

He breathed in.

Sprawling out like spilled paint to the horizon, rolling green dominated the view below, misted in places in the cold morning light of papery, frigid air. The wind bowled over the plains and broke against the dense, deep verdant canopies of the Shada Jungle to the northeast, and even from where he stood, one could still make out the flashes of color that were the native fauna circling above the trees.

Looking out, there seemed no visual distinction between the Amur and Mirad Plains, other than the slope of the land, and of course the spiraling smoke trails of civilization; Shanjiaoxia was populace enough and near enough at the base of these salt white cliffs that the evidence of its fires could be seen, but for all the many small tribes and villages out in those plains, there was nothing. He knew they were there, but could not see them. They were as ghosts.

Ghost...specter...hyōbao...

Carmine eyes drifted from the magnificent spectrum of emeralds and ferns, junipers and sages, over to an olive hue so much more beloved— eyes drifted and washed up, saved, on *home*.

Flyndt was beautiful in that cold morning light. The Arreat mountains under their feet framed him in crag rock and snowmelt, spindly xeric shrubland brave and relentless and enduring two shades off of his very skin, the stone where sunrise had yet to kiss purple as the marks on his nose and brow. His sunset eyes were closed, and he breathed in.

This was not his home, but here, some hundred kilometers up the side of these mountains, with the Highlands dominating on the other side and the valleys of the plains below, here— *here* was as close as the Omwati had likely been since he left Omwat over a year ago.

His home, feeling home. *For once*.

It is right. It is good. It makes the glacial drift and ancient bedrock that carved this entire basin over eons of slow, melting inevitability feel as unstable and paper-thin as his aching heart. He isn't falling; he fell eleven months two weeks ten days four hours ago. But sometimes, sometimes, it feels like it nonetheless. Like there is nothing beneath him, and he is *helpless*, powerless, lost.

There is so, so much he cannot give, no matter how badly he wants to, no matter how hard he tries.

No amount of *kew'maxi*, no new textured rugs or climbing perches or silken, patterned scarves, no signs for special characters or whispered words or vows. It won't make the house his home; no more than for Foxen. The house is a house.

Home is *Flyndt*, for him.

But he isn't that for his partner.

He swallows, and breathes of the mountain air. It is higher here than on Apaec; while they have only climbed the base of this mountain, even the peak at the Erinis compound is roughly equal. He hopes that what Flyndt feels is joy. He hopes that the sour limes and milk from Longshun hold more than sadness. He hopes that the orabek riding later today will bring smiles and hooting laughter. He hopes he hopes he *hopes*—

"Okay, well, what then? What are we talking here? Like? Like like? Is he your one true boo?"

'Are you asking me if I love him?'

"I mean— yeah, kinda? Doesn't have to be that serious, like, how long have you guys even known each other? Not that you can't care about him already, just, I have no idea. So..."

She sends him no less than nine glances while he debates what to say and how to phrase it. The question is complicated, with layers of physical and emotional criteria he is not even capable of or that are irrelevant. The answer is not.

He settles on, 'I told him my name.'

The ship jerks as Minnie pulls on the yoke so sharply that their nose is neatly vertical for a moment. They're both slammed back in their seats.

"You WHAT?!"

His cheeks and headtails ache with the cold, especially along the scars, especially at the places that have been ripped off, sundered, severed. His hand throbs where the littlest finger once was. The scar on his chest, framed in ink, beautiful feathered ink, burns with a warmth.

"Does he know what it means?" Minnie asks at length. He hrms, and she adds, "Giving your name."

'Knows it's important. His people are similar, I think. Not exact, but similar. Gave me his eventually, but doesn't use it otherwise.'

"You don't think he should know? Or is this some more of your," she waved a hand at him, "won't tell him you're interested bantha poodoo?"

'I've told him explicitly how important he is to me. I've done what I've done. Think my position is pretty clear...It will click or it won't, Minnow. He could be gone in a month if I get my shit together...'

The pit is far away, here. The crunch of Flyndt's bones. The collars and the whips and the shocks and the animals. Almost all the animals, at least. But the Omwati's happiness for riding will be worth it.

"It's pretty normal to kiss your boyfriend."

'Not my boyfriend.'

The breeze shifts, and it's strong enough here, where the mountains have yet to break it, that it burns his lidless eyes, causing them to water, *just the wind*, pushes Flyndt's crimson wild type crest nearly flat, the blue and silver feathers a ruffled halo, his tail feathers waving wildly.

"...he looks at you too, you know! I know you know! What if he likes you too—"

'No. I can't.'

"Hell you can't—"

'I CAN'T KYMIS!' *It's shouted hands and rasping breath. 'I can't hope for that, I can't, I fraking cannot handle that, it's going to break me, if I hope, and he doesn't— and he is just curious. Or it goes wrong. Or he leaves. **When** he leaves. Then I want him to go. Be happy, free. But I will not fraking survive it.*

*"Thol, **no**, don't say that. You will. You will, honey, it'll be okay..."*

It smells like dry air and rain at once. Flyndt smells like feathers, mostly. Feathers, incense, oil, and home.

>please be okay

>Please I don't know how to do this without you anymore

>i need you

>I need you so much more than you need me in know thays a provlem I know itn

>But I do

>I

The chill of the air and the sparkle of wan sun kiss his cheeks, flush them with a peach hue, and he wants to cup them in his hands, share warmth.

You protected the One who I Know and Hold In My Heart. I eat my insult. I'm sorry. Thank you. I give you my blade, I will fight for you and preserve your life until my death.

His Han'duwil robes lift and shift, shades of aquamarine and carmine and lavender he can't reconstruct perfectly, wools and weaving he has patched but cannot fully repair. He is an

outsider, and they are far from those steppes where Flyndt belongs with his brother who Foxen has failed to find, who he wants to meet—

'Is this O.K? You are home to me. I wanted to get you a small piece of yours.'

"This. This is more than O.K. Thank you, I am happy for this. May I...kiss you?"

"Yes, ner ver-copa...pl-ease."

So much to want. But he cannot ask. He will not ask. The mission remains: protect Flyndt, make Flyndt happy, find Gaile, save Gaile, make sure Gaile and Flyndt can go home.

The mission remains: say goodbye.

"Soooo-so so so...how's... your fiance?"

*'He is **not** my fiance,' Foxen signed so hard that he very nearly punched the spindly Rodian right in the face.*

"KARkokayokaysorry, karabast, man, okay, sorry—"

'Shut up, Heeks. He's fine. We're good.'

Flyndt's eyes open.

They are golden bled to orange, ringed in violet bled to pink. They are sunsets, and they are life. Waking and wanting. Breathing and yearning.

Stupid selfish impossible dreams he is not allowed to have. A future he cannot imagine. A future he imagines anyway, shaped in garden boxes with drupe stone fruits and gifted scarves and silent kisses and Flyndt saying, *"I choose it, ours,"* and not meaning just their bedroom, because he is a Bad Thing, and he *hopes*—

Flyndt catches the look on his face, whatever it is, and the blush deepens, but his piebald brows furrow too. He hopes off the stone he's perched on and jogs over, wind whipping, knapsack tied expertly tight.

"O.K?," his home asks, and makes the letters with his hands, touching his own. They both wear thick gloves borrowed from the inn for this pre-dawn hike. "Fox?"

O.K., he replies, and then, as always, always, always, forever now, *I love you.*

Flyndt clicks his beak, gives a slight smile. "You too. Ready? Keep go? Or back?"

Foxen tilts his head, mirroring the bird, and considers.

Best go back. Don't want to be late.

They did have an itinerary, after all, and had left their guide and gathered foraging down at the base.

"Hoo, yes, true. O.K. Let us." He squeezes Foxen's hand, then let's go, and turns to descend.

Foxen lingers a moment, watching him walk away. Practicing.

The words he's told his sister and brother so many times, that he tells himself every single day, repeat in the mind:

He could be gone tomorrow.

But now is not that.

So he breathes in, and follows his heart home.