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Behind the Mask

Ninja meets pirate.

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Part I

Kasumi eyed the man before him, grateful for the mask that hid his distaste.

So this was the brilliant Lord Luther Hatcher-Rosque?

He was not impressed.

A brilliant man, they had been told. Intelligence beyond compare, with looks and poise to match.

The man before them now was tall but...disconnected looking. His glasses were crooked, hair spilling free of a bright blue silk ribbon, and his clothes looked as though his valet had pressed them while heavily intoxicated.

If this was the man with whom his master was to be keeping company...Kasumi wondered if he might arrange a parting of ways.

Fingers pressed lightly at his back, warning him to remain still.

That his master was so easily able to predict his thoughts was disconcerting, but Kasumi was used to it.

He did not take his eyes from Lord Hatcher-Rosque. Surely this clumsy looking man was not the one about whom they had heard so much? He was a veritable buffoon, hardly worthy of his master...

A soft word drew his attention and he turned smoothly to follow Master Minoru up the gangway and into the waiting ship. Silent, elegant, a masked mystery whose presence would do much to dissuade impertinence and threats.

No one would touch Minoru, and if he had his way that idiotic looking fool would not come near enough to converse. Master was a man of honor and dignity; he did not consort with fools.

Three months, this journey.

Kasumi was beginning to doubt those months would pass with any sort of speed. He half hoped for some excitement, but did not let the thought carry far enough for the gods to make note.

A scuffling noise behind, a startled gasp, and he turned sharply around to catch Lord Hatcher-Rosque before he could fall to the deck. Sneering behind his mask, he let the clumsy man go once he was securely on his feet.

"Thank you," Hatcher-Rosque said politely, smiling.

Kasumi turned sharply away to rejoin his master, who had gotten several paces ahead.

"Do not mind Kasumi," Master Minoru said with one of his gentle smiles. "He was happy to help."

He begged to differ, but would not argue his master in public.

"Come," Hatcher-Rosque said, brushing back a strand of his messy hair. "I will show you your quarters." He pushed past them, stumbling often, and led the way below decks, finally pushing open the door of a small cabin.

Kasumi stifled an unseemly sigh. Why could they not simply travel to places that did not require the sea? Land he could control. Sea he could not. These small places were also not to his liking.

"I would be more than happy to join you and the Captain for dinner, my Lord. Extend my thanks to him, and thank you."

A few minute of bumbling talk and they were finally left alone. The door closed with a click and Kasumi allowed himself to relax a notch.

"You were all but hissing, Kasumi," Minoru said with a chuckle. "That utterly harmless, charming lord just offends your sensibilities doesn't he?"

Kasumi said nothing.

Minoru laughed harder. "Oh, Kasumi. So easily offended. One would never guess the thoughts behind that pretty face you hide."

Pretty face. He would glare if it would do any good.

"Hmm, and now I am offending you more. If you were a cat, you would be hissing and spitting and going for my face. Ah, you do please me, Kasumi."

He sketched a bow. "It is my will and desire to please, Master."

Minoru snorted. "I have no idea how one of your breeding turned out so blatant a smartass."

"I know not what you mean, Master," Kasumi murmured. The mask muffled his words, but Minoru never had trouble understanding him.

Another chuckle was the only reply. "Come, I must change for this dinner. I know he does not look as we might have expected, but you should not judge by looks, Kasumi."

Kasumi bristled. "I would not be so careless, Master."

"On the contrary, my protector. You would see an enemy anywhere, and that sight has saved my life more than once. Beyond that, however, you do not see people at all. It is strange that so much you see, and so much you do not."

"I see all that I must to keep you alive," Kasumi said, stung. He had never once failed his Master. In training he had surpassed all others. He was a credit to his clan and family.

Minoru sighed. "Ah, Kasumi. There was no insult there, only an observation from which you might try to learn. You are a perfect and unfailing protector, well worth all the money I spent and more. No better protector exists."

Kasumi nodded stiffly, but did not move from his spot near the wall.

"You are ridiculous," Minoru said. "I think you like being insulted. If you do not unbend, Kasumi, I shall make you remove that mask during dinner."

"Master!" Kasumi snapped.

Minoru chuckled. "Come and help me change."

Muttering soft curses behind his mask, Kasumi moved forward to help Minoru change from his travel clothes into attire more suitable for a dinner with peers. He kept back a contemptuous snort at the idea of regarding that bumbling moron as a peer of Master Minoru.

Ha. Any man who could not walk a straight line without falling over at least three times was no peer to anything except perhaps the floor he kept encountering.

When at last they were ready, he led the way out of the cabin, stepping back to let Minoru lead the way only once he knew

the way was secure. He hated these confined places.

In the Captain's quarters, he prowled until he knew every nuance of the room, ignoring Minoru's quiet murmurs to the others to mind his bodyguard's strange ways.

"Will you be dining with us?" Hatcher-Rosque asked politely, pushing up his slipping glasses and shoving back strands of hair.

Minoru chuckled. "He is welcome to, but he will not - that goes against his training and beliefs."

Kasumi glared at him in warning, knowing Minoru would be aware of it even if he could not see it.

"Plus, he would have to remove his mask." Minoru tossed him a smirk before taking the seat offered him by the Captain. "Lord Hatcher-Rosque, you are a man of great knowledge. Know you anything about our famed protectors?"

Hatcher-Rosque pushed his glasses up again and peered curiously.

Kasumi glared at him.

"Call me Luther, please. I don't believe anyone knows anything about the prized protectors of the land of night."

Minoru smiled and motioned Kasumi forward.

He went obediently, silently calling Minoru every last nasty name he could think of, making more up as he was ordered to bend.

Smooth fingers traced the line of his mask, something that would have cost anyone else his fingers. Kasumi held perfectly still, save for his eyes which constantly examined and reexamined the room, the people, all of it. Nothing was amiss, yet he could not settle.

Then again, Minoru was putting him on the spot. Stupid uppity pushy know it all masters.

Fingers again traced his mask, the marks carved into it, the deep jewel colors in which the carvings had been painted, sliding over the lips and nose to where the colors faded away into the solid black that dominated the left side. Each mask unique, the marks upon it meaningless to all but his brethren. None may bid him remove it save for his master.

"The markings are a mystery even to me," Minoru explained. "I purchased him eight years ago, at no small cost let me tell you." He winked and motioned for Kasumi to rise to his full height once more. "They show their faces to none but their parents, their teacher, and their master - and if I bid them do so."

The Captain frowned. "How would anyone know, then, if the wrong man was behind the mask? Surely there must be situations where such a problem would arise."

Minoru smiled.

Kasumi stifled a groan.

"My good sir," Minoru said with a smile that had convinced more than one man to get himself in trouble, "try to remove his mask."

The Captain quirked his brow, but gamely nodded and stood, moving around the table to approach Kasumi. He hesitated a moment, then reached up to pull off the mask.

It didn't come off.

Kasumi wished fervently that inflicting harm upon his master was not strictly against the contract.

"Why will it not come off?" the Captain asked.

"So it is true that your people do still practice magic?" Luther asked.

Minoru chuckled softly. "Only in bits and pieces. I myself know nothing of magic. The secret clans, such as Kasumi's, still know bits of it. The mask Kasumi wears is probably one of the strongest bits of magic that still exists."

"Fascinating," Luther said, pushing back his glasses again and if he did it one more time Kasumi was going to yank them off his face and fix the damned things. Honestly, did he not pay attention to such trivial details? This man was supposed to be

one of the greatest scholars in the world and he could not even dress himself? Had he no pride?

Dinner continued in agonizing fashion. Kasumi did not mind the stillness. He used to dinner longer and more tedious than this. It was simply that he could not reconcile the man before him with the scholar about whom he had heard so much. Neither could he understand why his master was so indulgent of the man who looked like an idiot, stumbled over his words like a fool, yet clearly possessed the rumored brilliance.

A man so visible should care more about how he looks.

When they finally reached the dessert course, Kasumi almost wanted to cheer in relief.

Then Luther spilled his coffee all over his cake and Kasumi settled for rolling his eyes, not even caring if anyone realized what he was doing - which was highly doubtful. When at last the dinner and chatting and farewells finally came to a close, Kasumi all but dragged Minoru back to their cabin.

Minoru laughed.

Kasumi pointedly ignored him, playing the role of protector and nothing more, until with a last laugh Minoru climbed into bed and shortly fell asleep.

Still he stood, opposite the bed where he could see everything most clearly - the single porthole, the door, and the bed. When at last every sound or lack of sound seemed to indicate all aboard had settled in to sleep, he closed his own eyes to catch what rest he could. Still standing.

He woke at the sound of movement, but knew before he even opened his eyes it was Minoru. The sounds around him indicated morning.

"Good morning, Kasumi."

"Master," Kasumi said with a grunt.

"You should eat."

Kasumi shrugged.

Minoru sighed. "Call for breakfast, would you, Kasumi. Breakfast for two."

"Master." He strode to the door, frowning as he reached it - and yanked the door open to see a sailor poised to knock.

"Um." The sailor shook himself. "Captain wanted to know if his lordship would like to join him for breakfast."

"Tell the Captain I very much would," Minoru called. "Please have a small meal brought quickly for my man."

"Yes, your lordship," the sailor said, then snapped a salute and darted off.

Kasumi moved back to his spot against the far wall and resumed his post.

"You cannot still be upset about last night," Minoru said lightly. "Do you still dislike that man so much?"

"He was no man," Kasumi said. "He was a fool. Why would a man humiliate himself so? Had he no pride? No care?"

Minoru sighed. "Kasumi, we have known each other for nearly a decade. I know you better than perhaps you realize, and certainly I know you better than most of your clan. Is his awkwardness truly all you see in that man? Is it not intriguing that he irritates you so?"

"I am not your pupil," Kasumi said coldly. "Save your lessons for those who have the desire and the coin to pay for them."

"You are hopeless," Minoru said.

Kasumi moved to the door and opened it before the sailor could not, somewhat mollified by the mix of fear and annoyance in his face. He took the tray and closed the door.

"Manners, Kasumi."

"I have none," Kasumi replied.

Minoru rolled his eyes. "Remove your mask, eat, and get yourself cleaned up. Honestly, if you are still snippy about being shown off - let it go. They are fascinated by you; explaining you a bit will disperse some of that attention and return you to anonymity. It is not like you to be this tense, Kasumi."

"I do not like that man," Kasumi said, obediently removing his mask and eating swiftly before stripping down to wash and change. He hated having his guard so lowered, but there simply was no help for it.

In short order they were ready, and Kasumi followed along to the Captain's quarters.

Inside, Luther was not even wearing a jacket, merely his shirt sleeves. The rudeness!

"Good morning," Luther greeted, picking up his glasses and sliding them onto his face. "Did you both sleep well?"

"Very well, thank you. Yourself, Luther?"

Luther smiled. "Quite well, indeed."

Minoru returned the smile and moved to his seat.

Kasumi saw the flintlocks a heartbeat too late - they fired simultaneously, and he only just barely dodged enough of the ball meant for his heart, taking it in the arm and slamming into the wall.

Nearby, the Captain dropped and lay still in a growing pool of blood.

The flintlocks were dropped and Luther brandished a new one, leveling it straight at Minoru's head. "Bodyguard, bodyguard, you let down your guard." He pulled off his glasses and let them drop to the floor, stepping on them as he circled slowly around the table.

"Who are you?" Minoru asked calmly.

"Luther works well enough, mate," Luther replied, the words said with an almost lazy air. "All I've ever heard about these bodyguards of the Night Islands - expected better, mate."

Minoru shrugged. "He's not dead yet."

"That can be changed," Luther replied. "Depends on you."

"Do not kill him. What do you want?"

Luther motioned for him to stand. "That'll keep 'til we're on my ship, mate."

His accent had changed completely. Kasumi barely recognized him as the buffoon he'd been sneering at. Gone was the fumbling nervousness, the awkwardly spoken proper northern accent, and as the scholar-turned-killer turned toward him, Kasumi realized the eyes no longer hidden by loose spectacles were as cold and hard as ice.

Holding fast to the wound in his arm, he struggled to stand, willing the world not to gray out. "How?"

Minoru turned toward them, and Kasumi glared at him, willing the bastard to head his silent order to stay silent.

"Kasumi, you are no longer my protector. I am no longer your master."

Damn it. He was going to kill the man. This was his fault, Minoru should not be trying to help him.

"Magic, hmm?" Luther asked, gun still trained on Minoru but his eyes solely for Kasumi. "I don't believe in magic. I prefer to know what my problems look like." He reached up and tugged.

The mask remained on.

"What the devil?" Luther asked.

Kasumi smirked-

"If you move, I will kill him," Luther said calmly.

"What?" Minoru asked. "If you kill me..."

Luther laughed and grabbed Kasumi by his wounded arm, squeezing hard enough that Kasumi nearly cried out. He collapsed into the chair into which he was thrown, wondering what was wrong with him. He'd taken worse than this and managed just fine.

Poison?

"If I kill you I will have no bargaining chip?" Luther asked, completing Minoru's unfinished question. He threw his head back and laughed.

Minoru's eyes widened. "I am not the one you want."

"You are not the one I've been paid to capture," Luther replied. "My captive is currently under sway of a nasty poison made from spider venom. He will not be further trouble, I think. It was tricky, finding a poison for you." Luther moved to grab his chin and tilt his head up, thumb stroking the painted lips of the mask thoughtfully. "You protectors are apparently immune to so many. I had to search the ends of the earth, and then figure out how to get it into you. Food, I suspected, would never work. This whole thing worked out much better than I anticipated."

His chin was roughly released, and the world tilted alarmingly. He could feel his body working to counter the poison, but it would seem Luther had indeed worked hard to locate a poison his body could not fight.

He wondered if Luther knew that if Kasumi survived, this poison would never affect him again. Best to keep that secret close. Kasumi let his head fall to the table, unable to summon the strength to keep it up any longer, but he did resist the urge to pass out.

If all he could do was listen, then he would listen.

"Why did you kill the Captain?"

"He's not one of mine," Luther replied. "Unfortunate, but sending him back alive would have risked our being captured. From what I was able to learn of him before we left port, the world will not miss him. You will soon see that we are all very good at playing the role of gentlemen sailor, but are ruffians to the last, mate."

Minoru said something, but Kasumi did not catch it, and he realized he was at last losing the battle to remain conscious.

Vowing silently the bastard non-scholar would pay, he succumbed to the dark.

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"How do you intend to eat?" Luther asked idly.

One day ago they had switched ships from the one they'd boarded in port to a ship that looked as though it was going to war. Dark wood and dark sails, and Luther had ordered the other ship sunk once all hands were aboard the Dreamer.

Kasumi said nothing, refusing to speak to this bastard who had tricked him like no one ever had. Minoru had been right - he had been so busy being offended by the man's seeming stupidity he had not looked closer. Decades of training and his own arrogance was his undoing. His teacher would be ashamed. Kasumi was ashamed of himself.

"I must say if you are attempting to thwart me by starving yourself to death, it would almost work - but there is the matter of Minoru."

Minoru. Technically he had ended his contract, a courtesy Kasumi did not deserve. It meant, however, that no one could remove his mask, and that meant he would keep the power it gave him.

Such as letting him go for several days without food or drink.

"We will not feed Minoru until you eat," Luther said, standing up and crossing the room, kneeling before him to grab Kasumi's hair and pull his head back. The blue-gray eyes watching him were cold, nothing like the friendly eyes of the bumbling idiot from before, and Kasumi felt the bitterness rise again as he realized he'd never looked closely at those eyes. He'd been too annoyed by the spectacles. Sloppy! Whoever this bastard was, he had somehow known all too well how to slip past Kasumi's guard. "Still not going to cooperate?"

Kasumi said nothing.

He wished he knew where Minoru was, but upon boarding the new ship they'd been separated - Luther had ordered Kasumi taken to his own quarters, 'not trusting the protector to be put somewhere unsupervised.' Smart, because Kasumi would not

waste time getting out and killing every last one of the bastards.

Luther let go of him to trace his mask, and Kasumi held still only because he had no choice tied up as he was - ankles secured to the floor, chains across his torso, arms stretched out and fastened to the wall. They'd prepared well for this little kidnapping.

What he really wanted to know was why someone wanted him. No one cared about him or his clan. They were shadows - albeit powerful shadows, but shadows all the same. They were not considered citizens, they were not considered anything. Precious few persons even knew how to contact the clans.

That aside, why him specifically? Was he simply the only one in this area? It was true few traveled as far and frequently as Minoru. Threats to one of the most prestigious and controversial scholars in the world was not unheard of. Someone wanting to kidnap his bodyguard?

Kasumi was rapidly getting sick of surprises and mysteries.

Still those fingers traced his mask, and he bit back telling the bastard to stop touching him only with an effort. He would not give in to such a stupid provocation. Still, it chafed. The mask was his, for none but his master and teacher to touch. That this stranger, this deceiver, this pirate touched his mask in such fashion - it was intimate, and unwanted, and Kasumi would kill him for it.

"It's a beautiful peace of work," Luther said at last. "Why will it not come off? What is the trick? Clever to pass it off as magic, but I would know the real reason."

Kasumi remained silent.

"Hmm," Luther murmured. "Stubborn. I like that." He smiled and stood up, striding to the table and turning a chair around, straddling it and folding his arms across the back. "You will have to take it off to eat, and until you tell me you will eat, Minoru will starve right alongside you. I have no doubt you can go for quite some time, but that man is many years older and probably not as tough as you."

Oh, yes. Kasumi was going to kill him. Slowly.

Luther laughed. "Are you trying to decide how to kill me? There are so many ways to let a man die slowly, I'm sure it's hard for you to choose one. It's nothing personal, you know. A job is a job."

Kasumi said nothing.

"Hmm, all this silence." Luther smiled and stood up, pushing the chair back into place. "It makes me want to make you scream."

He kept silent, but only because he bit his tongue. Luther moved close again, touching him again, and Kasumi wished more than anything he could actually break out of his bonds - but his captors knew what they were doing.

"Are you hungry yet?" Luther smirked. "I'm sure Minoru must be. He has not eaten since that dinner we all shared our first night at sea. I hear you ate the morning I took you, so you will last longer than Minoru for certain."

Kasumi could not wait to watch this bastard bleed to death. "Feed him."

"He speaks at last. Not until you remove that mask and eat."

"I cannot remove it without use of my hands," Kasumi said, "and if you free my hands I will kill you."

Luther touched the mask again. "Why can't I remove it?"

"You are neither my master nor my teacher, and so you will never be able to remove it," Kasumi replied. "Magic is magic, whether you believe in it or not."

"Hmm," Luther replied, reaching out to once more tug at the mask. "I would say it is pasted down, but then even you would be hard pressed to remove it."

"Why do you care? It's only a mask."

Luther shrugged. "I prefer to know what my enemies look like, and riddles annoy me."

"You have no problem being the riddle, however."

"Still stung I tricked you?" Luther asked, smirking. "For what it's worth, it wasn't easy coming up with a way to do it. I've never played the bumbling fool before; I practiced for months to get it right."

Months? Kasumi frowned at that.

Luther's smirk widened. "Yes, there's something for you to nibble on. You have pretty eyes, behind that mask. Like melted gold."

Kasumi ignored the taunt. "Why would anyone want me?"

"That is not for me to say," Luther replied. He started to say more, but a sharp knock at the door cut him off.

Standing, he called for the knocker to enter.

"Cap'n."

Luther nodded to the man who'd spoken, motioning him and a much younger man inside. The younger man immediately set to work setting out the things he'd been carrying, arranging them on the table. Nearby, Luther continued to speak quietly with the older man, whom Kasumi knew to be the first mate.

A few minutes later the first mate vanished.

"Ready, Cap'n?" the younger man asked.

"Yes," Luther replied, striding to the table. There, he quickly stripped off the poorly-fitted shirt he still wore, showing off a torso that belonged to no scholar. Under other circumstances, Kasumi might have allowed himself to briefly admire. As it was, he would take the razor held by the younger man and slit Luther's bastard throat.

Sitting down, Luther settled back and allowed the young man to cut his hair, shave him, occasionally offering a comment to the man's easy chatter. When the deed was finally done, the table cleared and the young man departed.

Alone again, Luther strode to the bed and the drawers beneath them, pulling out fresh clothes before stripping completely.

Kasumi looked away.

When Luther strode into his vision again, pouring a drink at the small bar near his desk, he was dressed in clothes that fit him all too well. Nothing remained the bumbling scholar. No, this was a pirate Captain all right. The blond hair had been neatly trimmed, cut close to his head, just long enough in the front to cover most of his forehead. The blue-gray eyes were sharp and bright as Luther turned to regard him with a smirk on his face. The white shirt, black breeches and jacket accentuated the broad shoulders and chest, the narrow hips and strong legs. He'd pulled on boots that just reached his thighs.

He was infuriating.

"Would you like something to drink?" Luther asked.

"Luther is not your name," Kasumi said.

Luther grinned and poured a brandy, then stalked toward him, kneeling down with the drink held lightly in his fingers. "I have so many names, what's one more? If there's another you prefer, by all means use that."

Kasumi said nothing.

"So do you still want to eat? You will have to tell me how to remove the mask."

"No one but I can remove it."

"You said your master could, if I play along with this magic thing. I can call him to take it off."

Kasumi almost wished Luther could see his smirk. "He broke our contract back on the ship, remember? He can no longer take it off."

"Why such secrecy?" Luther asked. "Who cares what you look like if you wear the mask all the time anyway? Why does it matter?"

"That is none of your business," Kasumi said. "Why do you care?"

Luther grinned and touched the mask again. "Like I said, I don't like riddles."

Kasumi would have laughed, but circumstances forbid it. Especially since the bastard was still touching his mask.

The fingers fell away. "Well, if you do not find a way to let me remove it, then you will starve. If you starve, Minoru starves. The decision is yours."

"I told you," Kasumi replied. "I cannot remove it except by taking it off myself. Only my teacher and my master can remove it otherwise. If you want me to eat, you will have to unbind at least one hand, and if you do that I will kill you."

Luther laughed. "My men will get to you before you can kill all of them. That aside, you cannot control this ship just the two of you. You are in the middle of the sea with no idea as to your location otherwise. At this point your best and only option is to cooperate."

Kasumi remained silent.

"Hmm. You may want to reconsider. If you refuse to cooperate, then I lose all reason to offer you the chance, and Minoru is one less mouth to feed."

"The minute I am free, I am going to kill you," Kasumi replied.

Luther laughed. "It's nothing personal, I assure you. I would treat any job the same way. For what it's worth, my captive, I would rather return Minoru alive. He has nothing to do with this, save as a way to make you cooperate. I kill only when I must, and he is not yet on my must list - unless he must die for you to cooperate."

"Kill him and I lose all reason to cooperate."

"That is true," Luther said. "You amuse me."

Kasumi said nothing.

Luther stood up and wandered back to the table, setting his glass down. Then he strode to the door and opened it, calling out. He closed the door and returned to the table. "There. Food is on the way, now we must only determine how to get you to eat without killing me."

They sat in silence until a rap at the door broke it, and a sailor entered at Luther's bidding. The smell of food was infuriating. Damn it.

"Unfasten one of his hands after you set that down," Luther ordered. "Be careful."

"Yes, Cap'n."

Kasumi waited.

"Leave," Luther said. He followed behind the sailor, closing and locking the door behind him. Turning around, he moved to Kasumi. "Going to remove it and eat?"

"Prove to me Minoru is being fed."

Luther smirked. "I'm afraid you will have to take my word for it," he said, "because I am not foolish enough to let you see him. He is eating. I am a businessman first and foremost, and it would be poor business to kill the only thing that gets you to cooperate."

Kasumi said nothing.

"Your former master is being cared for. I've not harmed so much as a hair on his head. Remove the mask, eat, else you will have proof most certain that he is in pain."

Grunting, Kasumi gave up. It hardly mattered if this man saw his face; he would be dead as soon as Kasumi learned what was going on. Reaching up, he removed the mask.

"My, my, you are a pretty one. Do you wear the mask to be less distracting?"

Kasumi ignored him and hooked the mask into place on his left arm, then reached for his food, eating as neatly and quickly as the awkward arrangement allowed. He tensed and dropped the spoon as Luther drew close, but did not bother to resist as his wrist was taking in a tight, callused grip.

He did protest when Luther touched his face, jerking from the touch and twisting his hand free, grabbing Luther's face and shoving him back hard. As Luther stumbled, Kasumi snagged his mask and slid it back into place.

Luther grunted as he righted himself. "I can see why you need to wear the mask, pretty."

Kasumi glared at him, flexing his still-free hand. "The nature of my appearance is not the reason I wear the mask."

"Sure," Luther replied tauntingly. He moved closer again and refastened Kasumi's free arm to the wall. "A face as pretty as that, and a body just as fine beneath all that dark clothing, it is little wonder they try to keep you covered. Are all shadows as pretty as you?"

"I wouldn't know," Kasumi said. "I do not know the faces of my brethren."

Luther tugged gently at the mask, frowning when it stayed firmly in place. He let it go with a grimace. "I think the mask is a futile effort at disguise. Mask or no mask, I would know your eyes anywhere."

Kasumi said nothing.

Laugh, Luther stood up. "I wonder how much trouble you will prove to be when I have to let you go to take a piss."

Lots of trouble, Kasumi vowed silently.

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"It truly is a pity we cannot get along," Luther said with a laugh, fingers going once more to the cuts on his face. Kasumi knew it had been stupid to fight once free, but he was tired of sitting idle.

Adding heavy bruising to his injuries would not help him later, but he thought it had been worth it just to put those marks on that smug bastard's face.

He still wanted to know why a lowly pirate Captain was able to match him in terms of skill. It was a source of no small amount of vexation. How? Damn it.

"Shortly you will not be my problem," Luther said. "If you managed to survive whatever it is my employer intends, however, I sense I will be seeing you again. I suppose an offer to buy you a drink is out of the question."

Kasumi said nothing.

Luther laughed. "It's nothing personal, I keep telling you that. I rather like you, really. All that fire. Usually by this point captives are sobbing and begging, though a few are still attempting to bribe me. You're a refreshing change, and it's obvious you still are concerned for Minoru. It might surprise you how quick people can be to sell out their comrades."

"Whatever happened to the real Luther?"

"I have no idea," Luther replied. "We made certain he was detained and that his messages explaining that never reached you, but once you were secured we stopped caring. I'm certain they have figured out by this point that something is amiss, but they will have a devil of a time putting the pieces together - especially since they will be thinking Minoru was the target." He laughed. "How is that for a well played game?"

Kasumi did not answer, but a knock at the door prevented any reply he might have given anyway.

"Captain," the first mate said. "We're coming up on the Deep Blue."

"Excellent," Luther said. "I'm coming. Make certain the men keep a sharp look out."

"Aye, Captain."

Luther turned to Kasumi as the door closed. "Almost over, my dear captive. At last you will meet the man willing to pay half a million in silver for your head. Are you worth that much? Did I charge too little? Too much?"

"The price for this humiliation will be your blood," Kasumi said.

"I do not doubt it," Luther said with a smile. "It's a pity, but such is life." He departed, leaving Kasumi alone.

Kasumi was worried.

He hated to admit it, but a half million in silver for him? That was disconcerting. Who would pay that much for him, and why? That was the most troubling question - why? Well, he would know soon enough and hopefully the knowledge would not kill him before he could get Minoru free.

Minutes turned into nearly two hours before Luther returned to the cabin, and Kasumi watched in silence as he armed himself. Wearing a cutlass, four daggers, three pistols, and spare shot and powder for the firearms.

"Do not try anything," Luther said as he approached with keys in hand. "Minoru is already on deck, ready to be carried along with us or thrown overboard in his weighted chains."

Kasumi held still, and cooperated as he was held to his feet - only because he fully intended to get free later, and kill this bastard at a later date. He forced himself to hold still as he was bound, arms behind him, legs manacled so he had only just enough room to walk.

Humiliating.

He stumbled trying to gain his feet, and was saved from falling over by an arm around his waist. "Steady there, pretty."

Kasumi said nothing, refusing to rise to the obvious taunt.

Roughly Luther escorted him out of the cabin and off the ship. Kasumi ignored the jeers and comments of the men, eyes only for the man he was extremely relieved to see alive and relatively well.

"Kasumi, thank the gods."

"Master," Kasumi said. "I apologize profusely. My shame knows no limit."

"Nonsense, Kasumi," Minoru said with a gentle smile. "I am rather more concerned as to why they want you."

Luther shoved him forward, motioning his second mate to do the same with Minoru. "Let's go, our employer is waiting and I want this job done." He motioned his first mate to lead the way, and it amused Kasumi that Luther would not trust him to anyone else, but preferred to keep hold of Kasumi himself. Amused and frustrated, because with anyone else he would have managed to break free.

Giving orders to his men to watch the ship, Luther motioned to his first and second mates, then the five of them departed. They traveled in silence through a desolate landscape, some remote scrap of island that was nothing more than sand and barren rock. Not even a bit of scrub dotted the landscape. Onward and upward they traveled, until the going simply got too steep for him to manage. "You will have to undo my feet," he said, unclenching his teeth just enough to speak.

"Do I look like a fool to you?" Luther asked with a laugh. "You'll manage; we're nearly where we need to be." He grinned, and spoke before Kasumi could protest. "Mange or I will be more than happy to carry you. Now go." He shoved hard, and Kasumi fumbled for a grip, making his way up the rocks slowly and painfully, liberally helped along by more shoves and tugs.

Bastard.

At last they crested the steep hill, and Kasumi struggled to regain control of his breathing even as he stared down into the small valley below. Before he could get a good look, he was all but thrown down the slope, winding up on his knees at the base.

He looked up at Luther, but instead of the smirk he'd anticipated, he saw that Luther's attention was solely for the men gathered in the middle of the valley. Finally Luther stooped and hauled him to his feet - but he never quite took his eyes off the group of men.

Kasumi eyed them as he was dragged along.

Nearby, Minoru gasped with the same shock Kasumi felt.

"I should have known," Minoru said quietly. "Jun."

The man to whom he'd spoken smiled. Kasumi's first impression of the man had been that he resembled a hungry rat. Eight

years later, that impression remained. He stepped forward, just clear of the men who had been clustered around him, spreading his arms wide. "Captain Cenel, I see you are as good as your word."

"I will choose to take that as a compliment rather than a slight," Luther replied, pulling one of his flintlocks free as he pulled Kasumi forward. "You owe me 250,000 silver, mate."

Jun looked at him briefly, then returned his attention to Kasumi. "Long time no see, son of the East Clan."

Kasumi said nothing, refusing - this was the man who had paid to have him kidnap? This scum, this filthy rat? He moved Luther down a notch on his kill list, more than happy to put Jun in the first position.

"I cannot believe it," Minoru said, shaking his head in wonder. "Perhaps I should not be surprised. You were ever after the secrets of the clans. Why go to such lengths as these?"

Jun smiled. "Magic, my friend."

"Magic," Kasumi repeated in disgust. "Men like you are the reason the world has abandoned magic and turned to science. You went to this much trouble in the hopes of learning secrets I would rather die than tell you?"

"Lord Minoru, a pleasure to see you again," Jun said, ignoring Kasumi.

"I cannot say the same," Minoru replied coldly. "Surely you realize this was a stupid venture?"

"Stupid? Hardly. Vastly amusing, however. I tried to persuade years ago to cooperate with me, Lord Kasumi."

Kasumi felt Luther's grip on his arm tighten slightly.

"You were not worthy of my protection," Kasumi replied. "My father told you that; and he explained the reasons. Our secrets are to be used but never shared."

Jun laughed, stroking his long beard with thin, bony fingers. He was even more slender than Kasumi recalled, reminding him only more a hungry rat willing to do anything for food. It was a pity this rat wanted only to feed on magic. "I've learned a new trick, Lord Kasumi. Fifteen of your brethren have I killed to learn it. They all died silent, but in extreme pain, and stripped of a few of their secrets."

Kasumi recoiled as Jun drew near, unable to help it, not liking the look in his dark eyes, the confidence with which he spoke of having obtained secrets - that fifteen other shadow warriors were dead. Impossible. Had he traveled so much in the last several years that he'd missed such news?

Perhaps the clans were keeping it quiet.

He repressed a shudder as those awful fingers touched his mask - and choked off a dismayed cry as with a softly spoken word Jun ripped it from his face.

"How did you do that?" Minoru demanded. "None but Kasumi should be capable of that."

"I knew there was a trick to it no one was sharing with me," Luther muttered. "Magic!"

Jun laughed. "My good Captain, it is magic. Your contempt for such things amuses me. Lord Kasumi, I have managed to learn how to deactivate the binding spell placed upon the masks."

"That will not work with all of them," Kasumi said quietly. "Who gave such a secret away?"

"A woman named Aiko, I believe," Jun said idly, caressing and fondling Kasumi's mask. Watching the violation made Kasumi want to scream. That was his and no others and he would cut the man's fingers off and watch him bleed to death. "Yes, after I killed her master and his son, she ceased to care about anything. I believe that whelp might have been hers, which is strictly against contract but then..." He looked up and smiled in a way that made Kasumi feel cold, and hate more than ever the way Jun fondled his mask. "If she was half as pretty as you, Lord Kasumi, I can certainly see why her master wanted so badly to convince her to break contract."

Kasumi sneered. "You are not even worthy of a contract, let alone worthy of breaking one for the sake of something so base as pleasure - not that any part of you is pleasurable."

Jun bristled with anger, but did not lash out as Kasumi had thought - hoped - he would.

Instead he brandished the mask. "I suspect that for all you are a beauty, Lord Kasumi, you would be a cold lay. This mask and its secrets are all I need from you. Answer my questions and you will suffer no harm. Act stubbornly and I will begin with inflicting harm about Lord Minoru. Toes, fingers, we will progress."

"He will tell you nothing," Minoru said calmly.

"We will see," Jun replied, stroking his beard again. "Captain, bring them along to my ship."

Luther shook his head. "I'm still missing my silver," he said coldly. "No one goes a step further until I see my money."

"Your money is on my ship," Jun said in a bored tone.

"Then you can bring it here," Luther replied. "I'm no fool; I know a rat when I see one."

Kasumi startled to hear his thoughts voiced by the last voice he would have expected. It angered him. "You are no better, who sell us into torture for mere silver."

"I tend not to ask too many questions," Luther replied, eyes still trained on Jun. "This can end peacefully or it can end ugly. Give me my money."

Jun grimaced. "To be honest, I think I would rather just kill you." Around him, the men who'd been silent and motionless until then suddenly charged.

Luther's flintlock flashed and one of the seven went down. Kasumi swore as he was shoved to the ground, fumbling to get out of the way of feet and falling bodies, swords and blood and chaos.

Something hit his head hard, and the world threatened to fade out. He hung on with a force of will, and was just managing to get himself up to his knees when he was roughly grabbed and thrown over a shoulder.

The jarring movement nearly finished the job of knocking him out, but Kasumi simply refused. He struggled as best he could in the grip of his captor, bucking and twisting for all he was worth, wishing he could just get his arms or legs free.

He heard the bang of a flintlock and abruptly he was back on the ground, sprawled across rock and a too-still body. The tell-tale sticky warmth beneath him said the dead or dying man's blood was soaking into his clothes.

Before he could find his balance, he was roughly hauled to his feet again.

Luther looked rather the worse for wear - and furious. Kasumi could sympathize, or would if Luther wasn't the reason for his own anger. "What is going on here?"

"That bastard Jun is a backstabbing, greedy rat, that's what," Luther snapped. "I managed to get you back, but I'm afraid the fucker's got Minoru. We need to get back to my ship."

Kasumi laughed. "He just tried to kill you and you still think your ship is all right? Your crew is probably dead. I cannot believe Jun was behind all this."

"Are you going to kill me if I free you?"

Kasumi started to say yes, then hesitated. Two minutes ago he would have said. He didn't like talking to this bastard. Minoru, however, came first. He'd just said Minoru was gone, which meant the situation had changed. He couldn't kill the bastard. Yet. The realization only increased his rage, but there was no choice. "I want to know what is going on here."

"I was paid to capture you and bring you here. My payment was half a million silver - a reasonable fee, I learned, for capturing one of you notorious shadows. What he wanted with you, I do not know. He said it would preferable if I kept Minoru alive as well, but if I had to kill him then it was of no real consequence. He's attempted to renege, and though I tried to stop him there were just too many and they've used tricks I've never seen - and if you tell me magic, I will leave you bound."

"It was magic," Kasumi said defiantly. "Though I could not tell you what kind. So he has taken Minoru and fled. Typical."

"How do you know him? Why does he call you 'Lord' Kasumi?"

Kasumi grimaced. "He attempted once to purchase a bodyguard. While it little matters to us if we are occasionally contracted to a foreigner, all applicants must meet certain requirements. He did not require our services, not really, and we did not trust him. He calls me Lord Kasumi mostly as mockery."

"Mostly?"

"Where are they going?" Kasumi asked. "Free me."

"Are you going to try to kill me?"

Kasumi glared at him. "As much pleasure as I would take in killing you, I am painfully aware that for now cooperation is our best bet. It does not please me, but retrieving my master must come first and you are at the moment my best hope. However, you have no reason to cooperate with me."

Luther grunted and began to undo the rope and chains binding him. "You know him, you can help find him. I don't know where they're going. The deal ended with me dropping you off here and collecting my money."

Limbs free, Kasumi turned and brought his leg up. The high kick connected neatly with Luther's chest, sending him reeling back to land hard on the wet rocks. "Bastard."

Grunting, Luther picked himself up.

Kasumi punched him, not quite hard enough to do serious injury to his jaw. When Luther regained his balance, he swung again - but this time his wrist was caught in a hard grip, and Luther pulled him close, pinning him against that broad chest. "Knock it off. We don't have time for this. You're pissed, fine. I told you it was nothing personal, but if you want to beat the shit out of me I'll let you try later. For now, we have more important things to do."

Grabbing him, Kasumi yanked him close. "When this is over, I am going to kill you."

"You're welcome to try, pretty," Luther said.

Kasumi punched him.

Luther laughed as he picked himself up. "Feisty. Stubborn. Beautiful. It's a shame you hate me. Ah, well. Come on, let's get back to my ship." He didn't wait for a reply, but turned and started running back to where they'd anchored the ship.

Cresting the hill, Kasumi yanked him to a stop. "Wait. Look."

Luther frowned. "It's too still. I cannot see my men."

"They're dead," Kasumi said flatly.

"Nonsense," Luther said. "We would have heard screams or something."

Kasumi said nothing. "It would be better not to go down there."

"If he did kill them, we have to at least check for survivors," Luther snapped. "I refuse to-"

He was cut off by a booming explosion, and screamed in denial as he watched his ship burn.

"That bastard," he said at last, the word softy, barely audible.

Kasumi looked at him, then at the burning, sinking ship. "I'm sure it was nothing personal," he said.

"Wrong," Luther snapped. "He just murdered my men when we did all that the bargain said we should do. This - this just became very personal indeed." He grabbed Kasumi's wrist and dragged him along.

Until Kasumi twisted free and gave him a hard kick, watching implacably as Luther tumbled down the hill. He followed after more slowly.

Luther picked himself up. "Stop trying to kill me until we are done cooperating - unless you have changed your mind about cooperating."

"No," Kasumi said. "Tell me, though, why I should bother being nice to a man who saw no qualms about sending me off to be tortured slowly to death, but takes it amiss that his own men would be murdered."

"I didn't know he was going to torture you," Luther said quietly, "for what it's worth. I thought he just wanted the mask and whatever stupid trick you use to keep it on. I didn't like that. I couldn't pull back without endangering my men, however - and a bargain is a bargain. Tell me honestly that if torturing me or my men was what it took to get your master back that you

would not do it."

Kasumi fell bitterly silent.

"Then I think that is enough judging for one day," Luther said quietly. "Come on, this way."

"Where are we going?"

"Always be prepared, I say," Luther replied, smirking. "There's a little cove about two miles from here. It will have all we need to get us back to the mainland, and from there we will track down that backstabbing bastard who should have made certain we were dead."

Kasumi nodded in agreement, and followed him across the barren, rocky landscape.

Part II

Kasumi dropped his shirt as the door opened, reaching for his knife instead.

He relaxed upon seeing it was only Luther, and set the knife down again. Retrieving his shirt, he tugged it over his head and quickly laced it up, shrugging into the snug, sleeveless black jacket that went over it. Once that was laced, the high collar adjusted so it lay properly, he sat down to pull on and lace up his boots. Standing once more, he laced the ends of his sleeves so that no loose fabric fell anywhere. Clothing tended to, he quickly put his holsters and weapons in place.

"Ready to go?" Luther asked.

Kasumi ignored the way his eyes lingered. He resisted the urge to touch his face, hating that even after seven weeks he still felt naked without his mask. He did not like this being looked at, this being seen. People stared at the shadow he had been, but no one had ever stared at him and he didn't like it.

It left him far too exposed, and his was a face people remembered.

"Ready," he said curtly, slinging his satchel over his head and across his chest, giving the inn room one last glance before nodding and following Luther from it. Out on the street they walked side by side, moving swiftly, and Kasumi only distantly noted that people moved out of their way.

The town in which they'd been staying was far from the most reputable of places. If there was any manner of government official to see the law was enforced, Kasumi had not seen him.

Which, in the end, worked out rather nicely.

It had taken them the better part of two weeks just to make port, and a week after that was spent recovering and gaining coin, purchasing lost equipment.

After that they had gone to work in earnest, Kasumi to search for information, Luther to obtain a new ship. Four weeks it had taken them to reach this point. "Is this crew going to slit my throat while I sleep?" Kasumi asked.

"Hardly," Luther asked. "I'm more worried about someone saying you look pretty and winding up with his throat slit."

Kasumi glared at him, but refused to otherwise rise to the bait.

"Don't worry," Luther said, clapping his shoulder and only the reminder he could man a ship kept Kasumi from killing the impertinent bastard. "I've told them not to comment on your looks where you can hear."

Rolling his eyes, Kasumi quickened his pace, irritated when Luther easily matched it. By the time they reached the harbor, Kasumi was ready to shove him off the pier and into the sludge below.

He was getting rather used to constantly feeling that way about his former kidnapper.

Luther paused on the dock to bellow at the men loading the ship, and Kasumi left him there to stride up the gangway and onto the ship.

When everything was over, he was never stepping foot on another ship. If Minoru tried to argue with him, he would employ extreme methods to save the idiot from himself. In fact, no more traveling period - and he still was not looking forward to

making this report to his clan. This had to be the most shameful behavior exhibited by one of their own in an extremely long time.

He ignored the sailor giving him looks and whispering, striding to the Captain's quarters and depositing his bag on the bed. Refusing to dwell on worries, he absently checked all his weapons, then strode to the desk against the end of the cabin. Over it was a shelf made up of small square holes, most of which each held a map, neatly rolled and stored.

Reaching up, he touched each one lightly, wishing he understood the odd marks that described each map. They weren't any language he knew, and his knowledge was not insignificant.

"You have your own cabin," Luther said as he entered, laughter in his voice. "Let me guess; you don't trust me."

Kasumi didn't bother to answer.

"I wish you would believe me when I said it was nothing personal. You are not a job any more. I wish we could be comrades."

"You were not the one chained to a wall and told if you did not eat that your master would die."

"Business is business. My first mate..." Luther's mouth tightened. "Actually started out as someone hired to kill me. Nothing personal is the nature of our business." He strode across and lightly touched the maps Kasumi had been examining. "Jun should not have made it personal." He turned away and set down his own bag, bending to stow the contents in various drawers and cabinets.

Kasumi fetched his own bag and quickly sorted through the contents.

"So are you going to share the bed?" Luther asked, moving well out of range as he asked the question.

"When do we leave?" Kasumi asked.

Luther laughed. "Soon. I'm about to go see to it now. Don't cause too much trouble while I'm gone."

Kasumi rolled his eyes and followed him outside, staying close to the Captain's quarters so that he was not in the way - but so he could see everything. He ignored the looks and whispers, wishing painfully for his mask.

He couldn't help the way he looked, and he really wished people would stop looking at him. Going back inside was tempting, but he refused to just sit around inside while Luther put them to sea.

So he watched, and endured the looks cast his way.

Until a certain smirking aggravation leaned over the railing of the poop deck to peer down at him. "Beautiful, you're distracting the men. Come on up here so they'll be too afraid of me to look at you."

Kasumi clenched his hands into fists. Bastard. Swearing soft curses, he braced himself and then jumped, catching the railing, pulling himself up, and leaping neatly over the edge. Then he punched Luther. "If my looks are so problematic, Captain, then I suggest you stop provoking me and take me to my mask."

"Oh, now, I don't think I want you putting it back on," Luther replied, testing his jaw. "I think that's the finest right I've ever encountered. For the sake of my jaw, I'll avoid pondering aloud what else that hand is good at."

"You-"

"Captain," the first mate said hastily, looking between them. "Any further orders?"

"No, Mr. Raff. Take the helm. I and Lord Kasumi will be in my quarters if you've anything further."

"Yes, Captain."

Luther nodded and stepped away, tossing a smirk at Kasumi. "Shall we, my Lord?"

Kasumi followed him in silence. "I am going to kill you," he snapped when they were back inside.

"I can't help it," Luther replied. "For a shadow you give away a remarkable amount of what you're thinking. Must be a side effect of wearing the mask - you never had to learn to control your expressions." He strode suddenly close, catching Kasumi's chin, holding it tight. Kasumi remained stubbornly still, glaring.

Luther regarded him thoughtfully. "Even your eyes. Melted gold, and every thought plain as day. Perhaps it's a good thing you lost that mask."

Kasumi punched him, then kicked him hard in the stomach, moving fast to pin him to the ground. "You have no idea what you're talking about, pirate. None."

"I know you're more upset about that mask than your master."

"I will rescue Minoru," Kasumi hissed, furious. "I am sworn to protect him and so I shall."

"Would you choose him over that stupid mask?"

Pain lanced through Kasumi. "Yes," he managed.

"It would tear you apart though," Luther said, sounding thoughtful, amazed. "Why does it matter so much?" If he was upset about being pinned to the deck, he made no show of it - did not even attempt to struggle.

Kasumi tightened his grip. "You have worn a thousand masks, and will likely wear a thousand more before you die. They mean nothing to you. That mask was me and you are the reason it is lost. Do not presume to tell me I am better off without it just because you value nothing."

By this point he should be used to Luther's tricks, but it still surprised him - he was not used to having an equal in skill and power. No one had ever bested him, least of all with the ease with which this infuriating bastard did so. He hit the floor with a grunt and rolled away, lashing out as he stood, driving Luther back.

Then suddenly he hit the deck hard, stars bursting in his vision from the pain of his head against wood. Still he managed to twist away, leg lashing out to catch Luther square in the chest, and he heard the satisfying knock of someone else's head against wood.

Regaining his feet, he braced for attack but recovered a second too late. He crashed against the door with a pained grunt, legs spread and trapped by Luther's, wrists securely pinned. He glared.

"Feisty, feisty," Luther murmured. "I know plenty about identity, and there is plenty I value. Do not presume to know me, pretty shadow."

Kasumi snarled and struggled in his grasp, rage only growing with the knowledge that this man constantly seemed to one-up him. Bastard. "Stop. Calling. Me. Pretty."

"Only stating fact," Luther replied. "You should calm down."

"I'll calm down after I've beaten you half to death," Kasumi snapped.

Luther laughed. "You and at least half the royal navies of the world. Are all shadows as pretty as you?"

Kasumi grimaced. "No. Let me go."

"If I let you go, you'll just start trying to beat me up again. Which is rather amusing, really. You're the first one to get one punch in, never mind the half dozen or so you've managed. I cannot remember the last time anyone matched me in a fight. I'm not your enemy."

"No," Kasumi agreed. "You just aggravate me."

"Fair enough," Luther said, leaning in close enough their breaths mingled, and Kasumi could smell his sweat, a hint of the sea and something vaguely like cinnamon. "If you are going to drive me insane, I think it's only fair I drive you insane - but I think we would both be happier if the aggravation you feel was more like the lust I feel."

Kasumi tensed to hear such words so baldly stated.

Then he was abruptly released, and barely caught himself from tumbling to the floor.

"As to possessions," Luther said quietly from the far side of the room. "It might surprise you how seriously I regard those things which belong to me. It was, as I said, nothing personal. However, we are comrades now - even if you do still want to kill me - and I promise I will help you get your mask back. Though I still think it a pity to cover up something so beautiful."

Kasumi rolled his eyes. "A fine bodyguard I would be if I was memorable," he said.

"I think the mask was a memory all its own."

"You think so?" Kasumi asked. "Tell me what it looked like."

Luther opened his mouth - then closed it with a snap. He frowned, irritated. "Part of it was black. Part of it was colorful. I think."

Kasumi smirked.

"Shut up," Luther said irritably. "If I hear 'magic' one more time, I'm going to act like you and start throwing punches."

Smothering an urge to laugh, Kasumi strode across the cabin to watch as Luther pulled out a map and spread it on the wide desk.

"This is the course plotted by the second mate," Luther said. "In three weeks we will be in Port Hollow. From there we will travel by foot up into the mountains. Hopefully all we've learned these past several days is accurate. If not, then it's back to the beginning."

Kasumi's mouth tightened. "He'll be there. I remember his mentioning the place before, though only once and it was in passing. This part of the world is relatively remote, is it not?"

"Yeah," Luther replied. "The rule of thumb is mind your own business and you live longer. What I don't understand is why no one notices this guy missing. My impression of 'Lord Jun' is that he's relatively important."

"Hardly," Kasumi said contemptuously. "In his world, powerful men may do as they please - so long as they are discreet. That was why he wanted to hire us; he was getting involved in dangerous things and wanted protection. While we certainly are not opposed to protecting criminals, since ours is not to question or care what our master does, all applicants must meet certain protocols. The first mistake he made was contacting us without someone to recommend him."

"I'd imagine it only went downhill from there," Luther said.

Kasumi nodded. "Yes. While we occasionally permit such exceptions...he began to make demands, and try to tell us who should protect him. We did not like that he knew so much, and further investigations led us to see he was an unsavory character indeed. At the very same time we were considering Master Minoru's request for a protector. In the end, we rejected Jun and told him never to trouble us again. I was contracted to Master Minoru, and have been with him ever since."

"Let me guess - you were the one Jun wanted protecting him. Why?"

"I was," Kasumi said.

"Yes, but why?" Luther pressed. "You're avoiding the question."

"I am one of the highest ranking bodyguards in the clan. Only two are above me, and even they concede it is more a matter of experience. Until I erred and was kidnapped by you, I probably was the best. This, obviously, has demoted me."

Unbearable. It was bad enough he was not good enough to take the role which should have been his birthright...to fail now at the only thing he was good at...

Luther rolled the map back up and stowed it. "You are not saying much of anything, are you?"

"You know more about me than I know about you," Kasumi snapped. "Do not think I'm so stupid I don't notice you extract information without giving it."

"That's because I'm boring," Luther replied lightly. "There are dozens of me scattered about every coastline. Orphan shunted about from home to home, workplace to workplace. I was working a ship when it was taken by pirates. As there was no one who would pay a ransom for me, the Captain had intended to kill me. I persuaded him to give me a chance. I have been a pirate ever since."

Kasumi said nothing.

"Told you it was boring," Luther replied. "Not even a scandal, me. I always wanted to be the runaway son of a Duke. That makes for a much more interesting pirate's tale. Maybe a lost love for whom I still pine. A bit of tragedy would make for a much grander story, don't you think?"

"I think you're an idiot," Kasumi replied. Honestly. The more time he spent with this man, the more he wondered how much

of that bumbling scholar he'd portrayed had been mere artifice.

Luther laughed.

A knock at the door prevented Kasumi's next scathing remark, and he strode irritably across the cabin to open it. The cabin boy entered bearing a heavily-laden tray, setting it down on the table before sketching a bow and vanishing - sneaking a lingering glance at Kasumi.

"I suspect," Luther said with another chuckle, "that if you ask that boy for something, he will give it gladly. Though honestly, I think you have the entire ship under some sort of spell."

Kasumi balled his hands into fists. "I cannot help my looks," he snarled. "I wish you would stop mocking me."

Luther quirked a brow and moved toward him, neatly catching the hands that came up to warn him off. "Mocking? Hardly. Do you not understand just how breathtaking you are? If I believed in magic, I would believe your looks to be the result of witchcraft indeed."

"They are," Kasumi snapped. "A little piece of family history I was unfortunately inflicted with, and I will thank you to stop rubbing it in my face."

Damn it, he just wanted his mask. Angrily turning away, he sat down at the table and helped himself to the food and ale set out, eating neatly and rapidly. Nearby Luther ate at a more leisurely pace, and Kasumi knew eating quickly was unnecessary, but the habits of a lifetime made it impossible to slow down.

Finished, he shoved away from the table and prowled the cabin, ending up at the maps again. "What are these symbols?"

"Sea runes, they're called," Luther said, standing up and joining him. "The language was common years and years ago. Wars change things, including language, but here on the sea some of the old language lingers." He pointed to the first mark of each slot. "These represent the nine oceans. From there, the second and third marks denote which section of a particular ocean." He pointed to other maps. "These are strictly land maps, of little use for sailing." He indicated another set. "These are world maps."

Kasumi nodded, memorizing the marks as best he could. He would study them further later, now that he knew roughly what he was looking at.

He returned to prowling restlessly about the cabin. Normally he had no problem holding still - it was a vital skill. However, at present he had no one to protect. No suspicious persons to watch, nothing to do whatsoever.

"You cannot be more than twenty-five," Luther said suddenly.

Kasumi froze, and shot him an icy look. "Twenty six."

"Barely, I'd imagine," Luther said, grinning.

The bastard was trying to make him angry. Damn it. He'd never met someone so damned infuriating in his life. Three weeks stuck on a ship with this man. At least in town he'd had ways to escape his presence for a time. His own bed.

Right now he would only sleep in peace if he took the cabin which had been allotted to him - which he wouldn't do, because he refused to go where he could be locked up and easily betrayed.

Part of him whispered that such caution was unnecessary, but Kasumi ruthlessly squashed it. Of course he could not trust this man, and he would not anymore than he strictly had to - nothing personal the man might say, but he didn't doubt the bastard would not waste a chance to turn a profit.

He wondered if it had occurred to Luther that Kasumi would be worth a pretty ransom. His family would much rather pay for his return than lose him, even if he wasn't all that he could and should have been.

Luther appeared in front of him, and Kasumi abruptly found something shoved at him. A book, he realized. He frowned at Luther.

"Sit down and relax, you're going to drive yourself crazy pacing about like that." He grinned and backed up a step. "I'd say take a walk about the ship but I'd prefer my men get their work done."

Kasumi glared.

"I would also recommend certain other activities, but I get the feeling I'd be in a lot of pain."

Kasumi threw the book at him and stalked from the cabin, ignoring the sailors and moving to the railing, standing where he was out of the way and would be left in peace. He watched the ocean, the sky, and let his thoughts wander. To home. To Minoru. To his mask.

He remained there until it grew dark and exhaustion urged him to sleep. Reluctantly he returned to the Captain's quarters. Luther was quietly conversing with his first mate, concluding a couple of minutes later.

Pointedly ignoring him, Kasumi readied himself for bed, laying out his bedroll on the floor close to the door but not where anyone would immediately see him.

"Sleeping on the floor really isn't the best idea. You can use your cabin, you know," Luther said. "I'm not going to lock you in or anything."

Kasumi did not reply, merely finished his preparations and then bedded down.

Luther sighed softly, and Kasumi listened to him moving about the cabin. Several minutes later the lamp was snuffed, and he listened to Luther settled into bed. He heard a soft 'good night' but did not respond to it, waiting until he knew Luther was asleep before finally allowing himself to relax.

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The shift in the air woke him.

Kasumi didn't move, simply listened to the near-soundless footsteps as someone entered the cabin unbidden and closed the door behind him.

The footsteps hesitated just inside, the intruder obviously taking stock.

He doubted whoever it was could see him; too dark, and Kasumi was not so oblivious he had missed the rumors aboard ship that he was the Captain's lover. Likely the intruder assumed he was in bed with Luther.

As if.

The near-soundless steps resumed, and Kasumi waited. Waited.

The moment the steps were past him, beyond the intruder being able to see him, he reached for one of his knives and threw.

A cry of pain and the scuff as the intruder attempted to turn and flee.

Kasumi stood and lunged, tackling him to the ground even as he heard Luther move, the smell of sulfur as a match was struck. A second later the warm light of a lantern filled the cabin.

"Well, well," Luther said. "You work in the galley. I do not believe you've come to give me a nightcap." He knelt and reached around to grasp the dagger lodged in the back of the man's right shoulder - and pushed, making the man gasp and pale with pain. "Who are you?"

"Cook's assistant," the man gasped.

Luther twisted the knife a bit. "Wrong answer, I think. Stand him up." Moving away, he lit more lamps and went to fetch medical supplies.

Kasumi obeyed, standing and hauling the man with him. Holding his wrists tightly in one hand, he used his other to pull a strip of fabric from one of the pockets on his jacket. Stronger than any rope, near impossible to tear, difficult to cut. Swiftly he bound the man's wrists, then moved him to a chair.

Joining them at the table, Luther deposited the supplies he'd gathered. He didn't move to help the man, however. "Who are you?"

The man said nothing.

"We could simply kill you and throw you overboard," Luther said, and his eyes had taken on the hardness Kasumi remembered from the earliest days of his own kidnapping.

Strange. Until now, he hadn't realized just how...not cold those eyes had been of late. Right now they were the color of a winter sky, just as frosty and unappealing. It made him realize now that earlier in the evening, and ever since they'd started cooperating weeks ago, they hadn't been that way at all.

He jerked his thoughts back to where they should be.

"You cannot be working for Jun," Luther said thoughtfully. "He knows we'll be after him; a spy would be pointless. So you must be working for someone else. The question is who?"

The man frowned.

Kasumi yanked the dagger out of the man's shoulder, cleaning it before cutting away the fabric of his shirt, laying the wound bare.

Luther moved in to clean and dress it. The gesture might have seemed strange, except Kasumi remembered that Luther had done the same for him. He was still a bastard.

"Now," Luther said, grabbing a chair and turning it so he could straddle it, resting his arms across the back. "I know of precious few who would be willing to do something this foolhardy. At present I'm at odds with no one willing to be this reckless - except, of course, the crown."

The man did not move, his face did not change, but Kasumi had only ever had trouble accurately reading one person in his life. "Would a royal soldier be this reckless?"

"Oh, definitely," Luther said with a smirk. "Especially these young ones. They haven't learned they can be killed yet. So I guess I didn't go entirely unrecognized while in port, which means you've seen me before."

"You raided the Swallowtail," the man replied. "I was a gunner. When they learned I'd seen you, I was put on the task of looking for you."

Luther nodded. "So see me, follow me, report to your superiors once we reach Port Hollow. Nice and tidy, except you got stupid about trying to sneak in here. Why?"

"Just trying to learn what I could."

Grunting, Luther stood. "Idiot. Don't they teach patience before they put children in the fields?"

"I am not-"

Kasumi cuffed him.

Luther strode to the door and called out; a minute later two sailors appeared.

"We've got us a Fop, mates. Take him to the brig. Feed him right, see he's not harassed, but don't go getting friendly either."

"Yes, Captain."

They all vanished.

Luther moved to the bar and poured a brandy. He looked at Kasumi, who shook his head.

"So," Luther said, moving back to straddle his chair again. "I owe you thanks for saving my life." His blue-gray eyes had lost their hardness.

Now that he was really noticing, Kasumi found the rapid shift rather...unsettling. He rolled his eyes at the words. "You woke up when I did."

"Still, you got to him first."

"He never said he had any intention of killing you," Kasumi said. "Stop being an idiot."

Luther laughed and took a sip of his brandy, eyes bright with mirth over the wide rim of the snifter. Slowly he lowered it. "You're so amusing when I'm being an idiot, however. Even back when you thought that's what I really was-"

"Oh, I still think that," Kasumi said, but wasn't able to muster his usual sting to put behind the words. "I think you more an

idiot now than before."

"Back when you thought I was an idiot scholar then," Luther continued, grin widening. "Even then, I thought it fun to rile you. Your mask does not hide your eyes, and even then I could tell you were ready to throttle some sense into me."

Kasumi glared.

Luther finished his brandy and set the glass on the table. "If you keep looking at me like that, I'm going to give in to temptation and kiss you. Fair warning." He stood up and started dousing the lanterns, then made his way back to bed in the dark.

Slowly Kasumi returned to his own, wholly disconcerted by such a bald statement. Precious few persons had ever seen his face. Even his parents had rarely seen his face since he'd fully taken up the role of a protector. Faces, appearances, did not matter. They were irrelevant. It was the skill that mattered, the ability. That he was beautiful was irrelevant.

To hear and see so much around him now that he was laid bare was frustrating. Luther's bald statements were unsettling.

He wanted his mask back.

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It was a moonless night.

Kasumi tended to think of those as lucky.

Hopefully that would balance out the idiocy that was Luther. Grimacing, he finished getting dressed, double-checking all the lacing, every last harness and weapon.

All that he lacked was his mask, and hopefully tonight would solve that little problem.

Standing, he pulled on his gloves and laced them up his forearms, testing his mobility before nodding and leaving the room, the inn, vanishing down the street.

The house he sought was a mile out of town; he covered the distance at a brisk pace. For the first time in a long time he was feeling useful again, even if the night wasn't exactly what he wanted - at least he would get Minoru and his mask back.

He came around the last bend in the road, house coming into plain view. An old manor, secluded, massive and well-built. It would concern him that this was so easy - but Jun was arrogant and thorough. Clever and smart, the sort to make certain he wouldn't be missed by anyone.

Gods above, let Minoru still be alive.

Keeping to the shadows, sending silent prayers once more to the moonless night above, Kasumi moved toward the house. Reaching it, he eschewed the front to circle around to the back. The garden wall was high, but the stones were old and rough. He would not even need his climbing tools for this. Flexing his hands once more, testing the suppleness and stretch of the gloves carefully stitched to perfectly fit his hands, he began to scale.

It was done in a moment, and he leapt neatly into the garden below, staying low as he made his way swiftly to the house. Kneeling, he reached into his boot and pulled out a lock pick. He struggled for a moment, mouthing a silent curse at the stupid lock - then it clicked. Tucking the lock pick away, he cautiously gave the door a push. When it started to squeak, he stopped.

Barely enough space to pass, but he made it work. Slipping inside, he closed the door behind him and continued on through the vast kitchen. Just beyond it, tucked into a little nook beneath what was obviously the spiraling staircase, was a door. Only his night vision let him see it, and he wished briefly for his mask, which would have afforded him better vision still.

The door knob twisted easily beneath his hand - but before he could move forward, the faintest scuff of feet on tile drew his attention.

Sulfur flared, and Kasumi closed his eyes before the sudden wash of light could ruin his vision. He caught the fist that came at him on sound alone, twisting his opponent's arm and throwing him into the wall. The wet sound of his nose crunching filled the room for a moment, but Kasumi paid it no mind.

He dropped the unconscious man, dodging another attack, bracing himself on his hands and kicking his legs out - his new opponent went down with a startled cry. Kasumi shifted his weight back to his legs and moved forward, grabbing the fallen

man up and slamming him back down, then punching him hard in the jaw.

The man went still.

Still the candle burned.

Kasumi held perfectly still. Waiting.

He spun at the last, pulling a dagger and throwing. His attacker went down with a wet, choking sound, and Kasumi heard the clatter of a dropped blade. He waited, but no further sounds came. The candle had also gone out.

Slowly opening his eyes, he strode to the dead man and turned him over, pulling his own dagger free, cleaning it on the dead man's jacket before returning it to its sheath.

That done, he strode back to the door and opened it. Examining his way for a moment, for the light would fade entirely once he was down there, he finally traveled down the stairs before him.

Light flared painful and bright as he reached the foot of the stairs, enough that he nearly did not see the four men that came at him.

Nearly.

Reaching for the pouch at the small of his back, he threw a handful of the contents at the nearest of his assailants. The man screamed and fell back, clawing at his eyes. Kasumi drew his long knife and countered the sword of the next, grabbing and sending him tumbling into the third, spinning away from the blade of the fourth, dropping low and then coming up beneath his defense to shove the knife through his throat.

Letting go, he pulled another dagger and finished off the second, who had recovered and was launching a second attack. The third was next, and when he turned he saw the first man had succeeded in knocking himself out in his mindless flailing.

The sound of laughter washed over him, and Kasumi drew two fresh daggers as he spun to face the source.

"Ah, Kasumi. Beautiful and deadly, in all ways the very definition of your family. You lack only the blue eyes. Did it ever frustrate you, my dark beauty, to be so close and yet so far? Gold eyes instead of blue; that one tiny little thing..."

Kasumi rolled his eyes and took a defensive stance. "Jun, I doubt you would understand."

"Understand what?"

It was Minoru who laughed and answered the question. He was thin and pale, a long cut on his right cheek, his robes filthy and ragged from weeks of being stuck in the same thing...but alive, and rather more well than Kasumi had expected to find him. "Jun, he does not want to be clan leader. He never did. Kasumi is much like me - a wanderer. Power holds no interest; only knowledge and self improvement."

Jun scoffed. "Which is why you fools are under my power." He snapped his fingers.

Six men this time. Kasumi felled the first, second, third, and fourth. He dodged the blows of the fifth and sixth - then let their blows connect.

He went down hard, stars bursting behind his eyes from the pain he had not completely been able to block.

Swearing colorfully, he let them drag him to a portion of the wall with one obvious purpose, and let them bind him to it.

"A man who should have been the next Lord of the clan, the most capable shadow warrior in your clan...felled by two common thugs and a pirate before that. I wonder if perhaps I am wasting my time studying your magic. Obviously it does not work for any of you."

Kasumi remained silent, carefully testing his bonds. Common rope, and they had stupidly bound his hands together over his head. Stupid. That would not hold him for long, mask or no mask. Excellent. This was turning out easier than he'd anticipated.

Across the room, Minoru looked at him, amusement flickering briefly in his eyes. "Kasumi, I am happy to see you alive."

"Master, I believe those words are mine. Are you well?"

"Well enough. To be honest, this being kidnapped will be much easier than explaining everything once it is over."

Kasumi grimaced, agreeing wholeheartedly.

Jun prowled close, and Kasumi forced himself not to recoil when cold fingers stroked his cheek, his jaw. "Beautiful, Lord Kasumi. Truly. If your eyes were blue, you would be perfect. I suppose close to perfection is all most can ask for...still, it is a pity."

"Do you really think you can get away with all this?" Minoru asked tiredly. "You have accomplished what amounts to nothing in all these weeks of study. Even Kasumi's mask, so far above the rest you have collected, gives you nothing. The clans have lasted this long without their secrets truly being discovered. Why do you think you will succeed where hundreds of others have failed?"

"Shut up," Jun said. "Your noise has not moved me before, it will not move me now. Kasumi, where is the good Captain?"

"Good Captain?" Kasumi asked contemptuously. "Do you mean that aggravating pirate? Dead. He's as sloppy as you. After your men dropped me, he set me free with the idea we could track you down together."

Jun just looked at him.

"We made our way back to his ship, only for it to blow up in our faces."

Jun laughed.

"After that he showed me his backup - a pirate, it seems, is always prepared. After we were well on our way, I slit his throat and dumped him over. You have been aggravating to find."

"I am impressed you've found me. I would be concerned other bothersome persons might locate me as well, but once I have your secrets I will be moving on."

Kasumi sneered. "What secrets are those? I will give you nothing."

Jun laughed and stroked his cheek again. "My dear, you are in no position to say no. I am beginning to doubt your skill - first kidnapped by a pirate, then taken down by mere thugs? Though you did take out several before the last two finally took you. Did you leave the ones upstairs alive?"

"All but one," Kasumi said. "Is this where you start trying to torture me?"

"No," Jun said. "This is where I ask you nicely. If you fail to cooperate, I torture Minoru."

Kasumi said nothing.

Jun smirked, then moved to a small chest in the corner. From inside it he began to pull out several silk-wrapped bundles. One by one he unwrapped them, and Kasumi trembled with increasing rage as each one was revealed.

Sixteen masks in all, amongst them his. Five total from his clan, all half black, half colorful, but each with a different pattern of colors. Another three from the West clan, deep gold on one half with brilliant flame tones on the other. Four more from the South clan; one half deepest blue, the other half painted to resemble ice and snow. The last four were a rich, dark brown on one side, the other patterned with leaves, flowers, ivy, all manner of greenery. "Bastard," he hissed. "Those do not belong to you."

"I took them, they are mine," Jun said, no small amount of smugness in it. "Once I unlock their secrets...ah, the fun I will have. No more will I be ignored or packed off to some dismal countryside."

Kasumi was going to kill him, slowly and painfully. Then he would rip the bastard's heart from his chest and see how he liked it. He barely repressed a shudder as his own mask was picked up and stroked. This bastard had no right to touch it so.

He held still as Jun walked toward him with the mask held tight.

"You will die," he snarled.

"No, I do not think so," Jun said. "It is not my problem that despite your lineage you are obviously an idiot. I am amazed Lord Minoru is still alive. Now, tell me what spells are laid into your mask. Some I can guess; spells to improve the senses, strength, things like that." He carefully touched several marks - or what he believed were marks. Kasumi would have laughed in his face if doing so would not have given away that Jun was sorely mistaken. "Which of these is the spell for

keeping all but a precious few from removing the mask?"

Kasumi did laugh at him then. "You can cancel the spell, but do not recognize it?"

Jun motioned to a man standing nearby, who stepped forward and backhanded Kasumi.

He licked blood from his lip. "You'll ruin my pretty face if you keep that up."

"Yes, that would be a pity," Jun agreed. He wiped a stray drop of blood away with his thumb. "It's a shame you are too dangerous to keep alive, I can think of much better uses for you than protector."

Kasumi sneered, but said nothing.

"I will ask you one more time," Jun said. "Tell me what I want to know."

"No."

Jun motioned, and the man moved to Minoru, roughly grabbing his hair and pressing a knife to his throat.

Kasumi bit back an angry protest, glaring furiously at Jun. "You will pay."

"So you keep saying," Jun said. "I wish you would see reason."

"All I see are many reasons to kill you the very moment I am free of these bonds." Which, hopefully, would be soon. Unless he'd made a horrible mistake...for some reason even thinking that twisted his gut. He turned away from the thought and focused on Jun.

Who stroked his face with far too much familiarity. "Pretty Kasumi, why do you fight me? I could use one of your skill and ability."

"You just said I'm obviously lacking in skill," Kasumi retorted.

"One as pretty as you would have many skills, I'd imagine," Jun said. "Besides, even a sub par shadow warrior is ten times better than any grunt I could hire. Share your secrets, give me your skills...declare me your master and I will let Lord Minoru go. I never wanted to kill you, Lord Kasumi. Surely you know this."

Kasumi said nothing.

Minoru laughed.

Jun whirled around to look at him. "What do you find so amusing?"

"That you honestly think Kasumi would say yes. He'd never accept such an offer from one such as you. The idea is ridiculous and amusing."

Jun jerked his head sharply, and Minoru was roughly cuffed by one of his men.

Kasumi barely kept himself in place. "Master."

"No worries, Kasumi. If I was not prepared for the repercussions, I would not have spoken."

Grimacing, Kasumi fell silent. He was getting impatient.

Yet even as he thought it, he heard a telltale muffled thud - then the room began to fill with pungent mist.

"What the-" Jun cut himself off and motioned for his men to act.

Too late.

Twisting his wrist just so in his bonds, Kasumi freed the tiny blade hidden within, just peeking out of the special slit in his glove. It sliced through the ropes as though they were gossamer.

He toppled, feet still confined, but that was quickly overcome as the mist enveloped the entirety of the chamber.

Standing, he moved into the mist and swiftly took out the remaining guards, retrieving his knives from where he'd seen them stashed. Reequipped, he turned and moved to Minoru, who had sat quietly throughout.

From the far side of the room came a pained shout, followed by a familiar laugh. Resisting an urge to roll his eyes, Kasumi freed Minoru and helped him stand. "Master, are you all right?"

"Perfectly fine, Kasumi. Nothing good food and a bit of rest won't cure. My bones aren't that old yet." His cheek was given a fond, light pat. "Well done."

Kasumi brushed the words aside. "Stay here, Master." Not waiting for a reply, he pushed through the mist to where he knew the masks lay. His own had still been in Jun's grasp, unfortunately - but he'd have it back soon. Working as best he could in the mist, he swiftly bundled all the masks back up and stowed them in the chest, closing and locking it, lifting it by one of the side handles.

He returned to Minoru's side.

"Kasumi!"

The mist distorted voices, but Kasumi could follow it anyway. Setting the chest down, he quickly made his way toward the stairs - a hand darted from the mist and snatched him close, and Kasumi swore softly as he collided with Luther.

"Took you long enough," he said tartly. "Unhand me."

Luther grinned. "No. Dispel this stuff. It's a nuisance now."

"Give me my mask," Kasumi said. "Else it will have to disperse in its own time."

Rolling his eyes and muttering about magic, Luther brandished the mask in question. "You're going to put this on and I'll never see you again, isn't that right?"

Kasumi frowned, acutely aware suddenly of the hand still firmly holding his, and how close they still stood. "Unhand me right this instant."

"That would be a yes," Luther said with a sigh. He let go and reached up to cup Kasumi's face. Perhaps he had simply grown used to the bastard and the liberties he took, but he found he could not summon the fury he had felt when Jun touched him. Instead the soft way Luther's thumb brushed across his lips left him reeling.

Before he could figure out a reply, his mask was thrust into his hands. It thrummed beneath his fingers, pleased to be back in the grasp of its owner. Kasumi let out a breath it seemed he had been holding ever since the mask was first taken from him.

He was whole again.

Lifting the mask, he put it back over his face. Magic thrummed as it settled, rushing through his blood, rejoining with its owner.

Luther sighed softly, and Kasumi almost thought it a sad sound. He shoved the errant thought away and focused, raising his arms and spreading his fingers wide, summoning up the magic that lay within his mask.

Around them the mist shimmered - then vanished.

"Do you still not believe in magic?" he asked, briefly startled to hear his voice muffled again.

Luther looked at him. "I guess I have no choice. Certainly it's not the only thing in this journey that has challenged my disbelief."

Kasumi frowned at the cryptic statement, but before he could demand an explanation Luther had turned away.

"Come," Luther said. "I've got Jun bound, the rest of his men are dead or unconscious. My men will be loading the last of the silver now, and then we can sail."

Nodding, Kasumi returned to Minoru's side and hefted the chest. "Come, Master."

Minoru nodded and slowly followed along, clearly stiff from his long confinement and maltreatment.

Slung over Luther's shoulder was an unconscious Jun. Kasumi smirked behind his mask.

"Now, now," Luther teased. "I can see you are plotting dastardly things for this bastard. Keep your knives sheathed, my

pretty shadow. He's going to the authorities, remember?"

Kasumi rolled his eyes and did not reply, refusing to rise to the bait - and more than a little disconcerted that even with his mask firmly back in place, this man could so easily read him. "If you do not behave, I will turn you over to the authorities."

"I thought you'd do that anyway," Luther said with a wink.

Except Kasumi could see the uncertainty in his eyes.

Damn it all. He wanted to be free of this man.

Turning sharply away, he drew one of his daggers and moved to lead the way back upstairs. "I would not betray you in such a way, and if you insinuate such again I will beat you to within an inch of your life."

Luther smiled, and resettled the cumbersome weight upon his shoulder. "Let's go."

Nodding, Kasumi darted quickly up the stairs. At the top, he shoved bodies out of the way to clear a path, then turned away from the kitchen through which he and later Luther had entered.

This time, he simply strode across the main entryway and threw open the front door.

Outside the night was still dark, but dawn was only a few hours away now.

At the top of the steps waited two lanterns. Striking the matches which had also been left, Kasumi lit the lanterns and handed one to Minoru and held fast to the other. He was sacrificing his night vision, but as a group they'd move faster with the light and if caught would seem a good deal less suspicious.

It took them an hour to reach the harbor, and another hour still to finish loading the ship with the commandeered silver and a few remaining supplies. A half hour beyond that, however, and they were well and truly put to sea.

Escorting Minoru to his cabin, Kasumi helped him clean up a bit and then change into fresh clothes.

"We must talk in the morning, Kasumi."

"Yes, Master."

Minoru smiled. "I've missed you. I am sorry all this happened - yet it seems to have been good for you, Kasumi."

"Master?"

"I'm intrigued to see you are getting along quite well with your kidnapper."

Kasumi made a face behind his mask. "We do what we must, Master."

"Indeed. Good night, Kasumi. I knew you would come for me, and I thank you. No matter what anyone might say, you are an exemplary protector."

"Good night, Master," Kasumi said softly, and doused the lantern. He moved to the door and stood silently, waiting until Minoru was fast asleep, then turned and left.

He made his way quickly to the Captain's quarters, opening the door and slipping inside.

Luther was changing, tugging on a clean linen shirt as Kasumi closed the door. He turned, looking surprised. "I thought you'd be guarding Minoru." He smiled.

Kasumi froze, shocked beyond all belief.

He...he should be with Minoru. His master returned, he was once more a protector.

Yet his instinct had been to return here once Minoru was asleep and secured.

Luther started to speak, but Kasumi turned and fled.

Back inside Minoru's room, he closed the door and slid down to sit on the floor. With unsteady hands he pulled his mask off, turning it over to stare at the colors which shimmered faintly in the weak moonlight slipping through the porthole. Dropping it in his lap, he buried his face in his hands.

Part III

Kasumi never thought he could hate land.

After months at sea, he had wanted nothing more than to be back at land.

He hated it.

The noise, the people, the brunches and luncheons and banquets, having to keep his eyes on hundreds of people at once. The looks, the whispers, the chastisements for his foolishness, the clucking that a supposed shadow warrior had so badly screwed up. Commendations for retrieving his master, of course, but that did not absolve the initial failure.

More commendations for capturing Jun and bringing in hard evidence against him.

Another month and everything would quiet down, and Minoru could return to his quiet studies, which would allow Kasumi to relax the slightest bit and maybe regain his more familiar equilibrium.

Except everywhere he went, he caught himself looking for a familiar blond head, straining to catch the sound of a familiar laugh.

He never saw or heard what he sought. Shortly after reaching port, after ensuring they got to where they needed to be... Luther had vanished back to his precious sea. Lingered would mean capture, so it was only natural.

Still.

Kasumi swore softly and cut off his straying thoughts, turning them back to where they should be.

Nearby, Minoru sat speaking with the man they should have met months ago - the real Lord Luther Hatcher-Rosque. He was everything that Kasumi had been led to expect. Handsome, dignified, well-spoken and possessed of a startling intellect. He and Minoru conversed a mile a minute on subjects beyond Kasumi's comprehension or interest. Minoru was happy, that was all he cared about.

He looked again at Hatcher-Rosque.

Neatly cropped hair, no need for a ribbon. He did not wear glasses. His clothes were perfectly pressed and arranged. He was polite, considerate, charming, friendly, and engaging. The real Hatcher-Rosque was the perfect image of a gentleman scholar.

Kasumi hated him.

He wondered how much longer this infernal luncheon would last, and the answer did not please him in the slightest. Minoru had few friends; most people were simply too intimidated by him - not least of all because he warranted an exotic looking bodyguard. It looked like he might have well and truly found a friend in Hatcher-Rosque.

Stupid bastard. If he was going to just vanish like that, couldn't he have said something? They'd discussed it, but he still could have said something before vanishing. Well, what had he expected, really? A pirate was a pirate, and if he'd thought...well, he knew damn good and well Luther or whoever he was wore masks.

His fingers twitched, but Kasumi stilled their movement before he could give in to the impulse to touch his mask. It was, as always, soothing. Familiar and right - and a reminder that all was as it should be.

Why, then, did he feel so discontent?

He turned away from answering his own question, flicking his gaze out over the crowded café. Sunshine spilled in the large windows on the far side of the room. Everywhere were bundles and bouquets of flowers, the colors light and warm, the atmosphere friendly, easy. Though he hated it, he could not deny it was a beautiful country. He wondered how long Minoru would choose to stay here.

If he could endure it. Then again, he might not have to. The clan representatives should be arriving any day, and likely they would take Kasumi back with them in disgrace. Not that he minded. Even that was better than staying here, always looking for a face he was never going to see.

The afternoon passed at a torturous pace, the crowds in the café coming and going as Minoru and Hatcher-Rosque talked

on and on. Finally the sun began to set, and Minoru reluctantly made his goodbyes.

"Thank you, Kasumi," he said as they walked along, "for being so patient."

"It is my will and honor to serve, Master," Kasumi replied automatically. "You look as though you are enjoying yourself."

"I am," Minoru said. "Luther is a fascinating man."

Kasumi tensed to hear that name.

Minoru looked at him. Kasumi hated that look. It said Minoru was seeing more than he had any business seeing.

"Was Luther his real name?" Minoru finally asked.

Kasumi grimaced behind his mask. "I do not think even he knew his real name."

"Hmm," Minoru murmured thoughtfully. "Do you like it here at all, Kasumi?"

"I am but a shadow, content to go where my master bids."

Minoru laughed softly. "It's a beautiful country, Kasumi. I thought you would like it here."

Kasumi said nothing, beginning to grow irritated. Minoru was up to something, and he didn't feel like dealing with it.

"Oh, my," Minoru said suddenly. "It looks as though we must finally face the last piece of music."

Dread settled hard and fast in Kasumi's gut as he took in what Minoru meant - a black carriage which bore the moon and four star crest of their homeland.

Minoru smiled and touched his shoulder briefly. "It will be all right, Kasumi. You will see."

Kasumi said nothing, merely jerked away and dropped back slightly to permit Minoru to lead the way inside.

His rooms were richly appointed in blue and brown, touches of other colors scattered about. Given to Minoru by the government in return for all he would be contributing as he worked with Lord Hatcher-Rosque. Finer than any rooms he'd had in all his travels. More and more Kasumi sensed they would not be resuming their travels. Once that would have made him happy.

"Most honored Lord Minoru," the men waiting inside greeted. All but one wore masks similar to Kasumi's, but each notably different. All bowed. The one who stood unmoving and unmasked was tall and broad of shoulder; his hair was long and pulled neatly back, black touched ever so lightly with threads of silver. His face was beautiful, a breathtaking statue or painting come to life. Most remarkable of all were his eyes, a brilliant, jewel-fine blue.

Minoru nodded. "Lord Daichi, it is an honor to see you again. I am sorry that the reason for our reunion is an unhappy one."

Lord Daichi nodded. "No matter the reason, Lord Minoru, we are most happy to see you. Let me first extend the apologies of the East Clan, for our abysmal failure to offer the protection you so generously commissioned."

"That apology is uncalled for," Minoru said quietly.

Kasumi stood still and silent behind him, a shadow even to Lord Daichi. Until they saw fit to make it otherwise, he did not exist.

"On the contrary," Lord Daichi said. "You should never have been in danger. We have had the full of the tale, and I cannot excuse that our very best was fooled and overtaken by a lowly pirate."

Minoru shook his head. "If that is the tale you have heard, then with all due respect, Lord Daichi, you have not heard the full of the tale, or even the proper one."

"Oh?" Lord Daichi asked. "What tale should I have heard?"

"An attack against me, Kasumi would have noted. He sensed no threat to my person, an accurate reading of the situation. Kasumi's nature is a kind and devoted one, as well as fierce and strong. This is why he is the best of protectors. He was fooled not because he failed to notice a threat to me, but because he took no notice of a threat to himself. It is not in Kasumi's nature to care about himself, and so he was blind to that threat. Find you, Lord Daichi, a flaw in this reasoning?"

There was a brief pause, then Lord Daichi conceded the point with a grunt. "I see no flaw deserving of punishment, but that is not the end of the tale."

"No, it is not. Shall we sit and enjoy a cup of tea before I continue the tale you should have heard?"

"I would appreciate that," Lord Daichi said. "We thank you for your consideration and hospitality."

"A trifling thing, tea, for such honored guests," Minoru replied lightly.

The group of four men fell silent as Minoru prepared the tea himself and brought it to the small table in the front sitting room of his apartments. Kasumi stood between the two large windows overlooking the street below, able to observe the room in its entirety. No one looked at him, which suited him just fine.

"Now, by your leave, continue your tale," Lord Daichi said. "I am most eager to hear it."

"The pirate you speak of was not one cast so easily aside, even by your very best. Recall you the paramour of our honored Princess from six years ago?"

The men all shared looks of mingled annoyance and amusement. "Yes," Lord Daichi replied. "That infuriating man from the high north. Aggravating race, that one. Wild, all of them."

Minoru chuckled. "Quite so. I believe our pirate was of that race. He had the look of them, and that wild edge. Kasumi learned he was an orphan, so it is very likely he is from the high north originally, or his parents were. That combined with spending his life at sea, which is no easy life at all...it is entirely within reason that he be a match for our Kasumi." He chuckled again. "Not that you will ever hear Kasumi admit it."

Kasumi kept still, refusing to acknowledge that little comment in any way.

The men all laughed briefly, chatting for a moment before Minoru recalled them to the matter at hand and laid out the story in full. When he finished the telling some two hours later, the men all sat quietly around the table, their tea long forgotten.

Lord Daichi finally looked up, face implacable as he regarded Kasumi. He turned to look at the men who had accompanied him, then Minoru. At last he nodded. "Very well. Though I feel he must still be punished for the mistakes made, I cannot in good conscience or fairness say that he failed in his duty. The recovery of your Master, Kasumi, was well-handled. I think I am sorry I did not meet this pirate of yours."

Of his. Ha. Whatever that meant. Kasumi nodded.

"By your courtesy, Lord Minoru?" Lord Daichi asked.

"Of course," Minoru replied with a smile. He turned to Kasumi. "If you will please, my protector, remove your mask."

Kasumi pulled his mask off, hooking it to his left upper arm.

Lord Daichi stood and crossed over to him. "Kasumi, it is good to see you alive and well. Your mother has missed you, and admonished me not to be too harsh before I had heard the full of it. I am glad I tend to do what she tells me."

Mouth twitching, Kasumi did not resist the embrace he was given, but returned it. "Father. Mother is well then, I take it?"

"Well and ruling the clan more than I," Lord Daichi said dryly. "I think your brother will never have to worry about taking over leadership - your mother will never give it up, I vow it."

Kasumi laughed.

"Come and sit, Kasumi. Lord Minoru, since we are not exacting the full punishment such a situation would normally require, I do not see why we cannot consider your proposition."

Minoru smiled. Kasumi glared at him, knowing that look all too well. He bit back an urge to demand to know what he was up to now, since his father would not be amused to hear him so casually address his master.

"Then let me send a note to the man who has made the request, and when he arrives we will discuss the matter properly."

"Of course," Lord Daichi said. "This is wonderful tea, what kind is it? I shall have to make certain we take quantities of it home, and I must find some trinket for my wife or I declare she will string me up..."

Kasumi restored his mask and sat in silence as Minoru penned a note and sent it off with a servant, and everyone chattered amicably. What was going on and why did he know nothing about it?

Why was he not happier about being let off so lightly? His father had come all this way to administer the judgment himself, even, and still Kasumi could feel nothing but the same tight, heavy misery that had plagued him for the past four months... ever since Luther had so abruptly vanished shortly after their arrival.

Three hours had passed before a sudden knock came at the door.

Minoru smiled and stood as a servant ran to answer the door, striding toward it as the door was opened to admit a tall, broad man dressed in fine clothes. Kasumi could not see him clearly, but something about Minoru's behavior set him on edge.

He waited as the man came more clearly into view, and Minoru introduced him. "Honored Lord Daichi, honored guests, I present to you Lord Isaac Keen."

The bastard was wearing glasses. Kasumi just knew he'd done it to aggravate. There was going to be a murder the very second Minoru moved out of the way. The flitting smirk he got said the bastard knew it, too.

"Lord Isaac, please take a seat and join us. We have been enjoying a local tea."

"I would be delighted," Lord Isaac said, taking the empty seat next to Minoru - and directly across from Kasumi.

"Lord Isaac," Lord Daichi said. "It is an honor to make your acquaintance after all the correspondence we have exchanged these past months."

"Likewise," Isaac said easily, smiling and nodding to all of them.

Lord Daichi laughed. "Your request is among the more unique I've received, though not quite the strangest."

Isaac grinned. "I try to be unique without standing out overmuch. Balance is crucial."

"Then why don't you and Lord Minoru explain everything in full, now that you are gathered and the matter of Kasumi's punishment has been decided."

Minoru nodded, first to Lord Daichi, then to Kasumi.

Disconcerting. What was going on here?

"I am finding that I quite enjoy the life I am building here," Minoru said slowly. "I think the friendship I am building with Lord Hatcher-Rosque will last a lifetime. After my recent adventures, I also find that I have little desire to resume my nomadic ways. While I am heartbroken at the idea of giving him up, for Kasumi is a dear friend to me, I am a man of honor and the contract I signed states that he is mine only so long as I require him. As I am settling down, I feel I will no longer require the services of such a high-caliber bodyguard."

Kasumi started, eyes widening in disbelief behind his mask. Minoru was letting him go?

Well...it was...that was the way of things. Of course. His contract was never going to last forever...

"That being said, Lord Daichi, gentlemen of the clan, I am here today to recommend a man who is in need of the services only you can offer."

Kasumi's eyes immediately narrowed. The bastard would not dare.

The smirk that flitted again across Luther's - Isaac's - mouth said he very much would dare.

Oh, he was going to-

"Honored gentlemen, most gracious Lord Daichi," Isaac said smoothly. "As I have already stated and made plain, I was until recently a criminal. A pirate to be specific. Recent events have persuaded me to give up that life and attempt to live a reformed and hopefully quiet life. With that in mind, I am not so stupid as to think old enemies will leave me in peace should they discover me here and think me turned into a milksop. Your clan comes highly recommended to me, and I can more than afford your asking price."

Lord Daichi chuckled. "As I said, unique circumstances. We have reviewed you thoroughly, and Lord Minoru has never

recommended anyone to us before, which means you come highly recommended indeed." He smiled. "Unless the gentlemen with me are opposed, I am more than willing to offer you a protector contract. As you stand in rather a dangerous position, given the circumstances, and likely will be in such danger the majority if not the entirety of your life, I am prepared to offer you our very best."

"That would be ideal," Isaac said, eyes gleaming with pure mischief.

Kasumi was going to kill all of them.

"I believe the price quoted to you in our correspondence will suffice."

"Done," Isaac promptly replied.

"Then unless you object, I offer the finest bodyguard the East clan can offer. His name is Kasumi, and henceforth you are his Master until such time you decide to end the contract."

"Accepted, and with pleasure," Isaac said.

Minoru stood. "Then I believe we will leave you to get acquainted with your new bodyguard. Lord Kasumi, I thank you for everything, from the bottom of my heart. Always you will be a friend to me, and I hope sometime soon we might dine together as peers."

Kasumi nodded and stood to sketch a deep bow. "It was an honor, Lord Minoru. May you lead a happy life. I will see you shortly, of that I have no doubt."

He embraced his father one last time, then waited as they all left, all but vibrating in place.

When the door closed with a resounding click, he turned slowly to face the bastard who was shortly going to be very dead.

"Would you take off the mask?" Isaac asked.

Kasumi removed the mask and carefully set it down on the table - then threw himself forward, catching Isaac on the jaw, dodging the arms that tried to catch him to drop and sweep Isaac's feet out from underneath him.

Then he punched the bastard again before he was himself caught and tossed aside. He gained his feet just in time to be shoved up against the nearest wall.

"Bastard," he hissed.

Isaac grinned - then kissed him.

Kasumi bit his lip hard, eliciting a satisfying grunt of pain - then he yanked his arms free and wrapped them around Isaac's neck, dragging him as close as he could possibly get. The scent of the sea still clung to him, mingling with some sharp, not-quite-sweet cologne. His hair had grown out in the four months since he'd vanished, long enough Kasumi could sink his fingers into it and lightly tug.

"I'm going to kill you," he said when Isaac finally let him go.

Isaac laughed. "I've missed you and your death threats, Kasumi."

"If you think for two seconds that I'm going to call you master, you conniving, vanishing-"

Isaac kissed him again, and Kasumi wished he could muster the will to put up a fight but after four damned months of feeling perfectly wretched because-He broke the kiss. "You vanished! Not even a goodbye, you just vanished! Let me go at once!"

"Sorry," Isaac replied. "I didn't want to say anything until I was certain, then I realized if I didn't take you by surprise you'd kill me."

Kasumi glared at him. "Isaac?"

"Don't like it?"

He just kept glaring.

Isaac grinned and lazily traced Kasumi's lips with his finger. "It was the name I had before I turned into a criminal. Probably

the only one not associated with some sort of crime. Would you prefer I go back to Luther?"

"Shut up," Kasumi replied. "Just shut up or I really will be forced to kill you. I can't believe-" He thumped Isaac's chest hard. "You could have said something."

"Um-I was slightly panicky. This whole reformed thing is new to me. And..."

Kasumi glared. "And what?" he snapped.

"I was afraid if I said something, you'd turn me down," Isaac confessed. "This way, I stood a chance of getting more time to change your mind." He cupped Kasumi's face in his hands. "May I safely assume that perhaps you won't regard me strictly as your Master?"

"If you honestly think I'm going to call you Master," Kasumi replied, "you're even crazier than I already thought. So is this your new mask? Lord and Master?"

Isaac grinned. "Well, I was rather hoping to live mostly mask free from now on. Can't be completely honest, of course, else I'd wind up with a noose around my neck."

Kasumi rolled his eyes and yanked him close. "You're an idiot."

"You're the only one who thinks that, you know," Isaac said. "Guess you see something no one else does." The words were spoken lightly, but the blue-gray eyes held an intensity that made it hard to breathe.

"Fair is fair," Kasumi replied. "No one else has ever called me feisty."

"No one else had better," Isaac said. "I reformed for you. I also paid a damn fortune to spend the rest of my life enduring death threats and nasty right hooks. That feistiness is mine and no one else's."

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