

TW: Prostitution, Sexual trauma, (implied) Child abuse, Alcoholism and Homophobia.

There was something cathartic in being able to set foot in Kugane, let alone being able to afford to live there. Doma, in its whole, was a mystery to him that he had yet to see unravel. It was somewhere he, that is if he were to dig through his hazy childhood memories, spent most of early childhood years. So it was worth exploring now, with everything said and done. Not that there's anywhere he could go now that the war in Ishgard was coming to an end. Discharged without a coin to his name, aside from the kind donation from the House of Fortemps in his honor. It was bittersweet, being granted the chance to see another day because of someone else's coin. So much for trying to provide for loved ones himself. Regardless, he was here and he will eagerly give up his body to be able to prolong yet another chance at life. The trip already ate up most of his budget, and the ease with which he went straight to the Sekiseigumi, the ease with which his forehead touched the ground as he begged to be accepted and the ease with which he put up a cruel and bloodthirsty front when he was put to trial by blade was expected. It was all almost like a practiced exchange, because it was. It disgusted him, he felt filthy. But that is the price which one pays to gain anything else. At least that was the case for him, he doubted other people led a less.. transactional existence. He felt like he would be far more jealous of other people if that wasn't the case, and he has yet to find himself really feeling any real jealousy towards one, singular person.

He was walking through Kugane, patrolling it like he was on duty. Unwavering even when he didn't need to be. Perhaps his steel resolve is what made *Officer Saichi* infamous. Whether that was good or bad, he couldn't tell. Most didn't see him as a simple man who was trying to make a living while searching for anything related to his late stepfather. You'd have to make him talk to know that. You'd have to get under his skin and find something underneath the picture perfect *Wolf of Mibu*. That 'Sugimoto' might as well not exist in the real world, but rather be a fragment of his ego he buried deep inside his mind. He was Officer Saichi. Nothing more, nothing less.

He found himself at a small bar, asking the bartender to pour him another shot of sake like there was no tomorrow. He often found himself doing something like this at night, when there were no prying eyes. When the fog was thick enough to hide how ugly he got. Maybe that was when *Sugimoto* came out. In his little world that consisted of this bar and the reflection he saw in his ochoko cup. When was the last time he was *just* Sugimoto? Perhaps a better question would be when was the first time? He knows when, and feels the Steppe nipping at his heels. He's not ready to remember it. He's not ready to explore that. Instead, he remembers the day the man he has come to call 'father' helped him pick a name, as clumsy as it was. Fatherhood must've been hard for someone like Michiyori. A free-spirited merchant barely in his early 20s, suddenly tasked with raising a very clingy, quiet boy abandoned by his parents. Not to say that Sugimoto was a problematic kid, quite the opposite actually. He used to make himself so small that it felt like he wasn't there.

The pitch perfect performance expected from an unwanted child.

It was more so that the young man wasn't prepared for fatherhood, probably hasn't even thought about it. He didn't know how to be a father, so he did whatever he thought was best. *'Not half bad.'* Sugimoto added to his thoughts as he downed another drink in silence. Perhaps Michiyori was too forceful at times, but he wrung all the shyness out of little Sugi like he was a wet cloth. Because the man loved him like his own, because Sugimoto needed to learn how to take up a space of his own.

"When someone is big, loud and terrifying, the best you can do is be bigger than them. It doesn't have to be true, but if you believe it — they will too."

And Sugimoto understood that. Furthermore, he understood that he is not protecting himself when he does this, but everyone else who can't.

He held his stepfather in highest regard. To him, he was the pinnacle of honorable and brave. He felt like if he'd open a dictionary and search for *'Bushido'*, he'd find a picture of Michiyori grinning back at him. Perhaps his urge to make a change, to protect him, stemmed from that. He wanted to be an honorable man, the kind that would make his father proud. And yet, he couldn't say he managed to become that. He felt more like a stubborn piece of steel jutting in the gut of Eorzea. Whether it was justified or not, was up for debate. When does traditionalism stall progression and when does progression begin to chip away at the fundamentals of life? It wasn't a question that Sugimoto could answer. His own role in this presented an unusual occurrence between these tensions. He, by blood, would belong in Doma. He was a Xaela, after all. Yet his lack of connection with his culture or deep knowledge of Doma as a whole made him feel more like an outsider. Having grown up with the Lominsan way of life, with its mannerisms and rulesets during his formative years, Kugane, and wherever he set his foot, felt like something unfamiliar. He was a stranger looking in. But then again, nothing was this straightforward. Perhaps the complexity of his life was a common occurrence. Perhaps not. It was hard to determine, like many things were ever since Michiyori had passed, even the man himself. He didn't really think about it in the army. Frankly, it was because his mind was too focused on *surviving*. Now, with ample time and the drinks rolling, it felt easier to reflect. He knew the man was no mere fisherman, his family was actually quite well off. At least, from what he learned. He didn't have the guts to confront the family directly. He didn't feel like it was his place to.

The unwanted child hiding in the reflection of Sugimoto's cup didn't have the words to tell them.. Anything.

Officer Saichi had no business investigating personal affairs.

If he was well off, why did he choose to leave it all behind? Wasn't it cruel to his family? He didn't seem like he was *unwanted*. He wasn't small and meek the way Sugimoto still was in the privacy of their home. Perhaps that can change with time, perhaps Sugimoto's body was ill fit for his mind. It has yet to catch up, but time doesn't wait for anyone. Perhaps it was for an entirely different reason. Sugimoto struggled to accept any as valid. Sure, he didn't know what happened between him and his family. He couldn't sit here and act like he hasn't made

less excusable choices. And yet, there was something else clawing at him, deep inside his ribcage.

Sugimoto's burning jealousy.

Officer Saichis' excessive drinking.

He felt guilty. He was nothing without Michiyori by his side, he was nothing without a woman he once loved by his side. All he did was try to be helpful, to *be enough* and to keep his name something that can be uttered with pride. But all his attempts fell short of what was needed. It's like he can't grasp the reigns of his life. Instead, it's always someone else. First it was the people he relied on, now it's whoever throws money in his face.

'You know that isn't true.' he thought to himself. The room around him was a blur. He has had too much to drink.

He knew it wasn't. But he likes to think his reliance on his loved ones was different to this. That it was *better* than this. Not that it mattered, in the end he's still unable to move forward on his own. Who does he have to rely on? He wasn't good at those things. It felt like he was forced to comprehend them when they were just out of reach of what he found comprehensible. It's something he felt, often. Clumsy and incompetent. Something he was. He felt his body fall on the futon. He didn't realize he had managed to get back home already. He has to undress, he reeks of blood. It took all the power in him to get up again. The stench made his mind wander somewhere else entirely.

A hazy memory, eyes that burned bright like the stars above.

"Sugi...moto," Dominve corrected himself, and Sugimoto had half the mind to tell him *it's fine*. To allow himself to be just 'Sugi' to the young Raen. Instead, he simply waited for the younger man to continue. *"What was your first time like? Was it a man, a woman, or.."* he trailed off, not really planning on finishing the sentence. It wasn't a loaded question, with how close they are — *with how close Sugimoto wants to be with him*, it was completely normal to be curious. He looked into those eyes, the ones that were always a little sad, somehow never getting obscured by the black & white hair strands. He was so soft in these moments. Sugimoto almost wanted to skewer him and eat him like dango. It was hard to not dignify him with an answer.

"Some man. At a brothel near the Drowning Wench. It's all closed down now." He replied, almost mechanically. These were the facts. This was his first time on paper, although he loathed calling it that. It's one of those things people apparently got to fondly recall afterwards. It was something they consented to.

"Huh, you didn't know his name?" Dominve replied before fully registering the other's words. The sadness in his eyes became more prominent, his words became more careful, softer. *"Why did you pay for your first time?"*

"I wasn't the one paying." Sugimoto replied, his expression remained neutral, but he wasn't looking at Dominve anymore. He needed to hide from those eyes.

There's something about a strong, youthful, beautiful man like the one he once was, that made Sugimoto wish he was seen as disgusting for the rest of his life.

There was something about his face and body that made older, sleazy men want to feel it up. To disregard his masculinity instead of accepting their desire for him. It's easier to just grope and paw at a pretty thing and keep cash rollin' than to proclaim yourself *a fag* under the spotlight. Sugimoto was just as apathetic to their plight and desires as they were to his. **He needed money.**

Sugimoto didn't want to recall the shame that dripped off of him as he laid there, curled up with Dominve, feeling *filthy*. Guilty that he thinks of *that* as he's embracing someone so sweet, so kind. The disgust and the urge to cease existing. Not death, per se, but to no longer be perceived. It ate away at him. All he could remember is Dominve holding him a little tighter in that very moment, undeterred by anything the older man has said. Something about that allowed Sugimoto to settle on his futon, the absence of the Raen's warmth being painfully apparent. And yet, the memory itself was comforting enough for him to finally drift away.

Stars at the end of his fingertips, bright but fleeting. Engulfed by darkness right as they appear. The moon rises before him as a *beacon*. Steady and calm, her silence is comforting. Her light forms a path in the boundless dark that he finds himself in, following it. The longer he walks, the more it takes shape. Roads and little paths from his early childhood. People tending to the cattle in the distance. Even now, he's indebted to her. She guides him, and like everything else, it comes at a price. The moon towers over him. Compared to her, he is nothing but a small child. A little shard of the sun that got chipped off. As he approached her, it felt like she was about to consume him.

Sugimoto is the one that dreams today.

Officer Saichi leaves his post.