

He sat alone at the bar. A small collection of empty bottles his only company. An ornate pipe hung from his mouth. His feathers, though dull with age, were well preened. And his dress, dignified. A man such as him should have at least half a dozen young dreamers competing to win his favor, not be relegated to the sidelines like a hapless nobody. But that wasn't what brought him to my attention. It was his eye's. Eye's that spoke of countless tales and boundless wisdom hard earned over a lifetime of struggle. I hadn't even noticed myself beginning to move until he looked up at me and I realised I had sat myself next to him.

"Aren't you a little old to be drinking like that?" No turning back now.

"Aren't you a little young to be giving me advice?" His voice is warm and friendly. Like a grandfather's jest.

"Touche." I respond in kind. "My name is Victoria C. Titania. Pleased to meet you." I smile and hold out my hand. But instead of receiving my greeting his face merely darkens as his gaze returns to his drink.

"I'm sorry but I've nothing to offer you. I'm just a tired old man without riches or power. At least, not the kind of power you'd be interested in. So you needn't worry about about wasting your time with me." I could hear the somber sigh in his tone. The exhaustion from too many years spent alone. It hurt.

"So you think I'm some cheap floozy come to win you over? Is that it?"

He chuckles. "My apologies, I meant nothing of the sort." He says looking back at me. His eye's beginning to look me over, and I can feel a warmth rising in my chest. "But wouldn't the time of a beautiful young woman such as yourself be better sp-"

"Who I choose to spend my time with is my business. Though I appreciate the compliment."

Cut off he merely looks back at me, eyeing me curiously. As though unsure what to make of my appearance. His brief confusion making me smile.

"Now, if you're quite done ogling my body would you care to dance?"

His eyes widen with surprise at my invitation and I almost gasp at their brilliance.

He opens his mouth as if to say something but then laughs it off with a wave of his hand. Now it's my turn to look confused.

"You'll have to forgive me." He says after taking a look at my face. "It's just been so long since the last time someone's ever asked me that question."

"Well?" I ask again, unable to hide my amusement.

"It would be my pleasure." He finally answers before getting up to stand.

He seemed to shed a decade in that act alone. His suit barely able to conceal the ripple of muscle as he straightened his back and rolled back his shoulders. He was like a beast standing before me. With all the intimidation of a predator having cornered its prey. And I wonder for the first time just what was I getting myself into. But it was already too late. As he held out his hand for mine our eyes met and I was instantly snared by his gaze. Any thoughts of backing out now fading away like my awareness of our surroundings.

I don't know when, where, or how he learned to dance. As far as I knew it may as well have been yesterday. Because he didn't miss a step. His movements unhampered by his age. In fact, it was quite the opposite. With each and every motion the years seemed to vanish from his body. As though our dance were a ritual taking him back in time. Every step bringing him closer to the youth he'd lost years ago.

I couldn't help but be caught up in the flow of it all. No... we couldn't. For I could feel him there. Right there with me. I could read the joy on his face. Witness the fascination in his eye's. He was watching me. As I was watching him. Together we were at the center of our own world. Our environment an illusion, and time a myth. Minutes melted into hours as we matched each other move for move. Till finally the last song played. And our world began fading away.

I didn't want it to end. Something inside of me wished it would never end. But the band was packing, the waiters mopping, and the few remaining patrons uttering formal finalities to their agreements.

Yet still I clung to him. Afraid to see his face. As though that would be the last step to marking the end of our time spent together. It isn't until a waiter asks us to leave that I muster the courage to look up at my partner. But what I found there in his gaze were not the eye's of a tired old man sitting alone at a bar mere hours before. But the restless eye's of a knight still young.

Not a word was spoken.

As we left that place and began walking the streets. I wasn't sure how to feel much less what to say. Here I was, hand in hand with a man I hardly knew. Not sure of where we were going, or when we'd get there. The only thing I knew for certain being that I didn't want to let go.

Suddenly without warning he comes to an abrupt stop. And turns with an almost wry look in his eye.

"Would you like to get something to eat?"

It takes a moment for me to register the question.

"Excuse me?" I check my ARS and see it's 3 o'clock in the morning.

"Go somewhere. Get a bite to eat."

*He must be kidding.* I think at first. But his honest look said otherwise and I can't help but laugh.

"I know it's a bit late but to be honest I'm feeling famished." *Incredible.*

"I heard what you said dear. What I'm wondering is what kind of man asks a woman out to dinner before even telling her his name."

His jaw goes slack with embarrassment, his pipe nearly falling from his beak.

"My deepest apologies" He chokes. "The years must finally be getting to me. My name is Aramaki. Aramaki Higewashi."

*Aramaki Higewashi.*

"Well Mr. Higewashi I would love to accompany you for a meal."

"Wonderful." He smiles, regaining his composure. "Though if you would please call me Aramaki. Mr. Higewashi is how I'm known to my subordinates."

"Subordinates!?" I exclaim in mock suspicion. "I thought you said you weren't a man of power?"

I wait for an answer but he only gazes back at me with a wistful smile.

"Aramaki?"

His smile brightens at the acknowledgement of his name.

"Victoria C. Titania."

"Yes?" I ask, but still he remains silent. Staring softly into my eyes.