

Life was different out in the woods. It was unassuming and unforgiving in tandem, a fact well understood by the people who lived there. Alunria gave and took in equal parts, moreso the latter, so one grew to be wary. To Nan'to, that constant vigilance had begun to feel unfamiliar, his new life full of beautiful mundane moments and consistent safety besides. That he was faced now with this vigilance again, in a way he could not circumvent, filled him with deep anxiety.

Trying to make good decisions while under stress always felt like fighting temptations. Impairing vices were easier than being plainly conscious, but what would Marce think if he found him too far that way? Nan'to wanted to be better than that. He didn't want to disappoint him.

So instead, he went home. Explained everything to his brother, full of emotion. The details of his work were known to him, but it was a hard thing to comfort—such troubles did not exist out here. Even so, Lee was both critical and understanding. Of course it was ridiculous, but the implications remained to endanger Toto and anyone who fought for him. Such was just the way of it.



Who would stay by his side in all this? There were plenty of people he knew who would—Wisp, Crys, his love of course, and the NightRaiders. But those fellows of the Call—Lazurite, Phyrar, Nishiru, and plenty others who claimed to support him—he wasn't so sure. He had made the mistake with "friends" once before, and he had been painfully bitten for it. It was better not to trust anyone, for the time being.

Lee eventually replaced himself with Julias' company, stepping away. Nan'to sighed, petting the dog's back idly and resisting thoughts. It was hard not to dwell on things, though. Marce had left to go speak with Kallias on the matter of the marks in question, and he knew how this was going to go. Playing around in Ishgard like he had been, knowing full well of his old mark's existence, had been a terrible mistake. He almost stained Adèle's name, and almost made an Ishgardian friend. *Stupid.*

Barking echoed down the hall all of a sudden, incessant—Calpunea loved to let visitors know she meant business. Perhaps it was a clansmate, but even if it was, he wasn't up for socializing. Lee, on the other hand, was sure to be thrilled... He closed his eyes, fully intent to nap here on the mat, if he could manage to fall asleep. He heard the tapping of feet and cane both leave and return...stopping behind him.

"Are you awake?" Lee asked quietly.

"Unfortunately," Nan'to answered back.

Lee made a pensive noise at that, glancing at what was in his hand. Given there were very few people who would be sending Toto mail at this time, that made the possibilities of a sender quite clear. With such in mind, he disagreed with that sentiment... Even if he understood it.

"Well, someone's sent you something, so maybe hold off on sleeping a little longer." He leans his weight on the cane so he could set the letter down on Nan'to's arm. After that, he went back to the kitchen—surely a good meal would help.

Nan'to looked up and over to see what was set on him, surprised to have received anything at all out here. When he grabbed it to inspect before him, a little gasp escaped his mouth. It was the seal he designed—Marce must have sent it. He opened it quickly, reading on his side.

My love,

I hope I am not interrupting your rest or your time away. I know there is much on your mind, but I hope this letter will alleviate at least one worry of yours.

The idea that a letter from him would be bothersome was nonsense—he *wished he had more of them*—but it was true that the letter brought worry for the truth within it. How had their conversation gone? The contents were not what he was expecting.

I have spoken to K. He is, as expected, wary of drawing any attention or harm to his family or business. But he is also deeply resolved to be of assistance to us in any way he can manage. He would not turn away from us in our time of need, for his honor does not allow it, and also because he is concerned for both of us, and Boss besides.

He was stunned. What the hells was Kallias thinking, agreeing to aid—it was already too much that Marce and the Bonvivant house were risking themselves for his sake. What about Eleonore or Pokie, what would they do if he fell in trouble with the citystate? Could the House help them then, or would everyone fall into the same pitfall of treachery?

I told him that I would let him know if or when an opportunity to help arises, without risking his loved ones.

He felt a knot form in his throat. Did Kallias really just not care? They couldn't promise a complete lack of risk, and he was certain the artisan was smart enough to know that. Was it really worth it to him...? *Why?* That was so stupid, *be more self preserving...*! They hardly knew each other yet.

I pray that this sets your mind at ease at least on his account, as it did mine. We are surrounded by good friends, and shall not want for help or comfort.

Please do not feel the need to come back until you are ready. Whenever you do, though, I will be waiting.

Yours, Marcelloix

Nan'to let out a shaky breath, folding up the letter and trying very hard not to cry. He wasn't very successful, hiding a sob in the floor mat—It felt much like those days where an unexpected act of kindness could bring him to his knees. He was stronger now, more composed, and self-assured most of all, but occasionally, such acts still caught him off guard. That was happening more often lately. It was just so hard not to—

Suddenly, he recoiled, slobber on his face—Jullias had begun licking his tears, paint and all. “**Eugh**—Jules, ssstop that—” He protested, hurrying to get up again.

Nan'to sat up just enough to clean his eyes with his sleeves—he'd have to wash his face—and made himself take a deep breath. Then a few more. He looked at the letter's seal, then his sweet, elderly dog's unassuming face (which he gave lots of

pets to), before turning to see Lee reaching for items from the cabinet. Probably making them lunch.

Once again, Marce was right. *Typical*. That last thought was amusing to him, and not unwelcome. He let out a sigh and picked himself up off the floor.

“...Can I help?”

—x—

Jan 23rd, 2023