

HAMMER & POWDER

SEVEN BROTHERS 1



MECANIDEDD

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MEGAN DERR

The Kingdom of Rinaha is all that stands between the violent, greedy Boorna and the rest of the continent, and they do so by way of the Wall of Gamala, an enormous undertaking that runs the length of the southern end of the continent, standing strong for more than two hundred years.

Maintaining the Wall is an expensive undertaking, one that other countries are reluctant to contribute significantly to, despite the fact they benefit greatly from its existence. In an effort to change that, the king of Rinaha arranges a marriage to a powerful Aaran noble.

Hideki, better known as Warhammer, is playing escort for his brother Saburo, the chosen candidate being sent off to marry the nephew of the king of Aaran. Shortly after arrival, though, Saburo runs away, with only a letter to explain what he's done. Now it is Hideki, ill-suited to political games, who must keep anger and wounded pride from erupting into war.

Meanwhile, back on the Wall, his twin brother Daisuke discovers the enemy is using children to do what their soldiers cannot, and in rescuing them, finds himself in exactly the sort of situation he prefers to avoid. On top of that, his brother Jiro, General of the Wall, expects him to entertain foreign guests, despite the fact everyone knows not to trust delicate situations to the man known as Gunpowder.

Hammer & Powder
Seven Brothers 1
By Megan Derr

Published by Megan Derr

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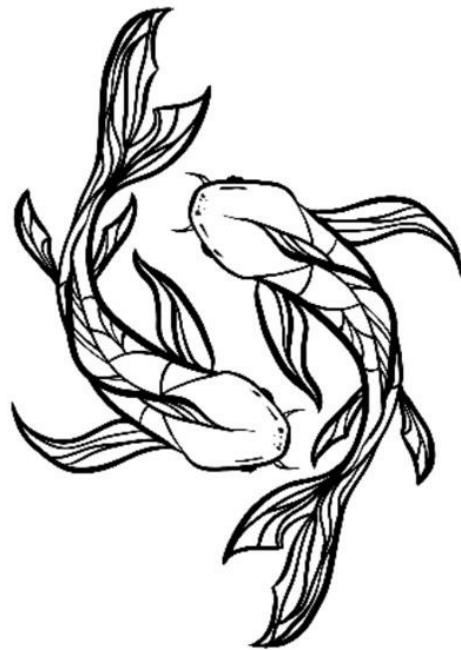
To Neil Ellice,

Thank you for being Soap, and an overall wonderful person

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CHAPTER ONE

Thunder rolled along the valley, the rain pounded the earth with renewed force, and Hideki gave serious consideration to drowning his moons-rejected brother in the water that was already more than halfway up his boots. Thank the moons he'd worn his griffon hide Dashings.

He looked out beyond the relative safety of the trees sheltering them from the worst of the storm and sighed. He should be on the Wall with Daisuke, not stuck with Saburo traveling into Aaran to see him foisted upon some poor, unsuspecting bastard. Though he supposed the person waiting for Saburo could be just as irritating. That would be justice of a sort—though it was more likely everyone else who would suffer. Saburo was infuriatingly immune to his own obnoxiousness.

"Stop sulking," Saburo chided from the warm, dry confines of his carriage. "I brought you along as an impressive presence, not a scowling threat."

"You would be the only one," Hideki retorted.

Saburo scoffed. "When we want to present a hostile front, we bring Daisuke and you know it. Now please stop acting like you're on your precious Wall and remember we're going to be among civilized people."

Hideki lifted the two middle fingers of his left hand in a crude gesture. "If you wanted a good impression to come along to cater to your whims, you should have brought Ryunosuke." Their youngest brother, and their mother's favorite, though she'd never admit it. He could be, and often was, an absolute brat, but he could also be sweet and charming when he felt like it. Of the seven of them, Ichiro, Jiro, Saburo, and Ryunosuke were considered the civilized ones.

"I have no desire to have my betrothed seduced away from me, thank you very much."

Hideki sighed again. "I should be on the Wall."

"Your precious Wall will manage just fine without you for a few days." Saburo flicked a hand. "Daisuke won't actually destroy it, no matter how out of control his temper gets. If he destroyed the Wall, he'd have to go home, where Mother would actually get hold of him."

A bare smile twitched at Hideki's lips. In all of Rinaha, his twin brother feared but one thing: the woman who'd given birth to them. It was a fear Hideki shared, but Daisuke had slightly more cause to be afraid.

"Are we going to sit here all day? I don't want to start off by arriving late."

"You'd rather show up half-drowned, all that lovely Fukui silk ruined and your pretty hair a sodden mess?"

Saburo shot him a nasty look. "Mock me, go ahead. Only one of us brought six trunks of clothes along, and it wasn't me."

"Strictly speaking, three are clothes, one is shoes, one is miscellany, and the last is weapons."

"Why are you bringing an entire trunk of weapons!"

Hideki gave him a look. "You showed up with no warning and gave me no time to plan properly. I'm a soldier; we tend to bring weapons wherever we go. Now shut up and stop pestering me, or I'll see to it we don't arrive until tomorrow night and you wake up bald."

"I'm beginning to regret bringing you."

"Good. My scouts are returning; we should be moving again soon."

"Finally."

Hideki shot him a last warning look and swung up into the saddle of his courser. He heeled the horse forward to meet the scouts at the edge of the trees.

Mina saluted as she reached him, her fire team doing the same behind her. "Major, the ground rises half a call ahead and continues to do so. Clouds don't abate, unfortunately, but there is a stretch of forest. The roads are well-maintained after we clear the valley. Even Major Powder wouldn't fault them."

Hideki snorted at that. Daisuke would *always* find fault with any bit of engineering he hadn't done himself. "Thank you. Fall in. We're continuing on." He lifted his hand in the air and curled it into a fist. "Move out!" Pulling up the hood of his raincoat, he led the way back out into the relentless storm.

It took a little more than an hour to reach the trees, and another three after that to reach the estate of Lord Ameshi, Duke of Keshar, half-sister to the King of Aaran. Lord Ameshi had three children, and the second one was about Saburo's age, thirty-two, putting them a couple of years older than Hideki and his twin brother Daisuke.

As Saburo was also the most politically and socially adept of the family, he was the perfect candidate for this marriage that would hopefully bridge the last of the divides between Rinaha and Aaran, securing peace once and for all and, more importantly, additional funds that the Wall desperately needed. Everybody on the continent loved to benefit from the Wall, but nobody wanted to help pay for it.

They approached a towering wall made of the sandy red stone so common to the northwest corner of the continent. Daisuke hated the stuff when he was forced to use it, but adored when his targets made the mistake because he knew approximately fifty ways to turn it to dust, and he and his engineers were always coming up with more.

The portcullis lifted as they reached it, and Hideki sent Mina ahead to formally announce them. He lifted a hand in thanks to the guards in the gate tower. They continued on up a long, wide driveway that was made of the same red stone, framed and edged by elaborately shaped greenery, low lamps making the path visible in the rapidly descending dark.

As they reached the house, the doors opened and several servants came smoothly down the stairs to attend them. Hideki had barely dismounted

before his horse was led away and he was guided up the steps into what proved to be a large entryway. It wasn't like home, where they would take off their shoes before entering the house first, but similar.

Hideki peeled off his meticulously-fitted gloves and shrugged out of his heavy raincoat. His clothes were damp, but not unbearably so; they would suffice for the initial round of introductions. Hopefully all would go well, Saburo would settle in quickly, and Hideki would be allowed to return to the Wall.

He caught his reflection in a mirror and smoothed down what little hair he had, wiped a splash of mud from his cheek. "You should have given me more warning."

Saburo gave him a look. "If I'd done that, you'd have found some way to weasel out of it, probably by escaping over your precious Wall to pick a fight, and you'd have taken Daisuke with you, and Jiro would have just stuck me with a handful of strangers. Stop complaining."

Hideki returned the look with one that promised retribution would be forthcoming and turned back to the mirror to smooth down his rumpled uniform. Thank the moons he always kept at least two formal uniforms ready at all times. His cadets hated him for it, but Hideki had lost count of the number of times he'd needed them.

He fussed with his crests, medals, and badges, ranging from marks of rank to various honors and awards. He preferred not to wear the stupid things, minus his insignia of course, but formal dress required it, and whatever his griping, he did want to help Saburo. There was also that he was representing his kingdom, but he cared far less about that.

Nearby, Saburo was fussing in front of another mirror, mouth turned down in concentration. Saburo was tall like most of their family, but had none of the heft that made Hideki and Daisuke so intimidating. He was beautiful, the jewel of their family. Of the seven of them, Ichiro had been groomed as heir; Jiro, Hideki, and Daisuke had gone into the military; Noriaki had run off to see the world; Saburo had fallen into politics, and Ryunosuke was a spoiled brat who did as he pleased.

Seeing Saburo here, betrothed to a powerful family of a country they'd called ally for only a matter of months... If anyone could do this, it was Saburo, and His Majesty had known that. He would do his family, his king, all of Rinaha proud. This was also the kind of challenge that Saburo had

always wanted, the kind of life he was made for. Hideki was so proud of and happy for him, he nearly smiled.

People didn't summon Hideki for his smiles, though. He and Daisuke had what his mother called presence, and Ryunosuke so charmingly called a talent for looming menacingly while being too handsome for anyone to get mad about it. Especially when they were together. The number of times he and Daisuke had gotten grossly inappropriate offers from people...

Hideki shoved the rambling thoughts away and put his mind on the task at hand. Saburo was here to woo and charm; Hideki was a glorified accessory to that, the medal-bedecked war hero from the famous Wall of Gamala.

"Ready?" he asked.

Saburo hesitated, then set his shoulders and jaw. "Yes."

Hideki offered his arm, and Saburo took it with one of his sunny smiles. See, he could be a good, civilized brother on occasion.

Leaving the antechamber, they stepped into the main entry hall, where a cluster of people were gathered waiting. Lord Ameshi was as beautiful and imperious as the gossip had said. Her dark skin had red undertones that drew out the brilliant green of her eyes, and she was dressed in matching tones of green with red accents. To her right was a woman who looked like a younger version of her, which meant she must be Lord Harrisem, Viscount Shei, and Ameshi's heir. On Ameshi's left...

Hideki's fingers twitched.

This must be Lord Berrik, and he was most intriguing. He wasn't a beauty like his mother and sister, but he was trim, elegant, with spectacles that shielded familiar green eyes. He had a quiet demeanor about him, but a hint of smile and the loose, heavy tumble of brown and gold locks falling to his chin hinted at a less serious nature. He was dressed handsomely, but before Hideki could try to get a better look at the clothes, Lord Ameshi stepped forward, extending her arms, her voice strong and pretty as she spoke in clear, even Aarani. "Welcome, Lord Takahara. It's an honor to have you and your guest here."

Saburo took her hands and bowed over them. "Thank you, Your Grace, the honor is mine entirely."

Lord Ameshi introduced her children and some of the staff who'd gathered. Hideki listened with half an ear, more interested in making note of

the guards tucked into easily overlooked corners, the general layout of the surrounding area, gauging what the rest of the house might be like, the number of exits, any impediments that might be lurking. Places threats could lurk and hide, waiting to strike, where they might be overlooked in a search of the house.

He snapped back to full attention as Saburo gently tugged on his arm. "This is my esteemed brother, Major Hideki Takahara." Hideki twitched inwardly. It was always strange to hear his name given in the wrong order—and stranger still to hear his given name at all. Only their mother called him Hideki. Usually with a very particular tone reserved for him and Daisuke.

"Major Takahara, an honor to meet you," Lord Ameshi replied.

Hideki bowed. "The honor is mine, Your Grace. Please, call me Hammer, everyone else does."

Lord Harrisem's eyes widened, and she took a half-step forward. "Not the Warhammer himself? Truly?" Her face lit up at Saburo's nod. "What an honor to have you in our home!"

Hideki fought an urge to duck behind his brother. Saburo preened. Bastard. "I'm humbled Your Lordship recognizes me." His Aarani wasn't as polished as Saburo's, but hopefully it would see him through this already interminable visit. Saburo was going to be repaying this debt the rest of his life.

Harrisem stepped closer. "I always heard you and your twin brother were inseparable; I'm surprised he's not here as well."

"They would like to be inseparable, that much is true," Saburo replied, casting Hideki a sly look that said he knew he was being a brat and there was nothing Hideki could do about it, which was Saburo's favorite thing in the world. "However, we do not let them travel together if we can possibly help it, as chaos and trouble always follow closely in their wake. We try to confine their talents to the Wall."

Lord Berrick stirred at that, stepping forward to stand next to his sister. "The Wall of Gamala? I've heard it's quite the wonder, but I've never had the chance to see it for myself." The glint in his eye was familiar—it was the same look that filled Daisuke's eyes whenever he talked about the latest bit of trouble he and his engineers were causing. Saburo may have been better off bringing Daisuke if that was where Berrick's interests lay.

Which was typical. Everyone cared about the engineering marvel of

the wall and all of the wild tales associated with the Gamala Special Engineer Company. No one cared about the soldiers who went down the dangerous side of the Wall to keep everyone on it safe. Most days, Hideki was fine with that.

Other times, when pretty men and women paid him any attention, it was hard not to resent that attention was really for his oblivious twin.

"Even I concede it is rather a stunning sight," Saburo replied. "Nobody fawns over it quite like Hideki and Daisuke, but it is impressive, especially under their care."

The Wall of Gamala was a little over two hundred years old, a barrier between Rinaha and the kingdom of Boorna, a long-standing enemy with no interest in ever becoming an ally and every interest in destroying first Rinaha, and then the rest of the continent. Though the wall belonged to Rinaha, because they were all that stood between Boorna and the rest of the continent, the other countries helped to fund it and even loaned out soldiers to train and help there. Peace was new enough between Rinaha and Aaran that they'd not yet begun contributing. If Saburo could change that and get them to contribute more than the rest of the continent, countless improvements could be made to the Wall, making it more formidable than ever before.

Hence the real reason their mother had agreed to this marriage, and why Hideki had begrudgingly agreed when Saburo showed up out of nowhere to demand he serve as escort.

Lord Ameshi chuckled. "I know the sort of fawning you speak of. My late husband was the same way with his precious ships. Enough chit-chat, though, I'm sure you would like the chance to refresh yourselves. We'll have drinks waiting in the blue salon in an hour, and dinner will be in two hours. Welcome again to our home. It's truly an honor and pleasure to have you."

Saburo kissed both her cheeks, then did the same with the other two, lingering a bare extra moment with Berrik. Hideki bowed low again and shadowed Saburo up the stairs.

Once alone in the room to which he was escorted, Hideki sighed and let his shoulders slump. He would give anything to be back at the Wall, where he did not have to pretend he was as capable of these things as most of his family. Where he was not stared at like some strange piece of art in a gallery. Where the people who sought him out sought *him* out, not access to Daisuke or Jiro.

His trunks had been placed in front of the enormous bed in one corner of the large room. Hideki unlocked them and quickly found the clothes he sought. Saburo might mock him, but it was also one of the reasons he'd chosen Hideki rather than Daisuke, who owned only enough clothes not to get yelled at by their mother.

Stripping off his damp clothes, Hideki washed quickly in the warm water that had been left and pulled on dark gray breeches with black piping up the sides, and a black military-style jacket with silver piping and a stiff standing collar with embroidered orchids. He pulled on black boots from one of the small trunks, and from the other small trunk selected four daggers that went into hidden sheaths and a handgun that went into a special pocket at the small of his back. He put extra ammo in another pocket, then combed his hair and pulled on gloves the same gray as his breeches.

The final touch was a bit of cologne, a lighter fragrance chosen specifically because the scents were favorable in Aaran. His family constantly bemoaned his manners and awkwardness with people, but they had never found flaw with his appearance. Saburo was the most beautiful of them, followed closely by Ryunosuke, but Hideki easily outstripped them in style. And spending, which Ichiro never missed an opportunity to tease him about.

When he was finally ready, he headed out to the hallway to wait for Saburo, who appeared a short time later in a handsome gown with a low, square cut bodice. Unlike the gowns popular in Aaran, which were made of solid colors, or stripes, at most simple, subtle patterns, this one was made of a combination of deep blue velvet interspersed with strips of deep cream Fukui silk screen-printed with roses in coordinating shades of blue, from dark to pale. Around his throat was their mother's triple rope of blue pearls, set with an ivory cameo. The necklace had been a wedding gift from their father's mother; that she'd given the prized possession to Saburo spoke volumes about how important this was to his family. He'd already known that but seeing the pearls around Saburo's throat really drove the point home.

"One of these days I'm going to out-fashion you," Saburo said with a sigh. "I worked so hard on my new wardrobe too. How are you always ahead when all you do is shoot people and turn Jiro's hair gray?"

Hideki grinned. "Practice. Don't be jealous. I may have the clothes, but you're the most beautiful person in the room, as always."

Saburo sniffed but looked mollified.

"Those pearls suit you. I'm going to write Mother and tell her you lost them."

"Don't you dare!" Saburo hissed. "She is sixty-eight and in no condition for your childish pranks."

Their mother was in perfect health and in good enough condition to command the army if she so felt like it. "I'm adding that you called her old and frail."

Saburo heaved a long sigh. "You're such a child."

Hideki snorted at that but forbore comment as they reached the top of the stairs and headed down, thanking the servant who waited for them at the base to lead them to the appropriate salon. Another servant opened the door for them, and they swept inside.

The others were already gathered, Lord Harrisem and Lord Ameshi in conversation by a small fireplace, and Berrick reading a catalogue or something in one of the chairs gathered in a circle with a small sofa.

Berrick noticed them first, setting the catalogue aside and rising with a smile. "Hello, again." He strode up to them and offered his hands, bowing over Saburo's when he offered his own. "You look beautiful, my lord."

"Thank you, Lord Berrick. You cut a fine figure yourself."

He cut a figure far better than fine, but that wasn't for Hideki to say. Berrick was Saburo's affianced and would clearly be more interested in Daisuke anyway. Hideki loved his twin more than anyone else in the world, but it would be nice if he didn't get all the attention just once.

Murmuring the appropriate platitudes, Hideki then excused himself and joined Lords Ameshi and Harrisem. "Lord Harrisem, I'm told you were recently married yourself. Congratulations."

"Second marriage, yes, thank you," Harrisem said with a smile. "My wife apologizes she could not be here for such an important occasion. The pregnancy has been hard on her, and she's been ordered to full bedrest, so I sent her off to the city to be close to her healers and every comfort she could dream up."

"I wish her health and happiness."

"Thank you. Tell us about life on the wall, if you're comfortable doing so, of course. They say Gamala is a veritable city in its own right."

"More like a glorified war camp," Hideki said with a laugh. "It's true

that we operate much like a city—well, a large town more like. There are approximately twenty thousand soldiers on the wall at any given time, and another five thousand civilians with special clearance. As you're going to be family, you are welcome to visit any time to tour it for yourself."

He'd rather shoot his own foot off than waste an entire day showing the wall to jumpy, ill-prepared tourists, but Saburo would kill him if he didn't make the offer.

"I will keep that in mind, for certain," Harrisem said with a small laugh. "Don't make the offer to Berrik, though, or he'll pack his bags tonight. He's been obsessed with the Wall since he was a boy and first found father's dusty old engineering books."

"He would get along marvelously with Daisuke," Hideki replied. "He's been building and creating since we were little."

"So how do the pair of you come by your unique epithets?" Ameshi asked. "I have them correct? Hammer and Powder? I'm sure it's common knowledge to most, going by the judgmental look my daughter is giving me, but I'm afraid I'm terrible at keeping up with such things."

"I'm always amazed people *do* keep up with what the pair of us get up to," Hideki said, sighing inwardly. "Strictly speaking, it's Warhammer and Gunpowder, but everyone shortens them. The simple answer is that I'm good at hitting things, and he's good at shooting them." Or occasionally blowing them up, but that wasn't really a fit remark for proper company. "We're good soldiers, though our brother Jiro surpasses us."

"General Takahara, I recall him from the treaty signing," Ameshi replied. "Handsome man, got plenty of looks and offers, I suspect. Quiet, very still."

"Yes, he's always been naturally inclined thus." Hideki left out the skills had been further honed over the years Jiro had spent on a special forces team where he spent his time creeping around in the dark to kidnap or kill people. Jiro was silent these days less from inclination and more from invisible wounds.

Nobody ever wanted to hear about that side of soldiering, though. Of war. They wanted medals and stories of battle and valor, with all the horrible bits removed or glossed over.

Thankfully, Saburo and Berrik joined them at that moment, and Hideki was able to resume the vastly more familiar and comfortable role of

silent, easily ignored observer.

If he wished he could be otherwise, well... too bad. He'd made his choices. He'd live with the lonely results. Thankfully, Saburo had promised he only needed to stay a few days, the week at most. After that, Hideki could return to the Wall, to Daisuke and all their friends. To doing what he was good at, the only thing it often felt he was good for, as nobody seemed to know what to do with him and Daisuke otherwise.



CHAPTER TWO

"That explosion was not my fault," Daisuke said.

On the other side of the desk, his brother Jiro stared back unimpressed. "I have at least fifty reports in my filing cabinet that attest otherwise, Major."

"I was asleep at the time, and I have enough sense not to blow up things on this side of the wall," Daisuke snapped. "I'm reckless, not incompetent."

Jiro sighed, looking exactly like their mother when she delivered yet another lecture on why Daisuke and Hideki really needed to stop throwing things off the roof of the family manor. "Well, I can't argue with that. What happened?"

"Don't ask me, ask your stupid fucking artillery. I would in particular ask Battery 8 about their latest delivery of ogre powder and why they're too fucking stupid to handle it correctly *with the handling instructions burned into the barrels.*"

"I have a headache," Jiro said, pinching the bridge of his nose.

"Well, that's not my fault either."

"For once."

Daisuke huffed but didn't argue. "Can I go now?"

"No, you may not," Jiro replied, dropping his hand. "When is Hideki returning?"

"Ask Saburo," Daisuke said, still bitter about that. No warning, not even a token request if Daisuke would accompany him as well. Nobody wanted him for anything unless it involved explosions or headshots. "Tell me when you find out, because I really need him back here."

Jiro's gaze sharpened. "Why?"

"Did you not get any of my fucking reports?" At Jiro's glower, he tacked on, "General."

"What's going on? I have so many reports I could burn down the wall with them."

"I marked them urgent!"

"So are all the rest," Jiro said, rubbing at his temples. "Just tell me already."

Daisuke huffed again. What was the point of all the stupid reports people were always making him write if nobody was going to read them? He could have saved them all a lot of time and trouble by just coming directly to Jiro in the first place. "There's been strange movement."

"Strange? In what sense?"

"In the sense that if I didn't know any better, I'd swear there were *children* on the downside," Daisuke said. Downside was what they called the Boorna side of the wall, as it was actually a steeper drop than upside, or the Rinaha side of the wall. "Small figures, too light to be tipped by our land traps, out there setting traps of their own. No severe casualties or injuries yet, but lots of lost fingers and toes, and damn near a whole hand."

"A hand counts as a severe injury," Jiro said mildly. "Shouldn't this have been brought directly to my attention?"

"Tell that to everyone who said I was losing my fucking mind, and I should just write you reports instead of taking advantage of our relationship and stealing your valuable time," Daisuke said with yet another huff, getting riled up just thinking about every sanctimonious, jealous piece of garbage—

"Give me the names of these people telling one of my best majors not

to talk to me, and I want a team sent out to investigate these possible children."

"Fine and fine. Can I go *now*?"

"No, did you really think you were going to get off that lightly?"

Daisuke didn't stamp his foot, but it was close. "I didn't do anything this time!"

Jiro gave a short laugh. "No, you've actually been pretty well behaved of late, which is why I'm trusting this task to you."

"It better not involve people," Daisuke said. "You know how I feel about *people*."

Jiro smiled, sharp and devious. Anyone who thought he wasn't as bad as Daisuke and Hideki was a fool. "There's a delegation from Belemere visiting. You're the only one who speaks it well enough not to embarrass yourself, so you're going to attend them the whole of the trip."

"No, I am not!" Daisuke bellowed.

With entirely too much cheer, Jiro replied, "You don't have a choice, Major. Orders are orders."

"I hate you," Daisuke hissed.

"They'll be here this afternoon, approximately fourteen hundred. Try to appear civilized. It's you and Hideki they really want to see anyway, as usual."

"Yeah, yeah. Can I leave *now*?"

"Dismissed," Jiro said drolly.

Daisuke did a sharp military turn and left the office, slamming the door behind him, and stormed off back along the wall to the tower that was his domain.

'Wall' and 'tower' really did not do either of those things justice. The wall itself was massive, two stories high on the upside, not including the towers, with an underground portion that on the downside made it three stories high. Wide enough to require a road running through the middle, one lane for each direction, though that didn't stop any number of cadets, privates, and most brass from fucking up traffic anyway. A Corp of twenty-five thousand people, more or less, inhabited the wall, with another five thousand in guests and transient civilian workers always trickling in and out. Sprawling beyond the upside of the wall was a complex of support: houses, offices, warehouses, training grounds, and more.

Placed evenly along the length of the wall were the towers, starting at the western edge, all the way out to sea, and paced every five hundred ticks until ending at the eastern edge, also in the ocean. The whole of the wall was overseen by Jiro, who'd replaced the previous general seven years ago. Each tower was commanded by a colonel, except for Tower Nine, which was controlled by him and Hideki. It housed the entirety of his Special Engineer Corp, which unlike the rest of the army engineers actually got things done, and Hideki's Special Forces.

Normally they'd never put a tower under the command of two majors, but well, without Hideki and Daisuke and the unique abilities of their respective battalions, this whole place would collapse. The last time they'd tried to install a colonel to babysit them, the stupid bastard hadn't lasted a week.

"Major!" a voice called out as he drew close to his tower, "Orders just arrived from the General."

"Would these orders have anything to do with babysitting a bunch of useless Belemere civilians?"

"They are from Belemere, Major," the cadet replied with a sharp salute. "However, report says there are five in total, and all are military or former military."

"Any further details?"

"Lots, Major."

"Well, get to reciting, then, I haven't got all day," Daisuke replied, and resumed walking, forcing the cadet to all but run at his side.

"You want the names in the right order or the Belemeren order?" he asked between panting breaths.

"Just do it their way, makes it less confusing later."

"Yes, Sir. The primary guest is Colonel Harlen Vinmoore of the Belemeren 6th Battalion."

Daisuke almost stopped walking at that. "A colonel? Doesn't a visit of this importance merit something more like a general?" Of course, if it had been a Belemeren general, Jiro wouldn't have been able to fob this off on him. The jerk could have at least harassed one of his own colonels. Everyone accused Jiro of favoring his brothers, but really the exact opposite was true.

"Couldn't say, sir," the cadet said blandly as they made their way up the spiraling stairs in the tower to Daisuke's office. "He's accompanied by

Major Senti Loor, First Lieutenant Radir Maas, and two veterans, Lord Madera Ektow and Master Kole Burnser." He stopped just inside the office as Daisuke kept walking and stood at attention.

Daisuke spared him a glance before he started looking through the chaos that was his notes, reports, logs, and who knew what else. If he was going to be babysitting Belemerens starting that afternoon, he needed to finish up the next part of his ogre moss experiments. "Where in the fuck are my moss notes?"

"Desk, forward portside, under that report you still need to finish regarding what's left of Chiyoko's hand."

"Thanks. I'll get it done," Daisuke replied, dumping the report with all the others and smoothing out his crumpled notes. "What else do you have on these stupid visitors?"

"Colonel Vinmoore is highly regarded for his actions against Ruemri some years ago. Want a list of deeds and medals?"

"Deeds, yes. Medals, no."

Daisuke half-listened as the cadet rattled off a long list of 'accomplishments' that really just amounted to sanctioned murder. Nobody liked to look at it that way, but that didn't mean it wasn't true. If you weren't killing in self-defense or by accident, it was murder.

"Next," he said when the cadet was finished. "You've lasted what, nine days? New record." His cadets rarely lasted more than five; the last record-holder had made it seven.

"My name is Shouhei, Major, if you cared yet," Shouhei replied in that same carefully bland tone of his.

Daisuke laughed. "Last ten days. Next guest, please, Cadet."

"Sir. Majors Loor and Maas have pretty standard careers, nothing particularly standout. Both are infantry. They're each fluent in multiple languages, with a great deal of overlap. Do you want them?"

Daisuke snorted. "I don't think you can offer up other people to me, Cadet, especially ones we haven't even met yet."

Shouhei gave him a withering look.

"No, I don't fucking care what languages they speak. Next."

"Lord Madera Ektow is the second son of the Duke of Marken, and they have some distant ties to the royal throne. He...Oh." Shouhei fell silent.

Daisuke turned sharply, taking in the shock on Shouhei's face that

quickly turned to dismay and sorrow. "What?"

"He was a major, part of the King's Own brigade that defected to Tallideth. He was severely injured in the Tallideth Explosion. Dual AK. Returned to Belemere when his father died unexpectedly, has been helping his older brother with... just says private family and estate matters... but was asked to come along on this trip for reasons not listed. The remaining guest, Master Kole Burnser, served Ektow in the military and retired when he did to continue serving him as a civilian. Not much more about him, just age, rank, and so forth."

Dual AK. The abbreviated way of saying he'd lost both of his legs above the knee. The meds had an even more laborious way to say it. An injury that traumatic and they were making him come here? Because it was definitely a matter of *making*. No one who'd been through a nightmare like the Tallideth Explosion agreed to return to the violence and chaos that had nearly gotten them killed in the first place. Not unless they wanted to die or had lost their fucking mind. Or turned essentially rabid. Daisuke had plenty of experience with all three.

On the other hand, a visitor like that meant Daisuke's life just got a little easier. No one with such debilitating injuries was allowed on the wall; it was too dangerous. That was only four guests he'd have to deal with—no, three, since the last one was only coming along to help the injured one. Three guests, one of them a Lieutenant Colonel who probably thought he had better things to do with his time.

There'd be no getting out of going to a formal dinner with all of them, but Jiro would be taking the brunt of that, including the expense. All Daisuke had to do was show three of the five around the wall, blow a few things up to satisfy them, and then get them off his fucking wall.

"Major Powder!"

"Damn this day to the Moons," Daisuke snarled, and bellowed down the stairs, "I'm coming!"

He charged down, faster than was wise, because nobody ever used that tone at that volume unless there was a real problem. Reaching the bottom, he snapped, "What?" as people came up with his armor and weapons, save for the sidearm that he wore at all times.

"The unknowns were spotted again, closer this time, and together rather than lengths apart." That came from Captain Riku, his second-in-

command. "I've sent out squads, and Major Hammer's forces are moving, but I expect they'll be as wily as ever, Major."

Daisuke let out a long string of invectives. He fervently wished Hideki was here; he was much better at wading directly into the fray. Daisuke worked best at a distance. Conveniently, at a distance was how everyone preferred him.

This matter was far too fraught, though, to keep sending everyone else to get blown up and shot at trying to pin down at least two wily children, possibly more. They were so small and quick, and always in pairs, so identical looking in clothes clearly intended for adults, that it was hard to tell if there was one pair, or multiple.

"I'm going downside," he said, Shouhei behind him, other soldiers folding in around him to start taking orders for dispensing. "Notify Hideki's squads and our own. I want Yumiko's team with me. Is that my Truisto? Good. Clear it!" he bellowed as they reached the descent sector of the wall. There were no doors leading directly to downside, save for one emergency door at each tower that only the colonel in charge and Jiro could unlock, under constant heavy twenty-five hour watch.

A descent squad scrambled into action, setting up and testing the rigging that would lower Daisuke and the expedition squad to Downside.

Strictly speaking, there was a sizeable area between Rinaha and Boorna that was legally termed disputed territory, and the token reason for the start of the war eons ago. In reality, they all called it the Void. Nothing lived there; barely anything grew there, and only the most desperate animals went scavenging.

Far, far on the other end was Boorna's answer to the Wall: the Moat. Rinaha went up; Boorna went down. Breaking through either defense was impossible. So the stalemate with the odd round of fighting, and the Void continuously suffered between them.

It was a stupid, pointless war, but nobody paid Daisuke to give a fuck. They paid him to blow things up, and occasionally shoot something when the actual snipers were too busy elsewhere. Daisuke hated it. Not his fault he had the vision and the patience for it. He'd much rather do literally anything else.

He'd rather not be in the military at all anymore, but that wasn't an option either. Not according to everyone else, especially his family, who thought it a good place for his 'excitable temperament' and 'odd fascinations'

and thoroughly enjoyed the prestige that he and Hideki brought to the family.

If he dared to voice his real wishes to anyone but Hideki... Well, he'd tried that once years ago. Once was more than enough. Whenever he got stupid and considered trying again, he just had to remember the laughter.

When his expedition squad arrived, Daisuke called, "Down ready!"

"Down ready," the sergeant in charge of the descent squad replied. He and his team got them all harnessed and roped up. "Down go!"

"Down go," Daisuke repeated, and swung out over the wall, letting the harness and ropes take his weight. When he was sure of them, not that he ever doubted his soldiers' abilities to do their jobs, unlike the rest of the damned wall, he called out, "Down away!"

"Down away!" the sergeant echoed back, and with that Daisuke and the five who made up a standard expedition squad descended.

When they reached the bottom, a vast nothingness of eerie quiet and constant dread, Daisuke bellowed back up, "Up stand ready!"

"Up standing ready!"

"Let's move out," Daisuke said grimly. "What's the last visual on targets?"

"6-an," Yumiko, the sergeant in charge of this expedition squad, replied. "Ken, stay on the Major. You two, point. You two, rear. *You*," she added, glaring at Daisuke. "Don't do anything stupid."

Daisuke spread his hands. "I didn't bring anything that goes boom, and there's nothing to explode here anyway. All I want is to retrieve those little troublemakers fucking up my traps."

Yumiko grunted, clearly unconvinced, but only said, "Move out!"

The Void had once been a beautiful rolling valley filled with tall grass, ancient trees, even a brook and large pond. Only a trickle of water and a puddle remained now, the rest of the land a jumbled mess of brown and gray, with stumps, rocks that had once been boulders, and some scraggly trees and shrubs that were doing their level best to live in a place where everything else had given up.

There were also lots of traps, placed by both sides to make everyone's life even more difficult. Daisuke hated them, especially the landmines. Nothing was stupider than placing traps their own people too easily lost track of, all for the vague hope some poor schmuck from the other side would step on it.

He hated it. All of it. This wasn't what his skills were for, but if he dared to say that or try to leave...

Well, he and Hideki would never hear the end of it, and Jiro would take the brunt of it, because that made *perfect* sense. Wasn't like he had anywhere else to be, anyway.

The two soldiers on point did it slowly—smartly, consulting maps and charts to be sure nobody wound up in bits and pieces. When Daisuke got back, he was going to get an ass-kicking for going into the fray himself when as a Major he was supposed to stay his ass in place, but too bad. What was Jiro going to do? Demote him? Court Marshall him? Make him do chores? Given him more guests to babysit?

All right, possibly that last one, but he could only manage so many useless strangers at once, so they'd have to get in line.

"Hold!" Yumiko said, lifting her left hand and curling it into a fist. Daisuke didn't need to lift his spyglass to see what had drawn her attention: movement in a well, one of the many dugouts littered across the place, used by both sides to creep toward each other, usually at night, for intel or to lob something explodey.

He watched, scarcely daring to breathe, until there was more movement—a tiny little head bobbing up to see if they were still there. "What's my path?"

"Clear straight on according to the papers," one of the privates on point said, his tone dubious, because as hard as the expeditions and engineer squads tried, there was always at least one mine that didn't get marked.

They really were fucking *stupid*.

"Hold position, be ready to haul ass back to the wall," Daisuke said. "Don't argue with me, Sergeant. If I'm going to be reckless, *I'm* going to be reckless." He didn't inflict himself and his choices on anyone else more than he strictly had to. Except for Hideki, but that was different.

He left all his weapons, because if this was what he thought, the last thing he wanted was a couple of kids grabbing his guns in a panicked fit. They'd all just have to hope there wasn't something worse in the well using the kids as bait.

Taking a deep breath, Daisuke abruptly bolted, rushing the Well and jumping down into it, landing with a thud and surging toward the first thing he saw.

Sure enough, it was a child. A fucking child. The poor thing screamed as Daisuke caught them up and threw them over one shoulder. They didn't weigh much at all and felt as fragile as a fucking bird.

He didn't register more than that before the other one was on him, screaming bloody murder before sinking teeth into his hand. Daisuke swore, loudly and colorfully, and jerked free, tearing the wound further. Then he grabbed the bitey one and threw them over the other shoulder.

That made climbing out of the well more than a little difficult, but it had a rough incline on the south side, which was something. He held fast to his squirming captives and bellowed, "Back to the wall!"

The squad turned as one and ran, not even bothering to ask if he wanted help. Daisuke would have given anything for Hideki's effortless strength right then, but he'd make do with his own. They were twins, after all—he wasn't *that* disparate.

When they reached the wall, Daisuke nearly crashing into it between his speed and his additional weight, he shouted, "Up at speed!" He handed off one of the children to Yumiko, who barely managed to keep hold of her furiously wriggling charge.

The ropes were cast down, and they'd barely clipped on when they were hauled upward at speed as ordered. As he reached the top, two privates came forward to haul away the child he still held, still more fighting with the one Yumiko had taken.

"Take them to the empty storeroom, and make fucking sure it's clear. I'm going to speak with my brother." He discarded his descent gear, made certain his weapons were taken away to be properly stored, and stormed off along the wall back to the office it felt like he'd only just escaped from.

"Is he in?" he asked the man at the reception desk, one of three who were always there no matter the hour or occasion.

The man snorted. "Yes, but if you ruin his mood, Major..."

"Yeah, yeah. Get in line." Daisuke shoved open the door to Jiro's office. "I caught them."

"Caught who?" Jiro asked. "Stop barging into my office, how many times do I have to tell you?"

"You should just give up. The children that I mentioned earlier. That Boorna has been sending out to find mines and Moons know what else."

Jiro stared at him blankly a moment, then swore, threw the papers he

was reading on his desk, and surged to his feet. "What in the *fuck*. Children? Actual, real children?"

"Yes, actual real children," Daisuke hissed. "I don't know more than that, though, because I came straight here. If they're using them on one section of the wall, we have to assume they're being used across the entire wall."

"I don't need you telling me that!" Jiro snapped, but clearly more at the situation than Daisuke. "Fuck. That's a new low, even for Boorna. Go. Get whatever information you can, send it to me ASAP. I'll put out a WAC order. Dismissed."

Daisuke left, all but running back to his tower and bounding up the stairs to the second level, where they'd recently cleared out a storeroom in anticipation of storing some components they needed, obtained via means Jiro didn't need to know anything about.

Inside were the children, Yumiko, and a handful of privates clearing the room and hauling in furniture, food, and other items.

The children, sitting against a wall huddled up together, surged to their feet and glared fierce enough to make Jiro proud as they saw Daisuke.

"Have they said anything?"

"Only in Boorna, not an accent I can parse, though I can tell easy enough it's not the kind of language kids should be using," Yumiko said with a snort.

"*We said you're all going to pay for this,*" the rightmost child spat. Both had hair shorn close to their scalp—more likely it had been shaved completely to get rid of lice and was only now starting to grow back in. The clothes they wore were definitely intended for adults, the overlong sleeves and legs rolled up and badly stitched in place, the boots probably stuffed with scrap fabric to keep them in place.

"*You're going to get baths, then you're going to eat, and then we're going to talk,*" Daisuke replied. They looked so affronted that he could understand and speak to them that Daisuke laughed. "Get them clean. Use my washroom if you need to, just make certain it's scoured afterward. The last thing the wall needs is another bout of vermin." He sighed. "Inform me when they're ready, the General wants information as quickly as we can get it."

He could probably terrify it out of them, but what good would that do? Anyway, Daisuke might not be the most pleasant person in the world

according to most, but he wasn't a monster. Not the kind who terrorized children, anyway. They'd be a lot more forthcoming if they were treated like *people*, not landmine detectors, for Moons' sake. "Keep me informed. Where the fuck is Shouhei?"

"Who the fuck is Shouhei?" Yumiko asked.

"Me," Shouhei said dryly from behind them. "The latest cadet thrown to Tower Nine. Major, your guests have arrived."

"They're not due for two more hours!" Daisuke said, and took out his pocket watch just to triple check himself. "Two and a *half* hours, actually. What the fuck are they doing here already? Where are they?"

"On the wall, looking at everything like all guests," Shouhei replied in that bland tone Daisuke was finding increasingly hilarious. If Shouhei actually lasted a whole ten days, he might just insist the bastard remain indefinitely.

Daisuke wanted to scream. Fuck this whole stupid day. "Fine, I guess I'd better go greet them, even though I'm not properly dressed for this shit yet." He sighed. "Keep me apprised of the children." He walked off before anyone could reply, barreling down the stairs. They were actually a tight double spiral, one side for up, one for down, divided by a low median that got jumped a hundred times a day for one reason or another.

At the base level—well, wall level, the tower kept going all the way to the downside ground level—he was met by Riku, who looked equally harried. "They aren't supposed to be here yet!"

"Who are you telling?" Daisuke grouched. "Come on, let's get this over with."

He strode out of the tower doors, propped open despite regulation because nobody had time to open and close doors five thousand times a day, and across the pavilion to where a glaringly out of place group was gathered, their expressions a mixture of rampant curiosity, disapproval, and exhaustion.

There were also *five* of them, when there should damn well only be three, four at most. Daisuke was *done* with this day. Every polite word he'd been trying to muster flew out of his head. "What in the *fuck* are *you* doing on this wall?" Everyone turned sharply to stare at him, but only two faces scowled—the man in the wheelchair, and the man who must be his assistant. "You must have read the rules! You're a liability!"

"I am not a fucking *liability*," the man snarled. What the hell was his

name? Where the fuck was Shouhei when Daisuke needed him? Damn it, what was it? Something painfully Belemeren. Ektow, that was it. Lord Madera Ektow. "How dare you."

"How dare you!" Daisuke snapped right back. "What happens if they decided on a fire shower? Hmm? What if there's a fucking explosion? I doubt you want to be in another one of those, do you, my lord?"

"You fucking *ass*," Ektow snarled. "We are here as guests—"

"I don't fucking care if you're here because you're marrying General Takahara, I don't tolerate liabilities on my wall."

Ektow sneered, ignoring as everyone tried to shut him up, wheeling himself forward. "Really, Major? Because the way I've heard it, one of the many things you don't care about is anyone's safety."

Daisuke drew back as though slapped, bile in his throat, eyes stinging with the force of the bad memory. Once, only once, had he fucked up so badly. When he was *fourteen*. Whatever anyone said about him, he never risked the safety of others a smidge more than the army required. "Get off my fucking wall," he hissed.

It was the stupid foreign Colonel who stepped forward and said, "You have no right—"

"Get them off my wall!" Daisuke bellowed. "Now! And you can tell General Takahara when he comes for my head that he can go to hell too." Turning on his heel with his usual precision, Daisuke stormed back into the tower, ignoring when Ektow called after him in a voice that almost sounded like the stupid bastard was sorry. As if.

Nobody was ever sorry, not when it came to the nonexistent feelings of the impervious, heartless Major Gunpowder.



CHAPTER THREE

Hideki woke before the sun was up, a habit so long ingrained he doubted he'd ever know what it was like to wake after the sun. Splashing his face with cold water to banish the grogginess, he dressed in his training pants, wrapping and knotting the sash that secured them in the dark with ease before retrieving a towel that he draped over the back of his neck and his shoes before heading out.

As the weather was nice, he didn't bother with a jacket or even a shirt. Back home, he wouldn't even bother with shoes, but he didn't know the flora here and didn't want to risk injury to his feet. On a normal day, he and Daisuke sparred together. Without Hideki, Daisuke probably wasn't bothering, and growling at everyone more than usual.

Shoving away the ache that was Daisuke's absence, Hideki slipped his shoes on and stepped out the back door of the house, nodding politely to the women who were getting started on the day's work for the kitchen, plucking and cleaning recently slaughtered chickens. They stared at him like always,

eyes wide and faces red, probably from outrage at a man walking around half-naked. Their whispers chased him, too low for him to understand, but furiously said.

Hideki was surprised only that no one had yelled at him yet.

Well behind the house, past a row of carefully cultivated trees, was a beautiful field of long grass and white flowers, a small, burbling brook that lent soothing sound as he practiced. Hanging his towel on a low branch, he moved to the section of field that had become his practice ring and moved into the starting position.

From there, he flowed with the ease of practice from one form to another, bending, twisting, and turning. Once he'd warmed up, he moved onto harder forms, kicking and swinging, high then low, sweeping, blocking, until he was panting and dripping sweat.

He paused to wipe his face and splash it with cool water from the creek, and then went on to shadow sparring, pouring out every frustration and uncertainty into his punches, swings, kicks, fighting back every whisper of doubt that tormented him. Just a few more days. The end of the week and he could go back to the Wall. Go back to what he knew, to where he had a place, even if he didn't like that place very much.

An embroidery shop, that was what he wanted. A place where he could do custom embroidery for people, sell books of patterns, unique threads and more. Who cared if he was nobility? War certainly didn't, and neither did Hideki. He'd open it right next to, or across from, the shop that Daisuke wanted to open making things that would help people: medicines, artificial limbs, and whatever else came into his head.

No more fighting. No more blowing people up. No more shooting.

They'd have more luck asking for the Moons.

So Hideki buried the wishes and wants like always and focused on his forms, until he'd gone through the whole set three times and finally reached the winding down portion.

He was halfway through it when he heard a gasp and the soft snort of a curious horse. Hideki whipped around, arms up—and then relaxed as he registered Berrick, who was dressed in riding clothes but currently leading the horse, a riding hat in his other hand. The ensemble was a handsome dark brown with reddish tones, with embroidery at the collar that Hideki would love to take a closer look at.

"Good morning," Berrick said, looking amused for reasons Hideki could not determine. "Have you done this every morning you've been here?"

"This?" Hideki blinked. "You mean practice? Yes, of course. The best way to hone the body and maintain an edge is to practice every day."

Berrick only looked more amused. "How do you leave the house?"

"Through the kitchen?" Hideki frowned. "Is something wrong? I know I'm a bit, uh, underdressed, but I didn't think it would be a problem so early in the day."

"A problem?" Berrick snorted. "I think the only complaint the kitchen will have is when you leave. Beautiful tattoos, if you do not mind my saying so."

This conversation was only growing more baffling, but at least the tattoo comment was something he could cling to. "Thank you. Daisuke and I had the chest pieces done when we turned twenty, and we get them touched up every few years." The tattoos, exact duplicates, were of a pair of koi swimming in blue waters, with lily pads and lotus blossoms above them. They'd required a month of work. They also had the family crest, a bundle of grasses bent to form concentric circles with a small firefly in the center of the smallest circle, between their shoulder blades. The rest of Daisuke's back was covered in his favorite poem, and Hideki's in flowers. His arms were wrapped in geometric patterns, a different one on each arm, which came all the way up to his shoulders. "Do you always go for morning rides? I'm surprised we've not crossed paths sooner."

"Normally I go west, out to the orchards, but the harvesting begins today, and I didn't want to be in the way. What are you practicing, exactly?"

"It's called judo where I'm from, a style of unarmed combat. The Takahara family has a long history with judo, and all our family knows it to some degree, though Jiro and I are the only to pursue it seriously." Ardently, in his case, though he liked it for the discipline, the artistry, not the ability to hurt people, not that anyone ever asked. "Is something wrong with your horse?"

"My horse? Oh, because I'm walking. No, I stopped so he could drink from the brook, and then heard something strange coming from the field." Berrick smiled, a hint of slyness in it. "I wasn't expecting to come across a half-naked Rinian, that's for certain."

Hideki laughed, even though inwardly he cringed. Saburo had brought

him along to be impressive, not make a fool of them. So much for it being early enough he wouldn't bother anyone. Stifling a sigh, he fetched his towel and wiped down before draping it over his neck once more. "Shall we return to the house, so I can make myself respectable once more?"

"I suppose duty calls," Berrick said with a sigh.

Hideki smiled in sympathy. "How do you usually spend your days?"

"I assist with the household, mostly. Neither my mother nor my sister have much patience for it, so I handle it. Not sure what they'll do when I marry and move away."

"No time for hobbies?" Hideki asked.

Berrick shrugged. "Every now and then I'm permitted to slip away, but I doubt I do anything that interests someone like you, Major."

"I see." A typical answer, as though Hideki was incapable of understanding or expressing interest in anything that wasn't a gun or a person in need of punching. Berrick would probably laugh himself silly to hear of Hideki's love of clothes, especially sewing and embroidery.

All his joy in the conversation snuffed, Hideki was grateful to see they'd reached the house. "I suppose I will see you—" He stopped as someone came bursting out the back door. Mina. "Major! Major! You must come at once."

"What's wrong?" Hideki asked sharply, catching her up as she barreled toward him. "Mina, get yourself together. What's wrong?"

"It's your brother. He's gone."

Hideki's heart dropped into his stomach. "What do you mean *gone*."

"Sorry, Major," Mina said, and drew herself up, snapping a salute. "Lord Saburo is missing, as are many personal effects. There is only a sealed envelope bearing your name left behind."

"*What!*" Berrick said. "What— How—"

Hideki all but ran into the house, through the kitchen and up the stairs, then down the hallway to Saburo's room, where Lords Ameshi and Harrisem were already there, faces filled with fury. In Ameshi's hand was a torn open envelope, and Hideki could see his name written in Rinian on the front. "Why are you opening letters addressed to me?"

Ameshi's head snapped up, and Harrisem jerked around to face him. "Why are you running around my house half naked like some harlot?" Ameshi snapped. "Why has your brother run away? What have you two been

scheming this whole time?"

Ignoring the harlot comment for the moment, Hideki strode up to her and yanked away the letter. "I have been scheming nothing, Your Grace. Saburo brought me along at the last moment, with scarcely time to pack, to help make an impressive showing. If I'd known he was going to do something like this, I would have tied him to his damned bed. If you will excuse me, I'll go make myself look less like a harlot."

He stormed into his room, paying no heed to the angry huffing and exclaiming behind him. Slamming the door shut and locking it, he went to the window where he had better light and pulled out the letter Ameshi had clearly helped herself to.

For all the good it would have done her, as for all that Saburo was a trained politician who spent a great deal of his time on correspondence, his handwriting was appalling. People had trouble reading Rinian when it was typed and neatly written. Reading Saburo's handwriting? Nearly required a degree all its own.

Hideki,

I'm sorry for doing this to you, for leaving you with the burden of cleaning up the mess I have made of everything. You won't believe me, but I am trying to do the right thing and help to stop this stupid war by lending my assistance to a group of Boornian rebels. I hope when we meet again someday, dearest brother, that it will be because peace has finally been achieved, and I can introduce you to the person I've fallen in love with and am doing this for and with.

Give everyone my love and apologies.

You'll be all right. You can do this. You and Daisuke aren't the warmongers everyone thinks.

All my love,

Saburo

Hideki was going to fucking *kill him*.

He balled the note in his fist, then swore and smoothed it out on the nearby writing desk before tucking it between the pages of a book to help flatten it further.

Stop this stupid war. Fallen in love with.

That fucking backstabbing bastard had chosen Boorna, cowardly, worthless Boornian rebels who never got a single damned thing done. Had

fallen in love with some bloodthirsty Boornian who had tricked him and would leave him for dead. Damn him and everyone else to hell.

Leaving the desk before he did something stupid like pitch it across the room, Hideki washed up in the large basin waiting in front of the fire, then pulled on the clothes he'd laid out the night before with high hopes for another successful day of helping Saburo build bonds with his new family.

The jacket was one of his favorites: ultra-fine dark blue wool with elaborate floral embroidery at the lapels and wide cuffs that he'd done himself over the span of two months, in silk thread of cream, pink, orange, and green, matched with cream breeches and dark brown Hanzou boots with gold trimmings and a blue heel. He tucked the letter into an inner pocket, and guns into special pockets made for them, and finished with knives in his boots.

He doubted he would need weapons, no matter how much more rotten this day got, but he hadn't lived this long by not being cautious. They already thought he was a glory-seeking warmonger and a harlot, what did a few weapons matter at this point?

Hideki brushed his hair, put his jewelry on, and finally returned to the hallway, where only a single servant stood waiting. "Major, Lord Ameshi and the others await you in the library."

"Understood. Where are my people?"

The servant shifted, fingers twitching at his sides, and he stared at the floor as he said, "Confined to quarters on Her Lordship's orders."

"I see. Thank you." There were going to be words about that. Hideki strode off through the house, downstairs to the library.

Ameshi, Harrisem, and Berrick awaited him like a grim tribunal. Hideki would give everything he owned to be anywhere else in the world right then. "I assume since you helped yourself to my message that there's no need to repeat its contents."

Ameshi regarded him coolly from where she sat behind her desk. "Where is he? What is your real goal here? What have you dragged my family into?"

"You read the note," Hideki said, frustration coiling in his gut. "You know as much as I do. Saburo asked me to come here as his escort, to show off my stupid medals and reputation as he got to know you all and settled in here."

"You expect me to believe that you, a soldier of notorious acumen,

was completely oblivious to your brother's scheming?"

"I'm a soldier, not a schemer. Anyone who knows me will tell you that," Hideki replied. "I'm not a political player like my parents, Ichiro, and Saburo. I rarely even leave the Wall; where would I have the time?"

Ameshi rose sharply, hands slapped down on her desk. "Enough of this. You are confined—"

"I'm not confined anywhere," Hideki hissed. "Neither are my people. I don't deny Saburo has done something incredibly stupid, even unconscionable, but you aren't going to punish me and my people for crimes we did not commit. If you want us off your property, that is a more than reasonable demand I'll obey, but I won't tolerate being a prisoner."

"This is *my* house and *you* are the backstabbing ingrate humiliating me and mine with this traitorous behavior," Ameshi snarled. "You will not speak to me—"

"Oh, enough," Berrick said. "Mother, he's right in that we don't know who is guilty of what, and from what you said of the contents of the note, Lord Saburo acted alone. Until we can prove otherwise, we don't help the situation by acting this way."

"You will sit down and be silent, Berrick," Ameshi snapped.

Berrick's mouth flattened, but he only bowed his head slightly and stepped back, acceding to her orders.

Turning back to Hideki, she said, "You will return to your chambers and stay there until I say otherwise."

Hideki met her angry gaze and said, "Make me."

He barely noticed the alarmed swearing around them, attention only for Ameshi, the hate and fury in her eyes. Saburo, and therefore Hideki, had wounded her pride. Her precious ego. She wouldn't be satisfied until she'd put at least one of them in their place, and Hideki wasn't having it. Yes, Saburo's mistakes were now his mistakes, but that didn't mean he was going to tolerate being treated like a bad dog.

Behind him, the door opened, and he heard the clink and shuffle of armor, the tread of the style of boots favored by soldiers and mercs. "You won't win this, and violence won't help solve the problem."

"You will do as you're told in my house!" Ameshi said. "Especially when you're a backstabbing traitor colluding with fucking Boorna. Detain him! Now!"

"Mother, no!" Berrick screamed, even as his sister dragged him out of the way.

Hideki only barely made note of it, attention entirely on the five... no, six... people trying to jump him from behind. He dropped to a crouch as two of them lunged, knocking their legs out from under them, then came up swinging at the third, sending him into the fifth, and moved into a high, sweeping kick that took care of four and sent six slamming into a table, taking it and everything on it as he went crashing to the floor.

Shifting his attention back to one and two, Hideki knocked them down again, noses crunching beneath his fists. He sent number three into the bookcases, threw five into Ameshi's desk where his head cracked against a heavy ornament on it, then threw the barely recovered four into the unlit fireplace.

When nobody came back for a third try, he turned to Ameshi. "I and my people will be taking our leave."

Ameshi said nothing, not that Hideki would have listened to anything she did say. He stormed from the room and up the stairs until he found Mina's room. When she opened the door, the tension in her face turned to relief—and then to renewed worry. "Major?"

"Gather up and move out. Send Akiko to scout for a suitable long-term campsite not more than an hour's ride away."

"Yes, Major."

Hideki continued on to his room, where he pulled out a satchel and his saddlebags and filled them with essentials, ignoring the stupid voice mourning over all the fine clothes he would have to leave behind and would probably never see again. His mind just wanted to focus on something small and easy, avoiding the far bigger problem of his stupid fucking brother whom he was going to kill.

Since when did Saburo give a damn about the war? Where in the world would he have met anyone from Boorna, let alone gotten to know them well enough to throw away everything for whatever fool mission he was on? The person he loved. Please. If Hideki ever did something this stupid and reckless after 'falling in love,' he hoped somebody had the sense to clobber him.

He stamped down on the trickle of envy, the knowledge that nobody was ever going to love him or Daisuke that way. All they saw was the

terrorizing two, the Hammer and the Powder. Just look at what had happened downstairs. Why had Saburo ever thought Hideki would be able to deal with this mess? He couldn't even hold one conversation without it descending into a complete mess.

Slinging his satchel over one shoulder, the saddlebags over another, he hastened from his room and took the back way out of the house, heading for the stables, where thankfully Saburo's servants already had horses ready to go, and sense enough not to bother with the carriage. "Did you know about this?"

"No, Major," the woman readying the horses, Tamiko, said. "I knew he'd been sneaking off to see someone back home, but he's also been quite passionate about this arranged marriage, so... I'm sorry."

"That's not your apology to make. I'm sorry we're going to be roughing it indefinitely. We're no longer welcome here, but I dare not go too far in case Saburo returns or someone catches up to him."

"Understood, Major."

Mina, the rest of her fireteam minus Akiko, and the last of Saburo's servants joined them minutes later. Hideki gave them the same brief explanation and apologies, and then they moved out, a group of nine, short only Akiko, who they'd hopefully reunite with soon. "What direction did Akiko go?"

"West, back the way we originally came; seemed the best chance to find good campground," Mina replied. "She'll send a flare when she's found something and meet us on the road. I left word with some of the staff that we're not going far, and they promised to pass the information along."

Hideki nodded and gave the signal to move out, ignoring when he thought he heard someone call his name. If they really wanted to speak to him, they'd come find him.

Some time after they left the manor behind, a flare went up, and Hideki followed the direction of it until they encountered Akiko nearly an hour later on the road. So a bit further afield than he would have liked, but she would have made the choice for good reason.

She saluted as they reached her. "Major, our campsite is roughly an hour and fifteen minutes due west of Keshar Manor. Outside your request, but I think you'll be pleased with the results. I've marked the turn-off here should we have visitors."

"Lead the way, Sergeant."

"Major." Akiko turned her horse and rode off, leading them through the brush, along a route that would be a crude dirt path by the time they broke camp, unless a miracle happened.

When they came to a stop, Hideki immediately saw why she'd chosen the spot. There was a brook nearby for fresh water, plenty of clear space to set up tents and bedding, stones for a proper firepit, boulders along two sides that would provide additional protection from the elements, and plenty of surrounding woodland that offered fuel for the fire and branches to make up bedding and additional shelters. "It's perfect, Sergeant. Excellent work."

"Thank you, Major."

Hideki dismounted and set to work removing his saddlebags and satchel. "Mina, I want two of you to go to the nearest town for additional supplies. Send two more after my stupid brother. Cooperate with Lord Ameshi's forces if you encounter them and it's possible, but the priority is Saburo. Bring him home no matter what, understood?"

"Yes, Major," Mina said, and immediately signaled to her fireteam, deftly catching the bag of coins that Hideki tossed her.

Leaving them to it, Hideki bent to assisting Saburo's servants with getting camp set up, working on the firepit and fire while they set up his tent and bedding for everyone else. Once he had a fire going, he turned to the food supplies they had on them, deftly sorting and taking stock, carefully storing everything when he was done so as not to attract wildlife.

Fetching water, he fixed a pot of tea and got some rice cooking.

He was just stringing his bow to go hunting when he heard the distinct rustle of a horse riding through the underbrush. Drawing one of his handguns, Hideki rose—and relaxed, motioning the others to stand down, as Berrick came into view. "What do you want?"

"I came to apologize, since my mother won't," Berrick said, dismounting and handing off his horse to the woman who came to take it, thanking her before turning his full attention back to Hideki. "I'm sorry. None of that should have happened the way it did. I believe you when you say you were not party to your brother's actions."

Hideki didn't relax, but he couldn't deny the words soothed some of the ills of the day. "Thank you. Does your mother know you're out here?"

"No, she doesn't," Berrick said. "May I sit?"

Nodding, Hideki sat himself on an old log the others had only just dragged closer to the fire, tossing away an errant snake trying to hide in a bed of moss, and motioned for Berrick to join him. "If it's not safe for you to return, you're welcome to remain here, but if I find later you've lied to me..."

"I'm not lying," Berrick replied quietly. "I won't lie, I'm angry with both of you. That disaster in the library didn't need to happen the way it did, but the blame lies mostly with my mother. Her pride is second only to her temper." He smiled ruefully. "I appreciate firsthand now why they call you Warhammer."

Hideki only nodded and poured them tea, though he cringed inwardly. Just once, he wished someone would look at him and see something other than Warhammer and 'the slightly less crazy twin'. That they'd see...

He didn't even know. What was there to see, after all? Someone who liked clothes a little too much and was good at embroidery? Who preferred quiet evenings listening to music and reading books to the social life he was expected to have? Catch of the season, to be sure. The interested parties would need to take numbers if they wanted a turn courting him.

Snorting at the image, Hideki handed off the tea he'd just poured and resettled on his mossy log. "I do what I'm trained to do. So shall we make up a bed for you, my lord?"

Berrick laughed. "No, not quite yet. I suspect my mother will let me play liaison now that I've come this far against her wishes. Though I'll still be hearing about it until the end of time." He rolled his eyes and stared at his tea. "I'm sorry you're out here like this. I could reach out to friends, see if—"

"That won't be necessary," Hideki replied. "Camping is still safer and more peaceful than the Wall. We'll be fine while we resolve this matter, though if you can provide additional supplies, or point me to where to obtain them, that would be appreciated."

"I'll take care of it," Berrick said, and lapsed into silence once more before abruptly saying, "Stained glass."

Hideki frowned. "I don't follow."

"Sorry, I mean, you asked me earlier what my hobby was, and I brushed you off, thinking you'd find it boring. It's stained glass. My mother finds it beneath me."

Hideki was starting to think Berrick's mother had a lot of opinions on a lot of things, and precious few of those opinions were worth anything. He

was far more interested in the fact that Berrick was opening up, seeing him as someone to say such things to, even though Hideki had just caused a great deal of upheaval and likely pissed off at least six guards.

Still, someone in the household was on his side, and that person Saburo's—

Saburo's betrothed. How had he completely forgotten all about that? He'd been so distracted...

Well, he'd remembered now, and he wouldn't forget a second time.

"My mother did stained glass for years before she married and focused on overseeing the household and raising children," he said. "Do you work solely in colored glass, or enamel as well?"

"Both," Berrick said eagerly, and that was clearly all the permission he needed to launch into an avid discussion of his latest project.

The whole day seemed blissfully normal, and Hideki was more than happy to let it remain that way for as long as possible. The problems would return soon enough; no need to rush the matter.



CHAPTER FOUR

"Another one, Major."

Daisuke groaned. Five, that was now five children that had been snatched from the Void. The next time he saw anyone from Boorna, he was going to shoot them in the fucking face. "Get them cleaned up and everything, put them with the others. I'll deal with them after lunch."

Not that he'd get very far. The children were all proving to be stubbornly close-mouthed about their situation. Whoever had terrified them into silence had done a horrifyingly good job.

Pushing away from his desk, he gathered up all his meticulously written reports and dropped them in the basket to be taken to Jiro. That done, he went in search of food. Each tower had its own mess, though that hadn't always been the case.

He took his ogre moss notes with him, as lunch would be his only chance to focus on them. Right after this he'd be going to see the children,

and by the time he was done with that he'd have to prep to supervise the night maneuvers Hideki's forces had scheduled. His presence would be token at best, but somebody of a certain rank had to be present in case something went wrong.

"Hey, Major."

"How goes?" Daisuke asked as he took the tray the cadet behind the line offered. "Who made the rice?"

"Tōru. You think we'd let Yua anywhere near it after last time?"

"At least something is going right around here. Thanks for the food."

"Pleasure, Major."

Taking his tray, which was piled with rice, curry, pickled vegetables, and a bowl of miso, he took a seat in a relatively quiet corner of the mess hall and spread his notes out in front of him to read over while he ate.

Ogre powder was the explosive of choice around the world, developed years ago in Belemere, hence the name. It was far more volatile than gunpowder, which was bad, because gunpowder would explode if looked at wrong. One of the key components of it was ogre moss, which contained a chemical vital to the whole 'go boom' process. It was named after the lumbering beasts whose bodies grew it in profusion when they died, though people had long ago learned to grow it independently.

Daisuke thought the moss had far greater use as medication. A few crude experiments had demonstrated it had potential as a numbing agent, which would make all manner of medical procedures more bearable. He'd stumbled across the realization when he'd had a bulk order of raw ogre moss shipped in, partly so they could grow their own on site, but also to see if they couldn't improve upon the whole extraction and production processes.

All the literature he could find though, in every language he knew or could have reliably translated, failed to mention the numbing effects it could have. Daisuke didn't know why, when it wasn't like he'd had to *try* to learn of the effect. He'd discovered it by chance.

He just had to isolate what exactly in the moss was doing it, if his batch of the stuff was unusual in some way...

Still, if he was right, and he could make a numbing medication from it, topical at least and possibly something that could be ingested or injected, he could improve so many things. Certainly it would be just what he needed to finally open—

"Major!"

Daisuke's head snapped up, and he scowled at the pristine-looking private in front of him. Someone that shiny could only be from Jiro's office. "What?"

"General Takahara requests your immediate presence, says to tell you it's a family emergency."

Daisuke was moving barely before he'd finished, yelling for someone to take his notes back to his office even as he ran through the mess and along the wall.

He came to a stumbling halt just outside of Jiro's office, threw open the door, and strode inside, slamming the door shut behind him. "What's wrong?"

"It's Saburo," Jiro said tersely. "I just received a letter from Hideki. Here."

Daisuke snatched the papers he held out, turned them around, and read. Just a few words in he started swearing loudly and colorfully. "I'm going to strangle that dumbass with his own hair." Finishing with Hideki's note, he read the one that Saburo had left him. "No, I'm going to do it with my hands."

"Not if I find him first," Jiro said with a sigh. "This is bad. Really bad. I've already sent word to Mother and Father; they'll send Ichiro to take care of it."

It was stupid to feel hurt, because he'd known all along nobody would ever trust him with something so important, but damn it, Hideki was *his* twin, he should be there helping him. "I should be going."

"We want to prevent further war, Daisuke, not start another one," Jiro said.

"Fuck you. Sir."

Jiro rolled his eyes, but his expression gentled as he said, "I know you want to be at Hideki's side. I can't remember the last time you two were apart this long. However, I need you here, especially with all these children cropping up. So far, they've said more to you than they have anyone else, even if all they do is call you stupid and threaten to kill you."

"I believe they've also questioned my parentage a few times," Daisuke said, not without amusement. "I wouldn't start a war, you know."

"You'd be you, Daisuke, and that's usually more than enough. Leave

the politics to those suited to them and do what you're suited for."

Exploding things, shooting people, wrangling children.

Daisuke swallowed the lump in his throat and ignored the thorns twisting and turning in his stomach. "Are you sure Hideki will be all right?"

"He'll manage. He'll have to. Saburo never should have done this to him." Jiro sighed again and rubbed his temples. "To be honest, I wish Saburo had taken you rather than Hideki. You would have caused me *worlds* of problems, but..."

But Daisuke wasn't as gentle as his brother. Hideki had a heart of spun sugar, all too easily missed behind his military uniform, quiet demeanor, and fists. He was happiest when he was embroidering butterflies on the collar of his newest jacket, or going through his Judo forms in the middle of a field, or reading a book while curled up next to a blazing fire wrapped in a blanket he'd knit himself.

These sorts of political games would eat him alive. Daisuke couldn't play them either, that was true, but he was *very* good at biting back.

When he found Saburo, the little shit would be lucky if *all* Daisuke did was strangle him.

He would be *really* lucky if their mother didn't get to him first.

"So what do you want from me, other than to completely ruin my day by telling me bad news I can't do anything to fix?"

Jiro gave him a look. "I want you to keep alert. If Saburo really is mixed up in all this, then he's bound to show his face eventually. The only ways into and out of Boorna are the ocean and the wall. I doubt he'll come this way any time soon, but keep alert anyway. Whatever the hell he's doing, he's going to need us again at some point. In the meantime, focus on those children. We need the information in their heads, information they may not even know they have. Boorna can be pretty damn contemptible, but so can we, if we're being honest. Using children isn't like them anymore than it's like us. So I want to know what the fuck is really going on. And lest you think I've forgotten that snit you threw two days ago, get your ass to the guest pavilion and apologize to the Belemeren party."

"I'll take a court martial before I apologize to those arrogant, congee-brained little upstarts."

That got him another sigh. Three so far. The record was nine, held by their mother. "Still mad about the safety crack, are we? You do have a

reputation for reckless endangerment."

"It's wrong."

"They couldn't know that. Apologize, Major, by end of day. That's an order, not a suggestion. Am I understood?"

"Yes, General," Daisuke bit out.

"Good. Dismissed."

Daisuke hesitated, then said, "I actually had a question. Unrelated to anything else."

Jiro looked up from the papers he'd just pulled close. "What?"

"Are you still in contact with that old friend of yours, the one who's a healer?"

"Kazuo?" Jiro blinked at him, then his brows furrowed. "Of course. Why do you ask?"

"I had some questions pertaining to several common painkillers and sedatives I wanted answered by somebody who knows what they're talking about—someone I can definitively trust to know what they're talking about. Would you write him and see if he'd mind me sending them to him?"

Jiro snorted a laugh. "Do I want to know why you're asking about such things? What in the hell kind of explosive or mark are you developing that—"

"Oh, never fucking mind. I'm sorry I asked."

The laughter vanished from Jiro's face, and he started to push to his feet, but Daisuke was done for the day. This was why he never said anything to anyone. All he got was laughter. Derision. Nobody ever asked like they meant it. Like they *cared*. No, they just acted like the idea of him wanting to *help* people was so incomprehensible it never even crossed their minds, not for the barest, fleeting second.

He'd just get his answers some other way.

Now he had to go see the children, and he hadn't even gotten to finish his lunch. Maybe he'd have the chance for a snack before night maneuvers. One could dream.

Back in his tower, he called for Shouhei and climbed the steps to the level containing the children's bedroom, which reminded him he needed to see about securing proper quarters for them off-wall *and* dig up people to stand guard.

"You bellowed, Major?"

"Is the newest child here with the others yet?"

"Arrived just moments ago, all scrubbed up and pissed off, just like the rest."

"Good. We need to secure proper quarters for them; we can't have children living on the wall. See what East Quadrant has."

"Yes, Major."

"Did I miss anything while I was gone?"

"Nothing of note. Night maneuvers are still a go; the field is undergoing final preparations now."

"Fine." Daisuke's stomach growled, far from satisfied from the three bites of rice and curry that was all he'd eaten today, but he ignored it.

Reaching the room where the children were being kept, he nodded to the privates on duty as they gave him sharp salutes. "How goes?"

"Quiet, Major. Every time we check in, they're just sitting quietly. Not even together, just across their individual beds. I've known prisoners on death count with more life in them."

Daisuke nodded again and stepped away from the door to undo his jacket and shrug out of it. Next went his weapons and all the other trappings of life in a warzone, leaving him in trousers, shirt, and boots. He doubted it went terribly far in making him less intimidating, but hopefully it helped a little. "I'm not to be disturbed unless there's an emergency or I explicitly call for help. Understood?"

"Yes, Major," the two privates and Shouhei chorused, before Shouhei added, "This is one of those stupid, reckless things you're not supposed to do."

"Stop talking to Jiro," Daisuke retorted, and then opened the door.

Inside, the room was now crowded with six beds, five of them occupied. At a glance, likely three boys and two girls, but Daisuke didn't like to make assumptions. Three had really dark brown skin, one had medium-toned brown skin with yellow undertones, and the last had extremely pale brown skin with red undertones. All five had shorn hair, and were covered in cuts, bruises, and scrapes. One seemed to be missing a couple of fingers, and the newest arrival had a heavily bandaged arm.

Children. In the Void. Every time he thought about it, he grew enraged all over again.

Speaking in Boornian, Daisuke said, "Good afternoon, chibis. Shall

we try speaking again?" Five little mutinous faces glared back at him. "Did they feed you today?" The answer was yes, but it was an easy enough question to shake or nod to, which three of them did.

Daisuke sat at the foot of the empty bed, drawing up one booted foot to rest on the frame, looping one arm casually around it. "You're not in danger here. You will not be punished. We wanted only to get you out of the Void. That place isn't meant for children."

The newest child, the one with the bandaged arm, abruptly burst out, "Grandfather will kill our families if we don't go back!"

The other children froze, stared at the rulebreaker in silent horror. Two of them started crying, but quietly in the way children never did unless they were scared of being punished for it.

Daisuke's chest seized. "What? Who is Grandfather?"

Another child, the one who'd bitten him in fact, seemed eager to talk now that someone else had broken the vow of silence. "That's what we call him. We don't know anything else. My mom and sister were really sick. They said if I helped them, they'd make them better."

One by one the children each provided their own grisly spin on the tale.

It wasn't hard to guess that there were even more children out there, and they wouldn't stop coming.

He didn't have the heart to tell them quite yet that their families were probably all dead.

"What are your names?" he asked when they finished their heartbreaking stories.

"Damjan," said the child who'd first spoken.

The bitey one said, "Čedomir."

The remaining children were Matija, Vanja, and Anđela. Four girls and Čedomir the only boy.

Daisuke wasn't certain of much, but he *was* certain that if anyone else ever laid a hand on these kids in any way, he would murder them in the slowest, most painful way possible. When he found 'Grandfather,' there was going to be a reckoning that would make Hell itself flinch.

"My name is Daisuke," he said, because even though he'd said that before, he was absolutely certain none of them had listened. "You're safe here. I don't know what I can do about your families yet, but when I know

something, I'll tell you. We're going to be moving you to a proper home soon, so you don't have to stay here in the tower. Do you have any requests? Certain toys you like? Games? Clothes? Books? I can't promise we'll be able to get everything, but we'll bring everything we can find."

"More food?" Čedomir asked with so much wistfulness that hearing it hurt.

"That was never in doubt. Just one moment." He went to the door, opened it, and beckoned Shouhei inside. Closing the door again, he said, "This is Shouhei, he works directly for me. You can trust him. Tell us everything you want, and he'll write it down, and we'll do what we can to make sure it's in your house or brought to you here, like food."

The children were slow and shy at first, hyper cautious about what they could really ask for, but as everything they said was written down with no comment, only the occasional question of clarification, they grew more excited and asked for more and more things.

Laughing, Daisuke finally lifted his hands to stem the flood of words. "All right, give us time to work on this list, and once it's finished we'll make another one, all right? Did you get it all?"

"Yes, Major," Shouhei replied.

"Good, thank you. Break the list down, take what you can to requisitions, then give the rest to whoever looks like they don't have enough to do and send them into town for it. Take the funds from my chest."

"Yes, Major," Shouhei repeated and departed.

Into the silence, it was Andela who said, "Sometimes people call Grandfather 'General'."

Well, that narrowed things down considerably. "Thank you," Daisuke said. "That helps me a lot. We'll find Grandfather and make sure he doesn't hurt any more people."

"And our families?"

"I don't know," Daisuke said, because he didn't want to make a promise he already knew he'd break. "Once I know something, I will tell you, I promise. All I want is to help you."

The children stared at him, eyes wide, faces somber, and nodded slowly. A couple of them, he could see they already knew what the answer would be. Which just made him hate 'Grandfather' and everyone involved in this nightmare even more. They were going to pay. They were going to pay a

hundred fucking times over.

One by one the children seemed to settle, asking questions or warily offering more tidbits about Grandfather as they fell asleep. Likely this was the first time they'd fallen asleep rather than dropped from exhaustion.

Daisuke stayed until they were all fast asleep, then made certain they were all comfortable and well covered in blankets before he finally slipped from the room. In the hall, he told the guards stationed at the door, "Check on them in a couple of hours. If they're awake, have food brought."

"Yes, Major."

Shouhei was nowhere to be seen, and neither were Daisuke's discarded clothes and weapons, which meant Shouhei must have taken them with him. Yawning, stomach rumbling, Daisuke went upstairs to his office, where sure enough his jacket had been hung up and everything else properly stowed.

Movement caught the corner of his eye, and he turned just as Shouhei stepped back into the office. "So who did you piss off to get thrown to Tower 9 in punishment?"

Shouhei rolled his eyes. "Lieutenant Colonel Mizutani. He had opinions on artillery storage that were stupid. I told him so. Apparently, he doesn't like being told he's stupid."

Daisuke laughed. "His loss. What did requisitions say?"

"Some things about your mother that weren't very nice, but they said they can have most of it ready by morning, and the rest by overmorrow when the newest shipments come in. I sent Okabe and Ikeda into town, and warned them that every last delo better be accounted for, or you'll have some things to say they won't enjoy."

Daisuke laughed again, loud enough to startle the soldiers stationed in the hallway. "I hope you stick around. Now come along, my ruthless assistant. I have to go apologize to those piece of shit Belemerens."

Shouhei lifted one brow. "Am I coming to help you word the apology or to bury bodies?"

"Somewhere in the middle. Keep me from clobbering them like they deserve."

"Yes, Major," Shouhei said. "That sort of mindset isn't going to make your apology sound very sincere."

"I said I'd follow orders. I didn't say I'd do it gracefully." Daisuke

shrugged into his jacket and deftly did up the buttons. Each tower had its own insignia, and Hideki had embroidered the Tower 9 insignia, a hawk perched on a cask of ogre powder with '9' emblazoned on the cask, into the wide cuffs of their military jackets.

Whenever someone asked him about it, marveling at the craftsmanship, they never knew what to say when he told them Hideki had done it. Much like no one could comprehend that someone like Daisuke would be more interested in healing than hurting, they couldn't picture Hideki and his brutal fists doing something as delicate as needlework.

Once he was back fully in uniform, weapons and all, Daisuke snatched up the cover he almost never wore and settled it in place on his head. He was already sick of the damned thing. "Let's go get this over with."

On the north side of the wall, in front of every tower, was an enormous two-level staircase and ramp combination. There was also a lift and pulley system for things that couldn't be taken up the ramp, which was currently being used to move the latest shipment of various dangerous substances, all of them in barrels painted red or yellow. "Make sure nobody from Battery 8 is in the area," Daisuke called out. "I don't want those congeebrained dumbasses anywhere near my powders after what they did to their own."

"Yes, Major!" a chorus of snickering voices called down.

Daisuke headed down the steps, Shouhei close behind, threading his way through the perpetual chaos of keeping a war city functioning. Even though it was getting close to dinner, everything was bustling. Even in the deadest hours of the night and morning there would be some level of activity. The Wall of Gamala never slept.

Beyond the wall was what everyone called the Buffer Zone, marked by a smaller, far less impressive wall, through which only cleared personnel were permitted, with larger gates to allow wagons and carts making deliveries.

Beyond *that* was all manner of housing, shops, stables, and more that sustained the Wall, an unofficial town that was currently locked in a battle with Rinaha and the military to become an actual town. Most of it was dedicated to housing, both for military with families or who simply did not want to be on the Wall every single moment of their lives, and for all the civilian support. Including whores, if one knew where to look, not that it was

hard, as the Wall and subtlety had never really gone hand in hand.

"I assume they're in East Quadrant?"

"Building 11."

One of the newer accommodations, which made sense. Gotta show off to Belemere, the precious jewel of the military world. Bah.

People cleared his path as he walked, as though they were afraid he'd shoot them or something. Gods, he hated being off-wall.

At the end of the street, he made a sharp left—and swayed on his feet, abruptly dizzy. He caught himself on the post for the street sign.

"Major?" Shouhei asked.

"I'm fine," Daisuke said, letting go of the post.

"Food would probably help."

"A lot of things would probably help, but they're not happening any time soon. You're my assistant, not my fucking nanny."

"Yes, Major." Shouhei sighed, but Daisuke ignored it like he ignored every other sigh in his life.

He really missed Hideki.

Ignoring the ache that thought provoked, he pushed onward, until he came to a gray stone building surrounded by a short wall already half-covered in the ivy that was the Wall's greatest bane. The stuff was clingier than young, marriageable types eager to catch an 'elusive, highly prized' Takahara. Like he and his brothers were fucking horses at auction.

Daisuke strode up the path—and stopped halfway as the door opened and a vaguely familiar figure stepped outside. This was the assistant, the one who'd left the military to continue serving Ektow. Daisuke scrambled for his name.

Kole Burnser, that was it.

"What are you doing here?" Burnser asked, speaking Belemere, shifting to stand in front of the door as though his twiggy little self stood any chance of stopping Daisuke if he really wanted inside. "I'm not going to let you yell at him again, or anymore of your fucking guard dogs."

"Guard dogs? What in the world are you talking about?" Daisuke asked, frowning. Just behind him, Shouhei made a suspicious coughing-choking noise. "I don't have guard dogs."

"Whatever you call all the little mongrels who've been showing up to reprimand Madera about his comments on the wall."

This conversation was not getting less confusing. "I have no idea what you're talking about. I don't have guard dogs, or mongrels, or anything else. I certainly haven't been sending people to yell at Lord Ektow. You may have noticed I'm perfectly capable of yelling at him all by myself. I've never needed anyone to do such things for me."

Burnser frowned. "Pretending I believe you, then who's been sending all those fucking Tower 9 soldiers to yell at him?"

"That is an excellent question." Daisuke turned to glare at Shouhei, who sighed in defeat. "Tell me."

"Everyone was pissed off that Lord Ektow accused you of endangering lives, so they've been taking it in turns to come here and explain all the ways you've looked after them when no one else would and how what happened to that child when you were fourteen was a genuine mistake, not a standard-setting incident."

Daisuke took a deep breath, let it out slowly, and said, "Return to Tower 9 and inform everyone in it that they'd better say their final prayers because once I get back they're all dead."

"Yes, Major," Shouhei said, and took off at an impressive run.

Turning back to Burnser, Daisuke said, "I apologize. They should not have done that. I had no idea it was going on or I would have ended it a lot sooner."

Burnser gave a terse nod. "You may as well come in, I guess."

Daisuke snorted a laugh at the tone of resignation, which was one of three tones people always used with him, the other two being frustration and murderous rage.

Opening the door, Burnser motioned him to go ahead, and as Daisuke did so, he caught a whiff of the perfume Burnser wore: amber, frankincense, leather and woodsmoke. It was a beautiful scent, and suited him perfectly, that soft brown skin with warm undertones, his features sharp and pretty, like cut glass with the raw edges bare. He had heavy black hair currently braided back, just barely reaching his shoulders, the stiff collar of his shirt and dark garnet jacket bringing out the dark blue of his eyes. A single round diamond glittered in one ear, and he had a gold hoop in his septum.

Daisuke couldn't help but wonder what exactly Burnser's relationship to Lord Ektow was, because if it wasn't romantic and/or sexual, Ektow was even stupider than he already believed. He could count on one hand the

number of times he'd felt like fucking anyone, and even he could see the appeal in taking Burnser to bed.

Well, whatever. Not his life, not his concern.

Burnser closed the door and then led him further into the house, which was as utilitarian and boring as every other house, though the guest pavilion houses were nicer than most, especially these new ones. They'd even painted the walls here something other than the dreary beige-gray that the military loved so much.

In the main downstairs room of the house, Ektow sat in a deep, wide chair reading a book that appeared to be written in Rinian, arranged up and down, right to left, instead of across reading left to right like in Belemere style.

He looked up and froze as he registered the identity of his guest. "Did you run out of goons?"

Burnser sighed impressively enough to make Jiro proud. "I'm beginning to think you two deserve each other. Tea, Major?"

"No, thank you, I don't feel like getting it thrown in my face today," Daisuke said, then turned back to Ektow. "I didn't know my soldiers had taken it upon themselves to come defend my non-existent honor. I apologize for their behavior—and mine, on the wall."

Ektow seemed faintly amused as he closed his book and set it aside.

Unlike most Belemere, he had pale skin, the sort of soft, delicate brown his mother would coo over and immediately try to capture in her paintings. His eyes were a much darker brown, with hints of red tones that made them positively bewitching. The severity of his features, like a professor about to deliver a stern lecture, was lessened by a profusion of freckles. He would have made quite the imposing figure in full dress, capturing the eye of every peer and subordinate in the vicinity.

Like with Burnser, Daisuke had no desire to fuck him, but he could appreciate why people would fight for that privilege. No doubt they'd hand over good money to see them together. *That* Daisuke would do, if he wouldn't take far more pleasure out of dragging them to the top of his tower and pitching them off it into the Void.

"You don't strike me as the apologizing type, Major," Ektow said.

"Madera!"

Ektow lifted his hands in surrender. "Fine, fine. I apologize as well.

My comments were out of line, even if they had been true. Which apparently, they're not, as I have been told by just about every soldier in Tower 9. Some were more polite than others."

Speaking of people that Daisuke was going to pitch into the Void... "Just for clarity's sake, were they all from my Engineer Corp, or were some of them Special Forces?"

"Oh, it was both," Burnser said with a laugh. "Your entire tower has it out for him. Apparently upsetting Majors Powder and Hammer is verboten, and when you upset one, you upset both, even if one isn't here right now."

"I see," Daisuke said. As much as he was going to kill each and every one of them, he couldn't deny it was nice to have people saying *good* things about him for once. "I will—" He stopped as he saw Ektow wince. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," Ektow said, gesturing impatiently. "It's been almost a year since I lost my legs, but I still get sharp phantom pains. They'll fade off in a few hours. I don't know why they're so stubbornly persistent. I was told they'd fade off, mostly if not entirely, after six months." He shrugged. "I didn't mean to interrupt, you, though. What were you saying?"

Daisuke had no idea, his mind already focused entirely on the problem. "Make a paste of accoren, bittermithe, and... oh, what do you call it in Belemere. The purple one, we call it *tarana*."

"Purple? Do you mean dragonroot?" Ektow said.

"Yes, that's it. Make a paste that is equal parts accoren, bittermithe, and dragonroot. Dilute one measure of the paste in a bowl of boiling water, something just large enough to soak a washrag in. Affix the soaked rag to the end of your leg—well, legs, if it's bothering in both, obviously. Leave for about an hour. Reapply as the pain returns, as often as you're able. Do that for at least a week, maybe as many as two, and the phantom pains should ease to almost nothing. Do it as they return, and in a couple of months you won't feel them at all."

Ektow blinked at him. "I have never heard of such a treatment."

That was because Daisuke had created it, though nobody knew that, for all it had become a fairly popular treatment throughout the Wall and the army in general, especially amongst veterans. He'd even heard rumors civilian healers had started suggesting it.

If only anyone at all would believe he was the one who'd come up

with it, but if they knew that, at least half of them would probably stop using it.

So he only said, "It's something someone in the army came up with, but don't ask me who. If you don't believe me, ask around. Everyone uses it, for lots more than phantom limb pain."

"Thank you, Major," Burnser replied. "I have all those ingredients, so we'll give it a try."

"Good. Now if you'll excuse me, I'd like to depart before I start a new fight, and I'm expected for night maneuvers soon anyway."

"I'll show you out," Burnser said, and headed off before Daisuke could tell him not to bother.

Daisuke followed—and swayed briefly again as the stupid dizziness came back. He just had to get through night maneuvers and then he could fucking eat. Ignoring the look that Ektow gave him, he resumed following Burnser from the room.

Once at the door, though, Burnser followed him outside and closed it. "Thank you for the advice on treating his pain. There is something else you should know, though Ektow will kill me if—when—he finds out I told you. He didn't want me to, after your rather... eventful... first meeting on the Wall."

"What?" Daisuke asked, brows lifting.

"He was invited along for a handful of reasons, but he agreed to come because Colonel Vinmoore promised he could speak with you about his legs."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that while Belemere is well known for its engineering on a large scale, your Special Corp is known for it on a smaller scale. Like improving upon artificial limbs, maybe, if someone had held his temper and made a good impression and felt like he could still ask for your expertise." Burnser scowled. "I can already tell that clashing tempers is going to be an ongoing problem with the two of you."

Daisuke grinned, for no good reason at all. "Are we making the limbs from the bottom, or improving upon some he already has?"

"You'd have to assess the ones he was given."

"After I'm done disciplining all the little upstarts in Tower 9, I'll send a team to fetch the legs and get specs. Tomorrow, likely."

Burnser seemed to melt, like his body had been held together with tension. "Thank you, Major. I appreciate it, especially after..."

"That's not even close to the rudest thing someone has said to me. It's not even the rudest this week. Anyone will be happy to remind you I started it. Tomorrow."

"Tomorrow."

Daisuke strode off, the door closing quietly behind him, but he'd only just left the yard and started off down the street when Burnser called his name and came running after him. Before Daisuke could ask what was wrong, Burnser thrust a paper-wrapped package into his hands. "Take these, you dumbass. Honestly, the two of you are so much alike it gives me a headache thinking about all the trouble you will cause me before this visit ends." He strode off back into the house without another word.

What in the name of the Moons...?

Resuming walking, Daisuke unwrapped the package—and stopped in surprise as he stared at the contents. Rice balls, each one formed into a triangle and wrapped in seaweed. From the smell, they were stuffed with smoked tuna. This was his favorite snack.

Bemused, he once more resumed walking, eating the set of five rice cakes in quick, neat bites, feeling infinitely better by the time he returned to Tower 9 to start on disciplining overstepping soldiers.

Though he'd also buy them beer at the end of the month, too.



CHAPTER FIVE

Hideki tossed the letter from Jiro aside and scrubbed a hand over his face, grimacing at the stubble he needed to shave. Well, wasn't like he had much else to do right now, may as well freeze his balls off bathing in the creek.

Gathering up what he needed, he headed out, mind turning over everything in Jiro's letter.

The visiting Belemereans and poor Daisuke having to handle them on his own. That Mother and Father would probably send Ichiro to deal with this mess. The gentle but stern lecture about how he shouldn't have laid all of Ameshi's goons flat, even though they'd been the ones to start it and he'd given them plenty of warning.

That he would have to stay here at least until Ichiro arrived, and possibly even longer.

All he wanted was to go back to the Wall. It wasn't his favorite place

to be, but it was home after a fashion. He at least felt comfortable there, had a place and a purpose. Had Daisuke, whose ongoing absence felt like an open wound.

They weren't 'joined at the hip' the way people loved to mock them for, but they were close. He was the only one in the world who knew that Daisuke wanted to be a healer. Daisuke was the only one who knew he wanted to open an embroidery shop. They knew a lot of things about each other that no one else did, because all anyone else ever saw was Hammer and Powder.

Sighing, Hideki waded into the water and set to work washing his clothes first. As he'd packed essentials only, he only had three sets of clothes to rotate between, which was frustrating and annoying. An entire third of his wardrobe was sitting in Ameshi's house, and he couldn't use any of it.

At least he'd remembered his embroidery and sewing kits.

When the clothes were clean and he'd laid them out or hung them up to dry, he turned to himself, starting at the top and working down. Then he switched to shaving, which was its own undertaking, because he didn't care for body hair, and then he washed everything one more time.

He was almost numb by the time he finished, but he felt significantly better, which was something. Pulling on his training pants, he used the field on the opposite side of the creek to go through his forms.

Laughter interrupted him as he was nearly finished. "I seem to be making a habit of coming upon you half naked, Major."

The back of his neck burning, Hideki turned and bowed. "My lord, what brings you to see us today?"

Berrik pointed a thumb over his shoulder. "I brought food. Thought you and your people would like more than whatever you've been hunting and rice, though I know Rinians love their rice."

Hideki laughed and left his forms, heading for the creek—and freezing as he realized that he couldn't get across unless he got his pants wet or removed them. Neither was terribly appealing, but he supposed getting them wet was the better option.

"Oh! My apologies, I'm in the way, aren't I?" Berrik immediately turned around. "I'm sorry you're still stuck out here. I keep trying to convince Mother..."

Snorting, Hideki stripped off his pants, waded across the creek, and

after hastily drying his legs, pulled them back on.

He really needed to stop practicing his forms while he was here; Berrik probably thought his mother had been right in calling Hideki a harlot, even though he was just trying to stay fit, and he'd only ever had two lovers in his life, neither of whom had worked out.

Unlike Daisuke, who had little to no interest in sex, and vastly preferred watching to participating, Hideki had always enjoyed it, but only with people he knew well and cared for. The first lover had been a woman who was angry he wouldn't give everything up to live the life she wanted for them, with no willingness to make space for the things he'd wanted.

The second had really wanted Daisuke the whole time and, when that obviously hadn't worked, had settled for a reasonable facsimile. Years later, the jerk still fled the room whenever they entered it; he didn't go anywhere near Tower 9 if he could possibly help it.

Hideki checked on his drying clothes, placed rocks to ensure nothing would blow away, and finally rejoined Berrik. "Thank you for bringing us food," he said as they walked back to camp. "How did you get it by Lord Ameshi?"

Berrik shrugged, gaze idly scanning their surroundings. "Mother doesn't pay attention to what the household does until someone doesn't dust her room properly or burns her soup. She's also not terribly pleased with me right now, so doesn't particularly care where I am so long as it's not in her sight."

"Your family sounds very... tense."

"In our defense, a matter entrusted to us by His Majesty has gone horribly awry, and if we don't fix it..."

Hideki sighed. "Trust me, nobody wants to throttle Saburo more than me, except for my parents when they find out. I still don't know where he would have even met somebody from Boorna."

"I cannot help there, I'm afraid, but you don't have to worry that I'll refuse to go through with the marriage when we find him. I admit my pride has taken a blow, but it wasn't as though it was a love match, and I know how important it is for us and Rinaha."

"I really am sorry," Hideki said. "We expect this sort of behavior from Ryunosuke, even Noriaki, given he's the one who left home years ago and hasn't been back." He sighed. "Not Saburo, though. He's supposed to be one

of the level-headed ones."

Berrik chuckled, casting him a sideways glance. "Guess I should have married one of you not level-headed ones."

Hideki grinned fleetingly. "Like the harlot currently living in the woods?"

"Mother shouldn't have called you that," Berrik said, rolling his eyes. "Anyway, she's got no room to talk, not after some of the stunts she pulled in her youth. She thinks we don't know the stories, but she's wrong."

Hideki laughed as they reached camp, where his people had already opened what seemed to be at least five baskets of food. "Did you pack the whole kitchen?"

"Bought everything at market, had the cooks prepare some of it, left the rest for you. They had some Rinaha foods there—I put all that in the green basket. Not sure how accurate any of it is, though. Why are the noodles black?"

Mina crowed as she opened the green basket and lifted out the noodles in question, currently dried and divided into tidy bundles wrapped in paper. "Squid ink noodles. This is a delicacy of my prefecture. Didn't expect to see them all the way out here. These will be perfect for dinner sometime this week."

"That will be nice, especially if we can get some eggs," Hideki said, not entirely able to keep the wistfulness from his voice. Nothing was better than a bowl of noodles piled with pork, steamed veggies, and a perfectly poached egg.

"Should be some in one of these baskets," Berrik said. "I cannot apologize enough. I think forcing people to camp in the woods is by far the lowest my mother has ever gone."

"It's not the Wall," Mina replied as she set to work stowing the food. She cast Hideki an amused glance, eyes dipping to his chest.

His very bare chest. Swearing silently at himself, Hideki hastened to his tent to get properly dressed. How had he managed to forget?

Talking with Berrik, that was how. Saburo was stupid, throwing away such an excellent marriage to a person who seemed genuinely good, who was interesting and friendly, kind and earnest.

"Beautiful stitching," Berrik said, voice floating through the tent. "Your work?"

Keiko, one of his privates, laughed. "Me? No, couldn't sew a straight line if my life depended on it. Wouldn't know where to start with embroidery. That's the Major's work."

"Oh?"

What in the world did that mean? Was that a good oh? A bad oh?

For the love of the Moons, was he losing his damned mind?

Hideki finished buttoning his jacket and stepped out of the tent. "Did someone mention me?"

"The Private here was mentioning you did this embroidery. It's beautiful. You have a fine hand."

"Thank you," Hideki said. The piece in question was elaborate leaves and flowers stitched on white rabbit fur. Embroidering fur was difficult, but the final effect was always so pretty. Once he was done with the embroidery, he'd finish sewing it up into a handwarmer, the kind that had become popular in the past few years, as a gift for his mother. "I learned from my caretaker; she was always stitching when she wasn't wrangling Daisuke and I into behaving."

"She must have been delighted you were so invested and showed such an acumen."

"She was," Hideki said softly. "She passed away several years ago, unfortunately, but she died at peace."

"I'm sorry for your loss. I have no idea what's become of my nanny. Once we were all out of the nursery, my mother sent her on her way and that was that. Very different from your experience, clearly."

Hideki's mouth quirked. "Clearly."

"Soup's ready," Mina called, drawing their attention. She cast Hideki another amused look, but only smirked when he replied with a questioning look of his own. "Plenty here if you'd like some, my lord."

Berrik hesitated, then said, "If you really don't mind. I'm afraid dinner tonight is one of my least favorites, so I'm in no hurry to return to the house."

Hideki frowned. "Won't you be missed if you don't?"

"Oh, uh, I don't think so," Berrik replied. "I told Timm, my personal servant, to inform them I wasn't feeling well if I didn't make it back in time. As long as I leave shortly after we eat, all should be well. So what's for dinner?"

One of Saburo's staff dished out the soup for everyone. "Wild

mushroom soup with herbs and quail." He handed Hideki a bowl, then Berrick. "There's also fresh bread and some cheese there." He pointed to a tree stump that had been commandeered as a serving table.

As they sat on the mossy log that seemed to have become their spot whenever Berrick visited, Berrick asked, "So do you do all your own embroidering? I noticed the work on your clothes before, but just assumed it had been done by a servant or commissioned."

"All me," Hideki replied. "I find it relaxing."

"What about your brother? Major Powder, I mean."

Around them, Hideki's soldiers laughed. "I'd pay money to see Major Powder hold still long enough to make a single stitch," Akiko replied. "I'd hand over a month's pay to watch him stitch an entire row."

Hideki gave her an amused look. "He had to learn the basics same as anyone."

Mina snorted. "He probably sewed somebody's sheets closed while they were sleeping."

"He used glue for that," Hideki replied. "Ichiro wasn't amused, and neither was Mother." That made everyone laugh again.

"Dare I ask what your brother's hobby is, then? Other than mischief, clearly."

Hideki shrugged one shoulder. "He's not so much for mischief now; he's got plenty of better things to occupy his time." He didn't bother to say that embroidery wasn't a *hobby* to him, it was an ardent pursuit and part of a lifelong dream. "Daisuke spends most of his spare time on his experiments. When I left the Wall to come here, he was working on something with ogre moss, but he hadn't shared the details yet."

Akiko rolled her eyes. "Probably yet another refinement for his land traps."

"Always possible," Hideki replied idly, because while he would vastly prefer to shake every single person in the world and tell them proudly that Daisuke was good with *medicine* above all else, Daisuke didn't like speaking of it. Not after the woman he'd loved had laughed in his face at the idea.

Yet another person who now fled the room if she knew they were in it.

"So what's the rest of your family like?" Berrick asked. "I know you and Saburo, and I've heard quite a bit about Daisuke."

"Ichiro is the heir. He tends toward somber and serious like our father. He's a professor of history at the University of Fukuoka. Everyone knows Jiro, of course."

"Be hard to know about you and Daisuke and not know about the Takahara who's in charge of the Wall. I heard there was a lot of contention about who should take over after the last General retired."

"Contention is a very kind way of saying that people were literally willing to kill Jiro over it," Hideki replied. "Unfortunately for them, they picked the wrong Takahara to play such games with."

Berrik frowned. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that before he was promoted out of field work, Jiro was part of a highly select unit within the army that specializes in particularly bloody work. Trying to assassinate Jiro is like trying to sneak up on a cat: A fool's game."

Berrik stared a moment, mouth ajar, and then said, "Goodness."

"Then there's Noriaki... He left home when he was young to travel the world, and we get letters from him sometimes, but that's about it. Mother's second-favorite complaint is that he's ungrateful and should come home to his family already."

Setting his empty bowl aside, Berrik laughed and asked, "So what's her favorite complaint?"

"That the gods test her every day with the trouble Daisuke and I cause her," Hideki replied drolly. "In her defense, we did quite a number of things growing up that would drive a saint to murder us. I'm not certain anyone would have convicted her if she had."

Berrik laughed even harder. "Now I need to hear the tales of your escapades, but I believe there's one brother to go?"

Hideki rolled his eyes. "Ryunosuke, Mother's precious, perfect golden boy, the youngest child who can do no wrong."

"Oh, another resentful middle child, I see," Berrik said, green eyes alight. "Don't be angry we're better than the rest of you."

"Don't make me dump this soup on your head."

Across the fire, Mina snorted and said, "If you ruin this soup I worked so hard on, I'll shove both your heads into the fire. Major."

"Noted, Sergeant," Hideki replied.

Eating the last of his bread and cheese, Berrik said, "So tell me a story

of you and Daisuke wreaking havoc."

One of Saburo's staff, Mei, called out from where she was washing dishes, "Tell the bridge one, Major."

Hideki groaned.

Berrick grinned. "Well now we definitely need to hear that one. Or I do. I assume everyone else knows it."

"I don't," chorused Mina and Akiko. "You haven't told us that one."

"Because it's particularly bad, even for us," Hideki said with a sigh. "Fine. For reference, the Takahara Estate resides on the far side of a small river. Most would think it merely a creek or stream to look at it, but it's only that narrow right at the surface. Dive down even just an arm's length and it widens considerably. Anyway, the only ways across are four bridges: the main one in front of the house, an even larger one a considerable distance away where the river actually widens visibly, and then two footbridges on either end of the estate. One footbridge broke years ago in a storm when lightning struck a tree and it fell on the bridge. Since it was never used anyway, my father never had it repaired.

"The other footbridge, however, was used a great deal, for various reasons. It was used even more often than the main bridge. One day Daisuke and I were playing in the river. We'd discovered that in a very particular spot, if you dove down, there was a ledge that led to a little cave. It was our secret hideaway." Still was, in fact, though they were rarely home anymore, let alone long enough to go swimming. Plus, adults who were soaking wet for no reason were far more conspicuous than children. "Anyway, the bridge was old, held up by moss and ivy and tree roots more than anything."

"Oh, no," Berrick said, mouth twitching.

"Oh, yes," Hideki said with a sigh. "There was a particularly large root, from a tree right along the riverbank, under the middle of the bridge. We decided, in all our twelve-year-old brilliance, that it would be fun to fasten a rope to this root and swing about. Eventually, we decided it would be *even better* if we climbed onto the edge of the bridge and jumped down, where the rope would *really* swing us about and we could land in the water with a truly impressive splash.

"Eventually, of course, we came to the conclusion it would be positively amazing if we jumped at the same time. So, climbing onto the edge of the bridge, we held fast to the rope and jumped together—and down the

bridge came. Only a few stones at first, one which clipped Daisuke and gave him a nice scar on the back of his left arm. At first, we thought that was all the damage we'd done... until more started falling, and we got out of the way just in time. We stood there on the riverbank watching as the entire bridge came down and was mostly lost in the river."

"Oh no, oh no," Berrick said, even as he and everyone else laughed hysterically. "Your parents must have killed you."

"Very nearly. We were heading back to the house to go ahead and confess when Mother came outside with two of her handmaidens. She looked at us, saw Daisuke was bleeding, and then one of her handmaidens noticed the bridge was gone. After that, there was a great deal of yelling and dragging us to our rooms and even more yelling. When Father got home that evening, it started all over again."

Berrick managed to stop laughing long enough to gasp out, "What became of the bridge? Did it get rebuilt?"

"Yes, and the new one is beautiful, wood instead of stone, painted a jewel blue and with the proper guardians at either end. Not long after it was finished, Father decided he wanted the other bridges to match it, so if you ask me, we did everyone a favor in the end. The new bridges are far superior to the old ones; mother preens at every compliment she receives. Did we get any thanks? Not a word."

"In fairness, you did nearly get yourselves killed. I'm glad the only damage to come out was a scrape."

Nearby, Mei sighed in exasperation. "It wasn't a scrape. Lord Daisuke's arm had been badly sliced open. If they hadn't been so close to the house, and their mother hadn't chanced upon them so quickly, it's entirely likely he might have bled out."

"That's an exaggeration," Hideki replied. The truth was that he didn't really remember. Neither he nor Daisuke had been terribly mindful of such things. A wound was an inconvenience to them, not a life-threatening problem. They'd been far more terrified of their mother's wrath.

"It's no such thing," Mei replied. "I was fourteen. I cleaned up all the blood and rags after *my* mother finished stitching him up. You two!"

Hideki sighed. "Whatever."

"I'm starting to appreciate how you stress people out so much," Berrick said with a smile, eyes sparkling again. "So were you two always getting into

mischief alone? Did any of your other brothers ever conspire with you?"

"It was just the two of us," Hideki said. "Ichiro and Jiro were thick as thieves; Saburo was always off with his friends; Noriaki preferred to be by himself, and Ryunosuke was of course Mother's darling, so he wasn't trusted to us troublemakers."

"So that's the age order? Ichiro, Jiro, Saburo, you and Daisuke, then Noriaki, and Ryunosuke last?"

Hideki bowed his head slightly. "Yes. We're all approximately two years apart."

"Surprised you haven't been married off yourself," Berrick said.

Laughing, though he didn't really feel it, Hideki replied, "We're more useful in the military."

That none of his brothers were married was something of a society scandal. Ichiro *had* been married, but walking into your own home to find your wife fucking your oldest friend had put a swift end to that. Not long after, his ex-wife had revealed she was pregnant, but given the circumstances, Ichiro had refused to believe the child was his. His friend and ex-wife had moved away shortly after, and no one had heard from them since.

Ichiro had never really been the same, and his parents thankfully had not pushed him to remarry. Jiro had always been married to the military. Nobody wanted Daisuke and Hideki that way. Saburo was a fucking fool. Nobody even knew where Noriaki was, and then there was Ryunosuke, whom their mother was determined would marry royalty.

Saburo's marriage should have been the next step in that plan for her precious golden child, but now that was ruined too. Saburo better hope this true love he'd run off with was brave enough to face down their mother when they dared to show their faces.

"What about you and your siblings?" Hideki asked.

Berrick shrugged. "Not much to say, I'm afraid. I'm the youngest of three, and younger than Nashtan by three years. My mother was not expecting me."

"Isn't she having another child with her new wife?"

Berrick's lip curled. "At the gold-hunter's insistence, yes. That's a drama for another day. Anyway, Harrisem is obviously the heir, and Nashtan is off playing politics in the palace; he was the one who proposed me as a marriage candidate. You can bet if this mess falls apart once and for all, he

will come for my head for ruining *his* plans and ambitions. My siblings consider me the soft one, which... they're not wrong. I don't like to play games the way they do. Saburo would have gotten along better with them than me, I think." He sighed. "I was really looking forward to having my own home, my own household to run, instead of always dancing around my mother and sister."

"Don't worry, you can have your turn strangling Saburo when we get our hands on him," Hideki replied.

A sudden, sharp impulse rose up to offer himself in Saburo's place. He had military prestige, he came from the same family, had his own independent funds and access to the family wealth... He wouldn't be able to provide the political gains that Saburo would have, would never be able to live that sort of life, but he could provide an excellent life, could buy any house Berrick might desire, in any location...

Ugh, what was he thinking? Where was his head? Off in the clouds, his mother would say. Even Daisuke would call him ridiculous. It was stupid and impulsive, just him trying to solve a problem and help out someone he was coming to genuinely like. Soft, Daisuke would call him. Far too soft.

Saburo really was fucking *stupid*. Berrick was wonderful; he'd have been a great spouse. Would be one, if they managed to drag Saburo back.

"We'll get him back, I promise," Hideki said. "Saburo isn't the runaway type, so he's bound to be terrible at it."

Berrick smiled faintly. "I have every faith. Hopefully my mother will come to her senses soon and you can return to the house."

"Speaking of returning to the house," Mina interjected, "you should be going soon, my lord. If you left now, it would still be full dark by the time you arrived, and traveling in the dead of night isn't safe."

"Oh, my, has it gotten to be so late?" Berrick glanced around, up at the sky. "Thank you, Sergeant, and for the meal. I'll come again when I'm able."

Hideki rose with him. "I'll escort you home."

"Then you'll be traveling back here alone in the dark."

"I'm the Warhammer," Hideki said dryly. "I'd like to see bandits try."

"There shouldn't be any bandits around here; Mother's guards are quite thorough about clearing them out when they're stupid enough to get too close to the property."

"Be that as it may, the last thing any of us needs is you coming to

harm. Sergeant, if I don't return in roughly three hours, come and find me. In the meantime, wipe that smirk off your face. And someone retrieve my drying laundry for me, please, because I won't remember to when I get back."

Mina replied with a salute that was entirely too flippant. "Yes, Major."

Once their horses were ready, Hideki swung up into the saddle and led the way back through the woods to the road.

"You really don't have to escort me," Berrick said. "I've traveled this road a thousand times; the last time bandits troubled anyone, I was maybe ten years old."

"I haven't survived this long as a soldier, or made it to Major, by taking foolish risks or allowing those around me to take them."

"It's more than an hour's ride back."

Hideki brushed the words aside. "What am I going to do back at camp? Now that it's dark, there isn't much *to* do. If you're uncomfortable with my presence—"

"No!" Berrick replied, the word tumbling out in a rush. "No, I don't mind at all. I just feel a bit silly needing an armed escort, and I don't want to put you out."

"We're only in this situation because of my brother, recall," Hideki replied. "The very least I can do is see to your safety until we get him back. Enough. I'm happy to help."

Happy to spend more time with Berrick, but he preferred to ignore that thought. Nothing good would come from lingering on it. They hadn't known each other more than a couple of weeks, and most of that for just a couple of hours at a time, when Berrick came every couple of days to visit and bring them fresh supplies.

They lapsed into silence, but for once in his life, it wasn't the kind of oppressive silence that made Hideki anxious and self-conscious. He could enjoy the birds singing their farewells to the sunlight, the animals that preferred dusk rustling about for their breakfast, Berrick's spicy-sweet perfume and the way his hair—

No. No, he wasn't doing this. Berrick was promised to Saburo. Even if he wasn't, Hideki had learned the hard way that nobody really wanted him. They wanted a novelty that quickly wore off, or they wanted Daisuke, or a way to get to Jiro.

"So do you have plans for whenever you retire from the military?" Berrick asked. "You don't have to tell me, of course. Or do you enjoy it like your brother Jiro? At least, I assume that someone who has made it all the way to commanding the Wall of Gamala must enjoy the job."

"Jiro loves the military; we often tease him that he is married to it and no person could possibly compete. As to me... I have some plans, but as to when I'll retire, I don't know. When we're no longer needed, I suppose. Or when we finally do something that forces Jiro to court martial us."

"Sounds like you keep Jiro busy."

"Not nearly as busy as he likes to tell everyone," Hideki grumbled with a smile. "Though if we ruin his chances for Commander, he may never forgive us."

Berrick's sad smile was just visible in the rapidly falling dark. "Your family sounds close."

"We are, though to hear Ichiro and Jiro tell it, our family as it is now almost wasn't. My parents did not get along in their earliest years, and nearly severed the marriage, according to Ichiro. What kept them together, he's never said, and it's not a topic my parents will allow to be brought up. I'm not even sure they realize how much we all know. Drama and secrets in every family, though."

Berrick laughed, amused and cynical all at once. "Oh, the stories I could tell of my family's drama. There may even be a murder or three."

"Only three?" Hideki scoffed. "You're not proper Rinian nobility if your family history does contain at least: ten murders, seven illegitimate children, one curse from an angry demon, and three ghosts."

"That's quite a list of qualifications," Berrick said, laughing harder. "Do you have to acquire them all before becoming nobility, or are you permitted a few generations to get everything in order? Do you have ghosts?"

"The Takahara Estate has no less than five ghosts and three spirits."

"What's the difference?"

"Spirits were never human." Hideki pulled up the special lantern affixed to his saddlebags, lit it, and kept it aloft as they traveled, occasionally switching arms when one grew tired. "The grisliest story, though, is the Ghost of the Maiden."

"Tell me, tell me," Berrick said. "Nothing is more sensible than a scary story told in the dark, so that later, when a squirrel runs across the road, I

scream in terror that a ghost is attacking us."

Hideki laughed, sending the lantern swaying. "Unfortunately, the story is more sad than scary. There used to be a tradition, centuries old and now centuries out of practice thankfully, where to protect an important structure, like a manor, a bridge, and so forth, a person was buried alive in or near that structure."

"Oh, no..."

"Takahara Manor is one of the oldest in the country, so old it has protected status as an historical building. Which means that it was built back when that practice was still carried out. Local legend is that the first Lord Takahara sacrificed his own daughter to ensure the safety of the family manor, and that is why it stands strong to this day. Still, nobody enjoys being *buried alive* for any reason, so her ghost haunts the manor, begging all who see her for freedom." Hideki grimaced. "The reality is that my grandfather was having renovations done in the gardens and came upon a skeleton dressed in the traditional garb of a sacrifice. Well, what was left of them. There are no family records of a Takahara being the sacrifice, so more than likely it was a girl from the village, an orphan or a child handed over by a poor family who needed the money, that kind of thing. Very sad, very *wrong*. Grandfather gave her a proper burial and rites, so if there ever was a ghost, it's gone now."

"I'm glad that's not done anymore."

"Agreed."

They lapsed into silence again, until the road opened up and the gates of the manor came into view. "Will you be able to get in?"

"I have a key for the pedestrian entrance," Berrick said. "Thank you for seeing me home, Major."

"Hideki is fine, please," Hideki replied, hating the way his own heart pounded.

Berrick's smile was just visible in the lantern light. "Then I insist you use my name as well. Thank you for the escort, Hideki. I'll try to come visit again tomorrow, but my mother wants us to go into town for reasons unspecified, so it may be the day after."

"At your leisure, please. You are the one risking your mother's wrath in coming to see us. Goodnight, my—Berrick. Sleep well."

"Pleasant dreams."

Hideki remained where he was until the gate was locked again and Berrick faded out of sight.

Turning his horse, he headed back to camp, calling himself every stupid name he could come up with.

He was stupid. He wasn't *doing* this. Absolutely not. Berrick was promised to Saburo. Nobody in their right mind would ever consider Hideki a suitable substitute, and an infatuation of barely two weeks certainly wasn't anything to trust or build on. Most importantly, just because he was getting moonstruck by Berrick didn't mean Berrick felt the same. In fact, if Hideki's life had made anything clear, it was that his feelings never were and probably never would be requited. He was thirty, his chances at that kind of happiness were barely above zero.

So he wasn't going to do anything stupid. He'd continue to be friendly. Saburo would be found. They'd get married. Hideki would return to the Wall. The end.



CHAPTER SIX

Daisuke was supposed to be on the Wall waiting for his scouts to return.

Instead, he was in off-wall housing contending with crying, shrieking children who weren't taking well to being sick and, as of the last five seconds ago, was covered in vomit from two of them.

He also hadn't slept that night, and dawn was breaking, so this was going to be a lovely day.

Stripping off his ruined jacket and shirt, he tossed them in the ever-growing pile of laundry, got all the kids bathed, dressed, and in bed, and then tried another round of medicine that would help the fever and let them sleep.

If they kept it down this time.

Thankfully, it worked on four out of five. The youngest, little Andela, who couldn't be more than five or six, threw up on him again. Stifling a sigh, he got her cleaned up and dressed again, settled in a freshly made bed, and

this time gave her the medicine in the littlest bits at a time, distracting her with every silly song he could remember his nurse singing to them as children.

By the time he gave her the last couple of drops, she was already nearly asleep and seemed likely to stay that way.

Heaving another sigh, this one of abject relief, he made certain all the children were tucked in and comfortable, and then finally went to clean up himself. Unfortunately, he hadn't anticipated being thrown up on, let alone multiple times, when he'd rushed off after being told the children were sick and demanding him.

So he set one of the soldiers on duty to dealing with the laundry, another to go get him a couple of changes of clothes, and sent the entirely-too-amused Shouhei to get him something to wear in the meantime from somewhere nearby.

All that addressed, he cleaned up the poor bathing room, which was the worse for wear after use by several sick children, and then finally, finally was able to take a hot bath himself, though the water took forever to heat. He sat in the water until he heard the clatter of the front door sliding open, then reluctantly heaved himself up, letting the majority of the water slough off before climbing out.

Drying hastily, he headed into the main room—and drew up short to see it wasn't Shouhei waiting for him as expected, but Ektow and Burnser. Of course it was. Definitely going to be one of those days. "Good morning. What are you doing up at this hour?"

"Hard habit to break, especially now we're back in the midst of military life," Ektow said, eyes flicking over Daisuke before swiftly dropping again. "We were on our morning walk when we came across Shouhei, and offered to get some of our clothes when he explained the situation."

"We should have knocked," Burnser said, meeting Daisuke's eyes. "Our apologies."

"For what? Seeing things you've seen a thousand times before?" Daisuke said with a snort and took the pile of neatly folded clothes that Burnser offered.

Ektow muttered something, but Daisuke missed the exact words, though Burnser's hissed 'silence yourself' was clear enough.

The pants fit almost perfectly, but the shirt was just slightly too small

as he tried to pull it on. So these clothes must belong to Ektow, who was just slightly broader than him in the shoulders and chest.

"Thank you," he said once he was fully dressed, standing after putting his own boots back on. "It's nice to have clean clothes again." And not smell like medicine-and-congee vomit.

Burnser cleared his throat. "Uh. Our pleasure to be of, um, service, Major. Would it be out of line to ask about your tattoos? They're... extensive. And beautiful."

Next to Burnser, Ektow rolled his eyes and muttered something that sounded like 'so predictable.'

Daisuke eyed them, but no explanation for their strange behavior seemed forthcoming. Well, whatever. "Tattoos are a tradition in Rinaha, especially amongst the snobby classes, the only ones who could afford such things for a long time. My brother and I have a few matching tattoos, like the koi on our chests, and then we have our own. He has patterns on his arms, I have plants." All of them used in healing, but no one had ever noticed. His back was covered in the family crest and his favorite poem, about a man who fell in love with the Moons, but being mortal was of course unable to reach them or be with them. One of the oldest stories in Rinaha, but this particular poem about the tragedy was less known, and one of the few things he'd been able to sit still for during lessons.

"Would you like some food, Major?" Ektow asked, lifting the basket on his lap.

"That would be nice, thank you," Daisuke replied, and sat with them at the table off to one side, watching idly as Ektow deftly got himself out of his chair and onto the cushion directly across from Daisuke. Burnser moved the chair out of the way, then sat facing the room.

Daisuke watched in silence as Burnser set out all the dishes and food, occasionally assisted by Ektow. Something about the way they moved together, so comfortable and in harmony... so similar to him and Hideki, but also completely different. "Can I ask a question?"

They looked at him, Ektow warily and Burnser with amusement. "If you can accept we might refuse to answer it," Ektow finally replied.

"Of course," Daisuke said, annoyance flaring.

"Then ask."

"Are you two lovers?"

Burnser choked on the sip of tea he'd just taken.

Ektow sighed. "Does the whole Wall suspect or just you?"

"I have no fucking idea what everyone else thinks, and I don't care," Daisuke replied. "Why does it matter? Is there a feud between your families or something, and it would be the scandal of the century?"

Burnser laughed so hard his tea splashed out of his cup and across the table, but his laughter didn't slow as he half-heartedly cleaned the mess up.

Ektow shot him a look of exasperation and unmistakable fondness before turning his attention back to Daisuke. "Yes, we are lovers. No, there isn't a giant scandal attached, just the usual one: I was his commanding officer in the military, and I technically am his 'superior' as a civilian. People either think I'm forcing him into this, or that he's a hussy shamelessly seducing poor, feeble me."

Daisuke laughed.

"For the record, there was no relationship while we served," Burnser said. "That would have gotten us in worlds of trouble."

"No relationship," Ektow said with a snort.

Burnser rolled his eyes. "Beyond one week where we were trapped in a mountain cabin together and the odd stolen kiss."

Daisuke smiled, ignoring the sliver of envy that curled through him. It was stupid. He didn't need a... lover, if that's what they were called when one party almost never wanted to fuck. Certainly one of his previous relationships had taken issue with the term. He had a good life. His family. Hideki, whom he loved more than anyone else in the world. One day he'd be a healer like he wanted, no matter how many people laughed at him along the way.

There was no reason to wish for something like what Ektow and Burnser clearly had. What so many other people had. Some people weren't meant for such things, and he was one of them, and that was fine. He was a lot for anyone to deal with and knew that. Too loud, too mercurial, too incapable of holding still unless he fixated so heavily on something he forgot the whole world. Too disinterested in fucking to be worth keeping. Too much of all the things nobody wanted.

"What about you, Major?" Burnser asked, eyes bright with curiosity and his affection for Ektow.

"What about me?"

Burnser rolled his eyes. "Do you have a lover?"

Daisuke scoffed. "No. The last person I had a relationship with won't even be in the same room as me now. I'm surprised you haven't already been told all about it. She's Lieutenant Colonel of Tower 1 now, and the whole damn tower loves to regale anyone who will listen with how black and hard my heart is." He rolled up the sleeves of his borrowed shirt and finally set to eating, enjoying miso, leftover fried rice, smoked seabass, and a greater variety of pickled vegetables than he ever saw on the Wall.

After a few minutes, he looked up—and found them watching him much as they had when they'd first arrived. "What? Why do you keep staring at me like that?"

"Like what?" Ektow asked, and Daisuke would almost swear his cheeks flushed. He glanced at Burnser, and scowled at whatever silent exchange they had.

Daisuke narrowed his eyes at them. "Like you don't know what I am or what to do with me. Granted, it's a look I get a lot, but usually from people who have to put up with me more often."

Burnser choked on his tea again, and Ektow muttered, "Mercy of Antela," as he dragged his hands down his face.

Before either of them could muster up an answer, one of the children started crying. Standing, Daisuke strode off into the bedroom the children had insisted on sharing, even though the house he'd secured for them—and was paying for, as the one the military had agreed to pay for was fucking pathetic—had three bedrooms they could have easily scattered across.

Daisuke couldn't really blame them, and so just had drawn back the necessary screens to make one larger room out of the two smaller bedrooms and filled it with every comfort and pleasure a child could need, going for things to appeal to a range of ages, since it was impossible to tell any of their ages for certain.

When he stepped into the room, it was to find Damjan out of bed, huddled against the wall near the door as though scared of something.

Moving slowly, Daisuke crouched down beside him and asked, "What's wrong, chibi?"

"Nightmare," Damjan said with a sniffle. "They dragged my parents away and threw them off the bridge. Then they took me away. I don't want to keep seeing it but— but—"

Daisuke tamped down on his rage. Soon. When he found the

mysterious Grandfather, *then* he would let his rage take the lead. "I'm sorry, sweetheart, no one should have to endure memories like that. I can't promise they'll go away, but they will fade and trouble you less over time. Your parents didn't deserve that, and the people who did it will pay. But remember your parents would want you happy above all else, and not to feel bad about what happened to them. All right? It's hard, but practice. You're safe now, and I won't let anyone else hurt you ever again. Now come on, let's see if we can't get you back to sleep and with happier dreams." He held out his arms and when Damjan stepped forward, scooped him gently up and carried him back to his bed.

Sitting in the bed, back against the wall, he gave Damjan a bit more medicine and then settled him with Damjan's back to his front, stretched out and so very tiny compared to Daisuke's stone-wall frame. Damjan shuffled and shifted until he lay with his head against Daisuke's chest, hands curled in close.

"Have you ever heard the story of the Frog Who Stole the Moon?"

"Which moon did it steal?"

"The only one in the sky, of course," Daisuke said with a laugh. "This is the story of how there came to be two moons instead of one." He began the tale, one their nurse had told a thousand times, ever hoping that each time was the one that a bedtime story would actually put him and Daisuke to sleep.

It had never worked. They fell asleep when they fell asleep, but they'd always enjoyed the stories—and getting out of bed to act them out once the nurse gave up and went to bed herself.

Thankfully, Damjan did not seem to have the endless energy and inability to hold still that had plagued Daisuke his whole life. A severe deficit in the ability to focus and pay attention, or focus on all the wrong things, his father had often said. Hideki had the same problem, but it was turned more inward, somehow. Daisuke was all noise, and Hideki was all quiet.

Damjan was asleep just minutes into the story, but Daisuke finished it anyway in case any of the other children had stirred and were listening. When he was finally done, he shifted slowly and carefully, until Damjan was settled in his bed once more, blankets pulled up snug.

Yawning and stretching, he headed out of the room—and froze to see the door was blocked by Burnser and Ektow, though they immediately moved out of the way, preceding him back down the hallway. "Your man

came by with additional clothes and said to tell you that your brother Ichiro will be arriving tomorrow. He also left some reports or something for you, and said that the scouts have still not returned."

"Um. Thank you," Daisuke replied, flustered for no reason he could name. Because two men who didn't even really like him had seen him telling fairytales to sleeping children? After seeing him naked because he'd been thrown up on all night?

Listening to that recounting of his evening and morning, yes, he could see why they stared at him like they had no idea what to make of him or do with him. He was used to people feeling that way about him, but he wasn't used to it stinging this much. Especially when he didn't know *why* it stung this much. They didn't even really like him, so why did it fucking matter what they thought?

Back in the front room, the food waited, but Daisuke had lost his appetite. Instead he scooped up the uniform waiting for him and went to get dressed in private this time. When he returned, the food had been cleared away, but replaced by tea. Jasmine, by the smell of it. Why were they still here? He wasn't complaining, mind, but it was strange they'd linger...

Oh, no, he was stupid. They were hoping for updates obviously.

Why did that realization leave him so disappointed?

Pushing away stupid, confounding emotions he had neither the time nor the inclination to deal with, Daisuke scooped up the stack of papers awaiting his attention and joined them at the table again. "I thought you Belemere preferred your coffee."

Ektow laughed, giving Burnser a teasing look before saying, "Kole might very well die if he doesn't get a good cup of coffee soon, but I've always been fond of tea, especially green tea."

"Have you ever had white tea?"

"White tea? No, I've never even heard of that," Ektow said.

"The region my family is from is known for their white teas. I'll have my mother send some." When they started to protest, he held up a hand to stop them and said, "It'll give her a nice break from plotting my brother Saburo's demise."

Ektow winced. "I'm sorry. I know a little bit about family causing problems, though my problem is very different from yours."

Daisuke was curious, far more curious than he had any business

being, but he did possess some manners, no matter what anyone said. He couldn't help it that most people didn't deserve them. "Well, I hope your problems resolve more smoothly than ours will, whether Saburo is found or not. Anyway, I'm sure you'd like me to come to the reason you're still here putting up with me."

"Putting up with you?" Burnser frowned. "I wouldn't describe spending time with you that way."

Daisuke snorted as he shuffled through his papers. "You'd be the first. Ah, here we go, the latest schematics." Shoving the rest of his work aside to deal with later, he spread the papers from his engineers out across the table, barely noticing as Burnser hastily moved the tea things out of the way. "The shoddy ones sent to you were far too heavy, and the joints not at all fluid enough for the kind of movement you need. I can see why Belemere sticks to bridges and explosions."

"They're world-renowned engineers, you know," Ektow said with a laugh.

"Yes, at building bridges and roads and then blowing them up later," Daisuke replied. "Now pay attention. The current fashion is to make them entirely of wood, or a composite of wood and metal, usually oak and steel, though cheaper ones are made of shoddy iron instead. We're currently working on two prototypes, one with a pylon of bamboo and steel, the other of just steel, but made more in the style of a traditional sword, since we think going with modern steel might be one of the problems."

He shuffled the papers. "Next is the socket, which we're still working on, but we'll have a traditional strap version ready by tomorrow and we're working on a suction idea that we hope to have a prototype of by next week. The joints are still stiffer than we'd like, but we'll have a better idea of how to tweak those once we can do a few test runs. The foot was finished this morning—we just need to finish the socket and assemble everything, and we'll have the legs ready for a test run hopefully tomorrow, or at worst overmorrow. Barring problems unforeseen, of course. Once all the technical matters are resolved, we'll of course focus on aesthetics."

Burnser smiled. "This is wonderful, Major."

Daisuke shrugged one shoulder. "It's what they're paid to do, and they enjoy having tasks that aren't focused on causing violence and pain."

"Speaking of what they're paid to do, what *do* I owe you?"

"Owe?" Daisuke stared at Ektow blinked slowly. "You don't owe anything. Why would you?"

Ektow bristled like a pissed off cat. "I didn't come here to play the poor wounded soldier—"

"Madera!"

"—in need of your damned charity."

"Whoever said it was charity?" Daisuke demanded.

"That's what it's called when everyone looks at me with pity and treats me like I need to be coddled and too feeble to even pay for things."

"The only thing you need is a good spanking," Daisuke snapped. "It's not charity, you prickly—"

"Prickly! At least I'm not—"

"Enough!" Burnser bellowed over both of them.

Daisuke kept his gaze on Ektow. "At least I'm not *what*?"

"You're *both* a pain my ass," Burnser snapped. "Knock it off, now, or I swear to the Moons I'll knock you both to the ground. No!" he added sharply when Ektow tried to speak, gesturing sharply at Daisuke when he tried to do the same. "Enough. Major, please kindly explain why you do not expect Madera to pay for his own prosthetics. Madera, shut up."

Daisuke huffed. "Because they've already been paid for. Eleven of my engineers are currently under contract with me to do private work. Everything from assisting with any non-military projects I devise and whatever commissions I feel like taking on. You're hardly the only project I'm working on right now. I don't charge for my work unless the costs or time exceed certain amounts. I always tell people that where applicable, but something like prosthetics was never in danger of exceeding the limit, so it never came up."

"So *you* just pay for everything, like the—"

"Madera, I will make you sleep on the sofa for the rest of the month, so help me."

Ektow huffed, but fell silent again.

"I receive a generous research stipend from the University of Fukuoka. Hideki and I graduated early and joined the military shortly after. As part of a special arrangement to...I suppose freelance my Masters, I was given a stipend to cover research and other costs, so I could continue my education while also serving. After I received my degrees, the research

arrangement continued, though it's set to conclude in a couple more years. Part of the agreement is that I turn my research over to them, publish a certain number of papers, that sort of nonsense. Isn't that why you sought me out?"

Ektow stared at him, emotions Daisuke couldn't parse flickering across his face. "No. I sought you out because your skills came highly recommended. I didn't know you were some sort of prodigy who had a Masters degree before most people finish undergraduate work."

"Doctorate," Daisuke muttered. Despite his terrible inability to hold still that made his childhood lessons a torment, once he'd been sent off to university at sixteen and able to study in his own ways, he'd made quick work of it all, all the way to Doctorate by twenty-five. Hideki had focused on learning the finer points of running a business, that sort of thing, with two bachelors to his name. Daisuke had two bachelors, a masters, and a doctorate.

It was something he preferred not to talk about, just one more thing that made people treat him differently. Avoid him. Hate him. Assume nasty things about him.

"I see more and more why your people hold you in awe," Burnser said.

"You mean why they came to yell at me for days in a row?" Ektow asked wryly.

Burnser gave him a look. "In their defense, you are good at being an ass."

"Yes, well, product of my environment and all that." Ektow sighed as Burnser's look grew more pointed. "I apologize, Major."

"No worries at all, my lord," Daisuke replied. "If it really matters that much to you, I can send an itemized bill." He smiled fleetingly. "Adjusted for putting up with me, of course."

"I don't know why you keep phrasing it that way," Burnser said, "but you're as bad as him, and you need to stop it. Seriously, I should be getting paid to deal with the two of you."

Daisuke looked at him, mouth curving into a real smile, then slid his gaze to Ektow. "Is he always this... bitey?"

"Oh, yes, and this is him still being patient with me," Ektow replied with a matching smile. "You should see him when he's really mad. He'd put us both to shame." The smile turned into a playful grin as he looked at Burnser. "Lucky for me, I know how to get him back in a good mood."

"You aren't going to be doing any of those things if you don't work harder at watching your temper."

Daisuke bit off a highly inappropriate comment about wanting to see any or all of this temper and apology for himself. Which, damn it all, he did want to see them. Together. Like a fucking fool.

Gathering up all his papers, he stood and gave a short bow. "If you'll excuse me, I need to be getting on with my day."

"Major—"

Daisuke didn't stop, just kept walking, as though this would be the time he could outrun his Moons-damned stupidity. What was *wrong* with him. They were a couple, a long-established one by the sounds of it, and it was a relationship they'd fought long and hard for. What sort of lech thought *I would like to watch you fuck*. That wasn't even the worst part though. The worst part was that he'd vastly enjoyed sitting with them, talking and snarking, watching as they grew comfortable enough around him to flirt openly with each other.

Even if there was someone outside his family willing to tolerate all his quirks and failings, he wasn't going to find that someone in a happily established couple for Moons' sake.

He really wished Hideki would come home. The longer he was gone, the faster Daisuke felt like he and his whole world were falling apart.



CHAPTER SEVEN

There was a storm on the air. Still distant, but drawing steadily closer. The wind had kicked up and leaves had turned, and clouds would soon darken the sky.

Hideki worked with the others to secure the camp, packing up everything that risked flying away and stowing it in his tent, to which they'd added additional anchors. Once everything was inside, they flattened the top of the tent and pinned that down as well, making the whole thing look like crates rigged for a voyage at sea or for traveling through tough terrain.

"Is that everything?"

"Yes, Major," Keiko replied with a sharp salute.

"Mount up and move out, then." They'd scoured the area for a suitable cave to take shelter in, but the only viable one had been too small. Their only choice was to return to the manor and hope Her Lordship didn't throw a hissy fit about them borrowing her stable to avoid dying from a deadly storm.

Because it was definitely going to be a bad one. Not typhoon bad, but close enough. He could all but taste the lightning, and thunder was beginning to rumble off in the distance.

They rode off, saddlebags packed with sufficient supplies to wait out the storm a few days, though he couldn't deny he was hoping they'd also get some assistance from Ameshi's people, even if they wouldn't have the basic decency to let them into the house proper.

As they approached the road, the sound of a horse drew his attention, and he signaled his people to hang back—and relaxed as he saw Berrick. "There you are," Berrick said. "I was worried you'd already gone somewhere else. Come on, the storm is coming up fast, and it's already flooded out the villages north of us."

"You shouldn't be out here," Hideki replied, even as he motioned his people to go, riding just behind them at Berrick's side.

They were roughly a third of the way into the journey when the sky went from gray to black, thunder cracking so hard that the whole world shook. Lightning flashed, so close that Berrick's horse panicked, screaming and rearing up—

Berrick flew out of the saddle, landing with a pained cry, just as a far more ominous cracking sound filled the air, followed by more thunder and lightning. "Move!" Hideki bellowed. "Move *now*." As his people continued onward, he wheeled around, grabbed the reins of Berrick's horse, and got them out of the way. Throwing himself out of the saddle, he bolted for Berrick, lying still on the ground, and scooped him up before turning sharply and racing back the way he'd come.

Even with his haste, a branch of the enormous tree felled by lightning and wind scraped along his back, shredding his jacket and some of the skin beneath. The tree landed with a resounding crash, so large it blocked any chance of getting around it and back onto the road, not without going into the woods and finding a way around, which they didn't have time for, especially not with both of them injured and the storm upon them.

"Major!" Mina bellowed. "Major!"

"We're safe!" Hideki gasped out. "Get to the house! We'll double back and make for the cave. Go now, Sergeant! That's a fucking order."

There was a brief hesitation, and then he just barely caught Mina's reply. "Yes, Major. Don't do anything stupid, like die."

"Understood, Sergeant."

Winching at the pain in his back, Hideki carried Berrick to the horses, where thankfully the calm of his own horse was steadying Berrick's.

Berrick groaned. "Fuck, that hurt. Where—"

"Can you ride?" Hideki asked. "I know you're hurt, but—"

"I can ride," Berrick said. "Had the wind knocked out of me, and my arm hurts, but I can ride." Hideki set him on his feet, and he stared wide eyed at the enormous tree blocking their path. "How are we going to get home now?"

"We aren't. Come on, mount up and follow me." Despite his assurances that he could ride fine, Berrick still needed help getting into the saddle—but seemed to hold just fine once he was there.

Biting his cheek against the pain in his back, which wasn't helped by all the movement or the rain that was starting to fall, he mounted his own horse again and led the way back to camp, and from there across the creek and along an old deer path, until he finally found the cave they'd scouted before.

Dismounting, he led the horses into the cave and got them settled at the very back of the cave.

"You're bleeding!"

Hideki whipped around in time to catch Berrick as he barreled forward, only just keeping them upright. "I'm not the one who went flying off my horse. How is your arm?"

"I think I just jammed it on the landing," Berrick replied. "Your back is a bloody mess. What happened?"

"The tree," Hideki replied. "It's fine. I'll get it cleaned up once we're settled. Come on, we need a fire and dry clothes."

Berrick frowned, but obediently set to work helping him get their makeshift camp set up. Outside, the wind howled like a raging beast, punctuated by crashing thunder and blinding bolts of lightning. "Where are your people?"

"Hopefully in your stables as planned." Hideki made certain the fire was strong and steady, then removed his sodden boots before standing up to strip off his clothes. Setting them aside in a pile to deal with shortly, he turned to his packs to pull out dry clothes—and turned back at the strangled noise Berrick made.

But when he looked, Berrick was facing away, working on his own clothes, the set of dry ones Hideki had loaned him set nearby.

Shrugging the noise off, Hideki pulled on socks, underclothes, and pants, but left his shirt off and opened up his medical kit.

"Could I be of help?" Berrick asked, and as Hideki turned toward him, added, "I'm not much of a medic, but I can at least clean the wounds and apply bandages if necessary. Do you feel all right, pain aside?"

Hideki handed off the kit and sat in front of the fire. "The help would be appreciated. Nothing worse than pain. I was just scraped by falling branches, I don't think there's any serious damage."

Berrick made noises of acknowledgement and set to work. Whatever Hideki had expected of a man who'd described himself as 'not much of a medic,' it was not the soft, deft, and gentle touches that quickly cleaned and treated his wounds, bandaging two of them. "Your poor tattoo."

Hideki was far more concerned about certain other misbehaving parts of his body. "It can be fixed, and I'd rather be alive with a ruined tattoo than dead with a perfect tattoo."

"True enough. I am sorry. This is all my fault. I was worried and came to make certain you and your people came to the house. I never would have just let you stay in the damn stable."

"Your mother hates me, as a Takahara and quite personally," Hideki said dryly. "The stable was the best we were going to get, and only if we begged forgiveness for borrowing rather than asking for permission."

"My mother can stuff it." Berrick raked his hands through his hair, absolute misery cutting across his face, far deeper than anything on Berrick's throbbing back. "I don't know why she insists on doing every single thing in her life the hardest way possible."

Hideki snorted, pulling one of the saddlebags close to dig out tea supplies. "As someone who comes from a family full of... shall we say, strong personalities... I can assure you they never notice they're taking the hard route every time."

Look at Saburo, who was supposed to be one of the sensible ones. Hideki hoped the stupid jerk was stuck out in the rain and it took his hair an entire week to dry properly.

"What about you?" Berrick asked, using his handkerchief to dry out his hair as best he could. He'd elected to sit next to Hideki, and in the aftermath

of his distracting touch, it was far too close for Hideki's peace of mind.

Hideki laughed unsteadily. "Oh, I think Daisuke and I take the crown on doing everything the hard way. Growing up, my father liked to say we had a 'severe deficit in the ability to sit still and pay attention' and 'a complete inability to do anything the way normal people would.'"

"Your father sounds like an ass."

Shrugging one shoulder, Hideki said, "He said it as an observation rather than as criticism, though sometimes he did want to pitch us into the koi pond. I can't say there weren't times we deserved it. He's also the one who pushed to let us do things our way, even when it wasn't the 'proper' or 'standard' way. If not for him, they would never have let us go to university when we did, or let Daisuke get all his degrees so quickly. Or let us join the military while he was still pursuing them, though some of that was Jiro's influence too."

"That sounds exhausting."

"Maybe, but most of the time we like it, and it's better than being bored."

"You always seem so calm," Berrik replied, looking at him intently, the firelight catching on his lashes in a way that Hideki felt stupid for noticing, but noticed all the same. "I can't picture you working yourself to exhaustion just to avoid being bored."

Hideki laughed ruefully. "I tend to be very busy in here." He tapped his temple. "My mind is always spinning, spinning, spinning. Makes me very good at focusing on things like embroidery or getting through a long and tedious turn on the watch." Fighting his way through the chaos of battle or putting all his energy on completing a mission. "The downside is... well, there's many."

"I have yet to see anything about you I'd call a downside."

Hideki's cheeks burned at the unexpected compliment. "I'm pretty sure every man in your mother's library would have plenty to say about my negative traits. I may not be as quick to burn as Daisuke, but we have the same hot temper."

"Is that why they call you the Warhammer and the Gunpowder?"

"Partly, yes," Hideki said, stifling a sigh at the names. He was proud of what he did, he was, but he didn't like that years of highly-skilled violence was all anyone ever remembered about him. "Mostly for our skills, though."

There was silence, and when Hideki looked toward to see what was wrong, Berrick rubbed the back of his head and looked away. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't keep asking, it's clear you dislike those nicknames. You're so fascinating, I want to know everything I can, but I shouldn't pry or ask questions that hurt you."

Fascinating? Hideki's heart gave an unwelcome lurch. No one had ever called him that before. He licked his lips, heart hammering in his ears now. "It's fine. Well, it's true we don't love the designations, but they're important to the people around us, those we command and everyone across the Wall. We're good at what we do, for better and worse. Even if..."

Berrick looked up, his green eyes darker than usual behind his gold-rimmed glasses. "Even if...?"

"The military isn't what we really wanted," Hideki said slowly, waiting for the surprise, the laughter and disbelief.

Instead, Berrick only smiled faintly. "That doesn't surprise me. You rarely talk about it, save to tell stories that will make people laugh or smile. You always look a bit worried when you talk about Daisuke, and tired when referencing all the two of you do on the Wall. I can see where military seemed a perfect fit for the two of you, at least from all I've heard and observed... but I sense you'd rather do something relatively quiet. Bookshop?"

Hideki's heart was going to pop, but even though admitting his greatest dream to anyone but Daisuke was his greatest struggle, he managed to quietly say, "Embroidery. I want to open a shop that does custom embroidery, sells patterns, that sort of thing."

He startled when a hand settled on his arm, and looked at Berrick again, helpless and lost as he stared into eyes that seemed to *see* him in a way even most of his family didn't. Only Daisuke, and Ichiro, who knew all about living a life he'd never wanted, though he'd only admitted to it once on a night when he was very, very drunk.

"I think that would suit you immensely," Berrick said with a shy smile. "Sounds nice, running a shop and having a smaller home, instead of a large manor that requires managing thirty to fifty people, hosting gatherings, attending other gatherings, keeping track of politics and marriages and scandals..." He sighed and looked away. "I dislike being a socialite as much as you dislike being a soldier, though obviously the two don't compare."

"Unhappy is unhappy," Hideki said, catching Berrick's hand as he started to pull away, keeping it on his arm. "I'm sorry. I didn't know. You seemed so enthusiastic about the marriage, and so suited..."

Berrick shrugged. "You seemed suited to the military, with your skills and fancy medals and looking ridiculously good in that uniform."

Hideki had never felt so many things at once. Hope. Longing. Desire. Pain. Fear. An aching need for something he knew damn good and well wasn't and would never be his. He swallowed the rock in his throat, staring into those green, green eyes. "You're promised to Saburo."

"Saburo left me for the love of his life," Berrick replied with a small laugh. "He doesn't get to complain that I've found myself vastly more interested in the handsome brother he left to clean up his mess."

Hideki drew breath to reply, but before he could voice it, Berrick's mouth covered his own, a hand sinking into his hair as Berrick turned and rose up to his knees to get a better height and angle. Hideki gasped, which was all the permission Berrick needed to press the kiss deeper. Shivering, Hideki twisted up and onto his own knees, arms sliding around Berrick's waist as he kissed back with all the want he'd been holding back from practically the moment they'd met.

Saburo was a *fool*.

The hand in his hair tightened, and the moan Berrick fed into his mouth was the finest thing Hideki had ever heard. He groaned in reply and moved them away from the fire, spreading Berrick out beneath him, holding fast to his hands and pinning them to the cave floor as he dove into another kiss. Berrick tasted like rain and kissed like a storm. Hideki groaned again and then reluctantly drew back, pushing up to rest on his heels, straddling Berrick.

Who looked absolutely lovely spread out on the cave floor, hair a mess and lips thoroughly kissed, pupils blown as he did some staring of his own. "You're beautiful," Hideki said, voice husky.

"Beautiful like a placid lake, maybe." Berrick licked his lips and reached out to draw Hideki close again. "You're beautiful like a sunrise."

"Just an old hammer," Hideki whispered before kissing him again, moaning into Berrick's eager mouth, grabbing his hands again, holding him in place. From the way Berrick shivered and groaned, that arrangement suited him just fine.

Eventually Berrick insisted on freedom, his fingers going immediately

to Hideki's shirt. "Off, off, off."

Hideki laughed. "Would you like me to take my shirt off?" He pulled back again and tugged his shirt over his head, setting it on top of the saddlebags so it wouldn't get wet or dirty.

"Yes," Berrick said in a soft, satisfied hiss, eyes burning as he ran his hands over Hideki's chest. "I've wanted to do this from the moment I came across you in that field."

"Really? I saw no indication of that."

Berrick gave him a look before shifting so he could sit up and put his mouth where his fingers had been. "What sort of trollop would that have made me? I can't imagine that would have impressed you, me flirting with you before we go back to the house where I pretended I wanted to flirt with your brother."

"We sound like a bad play," Hideki replied, and then forgot all about plays, about words, as Berrick pressed a hand to where his cock was still trapped in his pants.

"I don't think you could be a bad play if you tried."

Hideki laughed roughly. "That was terrible." He sank his hands into Berrick's hair and dragged him into a wet, hungry kiss, not stopping until they were both heaving for breath.

After that, they separated long enough to discard clothes and hastily lay down blankets to make things slightly more comfortable. "I did not come prepared for this... sort of thing..." Hideki said.

"Don't worry, I'm more than enough of a shameless slut for both of us," Berrick said with a laugh as he settled on the improvised bed and pulled Hideki back down on top of him. "Though today it was only by chance. I never took the jar out of my jacket from my last visit."

Hideki had no idea what to say to that admission, so he settled for kissing and touching. Berrick did not have his muscles, but Hideki hadn't been wanting that either. He was long and lean and beautiful, the only scars on his hands and arms, mostly burns and cuts from working on glass. The rest of him was smooth and flawless, warm to the touch, reacting to every brush of Hideki's fingers, flexing delightfully beneath his mouth. "What would you like?" he asked against Berrick's skin, mouth dragging along the soft skin of one thigh, then the other, then back up to tease the skin around his cock but never touching it.

Berrick pulled him to give a wet, open-mouthed kiss full of greed and hunger. "I want you to fuck me so hard that riding home later will be an agony, and I won't be able to sleep until I've gotten off with one of my toys wishing it was you again."

Hideki almost came right then and there, groaning and trembling as he took one hungry kiss after another, until he was finally able to draw back and fetch the jar Berrick had set nearby. Grabbing his cloak, he rolled it up tightly and slipped it beneath Berrick's hips, then worked his way back down that long, beautiful body, until he could spread those thighs wide and get his mouth to all new places.

Berrick nearly howled as Hideki's tongue worked his hole, teasing the rim before pushing lightly inside. His nails raked along Hideki's shoulders, leaving behind a sting far more pleasant than the wounds still throbbing on his back.

Drawing back, Hideki traced his hole with one slick finger before carefully pushing the finger in, working slowly, stretching and twisting.

"You— fuck—" Berrick broke off, reduced to panting and moaning, as Hideki worked in a second finger.

By the time he'd progressed to three, Berrick was begging loudly enough to rival the thunder. Drawing back, Hideki slicked his cock and used one hand to guide it to Berrick's hole, pushing inside slowly, giving Berrick time to adjust, body trembling with the effort to not simply let go and take what he wanted.

When he was finally fully seated, he pressed scattered kisses to Berrick's face, throat, shoulder, until Berrick rolled his hips in a silent order to get on with matters, his nails once more biting into Hideki's skin.

Hideki obeyed, pulled nearly all the way out and thrusting back in, panting in Berrick's ear as he did it again and again, fucking him in long, deep strokes. It wasn't long before Berrick was coming apart in his arms, teeth sinking into his shoulder, making Hideki huff a winded laugh.

He thrust into Berrick a few more times, rhythm lost, finally sinking in deep one last time before coming, face buried in Berrick's sweat-slick throat.

When he could move again, he gently pulled out and moved to sprawl out beside Berrick, partly on the chilly cave floor itself but absolutely not caring for the moment. Outside, the storm raged on, though it was slightly muffled by the enormous branch that had landed across the front of the cave

at some point.

"How long do you think it will last?" Berrick asked. "All the years I've lived here, never seen a storm quite like this. We get the edges of typhoons sometimes, but those mostly hit your side of the continent."

"The worst of it will end by tonight, though late tonight, and it will trickle on through most of tomorrow." Hideki sat up to get something to clean them up and add more wood to the fire. "I'd say by overmorrow we should be able to venture out."

Berrick pressed the back of one hand to his forehead. "Oh, no, whatever shall we do to pass the time trapped in a cave together."

"You won't be that flippant after three days of sleeping on hard rock," Hideki said with a laugh.

"Guess I'll just have to make certain I'm too tired to care." He sat up and kissed Hideki, drawing back slowly. "Though I wouldn't mind some food first. I was in such a hurry to get to you, I skipped breakfast. Is your back all right after all our, um, activity?"

Hideki flashed a brief grin before turning back to digging out what he needed to prepare lunch. "I've had wounds far worse than this and still had to keep fighting. Anyway, if we're going to keep you from getting bored the next couple of days, I'll have to get used to getting clawed and bitten."

Berrick's face flushed scarlet. "Sorry. I should have asked if that was all right."

"I have no complaints," Hideki replied. Pulling his clothes back on, he carried the cooking supplies and foodstuffs to the fire, where he neatly set about making a simple congee, hearty and warming, especially on days like this.

Smiling, Berrick scooted closer to the fire, drawing up his knees and wrapping his arms around his legs. "So what else do you like?"

"Like? Oh. Um." Hideki dropped his gaze to the rice he was washing. "I'm afraid I don't have a long list of interesting and exciting things I enjoy in bed. I've only had two other lovers, and neither was... much for variety, I guess you'd say."

"Oh, I see," Berrick said, in a tone that Hideki couldn't parse. When he looked up, Berrick was watching him hungrily, and it was clearly not food on his mind. "Well, I'm happy to expand your horizons. What do you think of eating lunch, and then I spread you out and ride you?"

Hideki might have whimpered. "I think that sounds like a marvelous plan."

"Splendid."



CHAPTER EIGHT

Ever since Ichiro had shown up the day before, Daisuke had more new friends than he knew what to do with. Typical. Even the delegation that had been avoiding him, except for Ektow and Burnser, suddenly wanted to cozy up to him.

"Ichiro, have I mentioned lately that I absolutely detest you?"

"This morning at breakfast," Ichiro replied without bothering to look up from the newspaper he was reading. "Who wants to soothe my broken heart now?"

"Who doesn't?" Daisuke grouched, pushing his legs off the table just to see him nearly topple from the shift in balance. "Aren't you supposed to be with Hideki by now?"

Resettling his feet on the table where he'd propped them, stupidly long legs taking up all available space, Ichiro shook out his crumbled paper. "The roads are completely flooded from that nasty storm, and where water isn't a problem, trees definitely are. Aren't you supposed to be heading

operations to clear the roads?"

Daisuke rolled his eyes. "My teams are working on it. If they needed me there supervising such basic operations, they wouldn't be *my* teams." He swiped the rice balls Ichiro couldn't be bothered to eat and wolfed them down while reading through the reports from his engineers that had just arrived, squirreling himself into a corner of Jiro's sitting room where no one would immediately notice him.

Not that they would bother to keep looking for him once they saw Ichiro. If Jiro was the most sought after Takahara in the military, Ichiro was the grand prize. The eldest son, the heir, renowned scholar, firm but kind leader, all their mother's beauty with the famous Takahara gray eyes, and of course he was so lonely and broken after his first wife had betrayed him by sleeping with his oldest friend.

Which, they weren't wrong. Ichiro was lonely and broken. He hadn't been the same since the two people he'd loved most in the world had not just betrayed him, but shattered his heart into a thousand pieces. But no greedy fortune hunter was going to be what helped him finally heal. Daisuke wasn't certain anything could.

In the meantime, he'd just keep the fortune hunters away as best he could.

"I hear you've made friends with Lord Ektow and his manservant."

"Lover," Daisuke said sharply, glaring. "Burnser assists him, and he did work under Ektow in the military, but they're very much a pair."

Ichiro's brows rose. "You're certain nothing nefarious is occurring."

"On my life."

"Then I apologize, I didn't realize. I've heard all about your tempestuous introduction." He looked up with a smirk. "Also that you're now a father of five."

Daisuke shot him a dirty look. "You weren't this mouthy when you showed up."

"Business before pleasure," Ichiro said breezily. "What do your new friends think of your brood?"

"They're not my *brood*, and they're not my friends," Daisuke snapped. "You know that's not how people see me and Hideki."

Ichiro frowned. "Yes, well, it's long established that people are stupid. That being said, everything I've heard tells me those two very much are your

friends. Rumor mill is already turning to lovers."

"Oh, for Moons' sake." Daisuke slammed his papers down. "You're as bad as Mother. They're lovers. Even if they did want a third, I can promise you they're not looking at me as an option. When they do look at me, they have the same confounded expression as everyone else. Now knock it off or I'll start asking when you're going to settle down again and produce heirs."

"Ugh, you win," Ichiro said, but there was no missing the sadness in his eyes. He and Ichiro didn't have much in common, but they were both scholars, and they both loved children... and they both knew what it was like to be betrayed by a lover, though Ichiro had gotten the worst of that by far. "Where's Jiro? He said he'd be back by now."

"Tower 5 pissed him right the fuck off and are suffering the consequences of their actions. Now let me read my reports, so I can get rid of you and get back the brother I like."

Ichiro grinned and went back to his newspaper.

Daisuke got to enjoy roughly twenty minutes of silence before the door opened and Jiro's aide admitted a familiar pair. Daisuke's heart jumped, because it was *stupid*, but he did not stand nor speak, as Burnser and Ektow seemed to have eyes only for Ichiro and hadn't noticed him at all.

Like always. It shouldn't even hurt anymore.

"Lord Takahara?" Ektow asked.

Ichiro rose, folding his paper and setting it aside. "That's me." He gave one of his stupidly elegant bows and smiled faintly. "You must be the Lord Ektow I've heard so much about, and Master Burnser, was it?"

"Yes, I'm honored." Ektow smiled. "I'm not a scholar myself, but I've many friends back home who are, and your research comes up often."

Offering what he and Hideki had always called his 'best behavior smile,' Ichiro replied, "Thank you, I'm honored they've heard about me as far away as Belemere." Daisuke rolled his eyes. "Daisuke and I come by our scholarly habits via our father, though his interest is botany. He didn't know quite what to do when I chose boring old books that nobody else can read, and Daisuke opted to blow things up."

"Speaking of the Major, I don't suppose you've seen him? That's why we came this way, actually."

Damn it.

"He's over there is the corner pretending he and his insecurities are

invisible," Ichiro said drolly, pointing a thumb over his shoulder.

"Fuck you," Daisuke grumbled as they all turned to look at him. "I was simply trying not to interrupt, since they seemed so excited to meet Your High and Mighty Lordship."

Ichiro grinned, entirely too much teeth and knowing. "I'm going to go stop Jiro from committing unsanctioned murder."

"I hate you, and I'm definitely telling Father the truth about his water lilies," Daisuke hissed.

Ichiro's grin just worsened. "Mother and her mourning doves."

Daisuke's eyes narrowed. "You don't want to get into a game of blackmail with me, Ichiro."

"Don't underestimate me. I'll see you all later." He gave another one of his stupidly perfect bows and slipped out the door, closing it near soundlessly behind him.

Burnser looked at Daisuke, one brow quirked. "What did you do to your mother's mourning doves?"

"Accidentally let them loose in the house, where they absolutely *destroyed* the kitchen," Daisuke said. "Ichiro got really drunk one night, fell in the pond, and completely wiped out my father's prize-winning water lilies."

"Prize-winning?" Burnser asked. "You can win prizes for water lilies?"

Daisuke rolled his eyes. "Don't ask. It's a whole new world, full of violence and bloodshed that makes the army look like a tea party. The less you know, the happier you'll be."

Burnser regarded him thoughtfully, a faint smile curving his too-pretty mouth. "On the contrary, Major, we rather enjoy learning all we can about you and your family."

That caused a familiar painful lurch in Daisuke's chest. Hope. Wishful thinking. "I'm not sure why, but never fear, there are plenty of people happy to tell you all about us."

Ektow's mouth turned down. "Yes, there certainly are, and I don't think favorably of any of them."

Daisuke's heart sank. "Who?" Whoever it was, they'd better hope it was just him they were badmouthing, because if they'd said a *single* negative thing about his brothers, they were going to be pitched over the wall

headfirst.

"Doesn't matter," Ektow said. "They were informed very clearly to keep their mouths shut around us."

Burnser snorted a laugh. "Is that what was very clear to them?"

"Oh, silence yourself."

Daisuke's mouth twitched. He really did *like* them, which proved just how stupid he really was. "So what did you want to see me about, Lord Ektow?"

Ektow scowled. "Why are you being so formal? I think after all our sniping, and Kole's repeated threats of bodily harm, you can use our names."

That was the worst idea Daisuke had ever heard. Formality was the only protective barrier he had left. What was he supposed to do, though? Say no and hurt their feelings, and when they asked why, explain that he liked them in a way they'd never reciprocate and he badly wanted to watch them fuck and flirt and bicker and simply be? After knowing them only a few weeks?

He was arrogant, reckless, rude, and dysfunctional, but he wasn't a masochist. "What did you need then, Madera? Kole?"

No, he was definitely a masochist, because being allowed to use their names was the sweetest and most painful thing he'd ever experienced.

They stared at him a moment, then Madera seemed to shake himself. "Um, that is, we were wondering if you'd like to come to dinner, if you had an evening free. I know you're extremely busy with the children, covering for your brother, everyone trying to find your other brother, and uh, what seems to be half the base trying to seduce your other *other* brother. Is he that much of a prize?"

"With a tragic backstory, even," Daisuke said, some of the knots in his stomach easing, if not loosening entirely. "I don't think he'd be into the whole threesome thing, though, if you had ambitions yourself." He grinned slightly. "Or is it Kole with the ambitions, planning to cast aside a lowly second son for an heir?"

Kole laughed as Madera glared, and laughed harder when Madera shifted the glare to him. "Oh, stop pouting, it's funny. Anyway, why would I leave you when you're about to oust your brother and take his place?"

Madera rolled his eyes and gave Kole a shove. "Never mind, Lord Ichiro can have you. I will pay him to take you."

That just made Kole laugh harder.

Daisuke smiled, even as his heart hurt more than ever. "I can do dinner. Not tonight..." He frowned. "Or tomorrow, I think some stupid ambassadors are coming about m—the children. Overmorrow would work, though." He bit off the urge to ask them *why* they were inviting him to dinner. It was probably some horribly mundane reason, and he'd rather go on pretending they simply wanted the dubious pleasure of his company and to maybe extend an invitation for a highly select dessert. "I'll tell Shouhei and make certain nothing interferes."

"We understand you have vastly more important commitments, Major," Kole said. "We are former military ourselves; we know what it's like. We'll plan for the day after tomorrow, then, and hope to see you there."

"I'll walk you out," Daisuke said, not trusting himself to say anything else. He strode across the room to join them, sighing inwardly to realize he'd stayed in his corner the whole time, and opened the door as they reached it.

As they passed him, Daisuke ran his eyes idly over the wheelchair, mind immediately going to ways it could be improved, give Madera more independence, like being able to move himself comfortably, instead of always relying on someone else or pushing the wheels along himself with no protection for his hands.

"Major?"

He blinked at them, realizing he was still standing by the door like a nitwit. "Sorry, lost in thought. You can call me Daisuke."

They shared a look he didn't understand, though it seemed full of... fondness? Maybe. Whatever. Madera said, "What consumed your thoughts?"

Daisuke hesitated, then mentally shrugged, because why did it matter? "I was thinking of improvements that could be made to your chair. Casters, angling the large wheels for better stability, some sort of guide rim so you can more safely control it yourself..." He pulled out the small sketchbook he always kept in his thigh pocket, tugged the pencil behind his ear free, and started sketching.

Once he had the rough drawing of what he wanted, he started in on smaller sketches of the details, with notes on size and weight, ideas for how to make it beautiful as well as functional, because he couldn't *stand* when people did the latter but not the former.

"What did you lose him to?"

Daisuke's head snapped up at the familiar droll tone and scowled at Jiro and Ichiro. "What do you want?"

"To get into my rooms," Jiro said, his tone exactly matching Ichiro's. They were as close to each other as Daisuke and Hideki, and it had never mattered that they were not quite two years apart. "Why are you standing here sketching and ignoring your friends?"

"Sorry," Daisuke muttered, tucking the sketchbook away. "I was fixing something." He stepped out of the way so Jiro and Ichiro could pass. "Have you heard more about these stupid ambassadors?"

"Not really," Jiro said with a sigh. "They're not your problem, anyway. Focus on the roads, so I can bring Hideki home and drag Saburo back to the manor by his hair."

Daisuke bristled. "They are too my problem! Nobody is touching those kids without going through me, and I swear to the Moons, if you try to get me out of the way so you can sneak them—"

"That's enough, Major," Jiro cut in sharply.

Ichiro winced slightly and moved to stand with Madera and Kole.

Daisuke cast him a brief disgusted look, then turned his full attention to Jiro. "Go fuck yourself, General."

Jiro narrowed his eyes in a way that would have anyone else on the Wall fleeing in terror. "You are out of—"

"You're out of line if you think anyone is taking those kids from me!" Daisuke bellowed. "Nobody wanted them! They were being used as cannon fodder! Their parents were murdered so they'd have nowhere else to go! I don't care if the king himself comes to the Wall, the only way anyone is taking those children away is by carrying them over my dead body! Do whatever the fuck you want to me, *General*, but I'm not bending on this."

"Daisuke—" Jiro clenched and relaxed his fists. "You would test the patience of the gods, I swear to the Moons. Nobody will be taking the children from you, all right? Professional murderer doesn't always mean heartless bastard! So would you calm the fuck down? This is exactly why I don't want you near those ambassadors."

"Fine, whatever," Daisuke snapped, then huffed out a breath and said with slightly more calm, "You're not heartless, it's everyone else who is, all those slimy politicians coming to barter them away to do Moons know what." Slimy politicians who always got their way, no matter how wrong that way

was or how many people they hurt in the process. He'd seen it more times than he could stomach counting.

Jiro stepped in close, hands resting firmly on Daisuke's shoulders. "Breathe, Daisuke. I will not let anything happen to those kids, and I won't let them be taken from you, I promise. All right? Good. Now go work on your precious new idea before you explode, or act like you were actually raised in civilized society—"

"I really hope you don't think our house qualifies as civilized anything."

"—and take your entirely too patient and tolerant friends to lunch before they realize they're better off far away from Takahara histrionics. All right?"

"Fine. All right." Daisuke shrugged off his hands, but tolerated when that got him roughly hugged in response. "Go away, your face annoys me."

Jiro scowled. "For the last time: these are *my* quarters. You go away."

"Bah!" Daisuke said, throwing up his hands as he strode off.

"Hello, Major!"

"Good afternoon, Major!"

Daisuke ignored those greetings and every other one that came his way, when normally people barely said two words to him and only if they had no choice. He was going to find Ichiro a spouse just so the rest of them could get some peace whenever he was around.

"So would you like to have that lunch, Major?" Kole smiled and gave a bare shake of his head. "Daisuke?"

"Come with me," Daisuke said gruffly. "We can eat in Tower Nine, though I'll never hear the end of it after how we met."

Madera snickered, not stopping even when Kole whacked his arm.

Kole rolled his eyes. "I swear to the Moons—"

"Get down!" Madera bellowed even as he threw himself out of his chair, knocking him and Daisuke to the ground right as a shot cracked out. The iron tang of fresh blood filled the air around him. Two more shots cracked out before return shots were fired, though good luck hitting a sharpshooter who was probably already on the move.

When it seemed no more shots were forthcoming, Daisuke sat up—and swore as his left shoulder gave out. Oh, the smell of blood was coming from him. Damn it.

Now that he'd registered that, the pain came, hot and agonizing. Daisuke gritted his teeth and held still as Kole shrugged out of his jacket and used it to staunch the bleeding. He looked to Madera, who sat next to him. "Thank you. Sharp eyes."

"Keep sharp or fall dead," Madera said, the reply clearly reflexive, his eyes on the direction of the shots. "Sharpshooters shouldn't have been able to get close enough for that kind of shot."

"They must have—"

"Shut up," Kole said. "You two can discuss this later, not while you're bleeding out. Honestly, it's not fair to me there's *two* of you."

Madera smirked, but before he could reply, medics came rushing up, and Daisuke was inundated in pain medication before they tipped him onto a stretcher and carted him away. He could just barely hear his brothers, Jiro taking control like the general he was, and Ichiro somehow helping while also staying out of the way like a good civilian.

Hideki. He wanted Hideki, damn it.

On that note, Daisuke passed out, as everyone screamed and shouted around him like they were worried about something.



When he woke it was dark and his shoulder felt like... well, like someone had fucking shot it. Groaning, Daisuke leveraged himself up with his good arm, until he was sitting in his bed. Which thankfully *was* his bed and not one of the horrid beds in Medic.

He drank some water from the cup on the side table, then cleared his throat and bellowed, "Shouhei!"

The door opened almost immediately, Shouhei smiling. "Oh, good, you're awake. How's the arm?"

"It fucking hurts, stop asking stupid questions. Give me a status report."

Shouhei rolled his eyes, because apparently there was absolutely no

discipline around here. "I'm under strict orders from the General not to let you do anything but stay in that bed until he comes to see you, including giving you reports."

"I'm going to kill that little upstart," Daisuke hissed. "I was shot! I deserve to know why and how. I still have one good arm, you impudent little shit."

"Shockingly, the General is scarier than you, Major."

"Then get His Lordship here at once," Daisuke snapped.

"Yes, Your Highness," Shouhei said with a laugh. "In the meantime, would you like to see your guests?"

"My guests?"

Instead of replying, Shouhei slipped out of sight, leaving the door open, the soft murmur of his voice carrying but not the words. A moment later Madera and Kole appeared, the latter carrying a basket wafting scents that immediately made Daisuke's stomach growl.

Kole pulled up a chair and sat, resting the basket on his lap. "How are you feeling?"

"Miserable, why does everyone keep asking that?"

"How did I know that would be your answer," Kole said with a roll of his eyes. There was entirely too much of that going on around here. "Would you like some of your pain tonic?"

"No," Daisuke said.

Kole gave him a disgusted look. "Another predictable answer."

"I'm starting to feel offended," Madera said.

"Good," Kole retorted, and rose to unpack the basket on Daisuke's table by the fire, which was suspiciously clean, a state in which he'd never once left it. Noticing his frown, Kole said, "Your papers and charts and week-old coffee cups are perfectly safe. Everything's been organized and set aside for you later, except for the dishes, which were returned to the kitchens, though I think a couple of them might be beyond saving."

In a loud whisper, Madera said, "He gets really snippy when he's worried."

Kole set the basket down with a thump. "Keep it up and you'll see snippy." Whipping away the cloth covering the basket, he set to work setting everything out, arranging it neatly around the table. "The sharpshooter got away, but his bodyguard was not so lucky. Unfortunately for us, he's also

dead, so he can't be questioned."

"I thought I wasn't supposed to be told everything."

"I'm not in the military. I don't have to follow orders anymore."

Madera gave a single, sharp laugh. "You didn't follow them when you *were* in the military."

Ignoring that, Kole dragged two chairs to the table, then turned briskly to Daisuke. "Do you require assistance?"

"My shoulder is wounded, not my leg," Daisuke said dryly. "Madera has that covered, I think, wouldn't want to overdo it."

Madera laughed, loud and bright, and grinned briefly at him before wheeling over to take his place at the table. Daisuke moved slowly, but despite Kole's scowling, did in fact manage to make it on his own.

Where he was promptly given a bottle and tonic cup. "Drink that or so help me I will force it down your throat."

Daisuke stared at Kole, then at the tonic, then Madera. "I see what you mean by snippy."

Madera chuffed a small laugh and gave Kole a look full of the kind of love Daisuke would never, ever see directed his way. He ached for himself, even as he enjoyed seeing it between them. "Should have seen him when I lost my legs. Even I'd given up on me, but he never did."

"Too many of them do," Daisuke said, and obediently drank a measure of the tonic. Another medicine that had become popular that no one knew he'd developed, a combination of accoren and various other substances, including sunbringer flower, which helped to soften the harsh effects accoren could have on the stomach. "May I have my dinner now?"

"Yes, you may," Kole said primly, and sat down to his own meal.

Daisuke took a sip of jasmine tea, which definitely tasted too good to have come from the commissary. The food also looked leagues better than the mess: grilled fish with a spicy-sweet glaze, brown rice, pickles, steamed vegetables, and an absolutely perfect miso soup. "Where did you get this food?"

"I made it," Kole said.

Daisuke nearly dropped his chopsticks. "You *made* it? You can *cook*? Like *this*?"

"Why do you think I risked a court martial to snap him up?" Madera asked.

"My mother was the head cook at the Likensur estate for many years, and cooked for many other prominent families after that," Kole said, shaking his head at them. "My father owned a tavern until they married, after which he moved into the distribution side of things. Cooking has always been in my family. If I hadn't joined the military, I'd probably be cooking for some duke or countess myself. Why do you rich people always act like cooking is some mystical art?"

"It may as well be," Daisuke said. "I can rattle off endless chemical formulae and tell you in detail how to build any number of bombs, but ask me to fix rice and I will burn the kitchen down."

"I *did* burn it down," Madera said, sounding almost cheerful. "Wasn't even rice. I was just boiling some eggs."

"The whole kitchen?" Daisuke asked.

"Just the counters and floor around the stove, and I still maintain it was not entirely my fault."

"It was absolutely, one hundred percent your fault," Kole said. "Never again."

Madera snickered. "I'm still not allowed in the kitchen, not even to make my own tea, and *that* I can actually do."

Daisuke finished his soup and went to work on the fish, rice, and pickles. "So do you two not live at your family estate, or whatnot, back in Belemere?"

"We did, but it was temporary," Madera said, all his humor fading. "I was... attending... my brother. Usually, though, we have a modest townhouse in the capital. One housekeeper and two maids that come in a couple of times a week to keep the place tidy."

"Sounds nice," Daisuke said. It was exactly the sort of arrangement he and Hideki had always wanted, rooms above a shop or a house close to where they both worked. They'd never needed grand estates or fancy townhouses, just space enough to be themselves.

"Much better than my brother's house, for certain," Madera replied, finishing his fish and taking a second piece. "We haven't heard much about the shooting, but my impression is that no one knows much of anything. With the sharpshooter having escaped and his guard dead, we have no way of knowing if you were target prime or one of convenience."

"They probably wanted Jiro but were running out of time, saw me,

and hoped my death would be enough to destabilize the Wall. How close were they?"

"I think they said 4-an," Kole replied.

"That is far too close. Where the fuck were the watches?" Especially since he'd been in Jiro's quarters, for fuck's sake. That area of the wall had double the watch. Someone should have seen something.

Unless they were convinced not to. The thought turned his stomach, mind railing against the idea that anyone would betray their own and the grim knowledge that money could make people do almost anything.

He'd just assign some of Hideki's people to it, whatever his stupid brother said. Nobody was going to hurt Jiro, not on his watch. He had a feeling Jiro wasn't going to let him out of Tower Nine any time soon, but that rarely slowed Daisuke down, and he'd be damned if he didn't see Jiro protected, since the stupid bastard wouldn't do it nearly well enough himself.

"I don't suppose you know how the road cleanup is going, since Shouhei isn't going to tell me anything?"

"Proceeds apace," Madera replied. "Everyone is being really nice to me now that I not-really saved your life."

Daisuke laughed. "You *did* save my life, and I'm grateful. I should have said that sooner."

Madera shrugged. "Given all the trouble they had extracting the mark from your shoulder, I think luck had more to do with it than me."

"Well, thank you all the same," Daisuke said, and hated the way his stupid stomach fluttered at the smile that earned him. He pushed away his empty dishes. "Thank you as well for the dinner, and assisting, I think, after I was shot. My memory is hazy."

Kole beamed fit to outdo the sun. "I'm glad you enjoyed the food. If you're still awake in an hour or so, we'll have dessert."

Daisuke's head jerked in affront. "An *hour*. Why do I have to wait—" He broke off groaning as a familiar pounding came at his door. "Go away!"

Instead, Jiro threw the door open and strode inside, Ichiro right behind him. "I see you're well clear of death's door."

"So, are you going to tell me anything, or I am still to be locked up like a princess in a tower?"

"You're staying right here, Your Highness," Jiro said, smirking at Daisuke's scowl. "Because we found papers on the dead soldier that point to

you being the intended target all along."

"That's stupid." Daisuke finished off the dregs of his tea. "I know plenty of people want to brain me with heavy objects, but I've never done anything that merits a professional hit." That got him a complete set of glares. "What? It's true."

"You are the strangest mix of brilliant and obtuse," Madera said.

"Ha!" Ichiro and Jiro laughed together, followed by Ichiro saying, "That is Daisuke *and* Hideki summed up succinctly."

"I will push you out a window," Daisuke muttered.

Ichiro just kept laughing.

"Are you seriously making me stay in here?"

"Yes," Jiro said. "Brotherly bias aside, you clod, the army can ill afford to lose you, and if the enemy needs you dead, we need you alive more than ever. Stay here. No one but Tower 9 soldiers are allowed in. Well, and your friends here, since I don't think they'd be Belemere's first choice in sharpshooter teams."

"No, definitely not me," Madera said. "I only ever barely passed my shooting evaluations."

Kole sipped his tea. "If you need an office organized or files re-ordered, I'm your man. Trekking across a barren wasteland to shoot a stranger, not so much. I'd probably get lost, to be honest. My sense of direction is abysmal."

"That's settled then, Your Highness remains in the tower with your courtiers until further notice."

Daisuke surged to his feet, arm coming up to shut Jiro up once and for all—and then he dropped right back down again as pain drained the color from his skin and the strength from his limbs. "Fuck all of you. I'm going back to bed."

Jiro chuckled and helped him, waving off Kole when he rose to do it, and once Daisuke was settled, ruffled his hair the way he had when they were children. "Rest, you stubborn ass. I'll need you in fighting shape when the real trouble starts."

He strode off without waiting for a reply, and Ichiro took his place as the other two followed Jiro out of the room for some reason. When the door had closed, he pulled a chair close and sat. "Jiro doesn't want you to know, but we're fairly certain you were *both* targets. His death to destabilize the

Wall, and your death to do that even more, especially to Tower Nine. It's no secret you and Hideki are the Wall's greatest strength. I'm heading out within the hour to fight my way to Hideki, even if I have to swim through flooded waters. We'll be back as soon as possible. Rest up, please, because they are going to need you, and if you try to rush it now, you'll only make things worse later. All right?"

Daisuke huffed. "Fine. Whatever. I'll stay in my damned tower. Just bring you and Hideki back alive and well. Saburo too, so I can kill him personally."

"Will do, Major." Ichiro rested a hand on his head, then rose and restored the chair before striding to the door. He turned back, one hand on the door handle. "Oh, one more thing."

"What?" Daisuke asked, not liking his smug tone in the slightest.

"Your not-friends most *definitely* want you to make them a party of three. Do yourself a favor and accept the offer when they make it. They're good for you." His smile was bittersweet and fleeting. "I know the real thing when I see it now. Give them a chance."

"Whatever. Shut up and go away," Daisuke said, absolutely *refusing* to believe a single word of that and get his stupid hopes up in earnest. They were already entirely too high for his taste.

When the door had closed, he settled into bed, exhaustion abruptly getting the better of him now he was alone and still. A few minutes later, the door opened and closed again, familiar voices washing over him, but he was already too far into sleep to stir, even when he heard Madera and Kole discussing cake.



CHAPTER NINE

The storm had completely demolished their campsite, but thankfully, finding a new one hadn't been difficult. He'd hoped that his team retreating to the stables would compel Her Lordship to invite them back to the house, but of course she hadn't.

At least real help would be arriving soon. Ichiro had been slowed by the storm, but he'd likely be here in the next couple of days. Hideki would have vastly preferred to be waiting for him at the manor with everyone else, but...

Well, good luck to Her Lordship when Ichiro arrived and learned Hideki had been living in the woods all this time. He'd managed to keep it from them because the last thing anyone needed was Daisuke and Jiro losing their shit, but there was nothing he could do now.

So he sat on the fallen tree they'd dragged to the campsite and enjoyed his breakfast of rice, smoked fish, and pickles.

He'd just finished doing the dishes and had poured a fresh cup of tea

when the familiar ruckus of a horse racing through the trees broke the still of the morning.

A moment later, a servant in Takahara livery burst into the clearing. Rei, one of Ichiro's personal servants, marked by the cherry blossom pin on their lapel. "Oh, thank the moons, I found you. Lord Hideki, you must come at once. We've reached the Keshar Estate and Lord Ichiro..."

"I'll come at once," Hideki said. "Let me get dressed." He hastened over to his clothes and quickly changed into uniform, yanking on boots and sliding weapons into place, then hurried over to the horse that was ready and waiting. "Thank you, Sergeant. Pack up camp and come to join us."

"Yes, Major," Mina replied. "We'll be along in short order."

Hideki led the way back to the road. "So how furious is my brother?"

"The last time I saw him this angry was when his marriage abruptly ended," Rei said grimly. "You should have warned us, Major."

Hideki winced. "I was hoping we'd have more important things to worry about. It's partly my fault, anyway, which I'm sure Her Lordship has been happy to explain."

"I've no idea. The moment he realized you weren't there, and where you *were*, Ichiro exploded, and I came looking for you, following directions given to me by Lord Berrik. He wanted to come himself, but he was afraid to leave his mother's side."

Hideki sighed, and after that they were moving too quickly to speak. When they reached the house, he barely waited for the horse to stop before dismounting and racing up the stairs. The door opened as he reached it, and Berrik slumped. "Thank the Moons. I thought you said you and Daisuke were the volatile ones."

"Ichiro is calm waters right up until he's not," Hideki replied. "I didn't realize he'd get *this* angry."

"Your family," Berrik muttered, but his mouth quirked faintly as he caught Hideki's eyes. "Come on." Berrik led him to the study where everything had fallen apart. As they stepped in, it was to a silence so frigid that winter would seem balmy by comparison.

Lord Ameshi sat at her desk, staring balefully at Ichiro, who stood by the fireplace glaring holes into the stonework. They both turned at the sound of the door opening, and the tension bled from Ichiro's shoulders, relief filling his face. "Hideki!" He surged across the room and swept Hideki up into a

tight embrace that Hideki happily returned.

Drawing back after a moment, holding his arms, Ichiro looked him over critically in a way that reminded Hideki viscerally of their mother. "Lord Berrick said you were wounded in the storm."

"My back got scratched up, but I'm already at the 'fading bruises and horrible itching' stage, it's nothing," Hideki said. "Why are you terrorizing everything?"

"Because I show up in good faith to resolve Saburo's fuck up and find my brother who did nothing wrong has been made to live in the woods!" Ichiro bellowed, rounding on Ameshi. "After you attacked him! After you tried to make him a *prisoner*. I will be reporting every last detail of this abuse to His Majesty—"

"You'd better include that your brother is a backstabbing traitor who ran off with the enemy," Ameshi hissed.

"Saburo will be dealt with," Ichiro said coldly. "He'll be treated like a *person*, not like a dog to be put in a cage and beaten into submission. Saburo's crimes are not Hideki's crimes, and you had no business punishing him until all the facts were known. If you were a guest in our home under these circumstances, we still would have treated your family as guests. Even in the fucking *storm* you left him out there! His people were huddled in your stables. What sort of heartless, narcissistic cretin—"

"Enough, Ichiro," Hideki said, grabbing his arm. "I'm fine. My people are fine. A few days of camping is nothing."

"It's not *nothing*," Ichiro hissed. "Heads will roll for this, or so help me—"

"Ichiro!" Hideki grabbed him and spun him back around, switching to Rinian, "*You're losing your temper just like she did. This battle isn't worth fighting. Let it go.*"

"*You don't deserve to be treated this way,*" Ichiro hissed, and Hideki swallowed to see there wasn't just anger in his eyes, but honest anguish. "*You're a good person. You and Daisuke have the biggest hearts of any of us, and they made you live in the woods like a fucking animal. I'm not letting this go.*"

Hideki swallowed. None of his family had ever said anything like that to them. "Ichiro..."

Ichiro hugged him tightly again. "*You've done enough. Leave this to*

me, now."

"As— As you wish, then," Hideki replied softly, not really certain what else to say.

He stepped back, bumping into Berrick, and wished with a sudden, sharp ache he could pull Berrick close and kiss him senseless and suggest a wild and reckless solution to the problem at the heart of this mess.

Leaving Ichiro and Ameshi to their war now, he bowed out, moving off to the side with Berrick in tow. "How are you?"

"Miss you," Berrick said quietly, hand twitching before he curled his fingers into a loose fist. "I've been trying to come see you more, but everything here has been..." he glanced at the two, who were back to shouting. "Intense. Your brother is remarkable. I don't know what I expected of the Takahara heir, but he's... very much."

Hideki laughed. "Ichiro is that. He's a good leader and heir, though sometimes I think his heart isn't really in it. He's happiest when he's buried in his books and research papers and lecture halls." His mouth twisted. "Especially now, after everything that happened with his ex-wife."

"Even I've heard those rumors. I can see how that would only make him even more protective of all of you. He was right, you know."

"Right?" Hideki's brow furrowed.

"You have a big heart."

Hideki flushed. "Oh, that." He gave a small laugh. "He's never said that before. Everyone just sees me and Daisuke as the problem children."

"I think your family sees you as far more than that," Berrick said, and sighed. "Trust me, I know how it looks when your family *doesn't* give a damn about you, just how well you obey." His mouth tightened, and he looked sad—no, distraught for a moment, but then it was gone.

Before Hideki could ask about it anyway, Ichiro said, "Hideki, did you hear?"

"What? No, my apologies, I was distracted talking to Be—Lord Berrick," Hideki replied. "What did you need?"

Ichiro quirked a brow at him, looking ever so briefly between him and Berrick, but only said, "Her Lordship is welcoming you back into her home."

Hideki didn't snort at that, but Berrick gave a strangled cough. "How gracious."

"Indeed," Ichiro said in a tone that was ostensibly level but still

somehow managed to convey all his scathing contempt.

"I did have my team break camp, on the chance we'd be getting new accommodations, so they should be here shortly. Thank you, Lord Ameshi."

Ameshi only grunted, stood, and strode from the room.

"What did you say to make my mother cooperate?" Berrick asked.

Ichiro folded his arms across his chest. "First Daisuke, and now you. I should have known you two would do even this in sync."

"Do *what* in sync?" Hideki asked. "What's wrong with Daisuke?"

"Actually, now you say that... sit down, Hideki."

Fear sliced through him, turning him cold. He'd been feeling uneasy the past few days, but had put it down to the situation, his feelings for Berrick, all they'd done while waiting for the storm to abate. "What's wrong with Daisuke! Damn it, Ichiro, how could you not—"

Ichiro caught him up as he surged forward and shoved him down into a seat. "He's *fine*. Stubborn and cranky and probably driving everyone crazy being locked in Tower 9, but he's fine. A sharpshooter nearly got him, but Lord Ektow saved him, and all he got was a nasty clip to the shoulder. He was awake and moving around just hours after it happened. He's *fine*."

Hideki couldn't *breathe*, even as the words slowly penetrated. Daisuke had nearly been killed and he hadn't been there. They weren't supposed to die apart. He'd almost— All because fucking Saburo—

A hand rested heavy on his shoulder, making him jump, and Hideki swallowed the lump in his throat as he looked up at Berrick.

"Your brother is well, Lord Ichiro said so himself—twice," Berrick said with a smile. "I don't know Lord Daisuke, but I am coming to know you pretty well, Lord Hideki, and I cannot imagine he would permit himself to die without you by his side."

Hideki nodded jerkily. "We— We promised. Together."

"Of course you did," Ichiro said with a sigh. "I'm surprised only that I didn't already know that for a fact. So how long have you two been fucking?"

Berrick choked, and Hideki glared. "You're as nosy as Mother."

"She did raise us, and I am the oldest," Ichiro replied, dropping his folded arms. "Let's have it."

"Since the storm," Hideki muttered. "What difference does it make? Saburo is gone, and after this I doubt..."

Ichiro sighed again, so much like their mother in that too. "You're

both smart enough to know better than to engage in such things unless you're willing for it to be used against you."

Berrik frowned. "Against us?"

"The only solution my family can offer to save face and salvage this situation is to offer a different brother for marriage. You've made it very easy now to decide which brother to offer."

"I don't see how that's a bad thing," Berrik said. "At least I'll be marrying someone I like, instead of someone who left me to run off with the enemy." He made a face. "Well, not enemy, but certainly not friends. The Boornian rebels don't like us any more than the rest of Boorna."

Hideki's heart was going to pop. Had Berrik just said marrying him wouldn't really be all that bad? It couldn't be that simple. Not once in his life had it *ever* been that simple.

Wait a minute. "What did you mean about me and Daisuke doing something at the same time?"

"Oh, he's hopelessly besotted with a couple of visitors," Ichiro replied. "The ones he pissed off in their first meeting but has befriended since. They like him too, but of course Daisuke doesn't see it."

That certainly sounded like Daisuke. *Two*. Hideki was going to tease him mercilessly for that.

"You won't be harassing him until this mess is sorted out, since you've put yourself right in the middle of it," Ichiro said. "Come on, let's rejoin the others, get you and your people settled in again, and then we'll hopefully sit down to a more civil discussion and resolve this mess once and for all."

"Yes, Ichiro," Hideki said.

Ichiro gave them a look, then headed out of the library, closing the door behind them.

"Did— Did you mean it?" Hideki replied. "About marrying me not being—"

Berrik kissed him, a hand on his chest. Drawing back just enough to speak, he said, "Yes, I did mean it, but first there are things I need—"

"Hideki! Hideki!" Ichiro slammed the door open. "Come out here now! It's about Saburo!"

Hideki bolted, holding fast to Berrik's hand and dragged him along.

In the main hallway, the people that Lord Ameshi had sent out, and the people Hideki had sent after them, were gathered. They were filthy, and

looked like they hadn't slept in two days. "Eiko, Osamu, it's good to see you. What news do you have?"

Anguish and guilt passed over Eiko's face before she bowed low, and Hideki's heart cracked. "We caught up to them three days ago, but all we found was a dead encampment. Six Boornian rebels, and there was evidence that Lord Saburo went over the cliff. We were unable to climb down the ravine, but there was a body at the bottom and this scarf caught on a rock at the top. I am sorry, Major, Lord Takahara."

"Ichiro..." Hideki turned to his brother, eyes blurring with tears. "He can't. That's not *fair*."

Making a rough, ragged noise, Ichiro pulled him into a hug. Hideki cried into his jacket. Saburo wasn't supposed to be *dead*. He was supposed to be alive and well so they could kill him themselves and then take him and his stupid true love home for their parents to deal with. Everything was supposed to eventually work out.

They weren't suddenly supposed to be six instead of seven. Not yet.

Ichiro said nothing, simply held him tight and mourned with him. Around them, everyone was silent.

Eventually, he pulled away, gathering himself up and restoring the cloak of Major Warhammer. "What do we do now?"

Hideki knew the answer though: they continued the negotiations, he agreed to marry Berrik and even perhaps do a handfasting or whatever they called it here to ensure no mistakes the second time, and then he would return to the Wall, and Ichiro would go home to tell the family Saburo was dead.

He pinched his eyes shut and took deep breaths, until he was calm again. Calm as he was going to get for a long time, anyway.

"I am sorry it's ended this way," Lord Ameshi said with what actually sounded like genuine sympathy. "Whatever my anger, I never wanted—"

She broke off as the front door slammed open, and they all stared as Mina and Keiko all but tumbled inside. Striding over to Hideki, she stood at attention, saluted, and held out a jacket.

A dark maroon jacket, trimmed and lined in gray, with the crest of a griffon with one broken wing emblazoned on the right breast, the stripes of a sergeant on the left.

The uniform of the Boornian military. In a place it had no business being.

"Where did you get that?" Hideki asked, voice soft and cold.

Ameshi's face had gone nearly as gray as the jacket.

"It was in the stable when we arrived, in one of the empty back stalls. I was looking for a spare pitchfork when I stumbled across it, Major. The blood on this sleeve is relatively fresh, I'd say not more than a few hours old."

Hideki grabbed the jacket with one faintly trembling hand, grief mixing with the sick feeling suddenly lodged in his gut and slowly turning into rage. He stared at Ameshi, who recoiled sharply before catching herself. "Why is there a bloody jacket from a Boornian First Sergeant in your stable?"

"I— I don't know—"

"Lies!" Hideki bellowed. "Boornian soldiers don't just show up twelve hours into enemy territory and accidentally leave a bloody jacket in the stable of a powerful Aaran noble! You've been colluding with our enemy this whole time! You're colluding with the people who killed my brother, and you have the nerve—"

"Hideki—"

He jerked away from Ichiro, who had sense enough to fall back. "Sergeant, arrest them all."

Ameshi bristled. "You have no right—"

"I have all the right," Hideki said coldly, causing Ameshi to take a step back, colliding with the wall behind her. "The Treaty of the Lily, paragraph six, section nine. You signed it when you agreed to the allyship. You fall under its purview. Arrest them." Movement caught the corner of his eye, and misery threatened to get the better of him as he turned and took in the anguish and shame filling Berrik's face. As all the pieces began to fall into place.

Ameshi was colluding with Boorna. How long, there was no telling. What had their plan been? To take Saburo hostage? Use him against Rinaha? Secure who even knew what benefits and promises from Boorna, keep her and her family, at the very least, safe as Boorna used their new friend to push into places they'd never been able to access before?

There were so many possibilities that his head ached trying to sort them. The details didn't matter, though. What mattered was that Boornian soldiers had been here, and at least one of them had been injured. They'd been here just hours ago. Had they been tied up in Saburo's death?

His stomach churned, and he could not think past the rage and hurt.

Staring at Berrick, he said, "So was everything you said, everything you *did*, just a ploy to get information out of me, make certain I was too distracted to notice anything I shouldn't?" Guilt flickered across Berrick's face, and Hideki's already cracked heart took a final, devastating blow and fell into pieces.

Every word. Every moment. Every fragile confession, things he'd never told *anyone*.

He was a moons-damned fool, the stupidest fucking dumbass in the world. He'd known better. Nobody ever wanted him and Daisuke as they really were. Never. Yet he'd told himself this was different, that Berrick was different. *Stupid*.

"Hideki, please, let me—"

Hideki didn't remember moving, though he'd never forget the sensation of Berrick's nose breaking beneath his fist, the cry of pain that resulted, and all the blood that followed.

Jerking away, he retreated to the library while Mina and the others worked to round up the family and servants and ensure they wouldn't be going anywhere anytime soon.

He braced his hands on the edge of the desk, head bowed low as he focused all his energy on his breathing. In. Out. In. Out.

Saburo was dead.

The Ameshi family was a bunch of backstabbing traitors colluding with Boorna this whole time, helping them to do Moons alone knew what. Invade the wall from this side. Attack the capital outright. Send in forces to pillage and burn in a devastating wave of chaos. Continue to slink around spinning webs in the dark until they could strike all at once from many directions. The possibilities were endless, and each worse than the last.

Berrick had been using him.

"Hideki."

Any other tone or voice, Hideki would have ignored. But this was Ichiro, his eldest brother, and the one person who truly understood the pain he was feeling.

Hideki slowly rose and turned. "Why?"

Ichiro gave a cracked, broken laugh. "I don't know. I've asked myself that question for years, and I still don't have the fucking answer. I'm sorry, Hideki." He extended his arms, and Hideki promptly went into them, holding fast while they mourned together over a dead brother and broken hearts.

They pulled apart only when someone knocked on the door. Withdrawing, wiping his face—and freezing, staring at the dried blood on his knuckles. Berrick's blood. Was he all right? Why did Hideki still care? The bastard had deserved every moment of pain.

Yet all Hideki wished was that this day had gone any other way.

He called for the knocker to enter and leaned against the edge of the desk. "Sergeant. What's the status?"

"Everyone has been secured in the basement for the present, until I can summon suitable guards to watch them in their rooms. I have Akiko and Keiko sweeping the house for weapons, information, anything else they can find. Osamu is setting up in the yard to try and catch anyone who might come for another visit."

Hideki nodded wearily. "Thank you, Sergeant. When Akiko and Keiko are finished, send one of them to the Wall to bring back additional forces."

"No," Ichiro said. "Not them. You."

"What?" Hideki asked, straightening again. "Are you out of your damned mind? I—"

"Have done enough. Have *suffered* enough, Hideki. Return to the Wall, tell the others what has happened. I'll hold things here, with Mina's assistance. She has everything well in hand, and you're compromised. We all know it. Better to get you out of here, and Daisuke needs you anyway. I promised him I'd bring you back, and I am fulfilling that promise as best I can. Report to Jiro, and he'll handle the rest."

Hideki wanted to argue. He did. But the words wouldn't come.

"It's all right, Hideki. This is not your problem," Ichiro replied, resting hands on his shoulders. "I was sent here to make it *my* problem. You've done your part. Go back to the Wall and let me do what *I'm* trained for."

"All right," Hideki whispered, relief sweeping through him as he spoke. He wanted, *needed*, Daisuke, and he was done acting like that wasn't true. He squeezed Ichiro's arm in silent thanks, nodded to Mina, then went to gather what belongings he would need for the journey.

A short time later, he slung his satchel over one shoulder and saddlebags over the other and headed out. At the stable, Mina waited for him. "Is something wrong?"

"I don't know," Mina said quietly. "I'm not even sure I should say

anything, but..."

"But?"

"Lord Berrick was crying when we locked him up. He begged several times to be able to speak with you, to explain that all wasn't what it seemed. It's not my place to judge if he speaks the truth or not, but I thought you would like to know."

"Lord Berrick can burn in hell," Hideki retorted. "Thank you for letting me know, though. Be careful, Mina. I'll make sure help comes as quickly as possible. When this is over, you'll get that promotion and commendation."

"Thank you, Major." She saluted as he strode onward, but he didn't miss her softly spoken, "I don't think he ever wanted to hurt you."

Hideki froze, stiffened, another acerbic comment on the tip of his tongue. In the end, though, he only continued onward. In the nearest stall, he readied his horse and led her out of the stable. Mounting up, he raced off back to the Wall. Back where he belonged, and never should have left.



CHAPTER TEN

Daisuke was with the children. It had taken a great deal of wheedling and whining, but Jiro had finally agreed to let him go stay with the children, so long as he took no less than ten guards with him. Which was at least eight too many, but even Daisuke knew when to take what he could get.

He sat at the head of the table—well, three tables that had been pushed together, overtaking the front room entirely—watching them eat, talking and laughing with far more ease than they had since they'd first been snatched from the Void.

One problem after another had delayed the talks with the visiting officials here to reclaim the children, but they should finally be starting any moment now.

The table had been piled with more food than five children should be able to eat, and yet two thirds of it was already gone, and the children were steadily going from eating to messing around. Daisuke gave it ten more minutes before the bickering started.

It reminded him so strongly of a thousand meals growing up that it put an ache in his chest.

When the bickering did indeed begin precisely eight minutes later, he sent them off to bathe and get ready for bed. If they went to sleep without fuss tonight, maybe he could go see Kole and Madera. All the problems meant they'd never gotten to eat, which disappointed Daisuke more than it probably should. Hopefully once the officials were gone and the children safe once and for all, they could finally have that dinner.

I know the real thing when I see it now.

Surely if Ichiro was saying it, there had to be something to the words? But why would Madera and Kole want him? At all, never mind in a relationship that was years old and had clearly come through more than one fire. What did they think he could offer?

Whatever it was, they'd change their minds in a hurry when they realized he wasn't nearly as much fun in the bedroom as everyone assumed he'd be.

Daisuke sighed as he set to cleaning up the chaotic remains of dinner, tossing what couldn't be kept, stacking the dishes, and putting away the leftovers that could be kept. Even before joining the military, he'd known how to clean up after himself and other chores his peers so often thought they were too good for. His mother did not countenance children who could not take care of themselves. *Fortunes can change in the blink of an eye. I'll not have you dying on the streets because we lost everything and you didn't know how to start a fire or wash dishes.*

Frankly the idea that the vast Takahara wealth, and a house that literally could not be destroyed because of its historical value, was ridiculous, but Daisuke had learned a long time ago to choose his arguments when it came to his mother.

He'd just finished setting the dishes by the door for the cadets on kitchen duty to fetch when they did their rounds when he heard footsteps coming up the walkway. He slid the door open, one hand going to his weapon, but immediately relaxed as he saw Kole and Madera—who was walking. His movements were stiff, hesitant, but that was to be expected while getting used to using his new prosthetics.

"Good evening, Major," Kole said cheerfully.

Daisuke rolled his eyes, because Kole only used his rank as a form of

address when he was pissed or up to something. "What are you scheming now?"

"Always so suspicious."

Behind Kole, Madera copied Daisuke's eyeroll.

Laughing, Daisuke let them inside. "You have five minutes before the children finish bathing and come to demand my attention once more, so let's have your scheme, please, your lordship."

"Oh, silence yourself," Kole said with a laugh. "We just came to show off Madera's legs a bit and see if you wanted to come for cake and coffee once the children were asleep."

Ignoring how stupidly pleased he was at the invitation, Daisuke asked, "How *are* the legs? What adjustments—"

"Enough," Kole said, slapping his fingers over Daisuke's mouth. "He is keeping notes as instructed. Be pleased with the efforts of you and your people and stop trying to fix, fix, fix."

Daisuke lifted his brows, and tried not to notice how adorably Kole flushed as he seemed to realize his own boldness and hastily withdrew his fingers.

"Sorry," Kole muttered, and shot a glare over his shoulder at Madera's poorly muffled snickering. "So? Cake and coffee?"

"I would never refuse a good cake," Daisuke replied.

Before any of them could speak further, the children returned, damp, ranging from naked to mostly dressed, announcing a squabble that entailed something about a favorite towel and someone's dressing robe. By the time Daisuke had that sorted out and the children in bed, he was ready to go to sleep himself.

Instead, he freshened up, read the children a story, and then rejoined Madera and Kole in the front room.

"You're good with children," Madera said. "It suits you."

Daisuke shrugged. "Most would say I have more in common with children than adults."

Kole snorted. "Most are stupid, then, because there's nothing childish about you. Shall we?"

Motioning for them to lead the way, Daisuke followed them out of the house, locked the door, and ensured the soldiers on watch would check on the children every half hour and summon him at once at the slightest problem.

They hadn't made it more than halfway down the block when someone came rushing toward them, the green and blue striped band on his left arm marking him as part of Jiro's personal retinue. "Major! General Takahara says your presence is required immediately."

"Oh, come on," Daisuke said with a groan. "Fine. I'm coming. Go away."

Clearly long-used to Takaharas, the man saluted and ran back the way he'd come.

Daisuke sighed. "I'm sorry, it looks like I have to forsake our plans yet again."

"The cake will keep," Kole replied. "I'm sure you're being summoned for something to do with the children, and they're all that matter right now."

Madera added, "If you're free before midnight, come over. If not, we'll try again tomorrow."

Daisuke nodded. "Thank you." He hesitated, wanting to say something else, but could not for the life of him figure out what, so he only nodded again and strode off, annoyance and worry coiling through him that Jiro would summon him nearly two hours past dinner time when the meetings must surely be over by now?

He ached to go see the children again for himself, even though he'd literally just left them, but this wouldn't be over until it was over, and the longer he delayed, the longer it would take.

At the Wall, he climbed the stairs and headed quickly toward the main tower that housed all the main offices and meeting rooms, including accommodations for important enough guests, like those visiting to decide what happened to a group of abused children used as landmine fodder.

He'd barely stepped inside the building when Jiro's primary aide came rushing up to him, adjusting her glasses, a clipboard and papers clutched against her chest. "Major Takahara, I'm to escort you to the hall. Where are your bodyguards?"

"Guarding the children, as they damn well should be," Daisuke snapped.

Rolling her eyes, the aide turned sharply and strode off, leading the way up one flight of stairs and all the way to the end to the biggest, fanciest meeting room they had, one of the few places along the whole tower that could be described as beautiful. The windows facing outward, away from the

Wall, were a bank of stained glass, done by an artist commissioned all the way from Tallideth. Somehow, they'd survived all the years the Wall had been built. During the day, they cast streaks of rainbows across the room, unless the curtains were drawn. Now, moonlight filtered through softly, teasing at the beautiful colors visible by day.

Jiro stood amongst a group of ten interfering, child-abusing assholes. Well, some of them were child-abusing assholes. Some of the others were the rest of the Belemeren delegation, the ones Daisuke had pointedly ignored since his spat with Madera.

That had somehow led to being invited over in the dead of night for coffee and cake. If Hideki could see all this, he'd be teasing Daisuke relentlessly.

Soon. Ichiro had been gone nearly two whole days now. He and Hideki would be back soon, and everything would get better.

"Major," Jiro said. "Thank you for coming so swiftly."

"Of course, General. What can I do for you?"

Jiro went through the list of people with him, rattling off names and ranks that Daisuke didn't give half a damn about but memorized anyway.

The only ones who stood out were the Boornian delegates: Lord Vethar, one of the slimier politicians of Boorna, an old man of wrinkled, weathered skin kept alive solely by the alcohol pickling him. Next to him was Lord Wyte, perhaps only fifty or so, with the mean edge of a man who enjoyed the power and authority of being a diplomat in a time of war. Daisuke and Hideki had lost more than a few soldiers to the scheming machinations of these two cretins, who'd been in charge of the Boorna side of the Void for as long as he could remember. Accompanying them were two colonels, Hanners and Mortim, a lower rank than should have been sent for such an important meeting, but Boorna probably hadn't want to risk any of their generals, and these two no doubt had orders to examine the Wall as thoroughly as possible.

Daisuke had never directly met any of them before, but he knew Vethar and Wyte on sight, and the other two by their names and ranks.

Wyte's brows rose as Daisuke joined them. "So you're the infamous Major Powder? I don't know why I expected... more, I suppose."

Jiro huffed a laugh, not least of all because Daisuke was at least a good head taller than Wyte, and practically twice his width. The man had all

the strength—and spine—of a worm.

"I am indeed Major Powder," Daisuke replied. "Sorry to be so unimpressive, I'm sure. What can I do for you, gentlemen?"

"We wanted to hear the tale of how you came to capture these children I've yet to actually see," Vethar said. "I also want to see them, as I'm beginning to strongly doubt their existence."

Jiro sighed. "Why would we lie about something like that, let alone carry the lie to a farce of this size? You will see the children when I am confident of their safety. Right now I have more confidence in a fish learning to breathe air. Daisuke, if you please."

Daisuke shrugged, completely not caring how rude the gesture was, and laid out how he'd come into contact with the first two children, and how soldiers along the wall eventually secured the others. Since then, a couple of more had been spotted, but only briefly, and never a second time, leaving him to suspect they were being withdrawn until it was safe for Boorna to resume use.

When he'd finished, the Boorna delegates seemed underwhelmed.

Leaving them to their muttering, Daisuke turned to Jiro. "Why is this still ongoing so late?"

"They arrived late and insisted on continuing the talks anyway," Jiro replied, "which I can't really blame them, considering how many delays we've already endured. Even if I would have preferred to postpone everything until morning."

Daisuke frowned. Yes, there had been a lot of delays. Some, like the storms that precluded a nasty typhoon season, were beyond anyone's control. Other delays, though...

Other delays could have been engineered, or falsified entirely, by people trying to stall while they got all their pieces into place. Like people who wanted to remove problematic children who could tell tales. Who could also use this chance to create a whole lot of chaos within the Wall.

Biting back several choice curses, Daisuke said sharply, "Jiro. They're stalling and distracting. Alert the Wall." He didn't wait for a reply but bolted for the door.

"Down!" Jiro bellowed, and Daisuke dropped just as a shot fired, regaining his feet as the room exploded into chaos.

The two colonels had drawn guns they shouldn't have had, but Jiro

had already shot one of them, and Daisuke shot the second right as the door flew open and more Boornian soldiers came rushing inside.

This was even worse than he'd thought. The fuckers would never be able to take the whole Wall, but they sure as fuck could do some damage.

Enough. He was done playing nice. Daisuke shot two more before he managed to throw the table on its side and duck behind it. Jiro crouched next to him, grunting between shots as he gave Daisuke a chance to prepare and lob the small bombs he always carried with him.

They worked, but maybe too well.

"I'm going to be hearing about these damages the rest of my fucking life," Jiro muttered. "You're not getting out that way, Daisuke." He jerked his head to the window before he leaned past the table to get off another shot. "Get moving. Take them home. I'll contact you. The moment Hideki shows up, I'll send him after you."

"Yes, General," Daisuke said, and left the few explosive packets he had left for Jiro to use, minus one, which he lit and lobbed at the beautiful stained-glass windows that had survived centuries of war but stood no chance against a pissed off Takahara.

As the jeweled-toned glass shattered into pieces, Daisuke ran and threw himself out the window, rolling as he landed, regaining his feet, and sprinting for the stairs. As he passed a baffled looking private, he bellowed, "Flare! Three, two, three! Get to it!"

"Yessir," the private replied, but Daisuke was already gone, bellowing further orders to everyone he passed but never slowing his pace, abandoning the Wall and making for the house where the children were hopefully still safe.

Something struck his arm, pain flaring hot and bright, but Daisuke only ran faster. Around him, the chaos continued to spread, shouting and screaming filling the air along with the stench of gunpowder.

"Major Powder!"

Shouhei. Finally someone useful.

Daisuke looked toward the sound of his voice, and caught the satchel that Shouhei tossed him, slinging it over one shoulder, feeling the familiar clink and weight of more pocket explosives. Excellent. He ducked down a narrow alley between two rows of houses. "What the fuck is going on, Shouhei?"

"They had troops hidden ready to attack the Wall. Don't know how they got so close undetected, but we suspect poison gas and backstabbing assholes are part of the problem. The General?"

"He's pissed, which means he's fine. For now." Daisuke hated abandoning Jiro, but if there was anyone who could take care of himself in the midst of a bloodbath, it was the man whose codename was Nighthawk.

Explosions and gunfire boomed and cracked behind them, but Daisuke focused only on what was ahead of him, slowing his steps as they drew closer to the house and he could hear gunshots and voices—including two Belemeren voices that shouldn't be involved.

He was going to fucking kill them.

Daisuke broke the lock on the garden gate and surged through, lifting his gun and taking out the two Boornian soldiers who stood at the back door. Beside him, Shouhei fired off to the left, and Daisuke caught movement to the right just in time to knock them both down to the ground and out of the line of fire. Rolling to his side, he fired at the soldier before he could get off any more shots, then surged to his feet and rushed into the house.

Gunsmoke. Blood. Screams of terror. Daisuke's rage, already well over boiling, exploded to new heights.

The bedrooms were empty. The front room was a fucking bloodbath. Kole. Daisuke dropped down beside him. "Are you all right?"

"Fine. They took the children. Said something about fleeing east, some rendezvous point two days ride from here." He laughed weakly, wiping at the blood dripping from his temple. "They didn't know I could understand them. Madera went after them, but one of his legs was damaged, so I don't know how far he'll get. Move it, and be careful, you stupid bastard."

Daisuke laughed softly. "Yes, sir." He rested a hand, brief but heavy, on Kole's shoulder and then rose and took off again, reloading his gun and prepping explosives as he went.

Only to crash right into a fucking trap, swiftly surrounded on all sides by Boornian soldiers who clearly had orders to capture, not kill, at least for the moment.

Two came up behind him, disarmed him, and yanked his arms behind his back, jerking his shoulders painfully. "Where's the other one?" the lieutenant in charge said. "This is Powder, but we have orders—"

Daisuke felt it. Felt *him*. Before the stupid lieutenant could finish

speaking, there was a crack of a gun and he dropped, dead from a shot to the head before he hit the ground. The two guards holding Daisuke faltered in their surprise, and then there was a bellow of fury before they went flying to the ground, pitched one after the other like sacks of rice.

Retrieving his dropped weapon, Daisuke tossed it to his left, where it was smoothly caught by Hideki, who started firing at the guards who remained either frozen in shock or had possessed just enough sense to try and run.

Hideki downed several of them, reloaded, and then shifted so he and Daisuke were pressed back-to-back. "What next?"

"Five children. Find and secure. Return here."

Hideki grunted and started firing, calling out orders as their respective soldiers finally flooded in. "This way." He pulled away from Daisuke and ran back down the street he'd come from. Daisuke followed without hesitation, Shouhei close behind him, their people covering their retreat and taking back control of the housing district.

Side by side they fought their way through the chaos, Daisuke lobbing explosives to clear a path, Hideki then surging forward with his soldiers to finish the job, secure new weapons, and reconfirm their direction. Powder. Hammer.

By the time they broke through the eastern gate, Daisuke was soaked in blood, sweat, and grime, but he could see the carriage now that must contain the children.

"Majors!" Shouhei bellowed and pointed to a pair of soldiers holding horses at the ready. Daisuke swung into the saddle and took off, Hideki right beside him. As they caught up to the carriage, Hideki held steady alongside it and with a move Daisuke would never have been able to pull off, leaped onto the top of it.

Daisuke pushed onward, pulling out one of his explosives and continuing past the carriage, around a bend in the road, until he saw the bridge he'd known was coming up. Lobbing the explosive with all his might, he then grabbed the reins of his horse, jerked it sharply to the left, and plunged into the woods for cover.

The bridge blew right as the carriage came around the bend, debris flying in all directions, the carriage horses screaming in panic—but held in place by Hideki, who'd dislodged the drivers and taken over. He slammed the

carriage to a halt, nearly toppling himself right out of it but holding steady at the last.

"Fuck," Daisuke said, returning to the road, throwing himself off his horse, and yanking open the carriage door.

Five children screamed his name and threw themselves at him, trying to tumble out of the carriage at the same time. Daisuke got them sorted and out one by one, examining each, thankfully finding no worse than one broken wrist, the rest a generous helping of scrapes and bruises. He dealt with the wrist as best he could, then with a great deal of coaxing got them back in the carriage, though only barely because the children seemed utterly fascinated by Hideki, or rather seeing Daisuke and Hideki side by side.

When the children were secured, Daisuke climbed up to sit next to Hideki. "It's about time, you stupid fuck."

"Can't I leave you alone for ten fucking minutes?" Hideki asked as he set the horses into motion, returning to the Wall as quickly as he could without a breakneck pace that would send the children battering around inside the carriage again. "Tell me everything."

So Daisuke did, from the day Hideki had left right up to the moment their paths had united.

Looking at Hideki, he had plenty of questions of his own, all of them subsets of just one: Who or what had made Hideki cry? The questions would have to wait, though, as much as it hurt him to ignore Hideki's pain.

Back at the Wall, the chaos seemed to be slowing, and they had minimal trouble making their way back through the mess.

"Stop!" Daisuke bellowed, and climbed down from the carriage, rushing over to where Madera was sitting against a wall, covered in blood and grime, his newly made legs lying across his lap. "Are you all right, you stupid bastard?"

Madera laughed—and then stopped, eyes going wide. "Oh, my. There really is a matched set of you."

Daisuke rolled his eyes. "Nevermind. I'm leaving you here."

Hideki laughed. "So you're the liability I've already heard so much about."

"That's me," Madera said with a laugh of his own. "Can I bum a ride off you? Are the children all right? I assume so, since Daisuke isn't trying to kill anyone."

"Banged up, scared, and no doubt further scarred, but alive," Daisuke said, and shoved the damaged legs at Hideki before scooping Madera into his arms and carrying him to the carriage. Ignoring his threats and protests, he stuffed Madera in with the children and then climbed back up, weapons once more ready as Hideki did the hard part.

Thankfully, they made it back to the children's house without further incident, though it took effort to weave through the carnage left by Boorna's failed attempt at... whatever the fuck they thought they could do against the entirety of the Wall of Gamala.

Dropping from the carriage, ignoring the many and varied complaints his body had about continued mistreatment, Daisuke hurried into the house, slumping briefly in relief to see that Kole was still there, and now on his feet and patched up. "What are you doing?"

Kole looked up from the satchels he was carrying out to the main room, stepping carefully over bodies. "Packing, what does it look like? We can't take five children to safety with no clothes or food."

"You're wounded!"

"Oh, for Moons' sake!" Kole said and shoved two of the satchels at him. "I am former military. I got a flashy scratch to the temple and some bruised ribs. I'm fine. Where's Madera?"

"Sulking in the carriage."

"Make yourself useful and run to our house, get his chair and the ready-bags in the trunk at the foot of our bed."

"Yes, my lord," Daisuke drawled, and stepped outside to pass the order off to the first soldier he saw who didn't already appear occupied. He handed off the satchels he carried to Hideki, then grabbed more. Once those were packed away, he jerked a thumb in the direction of the Wall. "We need more weapons."

"Not gonna get them there," Hideki replied. "We'll swing over to tower four before we leave the Wall entirely. They should have some supplies and weapons we can commandeer. They owe us, and they fucking know it."

Daisuke grinned briefly but was distracted from further comment as two soldiers came running up with Madera's chair and the ready-bags.

As he loaded them with the satchels and hopped back down, Hideki said, "Why are they coming with us?"

Daisuke blinked, realizing he had no answer for that.

"If by 'they' you mean me and Madera, then it's because we want to help, and if either one of you tries to argue with me, I will make you wish you were still dealing with these cretins," Kole said as he distastefully toed a dead Boornian soldier. "What sort of fuckheads come after *children*, for the love of the Moons?" He didn't wait for them to answer, simply yanked open the carriage door and climbed in, talking to Madera as it closed again.

Hideki grinned. "I can see why you're so enamored of them."

"Shut up," Daisuke muttered, face going hot beneath all the grime covering it. "Come on, let's get moving, and try to get word of how Jiro is doing before we leave."

Snorting, Hideki looked to the Wall, where the shattered stained glass was visible in the light of various fires. "I don't hear anyone screaming in rage, so he's probably fine. Takes more than the dumbest Boorna has to offer to put down Jiro. I for one am glad we won't be here to deal with the fallout." He got the horses moving, and they headed out, running parallel to the wall until they reached Tower Four.

"Major Powder!" A lieutenant came running up. "General Takahara told us to have these waiting for you, and to inform you he is well and has things in command, and you're to continue on with the orders he gave you."

"Understood, thank you," Daisuke said, and motioned for him and the soldiers with him to load up the trunks of weapons. The poor carriage wasn't remotely happy with all the additional weight, but too damn bad. They'd swap out for better when they reached a town where that would be possible. "Inform General Takahara that Major Hammer returned and is traveling with me, and we'll contact him with any pertinent info if he doesn't get it from further sources."

"Yes, Major!"

"Thank you." Daisuke dismissed him.

"Major! Major!"

He turned in his seat and saw Shouhei racing toward them on a dark roan horse. "What are you doing here?"

"Why are you leaving without me! The fucking nerve!" Shouhei bellowed.

Daisuke laughed. "Fall in, Private. Shouhei, Hideki. Hideki, Shouhei."

"Major Hammer, it's an honor to meet you."

"Who are you?"

"An aide thrown at me after he told Mizutani he was stupid. He's marvelous."

Hideki grinned. "Anyone who tells Mizutani what he needs to hear is good in my books. Let's get moving."

So they did, leaving the Wall behind in the dead of night, chased by the stench of gunpowder and smoke that blew on the wind for well after they were gone. They stopped only when necessary, as briefly as possible, until finally neither humans nor horses could carry on further.

Working together, Daisuke, Hideki, Shouhei, Kole, and Madera made camp and got the children fed and settled, though that involved more chemistry than Daisuke really liked using on anyone, least of all terrified children, but they needed sleep—good sleep—and they wouldn't be getting that unaided.

Two more days of travel and they should be home, where his mother would absolutely lose her mind at the little flock she'd immediately declare her grandchildren. If Boorna had thought the Wall was a challenge... Well, they'd better make their peace with their deity of choice, because Lady Takahara was going to send them to enjoy a personal meeting with the Moons if anyone dared touch her grandchildren.

When the children were finally settled, Daisuke stood with Hideki by the carriage looking everything over. Five sleeping children. A fire crackling nicely. Bedrolls set out for all of them, spaced amongst the children for assistance and protection.

Madera sitting by the fire sipping from a steaming mug, no doubt one of his beloved teas. Must have been in one of the ready-bags.

"Honestly, sit down before you fall down," Kole said, coming to stand in front of them and folding his arms across his chest in that way of his that said he would tolerate no disobedience. "Everything is fine. We got away."

"You shouldn't be here!" Daisuke said. "This is not your fight, it's not Belemere's fight, and if something were to happen to either of you—"

"Silence yourself," Kole said, then reached out, grabbed the front of Daisuke's jacket, and yanked him down.

"What in the hell—"

Kole kissed him, until Daisuke went stone-still from the shock of it before tentatively kissing him back, not remotely certain what in the world

was happening.

"That's better," Kole said, tearing away. "Now come sit down, or I swear to Moons I will drag you. Am I understood?"

"Yes, my lord," Daisuke replied.

Kole let him go and strode off to join Madera, who was grinning entirely too much for Daisuke's taste.

Next to him, Hideki was laughing his ass off. Daisuke rammed an elbow into his gut before striding off to join the others at the fire. "So what happened after I left to answer Jiro's summons?"

"At first, not much. We went back to our house, but then decided we'd just bring the cake and coffee to you. We were nearly there when we saw weird movement and a carriage that didn't fit. After that..." Kole raked his hands through his hair. "Everything kind of went ten directions at once. We tried to get the children, but there were simply too many soldiers. They seemed to realize we were civilians, and Belemeren, the only reason I think we weren't gunned down. That's not a war Boorna can afford. So you know, having us around might be good insurance. Where are we going, anyway? I assume the General knows?"

"Jiro gave the order, and we're going home, to the Takahara Estate. About two days southeast of here, more or less." He accepted the tea that Kole gave him and took a sip. "What was *that* about?"

Kole gave him an innocent look. "What was what about?"

Daisuke narrowed his eyes.

"Honestly it was fifty-fifty if he'd kiss you or punch you," Madera said with a snicker. "We're glad you're all right, given you clearly have a policy of running straight into danger, literally, even though as a major one would think you'd have a *touch* more sense."

Daisuke made a face and muttered, "Whatever."

That got him twin laughs—but not the third he'd expected, and it was only then he realized Hideki hadn't joined them.

"He went that way," Kole said, pointing to the trees behind Daisuke. "I thought he'd gone to piss, but from the look on your face... I hope he's all right."

Daisuke nodded and set his tea aside. "Thank you. Sorry. I'll— I'll be back soon."

"Take your time."

Rushing off, Daisuke found Hideki standing by the creek, staring at it like it held the answer to whatever questions were tumbling through his mind. Turning him around, Daisuke propped his arms on Hideki's shoulders, clasping his hands together behind Hideki's head. "Tell me everything."

With a deep, shuddery breath, Hideki did.



CHAPTER ELEVEN

As they turned down the private road that led to the Takahara Estate, Hideki couldn't deny that it was good to be home. The circumstances of their arrival could most definitely be better, but they hadn't been home in a long time, and there was a comfort to it that nothing else could bring.

Except, maybe, being in the arms—

He cut the thought off with a soft curse. He wasn't thinking about it. About *him*. All he cared about right now was keeping the children and Daisuke's partners safe. Whatever the three had or had not discussed, it was clear they *were* a three. Well, clear to everyone but Daisuke, who never trusted when good things happened to him.

Unlike Hideki, who trusted far too easily.

His shoulders eased a little more as they crossed over the small bridge that spanned a creek marking an informal border on the western edge of Takahara lands. Turning a bend in the road, the manor itself finally came into view.

Even by the impossible standards of the nobility, the Takahara manor was impressive. It sprawled, long and wide, carefully built to blend in with the surrounding woodlands and yet still stand apart. Spanning a deceptively innocuous looking stream that was actually a dangerous river were the three bridges that featured in so many of his and Daisuke's stories of childhood stupidity. They were made of strong cedar, the same used for the wall that surrounded the manor and the enormous gate entrance that matched up with the central bridge.

The house itself was a soft green that harmonized with its surroundings, with black ceramic tiles making up the heavy, sloped roofs. Various footpaths wended from the house into the woods, leading to everything from a shrine built by the first Takahara, the koi pond that meant so much to him and Daisuke, the pond and greenhouse where their father worked so assiduously on his precious water lilies, and many other nooks and crannies of the estate.

"Wow," Kole said from where he rode next to Hideki. Daisuke and Madera took up the rear, the wind occasionally catching snatches of their cheerful bickering over some book or play or something. "What a beautiful home. I can see why your family is so proud of it. Which bridge was it you two jumped from and wound up breaking?"

Hideki snickered and pointed to the one on the far left. "That one."

"I don't know why I thought it would be smaller."

"Used to be. When they rebuilt them, they went ahead and made all three bridges grand and glorious. The fourth bridge is further down that way, mostly used by traders and such as a shortcut that avoids the canyon. The family maintains it, but it's public use more than anything."

Up ahead, a figure appeared in the open gateway, waving an arm in greeting. Shouhei. Daisuke had sent him ahead to 'warn their parents and give them time to hide anything breakable,' which was a bit of an exaggeration on how their parents reacted when the twins came home. Mostly.

"Private," Hideki said with a smile as Shouhei met them at the bridge. "I see Ryunosuke lent you a yukata." A beautiful one, with vibrant carp swimming up a rainbow waterfall. One of Ryunosuke's favorites, so he must really like Shouhei.

Shouhei's face turned faintly pink. "He was most kind in lending it to me, Major."

"Ha!" Daisuke said as he joined them. "Ryu couldn't be *kind* if he was paid to do it, the spoiled brat. He's oiling you up for something."

Hideki rolled his eyes. "Enough. Let's go before Mother comes out." Because if she had to come to them, instead of them properly going to greet her, they'd never hear the end of it. Their father was not nearly so strict about such things, but their mother was, and she ruled the house.

When they passed through the gate, the two stable hands approached, bowing and greeting them before moving forward to attend the horses and carriage. Daisuke helped the children out of the carriage, and they remained close to him like goslings with a goose, as they all followed Hideki into the house.

In the entryway, Hideki removed his shoes, then washed his face and hands before stepping up into the house proper.

Madera hung back. "Maybe I should stay here. I don't want to risk damaging the floors with my legs or my chair."

Daisuke, predictably, grabbed him by the jacket and hauled him up. "Like I would design anything that would damage floors. Stop being stupid."

Smirking, Madera leaned in and murmured something in Daisuke's ears that made his brother go red in the face. Hideki gaped to see it.

Letting Madera go, Daisuke spun around and strode off further into the house. Hideki cast Madera a look and rolled his eyes as he only grinned in evil delight.

Most of the shoji screens were open to the garden that took up the center of the house, built around a small natural pond. When the Takahara family had first arrived here to explore the land gifted to them by a grateful queen, the small pond had caught the eye of that first Takahara, Lord Arata. He'd made it the keystone of the entire garden and built the house around it, ever mindful of the surrounding forest. The family had religiously maintained the garden ever since, the crown jewel of the estate.

His mother, as she always did this time of day whenever she was home, sat on the porch sipping lotus wine as she gazed out over the garden. She was the only living child of her parents, had nearly been the last Takahara. Everyone had been extremely, scathingly disappointed in her choice of spouse. So many soldiers, so many politicians, so many powerful people had vied for her hand, for the privilege of marrying into her family and taking her name...

Instead she had chosen a quiet little scholar who loved books, calligraphy, and water lilies.

And her. Nobody in the world loved Lady Reina more than her devoted husband Hanzo. According to Ichiro, who knew more about their parents' history than the rest of them, the beginning of the relationship had been rocky. Father had nearly accepted the offer of a man from another noble family. In the end, though, he'd chosen their mother.

She was dressed in her favorite autumn kimono, long and flowing, dark blue scattered with pink cherry blossoms being tossed about in a thunderstorm. Setting her wine aside, she turned around to face all of them.

Daisuke and Hideki stepped forward and bowed. "Mother, it's good to be home."

"It's good to have you home," she said with a soft smile. Her hair was long and loose, save for the front portions she'd pulled back with an onyx comb. Gray threaded her hair now, making her look all the more like the fierce Lady Takahara who had refused to let her family fade into the past. "Private Shouhei has told me much about your adventures. Introduce me to my grandchildren and then you will go rest, be refreshed for dinner."

"Yes, Mother," Daisuke and Hideki chorused before Daisuke introduced the children one by one. They gawked at her openly, clearly in awe, because who wouldn't be?

Smiling in that charming way of hers that fooled everyone into believing she was not actually a demon hiding in a human host, she coaxed the children into talking, asking questions and making comments that encouraged, handling them as deftly as she would a table of politicians or a meeting with her lawyers and accountants.

When they began to practically fall asleep where they stood, Hideki helped Daisuke get them moving through the house until they reached the room he and Daisuke had shared as children. Nowadays, since they were home so rarely, they had a room on the other side of the house. Daisuke could take that, get cozy with his new men. Hideki would use one of the guest rooms. Wasn't like he'd been sleeping much anyway.

Once the kids were settled, he went off to see to it, crossing paths with the servants carrying in their limited, unusual combination of luggage. "Would you put Lord Madera and Master Kole in our room with Daisuke. I'll take a guest room."

If the servants were startled by the request, they were far too well-trained to show it—and honestly, long-used to Daisuke and Hideki and everything peculiar thing they did. "As you wish, Lord Hideki. We'll prepare the room in the northeast corner, by the plum trees."

"Thank you. That would be perfect." Hideki left them to it, wandering through the house, taking in the familiar sights and scents. Incense, the fresh sweetness of the garden. As he passed his father's study, he caught a whiff of drying ink that indicated he'd recently completed some piece of calligraphy. Strange that he hadn't seen his father yet.

Passing through the back door, he went down the path that wended through the forest and off to the south, down a shallow hill to where another small pond could be found, though it was twice the size of the one in the garden. It was filled with koi, the result of some ancestor dumping koi presumed dead into it, for reasons lost to time, and that assumption being very, very wrong. Black, white, orange, gold, and every combination therein.

This had always been *their* spot. Him and Daisuke. When they needed respite. When everyone else got sick of them. When it felt like the world was against them, this family of wild koi that should not exist in a random pond in a random forest was their refuge.

He sat on the bank and watched the koi swim about, snatching bugs off the surface of the water or swimming deeper for heartier food. All around him, birds sang, insects buzzed, and smaller creatures frolicked about. Long used to him and Daisuke, the creatures of the forest had stopped being alarmed by their presence years ago.

Everything ached. His body from the fighting, followed by days of hard travel with little rest. His head from the tumult of thoughts with nowhere to go. His stomach from constantly worrying about Jiro and Ichiro. Especially Jiro, right in the middle of the fighting, and who would take the brunt of the blame for it happening at all.

His heart, for so quickly coming to care about someone who had never done anything but lie to and use him. Had Berrik meant a single thing he'd said? Done? Hideki had thought...

He drew his legs up and draped his arms across his knees, letting his forehead rest against them, staring at the grass and wildflowers beneath him.

"Lord Berrik was crying when we locked him up. He begged several times to be able to speak with you, to explain that all wasn't what it seemed."

It's not my place to judge if he speaks the truth or not, but I thought you would like to know."

Hideki closed his eyes against the tears that threatened again, as his mind tormented him with every moment, every touch, every kiss. He'd wanted so desperately for it to be real, to have found someone that understood him and wanted him anyway... and looking back, he'd missed a thousand signs that something was wrong.

So fucking smitten and self-absorbed that he'd put everyone in danger and left Ichiro to clean up his mess.

Then again, if he had stayed at the Ameshi estate, he wouldn't have been there to help Daisuke. He shuddered at the way Daisuke had been pinned down, on the verge of being shot because there was no way Daisuke would have ever allowed them to take him prisoner.

At least he still had his brother. Brothers. Except for Saburo. Remembering his brother was dead finally broke the dam, and Hideki could do nothing except let the tears have their way. Had he asked for too much? Had he been greedy? Was this what he deserved for his presumption?

It was all too much. He could not handle an assault on the wall, a broken heart, and grief over his dead brother all at once. How many of his people had died while he fled? Who would look out for Tower 9 while he and Daisuke were gone?

Wiping his eyes, Hideki stared across the pond again, enjoying the cool breeze that wended through the trees. At least he was home, even if he should still be on the wall.

A prickle along the back of his neck alerted him to company moments before he heard soft footsteps in the grass. Not Daisuke, whom he'd have felt, but only one person currently in the house walked so quietly. Hideki stood and turned, brushing off his uniform before standing at attention as his father came into view.

Ichiro was the very image of their mother, save for the years between them and their differing body types. Saburo and Ryunosuke also took strongly after her, though not as much as Ichiro. The rest of them leaned toward their father in looks, save for Noriaki who was an almost perfect split between them.

Most of the family had the famous Takahara gray eyes, but Hideki and Daisuke had inherited their father's hazel eyes, one more thing that set

them apart.

"Father."

"Hideki," Hanzo said with that fond, gentle smile he rarely showed anyone outside the family. His black hair was almost entirely silver now, though he was only sixty-four, younger than their mother by four years, another thing people had loved to gossip about. There was a small scar across the widest part of his nose, where an angry rival had swiped at him and Hanzo had only just evaded it. "Your brother has told me all. I thought I would find you here."

Hideki winced. Great, now his parents knew exactly how stupid he'd been. They'd have found out eventually, but he would have liked to delay as long as possible. If Daisuke had told them everything already, though, he must have had good reason. "I made a grave mistake, trusting someone I should not have, and left Ichiro to clean up the mess. Not my best performance. May, in fact, be my absolute worst."

"You are too hard on yourself, as always," Hanzo said, drawing closer. Rather than one of his usual yukatas or work clothes, he was wearing trousers, a shirt with the topmost buttons left undone, and a cardigan that Saburo had knitted for him years ago, the colors exactly those of the autumn leaves that would appear soon. His glasses dangled from a delicate gold chain, and there were still ink stains on his fingers from his calligraphy as he reached out to rest a hand on Hideki's shoulder, squeezing gently. "You are not to blame for being deceived. It is the deceiver who should carry shame and remorse. You have a good heart, Hideki. You always have. I am sorry you entrusted it to someone who was not worthy."

"Thank you, Father," Hideki said, chest feeling full of knives. "How — how have you and Mother been?"

"Quite well. Don't worry about us. Come and get ready for dinner, though, before Reina goes on the warpath herself."

Hideki managed a laugh. "Of course, Father." He followed Hanzo away from the pond and back up the path to the house, splitting off once they were inside to go to the room that should be ready for him by now.

Predictably, he found Daisuke there, waiting impatiently for him. "What are you doing in here?"

"Shouldn't I be asking you that?" Hideki said with a laugh. "This is my room."

"It is not!" Daisuke said, stamping his foot. "We already have a room."

Hideki rolled his eyes. "Yes, and you can share it with your men. Seems stupid to put them in a smaller guest room when the three of you can be in there comfortably. I'm right here, stupid. Stop throwing a fit."

"You're stupid," Daisuke muttered, but didn't protest when Hideki hugged him. "You shouldn't have to kick yourself out."

"Oh, please. No way was I going to sleep in there, forcing them to sleep elsewhere, or with all four of us in there and me keeping the sexual tension taut. No, thank you." Hideki smirked. "So what did Madera whisper in your ear?"

Daisuke flushed all over again. "None of your damn business, that's what."

"That's what I thought. Move so I can get dressed." When Daisuke obeyed, Hideki stripped off his current clothes and washed down with the basin of water that had been left for him, then dressed in the yukata that had been set out. Like most of their clothes, Hideki was the one who picked everything out and handled the tailoring, embroidery, and whatever else was required. Daisuke was happy to follow his lead and wear what he was told, for the most part.

Today they wore coordinating yukata. Daisuke's was a deep orange with red, black, and green leaves scattered all over, as though they'd been blown across it, with a bold white and green striped obi snug around his hips. Hideki's yukata was deep green, with red, black, and orange leaves scattered across it, with a striped obi of black and orange. "Where are Madera and Kole?"

"They made the mistake of accepting my mother's offer to enjoy saké in the garden before dinner."

"Why... why did you let them do that?" Hideki asked, eyes widening in horror.

Daisuke lifted his hands. "I tried. I really did. They seemed convinced I was overreacting, and they didn't want to be rude by refusing."

"The fly isn't rude for refusing the invitation of the spider," Hideki muttered, making Daisuke laugh. "Come on, I suppose we should go save them. How are the children?"

"Last I saw they were playing outside. Apparently, there are potential

nursemaids coming tomorrow for Mother and me to interview."

"I hope you aren't surprised by that."

Daisuke snorted. "I'm surprised she didn't already pick one. I mean, it's been three whole days since we sent word we were coming. Maybe old age is finally slowing her down. Hmm..."

"I'm not testing that theory with you," Hideki said, even though he very much would if Daisuke came up with mischief good enough to warrant the trouble they'd be in afterward. "Come on, let's go before the screams of terror start."

Snickering, clearly not terribly worried about his lovers being left alone with Reina, Daisuke walked with him down the hall to the main portion of the house, sliding into shoes set on a mat by the open screens before taking the stairs down into the garden. At the base of the stairs was a moss-covered stone lantern even older than the house it now inhabited, brought along by Lord Arata from his parents' home all the way to the south of the kingdom. Perched on top of the lantern was a fat frog, long green from moss, save for the black glass that made up its eyes, one of them faintly cracked.

Hideki and Daisuke both rubbed the frog's head as they passed, following the sound of voices to where Reina, Madera, and Kole sat at a small table beneath a cluster of delicate maple trees. Madera was laughing at something Reina had said, and Kole seemed content to listen and watch them while he sipped at a saké that cost nearly as much as the entire garden. He was exaggerating only slightly.

Reina smiled as she saw them, her eyes warm, like silver in late afternoon sunlight. "There you are. My handsome troublemakers."

"Strange seeing you out of uniform, Major," Kole said teasingly, looking straight at Daisuke. "Your mother is absolutely wonderful. However did she wind up with heathens like you?"

"The gods like to test us," Reina said loftily.

Hideki shared a look with Daisuke. It was going to be a *long* dinner.

"Sit," Reina commanded.

There wasn't exactly room for five in a space arranged for three, but Daisuke sat at the corner of the table, slightly back but mostly between Madera and Kole, and Hideki situated himself closer to the edge of the pond. Kole reached out and cupped Daisuke's face, stroking his cheek with his thumb, smiling when his cheeks pinkened. "Do people struggle to tell the two

of you apart?"

"Usually, unless we're in uniform, and even then they screw up sometimes. You can always see in their faces they aren't entirely certain which Major Takahara they're speaking to, but they're too afraid to admit it," Hideki said, rolling his eyes. "Even though our markings are different, since I'm not an engineer and Daisuke isn't special forces."

"They probably get distracted by your pretty faces and forget to check," Kole said with a snicker, looking pleased when Reina chuckled.

Hideki looked at Daisuke, who had noticed the same thing, and sent him a vaguely panicked look that Kole and Madera were *getting along* with their mother. Which never happened. People were *terrified* of her, and for good reason.

If anything said Daisuke's little threesome was meant to be, it was that, and Hideki could not wait to tease him about it later.

Rustling caught their attention, and they all smiled in greeting as Hanzo appeared, his hands cleaned of ink, his hair braided back, and wearing a fresh kimono of simple black and blue stripes with a dark yellow obi. "Good evening, all." He stopped beside Reina, who lifted a hand, and took it in both of his before giving the back a lingering kiss. "Good evening, my beautiful wife. Your cheeks are as pink as my prized lilies."

"I have to tempt you somehow," Reina said with a laugh, as though it wasn't obvious to everyone, even newcomers, that he would burn his precious lilies himself if she asked him. Which she never would, of course.

Hanzo sat close to Hideki by the edge of the pond, and thanked his wife with another kiss to her fingers when she handed him her own cup filled to the brim with saké that just happened to be one of his father's favorites. Theirs was the kind of relationship he'd always hoped for, had thought he'd found...

No, he wasn't going to think about it, make himself miserable, and ruin the mood for everyone else. Instead he restored his smile and joined the conversation about a viewing for the coming Harvest Moons, when both moons would appear larger than usual, and the White Moon would look more gold, the Blue Moon more green. "I'm impressed you're hosting it, Mother. You haven't done that in years."

"It was time," Reina said calmly.

Hanzo added, "Lady Michiko's daughter is due to give birth around

that time, so she's unable to do it, and your mother wasn't going to miss a chance to usurp it right back."

"Reclaim."

Hanzo grinned. "Of course, darling. Reclaim."

"I hope I'm around for the bloodshed," Daisuke said, swiping Madera's saké and throwing it back, to Hanzo's absolute horror.

"Where did I go wrong raising you?" Hanzo asked despairingly.

Hideki snickered and actually used one of the spare cups on the table to pour some for himself, even as a servant appeared with a fresh carafe. "Dinner will be ready in about an hour, my lady."

"Thank you, Umeko. Have you met Lord Madera and Master Kole? They're from Belemere, late of that fine military, and attached to Daisuke."

"My honor," Umeko said with a bow. "If you find anything lacking, please let me know and I'll attend the matter personally. Lord Daisuke, Lord Hideki, it is good to have you home."

"Speaking of my sons, have you seen Ryunosuke?"

"He was on his way, I believe, my lady, along with Master Shouhei."

"Thank you."

Umeko bowed again and slipped away. She'd barely vanished from sight when, as promised, Ryunosuke appeared, dressed in dark pink and an even darker blood red, his long, long hair swept back but otherwise left loose. He was as beautiful as their mother, and the brattiest brat to have ever been born. Right behind him came Shouhei, along with servants carrying additional tables and carafes of saké. In short order, they had everything rearranged and everyone better situated.

Ryunosuke, true to form, remained close to their mother, Shouhei taking the space beside him. Tossing his head, he stared at Daisuke and Hideki. "So what did you two do this time?"

Daisuke and Hideki sighed in unison. If either of them had said something like that, never mind led a conversation with it, their mother would have ripped them into pieces. With Ryunosuke, of course, she just chuckled indulgently and sipped her saké.

"Rescued children, nearly got assassinated, and was almost captured by Boorna," Daisuke said flatly.

Matching his tone, Hideki added, "Abandoned by Saburo, backstabbed by someone I was coming to love, unearthed Aaranan traitors

aligned with Boorna, and was one of the first to be told that Saburo was dead. What have *you* done?"

"Don't chide your brother like that," Reina said. "He works hard."

"Yes, Mother," Daisuke and Hideki said dutifully, sharing looks and silently plotting what exactly they'd do to Ryunosuke later.

"They've been through a lot, " Shouhei said abruptly. "I was there when Major Daisuke was brought in after being shot. I'm hardly new to bloodshed, these days, but it was still horrible. If Lord Madera had been even slightly slower in knocking him down, he wouldn't be here. Major Hideki returning when he did turned the tides of the fight for us. You shouldn't be so dismissive of their efforts."

Ryunosuke flushed, and to Hideki's complete astonishment, said, "I wasn't trying to be dismissive. They don't talk to me unless I'm teasing them." He fluttered a hand and continued before anyone could reply, "I encountered the children on their way back to their rooms. They were most enthralled with my hair. I guess if they've spent most of their time around the military, such long hair would be quite the sight."

Daisuke smiled like a proud parent. "I'm sure one or two of them will insist on copying you now. They're picking up Rinian at an impressive pace. Hopefully in a few years most of their time in the Void will be forgotten."

"They're certainly young enough for the memories to fade, though the scars never entirely will," Reina replied. "They adore you, Daisuke. We always knew you'd be a good father, and Hideki their favorite uncle."

"Y-You did?" Daisuke asked.

Reina frowned slightly, as though offended by the question. "Of course. Why wouldn't you be? Ah, there is dinner. Come, come, everyone," she added as the gong rang.

Daisuke shared a look with Hideki, but he could only shrug. The family must really feel sorry for them, if everyone was suddenly being nice and throwing compliments their way, but he wasn't going to complain.

He was still going to mess with Ryunosuke, though.



CHAPTER TWELVE

Weirdly well-rested for the first time in his life, or at least his life since joining the military, Daisuke found himself wide awake at entirely too early in the morning. With nothing else to do, as he wasn't stupid enough to do something noisy while his mother still slept, he decided on target practice.

Archery, specifically. He preferred his guns, but he'd begun with archery and was still a fair hand at it.

The morning was cool and misty, quiet except for his fellow early morning risers: the songbirds cheerfully flitting about looking for insects, and the little wild cats hunting the birds.

He let another arrow fly, lowering his bow as it landed right next to the first two, forming a neat line in the center of the target. He readied another arrow and released, satisfied when it landed exactly above the middle arrow. One more.

He reached for the next arrow, but stilled as he heard soft footsteps in the grass behind him. Not family, they wouldn't bother to be so quiet, save for

their father, who wouldn't make a sound at all. Turning sharply, he drew the arrow as he lifted the bow—and relaxed as he saw Madera, sleepy and rumped, despite being dressed for the day.

Yawning, Madera then said, "Correct me if I'm wrong, and this certainly isn't a complaint, but I don't think archery practice requires a bare chest."

Daisuke hated the way his stupid face warmed. "I get impatient with the sleeves. Did you need something?"

"Saw you were gone, went in search of you. One of the servants, Tōyu, I think, said you were probably out here. I didn't know you did archery."

"It's where I first learned to shoot, until they trusted Hideki and me to be anywhere near guns." He slid the arrow back in its quiver and placed the bow on its stand before grabbing the sleeves he'd shrugged out of earlier.

"Oh, don't get dressed on my account," Madera said, eyes raking shamelessly over him.

Daisuke rolled his eyes but left his clothes as they were. "There is nothing I have that you have not seen before."

"But rarely in such exquisite form." Madera moved close enough to touch. "May I?"

"If you want," Daisuke said gruffly. He had no idea what was happening or what people found so fascinating about his bare chest, other than the tattoos, but he also wasn't going to complain that Madera and Kole seemed genuinely interested in him.

That wouldn't last long, but he didn't have any fight left in him to resist. Not after all they'd done for him and the children. Not after that kiss.

Madera's hands were warm, almost hot, against his chilled skin, tracing the lines of the koi and then the ripples of water, all the way down to where they ended low on his stomach, making Daisuke shiver ever so slightly. Mouth curving in a little smirk, Madera smoothed his hands back up Daisuke's chest until he could wrap his arms around his neck and tug him down.

"You two are nothing but trouble," Daisuke said.

"That's rich coming from you," Madera said against his lips before tasting in them in a slow, leisurely fashion that sent more shivers up Daisuke's spine.

He hesitated a moment, then brought his hands up to rest against Madera's back, stroking and rubbing as the kiss deepened. Madera must have had some tea or something, because he tasted like green tea and honey, grassy and sweet. If this was how he kissed, it was no wonder Kole had been willing to take a chance on a commanding officer. Daisuke could feast on his mouth for hours, and would stop only if it meant he got to see how he looked taking Kole apart.

Madera drew back after several minutes, delightfully flushed and mused. "That is exactly what I expected."

"What do you mean?" Daisuke's hands tensed against his skin.

"You are very, *very* good at that, Major."

Daisuke's face went hot. "Kissing isn't hard." It was everything else he did—or didn't do—that made everyone mad.

"You would be surprised how many people are terrible at it. After all the nasty things people have gleefully told us about you, I'm not surprised you're a skilled kisser. They all sounded quite bitter about what they didn't have the sense to keep."

The last of the warm pleasure stoked by the kiss faded away, leaving on the chill of the air. "I'm pretty sure they were all more than happy to find someone more willing to fuck them whenever they wanted."

"I think they realized how stupid they were a little too late, but that's fine, because Kole and I have plans," Madera said, and kissed him again. Somebody moaned, possibly Daisuke, but he would never admit it.

"Well, well, what a good morning this is."

Daisuke pulled away, dragging his eyes open, and stared at where Kole was watching them with a grin, arms folded across his chest. "Archery practice isn't usually this interesting."

Madera laughed and let him go, extending an arm to Kole, who happily let himself be drawn forward into a kiss of his own, and wasn't that a pretty sight. Daisuke could definitely, easily, watch them for hours at a time.

When they drew apart, Kole immediately reached out to pull Daisuke into a kiss. Like Madera, he tasted grassy and sweet, but also faintly of mint.

As they drew apart, Kole licked his lips and said, "We should probably have a proper discussion soon, but I think this is going to work fine. I can only imagine how bossy an audience you're going to be."

Surprise jolted through Daisuke. "You already—"

"Know that you prefer watching to doing?" Madera finished. "Yes, I told you, there were plenty of people happy to warn us—well, me, Kole apparently turned invisible during every unsolicited conversation—that you're... many things I'm not going to repeat." He leaned up and bit lightly at Daisuke's jaw, a teasing nip that was better than fucking any day. "All I really heard, though, was people realizing too little, too late just how good they had it with you. If you prefer to sit and watch and give orders, Major, you'll find no complaints in our bed."

Daisuke shivered, not at all sorry to suddenly have them both in his arms, exchanging easy kisses for what seemed like ages, stopping only when a distant bell made the other two startle.

"What was that for?"

"Morning prayers, for those who think that anyone, gods included, want to be bothered first thing in the morning."

Kole snickered. "You're up early for someone who apparently hates it."

"Not used to getting so much sleep. Come on, breakfast isn't for a couple of hours yet. We can go back to our room and have more tea, or I can show you some of the estate."

"Can we see this?" Kole asked, tracing the koi on his chest.

"If you wish." Daisuke shrugged back into the sleeves of his kimono, ignoring the dual pouts that got him, even as the back of his neck burned at the attention. He left his bow and arrows to retrieve later, as the bow would be awkward to carry around the dense woods. He looked Madera over critically. "How are—"

"You fixed them yourself last night and made me walk up and down the hallway and through the garden roughly five hundred times each. You know damn good and well they're back to perfect operation."

Daisuke threw his hands up and strode off, headed for the far end of the practice field, where they could cut through the bamboo forest more easily. The woods around the house were a strange mix of deciduous, coniferous, and bamboo, like an area where all three types of forest collided in a peculiar mix. How that was possible, he didn't know. Plants were his father's interest, not his, and Daisuke knew better than to ask his father a question when the answer could go on for hours.

Eventually the forest turned into another clearing. Most of it was

taken up by the pond itself, but there was room all the way around it for people to sprawl in the grass for a nap, the sun beating down on their backs, the rest of the world far away.

He went to the edge of the pond, absently counting the fish and looking reflexively for his favorites: a large black one with a single orange spot on its back and one that was almost perfectly split in half in coloring, with one half white, the other half orange.

"They're beautiful, but how in the world did so many koi get all the way out here? Aren't they more of a kept fish than a wild fish?"

"There's still plenty of them in the wild, but it's true you see them more often in captivity than not. That's why Hideki and I like this one so much. Our private, weird little mix of civilized and not."

Madera smiled, and Kole crouched to get a closer look at the fish. "They're amazing." He looked around the clearing. "I can see why you two love the space so much."

"We found it by chance one day, when we were boys. Ten or so, I think. Wasn't a very good day. We'd angered our father, our mother, and most of our siblings. Nobody would talk to us except to yell at us more, and it felt like we were all alone in the world." Daisuke rolled his eyes. "Everything was fine by dinner, of course, but all small things are big things to children. Became our little hideaway since then." He huffed a laugh. "Not much of a hiding spot these days, as we came here so often we wore a path straight to it from the house."

"Surely no one else is so rude as to intrude," Madera said, bristling. "They have everywhere else to avail themselves."

Warmth curled through Daisuke, deep and dangerous, because it meant his feelings were rapidly turning from fondness to *can't live without you*, and the last thing he needed was to fall madly in love with two men who would go home eventually. Who probably wouldn't want something permanent with a troublemaker like him, especially when now he came with five children.

Smiling, he said, "They leave it to us. Only my parents really come to see us here, and only if it's important. My father came to speak with Hideki last night, I think." His mouth turned down, hands curling into fists at his side. He'd been doing his best not to think about that little backstabbing rat he was going to eviscerate with his dullest scalpel.

He startled as a hand wrapped around one of his and stared blankly at Kole for a moment. "Sorry."

"You don't need to apologize. What took you so far away?"

"Hideki. He's not doing well, and there's nothing I can do, but I might try to go and murder the little fuck who hurt him anyway."

Madera's mouth twitched. "While I have every faith you'd manage it, start with telling us what happened."

"If your brother wouldn't be upset about us hearing the tale, obviously. We'd like to help, if we can."

"He wouldn't mind me telling the two of you. Just the two of you."

"Of course."

Giving a jerky nod, Daisuke told them everything—well, nearly—that Hideki had told him.

"Shooting seems too kind," Madera said thoughtfully when he'd finished. "Throwing him off a cliff seems a touch too vicious."

Kole gave them both a look. "Knock it off. Nobody is killing anybody. Have any of you ever considered that Berrick was telling the truth?"

"Truth about what?" Daisuke asked scathingly.

"About everything not being what it seems," Kole replied. "Think about it. *Really* think about it. His betrothed runs away. His overbearing, probably abusive mother is enraged. How exactly was he to refuse her orders to spy? He also could not be sure, despite whatever feelings he was developing for the brother of his promised, that they could be entirely trusted. He was caught in a corner with no way to escape, or at least not escape unscathed. What would you do in that situation? Yes, probably pick a fight or blow something up, because both of you are entirely too tempestuous for your own good. That's *not* what I would do. I'd agree to what my mother said, because that appeases her, gets me out of the way of her wrath, *and* lets me spend time with Hideki, which was all I wanted anyway."

He sighed and pushed to his feet, brushing his hands of dirt. "Only problem is that secrets and lies always come out, and terrified of all the possible outcomes, he didn't tell the truth when he had chances to do so, making it so much worse when the truth *did* come out."

Daisuke opened his mouth. Closed it. Tried again and failed. Stared at the koi, going back over everything Hideki had said, picking it apart underneath this new light. At last he said, "You...might not be wrong."

"I swear to the Moons," Kole replied, lifting his eyes to the sky as Madera badly smothered a snicker.

Daisuke worried a thumb nail. "There's no way I can suggest all this to Hideki. It would hurt him all over again, especially if it turns out to be true. Or worse, you're wrong after all."

Madera grunted. "So what do you propose? Writing a letter won't do any good."

"I'm going to go see him, that's what I'm going to do. The challenge will be nobody thinking it strange that I'm gone for a few days." He considered and discarded multiple ideas. The worst part would be leaving the children, but there was simply no help for it.

If there was any chance, no matter how small, that Berrick wasn't the villain they all thought and could still make Hideki happy, Daisuke had to take it.

"No, you are not going—"

"Lord Daisuke."

Daisuke's head snapped up, and he stared across the pond at Umeko. "Yes?"

"You have a visitor, Master Kazuo."

"Kazuo? What in the world is he doing here? Thank you, Umeko, I'm on my way."

As she vanished into the trees, Kole asked, "Who is Kazuo?"

Daisuke frowned pensively. "He's an old friend of Jiro and Ichiro, mostly Jiro. They went to school together, just a couple of years behind Ichiro. The three were always together back then, the way Hideki and I were always together. I don't understand why he'd want to speak with me." He sighed. "Guess I'd better find out."

"We should be getting ready for breakfast anyway," Madera said. "We'll plan your great escape later."

"We'd better," Daisuke muttered.

Back in the house, he went to the receiving room directly off the main entrance. "Kazuo?"

"Daisuke!" Kazuo broke into a smile, pushing absently at his perfectly-in-place spectacles. "You're looking well. I hear your time on the Wall has been rather, um, exciting lately. Ryunosuke was giving me a full recounting before Lady Takahara summoned him. I was actually on my way

to Gamala to see you, but I stopped here to say hello to your parents and lo, here you are."

"Why would you be coming to see me and not Jiro?"

"Well, Jiro of course, but he specifically asked me to come see you if I could. He said you had questions about painkillers and sedatives you wanted answered by somebody you could implicitly trust?"

Daisuke gaped for a minute. "I didn't... he laughed at me... I didn't know..." That Jiro had listened. Taken him seriously. Had given even the slightest damn. "Thanks for going to so much trouble for me. I just asked if he'd make certain you wouldn't mind me sending a list of questions."

"He seemed upset in his letter, like he'd done something to hurt you, and asked if I would come."

"I see," Daisuke said softly. Maybe he was the one who hadn't been giving his brother enough credit. "Um. I wasn't able to bring all my research with me, given how abruptly we left the Wall, but I can go jot some things down, organize the questions, we can talk after breakfast?" He wasn't stupid enough to talk about it during breakfast, even if he still didn't understand why it bothered his mother so much.

"That sounds marvelous. I should go freshen up and shake off all this road dust. I'm lucky your mother doesn't mind me showing up so early. I made much better time than I expected. Can't wait to meet your children," he added with a grin.

Daisuke rolled his eyes and left Kazuo laughing to go get cleaned and dressed for breakfast.

When he slid the door open and stepped into his room, though, it was to find that Kole and Madera were very much *not* getting ready for breakfast. "If you make us late, my mother will kill all of us. Slowly. Probably by draining our blood to use in her dark rituals."

Kole laughed as he pulled off Madera's cock, ignoring the creative swearing that earned him. "Your mother is not nearly as terrifying as we were led to believe. I like your mother."

"Demons are good at luring in their victims," Daisuke drawled, then threw all caution and sense to the wind and added, "Now you heard the man: get back to work."

Grinning in clear approval, Kole went back to sucking Madera's cock, groaning around it when Madera fisted a hand in his hair and fucked up into

his mouth, using him shamelessly. He'd removed his legs, probably wise with all the metal bits, and if it was slowing him down any, that wasn't obvious. Daisuke moved closer and sat down. If he reached out, he could just barely touch them, but he was content for the moment to watch.

The way Kole's mouth was stretched around Madera's cock. The spit and come and tears making a mess of his face, the way his fingers dug into Madera's thighs so hard the skin would probably bruise. The way sweat dampened his hair. Madera's muscles flexing as he worked his cock in and out of Kole's mouth, the flush of his skin, the way his face was screwed into an expression that looked equal parts pleasure and pain.

How beautiful he looked as he came, the lovely moan that filled the room as he spilled down Kole's throat.

After a few moments, he slid his fingers free of Kole's hair, allowing him to sit up. Before Kole could wipe his face, Daisuke leaned in and kissed him, twining his own fingers through Kole's soft, damp hair, loving the taste of Madera on his lips, in his mouth. Kole moaned, moving restlessly against him—and then gasped into his mouth, jerking sharply, and it didn't take much guesswork to realize Madera was jerking him off.

Daisuke drew back so he could watch, moving to press up behind Kole, holding him tightly and nibbling on his throat as they both watched Madera's hand on his cock, jerking in quick, sure motions that had Kole spilling moments later.

"Fuck," Kole said breathlessly, squirming back against Daisuke, making him grunt. "Need some help with that, Major?"

"Not right now," Daisuke said, gently nudging him away. "I want to enjoy the anticipation and absolute torture of waiting until tonight."

Madera laughed and leaned past Kole to kiss him. "I look forward to this evening, then."

"There won't be any evenings in our future if we're late to breakfast."

"Your mother is not that bad."

"You just haven't made her angry yet." Daisuke washed up and dressed in proper clothes, then pulled out pen and paper to jot down his thoughts and questions to pester Kazuo with after breakfast. On a fresh sheet of paper he listed all the obstacles he'd have to overcome to sneak away to sort out the problem of Hideki's beloved. One way or another.

Of course, in the tentative joy of his new relationship and the delight

of Kazuo's unexpected visit, he'd completely forgotten he had something else to do after breakfast: cooperate with his mother to interview candidates for a caretaker for the children.

After *that* arduous, torturous three hours was over, Daisuke couldn't escape fast enough. Not that he didn't take the matter seriously, but nobody should have to be alone with his mother for three hours, especially not someone as fussy and demanding and impossible to please as her. It would be a miracle if any of the caretakers even accepted an offer of employment.

He found his lovers in the garden playing Go. "How in the world do you know how to play that? Only old people and those of us who couldn't escape when we were children still play that."

"You'd be surprised how many games bored soldiers learn to play while they wait for the next round of 'who is going to die this time?'"

"Fair enough," Daisuke said with a sigh, and sat down on the side of the board that put him facing the pond. "Is this all you two have been doing this whole time?"

Madera scoffed. "Hardly. Hideki took us and Shouhei around the rest of the estate and told us all about the time you got chased up a tree by a wild pig—"

"Traitor," Daisuke muttered.

"And then we talked to your father about his water lilies for a bit, and then we came back here to relax until you were free. Shouhei was absconded with by Ryunosuke again. Those two seem to be getting along splendidly. It was one of the servants, I did not catch his name, who offered several games for us to play. And this lovely plum wine." He smiled. "You have a beautiful home, very easy to fall in love with and never want to leave. You should see the moldering pile I'm soon to own." He made a face.

Daisuke's mouth twitched as he stole Kole's neglected plum wine. "You don't sound very excited for a man who is... inheriting a title, I assume? You've never said much—not that you have to."

Madera waved a hand in the air. "Bah. The whole affair is stupid. Beyond stupid. My brother is... frankly, he's a drunken, loud-mouthed ass who shouldn't have the title as he can't handle the responsibilities that go with it." His shoulders slumped. "That being said, I have no desire to take his place. I don't want to be a duke, I don't want to be forced to spend my life traveling between that drafty, dusty manor and the royal capital. Call me

selfish, lazy, whatever. I don't want to do it." He sighed and slumped further, the game completely forgotten. "However, I can't just shirk the responsibilities that come with all the luxury I was born into."

"Well, that's just stupid," Daisuke said. "We're all allowed to forge our own path. There's more than one way to uphold responsibilities. If your brother can't do it, and you don't want to do it, let the king take back the title and give it to someone who does want it. I promise, there's never a dearth of people who want titles and fancy piles of rock." He looked away, jaw tightening, before he finally made himself say, "After we leave the military, Hideki and I have always wanted to open our own shops. He an embroidery shop, me an apothecary."

Kole smiled. "To sell things like that clever soak you suggested to us for Madera's legs? That I suspect more and more you came up with."

"Maybe," Daisuke muttered, cheeks hot. "Anyway, everyone says spoiled brat nobles shouldn't be doing something as mundane as running a shop, but we're going to do it anyway. So if you don't want to be a duke, don't be a duke. Kole will *probably* love you without the title."

"Of course," Kole replied, grinning. "Especially now I've hooked a noble slash soldier slash healer."

Madera laughed as Daisuke rolled his eyes. "So what are we doing now?"

"I'm off to speak with Kazuo about some questions I have regarding common and less common painkillers. You're welcome to come, but it will probably be dreadfully boring. After that, though, my day is clear. Well, save for plotting certain things."

Kole smiled, eyes hot and full of promise. "Come find us after your meeting and we shall plot. Amongst other things."

"As you wish," Daisuke said with a grin, and kissed each of them before standing, sweeping them a bow, and striding off in search of Kazuo.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Hideki was miserable.

He could do everything he should: smile, laugh, converse, play with the children. All the other little things that filled the days of ordinary people. He even still enjoyed Judo and the rest of his training.

But his heart just wasn't in it. His heart was still in shattered pieces in a cave where he'd thought...

Jerking his head in an effort to banish the unwanted memories, Hideki tried to blot out *all* thoughts and simply focusing on *doing*. He went through every form, then did them all again, until he was sore and dripping sweat, the cool morning air doing little to help.

Wiping sweat from his forehead, he abandoned his practice field and went further into the woods, until the bamboo parts of it faded off and it was only the deciduous trees left, with a few interloping coniferous.

One of the things he loved about the estate was that there was no lack of water. Ponds, creeks, the river... and a large pond some distance from the

manor that was perfect for swimming. Also for his father and his precious lotus, but he kept those to the far north end of the pond, away from his 'disrespectful children bent on rampant destruction.'

Stripping off his clothes, Hideki walked to the end of the dock and dove into the cool water, swimming out to the little rocky island in the middle, turning, and swimming back to the dock.

That worked to blot out his thoughts for a little while, but the moment he climbed out of the water, chest heaving from exertion, everything came rushing back. Berrik. His betrayal. Having to leave Jiro behind. Daisuke deciding to gallivant off with Kazuo for a few days for reasons beyond even Hideki's understanding. He knew how much Daisuke loved his ideas for new medicines and other medical treatments, but was *now* really the time?

Hideki sprawled on the dock to dry off, staring up at the wispy clouds that would be burned away once the sun finished rising. When he was dry, he pulled his clothes on and slowly made his way back to the house, where he bathed and dressed for breakfast.

When he arrived, though, it was to find just Hanzo, Ryunosuke, and Shouhei. "Where's everyone else?"

"Madera and Kole wanted to do some hunting today—"

"Oh, right, I'd forgotten."

"—and mother has a headache and wanted to lie in a bit more," Ryunosuke finished.

The house had gone from full and lively to pretty damn empty very suddenly. Normally Hideki wouldn't care, people were always coming and going, in and out like the tide.

Right then, though, he could really use more distractions.

"I received another letter from Noriaki a few days ago," Ryunosuke said into the silence. "I forgot all about it with the excitement of your return."

That did pique Hideki's interest. "What's he up to now?"

"Apparently he went swimming out in the middle of the goddess-forsaken ocean and nearly got eaten by a shark that was bigger than three people combined. Can you imagine?"

Hideki snorted. "Can? Probably. Will I? Absolutely not. Everyone says Daisuke and I are the problem children, but frankly, I'm insulted we're ranked as worse than the brother who *swims with sharks*."

Shouhei laughed. "I have to agree."

Ryunosuke gave Hideki a look. "First of all, Daisuke would totally do it, don't even try to lie. Second of all, a servant was wounded by your shenanigans. To my knowledge, Noriaki only ever hurts himself."

"It was once, it was an honest accident, and Daisuke more than compensated him. Or is he not still an obscenely wealthy merchant who really doesn't care anymore he lost half his leg?"

The incident haunted Daisuke even now, all these years later. They'd been fourteen, messing around on the roof, climbing and playing, throwing things off, including some clever little popper things Daisuke had made, using them to startle wildlife when they lobbed them into the forest. Stupid, but they'd thought them harmless. Daisuke hadn't been into blowing things up then, not quite yet, just making loud noises.

Until a whole cluster of small events had come together to badly injure a servant out collecting chestnuts, wounding his leg so badly it'd had to be removed. Daisuke had been disconsolate for months. Even though their parents had properly compensated the man, Daisuke had done everything he could possibly think of to earn money that year, Hideki of course right beside him, to hand over to the man. They'd also roped Ichiro into helping him invest it...

And the man had long ago forgiven Daisuke, had said countless times that while the experience had obviously been unpleasant, his life had turned out rather well. There was no grudge. Still people loved to bring it up, rub salt in the wound. Then they turned right around and praised him for being so good with explosives and admiring his work on the Wall.

Sometimes people drove him absolutely crazy.

"Enough," Hanzo chided in his quiet way. "Ryunosuke, stop bringing up the past, especially when it has been properly dealt with and none of the affected parties continue to dwell on it. You're being unfair. All our children are difficult in their own ways and all of them wonderful in their own ways, like every other person in the world. I don't recall any of my other sons getting into a fistfight at a moon festival."

"You did *what*," Hideki, suddenly brimming with delight. "Who? Who did you punch?" He slapped his hand on the edge of the table. "I cannot believe you're only now mentioning this! Tell me!"

Instead, Ryunosuke glared at Hanzo. "You are *not* a good father."

Hanzo just grinned and went back to his miso and rice balls.

Hideki grinned, all teeth. "Tell me right now."

"Yes, yes, tell us," Shouhei said. "It sounds marvelous."

Ryunosuke groaned, bracing his elbows on the table and resting his temple in his hands. "I didn't *mean* to get into a fight. That nasty little cretin started it."

"Nasty little cretin? You can't mean Itsuki? Didn't he go overseas for some arranged marriage?" Itsuki and Ryunosuke had hated each other for practically as long as they'd been breathing. Even their mother didn't know why, and Ryunosuke usually told her everything.

"Yes, well, he returned, plus two children and minus his spouse, and he's been an absolute *bastard* ever since. He deserved every single blow I landed."

Hideki's brows vanished into his hair. "I see." Nothing at all, that was what he saw. "Are you ever going to tell us why you hate him so much?"

"Because he deserves to be hated," Ryunosuke said venomously, staring so hard at his tea Hideki was impressed it didn't start boiling.

"Obviously," Hideki replied dryly, finishing his own breakfast. "Well, thanks for that engaging story, Ryu. Now think about what you're going to do to convince me *not* to tell Daisuke all about this when he gets back."

Ryu rolled his eyes. "You won't even remember when he gets back; you'll be far too distracted."

"I'm never too distracted to miss a chance to team up with Daisuke against you."

"We'll just see," Ryu said with a smirk. "Now go away, I'm tired of looking at your face."

"Ryunosuke," Hanzo said warningly.

Hideki laughed, bid his father and Shouhei a good day, and headed back to his room to dress for going into town. As he and Daisuke were technically AWOL, there would eventually be hell to pay, but also they had done as Jiro ordered so...

So he was going into town before he went stir crazy or got so desperate to escape his thoughts he did something stupid.

He'd only just grabbed up his sandals and was headed for the front of the house when he heard voices in the front room. As he passed by, his father saw him and beckoned him in, expression grim. "Hideki, a runner has just arrived with a package for you and Daisuke. It's from Jiro."

Mouth tightening, Daisuke took the envelope, thick and heavy for its size, from the runner, who departed with a thanks for the coins his father handed over.

Breaking the seal on the large, rectangular envelope, the kind meant to withstand rain and other hazards of travel, he pulled out the papers within. There were two sets, one for each of them. Daisuke read his over slowly, not really surprised by what he read, sad and relieved and worried all at once. "Honorably discharged, effective immediately, by command of General Takahara of the Wall of Gamala. This is..."

"Typical of your brother, always worrying about the rest of you and never himself," Hanzo replied, frustrated and fond all at once. He took the bundle intended for Daisuke as Hideki offered it. "Anything else in there?"

"A letter," Hideki said as he found it neatly folded between the two sets of papers. "He says to remain here, try not to draw attention, and whatever happens, we're not to run off and do something stupid."

Hanzo stilled, and then his head jerked up sharply. "Whatever happens? What is *that* supposed to mean? What is he not telling us?"

"That he's in trouble for what happened at the wall, I suspect." Hideki pushed a hand through his hair, ruining all the work he'd put into making it look halfway decent. He really needed to cut... Well, no, he didn't. Not now. He was holding the papers that said he no longer had to keep it to military length. "I don't think I feel like going into town anymore." He handed all the papers off and left, carrying his sandals with him through to the back of the house. Sliding them on, he fled into the woods, the only place where he seemed to find any sort of respite these days.

Unsurprisingly, he found himself back at the koi pond. Why did stupid Daisuke have to gallivant off almost immediately after they'd arrived? Hideki *needed* him damn it, and he knew it. He'd gone off anyway.

Sighing, Hideki sat in his spot by the pond, staring at the fish who came swimming up immediately in hopes of treats. Which of course he had, because it was sheer habit to tuck them into his yukata or kimono just in case he did wind up at the pond.

Today's treat was dried brine shrimp. He tossed a couple of handfuls into the water, scattering them out, smiling as the fish went enthusiastically to work. They always had to be careful not to overfeed the fish, but he and Daisuke were good at keeping track, even when they didn't speak to each

other.

He drew his legs up and folded his arms across his knees, resting his chin on them as he watched the fish eat, the frogs and turtles that shared space with the koi, the dragonflies and other insects zipping about. The pond was beautiful, peaceful, but its ability to soothe him was not present that day.

Nothing was helping. Not sleep, not keeping busy, not trying to think of literally everything else in the world. As happy as he was for Daisuke, as much as he could see how perfect Madera and Kole were for him, watching the three of them only added to his hurt. It wasn't *fair*. Which was such a stupid, childish sentiment, but he'd really and truly thought...

He angrily wiped away the tears that slipped free. No way was he going to keep crying over someone who'd never even really wanted him. Had been using and manipulating him the whole time. Who clearly was going to waste not being used for covert operations. If he hadn't been born nobility, Berrik probably would have been a world-renowned actor. He would certainly light up the stage.

Gods, why was this so hard? It wasn't like he'd even known Berrik that long. Hideki had been largely unmoved by the end of relationships that had lasted significantly longer. This hadn't even *been* a relationship, just a strange something while they waited for Saburo to be found.

Saburo. He'd been trying so hard not to think about that. Too easy to forget he only had five brothers now, not six. They didn't even have his fucking body. They didn't have anything. Just an enormous mess to clean up, a disaster at the wall, causing so much chaos they couldn't even stop to properly mourn Saburo yet.

And here he was crying over a man who'd never really wanted him. He was pathetic. It was a wonder his entire family wasn't disgusted by and ashamed of him.

Footsteps drew his head up, and Hideki sighed as his father came into view. "Am I needed, or am I going to get an encouraging talk?"

Hanzo chuckled. "I do want to talk, but I'm not interested in lecturing you."

"I'd deserve it," Hideki said bitterly. "My brother is dead and all I can think about is the stupid bastard who used and betrayed me."

"I don't think any of us are ready to face the reality that Saburo is gone. Your mother screamed when she received the news, a wail like even I

have never heard from her before. Since that night, though, she has retained her usual calm. We'll mourn later, when the rest of our children are home safe." His sigh echoed Hideki's earlier one. "I admit it would be easier to accept if..."

If there was a body. But there wasn't. Just the words of a stranger than Saburo had gone over a cliff and died at the bottom of a ravine. Hideki wanted to throw up. Whatever his stupid decisions, whatever problems he'd caused with his stupid 'running away for love and peace' nonsense, he hadn't deserved that fate.

"Do not dwell on Saburo now. He would not want you to," Hanzo said gently, cupping the back of his neck and rubbing his thumb in soothing circles, something he'd done since Hideki was little. "I do not think I've ever told you about how your mother and I finally came together, all that nearly drove us apart for good."

Hideki stifled another sigh. "No, you didn't. Only Ichiro and Jiro hear those stories."

"Our courtship was... never formal. Very off and on, as she was forced to court many people, or at least spend some amount of time with them. I was much more wild in those days, arrogant, cocky, trying too hard to be something I wasn't and didn't even really want to be."

Hideki cast him a sideways glance, unable to picture his father as any of those things. His father was quiet, gentle, calm, and above all, humble. He was the eye in the middle of the storm that was their mother.

"I'm not making it up, trust me. So our relationship was tumultuous at best back then, but we both were slowly growing up, acting like the adults we were meant to be... until I caught her kissing someone else one night, and it shattered my heart into pieces, and I ran far, far away. Focused on my studies, my flowers, even tried a relationship with someone else." He smiled faintly. "I was absolutely miserable, but too hurt and proud to go back and speak with her. Lucky for both of us, she came looking for me. Nearly three months passed before we saw each other again. She showed up in the midst of a thunderstorm, and it was a paltry thing compared to her temper as she laid into me."

He could not picture his mother screaming and shouting at anyone. The angrier she got, the more eerily calm she became. His mother's softest, calmest tone was more dangerous than the angriest man. To anyone with

sense, at least. "Surely you had yelling of your own to do, if she'd been kissing someone else."

"I did, and I yelled back plenty, believe me. The short version is that we realized we loved each other and were being absolutely stupid about it. I went home with her, and six months later we were married."

Hideki looked at him, head tilted. "What about the other person, the one you tried to start a relationship with?"

"I think he always knew my heart wasn't really in it. He bore me no grudge when I said I was leaving. Never saw him again, though I asked after him whenever I was in that area."

Hideki frowned. "What are you trying to accomplish by telling me this? Mother didn't lie and deceive and use you. Mother wasn't secretly working for the enemy the whole fucking time."

"I don't know that an earnest spy would cry where his tears would have no effect."

"I'm not doing this," Hideki said, stomach twisting into knots. "I saw the guilt on his face. He can pretend he's sorry—"

"Why would he be sorry? If he was in earnest, why try to explain? Why cry? At the point the ruse was uncovered, there was no further use for you, so why maintain it?"

"Don't," Hideki said, voice cracking. "If you just came out here to give me false hope, and I get myself hurt all over again, I will never forgive you." He shoved to his feet and strode off, no longer in the mood to tolerate this or any other discussion his father wanted to have.

Berrik had betrayed him. Hideki had trusted him, confided in him, risked so much for him, betrayed his own brother, the one Berrik had technically been engaged to... for nothing. Saburo was dead, Berrik's affection had been a lie, and Hideki's joy built on those lies.

He walked aimlessly, wending and weaving through the trees, eventually winding up in the heart of the bamboo forest, which eventually led to the old clearing where Daisuke had tested his first explosives, demolishing all manner of rocks and whatever else they scrounged up.

Enough time had passed that everything was overgrown again, long grasses, flowers... no bamboo though. For whatever reason, it never grew in this clearing. Daisuke had always wanted to study—

Hideki jerked as the clanging of the house bell sounded, alerting

everyone on the estate that they were urgently needed back at the house. He ran as fast as he could, weaving, jumping and dodging his way through the dense forest, uncaring when his cheeks and arms stung where they were sliced open by leaves or scraped by branches.

He burst into the yard behind the house, pausing just barely to catch a bit of his breath, then hurried on inside, kicking off his sandals before pounding his way to the front of the house where the family always met for emergencies.

His parents, Ryunosuke, Kole, and Madera were already gathered. Hideki's eyes were only for his mother, though, whose face had gone paler than snow, eyes filled with so much fear and anguish that he feared she might pass out. "What's wrong?"

"We just got an official notice from the army," Hanzo said grimly. "Jiro has been taken into custody for his failures to properly defend the Wall, for discharging you and Daisuke without permission, failing to hand over the children as was agreed upon by *monsters*." Hanzo stopped, mouth tight, before he continued with a tenuous calm, "And many other trumped up charges just to make him look bad. He is being taken to Nakarai to stand trial."

Hideki ran from the room, barely making it outside before he threw up his breakfast in the grass.

Jiro had sacrificed himself. More than he and Daisuke had realized. They'd assumed Jiro would be given a slap on the wrist. He'd commanded the Wall of Gamala better than all his predecessors. No one could have anticipated all that would come from Daisuke rescuing *children who were being used as landmine fodder*.

Fuck. This couldn't happen. If Jiro was found guilty of his crimes, especially the failure to properly defend the Wall, he wasn't facing a court martial—he was facing execution.

For them. He'd done everything for them, knowing full well what would probably happen. And Daisuke and Hideki had been too stupid and absorbed in their own problems to see it. "Damn it, Jiro, you stupid fuck."

"I don't know Jiro very well, or you," Kole said gently from behind him, "but I know that he would not want you to be upset. His choices are his to make."

"We already lost Saburo; we can't lose Jiro too," Hideki said, voice

breaking, eyes blurring and stinging. "We just can't."

Kole stepped in close and, of all things, hugged him. "You haven't lost him yet. The fight's not over till it's over, we say back home. Remember that your brother loves you and thought you were worth the choices he made. Now come on, your mother is worried sick about you, and I've always been told the terrible two are tougher than this."

Hideki managed a weak laugh. "Thank you. I can see why Daisuke cares so deeply for you both. You suit him."

"He suits us," Kole said with a soft smile. "I'm honored we have your approval, though. I'd never want to cause trouble between the two of you."

His laugh that time was stronger. "No one gets between us; they've tried and failed every time. You just wanted to join us, which is what no one else ever tried." He followed Kole back into the house, grimacing at the dirt on his feet and quietly praying his mother would let it go until he had a chance to clean them.

"My apologies, Mother, Father."

Hanzo gave him a look, and then a hug. "You've nothing to apologize for."

"Nothing at all," his mother said firmly. "This news has been a nasty shock for all of us. The army is full of insipid fools with the spines of jellyfish."

"Jellyfish don't—oh, I get it," Madera said with a laugh, rolling his eyes at himself. "Yes, precisely. We endured the same appalling behavior back home, before King Morin kicked his father off the throne and started fixing everything."

"I, for one, will not be tolerating it. Hanzo."

Hanzo immediately offered his hands, helping Reina to her feet and keeping hold of her left hand when she was standing. "What is your plan?"

"I am still refining it. We will discuss this further at breakfast. Tonight, after the sun has set, however, we will gather at the temple and offer prayers. For Saburo. For Jiro."

"Yes, Mother," Ryunosuke and Hideki chorused.

She swept from the room, Hanzo following behind her, but he lingered to look back at Kole and Madera. "You two are welcome to come as well. You're part of the family now." He winked. "She's already researching how to do something equal to marriage between the three of you, fair

warning."

Hideki quirked a brow. "Since when is Mother that eager about any lover either of us brings home?"

"Since Daisuke finally picked someone—well, two someones—worthy of him," Hanzo said with a smile.

"We're honored to be regarded so highly," Madera said quietly. "Anyone should be proud to have Daisuke's favor."

"Yes, they should, but until now they weren't, though they were certainly proud of the status and money," Hanzo said with a sigh.

Hideki tried to smile, because he was truly happy for his brother, but all he could think about was Berrik. Ever present, like shrapnel in his chest that couldn't be safely removed.

Hanzo squeezed his shoulder, as though he could read Hideki's thoughts. His father had always been eerily good at that. "I still have faith in your choice too, even if you don't, Hideki. Now go rest. You look as though you need it. We'll wake you for dinner if you're not up before then."

"Yes, Father."

Hanzo faded off, and Hideki made his way to his room, where he cleaned up, dressed in a fresh yukata, and made up his bed before crawling into it and falling almost immediately to sleep despite, or perhaps because of, the tumultuous state of his mind.



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Daisuke looked over the manor where his brother had found the love of his life and was exceedingly underwhelmed. It was large, ostentatious, jutting out of its natural surroundings as though it somehow believed itself better. He'd never much cared for Aaran architecture, but usually it wasn't *this* ugly.

"You can't burn the house down, Daisuke."

"I wouldn't waste the ogre powder," Daisuke retorted, and finally pressed his horse into motion again, dismounting when he reached the base of the stairs. Kazuo came to stand next to him, thanking the stable hands who came to take the horses. They gave Daisuke wide-eyed looks, but he ignored them.

Bounding up the stairs, he pounded several times on the door, not bothering with the ridiculous little knocker.

The door swung open just moments later, and Ichiro immediately

rolled his eyes. "Did it ever occur to you, Daisuke, that I had *all* matters well in hand and your domineering interference wasn't needed?"

"No," Daisuke said, and strode past him into the house, as dark and dreary as its exterior. "Where is he?"

More servants gasped as they looked at him, and one woman darted off to undoubtedly tattle-tale.

"None of your damn business," Ichiro said. "Have you heard about Jiro?"

The somber tone snapped Daisuke's eyes back to him. "What's wrong?"

"He's been arrested. They're likely going to execute him."

"THEY WILL NOT!" Daisuke bellowed, guilt and remorse and absolute fury coursing through him. "I'll show them all exactly what I can do with gunpowder if they so much as harm a single fucking hair—" He narrowed his eyes, bristling, *daring* Ichiro not to remove his fucking hand from his mouth.

"H-Hideki?" A tear-soaked voice called out, the hope undercutting it painful to hear.

Daisuke turned sharply, staring up at the remarkably pretty man standing on the landing halfway up the stairs.

Before he could speak, the man's face fell. "Oh, you're not Hideki. You're Major Daisuke." He gave a small laugh, tired and resigned and filled with pain. "Did you come to shoot me? I would not blame you."

Narrowing his eyes, Daisuke shook off Ichiro's feeble grip and strode across the hall and up the stairs. Grabbing who he could only assume was Berrik, Daisuke hauled him back up the stairs.

"Daisuke! Get your ass down here now!"

"Go fuck yourself," Daisuke called out, not even bothering to turn around. When they were at the top of the stairs and out of Ichiro's fuming sight, he said, "Where can we talk?"

"This way," Berrik said quietly, and led him down another hall to what proved to be some sort of work room.

When the door was closed behind them, Daisuke stared straight at him and said, "Give me one good reason why I shouldn't break every bone in your body. That's a hell of a lot more of a chance than I've given anyone else who's hurt my brother, so make it count."

He looked around the room finally, giving Berrick a chance to gather his words. The walls were entirely window from halfway up the wall to the ceiling, sunlight pouring in and catching various bits of glass, casting rainbows across the room. More glass, in all manner of colors, was stacked on shelves and into special slots. Worktables were strewn with projects, sketchbooks, tools, and forgotten snacks and drinks.

Softly, Berrick said, "I would rather hurt myself a hundred times than hurt Hideki even once. I never meant for any of this to happen."

The very real pain in his voice was enough to give Daisuke pause, but it was the contents of the table just behind Berrick that sealed the matter: a half-finished panel of stained glass featuring two koi and water lilies in a pond of various shades of blue.

No conniving spy who'd never meant a single thing he said or did would go to that much trouble, create something so personal, spend hours, *days*, of labor, for someone they didn't care about.

"Hideki probably loved this place, even if glasswork is not his interest," Daisuke said with a sigh, all the angry, challenging things he'd been planning to say with his hand around the bastard's throat falling away. It was clear as polished crystal that Berrick was in love with his brother and even more miserable over their separation than Hideki.

"He never got to see it," Berrick said, barely speaking above a whisper. "I'd been hoping to show him and then... and then it all went so horribly wrong before I could tell him everything myself."

Daisuke folded his arms across his chest, scowling. Just because he wasn't going to throttle the bastard didn't mean he wouldn't make him suffer for every single second Hideki spent hurting. "You've said all the right things so far. Keep going and maybe I won't need to punch you after all."

Berrick, of all things, smiled. "I wish my siblings cared even a quarter as much as you and your brothers do about each other. Especially you and Hideki. You're so close. My siblings don't even remember my birthday without their staff to remind them. That's not what you're here for, though." He straightened, set his shoulders. "I swear on my life that I never meant to hurt Hideki. Quite the opposite. I've been... enchanted by him since the moment I saw him. The more time I spent with him, the more deeply I cared."

"So why all the spying and lying?"

Berrick looked away, scowling at something only he could see. "I don't even know where to begin. I knew my mother was up to something strange, possibly nefarious, but I had no way of knowing what exactly. None of my suspicions were substantial enough to bother anyone else with. When she told me to get close to Hideki and glean information, I agreed because it meant I could go see him and wouldn't have to sneak around to do it, and it also meant I could avoid family, which I am always happy to do. I reported back token bits of information that were just enough to keep her satisfied, and simply hoped that when Saburo was found we could... figure something out."

He blew out a frustrated breath and looked back at Daisuke. "I kept trying to tell him, but every time the opportunity presented, I was too cowardly to do it. And as much as I don't care much for my family, betraying them once and for all was harder than I expected. Everything turned into a mess." He shook his head. "I turned everything into a mess, and Hideki rightfully thought the worst." He touched fingers lightly, gently to his nose. The bruising had almost entirely faded, but there were lingering green and yellow marks to show where his nose had been thoroughly broken by Hideki's hurt and anger.

"I know he never wants to see or hear from me again—" Berrick stopped as his voice broke, eyes pinching in a futile effort to stop a tear that slipped out anyway. "And I won't fight whatever punishment you've come to levy, but could you at least tell him, for me, that I am sorry. From the bottom of my heart I am sorry. I never wanted to hurt him, never intended to. I— I hope he'll find the happiness he deserves, with someone who will treat him far better than I."

So much for Ichiro having this well in hand. Near as Daisuke could tell, everything was still a fucking mess.

Berrick dropped a hand on his worktable, little finger not quite touching the white pelvic fin of a half-finished koi. He stared at the project, but it was clear his mind saw something—someone—else entirely. "I was making him a gift, but I'm pretty sure he'd throw it off the nearest cliff if I actually sent it to him."

"More likely off the bridge into the river," Daisuke replied. "What goes in that river rarely comes back out."

Berrick flinched and looked near to tears again.

"That being said, I didn't come to shoot you or beat you or whatever

other violent assaults you're imagining. I did come intending to *verbally* beat you down, but physical violence isn't actually my preferred method of problem-solving. Only the military's."

That got the barest hint of smile. "Hideki always spoke so proudly of how much being a healer meant to you. Ichiro said you'd both been discharged, so I hope you can open your shops now."

Daisuke drew up to the table and fussed with the pieces of cut glass laid out, needing only to be arranged and soldered. "Why aren't you locked up anymore?"

"Lord Takahara decided I could be trusted after several lengthy interviews. I'm not allowed to leave the house, obviously, but he has judged me as not in line with my family. He said when this matter was resolved that he would do his best to secure me time with Hideki. At the very least he promised to carry a letter for me." His lips twitched and amusement flared ever so briefly in his eyes. "He also said that it was highly likely you would show up at some point, and it would not be a pleasant interaction if he could not stop you."

"Not that he even tried," Daisuke said, rolling his eyes. "I admit you're not entirely what I was expecting."

Berrick looked torn between wanting to ask, and very much not wanting to know.

Daisuke took pity on him. "My lover Madera and I were convinced you were a conniving little weasel. But our lover Kole had a different perspective on the matter, and he has proven to be correct, as he so often is. I was still braced for the worst, however, since Hideki is kinder than anyone deserves, and that is often used against him."

"People are stupid," Berrick said flatly. "Hideki should be treasured, protected. He should be allowed to enjoy his embroidery and judo and not be made to fight all the time just because he's big and good in combat."

"You'll do," Daisuke said, because in all the years he and Hideki had been alive, no one had ever leapt to Hideki's defense that way. Not a single person. Only this one, heartbroken and consoling himself by making a gift even as he was certain it would be promptly destroyed by the recipient. He hadn't once gotten angry, demanded that someone listen, take him to Hideki at once. Just accepted his mistakes and his loss and hoped for better for Hideki.

Berrick's brow drew down. "Do? Do what?"

"Pack your bags and arrange for the rest of your belongings to be readied for shipment. You're coming with me."

"With you?" Berrick repeated cautiously, the look on his face full of a hope so fragile it would shatter at the slightest disappointment. "To where?"

"Where do you think, dumbass? Home, to where my brother is absolutely wretched and miserable without you. As much as I had hoped I'd get to rail at you and knock your teeth out, I can see what Hideki was too upset to see: that you care for him, and mean it when you said you didn't want to hurt him. So go pack a bag that will tide you over for a few days, while I go deal with my insufferable eldest brother."

And figure out where Jiro had been taken, so he could go blow some scheming, backstabbing assholes into pieces, because nobody was executing a Takahara on his watch.

"Do... do you think he'll talk to me?"

"I think I can get you to see him, and from there you're on your own. If you screw up a second time, though, I will punch you so hard you won't wake up for a month, and when you do wake up, it will be at the bottom of a well. Understood?"

"Understood, Major."

"It's Daisuke. Now go pack."

Leaving Berrick to it, he strode back down the stairs, where a servant hastily pointed him to where Ichiro was lurking. The room proved to be an enormous library-study type of place, complete with expensive books that had probably never been read. "Where the fuck are they taking Jiro?"

"Like I'm stupid enough to tell you," Ichiro replied, not looking up from the papers he was reading. Across the room, Kazuo was reading a book, or pretending to anyway. Poorly, as it was written in a language Daisuke was certain Kazuo didn't read. Daisuke gave him a look, and Kazuo returned it with a puzzled one before looking down at Daisuke's indication, his entire face going pink as he realized he couldn't read the book he'd chosen. Slamming it shut, he set it aside and motioned for Daisuke to keep his mouth shut.

"What in the world are you two doing over there?" Ichiro asked.

"Making fun of you," Daisuke retorted. "I'm not playing, Ichiro. Where is Jiro?"

Ichiro sighed. "They're taking him to Nakarai."

"To subject him to a farce of a trial. I'm going to—"

"Do nothing!" Ichiro said, slamming a hand on the desk as he stood. "Jiro knew what he was doing when he made the choices that led to this. Do not bring more trouble down on his head by interfering. I promise you, nobody in this family is going to let them execute him."

Kazuo drew in a sharp breath. "Surely they wouldn't actually go through with that. It has to be an empty threat."

"I wish the matter were that simple," Ichiro replied. "Unfortunately, there are a great many people who were waiting for exactly this sort of opportunity. Jiro is a thorn in many fingers, and they've finally got pruning sheers."

"I have fire," Daisuke muttered.

Ichiro abandoned his desk entirely to go pour them all drinks. Any other time, Daisuke would have been highly amused at the way his brother was just making the entire manor his own.

"You let Berrick free, what about the rest of the family?"

"Still locked up where they can't cause trouble. Did you maim him?"

"Not at all," Daisuke replied. "He was already so broken-hearted, even I couldn't punch him. He really does love Hideki. Steals the fun out of beating him senseless."

"He does," Ichiro said with a smile as he handed over a glass half-filled with what smelled like cherry brandy. "Long past time someone appreciated the pair of you. How are matters with your two?"

"They're ridiculously cute," Kazuo said, grinning at the dirty look that got him. "Household rumor is that Her Ladyship is already researching how to give them some sort of wedding."

Daisuke dragged a hand down his face. "That woman is getting way ahead of herself."

Kazuo smiled softly as Ichiro handed him a glass of brandy. "Thank you."

Ichiro answered the smile with a brief one of his own before turning away, and Daisuke watched with interest as Kazuo's gaze lingered before he finally dropped his eyes to the brandy, smile fading into something bittersweet before vanishing entirely.

Daisuke filed that away to discuss with Hideki and Jiro later, and took

a generous swallow of brandy before saying, "So I can't do *anything* to help your dumbass partner in crime?"

"No, you cannot," Ichiro said. "Normally I am happy to let you and Hideki do as you please, as you are nowhere near the fools the world takes you for, but I am asking as a favor, Daisuke, please stay out of this one. Jiro is a victim of politics, and only further politics will get him out of this alive."

"Fine," Daisuke said with a huff. "If you take too long, though, I can't promise I'll keep sitting around doing nothing."

"I'll just tell Master Kole to tie you up. I doubt anyone will have complaints with that arrangement."

Daisuke rolled his eyes as Kazuo snickered. "So what are you waiting on here? Can't you hand them over to their authorities and leave this mess behind?"

"Those authorities should be arriving any day now, and then I am headed to Nakarai."

"Would you like some company?" Kazuo asked. "I have some resources that would prove useful, and I could never sit back and do nothing, not when it's Jiro, unless you had good reason I should stay away."

"You're not going to show up with enough weapons and explosives for two armies," Ichiro said. "Of course I'd love your company, and Jiro would even more."

Kazuo smiled like he'd been given the world's greatest gift. Moons, how had Daisuke never noticed Kazuo was smitten with Ichiro? Poor bastard.

"I'm returning home, and I'm taking Berrik with me. If these so-called authorities don't like it, you can tell them where I said to shove their dicks."

Ichiro rolled his eyes but didn't bother to otherwise respond.

Kazuo smiled. "Are you leaving today or tomorrow?"

"As soon as he's ready to go. There's no point in lingering, and I want to be home again, since I'm not allowed to blow up the stupid asses who arrested Jiro." However safe he logically knew his children were now, he didn't want to leave them alone for longer than strictly necessary. As wonderful as everyone else was, right now they trusted *him* the most, and he wanted to be there for them.

He wanted to *always* be there for them, until the day came when they no longer needed him.

Two lovers and five children in a matter of weeks. Sun and Moons,

even he boggled at his life sometimes.

The sound of footsteps snapped all their attention to the door, which opened a moment later to reveal Berrick. "Lord Takahara..."

"Daisuke has already told me you're leaving, whether I like it or not," Ichiro said with a smile. "I wish you the best of luck with Hideki, my lord. For what it's worth, I think my parents will adore you, and that is half the battle." He cast Daisuke a look. "You're an entirely separate battle."

"I should think so," Daisuke said haughtily.

Ichiro rolled his eyes. "Get going, so you can make good progress before dark falls. Be careful, please. It's a miracle you did not run into trouble on your way here, given you must run practically parallel to the wall most of the way."

Daisuke didn't deign to reply to that insulting statement. "Come along, Lord Berrick. I hope you can ride hard." He threw a grin over his shoulder. "Horses. I don't want to know what you do with my brother."

Choking and sputtering, face burning, Berrick hastened to catch up as Daisuke strode out of the house as dramatically as he'd entered it just a short time ago.

Outside, their horses were somehow already waiting, and it took only moments to get Berrick's bags secured.

As they mounted up, Berrick turned to him and said, "Thank you, Daisuke. You've been kinder than I deserve, and I owe you everything for this chance to set things right. Even if he will not take me back, at least he'll have the truth of the matter."

"Thank me when the matter is settled to everyone's satisfaction, and good luck with my mother." He heeled his horse into motion before Berrick could reply, leading them swiftly away from the ugly manor house and back into the woods beyond.

They traveled until it was too dark to go further, and made camp in a small circle of trees. "It will take us a few days to reach my family's home, which is a few days southwest of the Wall, approximately 2-an outside the town of Sabae."

"Known for silk production. Hideki mentioned once. He works with silk, in fabric and thread, a great deal because it's relatively easy to come by due to location."

Daisuke smiled. "Yes, precisely. That's how the original Takaharas

made their fortune. We're still involved in the silk trade to this day. Fukui silk, specifically, named for the particular type of silkworm used."

"Hideki definitely didn't mention *that*," Berrik said with a huff. "The most famous and expensive silk in the world."

"Our last name draws enough attention." He shrugged one shoulder before dividing up their food for the evening. They ate quickly, then bedded down to get some rest so they could leave at first light.

They had to add several additional hours to the first part of the journey to be certain of avoiding any scouts patrolling far afield. Daisuke was confident they wouldn't turn him in anyway, but he preferred not to risk it—or the livelihoods of soldiers who had done nothing wrong and didn't deserve to get tangled up in politics.

When they reached a small waypoint, Daisuke paid a messenger to hurry ahead of them with a message for his mother. After a half day of cleaning, restocking, and resting, they were back on the road.

Two days later, as dusk was just beginning to creep along the sky, they reached the turnoff to the private road that led to the Takahara estate. "Hope you're ready, because if you thought I was scary, I've got nothing on my mother."

"Near as I can tell, she is the only person in the whole world who terrifies the two of you," Berrik said, mouth twitching. "It's rather adorable." He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I'm ready. I'll face whatever it takes if it leads to Hideki."

"Then off we go."



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Hideki was back at the koi pond, the only place that seemed to offer him solace. He was trying, he really was *trying*, to let his heartache go. He needed to. There were so many other problems that required his attention. He needed to properly mourn Saburo. Needed to see what he could do about saving Jiro. Find his stupid errant twin and beat his ass for gallivanting off to attend his precious research when he should be *here*.

None of it would stick, though. So here he was again, sulking in the only place that didn't make him feel like his chest was being compressed by rocks. He needed to get over himself. He just didn't know *how*.

The sound of footsteps, a familiar tread, drew his attention, and he stood and turned just as Daisuke broke through the trees. "You're back."

"I am," Daisuke said, with that crooked smile that said mischief was afoot.

"Did you hear about Jiro?"

Daisuke's face clouded. "Yes, but no one will let us do anything

except sit here. It's fucking stupid."

"As stupid as you gallivanting off on one of your experiments when we all need you here?" Hideki asked, because he rarely got angry with Daisuke, or Daisuke with him, but right now he wanted to throw him in the pond. "Why couldn't it wait?"

That mischievous look returned. "It *can* wait. That's not why I really left."

Hideki scowled. "What in the world are you—" His heart dropped into his stomach as he realized, with sudden clarity, exactly what his damned brother might have actually been up to. "You didn't. You fucking *didn't*." He was going to throw up. "Daisuke, I will throw you in the fucking pond if you went and hurt him."

"Almost," Daisuke said, not even pretending that he'd feel guilty about it if he had. "Don't know if it's better or worse, but..." He stepped to the side and swept his arms toward the trees. Hideki followed the movement—and froze.

Berrik. Was there. At his family home. He looked *terrible*. He'd lost weight, even though it hadn't been more than a couple of weeks since they'd been apart. His eyes looked bruised, like he hadn't slept well in all that time. He was still so beautiful.

Hideki barely noticed as Daisuke faded off, frozen in place as Berrik slowly approached, and this close he could see Berrik's eyes were also red and raw, as though he'd been crying. Hideki swallowed, licked his suddenly dry lips, drinking in the sight of this man he'd missed so damned much. "What... what are you doing here?"

"Please don't send me away yet," Berrik burst out, hands fisted in front of him, as though he had to physically restrain himself from reaching out. "I know you don't want to see me ever again, but I wanted to explain, to apologize. I never— I never meant for any of this to happen." His gaze dropped, and he seemed to take several shuddering breaths before finally, slowly, looking up again. "I am sorry. I am so very sorry I hurt you. That was never what I wanted. I never lied to you about that, how I felt and how much I wanted us to... well, be an *us*."

Every part of Hideki *ached* to go to him, to simply believe every word and forgive all ills and never let Berrik go again. That was a fool's game though, when he'd already blindly trusted this man before. Daisuke had

brought him here, though, and he wouldn't have come this far without first meeting their parents...

"What happened?" he finally asked. "Why did you lie to me?"

Berrik looked near to tears at the question. "I always knew my mother and siblings were up to something, but they took pains to keep me out of it, and I never had enough information to go to anyone else with it. I thought they were just smuggling alcohol or other goods we're not allowed to import from Boorna. It's almost fashionable to be involved in smuggling." His mouth twisted. "When she ordered me to go see you, get information, I agreed because that's what I wanted to do anyway, and this way I wouldn't have to sneak around. I gave her harmless bits of info when necessary, just enough to convince her I was doing my job. There were so many times I tried to tell you..." He pinched his eyes shut. "But I backed down every time, too scared of how you'd react, what you'd think of me."

He reached up to touch his nose, and Hideki flinched, because he was the reason it had been broken, the reason it was now slightly crooked. Shame washed through him. However angry he'd been, however hurt, that wasn't sufficient justification for violence.

Opening his eyes, Berrik offered that bittersweet smile again, resignation in his eyes. "And of course, I got exactly what I deserved, with everything coming out in the worst way possible at the same time I learned my family wasn't smugglers, but traitors. Colluding with Boorna to... I still don't know what. Nothing good, for certain. Your brother has cleared me of involvement, but my family will most definitely be sentenced and punished."

Hideki had been selfish. He'd been so focused on his own heartache, he'd never stopped to consider what this was costing Berrik. He'd lost his lover, his family, and his home. Berrik had quite literally lost everything, yet he'd still come all this way...

A rough, broken noise tearing from his throat, Hideki surged forward and wrapped Berrik tightly in his arms. Berrik gasped, then sobbed as he buried his head against Hideki's chest. "I'm sorry, I'm really sorry, I—"

"Shush," Hideki said, grasping the sides of his face and pulling him into a kiss. Berrik shuddered against him, and Hideki could feel the tears running down his cheeks. Hideki deepened the kiss, relearning and reclaiming this man he'd missed more than a severed limb. Bit at his lips before licking them, exploring every dip and crevice, swallowing every moan

and whimper and sob. He let go of Berrick's face to wrap his arms tightly around him again, holding him almost bruisingly close.

After several minutes, he drew back enough to scattered soft kisses over whatever parts of Berrick he could reach without pulling away, punctuating each one with a softly murmured, "I'm sorry," or "I missed you," and every endearment he could think of.

At some point, they wound up on the ground, reminding him sharply of their time in the cave, making his chest ache anew. Drawing back, Hideki cupped his cheek, wiping tears away with his thumb. "I'm sorry, Berrick. I should have given you a chance."

Berrick covered Hideki's hand with his own. "No, please, I was the one lying and deceiving. You don't owe me anything. I'm sorry I made such a mess of things. I didn't—" His breath hitched. "I didn't really think you'd give me a second chance."

"I broke your nose, sweetheart, it would serve me right if *you* didn't give *me* another chance."

Berrick gave a small, wobbly smile. "I like when you say that." At Hideki's blank look, his smile strengthened. "Sweetheart."

"I'll say it as much as you like," Hideki said. "Will you stay?"

Berrick gave a real laugh then, as bright and true as those he'd offered before everything had gone so wrong. "You're joking right? Why in the world would I *not* stay. Leaving off the fact I never want to be parted from you ever again, what do I have to go home to? Once my family is officially convicted, the crown will reclaim the title, the land, everything. What doesn't get sold or auctioned off will be thrown out or given to charity. Ichiro said he would see my things sent once I knew where I would be, but..." He spread his hands. "I have nothing to my name now, save the bags I packed. Not really much of a marriage prospect now. Or any sort of prospect."

Hideki kissed him again, biting and sharp. "I don't want you because you're a *prospect*."

"Now, I know that's not true. You'll definitely need someone to keep the house while you get lost in your embroidery shop," Berrick teased, though there was still a hesitation in his demeanor that Hideki hated. "I'm sorry about Jiro, by the way. Ichiro and his friend that came with Daisuke seem confident they can fix matters, but it still must be nerve-wracking."

Tugging them back to their feet, Hideki gave him a look, even as he

kissed the back of Berrick's hand. "You would know better than I, given your *entire family* is probably facing execution."

"Ah, but my family lost my love and respect a long time ago. We're not close the way your family is. Not really the same thing." His face fell. "Not to mention my family is tied up in what happened to Saburo. Everywhere I look, all I see are reasons you should hate me."

"If I was capable of hating you, I wouldn't have been so hurt and angry," Hideki replied quietly, drawing him into a soft, lingering kiss. "Come on, I can smell rain." He'd barely finished speaking when thunder rolled, making Berrick laugh.

Keeping hold of his hand, Hideki led him back to the house.

"Your home is beautiful, by the way. I've never seen anything so beautiful in my life."

"We take a lot of pride in it, especially my mother," Hideki said with a smile as they slipped off their shoes and stepped into the house proper. "Come on, we'll have some tea and then get you settled. Where did they put your belongings?"

Berrick flushed. "Um, I don't actually know. I only brought two bags, and Daisuke took them from me before we were even inside. I was introduced to your parents, then he brought me to the koi pond. I honestly didn't think I'd see you so soon. Or so easily. I was expecting at least another broken nose."

Hideki scowled, gripping him by the hips and reeling him in to kiss him firmly. Fuck, he never wanted to go a single day without kissing this man. "No one will ever lay a finger on you again. Not me, not anyone else, and I'll kill anyone who does."

"Calm down, Major," Berrick said, trying to sound stern but failing miserably. "I'll be very disappointed if you never lay a finger on me again."

Rolling his eyes, Hideki smiled and said, "You know what I meant." Berrick grinned, and Hideki cupped his face again, leaning down to press their foreheads together. "I'm glad you came."

"Thank your brother. Ichiro said he'd talk to you about seeing me when this mess was over, but Daisuke showed up, ordered me to pack a bag, and brought me here. It must have been exceedingly dangerous to get that close to the wall, but he never hesitated." He laughed faintly. "I thought he was you at first, when he showed up. I heard his voice and ran downstairs to

see you, but the moment I saw him, I knew it wasn't you."

"You'd be one of the few. Now come on, I promised you tea." He led the way through the house to a small room used for various purposes, which could be combined with the rooms on either side of it to make a larger space. Currently, there was a table in the middle, the sides covered with fabric, and plenty of cushions for sitting.

Hideki kissed Berrick's fingers before reluctantly letting go. "Get settled, I'll arrange the tea."

Berrick smiled and leaned up to kiss his cheek before moving to obey.

Alone in the hallway, Hideki took a deep breath and released it slowly. The world felt too close and far away at the same time. He was half-afraid he'd wake up at any moment. Shaking himself, he headed for the kitchens.

He hadn't gone far, though, when a familiar figure he really should have anticipated stepped into his path. Hideki bowed. "Mother."

"Hideki," she greeted, lifting a hand to cup his cheek and pat it softly. "He is a good man, and a good fit for you. I am happy all this misunderstanding business has been settled and put behind us. You and your brother did unfortunately inherit my tempestuous temper, but you are conquering it much more quickly."

Hideki laughed. "Mother, you couldn't be tempestuous if your life depended on it. Grass is more tempestuous than you." His mother did have a temper, but it rarely showed itself, and even at her angriest, she was always in control.

Reina laughed. "If only that were true. Never mind that. Why are you not with your beloved?"

"I was going to arrange tea for us."

Scoffing, Reina waved a hand at the woman currently attending her. With a bow and wisp of smile, the woman faded off. "Return to him, the tea will arrive shortly. Have you thanked your brother yet?"

Hideki rolled his eyes. "I haven't seen him since he dropped Berrick and ran. I assume he's with his lovers. I'll see him at dinner."

"Very well." She lifted her head in silent command, and Hideki happily gave the kiss to her cheek.

"Thank you, Mother."

"I haven't done anything," Reina replied loftily before sweeping off in

her elegant way.

Smiling, shaking his head, Hideki did an about face and returned to Berrik.

Somehow, he wasn't remotely surprised to find they had invaders: Daisuke, Kole, and Madera.

Hideki gave Daisuke's head a playful shove as he looped around the table to sit next to Berrik. "Shouldn't you three be off celebrating your reunion?"

"And miss a chance to gloat about how I was right?" Kole replied. "I think not."

Daisuke rolled his eyes but was smiling as he leaned on the table. "I'm glad you've reconciled. None of us could endure your moping much longer."

"Oh, shut up, I can take guesses aplenty about how *you* were sulking while you convinced yourself that these two—"

"Be quiet or I'll make you," Daisuke said.

Hideki grinned, and Daisuke matched it.

"You two really are something else entirely when you're together," Madera said. "You come alive in a way you aren't when alone, though you've never, in my experience, lacked for life."

The brothers shrugged in unison. "We're two halves of a whole," Daisuke said. "But when we say that people either think we're disturbingly co-dependent—"

"—or that we'll be happy to act out their grossly inappropriate fantasies about us," Hideki finished.

"Fantasies are all well and good, but people should learn to keep those things to themselves," Kole replied.

"If only," Daisuke muttered.

The door slid open then, and two servants came in with tea aplenty for five.

"What are all these?" Berrik asked, motioning to the trays of food. "I've never seen anything like them."

Hideki picked up one of his favorites and broke it in half—something that would be incredibly rude in a formal setting, but he wasn't going to fuss over trivial ceremony when it was just the five of them. "Manju, a type of dumpling made from wheat flour with sweet filling. This one is yuzu, and the leaf-shaped ones are sweet red bean paste." He and Daisuke switched off

describing all the other foods, from pickles and crackers to a variety of sweets, as they enjoyed the repast.

"So what are you two going to do now that you're out of the army?" Berrik took a sip of tea. "Going to set up your shops? Do you know where?"

"Probably in town. This place gets enough business, local and transient, that we'd do well."

"We'd also be close to home, which would make Mother happy," Hideki added. "Right now, though, my concern is for Jiro."

Kole gave them a look. "Lady Reina was quite clear about the two of you staying out of it. You may as well turn your attention to the shops."

Hideki shrugged. "I suppose—but we may yet be recalled, since nobody is happy about how Jiro went about discharging us."

Daisuke snorted softly. "Please, they'd have to get by Mother first, and we all know how *that* will go."

"Don't be so certain," Hideki replied grimly, shooting his brother a look. "The marriage was a failure. We've been discharged. Jiro is under arrest. We've outed a powerful family of a tenuous ally as a traitor. I'm not sure Jiro's blood will be enough to satisfy anyone, and even Mother cannot stop two monarchs from getting what they want."

Madera laughed. "I don't know, my money is still on Lady Reina."

Daisuke's mouth twitched. "You may as well call her Mother—she's going to insist on it by dinner."

"That seems presumptuous."

"Not when she's already planning the wedding," Hideki muttered.

Daisuke shot him a look. "She'll be planning yours too, now. At least you *can* have a wedding. Whatever we do, if we ever get that far, will never be official." He frowned as he caught Madera and Kole staring at him. "What?"

"Nothing," Kole said with a smile. "Nothing at all."

Hiding a grin and refusing to help his adorably baffled brother out one single bit, Hideki piled his dishes on one of the now-empty trays and stood, offering a hand. "I'm sure you'd like to rest after keeping up with Daisuke for days on end. Come on, I'll show you to our room." The other three snickered, and Hideki rolled his eyes as he all but dragged Berrik from the room.

Safely in his new bedroom, he locked the doors before discarding his clothes for comfortable sleepwear and setting up the bedding.

"It's so different from back home," Berrick said, watching him.

Hideki stilled at the words before shaking himself and getting back to work. When he was done, he leaned back on his heels and looked at Berrick. "In a good way or a bad way?"

"Not any way, really, just an observation. I like it, though. My mother's house always felt so heavy and oppressive. The only rooms I enjoyed being in were my bedroom and my workshop. Especially my workshop, which had so many windows so there was nearly always light, and a cool breeze on nice days. Here... everything is so open and light." He sighed and slowly sank down to sit on the floor. "I think it's starting to really sink in that I have no home and no family."

Hideki immediately darted to his side, sitting down and pulling Berrick into his lap, holding him close and kissing his brow. "Do you want to go back? Have more time? We can live in Aaran if you prefer."

"No, no—" Berrick laughed. "It's all just moved very fast. I thought I would be planning a wedding right now, to a man who would probably never be more than a friend, if that. Now... well, everything is very, very different. All I want is you, though, Hideki. Losing you was a thousand times more painful than losing everything else. I just..." He swallowed, looked away, fingers gripped tightly in the folds of Hideki's yukata. "What if you grow weary of me? What will I do then?"

"Even if that were a possibility, which it's not, I would never leave you to flounder. We'll make all the arrangements necessary for you to stand on your own. You'll never have to worry about any of that. I promise. I have no desire to keep you by my side because you have no choice. Nobody should ever want that, and anyone who does is a cretin."

Berrick smiled, soft and sweet, eyes bright. "You really are too good for the world, Hideki. Certainly too good for me."

Matching the smile, Hideki replied, "Literally anyone would tell you that the exact opposite is true." Hideki kissed him, softly at first, barely a whisper across his lips. As Berrick sighed softly and leaned further into him, Hideki twined fingers through his hair and deepened the kiss, swallowing every quiet noise he drew out of Berrick.

His. His his *his*. He was never letting this man go again, not for as long as he lived.

Finally tearing himself away, he shifted his stance and heaved to his

feet, carrying Berrick in his arms.

"Mercy of the gods," Berrick said breathlessly. "How do you make that seem so easy, I know I'm no sack of feathers."

Kneeling again, Hideki got Berrick laid out in his bed. Their bed. Though if Berrick wanted an Aaran style bed, or anything else, Hideki would see to immediately. If and when they got their own home, he'd see it met every one of Berrick's needs and wants.

He brushed strands of hair from Berrick's forehead as he stretched out beside him. "I can't believe you came all this way, and after I broke your nose."

"The only thing I can't live without is you," Berrick said. "I'll never be able to express how sorry—"

Hideki kissed him. "It's over. Sleep. You look absolutely exhausted, and you need to be well-rested if we're going to start building the next part of our lives." He brushed a kiss along Berrick's cheek, then back to kiss behind his ear, eliciting a faint shiver. "You'll also need your strength for everything I intend to do to you later."

Berrick laughed, and his hold on Hideki tightened before he drifted off to sleep just moments later.



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

"Stop teasing me!" Kole gasped out.

Daisuke smirked. "*Don't* stop teasing him. If he's demanding instead of begging, you haven't teased enough."

Kole moaned, head dropping between his shoulders briefly before lifting it up enough to glare at Daisuke. "You're the *worst*."

"Insults just encourage me, darling," Daisuke replied, then rolled to his hands and knees and crawled forward to take Kole's mouth in a hungry kiss before tearing away and moving just out of reach. He met Madera's gaze as he shifted to observe them from the side, watch Madera's fingers push into Kole, stretching and twisting inside him, leaving Kole moaning and panting. Daisuke stroked one of his flushed, sweaty cheeks, brushing away a strand of hair sticking to it. "You're lovely."

"Compliments won't keep me from killing you if someone doesn't get on with it and fuck me proper!" Kole said between pants.

Madera caught Daisuke's eye and lifted his brows in silent query,

even as he continued to tease and torment.

"Madera, please," Kole groaned out, the words partially muffled as he buried his face in his folded arms.

Daisuke snickered. "See, was that so hard?" He gave Madera a bare nod, and Madera obediently withdrew his fingers and turned Kole over, spreading his thighs wide and settling between them. Grabbing his cock, he guided it to Kole's hole and slowly pushed inside, extracting more swears and pleas and threats before he was finally fully seated.

Returning to kneeling in front of Kole, Daisuke drew his head into his lap, stroking his flushed skin before holding him tightly where they could both see where Madera fucked into him over and over. Kole's head rubbed across his still-clothed dick in delightful, almost too-much stimulation, but Daisuke's attention was entirely on Madera's cock splitting Kole open, the way Kole moved between them, arms thrown back to cling to Daisuke, his grip almost painfully tight. "You're lovely," Daisuke said again. "Caught between us, being fucked open by your commanding officer, greedily begging for more and more."

"I'm not in the military anymore," Kole retorted, but any attempt to make the words a reprimand were lost beneath the way he immediately started begging for more, crying out when Madera obliged by fucking him harder than ever, driving in over and over, until Daisuke had to clap a hand over his mouth to muffle his shout as he came untouched, spilling across his own stomach.

Daisuke gently laid him down on the bedding again, then opened his own pants and finished himself off as Madera sank into Kole one last time and came. Their combined panting filled the small pace, all of them sprawling out across the floor to cool off.

"You two are going to be the death of me," Kole said eventually. "One was bad enough."

"I don't think I heard any real complaining," Madera replied with a laugh.

Snickering, Daisuke rolled to his feet and set to getting them all cleaned up, dressing himself before helping Madera with his legs, tweaking and fussing, despite protestations, because how could he not?

Once they were all clean and dressed, they headed off to meet his father in front of the house. When they arrived, Hanzo, Shouhei, Hideki, and

Berrik were already there. "So what is this big adventure into town all about?"

"If I wanted you to know, I would have already told you," Hanzo said with a smile. "Now come along. It's a fine day for a walk, wouldn't you say?"

Daisuke bristled. "You're going to make Madera walk 4-an?"

Madera rolled his eyes. "I can handle it. If the walk there tires me, we can secure a ride back, I'm sure. Quit fussing."

"Good luck with that," Hideki said, blithely ignoring the dirty look Daisuke cast him. As they started walking, he asked, "Have we heard anything more about Jiro?"

"Your mother received a letter this morning from Ichiro that they are soon leaving for Nakarai to help Jiro. He's being held in the royal palace as a prisoner of honor, as he should be."

"He shouldn't be any sort of prisoner," Daisuke said bitterly. "He did all the right things, and everyone else being backstabbing, double-crossing, lying cretins isn't his fault. If it was anyone else, the Wall would be in Boorna's hands right now."

Shouhei gave a single, sharp, derisive laugh. "Let them figure that out the hard way, if they want to be so stupid about it."

Hanzo chuckled. "In the meantime, Jiro is comfortable and well-tended, and His Majesty will give us a fair chance to fight for his life. The failed marriage is certainly our fault, but we also uncovered traitors—whose actions no doubt contributed to how Boorna was able to infiltrate the Wall, and with so many soldiers at that—so I doubt that entire mess will be used overmuch against us. Ichiro will handle it, especially with Kazuo by his side. Those three were always nearly as invincible as the two of you."

"I don't think anyone would describe us as invincible," Hideki said with a snort. "Just violent and stubborn."

"The Hammer and the Powder," Hanzo said with a soft smile as he looked them over. "My dear sons who have never let anyone or anything stop them, not even their mother, from whom you most definitely inherited your tempestuous spirit. It is the army's loss that they did not fight to keep you longer, but I do believe you've come to the end of that path. Today we will begin your new path, yes?"

"We will?" Hideki and Daisuke asked together.

Hanzo just smiled and changed the conversation to more idle topics.

Daisuke shot a look to Hideki, who silently shared his bafflement. It was more than a little worrisome how nice everyone was being lately, instead of reprimanding them for one thing and criticizing them for another.

He startled slightly as a hand slid into his and squeezed, dropping his gaze to a gently smiling Kole. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing at all," Kole replied. "You looked troubled."

"Not used to compliments. Or my family being nice. Usually they can't wait to see the back of us."

"That's not true," Hanzo said, looking hurt. "We have always been strict, and clearly we went too far, but we all love you both dearly and are immensely proud of you. Nobody talks about you more than Jiro, except perhaps Ryunosuke. This most recent fight isn't his first, you know."

"What do you mean?" Hideki asked.

It was Shouhei who replied, "He's gotten into several fights defending the two of you—but do not mention it to him, he doesn't want you to know. I only know because he got a bit drunk the other night and told me all about it."

"Ichiro has said many times it's a pity you never wanted to pursue an academic career because his peers could use the humbling you would give them." Hanzo's gaze shifted to Hideki. "Your embroidery work is admired everywhere we go. I sense that once you open your shop, you'll have more commissions than you can handle. You'll have to train proper assistants quickly."

Daisuke blinked several times, looking away at the landscape but not really seeing it. His shoulder brushed against Hideki's, and if they were alone, they would have hugged tightly.

Hideki finally said, "Are we dying, that everyone is suddenly being so nice?"

Hanzo sighed. "No, my only lost son is Saburo, and I admit I am still holding out hope there, though it seems a futile one. This would be so much easier to accept and process if..." He waved the words away. "Jiro wrote to us not long ago, voicing concerns he had regarding you two, about how you reacted when he laughed at something Daisuke said. It has made us all realize that perhaps we've not been as clear as we thought in our admiration and pride, in our affection. We love all our children, even the pair that tried to blow up the estate growing up and nearly stopped your mother's heart on numerous occasions."

"The house is still standing," Daisuke said breezily.

"And the new bridges are vast improvements on the old," Hideki added, grinning.

Hanzo rolled his eyes. "Nevermind, I take back all of it."

That made all of them laugh and earned them more than a few looks as they grew closer to town, passing through the beautiful arched gate made of stones that had once been part of a warlord's castle long since lost to time, remembered only in a few moldering books in a university library.

"What a lovely little town," Kole said, still holding fast to Daisuke's hand, Madera on his other side, Hideki still at Daisuke's left. As they moved further into town, though, Daisuke dropped back slightly, letting Hideki and Berrik walk in front of them, with Hanzo leading the way.

He and Hideki took it in turns to point out various shops and restaurants as they threaded through town. "That's our favorite ramen shop."

"That street cart has the best rice balls you'll ever taste."

"That's the very first shop that made and sold Fukui silk. There's a larger shop now, and the production is done outside of town now, but the original shop is the heart and soul of the town. Nowadays it focuses on custom work and special products; the larger store does the more everyday business," Daisuke said.

Hideki said, "I teased Saburo about his Fukui silk shortly before he ran away. I hope he had the sense to take it with him to sell if..." He broke off, sounding close to tears, and Daisuke let go of Kole's hand to hug his brother from behind, letting go only when Hideki's hands fell on his and squeezed briefly.

"Do you guys always get stared at like this when you come into town?" Shouhei asked.

Hanzo chuckled. "No, that's unique to these two. They have more of a reputation as brave and fearless soldiers than they realize. So many young people, especially the children, talk about how they're going to be just like the Hammer and the Powder one day."

"I hope not," Hideki muttered. "I'd rather they live long and happy lives, not be gunned down or blown up on the Wall or a battlefield far from home."

Daisuke sighed softly. "Agreed."

"This way," Hanzo said, and turned down a wide street bustling with

all manner of shops, from shoes and used clothes to spices and meat. More than a few people called out greetings to them, and a few younger people waved shyly at Daisuke and Hideki, blushing and turning away when they waved back.

"It's a good thing we're confident in your affections," Kole said with a laugh. "Otherwise I might be jealous of all these people flirting with you."

Daisuke rolled his eyes, but before he could make further reply, Hanzo drew them to a halt in front of an empty shop, where instead of an 'available' sign there was instead a 'sold' one. Daisuke cast his father a sideways look. "What did you do?"

"This used to be an apothecary," Hanzo said, ignoring the look. "Seems like fate, does it not? Also a room above it, should you desire to stay in town some nights, take a break from the children. Raising so many at once can be quite the handful." Hanzo winked, and then, ignoring the flurry of questions they shot at him, he resumed walking down the street, giving them no choice but to chase after him.

Just a few shops down, on the opposite side of the street, they came to another empty building, this one significantly larger. If Daisuke recalled correctly, this place had once made and sold paper. "Let me guess," he said before Hanzo could speak, "the perfect place for an embroidery shop that will likely make its own thread and floss someday."

Hanzo grinned, and for the first time, Daisuke realized that he and Hideki had the very same grin. "Just so." He held up his hands. "No protesting. Your mother purchased them. You know how she is. I'm merely making the delivery. She fully expects *all* of you to live at home, but of course if you also want rooms here in town, this place has them same as Daisuke's shop. And all other relevant purchases you'll have to make yourself."

"Thank you, Father," Daisuke said softly. "This is far too much."

"We're most grateful," Hideki said. "We didn't even realize..."

Hanzo scoffed. "You are our sons. We know you better than anyone, even when you think we don't. Now, I shall leave you to your explorations. Tara has a new saké he wants me to try, so don't wait for me when you want to head back. Your mother knows not to expect me anytime soon."

"You're going to leave us alone with her after showing us the shops?" Daisuke asked indignantly.

Hanzo's laughter trailed behind him as he vanished into the crowd.

"What a day," Hideki said, staring at the keys Hanzo had tossed him before departing.

Shouhei looked around, glancing briefly at them. "My parents can barely be bothered to reply to my letters, they're so disappointed in me. The nicest thing they ever gave me was a brand new pair of shoes instead of hand-me downs. I didn't know parents could be so generous and kind, until I met yours."

"They're certainly more than we deserve," Daisuke replied.

Hideki snickered and added, "Though I think more and more that Mother deserves *us*."

Rolling his eyes, Berrik motioned to the shop. "Shall we take a look?"

"May as well." Hideki unlocked the front door, tucked the keys into his jacket, and slid the door open before stepping inside. "Best keep shoes on until we can clean these floors properly."

The whole place smelled of dust and disuse, but there was nothing ominous, like mildew or rot. It was a large, open space, with windows all along the top of the wall, allowing light to pour down and light the entire space. At the back were three doors, likely to an office, storage, and the yard. "Hideki, this is amazing."

"It really is," Hideki said, looking near to tears. "Can you imagine? Plenty of room for display, for workshops, the space behind should work for dyeing... I know we wanted our shops to be next to each other, but..."

"I think a short distance down the street is close enough," Daisuke replied, dragging him close, pressing their foreheads together. "Who knew all it took to get what we wanted was chaos and rampant destruction."

And losing Saburo, which neither of them said, because if surrendering their dreams brought their brother back, they would do it without hesitation.

Withdrawing, Daisuke said, "Have fun, I'm going to go explore my shop. Come find us when you're done and we'll get lunch, start making lists."

"Sounds great."

Daisuke slung an arm Kole's shoulders as they headed out, and Madera took hold of his free hand as they walked back down the street. He could so very easily get used to this, come to need it every day of his life, walking arm in arm with them wherever they went, the three of them as close

as he and Hideki, and Hideki with Berrick always at his side.

It was nice, being five instead of two. And right there with them was Shouhei, his impeccably reliable cadet, who'd come along on this mad adventure for no real reason at all, that Daisuke could see, but he would repay that loyalty tenfold.

The shop, as they stepped inside, still smelled of the herbs that had once filled it as an apothecary. One entire wall was taken up by apothecary drawers of various sizes, absolutely perfect for him, and having them already installed would save a great deal of time and money. There were also glass cabinets, sturdy locked cabinets, and more. Even the tatami mats were still in excellent condition. He could only see maybe two that would need to be replaced. No furniture remained, but that was easily addressed.

"Your face is already full of light," Madera said softly. "I cannot imagine how you'll glow when this place is open."

Daisuke flushed hot. "I'm probably—"

"Stop, don't even finish that," Kole said, putting a finger to his lips to make certain of it. "Jiro will be fine. Saburo is not your fault. Nothing pertaining to the Wall and traitors and betrayal and all the other mess is your fault. You and Hideki have done enough. You're allowed to pursue your dream and be happy. There will always be strife mixed amidst the good. That doesn't mean you're not allowed to enjoy the good."

Daisuke tugged the hand away and bent to kiss him. "Stop being reasonable, it's getting in the way of my histrionics."

Kole huffed a soft laugh against his mouth before kissing him again.

"So do you need an assistant?" Shouhei asked as they drew apart. "I don't know anything about healing, but I'm good at all the boring stuff: money, records, taxes, that kind of thing. My father is an accountant in the palace—he oversees the budgets for the kitchens and gardens, so I grew up on this sort of thing."

"Of course you're hired if you want it," Daisuke said. "You came all this way for no reason that I can find, and if you're volunteering to do the paperwork, far be it for me to complain."

"I appreciate it, Major. Uh, my lord?"

"Daisuke."

Shouhei grinned. "Boss."

"You two," Madera said with a laugh. "Do we have anything to write

with? We can start making notes while we wait for the others."

"Always," Daisuke and Shouhei said in unison as they pulled notebooks and pens from their jackets.

Madera and Kole laughed, and Kole took Daisuke's from him. "You two work on the shop; I'll work on the upstairs and the office. Madera... stand around and look pretty, I guess." He laughed again when Madera rolled his eyes before vanishing up the stairs to take stock of the apartment.

Roughly an hour later, the door to the shop opened, and Hideki and Berrik stepped inside, both with suspiciously mussed hair that hadn't been properly smoothed back out. Daisuke quirked a brow at him and jerked his chin at his hair.

Smiling sheepishly, Hideki smoothed out his hair as he moved further inside. "Beautiful shop. Mother chose well. I've got more ideas than I can handle. More *work* than I can handle, so I think hiring help will be my first step." He looked at Shouhei, then back at Daisuke. "Guess you already did that part."

"He hired himself, really. What shall we do for lunch?"

"How about sukiyaki?"

"Sound perfect."

"What is that?" Kole asked.

"You're about to find out," Daisuke replied, throwing an arm around his shoulder and leading the way out of his shop, leaving Shouhei to lock up. "You'll love it."

Several minutes later, they were ensconced at their favorite table at their preferred sukiyaki restaurant, with one large pot simmering and enough saké for the entire army. Daisuke had helped Madera remove his legs, since it was easier to sit without them, and had them taken away to be safely stored until they left. They'd gotten more than a few looks for the whole affair, but between Daisuke and Hideki's matched glares, nobody was stupid enough to say anything.

Daisuke honestly wouldn't be surprised if he got requests once people realized he'd helped make the legs.

Which sent a wash of sadness through him. Worse than all the research he'd had to leave behind, he didn't have his team anymore either. Even if he'd left in more peaceful fashion, he wouldn't have retained them, though. They were all military first and foremost, and his funding had been

near its end, and they'd have all moved on to other things.

Anyway, he was a healer now, he didn't have time for engineering experiments. Not at the level he had before, at least. Better not to think about it.

Instead, he focused on the food, the company, working alongside Hideki to make and refine lists for all their respective shops and apartments would need, notes for hiring, for possible vendors, how to celebrate official openings, and more, until the food was long gone and they'd gotten through all the saké they'd started with and then some.

By the time they left the restaurant, it was far too late to call for a ride, let alone walk, and Daisuke didn't want to risk waking anyone up. Instead, he and Hideki secured rooms at a nearby inn for the night.

Once Kole and Madera were settled, however, Daisuke wasn't quite sleepy enough to settle. Instead, he headed off for the hot springs that made this inn so popular, one of two in the city and the slightly more popular—and expensive—one.

He wasn't remotely surprised when he encountered Hideki in the hallway, sharing a smile as they made their way to the springs together, settling in one of the small pools in the back.

"Probably had a bit too much saké to do this for long," Hideki said with a laugh.

Daisuke shrugged. The air was cool, and the sky a swirl of beautiful colors, the brother Moons full and bright, the hour late enough that all was quiet except for some distant, rambunctious drunks.

"Thank you again for bringing Berrik home. I'm sorry I didn't keep better watch of Saburo."

"We didn't know he needed to be watched. He made his choices. I wish they were better ones, but they were his choices to make," Daisuke said with a sigh. "Though speaking of brothers and stupid choices, we are going to help Jiro at some point."

"Obviously. Let them try their politics for a bit, and then we'll do things our way." Under the water, Hideki clasped and squeezed his hand, and Daisuke squeezed back before they parted again. "Are your men going to stay here, then?"

"I think so. Lots to sort out back in Belemere, so I might have to go for a few months. Hopefully, though, it can all be done with letters and

couriers who don't mind all that traveling."

Hideki sighed. "I guess all we get to do for now then is wait and see, but if you make me go to rescue Jiro by myself, I'll kill you."

"I would never miss a chance to blow up the royal palace. It would be a dream come true, and you know it."

"I do," Hideki said with a snicker. "We'll have to distract Mother."

"She's got five grandchildren and a wedding to plan, she's distracted," Daisuke drawled.

"Two weddings, stop pretending you're not also going to be dragged to the shrine."

It was Daisuke's turn to sigh. "We'll see."

Hideki snickered and slid down a bit further into the water, resting his head against Daisuke's shoulder as they lapsed into the easy silence that had always existed between them.



Next in the tales of *Seven Brothers*...

Nighthawk

Jiro is going to be executed. The disaster at the Wall of Gamala, perpetuated by child-murdering assholes from Boorna, is all the ammunition his enemies, and rivals of the Takahara family, need to get rid of him, secure the power left by his absence, and destroy his family from there. If they think he's going to go easily or quietly, though, they're sorely mistaken. Long before he rose through the ranks to general, Jiro was a member of the elite Shadow Force, a ruthless soldier and killer known only as Nighthawk. If it's a fight they want, it's a fight they're going to get.

When he arrives at the royal palace in Nakarai, however, Jiro finds an unexpected friend and ally in the notorious Lady Hei-Ran, formerly Princess Hei-Ran, disowned and exiled by her family for reasons never made public. The very last thing either one of them should be doing is befriending the other if they ever hope to repair the damage they've done to their lives and reputations, but neither will the growing bond between them be denied, even as the danger around them continues to increase.

About the Author

Megan is a long-time resident of queer romance and keeps herself busy reading and writing it. She is often accused of fluff and nonsense. When she's not involved in writing, she likes to cook, harass her wife and cats, or watch movies. She loves to hear from readers and can be found all over the internet.

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