

Oh. It worked.

Nathan leaned back against the phonebooth into a somewhat cozier position as the machine went at it. He wondered what time it was in Ninjago City. He wondered if he even noticed he was missing. He wondered if he would even get *his* Ace out of all the universes there were.

Conversation begins now.

Well, he hoped he'd at least get one of them.

"Ring, ring, call for Mister Lao?"

There is a three-bedroom apartment in Ninjago City. It's been silent for some time. One resident is at work. The other left. The last sits in the living room, illuminated by fairy lights and the sun sinking underneath the skyline of the city. He's working on a paper, red glasses perched on the bridge of his nose. He's entirely focused on his work...if not for the sudden voice in his head.

"Nathan?" comes his friend's voice through the silence, sharp, concerned, worried, he's worried, he worries for them. *"Nathan— you— where the hell have you been? How are you in my head?"*

"Greece," he lies, as natural as breathing. Relief seeps into his bones, yet that gnawing sensation is back in his stomach again. "I'm good. I did some magic stuff. I'm in your thoughts, big guy."

"...You've been in Greece for a whole month without so much as leaving a call?"

A month?

Nathan falters for a tenth of a second, and only a tenth. "Yeah. Backpacking. Wifi sucks."

"Okay." He does not believe him. *"I believe you. And all of your belongings still in our apartment."* He totally does not believe him. *"How's your, ah, impromptu backpacking trip across Greece then?"*

"It's great," Nathan chirps. "Chilly. Loving the snow."

Snow.

"...*Right*," comes Ace's very blunt response.

The two of them fall into a familiar and comfortable silence, despite being apart for...well. A month. It feels as if he's back at their apartment, able to relax in each other's presence; him, Ace, Emmie- just the three of them. Friends. Together.

But this silence cannot last forever. He knows this.

"Listen," Nathan admits, a little quicker than before. He has five minutes to talk. He's already wasted enough. "I don't know when I'll be back, alright? I don't know if I'll ever be back."

"...*You know, there are much easier ways of saying you want to move out*," Ace finally says, soft and quiet. There's guilt behind those words, and for a split second, Nathan doesn't exactly know why. "*We really wanted to talk to you after- after we got home, but we couldn't find you anywhere.*"

A month for them, two days for him.

Nathan's brows furrow together ever slightly. He leans forward to grasp the metal of the booth. Something to ground himself.

"*Emmie called you over and over, but your phone was just. Dead. I don't know if you were in...Greece. At the time or not, but we kept searching for you, and we didn't. We didn't know if you were alright or not, and-*"

"Yeah, yeah, worried about me now," he manages out, bitter. That crackling feeling is back. "Instead of, y'know, the three months you and Emmie-o spent runnin' around the fucking city." He doesn't mean to sound cruel. He doesn't want to sound cruel. But this anger, this passive, burning grief that's been eating him alive since the start of this *thing* is bubbling, boiling, somewhere in his lungs.

"*I- what- we were at the hospital with you, Nathan- visiting hours were short, but Emmie and I visited you every day-*"

"No— *no*, not that!" Nathan bursts out. The gnawing feeling in his chest bursts too, and he sinks his dull nails into the side of the metal machine. "I'm not talking about that! You guys— every night, there were these two vigilantes, just. Just *going* through the city, rummaging for the

papers, tools— *weapons* the Oni, the *Oni* used to use! And it was just *you* guys, every night, up and about the city! Ace, the fucking Oni!”

"We weren't going to bring the Oni back, why on Earth would we do that?!"

"I don't know! I didn't know a *thing*! You guys never told me anything! You guys—" *Oh*, it hurts to breathe. "Every time I saw something on the news about these two "vigilantes", I— I felt I was *losing* my mind, I thought that they were gonna do something *awful* again, and I *told* you guys about It too!"

"Why did you lie to me?" Nathan pleads, desperate for an answer. "Why did you guys lie to me? Why did you make me feel like everything was- was just *fine* and normal and- I was— I was *miserable*, Ace, I didn't know what you guys were doing— and I didn't know if I was driving myself crazy or not trying to, to *understand* what the hell was happening!"

He's gasping for air by the time he's finished ranting, breath coming out in short, hazy little clouds. Silence fills the phonebooth again, though for an entirely different reason now. He knows Ace better than he knows himself. That silence, that hesitance-

"We really didn't mean to."

-is genuine, tentative, afraid of ruining something that Nathan can't exactly place his finger on. *Afraid. He is afraid.* Nathan doesn't say a word.

"It. It...wasn't really a good idea for you to run around doing...vigilante work. The moment you got out of the hospital. And. I felt as if even mentioning it would make things worse." Stilted. Slow. Careful. "Emmie and I...noticed. Your, ah, increasing worry about the vigilantes. We should have known it was less about them and more about what they were doing."

"You were worried."

"Yes. Naturally."

"And you lied to me to keep me from getting sent to the ER again."

"...I guess omission does count as lying, no?"

Ace's a smart guy. He knows the answer to that already.

"I'm...I'm really sorry, Nathan," he whispers. "Really. I truly am. It was my idea. We wanted to get rid of the Oni's items that were left behind, places the Ninja might not have been – with, with our powers, and whatnot, and we didn't. We...we really didn't want to involve you. You just got out of the hospital. You– you almost died. We didn't want to stress you out any further than what you already went through."

It was all a haze, really. He couldn't remember much.

"...But I can see why that was...more. Stressful. And I do apologize."

Cafe. Screaming. Purple fog. Running.

Ace gets quieter when he's genuine. More formal. Carefully practiced words. Nathan's very good at noticing things.

Enveloping. Crackling. Stone. Their terrified faces, and then the dark.

He's fallen silent again, and Nathan can't gather a single stray thought from him to talk about.

He didn't fault his friends for the whole being turned to stone thing. It wasn't their fault. They couldn't have stopped it any other way.

They didn't mean to hurt him.

They wanted to help. The whole let's-keep-things-a-secret-from-Nathan thing was supposed to work. It was supposed to help.

They didn't mean to hurt him.

Cathartic? That doesn't sound right. Closure, maybe, but almost there. It still aches, yet it feels...better.

Ace is still quiet. Nathan doesn't want this call to end in silence. The last thing he wants is silence, ringing in his ears, stone and fog and quiet.

“...So, there’s actually a magic telephone booth here,” Nathan says. He wants to hear his voice. He misses his voice. “With letters and stuff instead of numbers. And I just- I just pressed in ‘Ace Lao’ and got you. Nifty, huh? I didn’t know they had those here. In Greece. Five minutes per, though.”

“...You just...asked for... ‘Ace’ Lao, and it worked?” He's talking again. Inquisitive. Curious. Something else. Nathan can't really tell what. Guilt? Still guilty.

“Yeah. Why wouldn’t it.”

“Mmm...Nathan, that’s my nickname.”

Nathan blanks. “That’s your nickname?”

Thoughts cannot carry laughter, but he would have strangled the world with his bare hands to hear his laugh just once. He knows he’s laughing. He can tell it from the silence that follows, and the strangled, strange way he says his next words—thoughts— *“You— you thought that my parents named me ‘Ace’?”*

“You— you— you liked planes as a kid—”

“Yeah, hence the nickname, Natto.” He loved eating natto. Slimy, disgusting, perfect fucking thing. Emmie bought it with her kimchi. She hated it. Nathan didn’t. *“Aiiyu, you thought my name was Ace, you thought my birthname— the name I’ve had since birth was Ace.”*

“Fine, I’ll bite,” Nathan snickers into the phone, and everything feels natural again. It feels like home again. It feels like he’s calling from a phone booth in Ninjago City and desperately needs Ace’s legal name for whatever reason, like taxes or- or taxes or something. “What’s your name, big guy? Not that I can call you again, this thing's a one time use thing. Just— just give me your fuckin’ name, doofus.”

Silence again.

“It’s Jason,” he responds, and it is this ever brief moment, this useless, infinitesimal moment that Nathan will remember for all time here. *“Jason. Jason Lao.”*

“...Hrm. I want to say it’s a nice name, but I can see why you use Ace more.”

"Oh, please. I was just surprised you managed to get it right the first time."

"Who said it was the first?" It was. He had hoped with all his heart he'd get this one.

And he suddenly falters, still holding onto the phone. That gnawing feeling is back. Premonition, of some kind. Or just a knowing feeling. He has to leave.

"I gotta go," Nathan says. He doesn't wanna go.

"Five minutes already?"

"Well, I spent half of it sitting in silence with you, so. Yeah." Spent. Not waste. Never a waste.

"...And you won't come back?"

He's quiet.

"...To call?"

They're quieter.

"...Home."

Home. He liked that.

"I don't know," Nathan admits. "I mean, I'll try, yeah. I got a lotta backpacks in Greece. Not many phone booths though."

"Of the magic talking-in-brain variety, or normal variety?"

"Bit of both," Nathan says, simple and simple and simple. "Yeah." He was never good at goodbyes. "Uh."

Sorry for leaving, sorry we fought, sorry I'll die here, sorry you can't even bring my ashes home, sorry for leaving a mess in my room, sorry for not asking about Emmie.

"Um. See ya, Jason. Jace. Jacey. Bye. Take care."

Thanks for letting me stay, thanks for feeding me, thanks for visiting me, thanks for caring about me, thanks for celebrating my birthday with me, thank you, thank you, thank you.

He waits for Jason's response, and receives nothing but buzzing in turn.