

*Mother, what would you do?*

Jax thinks this often. Sometimes to all of them, sometimes to one or the other. When he is angriest, he thinks of Lona and her scars, the dullness of her eyes and slowness of her movements, lit up by rare sparks of rage and tears, of the way she taught him to use his claws to cut. When he has a problem he knows not how to solve, he thinks of Aayn, of patience and consideration and careful formulating and the space amongst it for creativity, spinning solutions like spinning clay. When resentment and disenfranchisement narrow and poison his soul, he thinks of Ra and Yuunta, and the ability to find happiness in the cruelest of places if one makes effort to think and believe and act positively.

And often, often — every morning and night — he thinks of Asesh. He thinks of whether or not he is doing right by L'ara, training her to war-making and taking her as a Foundling. If he is gentle enough to her, to be kind, and firm enough, to respect her strength and autonomy. He thinks of the day and plays it back in his mind, examining his actions and decisions and each interaction with his squadmates or brothers in arms or subordinates. He thinks of those he has lost in his command, and those who he could never have saved, and those whose lives he took. He thinks of how his bones ache and how he is tired and how he cannot stop, and he thinks, *have I done enough?*

He is still alive, so the answer is always no, but he thinks it, and the brands on his skin itch.

He misses her. He misses all of them. And he wonders, what would they have done? Advised? He cannot ask them. Never again. After forty years, it is still *never again*. And it still hurts, at times.

This time, it is harder.

This time, it is for a lie.

This time, it is about Kobgin. And Kobgin...is special to him.

The first time he notices seems inconsequential. He and Kobgin are onboarding new recruits at Fort Blindshot, and Kobgin refuses to shake hands. This is not the first time Jax has seen this, but he has also seen Kobgin offer and accept the gesture before, so it does not stand out.

The unfortunate thing about puzzles is the once one has gathered enough pieces for a picture to form, one completes it no matter how much they wish to look away.

Because the fact of it is, Kobgin has quite a few odd behaviors. Behaviors that Jax *knows* are red flags, because he has been trained to look for and note them. Basic military counter-intelligence.

Jax does not want to, but nonetheless, he notices, and he remembers, and he starts a list.

The list has items like:

Kobgin never wears the same clothes twice, and they always smell like the plastique, faux-clean of something freshly bought. The fabrics are cheap for his casual ware, and all his uniforms and fatigues are standard but smell like the surplus warehouse. The only times Kobgin rewears an article of clothing is when he is redressing after undressing and has the same clothes available to put on.

Once, when leaving Kobgin's apartment, Jax ambles to the building's dumpster and follows his nose and the faint scent of the man to a few bags. All have standard trash and the clothes Kobgin has worn for the last five days.

Another is how sometimes, he hears Kobgin's voice click in his throat mid-sentence like it is catching, even though his sentences do not stumble and his words are almost always smooth. It is not a thing Humans would hear, but Jax does, and because he is already paying full attention to Kobgin's every utterance, he knows it is there. A pause that training could not entirely do away with. He is unsure if it is the remnants of an accent defeated or of a hesitation of thought, if there is something that is almost said or a sound nearly formed that the half-Selenian does not intend.

He thinks he could write a book of the things Kobgin does not say, tuck it in a volume next to what he *does*. He thinks he would still write poems about both.

Another: he knows Kobgin goes to drills that do not exist in the schedule for his regiment. He does not follow the half-Human, and, he is uncomfortably certain, would quickly lose track of him if he tried. But these drills are not all. Kobgin has missing hours. Kobgin has cover stories. Kobgin lies. And perhaps the part that hurts his heart the most— he can see it in Kobgin's face, smell it in his scent — is that sometimes, sometimes, Kobgin seems to think he himself is a lie too. There is a faint fear, a hesitance, a fragileness. The Selenian, for a moment during those times, seems ready to shatter inward, and in those moments is when Jax holds on tightest, trying to hold him together, trying to let Kobgin know how real he is— *look how hard and tight I hold you, look. You are not fragile. You are solid, you are real, you are here with me.*

There are these things, and there are others. Jax does not know what they are, but he is certain they exist.

He notices these things, things no one but he is let into a position to notice, the more time goes on, and the longer they spend together in stolen moments between schedules.

*Mother...*

He writes the list down. He documents and catalogues. He has a report, and he has the Intelligence Agency's code addressed.

*Mother... If you loved someone...and you knew it could be wrong...*

His dog tags weigh heavy on his breast. His scars and cybernetic ache. His trainees salute him and he salutes his commanders. His reflection stares back at him from a polished wall of names gone and remembered. He knows what he is supposed to do.

*What would you do?*

The day he decides not to send the report, they are simply spending a lunch together outside barracks. It is a thirty minute date, and their rations are the cool-warm of not-quite room temperature, the caf the military quality they know so well. Kobgin leans briefly into Jax's side and makes the hand signs Jax has been teaching him for *come here*, and when Jax bends low, he murmurs a compliment into his ear about Jax's eyes. His uniform still smells near-sterile save for musty factory detergent and today's sweat, but his curls under Jax's nose taste like one of Jax's own shampoos when he opens his mouth to scent properly. It is layered under a fresher unscented wash and faded, but it is there, likely from the night before last.

He knows. He knows Kobgin is hiding many things, and he knows they have threat potential. That it could hurt more than just Jax himself, but betray everything he stands for, Clan and servicemen and women and civilians alike. That it could be wrong.

But he also *knows* that Kobgin is a good man. And this much — this is significant. His mothers are very long gone, and Jax has his choices.

Jax does not send the report. He deletes it. And he waits, saying nothing. He will not confront Kobgin, will not demand answers, will not ask for something as if owed. *They are not things*, his mother said, and Jax will never treat them that way, either of them, or let them treat each other so.

He nuzzles into Kobgin's scalp, breathes there, thanks him softly with a whine for his acceptance, and asks for no apologies, explanations, or thanks in turn. Jax makes his choice, this time, but Kobgin need never know more of it than that it is made. That Jax adores him and chooses to trust him.

Freely given.