photograph has crystal blue eyes and dark brown skin; like all Hunters of higher purity, his heavily mixed bloodline makes his ethnicity impossible to determine. His name is Alton Blue, and he is the one anomaly in Shirabuki's victim preference, Noah Karahan's apprentice from solidly mid-content bloodlines who was kidnapped along with his master. The Association guesses his abduction and Turning might have been an accident, an additional victim swept up by chance. Either way, he is the youngest to be Turned, and also the one with the greatest ability to rebel against pureblooded commands. Apprentice Blue is the one target the Association wishes to save at all costs.

"He's about the age you were," Cross reminisces softly, placing a single fingertip on the blurry surveillance shot.
The nausea in Zero's gut flares again; he feels the weight of eyes on his back. "Hurry up and make your decisions," Zero replies curtly, stepping away, "We're giving the Senate a head start."

At first, it's such a small thing that Zero doesn't pay any attention.

Habiki is asleep in his arms, exhausted from crying, and Zero rocks back and forth, back and forth, otherwise the baby will wake up again. The rhythmic motion lulls Zero in a trancelike state, and he sinks, futures spinning out under his fingers like infinite points of light. Perhaps he is dreaming too - he sees Habiki grown, handsome and smiling - a ripple - Habiki as a young man, wearing a white Night Class uniform - another ripple - a gangly Habiki, all limbs, halfway between child and teenager.

When Zero rises up out of his dreams, like a boat skimming the surface of a stream, he has a passing desire to go outside for air. But his power pulses, and Zero loosens his hold, letting the thought slip away.

Then, a few days later, it happens again.

He's out running errands, and considers stopping for food. A spark of feeling crackles along his nerves, and Zero turns away from the cafe instead of going inside. He's a Hunter; it's practically a cardinal rule to trust your gut. But nothing comes of it, so Zero puts the matter out of his mind again.

Except it keeps happening. That little nudge in his head saying 'don't do that.' And it happens at the most innocuous times: when he's about to go downstairs, drink his tea, pause to straighten his skirts, visit Takuma, go see Yuuki and Kaname in the business offices. It perplexes him, but again, nothing bad happens. It doesn't feel like danger; if Zero had to put words to it, he'd describe it more as a feeling of opportunity.

The situation only becomes clear when he rejoins the teams rescuing the Turned Hunters, and that vague passing feeling bothers him relentlessly. Don't step left. Don't back up. Don't follow when they flee. Don't go on the roof. Don't leave the doorway. And definitely, definitely avoid clashing with the Senate's lackeys.

Then the bridge Zero was about to step onto explodes right after he experiences that persistent feeling again.

Which makes the situation very clear.

Zero would say something dramatic like 'someone is trying to assassinate me,' but he's pretty sure you have to be important to be assassinated. When he voices this thought to Shoshana, she gets a peculiar pained expression on her face, and sighs as if Zero has said something very stupid.

Zero thinks of just how many times his intuition has probably saved his life. I pity the assassin trying to kill me. It must be very frustrating.

Of course, Yuuki and Kaname don't find the situation as humorous. Zero minimizes the danger as much as he dares without outright lying, but how could his spouses fail to see through his misdirection?

His overprotective, endearing alphas begin hovering everywhere he goes - again - not that he's allowed to leave the estate. Used to their antics and knowing they only act this way out of care, Zero permits their restrictions. He hardly leaves anyway. The summer Jeweled Court was already
cancelled - no alpha would allow their omega outside when the fear of assassination runs so high.

The one and only thing Zero fights them on is his work with the Hunters. Zero always takes point whenever a hunting party goes after the Turned Hunters, and a few dozen murder attempts aren't going to stop him.

When Zero comes to Kaname with a request, his husband barely looks up from his reports. "And why should I go along with this surprise you've planned?"

Sighing, Zero sneaks close enough to breathe in the cologne and heavy alpha musk rising off Kaname's skin, and cheats by rubbing his cheek in the slope of his mate's throat so his own omega scent wafts over the pureblood's nostrils.

Kaname goes a little cross-eyed.

"Two reasons. You've been working too much, so this surprise is meant for you. Second, Yuuki is on board already, and if you behave during the first part," Zero lowers his voice, "I'll reward you with 'that' scenario. The one you keep asking for."

The pureblood's eyes widen. "Oh?"

Nodding quickly, Zero coughs to cover his embarrassment. Why did he have to be married to such perverted bloodsuckers!

Smirking, Kaname finally leans back and casts aside his work. "Well then, lead on."

Ten minutes of travel later, the pureblood is considerably less impressed.

"Zero," Kaname intones flatly, "what is this."

Zero surveys the scene: an empty parking lot, a cheap car with the right fender crumpled in, and the shallow friendliness of the human instructor wearing a rumpled polo shirt. "Driving school."

His husband sneers disdainfully. "This is unnecessary. I am a pureblood. With my abilities, I can go anywhere I like in considerably less time."

Zero eyes him with skepticism. "Kaname, magical bats are not a practical method of travel. Knowing how to drive is a useful skill."

Kaname's indifferent, unmoved expression doesn't shift.

Crossing his arms, Zero scowls. "You're ten thousand years old, you need to learn to drive."

Kaname lifts a single eyebrow in derision.

Zero pulls out his trump card. "Remember, we're only doing 'that' if you behave."

The reminder gives Kaname pause. Finally, the pureblood sighs and yields gracefully, striding over to the small car and sitting down in the driver's seat as if were a throne. The instructor scrambles in after him, looking rather lost.

Zero waves as he sprints away, Nightshade at his heels. He'll just come back when they're finished.

"That wasn't so bad, was it?" Zero teases, tugging Kaname after him by the hand.
Kaname presses his lips together, coolly ignoring Zero.

Zero swings his hips, just to torment his alpha a little. They're on a public street in the human world, so ravaging Zero will have to wait. Kaname can only look, and yearn to touch.

Yuuki's aura pulses ahead, in an apartment Zero has temporarily rented for this single purpose. She won't disturb them unless necessary; their game tonight doesn't suit her tastes, and she's present only for their safety.

Breaking into a run, Zero tastes the air, breathing deep the taste of smog and Kaname. His skin tingles uncomfortably from the sunlight, his recent oversensitivity striking again, but the thrill of a false chase blunts the sensation.

Yuuki waves as they flash past her to the bedroom. Waiting there is tonight's reward: a pair of silver, Hunter-made handcuffs spelled heavily enough to hold a pureblood.

"Last chance," Zero says, winding his arms around Kaname's throat and nibbling at the skin there.

His husband smirks. "I don't recall asking for your mercy, Hunter."

"Good answer," Zero praises, rolling his hips so Kaname's thickened cock rubs against the damp patch on Zero's trousers. He's leaking so much already - even Zero doesn't know where this libido came from.

Drawing back, even though the lack of skin to skin contact disappoints, Zero's voice holds the crack of a command. "On the bed. Now. Unless you want to slink off with your tail between your legs, bloodsucker."

"How forceful! You know I enjoy it when you pretend you can control me, Zero," Kaname rejoins, sliding his cravat from his neck.

Without saying a word, Zero backhands him. Hard.

Kaname inhales, a bright sheen lighting his eyes, and remains perfectly still as the bruise on his face fades back to alabaster perfection. Then Kaname swallows, and begins shedding his clothes even faster.

Zero picks up the handcuffs from the mattress, and waits meaningfully while Kaname gets naked. The pureblood pose shamelessly nude on the bed, still smirking. "You'd enjoy this more if I had my hands free."

It's easy to fall into the right pattern, an embarrassing side-effect of his power. Zero scowls. "We have an agreement, Kuran. You're not fucking me without them."

Kaname shrugs and holds his wrists out. "If I must."

The charms inlaid in the metal make Zero's fingertips tingle, his Hunter blood clashing with his vampiric nature. He clicks them closed over each of Kaname's strong wrists; the pureblood frowns, testing the give, before smiling in satisfaction. They aren't made to restrict his powers, just keep him physically restrained.

Leaning back, Zero admires the beautiful monster laid out underneath him. The dark auburn hair spread out on the pillows, the slope of his flawless throat and chest, the stupidly impressive cock leaking against his belly -
"We're not going to get very far if you don't take your clothes off," Kaname purrs, his hips rising meaningfully.

This bastard. "Do I need to gag you?" Zero demands, yanking off his gloves and undoing his belt. Like hell he's getting naked; just to spite Kaname he's not taking off anything except his pants.

"I didn't agree to that." The pureblood stretches extravagantly, and his cock bobs, fluid beading at the tip. "You're here keep me satisfied, little Hunter. That way I leave you and your kinsmen alone. You wouldn't want me to break our deal, would you?"

Damn him. Zero doesn't gift the leech a response, just steps out of his pants and underwear and kneels on the bed. He's about to straddle the pureblood's hips when Kaname laughs.

"Slowly, kitten. You'll need all night if you want to satisfy me."

Zero scoffs loudly. Still with his upper half clothed, Zero swings his leg over Kaname's chest and sets his hands around the pureblood's throat, claws pricking tiny wounds.

Kaname ignores the warning, and shows his teeth when he smiles. "Are you rushing because you know I've ruined your taste for human cock?"

Anger and lust coalesce lightning-fast. Zero slaps Kaname again, harder, and this time his claws break skin. Precious ruby drips down Kaname's cheek before the slices heal.

Zero's body goes rigid. Inhaling draws the scent over the roof of his mouth, past his lengthened fangs, the lure as much taste and touch as scent. Like a man possessed, Zero bends down and licks that pure blood off Kaname's cheek. Not a single smear is left behind.

Kaname groans, and Zero viciously twists a nipple in retaliation. "Good boy," the pureblood praises, the brightness of his eyes shining.

Zero pants, open-mouthed, anger twining with the rope of lust and hunger. His brain feels blanketed in fog. More. He needs more.

Like a beast, Zero sinks his teeth into the pureblood's shoulder, biting down and shaking his head to savage the wound. The burning taste of pure blood drives a red lance through all Zero's rationality. Their game and their plans are ripped away like mist. Kaname tastes so good, flushed with so much rich power.

The Hunter rakes his claws down the pureblood's flawless chest, sucking and kissing and drinking as he splits skin, widening the wounds with his fangs. He leaves half-crescent imprints of his teeth around Kaname's nipples, slices ribbons of blood down the vampire's ribs. Pressing down so hard on Kaname's wrists that the bones grind together, he bites his way down the join of hip and thigh, letting the blood pool there before lapping it up like the finest wine.

Kaname only moans with each forbidden act, his sacred pure blood anointing his limbs in red and mixing with his sweat. His cock twitches like every bite and slash is a sweet stroke to his length. The room stinks of copper and pheromones. Zero moves above him, chin and cheeks streaked with blood like a vision, his lavender irises tinged bright scarlet. Kaname can think of no more enchanting sight, and urges his boy on with his words and responses.

Deep in his blood frenzy, Zero forgets the lube hidden in the bloodstained blankets. Once Zero has painted Kaname's thighs in blood and ephemeral bruises, he straddles his lover like a throne and sinks down savagely, screaming in triumph as he's split wide, his folds greedily swallowing his prize. Still snapping and clawing, he rides Kaname until they both break, throwing his
bloodstained throat back and hissing.

Then, like all the strength has gone out of him, Zero collapses to the side, one leg hooked over Kaname's hips with the pureblood's half-hard cock still tucked inside him, a mix of blood, slick and semen marking their filthy skin.

"Well. That was a surprise," Kaname remarks, handcuffed and covered in his own blood. "One I enjoyed immensely," he continues before Zero has a chance to feel guilty. Stroking Zero's shoulder with his bound hands, Kaname languidly smiles. "No one has ever dared bleed me like that before. I'd like to do it again sometime."

Zero raises his head, finding it difficult to panic properly when his head is fuzzy from orgasm. "You do? It wasn't what we planned." Zero was supposed to hit Kaname a few times, maybe choke him again while pretending Zero was an enemy Hunter. Not have crazy bloody vampire sex.

"It was better than what we planned. I didn't think I could convince you to be so enthusiastic. Did you enjoy yourself?"

Zero grumbles and snuggles against Kaname, his ruined shirt getting even more blood on it. "Yeah I guess." Where had that bloodlust even come from? That hadn't felt like Level E, but it hadn't been normal hunger either.

"Are you both done?" Yuuki calls from the hall.

Putting aside his thoughts for later, Zero invites her inside. They could all use a nap before he shoves them down and rides them again.

In his dreams that are not dreams, Zero walks the corridors of the Senate. His ghostly footsteps are soundless in the empty, ostentatious hallways. But appearances are deceiving; even in daylight there is someone here. Zero's power senses this, and he ventures deeper into the bowels of the building, drawing close to a familiar aura, the one he'd sensed for a brief moment the first time he came here.

Five Level D vampires. Five Hunters. The signatures overlap and mix, the aura of a fellow Hunter nearly lost beneath the Level D taint. Zero matches faces and names: Campbell, Karahan, Watanabe, Rajapaksha, Baek. No sign of Karahan's apprentice Blue, which could be either good or bad.

His kinsmen don't raise their heads when Zero's dream-self approaches, peering down at the objects they are gathered around. Unnoticed, Zero rears back in shock.

Bombs. Dozens of them.

Shirabuki's stolen Hunters exchange no words, only distribute the explosives evenly between themselves before splitting up. Zero follows Karahan, watching as he places his bombs before escaping into the night. Outside, on the roof of a nearby building, the five unwilling vampires gather again, their plan complete. There is a certain resigned satisfaction in their eyes when Watanabe triggers the detonator.

And the downtown skyline turns to flame as the Senate burns.

"There is one thing that concerns me," Kaname says later, after they've returned to Rosehill to manage the crisis.
After tonight, Zero knows every one of Shirabuki's Turned Hunters carries a death sentence written in iron. It doesn't matter if casualties were minimal because the explosion happened in daytime while the Senate wasn't currently in session. Symbols have power, and the vampire world won't forget the Senate's symbol of power burning before their eyes. This cannot be interpreted as anything except an act of defiance, and a direct challenge to the reigning authority of the vampire world.

Already, the Hunter's Association has received reports that Hunter Watanabe has been brutally executed. Of the original roughly thirty Hunters Shirabuki abducted, fifteen are dead. Another seven are in Hunter custody. The rest are still at large, being searched for frantically by both the Association and the Senate.

"What's worrying you, Kaname?" Yuuki asks, rubbing her eyes tiredly.

Kaname gestures toward the television, where firefighters are extinguishing the last of the inferno. "What was Shirabuki Sara's endgame? This chaos cannot be maintained indefinitely. Her orders are too eye-catching, and the Senate's response will be overwhelming. Eventually, Shirabuki would have used her Hunters to death. Before they become useless to her, how did she intend to take advantage of the chaos?

To that, no one living has an answer.

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*Hunter Baek Soo-hyun sights down the length of her longsword. "I know a suicide mission when I see one, Campbell."*

*At his master's side, Alton Blue startles, looking toward Baek with wide eyes. Noah Karahan rests a hand on his apprentice's shoulder, but doesn't contradict Baek's words. The other Hunters gathered around have grim expressions.*

"Nevertheless, we don't have a choice," Even Campbell replies bitterly, touching his throat as the pureblood command wrapped around his neck cinches tighter.

"At least this is the last order," Rajapaksha points out dully. Unspoken between the eight gathered Hunters is the implication that none of them will survive it.

"Then I suppose it's time we get started," Baek chuckles, sheathing her blade. As one, the Hunters turn and survey their target: the castle belonging to the pureblood, Shouto Isaya.

Zero wakes with a shout in his bed at Rosehill.

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Takuma does not answer his phone. Neither does Shouto Isaya, or anyone in the Shouto estate.

"They've cut the lines, or they're blocking reception somehow. Hunter Baek was a member of the technical department," Zero mutters, throwing on the first clothing he sees.

"Or there isn't anyone able to answer," Kaname points out between phone calls contacting his nearest agents to the Shouto estate.

Yuuki yanks furiously at her coat clasps. "Everything makes sense now. If Sara had killed Kaname, I would have been her puppet as long as she could threaten Zero. That would have taken care of the Kuran family. Then Ouri's death was arranged next, because he was the oldest pureblood. After that, who would be her next biggest threat?"
Shouto, of course, who had also stolen the omega Shirabuki wanted. If she'd planned on attacking the Shouto estate in person tonight, then with eight Level D Hunters backing her she might very well have killed him.

When the three arrive, the scene is already complete chaos. For this perilous assault on Shouto's castle, Shirabuki must have gathered every last servant she had left. From a distance, they look like a swarm, swamping the grounds in every direction and barely being restrained by the disciplined defense the castle's guards and staff are mounting.

The sounds of combat are drowned out by constant booming thunder, and screaming winds. Above the castle, clouds swirl in a violent ring, like the genesis of a tornado. Lighting flickers so often anyone looking at the sky is blinded: Shouto is already in battle.

"Takuma-sempai isn't with Shouto!" Zero shouts over the din.

"Go and find him!" Kaname shouts back, his outline already breaking up into shadowy ravens. "I'll retrieve Shouto!"

Nodding, Zero closes his eyes, briefly assessing the battlefield through his Hunter senses. He doesn't tell Kaname anything like 'try and save the Hunters.' That time has passed; truthfully, their lives have been forfeit since they were Turned. Zero cannot ask others to risk their lives for that slight chance at salvation.

"There isn't any clear path! We'll have to break through somehow!" he tells Yuuki, clearing his mind. Regrets can't save anything.

She nods seriously. "Leave it to me!"

Zero leads his wife in a half-circle around the walls, searching for a weakness in the swarm, and gestures toward their entry point. The thunder is so loud he cannot even hear himself speak. No more words are exchanged; the two charge forward, straight toward the mass of vampires attempting to climb the walls.

Zero raises Bloody Rose, settling into the heightened awareness of battle; he breathes and the universe opens up. But before he can pull the trigger, the vampires standing in their way are tossed to the side as if a giant hand is sweeping their path clean. Zero and Yuuki sprint through the sudden empty corridor created in the sea of attackers, completely untouched. Yuuki's aura darkens and her power knocks away the bullets raining down, reflecting them back toward the vampires who fired them.

Once they reach the walls, Yuuki's arms wrap around Zero's chest, and despite his intuition's warning Zero shrieks in terror as his feet are suddenly dangling in mid air.

Toting Zero like a stuffed animal, Yuuki lands precisely atop the wall in a single bound, far higher than Zero could have jumped himself. Her laughter echoes in his ear. "You okay?"

Crouched on the rim, Zero stares at his wife with wide eyes, and coughs as he tries to regain his dignity. "I'm fine." It had been high, damnit!

"I've been training." She grins, takes him up in her arms again, and jumps down to land gracefully on the other side.

Bypassing the defenders, they dash straight into the castle itself, Zero guiding the way toward Takuma. The lightning casts crazed shadows through the windows, turning the halls and rooms into sinister, unfamiliar places.
Shouto has left his heart well-protected. Zero and Yuuki pass three lines of defense before they reach Takuma, tucked away in the most easily defended rooms in the castle. He's white as a ghost, but commands the castle's defense with perfect, ironclad composure. The guards aren't just Shouto's paranoia. Ten months pregnant with a child of higher blood purity, Takuma's natural power is sapped by supporting his pregnancy; he would be almost helpless if forced into combat.

"Zero-kun! Yuuki-hime!" he calls, straightening with a hand supporting the weight of his stomach. "Where's Isaya?"

"Alive," Zero shouts over a peal of thunder. "How can we help, Takuma-sempai?"

"Stay here with me. I need your Hunter senses to help me direct the staff. We're outnumbered and the defense is barely holding up."

Zero ignores the grateful look Yuuki gives Takuma. He can be sensible without anyone forcing him. Mostly. "The northwest wall is in danger. And a B-rank to the south is powering up to do something we won't like."

Roughly sixty seconds later, the stone under their feet trembles, making the teeth in Zero's jaw vibrate painfully.

"Breech!" shouts one of Shouto's servants through the radio, a terrible crash echoing in the background.

"The wall's collapsed. The current defenders can't contain it," Zero supplies, information springing into his brain as his power reads aura patterns.

"I'll go," Yuuki says, opening her hand, and the butterfly perched on her palm flutters free.

"Takuma-sempai and I will be fine. We've got three familiars, and me," Zero reminds her, hiding the uneasy feeling in his heart. Vulnerability, he identifies silently.

She nods unhappily, and tosses herself into the wind.

Zero turns to the castle maps laid out in the room, interpreting the vampires he senses into physical space. He has no worries for Yuuki's safety. Nothing here is capable of killing the grown, powerful vampire she's become.

Takuma and Zero work in tandem; Zero identifies the threats, while Takuma's tactics dismantle them. All the while, the thunder and gales shake the castle spires beneath their force. As hard as he tries not to, Zero tortures himself counting the hybrid Hunter auras flickering out.

"Some kind of stealth team has made it past the first defense circle."

Takuma taps a finger against the table, making the only possible decision. "We'll send the last of the inner defense line there."

Sending off their personal guards, in other words. That will leave the two of them as the only people in this section of the castle. Zero shouldn't be concerned. With his power, no one can sneak up on them, and they have three pureblood familiars who will call for help in emergency. Still, on a very deep level Zero doesn't like it, and he doesn't understand why.

In their makeshift command center, there's plenty of time for reflection as the two omegas guide the outcome of the battle, providing the occasional instruction to the defenders.
"Takuma-sempai?"

"Hmmm?"

"I want to apologize. I don't think I've been a very good friend to you recently." Zero ducks his head in shame, worrying the edge of his sleeve. "I know you've been excited about your pregnancy, and I know you never talk about it around me because you know it makes me…" Zero hesitates, sorting through his options before he finds the right words. "You respect the fact that it's a complicated subject for me."

"Zero-kun." Takuma takes his hand, "I don't mind. You don't need to listen to me chatter about painting a nursery."

"I just want you to know you don't have to avoid it around me," Zero insists. "I want you to feel you can share anything you'd like."

The noble smiles, little laugh lines creasing the edges of his green eyes. "Alright. When this is over - and my house isn't a warzone - let's have tea together, and we can talk."

Zero returns the smile. "I'd be happy to, Takuma-sempai."

The battle is beginning to lose momentum, but the course hasn't been easy. The outer wall is more holes than coherent structure, and the castle staff have retreated back into the keep itself. Yuuki has parked herself in the Great Hall and is kicking the ass of anyone who dreams of getting past her. The thunder has softened to a rumble, and the atmosphere isn't quite so harsh. Shouto and Kaname are wrapping up their one-sided duel.

"We heard you needed some guards?" draws a voice from the door.

Zero sighs, unsurprised by the five familiar vampire auras nearby. "Kain-san. I see you brought the whole inner circle."

"Kaname-sama called us," adds Souen, allowing the light-bending camouflage hiding them to dissipate.

Linked arm-in-arm with Shiki, Touya gives a wave. Behind them, Aido bounces on his toes, arms lifted above his head as he stretches. "Ahhh! Finally out of the lab."

Takuma brightens in delight, and grim set of his shoulders eases. "I wish it could be under better circumstances."

"Unfortunately, we have work to do," Zero interjects, "They're going for the upper floors again." He indicates the correct areas as the nobles crowd around the map, before shooing them away. Zero can admit he's sour about tonight's arrangement. Bloody Rose remains holstered at his side, and he hasn't been able to shoot a single vampire tonight.

"Kain, please be careful. My home is already in ruins, I don't need you to burn it down as well," Takuma calls, clearly in better spirits, wrinkling his nose when he finds his tea has gone cold.

Kain grunts, hands in his pockets, giving a backwards wave.

Snorting, Zero turns back to the map. "Get out of here already. Go make yourself useful."

Behind him, Takuma makes a noise like he's lost all the breath in his body.
Zero's intuition screams.

He whirls, and the world whites out.

Takuma is bent backwards, body limp, held up only by the ice spear embedded in his chest. Before him, Aido Hanabusa has his hand outstretched, the blank expression on his face slowly giving way to horror.

Isa howls, more like a human wail then a hound's cry, and leaps at Aido, jaws open and snarling.

Drawing Bloody Rose, Zero empties an entire clip into the familiar before the hound's body stops moving.

Far away, something inhuman screams, and an enormous bolt of lightning turns the night into day.

"Get Aido out of here!" Zero shouts furiously to Souen. "Shouto will kill him if he finds him! Shirabuki ordered this, didn't she?"

Aido nods, unable to tear his eyes from the evidence of his crime. "The party...it was the last order she gave me, I didn't know I swear!" His voice breaks on the last word, self-horror overtaking him.

Takuma stirs and coughs, blood flecking his lips. A dark stain is spreading across the front of his gown while his breath rattles wetly in his lungs.

"I...I...please, you have to help him!" Aido begs, taking a step back as though trying to deny reality.

"Don't move!" Zero shouts, battle experience overcoming his shock. "He'll bleed out immediately if you remove the spear. Can you keep it frozen without freezing his body around it?" Since the spear is made of ice, body heat would be enough to make it melt.

"I...I can," Aido stammers, obeying; the ice spear grows whiter and cloudier.

Kain jumps forward, helping ease Takuma to the ground, both nobles careful not to jar the spear.

Takuma's face is colorless. The round, healthy fullness of his belly is a horrific contrast to the hole in his chest and the gore seeping through his clothes, his vitality slipping away with every heartbeat. Takuma's eyelids flicker, consciousness briefly returning. "Isaya," he whimpers, "Isaya, our baby..."

"I'm so sorry," Aido weeps. "I'm sorry, Takuma."

"Go!" Zero commands, his heart wrenching, throwing himself on the ground and supporting Takuma's body in their place. "Kain, Souen, take him and run! Put him in the cells at Rosehill."

Kain has to drag Aido away - with Aido's state of mind, Aido believes he deserves to die. But that's for clearer heads to decide. With Ruka hiding them from Shouto's servants, they'll make it out okay.

Not for the first time, Zero curses the nature of his powers. He has no way of healing Takuma; even his blood isn't the best choice here. "Shiki - your blood is the purest!"

Shiki is already on his knees beside them, slicing through his wrist with one claw as Zero tilts Takuma's head to swallow the blood. Touya is on the phone, calling for help.

Zero counts heartbeats - two, not one. Please, he thinks. Please.
It feels like an eternity before someone comes, before a raging, half-insane Shouto takes Takuma's weight, leaving Zero boneless on the ground, his friend's blood smearing his clothes.

A shadow falls over Zero. "My sweet Consort, there's nothing more you can do here. Let us take you home."

Zero looks up into Kaname's face, numb.

Yuuki folds him into an embrace, and nuzzles soothingly, her feelings and alpha instinct in perfect agreement. Zero slumps into her arms, the emotional toll finally hitting him. His friend had nearly died in front of him, and he'd watched it happen without being able to do a thing.

Kaname cups Zero's cheek, stroking with his thumb. "I've brought you something."

Zero looks at the two trussed Level D Hunters, one of whom is the young apprentice Alton Blue. An hour ago he would have been overjoyed.

*A bitter victory indeed*, he thinks and covers his face with bloodstained hands.

Seated alone behind his desk, Kaname pinches the bridge of his nose, speaking curtly to the woman who's entered his study without invitation. "Consort Shoshana, now is *not* the time."

Takuma will live. As for his child...the Midwife would promise nothing, only that they would need to wait and see if Takuma lost the child today.

With Shouto understandably overwrought and grieving, wrapping up the battle's aftermath falls to Kaname and Yuuki. Kaname also has Aido's fate weighing on his mind. The noble remains locked in a cell, awaiting judgement. Whatever trifle Consort Shoshana wants must wait.

The omega speaks no word, only kneels down with difficulty and makes a full obeisance, forehead touching the floor.

Kaname straightens, a spark of annoyance sharpening his tongue. "Consort Shoshana. Let me remind you that our business has been completed and I have no further need for your life. I have not called for you. It is not wise to disobey me."

"I apologize, Kuran-sama," she says steadily, "but I must speak with you regarding Consort Kiryuu."

Concern moderates his anger; if it's about Zero, Kaname will tolerate her intrusion. "Continue. You may raise your head."

She nods, and looks him in the eye, though keeping the rest of her body pitched respectfully forward. "Kuran-sama, I have remained silent about your intentions with the immortality ritual. In that matter, I will say nothing to Consort Kiryuu. I recognize what you have done for me, and I do not wish to intrude upon your plans."

"See that you don't," Kaname reminds her coldly. "Was that all, Consort Shoshana?"

Her poise remains unshaken by his anger, and she shakes her head. "No, Kuran-sama. I simply wanted to make that clear, since I doubt you will welcome anything else I have come to tell you."

Kaname is reluctantly impressed. Even his own kind step back before his anger, yet this half-dead, elderly, widowed omega doesn't even flinch. "Continue."
Her gaze remains steady. "Kiryuu-sama has become someone I respect and care for, and after tonight's events I can hold my tongue no longer. I do not understand why you keep him ignorant, Kuran-sama, but you should know better than allowing him into battle. He leaps into danger without knowing what he risks."

Completely at a loss, it takes Kaname a moment to respond. "Your insinuations are foolish. Zero is the most powerful Hunter alive today. He is perfectly capable of defending himself. Even if he were to be overwhelmed, I assure you I am not so careless as to leave him unguarded."

For a long moment, Shoshana's dark eyes study him. "I am speaking," she says deliberately, "of Consort Kiryuu's pregnancy."

"Zero isn't pregnant," Kaname rejects immediately.

"Yes, he is," she states, straightening up and placing her hands on her folded thighs.

"The blood tests were conclusive. I saw the results myself," Kaname replies, wondering if perhaps Shoshana's illness has affected her mind.

A faint smile twitches her lips. "Did you know that it takes humans several weeks to confirm a pregnancy, even with the most advanced blood tests available? Very different from us vampires."

Suddenly, Kaname is taking this conversation very, very seriously.

"He always had such trouble keeping a healthy weight. Yet he regained his condition very quickly after his heat, didn't he? And he's still eating more than usual."

That was true, but hardly conclusive. Still, Kaname tamps down on the bloodbond just in case, keeping his feelings shielded.

"And you may have noticed his other appetites changing - he's been feeding from you and Kuran-hime more often, yes? Become more tactile, more needy? Perhaps also been more eager in bed?"

Kaname swallows, recognizing patterns he hadn't even noticed.

"Pregnant omegas also become more sensitive to sunlight. Consort Kiryuu has complained of the sun recently, hasn't he? But his panic attack after the Senate's interrogation was what convinced me. There is only one reason why an omega would not simply attack an offensive alpha."

She cups her hands, sending Kaname a significant look. "Because his instinct knows he is vulnerable. Because he is protecting something precious."

"How certain are you?" Kaname interrupts, unable to hide the roughness of his voice.

"Completely. I have seen too many pregnancies not to recognize the signs."

Getting up, Kaname begins to pace. "We'll have to confirm it with a blood test," he says.

She nods, already providing a solution. "Consort Kiryuu gives regular blood samples to the teams working on the antidote to Shirabuki's drug."

Kaname pauses, mind fitting together several pieces. The assassination attempts against Zero - filtered through Shoshana's suspicions, the timing is too convenient. If Kaname can covertly test those blood samples for pregnancy, it was possible someone else could as well.

Someone who decided the results required Zero's death.
The fault lines in Kaname's psyche quake as his darkness shifts its coils. Well. That someone will need to die.

"Thank you for your concern, Consort Shoshana," he says, mind already shifting and discarding possibilities. "You may return to your rooms."

Bowing at the waist, she staggers upright, and leaves quietly.

Kaname remains standing in the center of his study, thoughts tumbling one after another. He will have the tests run first, before he considers the scenario too deeply.

Perhaps Shoshana is wrong.

When Kaname appears silently at the door of his cell, Aido scrambles upright with a gasp.

He looks like he hasn't slept or eaten; someone has thankfully given him clean clothes. If Aido had still been stained with Takuma's blood, Kaname might have said something he could not take back.

The pureblood observes impassively while Aido's face cycles through several emotions - shame, fear, regret, all tinged with resignation.

Without any introduction, Kaname begins to speak. "You trespassed on the Shouto estate without being summoned and attacked a Consort with child. I cannot protect you from the consequences of those actions."

Sucking in a breath, Aido falls to his knees, bowing his head in acceptance of whatever fate Kaname has brought him.

Pausing, Kaname allows the moment to lengthen. "Isaya Shouto has spared your life. You're lucky he is a reasonable man."

Forehead pressed to the ground, Aido shrinks in on himself. "I will do whatever Shouto Isaya-sama deems necessary to atone." He hesitates, then with a thread of hope asks, "Does that mean...?"

"Takuma's child has survived the day," Kaname confirms, his own relief palpable even though his neutral mask. "The risk is still high he'll miscarry. If his child survives the next forty-eight hours, the Midwife is hopeful. Takuma will still be on bed rest for the foreseeable future."

Aido sags, a relieved sob shaking his shoulders.

"Shouto spared your life. Do not assume that mercy will hold if the child dies. As for your fate...Shouto left that up to me."

Aido's shoulders tense again.

Linking his hands behind his back, Kaname examines the noble kneeling before him. "I cannot release you. You will remain in custody until the antidote is complete, and you will submit to the presence of constant guards. Any resistance will not be tolerated and will be answered by violence."

"Yes, Kaname-sama."

"However...you will be allowed to continue your work on the antidote."

Aido stiffens in surprise. "Kaname-sama?"
Aido's reaction is understandable; trusting a servant who has recently betrayed you, willing or not, is the action of a fool. Yet Aido's position is ideal for this task. "Shirabuki Sara had limited contacts with you. The orders she gave cannot have been numerous or complex. And by all reports, your research has been critical for our progress so far. But that isn't why I'm sending you."

"I need a spy. I have reason to believe an agent may have stolen or performed unneeded tests on Zero's blood samples. Find out who. You'll be allowed to move between both teams for this purpose."

Aido knows better than to ask questions. Seiren appears in the doorway, and Kaname turns to leave, a clear dismissal.

Aido's desperate voice rings out behind him, laying bare his fear. "Kaname-sama? Takuma...is he...?" Does he hate me?

Without turning, Kaname replies, "You know Takuma as well as I do. He's convinced you tried to save them - you didn't strike his heart or his stomach. He interceded with Shouto on your behalf."

Aido's voice is thick with tears. "Thank you, Kaname-sama. I apologize for the trouble I've caused. Please thank Takuma for me as well."

"I'll pass it on," Kaname allows, flicking a glance over his shoulder. "You'll return to the labs tonight, under guard. Keep your orders in mind."

"Of course, Kaname-sama." Aido has a peculiar expression on his face, clever brain already working with the new information he's been given.

Kaname frowns imperceptibly as he walks away. Aido is always too smart for his own good.

The tests come back.

Shoshana is not wrong.

Fuck.

Chapter End Notes

Kaname certainly has some difficult decisions to make, doesn't he? I've known Zero was pregnant for three chapters, you have no idea the agony. Shoutout to reviewer Rainovia, who guessed the loophole I planted pretty much immediately. Sorry for trying to throw you off the scent ;)

One of Yuuki's hard limits for sex is that she won't deliberately hurt Zero or Kaname, so that's why she would rather stay away when the boys have sex this chapter. Rough sex is fine when her pureblood nature is in control, but that's different than intentionally hitting one of her husbands. Zero and Kaname have different preferences due to their backgrounds, so that's something between just the two of them.

No spoilers for next chapter, you're just going to have to guess, hehe.
Welcome to summer, my dear readers! I've managed to update relatively on time, please cross your fingers that I can keep the chapters coming at a better pace. And thank you all for the outpouring of support for the last chapter, it's always wonderful to hear you feedback.

If you were wondering about the chapter title, the three-body problem comes from mathematics, and it involves taking the initial positions of three moving masses, like planets, and solving for their motion. The best known three-body problem involves the Moon, the Earth, and the Sun. But considering last chapter's revelation, I think you can infer a more literal meaning.

A baby! A baby! We got mate pregnant! Mate is finally, completely ours!

Kaname, who is currently trying to have a breakdown, thank you, shoves his alpha instinct back down.

Undeterred, the alpha smashes its way to the surface again, practically vibrating in celebration. Our mate is such a good omega. Giving us offspring after his very first heat!

Kaname's inner alpha radiates satisfaction, tone becoming sly. We bred his pretty belly so full he couldn't help but carry our babe.

Well, they had, hadn't they? Kaname feels indescribably smug, a very alpha pride overtaking him. He knotted Zero first, so of course he fathered Zero's child. Yuuki will have to content herself with siring the next baby.

Hold on. Kaname shakes his head, jarring his thoughts loose. The child's paternity was not what meant to concern himself with. His Consort is with child after expressing very serious objections to the idea. This is a crisis Kaname needs to manage with the proper caution and planning.

We tell alpha-mate about the baby, and then we tell mate, and then we mount him together with alpha-mate to celebrate! the alpha insists, as though the solution is self-evident.

Frowning, Kaname taps his fingers on his desk. His first impulse is to hide the knowledge, long-held habit urging him to keep anything dangerous to himself.

Yuuki would kill him if he tried. If Kaname succeeded, she might even genuinely follow through on her threat to leave him. Kaname understands how desperately Yuuki wants a child with Zero. Giving up that dream had wounded her no less than it had Zero. In practical terms, Kaname will need her help protecting Zero whether they decide to tell Zero or not.

Yuuki will insist on telling Zero about his pregnancy, but Kaname has reservations. He cannot predict how Zero will react to the news. Best case scenario, the Hunter accepts the idea with a
minimum of stress. Worst case scenario, his Consort's self-loathing, discomfort with his own body, and fear cause him irreparable harm and he miscarries the child.

Kaname groans. Zero's health adds another complication. With his unpredictable, hybrid anatomy could Zero even carry a child safely? Human women sometimes died in childbirth, Kaname remembers uneasily, the idea strange and foreign.

After turning the problem over in his mind, Kaname's answer is clear. Yuuki must know immediately. But for the sake of his Consort's mental health, it might be best that Zero remain unaware for a little longer.

The secret cannot be kept long. Zero will inevitably know soon, because the physical signs will become too obvious to conceal. Zero will also eventually need specialized medical care, which will require his cooperation. Kaname would rather avoid the consequences of trying to slip non consensual medical procedures by Zero unnoticed - he might never be welcome in his spouses' bed again.

In the meantime, Kaname faces a significant problem: Zero will insist on Hunting without a clear reason to abstain. Carrying a child of higher blood purity will drain Zero's stamina and energy. If Zero were to encounter trouble while Hunting...One slip, and both he and the child could be lost. Kaname needs to come up with a solution, because risking Zero's life is unacceptable in any form.

We will keep mate and his baby safe, his alpha says. And for once, Kaname and his alpha instincts are in perfect agreement.

"You're being unusually gentle today," Zero murmurs, shivering when Kaname's hands stroke down the backs of his thighs.

"I can't make love to my own husband?" the pureblood replies in a voice like rich wine, favoring Zero with a heavy, laden gaze before continuing his scent marking Zero's entire body for the second time.

"You haven't even taken your pants off," Zero returns mildly, relaxing back into their bed and letting the matter drop. His limbs feels like limp noodles and he isn't in the mood to argue. He's half asleep from being petted already, and the faintest bit aroused.

Kaname had barged into the Consort's suite with an odd, feral look in his eyes. Zero had been expecting sex, not whatever weird vampire impulse produced this spontaneous massage.

Not that he's complaining. Being treasured feels pretty nice, the Hunter decides. Zero's eyes slip shut with a sigh, while Kaname's fingers delicately run over his stomach.

Yuuki squints at Kaname suspiciously. "You're sure?"

Kaname allows the stupidest, smuggest, most love-struck smile to plaster itself on his face. "My dear, I'm absolutely certain."

Yuuki screams.

Kaname finds himself tackled to the floor, squeezed so tightly his spine creaks. He chuckles, patting his wife's back.

Yuuki is reduced to incoherent shrieking for several minutes until she runs out of breath. Lifting
her head, she gives Kaname a sappy smile with round, shining eyes. "We're going to have a baby!" she shrieks again and collapses back onto his chest. "Have you seen him with Habiki? Zero's going to be such a wonderful parent! Wait, if he's the one giving birth what does that make us?"

"I'm otou-sama, you're okaa-sama. Zero is mama."

Yuuki props herself up on her elbows. "That sounds cute, what does it mean?"

Kaname's voice is self-satisfied. "It's an old word for mother."

She grins back at him. "We did pretty well, didn't we? A pregnancy on the first try - the Jeweled Court is going to pee themselves."

Kaname throws his head back and laughs. "Indeed they will. Now, let me up already."

Yuuki's laughter rises up to join Kaname's mirth, and together they regain their feet and brush themselves off.

His wife's eyes suddenly glaze over. "Zero's what, three months pregnant? He'll start showing soon won't he?"

Kaname's cock stirs at the mere thought, his alpha instincts feeding him very vivid images. "Vampire pregnancies are slower," he reminds Yuuki. "But Kuran babies are always large. He'll swell quickly."

Yuuki swallows, licking her bottom lip. "He'll be so cute. All big and round and soft. All because of us."

Their blood bond loops their mutual lust between them. Both achingly hard, Kaname and Yuuki's eyes lock and the temperature blisters.

Neither of them know who moves first. Yuuki slams Kaname against the wall, their hands shredding cloth until nothing but swollen flesh and lust remains, hands wrapped around each other's cock and trading filthy fantasies: their Consort fattened by the babe they sired, heavily seeded and bred, publicly displaying their blatant, undeniable claim, his new breasts leaking milk for nursing their child.

"I'm not sure we should tell Zero yet," Kaname says a few orgasms later, once they've regained intelligent thought.

"Kaname, we have to tell him -"

"I know," he interrupts hastily. "But how do you imagine Zero will react to knowing he's pregnant? Has he not insisted on multiple occasions that he does not want a child?"

Yuuki is silent; Kaname regrets silencing her joy, but they cannot celebrate without reservation.

"Our situation is currently stable. Zero is happy, his health is good, and he has peace of mind. We will tell him, but I believe we ought to delay for the time being."

"Zero takes too many risks with himself," Yuuki argues. "His Hunting, the assassination attempts - can we guarantee something won't go wrong?"

"I will ask Cross to stop giving Zero Hunting assignments," Kaname promises, already manufacturing a suitable excuse. Perhaps something about the Ichijo attack?
"And I have already taken steps to deal with the assassin," he adds, satisfaction lacing his voice.

Yuuki stares him down. "I don't like the idea of hiding this from Zero."

Not outright refusal. Kaname can work with that. "I know, but I promise we'll keep the secret for a few weeks at most. Just long enough that we can become accustomed to the idea, and plan how to best help Zero."

"No longer than that," Yuuki tells him, the hard tone of her words an equal promise.

His purebloods ambush Zero in the rose garden, while he's basking in the leftover early August heat. He's wearing a sweaty riding habit and smells like horse, but Kaname and Yuuki don't seem to care. Pinned between them, Zero gasps, feeling the prick of fangs as they mouth at his skin with the barest restraint.

Something is different tonight. They're always eager, but this awed, reverent intensity is new. They watch him with the beast's darkness in their eyes, predatory obsession mixed with helpless, overwhelming love. Their hands are gentle, but their strong grip is unbreakable.

Lulled by the summer heat, Zero surrenders himself to whatever need burns inside his purebloods, and finds himself taken to the state palace, to the ceremonial hall they were married in, and placed on an enormous throne of obsidian glass covered in black silk.

Yuuki and Kaname kneel at Zero's feet between his naked, spread thighs, adoring and equally hungry. While one alpha worships his wet, aching core with their mouth, offering filthy kisses that Zero blushes to receive, the other tells him how beautiful he looks against the black silk, how incredible he is, how much they love him.

Zero rewards his spouses with the moans spilling from his lips, and the way his body trembles and tenses as he comes. Once Yuuki and Kaname have taken fill, licking each other's mouths clean, they both fix Zero with looks that make him flush: devotion, the kind where you fall and keep on falling and never fear hitting the ground.

Kaname spreads Zero's thighs wider, draping his knees over the arms of the throne. While Yuuki kisses his temple, Zero wraps his arms around Kaname's back, and his husband gently eases inside him.

Zero sighs and goes limp, his body so slick and relaxed he easily welcomes his husband and the familiar sensation of being stuffed full.

"I'm slipping inside you like you were made for me," Kaname husks into Zero's ear as Yuuki kisses him. "Because you were, weren't you? Made for both of us. How did we ever believe we could live without you?"

"We'll take care of you, we swear it," Yuuki murmurs, running her hands down Zero's chest and belly, pinching his nipples into peaks; Zero arches into the touch, his sensitivity making him whine.

His head feels dizzy from the slow, though way they're taking him apart. He pants and lifts his hips, wanting to please the cock held tenderly inside him.

Yuuki - when had they switched? - laughs and leans forward, teasing Zero with the head of her length. "You're squeezing me like you're trying to stop me from wrecking you." She slams forward, hilting her cock in a single thrust and making Zero scream. "Shh, relax," his wife coaxes. "Let me
"Look at you," Kaname says, taking Yuuki's place again as they make love to him in tandem, "Look at you, kitten, yielding yourself so sweetly, so easily for us to feast upon. Always so giving," he praises, running a finger down Zero's cheek.

They venerate him like an idol, as if they're supplicants instead of vampire gods themselves. Zero feels tears gathering in his eyes alongside the slow, steady tightening below his navel.

"Love you, Zero."

"Love you more than anything."

Zero chokes on a sob, and white lights explode behind his eyes.

They both release long and hard inside him, right up against his womb; their seed leaks out and stains the black silk cover afterwards. Zero whimpers, and tilts his hips up to stop it escaping.

"Good boy, keeping it all inside you where it belongs," Kaname praises, pressed hip to hip with Yuuki as both purebloods cradle Zero's exhausted form, all three of them sharing the throne together.

Zero stares into his tea and sighs. "Takuma-sempai, Yuuki and Kaname are hiding something important from me again."

They're hardly being subtle about it - holding secretive meetings, being extra possessive, treating him like spun glass.

Lying propped up by pillows in his daybed, Takuma hums, petting Isa, who's curled up next to him avoiding the slightest pressure to Takuma's stomach. "Do you want to confront them about it?"

"Not really. If it was just Kaname I'd probably call him out on it, but Yuuki knows too and if she thinks it's a good idea for me not to know I'm just going to trust them. It's funny that they think they can hide anything from me, considering my intuition."

Takuma laughs, a dry coughing noise that betrays how little reason he's had for mirth recently.

"How are you feeling?" Zero asks.

"I feel stronger every time I see you," Takuma replies, neatly avoiding the emotional overtones of the question. The frustration of being bedridden, the deep and abiding fear of his baby's death - with his power, Zero doesn't need Takuma to tell him any of that.

"The Council of Elders has been pestering me about appointing one of them as a 'temporary' replacement. They have always preferred that I limit myself to domestic pursuits. I, of course, disagree, but I fear that my ability to control the nobles will be constrained until I've given birth."

Zero frowns. He's not as politically conversant as Kaname or Yuuki, but he knows that ending Shirabuki's threat has not magically stabilized the situation with the Senate. In her desire to rule, Shirabuki burned bridges that the Kurans may not be able to rebuild. Overall, the Senate has become more hostile, not less.

Takuma pauses thoughtfully. "I think I might know what Kaname is hiding. Would you like a hint?"
Zero considers the offer seriously. "Is it going to make me angry with them?"

"If it's what I think it is, I don't understand why they would try to hide it," Takuma replies.

"Go ahead then," Zero answers, leaning back.

"Kaname is still fighting with the Senate regarding your legal right to kill Hio Shizuka. In the meantime, the Senate has decided to concurrently open an inquiry into the three Kuran family deaths."

"Ah," Zero says, mouth twisting into a frown. So Kaname's identity is at risk, plus the Senate is going to raise another fuss about Zero killing Kuran Rido. Still, that's not something they'd have to hide from him.

"I'm sure they'll explain themselves to me eventually," Zero replies, dismissing his speculations for more pressing concerns. "I'm starving, do you have any food?"

Kaname does not ask questions when Yuuki announces she's taking the night off. Nor does Zero mention the early hour, or the business suit she's dressed in.

Yuuki second-guesses herself the whole way there. When her driver quietly warns her they're arriving at the address, she nervously straightens her hair just to keep her hands busy. She has the driver leave her at the door, ordering him not to return until called.

A butler answers the bell, leading Yuuki to a sitting room before withdrawing. When she was human, Yuuki would have thought this house very grand, but as the pureblood princess of the Kuran family, Yuuki is surrounded daily by far greater luxury. How far she's traveled from her human roots.

Soft footsteps come from the hall; the house's owner pauses in the door. "Hello, Yuuki-chan."

Yuuki swallows past the lump in her throat. "Hi, Yori-chan."

Yori's kept her hair the same, but the light brown has changed to grey, and there are laugh lines at the corners of her eyes. Yori has no Hunter blood to keep age at bay. Yuuki feels acutely how much time they've lost.

"I've always hoped that we would meet again," Yori says, enfolding Yuuki in a gentle, lavender-scented hug.

"I'm sorry it took so long," Yuuki confesses, tears escaping down her cheeks.

"You're here now, aren't you?" Yori reminds her, drawing Yuuki by the hand over to a couch.

Yuuki nods, composing herself. "You haven't said anything about how I look."

"Chairman Cross never had my memories wiped - I think he hoped something like this would happen."

Reminding herself to thank her foster father next time she sees him, Yuuki squeezes her friend's hand. "Tell me how you've been. I want to know everything."

Yori tilts her head to the side, teasing her with a smile. "Everything?"

Yuuki nods fervently. "Mmm!"
After finishing school, Yori worked in government, and then took up her father's position as Councilwoman when he passed suddenly. She is retired now, spending her time and wealth on philanthropy. She is content with her work and her friends; she never found anyone she liked enough to marry. The legacy of good she does in the world satisfies her desire to leave something behind.

"And what about you?" Yori asks around 11 PM, after they've eaten half a tub of icecream, Yuuki's borrowed a set of pajamas and they've migrated to Yori's bedroom.

Yuuki shoves more food in her mouth, chews and swallows. "What about me?"

Yori smacks her with a spoon. "How's Kaname? And Zero and the rest of the Night Class?"

"Actually, about that..."

Yori cackles. "I can't believe you married both of them. I mean, I always knew it would be at least one of them, but wow. You did well!"

Yuuki's grinning ear to ear. "I really did!"

Yori yawns, and pats Yuuki's knee. "Sorry. Can't keep up like I used to. Tell me more?"

It takes another hour, but the whole story comes spilling out - her marital troubles with Kaname before marrying Zero, the events of the last year, Shirabuki, and Zero's pregnancy.

Yori listens patiently, blinking herself awake every few minutes. "It sounds like you've already made a decision," she says once Yuuki falls silent.

Yuuki covers her face with her hands. "Yeah. I need to tell Zero."

Kaname's skin still tingles unpleasantly from the Hunter wards when the door swings open. Looping an arm around Zero's shoulders, Takamiya Kaito laughs and yanks his fellow apprentice inside the Takamiya family home.

"Uncle Zero's here!" Takamiya shouts over the din. There's a brief stampede, and at least six or seven adolescent Hunters are swarming over Zero, smiling and shoving themselves at his Consort.

Takamiya watches the circus unfold with a proud smile, before giving Kaname the evil eye. "Coming in or not, Kuran?"

Kaname, previously ignored and left to wait on the stoop, sighs and steps inside - the things he tolerates for Zero's sake.

At least twenty Hunters are scattered between the hallway, living room and dining room, and all of them are pretending they're not watching the pureblood now.

"Thanks for inviting us," Zero says, intervening to lower the pressure on Kaname.

"Our pleasure, it's good to see you! Where's your wife tonight?" Kaito asks as he takes their coats, manner relaxed and at ease, passing the other Hunters a clear cue.

"Yuuki went out this evening," Zero explains, "so we appreciate the company."

"No problem, we love stealing you for a couple of hours. Gotta admit, I'm shocked to see Kuran out of a suit." Takamiya elbows Zero, grinning at Kaname. "Figured you slept in them, you know?"
In his meticulously tailored button-down and trousers, Kaname raises a single disdainful eyebrow. "I'm shocked you know what a suit is, Takamiya-san."

"Kaito's even worn one. Once," Zero deadpans with a straight face.

"Once." Kaname makes a show of examining Takamiya's wrinkled T-shirt. In the background, one of the Hunters chokes on a laugh.

"Well then, my mistake," Kaname concludes. Takamiya's spawn howl loudly. The atmosphere relaxes, and the other Hunters return to their previous activities.

"Come say hello to Misao, she's in the kitchen," Takamiya invites, already making his way through the crowd.

Zero pulls Kaname after him, muttering names in an undertone. "That's Misao's sister and her wife and kids, that's Kaito's eldest daughter's husband, that's his youngest son's Master, those three are friends of the family - oh look, there's Yagari-sensei."

"Which ones are Takamiya's children?" Kaname interrupts, memorizing information with the ease learned from a lifetime of cutthroat politics.

"Just the five in the corner - Maiko, Shou and Asuga are Kaito and Misao's biological kids, Mei is Misao's biological daughter but not Kaito's - because of the preservation program, see - and Senka isn't biologically related to either of them but they raised him so it doesn't matter. Misao has been a surrogate for the Association a few times too, but that isn't considered parenthood. Rule of thumb, if you act like a parent then you're the parent."

Kaname blinks, somewhat bewildered by the Hunter definition of kinship. Common vampires were more flexible, but nobles and purebloods would never consider a child not blood related as their own.

Takamiya Misao, whom Kaname remembers from Zero's birthday party, graciously welcomes both of them into her home before sending them out to the dining room where her children are waiting to ambush Zero again. Kaname is content to sip his drink and watch; the Hunters are being remarkably tolerant, and he would like Zero to be invited back.

Takamiya's children clearly adore Zero, and treat him with unfeigned closeness. For Takamiya to have allowed a Level D like Zero near his young children must have been a contentious decision. Kaname understands how much the gesture of trust must have meant to his Consort.

"After dinner, we can go to one of the practice fields and you can show me your knife form," Zero promises Takamiya's youngest. Kaname startles when he recognizes the same love in Zero's expression now as when Zero looks at Habiki.

Guilt is an unfamiliar emotion; it takes Kaname a few moments to place his discomfort. Perhaps knowledge of his own pregnancy will distress Zero at first, but Kaname does not doubt Zero will love their child.

Adding to his guilt, Zero doesn't forget to include Kaname, either. "I babysat all of them when they were little," he explains. "Most of their cousins too. Hunters either live in perpetual bachelorhood or have giant families, and anybody without kids is fair game for free childcare. You don't want to know how many diapers I've changed."

Kaname raises an eyebrow. "That explains a great deal," he comments. The memories are hazy, but Kaname cannot ever recall interacting with Saya's children before they were capable of intelligent
speech. In hindsight, that is not a shining recommendation for his impending fatherhood.

"What's for dinner tonight, if I may ask?" Kaname inquires when the conversation ebbs, desperate for a distraction.

"Friday is noodle night," Takamiya Shou supplies helpfully. Takamiya's children are, perhaps understandably given their relationship with Zero, unnaturally comfortable in Kaname's presence.

"Dinner is ready!" someone calls from the kitchen. Kaname is brought an enormous bowl of 'noodles' that could be more accurately described as 'vegetables in sauce with noodles thrown in.' Kaname is beginning to understand where some of Zero's eating habits come from.

There isn't enough space for everyone to eat in the same room. Numerous Hunters are standing or sitting on the floor, but Takamiya's children insist on crowding around Zero.

Zero really will be a wonderful parent, Kaname thinks to himself once more - as if he did not have proof enough with Habiki! Watching Zero interact with the Takamiya brood, Kaname stews in fascinated guilt for the rest of the meal. Zero does not insist they stay long afterward, a move which is equal parts consideration for Kaname and the other Hunters.

As promised, Zero accompanies the youngest Takamiya child to test his knifework, and the rest of the pack tags along behind. Kaname swears his heart lodges in his throat with every swipe of the boy's blade. He ushers Zero away as soon as he can find a reasonable excuse, and only breathes a sigh of relief once Rosehill materializes once more.

Rather than return to their rooms, Zero looks out into the gardens, a contemplative look on his face. "When Kaito's children were old enough to watch themselves, I cut myself out of their lives. I knew that being associated with me would limit their opportunities. Kaito didn't like it, but he couldn't say I was wrong about that."

Ducking his head, Zero makes a self-soothing motion. "I think part of the reason I stopped trying to part of their lives is - is that I felt I didn't deserve their love."

"You do," Kaname insists. "You deserve everything."

When Yuuki returns sometime after midnight, Kaname is waiting for her. They barely take one look at each other before blurting out in unison, "We need to tell Zero."

Zero laughs as Magic races along the fence at a gallop, recognizing her master and energetic from being out of work. The other two mares are sticking their heads over the railing, begging Zero for scratches. Saya closes her eyes in bliss when Zero finds a satisfactory itchy spot.

"They're looking good," Zero tells Kaname and Yuuki as the pair hang back, holding the supplies for the picnic they've planned. "We had the vet out to look at Magic and Goldilocks, and if everything goes well I'll have two new foals in the spring. The timing is good. It'll be a few years before Habiki comes to live with us, so I can manage the foals' training until then."

Yuuki's face crinkles ever-so-slightly; without his power Zero wouldn't have caught it. *Guilt,* identifies his intuition, reinforcing Zero's suspicion that today is not simply an impromptu holiday. Zero suspects they're planning to confess whatever secret they've kept from him, and has cooperated however he can. Zero is immensely proud of Yuuki and Kaname for coming to him without being forced.
"Shall we go? I'm ready for breakfast," the Hunter suggests, giving Saya one last scratch before patting her neck and sending her trotting off to her friends.

Yuuki jumps on the opening. "Yes! We'll show you the spot we found," she chatters, taking Zero's hand and leading him away. The cheerful frog and lilypad pattern of her yukata brings a smile to Zero's face even now.

The air smells like sunlight and green things. The tall grass brushes against the tops of his sandal-shod feet and against his bare calves beneath his maroon yukata, As they pass by, the cicadas go quiet. Tilting his umbrella to better block the setting sun, Zero wanders the small open meadow while Yuuki and Kaname spread a picnic blanket and arrange breakfast.

He steals a kiss from Kaname and the last of the fish; Kaname yields without any protest, radiating a satisfied air as he watches Zero eat. Rather odd, but haven't they been odd this whole time?

No matter - Zero will know everything soon. Whatever secret they're hiding cannot be too horrifying.

Zero's intuition gives a violent shiver; he pushes aside his plate, appetite fled.

Yuuki eyes him with dismay, before exchanging a quick glance with Kaname.

The Hunter frowns. "Whatever you're hiding, you can tell me."

His spouses communicate silently through another long look. Her brows drawing together in determination, Yuuki firmly takes Zero's right hand. Kaname grasps Zero's left hand, cradling it between his palms like a silent entreaty.

Zero's shoulders stiffen; he knows they can hear his heartbeat quicken. His expression goes blank, stoic mask falling into place.

"It's nothing bad," Yuuki pleads with him, squeezing the hand she's holding. "We don't think it's a bad thing at all. We just don't know how it's going to make you feel."

Gaze trained on his wife, Zero doesn't relax a fraction. His expectant silence is answer enough.

She takes a deep breath, and looks him straight in the eye. "Zero, you're pregnant."

Truth, whispers his power.

Zero stops breathing. He stops thinking entirely. The sunset and the summer meadow are gone. The ringing in his ears consumes him.

"I need space," Zero begs, staggering unsteadily to his feet. "I need to think-"

Yuuki and Kaname shoot up as well, both looking like they want to reach out to him.

Waving away their hands, Zero runs a hand through his bangs, feeling light-headed. It's too much. Too much meaning all tangled up together, the good and the bad a clanging cacophony inside him.

Pregnant.

His chest tightens.

"There's a storm coming in from the west," Zero says, turning away and throwing their picnic dishes in the basket. "We'd better go."

Within a few hours, that grey smear on the horizon has become a torrential storm. Zero watches the downpour from the window of the Consort's suite alone, after dismissing his maids for the night.

Unconsciously, his hand creeps toward his belly before he jerks it away like he's been burned.

Fuck.

It's the blackness creeping around the edges of his vision that warns him. Zero startles, finding his body on the verge of passing out, his lungs heaving like a five-mile Hunt.

Breathe. He needs to breathe.

Zero can't breathe like this. The Hunter starts stripping away the layers of his costume, tossing the delicate fabric aside with a savage sense of pleasure. Stripped down to his leggings, he bolts into the bedroom, spilling his bag of Hunting gear out on the bed and shuffling frantically through the contents until his hand closes around Artemis Rod. Then Zero sprints back out, throwing open the doors to the courtyard and darting into the rain.

It's like stepping into a pool; rain slicks his bare shoulders within moments. The cold water is a shock to his senses. Zero instantly feels more alert, and slides into a ready stance as he extends Artemis Rod. As he begins moving through staff forms, his bare feet slip on the wet stone, but Zero stubbornly continues his practice routine.

Awareness drains away. Zero abandons everything but the sound of rain and the rhythm of his strikes.

When Zero comes back to himself, his muscles burn in the dangerous way that warns he's overextended his healing abilities, and he's torn his feet bloody on the rough footing. Zero has to pry his cramping hands from their white-knuckled grip on Artemis Rod just to retract his weapon.

He'd forgotten to close the doors. Zero feels a stab of guilt when he realizes the rugs are soaked, and he's probably tracking blood and mud inside. Rather than cleaning himself up, he goes and curls up in the bathtub instead.

Zero is conscious that he's backsliding. He can recognize that what he's just done is not a healthy way of coping with his emotions. But at least this is Zero doing something to his body, rather than his body doing something to Zero. At the reminder, Zero gags, hanging over the edge of the bathtub with bile rising up in his throat.

Wait.

Zero freezes.

Fuck, he's pregnant. Zero loses the last vestige of color in his face. Oh Ancestress, he just worked himself until his body screamed - the things he does to his body matter now. What if he hurt the baby?

And just like that, clarity descends. Zero slumps, the back of his head making a dull ringing thwack against the tub. His breathing evens out; the stinging pain in his feet penetrates past his panic.
Just now, the first thing Zero thought about was the baby. That simplifies things and puts everything into perspective, doesn't it?

If Zero lays aside his fears about his child's future and how badly the vampires and Hunters will react, and blocks out his ugly squirming feelings about the drastic changes pregnancy will create in an already alien body, how does Zero feel?

Pared down to the simplest, most essential question: does Zero want a child?

Yes. Zero chokes on a laugh that's at least half sob, scrubbing his forearm against his eyes.

The bathroom door hinges squeak, and there's the hesitant sound of nails clacking against tile. Zero wipes his eyes one more time, then props himself up against the bathtub rim.

Nightshade has his ears pinned against his skull, and his tail tucked against his belly. Yuuki's butterfly flutters its wings anxiously on Nightshade's nose. When Zero looks at the familiars, Nightshade whines piteously.

"I'm fine," Zero soothes, reaching a hand over the bathtub rim to stroke the wolf's soft ears. "I did something stupid and bled a little, that's all."

Yuuki's butterfly steps onto the back of his hand; Zero brings it up to eye-level, and gives an unsteady smile.

That's right, Zero reminds himself. He's not alone anymore. Yuuki and Kaname love him, and Kaname has sworn he will never harm Zero's children. What's happened can't be undone; pregnancy was a risk they'd accepted for the sake of bonding. Zero isn't sorry he's bonded to his spouses, and the child their union created will never be unwanted.

Zero sighs, and slumps down. In a moment, he's going to get up, pick the gravel shards out of his feet, and bandage them.

After that he's going to kick the familiars out of his suite and call his maids. Zero will need their help. Vampires demand a certain level of propriety when it comes to their traditions, after all.

"Consort Kiryuu humbly begs his honored lord husband and honored lady wife to receive him." The message had been delivered by Sasaki in person, kneeling on the ground as Zero's chief maid.

Kaname and Yuuki had looked at one another, before asking Sasaki to pass along their approval. She'd curtseyed without raising her eyes, and backed out of the room.

Since Zero expelled their familiars, the Kurans haven't the faintest clue what Zero is thinking, but they worry for his mental state. Earlier, Zero hadn't even spared a glance for the soggy-feathered raven spying from the courtyard roof while he worked himself bloody.

"Kuran-sama, Kuran-hime, Consort Kiryuu has arrived," Steward Inukai announces, a formal gravity in the cadence of his voice. To match the tone Zero's actions have established, they've moved to the receiving room of the residential palace and exchanged their clothing.

With one final wordless glance between them, Kaname and Yuuki stand side by side, awaiting Zero's decision.

His appearance draws their appreciative surprise. Even the Jeweled Court doesn't require such a formal costume - layers and layers of silk robes with elaborate embroidery, all colored silver like
the moon and the velvety blue-black of night. Their Consort wears every piece of his dowry, the elaborate Hoseki and collar, jewels spangled like spiderwebs in his hair and around his arms. Even his eyes are darkened with kohl and his lips rouged scarlet.

Skirts gathered in his hands, his maids trail behind him carrying the train of his robes. With a decisive nod, Zero dismisses them, and kneels down, his skirts spreading around him in a corona.

Then their consort takes a deep breath, and touches his forehead to the floor with a whisper of silk. "Honorable husband and wife. I thank you for seeing me."

"Our beloved Consort is always welcome. Please, speak," Kaname invites, while Yuuki steps forward and takes Zero by the hand, guiding him to sit upright.

Zero nods, and gathers his composure, before speaking in a firm tone. "When a pureblood takes an omega as Consort, it is tradition that after the birth of the omega's first child, the pureblood will grant their omega one request as long as it is within their ability to fulfill."

"That is true. We both intend to honor you in the traditional way," Kaname answers, his thoughts taking shape.

"I am bold, husband, to ask now. But I am -" here Zero stumbles a moment. "I am with child." His gaze pierces both of them. "I ask to receive my request now."

Their sweet boy asks for things so rarely. How can Kaname refuse? Yuuki's matching agreement flows through their blood bond. "You may ask," Yuuki says, squeezing Zero's hand.

The Hunter breathes deeply, then looks directly at Kaname. "My lord husband. Break this world and remake it into something that doesn't make me afraid for our child."

"Do you know what you ask of me?" Kaname demands, voice ragged. The sheer scale required - it could very well take him another ten thousand years to accomplish! And the power it would require him to wield…

The pureblood's hands clench into fists. "Do you wish me to become king again?"

"No!" Zero's voice softens, but his gaze doesn't waver. "I don't want that. But we both know there's more you could do - you've been overlooking vampire society's problems unless they directly hurt us. I'm not asking you to make a perfect world, Kaname. But give me a world where the child of a Hunter and a pureblood isn't forbidden. Or even just a world where the child of a pureblood and a Level D can exist without scorn!"

Kaname is silent, his face impassive. A thousand thoughts run through his head.

"Please," Zero begs, bending his body to the floor again, arms outstretched in supplication. Beautiful and desperate - Kaname's alpha howls at the sight. How this fear must have weighed on him.

"I will accept your request," Kaname says.

Zero lifts his head cautiously.

"It's true," he admits, stepping toward Zero and Yuuki. "I have been lenient these past years."

Zero bows his head again, eyes suspiciously bright. "Thank you. Thank you, Kaname."
"However," Kaname continues, tilting Zero's chin up to meet his eyes. "What are you willing to do, to gain our people's favor for the sake of our child?"

"Anything."

"Even if you must shape yourself into the perfect omega? Give up your human habits, devote yourself to your life as a vampire? Make yourself soft and acceptable, live slavishly for us and our children alone?"

"Anything, Kaname," Zero repeats. An edge of pain creeps into his tone, but he doesn't waver.

Kaname lowers his voice into something soft and dangerous. "Anything? Even if I tell you to never Hunt again? To never speak to your Master and friends? To destroy everything that makes you a Hunter?"

Zero freezes, expression twisting, before he nods.

Kaname caresses that pale cheek. "I won't ask that of you, Zero. But there will be sacrifices you must make, if you wish the vampire world to accept your child as easily as possible."

"I understand," Zero replies meekly.

Kaname strokes his Consort's silver hair. "Precious boy. Go and change. All will be as you wish."

Zero lowers his head, exhaustion making him list to the side. Yuuki scoops him up, and with one last glance at Kaname, leaves to return Zero to their bedroom.

Kaname collapses into a nearby chair, and closes his eyes. Well. It seems their feud with the Senate isn't finished after all.

Yuuki settles Zero at her throat, and hums when she feels fangs pierce her skin. Her alpha murmurs happily about providing for their mate and child.

"How are you feeling?" she asks once he's licked the wound closed, and curled up underneath her chin.

"Honestly, I'm too tired to tell."

Yuuki lets the two of them float in silence, then asks the question she's most afraid of. "Are you... at least a little bit happy?"

Zero buries his face against her collarbone. "I'm so happy I feel guilty about it."

"You shouldn't feel guilty," the pureblood replies, sudden fierce anger overtaking her. "It's the world that should feel guilty for making you believe you aren't allowed to have a family."

Zero startles, eyes wide.

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Zero startles, eyes wide.

Yuuki cuddles him until he relaxes again. "We love you. We'll help you, Zero. So rest for a while, okay?"

Eventually, he falls asleep, exhausted by the night's revelation.

Careful not to wake him, Yuuki places her hand on Zero's stomach, and imagines she feels a faint, firm swell under her palm. She smiles, and makes promises of her own in the darkness.
Chapter End Notes

And there we go! Prepare yourselves for fluff and suffering in equal measure.

Thanks to weisskreuz, Blemm-chan, Rainovia and a reviewer who'd rather remain anonymous for contributing the names for Kaito's kids.

The scene at Kaito's house is a very condensed version of what I imagine Hunter family structure to resemble. Regular vampire families function on a very Western model (1-3 children, with parents as primary caregivers), with the significant exception of alpha/omega pairs. Hunters are a totally different matter, because their families are structured to accommodate their profession and to produce a teaching environment that passes on necessary Hunting skills. Raising children is a community affair. For one thing, the master/apprentice relationship is almost like having a tertiary parent. If a child's parents are dead/unavailable, the child's master has legal and medical guardianship.

Next chapter: Now that our trio know the truth, the knowledge of Zero's pregnancy begins to spread. And is Zero really as fine as he thinks he is?

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