

Sometimes it'd be the tiniest thing.

No matter the hour. However far from the village he'd wandered. Even if his stomach was practically eating itself out of hunger.

His cloak might catch on a protruding rock embedded in a glacial wall. Or his foot could land wrong going down an icy slope, or an overheard muttered word would carry that certain type of inflection, and Shirogane would just know that he needed to get home right that instant.

His senses were reliable enough to guide him there once that time came. Scurrying off to his bedroom despite it not being that late in the day, hurriedly yet quietly shutting the door, fingers struggling to lock it before Yukisada could get in with that sympathetic look on his face and make him feel even worse. Then feeling guilty at keeping his friend out like that, and then guiltier at being such a burden to him in general.

It was bad enough when he wasted his time with what might actually count as problems. He didn't want his overreactions adding to the list.

Shrugging his cloak off—almost an afterthought—he'd fall onto his mattress and pull the blanket over his flattened ears. Longing for a moment's reprieve from the self-doubt and disgust and misery swilling around and around in his head.

Wishful thinking. He knew that full well.

Which never stopped that tiny bit of hope from lighting its painful spark in his chest as he curled up on his bed. The hope that he'd know peace this one time he tried to rest. Just this one time.

Resignation, that oh-so-familiar feeling, taking hold as the slight comfort of the mattress gave way to a different yet familiar warmth under his trembling body.

Darkness. Fuller than what his blanket had enveloped him in. Somewhat soothing, even, until, alongside a sharp, metallic smell and the feel of the ground seeming to bunch up against him in places, it resolved into the sight of dark leather with darker stains.

His heart began to pound. He swallowed heavily and made to lean on his arm, pushing aside the obvious truth of what held him here. A sky choked with dark clouds, parting only around a full, amber moon. And, stretching endlessly below, with eerie calm...

Shirogane felt somewhat grateful for never being close to that expanse. The glimpse he'd get upon first lifting his head was enough to paint grim pictures. Only a glimpse, it was, but it was a sight he'd never forget while awake. A colour he saw so often, spilling in every direction. Rising and falling in gentle yet unnaturally fast waves conveying a metallic stench up to where he lay.

In the middle of a sea which didn't have a single drop of water in it.

But his attention was demanded elsewhere. He could only delay the inevitable for so long. Soon he'd have to force his limbs to push him into a crouch, already shaking and sweating all over, and then he'd have to make himself look up. Look up, past where the dark leather of this platform ended, and into the eyes of his sole company in this hellscape.

Look up, and face Idate again.

Of course his dreams weren't an escape. Never did a moment of his life pass without being haunted by that deranged orca. When he dragged himself out of his bed every morning, he did so while already dreading an encounter with the chain-smoking sadist that day. It felt natural to expect. Like the pull of gravity, or the ebb and flow of the tides. But these times?

Quite different from the times he'd sat at the edge of an ice floe for hours, thinking his only company lay in his bucket and fishing rod and, for so long, being so, so wrong—and often not even knowing it.

Different times, indeed. For Idate never fixed him in the glare of four glowing eyes, with the second, larger pair blazing down from where the white spots in his hair were situated.

Idate never towered above the waves at a size that rivalled Iceberg Isle itself.

And Idate never allowed a silence to fester more horrifically than any cruel jibes or barbs.

Of course none of it was real. He repeated those words like a mantra, curled up and shivering in his bed no matter the actual temperature. And yet so often would it await him once he parted the curtain to dreamland. No matter how much he longed for it, the nightmare would never release him early.

He'd stay trapped here in Idate's clutches with the Isle nowhere to be seen. If only anyone else was here, Isle or not. He didn't expect help. He just wanted some kind of normalcy. Familiarity. The kind that didn't come with the guarantee of a whole body's worth of bruises at a minimum, and nausea lingering long after the beatings had ended.

At present, he couldn't pick and choose. His sole reminder of home loomed over him, silent, like a puppet of himself. Rhythmic gales blasted from his nostrils, searing the cringing wolf with snaps of heat before the cold took back its hold on him.

His claws—which Shirogane often wondered how an orca even possessed—held him captive, crowning curled fingers around his body. Better than being sunk deep into his flesh like fishhooks. Until he realised those weren't even the same claws that were caked in blood so often, but actually the giant's phalanges pushing through his gloved fingertips, twisting into yellowed, gnarled points.

Choking back a cry, Shirogane ripped his gaze from the dark digits, casting a desperate eye across the scarlet sea below. Surprisingly, nothing new had sprung into sight down there. *What were you expecting?* he berated himself. As if trying to jump free at this height would do him any good.

(It never did him much good in reality, either.)

But he'd always try. Because of that stupid little feeling he couldn't dislodge. That meager piece of hope that sometimes hurt as much as his routine abuse.

Starting with a slow crawl towards the cage of fingers on one side of him, which Idate would, in his lust for cruelty, inevitably allow. His tentative press against its 'bars' as he leaned forward, scanning the endless red waters below for an escape route he already knew didn't exist.

And then, twisting where he crouched, his search would continue towards the drop off the side of the giant's hand, as if the outcome would be different at this point of view. And further around, towards—

The glance he'd take could be as brief as anything, and yet this part would always render in nauseating detail. With Idate's suit unbuttoned and shirt tattered, the gory spectacle of his body was in full view. Four holes, big enough for Shirogane to fit inside, marred his enormous form: one just under his collarbone, one blossoming at the center of his torso, and two at his stomach.

All correlating to where, one fateful day, his perpetual plaything had managed to get some lucky shots on him with his harpoon gun.

(Or so Idate claimed later on, and the sometime marksman believed. It was always a strange subject to Shirogane, the possibility of it not being due to luck. The idea of some heretofore unseen strength—or, hell, basic talent—he might possess. He found it unsettling to think about. Not that it ever stopped him from doing so.)

Blood streamed in thick waterfalls from the massive holes. Each of them had been ripped open beyond what a harpoon could inflict, as if by Idate's own frenzied claws, leaving ragged flaps of skin fluttering around their rims like petals. Even with Shirogane tearing his stricken gaze from that sight, images of savaged and bleeding flesh still swam in his vision.

The rest of Idate, while apparently less wounded, was just as unnerving to look at: his organs were all outlined under his skin in freakish detail. Bloated and trembling with every beat, his heart pounded away in his chest. Lungs heaved in frenzy for air. The coiled mass of his intestines pulsed below, while muscles tensed and fluids sloshed within in a sickly cacophony.

Shirogane knew this wouldn't be the loudest these sounds would become. Nor would this outside view of Idate's guts be the only one he'd receive.

A sound like one thousand ice chunks calving from a glacier always pulled the transfixed wolf from his observations, back up to the monstrous orca's jaws parting before him. Stretching to a gape that would put a moray eel to shame, and then wider still, splitting the skin of his cheeks. A long tongue unfurled over those rows of fangs, longer than should be able to rest in his mouth, a mirror-smooth muscle thick with red-tinged saliva. Fetid and thick, his breath steamed in the moonlit air.

It never surprised Shirogane anymore that, whenever Idate would lift and tilt his hand, letting him slump into the confines of that cavernous maw, sprawling across his twitching, pink tongue...he would wish so often for those teeth to descend upon him, rip him to pieces, and sever him from the horrid sights that his mind saw fit to concoct.

But that would be a mercy. And such a thing simply did not exist in Idate's playbook.

So there he'd remain, staring at the rings of pale sentinels around him with a sickly mixture of emotions. And Idate would let him. With not the slightest twitch from his tongue or change in the sickly cycle of his breaths to break Shirogane's dark wonderings.

There the wolf would lie, made to drink in the stink of rotten fish and meat, saliva soaking into his clothes and further weighing down his exhausted body. But eventually came the break.

Beginning with Idate's tongue arching below, grinding Shirogane's back into the harsh ridge of his predator's palate. A sharp breath was forced into his lungs, more choked down than inhaled, as he heard and felt his bones creak under the pressure. Suspended by the great muscle for one endless moment, he stared unblinking at the uvula crowning his next destination, in the remaining light before it was sealed away by Idate's closing jaws.

In the split second before the wolf was cast into complete darkness, he saw eyes budding in the flesh of Idate's throat, parting wet lids to watch his entry.

And he'd finally plummet over the edge.

As the walls closed in, rippling around his body and shunting him down in clenches of muscle, Shirogane felt a string, drawn tight for so long and fraying under relentless force, finally snap. Now the worst things he could imagine were free to come to life.

Serrated, flesh-rending ridges in the vein of sharkskin. A second set of smaller jaws, nestled in the giant's pharynx like a pale beartrap. The recursive, tooth-studded rings of a lamprey. It mattered not.

All ushered Shirogane's squirming body into that of his eternal titanic tormentor. As helpless as if he were caught in a net, and writhing in its fleshy embrace like a fish out of water.

And dragged him down into tenebrous depths, prey to what his brain could and would conjure. Writhing and whining at the onslaught of sensation: the almost ticklish bubbling of froth, oozing out of the shuddering walls; the slick *pop* of suckers latching on and being tugged free just as quickly; and the scrape and stab of teeth, countless teeth. More eyeballs bulging against him, some getting pierced by his aimlessly twitching claws and splashing them with thick vitreous fluid.

There was little room to even struggle. His ears were victim to every wet squish and gurgle on his way down, and his nostrils flinched at the foul bitter-sour blend of scents which

assaulted them. All the while, the light pressure of a fingertip followed alongside, tracing the preything's journey from the outside with eerie calm.

Shirogane had forgone trying to move entirely once he came to the end of the wet, fleshy tunnel. Once darkness, in less than a second, gave way to blinding, blazing light as he was squeezed through the sphincter at its end.

And left to plunge into the blazing pit, the ability to cry nearly wrung out of him.

Would he have time for his desire to survive—however minimal it was, and useless it would be—to reignite in the heart of the inferno? Or would he have the mercy of snapping awake before those scalding tongues began to lash at his skin? Freed from the torture of volcanic gases choking the chamber, as they scalded his throat and melted his remaining eye in its socket?

Free-falling for one horribly drawn-out moment, these thoughts would all flash through his mind. And he would try to let out all his pain and terror in one scream. Eye wide and watering, mouth open, awaiting a howl that had died in his throat.

Curled up on a tight ball of limbs on his mattress, claws embedded in his blanket, thin, reedy breaths fading into the quiet air of his room.

About half a minute had passed before Shirogane could even move, with his breathing having slowed to a less head-spinning degree. Lifting his weary head to look around familiar surroundings, he fixated long enough on each item in the room to ensure it didn't morph or mutate in any way.

Sitting up, still shaking, he pricked his ears to listen, half-hoping—that *damn* feeling—and half-dreading any sign of Yukisada outside, and settling them back upon hearing nothing.

Assuring himself, once his lungs were capable, that *one* form of the nightmare had ended.

For now.

So he could focus on dragging himself over to sit on his bed's edge, blanket trailing behind him like the cloak he often wore. With a deep inhale, he pulled his claws free one by one, hearing the fabric tearing as if from very far away, then rubbed at his eye and sighed.

A fire was burning in the hearth.

Shirogane stared at it for a long moment, wondering how he'd failed to notice the crackling of wood or the light flickering around the room, before glancing at the door. Closed, but not locked. Apparently he wasn't noticing a lot of things today.

He ground his teeth together, claws digging into the skin of his legs. After another day of being useless, Yukisada had gone out of his way to help him with something so basic. Again.

His cave looked quite tempting now, lack of comfort be damned. Maybe lying down in there would clear his mind. More likely, it would make his thoughts fester even more, the further he was away from the one place he felt relatively safe.

God. Kindness was such a rarity here. And such a painful thing to experience.

Looking fixedly at the carpet, Shirogane huddled close to the fire and sat down. He squinted at the intensifying light as he curled his tail over his crossed legs. The blanket fell away, forgotten. His hands made their way into the fur of his tail to knead at it subconsciously.

He listened to his own breathing, trying to will himself into a somewhat calmer state. Twisting his tail fur between anxious fingers, seeking comfort from the warm fireplace before him and yet dreading to look directly into its orange-gold core.

For when his gaze inevitably did get drawn back to the fire, it would hold firm to their hypnotic glow, and the familiar apparitions that started to form in the midst of their twisting shapes.

He would feel his surroundings changing. The walls rippling and dripping, and the floor shifting wetly underneath him. Icy whites and blues bloomed over by harsh red. The crushing pressure of feeling observed, scrutinised and helpless.

And he would wonder when the flames would consume him, and when his agonised thrashing would blend into their crackling dance.