

The King of the Mountain Pass

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/19182436) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/19182436>.

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warnings:	Graphic Depictions Of Violence , No Archive Warnings Apply , Rape/Non-Con
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Gintama
Relationship:	Hijikata Toshirou/Sakata Gintoki
Characters:	Hijikata Toshirou , Sakata Gintoki , Sakamoto Tatsuma , Takasugi Shinsuke , Katsura Kotarou , Kagura (Gintama) , Shimura Shinpachi , Hedoro (Gintama) , the nameless doctor , a lot of other people
Additional Tags:	mostly our boys though , it's always porn , creep-o-factor 3.5-4/10 , Drama , Honor , Action/Adventure , Alternate Universe - Fantasy , there's more plot than porn for once , this one is so easy to write I fear I might neglect the other ones , help , Oral Sex , deflowering Hijikata , tugging at your heartstrings , Loyalty , Anal Sex , Anal Fingering , Wow these tags are a mess , Tags Are Fun , Humor , Suspense , Angst , Eventual Romance , Eventual Happy Ending , Eventual Fluff , Treachery , Betrayal , Magic , Fights , Duelling , Fate , Prophecy , Secrets , Lies , Truth , sex before romance , Love , Desire , Obsession , Trust , This is turning out more patchworky than intended , This Is Not Going To Go The Way You Think , density 3.5/10 , Wordcount: Over 100.000
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2019-06-11 Completed: 2021-11-27 Words: 105,817 Chapters: 30/30

The King of the Mountain Pass

by [Lack_of_Common_Sense](#)

Summary

AU, fantasy. Hijikata, a vice-commander, gets ambushed by a group of bandits while traversing the mountains with his squad in search of an escaped convict. He survives the assault but is captured and taken to meet the bandits' charismatic chief. Said chief is a strange man with silver hair, a man Hijikata had only heard of from tall tales and myths. He didn't believe a word before, but now this legend incarnate is in front of his eyes, and he's very different from the stories. Selfish, not at all noble, and supercilious towards his captive. Plus, he clearly has no intention of letting Hijikata go!

Notes

FAQ:

1) Can I translate your work and post it on my page?

No.

1.a) Is there any possibility of making an exception for me?

Unlikely. If we were close friends, maybe. Since we aren't, the answer is still no.

2) Can you answer questions about [this and that]?

Yes, as long as it's not spoilery. I can answer any remaining questions once the work is complete.

3) Is there a way to contact you less publicly than in the comments?

Yes, I have an Instagram account: [@rison_iinekin](#)

4) Are you still updating?

This fic is complete but there are others I am working on, albeit at the pace of a winded snail.

5) Can we be friends?

My current friend capacity is maxed out.

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

Ambushed

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Hijikata looked towards the darkening sky and silently wondered what he ever did to which god that they invented a horse. His ass hurt, his back hurt, and it was unpleasantly hot despite the nearing nightfall. The smell of the horses wasn't exactly pleasant in the heat, either; he would rather walk, if it weren't for the sad truth that the bastard they were trying to track down had stolen a horse during his escape. They were slower than him, since he was hiding his trail, and they had almost lost him several times.

"Hijikata-san!" he heard someone call his name, and he looked in that direction. Yamazaki was making his way towards him. "There's a stream ahead, and his trail ends on this side."

"Send some men upstream and some downstream, he couldn't have gotten too much off course. The direction hasn't changed much since the city. Hurry up, though, it's going to be dark soon and we won't be able to track him that way," Hijikata replied.

"Yessir!" Yamazaki saluted and rode off to the front again. Displeased, Hijikata glared at the clouds gathering above their heads. It was probably because of the mountains ahead that it rained so often in this area. Thanks to that, there was plenty of water, the forest was bright and lush and there were many streams running downhill. They had to stop at each because the piece of shit pyromancer – who attempted to set the royal palace on fire, but was captured and got sentenced to be deported – would ride through them in an attempt to shake his pursuers off his tail. As they kept going, though, Hijikata noticed that this guy was still following the same course despite the small detours he made every now and then in a vain attempt to confuse his enemy. Right now, trying to find his trail was just a reassurance.

"Hijikata-san! We've found Katsura's track!" someone called, and Hijikata spurred his horse to move faster. He wasn't keen on chasing escaped convicts in the dark – mostly because he couldn't see jack-shit. Unfortunately, he knew why the escapee would choose to come here of all places. Everyone'd heard the rumours about a gang of bandits led by the White Demon.

Hijikata didn't believe those tales, though. This area was near the state's borders and it was easy to make up lies about lands people never set their foot to. None of the Shinsengumi had ever met anyone who would be able to prove that they had met, or at least seen, the White Demon in person. He was said to be ruthless to his enemies, but gallant to the weak and helpless, and there were even whispers that he in fact wasn't human – that he was actually an immortal demon coming to the human realm to feast upon the unlawful and the unfair. It was, all in all, complete hogwash and Hijikata was far from interested in such folk myths.

Not that non-humans didn't exist. They did, but the government did not like seeing them living among humans, and so they were usually quickly chased out. That, Hijikata didn't agree with – but he was an officer of the law, and an order was an order. It had to be followed.

The forest slowly turned dark, and though the sky above the trees was still a lighter shade of blue, there were already some stars among the clouds. The path became narrower and began to serpentine, following the terrain, cutting deeper into it – perhaps a trace of a past river which had now taken a different route. The evening air was heavy and wet, filled with the scent of leaves and mud.

The group reached a narrow ravine; one by one, they entered the dark. Because of their horses, they had to go in a single file, as there was almost no room for two next to one another. They could barely see anything, but not a single person suggested that they should stop for the night and continue the next morning.

Hijikata, who was now riding in the front, felt uneasy. It was his instinct, telling him that something was off.

As his senses were on high alert, he caught the twang of a bow string a moment before something hit the stone wall of the ravine right next to his head. “Ambush!” he yelled out immediately. “Fall back!” He had no other choice under these circumstances – the enemy was above their heads, and staying still would mean death. They needed to get out of this narrow space, quickly.

The men followed his order immediately, and despite the darkness, they were quickly retreating towards the exit out of this trap.

Hijikata’s horse suddenly reared, neighing loudly.

There was a moment of not being bound by gravity.

A blunt hit.

The surrounding darkness found its way in and mercilessly smothered Hijikata’s mind.

When he came to, the first sensation, which hit him with the force of an avalanche, was the unpleasant combination of a splitting headache and nausea. His entire body hurt, he was tied up like a cabbage roll, hanging over the ass of someone’s horse, and he couldn’t move a muscle. Every now and then, the end of the horse’s tail whipped him in the face. There were voices, but not many, and they were always short and to the point. Information so brief he couldn’t decode it, or orders partly unintelligible to someone from the outside. Several times, he heard someone speak in one language and receive an answer in another.

He couldn’t assess his surroundings, because he was blindfolded. He wasn’t dumb enough to speak; though they didn’t bother with a gag, the last thing he needed was to call attention to himself. Instead of acting stupidly and on impulse, he chose to ignore the angry dwarf in his head who was currently attempting to break an anvil in there, and he at least tried to gather as much information from the surrounding sounds and the way they echoed. Mostly, they were going through rocky terrain and narrow-seeming places.

Suddenly, the sway of the horse’s step stopped. Someone hollered a few syllables Hijikata couldn’t recognise, and the following exchange of words was entirely beyond his

understanding capabilities. He somehow got that they were arguing about something, but he had no idea what the problem was.

“Guys, come on,” finally, someone spoke in a way Hijikata could understand – or rather, they called from afar, it seemed. “Does seriously no-one remember the password? Not one of you? Not a single person?”

There were murmurs and mumblings, but nobody responded.

“You guys are lucky I know you all,” that man called again, and there was a sound which Hijikata recognised as a drawbridge being lowered. The horses moved again – hollow sounds of horseshoes hitting the wooded bridge echoed loudly, and Hijikata realised that he could hear water below, though only very faintly.

“You took your sweet damn time,” the man spoke to them as they neared the end of the bridge and most likely a gate of some sort to go inside wherever this was. “I was waiting, thinking you got eaten out there or something.” The horse carrying Hijikata stopped next to the person talking.

“Ah, yeah. We had a run-in,” the person sitting in front of the bound Hijikata half-turned. They seemed surprisingly young, and Hijikata briefly wondered if it wasn’t a woman. No, this was a young boy’s voice.

“We lost no-one, though, I see,” the man said with audible approval in his voice. “Good job.”

“We had the advantage. He’s out like a light, though, even after several hours on the road. We turned to go back right after we secured the area, but he still hasn’t come to. He might need medical attention.”

Several hours?! Hijikata was shocked by that. What else could it mean except that they’d already left the country? He was now in a foreign country, unauthorised, and that could easily mean war in these unstable times. He was an officer, after all, and not just any at that.

“I’ll notify the doc.” The man, it seemed, turned to leave.

“Thanks. Ask Hedoru for some herbs, too,” the boy replied, then clicked his tongue and the horse moved again.

“Will do,” the man called.

A physician was going to be able to tell that Hijikata was feigning unconsciousness, so Hijikata decided to ‘wake up’ as soon as they got him off the horse.

It didn’t take long. There was the sound of a gate, voices, then someone’s hands which not so gently took him off the horse’s back. He hit the ground like a sack of wet sand and grunted in pain.

“Kagura-chan!” the boy’s voice resounded through the stables. “You need to be careful! He’s injured!”

“But he’s a prisoner, so what does it matter?” a girl said, and someone’s finger poked Hijikata’s cheek.

“He may be a prisoner, but he’s a warrior, too, Kagura-chan. You shouldn’t treat him that way. He deserves respect. Would you carry him inside? We need to check his wounds.” Though the boy was likely in his teens according to his voice, he had sound judgement and his attitude seemed adult-like.

“Okay.” To Hijikata’s horror and dismay, a single pair of small hands lifted him off the ground, and he was hoisted over some very slender shoulders. “Where to?”

“Come with me.”

“We should just lock him up. Don’t you dare ask me to put him in my bed,” Kagura mumbled under her breath as she followed behind the boy. “It’s not proper for a girl my age to have a grown man in her bed. Are you listening to me? Shinpachi!”

“I’m listening,” the boy – Shinpachi – replied, now slightly from above; his voice echoed in a strange way. He was likely walking up some stairs. Kagura followed, and the motion of going up the spiral of the staircase made Hijikata’s nausea worsen.

Suddenly, he hit his head on something – hard. “Ow!”

“Kagura-chan, you need to be careful about the doors,” Shinpachi said in a reprimanding tone. “We don’t want to break him any bones. Some of them might already be broken, so I’m begging you, don’t make it worse.”

“At least he’s awake,” she shrugged her shoulders, causing Hijikata to sway.

“He was awake already when you dropped him on the ground in the stables,” Shinpachi replied. Judging by the echo, they’d now entered a long corridor. There were voices in the distance. “Didn’t you hear him then?”

“I wasn’t paying attention,” Kagura replied. “I haven’t had breakfast yet, so I’m hungry and distracted.”

“It’s not breakfast time yet, Kagura-chan,” Shinpachi chuckled.

“I can’t help it, I’m a growing girl!” Kagura protested vigorously, causing more pain to surge through Hijikata’s body. He clenched his teeth, hoping that this nightmare would end soon.

“Shinpachi.” This voice, as Hijikata realised, was again the man whom they met at the gate. “The doc’s busy right now, but he said he’ll see to him as soon as he can. Hedoro is nowhere to be found at the moment, we’ll have to wait.”

“I see.” Shinpachi’s tone was indifferent. “Is Gin-san awake yet?”

“At this hour?” the man laughed loudly. “No way. We should all get to bed, there’s still some hours left before sunrise. Here,” he added, “I fetched you the cell keys. It’s been a while, so I hope the lock isn’t too rusted.”

“Alright, thank you. We’ll drop him off there and go to bed, then.” Shinpachi yawned.

“Well, you’ve earned it,” the man laughed again. “Good night.”

“Good night.”

It took another several minutes before they reached another staircase, this time leading down, and another only-gods-know-how-many minutes before Hijikata’s sore body met with some hay on the ground. He grunted again; though the hay was soft, the stone floor under it sure wasn’t. Even if the hay probably should serve in place of a bed, there was definitely not enough of it.

Finally, the blindfold was taken off of his eyes and he blinked into the light of the torches. The people looking at him were really just kids – a bespectacled young boy with a serious expression, and an even younger girl with outrageously orange hair, who was currently picking her nose. They both seemed to be in their teens, but Hijikata wouldn’t dare guess their exact age.

“I’m going to untie you now,” the boy informed Hijikata calmly. “It’s in your best interest not to try anything rash once your limbs are free.”

“Yeah,” Hijikata nodded, eyes glued to the girl. If she really carried him all the way here, her strength was something he wouldn’t want to face, especially this tired, sore and unarmed.

“Try to get some rest,” Shinpachi said while skilfully undoing the knots one after another. “The doctor will see you in the morning.”

Not replying, Hijikata curled up on the hay and closed his eyes. There were footsteps, the sound of the lock, and eventual silence.

Now, Hijikata could only wait for sunrise.

Chapter End Notes

Quite honestly, I'm 100% ready for this one to be unpopular. I had this idea last night and went against my plan to update all the other stuff I have underway, so this is mostly a fail on my part until I get that fixed. It's just - this idea wouldn't stop bugging me otherwise, and it's a pain to keep it alive in my head.

Well, let me know what you thought regardless of all that. I'd like to know if anyone's interested in reading more. Thanks! :)

Oh, and porn comes later. It's gonna be there, but not in the early chapters.

It Never Rains But It Pours

Chapter Notes

Have this rushed update inb4 I disappear for two weeks again. No internet land, here I come! (Just kidding, but paying so much for internet connection while on holiday is a pain in the ass.)

When Hijikata opened his eyes, it took him a moment before he remembered where he was. He sat up, groaning; his body ached as though an army of drunken pixies had a party on his back whilst he slept. Thankfully, though, when he felt carefully his ribs and then head, none of his bones seemed to be broken. Considering he fell off a horse in complete darkness, he could almost consider himself lucky.

Almost.

If only it weren't for the fact that he got captured by the enemy.

Surprisingly enough, the cell he got locked up in was not some damp cave-like hole with mildew or some obscure fungi growing on the walls; there was a crenel-like window, too narrow to climb through, but not barred and providing more than enough light. The window was facing East, and the morning sun was shining right through, painting onto the mostly brick wall with its orange rays.

When Hijikata glanced outside, he was greeted with a stunning view of a sunrise above a picturesque valley. The shadows of the mountains guarding the valley on the opposite side still reached well past half of the vale, and there were puffs of morning mist here and there, quickly dissipating in the light. There were meadows and green plains as far as the eye could see, with some houses scattered about, connected with paths. Trees here were abundant as well, connecting the steep mountainside with the soft-looking green fields. It seemed as though the mountain range held this basin of life safely and tenderly in its giant rocky palms.

Hijikata had had no idea this place even existed; if his assumption was correct, then he was within about four hours' ride from his place of capture, and there should have been naught but inhospitable rocks and deep ravines, and perhaps patches of grass here and there – definitely not a cornucopia brimming with riches. Hijikata could immediately understand that he, as a man in his position, should never have treaded on these grounds.

Right below the window, there was a cliff going metres and metres down with no chance of climbing up and down this way, even if he somehow managed to squeeze through the crenel, which was more than unlikely. Strategically, this outpost seemed like a vital point in this area's defence; Hijikata decided to find out as much as possible. Should he survive and manage to escape, all this information was invaluable.

That being said, the best course of action was to lay low. If the people here learned who he really was, there was no way they'd let him go just like that. In the best imaginable scenario, they'd have him beheaded, and in the worst case they'd torture and humiliate him for who he was. After all, that blasted pyromancer was headed here, no doubt. This was a treacherous land where a single misstep could easily be fatal.

When he heard footsteps, he backed away from the window and sat down on the hay he had slept on. For appearance's sake, he had to display obvious levels of disinterest so that nobody would think he was gathering intel.

The boy from last night – Shinpachi, was it? – appeared at the bars with a man in a long white coat in tow. “Good morning,” he said, pulling out his keys, and he unlocked the door.

Hijikata didn't say anything, since he felt he owed no extra courtesy to his enemy, even if said enemy was a well-mannered boy likely much younger than Hijikata himself.

“I heard you're injured,” the man in the white coat said. He had a scarred face, and it kind of looked like he patched it up himself. He eyed Hijikata from head to toe, then turned to Shinpachi. “You can leave for now,” he said. “I don't want you distracting me during treatment.”

“I understand,” Shinpachi nodded, but then he hesitated, and raising his hand with the keys, he asked, “Should I...?”

“If you think it's safer that way, sure.” The doctor shrugged his shoulders, and Shinpachi, after giving it a moment's thought, walked out and locked the door. “I'll be nearby, so just call me when you're done,” he said and turned to leave.

The doctor hummed in response and eyed Hijikata, who silently returned his stare, unblinking. “Get up,” he commanded.

Hijikata did so, though reluctantly. The doctor leaned in to examine Hijikata's eye up close, then he reached up to touch Hijikata's head. There was a while of silence, then the doctor took a step back and nodded in satisfaction. “Your skull seems intact,” he said. “Now, take your clothes off.”

“What?” Hijikata narrowed his eyes. “Why?”

“They told me you fell off a horse's back,” the doctor shrugged, not caring in the slightest about Hijikata's defensive attitude. “I can't examine your ribs properly with your clothes on. Just upper body is fine,” he added.

Gritting his teeth, Hijikata took off his shirt. He was lightly dressed, because down in the city, back home that is, it was almost summer, and Hijikata did not want to risk a heatstroke. The summer version of his uniform was not that different from regular clothing, so not only did he have only the necessary layers on, he also wouldn't immediately draw attention to his rank because his clothes had only the regular guards' crest sewn into the cloth.

With a tense expression, he suffered through the doctor's touches.

“Well, aren’t you a lucky one,” the doctor said eventually and stepped away, this time for good. “You’re going to have some nasty bruises, but that’s about it. Not a single broken bone. Seems to me that you’re good to go and see the chief.”

“What for?” Hijikata played dumb.

The doctor gave him a look which, contrary to Hijikata’s expectations, seemed to mean much more than just labelling Hijikata an idiot. Instead of replying, the doctor called out, “Shinpachi! We’re done here!”

Shinpachi reappeared from behind a corner, ready to unlock the door. Clearly, him leaving was just for formalities’ sake, since he was only a few steps away. “I don’t know about going to Gin-san right now,” he said into the sound of his keys clanging. “He’s only just about gotten up, and I think something came up already, so they’re now in the meeting room...”

“Surely he can spare a minute or two,” the doctor waved his hand dismissively. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I have other people to tend to,” he slipped past Shinpachi and made his way towards the exit.

Shinpachi watched him leave, then turned to look at Hijikata. “Are you well enough to walk?” he asked. “If you are, I’m going to accompany you to the meeting room. If you aren’t, we can postpone it.”

“I’m fine,” Hijikata’s pride got the better of him.

“Alright then, let’s go,” Shinpachi wasted no time.

Taken slightly aback by this boy’s defencelessness, Hijikata followed him. Shinpachi *was* armed, he had a sword at his side, but Hijikata could easily see that if the two of them were to cross their blades, Shinpachi would not come out of that clash as the winner. However, the boy did not seem like a fool, so he was likely aware of this himself. Even so, there were no other guards escorting this possibly very dangerous prisoner.

There were no guards anywhere in the halls, either. As it turned out now that Hijikata could see, the outpost was not large, but it was big enough to be considered a castle, and in terms of strategical placement and abilities, it was a formidable fortress. If anyone intended to conquer it, they’d have to be prepared to lose a lot of people and resources before they could fight their way in. The walls were just as firm and impregnable as the surrounding rock, and as there was a deep moat running by the front side with only a narrow path coming up to the only drawbridge, it was unreachable from the outside. Any attempts to starve the inhabitants of this place would fail due to their access to the valley, while the attackers would soon have a hard time trying to fill their stomachs. Hijikata caught himself feeling envious of this place’s advantages.

There was a single person guarding the door to the meeting room, and he barely spared the boy a glance; they just nodded at one another, and then the guard looked away as though Hijikata never existed.

Shinpachi carefully opened the door.

There were just three people inside; two of them were hunched over a map, and the third one was sitting at the back of the room with his feet on his desk, reading something – a letter, perhaps. At first glance, it was clear to Hijikata which one of them was the White Demon.

Dressed in white, with hair of the same colour, he had a standoffish aura which did not fall short of what the legends spoke about; he did not even raise his head when the two of them entered the room.

Shinpachi cleared his throat. “Gin-san?”

“What?” the man looked up from his reading. His eyes fell on Hijikata with disinterest.

“The guy I told you about this morning, remember?” Shinpachi said sheepishly. “That’s him. I know you’re busy, but...”

Gintoki eyed the prisoner again, with more care this time. His gaze lingered on Hijikata’s face for a good several seconds. “Nope, doesn’t ring a bell,” he said eventually. “Find out if he’s important. If he is, lock him up, and I’ll talk to him later. If he isn’t, I don’t care, and you guys do whatever you want.” With that, he was done, and he turned his attention back to whatever he was studying at the moment.

The other two men looked up from their map, both eyeing Hijikata at the same time. Hijikata did not notice, though, and he spoke, taking a step towards the leader, “What did you do with my sword?” He could not stand the thought that something could have happened to it.

Gintoki looked up again, and this time, it was to look straight into Hijikata’s eyes. Against his will, Hijikata felt a cold sensation creeping up his spine. This man’s gaze was unsettling. Despite feeling uneasy, he stared back, not wanting to lose even if it was just a staring contest.

“Shinpachi?” the White Demon then spoke, though he did not avert his gaze.

“We have it,” Shinpachi replied. “It’s in the armoury.”

“You heard,” Gintoki said. “If you get it back or not is up to you. Until that decision is made, we’ll take good care of it.”

“Up to me?” Hijikata parroted, suspicion corroding his confidence.

“Take him away, Shinpachi,” Gintoki waved his hand in an all-telling gesture. “Oh, Sakamoto, you go with them,” he added then.

One of the men, the one in the red coat, got up. “Alright.”

Soon after, Hijikata was back in his cell, locked up properly, and Shinpachi had gone off to somewhere. Sakamoto, on the other hand, stayed, and he was currently leaning onto the bars.

“So who are you?” he asked. Clearly, his task was to scour for information, even though Gintoki said no such thing expressly.

Hijikata, however, had already decided to lay low and act dumb. "I'm a member of the guard," he said.

"Yeah, but not just any, right?" Sakamoto shook his head. "Anyone can see that."

Hijikata pulled a confused grimace. "I don't know what you mean."

"Listen," Sakamoto said, rubbing the back of his neck unhappily as he stared through the iron bars, "how about you tell us who you are? If you do, we can all go on our merry way. If you don't, someone might try to make you speak, you know? Though I don't like it, there are people who enjoy doing that sort of thing. You might starve, or they might hurt you, and that's not something you want, is it? All I need is your name, or the like."

Hijikata clenched his teeth, looking away. If they learned his name, they'd ask more questions, and that he was not going to allow. He wasn't going to tell them anything, no matter what they tried. It was a question of both duty and personal honour, there was no way he'd tattle.

Suddenly, there was the sound of footsteps nearing Hijikata's cell. "I know who he is," someone said from the shadows.

Hijikata looked up, and immediately glared because he recognised that person. "Katsura," he hissed.

Dressed in white and blue robes, the escaped convict stood there, hands in his sleeves, and he looked at Hijikata with contempt. "Hijikata Toshiro, the rumoured Demonic Vice-commander, a lowly government dog. It was he who followed me here."

"*The* Hijikata Toshiro?" the interrogator jumped to his feet, turning towards Hijikata sharply. "That's a big fish. A fish bigger than we've ever caught. It's a total whale. We gotta tell Kintoki, quickly."

"I didn't know you caught him. How did it happen?" Katsura leaned towards the bars, looking at Hijikata like at a rare feral beast.

"I don't know, the evening patrol picked him up after they chased away the guards. I think he got hit with something blunt and lost consciousness." The interrogator turned towards the exit. "Zura? You coming?"

"It's not Zura, it's Katsura," the pyromancer retorted. Shooting a final glare at Hijikata, he nodded. "Let's go."

Being left alone again, Hijikata cursed under his breath. Why in the devil was that pyromancer still here?!

To Catch a Fleeing Bird

Chapter Notes

I caught some wifi, so have what I managed to write so far. It's a long-ass one. Yeee.

Nobody came.

Except for Shinpachi, who turned up to give Hijikata something plain to eat and drink, there was no-one who would come and see him. Hijikata thought it was odd, to say the least – when Katsura and Sakamoto stormed off in such a rush, he expected to get dragged upstairs again, only in chains this time. That, however, did not happen. He was mostly isolated in this part of the fortress, and though the view was great, Hijikata soon became fed up with this kind of lodging.

Shinpachi brought him food and water at nightfall, just about when Hijikata began feeling antsy. There were no people standing guard at his door, and judging by the utter and complete silence permeating this place, it seemed to Hijikata as though he was the only prisoner here. When Shinpachi appeared, it was a relief almost to see him. It would come to Hijikata as no surprise if they decided to abandon him in his cell, left him to die of hunger and thirst – he would chase the likes of these bandits relentlessly, after all, and it was because of him that many of them met an untimely end.

It turned out that letting Hijikata die miserably like a lowly dog was not the White Demon's intention.

Shinpachi gave Hijikata his food wordlessly and turned to leave without even meeting his eyes. From that, Hijikata concluded that Shinpachi learned the situation and perhaps now felt cheated for having treated Hijikata the way he did before. After all, Hijikata's name was infamous among the outlaws and his reputation preceded him. There was no way Shinpachi hadn't heard of the Demon Vice-commander; much like the White Demon in the city, Hijikata Toshiro was feared, detested and ill-spoken of in this land. Surely, having learned Hijikata's identity, Shinpachi now wanted as little to do with their prisoner as possible. Rather than cowardice, it was disdain.

When the awaited lynching did not happen and night arrived, Hijikata decided it would be best to escape. His riding boots, which nobody took from him, had a few wires in them to stay in shape; now, he took one out with great difficulty, and turned to the lock. He was absolutely inept when it came to lockpicking, but he had the whole night to keep trying.

It took him a good several hours before the lock finally clicked. His fingers ached, and his head hurt like there was no tomorrow, but he wanted to taste freedom as soon as possible. The well-maintained door opened soundlessly, and he peeked into the corridor.

It was empty, with only two torches illuminating the area; one of them was flickering and seemed as though it was about to burn out, the other was just by the door out of this place.

Swallowing hard, Hijikata left his cell.

His plan, for now, was thus: first, he needed to find his sword. No matter what, he was not going to leave without it. A sword was a part of a warrior's soul, and should he leave it behind, he'd never be whole again. Second, escape the castle without alerting anyone, and third and last, find a way to cross the chasm behind which this valley was hidden. That, for now, seemed to be the biggest hurdle of the three steps.

He remembered that Shinpachi said they put his sword into the armoury. That room had to be in an easily accessible part of the castle, and likely on the way out so that the people here could use it easily. Logically then, it was unlikely it would be towards the meeting room, and it was more probable for it to be connected to the stables somehow.

Having walked through the castle twice before, Hijikata could guess that it copied the mountains' profile and was rather long in shape, but not that wide. If what he concluded from the morning sun shining into his window was correct, then his cell was in a lower part of the south wing. The meeting room was almost at the opposite side, which had to mean that the armoury would be either in the south wing or to the middle.

There were other cells but all of them empty, just as Hijikata had suspected. With heart beating wildly, he opened the door leading out. There was no-one there, either – just a small room which was completely empty, with a winding staircase leading upwards. He paused at the bottom of it, listening carefully.

Not a sound.

Good, he thought as he began climbing the stairs. It seemed that the stars aligned in his favour – there was not a soul in sight. Though he had taken this route before when led by Shinpachi, he was extremely nervous. Even during the day, they met no-one here, and he found it fishy, to say the least. Nobody was guarding him down there either, and it seemed beyond suspicious, too. Perhaps it was a trap.

He couldn't very well just turn back to stay in his cell, though.

At the end of the stairs, there was no door there; he cautiously peeked around the corner. That corridor was empty as well, and just as scarcely lit as the cells. The complete silence there was making Hijikata anxious; he felt as though he was being led around by the nose.

Now, which way?

If he took this corridor to the very end, he'd reach another one leading to the staircase which would take him to the meeting chamber among other rooms. The likelihood of running into someone in that area was far greater than here, but he wasn't sure where the stairs leading back down to the stables and armoury could be. There was a number of doors along the wall, but to enter any of them was potentially hazardous.

With his ears straining to the very limits of their ability, he crept past the doors one by one. He heard nothing behind them, but he wasn't going to chance opening any. It didn't make much sense to him that there would be a staircase in any of them, either. He'd more expect it to be at the opposite side of the second corridor.

Reaching the already familiar T-end, he glanced both ways. Still no-one in sight. In the distance, he noticed someone's laughter, and figured it had to be upstairs. Turning the opposite way, he treaded lightly, making sure he wouldn't make a sound.

There was a turn at the end of the corridor, and indeed, there was a staircase, but it led upstairs as well. It was not a winding one, much like the one at the opposite side. Perhaps that was the reason he didn't remember being carried down it.

What the hell was that Kagura girl, anyway? She didn't look anything out of the ordinary except for her unusual hair colour. She had no weapon on her, and clearly she didn't need it. Her strength was a weapon in itself. Shinpachi didn't have that kind of strength, since he asked Kagura to carry Hijikata, and he seemed much more ordinary than anyone Hijikata had met here so far. If he lived in the city, the boy would surely be a straight-laced kid who never caused any trouble. Why he lived here, in an outlaws' outpost, Hijikata couldn't fathom.

Come to think of it, he addressed the White Demon rather familiarly – more so than anyone else in this place. Could he perhaps be the White Demon's son? They looked nothing alike, though, so rather than son he could be some sort of the leader's ward. Maybe the boy knew nothing but this kind of life, and if that was the case, then there was no wonder he would stay among the bandits.

Shinpachi being the White Demon's ward would explain a lot of things, too – such as why the boy wouldn't want to talk to Hijikata any longer. Perhaps he was told to stay away from Hijikata, or something along those lines.

Hijikata reached the top of the stairs and stopped again, listening for the presence of anyone at all in these halls.

No-one.

It was no longer suspicious – now it felt scary. Was this castle haunted? Hijikata shuddered. People, that was something he could easily deal with. Ghosts? Not so much.

He took a deep breath and opened a nearby door silently. There was just another corridor there, ending with a door. Somehow, this felt correct – why else would there be such a room? Surely this was the way out.

He took several steps in, then he turned back and closed the door behind himself. The last thing he needed was to alert someone to his antics. Even if he hadn't met anyone yet, he was not enough of a fool to risk it.

The other door opened to a surprise he hadn't expected to see.

The castle had two buildings.

Apparently, up until this point, he was in one of them, and the other was on the opposite side of a deep chasm cutting through the rock. From where he stood now, he could easily see most of the castle's layout.

The entry gate had two towers built into a thick outer wall, and Hijikata guessed there was a drawbridge behind it. Then, there was a courtyard, halfway hidden behind the opposite building. There were people there, walking around with torches, but because it was dark, they couldn't see Hijikata stand on the narrow bridge connecting the two buildings' upper levels. When he glanced to his right, he saw that he was standing about in the middle of the – probably – main building; it was bigger and at least one floor taller than the one on the opposite side of the chasm.

There was a second line of defence there, with a wall that was probably just as thick as the one at the entrance. Said wall had a couple of towers connected by a gate with a now illuminated drawbridge as well, and what lay behind it, Hijikata did not know.

The dark abyss beneath his feet had a cold feeling to it and Hijikata could faintly hear the sound of water. No matter what, he was sure this outpost had to have been created with the help of magic – it made no sense for any river to be flowing this way naturally. If such powerful sorcerers lived here, his people could be in trouble.

He slowly and with great caution made his way across. He was not afraid of heights, but he couldn't see the bottom in this darkness, and it would be sheer folly to rush ahead blindly. When he reached the middle, he noticed that either of the sides of the bridge could be lowered, perhaps even independently on one another. Should the first line of defence fall, the second one was even harder to get through. Unfortunately for the defenders, though, retreat was near impossible. Unfortunately for Hijikata, to escape through anywhere except the gates seemed impossible as well.

Sword first, escape second, Hijikata shook his head, and he opened the door on the opposite side. It opened inwards, and it hid a similar corridor as the main building. Steeling himself, Hijikata walked in.

"Now, where do you think you're going," echoed from behind him, and the door he had just walked through slammed shut.

Hijikata wheeled around to meet a cold look across the steely glint of a sword aimed right at his throat. He recognised this man – it was the third person from the meeting room. He was shorter than Hijikata himself, and one of his eyes was covered with a layer of hair, but neither of these things made him look any less deadly. Unlike Sakamoto, this man was a natural-born killer.

"You couldn't have possibly thought that nobody was watching you," he said, stepping closer, the edge of his blade touching Hijikata's throat ever so gently. It was a contact so light it did not break through Hijikata's skin, and the hand holding the sword was steady. He was likely friendlier with his blade than with the people around him. "We're trying to keep your presence here secret," he added, "so don't make our job harder."

"Why?" Hijikata asked, slightly puzzled.

“People would try and raid the castle if they knew,” the man said. “There are so many who want you dead. Although,” he added after a brief pause, “if it were up to me, you’d be dead by now. Gintoki sent most people away because of you so that you wouldn’t be found and word wouldn’t get out. The people in the knowing are already too many.”

Hijikata stepped back a little, preparing to fight. He had no weapons, but he was ready to defend himself.

“Don’t be a dumbass,” the man clicked his tongue. “I don’t know how to knock people out. If we’re going to fight, I’m going to have to kill you, and Gintoki’s gonna chew me out, even though that’s the last thing I need right now.”

Hijikata narrowed his eyes. He could make use of this. He didn’t know how this man and the White Demon were related, but as long as this stranger answered to Gintoki, and as long as Gintoki wanted Hijikata alive for whatever reason, this might just be Hijikata’s way out.

“Why does the White Demon want to keep me alive?” he asked, intending to stall long enough to come up with a decent plan out of this. He couldn’t make the other back out through the door to the bridge, as the door was now closed, and if he backed away himself, he could walk right under someone’s nose, and that was something neither of them wanted.

“Why should I tell you?” the man tilted his head. He didn’t seem to mind that Hijikata began to chat, even though Hijikata was convinced that this man definitely should have minded.

“So you don’t know,” Hijikata stated flatly. Maybe if he provoked this man, he could learn something useful. Or he could just keep him distracted and make him lower his guard.

“That won’t work on me,” the man, however, chuckled. “Of course I do know. I know even without having to ask him. We’ve been in an undesirable but inseparable relationship for years, after all. I know him like the back of my palm, so I already know what plans he has with you. No reason for me to tell you, though,” he added, smile still curving his thin lips. “It’s going to be much more fun watching you that way. I *can* tell you, though,” he leaned forward, “that you are not going to like it.”

An opening.

Hijikata jumped to the blunt side of the blade and lunged for the man’s throat, intending to kill.

The man ducked and rolled off to the side, instantly jumping to his feet. There wasn’t a moment of hesitation. He leapt towards Hijikata, his blade glinting in the torch’s light. Hijikata backed away, but he hit the wall. The attacker’s blade stopped a hair away from his eye.

“You suicidal bastard,” the man cursed, “are you *trying* to get yourself killed?”

“Well, you could just let me go if you want me to live so badly,” Hijikata replied sarcastically. The tip of the man’s sword was uncomfortably close – when he blinked, his

eyelashes touched it. He swallowed hard. No matter what, they were at a stalemate, as neither of them wanted to give in to the other.

Unexpectedly, the attacker backed away, pointing his sword towards the ground. “Be good and go back,” he said calmly. “If you don’t want it to hurt, that is.”

“Like fuck I would go back,” Hijikata retorted, regaining his stance.

“You never do as you’re told, do you,” the man clicked his tongue again. Then, he swung his sword to the side, hitting the torch. It shouldn’t have done anything, yet – the blade sliced through it like through butter, smothering the corridor in darkness. Only a few embers scattered onto the ground emitted dim fiery glow.

In the dark, Hijikata could faintly hear the sound of the other’s footsteps. He held his breath, expecting an attack. He could only rely on his instincts, as his eyes weren’t used to the absence of light yet.

In the nick of time, he ducked, more sensing than hearing the swing of the other’s arm. Blindly, he jumped forward, intending to ram the other’s torso with his head.

Success.

There was an ‘oomph’ and the other staggered backwards while Hijikata fell to one knee and clutched his head. It wasn’t metal what he hit, but for all that was holy, what was that guy made of?! Though he was lightly dressed with no visible armour, hitting his stomach made Hijikata’s head spin.

He scrambled back up to his feet – and received a hard hit to the side of his head. *It must’ve been the hilt of that guy’s sword*, was the last thought that crossed his mind.

He woke up, yet again, with a splitting headache and unable to move. His nose was buried in hay, and in that moment he thanked every single deity he knew that he wasn’t allergic. He made a fruitless attempt to roll over and found that upon moving his legs, he pulled on a rope that was tightened around his neck. They tied him up in a hogtie like some animal.

“Morning,” he heard behind himself, and he cursed under his breath. It was the same man who knocked him out.

“Hope you’re comfortable,” he leaned over so that Hijikata could see him. “Since you’re going to stay like that for a while. Don’t worry, though,” he added, smiling, “we’re not going to let you choke. Can’t let you die, after all.”

“What do you want with me?” Hijikata asked through his clenched teeth, trying to make himself a little more comfortable and failing.

“If you want an answer to that, you’re going to have to ask the man himself,” there was a hint of amusement in that man’s voice. “Gintoki, that is. I told you I’m going to keep it to myself.”

“Well, aren’t you enjoying yourself,” Hijikata muttered sourly.

“I am,” the man readily admitted. “Of course I am, seeing someone like you this helpless.” The satisfaction resounding in his words was puzzling – it almost sounded as though this was a personal matter.

“Do you bear a grudge against me?” Hijikata asked, trying to look at the man. “I don’t recall ever meeting you.”

“We have not met personally,” the man squatted next to Hijikata’s head, “but I have heard of you. To be precise, your name was the signature under many of my failed plans. I’m wanted in your city. My name is Takasugi Shinsuke,” he introduced himself, poking Hijikata’s cheek with his pipe.

Hijikata’s heart skipped a beat. The infamous Takasugi Shinsuke? He had heard that name, and of course he’d read his description countless times, but it didn’t even occur to him that this man would be here. He murdered someone in the city less than a week ago, so everyone in the Shinsengumi expected Takasugi to be hiding there under their noses. And yet, here he was, far from the city, out of the country and out of their reach. How many more outlaws found their way here? Who else, out of all the criminals they couldn’t find, was hiding in this secret haven?

He heard footsteps behind himself, and Takasugi got up, disappearing from Hijikata’s sight.

“Takasugi,” he heard the White Demon’s voice. “You called?”

“He’s good,” Takasugi chuckled under his breath. Hijikata realised Takasugi was talking about him. “I might even have a bruise later.”

“So he tried to escape and you just let him,” Gintoki stated flatly. “Am I getting this right?”

“It’s fun,” Takasugi shrugged his shoulders, though Hijikata couldn’t see that. “You should’ve seen his face when I told him my name.” The door of the cell opened, and someone walked in. This time, a puff of white hair came into Hijikata’s field of vision. Gintoki studied Hijikata’s face wordlessly.

Hijikata stared back. He did not feel intimidated by either of them, even if they currently held his life in their hands.

“He’s like a caged beast,” the White Demon bent over and grabbed Hijikata’s jaw. “Have you ever been tied up like this before?” he asked his prisoner with interest.

“No,” Hijikata replied. He had no such experience, but he knew what sort of danger awaited him if he were to stay like this for too long. There was a rope tightly embracing his throat, and he knew that it was attached to his ankles. People’s legs, if bent for too long a time, would naturally attempt to straighten themselves, thus pulling on the rope. Anyone tied up in this way would have to keep their head back and knees bent, otherwise they’d choke themselves. It was barbaric but effective.

“That so,” Gintoki gave a small smile. “Well, I hope you’re going to enjoy it to the fullest.” Turning to Takasugi, he added, “Watch him for me, won’t you?”

“Gladly,” Takasugi agreed and sat down. “At least he won’t get lonely.”

“Gin-san!” Suddenly, Shinpachi’s voice echoed from the distance. Soon, he reached Hijikata’s cell, breathing heavily. “Gin-san,” he panted. “Hasegawa-san asked me to get you. It seems...” he paused for a breath, “it seems that...”

“It’s okay, I got it. Let’s go,” Gintoki said, but he was already running.

They stormed off. Takasugi made himself comfortable, and everything went silent.

For a good several hours, nothing was happening. Takasugi sat there wordlessly, smoking his pipe, until they called for him, too, and Hijikata became completely alone.

Another hour or so passed and Hijikata found himself having difficulties breathing. His legs ached, but he couldn’t move them without tightening the rope around his throat. Slowly but surely, he was becoming dizzy, and though there was light now coming in through the crenel again, his world was getting dark.

The door suddenly opened again and someone walked in. He was flipped over and his legs got freed; he gasped for air desperately, trying to fill his lungs. That someone slipped a blindfold over his eyes, and while Hijikata was still trying to gather his bearings, they changed the way he was bound – now, there was just a rope holding his arms behind his back.

“Come on, get up,” Takasugi’s voice echoed in his ear. “Gintoki’s called for you.”

They walked, and Hijikata had no idea where they were going. Takasugi warned him about any obstacles that were in the way, but the route was unfamiliar, so although he did somewhat gather what his surroundings looked like from his hearing and Takasugi’s warnings, all he knew was that Takasugi was leading him somewhere he hadn’t been before.

They entered a bigger room, and Hijikata could hear voices and murmurs. As they walked through the crowd, Hijikata realised that something important was going on.

They stopped, and someone’s footsteps walked up to them.

“Let me just make sure of something,” Gintoki said and took Hijikata’s blindfold off in a single move. Hijikata blinked into the light several times, then his eyes fell onto the middle of the room. It was far from something he’d want to see.

Sougo was there, with Yamazaki and some others, beaten and bruised, kneeling on the floor with their arms bound behind their backs. The room was full of people dressed in all sorts of clothing, but they stood alongside one another, rich or poor, men or women, and they stared at the prisoners and at Hijikata. Their faces were far from friendly.

“These,” Gintoki gestured in the city guards’ general direction, “are yours?”

Hijikata looked at his men and saw them making faces which desperately told him to keep silent. Sougo was looking away; Yamazaki mouthed a silent 'no' almost unnoticeably when their eyes met. They thought it would be best if Gintoki assumed they had no direct relation.

Hijikata, however, thought differently. If he was right about Gintoki, then there was no point in lying. Quite the contrary, in fact. "Yes," he replied truthfully. "These are my men."

"Acting on your orders?" the White Demon continued; his tone was cold.

"No," Hijikata shook his head. "They came on their own." He shifted uncomfortably; Takasugi was a pro in tying people up, and the ropes around Hijikata's wrists were uncomfortably tight.

"That's all I needed," Gintoki nodded at Takasugi, who grabbed Hijikata by the elbow and was about to take him away. However, Hijikata was not done just yet, and he struggled against Takasugi's efforts.

"Wait," he protested. Everyone looked at him yet again; he was not in any position to say anything, so the fact that he dared to do so raised some eyebrows. "Let them go," the vice-commander said in a firm manner. He didn't want them to suffer just because he went and got himself captured.

"Well, aren't you awfully demanding," Gintoki folded his arms on his chest. "What makes you think I would do as you ask? *You* of all people?"

Without replying to him, Hijikata looked at his men. "Sougo," he said, "listen to me. You are to take the idiots who followed you home, and you shall not come searching for me again. Is that clear?"

The city guards glanced at one another. "What's the meaning of this?" Yamazaki eventually spoke. "Don't you want to—" he said, but was interrupted.

"Hijikata, you traitor," Sougo hissed, anger seething in his eyes. "If you disappear, what are we going to tell Kondo-san?! What about my sister?! Are you going to stay here until your bones rot?!" Upon hearing Hijikata's name, whispers spread through the crowd like a wave. Many of the onlookers turned their hostile gazes towards the vice-commander.

"You're not allowed to tell either of them what happened to me," Hijikata replied simply, not minding the disturbance his name caused, then he turned to look at the White Demon. "Would this be sufficient?" he asked. "If they appear in your territory again, you can have me beheaded," he added.

"Hijikata, you bastard!" Sougo screamed.

"Yeah, this is enough," Gintoki nodded, ignoring Sougo's outburst. "With your life on the line, they aren't likely to come back. Alright," he clapped his hands. "Let's break this up. We'll take them far enough, then let them go. But," he looked at the group of captives on the floor, "we'll be keeping your horses."

Sougo glared at him. Of course, everyone probably understood why Gintoki decided that – if they were to have to go on foot, they wouldn't follow Gintoki's men back. Instead, they had to go to the city first, regroup, report, and so on – and that would make them delay long enough for the trail to get cold. Obviously, none of the people present believed that they wouldn't try to rescue Hijikata again, so Gintoki had to make it so that they wouldn't find their way back.

Gintoki turned to Shinpachi. "Can you see to it?"

"Of course," the boy pushed his glasses up his nose.

"Take Kagura with you," Gintoki added, glancing to the side of the room. "She and her monster pet need to get some air." Following Gintoki's line of sight, Hijikata turned that way and saw that Kagura was sitting there with the biggest dog Hijikata has ever met, petting it behind the ears. They both seemed rather bored and generally disinterested in what was going on in the hall.

"Leave it to me," Shinpachi replied readily.

Gintoki nodded at him, satisfied with that answer. "Well," he then turned to the people in the hall, "as you can see, the capital is still no threat to us, and we," he gestured to himself, Shinpachi, Takasugi, and Sakamoto, who was standing there as well, "are doing our best to keep it that way. Rest assured, no-one knows how to find this place. You can return to your homes."

The people looked at him, but they eventually, albeit reluctantly, left the hall. Gintoki's men made Sougo and the rest get up, and they dragged them out as well. Shinpachi and Kagura followed with the giant dog in tow.

Gintoki stepped towards Hijikata. "I like the way you think," he patted Hijikata's shoulder.

Their eyes met, and again, Hijikata felt an unsettling chill. It was a sensation he understood far too well – warning bells. Hundreds of them going off at once inside Hijikata's brain. This man was someone to be wary of.

"Won't you join me?" Gintoki asked out of the blue.

"I refuse," Hijikata replied in a heartbeat without sparing a moment's thought.

Gintoki eyed him, smiling a little. "You didn't even have to think about your answer," he shook his head. "It didn't even occur to you that you could, for example, try being a double agent. An honourable man like you would be a great addition to our ranks."

Hijikata's eyes opened wide. Truly, Gintoki was right – Hijikata completely missed that opportunity. It was not his style, not the way his mind worked.

"They called you a traitor," Gintoki leaned closer. His expression was hard to read, but he seemed curious. "Doesn't that upset you? Not in the least?"

Hijikata didn't take a single step back. "If they think me so, then all the better," he replied. "That way, they won't be coming back."

Gintoki was now uncomfortably close, but Hijikata stood his ground.

"Who are you really loyal to, though?" Gintoki's eyes turned cold without any kind of forewarning, and Hijikata swallowed hard. "To your people?" he now stood so close their noses could touch if Hijikata didn't lean backwards a little. "To your king?" Gintoki continued. Clearly, the discomfort he caused Hijikata was completely intentional. "Or to yourself and your stupid honour?" he scoffed, slapping Hijikata's ass hard with both his hands.

Hijikata turned red in the face and attempted to headbutt him, but Gintoki jumped back and Takasugi kicked the back of Hijikata's knee, causing him to lose balance and fall to the floor. "Put him away," Gintoki said. "I'll deal with him later. Right now, we've got things to do."

"Will do," Takasugi tugged Hijikata to his feet and blindfolded him yet again. "Should I...?" he added, making a gesture Hijikata couldn't see.

"Sure," Gintoki agreed. "Just don't let him escape this time."

"Last time was intentional," Takasugi replied as he began dragging Hijikata towards the exit. "It's not happening again."

"Oh yeah, what did you even do that for?" Gintoki wanted to know.

"Just to test him," Takasugi called from the door. Then, that door slammed shut and Hijikata had to walk with his gaoler. There was no point in struggling – though he still felt humiliated by what Gintoki did earlier, letting his pride to rule over his reason would be foolish, and if he now resisted in order to save face, they might tie him up like they did before. Not like his men could see him now anyway, so he went along meekly.

Plus, as Gintoki had said, they labelled him a traitor. Of course, he understood why Sougo would say that, but it still bit him like a venomous snake where it hurt the most. He was loyal to his land and his king, he'd always been so – and Sougo felt entitled to claim that Hijikata no longer belonged there. If he truly meant it or not, that was another story, but it hardly mattered. In the end, for Sougo, who had never liked Hijikata very much in the first place, the easiest way out would be to say that the vice-commander had deserted, that he became a treacherous bastard not worth a cat's turd. The other members respected Hijikata for who he was, but with the vice-commander gone, Sougo was to take that place next. To keep searching for the man he hated, for the man who allegedly bewitched his sister and made her fall for him, for the man who had always stood in the light while Sougo had to watch from the shadows... there was just no reason for Sougo to do so, except for perhaps the little conscience and loyalty left in him, if there even was any. It was a win for him on almost any imaginable level.

There was one major problem for Sougo, though – Hijikata's disappearance might kill Mitsuba. Sougo's sister had always been of frail health, and if she received such a shock, she might not withstand it. That could be the only actual reason for Sougo to return and attempt

to rescue him – that man loved his sister boundlessly and would do anything she asked of him before she even voiced it. If she asked Sougo to look for Hijikata, he'd do so without rest.

Hijikata himself thought tenderly of Mitsuba, and it brought him no joy to be unable to see her ever again. Though they had very little time they could spend together, it was always a happy time. Granted, her cooking was terrible, but he didn't need her to cook for him. He just wanted her to be happy and healthy – and now, at the end, it seemed that he couldn't give her neither health nor happiness. At the very least, their relationship remained pure while it lasted.

His heart ached when he fully realised he would never see her smile again. If he really betrayed anyone, then it was Mitsuba and her trust. He'd promised her that he'd be back, after all. She was the only person in the world who had any right to call him a traitor. Even though he shouldn't let it affect him, Sougo's accusation hurt.

Gintoki called him out on that, and him doing so was just as humiliating as the ass-slap. It was as though the White Demon could read Hijikata easily, and there was not a scarier thought than being completely seen through by one's nemesis. That was who the White Demon was, after all – an enemy to death, a man who deserved nothing but the gallows.

Surely, the White Demon thought alike – at least, Hijikata had assumed so, which was why he was so puzzled by the fact that he was still alive. Instead of killing him personally or having him killed, Gintoki asked for Hijikata to be 'put away' as though Hijikata were a decorative vase or something of that sort. Something was fishy, and Hijikata was not looking forward to discovering the end of this tangled thread.

"There are steps going up," Takasugi informed him, and they began rising. Likely for the sake of saving space, this was another winding staircase, but it felt longer than any Hijikata had walked here so far. Not that he counted the steps.

They reached the end of the stairs, and Hijikata stumbled, as Takasugi did not warn him about it. Hijikata could hear him jangling with keys; soon, there was the sound of a door unlocking and Hijikata was pushed inside a room.

Takasugi undid the knots on Hijikata's arms and was about to untie him completely, but then he stopped. "I'm sure you can do the rest yourself," he chuckled and stepped away.

"Wait—" Hijikata began, but the door slammed shut and there was the sound of the lock trapping Hijikata inside.

"Fucker," Hijikata muttered, struggling against the ropes. They were tight and it took him several minutes before he managed to loosen them enough to free his limbs.

Quickly, he took his blindfold off and looked around, rubbing his wrists to help the blood flow.

It was a simple, small room with more crenel-like windows, a bed, a closet, a mirror for some reason, a table and a chair next to it. All in all, it looked more like a quarantine than anything

else. He couldn't see why Gintoki would lock him up here instead of the cells – unless, of course, it was simply because he had already managed to escape the cells once. In that case, that little exchange of 'should I?' and 'sure' likely meant that they wanted to change the place they kept him locked up in.

Correction – *put away* in. The fuck was up with that?

He made a round through the room. The bed was simple but seemed comfortable, so that was definitely an upgrade from the hay with hard floor beneath it. The closet was empty, and there were no other furnishings of interest.

Hijikata walked up to the window, and saw that this room's windows, too, were facing East. His view was restricted by the narrow crenel, but he saw farther now, and felt another stab of envy for how rich and lush this land seemed. In summer, the people in the city often suffered from drought, but this place hardly faced that kind of problem.

Sighing, he sat down onto the bed. He didn't know what Gintoki had planned for him, but there was nothing he could do to either find out or to avoid it.

If he at least had something to read. What was he supposed to do here in this barren room? Was the White Demon perhaps intending to hold a trial of some sort, wanting to judge Hijikata for all the things he'd been ordered to do? Some of those things Hijikata was not very proud of, though he did them all the same. Maybe they 'put him away' to have him wait for the day of his public execution. That would make sense, too. Takasugi said that they had wanted to keep Hijikata's presence a secret. The reason could have been that if word got out, it could have been carried over to the Shinsengumi, and that would mean trouble for this haven. After that, however, they caught Sougo and the rest, so they decided that such things were no longer needed – and in that case, a public execution would be a reasonable step from the White Demon's standpoint.

Perhaps.

Or he was totally off the mark. The White Demon was the stuff of legends, and up until yesterday, Hijikata doubted that such a person existed. There were countless rumours going around about him, some less believable than others. Hijikata had no qualms believing that there was a man who was just and noble and who would help anyone in need and would welcome anyone with arms open. However, he just wouldn't believe that there was someone whose eyes could kill and who could cut his enemies down without a blade in his hand. He wouldn't believe that there was a demon who came to the face of this Earth to unleash his unending wrath onto the vile and the unjust, either.

It was true that Gintoki's gaze was enough to make Hijikata uneasy, and that *never* happened with anyone before. The White Demon had eyes which harboured no hatred, no animosity, but they suggested that immense power was dormant behind that man's uncaring laziness. It felt as though his dead-fish look only served as a mask to hide something far greater, something terrifying, something that should not be trifled with. Hijikata sensed it; it was a warrior's sixth sense telling him that to anger this man would be akin to poking a hungry bear with a pointy stick. Hijikata was not afraid, no – but he was aware that he needed to act with extreme caution.

If such a man wanted to keep Hijikata alive, then what purpose could it possibly be for?

Hijikata couldn't think of anything. Unlike the White Demon who saw into him like into an open book, Hijikata couldn't read this particular enemy at all. Though he seemed well-organised and intelligent, having an entire army of outlaws at his beck and call, he as a person was the embodiment of chaos.

Hijikata leaned back and closed his eyes. Having to wait for his fate was a damn pain in the ass.

Lust for Freedom, part 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The door unlocked and Shinpachi entered, eyeing the room. Hijikata was sitting by one of the windows, looking outside. He did not move a lash upon hearing the boy behind him.

“Have you still not eaten?” Shinpachi said in a concerned tone, looking at Hijikata as he set the tray with food onto Hijikata’s table. Next to it, there lay another tray with Hijikata’s breakfast, untouched. “That’s not good. We aren’t trying to poison you or anything; you’re just starving yourself for no reason. How many days has it been? Two weeks?” he sighed. “Well, at least you’re drinking.”

Hijikata didn’t reply, nor did he turn his head to look at him at first, but just when Shinpachi decided to leave him, he jumped to his feet. “Hey... Can you let me see your leader?” he asked. His voice was steady even though he no longer felt as strong as when they caught him. He wouldn’t let it show, but he felt a little too weak to his liking. The reason he hadn’t eaten was rather simple – he wanted to make sure that Gintoki would see him. By refusing to eat, he put Gintoki, who had intended to keep him alive, in an unfavourable position; Gintoki now had no choice but to be concerned. Though Hijikata still did not understand why the White Demon chose to lock him up, he had no problem using it to his own gain.

Shinpachi stopped with his hand on the doorknob. “I suppose I can arrange it, but... what for?”

“I need to speak with him,” Hijikata dodged the question. He didn’t want to explain himself to the one person who was meant to be merely a messenger. Shinpachi was clearly close with the White Demon, and if he knew too much, he might make decisions which wouldn’t benefit Hijikata in any way.

The boy pushed his glasses up his nose. “I’ll see what can be done, but don’t expect too much. Gin-san has been busy lately.” With that, he finally turned to leave.

As soon as the door closed behind him, Hijikata could hear muffled voices. In about a minute, the door opened again and Takasugi stood there with shackles in his hands. Hijikata narrowed his eyes; that man seemed to always have something like this ready.

Wordlessly, he held out his hands and allowed Takasugi to put the shackles on him. He didn’t really know if it was an improvement in any way; last time the ropes he got bound with made him lose all feeling in his fingers, but these ‘beautiful bracelets’ were heavy and cold, and he was pretty sure they were going to chafe and bruise his wrists.

For some reason, Takasugi did not bother with blindfolding him this time. It was unlikely that he had forgotten, and Hijikata suspected there was a specific reason behind it, but he was not going to ask. After all, if it turned out that it really only slipped Takasugi’s mind, then he’d have to walk in darkness again, and he was very much not a fan of that.

It turned out that contrary to Hijikata's expectations, the room they locked him in was probably not originally intended to be a prison. It had its own bathroom and was rather barren, with only the base necessities, so Hijikata thought that perhaps they locked him up in a prison tower of some sort, but it was not the case. They walked out into a hallway like any other, and he could see some doors on the opposite wall, which led him to believe that these were living quarters rather than prison cells.

The staircase they had climbed previously was at the end of the hallway, and Takasugi made his way towards it, dragging Hijikata along. Shinpachi followed them silently, and Hijikata wondered what the boy might be thinking. After all, this was probably the first time they'd had such a prisoner. Not to be conceited, but Hijikata knew that he was a man whose presence would usually stir up a fuss, be it in a positive way or the contrary. Shinpachi was taking care of his needs diligently, but Hijikata felt that if the boy could choose, he would gladly leave that duty to someone else. Though they barely ever spoke to one another, there was the feeling of being disliked for who he was.

He was not really surprised by that. He didn't know what they told Shinpachi, but it probably was nothing flattering, and from the bandits' viewpoint, such attitude was justified tenfold. Not a single person in the entire castle was pleased that they had him there – all the more reason for Shinpachi to neglect his new addition to his to-do list. However, the boy would come three times a day always at a fixed time, and he would reluctantly bring simple meals he perhaps made himself. Hijikata had no idea how many stairs the boy had to climb every day just to bring Hijikata the meal which would then get refused. It was likely not an easy task, and Hijikata was only making it harder. To make the boy pointlessly walk through the entire castle so many times, even he would feel bad.

Still – now that he could see, he couldn't help admiring the way the castle was constructed. The rock it was built on didn't really leave much space to work with, so most of the spaces were narrow and everything was built in a way which utilised every last centimetre. Even his own 'room' had only two crenels and was small and cramped. There were exceptions to the rule, such as the meeting room, the... audience room or whatever that one was, and probably some others – but for the most part, there were numerous small spaces. Hijikata concluded that the bigger rooms were for public purposes.

While the building itself was fairly large for such an outpost, it was still mainly an outpost – designed and built to defend the valley rather than to live comfortably in. For military purposes, though, considering the limitations of the area and its layout, it could not possibly be any better. Whoever the architect was, they created a masterpiece; with the help of magic, they created a barrier no intruder could get through. Such powerful wizards were no longer – at least, to Hijikata's knowledge – and thus no more strongholds this amazing could be created.

Takasugi led him through a hallway with niches containing torch holders; then, they made a few turns, entered a wider hall and soon stopped in front of a large door which Hijikata remembered seeing about a fortnight ago from the other side. Takasugi opened the door as though the entire stronghold were at his command.

“... and the protection tax from last trimester was a little too high, if you don’t mind me saying...”

“Gintoki!” Takasugi called out, interrupting the sitting.

Everyone inside went silent and they turned their heads towards the entrance.

“What’s the ruckus about?” the White Demon asked in a rather annoyed tone, though his annoyance seemed to have lessened upon seeing the people who entered.

Hijikata could not respond, as he was briefly taken aback by the way the room was furnished. Last time he was here, he couldn’t really see most of it, but now with fewer people, he saw that it was kind of like a courtroom. There was a half-circle table at the end of it with four chairs, all but one occupied by familiar faces; there were guards all around the room, and by the side walls there were two rows of chairs, now full of people. To add to Hijikata’s surprise, there were women and children sitting among those people, though he only recognised Kagura. She was sitting closest to the crescent table; there was one free chair next to her.

Takasugi stepped closer to Hijikata, and Hijikata’s knees hit the floor hard.

“He demanded to see you,” Shinpachi explained, his tone slightly apologetic.

“We’re busy. What do you want?” Gintoki looked at Hijikata. “Get up.”

Hijikata did so, glaring at the shorter man behind him who pushed him to the ground. “I want to ask you to let me fight my way out,” he declared then, looking the enemy leader in the eye, his voice unwavering. “A champion of your choosing, against me, a one-on-one fight. If I win, you let me go.” He paused briefly, then added, “If you want it to be a fight to the death, that’s fine with me, too.”

“That is outrageous!” Katsura jumped to his feet, slamming his hand onto the wood of the crescent table. “You can’t *demand* such—”

“Shut up, Zura.” Their silver-haired leader silenced him mid-sentence. Katsura muttered something under his breath, but it could not be heard.

Everyone’s eyes were on Gintoki, who was looking at his prisoner with an unchanging expression. Hijikata noticed that everyone was holding their breath. If someone dropped a needle now, its sound would echo throughout the entire hall. Seconds passed, and there was no sound. The White Demon was evaluating Hijikata.

“Alright,” Gintoki finally replied. “I’ll allow it. However,” he got up and started making his way towards Hijikata, accompanied by dissatisfied murmurs, “if you lose, I want you to swear to me that you will not leave the castle without my direct consent. And even if you win, which I honestly doubt, we are going to escort you far beyond our walls, blindfolded and bound – much like your men back then – so that you cannot lead your people to us.” He stopped in front of Hijikata, staring him dead in the eye.

“I swear it,” Hijikata said immediately, unblinking. He was confident in himself – there was no-one besides the Commander who could beat him in a fight.

“Perfect.” Gintoki nodded at someone behind Hijikata’s back. “See that he’s fighting-fit. I want it to be a fair fight. And you, for your sake,” he looked at Hijikata again, “eat something. Get some sleep. You can wash up properly, too, if you want. I will decide the time and place, and only after I deem you strong enough. You’re a dumbass for not eating.” With that, he turned back into the room, eyeing the people to his left. “Now, where were we?”

To Hijikata’s utter confusion, not only did they stop blindfolding him – they also did not lock the door when they left. The lunch Shinpachi prepared for him was still waiting there, and albeit simple and gone cold, it now seemed like a meal worthy of gods. Unfortunately, the portion was too small, as Hijikata’s appetite grew into abysmal sizes, no longer restricted by his iron will.

For a good while, he wondered what he should do. The door was unlocked, and if he wanted to, he could attempt to escape – but if he did that, he’d break his word. He chose to fight, and he was not going to back out. Though he desired to be free, he wouldn’t spit on his own crest and run like a coward and a liar.

However, with all that being said, he felt so hungry he would fight a pack of wolves over a fallen deer barehanded. Or he’d just eat some of the wolves. He knew that if needed, he could have held out for much, much longer, but since there was no longer any reason for him to do so, his body demanded food. His knees were buckling, his hands were unsteady and if he were to hold a sword, he was more likely to injure himself than his opponent.

Clenching his teeth, he leaned onto his table and was about to get up, determined to find someone who would give him more food. Surely, there had to be some people around – if not guarding him, then at least minding their own business.

Suddenly, the door opened again and an unknown man peeked in; he had brown hair, a goatee and somehow looked like a lost case overall. “The boss will see you soon,” he said, and when Hijikata heard that voice, he recognised it – it was the same man who welcomed Shinpachi and his patrol back then. “And,” that man added in a less formal tone, “I thought you might want some more food.” From behind his back, he brought out a big bowl of fruits. “Shinpachi said that it’s going to be easier on your stomach.”

Hijikata swallowed hard. Fruit or whatever, as long as he could eat it, he’d wolf it down without complaints. He took the bowl, set it down onto the desk and began eating; he did not even see the man leave, and he didn’t care. He was so, *so* unbearably starved.

Minutes passed. Hijikata’s fruit was mostly gone now, and the only reason he did not eat all of it at once was that he was aware he could get the runs that way. The White Demon was nowhere to be seen, and so Hijikata, though tempted to leave, since the door was likely still unlocked, got up and walked over to the window. There, with fresh air and sunlight, it was easier to think. Although it was now well past noon and the sun would soon stop shining into Hijikata’s windows, it was still pleasant to see it – it felt somewhat reassuring, like a promise that he would be able to fight his way out. Despite the White Demon’s doubtful look, he was

ready to give it his all, and should he be unable to win, he wished he could die trying. If word got out that way, people would not think of him as a coward after his death, they'd remember that he went out fighting, that he defended his honour with his last breath.

With the White Demon so readily agreeing to the fight, though, Hijikata's confidence slightly stumbled. As soon as they had returned him to his room, they left him there alone with the door unlocked. Was the reason for this the doubt the White Demon voiced? Did they not think he was going to win, so they chose not to lock him up anymore, since he was as good as theirs? Or were they underestimating him?

Hijikata leaned his forehead against the cold wall, hoping to cool down a little.

"Nice view, isn't it?" Gintoki suddenly said, and Hijikata nearly jumped out of his skin.

It was unclear when he appeared – Hijikata certainly did not hear him enter – but Gintoki was suddenly standing next to him.

Hijikata didn't respond. Gintoki leaned onto the wall next to Hijikata and continued speaking. "This fortress is holding the area from the outside; safe behind its walls, the people in the valley live their ordinary lives. Down there, it's mostly farmland and nothing else."

Hijikata looked outside again. There were indeed fields in the distance, and if he tried hard enough, he could see some brown and white specks moving in the grass on the hillsides – probably livestock.

"As you can probably guess, this place is a refuge to all those forsaken by your laws. All the rabble, the scoundrel, the rogue elements you guys would see hanging. Petty thieves who would lose a hand for stealing a single apple because of their hunger, beggars who are no longer allowed to sleep on the streets, but cannot afford the simplest of lodgings. Some non-humans, whom your people shun. There is a number of wanted criminals here, too, as you surely know, since you and your men tracked one of them to the borders of our territory. You've already met Takasugi, too."

The White Demon paused briefly, glancing at Hijikata before he kept going. "Considering your position, there is no way I can let you go. I'm going to keep you here, even if I have to mistreat you because of it."

Hijikata pursed his lips, keeping silent. He understood that man's reasoning, but he wasn't having it. Regardless of what this bandit thought, there was nothing that could stop Hijikata from attempting to free himself as soon as possible. Hijikata was, above all, a man of duty, and even though he sometimes questioned the system, he wouldn't go against his orders and sense of morality. To bow his head and stay under lock and key would prove Sougo's accusations to be true.

"What I'm saying is," Gintoki stepped as uncomfortably close as before, and Hijikata caught himself wondering if this man had no sense of personal space, "you should take your challenge back and submit to me quietly. Withdraw from the fight. It's for your own good."

"I refuse," Hijikata replied, staring Gintoki right in the eye.

Gintoki smirked. “Well, if you wish to be publicly humiliated, that is fine by me. There will be no more chances to back out. Just remember that you have sworn to stay here if you lose,” he added, closing the remaining distance between them.

“I’d never choose to break my oath,” Hijikata frowned. “Do not belittle me—where do you think you’re touching,” he added in a single breath, slapping Gintoki’s hand away from his hip.

Gintoki stepped away, not bothering to conceal his amusement. “When do you think you’ll be ready?” he then changed the topic, though there was still mirth in his unusually coloured eyes.

“Soon enough,” Hijikata said. “Did you not say it was up to you to determine whether I’ve recovered enough?”

“I did,” Gintoki admitted. “I said that because you look like the kind of fool who’d be raring to fight right away. I know that you might not think too highly of me,” he tilted his head with a faint smile curving his lips, “but I would not have anyone fight and defeat you while you’re weakened – even if it’s your own fault. While it would certainly provide me with a quick solution to this matter, I won’t allow that.”

Their eyes met. Hijikata shivered, though only so slightly that Gintoki probably did not notice; again, he felt *smaller*, and that irritated him greatly. He would not be defeated by this hooligan or anyone else in this godforsaken land, even if everyone starting with their leader doubted him. He could feel that Gintoki was looking at him with a barely noticeable hint of contempt. The White Demon thought Hijikata *weak*.

Under normal circumstances, Hijikata would have considered this an insult – perhaps a grounds for a duel, even. However, there was an odd strength in that man’s gaze, and it was much more than simply a will steeled in fights. He had not seen this in anyone else – this kind of flame burned in no other man. Hijikata did not know what it was, he only sensed that this pyre would devour anyone who got too close.

He wondered if nobody else could see it. The people around Gintoki did not seem to act with any extra caution.

“I’m going to give you a few days,” the White Demon said, folding his arms on his chest. “During that period, you’ll be allowed to walk around the castle as you please.”

Hijikata narrowed his eyes; this seemed fishy, to say the least. “Why?”

“Because I do not believe you’d try and flee before the fight,” Gintoki shrugged his shoulders. “If you consider yourself a man, that is. And,” he then folded his arms on his chest, “I don’t believe that you’re going to win, either. However, your sword will be returned to you, too, if you wish to exercise and train before the duel.”

Hijikata must have pulled a face, because Gintoki paused briefly. “You think it’s foolish,” he stated after.

“A little, perhaps,” Hijikata admitted reluctantly. “You have no reason to trust me to stay, after all.” For all Gintoki knew, Hijikata could up and leave, no longer needing to stay in order to find his weapon. How could Gintoki possibly know whether Hijikata would try to escape or not?

“Oh, please.” Gintoki shook his head dismissively, stepping closer again. “Even if it were not for the fact that you are *the* Hijikata Toshiro, who would surely care to keep up his reputation of the man who is always true to his word...” his arms fell to his sides again, as he looked Hijikata straight in the eye, “Even if it weren’t for that, you’ve already proven yourself to be free of guile.”

Hijikata returned him a look of confusion. “Have I?”

Gintoki smirked again. “I’ll let you think about it.” Turning to leave, he finally glanced over his shoulder. “Do us all a favour and have someone draw you a bath,” he said. “You reek so much it could kill an eagle in flight.” Then, the door closed behind him.

Sitting down on his bed, Hijikata pursed his lips. Then, cautiously, he glanced around although he knew that there was no-one there.

He sniffed his armpit.

Nah, he’d definitely smelled much worse before.

Chapter End Notes

Yooo, I’m back. Wrote a lot during my vacation, surprisingly. My other fics are going to be updated soon, too, though I’m still working on that. As for this fic, I had to draw a map of the castle to be able to logic it out a little bit. If you’re interested in seeing the maps, let me know; I’ll pretty them up, post them somewhere and put up the link on my profile.

In case you have not noticed by now – I like architecture. I don’t know enough about it to call it a hobby, but I’d go as far as to call it an interest.

Lust for Freedom, part 2

Over the next handful of days, Hijikata was doing his best to regain his strength. True to his word, Gintoki returned Hijikata's sword, and nobody tried to stop Hijikata from going anywhere except the front gates plus the places which were off-limits to everyone else as well. He had wandered all over the castle, and not only did he manage to learn the layout of the entire grounds by heart, he also noticed a number of routes he could attempt to take in order to flee. Of course, he would not resort to such a cowardly act – his conscience would not allow it.

All of the possible escape routes were either dangerous or downright hazardous, and he heavily doubted that he could use any of them twice should there be a need for it. They were mostly along the lines of a briefly unguarded corner or a carelessly open window which, when glanced from, turned out to have at least seemingly manageable way of climbing out from. None of them were permanent and he would need more time to determine whether any of them were recurring.

Looking for them was only a force of habit, though, as he had no intention of attempting to escape. Or rather, he couldn't but notice them. They were also weak spots in the castle's defence, so Hijikata's brain would highlight and examine them without really trying. However, under normal circumstances, such places were insignificant and unimportant, as they would never allow more than one person at a time to enter, and someone would surely notice before it could become a real threat.

Plus, going the opposite direction – in, that is – would surely prove more difficult. Hijikata had had enough time to see that the guards were vigilant and there were many. They'd patrol constantly and the guard changed quite often, and to Hijikata's surprise, it was in a way which at first seemed completely random. When he thought about it after watching them from sundown until about midnight, he concluded that there *was* a real pattern to it, but it was so intricate no intruder could count with a fixed time.

In addition to that, the following day the pattern changed slightly, and Hijikata gave up on understanding it. Later, when he entered the other building, the one on the opposite side of the chasm, he found that there was a common room with a plan of patrol changes which everyone seemed to follow, but Hijikata couldn't make heads or tails of it. The dates and times were all jumbled and Hijikata couldn't understand which side to read it from. Parts of it were in some incomprehensible gibberish, and there were characters which Hijikata recognised as the writing system of one of the neighbouring countries. He'd never learnt it, so he could understand only the numbers, and that did not help.

The guards did not patrol inside the living quarters during the day, and the two buildings were, aside from the normal route across the second drawbridge, connected with that narrow collapsible bridge he had crossed whilst trying to flee. Now he knew that had he really gone through the door Takasugi was guarding, he would have walked out right into the middle of the beehive. All in all, he could consider it luck that Takasugi was there at the right moment, though he didn't know how it was possible.

The inhabitants of the fortress were not at all welcoming towards him.

He was hardly surprised. By this time, everyone knew who exactly had ended up under the White Demon's watch, and they treated him coldly at best. He had heard insults, but none of them warranted a duel, as they were mostly justified and did not really bother him. He would not fly off the handle just because someone called him a 'government dog' or for instance 'bastard'. The former was true, the latter did not even ruffle his feathers; after all, he had heard both of these many times even back home.

Since everyone knew that Hijikata was going to fight for his freedom, there were people whose eyes showed more than just simple hostility, too. For example, Shinpachi began talking to him again and there were even signs of admiration in his expression every now and then. Hijikata soon understood that most – if not all – of the people here hated cowardice; because of that, it was a good thing that he did not object to any of the conditions the White Demon stated, even though they were onerous no matter if he won or lost.

Not that he had any intention to be defeated.

He wondered whom he was going to fight. He had not heard anything, and though he was waiting for the White Demon to come to him with the rules of the duel, so far there had been no news. In fact, he hadn't even seen the White Demon himself since that time, which was... five days ago? It appeared that he had left the fortress, leaving it in the hands of his allies.

Hijikata doubted that the White Demon would stand against him in the duel. After all, he was the leader and should any harm come to him, the whole valley would be in peril. Plus, Hijikata already knew that the fortress had a fine selection of both human and non-human warriors who would for sure readily fight their infamous prisoner.

That made him wonder whether he hadn't misjudged the people's attitude towards Gintoki. Originally, he had thought that they were careless around their leader, as many of them spoke to him informally and treated him in a very friendly manner. However, despite their leader's absence, not a single person attempted to harm him, even though they had many reasons to do so.

Very clearly, they were not afraid of him – nobody objected to his sword being returned. Or perhaps they thought it was only natural. Everyone would walk around this place armed, and if they had no visible weapon, it was likely that they did not require one. Kagura, for example, surely had no reason to carry a sword. There were others without a blade at their side, and Hijikata assumed that they were sorcerers or something of that sort.

He was currently walking down a corridor on the highest floor of the main building. He had not come here before, as there was much to explore, and he had to focus on his recovery, too. Suddenly, he heard someone's effervescent laughter in the distance, and when he listened closely, he recognised that voice as Kagura's. He glanced around; there was an open window nearby, and when he walked up to it and looked outside, he saw the kids and their gigantic dog running about in the first courtyard. They seemed so carefree at the moment that it made Hijikata feel a little envious.

He turned away. He hadn't been here for that long, but he was beginning to sorely miss his life in the city. This, this was suffocating. Whenever he walked out to either of the courtyards, there was at least a couple of guards instantly alert, watching his every step. They wouldn't let him to the entrance gate or to the outer wall, and if possible, they followed him at a certain distance until he entered a building.

Deciding to swallow the bitter feeling of being restricted, he continued on. There were not as many doors in this hallway, and unlike the lower floors, the hallway led him by the wall rather than the middle.

He opened the door closest to him and discovered that it was a simple room, even simpler than his own, with a rather crude assortment of furniture. The beddings seemed worn by years of use, and the material was probably linen or something similarly rough to the touch. There was no-one inside, and so Hijikata left again, not seeing anything else worthy of notice.

The next door was hiding a surprise – Hijikata entered a library. He would not have expected one to be here, especially one this large; it probably, save for that one room from before, took up the entire floor. Until this moment, he had only considered this a military outpost. The people here did not seem to have the need to read, except for maybe Shinpachi. He had not seen anyone carrying books or scrolls, either.

Quietly, he closed the door behind himself and looked around. His amazement grew when he leaned to the nearest shelf and found that there was not a speck of dust – not on the books nor on the complex ornate carvings of the bookshelves. They were beautiful, and whoever carved them did so with great care, sculpting everything to the smallest of details.

All the paper seemed to smother out all sounds, and as he walked past rows and rows of books, he felt as though he had entered a different world. The air was filled with the scent of aged leather bindings and just as aged paper.

Randomly, he grabbed one of the many untitled books. He could see that some were being open rather frequently while others only barely, though he did not see any markings or indicators which would tell the readers what sort of books they were. The one he was holding seemed to be someone's favourite – there were bookmarks in it, and the binding felt smoothed out by many, many touches. He opened it on the first page, wanting to look inside.

"Don't touch that." That sentence came from behind while the book simultaneously got taken away from him. Hijikata wheeled around, instinctively grabbing the hilt of his sword.

Takasugi stood there, holding the book in his hands; Hijikata had no idea when that man could have possibly appeared. "If you wish to read, I'll point you to something more appropriate," Takasugi said, a faint smile appearing on his thin lips. "This one is still being written, after all."

Hijikata noticed Takasugi had some ink on his fingers. "Are you the one writing it?" he asked before he could stop himself.

The look which appeared in Takasugi's only visible eye was most odd. "Yes," he said eventually, "I suppose I am."

"What kind of book is it?" Hijikata asked further, this time confused by Takasugi's response.

"One not meant for you," Takasugi's smile did not waver. "I'm sure you'd much rather read something else. Our annals, perhaps?"

"Are you serious?" Hijikata finally let go of his sword. Why in the world would Takasugi let Hijikata, who was their prisoner and ultimately an enemy, go through their records?

"But of course," Takasugi nodded lightly. "If you *can* read them, that is."

Hijikata felt that he was being challenged, so he folded his arms across his chest. "Alright," he replied firmly, "let me see."

Takasugi's smile grew into a smirk, but he gestured at Hijikata to follow. "I'm actually glad that you found the book," he said conversationally, making his way to the other side of the room. "Gintoki misplaced it last time and I would have a difficult time finding it."

So there is some logic to it, Hijikata looked around as he walked along. Perhaps Takasugi had everything memorised and simply knew what was where.

"Here," Takasugi stopped, making a general gesture around a big bookcase; this one was not full yet, but all the volumes here were thick and heavy. Hijikata could see the shelves bending slightly under their weight.

"The oldest ones are over there," Takasugi explained, pointing to the bottom right corner, "but as they date hundreds of years back, I doubt they'd interest you. The most recent ones are here," he added, patting the last book on the half-filled shelf. "You're welcome to try reading through them. If you'd like, I can also provide you with a dictionary, should you require it."

Glancing sideways at Takasugi, Hijikata picked up the book and opened it.

Immediately, he knew he shouldn't have asked after all. Only about a third of it at least *looked* familiar, but it was written in a dialect he'd never heard before. There were multiple entries on the last page, each written in a different language and different hand. With an unspoken question, he looked at Takasugi, scouring for answers.

Takasugi was sporting an amused expression. "We take turns," he shrugged his shoulders. "None of the people here are historians, though, so some of the pages are not... what I'd call high quality records." Reaching for the book, he turned it a few pages back.

There was a rather simplistic, childishly drawn picture of the castle – probably – with the sun above it. The castle was drawn in green pencil, the sun was blue and there was a red bird flying above it. Hijikata raised his eyebrows. "Well, this is a mess," he said, suddenly feeling disheartened as he continued flipping through the pages. With some curiosity but little hope, he opened it on the day that they brought him in like a hunt's trophy.

He couldn't read it. It was just a Gordian knot of scribbles to him. He could not tell where words started and where they ended, and the same regarding sentences was a complete mystery. As he stared at the writings, he could feel Takasugi looking at him, and he knew even without looking that Takasugi was grinning maliciously like a fox. He chose to ignore it, however, and asked instead, "Can I borrow this?"

"Sure," Takasugi shrugged his shoulders. "Here's the dictionary," he then added before Hijikata could open his mouth to ask for it, and he pulled a small book out of his sleeve pocket.

Hijikata narrowed his eyes and hesitated briefly, but then he took it. "Thanks," he said. This was yet another thing that did not add up – he had not seen Takasugi reach into any of the shelves along the way, yet the man just had the book ready regardless.

"Do return the chronicle by sunset, however," Takasugi turned to leave. "You can borrow it the next morning again, if you're interested. We update the records every evening if possible." Without waiting for Hijikata's response, he made his way to a desk situated by the window. This was definitely not a crenel, and was providing more than enough light. Takasugi sat down and opened the book at the last page, reaching for a quill into the inkwell standing there.

Hijikata wondered about that book. It was a heavy one, and as Hijikata had noticed previously, the state of its bindings suggested that Takasugi, or perhaps other people as well, would take it and read it as often as the chronicle. However, Takasugi had stopped him from reading through that book, unlike the chronicle which seemed to be a crucial source of vital information. Just what was so important? Takasugi definitely did not strike him as a man who would be shy to show off an unfinished novel.

He had to catch at least a glimpse no matter what.

Not now, though – Takasugi wouldn't let him for sure. Perhaps he could sneak in here after dark.

If, and only if he could find it. Takasugi *did* say that Gintoki had misplaced it, and it did not really look that different from all the other books. Combined with the absence of any guide to this chaos of a library, Hijikata was at a loss.

"Oh, by the way," Takasugi suddenly looked up from his writing, "Gintoki is going to return within two hours' time. Do visit him in his chambers after, he's going to want to speak with you."

"How do you know that?" Hijikata frowned. There were no messengers that Hijikata knew of today, and to be able to tell the exact time of Gintoki's return was impossible.

Takasugi only smiled and did not say a word, gesturing at Hijikata to leave.

Thus, Hijikata spent about two hours in his own room, trying to eat his way through the language of the records of the day he had arrived. The dictionary was, to his surprise after all he had seen here, well-organised. Unfortunately, it was only vocabulary with no grammar

explanations, so his progress was slow and he had barely put two sentences together when he heard a trumpet echoing from the outside.

He finished the problem he had started solving, and then he made his way to where he expected Gintoki would be after his arrival.

He was about to enter the meeting room, this time unguarded, but then he hesitated with his hand on the door handle. He heard voices from the inside – without a doubt, belonging to Takasugi and Gintoki. They were discussing something, and from what Hijikata could hear, it seemed important. He stopped to eavesdrop for a moment before entering.

“... so you’re sure about this?” Gintoki’s voice was uncertain.

“It is him, without a doubt. He found it immediately without even trying. It is not as though he knew what to look for.” Takasugi, on the other hand, was collected, and Hijikata could guess that the man was wearing his usual smile. *“Do you not believe me?”*

“I do,” Gintoki replied hesitantly, *“though to me it still seems like too much of a stretch. He is an enemy, after all.”*

“I’ve been watching him from the moment they brought him here,” Takasugi’s tone turned slightly more insistent. *“There is no mistake.”*

“Alright,” Gintoki said, seemingly giving in. *“I’ll try to see him in that light if you say so.”*

Takasugi gave a short chuckle. *“You don’t seem displeased.”*

Hijikata furrowed his eyebrows. They were indubitably speaking about him, as there were no other prisoners besides himself. However, he couldn’t make heads or tails of it.

“Well, he does have certain firmness to him,” Gintoki said, and despite his calm and stoic voice, someone else in the room – not Takasugi – burst out laughing.

Fed up with being unable to understand what they were on about, and irked by that last remark, Hijikata pushed the door open. Everyone went instantly silent, turning to look at him. There were four people in the room – Katsura with an extremely infuriated expression, Takasugi, as collected as usual, Sakamoto, who was currently trying to stifle his laughter, and lastly Gintoki, who was making a gesture Hijikata could only describe as obscene.

Upon seeing Hijikata enter, the White Demon let his hand fall to his side. “Hello,” he said calmly. “I’m glad you’re feeling better.”

“Hi,” Hijikata replied sourly. “I’m told you wish to speak with me?”

Gintoki glanced at Takasugi, then nodded. “Yes, actually. Guys, can you leave us?” he then turned to his comrades. “I’d like to speak to him alone.”

“Okay,” Sakamoto muttered and passed by, stuffing his hands in his pockets. Takasugi and Katsura left wordlessly, without even looking at Hijikata.

“Please, have a seat,” Gintoki gestured towards one of the chairs.

Hijikata stubbornly remained standing instead, folding his arms on his chest. “So, what did you call me for?”

For a moment, Gintoki looked as though he was fighting a smirk, but then he calmed down and said, “Since you seem fairly healthy now, how do you feel about the duel? We can hold it tomorrow, if you’re feeling fine.”

“Sure,” Hijikata said, biting back the snarky remark about the fact that the White Demon told him he was the one to determine whether Hijikata was fighting-fit or not. He didn’t want to repeat himself, after all.

“Excellent.” Gintoki made his way to his desk and sat down on his chair, making himself comfortable. It clearly didn’t bother him that Hijikata chose to remain standing; he put his feet on his desk and leaned back, looking at Hijikata calmly. “There’s one more thing I want to talk to you about.”

“I’m listening,” Hijikata nodded. He did not exactly feel that he had any choice.

“You’re fighting on my grounds, so I decide the rules,” the White Demon stated.

“Of course,” Hijikata nodded. He wasn’t exactly in a position where he would have the right to interfere in that matter. “What do you propose?”

“A wooden sword, no armour, first clean hit is the winner,” Gintoki said firmly.

“Are you serious?” Hijikata blurted out. “Am I going to have to fight someone with a *stick*?”

Gintoki looked at him. “Is that a problem for you?”

“It’s hardly a fight at all that way,” Hijikata murmured. More importantly, he’d have to fight without his own sword, and that was unthinkable!

Gintoki got up slowly and took a flimsy-looking paper fan from his desk, closing it with a flick of his wrist. “I thought you’d see my reasoning,” he smirked wryly. “It is not the blade you should be wary of. It’s the warrior’s soul itself.”

With the last word, he swung the fan in front of an apple which lay on the table. Setting the fan down, he grabbed the top of the apple with his other hand.

Cleanly cut in the middle, the bottom half of the fruit slid right off, clattering on the plate in front of Gintoki. “A sword or not, it hardly matters,” the White Demon added. “No matter whom I choose, the outcome is going to be the same. I want you to understand – there are people here who can do these things with their eyes closed. Giving them a real sword could unleash destruction upon this outpost, and I cannot allow that. Some of them are properly mad.”

Hijikata couldn’t look away from the apple, not even when Gintoki began eating it absentmindedly. “Okay,” he breathed out, “I get it.” Gintoki himself seemed to be the king of

all the madmen here.

“Amazing.” Gintoki set the apple back down, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. “I look forward to seeing you fight tomorrow.”

So some of the rumours were true after all, Hijikata inhaled slowly, consciously calming down. Gintoki was no sorcerer, that much was obvious. Still, what he made Hijikata witness just now was breathtakingly terrifying. This was the power hidden inside the White Demon. Clearly and without a doubt, Gintoki was not inhuman – but as a warrior, he had gone far beyond the horizons of anyone Hijikata knew.

“You can leave now,” Gintoki tilted his head. “Unless there’s anything you want to talk about?” he added, walking over to Hijikata, and he casually sneaked his arm around Hijikata’s waist.

With all colour draining from his face, Hijikata recoiled from the other. “I... may I at least know the name of my opponent?” he asked in an uneasy tone, trying to be polite despite the fact that he didn’t like this kind of provocation – and coming from someone like the White Demon himself, he did not understand it. Someone as unimaginably powerful as this man surely had no need for this kind of silly pranks.

Gintoki smiled, but his eyes were dark and cold. “Let it be a surprise.”

Hijikata clenched his teeth, taking a deep breath. “Why won’t you tell me?” he asked, though the very moment those words left his mouth, he could sense that he had overstepped the safe boundary and was now trying to balance himself on a spider’s thread.

“Mostly because I haven’t decided yet,” Gintoki said in response, his tone strangely light, “but also because it would make me sad if you chickened out after hearing it. I’m assuming you’ve had enough chances to learn who my men are, and I’m sure there are some you would rather not stand against.”

Sad?! Hijikata looked at the White Demon as though they’d never met before. This man was too odd to understand; why in the world would it be sadness what Gintoki would feel if Hijikata decided to withdraw? In fact, he’d already tried to make Hijikata withdraw once, so why the change of opinion? “Are you calling me a coward?” he said instead despite knowing that that was not at all what the White Demon meant. His way of wording it was clearly deliberate, however, and Hijikata sensed that it was a jab which he was supposed to pick up on.

“No,” Gintoki leaned closer again, “not me. There is a lot of people who would like to have an opportunity to call you that, though.”

“Like Katsura, for instance?” Hijikata said. “His opinion has got nothing to do with me.”

“Ah, that’s where you’re wrong,” Gintoki shook his head, another mysterious smile curving his lips. “Though, yes, he *is* one of those people.”

Hijikata frowned, stepping away again. Both Takasugi and Gintoki would sometimes act as though they knew something Hijikata himself was unaware of, and that was making him extremely uneasy – he felt he was being played.

“I see you wish to leave now,” Gintoki finally stopped cornering him, “don’t let me keep you.”

Clicking his tongue, Hijikata turned away and left in a hurry, nearly running into Katsura and Sakamoto outside. Takasugi was no longer present.

Muttering a half-assed excuse, he made his way to his room.

The next morning, Shinpachi woke him up, bringing him a hearty breakfast. It felt still off to be treated with such care, even though he was someone who should have been executed a long time ago, but he didn’t comment on it. Instead, he silently let Shinpachi get him ready. That was another thing he found weird – after all, Shinpachi was something like the leader’s ward, so why in the world was he acting as a servant to Hijikata?

Since Hijikata still hadn’t gotten around asking Shinpachi about his true relations to the White Demon, he kept his mouth shut.

Although he knew the way, Shinpachi led him to the first courtyard. There, he gave Hijikata a wooden sword and briefly explained the traditional ways of duelling, warning Hijikata clearly that should he breach any of the rules, the duel could be, depending on the leader’s decision, considered invalid – or it could be counted as Hijikata’s loss, even.

In accordance with their rules, Hijikata turned his back towards the other half of the courtyard, slowly kneeling down on one knee, setting the wooden weapon in front of himself horizontally. The ground was wet, as it had probably rained at night, and Hijikata found that unfavourable. After all, with a slippery muddy surface underneath his feet, a mishap could come about far too easily. He even somewhat hoped that the duel would be postponed until the conditions were better, but it did not seem that way.

He glanced alongside the walls; there were people looking at him with serious expressions, but everyone was eerily silent. Some of their faces were familiar, and namely Katsura was looking at him with hatred in his eyes.

Hijikata hung his head again, watching his weapon, and with his back towards the opposite end of the courtyard, he collected himself. No matter who his opponent was, Hijikata had to win. Do or die, it was that simple. The price for his loss would be too high, after all.

He was not to get up and look at his opponent until he heard the sound of a gong – so the tradition dictated. Despite not knowing the local customs, he had to follow them to the best of his ability so that the duel wouldn’t be annulled. He did not think that Gintoki would just pronounce Hijikata the loser just because Hijikata didn’t know about some of the rules.

Soft murmurs spreading through the crowd let him know that his opponent had arrived. There were whispers, but nobody raised their voice to greet the other person. It seemed that as

opposed to the tournaments' audience in the city, the people here were not at all excited about the duel which was about to commence. Instead, they just watched on, some of their expressions downright grim.

He could hear sounds indicating that the other person was getting ready as well. There was no rush; the time itself seemed to have stopped its speedy horses, wanting to watch the battle for Hijikata's freedom.

Hijikata was breathing slowly and steadily, steeling his heart. This was hardly his first duel, but it was the first time so much was at stake.

The gong finally echoed through the enclosed space, and Hijikata got up, turning around. His throat clenched tightly.

His opponent was none other than the White Demon himself.

To Have Two Faces and Lose Them Both

Swallowing hard, Hijikata squeezed the linen-wrapped hilt of his sword in his hand. Gintoki stood opposite of him calmly, dressed in a simple set of white clothes, not heavier than Hijikata's own, expressionlessly watching his prisoner.

It felt as though time had come to a halt. The gears of fate shifted forcibly and creaked in agony as their eyes locked, and for reasons Hijikata couldn't comprehend, he could *sense* it. In this very moment, something was beginning to change.

Taking a deep breath to fight the sudden dizziness taking over his head, Hijikata charged forward. What just happened did not matter. The moment of absolute uncertainty did not matter. The brief but harrowing feeling of hanging on a spider's thread above a bottomless abyss did not matter. It was for but a heartbeat and could not undermine his determination.

The mud underneath his feet could not provide him with stable footing, so he had to take care not to slip, but the same applied to Gintoki. It was best not to dwell on it too much, since he could not afford to be distracted.

He swung his wooden blade, aiming at Gintoki's head, fully aware that the first few hits were going to be hopelessly blocked on either side. This was just a warm-up to the both of them.

Gintoki parried Hijikata's blow with ease and counterattacked immediately, pushing forward a step. Hijikata dodged, jumping backwards. He landed safely, but he was already attacking again. His lowered position allowed him to aim for Gintoki's abdomen from below.

Due to the added distance, he missed, though by only a hair. Gintoki followed his motion and stepped in swiftly, swinging from above. Hijikata managed to guard his head, but he had to support his weapon with both of his hands. The power behind that blow was too great – though Hijikata sensed that it lacked killing intent. He pushed upwards, getting up properly and throwing Gintoki off-balance, if for just a moment. Using that to his advantage, he attacked, wanting to hit Gintoki's torso.

The tip of his blade caught onto Gintoki's shirt and tore through, but did not meet with further resistance. Even so, gasps echoed through the surrounding crowd.

Gintoki chuckled and that made Hijikata seek out his eyes. There was a gleam in Gintoki's gaze, one Hijikata had not yet seen – the White Demon seemed thrilled. Gone was the dead-fish, apathetic look Hijikata usually saw. Now, the smothered flame inside Gintoki's heart began growing, illuminating the sky. For a split second, Hijikata found himself completely disarmed by the other.

That nearly proved fatal. Only by luck, he dodged the next swipe aimed towards his throat.

His foot slipped.

A tearing sound.

He found himself falling, hitting the muddy ground with his back.

Gintoki suddenly stood above him, and Hijikata expected him to land the final blow. Instead, Gintoki lowered his weapon and reached his hand out to Hijikata. “Seems like your boot is broken,” he said without a hint of mockery.

Reluctantly, Hijikata took the other’s hand and got up, feeling ashamed. Thankfully, not a single person was laughing – that would only make the entire situation much worse. “What now?” he asked.

Gintoki briefly furrowed his eyebrows, then he shrugged his shoulders. “Shoes off,” he said, “and then we start over.”

Hijikata nodded and started taking his boots off. The one he had taken the wire from had fallen apart – it was as though fate itself intended to punish Hijikata for trying to escape. If he had not attempted to pick the lock of his prison cell and flee, his boot would not have broken now.

He looked at the now barefoot Gintoki. This way, it was even less comfortable, as the mud was cold and his bare soles did not have nearly enough friction to help him keep steady. Truth be told, he was a little surprised that Gintoki would go this far to ensure the fight was fair.

The White Demon looked to the side and waved at the person standing by the gong. “We’re starting over,” he called, though it was probably obvious to everyone present.

Hijikata chucked his boot and a half to the side, and seeing that Gintoki was walking back to where he was when the fight started, he did the same, kneeling in that place once more, setting his sword onto the ground.

The sound of the gong seemed louder than before.

He grabbed his sword again, feeling the slippery hilt under his fingers. It was no longer clean, but he could only assume that Gintoki’s weapon was no different.

The White Demon was nearing Hijikata quickly, his expression focused. He didn’t give Hijikata time to think – his blade came closing in. Hijikata ducked and lunged forward, hoping to be as close as possible to gain an advantage. The White Demon was agile and quick, so perhaps if Hijikata limited the other’s ability to move around, then...

Gintoki saw it coming. He must have, because he stepped in against Hijikata at the same moment. Hijikata was forced to start turning midway to be able to see him. He managed to do so, and it saved his skin, as the White Demon did not wait with his next attack. Hijikata blocked Gintoki’s weapon, successfully protecting his abdomen. Gintoki’s sword slid down Hijikata’s blade. For a few rapid heartbeats, they stared one another down, not wanting to back away. They were so close that Hijikata could see sweat forming on Gintoki’s forehead.

Hijikata pushed stronger against Gintoki’s blade; Gintoki’s foot slid backwards a little. To regain his footing, Gintoki jumped away. Hijikata did the same, squeezing his hilt tighter upon landing.

They began circling each other cautiously, eyes locked. Their surroundings had gradually become insignificant, drowned out by their battle of wills.

Hijikata charged once again, wanting to break the cycle of following each other's movements.

Gintoki dodged his swipe. He made it look so easy, as though this was naught but a game to him. With a wolfish grin, he counterattacked. His weapon was headed straight for Hijikata's stomach.

Hijikata deflected it, then pushed forward, delivering several blows in close succession. Gintoki had no choice but to move back as he blocked them one by one. There was a point when Hijikata nearly saw himself winning, but after the fourth blow, Gintoki parried Hijikata's sword, clearly intending to return the favour. He pushed Hijikata the same distance back with a similar set of hits, ending with one aimed right at Hijikata's head.

Their wooden blades collided. Hijikata staggered backwards, clenching his teeth. He felt fine this morning, but it seemed that his body was still not as strong as it used to be; he could feel his knees slowly giving out. He supported his blade with his palm and pushed against Gintoki, hoping to throw him off balance.

He succeeded. Gintoki almost couldn't withstand it. Somehow, he did break his fall, but only just; finding solid ground, he laughed shortly, assuming a wider stance. Hijikata used this brief moment to catch his breath. The other was clearly in a better shape, and it was no wonder.

"Want to give up yet?" Gintoki asked under his breath, embers of excitement burning within his eyes.

"No. Do you?" Hijikata responded, attacking right after.

"Perfect," Gintoki laughed and parried Hijikata's weapon, counterattacking immediately. His speed increased, and Hijikata suddenly couldn't follow his opponent's movements. On instinct, he blocked Gintoki's blade to the left. There was no other way than to rely on his sixth sense. In this moment, he recognised that he had lost.

Gintoki's blade hit his forearm, and Hijikata's fingers let go of the wooden sword on their own accord. There was a harsh hit to Hijikata's stomach – right at his solar plexus.

Hijikata coughed, his legs failing to keep him upright. Ungracefully, he flopped into the mud, feeling the taste of defeat spread bitterly across his tongue.

For a second, there was utter silence. Then, finally, the audience behaved as they were supposed to, and they began cheering.

"I must say," Gintoki said, looming over Hijikata, "I'm very impressed. Not bad, not bad at all." He held out his hand. "It doesn't happen often that I have to get this serious."

For the second time that morning, Hijikata took said hand unhappily and let Gintoki help him to his feet. The White Demon was still true to his name; only his knee and the bottom part of his trousers were stained with mud. Meanwhile, because of his unfortunate accident with his boot, Hijikata was covered in dirt from head to toe.

“Won’t you reconsider?” the White Demon continued.

“Reconsider what?” Hijikata looked at him, confused.

“I’d like you to join me, after all,” Gintoki said. He was still holding Hijikata’s hand and it took all of Hijikata’s effort to shake it off.

“I will not betray my country,” Hijikata replied acrimoniously, trying to regain feeling in his fingers. Gintoki’s grip was merciless.

“I see. What a shame,” the White Demon said with a faint smile. “Although it does not surprise me.”

“Great,” Hijikata said sourly. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I’m going back to my prison cell,” he added, intending to pass by Gintoki.

“You’re not a prisoner,” Gintoki shook his head, grabbing Hijikata’s shoulder. Hijikata stopped, looking at Gintoki with a question in his gaze. “We’re not locking you up. You’ve given me your word that you won’t leave the castle unless I allow it, but besides that, you can walk around at will,” Gintoki continued.

“Not a prisoner, you say?” Hijikata scoffed. “Then, what am I?”

“You’re an esteemed guest,” the White Demon said with a deadpan. “I would appreciate it if you thought so. Well, that’s the treatment you’ll be getting, at least,” he appended, “and I’ll make sure you don’t have to stay in that uncomfortable room, too. I’ll have someone draw you a bath,” he finally smiled a little, “so make sure to rest.”

Hijikata pursed his lips. He really, really needed to wash himself, but he didn’t like this entire situation. It did not sit right with him – the way Gintoki spoke just now was not at all condescending, although the White Demon had every right to gloat. Not that Hijikata in the same situation would need to shame the loser any further. He had simply expected Gintoki to do something like that, and Gintoki did not deliver.

“Where am I supposed to go, then?” he asked in the end.

Gintoki reached his arm around Hijikata’s mud-covered shoulders, and Hijikata just let him. “For now, your previous room. A bathtub should be waiting for you already,” Gintoki replied, leading Hijikata towards the building. “After your bath, we’ll relocate you. Somebody’s going to come for you once your new living quarters are prepared.”

“My… living quarters?” Hijikata parroted.

“But of course,” Gintoki replied, smiling, and Hijikata realised that this man’s smile was a mask to hide a deeper meaning, “you’re going to be staying here, after all.”

Until when? Hijikata wanted to ask, but then he swallowed those words and finally made Gintoki take his arm off. He was suddenly tired; the humiliation of having lost to this hoodlum started eating him inside and Gintoki's presence anywhere within ten miles from Hijikata was not helping.

Gintoki seemed to have sensed this drop in Hijikata's mood, because he backed away without another word. That, again, surprised Hijikata a great deal. As he slowly made his way towards his room, no longer accompanied by a single person guarding him, he couldn't but wonder.

Today's duel made him re-evaluate Gintoki a little bit. Not too great a deal – he was still an overbearing and selfish man with no regard for personal space, but it turned out that when wielding his weapon, he was the epitome of what a warrior was meant to be. Hijikata's defeat was not disgraceful, or at least not a smidge more than it had to be. Gintoki didn't show a single sign of wanting to bask in the sun, though it was his every right as the winner.

Somehow, and to Hijikata's amazement, when he'd reached his room, there was a wooden bathtub with hot water standing in the middle, ready for him to use.

This was his first warm bath in more than a month. There was soap, too, which was a luxury they did not even have in the barracks, and a towel and some clean clothes to replace his now unbelievably filthy uniform. He had been wearing it since he got caught in this trap, and though he always slept without it at night, it still felt good to be able to take it off. Surely, someone could wash it for him.

Although... was there any need for him to keep it?

Leaving that headache for later, he began undressing.

Takasugi came for him just when Hijikata was out of the bath and about to get dressed. That man's timing was uncanny, and Hijikata wished he could stop overthinking it. If it weren't for the simple fact that he heard Takasugi nearing his room from afar, he would have thought that the man was spying on him from behind the door. After all, Takasugi was enough of a creep for Hijikata not to put such an act past him.

Though Hijikata was butt-naked when Takasugi entered, he didn't move a muscle in his face as he slowly and in a collected fashion wore his new trousers and shirt.

"I'm glad they fit," Takasugi said, eyeing Hijikata from head to his bare toes. "You're going to have to wait until we manage to get you a pair of shoes, though. I'd imagine you don't want to have to wear a pair someone else's had before."

"Yeah," Hijikata nodded. There were not many things he'd get squeamish about, but the thought of someone's old sweat and possibly some foot fungus in his shoes made him shudder. The question was, why and how did Takasugi know that?

"Follow me," Takasugi said, his expression so transparently amused that it made Hijikata worry. This man... he couldn't read minds, could he?

Takasugi's expression did not change in the least when Hijikata thought this. Either he really couldn't hear what Hijikata was thinking, or he was so used to hiding it that Hijikata wouldn't be able to tell.

Hijikata felt tense, but did his best not to show it as he walked up to the waiting Takasugi. "Where are you taking me?" he asked, though based on his previous conversation with the White Demon he already had a hunch.

"To your new chambers, of course." Takasugi's voice echoed throughout the corridor.

It was uncomfortable to walk on the cold stone floor barefoot; as Hijikata silently followed Takasugi, he wondered why the frequent changes. One of the explanations could have been that the previous room was really some sort of a solitary confinement room and they needed to keep it empty; another explanation, one which Hijikata liked a lot less, was that they'd finally decided what to do with him but did not bother explaining.

Gintoki called him a 'guest', and there was not a sliver of sarcasm in the man's voice – yet Hijikata struggled to believe in Gintoki's sincerity. Obviously, as a leader of this bandit valley, the White Demon had to have a great deal of integrity, otherwise he wouldn't keep his position for long. His people seemed to have a wide assortment of sympathies towards him, ranging from respect to admiration, and it seemed that a few women loved him, even. Still, Hijikata was an enemy soldier above all else, and it would make no sense for Gintoki – or anyone else here – to treat him with honour and respect.

He was uneasy as he walked at an arm's length behind Takasugi, and no relief came to him when they finally entered one of the doors Hijikata had yet to visit. It was, as he noticed, right next to the rooms where the White Demon resided.

The room was much more spacious than the one he had just been in, and it was clear that he was the first one to stay here after a long period of time. He eyed what was before him.

"Why are there roses here?" he asked then, looking at the gilded porcelain vase on the desk. It was the first thing that caught his eye, but as he examined the room further, he noticed more and more decorations which seemed a little off the mark for a man like himself. Unlike his previous room, it had a large double bed, a bigger closet, and there was an ornate wooden screen for changing. For whatever reason, there was a rather expensive-looking rug there as well. There were even paintings on the wall, which were definitely unneeded in an outpost such as this one. To top it all off, when Hijikata stepped towards the bed and touched the beddings, he discovered that they were made of silk, high-grade silk which he had only touched a few times in his life – such an unnecessary expense on his behalf? Why in the world?

"Oh, don't you know?" Takasugi asked innocently, clearly amused as he watched Hijikata stroll about the room like a tiger in a new cage.

"Don't I know what?" Hijikata turned towards him with his suspicion instantly increasing tenfold.

“These rooms were initially intended to be the mistress’s chambers.” A sparkle of malicious glee appeared in Takasugi’s single eye. “If these become your quarters, everyone understands what it means.”

Hijikata felt his mood sinking even further. So the humiliation he suffered when he lost to that demon wasn’t enough, after all? “You’ve got to be shitting me,” he breathed out, leaning against the wall.

“Not at all,” Takasugi assured him with a wide smile across his face. “You should be grateful for our leader’s hospitality.”

Hijikata pursed his lips. It should have hit him earlier, really, with all the touching and double-ended comments. He should have realised – and he should have jumped off a cliff, lunged right into the abyss dividing the castle in two so that he would never have to be subjected to such mortification. Clenching his fists, he turned on his heel and was about to storm out again – but met with Takasugi’s cold glare. Hijikata didn’t even see him move, but he was suddenly standing between him and the door.

“Whatever you’re thinking of doing,” Takasugi said, and his tone was downright threatening, “stay put. You should know that there is no escape.”

“You can’t be serious,” Hijikata let out between his clenched teeth, his voice more a growl than anything else. His fists were shaking. “I’d rather die!”

“That isn’t for you to choose,” Takasugi shook his head briefly. “Your life isn’t just yours anymore. It is Gintoki who decides whether you shall live or not.”

Hijikata staggered backwards, his vision darkening. If word got out beyond these walls, if somehow the people of the city learned that the feared and redoubtable Demonic Vice-commander was now that kind of prisoner, he’d lose all respect.

Worst of all – if Mitsuba was still alive, what would she think? What would she say? Would she spare him another glance, another precious word?

Heavily, he sat down onto the silken sheets, taking his suddenly aching head into his now shivering fingers.

“Since you seem to understand, I’ll take my leave,” Takasugi stated flatly. “There’s a bell on your desk, ring it if you need anything. Or, you can just sit and wait until Gintoki comes to see you.”

Hijikata didn’t watch him leave – he only heard the door click shut.

Takasugi didn’t lock him up, and Hijikata felt that he was being taken too lightly. After all, upon finding out what they wanted to do with him, there was no telling what he would do next. Unfortunately, he deduced from Takasugi’s curt warnings that he was still under their watch and each and every step he’d take was closely monitored. If he decided to do anything to save his face, he would be stopped. For some reason, Takasugi had a way of keeping an eye on him, and was harder to get rid of than oil stains.

Hijikata was to wait obediently for Gintoki to come to him.

In other words, he had become no more than a sex slave to the White Demon.

Upon realising that bottom line, he sighed heavily, curling up more.

Was this nightmare never going to end?

His mind was in turmoil, his heartbeat quickened, and he knew he had to do something, *anything*, to get himself out of this. There was no way he'd just let them do anything to him, was there? He sat up, looking around, trying to find a clue which would help him stop the impending doom.

Suddenly, the door opened again – too soon for Hijikata to come up with anything to save his own skin. Slowly, he turned that way, his heart running a mile a second.

Gintoki stood there nonchalantly, an unreadable expression on his face.

Warmth of Lands Unexplored

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“How are you feeling?” Gintoki asked, tilting his head to the side. He was dressed neatly in clean clothes, white as usual. Hijikata caught himself questioning just how did Gintoki manage to keep all his clothes this spotless. Usually, over time, white clothes would darken and there would be inevitable stains, but somehow, Gintoki was always wearing robes as radiant as snow. No such thing was possible in the city – it was only the richest of people who could afford to keep their garments pristine white, and even they wouldn’t be seen wearing such a delicate colour on a daily basis.

“Like someone who lost a fight and is now condemned to a lifetime of confinement,” Hijikata growled, letting go of his head. “What do you think?!”

“Now, why the hostility?” Gintoki shook his head and stepped into the room, closing the door. “I mean you no harm. Also, I wouldn’t call this confinement – all you need to leave the castle is my permission, remember?”

Hijikata did not reply; instead, he watched Gintoki walk over and sit down as though it were the most natural thing. He was immediately too close for Hijikata’s tastes, and the look in his eyes was extremely concerning. Hijikata turned his head away.

“Come on,” Gintoki leaned closer, invading Hijikata’s personal space yet again. “Talk to me. Are these chambers to your liking? Do you need anything? Are you hungry? Thirsty? Too cold? Too warm? Bored?”

“I... I’m alright,” Hijikata replied hesitantly.

“I can clearly see that there’s something wrong,” Gintoki insisted, moving in so close their shoulders touched.

“Stop asking me.” Hijikata felt that he had already said more than enough. After all, Gintoki himself was the primary source of Hijikata’s distress.

Because of what he’d been told by Takasugi, Hijikata was highly conscious of Gintoki, and he tensed up with every Gintoki’s move. That, of course, did not slip past the other’s attention, and so Gintoki eventually sighed and moved away, though by only about a palm’s width. “Somebody told you, huh,” he said somewhat dejectedly. It wasn’t a question.

“Told me what?” Hijikata narrowed his eyes.

“That I...” Gintoki’s hand shot towards Hijikata’s crotch without warning, “have this kind of intention.”

Hijikata was a split second faster and put both his hands there before Gintoki's hand landed. "Takasugi told me that these are the mistress's quarters," he said uneasily.

Gintoki backed away completely, and for a few moments, he was completely silent.

Hijikata glanced at him cautiously.

"What mistress? That dumbass," Gintoki said eventually, rubbing his face with both hands. "I mean, I guess he's not wrong per se," he admitted then, looking up to meet Hijikata's eyes. "I was kind of hoping to slowly ease you into it, though."

"I'm not doing that kind of thing with you," Hijikata stated hurriedly, moving further away from Gintoki.

"Why not?" Gintoki moved the same distance closer.

"It's shameful." Hijikata averted his eyes again. "That sort of act... between men, it's not right."

"There's no shame in this," Gintoki shook his head. "And not like you have a choice. At most, I might let you decide on which end you'd like to be, but tonight, I want to take rather than be taken." He leaned in, his expression serious. "If you're worried about what the others might think of you after, let me tell you this – regardless of what we end up with, they are going to assume that we did it. As Takasugi probably told you," he patted Hijikata's knee lightly, "everyone knows that these chambers are reserved for the one I choose to lay with."

"So this is all you kept me here for?" Hijikata had to back away further, and soon he found that he had no more space to retreat to. He realised that he had severely misjudged the White Demon's motives for keeping him alive. Gintoki possibly decided to keep Hijikata alive on just a whim of his, and in reality he didn't give a rat's ass. Hijikata could have as well gone and starved himself to death back then.

"What other reason is there?" Gintoki tilted his head. "I don't need you to betray your country and give me intel," he undid his belt and threw it aside. "I've got spies all over your city, after all. Since you've refused to join me twice," he added and got up, "there are no other reasons for me to keep you alive besides this one." With that, he pushed Hijikata backwards onto the bed, with his knees still off the edge.

"Then, you might as well kill me," Hijikata hissed, getting up on his elbows.

"Come now," Gintoki said, taking his shirt off, and half-naked he loomed over Hijikata, "don't be difficult. I'd tell you to imagine the woman you like if there is one, but I doubt she'd do what I'm about to."

Hijikata looked away, as Mitsuba's face flashed in his mind. This just made everything ten times worse.

Gintoki seemed to have noticed Hijikata's turmoil, because he grabbed Hijikata's lower jaw, making his so-said 'esteemed guest' to look him in the eye. "You've got two options," he

declared. “Either you cooperate with me, or I’m going to have to ask more people to join us in here to hold you down while do what I need to. Or, actually, there is a *third* option – you can seriously ask me to kill you again, and then I just might.”

Hijikata froze, feeling his blood running cold. He liked none of these options, but he felt that what the White Demon said were hardly empty threats; thus, he closed his eyes, sensing his survival instinct prevail. Facing Takasugi before, he had wanted to struggle for dear life, to fight to protect his pride with all his might, but now, in front of Gintoki, he felt much weaker, disarmed, vulnerable, helpless almost. He could feel that something within his heart wanted to open itself up to the man in front of him; he didn’t understand that in the least, and it terrified him greatly that he felt such closeness to his enemy, a closeness which existed despite all the alarm bells ringing in his head. He suppressed it quickly.

It took him a good several seconds, but then he managed to sift through his clenched teeth, “Alright, knock yourself out.”

Gintoki chuckled and started undoing Hijikata’s clothes. “I’m going to get you something better to wear,” he said thoughtfully as he opened Hijikata’s shirt and felt up his chest.

“Don’t need it,” Hijikata retorted, his face like that of a statue, not wanting to show any kind of weakness. The White Demon clearly wished to humiliate him, but Hijikata was not willing to yield.

“It’s such a waste having you wear something this plain,” Gintoki said as his fingers slowly trailed along Hijikata’s ribs, going lower one by one. When they reached Hijikata’s sides, the ex-Vice-commander’s eyebrows twitched. He wasn’t usually ticklish, but the touch was so light that it must have triggered the most sensitive of his nerves. “Although it is easy to take off,” Gintoki admitted, his breath gently caressing Hijikata’s stomach.

Something wet touched Hijikata’s navel and he tensed up; he felt Gintoki slowly lick towards his crotch, and the wet trail was cold, making goose-bumps appear on Hijikata’s skin. Gintoki’s lips began softly planting light kisses around Hijikata’s abdomen, and it was so delicate that Hijikata could barely feel it. It was as though Gintoki was, contrary to his own words, worried about hurting Hijikata.

“Raise your hips,” Gintoki said curtly, tugging onto the hem of Hijikata’s trousers.

Not at all eagerly, Hijikata obeyed, allowing Gintoki to strip his lower half completely. Save for his shirt, Hijikata was now entirely naked and thus mostly exposed for Gintoki to see; realising this, he could feel his face heat up. Thankfully, Gintoki did not comment on it; for a moment, he had a complicated expression, troubled almost, as though he didn’t want to keep going after all.

Then, Gintoki’s hand wrapped tightly around Hijikata’s cock; it was an odd feeling to have another man touch it. Though among the men in the barracks, this kind of act was not unusual, it was nothing to be proud of, no-one ever spoke about it, and Hijikata never took part. Now, he covered his face with his elbow, suffocated by shame; he never would have expected to be dragged down such roads. Though it was just his personal opinion, he considered this sort of thing a misconduct, something immoral, something his worldview

would never allow. He was *proper*, he was an exemplary warrior, his morals were cast iron. He had never even touched Mitsuba, never held her hand; the way he courted her was outdated and full of boundaries, but that way he could be sure he never wronged her, never compromised her chastity. He thought that before marriage, he should by no means put her in a position where she'd have to be questioned about the true nature of their relationship. They had known one another for the longest time, but his resolve never wavered.

For that reason, he, too, was virginal; however, now both his pride and his purity were walking the plank. His erection – much like his virginity – was firmly in Gintoki's grasp, and he could not say no.

He whimpered lightly when Gintoki let go suddenly. "Move from the edge a bit," Gintoki said. Though his tone was not commanding, Hijikata knew that it was so only because he had not put up any resistance.

He opened his eyes, and slowly, he backed away, settling down in the middle of the bed. Gintoki followed him, and Hijikata's heart skipped a beat when their eyes locked for a split second – before Hijikata quickly looked away. There were scars on the White Demon's skin, scars which told a story of a man whose motherland was a battleground. His body gave the impression that he hardly ever had a day's rest; he moved with a predatory grace, his toned muscles shifting under his skin.

"Lie on your stomach," Gintoki leaned closer.

Hijikata did so, not wanting to think of what was to come next. In theory, he did have a vague idea of how it went down between men. However, he had never, not once in his life, wanted to try it. After all, he would even have problems with excretion at times, so something penis-sized was definitely not meant to fit in there. For other people, maybe, but Hijikata was convinced that his own arse wouldn't and *shouldn't* stretch to such extremes.

He did not have the guts to try and catch a glimpse of the size of Gintoki's member. He felt already bad enough, there was no need for him to bring more misery to himself. At least in this position, neither of them could see the other's expression.

He pulled his pillow closer and buried his face in it when he felt Gintoki's hands spread his ass cheeks. "This might hurt a little," Gintoki informed him, "so bear with it."

Something brushed over his tiny hole, and Hijikata tensed up instantly, clutching his pillow strongly. Although for now, Gintoki was only rubbing him, it felt weird. Though he was hard before Gintoki told him to turn over, his erection vanished like the morning mists above the valley, and he no longer felt any arousal whatsoever.

Gintoki's fingers were wet, and Hijikata assumed that Gintoki must've licked them beforehand. The way they moved was making Hijikata's head spin. Hijikata didn't like it in the least; if he didn't have any thoughts of escape before this, now he wished he could run away and hide somewhere the White Demon would never reach.

One of Gintoki's fingertips applied pressure at the entrance, slowly slipping in. It did not go deep, probably only up to the first knuckle, but Hijikata immediately moved away on instinct,

his toes curling.

“Don’t do that,” Gintoki said with a hint of warning in his voice, and he grabbed Hijikata’s hip, holding him in place. Then, he pushed that finger inside in one go.

Hijikata cried out into his pillow, shivering madly. It felt horrible, terrible, the absolute worst. Gintoki wouldn’t stop moving his hand, massaging Hijikata’s insides carefully; it was beyond uncomfortable. “Relax,” he muttered, “you’re too tense.”

“Is it any wonder?” Hijikata hissed.

“I see you’ve gone to the privy,” Gintoki said instead of giving a reply. “It almost makes me think that you were expecting this to happen.” His tone became a little mocking along the way.

“I went... before my bath,” Hijikata’s voice was strained. “Nothing to do with... you.”

“What a shame,” Gintoki chuckled. “Second finger.”

Hijikata’s eyes snapped wide open as he felt his ass stretching more. One finger, that was something he could bear with somehow. Two fingers hurt a bit; although it felt that Gintoki was being careful, Hijikata still could not see how anyone could ever come to enjoy something like this. Gintoki’s hands were those of a man, big and a little rough to the touch, and the only pleasant thing about them was that they were warm.

“Third finger.”

“No,” Hijikata let out a distressed groan, biting down on the pillow in his arms right after. Forget being hard, he now felt like hurling. There was exactly nothing pleasant about this.

Suddenly, Gintoki touched something inside that made his head spin. Involuntarily, he whimpered, subconsciously arching his back. It gave him a scorching feeling of coldness piercing his fingers and toes from the inside out, in a flash gathering in the centre, going straight into his dick. “What...” he breathed out, barely able to hear himself. His legs turned into gelatine, and he was glad he did not have to stand up anytime soon.

Gintoki did not seem to have noticed Hijikata’s question; gently, he continued teasing that spot for a while without making a sound.

Hijikata could scarcely believe it, but he was getting hard. It wasn’t as pleasant as he would have preferred, but there was a tingling feeling he couldn’t shake off. Although he logically did not want to become the White Demon’s stress reliever in this sense, his lower half was suddenly getting unruly ideas. His dick was being downright disobedient.

Gintoki’s left hand suddenly grabbed Hijikata’s knee, and he felt his legs opening; with this, Gintoki made him lie on his back. Hijikata didn’t let go of his pillow, so he couldn’t see anything, but the movement caused a ragged moan to escape his throat. He didn’t know what reaction Gintoki had to that, because the White Demon was now completely silent. There were no more mocking remarks, not a single chuckle.

Suddenly, wet warmth enveloped Hijikata's erection, and it took Hijikata a second to comprehend what was really happening.

Gintoki casually and without a moment's hesitation took Hijikata's dick in his mouth.

Hijikata struggled a little, but gave up soon when he remembered he was supposed to endure. It was an overwhelming feeling, one both of a complete loss and great pleasure, and Hijikata squeezed the pillow in his arms tighter, biting into it again. That sensitive little spot inside of him was tingling, somehow wanting more attention – and oddly enough, though Hijikata didn't say a word, Gintoki delivered.

There was suddenly a little more pressure in *just* the right place. The mouth on his cock was not holding back either, and Hijikata, who was unschooled in the ways of love-making, knew well that he wasn't going to last long.

"Wait," he uttered again, slightly louder this time, "your mouth—!" Whatever he was going to say next got lost in an unintelligible avalanche of sounds he had no control over.

Too late. Or perhaps, perhaps it was on purpose – not a drop was spilled. Gintoki swallowed everything Hijikata shot down his gullet. "Gross," he said, grimacing. "Well, not that I expected it to be any different."

"Y-You... *swallowed* that?!" Hijikata couldn't believe his own ears, but when he finally looked at Gintoki again, it was obvious that this fool of a man drank it all like first-grade ale.

"I've decided to stop here for tonight," Gintoki said, getting off the bed. "I don't want to hurt you, so I'll make sure to do all the necessary preparations for next time, since you're clearly inexperienced."

Hijikata slowly and sluggishly sat up; then, his gaze fell lower, and suddenly he was twice as glad that Gintoki had stopped. The White Demon was graced with a weapon which would leave Hijikata's ass a wasteland. Hijikata did not understand why or how could Gintoki get aroused by anything that had transpired, but he was standing proud and dangerous while Hijikata himself was absolutely spent.

Frowning, he said sourly, "You could have told me that sooner."

"Ah, well, you see, my mouth was full," Gintoki shrugged, raising his palms towards the ceiling.

Hijikata turned beet red in shame. "Tell me," he muttered, still holding onto his pillow for comfort, "tell me honestly. Why would you do something like this?"

Gintoki let his hands fall back to his sides and gave Hijikata a smile which was almost tender. "You'll learn all in due time, I'm sure. For now, know this – I don't want to be unnecessarily harsh. If you allow me, I'll take care of all your needs."

"Allow? You've left me with no choice," Hijikata objected, finally setting his pillow aside. Now that it was over, he no longer felt as ashamed. His legs still were shaking as though he

had stolen them from a new-born fowl, but all he had to do was wait for them to go back to normal.

“Oh, no, not at all,” Gintoki shook his head. “There is always a choice. For example, you could lock yourself in your room and reject all my future advances. You could try to kill me in my sleep. You could break your oath and just leave,” he added. “There is always a choice, but each and every single one of them has consequences.” With that, he walked out of the room and quietly closed the door behind himself.

Hijikata lay in his silken bedsheets, watching the ceiling above his head. Though it seemed like quite a lot of time had passed since Gintoki drained him both of sperm and soul, he still felt sluggish and his body wouldn't listen to him fully.

All in all, he was rather taken aback by the gentleness Gintoki had displayed. When they fought earlier and he caught a glimpse of the raw energy the White Demon nurtured inside himself, he had expected to be burned into a crisp, to be torn into pieces and left to his fate. Instead, Gintoki took Hijikata into his palms like something fragile and touched him with utmost care. It was odd to say the least, and combined with the warm smile so free of guile just before Gintoki left, Hijikata didn't know what to make of it. Of course, he still felt tainted and humiliated, but he could now see that the White Demon was not trying to make him feel miserable.

It kind of irritated him that Gintoki was being so secretive, and Takasugi was no better. They were the ones he had spoken most with so far, as Shinpachi was a quiet boy, Sakamoto hadn't really showed that much interest in speaking with Hijikata, and Katsura and the rest treated him with caution, or unconcealed scorn.

Oftentimes when met with Takasugi, he felt that the man was observing him, kind of as though Hijikata were a rare insect. It left an unpleasant sensation behind, and it only showed that Takasugi knew *something* he was keeping to himself just for his own amusement. Hijikata wasn't completely sure if Gintoki was in on this, but he assumed that it was so at least to some extent. After all, he had heard them speaking about him before.

Another matter he couldn't easily wrap his head around was the way the White Demon changed face. Generally, when there was nothing worthwhile going on, he seemed stoic and unbothered by anything around him, but as Hijikata had been granted an opportunity to see him in a fight as well as in the bedroom, he could see how much difference there was when Gintoki was invested in something.

Hijikata couldn't understand where that tenderness stemmed from. However, he could see that when Gintoki touched him, he attempted to avoid causing the slightest pain, and all the threats he told Hijikata before were just bluff. Clearly, Hijikata did not have to fear for his own life, and his previous thought process was incorrect – it was not on a mere whim that Gintoki chose to keep Hijikata by his side. There had to be something more to it.

The question was then, why in the world did Gintoki bluff? They didn't even do anything, it was only Hijikata who felt any pleasure and came in the end. Gintoki, on the other hand, did

not gain anything from that. Hijikata found that strange – if the White Demon went as far as to lie to Hijikata like that, why wouldn't he just do it until the end?

Not that Hijikata wanted him to.

No fucking way, obviously.

Still, Gintoki struck him as someone who does not back down until he achieves his goal, so why would he back down when he did?

There was another matter altogether, too.

The White Demon said that Hijikata had choices.

Choices? What a joke. The things he had listed were insulting. To kill someone in their sleep was cowardly, and there was no way Hijikata would go against his word. Locking his door wasn't entirely out of the question, but he couldn't just imprison himself like that.

However, it was now completely clear that as far as Gintoki was concerned, no harm was to be done to Hijikata. That knowledge left Hijikata with two choices.

He could either resist, reject Gintoki with all his might – or leave it be and wait to see how things could unfold. He wasn't sure what about him attracted Gintoki so, and he found it strange that Gintoki had a hard-on as he was leaving. Despite that, he felt that Gintoki wasn't going to push him too much, so unless he started acting all... *inviting*, it shouldn't be too much of a problem.

He ruffled his hair, sighing. Though his grasp of the whole situation was becoming a little clearer, there were too many dark areas. The reason for Gintoki's attitude towards him was shrouded in mystery, and so was the library, and the book he had found only to be disallowed to look inside. Gintoki did say that Hijikata was likely to 'learn all in due time', but could Hijikata be sure of that? More importantly, what exactly did 'due time' mean?

Though he had told himself that he could wait, that he could be patient, his own curiosity was eating him inside. Just what was his role in all this? What if he was some sort of pawn in Takasugi's or Gintoki's schemes, and Gintoki's want for physical contact had nothing to do with it?

That did not explain the gentle behaviour Gintoki had displayed, though.

"Care to go for a ride before lunch?" Speak of the devil and he shall appear – Gintoki peeked in all of a sudden without knocking. "It'll do you good." He eyed Hijikata and chuckled. "You should wear something," he said in a slightly teasing tone. "To ride a horse naked might hurt your bits if you're not used to it."

Hijikata pursed his lips. There were numerous questions he wanted Gintoki to answer, but he was a little doubtful that this man would suddenly explain everything. As he thought about it a little deeper, he reached the conclusion that Gintoki was avoiding some topics on purpose, possibly in order to 'ease Hijikata into it', much like before.

That was alright, though. He *could* wait, after all.

“Sure,” he got up and reached for his clothes. “I guess there’s no harm in that.”

Chapter End Notes

I was quite sleepy writing this, so if you noticed anything that's off/incorrect/nonsensical, please let me know. Thanks!

A Foolish Agreement

It was rather warm outside; Hijikata did not know the difference would be that significant. It was only natural, given the strength of the stone walls, but even so, the weather had exceeded Hijikata's expectations. Summer was slowly nearing its peak, and it was getting hot even in the mountains.

Gintoki was walking a few steps ahead, and just by the way he walked, he seemed somewhat happy – as though Hijikata's consent to a horse ride was enough to make his day. There was a subtle change in comparison to when he was leaving Hijikata's chambers post the... *act*, though Hijikata only realised that now.

Thanks to Gintoki, Hijikata had a brand new pair of shoes, and they were slightly uncomfortable, as no-one had worn them before.

They reached the stables. Hijikata hadn't been here since the day of his arrival, so he was now surprised to discover his own horse standing at one of the troughs. With a questioning expression, he turned to Gintoki.

"They brought her here with you, I'm told," Gintoki explained. "Her wound has been treated and she should be okay to ride by now."

"Her wound?" Hijikata parroted.

"Hm?" Gintoki patted the horse's nose softly. "She had a crossbow bolt in her hind leg. Thankfully, it wasn't too serious, and she's a healthy one, too."

"Oh," Hijikata reached out to stroke the horse as well. *So that's why you reared*, he thought, looking at the horse like at a long-lost friend. She was, after all, all he had left from his previous life. This, here and now, was something he couldn't escape from.

"What do you think you're doing, Gintoki?" someone spoke from behind them in a sour tone, and Hijikata immediately knew who this was. They both turned around. Katsura was standing there, arms folded on his chest.

"What do you mean?" Gintoki tilted his head, genuinely confused. "We're going for a ride, can't you see?"

"I can, which is why I'm asking. Do you really trust him not to run off the minute you turn your back to him!?" Katsura raised his voice, gesturing towards Hijikata in an angered manner. "At least take some guards with you! He's seen too much, we can't just let him—"

"Oh, quit your yapping," Gintoki shook his head, cutting Katsura off mid-sentence. "We don't need an escort, thanks a lot."

"I'm telling you, he can't be trusted. Have you forgotten who he is?" Katsura insisted, but Gintoki wasn't having any of that.

“It’s because I know who he is that I trust him. Take it or leave it. You don’t have to agree with me,” he glanced at Hijikata, who kept silent, not wanting to fuel the fire, “but I feel like there is no need to be *that* cautious.”

“Well, if you say so,” Katsura sifted through his teeth, frowning. “But if he does run off,” he shot Hijikata a glare, “don’t say nobody warned you.”

“Alright, mum,” Gintoki gave a short chuckle. “If you’re that worried, you can come with us.”

“Unfortunately, I’ve got things to do,” Katsura shook his head. “Later.” With that, he turned to go inside. Following his back with his eyes, Hijikata realised that Katsura must have come from the outside without either of them noticing.

“And now he’s sulking,” Gintoki sighed. “Well, forget that. Let’s get to it.”

Soon, their horses were geared up and ready to go. Though Hijikata’s gear wasn’t there, he couldn’t really complain, since Gintoki provided him with a better one. It did bother him a little that these mountain bandits had gear of a higher quality than the police in his hometown, though.

It surprise him that Gintoki wasn’t bringing a weapon.

They led their horses into the courtyard and Gintoki mounted his own, then looked at Hijikata expectantly. He resembled a child like this – it seemed as though he could barely contain his excitement.

Hijikata climbed into his own saddle in no rush. He still felt a little sluggish for numerous reasons – going for a horse ride with the man who *just* explored his ass being only one of them. Thankfully, he had no trouble sitting after what Gintoki did. He didn’t know for sure, but he could imagine that if they did do it until the end, he could be in trouble right now.

Silently, he exhaled in relief, then he looked at Gintoki. In that moment, a mischievous sparkle flashed in Gintoki’s eye. “Let’s go!” he said, clicking his tongue at his horse.

“Alright,” Hijikata muttered. He didn’t really share the other’s enthusiasm, but he was alright with going along with it. To him, riding a horse was usually not for fun, but for his job instead, and he wasn’t exactly passionate about having to stay for hours on end in the saddle. A short ride could be pleasant, though; he hadn’t seen the open skies for far too long, after all.

As soon as they passed through the lower gate, Gintoki suddenly turned towards Hijikata with a grin. “Race you to the pond!”

“Wha-Hey! I don’t know which way the pond is!” Hijikata called after him.

“Guess you’re just gonna lose then,” Gintoki yelled over his shoulder, but he was already far ahead.

“Oh, for crying out loud,” Hijikata ground between his teeth as he quickly followed after the other.

Gintoki’s horse was fast, and since Hijikata had no clue about the terrain here, it soon became an endeavour not to lose sight of Gintoki’s back rather than racing him to win.

The road was narrow and steep, yet Gintoki was riding downhill at a hazardous speed. To Hijikata, this was not surprising at all – the bandit leader seemed to be a reckless fool with no sense for his own safety.

There was no point in trying to hold Gintoki back, and so Hijikata could only hope that the other was not going to fall to his death far, far down to the foot of this hill. Not that he would be terribly sad if such a thing happened, but he would surely get blamed for that.

The road was winding like a serpent down the mountainside, and Hijikata could see forested land down there. It was likely that the pond they were meant to reach was there somewhere, as Hijikata could see the glistening ribbon of a river decorating the green canvas of meadows beyond the trees. He could also see that Gintoki was far in the distance and clearly had no intention of waiting.

Hijikata, on the other hand, decided it would be best to swallow this insignificant loss and ride safely, since he never agreed to this bet anyway.

It took him more time than expected to reach the foot of the cliffside.

Taken aback, he stopped his horse briefly and just stared in pure awe. The forest here was much more majestic than the ones he was used to from when he was back home. It seemed to be overflowing with life, as though the trees and bushes were all one enormous creature, living and breathing at a pace so slow he could barely comprehend it. It seemed a sacrilege to tread onto the soil underneath the trees, warm and smelling of sun. Hesitantly, he searched for the right place to enter the green dome of leaves and branches.

Eventually, he found a path which seemed to be exactly what he was looking for, and as the ground was damp here too, he could easily notice the fresh trail likely belonging to Gintoki’s horse. He followed it cautiously, feeling like an intruder.

He ended up going on for a good few more minutes before he heard the faint sounds of water. Now, he knew which way to head, and so he spurred his horse.

The pond provided him with a truly breath-taking view. There was a wall of green bushes and a few willows around the shore, and the water was clear and glistening in the sunlight, gentle waves shivering on the surface. Gintoki’s horse stood in the water. There was something magical about the area, and even Hijikata’s horse seemed to be drawn in, as it suddenly moved on its own and entered the waters.

Gintoki was nowhere to be seen.

Hijikata allowed the horse to walk into the pond, not minding the fact that the water reached his ankles and his new shoes got wet. In fact, as they were made of leather, it was better that

they did get wet, since that way the leather would easily adjust its shape to Hijikata's feet.

Hijikata's horse came closer to Gintoki's and they snorted at one another.

Suddenly, Gintoki rose from the water, unforeseen, and he grabbed Hijikata strongly, pulling him off his saddle.

The splash sent ripples all the way to the opposite shore. Hijikata's horse moved a few steps forward, then stopped, not at all surprised.

"What are you doing?!" Hijikata got up, dripping wet from head to toe. The water was cold, nicely so after a speedy horse ride, but falling into it like this wasn't exactly pleasant. He did not drink any, but he was now absolutely drenched.

Gintoki giggled like a child. "Come on," he said, splashing water at Hijikata. "Relax a little."

Hijikata narrowed his eyes. Unlike Hijikata, Gintoki was undressed, so he had something dry to go back in. He seemed to be taunting Hijikata, and Hijikata did not like that in the least.

"Alright, if this is how you want to play," he growled and tackled Gintoki underwater.

The other man slipped from under his fingers like liquid. Hijikata submerged completely, and when he did get up again, Gintoki was standing above him, grinning. Hijikata jumped towards him again; Gintoki let out a cackle and dodged, but this time, Hijikata was more careful and managed to remain standing.

"I'll let you try and beat me again," Gintoki said, grabbing Hijikata's shoulder in a friendly manner. "Let's see if you can get to the opposite side faster."

Hijikata pursed his lips briefly, then nodded. "Sure. You're on."

Gintoki laughed and jumped into the water.

For a little under a second, Hijikata watched him swim. Then, he quickly made his way to his horse and climbed into his saddle. The horse, bless that magnificent creature, seemed to have understood instantly, because it began moving in the same direction as Gintoki, even though Hijikata didn't tell it to do anything.

Though they were a little behind at first, they managed to reach the opposite shore before Gintoki.

Gintoki rose from the water, his pallid skin glistening with wetness, and there was mirth in his eyes. "That's unfair," he said, a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth.

"There were no rules," Hijikata shrugged his shoulders, "and she's a much better swimmer than I am."

"How come?" Gintoki tilted his head, reaching out to pet the horse's nose gently.

“There aren’t many places for me to swim in the city,” Hijikata explained, desperately trying to ignore the fact that Gintoki was completely naked with no intention to cover himself up. “I only had to swim when I fell into the river as a child, and that was only in the autumn when the water levels were higher than usual due to rains spells.”

“Should I teach you?” Gintoki offered.

Hijikata eyed Gintoki’s face. It was clear from his expression that he was completely serious and his offer was genuine. However awkward it was for Hijikata, this could be a chance to finally be able to learn – but on the other hand, to completely entrust himself into Gintoki’s hands was out of the question.

“I don’t need it,” Hijikata shook his head.

“Oh, come on. Stop horsing around and get down here,” Gintoki reached up, and despite Hijikata’s struggles, he pulled him down and into his embrace. “You don’t have to be afraid of the water.”

“Who says I’m afraid?” Hijikata retorted and tried to free himself, but Gintoki wasn’t letting go. “I just don’t want any favours from you.” They were standing knee-deep in the pond.

“... Thanks,” Gintoki pulled a face and let go of Hijikata reluctantly. “I’m doing my damndest to be as accommodating as I can manage over here, but you sure aren’t making it easy for me.”

“That would be more believable if you didn’t target my ass,” Hijikata frowned. Though he was fairly certain that this was not all Gintoki wanted him for, he still hadn’t gotten any answers or explanations as to why in the world he was meant to stay in that fortress. Despite some of Gintoki’s perhaps honourable intentions, there was also a great amount of intentions less than honourable.

“You can’t blame me for that,” Gintoki leaned to the side and eyed Hijikata’s butt, now being tightly embraced by a thin layer of wet fabric. “You’re very...” he smiled, “... callipygian.”

“What does that even mean?” Hijikata turned a little to block Gintoki’s view.

“Means your ass is really, really nice.” Gintoki stepped in without warning and he gave Hijikata’s ass cheek a light pat. “I learned that word two days ago and been waiting to use it.”

“Using big words doesn’t suit you,” Hijikata retorted, swatting Gintoki’s hand away like an annoying insect. “Don’t touch me as you please.”

“Don’t be like that,” Gintoki said in a slightly defeated tone. “I just...” he eyed Hijikata again, and this time, Hijikata could clearly feel Gintoki’s heated, hungry gaze travelling all over his body, and he felt as exposed as he did this morning. He shuddered.

Gintoki finally started talking again. “I don’t want to force you into anything, but I desire you, so much so that it’s painful, so please... please, don’t reject me completely. I don’t know what I might do if that were to happen.” He spoke with unease and his voice was trembling.

Hijikata hesitated. Gintoki seemed so carefree just moments ago, yet now he was speaking feverishly and with great urgency in his eyes. At the moment, Hijikata could see no guile in this man – something he couldn't comprehend. They'd barely seen one another during Hijikata's stay here so far, so why in the world would Gintoki become so infatuated?

"I don't understand why," he admitted honestly, looking at Gintoki. "And as I've told you, I don't want to do that kind of thing with you."

"Sure," Gintoki leaned in a little, one of his palms casually finding its way to Hijikata's chest. "I'll respect that, but let me do at least *something*."

"Like what?" Hijikata raised his eyebrows, and he immediately regretted asking, because as soon as those words left his mouth, Gintoki closed the remaining distance between them and kissed Hijikata on the lips uncompromisingly. It was a gentle touch, and Gintoki's lips were surprisingly soft. Taken aback, Hijikata couldn't resist, and only attempted to struggle when Gintoki's tongue slipped inside past his own.

Gintoki let go and stepped back, the expression on his face a little strained. "Something like this?" he said. "This, and I want to sleep with you."

"I *just* said—" Hijikata began, but Gintoki shook his head.

"Not like that. In the same bed, I meant. Next to each other."

"Can I trust you not to do anything?" Hijikata took a subconscious step back. He didn't understand why Gintoki was willing to constantly show Hijikata his vulnerable sides, and he felt he should ask, but he was hesitant to do so. Somehow he had the feeling that this was a matter which should not be addressed, at least not just yet.

"Unless you invite me," Gintoki nodded.

Hijikata's brows furrowed. This, all in all, seemed more reasonable than the danger of having to open his legs for someone. Still, he had to swallow a lot of his pride to be able to bring himself to give a reluctant nod of agreement.

Gintoki lit up instantly as though someone put a candle inside his brain. "Perfect," he said and leaned in to plant a chaste kiss on Hijikata's cheek. That, for some reason, was much more embarrassing than the previous one, and Hijikata's face turned beet red. Gintoki couldn't see that, however, because he turned around and started making his way to the edge.

Hijikata watched his line of movement and found that Gintoki was, in fact, heading that way to retrieve his clothes. Far from folded neatly, they were in a pile near a tree stump.

His first thought was that of relief; he did not want to have to deal with Gintoki's nudity any longer. Despite Gintoki being a man, in the light of recent events, Hijikata didn't know where to look. He had seen Gintoki aroused, after all, and that image was etched into the deepest parts of his memory.

Hijikata's second thought was that of mischief. Seeing as Gintoki would tease him constantly, he didn't see why he couldn't retaliate. With that in mind, he called his own horse back and waited.

Soon enough, Gintoki was dressed. He eyed Hijikata, and upon seeing him in the saddle, he whistled at his own horse to come closer. He then mounted it and came closer to Hijikata.

As soon as he was close enough, Hijikata leapt from his saddle, knocking Gintoki into the water. They both ended up falling in together in a tangled ball of limbs and clothes. For a second or two, Hijikata held Gintoki underwater, then he let go. It surprised him a little to realise this, but he didn't want to hurt the White Demon – he just wanted to get back at the idiot for getting him soaked.

Gintoki pushed Hijikata away, and while trying to sit up, he was already laughing. "I deserved that. But," he added then, and his hand shot up to grab the back of Hijikata's head, "it will not go unpunished." With that, he pulled Hijikata's face closer, and made him suffer through another kiss – just as deep as the first one.

When he finally let go, Hijikata jumped away and ostentatiously wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, deciding to think twice before pulling any pranks on Gintoki in the future.

Upon returning to the castle, they weren't any drier. Gintoki was in a great mood, and though he was not saying much, the way he was beaming smiles left and right was a giveaway enough. It made Hijikata regret that he was compliant at the pond. He shouldn't have so simply agreed to the kissing. What if Gintoki did that sort of thing in front of people? Hijikata really did not need to lose any more face than he already had.

"Gintoki!" Takasugi's dissatisfied voice reached their ears. He emerged from the building just when they were about to enter the stables. "Where have you been?"

"Hm?" Gintoki looked at Takasugi with confusion written all over his face. "Just took our guest to the pond. Is there something wrong?"

"That explains why you both look like drowned rats," Takasugi bellowed. He was clearly on edge, and Hijikata noticed that this instantly worried Gintoki a great deal.

"I went down the hill and then came back. Nothing else, honestly," Gintoki said sincerely, then waved towards Hijikata. "He's been with me the whole time, he can tell you I'm not making this up."

"You're just *asking* for trouble, aren't you." Takasugi saw Hijikata nod, but it did not seem to calm him down much.

"Come on, what's the harm in having at least some fun?" Gintoki protested, his good mood now gone.

"You know why you shouldn't go off on your own." Takasugi folded his arms on his chest. "At least tell me before you do. Even if it's with him, you need your guard with you as well

in case something happens. He's not ready yet, after all, and you should be aware of this."

"I know," Gintoki sighed, then finally got off his horse. "You didn't have to give me a lecture first thing after I got back, you know. I was having such a good time."

"You're lucky idiots don't catch colds," Takasugi retorted. "You better get changed before lunch."

"Are we having a lot of guests?" Gintoki asked, clearly wanting to change the topic. "I'm slowly growing weary. I understand that having allies is important, but having to entertain them is such a pain in the ass."

"Not today, and not the next few days, either. You'll have time to rest." Takasugi's tone finally became less stern. "You need to make sure you don't pass out again."

"That was one time!" Gintoki raised his voice a little in self-defence. "And I was drunk!"

"Drunk and tired," Takasugi nodded. "And you know where that led you."

Hijikata dismounted as well and began leading the horse inside. Though they were, again, clearly speaking about him, they gave him no explanation, and he had no desire to make himself a part of the conversation. They wanted him for something, and so they had to tell him everything sooner or later.

"I need to speak with you, but at the moment it is inconvenient," Takasugi spoke to Gintoki.

"Inconvenient?" Gintoki parroted as he began to follow Hijikata's example.

Takasugi shrugged his shoulders, going alongside Gintoki. "It's time."

"Already?" Gintoki glanced at the sun, then entered the stable as well. "I didn't notice."

"Meet me at the library later today," Takasugi said in an insistent tone. "There's something you need to see."

"How much later?"

"That's up to you," Takasugi replied, then glanced at Hijikata. "Don't take him along. No offence," he then shot a small smile towards Hijikata.

"Some taken," Hijikata growled. "I hate being kept in the dark like this," he looked Takasugi in the only visible eye. "It's obvious you guys want something with me, yet I'm the only one who has no clue."

"I understand completely," Takasugi gave a curt nod, "but please be patient. There is a lot to take in, and you are in no way ready to bear that knowledge now. I promise you'll understand everything once the right time comes."

"Fine. Until that happens, don't be surprised if I act as I see fit," Hijikata frowned.

“Of course. Now if you’ll excuse me,” Takasugi courteously bowed his head towards Hijikata, then less courteously looked at Gintoki, “there’s much to be done.”

Watching him leave, Hijikata felt bitter. So far, the only thing he understood was that whatever they wanted with him, it was not going to be easy.

Gintoki patted his shoulder. “Let’s go eat,” he said warmly. “I’d like you to join me.”

Premonitions

The new clothes he was uncompromisingly given were far too orchidaceous to his liking. These robes, wholly made of heavy silk brocade and embroidered with silvery patterns on deep purple background, seemed fit for royalty, not for a soldier like himself. Clearly, they were chosen with someone's idea of beauty rather than Hijikata's idea of practical use. While pleasant to wear, they had a bit too ceremonial, too majestic air, and they were definitely unfit to fight in.

Hijikata wasn't used to such garments and felt therefore very uneasy and hindered. It made sense for the clothes to be made this way, as they were meant to be worn mainly indoors. However, Hijikata was accustomed to his outdoor uniform which allowed free movement and did not limit his agility and speed in any way.

Sadly, in his current predicament, he could either wear *that* or walk around naked, since the clothes he got wet in were taken from him. Still, he felt like an exotic animal, and it didn't help that Gintoki was obviously incredibly pleased upon seeing Hijikata wear that. He could feel everyone staring, and it was no wonder; after all, Gintoki had made it known that as of today, Hijikata was no longer a free man.

While they were eating lunch side by side, Gintoki would sometimes casually feel his hand or bring their legs into contact briefly. Though it was making Hijikata uncomfortable, even he could see that more often than not, Gintoki was unaware of this himself. That was one of the reasons why the silence between them felt incredibly awkward, and Hijikata was very relieved once they finished and he could leave. Gintoki made his way to the library for Takasugi's summons, and Hijikata was left to his own devices.

Right now, it was well past sunset and he was roaming the castle aimlessly. He hadn't seen Gintoki since lunchtime, and as he had dinner in his own chambers, he had no idea what the White Demon was currently up to. Gintoki did not seek him out at all, either, and Hijikata kind of enjoyed being allowed to relax.

At least for the time being.

He did agree to share his bed with Gintoki from now on, after all.

He wasn't sure if that was something he had to do every day, or if it was something occasional instead. If he had to judge by Gintoki's behaviour, he was never going to have his bed only to himself, ever. Then again, it all depended on Gintoki's mood.

Not on Hijikata's mood, obviously.

Hell would freeze over before Hijikata would invite Gintoki to his side. Still, having agreed to it, he couldn't exactly tell Gintoki to leave him alone now.

He just happened to be going past the door to one of the rooms. He was in the more habitable part of the castle, and as he was passing by a small grated window in a wall, he heard voices.

Since he recognised them as Gintoki and Takasugi, he peeked in through the grate, intending to listen in for a little while.

As he already knew, this room was usually used by people of lower standing than Gintoki; they would eat and drink there, but it was on the smaller side, as there was multiple of them rather than one big common room. There were no rules whatsoever as to who should use which room, but most people would avoid eating in the main dining hall, possibly out of respect for Gintoki and the rest of his council – namely Takasugi, Katsura and Sakamoto.

Right now, at the small table, Gintoki was sitting there, hunching over his drink; there was a bottle in front of him. Hijikata could kind of see his pallid face, and in the candlelight, it seemed more drained of colour than usual. Takasugi was standing next to him, but Hijikata couldn't see him well, either.

“You could also be mistaking the way you're drawn to one another for desire,” Takasugi said thoughtfully, likely replying to something Gintoki said previously. “There was no indication that you should harbour such feelings.”

“This is some scary shit,” Gintoki said, shaking his head briefly, as he clutched his cup strongly. “I'm not mistaking anything. I, ... I can't seem... to keep my hands to myself. I feel like I'm going insane.” There was a pause. “Forget trying to see him in that light, I... It's like I've been bewitched.”

“I warned you that he's going to change everything,” Takasugi stated flatly, “and you were the one who chose to keep him here. It's too late to back out; your paths are now irrevocably intertwined. Although this is not quite what we expected, you can't run from it anymore.”

“You misunderstand. I,” Gintoki took a deep breath, “I don't want to back out. This... I do want this. Just...” he looked into his own cup again. “Is he ever...” his voice faded out.

Takasugi shrugged his shoulders, gazing off to the distance for a moment while Gintoki kept silent. “He could, I suppose. You're going to need to gain his trust, though,” he said eventually.

“And how do I do that?!” Gintoki snapped, downing his cup in one go.

“Well,” Takasugi leaned a little closer, “to stop talking about him behind his back would be a start. He's right there, you know.”

“What?!” Gintoki attempted to jump to his feet, but failed and ended up falling off his chair, hitting the floor heavily like a sack of wet sand. Hijikata clicked his tongue in dissatisfaction; he had hoped that he might actually learn something, but what he did get to hear was limited and only posed more questions.

“Dumbass,” Takasugi stepped over Gintoki. “If that's all you've called me for, I'm leaving. You two can figure this out by yourselves.”

Hijikata walked around the corner, meeting with Takasugi in the entrance. As they were passing by one another, Takasugi leered at Hijikata, whispering, “You can't hide from me.”

“I know,” Hijikata retorted; he could see a glass cabinet in the room, and Takasugi probably saw him in the reflection. Paying it no more mind, he looked at Gintoki, who was trying to pick himself up.

“Hey there,” Gintoki said and finally managed to climb back onto his chair.

“You’re drunk, aren’t you,” Hijikata narrowed his eyes.

“C’me ‘ere,” Gintoki said instead of replying as he gestured for Hijikata to come closer. Now that Hijikata could see his face properly, it was clear that the White Demon’s usually pallid cheeks were now stained with blotches of redness, likely caused by intoxication.

Though reluctant, Hijikata grabbed a chair and pulled it closer to Gintoki’s own, then sat down. “What made you drink to this extent?” he asked carefully.

“Nothing much, really,” Gintoki mumbled and pulled the other close, wrapping his arms around Hijikata’s suddenly stiff waist. In this position, he was bending over and it was surely uncomfortable, but he didn’t seem to want to let go. “You smell nice,” he murmured and it sounded muffled, as he spoke against Hijikata’s torso.

Hijikata pursed his lips. Maybe he could use Gintoki’s weakened state to ask about some of the things weighing his mind. It felt a little underhanded, but on the other hand, the White Demon wouldn’t get drunk beyond reason, would he?

“Hey,” he began, but stopped when Gintoki suddenly tensed up. The air subtly changed, and Hijikata felt the hairs at the back of his neck rise in a sudden sense of wariness.

Gintoki slowly and unsteadily rose, holding onto Hijikata firmly while doing so. When their faces were finally on the same level, Hijikata shuddered. In the candlelight, Gintoki’s eyes seemed to be glowing.

At the same snail pace, as though entranced, Gintoki grabbed Hijikata’s head with his hands, and he pulled him closer for a kiss. Hijikata closed his eyes, giving in to it reluctantly; the taste of Gintoki’s tongue was now laced with the astringency of alcohol. He felt the other’s hands slide to his nape, and soon there were fingers exploring under his collar, stroking, teasing.

He really couldn’t keep his hands to himself.

How odd.

Hijikata didn’t have much time to think about it, though. He did have some experience kissing, but nothing in his memory even remotely resembled this feeling. He could feel his mind becoming muddled at a rather alarming rate, and though he was doing his best to breathe through his nose, he still found himself lacking much needed air. Gintoki was pressing on, clearly not wanting to stop, and he had stood up, now relentlessly making Hijikata bend backwards. It was only because his hands had still a firm grip on Hijikata’s nape that Hijikata did not fall over and onto the table.

The kiss in itself was gentle, but persistent and extremely sensual. Somehow, though Hijikata did not understand the reason for it, he found it electrifying, as though there were bolts of lightning surging through his skin. Even under the thick fabric of his new clothes he felt naked, and that made him highly self-conscious. Weakly, he pushed against Gintoki's chest, but that yielded no results. Gintoki's tongue didn't even pause, as if the White Demon wanted to taste every part of Hijikata's mouth.

"Ngh...!" Hijikata struggled more, desperately wishing Gintoki would let go.

Unfortunately, Gintoki didn't let go.

One of his arms wrapped around Hijikata's waist, and he made Hijikata sit on the table without breaking the kiss. Hijikata found himself unable to resist it – his legs had turned gelatinous, and he had no control over them whatsoever. It was as though he was drowning; his lungs couldn't keep up, and he realised that he held onto Gintoki in his dizziness.

A hand cupped his slowly but surely growing bulge. Hijikata's eyes snapped open and he turned his head away abruptly, causing Gintoki to inadvertently lick his cheek. "Stop," he choked out, trying to regain solid ground. He felt very unsteady, and it was only good that he was still sitting. "You're going too far!"

Gintoki blinked several times, then backed down a little, hanging his head. The unsettling gleam setting his eyes aflame vanished, and he finally seemed to have come to his senses. "Sorry," he muttered, falling back onto his chair heavily. "I don't know what took over me."

Still breathing heavily, Hijikata stared at the other. He wasn't ready for this, there was no way he could ever be ready for this. Gintoki being a man aside, what the hell was up with that intensity?! He wiped his mouth with his right hand while his left clutched the edge of the table strongly.

"Why are you so obsessed with me?" he said once he was sure his voice was not going to shake.

Gintoki raised his head wearily and looked at Hijikata. There was a moment of silence. "I don't know," he then said simply. "What I do know is," he hiccupped, "there has to be an explanation." Clearly, in his intoxicated state, it took him longer to organise his thoughts, but eventually, he added, "This is the first time I've ever felt like this..." He hesitated.

"Like what?" Hijikata said, hoping that Gintoki was not going to confess or something like that.

"Like I'm constantly at the verge of losing control." Gintoki looked at his own hands as though he had never seen them before. "Drinking was probably a bad idea."

"If you did lose control, what would happen?" Hijikata asked in a wary tone.

Gintoki's head sharply turned towards him, and there was something in his expression that made Hijikata shiver again. He could read pain in the other man's face, and it was hardly

something trivial. Gintoki seemed to have aged just thinking about it. Just what was he hiding?!

“Who knows.” Instead of explaining at least something to Hijikata, Gintoki only shrugged his shoulders. “I’d rather not find out. You might get hurt, and I don’t want that.”

“At least tell me what you want with me,” Hijikata muttered. He didn’t like any of this, but what he hated the most was being deliberately kept in the dark. The answers were clearly there, within his arm’s reach, but Gintoki and Takasugi were holding his wrists twisted behind his back.

“What I want?” The candle flames on the table candelabra flickered as Gintoki stood up abruptly. “I want *you*. I want to strip you naked and caress your body from head to toe, I want to explore each and every nook and cranny. But you aren’t letting me.”

Hijikata took a shaky breath. “That’s not what I...” he began, wanting to clarify, but was interrupted.

“If it were up to me,” Gintoki stepped so close there was barely any room left to breathe, “I’d make love to you from dusk until dawn. *If only* it were up to me,” he inched in, and Hijikata had to lean backwards in an attempt to escape, “I’d bend you over right here, right now, and ravish you on this table until you’d be teetering like a new-born fawn. Like I said, though, I don’t want to hurt you, so...”

“That’s not what I meant!” Hijikata raised his voice, now beet-red all the way up to his ears. “I was asking about you and Takasugi and the rest!”

Gintoki stepped away, disappointment clearly showing on his face. “Hmm, the rest doesn’t know yet. I don’t even fully understand what Takasugi’s planning.”

“... So you just trust him without knowing what he’s scheming?” Hijikata frowned a little.

“Scheming, you say,” Gintoki laughed shortly. “The four of us have been together since childhood, and as for the rest of the people within these walls, there isn’t a single one whom I wouldn’t trust with my life. Well, except Madao, maybe. His luck is the *worst*. To answer your question, though,” he smiled a little, “Takasugi is someone I can trust no matter what.”

Hijikata pursed his lips. He did not doubt Gintoki’s words, but what he heard made him wonder if Takasugi didn’t tell Gintoki everything so that Gintoki couldn’t explain the situation to Hijikata. If that was the case, then it was crucial for Hijikata not to learn the truth.

He hated that.

Takasugi seemed shady at best, and his serpentine smile always suggested he knew much more than he was willing to let on. In one way or another, he seemed to be concerned about Gintoki, but Hijikata had a gut feeling that these concerns were standing on selfish grounds. It was foolish of Gintoki to blindly trust that man.

Wait a minute.

Why was Hijikata even thinking about this? He shook his head vehemently, hoping to sort out his thoughts a little. As far as he was concerned, it would be best if these guys destroyed themselves from the inside – as long as he didn't get caught in the aftermath. Then he'd somehow get back to the city and perhaps even resume his position in the city guard, and everything would be back to normal and just peachy.

Sadly, that was not happening anytime soon, though, despite the situation seeming fishy. Hijikata had seen Takasugi's type before – the sort that had their long fingers in everything. Even if it weren't for Takasugi's untrustworthy appearance and that ever-present dodgy smile, Hijikata and his men used to try and track him down, but he always moved several steps ahead, and more often than not, they'd arrive to the scene of crime well after the nefarious deed was long done. Takasugi did mention that he held a grudge against Hijikata for the few occasions they almost managed to get there on time, and he had to flee in order not to get captured. Even so, now he was treating Hijikata almost respectfully, and that only confirmed Hijikata's hunch – that man was a rotten liar.

Realising that it still sounded as though he was worried about Gintoki, he shook his head again, rubbing his face. Somehow, he was really tired. Since he had fallen deep into thought, he didn't even realise that by now, Gintoki himself was nodding off. Unbelievable. This guy was prattling on just moments ago, but now he was curled up with his head on the table, his mouth ungracefully agape.

Against his better judgement, Hijikata reached out and shook Gintoki's shoulder.

"Nh?" Gintoki opened one of his eyes.

"I'm going to bed," Hijikata informed him curtly.

"Huh?" Gintoki opened the other eye as well and squinted at Hijikata; his slightly reddish orbs crossed as he came to a realisation. "Right! You've agreed to sleep with me, so you woke me up!" He jumped to his feet, then a little unsteadily leaned onto the table.

"I've agreed to sleep *next* to you," Hijikata corrected him. "But yes, that is why I woke you up. If you choose not to—" he then began.

Gintoki interrupted him eagerly. "I choose yes to!" He then squinted briefly, clearing his throat. "I mean... I want to."

In that moment, he had turned so meek that it caught Hijikata a little off-guard. There were no signs of the man who was trying to push him down not too long ago. "Well," Hijikata said, trying to hide his state of bewilderment to the best of his ability, "I'm going ahead, and for your information, I'm not waiting for you."

"That's fine, that's totally fine," Gintoki assured him quickly. "I'm going to be there in a bit. I just need to..." he hiccupped, "gather my bearings a little."

Hijikata gave him a curt nod and turned to walk out of the room, but Gintoki caught his sleeve, causing him to turn back. "What?"

“Are you... angry?” Gintoki whispered, his eyes those of a kicked puppy.

“About what?” Hijikata raised his eyebrows.

“That I went a little overboard...” Gintoki’s hand fell to his side lifelessly, and he hung his head. Now, he resembled a child wanting to be forgiven, hoping that his sins didn’t make any cracks in their fragile glass flower of a relationship.

“No,” Hijikata replied after a moment’s thought, “provided you don’t do it again.” Without waiting for Gintoki’s response, he then turned away and walked out in a rush. He felt that if he stayed any longer, the image of Gintoki he currently had might crumble, and that was something he could not allow.

Hijikata looked around. There was sharp rubble under his bare feet. Vast rocky fields were surrounding him, barren as far as the eye could see. The sky was an obscure, unpleasant shade of grey, hanging lead-heavy above him.

He set forth, unsure where he was headed. There were no landmarks, no sun in the sky aloft, and he had no shadow. It seemed as though it hardly mattered which way he turned – everything was the same, completely identical, and he might as well be walking in circles. There was no way of telling direction. He left no footprints behind, and with each step he took forward, he felt more and more lost.

Then, the fog came.

At first, he hardly noticed it. It was just strands, barely visible strips of ashen veils above the forlorn plains of nothingness. There was no wind to stir it – it just lay on the land motionlessly like the strokes of someone’s brush. After a while, though, Hijikata saw it move out of the corner of his eye, and it finally caught his attention. He had thought it was some sort of a creature, but upon turning that way he saw a misty tendril slowly making its way towards him. It was semi-transparent and rather formless, but it seemed to have a clear goal – to reach Hijikata.

He quickly glanced behind and saw something similar happening in the distance.

Before he could command his legs to do so, he was already running, driven by a sense of immense dread. He knew he wasn’t alone. There was something lurking in that white haze narrowing around him.

This can’t be. This can’t be! He ran forward, his throat clenching.

He needed to escape. There was no why or how, he just knew he had to, by all means.

The rocks were scratching his soles, gnawing at him as though they wanted to devour him entirely. He could feel he was bleeding, and his pain increased with each step, but he couldn’t let himself be taken. Whatever was chasing him definitely meant harm – and a lot of it.

Like long ghostly arms, the coils of thickening fog unfurled towards him and wrapped tightly around his naked ankles. The touch was oddly soft and warm, but it had a firm hold of Hijikata's legs, and he wound up painfully hitting the ground. The mass of whiteish smog closed in on him, smothering him from head to toe.

He attempted to hold his breath.

Vainly.

The fog entered his nostrils and his mouth regardless, and he choked, desperately gasping for air...

He blinked into the darkness surrounding him, and he realised that it was only a dream – a terrifying one, but a dream nonetheless. Exhaling in relief, he rubbed his face with his palm. There was still a lot of warm weight on his chest, and when he attempted to sit up to have a better look, he heard a disgruntled groan followed by a snore.

Gintoki was hugging him, naked.

Hijikata himself had had little choice but to undress when getting ready for bed, as his new attire would be ruined if he slept in it. He wasn't sure when Gintoki reached this room, but he must have thought that sleeping naked next to one another was an incredibly good idea. That was probably the reason for Hijikata's nightmare; no wonder he had difficulties breathing with a grown man lying on top of him.

Suddenly, the sound of a warning horn echoed throughout the silent night. Hijikata would instinctively jump to his feet, but Gintoki's embrace around his waist tightened and he couldn't budge. Miraculously, that bandit was not waking up, even though the sound of that horn was loud enough to wake the dead.

"Hey," Hijikata shook Gintoki's shoulder. "Wake up!"

Gintoki only hummed, not minding anything that was happening around him.

The warning horn sounded out brazenly once more, and simultaneously with it, Katsura burst in through the door, carrying a lantern. "Gintoki!" he yelled as he set the lamp down, then he stomped his way to their bed.

Finally, Gintoki opened his eyes gingerly, wincing. "What is it?" he groaned in a sleepy voice. "Lemme sleep, you ass."

"It's an emergency!" Katsura leapt in and grabbed both Gintoki's shoulders, making him sit up. "The Warding Medallion's been removed from its casing!"

"What?!" Gintoki was immediately awake. He jumped to his feet, and he quickly grabbed a pair of trousers. "Is it gone?"

"Yeah." Katsura, for some reason, frowned at Hijikata. "Takasugi's already on the case and Sakamoto's alerted everyone. We're searching the entire castle."

“Good,” Gintoki nodded and ran out, barefoot and barely dressed. Katsura followed behind him without a word.

Utterly bemused, Hijikata got up and was about to get dressed, when Katsura appeared in the entrance again. “You’re coming too!” he growled and grabbed Hijikata’s forearm, dragging him towards the door.

“Wait!” Hijikata struggled. “I can’t go out like this!”

“Nobody gives a…” Katsura turned to look at him, then stopped. “… You’re naked.”

“Yes! Obviously!” Hijikata yanked his arm free from Katsura’s grip. “Just let me wear *something*.”

“Hurry it up, then.” Katsura folded his arms on his chest, and Hijikata could feel the other’s stare burn holes through his skin as he bent over to retrieve his trousers from the floor. He had put them onto the chair, but Gintoki must have messed his clothes up, because now they were all in one pile on the ground. Sighing, he picked them all up before taking his trousers. He wasn’t keen on walking naked around the castle, especially now that everyone was on high alert.

“Finally,” Katsura grabbed him again as soon as Hijikata pulled his trousers up. “Let’s go!”

“Wait, my belt—” Hijikata protested, but Katsura only shook his head.

“Just hold them up.”

Cussing under his breath, Hijikata followed behind Katsura unhappily. The floor was unpleasantly cold.

They reached the meeting room; Gintoki, Takasugi and Sakamoto were already waiting there, grim expressions on their faces.

“Well?” Katsura said, looking at Takasugi. He let go of Hijikata and walked over to the three of them.

“We were waiting for you,” Gintoki interjected before Takasugi could reply. “You didn’t really have to drag *him* into this, though,” he added, shaking his head. “He’s got nothing to do with this.”

“*Nothing?!*” Katsura snapped. “He’s the most suspicious one! He’s an enemy, did you forget? Or have you just gone stupid? Who else here would benefit from this?!” he waved his arms around.

Gintoki looked at Hijikata, who was just standing there, confused. “Did you do it?”

“Did I do what?” Hijikata raised his eyebrow. “I have no idea what you’re on about.”

“Are you acting innocent now?” Katsura bellowed and was about to grab Hijikata, but Takasugi was faster and held his shoulder gently.

“Calm down,” he said. “No matter who’s behind this, it wasn’t Hijikata Toshiro.”

“You sure?” Katsura turned to him.

Gintoki sighed. “Obviously. Both Takasugi and I can tell you that he hasn’t left my side.”

Takasugi nodded in confirmation. “He’s a warrior who has absolutely no magic in him. Even if he tried to, he wouldn’t be able to hide from my sight. The perpetrator is, however, clouded in shadows.”

“Are you serious?” Katsura deflated, looking at the floor. “We’re going to have to increase security,” he then muttered. “I’ll see to it.” Turning away, he sighed heavily, and as he was passing by Hijikata, he muttered, “Sorry.”

Silence fell on the room for several moments. After the door closed behind Katsura, Hijikata looked at the three remaining faces. “Could anyone explain to me what is going on?”

They exchanged glances, then Takasugi looked at him. “Ask away.”

Hijikata pursed his lips briefly. “Okay,” he said. “First of all, what is up with *you*?” he pointed at Takasugi accusingly. “You’re not a magician, I know you’re not. You’ve never killed anyone with magic, and I’ve seen your handiwork enough times to be able to say that for certain...” his voice faded out when he saw an unpleasant grin spread across Takasugi’s face.

“You’re right,” Takasugi leaned in. “I don’t possess any active magic like Katsura does, for example. I am a seer,” he said, lifting up the ever-present curtain of hair over his left eye.

Hijikata recoiled in sudden horror, instantly bathing in cold sweat.

Instead of an eye, a freezing void was staring back at him, dark and menacing like nothing he’d ever seen. “What the—” he breathed out; he could feel himself shaking.

“It’s the result of a small accident,” Takasugi let go of his hair and stepped back, his smile becoming friendly again. “I was completely untouched by magic at first, too. Thanks to that, I see everything I choose to see. Unless, of course, there are other powers interfering and obstructing my view.”

“You see,” Sakamoto started, rubbing the back of his neck as he walked a little closer, “tonight, when I was making my rounds, I popped in here to check on the Medallion, as usual, and found that it was gone – but Takasugi can’t see who did it. That must mean whoever did it either was a sorcerer, or had the protection of one.”

Hijikata collected himself a little. “What’s that about a medallion?” he asked.

Sakamoto shot a glance at Gintoki who was watching Hijikata wordlessly. “Haven’t you told him?”

“No,” Gintoki shook his head. “I didn’t think it concerned him.”

“The Warding Medallion,” Takasugi began explaining, “is how we’ve avoided you and your men until now. It’s been enchanted to protect this place and everyone in it. Under its protection, you cannot be traced by magic unless the person trying to find you is also under its effect. Plus, it created a barrier around the entire mountain pass to hide any signs of us coming through the forest.” Sighing, he took out his pipe and a bag of tobacco, and as he began stuffing the dry leaves in, he continued, “Someone took it apart, and the spell has been broken. Right now, it’s relatively easy to find your way here – all you need are average tracking skills. We’re going to have to start mobilising. Even if you can’t siege this place easily, there’s going to be danger, and probably a lot of it.”

“Who cares about that?” Sakamoto shook his head. “The Medallion was a gift from sensei. We have to find it.”

“I’d imagine a lot of people would care.” Takasugi folded his arms on his chest. “We’d created a place to live by our own rules here, quietly and in peace using our own resources. The villages behind the barrier have been paying us for protection from bandits, too, and we’re going to have to abandon them now.”

“Wait, the people living at the borders have been cooperating with you?” Hijikata couldn’t believe his own ears. Protection from bandits? What a joke! This bunch of outlaws was exactly the danger people should fear, not turn to it for help! “Aren’t *you* the bandits? Why didn’t they ask for help from the capital?”

“Because we could help them much faster,” Sakamoto shrugged his shoulders. “And I wouldn’t call ourselves *bandits*, exactly. We have no interest in plundering villages. They don’t have much to live on, so they can’t give us much anyway. What they pay is just symbolic. The smallest hamlets can’t afford even that, so there’s no point in trying to milk them for what they don’t have. It’s like asking a cow to lay eggs, haha,” he laughed shortly.

“Of course, the bigger ones pay more. We had a…” Takasugi was about to fill in, but then he glanced at Gintoki. “You’re not listening.”

“Hm?” Gintoki hummed, but he didn’t really react, and Hijikata turned to him only to discover that Gintoki was watching him intently – or rather, it seemed as though he was in a trance, completely mesmerised by Hijikata.

“Alright,” Takasugi sighed. “You two can get back to whatever you were doing, and Sakamoto and I will take care of the most urgent matters.”

“Isn’t this room usually locked?” Hijikata looked around, desperately trying to ignore that he had become an eye candy. There were maps here and a lot of documents that were being kept here rather than the library everyone had access to.

“It is, but for someone skilled enough, that isn’t really an obstacle,” Takasugi shrugged his shoulders. “We’ve been using a simple lock and key. Maybe I should find someone to put a seal on the door, though,” he added, frowning slightly. Then, he stepped towards Gintoki and lightly slapped the back of Gintoki’s head, kind of like a mother would. “Hey, idiot. Snap out of it.”

“What?” Gintoki blinked.

“This is why I told you that you should hold back a little,” Takasugi said in a reprimanding tone. “Make sure you don’t become unmanageable.”

“I should probably sleep a little more,” Gintoki muttered. “You’re right, I shouldn’t have drunk so much.”

“Did you drink a lot?” Hijikata asked. Gintoki did look rather drunk back then, but not so drunk that it would be dangerous.

“More than my fill for sure,” Gintoki walked over to him and leaned on his shoulder. “I’m actually really hungover right now, so my head is killing me. Come, we’re going to listen to Takasugi the Mum, and we’re going back to bed. They’ll handle it.”

“Don’t make it weird,” Hijikata tried to make Gintoki let go, but failed – Gintoki was clinging to him like glue.

“It’s not weird,” Gintoki nosed at Hijikata’s nape.

“It’s extremely weird,” Hijikata retorted. “Shouldn’t you be the one handling everything? Aren’t you the leader?”

“He can’t,” Takasugi and Sakamoto said in unison.

“Why?” Hijikata raised his eyebrows.

“He has to get the alcohol out of his system,” Takasugi said with a grave expression, “because—”

“Don’t tell him!” Gintoki’s voice was suddenly desperate.

“Don’t tell me what?!” Hijikata was agitated. More secrets?! Wasn’t this enough?

Takasugi shook his head. “Gintoki’s got a point. It would be best to keep that a secret for now.”

“Damn all of you,” Hijikata snapped and pushed Gintoki away vehemently. “I’m going back to bed. This is none of my business, anyway.” With that, he turned to leave, not wanting to breathe the same air as those assholes a second longer.

“Wait, I’m coming with you!” Gintoki didn’t let himself be discouraged, and Hijikata could hear him following immediately. He, however, did not look back once.

Cracks in the Eggshell

Hijikata woke up again. The sun was just about to rise, so the sky outside was no longer pitch black. The window was open, so there was a fresh breeze coming inside; even though the air was cold, as the window had been open the whole night, Hijikata felt warm. He could hear birds chirping cheerfully, greeting the brand-new day.

There was one more sound, however – and an extremely disconcerting one, at that.

Gintoki's hand was clutching Hijikata's shoulder, and his face was planted between Hijikata's shoulder-blades; his heavy breath was tickling Hijikata's naked skin. His grip was strong, and it was fairly clear what Gintoki was doing. He was trying to keep silent but failing magnificently, and the small rhythmic shakes of his whole body were a dead giveaway.

Hijikata was frozen up, not knowing what to do. He would turn around and tell Gintoki to quit it, but first of all, he did not want to see Gintoki touching himself, and second of all, he doubted that Gintoki would stop. This, however unpleasant it was to Hijikata, was not a breach of their agreement.

He shuddered when Gintoki licked his skin.

“Oh, you're awake,” Gintoki let out a breathless chuckle. “Good morning. I'll be done in a moment.”

Hijikata covered his face in silent exasperation. This man had absolutely no shame. Gintoki seemed to never show any extra restraint, and though Hijikata was aware that he wasn't making it easy for him, it was Gintoki's own fault. Gintoki was the one who wouldn't stop sticking to him and making him generally uncomfortable.

He did go back to bed whilst deliberately completely disregarding Gintoki's presence – but being ignored definitely did not justify such outrageous actions.

He really wanted to get up and away from Gintoki's shooting distance, but he was worried that if he did, Gintoki might just finish upon seeing him naked, and truthfully, the last thing Hijikata wished for was to give Gintoki a show.

He died a little inside when he felt the bed shake slightly, and Gintoki's silver hair brushed over Hijikata's back as Gintoki curled up, letting out a ragged, semi-suppressed moan. At least no wetness reached him, but he knew for sure that to roll onto his back now would be the dumbest thing he could do given the present scenario.

“So, did you sleep well?” Gintoki said casually after a few moments, as though he did nothing at all just mere heartbeats ago.

“Considering the way I got woken up,” Hijikata growled, “no. You've got a knack for making me feel gross all over.”

“Hmm, what do you mean?” Gintoki closed the distance between them, and all the liquids Hijikata wanted to avoid got smeared over his lower back.

“Get off me,” he struggled, but Gintoki hugged him tightly, inching his face towards Hijikata’s own. Hijikata turned away as much as he could.

“Come on, gimme a good morning kiss,” Gintoki whined; his nose was now poking the back of Hijikata’s head, slowly running through Hijikata’s hair as Gintoki spoke.

“If you want it, you’ll have to take it,” Hijikata retorted.

As soon as he said that, Gintoki kicked off their covers and loomed over Hijikata in all his naked glory. “If that’s the way you prefer it,” he said under his breath, then he leaned down and pinned Hijikata underneath.

Hijikata involuntarily closed his eyes when Gintoki’s lips brushed over his own. A wet muscle slipped past and Hijikata unhappily allowed Gintoki to pry his mouth open. It did not taste good, it was the least sexy thing Gintoki’s done so far – kissing while tasting the other’s morning breath was definitely not among his top ten favourite ways of being harassed. In fact, it was odd that Gintoki did not seem to mind in the least. Instead, he hummed softly as he kept going, barely allowing Hijikata to breathe. Hijikata peeked at Gintoki through his eyelashes, wanting to see if this kissing fiend was going to stop anytime soon, but it did not seem he’d have any luck.

He could feel Gintoki groping his chest, and at first, he wanted to ignore it. His agreement with Gintoki essentially meant that Hijikata was to tell Gintoki to stop whenever he disliked anything Gintoki did – except kissing. However, Hijikata did not really want to tell Gintoki that his chest was off-limits, because it felt more weird than sexual, and if he said that to this pervert, Gintoki might just interpret it as Hijikata stating that he could get aroused from his chest being touched.

Which he *didn’t*.

He did *not*!

“Ngh,” he shuddered, clutching the sheet underneath.

“Oh, you felt that?” Gintoki murmured against his lips, moving his hand aside immediately. “Sorry,” he then added and gave Hijikata a final peck on the cheek. “I’ll be getting up. You should too since I ended up dirtying the bed.”

With that statement, Hijikata realised that the sheet underneath him was sticky. When Gintoki made him roll over, he pushed him right into it. Cussing, he sat up quickly, and having nothing else to wipe it off with, he chose to use the sheet which now had to be cleaned anyway.

“I’m going ahead,” Gintoki informed him. Hijikata glanced that way and saw that Gintoki was already dressed; it wasn’t that surprising since he only had a pair of trousers and a shirt, but Hijikata was still a little taken aback. He watched Gintoki waltz out, and then he finally

sighed and began dressing as well. His own clothes were much more complex than Gintoki's, and he made a mental note that he had to at least ask for something to ride a horse in.

When he reached the dining hall, he hesitated at the door. The bandit leader and his council were standing at the table, discussing something, but they all stopped as soon as Hijikata appeared.

There were only one plate and one cup on the table.

"Hijikata!" Gintoki called happily. "Eat up! Come, guys. Let's go," he patted Sakamoto's and Katsura's shoulders.

"But—" Katsura began, but Gintoki gave him a glare and began pushing them out of the room.

Hijikata stood there, watching them all move towards the door, and he somehow didn't like it at all.

"Stop making that face, it's not like we're trying to poison you," Takasugi gave him a mocking smirk as he was passing by.

The door closed behind them, and Hijikata became alone again.

Truth be told, he did feel rather hungry, so even though the entire situation did not sit with him right, he walked over to the meal and sat down. As opposed to the rather opulent dinner he had last night, and all the meals before this, it was just a simple, plain porridge. Hijikata was not picky, especially not in situations where he could not really afford to be, and so he grabbed the spoon off the table and began eating slowly.

It tasted a little bland, but it was alright. His drink was just water, but they had water every morning, so there was no difference. He preferred it that way, too – the thought of drinking alcohol first thing in the morning was unacceptable.

In the end, he found himself a little disappointed when there turned out to be no after-effects whatsoever.

After he'd finished eating, he walked out; there was a guard at the door, and as soon as Hijikata opened it, he turned to go inside. There were not many actual servants here, and the guards who were currently off-duty would usually do the chores and odd jobs around the castle, and so Hijikata figured that the man was only going to retrieve the dishes.

Gintoki was nowhere to be found, and no matter whom he asked, he found no trace of the White Demon or his council.

He'd only managed to see Gintoki in the late afternoon. By pure chance, he saw him from the library floor's window. Gintoki and the kids were standing in the courtyard, and Kagura was carrying a sack twice her size.

As quickly as he could, Hijikata made his way down there too. When he left the building and came nearer the three of them, Gintoki was currently saying, “Well, off you go.”

“But I don’t wanna go,” Kagura leapt towards Gintoki and clung to him like a bad odour.

“It’s dangerous,” Gintoki objected softly; Hijikata noticed that his expression was a little saddened, though usually, it could have easily slipped past him. Somehow, perhaps because of this morning, he was much more conscious of Gintoki’s every move.

“We can fight too! Right, Shinpachi?” Kagura turned to her friend, not letting go.

“I don’t like it either,” Shinpachi sighed, “but if Gin-san says so, I’m sure there’s a reason for it.”

Gintoki hummed in agreement. “The fortress isn’t the only point where intruders can sneak in,” he stated, finally managing to make Kagura stand on the ground. “There are more. This one is the most obvious, and it’s the hardest to get through, but if anyone discovers the other passages, I need someone on the inside as well. You two are going to protect Tae and the bar and everything and everyone around it, understand? And take that monster dog with you.”

“Sadaharu isn’t a monster,” Kagura pouted, but she finally backed away from Gintoki. “He’s a good boy.”

“Your good boy broke into the kitchen last night in all the commotion and ate everything that was cooking, *and* he broke the prep table. It looks like it cracked under his weight. It’s his fault that most of us have to run on an empty stomach, you know,” Gintoki folded his arms on his chest. “Like master, like dog. At least for a while, it’s not going to be me who needs to deal with two bottomless stomachs.”

“We’re still growing,” Kagura said the one phrase she would throw around a lot. Hijikata paid it little mind, though. Instead, he was questioning why in the world would he as a prisoner be getting any sort of breakfast while the leader himself would give his own up. It was a small matter, and it did not exactly mean that the whole fortress was suddenly out of rations. It did, however, mean that there was little to no food ready for immediate consumption, and that kind of complicated it for anyone who would want to eat at least *something*.

“Are you trying to tell me that Sadaharu’s going to become even bigger? Do I have to ask someone to carve a cave for him in the... ah, but there are no longer any geomancers around.” Gintoki ruffled his hair, thinking. “Can’t you just somehow make sure he stays the size he is? If he grows any bigger, we’re not getting him through a single doorway in the castle. Where is he, anyway?”

No longer? Hijikata looked Gintoki in the face. So there really *was* someone who helped form this outpost and its surroundings. That person was not in the castle anymore according to Gintoki’s words, but it was unclear what happened to them. Hijikata was sort of relieved to hear that, though – that kind of power was something not to be trifled with.

“Okay, *I’m* still growing,” Kagura didn’t let Gintoki catch her off-guard. “I don’t think Sadaharu’s gonna grow a lot anymore. Then again, you never know.”

Suddenly, the hairs on the back of Hijikata’s neck rose, and he ducked just in time to dodge a surprise attack by a big white ball of fur. “Ah, there he is,” Gintoki chuckled, watching Sadaharu try to stop until he reached Kagura. The monster girl just reached out her hand and the avalanche of paws came to a halt. Hijikata got up, dusting his clothes. The dog really was a disaster. Hijikata would hardly consider himself vain, but seeing such expensive fabric get dirty, even he would hate it. At least the ground was not muddy anymore.

Shinpachi had kept silent, but now he turned towards Gintoki, a serious expression on his face. “Is that really why you’re sending us down there?”

“Of course,” Gintoki didn’t miss a heartbeat.

“Are there no other reasons?” Shinpachi insisted. “Don’t you think that maybe...” his eyes darted towards Hijikata.

“I’ll leave that up to your imagination,” Gintoki grinned. “You just make sure your sister is alright and don’t worry about me. I’ll leave that village in your hands,” he then added firmly, patting Shinpachi’s shoulder. “Round up whoever’s been waiting to join us at this outpost, and see that they remember how to handle their swords.”

“Will do,” Shinpachi replied, and at that moment, he seemed much older than Hijikata ever saw him.

“Good,” Gintoki nodded approvingly and reached out to both of the kids to hug them.

“I’ve been meaning to ask you,” Hijikata muttered, watching the destructive trio of Shinpachi, Kagura and their dog leave, “but is either of them actually your child?”

“Hm?” Gintoki turned towards Hijikata. “Oh, no. Kagura’s dad is on the run, so I’m just mostly taking care of her in his stead.”

“Mostly?”

“Well, she can handle herself just fine,” Gintoki shrugged his shoulders. “As for Shinpachi, he has a sister down in the valley. Their parents are both dead, so I’m helping Tae with Shinpachi, too. It was his idea, before you ask,” he then added. “I wouldn’t consider myself mentally adult enough to properly guide a young mind.”

“No shit,” Hijikata said under his breath. There was no way this child in a grown-up disguise could be a proper role model for anyone. “What did he mean when he looked at me just now?”

“Did he do something like that?” Gintoki feigned innocence, but seeing Hijikata frown, he sighed. “I still can’t tell you. Neither of us is ready for you to know that bit.”

“Does that mean I’m the only one who knows nothing?!” Hijikata snapped. “Are you having fun keeping me in the dark?”

“Well, maybe if I thought you could handle it, I would have told you,” Gintoki retorted. “And no. Shinpachi knows, I know, Takasugi knows, Katsura knows, Sakamoto knows. That’s it. No-one else.”

“That’s most of the people around you,” Hijikata stated, but then he continued immediately, not giving Gintoki any room to answer that, “What does it mean to be ‘ready’, exactly?”

“Being one of us is a part of it,” Gintoki shrugged calmly, turning to go back inside. He did not stop talking, and as Hijikata wanted to hear this, he had little choice but to follow. “Of course, that’s not everything, but how can we tell you our secrets if you’re an outsider?” Gintoki stopped abruptly and Hijikata nearly ran into him.

“The reason Katsura is so hostile towards you is that you cannot be trusted. Not that I’d think you’d ever break your word,” he glanced at Hijikata as he clarified, “but none of us doubts that given the chance, you’d leave here.”

“I can’t deny that,” Hijikata pursed his lips. “Still,” he appended, “as I gave you my word not to leave this place without your consent, I feel like my hopes for freedom are not relevant.”

“You call *that* freedom?” Gintoki barked out a short mocking laugh as he entered a corridor leading into the castle. “Being a government dog, blindly following orders without thinking ‘cause you don’t really *want* to think about them, do you? That’s what freedom means to you?”

“Within these walls, I am not even that,” Hijikata replied, finally finding himself calm. “You’ve put this dog on a leash.”

“Heel, boy,” Gintoki chuckled, and he stopped in his stride for a moment so that he’d lean on Hijikata’s shoulder. The corridor they were in was dark and narrow, and it was another place he had never set a foot to before. He did not even realise it was there until Gintoki casually led him in – as though it only appeared when Gintoki intended for it to.

“Where are we?” he asked, glancing around uncomfortably. He was not scared of dark and narrow places, but somehow this particular one was making his skin crawl.

“You’ll see,” Gintoki patted his shoulder. “Let me know if you feel too sick.”

“What? Why?” Hijikata said as Gintoki grabbed his wrist and began dragging him forward, further into the dark.

“Because if you puke on my clean clothes, I’m going to have to change and that might be a problem right now, since this is the last clean set I have. That’s the problem with white, you know. Once you stain it, it’s dirty forever.” Gintoki seemed to be rather passionate about that. “Careful, we’re going to go down.”

Hijikata couldn’t see a thing, and so he could only rely on Gintoki. How come this man was able to walk through here so naturally without any light? As they began descending, he said, thus interrupting Gintoki who was just about to continue, “Not that. Why would I vomit?”

“You’re going to feel sick in just a minute,” Gintoki said flatly, “so if you do puke, aim the other way, thanks.”

“And why would I feel sick?” Hijikata insisted.

Suddenly, a tsunami of nausea washed over him, and his knees wobbled and gave in, and he wound up falling onto the floor. “What the fu...” he began, but before he could finish that sentence, the breakfast he ate this morning chose to visit the world of the living for one last time.

“Gross,” Gintoki stated; he was standing at a safe distance, so his clothes remained untouched. “Gross, but not surprising,” he added.

“Laughing at my expense, are you?” Hijikata growled and got up, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

It then finally hit him that he could see just fine. They were standing inside a circular room carved into stone, and in the middle of it, a massive stone disc was sitting – and something on it was emitting blue light.

Gintoki stepped closer towards the stone disc. “Since you were complaining that I tell you nothing,” he said and gestured for Hijikata to come along, “I thought I would show you something important.”

Hijikata followed him. The source of the blue glow was a metal circle with runic writings, embedded into the stone disc. Hijikata gave Gintoki a questioning glance.

“This,” Gintoki said, “is where the Warding Medallion used to be. As you can see, it’s gone, but it shouldn’t be. Do you know why?”

“No idea,” Hijikata shook his head.

“Besides the four of us, *unless* accompanied by at least one of the four of us, no-one can access this place the way we came. Even if an intruder somehow found the entrance, they wouldn’t get this far. You were only hit by the last line of defence, and only mildly – if you weren’t holding my hand, you would have been dead by now.”

“How great,” Hijikata muttered. “So, there’s some kind of a barrier around this cave?”

“Not just any kind,” Gintoki nodded. “Both the Medallion and this cave were created by the four of us... with the help of our teacher. Sensei... did what we asked of him, and sealed this place.”

“What do you mean?” Hijikata looked him in the eye. To him, it seemed that there was more to it than what was said, and Gintoki found it difficult to speak about it. He needed Hijikata to pry, otherwise he might just keep silent.

“We wanted to be sure that the spell would last,” Gintoki turned his head towards the empty casing on the stone disc. “And so... we did something we should not have. A stupid, stupid mistake.”

“What did you do?” Hijikata asked, even though he felt he was not going to like the answer.

Gintoki clenched his fists. “Dark magic. Blood magic. Just this once, to protect us all. No-one should have been able to get here – but someone did anyway.”

“Blood magic? Did you kill someone for it?” Hijikata, to his own surprise, did not want to think that Gintoki would do something so terrible. Gintoki was a hooligan to him, he was capricious and evanescent, he was mischievous and irresponsible at times, but he was very clearly not evil.

“No,” Gintoki denied that immediately. “We used... our own resources.”

“Which means?”

Gintoki gave a crooked smile. “At first, all we did was just a drop of blood from each of us; you don’t really need to use too much. But then, once the incantation was finished, all hell broke loose. By giving up a little of our blood, we were bound to the medallion *and* to one another, and the consequences were severe.” He was watching the empty casing and the blue glow made his cheeks appear hollow and starved, but also oddly ancient.

“You’ve seen Takasugi’s eye – that was no accident. It was a sacrifice. He did get something in return, but he can’t actually see through that eye of his. He can *predict* with it, read the past, the present and the future,” he paused and waved his hand as though he were dismissing his own thoughts, “but unless he deliberately focuses on what’s in his vicinity, it’s like he’s partially blind.”

Hijikata swallowed hard. “Did each of you sacrifice something?”

Gintoki’s smile grew even more bitter as he nodded in confirmation. “We did, and we didn’t get to pick.”

Hijikata’s brows furrowed. He doubted that their teacher would hurt them deliberately, since though they rarely spoke of him, all he’d heard about that man were words of praise. “So...” he began, the inside of his mouth unpleasantly dry as he voiced his realisation, “it’s the magic itself who chooses...?”

“Yeah,” Gintoki nodded again. “It’s not just physical, too. Takasugi lost an eye. It exploded, splattering everywhere, and that was the first time I’d heard him scream. Sakamoto was on his knees, retching blood, and Katsura and I just stood there, not knowing what to do, unaware that each of us also lost something precious. With Katsura, it was different than with them. He’s always been a magician, but since we did that, any and every spell he’d cast would end up either in a fire or as an explosion. He’s never going to be able to be anything but a pyromancer.”

“And you?” Hijikata asked, though he felt he didn’t want to know.

Gintoki shook his head, still smiling wryly; then, he cleared his throat. “Wow, this got heavy. Come, we’re done here. This is what I wanted you to see. Don’t worry, the barrier doesn’t... *shouldn’t* hurt you on the way back.”

“Have you tested that?” Hijikata narrowed his eyes as his wrist got grabbed again.

“No,” Gintoki replied, yanking Hijikata into the corridor.

Immediately, darkness shrouded Hijikata’s vision, but this time, he was not hit by the urge to throw up, unlike before. Gintoki’s grip was leading him away from that place, and Hijikata just let it happen, trying to process what he’d just heard.

It surprised him more than a little that as time went on, the White Demon, who seemed to be fickle and impulsive at first, was slowly turning out to be more and more devoted to the people he had under his wings. He did not think that Gintoki was someone who would willingly partake in a blood ceremony. Such practices were banned back in the city; magic was strictly regulated, and anyone who’d meddle with the dark arcane arts risked the gallows. It did not matter if they killed or not, it did not matter if the blood used in their enchantments came from animals, humans or themselves. Blood magic was volatile and hard to control even for the caster, and Hijikata had not heard of anyone who mastered it; if not closely watched, it could wreak havoc upon the city, and sanguimancy was thus, if discovered, punishable by death. Hijikata had seen the aftermath of a few failed spells in his time, and it was something that would make even the most hardened of men shake in their boots.

He wondered what happened to Gintoki. It seemed to him that the way Gintoki worded it must have meant that the others lost something they cherished. It would make sense to him – Takasugi lost half of his eyesight, and there was no other sense that would give a human so much. Sakamoto was someone full of life, someone who seemed to like to enjoy himself to the fullest, and he nearly died back then – and such horrors surely must have left a terrible scar. Katsura was, though Hijikata did not like to admit it, someone who knew his field of expertise better than anyone else. Perhaps the blood pact robbed him of that.

What did Gintoki cherish? What did he have to give up in order to protect this valley? Hijikata did not know.

They reached the end of the tunnel and ended up in the courtyard. Immediately, just to make certain, Hijikata looked back. As he had suspected, there was but a solid wall behind them, with no signs of hiding the way to the heart of the fortress.

Gintoki let go of his hand. “Now that you know,” he said, “I’ll leave you to your thoughts. I need to check up on a lot of things, and I don’t really want to make you come along. It’s kind of a pain in the ass, and I don’t see why you’d have to suffer with me,” he grinned.

“I’ll be alright,” Hijikata said firmly.

“I thought you’d say something like that.” Gintoki shrugged his shoulders. “See you later, then. At dinner, perhaps?” he tilted his head, giving a faint smile. Then, he chuckled, “By then, I’m sure the kitchen is going to be just fine.”

Hijikata only hummed and turned away, wanting to mull over it a little more.

Realising that he hadn’t been on the rampart yet, he chose to head that way. He was unsure whether the guards wouldn’t chase him off, but he wanted to try. The view from up there

could be amazing, and more importantly, he was still missing bits and pieces in mapping out the castle's defences. He wanted to, if possible, walk around the whole castle and see if it really was as impenetrable as he felt it was.

"Hijikata-san?" he heard a familiar voice just when he was about to head inside the guard tower.

"Yes?"

"I know Gin-san puts great trust in you," Hasegawa caught up to him, "but you shouldn't wander up there without letting the guards know. I'll go with you and talk to them."

"Alright, if you say so," Hijikata nodded. He and Hasegawa had barely talked, but he could easily see that Hasegawa was an honest man who was doing his best. Gintoki was right, though – the poor bastard's luck was truly extraordinarily bad. It was partially the fact that he had no self-awareness and was often a little absentminded, but even then, the way he'd bump into things and cause disasters wherever he came was concerning.

It took Hasegawa only a few sentences to reach an agreement with the guards in the tower, and Hijikata was allowed to walk the castle walls. There were people patrolling, but as it was not dark yet, there were not that many.

Hijikata chose a direction and began walking. There seemed to be a spot in the distance where he could just stand and think, undisturbed. The wall was slightly curved, copying the chasm between the castle and the forest outside, and Hijikata felt that it would be a great spot to be on his own for a little while.

He leaned onto the wall and looked across the chasm. To his disappointment, he saw nothing he wouldn't be aware of already – the castle was one with the mountains, unconquerable by common means.

Then, he noticed movement at the opposite side. It was only brief at first, but then he saw it again.

Then, a familiar face popped out of the bushes, one Hijikata thought he'd never see again.

Sougo waved at him and raised his hands; there was a rope with a grappling hook at its end.

Hijikata saw him rotate it and he quickly backed away, dodging just in time; the hook landed into one of the gaps in the rampart on Sougo's first attempt, and that again made Hijikata wonder just what sorts of things Sougo was up to when no-one was watching.

Nervously, he glanced around to check for the guards, but he did not see any. Faint laughter came from the tower. Nobody was looking their way, otherwise they would have been on their way here already. Hijikata shook his head. Gintoki really should discipline his guards more.

Sougo huffed and climbed over the outer wall; upon seeing Hijikata standing there nervously, he took a deep breath and was about to say something.

“Sougo! What are you doing here?!” Hijikata hissed, subconsciously lowering his voice into a whisper.

“What am I doing here, he asks,” Sougo bellowed. “What am I doing here? I crawl through mud, I creep through thorny bushes and sleep with foxes in their smelly dens, I scale this wall several times like an idiot just to see if you’re still alive, and what do I find?” Sougo paused to take a breath. “I find you walking around freely and unrestrained. Nobody’s even watching you – and what’s up with those clothes? Have you actually betrayed us?!”

Hijikata gave him a long stare. “I have not,” he said in the end in a wry tone, “and you of all people should know that the best.”

“What happened, then?!” Sougo sat down onto the stone floor heavily, glaring at his former superior.

“I asked to fight for my freedom, but I lost. Because of that, I’m now bound by my word that I won’t leave the castle without the leader’s consent.” He leaned on the wall’s edge and looked across the chasm to the other side. A gentle breeze came blowing from the forest, ruffling his hair; he turned his face towards it, wanting to feel it.

“Why would you make such a promise?” Sougo said in a reproachful tone.

“I was too confident in my abilities,” Hijikata hung his head briefly, “and their leader beat me fair and square.” His ego was still sore from that one. Gintoki didn’t cheat, he was just *that* good, and Hijikata lost to him on various levels as a warrior. That... *something* that Gintoki had – it was the essence of the sword, it was what any warrior desired to nurture in themselves.

“You can tell me all this later,” Sougo got up. “Let’s go.”

“Were you not listening to me?” Hijikata looked at him, shaking his head. “I can’t leave. I gave my word that I wouldn’t.”

“Sod your honour,” Sougo retorted. “Is it more important than returning home?”

Hijikata let out a helpless chuckle. “A man’s word is his vow, you fool,” he sighed, turning towards Sougo completely. “You came here because of Mitsuba, am I right?”

“I promised to her that I would bring you back, you bastard,” Sougo breathed out. “She’s on the verge of collapse, and so is the entire Shinsengumi.” He grabbed Hijikata’s shoulders. “Don’t you *dare* tell me that you’re staying. If my sister dies, I’m holding you entirely responsible, you hear me?!”

Hijikata stared back wordlessly. He had thought that Mitsuba had already died, and he felt responsible all right – responsible and guilty for having broken his promise. The word he gave her was given prior to the one Gintoki received, so if she was still alive, he had to try and return. However, by doing so he’d break the promise he had given to Gintoki, and that was something he didn’t want to do. Even if the White Demon was an enemy, he believed in Hijikata’s honour boundlessly, and he fulfilled the terms of their agreement to the last point.

He even allowed Hijikata to freely roam the castle, which showed that Gintoki, although he acted differently in person, thought Hijikata to be a warrior of equal standing despite Hijikata's loss in the fight.

He'd managed to put himself between a rock and a hard place, and the fault lay with him and him alone.

As he looked at the absolutely furious Sougo, a sudden idea hatched in his mind. It was insane, he was probably going mad, but if it worked – and it might just work – then he'd end up breaking no promises at all.

“Sougo,” he said then, grabbing the other's wrists and pushing them away firmly, “give me a day. Tomorrow at this time, come here again. I'll tell you what happens next then.”

Sougo narrowed his eyes. “What are you going to do? Also, are you kidding me? Do you know how difficult it is to get back from here? Are you seriously asking me to do it two more times?”

Hijikata grimaced. It was meant to be a confident smirk, but he wasn't confident at all, and it was probably more apparent than he would have preferred. “See you tomorrow,” he said and turned away. He had to leave now anyway, otherwise Sougo could get discovered, but he didn't want to be seen like this by anyone, either. He rushed past the guards in the tower as quickly as he could without rousing suspicion, but the half-baked plan that hatched in his head was making his throat clench.

There was no way it didn't show on his face.

Sowing Flowers, Harvesting Dust

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

It did show on his face. Obviously, it would show on his face, since he had absolutely no idea what kind of reaction Gintoki was going to have after hearing Hijikata's plea. It was stupidly straightforward, and while Hijikata did think that Gintoki preferred that sort of approach, he couldn't help worrying. After all, the man was as unpredictable as spring weather, and there was no telling what he might do. By now, he was acting rather courteously towards Hijikata, but the ex-vice-commander could hardly forget the bone-chilling danger resting beneath the White Demon's restrained demeanour.

Now, he was waiting for Gintoki in his – or *their*, since Gintoki seemed to have abandoned his own quarters – bedroom, and it would be instantly obvious to anyone that he was on pins and needles.

Gintoki, too, froze up at the door immediately after he'd entered. Then, he carefully closed the door and made his way to Hijikata, tense and cautious.

Hijikata just watched him come closer silently, unsure how to begin. Gintoki sat down next to him and just as wordlessly examined Hijikata's expression. "This isn't about today's morning, is it," he said then.

Hijikata shook his head.

"What is it, then?" Gintoki enquired, leaning in slightly. "Did I do something?"

"... No," Hijikata replied, then clenched his fists. To speak this was gut-wrenching, and he could feel his throat clenching painfully even before he attempted to string his words together. He braced himself internally to the best of his ability.

"So, what are you making that sour face for?" Gintoki insisted.

"I... want to ask for permission to leave the castle," Hijikata breathed and his voice shook just the tiniest bit.

"What for?" Gintoki said, and Hijikata could see that Gintoki's guard was up now. Gintoki did not mind letting Hijikata roam around unsupervised, but to let him go beyond the castle walls was a whole another matter.

Hijikata swallowed hard, looking away. "While I'm aware that as per our agreement, I'm putting my life on the line by telling you this," he let out uneasily, "I must ask you to listen to my explanation. One of my men sought me out, asking me to return. I," he then added hastily upon seeing Gintoki's expression change into that of dismissal, "I had given my word to someone, and I need to fulfil that promise."

Gintoki got up again and walked over to the window; this way, Hijikata could not see his face, and could only make wild guesses as to what was going through his mind.

For a while, Gintoki remained silent, staring into the darkness outside as though it held the answers to all of his questions. When he finally turned towards Hijikata and spoke, his tone was grave. “Do you understand what you’re asking of me?” he said, folding his arms on his chest.

Hijikata inhaled and prepared to speak, but before he could give Gintoki a reply, the White Demon continued in a serious voice, “I’ll allow it – on three conditions.”

“What are they?” Hijikata asked. No matter what, he had to at least hear them. He could somehow see that they were not going to be in his favour, but he was going to agree to just about anything as long as it would allow him to leave.

“First – I’m coming with you,” Gintoki stated firmly.

“Are you crazy?” Hijikata blurted out. That sentence escaped his mouth before his brain could interfere.

“Oh, are you worried about me?” Gintoki finally cracked a bit of a smile. It was more of a teasing smirk, but it didn’t even reach his eyes.

“No, I’m saying you’re an idiot!” Hijikata raised his voice a little, feeling frustrated that Gintoki was making light of the situation. “You’re going to get hanged!” He did not say ‘if you get caught’, because he did not doubt the intellect of his men. Gintoki did let his men go after being seen by them, and he was all but easily forgotten – there was no other like him, and each member of Hijikata’s squad at the time would recognise him instantly. Plus, as soon as he’d enter the city streets, he’d surely be noticed even by those who’d only heard rumours about him.

Not addressing that, Gintoki continued, his manner of speaking unfazed by what Hijikata said. “Second – I want you to give me your word that you’re going to return back here with me no matter what. If you can’t promise that, I won’t allow you to leave. I’ll chain you up if I have to.”

“And the third one?” Hijikata choked out somehow, his throat clenched.

“Promise me first,” Gintoki suddenly stepped in and pushed Hijikata backwards onto the bed, looming over him. “Give me a promise that we’re going to return together, you and I.”

Hijikata hesitated. He had to see Mitsuba again regardless of who or what stood in his way, but to promise this meant to have to give up this sudden chance to be free again – and giving up his freedom meant he had to say goodbye to Mitsuba forever.

At the very least, though, if he agreed to Gintoki’s conditions, he would be able to bid her farewell properly, to see her one last time and to make sure that she was alright. “I promise,” he let out between his clenched teeth. “And the third one?” he then repeated.

“Try and guess,” Gintoki said with a deadpan.

Hijikata swallowed hard; he did have a hunch, but he did not like it in the least. “Don’t tell me... you want me to... with you...” Ashamed, he couldn’t even say it out loud.

“Well, I thought I would ask you to open your mouth for me,” Gintoki shrugged his shoulders, “but that works too. I’ll let you choose.” At that moment, his demeanour was showing clearly that he was not willing to compromise. Hijikata felt a chill run down his spine.

“Open my mouth...?” he said, unsure what the White Demon meant.

Gintoki explained with a gesture that made Hijikata turn the colour of a ripe tomato.

“Why would you ask that of me,” Hijikata muttered, disheartened.

“Let’s see?” Gintoki sarcastically tilted his head to the side, pretending to think. “How about because the guy I want is trying to run away from me for a woman?”

“How did you—” Hijikata began, completely aghast, but Gintoki cut him off.

“I’m not an idiot, I can see the reasons written all over your pretty face,” he shook his head with a stern expression. “I’ve known that there was a woman ever since the first time I tried to do it with you, you know? You’re so transparent.” He heaved a sigh, “There’s a woman, you love her, and she probably loves you back, seeing as you want to return to her,” he folded his arms on his chest. “I’m not letting that happen. In fact, I’ll do all I can to keep you by my side – if you can’t agree to a single one of these conditions, I’m not letting you go, and I’m confining you to your chambers. There are shackles ready under this bed, and I can close them around your wrists right now. However, if you choose that, then I won’t touch you as per our previous agreement.”

“Shackles?” Hijikata’s eyes widened, and against all sound reason, he immediately fell to his knees by the bed to check.

Gintoki was not lying. When Hijikata reached under there, his hand almost immediately came in contact with the coldness of metal.

“I’m not taking any chances,” the White Demon said when Hijikata turned to him with a shocked expression. “If you hadn’t brought this up, you probably wouldn’t have known at all. I’d never wanted to resort to such things. It pains me to doubt you, but if your affection towards that woman is stronger than your sense of duty to keep the word you’ve given me,” he lowered his voice, his face ominous and contorted, “then I’d rather put you in a cage.”

“Why?” Hijikata choked out.

“Like I said, I will *never* let go of you,” Gintoki said decisively. “Ever since the prophecy about your arrival, ever since I’ve learned about your existence, I knew I had to meet you and keep you by my side at all costs. I didn’t know that you were going to be a man, but that doesn’t matter. You’re mine. You must have felt it too on the day we fought,” he leaned in,

and made Hijikata back up once again until Hijikata was sitting on the bed, “that there is no going back.”

Hijikata closed his eyes briefly. Gintoki was right, but to accept this would be a terrible stain on his clean moral slate. He never believed in fate in the first place. “What do you mean, a prophecy?” he asked instead. This was something he had suspected for a while, but everyone was dodging his questions to a ridiculous extent.

“You’ll see,” Gintoki breathed out, pushing Hijikata down and looming over him. “Now, *choose*.”

Hijikata realised he couldn’t move. He was paralysed, as though something took all power from him. It was similar to that one brief moment during their duel, but now he just couldn’t snap out of it. In a way, though not exactly, it reminded him of his latest nightmare – there was a danger with him in the room, and there was nothing he could do to defend himself. He looked into Gintoki’s eyes, recognising the flame burning in them, and he inhaled slowly, trying to collect himself. Gintoki had looked at him in this way before – last evening, when Hijikata barely stopped him from continuing.

Sadly, now, just as Gintoki had pointed out, there was no escape.

He did know one thing for certain.

This was not, in any shape or form, anything even remotely resembling the feeling of love. Not from his side and not from Gintoki’s, either. Even though he could easily describe Gintoki’s expression as tender, the fire within Gintoki’s reddish orbs was threatening to burn him into a crisp. It felt like starvation, carnal lust so strong it transcended the boundary of reason and would consume him to the last hair if Gintoki stopped keeping himself in check for but a moment.

“If,” Hijikata said nervously, lowering his eyes so that he would feel a little less like a prey, “if I decide to let you... do *that*, promise that you’ll speak nothing of it. No-one but you and I should know that it happened.”

“I understand,” Gintoki nodded. “Though, as I’ve told you before, everyone in this castle thinks we’re long past that stage.”

“That is not what I had in mind,” Hijikata shook his head. “I would like you to give me your word that on our way to the city, you’ll refrain from displaying any signs of your intentions... or signs hinting at what has been done. I don’t want my subordinates to ever realise that such a thing happened.”

“Scared of losing face?” Gintoki’s hand cupped his cheek. “Even though you’re coming back here anyway?”

“I do care about how they’re going to remember me,” Hijikata frowned, but didn’t try to push Gintoki away. “They haven’t known me weak, and they shall *never* know that I opened my legs for you like a woman would.”

“Do you think that’s a sign of weakness?” Gintoki asked in a light, gentle tone, and he began undoing Hijikata’s robes. Hijikata looked away, feeling blush bloom on his cheeks again.

“Maybe not,” he said, shivering a little as he felt cold air on his exposed chest, “but to let you do it definitely is.”

“I see,” Gintoki pulled down Hijikata’s trousers, “so, to you, this is a battle.”

“It *was* a battle and I have lost to you,” Hijikata clenched his teeth, “*again*.”

“Aren’t you a sore loser,” Gintoki chuckled under his breath and was just about to grab a hold of Hijikata’s underwear.

“Hold on, what are you stripping me for?” Hijikata suddenly realised. “I haven’t said I’d do it yet!”

“You just said that you’ve lost,” Gintoki pointed out simply, “and that can’t mean anything else, can it?”

“Alright, but you started even before I said that,” Hijikata protested, even though he knew that it was a fruitless effort. He did not want to do this, but Gintoki was right. Just the simple fact that Hijikata did not stop Gintoki in time while still having every right to do so meant that he had already given in, and a verbal confirmation was a formality they hardly had a need for.

To give in is to betray. To betray is to lose. To lose is to be disgraced. Hijikata grimaced, but since Gintoki was just looking at him with a small smile and not responding to those idiotic and empty words of protest, it was obvious they had both understood.

It really was Hijikata’s loss on all fronts.

“Try to enjoy yourself,” Gintoki whispered, seeing defeat in Hijikata’s expression. Hijikata shot him a glare, but when the White Demon leaned in for a kiss, he parted his lips compliantly. The kisses were, after all, the least of all the evils awaiting him that night.

Gintoki’s tongue found its way past Hijikata’s lips easily, and as it touched Hijikata’s own, it felt a little hesitant. Hijikata saw that Gintoki’s eyelids fluttered closed, and soon there was a firm hand on his cheek, too – firm and a little rough, but gentle and careful, caressing softly. The kiss was different from the one from last evening, or even the one from this morning. It was less hungry, not at all pushy, yet all the more affectionate. Hijikata felt something he’d describe as a bitter twinge of guilt.

He knew that Gintoki wasn’t in love. However, now it seemed to Hijikata that he was desperately *trying* to be in love, and though Hijikata failed to see any logical sense in that, it made him feel as though he was doing something *wrong* by rejecting Gintoki so vehemently.

Perhaps it was a part of human nature to sympathise with those doing their best to get at least a little closer to their goal, as long as that goal was of noble nature. It was also but human to consider love the noblest of all ideas, and by recognising this, Hijikata could sense his

protective walls had begun to crumble. He tried to remind himself that just this man's name alone would have the entire city alert, he tried to remember that right after he'd reached this place, he promised Gintoki the gallows in his heart.

Vainly.

After all, he'd never hated the man. He was not exactly elated to have to share a bed with him, and it did not make him glad in any way how nobody told him what they really wanted him for. However, aside from the unpleasanties Hijikata had to endure, and aside from keeping him in the dark, Gintoki had not given Hijikata any legitimate reasons for hatred – and Hijikata would have to be incredibly weak to hate Gintoki over something like that. As far as he could be certain, Gintoki wouldn't try to be nice to him just to hurt him later, right? He didn't know just how truthful Gintoki had been, but it wouldn't make any sense for Gintoki to be courteous to this extent just for the sake of a stupidly complex game of pretend. A comfortable room, a bed fit for a king – Hijikata choked on his saliva briefly – good meals at the chief's table and robes likely more expensive than the entirety of the Shinsengumi headquarters? There was no possible way that this was all only a convoluted, elaborate lie.

The White Demon even let Hijikata's men go when Hijikata asked, and that was at a point when there should have been no deeper meaning to it. Gintoki was not trying to impress anyone back then – instead, he watched Hijikata and was impressed enough to agree. Even when relying on the Medallion's protection, it was reckless to let the Shinsengumi go after they'd seen his face, but he did it anyway and thought nothing of it. There was a lot about him worthy of respect.

"Stop thinking," Gintoki said in a slightly dissatisfied tone, gently laying his forehead on Hijikata's own. "I know you're trying to distract yourself, but it's going to be better if you just give in to it."

Hijikata, who wasn't really trying to distract himself for once, said nothing and watched Gintoki back away. Gintoki made his way to the bedside table and rummaged through its drawer. Since Hijikata had nothing to store in there, he'd never opened it and was now taken aback to see just how many things he had no clue about were inside.

"A-ha!" Gintoki victoriously held up a small glass vial; it was small enough to fit into his closed fist with only the cork showing, and the liquid in it was colourless. Gintoki opened the vial and smeared some of its contents on his finger, then closed the vial and pocketed it. When he came closer to Hijikata again, a mildly sweet scent tickled Hijikata's nose.

Gintoki knelt down between Hijikata's legs. "I'm going to rub you here," he reached out slowly and touched Hijikata's behind, "so that it doesn't hurt. Let me know if it's too uncomfortable. Last time, I was... a little too eager," he said, and Hijikata realised that his voice was now apologetic. Perhaps that was why he reluctantly nodded and lay his head down afterwards, closing his eyes.

Gintoki's hand touched his front first, and it was warm. Gintoki's palm had a degree of roughness acquired by handling his blade every day, not unlike Hijikata's own, so as long as he was only touching Hijikata's dick and no other places, it wasn't *that* unpleasant.

Subconsciously, Hijikata ground his teeth when Gintoki's fingers prodded at his entrance. He'd experienced it once, so he kind of knew what to expect, but that knowledge did not make it any less unpleasant. He exhaled silently so that Gintoki wouldn't notice, and he tried to focus only on what was happening in the *better* one of the two places.

Though Gintoki was trying to be gentle, to have something foreign inside of him was still uncomfortable to Hijikata. It was better now with the oil Gintoki used to lubricate his hand with, but even then Hijikata had to focus really hard to be able to at least try to enjoy it. At least it didn't hurt like last time.

Suddenly, the door burst open, and Takasugi stormed in, instantly trampling Hijikata's budding arousal to the ground. "You're not going any—" he began, then he clicked his tongue, stopping in his stride. "I was too late. You've already given your word," he stated flatly upon seeing them. He did not even close the door.

"Since you understand, get out. I'm kind of busy over here," Gintoki retorted, subconsciously squeezing Hijikata's half-hard cock tighter. Hijikata whimpered; he was looking away from the door and could feel himself trembling. At the moment, he'd rather die than meet Takasugi's eyes.

"You do understand that if you do not return, it'll cause a war, yes?" Takasugi did not budge from the entrance, folding his arms on his chest as he spoke.

"Then I just have to come back, right?" Gintoki shrugged it off as though it were the simplest of matters. As if it still were just the two of them, he continued gently massaging Hijikata's entrance. Hijikata was utterly mortified; how come that neither of these two lunatics seemed to mind the situation?!

"Do you think it's going to be that easy?" Takasugi insisted. "To go into enemy territory on your own?"

"It's safer if I go by myself. A large group of people is bound to attract attention," Gintoki pointed out, then added, "Go away. You're killing the mood."

"What am I supposed to tell Zura or Sakamoto if either of them asks for you?" Takasugi was still audibly upset, though no less than Hijikata himself. Had Hijikata known that Takasugi would walk in on them, he wouldn't have agreed to do such a thing. The fact that neither Takasugi nor Gintoki seemed to be bothered by this was surreal.

"Tell them I'm trying to score points with Hijikata and so we'd gone out for a few days," Gintoki said, his words laced with a hint of amusement. "It's the truth, after all, if but a part of the whole picture."

"Is there nothing I could say that would stop you from going?" Takasugi tried again.

Gintoki did not say a word, he only shook his head.

"Well, I guess I'm doing one more divination tonight, then," Takasugi growled and turned away. "You reckless bastard." The door finally closed.

“Thanks,” Gintoki called after him, and finally he looked at Hijikata. “You okay?” he asked with concern upon seeing the other’s contorted face.

“Obviously not,” Hijikata hissed, propping up on his elbows. “What were you two *thinking?!?*” Though he was slowly getting aroused before Takasugi interrupted them, he now had no arousal to speak of.

Gintoki squinted briefly and Hijikata could *see* the slow realisation happening. “Oh,” Gintoki muttered, looking visibly ashamed. “I’m sorry,” he added, looking absolutely sincere as he retracted his hands and rested them in his lap. “I wasn’t thinking.”

“Are you serious,” Hijikata sighed heavily, and he flopped back in resignation. He couldn’t even bring himself to be mad. This was so far beyond the boundaries of common sense that he couldn’t handle it. Though he already knew that Gintoki was not among the most normal people out there, for him to be unaware that to be caught in flagrante delicto was a bad thing was a whole new level of crazy. To make it worse, Takasugi did not seem to realise it, either. The absurdity of the whole situation washed Hijikata’s anger away, though he was still not happy about it in the least.

Now he had to deal with a completely new issue – Gintoki, looking like a dog about to be punished, was watching him without a word, just waiting for hellfire to rain upon his head.

There was a while of silence. Finally, Gintoki took an audible shaky breath and spoke.

“Do you want to stop?” he said in a strained, slightly raspy voice.

Hijikata thought about it. No, he didn’t want to stop. Not because he was happy to do something like this, but because they had agreed to do this, and if they didn’t do it, then Hijikata was staying here. No matter how guilty Gintoki might feel, he was definitely not going to go back on his word, much like Hijikata himself. He shook his head curtly. “You’re not letting me go if we don’t do it,” he said, “so let’s get it over with.”

Gintoki glanced at his own hands, then at Hijikata, then at his hands again. Then, slowly and as though in trance, he moved over to Hijikata and laid his hands on the inner sides of Hijikata’s thighs. He stroked up Hijikata’s legs, then leaned in, and Hijikata watched him reach for that vial again. Hijikata’s heartbeat sped up, and he closed his eyes, not wanting to see it.

Slick fingers pushed their way inside of him again, and they carefully sought out that one spot Hijikata was scared of. Immediately, he had goose-bumps, and he clenched his teeth strongly, knowing that if Gintoki kept on touching there, it would soon take all of Hijikata’s strength to remain silent.

Gintoki took a hold of Hijikata’s dick, and there was the touch of soft lips right after, as history chose to repeat itself, and Gintoki took Hijikata in his mouth again. Hijikata clutched the sheets, feeling his legs quivering against his will. Gintoki’s mouth was wet and warm, and even though Hijikata wasn’t looking, he knew that it was going deeper than Hijikata could ever imagine, and Gintoki was *enjoying himself* doing that.

Gintoki did not give him a moment's rest, and Hijikata soon found himself getting close. "Gintoki," he gasped, "I—"

Gintoki stopped immediately and backed away again. Hijikata, being deprived of the orgasm he wanted, opened his eyes and saw that Gintoki was taking his clothes off.

A new wave of instinctive fear washed over him. This was it, the real thing – he was about to be *invaded*, and there was no going back. Gintoki was hard already, much like back then, but this time, he wasn't stopping.

Hijikata braced himself internally and waited; Gintoki closed in on him. "Turn over," he commanded, and then he added in a less authoritative tone, "If you get on your hands and knees, it's probably going to be easier on you."

Looking away, Hijikata did as he was told, though the new position let him taste shame in all sorts of new ways. He shuddered when he felt Gintoki's hands on his sides, and as they caressed his skin, a chill ran down his spine. One of the hands disappeared, and right after that, something warm came in contact with Hijikata's hole. Finally, Gintoki slowly entered him, and Hijikata breathed deeply, trying to cope with both physical and mental discomfort.

A gust of cold wind forced the window open and blew out all the candles, but Gintoki didn't seem to have noticed – or he just did not care. In the sudden darkness, Hijikata was both relieved that he could no longer be seen, and subconsciously afraid. Though Gintoki did nothing different, it felt as though the dark was Gintoki's domain. Hijikata sensed the presence behind him *grow*, and it made his hair stand on end.

Gintoki waited.

Hijikata realised that Gintoki was trying to let him get used to it a little, so he tried to relax to the best of his ability. The hands on his hips were now slightly sweaty despite the cold air now breezing through the room. Outside the castle walls, a storm was brewing. It began to rain; softly at first, but then the rain got heavier and louder – and Gintoki still was not moving.

"Did you fall asleep?" Hijikata half-turned to glance at Gintoki; all he could see was Gintoki's silhouette, motionless.

In response, Gintoki's hands squeezed Hijikata tighter, and Hijikata bit his lip when Gintoki drew his hips back. It was a strange sensation, less pleasant than unpleasant, but there was something about it that was making his whole body weak – and though he'd never admit it, perhaps due to Gintoki's *thorough* exploration earlier, he wasn't turned off by it.

He clenched his fists, closing his eyes. As the room was getting colder, the warmth emanating from Gintoki seemed stronger than in the beginning. Hijikata swallowed hard when Gintoki started moving slowly, and he hung his head in resignation, trying not to think about it too much.

Gintoki's weight on him increased a little, as Gintoki moved one of his hands into Hijikata's crotch. Hijikata shuddered, arching his back; that was just the kind of attention he needed.

The sound of rain from the outside drowned out Hijikata's soft grunts and gasps for air. Gintoki drew out of him with each agonizingly slow thrust of his hips.

Hijikata felt his tongue and the inside of his throat becoming dry. The air was cold, but Gintoki was hot, and so was the hand wrapped around his cock; he could hear his own heartbeat, and he knew he was dripping with precum, dirtying Gintoki's hand. He felt *wet* down there overall, and he was only glad that he wasn't given time to be properly embarrassed.

A thunder echoed above the valley, but Gintoki kept going, unfazed, at the same snail pace.

Suddenly, Hijikata yelped as *that* one spot inside Hijikata's ass got assaulted without warning, and his arms just gave in. He collapsed face-first onto the bed, and it was only because Gintoki's hand was holding his hips in place that he didn't fall down completely.

Gintoki seemed to have been waiting for this, because he let go of Hijikata's cock and moved his pelvis in the same way again, rubbing against *that* place. Hijikata held back a groan, desperate to stay silent. His entire body was trembling, and even though Gintoki wasn't rubbing his front anymore, he was hard and leaking, and each thrust of Gintoki's hips was making it worse.

Gintoki picked up the pace and Hijikata felt a grossly sticky hand slide down his side to resume its position on his hip. He clutched the pillow he had landed on, not even trying to get back up. His legs were now farther apart than before, and there was wetness dribbling down his thighs.

Somehow, it was beginning to feel *good*.

For that reason alone, he was scared of the hands holding him. The silence was unsettling, and with the storm outside, Hijikata couldn't shake off an unpleasantly eerie feeling. He couldn't see Gintoki, and that wasn't helping – though the bandit was usually so clingy, he seemed to be trying to avoid touching too much.

For whatever reason, Gintoki was holding back.

Even so, even with just those limited touches, Hijikata was slowly being pushed to the edge, and that realisation made him wish he had never agreed to this. He just wanted to come and be done with it. To think for even just a split second that he did not hate this, he had to be going mad.

Gintoki's hand reached for his dick again, and he threw his head back. "Gi—!" he almost moaned that bastard's name. He bit it back stubbornly, not wanting to succumb to it.

There was no response; Gintoki remained as terrifyingly silent as he had been the whole time. Hijikata realised he couldn't even hear the other's breaths anymore, and that gave him an oddly ominous feeling. He buried his face in his pillow, muffling himself that way, and he arched his back a little more, hoping that Gintoki would just cum already.

Gintoki sped up a little more, likely getting close. Hijikata braced himself for it, subsequently realising that by thinking about it too hard, he wasn't going to come himself.

Both of Gintoki's hands squeezed him tighter, and Hijikata whimpered, biting his lip. Gintoki stayed still for a few moments, and Hijikata knew that his insides were now full of something he had never wanted to be anywhere *close* to.

Gintoki pulled out, and he directed Hijikata to lie down; then, wordlessly, he opened Hijikata's legs again. One of his hands took a hold of Hijikata's shaft, while the other went lower and just stroked every bit of Hijikata's sensitised wet skin.

"You don't have to—" Hijikata began protesting, but Gintoki shushed him and started massaging his dick. Hijikata let out a shaky breath in response; he would have been okay with just Gintoki cumming, as he hadn't even expected Gintoki to do this.

His whole body jerked when Gintoki's fingers entered him again. They went in easily, and Hijikata closed his eyes in shame, feeling just how slippery it was now. Gintoki's grip was unwavering and soon, Hijikata's mind went blank as he finally came, an unintelligible mess of sounds rolling off his lips.

Gintoki let go of him and got up; Hijikata heard him close the window, then walk around a little. Soon, he was back and despite Hijikata's weak protests, he started wiping Hijikata clean with a piece of cloth. Hijikata appreciated that, but Gintoki still wasn't talking, and that was making him anxious.

He learned that Gintoki really wanted to be gentle with him – there wasn't a moment's pain tonight. He found that allowing Gintoki to do him was exhausting, because now he was unable to lift a finger.

He learned that having sex this way was sad and lonely, and he did not like that in the least. Gintoki had made it quite clear that he wanted all of Hijikata, and so Hijikata had expected Gintoki to be all over him, but Gintoki showed restraint instead, and that was *extremely* underwhelming. Hijikata was dissatisfied, and he wasn't entirely sure why. Perhaps because he had braced himself for an extreme display of Gintoki's affection, and that never came.

He rolled over. He had wanted to get up and deal with Gintoki's semen, but he felt dead tired, and he only halfway realised that Gintoki covered him with a blanket, then cuddled up to him.

It might have been his imagination, but he felt someone's hand caress his hair just before his consciousness slipped away, and then sleep took the reins, and Hijikata felt nothing at all.

Chapter End Notes

Again, was super tired writing this. Let me know if you spot errors.

Seed of Weakness

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Hijikata came to his senses to find himself in instant denial.

That did NOT just happen.

He sat up abruptly.

Sadly, Gintoki was snoring away next to him, and as soon as he checked his body, he found further evidence that they did indeed do the unspeakable. There was dried... *stuff* on his skin, and it felt uncomfortable in places. Even though Gintoki did wipe him last night, it was dark then, and he could only do so much without water.

His rear, too, felt odd, though not in the way he would have assumed. He was ready for post-sex pain, or perhaps an upset stomach since he did not deal with Gintoki's semen in time, but this was different. Rather than anything else, he felt warmth, one without a clear source or direction, one that resembled *nothing* he had ever felt before.

He made sure that the White Demon was dormant. He was; a regular faint noise would escape his nostrils every time he breathed, and there was a little bit of drool in the corner of his slightly open mouth. Hijikata frowned at him. *How dare you sleep so soundly after you did such a thing to me.*

The storm outside was still raging, but Gintoki was probably in too deep a slumber for the thunder to wake him up.

Assured that Gintoki wouldn't watch, Hijikata reached to his own butt.

Dry.

He wasn't going to push a finger inside to make sure there was nothing in there, no way – but it didn't *feel* as though it was entered last night, and that little hole had no signs of having been filled with someone's cum, either. In fact, if Hijikata didn't remember it so distinctly, he would start having doubts, but his memory of last night was infuriatingly clear. He could almost *taste* it.

Bitterness.

He was absolutely bitter, and he knew why, and that knowledge was not making it any less annoying.

After that disgustingly awkward intermezzo with Takasugi during which Hijikata seemed to be the only one bothered at all, Gintoki didn't kiss him once. In fact, he didn't do a whole lot, though usually he'd shower Hijikata with an undesirable amount of affection. What they'd done felt very business-like, and that made the whole situation so much worse. Hijikata was

not a goddamn prostitute, and Gintoki had no right to be so distant during Hijikata's first time! It was scary to be entered, though those were the exact words he would *not* use to describe it, even under torture, and since he had to do it anyway, he would have preferred Gintoki to be as persistent as usual. Because of the way Gintoki chose to do things, the feeling of guilt Hijikata had to fight at first had almost faded. Screw him, seriously.

Hijikata frowned at the sleeping Gintoki again. He felt dirty, both physically and morally, and so he got up to go and get some warm water in the kitchen to take it elsewhere, intending to take care of his mess in private, away from anyone's prying eyes. Besides Takasugi's, as there was no hiding from that man.

Of course, he did get dressed before leaving the room in complete silence. Gintoki did not wake up, and Hijikata kind of hoped to get ready before Gintoki would even start thinking about getting out of bed. He had to show that his resolve to leave was strong, even if he did promise to return. It was less of a need to run away, and more of a need to prove to everyone including himself that Gintoki, in fact, was *not* in control of Hijikata and his actions.

Though, obviously, if presented with an opportunity to escape, he'd definitely opt for freedom rather than the impenetrable castle walls. Since he had given his promise that they'd return together, his only chance to be free from Gintoki's grasp would be Gintoki's death, one he would not have caused himself and had nothing to do with. His future seemed incredibly bleak in that regard.

The kitchen was already busy, but when he asked for some hot water, he got some in a bucket without any difficulties; he was offered a bath, even, but he refused. He'd have to wait for a long time, and he wanted to wash the traces of the last night off as soon as possible. Taking the bucket, he made his leave, careful not to spill a drop.

Since he couldn't think of a good private place to strip and scrub his skin clean, he hesitated outside the kitchen door, looking at the floor.

Then, he realised.

Gintoki was sleeping in Hijikata's bed, so obviously Hijikata couldn't take care of his hygiene there, but *Gintoki's* chambers were empty. There was a washbasin in every single room, so as long as nobody saw him going into Gintoki's rooms, he should have enough time to clean himself properly.

He made his way there quickly. There was the risk of Gintoki entering at any time for any reason, but he was willing to chance it.

He met a few guards on the way; some paid him no mind, one or two gave him a puzzled look as he passed by in a rush. He hardly cared, though – his skin felt gross and that was all that mattered.

The door to Gintoki's chambers was unlocked. Hijikata thought it was a little reckless, especially after the incident with the Medallion, but since it suited him perfectly, he just slipped inside and closed the door, unnoticed.

Setting the bucket on the floor, he looked around. Almost immediately, he found Gintoki's washbasin atop his closet, and he set it on the ground and filled it with water, then he began stripping. There was a linen towel next to that basin, and Hijikata only hoped that it wasn't one Gintoki had used previously.

The water was still a little too hot; he did get a bucketful of something that was almost boiling, after all. Hence, he began really carefully, dipping the towel in the basin just enough to make it damp and then scrubbing the incriminated spots furiously. His chest, his crotch, his thighs, his stomach, and somehow even his hair and neck, as he discovered when he reached up to ruffle it. Thankfully, it wasn't a lot and it was in a place people couldn't notice.

A thunderous sound from the outside made him shiver. The storm never did let up, and though he was inside, he could hear the wind and rain trying to penetrate the walls surrounding him. He wasn't even sure how he slept through that, because Mother Nature was clearly furious, and her voice was far from gentle and calming. Gintoki's sleep couldn't be interrupted by this either, but Hijikata would usually wake up with much less than this. Then again, he did suffer through a lot last night, and the mental toll must have been what got him in the end.

He finished his washing and wore his trousers, then he walked over to the window and looked outside. The weather was merciless, and it made Hijikata wonder if they shouldn't postpone their little trip. Under such circumstances, to go through the mountains could prove deadly.

Sighing, he leaned onto the wall next to the window. He still had to somehow let Sougo know that it worked, that they were leaving and that there was no need to come in the evening, because Hijikata wanted to leave as soon as possible. If only they had a way of contacting one another. The storm was sheer malice of natural forces, and it was dangerous to stay out there at the moment. He definitely couldn't ask Sougo to scale the stupid wall again.

He figured that Sougo wouldn't risk his neck in this weather for a guy he hated. Still, if they were leaving today, they had to meet up.

Perhaps he should ask Gintoki to let Sougo in for the time being?

Except, Gintoki had absolutely no obligations towards Sougo, and Hijikata felt that he was already on a thin ice after asking to leave. Sougo was an enemy soldier, and if Gintoki let him in, Sougo might not be getting out – and even though this former subordinate of his was an unlikeable bastard, he was also Mitsuba's brother, and Hijikata couldn't possibly face Mitsuba with her brother's whereabouts unknown.

"I feel like I've just missed something important," a voice came from the door. Hijikata spun around to see Gintoki there with a faint smile on his face, wearing a loose shirt and a pair of trousers; he didn't even hear the White Demon open the door. That man was just suddenly *there*. "Good morning," he greeted Hijikata in a casual tone.

"Morning," Hijikata nodded, instantly cautious when Gintoki began approaching him.

“How was your night?” Gintoki said, slowly and with no rush closing the distance between them.

“I’m not sure,” Hijikata replied truthfully. He did get a good sleep, but he also thought something was *off*, and he didn’t know what it was, and the annoying warmth he felt inside felt as though it was spreading, or growing maybe – it was hard to describe – and he hated it.

Gintoki finally stood next to him, and with a slightly saddened expression, he reached up to run his fingers through Hijikata’s hair. Hijikata tensed up, and as soon as he saw Gintoki inch in, he closed his eyes. A hand gently held the back of his head moments before Gintoki’s mouth touched Hijikata’s own.

Again, Hijikata allowed it to happen, parting his lips with a small dose of reluctance and giving Gintoki free rein. He felt Gintoki’s fingers trace along his jawline, softly and carefully.

Hijikata inhaled sharply, suddenly recalling last night. That was something he didn’t want to remember, especially right now, with Gintoki’s tongue in his mouth. Bastard should have done this yesterday, when Hijikata was in the mood.

The kiss was slow and gentle, but Hijikata noticed that Gintoki never stopped moving closer and now Hijikata was pinned against the wall with no means of escape. The stones behind his bare back were cold, slightly countering the odd warmth inside of him which he couldn’t understand.

Gintoki pushed his thigh between Hijikata’s legs and against Hijikata’s crotch, never breaking the contact of their lips; it was then Hijikata realised his knees were giving in, because they were more or less the same height, so there would be no way otherwise for Gintoki to just rub his leg against Hijikata’s dick like that.

Gintoki’s hands let go of Hijikata’s head, and they quickly made their way down Hijikata’s chest and sides, then they slipped behind and in Hijikata’s trousers. Hijikata struggled against it a little, but Gintoki did not back down in the least, kneading Hijikata’s buttocks shamelessly. His breath was now erratic, and it had turned heavier.

Hijikata struggled to get some air. Gintoki was doing *that thing* again.

“N...!” he managed to let out, but that was all he said before Gintoki ate the rest away. He could feel his ass cheeks being spread, and Gintoki’s fingers were a little too close to places they shouldn’t be. The White Demon seemed to be getting increasingly greedier, too, and was now kissing Hijikata deeply; Hijikata could feel *something* pressing against him, and that was kind of gross, but Gintoki’s leg was rubbing against him as well, and that was troublesome.

Don’tgetharddon’tgetharddon’tgethard...

He tried to free himself from Gintoki, but it was as though his muscles had turned into mush. Rather than pushing Gintoki away, he ended up holding onto him, though that was far from what he had intended. He was getting hard, and the seas of shame had risen again, wanting to swallow him whole.

He peeked at Gintoki through his eyelashes.

Gintoki's eyes were open, but unfocused and feverishly glazed. He was sort of looking, but not really looking at Hijikata; it felt more as though he was seeing something at the back of Hijikata's head.

Gathering his strength, Hijikata finally pushed Gintoki away, if only a little. "Fuck off," he somehow managed to say despite being out of breath.

Gintoki blinked, and he finally met Hijikata's eyes. Then, while maintaining eye contact, he slowly lowered himself to his knees. "Looks like you're a little troubled over here," he said, running his hands up Hijikata's thighs with the grin of a man who knew far too well that he was in fact the root of the problem. "I could help you, if you'd like."

Hijikata inhaled shakily. He *wanted* to say no, he really did, but somehow seeing the White Demon on his knees before him made him shudder.

Gintoki waited for his response, his expression oddly innocent, a small smile curving his lips, and his head tilted slightly to the side.

"... Fine," Hijikata said begrudgingly, "but the back door is closed for today. If that's okay with you, then, by all means, help yourself."

He saw astonishment flash across Gintoki's face briefly, and that was surprisingly satisfying. This, he realised, made him happier than it should have. It looked as though Gintoki submitted himself to Hijikata all of a sudden – even though they both knew he didn't *really* – and that was thrilling.

"Then, don't mind if I do," Gintoki gave a short chuckle, then he leaned in and tugged Hijikata's trousers down.

It was still awkward to be exposed in front of this man, even more so when Hijikata could see the excited spark in Gintoki's eyes. Again, he wondered why Gintoki chose to be so goddamn distant last night – clearly, being this persistent was making the bastard happy, so why did he have to go and leave Hijikata feeling like that?

Hijikata clenched his teeth. *Lonely*. He was still upset about that. He should have no reason to feel neglected in this way, yet he did anyway, and he did not understand why.

Gintoki parted his lips and licked the underside of Hijikata's cock, maintaining eye contact. Then, slowly, he lowered his eyelids, taking Hijikata's erection inside, exhaling through his nose.

Hijikata watched him with bated breath, subconsciously covering his mouth. His heartbeat sped up again, as he watched a faint pink tone bloom on Gintoki's pallid cheeks. The warm sensation he had been feeling since this morning seemed to have reacted to it, too, and it felt as though there were currents of hot water flowing through his entire body, forcefully and mercilessly shattering Hijikata's inhibitions.

With his hand shivering, he reached for Gintoki's hair. This was the first time he actually touched Gintoki out of his own volition, and as soon as his fingertips made contact with the silvery curls of the man before him, he knew he wanted to touch more. His other hand slowly began falling to his side – but it never finished that route; instead, it ended up caressing Gintoki's cheek. Hijikata stood there with his legs slightly apart, letting Gintoki gently rub all his sensitive spots, and he felt something wet dripping down inner thigh.

He inhaled unsteadily in an attempt to catch his breath a little, and he narrowed his eyes, realising that there was something he *really* wanted to do at that moment – and all things taken into account, Gintoki shouldn't have any complaints.

A little hesitant, he reached farther to place his hands on the back of Gintoki's head.

Gintoki opened his eyes, locking them with Hijikata's own, and there was a louder exhale. Hijikata realised that Gintoki just *laughed*, and that irritated him.

He gritted his teeth, and clutching Gintoki's hair firmly, he pushed that warm mouth down his shaft, biting his lip. A tooth grazed his skin lightly, but he didn't mind, moving his hips. Strangely, Gintoki was taking it remarkably well.

To his own surprise, Hijikata found himself unhappy with that realization. It was true that he wanted to cause Gintoki a considerable degree of discomfort, but what bugged him more was the possible reason behind Gintoki's skills. After all, Gintoki didn't *seem* like someone who'd sleep around, and a man of his reputation could hardly take a fellow man for a bit of casual dick care practice without rumours spreading immediately.

It bothered him. He could feel himself reaching Gintoki's throat, but there wasn't the slightest sign of struggle.

He noticed Gintoki reaching to his own crotch. "Pervert," he muttered, watching Gintoki's face. There was a little bit of moisture around Gintoki's eyes, likely from fighting the gag reflex, and his face was now much redder. He was breathing heavily through his nose, but far from unhappy, he was shamelessly sucking on Hijikata's dick with his own hand between his legs. Hijikata could kind of see down Gintoki's shirt, too, as it began falling off that man's pale shoulder, exposing a pronounced collarbone and not at all modestly showing the muscles under Gintoki's ivory skin. Despite the cold air in the room, there was sweat glistening on the soft curve of Gintoki's nape.

"Gintoki, I'm—" he began, trying to push Gintoki's head away, as he didn't want to make him have to swallow it. However, Gintoki pressed against him instead, sucking harder, his one free hand grabbing Hijikata's naked ass cheek.

Hijikata's hips bucked and he came, promptly collapsing to the floor. He hated it, but when Gintoki grabbed his butt, it was as though a switch got flipped, and he came twice as hard as he had expected to, and so his knees gave in, drained of strength.

Gintoki backed away, and this time, Hijikata could *see* him swallow that.

“Why would you just...” he began weakly, but Gintoki simply shrugged his shoulders, turning to the now lukewarm water in the basin.

“You’d just washed yourself, so I didn’t want to get you dirty,” he explained calmly, washing his hands. Only after his hands were clean did he fix his front, turning to Hijikata again. “Our stuff should be ready by now, thanks to Takasugi, but you couldn’t possibly want to ride a horse with an erection. We needed to be rid of that, right?”

“You’re so shameless,” Hijikata breathed out heavily, and with his knees still weak, he scrambled to his feet, tugging his trousers up as soon as he managed to stand.

“Hmm, but you already knew that,” Gintoki gave him a mischievous smile. “I’d recommend you to change. These clothes are going to wait for you once you return.”

“So – you *do* realise that the robes you gave me are highly impractical,” Hijikata frowned.

Gintoki’s smile did not falter. “Have you *seen* yourself in them? It would be such a waste for you not to wear them. Even now, with just a half of that attire, you look like royalty.”

Hijikata could feel that his face was slowly heating up. He wasn’t sure if it was exactly *flirting* what Gintoki was doing, but it felt like it, with the way Gintoki was looking at him. Again, he was bemused. At first, Gintoki had no interest in him, then he started full-on seducing him, last night he looked like he *wanted* to love Hijikata, but then he showed restraint... and now he seemed to have bounced back two steps and was trying to seduce Hijikata again.

Hijikata couldn’t figure him out. This man was the epitome of mayhem, and Hijikata could not fathom why he would choose to be so contradictory.

He glanced outside. Miraculously, the storm seemed to have finally let up. It was still cloudy, but the rain had stopped, and it was no longer as dark as before.

Upon turning back, he saw that Gintoki had made his way to his closet and was now changing. No wonder; his trousers were soiled, as was the floor – as Hijikata noticed when he looked down. Carefully, he avoided the stains, relieved that none of it seemed to have gotten on him or his clothes.

“You know,” he began again, “I *would* change, but for that I’d first need to have something to change *into*. I have checked my closet before, but none of the clothes you’ve given me are suitable for being on the horseback in.”

“... You might be right,” Gintoki paused briefly before pulling a new shirt over his head; Hijikata noticed that for once, Gintoki was not wearing any white clothes. “I haven’t considered the possibility that you would actually swallow your pride and ask for permission to leave.” He turned around and eyed Hijikata from head to toe, then he reached for his belt. “She must mean a really great deal to you.”

Hijikata shifted his shoulders uncomfortably. There wasn’t a hint of any negative emotions in the way Gintoki said that last sentence, but somehow it gave Hijikata a sense of unease and a

sour, slightly astringent aftertaste in his mouth. “She does,” he admitted, and as soon as he did, he saw Gintoki clench his teeth and look away.

Gintoki pretended to search for something in his still open closet for a few moments, then he shook his head and finally closed it. “Let’s go,” he then turned back to Hijikata with a smile which was like a punch to the gut for the ex-vice-commander. That smile was soft and gentle at first glance, yet very subtly laced with pain around the edges, and Hijikata caught onto that, and he hated the fact that he realised this.

At this very moment, Hijikata Toshiro felt like an utter asshole. He did not mean for Gintoki to make this face. He just wanted to speak the truth...

That poisonous warmth inside of him shifted violently, and he was hit with an urge to vomit for a split second, his vision abruptly darkening. He took a shaky breath, blinking, and waited for his surroundings to take shape again. He realised that his fingertips were trembling, but he could do nothing to stop them from doing so.

“Are you okay?” Gintoki was watching him with visible concern.

“I’m fine,” Hijikata nodded slowly. Now, he was – but moments ago, he felt as though the earth beneath his feet opened up and swallowed him whole. “You could just lend me some of *your* clothes,” he added then.

There was a pause. “... Smart,” Gintoki said, and he pointed at his closet. “Pick whatever, and meet me at the stables after you do. I have to do something first, but I’ll be there soon. Unless you want to come with me,” he then added with a sly grin, “in which case I’m more than happy to stay until you change.”

“See you at the stables,” Hijikata said stiffly. Seriously, could this man *stop* with the constant inappropriate commentary? Plus, he saw Hijikata pretty much naked moments ago. There was no need for him to say that.

“Aw, you’re no fun,” Gintoki chuckled, but he waltzed out, closing the door on the way.

Hijikata pinched the bridge of his nose, then turned towards that closet and opened it. To his surprise, it didn’t smell bad – someone was likely making sure Gintoki wouldn’t stuff his dirty clothes in there, even though that seemed exactly like something Gintoki would do every now and then.

He eyed the entirety of the closet, and his gaze fell on a familiar tone of fabric.

Hesitantly, he grabbed it and pulled it out slowly, making sure not to mess up any other clothes.

It was his uniform, washed clean and even repaired here and there. It wasn’t in the best state, but it hadn’t been in the first place when he arrived here. In fact, he’d say that it was in a better state now than it was before.

For some reason, Gintoki had taken Hijikata’s uniform and stored it in his own closet.

Why?

Hijikata didn't know.

A wave of nostalgia surged into him through his fingertips. He looked at that garment like at an estranged lover, wondering if he should wear it. He had missed it, but at the same time there was something telling him to put it back where he found it, and to never touch it again.

He shook his head. Clearly, staying near Gintoki for prolonged periods of time was eating his brain. Why would he not wear it? It was *his*, and though worn and too light for the cold post-storm air outside, it was the perfect kind of clothes to make his return in.

The coarse material of it felt good against his skin. It finally felt as though he was going home, and with that thought, his heartbeat sped up a little.

He finished dressing and walked out. The way to the stables would have been uneventful, but as soon he walked through the exit from the barracks, a hand grabbed his shoulder and tugged him into a dark corner. Takasugi stood there, his face dead serious.

"What is it?" Hijikata asked, wondering if he did something – besides, well, that bit where he pretty much stole the people's leader away.

"Don't you *dare* put him in danger." Takasugi's voice was cold and stern.

Hijikata gave him a slightly dumbfounded look. "Why would I do that?" After all, he *did* promise to return along with Gintoki, and Takasugi being Takasugi, he must have surely already discovered that.

"You don't understand," Takasugi growled, and his grip on Hijikata's shoulder grew so strong it hurt. "He's volatile. I'll explain after you two return," he added, seeing Hijikata open his mouth to speak, "so for now just keep that in mind."

"You're being extremely unhelpful," Hijikata grit his teeth, but he nodded. "I'll... try to watch out for him."

Takasugi did not seem at all reassured and was about to say something more, but Gintoki peeked out from behind the door suddenly. "What are you two lurking around for?" he said, eyeing them. Takasugi let go of Hijikata's shoulder and took a small step back.

"Where did you go?" Hijikata wanted to know.

Gintoki held up a bag victoriously. "Provisions," he said with a grin, "I raided the kitchen. Also," he added, "I got myself a thing. Hold this," he handed Hijikata the bag he was holding, and then he proceeded to reach to his belt. What looked like a shapeless rag hanging at his waist turned out to be a fairly complex headscarf which, when Gintoki finally managed to put it on properly, was covering both his hair and most of his face.

Hijikata looked at Gintoki and realised that he was feeling relieved. Sougo did not have the memory of a goldfish and would recognise Gintoki without a doubt; Gintoki was disguising himself, and as he seemed not to have a speck of white on him right now, it was less likely

for him to be recognised. He did remember to hide his face as well as his unnatural hair colour.

After all, this man was no fool – even though Hijikata would forget about that at times.

“Why did you keep my uniform?” he asked as they set off towards the stables, leaving Takasugi behind with whatever he might have wanted to tell Hijikata in private.

Gintoki cleared his throat, and when they walked out into the light, he halted in his step. “Oh... you’re wearing it,” he said, and Hijikata couldn’t decipher the emotion hidden in his tone. However, Gintoki bounced back immediately, and he leaned in, lowering his voice, “I used it as a side dish since its owner wouldn’t allow me to touch him.”

“Moron,” Hijikata snapped at him, instantly feeling gross.

“Don’t worry, it’s been washed,” Gintoki walked past him and made his way towards his horse. Silently, he added his bag of provisions to his saddle. “Oh, right,” he said then, and he spun around to face Hijikata, who was standing fairly close; sneaking one arm around Hijikata’s waist, he closed the distance between them, uncovering his face.

“What are you doing now of all times?” Hijikata struggled a little, glancing around.

“Since this might be the last time,” Gintoki whispered, and Hijikata could swear he saw something glisten in Gintoki’s half-lidded eyes, “let me.”

Before Hijikata could ask what Gintoki meant by that, there was a soft pair of lips on his own. A hand gently cupped his cheek, then stroked softly past his ear and snuck into his hair, combing through it. Hijikata opened his mouth a little, letting Gintoki kiss him without further objections. He could feel Gintoki’s embrace grow slightly tighter, but it was different from before – it was not overbearing at all, and he didn’t feel threatened by it this time.

Gintoki finally took a drawn step back, inhaling shakily. His eyes lingered on Hijikata’s face for a few moments, then he hung his head and pulled the scarf back over his face. “Alright, let’s go,” he said then, his voice a little foggy.

Hijikata’s heart clenched.

They rode out into the forest in no rush; Hijikata kept silent. He did tell Sougo to meet at that corner of the rampart in the evening, but right now it was barely noon and they were already out. He had not expected this to go so smoothly, so now he could only hope that Sougo didn’t ride off to somewhere, and that he noticed them leaving.

He wondered how Sougo dealt with the storm. While Hijikata was in his warm bed next to another just as warm human body, Sougo had to brave the cold rain and the merciless wind alone. That by itself was likely no challenge for Sougo, but with how the storm had raged last night, Hijikata hoped that Sougo had had enough common sense not to get too close to the edge of the chasm.

Come to think of it, Gintoki never questioned how exactly Sougo got in touch with him. Hijikata wanted to address the matter and opened his mouth, when suddenly, he had a strong sense of being watched.

He turned his head in that direction – just in time to see Sougo emerge from behind a rock with a crossbow. “Hold your fire!” he yelled quickly, stopping his horse.

Sougo pulled a surprised face, but he obeyed, lowering his crossbow slowly.

Gintoki glanced back and saw what happened; he clasped his hands together and leaned to the side theatrically, speaking in falsetto. “Oh, I’m so lucky to have you here with me! I feel so protected.”

“Shut up,” Hijikata growled under his breath and gestured at Sougo to come closer.

Sougo took a few steps forward, and stood on the elevated edge of the road. “Who is that?” he said coldly, not even looking at Gintoki.

Hijikata hesitated. He thought back and realised there was no need to be cautious regarding Gintoki’s name – as far as he knew, Sougo had never heard it. Gintoki was known as the White Demon, and during Sougo’s brief capture, it was unlikely that someone would call Gintoki by his name.

Still, he did not know how to introduce this man.

Since he kept silent, Sougo’s eyes shifted towards Gintoki, then back to Hijikata. “So... you could have just *left* this entire time?” he said with a sharp, biting undertone in his voice.

“No!” Hijikata shook his head immediately, looking at Sougo, and he felt a little helpless. There was nothing Gintoki could say to make the situation better, but he seemed to be aware of that and just sat there wordlessly.

“He’s... my escort,” Hijikata said uneasily. “I am to return here after I will have dealt with my... business in the city.”

“I’ve thought this before,” Sougo sighed, “but you really are an idiot, aren’t you, Hijikata-san.”

“You shouldn’t insult your superiors like that,” Hijikata snapped, then added in a calmer tone, “Where’s your horse?”

“Nearby,” Sougo shrugged his shoulders. “Let’s meet at the crossroads,” he then added before Hijikata could say anything else, and he turned to leave.

Hijikata watched him do so. In truth, he had expected to get reprimanded more; Sougo was taking everything a little too calmly.

Then again, Sougo rarely got worked up for anything, so perhaps he was just acting like usual.

Hijikata took a breath and slowly nodded at Gintoki. “Let’s go.”

His heart felt suddenly a little lighter. He was, if briefly, returning home, after all.

Chapter End Notes

Well this took fucken forever didn't it

Embers of Night

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“We should set up camp,” Hijikata said loud enough for both his companions to hear. They turned around and glanced at him, and Sougo then nodded.

“I forgot you’re so weak, Hijikata-san.”

“Shut your piehole,” Hijikata retorted listlessly. Sougo was right, that twerp. Hijikata could only handle being on horseback either when under an adrenaline rush or for a shorter period of time. After having spent such a long time idling away behind the castle walls, his bottom was not used to such treatment and felt profusely sore. The fact that he had starved himself in the beginning likely did not help his constitution, either, and he found himself regretting some of his decisions yet again.

To make matters worse, before they managed to find their way out of the mountains and to the mountain pass which led back down to the plains, they strayed off the path several times, and Gintoki did his best to be the exact opposite of helpful; he did not give a word of advice, and thus their little group had lost several hours going in circles. Now, the sun was nearing the horizon at an unseemly speed, and Hijikata found himself glaring at that orange dot. He had hoped to reach the city sooner than tomorrow midday, but the sun was clearly not cooperating.

It did not take them long to set up what was a reasonable campsite. The horses were given water from a nearby stream, the fire was keeping them warm, and Gintoki opened his large sack of what he had called provisions, and began cooking a stew; he even brought a pot, bowls and spoons with him, and Hijikata was questioning this man’s sound mind yet again. Surely, they could have lasted one evening without all this.

“Here,” Gintoki handed him a bowl. Hijikata took it wordlessly and watched Gintoki repeat the same gesture towards Sougo. He then sat down and began eating first, stuffing his face as though he hadn’t seen a proper meal in his entire life, not caring whether the other two were eating or not.

Hijikata examined his bowl. It didn’t *smell* bad, and it was warm; though down in the plains, the night was much warmer than at the fortress, the night air was still cold. After the sun had disappeared behind the horizon and stars scattered across the cloudless sky, Hijikata found himself welcoming this warm meal. Slowly, he ate it spoonful by spoonful, not wanting to follow Gintoki’s gluttonous example.

The fire calmly crackled into the night.

Sougo yawned, setting his bowl down. “I’ll be going to sleep first,” he said, rubbing his forehead drowsily. “Wake me up when it’s my turn to keep watch.”

Hijikata hummed in affirmation, and only out of the corner of his eye he saw Sougo move a little farther from the fire and lie down. It was not that late, Hijikata felt, but he could easily understand that Sougo had probably not slept a wink while he was searching for his vice-commander. Truthfully, he held a certain degree of admiration to the dedication Sougo could show when he felt like doing so. Of course, that dedication was a rare sight to behold, as Sougo was usually very unenthusiastic and he'd devise new and new ways of slacking on the job; still, Hijikata was glad that Mitsuba had such a brother, one who was willing to brave hell and high water when she was concerned.

He sighed silently. He had deeply wished to see Mitsuba, to make sure she was alright, and even now, that had not changed – however, he had yet to come into terms with the fact that he would be leaving her behind for good. He didn't even know what he was going to tell her; should he explain himself truthfully? If he said what really happened – that he exchanged his freedom for a chance to see her one last time – wouldn't that make him look self-righteous? He didn't want to try and make himself look better than what he felt.

He never doubted her feelings, and that was why he knew he was going to break her heart either way. His own heart ached, too, when he thought about it, but he felt that it would be better to let her know that he can never return again rather than leave her hopeful. Plus... he no longer considered himself worthy of standing by her side. It was out of his hands, but he lay with another, and unforgivably, with another man at that.

While he did not blame Gintoki for his sense of loss, as he was aware that the White Demon could not possibly understand, he did blame himself for being unable to fight against what fate had thrown under his feet, causing him to stumble and fall into an inescapable abyss. Gintoki was not the one at fault – not in a sense where Hijikata could point at him in an accusatory manner and call him the problem. Being in Gintoki's position meant he couldn't easily let Hijikata go, and it was rather generous of the White Demon to let Shinsengumi's vice-commander live, especially as not a single person mentioned something like ransom at that time, and there was nothing to be gained.

After that, the prophecy-related talks began, Gintoki got closer to him and changed his attitude at an alarming speed. Hijikata didn't understand that, but he figured if at least one person in the entire fort had had enough decency to explain the details of said prophecy, it would make much more sense.

Although... there could be something else behind the change in Gintoki's behaviour, too. Plus, even if that weren't the case, it was very unclear just how many people were aware of that prophecy, and just how many people knew any details. Takasugi was one secretive son of a bitch, and Hijikata did not trust him, especially since the seer seemed to be a bit unclear on whether to treat Hijikata kindly or with hostility. He did turn slightly friendlier over time, but that momentary display of bone-chilling coldness just before Hijikata and Gintoki left the castle... It made Hijikata wonder just how much of what he'd seen of the man so far was just a cleverly constructed mask. At that moment, he did not think of Takasugi's attitude much, but retrospectively, there seemed to be more to it than 'just' concern over the leader's safety.

He froze when he felt an arm sneak around his waist. *"What are you doing?!"* he snapped under his breath, turning to Gintoki, who was suddenly sitting right next to him; Hijikata did

not realise this until it was too late. He saw that Gintoki's face was now uncovered.

"Don't worry, he's fast asleep," Gintoki replied simply, and to prove it, he poked Sougo with his foot. Sougo groaned but did not wake up. Then, before Hijikata could protest any further, Gintoki held up a small bottle against the flames for Hijikata to see. It was empty.

"... What did you do?" Hijikata narrowed his eyes.

"I made sure he'd sleep soundly until morning," Gintoki said, his voice calm and unbothered as he tucked that bottle back into his pocket. Hijikata shuddered. This was, again, the side of Gintoki he tended to forget about – the dangerous side. If even to add this kind of cursed spice into someone's food wasn't below him, then where were his limits? Hijikata did not want to find out.

"It's not like it's bad for him," Gintoki said as he snuggled a little closer despite Hijikata's weak protests. "It's just an herbal remedy. I'm sure he's gotten barely any sleep until now."

That was true, but it still did not excuse Gintoki's actions. "You... never do this kind of thing again," Hijikata said, putting as much authority into his tone as he could muster.

"Or what, Mr. Vice-commander, you'll arrest me?" Gintoki replied in a playfully teasing tone, leaning his chin on Hijikata's shoulder. "I only did it so I could stick to you, you know. We're going to have to sleep separately anyway since you don't want anyone to find about it," he gestured towards the sleeping Sougo. "I could have probably tried to endure it, but I didn't want to, so..."

Hijikata hung his head – or perhaps nodded. Gintoki was leaning onto him, and his scent made Hijikata's thoughts drift a little. "Listen," he took a breath, "last night..."

"Hm?" Gintoki glanced up at him.

"No," Hijikata cleared his throat immediately. "Forget I asked."

"Alright," Gintoki said softly. His hand moved and grabbed Hijikata's, and though Hijikata knew he didn't have to take it quietly and could jerk his hand away, he stayed put and let Gintoki entwine their fingers. "If you want to ask later, I'll listen."

"There's something else I wanted to ask about," Hijikata admitted. "Back then, soon after I came to the castle, I overheard you and Takasugi talking..."

"About what?" Gintoki let go and backed away, sitting so that he could see Hijikata's face clearly.

"I... there was a prophecy about me, right?" Hijikata said uneasily. "Takasugi saw something, and that was the reason why you decided not to have me executed." The way he worded it was intentional; it was clear to him that at this point, the amount of affection Gintoki held for him was not small, and by saying it like that, he was hitting Gintoki below the belt. Of course, that entire prophecy matter was bugging him greatly, but he also had a

smidge of hope that perhaps Gintoki's tongue would slip, and he'd end up accidentally explaining why he was so damn distant that night.

It was a sin, but he'd committed to it, since there was no other way. He had chosen to sin, and under such circumstances, he would have preferred a tenderer, more personal treatment. If he had to betray himself and Mitsuba in one fell swoop, he wanted it to be worth it.

"Yes... and no," Gintoki replied hesitantly, turning his head towards the flames. "When you arrived, I had no idea who you were. You remember that, I think. The thing is, we haven't had an outsider in our hands for years, and though it was very unlikely, Takasugi decided to see if you were who his prophecies spoke of. I don't... really understand it, but he said that prophecies are kind of like dreams, that you can't see a person's face until you've met them —" he paused, realising he was getting off track. "He handed me a book and asked me to misplace it. Then, he said, if you pick it up, you are the one who..." now, it wasn't just a pause, it was clear hesitation. "I don't think I should be speaking to you about this without Takasugi's knowledge," he said then, and his shoulders sagged.

"Do you answer to him in everything?" Hijikata frowned a little. After all, Gintoki was the leader of his people, and this made him and Takasugi sort of look like husband and wife, with the wife pulling the strings and thus steering the course of the entire state.

Gintoki shook his head. "No, but... there are *things*," he said then, and he did not explain further.

Hijikata kept silent for a few moments. "Alright," he said then. "Why did you agree to let me leave the castle?"

"You mean, besides being able to finally get into your pants?" Gintoki tilted his head with a smirk.

Hijikata didn't let that bother him. "You're not that much of an idiot," he said firmly. "Letting me out poses a danger to you and your entire valley and is incredibly risky in general, so why?"

Gintoki's face grew more serious. "I no longer think you'd reveal the valley's position," he then shrugged his shoulders simply. "That's why I agreed in the first place."

"Why would you trust me on that?" Hijikata said. It came as a mere breath over his parted lips; truly, he never had any plans on telling anyone what he had been up to in his absence, or where he had been, and he was even hoping to get Sougo sworn to secrecy, but Gintoki knew none of that.

"Unless I'd misjudged you, in which case you'd be incredibly skilled to have led me by the nose for so long, I just don't think you're that kind of guy," Gintoki said. "You gave me a promise that we're going to return, that I get to take you back with me – and I have no doubt that even if that fails, even if I muck up colossally and get arrested, you'll keep my people a secret."

"How can you be so sure?" Hijikata watched Gintoki with disbelief in his eyes.

“Again, you’re proving that I’m right by asking me these questions,” Gintoki smiled gently.

“I’m not sure I—” Hijikata began, but then he stopped. Gintoki was right. Again. Had Hijikata planned on betraying Gintoki, he wouldn’t try to sow seeds of doubt into Gintoki’s mind. He would avoid doing that as much as possible, and instead he’d try coaxing Gintoki into a false sense of security.

Unless, of course, Hijikata knew all this and had predicted that asking such questions would mislead Gintoki, fool him into thinking that Hijikata wasn’t going to break his word – but such thoughts never crossed Gintoki’s mind.

No matter how he sliced it, Gintoki trusted him *and was right to do so*, and that made Hijikata sick to his stomach.

“So – you’re not at all worried that I – or Sougo, for that matter – would disclose the position of the valley to the authorities?” Hijikata said, trying to make as certain of this as he could because he couldn’t *comprehend* this kind of trust to a person who was originally *meant* to be the White Demon’s enemy. “Even though you’ve wanted to hide that place and its people enough to form a blood pact?”

“You do not truly understand, do you,” Gintoki said, shaking his head once more, and Hijikata realised that this man, the ruler of the valley, now seemed *hurt*. “I’m hiding them from you lot, sure,” he admitted, “but by doing so I’m also keeping them there.”

Hijikata’s eyes widened. He did not think to look at it this way. “So, you’re... *protecting* us?” he breathed out.

“In a way,” Gintoki looked away, avoiding a direct response. “It’s not that they can’t leave – they don’t want to. Mostly, of course. And if they do leave, they return.”

Hijikata was glad he was sitting because he could feel his legs would otherwise give in, and he hung his head heavily. The most effective prison of all – one the prisoners would *choose* to stay in. By not telling anyone the truth, Gintoki kept an idea of safety and peaceful life within the hearts of those forsaken by society, and they, given the chance to start anew, did all they could to stay within these imaginary walls. Now it made sense why the castle was impenetrable from either direction, and why it was so far from the houses in the valley. Gintoki probably did not see it this way, he was more likely to think that he was protecting both groups from one another.

“After all, they’re the worst of the worst, are they not?” Gintoki continued speaking, his voice now hollow as though it was not his own. “Thieves and robbers, murderers and inhuman monsters, ones who look so alien that your people flee at the sight of them.”

Hijikata kept silent. His heart was clenched, and he did not know how to respond, and to make matters worse, Gintoki now seemed very distant, much more so than he had ever been as he watched the flames dance in the firepit.

“And yet,” Gintoki added in a whisper, “once presented with a chance, many of them began their life anew. Do you know why? For most of them steal because of hunger and kill in self-

defence, not being strong enough only to protect themselves rather than end a life in a desperate struggle. It is an unfair machine of justice, the one in the city, steered by money and greased by debt.”

By now, this was *definitely* not the usual Gintoki speaking. It was not *in* the normal Gintoki to string words together this way, Hijikata knew this much. The normal Gintoki was much more... human.

“We ended up creating a refuge,” Gintoki said, “and we paid the price for it accordingly. Now that the Medallion is lost, I fear it might also start causing unrest. It was already bad enough when the people learned we had *you* within the castle walls. Some demanded that you stand a trial,” he said, then looked at Hijikata. “Of course, we left you out of that matter, and it was quickly resolved, but...”

Hijikata’s brows furrowed. “Why would the absence of the Warding Medallion cause unrest in the valley?” he asked, wording it in a way where he could expect Gintoki to correct him in case he had misunderstood.

“It’s not just for keeping people out,” Gintoki said, made a movement which looked as though he was about to get up and sit next to Hijikata again, but then he changed his mind and remained where he was, “it’s also for keeping peace within the valley. It...” he glanced at his own hands, now resting in his lap. “It fills the void.”

“Void?” Hijikata repeated uncertainly.

“The people there, my people... everyone,” Gintoki spoke as though his throat was tightly clenched, “everyone is wounded. When you hurt, the world around you hurts as well. The Medallion was there to ease the pain. It’s not a great solution, but it’s about what you could expect from blood magic...” His voice faded out, and after a while, it was clear that Gintoki was done talking about this topic.

“Shouldn’t you have stayed in the valley, then?” Hijikata said carefully. “What if you’re not there, and something happens—”

“And be separated from you?” Gintoki said simply, finally looking Hijikata in the eye again. “I don’t have that kind of strength.” His voice was calm as he said this, without a quiver.

Hijikata didn’t understand it fully, but he accepted it wordlessly, looking away and into the flames. Gintoki was a riddle he still did not have the solution to, as he was missing a key part – something Gintoki was keeping from him. He *was* told that he’d learn all in due time, and it was probably Takasugi who said so through Gintoki’s lips.

Hijikata wondered how far and how clearly Takasugi could see into the future. There were moments when Takasugi seemed to be unaware of what was about to happen or did not know Gintoki’s whereabouts, or that time when he stormed into their bedroom to stop them but was too late – Hijikata felt that this shouldn’t happen if Takasugi was a seer.

Not that Hijikata doubted that Takasugi had the power of divination. He looked into the darkness in Takasugi’s eye socket, and he had seen the swirling shapeless horrors inhabiting

Takasugi's skull, and there was no reason to doubt. What he doubted more was Takasugi's sanity; no man's mind should be able to withstand such a horrible, horrible thing anywhere near it. The fact that Takasugi wasn't a mumbling, drooling bundle of rags and crazy was a little alarming.

Takasugi hadn't been prepared for Gintoki to leave the fortress. That much was clear, and as Takasugi had dragged Hijikata aside to give him a rather hostile earful before Gintoki interrupted them, Hijikata was under the impression that Takasugi either couldn't see or couldn't influence in any way what Gintoki was going to be up to. Did something block his vision? Or was there a limit to what he could see?

Hijikata pursed his lips tightly and glanced at Gintoki, who was absentmindedly gazing into the flames. The red and golden firelight danced on that man's pallid face, and it seemed as though Gintoki's eyes were glowing, but it was a different glow than back when Gintoki had only barely kept himself under control. This light was dimmer, like a lighthouse in the distance or a candle on a windy night, flashing out of existence every now and then, reappearing anew when there seemed to be no trace of it left. He seemed lonely and lost, lost in thought as much as lost in the world, and as he was sitting there, he appeared to be getting smaller little by little.

Hijikata, again, did not know what to say. He did not even think that there was anything he *could* say. Though he was unsure why, seeing Gintoki in this way pained him.

"We should go to sleep," he said softly. "The morning is going to be merciless."

"I'll take first watch, then," Gintoki looked up from the flames, and that terrible distance in his eyes vanished as though it had never existed.

"I guess Sougo's not going to take the third," Hijikata murmured wryly.

"Sorry about that." Gintoki got to his feet and he closed the distance between Hijikata and himself. "I promise it won't happen again." With that, he leaned down and gently pressed his lips against Hijikata's forehead.

"... Hmn." Hijikata nodded, and slowly reached up to touch his forehead, though Gintoki couldn't see that. It was odd, this gentleness Gintoki would show at times, and it would make Hijikata almost forget that this was a dangerous mission they were on. After all, the White Demon was a criminal, and though he had not shown his face within the city walls, and ordinary people only thought he was but a legend, there *was* a warrant on his head. Hijikata knew, and before he met Gintoki in person, he had thought it was pure idiocy to try and arrest a rumour.

Just now, that rumour had given him a gentle kiss on the forehead.

This was dangerous. Due to the rush they were in, Hijikata did not manage to talk to Sougo about this properly. Sougo was not in a talkative mood, either, possibly because he was terribly worried for Mitsuba, much like Hijikata himself was. Tomorrow on the way, he somehow had to get a word in to make sure Sougo would keep his mouth shut because no

matter what, he and Gintoki had to return together. He could not bear to break another promise, not anymore.

Looking into the flames, he frowned. Truthfully, he'd still much rather stay in the city and return to his previous life. However, he was now bound to Gintoki, and he had also promised to Takasugi to keep an eye out for that perm-head...

"... Gintoki?" he turned around.

Gintoki, who was about to pick up his sword, looked up to meet Hijikata's eyes. "What is it?"

"About that book... the Book of Prophecies," Hijikata said hesitantly, "have you read it? Do you know what it says about me?"

"Only what I've heard from Takasugi," Gintoki shrugged his shoulders. "I can't read a word in that language. It's for Takasugi's use only, anyway." Hijikata must have made a surprised face, because Gintoki then explained, "I'm told he writes it in some sort of trance and then he has to go back and read it again. It sounded troublesome, so I didn't ask further." With that, he walked up to Hijikata again. "You should go to sleep," he said softly.

Hijikata nodded and turned away, but then he felt a light tap on his shoulder. When he turned back, he was met with a chaste kiss on the lips. "Good night."

Hijikata felt blood rush to his cheeks, but he did not say anything, he just hung his head again; he sat still for a few minutes before he attempted to make himself somewhat comfortable by the fire.

He watched Gintoki's silhouette in the dark making rounds slowly, and feeling oddly secure, he allowed his senses to dull until the world turned completely dark and he did not know of a thing anymore.

Chapter End Notes

well this took ages oops

Thirty Pieces of Silver

Chapter Notes

Heh.

Heh heh.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“If he doesn’t wake up, I’m going to strangle you,” Hijikata said darkly, standing above Sougo.

Sougo was dead asleep, though it was already almost noon, and no matter what they tried, they couldn’t wake him up. Of course, Hijikata checked his breathing and pulse as soon as he noticed that Sougo was completely in limbo even after sunrise, and to Hijikata’s great relief, he didn’t seem any more abnormal than usual. However, though he was sleeping soundly, and though his breath was even and light, he wouldn’t open his eyes.

“He is going to,” Gintoki said, though he sounded uncertain. “I’m... I did not expect it to knock him out so hard. When I take it, it just helps me sleep and I wake up refreshed the next morning.”

“Well... maybe it’s because he was exhausted,” Hijikata muttered in resignation and squatted beside his brother in arms. “And anyway, I have never seen you having trouble sleeping. You always sleep like a log and snore like a bear.”

“Only when I’m by your side,” Gintoki said and looked at the sky. The sun was shining, and the blue vastness above their heads was without a single cloud; in the far distance, there were a few birds of prey circling in the sky.

“At this rate, we’re going to reach the city after nightfall,” Hijikata said unhappily, “and I want you to keep in mind that it’s your fault.”

“Not that I planned this,” Gintoki shrugged his shoulders, “but it’s better for me this way. I’d rather not end up being recognised.”

Hijikata narrowed his eyes in suspicion. “You *didn’t* plan this, did you?”

Gintoki shook his head curtly. “I didn’t. If I could, I would get this over with as quickly as possible so that I’d have you safely caged again.”

“Caged?” Hijikata repeated. “So you realise?”

“Of course I do, what do you take me for?” Gintoki’s tone turned sour. “Of course I’m aware. Still, I’d rather keep you in my chambers like a damsel than have you run off.”

Hijikata scoffed, looking away from Sougo and towards the city. He could see it in the distance already, though that had little bearing on how long it was going to take before they reached it. He knew that as he had spent too many days idly, he had become a liability and it was because of him, too, that they were not as fast as they could be otherwise.

He wanted to hurry up and see Mitsuba.

He wanted to quickly see her and make sure she was alright.

He wanted to tell her how sorry he was.

He didn't want to tell her goodbye.

Though that was how it was, he was fully aware that it was his only option. It was also *her* only option; with Hijikata's whereabouts unknown, she was tied down. He knew and never doubted that she would wait for him faithfully, and if he were to die whilst they were still bound to one another by their promise, she wouldn't take another.

He also knew that she would suffer because of it, and her weak body might not hold. That was something he could not allow, and at the very least, he wished he could set her free. That promise, albeit something beautiful and shining, was not to become a burden to her. When they'd vowed, they did so wordlessly and in private, as there was no need for empty words nor witnesses – and now, he was going to trample this pure, fragile flower blossoming between them into the ground.

Sougo likely knew that as well. He'd never approved of Hijikata's and Mitsuba's mutual affection, but he did nothing, possibly not wanting to get in the way of his sister's happiness. Still, Hijikata felt that although Sougo had intended to bring Hijikata back at first, he would probably be more satisfied with an outcome where his big sister and Hijikata went their separate ways.

Hijikata didn't blame him for it. His path was a dangerous one, and if he ended up dying like a dog beside the street, it would likely cast a shadow over Mitsuba's life as well. It was his wish to see her lead a happy life, and he was aware that as long as he was in this line of work, that could not be fulfilled – but somewhere deep inside his heart he had hoped to retire soon, at least temporarily, to be able to settle down with her and start a family.

All of those dreams were now gone, akin to last year's snows.

Sougo groaned and rolled over, now face-down in the dirt. That lasted about two seconds, and just when Hijikata thought he should turn him on his back again, Sougo slowly sat up and blinked confusedly, looking around in an attempt to gather his bearings.

Hijikata exhaled silently in relief. He did not want to doubt Gintoki's words, but it was possible that Gintoki had for example miscalculated the dose, or might have brought a wrong kind of potion with him, and if that were to happen and resulted in Sougo's death... Hijikata did not want to imagine that.

Sougo looked up at the sky. "Why didn't you wake me up?" was his first sentence.

Hijikata opened his mouth, but Gintoki interjected, “Do you think we haven’t tried? You were sleeping like a log.”

Sougo narrowed his eyes and looked at Hijikata, then at Gintoki. As Gintoki’s face was covered and there was nothing Sougo could read just from Gintoki’s eyes, he turned towards Hijikata again. Hijikata, having no other option, just nodded. “I even tried pouring water on your face. It did nothing. I bet you haven’t slept for days.”

Sougo’s brows furrowed, but he did not reply; instead, he got up and began dusting his clothes off. “We should hurry,” he said curtly.

Hijikata nodded in agreement and made his way to his horse.

They reached the city just after sunset; the sky was quickly getting dark, and though it was late summer, the wind got kind of cold once the sun was behind the horizon.

“I’ll go ahead and talk to my sister first,” Sougo declared. “I can’t have you shocking her too much.”

Hijikata nodded with a frown. If his sudden appearance ended up straining Mitsuba too much and she’d die because of it, he’d never forgive himself.

Sougo rode off and Hijikata was left alone with Gintoki. He felt strange, his mind weighed down with worry. Gintoki kept silent, giving no signs of wanting to talk about this; it surprised Hijikata, but rather than sulking, Gintoki seemed to be immersed in thoughts. Not wanting to interrupt, he relied on his horse to walk with no rush.

“What are you going to tell her?” Gintoki asked eventually as his own horse followed Hijikata’s. His voice was curious, but not invasive.

“I don’t know,” Hijikata admitted. It only added to all of his worries that he was unsure of which words to choose to properly convey to Mitsuba that although he never wished for such a thing to happen, he was never coming back. What was worse, he had really hoped that he’d manage to talk to Sougo before reaching the city, but that did not happen. No matter what, the city guards must not be alerted to the White Demon’s presence. He knew that he was now concealing a wanted criminal, but he had given his word that he’d return to the valley with Gintoki. He was torn, but he couldn’t go back on his promise. Anyone’s opinion on this did not matter – he had chosen this fully aware that his actions would bring terrible consequences.

Gintoki was by his side silently, and Hijikata was not sure he welcomed this silence. Perhaps he would welcome it if Gintoki chose to talk instead, disrupting the sense of weight upon Hijikata’s shoulders by creating a distraction. There were times when Gintoki was carefree in a highly contagious way, and if he could somehow conjure that up right now, it could help.

However, Gintoki’s mouth was sealed shut and as his face was cloaked, Hijikata had no idea what truly was on Gintoki’s mind.

Or maybe... maybe it would not help at all. Hijikata wasn't sure that he wouldn't lash out at the other, because he was *very* tense, like the string of a crossbow, waiting to be set free. It might be so that Gintoki sensed it, sensed that Hijikata was best to be left with his feathers unruffled.

Like that crossbow, Hijikata's anxious feelings were probably going to be released at the drop of a hat.

Very slowly, he was making his way towards the house where Mitsuba lived.

It was technically Sougo's home as well, but he'd spend most of the time at the barracks instead. Sougo, in fear of leaving his sister all alone, arranged for a certain elderly woman to live in there as well; she was a servant of sorts, even if her only salary was that she could stay at that place for free. Hijikata did not remember that woman's name, but he was still grateful that she'd care for the sickly Mitsuba.

The woman did not care for him much. Every now and then he'd receive an earful from her, saying that whenever he appeared, Mitsuba's health worsened. It was saddening, and it was one of the reasons he tried to limit his visits a great deal, and oftentimes he'd come at night to make sure he wouldn't be seen by anyone.

Even then, he did not so much as touch Mitsuba. They were not married yet, and he could not bear the thought that she'd get badmouthed by her neighbours.

The house itself was a rather humble dwelling, but not so much so that it wouldn't have a garden around it; Sougo was, after all, bringing a rather reasonable salary home. They'd bought the house as soon as they had the money. It was Sougo's idea, as he wanted only the best for his sister.

Hijikata's own home was the barracks, and the barracks only. He did not have a house of his own, and all of his savings were in the bank. He barely needed anything, after all. He did make it so that something bad happened to him and he'd die, Mitsuba would receive half of his money; the other half would go to Kondo-san, the Shinsengumi's commander, as Hijikata felt greatly indebted to him. After all, it was he who showed Hijikata the righteous path of a warrior.

Righteous?

Lately, Hijikata had been questioning everything he knew, and he did not like it one bit.

When they'd finally reached the house, Hijikata stopped and turned towards Gintoki, who had been silent the whole time. "We're here," he said under his breath. "Wait for me nearby."

"Alright, just don't go spending the night there," Gintoki replied, and Hijikata could not decipher his tone.

"Moron," he mumbled and crossed the road. There was a dim light on in Mitsuba's room; the cicadas wouldn't stop playing their song, and Hijikata listened to it for a few moments, watching the starry sky, seeking courage.

He found none.

Even so, he stepped forth.

His horse remained in the street.

It was a first for him to come through the front door at this time of night, but he felt it would not be right for him to head straight to Mitsuba's window this time. Not with the news he bore.

He knocked on the front door and waited. It took a good several moments, but finally, he heard a shuffle from the inside; then, the inner panel of the door opened, followed by the outer one. The elderly woman who opened the door paled in the face, and as white as the moon's glow, she covered her mouth in a silent scream as though she saw a ghost.

Hijikata watched her blink several times. Then, she very blatantly checked if he had legs, and only after that did she speak. "Is it really you?"

"It is," Hijikata replied simply. "I am no ghost, as you can see."

"My goodness, the young lady is going to be delighted," the woman said, not at all sounding upset that Hijikata would appear, even though she did not use to like him in the least. "Her brother is visiting her right now, but if you wait just a little—" she stepped out of the way, allowing him to enter.

Hijikata walked in. "Thank you," he said, but his eyes already watched the way towards Mitsuba's room. He could faintly hear voices, unmistakably belonging to the Okita siblings.

He stood near the door, intending to wait.

Finally, after several minutes, Sougo opened the door and walked out. Upon seeing Hijikata, he frowned a little. "Go to her," he said, though his voice was far from compliant, "I'll leave you two alone."

Swallowing hard and ungracefully wiping his sweaty palms on his uniform, Hijikata steeled himself internally and stepped forth.

There she was in the dim light of her lamp, leaning her back onto a pile of pillows her brother had likely arranged for her so that she'd be comfortable. She was just as beautiful and lovable as Hijikata had remembered, if slightly skinnier and paler than when he'd seen her last. Her eyes, sparkling with anticipation, were fixated on the entrance, awaiting his arrival. The feelings they both used to conceal for the sake of Mitsuba's public image were now breaking through, and she could not look more delighted.

Hijikata took a deep breath. "I'm back," he said gently.

Mitsuba's slightly chapped lips curved into a smile. "You're really alive," she breathed out, her voice quivering with tears of relief. Hijikata's stomach contorted in pain; he was here not to announce his return, but to bid her farewell, and seeing her happy was making it all the

more difficult. He fell to his knees in front of her, bowing his head. All of his anxiety and nervousness were gone in a flash – now, all he felt was a deep, harrowing sorrow.

She sat up more and scooted closer, hanging her feet off the edge of the bed. He saw her hands resting in her lap for a moment, then one of them moved and caressed his hair gently. He reached up and grabbed it, then he took a hold of her other hand as well, and he inhaled shakily.

There was so much he wanted to tell her, but all the words got stuck in his throat and he couldn't let out a single one; he held her soft, cold hands a little tighter, and he brought them to his cheek, closing his eyes.

"I don't understand," she whispered. "Are you not glad that we've reunited?"

"I am," he said, and his voice failed him, "I am, but..."

"... but?" she uttered weakly.

"I cannot stay." He looked up to meet her eyes.

She retracted her hands slowly. "Why?"

Hijikata hung his head in shame. "I can't tell you that."

"Have you perhaps..." Mitsuba asked, and though her voice was barely audible, it did not quiver, "... found another?"

"No!" Hijikata looked up at her again instantly. No matter what, nobody in the world could replace Mitsuba and what she meant to him. Her existence held a special place in his heart. Not now, not ever, could there be another person as precious.

"Why have you come, then?"

He inhaled shakily. "I've come to annul our vows," he said uneasily, each word a stab to his own heart. "I won't be returning."

For a while, she did not reply as she studied his face in silence. "Tell me your reasons," she said strangely firmly for someone on her sickbed.

"I don't want you to be bound by our promise," he whispered, feeling that there was a bitter tear on his cheek. "After I leave, I'll be as good as dead, and I don't want to make you suffer the consequences of that."

Again, a while of silence. Then, she sighed softly. "Ever so considerate," she whispered. "I would have preferred a lie. Why couldn't you say that you don't want to see me anymore? That there isn't an ounce of warmth left in you for me? That you've met someone else to give your love to?"

"There's no way I'd do that," Hijikata shook his head. "If I said something like that, there's no telling what would happen to you. I couldn't bear seeing you hurt."

“You’re hurting me regardless,” she gave a small sad smile. “Sou-chan did not say anything that could prepare me for this.”

“I’m so sorry,” he breathed out. She wasn’t crying, but he could see that she wanted to.

“Why can’t you stay, then?” she insisted in a soft voice.

Hijikata swallowed hard. He did not want to say this, but he could not refuse her. “I’m still a prisoner,” he replied truthfully. Gintoki’s claims about him being an esteemed guest be damned, a prisoner was what he really was. The idea of freedom in that towering fortress was but an illusion, and he was well aware of that.

She watched him with an unspoken question in her eyes.

“I... I gave my word,” he said uneasily, “that I would return. I just wanted to see you one last time,” he finally admitted, hanging his head.

“What a fool of a man,” she whispered. Like brother, like sister, they both called him stupid and had every right to do so. Even Hijikata himself thought that he was extremely foolish to do something like this.

“Leave,” she said firmly.

He looked up at her sharply. “What?”

“Leave,” she repeated. “If this is how things are, you have no place here, isn’t that right?”

Gritting his teeth so hard it hurt, Hijikata got up abruptly. “You’re right,” he let out painfully through his clenched throat. “I...” He turned to her.

Their eyes met.

“Farewell,” she then said, wetness glistening in her eyes.

Hijikata hung his head and stormed out. He wanted to be out of here, right now, because he knew he could not bear the guilt. Her teary face was going to haunt his dreams, but he saw no other way. There was nothing else he could have said or done.

“Wait, Hijikata-san,” Sougo’s hand suddenly clutched his shoulder just as he was on the doorstep, and he was dragged back inside.

“What do you want?” Hijikata asked, his voice still a little hoarse; he had just broken both Mitsuba’s and his own heart to a million pieces, yet this bastard wouldn’t let him have a moment’s peace.

“Just... stay here for a moment longer,” Sougo said.

It couldn’t be seen clearly, because the entryway was dark, but after a moment, it became apparent that Sougo was *smiling*.

Hijikata's eyes widened in sudden horror. "What have you done?"

"I cut your chains," Sougo shrugged his shoulders nonchalantly. "Of course, that, and I couldn't pass up the reward for capturing the White Demon himself."

"You... how?" Hijikata let out, feeling his knees buckling. Gintoki did make sure not to be recognised...

"Did you think I was stupid, Hijikata-san?" Sougo shook his head, a crooked smile on his face. His eyes were dark. "It was obvious whom we had with us. Even with the hood covering his hair and face, there was no doubt. He carries himself like a leader. Don't get me wrong, I'm glad that you aren't going to torture my sister any longer, but I couldn't have let him escape, could I?"

Hijikata pushed Sougo out of the way, not minding the thud he heard behind himself. With heartbeat drumming deafeningly in his ears, he stormed out to the street.

There, in the light of torches, two dozen of uniformed soldiers stood around a single man. Several were holding him in check with their swords drawn while one was tying that man's wrists with a rope. Someone had pulled the headscarf off of his head, revealing a puff of white hair.

It was clear at first glance that there had been no fight. They must have captured him dishonourably, without giving him a chance to defend himself. As a soldier and a policeman, Hijikata understood this, but as a warrior, he was outraged. The tall tales concerning the White Demon must have drawn out the cowardice of men. *Like a bunch of bandits*, Hijikata thought bitterly.

"Move!" one of them commanded. Gintoki raised his head, and just by chance, his gaze fell on Hijikata. In a split second, his collected expression changed, a clear reproach and the feelings of betrayal written on his face. Suddenly, there was no trace of the White Demon and his rumoured strength and pride; Gintoki was looking at Hijikata with a pair of terribly hurt and deeply disappointed eyes.

How could you?

The moment passed, and the police took off. Gintoki turned away, his shoulders sagging, and he hung his head, letting them haul him along without any fuss.

Hijikata clenched his fists, breathing heavily. He didn't have anything to do with this, he didn't alert the guards, he didn't betray Gintoki's trust. It was Sougo's doing. It was *all* Sougo's doing. Because of Sougo, Hijikata had let go of Mitsuba, and Gintoki ended up getting arrested.

However... was that not a good thing?

He was now free.

Chapter End Notes

I just want to clarify, this isn't over yet.

Demon's Mark

Chapter Notes

And we ride on!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Hijikata found his own quarters completely unchanged; his rooms were still his own, and they were in the same state he had left them in – even though he'd been gone for almost half a year. He wasn't sure how to feel about it. People have come in and cleaned the gathering dust, and the paperwork he was in charge of before his departure was gone, but aside from that, everything was the very same.

Last night, after Gintoki's arrest, he stumbled in wearily and had fallen asleep in his bed without considering that these rooms might have gotten assigned to someone else in his absence. He didn't even change, nor did he wash up – the events of that night had left him feeling numb and exhausted, and he couldn't think clearly at all.

The morning that arrived next was not much better, but at least physically speaking, he did not feel as bad as the evening before. He got up and walked around his room for a while, wanting to make sure that nothing had changed. After all the crap he had gone through, the last thing he needed would be to end up homeless.

Thankfully, none of his things were moved. His closet, too, was unchanged, though Hijikata discovered upon opening it that someone had washed all of his clothes. Normally, that would make him a little upset, as he naturally never liked people going through his things, but just this once, he absolutely welcomed it. Finally, he took off his worn uniform and slipped comfortably into his civil yukata. For now, at least before he had to go and report for duty, he wanted to have a moment or two to himself.

He was not feeling great.

He was, in fact, feeling the opposite of that.

His head was beginning to ache. When he glanced out, he saw that it was well past sunrise, so he was not really surprised. It never did him well to sleep in late.

Yawning, he stretched, and then he paused for a moment, staring at the ceiling.

He was back, and it felt surreal. He never thought he would enter this room again, let alone return to his duties. In a way, he welcomed it, because back at the castle, he would have barely anything to do, aside from dealing with Gintoki and his antics, and—

Now hold on just a damn second, he stopped in his tracks.

Of course he welcomed the twist of fate which allowed his return. He had missed his job, he had missed the city and its people, so of course he welcomed this. What Sougo did was underhanded and it did feel like a betrayal. However, it was the reasonable thing to do in Sougo's position, and thus Hijikata could not blame Sougo for it – if, and only if, those were Sougo's true motives.

He made a mental note to question Sougo about this later.

He stretched again, and his gaze fell onto his calendar. Someone, perhaps the same person who would clean this place, made sure that it would show the right date.

It was a holiday.

Not that members of the watch really did have any holidays – nevertheless, Hijikata chose to take this day to slowly readjust. It was better than ending up causing a blunder, and considering Hijikata was not feeling the best at the moment, he figured it wouldn't be the smartest idea to jump into action headfirst.

He then remembered that on holidays, the open air bath that was right around the corner would be open even before noon – exclusively for the policemen. Back then, he rarely used it, but today he felt that he needed it. Not having the option of this luxury for half a year made him realise that he missed it.

He grabbed a towel and walked out leisurely. On the way, he got held up several times as he met a few members of the Shinsengumi who were surprisingly happy to see him. He had not expected to feel *this* welcome.

As soon as he entered the bath house, he heard a familiar voice.

“Toshi!”

Hijikata braced himself internally, and as soon as he did, he was met with a bear hug. “Kondo-san,” he said, though a little tensely, as the commander was squeezing him so hard that Hijikata could barely breathe.

“We've missed you so much,” the commander finally let go, and Hijikata could now see that Kondo was weeping tears of joy. “Where have you been? What's happened to you?”

Hijikata inhaled to reply, but Kondo continued immediately. “I'm heading out now,” he said, his tone a little saddened, “but after I get back, you're going to have to tell me everything! Okay?”

Giving up, Hijikata just nodded.

“Good, good!” Kondo patted Hijikata's shoulder firmly. “You just take it easy now, alright?”

Hijikata watched him leave, and only after Kondo was out of sight did he turn to go further in. He greeted the owner, ignored his surprised expression and waltzed past, quickly making his way towards the bathing area.

As he was undressing, he realised that this was the first time in about half a year to get naked without being worried about getting ambushed and or harassed by a certain someone. After all, the first time Gintoki slapped his ass was not too long after Hijikata got captured.

He walked into the bathing area and saw that it was completely empty. That was a great feeling; quickly, he washed his body with the cold water that was in buckets at the side, and then he hesitated at the edge of the rather large but shallow pool.

Finally, he entered the water and exhaled slowly as he felt warmth quickly permeating his body. In no rush, he made his way to the opposite end of the bath, wanting to see if someone else were to enter – he would feel uneasy otherwise.

He sat down and closed his eyes, leaning his back against the side of the pool. The heat made his mind a little muddled soon, but he let it be, slowly melting into the stone tiling as he closed his eyes comfortably.

He opened them again when he heard someone enter. To his mild displeasure, it was Sougo. Considering the events of last night, Sougo was not among the people Hijikata would wish to see at the moment. While he did need to talk to him, he really did not want to.

Sougo made his way towards Hijikata and sat down next to him without reserve. “How are you faring, Hijikata-san?” he asked.

Hijikata had expected a great deal of mockery, so a question that seemed genuine caught him a little off-guard. He shrugged his shoulders. He did not exactly want to share his worries and feelings of uncertainty with Sougo of all people – especially after the stunt Sougo pulled last night. “Did your sister ask you to check on me?” he instead answered that question with another.

Sougo did not say either yes or no, he just sat in silence for a while. “Are you worried?” he said then.

“About what?” Hijikata narrowed his eyes slightly in suspicion.

“You tell me, Hijikata-san,” Sougo stared back, unblinking.

Hijikata clicked his tongue. This guy was like a venomous lizard. “I’m not,” he replied sourly. “I’ll be back on track in no time.”

Sougo smirked and leaned back, closing his eyes. Hijikata’s eyebrow cocked. *What the hell are you smirking about?*

“Yesterday was surprising,” Sougo spoke, his eyes still closed. “I was rather taken aback that the White Demon did not fight back in the slightest. You know, a part of me expected him to just take the whole unit apart. Back when we got caught, he was way scarier than last night.”

Hijikata clenched his teeth briefly. “Sougo,” he said then quietly. “Why did you do it?”

Sougo raised his head and gave him a long, hard stare. “Because, Hijikata-san, you fully intended to abandon your loyalties in favour of your personal promise.”

Hijikata inhaled sharply. “I didn’t—”

“Of course you did,” Sougo’s expression turned dismissive. “The fact that you didn’t realise it makes everything so much worse. Your duty is to the state, not to some bandit from the woods. I don’t understand how you could possibly think otherwise.”

Hijikata opened his mouth, then he closed it. There was so much he wanted to express that he did not know where to start. “I didn’t see any other way of returning,” he said eventually.

“That was, again, because of a promise you’ve made. And you did not intend to stay,” Sougo pointed out. “What a selfish bastard. Have you forgotten who you are?”

“What do you mean by that?” Hijikata growled. It felt as though Sougo was picking a fight.

“During your absence, the entirety of the Shinsengumi nearly fell apart,” Sougo was now frowning. “I don’t like you, but we were useless as a whole. Something vital was missing. They need you for some reason. Don’t tell me that you’re unaware how important you are. Kondo-san was bawling his eyes out every night, and it was shameful to see him with red eyes and sleep deprived every morning. Don’t you *dare* act like that had nothing to do with you.”

Now, Hijikata had to look away. It was true that Mitsuba aside, the Shinsengumi was his entire life, and there was never anything else he would dedicate himself to. He did not consider himself particularly important, but what Sougo said just now made him feel guilty to the core. There were debts, and there was his life’s work, and Gintoki just picked him up like a sugar ornament off a cake. Worse yet, Hijikata did more or less get eaten, which, he smirked bitterly, made that comparison a little more fitting.

“You could have at least warned me,” he said in the end.

“He was right there the entire time,” Sougo shook his head, “plus I can somehow see you ruining that plan. You got completely brainwashed there, Hijikata-san. Don’t you see? He’s a *wanted criminal*, yet you wanted to run off with him again,” he rubbed his forehead in exasperation.

Hijikata sighed. “I just don’t like that he got ambushed like that,” he said. He wasn’t present when it happened, of course, but it was rather easy to picture from the aftermath.

“Not everyone is that honourable knight that you are,” Sougo retorted. “In a fair fight, there’s no way we would have gotten him. I know his kind.”

You really don’t, Hijikata thought. *He’s like nothing I’ve ever seen.*

Sougo continued. “I’m doing you a favour, Hijikata-san. If you don’t tell anyone, your crime will be left unspoken of.” He formed a bowl with his hands and splashed some water on his face, then he swept his hair back with his fingers. “Although I couldn’t care less if you died off in some ditch,” he added with a crooked smile, “to the Shinsengumi, you’re indispensable. That being said, you should be thankful to me for saving your career.”

Hijikata pursed his lips briefly. Sougo was right. He *should* feel grateful – but for some reason, he didn't, and that puzzled him. He did not feel an ounce of gratitude.

"I won't tell anyone that you almost became a traitor," Sougo turned to him again. "As long as you return to work the way you should."

"Threatening me?" Hijikata smirked. This was more like the Sougo he knew.

"Jus making sure you know what the deal is," Sougo replied calmly.

Hijikata let out a chuckle and leaned back as well. Sougo's accusations aside, he *was* happy to be back, even if it was going to be difficult to readjust to his packed schedule and heaps of work. It was bittersweet, and it hurt a little, and the whole situation with Mitsuba was like a reopened wound. Gintoki's humiliating arrest wasn't helping, either – but all that was eventually going to pass. Logically, he knew that, and he was aware that all he could do was to resign to it.

"His trial is today," Sougo said after a few moments. "I doubt he's going to get off scot-free."

"That was quick," Hijikata murmured.

"A criminal of his calibre? Of course they'd want to see him dealt with as soon as possible," Sougo shrugged his shoulders. "If I were to guess, he's got a week to live at most."

"The gallows?"

"Probably." Sougo yawned. "I don't think you should be at the trial, Hijikata-san. Just take a day off, as you should anyway."

"I don't know what your image of me is right now," Hijikata protested a little, "but now that he's in jail, he's got nothing to do with me anymore."

"If you say so," Sougo shrugged his shoulders, "then do as you see fit."

Hijikata thought about it briefly. Though his implications were off, Sougo was right that Hijikata shouldn't be at the trial – less so because it would pain him, and more so out of his remaining respect for Gintoki. The expression Gintoki gave him just before he got hauled away was downright agonised, and Hijikata did not want to unnecessarily hurt him more.

The door at the opposite side of the room rattled, and when Hijikata raised his head, he saw it was Yamazaki who entered. With that, the topic was closed; with a third party present, they couldn't discuss this any further.

"Chief!" Yamazaki called. "You really *are* back!"

Hijikata watched him come closer, and determined it was just about the right time to leave. He got up, nodding at Yamazaki as he walked past; then, he remembered something and turned back. "Yamazaki..." he began, wanting to ask who did his paperwork in his absence.

Yamazaki and Sougo exchanged glances in horrified silence. “What?!” he snapped at them both.

“Chief, y-your back...” Yamazaki stuttered, his eyes still bulging out in evident shock. Sougo regained his composure faster, but still seemed more than uncomfortable.

Hijikata briefly froze. What about it, he wanted to ask, but then he looked away instead. “Just ignore that,” he said, and he only wished that he could sound more confident. After all, he had no idea what alarmed Yamazaki so.

Calmly and in no hurry, he made his way out of the bathing area – and then, as soon as he knew he was out of their sight, he rushed to the changing room.

There was a mirror on the wall; Hijikata turned his back to it, looking over his shoulder. A chill ran down his spine, and his eyes widened in horror.

Like a cruel joke, there was a large pattern on his back etched into his skin, glaring white like a scar. It started between his butt cheeks and crept its way up his back in zig-zag branches like lightning, getting thinner and thinner the farther up his spine it was. Hijikata reached to his lower back and touched it, and he realised it was completely desensitised. He even tried to dig his nails into it, but it felt like his skin *died* in those places – he couldn’t feel a thing there.

“What the fuck,” he muttered under his breath. What on earth happened for this to appear on his back?

His hand slowly followed the white line lower, and the moment he touched the root of it, he remembered.

Gintoki came inside that night. Was this the result?

Then again, what other reason could there be?

Hijikata’s heart sank. Even though he was no longer bound by Gintoki, the traces of this man were never going to disappear. It hit him then how terribly guilty he felt; this mark was a reminder of his betrayal, one he could not erase, burned into his skin from the inside like a stigma. Nobody else could understand the meaning of it and that was good, but the pain stemming from that jagged pattern was inevitably his to bear.

Sighing heavily, he leaned his forehead on the wall. He *definitely* shouldn’t go to the trial.

Like in a trance, he got dressed, and he walked back to the headquarters with his mind foggy. It was strange; until he saw that marking on his back, he didn’t feel this much guilt.

He sat down in his room and stared at the ceiling.

Gintoki *was* a criminal. He was someone whose name was on the list of the most dangerous individuals out there. Hijikata *knew* this.

Gintoki had locked him up.

Gintoki had forcibly taken him in ways beyond Hijikata's imagination.

Gintoki was the leader of an entire valley of cutthroats and thieves.

Gintoki *deserved* the gallows.

Chapter End Notes

If you see any typos / errors / plothes / unfinished sentences, let me know. The same goes for any thoughts, impressions, or questions that you might have. I want to know them. Getting to see what people think makes me happy.

The Crumbling Walls

Several days had passed, and during those, Hijikata hadn't slept a wink. The initial denial he attempted to force himself into faded the first night after Gintoki's trial; Gintoki had been sentenced to death and was to be hung by the end of the week, just as Sougo had predicted.

Guilt-ridden and full of questions he was likely never going to get the answers to, Hijikata moved through his day-to-day life like a ghost. He did more or less maintain a calm and collected façade on the outside so that the people around him did not notice he was struggling, but his mood got steadily worse and worse, and he was cranky at best. That wasn't exactly surprising to anyone, though – everyone had heard about his break-up with Mitsuba, and they mostly chalked it up to that.

Oddly enough, Mitsuba's case was not what bothered him the most. Perhaps it was due to their long-term separation prior, but despite being sad, Hijikata was not nearly as affected by it as he had expected to be. He did ask Sougo about her health several times and got brushed off every time, and from that, he could only assume that it did not worsen. Surely, Sougo would not pass up an opportunity to rub it in if anything happened to Mitsuba.

Instead, his head ached for a different reason, apart from sleep deprivation.

He didn't go to the trial. He couldn't. If he did, he'd have to testify against Gintoki, and to his own dismay, he knew he didn't have the stomach for that.

He had not gone to Gintoki's trial, but he heard that there were several accusations brought up that he doubted heavily. One of them, and probably the most unbelievable one of them all, was that Gintoki had had Hijikata tortured with the use of dark magic. At first, Hijikata had no idea where that one stemmed from, but then he realised – Sougo and Yamazaki saw his scarring in the baths, and this was the conclusion they must have reached.

Worse yet, Gintoki did not deny any of it. Instead, according to Hijikata's source, he admitted everything, whether it was true or not, proudly in a confident voice, as though he considered all of those crimes *accomplishments*.

Why he did that, Hijikata could not fathom. Many of the accusations thrown his way were likely false, but Gintoki did not object at all.

There were two days left until Gintoki's final morning, and Hijikata's stomach was so clenched that he couldn't eat breakfast lest he threw up. He forced some tea down his own throat at least, but he knew that at this rate, he was going to get sick. At the very least, he wanted answers. Considering Gintoki was going to die, Hijikata had to ask him as soon as possible, otherwise these things would never get cleared up because Hijikata was not going back to the valley. Plus, even if he chose to return there for some insane reason, there were matters only Gintoki could explain.

Why did Gintoki let himself get arrested without fighting back? Hijikata was convinced that Gintoki could have easily killed them all if he wanted to, and he could have fled. He didn't

even *try* to defend himself, however, and allowed himself to be captured like a sitting bird.

What was the meaning of the marking on Hijikata's skin? By now, he was certain that it had everything to do with Gintoki, and there were two reasons for this conviction of his. One, he did not recall anything besides *that night* that would be extraordinary enough to warrant such a terrible-looking scar to appear on his body. Two, every time his guilt reached the most painful point, he could feel that scar respond to it, if only a little. It was like a small vibration running up his back.

He didn't like it in the least.

Why in the world did Gintoki confess to crimes he did not commit? As far as Hijikata knew, there was no benefit to it whatsoever. The only things Gintoki achieved was that the trial took less time, and that his death sentence got worse, to a point where the only execution more humiliating than the gallows would be to get ripped apart by four horses. Hijikata did not peg Gintoki for a fool, but his actions suggested otherwise.

Why did Takasugi act like it would cause the end of the world if Gintoki got in danger, and why didn't anything happen, then? Gintoki was in grave danger right now, just waiting to be executed, but nothing was happening. Gintoki was sitting calmly in his cell, awaiting his own bitter end, and as far as Hijikata knew, he was taking it in a rather composed manner. It seemed that the man did not lose even a smidge of his dignity, and Hijikata was not there to see it.

To be perfectly honest, he did want to talk to Gintoki before the big day; he wanted to let him know that he was not behind what Sougo caused, and he wanted to send him off on his final journey with as much respect as possible. Gintoki deserved it, after all, at least as a warrior – even if he did become a criminal, he had his unblemished honour, and Hijikata admired that and was a little jealous. The way Gintoki viewed honour was likely different from Hijikata's own, but that did not matter – what really mattered was that the man lived in a way where he never experienced shame.

Hijikata admired that, and he was envious. As for him, he felt at least a small twinge of shame almost every day, though he did not always bother to address it in his mind. There were promises he needed to fulfil, there were rules he had to adhere to, and above all, there was his duty to the city. Whenever he felt that he was not doing enough, he felt shameful, he felt that he *failed*. However, in contrast to that, it seemed to him that there was no room in Gintoki's mind for such an unpleasant concept. Gintoki did not dwell on his failings, he moved on, not feeling shameful in the least – and that, possibly, was why Hijikata felt always a little overshadowed in Gintoki's presence. Gintoki appeared to be straight like an arrow, and Hijikata thought himself a smaller person in comparison.

In a way, it was unbelievably frustrating, because despite Gintoki's obnoxious character, there was a strange sense of purity that Hijikata had longed to have but never found in himself. He'd never encountered it in the city, either. While Gintoki clearly did have his share of worries, he was fearless and did not allow himself to be blindsided by it. He was an honourable and strong man, a prime example of what a warrior should be.

If only he did not stand on the wrong side of the law.

If only.

If they'd met under different circumstances, perhaps they'd even be able to become friends, and Hijikata wouldn't have to watch Gintoki die.

Then again, Hijikata doubted that he was going to have the stomach to go see the execution, anyway.

He curled up on the floor by his desk, feeling wholly in pain. He thought it was a waste; Gintoki's advances on him aside, it would be a damn pity to lay him to dust. There was no other man like him out there.

Rubbing his stinging eyes, Hijikata got up unsteadily. He at least had to ask Gintoki a couple of things.

With that thought, he walked over to his closet and pulled out his uniform. Up until now, he had been wearing casual clothes, but it was unthinkable to leave his room dressed as a *civilian*.

As he slipped his jacket on and reached for his belt, he remembered the needlessly expensive robes Gintoki had him wear as though Hijikata was a trained monkey. In response, his scar sent a cold shiver up his spine. It began aching a day after Gintoki's trial, and it gradually worsened. It wasn't a sharp pain, and sometimes it turned into a strange buzzing sensation, one he came to hate very quickly.

In a deeply foul mood, he finished dressing and made his way out onto the street and towards the prison walls.

To be allowed a prison visit was a lengthy process. To be allowed to visit someone like Gintoki was even a lengthier one. He'd entered the prison while it was still bright outside, but to fill out all the necessary papers took so much time that the sun had begun to set when he finally managed to receive the final permission.

It would probably have been easier if the Shinsengumi had any members in the prison guard, but they were not closely associated, and Hijikata had a slight suspicion that the prison guards did not care for the Shinsengumi much. Technically speaking, he was above them in command, but he had no power over the procedures they were using. He *could* have just ordered them to let him in, but he wasn't in the mood to get into petty fights over something he could obtain through conventional methods.

One of the prison guards dealing with him led him through a door at the end of the guards' office and continued towards the dungeons. Hijikata didn't need anyone to show him where the solitary cells were, but such was the procedure – and it was only logical.

Gintoki's cell, though separated from all others, was the standard type with a guard table in front of a set of iron bars. They didn't need to put Gintoki into a special cell for magic users, nor did they need a guard versed in magic.

He entered, and the two guards stationed there jumped to their feet; when they recognised him, they saluted in greeting – as they should when meeting an officer of a higher rank. He gave them an acknowledging nod and looked behind the bars. Gintoki was facing the back wall and couldn't see anything happening behind him. Though he was in a sorry state, covered in dirt and bruises, with his clothes torn, he was sitting upright, his spirit shining through it brightly like a star.

Hijikata took a few steps in, and watched that glow instantly diminish.

“Have you come to laugh at me?” Gintoki turned his head. There was no blame in his eyes, not anymore – just resignation and sadness. Hijikata felt a bitter taste spread across his tongue.

He didn't respond. Instead, he turned towards the guards. “Everybody, out.”

“Sir?” the highest-ranked one of the guards tilted his head in confusion. Both of the guardsmen knew that they shouldn't leave their post, but even if they did not know who Hijikata was, his uniform alone told them that this person was their superior and as such should not be questioned. Still, they hesitated. Hijikata couldn't really blame them for it. It was better to be punished lightly for being uncooperative than to be punished severely for leaving their post. They needed an explanation.

Hijikata's expression darkened. “I'm here to *question* the prisoner,” he said in a menacing tone, casually laying his hand onto the hilt of the dagger by his waist. “I want everyone *out*. Now.”

“Sir.” The guard saluted, and in that moment, Hijikata could see it written on the guard's face that the rumour that the White Demon had tortured him had spread even outside the Shinsengumi; it wouldn't be strange for him to want to exact revenge on that man.

They gathered their dice which they were using to kill time, and then they made a speedy escape. The same guard who briefly spoke with Hijikata handed him the keys on the way.

Hijikata watched the guards leave, a grim expression on his face; the keys were cold in his hand. Only after the room turned silent did he look at Gintoki.

Their eyes met, and Gintoki averted his gaze. “Why are you here?” he asked, and Hijikata swallowed hard. There was so much defeat in Gintoki's tone, and he was to blame for it.

“Am I not allowed to come?” he replied and stepped closer.

“I didn't want to see you again,” Gintoki said simply.

“I... I need to ask you some things,” Hijikata explained himself uneasily. He could understand why Gintoki said that, but it felt like a needle to his heart.

“I'm not interested.” Gintoki's voice was hollow.

Hijikata took an unsteady breath. “Then... at least let me tell you this,” he forced out of his clenched throat, looking at the ground. “I did not intend to lead you to a trap. It wasn't... my

doing. Not directly. I didn't mean... for this to happen."

There was a rustle, and when he raised his head, he could see that Gintoki was now facing him completely. "Really?"

Hijikata nodded. "Really."

Gintoki's shoulders finally relaxed, and he covered his face with his palms. "That's a relief," he murmured.

Hijikata felt a twinge of guilt again. "Why didn't you fight back?" he asked in a whisper.

Gintoki let his hands fall into his lap; there was a disarming smile on his face, though the rims of his eyes seemed to be glistening even in the dim light of his cell. "I thought you betrayed me."

Hijikata's breath hitched. "You..."

"I couldn't live without you," Gintoki added, his gaze still glued to Hijikata's face. "I thought for sure that you broke your promise so that you could be with your lady friend."

For a moment, Hijikata kept silent; the scar on his back was burning. "Just why do you care so much for me?" he asked in the end.

Gintoki smiled again and did not reply.

A Glimmer of Hope

Chapter Notes

Sorry for posting this so late. Like many of us, I haven't been in a good place mentally in these recent weeks. I do feel a certain degree of responsibility as a creator, since this way I am providing a way to spend time for those who enjoy reading my stories, so I do hope you'll accept my apology.

Also, as always, if you see any typos/errors/unfinished sentences, let me know. I am reading the comments and I fix everything.

By the way, if you feel like it, you can follow me on Instagram @rison_iinekin. I've only just started it so there's nothing there, but I've been hoping to maybe write and post some original stories up here, and that IG account should be dedicated to that, mostly. Of course, if you have any questions/commentary regarding my fanfics, you can contact me there as well. I don't know if this is a good idea, but I thought I might as well give it a try.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Taking an uneasy breath, Hijikata staggered backwards and sat down onto one of the chairs by the guards' table, and he leaned his elbows on his knees, holding his head. This, this was *heavy*, incredibly so, and he was not sure how to handle it. Gintoki was sitting there behind the bars, looking at him as if there was nothing he regretted anymore – as though knowing that Hijikata did not betray him allowed him to finally make peace.

He shouldn't have allowed things to come to this point.

He shouldn't have.

But he did anyway.

“You can leave now,” Gintoki said, his voice calm. “Thanks for coming. I’m glad I got to see you again.”

Hijikata clenched his teeth so hard it hurt, and he got up slowly, feeling that he did not have nearly enough strength in his legs; he turned his back to the prisoner and looked at the door leading out of the cell. Slowly, as though in a daze, he climbed the first step and looked around as if this was his first time coming here.

He looked at Gintoki again.

Their eyes met.

Hijikata's brows furrowed; there were things left unfinished. He turned back and swiftly walked closer, then he unlocked the door of the cell and stepped inside. Without a word, he knelt beside Gintoki and reached out to his cuffs.

"What are you doing?" Gintoki whispered in apparent disbelief.

"Breaking the law," Hijikata murmured in response.

"If you do this," Gintoki said and tried to stop him by moving his wrists away, "you're going to become a traitor for real this time."

Hijikata looked him in the eye. "I know," he then simply replied, grabbing Gintoki's hands and pulling them closer. As he inserted the key into the cuffs, he hesitated briefly, then he finally turned it, bitterness assaulting his senses. He was disgusted with himself.

"I forced you to swear that we're to return together," Gintoki sighed, cupping Hijikata's cheeks with his palms, "but if you're going to make this kind of face, I'd rather free you of that promise. You don't have to do this. Just leave me to my fate."

Hijikata pursed his lips. "No," he said decisively and got up, then he reached out to Gintoki. "Come."

Gintoki did not take his hand, and as he got up, his face was wry. "Are you sure?" he asked, backing away a little. "If they catch us, they're going to hang us both."

"Shut up and come," Hijikata growled and grabbed Gintoki's forearm. He dragged him out of the cell uncompromisingly and hauled him towards the end of the room. It was a dead-end; there were no doors, no stairs to use.

"What is your plan here?" Gintoki whispered.

Hijikata wordlessly pointed upwards.

Hidden out of sight so as not to tempt a reckless convict, there was an air shaft in the ceiling. It was covered with a rusty iron grate which was cemented to the stone.

"We're going to have to rip out the grate," Hijikata said under his breath, "and it's going to make noise once we do. I know they left us alone, but I don't know how far they've gone, so once it's loose, you're going to have to quickly climb on my shoulders. I'll hoist you up."

"Wait, what about you?" Gintoki protested. "If they catch you freeing me..." His gaze fell behind Hijikata. "The table!"

Hijikata turned back to eye said table and pursed his lips. "I doubt it'll hold," he shook his head. "It looks flimsy."

"It only needs to hold for a bit. You jump up and I'll catch you."

Hijikata went silent for a moment. "You reckless bastard," he murmured then and moved over to the table to bring it closer to have it at the ready. "I can't believe I'm doing this."

Gintoki grinned. “So,” he said, “how are we going to bring the grate down?”

Hijikata looked up again. He did not want to risk breaking the table before they could use it, plus it could make a lot of noise as well, and he didn’t feel like ringing the alarm prematurely.

He thought about it for a second.

“You don’t actually know, do you?” Gintoki said. “I’ll just go back to my cell.”

Hijikata ignored him; there was no way he was letting Gintoki do that, of course – not after he’d resolved to betray his country for the idiot. He untied his belt, put his dagger down, and then he attached the key ring he’d received from the guards to one end; then, silently praying the concrete around the grate was weak enough to crack on his first try, he tossed the keys upwards. The key-heavy end of the belt hooked over one of the bars of the grate, but it was too short to grab both ends.

“Lift me up,” Hijikata said to Gintoki. “When I give the signal, you let go of me and shield your eyes.”

“Ooh, I like it when you take the lead,” Gintoki chuckled.

“Save that for when we’re both out,” Hijikata retorted, still holding the keyless end of his belt.

Still smiling, Gintoki squatted and locked his arms around Hijikata’s legs. Then, he stood up, and as Hijikata rose, the keyring came lower. It was just barely, but Hijikata managed to get a hold of it. “Ready?” he asked.

“Yep.”

“Alright,” Hijikata sifted through his clenched teeth. “Now!”

Gintoki let go, and Hijikata fell.

As the grate was too high for a single person to reach, it was not made very sturdily, and it had been there for quite a while, so it was worn out by the ever-starved tooth of time. It only held on for a moment.

Hijikata closed his eyes. Everything slowed down. His fingers clutching his belt loosened, and he braced himself for impact.

An arm pulled him backwards.

Hijikata ended his fall atop Gintoki on the floor. The grate clanged at their feet.

“Are you stupid?!” Gintoki snapped. “The grate was going to hit you!”

Hijikata inhaled shakily. He had known that the falling grate was going to hit his head since the moment he decided to do this. His half-baked plan was stupid, he knew that as well, but he had to get Gintoki out no matter the cost, and his – Gintoki’s – time was limited. He did

not intend to climb into the vent with Gintoki in the first place. He didn't think he would be able to.

He never expected Gintoki to be fast enough to help.

For a heartbeat, neither of them moved.

Then, Hijikata quickly scrambled to his feet. "Come on," he said, "hurry up!"

He took a shoulder-width stance underneath the vent and gestured at Gintoki to come closer. When Gintoki did so, Hijikata bent his knees a little and let Gintoki climb up, to his shoulders, and then he raised his hands as support for Gintoki to stand up. Gintoki was heavy, but not as much as Hijikata had expected. It was possible that he had lost some weight due to stress.

Just as Gintoki grabbed the upper edge of the vent and began to pull himself up, a guard entered the door. She was probably alerted by the sound of the grate hitting the ground; the solitary cells were usually silent, so this much noise was bound to draw attention.

Her eyes widened and she turned on her heel, running out. She was alone, so she probably did not want to take Hijikata on; it was a smart decision, but it also meant she was going to alert the other guards.

"Come on, the table, quick!"

Hijikata pulled it closer and climbed on it.

The table wobbled under his weight.

Clenching his teeth, Hijikata jumped with all his might.

The table fell apart under his feet, but it did not matter.

Gintoki's hands locked around his forearms and he got pulled up into the narrow space of the vent, high enough to be able to get his lower half in as well. He could hear someone running into the cell below, and he exhaled shakily.

This was it.

He, too, was now a fugitive.

Gintoki whispered something, but Hijikata couldn't hear him over the blood pumping in his ears. "Go," he whispered and pointed forwards. Someone below them was now yelling orders.

Gintoki somehow managed to turn around, though it took him a few moments, and he began inching forward. Thankfully, the vent was not nearly as narrow as Hijikata feared. Just as thankfully, he was not claustrophobic, so even though it was unpleasant, he could handle it.

They began making their way forward through the crawlspace in complete darkness.

“Do you know where this is headed?” Gintoki said after a while.

“There are multiple exits, and I have no idea which way we’re going,” Hijikata said without beating around the bush. “Try feeling for a breeze, though; ideally, we should end up at the exit by the lake.”

“They might be expecting that,” Gintoki pointed out.

“They won’t,” Hijikata said, shaking his head, though Gintoki couldn’t see it. “I can’t swim. I told you that before.”

“I thought you just said that you weren’t a good swimmer,” Gintoki said. He stopped, and Hijikata bumped into him.

“I only ever swam as a child, and that was more uncoordinated flailing than anything else,” Hijikata explained. “All I had to do was to stay above water until someone pulled me out. I can swim as well as a brick. In other words, I can’t.”

“You’re lucky I can, then,” Gintoki said with a chuckle.

“Why did you stop?” Hijikata addressed the problem at hand.

“There’s a…” Gintoki hesitated briefly, “… a crossroads? I’m not sure which way to turn.”

Hijikata opened his mouth to speak, but suddenly, he had a *really* strong feeling that he should tell Gintoki to turn left. As he wasn’t sure where it came from, he stopped himself from saying it. Was it Takasugi telling him to do this? Was Takasugi even capable of such things? Actually, speaking of that, it was odd that Takasugi did not seek Hijikata out. Unless, of course, he had foreseen that Hijikata would free Gintoki…

He rolled his eyes. *Fine*. Whoever was giving him advice… “Turn left,” he said.

“You sure?” Gintoki said doubtfully.

“No,” Hijikata replied, “but it’s as good a guess as any, and we can’t stay here.”

“Fair enough.” Gintoki began moving again.

Hijikata followed him silently; every now and then, they’d get some light, as they were passing by the vent exits. There was yelling, stomping, clanging of weapons – the prison was on high alert.

Whenever they were by an exit, Hijikata subconsciously held his breath.

After a while, he realised that the rock under his hands and by now bruised forearms and knees, as well as the ceiling he’d occasionally bump his head against, were wet. The air was getting colder, too.

“I smell water,” Gintoki said. Hijikata nodded to himself as if to confirm a hunch. He smelled it too, although for the most part, all he could smell were Gintoki’s feet. Once, Gintoki farted

and Hijikata was momentarily ready to call the whole rescue mission off right then and there.

The air shaft began to rise, and they had to brace against the walls to be able to get up the steep slope. Then, it began descending a little again, and Hijikata realised it was because the builders did not want rainwater to get inside.

Over Gintoki's silhouette, he caught a glimpse of the night sky, strangely bright in comparison to the darkness they'd just spent about an hour in.

The vent exit on this side was not covered by a grate. Gintoki peeked out carefully. "There are no guards waiting for us," he said under his breath. "You were right."

Hijikata exhaled in partial relief.

"I'm gonna jump into the lake," Gintoki said, half-turning to see Hijikata. "I'll catch you. Try not to make too much noise."

"How the f—" Hijikata began, but Gintoki suddenly vanished from his view.

There was a splash, but only barely – it might have been just a fish.

Hijikata crawled to the exit.

He could see Gintoki's white hair on the water several meters below him, and he swallowed hard. He did not want to jump. He *really* didn't. It was no secret that the lake was rather deep, and he was a terrible swimmer. A rock could probably swim better.

Still, Hijikata could not stay in the vent forever, and every second passing was precious. They had to escape as soon as possible.

Taking a deep breath, he crawled out as far as he could without falling, and then he finally jumped as well.

For a moment, he flew.

Cold water embraced him closely through his clothes. He immediately felt as though he was sinking, and he wanted to gasp for breath, but all he got in his mouth was water; he choked, and started moving his legs and arms in a desperate attempt to swim to the surface. There was just emptiness under him, and when he opened his eyes, all he could see was darkness. Suddenly, he was not sure which way was up and which way was down. He couldn't breathe, he knew he had to resist the urge to inhale, but he wanted to, desperately—

A pair of hands grabbed him and pulled him up. He coughed violently, hanging onto Gintoki so hard his muscles cramped.

"Shh," Gintoki whispered, and he swam a few meters backwards to get closer to the prison wall to hide in its shadow. "You okay?"

Hijikata coughed one more time. He'd received a bit of a shock and could feel himself shaking; his throat hurt like hell, too. "Let's never do this again," he murmured.

“Agreed.” Gintoki looked around. “Listen,” he said under his breath, “I can get you to the shore, but you need to relax a little. The water won’t support you if you stay this tense, and I can’t swim very far with you like that.”

“How are you holding me now, then?” Hijikata questioned that.

“Actually, I’m standing right now,” Gintoki said. “The water is a little shallower by the wall.”

“Oh.” Hijikata hesitantly let go; as soon as his feet touched the muddy ground beneath, he felt an immense sense of relief wash over him. It wasn’t that he didn’t trust Gintoki, but moments ago, he’d completely forgotten that Gintoki was even there. His mind had gone blank then and he was utterly helpless in his blind panic.

“So, what do we do now?” he asked eventually – once his heart stopped beating like that of a panicked rabbit. “We need a plan.”

“Let’s get you out of the water first,” Gintoki replied, “and then we’ll have to find a way to leave the city. You know the area better than I do, so I’ll be relying on you.”

“Okay,” Hijikata gave it a moment’s thought. “It might be best to head south from here,” he mused, “so when we reach the shore, let’s go...” he looked around, “... left.”

“Where does that take us, exactly?” Gintoki asked.

“There’s a farm on the outskirts that way. They might have a horse or two,” Hijikata explained.

Gintoki gave a short chuckle. “Look at you. First, you bust a prisoner out, and then you just casually decide to steal a horse?” His face, barely visible in the moonlight, turned serious. “I’m not going to steal a farmer’s horse at the end of summer.”

Hijikata, who knew little about farming, hung his head. “What do you plan on doing, then?”

“We do need horses,” Gintoki admitted. “Maybe you could go and try taking yours?”

“Are you out of your mind?” Hijikata’s eyes opened wide as he looked at Gintoki again. “If they catch me, I’m done for, and so are you!”

“Well, then let’s just make sure that doesn’t happen,” Gintoki shrugged. “It’s probably closer, anyway.”

“That’s true.” Hijikata shivered. The cold water was rapidly draining his body warmth, and he could feel that his teeth would start chattering soon. “Fine, let’s head for the Shinsengumi HQ, then. At least I’ll pick up my sword on the way.”

“Right... actually, why didn’t you bring it?” Gintoki asked.

“They’d take it from me anyway,” Hijikata said. “It was a wonder they let me keep my dagger. Normally, there would be no weapons allowed.” In the end, he left his dagger behind

in Gintoki's cell, so right now, he was completely unarmed, and he did not like the thought of that – especially since the same could be said about Gintoki.

Gintoki didn't reply; he glanced at the sky, then he turned his back to Hijikata. "Hop on," he said, "and try to stay relaxed."

Hijikata stepped closer and did as he was told; the thought of having to cross the dark water between them and the shore was making his toes curl, but he had no intention of staying in the lake, either.

They crossed the lake safely in complete silence and reached the shore.

As soon as Hijikata stood on dry land, his legs gave in and he curled up on the edge of the water behind a few bushes, breathing heavily. He wouldn't have thought that not doing anything would exert him so much.

"You alright?" Gintoki squatted next to him.

After a second, Hijikata murmured a shaky 'yeah'. He absolutely wasn't alright on various levels, but they didn't have time for this.

Gintoki peeked out between the branches. "We should go," he whispered. "I don't see any guards anywhere, and that's... odd."

"Maybe we're just lucky," Hijikata said aloud what he desperately wanted to believe.

"Which way?" Gintoki turned to him with urgency in his voice. Surely, he felt it too. Something was strange; the city was quiet and there wasn't a soul in sight. It would be like this under normal circumstances, but not with a dangerous criminal on the loose.

Clenching his teeth, Hijikata got up. His knees were still trying to be wobbly, but he steadied them through sheer force of his will; weakness was something he couldn't afford at the moment.

They made their way to the Shinsengumi HQ as quickly as they could.

"Wait here," Hijikata whispered to Gintoki. They were crouched by a nearby corner; Hijikata could see the HQ main gate from where he was, and that sight was accompanied by a pang of guilt. "I don't want you to get caught. If someone comes your way, go ahead without me. I'll join you later."

"You sure?"

Hijikata nodded and set off. Quickly, he crossed the street, and then he made his way to the gate along the wall. His heart was beating a mile an hour as he tried to open the small door in the gate.

To his relief, it wasn't locked.

He slipped inside.

Then, he halted in his tracks when he saw a familiar silhouette.

“Would you look at that,” Sougo said, folding his arms on his chest. “Hijikata the traitor, crawling in like the snake he is.”

“Word sure travels fast,” Hijikata breathed out. He was unarmed, and to fight Sougo barehanded was something he was not very keen on doing. The bastard was pretty skilled with his sword.

“It doesn’t,” Sougo shook his head, “but it’s easy to put two and two together. Your uniform is torn and dirty, and you’re all wet. You helped him escape, didn’t you?”

“Where is everyone?” Hijikata didn’t deny it.

“The Shinsengumi got called over to the prison to help searching for an escaped convict,” Sougo shrugged his shoulders indifferently, “but I didn’t feel like going, so they told me to stand guard here instead – and thanks to that, I caught myself a rat.”

Hijikata instinctively reached to his hip but found no weapon.

“You know,” Sougo said as he drew his sword, “I could kill you right here and now, and I would probably be rewarded for it by the higher-ups. Possibly promoted, even.”

Hijikata did not reply.

Sougo stood before him, and he did not seem eager to step forward and attack. “Seriously,” he said after a while of silence, “what’s happened to you? You used to be so loyal; they could take you apart limb by limb and you still wouldn’t yield.”

Hijikata shrugged his shoulders. He wasn’t sure. All he knew for certain was that he did not free the most wanted criminal of all time because of the promise he had made. There was something else, something much more complicated and far beyond this simple sense of obligation he felt towards the city.

Almost as though it was meant to be.

He did not have a name for it.

Sougo shook his head and sheathed his sword again. “So?” he said. “What did you come here for?”

“Weapons and horses,” Hijikata replied. He did not think that lying would be helpful in this situation.

“Alright.” Sougo finally stepped out of the way completely. “Hurry it up.”

“Wait, you’re just letting me take...” Hijikata began.

“If it means you’re going to leave the city for good, then yes,” Sougo interrupted him impatiently. “Actually, go get your weapons. I’ll get your horses ready.” Without waiting for

Hijikata to reply, Sougo turned away to head to the stables.

Hijikata stood dumbstruck for a moment. He'd never expected Sougo of all people to help him. Before, Sougo was angry with him for what almost became desertion, and now that Hijikata really was going to desert, Sougo was in favour of the idea?

Saving that question for later, he made his way to his room. As quickly as he could, he changed from his now tattered remnants of his uniform into civilian clothes.

It was a strange feeling to realise he was never going to wear his uniform again.

He grabbed his sword and strapped it to his hip; instantly, he felt much less naked than moments ago.

He needed to get a sword for Gintoki, too. The White Demon was a force to be reckoned with, but if Hijikata were to be the only one with a weapon, they'd be in trouble should they get captured.

Feeling a hint of guilt, he carefully took the second sword off his weapon stand. This one used to be his brother's – a long time ago. Hijikata was reluctant to use it, as he felt that it would not be right. However, given his current situation, Hijikata hoped that Tamegoro would forgive this selfishness.

Muttering an apology not directed to anyone in particular, he walked out again. When he reached the gate, Sougo was there, waiting. One of the horses was Hijikata's; the other, as it turned out upon closer inspection, was Sougo's own.

"Why are you helping me?" Hijikata couldn't take it anymore. It made no sense to him.

"Do you think," Sougo replied dully, "that I could ever face Kondo-san or the rest of the crew again if I attacked you?"

Hijikata's mouth opened, then closed.

"Go," Sougo said simply. "Never return."

Hijikata nodded and took the reins from Sougo, turning to leave. "Wait," he then halted in his step. "If they find out you've helped me, you'll be neck-deep in trouble. Sit down, I'll tie you up."

Sougo frowned, but then he took off his belt and handed it to Hijikata wordlessly. Hijikata watched him sit down in an angered manner, and a strange feeling washed over him. He wished things would have gone differently.

He knelt beside Sougo and tied his wrist together. "Thanks," he said under his breath. Then, he drew his sword, and with its hilt, he knocked Sougo unconscious.

He opened the gate and looked across the street; Gintoki was standing there, leaning on the wall. Hijikata waved him over. Before Gintoki reached him, he glanced at the lifeless body behind him; in a way, Sougo had proven himself to be more loyal to Hijikata than Hijikata

ever thought him to be. First, he tried to save Hijikata from Gintoki as well as to help him keep his job, and when that didn't work out, he opened the path for Hijikata to leave – all that without asking for gratitude. Hijikata was regretful that he had not noticed this before.

“Awesome,” Gintoki said as soon as he reached the gate. “Let's go.”

Without a word, Hijikata handed him Tamegoro's sword, then he climbed into the saddle. They set off without looking back.

Hijikata didn't speak until they were out of the city. He didn't want to waste a moment because he knew it was only a matter of time before someone discovered Sougo, and then the guards would give chase. “Gintoki,” he called out, briefly halting his horse.

“What?” Gintoki turned back in his saddle to look at him.

“I *am* coming back with you,” Hijikata said firmly, “because I promised you that – but if you want me to *stay*, I have one condition.”

Blood drained from Gintoki's face, and Hijikata could see that he was now extremely nervous. “A condition?”

Hijikata took a deep breath. If Gintoki couldn't agree to it, Hijikata was ready to leave and live like a nomad until the end of his days. It would certainly be regrettable, but this was very important to him, and he could only hope that Gintoki was going to respect his wish.

Chapter End Notes

I'm sorry, this chapter was so hectic.

Did you guys know that alternatives to concrete have been around since as far back as the Babylonian times? I sure didn't until I looked it up. History is cool. It's on Wikipedia if you fancy a read.

Though I was just checking if the grate could be cemented to the ceiling. Turns out, sure it could. The verb ‘to cement’ means ‘to overlay with concrete’.

Also, the acrobat move they did to leave the cell was this:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WtubAW-54Kc> (lol, video is hella old).

Like many of the other creators, I also ask all of you to stay home as much as possible and wash your hands. Stay away from large groups of people. Eat vitamins. Hydrate. We'll pull through. The more we stay away from other people, the sooner this pandemic ends.

Runaways

“After we get back,” Hijikata spoke slowly, “I don’t want to be your prisoner anymore.”

There was a moment of silence. “That’s it?” Gintoki then said in a relieved tone.

“That’s it. I want freedom to move around, and I don’t want to be your princess in the tower, either. Sitting on my ass doing nothing is not for me.”

“That’s not a problem,” Gintoki replied. “I was worried that you’d say I’m not allowed to touch you ever again, or something.”

Hijikata realised that he should have made it *two* conditions, but he had already said it and couldn’t take it back, so he shrugged his shoulders. “I guess I’ll have to rely on your common sense for that.”

Gintoki chuckled shortly. “You sure that is a good idea?”

Hijikata scoffed. “Since you’re aware that you lack it, try working on it.”

“I just...” Gintoki hesitated, hanging his head. “I wouldn’t want to upset you again.”

Hijikata looked at Gintoki; it was strange how whenever Gintoki thought that he wronged Hijikata in some way, he seemed so much *smaller*. This was not the first time he looked like a kicked puppy, and it always seemed genuine, without a hint of pretence. It made Hijikata remember that he wanted to talk about whatever Gintoki felt once they returned – properly, and without any jokes or misleading remarks, so that he could understand correctly and find the best way to deal with it.

He cleared his throat. “We should go,” he said as he glanced over his shoulder at the city’s silhouettes behind them. There was no telling when the alarm would be raised, and he wanted to be as far as humanly possible from the city when that happened. Now that he had betrayed his loyalties and broken his oath, there was going to be a bounty on his head, much like there was one on Gintoki’s own. Plus, he was seen helping Gintoki escape. It wasn’t just a matter of desertion, but a matter of siding with an enemy of the state as well.

“Okay,” Gintoki said simply, and spurred his horse again. Hijikata followed him closely.

The night air was a little chilly, and when the wind picked up, Hijikata was suddenly grateful that he did get the chance to change his clothes.

In the distance, the warning bells finally echoed, and when Hijikata glanced back in his saddle, he saw lights near the edge of the city. They were not far enough to be safe just yet, especially since the city guards knew the outskirts just as well as he did; anxiously, he caught up with Gintoki. “Let’s hurry,” he said in an insistent tone.

“I heard the bell,” Gintoki replied. “That was surprisingly quick.”

They sped up. Hijikata knew that the guards were only aware of the general direction they were fleeing, and that the guards couldn't see them yet, since it was still dark and neither he nor Gintoki were carrying a light. However, the sky was clear, and dawn was drawing near – and under such circumstances, they were going to be painfully obvious in the plains once the sun had risen. There was no hiding this time – and with that thought, Hijikata was bathing in cold sweat. All they could do was to rely on their horses' speed and endurance, and pray to the skies that once they reach the edge of the plains – which was over half a day away – they could perhaps lose their pursuers in the green maze of trees.

Gintoki's horse broke out into a gallop; Hijikata's followed the other's example even though Hijikata didn't tell her to do that.

They rode on and on, and the sky above their heads began brightening gradually. The moon was hanging low above the horizon in front of them, almost hidden behind the mountains they were headed for, and the sun had yet to start rising, but it was not nearly as dark as when they'd left the city.

Hijikata looked back again. Far behind them, he could see a group of horses in the morning haze, and he knew for sure that the guards could see them as well. Even though they did manage to be farther away than he had expected, it was hardly enough to shake them off.

Hijikata felt like shit. His body was aching, his tongue was dryly stuck to the roof of his mouth, and just being aware that the sun was going to rise soon and fry them in their own juices was making his thirst even worse. The scar on his back, though it was dormant for a while, was now throbbing like a second heart, and he hated that never-ending pulsing sensation.

Mentally, he wasn't feeling good, either.

This was his first time to be the one running away. He was being *chased*, and something deeply ingrained in his brain was telling him that this situation was shameful. Though he logically knew that he had chosen this path and that there was no other way of freeing Gintoki on time, he still felt shame gnawing at the last remnants of what was left of his former self.

Gintoki turned back to glance at him; his eyes then grazed the horizon briefly, and then he looked to the front again, his head hanging a little low.

Was he worried about Hijikata? Or perhaps in general? Hijikata didn't know.

Suddenly, a drop of water hit Hijikata's face.

He looked up.

The same sky that was completely empty moments ago was now veiled by a thick layer of heavy, low-hanging clouds. The wind got stronger as well, and Hijikata realised that it got darker again, as the clouds did not allow the arriving dawn to pierce through.

There was a flash of lightning, immediately followed by the sound of thunder.

It didn't simply start raining.

Within a minute, it was as though someone had turned over a bottomless bucket of water above their heads; the water falling from the sky was hitting them harshly. The wind was blowing the rain right in their faces, and it was hard to breathe without inhaling water. Hijikata was instantly soaked to the bone – as much as he was when he got out of the lake.

It was a miracle that in the middle of all of this, the horses did not panic. Hijikata himself was panicking a little, because the visibility became so much worse that he had a hard time seeing Gintoki a few meters in front of him.

No, but... this was good, he realised.

If he could barely see Gintoki, who was so close, then even if the storm slowed them down considerably, the guards must have completely lost them. The strong rain was going to completely erase any trace they might have left behind, too.

He caught up with Gintoki, who slowed into a trot, and peered at his face. Gintoki was looking forwards, focused.

Hijikata wanted to say something, but then he chose to keep silent instead. He'd have to yell to be heard over the sound of rain and thunder, and he wasn't even sure what he *should* say.

This storm couldn't have been caused by a stroke of luck. They'd been incredibly lucky the entire night, and it was almost suspicious how easily they'd managed to escape, given the circumstances. Hijikata was no stranger to summer storms, so he knew what they looked like. No summer storm would appear out of thin air – and it was past the season for such a storm to occur. Not to mention that such a storm would not come in the early morning hours.

He shivered.

His clothes were clinging to his skin and it was unpleasant, but more importantly, he was cold. Fatigue was probably adding to it as well, but he was shivering a little. More than anything, he wished they'd reach the forest edge soon, but they still had a long time to go – much longer now that the rain had begun and did not seem like it would let up anytime soon.

They rode in sombre silence.

Hijikata allowed Gintoki to lead the way. He, though he wouldn't admit it aloud, was not a skilled rider, and to navigate in such weather conditions was impossible for him, too. He grew up in the city, and there, he knew each and every pebble from every side including the bottom. The farther from the city they were, though, the less familiar everything looked, and he was worried that if he were to take the lead now, he'd make like a homing pigeon, and his instincts might end up leading them right to the guards.

Gintoki was unusually quiet, and Hijikata found it a little unsettling after a few hours. It was possible that he was simply concentrating on choosing the right direction, but Hijikata couldn't but doubt that. This storm – and by now, Hijikata was absolutely certain it was no

ordinary storm – had a similar feeling to that which arrived on the night of Hijikata's shame. It was abrupt and violent, and it lasted long.

Hijikata remembered that on the morning after, the storm still hadn't passed. Should storms ordinarily take that long? In the back of his mind, he had chalked it up to not knowing the weathers in the mountains very well, but now he found himself doubtful.

Hijikata tried to recall when exactly that storm ended, but he didn't manage. It was a hectic day, after all. He had other things to worry about then.

"Do you think we lost them?" he raised his voice so that Gintoki would be able to hear him.

Gintoki didn't answer.

Hijikata clenched his teeth. He wasn't sure if Gintoki didn't hear him, or didn't want to answer; he, at least, hoped that the guards' search was now going to be in vain. For the sake of their horses, neither group could go much faster; the grass, now beaten down flat by the strong rain, was slippery, and hiding a layer of mud underneath. The plains rarely experienced a rainfall this heavy, and the ground could no longer drink it all.

Hijikata was freezing.

The rain was cold and merciless, and in its sound, it was easy to lose track of time and sense of direction. Even so, Gintoki was not stopping.

Hijikata didn't know how much time had passed, but finally, the first silhouettes of trees began appearing around them behind the greyish veil of constantly falling water. Before long, they entered the scattered forest edge. It did not affect the rain's intensity, but Hijikata finally felt at least some relief. They weren't going to reach the castle before nightfall, of course, but it was nice to see that they were getting closer.

Through the noise of rain, he caught the sound of water.

The shallow stream that Katsura waded through in order to hide his trail back when Hijikata was trying to arrest him was now much wider and possibly deeper, and as they neared it, its roar became so loud that Hijikata couldn't hear anything else.

Gintoki calmly led his horse towards the water.

Is he serious?! Hijikata watched Gintoki in shock.

Gintoki glanced back and gestured at Hijikata to come along.

Against sound reason, Hijikata moved forward, following suit.

At the riverbank, Gintoki glanced around, then started going upstream. Hijikata wondered if Gintoki lost his mind in prison; even if there ended up being a wade nearby, the water current was too strong for them to risk both their lives and the lives of their horses.

For gods knew how long, Gintoki led Hijikata along the river silently. The terrain around them gradually lost its former muddy fashion, and rocks started appearing about. The river became a little narrower but that much harsher, and Hijikata still saw no way of crossing. With the trees and uneven ground, it was difficult to get the horses to jump across – not to mention that Hijikata doubted the horses could make it all the way to the opposite side.

Then, Gintoki waved at him again and pointed forwards.

Hijikata looked that way, then turned to Gintoki with an unspoken question. The river was beginning to meander there a little, and Gintoki seemed to have that particular bend in mind.

Only when they came closer to that area did it become clearer. Right under the surface of the water, there was a row of large rocks. Usually, they'd serve people to cross the river without getting wet, but given the situation, that was not possible. However, as Gintoki began leading his horse towards the downstream side of the rocks, Hijikata realised that if they stuck as close to them as possible, they'd avoid the strongest currents.

Gintoki began trudging through the water.

Hijikata stood on the bank, hesitant to follow. After all, he couldn't swim; should he fall into the water here, it would inevitably lead to his death. Though he was aware that this was the safest bet, he really did not want to risk it. If he drowned now, wouldn't everything he'd done be for nought?

The flashbacks of when he almost drowned back at the prison lake started flooding his brain.

Gintoki's horse was struggling a bit, but Gintoki was steering it while remaining level-headed, and he managed to get more than halfway through before he glanced back and saw that Hijikata stood on the bank indecisively.

At that moment, Hijikata felt a sense of peace wash over him. He didn't understand why, but he suddenly knew that everything was going to be okay.

Just in case, he unstrapped his sword and affixed it tightly to the saddle. Then, he gently urged his horse to go forth.

Gintoki crossed the river and was waiting on the other bank.

His horse didn't like it in the least, and her step was reluctant. Even so, as Gintoki watched her from the opposite side of the river, she slowly and carefully entered the deeper waters. Hijikata clung to her closely, wanting to stay on her back at all costs.

The water reached up to his thighs, then waist.

That was when his horse slipped.

She neighed.

“Hiji—!”

He heard only half of that sound before he ended up underwater.

Panic surged through his body, his limbs refusing to cooperate. He could feel himself letting go, and he had no control over it. He did not even manage to take a deep breath – and now was being rapidly taken away with the current.

All the sounds dulled down, and there was nothing but grey water and bubbles around him. He tried to move, but his exhausted and still-traumatized body wouldn't listen to him.

Unable to move a muscle, he closed his eyes.

His murky grave tasted of mud.

“Hijikata!” he heard, and then his upper body landed on the bank painfully. He could recognise Gintoki's voice, but couldn't understand anything else Gintoki said; all the other sounds were back, and there was the warmth of another person's body, as Gintoki was trying to pull him out of the water completely.

“Can you hear me?!” an agonized cry reached his ears. Cold palms cupped his cheeks.

His eyes snapped open, and he curled up on the ground – coughing, choking, and retching water. Everything hurt – much more so than half a day ago when they were escaping the prison. His vision was still dark, and he could barely keep a hold of his consciousness. His brain was one huge blaring alarm. His ears were ringing, and his head ached as though it was going to split open. Desperately trying to get air into his lungs, he dug his nails into the rough surface of the riverbank, not caring that he bled.

Finally, he managed to catch his breath, at least somewhat, and he looked up. Gintoki was leaning over him, a myriad of emotions on his face.

For a moment, they remained still.

Then, Gintoki pulled him into an embrace, and Hijikata was unsure who was the one shaking. “I'm so sorry,” Gintoki's lips murmured against his ear.

Hijikata clutched Gintoki's shoulder. “We should move,” he said weakly. “It's dangerous to stay here.”

Gintoki probably couldn't hear him over the omnipresent sound of water, but he leaned to Hijikata's ear again. “Can you stand?” he said as though he understood.

With Gintoki as support, Hijikata got up.

They were not as far downstream from the wade as he had assumed. His horse was standing nearby, and as they approached slowly, she moved away from them in a startled manner.

Gintoki said something, but it was drowned out by thunder.

Hijikata's horse froze in place, and Gintoki dragged Hijikata closer and helped him get into the saddle. Hijikata hugged her closely again, feeling relieved to be on land. He did not blame

her for what happened – what they were doing was hazardous, and he was just glad that she did not run away once she got out of the river.

Gintoki climbed into his own saddle and came closer with his horse to take a hold of Hijikata's reins. Ordinarily, Hijikata would have objections, but at this moment, he accepted it with silent gratitude, and let Gintoki lead him away from the deadly water.

Dusk was approaching. With the rain still falling, it got darker much faster than it would have otherwise.

They arrived at a cave large enough for both them and their horses to take shelter in. It breathed cold, but it was better than staying out in the storm. The horses seemed to welcome it as well.

Gintoki dismounted and walked over to Hijikata's horse, holding out his arms.

"Shouldn't we keep going?" Hijikata said doubtfully. It wouldn't take too long for them to reach the castle now.

"You need to rest," Gintoki shook his head curtly. "At least for a little while."

Reluctantly, Hijikata slid off his saddle, leaning onto the other. Gintoki dragged him off to the side of the cave and made him sit down. "Wait here," he said in a gentle but a firm tone. "I'll try and get a fire going."

"It's not safe," Hijikata objected. "If the light is seen, or if the smoke gets to them..."

"They won't look for us here," Gintoki said calmly. "They'd long lost track of us, anyway." With that, he walked out into the storm.

Hijikata curled up, trying to keep at least somewhat warm. He was beyond unhappy; he had intended to save Gintoki from prison, and yet Gintoki ended up having to save him twice, both times from something so stupid as drowning.

He hugged his knees tighter. It hardly made sense, he realized. He fell off his horse in the middle of the river, so how did Gintoki manage to get to him so soon, before he drowned or broke his skull on any of the rocks in the stream?

Shivering, he chalked it up to a stray current carrying him off to the side. He felt sick; though he managed to vomit out a great deal of the water he had gulped down, there was surely some left in him, and it did not do him any good.

His eyelids felt heavy, but he didn't want to fall asleep while he was alone.

It took Gintoki a hellishly long time before he appeared at the cave entrance again; it got completely dark by then. He was carrying wood and kindling. He put it down, then wordlessly came closer and checked on Hijikata. Then, just as silently, he started messing with the pile of stuff he brought.

There was the sound of steel and flintstone clashing, and then a spark. Then, two. The barely dry moss and wet birch bark set on the ground began smouldering, and eventually, a small flame appeared. Gintoki bowed his head close to it, blowing gently as he added more kindling.

Hijikata watched him do so, and soon he scooted a little closer to the light. He hated how useless he was at the moment, and having to be cared for was making him bitter. He scowled, reaching out his hands towards the warmth. It was small for now, but Gintoki clearly knew what he was doing. Overall, it was surprising how much energy Gintoki seemed to have; Hijikata himself felt completely drained, but Gintoki seemed to be taking all of this much better.

“We’ll rest for a while,” Gintoki said as he turned to Hijikata, “wait out the rain. Then, we’ll keep going. Okay?”

Hijikata nodded, watching the flames dance and hiss on the wet wood. Gintoki was adding thicker branches now, and steam was rising off their bark in dancing curls.

Hijikata looked at his hands, now all scratched up. He didn’t remember what happened to them, but they were aching, much like the rest of him.

He was tired.

Gintoki stopped tending to the fire and moved to sit down next to Hijikata. “Cold?” he asked.

“A bit,” Hijikata admitted. “It’ll be better soon.”

For a while, they watched the fire silently.

“Thanks,” Hijikata muttered out of the blue.

“Hmm.” Gintoki scooted a little closer. “I don’t need your thanks,” he said then.

Hijikata froze briefly, but as Gintoki’s arm came into contact with his own, he understood. Gintoki meant that he didn’t do it expecting gratitude. He helped because he wanted Hijikata to live, and that was all there was to it.

“Hey,” Gintoki whispered. His hand clutched Hijikata’s elbow, and when Hijikata turned to look at him, he found that his face was now only a hair’s width from Gintoki’s own.

“Can I?” Gintoki said softly; his voice was a little foggy. This up-close, Gintoki’s eyes seemed to be sparkling in the firelight, and Hijikata realised that it was because they were watering.

“If you must,” Hijikata said under his breath listlessly. He didn’t have the strength to argue about this – and there was no shame left in it, either.

Gintoki’s hands gently cradled Hijikata’s head; he took an unsteady breath, and he closed the remaining distance between them. Hijikata closed his eyes and parted his lips, letting himself

be kissed slowly; Gintoki was lightly caressing his hair as he delved a little deeper into the kiss. Hijikata realised it tasted a little salty, and he closed his eyes tighter.

Their lips parted, and Gintoki pulled him closer, hugging him tightly. “I’m so glad you’re alive.”

Blissful Sunrise

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Hijikata woke up when the first sun rays warmly tickled his face.

He blinked several times into the light, looking at the familiar ceiling. The last thing he remembered was Gintoki's embrace at the cave. He must have fallen asleep after, or more accurately, passed out from exhaustion – now, he was in his bed at the castle, with the morning sun shining through the window of his room. Gintoki probably took Hijikata the rest of the way back without trying to wake him up. He didn't strip him, either, and so Hijikata ended up sleeping in his unbelievably filthy clothes.

That was fine, though.

He stirred a little, yawning.

It didn't seem real still. He rolled over to look towards the window, and immediately tensed up when he saw that Gintoki had joined him in the bed again.

Oddly, Hijikata was not as unhappy as he thought he should have been. Briefly, he was kind of annoyed, since he was convinced that Gintoki was going to try something inappropriate once he woke up, but that was about it.

He felt warm.

It was nice; though he was still sore all over after yesterday's wild ride from the city, he felt generally much better than he did yesterday – both physically and mentally. This, this was... *right*. He hadn't thought such a thing for years. His existence back in the city was something he accepted and never put too much thought into, assuming that it was what he had chosen for himself. He never imagined that it would be this freeing to let go of all of it. It was as though a weight he was unaware of had lifted off his shoulders.

Gintoki groaned in his sleep and rolled over, his arm flopping across Hijikata's torso. His chest was bare, and Hijikata was certain that the rest of him was just as unclothed. It was not the first time, and Hijikata suspected that Gintoki always slept naked regardless of the weather.

He carefully took a hold of Gintoki's wrist and attempted to move his arm away without waking him up.

Gintoki made an unhappy noise, furrowed his eyebrows and turned over again, his face now buried in the pillow he had stolen from under Hijikata's head at some point during the night. Soon, he began snoring, letting out low rumbling sounds.

Hijikata chuckled silently. Gintoki was possibly extremely tired after yesterday, too, so there was no need to be too hard on him this time. After all, he *did* save Hijikata multiple times and brought him here safely, too.

He made himself a little more comfortable and closed his eyes for a while. He could hear birds' voices outside, and Gintoki's soft snores.

There was no duty.

No responsibility.

Just a calm, peaceful morning.

Knowing that he was going to get antsy eventually, as he hated being idle for too long, he chose to relish in the moment for now. It had been quite a while since he could just melt away into the pillows – even though his own got stolen from him – and the bed Gintoki had chosen for his future woman was much softer than the one Hijikata was used to from the city.

Remembering that he was originally put into this room for *that* kind of thing, Hijikata frowned a little. He still had no plans of playing the princess here, and he only hoped that Gintoki understood that. It was not just about not being a prisoner, it was also about being seen as an equal, and that was something he couldn't say without making it sound awkward.

He opened his eyes again and sat up slowly. His whole body ached, and he was hardly surprised; even though with each step, his legs hurt more in protest, he slowly made his way to the window and opened it to look outside.

The valley was just as beautiful as he remembered. A gentle, cool breeze wafted against his face, bringing the scent of tree sap coming from the forested hillsides, and a hint of hay drying out in the sun. He wondered if yesterday's storm hit the valley as well; it was possible that the steep mountains had blocked it off. It would have been a problem during this time, but the haystacks seemed to be fine – at least from afar.

There was some mist rolling lazily over the meadows and fields in the distance, but the sun was going to drink it away soon enough.

He heard a rustle behind himself, but he didn't turn around. There were footsteps, then a sheet fluttered over his shoulders, and Gintoki leaned on the windowsill next to him.

Hijikata said nothing; even though they were both now under the sheet, and even though Gintoki was naked, there was no physical contact between them. Hijikata knew that Gintoki was now being careful.

"Morning," Gintoki said.

"Yeah." Hijikata was still looking towards the horizon.

"Have you slept well?"

"Yeah," he said again. "Thanks for bringing me."

Gintoki hummed. “Feels good to be back, doesn’t it?”

“It does.” Hijikata thought about it briefly. It wasn’t his home quite just yet, but he felt that it could become so. All the disgust, guilt and shame he had felt when he chose to free Gintoki from prison seemed now as but a dream to him.

“Can I touch you?” Gintoki said out of the blue.

“Don’t do anything weird,” Hijikata replied evasively. When Gintoki’s body pressed against him, he tensed up a little, but Gintoki stopped there, simply standing by Hijikata’s side, not even trying to reach out his hand.

They stood in silence.

Hijikata’s back slowly began heating up.

“You know,” Gintoki then murmured after a while as he leaned his head on Hijikata’s shoulder, “yesterday... I’m glad I didn’t have to use the sword you gave me.”

“Yeah.” Hijikata still remembered the time Gintoki cut an apple in half with a paper fan. “You’d better take good care of it regardless, though,” he added.

“Is it special? I could have it put in the treasury,” Gintoki suggested.

Hijikata shook his head curtly. “It belonged to my brother.”

“I’ll put it up in your room, then.”

Gintoki didn’t pry, and Hijikata appreciated that. There wasn’t much to say, but it was not a conversation he’d want to have now of all times. Talks about death tended to spoil pleasant mornings.

There was another while of silence.

“You stink,” Gintoki said out of the blue. “A lot, actually.”

“No wonder,” Hijikata retorted, but he was smiling a little. “You tossed me on the bed the way I was.”

“I’ll ask someone to draw you a bath,” Gintoki stepped away.

Hijikata watched him wrap himself in the sheet and walk out. He had expected Gintoki to pick up on that, to object that if he took Hijikata’s clothes off, Hijikata wouldn’t let him get away with it.

Instead, Gintoki glossed over it and left, and that was worrisome.

Gintoki was clean, so Hijikata guessed that he had washed up before going to sleep. Hijikata himself would love to take a hot bath right away to get rid of the grime stuck to his skin –

mostly under his clothes, as the rain could not wash that off – but he knew that it would take some time before the water got warm enough.

He leaned on the windowsill again. He noticed a bird of prey in the distance, circling above the fields, and he smiled a little. It was such a simple life, driven by nought but survival instinct, and that made him think of Gintoki in a way. Gintoki wasn't a complicated man, and was driven by simple matters... usually. Though, Hijikata still could not understand the true nature of the feelings of dependency Gintoki developed towards him.

He really should talk about this with Gintoki.

He knew that, and yet, how was he supposed to even start?

One thing was certain – he was not going to handle this the same way he had confessed to Mitsuba. Back then, he had written a carefully worded letter, but that was much less awkward, seeing as they rarely had the chance to meet face-to-face. He would feel like an idiot giving a letter to Gintoki, since they could easily talk whenever either of them pleased.

He *could* just try talking to him. After all, Gintoki preferred the straightforward approach anyway.

He gazed off into the distance. In the short time he had been watching, cattle began appearing on the meadows, and the valley got a little livelier. Hijikata stared, awestruck; it was as though someone breathed life into a marvellous painting. The golden light of the rising sun spilt over the lush green tones of the valley, and the forest suddenly seemed especially dark in the areas the sun couldn't reach yet; water streams turned into sparkling ribbons threading through the canvas of grassy fields, and the remaining strands of morning mists gave the scenery a magical touch.

It was hard to believe that this place just *happened* without any sort of divine intervention.

The door opened again. “Your bath’s ready,” Gintoki said upon entering. He was fully dressed in his usual all-white attire, and as usual, Hijikata was a little taken aback by just how much clothes could change a man.

“That was quick.” He glanced out of the window again, but the moment had passed. That was alright, though – from now on, he was going to see many more.

“I kicked Zura out of bed and got him to heat the water,” Gintoki grinned. “Let’s go.”

“You’re not coming in with me, are you?” Hijikata narrowed his eyes. Gintoki smiled, shook his head wordlessly and left the room.

Hijikata pursed his lips, then he closed the window and proceeded to walk out, too. He, of course, knew well where the bath was, but he had rarely used it before. It was a room they often did the laundry in as well, and as Hijikata was confined to the castle and had no real chances to get dirty – or even to sweat properly – he preferred to just clean himself with the washbasin he had in the relative privacy of his own chamber.

When he reached the dim-lit bath, Gintoki was nowhere to be seen; the wooden bathtub was filled with warm water, and just imagining the relief it was going to bring his sore muscles made Hijikata shiver with anticipation.

He looked around; there was a towel, but he saw nothing he could wear after his bath. Lack of wearables was a problem he had run into before. Clenching his teeth, he turned around, wanting to go ask Gintoki to give him something normal to wear – and he found Gintoki standing at the door, carrying what seemed to be a change of clothes.

Gintoki casually walked up to him, then set the bundle of clothes he was carrying next to the towel. “Well?” he said. “What are you waiting for? Hop on in.”

“I thought you weren’t going to be here with me,” Hijikata objected.

“I’m not going to *bathe* with you,” Gintoki nodded, “but I want to wash your hair.”

Hijikata pinched the bridge of his nose. “I told you before,” he said, “I don’t want to be treated like a damsel by you.”

“It’s nothing like that,” Gintoki shook his head in response. “Just... let me. Okay?”

Hijikata hesitated briefly, and it must have shown because Gintoki added, “I won’t try anything. I promise.”

“... *Fine*,” Hijikata gave in reluctantly.

When he began stripping, Gintoki turned his back to him. In a way, it was reassuring, but at the same time, Hijikata couldn’t but question it.

He entered the tub and hissed; the bath was a little warmer than he had expected. Slowly, he lowered himself into the water until he was sitting. It reached all the way up to his neck. “You can turn around now,” he said as he pulled his knees close to his chest, curling up.

“We bought this fancy soap recently,” Gintoki said, and Hijikata heard him walk closer. “It’s supposed to make a lot of bubbles. I did not have the chance to try it before we left for the city,” he added, “so I thought I would try it on you.” There was the sound of a chair being moved.

Hijikata hummed. He didn’t mind, though he wasn’t sure what Gintoki was hoping to achieve. He scooted a little forwards so that he’d have space in the bath to get his hair wet – and then he froze.

Somehow, the idea of closing his eyes and submerging his entire head underwater was not at all pleasant. He shuddered, clenching his teeth. It was stupid. He knew it was stupid. Still, his body remembered having almost drowned *twice*, and it wasn’t going to forget that experience anytime soon.

Slowly, he began leaning back, his eyes tightly shut.

Then, he felt Gintoki's hands supporting his head. Relief washed over him – along with the realisation that there was a possibility Gintoki *knew* Hijikata would have trouble with this. If that was so, then he was here really just to help, and Hijikata shouldn't doubt him.

Gintoki's fingers gently combed through Hijikata's hair for a while. Then, he gently nudged Hijikata to make him sit up again. A waft of flowery scent reached Hijikata's nose before Gintoki began massaging his scalp.

"It doesn't really foam up all that much," Gintoki said under his breath. "I think we got scammed."

Hijikata chuckled. "Or maybe you're just doing it wrong."

"How rude," Gintoki said, and one of his hands playfully tugged at Hijikata's ear. "I'll have you know I'm doing my best."

That, Hijikata did not doubt.

He relaxed a little, stretching out his legs and leaning into Gintoki's touch. He felt a little bad to have Gintoki do this, but since Gintoki insisted, and since he was now not on the greatest terms with water, he had no other choice. After all, he wouldn't want to stay dirty.

"I'm going to wash your hair now," Gintoki informed him.

Hijikata leaned back a bit more in silent affirmation. With his eyes closed, he was lowered into the water again, allowing Gintoki to wash out the bubbles. Gintoki's touches were slow and careful, perhaps so as to avoid causing even the slightest discomfort.

"The clothes I brought are yours," Gintoki said casually. "They got delivered while we were gone. I bought a bunch, since you had barely anything here, and I didn't want to make you keep borrowing mine."

"Thanks." Hijikata was a little surprised. Gintoki was turning out to be more and more thoughtful as time went on. Subconsciously, he nuzzled into Gintoki's hands. When he heard a faint strained sound, he opened his eyes.

Gintoki was looking down at him intently. "Please don't tell me that you've got a hard-on," Hijikata murmured, sitting up and burying his face into his palms.

"Okay then," Gintoki shrugged, "I won't."

"You do, though, don't you," Hijikata said in a resigned tone.

"You told me not to tell you." It was clear from Gintoki's voice that he was smiling.

"Oh, shut up." Hijikata brushed his wet hair back and slowly got up. Then, he looked at Gintoki again and saw that he was now shielding his eyes. Shaking his head, Hijikata got out from the tub and reached for the towel. "You've already seen me naked," he said, a little disgruntled, "so why are you acting like a maiden now?"

Gintoki got up, too. “If I look at you too much, I’ll want to touch you,” he said, “but I already promised that I wouldn’t try anything, so hurry and get dressed. Or I’ll jump you,” he added playfully.

Hijikata scoffed and unfolded his new clothes. He was pleased to find out that this time, Gintoki didn’t give him another stupidly over-the-top robe, as he was ready to give Gintoki an earful if that were to be the case. However, it was a much simpler set of clothes, in shades of grey and dark blue, and made of light fabric. Even so, it seemed like it was of much higher quality than anything he’d have worn back in the city – his formal uniform included.

Quickly, he got dressed and then he turned to look at Gintoki. “I’m done.”

“Hmm.” Gintoki uncovered his face and eyed Hijikata from head to toe. “You really look good in just about anything, huh?”

Hijikata, who didn’t know how to respond to that, grabbed the towel again and began drying his hair properly.

Gintoki stepped closer to him. “Listen,” he began hesitantly, “I…”

“Hm?” Hijikata peeked out from under the towel.

Gintoki’s mouth opened and closed. In the end, he shook his head. “Never mind. Thanks for coming back,” he said instead of whatever he wanted to tell Hijikata originally; he was smiling, but it was a smile Hijikata couldn’t read.

I should kiss him, surfaced his mind all of a sudden.

Gintoki turned away, heading out of the room.

Hijikata stood there, frozen.

It was a similar feeling to the one he had when they were in the vents, escaping the prison. That thought, wherever it came from, was not his own. Someone – or something – was messing with his brain, and he did not like that in the least.

Shaking his head, he took a deep breath and walked out of the room as well.

Chapter End Notes

This took longer than I had hoped.
Happy belated birthday to Hijikata!

The First Judgement, Unbeknownst

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Still sore, but somewhat refreshed after his bath, Hijikata was slowly walking down the corridor. His footsteps echoed under the stony ceiling, and he found it strangely comforting to hear this sound. Today, he decided, he was going to take it all in again, both to try to adapt and to find inner peace. There was still some guilt eating away on his heart, though he wouldn't tell anyone.

Gintoki chose to give Hijikata some space. Hijikata understood and appreciated that, and yet – somehow – there was a certain degree of dissatisfaction, or perhaps disappointment. Gintoki *did* get handsy with him in the past, and Hijikata had not expected that to change. However, Gintoki was now going out of his way to get Hijikata's consent for every little thing, and while Hijikata was glad not to get kissed and groped whenever chance arose, he found this change concerning. Just what must have gone through Gintoki's head while he was in prison, thinking that Hijikata had abandoned him? This change couldn't have happened on its own. Something must have brought it up, and Hijikata... Hijikata did not like it. He did not like it because this felt like something much bigger than just Gintoki upholding his promise to treat Hijikata like a fellow human being.

Although, he didn't like being groped, either.

He walked out onto a balcony, and he leaned on the railing. He was getting a little hungry, but he didn't feel like eating; he did not think of trying to fetch breakfast, because he knew Gintoki hadn't probably eaten yet, either, and so it was going to be served later. Instead, he glanced over the courtyard. This was the lower one, the one closer to the valley – though wide, there was not much in it.

Close to the wall on the opposite side of the courtyard, there were two people standing and talking, and Hijikata recognised them as Takasugi and Katsura. Katsura seemed to be talking angrily, waving his hands about in an agitated manner. Takasugi was as collected as usual – at least, that was what Hijikata assumed, since Takasugi's back was turned to him. He could kind of hear Katsura's voice, but what he was saying was unintelligible.

Hijikata watched them for a while. Katsura seemed to get gradually angrier and angrier, gesturing all over the place and pointing towards the castle every now and then. Takasugi, whose voice was not audible at all from where Hijikata stood, was barely moving; only every now and then, he would shake his head.

Eventually, Katsura pushed Takasugi's shoulder and attempted to storm past Takasugi – but the shorter man stopped him, wrapping an arm around his waist and thus stopping him in his stride.

Katsura hesitated, and Takasugi pulled him closer.

Hijikata ducked behind the stone railing, shocked. *Did they just kiss?!*

He peeked over the railing again, but the two of them must have walked inside one of the doors nearby because they were nowhere to be seen.

He never thought that Takasugi and Katsura would be like that. He never noticed – or maybe, maybe he just never considered the possibility. They *were* rather close, but they never showed any blatant display of affection, and so Hijikata, who knew about himself that he was extremely dense in that regard, just had no way of realising. It was possible that the two of them were getting it on right now somewhere inside the castle.

He didn't really want to imagine that. His imagination supplied him with a plethora of uninvited imagery, though, and he sighed heavily, rubbing his face.

Slowly, he got up again and leaned onto the railing once more, feeling a little defeated. Even though Gintoki backed off for the time being, he wanted to be with Hijikata in the same way Takasugi was with Katsura, and Hijikata wasn't sure what to do about it.

They really should talk it through.

Hijikata felt reluctant to bring it up, though. Though he couldn't really explain why, he felt that it was going to be much more uncomfortable than it should be. There was an unshakable sense of unease.

The scar on his back tingled.

Moments after, Hijikata could hear footsteps nearing him, and soon, Gintoki peeked out of the door. "There you are," he said. "Wanna eat?"

Hijikata wondered if Gintoki knew about the scar. It was possible that he didn't – and Hijikata doubted that the scar was deliberate on Gintoki's part, no matter what it meant. However, if Gintoki had no idea about the scar, then he was surely going to be shocked beyond measure. After all, he did say that he'd never want to hurt Hijikata – and really, Hijikata did not want to see Gintoki hurting, either.

"I'm a bit hungry," he said, though he was much hungrier than just 'a bit'. Food could lift his spirits a little.

"Okay, let's go, then," Gintoki gave a small smile. "I'm starving, too."

Hijikata nodded and followed him back inside. Even in the dark windowless part of the hallway, Gintoki's white clothes were impossible to lose track of – but Gintoki's attire was a flowy one today, and it gave off a slightly eerie feeling in the shadows.

Kiss—

Hijikata clenched his teeth. *Shut up*. Not only was that voice *definitely* not his own, it had also shitty ideas and an even shittier timing.

When they reached the dining room, the table was all set. At a glance, Hijikata counted five plates, one of which was already full, and Sakamoto was eating out of it. Or rather – stuffing his face with almost reckless zeal. Other than him, there was no-one in the room until their arrival. When they walked in, he nodded at them, humming, but his cheeks were so full he couldn't say anything.

Gintoki made his way to his usual spot, and Hijikata did so as well, having made peace with the fact that his spot was right next to Gintoki's since day one.

A not very human-looking guard closed the door.

Hijikata was used to them by now. At first, it freaked him out a little to know that there were so many non-humans around, but at this point in time, it felt almost natural to him. Unlike the humans, they rarely displayed signs of hostility towards him – possibly because most of them did not have the experience being chased by the Shinsengumi. The humans living here were often people convicted of crimes, however minor, and if they tried to escape their sentence, the Shinsengumi would soon be hard on their heels. It was hardly any wonder that the human portion of the valley's inhabitants did not exactly have a liking for Hijikata.

The non-humans were not allowed to enter the city, and as such, the grudge they might or might not have felt towards the city people was not nearly as personal. There were some who'd greet Hijikata in a friendly manner if they passed by each other in the corridor – at least, before their trip to the city. Hijikata had no reason to expect that to change. The humans, however, would glare at him a lot when they thought he wasn't looking.

He was no fool, and he of course knew that the reason nobody ever said anything to his face was that Gintoki was favouring him. He also knew that this was why the humans living in the castle mostly avoided any interaction with him. He had yet to earn their approval.

He had thought that saving Gintoki from the gallows would have helped a little, though.

Then again, the fact that Gintoki almost died was his fault in the first place.

Plus, it wasn't clear if anyone here knew about it – except maybe Takasugi.

And anyway, he'd only returned last night and barely saw anyone. Perhaps the people here would start treating him at least slightly friendlier now.

Or not, he thought as he saw Katsura vehemently push the door open and step inside.

Katsura eyed the people at the table, and his expression darkened when his gaze fell on Hijikata. If it was because Katsura's grudge was the freshest, or if it was due to something else entirely, Hijikata did not know.

"Takasugi's going to be a bit late," Katsura said flatly as he walked over to his chair. "He said we don't have to wait for him."

"Alright, thanks," Gintoki nodded curtly.

They all began eating, but the silence was suffocating. Hijikata gradually became more and more uneasy. He knew that his presence was not quite welcome just yet – not by anyone but Gintoki. He wasn't sure what Sakamoto thought, but the two of them have barely spoken, so it was only natural to assume that Sakamoto, much like everyone else here, wanted nothing to do with Hijikata.

He felt that something was hanging in the air, something he had no context for. As such, he couldn't address it, and so he just sat there and slowly chewed, hoping that someone would finally chase that elephant out of the dining room.

“Gintoki!” Katsura finally slammed his fist on the table. In a way, Hijikata was relieved; it was obvious by the way he was being glared at that he was the problem. Katsura had disliked him from the very start but unlike anyone else in the castle, he had no qualms voicing that opinion.

“What?” Gintoki swallowed what he had in his mouth and looked up from his plate.

“I can't agree to it after all,” Katsura said, looking at Gintoki from across the table. “What you said last night – it's unacceptable!”

“You're just cranky because I woke you up early,” Gintoki shrugged it off. “Eat more, it'll make you feel better.”

“Stop treating this like a joke,” Katsura frowned. “You can't just have *him*,” his finger stabbed the air in Hijikata's direction, “be a free man in this land! Do you not remember how it went when you chose to keep him alive back then?”

Oh, so that was it. Now, Hijikata understood. He knew, at least vaguely, that the fact he was not executed back when he first came here caused quite the stir and there were some people who called for his death. Gintoki chose not to bother him with it, and he made sure that it would be settled quickly and quietly, but some unrest was probably bound to happen one way or another.

“We've handled it once, we can handle it again,” Gintoki was not fazed in the least. “I could have him pledge allegiance to me, publicly,” he then suggested, looking at Hijikata, who shrugged wordlessly. He was not opposed to the idea; after all, he was already operating on that basis.

“Do you think that's going to be enough?!” Katsura scoffed sceptically.

“He betrayed his country to save me,” Gintoki replied calmly. “I trust him implicitly.”

“It's not just a matter of trust!” Katsura got up from his chair.

Gintoki watched him calmly. “What, then?”

“Integrity!”

Hijikata's eyebrow cocked.

“He’s turned on his own once before. Who’s to say that he won’t do it again?! How are you going to explain this to your people?” Katsura insisted. “These are turbulent times! If something goes wrong...”

“Why do I have to answer to my people in this?” Gintoki leaned back in his chair. “I’m granting him freedom because I want him to stand on equal grounds with me and everyone else. It needs to be made official; otherwise, nobody here would treat him fairly. What is the point of being a leader if I can’t tell people what to do, huh?”

“Maybe that would normally work,” Katsura said as he rolled his eyes in exasperation, “but *he* – did you even stop to consider who he is?!”

“Sounds to me like you’re taking this personally,” Gintoki leaned a little forward.

“That’s completely besides the point!” Katsura was getting red in the face. “You can’t keep a snake at your chest and expect it not to bite you!”

Hijikata folded his arms on his chest. He wasn’t exactly happy about what Katsura was implying, but it was a reasonable way of thinking. It would be great if Katsura simply accepted that Hijikata was staying for good, and not as a prisoner. Still, he couldn’t blame Katsura for being cautious.

“It’ll be fine,” Gintoki shook his head, smiling softly. “If you don’t trust my judgement, ask Takasugi.”

Katsura pursed his lips. “I don’t care what Takasugi has to say about this! This bastard,” he pointed an accusatory finger at Hijikata, “is a government dog! He’s always been trying to catch us all, one by one, and then he’d have us judged and executed, like sensei—”

“Zura.”

That one word fell like a block of ice. Gintoki slowly rose from his chair, looking at Katsura.

Involuntarily, Hijikata shuddered. All of a sudden, Gintoki exuded a heavy, suffocating aura.

Katsura’s mouth opened, then closed. “I’m just saying that we should maybe—”

“I hope you’ve thought through what you’re about to say,” Gintoki narrowed his eyes.

Katsura cleared his throat, his anger clearly knocked down a notch or two. “I think we should... *make sure* that he doesn’t betray us, too. That’s all,” he ended with a gesture Hijikata did not understand. There was a thin line of sparkles trailing behind Katsura’s fingers. Whatever that was, it implied something Hijikata was unfamiliar with.

Gintoki let out a huff and sat back down. “Absolutely not,” he said firmly. “I am *not* doing that ever again.”

“But—”

“Have you forgotten where that led us?” Gintoki shook his head. “Now who’s treating serious matters as a joke?”

Katsura hung his head. “... *Fine*,” he said as he slowly sat back down. “Have it your way. Just don’t say I haven’t warned you if things go sideways.”

“They won’t.” Gintoki resumed eating, and Hijikata could finally breathe freely again.

Suddenly, Sakamoto, who kept silent until now, spoke up. “You know, Zura,” he said, then paused to pick his teeth with his fingernail, “nobody’s going to turn back on Kintoki – or on the four of us – just because we’ve decided to accept an outsider. Most of the people here were once outsiders, too. Sure, there *are* gonna be some who might hate the idea of him being here,” he admitted, “but some people are never happy. Instead, we should focus on finding the Medallion so that this place is protected, and the situation calms down again.”

There was a pause. “Did you eat something weird?” Gintoki asked worriedly.

“You know things have gotten bad when *he* of all people is the voice of reason,” Katsura murmured, rubbing his temples. “Yeah. The Medallion does take priority. You’re right,” he sighed.

So, the Medallion was still gone, then. That wasn’t good – though it was hardly a surprise. Surely, if they had found it in Gintoki’s and Hijikata’s absence, this would be the first news they’d have heard upon returning.

“I didn’t eat anything weird,” Sakamoto shook his head. “I got scolded by Mutsu again, though, haha,” he said with a sheepish chuckle. “I’m trying to... take things more seriously.”

Hijikata saw that Gintoki was looking at Sakamoto with genuine concern. Hijikata hardly knew anything about the man, besides him being generally lively and having a really obnoxious laugh, so he wasn’t exactly sure, but even he felt that Sakamoto had been oddly quiet.

It was possible that with the Medallion gone, the four of them were being affected more than anyone else in the valley. They were, after all, bound to it by blood, and there was no telling just what might happen to them – perhaps the longer the Medallion’s absence was, the more severe the situation became.

Sakamoto got up slowly from his chair, and unsteadily, he leaned on his hands. “I think I’ll try and take a nap,” he said. “I couldn’t sleep last night, so maybe now... Agh, my head is killing me.”

“Wait,” Gintoki got up as well.

“I don’t need you walking me,” Sakamoto chuckled. “It’s not *that* bad—”

“Shut up,” Gintoki cut him off uncompromisingly and walked over to him.

Hijikata watched them walk out, with Sakamoto leaning heavily on Gintoki’s shoulders. Katsura sat there for a moment longer, but he was clearly anxious, and it took him about ten

seconds to shoot up from his seat and rush after them.

Hijikata looked at his unfinished plate. He'd completely lost his appetite; listlessly, he got up, too, and he began making his way out of the room. He wished he could help, but as far as he knew, there was nothing he could do...

Wait, how about the library? he then realised. There were countless books and historical records – and the Book of Prophecies, as well. Takasugi had hidden it from him before, but Hijikata did remember what it looked like, and there was no way he was going to let Takasugi stop him this time.

He made a quick stop in his chambers, and then, armed with a dictionary, he made for the archives.

It was amazing how books had the ability to amplify the silence of an already quiet room. There was no-one in there; Hijikata had half-assumed to find Takasugi scribbling away, but the one-eyed man was not present.

The Book of Prophecies was gathering dust on the desk Takasugi would work at.

It was closed.

Hijikata sat down, his dictionary in hand; he was unsure as to what exactly he was hoping to find, but if there was a *slight* chance that Takasugi missed an important detail that could lead them to the Medallion, then...

He opened the Book at the last used page.

He frowned and turned a few pages back.

His dictionary was useless here. He didn't know what kind of godforsaken code Takasugi was using, but either it was not meant to be read, or it was a language Hijikata had never seen before. The entries were dated, but aside from the dates at the beginning of each, he could not decipher a single symbol.

"Shit," he muttered.

He turned a few more pages to get to the earlier entries but had no luck in deciphering what any of that meant. He did notice some of the symbols repeating in the recent entries, but there was no indication that it pertained to the Medallion.

Just out of sheer curiosity, he found the entry dated closest to the day he had first arrived to the castle. It was only three days before, but the handwriting of this one was much less neat than the others'. It was written in bold, chaotic-looking letters, and some of the words were underlined, some blackened out.

Hijikata flipped through the pages again, paying closer attention to the handwriting this time.

Again, three days before the night he slept with Gintoki, the whole page was an absolute mess. There were not many other significant entries before this date – but after that, though

the chaos had lessened per entry, it was consistently in almost every new prophecy. There were words scribbled over, rewritten, underlined.

The underlined ones seemed to repeat frequently.

Hijikata turned the pages to the date he came here first again, and from then, slowly back in time, trying to notice the symbols that were underlined in the recent prophecies.

He found some of them, but he couldn't be completely sure because they were not highlighted in the older entries.

To make matters worse, the longer he stared at the unfamiliar script, the more he felt that a headache was coming his way.

He sighed and closed his eyes briefly, rubbing his forehead. It had probably been only minutes since he began, and he already needed to take a break.

The door opened and he heard footsteps.

"Oh my," came from behind him. "First day since you've returned our leader to us, and you're already messing up my records?" Takasugi was leaning onto one of the bookshelves with his shoulder.

"You told me that I was welcome to look through them," Hijikata retorted as he opened his eyes and returned to examining the book where he left off.

Takasugi chuckled briefly. "So I did," he said. "How's that going?"

Hijikata pursed his lips. "I can't make heads or tails of it," he admitted in an annoyed tone after a momentary pause.

"Of course you can't. That one is for me, not for you – or for anyone else." Takasugi stepped closer.

"That hardly seems fair," Hijikata finally turned to him.

Takasugi shrugged his shoulders. "If you found another seer, they might help you decipher it," he said flatly.

"So you're saying you won't do it, then," Hijikata frowned.

Takasugi raised his finger to his lips and pretended to think. "No," he said then, "I won't."

Hijikata stared at him for a moment. *Prick*, he thought but seeing Takasugi make that gesture made him recall the events of today's morning. He cleared his throat. "Listen..."

"Hm?"

"You might want to be careful if you don't want to be seen being affectionate with..." Hijikata hesitated. What if he was wrong? He did assume that they preferred to keep it

personal, but what if they didn't care? Worse yet, what if they weren't like that at all and he misunderstood? He didn't even have a good angle then and was all the way on the opposite side of the courtyard. It was possible that he had made a mistake.

There was a pause.

"Don't tell him you saw that," Takasugi said quietly in an unusually meek manner. "It took me months of secretly trying to win him over."

"I wasn't going to tell him," Hijikata shook his head. "He doesn't like me, anyway. We were not going to talk."

"You never know," Takasugi shrugged. "He's not exactly ready to face this yet. Plus lately, he's become..." he shortly looked for the right phrase, "... well, his fuse is shorter. I just hope that he won't spontaneously combust or something."

"Wait, that could happen?!" Hijikata became nervous. Katsura was a pyromancer, after all – if involuntarily by an unfortunate twist of fate – and since Hijikata knew that pyromancers were in no way impervious to fire...

"I'm joking," Takasugi's lips curved in a wry smile. "Mostly."

"At breakfast," Hijikata said carefully, "Sakamoto looked like he was about to collapse. Gintoki doesn't seem like himself lately, either..."

Takasugi narrowed his one visible eye. "What are you implying?"

"Isn't it because the Warding Medallion is gone?" Hijikata said – and then he witnessed the rarest sight of them all.

Takasugi's expression changed into that of pure astonishment.

"That makes *so much sense*," the seer breathed out. "Why haven't I realised?" Abruptly, he turned to the Book of Prophecies and pulled it closer. "That must be it... that's why I..."

Hijikata raised his eyebrows. He had thought for sure that the four of them had already figured this out – and he immediately told this to Takasugi as well.

Takasugi shook his head. "We get like this sometimes," he muttered, "but it's never been so bad since the first few weeks after we formed the blood pact..." He then trailed off, his lips moving soundlessly as he was skimming through the Book.

"Are you all going to be okay?" Hijikata asked though he wasn't sure it was even his place to ask.

"I don't know," Takasugi shook his head curtly. "Shut up. Or go away. I can't focus."

"Alright," Hijikata shrugged his shoulders and got up, intending to leave.

“Oh, right,” Takasugi looked up from the Book. “Gintoki told me to send you to him if I met you.”

Chapter End Notes

my IG (where I also announce updates): @rison_iinekin

my Discord server (in case you want to contact me but prefer not to use your Instagram):

<https://discord.gg/ksxHgSv>

Like a Brick

“You asked for me?” Hijikata found Gintoki in the stables. He found it more than just a little odd that he somehow knew which way to go to; the moment Takasugi told him that Gintoki wanted to see him, it was as though a little light lit up in his brain, leading him straight to where Gintoki was at the moment.

“Yeah,” Gintoki looked at him from behind his horse. “Wanna go for a ride?”

Hijikata pursed his lips. “I still can’t feel my ass,” he objected.

“Remember how I offered that I’d teach you to swim? I thought we should get started before the weather gets too cold,” Gintoki explained. “We’d be just going to the pond.”

“It’s not even autumn yet,” Hijikata raised his eyebrows.

Gintoki smiled a little. “Here in the mountains, winter comes much sooner and with much more spite than down in the city. In only a little under two months, we might be getting first snowfall. Granted, the first few ones always melt away, but... these are probably our last proper warm days of the year. The mornings get colder, and the forest pond does, too.”

“I don’t know,” Hijikata was hesitant. He did not want to show weakness, but the memory of having nearly drowned in the river was still too fresh.

“I’m not going to force you,” Gintoki said, “but I want you to be safe. If you fall in water somewhere and end up dying...”

Hijikata hung his head briefly. It was a sound argument; he *did* have to learn to swim sooner or later. There were numerous bodies of water in the valley, he knew that much from just looking out of the window. It was different from the city, and he had to adapt.

Plus, this concern of Gintoki’s meant one more thing – that Gintoki was really going to stop keeping tabs on him. Hijikata still found that surprising. Regardless of whether this was deliberate on Gintoki’s part, it was a sign that Hijikata could trust in Gintoki’s words and actions – more so than he gave Gintoki credit for.

“Alright,” he conceded.

“Awesome.” Gintoki’s face disappeared behind the horse’s neck. “I won’t make you race me this time,” he added with a chuckle.

“You’d better not,” Hijikata grumbled as he walked over to his horse. She looked at him, moving her ears. She looked a little nervous; Hijikata reached up to her to pet her nose. She calmed down a little with him near her, but she still seemed cautious.

They dressed their horses and set off.

Gintoki kept his promise, and though he was a little ahead of Hijikata, he maintained the same distance, not going too fast.

Hijikata wondered how it was possible that while Hijikata himself was absolutely exhausted after the whole jailbreak, generally in pain and wishing to sleep for three days straight, Gintoki seemed to be just peachy.

Then again, Gintoki was usually really pale, so he would look a bit unhealthy under some lighting, and maybe Hijikata just couldn't really tell just how Gintoki was really doing.

At a leisurely pace, they reached the foot of the cliff and continued down the path towards the curtain of green ahead. Much like before, he felt like a heretic upon entering the forest even though Gintoki clearly did not mind in the least, Hijikata vaguely sensed a strange, unfamiliar air of divinity around, and Hijikata was compelled to follow closely after Gintoki and not to take one step outside the path beneath their horses' hooves.

The area around the pond was peaceful; Gintoki jumped off his horse and just left it there, not bothering to tie it to anything. The horse bowed its head to the ground and started munching on the grass.

Hijikata was still in his saddle, hesitant. He realised just now that to learn to swim, he had to get naked in front of Gintoki. Although he wasn't embarrassed when he was in the bath, it was partly because the laundry room was rather dark, and the scarce light back then did not leave him nearly as exposed as it did now.

Eh, damn it all, he thought and got off as well. He gave it a brief thought, and then he chose to tie his horse to one of the trees; not that he didn't trust her to behave herself, but she was oddly jumpy today and he'd rather she didn't run off.

Gintoki was squatting by the pond, hand submerged in water. "You ready?" he looked up when Hijikata walked closer.

"No," Hijikata replied unhappily.

"The water's warm," Gintoki said reassuringly, "so it won't be that bad." With that, he took a few steps back and began taking his clothes off.

Hijikata turned away, intending to do the same. It was still awkward, and he decided to hurry up and quickly be at least waist-deep so that he wouldn't get looked at too much. This morning, Gintoki was doing his best not to ogle him, and it was really the only reason Hijikata was willing to strip now.

He disrobed as quickly as he could, and then he entered the water. By the edge, it reached his knees, and he hissed shortly. "You call this warm?"

As soon as he said that, he heard Gintoki's breath hitch.

"Hijikata..." he said, and there was worry in his voice, "what happened to you?"

“What?” Hijikata glanced over his shoulder. Gintoki, now also naked, was watching him with eyes widened, and Hijikata recognised that shocked, horrified look.

“That...” Gintoki’s voice failed him.

The scar. “So you didn’t know...” Hijikata murmured.

Gintoki froze.

“Are you saying it’s because of me?” he let out uneasily. With his knees visibly buckling, he slowly walked over to Hijikata, his face worrisomely pale.

“Yes. I thought you knew about this,” Hijikata replied. “You did admit to everything they threw at you at the trial, so I thought you’d have at least a vague idea.”

“Do you think I was listening then?” Gintoki muttered, his voice strained. “I just wanted it to be over quickly at the time, so I nodded to every accusation that came my way.”

“You—” Hijikata began, but that ended in a surprised hiss when Gintoki’s fingertips came in contact with his skin.

“Does it hurt?” Gintoki whispered as he gently trailed along the discoloured lines on Hijikata’s shoulder.

Hijikata turned away. Most of the time, the scar was okay. There *were* the strange thoughts he had every now and then, the ones he was certain that they were not his, but he didn’t want Gintoki to worry. “Look—” he said, then heaved a sigh, “—leave it, alright? It doesn’t hurt and it doesn’t cause me any major trouble. Sometimes I can feel it being there, but that’s all. Let’s just get to the swimming.” He started making his way into the deeper waters.

Gintoki’s hand grabbed his arm strongly.

Hijikata looked back and he shuddered; Gintoki’s air had changed.

Instead of Gintoki, it was the White Demon who stood there, the one Hijikata had not seen in a while, the one he was secretly scared of beyond death. The last time he remembered feeling like this in front of Gintoki was on that accursed night they lay together, when they were veiled by darkness and he was unable to see Gintoki’s face. It was different from this morning when Gintoki warned Katsura about whatever it was the pyromancer was suggesting – at breakfast, it felt suffocating, but now, Hijikata could feel his knees giving in and his mind *bending backwards* in a futile attempt to flee. His scar began throbbing with a warm sensation spreading across his back.

He couldn’t look away from Gintoki’s face. Somehow, he managed to stand his ground as Gintoki stepped into the water as well, though he wasn’t sure how it was possible; Gintoki’s eyes, burning like embers, were hypnotizing, and he felt petrified by Gintoki’s gaze.

Gintoki’s hands clutched Hijikata’s hips, and Hijikata got tugged closer, skin-to-skin with the other. There were fingers slowly tracing his scarred skin, and to his dismay, Hijikata *felt* that.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” the White Demon whispered into his ear, and Hijikata trembled. This feverish tone was nothing like the Gintoki he knew.

Weakly, he struggled against Gintoki’s chest – and surprisingly, that was enough; Gintoki stepped back immediately, his knees hitting the edge of the pond, and he fell backwards on his ass.

“Sorry,” he muttered, covering his eyes with his palms in shame. “Something came over me. I’ll try to watch it.”

Hijikata narrowed his eyes, watching Gintoki. “Alright,” he said after a while of silence.

By now, he was pretty sure that whatever was going on with Gintoki must have been caused by the Medallion’s disappearance. Takasugi implied that he was having issues too, Sakamoto was clearly feeling terrible at breakfast, and while Katsura seemed to be the same jerk he usually was, Hijikata did not doubt that he was having problems as well.

“Come on, get up,” he said, reaching out to Gintoki in an attempt to sound reassuring.

“You’re not mad?” Gintoki’s hands slowly fell down to his lap.

Hijikata simply shook his head. He doubted that what just happened was under Gintoki’s control.

Though Gintoki made a relieved face, he did not take Hijikata’s hand as he rose to his feet again. “Do you still want me to teach you?” he asked hesitantly.

To that, Hijikata nodded. To learn to swim was vital whether he liked it or not. “Let’s do this,” he said firmly.

Gintoki perked up a little, and he began making his way towards the deeper waters. Hijikata followed after him.

Though they were doing their best, one does not simply learn to swim in a day. In the end, they had to return to the castle, because the water really was not warm enough for them to keep doing this past lunchtime.

Now, Hijikata was making his way down the corridor, wanting to take a post-lunch nap in his room. He ate more than he should have, and it made him drowsy, but at the same time it gave him a sense of satisfaction; after trying to keep his head above water for so long he was tired, and a tasty meal did him a whole lot of good.

It helped that he and Gintoki were late for lunch and so they were the only ones eating there. Gintoki then left, saying he had something to do, and Hijikata decided to sleep the drowsiness off.

He stopped dead in his track when he heard voices.

It wasn’t the kind of voices he’d want to hear.

Unfortunately, there was no other way to reach his room, and so he walked past that door as quietly as he could, taking care not to make any noise at all, and then he, beet red in the face, rushed towards his chambers.

He wasn't going to be able to look Katsura in the eye the next time they met.

What Lurks Beneath

Hijikata looked around. There was sharp rubble under his bare feet. Vast rocky fields were surrounding him, barren as far as the eye could see. The sky was an obscure, unpleasant shade of grey, hanging lead-heavy above him.

There were no landmarks, no sun in the sky aloft, and he had no shadow.

He narrowed his eyes. This seemed awfully familiar – he must have been here at least once before. Though he had no clear memory of these plains, he was also certain that this was not his first time here. “Where the hell am I?” he murmured as he set off, trudging forth in a less than enthused manner.

The horizon, a flat and unwelcoming line, was not getting any closer, and it showed no signs of change as Hijikata walked on.

He knew what was coming.

He couldn’t escape the fog, he was sure of that. No matter what he did, it would close in on him and hunt him down – even though there was none in sight just yet. He remembered and didn’t remember this nightmarish hellscape, couldn’t shake the notion that the way his feet burned and bled, being bitten by the angry grit below no matter how carefully and lightly he attempted to tread, was something he had come to know already.

With teeth clenched and drenched in sweat, he continued forward, unsure there was any point in doing so. Nevertheless, he did not want to stop.

A sense of unease washed over him.

The ground beneath his feet shook violently. Having lost balance, Hijikata fell on one knee, cussing as sharp pain shot through his leg.

The rubble in front of him burst into the air, and Hijikata instinctively shielded his eyes.

When he peeked through his fingers, his throat clenched in undiluted terror; he jumped back ungracefully, scrambling backwards, just for the love of all that was holy wanting to get away from that thing. He couldn’t breathe, his heartbeat was deafeningly drumming in his ears, and no matter how hard he wished to, he couldn’t avert his gaze. His brain struggled to comprehend what was before him, unable to assemble a clear picture of the horror closing in. All he could see clearly was a hypnotizing pair of gleaming pupil-less red eyes, fixed on him.

Something tickled his fingers. The fog had seeped through the rubble and began wrapping itself around Hijikata’s limbs, eventually stopping him completely no matter how hard he struggled.

The creature that had emerged from the ground walked up to Hijikata in no rush, and just as slowly, it loomed over him without a sound. As it dragged its finger down Hijikata’s chest,

his clothes shredded under its touch. The fog's embrace tightened, pinning him to the ground, and he cried out when he felt the sharp rocks underneath pierce his skin.

The monster laid its large hands – at least Hijikata *hoped* they were just hands – on his inner thighs, and with the sound of fabric giving way upon contact, it pushed Hijikata's legs apart.

Hijikata, now more or less naked, desperately wanted to at least close his eyes, but was not allowed to. Instead, he had to watch the creature stroke his body slowly, getting rid of all of his clothes.

It caressed his skin in a way that made his hair stand on end – tracing every curve and every nook and cranny, not even avoiding the space between Hijikata's legs. Hijikata squirmed helplessly despite the rubble digging into his skin in a fruitless attempt to get away; there were tears in his eyes, but even so, he had a clear view of when the monster leaned in and its hand went up slowly, stroking his taut stomach and chest, and then it wrapped around his neck.

Whimpering, Hijikata bared his clenched teeth.

The monster's other hand closed around Hijikata's dick.

Hijikata let out a strained cuss; though he wished nothing but for this to stop, he was getting hard from things which would usually never arouse him in the least.

The creature's face inched in, and those red eyes filled Hijikata's entire vision.

“Hijikata?”

His eyes snapped open, and he gasped for oxygen, filling his lungs with the chilly night air.

“I don't mind you squeezing me so tightly,” Gintoki whispered, “but you're hard, so it's kind of...”

Hijikata immediately let go, backing away. The memory of that horrible dream was already fading, and he wasn't sure why he was now bathing in cold sweat, or why he still had an erection despite the ominous aftertaste that remained.

“You alright?”

Hijikata swallowed hard. “Yeah,” he said, rubbing his face with his palm. His voice was a little unsteady, and he clenched his teeth briefly before he spoke again. “I just had a... bad dream, that's all.”

“I could tell.” Gintoki sat up and scooted to the edge of the bed to light a candle. Hijikata watched him do so, yet again questioning why Gintoki chose to sleep in the nude. Even if he did not have a single cell on him that would know what embarrassment meant, it had to be inconvenient, surely.

Then again, Gintoki *had* made sure that Hijikata's beddings were very pleasant to the touch.

There was a moment of silence, then Gintoki slipped under the blanket again. “Want me to help you take care of that?” he asked.

“Of what?”

Wordlessly, Gintoki moved closer, and leaning on one elbow, he pulled their blanket down just so that it would still – though just barely – hide Hijikata’s crotch. “This, of course.” His hand disappeared under the blanket, and Hijikata could feel fingers wrap warmly around his hard-on.

“Wait, no—”

“No?” Gintoki released his grip but did not move his hand from where it was, and he looked up at Hijikata. His expression was disarming, and there was something reassuring about it, as though he wanted to do this for the sole purpose of making Hijikata think of something else than the horrible dream he just had. “I’ll just get you off,” he said. “I won’t do anything except that.”

Hijikata inhaled shakily, giving up. “... Okay,” he whispered, looking away.

Gintoki pulled the blanket out of the way, and then he moved lower.

Hijikata shuddered when he felt the soft touch of Gintoki’s lips on his skin. It had been a while for him; he hadn’t had time to touch himself, so his thresholds were much lower than usual.

Gintoki mouthed at Hijikata’s erect dick; in the candlelight, Hijikata could see that Gintoki’s eyes were closed, and his eyebrows furrowed a little when he opened his mouth to take Hijikata in.

The contrast of Gintoki’s hot mouth and the cold night’s air made Hijikata hiss. He clutched the sheet underneath, already regretting that he allowed this, but against his better judgement, he did nothing to stop this. There was something telling him that if he let this happen, the remaining sensation of imminent doom would disappear.

Gintoki’s fingers slipped past Hijikata’s balls, and Hijikata tensed up briefly. Thankfully, Gintoki did not seem to have the intention to stir up his rear; instead, he stroked and teased from the underside of Hijikata’s balls, gentle but persistent, and with a soft tongue doing an amazing job on its own end, Hijikata couldn’t properly follow what was happening.

He let out a small high-pitched sound when Gintoki accidentally grazed his skin with his teeth. It was light, it didn’t even hurt, but it startled him; before he realised it, his hand was in Gintoki’s hair.

Gintoki pulled away instantly. “You alright?” he asked with much more concern than was fit for the current situation.

Hijikata himself did not understand the reason why he ended up hanging his head. “I’m fine,” he let out, and it was barely audible, as though he did not want to hear himself.

Taking it as permission, Gintoki lowered his head again. Hijikata closed his eyes and laid his head down, succumbing to the pleasure bestowed upon him. He dug his fingernails into his palms, stifling his voice, though he couldn't control his intermittent gasps and hisses escaping his clenched teeth. He didn't understand why his whole body was ablaze, why his skin felt so hot now – he knew, however, that he'd be damned in more ways than one if he were to tell Gintoki to stop.

Gintoki's lips touched the base of Hijikata's cock, and Hijikata raised his arm and hid his face in his elbow, clenching his teeth a little harder. One of Gintoki's hands was caressing his abdomen softly while the other was clutching Hijikata's thigh a *little* too high up, sometimes teasingly dancing over Hijikata's exposed skin in the most sensitive of places. Even so, he refrained from even trying to open Hijikata up with his fingers as he did back then. He bobbed his head up and down with a soft grunt every now and then – persistently, until sparks appeared behind Hijikata's lowered eyelids.

Hijikata came inside Gintoki's mouth for the second time.

It didn't stop there.

Hijikata actually tried to struggle when Gintoki sucked harder, not only swallowing everything but also gathering it all until the last drop – but he could barely move. It felt that his limbs had turned into gelatine, and he didn't even manage to sit up properly and ended up collapsing back onto the bed.

“You should try going back to sleep,” Gintoki said softly.

Hijikata finally looked at him. “You drank it again, huh,” he muttered weakly.

Gintoki nonchalantly shrugged his shoulders. “Well, I wouldn't want to make a mess in the bed, right?” When Hijikata didn't answer, he added, “It doesn't taste that terrible, you know.”

“I somehow doubt that,” Hijikata yawned.

“Feel free to try mine anytime you like,” Gintoki said with a chuckle as he grabbed the blanket and huddled up to Hijikata, covering them both with the blanket.

“Shut up,” Hijikata replied sleepily and turned his back to Gintoki.

Gintoki, in turn, clung closer to him wordlessly.

They left the candle burning.

Before Hijikata drifted off, one last thought surfaced the oceans of his mind.

Gintoki didn't get hard.

Seer Unseen

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Hijikata woke up because his scar was tingling.

It took him a few seconds to realise that it was well past sunrise, and another few to notice that Gintoki was not next to him.

Subsequently, he realised that last night, he allowed something he probably shouldn't have. Gintoki was interested in Hijikata in the most carnal sense, as far as Hijikata could tell, and to give him false hopes even before they had the chance to discuss it properly... he felt bad. Obviously, he'd feel bad. He hated to lie and mislead, even when it was to his advantage. In this situation, to make Gintoki misunderstand would not serve him in any way, so it made him feel even worse.

He didn't *dislike* what was done to him, though – and that was a problem. Even though it was true he had left everything behind for Gintoki's sake, his intentions did not align with Gintoki's own. He thought he should have felt much worse about it, especially after that short but extremely strange moment at the pond. It was obvious that Gintoki wasn't in full control of himself then, and when that happened, Hijikata was secretly scared of him; however, last night, he seemed genuinely comforting.

Hijikata must have been out of his mind to allow for *that* to happen.

The memory that Gintoki wasn't hard when he hugged Hijikata post act resurfaced his mind, and instantly, he was overwhelmed with worry. Gintoki had jerked off with his face buried in between Hijikata's shoulder blades before, and though Hijikata did not have the guts to ask, he was fairly certain that Gintoki was sniffing him while at it back then. Last night, though, he showed no signs of arousal, none whatsoever despite their *extreme* closeness, and Hijikata felt that was not right.

Was it because of the Medallion, too?

Hijikata had no idea if that was possible, but the only other explanation would be that Gintoki had lost interest extremely abruptly, and that seemed unlikely. The loss of libido in itself was not a cause for concern, but then, when would it stop? How far would Gintoki and the others change?

The door burst open.

Hijikata, who was deep in thought, clutched his blanket to his bare chest.

Katsura loomed over him. "Get up," he said sternly.

Something was off.

Despite his general dislike for Katsura, Hijikata did not feel like arguing, so he did as he was told. Katsura made him get dressed, and then, just when Hijikata was about to ask what the hell was going on, he whipped out a rope from gods knew where and took a hold of Hijikata's wrist.

"What the hell?!" Hijikata finally snapped. "What are you trying to do here?"

"Gintoki's orders," Katsura replied curtly. "Don't fuck around and hold still."

Hijikata froze. *What?*

Hesitantly, he allowed Katsura to bind his wrists together. He did not like this at all. Katsura was not helping by keeping eerily quiet, either – then again, he and Hijikata would hardly ever talk to each other, so him glaring daggers and keeping silent was no surprise... but for Gintoki not to tell Hijikata anything and instead have him brought in ropes, something was *definitely* amiss.

Gintoki would usually *never* do such a thing.

Taking a deep breath as he followed Katsura out of the room, he internally got ready to make a break for it in case Katsura showed any signs that he had finally snapped and was going to off Hijikata in some sketchy corner.

Contrary to his expectations, however, Katsura was leading him to the audience hall. That, too, was concerning – though for entirely different reasons. Hijikata could faintly hear voices of a lot of people, and so, when they reached the doors, his heart was beating so hard it threatened to leap out of his chest.

Katsura pushed the doors open.

The hall was full of people, human or not, and they all turned to look at them.

Hijikata swallowed hard. He could see many faces he had met in the castle before, but there were unknown faces as well.

Gintoki stood at the opposite end of the room on the elevated platform with his back to the entrance, and Hijikata couldn't see his face; he was talking to Sakamoto, who was standing at the side. Takasugi was not there.

It seemed that Sakamoto was feeling better. That was good at least, but it begged the question if – by some strange twist of fate – somehow the Medallion had been found and Hijikata framed for its disappearance. No matter how he looked at it, this was going to be a public trial, one meant for him.

Gintoki's clothes, all white again, seemed heavy and ceremonious even from afar. He turned around and watched Katsura drag the suddenly petrified Hijikata closer, his expression serious.

Unscrupulously, Katsura shoved Hijikata to his knees in front of Gintoki. Hijikata was so perplexed that he did not even have it in him to hiss in pain.

“Well then, shall we begin?” Gintoki said, and at the sound of his voice, everyone in the room quieted down in a heartbeat.

Hijikata looked up at him, confused and worried.

“With any god who might be listening, and with you all as my witnesses,” Gintoki’s gaze swept across the room as he raised his hand to hold it above Hijikata’s head, “I now pronounce Hijikata Toshiro a free man of this land.”

Hijikata inhaled sharply. He was expecting to hear all sorts of things, but not this. His eyebrow cocked as his confusion was instantly replaced by anger; there was no reason for Gintoki to keep it from him in such a manner – and he had no response prepared, to boot.

Katsura stepped in with his face still spelling a storm, but he held up an ornate dagger with both hands and bowed his head slightly. Gintoki took the dagger from him, and after Katsura stepped back to stand at Sakamoto’s side again, the White Demon leaned down and with a single move of his hand, he freed Hijikata’s wrists.

Katsura gestured at Hijikata to get up; Hijikata did so hesitantly.

Gintoki began once more. “From this day forth,” he paused momentarily, “should any harm come to him, it will be considered a crime and judged as such. He is entitled to move at will and to own property, should he want to purchase any. Above all, his will is free and so is his spirit.”

Hijikata wasn’t sure if he should respond, but before he made up his mind, Gintoki continued. “He has proven his loyalty to me, but in doing so, like many of you, he had to leave his home behind. Under these circumstances, he’ll be an honoured guest here at the castle until he either chooses to stay for good, or leave.” Gintoki’s voice failed momentarily, and he looked directly at Hijikata, his formal expression collapsing into a genuinely pleading one; when he spoke again, it was barely audible. “... but please, stay.”

Hijikata took an unsteady breath. Hesitantly, as if led by something, he bowed his head and replied simply, “Thank you, it’s an honour.”

“You bet your damn ass it is,” Katsura said under his breath, and Sakamoto elbowed him lightly, whispering something. Katsura pulled a face but hung his head, seemingly in defeat.

Gintoki reached out his hand to Hijikata and in a symbolic gesture, he invited him to step up onto the platform. Hijikata allowed himself to be pulled along, and when he stood next to Gintoki and glanced at the crowd, people *finally* began clapping. He let out a sigh of relief – he had expected that this would meet with a lot of opposition, but it seemed that Gintoki’s word was the ultimate law.

Gintoki turned his attention to the crowd. “Let’s celebrate this in the dining hall,” he said with a smile. “We’ll be joining you momentarily.”

The guards held the doors open and the crowd began pouring out into the hallway.

“What the hell was that?” Hijikata looked into Gintoki’s face as soon as the common and uncommon folk was gone.

“What?” Gintoki replied, confused, his smile already gone.

“You could have told me what you were planning,” Hijikata folded his arms on his chest. “I looked like a fool.”

“Wait, Zura didn’t tell you?” Gintoki asked, glancing at his friend who was smirking now.

“It’s not Zura, it’s Katsura. Have you looked at his face before he realised what was happening? Hilarious,” Katsura replied, and Hijikata wished he could punch him, just once. Why the hell did this guy have to keep messing with him?!

Gintoki sighed. “Dumbass.”

Hijikata frowned at Katsura, but before he could begin asking just when was Katsura going to act like an adult, Gintoki spoke again. “Well, sorry about that,” he said, scratching his head sheepishly. “I would have told you myself, but we’ve got a... *situation*, so we had to do this quickly.” His face and tone were grave.

Hijikata immediately sensed a problem. “What happened?”

“Takasugi’s disappeared,” Sakamoto replied in Gintoki’s place, his face turning a little pallid. “There’s no sign of him anywhere, and he didn’t notify any one of us. The guards know nothing, too, even though there is no way to leave the castle unless you either go through one of the gates – or jump into the river below.”

Hijikata pursed his lips. This really *was* strange, and it definitely explained why Katsura was so antsy despite his attempts to appear normal. Deciding to argue with Katsura at a later time, he asked, “Do we at least know who spoke to him last?”

“I think I did,” Katsura said. “He *did* look a little out of it last night, but I wouldn’t have thought...”

Everyone including Hijikata nodded. Takasugi was all sorts of weird, but it was unlikely he’d just up and leave, especially since he, according to his own words, managed to make Katsura give in to him only recently.

“Well,” Sakamoto said, “let’s not keep the gentry waiting. We’ll discuss it later.”

Hijikata nodded and followed the three of them slowly, deep in thought. He had hoped that his suspicions would prove to be completely off the mark, but with how secretive Takasugi was, this stank of betrayal. For now, though, he kept that thought locked away at the back of his mind, not wanting to pour more oil into the fire. They all were clearly worried, but Katsura especially looked completely lifeless, and Hijikata could not bring himself to say it.

After the lunch – as Hijikata would hesitate to call it a *feast*, considering how rushed it was – Gintoki asked them to come to the meeting room. Now, Hijikata was standing by the desk in

said room, looking at it. There was a paper fan there, the very same which Gintoki once sliced an apple in half with, and the sight of it made Hijikata's throat dry. He'd almost forgotten.

Gintoki and Katsura had not arrived yet, and Sakamoto was sitting there, curled up in a chair. It seemed that his condition turned for the worse yet again; his face was ashen, and he was hugging his knees to his chest as he rested with his eyes closed.

The door opened and Katsura walked in. "Where is he?" he asked, not seeing Gintoki anywhere.

Hijikata shrugged his shoulders.

They waited.

Finally, Gintoki showed up, his face tired. He closed the door behind himself and walked over to the desk, leaning his backside against it.

There was a moment of silence.

"Alright," Gintoki said, "anyone got any ideas?"

Nobody said anything.

"Damn," Gintoki rubbed his face with his hands. "First the Medallion, and now this..."

"You know," Katsura began hesitantly, "I didn't want to go there, but... I think it's *her* doing."

"Her?" Gintoki parroted, but then his face turned even paler than usual. "Oh no."

Even Sakamoto opened his eyes. "Don't say that even as a joke," he muttered listlessly.

"I mean, think about it," Katsura threw his hands into the air. "Who else would benefit from the Medallion *and* Takasugi being gone? Who else would want to leave the valley vulnerable?"

Gintoki was biting his lip. "It *does* make sense," he admitted after a while, "and I hate that it does. I never wanted to see her again." He sighed heavily. "Shit."

Hijikata cleared his throat.

"Sorry," Gintoki looked at him. "I didn't mean to leave you out of the loop there. Guys, do you mind if I—" he began.

Katsura shrugged his shoulders. "We might as well," he nodded, sitting down on the empty chair that was behind the desk.

"Years ago," Gintoki began, "when we first came into this valley, we were looking for a place just to stay for a few days before moving on, farther away from the city. We passed through,

almost, and settled at a secluded grove for the night. It seemed safe and defensible, so we stayed, right? But at night, we had an unexpected visit.”

Hijikata tilted his head in an unspoken question. Sakamoto slowly got up and walked over to the desk, his step all but steady.

“A woman, dressed in leaves and bark, demanding a sacrifice for having stepped into her territory,” Katsura explained. “She just suddenly stood there among us, in place of the fire we spent hours trying to light. I was not great with pyromancy back then, so you can imagine how happy we were to have to be in the dark and cold again,” he added sourly. “When we asked what she wanted...”

“... she pointed at me,” Gintoki gave a wry smile. “Obviously, we refused, and so she gave us another option.”

“She asked us to stay and worship her,” Sakamoto said, rummaging through some papers on the table.

Gintoki smiled shortly. “I told her to kiss my beautifully sculpted...” he cleared his throat.

Sakamoto gave a small chuckle. “Funny for sure,” he looked up briefly, “but a mistake still.”

Nodding, Gintoki continued. “In response to that, she cursed me where I stood. I keeled over, and so the others took me and left the grove in a rush, and we crossed the valley once more, settling at this end instead.”

“She cursed you?” Hijikata whispered.

“It took him months of recovery and sensei nearly burned himself out trying to save him,” Katsura murmured uneasily. “During that time, others started settling nearby, too.”

“After I got better, we started putting this place together. Well, with sensei’s help. He had the idea, and he gave the valley its shape – and later, as more and more people came here seeking refuge, he helped build our castle as well. And then, once we were done making sure there was no easy way in or out,” Gintoki lowered his voice into a whisper, “we formed the blood pact... but you’ve already heard about that.”

Hijikata glanced at Katsura and Sakamoto, whose expressions were tense.

“We never entered that grove again, and we warned everyone else to keep away from it.” Sakamoto leaned onto the desk heavily; he was getting a little short of breath. “With a goddess like that, there was no way we’d get what we wanted... or needed. The blood pact worked well enough for us, at least until the Medallion’s disappearance.” Taking a deep breath, he grabbed a piece of paper and held it out in front of Hijikata’s eyes.

Hijikata looked at it. The Warding Medallion looked much simpler than he had imagined, but the runes on it seemed to be pulsing even though it was only a sketch. The real one must have been incredibly powerful.

“If *she* has it,” Gintoki said, “we need to get it back before something terrible happens. I wouldn’t be surprised if she turned all spiteful after all those years without a single person giving her the attention she wanted. And Zura’s right,” he then added, “she might have Takasugi, too. That would at least explain why no-one saw him leave.”

“Wouldn’t she have left a message, though?” Sakamoto mused.

Katsura shook his head. “Not if she wants to off us one by one.”

Gintoki was frowning. “Alright,” he said after a while, “I’ll go and confront her.”

“Like hell am I letting you go alone,” Katsura objected. “I’m coming with. If it’s really her, going alone would be playing right into her grimy hands.”

“Me too,” Hijikata said firmly, and it stung a little when all three of them looked at him with genuine surprise written all over their faces. “I’m coming, too.”

Gintoki gave a small soft smile. “Thanks,” he whispered. Then, he looked at Sakamoto. “*You* are staying here. I’ll leave the castle to you and Mutsu... well, mostly Mutsu, seeing as you look about ready to faint,” he said in a tone that left no space for objections.

Sakamoto hung his head, but he seemed to agree with Gintoki’s reasoning. Hijikata, too, could see why Gintoki said that – Sakamoto was deathly pale now, and it would be a wonder if he could handle a longer trip. Plus, even if he did, he could easily become a liability, and if they all wanted to survive this unscathed, it was best to leave him here.

“We’ll make the preparations in the next few days,” Gintoki declared. “I’m going to have someone call Mutsu back from the river outpost, and...” he hesitated, “... make arrangements, just in case.” With that, he walked out.

Sakamoto straightened up. “I’m going to bed,” he said weakly. “I’m... sure you guys can handle it.” Much slower than Gintoki, he left as well.

Katsura sighed. “Damn it,” he hissed, and then he turned to follow the others’ example.

“Wait,” Hijikata stopped him, though he felt reluctant to do so.

“Hm?” Katsura looked at him – and surprisingly, there was no animosity in his expression.

“Gintoki told me,” Hijikata’s voice got briefly caught in his throat, “that you each lost something when you formed the blood pact.”

“Yeah, and?”

“I know what happened to each of you,” Hijikata swallowed hard, “except him.”

Katsura shook his head curtly and started making his way towards the door again.

“Katsura,” Hijikata said, his tone now insistent, “*what* did Gintoki lose?”

Katsura paused at the exit briefly. “Himself.”

The door slammed closed, and Hijikata was left with new questions arisen.

Chapter End Notes

I know, it took longer than it should have - but I was invited by some amazing people to cook up something great, excellent, awesome. Stay tuned for Gintoki's birthday next month!

(as usual, if you see any typos, errors, anything, let me know, please and thank you. If you don't, leave a comment anyway if you want to share your opinion with me, or just make my day better ^^)

The Second Judgement, Intended

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Hijikata stared at the closed door for a few heartbeats, frozen. *What?*

What Katsura said did not make much sense to him in the first several seconds; to lose oneself, in his mind, would mean to go insane, and while Gintoki was, by all means, chaos incarnate and overall someone Hijikata couldn't read no matter how hard he tried, he was not a drooling lunatic. Even a blind man could see that Gintoki cared deeply for those close to him, and that there was sobriety in the way he handled impersonal affairs. He was brave, strong, kind to his subjects as the kind of ruler he was, and he even stopped tormenting Hijikata. At this moment, there was nothing about the man Hijikata would disapprove of.

Nothing?

Hijikata shuddered. That, yet again, was an uninvited thought – one which was not his own, and it didn't *feel* like his own. It didn't even try. It was like a grain of sand in the gears of his brain, leaving a grinding, sharp and painful sensation behind, if for but a split second. "Who...?" Hijikata whispered, even though as soon as he did, he felt foolish. Who in their right mind would be asking an empty room in this manner?

What would be a better question.

Startled, Hijikata backed away, even though there was nothing to back away from. If it weren't for the desk behind him, his legs would have given way, but he ended up leaning onto the desk with his backside. He did not expect to receive an answer, not really, but as soon as he felt that voice echo through his head, an all too familiar feeling of pure dread flooded him. He remembered the nightmare from last night, and it was now that he realised that he had had the same kind of dream twice already. It wasn't nearly as strong and suffocating as when he woke up in cold sweat, clinging to Gintoki in an instinctive attempt to seek solace – but it still left him clutching the edge of the desk so hard it almost hurt. The scar on his back burned like the depths of winter, and he breathed heavily, suddenly deprived of oxygen.

"What do you want?" he let out between gasps, stubbornly ignoring the urge to call for help. He *should*, should look for Gintoki, look for *anyone* who might be able to either save him or to at least give him his last rites, but he couldn't let this pass up. The intrusive voice he hadn't been able to grab a hold of just casually waltzed in; he couldn't just let this go.

I want you.

The answer, though simple and not unexpected, was akin to a freezing wire slicing through his entire being. Hijikata let out a pained sound, sliding off the desk, and he curled up on the ground. He felt cold. Unbelievably, indescribably cold. "Why?" he coughed.

For what you are.

Hijikata groaned again. Unfortunately, he was not dreaming at this moment, so he couldn't just wake up – still, he wanted to, he wished for nothing more than to leave this waking nightmare. There was one more thing he needed to know, though. “Are you behind this?” he forced out of his clenching throat.

Behind what?

“The Medallion...”

No.

As soon as he felt relief, the pain lessened as well, and the voice mellowed down a little, speaking again.

You shouldn't fear me. I have saved you before.

“What?” Hijikata said, taken aback, but the moment that word fell onto the room, the remainder of the awful feeling vanished, and he knew he was not going to get an answer.

“You haven't told me what you were, you piece of shit,” he murmured, but there was no-one left to hear it. Even his scar had stopped aching, and there was nothing indicating that just seconds ago, he was writhing on the floor.

He crawled from under the desk, shaking his head as if to get rid of any unpleasantness that might have stuck behind, and he dusted his knees off. What just happened cleared up exactly nothing and it made him feel unhappy and dissatisfied. Yeah, he didn't have anything bad to say about Gintoki, so what? That perm-head might have been overbearing since the start, but he was not nearly as terrible as the rumours painted him.

Although... it *was* a little scary now that the Medallion was gone, and whatever happened to Gintoki seemed to affect him more. Katsura did not really clarify enough, and Hijikata felt that he should talk about this with Gintoki properly. There were other things he needed to discuss, too, and the more he dragged it out, the worse he felt.

With Takasugi gone, there was an unfillable hole left behind, an abyss just as gaping and horrible as the one hiding in Takasugi's empty eye, and Gintoki was determined to go and save the seer no matter the cost. Hijikata knew this, and he understood completely – but he was worried that there might not be enough time if he stalled any longer.

They needed to talk.

Steeling himself internally, he left the room, wanting to find Gintoki.

He had to ask around, but eventually, his inquiries led him to his own room.

Gintoki was sitting there at the desk Hijikata himself never used, and he was scribbling something onto paper with a serious face. There were several crumpled papers on the floor as well.

Gintoki did not seem to have noticed that Hijikata entered; his lips were moving soundlessly. Abruptly, he crumpled up the paper in front of him and tossed it over his shoulder. Then, murmuring something unintelligible but undoubtedly rude, he took out another sheet of paper and began anew.

Hijikata quietly walked over to Gintoki and picked up one of the rejects.

There was a moment of silence in which Hijikata was reading.

“Hey,” he said then, his voice shivering in that one word. “This...”

Gintoki looked up, and upon seeing Hijikata, his expression softened. He didn’t say a word; instead, he dipped his quill into the inkwell and began writing again.

“Gintoki!” Hijikata snapped, dropping the paper onto the ground. “This is a last will, isn’t it?!”

“Yeah,” Gintoki admitted flatly without hesitation.

“Do you not expect to come back?” Hijikata stepped even closer.

“I do, it’s just... just in case,” Gintoki said, but he did not look up to meet Hijikata’s eyes this time. “In case things go... pear-shaped, in case anything happens to me, I need to make sure that everything is in order, and that there’s someone who can handle everything. I need the kids to be safe, too.” His voice, lowered into but a whisper, was uncertain. “They don’t even know what’s going on.”

“I don’t either,” Hijikata retorted, suddenly annoyed, and against reason, he grabbed Gintoki’s head with both hands and made him look up.

Their gazes locked, and Hijikata felt a pang just about where his heart was; despite not knowing anything, he could see that there was a battle inside Gintoki, and the perm-head was *losing*. There was something on his mind, or perhaps something he had to do but hated it, or perhaps it wasn’t anything in particular that Gintoki was thinking of, maybe just a bad feeling, Hijikata didn’t know. It was similar to the face Gintoki made when Hijikata saw him in prison, and Hijikata could not stand seeing that expression on him again.

“Gintoki,” he said firmly, “I need you to talk to me.” He wasn’t sure what he was fishing for, but he would not allow this man to look like this, ever.

There was a moment of silence.

Gintoki reached up, and grabbing Hijikata’s wrists, he freed his head. “It’s nothing,” he said with a smile so obviously forced that Hijikata’s self-restraint just *broke*.

“Go find a mirror and then say it again!” Hijikata bellowed, grabbing the chair Gintoki was sitting on, and he dragged it away from the desk, turning it sideways. Gintoki was heavy, but Hijikata with his anger-driven strength did not even notice.

Stupefied, Gintoki stared at Hijikata, eyes widened.

Hijikata grabbed Gintoki's shoulders and leaned onto them, frowning. His lower jaw was clenched; there was so much he wanted to say that he didn't know where to begin. "Listen," he said in the end, "I thought you were finally going to cut it out, but here you go, keeping me in the dark again. I am sick and tired of you constantly doing that."

Gintoki lowered his eyelids. "What do you *want* me to say?" he let out, his voice uneasy.

Hijikata drew a long, deep breath. "What was it that made you look like a ghost?" he said in the end.

"It-it would have been fine if just me and Zura went to look for Takasugi," Gintoki looked at him again. "But then you said you wanted to come along, and I—"

"Did you not want me to come?" Hijikata felt a stab of guilt. He did sort of butt in before, and it might have been not his place to try and help.

"That's not it," Gintoki shook his head. "There's no way. I," his voice trembled, "I *love* you, damn it! Of course I want you to come with me! Just—" he paused to take a breath, "I'd rather die than have anything happen to you."

Hijikata bit his lip. This was no time to feel bashful, but it hit him hard regardless. Gintoki's confession, though he should have expected it, came from a completely different direction than he thought it would, and it caught him off guard and unprepared. He cleared his throat, intending to reply, intending to reject Gintoki while he had the opportunity to do so, but the words wouldn't come out. He didn't *want* to say that kind of thing anymore. His heartbeat sped up, and if he weren't blushing, it would have been a miracle, but the miracle didn't happen.

His mouth opened.

It closed.

"Gi..." he cleared his throat once more. "Gintoki. What exactly," he said, pausing briefly to steel himself a little, "do you think of me?"

"Are you sure you want to hear me say that?" Gintoki whispered.

Hijikata stepped back and folded his arms on his chest, regaining just the tiniest bit of composure. "If I didn't, would I have asked? What are you, scared?"

Gintoki slowly rose from his chair. "I find you irresistible," he said simply. "If you allowed me to make you mine, I'd never let you go. I," he then added, his voice lowered into a mere whisper, "I want you in ways that could break you. *Of course* I'm scared. Wouldn't you be?"

Hijikata clenched his teeth briefly, closing his eyes just for a heartbeat. "Do you think I'm that weak?" he asked, amazed at those words leaving his mouth.

"You said you were going to rely on my common sense." Gintoki raised his hand to reach out to Hijikata, but then he let it fall again. "I'm not sure how much of that I have left, though. I

feel the need to touch you growing stronger day by day. I'm *scared*, Hijikata. If you come along and I end up doing something regrettable, I'll never forgive myself."

"You didn't even get hard last time," Hijikata said before he could stop himself. Then, his eyes widened in an abrupt, terrible, horrifying realisation. "You—! All this," he gestured between the two of them hastily, "the will – you're planning for this to be a suicide mission!"

The genuine shock spreading across Gintoki's face confirmed his hunch. Angrily, he grabbed Gintoki under the collar. "I will *not* let that happen," he hissed, his eyes narrowed. "You'd better pay close attention."

"Wh—" Gintoki began but got cut off when Hijikata's lips sealed his own. He struggled a little, but it did not take him long to give in, and he kissed Hijikata back gently, innocently, as though he was reluctant to believe it was really happening.

Hijikata stepped away eventually, licking his lips, thoroughly enjoying the pure, unadulterated confusion in Gintoki's eyes. He wasn't exactly sure it was love from his side, and it was less likely than not, but he was sure he'd much rather do this than let Gintoki wallow in the pits of anguish he seemed to have dug for himself.

Seeing that Gintoki was wordlessly waiting for an explanation, he smiled a little. It was meant to be an encouraging smile, but he wasn't exactly sure how it came out in the end. "You don't have to be worried about doing something regrettable," he said softly. "I'll be coming with you, and we're all going to come back, Takasugi included."

Gintoki stood there with mouth gaping, rendered speechless.

Hijikata leaned in, coming so close their noses almost touched. "Don't you *dare* finish writing that will," he warned. "You'll have plenty of time to do that after we get back."

Gintoki's mouth finally closed and curved into a smile. "You speak as if you're now a seer, too," he said with a chuckle.

"I'm not," Hijikata shook his head. "I just don't think it's wise to assume we've lost the battle."

Gintoki stared at him for several heartbeats. "You're right," he said.

"Of course I am," Hijikata retorted. "We should get ready as soon as possible, though. I don't know what else you have planned before we depart, but it better not take long."

"What about *this* battle, though?" Gintoki smirked, and he leaned in, groping Hijikata's ass.

"Are you challenging me?" Hijikata grabbed his wrist. "That's hardly fair, don't you think? I have much less experience than you do."

"You've already won." Gintoki stepped in, his arms wrapping around Hijikata's waist, and he rested his head on Hijikata's shoulder. "We should fight it out anyway, though."

“We don’t have that kind of time,” Hijikata pointed out, and to his surprise, he felt a hint of regret after stating what was but the truth. Rather than that nameless voice haunting his dreams, he’d much rather let Gintoki have his way.

Gintoki inhaled deeply. “You’re right,” he said, disappointment echoing in his words. “I’m going to get someone to contact Mutsu.”

Hijikata, who hadn’t met Mutsu yet, just nodded. From what he heard, he figured that one, Mutsu was in a relationship with Sakamoto, and two, that she was not just anyone in terms of hierarchy. Her name would fall every now and then, and it always implied strength and strategical thinking. Even though he’d never met her, he thought she might be someone he’d respect.

Gintoki squeezed him a little harder, then he let go; he stepped back, and for a moment, he studied Hijikata’s face, his own expression soft and seemingly a little lonely. “Thanks,” he said for the second time that day.

“What for?” Hijikata tilted his head in a questioning manner.

“Just,” Gintoki shrugged his shoulders, “in general.”

Hijikata gave a small chuckle. “Moron,” he said, and as he watched Gintoki grin and leave, a sensation akin to relief flooded his heart.

He was no longer afraid of the White Demon.

Chapter End Notes

Weeeeeell this took forever to happen.

Shoutout to Trapid who, unknowingly and accidentally, unclogged my writing juice tap.

Breath of the Past

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

*Once, there was one whose footsteps shook the earth,
one whose gaze was frost and voice the starkest, coldest of gales.*

Hijikata stared in fascination at the valley opening welcomingly before him. Though he would always look at it from the castle window, he had never gone farther than the pond, and seeing it now from horseback as they emerged from the forest, he felt astonished at the view even though he had no time to stop and really take in for what it was worth.

Autumn had already begun painting the meadows golden and some trees yellow and red, and the faint traces of morning fog remaining far in the distance below resembled strands of silk; droplets of dew on the grass around them were sparkling in the sun, and though the sun rays felt still warm, the air smelled of winter. Back in the city, Hijikata hardly ever noticed, but here in the mountains, the change was rather abrupt. It was hard to believe that he had wanted to learn to swim before the weather got too cold. He barely got the chance to dip his toes in water and he already had to wait for spring.

Now, as they were descending the still steep, but no longer as treacherous road towards the houses in the distance, Hijikata watched Gintoki's broad back draped in white, and he felt a strange sting of sadness. Though he had managed to convince Gintoki not to write his last will, and though he had managed to have them set out without saying final goodbyes to the people in the castle, he could sense that the air above their group was ominous despite everything he'd tried. Gintoki rode on silently with a deadpan, and Katsura was at the front, just as silent but with his face grim.

He was not one to lighten the mood, after all. He had never been good at it, and it did not feel right to try and cheer these two up at this moment since they knew about the situation more than he did. He didn't feel any sort of happy, either – though he had never fully trusted Takasugi and did not particularly like him, it was beyond obvious that Gintoki and the others cared about Takasugi a great deal, and that was enough reason for Hijikata to care as well. He wanted to help.

Since they'd left the castle behind, neither Gintoki nor Katsura had spoken. Hijikata followed them silently as well. The only words of reassurance he could say were the ones he had already given to Gintoki yesterday, and there was nothing else left but to go forth and hope for the best.

With wind in their hair, they rode downhill. The path meandered forth lazily, and the landscape before their eyes appeared strangely, inappropriately tranquil, as though they didn't need to worry about a thing, as though Takasugi never disappeared. Calm weather was good, though – this way, it was easier for them to keep going; fast, faster, so that they'd find

Takasugi soon, and based on what Katsura had told them in the meeting room, possibly the Medallion as well.

It didn't make a lot of sense to Hijikata that the goddess – no matter how great her power was – would have been able to get her hands on the Warding Medallion, though. Though he did not have any education when it came to magic, he had heard that spells and curses created via sanguimancy were unbreakable by anyone but the caster themselves; there were legends speaking of demons and gods alike being forever hamstrung or completely paralyzed by blood magic because the caster who'd cursed them died and there was no-one who could free them. All creatures were powerless in the face of sanguimancy.

The Medallion as well as the whole room it used to be stored in were created through such a spell, and therefore not even a goddess should have been able to enter that room unscathed. There were many reasons sanguimancy was generally frowned upon, even among mages; luckily for the ordinary man, blood magic was near impossible to master, and many a foolish acolyte had died, their very soul burnt to a crisp by power they could not control.

Gintoki's master, or sensei, as they called him, seemed to have been more in control than any other sanguimancer Hijikata had ever come close to. It was unsettlingly often – once or twice a year – that he and his men would come to a destroyed building, at first glance visibly different from a simple house fire, with a completely dried-up mummy in the middle of the ruin.

The aftermath of a sanguimancy spell gone wrong.

Even the air in those places felt bad – sticky on the skin, strongly smelling of rusted iron, and awfully, horribly gritty in the nostrils even though there was no dust in the air. Such places were then usually labelled as cursed and the house couldn't be rebuilt until the last remnants of blood magic had gone away. Sometimes it only took days, sometimes it took months, and Hijikata remembered two houses on the outskirts that likely remained cursed to this day.

He, who was naturally anti-talented for spellcasting of any kind, never even thought of getting tangled up in magical affairs. While magic wasn't necessarily inborn, it lived in the body – and inside of Hijikata, it would surely wither like a flower in the desert.

It took years of dedication to be at least average at spellcasting, unless the person in question was a genius or had exceptional talent... or outside help. It was very rare for creatures with more aptitude for magic, such as demons or spirits, to get involved, though.

Of course, there were those who would try and summon demons for power... or they'd try blood magic in hopes of becoming powerful faster.

However, sanguimancy was something awful. Even when it went right and the spell worked as intended, someone got hurt in the process; that was the case with Gintoki, Sakamoto, Katsura and Takasugi. They all suffered due to the spell, and they were closely bound to the Warding Medallion. Ever since the Medallion disappeared, all of them were unstable, each in a different way – and Hijikata was worried.

The spell they had cast was supposed to be something much simpler than what ended up happening, but that was not surprising. Blood magic was never so straightforward as to simply do what was asked.

Hijikata briefly wondered if sensei gave his blood as well. Gintoki hadn't gone into that much detail when he explained what happened, but it was not exactly relevant, as their sensei was no longer among the living.

Hijikata found himself wishing that he had met this sensei; the four of them seemed to hold him in high regard, after all.

If only he at least knew his name. Thinking back, he recalled that Katsura, in his outburst of anger, said that their sensei was judged and executed – and that, under normal circumstances, would mean a public execution. Criminals whose death were meant to be kept secret were not given a trial, obviously, so this obviously wasn't sensei's case.

There was one thing that didn't add up, though – the last public execution of an *alleged* sanguimancer was long ago – long enough to make it into history books. Was it... a hundred years ago? A hundred and twenty? Hijikata wasn't sure. What was that man's name, again? He was sure there was something like this when he went to school before he joined the force.

He remembered the page it was on, even...

He shook his head. That didn't make a lick of sense. Perhaps Katsura didn't have the exact information about sensei's death and only assumed that the public execution happened.

His horse slowed down, and he looked up. As he was last, he let the other two lead, relying on his horse to follow. She was a smart girl, after all.

They'd reached a river; there was a bridge to get to the other side, but Katsura's horse was reluctant to cross.

Katsura sighed and jumped down, grabbing the horse's headgear, and he began leading it slowly. The bridge was sturdy but narrow, and Katsura's horse did not seem to be happy with that.

Gintoki watched Katsura for a few moments, then he turned to look at Hijikata. "We'll make a stop in an hour or so."

"A stop?" Hijikata parroted. He had thought that they'd want to press on until they either couldn't keep going or until they'd reached the goddess's abode.

"Just for a while. I need to talk to Shinpachi's sister, her name's Tae. I don't know if I've told you about her properly." There was a pause. "And... I want to see the kids one more time."

"You're talking as if we're not going to return. Again. Stop it."

"I can't help it," Gintoki replied uneasily as he directed his horse to cross the bridge as well. It was much less scared than Katsura's own, and it didn't even mind when Hijikata and his horse followed suit.

They entered a grove; their path connected to a wider one, and they turned right at the crossroads.

It wasn't as though Hijikata did not understand that Gintoki was worried. Still, he would have preferred if Gintoki adopted the carefree attitude he was a master of rather than this sombre, serious mood he had going on. The missing Medallion was most likely the cause, but Gintoki seemed to have lost the lightness he used to carry himself with. Just when was it that he had last seen Gintoki genuinely laugh?

Even though Gintoki was happy yesterday after they'd kissed, there was too much going on, so they couldn't even come into terms with whatever was or was not going to happen between them, and there was no space for untainted happiness with one of Gintoki's closest friends gone. To Hijikata, it felt as though Gintoki chose to postpone that matter. He wasn't sure why, exactly, but as long as it meant another reason for Gintoki to *want* to survive and return safely, he was fine with it.

He also wanted to kiss Gintoki again. It wasn't an *urge* or a *desire*, and he felt that he wasn't compelled by that voice, either. The voice hadn't made an appearance since startling Hijikata back in the meeting room, and Hijikata was more than fine with that. It was not obvious what the voice wanted – and on the contrary, Hijikata knew exactly what he wanted. He was determined to help Gintoki find the godforsaken seer and to bring him home safely, and then... then they should sit down and have a chat. A proper one, unobstructed by other matters.

As long as Gintoki was willing, anyway.

They rode out of the grove; it was long after harvest and the grain eddish made the fields look barren and empty. For some reason, at this sight, Hijikata's heart clenched as a sense of loneliness washed over him. It was odd that the ground was still unploughed, though – he was sure that with winter looming over the land, there would be no eddish left at this point. Even if he wasn't a farmer and knew close to nothing about such work, he remembered this much. The scent of wet soil being turned in preparation for the next year...

"Damn it," he heard Gintoki cuss, and he wondered if the perm-head thought the same right now.

He didn't ask.

Before long, a small town came into view – though to call it a town was rather generous. The small assembly of houses was a village at best if Hijikata viewed it as a city dweller. In the valley, though, it was, as far as he could tell, one of the bigger ones. It lay in a picturesque divot between small hills, and it seemed to fit perfectly as if it came out of a work of art.

As they came a bit closer, Hijikata noticed that most of the buildings were older than he had expected. From what he was told, Gintoki's sensei and his pupils came here, founded the valley and created a haven with the help of other miscreants and alleged criminal elements who chose to settle down here, possibly because they were following sensei – that, Hijikata only guessed. He knew that sensei gave Gintoki and his friends the Warding Medallion, and it was very likely that he helped them build the castle with magic.

It was beyond obvious that no human hands built the castle the way it was, and he saw that the moment he had been dragged there.

It felt as though more time had passed since then.

Between Gintoki's first arrival to the valley, not more than ten years must have passed for sure, based on what Gintoki said. Looking at the buildings before him, though, Hijikata could see that some of them were in a sorry state, and a few of them were in dire need of renovations. It didn't seem as though it was just due to difficult weather conditions or a harsh winter, either.

He saw an old man sitting in front of one of the houses, petting a dog who for an inexplicable reason looked just as old. Seeing Gintoki pass by, the man took his hat off as a sign of respect.

Hijikata furrowed his brows thoughtfully.

The old man on the porch was missing two fingers on his right hand. That made him a punished criminal, and a lucky one as well since he got to keep the remaining three. Hijikata shuddered; the city's idea of light punishment was still making him sick.

However... it was not usual to punish people who were so old they could barely walk – and even if the old man had stolen something and wound up getting punished as per the usual regulations, how would he make it here in such a state? Plus, thieves were usually locked up after losing their greedy appendages, no matter their age, and if this scrawny old man were to go to prison, he would have most likely died due to terrible wound treatment...

Hijikata glanced over his shoulder.

The man was petting his mangy dog, not minding the sovereign, his aide nor the stranger in tow.

Hijikata looked to the front and immediately saw a glaringly orange-haired girl walk from one of the buildings ahead.

The signboard above the entrance told Hijikata it was an inn.

"Gin-chan!" Kagura dropped her broom on the ground where she stood, and she ran over to Gintoki. "Are we going back to the castle?"

"Not yet, sorry. There's something we need to take care of, so we'll return together after that," Gintoki forced a reassuring smile, and Hijikata looked away because he could tell, and it was unpleasant to see.

"Oh, can we come with?"

Gintoki shook his head. "It's better if you wait for me here," he said. "We'll pick you both up on our way back."

"You mean all three of us, right?" Kagura protested. "Sadaharu is coming, too!"

“Right.” Hijikata saw that Gintoki didn’t have the energy to argue, even in jest.

Kagura was about to say something else, but the door of the inn suddenly opened; a young woman stood there, a mature air about her despite her youth.

“Kagura-chan, come back inside.” She turned to Gintoki, not at all surprised. “Gin-san. Welcome.” She eyed Hijikata from head to toe, clearly assessing him. “Is that... your fated one?” she said after a good while.

“Al-righty,” Gintoki stepped closer hastily, “let’s go inside.” He urged her to go back in, not meeting Hijikata’s eyes.

She gave him a surprised look, but nodded and disappeared inside again.

Gintoki froze at the entrance for a few heartbeats. “Wait here,” he then said, his face collected as though the young woman did not just say something very, very important.

Hijikata wanted to object, but something in Gintoki’s tone glued his feet to the ground and his mouth shut. Instead of arguing, he nodded and leaned his back on the wall. He wasn’t sure why Gintoki didn’t want him to follow, but it was not that difficult to guess; he had met the kids only briefly, and they were distrustful towards him – and the same likely went for anyone else who had not been to the castle recently. That, and he clearly did not want to address what she’d just said.

At the edge of his vision, he caught movement, and when he looked up, he saw a muscular man heading towards him. The man was missing an ear and Hijikata felt a chill; it was unfortunate – that he remembered this man, as well as what happened to him. Though Hijikata was only following orders, he still brought that man to prison in shackles, and as the poor sod’s status was low, he didn’t even get a trial. They’d cut his ear off, and kept him locked up until he miraculously escaped. Considering the circumstances, it was hardly surprising that they’d meet here – and the scowl on the man’s face was no mystery.

“The hell are you doing here?” the man drawled menacingly, his fists opening and closing. He seemed to be itching to straight-up sock Hijikata in the face without any conversation, but he was hesitating.

“I came with your leader,” Hijikata shrugged his shoulders calmly.

“Yeah, I saw that,” the other retorted, “but why?”

“Why don’t you ask him?”

“Fucker...” The man tensed up, his eyebrows furrowed – but then he took a small step back and making an ungodly noise, he spat out a well-aimed gob of spit and mucus at the ground right at Hijikata’s feet. “One wrong move,” he bellowed, pointing his finger at Hijikata’s face, “and you’re a dead man.”

At that moment, the door opened, and Katsura walked out. “Oi,” he said.

“Katsura-san!” the man backed away. “He—Why would someone like him—”

“Leave him alone. Why he’s here with us is none of your concern,” Katsura took a step closer, casually raising his hand, as if for a handshake – but then his palm turned upwards and a small flame flickered to life. “Don’t ask questions you don’t need the answer to. That is, if you value your eyebrows.”

“I’m... I’m sorry,” the man muttered, “but I... we can’t just see him walking around like this after all he’s done. He needs to be punished.”

“He already has been,” Katsura replied sourly, giving Hijikata a sideways glance, “in more ways than one.”

Hijikata maintained a deadpan, but he felt a wave of curiosity mixed with concern rising from within.

“If... if you say so,” the man finally bowed his head, though he was clearly dissatisfied.

“Leave,” Katsura commanded coldly, letting the flame in his hand die out.

Hijikata waited until they were alone. “What was that about?” he said then.

“Well, I might not like you—” Katsura paused briefly, then shook his head. “No, actually, I really do not like you... but Gintoki does, and you’re helping us find Takasugi, so I can at least acknowledge that.”

Hijikata hummed. “What do you mean I’ve been punished?” he asked after a few moments. It didn’t sound as simple as just trying to get the man off Hijikata’s case, and Hijikata felt that Katsura was not referring to Hijikata leaving the city, or having been locked up in the castle for so long – it seemed much more ominous than just that.

Katsura pursed his lips. “I—” he opened his mouth to speak, then closed it again and shook his head. “It’s not my place to say.”

“What in tarnation does *that* mean?” Hijikata rubbed his face with his palms, suddenly frustrated. It was happening again, and he was fed up with...

Hold on.

Hijikata let his hands fall to his sides, lips parted in realisation.

Katsura said so himself – he did not like Hijikata. That meant he wouldn’t keep silent just for Hijikata’s sake, since he wouldn’t care about being careful or even just polite. It could have been on Takasugi’s orders that Katsura kept mum, but then again, Takasugi liked to bait Hijikata, to taunt him with glimpses of truth. This, however, resembled none of the things Takasugi had hinted at. In that case, this *had* to be related to Gintoki somehow. Hijikata didn’t know how, but this was the only possible answer. “Katsura,” he said, wishing his voice had more certainty to it, “what exactly is going on with Gintoki?”

“How did you even—” Katsura’s eyes opened wide in surprise. “I don’t – look, he has to tell you this himself. I wouldn’t even know where to begin, and he’d be pissed if I told you

without his consent. Plus... It'll be better to talk about it after everything is back to normal. I'm sure he'll explain then."

Hijikata took a breath. He wanted to tell Katsura that Otae said something about Hijikata being Gintoki's 'fated one', but then he closed his mouth. This was not a good time, and Katsura wouldn't tell Hijikata anything anyway.

Since she'd never met Hijikata before, that must have meant that either of the kids knew about this as well, and they probably told her about Hijikata's arrival and everything else – and that, in turn, meant that there were many more people in the know than he had originally thought, and they all kept him in the dark.

What for?

Hijikata did not know.

Gintoki peeked out from the door. "If you want to eat or drink anything here, do it now," he said. "I asked Shinpachi to come with us so that he can take the horses back here. He's getting ready." Turning towards Hijikata, he added an explanation, "We can't take the horses to the forest. It's not safe for them."

"It's not safe for us, either," Katsura remarked, then he brushed past Gintoki to go inside yet again.

Hijikata hung his head briefly, then followed Katsura's example. After all, he did not know how much longer this was going to take, and though they had packed some food, it was probably better to save it for later. To be faster, they had to travel light, so they'd only packed the necessary.

He entered and looked around; the front room was simply, crudely furnished, and at the end of it – possibly at the entrance to the kitchen – there was a bar; an old woman was standing behind it, smoking a pipe. Her face was stern and gaze glued to Hijikata's face, and Hijikata felt that he was being assessed.

"Hello," he greeted, bowing his head slightly. She nodded in response; Gintoki slipped past Hijikata and made his way upstairs.

Hijikata sat down next to Katsura. As soon as he did, Tae walked in from the kitchen, carrying tea.

Hijikata thanked her when she set a cup down in front of him and poured him tea; warming his hands on it, he let out a breath. He hadn't realised, but his fingers were cold.

Just for a moment, he closed his eyes, knowing that after this, there would be no time to rest.

Opening his eyes again, he turned to Katsura, whose eyelids were lowered as well. This was the first time he got the chance to properly look at Katsura up close since the news of Takasugi's disappearance.

The pyromancer's cheeks were hollow and he had dark circles under his eyes; he most likely hadn't slept a wink. Though he was resting his eyesight now, Hijikata was sure that Katsura was too tense to be able to rest, and it was only going to get worse.

They had to find the seer as soon as possible, for everyone's sake.

Hijikata sighed and took a sip of his tea. It was mild in taste yet surprisingly invigorating, as he noted when he rolled it over his tongue.

For a moment, he considered asking if Katsura was okay, but then he decided against. The answer to that question was obvious, and Hijikata's concern was unlikely to be appreciated.

In silence, they drank their tea and ate a little, waiting until everyone was ready to depart.

Chapter End Notes

I wonder if I'm being too obvious at this point. Am I?

Leave a comment if you feel like brightening my day! :)

The Root of the Problem

Chapter Notes

A fair warning: Some of the imagery in this chapter might be disturbing to some individuals. Proceed with caution.

Also, Hijikata is by no means weak, but I'm sure anyone who ever tried to climb knows that there are specific muscles needed for it and most normal people lack those.

Once, there was another, one whose smile could melt ice.

Hijikata cursed under his breath as a wet branch slapped him in the face.

The forest was cold and dark, and it smelled of mud; there was no path to follow, and every step they took entailed having to untangle their feet. There was thick, thorny underbrush, and its branches and vines seemed to fight against them.

The only sounds he was aware of were their breaths and the cracking of twigs underneath the soles of their shoes. Otherwise, their surroundings were eerily silent – or so he felt, until he tried listening a little closer, and realised that there were small, barely noticeable hisses, or perhaps whispers, sounds so insignificant that the crinkling of leaves accompanying each step forward was loud enough to drown them out.

An unpleasant feeling crept up Hijikata's spine, not dissimilar to the sense of dread he had when Gintoki woke him up from his nightmarish sleep the other night. Despite the omnipresent cold and wetness, his palms were sweaty and his throat dry; rather than being observed or followed, he was inexplicably certain that something was *lying in wait* until they were close enough to be devoured.

If Gintoki or Katsura felt the same, they did not show it; with Gintoki now in the lead, they pressed on relentlessly, and Hijikata could not muster the courage to ask whether they were going the right way. There was nothing that would tell them, as far as Hijikata could see.

Though, his preferred way of marking the way would be huge arrows pointing them to their goal – best if they had “the lair of the crazy evil forest witch” written on them. Not only would that lead them *to*, but also *from*. Hijikata *really* was not on board with the idea of this being a suicide mission, and it made him feel resentful that he had not been able to completely convince Gintoki that success was possible. He could tell that Gintoki was just going along with what Hijikata said.

Hijikata hated being unable to change anything. He hated being unable to help, or at least to reassure the others that things were going to turn out alright. What else was he good for if not

even that? After all, he knew nothing of the dangers they were about to face, nor did he understand the source of Gintoki's fatalistic determination.

It took them what felt like days struggling through the underbrush; once or twice, Hijikata could have sworn he saw something move just out of the corner of his eye, and that thought made him shiver. He was okay with enemies he could fight physically, but if this place was haunted on top of all things, they should have packed something to protect themselves, or at least brought salt to throw when needed. Anything, really – he was no coward, but creatures he could neither touch nor comprehend were the sole plot of his nightmares, especially as of late.

Finally, they reached a change in the scenery. A steep rock was rising from the ground in a way it should not be. A child would understand that this was the work of forces much faster and more violent than the slow course nature would take, and it was not made by human hands, either. Some sort of magic formed this as a barrier to stand in the way of unwanted visitors, and in this way, Hijikata understood that they had been going in the right direction all along.

The obstacle in their way was just that – it went into the distance in either direction, disappearing among the shades of the trees, but it was not so tall that it could not be overcome at all. Hijikata noticed that from where they stood, the shape of it was more or less regular, and he guessed that it formed a circle which was protecting something or *someone* in the middle of it. That must also be where Takasugi was, hopefully. Hijikata did not dare think of what would happen if Takasugi were not there, or worse yet, not among the living anymore.

Gintoki nodded at the two of them and began climbing. The wall of rock was not vertical, so it was possible, but due to lichen and wetness, it was tricky to grab onto. Hijikata watched in amazement as Gintoki made his way up steadily, finding holds in places near impossible, and finally, he reached the top and looked down at his two companions.

Hijikata saw that Katsura was standing there, looking up, hesitating. Perhaps it was because he was a mage and rock climbing was not something he did on a regular basis, but he seemed unhappy facing the wall.

“Let me boost you up,” Hijikata offered and stood with his back against the wall. It could be that Katsura was desperately wanting to go on but worried because the obstacle before them could pose a bigger problem than he could handle alone. Hijikata did not know and had no intention of asking.

Katsura shot him a surprised look but did not question it; silently, he accepted Hijikata's help and with Hijikata's shoulders as support, he made it high enough to be able to grab a hold of Gintoki's hand.

Hijikata followed uncertainly. He had never done this kind of thing before, not even when they were escaping the prison, and since he had not remembered the holds Gintoki used to get up, he couldn't find a good enough footing. Everything was slippery and his hands, now numb with cold, were being exceptionally uncooperative.

“Hijikata,” Gintoki said.

Hijikata looked up.

“To your left, and then right above your head, if you jump up a little,” Gintoki instructed him.

Hijikata found the left hold Gintoki spoke of, and jumped – and to his surprise, his right hand found a crevice above his head that wasn’t even visible from below. He was now hanging by his right hand just above the ground.

“Now, there should be a place for your right foot in front of you, but you might have to pull yourself up a little,” Gintoki continued.

Hijikata let out a strained groan, quickly moved his left hand next to his right, pulled himself up – and found a small but safe spot to lean his foot onto.

“Now you’re going to have to stand up,” Gintoki said. “When you do, there should be a hold similar to the first one right in front of your face.”

“Stand up?! Are you out of your—”

“Hurry up, we don’t have time.”

Gritting his teeth, Hijikata attempted to find support for *both* of his feet but failed. He let go of his left hand and blindly, he groped higher to find anything at all to hold onto.

Digging his fingers into a small slit, Hijikata huffed and *very* cautiously let go of his right, then he stood up, leaning against the wall as much as he could so that gravity would not reacquaint him with the soil below.

When he finally stood in a way where he could hold on with both of his hands, it was like a small miracle.

“Get up a little higher and we’ll pull you up,” Katsura said.

“Shut up, Zura,” Hijikata sifted through his teeth strenuously.

Taken aback, Katsura did not manage to retort as he usually would; Hijikata didn’t care, though – instead, he hissed as he pulled his fingers out of the crevice and found himself bleeding. It was risky, but he saw another hold a little higher – but he’d have to jump again. Gintoki was like a mountain goat or a monkey to have gotten up there so fast.

His right leg was getting numb now, but if he changed his legs quickly, he wouldn’t be able to jump the way he wanted to.

“To your—” Gintoki began.

Hijikata jumped, letting go of his hold, and only just managed to get to the crack in the rock he was aiming for. It was dumb luck, he knew this, but he was going to thank the fortunes later – he did not have footing right now.

Just barely hanging on, he looked up. Gintoki was bending down so he was not too far away. Maybe if he pulled himself up and reached out...

"Grab me," he let out, pulled himself up on both arms, then reached out. It was not *that* high, if he fell, nothing terrible would happen... right?

A spike of panic-induced adrenaline burned its way through his brain, his vision briefly turned dark.

Gintoki's fingers wrapped around his wrist and Katsura's were there too a split second later, pulling him higher.

He flopped over the wall like a wet rag between the other two men, breathing heavily.

"Who's the one out of his mind?" Gintoki said after a few seconds; he, too, was out of breath. "I saw my life flashing before my eyes."

Hijikata gave a light chuckle. "It worked, didn't it?"

"Reckless bastard," Katsura muttered, but there was not a sign of spite in his tone.

Hijikata scrambled up. His arms and legs were shaking, but it was more due to the adrenaline surge moments prior than anything else. "Let's go," he said and gestured forward.

Gravity took care of them on the way down.

There was a small grove behind the wall, greener and fresher than the forest they'd just passed through. Still, it was just as eerie. Perhaps even more so, as the scenery got prettier while the downright creepy mood remained.

The area behind the wall was shaped kind of like a bowl, and everything seemed to be directing them to the middle of it.

They walked on, and Hijikata couldn't shake off the prickling sensation at the back of his head, the feeling of someone's gaze following him.

Eventually, they reached a circular clearing, encircled by tall carved stones from all sides. Through the gaps between those, they saw an unnatural beam of light illuminating a motionless silhouette in the middle of the clearing.

"Takasugi!" Katsura screamed.

Takasugi was kneeling, his head thrown back and his arms limp by his sides. His clothes were torn and skin sickly in tone, dirtied and bruised. His back was turned to them, but even from where they were standing, they could see that Takasugi's body was much thinner and weaker than it was when they last saw him. There were thick vines, or maybe roots, coiling around his etiolated form, embracing him tightly.

Katsura sprinted forward first, and Hijikata and Gintoki followed right after.

Takasugi's cheeks were hollow and lips chapped and pallid, and his one healthy eye, now half-lidded, did not move when they came closer.

In his other eye socket, the one that allowed him to peer into the future, a root found its way into his skull.

Hijikata swallowed hard. The only visible evidence that Takasugi was still alive was the occasional puff of whiteness rising from his parted lips, but there was no telling how much he had left.

This was far beyond anything he might have been expecting.

Katsura fell to his knees in front of Takasugi and carefully, with his hands shaking, he tried to remove one of the roots.

The floor shook violently.

Hijikata found himself lacking support underneath his feet.

Roots burst from the ground, wrapping around their legs and reaching higher, lifting them into the air, growing and pulsing wildly as they tightened around their limbs with lightning speed, rendering them immobile.

Hijikata struggled to reach for his weapon.

Vainly. He could not move an inch.

A quick glance told him that Gintoki and Katsura weren't doing any better.

In the middle of the circle of stones, where no-one had been moments prior, a woman veiled in leaves and grass was standing, her smile anything but pleasant. When she spoke, Hijikata felt an army of spiders marching down his spine; her voice was like the rustling of wind playing with dry leaves at a cemetery, like echoes at the bottom of a deadly abyss.

"So nice of you to come visit."

Unbreakable Bonds

Chapter Notes

aha haha thesis who

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“What did you do to Takasugi?!” Katsura yelled, struggling against the embrace of the vines and roots, but he, too, was unable to free himself.

The goddess turned her head his way and placed her finger across her lips. “Shush,” she said, and a vine rose to Katsura’s face, its foliage sticking to his mouth and nose. “Wait your turn.” Katsura tried to move away but failed, and as he was unable to breathe, his efforts soon ceased.

Slowly, the goddess walked over to Gintoki and had the vines bring him lower so that they were face-to-face. “Remember me?”

“What *did* you do to Takasugi?” Gintoki growled.

“Disobedient pawns have to be punished,” she shrugged, smiling. Though she was beautiful, there was nothing good about her, and Hijikata felt a chill.

“... pawns?” Gintoki parroted. “Explain.”

She pouted, but then tilted her head a little to the side and replied, “I might as well before I tear you apart limb from limb.” She dragged her fingertip along Gintoki’s lower jaw slowly. Then, she spoke, “Before you came, not once have I been so *insulted*. I swore that you’d rue the day you dared to trespass here, sullyng this sacred ground. I wanted you to *burn*, but you and your friends were out of reach to me. I managed to root out the oldest one and manipulated some humans to have him executed in the city, but to get to the rest of you was not so easy. *You* have the spiritual talent of a louse, that worm with the obnoxious laugh is as dull as you are, and *he*,” she pointed her finger at the now unconscious Katsura, “is so amazingly stupid he couldn’t hear me. The seer, though...”

The smile that curved her lips upon seeing the seething anger on Gintoki’s face was far from pleasant.

“The first few decades, I wasn’t sure it would work at all,” she said. “I would send him visions every night, one worse than the next, visions of pain and suffering and agony. All the anger and hatred I felt fell unto him, and he... endured. Almost admirable, really. Do you know how long it took me to break him?!” She raised her voice and Hijikata winced. “Some two hundred winters!”

Hijikata's eyes widened. *What?!*

The goddess's fingers reached for Gintoki's throat and clutched it. "Nevertheless, I succeeded, and eventually, he brought me a little... gift."

Her free hand rose, and with a small sound of metal, a medallion on a long golden chain swung before their eyes. "Now that I have this, your little immortality spell is useless."

She let go of Gintoki's throat and grabbed the Warding Medallion in her fist. A bright light seeped through her fingers. Gintoki groaned in pain.

"Stop!" Hijikata shouted.

The goddess let go of the Medallion and looked at him as though she hadn't noticed him before. "I don't know who you are," she said coldly, "but shut your filthy mouth."

The roots around Hijikata's body tightened harshly and slammed him into the ground. Hijikata grunted in pain; he tried to fight them but to no avail.

"Maybe I should kill you first," the goddess walked over to Hijikata and leaned down. "You're an eyesore."

"Don't you dare."

The goddess wheeled around with a start.

Where Gintoki was moments prior, a creature beyond imagination stood firmly. The vines coiling around its body turned brown and weak as the blindingly white monster grew larger, and where its feet touched the ground, the grass underneath began wilting.

Hijikata felt his blood freezing. This was the demon from his nightmares; the suppressed memories of those terrible dreams came flooding back, and he let out a whimper.

The demon's ardent pupil-less eyes gleamed dangerously, and the roots on Hijikata's body withered. Hijikata, no longer restrained, scrambled to get up.

The goddess stood there, petrified with shock. "How?!" Finally, she attempted to back away, fear apparent on her face.

The demon spoke. His voice sounded like thousands of ice bells crashing together – a distorted, twisted, agonised song. "*You freed me,*" he snarled. "*If you'd left the Medallion alone, I wouldn't have regained my strength so easily.*" The demon's shadow began to grow and cover everything it touched in inky blackness.

Hijikata swallowed hard, bathing in cold sweat. A sharp whiplash of wind hit him, and he staggered backwards, hitting the ground. The goddess shrieked as the wind tore the Medallion out of her grasp.

The darkness spreading from underneath the demon's feet reached Hijikata and began creeping up his legs; he found himself unable to move a single muscle, but it was fear he was

petrified with. The wind was getting stronger and stronger, tearing apart the withered roots and vines that remained. Katsura and Takasugi fell onto the ground, no longer constrained by the plants.

As the demon slowly inched closer, the surrounding temperature started dropping. Hijikata watched on with eyes widened in shock, completely terrified.

Their eyes met.

"You're scared," the creature breathed out, and as he did, everything died down in an instant. Gintoki took a few more unsteady steps and fell to his knees in front of Hijikata, hanging his head. With hands shaking, he reached out to grab the fabric of Hijikata's clothes.

"This... I'd never... I'd never intended to show you this side of me," he said, his voice finally back to normal – but so, so agonizingly desperate. He glanced up to meet Hijikata's eyes. His own eyes looked human again, but they were full of pain and remorse. *"A..."* he took a shaky breath, *"Are you alright?"*

"I'm... I'm fine," Hijikata nodded hesitantly, amazed by those words leaving his own mouth. He was very much not fine. Somehow, he had come into terms with inhuman creatures living in the valley; they were, after all, creatures of flesh and bone, and when it came down to it, they – physical appearance aside – were not all that different from humans. However, coming face-to-face with a being of another world, a real, proper demon, even he would be afraid.

The air around them was slowly returning to its former temperature, but Hijikata couldn't shake the feeling of freezing horror.

This man had had sex with him, they shared the bed numerous times, they got as intimate as they possibly could have, and Hijikata even *allowed* all of that. Nothing indicated that there was a monster hiding behind those touches. Now, finally, he understood why he felt cornered by Gintoki so easily – it was his instinct telling him that he should run for dear life.

This was what Takasugi meant by 'volatile' back then.

The goddess loomed over them suddenly. *"I don't know how you did that,"* she hissed, *"but this is where you die."*

An ice shard flew straight out of Gintoki's back, burying itself into her stomach. The demon was suddenly there again in all his blinding glory, even larger than before, and he turned around, his clawed hand locking around the goddess's neck and lifting her off the ground. It happened so fast that Hijikata's eyes barely followed.

"Did you really think you could take what's mine?" the demon bellowed. *"Did you think I'd let you?"*

The goddess clutched the arm holding her in the air, but as she did, her hands began turning brown too, like the leaves of a flower in winter, and they began falling apart.

"No," she whispered, *"this can't..."*

In the distance, the rock barrier crumbled loudly. The goddess's eyes closed, and then she was no more.

The demon turned to Hijikata, and Hijikata instinctively reached for his weapon, but before he could draw, the demon lowered himself on one knee in a submissive position.

“*Master,*” it bellowed.

Hijikata must have misheard, surely. “... what?” he managed to say, though he was still shaken after what just transpired. He could have sworn that the demon just called him his...

“*Master.*” The demon bowed his head, and he turned a little smaller, enough to match Hijikata in size.

“Excuse me?” Hijikata still felt that he was most likely hallucinating.

The demon glanced up at Hijikata. “*You are the one I have been longing to meet for years. The one and only who can free me from my accursed entrapment, the one who can bring an end to my yearning, the one who can direct and amplify my power at will. I helped you escape when you were in peril, and I tried to visit you in your dreams... but failed.*” The demon hung his head again. “*I humbly apologise for the pain I have caused you.*”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.” Hijikata frowned, regaining his composure. The fear he felt before was now replaced with worry. They chatted away like this, but what became of Gintoki? Was he alright? Could he hear them? What would happen to him now that the demon was free? Also, what in the world was he supposed to do about this demon in the first place?

“*It is written,*” the demon said simply. “*It’s been foretold.*”

“Hold on, what?” Hijikata’s heartbeat sped up. The prophecy nobody bothered to explain to him... was it related to this?

“*That seer,*” the demon pointed to Takasugi on the ground, “*spoke of your arrival. I was unsure at first, but as soon as my vessel began feeling affection towards you, it became clear that it is you I have been waiting for.*”

“Is he alright?”

“*Who?*”

“Gintoki. Your vessel,” Hijikata said biting. “Is he alright?”

“*Why does it matter?*” The demon looked at Hijikata with confusion.

“Answer me!” Hijikata demanded.

“*He is fine,*” the demon hung his head. “*I apologise if I angered you.*”

“Give him back. Now.” Hijikata’s tone was now authoritative and firm.

“Why do you care about him so, Master?” The demon’s fists clenched and opened; the creature seemed displeased, jealous even. *“Even though it is I you’ve bonded with?”*

“I did *what?!?*” Hijikata snapped. This bastard was infuriating. Scary, sure, terrifying even – but his talent to get on Hijikata’s nerves was exceptional.

“You bear my mark and bestowed a kiss upon me. We have bonded.”

Hijikata frowned. “It wasn’t *you* I kissed.”

The demon grimaced, baring his sharp teeth, and Hijikata realised that the monster just attempted to smile. *“That matters not,”* the demon said, getting up, and he closed the space between them in a single step. *“The man you speak of is nought but my vessel, and you can and **should** disregard his presence altogether; Master. Allow me to stay by your side instead.”* He clutched Hijikata’s shoulders with his clawed hands. The scar on Hijikata’s back began burning.

“Go fuck yourself,” Hijikata recommended.

“But, Master...” The demon’s shoulders slumped dejectedly. *“It was your wish to help your companions that brought me out,”* he said, his tone respectful yet with a hint of reproach.

“Then it shall be my wish to have you go back wherever you came from,” Hijikata retorted. “Give him back, and don’t make me ask again.”

“If that is your wish,” the demon let go and stepped away from Hijikata, *“then that is what I shall do. Summon me anytime you like; I’ll always heed your call.”*

“One more thing,” Hijikata said quickly.

“Yes, Master?”

“Don’t you *dare* take over his body without my direct permission ever again.” Hijikata was sure that Gintoki would not want that kind of thing to happen spontaneously, and well... Hijikata wouldn’t enjoy that, either. Especially if he and Gintoki were to become a little closer after all this.

“Understood.”

The demon’s features began shrinking little by little and disappearing one by one, and eventually, Gintoki stood before Hijikata on unsteady legs. He staggered, and Hijikata stepped in just in time to catch him.

“Hiji...” Gintoki blinked several times, then brought his hands up drowsily to rub his face – and inhaled sharply. “Hijikata!”

“I’m alright,” Hijikata said simply, helping Gintoki to stand upright. “How are you feeling?”

“My head hurts,” Gintoki groaned. “That demonic piece of... he didn’t do anything to you, did he?”

Hijikata shook his head.

“That’s a relief. He’s never taken over like this before.” Gintoki let go of Hijikata and looked around. “Where’s the Medallion?”

The Medallion was on the forest floor where it landed before. Gintoki lunged for it and fell, hitting the ground hard; his fingers closed around the talisman, hiding its golden gleam. “Ow,” he said, but his tense face finally relaxed, and more than anything, he seemed relieved.

There was a groan, and Katsura sat up slowly, gritting his teeth. “What happened?” he murmured, looking at the others – and then he scrambled to his feet and ran over to Takasugi who was still collapsed in the very same spot.

“He’s alive,” he let out brokenly and brought Takasugi’s unconscious form closer to his chest briefly. Then, he lay Takasugi down gently and began taking off some of his outer layers to dress Takasugi up to keep him warm.

“Hijikata,” Gintoki said, getting up unsteadily, “I... thanks.”

Hijikata shook his head. “I didn’t do anything.”

Gintoki let out a short laugh. “I don’t know what you did, but I feel grateful anyway, so let me have this one. And, actually...” He stepped closer.

“What?”

“Let me have one more thing,” Gintoki leaned in and placed a chaste kiss on Hijikata’s lips. “I need you to stay by my side. Preferably forever, but it’s enough just until you get sick of me.”

“Your timing is supremely bad,” Hijikata stated flatly, “but sure. All yours.”

Gintoki laid his forehead on Hijikata’s shoulder. “Thanks,” he mumbled.

“Can you two,” Katsura said with a thorn in his voice, “stop getting all chummy with each other and help me over here instead?”

“Right. Let’s get the duplicitous idiot and go back,” Gintoki stepped away from Hijikata and walked over to Katsura to help him carry the seer. He clearly wasn’t angry, and Hijikata guessed that Gintoki had already forgiven Takasugi everything he’d done.

Chapter End Notes

Actually, are people still reading? I'm thinking of an indefinite hiatus... but then again we're so close to the end, idk.

Sealed With a Kiss

Chapter Notes

Am I done with my thesis? No.

Am I posting because I'm addicted to writing fiction and couldn't take it anymore?

Maaaaaaaaaybe.

Hijikata couldn't sleep. No matter how hard he tried, his unquiet thoughts wouldn't still, churning, boiling.

They were at Tae's inn again. The way back was difficult as they had to take turns carrying Takasugi, and it was only because Katsura sent out a fire signal spell that Shinpachi rode out to meet them. Everyone at the inn was clearly relieved, but they let them rest without bombarding them with questions. Hijikata should have been dead tired, but his curiosity was impossible to lull.

The goddess said it took her some two hundred years to break Takasugi's mind.

It did not take a genius to realise that that number was much larger than any human's lifespan. Just how old was Gintoki, really? And the others, for that matter? There was *so much* to unpack. The forest witch said she lured the 'oldest one' to his death, and Hijikata figured that that person was the same sensei who once helped shape the castle and the valley, the one the castle-dwelling quartet admired even years – *centuries*, Hijikata corrected himself – after his death. The way Katsura acted made it seem as though it was a fresh wound, so it seemed all the more unreal that the group of men who hardly looked older than him would have roamed this world ages before Hijikata's time.

What if—

Hijikata sat up with a start. What if Gintoki knew about Hijikata before Hijikata was born?!

Sure, the demon did not say that, but it was a possibility. It sounded as though the years of waiting the demon mentioned were hellishly long. If it was unbearable even for a demon, it really might have lasted longer than Hijikata's life thus far.

Nobody ever told Hijikata when that prophecy first appeared.

At the very least, Hijikata now understood what the prophecy was about, probably. Possibly. Gintoki had been waiting for him because, as the demon said, Hijikata could control the demon residing within the king of this valley.

That could also mean that Gintoki *couldn't* control the demon in the least, and if that indeed was the case, then it would make sense for Takasugi to have been very concerned when

Gintoki was leaving the castle with Hijikata. Less than being unaware that Hijikata was on their side, he could have just been worried that the jury would see Gintoki dead and in doing so, they would unleash hell on the blissfully unaware citizens.

That made Hijikata wonder just how much of what he had seen was the demon and how much was, in fact, just Gintoki. The incredible strength sleeping within that man *could* be attributed to the demon, but Hijikata doubted that, even though he was not sure why himself. Perhaps, perhaps he just wanted to doubt. He wanted Gintoki to be as human as possible, for various reasons most of which were highly personal.

They had one hell of an age gap.

He sighed and rubbed his face with his palms. All this tired thinking was giving him a headache.

Among other things, he hoped he was going to be allowed to stay once Gintoki and the rest would get around to questioning Takasugi. It was bound to happen since Takasugi was a secretive bastard, and as it turned out, Hijikata was not the only one Takasugi chose to keep in the dark. There were things that needed to be discussed.

Hijikata shouldn't even be concerned about the age gap. He knew that at this point, it shouldn't matter. Gintoki became important to him, though he was still kind of reluctant about the physical aspect of things yet to come. He knew that Gintoki's affection was stronger, and it was only natural to want to touch when close to someone dear; Hijikata understood that, and he could hardly blame Gintoki for feeling that way.

The recent events did not allow him to try and see Gintoki in such light, though. Now that there was space for it, Hijikata felt that he needed some time to sort out his core a little.

He didn't *not* want their relationship up until now to change in that manner. He thought it was kind of inevitable given the way Gintoki was. In truth, the age gap bothered him more than the fact that Gintoki was a man. He'd also never admit it, but he was kind of curious about *that*. Just a little. The one time they did it was not enough for him to be prepared for what might come, but now that everything was going to calm down as soon as the Medallion situation got resolved, he was sure that Gintoki was going to make advances Hijikata would no longer refuse. Even though he was rather nervous, he...

He rolled over. Alright, *fine*, he admitted to himself angrily – he *did* want it to happen. The way Gintoki got under his skin and carved his name on the inside of Hijikata's every bone couldn't be ignored anymore.

The demon inside of Gintoki was a much bigger problem, though. Obviously, Hijikata wanted nothing to do with *him*. He couldn't fully trust him not to act up, especially since he was a demon, a creature whose essence was selfishness. The lightning on his back was proof, and though Hijikata chose to think of the scar primarily as a connection between him and Gintoki, it was also a reminder that the demon was there, waiting. Since their blood pact couldn't be broken, there was nothing that could be done to separate Gintoki and the demon, as far as Hijikata knew. Maybe Takasugi would know of a way, but he was out, and was going to be out for only gods knew how long.

Clenching his teeth, he sat up. All this thinking was getting him nowhere and he needed to piss. That was when he realised that Gintoki wasn't next to him. He didn't remember hearing the perm-head leave, but the other futon was empty.

Quickly, he made his way outside to relieve his bladder, and then, since he was wide awake anyway, he decided to look for Gintoki.

He circled the inn and entered the garden behind it; the lantern above the back porch was shining and Gintoki was sitting there, looking into the dark. His face was sombre.

Hijikata stood in the shade, and he was about to walk up to the porch, but then the door opened, and Tae walked out. "Can't sleep?" she said when Gintoki looked up at her.

Gintoki hummed in affirmation. "He agreed," there was a whisper.

"I see. Then, it'll end," Tae replied.

Gintoki nodded wordlessly in response.

"I'm happy for you, Gin-san," she gave a small smile. "Truly."

"Thanks." Gintoki was showing a complicated expression – he did not seem unhappy, but there were traces of unease as well. "What do you think is going to happen now?"

She shrugged her shoulders. There was a while of silence. "I'm going to sleep," she said then, "but feel free to help yourself to anything if you get hungry or thirsty."

Hijikata waited for her to leave, and for a few moments, he watched Gintoki from the shadows. "*What*'ll end?" he said then.

Gintoki jumped to his feet. "You've been there the entire time?"

Hijikata stepped into the light and nodded. He wasn't sure what kind of expression he was wearing, but it couldn't be good because Gintoki's face was instantly flooded with panic.

"*What*'ll end?" he asked simply. The way Tae said it sounded ominous to him.

Gintoki visibly hesitated. "I..." he began, but then he took a deep breath, sat down on the porch and patted a spot next to him. Hijikata came closer and made himself comfortable by Gintoki's side.

"The prophecy said that someone would come and bring peace to us," Gintoki said, weighing every word. "It said that the last person I'd fall for would..." he bit his lip briefly, "... help us move on."

Hijikata didn't say anything. Gintoki's previous loves were none of his concern, and he knew that Gintoki felt for him deeply. Silently, he waited for Gintoki to continue.

"It was also foretold that that person would reciprocate," Gintoki looked down, twirling his thumbs nervously. "So... since I am *so* attracted to you, and since you promised... I think it's

going to happen.”

“Do you know how?” Hijikata asked.

Gintoki shook his head. “Since we haven’t dropped dead yet,” he chuckled with a hint of bitterness, “maybe we’ll get to grow old together. Or maybe we’re going to die as soon as the Medallion is in its place again. I have no idea.”

Hijikata took a heavy breath. “Why did Tae know about this?” he said then. “She’s not a part of your blood pact, is she?”

“No, but I was watching over her brother. Of course she’d want to know. She promised not to tell anyone, and she kept everything to herself. Kagura and Shinpachi have no idea; the only ones who know are you, the four of us, and her.”

“She said she was happy for you.”

Gintoki’s smile was a little sad. “Well, I’ve lived several lifetimes now,” he said. “It’s exhausting. Still...” There was a pause, and Gintoki’s hand took hold of Hijikata’s, “I hope I won’t have to leave you behind. That would be regrettable.”

“How old are you, really?” Hijikata asked as he entwined his fingers with Gintoki’s. Gintoki’s palm was sweaty, but so was Hijikata’s own, even though it was not that warm outside.

“About... three hundred years, give or take a few decades,” Gintoki let out uneasily. “I don’t remember exactly.”

Hijikata chuckled shortly in an attempt to lighten the mood a little. “So that’s why your hair is white,” he teased. Though he was uneasy about this himself, he didn’t want Gintoki to worry too much.

“How dare you, I’ve always looked like this,” Gintoki retorted and finally smiled a little, looking Hijikata in the eye. “Hey...” he whispered then.

“Hm?”

“Can I kiss you?”

Hijikata averted his gaze bashfully. “Like you need to ask,” he murmured.

As Gintoki’s lips touched his own, he closed his eyes. What he had promised to Gintoki was much simpler in his mind than something so grandiose as fulfilling a prophecy; he just wanted to be by Gintoki’s side. Both Gintoki and the demon wanted to be free of the other, and if his consent alone was enough to make that happen, then he was all the more compliant.

Gintoki’s hand tried to slide under his collar, and Hijikata broke their kiss. “Wait,” he said.

Gintoki froze.

“I’m not rejecting you,” Hijikata clarified quickly. “Just... not here. Not now. Not... yet.”

Gintoki glanced down. “You’re right,” he said then. “I doubt Tae would be happy if we did something like that out here.”

“That, and someone might come,” Hijikata added. “Last time it happened was *not* fun, and I’d rather not have the mood die like that ever again.”

“You’re not going to let me live it down, are you,” Gintoki rubbed the back of his neck sheepishly. “I’m... really sorry about that one.”

“Next time, we’re locking the door,” Hijikata said firmly.

“Roger,” Gintoki saluted half in jest. “I still want to touch you, though. Just a little bit?”

“No.” Hijikata scooted away from Gintoki slightly. “You told me that the demon has never taken over before, right?” he then asked abruptly.

“Never,” Gintoki said. “I could feel him being there, but until that point, we were mostly synchronised. I could borrow his power a little – remember the rain that came when we were escaping the city? I couldn’t stop it once it began, but it helped. You almost died there, though. I’m... sorry about that, too.”

“Did you know he was speaking to me?”

“He was doing what?!”

Hijikata took a deep breath. “The nightmares I had? Also, I think it was him who led us out of the prison through the vents. And after that, after he took over, he told me that I should be interested in him, not you.” He barked out a short laugh. “I told him to go fuck himself.”

Gintoki smiled briefly, then hung his head. “You know...” he said tensely, “the night we did... the night we had sex...” He paused, swallowing hard. “He was stronger than before, and he fought *against* me. That never happened before.”

Hijikata gave a crooked smile. “Ah, yeah. He told me that he and I have bonded, because he marked me and because I kissed him. What a load of...”

Gintoki’s hand covered his mouth suddenly. “If you’re trying to make me jealous, it’s working,” Gintoki whispered.

Hijikata found that kind of amusing. “I told him,” he mumbled against Gintoki’s palm, and Gintoki let go, “that he’s not allowed to take over you without my say-so. I have no intention of fraternising with him, don’t worry.”

“Without your say-so?” Gintoki narrowed his eyes.

“He promised,” Hijikata shrugged his shoulders in response.

“Well, he'd better keep his word.” Gintoki leaned in to kiss Hijikata again. This time, his tongue found its way into Hijikata’s mouth, and Hijikata raised his hand to run his fingers through Gintoki’s curls.

Gintoki’s hand sneaked around Hijikata’s waist and brought them closer. Hijikata could feel his cheeks warm up despite the cold night, and he put his arm over Gintoki’s shoulders.

For a while, they kissed slowly in a warm embrace, and Hijikata found himself feeling strangely content; perhaps because the two of them were destined to meet, there were no doubts in his heart.

“We should go to sleep,” he said eventually, sounding a little out of breath.

Gintoki hummed and squeezed Hijikata a little tighter in his arms, then he let go and got up.

Hijikata followed suit and they made their way inside and then upstairs and into their room. Gintoki fell face-first onto his futon. “You know,” he said into his pillow, “it was kind of a relief to tell you all of that.”

“Then you should’ve done that earlier,” Hijikata retorted, but there was no anger in his voice. Gintoki was right – he, too, was relieved.

He lay down into his bed, and Gintoki immediately pulled him closer and covered them both with one blanket. It was warm, and finally, Hijikata felt himself getting drowsy.

He rolled over and reached to hug Gintoki with the intention to sleep until dawning.

Back Home

Chapter Notes

This took foreeeeeeeeeever but we're back!

Seeing the castle walls again was like a breath of fresh air. Hijikata felt that they'd been away much longer than they really were; so much had happened over the past few days that he still hadn't completely processed all of it.

After they'd rested, they left the inn and made their way back to the keep; Katsura took the still unconscious Takasugi onto his horse, and they rode slowly and carefully; Katsura wouldn't let anyone else take Takasugi even when they offered. Hijikata understood that kind of feeling. This way, though, it took longer to get home, and they'd only reached the gate after sunset. The guards let them in quietly, leaving them alone again at a single gesture from Gintoki. On the way, one of them hooked a torch into a metal holder on the wall nearby.

They got off the horses and helped Katsura to take Takasugi on his back. Katsura's knees buckled when Takasugi's lifeless form weighed upon him, but he managed to keep standing, his face sombre and determined.

Hijikata clenched his teeth. He would help Katsura out – in fact, he would *like* to, seeing as Katsura was most likely deathly tired. He had definitely slept the least amount out of all of them and ended up transporting Takasugi, so it was a miracle he was still holding up. He didn't seem as if he'd be willing to accept help, though.

"Let's go put the Medallion back into place," Gintoki said, looking at Katsura. "Think you can handle it?"

"Who else would?" Katsura retorted. "*He* can't. His blood wasn't used in the ritual."

"We need five people, though," Gintoki replied, his voice getting lower, "and sensei is not exactly... *available* anymore."

"Is that even going to work?" Katsura said doubtfully.

"I don't know, and Takasugi's out like a light so it might not work with him, either. We don't," he hesitated, unease briefly contorting his face, "we don't even know if Tatsuma is okay. What if, while we were gone, he..."

"Don't you *dare*," Katsura snapped. "I'll go find him. You two wait with Takasugi, and I'll... *we* will be back soon."

Gintoki hummed in response. Hijikata looked at him and saw that in the dying light, Gintoki seemed too tired to argue; Katsura, on the other hand, despite his exhaustion, stubbornly refused to stand idly. Or, perhaps – perhaps he knew that if he were to stop, he'd collapse on the spot. Hijikata couldn't be sure.

As he was standing a bit closer, Katsura uncompromisingly shoved Takasugi into Hijikata's arms and stormed off, his step less than steady.

"That idiot," Gintoki murmured, but he took a step closer to Hijikata and helped him support Takasugi's body. "Come," he suggested, "let's put him by the wall."

Carefully, they sat Takasugi on the ground and leaned his back against the cold stone of the castle looming behind them. The entrance to the catacombs had to be nearby, though Hijikata still couldn't see it, much like before.

Takasugi groaned; Gintoki immediately crouched next to him.

Takasugi's eyelids rose a little, and he coughed dryly before slowly looking up. "Where... is he?" was the first sentence that left his mouth.

"He went to get Tatsuma," Gintoki said softly. "Think you'll live?"

"I've got... a few," Takasugi attempted to sit up straight, but failed, "more years... to go."

"Great, because I'm going to have to ask you some questions."

Takasugi chuckled a little but it ended up turning into another cough. "You would."

"You knew about all of that, huh?" Gintoki poked Takasugi's cheek with his finger.

"I just... didn't think it would hurt... this much." Takasugi's hand slowly rose to his missing eye and covered it.

Hijikata turned around when he heard footsteps. He saw three silhouettes, one being supported by the other two. As they came close, he recognised the one on the left as Katsura, and the one in the middle as Sakamoto. The third one was a woman he didn't know, but he surmised that this was Mutsu. Her face was stern but it was obvious she was worried as well, and no wonder; Sakamoto looked like death itself. His eyes were open but unfocused, and he seemed to have lost a lot of weight over the few days they were gone. His face was devoid of colour even in the light of the torch. More than a living human, he resembled a corpse.

Katsura looked up and noticed that Takasugi was conscious, and a relieved expression briefly appeared on his face.

"Let me help." Hijikata stepped in to have Sakamoto lean on him instead. Katsura and Mutsu let go of him and moved away, though Mutsu remained right next to them, her eyebrows furrowing. She reached out to caress Sakamoto's cheek. He didn't react; his eyelids did not even twitch.

“Right,” Takasugi said, and though his voice was weak, it was full of resolve, “let’s go. Mutsu—”

“I know. I’ll wait here.”

Takasugi nodded, and then, grabbing onto the wall for support, he slowly got up. Clinging to its stone surface and digging his fingers into it, he began making his way along the wall, presumably towards the entrance to the catacombs. Katsura cursed under his breath and jumped to him, lending him his shoulder.

Gintoki hesitated, but then he turned towards Hijikata to help him with Sakamoto, who couldn’t stand on his own at all.

Together, they passed through the illusory barrier and entered the catacombs. Katsura and Takasugi were in front, and Katsura cast a small flickering flame to light their way. The corridor was narrow, so to pass through it with three people next to each other wasn’t easy. Hijikata was constantly brushing against the wall, and he was sure Gintoki was the same.

As the floor began descending, he braced himself internally. The memory of how sick he felt the last time he was here with Gintoki surfaced in his mind; he was touching Sakamoto, so if Gintoki was right, he should survive it, but he hoped that Gintoki was ready to grab Sakamoto because his body was going to...

... collapse?

He stood in the blue light of the medallion room, unaffected. Nothing happened.

Gintoki was looking at him, just as puzzled as Hijikata himself. “Huh.”

Hijikata, to the best of his ability, shrugged.

Katsura was looking at them, too. “I guess this means you’re one of us,” he murmured, “so this might just work.”

They brought Sakamoto to the stone table and tried to prop him up. He slumped over, the upper half of his body resting on the stone.

“That’ll do,” Takasugi let out. He was winded, but perhaps driven by the thought that everything was going to be fine soon, he looked better than before.

They stood in a circle around the table in spots Takasugi pointed them to; Gintoki took out the Warding Medallion and placed it in the casing carefully with an audible click. Takasugi leaned forward and opened his mouth, but Katsura cut him off. “Wait!”

“What?” Takasugi looked at him.

“You’re exhausted, aren’t you? Let me do it.”

“Do you want the entire castle... to go up in flames? Don’t be a dumbass,” Takasugi shook his head. “Just hold the circle with the others and make sure not to combust.”

Gintoki's hand found Hijikata's; Hijikata grabbed Katsura's hand, and he saw Gintoki and Takasugi grab a hold of Sakamoto on either side. Then, Takasugi's and Katsura's hands connected.

Takasugi leaned in again and began reading the runic carvings on the Medallion.

The blue light in the room began to dim, and as it died down, the Medallion began to emit a different light, changing from azure to cyan, growing stronger and eventually drowning out everything including Takasugi's voice. It was blinding, but Hijikata couldn't look away. His heartbeat was fast, he could feel it, but he couldn't hear it as he normally would.

Then, in a flash, everything stopped. Hijikata's ears began to ring at the sudden change, but that sensation subsided in a few seconds, too.

The runes on the Medallion retained their cyan glow, gently illuminating their surroundings. Oddly, Hijikata himself realised he felt a little lighter, as though a weight he had been unaware of lifted off his shoulders.

Suddenly, Sakamoto stood up. "Where—" he looked around, meeting everyone's relieved eyes. "Oh. You guys did it!"

"You gave us a scare when Mutsu brought you out looking like that," Gintoki said, grabbing Sakamoto's shoulder. "You'd better go show her you're okay."

"Shit, you're right." Turning on his heel, Sakamoto rushed – as much as it was possible with his legs unsteady and knees buckling – out of the room.

"Takasugi!" Upon hearing Katsura's alarmed voice, Hijikata wheeled around.

Takasugi was pale, and blood was dripping from his nose; he was currently wiping it with his sleeve. "I'm fine," he said, his voice much steadier than it was a while ago. "It's just the incantation. I probably look like crap, but I'll be fine by morning."

"Are you *sure*?" Gintoki asked, wanting reassurance.

Takasugi simply nodded. "I'm sure you feel it too," he said, his voice muffled as he held up his sleeve under his nose again. "That we're okay now." He glanced at Hijikata. "We should *all* feel it."

"Alright," Gintoki said, though he didn't sound fully convinced. "If you start feeling worse, though, let us know, got it?"

"I told you, I'm fine," Takasugi insisted.

Katsura interjected. "We should get you to bed..." he began, but before he could finish that sentence, he lost consciousness himself; Takasugi barely managed to catch him.

Carrying Katsura this time, they left the Medallion room, intending to get their deserved rest.

The Queen of the Mountain Pass

Chapter Notes

oh boy i sure hope this last chapter is not a major disappointment for some of you

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“So.”

Gintoki’s hand slammed onto the dining table so hard that Hijikata had to suppress the urge to check if it left a dent in the aged oak wood.

Takasugi looked up at him and put his spoon down slowly. “What?”

“Start explaining yourself.” Gintoki’s tone of voice sent a shiver down Hijikata’s spine. Gintoki was *angry*, and rightfully so. Takasugi cooperated with the forest goddess and kept important things to himself, things that would have helped them avoid ever getting into grave danger. Sakamoto and Takasugi himself almost died because the seer chose not to tell them anything. Even now, there were things Hijikata – and the others, too, possibly – did not fully understand.

“I don’t know where to start,” Takasugi shrugged his shoulders.

“First of all, didn’t you say that you can’t cast spells?” Hijikata interjected before Gintoki could say anything. This bothered him since last night. “But you were the one chanting yesterday?”

To the best of his ability, Takasugi gave him a side eye. “You don’t need to *have* active magic to be able to do sanguimancy. You don’t actually need to have any magic at all. That’s why so many people die from it – anyone can do it, and few can control it. Luckily for me, the original spell had already been cast, and renewing it was not nearly as taxing as casting it in the first place.”

“... Oh.” This made sense. It also explained why there were so many sanguimancy-related accidents back when he was still a part of the city police force. People just wanted power and didn’t care how they got it.

“You knew that the Medallion would get stolen, didn’t you?” Gintoki said sternly.

“Stolen?” Takasugi chuckled shortly. “It didn’t get stolen. You know that ordinarily, nobody but us can enter that place. I was the one who took it.”

“*What?!*”

“I took it out of its casing a few days before *his* men came looking for him.” Takasugi nodded towards Hijikata. “That’s how they found the way in the first place.”

“Why would you—”

“Because I was supposed to bring it to her.” Takasugi took a sip of his water. “And so I did.”

Gintoki’s eyebrow cocked but before he could snap, Takasugi looked up at him from his chair. “You see, since I lost my eye, I knew that this would happen. All of it. Hijikata’s arrival, and you getting arrested and brought back, and the goddess dying – I knew. I did have to nudge you back to the right path a few times, though.”

“Why didn’t you tell us, then?!”

“Obviously because you’d try and prevent all this from ever happening,” Takasugi leaned back in his chair, looking into the shadows under the ceiling, “and if you did, we’d be still the same as before. Or did you not want *this*,” he gestured among the four of them, “to finally end? I’m fed up with this crap. Some of the people in this valley see us as gods, doesn’t that drive you mad? Don’t you want to grow old like everyone else?”

“... yeah.” Gintoki bit his lip, deflating a little. “You’re right.”

Takasugi nodded, continuing. “Normally, people can’t easily change their fate, but you, with the demon inside you and Hijikata by your side no less, do have that ability. If I told you what was going to happen, you wouldn’t be able to resist the urge to intervene. Of course, if I saw that someone was going to die, I would have told you, but since I knew that as long as I can manage to keep my mouth shut, everything was going to be fine, why would I tell you anything?”

“Damn you,” Gintoki heaved a sigh and sat down on the neighbouring chair.

“You should be grateful,” Takasugi looked at him, smirking a little.

“No, I am, of course, but I want to strangle you all the same.” Gintoki rubbed his face with his palms. “You better not pull this shit again.”

“I can’t promise that. You’re just going to have to trust me,” Takasugi replied, leaning on the table as he got up. “Or don’t,” he added after a short pause. With that, he made his way towards the door, where he briefly stopped. “My only regret is that I couldn’t see her face when she found out that in reality, I was the one using her. Did she find out about it at all?”

“I doubt it,” Gintoki shook his head.

“Damn.” There was a hint of disappointment in Takasugi’s voice. He smiled a little, and then, the door closed behind him.

Katsura got up and walked out too, likely intending to follow Takasugi to talk to him in private.

Hijikata glanced at Sakamoto, who hardly paid any attention to the conversation and only kept on stuffing his face. There was a pot of porridge in front of him, and if Hijikata counted right, Sakamoto was currently devouring his sixth bowl. Colour had returned to his cheeks, and his eyes regained the spark they used to have but he was still emaciated and a bit sickly.

Gintoki was looking at him, too. "How are you feeling?" he asked with concern.

"Mha?" Sakamoto looked up; his mouth was full and there were grains around his mouth.

Gintoki chuckled and got up, too. "No, never mind. You're clearly doing okay." He turned to Hijikata. "I'm gonna go to my room. I don't know about you, but I don't feel like doing anything today."

Hijikata leaned in. "*Anything* at all?" he whispered.

Gintoki's eyes found his own, and Hijikata looked away briefly. He wasn't used to seducing someone, let alone so blatantly. Despite his best efforts, he felt a blush creeping up to his cheeks, and his ears heated up. They weren't alone, either, but...

"...are you serious?" Gintoki let out, his face turning a little pale as he clutched Hijikata's sleeve.

Hijikata didn't reply; freeing himself from Gintoki's grip gently with a smile, he turned on his heel and then he made his way out of the room, leaving Gintoki behind.

Hijikata stood in his own room, unsure what to do. He did invite Gintoki, sure, but right now, what was he supposed to do to prepare? He did have a morning bath before breakfast, much like the rest of them did. They all came back grimy and deathly tired, so everything had to be dealt with once they had rested.

His body was clean, so was his bed. Or, *their* bed, seeing as Gintoki would always sleep next to him.

Hijikata sat down on the cushioning. The silken beddings felt soft under his fingers, and he ran his hands across it slowly. Gintoki's own bed, the one he had abandoned in order to sleep next to Hijikata for the rest of eternity, was not covered in silk.

It wasn't covered in silk because a certain someone didn't sleep in it. Hijikata understood that much now. Gintoki came to cherish Hijikata in the most extravagant of ways, and he didn't care if he was being wasteful in the least. The bed in Hijikata's room was the most comfortable one he'd ever slept on, and with Gintoki sleeping there as well, it was being put to good use, at least – though it was about to get a new purpose.

Hijikata blushed a little. They really were going to do it, here, on their bed, in broad daylight. They'd slept here last night, and that was not nearly as awkward as this anticipation he was feeling now. Even though he woke up with Gintoki's limbs entangled with his own, and even though Gintoki clung to him whilst sleeping soundly, it wasn't embarrassing anymore.

He recalled the time they *couldn't* sleep next to each other – when they went to the city and then spent a hellish week apart from one another. Nothing that came after was nearly as torturous for Hijikata, and he wondered if Gintoki felt the same. He – *no*, Hijikata realised, the White Demon made sure that they would be together as much as possible. It wasn't just Gintoki, it was also the creature who called Hijikata his master; they both insisted on being by Hijikata's side whenever they could.

He got up and pushed the duvet out of the way. If they were going to have sex, the sheet was much easier to change than the whole duvet, and Hijikata would prefer not to dirty it.

Gintoki was still not here. Hijikata decided to go see what was taking so long, and he walked to the door.

His hand hovered over the door handle.

He hesitated.

Then, he opened the door. "Are you coming in, or what?"

Gintoki stood there, a complicated expression of uncertainty and sheepishness on his face. His hand was in the same position as Hijikata's own moments ago. "I was... just about to," he said, and Hijikata could easily see it was a lie.

Smirking, Hijikata stepped back in and waited until Gintoki came in, then he closed the door and promptly locked it. He was absolutely not letting anyone interrupt them this time. "It's a bit late for you to be getting cold feet," he said.

"I'm not! I'm not, okay?" Gintoki retorted defensively, then he looked away. "I'm just... nervous."

Hijikata raised his eyebrows. *Gintoki* was nervous? "It's not like we haven't done this before," he said, not at all feeling as sure as he was trying to make it sound. The bastard's nervousness was contagious, dammit.

To hide his own embarrassment, he turned his back to Gintoki and took a few steps to the window.

He closed the curtains in a single motion.

Gintoki's footsteps came from behind.

Hijikata swallowed hard. Gintoki's breath warmly tickled him on his nape, and in response to that, his scar throbbed. Though Hijikata now knew why, that knowledge did not make this any easier or any less awkward. He felt Gintoki's hands rest on his sides, and he closed his eyes.

"I want you," Gintoki whispered.

Hijikata took a deep breath, and turning his head to the man behind him, he reached up to grab a fistful of silvery curls.

Gintoki's grip on him tightened as their lips came into contact. The kiss was soft at first, though hardly innocent, and Hijikata's cheeks turned reddish.

"Then, take me," he murmured against Gintoki's mouth, his voice a little raspy.

He heard Gintoki's breath hitch, and smiled subconsciously as Gintoki's arms finally wrapped around him closely. He returned the embrace with the same intention – wanting to touch. The last several days had been exhausting, and it felt only right to seek comfort in each other's arms.

"Hey," Gintoki's lips brushed over his ear, "would you... can I have a request?"

"That depends on what it is." Hijikata did not want to doubt Gintoki, but there was a small seed of worry in him; he really did not want their first fully consensual lovemaking to be any more awkward than it had to be.

"Can we open the curtains after all?" Gintoki's voice was hushed. "I want to see you properly."

Hijikata took a shaky breath; steeling himself internally, he nodded. "Alright."

Gintoki let go of Hijikata, walked over to the window and opened the curtains hesitantly. Light flooded the room once more. Hijikata swallowed hard nervously, and then he sat on the edge of his bed again.

Illuminated from behind, Gintoki stepped closer. He leaned in, and cradling Hijikata's face in his palms, he kissed him slowly, his eyes closing. It was a soft, careful kiss; Gintoki's fingers moved, combing through Hijikata's hair gently.

Hijikata's hand rose up and clutched Gintoki's clothes. He started reclining backwards until his back was flat on the bed and Gintoki looming over him; their lips never broke contact. Gintoki's tongue slipped into his mouth, and Hijikata could feel a hand loosening his belt. His heart was beating rapidly with excitement; a year ago, if someone told him he'd be *this* aroused whilst under another man, he'd probably fight them for such insolence. Now, though, he was anticipating Gintoki's next move eagerly – he was even okay with letting Gintoki take the lead. A part of it was, of course, his own lack of experience, but that wasn't all. He wanted Gintoki to do as he liked.

Gintoki opened Hijikata's shirt partially, and his hand slipped under its fabric; though his palm was roughened from centuries of handling his sword, it was no longer unpleasant to Hijikata. He relaxed into Gintoki's touch, suppressing a small moan when Gintoki's callous hand caressed his nipple.

He'd never go back.

Gintoki broke their kiss and hid his head in Hijikata's nape. "I love you so much," he breathed out. "It's unbearable."

“You don’t have to bear with it,” Hijikata whispered in response. “I like you, too.” It was still too big a hurdle for him to show as much affection as Gintoki did but if it was this much...

Gintoki tensed up briefly and looked up at Hijikata. “Say that again?”

“You heard me just fine.”

“Yeah, but I didn’t get to see your face,” Gintoki pouted.

“I guess you’re just going to have to pay more attention next time,” Hijikata chuckled, though his face was the shade of a ripe tomato. He propped up on his elbows and placed a quick kiss on Gintoki’s lips. “Don’t keep me waiting.”

Gintoki inhaled sharply and fused their lips together yet again, this time in a kiss much hungrier and deeper than before. He knelt over the other, his hands cradling Hijikata’s head dearly, and he breathed heavily through his nose.

Hijikata fell back down onto the sheets, holding onto the fabric of Gintoki’s shirt with one hand, caressing the back of Gintoki’s neck with the other. With hands a little unsteady, he worked to pull the shirt over Gintoki’s head, then he tossed it aside. Gintoki, with his hair ruffled and eyes glistening, smiled a little, a pink blush staining his cheeks, and he leaned down to place a chaste kiss on Hijikata’s cheek as he proceeded to fully open his shirt. Hijikata raised his hips when Gintoki grabbed the hem of his trousers. They got tugged down, and Hijikata covered his crotch with his hands, looking away bashfully. He didn’t hate this but despite that, or perhaps because of that, this whole act was much more embarrassing than before.

Gintoki chuckled lightly as he pulled Hijikata’s trousers down completely, then he turned around to reach into the bedside table to get the vial of oil from last time. Hijikata’s eyes followed that motion, and he held his breath briefly; Gintoki’s muscles moved gracefully under his scarred, pallid skin. Though Gintoki was beautiful in the same way a wild animal would be, Hijikata no longer found himself afraid. The bond they shared was deeper than simple attraction or pure instinct, and yet it had the force of both and more, and Hijikata found himself staring in fascination, aroused beyond belief, the inside of his mouth suddenly dry. It was love, he knew – love and fate, adorned by an inevitable desire now burning deep inside his gut.

Gintoki turned back and their eyes met. Gintoki’s lips parted and he moved closer swiftly, dropping the still-closed vial onto the sheets, and he pulled Hijikata into a kiss. “If you look at me like that,” he let out, his voice heated, “don’t blame me for what happens next.”

Hijikata swallowed hard but there was a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth.

Gintoki’s hand moved to Hijikata’s groin and pushed past Hijikata’s guard. “Don’t hide,” he said, and it was more a demand than anything else – but Hijikata obeyed, his hands moving to his sides to clutch the sheet beneath them.

Gintoki reached for the vial and opened it, dribbling its contents over his hand and subsequently Hijikata’s abdomen; it was a little cold. Gintoki used a generous amount, not at

all caring that it was messy. Hijikata watched him with his eyes narrowed, and he gasped when Gintoki's slick fingers wrapped around his hard-on.

Gintoki pushed Hijikata's legs apart and caressed his abdomen to cover his other hand in the oil as well, then he looked up at Hijikata as his fingers moved to Hijikata's rear where they stopped. "Can I, really?"

Hijikata's eyelids fluttered shut. "Go for it," he whispered, though he was fairly certain he would never feel truly ready. He clenched his teeth when he felt a finger sliding in slowly – just one at first – and he tried to focus on the hand around his dick instead. He knew that Gintoki would find that good spot in him soon but until that happened, it just felt awkward.

"Nh...!"

"There it is," Gintoki said, and he sounded so happy with himself that Hijikata opened his eyes to glare.

Gintoki met his gaze and Hijikata regretted having looked at this idiot in the first place because Gintoki grinned, applying pressure to the good spot again but entirely on purpose this time. Hijikata bucked his hips involuntarily, and right after, Gintoki added a finger, teasing Hijikata inside gently. The sweet scent of the oil reached Hijikata's nostrils and Hijikata knew that this smell would now always remind him of what they were doing right now. Gintoki's fingers were moving in and out of him carefully, and each time they grazed the little bundle of nerves inside, Hijikata's head would spin a little. The hand around his cock was keeping him dangerously close to the edge but not quite at it, and he was quickly growing impatient.

"Hurry up," he finally groaned when he couldn't take it anymore.

"Not yet," Gintoki shook his head, and he pushed a third finger in. "You're going to hurt."

Hijikata got up on his elbows heavily, and he looked between Gintoki's legs. Gintoki was still wearing his trousers, and the tent he was pitching would put any field encampment to shame. Hijikata laid his foot on Gintoki's thigh and tugged at the fabric of his trousers with his toes lightly. "Hurry," he whispered in a sultry voice.

Gintoki let out a strained sound and pulled his fingers out. "Fine," he conceded, "but if it hurts, make sure to tell me."

Hijikata hummed in affirmation and watched Gintoki finally take his dick out. He held his breath as Gintoki closed the little bit of distance between them, and he bit his lip and closed his eyes upon being entered. Gintoki was right, it hurt a little bit – but not so much so that he'd admit it.

"It's all in," Gintoki breathed out, leaning in. "You okay?"

"Y—" Hijikata attempted to reply and his voice cracked, "Yeah."

Hot lips found his own, and as their tongues met, Gintoki slowly drew his hips back. Hijikata let out a moan that got partly stifled by the other's mouth, and tears welled up in his eyes. His insides were tingling, and though Gintoki wasn't touching his front anymore, he was feeling it and found himself wanting more, more, until they'd drown in each other. He wrapped his arms around Gintoki, and to the best of his ability, he attempted to synchronise their movements.

Gintoki nosed at Hijikata's nape, sometimes nibbling gently, and his breath echoed heavy in Hijikata's ears. Gradually, Gintoki began to speed up, and with the pace, the angle at which he moved also changed and Hijikata threw his head back when the good spot in him finally received some love again. His cock throbbed happily, and Hijikata lost control over his voice. Through the haze of ecstasy smothering his mind, he could hear Gintoki's moans as well, and that fired him up even more.

"Gintoki," he choked out, "I'm gonna c—"

A kiss cut him off, and to his dismay, Gintoki pulled out immediately. Before he could complain, though, Gintoki's hand held their cocks firmly together, and Gintoki continued moving his hips. Their lips parted, and Hijikata cried out, his feet cramping as he came, holding onto Gintoki for dear life.

Gintoki came soon after, letting out a ragged moan right next to Hijikata's ear.

For a moment, neither of them moved, only their chests were falling and rising rapidly. Then, Gintoki moved in for a hug but Hijikata stopped him. "We should clean up," he said, still out of breath.

"Right," Gintoki backed away dejectedly, and Hijikata ignored the small stab of guilt he felt.

Gintoki, who was cleaner than Hijikata himself, got off the bed, quickly got dressed and announced, "I'll be right back." With that, he unlocked the door and left the room.

Hijikata sat up sluggishly and wrapped himself in the already dirty sheet. Now that they weren't sharing body warmth, he was beginning to feel cold.

It felt good just now, and he was a little taken aback that he felt disappointed when Gintoki pulled out. He would have been able to cum with Gintoki inside him, and he was even willing to have to deal with the mess inside afterwards – but as usual, Gintoki did as he pleased.

Hesitantly, he reached to his behind. It was looser than he had expected, and though it made sense, it also made a new wave of embarrassment rise from within and set his cheeks aflame.

They really just did that, and... and Hijikata wouldn't mind doing that again. Not right now, obviously, but next time for sure.

He curled up more and hugged his knees. He was now cold and sticky and that was not pleasant, and yet he was not upset about it at all. Instead, he felt oddly content.

The door opened again and Gintoki stood there with a bucket with hot water and a towel. Seeing Hijikata curled up on the bed, a worried expression flashed across his face. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” Hijikata nodded, sensing that he was getting red in the face yet again. “Just cold.”

Wordlessly, Gintoki stepped closer and set the bucket on the ground, then he dipped the towel in it. Hijikata took it from him and turned away to wipe his body. Now that they went and did it, he felt *shy* and though it irritated him, he couldn’t help it.

When he was clean, Gintoki took the bucket and the towel away again; left alone, Hijikata buttoned his shirt again and finally dropped the dirtied sheet on the ground. With his lower half buck naked, he walked over to his closet, though there was a bit of a wobble in his step, and he pulled out a clean sheet to put on their bed. The rest of the clean-up, he decided, had to wait until he was not so sluggish.

He straightened up the duvet and lay under it.

Gintoki appeared in the door again, and as he closed it, Hijikata noticed some hesitancy in his step as he made his way to their bed.

Wordlessly, Hijikata lifted up the duvet enough for it to mean an invitation. With a relieved smile, Gintoki slipped in too, and much more shamelessly than moments prior, he pulled Hijikata into a hug. Hijikata didn’t fight it, he just rolled over so that his back would be pressed against Gintoki’s chest.

The scar on his back tingled, and Hijikata realised that it didn’t do anything at all during the entire time they were all over each other.

“Hey,” he said, “how has the demon been since then?”

Gintoki hummed thoughtfully. “Quiet,” he replied after a few seconds.

“So then, he doesn’t bother you anymore?”

“Not when you’re with me.” Gintoki’s embrace tightened. “Being near you gives me peace of mind. He hasn’t really done anything since you told him off.”

“Hmm.” That was a relief. Hijikata wasn’t sure what he’d do if the demon disobeyed him.

“I sleep much better than when I used to, too,” Gintoki continued. “Before you came, I would have nightmares, or I couldn’t sleep at all. The first night we slept next to each other, I slept the best I had in years... though the Medallion got taken and my sleep got cut short.”

Hijikata chuckled. “And I bet that was your biggest worry.”

“Oi. I take sleep very seriously, I’ll have you know,” Gintoki protested but Hijikata could hear him smiling as he said it.

"I bet you wo—nh," Hijikata was about to tease Gintoki more but then he felt a hand going down his still very naked thigh. "Stop that."

“I was just checking if you wore anything,” Gintoki said, his tone as innocent as it could possibly get.

“Right,” Hijikata said sarcastically, and grabbing Gintoki’s disobedient hand, he moved it to his stomach.

There was a while of silence; Hijikata felt fingers combing through his hair and he relaxed into it, closing his eyes.

“Hey, Hijikata.”

“What?”

“Marry me?”

He choked on air, and only after he calmed down did he turn to look at Gintoki's face – but the perm-head was completely serious.

Screw it, Hijikata thought, I concede. You win. “Sure.”

Chapter End Notes

It's over

Well, not totally. I still have an extra planned and the omake scenes and omitted bits are coming up, so there's still a bunch of not really relevant content coming up, but the story is over.

Which also means that now is the time for questions. I'll answer anything I can.

And yes, one of the reasons I was postponing this update is that I don't like it when nice things end lol. This end is long overdue though.

End Notes

Thanks for reading!

If you're liking this, you might also enjoy Faceless. In case you're too lazy to look for it through my profile, have no fear, here's the solution!

<https://archiveofourown.org/works/15651120/chapters/36351951>

also, my instagram where I post updates of all my fics: @rison_iinekin

Update: I'm now on Tumblr @lack-of-common-sense and on Twitter @sense_lack

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!