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> Hey tolly is it Okie if li come over? Have smth 4 u 2. Only like 10 mins promise & i wont bug flyndty

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"Well...surprise!" she whisper-shouted, taking her arms out from behind her back and presenting a wrapped package. Pink flimsi, of course. Good color, though: a pale spring carnation suitable to the eye and to the thawing season. It is blocky in the way that suggests impossible (unless one is highly skilled) precision wrapping around a non-standard three dimensional shape. "I know it's a couple months late, okie, I'm sorry, but like, timing and stuff, and the math just kinda occurred to me and I know it's been bad so wanted to respect your space but...there ya go."

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It is a picture frame, in the shape of an (ugh) anatomically incorrect heart. Not too guady beyond that, though. She picked a reasonable dark wood and used soft felt pastie stickers and glitter glue to decorate, directly reminiscing to things she had made him as a tadpole. The stickers are cartoonish parrots of some sort, and also gray sharks. There's more hearts, and the glitter scribes a formula with their initials with an X between them equating to a squared sum: $F \times F = F^2$

It is objectively horrific and adorable.

It makes the body seize. The chest tightens. The eyes wish very explicitly to close and the knees warn of impending malfunction in the general downwards direction. He stops breathing because he knows if he does it will result in a sob.

And because this is his baby sister, she knows him well though (second best, now) to know that Something Is Happening. She starts to say, "Hey, Tolly—"

His entire hand presses over her face, effectively silencing her as well as moving. All at once he has them back out the door, closing it ever so gently behind them, while she grouses at him, "Alright, alright, I'm going, sheesh, *get off.*"

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It's not our anniversary. I don't even know if his people celebrate such things.

"Okay, sure, but it's *an* anniversary. You guys have been together for over a year!"

Incorrect. Time together: 24 months 29 days 13 hours.

"Okie one, *my statement is still technically correct then, you shab.* Second of all, you're telling me it's been *two years?!"*

Confirm, confirm, ankle biter.

"Thol!" she exclaimed, and then repeated, "two years!" and then, "But you only started dating—"

Not dating.

"For kark's sake, being boyfriends—"

Not my boyfriend.

Minnie covered her face with her hands and screamed into them dramatically. When she was done she said, "I will punch you. What about partner? Is that okay?"

Foxen paused to think, gaze flickering briefly with the calculation of memory recall.

No. Only things Flyndt has said is we are courting. Told Bril. That is appropriate/allowable.

"Fine. Your... courtier? Courtee? Courtship...per? Courtshipper. No. Uuughghhghh. Person who is courting you."

Confirm.

"Who you've been *courting* since you had a very reasonable breakdown on my floor over kissing him that I want to be very clear I'm not judging at all about and know is entirely valid as are your feelings and traumas."

Confirm.

"Which was over a year ago."

18 months 13 days 2 hours.

"Thol Bapti," she said with feeling. "And that doesn't matter to you?"

Of course it matters to me. Every minute. Every second, Kymis. Doesn't mean we're celebrating. Doesn't mean he's keeping track of finds the time relevant.

"Have you asked him?"

Deny. Bothersome, distraction. Flyndt made clear: Mission priority. Wishes we will be respecting.

"That sounds like you're projecting a guilty conscience over wanting his attention -- which, again, perfectly valid and reasonable -- onto him and his avoidant behaviors disguised as requests for privacy and focus, right after an extremely traumatic event, for both of you, who both need to heal, in different and opposing ways."

He gives her a look.

If I wanted Jax to psychoanalyze me I'd call him.

"Yeah well I've got a degree and eyeballs too, asshole, and I know you two."

It doesn't matter if he's not dealing with it. Dealing with it or NOT is his choice.

"But his choices *affect you too*. That's the point, Foxen."

He didn't consent to that.

"I think he really did."

He agreed we were important. He agreed he would always remember me and hold me in his heart. He agreed he loved me. But he cannot and has not agreed to stay. He isn't responsible for me or my feelings or maintaining them or us. We agreed on that. This isn't one sided. I'm not a victim.

"It's becoming one sided," Minnie pushed on, "when you don't even talk to each other for days!"

We talk.

"You have a conversation? Or do you talk at him, and he grunts at you?"

Semantics.

"Which matter. Stop being so obstinately literal for once when you know what I'm saying."

He nearly fucking died, Kymis. He gets to process or not however he is going to and you have no right to say one fucking thing about how he does or his trauma. I don't fucking care if he's ignoring me, that's his choice.

"But you DO care!"

It doesn't matter.

"You FUCKING MATTER!"

I know I do. His words are slashed, an underline. *What do you want me to say? That if it hurts? Of course it fucking hurts! It hurts so bad I can barely breathe. I feel like I'm coming out of my fucking skin, I'm burning every night. You want me to say that I miss him when he's right there? Of fucking course I do, I miss him so fucking much it's—*

He stops because his hands are shaking and talking his becoming difficult.

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"I just ...I'm just worried about you, Tolly. I want you to be happy."

I am happy.

"Until he's 'gone tomorrow,' right?"

Confirm.

"Deny! No, okay?! Aaarrgh. I could knock both your heads together!"

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"How many times are we going to have conversations like this?"

Only a grand total of two, if you stop assuming shit while you're trying to be happy for me.

Minnie glared at him viciously.

"Well *excuse me* for trying to do something nice for you, I'll take it karking back—"

DENY. Tadpole, he tries to forestall. I love it. Don't think I don't love it. It's delightful. And I'll show Flyndt. Today. I promise. Just don't expect much.

"I'm not," she argued. "That's the point of a gift, Tolly, I'm not expecting anything."

Are these pluses?

"Yeah, yanno, cause like, *bird plus shark*," she says it rhytmatically, to a tune, smiling at him like the agent of actual evil she is, like she knows exactly what she just did, tormenting him with an earworm that even idiots, forget a trap of mind like his, would be helpless too.

The *do-do-do* autocompletes in his brain.

Fucking goddammit.

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If you want to give him support, then give it to him, not me.

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Hey, he greets, seeing sunset eyes flicker briefly to his hands,

Minnie made us a present. You can look at it, if you want? Or later?

"Hmm? Later. Yes, eat later. Promise."

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Come to bed?

"Later. **Hrm.**"

O.K. I love you.

"You too."

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In the doorway, he looks back and whispers, "Ha-ppy anniv-er-sary, *ner kar'ta.*"