

Flyndt goes through the portal.

So of course Foxen follows after him.

None of this is the plan. The plan is:

Select missions together only as necessary.

- Do not leave the system alone or without telling the other. That means danger.
- If leaving system, Shepard chips stay on.
- But right now we're not leaving anyway because there have been many hurts and horrors and we don't need more fraking trauma. No. Deny. Flyndt says so too. Ever since the capture and interrogation of the Foxen by entity: Collective, category: pieces of shit, they have been a) researching the enemy b) training, and c) chief priority: resting. Flyndt has only just dismantled *most* of the traps he set up around the house and we're still missing a crossbolt somewhere and a toothbrush. Likelihood they've been made into a siege in one of the bushes: high.

We're going to have a nice goddamn dinner and you were going to tell me what 'under the suns' epitaph meant to your people, is it Omwatese, or specific to your tribe, is it a blessing, can I use it.

But no.

Because yay, trauma.

Because there is not just the piece of shit Collective, there is also the Children of Mortis, category: Force-Using only pieces of shit. The Brotherhood has quadrupled its enemies in the five years he was gone stuck in a pit. The current roster of pissed off dangerous lethal enemies is *exponentially higher*. And so is his systolic blood pressure.

They were supposed to have a soft night.

Now, Flyndt goes through a portal. Because of rumors of ghosts, and carefully planted words about possibility and obligation, and a hope that his lost brother is on the other side of that goddamn magical stupid gateway. The why doesn't matter. What matters is on a split second decision, Flyndt goes.

So Foxen goes after him.

It feels sort of like being rearranged into component molecules by a fist gripping the stomach.

When the sensation passes, the body coils, the mind assesses. The self has been left behind the moment threat arose. Now there is only the asset of the body and mind and mission.

Assess.

Visual inventory: what the frak.

The world will not hold still. For one moment, it seems like falling. Being held above a large map, given views of floating continents, like islands in the air, stars suspended between them; pillars of light and darkness, punching holes through entire worlds, collapsing them in plasmic spears, leaving only debris stuck in their gravitational pull; thick fogs of mist and fire alike, bioluminescent fungi and oceans, boiling seas and endless mountains.

Then the galaxy collapses, and visual range is limited to 0.5 m in front of the extended hand, all else dense mist. It is extremely quiet. Only the body produces any sound. Respirations and heartbeat: increased.

The mind reels. The body refuses the input. Set task: find Flyndt.

*Find home.*

The Foxen proceeds at what is presumed forward direction at a cautious 1.6 kph, raising pistol in loose ready hold. All items have come with the body. Assessment: atmosphere, breathable; ground, solid, but invisible through mist. The eyes and the ears and even the headtails search for input, but there is only fog and silence.

Is this a trick.

Children of Mortis, classification: Force Using cabal of untold power frak my fraking life, are allegedly here. Somewhere. Could this be an illusion. Could none of it be happening. Could the body be at the house, by the pool, in their nest, dreaming, home tucked beside him while the droid charges on its tiny platform.

Conjecture: dismissed. Set task: here, now.

Set task: fraking. Find. Flyndt.

The body proceeds for undetermined amount of time/duration and for uncertain distance in unknown conditions. Heartbeat and respiration want to increase, but the mind denies this. Maintain pace.

So ready is the body for anything that it elevates 0.3 m in the air when a sound comes. Heartbeat: out the fraking window.

The body spins, pointing muzzle towards source of noise. It is a faint moan, almost a wail. Assessment: ghostly. Then more start coming. Different vocal tenors and emotional states conveyed. Assessment: lot of things in this mist.

Set task: pick one.

The body proceeds.

Distance to close: approximately 4 m.

3.5 m

3 m

1.7 m

0.4 m

Assess assess assess.

The boot hits something. The arm snaps down. The hammer cocks. The eyes look.

A figure lays on the ground. The robes are Brotherhood-scientist affiliate. Saw bozos dressed like this before going through the portal. He kicks it, hard, and it moans. The eyes do not open. Garbled noises of distress.

He kicks again, firm enough to hear the rib snap. Still no response. Deeply sedated, perhaps. Or some other form of repression.

Set task: pick another what if Flyndt is here somewhere?

The body proceeds. The next and next objects category: people are not Flyndt and are irrelevant. Some seem euphoric. Most just numb. Is it the mist. He has been breathing it this entire time and not yet succumbed. How much time does he have. He must obtain Flyndt and evacuate before unconsciousness/inebriation/poison onset.

*Hee-hoo*, he hears, and the body freezes. The heartbeat—

His heart frakking leaps in his chest. He pivots and *runs*.

"FLYNDT!" Foxen tries to yell, but of course no sound comes out of his goddamn damaged throat you fraking useless thing! He takes his pistol and slams the butt on the arm of his bracer, over and over, the *ring!* of steel on *beskar* clarion song in the silence, resounding in the mist. It's so loud it hurts after all this muffled input. But no hoots or trills or coos answer his call like they normally do.

He stops and listens and his vision is black at the edges from how hard he's breathing.

*Please please please please please, love, where are you?!*

The mind struggles to focus. Focus! Set task: focus!

*Hee-hoo*, snores Flyndt, closeby.

Foxen follows. He steps so carefully, throat nearly closed, imagining if he heard a *crunch* from one wrong move.

But this time he doesn't find a body with his boot. He sees the Omwati first, beloved reds and browns and silver blues of his feathers a shock of color in the pallid fog. The olive of his skin.

The knees hit the not-ground. The arms gather, *gentle*. The face presses into the crest of feathers and inhales until the shaking stops.

No time.

Have to get out.

Likelihood of the body also collapsing: too high.

But which way is *out*?

In his urgency, he had critically erred. Not left a signal or trail of some kind back. Limited resources, but still. Where is out?

WHERE IS OUT.

They can't stay here they have to get back they were going to have roast and meilooruns and he was going to explain how boot camp wasn't a camp for boots but tell Flyndt he liked his version better. Go on take all my shoes I don't care they can go in a ditch.

A hand brushes the shoulder. The head jerks up, clutching Flyndt carefully, protectively close, away from the touch, using the self as a shield.

There is no hand. No humanoid body. Only a bright blue and white bird. It is tiny. Downy? That's the word. It floats there despite not having flight feathers.

What.

*What.*

Has he joined the dreamers?

But the baby bird just floats there, menacingly or benevolently, he cannot decide. It floats closer, spinning over Flyndt even though Foxen tries to keep it away. His hand, swatting at it like a bug, passes right through. It preens at Flyndt's cheek. Then it floats up to Foxen's eyeline, seems to stare, and turns and floats away.

Well.

Okay then.

He gets up and follows, because what else is there to do.

They walk, objectively, forever. He just follows, carefully carding fingers through Flyndt's feathers, hoping there is no internal damage he cannot see. That whatever is happening, when it is over, they will be okay. *O.K.*

Time: unknown.

Distance: unknown.

Progress: unknown.

Assessment: no idea what I'm doing.

He just follows.

And eventually, there is a portal, there where mist loomed moments ago. It looks just like the one on the Brotherhood side, only more corroded with age, growing a sort of glowing, blooming lichen and sunken into the not-ground. The bird coos at him.

He turns to it.

Well, okay.

Foxen lifts one hand, signing, *Thank you*. It seems happy about that. Does a flappy thing with flightless wings and then alights onto Flyndt's chest and just disappears.

Figure that out later.

The Nautolan held tight — but gentle — and stepped back through the portal. Felt his insides rearrange. Stumbled into a world so full of noise and light and color that his head started splitting immediately. It slammed into him like an icepick in both eyes. Again the knees hit the ground, but this time it was metal, a lab or a tunnel or a ship, and there are bodies and voices and alarms and beeping. They approach, and learn quickly he will not allow that.

No one is touching Flyndt.

They are not experiments.

Get away.

Bullets are persuasive and so are teeth. At least to this crowd. Plus there's a lot else going on with the portal and with missing operatives or something. He doesn't care.

He only cares that in the blinding, agonizing chaos, when he washes up somewhere against a wall in a red-flashing hallway, Flyndt stirs.

He groans, "Fff...Bapt? Fox?" And then, hooting into alertness, is bolt upright and jumping down, feathers all on end. "Fox! What! What? Where? Is Gaile?"

There is heartbreak in his voice. Foxen shakes his head. If Flyndt's brother was through that portal, they didn't find him.

Flyndt's face falls, but only briefly. He notices the mess around them. His eyes slit in suspicion, and he is *brining* with dangeralertprotect. His small gloved hand snaps to Foxen's arm.

"Let us go. Not safe. Home?" he demand-asks.

Foxen could fall over in relief. Yes. Steal a ship find Minnie I don't know I don't care just not here not whatever that was.

Just.

Home, he agrees, gesturing most important.