Hell Hath No Fury

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Summary

Kana, Shiro and Siegbert try to make their fathers proud, but end up captured by Iago instead. He tries to use the children as leverage to win the war, but miscalculates on three aspects.

1) He imprisons the most influential kids on the continent.
2) He underestimates the determination of fathers whose children have been hurt.
3) Kana is actually a dragon.

Notes

I am Fire Emblem trash x10000 and that's why I haven't been writing any other fanfics lately. I had to get this out of my system. Actually, this started as a small 10k oneshot about dads saving their kids (because parent/child supports are life) and snowballed into a 33k mini-novel with a plot, dragons, and more gay MU (Kamui) than I first intended. Oh well. No harm done, right?

You might need to read this in two sittings tbh.

Warnings include torturing a child bc Iago is literal trash (worse than Garon tbh) and looks like he hasn't taken a shower in a century. Also, better read after you've played like... chapter 24 of Revelations. Cause this is set in Valla. But you do you.

Please enjoy ♡
In retrospect, maybe they should've left the adult things to... well... the adults. Although most of them were hardly children anymore! In fact, many amongst the young men and women that Kamui's army had gathered from the Deeprealms had only a few years of age less than their parents. That had to count for something.

And yet, a little voice whispered in Shiro's head as he was finally forced down to the ground to bite the dust, they didn't have the experience their parents had, and that was probably the biggest catalyst to their current situation.

A few steps away, Siegbert was being clasped in irons, holding his head high in acceptance of his defeat although Shiro knew his expression to be one that was a step away from panic. The poor dastard was probably trying so hard to keep it together, as if to boast, later on, that he did not break under enemy onslaught. If they did get a 'later on', that is.

If it hadn't been for their stupid craving for accomplishment and praise, they wouldn't even have been in this situation right now! Shiro would blame that one on his father as well. Of course, since if he hadn't neglected him for so many years, he could've built himself a better self-esteem and wouldn't have needed his approval like he needed air. Same went for his Nohrian equal, Siegbert, who idolized Prince Xander and needed his approval more than he needed air. And Kana... well... Kana had just wanted to have fun, and maybe prove to her father that she wasn't a child anymore. She didn't even need to be here.

It had been a good plan at first. Their battle against Vallite forces had been ongoing for four days, and their army was getting exhausted. Kamui had been talking of sending an elite force to take out the Vallite commander, but he and the two Crown Princes couldn't agree on who to send on such a dangerous mission.

To Shiro, it just sounded like whoever succeeded in offing the enemy commander would be showered in glory. And glory was exactly what he needed, what with his piss-poor skill as a future King. Siegbert had tagged along because, well, in his awfully formal words, it was "an excellent opportunity to test [his] finer skills of war and determine how much [he] still had to improve". To Shiro, it basically sounded something like "I just want to believe that I'm not a useless piece of pegasus dung". He didn't say that out loud and agreed to his friend's help on the secret mission, if only to avoid mentioning that Siegbert's overachieving and self-deprecating nature was almost legendary amongst their ranks.

Kana was a mistake.

Now, if he was Kamui or his husband -Niles, if Shiro remembered correctly-, that thought might have been frowned upon. But it's not that Shiro wished his little cousin had never been born. In fact, he loved the life out of her! And that's precisely why it had been a mistake to let her come on this mission when she admitted to eavesdropping and begged to come with them. He should've said no, he never should've let his over-inflated ego fool him into thinking that his plan was fail-proof.

If Ryoma could see him now, beaten down and covered in dust and blood, he would probably smack him. Would he? His father had never raised a hand against him. Would now be a good time to start? Considering Shiro's idiocy -yes, yes he admitted it just this once-, it would probably be.

The distracting thoughts left his shell-shocked mind at the sound of a little scream. He made a
small movement to rise, but was immediately hit back down. His jaw hit the dirt harshly and stars exploded behind his eyelids when pain thundered through him. He might have fainted for a second, he wasn't sure.

"No! Shiro!"

The tiny voice screaming in the back of his head turned out to be Shiro's baby cousin, and Shiro was forced to face Kana when he was dragged up by the collar for his hands to be shackled behind his back. He cracked an eye open at the sound of sobbing and saw her, in all her tiny glory, kneeling a bit further away in the very same predicament, and for the first time since they got caught, his heart wrenched.

"It's okay, Kana," he grinned, although it was decidedly not okay when he spat blood out of his mouth from biting his tongue, to his little cousin's abject horror. "Don't worry about it. We'll figure something out."

"They're hurting you, Shiro," she continued, her lower lip wobbling as she tried to hold her tears back. "They're going to hurt us. We never should've come here without our daddies. Please don't let them separate us, I don't want to leave you!"

Damn it. Shiro wished he could help her, but with at least four of the Vallite soldiers surrounding each of them, that would be too hard -and too futile- of a task to accomplish.

"But we did it, in the end. We slayed their leader. Our army will win this battle thanks to us."

Surprisingly, it was Siegbert who spoke up in that small, quivering voice of his. They both turned to look at him as his guards tugged at his arms, signalling for him to walk. He cooperated, if only to preserve his dignity and avoid any extra pain, unlike Shiro. "Kana, just do as they say for now, okay? Just be nice, and they won't hurt you."

"No, Siegbert, don't go away!" she almost began to cry again, but held back. Shiro had never asked about her age, but she was behaving admirably for the ten year old (or maybe twelve?) that she was underneath all the plates of armour.

"It's alright, Kana," Siegbert smiled at her, trying to look comforting but somehow falling short. The blood dripping from a gash on his forehead, painting half of his face in red, probably contributed to his failure to soothe her. Shiro couldn't blame him for trying. "We'll figure something out. And besides," he added, trying to twist to look at them as his captors forced him to walk on. "When our fathers find out, they'll definitely come to our rescue."

Shiro knew that the idea of Prince Xander having to save him was as annoying to Siegbert as the idea of Ryoma saving him was for him. They'd gotten themselves into this mess, so it was only fair to get themselves out. Besides, they'd never live it down if the two heirs to two gigantic kingdoms had to be saved by their fathers like some damsel or another. They were already eighteen, for goodness' sake, they should be able to handle a few invisible soldiers and rescue their young cousin on top of it!

While his inner monologue kept going, the guards hauled Kana to her feet, although her small stature made the movement an awkward one. She thrashed for a moment, mostly by reflex, but as soon as one of her silent guards made a move for his club, she stilled immediately. Her face blanched, and she glanced at Shiro for help.

He could only hazard a half-hearted smile at her.

"We'll join you later. Be strong for your dad, Kana," he encouraged her, hating how the child was being manhandled like she was a dangerous criminal. Well, she could be surprisingly dangerous
with a sword in her hand, in her defence, but right now... right now she just looked scared. With
good reason.

They led her off in the same direction they did for Siegbert, and with every step, Kana held her
head higher, if only because of what Shiro had told her. At least she wouldn't mind her fathers
rescuing her. Shiro would never live it down if he had to be lectured by Ryoma about his
recklessness. He knew Siegbert wouldn't receive a lashing of words from Prince Xander, but he'd
self-flagellate with shame and insecurity and probably commit seppuku, if he even knew what that
meant. Shiro wouldn't put it past the learned young man.

They pulled him up next, treating him a bit more roughly than the others, probably since he'd
resisted a bit more as well upon their capture. He didn't disappoint them on that front, kicking out
at one of the Vallite soldiers if only for the brief satisfaction of hearing it cry out in pain. He didn't
know if the grunts could even speak, but they could scream in pain, and that was all the
communication Shiro needed from them.

His efforts were rewarded with a smack to the back of the head with the hilt of a sword, and Shiro
forgot to breathe for a whole three seconds before the black spots in his vision cleared.

"Fine, fine, I'm walking," he groaned out, taking a few fumbling steps forward. His guards did not
answer him, and Shiro resolved himself to a march in silence.

They marched out of the clearing where the three royal children had ambushed and defeated the
enemy general, the bodies of the Vallite soldiers and general already disappearing like wisps in the
air, leaving no evidence of a fight behind them other than the bloodstains on the grass. Shiro's
captors maneuvered him dizzyingly through the trees clustered in the forest, probably purposefully
trying to throw him off, and Shiro followed in silence, tripping on rising tree roots once or twice.

They reached the enemy camp just as Shiro's shallow wounds began to burn, demanding medical
attention. He did not have the time to say anything, however, before the Vallite soldiers silently
shoved him towards a horse cart.

"You want me to sit in the cart?" he asked them, unimpressed, clicking his tongue when the
soldiers simply drew out their weapons as an answer. "Fine. Jeez. Just asking. It wasn't really
clear, from the way you just shoved me against a wagon. Say please, next time."

'Please' came in the form of a spear pointed at his throat, and Shiro silently climbed into the cart -
with some difficulty considering his hands were tied behind his back-, sitting near the corner. The
guard with the spear climbed in with him, and Shiro's blood froze in his veins as he dragged a
heavy chain out from under a bench, clipping one end of it to the cart railing. By the time Shiro
had debated struggling, the other end had already been clipped to the irons chafing his wrists.

"Well, shit," he groaned, gathering his knees up to his chest if only to make himself smaller.

Now, panic was truly beginning to settle in his heart. If he was being loaded into a wagon and
secured, then that meant that they were about to journey someplace far. And the farther they went,
the harder it would be to be saved.

"Damn it," he muttered pensively, allowing his eyes to fill with tears that he did not shed in an
indulgent moment of weakness. "Okay. I can do this. We can do this. It can't get any worse from
here on out."

The horses at the front of the cart neighed to the crack of a whip. The cart began to roll. Rather
suddenly, a cloth bag was drawn over Shiro's head, and the young Hoshidan prince screamed for
the first time since their capture.
Siegbert looked worse for wear, Shiro noticed as he was shoved unceremoniously into the same cell as his friend. His curly hair, face and neck were covered in dried blood and dirt, a bright bruise blossoming on his left cheek. His armour had been torn from him, and he was left in a simple long-sleeved undershirt and his riding breeches, both ripped and bloody in many places. His feet were bare, like Shiro's, although he did not understand the point of confiscating their boots. Were they afraid of them sneaking daggers in their footwear? Hadn't anybody told these mindless Vallite puppets that hiding blades in boots was a very outdated and uncomfortable technique?

"You are silent," Siegbert remarked, his face blanching. "Friend! Do not tell me they have taken your tongue!"

"Don't you think I'd be a little less, uhh... not-in-pain if someone took off a piece of me like that?" Shiro frowned, sitting down next to Siegbert, giving them enough space to inspect each other. Their silent guard had left them in peace in the dim dungeon that was to be their new home.

"Well, I must admit I could have been a little bit relieved," Siegbert mumbled, although he quickly regained his composure. "Nonetheless. I am glad you are unharmed."

"Same for you. As unharmed as we can be in this situation," Shiro cringed. "How's your head wound? It looks like it bled a lot."

"It's only a scratch. It cannot stop me!" Siegbert hurriedly replied, sitting straighter. As if to contradict him, a fresh pearl of blood oozed out of the laceration on his hairline.

"Sig, the gods won't smite you for slouching in here," Shiro rolled his eyes. "Your father isn't here. There's no need to pretend you're okay."

"I apologize," Siegbert replied in all his naive innocence, not changing his posture regardless. Shiro swore it would be cute if he wasn't such an uptight ass about it.

"Whatever." He rolled his eyes and tugged at his chains. His iron cuffs were held together by a chain about six inches long. They were made of very heavy metal, the kind that even magic would take a while to get through. "Let's bandage your head wound first."

"Lead the way to the infirmary," Siegbert glared at him and Shiro couldn't help but laugh.

"So you can make a joke sometimes!" he grinned at Siegbert's embarrassment, shaking his head. "Nah, no infirmary. We're gonna do this ourselves. Watch this."

Good thing stretching was a sizeable part of his daily training routine. Now, Shiro patted himself on the back for his good flexibility, especially when he began to wiggle his tied arms to the front. It took some effort, but he got his hips through the loop in his arms, and then slipped one leg through at a time. In the space of two minutes, he had his arms tied in front of him.

"Ta-da!"

"Wonderful!" Siegbert smiled lightly. "Now if only you could get out of those bindings as well."

"Don't ask too much of me," Shiro chuckled, awkwardly tugging at a piece of his uniform that was already ripped, courtesy of a sword almost slicing him in half. It came apart easily, leaving Shiro with a large strip of cloth, and with his uniform greatly shorter, now coming to his mid-
thighs. It didn't bother him. The enemy had stripped him of his leather armour pieces and his obi, so he looked pathetic already, sitting on the cold cobblestone in nothing but a pair of pants and half a uniform that he couldn't even close over his bare chest.

"You are kind to ruin your clothing for me," Siegbert muttered, scooting closer and ducking his head lightly so that Shiro could have access to the laceration on his temple.

"Have you seen me? I look good in anything, so don't you worry your pretty, uhh... bloody head," Shiro grinned pressing the wad of cloth to the wound that was already mostly coagulated. Siegbert would need to see Aunt Sakura immediately after their rescue to make sure he didn't get an infection.

They stayed that way for a while, Shiro occasionally folding the cloth to use one of the relatively cleaner sides. Siegbert said nothing aside from the occasional hiss of pain, and it felt like both of them were just reflecting on the severity of their actions.

"But we took down the general..." Shiro found himself murmuring, mostly to himself. Siegbert shifted to look at him sadly, and in that moment, when they crossed gazes, they knew that they were both thinking the same thing, and were both debating if they should be proud of themselves or not.

Thankfully, their oncoming existential crisis was interrupted by the sound of a heavy door opening somewhere a bit further from them, and the two royals stiffened. Heavy footsteps began to approach them, and the two shared a glance, steeling themselves for the worst. They watched the outside of the cell keenly, trying to make out the details of the tight hallway and the small cell facing theirs in the dim light of a torch and the mild sunlight filtering in from the barred window at the top of their cell.

Soon enough, the footsteps approached until the newcomer was standing right in front of their cell, and the two boys' eyes widened.

The buff warden, wearing a traditional Berserker uniform with an axe at his hip to boot, was not one to be messed with. And yet, when the little girl walking by his side, fully unbound, looked up to see her cousins staring back, she could not help but tear away from the guard and launch herself at the bars holding Shiro and Siegbert back.

"Shiro! Siegbert!" The relief was almost palpable in her voice as she put her small hands through the bars. The two boys scrambled to reach her, but just as Shiro's hand brushed her fingertips, the warden roughly grabbed her from the back of the undershirt she was left in and tugged her away roughly.

"Kana!" they cried out in unison, watching in horror as the warden lifted the little girl from her loose garment (which had miraculously not torn, Shiro prayed with all his heart that it wouldn't tear and leave his baby cousin bare) and stared her in the eye. She, in the other hand, did not seem to care much for the Vallite's obvious advantage in size.

"Let me go!" she screeched, kicking out at him in a rather futile manner. "I want to see them! Let me down!"

"Leave her be!" Siegbert demanded as well, clenching his fists angrily. "She is but a child!"

The warden did not speak. Predictable. Instead, he grabbed keys from his belt, the three of them blanching for a moment when they thought he was going for his axe, and unlocked the cell in front of the boys' cell. It was a small relief that was quickly taken away when the warden just tossed Kana in as if she was a sack of flour. She hit the ground and rolled a bit awkwardly to take
the weight off of her shoulder, where she impacted the floor, but by the time she stood up, clutching herself in pain, the door had already swung shut.

"No!" she cried out rushing to the bars and staring up at the warden's soulless eyes. "Put me in with them! Put me in the other cell!"

The warrior simply looked at her shaking the bars fearlessly for another second and a half, and then clicked the key in the lock. Kana watched in defeat as he took his keys, and marched off without another glance at any of them.

They waited for the heavy door to open and swing shut noisily before they spoke again.

"Kana, thank the gods you are safe," Siegbert sighed out in genuine relief. "When they failed to bring you in here, I feared the worst."

"I'm fine," she huffed, sitting down cross-legged and crossing her arms as well in a childish pout. "I would've been better if I could've hugged you to make sure you're fine."

"We're fine," Shiro laughed at her display, itching to ruffle her hair. "Could do without the shackles, but I guess we can't be picky. How come you don't have any on? Not that I'm against it, but..."

"I met the man who runs this place," Kana sighed. "He called me his 'little princess' and said he would be keeping me here, so I get to have a bit more freedom. As if I'll let him keep me, though."

"That's where you were all this time?" Siegbert asked worriedly. "I hope he did not... coerce you into divulging information, or something of the sort."

"Nu-unh. The guards didn't touch me unless I fought back," Kana mumbled. "Like I said. He thinks he'll be keeping me, so he wants to make me comfortable. I won't let him, though. I gotta go back to my Papa."

"You've got a strange idea of comfort to be in here," Shiro joked, enjoying the way her face lit up in a smile.

"Silly Shiro, I didn't ask to be here! But at least I've found both of you. So it's really not that bad," she laughed.

"Right," Shiro nodded. "So. Now that we're all here, let's talk business. We need to get the hell out of here as fast as we can and go back to our families!"

"Right!" Kana cheered on, listening intently.

"First, do we have any idea where we are?"

"I think I have a vague idea," Siegbert hummed in thought. "When we were in the carts, I tried to follow the wind. At dawn, Kamui told the archers that the wind would blow towards the East today, so if I am correct, by the wind I felt during our journey, we must be somewhere to the northwest of our camp."

"Wow," Shiro whistled in genuine admiration. "You're good! Anything else?"

"Well, this is an approximation, but if we follow the sun's path, we can also establish that we travelled for about... two hours," Siegbert hypothesized. "We're in a fort, clearly, but I am not well-versed enough in the geography of Valla to say which one."
"That's already a great start!" Kana cheered on. "You're incredible, Siegbert!"

"Ah." Siegbert turned his head down, blushing. Or maybe that was the dried blood reflecting off his pale skin. "Thank you, Kana. Your praise is an honour."

"Drop the formalities, Sig," Shiro rolled his eyes.

"What do you mean?" Seigbert frowned in confusion, and Shiro figured he just couldn't win on that front.

"Nevermind," he sighed, rubbing his forehead tiredly. "Okay. Anything else we know about this place?"

"Kana, you said you met with the master of the fort," Siegbert brought up. "Was there anything notable about him?"

"Well, he wasn't like the other soldiers. I think he's human like us," she mused out loud. "Let's see. He has long black hair... oh, he wears a mask. It's gold, and it covers his eye. I wonder if he lost it in a fight. He did look pretty roughed up for someone acting like a fort master..."

"Focus, Kana. What else? Did you get a name?" Siegbert prompted.

"Oh, yeah," the little girl nodded, her messy bun slipping loose with every movement of her head. "What was it? It wasn't a very nice name..." She hummed in thought. "Igor? No, it sounded softer than that..."

"Softer?"

"Yeah... Like Iyemo... Iogo...?"

She didn't need to keep guessing. Next to Shiro, Siegbert took a sharp breath, and when the Hoshidan prince turned to make sure he was okay, he found him to be pale beyond recognition.

"Iago," Siegbert murmured, and by the looks of it, it wasn't a name he was supposed to want to hear.

There was a voice requesting entry from the front of his tent, and Kamui shot upright from where he had fallen asleep on top of his report, wiping off some drool from his lips.

"Come in!" he called, fixing his clothes to make it look like he hadn't just fallen asleep on the job.

"It's me." The tent flap swung open and Silas stepped in, papers in his hands. "Sorry to bother, I know you're busy."

"Nonsense, Silas. Join me," Kamui smiled at his childhood best friend, standing up to greet him.

"Thanks," the silver-haired knight grinned at him, and then frowned as he approached. "Did you... fall asleep, by any chance?"

"N-no! That's preposterous. Of course no-"

"The paper left a crease on your cheek."

"Oh, for the love of all that is holy," Kamui let out a frustrated grunt, rubbing his cheek. "Sorry. That's embarrassing."
"Don't worry about it, Kamui. It's good that you're getting some sleep," Silas waved him off, putting his papers on his commander's desk.

"Not when our soldiers are out fighting day and night," Kamui sighed, taking the papers without reading them just yet. "It's been four days, Silas. Four days, and we have yet to breach their lines. The Vallite soldiers just keep coming whilst ours are tired. Even sending our men to fight on a shift-based schedule is wearing them out. We need to finish this soon."

"I feel like maybe they're getting fresh reinforcements continuously," Silas mused out loud. "Vallite soldiers are immaterial, right? That's why the grunts aren't too skilled at fighting- they're all low-level souls, or magic that was given a human form. So maybe someone is out there, creating more of them as we speak."

"So you think that there's someone else behind this, huh." Kamui rubbed his nose bridge tiredly. If he wanted to stay awake, he'd have to have some coffee. Maybe he could ask Dwyer for some, and if he was really lucky, Jakob wouldn't hear about him going to his son instead of his loyal butler.


"Spoken wisely," Kamui nodded and sat back down on his chair, grabbing Silas' report. "First, we'll have to take care of their general. If nobody is giving the reinforcements orders, then there's no point in reinforcements, right?"

"Right."

"So. What extra work have you brought me?" He chuckled eyeing the report written in very neat writing. He recognized Sakura's penmanship.

"The medical report. Lady Sakura finished the one for the last shift that came in, and was working on the current one when I saw her. She is hoping to finish the current report by the time the shift change comes at dusk," Silas explained as Kamui leafed through his sister's tally of their injured, dead, and special cases, as well as inventory.

"Anything notable?" he asked, putting the papers down. He trusted Silas to give him the run-down without bothering with the papers.

"None. We have had a dozen casualties so far, and about ten times as many wounded, but the healers are not letting anybody die. They're good," Silas smiled.

"Good. How about the men? How is their morale?" Kamui continued on, putting the papers aside and crossing his hands on the table.

"I won't lie to you. This stand-off is taking a toll, and like you said, they're getting tired in all senses of the term," Silas explained with a sigh. "There is beginning to have talk of a pointless war. The men deny that themselves, but it won't be long until doubts creep into their minds."

"We must take this battle, and quickly, then," Kamui noted. "A swift ending will surely put an end to their doubts and strengthen their trust in us. We cannot do this without the strength of our unified Nohrian and Hoshidan army, Silas."

"I know, Kamui."

"Summon Ryoma and Xander. I want to put plans on the table to take out their general once more, and this time, I will not let them leave until I have an answer," Kamui requested a bit harshly.
"I'll get them," Silas nodded, not at all thrown off by his friend's frustration. He broke away from the table and went for the tent flap, just as new voices filtered in, approaching the tent.

"Ew! You're so gross! How can you even say that in public!?"

"Ah, but my lovely, you should hear the filth that comes out of your mouth sometimes. Almost worse than mine."

"I'll summon them later, on second thought," Silas chuckled in amusement, watching Kamui rub colour back in his face at the sound of the voices.

"I'd like to see them as soon as possible, Silas," he insisted, the tent flap swinging open as if to punctuate his sentence.

"Who, us?" the newcomer grinned, Kamui raising his eyes to meet the teasing gaze being thrown at him.

"Dad, you're interrupting!" the girl behind him sighed. "Father and Commander Silas were probably having a moment! A private moment... close together... working out some stuff on a report... when their hands accidentally brush..."

"Niles, Nina," Kamui cut his daughter off with a groan. "I'm busy right now. Please do not waltz in unannounced like this."

"You're never too busy for me, Father," Nina grinned, sauntering over to Kamui with her braids bouncing in the air. He couldn't deny her, and he knew it. He cracked a smile.

"That might be true, my darling, but I have duties as this army's leader. I cannot shirk them."

"Take some time off, Kamui," Silas insisted, opening the tent flap. "I'll tell Prince Ryoma and Prince Xander to meet you in here in an hour."

"Thank you, my friend."

"Anything else before I go?" Silas asked good-naturedly.

"Ah, uh..." Kamui glanced at Niles, who was respectfully, if not coyly, waiting for him to finish. "If you run into him... could you tell Dwyer I'd like some coffee?"

"Oho... If you wanted to wake up, I could've given you a much better buzz than just coffee," his husband teased, sliding closer to Kamui. Next to him, Nina made a small noise of disgust.

"Make that two cups of coffee," Kamui sighed, and Silas left chuckling.

As soon as he was gone, Niles bent to kiss the tip of Kamui's pointed ear.

"You're tired, love. Have some rest for an hour before meeting with your brothers," the outlaw recommended.

"I have work to do," Kamui weakly argued.

"You won't be able to focus if you're not well-rested," Nina lectured him in a sing-song voice. "Take a nap. A real nap. In bed. Not on your papers." She giggled tapping her cheek in amusement.

"Damn," Kamui swore rubbing his cheek again where the imprint was still on his skin, apparently.
"Did you two not want to see me, however? It wouldn't make sense for me to sleep if you've come to visit me."

"It's okay. I guess I can tolerate Dad's face if it means you're getting some rest."

"Nina..." Niles pouted in a voice that only expressed exasperation.

"Be nice to your father, dear," Kamui rolled his eyes, getting up with the thought of having a nap after all.

"I'll be nice when he stops being creepy."

"Well, you get that from me," Niles hummed, throwing his arms around Kamui's waist and pulling him closer into his embrace. "At least we know you're my daughter for real."

"... Mhm..."

"Niles. Our daughter is fantasizing about us holding each other like this, you know," Kamui remarked, not making a move to disentangle himself from his husband's loving embrace regardless.

"Oh, let the kids have their fun," Niles hummed, chuckling when Nina discreetly cackled next to them.

"Speaking of kids," Kamui drew back, a lazy smile on his face. "Have any of you seen Kana today?"

"I saw her early this morning when I went to bathe in the river," Nina answered. "She was up and dressed for battle, but she was with Shiro and Siegbert, so I imagine they played some sort of game with her."

"Like the time she almost transformed into a dragon to play a game with Hinata's son," Niles laughed lightly. "She's a handful, that child."

"How come I can't turn into a dragon?" Nina pouted.

"Maybe, dear daughter..." Niles teased, letting Kamui go to instead pinch Nina's cheeks obnoxiously. "... because you're mine!"

"Don't touch me, ew!" Nina whined, only earning herself a laugh from both her fathers, biological or not. They were her fathers, and whether she admitted it or not, she loved them equally.

"Alright. I'm gonna take you up on that offer for a nap," Kamui decided, unpinning his cape and removing his shoes on the way to the bed. Niles followed, doing the same for his cape and shoes.

"Nina, will you join us?" Niles offered in a rare moment of genuineness.

"The bed's too small, and I'm not a child anymore."

"Sixteen is still a child to me, Nina dear."

"Come. If we cuddle, we will all fit," Kamui encouraged her, pulling the cover back on his bed. He and Niles slept separately, if only due to their hierarchical standing, so the bed was a single, but... they'd fit two people on it before. A third shouldn't be a problem.

The three of them squeezed in with Nina grumpily squished between her fathers, looking decidedly unhappy with her choice. And yet, when Kamui and Niles held her, and held each
other, she could not help but feel overwhelmed with love.

"I wish Kana was here," she mumbled, if only to break the silence.

"We will repeat the experience with Kana once she returns from her adventures with her cousins," Niles whispered to her, then put a finger to his lips. "Now hush, love. Your father is sleeping. Take a rest as well. You are doing well, learning to handle your staff at the medical tent, and I know that it gets tiring on the long run."

"You'll be here when I wake up, right?" she murmured softly, as if embarrassed, refusing to close her eyes until she got an answer.

"Of course. We're a family now, and none of us are going anywhere. You, me, Kamui, Kana... We're always going to be together."

"Do you think they've noticed we're gone?"

Siegbert woke from his light sleep in an instant upon being addressed, and yawned, trying to stretch awkwardly.

"Pardon?"

"Our friends. Our family," Shiro clarified, looking up at the small window just out of reach at the top of their cell. The light was not as strong as before, which meant that it was already well in the afternoon. Dusk would fall soon. They had left camp early in the morning and had been captured in the mid-morning, so it had been only around ten hours they'd been missing. Somehow, with how hectic the army was during battles, he didn't have much faith that their disappearance had been noted.

"Well..." Siegbert seemed to have come to the same conclusion, though he seemed to be avoiding saying it out loud. "Perhaps they have their doubts and will sound the alarm in a little while. We are at war and frequently spend days away from our friends and family, so they might not find our absence suspicious just yet."

"That's fine," Shiro shrugged. "We'll just have to find a way to bust out by ourselves."

As if on cue, the heavy dungeon doors slammed open in the distance, and the boys stiffened in apprehension. Many heavy footsteps came down the tight corridor lined with cells now, which indicated that there were more than one guard. On the other side, Kana was still napping on the cobblestone, head pillowed on her bent arm. She only roused when the guards, three in number this time, stopped in front of their cells.

"Shiro? Siegbert?" she called out in mild alarm as the cell doors were both opened.

"Remain calm, Kana," Siegbert instructed nervously, standing up when the guard came into their cell. Shiro was dragged to his feet forcefully, and they were both escorted out.

Kana squeaked lightly as the guard gripped her upper arm to pull her out of her cell, struggling to loosen the tight grip on her as she joined her cousins' side.

"Where are you taking us?" Shiro asked, glaring at the guards although he did not expect an answer.

Predictably, he got none. They were simply pushed and pulled towards the exit.
Glancing briefly at his companions, Shiro noticed their focused expressions, and knew that, just like him, they were memorizing the route for future use in their escape. They were escorted up a set of stairs, and out of the heavy dungeon doors. The fort holding them captive was not remarkable at all, with grey stone walls and grey stone floors. In fact, it was so bare and devoid of any signs of life that Shiro hypothesized that it could very well be abandoned. That would mean that the chances of it appearing on a map were low. That didn't bode well for them.

They went through the sinewy hallways, occasionally passing by some Vallite soldiers, who fully ignored them. They seemed to be in a hurry. But it was hard to tell, considering they were soulless puppets, and all.

They passed by many doors, but none of them looked like it led outside. Shiro could only conclude that they were being led through the inner parts of the fort. His thoughts were interrupted, however, when they were stopped in front of an unremarkable set of doors, meaning that they had reached their final destination. They were all silent as they entered.

Inside what seemed to be a set of chambers, a fire was burning in the hearth. A man in distinctively Nohrian magician robes sat by the fire and grinned widely upon their entry. Shiro's doubts were confirmed when Kana gasped next to him.

"Iago!"

"It's Iago, you wretched child," the man grunted, the grin falling off his face. He motioned them closer, and the guards kept their grip tight on them as they approached the mastermind behind their capture.

"What do you want?" Kana huffed, almost stupidly brave in this situation. Shiro would've liked to praise her, but he knew to mind his tongue right now.

"Kana, my dearest, be polite," Iago rolled his eyes. "Simply because you have my favour, it does not signify that you may disrespect me at your leisure. I may have your companions' heads any time I want, remember that."

Ah, so the man was holding Shiro’s and Siegbert's lives over Kana's head. That was a strange way of doing things, though, considering that the two boys probably outranked Kana in their respective kingdoms.

"I wasn't going to summon you again today, but I figured I may as well get to know your companions," Iago continued. "Would you mind introducing these gentlemen to me?"

"They're my friends," Kana mumbled vaguely. "They helped me get into the enemy camp to assassinate the general. They've got nothing to do with you."

"My soldiers report to me that they are quite the admirable fighters, though. I doubt that with such prowess, they are simple nobodies," Iago remarked, raking his eyes over the boys. It made Shiro's skin crawl.

"Didn't know your soldiers spoke. I figured they were just silent puppets," Shiro muttered.

"You'd be surprised," Iago clicked his tongue. "Now, kindly introduce yourselves before making any more sarcastic remarks. It's only polite. I'll even introduce myself, if that'll break the ice."

"They know who you are," Kana interrupted. "And they've got nothing to do with you. Let them go."
"You are absolutely endearing, little pet," Iago cooed, genuinely amused. He motioned to one of the guards, who shoved Kana towards Iago. She stumbled, but did not make a move to get away, only stiffening when the mage put his hand on her messy hair and patted her mockingly. It was condescending and an attack on Kana's honour, and both the princes' tempers flared. Siegbert was simply a bit quieter about it.

"Do not touch Kana, you vile snake," he spat out. "You corrupt her with your vermin hands."

"Such sharp words, boy," Iago raised a brow, dropping his hand. Kana made a small movement away from him. "But it is curious that you address my pet by her name."

"Kana is not yours, you sick dastard!" Shiro growled, fighting against his bonds, but effectively being shaken back into compliance by his captor.

"You as well?" Iago's eyes were calculating. "You attach no title to the princess' name, which means that you must be quite high-placed in the hierarchy of your camp. And yet, you are so young. Tell me. Who are you two, really?"

"They're just my friends!" Kana insisted, clenching her fists. "I tell them not to call me by my title because we're friends! Otherwise, they're just soldiers. They've got nothing to do with you."

"So what you're saying is that they have no bargaining value like you, my dear," Iago clarified, looking over Shiro's and Siegbert's tense forms. "So I cannot use them just like I will send something of yours to your father dearest to ransom you."

"Nah. So just let them be," Kana pouted.

"Or perhaps they can be my messengers. You seem to be insisting to let them go," Iago smirked. "Perhaps I will take the tall one," he motioned to Shiro. "And I will send my ransom letter attached to his corpse."

Kana distinctively blanched, as if she knew not to put the possibility past her antagonist. Shiro admitted that he wasn't very keen on being sent back to his family dead, either.

"Or perhaps I will carve my message on the silver-tongued one's back, and have him rush to ride back to your camp before he exsanguinates himself," Iago suggested, humming at Siegbert, as if trying to rouse a reaction out of him.

Siegbert stood expressionless, although perhaps he did turn a shade paler. Somehow, Shiro doubted it was due to blood loss.

"Stop it!" Kana screeched, the images conjured in her childish mind probably more horrific than she deserved to imagine. Tears were visibly welling up in her eyes. "Please!"

"Kana, it will be alright," Shiro called to her, his heart wrenching. He and Siegbert were young, too young to be held captive, but Kana was even younger, thirty years too young to be subjected to psychological manipulation like this. "Don't cry, little princess. All will be fine."

"To torture a child like this..." Siegbert muttered under his breath, glaring daggers at the mage, who seemed oddly satisfied by their reactions. "You are a coward, without honour nor pride. You would sink as low as to threaten a little girl?"

"This little girl happens to be the daughter of that traitor prince Kamui, and one of the most capable warriors in his army. I am simply playing my cards to win, no matter what it takes. If she did not want to be involved in adult politics, she should have stayed home and played with her dolls."
"You-" Shiro saw red. Between Kana's pain and Iago's amusement, he could not take it anymore. He gave another rough tug to escape his captor's grip, and kicked back, right into the soldier's abdomen. His grip loosened just enough for Shiro to escape, and the Hoshidan prince rushed towards the mage to do something, anything, anything to just stop him running his mouth.

"Shiro!" Both Kana and Siegbert barely had time to yell their warning. Shiro could only enjoy the split-second of panic in Iago's eyes before he was tackled to the ground by one of the guards, the one who had been holding Kana earlier. Breath left his lungs in a single choked exhale, and pain coursed through his ribs as he was pressed to the ground.

"Tsk tsk tsk. What animalistic behaviour," Iago chided, pretending he hadn't just been terrified for his life. Shiro hated him and his cowardly tactics. He spat as hard as he could at Iago's feet, feeling blood welling up in his mouth from an earlier wound reopened. "Truly an animal."

"You goaded him into it!" Kana protested, tiny fists clenched in anger. "Of course he'd protect me! He wouldn't have done anything if you had just... just shut up!"

Slap.

"Kana!" Siegbert gasped, giving his own binds a tug. Shiro, still on the ground, growled in rage and tried to fight his captor to get to his little cousin, who was now laying on the ground, nursing her face where she had been violently backhanded.

"Listen here, worm," Iago hissed warningly at her, nudging her roughly with his foot. She took some distance, and then glared at him venomously. A scratch marred her face where Iago's ring had dragged across her cheek. She spat out some blood at his feet, probably from biting her inner cheek, imitating Shiro. "Just because I need you alive, it does not mean that I will indulge your uncouth mouth. I can easily hold you down and slice off your tongue if you insist on antagonizing me."

"My dad's gonna come for you," Kana hissed. "He's gonna come save us, and when he gets here, you're gonna wish you were dead."

Iago considered her words for a moment, and then stood up. Kana refused to shrink, even as she knelt before him, and Shiro had a bad feeling.

With some difficulty, Iago crouched to be at her level, and then suddenly grabbed her by her hair. She squeaked, but made no other noise to indicate her distress.

Shiro observed Siegbert biting his lip so hard that a drop of blood rolled down his chin, pearling on his blood-stained neck.

"I look forward to his arrival, then." The mage's grip tightened painfully on her hair, and Kana could feel some of the strands ripping out underneath the twisting fingers. He shook her lightly, as if testing what she would do, and then smirked widely at her. She held back from punching him square in the teeth. "This time, I will destroy him. So let him come. If he can find you, he is welcome to meet his demise at my hands."

"He'll come, and you'll regret that false bravado," Kana hissed back in return, surprising her cousins with the animosity laced in her words.

Iago seemed to be pleasantly surprised as well, for he stood, not letting go of Kana's hair. The little girl was forced to stand as well, whimpering at the pain of her irritated scalp, and instinctively reached up to try and loosen the mage's grip, especially when his tugging finally dislodged her hair ribbon, letting her pale strands flow down her back and into Iago's greedy hands.
They all stood in silence for another few seconds before Iago's face split into a grin.

"Well, we have no further use for nobodies," he cooed in false regret. "Guards. Dispose of these gentlemen."

"No!" Kana screeched, her voice resonating loudly within Iago's chambers as Shiro was dragged to his knees, and Siegbert was shoved to his. The two boys were attempting to struggle, not willing to go down without a fight, but with their hands bound and weaponless, there wasn't much they could do. "Stop it! Please! Don't kill them!"

The guards did not react to her, struggling to control their prisoners. The princes were putting up quite a fight now that their immediate survival was at stake, using their legs to try and kick the guards away and put some distance between them. Shiro even tried clubbing one of the guards in the face with his shackled hands, but the Vallite seemed barely fazed thanks to his large helmet absorbing the blow.

"Let go!" Kana screeched, fighting Iago as well. The grip in her hair was tight and painful, and Iago seemed unfazed by her rabid punches and kicks at such an awkward angle. In fact, he almost seemed amused by their struggle, and that just pissed off Kana even more.

Something feral pulsed inside of her, but she swallowed it down. And when Siegbert let out a cry of pain, his guard having grabbed his hair where his laceration was, it pulsed again, and again, stronger every time her attacks were ineffective, faster when Shiro was shoved back to the ground, again and again until there were tears in his eyes.

Soon, it was a pressure in her chest, and a ball in her throat, and she could not speak anymore. Red began to creep into the sides of her vision, and it did not clear when she blinked. Rage pulsed in her heart, and it took all she had to control it.

The precious pendant underneath her shirt pulsed in unison with her feral rage, and she focused on it to try and suppress the monster slowly clawing its way out of her. She bit her lip, feeling the fire of transformation coursing through her, but the Dragonstone helped keep her in check. And yet, at some point, her rage must have become overpowering, because she opened her mouth to scream, and all that came out was a violent roar.

Everyone froze, including Shiro and Siegbert, who turned to look at the young dragon heir in horror. In this rage state, there was a chance that Kana's control of her inner dragon would falter, despite the Dragonstone. If that happened, they would all die a painful, fiery death.

"Control it, Kana!" Siegbert prompted her, still trying to fight off his guards, who could not get him still enough to pull out their weapons for the execution. "Do not let the dragon take over!"

Foreign markings were creeping up Kana's cheeks, her eyes changing colour and her pupils turning into slits. Her nails were elongating into claws, and when she accidentally scratched Iago deep enough for him to bleed, the mage suddenly realized that he was losing control.

"Damn it!" he swore, shoving her away.

Fighting her inner battle, Kana fell to the ground on all fours, panting and whimpering as she tried to quell her inner beast. Her back arched, a large bump pulsating near her shoulders blades, but she calmed the dragon quickly enough to prevent the wings from bursting through her skin. In this state, when less emotionally compromised, she was able to partially transform and use her Dragon Fang ability to increase the strength of her attacks, but now, it seemed more like the dragon was invading her body parasitically. Siegbert and Shiro watched in horror as her mouth opened in another roar, deeper this time, exposing her deadly fangs.
They could do nothing to stop her. Not with their hands bound - quite literally - like this. In some twisted act of grace, however, Iago was able to stumble back to the hearth and grab the tome resting on the coffee table.

It was heart-wrenching to watch it happen, but the princes knew that it was better than the alternative. Iago flipped through his tome and then put out his hand, concentrating magic at his fingertips. Kana did not seem to notice, and so was unable to dodge when runes began to light up in the air around Iago, dragging magic into the palm of his hand.

Shiro averted his eyes when the powerful blast left Iago's hand, going straight for Kana. The young princess was entrapped in light for a moment, and then, she screamed.

It was a dragon's roar at first, and everyone, even the soulless guards, halted to watch her thrash in the whirlwind of magic around her. And then, the roar turned into the screeching of a young girl in pain, and a strange kind of relief coursed through them all.

"Enough," Shiro begged, glancing at Iago, who did not relent. "Enough! Her dragon has receded! You can stop hurting her!"

Iago did not reply. As if to spite him, he kept his hand up for another moment, and then clenched his outstretched fist. The magic returned to him and disappeared, leaving Kana convulsing on the floor. The last of her fangs were dulling back into teeth when she opened her eyes, glancing at her cousins in pain.

"S-Shiro... Siegbert... I'm... sorry."

"Kana..." The Nohrian prince simply averted his eyes, ashamed that he could not help her.

She blinked a few more times, then let her eyes fall shut in exhaustion. Between her transformation and Iago's powerful magic, she must have been drained.

"Well. That was quite something, wasn't it?" the mage sighed out, seemingly taken aback as well. Still, he seemed satisfied. "So. Shiro and Siegbert. That is what she called you, correct?"

The boys remained silent, not bowing their heads despite being held on their knees.

"I feel like I should recognize those names. I highly doubt that you two are mere cannon fodder, as my little pet claims you to be. Your linguistics and fighting prowess are too advanced to be those of a commoner. Speak the truth." The boys froze under Iago's dubious staring. "You must at the very least be of noble birth."

Neither of them replied, knowing not to fall for his interrogation. Next to Iago's feet, Kana moaned, but did not wake. That seemed to drag the mage's attention to her, and after some consideration, he went towards her, and knelt.

"Don't touch her," Shiro warned him weakly. "Haven't you done enough?"

"I have no intention of harming her further. Not for now, at least," Iago replied, looking at her before turning her roughly onto her back. She flopped bonelessly onto the ground, still unconscious. He considered her for another moment before tugging the laces of her undershirt open.

"Fiend!" Siegbert bristled. "Remove your hands at once! You are the lowest of the low if you would do this to a little girl!"
"Calm yourself, fiery youth," Iago rolled his eyes. "I only have interest in her pendant. I've never seen something like it. I bet it is quite unique." He pulled out the Dragonstone, rolling it in his palm.

"It allows her to suppress the beast inside of her," Shiro hissed. "You take it away from her, and she will turn into a raging monster and will rip your miserable head from your miserable shoulders." She'd do the same to them, of course, but that was the bluff.

Iago called it.

"I suppose it means that she would lose all concept of allies and enemies and smite all around her indiscriminately," he concluded, snapping the pendant off of her neck. "There's no better way to destroy someone than through guilt, you know. This'll do wonderfully."

"What are you planning?" Siegbert frowned, watching the mage return to his seat by the fireplace as if nothing had transpired.

"Nothing of importance," Iago replied, getting cockily talkative due to his clear win. He twirled the pendant in front of his eyes, admiring its intricacies. "I'm simply going to be sending a parcel to Lord Kamui."

He admired the pendant a moment longer, then shifted his attention to the girl to whom it belonged. Kana still laid on her back, knocked out and unaware of the world. Iago just sighed in content, and put the pendant down on the coffee table, watching Shiro and Siegbert. He was toying with them, and they knew it, and refused to bend under his gaze. The mage realized it, too, and gave up after a little while.

"Take all three of them back to their cells," he ordered. "Shiro and Siegbert. You may be of use to me yet."

"Just try it, scum," Shiro huffed as he was roughly manhandled to his feet, as Siegbert was.

"Yes, yes. Insult me on your march down to the dungeons, won't you?" Iago teased. "I will see you tomorrow, surely with news of my gift to your camp. Wish my dearest Kana a happy recovery, won't you?"

"Fuck you," Siegbert spat as he was removed from the room. Shiro enjoyed the brief surprise on Iago's face once again, although he was sure his expression mirrored the mage's.

"Dude, seriously?" he gaped as they were escorted down the hall, stumbling. A third guard was pacing behind them with Kana slung over his shoulder. "I'm telling your father."

"Don't you dare," Siegbert blushed. "It is unbecoming of me to say such things. He mustn't know."

"I'm kidding. I didn't even know your vocabulary extended into such a range," Shiro teased him, his muscles aching from the fruitless struggle. "Proud of ya, Sig."

"Never forget that I, too, spent much time by myself in the Deeprealms. And perhaps it doesn't seem like it, but I, too, once harboured loneliness and bitterness in my heart."

"And that's when you learned to swear?" Shiro raised his eyebrows incredulously. "That's some story. I've never heard you swear like that before. But I understand. I was frustrated at my father, too, for abandoning me."

"But I do not swear because of my father this time," Siegbert clarified, glancing at his friend with
all the determination of a believer. "For this time, he has not abandoned me. Nor has yours. They will come for us. They will not leave us again."

Shiro liked the thought of believing him. So he did.

Kamui was still in full-blown debate with Xander and Ryoma over who to include in the assassination party to take out the enemy leader when Silas burst into his tent, out of breath. They had been at it since the mid-afternoon, and had taken a break to receive reports, and were finally at the end of it.

"I think that Camilla's retainer, Beruka, would make an excellent third man," Xander was saying. "She can take to the air with her Wyvern, and was an assassin in the past. She would be well-suited for taking out our target."

"But her accuracy in melee is lacking, from what I gather," Ryoma argued. "If they are surrounded-"

Kamui was trying to pay attention, he really was. But at that point, he was just tired. Which was why Silas' interruption was very welcome, despite being highly impolite.

They heard his footsteps rushing towards the tent before they saw him burst in, panting. Hands immediately went to Raijinto and Siegfried, but Kamui did not move, trusting that no enemy could get this far into camp without being stopped.

"Milords!" the silver-haired knight cried out. "My apologies for bursting in, but I have news!"

"Silas, you are out of breath! Is everything alright?" Ryoma frowned, concerned.

"Yes, Lord Ryoma!" Silas nodded, turning to Kamui. "Lady Hinoka has sent a rider from the battlefield with a message for you, Kamui."

"I'm listening." Kamui's face was serious for a second, before it melted into a smile. "But I recognize the mirth in your voice, my friend. Something good has happened, am I correct?"

"The enemy ranks are giving way," Silas nodded, smiling softly. "Lady Hinoka reports that the reinforcements coming in are not forming lines and are just attacking without pattern or form. Something seems to have changed in their chain of command."

"You mean... could their commander have been...?" Xander left the words hanging, glancing at Kamui expectantly.

"But we have not sent our assassins out yet," Kamui frowned lightly. "Silas, has their commander fallen in battle?"

"Lady Camilla is sweeping the battleground from the skies as we speak for proof of a body before it disappears," Silas explained. "She has asked for young Prince Kiragi's assistance, so if there is a body to be found, we will know of it shortly."

"This is wonderful news regardless," Ryoma nodded, a satisfied smiled blooming on his face. "It's almost been five days we've been fighting without gaining ground, so this will keep our men going until we completely rout the enemy."

"Let's not take it for granted. They might simply be having internal dissent in the chain of command," Xander reminded them.
"Then we should strike now, Sire," Silas recommended. "We can withdraw Lady Hinoka's and Lady Camilla's exhausted troops from the battlefield, and send in all of our remaining forces to blast through their ranks and decimate the rest of them."

"We cannot rush in like headless chickens, however," Kamui reminded him. "I agree that we must strike quickly, but I still have to meet the war council to determine who will leads troops on which side of the battlefield. We must not forget that despite not having form, these Vallite troops can still overwhelm us in numbers."

"Shall I summon the core council, or the extended council?" Silas asked, not questioning Kamui's leadership.

"Call the extended council. The retainers and the children will be participating to this final effort as well, so it would be wise to include them in the planning process," Kamui decided, his brothers not objecting to his wise decision.

"I will have them all gathered in the mess tent within the next half hour," Silas bowed, and Kamui knew he could count on his best friend and right-hand man to hurry. His tone indicated that he knew the importance of moving fast.

As soon as he left, Kamui swept their previous plans off the table, and pulled out a new sheet of parchment.

"We must strike before they have time to regroup and re-establish their commands," he immediately switched gears, his brothers falling in step.

"I suggest that we immediately assign Leo's troops to the right flank. His mounted mages can begin their onslaught at long-range and close in upon the enemy," Xander suggested.

"Takumi can lead his archers from the right flank as well. His snipers will provide Prince Leo's troops a comfortable margin to approach the enemy," Ryoma agreed.

"I want Saizo, Kagero and Kaze to take their troops to the nearby forest and ambush the soldiers attempting to flee, or join the battlefield. I know their camp remains within the forest, so they will be the main forces in charge of isolating the battlefield," Kamui explained, sketching out their plans on the parchment.

"What of the children? What will you have them do?" Ryoma asked.

"Many of them are responsible enough to lead their own platoon in the front lines. I was thinking of attributing soldiers to Siegbert and Shiro, amongst others. What is your counsel?" Kamui asked them.

"It will be a great opportunity for them to learn to lead on the battlefield," Xander agreed confidently.

"Right." Ryoma didn't seem so sure, and despite the gravity of the situation, Kamui couldn't help but laugh. It was no secret that Ryoma really tried hard to have faith in his son. It paid off, like, half the time.

"I will otherwise station most children with their parents, since many of them share a weapon preference. I'll leave it up to them to assign units to their children. The youngest ones, such as Midori, Kana, and Percy, will remain on the back lines for today and assist Sakura."

"I hope I do not overstep my boundaries, brother, but I would suggest placing Kana in the fray
today,” Xander suggested. "Perhaps she can fight alongside Prince Shiro. The two have always been very good when they spar alongside one another. I daresay, I feel that Siegbert may actually be jealous of Shiro for getting along so well with his younger cousin.” He cracked a smile.

"I will trust your judgement, brother. Kana is far from a helpless child, and perhaps keeping her in the second wave, right before Charlotte's and Benny's knights, would allow her to get experience without the danger of getting overwhelmed. In that case, I would ask that the young princes lead second-wave platoons."

"Very well. I'm sure they'll be up to the task," Ryoma nodded, his tone saying that they had to move on.

"We should go to the mess tent and set up the meeting space," Kamui suggested, gathering his map and parchments, trying to balance his quill and inkpot on top of his equipment.

"Let me help." Xander rushed to help him, taking a few things out of his arms. "One last thing, Kamui. What would you have us do in this battle? I imagine that you are keeping the pivotal role for yourself, as usual, but I want you to remind you that you are not alone. We will help."

"Indeed, brother," Ryoma assured him, escorting them out of the tent. "Let us assist you in whatever you had in mind for yourself."

"Do not worry, both of you. I always intended to get you in on this part of the plan," Kamui assured them. "Ryoma, I know you are not fond of horses, but I will ask of you to ride alongside me. Xander, you as well."

"Where are we headed?" the blond prince asked curiously. Especially curiously when the army commander's eyes darkened.

"To the heart of the enemy camp. To investigate this sudden change in the tide and issue an immediate withdraw order if this is a trap."

...-...-...-...-...

It was night when Kana woke. Moonlight was filtering through the slim window in Shiro's and Siegbert's cell, the only noise coming from the crackling of the torch fire and the occasional scurrying of rats.

Kana winced. She hated rats.

She sat up from the awkward twisted lying down position she was in, and groaned when her body protested the movement. For a moment, she wondered what the hell had happened to her, before the memories of her meeting with Iago shot to the forefront of her mind.

Iago intended to execute his cousins!

"No, please... no!" she whimpered to herself, jerking to her feet unsteadily and rushing towards the bars to try and peer through to the other cell.

She feared the worst when she heard nothing, but then, in the dim light, she saw two figured curled up against the back of the cell. Her heart rate slowed a bit, and she exhaled in relief.

"Psst! Shiro! Siegbert!" she whispered, as if she was afraid of someone hearing them. Decidedly, they were alone in the dungeons, however.

No one answered, so she repeated her call, a bit louder. On the third attempt, there was finally
some shifting in the other cell, and Kana tried one last time.

"Is anyone awake? Can you hear me?" she called into the dark.

"Kana?" she recognized Siegbert's soft spoken voice, and smiled when there was scrambling towards her. Siegbert soon appeared at the bars facing her cell, his blood-stained face lighting up in relief upon seeing her awake. "Thank the gods, you're awake. You've been out for several hours and we were worried."

"I'm sorry, Siegbert. I didn't mean to worry," she apologized in shame. "I must have worried you a whole lot when I, uhh... did the whole dragon thing..."

"I won't lie to you, Kana. You did scare us quite a bit. It was regrettable, but Iago stopped your transformation in time," the Nohrian prince explained to her.

"I see. I still have to practice so much. Father can turn into a dragon and still be in control of himself at all times, you know. I must aspire to be like him," Kana hummed thoughtfully. "I suppose it's all in the practice. At least this Dragonstone guarantees that I'm safe from myself."

"Umm.. yes... about that..."

"Wait a second."

"Ah, yes. There's been an... incident.." Siegbert winced, and Kana immediately pulled her shirt away to glance down. Where her pendant used to hang was now nothing more than bare skin. Her eyes widened in horror.

"Oh no... oh no! How could this happen?"

"Do not panic, Kana!" Siegbert warned him hurriedly. "You know better than I that your dragon responds to fear, anger and pain. Remain calm, and it will, too."

"What if I turn, Siegbert?" she murmured meekly, worry still coating her words despite the warning. "I'll hurt you and Shiro as well!"

"We will make sure that doesn't happen. It's exactly what Iago wants, so we'll just have to remain headstrong and defy him," Siegbert smiled comforting at her.

"Right! Until my Papa gets here and kicks his sorry behind into the next millennium!" she giggled, and Siegbert could not help but get dragged into her enthusiasm.

The damp walls took their toll on their mood rather quickly, however. Kana's smile fell right off her face, and a strange melancholy slipped into her heart instead.

The moonlight reminded her of her Papa, a bright beacon even during the darkest times. The stars reminded her of her daddy, and of all the nights she had joined him during his stargazing. The torchlight reminded her of her big sister, burning bright with fiery spirit and warming those who knew to handle her, burning those who mistreated her.

She missed her family. It had not even been a day she had been away from them, but the fear and uncertainty of captivity made a day feel like a week. She just wanted to go home.

"Siegbert, do you miss your father?" she asked in a quiet voice. Siegbert shifted from the other side, possibly to get into a more comfortable position, and sighed.

"My father is my hero. But that is why I do not miss him. He is my hero, but it is wrong to long
for him and await his arrival. We must take action and prove to our fathers, to our heroes, that we are worthy and strong. And that instead of weakening us, the yearning for their presence has given us the drive we need to return to them."

"I get it. We have to be strong for our daddies," Kana sniffled, and the thought of her family, now so far away, brought tears to her eyes. Were they thinking of her? Did they miss her? Did they even know she was gone? "But Siegbert... without all the fancy prince-speak... Tell me truly. Do you miss your dad?"

There was silence. Outside, a bird cawed into the night and took flight. Shiro mumbled in his sleep and shifted, though he did not wake. Kana waited for his gentle cousin's answer patiently.

"I do," Siegbert finally murmured, as if he was admitting some great secret. "But when he comes for me, I want to be able to tell him that I missed him so much that I fought tooth and nail to return to him. And that I never surrendered."

"That makes sense," Kana laughed a bit sadly, letting only one tear drip from her eyes. She indulged in a moment of nostalgia before steeling herself, and taking a deep breath to calm down. "Thank you, Siegbert. We should return to sleep. We must gather our strength for tomorrow."

"What's tomorrow?" Siegbert asked, returning to his spot by Shiro's side.

"A brand new day," Kana giggled, making herself as comfortable as possible on the dirty cobblestone as well. "And, more specifically, the day we get out of here."

Kamui didn't understand. He just didn't get what was going on.

"You still have that troubled look on your face, love," Niles remarked from where he laid in Kamui's bed, stripped down to his pants and loose shirt. "And yet, you led our army to victory today. So why do you look so tense? Is it because you want me to work the tension out of your body?" he hinted playfully, shifting in bed.

"Niles, now is not the time," Kamui shot him down especially roughly, to which Niles frowned. Something bothersome was clearly on his husband's mind. He got out of bed and came closer, although he did not touch Kamui, who was sitting in his work chair looking through his papers.

"Tell me what's on your mind," he ordered softly. Kamui could not help but comply when Niles spoke to him that way, so he did explain.

"There's something off about the enemy."

"You charged through the battlefield, into the enemy camp with your brothers. Did you find something there that has stayed on your mind?" Niles guessed.

"No... We found nothing, and that's what's bothering me," Kamui sighed, setting down his parchments. "Most soldiers were already on the battlefield, fighting. Many of them were on their way and were killed by the ambush divisions in the forest. Only few remained in the camp, easy targets for the three of us, and yet, there was no sign of a leader. I'm wondering if perhaps they fled. But then, nothing was taken away from the camp, so it's not like they made a tactical retreat..."

"Maybe their leader was killed," Niles suggested. "A forest as dense as that is a perfect spot for assassination. It's almost ridiculously easy to ambush someone and then flee via the treetops. I've never done it, but I've heard it's easy."
"But then, what proof do we have?"

"A victory on the battlefield is rather hard proof, don't you think?"

"I suppose..." Kamui ran a hand through his hair. "I just have this gut feeling that something's off as well, but I can't say what. And I have a feeling it's tied to the recent disappearances."

"Disappearances?" Niles perked up. "I didn't hear you mention this before. What disappearances?"

"I didn't want to publicize it, in case I was wrong. With a camp this big and a battle this extensive, it's quite common not to see someone for several days, after all," Kamui started off, seeming hesitant to extrapolate.

"What are you so afraid of telling me, hmm? Will I have to punish you for withholding information from me?" Niles teased, finally coming close and leaning down to kiss his ear.

"Niles," Kamui warned, turning to him with concern painting streaks in the red of his eyes. "I think Kana is missing."

Niles studied him and the worry in his expression, and then sighed, stepping back.

"Tell me what evidence you have, and I will find her, wherever she is, and bring her back," he bit out fiercely. Kamui was slightly taken aback, not used to Niles being this passionate (not in this context, at least). He knew that his husband loved both of his daughters equally, but he was being an awful lot more serious lately. Especially when it came to Nina and Kana.

"I-I mean, don't get all worked up!" Kamui stammered.

"Should I work you up instead? Hmm?"

"I mean that it's just a nagging thought. I haven't seen Kana all day. Nina says she saw her this morning, but she was not in the mess tent for lunch, nor was she present at the extended war council, along with Shiro and Siegbert," Kamui explained. "I know, I might be overreacting. Last battle we fought, I didn't see her for the two days it took for us to win it. But this time, with all this good luck suddenly befalling us..."

"You feel like you're paying for your good luck with something else," Niles completed his sentence, his face softening. Probably recognizing himself in Kamui's words. "I didn't know you were the superstitious type."

"I'm not. I make my own fate. But this..."

"I get it. Sometimes, your gut feeling tells you something that your mind can't quite understand. In the past, gut feeling was all I ever had to guide me through another day in the slums," Niles explained.

"And? What should I do now?" Kamui asked, not sure where to go with this.

"If the slums have taught me one thing, love, it's what I'm about to teach you." Niles knelt, and gently took one of Kamui's hands in his. "Always trust your gut, no matter how illogical it seems to be at the time."

"Right. Thank you, Niles," Kamui bit his lip, indulging in the light caress of his husband's fingers on the back on his palm.
"At your service, milord," Niles bowed his head lightly, and then glanced back at Kamui. This time, his only uncovered eye was steeled and cold. The look of a killer. It never failed to shake Kamui to the core. "And one last thing, perhaps. A lesson that the slums failed to teach me, and that I painstakingly had to teach myself. And that you should engrave upon your heart next to all you hold dear, if I may be as bold."

"And what would that be, Niles?" Kamui asked, although he felt like the icy expression on his husband's face already said it all. He wished he had never asked when Niles dipped his head and pressed a fierce kiss to his knuckles. Angry. Agitated. Worried.

"If someone hurts your loved ones," Niles answered softly, emotionlessly, "annihilate them."

It was almost as if Niles had predicted what was to follow. Knowing him, he had probably noticed Kana's disappearance early on, but had brushed it off as Kamui had at first. Perhaps guilt had made him nervous and paranoid. Either way, Kamui had never been more grateful for his husband's presence when Silas suddenly burst into their tent, a half hour following their conversation.

"I've been doing this a lot today, Kamui, I'm sorry!" he quickly caught his breath. "But the air patrols have spotted a lone rider coming down the field to our camp. We need orders."

"Let's hurry to the camp entrance," Kamui frowned, grabbing the Alpha Yato and rushing out after Silas without another word. He knew Niles would follow regardless.

"It's strange. It really is all alone," Silas panted out as they rushed, soldiers ducking out of their way when they ran past the many campfires and tents. "Reina is in charge of the overnight air patrol and has already led a squadron of Kinshi Knights to the surrounding areas to make sure there isn't another army heading our way, but so far, we have confirmed that this rider is alone."

"A rogue?" Kamui frowned. "Perhaps it is a trap. It may be carrying dangerous cargo. We cannot let it get into the camp."

"Right!" Soon, they reached the edge of camp facing the battlefield. Indeed, Kamui could see the lone rider coming for them at full speed. It would be upon them in less than a minute.

"Kamui!" His name was called, and the prince looked up to see his little brother on the walls with the rest of the archers keeping watch. The Fujin Yumi was already in his hand, and Takumi looked torn. "What do we do?"

"Take down the horse! Stop its advance!" Kamui yelled out, Takumi repeating the order to his archers before making his way down the wall. Whistling rang out in the night air as the arrows rained upon the intruder, but strangely enough, they bounced off a semi-opaque barrier around him.

"A magical barrier!" Silas cried out in warning, unsheathing his sword and standing in front of Kamui despite what he said next. "Normal weapons won't hurt it!"

"All magic barriers have a seam, where the magic originates. The key to breaking them is to get through the seam," a new voice piped up behind them, and soon enough, the newcomer was in front of them.

"Leo!" Kamui called out in surprise as his little brother raised Brynhildr, and then pointed at the rider. It was dangerously close now.

"Prince Takumi!" Leo called out, disregarding Kamui entirely and instead focusing his magic at his fingertips. The barrier around the rider consolidated into something likening blue glass, and
Kamui only caught on a second too late.

Takumi jumped off the remaining ladder rungs, materializing an arrow for the Fujin Yumi as he fell, and as soon as his feet touched the ground, he fired his arrow.

The arrow went right through the small gap in the magical shield that Leo had indicated, and lodged itself firmly between the rider's eyes. The rider fell off his horse with that sort of momentum, but the invisible animal kept running at them.

"Everyone, jump!" Silas yelled out, tackling Kamui to the side. Takumi did the same for Leo, and they all got out of the rampaging horse's path just before it tore through them, simply running straight into the camp's wooden fence and exploding into a thousand sparkling flakes that rained down upon them.

"Is everyone alright?" Kamui coughed out, helping his best friend off the dusty ground. On the other side, Leo and Takumi had narrowly evaded the dust thanks to Niles, who had caught his lord, and by extension, Takumi, when they'd jumped.

"Wonderful, thanks," Takumi grumbled, pulling away from Leo's hold with an embarrassed blush on his cheeks. "What the hell was that? That was weird!"

"A Vallite rider, sent alone to our camp, with what purpose?" Leo brainstormed out loud, dusting himself off although his retainer had caught them. "Vallite soldiers do not communicate, so it's not as if it was sent to parlay."

"Lord Kamui figured it may be a dangerous package," Niles added to the conversation, not at all offended by Leo's lack of gratitude. He knew him to be grateful without the words being said. "Marvellous job halting its advance, by the way."

"Right!" Takumi crossed his arms proudly. "It's not like I needed to hear all that explanation about magic barriers, but Prince Leo's magic also helped."

"I was only explaining so that you knew what to go for with your arrow. Thank goodness you got it, in any case," Leo huffed indignantly, sporting a blush that was quite similar to Takumi's.

"Look. I'm not saying we worked well together. But that was kind of cool."

"Indeed. It's not that I look forward to it, or anything, but I wouldn't mind cooperating with you again in the future."

"Kamui, what's our next step?" Silas redirected the conversation to the prince who was watching his little brothers banter all too obviously.

"I'll ask Leo and Takumi to investigate the site where the horse, err... exploded. Make sure it did not leave anything behind. Silas, call the Kinshi Knights and ask for a progress report. If anything is coming for us, I want to know immediately. Niles, you and I will go check out the rider," Kamui instructed. "No need to sound the alarm just yet. Just keep me in the loop."

"Right!" With a nod of assent, they all vacated to their delegated tasks, Kamui leading Niles out into the field, where, a few feet away, the driver had flown off his horse. The corpse was emanating magic as it disappeared slowly, and Kamui hoped he'd find something on the rider.

"So what's your gut feeling telling you now?" Niles asked quietly as they approached the corpse, making sure it was dead (Takumi never missed, but they couldn't be too careful) before kneeling next to it to inspect it.
"I don't know," Kamui mumbled, leaving the inspection to Niles' professional looter hands. If anything was to be found on this corpse, he'd find it. "I think... I feel a void."

"A void?" Niles frowned, freezing when his hand grasped a solid object in the rider's jacket. He pulled it out just as Kamui finished his sentence.

"A feeling of impending doom," he sighed out, then looked at Niles' find. "What is it?"

"A letter," Niles handed said letter to him. "To you. There seems to be an object in the casing."

"A letter from the enemy?" Kamui frowned, taking it and inspecting it briefly before ripping the edge off the casing to pull out the letter.

'Exalted Nohrian Traitor Prince Kamui,' it began, and Kamui's fingers tightened on the parchment, almost piercing through at the next words. 'Please kindly accept my gift to you.'

He dropped the parchment, ignoring Niles' worried questions, probably regarding the panic in his expression. He did not need to say anything. Both of them understood what situation they were facing when Kamui overturned the letter casing, and Kana's Dragonstone tumbled into his palm.

"Kamui, darling, I understand that you are worried. If my child was taken from me, I'd slaughter all who stood in my path as well. But you must calm yourself and think about this rationally," Camilla groaned out, watching her little brother pace around his room nervously.

"You're right, Camilla. I just wish... damn it, I just wish I could know where she is, or if she's okay. If she doesn't have her Dragonstone on her..."

"Stop thinking of what could be and focus on what you can do now," Hinoka agreed with her Nohrian counterpart.

"Besides, between all of us, we'll definitely figure out where she's being kept," Takumi encouraged him, peering over Leo's shoulder at the letter that he was reading in the candlelight.

"I hope so..." Kamui rubbed his forehead. "Okay, what is taking Ryoma and Xander so long to get here? I told Silas to tell them this was urgent!"

"Calm yourself, love," Niles prompted, but stepped back when Kamui turned to him, teeth bared.

"Don't tell me to calm down, Niles. This is my daughter, our daughter, our baby girl being held hostage by some cowardly, dishonourable snake of man, who took her Dragonstone away from her, who probably hurt her, who is probably messing with her innocent ten-year old mind, and who is using her for leverage against us! Don't you fucking dare tell me to calm down! Don't you care!?"

"Now, now, Kamui," Xander's voice filtered in, and a moment later, both of his older brothers stepped into the tent. It was quite cramped now, with so many people in there. "I didn't think you had it in you to swear like that. Especially not at your significant other."

"Tell us, Kamui," Ryoma added on, if only slightly amusedly. "Was this urgent summons necessary to help you resolve a domestic?"

"Do not concern yourselves, milords," Niles waved them off cheekily. "My dearest husband enjoys yelling abuse at me. It's consensual."
"Niles, hold your tongue," Leo groaned, raising his eyes from the letter, and instead putting his hand on it. "You are distracting me."

"In all seriousness," Xander immediately sobered, turning to Kamui, who looked a bit embarrassed about his outburst. "We caught a gist of the situation in your, uh... emotional outburst. But clarify it for us. The little princess Kana has been taken?"

"Yes. We received a ransom letter from her captor," Kamui's eyes darkened. "That snake even dared sign his name. I hope he knows that he might as well have signed his death warrant."

"Who is the perpetrator?" Ryoma frowned at such animosity coming from his usually peaceful brother. Then again, he had seen him once more like this before- when they had first retrieved Kana from her Deerealm.

"Iago," Leo answered in disgust, clicking his tongue.

"Iago!?" Xander exclaimed, frowning. "That vile magician is dead! We slayed him!"

"That is the Nohrian mage, correct? I was sure to have seen him slain as well," Hinoka frowned, glancing at Camilla for explanations. She seemed as confused as she was.

"It cannot be anyone else," Leo insisted, raising the letter to Kamui. "This letter is imbued with dark, impure magic. I can feel it on my hands when I touch the parchment. The magic feels tarry underneath my fingertips. No one but Iago could resort to such corrupt magic."

"Then we will put him down like the dishonourable dog he is once and for all," Ryoma decided. "That is why you enlisted our help, is it not, Kamui?"

"Yes." Kamui's voice suddenly lowered, and he looked away. "That, and... I have unfortunate news concerning you two."

"More unfortunate news?" Camilla bemoaned, worried. "Is it another one of Iago's doings?"

"I'm afraid so." Kamui sighed, and handed Xander the letter. The Nohrian Crown Prince held it a bit to the side so that Ryoma could read it simultaneously. "There is a mention of two other hostages, two young men, along with Kana," Kamui began, hating the way their eyes widened minutely as they read the letter. "There is no mention of their names, but I'm afraid... I have reason to believe that they may be Shiro and Siegbert."

He respectfully let the two Crown Princes read the ransom letter and waited for them to put the parchment down to continue. He knew it was a lot to digest.

"Xander... Ryoma..."

"Iago does realize that by kidnapping three royal children, he has essentially declared war on Nohr, Hoshido, and everything in between, right?" Xander interrupted, barely hidden fury reflecting in his eyes.

"I would not have been extremely worried, were it not this Iago character who masterminded their capture," Ryoma added. "This man will use any underhanded method to win, and a man lacking honour and pride is the most dangerous of all. Shiro, Siegbert and Kana are amongst the strongest fighters in this army, but strength will not help them against foul play."

"Those poor children," Camilla bit her tongue. "Now I am oh-so worried for all of their safety... What if he's already hurt our precious little princes and princess? What if..."
"That dastard," Takumi clicked his tongue to interrupt her dark train of thought. "I'll put an arrow in each of his eyes for what he's done!"

"Hold, Prince Takumi," Leo warily halted his angry ranting. "There may be good news yet."

"Praytell, Leo. What have you deduced?" Xander turned to him, hopeful that his smart little brother had found something that they hadn't.

"From the way Iago wrote the letter, it doesn't seem to me that he knows the true identity of Shiro and Siegbert. He repeatedly calls Kana his 'little princess' -" Kamui's breath audibly hitched. They all pretended not to notice Niles gently squeezing his hand in comfort "-but there is no mention of Shiro's and Siegbert's names, much less their titles. I... I don't think he is aware that he had captured the sons of the two most powerful men on the continent."

"That could mean that they are relatively safe and locked away, and that Iago does not care much for them," Hinoka hopefully provided.

"But it could also mean that Iago has disposed of them already, if they have no value to him," Takumi remarked before realizing that his remark was insensitive. "I-I mean, if he wrote about them in the letter, he mustn't have, but-"

"We must face the realities, no matter how painful," Ryoma interrupted, his face crisped in anger, and dare they all mentally note it, fear.

Xander silently reflected his expression, glancing at his Hoshidan counterpart for cues of how to proceed, and in that moment, the tent filled with some of the strongest warriors in the country indulged in the very human emotion of terror. They all remained silent.

"Damn it," Takumi began yet again, talkative when he was frustrated. "If only we knew where they were being held. I'd charge in headfirst and slay that dastard without warning."

"There is no clue in the letter as to where they are," Leo answered his silent question. "But if they were taken this morning, it has been twelve hours since their disappearance. The letter must have taken a while to arrive, and must have been written much beforehand. It's very vague, but we at least can deduce that they are not too far away. They're on this Vallite island, at the very least, for travelling between islands is quite the task and would take more than twelve hours."

"Then if this is a ransom letter without a location, how are we to deliver the ransom, if we even were to cooperate with Iago's distasteful scheme?" Camilla asked, a pertinent question.

"No need for a location," Kamui answered quietly. They all turned to face the storm in his eyes. "The ransom is my blood on the Yato. He promises to return his hostages if I stab myself on my sword."

"Kamui..." Hinoka gasped.

"I will not do it," Kamui bit his lip. "As... as strange as it is for me to say this... I don't... trust Iago to return Kana regardless of what I do."

"Good," Xander nodded curtly. "Trust all the suspicious little servant boys you like, Kamui, but do not trust that snake Iago. You've seen yourself what treachery he is capable of."

"I will not risk leaving my daughter in his slimy hands," Kamui agreed. "Nor will I leave my nephews, Shiro and Siegbert, to suffer at his hands. I will bring all of them back. We will bring them back."
"Aye," Ryoma agreed, his voice tight. It was obvious that he was worried for the wellbeing of the children in captivity.

"Well, if he's keeping tabs on Kamui to make sure he's stabbed himself, then that means he can't be far, right?" Takumi remarked.

"Correct. I'd wager a few hours' ride from our location at best," Leo agreed.

"If only we could pinpoint them somehow," Camilla mused out loud. "Or even just get some news of them. Just to make sure they're still alive, at the very least. Just a sign of life is enough."

They all lapsed into silence, all lost in their own thoughts, trying to figure out how to get to the children as soon as possible. None of them spoke, until Leo moved. Almost simultaneously, Niles made a move for the exit.

"Niles?" Kamui asked curiously, watching him leave. "Where are you going so suddenly?"

"Milord Leo and I have had a shared thought all so suddenly," he teased. "I am fetching the people he would have requested of me if you had given him a chance to speak."

He disappeared through the crack in the tent flap whilst everyone turned to Leo to look at him incredulously. He didn't seem impressed, however.

"I don't know how he does it either," he shrugged like it was nothing. "I've gotten used to it, despite not understanding it, especially since I've yet to crack the secret to telepathy."

"And even then, the last person you'd want to link your thoughts with would be Niles," Camilla muttered, blushing lightly at the memory, perhaps, of a conversation they'd had previously. Niles was known to make sexual innuendos at anything that breathed, after all.

The joke was like a breath of fresh air, and they all relaxed a bit. Knowing that Leo had a plan was extremely comforting for the parents whose children were being held captive by the Nohrian mage. For their worried aunts and uncles, too.

Soon enough, Niles returned, entering the tent alone.

"I've brought them. You might want to prepare yourselves," he warned amusedly, going to rejoin Kamui behind the table.

"If you're not used to it like I am, there's no use preparing yourself," Leo argued, and before they could all even begin to wonder what that meant, the tent flap burst open.

"Behold!" A loud voice boomed, and someone groaned in exasperation. It might've been Takumi. "The chosen hero arrives!"

"Behold!" a higher voice repeated behind Odin, who moved to give way to his adorable, adorably loud daughter, Ophelia. She greeted them cheerily, swiping her pointy witch's hat down to pay respects to the royals gathered in the tent. "The chosen heroine arrives!"

"Milord Leo, my fellow retainer informs us at this silent hour that you have need of services that only my cursed bloodline may provide!" Odin bowed to his lord, Ophelia following suit politely.

"Odin, Ophelia, we have a situation on your hands that requires your expertise of magic. Asides from myself, you two are the strongest mages in this camp, and so I would enlist your help," Leo explained briefly.
"Milord!" Ophelia gasped, genuinely thrown aback by the generous compliment. "You speak a generous tongue! I, Ophelia Dusk, pledge myself to your noble cause once again as my father has done before me, and swear to use my power as a chosen one in your exalted name!"

"Did she just say all that to agree to help?" Hinoka whispered to Kamui, who just laughed sheepishly and shrugged.

"Father and daughter are the same, I guess. That's the chosen pair for you," he quipped.

"Now, we beseech Milord to inform us of the dire circumstances in which our astral power is required," Odin redirected the conversation. "Not to discredit our status as chosen ones, but, uhh... Milord Leo is well-known to be one of the strongest mages in Nohr. What can we humble servants accomplish in your glory?"

"You are familiar with the vile Nohrian mage Iago, correct?" Xander stepped in to take control of the discussion. A nod from both mages let him continue. Of course they would know. All Nohrian mages knew of Iago, the honourless royal magician whom they used as a reference for failure during their training. "Long story short, he has kidnapped Shiro, Siegbert, and Kana, and we require your assistance in locating them so that we may retrieve them."

"What!?" Ophelia screeched, obviously aware of the implications of the situation.

"Ophelia, behave!" Odin warned, though he seemed troubled as well. "As chosen ones, we must remain immovable as pillars! Not only Milord Leo, but also Milord Xander, Milord Ryoma, and Milord Kamui are relying on our mastery of the shadows to ensure the safety of their offspring. This is a grand challenge that we must honour in the name of our lords."

"Understood! Forgive my moment of weakness. I have much to learn before reaching your level of level-headed wisdom," Ophelia turned to face Leo. "Milord! Tell me what I must accomplish, and consider it done!"

"Ophelia, you at least recognize that you are the strongest witch amongst our army," Leo stated, not as much of a compliment as it was a fact. The red on Ophelia's cheeks said otherwise, though. And Odin, well... he finally seemed to be reading the atmosphere and was barely holding himself back from yelling his pride in his daughter across the rooftops. Tent tops. Across the camp. Whichever.

"I have indeed begun studying the legendary tome Excalibur, if that is what you mean, Milord," she admitted in a bizarre show of shyness.

"I also mean that you have proven your aptitude time and time again on the battlefield by warping to the side of our allies to lend your aid. Your skill in teleporting yourself across space and time is unrivalled in this camp, Ophelia. As witch's training is inaccessible to sorcerers such as your father and I, you are the only one who may complete the task at hand," Leo explained.

"I get it!" Ryoma exclaimed. "You would have Ophelia locate Shiro, Siegbert and Kana, and warp to their location to check on them?"

"Exactly." Leo turned to his retainer and his daughter, who seemed deep in thought. "Ophelia. Do you think you can do it?"

"Milord," Odin stepped in a bit more quietly. "Truth is... Ophelia is exhausted from today's battle. She was wounded and the healers only just finished patching her up. I do not mean to be confrontational, Milord, really, but..."

"You are concerned for her wellbeing," Leo concluded, if only with a smidgen of disappointment.
"Understandable."

"I mean all due respect," Odin muttered, all bravado fallen away. Ophelia was glancing between him and Leo, and now that Odin mentioned it, without her theatrics in play, she did seem a bit paler than usual. Her dress had a tear in the side that had been hurriedly sewn together, if only to preserve her modesty.

"So you're saying that we have an answer at our fingertips, but that it has slipped away from us again," Xander clicked his tongue. "Damn it all."

"Milord," Odin blanched, instinctively stepping in front of his silent daughter. "There is nothing more than we, as carriers of fell blood, would like than to assist you. But Ophelia is only human-"

"We understand," Ryoma interrupted him, tiredly rubbing his forehead. Leo just seemed apologetic for giving them false hope. "Odin, correct?" The Nohrian mage nodded a bit cautiously. "We are not disappointed at you, nor your daughter. Just the circumstances. It's frustrating, to say the least. Like you are looking out for your child, we are simply looking for a way to look out for ours."

"We can always try tomorrow" Camilla weakly suggested.

"It might be too late tomorrow," Kamui grimly commented.

"It will be better than nothing," Niles fiercely bit out, breaking his silence to glare at his husband, as if reprimanding him for giving up.

"Odin," Leo called him, deciding for all of them. "Thank you for presenting yourselves. Have Ophelia rest and we will try tomorrow. If there is nothing else, you may go."

"Milord!" Suddenly, Ophelia was stepping forward again. "I wish to attempt it!"

"Ophelia!" Odin jerked, surprised by his daughter's insistence. "Are you certain?"

"I will not bring shame upon Milord's name!" she insisted. "Milord Leo, you have graced me with your kind-hearted praise, and the title of 'strongest witch amongst our army' is a badge of honour that my mind refuses to surrender. I cannot take such words so greedily from you and offer nothing in return!"

"Ophelia, we established that we would try again tomorrow. You don't owe me anything," Leo rolled his eyes, although she took a step forward towards him, startling him with her intensity. She held out her hand to Leo.

"Ophelia, stay your fell hand!" Odin warned her. "Do not force yourself upon our lord!"

"Milord Leo!" she continued, bravely for someone her age. "I care greatly for Prince Shiro, Prince Siegbert, and the little Dragon Princess Kana! Please allow me to assist you in assisting them. Nothing would bring me more honour than to complete this mission."

"Are you certain, child?" Xander frowned, not outright rejecting her but also unsure, seeing how hesitant Odin seemed to be. "Your father knows best for you and seems to hesitate."

"Milord, my will is unshakeable. I will attempt the warp tonight, or my name shall cease to be Ophelia Dusk, the chosen heroine," Ophelia assured. "But in order to accomplish such a feat, I will require much magic, much more than I currently hold within my cursed body. If it is not overstepping my boundaries, Milord..." she glanced at Leo expectantly, hopefully.
Leo observed her for another moment, and then cracked a small smile.

"Not at all," he shrugged, taking her hand and rising from his seat. "I suppose we should ask your father to join us as well."

"Of course!" she giddily held her other hand out to Odin, who seemed to feel a mix of undiluted pride and worry for his daughter. He took her hand regardless, returning her bright smile. "Now that the chosen hero, the chosen heroine, and the greatest mage in Nohr have assembled."

"That's kind of pushing it."

"Kindly shut up, Prince Takumi."

"-We shall save the missing princes and princess!" Ophelia concluded, gripping her fellow mages' hands tightly. "Now, I will begin by attempting to seek out their life force. If they remain far from camp, it may take a time, but I will accomplish it dutifully!"

"Best of luck," Niles wished her, if only a bit sarcastically, and Ophelia began.

She closed her eyes, and the runes for the warping spell appeared underneath her feet. Her hands clenched tighter on her companions', and both Leo and Odin let out a low grunt when their magic power began to flow in through Ophelia to fuel her powerful spell.

On the battlefield, Kamui knew her to use this spell like her bread and butter. But then again, it probably did not require so much magic, nor concentration, to warp a few dozen feet at a time. They were now asking her to warp across several hours of horse ride, to gods-knew-where. Understandably, she would take a while.

A minute passed. Two. The silence began to become pressuring. Ryoma began to fidget. Xander glanced at the tent tarp as if he expected their children to just waltz in and proclaim that they'd played a practical joke. Five, six minutes. Ophelia's face was still focused, the runes still present under her.

Kamui's exhaustion began to catch up with him, so he leaned onto the table. In a moment of intimacy, and comfort, Niles took his hands in his and intertwined their fingers, leaning their foreheads together.

"I'm sorry for earlier," the prince whispered. "I was unnecessarily cruel to you."

"I'm used to unnecessary cruelty, love. It doesn't matter. I know you are stressed," Niles quipped in that usual dark manner of his. "Would you like to take more of your stress out on me?"

"Please don't say things like that right now, Niles," Kamui murmured. "Just hold me."

And Niles did. He held the prince to his chest, ignoring the looks he got from the other royals in the tent. Their marriage had been settled, swallowed, and digested by all a while back, but he knew, deep inside, that the royal families would always resent him for being the filth to steal their beloved brother's heart.

He didn't blame them. He resented himself as well for loving Kamui, too, sometimes. But only sometimes. And the rest of the time, like now, he couldn't bring himself to regret any of the choices that had led him here.

Finally, a whole fifteen minutes after Ophelia began her spell, she finally let out a small gasp. It dragged all the somnolent gazes back to her, all eyes now devoid of tiredness as they watched her face crisp into a strained expression.
"Ah," she called out softly, as if trying to communicate something, and her grip on Leo's and Odin's hands became strong enough to cut their circulation.

"Ophelia?" Kamui called out cautiously, separating from Niles to approach her.

No answer. Her face twisted into something like pain, and alarm rang through Kamui's system. She did not look well anymore, quickly losing all colour as if she was bleeding out.

She let go of Leo and Odin, paling even further. The two other mages immediately regained consciousness again upon release, and stumbled. Niles had caught Leo immediately and had lowered the exhausted prince gently to the ground for Camilla to fuss over. Odin had caught himself on the table and was catching his breath, watching his daughter disappear slowly.

Ophelia had become translucent when suddenly, the runes under her feet disappeared. At that exact moment, Kamui's hopes flew out of the holes in the tent. He knew she had failed, even before she regained all her colour, and crumpled bonelessly to the ground. Odin caught her, but she was dead weight, and his own weak legs dragged both of them to the ground.

"OPHELIA!" he cried out, touching her face. "Daughter, wake up! Talk to me!"

"She lives," Xander announced, surprising everyone by kneeling next to the witch and putting a hand on her throat. Odin looked up at him in shock, as if wondering why a man of his stature would kneel for them, and Xander must have understood the silent question for he nodded at him with utmost respect. "Your daughter put herself in harm's way for the sake of my son. I thank you for your sacrifice and regret that it did not yield more favourable results."

"Thank you, Milord," Odin murmured tiredly, glancing back down at his unconscious daughter and caressing her pale cheeks lovingly.

"Niles, run and fetch Elise!" Kamui ordered in mild panic. With three of their children missing, they couldn't lose another now.

Niles moved to exit the tent yet again, but a rousing whimper from Ophelia stopped him. They all crowded around the young woman as she woke, except Camilla, who was nursing an exhausted Leo at the desk. She opened her eyes slowly, and glanced up in the worried eyes of her father first. She stared in silence for a second before averting her gaze.

"I failed," her voice shook with disappointment, and Odin immediately crushed her to his chest.

"Daughter, no. You did all you could. You performed admirably in your condition," he comforted her.

"But I found their life energy. After scouring the entire island with my magic, my fair finger of fate pointed me to their souls like a compass leading me home... I had found them... I was so close..."

"Oh, Ophelia," Odin rocked her softly, letting her sniffle and smother a few tears into his shoulder. "You are not to blame."

"Ophelia," Ryoma called her, and Odin supported her as she turned to glance tiredly at him, tears still brimming in her eyes. "You are indeed worthy of the title of strongest witch in the camp. You performed well. I am grateful for your service."

"I am unworthy of your gratitude," she insisted. "If only... just a little more..."
"You say you found their life energy?" Xander interrupted, letting her nod before continuing. "Can you give us a location? We can take it from here."

"I apologize," she shook her head. "My warping spell allows me to teleport to the side of an ally, not to a specific location. I cannot tell where they are. Only that they are."

"Then for now, that is enough. Knowing that they live is enough," Xander choked out, although his eyes told a whole other story. If he could, he would probably be razing down the entire country in search of his son right now. But his hands were tied.

"Then I can tell you that their light burns bright," Ophelia offered softly. "Shiro, Siegbert, and Kana. Their soul remains anchored to their body. It took a while to find them, but once I did, there was no mistaking it." She breathed deeply to regain some spirits. "They are hurt, and they are scared. But they are hopeful, collected, and very much alive. It doesn't seem like they're likely to fall at the hands of this unholy sorcerer anytime soon."

"Then I am indebted to you, Ophelia," Xander spoke to her kindly, letting shine a side of him that not many people had seen. "Perhaps as the Crown Prince of Nohr, but mostly as the father of the child you've found."

"And I the same," Ryoma added. "Your talent in magic is admirable. You have my respect."

"Thank you for pushing yourself so hard for us, Ophelia," Kamui added, only feeling right to add. She had confirmed, after all, that Kana was alive and still kicking and scratching any who dared hurt her. "You truly are a chosen one."

"W-What light is this?" Ophelia stammered, new tears rolling down her cheeks. "Milords... If I were to die tonight, I would die a blissful woman. I see life in the light thanks to your kind words. I wish to repay you."

"Ophelia, you don't-"

"Tomorrow," she insisted firmly. "Give me the morning to rest and gather my astral energy back into this mortal prison of mine. Once I have contained all I can, I will return here, and attempt the warp once more. Now that I have located them, I will expend less energy in warping. Give me until midday."

"Thank you, Ophelia," Ryoma accepted. "Ask whatever you need of the camp servants tonight and rest well. I will send Sakura to check on you personally in your tent soon."

"I will not let you down in the morn," Ophelia promised a bit breathily, obviously losing it again. Odin took this as his cue to help his daughter up to her unsteady feet and looped an arm around her thin waist to help her walk.

"We extend apologies to Milord Leo for dragging him into this," Odin glanced at his lord, watching them silently, exhaustedly, from where he sat by the desk. "Have a restful night, Milords and Ladies."

They both bowed despite their weakened condition, mostly out of habit, and then left the tent in a slow gait, Odin clearly whispering proud praise to his somnolent daughter as they walked.

That left the royals in the tent to muse over their next step.

"Well, they're an eccentric pair, but they sure are powerful," Kamui conceded.

"Indeed." Ryoma yawned. "Now. It seems I've hit my mortal limits as well. I believe I will retire.
If tomorrow we strike upon the miscreant who stole our sons and daughter away, we will need all our strength."

"Agreed. For the snake he is, he can handle himself with a tome," Xander admitted bitterly. "I shall do the same, then."

"I will accompany Leo to his chambers," Camilla helped her little brother up. "The spell has exhausted him as well."

"I will go check on Sakura and Princess Elise and make sure they are not overworking themselves in the infirmary," Hinoka volunteered.

"Have a good night, all of you," Kamui wished them, staying behind with Niles.

Just as Ryoma was about to throw the tent flap open, it was opened, and Nina stepped in.

"Father!" she called before shrinking away from the literal horde of royalty massed at the entrance. "Ah! Forgive me, Milords and Ladies," she apologized, still unsure where she stood in relation to them. Though she was Kamui's daughter, her blood was not royalty, so she was not sure how to behave around the royals.

"No bother, Nina," Ryoma smiled softly at her regardless, stepping back to let her in. She entered with an awkward bow, and jogged to her fathers.

"Father! Dad! Has something happened?" she asked worriedly. "I saw Ophelia limping away and I feared the worst! Tell me you are unharmed!"

"Nina..." Kamui smiled at her, a strange sadness overcoming him. What he wouldn't give to have Kana safe in his arms right now. "O, sweet daughter of mine. We are alright. I will explain later."

And he dragged her into a tender hug, missing the way she fit into his arms. Missing the way Kana would hug his waist. Worry would keep him awake at night, but at least he was privileged. Ryoma and Xander had only one child each, but Kamui could find solace in the knowledge that his eldest daughter was still safe regardless of all else.

"Father?" she questioned in confusion, doubly so when Niles also held her and Kamui together, as if to keep them from falling apart.

"We love you, Nina," Niles simply offered as an explanation, and despite her usual combative nature, she did not struggle in their embrace, although she did not return the words to them. They already knew, though.

In the front of the tent, the flap was finally closed, and they were left to finish their moment as a family alone.

When Shiro woke, it was to the feeling of sandpaper in his mouth. When he rolled his tongue, he realized that it was simply the dryness of his mouth that felt so unpleasant. He figured he could kill for a glass of water right about now. Preferably one of the guards, actually. With his favourite silver naginata, if at all possible.

Next to him, Siegbert roused to his movements, unsurprisingly a light sleeper, especially in their circumstances. And yet, due to exhaustion and his body mending its wounds, he did take a while to actually rise into a sitting position, pale and haggard-looking.
"Good morning, friend," Shiro wished him, if only half-sarcastically. "Sleep has done you well, I hope."

"I am wonderful this morning, as you can tell," Siegbert returned just as mockingly, letting his more playful side show under the circumstances.

"What of our fair lady?" Shiro motioned to the other cell, where Kana slept with her back to them.

"She seems well," Siegbert winced at his choice of words. "Well... as well as she can be in this position. She woke last night and we spoke. She was simply exhausted from fighting the dragon, but she was unhurt."

"That's a relief," Shiro agreed. "Now. Let's consider our plan for the day."

"Surely Iago has already sent Kana's Dragonstone to camp, and our parents must have retaliated somehow. We will probably meet with the fiend soon so he may gloat about his supposed victory to us," Siegbert predicted. "We must use whatever opportunity we may find to inquire about our location. Once we know where we are, we can orchestrate an escape more efficiently."

"Well thought," Shiro acquiesced. "I was also considering another thing, quite important indeed."

"Have I forgotten something?"

"Yeah." Shiro's stomach growled, as if on cue. "Breakfast."

Siegbert laughed softly at that, and Shiro couldn't help but join in. Siegbert's mirth was contagious, especially in their circumstances, where any joy they could feel was infectious. Most relieving than all was the fact that they both could still laugh, and they comforted one another with the smiles they shared.

"Sorry to interrupt," a small voice piped in, and they both turned to look at Kana, who seemed to have woken to the sound of their laughter. Her face held a glow to it, if only because she had caught their contagious peace as well. They turned to greet her just as she sat up and stretched. "I need to pee."

"Right," Shiro snickered at her decidedly un-royalty-like vocabulary. "Breakfast and a chamber pot. Now that sounds like a plan."

Although their plan had to wait a little. The guards only came for them a while after they woke, although this time, they all complied, knowing they had to get out of their cell to gather information about their whereabouts. If only the guards spoke, they would've questioned them as well, but Iago would unfortunately have to do in this situation.

They were led yet again to Iago's chambers, where, like the evening before, they were made to stand before the mage. Although this time, it was much harder to do, considering that the smell of fresh bread hit their noses before they even entered the room. They had never been tested like this before.

"I'm not sure if I'm gonna get sick or if I'm starving," Kana whined lowly as they were escorted up to where Iago sat, indeed breaking fast on bread and cheese.

"Good morning to you all. I trust your accommodations were to your liking overnight," he greeted them without even looking at them, although he did laugh at his own quip. He was the only one.

"Could've appreciated an extra blanket, but we do what we can in these hard times, right?" Shiro threw back, refusing to give the man the victory of silence.
"Do not abuse my hospitality," Iago warned amusedly, decidedly in a good mood this morning. It probably bode well for them.

They stood in silence for another while, simply made to watch Iago eat in silence and read his tome, occasionally flipping a page or wiping his hands on his handkerchief.

Finally, an unusual voice was the one that broke the silence. That of Kana's stomach.

Her tummy gurgled loudly, and she squeaked, winding her arms around her midsection as if to quell the embarrassing sounds.

"S-Sorry!" she apologized, mostly to her cousins, who only stifled their indulgent laughter.

"Kana dearest," Iago cooed with false concern. "If you were hungry, you needed but ask." He stood, and Kana took a step back instinctively. "Let me attend to you. What on this table do you desire?"

"Does this offer extend to my companions?" Kana replied diplomatically, seeing the exact moment when annoyance crossed Iago's face. Better not antagonize him and get what she wanted, she figured.

"If it pleases you, my pet," he spat out the condescending nickname, and Shiro's fingers itched to just stab him with one of the forks on the table.

"Then I would request water," she decided, smart enough to set her priorities straight.

"Of course. You haven't eaten or drank anything since yesterday morning, have you, children?" Iago mocked, grabbing a sweating carafe of cold water off the table and going for them. He grabbed a wine glass from the table and poured Kana a glass, bowing with a mocking grin to offer it to her.

She threw him a suspicious glance, but accepted the glass, downing the water greedily. The freezing water burned her dry throat, but she appreciated it regardless.

She handed him the empty glass, figuring he would reuse it, but should have known better. In retrospect, she should have expected anything but Iago's kindness towards her companions.

The mage tossed it away carelessly, the glass shattering into a thousand pieces upon contact with the ground, and before they had time to process the move, Iago had tilted the carafe over Siegbert's head.

The Nohrian prince yelped lightly at the contact of freezing water on his head, then winced in pain as it burned the laceration on his scalp. And yet, it felt somehow good to clean some of the dried blood and dirt off of him. He let the water run a little more before swallowing his pride and tilting his head up to catch some of the water into his mouth.

"Beautiful," Iago commended softly, somehow making Siegbert's skin crawl. He looked away when Iago moved to Shiro, who expected being doused in freezing water as well.

He let some of the water run through his matted hair as Siegbert had done and then drank greedily from the offered water, knowing not to expect anything similar until much later.

Before Iago had a chance to draw away, Shiro shook his hair out as a dog would, enjoying the mage's face of disgust when the dirty water splashed onto his robes.

"You're about to say something incredibly stupid, Shiro, hold your tongue-" Siegbert began in a
single whispered breath, but Shiro disregarded him by laughing right in Iago's face.

"I did not expect bathing to be included in your offer. Thank you for your service, mage," he provoked, thoroughly enjoying the rage in Iago's eyes.

"Filthy mongrel," he sneered, but even the kick he delivered to Shiro's ribs could not deter him from smiling, proud of himself. "If it did not upset my pet so, I would have offed you a long time ago. Your life is a bargaining chip for her compliance. You are nothing. Expendable." He spat in Shiro's face, the prince wincing, as he had not expected that. "Do. Not. Test. Me."

"Or what?" Shiro played with dangerous words, his eyes calculating underneath the goofy expression. "You will throw my body out in the empty fields beyond this fortress? Perhaps left in the forest for carnivores to tear apart? Would you drown me in a lake nearby?"

"I think you'd enjoy the drop of the ravine nearby, actually," Iago replied, now looking dangerously angry. "The waterfall is only slight, and you would meet your inevitable end broken upon the rocks at the bottom. It is only a shame that I will be unable to hear the crunch of your shattered bones. Or will I?" He turned to return to the table. "I am tempted to find out, in actuality. If you die, I have your companion's life still to hold over my dearest Kana's head."

"That won't be necessary," Siegbert immediately stepped in with his soothing, diplomatic words. "You must be clement with him, mage. He is a bit of a simpleton."

"Hey!"

"Definitely a simpleton," Kana hummed in agreement. "Forgive him."

"For you, I will, darling." Iago shrugged, not really caring at this point. He sat back down and grabbed his tome to leaf through it. "Now. Any other requests for me?"

"Chamber pot," Kana mumbled, shifting her weight from one foot to another. "I really need to go."

"The guards will see to it," Iago rolled his eyes, bored.

"Then why did you summon us here, if there is nothing specific?" Kana asked.

"I simply wished to extend my hospitality to you. I did not expect such rudeness, I admit." A slight grin cracked his face at that. "Although perhaps it is also to inform you that the traitor prince had received your pendant and that I guarantee you that he is lost now. He wants to save you, but I gave him no hints. I can only imagine the sweet suffering etched on his face as he comes to terms with the fact that he must abide by my terms of the trade to ensure your release..."

"What terms would those be...?" Kana inquired carefully.

"Death." Iago's grin widened. "At his own hands. Only then will I return you to your remaining friends and family."

"Monster!" she gasped out, affronted. "My Papa would never stoop so low! He will never comply with your terms!"

"He will, pet," Iago nodded self-assuredly. "I am already planning my next gift to him if he doesn't. I planned to send him one of your pretty little eyes, but it might be damaged during the delivery. How would you feel about a few fingers?"

Kana did not reply, the twist of her lips conveying all the disgust, and perhaps fear, that she felt at
the thought of the threat.

"Ah, your silence tells me that our meeting is over," Iago shrugged. "Then I will let you return to your chambers until we next meet."

"And when would that be?" Kana asked, her voice only shaking slightly.

"Perhaps tonight. I might have you for dinner. Yes, why not," Iago spoke mostly to himself now. "I will organize for entertainment. It will be a joyous occasion indeed."

"Then we request leave until then," Kana interrupted his musings.

"As you wish," Iago dismissed them with a wave of his hand. The guards gripped them with their arms again to lead them out. "Ah, before you go. I wouldn't want to turn a blind eye to your needs," Iago hummed, grabbing a half eaten loaf of bread off the table, and tossing it blindly in their general direction. It landed and rolled to about a foot in front of Kana. She was taken aback by the gesture, but also looked uncharacteristically angry.

Shiro and Siegbert saw her hesitate, and then were surprised to see her turn around.

"Take me back to my cell," she demanded of the Vallite puppet escorting her, already striding out on her own without looking back. Shiro and Siegbert were tugged to their feet hastily to follow, and could not help but notice a certain regal quality to Kana's walk, even in captivity.

They could not help but feel that she would be her father's pride and joy if he knew how she behaved as a political prisoner. She was growing up quickly.

Regrettably, too quickly.

They all found themselves back in their cells to muse upon their encounter later on, and plan an escape.

"So thanks to Shiro's reckless taunting, we now have an idea of what sort of place we're in," Siegbert summarized. "But we also know that in our escape, we will be limited on one side by this ravine Iago mentioned. We will have to gather more information before making a break for it. And preferably free ourselves of these offensive shackles." He rattled his wrists, which were still chained behind his back.

"One thing at a time," Shiro insisted. "First, we need to figure out what to do with the information about our location. We should try and think of a way to communicate it outside these walls."

It felt like he needed just ask. A moment later, all so suddenly, the air thickened with magic.

"What is this feeling?" Siegbert grunted, feeling choked. The very fabric of space around them seemed to become molasses for a moment. "Is this Iago's doing?!"

And then, his answer came in a moment. The air lightened again. There was the sound of a chime, and suddenly, Ophelia Dusk was stumbling out of thin air, onto the ground.

"Oof!" she grunted, catching herself clumsily on her hands and knees, and then sighing out in relief. "Oh, my. I could possibly have ameliorated my landing on that one."

"OPHELIA!?" Shiro and Siegbert exclaimed at once, glancing at one another as if to make sure they weren't hallucinating. Kana's joyful echo of the name from the other cell confirmed that what they were seeing was real.
Ophelia was actually in their cell with them.

"Companions!" the eccentric girl gasped out, getting up and facing the flabbergasted princes. Her face erupted into a wide grin. "I have done it!"

"Done what?" Siegbert asked in utter confusion, watching her twirl around in unabashed triumph.

"Warped across the country to find myself by your side, of course!" she replied in a hum. "Yes, I can see it in my mind's eye already... Ophelia Dusk, the chosen heroine and strongest witch in Nohr... nay! The world! As a daughter of darkness, that is the state of, err... chosen-ness that I must achieve!" She giggled, clasping her hands together excitedly. "Oh, my father will be so proud of me!"

"Umm... 'Phelia?" Shiro raised an eyebrow at her antics. "Not that we're ungrateful to see you, but.. what are you doing here? It's not safe."

"That is precisely why I have materialized at your side," she explained. "Your fathers have chosen me to be the messenger of the heavens and to carry information to and fro your unknown location. That, and to ensure with my very own eyes your wellbeing." She glanced at Siegbert, shirt and hair soaked with the blood that had run off his wound, with doubts shining in her eyes. "I must admit not to known how to report to them satisfactorily on that end. Not to slight you, but you all look terrible."

She eyed the chains around their bound wrists and clicked her tongue, reaching out to pinch a chain link between her fingers for both of them.

"These are unsightly. Let me relieve you of them," she offered, and the chains easily snapped where she held them.

"Thank you, Ophelia!" Siegbert exclaimed, groaning as he rolled his shoulders. His hands had been tied behind his back for too long. It was regrettable that she couldn't remove the cuffs themselves, but unbinding them had already done them a huge favour.

"Now you look slightly less defeated," she acknowledged their thanks proudly.

"You're as pretty as ever, though, Ophelia!" Kana pouted. "I'm always so jealous of you!"

"Alas, 'tis a curse that the chosen ones carry upon their shoulders, along with all the other curses we bear," Ophelia turned to her. "Ah, but you are so very far, Princess. Let me bring you closer."

This time, the warp did not twist the spacetime around the princes too noticeably. Ophelia was gone in a second, a chiming sound announcing her arrival at Kana's side, and another chiming sound announced her return to their cell, with Kana in tow.

"Ophelia!" Kana crowed in amazement. "Was that a warp!? That was so cool! You're so cool!"

She threw her arms around the girl's waist excitedly.

"'Phelia," Shiro let out the breath he was holding in amazement. "Can you warp Kana out of here?"

"Ah, but you have unfortunately discovered my only weakness," Ophelia patted Kana's loose hair softly, and then drew her away. "The warp to get here took tremendous amounts of magic. There is no way I could attempt it with anything more than the clothes on my back." She suddenly fell deep in contemplation. "Although I admit that perhaps if I bare myself, I can bring back a weapon..."
"Ophelia, that will be unnecessary!" Siegbert coughed in embarrassment. "Soleil has rubbed off on you too much, I fear."

"Nonsense!" Ophelia grinned at them. "Now! To business!"

"Do you have orders for us?" Siegbert perked up.

"Ah, how bothersome," she pursed her lips. "We were mostly hoping you had orders for us. We have no idea what your location is, so our hands are tied."

"But you're here now," Kana remarked, uncomprehending.

"I followed your life force, not your location. I materialized at your side specifically, but I do not know where we are," the witch shrugged. "I was hoping you'd be able to inform me so I may relay this sacred knowledge to your fathers."

"So they are concerned with our disappearance," Shiro huffed, surprising himself, even, with the incredulity.

"Of course!" Ophelia looked affronted. "They are so very concerned that they looked like they barely rested last night."

"Did they...?"

"They did not verbalize those golden thoughts," Ophelia completed the silent question, her eyes softening. "But you must know better than I that they feel those honey-sweet emotions for you at all times. They are your fathers, no matter what. And they want to retrieve you without further ado."

"Then we will rely on their help," Siegbert agreed. "You must thank them on our behalf, and... apologize... for being burdensome."

"With all due respect, young lord, I doubt they see you as a burden," Ophelia disagreed.

"Yeah, Siegbert! Especially since we were the ones to take out the enemy general!" Kana insisted. "Ophelia, the battle is over, I hope. That's the only comfort we could have in here."

"It is indeed. I never would have guessed that you were the heroes of this fight," Ophelia cocked her head, genuinely impressed. "When I tell your fathers, they will be proud of you. If not a bit infuriated for enterprising such a dangerous mission by yourselves."

"Save us the lecture, 'Phelia," Shiro groaned. "I can feel the headache already from when my father will lay it on me."

"I wager you look forward to it," she chuckled.

"More than anything."

"Then you should report our location at once, Ophelia. The sooner they come, the better," Siegbert rerouted their conversation. "Iago will not be so clement much longer, I feel."

"Then I am all ears, Milord," Ophelia nodded seriously, turning to her prince to receive his report. They told her all the hints they had gathered about their location, which, they realized worriedly, was not much. Just a general direction, and perhaps a notable landmark.

Ophelia seemed satisfied with it nonetheless, recording all their words in her memory. In return,
she told them of their overwhelming victory on the battlefield, telling in the style of ancient epics how Kamui coordinated the strategic swoop that crowned them victors, and how their assassination of the general was the catalyst to their triumph. Her talented story-telling entertained them for at least half an hour, and it felt good to speak with her so carelessly now. Freedom felt like such a luxury. They would never again take it for granted.

"You should return," Shiro finally mumbled, not wanting to let her go, but knowing she had to return to their families to report her findings.

"Truthfully I must. And I was ready to complete my mission without hesitation." Her face fell. "But seeing you safe and sound... I have been conquered by a certain hiraeth. I feel that if I close my eyes too long, I will lose you... And I am reluctant to leave your side."

"Ophelia, you must go however. We are counting on you to lead our fathers to us," Siegbert encouraged her, a sad smile on his face as well. "You have brought us much comfort. The thought of our families will keep us strong in captivity. Now go. Fulfil your duty."

"Then I will return further on in the day," Ophelia decided. "Perhaps as dusk masks my presence, I will return for you."

"Be careful," Kana simply wished her, standing as she stood. The boys followed them up. Kana did not hold back, tightly hugging Ophelia's waist. "Thank you."

"Fear not, little princess," she murmured, petting her hair softly. "Captivity is not your wretched fate. We will free you."

"Godspeed, Ophelia," Siegbert wished her, standing stiff. Ophelia looked at him up and down, and her eyes softened.

"Permit me, Milord," she smiled at him, and hugged him too, pressing him close to her. He was still damp, but Ophelia held him to impart to him the comfort of a warm body. He did not pull away until she did.

"Do I get one?" Shiro snickered, bear-hugging Ophelia when she turned to embrace him goodbye as well. "You're awesome, 'Phelia."

"If I am as stellar as you claim, how is it that you mistake the pronunciation of my sacred name?" she teased, flicking him away from her.

"Cause I like hearing you get worked up about it," Shiro grinned, giving her some distance. They all took a step back as she prepared herself, closing her eyes softly. She opened them again when she located her arrival point, and the runes lit up in a circle beneath her feet. The air became thick with powerful magic again.

"And with this, I return home," she announced, swiping her pointy hat down in a theatrical bow. "And promise you the same in the near future."

She smiled. There was the inexplicable sound of a chime, and she had disappeared into thin air.

Kana turned to Shiro, and, visibly holding herself together by the frayed edges, she buried her face in his abdomen to hide her sadness.

...-...-...-...-...-...-...

"- what I'll do if she does not return-"
Ophelia tried not to focus on the voices around her arrival point and instead focused on her arrival itself. And that's basically how she ended up materializing right next to her father, only stumbling lightly before standing up straight. Everyone had gone silent.

"Behold!" she greeted them, swinging her hat down proudly. "My landing was only slightly graceless this time around!"

Immediately, there were hands on her shoulders.

"Ophelia," Odin worriedly faced her. "You have returned."

"That I have!"

"You are bloodied."

"Oh, this?" she hummed, putting her arms out in front of her. Indeed, her black dress had visible patches of blood on it, as did her exposed collarbones. "Fret not. This is Prince Siegbert's blood."

"Kindly repeat that?" Xander deadpanned from behind her, and she turned to face his incredulous expression. "Did you say that Siegbert is badly hurt?"

"He does have a nasty gash upon his temple, Milord, but it has stopped bleeding. He seems well, in fact. Undeterred," she explained. "In fact, Prince Shiro is worse off. But he wouldn't be if he stayed his tongue sometimes."

"Oh gods," Ryoma closed his eyes to take a deep breath. "What has that child brought upon himself?"

"Well, he puts up a lot of resistance-"

"Shiro..."

"-and taunts Iago freely-"

"Shiro, for goodness sake!"

"-but with all due respect, Milord," Ophelia finished. "His boldness left Iago loose-lipped. He let slip hints of their location when they faced off."

"And what of Kana?" Kamui pressed her worriedly.

"The dragon princess is unharmed for the most part," she reported. "The young princes are protective of her. But from what they tell me, since she is the one Iago is concerned with, she is the one who mediates most of their talks. She is so young, but she stands up to that vile sorcerer quite well. I feel that she may even be the strongest of them all. Not to slight the courage of the princes, but..."

"You mention hints of their location?" Ryoma prompted next.

"Yes!" she nodded, swaying when she moved too fast. Odin was at her side in a second, concern etching the lines of his young face as he led her to a chair to rest. "From Prince Siegbert's deductions and Prince Shiro's reverse-interrogation findings, they situate themselves approximately three hours' ride to the northwest, in what is likely an abandoned fortress. There is a ravine nearby with only a slight waterfall, and most notably, the rocks at the bottom are sharp enough to break the bones of any man who falls down." She seemed to think out loud after that. "Or is thrown in, like Shiro would be..."
To his credit, Ryoma seemed only mildly alarmed.

"We should ride out," Kamui immediately decided. "It doesn't matter if we know where this fortress is or not. We should gather a party and head out northwest immediately. At the very worst, we will sweep the territory and find it. We cannot waste any more time. Who knows what the next ultimatum will be."

"It is her fingers next, Milord," Ophelia mumbled, a bit self-conscious. They all turned to her in horror, waiting for an explanation. "He has threatened to send you Princess Kana's severed fingers next if you fail to comply."

Kamui did not realize that his inner beast was roaring until one of his newly-grown claws cut into his palm when he clenched his fists tight.

"Your fangs are showing, love," Niles teased, putting a hand on his shoulder softly. Immediately, the fangs and claws receded, Kamui holding a much better control on his dragon blood than Kana did.

He took a deep breath to steady himself, aware of all eyes on him. He could not afford to lose to emotion now.

"Niles," he ordered calmly, commanding authority once again with his steady tone. "Inform Silas that the camp is under his command while I am gone."

"Of course." Niles slipped out obediently.

"Odin, I would be honoured if we could have you and Ophelia with us," he turned to the mage, who glanced at his daughter doubtfully. She nodded firmly.

"I promised to bring them home," she responded, her eyes steeled. "I will ride with you."

"I will let Lord Leo knows of our absence. Come saddle your horse, Ophelia," Odin decided. They both bowed and left the tent.

"Xander, Ryoma..." Kamui glanced at them.

"Needless to ask," Xander interrupted him. "I will have Laslow prepare our horses and meet you in the camp entrance in ten minutes."

"Will you bring your retainers, Ryoma?" Kamui asked.

"No. I would rather have them guard the camp in my absence," Ryoma shook his head. "I will prepare as well and meet you there."

As soon as he left, Kamui went for his clothing chest, and pulled out his battle armour.

They met in the camp entrance as agreed a bit later, their party quite sizeable when Niles and Nina joined them as well.

"We're gonna save my daughter," Niles simply offered. "And you'll find both of us surprisingly proficient with staves."

"Then let's set out without further ado," Kamui ordered. He nodded to Silas, who had come to wave them off, and then kicked his horse into an immediate gallop.

They thundered out of camp, heading northwest, following the tug of their heartstrings like a
compass pointing to their captive children.

"It is a shame that your father still has not saved you, dear," Iago hummed casually, eating a slice of apple, and then throwing another slice by Kana's bare feet. It landed with a wet splat next to all the other pieces of food he was throwing at her like a master throwing scraps to his dog. Kana simply glared at him, never even twitching to accept any of the food, despite her stomach beseeching her for a bite.

"That is because he would not off himself for a dog like you," she bit back. "Papa will come for me, and when he does, you will curse the day you drew breath upon this world."

"He cannot come for you if he doesn't know where you are," Iago replied lightly. "It will be dusk soon, and I have not yet received news of his death. I fear I may have to send him a reminder soon."

Kana shivered, instinctively clenching her fists to hide her fingers from view.

"But at least I can enjoy your mildly pleasant company for a while longer, pet," he concluded.

"The sentiment is not mutual," Kana spat back.

"You are much bolder when your companions are not accompanying you," Iago noted. "Is it because you do not want to see them be punished for your backtalk? Because I can punish them any time I want. I need but relay the order to the guards by the dungeon doors, and upon your return, you will find them slaughtered."

Kana said nothing, defiant, but anxious.

"Why do you fight so hard for their lives?" Iago kept asking, not minding her silence. "They are simple noble boys, are they not?"

"They're my friends," Kana curtly replied.

"That's not all, is it? You are too familiar to be just friends," Iago peeled another slice of apple thoughtfully, making a show of sliding the knife underneath the slice's skin. "Are they family?"

Kana glared at him.

"Lovers, perhaps?"

She wasn't expecting that, and so she flinched. Iago caught the movement.

"No need to look so shocked," he teased. "Family, then. Brothers? Cousins? That would make them royalty as well, wouldn't it?"

Kana remained silent, though the closer Iago came to the truth, the more it unnerved her.

"Your stubborn silence is getting old, frankly," Iago sighed in exasperation, calmly eating his slice, and then throwing the apple away. "The longer you stay silent, the more you inculpate yourself."

"I am no culprit," she retorted. "I'm not the one who needs to pay for crimes."

"That's not the point. I'm just asking questions now," Iago looked up, past Kana. She turned around as well, and froze when the two guards at the door approached her. She took a step back.
"Don't touch me," she warned weakly, only escaping a few feet before rough grips closed upon her upper arms, dragging her back before Iago. She struggled, if only to loosen the bruising grip.

"Now, lovely," Iago began again, tapping the flat of the knife into the palm of his hand. From where he sat, he and Kana were at eye level and stared each other down. "Tell me who your companions are. From their speech and fighting style, as well as their family relation to you, I must deduce that they are royalty. But from where? Nohr? Hoshido?"

Kana pursed her lips stubbornly, though she could not help that her heart rate accelerated.

"Nohr, or Hoshido?" Iago repeated. "I shan't ask again, child." He did not seem too amused anymore.

Kana said nothing, so Iago set his knife against her clothed shoulder, and dragged it down.

A screech left Kana's sealed lips and she squirmed to try and lessen the pain from the burning cut on her shoulder now leaking blood into her white undershirt. The sleeve of the shirt now hung lower, exposing milky skin through the tear in the fabric.

"Nohr, or Hoshido?"

"Both," she whimpered, hoping he'd leave her alone. She wanted to go back to Shiro and Siegbert. She wanted her cousins to hold her and tell her she'd be okay. She was beginning to get scared.

"Right, right. Shiro and Siegbert, was it?" Kana flinched when Iago put the knife forward again, but tensed when he simply cleaned the specks of blood on the blade onto her shirt. "Decidedly Hoshidan and Nohrian-sounding names. And would you care to tell me what position they have in the royal line? Whose children are they? Whose little brothers? I've never seen the Nohrian one in the palace, so I must conclude he is one of you strangely-grown children."

Kana was torn between answering and not answering, but her silence must've been considered defiance. Iago put the knife against her exposed arm.

"No!" her breath hitched in terror, and she squirmed away from the blade. "Princes! They are the sons of the Crown Princes!" she panted out, still watching the blade like a hawk, or more like a wounded deer.

"Ah, so I have the Dragon Princess and the sons of Xander and Ryoma within my grasp," Iago considered carefully, seeming strangely unsure. "Perhaps... Perhaps I have made more enemies than I intended..."

"They'll all kill you when they get here," Kana choked out, adrenaline pumping through her veins as her survival instincts kicked in. "You'll pay!"

"You're getting a bit excited, pet," Iago chided. "I suppose it's time for you to retire."

Kana didn't dare hope.

"But I have one last question for you, before you go." And there it was. "Just answer honestly, Kana, and I will let you return to your princely cousins unharmed."

She nodded hesitantly.

"Do you take me for a fool?"
That definitely took her aback. Her eyes widened, cold sweat rolling down the back of her neck. She wasn't even sure what to respond.

"I... I don't know what you mean," she stammered out nervously.

"You're not being honest with me, Kana," Iago chided again. "You know what I mean."

"Honestly. I-I don't."

"Then tell me about the witch, Kana."

Kana's breath flew from her lungs as if she had been sucker punched. Ophelia's gentle face appeared in her mind's eye immediately, and she forgot to breathe as all the worst-case scenarios flew through her mind in an instant.

"You have forgotten to breathe," Iago teased her, although it didn't sound like teasing anymore. He actually sounded a bit angry. And that scared Kana more than anything. She wished that Shiro and Siegbert were in here with her. Alone with two axe-wielding berserkers and a mage without a conscience, she felt smaller and weaker than ever.

"I-I don't-"

"The witch, Kana," Iago repeated, tapping the flat side of the knife against her pale cheek. The scar from yesterday's backhand was still an angry red upon it. "You didn't think I wouldn't notice, did you?"

Yet again, her terrified silence spoke volumes.

"Any sorcerer even worth his salt and can detect changes in the magic concentration in the air," Iago clarified, boasting if only a little. "She must have come from far to displace so much magic upon her arrival. I felt a disturbance as soon as she landed."

"Yet you did nothing," Kana replied, regretting her words when Iago gripped her chin roughly.

"Swallow your tongue or I'll make you, little girl. I was busy. Besides, I didn't think it was a witch at first. Only when I was told that you had inexplicably shown up in the other cell did I make the connection. I did not think you primitive beings had enough magic proficiency to train witches in the army." He shook her, then let her go.

"So then, what's it to you?" she spat out, working the numbness out of her jaw.

"She is leading your fathers to you, isn't she?" Iago wasn't as dumb as he looked, it seemed. Kana had a right to be afraid. "Believe it or not, that could pose a problem. With my current resources, even I cannot handle three princes and their entourage."

"Should've thought of it before you kidnapped three royal children," Kana taunted.

"Okay, Kana." Iago rubbed his forehead tiredly. "Okay. I understand. You are a fighter, a survivor, whatever it is you want to call yourself. But I am so very tired of your temper. You were so sweet, so diplomatic when you got here, and now... that uncouth Hoshidan prince must be giving you ideas."

Kana could feel the storm arriving from a mile away.

"Against the table," Iago snapped, and Kana squawked when she was awkwardly tugged and slammed against the dinner table.
It was just high enough for Iago to reach for her neck during her panicked confusion and tilt it back so that her head rested upon the table in an awkward angle. It hurt her back and her neck. Her wrists and shoulders hurt where the guards pushed her down. Her breath came out in quick pants as she became more and more anxious, and the first whimper escaped her when Iago put his knife above her.

"When did she come?" Iago asked, his face stern now.

"Let go of me!" Kana begged in panic, struggling wildly. "Please! You're hurting me!"

The knife slammed into the table, dangerously close to her face, and Kana screamed.

"Stop it! This morning, shortly after breakfast! She came this morning!" she cried out, tears of terror dripping down her cheeks, into her dirty hair. "Please! Please, I wanna go back! Let me go back to Shiro and Siegbert! Please!"

"What information did she carry back?" Iago asked, clicking his tongue in displeasure.

"Our approximate location! We told her all we knew about where we were, that's all!" she sobbed, her nose running. "Please! Please let me go! There was nothing else, I swear!"

"What did you tell her, exactly!?" Iago demanded, seeming more agitated himself at the thought of the group of warriors closing upon him. "Answer quickly!"

"Three hours northwest of camp, by the ravine!" she answered, tripping over her words in her haste to answer.

"Damn it all," Iago clicked his tongue, now truly angry, and perhaps a bit worried. "Well, as long as they don't take the beaten path through the forest, they won't find the bridge across the ravine..."

"Please let go of me now!" Kana begged. "I've given you everything!"

"Including a headache," Iago growled, steadying her head with a hand on her jaw. Her neck craned painfully against the table. "Stupid child... you've gotten yourself in more trouble than you can handle."

Kana whimpered with every breath she took, and watched as Iago contemplated her for a while.

"I guess I will take your eye, after all," he decided, sliding the cool metal of the knife against her cheek. "Just like your filthy father."

Kana screamed.

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Somewhere further away, Kamui doubled over all too suddenly, almost falling over in the watering hole they rested their horses at. Laslow, who was having his and Xander's horse drink next to him, caught him and steadied him.

"Milord!"

His cry predictably alerted the others, who were stretching their legs, and soon enough, Kamui had a crowd around him.

"Kamui!" Ryoma supported him, concerned. "Are you unwell?"
"N-No. I'm fine," Kamui gritted out, though the terrible pressure on his lungs and heart was anything but fine. "I just... something bad has happened."

"I will go to them!" Ophelia immediately volunteered, taking her hat off in her signature departure move.

"No!" Kamui stopped her. "Don't go! You'll be in danger as well!"

"We must do something!" she protested.

"Let's ride, quickly!" Xander motioned to the horses. They all mounted, Niles silently helping Kamui up on his. Nina watched her father struggle, and bit her lip in worry. She hated seeing him this weak, because she'd never seen this side of him. It was scary.

As soon as they drove the horses into a gallop, Kamui pulled up next to Ophelia. His face was still lined with remnants of pain, but the worst had seemingly passed.

"Ophelia, please," he asked of her. "Please, can you only tell me if they are alright? Please tell me if you can find their soul, or life force, or whatever you look for when you warp. I have a terrible feeling."

"Of course," she nodded, closing her eyes, and trusting Kamui to steer her horse should they change direction. It did not take her long, anyway. "I... I feel Shiro and Siegbert. They are fine."

"And Kana?" Kamui choked out, not liking the purse of her lips.

"Fading," she reported heavily. "I can sense more of the dragon than anything else."

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"Let go of her!"

A strangled roar escaped Kana's gritted fangs, and when the guards dropped her unceremoniously, she landed upon her clawed hands. She pressed one of her hands to her wounded eye, which was thankfully still in place. Iago had only managed a superficial slice of her eyelid before her dragon blood had pulsed, pain and terror calling the beast to the surface of her skin.

"Damn it." Only now, Iago was painfully aware of the pendant she was missing under her shirt. He hadn't expected her to actually turn into a dragon anytime soon.

Kana's back arched, and a pair of pale grey wings burst from her back, tearing holes through her clothing. Her pupils had turned to slits, and she roared again, a cross between a dragon's cry and a little girl's scream.

"Get ready to put her down," Iago clicked his tongue at the berserkers, who unsheathed their axes. If only she had not turned now, he could have made good use of her dragon-turning ability later. What a shame.

Her wings flapped, her body twitching as she fought on, and Iago did not have much faith in her ability to reverse the transformation at this stage. He opened his tome, prepared to fight the dragon as soon as it emerged fully.

And yet, it did not come. Kana spent a good three minutes rolling around the floor, roaring and arching her limbs in her internal struggle, but the dragon did not emerge. And somehow, it occurred to Iago that she was actually fighting it.
He glanced at the two berserkers standing at the ready, and flipped his tome to another page. His favourite spell.

Through the red clouding her vision, Kana looked up when she heard her name. Was it her name? Kana? Did she have a name? There was anger inside of her, anger and pain. So much pain. She was afraid. Who was calling her name?

She roared, and in front of her, she saw Shiro and Siegbert. They wielded their weapons at her, and the fear returned. They looked scared as well. Why did the humans look scared?

They didn't want to hurt her.

She was so afraid. She was hurting.

Shiro and Siegbert loved her. They could help her.

What was her name?

"Kana," someone else was calling. "Shiro and Siegbert are waiting for you. Control yourself, Kana."

Kana. Her name was Kana. And the dragon was not her. The dragon would hurt Shiro and Siegbert. She did not want to hurt them.

Her consciousness returned slowly as she fought down the final impulses of the dragon. Without a Dragonstone to aid her, the task was monumentally difficult, but she knew she had succeeded when her shirt flapped loosely against her back in shreds, announcing the retreat of her wings. When she cried out, it was the voice of a little girl, not a dragon. It was her voice.

She looked up, but Shiro and Siegbert were nowhere to be seen. Only Iago, and two guards.

The dragon reared its head again when Kana's eye pulsed with pain, but she refused to give in to it.

She fled.

Nobody stopped her. Iago knew that she was not at risk of escaping in this condition. In fact, he knew exactly where she was going.

Kana ran down the sinewy hallways that she had memorized, all the Vallite soldiers ignoring her as she sprinted with one of her clawed hands clutched over her eye. The more she ran, the more in control she felt, and she focused on the pain to avoid focusing on the terror still pervading her bones. Her claws soon receded, and her fangs rounded as she slammed the heavy dungeon doors open, panting.

The familiarity of the dimly lit, humid dungeons was ironically soothing, and tears of relief were soon coursing down her cheeks, burning her injury on her left eye. Blood ran down her face along with tears.

She must have been sobbing loudly, for Siegbert and Shiro were calling for her even before she reached their cell.

"Kana? Kana, is that you?" one of them was saying, but she had now idea who. She slid to a stop in front of their cell, and pressed herself against the bars, trying desperately to reach through with her one free hand.
"S-Shiro," she cried, comforted when her cousins scrambled to try and hold her through the bars regardless. "S-Siegbert... It hurts..."

"Hush, Kana, hush," Siegbert's voice cracked, probably as he noticed the blood running down her face where she held her eye. Iago's earliest threat came to mind.

"Oh gods," Shiro sounded like he would be sick. "H-He didn't... that sick dastard didn't... He wouldn't, even someone as low as him..."

"It hurts," she cried harder. "I'm scared. I want to go home. I want my Papa, I want my daddy, I want Nina. I don't wanna stay here! Please let it end!"

"Kana," they both murmured, her heartache tearing their own beating hearts right out of their chests. It was awkward to hold her close through the bars, but they held her and hushed her until a guard showed up to unlock the cell. He didn't even have to escort her in, for she almost ran in, and threw herself at Shiro.

Neither of them noticed what was happening next, for they were too busy holding and rocking her, pressing her between them as if they could protect her from the horrors of this world.

"It hurts," she sniffled weakly, over and over again until her cries quieted. She was drained.

"Let me see, Kana," Siegbert gently pried her hand from her eye. She resisted only slightly before letting it fall. Siegbert assessed the split eyelid, immensely relieved that the monster hadn't actually carved out her eye as he had suggested, and ripped a piece of his long sleeve to create a compress for her. "Here. The bleeding's almost stopped."

"He asked me about Ophelia," she stammered, looking at Shiro hopeless. "He knows about Phelia... he knows our fathers are coming. He knows who you two are." Her voice cracked pitifully. "I... I told him everything."

"Kana, there is nothing to be ashamed of," Shiro fiercely assured her. "You are still a child. Nobody expects you to go through something like that. Grown men aren't expected to go through something like that."

"I'm sorry," she apologized quietly, and their hearts broke in unison. They retreated into a cocoon in the corner, wrapped around her to let her cry her pain away in peace.

"Leave," Shiro barked once at the guard, who was still standing inside their cell, as if waiting for something. But when the guard didn't leave, he didn't expend any more energy on him and returned to ensuring Kana's wellbeing.

For the next ten minutes, all went well. Kana even calmed enough to fall into a light sleep, enough to make her forget about the pain. Shiro and Siegbert discussed a possible plan of escape in low tones, occasionally glancing at the creepy guard just standing in their cell.

And then, the air around them filled with magic, and Shiro and Siegbert realized at once what the guard was here for.

"Ophelia, no!" Shiro cried out, just as the witch appeared before them.

"The chosen heroine arri-aah!" she screeched, ducking the guard's axe swing closely. "Sweet mother of the night! What is this!?"

"An ambush!" Shiro warned her, getting up and leaving Kana tucked in Siegbert's arms. The latter held her tightly even as she woke from her light sleep, murmuring comforts to her.
By the time Shiro made it in front of Ophelia, the guard had swung his axe again. Shiro barely put his arm out in time in front of her. She screamed and closed her eyes, expecting the worst.

Shiro expected the worst, too. But his aim wasn't as bad as he thought. The axe swing deflected off his iron cuff, rattling him to the bone and splitting his forearm where the blade dragged in an arc, but at least nobody was missing a head or an arm entirely.

"Ophelia, get out of here!" Shiro warned, charging at the guard before he could recover. He tackled the guard and tried to wrestle the weapon away. "It's a trap!"

"Ophelia," Kana rasped out desperately, catching her attention. The witch let out a horrified gasp at the sight of her bloodied face. "Tell them! Take the beaten path across the forest to reach the bridge crossing the ravine!"

"I will!" she promised, knowing that now, she held information that could save their lives. She had to go, no matter what her personal feelings about it were.

A crash distracted her, and she took one second too many to watch as Shiro was flung off the berserker like a ragdoll. The Vallite turned to her immediately, and swung.

She located her father in the space nearby, and warped, just as the axe cut through where she stood.

They were left yet again the three of them with the Vallite guard. Shiro was on standby in case it attacked them, but it didn't move, seemingly under clear orders to attack Ophelia only. They had been expecting her. And now that Iago's plan had been foiled, they were surely in a world of trouble.

Speaking of the devil, the man himself walked in front of their cell, accompanied by two guards, distastefully sneering at the wounded children sprawled in the cell. Kana whimpered, her eye throbbing, and hid her face in Siegbert's bloodied shirt. Shiro rose to his knees, trembling with the exertion of putting up a fight.

"You are all so pitiful," Iago shook his head mournfully. "I wish things could have gone differently. But the witch has gone, and she brings the Crown Princes with her. I cannot turn a blind eye to this situation anymore."

"You're only getting what you deserve, you son of a whore," Shiro spat at him with all the defiance his beaten, starved body had left.

Iago just looked at him, and then motioned to the guards behind him. The children tensed, expecting the worst.

"You know what to do," Iago snapped venomously, now regarding the children with nothing but hate. The guards advanced into the cell. "Separate them."

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"It was a trap!" Ophelia exclaimed as soon as she landed from her warp, not even priding herself in her steady landing. "Iago knows we are coming and set his guards out to intercept me!"

"Ophelia, hold!" Odin interrupted her, always as protective of his daughter. "Don't exert yourself!"

"They are hurt!" Ophelia continued, glancing in panic at all the people around her. "Kana's agony
was palpable in the air! Shiro was hurt protecting me, and Siegbert... Siegbert is the only hope they have of fighting!"

"Nina!" Kamui called in alarm, his daughter approaching quickly with her staff raised already. She seemed to have noticed the same thing they all had.

"Kana tells us to take the beaten path through the forest, across the bridge over the ravine," Ophelia babbled on, mind running a thousand miles an hour. Something rose in her throat. "Fie! Have I been cursed? There is a monster clawing in my throat!"

"Ophelia, enough!" Odin almost screeched at her, putting his hands on her shoulder. At the same time, her shoulders hitched, and she bent over, throwing up blood. Once, twice, until she was crying and whimpering.

"I will assist," Niles suggested, he and Nina focusing all their magic into their healing staves. Odin laid Ophelia down, brushing her sweaty bangs away from her forehead, and hushing her, and she wondered why everyone looked so grim.

When she pulled her hand away from her abdomen, she found it soaked in blood. A quick glance down gave her a good view of her ripped dress, and the angry slice in her abdomen. It bled profusely, and yet she did not feel the pain, too high on the adrenaline it had taken to escape the ambush.

"Hah," she dropped her head, staring at the night sky. Valla's skies always seemed cloudless to her. She could see stars and floating islands upside down from where she laid. It was a very serene sight. "That must have been that last swing. I suppose I was a smidgen too late warping after all."

"Ophelia, stay with me!" Odin pleaded with her, close to tears, understandably. Nina and Niles were doing their best, but their faces were grim. Ophelia didn't really like that people cried over her. She had done her duty like a proper chosen one, after all.

"Sorry, father," she gurgled, more blood flowing from her mouth, down the sides of her bloodied face, into her long, luscious hair. Odin took her ashen face in his hands and caressed her hair softly, his body quivering with withheld emotion. "I suppose... This is... the final curtain..."

"You performed better than I expected, my darling. I'm proud of you," Odin murmured, still caressing her forehead whilst Niles and Nina toiled over her wound. Her breathing was shallow and blood had drained from her face, but at least now, the wound was closed. It was large, but relatively shallow.

"This did not have to happen," Ryoma bowed his head in respect for the young girl bleeding out on the grass. "In saving our children, we never should've had to sacrifice another's."

"Iago will pay for everything he's done," Kamui seethed. "I will never forgive him. And I will never let him off the hook for all this suffering he's caused." There was a murderous intent in his voice that had never shown before, and it was slightly unnerving.

"We should leave Odin to his daughter," Xander quietly suggested. "It was wrong to involve them in the first place. I imagine he will want to be by her side until she..."

"Milord." Surprisingly, Laslow spoke up. It was unsurprising, however, when they remembered that Laslow and Odin came from the same place and were very close companions. Laslow knew him probably better than anybody. "Odin will come with us as soon as he ensures that Ophelia will live. And she will. She takes after her father in stubbornness."

"Are you certain?" Xander glanced at his retainer. "He is quiet. I am under the impression that he
is grieving."

"Oh no, Milord," Laslow assured him confidently. "Odin may be quiet, but he is not grieving right now." They all glanced at the mage, who had an unreadable expression on his face when he cared for his daughter. "He is furious."

"Really?" Ryoma was genuinely taken aback.

"Oh yes," Laslow continued with utmost seriousness. It was scary, almost, how he seemed to recognize Odin's facial expressions, as if he'd witnessed something like this happening before. "And if he comes with us, he will be an invaluable asset. For hell hath no fury like a parent who loses their child." His eyes darkened as a secret thought passed through his mind. They could only begin to guess about it. "Nor a child who loses their parent."

They rode in silence, their party now down three members. Laslow had suggested he ride back to camp as an escort to Ophelia, on whom Nina still operated relentlessly with her staff until they could get her to a proper healer. Niles stayed with the party, if only because he was the only other person capable of handling a staff, and they did not know in which state they would find their children. Odin rode with them as well, having wordlessly handed his dying daughter to Laslow with all the trust in the world that he would keep her safe. Kamui had a hard time believing it, even if he was known to trust people left and right. He couldn't imagine handing Kana off to someone in such a dire situation. Odin and Laslow must have had incredible faith in one another.

With Ophelia's final instructions guiding them, they actually found the beaten path through the forest quite easily. The horses were able to cross it at a steady trot, and soon, they were crossing the plank bridge across the ravine. The moonlight cast a glow upon the shallow water breaking upon the pointy rocks below. The abandoned fort indeed stood tall across from them, and their hearts beat faster when they approached it. This was the place.

It was confirmed by the sheer amount of Vallite soldiers, of all melee types, waiting for them in the courtyard. As Ophelia had reported, they were expected.

"Kamui, how should we take them?" Xander asked, eyes calculating. The first wave of soldiers began to advance as they got closer, and soon, they would clash.

"I would suggest arrowing through them and entering the fort. If we face them in the halls, there will be less space in which to be overwhelmed," Ryoma counselled.

"No," Odin spoke flatly. "Stand back and let me clear the courtyard."

"Don't get cocky, Odin. Just because you're Lord Leo's retainer-" Niles began his warning, but Kamui stopped him with a wave of his hand. Something in Odin's eyes told Kamui that he knew what he was suggesting. And Kamui only did what he did best. He trusted.

"Go," he simply ordered, and slowed his horse. Everyone but Odin followed his example, and witnessed the following carnage.

Odin rode a little more before suddenly halting his horse. He jumped off even before she stopped, and opened up his tome. He said nothing, but the air suddenly crackled with electricity, so heavy that the little hairs at the back of Kamui's neck stood. The horses neighed, clearly unnerved, and their riders focused on keeping them still.

Runes rose around Odin, at his feet and by his head, and his eyes flashed as more electricity crackled in the air. Slowly, his feet left the ground, and as he was lifted into the air, the ground
began to shake.

"What is this!?!" Ryoma exclaimed, looking at his companions for explanations. None of them, not even Niles, knew what was going on. Niles did look more impressed than usual, though.

The earthquake lasted for a few seconds longer, getting more intense until the horses were bucking. Kamui had half a mind to tell Odin to stop, but his eyes were captivated by the sorcerer's awesome power.

The mage took a step back in the air, flipping backwards, and began his descent. And as he descended, lightning rose from the ground, crackling in circles amongst the enemy crowd. In a thunderous booming noise, a hundred explosions of electricity ripped through every single Vallite soldier in the courtyard at once, blinding everyone with a burst of white light.

When the light faded and the darkness of the night returned, Kamui's eyes hurt. He rubbed them and glanced at the courtyard, where Odin now stood amongst a literal graveyard of smoking, half-charred bodies that were slowly disappearing into thin air.

"I honestly never knew he could do that," Niles' awed commentary reminded him to close his hanging jaw. He jumped off his horse, trusting his loyal steed to remain in place, and his brothers and husband did the same, if only a bit numbly.

"Now I see why Leo chose him as a retainer," Xander commented as they approached.

Odin turned to greet them, his face stony as ever, but his eyes softer. More tired.

"I will guard the horses," he quietly suggested as if he hadn't just annihilated an entire army by himself. Kamui shivered. "The path is clear, Milords. For the princes and princess, and for Ophelia, I beseech you to put Iago down once and for all like the vermin he is."

"Promise," Kamui nodded to him, and the four remaining members went on. Odin watched them enter the fortress before returning to the horses, and crashing next to them, exhausted.

"Mother," he murmured to the clear, starry skies, running a hand through his hair. "I know now what you felt the day you decided to die for me. And I know what it's like to decide to die for you." His heart clenched as Ophelia's crystalline laughter rang in his ears. He couldn't imagine never hearing it again. "So please. Please spare me the pain. Return my darling Ophelia to me. Someday we will both take to the heavens to meet you, I promise. But please."

There was not a single cloud in the sky, and yet Odin felt raindrops on his face.

"Please, Mother. Not yet. Please don't make today that day."

The final stretch was the longest one. The group of fathers rushed down the corridors, easily taking down the occasional enemy on their way down. Vallite forts had pretty much the same engineering as Nohrian forts, so Niles was best placed to lead them through it despite never having been here himself.

"The dungeons should be through here," he motioned breathlessly as they turned another corridor, running up against a Vallite spear-soldier. Xander took this one down, avoiding its spear sideways and beheading him in one clean motion. At the end of that hallway, a set of heavy doors stood bolted and shut.

The bolts came undone rapidly, and they engaged the stone stairs that led them down into the
obscurity of the dungeons. The torches along the wall provided ill lighting, but it was all they had without Odin to cast a lantern spell.

"Shiro? Siegbert? Kana?" Kamui called out as they passed rows and rows of empty cells. "Is anyone here?"

There was no answer at first, and then a rasp. Niles immediately detected it.

"This way," he led them further down. "Answer now. Who is here?"

"F...ather..." the rasp returned, following by a weak cough. "Here..."

"Siegbert," Xander's breath didn't catch per se, but almost. As if guided by a compass, he came to a stop in front of a cell, and grabbed the bars. It took the rest of them a moment, but they saw what he saw.

Siegbert sitting against a wall, covered in blood of varied shades and age, holding his stomach in a heavy effort to breathe. Bruises circled his delicate throat where someone had clearly almost choked the life out of him. A bit further away, Shiro was sprawled on the cobblestone, face-down and unconscious. Lacerations crisscrossed across both of his arms, which would have been a whip's work if the wounds had looked a bit more torn on the edges. It looked more like a dozen blades had drawn patterns on his skin.

"Shiro!" Ryoma also called, spotting his son's unconscious body.

"He... lives..." Siegbert assured him. He made a weak movement to go to Shiro's side, but the worrying wheeze that tore from his throat at the movement froze him in place.

"Don't move," Xander ordered, getting antsy. He didn't need to say anything, though. When he turned to look at Kamui, he found his brother holding a torchlight for his husband, who was focused on picking the cell door lock.

So perhaps there was a perk to having a thief in their family after all.

Niles played around with the lockpicks he'd pulled out of who-knows-where, and with a decisive click, the lock snapped open. He threw the cell door open and stood back, both Crown Princes rushing in. And if the sight of the two most powerful young men on the continent, on their knees and cradling their teenage sons, didn't warm Kamui's heart, he didn't know what would.

"Shiro! Shiro, wake up," Ryoma gentle tapped his son's face.

"H...e received a ra...ther... harsh blow to the h...ead... hasn't woken since..." Siegbert rasped, pushing against his father's hands. "Father... I am sorry..."

"Siegbert, there is nothing to apologize for," Xander worriedly lifted his hair to view the scalp laceration that had bled all over him. "You did nothing to deserve cruelty at the hands of Iago. I won't have you apologizing emptily." He leaned back to get a full view at his son's weakened form.

"But I couldn't..." he wheezed, hands flying to his throat in panic. He coughed, taking a few shallow breaths, and Xander worriedly supported him with a hand on his lower back as he struggled to breathe.

"Hush, Siegbert," he demanded firmly once his son was breathing again. "Your windpipe is damaged. Do not speak. I will not risk you displacing something and collapsing your windpipe entirely."
"Kana," Siegbert insisted. "Iago has... Kana... in the dining h...all."

"Enough!" Xander insisted, but when Siegbert looked at him pleadingly, his breathing still painfully audible, he sighed and put a hand on his head. "That's enough, Siegbert. We will take it from here. I am just glad you have been returned to me safely."

Siegbert looked like he wanted to say something else, but held back. Instead, he gave Xander a shy, insecure smile and leaned into his touch.

Thankfully, his translator was around.

"He means to apologize for not making the prison break ourselves." They all started when Shiro grunted, sitting up with Ryoma's help. "And also for doing that dumb assassination stunt by ourselves."

"Ophelia explained it to us on the way here," Ryoma pursed his lips. "Shiro, I wouldn't believe that you would have that kind of irrationality, even in you."

"Oh, come on!"

"Taking risks like that? And dragging your cousins in with you? Your impulsivity is hardly becoming of a future leader," Ryoma continued.

"Dad," Shiro just laughed, as if the whole thing was amusing. "Seriously? Can't you find another time to lecture me than in this dank dungeon, where I am, if you hadn't noticed, bleeding out and concussed?"

"I only lecture you because I just... I don't want anything like this to happen again!" Ryoma defended himself. Shiro only laughed once more.

"I hear ya, dad. I know that criticizing me is your weird way of saying you love me," he clutched his head. "But I'm seriously concussed right now. I took an axe to the head. Can we save the lectures for when we're back at camp? You'll have time to think of more points of criticism on the ride there."

"Stop moving your head, then," Ryoma clicked his tongue, inspecting Shiro's head and neck for any obvious bone deformities. There were bruises behind his ears, which, if he remembered correctly, were indicators of skull fractures, so he didn't want to risk any further injury. "Shiro..." he sighed, and then awkwardly put his arms around his son. "You... you did a good job protecting your comrades. I heard that your courage got you into trouble, but also saved the others a lot of trouble. So... good job."

"Man," Shiro rolled his eyes, clutching his father right back. Only the tightness of his grip conveyed how scared he really had been. "See, this sucks, cause when I faint in the next minute or so, I won't remember these rare compliments from you."

"I'll repeat them as many times as you want. As long as it doesn't get to your head," Ryoma quipped. Shiro's grip loosened on him when the boy fainted again soon after. "Shiro..? Shiro!"

"I'll try and stabilize both of them," Niles volunteered, stepping in. "They'll need immediate ministrations from someone like Lady Sakura or Lady Elise, but I'll try to satisfy you all with my own expertise right now."

"That would be appreciated," Xander rolled his eyes at Niles' typical innuendos, but was relieved when he pulled out his staff.
"Kamui, go retrieve Kana," Ryoma ordered, clutching Shiro's dead weight to his chest tightly. "We will join you once these two are safe."

"Yes." Kamui agreed, glancing at his brothers and nephews, now safe from harm at last. Soon, he would have his darling daughter in his arms the same way. He hoped to get to her quickly.

"Bring her back, Kamui," Niles simply said to him, and he was gone.

Kamui was breathless by the time he made his way to the dining hall. To his dismay, it was totally empty.

"Iago!" he called out into the open. "Show yourself, coward! Return my daughter to me!"

"Your daughter will return to you, alright," Iago's cackling came from thin air, and Kamui gritted his teeth.

"Show yourself!" he insisted, and this time, Iago obliged.

With a chiming sound, he dispelled whatever invisibility illusion he had on him, and appeared in the middle of the room. At his feet was a dead Vallite mercenary, impaled with a sword and disappearing slowly.

"Where is Kana?" Kamui immediately asked, stepping confidently towards Iago.

"So impatient," Iago chided arrogantly. "Here she comes. Don't you hear her tiny, tiny feet pitter-pattering on the cobblestone? She is running to her father now!" he laughed, then sobered. "What a shame that her father is dead. And you killed him."

"I-What?" Kamui was taken aback, but had no time to think about it. At the end of the hall, Kana burst in through the double doors.

"Father!" she screeched, bursting into a sprint towards Kamui.

"Kana!" Kamui called out in reply, taking a few steps forward.

"No!" she suddenly yelled. "Stay in your place, scum! Don't you dare call my name after what you've done!"

"K-Kana?" Kamui paled. "Kana, what has overcome you?"

The little girl ignored him, instead running for Iago instead. And to Kamui's horror, she dropped to her knees in front of the dead Vallite soldier.

"Father!" she shook his shoulders, her voice rising in pitch and panic. "No... no! Papa!"

"Kana!" Kamui now understood what was going on, with Iago watching Kana shaking the Vallite at his feet. He had been a victim of Iago's dirty illusions before, but not Kana. Now he understood what she must be seeing. Himself, broken, bloodied, dead. And the man who killed her father before her. He had to snap her out of it. "Kana, listen to me!"

"I'm done listening!" she yelled, hanging her head. Her hair fell across her face, obscuring her eyes as she mourned her false father. Iago seemed extremely proud of his illusion. "You... how dare you! He was my father!"
"Kana, it's not true! It's an illusion!" Kamui tried. "Iago is making you see things that are untrue! I am Kamui! Your father! I am here!"

"Enough LIES, I SAID!" Kana screamed, getting up. Kamui flinched when he saw the bloody mess one of her eyes had become, but he was more scared of the murderous intent in her gaze.

"Kana, focus in front of you! Iago is right there!" he tried one last time. Kana spat to the side, and looked at her father. Coldly, she pulled the sword from her illusionary father's body, and tested its weight.

"I will tear your head from your shoulders, snake," she hissed, stepping over the Vallite's body, and taking a fighting stance. "This ends now!"

Kamui refused to fight his own daughter. He would not.

But he couldn't help but reach for his Yato when she twirled her sword in her hands, and dropped into position. Her pupils shrunk into slits.

"Shit," Kamui swore, and she was upon him.

They clashed a few times, steel versus steel before Kana's arm, now clawed, almost swiped Kamui's head right off his shoulders. They met again, then stood back to catch their breath.

If this was anybody else, Kamui would go all-out on them. But he couldn't bring himself to harm his daughter. Not his precious little Kana who was such a fierce warrior in the name of her (falsely) deceased father. But she was going all-out, grief tearing the dragon right out of her. Low growls left her throat as she panted, markings appearing across her face and neck.

"Kana, control the dragon!" he prompted her, hoping to save her from the transformation. "Swallow it back down!"

"My father is dead," she growled, her voice more guttural. "I have no more reason to hold back." She seemed unfazed by the wings that tore effortlessly through her back and unfurled widely. Kamui protected his eyes from the dust she picked up.

When he blinked again, she was upon him with her sharp fangs bared to bite his throat out.

He dodged her and half-heartedly clashed steel with her again, unable to help the awe he felt at his daughter's strength. And yet, overcome by emotion, she fought with reckless abandon, and he spotted many openings he could take advantage of. But he didn't. He couldn't hurt her.

The dragon kept rising to the surface. Soon, a tail had burst from her lower back as well, swishing dangerously with the promise of shattering any bone it caught. At this point, Kana was more dragon than human. She stepped back, and gave one last furious glance at Kamui as a humanoid before she let herself go.

A loud draconic roar heralded the rise of her inner dragon, Kana dropping to all four to accommodate the changing size of her limbs. She grew in size, towering over Kamui soon enough, although his own dragon was even larger. He was not impressed. Just worried.

Kana reared on her legs, and charged.

"This is fantastic!" Iago cheered from where he stood, taunting Kamui behind his barrier of invisibility. "Without her Dragonstone, her mind is lost! This dragon will kill you without feeling a thing! And when poor Kana will have exhausted herself and will have reverted... Imagine what a sight will await her innocent eyes!"
"Shut up!" Kamui roared, feeling his own dragon pulse with anger. He dodged a swipe of Kana's claws and rolled behind her, rushing for Iago. He saw him, at least. Perhaps if he slayed Iago, and the illusion dispelled, Kana would return to normal. His stride was too short, however, and a swipe of Kana's tail caught him in the legs, tripping him face-first into the cobblestone floor. He rose quickly to avoid the massive crash of her paw where he laid a moment ago.

"I think you have your work cut out for you, traitor prince!" Iago chuckled in satisfaction. "Better focus on the enemy at hand!"

"Well said!"

And suddenly, Iago was screeching in pain. Kamui hazarded a glance towards him, and was satisfied to see an arrow embedded in his leg.

"I'll leave it to you!" he called out seemingly to no one, but soon enough, Niles jumped down from one of the balconies lining the dining hall, and shot another arrow at Iago. It was easily avoided.

"I'm more the type to dish out the pain," Niles introduced himself. "But you harmed my daughter, so I hope you'll find pleasure in the retribution I'll inflict upon you."

Kamui left Iago to his husband, instead focusing on Kana. The dragon had lost none of its vigour, still attacking in the same frenzy as before. It didn't show any signs of relenting. He wasn't sure how to stop it at this point. He'd exhaust himself before it did, at this rate.

His mind flashed back to that tragic day in Hoshido, when he lost his mother and was overwhelmed with grief. That was the first time he had transformed into a dragon without his Dragonstone. Grief had awakened his dragon blood, which was comparable to Kana's situation. So perhaps he could stop her in the same way he was stopped the last time.

That didn't bode well for him.

Parenthood is a pain, Niles had told him when they'd decided to have Nina. He'd repeated it when they had Kana. Kamui had seen it all, but he felt like he was about to see a whole new side of it.

"The shit we do for our children," he sighed, and sheathed his sword. That seemed to catch Kana's attention, and she slowed cautiously. Good.

"Kamui?" Niles called to him in confusion, but Kamui didn't answer him.

"See, Kana? It's me! Kamui!" he spread his arms out. "Your father!"

The dragon approached him cautiously and seemed to think. And then, Kana swiped her claws at Kamui, who barely had time to put his arms up before he was sent flying into the nearby wall.

"Kamui!" Niles cried out, suddenly very afraid. He couldn't focus on his fight with Iago, knowing that his daughter had probably just broken his husband's spine, at the very least.

"I'm fine!" Kamui called out nonetheless, falling out of the dust and rubble from the indent in the wall and reverting his partially-transformed arms and back to his human form. The best part of controlling the dragon blood at will was opportune uses of the dragon fang ability to partially transform his body. And yet, even strengthening his back for the impact hadn't stopped the shock from reverberating across his body and leaving him shaken.

He had no time to recover. He grunted as Kana's claws smashed him against the wall again,
gripping him tightly. Just because he let himself be captured and even expected the rough
treatment, it didn't mean it hurt less.

"Kana, please," he pleaded. "Look at me. Look at me truly, and realize that I am your father."

The dragon roared, and yet, when Kamui blinked, his head was still attached to the rest of him.

"Niles, your other father, is fighting Iago right now. Iago has cast an illusion on you. The body
you saw was not mine. I'm not dead, Kana," Kamui pleaded with her. "I'm right here for you.
And I'm not leaving until I take you home with me."

The dragon stood still. The claws seemed to loosen. Kamui's heart skipped a beat.

"Return to me, Kana," he called out to her. "Return to me, and if you still have your doubts, then
take the Yato at my hip and slay me. If that is your wish, who am I to stop you?"

The dragon let out a meeker roar, as if protesting.

"Go on. You can do it. I know you're in there, Kana. I know you're fighting the dragon. And I
know you're winning. My little girl doesn't even give up, after all."

The dragon hesitated, and then backed off. Kamui dropped to the floor with a small sigh of relief,
and then faced the massive creature. It seemed to be waiting for him.

"Kamui!" the final pieces of the puzzle arrived thundering into the dining hall, watching the scene
unfold in horror. The dragon glanced back at Ryoma and Xander, who had called Kamui's name,
and looked back to the human before it. Kamui extended his hand gently towards the dragon but
didn't touch it.

"We're all waiting for you, Kana," Kamui murmured to the dragon, his youngest daughter. "Shiro
and Siegbert, safe, are waiting for you. Nina is worried for you. Ophelia will want to see you
when she wakes. Your daddy Niles is fighting Iago to put an end to your suffering once and for
all. All your aunts and uncles are concerned for your wellbeing," he smiled at the dragon, at Kana.
"And I love you, Kana. I love you more than there are stars in the sky."

The dragon listened, and the dragon understood. It bridged the gap with a low-pitched whine, and
touched its snout to Kamui's hand in surrender. Kamui smiled at the dragon before a bright light
engulfed them both. He closed his eyes.

When he opened them, Kana was in his arms, blinking the last of her tears away.

"Do you mean it?" she whispered. "Do you love me?"

"I would never lie to you about something like that," Kamui promised, drawing her to his chest for
a tight embrace. He caressed her let-down hair softly, avoiding all the tangles made by her time in
captivity. There would be a lot to smooth out, but later on.

"More than the stars in the sky?" she asked again, huddling closer.

"Yes."

"That's a lot of stars," she remarked, some of her usual playfulness slipping into her voice.

"Indeed." And he held her. In all her bloodied, beaten, childish glory, he held his daughter like she
was the last thing he had in this world, and did not let her go until she fell asleep. Even then, it
was only to Niles, who came to get him once Ryoma, Xander and himself had effectively
neutralized Iago.

"I'll take her to the horses with the rest of the wounded," Niles murmured to his husband, gently accepting his younger daughter in his arms. "You took quite a beating, too. I'll have to kiss you all over when we get home."

"I have something important to do before we go home," Kamui had told him grimly, caressing Kana's bloodied hair carefully. Niles understood. He always did.

"I've done my worst," he replied, making sure Kana was asleep. "Your brothers would like to execute him where he stands. But I told them to wait for you first."

"I won't be long," Kamui promised, and they parted ways.

Niles took his daughter outside, where Odin had brought the horses to the courtyard. Shiro and Siegbert were resting under his watch, gathering strength for the journey ahead. Niles has done his best with a patchwork of their injuries, but a real healer would have to see them as soon as possible.

Odin perked when he saw him approach, and his tired face brightened considerably when he saw Kana safe in his arms.

"The dragon princess is back amongst us," he remarked in relief, making space for his fellow retainer to sit next to him. "I am glad."

"You know, your appearances are pretty deceiving," Niles rerouted the conversation, sitting with Kana comfortable in his lap. He pulled his worn-out staff from his belt before extrapolating. "That earlier trick with the annihilation of the courtyard, that was something alright."

"I don't advertise myself as a weapon of mass destruction. I was just... overwhelmed," Odin frowned. "But I am a chosen one, after all!" He then smirked cockily at Niles, who was healing Kana's more superficial injuries dutifully. "And you, Niles... I never knew you were such a family man!"

"Oho, what can I say?" Niles smiled good-naturedly, caressing Kana's unmarred cheek for good measure. "Not having a father has made me curious about what it takes to be one!"

"With your kids running around causing trouble like this, you've got your work cut out for you," Odin teased.

"Ah, but you see, Odin... I've discovered that I do have hidden feelings of nurturing after all. And that's what makes me a good father."

"Have you been telling yourself that to sleep better at night?" Odin teased.

"Oh, shut it. I've been drinking to sleep better at night," Niles rolled his eyes.

"Whoa, man, that's dark. Darker than me, and my name is Odin Dark. You okay?"

"I'm kidding," Niles waved him off. "Point is, I'm a good father."

"Sure," Odin indulged his companion.

"Right, now the real question," Niles put down his exhausted staff, and inspected Kana's scarred eye. "Do you think I should gift her an eyepatch? We could match until it heals."
Odin just laughed. It finally felt like things had gone back to normal.

...-...-...-...-...-...

'Normal' was an overstatement.

It took a while for the three to recover from their experience. At the hands of the dedicated team of healers, their wounds closed right up (and Kana was disappointed when she was told she didn't need to wear her dad's eyepatch anymore), but the memories stayed for months to follow.

But it was a work in progress. Even when the nightmares became overwhelming, there would always be someone around to soothe them. To remind them that they were loved. And thus, the children learned and became stronger from their traumatic experience, although their parents knew that they'd be keeping their emotional baggage on them for a long time yet.

It showed in their routines, but instead of disrupting the war march, it only served to solidify the bonds between the people who fought so closely together. So that when, months later, they prevailed over the Silent Dragon Anankos, victory only felt that much sweeter.

Mitama would write a poem regarding the incident that would record in such few words so many grand emotions that it would later become one of her most famous works. And not only as a literary delight, but also as a warning. To anybody who tried to lay their hands on any of the children again.

'Hell hath no fury

Like madness of a father

Who has lost a child.'

End Notes

Iogo is a brand of yogurt and I actually kinda like it. Visit my castle and grab some milk to make yogurt with. Also, cool skills. If you can outrun my units, that is ;) My address is 05094-98758-52700-67350

Okay so I kept the kids' moms anonymous so you can plug whatever hair colour you want. But if you squint, you can see all my fav gay pairings showin up at least once. Ophelia/Shiro is like my only straight pair. Anyway, idk how Nina and Kana exist in this verse but they do bc I love them. And I love Ophelia. Ophelia is so fucking cool. Reclass Ophie as a witch and never regret your life again, guaranteed. Also, Shiro and Siegbert are precious and don't get enough love.

Okay, so is Dragon Fang the coolest looking skill or what?? Partially transforming your body into a dragon!!?? Wicked cool!! Only other skill to look super swag is Warp. Witches are bomb.

I had more to say but I have a job interview in 8 hours so I gotta run. Hope you liked this!! Please take the time to love your Fire Emblem baes today!
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!