

Sho marched.

He didn't know where he was going, or why, only that his feet rose and fell in rhythm with those of the shadows that followed behind him. The air was gray — not misty or foggy, just gray — stretching infinitely in every direction.

The ground was soft, shifting beneath his feet but never collapsing. Each step echoed faintly, like walking across the inside of a drum.

He sensed Akuji marching behind him, conversing calmly with the shadows. Even though they were in such close proximity, Akuji's words and the replies of the shadows failed to reach Sho's ears; the words were muffled, as if they were being spoken from underwater.

He couldn't see the line, but he felt its weight. It seemed endless.

A voice spoke.

"Don't..."

It was close — yet distant. A low, layered whisper.

Sho kept marching as he searched for the voice's source.

"Don't look back," it said.

"What?" Sho said quietly. His own voice sounded strange; small, echoing, like it didn't belong to him.

"Keep walking," the voice answered.

Something in its tone made Sho's stomach turn. The air grew thicker as he breathed, weighing in on his chest. He started to turn his head.

"Don't."

The voice was sharp and rough. It rattled Sho's body from the inside, scraping through his chest like metal against stone.

"Why?" Sho asked. His movements were manual and hesitant.

The voice didn't answer.

"Why?" he asked louder.

"You'll lose them."

The urge to look grew stronger with each step. His heart pounded in his ears. The more he was told not to look, the more he *needed* to. His eyes dulled, irises swirling into motionless whirlpools.

Behind him, someone stumbled.

A few of the succeeding shadows tripped, causing the ones before them to topple into each other like dominoes. Akuji was pushed off balance and fell with them, landing at Sho's heels.

Sho turned quickly, instinctively looking back.

Nothing.

There was no one there, just an empty, colorless landscape that spanned to eternity. He froze.

A new voice whispered to him.

Sho...

The swirling intensified.

Sho.

The voice came softer. It was different from the one that had been commanding him. It was clearer, familiar.

"Sho!"

The Hearth

Sho opened his eyes.

"I know you can hear me!" Vivi's voice came from downstairs, sharper than it had been previously. "Don't make me come up there!"

Sho groaned, rolled out of his blanket, and hit the floor.

Thud.

"I *just* woke up!" he shouted back.

"You said that ten minutes ago!"

What? he thought.

He sat up and yawned, stretching his arms outward. His hair was a mess. The bedroom gradually filled with morning sounds: blankets shuffling, kids yawning, a sneeze. Cool, early sunrays leaked through the blinds, striping the room in gold. Sho's body slumped forward after his stretch. The floorboards creaked as he stood up and dragged himself to the stairs.

After brushing his teeth and washing his face, he trudged to the kitchen, guided more so by the smell of toast than his eyesight. When Vivi saw him walk in, she reached over from the sink to the counter and grabbed a piece of paper.

"Market run," she said, holding the paper out. "Soap, flour, oil. I'd go, but I have like twelve mouths to feed and no patience today."

Sho rubbed his eye. "Why me?"

"Because you wouldn't eat your oatmeal," Vivi replied, shoving the list into his face.

"That was *yesterday!*"

"And this is *today*. Glad you're not time blind. Go." She turned and headed back to what she was doing, calling over her shoulder, "Don't get distracted! Just get what's on the list and come straight back."

Sho folded the list up and tucked it into his pocket, mocking her under his breath.

"What?"

"Nothing."

He hurried to the front door and stepped outside.

Calrow–Marketplace

The town square bustled with activity. Dozens of stands were set up along the dirt roads, their owners happily chatting amongst themselves and with customers. The aroma of freshly baked bread carried through the air along with the tinkling of wind chimes and the creaking of wagon wheels.

Sho walked through the marketplace with hands in his pockets, eyes glancing from stand to stand. The place spanned wide across the square. Most booths were built from mismatched wood and tarps, painted every color imaginable.

Dogs and children ran through the streets, weaving between stalls while vendors announced their wares and prices over the clamor. Somewhere, one man was ringing a bell, advertising something about “fresh imports from Wexleigh.”

Sho approached a soap vendor first — an old woman whose hands were stained from dye and perfume. Her table was laid out with colorful soap bricks of various sizes, each wrapped in cloth and labeled neatly.

“Morning, Miz Bea,” Sho greeted, rubbing his eye.

The woman smiled sweetly at him. “Good morning, hun. What’ll it be today?”

“Uh...” Sho consulted the list. There were drawings next to the names of each item. “This one,” He said, pointing to a bright yellow block. Its top side was engraved with a ripple pattern.

“Marigold, good choice. Six marqs.” She put out her hand.

Sho reached into the small bag hanging at his side and fished out six small, silver coins. He dropped them into Bea’s hand.

“Thank you kindly,” she said. She leaned forward slightly and added, “Tell your mama she’s got good taste.”

“Oh, she’s not—” Sho started, but the woman had already turned her attention to the next customer. He let out a tiny sigh and put the soap in his bag.

The next stop was a baker’s stall selling bread, flour, and oil, though its owner was arguing with another man over pricing. Sho walked up the booth and leaned against it, waiting. His gaze wandered his surroundings until it landed on a girl sitting by the fountain.

She’s dressed weird, he thought.

She was around his age — eight — with dark curls tied up tightly behind her head, her hands folded in her lap. Hanging at her side was a patched satchel that seemed to be overflowing with miscellaneous crafting items. Her clothes were brightly colored but simple and clean — too neat for this town. She looked out of place somehow, not just because of her appearance, but her demeanor as well. She seemed observant, watching everything and nothing at once.

Her eyes met Sho’s.

Sho flicked his gaze to a nearby jar of oil, pretending to study it.

“Hey,” came a soft voice.

He turned his head to see the girl standing beside him, holding her hand out.

"You dropped this," she said, showing him the coin.

Sho blinked. "Oh. Thanks," he said, taking it from her. "I didn't notice."

"You should," she replied. Her face was unreadable. "Haven't seen a lot of honest people around here."

"Mhm," Sho agreed.

The girl tilted her head curiously. "You look funny," she said, "never seen white hair before."

Before Sho could respond, a loud whistle cut through the market noise. Both of them looked in the direction it came from.

A group of boys their age — five of them — appeared from between two stalls, all dressed in scuffed boots and shirts with the sleeves ripped off. They walked toward the girl and Sho.

The tallest of the five spoke first. "What's goin' on here, ghost boy?" The other four snickered a bit.

Sho's face went sour. "What do you want?" he asked, unamused.

The boy ignored his question, turning his attention to the girl. "Hey, you know he's from the outskirts, right?" he asked.

"I don't know what that means," the girl replied.

"Means he's a freak. Everyone out there is," the boy said. He gestured to Sho. "But especially him."

Sho didn't react.

"Why, what'd he do?" the girl asked.

"Look at him," the boy answered.

"I have stuff to do," Sho cut in, starting on his way past the group. "If you have something important to say, tell me lat—"

The boy grabbed the back of Sho's shirt and pulled him back, throwing him to the ground. He crossed his arms, looking down at him.

“Not sure what it is, but something about your house must make you stupid,” the boy said, “I was still talking.”

Sho’s face darkened. His heart began to beat faster. He clenched his fist, raking sand through his fingers.

One of the four kneeled down to Sho’s level. “When Kain’s talking, you gotta listen, okay?” he said, his tone dripping with condescension.

Sho stared him in the eyes through his bangs. He said nothing, but his glare pierced right through the boy’s skull.

The boy’s nose wrinkled in a scowl.

“What?” he spat.

Sho’s fist clenched tighter.

He snapped his arm up, flinging sand into the boy’s eyes. Before the boy could react, Sho kicked him in the face, sending him backward into the dirt. He scrambled to his feet and took off, startling shoppers and merchants as he cut through the stalls. The sound of pounding footsteps followed close behind.

He ran into a wagon, the crash knocking him off balance and sending a basket of apples tumbling to the ground — one of the boys cursed when he slipped on one — he quickly recovered and kept moving.

He cut left through a narrow row of carts ducking under a low-hanging tarp and leaping over a crate. His bag thumped against his side with each stride. He put his hand over it, holding it close. *Not losing stuff*, he thought.

“Get back here!” one of the boys yelled.

Sho ignored him, breathing fast through his nose. His body moved on instinct — sliding under wagon handles, hopping low fences, darting through gaps in the crowd. The marketplace became a blur of color and noise.

He turned a corner and vaulted over a large water barrel, landing hard and nearly falling before catching himself. The soles of his feet stung. He could hear them getting closer — boots hitting the ground, angry shouting.

Too many turns, he thought. *I’ll get boxed in.*

Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted a narrow alleyway between two stores. Its path sloped slightly downward. He ran for it.

He came face to face with a wall. It wasn't too high for him to climb — if he could find a few footholds, he'd be out. Angry shouts echoed behind him — much too close for his liking. He stuck his foot in a window frame and pushed off, aiming to get as high up the wall as he could. He grabbed at the bricks, but they were slick with moss. His hands slipped. He hit the ground, knocking the wind out of himself.

He rolled onto his stomach, breathing heavily as he regained his composure. Before he could get up, a voice came from the alley's entrance.

"Hey."

Kain walked down the alleyway, flanked by his four friends. Sho didn't look up. The sound of their boots grew heavier with each step. A shadow cast over Sho's body as Kain stopped in front of him.

"You're fast, ghost boy," Kain taunted, his voice low and smooth. A wide, wolfish grin spread across his face. "Got somewhere to be?"

No answer.

Kain tilted his head slightly. "Hmph," he pouted. "Pick him up."

Two of the boys stepped forward, grabbed Sho by his shoulders, and lifted him up. He struggled against them, jerking and twisting his body, but they kept their grip tight. His breath was short from running.

Kain leaned forward, his face inches from Sho's.

"You run like a rat," he said. "Makes sense, since you're a stray."

Sho looked him in the eyes and said nothing.

A fist slammed into his gut.

All of the air in his lungs left him in a violent gasp. He doubled over, coughing as he struggled to catch his breath. The two boys yanked him back upright.

"Being quiet doesn't make you cool, it just makes you boring," Kain remarked. He kicked Sho in the chest — hard — forcing him out of the boys' grasp and sending him staggering backward.

Sho's back hit the wall. His stomach throbbed from the first hit, but breathing was a little easier now. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and stared up at them, his vision slightly blurred. His eyes were determined, unwavering.

Kain snorted. "I don't know why you don't just stay on the outskirts," he mused, shrugging. "You obviously don't belong here. Don't you live off charity?"

Sho didn't respond.

"Hey, you're kinda making me mad," Kain said. "Say something."

Silence.

Kain frowned. "Ok, you know what? Get him."

The two boys lunged forward. The first swung at Sho — he ducked past the punch and kicked the boy in the thigh, knocking him to the dirt. He turned to the second and struck him in the jaw, following up with a punch to the ribs. By then, the first boy had recovered and thrust his hand out in an attempt to grab him. He was met with a horse kick that sent him staggering back.

The second boy hooked his arms around Sho's neck, lifted him, and threw him to the ground. Sho quickly rolled, narrowly avoiding a stomp, and scrambled to his feet—

—pain exploded across his skull.

The blow came out of nowhere, slamming into the side of his head and momentarily snapping his vision white. The world tilted. His body lurched sideways, crashing into the wall. For a second, he didn't know what hit him — then he heard Kain's voice.

"Huh. Thought you'd dodge."

Sho's ears rang. He pressed a hand against the wall, trying to steady himself. The side of his face burned. He forced himself to lift his head.

Kain stood before him, shaking his hand out like he'd touched something dirty. "Ew, sweat," he said with a grimace. He made eye contact with Sho. "Where'd you learn that?"

Sho brought his hand to his head, rubbing it to dull the pain. Without a word, Kain stepped forward and drove his boot into Sho's side.

The kick landed with a solid *thud*. Sho's body folded, air bursting out of him in a choked grunt. He fell to the ground, eyes wide, clutching his side as he gagged. The sting ran through his insides like fire — he felt like throwing up.

Kain's face scrunched with disdain as he looked down at him. "Maybe you're slow," he sneered.

Sho's breath came in shallow, ragged pulls — he could barely suck the air back into his lungs. He clenched his teeth, trying to push himself up on one arm.

Kain sighed through his nose. He raised his foot, angling his heel toward Sho's back.

He paused, his leg still raised, heel hovering inches from Sho's spine. His eyes were neither bright nor dull, but focused — he seemed to be staring into Sho, scrutinizing his soul.

"You know how I *know* you're a freak?"

Sho glared up at him.

"You aren't crying."

He started to bring his leg down.

"Hey!"

A voice came from the mouth of the alley. The girl stood there, one hand gripping the strap of her satchel while the other rested on her hip. She didn't look angry or upset, just unimpressed.

"You're jumping him? That's lame," she said in a flat tone. Her expression seemed more disappointed than anything.

Kain looked at her and raised an eyebrow. "Don't you got something better to do?" he asked.

"I could say the same thing." Her eyes were narrowed into slits.

Kain sighed and lowered his foot. He shrugged.

"Well, now it's ruined," he said, "I'm going home." He shoved his hands in his pockets and started on his way out.

The other four followed suit, trailing after him. Sho stayed on the ground, watching their shadows pass by as they left.

This sucks, he thought.

He patted his side, checking for the bag. It hurt when it pressed against him, but at least it was still there.

Cool.

"You good?"

Sho looked up. The girl was still there, her eyes fixed on him.

"Yeah," he answered.

She walked down the slope and crouched beside him, resting her elbows on her knees.

"Can you fight?" she asked. Eye contact was evidently her strong suit.

"Not too good at it," Sho muttered, looking away.

"Yeah, I can tell."

There was a brief pause.

"You gonna stay there?" she asked.

"Yeah. For now."

"Kay." The girl stood, dusted her clothes off, and adjusted her satchel strap. Without another word, she turned and walked back out of the alley.

Sho managed to roll onto his back, staring up at the bright, blue sky framed by the rooftops. His ribs ached. His head throbbed.

"This is fine."

He let out a long sigh and closed his eyes.

About an hour later, a new shadow cast over him. He opened his eyes to see Akuji with his hands in his pockets, frowning.

"Yosh," Sho greeted, his voice tired.

"Vivi said we're going out in pairs from now on," Akuji said.

"Ee-yep."