



Dragon scales gleamed under the soft chandelier light in the Shadowbearer's chamber. They had crept further since the king's last cycle renewal. Pale green and purple, almost translucent. Up Ryuji's throat and across his collarbone. A beautifully terrible invasion. Edan worked with steady hands, uncorking a small vial and filling a long, thin needle with a red and shimmering liquid. Micah watched, every muscle in his body coiling tighter, as Edan slid the needle beneath the edge of a scale and pressed down, injecting the potion directly into the cursed flesh. Ryuji hissed through his teeth, his body jerking against Edan's hand, but the young Shadowlord only murmured soft praises and kept tending him.

Micah stayed a few paces back, unseen, his heart twisting. They were changing. Both of them. And he... he was nothing more than a shadow pressed against the walls of their lives. A thought, sudden and unbidden, slipped into him like a blade through silk.

Mae. Where was his mother now? Had she found peace in whatever came after? Could she even see him, if she looked hard enough, standing lost in this place between breathing and dying?

The nostalgia caught him off guard, fierce and aching. That's when he heard it. A voice, close but wrong, threading through the marrow of his mind:

"The dead are dust. You waste yourself mourning what has already forgotten you."

Micah flinched. That voice again. It wasn't his own. It wasn't his mother's, either. It slithered along the edges of him, cold and certain.

"You belong to the shadows. Not to memory."

"No," he whispered back, too soft for anyone to hear.

Because he remembered.

Her fingers curled around his wrist. The sharp, sterile scent of antiseptic and bleach. The tired, knowing smile that held all the stars in his universe. The hospital walls bled into existence around him, the memory seizing him whole. Suddenly, he was there again, watching the blood thread from his veins to hers. Feeling the impossible, unbearable weight of love that had nowhere to go but into her.

Many Years Ago

She opened her eyes and smiled at him, fragile and full of fire. "Still hate needles?"

Micah huffed a small laugh, turning his gaze to his mother. She was too pale, her skin nearly the color of the sheets. He hated that. Hated how the illness had hollowed her out, piece by piece, like the tide wearing down stone.

"I hated the needles," he admitted. "Never hated helping you."

The blood moved slow and steady from Micah's arm, coiling like a thin red ribbon into the clear plastic bag. It was unsettling to watch how something so vital, so much of him, could drain so easily away.

He hated this room. But he stayed. Every week. He didn't know what else to do. He flexed his fingers, feeling the pull of the IV taped against his skin. How much of himself had he left in this hospital? How many ounces of blood, how many sleepless nights, how many stolen fragments of hope?

Her smile was tired but real, straining as it curved at the edges. She shifted slightly, wincing and adjusting herself against the pillows. "You were always brave," she murmured.

Brave. Was that what this was?

Micah had never thought of himself that way. He wasn't brave. He was just here. Because he had to be. Because there was nowhere else in the world he wanted to be more than sitting by her side. Because the idea of a world without her was a place he didn't know how to exist in.

He adjusted the blanket around her legs, the motion as familiar as breathing. "I cried the first time," he reminded her. "Dad had to bribe me with mango sticky rice."

She chuckled, a dry, sweet sound. "You always cried for others, never for yourself."

Micah looked away, pretending to watch the drip of blood in the transfusion bag. He swallowed. The words landed in the hollow space of his chest, right where he kept the things he didn't talk about. Things like the growing fear that one day this transfusion wouldn't be enough. That he wouldn't be enough. That one day, there wouldn't be any more "helping" to do.

His mother's fingers found his wrist, resting there, fragile and cool. "I want to tell you something."

Micah glanced at her again, catching the shift in her expression.

“In our old stories, back home,” she began, “they say the world you see is only half of what truly exists. The rest, the lost souls, the broken spirits, they live in the realm of shadows.”

Micah swallowed, his throat suddenly dry. He knew these stories. She used to tell them to him when he was little, tracing soft patterns on his arms as she wove Thai myths and legends into his dreams.

“But the bravest ones,” she continued, her thumb brushing lightly over the pulse in his wrist, “...the bravest aren’t the ones who run from the darkness. But the ones who face it. Not to be consumed by it, but to guide others through it.”

A chill curled down Micah’s spine. Why was she telling him this now?

She smiled faintly, as if hearing the question in his silence. “One day, you will feel the shadows of life calling you.” Her fingers squeezed his gently. “When it does... don’t be afraid. Embrace it.”

Micah’s jaw tensed. He forced a breath through his nose. She was tired. That was all this was. Old stories and exhaustion tangling into something heavier. Micah squeezed her hand, grounding himself in the warmth between them. Stay here. Stay with me. He didn’t say it out loud. Didn’t need to. They’d been having that same conversation in silence for months.

“I’m not going anywhere,” he said instead.

Her gaze shifted to the window, the shadows stretching longer across the room as the sun sank on the horizon. A knowing sadness softened her features, and she sighed as she closed her eyes. “Nong Micah... carry my light when you walk in places without stars...”