

Disjunct

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Warnings Apply

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Summary:

When Thoma first arrives in Inazuma, he doesn't intend to stay. He was born a child of the wind, after all, and eternity does not like the change freedom loves to bring.

However, when the powerful Kamisato Clan allow him to belong, he ends up settling into a fulfilling life as their devoted retainer. Still, there are moments where it feels as if he is stealing his own place in the land his father called home.

An exploration of mixed-race Thoma.

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[\[https://archiveofourown.org/works/36985915\]](https://archiveofourown.org/works/36985915)

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One of my favorite comments ever once described my writing as being like coffee: starting off kind of dull, then becoming violently bitter, before finally mellowing out into something rich and warm.

I kind of hope this fic gives off those vibes as well.

THOMAS IS THIRTEEN YEARS OLD when he washes up on the shores of Inazuma.

Exhausted, frightened, and cold, he comes with nothing but the clothes on his back and his father's name on the tip of his tongue. His tiny boat capsized in a sudden storm, nearly drowning him in the perilous waves with the bottle of dandelion wine he had set out to deliver, but he is alive all the same. The poor boy nearly starts to cry from the relief of it all.

"Thank Barbatos," he breathes, shaking out his wet mop of hair.

Though the sun has already set, the lonely moon princess shines a few moonbeams through the fading storm clouds for him to regain his bearings. Thomas scans his surroundings for something—*anything*—to guide him as the chilly night breeze begins to sap what little warmth he has left beneath his wave-drenched clothes.

Fortunately, he quickly spots the distant blue glow of a Statue of The Seven up a nearby cliff, and Thomas sends his gratitude through chattering teeth to anyone listening. If there's anything the sisters at the Church of Favonius had taught him growing up, it was that as long as he could find a statue, the Archons would keep watch over him.

Thomas removes his shoes and wrings out his socks before he starts climbing. Briefly, he wonders if he's missing anything (he *swears* he boarded the little eastbound boat with more than just the clothes on his back and his father's name on the tip of his tongue), but it's hard to focus when it feels like there's still saltwater up his nose from the capsizing, so he tucks the thought away and begins to climb.

He's not sure what he expects to be at the top of the cliff, aside from perhaps the Statue of the Seven, but he's still surprised when he looks over the cliff's edge and sees a teenage boy, perhaps a couple years older than himself, *staring* from a few meters away.

Thomas freezes. (Almost literally, with how cold he feels.) The

other boy stares at him for a few seconds more, the wind tugging at his long, blue hair, until a girl with silvery hair, presumably his sister, also runs into view, her eyes widening with surprise when she spots him.

“Ayato!” she says, shaking her brother’s shoulder and sounding rather like she’s trying not to let Thomas hear her. “There’s a stranger over there!”

“I can see that, Ayaka!” the boy, Ayato, snips back, doing but a marginally better job at concealing his voice than his sister. “Go get Mom or Dad!”

Thomas’s muscles relax, and he finishes hauling himself up as the pale-haired siblings in front of him finish their bickering, ending when the sister runs off into a building he hadn’t noticed when he was at the bottom of the cliff. He makes eye contact with the brother again and gives a little wave after a prolonged awkward pause. “Hey! My name’s Thomas.”

Surprise briefly flashes over Ayato’s face, as if he hadn’t expected Thomas to be able to speak. “What are you doing here?” he asks, notably using Teyvat Common over the local Inazuma tongue.

Thomas glances over at the Statue (it’s hard to describe the odd feeling he gets, knowing it’s not of Barbatos, as if for the first time, it sinks in that he’s no longer in Mondstadt), then back at Ayato.

“Tm...” Thomas begins, then realizes he lost his purpose in the shipwreck. “Tm *supposed* to be bringing a bottle of dandelion wine to my father, but I kind of lost it on the way here.” He dips his head and offers Ayato a sheepish smile in hopes that it will make him look like less of a dunce.

While Ayato still gives him a suspicious look, *something* Thomas did must work on him, because his expression seems more contemplative than hostile. However, Ayaka comes running back up the hill with two older men hiking close behind before he says anything.

“An outlander,” says one of the men as they approach Thomas, who nods along because ‘outlander’ *is* correct. “Do you have your entry papers, young man?”

“Nope.”

This proves to be quite the problem. He had originally intended to leave on the same boat he arrived on, but *that* thing has been smashed to splinters by the tides at this point. No locals are willing to make a trip that far out to sea, and the only other boats that leave this country belong to merchants, so if he’s to be deported, it would have to happen in a few days’ time at minimum as people try to arrange his voyage.

Well, it’s a problem depending on who you’re asking. From Thomas’s perspective, it both is and isn’t. It *is* because without entry papers, he’s stuck in Ritou. At the same time, it *isn’t* because those few days give him the time he needs to find a reason to stay in Inazuma long enough to at *least* track down his father.

In the end, Ayato and Ayaka— the children of the powerful Kamisato Clan— take a liking to him for reasons he feels no need to question.

As a result, on the day he’s meant to be deported, Thomas is given the right to stay in the country.

“Justification for permit?” Miss Kageyama asks him on the day his stay is made official.

Thomas recites the reasoning he had been taught earlier: “I have kin somewhere in the country; as that person must necessarily have Inazuman residency, I therefore have adequate connection justifying my own residency.”

Miss Kageyama nods, and she writes that down. “All right, then. You’ll need a new name while you’re staying here,” she says, sliding a thick book over the counter. “Here’s a dictionary. Feel free to choose whatever words you think sound pleasant or meaning-

ful, though bear in mind that...”

Thomas stares at her. “I already have an Inazuman name,” he blurts. Because he really *does* have one. His father gave it to him when he was born, taught him to read and write it as he grew up.

Miss Kageyama peers at him curiously. “Is that so?” she asks, her tone some mix of surprise and skepticism.

Suddenly, Thomas feels quite small beneath her gaze. Is it strange that he already has an Inazuman name? Was he not supposed to say that?

He nods anyway.

Miss Kageyama takes back the dictionary, though she seems oddly reluctant to do so. “Apologies,” she says as mere courtesy. She hands him a pen instead, and he promptly fills out the rest of the paperwork himself. “Welcome to Inazuma...” She glances down at his signature. “Honda Thoma.”

THOMA IS FOURTEEN YEARS OLD when he receives his Vision.

A thunderstorm sets the tone for the Kamisato Estate's first night of mourning. Thoma is busy shuttering the windows to keep the rain off the candles and incense when he hears someone approaching from behind. Quickly, he turns around and straightens his posture; an anxious emptiness swirls in his stomach for the moment before he sees who it is.

"Young Lord Ayato," Thoma says. He relaxes and lets out a small sigh of relief, then jolts when he remembers his station and quickly bows. "Clan head."

"Thoma," says the young lord, more serious than what Thoma is used to. (It makes that pit in Thoma's stomach reappear and churn once more.) "You need not bow so long and so low. I am not clan head just yet."

(As Thoma straightens up, he *swears* he catches Ayato mutter, "Not that I think you need to bow at all." But Thoma pretends he didn't hear anything at all.)

Ayato continues. "Now that the situation in Inazuma is unclear, the troubles faced by the Kamisato Clan will only continue to grow. You are someone who can see what's at stake; if you don't want to get involved, then it's best you return home earlier than planned."

Though Thoma doubts they're meant to, something about Ayato's words sting. As considerate as they are, they feel isolating in a way Thoma cannot describe, as if between the well-intentioned sentiments lies a reminder that he is still, at the end of the day, an outsider. (As if despite the time he has spent here in Inazuma, despite the effort he has put into connecting with its people, its culture—*his own heritage*—his mother's land will always be the more important part of him than his father's.)

But, Thoma casts aside that initial sting. (After all, it *was* unintentional.) He hasn't once thought of leaving Inazuma, and with his

father's location and status as of yet still unknown, he doesn't plan on starting just yet.

Besides, while the internal affairs and petty politics of the Yashiro Commission and Kamisato Clan *shouldn't* affect him, the thought of leaving (as if he hasn't also become part of this place) doesn't sit well with Thoma, to the point where it feels like something new entirely begins kindling in the gap where his anxiety had earlier been whirling.

"I am only given the opportunity to stay in Inazuma because the Kamisato Clan has fought so hard for it, and I am a servant of yours in an attempt to repay you both for your kindness," Thoma begins slowly, the words feeling weighty on his tongue. "Even though I grew up in Mondstadt, my father still taught me the importance of loyalty, how it is a righteous devotion that extends out into eternity. If I leave now, then... that's now how a loyal servant should behave, and I will have failed to fulfill the expectations set up for me. The young lord and lady's futures are as uncertain as that of the nation's right now, so I would like to do my best in my ability to support you both as a helper."

His conviction grows with every word he says, and by the end of his speech, they burn with a passion in service of his loyalty.

Lightning strikes the ground just outside of the compound, and both boys jump, startled. Thoma even nearly drops something, though he doesn't remember holding anything at all. He catches it with a yelp, then realizes what it is: a Vision, glowing an ardent red.

It's warm, like miso soup in the winter, and heavier than it looks. Its design lacks the distinctive wings of Mondstadt, which, in all his childhood daydreams, Thoma had always assumed he'd receive; instead, with its circular knot reminiscent of the Raiden Shogun's celestial ideal of eternity, the casing is *unmistakably* Inazuman.

Thoma cradles it in both hands, still processing the moment.

That a carefree drifter such as himself could find an ambition powerful enough to draw the gods' favor... the only thing Thoma can think to call it is *striking*.

(That the gods acknowledge his desires as stemming from his *Inazuman* heritage specifically— now that makes Thoma feel *seen*.)

Thoma and Ayato continue to stare at the Vision for a few more long moments, completely dumbstruck.

He looks up at Ayato.

Something akin to uncertainty flashes across Ayato's face, but it's hard to tell in the dim lighting. A reverent (*fearful?*) silence continues to hang between them.

Then, the young lord speaks at last.

"Well," he begins, "if that is truly how you feel, then you should begin spending your spare time studying the polearm. Ayaka and I will need a bodyguard we can trust if we are to fix our father's mistakes." He puts a steady hand on Thoma's shoulder. "Please take good care of us. Our lives will be in your hands, Thoma."

THOMA IS FIFTEEN YEARS OLD when Inazuma starts to tighten its borders.

It's the little things at first. The young lady Ayaka becomes crest-fallen when he tells her that the little candied fruit pastries from Liyue she likes so much are no longer sold at the market because the Kanjou Commission have deemed them '*frivolous imports*'. His lord Ayato sulks for days when Yae Publishing House announce they will not be stocking future volumes of *Hex & Hound* until further notice.

(Thoma thinks he could cheer them up through black market means, but that idea goes out the window when Tenryou soldiers make a public spectacle of a man caught with a copy of *The Steambird* from Fontaine.)

The usual trading partners of the Kamisato Clan treat him, for the most part, as they always do. (And if they don't– Thoma notices those businesses mysteriously vanish from the shopping lists Ayaka gives him.) For a while, he is fine, he thinks; nothing much has changed.

It is a windy midsummer afternoon when the post office apologizes to Thoma.

The breeze rustles through his hair, reminding him of the wild highlands surrounding Mondstadt. Perhaps it's not the most apt comparison to make as he runs through Inazuma City to do his daily chores, but it's hard not to remember afternoons spent catching crystalflies with Kaeya when he notices the rising prices of fresh apples and grapes at the market; or evenings spent learning to sew with the rebellious Sister Rosaria when Ogura invites him to browse the latest fashion trends on behalf of the Kamisato siblings; or the mornings during Windblume spent gathering windwheel asters with Lisa when he stops by Naganohara Fireworks to place an order on behalf of the Yashiro Commission.

"You seem really tired these days," Yoimiya tells him when he

fails to quip back at her one too many times. “It’s like there’s something weighing you down.”

“Really?” Thoma blinks a couple times and tries to remember if that’s the case.

(At least he *has* the time to spare dawdling here. The Naganoharas have been friends with the Kamisatos for generations thanks to their collaborative works, so Ayaka knows to put them down as the final stop of the day to accommodate for Yoimiya’s endless friendly chatter.)

Eventually, he admits, “I guess maybe.”

Yoimiya nods as she dumps some metal strips into a fireworks shell. “Yeah, ‘cause, like, usually you’ve got this pep in your step, kind of like you’re powered by those steam engines Ritou merchants always like to talk about, but lately you’ve been having this totally different vibe. It’s like a bird just got its wings clipped, and it’s been left to mourn inside a cage sitting on the windowsill... It’s not the Sakoku Decree, is it?”

Thoma shifts the weight of his grocery bag around on his shoulders. Usually, he’s rather fond of how open and easy his conversations with Yoimiya are, but her analogy makes him viscerally uncomfortable for reasons he does not want to unpack.

“Kind of,” he says.

(“*Starts*” would have been a better word for it, but Yoimiya replies before he can elaborate.)

“Aww, don’t sweat it so much, Thoma!” she chirps, tucking some stray hair behind her ear. “Sure, you’ve met a lot of people who think you’re taking space from someone ‘*more Inazuman*’, but that’s just *blatantly* untrue. What in Teyvat could that possibly even *mean*, anyway? Just ‘cause your mom’s a Mondstadter doesn’t mean you don’t have a whole other half of your family tree rooted here in Inazuma. It doesn’t mean you don’t *live here* like the rest of us. Be-

sides, the people saying that *barely* even matter anyway.”

Yoimiya rolls her eyes, apparently at the mere *thought* of them, as if they are the dumbest people she’s heard of in all fourteen years of her life.

(Thoma finds himself in agreement there; they’re all a bunch of stuffy old coots in office.)

“Everyone *I’ve* ever known thinks you’re nice,” Yoimiya continues, messing with quantities of dry powders and the like on her brass scale. “Granny Oni says you’re one of the most reliable people she knows, even among the adults—”

“She takes care of *Itto*,” Thoma, who knows firsthand what a catastrophic *mess* Ayato’s oni friend can make, points out.

Yoimiya shrugs. “Everyone in Narukami thinks you’re super chill and easy to talk to. I would know, because I talk to *everyone*.” She grins, seals the firework shell, and holds it up between them. “The *people*, Thoma, it’s the *people* here who like you. Pops always tells me that when you put all the people together, everyone combined can be just as important than the one Raiden Shogun on her own.”

“What is a god without their believers,” Thoma comments, remembering of the strong sense of faith present within Mondstadt’s walls despite their Archon’s centuries-long absence. He puts down his bag from the earlier errands; they’ve started to become heavy.

“Exactly— uh, although, obviously still with utmost respect to Her Excellency and all— but anyway, what I’m *saying* here, is that people like you for your Mondstadtian charm.” Despite her fumbles, Yoimiya finishes her pep talk proudly, even giving Thoma a friendly punch in the arm with her free hand.

Thoma smiles, touched.

~~But his “Mondstadtian charm” won’t get this crumpled letter out of his pocket, over the ocean, or into his mother’s mailbox, now will it?~~

(He thinks of the way his stomach had turned just earlier today when the post office returned it to him, placating apologies on the tip of their helpless tongues, and he realized at last that perhaps he is trapped.)

((He is not trapped; he is not some bug caught in the Shogun's amber to be preserved for eternity. *No one* is. The people and their lives *will* change with time, whether Her Excellency likes it or not—if she sees them at all. And if he wants to, then Barbatos help him, but he *can* leave.))

Still, her reassurances ease the weight on his mind, for he's always known he'd be more than welcome back should he ever return to his windy birthplace; it's been his place in this thunderous hometown of his over which he has grown insecure as of late.

"Thanks, Yoimiya," he says as sincerely as he possibly can.

"No problem!" she cheerfully replies, tossing him the completed firework. (Thoma fumbles with his hands for a second, fearful that the Vision at his hip might mistakenly spark to life.) "Though, if you're having trouble getting people to trust you because of how you look, it might be fun to..." She reaches her hand into some black powder, and before Thoma can realize what she's doing, she ruffles it into his bright blond hair.

"Hey—!"

"Hmm..." (He imagines Yoimiya squinting in thought as he coughs from the dusty air.) "That didn't work how I imagined."

Thoma scrambles to put the firework down somewhere safe before taking a few steps back to shake out his hair like a dog. "What *were* you imagining?" he asks, repressing a sneeze. He's not mad, just confused.

Yoimiya claps the dirt off her palms, and the wind clears the air enough for Thoma to see her trot off to fetch a pail of water. "I wanted to see how you might look with black hair like most other

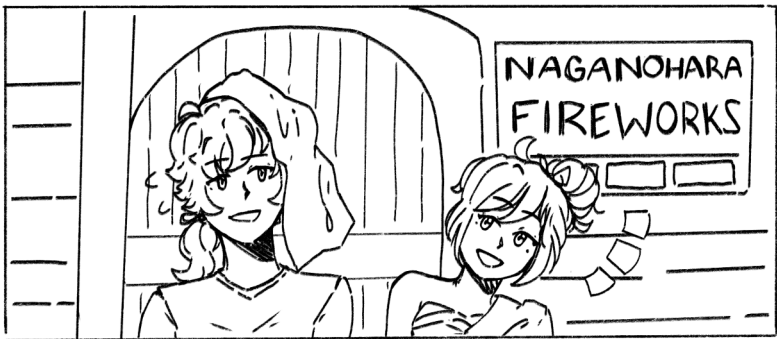
people,” she explains, hoisting the pail into her arms now. “Squat down and stick your neck out,” she orders.

Thoma obeys, bracing himself just in time for the rush of sun-warmed water Yoimiya dumps on his head with the family rain bucket. Perhaps a little gross, but it’s how his adventures with Yoimiya often pan out.

Yoimiya heads inside to grab a towel, and he shakes his head out a second time, careful not to spray any passers-by. Vaguely, he wishes he could use his Pyro to dry his hair without vaporizing his whole head. It wouldn’t be the first time he’s tried, if his singed neck hairs are any testament.

“I’m not sure I want to dye my hair anyway,” he says when she returns. Faintly blackened water continues to streak slowly down his face, and he tries his best not to let it drip onto anything else. “It seems like it would be a pain to clean and maintain.”

“I suppose that’s true.” Yoimiya sighs as she tosses the towel onto his head. She hums and examines her own dark hair. “What if I bleached *my* hair instead? Maybe then you won’t stand out so much!”



Thoma pats his hair dry and wipes down his face. “Aren’t the chemicals necessary for that made in Fontaine?”

Yoimiya heaves an exasperated sigh. “Fontaine, Fontaine– *everything* cool just has to come from *Fontaine*, it seems.” She crosses

her arms and furrows her brow for a moment. “It doesn’t matter; I’ll just figure out the formula here myself.”

“Will your dad let you use the firework stocks like that?”

Yoimiya flippantly shrugs. “I mean, I’m allowed to use the stuff in the shop for a lot of things.” She gestures to the shelves full of knickknacks. “Besides, Pops has left this year’s summer fireworks show to me ‘cause his hearing’s starting to go. Shop’s gonna be mine pretty soon.”

Thoma shakes out the towel and carefully folds it to be handed back to Yoimiya, who promptly and carelessly tosses it onto her workbench.

An old proverb the Favonian Sisters would often quote to bicker-some children flits to mind.

“Well, if that’s what you want to do, then a choice made freely for one’s own sake is not for others to have or take,” he recites, internally surprised at how easily it comes back to him.

Yoimiya gives him a puzzled look.

“It sounds better in Mond’s language,” he sheepishly explains. “It means that the value of your choices comes from the freedom to have made it differently, though others are still just as free to fight back should they find your decisions oppressive. Your appearance is your decision, though, so if you want to bleach your hair to look like mine, then I think you should go for it.”

Yoimiya brightens. “See, this is what I was talking about earlier! Even though you naturally understand the Inazuman point of view, the way you still see the world with slightly different eyes is like a breath of fresh air. It’s what we need around here, I think, and it’s why people love you. *That’s* why you belong here, no matter what the other Commissioners say, Thoma.”

THOMA IS SEVENTEEN YEARS OLD when Ayaka asks him to accompany her to that year's Cherry Blossom Festival.

She finds him out in the courtyard, practicing polearm drills with the help of Ayato, about a week before the festival is to take place.

"Of course I'll go," Thoma says without a second thought, and the young lady lights up with delight. "It's the first festival you've organized entirely on your own, so I expect you'll need an escort." He grins at her and spins his polearm around in the kind of elaborate ceremonial work that would have been impossible for him just a few years ago. "You can count on me to keep you safe like always, young lady!"

The *young lady* gives her brother a flat look for reasons Thoma cannot fathom, but when Thoma himself tries to shoot his lord a questioning glance, Ayato simply heaves an exasperated sigh and chides his sister for interrupting their practice time.

(He doesn't figure out what that exchange means until *years* later, when the memory hits him like a sack of potatoes to the face while he's buying flowers at the market for his fiancée.)

He plans to wear his regular servant's uniform, but his lord Ayato insists on something else, saying that while the definition of a servant and an escort broadly overlap in this situation, the distinction matters to the people who will be in attendance. Thoma, finding this reasonable, agrees, and they compromise on something more akin to a samurai's attire.

However, when Ayaka catches wind of this, it becomes *her* turn to insist on *still* something else.

"The Cherry Blossom Festival is meant to celebrate the coming of spring and the inherent beauty of a transient bloom," she argues. "Both Her Excellency and Guuji Yae will be in attendance; the Tenryou Commission will have many of their best soldiers stationed around Narukami Shrine accordingly. Therefore, to come

looking as if we are prepared for a fight might be seen as an insult to the Shogun and her efforts to protect us.”

Despite the fact that both— well, all three, now that the young lady has also earned one of her own— of them are bringing their Visions along, Thoma agrees that this is, again, a reasonable point, and allows the young lady to redress him to her liking.

This is how he ends up attending his first formal Cherry Blossom Festival in a kimono that has never seen the light of day.

Which isn’t to say that it’s his first time wearing this sort of thing, just not to anything this... *official*. The little street festivals Ayaka likes so much to sneak into are much more casual, and at least in those circumstances, he’s graced with the extra cover of the night. This is Narukami Shrine in the middle of a bright and sunny morning, and he *feels* the stares of nearly every official judging him.

He tries his best to cast it out of his mind as they pass through the shrine gates, where a shrine maiden greets them. She leads them to their reserved seats at the front of the stage; they have arrived at the perfect time.

The mild spring breeze picks up, and cherry blossom petals come fluttering down like flurries of pink snow. The Guuji steps forward, a foxy smirk upon her face, and performs the annual cleansing ritual for the people.

It is lovely, and quite enthralling— he finds himself lost in its elegance and cleanliness.

And then, with the opening ceremony complete, it comes time for the Yashiro Commission’s young lady of the Kamisato Clan, Ayaka, to perform.

For some reason, a lump forms in Thoma’s throat as he watches her rise with perfect grace and take center stage. She sweeps her gaze over the audience as she assumes position, briefly lingering on Thoma at the end. (His heart skips a beat.)

The crowd settles with a hush. Her performance begins.

It dawns on him then, watching her dance, that the young lady Ayaka has grown up at some point when he must have been looking away.

(She is beautiful, he realizes, like a princess in a fairy tale.)

She tosses her fan up in a summoning of frost. Thoma forgets how to breathe.

And then, seemingly just as it began, her performance is over. Ayaka acknowledges her audience's applause, then exits the stage. The enchanting nature of the fan dance draws everyone's gaze after her, leading them right back to where she is seated next to her servant and her brother.

The pricking of everyone's eyes on him, like a disobedient needle during a mend job, breaks the spell the beautiful dance had cast over him, and it is almost violent the way their collective stare reminds Thoma that he is in the real world, not a fairy tale.

Thoma casts a sidelong glance at the Kamisato siblings, but they are both still captivated by the continuing festival performances, seemingly oblivious to the harsh looks they are receiving.

Low murmurs ripple through the crowd, each too insignificant on its own to disrupt the show; yet somehow, his ears have been given the uncanny ability to catch their every word.

"Does he even know what he is watching?" he hears, and it's like catching his bare foot on a shard of broken porcelain after he thinks he's cleaned it all up.

"Of course not. Look at him— yellow hair, green eyes— he's not of here."

Thoma's chest tightens. (These clothes no longer feel like his own.)

"How could an outlander possibly understand the depth of meaning to the Cherry Blossom Festival without living with its history?"

The inside of his mouth, where the memories of his father's lessons live, turns foul. (His own ancestors cut him from their tree.)

"What a waste of a good seat."

At least they're right about one thing. He *doesn't* know what he's watching, not anymore. It's like all his senses shut down, putting him to sleep, but instead of dreaming, he is left with the dim voices in his head, echoing through his thoughts like a peal of thunder from a streak of lightning that struck down right outside the window.

(His skin no longer belongs to him.)

An elbow digs into his side; Thoma wakes. He meets Ayato's gaze through the corners of their eyes; understanding passes through them. Ayato returns his attention to the performance.

Thoma takes in a long, quiet breath, just as his mother in Mondstadt taught him growing up. He pays careful attention to the way the air *feels* in his lungs– the space it takes, the freedom it comes to demand– then lets it all slowly go.

(He imagines the wind carrying everyone's glares and murmurs away with it.)

Calmer now, he finds his shoulders lighter and his breath more free from the exercise.

((Sometimes, noticing the breath in his own lungs is all Thoma needs to be reminded that he is a real, human person and not what others think him to be.))

Once the show is over, Ayato retreats to the Kamisato Estate, allegedly to hide his handsome face from his many potential suitors, but Ayaka expresses a wish to stay out.

"Will you come with me?" she asks him. "It's not proper for a young lady to be out by herself."

Though nothing has changed between this moment and last week, Thoma feels differently about her invitation, despite it being practically identical to the original one. “Of course,” he says, even though it is the middle of the afternoon and she is a master of her sword arts. He bows his head to her, more reverent than joking, as he more often is. “I will always be here if m’lady needs a body-guard.”

(And because he bows his head, he misses the way Ayaka’s eyes change when he calls her *m’lady*.)

His lady lightly taps his head with her fan. “Well, then, come! We have much to see today, and far to go to see it. These flowers won’t be in bloom forever, you know.”

Thoma raises his head and grins. “Of course,” he replies.

He stays by her side all through the day.

His heart beats strongly in his chest, grounding him each moment throughout. No one in the city seems to notice or care that his face is not quite like theirs; all that seems to matter is that their princess calls him another one of their own.

(It’s lovely, and it lets him feel like himself again.)

“Allow me to see you home,” he says to Ayaka once the crowds have dwindled down to nearly nothing.

Ayaka looks up at him, confused. “But you already live in our servants’ quarters,” she says.

“That’s the joke,” he says, flinching a little inside. (Back in Mondstadt, such an offering is almost never a joke.) “It’s, ah... common during the Windblume Festival, between friends who live near each other.”

“Oh!” Ayaka hides her face with her fan, evidently embarrassed.

Thoma laughs in spite of himself. “Well, m’lady, let’s try that again. May I see you home?”

She peeks at him over the edge of her fan, then lowers it entirely. “Yes,” she says as she tucks it away in the folds of her dress. “Yes, you may, my Thoma.”

THOMA IS NINETEEN YEARS OLD when someone asks him what his other half is.

“Oh, it’s actually Inazu–” he begins, but the burly merchant woman waves him off with a loud belly laugh.

“No, no– I might have only one good eye in me, but I can at *least* see *that* pretty easily,” she says, much more cheerful than her words alone may seem. “It’s subtle, but your face, it gives you away. Your eyes, they’re the same shape as some guys from around here I’ve met through my travels, and your nose doesn’t stick out quite like someone from Mondstadt or Fontaine. And the way you dress and act– you’re a local, aren’t you?”

Thoma doesn’t notice that his mouth has fallen open until he hears the sharp click of his teeth coming together when trying to formulate a response. (He winces.)

((He didn’t think it was *possible* to render him fully speechless anymore.))

“You could say that,” he answers at last, because six years of residency (and counting) in the foreigner-hostile Inazuma is certainly nothing to sneeze at. “I was born in Mondstadt, as that’s where my mother is from and where she still lives to this day, but I moved here a few years ago in search of my father, who returned to his homeland after over a decade away from his natal family.”

“Really now? That’s pretty cool! Don’t see too many people like you in this town– bunch’a merchants loitering around as they wait to get back to their home countries, the lot of them,” says the one-eyed woman, whom Thoma is starting to *strongly* suspect is not the mere merchant he’d originally assumed her to be. “They never find the same meaning to a place the way someone with a personal connection back here would, so they forever remain strangers in a strange land. Of course, maybe they’d find something worth calling home here if they went looking for it, but people are funny like that. Once they find a place to call home, they’ll do damn

near anything to keep it that way.”

Thoma looks around, wondering how many people have been stuck at customs here and for how long.

“By the way, the name’s Beidou.” The sailor’s voice draws his attention back to her as she grins wide like a sea dragon and proudly jabs a thumb to her chest. “Captain of *The Crux* from Liyue. Word on the sea has it that the fireworks for this year’s Lantern Rite have been held back at the export, so we’re here to meet with a Miss Nagano-hara and, ah, *expedite* the process.”

Beidou? Thoma furrows his brow. The name sounds familiar for some reason—

He gasps. “The—” he begins.

Beidou raises a finger to her smiling lips in a *shh* gesture. She winks (or maybe blinks?) and says, “The slayer of Haishan, scourge of the stormy seas.”

Thoma finally catches sight of the Electro Vision twinkling at the pirate’s hip. “Yes, the sailor whose crew can navigate through any storm,” he says. Tiny embers buried in the back of his mind spark back to life after years of dormancy, and the hope they bring to his heart feels so light and lovely he can’t help but to allow them to exist. “I know we’ve just met, so I hope this isn’t too forward of me, but I’d like to ask a favor of you, Captain.”

Beidou eyes the Kamisato crest clearly embroidered upon his servant’s uniform. “Favors from *The Crux* don’t come free,” she says, putting her hands on her hips, “but I’m listening.”

Thoma reaches into a little pocket he sewed into his grocery bag four years ago and pulls out an envelope, so old and worn that the paper has grown soft, its edges torn with age, and hesitantly offers it to the captain. “Can you deliver this to Mondstadt for me?”

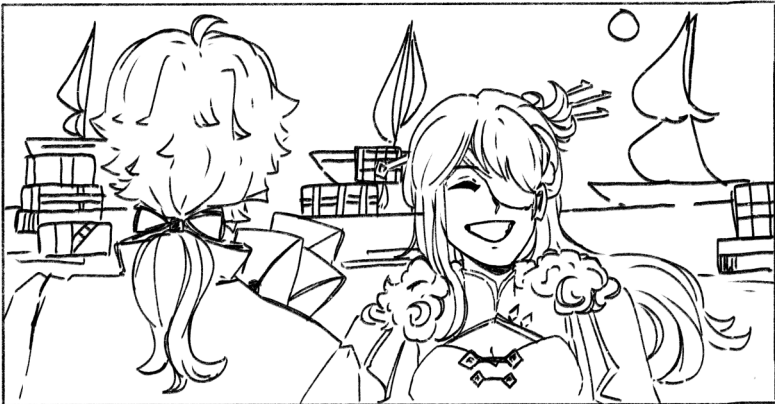
Beidou gingerly accepts the letter and looks over the outgoing address.

“*Maria Roth*,” she reads under her breath, when suddenly, her eyes light up with recognition. She points to him with the letter between her fingers. “Hang on a second. You wouldn’t happen to be Thomas Roth, would you?”

It’s been *years* since anyone’s called him by that name. While he hasn’t forgotten he had it at all, its sounds fall oddly on his ears, both familiar and strange at once.

“That’s me,” he jokes, even if the name no longer feels as if it *fits* the way it used to. It’s like he’s looking back at his own childhood handwriting: definitely his own, but indicative of a version of himself who no longer exists in that form. “What’s your price?”

“Aww, shucks, don’t worry about that. Prices for favors only apply to some more... *political* dealings I do,” Beidou says, waving him off with an expression that reads as part fondness, part irritation—kind of like a long-term love. She tucks his letter into her belt and pulls a small, brown-paper package out of a satchel at her hip. She offers it to him with far more gentility than Thoma expects from someone of her origin and profession. “This is from your mother.”



Thoma takes over four years’ worth of his mother’s letters from Beidou, mind racing. He has more of his own he’d like to send,

but he handed over the only one on his person. The rest sit in a drawer in his quarters. Unlike the first of their kind, they have never seen the inside of the post office; unlike the rest of its kind, he has never had the heart to put the first with its kin.

Thoma stares at the gift, stunned.

“Come now, I still have something from your father, too! They’re not letters, but I presume it’s just as important.”

Thoma looks up. “My father?” he asks. *The man whom I’ve seen neither hide nor hair since arriving in Inazuma?*

“Yup,” confirms Beidou, rooting around in her bag. “He retired from the crew a few months ago, so we dropped him off at Dornman Port in Mond quite recently.” She tosses him a little, red sachet. “Here. Happy Lantern Rite! Don’t spend it all in one place, now.”

Thoma doesn’t get the joke, since all he’s ever heard and known of Liyue’s Lantern Rite comes from that old Outrider Captain back in Mondstadt. Still, he plays along.

“I won’t,” he promises, tucking his mother’s letters under his arm to better look at his father’s gift, only to suddenly still.

It’s the omamori his father gave his mother before leaving for Inazuma, to give her good luck as she continued to raise him alone.

“Oh,” he says, once again dumbstruck.

“*Aiya*, there’s no need to start crying; he’s not *dead*.”

Beidou tries to hand him a handkerchief, but Thoma politely declines, pulling a hankie of his own out of his pocket.

“I just... I don’t know what came over me,” he says, a half-lie only because he doesn’t know its name. “I wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for him leaving, and I wouldn’t have stayed this long if I had been able to find him quickly.”

He looks around Ritou with fresh eyes. It’s changed a lot since he first washed ashore, but also not at all in the years since his immigration. The rows of temporary merchants’ homes, built when he was sixteen, have been lived in by many of the same people for months, if not *years* by this point.

There are a great many faces he’s come to recognize through his years of connecting with people, and very, very few he does not.

Despite this, the merchant town hustles and bustles about less these days than when it was hardly much more than an immigration port.

Homesickness.

(He knows how it goes.)

How are his old schoolmates? The Knights of Favonius and the Sisters of the Church? The new niece his mother told him about in her last letter? Are they working? Are they well? Are they all still happy; are they all still friends?

Who has sought refuge in the city, and who has departed on new adventures? The winds are ever-changing, and its city is no different.

((It’s practically *unfathomable* to know that he holds the answers in his hands after four years of disconnect.))

It evokes a very *stark* emotion within him, one he can’t seem to name.

It aches, like the childhood guilt of ignoring your mother calling you home for supper. Even so, the ache itself is twisted around (or perhaps even anchored in) a warm, core sense of belonging, one which assures him that he is not disobedient for staying out.

The people here are listless, though he can only relate by half. Most everyone sees an outlander in him; yet, he is not like the merchants, a stranger in a strange land.

He is home, but he is also missing somewhere.

(The feeling could almost tear him asunder.)

“Hey, kid— you okay?”

Thoma sputters as the one-eyed sailor gives him a firm clap on the shoulder. “Huh?”

“You were zoned out,” she explains.

“Sorry,” he says, apologies coming out of him like instinct. “Sorry,” he then repeats, because he realizes he said it first in Inazuma’s tongue.

Beidou grunts, probably meant to be a comforting acknowledgement, though it still comes off as rough around the edges. “Don’t think too hard; you’ll hurt yourself,” she warns, albeit jokingly.

Thoma laughs.

He tucks the omamori into his pocket for safekeeping and cradles the package of letters in his arm as he would a child. “What do you know of my father?” he asks.

Now it’s Beidou’s turn to cackle. “Oh, *loads*,” she replies. “He was with us for quite a few years, that man! Say, how would you like to come aboard *The Alcor* for a voyage someday, and I can tell you all about him as I show you how exactly we get through your Archon’s thunderstorm barrier?”

It's a very sudden offer, but as exciting as it sounds, Thoma can't find it in himself to seriously consider it.

"I'm afraid I'll have to decline, Captain," he says. "Unlike the unfortunate merchants here, I've found a place for myself in this land. I think that if I were to return to Mondstadt, *really* return with the intent to stay, I would *still* feel drawn back here to Inazuma, just as a sailor is drawn back to the sea. I'm sure you understand."

Beidou reaches out and ruffles his hair, which probably looks quite odd, considering how near her height he is. "Hah! Sure do, kiddo. Just know that my offer stands as long as *The Crux* is around."

"Thank you," he says, and it feels like he's opening an old, forgotten window to let the spring breeze in for the first time in ages. "I'll take you up on that someday, when I find time to visit my mother again, just as long as you can bring me back here to my lord and lady when I'm done."

Beidou huffs. "Of course! My crew is my family, and I'm sure you know all about that filial piety stuff from your dad. That means it includes you, too, now, Thomas."

There it is again, his other name. He thinks it's time to clear that up with her.

"Ah, right, by the way, my name here—" He looks the pirate woman in the eye and says: "It's actually *Thoma*."

THOMA IS TWENTY-ONE YEARS OLD when he gets engaged to his lady Kamisato Ayaka, much to everyone's— including his *own*— surprise.

The talks have been going on for at least a year by that point, ever since she came of age. As the invisible servant boy, the Kamisato Clan elders do not care if Thoma is in the room while they bemoan her lack of a betrothed and try, *desperately* so, to nag her into getting one.

“Little Ayaka,” says one of her uncles, and Thoma bristles on her behalf at the patronizing tone. “You’re growing up! One of these days, you will have to get married, and the time has come for you to choose a spouse!”

(Even though Thoma is focused on cleaning the bookshelf in front of him and can’t watch the scene play out for himself, he can still clearly imagine the way Ayato must be rolling his eyes at all this nonsense. After all, *he’s* the clan head; *he’s* still single; yet, curiously, he has never *once* been ordered to get married!)

Thoma hears his lady sheathe her sword in favor of a fan, which she opens with a practiced flick of her wrist.

“A spouse?” she asks, playing dumb.

(Thoma smiles to himself, wondering what his lovely lady has hidden up her sleeve this time.)

“Yes! At this point, just *naming* someone would be progress enough.”

Ayaka hums. The little bell she has tied to the end of her fan tinkles cheerfully as she flutters it in thought. Then, she shuts it with a soft *fwish*.

“Very well, then,” she says, as pleasant and demure as always.

She starts walking. Thoma pays her footsteps no mind (he has a job to do, after all) until he feels her tapping at his shoulder. He

finishes off the shelf and turns around, tucking the dust rag into his back pocket as he says, “Yes, M’lady?”

She takes his hand and presses her fan into the center of his palm, much to his confusion. He looks down at the fan, then up at Ayaka, then back down at the fan. All the while, she smiles sweetly up at him.

“I choose Thoma,” she says, and she takes his other hand, placing it over the fan as if to signify his new ownership over it.

And *oh*, how *everything* makes sense now.

Thoma’s head bolts up. “M’LADY??” he nearly shouts, the surprise alone rendering him unable to fully rein in his volume. She’s *never* been this forward before, not about *any* subject matter!

(And does this mean that all these years of subtle exchanges, have they truly been...?)

But Ayaka is already walking out the door– when did she start walking? He hadn’t noticed her starting to leave. Instinctively, he takes a few hurried steps after her, but he stops when the shock of Lady Ayaka proposing to him hits him once more, as if briefly afflicted by Overload.

He flicks his gaze over to the uncle and Ayato. The former has a face akin to that of a toad before it croaks, while the latter must hold himself steady against the doorway as he visibly struggles to hold back laughter for all of five seconds before he breaks.

“Well, it seems that *Little Ayaka* has chosen!” Ayato wheezes, making a mockery of the way the uncle had patronized her mere minutes ago. Ayato gestures grandly to Thoma, who feels his face heat up in embarrassment. “She wants Thoma!”

THOMA IS TWENTY-THREE YEARS OLD when the Vision Hunt Decree is passed into law.

When he first reads the news, posted on the bulletin board in the heart of Inazuma City, he doesn't know what to think. His first instinct is fear—panic drops a weight into his stomach, and his heart lurches in his chest.

Then, he remembers: *Ob, right, I'm a Mondstadter. They wouldn't take an outlander's Vision, just for political reasons... right?*

The train of thought makes him hesitate, however. He has long since obtained permanent residence in the country, and his engagement to Ayaka means that he'll soon be a full citizen as well.

His hand drifts to where his Vision hangs upon his belt. It is, without a doubt, an Inazuman Vision. It always has been.

(The danger he's in begins to dawn on him. It's been a long time since he has prayed to the Anemo Archon, but the words, "*Wind, hear me...*" fall from his lips regardless.)

The bulletin board notice speaks of Visions as obstructions to the Raiden Shogun's ideal of eternity. Vision bearers are anomalies among people. Anomalies, exceptions—these are what create differences, and differences are what erode the perpetual uniformity that makes up eternity.

Reading the notice several times over, Thoma wonders what he will be in the eyes of the Shogunate.

The answer hits him all at once: *it won't matter*. Inazuman or outlander—regardless of how he is labeled, he is still an exception in some way. It's only a matter of time before...

"Thoma?"

Ayaka's concerned voice pulls him out of his thoughts. Turning towards her, he relaxes a bit and greets her back. "M'lady. You're here early."

The Shirasagi Himegimi pulls out her fan and playfully hides everything but her eyes. “Am I now?” she coyly asks, and Thoma can tell she’s merely pretending to mull over his words. “Shall we go to tea, then?”

It’s neither a question nor an invitation, but Thoma is more than happy to play along as if it were either. “Of course, m’lady,” he says, bowing exaggeratedly as he gestures for her to lead the way. (He catches her quiet laughter and grins.)

He feels the stare of others on him more keenly than usual as he follows her through the city streets.

It’s odd. These sorts of things don’t usually bother him anymore, but then again, it’s also unusual for him to receive othering stares these days. The people here *know* him, after all. It’s taken him a long time to get to this point, but after the Kamisato Clan’s repeated and pointed acceptance of him as one of their own, the moments of disjunction between himself and the native Inazumans have only grown fewer and farther between.

(Or perhaps he simply hasn’t thought of himself as an outlander in forever.)

Thoma stares at the Vision secured to the back of Ayaka’s dress as he ushers her into Komore Teahouse, and his throat constricts a bit at the thought of his lady’s Vision getting taken away. She’s told him several times, in the quiet hours of the night when intimate secrets are best exchanged, what exactly it means to her: a coming-of-age symbol, a mark of her swordsmanship, a precious reminder of her worth as a leader— among other things.

Of course, knowing what he does about politics, she will be safe from the Tenryou Commission until the last possible moment. It would be *terrible* optics to strip the people’s beloved princess of her ambition while the changes are still new, so to do it without extreme reason is out of the question.

But all that hinges on Ayaka keeping her head down and showing

her deference to the Shogunate. While the *Shirasagi Himegimi* might be the perfect picture of nerveless poise in the minds of the people, Thoma knows that *Ayaka* hides a passionate streak beneath it all, like a blue flame so hot it chills instead of burns at the touch. And he knows (oh, how he *knows*) how she refuses to let go of the things she loves without a fight.

Like the time when they were still kids, and she chased Ayato all around the house and courtyard because he stole the last of those cakes imported from Liyue. Or the time when Yoimiya hid an important fireworks order in her hair ornament only to *lose it in the river*, and Ayaka turned to frost for the first time to sprint downstream after it. Or how he always sees her smuggling candy to Sayu because she wants the little girl to savor the sweetness of childhood for as long as she can.

Thoma knows she'd never sit idly by if he was in trouble. The fact that he still stands in this land is proof enough of that.

"Ayaka," he says so softly, it is barely more than a breath.

Save for Taroumaru, they are alone in Komore Teahouse, so of course she hears. She turns to him, wide, grey eyes filled with curiosity, and says, a little teasingly, "Thoma."

They settle into the high stools at Taroumaru's counter and give him their orders as normal, although there's a sense of unease growing in the space between his heart and his ribs. Thoma tries instead to focus on the way the dust catches the light of the mid-morning sun through the teahouse windows, but the inside of his head is still reeling from the notice board earlier.

"Her Excellency declared a Vision Hunt Decree today," Thoma says once Taroumaru nudges their orders over.

"I know," Ayaka quietly replies, setting her tea down. "I'm sorry. Ayato and I tried our best to fight it, but the other Commissioners teamed up and talked Her Excellency into it."

Thoma takes a bite of a dango. “It’s not your fault.”

“Perhaps.” Ayaka returns to her tea, pensive. “...Do you think it might be time for you to visit your mother for a while?”

A spark flares up in Thoma’s chest, and his Vision briefly flashes, as if resonating with his desires. “No, not yet,” he says instantly, shifting in his seat to face her. He reaches out and cups her face in his calloused hand, the intensity of his devotion burning warmly within him. “There are people I want to protect, to whom I am loyal to my dying breath, who would choose to stay here. I can’t just leave them behind.”

Ayaka puts her own hand over Thoma’s as she leans into his touch.

“Of course,” she says after they kiss. He rests his forehead against hers, and she presses her lips into the heart of his palm. “Then I will do everything within my power to keep you safe, my dear Thoma.”

THOMA IS TWENTY-FOUR YEARS OLD when the Traveler arrives on the shores of Inazuma.

She is bitter and exhausted from her endless search for her older brother, turning down Thoma's every offer of hospitality aside from help through the border until he arranges her audience with the Yashiro Commission.

She then sweeps through the nation like a monsoon and, through sheer force of will, manages to get the Vision Hunt Decree repealed. When it happens, it feels as if everyone, one by one, lets out a slow, quiet sigh of relief as the news swiftly circulates throughout the islands.

Thoma is ultimately little more than a tacit observer to her fight. The safety network he has cultivated through the years mistakenly slips but once; yet, it is still enough for the Tenryou to catch him unawares on the night he was meant to take Ayaka to the annual summer festival. While the Traveler risks her life for his against the Shogun, his escape leaves him languishing in Komore Teahouse for ages as a result.

(For her own safety, Thoma talks Ayaka out of confronting Her Excellency herself; while the people are strong, their strength lies in their collective resilience. They still need their princess for the power she wields to fight injustice.)

((Still, it pains him to see his love so ragged and forlorn when she climbs through the unlocked windows after a long day's work to visit him by candlelight. Perhaps he could have spared her this hardship had he been more vigilant, less *Mond*— maybe then, the conservatives still kicking in the Yashiro Commission wouldn't have hounded her so hard about his whereabouts every day.))

For all that the Shogun may try, however, nothing lasts an eternity. As close to forever his confinement may have felt, Thoma is set free in due time. The Inazuma he reenters feels altogether both brand new and entirely the same: the sun still shines upon

the islands, and the storm still swirls beyond the seashore, but the people are lighter and brighter.

Hope is alight in the air like Yoimiya’s fireworks.

“Would you ever want to move back to Mondstadt?” the Traveler, Lumine, asks him one day.



Thoma gives her a curious look. “Move? You mean permanently?” he asks, because of *course* he has plans to go back again someday—it’s almost *unacceptable* how long he’s taking to introduce his fiancée to his mother at this point— but to *stay*?

Lumine nods and puts down the bag of groceries he helped her haggle earlier. “This place is lovely and all, but it’s *stifling* compared to Mondstadt.”

“Ah,” says Thoma understandingly.

“Being an outlander is such a pain, too; I don’t know how you do it,” Lumine continues, stretching out her arms. “I know it gets

better once people get to know you, but it's so *aggravating* trying to get people to give you a chance at all. Even then, you constantly have to earn people's trust *over* and *over* again in order to get anything done because one person's trust gets you nowhere with anyone else."

"Yeah! Don't any of these people know how the reputation system works?" Paimon laments from inside the paper grocery bag. She smacks between words, obviously chewing on something in there. "These people should know better! How can *anyone* not trust Paimon after everything Paimon and Lumine have done for Teyvat?"

"The people here barely have access to news outside of Ina—Paimon, are you eating the lavender melons??"

Thoma watches Lumine fish out a wailing Paimon. Their argument draws stares from the other market folk, but when Thoma flashes them a friendly smile and wave, everyone decides that the situation is none of their business.

"To answer your question," Thoma blithely replies (once Lumine forces Paimon to agree to eat *only one melon in its entirety* instead of taking *two bites out of each melon* to see if she wanted to claim it for later, that is), "it really *was* tough the first few years I lived here. Obviously, there must be a fair number of conservatively-minded people in the government to get something like the Sakoku Decree passed in the first place, and since I've been connected to the Yashiro Commission essentially since the day I arrived... Well, let's just say that there was a time when I was not that welcome here. Even though my work as one of the Kamisato Clan's retainers gave me some protection, it painted a target on my back at the same time. It made me visible to the people in power. There have been multiple times I'm sure I would have been deported for some minor fumble had it not been for the connections I made while under their roof."

Paimon makes a fearful, childish noise. “That’s so scary! Paimon can’t imagine thinking Paimon is safe and loved, only to be stabbed in the back and tossed out like garbage...” She buries her face into Lumine’s shoulder.

“Don’t worry, Paimon; I won’t throw you out,” Lumine reassures the little fairy thing. “Think of all the calories I would waste by getting rid of perfectly good emergency food!”

“Hey!! That’s not funny!!!”

Paimon angrily disappears in a little puff of stars as the Traveler gets her brief laughs. “She’s just having a little tantrum in her private space,” she casually explains, as if Thoma knows how Paimon is able to slip through what appears to be the fabric of space and time to have tantrums. “But, I’d still like to know: If there have been so many people trying to get rid of you, how come you still stayed?”

“Well, even though neither Ayato nor Ayaka will tell me for *certain* exactly how far they’ve had to fight on my behalf, I couldn’t just *leave* the Kamisatos after everything they’d done for me now, could I?” Thoma puts his hands on his hips and gives Lumine a mock reprimanding look. He holds the pose for a second, then picks up her groceries and gestures for her to follow. “C’mon, we shouldn’t loiter so close to the market.”

Lumine runs a few steps to catch up with him, then tugs her bag off his shoulder so that she can carry it for herself. “I suppose, but... I guess I can’t imagine settling down somewhere without first finding what I’m looking for,” she admits. “Especially if it means I’m more free to be myself and do as I please elsewhere.”

“I don’t blame you,” Thoma replies. “You’re looking for your brother, after all. I’m sure he means the world to you.”

“He’s all I have left, in a lot of ways.”

Thoma acknowledges her with a hum.

“I got my Vision here in Inazuma,” he says when they stop in one of the city parks, atop a hill overlooking the outskirts of the city. “That’s a pretty significant part of why I’ve chosen to make my home here, even when given my outs. Sure, my mom’s in Mond, and I love and miss her dearly– but the people here are my family, too.”

A pause.

“Doesn’t it hurt?”

Thoma tilts his head at Lumine like a confused puppy. “Hmm?”

Lumine avoids meeting his gaze. “To know that you share a part of yourself with those who reject you,” she explains, voice soft and barely carrying over the breeze. “To know that the only half that matters to some people is the half they can otherize– doesn’t it *hurt*?”

“Ah.” Thoma feels a familiar pang in his chest when confronted by her questions, like an old man’s battle wounds warning him of a coming storm. “Yes.” He laughs, as if that will let these feelings out of him. “Yes, it has. And it still does sometimes.”

Lumine is quiet for a minute more. “Then how come you’ve never told Ayaka about it?”

Thoma’s heart skips a beat. (Because *seriously*– what could he have possibly said to have led her to *that* conclusion?)

((Not that she’s *wrong* or anything, but he has his reasons for wanting to know.))

Thoma shakes his head. *Well, she is a well-connected woman*, he reasons, and decides against questioning the matter aloud. “Well, at first, it was just because I didn’t think she *needed* to know,” he explains. “And it’s not as if I ever felt that Ayato needed to know either, so she’s not special in that regard! This isn’t something I’ve told either of the Kamisato siblings about. It’s just that the two of them have been nothing but kind to me ever since I landed here, and

I’ve never wanted either of them to mistakenly believe they had ever made it seem as if I was unwelcome.”

Despite explaining himself fully, Lumine continues to look at him expectantly.

Thoma sighs, and he starts to walk down the street, towards the statue of the Omnipresent God. “The Sakoku Decree is loosening up these days; the worst of it is almost certainly over now. The tension around outlanders should all fade away from here.” He stops at a railing overlooking the ocean, and he leans against it to better feel the caress of the sea breeze. “She already has so much to worry about, so many expectations to shoulder, and... as a child of the wind, I don’t want her to weigh herself down with my worries.”

Lumine joins him at the railing. “She loves you, Thoma,” she reminds him, and Paimon returns, refreshed from her tiny tantrum.

Thoma lets out a little snort of amusement. “That, she does,” he admits, musingly. Through the years, the surprise and bewilderment he used to feel at these reminders have lessened, replaced by a tender fondness in his chest. Because she’s right, and of course *Lumine* would know. Once you know her tells, it’s quite easy to realize that Ayaka wears her heart on her sleeve, and the Traveler, Thoma wryly notes, has a remarkable eye for people.

“I think you should at least talk to her about it,” Lumine continues, and her little companion nods so vigorously, her entire body bobs up and down in the air like a specter.

“Yeah! It’s like what Jean once told us! The most convincing couples in fiction are the ones who communicate with each other instead of just artificially padding out story time by creating a bunch of silly misunderstandings—”

“Paimon!” Lumine hisses, tugging Paimon sharply by the leg. “Jean doesn’t like it when people know she reads—”

Thoma waves them off. “It’s fine; Jean was always into romance novels and such, at least from what I remember growing up,” he says. “We all have things we never really grow out of.”

Lumine heaves a visible and audible sigh of relief.

(Just how many secrets weigh down this woman’s shoulders? Thoma wonders, though, again, he deliberately chooses not to pry.)

Luckily, the conversation shifts to something more lighthearted thanks to Paimon’s two-second attention span—a welcome break from the heaviness of the previous subject matter. Before anyone knows it, the hangout is over.

Thoma bids goodbye to the Traveler and Paimon outside the Kamisato Estate, then returns inside.

“*Ayaka*,” he calls as he pads quietly through the halls.

“Yes?” she answers when he stands before her study door. “Come in.”

Thoma enters, and for a moment, he is taken aback by the sight of his fiancée. The fading light, streaming through the window behind her, halos her silvery hair in a golden glow; her expression, though tired from a long day’s work, still softens when their eyes meet. He’s seen her like this more times than he can count, but like that of the red dawn over the wine-dark sea, it takes a bit of his breath away with its beauty each and every time.

“I’m home,” he says, soft as snowfall. (He’s proud of how silently the door slides shut behind him: He greased those joints himself, thank you very much.)

Ayaka rests her cheek on her palm, a stray hair falling over her face. “Welcome back,” she replies fondly. “How was your day?”

“Fine,” he answers, settling into a seat across from her. “Lumine and her little friend Paimon tagged along for chores in Ritou. They needed someone to talk to about the troubles of being an

outlander, and I was more than happy to hear them out. And yours?”

“Tiring,” Ayaka admits, shifting her papers off to the side. “Preparing the petition for Her Excellency to repeal the Sakoku Decree has left Ayato swamped in paperwork, so today has been another day of picking up the slack.”

Thoma hums, and a pleasant quiet settles between them. Ayaka begins to idly sift through the things on her desk, placing each object back where it belongs one by one with the utmost care.

“Still,” she continues, her focus still on her desk, “it admittedly *has* been a nice reprieve from my usual social work.”

“Careful, now; you’re starting to sound like Sangonomiya,” Thoma jokes, despite the aching lump that grows in his throat.

His lady looks at him, meets his eye with her piercing grey gaze.

Thoma freezes.

She studies him sharply for a spell, then releases the tension between them with the unfurrowing of her brow. “I love you.”

It sounds like a reminder.

(Maybe it is one.)

((Maybe he needed it.))

Thoma exhales, and the wind he creates tugs away the strain in his throat so that he may speak again.

“I know.”

(I love you, too.)

“So...” Ayaka falters, her mouth open to say something further, but the stiffness in the air must make her hesitate. (Thoma feels it, too.) Still, she pushes through. “What’s wrong? You seem like there’s been something bothering you.”

It truly does not feel like he is allowed to say. *He* is the one meant to carry the judgements of others upon his back, but he cannot shield his lady from the ugly thing upon his shoulders if he sets it down between them. It's as if speaking about this weight means it will immediately crush them both after.

“Has it ever been a burden to you that I don’t look Inazuman?”

The words settle into the air like a thick, heavy fog. Thoma finds himself staring at his fiancée for a while, at all the little details of her face he has long since memorized, from the mole beneath her left eye, to the little fringe at the edge of her bangs she always trims a little bit unevenly to match (*to mock*) her brother.

“What do you mean?” she asks.

Thoma gestures to himself, uncertain. “I don’t *look* like I belong here.”

Ayaka cocks her head, chin still cupped in her palm, and Thoma almost sighs. Eleven years speaking a language that likes to dance around its true meaning has, at times, made it hard to be vulnerable when using it, and it’s starting to look like Ayaka is getting back at him for all the times he’s prodded at her to speak her mind more.

“Everyone expects you to live this idealized version of an Inazuman life. To many, you’re the model of what a cultured and well-educated woman should be. You’re meant to lead an exemplary life for the citizenry.

“People *judge* you and Lord Ayato whenever I accompany you to events. *Badly*. People don’t see me and think that the thunder of Inazuma is a part of me just as much as it is a part of them. They

look at me as if I'm stealing my place here from someone and you both are traitors for letting it happen.

"They see an outsider, cherry picking parts of them for my own shallow pleasures because they think I don't– that I *can't*, even– understand what it means to be a part of Inazuma, both for better and for worse. Even if they'd understand if they knew a bit more about me, it doesn't remove the weight of their first judgements.

"All of this simply because I don't *look* Inazuman. Regardless of who I really am or what I really know, I don't fit into that vision of a perfect life everyone expects you to lead, but you chose to build your life with me anyway."

Speaking feels like reeling in a deep-sea line and puking up fish-hooks at the same time. He is the monster hiding in the depths of his own chest and throat *and* the fisherman struggling to pull it up at the same time.

"You *are* Inazuman," Ayaka reminds him, gentle, but firm.

And he knows this.

(But sometimes it feels like he shouldn't be.)

((It aches like some sort of grief to admit this to himself.))

She continues without pause. "You understand what it means to be Inazuman just as well as anyone else here."

"You still feel the weight of people's expectations. I *know* you do," he counters. She is dodging the question, and he is *begging* her for an answer, even though he fears what he believes to be the truth. He *has* to know if he's inadvertently adding to that weight.

Ayaka hums in thought. "If you put it that way, well..." For want of a fan, she spends a moment tapping her lip with her little finger, then sits up straight and proper to look at him fully. "If you put it that way, I'm no more burdened by your appearance than you are."

Thoma blinks. *That's silly; of course you feel the weight–*

Ayaka lights a candle and puts out the match with a touch of Cryo.

His train of thought stops as her carefully crafted meaning falls in place all at once.

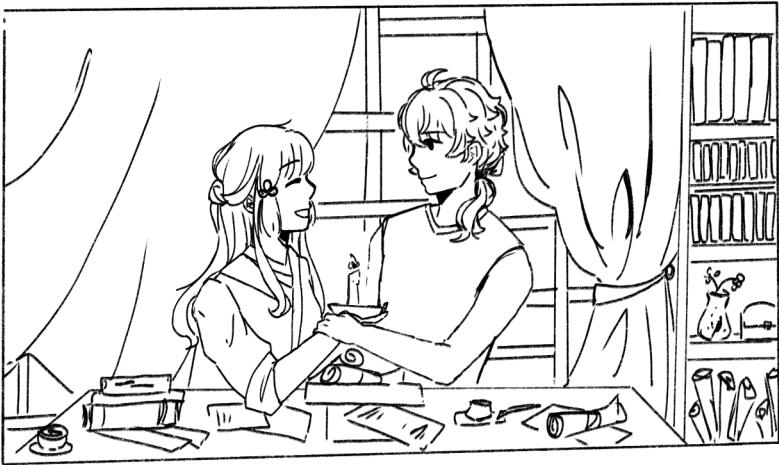
“Oh,” he says aloud, a little dumbly, all things told.

His lady, the *Shirasagi Himegimi*, feels the weight of everything except perhaps that of the world itself. It's part of her job as the princess, and she carries it with a grace which rivals that of a heron.

But *Ayaka* is strong. *Ayaka* is his partner. She sees his struggles for what they are and is willing to share in them in much the same way he eases her burdens by caring for the household and accepts the responsibility that comes with bearing the Yashiro's name.

Twilight has lain a blue filter over the land, save the pale red-orange glow of their little candle's flame.

Ayaka stands, picking up the candle holder to bring the light along. She smiles warmly at him.



Thoma's Vision glows with his decade-old passions; he feels lighter than the wind as he joins her by her side. He leans in gently to take the candle from Ayaka, but to his surprise, she does her best to hold it out of his reach.

"Allow me to see you home," she says, quoting the old joke at him with the utmost sincerity. He's surprised she remembers it, considering how many years it's been since he last used it.

"Oh, but my lady!" he jokes back, "We already live together!"

"I know." Ayaka puts her free hand on his shoulder and lifts herself onto her tiptoes to kiss him. "I'm glad you've found your way home, my love."

– NOTES & COMMENTS–

Titled *Disjunct* as the fic is meant to focus on the moments when Thoma suddenly felt out of place in Inazuma when, by all other measures, he should have fit in (and *would* have, had he looked more like his Inazuman father). I like how jarring the word “disjunct” feels in one’s mouth; I think it feels evocative of the way I tried to portray that feeling of sudden awareness when you realize that people see you as an Other.

I waffled around a lot between posting this in full or just posting an altered version of age 23 or 24 as a pure Thomaya oneshot, so if you’re reading this, that means I didn’t chicken out. Yay.

I hope that at the very least, this has been read in a charitable light. So rarely do you see people explore what it means to be mixed race and how that affects a person; it’s just one more epithet to a lot of people. Usually, a person’s more contrasting (“exotic”, if you will) half will be emphasized by the narrative and fandom. Maybe it’s because I don’t look much like the half I most resonate with culturally that I want to fight to showcase the ways these characters are also the *same* as those around them, the ways they can be— *are*— both. (And yes, I have a lot of thoughts about Ganyu as well.)

So, as slim as my audience may be, if the thoughts and feelings presented in this fic resonated somewhere, **know that I see you.**

Anyway. Thank you for seeing me.

