

Series Title: Greenlings
Book ONE: Ai no Hanashi (Story of Love)
Chapter Number: Prologue
Author: D. Sanders

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The Lands of Ardfel were facing change. The King was growing old, and for too long let his council of lords rule their prefectures as they saw fit. So long as the tributes to the crown were paid, King Leuoe paid no heed. His son however watched and grew afraid. Times would change and not for the better if he did not stay vigilant and gather around him men and women he could trust. Every year the greenlings grew fewer and fewer, returning to their hidden cities in the far north and south, beyond greater Ardfel's borders.

Inuoe knew the signs of danger were on the horizon if the fair folk were fleeing in droves, and no amount of persuasion could convince his father otherwise.

So Inuoe would wait, watch, learn and prepare.

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Keiji sat listening to his foster mother's labored breathing, worried that each breath would be her last. Every year it seemed to worsen, she was old, far older than anyone he knew or had known in his short fifteen years. Orphaned and left to die, she had found him and raised him, his heritage a mystery. His fiery red hair and strangely bright peacock blue eyes were also a mystery, no one in this little Greenling village ever had such coloring, no greenling did, only humans had such coloring, but only greenlings had the magic sense.

Keiji had both, very diluted but it was there. He had intuition and cunning, he knew when danger was near, he could be silent as the cat in the night, and he was far too quick witted and smart for his own good, curiosity tended to get him in severe trouble while growing up.

But for all his devilish pranks, he was well loved - it was impossible not to love the impish redhead, even if he drove you crazy with his ornery streaks.

“Now Keiji don’t look at me with the death fear in your eyes. What have I told you my little seedling? I am not so close yet. One more year in me lad.” She rasped taking his young hand in hers.

“I know, it’s just...”

“It’s just you don’t like letting go. You may act like a thistle amongst roses, but you are the orchid in bloom in your heart where it matters.” She smiled as she sat up to drink the tea Keiji had brewed for her and sat on her table nearby.

“Keiji, you have a grand future ahead of you, I have seen it, you will make me proud.”

“You keep saying that. Why won’t you tell me your visions?” Keiji asked hearing her say this day after day without so much as a hint of what she had seen was frustrating.

“Because it is a path you must walk on your own, without my direction. All I will tell you, and all that you need know is this... When you find the snow that is soft and warm to the touch, that makes your heart skip and yearn, hang onto it, that is yours and only yours.”

“Again with the snow? Mama, you can’t hold snow, nor is it soft and warm. You’re senile.”

The old woman laughed until she gasped for air slapping Keiji’s knee where she lay. “My dear, dear boy. You will see. You will see.”

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A youth who looked far younger than his years due to malnutrition and years of abuse sat huddled in the corner of his chambers - an iron collar around his neck chained him to a central point on the floor. He was born of hate, a bastard son to a human lord, his mother a greenling taken captive on a whim. He was never meant to be; he was a lord's lustful shame, and a woman's worst nightmare. The only reason he still drew breath was his father's twisted sense of guilt. He was barely alive, he ate what he could manage to wrestle away from the hunting dogs that belonged to his much older brothers, and being small and shackled he didn't manage to win much food.

His Father's death just made his situation worse; his brothers humiliated him, and beat him. He was a game to them, every evening he was brought into the main hall for the dinner hour, made to stand in a corner and watch all the court feast, then the dogs were brought in and the leftovers tossed out onto the floor where he'd have to fight for his days rations.

The iron heavy around his neck a constant reminder he was half greenling and they feared his sense. Only iron made it impossible for him to use whatever gifts he'd inherited from his mother.

He'd never known a day where the iron wasn't there, but he knew, deep down he knew he was strong, why else did they keep him bound. His hair was the sign they feared. The telltale sign he was gifted. From his birth, he had hair of the most pure and pristine white. It never held color - the magic he had been born into constantly bleached his hair and allowed no pigment. He had no other body hair apart from his hair and eyebrows. Even after puberty came and went, he still remained as before, his human blood had lost the battle in his make up, he was more greenling in his creation, and that was what he thought caused his father and brother's to fear most. He was an unknown variable, and they made sure they caged him so his full potential would never be realized.

All of these factors the youth could bear, even his name or lack thereof was a burden he had grown accustomed to. He had never been given a proper name, he was called what he was, a Bastard. It hurt but such torment wouldn't kill him. The only suffering that caused him to wish he'd never been born was the suffering of others because of him.

If anyone showed him pity or worse kindness, Akui, the eldest brother brought a swift end to them. Often killing them in front of the poor boy to drive home the point he should always be alone, to make a friend would be to sign their death warrant.

To this end, the boy called Bastard, never uttered a word, never spoke, never showed emotion, just blindly followed orders, and existed and ceased to live. The rumors he killed those who showed him kindness circulated but were not believed. The people knew better, they knew the boy wouldn't kill, but they knew death did come from another hand, so they avoided him.

They pitied in silence, and watched the youth turn ever more into a living statue. Cold, distant, and devoid of happiness, a creature of extreme sorrow and all those who bore witness to his torment, held their tongues out of fear, kept their distance to spare themselves as much as to spare the boy any more death on his conscience.

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One more year to the day and she was gone. Keiji had tried to remain in that little house on his own, but her memory was everywhere. His once happy home had turned to sorrow, he lasted a year before he could bear it no longer and with a heavy hand he boarded up the windows, grabbed a sack full of rations, his bow, his dagger, his sword and left his small village in the high forested mountains and began his journey.

He had no direction, no purpose, but he was a strong lad of seventeen summers, tall, handsome, quick of foot and quicker of mind, he had no doubts he would be able to survive. His fellow villagers came out to wish him well, gifting him trinkets to protect him as he left their secluded sanctuary.

The world of men was vast and volatile. They tried to convince him to stay, but everyone knew Keiji's path would lead away from them one day, that day had finally come.

"Kojiro Keiji, when you return, you must bring with you the snow. It is important that you do so." The village mage, elder Ryuen, spoke as he tied a smooth blue river stone, engraved with the symbol of protection, and attached to a leather lace around Keiji's neck.

"Again with the snow? Don't we get enough up here in winter without me bringing back more?"

"Cheeky boy. Kojiro Hana should have boxed your ears more for that tongue. You will know when you find it, and then bring it here. Hana told you this and I have seen it too. We cannot tell you more, and you know that too. Patience was never one of your virtues."

Keiji just rolled his eyes.

"Nor when to be respectful of your elders. Be safe young one, the world needs you."

"The world needs me like it needs another war. I'll be fine." Keiji waved over his head as he walked down the path.

"That is precisely why the world needs you both." Ryuen sighed and spoke to the wind as Keiji disappeared beyond the bend.

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Keiji had been wandering most of the spring and summer and decided that since autumn and winter was on the horizon he'd find himself a job that would keep him indoors for the bitter seasons, he could always continue his travels in the good weather after all. So he pondered his options one night as he sat in a pub in a small village and listened to the patron's conversations.

"I hear his Lordship Kanashimi is looking for a guard for the Bastard."

"He'll nary find one, it's a death sentence."

"The Bastard wouldn't kill a fly. You don't believe those rumors."

"No, but every poor fool ever to work that position has either disappeared or turned up dead. No thank you. Pay or no pay it's not worth it."

Ever one for a challenge Keiji finished his extremely watered down stout, wiped the froth from his upper lip, grabbed his sack, and headed for the door. Tipping his head to the group of men he'd been eavesdropping on.

"Thank you for the job tip." He winked as he spoke and gleefully watched the older men choke on their brews.

"Lad are you daft? It's a death sentence!"

"It's a challenge. I like a challenge."

"It's suicide!"

“It’s an adventure.”

“It be your tombstone laddy.”

And with that Keiji was on his way to Kanashimi Keep, ancestral home of the Kanashimi clan, the seat for the ruling lords of the Kana Prefecture, the last human domain in the north before the greenling lands and the vast forests and mountains began. He’d been wandering about the Kana prefecture for months doing odd jobs here and there, getting used to the human settlements and listening to the rumors milling about.

Always one to gather information for his own interests, Keiji thought this venture worth the danger to learn more about the interesting politics that clung to humans like a plague. Intrigue and plotting, for a mind like Keiji’s it was an irresistible puzzle waiting to be solved.

Being reckless by nature, Keiji wasted no time in pursuing this path laid before him. If worse came to worse he had no doubt he could easily escape and head for greener pastures.

How hard was it going to be to guard one person? From the sounds of things he was nothing to concern himself over, he’d just have to watch Lord Akui Kanashimi and when the winds of favor shifted Keiji would be long gone.

He may be reckless, but he was no one’s fool after all.

Or so he thought...

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“Drifting Snow”
Author: D. Sanders

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Keiji reached Kanashimi Keep during the evening dinner hour and when he stated his business to the servant who greeted him at the gates he was certain the poor bastards eyes had fallen from their sockets.

“Please spare me the warnings, I’ve heard them. Will you take my request to his Lordship please?” Keiji stated leaning up against the doorframe and crossing his arms across his chest.

“It’s your funeral.” The old man said and disappeared leaving Keiji to wait at the door.

“Your lordship, begging your pardon. But a young mercenary be at the door, he’s heard you are looking for a keeper.” The old man bent half over in submissiveness as he told his master of the visitor.

Akui watching the dogs and his youngest half sibling fight over rations chuckled. “So bring him here. He can watch too.”

The servant bowed and went to retrieve the redheaded youth from the door.

Keiji carefully kept his reaction in check, as he was lead into the hall full of taunts and hollering. There on the floor a painfully thin boy was half being mauled by a rather large mastiff, over a mutton bone with hardly enough meat on it to sustain a child of four. The boy was filthy, his long hair a riot of snarls and tangles, his clothes made of discarded burlap tied together with rope to hide his nakedness. It was appalling. The greenling being abused was against all laws of Ardfel.

The Greenlings or Fair Folk were protected from harm by law in an ancient treaty between Ardfel's first king and the Greenling Elder's council. Keiji bit his tongue and bowed to the handsome dark haired man in the Lord's seat at the high table.

Keiji noticed the handsome face, and the trim physique, but he always did notice a man in good form, it was in his nature and Akui was a man in the prime of his life, thirty summers, fit, strong, handsome and infinitely cruel. Keiji could feel the perverse joy of watching the small white haired youth positively saturate him with negative energy. It made Keiji's skin crawl, but he smiled, bowed and put on an indifferent air. Humans could be very easy to deceive, they gave out plenty of signals Keiji could read like a book and then act accordingly.

It was times like this Keiji was thankful his human heritage was what was dominant in his features and coloring. Unless they stripped him down to see he had no body hair, they'd never know he was half greenling. Greenlings only had hair in three shades, Green for those born with the healing arts, Blue for the common folk, with little to no sense beyond simple witchery or rune reading, or the rarest of them all Pure White, the mage class.

Humans achieved white hair only with age or a birth defect; a greenling with white hair was pure power, adepts of the highest order. Ryuen was one such mage, and Keiji had always admired his village elder, and the restraint from temptation he used when applying his senses to the world around them.

Their eyes came in only four shades. The lightest of blues, violet, gold or green, or a mixture of said colors. The shades were also never darker than the Violet of Amethyst, or Peridot Green, blue topaz, or goldenrod.

Those with greenling blood in them were usually painfully obvious to recognize.

Except in Keiji's case. Bright red hair like an over-ripe apple and eyes that mimicked a peacock feather's iridescent-blue hue, much too dark for greenling stock, and an oddity for a human as well, but still closer to human coloring than a greenling. Save for his one concession to his greenling heritage with his total lack of body hair, you'd never be able to tell at all.

And even then all he had to do was claim lice infestation and he'd been forced to shave. A simple lie to prevent knowledge of his dual heritage he held the upper hand.

He was eternally grateful of this fact too seeing as Lord Kanashimi blatantly disregarded Ardfel law and was publicly torturing a greenling right in his very hall as dinner entertainment.

"I've been informed you're here for the Keeper position." Akui said eyeing Keiji over the rim of his goblet.

"I am my lord."

"And why should I give this position to you?"

"Pardon my being bold my Lord, but the rumors I hear of it being dangerous have piqued my interest. I like a good challenge."

Akui laughed and pointed toward the boy on the floor. "The Bastard is challenging. He's killed all his previous Keepers have you heard that?"

"I have. It is why I am here."

"You have balls lad. And seeing as I am in need urgently of a keeper, I'll not bother with anything more formal. The rules are simple, Keep him locked and guarded in his room. Do not coddle him,

do not trust him and do not show the creature kindness or pity. He's a foul blight on this family and will be treated as such. I am away to court in the capital on the morrow, you have excellent timing lad. I will be gone until spring. Your duties will be simple. He feeds with the dogs once a day normally. But seeing as the dogs will be coming with me, feed him once a day from the kitchen scraps. No more. Keep him inside, he must never go outside, he remains within the keep at all times and in his chamber. Your chamber will be next to his, do not expect conversation, he's a mute and a simpleton." Akui said as the servants began to clear the table and the youth huddled near the hearth trying desperately to gnaw the marrow from a bone. It was all he managed to scrounge for himself this night. Keiji's stomach lurched, the poor... Bastard.

"I understand. If he gets out of line do I have any limits to my method of punishment for disobedience?" Keiji asked and knew he hit the mark when Akui smirked.

"You think like a mercenary, I like that. Just do not kill him, if he needs to be brought back into line, you've no need to spare the rod."

Keiji bowed and Akui smiled. "Remember, no kindness or pity, he's a murdering Bastard. You start now. When he finishes eating, take him back to his chambers." He began then turned to address the boy directly.

"BASTARD! This is your new Keeper, obey him while I am away!" Akui said and the youth's eyes went wide with terror, and Keiji knew the look for what it was, not terror of him, but terror FOR him.

Keiji waited until Akui had left the room and the rest of the underling lords and ladies left before he cautiously moved within a whisper's earshot, his body language looked bored and his face could only be seen by the youth.

“Look, I know the rumors. I know what goes on, don’t be afraid of or for me kid. I can take care of myself. It’ll just be you and me for the fall and winter, so let’s start this off right. The name is Keiji and I may not look it, but I’ve a few tricks up my sleeve.” Keiji winked as his eyes met the boy’s.

Such sorrow was contained in pale lavender-blue eyes Keiji wanted to weep. They looked right into his soul and his heart lurched in empathy. They were not the eyes of a simpleton; there was much going on behind those beautiful eyes. All of it filled with despair.

“Leave.” Came the soft almost inaudible tenor. The voice sounded older than the youth appeared.

“You speak?”

“I am not mute no. I choose not to speak. If you stay, you’ll die. Leave while you can... Please.”

The voice was trembling with fear.

“No. And we’ll talk about this later. First let’s get you to your room and food. You look half starved.”

“They won’t give you food for me.”

“I have some in my bag, come on let’s move people are coming.”

“Yes they are... how did you know?”

“We’ll talk later Kid, let’s move.” Keiji said grabbing the chain with disgust, even through his glove the iron practically burned, the poor kid must be in agony.

He turned and gave a quick wink to the boy. "I SAID MOVE IT ... NOW MOVE." Keiji gave a tug to the chain but the way he held it protected the boy from the tug. It was all for sound and show. He was just pretending to be cruel for the benefit for anyone eavesdropping, the boy followed meekly, but curious. This stranger was hardly older than he was, and so far being smart about his actions.

Maybe he did have a few tricks, maybe this one would live – There was a glimmer of hope at last.

Maybe this handsome one would be able to stay -- the boy sincerely hoped so. Out of all his keepers, this one was by far and away the youngest and most appealing to the eye to look upon, and not to mention so far the smartest. The bastard held his breath as he directed Keiji to his chamber.

Once inside and behind a closed and bolted door Keiji turned and let the bravado drop. "Sit down."

"Bolt me to the floor."

"Not a hope in hell." Keiji said as he gently took the shorter youth by the elbow and maneuvered him toward the bed. "Sit, let me see your neck."

The youth obeyed and Keiji gently moved the mass of snarled hair to the side and inspected his neck it was rubbed raw from the iron, and painful blisters were evident. "Son of a whore. Hang on Kid. I may not be able to take that damned thing off... yet. But I can help a little until then." Keiji said moving to his sack and pulling out a bottle with a sweet smelling oily substance in it. He liberally poured it over the youth's neck and the audible sigh of relief was practically music to Keiji's ears.

“Better?”

“Much. What is that?”

“Burn ointment. My Foster mother taught me how to make this when I was a kid.” Keiji smiled as he put the stopper back in the bottle and raided his sack further, tossing the boy a few strips of dried beef. “That’s not much, but more than you’ve had eat up, I’ve more for later, we don’t want to make you sick with too much too soon Kid.”

The youth didn’t need to be told twice and practically wolfed down the offerings. He finished quickly as Keiji discovered the door adjoining their rooms. “I take it this is my room Kid?”

“It is, and I’m not a kid.”

Keiji quirked an eyebrow and turned to look at the boy sitting on the bed, appraising thoroughly, “No? Just how old are you then?” Keiji asked expecting him to be no more than fourteen.

“I am sixteen, almost seventeen springs.” He was almost Keiji’s age, a little less than a year separated them.

“Okay, my apologies then. You don’t look it. But then it’s hard to tell anything in the state you are currently. I think a bath is in order, and then a comb.” Keiji said going into his room and calling a servant to bring him a tub and water. No one had to know it was for the boy and not for him.

“Akui will be furious. Don’t risk it.” The boy began to protest and Keiji held up a hand.

“Akui will have his arse on the road in the morning and will not return until spring. I think we can toss mud on you then, for now, you need this. And I need this, no offense, but you stink of dogs.”

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be, I hardly see this as your fault. It makes me positively ill to see this. I'm on your side here kid. Let me help."

"I'm not a kid."

"I know, I know. It's better than what they call you, and I refuse to call you. So cope with it."

The youth smiled at this and bowed his head. "You win. Call me whatever you wish."

"Until I can think of something appropriate, kid will suffice." Keiji said as the tub arrived.

Once the servants were gone and the tub filled Keiji bolted his door and then retrieved his charge through the connecting door way.

"Strip." Keiji said as he rummaged for soap in his bag. He got an eyeful as he turned around.

He could see the poor lad's ribs and hipbones he was so thin. However, there was truth to his words, he was no mere boy. Just small of stature for his age, stunted growth was common if he wasn't fed properly, and that could be rectified if he gave the lad something to eat, everything else was just as it should be. Keiji swallowed hard and was grateful when the youth submerged himself in the water. Keiji tossed in the soap.

"You work on your bits kid. I'll see what I can do about all this hair." Keiji said dumping water over his head and setting to work with soaps and a sturdy comb.

It took a good two hours, and the water had grown murky and stone cold by the time they finished. Keiji's mouth had gone dry and the youth stood before him wearing only one of Keiji's shirts. His long hair was braided and hung over his shoulder as he stood looking in the mirror, Keiji behind him.

He was painfully beautiful to look at, even for the fairest of Greenling women; the lad would give her a run for her money. He was, in a word, exquisite.

"That cannot be me."

"Amazing what dirt can hide. No?" Keiji asked coming up behind him to smile at him in the mirror over his shoulder. Then rubbing more ointment on his neck to replace what had been previously washed off. The damn collar was severely pissing Keiji off now. Such beauty should not be marred, and this was going to leave a scar unless a healer attended it. The boy almost purred as Keiji applied the salve.

"Feels good?" Keiji asked his breath fanning the boy's ear causing him to shiver.

"Very. I will nary be able to thank you."

"I'll think of something eventually." Keiji said moving the youth's braid from one shoulder to the other so he could apply the ointment to the other side, and he stopped a moment to look at the fine strands.

Soft and warm, like small drifts of snow as they lay in his hand, like snow... like snow – Keiji's breath hitched as he lifted his gaze to the mirror and Blue eyes met lavender and Keiji knew.

"Yuki."

“What?”

“Yuki, it means snow in the ancient language. I think that suits you.” Keiji smiled as he stepped closer and took a deep breath and tried to hide his now suddenly all too aware senses. Damn that old woman, she was right.

“Yuki. I like that.” The youth said oblivious to Keiji’s sudden awkwardness, as he turned to face him.

“Thank you Keiji. So very much.” Yuki said as he smiled a dazzlingly bright smile that sent Keiji to his spiritual knees. His heart skipped, his pulse raced, and in his hands he still held that glorious man of drifting snow.

“...That will be yours and yours alone.”

Keiji closed his eyes and his foster mother’s voice echoed in his head. He almost felt faint.

He snapped to his senses however when he felt Yuki lean against him, or rather sag. His heart raced for other reasons now. “Yuki? Are you all right?”

“I... so... tired.” Yuki began then literally fainted into Keiji’s arms.

“Shit, my fault. You’re still a long way away from good health, and here I have you in a cold bath. Damn it I know better.” Keiji said moving to put Yuki in bed, only to stop short, that bed was filthy. He wasn’t about to put Yuki in that thing until he had it deloused.

He put Yuki in his bed instead. "If Mama was right, you're going to be here eventually anyway. I promise to be a good boy... for now. You are certainly not a kid, and are without a doubt the most beautiful man I've ever laid eyes on, so just so you know now, when you're better, all promises are null and void." Keiji said as he pulled the blanket up over him and gently and chastely kissed a sleeping brow.

"Goodnight, Yuki." Keiji whispered as he blew out his candles and crawled in beside the youth who in one evening had changed his life forever.

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Keiji awakened as was his wont to do just before dawn, old habits of doing chores at first light had made his inner alarm keen, and like clockwork, Keiji was awake as dawn promised to break the horizon.

During the night, Yuki's braid had come unraveled from its knot and Keiji awoke to the soft strands, wave after wave from where it had dried in its plait, splayed across the pillow and his chest. He took a handful and gently inhaled the aroma of the soap that still lingered.

It was perhaps the softest, most fine hair he had ever touched, and if Yuki ever decided to cut it, he'd weep. Hair like his was never meant to see the business end of a pair of shears.

As Keiji lay there in the predawn darkness, he listened to the sounds of activity, it appeared Akui and his small entourage had indeed already begun making ready to leave at first light, and in the hustle and bustle had totally forgotten about Yuki. As Keiji expected they would, which was all fine and dandy to him, since he had absolutely no intention of moving from this bed until Yuki awakened from his much needed rest.

Wild horses wouldn't be able to budge him from this bed and he was relishing every moment spent in this young man's close proximity.

It wasn't every day your *Koishii Koibito* or as the humans called it, your Beloved Lover or Soul Mate was handed to you on a silver platter. Sometimes the old Greenling language just described things more appropriately.

Because had someone told Keiji twenty-four hours earlier that he'd be laying beside the one person he'd spend the rest of his days with by the dawn he'd have laughed and called you daft.

He'd always been a casual lover, whatever flight of fancy he followed until he grew bored or vice versa. He was no stranger to intimate liaisons, but nor was he extremely wanton either. He may have been casual about his relationships, but he had also been extremely picky about them too.

Now he was in a quandary, because now he had senses awakened within him that defied all explanation, he felt the presence of Yuki under his skin, literally. It was like his entire Greenling side came surging to the surface and refused to be ignored. Being a *Koishii Koibito* pair was extremely rare, even for Greenlings. Knowing about it and experiencing the sensations were two entirely different things, and Keiji had seen a *Koibito* couple, he was aware, and yet it still caught him off guard when he himself fell into one such pairing.

What was Yuki going to feel? He had been devoid of anything even remotely resembling affection. How was he going to react when he discovered their bond?

Keiji could only pray to the gods for guidance, he'd have to take this slowly and one step at a time. The last thing he wanted was for Yuki to be inundated with too much too fast and run scared.

Hell Keiji was considering running for the hills at this point in time as well to stave off his own fears of commitment. Yuki would be a rather large responsibility until he managed to spread his own wings and learn how to fly solo.

He was a man, but still a child in so very many ways.

So was Keiji for that matter, but at least he had some experience in life to draw from.

Yuki was like a newborn babe in that aspect. There was a whole world out there he'd never even heard of let alone seen.

Yuki's education came first, then and only then could they move forward together as equal partners.

Keiji hoped his patience would last, Yuki was a rather large and beautiful temptation despite the fact Keiji could feel his *Koibito's* very pulse.

It matched his own. Sometime during the night even their heartbeats has synchronized.

They were a bonded pair, whether they liked it or not.

Keiji was lost in thought, considering all the possibilities and trying to think what to do, when Yuki stirred. Only slightly, and only enough movement to make Keiji's entire body feel like it had melted and become one with the mattress. Yuki had turned on his side, and his cheek came to rest against Keiji's shoulder. He was positively radiant to look at as the first rays of dawn filtered into the room.

“I could really get used to being your pillow.” Keiji murmured with a smile evident even in his voice, as he brushed an errant lock of hair out of Yuki’s eyes. “I’ll certainly be the cock of the walk when you make your debut. You’re quite the looker if I do say so myself.” Keiji added chuckling to himself.

“Mmm-Keiji? Did you say something?” A sleep-laden voice asked without even opening his eyes.

“Just muttering to myself. Go back to sleep, it’s still early and you need your rest.” Keiji said moving his arm slightly so Yuki would be more comfortable against him.

What Keiji didn’t expect was for the slight form to mold against his side, and a delicate almost frail arm drape over him as Yuki burrowed closer against him half asleep.

“So warm.” Yuki spoke through a yawn, and almost immediately drifted back to sleep, totally unaware of his actions.

Keiji groaned. That temptation grew tenfold. Then ceased as Keiji inspected Yuki’s arm. He was going to have to do something about his diet and quickly. He was far too thin and sickly of form. At nearly seventeen summers, he was far too small, even taking into account his skeletal frame which was only slightly smaller than Keiji’s, he looked even smaller with the lack of anything resembling meat on his bones.

Keiji knew they’d have to be gone before Akui returned, and there was no way Yuki would survive the journey north to Keiji’s old village even in good weather.

Autumn was here which meant Keiji’s village was already well into snow season. That sort of weather would kill Yuki, he had no natural insulation and certainly not enough strength to possibly

walk a mile let alone up a steep mountain trail, even a healthy man got good and winded attempting that climb.

So with Yuki's health top priority, Keiji thought the best course of action would be to get some weight on Yuki as quickly as possible, and get him at least as strong as he could before they high tailed it out of here the first sign of good weather.

Good weather meant Akui would be making the journey back from the capital so they'd have about a week leeway to get as far away as possible. Akui has seen the last of Yuki for good if Keiji had a say in the matter, and he did now. His *Koibito* would never suffer under that man's hand ever again.

Just the thought of it made Keiji's blood boil in anger and if he needed any proof Yuki was feeling the bond they now shared, he got it when his anger woke Yuki up.

"What's wrong?" Yuki asked in almost a panic sitting bolt upright and trying to regain his awareness from a dead sleep.

"Nothing. Nothing, don't fret. I was just angry, and you picked up on my emotion. Everything is all right Yuki." Keiji said reaching out to calm the flighty creature beside him.

It took a minute or two for Yuki to settle down and allow himself to be coaxed back against Keiji's side.

"Keiji, thank you again."

"Stop it. You've nothing to thank me for Yuki. Honestly. Just rest, you need it."

“You sure I’m not in your way here... I can go back to my room.”

“Not on your life. I like you right where you are. Now shut up and sleep.”

“I like it here too.”

“I know. Now what part of the words shut and up do you not understand? Go back to sleep already.”

Yuki chuckled “I understand fine, but I’m not sleepy.”

“So I noticed. Humor me.”

“You don’t have hair on your chest.”

“Nope, and quit changing the subject.” Keiji scolded, but half-heartedly. He’d play along with Yuki for now.

“Nor any on your arms.”

“Right again, care to guess where else I’m smooth as a baby’s bottom?”

“KEIJI!” Yuki turned a bright red and Keiji practically choked with laughter.

“What? It’s true. What’s there to be embarrassed about, you don’t have any there either.” Keiji teased poking Yuki gently in the side.

"I know but... oh dear. Well I guess that answers my next question then. You're part Greenling too?"

"I am."

"I'd have never guessed."

"I know. Mama said I'm the only half-breed she's ever seen without any physical traits beyond the hair issue. That little secret comes in handy, so keep that to yourself Laddy." Keiji said smiling at the still rosy-hued boy beside him.

"I've never talked to anyone before you. Your secret is safe with me." Yuki sighed, the sadness threatening to creep up again. It would be a long time before his sorrow and fear was gone.

"Hey now snowdrop, none of that. Moping is not allowed in here. Some here let me fix your hair, you've gone all wild on me again in the night." Keiji said moving behind Yuki on the bed and began combing his hair.

Yuki sighed in contentment and let Keiji tame his hair in a braid once again.

"Do me a favor? Remember when I said I'd think of something you could do in return for me?" Yuki nodded as Keiji tied the fastener on the end of his very long braid. "Never cut your hair. Please." Yuki turned and smiled at Keiji.

"I promise." The phrase was punctuated with a rumbling of a protesting stomach.

Keiji laughed as he stood up from the bed and stretched. "That's my cue I think." Keiji said as he tossed on a shirt over his breeches and grabbed his sack. "I'm off to raid the kitchen, think you can be good for a few minutes?"

Yuki smiled and pulled his knees up under his chin. "They won't give you more than you need you know. I'll be fine, don't worry."

"Like I'm not going to feed you? Right. So little faith you have in me." Keiji's sentence was cut off as the door closed behind him.

"I have total faith in you. I just know better." Yuki said stretching out on Keiji's bed to wait for his return.

He was asleep again within minutes. Dreaming of red hair and bright blue eyes.

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Series Title: Greenlings
Book ONE: Ai no Hanashi (Story of Love)
Chapter Number: Two
“My Hearth in Winter”
Author: D. Sanders

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Keiji walked down a multitude of corridors, and finally when he conceded defeat in knowing where the kitchen was, he turned on the charm and solicited a young maid for assistance. She smiled, blushed at his boyish charm then volunteered to take him there personally.

Sometimes Keiji found his looks an asset, this was one of those times. A dashing smile, a well placed wink, and an air of the dangerous added for good measure and soon he had a kitchen full of old and young alike flirting with him and trying to curry his favor with what he or she could aid him with.

Keiji however knew the person he needed to charm most, was the one in charge. So when she entered and bellowed for the rest of the staff to get back to work, Keiji schmoozed his way over and charmed her like she hadn't been charmed in sixty summers.

“That might work on the young ones laddy. I've grandchildren older than ye.” She shook a finger at him, but smiled.

“Surely you're not old enough for Grandchildren.”

“Now I know yer after something young one.” She cackled as Keiji propped himself up at the table beside her.

“You've caught me out. I'm here to fill my belly and...” Keiji patted his sack.

“Can’t love. I know what you want, it be orders from the master. As much as I want to, I can’t.”

The old woman sighed as her hands fretted with her well-worn apron.

“Then maybe you can tell me a good time to steal some unattended extras?” He had to try and pull out all the stops. Yuki needed this more than anything, and Keiji had played a hunch that at least someone was on Yuki’s side, it appeared the old grandma was indeed warring with her orders and her compassion.

“It’ll be our necks in the noose.”

“It will only be mine, and I’ve no intention of stretching. Please Ba-san.” Keiji added the affectionate Greenling reference to grandmother, and he watched her eyes grow wide.

“Ssssh! How ye know I am?”

“Violet eyes Baba.” Keiji said shoving up his sleeve to show her his arm.

She quickly moved to have him replace his sleeve. “Careful laddy. Me grandfather was, me eyes is all that’s left of the fair blood in my family. It be a death sentence in this keep.”

“I know. So help me save him from this death sentence. I need to make him healthy enough to leave under his own strength. Please help us.”

“You’re insane lad. You’ll nary get out of this place alive. The Master has eyes and ears everywhere. And Viscount Yogore is still here.” Her evident look of disgust raised Keiji’s eyebrows.

“Who is he?” Keiji asked, not sure if he wanted the answer.

“Worse than a foul dog he be. Poor Little One. I know not who is worse. His lordship or the Viscount.”

“Ba-san. He is my Koibito. I must save him or die trying. Please tell me all you know.” Keiji said quietly, taking her weathered hand in his, pleading.

“No. He isn’t? Koibito?”

Keiji nodded in all seriousness.

“Mercy of the Maker be upon you. Follow me dearheart.” Murasaki Sumire led Keiji into the pantry and began stuffing his sack with all manner of breads and cheeses, fruits and vegetables.

“Come in here at night in future, I’ll leave a sack ready, just help yourself, I’ll account for what is missing. Heaven help us, but if you speak the truth, just know to keep the Viscount as far away from the little one as you can.”

“Ba-san, please. Is it what I fear?”

“Aye laddy. Yogore is pure filth, and what he has done to the little one makes me weep at night. We all weep, mayhap you are the answer to my prayers.” She said shoving the sack into Keiji’s hands.

“Yogore. Where is he now?” Keiji asked shouldering the rather heavy sack, anger and fear welling up in his stomach.

“He has ridden with the Master to the nearest town. He’ll return on the morrow to his own manner just five miles to the west. He will then make weekly visits to the Keep to attend to the master’s business affairs in his absence. Heard them say this not an hour ago.”

“Damn, that is not good news. Does he have other distractions? I need him to temporarily forget Yuki even exists.”

At the mention of the name, Sumire smiled. “Name him did you?”

“Aye.”

“Snow suits him it does. Yes, keep the masters documents out, and Yogore will exhaust himself reading what he ought not to. With the master away, you will no doubt find him going through the master’s library and private office.”

“Excellent. Can we get a page to watch Yogore and warn me if he’s coming?” Keiji thought, forewarning was always useful, and servants knew everything and anything of importance.

“My great-grandson, Murasaki Tohru. He doesn’t work for the master, he’s a right smart lad, just turned ten yesterday. I’ll send him to ye, he’s quiet as a cat, and wily as a fox in the hen house he is. Full of piss and vinegar he be perfect.”

Keiji kissed Sumire’s cheek. “Thank you Ba-san. Come spring, if you feel you can make the journey, I’ll repay you for your kindness. Head north up the Highland Pass to Midori no Yama, or Green Mountain as it’s commonly known here, that’s the last town before you reach our village beyond. There is safe haven there for you should you need it, it is where I must take Yuki when he’s strong enough. If you make it to Midori no Yama, go to the Midori Inn, and ask for Yamataki Yusuke, then give him my name. He’ll see you have a guide to our village.”

“You mean there really are Hidden Greenling Cities?”

“Yes. My home however is just a small village before you reach the Northern City. You deserve a nice retirement, I'll see you have it with my gratitude.”

“Just get that little one out of here, and maybe I'll take you up on your offer.” Sumire said as Keiji shouldered the bag and headed back to Yuki. Sumire reminded him greatly of his foster mother, he always did have a soft spot for elderly women. And he meant what he'd said, if she came north, he'd see to it she never worked again.

Keiji was above all an honorable man, and any help he received he returned tenfold if at all humanly possible. Keiji, always and without fail, repaid his debts and this was a life debt in his opinion. Her help was saving the life of the one he held most precious, he would never fully be able to repay Murasaki Sumire, but he would certainly try.

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Yuki was still sleeping peacefully as Keiji quietly entered the room and set the overly stuffed sack down on the table by the hearth and gently moved to rouse Yuki from his dreams. He had just perched himself on the edge of the bed to lean over Yuki when the sight of the iron collar around his neck arrested Keiji's attention. Even with the application of the iron burn ointment -- the wound beneath was only marginally better.

Keiji sat studying the foul device, it looked formed around Yuki's neck, there were no obvious signs where it locked, and it was so encrusted with years worth of weeping blisters and dirt, even had there been a lock at one time, it would have been well fused together by now.

There was only one way that that collar was coming off, it would have to be cut off.

How that was going to happen however, Keiji had no idea. It had to come off one-way or another, and the sooner the better. Keiji couldn't touch it for long himself with a bare hand before it left a welt on his fingers, and it burned cold. He wanted to weep thinking of the constant pain Yuki must be in and had learned to tolerate over the years.

"You either have an enormous pain threshold, or you have one well trained mind of matter skill. I believe it to be both actually. Stronger men than you would be crying like a suckling infant in your shoes. You have my respect Koi." Keiji muttered before leaning over to place a kiss on Yuki's cheek.

Yuki slowly blinked open tired eyes and smiled. "You're back." He breathed, his eyes showing genuine happiness that Keiji was sure had been bereft of that light for far too long.

"Aye snowdrop. And who was it that doubted me this morning? Care to break your fast?"

Yuki sat up in shock. "How did you...?"

"Charm, my doubtful one, charm."

"Why don't I doubt that in the slightest?" Yuki smirked and Keiji laughed at the rather comical expression, a smirk was out of place on Yuki's stunning, and all too innocent looking face.

"Ah, I'm not as bad as I seem, honestly." Keiji mustered a weak defense and stood and walked over to the table. Yuki followed and stood jaw agape as Keiji began bringing out the bounty from within burlap confines.

Yuki was utterly speechless as his knees failed him and he plopped unceremoniously into the chair beside the table.

“Careful snowdrop, there’s not enough padding on your backside yet to go about abusing it with a fall.” Keiji teased as he laid a small loaf of crusty bread and a large wedge of yellow cheese in front of his beloved.

“What... how?”

“Questions later. Eat.” Yuki obeyed with unabashed joy in his eyes. Keiji’s heart swelled, Yuki was truly a different creature from the night before, if Keiji had to walk a thousand miles over hot coals to see that look in those large, wide set, lavender blue eyes, he would with no questions asked. He was looking straight into all that was good in the world, all that was right, if he hadn’t been bonded to Yuki, he’d have fallen in love the old fashioned way, right at that moment.

Yuki was pure heaven; something so ethereal to look upon, so fulfilling to his soul couldn’t be anything but a gift from above.

“Are you not eating too?” Yuki asked seeing Keiji had only managed to stare a hole in him from across the table.

“After you. I ate a little in the kitchen, I want you to have your fill first.”

“I am already quite full. This all just tastes so good I dare say I am eating for the taste alone. I will burst soon.”

"I doubt that snowdrop." Keiji chuckled as he leaned back in his chair and stretched with a stated groan as his spine gave an audible pop. A good stretch always felt good, and he was just about to toss himself back into bed when a soft knock came to the door.

Yuki made a mad dash to his room in terror making Keiji's head spin. He moved fast as lightening, and was a white blur of motion. Keiji frowned and got up to answer the door.

There stood a young blond boy, with large sea foam green eyes, and a riot of freckles across his nose. "You must be master Tohru?" Keiji asked and the boy nodded shyly. "Come on in lad, we will have a chat."

"Ba-san said I should come." The boy said as Keiji led him inside and shut the door.

"Right she did, and pardon me a moment while I retrieve the cat you scared up a tree."

The boy looked confused, but sat in the chair Yuki had just vacated, his feet dangling idly as he waited.

Keiji made his way into Yuki's room and his heart stopped. Quivering on the floor in fear was a disheveled mess of a young man. In the few moments he'd been away, He'd ripped his braid out, smeared dirt all over his newly clean face, and had chained himself to the floor.

Keiji sank to his knees and pulled Yuki into his arms. "Oh Yuki, love. There is nothing to fear."

Keiji tried to reassure past the knot in his throat.

Yuki said nothing, only curled into a ball, quaking with fright. Keiji just held him tightly until the shaking stopped, softly stoking the silken strands of Yuki's long, lush hair. Unbound it fell past his waist in wave upon wave of pristine white.

It took several minutes for Yuki's fear to subside and the quivering to stop and in all that time he never uttered a word. Keiji felt his heart constrict in pain, how long would his healing take?

He had no answer to that question as he went about removing the chain from the collar and tossing it aside. Yuki still sat like a broken toy that had been discarded on the floor.

Grabbing a cloth and wetting it from the washbasin near the door that connected their rooms, Keiji knelt before Yuki and lovingly washed the hastily applied dirt from Yuki's face. "Love, you are much too beautiful to me to see this on your face. And far too dear to me to allow any harm to come to you – please have faith in me."

Keiji's voice was soft, his normally cocky baritone, like a summer afternoon full of lazy affection. Yuki closed his eyes and leaned into Keiji's touch as the cloth caressed his face.

"What is happening?" Yuki breathed, shuddering for new reasons he had no name for.

"You feel it don't you?"

"What is this I feel? Why do I want nothing more than to be lost in you?"

Those words melted Keiji's heart and he dropped the rag to cup Yuki's face in his hands. "Why do I want the same? It is a good question and one we will have a lifetime to find the answer to, my love. My Koibito." Keiji breathed, touching his forehead to Yuki's.

"Koibito? Us? How?"

"I don't know how Yuki, no one does. But we are, I feel you under my very skin." Keiji murmured his face still a sparse few inches from Yuki's his voice hardly more than a whisper.

"I thought I was imagining that, I feel... I feel... I don't know what I feel. I don't know what I want. I don't know anything. But I do know I can feel your heart, it beats in time with mine, I don't understand." Yuki was at an emotional loss; everything was overwhelming him with new and wonderful sensations. He couldn't have stopped his tears if he tried. Keiji just wrapped around him protectively and held him close.

"I don't understand either. I really honestly don't Yuki. But I understand that I love you, in one night you have become the most important thing in my life and I will never let you suffer. I promise." Keiji said and meant every word.

"Keiji, I... I don't know what love is, but if it is this great peace that fills my soul when I see you, this light, drunken feeling when you touch me. Then I can truly say I love you too." Yuki whispered into the crook of Keiji's neck, breathing deeply and shivering again.

"Those would be some of the symptoms, aye." Keiji chuckled turning his head to place a tender kiss on Yuki's brow. "And as much as I would love to sit here and hold you like this, we have a young visitor come to help us snowdrop. Come meet a friend and let us get to work on getting you home."

"Home?" Yuki asked perplexed, he was home.

"Aye Love, home. Our home, a place where you belong." Keiji said standing and bringing Yuki to his feet in the process and draping an arm over his shoulders, Keiji realized just how perfect Yuki seemed to fit alongside him.

"I belong with you." Yuki sighed, his own arm finding a natural place around Keiji's waist, it felt so right.

"Yes, you do." Keiji winked as he led Yuki back into the adjoining room.

There a small boy sat up in amazement, he had not expected the one his Ba-san called "little one" to look as he did, and his confusion was all over his young features.

"Put your eyes back into their sockets squirt. This is who you think it is." Keiji said and Yuki gave a shy smile to the little boy at the table.

"That's...?"

"Yuki" Keiji said before the boy could form any word even remotely resembling "bastard".

"Hello." Yuki said, his soft tenor shy and light.

"YOU TALK TOO!?" The boy was flabbergasted. Yuki nodded.

"Listen Tohru, as much as this amuses me to no end to watch, we need you to help us. This is very, VERY important. Your grandmother has sent you to us because she thinks you're man enough for the job. Do you think you can be a man about it?" Keiji asked and suddenly the boy grew serious and nodded.

"What is wrong?" Yuki asked sitting down across from Tohru at the table.

Keiji sighed and turned to face his beloved. He would have preferred washing his genitalia with sandpaper than talk about the matter at hand. He pulled up a third chair and joined the two at the table, and took Yuki's hand to hold absently as he began.

"I need to ask some questions first I'd rather not ask. Yuki, Viscount Yogore..." Yuki's hand clenched and Keiji held it tighter for reassurance. "... He has remained behind, and spare me the details in front of the boy, but do you know of anything he enjoys that will keep him occupied and away from you? The lad's Ba-san gave me a few ideas, but I'd like more if I can get them." Keiji asked and Yuki hung his head.

"He enjoys many things I'd not inflict on any living soul. If he drinks too much wine however he will pass out stone cold for hours on end." The cold burning hatred in Yuki's voice spoke volumes.

"I see him in the cellar all the time-a-stealing the wine." The lad piped up and Keiji's attention shifted.

"The cellar? He goes himself?" Keiji asked and the boy nodded.

"Yup, I play down there sometimes, and I fell over him a few times. Yuki's right, an army couldn't wake him up."

"Yes! Okay kiddo, here's your job. You watch Yogore, and the first time he gets good and drunk you come get me. I think I just found a nice easy way out of this." Keiji almost laughed it would be simple.

"What?" Yuki asked and Keiji smirked evilly.

"I know a much better use for that chain than on you my love. Cellar's are nice, dark, creepy, and full of closets."

"Lock him up?! Are you mad?" Yuki asked and Keiji grinned.

"Does he not deserve it? Think of it as a small taste of revenge that will never be enough. Tohru can take him food and keep him plastered with drink. He won't care if he's chained or not."

Yuki had to agree, Keiji had a point, and he also had to admit to himself, he'd like to see more happen to the man who gave him the worst nightmares he'd ever had, while still awake. Yuki nodded once in agreement.

"Tohru? You think you can handle this?"

"AYE! He hit my Ba-san once, and broke her tooth. Just 'cause he wanted beef and not lamb stew. I done saw it. And he killed my friend's cat by throwing it in a well too. He's mean I can do this. I wanna help, cause we all see what he does to him and it makes my Ba-san cry."

Keiji held up his hand. "Enough. Okay. SO be on the lookout for him Tohru, then come to me right away and I'll get him down there someway or somehow as fast as I can. Now off with you to play lad until we need you." Keiji dismissed the boy who scampered off as Yuki stood to stand in front of the empty hearth, his face turned away from Keiji.

"Before you ask Keiji. The answer is Yes, and much more. I do not wish to say anymore."

Keiji stood and wrapped his arms around Yuki from behind and just held him close, Yuki's back pressed against his chest. "I won't ask. He'll never touch you again, and he's very lucky I do not kill him."

"I'd rather you don't kill Keiji. That just makes you like him. I want to and try to forget him every day. Please let us not talk about him unless we absolutely must. Help me forget."

"I promise snowdrop." Keiji vowed even though a part of him was devastated to learn that his worst fears had been true. There was much more healing to be done, both physically and spiritually, and only time and patience would see them through the pain together.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

It was later that afternoon, when Tohru came back to their chambers, the second time, much to Keiji's relief, Yuki moved to stand behind him rather than flee altogether. The boy was out of breath but smiling.

"Ba-san sent this." The boy held up the small parcel. "She said it's for Yuki."

Perplexed Yuki took the bundle from the boy's hands and set it on the table, Tohru followed Yuki to the table and plopped down on a Chair as Keiji shut the door and moved to see the mystery gift's contents.

There was a small note attached and Yuki looked at it then sighed sadly and held it out to Keiji. "I'm afraid I have never learned to read. Can you tell me what this says please?"

Keiji smiled and took the note. "Come here and well start teaching you to read then." Keiji said giving Yuki's arm a tug so he would topple into his lap. Once Yuki settled, Keiji held up the note and pointed with his finger the words he was reading aloud.

“Master Yuki, please accept this with all my hopes for the future. This belonged to your mother, I have kept it safe for you in hopes one day I would be able to return it to you.”

“My... mother’s?” Yuki said in awe, his hands trembling as he went to unwrap the small bundle.

He carefully folded back the many layers of cloth to reveal a golden chain, with a shining lapis lazuli stone held in a golden pair of dragon wings. It was remarkable and delicate workmanship, and etched into the stone was a symbol. At Keiji’s gasp of shock Yuki held the necklace out to him for inspection.

“Do you know what that means?” Yuki asked and Keiji’s mouth went dry and nodded almost reverently.

“Hikari Junsui.”

“Was that her name?”

“Aye Love. And if that was your mother’s it is more imperative than ever I get you out of here.”
Keiji said his knees weak.

“Did you know her? Keiji why are you so distressed? I feel it.”

“Hikari. You’re Hikari!”

“Why is that so troublesome to you?” Yuki asked distressed himself now at Keiji’s reaction to the necklace he’d left abandoned on the table in favor of kneeling before Keiji’s feet.

“Get up! Get up. Never ever bow to me... please.”

“Keiji will you please tell me what is wrong?”

“Hikari. Even Tohru can tell you who the Hikari are - surely you’ve heard at least once Yuki. They only happen to me the most powerful clan, no son ever born to that family has ever been less than an adept mage. And that’s just the toddler age terrors still in nappies! Great mounds of dragon dung, what was your father thinking abducting a Hikari? How on earth did a Hikari manage to get abducted in the first place? Junsui... Junsui... wait that’s a pure name, she must have been of the temple, a healer. That’s the only way.”

“Wait slow down Keiji!” Yuki pleaded as he watched his agitated love get up and pace the room in thought.

“All the Hikari moved to the great city two decades ago, they don’t come to Ardfel anymore. I have to get you to them, Ryuen will only be able to train you so far, I’ve no doubt you’ll surpass him in a mere month.”

“KEIJI!” Yuki’s raised voice shocked Keiji out of his vocalized thoughts, and the panic in Yuki’s eyes brought Keiji to him on the floor.

“Nothing has changed between us Koi, nothing can change our bond. But it is a change to who we are together. You have a rather long road to travel my love, and much learning to grasp, but I will be there beside you to help you. But I daresay in a few years, it will be you who will be stronger than I.”

“Does being stronger matter between us?” Yuki asked and Keiji smiled.

“Nay, it doesn’t. Well it does if I want to keep my backside in one piece.” Keiji teased and Yuki laughed softly, moving to take the necklace from the table and then pressed it into Keiji’s hand.

“Take this, I know a little of Koishii Koibito bonding stories to know it is a sign of affection to gift your partner something of meaning. This is all I have and it belongs to you now.” Yuki stated and Keiji nodded once and bowed his head and allowed Yuki to place it around his neck.

From around his wrists, Keiji removed two bracelets, made of various, well worn and highly polished river stones, each one engraved with a symbol. “My mama made these years ago. They are protective wards, and healing charms, meant to keep you safe and healthy. They have served me well for many years, I cannot think of anyone I’d rather them protect now, than you.” Keiji said slipping them over Yuki’s hands. “The right hand is for protection, the left for healing.” Keiji added pointing out which symbols reflected which bracelet.

“Keiji.” Yuki sighed his name; it was full of wonder and love.

“Excuse me... Um. Ba-san wanted to know if it was okay to come see Master Yuki.” They had completely forgotten Tohru was even in the room.

“Aye lad. Tell a servant to bring us wash water on the way out, then I will bring Yuki to her.”

“I cannot!”

“Oh, yes you can love. Let us try an experiment shall we to prove to you that you have more power than you think.” Keiji began as Tohru ran off to send in a servant.

“What sort of experiment?” Yuki asked skeptical.

“Will that horrid thing off your neck.”

“I have willed it off.”

“No, I mean close your eyes, focus on it, think of only that with no distractions, and then will it to break in half. That would be a simple thing for a Hikari. It’s probably why that iron hasn’t killed you. You have more power in one strand of hair than most will ever see, let alone have. I have a blister and I only touched it directly once. You’ve been wearing it for years. Do as I tell you, and see for yourself.” Keiji urged, as Yuki sat cross-legged on the floor and shut his eyes.

Keiji sat down to watch, he could feel the power and magic in the room buckle and shift, it wanted to go to Yuki, he was their master and they begged to be absorbed by his light. The Hikari were all natural born mages, it was instinct for them to wield the power, and it was as much a part of a Hikari as water was to the ocean or trees to a forest. They were symbiotic entities, and the only thing stopping the flow of power into Yuki was his lack of knowledge and that iron collar. Iron was only an annoyance to Hikari, it burned them like it did every other Greenling, they did feel the same pain but they could endure, it would not kill them.

Yuki’s father must have known that, and why Keiji didn’t think of it himself when it was so obvious an answer he’d chastise himself for later. Right now, he was watching, and waiting for Yuki to discover his nature, his calling, his true self was right there, hovering just under the surface and all he had to do was take hold, and then his freedom would be his, and by his own hand.

Keiji watched the stray strands of Yuki’s braid begin to move as if stirred by an invisible breeze, and his very skin began to shine like alabaster, the magic in the room seemed to rejoice in the fact it was being called after waiting so long, it almost hummed in euphoria as it responded to its master’s summons, it grew louder, it buzzed like the bees in a hive, it sang like the nightingale at

the moon, it crowed like the rooster at dawn and then there was a loud crack and clang as the severed halves of the collar fell to the floor.

Yuki cried out in pain and relief and the magic remained and comforted as Keiji rushed to Yuki's side as he collapsed, exhausted.

"I... I did it." Yuki gasped, astounded, fatigued, joyful, and utterly spent.

"Aye love, you did. A True Hikari you are." Keiji said stroking Yuki's hair as he cradled him on the floor. "Now don't sleep yet. Eat first, you must restore what you used." Keiji said reaching up onto the table blindly from the floor and bringing down a pear.

Yuki was too tired to even hold it, so Keiji fed it to him, biting off the pieces himself then passing them between sleepy lips.

"One day that feat won't even make you yawn. But for now, I'll take care of you." Keiji reassured, passing the last of the fruit to his beloved. It was then the water arrived and Keiji laid Yuki on the bed as he went to retrieve it, without letting the servant inside to see just what had transpired.

The tub was still in the room, so Keiji filled it then moved to the bed where Yuki had already fallen asleep.

He never woke as Keiji removed his borrowed shirt and breeches, and laid him in the bath still slumbering.

"You will kill me for this later I'm sure, and I will deserve it, but humor your Koibito." Keiji whispered into unhearing ears as he washed Yuki almost reverently from head to toe, taking special care around his neck. It was a festering field of bruises, blisters, and red angry flesh. Even

a Hikari could scar, and having been subjected to that collar for as many years as Yuki had been wearing it, when the abused flesh healed, he'd have a lifelong reminder of the cruelty he had endured, and survived. It would be a reminder that he would wear that would remind him he had the power to escape hell in his hands, it was not a scar, it was a badge of courage. At least it was in Keiji's eyes. He hoped Yuki would see it the same way.

Having tended to his neck and hair, Keiji couldn't resist taking advantage of the moment and inspecting his bonded thoroughly as he washed him, this was what he would deserve a beating for later, he took liberties of his sleeping partner, he probably shouldn't have, but he did keep it to innocent caressing and the light fondling of a few places that particularly piqued his interest.

He didn't linger too long, it was having an effect on him too that he'd have no time to take care of, so he cut his play short, and removed the still blissfully unaware Yuki back to bed to dry him off and applied more ointment and protective bandages to the wound which was already beginning to look better after a decent washing and having medicinal herbs applied before dressing him again in more borrowed clothing.

It was nearing the dinner hour when Yuki roused from his slumber to see Keiji seated by the window, smoking a sweet smelling tobacco from a long slender pipe. Attuned, Keiji looked over and met Yuki's eyes with a grin. "Sleep well?"

"Aye." Yuki said sitting up, reaching up to touch his neck and winced as his fingers brushed the bandages Keiji must have wrapped around his neck. He was clean, in new clothes, and he had slept through it all.

"Don't touch it yet, let the ointment work Koi." Keiji said tapping out his pipe and crossing the room to sit beside Yuki on the bed.

“It feels good even though it hurts. Does that make sense?” Yuki asked and Keiji nodded.

“Freedom gained by winning it yourself is indeed a good feeling. You should be proud, you did this on your own.”

“I just feel tired, and happy, and scared all at once.”

“Any other emotions in there?” Keiji asked leaning over Yuki, nose to nose.

“Love.” Yuki whispered, his eyes closing.

“Good answer.” Keiji replied, leaning in and kissing Yuki for the first time. Languid, searching, needy, passionate, awkward, and hopeful, it was the sort of kiss that expressed all those things and more. It was their first, it was magic all by itself, and they’d have more, but none would ever be the same as the first. As their lips parted, smiles remained as eyes opened to look into the others.

“You are wonderful.” Keiji breathed sitting up and pulling Yuki up with him.

“I was thinking the same.” Yuki replied as they stood hand in hand.

“Let’s go get dinner, never walk in fear ever again Lord Hikari Yuki. No one here can harm you, the magic won’t let them, nor will I.” Keiji said strapping on his sword, made of steel and silver, and taking Yuki’s arm in his own.

“Kojiro.”

“Come again?”

“I may have learned my heritage, but I think I would like it best if you gave me your name, you did after all name me the first time around. Is it not also common for Koibito to share a name?”

“Aye love, it is, but it is usually the higher clan’s name that is taken. That would be yours, not mine.”

“I have never known that clan, my Father was Kanashimi, a name technically mine and that I will never use, I have never used Hikari either. I love a Kojiro - I would like my Koibito’s name as my own. Is that all right?”

“You honor me Koi. It is all right. Kojiro Yuki you will be if it is your wish. There may come a time however when Hikari will hold more weight.”

“Then they can learn of my heritage then, I love you, and wish to bear your name, please.”

Keiji grasped Yuki by the shoulders and kissed him, firmly. “Then Kojiro Yuki you will be, and I am one lucky bastard.”

“I do believe I am the lucky “bastard” here.” Yuki grinned and Keiji howled with laughter.

“Love, we’re both Bastards. Let’s live up to those titles and have some fun.” Keiji winked as he and Yuki headed down the corridor toward the dining hall arm in arm.

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On the way to the dining hall, Keiji first lead a rather timid Yuki toward the Kitchen first. Upon entering the hustle and bustle of the dinner hour, preparations ground to an immediate halt, a platter clattered to the floor heard, but unseen, and a multitude of servants stood stock-still and stared.

Keiji felt Yuki’s inner terror begin to swell, and he could feel the urge to flee building. He held Yuki’s hand tighter and grinned. “Oi, Oi, Oi, you all look like you’ve seen a ghost. Ba-san! You’ve got a ghost loose in here?” Keiji hollered, making quite a show of looking around for said spirit.

Yuki’s free hand came up to hide the chuckle he couldn’t help let escape at Keiji’s rather comical antics. “BA-saaaaaaaaaan!” Keiji called again, lifting the corner of a table to peer underneath.

“What’s all the noise in here?” Sumire began stopping short seeing Yuki smiling as he watched Keiji make a fool of himself. “My heaven. You look just like her, I never would have guessed.” Sumire walked over, tears in her eyes as she lay gnarled old hands to either side of Yuki’s face.

Keiji stood beaming down at them both. “Quite handsome as a peacock isn’t he?”

“Beautiful, absolutely breath-taking. Too long have you been hidden little one. Shine like the gem you are at last.” Sumire began to laugh joyfully. The rest of the servants still stood around, jaws agape, knowing but disbelieving their own eyes. No one would have ever expected that the filthy bastard was indeed the pristine swan standing before them.

“Thank you.” Yuki said softly, his cheeks flushed with embarrassment under such scrutiny as he ducked his gaze away and down.

“I knew there be a voice under there somewhere. Don’t be shy pet, it’s long past time I do what I ought to have done years ago. It took your great lout here to wake up this old bag of bones. I’ll help you as I should have done long ago.” Sumire smiled affectionately, tucking Yuki’s stray wisps of hair behind his ears. “My, my, I think a hair cut is in order for you.”

“Not on your life Ba-san. Leave his hair just as it is.” Keiji cut in, eyes wide.

“He’s all wild.”

“I like it like that.”

“You would rowdy boy. At least let me trim it.”

“No, he looks divine shaggy, leave it.”

They continued to argue and only paused when Yuki’s sweet laughter took their breath away.

“I made a promise to him. I won’t cut it, but thank you.” Yuki smiled, his eyes bright with mirth.

“What does an old woman know? Fine, fine, you win. But I daresay the clothes on you boy are three sizes too large and then some. Tell me Keiji, in what mirror did you look to think those colors and those baggy garments looked good?”

“Hey! Don’t pick on me! It’s all I had Baba!!! The best I had at that!”

“Swine. Men never know how to dress themselves. Come with me. All you lazy lay-a-bouts, back to work, anyone say anything and you’re fired.” Sumire ordered and people scrambled back to work. Keiji grinned and followed behind, as Sumire latched onto Yuki’s hand and practically dragged him back into her private quarters off the kitchens.

Once behind closed doors, Sumire, still rather spry for her age, began rummaging through an old chest set at the foot of her bed. “You’d be surprised what the Lords and Ladies discard around here, perfectly good material, one little tear does not ruin make. Ffft, waste not, want not, I save it all. Made these for Tohru I did, but he’s yet to grow into ‘em. Fine material, ah here’s one yes, nice color. Blues or maybe purples, heck either will bring out your eyes.” Sumire began bringing out a soft sky blue poet shirt, with a dark royal blue satin long vest and laid them aside as she began looking for breeches to match. “These may be a little short, but that’s nothing a nice pair of boots won’t hide.” Sumire said picking up and holding the fabric next to Yuki’s face.

“See there, see how his eyes just pop out at you with these colors?” Keiji whistled through his teeth, he had to wholeheartedly agree with her. Much better than the cream and brown colors of his own garments hanging like bad laundry off his beloved in comparison.

“Wow.” Was Keiji’s only comment as Sumire excused herself and exited the room in order for Yuki to change with a little privacy.

Yuki was pensive and hesitant, holding the clothes without movement to change.

“What’s wrong snowdrop?”

“What’s happening here? The world is suddenly upside-down. It’s not that I’m not grateful, I am. I just... Keiji. Everyone looks at me like I’m some phantom about to steal their souls. I’m the Bastard to them, I...”

“You’re nervous, that’s fine Koi. Nervous is one thing scared is another. They look at you because for years, like Ba-san, they’ve wanted to help you, but they fear too. Now there is no reason for them to fear. Look at you, you’re beautiful, you’re kind, you’re strong. Stronger than Akui, stronger than Yogore, you give them hope. Yes, you will shock them, that’s a good thing.”

Keiji moved over and lifted Yuki’s shirt and pulled the one Sumire had given him over his head.

“You’re radiant, shine love. Never hide yourself again. Stand proud, and I’ll be right beside you always. Gloating.”

“Gloating?” Yuki cocked his head to the side in query.

“You’re gorgeous, and all mine.” Keiji grinned evilly and Yuki just smiled and shook his head.

“You are certainly one of a kind Keiji. Thank you, but I might remind you, that you are not so bad on the eyes yourself.”

“Like what you see do you?” Keiji purred oozing over and wrapping his arms around Yuki from behind as he tried to fasten his breeches.

Yuki leaned back tilting his head to rest against Keiji’s shoulder as he looked up and smiled.

“I’d be lying if I said otherwise. You are quite the rouge, but certainly a handsome one.”

“And all yours snowdrop.” Keiji kissed Yuki’s brow with a saucy wink as he once more tucked Yuki’s arm into the crook of his own.

“It’s high time you ate a decent meal, at a proper table.”

“I’d rather eat alone. I don’t know how to, I mean, I never used those fork things everyone eats with.”

“Good, then when I teach you proper use of greenling sticks you won’t have to unlearn habits. Sticks are much more versatile, you can use any twig if the need arises, and does wonders for your dexterity too.” Yuki looked bewildered and Keiji smirked as they walked back into the kitchen and joined by Tohru and Sumire headed toward the Hall for Dinner.

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The hall was full of the resident minor nobility, the remainder of Akui’s liege men’s families, the women and children and a few of the older couples who had remained behind rather than accompany their lord to the capital for the winter were all seated in their usual places at the long tables that formed a horseshoe like semicircle facing the main table where Akui and his most trusted men usually sat and dined. To the side, where the dogs were usually kept and where Yuki was chained every night was blissfully vacant and as Yuki entered the hall on the arm of Keiji, his eyes alighted anywhere and everywhere except that one area.

A hush fell over the room as the pair entered, and whispers were exchanged and eyes like saucers fell upon him as recognition of the stunning and strange beauty that has suddenly graced the room was recognized.

Keiji without missing a beat strode towards the main table, Yuki tried to fall back but Keiji’s grip was firm and sure. “There is no where else to sit love. Besides in the absence of the elder the brother, the younger holds rank here. Any law in the country, Bastard or not, will back me up there. They know that too.” Keiji said softly as they reached the table and he motioned for Yuki to be seated.

All eyes were still fixated on Yuki as he settled himself to the right of the head chair, where he should have been seated since birth had circumstances been otherwise. Yuki's eyes were downcast as he looked at his folded hands in his lap as Keiji stood to his right, still not seated.

What was Keiji thinking? Yuki began to wonder when the ice was broken, as an old man, nearly seventy winters stood and then started to applaud.

Yuki's head shot up, it was old Mamoru Kodai, the only remaining knight from Yuki's Grandfather's court. The man always left the hall when Akui tossed out the scraps. He was... smiling.

"Stand up you great cowardly women and fools! It's about time you show his lordship some respect! I am Mamoru Kodai Master." Kodai bowed, even as old as he was, he still retained the stature and pride of a man half his age. His lifestyle of his youth had served him well in his old age, and he still stood tall, and one would even say handsome still.

"Your grandfather weeps in his grave. First the son, then the grandson shame him, I carry that shame for him now. Allow me to say I am sorry."

Yuki's tongue was tied so, ever the observant Keiji, just laid a hand on Yuki's shoulder and squeezed reassuringly. "YUKI..." Keiji emphasized the name and paused briefly, Kodai smiled. "... is a bit overwhelmed. It is good to see he has friends when he thought he had none."

"TISH-TOSH DRAGON SPIT! If Akui didn't beat, maim, and kill every poor idiot nice to that boy, he'd have realized it years ago that the only people here who want to see him hurt are Akui and Yogore. No one else here approves of that sort of thing. Am I right?" Kodai turned to eye the rest of those gathered in the hall.

"I said am I right?" Kodai said more firmly and a young woman only slightly older than Yuki stood, he recognized her as Mamoru Jujun, Kodai's eldest granddaughter, her soft voice barely heard as if she was afraid to speak, but even more afraid to stay silent when given the chance.

"Aye. It's horrible. It's so nice to see you here like this Lord Yuki." She had heard the name and was the first person to address him by it formally.

"He's so pretty!! Ojii-san!" A little girl, no more than perhaps four tugged on Kodai's shirt, her brown hair and large brown eyes alight with childhood innocence. This was obviously Jujun's youngest sister as their resemblance to each other was remarkable.

"Aye Saya. Aye." Kodai patted her head fondly as only a proud and extremely indulgent grandfather would.

Yuki blushed, suddenly his world seemed to open up around him and he could feel support around him he would have never dreamed he had filling the room to overflowing. He had feared taunting and hate, but he was received with respect and honor. His eye's grew moist with tears as he turned his face up to look at those all around the room, he felt drunk, and tears of joy sprang from his eyes as a musical laugh bubbled up from his throat.

Keiji watched Kodai hand little Saya a clean napkin and urge her to take it to Yuki. She didn't need much encouragement and she bounded over and held it out to Yuki all smiles. "Thank you Saya." Yuki said softly and Saya squealed.

"Ojii-san! He talks pretty too! You we're right!" Kodai just nodded, Yuki laughed again and reached out to hug the girl still giddily bouncing on the balls of her feet.

“Such a Joy.” Yuki whispered, rubbing his eyes with the napkin turned handkerchief while he hugged the little girl before him.

“See snowdrop. Trust my instincts. Those are my gifts.” Keiji winked and Yuki nodded as Saya skipped happily away chanting ‘pretty-yuki-yuki-white-snow’ in a sing song voice as she rejoined her grandfather and sister.

“I take it, come spring we will see the backside of you?” Kodai turned to address Keiji who nodded.

“Aye. Any help you can provide to keep him safe until he can travel I would appreciate Jii-san.”

Kodai chuckled. “Jii-san is it? I’ll show you these old bones can still muster up when needed count me in. Sumire will have my backside if I don’t lend a hand. Right woman?” He started turning to look at the woman as she entered with food.

“Tan it good you old bag of bones.” She confirmed going up to serve Yuki and Keiji first.

“My best stew, eat hearty little one. Ba-san knows what’s best for growing boys. Raised seven sons I did.” She smiled patting Yuki’s cheek then turning to pinch Keiji’s. “And I can handle the rowdy ones too. You sit and eat too and stop turning this place upside-down for ten minutes.”

Keiji laughed and grinned. “Aye Baba.”

“Good. Now the rest of you eat first, talk later.” She ordered as other servants filed in to serve the meal.

It was amazing how many people of noble blood obeyed the orders of one servant. Sumire definitely ran this roost when the upper echelon was away to court in the capital.

Keiji watched Jujun stealing furtive looks at him. Why did the good, shy girls always like the bad boys? Keiji mused whilst watching Yuki all through the meal, which despite his fears, was handling the spoon quite easily. He was however, too immersed in using it properly to eat the hearty lamb stew, that he never noticed his Koibito's admirer.

Keiji would make sure she knew before the night was over he was off the market. No sense in letting her entertain false hopes after all and putting a stop to it while it was still a crush was the best way to handle this.

Yuki's admirer was going to be more difficult -- four year olds had the tenacity of wild boars.

Although she was a cute little future pain in his ass, he gave Saya that much.

Soon his thoughts meandered back to his cooling dinner and shoving other worries aside Keiji focused on the best stew he had indeed ever eaten.

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Yuki's bowl was emptied as he sat back with a contented sigh. His pallid coloring from the day before virtually gone, and a golden hue began to darken his skin. Skin coloring wholly greenling Keiji noted. Nothing about Yuki spoke of human heritage, not his looks, his talents, or his physiology. The more Keiji looked the more he began to entertain notions of his beloved's lineage. His health was returning rapidly, he was made of much sturdier stock than someone with human blood should have been. Especially after the years of torment he had endured, he was

returning to health as quickly as his Hikari bloodline dictated, in fact, it was as if he was even more.

Even among the Hikari, there were those of even more remarkable powers, the Shinsei, the blessed ones, the Guardians of life and light. They were never on the council of elders; they were a council in and of themselves. Wise and just caretakers of the Greenling beliefs, advisors to the ruling council of tribes, warriors of the highest order, mages of a deeper magic, healers of souls and protectors of the ancient ways of peace.

“What are you staring at?” Yuki asked seeing that Keiji seemed lost in thought, fixated on his face.

“You beloved. You are a puzzle I will solve yet.” Keiji winked shoving the random thoughts away for the moment, he was grasping at straws, they’d have time later to delve into Yuki when they reached the mountains, and Ryuen would know more about it than Keiji anyway.

All Keiji needed to concern himself with now was to keep on track, Yuki seemed healthy, and over the next few months would just need to gain his weight to make the journey north. An easy task if his beloved continued to show improvement as he had in just a short twenty-four hours.

“A puzzle am I to you?” Yuki’s tone seemed playful and teasing.

“Aye love. Quite an intriguing one at that.” Keiji smirked lifting Yuki’s hand to kiss the back of it affectionately.

A soft cough interrupted their moment and Keiji turned to see Jujun standing before them. “If you please, Ojji-san would like to know if the Master would enjoy some music. It has been far too long

since these walls have heard the sound. I can play for you if you'd like." She said softly, eyes shyly downcast.

"I think that is a wonderful idea. What do you say Love?" Keiji asked and Yuki smiled.

"I would also very much like to hear you play Lady Mamoru." Yuki breathed and Jujun smiled sweetly and curtsied.

"It seems there should be cause for celebration this evening. Unless my eyes deceive me, you both have love in your eyes when you look upon the other." Jujun added, the glimmer of a wry sense of humor in her eyes, beneath the demure exterior, a fire burned.

"Your eyes are keen my Lady. You are correct. We are bonded, Koishii Koibito."

"Koibito? Truly?" She asked the delight of romance in her eyes.

Keiji and Yuki nodded as one.

"I have heard, but have never seen a Koibito bond. Greenlings do not come to this keep."

"It is rare even among the Greenling. Perhaps one day you will see the world beyond this keep." Keiji said as Jujun just backed away to find her harp and play. Being replaced by her grandfather he settled beside Keiji at the table.

"She will fester and die here." Kodai spoke lighting his pipe, the smoke creating a halo around his head. His tobacco was far harsher smelling than Keiji's sweet fragrant pipe, which also materialized from a pocket as Keiji lit his own bowl. He would have to ask Keiji later the difference. He suspected a greenling blend of sorts would be the cause of the difference in scent.

“You will all die here of soul rot. The only light in the shadows are the spirits of good men and women and they are few and far between when the shadow holds sway with fear.” Keiji said leaning back in his chair, puffing seriously on his pipe. His eyes narrowed as he looked around the room. Yuki watched intently, Keiji looked far older than his years in this light, he held a maturity of a man thrice his age it seemed as the fire danced in his eyes from his pipe. They looked almost reptilian, wise, ancient eyes. If the saying some people had old souls were true, than Keiji possessed an old one indeed.

“She will be eighteen winters come the solstice, born the same day as our young master here, save but a year his elder. She’ll be eligible for marriage, and I’ll not see her wed to this keep. When you leave I beg you, take her with you.” Kodai pleaded and Keiji nodded.

“I’ll take all who wish to come, including you old man. You move well, there is fight in you yet, and I could use the help of an experienced man if I am traveling with women and children. Even if it is spring here when we leave, we head north, Spring breaks late in my village, it will be a hard journey.” Keiji said as the soft melody of Jujun’s harp began to fill the room with its beauty.

A song as lovely as the young maiden who played her harp graced the room and conversation paused for a moment to allow the music to lift the shadow from the room.

“Besides old man, will you be safe here yourself for aiding us? Don’t give up your life without a fight. It goes against your nature.” Keiji added with a wink.

“You’re are an astute young man. Aye lad, I’ll come, and you can bet your boots Sumire and young Tohru will be joining you. That woman has latched onto you, and she’s as tenacious as a ferret.”

“You speak from experience?”

“Even Knights fear the power of her wrath.” Kodai chuckled, light filling his eyes.

“So how long has she been your companion?”

“Nothing as formal as that lad. But we do have a history, and share a son. Tohru is also my grandson.” Kodai smiled as the boy in question sat playing cat’s cradle with young Saya.

“I could see the resemblance.”

“You are quite perceptive lad. Just who are you?”

“A wanderer, that’s all. I have no parents, I have no past, I am as much a mystery to myself as to those who raised me. Even I have yet to discover who I am, and I am usually quite good at solving riddles. But one needs clues, and I have none.”

“Yet.” Yuki added joining the conversation and smiling up at his beloved. “But does it matter? You are you, and I certainly would not have you any other way.”

Keiji just leaned over and stole a soft lingering kiss. “Nay it does not matter. I am just curious by nature.”

“So you are.” Yuki smiled winsomely as Jujun’s song finished.

“I’d say you’d better take the young master here to his bed. The nights are growing colder, and he’s looking a right sight better, but still looking a bit delicate of weight to these eyes.” Kodai winked and Keiji grinned.

“Jii-san here is right. I think a good night’s rest is in order.” Keiji stood, taking Yuki’s hand with one hand and a flagon of wine with the other. “Good night good folk. Until the morrow.” Keiji bowed and led Yuki from the room with a purpose in his step.

Jujun walked over curious to her chuckling grandfather.

“It’s a night for lovers my dear. Ah, to be young again.”

“Ojii-san!” Jujun blushed but smiled.

Kodai just laughed even harder, choking himself with mirth until Sumire came to slap him on the back.

“When do we leave?” She asked as Kodai regained his composure.

“First thaw. The sooner we leave the better. And we have work to do this winter to make sure we make it to spring. I’ll take care of Yogore with Tohru. You ladies make sure Yuki gains weight, he’ll need it for this journey. That lad is painfully thin.”

“Aye, but his health is amazing in spite of it. He nary looks like he be the same boy. Keiji has brought us a light he has, and it has already chased the shadows away from the little one.” Sumire said fondly.

“Aye, we would be daft not to follow wherever Keiji leads. I do not think he is even aware of his own brilliance. But then at the moment, he has eyes but for one person here. He’s a tad preoccupied.”

“Kodai, don’t make me get my broom out to hit you, you dirty old man.”

“Spare me Sumire my joy. But tell me you did not see for yourself the affection there.”

“Aye I did, but you can just stay out of their business. Leave them be.”

“I think it’s romantic. Meeting by chance, finding your soul bound.” Jujun breathed dreamily.

“This is not a chance meeting. Their paths were meant to cross. Soul bound always find one another, it is destiny they follow. I just hope my old bones live to see the path’s end. I can smell change in the air.” Kodai said puffing his pipe.

“It’s still romantic Ojji-san.” Jujun said and Sumire smiled.

“Aye pet. It surely is, and the sooner we’re gone from here, the sooner it will happen for you too.”

“I hope so. But I will not hold my breath. Just leaving here is joy enough for me. I do not wish to marry anyone here, that is certain.”

“You always were a smart girl. You’ll find someone who’ll appreciate your mind as well as your pretty face pet. I’m certain of that.” Sumire said turning to clear the plates off the table.

“I think we should all get an early night tonight. Yogore will surely be here before nightfall on the morrow. We’ll need our wits about us.” Sumire added and Kodai nodded.

“Right as always woman. To bed with us all.”

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It was like a dream walk back to their chambers. Neither of them spoke a word, as they slowly walked back hand in hand. When Yuki slipped under his arm about half way back, and laid his head against his shoulder as they walked, Keiji's heart pounded wildly in his chest, he never wanted to wake from this moment, every fiber in his being was alive with wonderment and joy.

When they entered Keiji's side of their joint chambers Yuki drifted toward the window as Keiji set the wine on the table and set about stoking a fire in the hearth.

Once the flame was burning merrily, Keiji poured two small cups of wine and joined Yuki where he had settled on the window seat. "I am so happy." Yuki breathed, taking the cup from Keiji's hand, his eyes showing signs of fresh tears.

"So am I." Keiji answered, leaning over to kiss the trails still lingering on Yuki's cheeks. His shiver was not from cold, but from joy and anticipation.

"Come move by the fire love, I want to check your bandage." Keiji softly directed, setting aside his cup and taking Yuki's hand to lead him over to the chair. He almost gleefully rejoiced when with the barest of gestures, he was able to give Yuki his cue, and arms gracefully raised to allow Keiji to lift sky blue silk free from a pliant and content youth.

"By the maker. How on earth?" Keiji muttered as he took a good look at Yuki's bare torso. He was still thin, but the rack of ribs so painfully evident the day before were just slight ridges, it looked as if over night he had gained twenty pounds, and it just was not possible. And the wound, festering and angrily bleeding that morning was nothing but a white edged scar, that looked like frosted window pane crystals in a jagged ring around the base of his neck, a winter necklace to grace the wintry god who sat before him. Yuki was in all ways but for being just slightly underweight, totally healed.

“What?” Yuki asked and Keiji just gaped.

“You! It’s impossible, even for Shinsei! I’d bet my life that not a drop of human blood runs in your veins Yuki. You can’t possibly be anything else. It doesn’t make sense; you should not be this healthy in such a short span time. Not that I’m complaining about it, but damn it, it’s unheard of. No fucking wonder you’re still kicking. Delicate my ass! You’re perhaps the strongest man I have ever met, seen, or heard of in all my days and then some.” Keiji laughed, flopped back on the bed and just shook his head.

“I have no doubt you’ll be able to tackle the mountains even better than I come springtide. I have drastically underestimated you.” Keiji added, propping his chin on his hand as he rested an elbow on his knee. “Amazing.”

“I have always healed quickly, I’ve had to.” Yuki sighed and shrugged.

“Then you’ve a gift for healing that you have trained to use on an instinctual level if that is the case. Either way, you have a remarkable talent my love.” Keiji smiled reaching out to take Yuki’s hand.

Yuki allowed Keiji to pull him close, and settling across his knees, facing him, Yuki wrapped his arms around Keiji’s neck and initiated his first kiss. Keiji accepted the kiss and returned it greedily as he fell back onto the bed and rolling to his side to devour the kiss and take the lead.

They were breathless as their lips parted and a disheveled Yuki smiled up at his soon to be lover.

“You like to lead don’t you?” Yuki asked knowing full well the answer.

“I’ll stop if you desire it.”

“Keiji, I am in jest with you. I care not to lead this dance. I am more than content to be here with you, just as we are. You’ve not lead me astray, nor do I trust you shall ever lead me places I do not already wish to go. I go willingly wherever you wish to lead us, Koishii. Now and always.”

It was Keiji’s turn to cry tears of joy. He crushed Yuki in his embrace and wept into his shoulder. Love so deep and overwhelming played havoc with emotions, but lent a freedom to the soul that neither of them had ever experienced, and would never lose until death claimed them.

Being Koishii Koibito was a blessing as much as it was a curse. They would love more deeply and feel more passionately, they would live tied to one another in a very literal sense of the word. They would live and love and die together. They would wither like cut flowers if parted, they had become a single whole, and to sever them would be to destroy them.

When one partner died, the other would follow. Koishii Koibito partner’s hearts beat as one, and when one faded, so did the other. They would never be parted in life, or in death. It was an eternal bond. One that both Keiji and Yuki felt becoming stronger with every moment they spent together.

Their hearts already beat to a tune of their own making, and they were forging the new bond they shared with lips and tears as they held one another tightly, too scared to let go, and too happy to care. Words of love were whispered between kisses and words of comfort cooed when the tears sprang free. Hands caressed, and lips gasped as in the light of the fire two new lovers began their first dance as true partners.

Clothes lay scattered, and bedclothes were tangled and confused with limbs as hands alternately grasped and petted, stroked and teased. Wine sat forgotten, and logs crackled in the hearth, casting illumination over the light sheen of perspiration glazing excited bodies as they moved like

serpentine waves against one another. Flesh against flesh, mouth to mouth, heart to heart. A whimper of loss escaped Yuki's throat as Keiji sat up from their endeavors and blindly searched for the discarded bottle of ointment he'd used on Yuki's burns that morning.

Yuki was soon to discover it had more than one use, and a pleasant one indeed.

Keiji was gone for only a moment, and when he returned, bottle in hand, he quickly showed Yuki the more pleasant uses of the oily and sweet smelling ointment.

Sensations he never dreamed possible danced like lights behind closed eyes, as their bodies smoothly joined as one, there was no pain, no hate, no violence, nothing Yuki had ever known associated with this act. Nothing remained to taint this night of newly found emotions. It was love, it was music, it was spring in midwinter, it was the closest one could be to the one they loved, Yuki wept with joy and Keiji held him close as they moved as one, cries of passion swallowed in kisses of deepest desire. It lasted forever and yet was over far too soon. They crested the mountain their love had built together and then fell from the pinnacle calling each other's names in unison.

Tired, filled to bursting with emotion, and panting from exertion they lay entwined. Hot, slick with the sweat of ecstasy, and in the heat of the fire, they laid there together. Utterly spent, and yet, blissfully content.

"That was... fucking amazing."

Leave it to Keiji to destroy an otherwise surreal moment. Yuki tumbled into laughter and stretched out on his back beside his lover.

"What's so funny?"

"You, you rouge. But you're right, that was wonderful."

"I'm thirsty as hell now, it's hot in here." Keiji groaned stumbling out of bed on weak knees to the wine on the table. Gulping down half the flagon in one draught. Handing the rest to Yuki to slack his own thirst.

"It is hot in here, and we certainly made this bed rather a mess."

"Fact of life we'd better get used to, we're going to be sharing a bed for a long time Koi." Keiji said taking the almost empty flagon back from Yuki and draining the last of it before falling back into the bed.

"I think we'll live, messy sheets won't kill us. Come here snowdrop." Keiji mumbled as he spooned up behind Yuki and burrowed them both into the rumpled bed. "Goodnight Love." Keiji added placing a kiss at the base of Yuki's neck.

Yuki sighed and melted into the arms that held him. "Sleep well my love." Yuki replied asleep almost before he had finished speaking. It had been a long, glorious day and one he would never forget as long as he lived.

Series Title: Greenlings
Book ONE: Ai no Hanashi (Story of Love)
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“Past and Future”
Author: D. Sanders

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Dreamscapes are strange and wonderful, and oft times confusing. As was the current dream Keiji was experiencing. One moment he and Yuki were being rather risqué in the Hot Springs near Keiji’s home, the next moment the steam turned to mist and Keiji was alone. When the mist cleared he was sitting at the kitchen table in the home he had shared with Hana, and she was there serving him tea and her shortbread. Goodness how he had missed her cookies.

“Eat up laddy. When your mouth is full you listen to me.” Hana’s form said and the retort he began to utter was sprayed with crumbs and garbled beyond recognition.

“Cheeky Boy.” Hana said pulling up a chair across from him and sipping her tea.

“Right, no sense in dilly-dallying here, because time is important my laddy. You have no time and you’d know that yourself if you weren’t sleepin’ like the dead and makin’ the dead come and wake you up.” Hana began with her wry sense of humor still intact it seemed.

“That pang in your stomach, isn’t a cramp from your nocturnal lover’s games, you know your instincts better than that. That sense of yours only grows stronger as you come of age laddy. Heed it, you are needed elsewhere, so you must survive this trial. Take the little one, NOW, you must be gone before dawn. Take the Old Knight, the women and children with you, none of you are safe. He knows, and he is coming.”

“Who’s he?”

“A nightmare. Akurei Filth.” With that Hana spat in disgust.

“AKUREI? HERE?”

“Aye laddy, here and leeching power from that little one for far too long, he’s grown strong, and he is a foe you cannot win against... yet. Get out and head home, you will be met along the way with help, I’ve sent them, and they are coming, look for them on the Road to Green Grove.”

“Who’s coming?”

“You will see.”

“Damn you Kasan! You always tease.”

“I know, keeps you sharp. You will know when it is time for you to know and not before my pet. Now make haste, your time is dwindling.”

With that the mists cleared and Keiji woke up in a cold sweat, the gnawing in the pit of his stomach a sure sign of eminent danger.

Yuki was fitfully tossing, picking up on Keiji’s fret. “Come on Snowdrop, we gotta get out of here... NOW.” Keiji urged bringing Yuki to wakefulness and running about pulling on clothes and trying to find the warmest he had to bundle Yuki into.

“What’s wrong?”

“Yogore is more than we can handle. He’s more than I expected, and I’ll explain on the way. You dress in all those garments I laid out there, you’ll need the warmth then eat that bread, it’s not too

hard yet. You'll need that too, I'm off to rouse the others, we all have to get out, and we'll need horses. I'll be right back." Keiji said kissing Yuki's cheek in a hurry as he shoved an apple into his mouth as he ran off down the hall toward the kitchen. He knew where Sumire's quarters were -- she'd guide him and help wake the others.

It didn't take long to have Sumire up and young Tohru dressed and running to wake his Grandfather and cousins with a message that Kodai was to come to the stables immediately.

Leaving Sumire to pack travel rations, Keiji went to collect Yuki and then head out to the stables.

"Come on love, hurry. The sun will be up soon and we have to be gone before it rises."

Yuki didn't need to be told twice and took Keiji's hand as they ran down the halls, Yuki wincing a time or two.

"What's wrong? Are you hurt?" Keiji paused noticing Yuki's unusual gait.

"Um, just a little out of sorts this morning."

"Out of sorts?"

"I'm a little sore."

"Sore?"

"Keiji don't be daft." Yuki's tone was more amused than aggravated.

It took a moment for it to dawn on Keiji just what the problem was... "Oh Goodness, I'm sorry."

“Don’t be Koi. Believe me, it’s worth the morning after.” Yuki smiled as they came into the courtyard and met by an alert Kodai and Jujun carrying her younger sister, all of them dressed for hard riding in inclement weather.

“I got four horses. You and Lord Yuki on one, Sumire and Tohru on the Other, I’ll carry Saya, and Jujun can outride us all if need be, she’s quite the expert and she’ll carry our rations.” Kodai said leading the horses as Sumire and Tohru came rushing out loaded with sacks.

Keiji began handing provisions to Kodai who instantly went to work tying down the sacks on Jujun’s mare, lashing them tight and giving her a hand up. Then Keiji turned to his and Yuki’s mount, a beautiful stallion in his prime. Chestnut brown from nose to tail, a simply magnificent creature he was to behold. He whickered a little at Keiji’s approach, but he was trained well and didn’t shy away or bolt in his obviously nervous state.

“Horses never like me. I can’t for the life of me figure it out. It’s alright, I won’t eat you.” Keiji reassured then examined the saddle. “We’ll need a pillow, Tohru please fetch me one please, Yuki will fall apart on this without some cushioning.”

Tohru was gone only a moment and tossing the procured pillow to Keiji, who set to work affixing it to the saddle, Tohru took up his own place in front of his Grandmother, with his own pillow, and one for Saya.

“Clever lad” Keiji chuckled as he turned to Yuki. “Right love, let’s get you up here, and I promise I’ll let you kick my backside for the pain you’re going to be in this night. I’m so sorry.” Keiji said as Yuki settled on the saddle and Keiji climbed up behind him.

“How sore?”

"Well let's just say I know my balls will be on fire tonight, I don't ride often either. Horses don't like me."

"Wonderful." Yuki said with a hint of sarcasm as Keiji turned to the others.

"We head for Green Grove as fast we can, I've been told we'll be met along the way by help, but I don't know by whom. We have to beat Yogore, and I'll explain when we pause for food why we have to leave so quickly. Let's Ride!" Keiji finished with a click of his tongue and four horses burst out into the pre-dawn darkness headed north on swift hooves.

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Yogore Ijiwaru stood in Yuki's empty chamber and fumed. "That was fast, I underestimated you young handsome Red." He muttered kicking the chain that lay abandoned on the floor, then moving to the adjoining room and examining the bed, that looked hastily vacated.

"Very fast indeed." Yogore added noting the tell tale signs that more had occurred in that bed than just sleeping. "Can't say I blame you, the bastard cries so deliciously."

Yogore smirked as he grabbed his riding gloves, judging from the energy generated by their haste, they had maybe two or three hours lead, and knowing the Bastard as well as he did, riding hard would not be an option, he'd rattle apart, even if they did seem to get the collar off he'd spent quite a few years fusing to that boy's neck, he couldn't have possibly healed enough in less than forty-eight hours to endure a hard ride a horseback.

He had plenty of time to catch up; he had a few tricks up his sleeve too. And they knew, or suspected at least one. He was no mere Jinrui weakling. He tolerated Akui because the man was usable toward his agenda, the bastard was not necessary, but when such a wealth of power to drink from was handy, one didn't let it loose so easily.

"It might be for the best. Let him know precisely what he's missing. All the more pain when it all goes away... right in front of his very eyes. Poor foolish children, but my gain in the end." Yogore was laughing as he headed back out to his horse and mounted. Spurring the black war stallion north on swift hooves, the hunter was in the mood for sport, and his dark, handsome face wore an evil grin of lust as he rode up the North Road towards Green Grove.

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Seven riders rode until mid-morning, and a muted sob from Yuki made Keiji pull back on the reigns. "WHOA!! Yuki? Love?"

When Yuki's pain filled face, still damp with tears turned to look up at his lover, Keiji felt like a cad for not noticing before. In his defense however, he was rather focused on staying on the horse himself and the gnawing panic in the pit of his stomach. "Yuki, love, why didn't you say something?"

"We need to hurry, I am f-fine."

"You're not fine. We take a rest, we have time enough for a quick meal I refuse to see you suffer in silence." Keiji stated brooking no argument, and steered the horse off the road and into the tree-cover nearby.

Once he was satisfied they were out of sight, he slid down and his heart stopped. The pillow Yuki had been sitting on was saturated with blood, and Yuki nearly toppled off his perch since Keiji was no longer wrapped around from behind to support him. "Oh, merciful goddess. YUKI!" Keiji captured his lover in his arms as he gently laid him down on the ground.

"Basan! I need help! We need anything that can be used as a bandage, Tohru, find fresh water if you can." Keiji was now officially panicked, Yuki had lost an obscene amount of blood, and the source of the injury was still unknown. "Yuki, let me see love." Keiji cooed softly peeling away three layers of breeches as Sumire walked over with strips of cloth torn from hers and Jujun's garments.

"Don't be embarrassed little one, I've some healers skill I need to see." Sumire said as Keiji helped turn Yuki over who was decidedly out of sorts. His eyes were glazed and his breathing shallow.

"Basan? How on earth can there be so much? I don't see a wound." Keiji said as they both wiped the blood free.

"It's on the inside Love. Beyond my talents, he's bleeding from within. He's so thin, I can only guess that his body can't handle this abuse, I fear something on the inside has ruptured or has torn. We've ridden hard for the past four hours, I'm sore, even Jujun, who is an expert rider is hobbling a little. I fear we've put Yuki through too much too soon."

Keiji was in silent tears as he laid Yuki's head in his lap and stroked his face. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry." He muttered over and over as he leaned over to kiss Yuki's brow. Tohru managed to find a small stream and was carrying a small container full of water and dipping a strip of cloth in the cool water Sumire tried soothing the abuse, and she was not happy at the constant blood loss. Keiji used another strip to dribble cool water into Yuki's mouth.

"Keiji, please. I can ride." Yuki tried to protest, weakly, his voice hardly more than a whisper.

"No you cannot. I should have never put you on that beast. I'll get you to Green Grove another way." Keiji vowed, looking up at Sumire who sadly shook her head. He needed to heal on his own, it was beyond her.

"Kodai, take the others and go, I'll meet you there somehow, I'll find a way if I have to carry him every step. But Yogore is on our trail, Every minute we waste the closer he gets. Help me get Yuki into to deeper cover, close to that stream Tohru found. I have my bow and my sword, I can get him some fresh meat to eat, just leave me a few of the rations just in case I'm not lucky. Then I want you all back on the road to Green Grove. It's Yuki, Yogore is after, there's no sense in you getting involved here." Keiji began thinking on his feet as He and Kodai gently moved Yuki to a small grove of evergreens near the stream.

They tied the horse where he could easily drink and graze on the tall grasses along the bank out of sight. Keiji took the saddle blanket off the horse, and laid it over a bed of pine needles for a makeshift bed to ease Yuki's shaken body. Then laid his cloak over Yuki to keep him warm, then turned and slung a small sack of rations over a tree branch to keep it off the ground. "All right, the rest of you eat fast and get back on the road. I don't like this feeling in my gut. Not in the slightest." Keiji said turning back to Yuki who was growing exceedingly pale. "Yuki?"

"I'm all right." Yuki gave a weak smile as Keiji sat down to once again rest Yuki's head in his lap, running soothing fingers through Yuki's wind whipped hair.

"Liar. Just lay still and hopefully that wondrous healing gift you possess will get to work on what we can't see." Keiji's voice belied he held little hope, but hope was all they had.

The others seemed reluctant to leave, but did as Keiji ordered and after just a few minutes were already back on the road. Keiji made sure to cover their tracks so it wasn't obvious someone had left the road, and hurried back to Yuki's side.

He was even worse, it was obvious the deathlike sleep was from loss of blood and Keiji was worried. The bleeding had slowed, but he was still having to dab away the small trickle that refused to stop. "Fight Yuki, stay with me snowdrop." Keiji whispered as he heard the snap of a twig.

He was ready with bow drawn in a flash, silently listening as the steps came closer through the forest deadfall. From the sound it was two people, and his inner alarm wasn't indicating it was Yogore, but still being cautious was prudent.

Two figures, wrapped in heavy cloaks appeared slowly hands up in a gesture of goodwill. Their cloaks were of a distinctly Shizen style and the taller of the pair spoke in a soft lilting baritone. "We are here to help, Hana has sent us. Please do not fire your arrow, your reputation on the mark precedes you Kojiro Keiji."

With a sigh of relief Keiji lowered his bow. "By the Celestial Goddesses, I am pleased. Tell me one of you is a healer."

"I am." The shorter of the pair spoke, a woman of commanding yet gentle tones. Her hood fell back to reveal a woman like no other Keiji had ever seen, yet at the same time so familiar it was as if she had always been near. Her hair was a brilliant blue and her skin almost alabaster dusted in silver as it gradually shifted into a hue that matched her hair. Iridescent scales framed her face and the backs of her hands. Her eyes large and wide, and the same startling peacock blue like Keiji's.

She was neither human or Shizen, and as mysterious as she looked, she seemed just the opposite when it came to the feelings she evoked from within. Keiji instinctively knew this woman, yet did not know how.

“A boy always knows his true mother.” She said smiling and meeting Keiji’s eyes fondly and full of unmistakable motherly love. “That is why you feel no threat. Because I would never harm my son or his Koibito.”

Keiji was dumbstruck, his mother? It couldn’t be, he had been orphaned and raised by Hana, this woman looked hardly older than he, yet she claimed to be his mother. It didn’t make sense.

“It does not make sense, but it shall when we have time to talk.” She said kneeling beside the sleeping Yuki and laying her hands to his cheeks. “Always you look the same Yuki, I would know this one any where.” Was all she said as she began to faintly glow a soft muted blue-green. A healer’s aura.

It was then Keiji noticed the man beside her kneel, with his hood pulled back, it was startlingly clear the power this man possessed, the henna markings on his face denoting his elevated status. Three small circles under each eye, and one in the center of his forehead denoting the seven levels of virtue. “**Gi**” Rectitude, “**Yu**” Valor, “**Jin**” Benevolence, “**Rei**” Respect, “**Makoto**” Honesty, “**Meiyo**” Honor and “**Chugi**” Loyalty. In addition to the virtue markings, also under his left eye, along the cheek bone the marking of the Shinsei Mahotsukai, a simple swirled knot that resembled the intricate curves of grapevines, There was but one level higher than this man in power, and that had only ever been obtained by one other, the legendary Shinsei Mahotsukai no Ryu, the eternal lover of the Dragon Star, the Hoshi no Ryu. They appeared every seven hundred years according to legend, but they certainly had not been around in a very long time...

However, that was not what caught Keiji's immediate attention, the man's cheeks were wet with tears and his icy blue, almost silver eyes showing a man full of sorrow.

Before Keiji could formulate the question, it was answered.

"I thought him lost forever. My lover had only just conceived him, and had gone to the shrine to give thanks... I never saw her again. I searched for months without a hope, there was no trace. I thought them both gone. When Hana came to me two nights ago in a dream saying my son was alive and needing help, I still dared not believe in a hope. Yet here I see him, and his face is hers. His aura is mine, this is my son."

"And I knew no Jinrui could be his sire. Hikari Juyo, Ran no Nawabari, Highest order of Shinsei." Keiji gave him a respectful bow, this man was notably the most powerful of the Shizuka in all the clans combined. With this man as father, it was suddenly exceedingly clear how Yuki had managed to survive all these years bound in a collar of deadly iron.

Juyo smiled with kindness and extended a hand to Keiji. "I have gained more than one son this day. I am Juyo to you, and eternally grateful you have guided him home."

"He is my Koibito, I could not leave him behind if I tried." Keiji smiled in return taking Juyo's hand and shaking.

"Nay, in every lifetime you are both bonded in life and in death. One cannot exist without the other." Keiji's mother chimed in her eyes still closed in concentration, yet able to respond to the conversation around her.

"What do you mean every lifetime?" Keiji asked and she only smiled.

"I take it he does not know Aoi?" Juyo asked and she shook her head.

"Know what?"

"I'm afraid it is not my place to tell you my boy. But you will know."

"I really despise that sort of answer to a question." Keiji huffed but did not press, his concern was on his beloved and the threat drawing nearer by the minute.

"Yes dear. You always did. Patience has never been one of your virtues in any life. Yuki is the one with the abundance of patience, he puts up with you after all." Aoi smiled almost wickedly as Yuki stirred slightly. "It seems I was not needed as anything other than support he was already in the healing trance on his own. He is strong, he had already healed the part of his internal organs that were damaged. The poor dear, his own bones did this to him, he is so thin. However, this injury has been a catalyst, He has tapped his full potential already while still so young, but then Yuki always remembers quite early on who he is, this really surprises me not. All He ever needed was purpose to see clearly, he has seen who he is, and I dare say will wake up far wiser than he was when he began this trance. He has gone quite deep within, where the secrets lay dormant until needed" Aoi said as her aura began to fade and Yuki let out a small whimper.

Keiji was by his side in an instant, clasping a hand tightly. Yuki was still asleep, but his face was troubled. "TETSUYA!" Yuki sobbed in lament and sorrow, still caught in his trance.

"He is too deep!" Aoi gasped ripping Yuki's hand out of Keiji's. "Do not touch him until he comes out. He is remembering too keenly and your touch will amplify the memory."

"What memory?"

“Your last life, and judging from that cry his torment for being too late to save you.”

“Alright, talk to me. What is going on here? What do you know?” Keiji demanded and Aoi sighed.

“My son, I had hoped you would have had time to come of proper age before any of your destinies became apparent. This time around, it seems the world will need you far sooner than before.” Aoi began moving to rest Yuki’s head in her lap, stroking his brow to calm the youth in torment.

“Have you heard the legends of the Hoshi no Ryu?”

“What child, Jinrui or Shizen hasn’t?”

“You ARE the Hoshi no Ryu my son.” Aoi said bluntly and to the point.

“Horse shit.”

“It’s true. Believe or not.”

“Last I heard, the Hoshi no Ryu is a DRAGON, I hardly look like a dragon.”

“Do I look like a dragon?” Aoi asked and Keiji huffed.

“Odd, but not a dragon.”

In that moment, Aoi changed, and her form shifted into an elegant serpentine shape with bright sapphire and peacock blue scales, with silver accents that shimmered like the night sky with an otherworldly light.

“My name is Ryu Aoi, I was born from the infant seas and stars, I have lived since before time was measured and I shall live until all the stars fade. I was never a child and I shall never grow old. I have born a thousand sons, all of them with the same mortal soul. I have given birth to you a thousand times, and I shall a thousand more. You live every seven hundred years, you are the peacekeeper, the land changer, the guardian of light, and the balance of Darkness. You bring order to chaos, and change to that that has grown stagnant. You are a paradox, you are my one son, my only son, in his newest reincarnation.” Aoi spoke as she changed back into her “human” guise.

“Shit.” Was all that managed to be said as Keiji sat in awe of the woman before him.

“And that never changes either. You may be born of my body, but you are ever the son of your father. Master of speech still eludes you after countless millennia’s. Both of you.” Aoi sighed looking down to smile at Yuki.

“He is beginning to settle.”

“Who was Tetsuya?” Keiji asked as they waited for Yuki to come out of his current state.

“You. It is a sad tale, are you sure you wish to hear it?” Aoi asked and Keiji nodded, if Yuki remembered it, it seemed wise to know a subject to avoid in casual conversation.

“As you can see Yuki has remarkable healing talents, and they have served you both well in your history together. You make carry the world on your shoulders my son... but Yuki carries you. He always has, and there has only been one time where Yuki failed. Well, failure is too harsh a word, it was not his fault, but he blamed himself for it in those last moments before he followed you into death. To make a long tale much shorter, what happened was unforeseen, and unavoidable. It

was during your last incarnation, during the peace treaty signing at what is now known as Dragonfall Fells. Yuki had traveled to Lake Ashura with the Queen as escort as you helped officiate the treaty signing between our clans and the Ardfel nation. An assassin's arrow found your heart, and Yuki crawled four miles in agony back from the lake to be at your side. He had felt the arrow strike you, and felt you lingering, waiting for him to be by your side. Your last words to him were 'until we meet once more and may our time be longer.' Yuki remained behind just a few minutes, begging your forgiveness until he faded. It was tragic, he blamed himself for being too far away to help you when you needed him."

"That's crazy. I'd never blame him for something like that." Keiji interjected and Aoi smiled.

"Of course you would not, and now you may at least put an old demon to rest. Yuki always remembers the past, he will remember his words to you, you should at least say the words that you forgive him. It will help erase the pain of your last parting."

"You're probably right okasan. What was Yuki's name before?" Keiji asked running weary hands through his disheveled hair before turning to look at Aoi.

"That is simple, you have named him in every lifetime, and you are always predictable. Snow is not the only white thing in this world, yet you name him after snow every time. His name has always been Yuki." Aoi chuckled and Juyo smiled.

"We hadn't even picked his name out yet, it seems you saved me the trouble." Juyo finally spoke having followed the conversation with a bittersweet pang of regret at not naming his own son. Keiji turned to him in almost apology and Juyo just smiled. "Yuki is a fine name, I could not be prouder to be his father."

“He’s getting closer.” Keiji said matter-of-factly, derailing any further discussions on the past, the present was looming fast.

“No akurei filth will get far here. I will stop him, and when Yuki regains his health, he will be able to stop me. I can feel his aura, I pale in comparison.” Juyo said standing and looking toward the road. “He’s not far I am beginning to sense him, which means he should, if he has any natural talent other than blood magic, he will be sensing me soon enough.”

“Shall we meet him on the road?” Keiji asked picking up his bow and notching an arrow.

“Aye, it is best to meet an enemy on a battleground of your own choosing.” Juyo agreed and Aoi nodded from where she sat.

“I will guard him for now, he will wake soon and then we can journey to meet the others.” Aoi stated as Juyo and Keiji went to wait for Yogore in plain sight.

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It was hard and fast riding when they left Keiji and Yuki behind, Jujun wept as she rode but knew even had she stayed, there was naught she could do to help protect them, she hated feeling so helpless. However, she would trust Keiji’s orders, her gut knew this was the right thing to do, they’d get to Green Grove as fast as they could and wait.

The forest beside the road was a blur of motion as she kept her eyes focused on the goal ahead, she could hear the others close behind her keeping pace, when a flash of red appeared in the road before them and the horses reared in fright. Jujun felt weightless as she was thrown from her saddle and then just as suddenly, strong arms catching her from freefall.

“Sorry, I forget these beasties are frightened of my true form.” A voice very familiar said and Jujun turned to look up at the man holding her.

“Keiji!? How?” Jujun cried with relief and then he just laughed.

“Keiji? Nay, my name is Akai. Keiji is my Son. He always did favor me.” The man said setting Jujun on the ground and stepping back Jujun could see clearly. The face may be similar, but the man before her was certainly not Keiji. He was of the same height and build, wore the same crooked smile, but his eyes were like fire, and his skin was almost golden as it faded into brilliant red scales framing his face, the back of his hands, and arms. He was something from legend, Jujun knew her history and had always wondered what the great Immortal’s looked like, now she knew.

Ryu Akai, the Red Dragon, father of time and space, keeper of wisdom and the great warrior spirit himself. She had not expected him to look so young which meant the large mass of red she had seen would have been his true form, his dragon body. Then it dawned on her what Akai had just spoken.

“Your son? Keiji is your son?” She asked eyes wide in disbelief.

“Aye, and his mother has gone to fetch him. I am to protect you on your journey north. We will meet up in Green Grove and head up into the mountains together.”

“If Keiji is your son, does that mean he is...?”

“The Hoshi no Ryu? Aye. You know your history well little one made of fair earth tones.” Akai smiled as the others gathered around trying to calm agitated horses.

"I knew that boy seemed special. I can die a proud man having seen the coming of the Hoshi."

Kodai said as he helped the children and Sumire down from their mounts.

"He is still wet behind the ears. I had hoped he'd have more life experience under his belt before he was needed to awaken. He will only be eighteen in a fortnight, a pup who must take control of his pack with haste. Time it seems will no longer wait for him. Aoi has foreseen the coming, and the guardian passed over the threshold to give us warning to come and give aide. I will explain when we can all make use of the knowledge equally. For now let us get to safer ground and shelter." Akai said turning to look south back down the road.

"His first battle approaches on swift hooves bathed in much blood and sorrow. He will awaken this day, life as he knew it will irrevocably change forever. For good or for ill yet remains to be determined. Power to thy wings, my son." Akai said turning away to face north. "Follow me, there is a shorter way than the road and much safer."

Leading the horses on foot, the group followed Akai off the road and down a path that opened before him almost magically. A golden road that was not visible before. Akai felt a small tug at the hem of his cloak and looked down into the bright face of a young boy.

"Tohru, great things you will see lad. Great things you shall bear on such young shoulders."

"You know my name?"

"Aye." Akai said reaching down to ruffle his blonde shaggy locks.

"Are you really a Dragon? Jujun told us stories all about you."

"Aye I am a dragon. Do I scare you young one?"

“No.” Tohru said smiling up at the man Keiji so resembled.

“And why is that young Master? Akai asked, indulging the curious youth.

“Because you’re good in all the stories.”

“Good am I? Perhaps you might want to impart your wisdom to my good mate. Her opinion of me is not quite the same as yours.” Akai said with a wink as the group traveled forward.

“Now I know you’re Keiji’s sire.” Sumire cackled, it was plain to see the apple had not fallen far from this tree.

“He is always thus. My blood tends to run quite strong, much to Aoi’s lament.” Akai laughed as he lead the group, once again it seemed he was in for a tongue lashing from his mate at their son’s lack of graces. Inside however Akai was beaming with proud mischief, once again he was looking forward to enjoying his son’s company, he had missed him these past seven hundred years, his life was so short in comparison, Akai would enjoy the time they had together while it lasted this time around, just as he had every time previously.

It seemed only a few minutes since they’d left the road when Akai led them from the path into a small bustling town. “We are here.”

“How?” The group exclaimed in almost unison. Akai only winked mischievously.

“My secret.” Akai grinned as he headed toward the inn.

“My Lord Akai, you grace us, the rooms have been prepared.” The Inn keeper said rushing out to help the travelers.

“Thank you, let’s get them fed and rested, we should be joined soon by the others.” Akai said taking the two littlest children by the hands and leading them over towards the warm fire. “What say we have a story while you eat?” He said settling down with them by the hearth and while they drank a hearty stew, Ryu Akai began to tell them the stories of the Hoshi no Ryu, starting at the very beginning.

Soon all within ear shot, Man, woman and child alike sat around Akai’s feet listening to the immortal’s impromptu history lesson.

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Series Title: Greenlings

Book ONE: Ai no Hanashi (Story of Love)

Chapter Number: Five

“The Hoshi no Ryu Returns”

Author: D. Sanders

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Yuki opened his eyes slowly, the diffused light from the conifer grove dancing like stars before his eyes. He felt soft hands stroking his forehead, and he remembered the touch, he closed his eyes again and smiled.

“Aoi, how long have I been in trance?”

“Long enough as was needed, not too long to cause undue concern for most of us who know you, save your other half. You are always dependable to not give us much cause for worry once you awaken to your inner soul.”

“It’s strange waking up, it always is. I have my memories of this lifetime, my unaware self and the memories of this life are still here, and then all the times I thought I was dreaming turn out to be dreams of things that once were. It is quite a disconcerting sensation waking. I am grateful Keiji does not ever go through this. He is passionate enough without adding fuel to his fire.” Yuki chuckled sitting up to kiss Aoi’s cheek.

“Okasan no Ryu, you never change. Still as beautiful as ever.” Yuki smiled running a hand through his hair with a sigh.

“And you ever know how to flatter the mother of your lover.” Aoi grinned back patting his hand.

“You’re so young this time, this portents ill.” She added in all seriousness.

“Aye, the youngest I’ve been to have awakened, this body is not even seventeen yet, and weak in many ways that even my healer’s gift cannot mend. It must have time to mend itself from the years of abuse it has taken. Time we do not have. Keiji is facing something dangerous, I feel it coming, and why I didn’t wake up sooner to deal with this evil is beyond me. Iron still fogs my mind and this scar it gave me will never fully heal. It will take some time for the effects on me to wane, the Akurei coming is smart, he suspected me, and caged me well and kept me from awakening.” Yuki said standing and stretching.

“Either that or he was just lucky and thought I was just a convenient well of power to drink from.” He added frowning and starting to walk toward the road.

“Do you think it wise Yuki that you get involved?” Aoi cautioned and Yuki turned and smiled at her.

“I am doing what I was born countless times to do. I protect the one who protects us all. This is my purpose in life.” Yuki said in a tone that was final and confident. “This Akurei Maho needs to learn he hurt the wrong man.” Yuki added, and this tone was chilling.

Aoi nodded. Yuki had truly awakened. The gentle, loving, peaceful and kind soul he was most of the time masked a much darker and deeper inner self, the mage of snow and ice. It took a lot to make him angry, but once angered, the Blessed Winter Enchanter of Dragons, the Shinsei Fuyu Majutsushi no Ryu never forgave easily and was a foe one lived to regret making.

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Keiji and Juyo stood in the road waiting without talking, eyes fixed south. They could both sense him now, and a much greater power as well drawing nearer. Keiji turned his gaze to the woods and a mist like heavy fog began to roll in, from the mist Yuki stepped.

“Go back, this is no place for you.” Keiji snapped and Yuki shook his head as he walked up to face his lover.

“This is my place here.” Yuki said wrapping his arms around his lover’s neck pulling his face down to give a soft kiss. “Awaken my love, call your Eien Yoroi no Ryu.” Yuki whispered and Keiji’s eyes went wide.

“I am not the Hoshi no Ryu.”

“You are. Feel me surround you, draw from me your birthright.”

“Yuki... I...”

“You have no time, he is upon us, take your armor and fight. Protect us all and I will protect you.”

“How?”

“Our bond, grasp it, seize it and pull.” Yuki said feeling Keiji’s inner self reach toward that thread that tied their souls together as one and as he pulled Yuki’s form evaporated into the mists, only his voice remained in Keiji’s mind.

“I am your sword, I am your shield, I am your wellspring, Eien Yoroi no Ryu!” Keiji felt on fire then frozen to the ground as his body began to be wrapped in the mist, his arms and legs encased in lightweight armor of pristine white that looked like dragon scales, his shield a great dragon head, his helm bore wings and instead of feathers, Yuki’s hair. His sword white light with no hilt, it came directly from his palm, he felt as if he could fly.

“You can fly my love. My Hoshi.” Yuki’s voice soft in his mind, reassuring.

“Hey if this getup gets scratched do you feel it?” Keiji asked suddenly terrified, this armor was Yuki.

“Getup? You look divine. And yes, I still feel, but you will not hurt me unless you die. I am bound to you, always.” Yuki seemed to caress his mind.

“I still cannot believe all this.”

“You never fully remember Keiji in your conscious mind, your memories are your instincts, heed them. You have countless experience where it matters most, follow your gut feelings.”

“I understand you remember everything consciously now?” Keiji asked and Juyo watched enthralled, actually seeing the re-birth of the Hoshi no Ryu and the Shinsei Fuyu Majutsushi no Ryu with his own eyes was something no one ever dreamed possible. And he was the witness to the legend.

It was as glorious to behold as all the legends spoke of, his own son the Shinsei Fuyu Majutsushi no Ryu brought prideful tears to his eyes. The Eien Yoroi no Ryu was more beautiful beyond words, but then again so was the man behind the armor. The Shinsei Fuyu Majutsushi no Ryu was also a legend for his sheer beauty. Male or female could not compare. It was clear the armor was also a reflection of the man who created the armor for his lover to wear.

“Yes, everything.” Yuki added a hint of unmistakable lust lacing his voice. A ghostly hand caressing body and mind and for the first time in Keiji’s life he blushed a bright red. He coughed and sputtered and seeing as Juyo only heard his side of the conversation, the look of confusion on his face made Keiji blush an even deeper hue.

“What’s wrong Hoshi?”

“First, Keiji is just fine and second your son had better be making me promises he can keep!”

Yuki’s laughter rang like bells in Keiji’s mind. “Most assuredly they are promises I intend on keeping.”

“I don’t think I want to know what he is saying to you do I?” Juyo asked blushing a little himself now.

“No you don’t.” Keiji responded as the sounds of hooves approached. “Here he comes.”

“Tell my father to stand back, we can handle this one.” Yuki said, malice lacing his tone.

“Yuki says to stand back, and are you sure Yuki?”

“Absolutely. I want this one.”

“This time I won’t argue with you love, I can hear it in your voice.” Keiji said feeling a chill creep down his spine at the hatred surging through him. The painful memories surging and pulsating, the armor glowing red hot to the eye yet cool on Keiji’s skin.

Yogore rode into the mists and pulled up hard on the reigns, the mysterious fog was dripping with power. “Come out Bastard, play time is over you are going back where you belong.” Yogore sneered and the mists parted with a flair for the dramatic revealing Keiji standing there in full armor.

“Yuki says if you wish to keep your hide in tact, you turn around and ride back the way you came.” Keiji grinned loving the wide-eyed look Yogore gave them.

“If you think fancy tricks and mimicking a painting of the Hoshi no Ryu will scare me you are mistaken.”

“I’m afraid this is no trick.” Keiji said holding up his sword above his head, which pulsed and flashed in a shower of sparks.

“Where is the Bastard?”

“All around you. The mist, my armor, my sword, he is everywhere and nowhere. And he’s quite angry. Yuki gives you one final warning, turn around and never come back.”

“The Bastard is calling himself Yuki? How quaint. You are not the Hoshi no Ryu and he is certainly not the Shinsei Fuyu Majutsushi no Ryu.” Yogore sneered holding up his hands and letting a blast of red energy shoot from his fingers toward Keiji. The armor flashed and the red tendrils of power were absorbed harmlessly.

A second flash and a sphere of pure white light flew from the sword in a blur and before he could deflect it, Yogore was thrown from his mount, stunned at the force of the blast. This was not an act, he was looking at the real Hoshi no Ryu, he had returned. He was in serious trouble facing this man alone, the Shinsei Fuyu Majutsushi no Ryu was the source of the Hoshi’s power, and that man was almost impossible to defeat. It would take an army to bring them down, Yogore hurriedly remounted.

“Fine, you win this time. Take the bastard and go, but know if you let me go, I will return to claim him. I had him once under my control and I will have him back.”

Keiji spoke for himself this time. "You would have to kill me to have him, be glad Yuki is letting you go. I'm of a mind to kill you right here right now and be done with it." Keiji spat, wanting to rip this man apart with his bare hands, but Yuki was tired, the blast took a lot of his energy, his body was still very weak.

Yogore turned and raced back toward Kanashimi Keep, and the armor melted from Keiji's body and a limp body fell into Keiji's arms.

"I'm exhausted." Yuki gasped as Keiji picked him up.

"But brave to face him like that, I dare say the Yuki that was is no more, fear no longer rules you."

"No, I am ruled by a much more beautiful emotion."

Keiji quirked an eyebrow and Yuki smiled and laid a hand to Keiji's cheek. "Love."

"That is true, and please forgive yourself. I know what happened the last time and it was never your fault. Tetsuya or Keiji, or whatever else you have called me, one thing my guts tell me is the same, I would never blame you for something like that. Forgive yourself."

With that Yuki's eyes drifted shut the smile tugging at his lips. "Koishii Koibito Aishiteru."

"I love you too." Keiji said joining Juyo by the road, Aoi leading a terrified horse from the forest cover.

"He hates you too I see." Keiji said and Aoi smiled.

“Horses know our true forms, what beast faces a dragon willingly?” Aoi said handing the reigns to Juyo.

“Follow me, I will open the ancient pathway, we will be to Green Grove in a few minutes, where we can call a rest with our friends. Akai tells me the others are already there and waiting.

“So you both can bend time and space like I’ve heard?” Keiji asked as he carried Yuki as they walked a golden road.

“So, my son, can you. You have yet to really awaken, you are not of age yet. You will learn what you need to learn when we get you both home and can train you to use your gifts. Yuki thankfully needs no training, just rest and recuperation from years of abuse to his body.” Aoi said as they walked.

“Why didn’t you raise me yourself?” Keiji asked the niggling question that had to be asked.

“If you are born to fight for the people, is it not best you fight for them because you love them? You needed exposure to them, know their customs and ways, you needed to learn to be one of them. You needed Yuki. Believe me, had I a choice and you were not born to be more than just my beloved son, I would indeed keep you at my home and heart always.” Aoi said, a hint of sadness in her tone.

“I’m sorry Okasan.” Keiji replied with regret he’d asked the question.

“Do not be my son, you have every right to know why we give you to a guardian to be raised, it is natural for you to ask that question. You do every time.” Aoi smiled as they walked into Green Grove during the pre-dinner hour rush.

The first to greet them was Tohru and Saya as they entered the Inn, close behind them was Jujun and a man that Keiji did a rather comical double take when he spied him. It was like looking into a mirror, almost. There was no doubt in his mind his gut reaction was perfect. Keiji bowed his head seeing as his arms were still full of a sleeping wizard. "Tosan?"

Akai smiled "Musuko." Akai replied in kind, gesturing to the stairs. "Lets get him in a bed, I watched through Aoi's eyes, not your most impressive debut, but good to see you like that again."

"I'm not sure how I feel about all this yet, it's rather much to digest still." Keiji said truthfully as he climbed the stairs behind Akai as he led them to their room.

"Understandable, you are both very young this time. You are both usually quite a few years older when you come together. Here, this room is yours. The old knight and the brusque basan are next to you, the children on the other side. Juyo the first door we passed and your Mother and I prefer other accommodations. We do not wear this form as often as you do my son." Akai said as Keiji laid Yuki in bed and pulled the covers up over him.

"I've never known another. I guess that's one of my lessons?" Keiji sighed kicking off his boots.

"Aye. But for now rest with him, we will bring you food -- he will need some very soon, but you more. He always does." Akai said with a wink as he almost skipped out of the room.

Keiji just shook his head, his parents seemed to know more about Yuki than he did and it was almost irritating.

"They have memories of me you don't that's all my love." Yuki said trailing a hand up Keiji's back where he sat perched on the side of the bed.

“What I want to know is what that last comment meant, he looked far too saucy.” Keiji said turning to look at Yuki whose face was flushed and whose eyes were heavy lidded.

Yuki’s hands reached up, and his fingers entwined behind Keiji’s neck and a gentle tug brought Keiji’s form down close atop Yuki where he lay.

“It meant just what you think it meant. I have just been intimately wrapped around your body, it -- DOES things to me.”

Keiji smirked. “In other words you get a raging hard-on for me?”

Yuki groaned. “I tried to put that in less crass and more subtle ways, but yes. Becoming the Eien Yoroi no Ryu is our most intimate partnership, I need completion after, and don’t you dare deny that you also have been needing this.”

“Yuki I never lie. I could barely stand up back there! I got hard the moment you put that thing on me.”

“That “thing” is me. That is why you feel this way.”

“That makes battle rather difficult don’t you think?” Keiji purred as he undid Yuki’s ruined top.

“We do not use the armor coupling often, it was just visually impressive and functional this time, seeing as you cannot shift your form yet into your true shape. I only become your armor when you must be in this form. It does make battle difficult for us both.” Yuki panted as Keiji trailed kisses down a now nude torso.

“Thanks for the warning.” Keiji growled as he circled a lazy tongue around Yuki’s navel.

“Unnnnn, you loved it.” Yuki half chuckled half purred as Keiji’s mouth and tongue did obscene things as Yuki’s breeches disappeared from his legs, exposing his almost painful looking erection.

“I did.” Keiji countered standing and shedding his own clothes.

Yuki’s sat up faster than Keiji had seen him move before and Keiji’s knees buckled and he went tumbling into sheets when a very wicked mouth encased him and began to make good on one earlier promise made that day.

“By the goddesses, Yuki!” Keiji gasped as he strained to watch his lover’s head bob up and down giving him more pleasure than he’d ever imagined. “Get over here where I can reach you damn it!” Keiji growled grabbing hold of Yuki so he would place his legs on either side of Keiji’s head, then flipping them over so Yuki’s back was in the mattress, Keiji began his own movements. Licking and sucking with his own desire to taste and feel, while thrusting gently and slowly into an equally eager mouth, seeking in earnest a completion to their intimate metaphysical coupling.

It was frantic paced, they both needed release, and it came as swiftly as it began. Keiji sat up to watch Yuki almost savor the taste of him, fingers dabbing at the corners of his mouth, almost afraid of missing it all. “You look quite decidedly wicked right now.” Keiji teased and Yuki cracked open one eye then the other and grinned.

“I have missed that. I have missed you. Even when I didn’t know what precisely I was missing, I missed you. Crazy that sounds, I know, but it’s true. This reincarnation of mine dreamed of you the most, almost constantly I saw you in my dreams, faceless you were, but the love I felt in those dreams is the same. I needed you desperately, I was so alone.” Yuki said moving to crawl into Keiji’s arms.

Keiji gathered Yuki into his arms and inhaled deeply, the scent of lust and musk from their primal urges to couple felt like a warm elixir in the pit of his stomach. This raw desire he felt for this boy barely a man was almost frightening in its intensity.

“I have never felt so damn possessive over anything as I feel about you right now.” Keiji’s voice was gruff as his arms tightened around Yuki’s shoulders.

“That is because you are what you are. The desires you feel are proof you are a dragon and no mere man. You feel things much more intensely than others. You were like this from the very first time you took a youth from his bath and made violent love to him right out in the open on the lakeshore.” Yuki chuckled.

“I did that?”

“You did. Little did I know that beautiful red sleeping dragon on the cliff above me was spying on me. One minute I was washing my hair, the next I was bent in half with you having your wicked way with me. Good thing really we are Koibito bonded, that sort of introduction to each other isn’t usually what one considers romantic. But you do tend to, how do I put this, act first ask questions later. Like the question ‘what is your name?’” Yuki laughed mid thought. “You didn’t even ask my name until a few days later. And when I didn’t have one to give, you named me Yuki. Then you took me back to your home and kept me naked for days, I couldn’t walk for a week.”

“Fuck me, I’m sorry.” Keiji said in shock.

“Don’t be, you were and are a wonderful lover, and times then were much different than they are now. The Shizuka were still a primitive race ourselves. Our relationship now still reaches back to our first one in many ways. Our souls have not changed. You are a dragon, you burn within, I feed off your fire. We are matched well.” Yuki said sitting up to stretch.

“And I do believe our father’s are about to descend upon us with food, we might want to cover ourselves.” Yuki said just as the knock came to the door and two young men wrapped in sheets greeted their sires, gratefully accepting the offered food.

Akai grinned at the disheveled pair and winked. “Eat up, and rest. We head out in the morning for Midori Yama Mori.”

Keiji smiled and then just stared in shock when a breathless voice of long love and sincerely longing came from Yuki’s lips... “Home.”

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Keiji sat in wonder watching the “new” Yuki make his way through their meal. The way he handled the Hashi utensils like a master where the day before he’d never held them in his life. The way he favored one food over another, where in his current existence he had never tasted them before. Yuki looked up from his bowl of rice and smiled.

“This body may have never tasted, but I remember what I used to like.” Yuki said smiling over his bowl and tapping Keiji’s with his Hashi. “Yours grows cold.”

“I can’t help it, I’m finding you fascinating at the moment. How do you feel?” Keiji asked taking a bite of his own meal.

“I am healed for the most part. I repaired the damage on the inside earlier. What I cannot heal with my gifts is this body’s poor condition. I am malnourished which makes me weak, and this body still has not stopped growing either. I’m afraid I will be stunted in this life, there is some damage to this form even time will not fully heal.”

"I like you as you are if that helps."

Yuki smiled. "Of that I had no doubt."

"Just making sure." Keiji grinned pouring them both glasses of the fresh apple cider that had been brought in to them.

"Tell me, is our home still near the Saishi Izumi?" Yuki asked and Keiji almost spilled his glass.

"How did you know there was a house near the Saishi Izumi?"

"We put it there. We have always lived there once we found those springs."

"The house is there, no one lives in it, but Kasan always went to clean it." Keiji said remembering how his foster mother always tended the vacant structure.

"The Guardians take care of more than just you and I when we are born, they tend to our legacy as well. Tell me my peach and cherry trees are still there!"

Keiji laughed. "Hai, Hai... your grove is strong. I take it you like Peaches?"

"Adore them. Just as you must have grown up raiding the cherry trees, those were planted for you after all."

"I did, you know my favorite fruit?"

"I remember." Yuki smiled wistfully, his eyes shimmering with tears. Keiji didn't need to be asked, he held open his arms and Yuki crawled onto Keiji's lap and into them, burying his tears into Keiji's shoulder.

"Don't cry Love." Keiji soothed and Yuki sniffled but did not move.

"This is a wholly new emotion, I am overwhelmed. My memories of you are keen -- my memories of my life now are just as keen. I was so devastatingly alone. You've no idea what I have lived through these past sixteen, nigh on seventeen years. The pain and the torment were almost unbearable. Now gone they are, once again you waltz into my life and change it forever. You give me such joy in life Keiji, my heart feels like bursting I love you so very much." Yuki spoke still nestled in Keiji's embrace.

"I feel your love in our bond, I feel all your emotions. I'm sure you feel mine. I didn't think I could love you as much as I do, and it just seems to expand the more I am with you." Keiji returned in kind, kissing Yuki's hair atop his head. "Shall we go to bed? I think I'd just like to hold you while we sleep." Keiji said without waiting for an answer, and picking Yuki up and carrying him to bed.

There were no objections as Yuki rested his head on Keiji's chest.

Sleep was deep and restful for the great powers that had been newly reborn into the world.

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Keiji was awakened by the sound of quiet conversation and the smell of warm honey rosehip tea and fresh bread. He cracked open an eye and saw Yuki and his father talking softly, seated at the table, sharing a light morning meal over tea and catching up on the past sixteen years.

“Finally awake I see.” Yuki said turning his head toward the bed and his smile was more radiant than morning sunshine.

“Hai.” Keiji said yawning and sitting up rubbing the sleep from his eyes. “I slept like the dead.” He added, stumbling over toward the table trying to hold a blanket around his nakedness and not fall over said blanket as he crossed the room with newly wakened muddled senses.

“I’m not surprised.” Yuki chuckled into his tea cup as Keiji flopped into a vacant chair and reached for the still warm bread sitting in a basket on the table removing a slice and liberally slathering equally warm apple butter on it and eating it all in a matter of a few bites.

“And that doesn’t surprise me either. Have an appetite this morning Koishii?” Yuki teased and Keiji grinned licking butter off his fingers.

“You can quit that, you know damn well I do.” Keiji replied with a saucy smirk, not taking his lover’s bait, he was good for one blush in a blue moon, his quota was met for the interim.

Juyo laughed and then sighed. “I can see things will be more than entertaining when around the pair of you.” He said shaking his head in happy resignation.

Keiji just grinned, full of wicked mischief, then noticed for the first time Yuki’s attire. Keiji’s hand stopped in mid stroke, the bread and butter forgotten as he drank in the sight. Yuki’s hair was free from his braid, yet it still held a wave where the plait had been and it cascaded over his shoulders in wild abandon. But the part that caught his attention most was the sky blue Shizuka robe embroidered with midnight blue threads in an orchid blossom motif. The robe was loosely tied and a part of Yuki’s chest was exposed, and a graceful knee and leg was visible where Yuki’s legs were crossed. To put it simply, Yuki looked divine and wholly Shizuka. The transformation of the tattered filthy boy to the graceful swan of a young man was staggering to behold.

"Where did you get that robe?" Keiji breathed in wonder and Yuki eyes closed in mirth as he smiled as he cocked his head in amusement.

"Otosan. My clothes from yesterday were ruined. He went out last night to the market and brought me a few things this morning. This is lovely, isn't it?" Yuki asked running a hand over the silken material of his sleeve. "I must say, material has come a long way in seven hundred years. This is so soft." He added and Juyo and Keiji both did a double take at the last comment.

"Silk was around then." Keiji said and Yuki shook his head.

"It was, just not this refined or soft. Not to mention the artisan who did this embroidery is a master with the needle." Yuki said reaching for the teapot and refilling his cup and everyone else's on the table with the fragrant rose tea.

"It's amazing the history contained in your head my son. It must be wonderful to know so much." Juyo said and Yuki's face took on a soft, almost sad look.

"Sometimes. Other times I long for something new. Yesterday I was lost in the newness of my life. The wonderful man who had come into it, all the new friends I never knew I had. The joy of my first real bath, my first kiss. Today? Things this body may have not had the joy of knowing, the mind now knows. It will be hard to find joy in small things now. Knowledge is a trade off. It helps us in many things, and hinders us in others."

Keiji took Yuki's hand and kissed his palm. "Then I'll just have to find new ways to surprise you if I can." He said and Yuki smiled.

"If anyone can succeed in that promise, you certainly can." Yuki replied interlacing his fingers with Keiji's.

"Well I think I'll let you two finish breaking your fast. I'm sure the others are just finishing up as well. I think we should meet in the common room downstairs in a hour and be on our way." Juyo said standing and Yuki stood with him and embraced him fondly.

"Otosan. Thank you. I pray with all my heart we find more time soon to get to know each other better." Yuki said and Juyo returned the embrace tightly.

"Yuki, I have you alive and well, believe me there is nothing in this world that will stop me from spending as much time with my son as possible." Juyo reassured before excusing himself and exiting the room.

"Did you have a nice talk with him?" Keiji asked his mouth half full of bread and apple butter.

"Yes. He told me of my mother and how much apparently I look like she." Yuki spoke as he removed the robe and began dressing in the other garments Juyo had procured for him. In place of the robe, Yuki pulled on warm doe skin breeches, dyed in a slate blue hue. Next came a simple white undershirt with full oversized sleeves and over that a matching slate colored doeskin vest with a high fitted collar designed to keep the cold out. The low boots of the same doeskin lined with lamb's wool a perfect fit as Yuki slipped them over his feet.

"You look fantastic in clothes that fit you properly." Keiji commented, drinking his tea, leaning back in his chair, the blanket covering him long gone, and his quite apparent approval met Yuki's eyesight as he turned around to look at Keiji.

“Thank you, and I just managed to put it on, I’m afraid you’ll have to wait a while until it comes off again.” Yuki said grinning at his lover’s desire and picking up a hairbrush and wincing as he found a particularly stubborn knot in his hair.

“Come here. Sit down, allow me.” Keiji said and Yuki sat in a chair handing Keiji the brush in the process. Closing his eyes as Keiji ran the brush through his long almost knee length hair. Once brushed, Keiji braided the long tresses again. “I really do like it long like this. Your hair is gorgeous.” Keiji added tossing the brush on the bed and flopping down upon it with a smile still on his face.

“I promised never to cut it and I won’t. You always did like my hair long.” Yuki said straddling Keiji on the bed and leaning over to place a long lingering kiss on Keiji’s lips before sitting up and licking his lips. “Mmmmm, apple butter and dragon, what a tasty combination.” Yuki purred and Keiji laughed still flat on his back on the bed.

“Keep that up and we’ll be late.” Keiji chuckled dumping Yuki unceremoniously off his lap and standing up to dress himself.

“Wait, Otosan brought some for you too.” Yuki said getting up to hand Keiji his new garments. “Apparently my father has a flair for the dramatic, and I must thank him later. You will look good enough to eat in this.” Yuki said holding out the black suede breeches, vest and knee high boots, black shirt with red trim and black cloak. Cut in the same fashion as Yuki’s garments but in color a stark contrast.

Once dressed Yuki whistled low through his teeth, “It’s my turn to salivate. You look wonderful. My father has a good sense of color to compliment our natural coloring.”

“Well if we’re out to make an impression, these will help add atmosphere indeed. Come on Koi, let’s go meet the others and go home. I want you out of those clothes later, so the sooner we get home, the sooner I get you naked.”

“You have a one track mind Kojiro Keiji.”

“And you don’t?”

“I cannot lie, I love being young with you, in every life you are a wonderful lover.”

“And you Koishii are inspiration and temptation.” Keiji smirked taking Yuki’s hand as they headed downstairs.

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Series Title: Greenlings
Book TWO: Gakumon Soshite Hattatsu (Growth and Learning)
Chapter Number: Six
“Homecoming”
Author: D. Sanders

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Everyone was indeed already gathered in the common room downstairs as Keiji and Yuki descended down the stairs. Everyone was there and quite a few more, all looking at Keiji and Yuki with wide eyes, skepticism, awe and a host of other indescribable emotions across their faces. Keiji quirked an eyebrow and Yuki chuckled. “Methinks the news we are back has reached a few ears.” Yuki said smiling at the crowd as they joined their awaiting traveling party.

“Gee, do you think so?” Keiji said sarcastically as Yuki stated the obvious as he too joined the group.

The innkeeper nervously approached and bowed. “Did you sleep well my Lords? I gave you the best room I had, I pray it was satisfactory.” He said in humility and respect. Yuki held out his hand.

“I slept better than I have in a long time. Your accommodations and the meal were lovely. Thank you Master Innkeeper.” Yuki said quite diplomatically and graciously. Keiji was still trying to digest all the interested eyes staring at him.

“You are most welcome My lord Majutsushi.” The innkeeper responded almost beaming with pride. He would brag for years to come that it was HIS INN that the Hoshi no Ryu and the Shinsei Fuyu Majutsushi no Ryu stated at on their first awakening night. That claim to fame was one few could make. Everyone would want to stay in that room. Yuki knew this as well and walked over to the hearth and laid his hand on the stonework, and stone in the center, just above the mantle began to glow. It took only a moment, but when Yuki removed his hand, an etching of a dragon

with a rune on its chest that stood for the symbol of winter was forever carved into the stone. A symbol that the pair had indeed been within the inn's walls. No one would ever doubt the old innkeeper's tales.

"Oh thank you my Lord, thank you." The innkeeper's wife sobbed her gratitude and all those still in doubt, doubted no longer. Yuki just turned around and gave a bright beaming smile.

"It was the least I could do for your kindness. May our crest bring you prosperity, good luck and peace as long as it remains upon the light of your welcoming hearth." Yuki said bowing to the innkeeper and his wife before moving to stand next to Keiji, a hand absently slipping into his lovers.

"Flashy move snowdrop." Keiji jibbed and Yuki just looked up and smiled.

"Not flashy, a gratitude payment. Our crest is proof we were here, we ARE legends whether we like it or not, giving an old man a tale to tell to bring him profits is not a difficult task. That is our crest, it's proof we were here." Yuki explained and it did make a lot of sense, Keiji just shrugged. He never thought much of money or material things, his interests were sensory in nature, good food, good drink, great sex and the like, but others did and Yuki was right, the old man would make a pretty penny just showing off the mantle, and it was apparently a simple thing for Yuki to do, no harm and only good will done after all.

Kodai strode forward and clapped Keiji on the back heartily. "I'd have never taken such a skinny lad as the Hoshi. But I guess given time you'll fill out a tad." Kodai winked and Keiji laughed.

"And it looks to me you're still filling out Jii-Jii" Keiji ribbed right back poking Kodai's middle that did seem to be straining his breeches at the seams. Kodai patted his belly with pride.

“Years of being with a damn fine cook. I wear this with pride and satisfaction.” Kodai said as Jujun joined the group, turning a few heads herself with her new attire. She was dressed head to toe in deep and rich shades of forest green. From her shirt to her over-tunic, to the leather riding breeches to her boots and cloak, she was a vision of nature at it’s finest. She smiled softly as both Keiji and Yuki nodded with approval.

“Is this your work too Otosan?” Yuki asked his father who nodded.

“The good lass came with me to help me with shopping, and something as lovely as the young Miss here needed a good showing off. None of our women are of her coloring, good earthy tones of nature herself. I only added to what the goddesses already blessed her with.” Juyo said with a wink and Jujun blushed.

“You are far too kind Lord Hikari. He would not let me refuse.”

“I should say not young lady. It is a crime not to reward the good hearted.” Juyo said smiling at her as the others collected their belongs and stood to leave.

“Otosan is right, you do look lovely.” Yuki said kissing Jujun’s cheek and laying an arm about her shoulders as they headed outside.

“I had a hard time believing all that, until I saw you do that to the mantle. Is it hard? I mean, they said you remember things from ten thousand years ago.” Jujun asked and Yuki nodded.

“Longer than that, and yes it is hard in ways.” Yuki said and Jujun sighed.

“I am sorry. If you ever want an ear to listen when things are sad or difficult for you, mine ear is yours to bend.” Jujun offered and Yuki smiled and squeezed her shoulders as they walked.

“I’ll remember that, and thank you, you are a dear friend Ju.” Yuki said as Aoi and Akai met them all in the street.

“Shall we be off?” Akai asked and the group nodded in unison. In moments they were walking that golden road toward Midori Yama Mori. Akai and Aoi in the lead, followed by Yuki and Keiji, Juyo and Kodai, Sumire with the Children and bringing up the rear leading the horses, the unassuming Jujun.

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