

## Where the Heart Is

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## Where the Heart Is

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### Summary

"Fafnir is standing behind the line of the couch, just over Makoto's shoulder, staring so intently at the screen that Makoto doesn't need to turn his head to see him." The making of a hit.

## Tutorial

The video games are a retreat, at first. Makoto is familiar with Kobayashi's home, even if he hasn't yet grown perfectly comfortable in her brand-new apartment; he's at least capable of hooking up the television to the game console and settling down for a few hours of entertainment. If there were a smaller group gathered for the evening he would leave the television dark and turn himself to carrying on what polite conversation is needed to make friends out of strangers, but the apartment is rapidly filling with the varied seemings of those Tohru claims as friends, and after facing down one wave of murderous rage Makoto is quite ready to retreat to nonthreatening calm to prevent latent violence from breaking into a massacre that he's sure he will get the worst end of.

Makoto has an audience right from the start. The little girl Kobayashi has taken in -- Kanna, as she was introduced -- has settled on one end of the couch and shows no discomfort at having her claim to the furniture shared by Makoto claim the spot before the screen. She must be another dragon like Tohru herself, but she appears no different from a cute elementary school student, just as Tohru bears herself with the same bright energy of the young woman she looks like. It is true that Makoto still recalls the shape of an enormous dragon swelling before him, rising up from the form of the woman who has declared herself to be Kobayashi's dedicated maid -- there is no amount of intoxication that could have wiped that detail from his mind -- but it's easier than he expected to take Tohru at face value, without the burden of semi-secret awareness to trip him up. Kobayashi treats Tohru as her live-in maid, and Tohru clearly wishes to be taken as that by others; so Makoto does so, and what tension there is between them is nothing more intense than misplaced jealousy.

Fafnir is a different story. His own dragon form was far more alarming than Tohru's, however briefly glimpsed; Makoto finds the recollection of it slipping from his mind even when he tries to reach for it, as if the impossibility his eyes saw is too much for his mind to make sense of in the limitations of the world in which he lives. The more human form Fafnir adopted is suited for the reality of his existence, Makoto thinks, with the dark of his hair sweeping to half-hide his face and his visible eye glittering a furious red, but however striking his appearance Makoto found himself cringing back from the wave of unrelieved hostility that seemed to pour off the other like a chill icing the friendly warmth of the room. Discretion seemed the best option, from there: Makoto made his introductions, offering a smile and a wave to the unmoving scowl and glare he received for himself from the human-form dragon before him, and then he escaped to the living room to give Fafnir whatever space the other might wish to take from the humans he clearly despises.

It's a surprise, then, to have him draw closer. Makoto doesn't turn at the sound of footsteps passing behind the couch, although he's certain without looking of the identity of the other; his spine prickles with awareness of Fafnir's attention, adrenaline shivering through him to tense his body with the expectation of danger and the need to take decisive action. But this isn't the place for a fight, and Makoto has no desire at all to so much as argue with anyone, least of all the crimson-eyed dragon that has adopted the form of a demonic butler straight out of an anime, so he fixes his attention on the motion of the avatar on the television screen in front of him, and lets his adrenaline ease into the well-practiced calm that he falls into for particularly difficult games. His shoulders loosen, his grip on the controller goes gentle instead of desperate, and Makoto feels his stress bled off by the reassuring familiarity of the game before him.

Even so, Makoto's not oblivious to his surroundings. Kanna is seated on the couch next to him, watching the screen with focused interest; in the kitchen there's the sound of Tohru cooking, and Kobayashi and Lucoa are speaking to the other woman with the ease of quick-forming friendship in their voices. And Fafnir is standing behind the line of the couch, just over Makoto's shoulder, staring so intently at the screen that Makoto doesn't need to turn his head to see him. He can catch

glimpses of the other's face in the reflection from the television at particularly dim-lit portions of the dungeon, can see the tension of Fafnir's frown creasing interest instead of anger across his handsome face; but more immediately Makoto feels none of the violent aura that washed over him in the first minutes of the other's entrance. He doesn't turn his head to look over his shoulder and give away his attention to the other, but he's still aware of Fafnir's presence, as clearly as if he can feel the other's focus on the screen mapped to a touch at the back of his neck and prickling across his scalp.

It's when Makoto has just finished a boss fight that Fafnir moves. He seems to glide across the floor, as if he might be flying instead of walking through the space; appropriate enough, Makoto thinks, as he takes advantage of the other's motion to steal a quick glance sideways at him. Fafnir really is dressed as a butler, every detail of his outfit as point-perfect as if he stepped from the page of a book; or from the screen of an anime, Makoto amends in his own mind, considering the length of inky black hair spilling over the other's shoulders and draped to curtain half his face in a way that is certainly illogical but absolutely aesthetically appealing. His frown and the color of his gaze fits, too; perhaps not for the cool composure of a classic butler, but absolutely for the unspoken danger presented by an otherworldly creature adopting a seeming that cannot entirely mask their own nature. Makoto watches Fafnir out of the corner of his eye as the other comes around the edge of the couch to drop to sit heavily at the far side, where his seat will give him the greatest proximity to the television screen, and then he looks back to the game before Fafnir catches him staring.

The game is a challenging one. Makoto has put enough hours into it that he can play with some measure of fluidity, but even so he dies once within the first fifteen minutes, and his second attempt results in regular near-misses and close calls that only reflexes and luck keep from being another game over. His attention is fixed on the screen, his fingers shifting with well-trained ease over the controller in his hands; but even with the pleasure of a challenge and the satisfaction of demonstrating his own skill to himself, Makoto remains hyper-aware of the dark-coated figure hunched at the end of the couch across from him. Fafnir's position is not one of easy relaxation or even of rigid anger; he's perched at the end of the couch, as close to the screen as he can get and remain on the cushions, and his whole body is canted forward to lean in over his knees to draw closer still to the display. It's impossible to look at the screen and not see him in the periphery, and with the joint effect of distraction and curiosity to motivate him Makoto begins to sneak glances at the other between the bursts of combat that demand the whole of his attention.

Fafnir is as handsome in profile as he appeared to be in the first glimpse Makoto had of him, when terror was still uppermost to prevent him from indulging in true appreciation. His nose is straight, the contours of his cheekbones and jaw showing with clarity under the white of his skin; Makoto doesn't think he's ever seen anyone so pale in reality, with Fafnir's skin as bleached of color as if it has truly never seen the sun. The effect is only heightened by the unrelieved black of his hair hanging to curtain around his features; the weight of it is heavy across his back and so dark Makoto can see no trace of the softening brown that might lie under the color on someone else. It looks like shadow given physical form, collected to pour over Fafnir's shoulders and drape around his features, as if to hide a beauty too much for human eyes to bear.

It's also exceedingly difficult to see past.

Makoto pauses the game. Fafnir has come forward off the couch entirely, giving up even the pretense of inattention to draw close to the television, as if he might be able to see better from the distance of inches instead of the few feet Makoto is sitting at. His head is directly in front of the screen, his hair and shoulders blocking the entire right side of the display; Makoto has no faith in his ability to successfully walk the avatar down a hallway like this, much less survive the upcoming boss fight. He gazes at the back of Fafnir's head for a moment, contemplating the

elegance of the other's clothes, remembering the chill of that aura in the entryway, taking in the childlike enthusiasm implied by his present position; and then he takes a breath and speaks as casually as he can as he extends the controller out over the space between himself and Fafnir's shoulders.

"Care to try?"

Fafnir only barely turns away from the television. His shoulders remain angled away, formed to make a defensive wall between himself and Makoto; but his head is tipped, his chin tilting enough to let him glare at Makoto with one crimson eye as if interrogating him for ill intentions. Makoto keeps his smile on his face and his hand extended, allowing no indication of his earlier fear to gain hold on his expression. It's easier than he expected; for all that he saw what must be Fafnir's true form in the doorway, it's hard to recall the instinctive terror of it when confronted with what looks like a dapper young butler fresh out of a doujinshi. Makoto holds Fafnir's gaze without flinching; after a moment Fafnir's attention drops to his hand and the controller there. When he moves it's with speed, reaching to all but snatch the controller from Makoto's grip, but Makoto wasn't trying to hold onto it and he doesn't protest the removal.

"It'll be harder to see from that close," he says, and braces his hand at the edge of the couch so he can slide himself sideways "If you--" but Fafnir is moving before Makoto has even finished speaking, unfolding from where he was squatting in front of the television and coming in to sit on the couch and claim the cushion immediately adjacent to Makoto himself. Makoto goes still, wondering if he should keep moving farther away, if he should allow greater space to keep Fafnir from feeling oppressed, but Fafnir isn't looking at the man right next to him. He's glaring down at the controller in his hands, scowling as he fits his hands into place in a clumsy imitation of Makoto's own hold before looking up at the television again.

"How do I start it?" He doesn't sound angry, although his tone is still a far cry from what someone else might consider friendly. There's tension on the words, a strain at the back of his throat and hunching over his shoulders as he glares at the screen, but Makoto isn't offended. He's seen enough examples of desperate enthusiasm to recognize it on sight, even in the human seeming of a shadow-bound dragon whose natural form apparently exists in sufficient dimensions to prohibit Makoto's brain from comprehending it.

Makoto reaches to point to the button at the middle of the controller. "Push this button." Fafnir looks down to follow the gesture of Makoto's hand before he obeys the instruction. The pause screen vanishes, the television returns to its regular speed, and Fafnir huffs a breath as he looks back up and leans in far over his knees as if drawing closer to the screen will unfold its secrets.

"You can walk around with the joystick on the left side," Makoto says, keeping his gaze on the screen instead of watching the tension in Fafnir's shoulders. "The button under your right thumb will let you swing your sword." There's a moment of hesitation as Fafnir looks back down before the avatar moves to swing its sword in a chopping motion at the air before it. "The button at the top right--" but the avatar is already moving to hunch into a defensive crouch, ducking low behind the weight of its shield held up before its face, and Makoto lets his instruction give way to a smile. "You've got it."

Fafnir lets the defense button go to resume pacing the character around the room. He's a little clumsy with the movement of the avatar, his touch at the joystick unsteady and any missteps punctuated with a hissing breath of irritation, but he rapidly masters the action after no more than one pass around the room on the screen. He finds the control to move the camera without Makoto telling him at all, bringing it around to follow his action so he can watch the path his avatar is taking, and before five minutes have passed he's moving both the character and the camera in

perfect grace with each other.

“Good job,” Makoto says with full sincerity. “You got the hang of that quickly.”

Fafnir snorts. “Of course,” he says, short and snapping, but even then there’s none of that murderous temper in his tone, and when Makoto glances sideways at him Fafnir’s frown is one of attention rather than ire. “How do I fight the next enemy?”

“Right,” Makoto says, and turns back to the screen so he can lift his hand to gesture. “You saw the doorway we came in through? On the other side there’s an inset into the wall. It’s hard to see but if you walk right up to it you’ll be able to see there’s a gap big enough to walk through.” Fafnir follows Makoto’s instructions to exit the room, moving with greater grace with each step the avatar takes, and Makoto ducks his head to a nod and drops his hand. “If you keep going down this path you’ll come out into an open space. That boss...”

Fafnir doesn’t look away from the television screen for any of Makoto’s instructions, even when he’s *tsking* frustration at each hit the next boss lands on his avatar. Makoto is caught up in the game as well, too focused on offering suggestions and watching Fafnir’s actions gain in skill and elegance to spare more than a glance at the weight of dark hair curtaining the other’s features from him; but he doesn’t move to pull away from the weight of Fafnir’s hip pressing against his, and Fafnir doesn’t flinch to draw back either, even when frustration makes the motion of his hands jerky and rushed. Makoto commiserates in the other’s losses, and congratulates him on his wins, and by the time the screen is giving way to a *Game Over* display all the adrenaline in his veins has gone warm and glowing with happiness instead of nerves.

## Exposition

Makoto is still thinking about Kobayashi's party when he returns to work on Monday morning. The evening had drawn long, falling into the dreamlike haze that follows a half-dozen beers and the impending weight of sleep; by the time Makoto had returned to his own apartment he was unsteady on his feet and too tired to even think of indulging in a game before collapsing into bed and the comfort of rest. He had slept straight through the morning, waking groggy and with a distant headache to serve as a hangover, and his Sunday was given over to easing himself back into health with drawn-dark blinds and the glow of his television or computer screen to illuminate his apartment. The party still felt part of the present, a seamless connection between the end of work on Saturday and the comfortable relaxation of his day off; it isn't until he wakes Monday morning and turns himself towards the routine of preparing for work that he begins to feel the bittersweet ache of a past-tense pleasure sliding into the fog of memory.

Makoto arrives before Kobayashi, if only by a few minutes. His train brings him to the station nearest work before her own, which usually gives him just enough time to drape his coat over the back of his chair and claim a fresh cup of tea for the corner of his desk before she comes in the door, yawning her way into attention before she sets her bag alongside her desk and draws the chair back. This morning is no different; Kobayashi's occasional late arrivals have entirely vanished since the advent of her devoted maid, and even after making herself a cup of coffee she is sitting down before her keyboard with a few minutes to spare before the official start time for the office.

Makoto turns to offer her a smile of greeting. "Good morning."

"Morning." Kobayashi yawns hugely, only thinking to lift her hand to cover her mouth halfway through. "Sorry. I was up kind of late last night."

Makoto grimaces sympathy. "Was the cleanup rough?"

Kobayashi shakes her head. "No, Tohru took care of most of it before I was awake. I just overdid the beer a little too much. My headache didn't ease up until the afternoon was half-gone."

"That's rough," Makoto says. "I was a little hungover but it wasn't too bad so long as I stayed inside and kept the volume on low." He turns back to his computer as it finishes starting up so he can reach for his keyboard and mouse. "Did your guests stay overnight?"

He can just see Kobayashi shake her head in negation. "No. Lucoa was still there when I went to bed but she had left by the morning. I'm not sure Tohru slept at all, but then again she says she doesn't need to."

Makoto hums acknowledgment of this without looking away from his computer screen. "Did Fafnir stick around long?"

"No," Kobayashi says. "He left almost as soon as you did. I think he couldn't figure out how to change the game in the console and didn't want to ask any of the rest of us." She reaches to turn on her computer and pauses for a moment while the tower beeps acknowledgment and begins the humming process of booting itself up. "I'm surprised how well you two got along."

Makoto pulls his keyboard in towards himself and starts typing with only half his mind on what he's doing. "Me too," he admits. "He didn't seem like he was exactly looking for friendship when he came in the door."

Kobayashi snorts. "I thought he was looking for a sacrificial victim," she says. "I never would have thought to try video games but you really hooked him." She glances sideways at Makoto. "Did you know that would hold his attention?"

Makoto lifts his shoulders into a shrug. "I didn't know," he allows. "I was just entertaining myself and he happened to be interested. It's always best to connect over things you both like doing."

"Mm," Kobayashi hums. "That's true." She turns back to her computer screen, her attention fixing on the glow of the display before her, and they both fall to silence but for the tap of their respective keyboards under their fingers. Makoto keeps looking at his monitor, following the lines of code expanding out in answer to the work of his fingers, but his focus keeps slipping backwards to the space of Kobayashi's living room and the sheen of dark hair in the corner of his eye. He finishes drafting the function he's writing, pauses to read back through it for obvious errors in logic or syntax, and then he tabs down to a new line as he speaks with careful disinterest. "Do you think you'll be seeing more of Tohru's friends in the future?"

"Mm," Kobayashi hums. "I'm not sure. I'm not really sure how Tohru gets ahold of them in the first place." There's a brief pause, as if she intends to leave it at that, but then: "I hope so," she says, with force enough that Makoto glances sideways at her. Kobayashi is looking at the monitor of her computer but her gaze is unfocused; he's sure she's seeing something other than the white screen and dark text before her as the movement of her fingers at the keys slows and stops. "I want Tohru to be able to invite her friends over anytime she wants."

"Sure," Makoto says. "It is her house too, right?" Kobayashi ducks her head into a nod, although her attention doesn't return; Makoto watches her for another moment before he looks back to his own screen again. "I think she thinks of it that way already."

"I hope so," Kobayashi says. "You'll come over next time she wants to have her friends over, right? I'm pretty sure two dragons is about the limit of what I can handle at one time."

Makoto thinks about the hunch of attention in Fafnir's shoulders, the bright of that crimson gaze turned with absolute focus on the display of the television before them. He remembers the press of a hip carelessly close to his own, and the warmth of a back beneath the slap of his hand as he shouted some drunken counterpoint to Kobayashi's claim of butler respectability, and he ducks his head to smile at his computer screen with far more warmth than the code before him really merits.

"Sure," he says. "Just let me know and I'll be sure to be there."

## Illuminate

It's some weeks after that before Makoto has another chance to see Fafnir. He hardly expected anything different; he has no idea what goes into the process of passing from one world to the other, but it can hardly be a simple undertaking, given how many years he has lived his life without knowingly encountering a dragon. Perhaps it is a far more complicated process than Makoto guesses to travel to this realm, or even to take on the human form that Tohru wears with such seeming ease; and of course Makoto has no real claim on Fafnir's interest, and no guarantee that he would be informed if the other were to reappear in this world. For all he knows a single evening amidst the humans Fafnir clearly disdains was enough for the other, however much enjoyment he may have gained from the flicker of the television screen and the appeal of the video games Makoto walked him through; Makoto may spend the rest of his life waiting for a second meeting that never occurs.

He tries not to fret about it. If he never sees Fafnir again, so be it; the thrill of that one interaction can become no more than a pleasant memory, a recollection to hold to glowing satisfaction even if he can hardly share the story of teaching a dragon to play video games with anyone other than those who were there to see it happening. Makoto is content with that conclusion, if it comes to that; and yet something in him holds the memory brighter, even as the weeks pass with not so much as a murmur of the other's existence or any indication that Makoto is remembered at all. Makoto can't explain it; it's like some part of his mind is waiting for a conclusion, patiently expectant of a resolution that has yet to form. It's not a great burden on his mind, in any case, so he lets his intuition insist that there is more to come without trying to rid himself of the conviction, and he gives over his evenings to the distraction of games and event preparation without an excess of concern over the fact that his daydreams have taken to drifting towards handsome butlers instead of pretty maids.

It's halfway through May when Makoto's patience pays off.

It comes in the form of a knock at his door, a clear rap loud enough for him to hear over the murmur of the game he is in the middle of replaying for what must be going on the tenth time. He's grateful that it's a solo game instead of one of the multiplayer missions that demand uninterrupted focus; as it is answering the door is simply a matter of pressing the pause button and briefly confirming that he is sufficiently dressed to be seen in public. He's in far more casual attire than anything he would consider wearing to work -- his t-shirt is soft around his shoulders and his shorts are chosen more for the comfort they provide in the ever-increasing heat of advancing spring than for their style -- but he's at home, after all, and while he doesn't openly take his hobbies to work with him he sees no need to be ashamed of them when someone is visiting him in the comfort of his own home. He leaves everything as it is, not pausing to bother with sliding shoes on over his bare feet as he pads to the door to open for what he is expecting to be a package, or maybe one of his neighbors asking for a quick favor. "Who is it?"

Tohru is standing on his doorstep, bearing the full maid costume that she wears on every occasion Makoto has had to meet her, with her hands clasped in front of her and her expression set into an expression of unusual hesitancy instead of the frowning dislike with which she has always previously greeted Makoto's presence. This would be surprise enough on its own to merit the bright note in Makoto's voice as he greets her with a "Tohru-dono!"; but his gaze is sliding away from Tohru's face almost as soon as it lands there, drifting up to seek out the shadowy figure over her shoulder as quickly as his vision can claim it. Makoto knows him at a glance, and when he says "Oh," there's a breathless surprise on his tone that he doesn't attempt to restrain. "If it isn't Fafnir-dono!" He blinks hard. "I'm surprised you knew where I lived."



“I asked Kobayashi-san,” Tohru says, speaking as quickly as if she’s a salesperson trying to fasttalk an unwitting buyer into a bad deal. “So, Takiya-san.”

Makoto stares at Fafnir for another moment before he can make himself look back to Tohru, and even once he’s meeting the other’s gaze his attention is still clinging to the line of tension in Fafnir’s shoulders and the force of that red eye tracking his reaction. “What is it?”

“Actually, would you let Fafnir-san here...” She draws a breath before plunging on, still speaking with a tension that Makoto can hardly feel in the dreamlike haze that seems to have settled around him just for seeing the impossibility of Fafnir before him, at his house, within the outline of his daily life. “...Stay with you for a while?” Tohru finishes with her head ducked forward and her shoulders tipping into the start of a bow, as if to add the persuasion of desperation to her plea.

Makoto looks from Tohru back to the well-dressed shadow lurking over her shoulder. “O-ho, Fafnir-dono?”

Tohru shuffles uncomfortably. “Y-yes.”

Makoto stares at Tohru for a moment, waiting while his mind catches up to her words and makes sense out of this offer. It’s only a challenge because it aligns so exactly with the hopes that he has deliberately left unformed in the back of his head; it feels as if she must be telepathic, to reach into his subconscious and draw free the desire too distant for Makoto to even let himself acknowledge before now. But Tohru looks pleading more than knowing, like she’s bracing herself for a rejection instead of certain of acceptance, and Makoto doesn’t mean to stand waiting for the universe to take back this impossible good fortune from his lack of response. “Sure thing.”

Tohru rocks back on her heels, her eyes opening wide as she jerks up to gape at Makoto as if she can’t believe her ears. “Huh? You mean it?!”

Makoto’s cheeks flush with self-consciousness as he glances back to the space of the one-bedroom apartment behind him. “Well, it’s a little cramped, but...”

“You really mean it?!” Tohru blurts before Makoto can finish his sentence. “I know I’m one to talk, but this dragon’s fairly dangerous,” as she and Makoto both turn to consider the shadowy figure glaring over her shoulder.

Except he’s not glaring. There is in fact no tension in Fafnir’s face at all; his mouth is softened without the tension of a frown against it, and if his hair is still falling to cover half his face the eye still visible is wide and bright with what Makoto can only describe as anticipation. His arms are at his sides instead of crossed over his chest; his whole body is so taut with hope he looks to be all but bouncing in place with impatience to speak before Tohru has even finished her statement.

“Hey,” he says, and his voice is softer too, stripped of all the distrust and irritation that it bore at Makoto’s last meeting with him. He meets Makoto’s gaze directly for only a moment before looking away over his shoulder, into the illumination of the apartment visible through the open doorway. “About last time.”

Makoto stares at him. “You mean the game?”

Fafnir goes still, his attention fixing wholly on Makoto in front of him as if everything else in the world has immediately ceased to hold any interest for him. “What others are there?”

Makoto doesn’t smile as he wants to, with the effervescent happiness he can feel rising in his chest to press tight against his ribcage and flush at his cheeks; but he does let his mouth curve up into

something that hopefully looks like welcome more than desperation. “Well,” he says, and steps to the side of the door. “Come on in.”

Fafnir doesn’t hesitate at all in accepting this invitation. “Tell me more about them.” He strides forward as quickly as Makoto steps aside, as if as anxious to be inside the other’s apartment as Makoto is to have him there, and Makoto turns to follow him as if drawn helplessly forward by magnetism to trail in the other’s wake as he offers a “Sure thing” that goes softer in his throat than he means it to. Fafnir shows no hesitation at this any more than he does at entering the home of an all-but-complete stranger; he only pauses to take his shoes off at the lip of the entryway before he continues forward with as much comfort as if Makoto’s apartment has already become his own. Makoto has to bite his lip to hold back the giveaway bright of his smile, but Fafnir doesn’t turn to see the disbelieving joy in the other’s face. He comes forward instead, maneuvering with graceful ease around the shelves full of boxed figures and the prints draping the walls so he can settle himself at the middle of the couch in front of the television and the still-paused game. Makoto is left standing in the hallway behind him, staring at the back of Fafnir’s head and the heavy weight of long hair spilling across his shoulders, until Fafnir shifts to glance back over his shoulder, his gaze still tense with anticipation. “Do you play this one like the last?”

“Ah,” Makoto says, and shakes his head to clear it of the distraction of appreciation hazing his thoughts. “It’s a little different. I’ll show you.” He comes forward at once, stepping around the edge of the couch to pick up the controller and hand it over to Fafnir’s waiting hands. Fafnir accepts it, bracing the weight against his fingers as if satisfying himself as to the physical reality of the controls while Makoto takes a knee at the floor so he can push the power button and reset the game. The screen goes black for a moment as the console powers down before illuminating again with the logo of the device, shortly followed by the title card of the game itself. Makoto gets to his feet and returns to the couch; for a moment he wonders if he ought to sit farther away than he did at Kobayashi’s, but Fafnir’s attention is riveted on the screen, and he doesn’t appear at all discomfited by Makoto’s proximity. Makoto ends up splitting the difference, sitting halfway between the arm of the couch and Fafnir’s own position, where he can brush the weight of the other’s coat with his elbow when he moves but remains just shy of pressing his leg flush against the other’s.

“This is the start screen,” he explains, lifting a hand to gesture towards the display illuminated on the television before them. “Those top boxes are my old save files. If you scroll down there should be another pair of empty slots -- there they are -- and you can choose either of them.” Fafnir presses the select button to open up the player name screen and Makoto nods approval. “Put whatever you want here. You can do your own name if you want, or a pseudonym, or...”

It’s not until Fafnir is finishing the first level of the game that Makoto thinks of Tohru and realizes that he left her on the front doorstep without even an attempt at a farewell. He’ll have to apologize for that rudeness later, he thinks, when he next sees her; but right now Fafnir is pressing close against him on his couch, his fingers working with fast-improving skill over the buttons of the controller, and that demands all of Makoto’s attention to appreciate the sudden reality of what have only been idle daydreams until now.

## Palatable

Fafnir goes on playing video games straight through the night. Makoto lingers as long as he can, absorbed in offering advice and watching the flicker of a game obeying a player other than himself; but after a few hours even the tingling self-consciousness that comes with Fafnir's proximity isn't enough to overcome the straining yawns that keep breaking free of his chest and stretching at his jaw, and Makoto is forced to admit defeat and retreat for a shower and the comfort of his futon. Fafnir is still hunched forward on the couch when Makoto emerges with his hair wet and eyes heavy; he looks as fixated as he did when they began, with no trace of exhaustion in the sharp angles of his face. Makoto looks at him for a moment, his attention lingering in the other's distraction, until Fafnir speaks without looking up at him.

"Do you need to turn the sound off for the night?"

Makoto blinks. He hadn't realized Fafnir was paying any attention to him at all; it's startling to be acknowledged from what appears to be a completely immersive fugue. It takes him a moment to collect himself enough to answer.

"I should," he admits, and comes forward to kneel at the side of the television where he won't be in Fafnir's line of sight as he reaches for the mute button. Fafnir doesn't pause the game or slow any part of his movement; as the background music and sound effects cut off Makoto can clearly hear the soft tapping of the buttons on the controller shifting beneath the force of the other's fingers. Makoto draws away from the television and looks back over his shoulder, but Fafnir is still just as absorbed in the screen as he appeared to be a moment ago, and he doesn't glance at Makoto to make eye contact. "Is that alright for you?"

Fafnir ducks his head to a nod. "Fine," he says. His reply isn't particularly friendly, as such things go, but it lacks the sharp edge it could have, and from someone who appeared ready to murder everyone in sight when they first met Makoto thinks this is notable progress. He retreats from the television, leaving the light on in the living room as he steps around the corner to spread his futon out across the floor behind his computer desk, and when he stretches out across the bedding it's with his head at the far end of the room, so the illumination from where Fafnir is sitting is striping yellow across his feet instead of into his eyes. Makoto wonders if the light will prove a distraction, if he'll struggle for sleep with the proof of someone else lingering so near to where he is lying; but when he shuts his eyes exhaustion sweeps in like a wave, the shadow of sleep drawing up over him as if a blanket being pulled up and around his shoulders. Makoto's body eases, giving up the adrenaline that came with Fafnir's presence in exchange for the relief of comfort, and when he drifts into dreams it is with the faint sound of the controller clicking as a lullaby.

He wakes to the buzz of his phone alarm going off next to him. Makoto reaches out to fumble it off first thing, almost before he's opened his eyes; when he does he finds the light from the living room still glowing yellow, and the click of the controller continuing unabated. He pushes himself upright from his blankets, yawning hugely to clear the first haze of waking from his mind before he comes forward to kneel at the end of the bed so he can look around the corner and into the other room.

Fafnir is still seated in the middle of the couch, his shoulders still tipped far forward as he rests his elbows against the support of his knees before him. He doesn't look like he's relaxed at all since Makoto handed him the controller shortly after his arrival; from the intensity of his gaze, Makoto isn't entirely sure he's been remembering to blink. Still, there's none of the signs of exhaustion that Makoto would expect to see from someone who has spent the night playing video games. Fafnir's

clothes are still in perfect order, hardly showing so much as a wrinkle from his all-night slouch, and if his hair is hanging heavy around his face it's no less smooth than it appeared upon his arrival. His expression is tense, to be sure, his forehead creased on focus and his mouth tight on a frown of attention, but Makoto is sure that the shadows under his eyes were there the first night they met as well, and certainly aren't deep enough to indicate any of the crushing exhaustion he might expect under the circumstances. He looks at Fafnir for a moment, taking in these few details, before he recalls himself back to politeness to offer a drowsy smile at the other.

"Good morning, Fafnir-dono." Makoto turns his head to look at the screen; it's the same game Fafnir was playing last night, albeit significantly further advanced into the plot than it was when he left. He nods towards the television. "Would you like the sound back on?"

"Yes." There's no temper on that either, but Fafnir's answer is still quick enough to prove some measure of impatience. "It's harder to play without the sound effects."

"Ah, yeah." Makoto comes forward without bothering with getting to his feet as he rounds the corner from the bedroom into the illumination of the living room and reaches for the control buttons at the bottom of the television screen. "Sorry about that." He switches the sound back on and it comes back at once in a hum of background music and the louder notes of the combat Fafnir's avatar is presently engaged in. "I can pick you up some headphones on my way home from work today."

Makoto can see Fafnir duck his head into a nod in his periphery. "Okay."

Makoto carefully keeps his head ducked down to offer at least some shadow for the smile that pulls itself across his lips. "Alright," he says, and pushes to get to his feet so he can step back into the bedroom and put his futon back together and stored away. "I'll go and get dressed for work. Be right out." There's no response from the figure on the couch but Makoto wasn't waiting for one in any case. He collects his clothes before stepping into the bathroom so he can change behind the closed door instead of in the open space of his bedroom, and in a few minutes he's emerging again, hair smoothed from the rumple of sleep and wearing a button-up shirt and slacks instead of the casual shorts and soft t-shirt in which he spent the whole of the previous evening.

Fafnir doesn't look up as Makoto reemerges into the space of the living room. His gaze is fixed on the screen in front of him, his whole expression so set on intent focus that it would be easy to believe him entirely oblivious to what's happening around him; but Makoto is certain Fafnir is entirely aware of him as he steps past the couch and into the alcove that forms the kitchen space. It doesn't feel like he's being ignored or dismissed; rather there's something of trust in Fafnir's focus, as if he's secure enough to offer Makoto the compliment of continuing what he's doing without treating the other as a disruption. The thought makes Makoto smile, even with Fafnir's back to him so the expression goes unobserved as he crouches down in front of the cabinets to find something appropriate for breakfast. He has a packet of curry, quick enough to make that he can heat it up and still have plenty of time to catch the train to work; it's only once he's torn the wrapper open and turned the stove on that he thinks to wonder about Fafnir's physical needs as well.

Makoto looks back to the living room. Fafnir hasn't stirred in spite of the sound of Makoto moving in the space directly behind him; there's no more tension in his body than what was there when Makoto sat up, no indication of discomfort at having someone standing out of his range of sight. Makoto wonders briefly if Fafnir really needs to see him at all, if he might not have some different method of sensing that expands beyond the physical limitations that Makoto has always taken for granted; but it makes no real difference in the moment, anyway. "Fafnir-dono?"

Fafnir makes a wordless noise in the back of his throat by way of acknowledgment. “Mm?”

“I’m going to make myself breakfast,” Makoto says. “Do you want something to eat?”

Fafnir pauses, his fingers going still at the controller in his hands. He doesn’t turn around and Makoto can’t see his expression; all he can make out is the line of the other’s shoulders, and past the dark of his head the stillness of the avatar ceasing its regular motion on the television screen. Makoto waits, watching the back of Fafnir’s head with as much attention as if the other were actually turning to see him, and after a moment Fafnir responds aloud.

“I’ll try it.” He sounds skeptical, like he’s expecting Makoto to attempt to poison him, but Makoto just smiles and turns back to the counter.

“Alright.” He unbuttons his cuffs so he can roll the sleeves of his shirt farther up his arms to keep them clear of his cooking, falling into the familiar habit while the sound of the game spills around the corner to serve as backdrop for his efforts.

It’s a simple process to put everything together, even if it takes a bit of time. Makoto doesn’t have to think about what he’s doing, and Fafnir seems to be wholly occupied in the living room; he doesn’t offer any questions about when the food will be done, at least, and Makoto lets them coexist in silence but for the sound of his cooking and Fafnir’s playing. It’s only when he has the curry served over plates of rice and is returning back to the living room that he speaks, and then it’s only to say “Breakfast is ready” to announce his approach to Fafnir.

Makoto is half-expecting the other to go on playing even as he comes forward with the plates of food; but Fafnir presses the button to pause the game without Makoto even suggesting it, and when Makoto steps forward Fafnir reaches up to take one of the plates from him. Makoto hands over the second as well, just to free his hands so he can step past the couch and bring out the table that is folded up and set carefully away against the wall; Fafnir waits, a plate in each hand and an expression of stoic patience on his face, until Makoto has set the table in front of the couch for them both. He sets the plates down as soon as Makoto is stepping back, one on each end of the table, and Makoto sits at the other end of the couch with a smile of gratitude for Fafnir.

“Thank you,” he says, and presses his hands together over the meal. Fafnir imitates him, although he speaks in a mumble so soft Makoto can barely hear the words, and he hesitates in reaching for his plate until Makoto has taken a bite of the curry, carefully to keep from burning himself on the steam. Makoto can feel Fafnir’s attention on him, fixed to laser intensity as he frowns at the other, but he doesn’t look away from his meal or sideways to see if Fafnir is eating his own. He just continues through his breakfast, appreciating the flavor of the familiar meal, while at his side Fafnir reaches for his own plate to try it for himself. He’s tentative on the first bite, clearly uncertain as to the quality of the food even if satisfied by Makoto’s demonstration of its edibility, but no sooner has the fork reached his lips than he stiffens, his shoulders drawing back with the shock of surprise.

“It’s sweet.”

“Mm.” Makoto ducks his head into a nod without looking up from his attention to his own plate of food. “I went with sweet instead of spicy the last time I went shopping. This is the last box of it.” He takes another bite and chews and swallows before glancing sideways at Fafnir next to him. “Do you not like it?”

Fafnir’s expression is mostly hidden by the fall of his hair draping to a curtain in front of his face. All Makoto can see of him is the set of his mouth, and that is fixed onto the same almost-frown that seems to be the other’s default state. Still, he can see enough to watch the shift of Fafnir’s lips

tightening against each other, and when Fafnir shakes his head the motion is perfectly clear even with the shadow of his hair blocking his face.

“It’s fine,” is all he says, in a tone that might be begrudging coming from someone else; but he ducks in over his plate, and by the time Makoto is collecting the last bite of food from his own dish Fafnir’s plate is scraped almost entirely clean. Fafnir has pushed the plate aside to the edge of the table to keep it out of the way so he can resume his game, and he doesn’t look up again as Makoto pulls the plate in to stack underneath his own, but when Makoto gets to his feet Fafnir speaks, loudly enough that his voice carries clear over the sound from the television. “Is there more of that curry?”

Makoto doesn’t look at Fafnir next to him; he keeps his gaze carefully fixed on the plates and his tone more cheerful than expectant. “There is,” he says. “There’s enough from this batch for lunch. I’ll wrap up some to take with me to work and leave another container in the fridge for you to heat up and eat whenever you’re hungry.” He gets up from the couch so he can carry the dishes back into the kitchen; when he speaks it’s from around the corner, without trying to watch Fafnir’s face. “I’ll get some more boxes of curry when I pick up those headphones for you on the way home from work.”

Fafnir doesn’t offer an answer to this, but Makoto doesn’t really need one. He’s beginning to guess that silence from the other is as good as assent in someone else; and besides, the plate clear of so much as a grain of rice is response enough.

## Electronic

“What is this?”

The question is loud enough that Makoto can hear it clearly in the kitchen even over the rush of the water as he washes the dishes from dinner. “Just a minute,” he calls back without looking up from what he’s doing. “I’m almost done.” He rinses the last of the soap from the second plate and leans over to balance it barely atop the first to dry on the counter before shutting off the water and drying his hands on the dishtowel. It’s only then that he turns back to the living room where he left Fafnir in front of the television so he can see what it is that has captured his roommate’s attention.

Fafnir is right where Makoto left him, in the position on the couch that he claimed for his own on his first night in the apartment and has remained in almost without shifting since. He spends far more time there than Makoto does; the demands of work keep Makoto out of the house for the greater part of most days, of course, but there’s also the long hours of the night, which Fafnir seems to be able to use as he wishes without the need for sleep that eventually pushes Makoto towards bed no matter how badly he may want to indulge in just one more game. Makoto thinks it’s a matter of months, maybe of days, before Fafnir has accumulated more hours on his favorite games than Makoto has himself. The idea is pleasant enough that it draws a smile onto his face even before he has stepped forward to brace a hand at the back of the couch and lean in to see what Fafnir is looking at.

“Ah,” Makoto says as he sees the thick jewel case Fafnir is holding. “It’s an adventure game. There’s less fighting than in some of the ones you’ve been playing lately but the story’s good.” He lets his bracing hold on the couch ease so he can tip in closer and rest his weight against his elbows instead of locked-out into the length of his arms. “I forgot where I had put that. I guess I stored it with the console games instead of by the computer.”

Fafnir turns his head to fix Makoto with the dark focus of a crimson eye. “This is a computer game.”

The words don’t sound like a question by any stretch of the imagination, any more than Fafnir’s monotone sounds like interest. Makoto still smiles and ducks his head into a nod. “I have a bunch of them,” he says. “Most don’t let you use multiplayer mode with just one computer so I haven’t been playing as much of them.” He pauses to take in Fafnir’s turned head and steady gaze on his face before he takes a breath and flickers a smile at the other. “Want to see?”

Fafnir doesn’t even hesitate before ducking his head into a nod. Makoto beams at him and pushes up from his lean against the back of the couch. “Alright,” he says. “Come with me, I’ll show you.”

The space set aside for Makoto’s computer desk is darker than the rest of the apartment and a little less crowded, given its secondary purpose as bedroom when Makoto succumbs to human frailty and gives up gaming for sleep. Makoto isn’t sure that Fafnir has ever actually passed through the doorway in the weeks since he moved in, but he doesn’t hesitate at all in following Makoto through the entrance to stand behind the chair in which Makoto settles himself. He’s hovering in the space just over Makoto’s shoulder, where the dark of his hair and habitual clothing makes him vanish into the shadows of peripheral vision, but Makoto doesn’t mind. He’s grown accustomed to Fafnir’s tendency to lurk, and whatever instinctive fear he might have felt at their first meeting is long since chased away by shared plates of curry and good-natured teasing over their respective skill at games. So he leaves Fafnir to darken his shadow without turning around to watch him as he starts up the computer so he can open the game.

“It’s been years since I played this,” he admits as the opening screen illuminates his face to blue and his speakers crackle with the boom of music that welcomes players to the adventure advertised. “I’ve been playing online games more recently, but these older ones still require the original CDs.” He clicks through the opening screen to light up the monitor with the character selection. “This one doesn’t give you all that many options for customization at the beginning, but we’ll get a chance to build out the character ability as we gain skill points and progress through the levels. I like this game for how much optimization it allows, you really can play through with whatever build you want.” Makoto tips his head to glance at Fafnir, who inclines his own head fractionally so he can see Makoto smile up at him, although his mouth doesn’t give up any kind of motion in response. “You’ll see, once we get farther in.”

Makoto goes on speaking, offering a running commentary for his actions as he clicks through the first few exposition conversations so he can gain control of his avatar. Fafnir doesn’t say anything at all, either to ask for more details or to offer appreciation for what Makoto is providing, but Makoto has learned well enough how to read the signs of Fafnir’s interest, and his silent focus speaks clearly to that. Makoto carries them through the introduction to the story, and the basic preparation that is the most available in the first town in the game, and then he looks up to Fafnir next to him. “Ready to get started?”

Fafnir doesn’t turn to look at Makoto. The curtain of his dark hair is falling in front of his face so Makoto can’t see what expression the other is wearing, but the jerk of his chin on a nod is perfectly clear. Makoto smiles and turns back to the screen so he can see what he’s doing as he guides the avatar out of the walls of the starting city and into the fields where they will find the combat to provide levels and equipment to improve the character’s stats.

Fafnir remains perfectly silent at Makoto’s side. Just judging from his lack of questions he might seem disinterested, or even frustrated; but Makoto has barely fought off his first attacker when Fafnir’s hand closes at the back edge of his chair and the other leans forward to get closer to the computer monitor. The added weight tips the chair slightly off-center as Makoto is angled in towards Fafnir standing next to him, but the game isn’t so hard that Makoto needs his full focus, and he appreciates the intensity of Fafnir’s interest whenever it appears. He continues playing, offering far fewer comments now as he fits his motions to the rhythm of combat, and Fafnir stays at his side, head tipped down to turn his full attention on the motion on the screen before them. As Makoto guides the avatar into a horde of some dozen attackers at once Fafnir tips in closer, reaching to brace a hand at the edge of the desk so he can lean in to fix the screen with the full force of his crimson-eyed attention. His hair slides forward against his shoulder as he moves; Makoto could lift a hand at touch his fingers against the shadowy weight of it, if he wanted. He keeps his hands on the keyboard and the mouse, and if his gaze slides to linger at Fafnir next to him more often than it might, Fafnir is too occupied with the game to comment, if he even notices.

Makoto hits the pause button as a dramatic groan of anguish indicates the collapse of the last of the enemies on the screen. Fafnir rocks back slightly, straightening from his intent forward lean as the motion stills, and Makoto draws his hands back so he can gesture an invitation to the mouse and keyboard. “Want to give it a try?”

Fafnir turns his head. It’s hard to see the vivid color of his gaze in the dim lighting of the room and with his hair falling to half-hide his features from Makoto’s gaze, but Makoto can still see the angle of his head and the motion of his lashes as his focus falls to the other’s hands. Makoto braces a hand at the edge of the desk so he can push himself back enough to stand and leave the space vacant for Fafnir’s use. Fafnir doesn’t wait for more of an invitation; he’s turning the chair around towards himself as quickly as Makoto moves away from it, twisting it to face him before he sweeps to sit down with the strange, uncanny elegance he sometimes seems to flicker with. Makoto steps around the chair and, after a moment’s hesitation, leans in to adopt the same position Fafnir



assumed over him. Makoto feels awareness of the proximity prickle warmth all across his skin, as if Fafnir is radiating heat that Makoto has drawn close enough to feel against himself, but Fafnir doesn't so much as glance up at him to indicate he's aware of Makoto edging so near. He just leans in over the desk to frown at the screen as he moves the mouse to click *Resume* and start the action of the game again.

"Move with these keys," Makoto says, although Fafnir is already reaching for the keyboard to steer the avatar into motion. "Attack with the mouse. If you want to change attacks use the function keys, up here." He lifts his hand from the desk to gesture to the top row of the keyboard; Fafnir glances at his motion and answers with a curt nod of acknowledgment. There's a roar of sound from the speakers, loud enough to draw their attention back to the game, and Fafnir brings the avatar into action to run forward with the weight of its sword held high.

"You can just hit these with your normal attack," Makoto tells him. "They should go down without--" and one of them swings a hammer-blow that makes the avatar stumble and shout pain that Makoto mirrors with a grimace. "--Too much trouble. Sorry, those are rough."

"How do I dodge them?" Fafnir asks without looking up.

"Step sideways," Makoto says. "Or come in and attack. Your moves are quicker and you can interrupt their blows if you cut them off." The avatar darts forward, its sword slashes once, and the figure before it bellows and topples backwards with a splash of pixelated blood. Makoto smiles. "Just like that." He watches as Fafnir dispatches the remaining enemies while taking no more than a single blow; Makoto opens his mouth to speak but Fafnir is already hitting the key to drink a potion to return the health gauge bar to full. Makoto lets his suggestion go unspoken and replaces it with a smile instead. "You're a natural."

"Of course I am," Fafnir says, sounding more distracted than defensive. "Where do I find more enemies?"

"Head northwest," Makoto suggests, and Fafnir guides the avatar to motion at once. He only needs one suggestion for the next fight, and none at all for the third. By the time he's navigating the quest menu Makoto is sure he could continue playing the game with no input from Makoto leaning over him at all.

Makoto stays anyway. There's a pleasure to be had just in watching someone else play a familiar game, made all the keener by Fafnir's rapid improvement as he learns the techniques like he's incorporating them into instinct; and from where Makoto's positioned he can glance sideways to see Fafnir's expression, so intent on focus that he forgets even to frown. Makoto watches Fafnir for a long minute, tracing appreciation across the elegant lines of the other's features and the striking contrast of his dark hair and pale skin; then he looks back to the game to go on watching Fafnir play with an unobserved smile lingering at the corners of his mouth.

## Competitive

Makoto quickly finds a routine for life with his new roommate. Fafnir is easy to live with, in spite of Tohru's concerns to the contrary when she first deposited him on Makoto's doorstep. It is true that he tends to hold his expression braced on a defensive frown by default, and that he is not enormously communicative with the same bubbly exuberance that Tohru herself has demonstrated on every occasion Makoto has had to be around her. But Fafnir's moods are clear to read from the shifts in his posture, or the set of his shoulders, or the intensity of his habitual scowl, and in the peace of the apartment that has rapidly become their own Makoto has nothing to keep him from near-perfect comprehension without saying so much as a word. He can tell when Fafnir is in a bad mood, when he's anxious, when he's content, until he thinks he might be more comfortable in the other's presence than out of it. His initial horror at the first moment of their meeting has evaporated to nothing at all, unravelled by the easy familiarity of going through the steps of daily life with his roommate, until the idea that he was ever afraid of Fafnir in any way is almost enough to make him laugh.

Makoto looks forward to coming home, now. There has always been a pleasure to returning at the end of a long day of work, to changing out of the restricting creases of his work clothes and into the worn-soft comfort of shorts and a t-shirt; but now the knowledge of the company waiting for him is enough to speed Makoto's steps along the sidewalk and curve a smile onto his lips as he crosses the last few blocks to the apartment that feels more like a home with every day that passes. He's not sure how Fafnir thinks of the space, if it feels as much a haven for him as it does for Makoto; but he's still around, with no word or gesture to indicate the least intention of leaving, and that is enough for Makoto to claim as reassurance that he'll be able to keep this for some time longer, at the very least.

Fafnir is home when Makoto comes in the front door. He's taken to spending the hours Makoto is at work in single-player games on the computer; Makoto can just see the greater shadow of Fafnir's presence in the dim of the far room as he pauses in the entryway to shrug free of his jacket and slip his shoes off. Fafnir doesn't respond aloud to Makoto's habitual announcement of his return, but his head shifts to glance towards the other, his chin dips towards a nod, and Makoto smiles at this acknowledgment and leaves Fafnir to his game while he collects a change of clothes and retreats into the bathroom to trade tie and suit for less formality and greater comfort.

Fafnir doesn't turn as Makoto emerges from the bathroom, but when he speaks his voice is pitched loud to carry beyond the half-voiced grumbling he often levels at the game he is in the midst of playing. "What's for dinner?"

"We still have a lot of curry," Makoto suggests as he hangs his suit up and sets it aside for the next day. "Do you mind having it again?"

Fafnir huffs. "As long as it's sweet."

Makoto smiles. "Of course," he says, and pads out of the computer room so he can start on the process of cooking in the kitchen. It's hardly a complex undertaking, and it's made easier by the repetition of exactly this over the last weeks. When it comes to food Fafnir has demonstrated a strong preference for the familiar rather than exciting experimentation; a fact which Makoto particularly appreciates at the end of a long day of work when all he really wants to do is start up the television and lose himself in a co-op game for the few hours he can manage to stay awake before sleep gets the better of him. He can work almost entirely on autopilot to start the rice and heat the waiting curry; his thoughts are free to wander elsewhere down paths which his gaze

follows to drift to the other room during the few minutes he is standing waiting for the microwave to finish.

Fafnir isn't looking at Makoto. He's utterly absorbed in the game before him, so immersed that even the set of his mouth has softened out of his usual carefully-held frown. Makoto sees that more and more, lately, as Fafnir acclimates to the life he has decided to try for himself; it's like seeing cracks in well-polished armor, as if some part of the other's tense resistance is loosening its hold with each day that passes in comfortable coexistence with one of the humans he claims to so abhor. Makoto can't remember the last time Fafnir actually scowled at him directly; it's hard to remember the danger in the other's eyes when Makoto hasn't seen him glare in weeks. Makoto watches Fafnir's attention to the game, lingering in the handsome face that has become so much more familiar than Makoto thought it would be after their first meeting; and then the microwave beeps, and Makoto turns away to return his attention to his efforts towards dinner.

Makoto isn't sure if he'll have to call Fafnir over. The other appears utterly inattentive to what is happening in the kitchen, even as Makoto is stirring the rice and serving it out onto two plates alongside the curry he has just finished. But when Makoto picks up the plates and turns to carry them to the living room Fafnir clicks decisively on the screen in front of him and pushes back as the game shuts off to darken the monitor. He comes forward from the computer as quickly as Makoto does from the kitchen, so as Makoto draws up in front of the couch Fafnir is reaching to take one of the plates of food from him. Makoto surrenders the meal with a smile that Fafnir reciprocates with the tiniest inclination of his head in a nod, and they both settle in on opposite ends of the couch to turn their attention to the meal before them.

Makoto enjoys these dinners. There is rarely anything unexpected about the food itself, between Fafnir's preferences and Makoto's limited energy by the end of the day; but he likes curry for himself, and Fafnir's appreciation can be read from the forward tilt of his shoulders as he turns himself to the task of finishing his meal with dedicated interest. It seems a remarkably ordinary meal, for someone dressed as Fafnir is; he looks like he would be better served by sandwiches cut to tiny triangles and a steaming cup of black tea with a lineage more respected than most people Makoto knows. But Fafnir makes it match his aesthetic, primarily by the clear expression of his enthusiasm for it, and it is that as much as the meal itself that keeps a smile on Makoto's lips as they work their way through dinner in companionable silence.

Fafnir finishes first, if only by a few bites. He leans forward to set his plate at the folding table Makoto has set up in front of the television for them to eat from and reaches for one of the game controllers set at the floor as part of the same movement. "Ready to play?"

Makoto is just in the process of filling his mouth with the last bite of his meal; for a minute he is rendered mute by this effort and has to content himself with shaking his head. Fafnir turns to frown confusion at him. "Why not?"

Makoto makes some effort and manages to swallow enough to clear his throat for speech. "I'll be ready in a few minutes," he says. He leans forward from his slouch into the couch so he can reach for the edge of Fafnir's plate and bring it in towards his own to stack them one atop the other. "I just need to clean up the kitchen first." He ducks his head towards the waiting television screen. "You could play a round or two without me. I can join in as soon as I'm done."

Makoto is expecting Fafnir to dip his head in understanding before turning to lose himself completely in the allure presented by the glow of the television screen and the satisfaction to be gained from one of his favorite games. But Fafnir stays still, head turned as he watches Makoto pile their dishes together, and as Makoto pushes to his feet Fafnir draws a breath and speaks.

“I could help,” he says. Makoto pauses to stare at him; Fafnir glances at his face for a moment before turning to look back at the television screen and letting his hair curtain his expression once more. “It would go faster.”

“I don’t think we can both fit in the kitchen at the same time,” Makoto says. “It won’t be long, it’s only a few plates.” Fafnir huffs a sound like an exhale; Makoto wouldn’t think anything of it if it were from someone else. Coming from Fafnir, it’s enough to pause his motion so he can tilt his head and consider the full range of the other’s position.

Fafnir is tipped in over his knees, his hands set on the buttons of his controller, but he hasn’t started the game yet, and the tension across his shoulders doesn’t look like the general irritation with the world that he so often exudes like a cloud. In context, with his hair falling in front of his face to block Makoto’s view of his expression, it looks like nothing so much as the stress that might come with embarrassment.

Makoto doesn’t give voice to the flicker of epiphany that breaks over him. It will only embarrass Fafnir further to have his offer called out, and Makoto doesn’t need confirmation beyond his own certainty. He follows Fafnir’s example instead, and lets his actions speak for him as he reaches for the corners of the table so he can set it aside before dropping back to resume his seat alongside the other. Fafnir turns to look at him sideways; Makoto lets him look, occupying himself instead with reaching for the second controller on his side of the couch.

“Let’s play for it,” he suggests, and turns to smile into Fafnir’s focused gaze. “Loser does the dishes. Sound fair?”

Fafnir stares at him for a moment. Then he blinks, and huffs, and turns back to the television screen in front of them. “You’ll end up doing them every time anyway.”

“Oho, is that a challenge?” Makoto grins. “You’ll regret talking so big when you’re wrist-deep in suds.” He lifts a hand to gesture towards the screen. “Your choice.”

Fafnir does win, in the end, thanks to an impressive combo attack levelled right as Makoto begins to think his victory assured, and Makoto is forced to concede defeat and get up to wash and put away the dishes, only a little delayed from his original plan. But he’s smiling through the process, as pleased with the result as if he had been the victor, and by the time he’s setting the last dish aside Fafnir has started up the game they’ve been working on and is waiting with ill-disguised impatience for Makoto to join him.

“Are you almost done?” he asks, turning to look back over his shoulder towards the kitchen.

Makoto dries his hands and tosses the towel aside. “Yep,” he says, and reaches to shut off the kitchen light as he comes back around the couch. Fafnir has put the table away while Makoto was cleaning; he can come straight across between Fafnir and the television to fall back into his position on the far side of the couch. Fafnir extends Makoto’s controller to him as soon as the other is seated, and he’s starting the game almost as quickly to drop them into the loading screen. Makoto glances at the dark of Fafnir’s hair, and the comfort in the angle of the other’s shoulders, and then he smiles and leans back against the couch so they can both settle in for the rest of their evening together.

## Addition

Makoto takes a detour on his way home from work on Saturday.

He's been developing a plan in the back of his head all through the week. The idea presented itself to him the day after Fafnir's introduction to computer games, and it's been taking shape and form for itself over the intervening days, seeming to expand on its own merit with nearly no conscious effort from Makoto himself. He considers his financial situation while he's making himself cups of tea at work, running over the amount he has in savings and how much of that he can reasonably make use of while sustaining some stability for the joint responsibility he now has to himself and Fafnir both. At night his drowsy mind wanders over the space in front of him, considering the distance between the walls of the room that serves as office and bedroom at once; in the mornings he wakes to gaze blearily at the distance between his comforter and the chair in which Fafnir spends what Makoto estimates to be the majority of his time. He's made his decision by the third day, after taking the time to be utterly secure in his ability to take the action he wants; after that it's just a matter of aligning his work schedule with the hours of the store he needs to visit and getting off work early enough to make it in before closing.

He doesn't have a chance during the week. For the most part the shops on his way home from work close in the early evening, and with the present demands of his job Makoto has been walking home with the first flickers of starlight overhead for company. But the big project they have been working towards wraps up on Friday, to many congratulations at work and much celebration out of it, and the next morning the entire office is slow and heavy with the hangovers many of them brought in with them and the relief of a tough deadline successfully met. Makoto spends the day refactoring an old segment of code that he's been meaning to streamline when he has the time, and taking a longer-than-usual break with Kobayashi in the break room where she eats the lunch Tohru made for her and Makoto works through the leftovers he packed for himself. By the early afternoon half the office has gone home; by the time the sun is sinking towards the orange of sunset all the supervisors have packed up and gone, leaving the rest of the employees to finish whatever they are working on before they leave for the weekend. Makoto adds the last few comments to the function he's been building, runs it through testing to make sure everything compiles as it should, and then pushes back from his desk to stretch the tension out of his shoulders as his computer starts the process of powering down.

"Done for the day?" Kobayashi asks without looking away from her own monitor.

Makoto nods. "I wanted to do some shopping on the way home," he says. "If I leave now I can get it done and be home before it gets too late."

Kobayashi hums agreement. "Good luck," she says. Makoto's computer whirrs softly as it finishes shutting off and Makoto gets to his feet so he can retrieve the jacket slung over the back of his chair and drape it over his arm rather than bothering with pulling it back on. He glances back over his workstation to make sure he's not forgetting anything, and next to him Kobayashi clears her throat.

"How's it going at your apartment?" she asks. Makoto looks back to her but her gaze is still fixed on her computer screen. "With Fafnir. It's been a few weeks now, right?"

"Mm," Makoto hums. "It'll be three this weekend." He lifts his gaze from Kobayashi to look out the window of the office. The sky is still bright with afternoon sunlight; Makoto can barely see the first traces of gold that speak to the oncoming night. He should be home well before sundown, even with his shopping expedition; the thought of the comforts of the evening still waiting ahead of

him once he makes it back home makes him smile. "It's going great."

"Yeah?" Kobayashi's hands are still on her keyboard but their motion has stopped; when Makoto looks back to her she's looking sideways up at him from behind the shine of her glasses. "Tohru said that Fafnir might be a little hard to deal with."

Makoto smiles and shakes his head. "Not at all," he says. "He's a bit intimidating at first introduction but he's really perfectly friendly."

Kobayashi's eyebrows raise. "Huh," she says. "I never would have thought."

"Yeah," Makoto says. "It's fun to have someone to play games with, and he doesn't seem to mind how small the apartment is." He pauses to reach for some more persuasive argument; but the only thing that comes to mind is the crisp lines of Fafnir's coat, and the regal composure of his expression, and Makoto is fairly sure those aspects are of a more personal than objective benefit. Finally he contents himself with a shrug and a sheepish smile. "And it's nice to know there's someone waiting for me to come home at the end of the day."

"Ah," Kobayashi says, and looks away as she lifts a hand from her keyboard to push her glasses a little higher up her nose. "Yeah, I get that." There's a pause; then Kobayashi clears her throat and speaks with a little more force than the words need. "You'd better get going, if you're going shopping."

"I should," Makoto admits. "I'm off, then. Say hi to Tohru and Kanna for me." Kobayashi lifts her hand in a wave of acknowledgment to this and Makoto smiles and turns to make his way out of the building and begin his journey home.

It takes him longer at the store than he expects. He had originally had some thought of returning around his usual time, even with the stop along the way; but there are more options than even his deliberate consideration had accounted for, and without official measurements from the second room in his apartment he takes longer in considering different layouts for the furniture than he was anticipating. Finally he decides that he can always sleep in the living room, if there's not enough space on the floor in the office, and hands over the money to cover his combined selections. In return he gets a receipt, and a delivery confirmation for the next day; a seemingly minor return for what he's just spent, but enough to keep a smile on his face as he walks the last handful of blocks over the remaining distance to his apartment.

Fafnir is waiting for him. There's no sign of him as Makoto opens the door to step into the entryway, but he's barely passed over the threshold when there's a voice, "You're late," loud enough that Makoto can hear it clearly even from the other room.

Makoto's smile widens. "I'm home," he calls back, and comes forward so he can let the door fall shut as he steps out of his shoes and slides his jacket off his arm so he can shake out the creases in it. "I'm sorry about the delay. I can start on dinner right away, if you're hungry."

Fafnir snorts in answer. Makoto leaves his shoes in the entryway and steps forward into the apartment so he can cross the living room to where Fafnir is sitting illuminated by the blue light of the monitor in front of him. Fafnir is in the middle of a game, steering the avatar on the screen through a series of obstacles with fluid grace, but his gaze slides sideways at Makoto's approach, touching briefly at the other's eyes before he looks back to the game. "You were working?"

Makoto shakes his head at the statement that Fafnir only barely bothers to draw towards the upswing of a question. "I got done early, actually." He comes forward to stand in the entrance of the office space, to the side so he doesn't cast a shadow into the ambient illumination spilling

around Fafnir's shoulders from the light in the living room. "I stopped off at a computer shop on the way home." Makoto glances at the curtain of Fafnir's dark hair and then looks away again to deliberately turn his attention to the open space still remaining on the far side of the room. It's more than he realized; he should be able to fit the second desk behind the one at which Fafnir is currently seated and still have space for his futon between the two, as long as the chair of the unused desk is pushed in all the way. "They'll be delivering the desk and the electronics for a second computer tomorrow."

The sound of Fafnir's fingers moving against the keyboard in front of him pauses. There's a moment of silence but for the modulated sound of the game still playing; then that cuts off too, as Fafnir pauses the action. When he turns in his chair Makoto can see the motion out of the corner of his eye without having to turn his head and look at Fafnir directly. "You got another computer."

There's not even the illusion of a question on the words, this time. Makoto hums affirmative. "It'll be here tomorrow. If it shows up in the morning I should have everything set up and running by the evening." He tips his head to look back to Fafnir gazing at him and flickers a smile at the other's flat stare. "We can give it a try as soon as it's ready."

Fafnir doesn't look aside. "Is it for me?"

"If you'd like," Makoto says easily. "Or I can use it, or we can take turns. It should be more or less the same as the machine you're using now." He ducks his head to indicate the computer that has occupied so much of Fafnir's time for the last days. "This way we'll have two of them." He steps forward so he can hang up his jacket before turning back with the intention of returning over the distance to the kitchen. "The usual okay for dinner again?"

"Curry?" Fafnir says. "Yes." Makoto nods and steps past the desk; as he moves towards the kitchen Fafnir calls after him. "Are there multiplayer games on the computer too?"

Makoto glances back to smile at Fafnir's focused attention. "You bet," he says, and reaches to unbutton the cuff of his shirt so he can roll his sleeves up. "I'll show you as soon as we have the new one set up." He looks down to his sleeve to fix his gaze there instead of on Fafnir's face. "I thought you might like to play together, since you're enjoying the computer so much."

Fafnir huffs. It would sound almost skeptical, from someone else; but Makoto is learning to read Fafnir's tells, and the lack of spoken rejection means the sound is closer to embarrassment than refusal. Makoto fusses with his sleeve for a long moment, keeping his head turned down so Fafnir can collect himself; by the time he glances back up Fafnir has turned back to his computer screen, and the only read Makoto can get on his expression is from the shadows of his profile. There's not much to see -- his mouth is set on a neutral line, his gaze is fixed fully on the screen -- but he hasn't restarted his game yet either. Fafnir's attention flickers to the side, then back to the screen before he takes a breath to speak. "Tomorrow?"

Makoto nods. "In the morning, hopefully."

Fafnir pauses for a moment. Then: "Okay," he says, and clicks on the computer screen to restart his game.

Makoto leaves him to it without protesting the retreat from the conversation. He needs to get started on dinner anyway before they can get back to the console game they're playing together, and he has all the confirmation he needs that Fafnir is looking forward to the new addition as much as Makoto is himself.

## Alliance

They make good use of the new computer. It does show up the next morning, early enough to allow Makoto plenty of time to set it up; Fafnir fails to be of much help, due primarily to his complete inexperience with any kind of electronics, but he spends the time sitting at Makoto's side and watching with such intent focus that Makoto suspects him to be absorbing knowledge of computers as rapidly as he picks up the controls of a new game. Makoto is happy to have the audience; it's more a pleasure than a chore to work on the assembly under Fafnir's focused attention, and with the rest of the day before them he's looking forward to the result as much as the process to get there. He has everything up and running before lunchtime, and leaves Fafnir to get himself acquainted with the new machine while Makoto retreats to the kitchen to produce some kind of sandwiches for them to down before they get into the all-consuming pleasure of playing together. They take a brief interlude to eat in the living room, at a distance from the computers to save the keyboard from the inevitable crumbs, before agreeing without speaking to stack their plates on the counter and leave them for the evening cleanup. Usually Makoto would take the time to tidy up after himself, just to save the effort later; but Fafnir is tense with anticipation, drawn as taut with excitement as Makoto remembers him looking that first day on his front step, and the appeal of satisfying that enthusiasm is too much for Makoto to even consider refusing.

Fafnir takes the new computer upon their return to the other room of the apartment. Makoto claims the other side, with his familiar desk made something novel again by Fafnir's recent concerted use of it; the chair seems to fit a little differently as he leans back against it, the mouse settles against his palm more smoothly than he recalls. Behind him Fafnir shifts to seek out greater comfort in the new chair in a rustle of crisp clothing; when he turns to speak he is close enough that the sound comes over Makoto's shoulder, as if he has Fafnir's shadow tipping physically in over him. "What are we playing?"

"Hm." Makoto purses his lips as he considers the array of options on the desktop in front of him. Fafnir's spent most of his time on the single-player adventure game on which Makoto started him; there's a multi-player mode on that as well, but Makoto wants to show off something different, now that they have the chance to explore a greater range of options. He scrolls through the library of possibilities, comparing co-op and competitive modes as he considers; and then he reaches an option near the bottom of the list, and draws to a stop without even glancing over the choices remaining.

He turns in his chair to angle an arm over the back so he can look at Fafnir. "Fafnir-dono, do you want to play an online game?"

Fafnir glances back over his shoulder. He's not smiling, but the focus in his uncovered eye speaks clearly enough to his interest. "What's the difference?"

"We've been playing mostly local games so far," Makoto tells him. "On the television or here, it's been just you and me as players. If we join an online game we could play together with all kinds of people all over the world."

Fafnir huffs an exhale. "Are they good?"

"Sometimes," Makoto says. "It's a huge group of players, it just depends on who you end up with."

Fafnir considers him. "We'd be playing together?"



“We can form a group and stick together no matter who else we end up playing with.” Makoto smiles. “I won’t leave you alone, Fafnir-dono.”

Fafnir snorts and turns away. “I don’t need a human to babysit me,” he says. “How do we start?”

“It’s the bottom icon on the left,” Makoto says, and turns back to his own computer to open up the game in turn. “You’ll design and name a character first, before getting into the game itself.”

“Players start at first level?”

“That’s right.” Makoto selects a base character for himself and opens up the designer to tweak the hair color and armor style; behind him there’s the soft sound of clicking as Fafnir does the same. “You start out in an introductory area to give you a chance to learn the game and form up with a group, if you want. Then you can go out into the world and start progressing levels and collecting loot. Some of the areas are level-locked, which is where you’ll find the really tough bosses.”

“And the best item drops,” Fafnir says, his voice heavy with intent.

Makoto smiles at his screen. “That’s right,” he says, and approves his character design so he can provide a name to his newly-designed avatar. “We should be able to unlock the first of them by the end of tonight, if we’re lucky.” His character lifts a hand to wave at the screen as he gives them a name before the view changes to a brief loading menu. The computer hums, the screen flickers, and as the loading screen pulls away Makoto is left looking into the interior of the starting-character inn, presently populated with a pair of NPCs, a handful of other player characters, and his own avatar standing in their starting armor in the middle of the room.

“I’m in,” Makoto says. “Are you still working on your character?” Fafnir huffs a sound that Makoto takes for assent. “I’ll wait in the starting area for you.” He paces around the room, taking stock of the other avatars and considering the quest board for starting missions, but before he can move to select it another character materializes in the center of the room, dressed so entirely in black that Makoto has not even a flicker of a doubt as to the identity of the player.

“You made it,” Makoto says, and clicks on Fafnir’s avatar so he can open up the party menu for *Ooyama Takeshi*. “Cool design, Fafnir-dono.”

Fafnir snorts by way of dismissing the compliment. “What’s this?”

“I’ve invited you to join my party,” Makoto says, and clicks on his own avatar so they will lift their arm in a wave towards Fafnir’s. “If you wanted to play together for the first few levels, at least. You can play on your own too, if you want. Just click on--” and the pending invitation box on his screen vanishes, replaced instead with a notification that *Ooyama Takeshi has joined your party*. “Oh.”

“It’ll be faster to progress with a partner,” Fafnir says. He’s looking at his own monitor when Makoto glances back over his shoulder at him, as if the screen is holding his complete attention even though their characters are doing nothing but standing still in the middle of the inn. “We’ll get to the better items quickly working together.”

They’ll also be splitting the drops between the two of them, a fact that has pushed Fafnir to more competitive than cooperative games in the past; but Makoto doesn’t comment on this fact. He just ducks his head and turns back to smile at his monitor. “That’s true.”

“So.” Fafnir is pacing his avatar across the inn, moving through the empty space around the other characters like he’s looking for a random encounter to appear. “How do we get started?”

Makoto nods. “We’ll start with selecting something from the quest wall,” he says, and walks his avatar up to open the menu. “Do you want to do a hunting mission or a collection quest?”

Fafnir picks the latter of the options, a fact which doesn’t much surprise Makoto, and within a few minutes of sitting down they’re venturing out of the inn into the starting zone for new characters. Makoto remembers where they are meant to go, at least well enough that he can direct them to the gate leading out of the city, but Fafnir follows close enough on his heels that it’s hard to tell which of them is leading. Within the first half-hour they’ve finished the quest and are on their way back to claim the reward; by the time they’ve been playing for an hour they’re finished with the introductory material and continuing out into the world awaiting them.

Around them the day continues on, morning shifting into afternoon before dimming into the shadows of evening, but Makoto hardly notices. With Fafnir behind him and the glow of his computer screen in front of him, he’s been smiling for hours, and he doesn’t see any reason to stop any time soon.

## Proximity

Makoto tries to be quick about changing when he gets home from work. His clothes aren't comfortable enough to stay in through the relative comfort of the evenings that he spends with Fafnir and, more immediately, taking them off as soon as he gets home saves him from having to wash them as often as might be needed if he were cooking and eating in them more. There's still something of a delay, though, in coming in from the downpour of a summer rainstorm and working through the careful process of stripping off his coat, and setting aside his shoes, and tipping his umbrella alongside the door to dry, before he can even come in to collect a change of clothes so he can duck into the bathroom to trade out his suit and button-up shirt for soft shorts and a nerdy t-shirt.

Makoto never used to think much of this, before. When his apartment was his own the evenings were his to do with as he liked; even on those nights he made plans to help in a multiplayer raid, the events were always late enough that he was sure to make it home by the time they began. His games were always waiting for him, as perfectly patient as only inanimate entertainments can be; Makoto could eat dinner first, or even take his evening bath as soon as he came in the door from work, if he was particularly tired or fighting off a cold. With no expectations on his time he made his evenings whatever he wished them to be on a nightly basis, and if he fell into a routine more often than not, it was more from habit than need.

It's different with Fafnir. Fafnir is hardly demanding; even his expressions of impatience are limited to a few words, and those so composed it's hard to recognize them for what they are anyway. He seems utterly content to spend long swathes of the day and often the night playing computer games on his own, or with whatever party members he has collected while Makoto was occupied at work. Makoto had even wondered, in the first few days after introducing Fafnir to his multiplayer online games, if he hadn't given away his newfound companionship to the allure that the possibilities of the internet offer. Fafnir certainly plays almost non-stop, all through the night and ceaselessly during the day, so far as Makoto can tell; but he's always pushing back from the computer desk just as Makoto is emerging from changing in the bathroom, always lifting his head to turn his crimson gaze on Makoto with all the force of expectation behind it even before he bothers to ask what they're playing that night. The rhythm of that has proven unchanging, sustained regardless of what Fafnir does with the rest of his day and the hours he spends amusing himself without Makoto, and it's the anticipation of Fafnir's unswerving attention that hastens Makoto's efforts to change until he's in some danger of losing efficiency to the clumsiness of too-much haste.

It takes him longer than usual, today. The rain has dampened his hair and speckled his pants and the wrists of his sleeves with wet; it's harder to shed his clothes with the humidity sticking them to his skin, and then they need more immediate attention than what Makoto habitually gives to smooth them over the hanger and free of the wrinkles they've collected in the heavy air. His change of clothes isn't much better; the t-shirt catches at his hair to tumble it out-of-order, and even once he gets himself dressed again his clothes stick and cling uncomfortably to the damp that refuses to evaporate off his skin with how heavy the air is around him. Makoto thinks of Fafnir as he leans in towards the mirror so he can finger-comb his hair back from the tangled mess the rain and his efforts have made of it; the other must be wearing several layers of clothing to produce such a perfectly formal appearance, he can hardly be comfortable with the advent of the rainy season that has turned the air to soup even indoors. Makoto wonders if he ought to get a dehumidifier, just to dry some of the sticky weight of the air while they're inside; or maybe it would be easier to offer Fafnir a change of clothes, although Makoto has never seen him indicate the least desire for such. Now that Makoto thinks of it, he's never seen Tohru wearing anything

other than the same cosplay-maid outfit in which he first met her; he's not actually at all sure that dragons have any need to change their clothes at all. Maybe it's a matter of personal preference, individual to each dragon. He collects the hanger with his own clothes draped across it, shaking once to free any last wrinkles, and then he pulls open the bathroom door so he can let himself out into the other room.

Fafnir isn't at his computer desk anymore. He's completed what he was doing when Makoto came in the front door, to find his usual greeting met with Fafnir's wordless huff of acknowledgment, and both the computers around the corner are shut down as Makoto glances at them. Fafnir's on the living room floor instead, kneeling in front of the shelves of video games as he frowns at the titles available before him and looking as pulled-together as he ever does in his full butler uniform.

"I'm done," Makoto announces as he steps forward and rounds the corner to hang up his suit on the rack at the far side of the computer room. "Sorry it took me longer than usual. The rain really gets into everything."

Fafnir snorts. "It's fine," he says, in a tone so flat Makoto would take it for sarcasm from anyone except exactly the person to whom he's speaking. "What do you want to play?"

"I'll let you pick," Makoto says. "Since I kept you waiting."

"Do you have an early morning tomorrow?"

"No more than usual." Fafnir hums and leans forward to reach for the shelf of games and Makoto turns back to run a hand over his hanging suit before he leaves it for the night. He tugs at the crease along the hem to draw it into a slightly more stable balance over the hanger and speaks without turning around. "Do you want me to get you a change of clothes?"

Fafnir goes still. "What?"

Makoto looks back. Fafnir is still kneeling on the floor, his hand still outstretched to slide a video game free from the selection before him, but the motion is stalled half-finished as he frowns up at Makoto in the shadows of the other room.

"I could get you a change of clothes if you wanted," Makoto says. He ducks his head to watch his feet as he navigates through the gap between the two computer desks on either side of the space and continues speaking with casual unconcern to answer Fafnir's fixed stare. "It's been really humid lately. If you wanted to try something different I could get you some clothes of your own to change into. Or you could borrow one of my t-shirts, if you wanted to give it a try."

Fafnir's frown deepens. He turns his head to look away from Makoto's gaze. "I don't need to change," he says stiffly. "My clothes are formed from my scales, they're not the same as human garments."

"Oh," Makoto says. He pauses to consider the details of Fafnir's clothing with this new piece of information. "That's pretty cool, Fafnir-dono." Fafnir's attention swings back to fix suspicion on Makoto, which Makoto answers with the ease of a smile and a huffed laugh. "You're probably more comfortable than I am, then."

Fafnir huffs and tosses his head so his hair swings back from his face. "I don't waste my time worrying about physical comfort like humans do."

There's something of an insult there, but Makoto is used to this kind of offhand dismissal and meets it with the easy response of a smile. "That sounds a lot more efficient," he admits. He steps

past Fafnir kneeling in front of the television so he can come around to take up a seat on the couch, somewhat to the left of the midpoint view of screen. Fafnir watches him settle himself, but when Makoto looks back to him Fafnir turns away instead of waiting to meet the other's eyes. "Does that mean you can change what you're wearing any time you wanted to?"

Fafnir pulls the game he's holding off the shelf. "If I wanted to," he says. "Do you want to play this game or not?"

"I want to play," Makoto says at once. Fafnir huffs and reaches out to push open the disc tray of the game console; Makoto leans forward so he can reach for the remote to turn on the television while Fafnir is setting up the game. The console hums as Fafnir switches it on, the screen flickers into illumination with the game logo, and Fafnir unfolds to get to his feet in a single graceful action. Makoto looks up to offer him a smile of embarrassed apology. "Sorry for pestering you."

"You didn't," Fafnir says without looking at Makoto's face. "It's fine." As he comes in towards the couch Makoto shifts his weight, meaning to move farther to the side to make space for Fafnir, but Fafnir turns to drop into the space immediately alongside him without waiting for Makoto to slide away. His clothes rustle, the dark of his pants brush against Makoto's bare knee, and Makoto goes still as Fafnir settles so close alongside him that they're nearly pressing together all along the line between them. Fafnir's not quite touching him, not quite leaning in to press his weight against Makoto's, but he seems to be so close that Makoto feels like they'll brush against each other if either of them so much as takes a breath. He wonders if he should move away, if Fafnir wants him to slide away and cede the midpoint of the couch to the other's use, and while he's still holding carefully still Fafnir leans to the side so he can reach past Makoto for the controllers left at the side of the couch.

His shoulder presses against Makoto's arm. For a minute Makoto can feel the whole of Fafnir's body against him, heavy and real and startlingly warm even through the layer of his clothes. Makoto's chest tightens, his skin prickling with self-consciousness, and for a moment his mind slips back to Fafnir's statement about the substance of his apparent clothing. Fafnir's human form is one he transformed himself into, with the aesthetic trappings a side effect rather than something he added after the fact; Makoto suddenly wonders if Fafnir's clothes are really anything like clothes at all or if they're not closer to an extension of his body, shaped into a seeming more easily accepted by the humans around him. He wonders if Fafnir even feels them as a burden against his skin; he wonders how clearly Fafnir can feel the texture of Makoto's bare arm pressing close against the dark of his sleeve. Makoto flushes warm, his shoulders tense with a sudden, bright awareness of every point of contact between himself and Fafnir, and then Fafnir straightens, easing back from his lean against Makoto as he offers one of the paired controllers he just picked up. Makoto blinks and stares at the controller, struggling to bring himself back from the distraction into which he briefly wandered; next to him Fafnir's head turns, his hair shifting as he glances at Makoto next to him.

"You said it was my choice," he says, with his usual flat tone pulling taut until he sounds almost defensive.

Makoto looks up. The opening screen of the game is flickering on the television, waiting for input from the players; Fafnir is still holding out the second controller to him, even with his head turned aside to hide his expression from Makoto's gaze. Makoto looks down to the controller; then he shakes his head to center himself and reaches to accept it. "I did," he says. "Good choice. This is a fun one."

Fafnir snorts, as if scoffing at the reassurance of Makoto's words. "Play a round before dinner?"

Makoto steadies his grip on the controller. “Make it two and you’re on,” he says, and when he presses the button to join the game Fafnir does so at almost precisely the same time. The screen unfolds into the opening selection for the player characters, and when Makoto leans forward to make his choice he only barely pays attention to the brush of Fafnir’s sleeve touching against his forearm as the other shifts to match him.

Makoto keeps his attention on the game from that point on. He has to, if he’s going to hold his own against Fafnir, and they do a good enough job of losing track of time that they’ve finished three rounds and are starting on a fourth before Makoto remembers the promise of dinner. But Fafnir is sitting close alongside him, the pair of them pressing together in the middle of the couch instead of retreating to either end, and when Makoto glances sideways Fafnir is watching the screen, his gaze intent and so focused that he’s forgotten to hold his mouth to the weight of his usual frown. Makoto looks at the soft of Fafnir’s lips, where they are relaxed into something that very nearly resembles a smile; and then he looks back to the screen, and lets dinner wait a little longer.

## Development

Makoto doesn't spend all of his downtime playing games with Fafnir. They do have to eat, after all, with the shopping and preparation that comes with that, and he loses their nightly competition over cleaning up as often as Fafnir does. There are the necessities of life to be considered, too, the laundry that Makoto generates himself and the general tidying that needs to be managed occasionally even for two people who spend the vast majority of their time in electronic pursuits; but Makoto has other interests as well, and as the weeks leading up to the biggest social event of his year diminish he feels the stress of productivity building over him until it grows great enough to overcome his desire to indulge in more virtual pursuits.

He's decided himself on his weekend plans well before he settles into bed on Saturday night. It's difficult during the weekdays to find the uninterrupted time to work on the project he's been meaning to undertake, and by the time he returns from a day of work additional coding has sunk to the very bottom of things he wishes to do with his downtime. But Sunday offers real possibility, both in terms of available time and the energy to make something of it, and as Makoto drifts into sleep to the sound of Fafnir's keyboard tapping with the other's actions it's with the comfortable anticipation of productivity the next morning.

The day dawns with a storm. They're in the midst of the summer rain by now; Makoto has taken his umbrella with him every day to work, and made use of it too, sometimes both coming and going. The clouds that await his considering glance out the window are heavy and dark across the sky, so dense that it's difficult even to be certain that the sun has risen at all, and they appear to be determined to hold position for the whole of the day. With the rain sluicing wet across the outside of the window there's no point in making an attempt at the laundry, and less in bothering with getting dressed to go out into the storm, and Makoto lets the curtain fall back into place over the glass with the comfortable certainty that his plans are confirmed to be the best use of his time for the day.

Fafnir hasn't turned around from his position in front of the computer. He's remained there all night, as far as Makoto knows, and without offering any response to Makoto's habitual "Good morning" he offered when he first sat up into bleary awareness of the world upon waking. But he speaks as Makoto lets the curtain fall back over the faint illumination outside, breaking the peace of the raindrops pattering against the pane of the window without looking aside from the action on his computer screen. "Are you joining the raid this morning?"

Makoto shakes his head. "I'm starting work on a project today," he says. "I'll settle in to it as soon as we're done with breakfast." Fafnir turns his head to glance up at him and Makoto offers an apologetic smile in answer to the other's attention. "I'm going to have to pass on gaming until this evening. Sorry, Fafnir-dono."

Fafnir snorts and looks back to his screen. The dismissal is clear, but his shoulders are as relaxed as they ever are when he's in the middle of a quest, so Makoto considers himself basically forgiven for what inconvenience his absence may cause. He leaves Fafnir to the computer while he takes on the task of rolling his futon up and putting it away before heading out to the kitchen to start in on breakfast without bothering with changing into more formal clothes than the shorts and shirt he slept in. There's no one to see him but Fafnir anyway, and for all that Fafnir's own appearance is always perfectly pristine Makoto has yet to see the least discomfort from the other regarding what Makoto does or doesn't wear around him. Makoto had wondered about it, the first few days; but he appreciates comfort too much to hold onto the concern for long, and if Fafnir doesn't mind Makoto's casual clothes Makoto certainly doesn't mind the studied elegance of Fafnir's

appearance. It must be a strange combination to an outside observer, Makoto thinks; to him it's rapidly become typical, another part of the juxtaposed contrasts that make up the pleasant backdrop of living with Fafnir.

Makoto doesn't hear Fafnir finish the game he's playing. The other uses headphones for the length of the night to keep from disturbing the sleep that is optional for him but a necessity for Makoto, and he often doesn't take them off until Makoto is settling into the chair behind him to join a party to take on a boss. Today he logs out before Makoto calls him to breakfast and is waiting on the couch when the other emerges from the kitchen with their plates of food. It's the first time Makoto can ever recall Fafnir stopping a game early.

Makoto doesn't comment on this unprecedented event. He just hands over one of the dishes in his hold to Fafnir before padding around the corner of the couch to take up his usual position on the other side, somewhat closer to Fafnir next to him than he would have sat even a week ago. Fafnir doesn't say anything, doesn't even turn his head to glance at Makoto next to him; he ducks forward towards the table set up in front of them instead and turns his attention to his food with as much focus as if it's the most vital concern for him at the moment. Makoto follows his example, and for a few minutes there is nothing to hear but the trickle of the rain against the windows and the peaceful coexistence of two people comfortable enough to eat together in silence.

Fafnir finishes first. Usually this would be followed by him rising to take his plate to the kitchen before returning to the game he left paused in the other room, but this time he lingers, sitting in silence at the other end of the couch with his plate held in his lap like he's forgotten it's there. Makoto glances at him sideways between his attention to what remains of his own meal but Fafnir looks perfectly content, like he's waiting for something to happen to disrupt the quiet in the room. Makoto is left to finish his breakfast in peace; it's only as he's lowering the plate to his lap that Fafnir turns in to tilt his head vaguely in Makoto's direction and speaks. "What are you working on?"

Makoto swallows the last bite of his food to clear his mouth before he answers. "I'm building a game of my own," he says. He sets his plate on his lap and reaches out for Fafnir's; Fafnir hands it over so Makoto can stack them together before rising to his feet to take them to the kitchen. "Comiket is coming up in two months and I want to make sure I have the design finished and all the bugs worked out before then."

Fafnir follows Makoto towards the kitchen, trailing in the other's wake like a shadow. "Comiket?"

Makoto nods and reaches to turn on the water so he can rinse the dishes clean. "Comic Market," he clarifies. "It's a big event that happens twice a year, in the summer and the winter. People get together to buy and sell things they've made. There's a lot of comics, of course, but some people come looking for games too." He scrubs at the plate in his hands to wash it clean, keeping his attention on the action of his hands rather than looking up at Fafnir next to him. "I want to have one to sell along with the comic for the circle I'm part of." Makoto tips his head to indicate the cloth at the far side of the kitchen. "Do you want to dry the plates?" Fafnir picks up the cloth and steps around Makoto to the far side of the sink and Makoto hands him the cleaned dish before turning his attention to the second.

"I'll have to put some time into the comic too," he says as he soaps and rinses the remaining dishes clean. "My circle wants to pick up that work a little later in July. If I want to get my game put together I'll need to put in most of the work now so I'm just making last tweaks by the time the circle starts meeting."

Fafnir is drying the plates with careful attention. He doesn't look at Makoto as the other glances



back to him, but when he speaks the words are clear from behind the weight of his hair. “Is it a computer game?”

“Mm,” Makoto nods. “We can run it on either of our machines.”

Fafnir sets the first dish aside and reaches for the second. “Genre?”

“Bullet hell,” Makoto says. “Plus a little bit of plot to give the player time to catch their breath.”

“Hmph.” Fafnir dries the second plate and stacks them together; Makoto reaches to swing open the cupboard so Fafnir can put them back to wait for their use again later tonight. With the dishes done they are left standing side-by-side in the narrow space of the kitchen. Fafnir’s gaze slides to Makoto’s face, touches against the other’s attention, and then flickers away again as he turns to look out the window. Makoto waits, held where he is by a sense of tension that says the conversation isn’t quite over yet, and after a moment Fafnir swallows and speaks without looking at him. “Can I play it?”

Makoto beams at him. “I hope you will,” he says. “I could really do with a playtester once I have the basic structure set up.” He tips his head to the side to gesture and when he steps out of the kitchen Fafnir leaves the drying cloth on the counter and moves to follow him towards the shadows of the other room. “It’ll take me a few days of work, but I should have something playable by next weekend at least.” Makoto draws up to the chair in front of the desk that has become his own before glancing back. “I’ll let you know when I’m ready for you to give it a try.”

Fafnir ducks his head into a nod. There’s no smile at his lips, nothing to indicate his satisfaction in this outcome, but he’s not frowning into the tension that would speak to true frustration either. “Okay,” he says, and turns to return to his position in front of his own computer. Makoto watches him settle back into place and reach for his mouse again; it’s only as Fafnir leans back in to resume his game that Makoto looks away to his own desk. He draws the chair back and sits down as he reaches to power the computer on, and from behind him Fafnir speaks without turning. “Do you want me to keep using headphones?”

Makoto glances back; but of course Fafnir’s not looking at him. He still shakes his head, even without anyone to see the gesture as he smiles at the line of Fafnir’s shoulders. “You can unplug them,” he says, and turns back to his screen. “It’ll be nice background noise.”

Fafnir doesn’t answer out loud, but after a minute there’s the sound of familiar music from his speakers as he returns to his game. Makoto smiles at the monitor of his computer, and when he opens up the file to begin work on his game he does so with the thought of Fafnir’s focused gaze in mind for his future audience.

## Training

Makoto waits to practice the chant until Fafnir is in the bathroom.

It's not that he's embarrassed. He's intending to offer his portion of the call-and-response in the middle of an enormous crowd; there's nothing to be gained from shyness under the circumstances, and Makoto has never been one to apologize for his interests in any case. It's true that he refrains from bringing them in to work, for the most part; but Fafnir has lived with him for weeks, and by now Makoto thinks he hardly has any secrets left to keep to himself even if he wanted to. The necessary practice for the event he'll be going to at the end of the month is just another one of his hobbies, no more a cause of embarrassment than his dedication to video games or his penchant for the elegance embodied by maids and butlers alike; he doesn't care if Fafnir sees him practicing any more than he minds when the other leans in close over the back of his computer chair to frown attention at the game Makoto is playing. But the apartment is small, and the more so with both of them in the living room at once, and it's as much a consideration of physical space as anything else that holds Makoto back until the sound of the shower splashing against tile speaks to Fafnir's occupation elsewhere.

It's a fairly simple chant. Makoto has learned far more complicated routines, those that are so lengthy and detailed that they verge into the beginnings of an actual dance; and has successfully executed those as well, of course. It's been years since he missed a chance for the collectible items that are only available to the most enthusiastic participants at live events, and he's not about to start now. He reviews the words, murmuring them to himself to make sure he's committed them to memory, before he moves to set himself in the middle of the living room where the last jump is unlikely to knock over a display case or run him up against a computer desk.

It's a basic sequence. Makoto works it through for himself, repeating back the call in a lower tone before increasing his volume to the enthusiasm needed for the response; his motions are more restrained than they will be, for now, but he sketches them with upraised arms all the same, just to link the action with the words. It's the last part that he's most interested in, anyway, and the part that is most vital to land correctly. Makoto crouches low, folding himself in to collect greater momentum for his movement, before surging up and into the spin that composes the last part of the routine.

It looked simple in the video instructions but he doesn't pull it tight enough on his first try. He only makes it two-third of the way around instead of a full rotation, and when he lands he's off-balance and stumbles before he can catch himself. Makoto frowns and tries the jump again; it's more successful this time, now that he's prepared for it. He starts over from the top, reciting back the words with more enthusiasm as he gets the feel of it, and this time when he goes in for the final spin he makes it all the way around without difficulty. His feet land at the floor, his head comes up, and he sees Fafnir standing in the doorway to the bathroom, wearing exactly the clothes he went in with except for the white towel draped around his shoulders and the heavy wet of his undone hair lying over that.

"Oh," Makoto says, drawing up to stand upright and offering Fafnir a grin. "Fafnir-dono. I didn't realize you were done."

"Mm," Fafnir hums. "We're almost out of shampoo."

"Ah," Makoto says. "Thanks. I'll pick some up on my way home from work." He turns to head for the kitchen so he can write a note for himself. "Can it wait until Thursday?"

“Yes.” Fafnir comes out of the doorway of the bathroom; Makoto hears him crossing the floor, though he pauses in the doorway between the living room and the shadows of the computer room where they spend the majority of their time.

Makoto finishes writing the note and sets it aside to take with him to work. When he looks back Fafnir is still standing in the doorway, head turned to look at him. Makoto tips his head and smiles. “What’s up?”

Fafnir’s forehead tightens to a crease. “What were you doing?”

“I was practicing a call-and-response,” Makoto tells him. “It’s for a live event I’m going to in a few weeks. They shout questions to the audience and everyone who knows the right responses gives them.” He comes back across the living room to move past Fafnir and towards his computer, where the webpage for the event is still up. “They give out items to everyone who knows the right answers.” He scrolls up to the photograph of the merchandise he’s aiming for and turns himself slightly to the side to give a better view to Fafnir, who has come up behind him to look over his shoulder. “See?”

Fafnir tips in close to frown at the screen. The towel around his shoulders has slipped slightly askew; his hair is clinging wet against it. Without his usual tie to hold it back the dark spreads out across his shoulders and spills a heavy lock forward to fall in front of his face. “Limited edition,” he reads off the screen. “What does that mean?”

“Ahh,” Makoto says. “I’m glad you asked.” He turns in his chair to fix Fafnir with the full force of his attention as he clasps his hands in front of him and leans in closer. “That means, Fafnir-dono, that I will join the elite ranks of the truest of fans.” He lifts a hand to gesture towards his computer screen without looking at it. “These are only available at the live events that are happening this month, in this city. There is only a fraction of the fanbase who will have access to this and I--” as he sweeps his hand around to press his outstretched fingers to his chest, “--will be among those chosen few.”

Fafnir follows the gesture of the other’s hand, tracking the sweep of Makoto’s motion before looking back to the computer screen. “This is a rare item?”

Makoto ducks his head. “It is,” he says. “After this event is over there will only be a few hundred people who will be able to say they have one.”

Fafnir doesn’t look away from the screen. “And that makes it valuable.”

“Yes,” Makoto agrees. “Though no real fan would ever sell theirs. It’s about having it, not selling.”

Fafnir hums a note in the back of his throat. It’s the closest thing to warmth Makoto has ever heard from him. “It is a treasure.”

Makoto beams up at him. “Exactly.”

Fafnir stares at the screen. Makoto can almost see the thoughts working behind his eyes and fitting themselves to the shift of his lips pressing against each other. Finally he lifts his chin, raising himself to haughty self-assurance before nodding decisively. “I will get one myself.”

Makoto can’t help the way his eyebrows raise. “Really?” he asks. “I didn’t think you cared much about Nyami-Nyami, Fafnir-dono.”

Fafnir looks to frown at him. “What does that have to do with it?” he asks. “It’s a valuable item.” He fixes his attention back on the screen. “I wish to have one for my own collection.”

Makoto is disinclined to argue with Fafnir in general, and even more so when he sounds as firm as he does on this particular statement. “Okay,” he says, and smiles when Fafnir looks back to him. “I’ll get a ticket and a *happi* for you to wear.”

Fafnir’s mouth catches onto a frown. “I’ll need to change?”

“No, no,” Makoto insists, waving his hand to brush this aside. “You can just wear it over your usual clothes. That’s what everyone else does. All you’ll need to do is learn the right responses before the event.”

“Mm.” Fafnir looks back to the computer screen before he speaks again. “Can you show me?”

Makoto smiles. “Sure,” he says. “We can learn them together.” He pushes back from the computer desk; alongside him Fafnir straightens to watch as Makoto moves towards the open space in the living room before turning back to gesture. “Come with me, I’ll show you.”

As it turns out, there’s not enough space in the living room for them both to go through the motions of the routine at the same time, but Fafnir doesn’t protest when Makoto suggests they take it in turns, and if his cues are a little more monotone than Makoto expects they will be at the event his responses are word-perfect after no more than two repetitions. By the time they call a stop for the night Fafnir’s hair is dry around his shoulders, the towel is tossed over the back of one of the computer chairs, and Makoto is smiling without thinking about it at all.

He’s been looking forward to the event for weeks; now he thinks he might have just as much fun preparing for it with Fafnir as in attending it together.

## Assist

“Sorry about the mess,” Makoto says as he comes around the corner to the kitchen so he can deposit their paired plates at the counter where Fafnir is working through the stacks of dishes left in the sink. “Dinner was a little more complicated than usual tonight.”

Fafnir glances sideways at him. “Why are you apologizing?” he asks. His tone is so flat that the words sound sarcastic, but when he reaches for the plates Makoto is holding there’s no strain of irritation anywhere under the movement or as he sets the dishes in the sink in front of him. “I lost. It’s my turn to clean up.”

“Yeah, but I’m better at that game,” Makoto points out as he turns around to lean against the edge of the counter alongside Fafnir at the sink. “My victory was an inevitability, Fafnir-dono.”

Fafnir snorts roughly in the back of his throat. “It was not.” He reaches to turn on the faucet with his elbow instead of his soapy hands so he can rinse the plate in his hands clean. “A dragon can always triumph over a human whenever he chooses to.”

“Mm,” Makoto hums, and tips his head to look at Fafnir watching what he’s doing in the sink. “So you let me win, Fafnir-dono?”

Fafnir’s head comes up, his eyes wide with surprise. “What?” he growls before he catches himself to press his lips tight together and turn away to scowl into the sink before him. “I did *not*.”

Makoto watches Fafnir for another moment. His shoulders are tight under the dark of his coat; he’s not flushed, but then Makoto can’t recall ever seeing Fafnir blush under even the greatest of embarrassments, so that’s not much evidence in either direction. Far more telling is the pressure at his mouth, where he’s pressing his lips hard together like he means to hold back whatever else he might say to give himself away. It makes Makoto’s chest glow warm to see even this fractional giveaway of emotional investment; but Fafnir looks a little bit like he’s thinking of never speaking again, and after a moment of indulgence Makoto straightens from the edge of the counter so he can clear his throat into a more casual seeming. “Let me help with the drying.”

Fafnir tips his head to track Makoto’s motion with his one uncovered eye as the other moves to step around him. “I don’t need assistance.”

“I know,” Makoto says, speaking lightly as he turns sideways to squeeze past Fafnir and come around into the space left on the far side of the counter. “I’m offering.” He reaches for the extra drying cloth and glances up to smile at Fafnir through his lashes. “And this way we can get back to the seasonal quest sooner.” Fafnir scoffs at the back of his throat, Makoto smiles wider, and when Fafnir turns his head back to what he’s doing Makoto reaches to pick up a plate and set about drying it to clear space for Fafnir to better continue his portion of the evening chores.

Peace spreads out around them. There’s a rhythm to their movement, as Fafnir washes dishes and Makoto dries them; after a few minutes Fafnir shuts off the water and takes over putting the dishes away as Makoto finishes them. Makoto is left to run the towel over the damp surface of the plates as he leans against the corner next to him and lets his attention wander over Fafnir. Fafnir looks as composed as he ever does; his clothes never show any kind of wrinkles that Makoto has seen, and if he’s ever spilled anything on himself Makoto has never seen him do it. Makoto supposes the issue of stains is solved as part of Fafnir’s evening bath, just the same way Makoto washes away the accumulated dust and sweat of the day under the spray of the shower; it seems like it would be an easier way to deal with things rather than bothering with the effort to wash clothes and body as

separate steps.

Fafnir turns back to Makoto and extends a hand for the final cup. Makoto gives the glass a last swipe with the towel and passes it over before shaking the drying cloth out so he can turn and lay it flat over the counter. "Is your hair like the rest of your clothes, Fafnir-dono?"

Makoto can see Fafnir turn to look at him in his peripheral vision, although he doesn't tip his head to see the frown Fafnir fixes him with. "What?"

"Your clothes are transformed scales, right?" Makoto turns away from the counter to look at the heavy weight of Fafnir's dark hair draping around his face and along the line of his back. "Your hair must be the same way, right?"

"Oh." Fafnir dips his chin down to shadow his expression to heavier weight. "Yes, it is."

"Mm," Makoto hums. "That's cool. So you could look however you want?"

"Yes," Fafnir says coolly. "If I wanted." There's a beat; then his head shifts to the side very slightly. Makoto can only tell that he moved at all by the shift of the hair falling in front of his face. "Do *you* want me to look different?"

"Hm?" Makoto blinks. "No, not at all. I was just thinking how much easier it would make cosplay if you ever wanted to give that a try." Fafnir's gaze slides up from the shadows over his expression to brush against Makoto's face like he's looking for proof of the other's sincerity. Makoto meets him directly before he smiles and straightens from where he's tipped in against the counter.

"I like the way you look now, Fafnir-dono," Makoto says, and lifts his hand to reach out over the space between them. It's not far -- the kitchen is small, and they are standing close together to both fit into the square of linoleum at the floor -- but he still moves slowly so his action will be clearly telegraphed. Fafnir is looking right at him, his vivid gaze intent on Makoto's face, but he doesn't move to flinch away as Makoto's hand comes out to touch fingertips gently to the dark of the other's hair. Makoto draws back the fall of Fafnir's hair in front of his face, sweeping it to the side so for a moment he can see the glow of the eye the other usually keeps covered, before he lets the weight slip free of his fingers so he can reach farther and ghost his fingers along the smooth of the longer locks that Fafnir keeps tied to tidiness at the middle of his back. Makoto follows the smooth of the strands over Fafnir's ear and down to the line of his shoulder before he lets his hand fall back to his side and offers a smile in exchange. "You have really nice hair."

Fafnir makes a sound in the back of his throat. Makoto thinks it might be intended to carry the skepticism of a snort, but there's not enough force to bear it forward and it sounds more like an overfast exhale instead. Fafnir turns his head to break from Makoto's steady gaze. "It's been getting dry lately."

"Oh?" Makoto considers the shine of the light off Fafnir's glossy black hair. "Really? It looks the same to me."

Fafnir jerks his head into a shake. "It feels drier," he says, and lifts a hand to pull the greater weight up and over his shoulder. The tie at the end slips free and he lifts his hand to drag his fingers roughly through the length as if to demonstrate. "It catches against itself."

Makoto reaches out to imitate Fafnir's motion in drawing his fingers through the weight of the other's hair. Fafnir's right; Makoto can feel the strands stick at his fingers, clinging as if with static in spite of the smooth sheen they still have under the light. He frowns as he runs his fingers through the length and considers the rough edges at the very end of the strands. "You're right." He lets his

hand fall and Fafnir sweeps his hair back together so he can retie the bow at the end while Makoto considers the problem. He's never thought much about his own hair; he keeps it short enough that it doesn't require styling except for particularly formal events, and it's never had any problems with no more than a regular wash in the shower. It makes sense that Fafnir might need to take greater care with so much more to deal with; and, of course, his experience of dealing with a human body is somewhat limited.

Fafnir pushes his tied-back hair over his shoulder and lifts his head to look back to Makoto. "So what do I do?"

Makoto nods into a decision. "I'll pick up a rinse for long hair later this week," he says. "You should be able to use it in the evenings and leave it in during your bath. That should help reduce some of the dryness and smooth everything out."

Makoto has only a general idea what he's talking about. He's seen some of the products available at the store when buying more shampoo, but he's never had occasion to give them more than a cursory glance. But Fafnir ducks his head to nod as if Makoto is the ultimate keeper of knowledge on the subject, and when he breathes out it's with force enough to sound like a sigh of relief.

"Okay," he says. He turns away towards the other room, only pausing to tilt his head just barely in recognition of Makoto still standing behind him. "Are you ready for that raid now?"

Makoto smiles at Fafnir's shoulders. "You bet," he says, and steps forward to follow Fafnir out of the kitchen. "I'm looking forward to being the one to land the killing blow on the final boss tonight."

Fafnir snorts. "That's unfortunate, since *I* will be the one to finish taking down our opponent."

Makoto raises his eyebrows. "You sure talk big for someone who just got crushed by me."

"You only won because I let you win," Fafnir tells Makoto. "I have no intention of being so generous when the honor of the final blow is at stake."

"Ah," Makoto says. "I see." They continue through the living room towards their paired computer desks; it's just as Fafnir is stepping through the entryway to the second room that Makoto speaks again. "So you *did* take the dishes on purpose."

Fafnir pauses within the shadows of the other room for just a moment before he turns to move towards his computer chair with a little more haste than usual. "Shut up, Takiya."

Makoto laughs. "Yes, Fafnir-dono," he says, and follows Fafnir into the computer room so he can assume his matching position at the other side of the room.

## Misspoken

Makoto takes practicing for the event very seriously. It's a simple call-and-response; he had the replies locked into memory within the first hour after undertaking to learn them. But there's more to an event than mere recitation, and even the enthusiasm that is bound to follow from the setting and the crowd isn't enough for Makoto to rely upon. He has every intention of doing right by himself, and by his own building anticipation of the event itself, and as it draws nearer he finds the best outlet for his own enthusiasm is in practicing the contribution that he and Fafnir will be making.

They're in the middle of it right now. They've been taking it in turns, with Fafnir's monotone recitation prompting Makoto's enthusiastic shouts in response before Makoto takes over to stir Fafnir to the expression of some measure of excitement in himself. He's standing on the couch right now, to better embody the position of the performer on stage, while Fafnir stands before him with a pink headband around his dark hair, a bright *happi* around his shoulders, and an unlit glowstick held up at his side in what Makoto thinks is the precise angle at which he initially placed it.

"Kings!" Makoto shouts.

Fafnir doesn't blink from his level gaze. "Rule."

"Citizens!"

"Suck."

Makoto braces himself for the finale. "Nyami-nyami."

"Rules," Fafnir says, his voice dipping deep on intensity, and he spreads his arms out to either side to crouch with as much deliberation as if he's on a stage himself.

Makoto brings both hands in close in front of his chest so he can throw them up for added enthusiasm. "Kaboom!" Fafnir's shout falls in perfect time with Makoto's, and Makoto watches with deep satisfaction as Fafnir springs up into a perfect, complete spin around the axle of his upraised glowstick. His hair swings around his shoulders in an arc to sweep around his face as he lands as lightly on the balls of his feet as he left them; his outstretched arms seem more a flourish of the action than a necessity for balance.

Makoto lets his arms lower and breathes out in satisfaction. "Nice!" Fafnir straightens from his crouch; his chin comes up, his face turning upward towards the light as he tosses the weight of his hair back from his face with a sense of drama Makoto thinks is improved by the other's justifiable pride in his success. "You're doing great!" Fafnir had been quick to learn the response, faster even than Makoto himself when it comes to the words, but teaching him how to expression a modicum of overt enthusiasm has been a careful process over the last weeks. To see him taking pride in his own success is as great a pleasure to Makoto as hearing the resonant intensity under the other's voice as he recites back the words of the chant they have spent the last days practicing. Makoto looks down from his perch on the couch, beaming with the overwhelming happiness of a friend's success, and when he speaks it's from that same glowing joy, without any pause to restrain the words that tumble over his lips. "You've improved a whole lot, Faf-kun!"

Fafnir's head jerks up, his gaze latches onto Makoto standing over him. With the illumination overhead his red eye seems to glow with the light until his stare becomes as piercing as a weapon



as he glares at Makoto. “Who’s Faf-kun?”

The edge on his tone is clear enough to cut right through the haze of excitement that had Makoto so firmly in its grip. Makoto goes still, the unthinking pleasure of his forward lean off the couch stalled by the abrupt awareness of his own misstep, of pushing too far into an intimacy that has been a process more of inches than steps. “Oh,” he says, and lets his arms come down as he rocks back over the balance of his own feet instead of tipping in close to Fafnir in front of him. “You don’t like it?” He doesn’t wait for an answer when Fafnir’s stare is making his opinion so abundantly clear. He turns aside instead, surrendering to the judgment of the other’s focused gaze as he ducks his head so he can descend from the couch with care in exchange for the enthusiasm that brought him onto it in the first place. “My apologies then.”

Fafnir is standing just in front of the furniture; Makoto tips sideways to move past him with far more care than he would normally show in avoiding brushing against the weight of the other’s sleeve. He feels self-consciousness straining across his shoulders and thrumming down his arms; it takes a force of will to hold to his smile, and even then he only manages it by taking as motivation the need to ease Fafnir’s discomfort with his too-great intimacy. Fafnir’s head turns as Makoto moves past him, his gaze lingering against the other as he goes, but Makoto keeps his own attention turned on the kitchen as he moves past to give Fafnir the space of the living room to himself.

“You can put the event clothes back away for now,” Makoto says as he moves into the kitchen, speaking over his shoulder without turning to look back. “I’ll get dinner started, and we don’t want to have to worry about washing them before the event.” Fafnir doesn’t answer aloud, but when Makoto glances back at him the other is moving to shrug the pink *happi* off this shoulders without hesitating over Makoto’s suggestion. Makoto turns back to what he’s doing, leaving Fafnir without an audience while he lets the passage of time ease some of his excessive friendliness.

He hadn’t meant to overstep. Makoto has been careful as the days pass to tread lightly with Fafnir, to offer support without insisting on it, to allow the other space to grow comfortable with the differences of the life he is exploring without feeling himself stifled by the demands of the person who is at least his roommate and, Makoto hopes, increasingly a friend. But Fafnir is restrained, subtle in his expression and reserved with his enthusiasm, and Makoto has had to learn how to read the suggestions of emotion that Fafnir presents with the set of his mouth, or the dark of his gaze, or the lingering shadow of his presence. He thought he had become quite skilled at it; he hasn’t run up against any obvious miscommunication thus far, anyway. He must have made a mistake somewhere along the way, though, perhaps several, to lead him into such overenthusiasm to merit Fafnir actively balking from the intimacy. It’s not as if he can take it back now, anyway; the best he can do is to apologize and let it go, and perhaps to keep a tighter rein on the warmth that presses at his chest and urges him on to an expression of the affection that had seemed to Makoto to be carried so clearly in all their interactions.

Makoto retrieves the supplies for dinner while Fafnir is taking off the clothes for the event and folding them for storage until the next evening. The meal is simple, nothing like the gourmet undertakings that Tohrû puts together for Kobayashi on a daily basis, but Makoto is grateful just for the ease that enables him to lean into what has become a near-nightly routine as a means of distracting himself from the unpleasant awareness of his misstep. He peels open the wrap on the packages and puts one of them into the microwave to heat, while in the other room Fafnir returns from putting the clothes away and assumes his usual position at the end of the couch, sitting precisely upright and gazing forward at the television screen. Makoto half-expects him to start up a game, just to pass the few minutes before dinner is ready, but Fafnir hasn’t make any action to reach for the controller or the remote when Makoto looks back a minute later. He’s just sitting still, staring at the far side of the room like he’s entirely engrossed in the process of waiting. Makoto

watches him for a moment, wondering at what could possibly be flickering through the other's head, and then he turns aside to open the fridge so he can speak without pinning the other beneath the weight of his gaze.

"So," he says as he pulls another container out, speaking as lightly as he can in spite of his lingering self-consciousness. "Now you're all set for the call and response part of tomorrow's event!"

Makoto wonders if Fafnir will respond at all, if he won't leave the chill of silence to further frost the uncomfortable tension between them; but his answer comes immediately, and with no trace of the cold rejection that Makoto had been afraid of. "And I can obtain a limited edition item at that event, right?"

"That's right." The microwave beeps from behind Makoto and he turns to check on it with significantly more ease in his movement than he had even a moment before. He tips his head to glance at Fafnir on the couch. The other is watching him, his head turned and his expression neutral but focused as he gazes at Makoto. Makoto offers him a smile before looking back to the microwave. "Today we're having curry."

"Mild?" Fafnir asks.

"That's right." Makoto serves the rice out onto a pair of plates, following it with a heaping serving of curry alongside each before he collects the dishes to bring them out to the living room. Fafnir is still watching him without any indication of looking aside; he reaches out to take one of the plates from Makoto as the other approaches. Makoto smiles and nods gratitude. "Thanks." He steps in to sit at the other side of the couch, careful to leave enough space for Fafnir to draw away in case he wants to, but if Fafnir notices this effort he fails to make any use of it. He just turns in over his plate, settling himself on the couch alongside Makoto with apparent comfort, and even when his knee rocks out to bump against Makoto's he doesn't pull away. Makoto glances at Fafnir alongside him, taking note of the ease in the other's shoulders and the calm in his expression, before he smiles relief and turns himself to the appreciation of his own meal.

Whatever mistake he may have made, it's a comfort to know that it's forgotten, or at least forgiven. So long as he can keep Fafnir's company, Makoto doesn't much mind which one it is.

## Confirmation

The rest of the evening goes more smoothly. Makoto does his best to return to normal as quickly as he can, to give the impression of comfortable cheer however self-conscious he may feel over his misstep, and by the time Fafnir emerges from his lingering soak in the bathroom Makoto feels almost himself again as he glances back to offer the other a smile before turning his attention back to the game on which he's working. They spend another few hours coding, and play-testing, and just playing with no greater intent than sheer enjoyment, until Makoto's exhaustion gets the better of him and he has to admit his nightly defeat to the specter of sleep looming over him. He leaves Fafnir in the glow of his own computer screen, clicking through actions on the screen with the focus that never seems to waver to anything as mundane as sleep, while he takes himself into the bathroom so he can brush his teeth and change for the night.

It's been a good night, Makoto reflects as he stares unseeing at his familiar reflection and brushes his teeth with all the unthinking habit of ritual. It's always a pleasure to have an evening of comfort after a long day of work, and there's the event coming up to look forward to as well. Fafnir's rejection of Makoto's attempted nickname is hardly something to dwell over; it's a minor misjudgment on Makoto's part, either of the closeness of their friendship or even just of Fafnir's willingness to give way to human endearment, and that shouldn't come as much of a surprise. It's easy for Makoto to forget what Fafnir really is when they are living in such peaceful domesticity; but of course he is a dragon, after all, a gigantic magical creature only temporarily taking on the human form with which Makoto has become so familiar. It's only natural that he would balk at some human conventions; Makoto counts himself lucky that Fafnir has already been so amenable to their shared interest in video games and that his tastes in food run down such direct paths. Makoto simply leaned too far into the humanity that Fafnir wears with such ease; and even then there seems to be no lasting harm, no indication of Fafnir retreating from any part of the routine that has become so comfortably regular for them both. Makoto can keep what they have without fear, can delay for another length of time before he resumes his efforts to bear them towards the affection he finds himself reaching for at every opportunity, and in the meantime he keeps all the pleasure and comfortable warmth that he has found in Fafnir as a roommate.

Makoto leans in over the sink as he finishes brushing his teeth so he can spit and cup water to rinse his mouth of toothpaste. The brush goes back in the cup where he found it, alongside the red one he bought for Fafnir the first day after the other moved in. Makoto considers it for a moment, his attention held by the color and his own wandering thoughts as he realizes he doesn't even know if Fafnir needs to brush his teeth at all. His clothes aren't really clothes, after all, they don't require any of the washing to which Makoto subjects his own shirts and pants; who knows if dragons need to brush their teeth? They must not need to in their dragon form, anyway; the thought makes Makoto smile in spite of himself, thinking of a brush large enough to deal with the size of the mouth involved. Fafnir has never commented on the subject, any more than he's spoken to the relative necessity of bathing. Maybe shifting his transformation and lingering in the steam of a hot bath with his hair wet around him is an indulgence for him.

The thought draws Makoto's gaze around to the tiled edge of the bath, drained now after their respective turns soaking. There's the regular containers there, of course, Makoto's usual shampoo and the body wash they both share, but there's a third bottle alongside the first two, set within easy reach of the showerhead where someone could find it even with wet hair hanging around their shoulders. Makoto gazes at the conditioner for a long minute; then he smiles, and turns away so he can change into the softer shorts and thin shirt he wears to sleep in.

Fafnir is still at his computer when Makoto emerges. He doesn't look up as Makoto come through

the entrance to drag out the futon from where he tucked it away in the corner this morning, but even his inattention is a kind of a compliment, speaking as it does to his comfort with Makoto's presence. Makoto pulls the futon free and spreads it out to layer across the floor between his own computer desk and Fafnir's, and it's while he's kneeling at the far end to smooth the blanket down over the mattress that he speaks as casually as he can manage. "Did you try using the conditioner on your hair, Fafnir-dono?"

The pace of Fafnir's clicking doesn't pause for this interruption. "Mm."

Makoto rocks back onto his heels to reach for his pillow so he can fluff it between his hands before tossing it to the far end of the futon. "Did it help at all?"

Fafnir nods. "Yes." There's a breath of hesitation as the rhythm of his gameplay stutters; then he speaks again, a little more loudly than before. "Does it look better?"

Makoto lifts his gaze to the dark of Fafnir's hair. The room is dimly lit, filled with shades of blue and gray; Makoto can't make out the individual strands, can see nothing more distinct than the curtain of shadow spilling over Fafnir's shoulders before drawing together into the low ponytail in which Fafnir habitually keeps it. It looks pristine, sleek and so elegant it's hard to believe it's not the nighttime darkness it appears to be. Makoto stares for a moment, his gaze sliding along the smooth weight, before he answers.

"It does," he says, and hesitates for a moment. He's already pushed too far once tonight, he doesn't want to intrude onto Fafnir's comfort twice in the same day; but the moment is heavy with possibility, and Makoto can't bear the thought of letting it slip past unacknowledged. He presses his lips together to steady himself, to draw a breath while Fafnir is turned away, and when he speaks his voice is pitched to deliberate ease. "Can I try touching it?"

Fafnir shifts, his head tipping as if to look over his shoulder, but he doesn't complete the motion to give Makoto any more than the barest glimpse of his features in profile. There's a heartbeat of a pause, not even enough time for Makoto's adrenaline to darken into regret, before Fafnir says "Sure." His tone is flat, absent any kind of emotional tell, but he's speaking clearly enough that Makoto doesn't have to struggle to hear him, and as Makoto slides forward to kneel at the futon so he can reach out Fafnir turns back to the computer so he can resume playing his game. There's the *click* of the mouse under his direction, the soft murmur of sound effects crackling from the speakers, and Makoto reaches out to smooth his fingers across the fall of Fafnir's tied-back hair.

It's as smooth as it looks. The locks are silky under his touch, soft enough to suit the nighttime shadows they have collected; Makoto can sink his fingers into Fafnir's hair without resistance, could catch the weight of it back in his hold and lift it free of the other's shoulders if he wanted. He does want to -- Makoto wants to unfasten the tie on Fafnir's ponytail to spill the other's hair loose around his shoulders, wants to collect the dark locks into the grip of his hands and draw them back from the handsome lines of the other's face -- but Makoto is too self-aware to give in to an indulgence beyond what Fafnir is already offering him. He contents himself instead with a lingering touch, smoothing over the strands in pursuit of the answer he could guess at just from sight, before he draws his hand away and tips back over his heels.

"It feels better too," he says, as easily as he can give the words. "I'm glad that worked." He turns aside from Fafnir so he can occupy himself with his futon again instead of staring at the back of the other's head. "Let me know when you start to run low and I'll pick up another bottle for you."

"Hm." Fafnir's acknowledgment is so soft that Makoto wonders if the other has lost himself to the pattern of his game, if he has already moved on from the conversation entirely. Makoto is ready to consider it done, to leave Fafnir to his entertainment while he finishes preparing for bed himself,

but then Fafnir takes a breath and Makoto is looking up in anticipation even before the other speaks.

“Thank you,” Fafnir says. There’s a pause made breathless by the break in the sound of his clicking. “Takiya.” The tapping resumes, the sound effects from the game redouble, and Makoto is left to gaze at the back of Fafnir’s shoulders with no audience for himself at all. He stares for a long minute, watching the other’s shoulders and the curtain of his hair; and then he turns away again, to finish preparing his futon with a smile lingering unseen at his lips.

## Acquired

Makoto wakes to the tapping of Fafnir's keyboard. It's a comfortable sound; Makoto long since grew accustomed to the soft noise of Fafnir's gameplay, until it serves as well as a lullaby might someone else. The faint glow of the computer screen is no more disruptive to his sleep than the sound of Fafnir's minimal motions are, and there is a familiar pleasure to be had in the reassurance of the other's presence. The first week after Fafnir moved in Makoto found himself stirring awake in the middle of the night, feeling the vague alarm that comes with the disorientation of sleep; the proof of his companion's continued presence had been enough to soothe his unformed fears and ease him back into the sleep from which he had briefly detoured. By now Makoto's half-formed fears that Fafnir will vanish in the night have evaporated, and he sleeps soundly through what hours of rest he needs to claim for himself before waking with the easy certainty that Fafnir has not so much as stirred from his position alongside Makoto the whole of the night. Makoto lies in bed for a moment, letting his body adjust to the idea of waking as Fafnir clicks and taps at the computer, before he braces a hand at the futon and pushes himself to sit up behind the other.

"Fafnir-dono, good morning." His voice is raspy with the same sleep that weights his lids and strains to a yawn in his chest, but Fafnir doesn't comment. Fafnir doesn't even turn around to acknowledge Makoto's rising; by all reasonable standards, he appears to be so entirely absorbed that he might not even notice the movement of his roommate rising behind him.

Makoto doesn't push for more direct recognition. One of the greatest advantages to having Fafnir as a roommate is his willingness to leave understood conversations entirely unvoiced, which saves Makoto from the need to muster true coherency first thing in the morning. He can get to his feet without feeling self-conscious about his rumpled clothes or his tousled hair and stumble out of the computer room without worrying that Fafnir will be offended by his disregard. There's an understanding there, felt if never properly spoken, and if Makoto doesn't mind Fafnir playing games straight through the night Fafnir doesn't seem to be bothered by the human weakness that pulls Makoto into the necessity of unconsciousness for several hours a day. Makoto hopes that Fafnir is as unruffled by Makoto's needs as Makoto is by Fafnir's, but he appreciates the other's tolerance, however much or little warmth may come with it.

Makoto takes his time in the bathroom. He doesn't have time for a long soak in the mornings, though the idea is often tempting and sometimes an indulgence allowed by the weekend or time off. This morning he contents himself with wetting his hair from the tangled halo it has made around his head and brushing his teeth to wash away the lingering dregs of sleep on his tongue. His clothes are waiting, the same short-sleeved shirt and slacks that he wears in to work now that the heat demands some concession to formality, and by the time he's emerged from the bathroom he looks like the professional he will be spending the day as rather than the dedicated gamer he is in truth.

Fafnir has moved away from his computer game while Makoto was in the bathroom. He's on the couch when Makoto emerges, tipped in over his knees and with one of their controllers braced between both hands as he fixes his gaze on the television screen in front of him. There is more sound, too, now that Makoto's rising has removed the need for headphones; Makoto recognizes the background sound effects from the screen even before he's come around to catch a glimpse at the action taking place under the direction of Fafnir's controller.

"Morning," he offers, repeating his earlier greeting with somewhat greater clarity on his voice. "Are you ready for breakfast soon?" Fafnir ducks his head into a nod without looking up from the television and Makoto smiles as he pulls the bathroom door shut behind him. "Alright. I'll roll up

the futon and get started on it.”

Makoto feels more alert by the time he’s folded the futon over on itself and pushed it away to the corner of the room where it spends the day while he is at work and Fafnir is logging an inhuman number of hours on his collection of games. Fafnir remains fixed on the game in front of him as Makoto comes back out to head for the kitchen; his gaze doesn’t flicker as Makoto glances at him in passing. He looks entirely professional, with the crisp edges and clean lines of his butler uniform more suitable for a Western mansion than the space of Makoto’s own one-bedroom apartment. There is no reason he should fit so well amidst the gaming paraphernalia and limited edition merchandise that Makoto has collected for himself; but Makoto thinks he looks the more comfortable for the setting, as if some of the stiffness inherent to his uniform has eased into as much relaxation as Makoto finds in the t-shirts he changes into upon his return home. Makoto considers Fafnir for a moment, appreciating the juxtaposition of the setting and the occupant; and then Fafnir speaks without looking up to meet Makoto’s gaze. “Are we having breakfast?”

“Oh,” Makoto says, and comes back to himself at once. “I’ll start on it.” And he leaves Fafnir to the game while he retreats to the tiny space of the kitchen to set about producing something for them both to eat.

“I’m looking forward to tonight,” he says as he pulls open the door of the fridge so he can take stock of what supplies they have available. “The event doesn’t start until late but we’ll have a lot to do to get ready before we head over there.”

Fafnir huffs a sound of acknowledgment. “When will we leave?”

“As soon as I’m back and changed.” Makoto considers the options for breakfast, the sweet curry that has become routine, the possibility of a more involved meal that he doesn’t really have the time to make, and decides to split the difference between novelty and speed before reaching for the container of natto at the back corner of the fridge. “I want to get out to do a little shopping before the event so we can get something to eat while we’re out. You don’t mind going with me, do you?”

Fafnir taps against the controller buttons to execute a sequence that illuminates the screen with the announcement of a combo attack. “Are you going to the game store?”

“That’s right.” Makoto goes back into the fridge for some of the leftover rice from their previous night’s meal so he can start it heating before turning his attention back to the container of natto. “There’s a new game out for one of my favorite series. I want to pick up my advance copy before they release it for general purchase.”

“Sure.” Fafnir works through another complicated maneuver without turning aside from the screen. “It’s supposed to be rainy again today.”

“I’ll take an umbrella to work,” Makoto promises, and turns back so he can locate a pair of chopsticks and set to work stirring the natto. Behind him the microwave beeps and he turns to open the door so he can retrieve the steaming rice.

“What’s for breakfast?” Fafnir asks from the couch.

Makoto sets the rice on the counter and turns back to his efforts. “This morning we have natto and rice.”

“Mild?”

“This doesn’t work that way.” Makoto goes on stirring without looking up. In the living room the

sound of the game continues unabated; it's only as Makoto is serving the natto out over bowls of rice that Fafnir pauses his game so he can set his controller down. He accepts the bowl Makoto offers him without protest and holds it on his lap while Makoto sits at the couch alongside him.

*"Itadakimasu,"* Makoto says, with the accompaniment of Fafnir's usual complete silence, and reaches for his chopsticks to gather a bite of the meal before him. He doesn't turn his head to look at Fafnir next to him, but he can feel the focus of the other's attention holding to him as he collects the natto and rice together so he can bring them to his mouth. It's only after Makoto has taken a bite that Fafnir moves to pick up his own chopsticks, and even when Makoto glances back Fafnir is stalled frowning at his bowl.

"You don't have to eat it if you don't want to," Makoto says. Fafnir looks sideways at him but doesn't speak, even when Makoto offers a smile. "There's still another few packets of curry, if you'd like those instead." Fafnir huffs a breath that carries skepticism, if not much else that Makoto can identify, and then he's turning back to his bowl so he can take a bite at once. Makoto watches his face, looking for some indication of the other's reaction from the fixed focus in his eyes and the set of his mouth as he chews.

"It's a strong flavor," Makoto says. "They say it's an acquired taste. If you don't like it I'll make something else for you."

"No," Fafnir says. "It's fine." His tone is so flat it's hard to gauge his sincerity, but he takes another bite without hesitating over it this time, and after a moment Makoto turns back to his own breakfast. They eat in the peace that has become as much a staple of their meals as curry, and if Fafnir has any complaints he doesn't voice them.

Makoto finishes first. He sets his chopsticks across the top of his bowl and ducks his head over the conclusion of his meal before looking to see Fafnir's status. He's expecting slow progress, if Fafnir has continued at all, but as he turns his head Fafnir is finishing the last bite of the meal before setting his own chopsticks down atop a bowl as empty as Makoto's own. Makoto opens his eyes wide with surprise. "You finished."

"Hm?" Fafnir lifts his head quickly enough that his hair slides forward off his shoulder with the motion. "Yes. It was good."

"You really did like it," Makoto says. "I wasn't sure you would."

Fafnir frowns. "It wasn't spicy," he says, as if that's answer enough, and he picks his bowl up to hand it to Makoto. "We can have that again."

Makoto accepts the bowl with a smile. "Alright," he says. "I'll keep it in mind." He gets to his feet before glancing back to Fafnir sitting next to him. "Thanks, Fafnir-dono." Fafnir looks up at him for a moment, meeting Makoto's smile with his usual stoic stare before he huffs a breath and turns away to pick up the controller again. Makoto turns to take the dishes back to the kitchen so he can wash them and set them out to dry before collecting his umbrella and braving the storm on his way in to the office.

The weather is far from welcoming, and Makoto comes in to find a new project has been reassigned to him at the last minute to deal with, but even when he locks his computer for his lunch break he's still smiling.



## Mutual

Makoto is having a wonderful day. His conversation with Fafnir over breakfast this morning was a pleasant one, more than sufficient to ease whatever lingering stress he might have over his misstep towards too-much familiarity the night before, and enthusiasm for the event later in the evening proved more than sufficient to carry him right through the relative stress that his daily work offers. His projects are clear enough, in spite of their expansive scale, and even with an adjusted deadline he has enough time to work on them that he doesn't have to worry about staying late this particular night. He shuts off his computer at the end of his day, almost an hour before Kobayashi will stretch and begin the process of concluding her own work, and he leaves to take the train home with her friendly farewell to see him off.

Fafnir is waiting for him. Usually Makoto comes home to find Fafnir in the shadows of the computer room, entirely absorbed in the undertaking to which he has devoted so much of his time; today there is a dark figure sitting upright on the couch when Makoto comes in the door, and even if he's facing the television there's no game flickering over it. Fafnir turns his head as Makoto comes in the doorway, meeting the other's habitual "I'm home," with a level stare, and Makoto smiles as he closes his umbrella and sets it alongside the door to await his return. "Just give me a minute to get changed and we can go." Fafnir inclines his head into a nod, as regal as if he is a king on a throne, and Makoto slides free of his shoes so he can collect his change of clothes and set about transforming himself from his professional self into his casual one.

It only takes a few minutes, although Makoto's rising enthusiasm makes every second feel ten times as long as it really is. He's ready to apologize for the delay when he steps out of the bathroom in the jeans and t-shirt into which he's changed, but Fafnir doesn't give him a chance for such. He's on his feet, now, standing by the edge of the entryway with the dark umbrella Makoto bought for him two weeks ago in his hand, radiating as much impatience as someone can with their expression held into fixed lines of absolute composure.

"Your bag is over there," Fafnir says as soon as Makoto steps out of the bathroom. Makoto looks down to find his backpack already packed and sitting at the floor alongside the door to the bathroom; he picks it up to carry with him as he hangs up his work clothes before returning back across the room with his attention on the contents of the bag before him. "It has everything in it already."

Makoto can see the pink of the *happi* they will be wearing for the event at the top of the bag, covering whatever else is packed within. "Did you get the glowsticks?"

Fafnir's huff of an exhale conveys all the disdain he would feel for someone who would forget something so essential. "Of course."

"The autograph pads?"

"In the outside pocket."

Makoto looks up from the bag. "The tickets?" Fafnir reaches into the pocket of his coat to produce the pair of tickets, fanned out so Makoto can see them both from across the distance of the living room. Makoto runs through his own mental checklist of items to collect, finds everything already crossed off, and lets his focus give way to a beaming smile at Fafnir.

"Thanks," he says, and crosses the living room so he can put his shoes back on from where he set them at the edge of the entryway. "You really saved me some time."

Fafnir snorts by way of responding to this, but when Makoto glances back at him the other is gazing at the door, his mouth so deliberately set it just seems to draw more attention to the enthusiasm all but humming across the span of his shoulders. Makoto feels a smile fighting for freedom across his mouth and ducks his head down so he can indulge in the happiness of it without embarrassing Fafnir waiting for him at the side of the entryway. He gets his shoes on, and pulls his backpack up over his shoulders, and as he reaches for his dripping umbrella Fafnir shuts off the main light for the apartment. Makoto pulls open the apartment door, Fafnir follows him out into the rain that has been falling steadily for the whole of the day, and they're on their way at last.

It's not a great distance. They could catch the train to the event directly, if they wanted to, but Makoto needs to pick up his game on the way, and Fafnir offers no protest at all to the prospect of taking a more meandering route to their destination via the shopping district and the game stores there. Apparently being on their way is enough to ease whatever tension of anticipation held Fafnir so entirely in its grip; when Makoto looks at the figure pacing beside him Fafnir is gazing straight ahead, his attention turned on the street before them with as much focus as he usually brings to video games or his computer monitor. He looks like he's wrapped himself in the space of his own thoughts, like he's somewhere completely different than walking along the wet street at Makoto's side. Makoto watches him for a minute, lingering in the satisfaction of gazing at Fafnir while the other's attention is so entirely elsewhere, before he turns his head to watch where they're going and speaks. "I'm thinking about going to the game store first, if you're not too hungry yet. If we go now we should be able to beat the evening rush and be on our way sooner."

Fafnir hums. "Are you shopping?"

Makoto shakes his head. "I'm just picking up that preorder," he says. "I'd like to take the time to go in and browse properly with you, but we should save that for a weekend when we have the time to devote to it. It's not as much fun to shop when you're on a time limit."

Fafnir is quiet for a minute. "Can we go next week?"

"Sure." Makoto tips his head to smile at Fafnir, who glances at him without turning his head to look. "Maybe the rain will have cleared off a little by then too." Fafnir snorts skepticism at this and Makoto laughs before turning back to continue down the sidewalk in companionable silence. They continue on for another ten minutes, with just the peace of the rain smacking against their umbrellas, before the overhang in front of the shop comes into view and Makoto can lift a hand to gesture towards it.

"It's right over there," he says, and looks to Fafnir alongside him. "Do you want to come inside with me?"

Fafnir shakes his head. "Next week is fine." He tips his umbrella back to frown at the overhang. "I'll wait out here for you."

"Alright." The patter against their umbrellas softens as they step under the shop awning. There are a few other customers lingering in the relative comfort of the shelter; Makoto is careful in collapsing his umbrella to keep from spraying them with water droplets at the action. "I'll be right back, Fafnir-dono."

Fafnir ducks his head into a nod and collapses his own umbrella before turning to stand with his back to the advertisements in the window so he can gaze straight ahead of him into the grey drizzle that has held the city for the last days. Makoto smiles, tickled in spite of himself by the appearance they present of a valet and an utterly ordinary young man, before he turns to step through the doors of the store so he can pick up the game waiting for him.

It's a quick process. All Makoto really has to do is take up his position in line and wait until the next available cashier calls him up; the line is far shorter than it often becomes on the weekends or later in the day, and with Fafnir waiting for him he's glad for it. But he finds his gaze sliding to the papered-over windows even as he's waiting in line, looking to ground itself against the shadowy figure just visible in silhouette against the far side of the glass. Fafnir doesn't move the whole time that Makoto is waiting; he just goes on standing right where he set himself, with his back facing the window and his head lifted to fix his gaze out onto the street before him. Makoto wonders if he feels the delay, if he's as anxious to continue on to their destination as he seemed in the apartment; maybe he's lost in a daydream about the event still to come, or is reviewing the call-and-response they have both learned so well they can recite it back at the least cue from the other. That urges Makoto's attention back to excitement, and the rising enthusiasm for their plans for the evening, until he's smiling by the time he steps up to the counter to ask for the preorder under *Takiya Makoto*. He's sure of having a good time at the event, was certain of that as soon as he procured tickets for himself, and the pleasure of sharing it with Fafnir just makes his anticipation all the keener. He's beaming as he takes his bag from the cashier and gives them the most genuine thanks he has ever offered, and then he's returning to the front of the store so he can emerge through the sliding doors and rejoin his patient shadow against the glass.

"Sorry for the wait," he says. Fafnir looks over at him, his attention dropping to the bag in Makoto's hand, and Makoto turns to smile out into the falling rain, feeling happiness warm enough in his chest to more than make up for the gray of the weather around them. Enthusiasm presses at his lips, urging him into speech, and when he lets a breath go the words come with all the unthought ease of sincerity. "I can't wait for the event, Faf-ku--" and he realizes his mistake at the same time he feels the nickname against his lips and breaks it off half-formed. "Ah!"

It's another misstep. Makoto's skin goes cold with self-awareness of his own mistake, his heart sinking from the heights to which anticipation raised it. It's hardly been a day, not even a full span of hours, and he's already slipped from his determination to hold himself to greater restraint. For a moment Makoto can't stand to lift his head, can't bear the thought of looking up to see the expression on Fafnir's face. He remembers too well the angle of the other's head, the focus in his visible eye as he frowned at Makoto's presumption the night before, and in the first realization of his mistake he can't make himself face the repercussions of it.

"I don't mind."

It takes Makoto a moment to place the other's voice. He knows what Fafnir sounds like, of course, has more than enough experience to make the other's flat tone perfectly familiar to him; but Fafnir is speaking more loudly than he usually does, and with none of the rough irritation that usually accompanies those rare occasions when he increases his volume to clarity. The words are clear, carefully enunciated and perfectly unmistakable, so when Makoto says "Huh?" as he looks to Fafnir at his side it comes from his own confusion more than the other's incoherence.

Fafnir doesn't turn to look at Makoto. His head is ducked down, his attention apparently fixed on the umbrella he is opening to lift in front of him; when he answers it is in that same clear tone, so Makoto can hear his words even over the sound of the rain hitting the awning overhead. "You're a hit."

Makoto loses all his hold on his breath. His mind is blank, all thoughts of his new game and the upcoming event and even the steady drip of the rain swept entirely from his thoughts as he stares at Fafnir stepping forward and into the rain in front of him. His heart is thudding at what feels like a great distance away; when he speaks the sound comes with no thought at all, as he reaches out to test a barrier that has vanished like it was never there, as maybe it really never was at all. "Faf..."

Fafnir moves out from under the overhang of the shopfront. "Let's hurry." His tone is still clear, but more than the words it's his motion away that jolts Makoto out of his brief daze of confusion and back into action.

"Oh," he says, and looks down so he can fumble his own umbrella open and lift it for protection from the downpour. "Yes!" He's a few steps behind Fafnir as he stumbles out onto the sidewalk but Fafnir is moving slowly and it's easy for Makoto to catch up to him. They fall into pace alongside each other, so near that the edges of their umbrellas brush together, close enough that Makoto could bump his elbow against Fafnir's if he lifted his arm to try. Makoto's heart is racing, catching up on the surge of adrenaline that followed that first rush of shock, but when he looks at Fafnir next to him the other looks perfectly calm as he gazes straight ahead into the rain falling around them. Makoto wonders for a moment if he misunderstood the weight of Fafnir's statement, if some portion of that communication was lost in translation as well; and then his shoulder bumps against Fafnir's arm, and he feels the tension straining all through the other's body. Makoto looks to the grip of Fafnir's hold on the handle of his umbrella, down to the deliberate grace of his stride, back to the intent forward attention of his visible eye; and then he looks out at the street again, and breathes out softly so his sigh of understanding won't be audible.

They continue in quiet for another few steps; then Makoto draws an inhale so he can speak with deliberate nonchalance, and without looking at Fafnir next to him. "We should have over an hour for dinner," he says. "Does anything sound good to you, Faf-kun?"

Fafnir shrugs. "We can go wherever you want."

Makoto hums. "Okay," he says. "I'll take you out for ramen, then. There's a place just a few blocks away where we can get out of the rain until the event starts. They've got the best broth in the city."

"Mm," Fafnir hums. "Mild?"

Makoto smiles. "Of course," he says, and looks back to Fafnir next to him. "I promise you'll like it." Fafnir's gaze slides sideways, drifting to skim over Makoto's face. His expression doesn't shift, his mouth doesn't move to echo Makoto's smile, but when he looks away Makoto imagines he can see the faintest suggestion of color under the other's ivory-pale skin, touching his cheekbones to a flush almost invisible in the shadows of the day. Makoto goes on watching him for another moment, just to be sure of what he's seeing, before he looks away again to go on smiling as they walk through the rain side-by-side.

## Enthusiasm

Makoto has no idea what time it is when he and Fafnir ride the crush of the crowd out of the doors of the event venue. The last time he checked was when they were in line in front of the entrance, waiting for the doors to open to grant them access along with the rush of the rest of the fans, and once they were within the shadows Makoto lost all track of time and all focus on anything outside of the joy of the immediate present. His attention was fixed on the glow illuminating the stage, and the music and cheering ringing in his ears; occasionally he'd look alongside him, to gauge Fafnir's enjoyment of the same, but Fafnir always had his head lifted and face turned up into the same neon light playing across Makoto's. He's not as effusive as some of the people forming the crowd around them, which is to say he neither cries nor screams his enthusiasm, but he swings his glowstick with as much intensity as everyone else, and when the time comes for the call-and-response portion he moves in perfect sync with Makoto alongside him. Makoto is left beaming, thrilled in the moment and delighted by Fafnir's company for it, and his smile lingers as they emerge from the trailing ends of the crowd to begin the walk home in the blissful exhaustion that always settles in at the conclusion of an event.

"That was incredible," Makoto sighs as they break away from the last of their fellow fans to continue down the sidewalk together. There are a few restaurants still open and the occasional spill of sound or laughter from a door left open to entice late-night customers within, but for the most part they have the street to themselves, and Makoto hardly notices the distractions around them for the haze that has settled itself over his own mind. "I knew it was going to be great, but they really outdid themselves with the show this time." He lets a breath of complete satisfaction go before he tips his head to turn his lingering smile on Fafnir next to him. "Did you have a good time, Faf-kun?"

Fafnir is still wearing his pink *happi* loose over the restrained black of his butler uniform. His expression is perfectly composed, his mouth flat with no trace of the smile curving across Makoto's lips, but his hand is still lifted up in front of his shoulder to bear the weight of the glowstick he was wielding during the event, although the electric glow has been switched off to dampen the illumination. He ducks his head without looking away from the focus he's giving to the sidewalk in front of him. "Mm."

"I'm so glad," Makoto sighs. He lifts his head to look up at the night sky, where he can see a few flickering stars from between the gaps in the somewhat-cleared clouds. "Lucky that the rain stopped while we were inside." Fafnir lifts his chin to follow Makoto's upward gaze. "Though it's supposed to start back up again tonight."

"Hmph." Fafnir lowers his head. "That's fine."

"You're right," Makoto agrees. "It's more fun to play games when it's raining outside anyway, don't you think?" He's not really expecting an answer and Fafnir doesn't provide one; they just continue walking in comfortable silence down the street, with no more than the sound of their footsteps against the sidewalk to accompany them. Makoto's ears are ringing, aching faintly with the weight of the sound that has been pressing in on him for the last hours, and his throat is raw from the shouting he hardly remembers doing, but even with the lingering physical effects of overexertion he can't get himself to stop smiling and isn't really trying. Some part of his attention is still in the roar of the event, replaying the crescendo of music and the wave of enthusiasm that made he and Fafnir just a portion of the far larger crowd around them, and what is left for the present is humming with the deep comfort of complete satisfaction, of having company for his late-night walk home, of sharing the joy of this experience with the dark-clad figure alongside him.

Makoto draws a breath into his lungs and sighs it out around the smile lingering at his face. "I'm so glad I have tomorrow off work after this."

Fafnir shifts alongside him, though he doesn't lower his upraised glowstick. "We'll play that new game."

His tone doesn't quite make it to the upswing of a question, but Makoto nods in agreement all the same. "First thing," he says, before his words are caught by a yawn huge enough to strain at his chest and crack at his jaw. "As soon as I'm up. We can start before breakfast, even."

Fafnir continues to pace forward at Makoto's side for another few strides before he speaks. "Do we need to wait until tomorrow?"

Makoto looks up. Fafnir's not looking at him; he has his usual stoic expression in place, his gaze fixed ahead of him without glancing to meet Makoto's stare. But he's gripping his glowstick tight, and the open front of his *happi* is fluttering around him to brush against the sleeve of Makoto's own, and even in the dark Makoto can see the glitter of enthusiasm in Fafnir's single uncovered eye. He considers his own exhaustion, the ache in his legs and the weight in his arms and the dry roughness in his throat; and then he thinks of the bag at his side, weighed down with the case for the game he's been carrying with him since their visit to the store this afternoon, and the tension of hope building itself along Fafnir's shoulders and in the crisp of his stride forward, and he smiles with the rush of enthusiasm that breaks over him to wash his exhaustion aside, or at least out of importance.

"Nope," he says, and shakes his head. "We can start playing tonight, if you want to." Fafnir's gaze slides to meet Makoto's and Makoto beams back at him. "You'd better be prepared to give it your best as soon as we get home, Faf-kun."

Fafnir snorts. "Of course," he says, and tosses his head so his hair sweeps back from his face in a curtain of shadow. It's a graceful motion; Makoto thinks it might be even more assisted than undermined by the bright pink layered over Fafnir's usual coat. "I never bring anything less to competition."

"That's the spirit," Makoto says. "Let's find out how far your natural talent takes you in the face of my experience." Fafnir scoffs at this but doesn't put words to his skepticism, and Makoto lets the easy teasing go in favor of turning his attention towards crossing the distance between them and the apartment the more quickly. He would have thought he was too tired to walk at anything faster than the sedate pace they were managing; but when Fafnir's stride lengthens Makoto matches him without a struggle, and they're almost jogging by the time they return home. Makoto is out of breath and flushed with the exertion, while Fafnir looks as entirely cool as ever, but Fafnir's the first one through the door, and by the time Makoto has his shoes off Fafnir has the TV turned on and both controllers set out in easy range of the couch.

"Hurry up," he calls as Makoto slides his shoes to the side of the entryway. "Do you want to be player one?"

Makoto smiles and reaches for the game in the bag he set against the wall by the door. "I don't care either way," he says, and leaves the bag where it lies so he can pad forward to join Fafnir on the couch. "Whatever you want is fine." Fafnir tosses his hair back as Makoto sits on the couch next to him and offers the second controller; Makoto takes it to set at his far side before they both lean close together over the case as Makoto slides a fingernail under the plastic wrap around it to peel it open and free the cartridge inside.

It's late into the night, and Makoto has had a long day since he got up this morning, but with

Fafnir's shoulder bumping close against the shift of his own, Makoto has far more appealing pursuits than sleep.

## Respite

Makoto pushes back from his computer desk with a sigh that seems to come more from the knotted ache of too-tense muscles finally relaxing than from his conscious mind. His chair squeaks when he rocks back against it, and the more loudly when he lifts his arms over his head to stretch out some of the tension in his shoulders; the soft sound seems very loud in the silence that has fallen with the end to the typing he's been doing for the last unmeasured span of time.

"There," he says as he lets his arms fall to drape heavy past the support of the chair beneath him. "That's done."

"Did you finish?"

Makoto turns his head to look towards the sound of the voice. Fafnir is in the brighter light of the living room, where he's all but taken up residence for the last two days; his own shoulders remain curved in over the desk at which he's sitting, currently engrossed in the complexities of inking an illustration that covers the greater part of the page before him. He doesn't look up as he speaks; Makoto can barely see the glint of light off the tiny glasses the other wears for how intent his position over the desk is.

Fafnir's position is no kind of a deterrent to Makoto, any more than the flat of his tone is indicative of actual disinterest. Makoto has been to enough Comikets to recognize the strain of anxious preparation in someone else, and he's been too involved in his own project to possibly complain about Fafnir's dedication now. He smiles at Fafnir's bowed head before tilting his own back to rest heavy at the support of the chair behind him. "I did," he says, with all the weight of relief on the words. "It's ready to go, now."

Fafnir reaches out for more ink. "Did you get the refactoring done on the last stage?"

"Yup." Makoto lifts an arm to drape over his face and sighs heavily into the dark of his sleeve. His head is throbbing, he realizes as he allows himself the space to really notice his own physical state; he wonders how long the headache beating gently behind his eyes has been forming. "It took me all last night but I'm not leaving anything undone."

Fafnir huffs. "Congratulations."

"Thanks." Makoto tips his head to the side without lifting his arm from over his face so he can look back to Fafnir at the table. There's a pile of finished pages at the other's elbow, but the stack still waiting additional attention remains high enough to make Makoto flinch. "Do you want help, Faf-kun?"

Fafnir shakes his head as he lifts the sheet in front of him to add carefully to the pile at his elbow. "No."

"Want to do your first book on your own?" Makoto asks. "I understand that." He lifts his head as he lets his arm fall so he can gaze up at the ceiling in pursuit of motivation to actually stir himself to action. "Do you want something to eat?"

"Mm," Fafnir hums. "Later." There's a slide of paper over the desk; Makoto can see Fafnir shift in his periphery as he settles over the fresh sheet before him. "You could take a bath first."

"That's a good idea," Makoto admits. "I'll do that." He steels himself for the action, struggling for focus enough to get himself up and out of the support under him; and then finally just moves at



once to swing upright and to his feet before his body can come up with more compelling reasons why he shouldn't. His headache spikes higher, pounding protest at his temples, but Makoto stands still once he's upright and the pain admits defeat and recedes to a more manageable level so he can make his way around the corner and to the comfort promised by a cool rinse and the steam of a hot bath.

Makoto lingers in the bathroom. There is a pleasure to rinsing the soap off his body, even though he has done nothing more strenuous than sit in his computer chair for the whole of the last day he has off from work before Comiket itself. He feels heavy with his exertion, like he's bearing his mental exhaustion in the tight-knotted muscles of his body; after he's managed a token wash there is an intense pleasure to climbing into the pool of hot water and sinking in deep enough that he can submerge everything but his head and the very tops of his knees into the steam-heat of the bath. Makoto tips his head back against the edge of the tub, far enough that the very back of his hair drifts and floats against the water lapping at his shoulder and up along his neck, and he lets his thoughts wander free of the intense focus to which he has held them all day.

He's slow about extricating himself from the drowsy heat. A long span of time goes by without any interruption to his daydreaming; even once he stirs himself enough to get to his feet so he can dry himself off his motions are slow and unhurried with the languid comfort of hard-earned success. He stays in the steam-humid air of the bathroom for several minutes as he works through the process of dressing himself again, in a loose t-shirt and the thin sweatpants he means to wear to bed, and when he pulls the bathroom door open to rejoin Fafnir in the main part of the apartment his entrance is marked by a cloud of steam that spills to haze the hallway for a few minutes as he pads out into the living room where Fafnir is still hunched in over his efforts with his book.

"That was a great idea," Makoto admits as he moves past Fafnir so he can drop his clothes into the hamper to be washed later in the week. "I feel more myself than I have in days, now." He comes back out into the living room and considers the somewhat smaller heap of paper next to Fafnir. "How's it going?"

"Fine," Fafnir says without lifting his head. "I'll have it done before morning."

"That's great," Makoto says. "I can take it in to work with me and get copies made on my way home." Fafnir makes a sound of more-or-less assent and Makoto moves past him into the kitchen so he can collect together the items he needs to produce something approximating a meal. He isn't sure when he last ate something more substantial than snacks, and he's reasonably sure that Fafnir has been running on the same mystical force that allows the other to go without sleep and remain as functional and composed in his appearance as ever. There's drinks in the fridge, though, a pitcher of iced tea that Makoto mixed three days ago and had almost entirely forgotten about, and his semi-regular shopping trips have kept them in plenty of curry to feed both himself and Fafnir, if the other can be persuaded to pause in his intent focus on the pages in front of him. Makoto sets the box of curry on the counter and retrieves the rice cooker from the back corner of the counter where it has been stored so he can fill it with a double serving of rice and set it to begin the cooking process. With that started he has some downtime before he needs to start heating up the packages of curry, and with Fafnir occupied in the space in front of the television Makoto is content to linger in the kitchen and look out the window at the world that he has almost entirely ignored for the last 24 hours.

It's earlier than he realized. It's been raining all day, with the steady, constant drizzle that has wrapped the city for almost a full week without breaking, and with his attention so fixed on the task of finishing his computer game Makoto didn't bother to count the hours passing. It's still early in the evening, hardly past the time he would be returning home after work on a weeknight, although the clouds draping over the sky keep the world dark enough that it could be hours later

with hardly any difference in the lighting. It's still pleasant to look out the window, just to be gazing at something at a somewhat greater distance than the immediate proximity of his computer screen, and Makoto braces his hands at the edge of the counter and leans forward so he can gaze out the glass with idle interest while he waits for the rice cooker to beep that it's done.

He sees the break in the clouds from the illumination, first. The day has been uniformly gray, weighed down by the summer storm that has lingered for almost a full month without easing; it's startling to see the bright of sunlight breaking through, and so unexpected that Makoto squints and lifts an arm against the light that seems blinding in the first moment of seeing it. The street glitters bright, the sheen of wet across the pavement catching to reflect light back up into Makoto's open eyes; the trailing raindrops in the air catch the light to a haze as they fall to a sheet that retreats as the clouds give way. Makoto blinks sunspots from his eyes, a little disoriented by this sudden influx of more light than he's seen in days; and then he makes sense of the situation, and he's tipping his head to look to what he can see of the sky opposite the setting sun. It's hard to see past the buildings around them and from the angle of the apartment window, but Makoto can still make out a narrow sliver of the sky overhead, and that's enough to confirm his suspicion.

He leaves the rice cooker steaming gently from the vents on the top as it nears the end of its cycle and the curry still in the box set out on the counter. His shoes are in the entryway; he steps into them without bothering with the laces or reaching for his umbrella before he pulls open the door to look outside. There's a stir from the living room as Fafnir lifts his head to ask "Takiya?" in a tone of some concern, but Makoto only glances at the other as he moves towards the doorway.

"The storm's breaking," he says by way of answer, and leaves the door open behind him as he steps out into the fading drizzle of the rain. The air is still damp, heavy with the effect of the rain that has only just drawn back from the curtain it draped around the city for the last days, but the gold of the sunset is spilling out from behind the clouds to gild all the wet to a glittering shine. Makoto looks out at the sunlit reflection across the pavement of the street, and up at the gray of the clouds pulling back from the sky, and then there's the sound of the door shutting behind him, and he looks back to see Fafnir stepping forward from the apartment, his umbrella in hand but still closed with the lack of necessity for it.

Makoto smiles as Fafnir comes to stand alongside him. "I'll only be out for a minute," he says. "I just wanted to see the storm clear." He looks back out to the glow of the sun at the horizon, made enormous and brilliant by the haze of water in the air, and when Fafnir turns his head to look in the other direction Makoto follows his attention to set the sun at his back so he can face the arc of color spread across the sky.

It's a beautiful rainbow, one of the clearest Makoto's ever seen. The rain has left the air heavy with moisture and the sun is hanging low and bright in the sky; the rainbow is vivid and enormous, arcing over the familiar horizon of the city with such clarity that Makoto can pick out the stripe of purple at the bottom of the curve. It seems impossible for there to be such color in the world that has been so uniformly gray for the last days; for a long minute Makoto just stands and stares, caught off-guard by this unlooked-for relief from the unending storm that has been breaking over them.

Fafnir breathing a sigh at his side pushes Makoto into a blink, and then into the motion to turn his head to look at the other. He can't see Fafnir's expression past the heavy curtain of his hair, but the lift of the other's chin is obvious, and there is no question that he is looking up at the curve of the rainbow the same as Makoto. "It's beautiful."

He doesn't sound particularly pleased about this statement, but even the neutral sincerity of his words is enough to open Makoto's eyes wide on surprise. They stay like that for a moment, Fafnir

looking at the sky and Makoto looking at Fafnir; then Fafnir's head tips, his chin angling like he's answering the pull of Makoto's attention on him, and Makoto turns aside to relieve Fafnir of the embarrassment of his surprised focus.

"Yes," he says, lifting his head to look back to the radiant color sweeping across the sky. "It really is, isn't it?"

Neither of them say anything else, but Makoto doesn't move to return to the house, and even with the demands of his unfinished book hanging over him, Fafnir seems perfectly content to stand on the damp of the sidewalk alongside him for as long as the rainbow lingers in the rain-wet air overhead.

## Complimentary

“I really am sorry about the sales,” Makoto says, speaking loudly so his voice will carry from the kitchen where he’s serving curry over rice for their much-delayed dinner. “I know how hard it is to face a crowd that doesn’t appreciate real skill.” He glances back to the living room but if his words are having any effect it’s too slight for him to tell. Fafnir is still sitting right where he has been since they came in the door, slumped back over the couch with his head resting at the support of the back and his blank gaze directed more-or-less towards the ceiling, although Makoto suspects he’s seeing about as much as he’s hearing. Makoto grimaces sympathy and looks back to the bowl in front of him. “And it’s been a long day. We’ll eat some dinner and you can take a bath and see if that doesn’t help.”

Fafnir makes a weak sound. Makoto doesn’t know if it’s a whimper or a protest to his attempts at comfort. In either case it lacks enough force for Makoto to hear any words on it, if there were any words to begin with. Makoto pours the second serving of curry over the bowl of rice for himself and leaves the empty containers on the counter so he can pick up both bowls and bear them out to the living room. “You didn’t have anything to eat during the event, right?” He draws around the corner of the couch so he can sit at the cushion alongside Fafnir’s utterly limp presence and hold the bowl out to the other. “It’s easy to forget in the rush of the crowd. Have some dinner.”

Fafnir lies still for another long moment. When he moves it’s a slow process, as if he’s drawing strength into the weight of his body by force of will alone, and even then it is only so he can raise his head from his slump over the couch and turn to glare at Makoto next to him. His brows are drawn together around a deep crease at the middle of his forehead; his visible eye is dark with the same temper tightening his mouth onto a frown.

“Dinner,” he says, in a low enough tone that Makoto can feel it like an earthquake running through his bare feet and climbing the length of his spine to shiver over his skin. Fafnir’s head tilts and the shadow of hair before his face swings to the side. The darkness is too deep for Makoto to see the hidden side of the other’s face, but for a moment there’s a glint from within it, like an open flame or the edge of a knife catching at illumination to make a threat out of Fafnir’s attention on Makoto’s face. “Is mere food going to make me feel better?”

Makoto meets the force of Fafnir’s glare with a smile. “You never know until you try,” he says, and holds the bowl out farther towards Fafnir. Fafnir’s attention shifts, dropping until he’s frowning at the curry instead of at Makoto, and Makoto beams the brighter at the dark of the other’s hair falling over his face. “It’s mild.”

Fafnir gazes down at Makoto’s offering for a moment. Then his hand raises, still while his head is ducked down, and he takes the edge of the bowl to accept from Makoto’s hand. Makoto releases the dish and turns back to settle his own attention comfortably on the meal in his own hands.

“*Itadakimasu,*” he murmurs, and balances the bowl on his knees so he can free his hand to claim his chopsticks and start in on the meal. Next to him Fafnir is still staring at his bowl like he’s not sure what he ought to do with it, but Makoto doesn’t turn to offer the pressure of an expectant gaze, just keeps his head ducked down as he works into his own meal with the keen hunger of a day spent too occupied to think of food until long hours after a more reasonable mealtime. He eats several bites in silence; it’s only as Fafnir moves beside him to reach for his own chopsticks that Makoto has eased the edge of his hunger enough to pause and speak between bites of his meal.

“You didn’t do anything wrong, you know.” He’s speaking conversationally, to keep the weight of the subject from bearing down on them, and he takes another bite to pause between his words. “It’s

hard for any circle to get started. I think I sold two volumes at my first Comiket.”

There’s a low noise from the back of Fafnir’s throat. Makoto doesn’t look to see the expression that goes with it. “Two more than none.”

Makoto hums assent as he swallows a bite. “One was to my mother, after she took the manuscript out for copying,” he says. “And I bought one for myself. I still have it,” as he gestures with his chopsticks to the shelves of books around him, “somewhere around here.” Fafnir’s head shifts to follow the motion as Makoto glances sideways to smile at him. “It’s hard to get started.”

Fafnir’s gaze slides over the shelves like he’s taking stock of the books stacked close together to fit between the figures in their original boxes and the collected gaming magazines and manga volumes. Makoto looks away again to leave Fafnir to his consideration as he takes another bite of his dinner. Fafnir doesn’t say anything, although Makoto can feel the other’s gaze lingering on him after he’s finished his survey of the shelves, and after another minute he turns back to his bowl with somewhat more intent than he showed before. Makoto finishes the last of his own curry and leans forward so he can set the empty bowl on the table in front of them with a sigh. Fafnir’s cart is still at the side of the couch where he dragged it in his unfocused passage through the door to deposit himself onto the furniture. Makoto leans over to pull it around towards him and reach for the volume set at the top of the stack of unsold manuscripts in the box.

“They look good all put together like this,” he says as he pulls the topmost booklet from the pile. “I didn’t see them after you collated everything.”

Fafnir huffs a breath that sounds very nearly normal for the circumstances. “You were working on your own projects.”

“Ah,” Makoto hums. “I guess so.” He considers the illustration on the front cover -- it’s done in black-and-white, a vaguely spiraling design that brings to mind some kind of creeping vine or the spreading tendrils of fog -- before holding it up and looking to Fafnir. “Do you mind if I take a look, Faf-kun?”

Fafnir shrugs. “Fine.”

Makoto smiles, undeterred by the other’s lack of enthusiasm, and leans back against the couch as he turns the first page with all the thrilled anticipation that always comes with opening a new book and seeing what awaits within. There’s a sheet after the title page, with Fafnir’s name written in place of pride near the middle of the white, and then a table of contents, labeled in neat rows that completely belie the details they profess to contain. Makoto reads down the list, feeling his eyebrows raise in spite of himself as he looks at the promised collection, before he turns to the next page.

The table of contents is entirely accurate. Makoto isn’t surprised by the precision of it, not after living with Fafnir for the last months together, but there is something startlingly businesslike about the curses laid out in the anthology in his hands. They are written almost like recipes, with a list of necessities followed by specific instructions that have no qualms at all about providing the means to doom someone to cataclysmic bad luck, or undoing the path of their fate, or imbuing them with unquenchable greed. There are instructions on how to strip away the immortality from a god, or how to grant perpetual existence to a creature doomed to grow ever older for eternity, and other, more visceral results, complete with illustrations labelled with as much careful accuracy as the rest of the book. Makoto turns through the pages, skimming over the information within while maintaining as much academic distance as he can, until Fafnir next to him sets his empty bowl down on the table alongside Makoto’s and asks “What do you think?” in the deliberately disinterested tone of all creators watching an appraisal of their work.

Makoto hums a note in the back of his throat. "This is well put together," he says politely, and turns the page so he's looking at an illustration for what is labelled as a *Miasma of Pestilence* rather than the anatomical breakdown of what, exactly, an *Inverted Existence* might entail. "The drawings are a nice touch too. I didn't know you were such a good artist, Faf-kun."

Fafnir scoffs. "I can excel at whatever I choose to turn my hand to."

Makoto looks up to beam at him. "I guess I'm not surprised by that," he says. He looks back to the pages. "These are all real curses?"

Fafnir ducks his head into a nod. "Of course. Inaccuracies would reflect on my reputation."

"Right." Makoto closes the book in his hands and looks to the cart sitting alongside him, with the cardboard price tag hanging off the front of it. The price has been crossed out several times, with the number steadily decreasing with each adjustment, but he backtracks to the first value at the top of the sign. "This is how much you were charging?"

Fafnir huffs. "That was my original intention."

Makoto nods and leans back against the support of the couch so he can fit a hand into his pocket. Fafnir watches him from under the curtain of his hair shadowing his face, statue-still while Makoto fumbles a bill free and eases back to the couch as he holds it out with the hand not occupied with the weight of the book.

"Here," Makoto says. Fafnir's gaze drops from his face to the bill but he doesn't reach to take it right away. Makoto keeps holding it out, offering the money along with a smile formed of as much sincerity as he can muster. "For the book."

Fafnir looks back up to his face. "You're buying a copy?"

"Sure," Makoto says. "I can't accept it for nothing. And I want to add it to my collection." He beams in answer to Fafnir's flat stare. "It's a one-of-a-kind anthology, after all."

Fafnir snorts skepticism, but after a pause he reaches up after all to claim the bill Makoto is holding out for him. He holds it between his hands for a moment, gazing at the money like he's never seen it before, before his expression creases onto a frown and he folds the bill carefully over on itself as if it's something to be treated with as much care as the book in Makoto's hands.

"You'd better be careful with that," he says, in a tone approximating the hauteur he puts on like a coat for public appearances. "It'll only become more valuable when the second volume is released."

"I'm looking forward to it," Makoto says, and gets to his feet so he can place the book carefully away on one of the corners of the overstuffed bookshelves. He has to come up on his toes to reach the shelf, and when he speaks it's without turning around to look at Fafnir. "Do you mind skipping on the competition for the dishes, since it's so late? I can do the washing-up myself if you want to take the first bath."

Fafnir gusts an exhale. "Alright," he says, but when Makoto turns back from the bookshelf Fafnir is still sitting where he was, if somewhat more upright than the boneless slump he had maintained while Makoto was making dinner. He's looking straight forward, his head raised and gaze fixed on the dark of the television in front of him; Makoto can't hear him swallow, but he can see the tension in the fingers braced against the other's knees as Fafnir steadies himself. Makoto pauses with a hand at the support of the bookshelf, sensing the anticipation in the air, and Fafnir's head

inclines just slightly towards him, the other's gaze drifting before he turns to look forward again. "Thank you, Takiya."

Makoto blinks, just once; and then smiles, with no concern to dampen the warmth of the expression even though Fafnir is facing away with resolute intent. "Of course," he says, and comes forward from the shelves so he can collect the dishes. "Don't take too long in the bath or I'll end up falling asleep before my turn." Fafnir huffs in answer to this and turns his head away as Makoto steps in to collect the dishes, but when he gets to his feet there's a little more of his usual grace in his motion in place of the heavy resignation that weighed on him before, and when he tosses his hair back from his face the action carries the easy confidence that Makoto is accustomed to seeing. Makoto pauses in front of the couch, watching as Fafnir paces through the apartment to vanish into the small space of the bathroom; then he smiles, and turns aside, and takes the dishes to the sink to finish up the last of the necessities for the day.

## Contingent

"I'm home," Makoto calls into the waiting quiet of the apartment even before he's stepped out of the doorway and left the door to click shut behind him.

He can't hear the huff of acknowledgment he's sure is offered from the other room, but the sound of a computer chair squeaking is loud enough to hear even from the entryway. Even more clear is Fafnir's response, "Welcome home," following with ready speed even if his tone is so completely flat as to make the welcome sound more sarcastic than anything else. Makoto doesn't mind. It makes him smile instead, ducking his head to watch his feet as he slides his shoes off at the edge of the entryway before stepping forward into the apartment. Fafnir is still at his computer desk, with one hand extended to brace against the mouse, but his chunky headphones are loose around his neck, and his head is turned so he can give Makoto the attention of his uncovered eye, and that's more than enough welcome to glow warmth through the whole of Makoto's chest.

Makoto beams at Fafnir. "Hey there," he says, and comes forward across the living room as he lifts a hand to fit into the knot of his tie so he can loosen the tension of it from against the buttoned-up height of his collar. "Are you still working on that collection quest from this morning, Faf-kun?"

Fafnir snorts and turns back to his monitor. "I finished that before noon."

"Oh yeah?" Makoto steps through the doorway to the dim-lit computer room so he can move behind Fafnir's computer chair and look at the display on the screen. Fafnir has the combat paused and his inventory screen open; Makoto unfastens the top button of his shirt collar to ease the pressure of the cloth against his skin before he ducks down to get a better look at the other's display. "Oh wow, you did." His eyebrows go up and he reaches out to gesture towards the monitor. "Is that the first piece of the trading quest too?"

"Of course," Fafnir says, and reaches to press at the keyboard to open up the next page of the display. "I got started on it while you were gone." He tabs back to the first page with a press of his thumb against the spacebar. "I need to pass it to another player character to open up the next stage."

"No one online during the workday?" Makoto asks rhetorically, and straightens from his lean in over Fafnir's shoulder. "Give me a minute to log in and I'll trade with you before I get started on dinner." Fafnir doesn't offer gratitude by word or look to this, but he huffs a breath as he turns back in to resume full control of his workstation, and Makoto doesn't need more than that to keep his smile on his lips. He steps back across the room to start up his own computer and pull his chair back to drop into position in front of the keyboard before he goes to change out of his work clothes and into something more casual for the evening.

Makoto's computer is set to start up quickly, but even then it takes some delay for the tower to hum with electricity and the monitor to flicker to life. He leans back into his chair, slouching into greater comfort than what he has maintained at work all day while he watches the screen with idle interest. "We had a new employee start working with us today."

Fafnir huffs an exhale from the other side of the room. There is no break in the clicking of his mouse or the pattern of his fingers moving over his keyboard, but the breath is enough to indicate his attention. Makoto clicks through the login screen for his computer and rocks forward in his chair as his home screen appears with the link to the game Fafnir is playing. "She's alright. I don't think she'll be up for project work for a while yet, but she seems to be a fast learner, although she doesn't have much experience with computers."



Fafnir snorts judgment to this, as if his own experience stretches back far longer than the few months that he's been living with Makoto. Makoto tips to smile at the back of Fafnir's head as he opens up the game's initial loading screen. "I don't think that's really her fault, though. Kobayashi said she's one of Tohru's--" Makoto considers the possible words he could use to finish this sentence, recalls Kobayashi's grimace as she described Tohru's reaction to the new visitor's arrival, and changes away from the *friends* he had originally intended to say. "Acquaintances."

The room goes quiet for a moment as the rhythmic movement of Fafnir's hands goes still over the keyboard and mouse in front of him. It's only a breath before he resumes, with as much force as before, but for Fafnir Makoto thinks it's the approximate equivalent of a blank stare of shock. It's another moment before he collects himself enough to speak. "Another dragon?"

"Mm," Makoto says. "Seems that way." He clicks into the login screen for the game and enters his information in an unthinking, smooth flow of fingers working over his keyboard. "She introduced herself as Elma." Fafnir huffs an exhale of judgment. Makoto glances back at the other's unmoving shoulders. "Are you friends?"

"No," Fafnir says with decisive force. "We're on different sides."

Makoto blinks and turns to brace his arm over the top of his chair so he can gaze at the dark fall of Fafnir's hair that is all he has to judge the other's reaction. "Sides?"

"Yes." Fafnir hits one of the keys on his keyboard and double-clicks with some measure of aggression. "The Order Faction and the Chaos Faction. Elma is aligned with Order."

"Ah," Makoto says. "And you're with Chaos?" Fafnir ducks his head forward into a nod. Makoto can see the movement ripple through the weight of dark hair spilling across the other's shoulders. He hums understanding. "Are you at war with each other?"

"No." Fafnir clicks at something on the screen of his monitor; there's the modulation of an electronic yell from his speakers as whatever he is fighting is defeated. "We oppose each other. That's all."

"Ah," Makoto says. "So you won't be setting off duels in the middle of the shopping district?"

Fafnir snorts as if this idea is patently absurd. "I can't speak for Elma," he says, in a tone that implies that this concern is too far beneath him to even be properly considered. "I have better things to do than pick fights in the human realm."

Makoto smiles. "I'm glad to hear it," he says. "I'm pretty sure you could single-handedly destroy this apartment building if you wanted to."

This gets him another scoff. "Just the building?"

Makoto smiles at Fafnir's shoulders, even though the other isn't turning to see his expression. "Are you stronger than Tohru?"

Fafnir tosses his head. "Considerably."

"Well." Makoto leans into the arm he has over the back of his chair so he can rock against the support of the furniture. "Thank you for not destroying our world yet, Faf-kun." Fafnir glances back at that, turning in his chair so the glint of his red eye can pick out Makoto leaning over the chair behind him. Makoto meets Fafnir's skeptical frown with the same unflinching smile he's been offering to the other's shoulders, and Fafnir's attention skips down over his face like he's taking the measure of Makoto's sincerity. "I'm glad you're enjoying staying here that much."

Fafnir doesn't blush. There's no indication of color across his pale cheeks, no flicker of a smile at the set of his mouth. But he does stay still for a long second, fixed where he is looking back over his shoulder to Makoto behind him, and even the battle cry of an approaching enemy takes a moment to get him to turn back around to his monitor with a huffed exhale.

"Don't be stupid, Takiya," Fafnir says. "Hurry up and log in so I can complete the trading requirement."

"Ah," Makoto says, "right," and he turns back to his computer to click through the opening screens so he can join Fafnir's game and open up the option to trade items between their characters.

## Ambient

Makoto hadn't expected how strange it would feel to have the apartment to himself. It's only been a few months since Fafnir moved in and brought the constant shadow of his presence into Makoto's daily life; Makoto has been living on his own for years, and in this precise apartment for almost two. It has been surprisingly easy to adjust to the constant presence of his roommate, to reform his life to accommodate the consideration of the second occupant of what has rapidly become their shared home; but when Fafnir first announced his intention to spend the afternoon with Tohru and the rest of the dragons he would probably call acquaintances and Makoto is sure are closer to friends, Makoto had been expecting to feel some measure of nostalgic comfort in the opportunity to sprawl over his apartment with no one but himself to fill up the space.

There is very little comfort to it at all, as it turns out. Makoto sees Fafnir off with a wave and a wish to have a good time, which Fafnir answers with a huff that seems to suggest that he has very few expectations of such and that all of those are likely to be dashed anyway, but no sooner has the door shut than Makoto feels the quiet of the apartment weighting around him. Fafnir is far from a noisy person; he has spent full days without saying more than a dozen words, and since Makoto bought him a pair of noise-cancelling headphones soon after the other's move into his home even the sounds of his gaming are minimal or nonexistent. But he's always playing something, on the television while Makoto is cooking or leaning in over his computer desk as Makoto spreads out the futon over the floor between their chairs, and Makoto hadn't realized how accustomed he has become to the soft, constant sound of buttons clicking until it's absent. He stands in the entryway of the apartment that Fafnir has just left, considering the space and how strangely large it feels in spite of the collectibles and art he has stored against every available wall, and then he huffs a laugh at himself and comes around the corner to occupy himself with cleaning up the kitchen after the morning meal.

Makoto keeps himself busy. There are always a few chores that need doing over the day he has off from work, and he enjoys the easy domesticity of drying the paired dishes from breakfast before he takes his work clothes out from the washer so he can hang them up in the bright of the sunshine that broke over the city this morning. Fafnir is naturally self-contained, with a definite tendency to put game cartridges back in their boxes and tucked away in neat rows as if he's taking deliberate stock of their supply, and with only his work clothes to wash Makoto has everything tidied and drying within the first hour after Fafnir has departed. That leaves him with the next several hours of the day to himself, and an open schedule to pursue whatever he likes, which he is happy to make use of even if the apartment still feels echoingly quiet without the regular white noise that Fafnir's presence brings with it.

Makoto settles himself in front of his computer, first. He's spent most of his evenings after work supporting in the multiplayer online raids that Fafnir plays for the greater part of every day; with Fafnir occupied with his friends, Makoto can indulge in one of the solo games that he has been missing for the last few weeks. It's a pleasure to settle into his chair and find a rhythm for himself that is all his own, without any consideration of matching the pace of the other people he's playing with, and after the first hour he's not thinking about how quiet the apartment is anymore for how focused he is on his own game.

It's a pleasant way to spend the time, soothing and entertaining as Makoto always finds this particular hobby, and by the time the ache of hunger in his stomach is enough to pull his attention away he finds he's been smiling at his monitor for what must be hours of uninterrupted happiness. It's strange to come back to himself, to realize that he hasn't spoken to offer any of the casual commentary or clarifying questions that he usually is asking of Fafnir, and it's even stranger to look

back over his shoulder and find Fafnir's computer powered down and the chair in front of it pushed all the way in against the keyboard. Makoto gazes at the absence of his roommate, returning his awareness to the almost-loneliness that he has been feeling all day, and then he shakes his head, and smiles to himself, and pushes back from his computer desk so he can go outside to bring in the laundry.

He is just carrying in the last of the shirts, dried to sun-warm crispness from their time outside, when the sound of the door handle turning pulls his attention to the entryway. Makoto pauses next to the couch currently heaped with the weight of the clothes waiting for him to shake them out and fold them for storage, and the front door comes open to let what appears to be a humanoid shadow through the entrance and out of the sun. Fafnir's head is down as he steps inside, and when he speaks his voice is soft enough that Makoto hears more of a mumble than a coherent *I'm home*, but Makoto is smiling welcome anyway.

"Welcome home," he says, with far more clarity on the words than Fafnir gave to his own. Fafnir lifts his head to look at Makoto over the top of the glasses perched on his nose and Makoto beams at him before he looks down so he can spread the shirts over his arm across the rest of the laundry on the couch. "How was it at Kobayashi's?"

Fafnir snorts dismissal of this question, but he only lets the silence hang for a moment before he says "As expected," in a tone that would be resignation coming from anyone else. From Fafnir Makoto thinks it's remarkably near to actual happiness, however set his expression may be against any surrender to that.

Makoto smiles. "I'm glad you had a good time," he says. He picks up one of the shirts laid out in front of him so he can shake it loose of the creases that it dried into before folding it with more deliberate care. "It's always nice to get together with friends."

Fafnir tosses his head. "We're not friends."

"Mm," Makoto hums. "Fellow dragons, then." He glances up to see if Fafnir will balk at this as well. He's expecting to find a crimson glare waiting for him to speak to the lack of appreciation Fafnir usually feels at having his habitual assumed distance threatened, but Fafnir is looking at the side of the entryway where he's still standing, his attention so distant Makoto feels a little like he's still looking at the street all the way through the multiple apartment walls between themselves and the sidewalk. Makoto hesitates with a shirt half-folded in his hands, some of his comfortable amusement giving way to concern. "Faf-kun?"

Fafnir blinks and shakes his head. "What?" he says, looking down so he can step out of his shoes instead of looking up at Makoto.

Makoto watches Fafnir for a moment, observing the weight of the other's fingers bracing to the wall in front of him so he can maintain his determinedly upright posture as he slips his shoes free, before he shakes his head and looks back to the laundry. "Nothing," he says. Fafnir glances back at him and snorts soft disbelief, but Makoto keeps watching the laundry instead of looking up. "Did you do anything fun?"

"Hmph," Fafnir offers by way of response. "There was a competition." The sound of his footsteps against the floor announces his approach; Makoto takes a half-step to the side of where he's standing to make space for Fafnir alongside him. "Tohru and Kobayashi made bento."

Makoto looks up. "Kobayashi did?" Fafnir inclines his head into a nod. Makoto raises his eyebrows and smiles surprise. "I didn't think she had much interest in cooking." He looks back to the laundry. Fafnir is collecting the socks into matching pairs; Makoto reaches for the last of the

shirts to shake the creases out of it. “She must be a lot less stressed since Tohru moved in with her if she’s making bento on her day off.”

Fafnir snorts a sound that might be skepticism and Makoto thinks is probably closer to agreement, but he doesn’t speak and Makoto doesn’t try to push the conversation to continue. They fall into quiet, with just the rustle of the clothing between them as Makoto folds the last shirt to join the others before he fishes out a pair of pants from the pile before them. Next to him Fafnir has his head ducked down over his precise efforts with the socks he’s folding into pairs. For a minute the apartment is peaceful, with just the matched sounds of their efforts overlapping; then Fafnir reaches to set aside a pair of socks and speaks before he reaches for the next.

“Does fighting bring humans closer?”

Makoto looks up from the clothing in his hands, caught too off-guard by the question to recall his usual hesitation in turning the full force of his attention on Fafnir’s self-consciousness. But Fafnir is standing on Makoto’s left side, with the fall of his loose hair curtaining his face, and all Makoto is left to see of him is the set of his lips pressing together as if to deny the words he just spoke. Makoto gazes at Fafnir’s dark hair for a breath before he collects himself, and even when he looks back to the slacks he’s holding in front of him his attention is lingering against the tension at Fafnir’s jaw and pressing his mouth tight more than the creases in the pants he’s trying to put away.

“Not always,” he says, with as much casual honesty as he can put on the words. “Violent fighting usually does the opposite.” He huffs a laugh at this understatement while Fafnir stays quiet beside him. Makoto folds the pants in his hands over on themselves and lays them flat atop the pile of shirts. “But sometimes siblings or friends will bicker with each other.” He shrugs. “Between partners it can even be a kind of flirting.”

Fafnir huffs. “*Tsundere*.”

Makoto smiles. “Yeah,” he says, and reaches for an undershirt. “You always get a couple of those in dating sims. It’s not quite the same in real life, but it’s something like that.”

There’s a pause. Makoto glances at Fafnir without offering the giveaway of turning his head to look in the other’s direction, but Fafnir is still leaning forward so his face is entirely obscured by his hair. He’s nearly done with the socks; as Makoto watches he reaches out for the second-to-last pair so he can hook his thumbs inside one and fold it down over the two together. Fafnir sets the socks down in the careful line he’s made of the others and Makoto looks back to the shirt in his hands before Fafnir looks up to catch him staring. He shakes it out again, although the motion is completely unnecessary, and starts to fold it up as he resumes speaking.

“It’s not like that for everyone though.” He holds the shirt out to the side without waiting for Fafnir to offer, and Fafnir takes it from him to set over the arm of the couch. “Sometimes two people are so close that they don’t fight about anything at all.” He reaches for the last of the shirts to shake out the wrinkles and fold it over on itself. Fafnir’s head shifts towards him, tipping until Makoto can feel the focus of the other’s gaze against his face, but he keeps his head down and his smile turned on the work of his hands with the shirt. It’s only once it’s folded that he turns to offer it to Fafnir, and only as Fafnir’s hands are closing on the fabric that Makoto takes a breath to go on speaking.

“I’m glad to have you back,” he says, keeping his tone deliberately light as he looks up to smile at Fafnir directly. “I really missed having you around this afternoon, Faf-kun.”

Fafnir stares at Makoto for a moment. His head is still turned half-away, so his hair is curtaining

the greater part of his expression, and there's not much giveaway in his face anyway, no more than the brief reaction of a blink and the shift of his mouth tightening to deliberate stoicism. But he's still looking at Makoto, and Makoto goes on smiling at him until Fafnir huffs a breath through his nose and pulls against the shirt held between them to take it from Makoto's hold.

"Idiot," he says, and turns away again so he can lay the folded shirt atop the other.

Makoto's smile goes wider at his mouth, stretching until he has to bite his lip to keep from laughing, but Fafnir is turned away, and that gives him the time to duck his head and breathe himself back into composure before he clears his throat deliberately. "Thanks for your help," he says, and leans forward to collect the folded button-up shirts and his work pants. "I'll put these away and then see what we can make for dinner, alright?"

Fafnir snorts by means of acknowledging this as well, but when Makoto turns away from the couch to carry the clothes to the bedroom Fafnir shifts behind him instead of turning to follow. It takes Makoto a few minutes to get his work clothes put away, and when he turns back Fafnir is waiting with the rest of the laundry heaped into a neat pile in his arms. Fafnir doesn't respond to Makoto's smile, or to his thanks, but he lingers while Makoto puts the rest of the laundry away, and when Makoto makes his way back to the kitchen Fafnir follows to take up his usual position on the couch in front of the television instead. By the time Makoto is filling the rice cooker to start heating the television is on, and a game is starting up, and very shortly thereafter the soft sound of Fafnir's playing is making the apartment sound like home again.

## Grind

It's nearly midnight by the time Makoto lets himself through the door of the apartment.

He's exhausted. As a rule he tries to keep his energy up at work as much as possible, and the thought of returning to an evening of Fafnir's companionship is frequently enough to bring a smile to his face no matter how arduous his work day has proven. If this were the first long day he's had this week, he thinks he could manage a smile, or at least some energy to his voice as he calls "I'm home," to the nighttime shadows of the apartment. But it's been over a week since he spent less than a dozen hours at work, and longer since he had a proper day off, and even Makoto's determined optimism is running low at this point. His announcement of his return is more habit than enthusiasm as he steps through the door, so lacking in energy that he's not surprised when there is no response from inside. He steps free of his shoes in the entryway, feeling his feet and legs and body aching with accumulated exhaustion, and for a minute he just stays there, his feet flat on the cool of the entryway and his head tipped forward to press against the wall in front of him while he lets the distant throb of his all-day headache sweep over him in the relief that comes with the first few breaths of downtime he has had in what feels like a year.

The apartment is very quiet when Makoto is able to muster the strength to stir himself to action, or at least to turn so he can take a few steps farther into the space. Fafnir isn't asleep, of course -- as far as Makoto knows the other has no more desire for sleep than need for it, and in the last days of completing the project that has dominated Makoto's working and waking life the futon has seen very little use at all. But the living room is dark, and the monitor on the other's desk is flickering with the idle motion of a screensaver instead of a game, with no player sitting in the chair before it. Makoto stands in the doorway to the study for a long moment, gazing blankly at the empty chair while his mind makes its slogging way through the familiar paths of logic. It's only after long seconds of thought that he finally arrives at the obvious conclusion, and turns to the shut door to the bathroom.

There is a light glowing under the closed door, Makoto sees as soon as he turns his head to look. More than that, with no other sound in the apartment the soft splash of water against the sides of the tub is clear to hear; it's only exhausted inattention that kept Makoto from taking note of the sound for what it was when he came in the door. Makoto pads across the apartment floor to the bathroom door and reaches out to tap his knuckles gently against it. The splash inside goes instantly silent, but Makoto leans in to call through the door all the same. "I'm home, Faf-kun."

Fafnir's answer is immediate. "*Yes. Come in.*"

Makoto catches his fingers at the edge of the door and slides it open obediently. The air inside is heavy, thick with steam and fogging against the mirror over the sink; Makoto feels it billowing out around him, softening the creases of his work clothes and easing the office-dry feel of his skin on contact. Fafnir is sitting up in the tub with his wet hair loose around his shoulders; he tips his head to frown at Makoto standing in the open doorway of the bathroom.

"Shut the door," he says, and turns to look forward again as he lifts his hands to push the weight of his hair back over his shoulders. "You're letting the steam out."

"Ah," Makoto says. "Sorry." He steps forward into the bathroom and slides the door shut behind him again before he tips back to lean against the support while he smiles apology at Fafnir. "Sorry it's so late. Did you have something to eat?"

Fafnir huffs. "I finished the curry from this morning." His gaze slides sideways to touch against

Makoto's face. His usual glasses are gone; the sharp edge of his stare seems somewhat blunted by their absence, until his glance at Makoto looks as much like curiosity as judgment. "Have you had dinner?"

Makoto shrugs. "We had bentos at work," he says. "It was a while before we finished but they had enough for everyone."

Fafnir turns his head down again to fix his gaze on the green-tinted water around him. "Are you hungry?"

Makoto shakes his head. "I'm just tired." He catches himself with the proof of a yawn for this, and follows it up by sliding down the support of the door so he can sit heavily at the floor. The position puts him a little below Fafnir's eye level; Fafnir's attention flickers sideways to him again, but he doesn't speak, and Makoto manages a smile that is sincere enough, however exhausted he feels. "I feel like I could sleep for a week."

"Hmph," Fafnir scoffs, without much force behind the sound. "I suppose rest is a necessity for lesser lifeforms." Makoto's smile goes a little wider at this insult in form more than meaning. Fafnir lifts a hand to let the water caught in his palm spill through his fingers. "Will you have more to do tomorrow?"

"Mm," Makoto hums, and shakes his head without lifting himself from the support of the door behind him. "No. We finally finished up this evening." He heaves a sigh that he can feel sag the weight of absolute relief through his shoulders as he lets his eyes shut. "Kobayashi will be able to make it to Kanna's sports day like she wanted to."

Fafnir snorts. There is a splash as he lets his hand drop back into the water around him. "You did not need to help as much as you did."

"No," Makoto agrees. "But I wanted to. And I'm glad I did." He smiles without opening his eyes just remembering the relief in Kobayashi's exhausted face when they parted from the office an hour ago to return to their respective homes. "It's always worth it to do something to help a friend." Fafnir makes a sound of vague skepticism, but he offers no more protest than that.

There's a span of silence. Makoto can feel exhaustion aching through every part of his body, throbbing at the backs of his eyes and heavy in his limbs; with his shoulders slumped back against the door at his back and his legs stretched out in front of him the dull weight is almost pleasant, a memory of exertion that is left well behind him. The steam in the air is warm against his face and curling damp at the ends of his hair against his forehead; with his eyes shut, Makoto imagines he can feel Fafnir's gaze against him, trailing across his features and sliding down to curl itself against the stubble starting to come in against the line of his jaw and the length of his throat. It's a vivid thought, so immersive to Makoto's drowsy thoughts that he leans into the illusion of it, tilting his head farther back and relaxing into languid comfort against the weight at his back, until when Fafnir speaks Makoto is startled to open his eyes and find the other with his head turned and his focus pinned to the far edge of the bathtub instead of on Makoto himself.

"You'll be here tomorrow," Fafnir says, in a tone closer to a statement than a question. "There's a lot to catch up on. We've fallen behind on the quests while you were working."

"Ah," Makoto says. "Of course. I'll start up a party with you first thing." He tips his head to the side and smiles, although Fafnir isn't looking at him. "Sorry to leave you on your own, Faf-kun."

Fafnir snorts. "I am fully capable of defeating opponents in a solo campaign," he says. "The rewards are improved by fighting as a party, however. There is a limited edition equipment set that



is only available through the end of this month.”

Makoto nods. “Got it,” he says. “I’ll be at your disposal starting first thing tomorrow, Faf-kun.”

Fafnir huffs again. His head tips like he’s thinking about turning to look at Makoto, although he doesn’t quite complete the action. “Will you want a bath tonight too?”

Makoto shakes his head. “I can take one tomorrow,” he says, and braces a hand against the floor so he can push himself forward off the support of the door. Fafnir’s head does turn as Makoto moves, his red gaze coming around to mark the other’s motion as Makoto struggles himself back to his feet from his slump at the floor. Makoto pauses as he makes it back to standing to smile at Fafnir looking up at him from the water lapping against his bare shoulders and ink-dark hair spilling wet around him. “Take your time, Faf-kun, I’ll change for bed when you’re done.” And he slides the door open halfway so he can slip out again, moving quickly enough to keep the greater part of the steam still inside the room instead of spilling out of it.

Makoto is smiling as he slides the door shut behind him and moves to drop onto the comfort of the couch. He has some vague thought of starting up a game for the indulgence he hasn’t had the time for for the weeks that have felt like years; but the thought of moving, even just to rock forward onto his knees and choose a game, is more than he can push himself into, and he just ends up leaning back against the couch and shutting his eyes to the comfort of long-needed relaxation. His legs are heavy against the cushions under him, the couch catches and braces the weight of his shoulders, and with his body supported Makoto’s mind slides back to the steam-fogged air of the bathroom and the dark of Fafnir’s hair around his pale shoulders. His thoughts drift of their own accord, wandering through the hazy inattention that comes with the first start of sleep as they consider the shape of Fafnir’s collarbones under damp skin, and the shadow of dark lashes framing a brilliant crimson gaze, and the set of lips brought together around the tension of a frown more habitual than displeased. Makoto’s mouth curves towards a smile without his thinking of it, his shoulders slide to tip him sideways over the couch, and when he moves to lie across the cushions it’s with more attention to the warmth of his thoughts than the exhausted comfort of reality. He turns in against the support of the couch arm beneath him, his knees draw up to fit his legs over the far end, and Makoto drifts into sleep without noting the moment of stepping from one state to the other.

By the time the bathroom door slides open, Makoto is too deeply asleep for the soft sound to wake him, much less the pad of footsteps that pause at the corner of the living room before retreating again with such deliberate care as to be almost completely silent. He doesn’t stir at the approach of a shadowy figure, or the shift over him that brings the weight of a blanket around his shoulders. All he knows is that some tension of discomfort in him eases, soothed by the warmth pressing around him, and if there is a touch against the curl of hair over his ear, it’s gentle enough to soothe him into deeper sleep instead of jolting him back awake.

## Support

Work is a little better, after that. Makoto's days are still long, still busy enough with projects to keep him occupied from the moment he sits down in front of his computer monitor to well after the ever-earlier sunset has darkened the sky to orange; but he leaves well before midnight, now, and even if night is entirely fallen by the time he makes it to the front door of his apartment that's more a function of the shortening days than a symptom of the overwork everyone in their company was subject to through the last month. Makoto has plenty of time after his return to prepare a dinner that he invariably eats on the couch alongside his roommate before they make quick work of the dishes and retire to whatever game they are presently working on for the hours until exhaustion gets the better of Makoto and tugs him towards bed. They have caught up on the quests that were released while Makoto and Kobayashi and the rest of their company were caught in the impending pressure of deadlines, and now Makoto is free to turn himself over to whatever use Fafnir wishes to make of him, whether in playing against each other on the living room console or forming a party to take on the higher-level bosses in the multiplayer game that absorbs the greater part of Fafnir's time every day.

Makoto is thinking about the prospect of gaming as he comes up to the door of the apartment and reaches to turn the handle, left unlocked in consideration of the relative danger Fafnir is capable of offering to anyone who thinks to intrude without permission. They've been working on a series of online quests lately, a handful a night for most of the last week, but Makoto isn't sure there are enough left to fill more than an hour. He's fairly sure there's a new DLC about to be released for one of the console games Fafnir favors, too, with a new character addition to the potential lineup, though he can't remember if it was meant to be released this evening or first thing on the weekend. Makoto frowns in thought as he pulls the door open and steps inside, wondering if he should just ask Fafnir, who surely knows the answer; and then he catches a whiff of the rich scent wafting through the air, and his head comes up as his eyes open wide with recognition.

He stands still in the entryway for a moment, the door still open in his hand and his attention to what he was doing entirely forgotten. Then there's the sound of movement from around the corner, and immediately after: "Takiya?" in the unvarnished crisp of Fafnir's voice.

Makoto shakes his head to bring himself back. "Yes," he says. "I'm home." He steps fully into the entryway so he can push the door shut behind him before stepping out of his shoes, though the action comes more on autopilot than from conscious focus to what he's doing.

"Welcome home." Makoto slides his shoes to the edge of the entryway and shrugs out of his coat so he can hang it up alongside the door. He can still hear Fafnir around the corner, though the television in the living room is dark and there is no one sitting on the couch in front of it. There's another sound from around the corner, that of a metal lid clattering against its container, as Makoto steps out of the entryway and into the apartment itself. "You're back early."

"I caught the first train after work," Makoto explains as he pads across the living room floor. "It was almost leaving when I showed up, I was just barely able to squeeze on." He reaches to touch against the edge of the doorway to the kitchen as he steps around to look inside.

Fafnir is standing over the counter in the kitchen with containers and dishes laid out around him. There is no chaos to it at all; everything is in precise order, both plates aligned exactly before him and the two containers of the curry that Makoto smelled from the doorway set out next to each. It was the lid of the rice cooker that he had heard, he realized; a fairly simple deduction, given that Fafnir still has it lifted as he stirs the rice inside. Fafnir is wearing his usual uniform, the

unadorned black as crisp and pristine as ever, but he has the apron he sometimes wears when doing the dishes tied over the front of his outfit, and instead of tying his hair together between his shoulders the dark of it is pulled up into a ponytail high at the back of his head. His bangs are still curtaining the far side of his face, from what Makoto can see, but the steam rising from the rice cooker is dampening them to the suggestion of a wave as Fafnir leans forward to frown at the rice in front of him.

Makoto leans against the doorway to the kitchen, reclining into as much nonchalance as he can find before he speaks with casual interest. "Are you cooking for us tonight?"

Fafnir snorts. "It didn't look that hard," he says without looking up from his efforts with the rice. "If a mere human can prepare a meal surely a dragon can do the same." His gaze slides back to touch at Makoto's face before he looks away to what he's doing once more. "I'll have it done by the time you're usually back."

Makoto smiles. "Take your time," he says. "I'm in no hurry." Fafnir ducks his head to try a bite of the rice off the edge of the serving spoon. The shift of his shoulders lets his tied-up hair slide forward off the back of his neck; Makoto can see a few shorter strands left out of the ponytail to curl against the pale line of Fafnir's neck. For a moment Makoto stays where he is, a step away from Fafnir's bowed head and the weight of his attention ghosting against the back of the other's bared neck; then he turns his head and straightens from his lean at the doorway so he can step around Fafnir at the counter to the sink at the other side.

"I can get us something to drink," he volunteers as he reaches for the cabinet so he can draw a pair of cups free. "Do you want some oolong tea or just water?"

"Tea," Fafnir says. The rice seems to have met with his satisfaction, judging from his present efforts to serve it into a heaping portion on each plate; Makoto leaves the assembly of dinner to the other while he slides past to open the fridge and fetch the pitcher of chilled tea so he can pour two glasses for them. Fafnir has one plate ready to serve by the time Makoto is putting the pitcher back away and returning for the cups. He slides it across the counter almost without turning his head to see Makoto before he turns back to the other. "Take that one out."

"Sure," Makoto says, and takes the plate so he can bear it out to the living room. The folding table over which they eat is still set aside against the wall; he sets the plate down on the couch for a minute so he can unfold the table and set it open before replacing the plate on the more secure surface. When he turns back to the kitchen Fafnir is stripping his apron off over his head without bothering with untying it before reaching for the second plate set out on the counter next to him.

"Just grabbing the drinks," Makoto says, and turns sideways to fit past Fafnir so he can claim the cups and follow the other out into the living room. Fafnir comes around the couch to sit in his usual position just barely right of center in front of the television even before he leans forward to set his plate down. Makoto deposits the cups, one in front of each plate, before he comes around the edge of the table to take his own position immediately alongside Fafnir. Fafnir shifts as Makoto sits down, huffing as if he's discomfited by the need to adjust his position, but his leg ends up pressing flush against Makoto's so their shoulders are almost touching, and Makoto doesn't move to pull back to a greater distance.

"*Itadakimasu*," he says, with Fafnir's voice a low echo of his own, and they both reach out for their plates as a single motion. Makoto turns himself immediately to the meal before him so he can try a bite even before Fafnir manages it.

"Oh wow," he says, speaking with some difficulty around the mouthful of food before he manages to swallow and beam at Fafnir. "This turned out really well, Faf-kun!"

Fafnir snorts. "Of course it did," he says, and punctuates with a careful bite from his own plate. "It's hardly a complex undertaking."

"I really appreciate it," Makoto admits as he takes another bite to prove this point. "I don't think I've had someone else cook for me at home since I moved out of my parents' house." He glances sideways at Fafnir, who is still turning his full focus to the plate before him like he isn't even listening to what Makoto is saying. Makoto smiles wider and tips himself very slightly sideways to bump his shoulder against Fafnir's. "Do you think you'll be making a habit of it?"

Fafnir *tsks* and takes a rather enormous bite of his curry, which he chews and swallows before tossing his head and answering. "I just wanted to get started on tonight's raid earlier. There's new content that opened up this afternoon and I don't want to have to wait another day because you're too tired to play."

The odds of this actually happening are, Makoto thinks, about as likely as he is to spontaneously develop a dragon form of his own to match the one he glimpsed in the first moment of meeting Fafnir; but he doesn't say so. Instead he smiles at Fafnir and looks back to the plate he is holding in his lap.

"We can start as soon as we're done with dinner," he promises, and takes another bite of the curry. There's a beat of silence as he chews and swallows; when he takes another breath to speak it is with his gaze fixed on the plate in front of him and his voice as light as he can get it. "I like your hair like that too, Faf-kun." He tips his head to look sideways so he can flicker a smile in answer to the stare this gets him from Fafnir himself. "It looks nice tied up."

Fafnir stares at Makoto smiling at him for a minute. When he turns away it is all at once, a quick jerk of his head that swings his bangs in front of his face to curtain his expression away from Makoto's view. "It's just to keep it out of the way," he says sharply, his voice cutting from behind the shadow blocking his features.

"I know," Makoto says without any answering heat. He looks back to his plate and carefully clears his throat as he collects another bite for himself. "What are the reward tiers looking like in the new raid?"

It's a moment before Fafnir answers, and even then it takes a few more gentle questions before the tension of self-consciousness has worked itself free from his voice and he's speaking with some measure of his usual enthusiasm for the subject. Makoto lets him talk, as content to listen as he is to finish enjoying the rest of his dinner. He doesn't mention his gratitude again, and Fafnir doesn't bring it up either, but even when they've set the dishes to dry and Fafnir is starting up his computer while Makoto settles himself in front of his own, Fafnir's hair is still drawn up into that ponytail, and Makoto lets himself sneak a glance back over his shoulder before he turns back to smile at his own screen while he starts up the game for the night's efforts.

## Ally

The Christmas play is better than Makoto was expecting it to be.

He admits to some concern when Fafnir first mentioned the plan, off-hand one evening while he was handing a soapy plate to Makoto to rinse and set to dry in the rack alongside the sink. Makoto knows Fafnir well enough by now to trust to the other's relative self-control when it comes to public performances, at least; but the weeks he has now had working with Elma have convinced him of her good intentions, and sincere effort, and general incompetence in everything she does that wanders too far from her favorite pursuit of consuming every variety of human food she can get her hands on. Makoto hasn't forgotten Tohru's transformation in front of him the very first night they met, with no consideration to the codes of secrecy that Fafnir has since informed him certainly exist, and with Tohru as a guiding influence Makoto isn't at all sure in Lucoa or Kanna's ability or willingness to restrain the varied group to a reasonably human level of performance.

He was right to doubt in their restraint, as it turns out; but he rather thinks the end result is the better for it. Certainly the plot is scattered, featuring demons and fairies and dragons and ronin with no consideration at all for the various stories that are being stirred together based, so far as Makoto can tell, on each actor's personal preference in costume and ability to recite or improvise their lines, and there is more than one open flame on stage at various points in the performance, which draws Makoto's attention to the nearest emergency exit and fire extinguisher, just to be more safe than sorry. But the flames remain contained, by luck or magic or both, and what displays of true magic there are are met with smiles and applause from an audience happy to assume these to be no more than remarkably detailed expressions of stagecraft. By the time a plume of real, brilliant fire erupts from Tohru's mouth to be met with *oohs* of delight instead of panic from the crowd, Makoto has decided that there is nothing the cast can do that will sufficiently alarm their audience into real worry, and that means the best he can do is appreciate the show himself. It's certainly true that the cobbled-together plot is made vastly more engaging by the displays of real magic flickering across the stage from Tohru, and Elma, and Kanna, and sometimes even Fafnir, during one of his resonant monologues, until by the time the cast have shuffled out for a final bow from all but Fafnir glaring at the end of the line Makoto is clapping as enthusiastically as anyone else in the audience, with the addition of a whistling cheer for good measure.

He waits with Kobayashi, afterwards. It's warmer inside but more crowded, too, and with their winter jackets on it's comfortable enough even in the crisp December air to wait by the gate for their friends to emerge from inside. Kobayashi takes the lead to the front entrance to the nursing home, her gaze distant and a smile that Makoto thinks is unconscious tugging at the corner of her mouth. Makoto suspects her to be reliving some of the more spectacular details of the last hour's performance and he doesn't intrude on her thoughts; better to fall into place alongside her, standing by the front gate where they won't be missed when their thespian friends emerge from their more-or-less elaborate costumes.

They stand in silence for a span of time. Kobayashi is lost in her own thoughts, judging from the glaze in the focus she is ostensibly turning on the sidewalk running in front of the building; for his part Makoto finds himself looking back towards the doors through which they left, watching for the first sign of their friends returning to them. They form a large group, he is as likely to hear them approaching as to see them as they open the door to spill out into the cool air, but all his careful logic can't keep him from glancing back at every half-seen shadow in his periphery, as if he is expecting Fafnir to materialize into the space just over his shoulder with the eerie grace suggested by his appearance. Finally Makoto turns away from the street entirely to fix his gaze on the doors to the nursing home behind them, and sets his hands in his pockets and his shoulders steady under

his coat to wait out the arrival of the others. They stay like that for another minute, Makoto looking in and Kobayashi gazing out; then Kobayashi shakes her head like she's returning to the present moment, and takes a sharp breath as if she is forcing herself back to reality before looking back to the door. "They're still not out?"

Makoto shakes his head. "Not yet," he says. "I guess it takes a while to get out of some of those costumes, unless they magicked them all on in the first place."

Kobayashi snorts. "They might have," she says. "I don't know how Lucoa got her top to stay on with anything other than magic." Makoto smiles by way of answer and Kobayashi turns away from the street to look back towards the building along with him. They are quiet for a moment of comfortable peace; then Kobayashi takes another breath and continues speaking. "That was kind of a mess, wasn't it?"

"Mm," Makoto hums. "It was, a bit." He tips his head to the side, his smile going wider as he reflects. "I liked it, though. It was more fun than a straightforward story would have been."

"Huh," Kobayashi huffs. "It was, wasn't it?" Makoto glances sideways at her but she's not looking at him; her gaze is turned towards the door of the building, along with the curve of the smile shaping her mouth to nearly as much softness as is in her eyes. "I guess that's something."

Makoto nods. "I think so," he says. He looks away from Kobayashi and back to the doors. There's still no sign of Fafnir any more than any of the others, but the cool of the air is crisp against Makoto's nose and cheeks and he's happy to be patient for a while longer. "Do you have any plans with Tohru for Christmas Eve?"

Kobayashi shrugs, a motion made more eloquent by the weight of the heavy coat bundled around her. "Nothing official," she says. "I wanted to invite everyone over to celebrate the end of the performance. Tohru and Kanna have been working on this for weeks."

Makoto hums agreement. "Fafnir too," he says. "Not that he wants anyone to know that. But he's been practicing his lines in the other room while I'm in the bath, I think."

Kobayashi laughs. "He really does care about these kinds of things, doesn't he?"

Makoto smiles. "He does, yeah."

There's another pause of silence before Kobayashi coughs against the cold in the air and reaches to pull her glasses off her face so she can worry over them with the end of her scarf. She keeps her head ducked forward over the work of her hands when she clears her throat and speaks without looking up at Makoto next to her. "It's going alright then? You and Fafnir?"

Makoto looks back to the doors in front of them, his attention drawn inevitably back to focus on his currently-absent roommate. Even without Fafnir here with him, the thought of the other is enough to flush across Makoto's cheeks and tug at the smile at his lips to curve it to giveaway radiance, if there were anyone currently looking to see his reaction. It takes him a minute before he can collect himself to an answer, and when he does he makes no attempt at all to disguise the soft affection curving at his lips and glowing in his voice. "Things with Faf-kun are great."

Kobayashi looks up sharply at Makoto next to her. Makoto glances back to meet the direct surprise in her gaze, a little unfocused with the absence of her glasses but still perfectly clear to read. He lets her see him smiling, albeit with the expression gone a little lopsided on self-consciousness, and after a moment she is the one to pull away and stare blankly at the door again.

“Ah,” she says, and takes another inattentive swipe at her glasses with her scarf. She blinks before looking up at Makoto again, just once, before ducking her head so she can replace her glasses. There’s a beat of stillness before Kobayashi coughs deliberately and clears her throat. “Well. That’s great.”

Makoto laughs. “You’re surprised.”

“I’m--” Kobayashi starts, and then catches herself back. Makoto watches her work through her thoughts before she starts over again. “I didn’t know if he’d get along with you.”

“Me neither,” Makoto admits. “I’m glad he does.”

“Me too,” Kobayashi says. “Really glad.” She pauses, like she’s thinking over the sound of her words only as she hears them, before she nods. “That’s great. I’m happy for you.”

Makoto smiles. “Thanks.”

Kobayashi clears her throat again. Makoto doesn’t need to look at her to know that she’s coloring with the start of embarrassment. “You, uh. Don’t have to hang out with the rest of us tonight.” She reaches to push her glasses a little higher up the bridge of her nose. “If you have plans together. It is Christmas Eve.”

Makoto laughs at that, without any attempt to ease the sound back from breaking bright and warm in the wintry air around them. “Let’s hang out together,” he says. “If we go back now we’ll just end up playing video games all night anyway. It’ll be good to spend some time with friends.” He shrugs. “Besides, there’s always the rest of the night. It’s not like we’ll split up to go home.”

Kobayashi huffs a laugh. “I guess not,” she says. “Good. It’ll be more fun with you both there.”

“Mm,” Makoto hums. He lets the quiet spread for a minute, warm with the understanding between them, before he draws a breath to speak with casual unconcern. “What about you and Tohru?”

Kobayashi startles as if he’s shocked her, her head whipping around so she can stare at Makoto with open surprise before she corrects herself to look strictly forward instead. It doesn’t do anything to hide the color seeping red across her face, though. “What?” she says, in a tone that makes her sound more than a little strangled. “What about me and Tohru?”

“It is Christmas Eve,” Makoto says. “You don’t mind having everyone over?”

Kobayashi shakes her head more violently than the gesture requires. “No,” she says. “It’ll be good to spend time with everyone after the play.” She ducks her head, reaching like she’s thinking of stripping her glasses off and hiding in the action of rubbing at the lenses again; Makoto watches her sideways as her fingers still against the frames, stalling out for a moment’s time before she lets her hand drop to her side. Her gaze flickers up, touching to the door where the rest will be emerging, and then she lifts her head, deliberately raising her chin so she can face forward with full intention. “And we’ll have the rest of the night, anyway.”

Makoto smiles. “Alright,” he says, and looks back to the nursing home so he and Kobayashi can fall back into companionable silence while they wait for the rest of their friends, and their respective partners.

## Contact

It's late in the evening by the time Makoto and Fafnir make it back to their apartment from Kobayashi's. The Christmas Eve party had stretched from an array of snacks into a full-course meal, thanks to Tohru's enthusiasm and ever-increasing skill, and with a plentiful array of beer for those attendees old enough to partake Makoto found himself too pleasantly tipsy to mind the passage of hours drifting past. In the end it was Kobayashi falling asleep over the edge of the couch that stirred him to attending the lateness of the hour, and even then it was almost a half hour before Fafnir could be prised away from the marathon session he was making of Kobayashi's game console. By the time they were stepping out from Kobayashi's apartment into the crisp chill of the winter night it was long past sundown, with only a few hours left before Christmas Eve turned the corner to Christmas itself.

Their journey back to their apartment is peaceful. The train is quiet, with more space than usual thanks to the varied plans the other members of the city have taken up for the holiday; there is space enough for both Fafnir and Makoto to sit down in a pair of seats alongside each other. Fafnir spends the ride sitting perfectly upright, with his gaze fixed straight ahead and his mouth set into the habitual frown that makes him look judgmental and resigned at once; for his part Makoto is happy to relax against the seat behind him and let the minutes pass uncounted as they carry them home. His attention wanders, eased in its motion by the effect of the alcohol flushing his cheeks and the drowsiness hazing his thoughts to warm comfort; he gazes at the scenery flickering past in the shadows outside the window, and reads the ads posted along the top edge of the train compartment, and watches one of the other passengers slowly collapse into sleep against the support of the friend sitting next to her. Finally his focus dips to Fafnir next to him, touching to the uninterrupted shadow that spills over the other's shoulders to be drawn into the low ponytail at the middle of his back and skimming the sharp lines of the other's profile that Makoto can just see from his position in his seat. Fafnir doesn't turn to look at him, and doesn't protest even if he notices the attention Makoto is fixing him with, and Makoto spends the latter half of the train ride perfectly content in his present company and his personal appreciation of the same.

Makoto had expected he would be too sleepy when they get home to manage much more than dragging his futon out over the floor and collapsing into the comfort of sleep. But the walk back from the train station is cold enough to chase away the drowsy warmth that saturated the train car, and by the time he is holding open the door for Fafnir to take the lead inside some measure of his daytime energy has returned, along with his enthusiasm for their usual pursuits. Makoto is the one who suggests they take on one of the boss battles in Fafnir's favorite online game, and Fafnir is quick to give a sharp nod of agreement, and so it is that they spend the time remaining before the start of Christmas Day invested in the clash of animated swords and the shouts of combat doubled over between two sets of speakers. By the time Makoto's exhaustion has mustered itself for another bid towards sleep they are a half hour into the new day, and he is so far gone towards sleep that it is hard even to offer his excuses for the jaw-creaking yawns that have taken over him.

"Sorry," he says, lifting a hand over his mouth to cover yet another such as he pushes back from the log-off animation playing across his screen as he departs the game he's been wrapped in for the last hour. "If I keep playing I'm going to fall asleep right over my keyboard."

"It's fine," Fafnir says, in the flat tone that is the closest he comes to reassurance. "You have tomorrow off too, we can play more then."

Makoto smiles at Fafnir's shoulders, since the other is still turned in to continue playing his own character through the solo content in the game. "That's true," he says. "I'll just go and change and



be right back.”

Makoto doesn't bother with the indulgence of a bath. He's had plenty of time to warm up since their brief walk home from the train station, and with the absorption of the video game absent he finds himself so sleepy it's hard to stay awake even to brush his teeth and pull on the long-sleeved shirt he'll wear to bed. He'd fall asleep in the bath if he tries to take one, likely not waking until the morning with the water gone cold and a crick in his neck, and Makoto thinks he'd rather adopt the comfort of his usual position stretched out on the study floor behind the constant rhythm of Fafnir's keyboard. So he limits himself to the bare minimum of bedtime preparation before he slides the door open so he can return to the study where he left Fafnir leaning in over his own game.

Fafnir is still in his seat, looking as focused on the game now as he did when Makoto left. Makoto would think he hadn't moved at all, except that the futon that is usually stored in the corner of the room has been unrolled over the floor between their computer desks and a comforter and pillow are spread out over the top of it.

Makoto smiles at this consideration and steps around the far edge of the bed so he can drop the armful of his clothes into the hamper. “Thanks, Faf-kun.” Fafnir snorts dismissal instead of acknowledging this gratitude and Makoto doesn't push the subject. He drops his clothes in the pile to be washed when he next has a chance and reaches for the *happi* he wears over his pajamas for the extra layer of warmth against the nighttime cool of the apartment. He pulls the loose sleeves up over his shoulders and is just knotting the tie in the front when the soft hum of the world seems to dampen and quiet to perfect peace.

It takes Makoto a moment to realize what's happened. There's still the sound of Fafnir's keyboard tapping under the motion of his fingers to fill the inside of the apartment with the activity so familiar Makoto hardly even notices it anymore; beyond that it takes him a minute to think of outside, where the soft murmur of distant cars or the train at the station blocks away usually form a faint layer of white noise so constant he can't even hear them unless the sound is deliberately drawn to his attention. The absence of it is more startling than its presence, enough that even his sleepy attention is drawn into as much focus as he can manage under the circumstances, and he's just starting to look up when Fafnir says “Takiya,” from the computer desk. Makoto looks around to the other, turning to see just as Fafnir taps into the pause screen for his game so he can lift a hand to point silently out the window. Makoto looks, recognition still lagging behind in his thoughts, and then he sees the flakes of white drifting on the far side of the glass and he huffs a breath of pleased realization.

“Oh,” he says. “It's snowing” and he steps forward around the edge of the futon to lean in and look out the window over Fafnir's computer desk.

The weather has only just changed, Makoto thinks. The ground outside is still gray, not yet holding to the flakes that are drifting from the sky to float gently towards the earth below; but the snow is filling the air, falling thickly enough even as Makoto looks that he's sure there will be a layer of white coating all the ground outside by the morning. It's the snow that is muffling the outside sounds, holding them at arm's-length to wrap the apartment in a bubble of its own peace, and even the usual hum of Fafnir's gameplay has stopped for the moment, as he looks up to gaze out the same window Makoto is leaning towards. The apartment is very still with Fafnir's distraction; Makoto can hear the sound of his breathing, can even pick out the soft rhythm of Fafnir's matching his own if he listens for it.

“It's beautiful,” he says, still looking out the window at the wandering paths the snowflakes are making in the air as they fall from the clouds above to the ground below.

Fafnir huffs an exhale of answer. "It's a white Christmas."

Makoto laughs. "Yeah," he says. "I guess it is." He smiles out at the falling snow, feeling the peace of the moment settle contentment deep into every part of his exhausted body. "Merry Christmas, Faf-kun."

There's a pause. Makoto isn't really expecting a response; if anything, Fafnir is likely to content himself with a snort or a scoffing breath to acknowledge and dismiss the well wishes at one and the same time. But for a moment there is silence instead, drawn taut with anticipation, and when Fafnir speaks it's all at once, in a clear, deliberate tone like he's anxious to make sure the words carry clearly to Makoto. "Merry Christmas, Takiya."

Makoto looks back from the window. Fafnir is still sitting at his computer desk, his chair pushed in close to the keyboard in front of him; but his hands are in his lap, now, instead of hovering expectantly over the controls for his paused game, and he has his gaze lifted so his one visible eye is focused full on Makoto leaning over the desk next to him. He doesn't look away when Makoto looks back at him, doesn't duck his head or grimace into the distraction of a frown; he just goes on looking, his expression made warm by unusual neutrality as he meets Makoto's gaze directly.

They are still like that for a moment. Makoto has a hand up to touch at the edge of the curtains pulled back from the glass at the window; he's leaning forward over the support of the desk in front of him. Fafnir doesn't look away when Makoto straightens to stand in front of him; he doesn't blink when Makoto lets his hand drop to his side, doesn't move when Makoto reaches out past his shoulder to brace his grip at the back of Fafnir's chair. He stays still when Makoto lifts his hand to brush against the weight of dark hair falling over half Fafnir's features, goes on gazing as Makoto bends forward to lean in over Fafnir in his computer chair. It's only in the last moment as Makoto draws closer that Fafnir's gaze flickers, and then it is only to drop from his eyes to his mouth in the moment before Makoto tips his head and fits his lips gently to the shape of Fafnir's own.

Fafnir's mouth is soft against Makoto's. Makoto had half-expected the strain of tension, some afterimage of the frown that Fafnir holds to his lips with such determined force; but Fafnir has let it go free, or maybe never had it at all, since their return from Kobayashi's apartment. His lips are warm, his mouth pliant under the gentle press of Makoto kissing him; even when Makoto drops his hand to skim his knuckles just along the sharp edge of Fafnir's jawline, Fafnir only lifts his chin a little higher to ease further into the work of Makoto's mouth on his. Makoto lingers for a long moment, the world gone breathlessly still around him; and then there is a rustle of crisp fabric shifting, and the friction of long fingers reaching to cradle the back of Makoto's neck and hold him where he is. Fafnir's hand settles against Makoto's head, his fingers reaching to steady over the other's hair, and Makoto can feel the heat of the touch against his scalp tremble down his spine and flush into the whole of his body. His fingers against Fafnir's jaw ease to slide in a little closer, to allow for a breath more intimacy, and when Fafnir shifts in his chair Makoto can feel the motion as the other leaning in towards him, rocking forward to urge a little more force into the fit of their mouths pressing carefully together.

The apartment is very still when they draw apart. Outside the window the snow is still falling, the first few flakes beginning to stick to the ground where they will collect to drifts by the morning; Fafnir's monitor is still bright with the pause screen of his game, waiting patiently for his attention to return to it. Makoto can feel the force of his heart pounding in his chest, thudding hard with the adrenaline he has found against the heat of Fafnir's mouth; Fafnir's hand against his head is tight for the first moment, bracing hard as if to hold Makoto where he is before Makoto hears Fafnir huff an exhale and deliberately loosen his hand so it can slide away and to his lap. Makoto follows Fafnir's lead and lets his touch draw back from the weight of the dark hair half-covering the other's face; after another heartbeat he leans against his hand at the desk so he can straighten to

stand over his own feet instead of leaning far into Fafnir sitting in front of him. Fafnir watches him move, his one visible eye tracking Makoto with a focus as intense as it is unreadable, but Makoto's lips are still hot with the touch of Fafnir's, his neck is still glowing with the print of Fafnir's fingers, and when he looks at Fafnir the only thing he can offer to the other's inscrutable gaze is a helplessly soft smile.

"I'll get back online as soon as I get up," Makoto says, by means of gesturing vaguely to the conversation they were having in the space before their step from implicit into overt romance. His voice is a little weak but he doesn't try to strengthen it; he just lets his smile go sheepish by way of explanation as he lifts his hand to push his hair behind his ear and trail the gesture to the back of his neck, where Fafnir's fingers pressed such warmth against his skin. Fafnir's gaze tracks the motion, following the movement of Makoto's wrist before his attention jumps back to Makoto's face, touching at the other's smile before returning to his eyes, and Makoto beams back at him. "I'll just get a few hours of sleep." He lifts his hand to gesture vaguely towards the futon laid out next to him as he takes a step towards it without looking away from Fafnir. "Thanks again for putting out the futon."

Fafnir snorts and pivots away to give his profile to Makoto's lingering attention. "It's nothing," he says. There's a pause as he reaches for his mouse and moves to resume his game; and then, as Makoto is turning to the futon: "Good night," with the words coming fast like he's rushing to get them out.

Makoto doesn't look back to Fafnir at the computer desk, but his smile still spreads wide over his face all the same. "Yeah," he says, and steps forward so he can kneel at the edge of the futon to draw the comforter back. "Good night, Faf-kun." He settles himself between the comforter and the mattress, turning to wrap himself in the warmth of the blanket, and Fafnir reaches to turn off the overhead light before Makoto can ask. Makoto tips his head to look up at Fafnir sitting in front of the glow of the computer and watch while he fits his headphones on before restarting his game; then he closes his eyes to the familiar glow, and lets the quiet of the Christmas snowfall and the soft rhythm of Fafnir's fingers on the keys lull him seamlessly from one dream into another.

## Mode

Makoto makes the most of the time he has off work for his winter break. He has been looking forward to the vacation promised by the end of the year since the marathon of project work that hit at the end of October; now that it is finally here he has every intention of doing precisely what he most wants to do for the days and nights of free time he has available to him. He wakes up on Christmas afternoon, having slept right through the whole of the morning, and after a vague gesture towards consciousness via a morning shower he takes up his position in front of his own computer, with a handful of mandarins half-peeled and set out in front of him to allow for easy consumption of a slice or two during loading screens. By the time he has to stop for dinner the mandarins are gone and he and Fafnir have cleared a half-dozen of the quests that have been waiting on Makoto's presence, and Makoto has every intention of closing out a full dozen before he collapses into his futon to sleep that night.

They don't talk about the night before. Makoto doesn't bring it up, and Fafnir doesn't ask about it, and neither of them make any move to revisit the heat of their mouths pressing to each other. Makoto might worry about bringing down Fafnir's judgment with his relatively forward pursuit; but he remembers too clearly the touch of Fafnir's grip at the back of his head for even self-consciousness to convince him his appreciation is one-sided, and he knows Fafnir too well to mistake silence from the other as anything other than the comfort that it has been demonstrated to be. Their mutual quiet on the subject is more a function of understanding than anything else, by all Makoto's estimation, and if Fafnir is content to let that one kiss stand alone for a span of time Makoto is in no hurry himself. He has everything they have had all this time, the comfort of companionship and the pleasure of a friend and the hum of appreciation that seems to be a little warmer, now, than it has been allowed to be before, and Makoto thinks he could live a truly blessed existence with a life precisely like the one he is living now.

They pass days like that, bundled against the cold of the drifting snow by the expedience of remaining entirely inside for the greater part of Makoto's time off work. There is always a game running, either on the television screen while Makoto makes dinner or echoed between their opposing computer monitors or humming in the soft hours of the night as a lullaby to soothe Makoto's sleep and sweeten his dreams with this immediate proof of Fafnir's presence next to him. They take turns in the bath, with Makoto lingering almost as long from comfort as Fafnir does from the necessity of caring for his long hair, and cleaning up after dinner is always a joint process, now, with Fafnir getting to his feet to join Makoto at the sink regardless of who wins the match that they still play as a conclusion to their meal. It's a peaceful existence, one where Makoto can let the days slide by without hanging onto every hour that passes, and if they stand a little closer at the sink, or lean a little nearer over each other's computer desks, or sit pressing close against each other on the couch, neither of them says anything about it or makes any effort to draw away to the original distance they have been slowly untangling over the last months of their acquaintance.

They have to go outside eventually, of course. Makoto is happy to spend days in the seclusion of their apartment, the more so with that company he most appreciates of anyone's, but the days that pass to leave Christmas behind bring the New Year closer, and even the blissful indulgence of days of gameplay eventually leaves Makoto thinking of the rest of their friends, similarly ensconced in their respective homes against the wintery bite of the air. Their vacation must draw to an end eventually, however pleasant the interlude has been, and Makoto isn't so much of a recluse that he's going to stay home from the pleasure to be found at the New Year's Festival. Fafnir will come with him, of course; and it's then that Makoto makes a suggestion, and finds his roommate far more open to the idea than he had expected him to be.

“It’s going to look great,” Makoto says now, as he kneels on the floor behind Fafnir so he can better focus on his efforts to tie the sash around the formal kimono the other is wearing. “I just need to get the last few layers settled.”

Fafnir heaves a sigh that sags his shoulders under the weight of the kimono around him. “This is a great deal of effort,” he declares. “Why are humans so invested in their appearance?”

Makoto hums a laugh in the back of his throat. “I guess we get bored of looking like ourselves all the time,” he says. “It’s like cosplay, you get to dress up and seem like a different person for a little while.” Fafnir huffs at this, sounding deeply unconvinced by Makoto’s claim, but he doesn’t move as Makoto tugs at the edges of the sash to smooth the fabric any more than he did before, and Makoto has no doubt in the other’s ability to put a stop to any pursuit he’s not personally enjoying at least a little.

Makoto stays where he is for another minute, until he’s sure that the sash is secure and the creases are all aligned as they should be. It’s been some time since he last wore this kimono himself, and it’s harder to judge how tight to pull everything when he can’t feel it, but the habit comes back to him as he continues until he’s certain in the final result. He runs his hand across the fabric once more, checking the knot on the sash and the fall of the cloth draped around Fafnir’s shoulders, before he nods satisfaction and braces a hand at the floor to push himself to his feet.

“That should do it,” he says. “Can I see the front?”

Fafnir turns obediently. He is standing in the same position that Makoto set him into originally, with his hands folded in front of him and his expression weighted into the frown that has become so familiar to Makoto over the last months, but the habit is limited to his mouth to leave the rest of his face a mask of handsome neutrality. He stares back at Makoto’s considering gaze without scowling or flinching away, and Makoto smiles at him in answer before he takes a step back to take in the whole of Fafnir’s appearance.

He looks good. Other than the Christmas play Makoto has only ever seen Fafnir in the butler uniform he was wearing when they met, very occasionally with an event *happi* pulled on over it, or sitting in the depths of the bath with no more than his bare shoulders under the weight of his wet hair visible. The kimono he is wearing is restrained, all dark colors and elegant lines, but the change in his clothing is enough to arrest Makoto’s casual familiarity and strike him all over again with the beauty of the other’s features. In his butler uniform Fafnir looks austere, distant and formal and vaguely unsettling, with the weight of his hair to shadow his expression and the crimson of his visible eye to glint the possibility of a demonic undertone to his nature. His hair is the same now, as is the color of his gaze and the set of his expression, but in the weight of a kimono the shadow over his face looks more demure than threatening, and the softened shade of the clothing eases the vivid red of his eye to a gentler hue than the blood-crimson to which Makoto is so accustomed. And there is the simple fact of his appearance, all the elegant details of his features and bearing that have become such a regular part of Makoto’s life brought into renewed focus by the change of a familiar outfit for a new one.

It’s Fafnir who brings Makoto back to himself by the expedience of clearing his throat with more force than his usual half-voiced responses. “Does it look like it’s supposed to?” When Makoto blinks himself back into the moment Fafnir is watching his face, his frown still at his lips but a hint of tension starting to form between his brows as well, and Makoto realizes at once that he’s been left staring in the wake of his own appreciation.

It’s easy to find a smile for himself, even if the expression is warm with more obvious affection than he would have let himself show even a week before, and when he moves it’s to step in and

reach out to press the comfort of a hand to Fafnir's shoulder. "It looks perfect," he says, his voice audibly warm with sincerity. "You look great, Faf-kun. Thanks for trying it on."

Fafnir snorts and tosses his head. "I could have transformed my clothes," he says with only the barest gesture towards frustration in his tone. "It would have been quicker."

"It's not about being quick," Makoto tells him. "Part of the tradition is the process of putting it on." He smooths his hand over the front of the kimono, where the front of the outer layer is pulled into a perfect V over the lighter interior wrapping close around Fafnir's chest. "And it's fun to have you try on my clothes." Makoto looks up to beam at Fafnir. "You look so much better in them than I did."

Fafnir scoffs. "Don't be stupid," he says, sharp like he's issuing an order he fully expects to be obeyed. "They're your clothes. You must look fine in them."

Makoto shrugs. "I look fine," he agrees. "I don't look like you do."

Makoto doesn't mean for the words to come out quite as soft as they do. It's a true statement, after all, not something that necessitates the way his voice dips to open affection over the last words; but his voice has a mind of its own, it seems, and what it does is drift into such obvious warmth that it draws Fafnir's gaze flickering up to seize Makoto's expression like he's seeking proof of such sincerity. Makoto's cheeks warm, glowing into a flush, but he doesn't look away as Fafnir's attention fixes onto his own. He just gazes back, meeting Fafnir's focus with as much honesty as he has to offer. Fafnir stares at him for a long minute, his mouth tightening onto an unthinking frown as they look at each other; and then his lashes flutter, his gaze dips down, and Makoto feels a shiver of adrenaline fit anticipation along the length of his spine.

Fafnir's frown deepens, his forehead creases on tension. For a moment Makoto isn't sure he's going to speak at all; even when he does the word comes fast, almost sharp with the speed he gives to it. "Takiya."

Makoto lets his breath go, feeling the weight of inevitability settle onto his shoulders and hum calm into his thoughts. "Yes."

It's a statement, not a question; he doesn't need to ask to know what Fafnir is saying, not with that crease between the other's brows and the set of his jaw to speak clearly enough. All Makoto needs to give is an answer, and then to stand still and submissive while Fafnir's shoulders tighten on intention and his hands flex in front of him. They stand still for a moment, caught in the middle of the living room by their absolute attention on each other, and then Fafnir takes a step forward, and Makoto is shutting his eyes even before Fafnir is freeing his hands so he can reach up and catch Makoto's head still between his palms. His fingers tangle into Makoto's hair, sliding against the other's scalp to claim traction for himself, and when his hands shift to tilt Makoto's chin up Makoto gives way immediately for the asking, turning his head towards Fafnir's as he lifts a hand to brush his fingertips along the front of his own kimono wrapped to such stately elegance around Fafnir's human form. Fafnir tips his head, his hair brushes Makoto's face, and when his mouth presses to Makoto's Makoto leans in instantly to capitulate to the friction of the other's lips against his once more.

They stand still like that for a minute, with Fafnir's hands fixing Makoto still and Makoto's upraised fingers trailing along that smooth line at the collar of the kimono. Makoto can feel every second passing with impossible slowness, as every part of his mind catalogues the details of Fafnir kissing him: the pressure of the fingertips holding to his head, the heat of Fafnir's lips glowing at his own, the feel of Fafnir's breathing spilling hot over his cheek. Everything is vital, essential in the moment even as his heart beats faster with that expectant adrenaline and his skin prickles with

overwhelming awareness of every inch of his body.

Then Fafnir's jaw shifts, his lips work against Makoto's, and Makoto's mouth opens without his intention, without his thought, without any time for him to focus before his attention tumbles away to scatter from his suddenly slack grip. He forgets where they are, forgets the time, forgets everything he is thinking, because all there is is the heat of Fafnir's mouth against his, and the burn spreading out through his veins, and a want too long resisted making itself known as an abruptly insistent need. Makoto is reaching for Fafnir's neck, stepping in closer over the careful distance between them, but there is nowhere to go because Fafnir is rocking in too, seeming more to spill over the space to Makoto than to step across it. They're pressed close against each other, Makoto's shirt crushing flush to the careful lines of Fafnir's kimono and Fafnir's fingers clutching as hard at Makoto's hair as Makoto's are tangled into the endless inky spill of Fafnir's, and for a completely unobserved duration they are caught together, pressing as close against each other as they can manage with the limitations of clothing and fundamentally human forms.

Makoto's mouth is burning when they pull apart at last, his lips tingling with such sensation he feels sure they must be flushed as dark as Fafnir's uncovered eye has gone. He thinks about feeling self-conscious about the hand he has fisted into Fafnir's hair, or the hold clutching against the front of the other's clothes, but Fafnir still has both his hands steadying Makoto's head and his gaze trailing the shape of Makoto's mouth, so instead of an apology Makoto musters a smile that returns Fafnir's attention back to his eyes, if only after a moment.

"Well," he says. "I guess that answers the question of whether you wanted to kiss me again."

Fafnir's expression flickers, his mouth dips towards the outline of a frown for a breath. "You thought I didn't?"

Makoto shakes his head. "No," he says. "I was just wondering if you would before I did." Fafnir huffs an exhale and Makoto laughs, too bright and warm with joy to think of holding it back. "I'm glad I waited." Fafnir makes a low sound and Makoto tips his head and raises his eyebrows. "Are you not, Faf-kun?"

Fafnir's mouth tightens onto a grimace, his head ducks to hide his expression behind his hair. Makoto waits -- he can't do much else, with Fafnir's hands still holding him with uncanny strength -- until Fafnir *tsks* and lifts his chin to toss his hair back from his face.

"We are leaving for the festival soon," he says, his voice crisp enough that Makoto almost doesn't hear the rumble of heat beneath it, thinks he might not at all were he not so close that he can feel the sound thrum against his hand at the front of Fafnir's kimono. Fafnir tips his head to look back at Makoto, just enough so Makoto can see the flicker of crimson at his eye. "No, I am not glad that you waited, Takiya."

"Mm," Makoto hums around the grin trying to spread itself over his whole face. "We'll just have to pick things back up when we get back." He eases his hold on Fafnir's hair; after a moment Fafnir takes the hint and loosens his hold on the other, although his grip holds to enough lingering desire that Makoto has to put some force into his effort to free himself. It's a little easier to breathe with slightly more distance between them, though not by a great deal; Makoto takes an inhale to steady himself, and then another, before he lifts his hand to his hair to tumble the tangled locks back into order and tug his shirt straight on his shoulders. He keeps his head ducked down at what he's doing, but his gaze drifts up to meet Fafnir's still fixed on him. "I'd think an immortal dragon could afford at least as much patience as a mere human."

Fafnir's jaw sets, his chin lifts into haughty self-assurance. "Of course I can," he declares. "I could easily wait for a decade if need be."

“I don’t need that long,” Makoto says. “Just the night. And we’ll be together at the festival anyway.” He glances down at Fafnir’s elegant clothing and feels his smile trying to tug free at the corner of his mouth where he’s tucked it into restraint. “It’ll be kind of like a date.”

Fafnir scoffs at the back of his throat and tosses his head. “Don’t be ridiculous,” he says, though he fails to note which part of this statement, exactly, merits the description. He turns away from Makoto decisively enough that the weight of the kimono around him sweeps an arc through the air as he begins to move towards the door of the apartment. “Hurry up and finish getting ready, Takiya. They’ll be waiting on us.”

Makoto doubts that there is any such rush to get out the door, objectively speaking. But he takes the command for the enthusiasm it is more than the impatience it sounds like, and contents himself with a smile at Fafnir’s turned shoulders instead of a more obvious response. “Sure,” he says instead, and turns to retrieve his jacket to pull on over his shirt. “I’ll be right there.”

Fafnir stays by the door while Makoto finishes getting ready, giving a convincing impression of haughty impatience with the assistance of the kimono wrapped around him, but when Makoto pauses to search for his scarf it’s Fafnir who holds it out towards him without turning to look, and if he doesn’t answer the warmth of Makoto’s “Thank you” he doesn’t snort rejection of it either. Makoto wraps himself in scarf, and jacket, and finally shoes; and then he pulls the door open, and Fafnir holds it for him, and they step out to meet the New Year side by side.



## Radiant

The first project Makoto takes on in the new year is a simple one. He and Fafnir are in the middle of a series of quests in Fafnir's online game, and Makoto has plans to take over the television and do a one-sitting playthrough of his favorite RPG before he returns to work and his more regular evening-and-weekend play time. But the weather has stayed cold since Christmas brought snow with it, and the evening spent at Kobayashi's apartment provided an idea that Makoto intends to act on as quickly as possible, with Fafnir's huffed disregard equivalent to open approval from someone else.

"What about this one?" Makoto asks, stepping forward from where Fafnir is trailing in his wake to touch at the edge of the blanket on the kotatsu he's considering.

Fafnir comes forward to follow the suggestion of Makoto's upraised hand. He's back in his usual butler uniform, with the kimono he wore over New Year's returned to storage where Makoto keeps it the majority of the time; but his retreat to his typical clothing has had no effect on his very recent tendency to stand a little closer to Makoto, without the careful inch of distance they have maintained through the previous months. His sleeve brushes against Makoto's jacket as he leans in to frown attention at the kotatsu; Makoto keeps looking at the furniture rather than at Fafnir, but he can feel the contact glow warmth through him in complete disregard of the winter chill in the air.

Finally Fafnir grimaces and straightens. "I don't like the pattern."

"We can get a plain one," Makoto says. "The blanket is easy to change. I think they even have different styles for the tabletop." He reaches for the tag listing options to look before glancing sideways to smile at Fafnir. "We could get one that's all black, if you want." Fafnir snorts rejection of this idea and turns to walk away, leaving Makoto to laugh and let the card fall so he can hurry in the other's wake.

"So," he says. "That's a no on that one, Faf-kun?"

Fafnir tosses his head. "It's too small."

Makoto glances back. "I guess it is smaller than Kobayashi's," he says. "There are only two of us, though. We could always sit across from each other."

Fafnir scoffs in the back of his throat at this. Makoto looks back to him but Fafnir is on the wrong side for him to see much of the other's face, with his hair falling in front of him. All he has to go on is the stiffly formal set of Fafnir's shoulders, and the tension of his mouth, and the strain at his jaw. It might not have been enough back in the springtime, when they first met at Kobayashi's apartment; by now, Makoto thinks he could read Fafnir's mood solely from the curl of his fingers or the pattern of the dismissive huffs he offers as his default answer to questions. The position of Fafnir where he is says something, when the other is usually careful to keep Makoto in sight rather than hidden behind the weight of his hair, and his head is tipped very slightly to the side, as if he's paying more attention to the dining room sets on the far side of the aisle than to the kotatsu the two of them are ostensibly perusing. Makoto looks at Fafnir for a minute, as much in appreciation of the other's handsome features as out of an actual need to further pick apart the details of his protest, before he turns away to look at the kotatsu and clears his throat to pull Fafnir's attention back.

"What about that one over there?" It's a larger design, as wide across as the fold-out table they use in front of the television for all their meals and deep enough to square off the top surface. Makoto

thinks it's nearly as big as the large kotatsu that Kobayashi shares with Tohru and Kanna. "That would give us a lot more space."

"Hmph," Fafnir says, and turns to follow the gesture of Makoto's arm. Makoto lets him take the lead so he can cross behind the other's path and come in on his far side, where he can sneak glimpses of Fafnir's face as the other frowns at the furniture before him. Makoto watches him for a moment, unobserved or at least without encountering protest, before he looks back to the kotatsu and lifts a hand to gesture.

"There's the same options for the style," he points out. "We can order it to look however you want. I'd have to move the couch back against the wall but if we have this we could just sit around the kotatsu instead of bothering with a separate table."

"Mm," Fafnir says. "It would fit in front of the TV?"

Makoto tips his head to gauge the size. "It should," he says. "And we can always move some of the shelves around if we need to get more space." He glances at Fafnir next to him, who is still frowning at the kotatsu as if he is in the midst of an interrogation. "What do you think, Faf-kun?"

Fafnir glances at Makoto without turning his head. His expression holds steady, fixed to his deliberate frown, but his gaze flickers over Makoto's face, meeting the other's attention before dropping to brush against the smile Makoto is turning on him before he looks back to the kotatsu and jerks his chin into a short nod. "Do what you want."

Makoto knows how to recognize a *yes* from Fafnir when he hears it. "Alright," he says, and reaches to touch his fingers just to the line of the other's shoulder. "I'll go get one of the salespeople while you pick out the style." Fafnir nods in agreement and Makoto goes to follow through on his own promise. By the time he has returned Fafnir is holding the card for the options and ready to give his answer without any hesitation; he doesn't go with black, after all, but instead with a lighter finish for the table and a dark blue blanket to drape around it. Makoto makes the payment, and arranges for a delivery later in the day, and by the time he is pocketing his receipt Fafnir is hovering at his shoulder again with visibly increasing anxiety to return to the apartment. Makoto thanks the saleswoman, and fastens his jacket back up against the cold, and they emerge onto the street to take on the walk back home through the sun-brilliant chill of the wintery air.

"I'm glad they can bring it by so soon," Makoto says as he and Fafnir fall into step with each other along the sidewalk. "If we move the rest of the furniture back a little ways we should be able to have everything set up by this evening."

Fafnir huffs. "In time for dinner?"

"Should be," Makoto says. He lifts his head to look up at the sky overhead: a brilliant, clear blue, without a trace of the stormclouds that floated snow down onto the city just a week before. The air is still cold enough that his breath mists to fog as he exhales, but it's a short enough walk home that Makoto is glad to appreciate the fresh air instead of tensing against the chill reddening his nose and the tips of his ears. For his part, Fafnir looks as perfectly put together as always, without so much as a flush to acknowledge the cold in the air; he looks as comfortable in the frost as he did at summer Comiket, when his black attire made him look like a walking shadow in the humid heat. Makoto watches him for a moment, appreciating the familiar details of the other's appearance, from his perfectly smooth hair to his crisp coat to his stoic expression, before he looks back to the sidewalk in front of them and heaves a sigh of satisfaction.

"I'm sure glad I had you with me to pick that out," he says. "I would have chosen the first one if I were on my own, I think."

Fafnir snorts. "The first one was far too small."

"You're completely right," Makoto says. "I was thinking about it wrong at first. It'll be much better to be able to share a side together."

Makoto can see Fafnir's head turn in his periphery as the other swings around to frown at him. He keeps walking forward himself without slowing his pace or missing a step, but he lets his gaze slide sideways to touch Fafnir's eyes as his lips curve towards the start of a smile. Fafnir stares at him for a moment, his expression smoothed to perfect unreadability, before he turns his head sharply to look at the street with a snort. "You're ridiculous, Takiya."

Makoto beams at Fafnir, undeterred by this flourish of put-upon disinterest. "I know," he says. He looks away from Fafnir's face and back to the sidewalk in front of them at the same time he slides his hand free from his pocket to let it hang in the space between them, where his sleeve and Fafnir's are brushing against each other. Fafnir looks down to track the movement -- Makoto can see the motion in the swing of the other's hair -- but Makoto doesn't look to Fafnir's face, or down to the gap between their hands. "So do you want to move furniture when we get home, or do you want to go in for a raid or two to start?"

There's a momentary pause from Fafnir next to him. Then he lifts his head to look forward, and takes a step that carries him into slightly more of a slant than his straight-ahead progress. His arm presses to Makoto's, their sleeves pin close to each other, and between them their hands bump against each other, knuckles brushing to the suggestion of connection without quite interlacing.

"We should do a game first," Fafnir says decisively. "To decide who moves the couch."

"Hmm," Makoto hums. "Alright. But the winner makes dinner after the delivery arrives."

"Hmph," Fafnir says. "Obviously."

Makoto doesn't turn his head to look at the other's expression, and if Fafnir glances at him he does it so carefully that Makoto doesn't notice. But their hands stay pressing together in spite of the slight differences in their strides, lingering in the contact without quite shifting to clasp together, and even when they are coming into sight of their apartment complex, Makoto's fingers are glowing warm with total disregard for the chill in the air around them.

## Downtime

Makoto is almost asleep by the time Fafnir comes out of the bathroom. He had intended to stay up, maybe even to muster the focus to play through one more co-op level before he collapsed into bed; but no sooner had Fafnir shut the door behind him than Makoto had found himself gripped by an enormous yawn that seemed to take all his focus with it. His first day back at work has left him exhausted in a way that he had forgotten over the span of the winter holiday, and in the end the effort needed to power down his computer and arrange the futon on the floor is enough to be nearly painful in the few minutes he has to stay awake to manage it. He leaves the light on overhead in an effort to keep himself awake until he can wish Fafnir a good night and leave the other to fill the hours till morning with his solo pursuits, but even with this consideration he is drifting through the haze of dreams when the sound of the bathroom door coming open jolts him into something vaguely like consciousness again.

Makoto stirs in the blankets, turning to look up at the light as he blinks in an effort to focus himself. From around the corner there is the sound of the bathroom fan turning off, followed immediately by approaching footsteps. Fafnir appears in the doorway, fully dressed in his usual black uniform, with only the towel around his shoulders and his wet hair to speak to his recent bath. He looks to the computer first, where Makoto was sitting when he left, and then immediately down to the bed spread out over the floor. "Takiya."

Makoto smiles up at him. "Sorry, Faf-kun." He pauses to yawn hugely, only managing to lift his hand to cover his mouth for the last half of the reaction. "The day caught up with me. I'll have to put off the next level until tomorrow."

Fafnir snorts. "You'll need to be at your best for us to win," he says. "I'm in no hurry."

"Right," Makoto says. "Eternal dragon, huh?" He yawns again and turns over onto his side so he can settle closer into the pillow beneath him. "You can leave the light on if you want. It didn't keep me awake like I wanted it to, you might as well get some benefit out of it."

Makoto can hear the scoff of Fafnir's exhale. "Why would you stay awake?"

"Mm," Makoto hums without opening his eyes. "I wanted to say goodnight, Faf-kun." His yawn is a little smaller this time as he turns to nuzzle closer into his pillow. "Goodnight."

Makoto doesn't hear an answer. He doesn't hear anything at all, in fact, either one of Fafnir's usual huffs or the pace of the other moving to step in behind him and take up his position at his computer desk. Makoto wonders if Fafnir is waiting for more, if he should lift his head to see if the other is still standing looking down at him, but then there's a *click*, and the light overhead shuts off to drop the room into the usual shadows illuminated by the blue glow of Fafnir's monitor. Makoto smiles into the dark of his shut eyes, touched by this consideration, but he doesn't say anything to acknowledge it and potentially embarrass Fafnir. He sighs an exhale, feeling his body easing into the weight of relaxation against the support of the mattress beneath him, and then there's the sound of a button clicking, and the soft whir of electronics that has become the backdrop to Makoto's sleep shuts off to silence more startling than the faint sound.

Makoto opens his eyes and turns to look at the desk, but with the computer off the room is darker than he is used to and his eyes aren't adjusted enough to let him see anything. He pushes up onto his elbow, his overwhelming drowsiness set enough aside by the surprise of the moment to urge him upright in an effort to regain some awareness. "Faf-kun?" Makoto lifts his hand from his side, reaching out into the darkness that has been made startlingly absolute, and fingers catch around his

own, a hand clasps tight against his to hold it still.

“Yes.” Fafnir’s voice seems very loud in the dark of the room, even though he’s speaking more softly than Makoto is used to hearing him. “I’m still here, Takiya.”

Makoto lifts his free hand out in the direction of the other’s voice. His fingers brush Fafnir’s jaw before coming up to follow the curve of his ear, where the weight of his still-damp hair is pushed back over his shoulder. It’s been left untied to spill down his back, although he’s done something with the towel that was draped around his shoulders, and his clothes are different too, Makoto finds as his hand finds a softer texture than Fafnir’s usual crisp jacket waiting for him. The fabric is thinner, silky-smooth under Makoto’s touch and wrapping around the other’s shoulders to button up the front to a soft collar that comes to a V just between his collarbones. Makoto feels out the edges of it with his fingertips as his eyes adjust to the darkness, until he can see Fafnir in a monochrome of pale skin and dark pajamas that blend with the shadow of his hair in the faint illumination. His face is half-covered, and it’s impossible to see any details in his expression, but he’s not pulling away from the weight of Makoto’s touch against him, and he remains kneeling at the blankets draped over the futon as Makoto traces his new clothing by touch more than sight. Finally Makoto lets his free hand fall into his lap and smiles into the shadows of the room. “Did you get tired of your other clothes?”

Fafnir huffs a soft exhale. In the quiet of the room Makoto imagines he can feel the weight of the breath flickering over his skin. “They’re not made for sleeping.”

Makoto hesitates for a moment, wondering if he shouldn’t just let this comment carry the weight of its implications unacknowledged. But Fafnir’s hand is still tight around his, pressing force like he’s waiting for Makoto’s action, and so Makoto takes a breath and speaks as lightly as he can. “I thought you didn’t need to sleep?”

“I don’t,” Fafnir says at once, with as much force as if Makoto had accused him of some inherent weakness instead of an essential part of human life. “It’s not a necessity for dragons.” He tosses his head; Makoto can see the motion in the shift of darkness that makes up the weight of the other’s hair. “We can choose when we wish to indulge in it.”

“Ah,” Makoto says. “And you want to?”

Fafnir snorts. “Obviously.”

Makoto doesn’t know if Fafnir can see better in the dark than he can. He tips his head to the side and smiles in the direction of the other, just in case, and when he speaks the tension of amusement is audible on his voice. “Are you saying I’ve become more interesting than video games, Faf-kun?”

There’s a rumble of sound, low enough to be called a growl even before Fafnir claims words for himself. “Don’t push your luck, Takiya.”

Makoto laughs. “Okay,” he says, and shifts his hand in Fafnir’s hold to clasp his fingers around the other’s hand as well. When he pulls Fafnir leans closer without protest, in spite of his frustration, and Makoto reaches out to orient himself with a hand against the back of Fafnir’s head so he can find Fafnir’s mouth with his own. Fafnir is frowning as Makoto kisses him, holding the strain of irritation against his lips, but it disintegrates as quickly as Makoto shifts closer against him, melting to warmth as Makoto slides his arm around Fafnir’s shoulders and leans in for more. Fafnir’s hand braces against Makoto’s back, pressing hard enough to pull the other in against him, and when his lips part Makoto opens his mouth in answering surrender.

With the distraction of Fafnir's hands holding him steady and Fafnir's mouth pressing to his own, it takes Makoto somewhat longer to get to bed than he thought it would. It's something of a struggle to get themselves horizontal across the futon, and then another effort to disentangle Fafnir from the mess he's made of the blanket so they are both beneath it instead of knotted around it, and then the temptation is too great for Makoto to do anything but wrap an arm around Fafnir's shoulders and linger in another round of kissing gone slow and soft with drowsiness.

In the end sleep comes for him before he's ready to give in, sweeping up to claim his consciousness while he's still distantly considering the possibilities of having Fafnir in his bed and with far less clothing than he usually has on. Makoto finds himself startling awake from a half-formed dream, lifting his head from the pillow with a vague and overwhelming sense of something left undone. He blinks into the darkness of the room, feeling disoriented and dizzy in his own confusion, and from the shadows there is an incoherent growl, and an arm reaches out to wind around his waist.

"It's the middle of the night," Fafnir's voice declares from where he has half-buried himself underneath the weight of the comforter laid across them both. "Go to *sleep*, Takiya."

Makoto blinks at the room around him, picking out familiarity from the darkness that seems strangely absolute without the blue nightlight of the computer monitor to which he has grown accustomed. There's the door to the living room, the chair of his desk pushed in close, the height of the bookshelf; it's only Fafnir's desk that is strange, silent and still without its habitual occupant. Then he looks down, to the shadows that have collected themselves into the shape of Fafnir alongside him, pressing close to share the span of the futon and the cover of the comforter at once. Fafnir's head is turned down against the pillow, his hair falling over his face as he makes no effort to lift it; as Makoto gazes at him the arm around his waist loosens and reaches up so Fafnir's hand catches against the side of his neck and tugs insistently.

"You said you were tired," he grumbles into the blankets piled around them. "It'll wait until the morning. Come to bed."

Makoto smiles into the darkness. "Right," he says, and lets Fafnir's hold pull him back down to the bed. Fafnir's arm slides around his shoulders to draw him in closer, as if the other intends to hold him down by force, and Makoto lets himself be pulled in until his hair is brushing the weight of Fafnir's next to him, until he can reach out to drape his arm around Fafnir's waist. "Goodnight, Faf-kun." Fafnir huffs in answer to this, and turns his face down farther against the pillow, and Makoto shuts his eyes, and lets himself be carried smoothly into dreams.

## Test Run

Makoto finds himself playing far fewer video games after the winter holiday is over.

He expected some measure of that, of course. He has much less time to spend at home when the greater part of his day is occupied with work, and in the first month back in the office there is enough to catch up on that he stays late more days than he doesn't. And his downtime is busier, too, with a social circle that seems to be constantly expanding thanks to the addition of new draconic arrivals and the expanding group of friends that the existing members bring with them. Makoto is happy to spend an evening over drinks with Kobayashi, or eating one of Tohru's expansive meals, or rewarding Elma for a job well done with as many taiyaki as she can hold. Games can wait, even if those have become a more social undertaking than they once were with the addition of Fafnir in his life, and sharing an apartment means that they are hardly likely to miss each other for more than a handful of hours at once. But even when Makoto is at home, with Fafnir ready to make the most of his company, they have lately been finding other things to do with their time.

Makoto isn't about to complain. He has spent the greater part of the last months appreciating Fafnir's presence in silence and as much self-restraint as he could muster; the ever-increasing allowance they are finding for indulging in each other's company is a pleasure so keen as to feel a relief every time Makoto reaches to stroke Fafnir's hair back over his shoulder or stretches to smooth his hand over the front of the other's dark jacket. And he's hardly the only one initiating. Fafnir hovers in the kitchen when Makoto is making dinner, now, often so close that they bump into each other whenever one or the other of them turns, and on more than one occasion Makoto has been grateful that his cooking tends towards the microwave instead of the oven, when Fafnir ducked his head in for a kiss that Makoto turned to meet and they found themselves losing a half hour or more against the edge of the countertop. It can take over an hour to make a meal that used to take fifteen minutes to prepare, and Makoto finds himself flushed and breathless by the time they make it to the kotatsu they have set up in place of a dining table. They eat with as much haste now as they used to, with the same complete focus from them both on the meal before them; but they reach for each other instead of for the game controllers as soon as their bowls are empty, until sometimes Makoto spends the entire evening too occupied to so much as power up his computer or turn the television on.

The kotatsu is their preferred location, lately. Fafnir is making a habit of coming to bed with Makoto, although he doesn't make it every night; but Makoto isn't sure how much of the other's presence is an offer and how much it is a desire for innocent affection, and his own need for sleep provides a compelling argument to keep their late-night interludes relatively chaste. But the earlier part of the evenings have no such limitations, and as the days go by Makoto finds them both drifting towards increasing intensity during the time they spend making out under the warmth of the kotatsu.

They only barely made it through dinner, tonight. Makoto had hardly set his empty bowl down at the edge of the table before Fafnir was leaning in towards him, and his murmur of gratitude over the meal was more than a little rushed by his desire to turn in and meet Fafnir's mouth with his own. Fafnir urged in against him at once, sliding his tongue past Makoto's willing lips to claim the heat of the other's mouth for his own, and when his arm caught around Makoto's waist Makoto dropped back with ready surrender to the floor. Fafnir followed him in, hardly breaking from Makoto's mouth even as they toppled down, and that's where they have been since, with Fafnir bracing Makoto still underneath him while he kisses him with as much greedy intensity as he brings to his gameplay. One of his hands is clutching to a fist in Makoto's hair, bracing tight

enough to hold the other steady if Makoto were making any motion at all towards moving; the other has ended up somewhere around the waist of the sweater Makoto pulled on when he got home and changed out of his work clothes and is dragging force enough to hold Makoto flush against Fafnir's chest. Makoto is doing his part to hold them together too, although he's somewhat gentler with the silky length of Fafnir's hair; he has an arm thrown around Fafnir's shoulders, and one of his legs angled out into an invitation that would feel overt if they weren't clutching as hard at each other as they are. As it is the movement of his body is more on instinct than intention, something he finds for himself with what fragments of attention he has left over from Fafnir's mouth pressing to his skin and the taste of Fafnir's lips dark and hot against his tongue.

Fafnir is as a fast learner in this as much as with the games he has taken to with such ready ease. Makoto has no idea how dragons express desire or affection, and even if he did he suspects it would be poorly suited to his own human form. But Fafnir picked up the premise of kissing instantly, until Makoto isn't completely sure it was a novel idea to him in the first place, and he has adopted everything else as quickly as Makoto has suggested it through the friction of his hands or the shift of his lips. Fafnir has taken to bracing Makoto's head between both his hands, holding him still for the work of his mouth as if he is intending to lay claim to every inch of him with deliberate focus; all it took was one shuddering tremor of heat for him to learn to drag his fingernails across Makoto's scalp, or over the space behind his ear, or along the texture of bone at the back of the other's neck. His hands wander, pressing to the hems of Makoto's shirts and ghosting over the loose edges of collars and inside the weight of heavy cuffs in a perfect echo of the hesitant explorations Makoto makes at the fringes of the other's dark clothing; but he never presses for anything more, and with Fafnir's uniform like a defensive wall Makoto isn't sure how to ask for more without putting it to the direct question that would color Fafnir's cheeks and sharpen his voice on embarrassment. There's always the bath, of course, where an expanse of bare skin is readily available; but it's been weeks since they casually shared that space, well before that first press of Makoto's mouth to Fafnir's lips, and Makoto isn't yet so desperate that he is ready to climb into the tub alongside Fafnir and let events take their course. There is the kissing, for now, and the relief of his own imagination when that takes a turn for the heated; which it is doing more frequently, now, with every day that passes.

He is definitely going to have to take some time in the shower tonight, Makoto reflects distantly, as he tips his head to pull against the grip of Fafnir's hand in his hair so he can touch his lips to the corner of Fafnir's mouth and then, as the other's hold eases to grant him motion, down against the line of his sharply angled jaw. Their feet are still under the blanket around the kotatsu, which is radiating heat into the air around them, but right now Makoto thinks the rest of him might be warmer even than his well-insulated feet. He and Fafnir are pressing close together across the floor, pinned against each other by their respective efforts, and when Makoto kisses against Fafnir's jaw Fafnir curves his head back and arches himself forward to draw them closer still. Makoto's heart is pounding, his lips are aching with heat as he trails his way along Fafnir's throat to the cravat cinched tight against the other's neck. Fafnir makes a low sound in the back of his throat as Makoto's lips touch him, the note rough enough that Makoto feels it hum against his mouth, and as Makoto tips his head to fit a little closer against the barrier of the other's collar Fafnir's hand against his sweater tightens, the fabric shifts in his hold, and Makoto can feel the cool of the room around them ghost across the inch of skin left bare just over the waistband of his jeans.

Makoto doesn't tense where he's pressed against Fafnir. It's a near thing, for a moment, with the frisson of self-consciousness that shivers up his spine; but he's occupied in kissing against the pale curve of the other's neck, and he remains where he is, even as what feels like the full scope of his attention narrows down to the space of bare skin so close to the weight of Fafnir's touch. This will be enough, he tells himself, just the possibility alone is a step forward; and then Fafnir's hand



slides against his waist, and his fingers brush against the bare skin of Makoto's hip, and Makoto fails to hold back either the shudder that runs through him or the gust of an exhale he spills against Fafnir's throat.

He can feel the way Fafnir tenses against him, as all the languid ease of their position tightens in immediate response. Makoto thinks of apology, of opening his mouth to retreat back from his unrestrained reaction and pull them back to the safety of the careful kissing in which they have been lingering. But then Fafnir shifts against him, rocking forward to press closer against Makoto as his hand slides up under the other's shirt with deliberate force, and whatever words Makoto might have given disintegrate into a groan of appreciation. He lifts his head, acting on instinct as much as any conscious thought, and Fafnir is there to meet him, catching Makoto's mouth beneath the force of his own as his touch urges up higher under Makoto's shirt to lay claim to as much of the other's skin as he can reach.

Makoto loses track of things a little, after that. Fafnir's hand is trailing over his back, marking out paths of heat in the wake of his fingers that leave Makoto flushed and breathless with the electric sensation of the other's touch, but Makoto is reaching too, fumbling against the layers of the other's clothes with more force than care. He doesn't expect to get past so much as the topmost layer of fabric, expects Fafnir's vest to be as good as a wall for holding his own touch at a distance, but the cloth seems to fall open as quickly as he touches it, vest and shirt alike drawing loose as soon as he reaches for them. Makoto struggles through the formal layers of Fafnir's clothes, disheveling every aspect of the other's pristine appearance as he goes, and then his hands are pressing against skin flushed to the same breathless heat as his own and Fafnir is making a sound against Makoto's mouth that sounds like a growl and that Makoto can feel at the lowest point of his belly. Makoto gets an arm around Fafnir's waist, Fafnir's fingers tighten to brace between Makoto's shoulderblades, and when Fafnir curves in over him Makoto turns back in easy surrender to let Fafnir cast the shadow of his shoulders in over him. Fafnir's hair slides forward around his shoulders, urged loose of its tie at some point while they were sprawling together; Makoto has a glimpse of red eyes, vivid and glowing with heat in the darkness curtaining them, before Fafnir's mouth is descending upon his own and he has to shut his eyes and give himself up to the demand of the force breaking over him.

Makoto doesn't consciously notice where his hands are going, doesn't notice the paths Fafnir's fingers are marking out across his skin. It's true that he's hard inside his jeans, that all the thoughts in his head are drawing in to circle on that one point where is he most craving pressure and force and friction; but that same heat is spilling through his body in equal measure, until he is as quick to arch up to the drag of fingernails over his shoulder or the press of a hand against the side of his neck as to the forward angle of Fafnir's knee slotting between his own. The room has gone darker, the light fading to a far distant point like it's following the trajectory of Makoto's focus, but Makoto doesn't need illumination to fit his hands into Fafnir's hair or draw his arm around the other's waist to urge him down. He can do that in the shadows, can do it with his eyes closed, and the insistent pounding of his heartbeat is just beginning to suggest to what other use they could put this supernatural darkness when Makoto becomes aware of a shrill beeping sound from the other room, faint with distance but growing in intensity and volume as time passes.

It takes him a minute to relocate his attention back into his body. He's lying on his back on the floor, still with one foot ostensibly under the warmth of the kotatsu, but he has the other leg up and hooked around Fafnir's hip, or what he assumes is Fafnir's hip. It's difficult to be sure in the darkness expanding over the room; all Makoto is certain of is that he's holding onto the figure over him, and that it is Fafnir's breathing pulling rough inhales against the side of his neck, and that his skin is glowing with impossible heat everywhere Fafnir touches him. Friction draws around the line of his waist, sliding down to follow the angle of his hip towards the waistband of his pants, and Makoto finds his breath to say "Faf-kun," in a tone that goes far higher on its way up his throat

than he intends it to.

There is a sound against his collarbone, rumbling over a warning that drops Makoto's stomach on a premonition of danger at the same time it tightens his balls with a rush of arousal. "*What?*"

Makoto tips his head in the general direction of the computer room and jerks his chin towards the source of the sound. "Your alarm's going off."

There's a pause. For a breath neither of them are moving; Makoto can feel the speed of his breathing working in his chest, can feel the heat of Fafnir's skin under his palm bracing at the other's back. Then Fafnir hisses, a sound of frustration more than heat, and the shadows in the room retract, pulling back in on themselves like fog clearing away to leave the room as warmly lit as ever. Makoto is left blinking up at the ceiling, with only the ache of suddenly-renewed sight to prove that the darkness was there at all, as Fafnir turns his head to scowl viciously at the computer room. Makoto gazes up at him, looking without moving, before he takes a breath to make a gesture back towards normalcy. "What's it for?"

Fafnir's exhale is taut enough in his throat that Makoto can feel the vibration of it humming down the length of his spine. "A raid."

Makoto takes a deliberate breath and lets it out as carefully. By the time he's finished his exhale his smile up at Fafnir comes with true sincerity. "You should do it." Fafnir grimaces and shakes his head. Makoto loosens his grip on the weight of the other's hair so he can draw his hand free and up to stroke gently across the dark locks. "You have party members overseas, right? It's not often you can find the time to all team up for these."

Fafnir looks back to turn the edge of his scowl on Makoto beneath him. The lighting in the room shifts, tipping itself towards darkness as if the lightbulbs are all dimming at the same time. Fafnir's eyes seem to glow brighter in the shadows. "I don't *want* to play with them."

Makoto lifts his other hand to touch to Fafnir's face so he can cradle the other's head between his hands. "I know," he says, and pushes up from the floor so he can press his mouth against Fafnir's lips. Fafnir's lashes dip, the edge of his frown softens under Makoto's mouth; Makoto lingers in the contact for a long moment, and when he finally draws back the room is brighter again with the retreat of that rising shadow. "You promised you'd join." Makoto disentangles his leg from around Fafnir's hip so he can brace his foot at the floor and slide himself back and free from the shadow of Fafnir leaning over him. Fafnir watches him move back, his brows lowered on frustration but making no motion to hold Makoto still. Makoto ends sitting upright in front of the other, his sweater rumpled and his hair tousled and mouth still holding onto his deliberate smile.

"Go and join the raid," he says. "Your party's waiting for you." He slides a thumb against Fafnir's jaw and leans forward to bump his forehead to the other's. "I'll still be here when you're done."

Fafnir scoffs. "You had better be," he says, in the dark tone of a threat, and then he leans forward to press his mouth hard against Makoto's. Makoto shuts his eyes to the heat of Fafnir's lips against his; his eyes are still shut when Fafnir draws back in a rustle of motion and a huff of breath. Fafnir vanishes from Makoto's hold, pulling away in a single motion, and by the time Makoto is opening his eyes to look after him Fafnir is striding towards the computer room as he tugs sharply at his clothing. By the time he swings himself around to pull his chair back and cast himself into it his shirt is returned to its usual pristine lines, his vest and cravat reassembled to show no trace at all of Makoto's desperate hands working at them. He looks perfectly composed, as cool and distant as ever, except for the tension setting at his mouth and the faintest hint of what might be a flush across his cheeks, all but lost to the dim lighting of the room around him. The alarm cuts off as he clicks the mouse with a hiss, shortly followed by the opening melody of the game he is meant to be

playing, and Makoto ducks his head and turns aside so he can get to his feet and leave Fafnir to work out his aggression in the virtual scope of the game.

It's earlier than Makoto usually retreats to the bathroom, with hours of viable playtime still left in the day. But Fafnir is occupied with his game, and Makoto badly needs the privacy offered by the door drawn shut to separate him from his roommate for at least a few minutes. He starts the water running, turned up hot to cloud the air around him foggy with steam and fill the bathroom with the sound of the faucet splashing into the tub. Then he strips off his clothes, his heavy sweater and rumpled shirt and half-fastened jeans, and he comes forward to sit at the edge of the tile so he can tip his head and shoulders back against the wall behind him as he reaches to close his hand around himself and retreat into the very near memories of the last several minutes.

It doesn't take very long. Makoto's heart is still racing, his mouth still aching heat from the force of Fafnir's lips against his and his skin alight with the traction of Fafnir's fingernails and grip dragging against him, and when he shuts his eyes he can sink himself into a darkness like the one that spread to fill the living room with the proof of Fafnir's less-than-human existence. Makoto thinks of the pressure of Fafnir's hold clutching to fix him still, the sound of Fafnir's voice growling heat at his skin, the haze of shadow spreading to eclipse his vision with absolute, impenetrable darkness; and his hips jerk forward, his breathing spills, and he comes over the flexing grip of his hand. He lets himself linger for a long span, stroking himself through aftershocks as his memory expands to wander over the shape of Fafnir's frown, the taste of his skin, the silky give of his elegant clothes rumpling to Makoto's touch; and then he lets his hold go, and breathes out a sigh of relief, and opens his eyes so he can collect himself towards washing before he climbs into the steaming heat of the bath awaiting him.

He has been patient this long, he tells himself as he leans back to submerge the greater part of his body in the waves of water lapping against him. In the grand scheme of things an extra day or two won't even be enough of a delay for him to remember in a year's time. But still, Makoto finds himself hoping that Fafnir's next raid won't be for another week, at least, and he's pretty sure Fafnir is planning for exactly the same.

## Introductory

Makoto and Fafnir find their way to a new routine between them as they make it further into the new year. Makoto has to return to work within the first week, an inconvenience that he has never felt as keenly as he feels it now with the greater range of indulgences waiting for him at home to distract his thoughts and send him into a daydream for long stretches only interrupted by Kobayashi or one of his other coworkers. For the first few days Makoto finds himself jittery by the time he's finishing his lunch break, and in the first week he hardly does any gaming at all in the evenings for how thoroughly Fafnir demands his attention. But time eases the stress of Makoto's limited time at home, and as the days go by he and Fafnir return to some part of their original routine of post-dinner matches to decide the chore schedule, and taking turns soaking in an evening bath while the other takes the lead on a quest in one of the multitude of computer games available to them, before teaming up to get through as many dungeons as they can manage before exhaustion gets the better of Makoto and drags him into the comfort promised by the futon he stretches out between the desks and wraps himself in.

That is the most notable of changes, Makoto thinks. He still collapses into bed sometime before midnight, most nights, or somewhat after when he's particularly invested in the project he's working on; but what used to be something he delayed as long as possible he looks forward to, now, through much of the work day and increasingly as the hours of the evening pass to bring it closer. When he powers off his computer now it's more often with anticipation prickling along his spine than with a yawn straining at his jaw, and when he says, "I'm going to head to bed" Fafnir's huff is of agreement instead of simple acknowledgment. Makoto spreads out the futon to the sound of Fafnir wrapping up his gaming, and steps around the corner to change into pajama pants and a sweater while Fafnir is powering down the machine, and when he settles into the soft of bed he does so with Fafnir alongside him.

Makoto loves these times. For the last weeks since his return to work he's been too tired to do much more than collapse into bed and fall asleep almost before Fafnir is well settled next to him; it's only in the last few days that he's been able to stay awake long enough to indulge in a few minutes of drowsy kissing before succumbing to unconsciousness. But it's earlier than usual tonight, and he's carrying less of the crushing weight of exhaustion that hit him with the first few days at work, and when Fafnir draws back the blankets to join Makoto under their weight Makoto is ready to reach out and catch both his hands into Fafnir's hair to draw the other down against him. Fafnir follows the suggestion of Makoto's hold without hesitation in wrapping an arm around Makoto's waist and letting himself be drawn into the heat of a kiss, and when Makoto shuts his eyes it's with the intention of appreciating the indulgence instead of as a capitulation to sleep.

It's a slow progression, at first. Fafnir has never voiced so much as a word of protest to Makoto's tendency to sleep through the hours of the night that Fafnir, at least, has no trouble making more productive use of, and for the last days Makoto has been happy to keep his explorations on the chaste side rather than leaning into the possibility of more when he lacks the energy to act on it. But he's awake, tonight, immediately aware of his surroundings in spite of the relative lateness of the hour, and tonight when Fafnir shifts to press closer against his mouth and touch his tongue against the curve of Makoto's lips Makoto gives way at once and slides his hands farther into Fafnir's hair to urge the other closer even than he was. Fafnir leans in immediately, bonelessly pliant to the request of Makoto's hands winding into his hair, and when Makoto presses harder into the kiss Fafnir meets him in kind, tightening his hold at the small of Makoto's back as his shoulders shift with rising tension. Makoto lets one of his hands go, the better to wrap an arm around Fafnir's shoulders so he can pull the other in closer, and as he brings a knee up to hook around Fafnir's hip he can feel rough heat in the sound Fafnir makes that muffles to silence against

the press of Makoto's lips. Fafnir's hand slides down Makoto's back, his free hand lifts to brace hard at the back of Makoto's head, and Makoto arches his back and tips his head and lets the instinct of desire guide the press of his hands and the shift of his mouth against Fafnir's own.

Fafnir is far from passive in his position against Makoto. His hands flex with a strength that Makoto didn't know he had, his knee comes forward to brace between Makoto's thighs and steady them against the soft of the futon beneath them. If Makoto weren't answering with equal intensity he thinks Fafnir would have him pressed back over the sheets, sprawling on his back with the shadow of the other's form looming over him with the full force of the intensity that Makoto sometimes sees flickering behind the red of Fafnir's eyes. But Makoto is reaching as readily as Fafnir, fisting his hands into the spill of the other's hair and tightening his leg over the other's hip to urge them closer together until he almost wishes for more force in the hold wrapping around his waist, more resistance in the thigh sliding to press high between his own. He rocks himself closer against Fafnir, which Fafnir answers with the same ready response in his own form, until Makoto can hear the same desperation in Fafnir's breathing that he can feel in the heartbeat pounding against the inside of his chest.

He knows what he wants. Makoto has spent more than a few nights thinking of this, of the feel of Fafnir's hands against him, of the tension of his body matching that in Fafnir's own; his imagination has only grown more detailed with the addition of personal experiences that he has been collecting over the last several days, as their interludes grow longer and more involved. But he can't keep himself from hesitating, from hovering at the cusp of commitment without quite stepping over the edge. By now Makoto is sure of his understanding of Fafnir, confident in his read on the minimalist reactions he gets from the other the greater part of the time, but it's hard to trust his own judgment when he can feel irrepressible energy trembling in his fingers and sparking electric along his spine. It's hard to think clearly even in his own head, much less to focus on the reactions of Fafnir against him, and if there's anything Makoto wants to get right it's this. So he waits, hovering at the edge of certainty without quite acting on it, stifling the question he wants to ask in the force of another kiss against Fafnir's mouth, until finally the fingers at the back of his head tighten in his hair to hold him still as Fafnir draws back with a gasp of air. Makoto blinks hard, jolted back into the present by this abrupt loss of the friction against his mouth, and Fafnir speaks while he's still trying to clear his vision, in a spill of words that comes out rough for how fast he says them.

"I don't have a raid tonight, Takiya."

It takes Makoto a minute to catch up to this. The statement seems obvious, with Fafnir's computer powered down to the same peaceful darkness as Makoto's own; and then his dizzy rationality makes it back through the relevance of memory, and Makoto opens his eyes wide to stare at Fafnir. It's hard to see the other's features in the shadows, with the darkness of night wrapping the room around them, but he meets Fafnir's gaze all the same, staring into the other's face without trying to hide the heat he's sure is flushing all across his face and heavy at his lashes.

"Oh," Makoto says. He presses his lips together and swallows before he speaks. "Are you sure, Faf-kun?"

Fafnir huffs a sharp exhale. "Yes."

Makoto couldn't hope for a more direct answer. He takes another breath, collecting himself to the reality of the moment, before he ducks his head into a nod. "Okay," he says. "Let me just--" as he loosens his fingers from the grip he's held on Fafnir's hair so he can draw himself free. It takes him a moment to unwind his arms and leg from where he's been clinging to Fafnir, and another after that before Fafnir relinquishes his own hold to let Makoto pull away so he can push to sit up

from the tangle they've made of the blankets. Fafnir follows, sitting up without regard for the loss of warmth as the comforter slides down around his waist; then again, if he's half as warm as Makoto feels, Makoto can't imagine the chill of the air in the apartment is much of a problem just at the moment.

"I'll need a minute," Makoto says, and gets to his feet, moving carefully so he can be sure of his balance over legs that feel like they're trembling as badly as his hands. It's not nervousness coursing through his veins; rather it's impatience, the effect of adrenaline running so hot that even the familiar soft of his clothes brushing against his skin seems to carry as much sensation as the texture of a hand drawing across his body. Makoto turns to make his way to the dresser at the far corner of the room, moving carefully to keep from tripping over obstacles that go unseen in the shadows, but he makes it to the dresser without difficulty. He can find the bottle by touch, without having to turn the light on, and then he's returning back over the floor to where Fafnir is sitting up on the futon, watching him from behind the absolute dark of his hair falling in front of his face. Makoto reaches out as he draws close to kneel at the edge of the futon, stretching for support as he lowers his balance, and a hand meets him, Fafnir's fingers closing tight around his own to steady Makoto's return to the bed.

Makoto smiles. "Thanks," he says, and sets the bottle next to him so he can use both hands in pushing his pajama pants off his hips and down his legs. He's grateful for the darkness around them; after living together for months, he's not terribly self-conscious about Fafnir seeing him naked, but there's a particular kind of self-awareness that comes with being hard that he thinks might stutter his motion otherwise. Fafnir is still watching him, and for all Makoto knows he can see as well in the dark as in broad daylight, but Makoto's own hazy vision is enough to calm his instinctive embarrassment as he strips his pants off and pushes them to the side of the futon. He turns back for the bottle as soon as that's done, reaching out to fumble through the shadows for the smooth shape of it, and again Fafnir's hand finds his own to offer the bottle the other has picked up in answer to Makoto's searching fingers.

Makoto smiles. "Thanks again, Faf-kun." If Fafnir nods he can't see the motion well enough to identify it, but between them silence can speak as loudly as overt encouragement, and Makoto doesn't push for more. He opens the bottle and slicks his fingers with efficient haste; when he reaches to set the bottle back down Fafnir's hand interrupts again to take it and push it aside over the edge of the futon. Makoto rocks his weight back, and reaches out with one hand to brace himself steady, and fits the wet-slick fingers of the other down to press between his thighs and find their way to the tension of his entrance.

He's gentle with himself. His heart is racing with anticipation, his cock aching for the heat of Fafnir's skin, for the grip of his hands, for the motion of his body, but he'll only make things harder on himself if he hurries in this. So Makoto leans hard against the support of his hand, and ducks his head to keep his mind focused on what he is doing instead of what he's about to do, and he works himself open with careful strokes, urging with slow pressure until he can relax enough to go deeper and move faster. The sensation is intense, enough to flush his cheeks and ache at his cock until he thinks this would be enough, if he were alone, if it were the simple satisfaction of physical intensity he was seeking; but Fafnir is sitting up in the futon next to him, his gaze carrying such physical force that Makoto can feel it even without lifting his head, and Makoto's body is prickling with desire to feel that shadowy form over, around, inside him; so Makoto tips his knees wider, and draws his hand back, and presses greater strain into himself to coax natural resistance into the surrender of heat.

Makoto can feel himself trembling as he draws his fingers back out of himself, from the brace of his wrist at the inside of his thigh down to the open angle of his knees and up his spine, to hum vibration along his shoulders and thrumming into his thoughts. He's distractingly hard, his cock

straining at his hips in answer to the persuasion of his fingers and the possibility of his imagination, but more than that Makoto is so thrillingly excited he can hardly catch his breath, can barely focus enough to sit up so he can strip his sweater over his head and away. The loss leaves him bare to the cold, pebbling goosebumps across his shoulders and tightening his nipples in immediate response to the chill of the air against him, but all Makoto's thoughts of self-consciousness are gone, now, worked free along with the tension he persuaded away under the stroke of his fingers. He draws a knee under himself so he can lean forward, and when he reaches out Fafnir lifts his hand in answer, touching his fingers to Makoto's bare hip to steady him as Makoto slides forward over the space of the blankets rumpled between them.

"Faf-kun," Makoto says, feeling breathless and sounding hot, with his voice going dark and sultry in the back of his throat without his intention. Fafnir's fingers at his hip tighten to dig in hard against his skin. Makoto feels the pressure as heat rippling out into his body and tightening expectation at the base of his cock. He presses his lips together to swallow and slides his hand down into Fafnir's hair, curling his touch against the back of the other's neck as he ducks in towards Fafnir's lips. "Your turn."

Makoto can feel the intake of breath Fafnir takes; they're so near the gust of it pulls across his mouth, as if Fafnir is trying to draw Makoto into his lungs as much as the air. Then Fafnir's hand comes up to seize at the back of Makoto's head, Fafnir surges forward against him, and Makoto's mouth is covered by the heat of Fafnir's crushing against his lips. Makoto parts his lips immediately, welcoming Fafnir into his mouth as he loops his arm around the support of the other's shoulders, and Fafnir takes the offering as part of the same motion that bears him forward to push Makoto back down against the blankets beneath them. Makoto falls without resistance: between his arm around Fafnir's shoulders and the grip bruising traction at his hip gravity has no claim on him greater than what Fafnir can offer, and when Makoto's shoulders land at the futon it's only a moment before Fafnir is atop him to pin Makoto down beneath the weight of his body. Makoto's leg tips wide, his fingers flex into the dark of Fafnir's hair, and then Fafnir is pressing between his open thighs, his narrow hips slotting into place against Makoto's body. A thrill of awareness runs through Makoto at the weight of Fafnir against him, at the strain along the inside of his thighs, at the pressure of Fafnir's body pinning his cock back to his stomach, and suddenly the layer of clothes still keeping them apart is too much to stand.

Makoto doesn't pull away from the force of Fafnir's mouth against his, doesn't ease the hold of his arm bracing around the other's shoulders, but he does loosen his grip on Fafnir's hair so he can drop his hand to the shadow of the cravat tied into pristine elegance against the other's collar. Makoto has no idea how it's tied and less how to work the knot loose to free the silky fabric, but he's ready to make up for his lack of understanding with clumsy effort until he has worked his way past the layers of clothing that wrap Fafnir as closely as armor. But he has barely curled his fingers in beneath the weight of the cravat when the resistance melts away, slipping free as if the tie is unravelling beneath his touch, and then the fabric is gone entirely, disintegrating from beneath Makoto's hold as if it was never there at all. It's not just the cravat; the texture under Makoto's arm is shifting, cool cloth melting into warm skin, and as Makoto breaks from the kiss to gasp a breath he finds Fafnir's clothes disintegrating from between them, melting away like they were never there at all. Even the tie around his hair gives way, freeing the dark weight to tumble forward around his bare shoulders in a wave of darkness, and Makoto is left to reach up and push his fingers into the loosened weight as he smiles breathless affection up at Fafnir over him.

"Wow," he breathes. "That's a neat trick, Faf-kun."

"Mm," Fafnir says, apparently even less interested in conversation than he usually is, and then he shifts his weight atop Makoto and Makoto finds himself agreeing on the unimportance of speech just at the moment. They're pressed together all along their bodies, from shoulder to chest and

down to the angle of hips, where Fafnir is bracketed between Makoto's open knees, and with the summary removal of Fafnir's affectation of clothing there is nothing at all keeping the heat of Fafnir's arousal from the friction of Makoto's body. Makoto sucks an inhale as Fafnir's cock slips against the inside crease of his hip, his voice cracking into a near-whimper at the friction pressing over him, and Fafnir ducks his head down and rocks back to draw himself into better alignment with Makoto beneath him.

Makoto braces his heels at the bed, angling his knees wider the better to tilt himself up to meet Fafnir over him. He doesn't know if it helps at all, doesn't know if Fafnir needs the assistance in bringing them together, but he's trembling with tight-strung heat and he craves the friction of Fafnir's body against his too much to do anything but arch up in wordless pleading for it. Fafnir's hips shift down, a lock of his hair spills over his shoulder to drape at Makoto's collarbone, and then he comes forward, and Makoto moans wordless, incoherent heat at the feel of Fafnir sliding up and into him. It's a smooth motion, as graceful as anything, as everything Fafnir does, and it leaves Makoto quivering with the sudden relief of pressure filling him as much as with the conscious thought of Fafnir feeling Makoto shuddering with sensation around him.

They are still for a moment, Fafnir's hips pressing flush to Makoto's and Makoto's knees tipped open around the width of Fafnir's body. Then Fafnir draws a breath so rough that Makoto can feel it drag along his spine like a touch and speaks in a voice that seems to come from the shadows of the room itself as much as the form braced over him. "Takiya."

Makoto blinks, returning himself from the brief incandescence of relief by an effort of some will. It seems impossible, to finally be here, to finally have this; but his cock is still straining towards his belly, his heart is still racing with the desperation of unsatisfied arousal, and the want is enough to ground him, to return him to the present moment again. He takes a breath, and reaches up, and touches his fingers to Fafnir's hair as he smiles up at the figure leaning over him. "Yes, Faf-kun."

It's not an answer, exactly, and Fafnir's tone was more that of a statement than a question. But Makoto can feel the tension in Fafnir's shoulder under his arm ease, can hear the sound of the exhale the other sets free of his lips, and when Fafnir leans down for his mouth Makoto is turning his chin up to meet him, to offer the part of his lips for the weight of the other's mouth atop his. Makoto slides his hand up into Fafnir's hair, urging back the loose weight of it as he lifts a leg to catch around Fafnir's hip and hold them together, and when Fafnir growls Makoto feels the heat purr against his mouth in the moment before Fafnir shifts over him, and begins to move.

It is not that Fafnir is rough. Makoto didn't expect him to be, however inventive his fantasies have become; Fafnir is too self-contained, too refined even in his most emotional moments to give way entirely to instinctive desire. But he is certain, as unhesitating in his movement as if this is his natural form, as if he knows precisely what it is he is seeking, and beneath that Makoto's focus gives way, surrendering itself to the insistent distraction of Fafnir moving into him. His fingers curl into the weight of Fafnir's hair, his leg flexes tight around the shift of the other's hip, and when his breath spills from his lips it comes as a moan too resonant with pleasure for Makoto to even wish for the focus to call it back.

There's something almost dreamlike about it, the heat and the friction and the darkness of the night wrapping around them. Makoto thinks at first it's his vision hazing, his own inattention that is making it hard to see even the familiar bookshelf in the corner, to pick out the shape of the computer chair pushed in underneath his own desk; and then Fafnir huffs an exhale that drags on a growl, and Makoto realizes it's the room itself that is going darker, as if what limited light the night has left is being drawn in and quenched from existence itself. Makoto can feel Fafnir against him with perfect clarity, can hear the sound of his breathing and feel the blankets beneath him and tighten his hold around the other's shoulders, but his vision is going dark, disintegrating as readily



as the transformation of Fafnir's clothes melted away from his body. Makoto gazes out at the dark for a minute, watching faint illumination give way to spreading shadow, and then he shuts his eyes, and turns his head in, and draws his own attention away from fading sight and into the entire clarity of touch and sound and breath.

Fafnir has a grip against Makoto's hip, now, his fingers pressing hard enough to fix the other still against the smooth force of his body working within Makoto's, and Makoto can feel the rising tide of pleasure climbing through him, spilling up his spine and tightening his chest with every stroke of Fafnir into him. His leg is trembling against Fafnir's hip, his breathing is breaking high over the cusp of open want, and with the room wrapped in darkness all Makoto has to orient against is the span of Fafnir's shoulders under his hold and the resistance of the other's body between the press of his thighs. Makoto can't tell if his eyes are still closed, or if he opened them on one of Fafnir's forward thrusts and is now gazing wide-eyed into the sightless black all around him; it doesn't matter, it could be brilliant midday outside and all he would be able to see is the shadowy proof of Fafnir's existence. Makoto catches a breath, struck with the satisfaction of that thought, and he loosens one of his hands from where he's holding to Fafnir so he can reach down between them instead. It's strange to reach without seeing, to follow the line of his stomach down to fumble a grip around his cock, but then his fingers are flexing tight and Makoto's head is going back, his voice is breaking onto a moan he makes no effort at all to stifle.

The rest of the world seems very distant, impossibly far from where Fafnir is wrapped around him; when there is a touch at the side of his neck Makoto tips his head to surrender to the press of Fafnir's mouth to his skin as he flexes his grip and strokes up over himself. He feels like he's floating, like he's drifting through the perfect hesitation that comes of the moment before release; but Fafnir is still moving, still matching that steady rhythm, and even the most gentle weight of Makoto's hold on himself is stirring arousal to spiking peaks within him. He trails his fingers up over himself, lingering in the sensation, drawing it exquisitely, perfectly long, and then Fafnir comes forward and into him, and Makoto feels himself slip over the edge into inevitability.

He tightens his grip on himself, flexes his fingers into a deliberate, firm stroke, and when his orgasm breaks he lets himself surrender to it completely. His back arches, his shoulders flex, his throat works, and for a moment Makoto doesn't see the dark at all for the flare of sightless light that bursts at the back of his eyes. Fafnir huffs at his shoulder, his fingers fix hard at Makoto's hip as he leans into his motion, but Makoto is adrift in pleasure, too breathless with the tremors of orgasm to do anything but let his own pleasure persuade Fafnir's from him. After a moment Makoto manages to lift his hand from Fafnir's shoulder, to reach to touch his fingers to the other's hair, and Fafnir tenses over him, going perfectly silent for a breath as his body ripples with the pulse of his own orgasm. Makoto holds onto him, bracing Fafnir against him within the absolute dark that has wrapped itself around them, and then Fafnir gusts an exhale and falls forward to weight at the support of Makoto's shoulder. Makoto lets his leg slide down to lay over Fafnir's instead of bracing at his back, and loosens his grip to stroke through the other's hair instead of clutching at it, and as he blinks hazily the world fades back into clarity around him, the pale shadows of moonlight reclaiming their place until Makoto can see the chairs, and the doorway, and even squint at some of the titles on the bookshelf.

He waits for several minutes, until the room seems so bright he's surprised that it ever seemed dim-lit to his eyes. Then he slides his hand down, trailing across Fafnir's shoulders, and speaks as gently as he can. "The darkness was cool," he says. "Will you do that every time, Faf-kun?"

Fafnir's exhale gusts loud at Makoto's shoulder. "I don't know."

His tone is less than entirely welcoming to further conversation, but his shoulders are still weighted with comfort, and it's hard for Makoto to feel the instinctive alarm that he used to, so many months

ago it feels like he's remembering a life that belonged to someone else. He strokes through Fafnir's hair, gentle as he lets the locks slide through his fingers. "We'll have to practice to find out, I guess."

Fafnir scoffs without lifting his head. "Shut up, Takiya."

Makoto smiles out into the more ordinary nighttime shadows filling the room around them. "Okay," he says, and shuts his eyes to fall back into the comfort of darkness wrapping the two of them together.

## Casual

“Hurry up,” Fafnir calls from around the corner to the kitchen. “I’m running out of dishes to rinse.”

“On my way,” Makoto shouts in response, and drops to a knee to grab at the last cup sitting at the edge of the table set in front of the television without disrupting the hold he has on the glass tucked between the corner of his elbow and his side. It’s a slightly precarious balance, with the weight of two dishes stacked atop each other in his other hand, but Makoto gets to his feet without dropping either glass or plates onto the floor so he can bear all of the dishes together into the kitchen.

Fafnir is just shaking the water from the last of the cooking supplies as Makoto approaches. He glances over his shoulder at the other as Makoto draws up to the counter before looking back to shut off the faucet. Makoto sets the plates down on the close side of the counter so he can free his hand to retrieve the cup braced at the inside of his elbow, but Fafnir beats him to it. Makoto loosens the force of his arm as Fafnir’s fingers close around the bottom of the cup and he beams a smile as Fafnir deposits the cup into the soapy water on the near side of the sink. “Thanks, Faf-kun.”

Fafnir snorts. “You could have taken two trips.”

“Yeah,” Makoto agrees without heat. “I probably should have. It seemed faster in the moment.” Fafnir huffs to indicate what he thinks of this misjudgment and Makoto smiles and steps around him. “Trade you for rinsing?” Fafnir answers by holding out the soapy cup he’s just finished washing and Makoto takes it before reaching to run the faucet again so he can rinse clean the dishes as Fafnir washes them.

Cleanup is significantly faster, now, than it used to be. They still play a post-meal round or two of whatever game is most appealing on that particular night, with the full force of their usual competitive fervor; but when Makoto moves to set his controller down Fafnir does the same, regardless of the outcome of the match, and when they retreat to the kitchen to wash and dry the dishes it’s with company to make quick work of the task. Fafnir has taken to cooking as well, sometimes preparing dinner early so it’s waiting as Makoto comes in the front door after work and sometimes lingering in the kitchen to stir rice or chop vegetables or pour tea while Makoto moves around him to complete whatever else Fafnir has left for him to do. Makoto never minded cooking or cleaning, before -- he’s lived alone for years, and the addition of another person to the apartment makes hardly any difference in what work needs to be done -- but he finds it something to be enjoyed, now, with Fafnir a constant presence at his side whether he’s sweeping the floor or hanging up the laundry or putting dishes away in the cabinets. There’s a comfort to the other’s company, a pleasure of companionship that Makoto has appreciated from the first day Fafnir joined the structure of his everyday life, and the more recent developments in their relationship have only added the flair of self-conscious warmth to the weight of their elbows bumping together, or the glances Makoto sometimes catches Fafnir sneaking at him.

He looks up to find one of those lingering on him now, as he sets the second cup aside and looks back to the efforts Fafnir is turning on the plates and forks in the sink before him. Fafnir’s hands are submerged in the soapy water, his jacket stripped and the white sleeves of his shirt unbuttoned and pushed up his elbows to keep them clear of the water, but he’s not looking at his hands. His gaze has drifted sideways, the crimson of his attention has fixed itself onto Makoto’s face, and he doesn’t look away as Makoto meets his stare. They look at each other for a moment, standing shoulder-to-shoulder in the narrow space in front of the sink they’re sharing, before Makoto takes a breath and tips his head to gesture towards the spill of foamy bubbles rising around Fafnir’s hands.

“Do you want to trade back again?”

Fafnir blinks, looking like he’s coming back to the present from wherever his thoughts were wandering. He turns away at once, hunching forward over the sink as he hides his expression in shadow. “That’s not necessary.”

“Mm,” Makoto hums. “Okay.” There’s nothing for him to do while he waits for the next plate to rinse so he goes on as he began, gazing at Fafnir in profile as the other keeps his attention fixed on his efforts with the dishes. Fafnir’s wearing the apron long-since claimed as his; he’s so careful with the water that Makoto doesn’t think he’s ever actually splashed onto himself, but there’s something charming about the domesticity of the other’s rolled-up sleeves and carefully-tied apron over the rigid formality of the clothes in which he usually wraps himself.

Makoto has been seeing less and less of that latter in recent weeks. Since Fafnir donned a kimono for New Year’s he’s proven willing to try whatever varieties of clothing Makoto suggests, although thus far Makoto has found himself most interested in the none-at-all they have been exploring lately. And he likes Fafnir’s usual outfit, both in its typical restrained formality and in the intimacy implied by its present disarray, until he finds himself smiling at the rolled-up cuffs of the other’s sleeves and the weight of his hair laid across his shoulders. Even that last is a little less reserved than usual; a lock has slipped free of the tie at the middle of Fafnir’s back, the weight of it sliding across the other’s shoulder as he scrubs at the plate with more force than is strictly necessary. Makoto watches it trail over Fafnir’s shoulder and into some danger of falling before he reaches out to catch it just as it tumbles forward.

“Careful,” Makoto says as Fafnir turns to give him the force of his attention instead of the plate. Makoto reaches to fit the lock of hair behind Fafnir’s ear, where he can tuck it safely out of range of the full sink before them, before he looks back to smile at the other. “Dish soap isn’t going to be particularly good for your hair.”

Fafnir snorts agreement but doesn’t look away. His motion has stilled but Makoto doesn’t protest; he’s happy to lean his hip against the edge of the sink and smile in answer to the fixed attention of Fafnir’s gaze on him. Fafnir’s focus touches his eyes, his mouth, the collar of his shirt; and then returns to his mouth to linger there, with intention enough that Makoto’s skin prickles with anticipation. Fafnir’s forehead creases, his mouth tightens; and Makoto reaches out without looking to push the plate free from the other’s hold and slide his fingers around Fafnir’s wrist instead. Fafnir turns as Makoto pulls to urge him closer, submitting to the other’s grip with no protest beyond the frown at his lips as Makoto pulls Fafnir’s touch in towards him.

“My hands are wet,” Fafnir says, as his fingers brush the hem of Makoto’s shirt to catch damp friction against the fabric.

“Mm,” Makoto hums. “That’s fine.” He winds an arm around Fafnir’s waist and reaches to slide his fingers into the weight of the other’s hair to persuade it free of its tie. “I won’t be keeping my clothes on anyway.” He fits his palm against Fafnir’s head, settling his fingers against the other’s hair, and Fafnir leans in without needing any urging at all to fit his mouth against the curve of Makoto’s smile.

Cleanup is usually faster now, with the two of them; and when it takes significantly longer, Makoto considers it time very well spent.

## Exploration

“*Oh,*” Makoto gasps, his fingers tightening reflexively against the sheets rumpled underneath him. “*Faf-kun.*”

Fafnir hisses a sound in the back of his throat that would be a growl, Makoto thinks, if it weren’t so shadowed on heat. “Am I hurting you?”

It’s a moment before Makoto can get the words to answer that aloud, or at least with any measure of coherency. Instead he shakes his head by way of reply, offering unmistakable negation while he catches his breath back into his chest to at least make an attempt at speech. “No,” he finally manages, and shakes his head again. “You can keep going.” He shifts his grip against the sheets and lets his head fall forward so he can breathe deep against the tension of pleasure wrapping itself around his chest. “It feels good.”

Fafnir offers silence in response to that, a quiet so entire that Makoto imagines he can see the fixed expression that stands in for embarrassment in Fafnir without having to lift his head to look. He wonders for a moment if he should have left the second part unstated, to form itself from the implication of his flushed skin and aching cock; but then Fafnir shifts behind him, changing angle as he presses forward to work farther into Makoto before him, and as Makoto’s back arches and his breathing spills to another groan his concerns are pushed aside by the demanding immediacy of the present moment.

This was Fafnir’s idea. They have ended up in bed together most nights since that first time, figuratively speaking if not always literally tangled in the sheets of the futon, but the greater part of the evenings are steered by Makoto leaning in for a kiss, or Fafnir watching him with enough intensity to urge the other to action, rather than by a direct statement from Fafnir himself. But he had been direct about it tonight, broaching the subject even before Makoto had finished drying the last of the dishes after dinner. Makoto thinks it was at least as much the surprise of Fafnir’s request as the actual thought itself that had warmed his cheeks and tightened arousal along his spine as soon as the other spoke, and that immediate pleasure hardly had time to wane in the few minutes it took them to finish the most cursory cleanup Makoto has ever done and retreat to the back room that holds both their computers and the futon. Fafnir had the futon unrolled almost at once, before Makoto had even made a decision about what he should take on first, and Makoto had been happy to turn his attention to pulling his shirt up over his head and stripping his pants free of his legs while Fafnir retrieved the much-used bottle from the dresser. By the time Makoto was dropping his undershirt to the floor Fafnir had returned, first to brace a hand at the back of Makoto’s neck and then to kiss him with such force that Makoto ended with his hands clutching at the front of Fafnir’s coat to hold himself upright. Fafnir hadn’t balked at this either; he had just turned them both around towards the bed, and pushed to urge Makoto onto his knees and then forward over the support of his hands, and Makoto had obeyed while his heart pounded on anticipation and his cock throbbed hot with expectation.

Fafnir is good with his fingers. It’s not as if this is a surprise: Makoto has been playing video games with him for months, now, he has ample evidence of the dexterity of Fafnir’s hands. He’s had more than a few fantasies about them, too, with the details rather increasing than otherwise as he gains first-hand experience; but he still wasn’t fully prepared for the way Fafnir’s touch feels working inside him, reaching to startling depth as the fingers at Makoto’s neck brace to fix him steady against the forward stroke of the fingers thrusting into him. Makoto makes quick work of preparation for himself, with a focus more towards what will follow than the act itself; with Fafnir’s fingers marking a steady rhythm as they work into him, and his toes curling with each

flush of sensation that rushes over him with every forward push, Makoto can see the very real possibility of coming without even needing the friction of a hand pulling over his straining cock. It makes him feel dizzy, distant from his own body in everything except for the sensation cresting in waves over him, and Makoto tightens his hold on the sheets and tilts his hips back to urge Fafnir on to more.

He doesn't know what Fafnir intends to do, exactly. He hadn't stopped to ask for clarification; the direct statement *I want to finger you* had been more than ample persuasion to overcome any of the ever-minimal resistance Makoto might muster against a request from Fafnir. Maybe he really does want to bring Makoto over the edge like this, while he braces him steady with that grip at the back of his neck; maybe he's only continuing until his own interest sparks too bright and he replaces the press of his fingers with the heat of his cock. Makoto doesn't know, and as Fafnir continues he finds himself caring less and less, until his whole focus is narrowed to the strain at his shoulders as he holds himself up against the sound of his breathing rasping hot in his chest. Maybe Fafnir will keep him like this forever, perhaps this is some kind of elaborate curse too erotic to be included in the Anthology; and then Fafnir takes a breath, and Makoto blinks himself back towards rationality as the pressure inside him hesitates in its motion. There's a pause, an indication of what Makoto might call uncertainty from anyone else, and then:

"Takiya," with Fafnir's voice loud, like he's afraid of not being heard and is trying to overcome his own hesitation by volume. "I want to try something different."

"Okay," Makoto says, immediately, because he can't think of a world where he would ever deny Fafnir anything the other wants. He tips his head to look back over his shoulder to where he can see the shadow of Fafnir positioned behind him. "What are you thinking, Faf-kun?"

Fafnir grimaces, the expression clear enough that Makoto can see it even from his craning angle and the heat haze that has blurred his vision out of focus. Fafnir ducks his head forward so his hair falls in front of his face; when he speaks again Makoto can't see any part of his expression at all. "I'm going to transform my physical form."

The flush of heat that rushes through Makoto is so intense he feels sure Fafnir would be able to see the color spreading under his skin if the other were looking at him. As it is the tension that flexes at his shoulders and tightens around Fafnir's touch inside him must be unmistakable, although Fafnir doesn't speak to acknowledge it. "Oh," Makoto breathes. "Yes, please." He closes his mouth and swallows to return some moisture to his heat-dry tongue so he can speak with a little more clarity. "Are you going to go full dragon?"

Fafnir snorts. "No," he says shortly. "The sight of my true form would drive you mad." He doesn't say this like a threat; his tone is far closer to the flat statement of absolute accuracy than the adopted arrogance he has learned to apply when he is opposing Makoto in a video game competition. Makoto is absolutely sure that Fafnir is being perfectly accurate in his claim; and he's very sure that the flutter of adrenaline that flickers down his spine in answer is far closer to arousal than the fear it reasonably should be. Fafnir doesn't acknowledge that either, if he notices the breathless huff Makoto gives in response; he just tosses his head to flip his hair away from his face and shifts one of his knees in to fit between the open angle of Makoto's. "I'll only be transforming a few aspects."

"Oh," Makoto says, still with significantly more height on his voice than he usually has. "Okay. Cool." He turns his head back to stare at the futon beneath him and tightens his hands against the sheets. "Should I shut my eyes or something?"

He can hear Fafnir snort. "If you wish," he says. He leans forward to steady his grip against the

back of Makoto's neck; the extra force presses Makoto down against his elbows at the futon. He submits without protest, happy to dip his head in implicit surrender to the hold Fafnir has against him, and Fafnir's touch in him shifts to slide back by an inch before he resumes the force of his fingers working into the other.

It takes a minute before Makoto notices any change. For the first few thrusts the distraction of the resumed friction is enough to tighten his chest on moaning inhaled that strip all the focus from his thoughts and return him to the incoherent pleasure that Fafnir had him braced by before. The rhythm is unchanging, the pressure stroking in against him with force enough to tighten his thighs and twitch at his cock; it takes Makoto longer to notice the shift in the shape stroking into him, the difference in the texture sliding across his skin. Fafnir's touch is going smoother, cooler, altering its form with each forward stroke he takes; and he's going deeper, too, working into the heat of Makoto's body as willingly as Makoto opens for him. Makoto can feel the force inside him, the strain filling him as quickly as his desperate breathing pleads for more, and each forward stroke shudders sensation down his spine and flexes his thighs on the desire to urge back for more.

"Oh," Makoto gasps, feeling the heat of his breathing spill back to him from how close the futon is beneath him. "Faf-kun."

Fafnir's hold at his neck shifts. "Takiya," he says; but his voice is strange, it sounds like it's echoing from a long hallway, or as if it's bouncing back from the walls of some much larger space than the one Makoto knows they're presently in. There's greater tension against his skin, too: Fafnir's fingers are gripping tighter, are growing longer, until his fingers are bracing at the back of Makoto's head as well as the nape of his neck. There's friction against Makoto's skin, the scrape of nails gone harder and sharper than they were a moment ago, and Fafnir's palm is cooler than it was, as if his body is losing temperature as quickly as Makoto's is flushing with it. Makoto can feel a texture against the back of his neck, the suggestion of scales pressing flush against his skin, and he shuts his eyes and groans with the heat that surges through him in answer.

Fafnir doesn't stop. He has resumed his initial rhythm, has returned to the steady stroking he began with, and that continues unabated, even as his touch goes cool and slick as he moves into Makoto. Makoto's legs are shaking, now, quivering with tension he can't so much as think to restrain, much less actually make the effort to hold back, and he can feel the heat surging through him aching in his cock where it has gone untouched between his legs. He feels like he's going to come, like he's on the very edge of satisfaction, like every forward motion Fafnir takes into him will be enough to push him forward and into the endless fall of orgasm; but his fingers stay tight at the sheets, and his legs go on shaking with impossible force, and the heat builds under his skin until Makoto feels like he's glowing with it, as if his whole face must be flushed dark with the arousal Fafnir is working into him.

There's a motion behind him, the sound of sheets rustling as Fafnir shifts his weight. A knee presses to Makoto's, Fafnir's thighs tightening to brace around his own, and Makoto gasps a breath and rocks himself back as much as his shaking legs will let him. It's not much movement, held as he is between the force at his neck and the pressure stroking into him, but it presses him back against Fafnir's hips, where the barrier of clothing has evaporated from between them. Fafnir growls as Makoto urges against him, rumbling the sound from down in the depths of his chest, and his grip pushes the other forward as he tips himself to the side to fit them together. His cock slides at the inside of Makoto's hip, pressing friction up against the other's balls as he presses to fit himself between Makoto's thighs, and Makoto groans and shudders with the friction of Fafnir's cock sliding against the side of his own. Fafnir's touch might be cool, from the force he's working into Makoto to the grip steady at the back of his neck, but his cock is radiant with the same heat Makoto can feel aching in his own.

Fafnir steadies himself, bracing a knee at the futon and his hips behind Makoto's, and when he rocks himself forward the friction comes with the stroke into Makoto, as his hips echo the motion of whatever he has urging such impossible pleasure into Makoto's body to shudder through his shoulders and gasp at his breath. Makoto rocks himself back, reflexively seeking out the pressure and the friction and the heat all together, and when Fafnir thrusts against him again the incidental traction against his cock curls Makoto's toes and flexes his neck under the grip of the hand at his head. He seizes a breath, his hands tightening to fists at the blankets; and Fafnir slides forward, and Makoto spends all the air in his lungs as he comes, his cock pulsing with heat to answer the pressure filling him and the friction dragging against him. Fafnir growls behind him, his grip fixes at the back of Makoto's neck, and Makoto lets his arms give way to drop him to the futon before him as Fafnir holds him down for the force of his orgasm to break over him. He feels dizzy, overwhelmed and lost in the sensation eclipsing him; it's only distantly that he feels Fafnir shifting against him to seek out the satisfaction of his own release. It only takes a moment, to Makoto's distracted attention; then Fafnir is tipping over him, his hair falling loose to brush against Makoto's bare shoulders, and as he huffs a sharp exhale of heat the room goes dim, the light swallowed up into darkness for a brief moment.

Makoto keeps his eyes open so he can watch it, can see the shadow of Fafnir's pleasure expand and break over the world in which they are held together; and then watches it fade back, retreating to return the room to its normal appearance. The hand at Makoto's neck eases, the pressure inside him retreats, and by the time Fafnir is sliding his touch free and straightening from his lean over Makoto's shoulder Makoto is sure he'll find a perfectly human appearance waiting for him when he looks back.

He does anyway. Fafnir might have undone whatever partial transformation he indulged them both in, but even his fully human form is breathtakingly attractive, and Makoto has found he appreciates it even more when Fafnir is freed of the restraints of his habitual uniform. Right now Fafnir is rocked back over his knees, his hands dropped to his lap and still breathing hard enough that Makoto can see the shift in his shoulders with each inhale, however hard Fafnir is striving to smooth the sound out of audibility. His expression is composed, or mostly so, but his cheeks are still flushed with a faint suggestion of heat, and his hair is still tumbling loose around his shoulders. His glasses are nowhere to be seen; in their absence his gaze seems to carry physical force, even with the dark of his bangs falling to mask one eye as Makoto turns over to sprawl on the futon and smile up at him.

"That was fun," he says. "Can we do it again sometime?"

Fafnir scoffs at the back of his throat, though the sound lacks much force to give it an edge. "You *enjoyed* being taken by a cursed dragon?"

"Mm," Makoto hums. "When you put it that way..." He pushes against the futon to sit up so he can tip his head and smile at Fafnir from a nearer vantage point. "It sounds even more exciting." He lifts a hand to brush a lock of Fafnir's hair back over his shoulder. Fafnir watches the motion with skeptical focus, but he doesn't flinch away as Makoto moves, and when Makoto touches his fingers to the line of the other's shoulder Fafnir tilts his head to the side into fractional surrender to the contact. Makoto traces against the line of Fafnir's collarbone, lingering in the contact before he lets his fingers slip down over the span of the other's pale chest. "Would you ever fully transform with me, Faf-kun?"

Fafnir frowns. "All mortals who gaze upon my true form are cursed into perpetual madness."

"I could keep my eyes shut," Makoto suggests. "Or you could blindfold me."



Fafnir is still frowning at him, his forehead creasing to pinch tight between his brows. His attention flickers over Makoto's face, weighting at the other's features as if he's looking for something, before he lifts his chin and speaks. "Are you already insane, Takiya?"

Makoto laughs out loud. "Maybe," he admits, and lifts his hand to cradle the back of Fafnir's head as he leans in. Fafnir's frown doesn't ease as Makoto tips forward, but his mouth softens instantly to the touch of Makoto's lips, and Makoto lingers until Fafnir's hands have come up to brace at his hips and the crease at the other's forehead is entirely melted away. Fafnir's lashes shadow his gaze for a moment as Makoto pulls back, and Makoto smiles and tips forward to bump his forehead against Fafnir's. "Let's go take a bath, Faf-kun."

"Mm," Fafnir hums. "And then exploring the new content?"

"You bet," Makoto says, and reaches to close his hand around Fafnir's wrist. "Wouldn't miss it for the world." Fafnir huffs skepticism at this, but when he shifts his hand it is only to clasp his grip close around Makoto's arm, and when Makoto moves to get to his feet Fafnir rises with him without any hesitation at all.

## Cooperative

Makoto reaches up to set his fingers at the top of Fafnir's head and draw down the heavy sheet of wet hair spilling across the other's shoulders. His hands slide smoothly, thanks to the layer of conditioner coating his fingers, but Makoto still goes slowly, as much to make sure he works through each individual strand as out of care for nonexistent knots in what gives every impression of being a curtain of unbroken shadow across Fafnir's shoulderblades.

Makoto reaches the ends and lifts his hands to catch the edges back from around Fafnir's face so he can smooth them in with the rest. "You have really nice hair, you know, Faf-kun."

Makoto can't see the expression Fafnir gives in answer to this, but the gust of exhale he gets in response is only made the more audible by the tiled walls and narrow space of the bathroom around them. "It's the way the transformation works."

"I know," Makoto says, and trails his hand down Fafnir's hair again. "But you put a lot of work into taking care of it now that you're in human form most of the time." He pulls the whole together at the nape of Fafnir's neck so he can smooth his hand down over the outside of the ponytail. "It takes time to do this yourself every night." Fafnir doesn't answer this aloud, but he does duck his head farther forward to give Makoto a better angle to draw his fingers through the wet hair spread out across his shoulders. Makoto takes the hint towards silence and lets the conversation lapse into peace as he goes on stroking the conditioner into Fafnir's hair.

It's a peaceful quiet. The bathroom might not be the most comfortable place in its basic layout, but with steam rising from the full tub alongside them to cloud the air to warmth the heat alone is deeply satisfying, the more so when set against the wintry chill that seeped past even Makoto's heavy coat during his walk home from the train station tonight. Fafnir's suggestion of a bath after dinner was too pleasant to turn aside, and the opportunity to linger in the ritual of smoothing conditioner into the other's hair has offered exactly the kind of slow appreciation that Makoto lacks the time or means to indulge in during the long hours of the work day. He has worked through the necessary steps of washing himself with deliberate slowness, moving carefully to linger in the feel of the soap against his skin and the water sluicing over his head to plaster his hair to his scalp, until he's so relaxed that this last step before retreating to the comfort of the bath is as much an indulgence as a task to be completed.

Makoto reaches forward to press his fingers just over Fafnir's ears, offering force enough to drag his nails into gentle sensation over the other's scalp as he pulls Fafnir's hair back to the middle of his shoulders. It's a needless motion -- by this point Fafnir's hair is as conditioned as it is going to be, there's nothing more Makoto needs to do before climbing into the bath -- but Fafnir ducks his head forward in surrender instead of protest, and Makoto draws his touch back down the other's neck and across the flex of his shoulders, watching the shudder of sensation through Fafnir follow in the wake of his hands. It makes Makoto smile affection that goes felt if not seen, and when he reaches up to repeat the motion it's without any attempt at excuse. This kind of indulgence would have gotten him a frown when Fafnir moved in, or one of those suspicious glances that Fafnir offered by way of doubting Makoto's motives at every turn; now Fafnir just leans farther forward, curving his shoulders to offer his back for Makoto's touch. A lock of hair slides forward to fall in front of him but neither of them move to pull it back.

Makoto continues along the path of his touch, drawing against Fafnir's spine and to the curve of his waist to fit his hands against the angle of hip before he leans forward to touch his lips against the line of Fafnir's bare shoulder in front of him. Fafnir's exhale is soft, muffled out of the edge of

scorn it might have once had, and Makoto turns his head to rest against Fafnir's shoulder as he slides a hand around to wind his hold around Fafnir's waist. It's an indulgence, more than he would try even in the relative privacy of the living room, when there is the distraction of the television to fix Fafnir's attention, but here there is nothing and no one but the two of them, and Makoto is too languid with heat and comfort and affection to resist winding his arms around the other.

He can feel Fafnir tense. It's impossible to miss, with Makoto pressing flush to the line of the other's back, even if he didn't hear the sharp intake of breath Fafnir takes from the steam around them. Makoto doesn't say anything, doesn't lift his head or loosen his hold; he doesn't actually offer the least sign that he noticed Fafnir's shiver of tension at all. He just stays where he is, arms wrapped around the other's waist and head pillowed at his shoulder while Fafnir stays perfectly still before him. There is a pause, a long breath of uncertainty; and then Fafnir's arm shifts, and when it comes down it's to press his hand atop Makoto's wrist. His hold is tentative, at first, more a weight of his fingers against Makoto's arm than a grip, but it tightens as Makoto stays still, until Fafnir is pressing against him as much as Makoto himself is holding to Fafnir. Makoto turns his head down against Fafnir's shoulder, bracing his forehead at the other's shoulder as he gives in to the surrender of a smile against the heat of Fafnir's damp skin.

He can feel Fafnir take a breath, can sense the intention of it even before Fafnir speaks in a tone pitched to a deliberate edge on tension. "Has the conditioner been in long enough?"

"Mm," Makoto hums, and lifts his head from Fafnir's shoulder as he loosens his hold. "I think so." He frees his hand to touch against the soft of the locks and Fafnir lets his hold go as he straightens to sit with his usual rigidly upright posture. Makoto draws Fafnir's hair back, lingering over the ends and the shorter bangs brushing the other's cheek, before he nods.

"I'll rinse it out," he declares. "Hold still." Fafnir doesn't need the instruction -- he hasn't so much as shifted since he found his way back to his usual posture. Makoto pushes to his feet, feeling slightly light-headed with the heat in the enclosed space as he reaches for the showerhead to rinse the conditioner free of Fafnir's hair. Fafnir picks it up to offer it to Makoto before bowing his head in expectation of the water that Makoto turns on him. Makoto takes his time, rinsing until he's sure the last of the conditioner has been washed from Fafnir's hair, before he shuts the shower off and takes a step back.

"There's that," he says. Fafnir lifts his head and raises his hands to pull his hair back over his shoulder and press some of the water out of the locks. Makoto steps around him to return the showerhead to its holder on the wall. "Do you want to take first turn in the bath, Faf-kun?"

Fafnir snorts and rises to get to his feet. "Don't be silly," he says sharply as he turns towards the radiant heat of the waiting tub. The water splashes as he steps into it and sinks down to sit against the back edge. When he ducks his head his bangs fall forward in front of his face to disguise half of his expression if not the whole of it. "There's enough space for two."

Makoto is not at all sure about the accuracy of this statement. The bathtub, like the apartment, is built with the expectation of a single resident; it's nothing like the wide pools available at a bathhouse. But Fafnir slides in towards the far side of the tub, moving without lifting his head to gauge Makoto's reaction, and Makoto can hardly offer any kind of a response to that beyond a smile.

"Sure," he says, and comes forward to step over the edge and join Fafnir.

It really is a tight fit. Makoto has to move carefully just to navigate the process of climbing in over the raised edge, a feat he only manages thanks to bracing one hand against Fafnir's shoulder and another against the lip of the bath itself. The water rises with the addition of another body, lapping

at the edge as Makoto gets both feet in and overflowing in a waterfall to the drain in the floor as he lowers himself into the space left behind Fafnir's hunched-in shoulders. For a moment Makoto feels like he's trapped, as if having once gotten into the bath he might not be able to manage extricating himself, but then Fafnir leans back against his chest, and Makoto gets his knee past the other's waist to fit around Fafnir instead of behind him, and as the water level steadies around them Makoto breathes a sigh and finds himself surprisingly comfortable, in spite of the cramped quarters.

"Huh," he says. "We really did fit."

Fafnir snorts. "Of course we did," he says. "I know what I'm talking about."

"You do," Makoto agrees. He slides one arm off the support of the bath next to him and into the water. "I should have trusted you, Faf-kun."

Fafnir huffs agreement to this and lifts his elbow by a few inches. The movement makes space for Makoto's arm to fit beneath Fafnir's, and then around the other's waist, and when Fafnir lowers his arm again the weight settles atop Makoto's like a brace to fix the other in place. Makoto turns his head in against Fafnir's hair, and smiles, and when he tightens his hold Fafnir leans back against him so they both relax a little deeper into the steam of the bath rising around them.

## Strategic

“Here,” Makoto says, leaning back from his computer chair so he can call over the sound of the game playing in the other room. “What about this, Faf-kun?”

There’s a brief delay in response, as there is first the sound of the game pausing and then of the individual in question getting to his feet. Makoto tips his head to smile as Fafnir comes around the corner to the shadows of the computer room. “I think this’ll be the winner, in the end.”

“Hmph,” Fafnir says, sounding skeptical. He comes in to stand just alongside Makoto’s chair and braces a hand against the backrest to steady himself as he leans in to frown at the computer monitor. “Show me.”

Makoto doesn’t bother with taking offense at the barely-disguised order in Fafnir’s tone. He already has the information open on his screen anyway; he reaches for his mouse to gesture with the cursor at the relevant details. “It’s an onsen a few hours out of the city. We’ll need to take a train to get there but the travel isn’t too bad, and if we’re staying for the night we could make a weekend trip of it.” He scrolls down the page so he can click through some of the marketing photos displayed on the website. “The town is pretty and there’s plenty to do at the onsen, depending on what everyone feels like on the day.”

Fafnir hums. “You’re inviting everyone?”

“I was planning on it,” Makoto admits. “Kobayashi could always do with some time off, and she’ll bring Tohru, of course. Kanna can’t stay at home alone, and she can probably get permission for Saikawa to come out with the rest of us. Lucoa and Shouta are always fun to have around. And we can’t leave Elma out if everyone else is going.” He tips his head to glance up at Fafnir leaning over him. “That’s not a problem, is it, Faf-kun?”

Fafnir snorts. “It is Tohru who struggles to control herself around the opposition.” He tosses his head so his hair sweeps through an elegant arc around his face. “I can tolerate anyone.”

“That’s good,” Makoto smiles. “I’d hate for anyone to feel left out. And these trips are always more fun when you have more people going.” He looks back to the screen so he can click through to the next set of images. “It’ll be more peaceful on our side of the onsen, anyway. If we get lucky we’ll have the whole pool for just us and Shouta.”

“Mm,” Fafnir hums, and reaches out for the mouse Makoto is holding. Makoto relinquishes it at once, happy to give over exploration of the site to Fafnir, who clicks rapidly through several images without softening the frown of consideration he’s turning on the screen. Makoto watches Fafnir’s expression, waiting for a grimace of rejection that doesn’t come, even as the other cycles through the last of the images to return to the photographs of the front of the inn. Fafnir gives up the mouse, although he doesn’t straighten from the lean he’s making over the support of Makoto’s chair to stare at the screen. Makoto takes the mouse back and clicks to a new tab, this one with a handful of interior images of one of the rooms available for rent.

“We should be able to comfortably share a handful of rooms,” he says as he scrolls down. “They have several available and if I book far enough in advance I can get enough for everyone.”

Fafnir breathes out hard through his nose. “How many?”

“Rooms?” Makoto asks without turning his head to look away from the photos he’s looked

through a dozen times over the last week, as hypotheticals took on the greater form of a plan. “I was thinking three should be enough. Kobayashi and Tohru can keep an eye on Kanna and Saikawa in a bigger one, and as long as Elma doesn’t mind sharing with Lucoa we should be all set.”

Fafnir considers this for a moment. When he speaks his tone is level but taut on an intensity his forward lean does nothing at all to disguise. “We will have a room to ourselves?”

“Mm,” Makoto hums. “That’s what I’m planning on.” He clicks through to open up one of the interior photographs, this one of a narrow balcony open to the sky overhead.

“I was thinking this one,” he says. “It’s a little bit smaller, but since there’s just the two of us we should be able to fit. It’s not like we’re not used to living with each other, after all.” He lifts his head to beam up at Fafnir next to him. “What do you think, Faf-kun?”

Fafnir glances sideways at Makoto. His mouth is set on a deliberately flat line, without any sign of a smile or a crease at his forehead to indicate his reaction. But his gaze flickers over Makoto’s face, touching against the other’s features like he’s reorienting himself with their familiarity, and Makoto can see the answer behind the shine of Fafnir’s glasses before Fafnir turns his head to scoff at the images on the monitor again. “Do what you want, Takiya.”

Makoto beams. “Okay,” he says. “Thanks, Faf-kun.” Fafnir straightens and loosens his hold on the back of Makoto’s chair as he turns to return to the living room; Makoto tips to call after him as the other moves away. “We can bring the main console with us to play in the evening after dinner.” Fafnir pauses, hesitating as if he might turn back around; and then he huffs, and tosses his hair, and continues to resume his position in front of the television. Makoto watches him go, smiling as Fafnir reaches for his controller and tosses his hair back from his face to return his attention to the game, before he turns himself back around in his chair so he can make the necessary reservations.

## Peace

“Alright,” Makoto says, struggling to fit the word to coherency with the strain in his jaw of the third enormous yawn he’s mustered in the last five minutes. This one is so dramatic that it blurs his vision and quivers in the back of his throat until he has to actually pause his half of the split-screen view displayed on the television. “I’ve got to call it a night, Faf-kun.”

Fafnir huffs next to him without turning his head. “It’s not even midnight.”

“I know,” Makoto says, recovering himself enough to restart his side of the game so he can steer his avatar to a save point. “The bath got the better of me, I think. I’m going to fall asleep right where I’m sitting if I try to do another round. Sorry.” His screen flashes confirmation of the save and Makoto closes out of the game to leave just Fafnir’s half of the display still running. Makoto sets his controller down and lifts his hand to cover his mouth for another overwhelming yawn. When he has regained control of his jaw enough to speak he does so with a tip of his head towards Fafnir sitting on the floor next to him. “I think we brought your headphones. Do you want to keep playing?”

Fafnir tosses his head. “Later,” he says, and hits the button on his own controller to save his progress. The screen freezes for a moment as it loads before giving him the same feedback it offered to Makoto, and Fafnir powers off the game and leans forward to set his controller carefully aside. “I’ll put something else on after you go to bed.”

“Are you sure?” Makoto asks as Fafnir is reaching to press the power button on the television and turn off the soft hum of the display. “I want everyone to have a good time on this trip, Faf-kun. If you’d like to go on playing that would be fine with me.”

Fafnir turns his head fractionally towards Makoto. His hair falls dark over his face but his gaze glows bright enough that Makoto can see the glint of crimson from within the shadows with perfect clarity.

“Takiya,” he says, his voice flat with intensity. “Don’t play dumb.”

Makoto has to smile at that. “Okay,” he says. “Sorry, Faf-kun.”

Fafnir snorts. “No you’re not.”

Makoto doesn’t try to argue. Fafnir’s right, after all, and he’s hardly going to be able to muster regret when Fafnir is turning away from the television to come across the floor to where Makoto is kneeling. Makoto lifts a hand to touch to Fafnir’s hair as the other comes in towards him, his fingers catching to cradle against the back of the other’s head as his smile spreads wider across his face, and when Fafnir’s hand comes up to brace at his back Makoto is already leaning into the support to let Fafnir lower him back to the floor as he tips in over Makoto beneath him. Fafnir makes a low sound in the back of his throat, a rough rumble that drags towards heat as he braces against the floor over Makoto’s shoulder, and Makoto lifts his chin and reaches to slide his hand against the back of Fafnir’s neck to draw the other down and against the press of his mouth to Fafnir’s own.

Makoto loves kissing Fafnir. There are a lot of things he enjoys doing with Fafnir, from playing video games to folding laundry to drowsing in the tangle of their shared bedsheets on a weekend morning; but even amidst the full range of possibilities available to them, kissing is one of his very favorite indulgences. He likes the way the sound of Fafnir’s voice feels warm and humming

against his lips, likes the soft of the other's hair sliding loose to wind around his fingers and spill down over him; he loves the way Fafnir grips at his hip like he's trying to brace Makoto still, and the way Fafnir presses down against him as if to fit the weight of his body to a perfect mirror of Makoto's own beneath him. Makoto adores the heat of Fafnir's mouth, and the taste of his tongue, and the sound of his breathing, and even with the accumulated exhaustion of the day demanding rest his body finds as-yet-untapped reserves of energy to curve him up from the floor to meet Fafnir over him, and wind his arms around Fafnir's neck and about the slender curve of his waist, and tip his head into a lingering exploration of Fafnir's mouth that leaves Makoto breathless and Fafnir rumbling over a sound somewhere between a purr and a growl as it forms in the span of his chest.

Makoto doesn't know how their yukata come undone. He doesn't deliberately pull at the sash tied around Fafnir's waist, and as far as he knows Fafnir is too occupied in supporting himself with one arm and holding Makoto still with the other to spare the wandering fingers to unfasten Makoto's clothes from around him. But they seem to follow the same trajectory that clothing so often does, somewhere in the distraction that follows their kissing, until Makoto is not surprised at all to find Fafnir's knee pressing between his thighs and his yukata hitched up around his waist until the loose knot holding it around him is doing nothing at all to sustain any kind of decency. Makoto reaches for the collar of Fafnir's yukata, touching his fingers to the fabric to find it sliding as readily under his grip as his own has been rendered by Fafnir's touch, and when he draws back from the press of the other's lips he is smiling warm with anticipation as his hand draws farther down Fafnir's increasingly open neckline.

"So," Makoto says, glancing down as he lets Fafnir's yukata go so he can reach inside the collar instead and brush his fingertips just over the span of the other's pale chest. "You have the same idea I do, then?"

Fafnir hisses past his teeth. "What do you think, Takiya?"

Makoto smiles. "I think that's a yes," he says, and draws his hand away from Fafnir's chest to reach up for his hair again. The tie holding it back has fallen loose somewhere in the last minutes since Fafnir pressed him back to the floor; the length of it is spilling around Fafnir's shoulders, now, draping around the other's face and shadowing Makoto beneath him in turn. Makoto slides his hands up into it and draws Fafnir down towards his mouth so he can murmur against the set frown at the other's mouth. "The bottle of lube is in the side pocket of my bag." Fafnir huffs a breath in answer to that, which makes Makoto smile against his mouth before Fafnir leans in to kiss him back against the floor and distract him from even this deliberately gentle teasing.

Fafnir doesn't let Makoto go in retrieving the bottle thus indicated. Makoto isn't completely sure how Fafnir achieves these sorts of maneuvers; he suspects some kind of shadowy force, like the one that darkens the space of their apartment and fogs his vision to hazy heat whenever they are together like this, but he hasn't yet had to chance to confirm it. He's certainly interested -- he's happy with anything Fafnir has to share with him, and if that comes in the form of shadowy dragon tentacles, all the better -- but right now Fafnir is pinning him still and Makoto is too occupied with his present pursuit to go in search of anything further. He notices the rustle of his bag tucked into the corner, and the shift of Fafnir moving over him to better position his balance where he's holding Makoto to the floor, but for the most part Makoto is occupied by the press of Fafnir's lips and the heat of Fafnir's tongue tasting against the inside of his mouth until fingers slide under the sash of his yukata and pull it open to unfold the fabric entirely from its clasp around his body.

Makoto doesn't need to be told what to do from here. He keeps his fingers wound into Fafnir's hair, keeps seeking the heat of the other's lips with the press of his own, and as his yukata falls wide he spreads his knees apart to make an open invitation of his thighs. Fafnir's elbow over his



shoulder slides a little closer, Fafnir's free hand dips under to brace at the back of Makoto's neck, and it's only once he has Makoto well-steadied that Fafnir draws back to breathe heat against the other's parted lips as he touches against the inside of Makoto's knee. His hand comes up, slick friction ghosting over Makoto's skin as he draws higher, until his fingers touch against the sensitive heat of the other's entrance. Makoto gusts an exhale, deliberately sighing himself into relaxation where he's sprawled across the floor, and Fafnir turns his hand and presses up into him with the smooth stroke of a finger. Makoto tightens around him, savoring the friction of Fafnir sliding into him, and Fafnir breathes out hard and draws back to push in again, stroking a little deeper into Makoto as he goes. Makoto shudders over an exhale, and slides his fingers farther into Fafnir's hair, and Fafnir leans in over him to breathe against the shape of Makoto's mouth as he finds a steady rhythm for the gentle demand of his motion.

It's easy to relax. Makoto is exhausted from the day, all his strength worn down to the pleasant weight that comes with a long day of enjoyable experiences; sprawling in their room at the onsen while Fafnir works him open with confident force is exactly the kind of deep-down satisfaction to serve as a perfect conclusion to the day. Makoto lets one leg tip wide, sliding his foot out over the floor to give Fafnir a better angle to work against him, and when Fafnir urges a second finger alongside the first Makoto gives way without so much as a thought of resistance. The pressure of Fafnir's fingers is satisfying, the dull force of strain stretching him open more pleasant than anything else, and when Makoto's breathing catches on speed he lets it come without making any attempt to hold back the heat swelling his cock hard at his hips and tightening his body around Fafnir's touch to urge the other deeper. Fafnir keeps moving, his head ducked down over Makoto's and his fingers working with steady certainty, and Makoto relaxes over the floor and lets arousal rise in him until he is as flushed as he was sitting in the rising steam of the bath outside.

Fafnir doesn't speak to break the quiet of the room. Makoto's hands are winding through Fafnir's hair, urging against the heavy locks with idle attention as his breathing sticks heat-bright in his throat with each push of Fafnir's fingers into him, and there's the soft sound of their breathing spilling into shared humidity in the space between their bodies; but other than that they are both silent, content to speak with touch and breath rather than with words. Makoto can feel himself tightening with want, can feel his legs beginning to tremble with an ache for more as Fafnir's fingers move more easily into him, and before he can take breath to speak Fafnir is slipping his touch free and reaching to catch at the knot holding his loosened yukata around him. His thumb drags the tie free, the fabric falls open to hang loose around Makoto spread out beneath him, and Makoto slides his leg from between Fafnir's so he can lift his knees to bracket Fafnir's hips as the other tips himself down to slot between the span of Makoto's thighs. Fafnir tips his head down to frown attention as he steadies himself and braces a firm hold at the inside of Makoto's leg, and Makoto keeps his gaze turned up to read the flicker of reaction across Fafnir's face rather than watching for the action of his body.

Fafnir's fingers tighten at Makoto's leg, his forehead creases with concentration, and then his hips tilt forward, and Makoto shuts his eyes and breathes out a sigh of relief as Fafnir thrusts forward to fill him with the heat of his cock. Makoto tightens for a moment, his body flexing with the first wave of involuntary heat, and Fafnir's hand lifts from his thigh to grip at his hip instead, to span pale fingers against the shape of Makoto's waist. Fafnir's head lifts; when Makoto opens his eyes he finds Fafnir watching him, his mouth still tight on a frown and his forehead still creased, and his eyes all but glowing with vivid attention. Makoto smiles up at Fafnir, and winds his fingers together to clasp at the back of the other's neck, and Fafnir draws back to thrust forward and into him again. Makoto loses his breath, his lashes fluttering in spite of himself, and when Fafnir strokes again he relinquishes a hold at Fafnir's hair so he can reach up and brace himself with an arm around the other's shoulders instead. Fafnir leans in closer, ducking his head to press his forehead to the curve of Makoto's neck, and Makoto is left to gaze heat-hazed inattention at the

ceiling overhead as the force and friction of Fafnir taking him eclipse all of his senses into the dizzy distraction of building heat.

There isn't a chance for Makoto to catch his breath. Fafnir is gentle with him, now as always, careful even in the hold of his fingers bracing Makoto's hip as if he's focused as much on holding back his draconic instincts as giving in to his human ones; but there is a demand to his rhythm, an insistence that comes with each forward thrust, and Makoto's body is answering in kind, flushing so radiant with rising heat that even the loose sleeves of his yukata feel heavy and clinging where they have fallen back from his upraised arms. Fafnir is close against him, his body so near that his chest brushes Makoto's with each forward stroke he takes, that Makoto's cock skims the taut flex of Fafnir's stomach on each pull back, and Makoto feels overheated and dizzy and helpless to the heat wrapping around him, sparking in his veins and swelling at his cock and filling him with the certain force of Fafnir's own desire. He has an arm braced around Fafnir's shoulders, his fingers gripping tight at the line of the other's back where he can feel the flex of Fafnir's motion working over him, and his knees are pressing to Fafnir's hips, steadying against the rhythm bringing them together. Fafnir is breathing against his shoulder, his inhales coming hard as he moves into Makoto beneath him, and Makoto's own breathing is drawing faster too, catching to align with the friction of Fafnir coming forward into him on each thrust he takes.

Makoto can feel the heat rising between them, can match the ache of his own arousal tensing within him to the speed of Fafnir's movement and the brace of the hand gripping hard at his hip. Fafnir's breathing is coming faster against Makoto's skin, his shoulders tightening with the same force bringing them together; the air Makoto draws into his lungs is thick with heat, humid from the movement of their bodies and as glowing-warm as the motion of them fitting together. Makoto's cock is curving hard towards his stomach, straining for even the glancing friction of Fafnir's body brushing over it, and when Makoto blinks he can see the room shifting towards darkness, the light dimming and illumination retreating from the shadow that is spreading itself out from the shape of Fafnir's body over him. Makoto watches the darkness unfold, sees the light fade as if the night is spreading wings of shadow out into the room itself, and then he closes his eyes, and lets his hold on Fafnir's hair go to reach down for himself instead.

He shudders with the contact of his fingers, trembling with force just at the glancing weight of his fingertips skimming against his length. Fafnir must feel the force that runs through Makoto beneath him, must be able to track it from the flex in the other's thighs as much as the gasp of his breathing as he fits his fingers around himself, but the only response he gives is a hard exhale against Makoto's shoulder, as much a gasp as a growl, and the flex of his grip holding Makoto's hip steady. Makoto tips his knees wider, giving himself up to Fafnir's taking as he deliberately relaxes into the sensation of his own grip on himself, and when he pulls up over his cock he can feel the friction spreading out into him, pooling in his belly and tightening in his balls and thrumming electric through his legs and up the length of his spine. He keeps his touch gentle, almost teasing more than focused, but even with a light touch the heat is rising in him, climbing along his back and reaching out to curl at his toes as he pants for air and resists the urge to reach for the pleasure expanding out to encompass the whole of his body. His fingertips are tingling, his breath catching sharp in his throat with each dragging press of his hold over himself, and then Fafnir's hand at the back of his neck tightens and Makoto's attention flickers away from himself to focus on Fafnir instead. Fafnir's head tips forward, pressing hard against Makoto's shoulder as he hisses a sharp inhale past his teeth, and then his hips jolt forward and he exhales hard with the force of the orgasm that breaks over him. The room goes dark, illumination extinguished as instantly as if Makoto had closed his eyes, and Makoto arches against the floor and cries out as he comes into the darkness of Fafnir's pleasure. His cock pulses under his touch, spilling his release out over his stomach as he quivers through the waves of heat, and even in the dark Makoto can feel the tension of Fafnir's fingers tightening at his hip to brace him still through the rush of pleasure

surging through them both.

The light returns slowly, fading back in gently enough that Makoto doesn't need to shut his eyes to flinch away from a sudden flare of unexpected illumination. The shadows retreat, winding back from the fog that had wrapped them both, until finally Makoto can see the room with perfect clarity once again. He's still lying in the middle of the floor, his yukata spread out around him and his knees open around Fafnir's hips; Fafnir is lying against him, still breathing with some force against the support of Makoto's shoulder. His loose hair has tumbled around his shoulders and over Makoto; a few locks are spilling over Makoto's chest, trailing ticklish sensation against the side of his neck and hiding the greater part of Fafnir's features from view, even with the returned light around them. Makoto lies still for a long minute, savoring the humid heat of shared pleasure and the spreading languor of perfect comfort, before he lifts his hand from Fafnir's shoulder and draws against the curtain of dark hair spilling free over them both. The shadow slides back under his touch as he slides his hand over Fafnir's shoulder and along the back of his neck, and when Fafnir moves it's to turn his head to pillow at Makoto's shoulder instead of twisting away to hide his features.

It's late into the evening, with the sun having set while they were still in the onsen long hours before. From the other side of the window Makoto can hear the faint sound of crickets chirping, can imagine he hears the distant, soft splash of water lapping against the edges of the pools outside. Neither he nor Fafnir moves to speak in the peace of their own room either; in the quiet the sound of their breathing easing, the slide of Makoto's fingers through Fafnir's hair, the rustle of Makoto's yukata as Fafnir's hand slides from his hip to wind around his waist, are all perfectly clear to hear. Makoto listens to the soft murmur of intimacy, lingering in appreciation of the myriad details of Fafnir fitting so close against him, and he smiles, and shuts his eyes, and turns his head to breathe a sigh of perfect happiness against the top of Fafnir's head.

## Offhand

Everyone is very quiet on the train ride home. Makoto isn't the only one who made a long day of their outing, it seems; the greater part of their group drift into sleep before the train ride is five minutes underway, with the younger members toppling sideways in their chairs and Elma and Lucoa contenting themselves with reclining back into their assigned seats rather than occupying the open spaces next to them as well. Even Tohru takes advantage of the excuse to settle herself with her head in Kobayashi's lap, and for once Kobayashi doesn't move to protest this but instead rests her hand against Tohru's shoulder and turns to gaze out the window at the countryside moving past with her chin braced at a hand that doesn't quite suffice to cover the curve of the smile starting against her lips.

Makoto doesn't sleep. He could, if he settled himself into the support of his chair and let the pleasant exhaustion of a thorough vacation take hold of him; but he means to enjoy the entirety of this trip, and that means overseeing the ride home as well as everything that came before. Fafnir, of course, shows no signs at all of drowsiness; he spent the whole of the night with Makoto, in a startling break from his usual all-night gaming, and whatever of that he spent actually asleep is more than enough to allow him full awareness today. He is turned to face the window as well, with much closer to judgment on his expression than the idle appreciation Kobayashi is showing, but his shoulders are relaxed in spite of the severity of his expression, and with his elbow braced against the armrest between them Makoto thinks he might be very nearly comfortable, as much as Fafnir ever manages that for himself.

It's a peaceful scene. Makoto can take stock of the whole of their group just for turning his head to glance at them, and the shared sleepiness of the others is a compliment to his arrangement of the trip, he feels. The train is steady, rocking with a slight motion more lulling than distracting as it bears them down the rails and back towards home, and the thought of returning to the apartment gives Makoto the pleasantly warm ache of nostalgia that comes at the end of a trip away from home. He's had a successful vacation, and is looking forward to the pleasure of settling himself back into his routine, and then there's the soft sound of a snore, and when he looks up Kobayashi has tipped in to drowse against the side of her seat.

It can't be a terribly comfortable position. She's still upright in her assigned chair, without the curled-up comfort that Tohru has found for herself in Kobayashi's lap, and she hasn't tipped her seat back the few inches that would give her a more secure position for a nap. But her head is bowed slightly forward, her face pressing into the headrest next to her, and she looks completely relaxed in spite of the awkward position. The crease at her forehead is gone, the set of her lips has eased; even the hand she has resting at Tohru's shoulder has softened into more of the caress it looks like than the uncertain contact it was initially. Together they make a picture of domesticity, as if they have both nodded off on the couch in their apartment rather than on the way back from a weekend trip to an onsen. Makoto smiles to himself to see the comfort of it, and beside him Fafnir huffs a soft exhale.

"She is making a show of humanity." When Makoto tips his head to look at him Fafnir is frowning at Tohru, where the other dragon has her head pillowed at Kobayashi's lap and is breathing as slowly and softly as Kobayashi herself. "She doesn't require sleep any more than I do."

Makoto hums acknowledgment. "That doesn't mean it's not fun sometimes," he says. "She's not the only one, anyway." He glances out to the rest of their group and their various states of demonstrated exhaustion. "I guess everyone wanted to indulge in it a little." Fafnir scoffs and turns his head to look out the window of the train. Makoto tips in to smile at him, even though Fafnir is

looking away. “Not you, Faf-kun?”

Fafnir snorts. “I have no interest in sleeping on a train.” There’s a pause; then his head turns, just fractionally. It’s not enough to give Makoto a good look at Fafnir’s face, but he can see the tension at the corner of the other’s mouth flex on what he would call hesitation in someone else before Fafnir works himself around to speaking. “Are you tired?”

Makoto shrugs. “A little,” he admits. “Yesterday was a long day.”

Fafnir turns his head back to the window again. Makoto watches his shoulders patiently until Fafnir has drawn a breath to speak. “I can hold still, if you wish to sleep.”

It takes Makoto a moment to understand this offer for what it is. It’s only in looking back to Kobayashi and Tohru in the opposing seats that he parses the suggestion into meaning.

“Oh,” he says. He can’t deny that it’s an appealing prospect; even in imagination Makoto feels himself going warm with the casual intimacy of it, with the thought of Fafnir’s fingers brushing through his hair as he drifts into sleep. But Fafnir is sitting very stiffly in his seat, his head turned to fix his attention out the window, and even with the rest of their party arrayed in various states of inattention Makoto doesn’t want to push the boundaries of the other’s comfort quite that far. He looks at Fafnir’s turned head for a minute; then he shakes his head and smiles.

“I think I’ll stay awake,” he says. Fafnir’s head shifts, a red eye peeking from behind shadow to fix on Makoto’s face; Makoto lets Fafnir see him smiling before he turns his head to look back out at the rest of the train. “I like long train rides like this. You can see so much more than you get in the city.”

Makoto pauses to let that stand on its own before he shifts to brace his elbow against the armrest alongside the aisle so he can lean into the support of it and brace his chin in his hand. “And I have such good company to pass the time with, I don’t want to miss out on that.” He tips his head to smile at Fafnir next to him.

Fafnir is still watching him, as Makoto knew he would be, his hair falling heavy over his face. His forehead creases as Makoto smiles at him, his gaze darkening with intensity before he turns away with a huff again. “Be quiet, Takiya.”

Makoto breathes a laugh made soft in consideration of the sleepers around them. “Okay,” he says, and turns to look back down the aisle of the train. He can see the door to the next car down, and some motion from the saleswoman he suspects will soon be entering their compartment; and then there’s a brush of contact against his wrist, a murmur of friction sliding over his skin, and Makoto feels his chest tighten on pleased surprise as Fafnir’s hand drops from the armrest between them to seek out his own hand, left palm-up in a deliberate invitation that has gone totally disregarded until now. Fafnir’s hold fits around Makoto’s wrist, pausing so long Makoto wonders if Fafnir won’t leave it at that, but then Makoto angles his hand to the side to open his palm up into greater possibility, and when Fafnir’s grip loosens his fingers slide up over Makoto’s hand instead. Fafnir’s fingers press to Makoto’s, their hands match together for a breath, and when Makoto tips his hand fractionally to the side Fafnir’s fingers wind through his own to lace their holds together.

Makoto sits very still for a long moment, feeling his heart beating fast in his chest as his fingertips skim against the texture of Fafnir’s knuckles under his hold. When he shifts his weight it’s fractionally, just to adjust the angle of his chin in his bracing hand so he can cast his gaze sideways towards Fafnir next to him. Fafnir isn’t looking at him, he’s turned entirely away towards the window as if he’s utterly invested in the countryside flickering past on the other side of the glass, but his grip tightens around Makoto’s hand as the other glances at him, his fingers flexing as if

intent on holding the point of contact between them. Makoto catches his lower lip in his teeth, feeling his heart swell with affection too much for him to restrain his beaming smile, and then he turns back out to gaze unseeing down the aisle of the train, pretending nonchalance while every part of his attention winds itself into the grip of Fafnir's hand around his own and the fit of his fingers slotting perfectly with the other's.

## Switch

It only takes two levels before Makoto is certain of what Fafnir is doing.

He suspects almost as soon as they start playing. Fafnir has never been a slow starter, in the plentiful experience Makoto has accumulated over the last year living together; but right from the opening moves, Fafnir lags behind, playing with such delayed reactions that Makoto more than once glances sideways at the dark-garbed figure sitting at the kotatsu next to him just to make sure Fafnir is still watching the television screen at all. Fafnir *is* watching, and with a set to his mouth that indicates intense focus on the task at hand; which makes his missed jumps and failed attacks the more confusing. Makoto takes the lead in the first level, and only extends his advantage in the second, and then he misses a jump at the very start of the third, and Fafnir all but throws his avatar off a ledge into the lava flickering at the bottom of the screen, and Makoto is sure.

He doesn't say anything. This competition was Fafnir's idea in the first place, presented with a ducked head and so much of an edge on his voice that Makoto wouldn't believe the subject at hand if he didn't know Fafnir well enough to know that it's only self-consciousness that can put such tension on the other's tone. He hadn't pressed the subject then, just agreed with enough casual ease to loosen some part of the strain wound into Fafnir's shoulders, and he doesn't comment on it now, either, even as the levels pass and Makoto's avatar gains a laughably enormous lead on Fafnir's inept playing. Makoto takes the advantage Fafnir hands to him, and claims the victory that Fafnir has carved his name into, and when the screen is flashing to display the results Fafnir casts his controller onto the table and moves to get to his feet before Makoto even has a chance to reach for the remote. Fafnir doesn't tell Makoto to hurry, at least not aloud, but he does stand at the side of the kotatsu all but vibrating with impatience until Makoto has shut off the television and put his own controller down so he can get to his feet and follow Fafnir around the corner to what functions as bedroom as well as computer room.

The futon is laid out already. Fafnir had had that arranged when Makoto came home from work to find his roommate sitting upright on the couch without so much as a handheld game to occupy the focus of his fixed gaze; his suggestion for what they should do with the evening had been closer to a demand than a request, when granted the force of his crimson gaze fixed on Makoto. Makoto wasn't about to argue -- he's happy to go to bed with Fafnir just about any time he gets the chance, and all the faster when Fafnir is anxious enough to urge for it himself -- and he doesn't argue now, as he trails Fafnir into the space where the futon fits between the two pushed-in computer chairs. Fafnir comes in to kneel at the edge of the futon, folding with perfect grace to sit seiza at the corner of the mattress, and when he tosses his hair back from his face he makes even that simple motion carry as much regal self-assurance as if his position is that of a king instead of a supplicant.

"Very well," he says, and lifts his head to fix Makoto with the bright attention of his crimson stare. "How would you like me?"

Makoto hums at the back of his throat and comes in closer so he can drop to take a knee of his own at the edge of the blanket alongside Fafnir. Fafnir watches him approach, his chin still lifted and gaze cutting sharply down the line of his nose, but he doesn't turn aside as Makoto twists in to face him before lifting a hand to stroke against the heavy fall of Fafnir's hair along his face. Fafnir's lashes dip as Makoto's fingers brush over the curve of his ear, his head tips very slightly to the side as if to offer the line of his neck for Makoto's touch, and Makoto smiles and lifts his hand to repeat the caress of the motion.

"I'm not sure yet," he says. "Let me think about it for a minute."

Fafnir narrows his eyes at Makoto. "If you do not intend to keep your side of the deal--"

"I do," Makoto says, calmly enough that he cuts off the resonance of Fafnir's building temper before it can gain traction. Fafnir closes his mouth to frown at Makoto, which Makoto answers with a smile of as much sincerity as he knows how to offer. "I *definitely* do." Makoto fits his hand to the back of Fafnir's neck, curling his fingers against the other's head to hold him steady as he leans forward to brush his lips against Fafnir's own. Fafnir submits to the contact, his lashes dipping as his mouth softens for no more than the barest contact with Makoto's. Makoto lingers just long enough to undo the strain at Fafnir's lips to the beginnings of parted expectation; then he pulls back to offer Fafnir another smile. "I just want to savor my victory, Faf-kun."

"Hmph." Fafnir tosses his head again. "Don't get used to it. I will reclaim my title in our next competition."

"I'm looking forward to it," Makoto says. "And I'm excited to change things up too." He ducks his head forward to bump his forehead gently against Fafnir's as he curves a smile not-quite against the other's mouth. "I like doing all kinds of things with you, Faf-kun."

Fafnir snorts again. "Don't be sappy, Takiya," he says, and reaches to catch his hand around the back of Makoto's head to pull him into the force of a more determined kiss. Makoto lifts his chin in obedient answer, smiling even as Fafnir's lips press against his, and when he reaches to wrap an arm around Fafnir's waist Fafnir follows the guidance of his hold to let Makoto tip them in over the futon together.

They are occupied with kissing for some time. Makoto invariably finds it difficult to pay attention to anything else once he has the heat of Fafnir's mouth pressing against his, and Fafnir sets his hands into Makoto's hair to brace the other still between his palms and kisses into Makoto's mouth as if he means to lay claim to all the shadows Makoto holds in the soft spaces past his lips. Fafnir's tongue presses into Makoto's mouth, Makoto catches at the give of Fafnir's lip, the heat of their breathing melts one into the other without space for distinction between them, and the inevitable shift of their hands over each other is more a matter of instinct than conscious thought.

Makoto doesn't startle when Fafnir's hand slides down his back to push his sweater up his waist and press against the curve of his spine; his own fingers are working their way beneath the knot of Fafnir's dark cravat to find the edges of hidden collarbones and pale skin usually kept well-shadowed behind coat and jacket alike. Makoto savors over the process of unfastening the buttons of Fafnir's clothing, of unwrapping the layers of fabric from the heat of the other's bare skin waiting for the press of his own, while Fafnir pulls to urge Makoto's clothing up around his waist, chest, finally growling frustration and pulling back so he can tug the whole free of Makoto's head. Makoto ducks his head to submit to this force, happy to give over the warmth of his clothing for the greater heat of Fafnir's body, and in the moment it takes him to wiggle free of his shirt and sweater Fafnir does something to his transformation that leaves his clothing melting to dark fog as quickly as Makoto reaches out to press his hands to it. Instead of crisp shirt and silky cravat Makoto's hands find a slim waist, and pale shoulders, and the only thing he can do under the circumstances is to loop his arm around Fafnir to draw the other in against him so he can tip them over and press Fafnir back over the blankets of the futon.

Fafnir doesn't resist this change in position. He welcomes it, rather, judging from the force of his hand fisting into Makoto's hair and the grip he slides down Makoto's spine to brace just over the waistband of the other's jeans. Makoto comes forward in answer to the demand of Fafnir's pull, happy to rock himself down to fit between the angle of Fafnir's smoke-shadowed legs, and when his hips press down against Fafnir's Makoto groans with the friction of Fafnir's cock pressing hard against the front of his pants to drag against his own arousal. Makoto ducks his head down to press



his forehead to the line of Fafnir's shoulder, breathing hard as his hips rock forward to urge down against the other's, and against his ear he can hear the hiss of Fafnir's exhale drawn taut on heat and impatience as he fists at Makoto's hair to demand the other's attention.

"Takiya," Fafnir says, his voice rumbling low enough that it drifts towards a warning, and Makoto ducks his head to nod at the other's shoulder.

"Yeah," he says, and pushes himself up in an attempt to regain some clarity of focus on priorities beyond grinding down against the solid heat of Fafnir's cock pressing against him through his pants. Fafnir is waiting for him as soon as Makoto looks up, holding out the bottle of lube he apparently laid claim to sometime in the last few minutes. Makoto doesn't know if it's a matter of perfect preparation or just an application of the other's more-than-human abilities and doesn't figure it makes much of a difference anyway. He has the bottle all the same, can reach out and take it as quickly as Fafnir offers it to him, and as Makoto pushes to rock back onto his knees so he can manage the bottle Fafnir sits up as well, shaking his hair back from his face with unselfconscious grace.

Makoto glances at him, unable to resist the temptation to watch Fafnir's elegant motion as he turns over on the futon so he can brace himself on his hands and knees, his head ducked forward and his hair spilling over his shoulders to leave the pale curve of his back for Makoto's appreciation. Makoto watches Fafnir as he slicks his fingers without looking, his attention spanning the dark of Fafnir's hair, the flex of his shoulders, the dip of his spine curving down before rising to the angle of his hips, until Fafnir tips his head to cast a scarlet glare back over his shoulder in Makoto's direction. "Hurry it up, Takiya."

"Ah," Makoto says, and looks back down to what he's doing. "Right." His hand is slippery enough, fingers coated to wet and palm slick with lube; he shuts the bottle one-handed and tosses it to the edge of the futon where it won't be in the way. Fafnir turns his head away again as Makoto rocks forward to kneel behind him in the space between Fafnir's open knees, ducking his head so his hair is curtaining any chance Makoto might have of seeing his expression. Makoto looks all the same, taking in the set of Fafnir's shoulders and the line of his back and the deliberate tension at his thighs, before he lifts his hand to touch against Fafnir's hip. He lingers in the contact for a long minute, drawing his touch into a deliberate caress until Fafnir's shoulders let go of some of their tight-drawn tension, before he tightens his hold to a bracing grip and lifts his other hand to touch the slick texture of his fingers to the other's entrance.

Makoto doesn't need to give Fafnir any explicit instruction. They've done this enough with their positions reversed that Fafnir has learned the process, even if he hasn't yet had the experience, and Makoto can hear the huff of a deliberate exhale that Fafnir gives as he relaxes in expectation of Makoto's touch sliding into him. It's Makoto who pauses, collecting himself into the anticipation of the moment, kneeling between Fafnir's legs and with his fingers pressing gently against the other's body, before he shifts his hand to slide a single finger carefully past the other's entrance. Fafnir tightens around him for a moment, clenching against the relative strain of Makoto's touch, but he eases as quickly as Makoto hesitates, gusting an exhale and dropping his head farther forward like he's deliberately easing the strain from the back of his neck. Makoto watches Fafnir's shoulders, gauging the other's comfort from the angle of his back and the curve of his neck, before he presses in farther to work a little deeper into Fafnir's body. Fafnir lets him come forward without resistance this time, breathing slow through the work of Makoto stroking into him, and Makoto keeps going, moving with deliberate care even as his heart pounds in his chest and heat collects taut against his spine and low in his hips. Fafnir is hot to the touch, tight around his fingers even with his intentional easing to the demands of Makoto's motion, and Makoto can't help but be intensely aware of the intimacy of his touch pressing within Fafnir's human form. He watches the tilt of Fafnir's head, and listens for any sign of strain on the other's breathing, and when he works

his fingers it's carefully, moving slowly as much to savor the sensation of working Fafnir open as in pursuit of the end goal.

It gets easier. Fafnir softens as Makoto works into him, opening to first one and then a second finger, when Makoto shifts to offer a pair together. The slick of the lube eases Makoto's motion as he works, smoothing each stroke a little more than the last, until he is moving with a steady rhythm as he slides his touch forward to fill Fafnir with his fingers before drawing back in expectation of the next thrust. He still has his grip at Fafnir's hip, although he doesn't really need to exert the force of it; Fafnir is holding himself steady enough for the thrust of Makoto's fingers just with his hands and knees against the futon to offer resistance to the forward stroke of the other's touch. They both are breathing faster, Makoto with the edge of rising arousal and Fafnir in deep, deliberate breaths that he gusts to exhales with each forward stroke of Makoto's fingers, until finally Makoto can think of nothing more to offer by way of preparation. He pauses, hesitating for a moment with his fingers pressing into Fafnir and his hand resting at the other's hip; and then he slides back, withdrawing with an intention that frees him entirely from the grip of the other's body before he draws his hand away from Fafnir's hip so he can rock back over his heels and reach for the fly of his jeans.

Fafnir turns his head fractionally, glancing back over his shoulder to where Makoto is undoing his pants, but he doesn't speak to offer question or demand as Makoto gets his zipper down and sits back to push his clothes off his hips and free of his legs. He just stays where he is, on hands and knees with his crimson gaze flickering dark over his shoulder as he watches Makoto strip down to bare skin to match Fafnir's own. Makoto pushes his jeans aside and out of the way of the futon before turning back in to resume his position kneeling behind Fafnir as he reaches to clasp his slick palm around himself and stroke wet up over the heat of his cock. The sensation sparks up his spine, flashing heat through his body as he lays claim to the arousal that has gone untouched over the minutes it has taken him to prep Fafnir, but Makoto's attention is too fixed on the dip of Fafnir's spine and the flex of the other's shoulders to spare much focus for even the sensation of his fingers gripping to pull over his cock. His cock aches, pressing certain heat firm against his palm, and Makoto breathes out and comes up onto his knees behind Fafnir. His hand returns to Fafnir's hip, his fingers spread to steady against the other's pale skin, and he hesitates for a moment with his grip steady around his cock and Fafnir kneeling on the bed before him.

Fafnir's head is still turned, his hair falling over his face to darken the color of his eyes to shadow, but Makoto looks to meet his gaze all the same, to offer sincerity in answer to the darkness masking Fafnir's face. He takes a breath and lets it go, deliberately slowly, before he speaks. "Okay, Faf-kun?"

Makoto can't see the expression on Fafnir's face past the weight of his hair, but he can hear the scoff of an exhale at the other's lips in answer. "Don't keep me waiting, Takiya."

Makoto smiles. "Okay," he says. Fafnir drops his head back down over the brace of his hands at the futon and Makoto looks down so he can guide himself forward over the space between them. He braces his grip at the base of his cock, tilting himself out to a greater angle as he rocks his weight in over his knees; and then the head of his cock is pressing against Fafnir's entrance, and he's thrusting forward, and his cock slides smoothly into the grip of Fafnir's body.

Fafnir makes a sound as Makoto fills him, an exhale that comes sharp enough to form around the shape of a groan. Makoto looks up for a moment of concern, but Fafnir is dropping his head forward rather than flinching away, and when Makoto hesitates Fafnir digs into his grip on the blankets and rocks himself back to finish out the motion the other began. Makoto reaches out to grab at Fafnir's hip with his other hand, as much to steady himself as to still the other's motion, and when he breathes out the exhale takes the form of a breathless laugh in his throat. He fixes his grip

to certainty against Fafnir's hips, braces himself for a moment to take a breath; and then he draws back, moving slowly as he slides away so he can take a deliberate thrust forward and into Fafnir again. Fafnir's exhale is softer, this time, with less of the startled heat that came with the first, but Makoto is still listening for it, is still watching the flex of tension ripple across Fafnir's shoulders as he shudders with the friction. Makoto watches Fafnir, his attention held as much by the other's reaction as by the sensation climbing along his own spine, and he keeps watching as he rocks back to take another careful thrust to bring them into the start of a rhythm.

Fafnir keeps his head ducked down over the grip he has made on the sheets beneath him. Makoto can't see his face, can see nothing of his expression from the position they are in, but Fafnir's breathing is level enough, even if it's coming harder than it usually does as Makoto moves into him to bring them together, and he's still relaxed enough to let Makoto move easily as he finds a steady pattern to the thrust of his hips. He's still tight around Makoto, flexing hard enough that Makoto has to breathe deliberately to sustain a measured pace instead of falling into more desperate haste, but there's no strain in Fafnir's shoulders, no hiss of pain that would stall Makoto's movement immediately on hearing. They're fitting smoothly together, as readily as they have learned to when it is Makoto lying across the sheets beneath Fafnir; and then Makoto comes forward, his hips tipping to an easier angle, and Fafnir gasps an inhale as the room goes dark. It's only for a moment, the shadow eclipsing the illumination in the same heartbeat that Fafnir clenches tight around Makoto's cock inside him, but it's enough to stall Makoto's breathing on a flare of adrenaline so instant he doesn't even parse it as thrill or fear for a moment. He just goes still, freezing in place with the shock of Fafnir's reaction, and then Fafnir gusts an exhale and light surges back to illuminate the tension in Fafnir's shoulders and the forward tilt of his head over his hands.

Makoto takes a breath. "Faf-kun?" Fafnir growls something in the back of his throat. Makoto cocks his head to the side. "Should I keep going?"

Fafnir turns his head. Makoto sees a flicker of red, flaring vivid as a flame from the shadow of the other's hair, and he can see the answer so clearly he's drawing back even before Fafnir has hissed "Yes" to the edge of a curse against his teeth. Makoto pulls away, just by enough that he can get the traction for another thrust, and when he rocks forward Fafnir groans a sound low enough to more than match the darkness that spills up to fill the room around them. Makoto lifts his head to look up, to see the faint glow of the light overhead dimmed to no more than a faint yellow circle in the shadows surrounding them, and he tightens his grip on Fafnir's hips and continues moving without waiting to be ordered to it. Fafnir flexes around him again, tightening with the sensation of Makoto thrusting into him, and Makoto breathes himself into a starstruck smile as the room flickers with the dark intensity of Fafnir's reaction.

He can't see what he's doing. The shadows aren't absolute, they lack the consistent weight that forms when it is Fafnir bracing between Makoto's thighs to claim the other's body for his own, but they flicker in intensity, spiking high before fading as Makoto draws back for his next thrust forward into Fafnir kneeling before him. The light flickers around them, eclipsed and eased in time with the rhythm of their bodies coming together, and Makoto finds himself gazing at Fafnir in front of him, catching glimpses of the other in the fragments of illumination he gets between the waves of encroaching darkness. Fafnir's head is bowed entirely forward, now, his hair pouring forward in a sheet around his head; the back of his neck is curved up, his shoulderblades rising under his skin like they are reaching for the wings of his draconic form. His breathing is louder than it was, louder than it should be; Makoto can feel the rasp on Fafnir's exhalations dragging vibration down the length of his spine, can feel his body answer with heat tightening his balls and swelling harder into his cock. He's still holding onto Fafnir's hips in front of him, still moving forward to sink himself into the heat of the other's body with each thrust, but his vision is flickering out of all utility, his senses narrowing to reliance on the sound of heat dragging through an expansive chest and the tension spreading out from his hips to expand across his chest and flex into the muscle of his

thighs. Makoto is panting for air, his voice breaking higher as Fafnir's rumbles to unmeasured depths that fill the whole of the space around them, and he's not sure, now, if he's fixing Fafnir still with his hold on the other or trying to keep himself steady in a world disintegrating into the shadow and heat enveloping him. All he can hold to is the sensation, the friction building around him to flush his skin and gasp his breathing sharp and high in his chest, and then Fafnir catches over an inhale and Makoto can feel him tense, can feel the taut thrum of anticipation as if it's humming through the air around them as much as through the physical form still braced between his hands.

Makoto's hips come forward, moving on instinct of their own, wholly separate from the breathless, straining tension taut at the back of his mind, and from the weight of the shadows Fafnir groans a sound that seems to set all Makoto's blood on fire just for hearing it. Makoto seizes a breath, feeling as if the shadows have gained the humid heat of steam just for that one sound to set them alight, and around him he can feel the force of Fafnir's orgasm pulse through the other, jolting in his thighs and arcing through his hips and seizing hard around the resistance of Makoto's cock inside him. Makoto gasps, choking to sunbright heights in his throat, and he comes instantly, drawn down into the tumbling relief of pleasure by the demand of Fafnir coming around him. His shoulders come forward, his head drops down, and for what feels like a small eternity all Makoto can do is clutch at Fafnir's hips and gasp his way through the waves of pleasure rushing through and over and around him.

He finds the light waiting for him, when he returns some part of his attention to his vision. He can see Fafnir again, pale skin and dark hair tipped down over the support of the futon before him; Fafnir has kept his hands under him, but he's angled far forward into their support, and a few long strands of hair are clinging to the sweat-damp glistening over his shoulders and slick at the curve of his back. Makoto holds still for a moment, breathing hard as he looks down at Fafnir in front of him; then he tightens his hold on Fafnir's hips in warning, and rocks back so he can draw free of the other's body. Fafnir huffs in the back of his throat as Makoto slides out of him, his fingers tightening at the sheets at the friction, but when Makoto drops back to sit over his heels Fafnir doesn't hesitate in turning himself around so he can sit up over the futon instead of kneeling atop it. He braces a hand behind himself, leaning into the support without visible concern for the view he's giving Makoto of his bare chest and slow-softening cock, and when he looks up to meet Makoto's gaze his eyes are as sharp as ever, if somewhat darkened by the shadow of the pleasure that has so recently claimed them both. "What?"

Makoto blinks and smiles confusion. "Hm?"

Fafnir frowns and lifts a hand to gesture at Makoto. "You want to say something," he says, and drops his hand back in front of himself so he can fix Makoto with his full attention. "What is it?"

Makoto hadn't realized he did. The only thing he had consciously been aware of was the languid comfort of satisfaction, and the general appreciation of getting to see Fafnir somewhat less clothed and more flushed than he usually appears. But Fafnir's statement brings words to mind as if they are answering the other's demand, and Makoto shrugs and speaks.

"You know you could have asked to switch, instead of letting me win."

Fafnir bares his teeth in a grimace and turns his head to look away, moving quickly enough that his hair sweeps in an arc in front of his face so Makoto can't see his expression. Makoto goes on smiling at him all the same, even if he can't see the details of Fafnir's face, and after a moment Fafnir clears his throat from behind the curtain of his hair.

"I'll keep it in mind," he says, sounding more irritable than anything else. When he tips his head to

look back it comes with a threat in the form of a red-eyed glare. “You’re not going to get off so easy next time.”

Makoto laughs aloud. “I’m looking forward to it,” he says, and rocks forward onto his knees so he can fit himself closer to Fafnir on the futon. Fafnir is still scowling as he draws closer, his mouth still set onto the hard edge of a frown, but he lifts his chin as Makoto leans in for a kiss, and by the time their lips touch Makoto finds there is hardly even a show of irritation left for him to kiss away from Fafnir’s mouth.

He takes his time with it just the same.

## Credits

“Sorry for the wait,” Makoto says as he returns from the kitchen with a cup of tea in either hand. “I didn’t realize we needed to open a new box.” Fafnir snorts dismissal to this apology and hits the pause button on his game as Makoto crosses in front of the couch to approach where Fafnir is sitting under the kotatsu. It’ll be too warm for the heater soon, with the cherry trees just starting to show the first signs of the buds that will break open into pink flowers by the end of the month, but neither Makoto nor Fafnir has suggested that they put the kotatsu away yet, and until then Makoto is happy to make the most of the close quarters it puts him in with Fafnir.

Fafnir lets go of his grip on his controller with one hand as Makoto approaches and turns so he can reach up and take the cup of steaming tea the other offers to him. Makoto leans in to set his own down at the edge of the kotatsu alongside Fafnir’s before drawing in close so he can pull back the edge of the blanket and slide his feet into the radiant warmth beneath the surface. Fafnir shifts slightly to the side to make space for Makoto to settle himself, but he tips back into the pressed-close proximity they were in as soon as Makoto lays the blanket back over his lap, and Makoto doesn’t complain. He just smiles at the warmth of Fafnir’s knee angling out to rest against his own and tips in to lean against the support of the other’s shoulder as he reaches for the handheld game he’s been playing alongside Fafnir’s pursuit of a perfect score in the game displayed on the television. He shifts himself back into the perfect comfort he gave up in exchange for procuring tea for them both, prepared to drop right back into the peaceful companionship in which they have been lingering all morning; and then he realizes Fafnir hasn’t started his game back up, and Makoto pauses to tip his head and look up towards the other.

Fafnir is still just as he was when Makoto sat down next to him. He has his controller in one hand, his grip braced to familiar comfort against the smooth plastic, but his other hand is lingering against the side of his cup of tea as if he’s forgotten it’s there, and if he’s looking in the direction of the television screen the focus of his gaze is somewhere far past it, like he’s seeing something utterly different than the room around them. He doesn’t look irritated, isn’t so much as frowning, but the distance in his eyes captures Makoto’s attention so entirely that he doesn’t even look down at his game as he pauses again.

“Faf-kun?” Fafnir shifts his head very slightly in Makoto’s direction in answer. Makoto tips his game down from where he was holding it up and cocks his head to the side as he smiles at the other. “You okay?”

Fafnir doesn’t answer right away. He stays as he is for another moment, one hand on his controller and the other against his teacup, before he turns his head to face back towards the paused television screen again. “I was thinking about the date.”

“The date?” Makoto says, and lowers his game to the table entirely. He does a brief mental check of the games they currently have waiting on pre-order, and the next upcoming event. “What about it?”

Fafnir’s head shifts in Makoto’s direction again. Makoto can see the other’s gaze angle sideways to touch at Makoto’s face before Fafnir glances aside. There’s another pause before Fafnir takes a breath. “It was this day last year that I first came to the human world.”

“Oh.” Makoto thinks back through the months that have passed, back to this same date a year ago; and memory tugs at the back of his mind as his eyes widen in recognition. “Wasn’t that the day of Kobayashi’s housewarming party?”

Fafnir huffs affirmative. Makoto blinks up at him. “Do you mean--” He pauses to consider his phrasing for a moment before he starts to smile. “It’s the anniversary of the day we met.”

Fafnir turns his head aside entirely. His knee doesn’t move from where he’s pressing it against Makoto’s leg. Makoto goes on smiling at him.

“I didn’t realize it had been a whole year,” he says. “Wow.” Makoto pauses to reflect on this. “I’m glad you remembered the date, Faf-kun.”

Fafnir snorts without turning his head. “It’s a trivial detail,” he says, with some general measure of force on the words that falls completely short of actually conveying any kind of temper. His head shifts in the general direction of looking back towards Makoto. “I only just thought of it.”

“I’m glad you said something,” Makoto tells him. “We should do something to celebrate.” He glances towards the door of the apartment. “I could pick up something special from the store for dinner.”

Fafnir shakes his head. “That’s not necessary,” he says. “I just thought of it.”

“Are you sure?” Makoto asks, bracing a hand at the edge of the table in expectation of getting back to his feet after all. “I don’t mind.”

Fafnir’s hand comes out, giving over the contact with his cup of tea to close tight around Makoto’s wrist to hold him still. “I’m sure,” he says, with speed enough to give the words force. Makoto stays still, watching the shadows half-hiding Fafnir’s face as the other keeps his head down and his hand tight. There’s another pause; then Fafnir speaks again, more slowly and with deliberate clarity.

“I’d rather have you here with me, Makoto.”

Makoto feels the warmth spreading through the whole of his body, starting in the center of his chest and expanding through his legs, arms, hands, face, until he feels his whole self glowing with radiance. Fafnir keeps his hold on his wrist for a moment; then he lets Makoto go, and turns back to return his hold to his controller and his gaze to the television screen. Makoto watches him as Fafnir fixes his attention back on the game and restarts play. Then he smiles, bright and spreading as warm as the happiness in his chest.

“Okay,” he says, and reaches out to reclaim his own game in turn. “I’d rather be with you too, Faf-kun.” Fafnir snorts at this, sounding almost dismissive; but he doesn’t move his knee aside, and when Makoto shifts in to lean against the other’s shoulder Fafnir tips to accommodate the force of Makoto against him. Makoto glances up to Fafnir’s face, set into lines of absolute attention as he frowns at the motion on the television screen before them; and then he smiles again, and ducks his head against Fafnir’s shoulder, and they return to playing together.

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