

Bansou woke the next morning to sunlight shining through broken branches of the trees above him. He sat up and rubbed his head with his hand, grunting at a pain in his leg as he tried to move his position. When he looked down to examine it, he noticed he no longer wore any clothing and the only thing on him—his satchel—sat loosely to his side.

“What did I do?” he asked no one, putting his hands over his eyes.

He ran his hands over the sparse feathers behind his cheeks and through his black hair, but after a moment longer, he sighed deeply and put his hands to the ground to get up. Wincing as he adjusted his wings so he could rise, his gaze moved to the feathery appendages, and he noted the blood seeped into a portion of his right wing. His eyes moved over the rest of the wing, then to his leg, to examine the wound on it.

This... was all this... he thought, distantly, as he touched the wound and watched it freeze over with liquid that streamed down his arm to his fingertips. ...was it done by those men? Did I... lose control?

He stared at his fingers, frozen at the tips with the icy liquid, and flexed them as the solid ice slowly melted back into his skin. His eyes moved from his hand and scanned the area around him, trying to make sense of what had happened, which his memory bore little remembrance.

Where am I?... Where... Where is Jasper? Aisling? He looked around to take in the tall, pine trees and dappled lighting which showed to him that he had traveled far from the city which he'd called “home” the past few months.

Bansou forced himself to rise, gritting his teeth at the pain in his leg but standing nonetheless. His body sore, he winced as he took a few steps, but he soon stopped, unsure of where to go next. He looked up to the sky through the trees and decided a view from the air would help.

Bansou fumbled around in his satchel for a moment until he came upon one spare set of clothing which he'd stuffed away in there, just for emergencies like this. He left his overcoat and belts inside the satchel, laid it on the ground, and pulled his loose, brown pants on. The white shirt which buttoned in the back took a minute to put on correctly, but by then, he felt less sore. He picked up his bag again and clipped its strap around his head, over his left shoulder, and under his right arm and wing, careful to avoid clipping feathers into the buckle. The winged nonhuman then straightened himself and frowned. Time to get going.

Blinking his eyes at the sun, Bansou sighed and stretched his wings, bent his legs, and leapt into the air. Bansou flapped his wings and passed the treetops, scraping feathers against a few pine needles as he did so. He circled for a few minutes, using his binocular-like vision to eye the horizon, where he could just barely make out a shining patch of land. That must be the city, he thought, but instead of heading in that direction, he landed on a sturdy branch in a tall tree and bit his lip in thought.

Those people may have started tracking him by now, and whoever the NHSF were, Bansou doubted he wanted to see them again. Brows furrowed, the winged nonhuman crossed his arms and gazed across the tops of the trees, in the opposite direction. One way

held the risk of capture, just as his friends may have been. The other held possible safety or even more danger. Either way, he hadn't much time to make a decision, as the longer he waited, the more danger presented itself.

Finally, Bansou shook his head, uncrossed his arms, and leapt off of the tree and into the sky again. He ascended fifty yards before gliding on the thermals. His direction: towards the city. Risks or not, he would never leave his friends behind.

Bansou landed on the outskirts of the city, being sure to avoid humans as he pulled his coat from his satchel and pulled it and the wing-binding belts around him. He winced a bit at the familiar, uncomfortable feeling it gave him when he tightened the belts and hid his wings.

Biting his lip, Bansou sighed and stepped away from behind an old construction site—long abandoned—and onto the concrete of the sidewalk. He pulled his cap over his pointed ears and bandana closer to his neck to cover any feathers which he may have missed plucking. He didn't dare return to his apartment, and instead turned towards the nonhuman bar where he'd first met Jasper and Aisling. The streets were unsettlingly quiet, but Bansou had seldom been in the area this early in the morning. He did his best to settle his pounding heart and anxious breathing, and he kept his eyes sharply focused on his surroundings, ready for any sign of danger.

Rubbing the translucent scaling on his fingers nervously as he passed a few people talking outside of a shop, Bansou arrived at the nondescript pub, hidden away between a law firm and loan agency. Its windows darkened and exterior covered in peeling paint, most people would overlook the establishment and find somewhere else to buy their alcohol. The neighborhood it rested in had never been the best, either, so only those humans who would be interested would not often stop by, allowing the nonhumans to come and go with little disturbance.

Bansou held his hand over the bronze door handle for nearly a minute, contemplating whether or not to enter, but when he heard more people walking down the street, he made the quick decision to enter. His eyes adjusted to the dark interior as he closed the door quietly behind him. The sparse, dim light fixtures in the main room lit the maroon walls and did not help the empty room look any more inviting.

Bansou walked carefully around round tables and chairs and held tightly onto his satchel. The bar had seldom been so empty, but the basement floor may hold help for him and other nonhumans in hiding; or so he hoped. His thin shoes creaked on the old, wooden floorboards, and at every noise, he had to stop himself from panicking. The doorway to the basement stairwell revealed only darkness beyond its wide opening. Bansou's fists clenched and eyes widened as he stepped through it and took his first steps down.

"Hello? Is anyone here?" he called as quietly as he could while still wanting to be heard. "The door was unlocked, so I came in..."

Bansou stopped in his tracks as he heard a loud ruckus from the upper story where he'd just left. Heart racing loudly, he grasped at his chest and shivered, doing his best not to panic. However, that became harder and harder to do as loud footsteps of multiple

people sounded both below and above him on the nearly pitch-black stairwell. He doubted the noises were caused by anyone friendly and struggled to keep his emotions even as he pulled the binding belts loose for flight.

"Don't move!" shouted a voice from below him as a half dozen people in black body armor and night goggles met him at the bottom and more without goggles arrived from the top of the stairs. They all held semiautomatic weapons and wore helmets and—as Bansou could faintly see in the light—NHSF badges and logos. "Put your hands in the air! You're coming with us."

Bansou could feel his control over his dragon form waning as stressors mounted and he lost sight of any escape. To give in would kill or seriously injure most of the armed agents, but if he didn't, Bansou feared he would never get out. With the warm atmosphere of the bar and he himself being dehydrated, his only other option of defense fell through. He would have to transform to keep his freedom.

Just as Bansou released all of the little control he had over his adrenaline-induced transformation, he heard that same, commanding voice from before shout. The man with the square-rimmed glasses stood at the top of the stairs, outlined in dim lighting.

"Bring him down!" the commander ordered, and a moment later, as Bansou looked up to the man, he felt something sharp hit him in the neck. A gloved, human hand holding a cylinder pulled away, revealing its sharp needles and empty insides. Within seconds, Bansou's vision swam, and he fell forward, only caught by the man who had injected him with the tranquilizer.