

BLACKBIRD

Pine wanders away from the others only to hunt, despite the protests both Muttonchops and Nitro had vehemently given- they don't realize that it wasn't hunger that drove the red pelted tom away to solitude.

It was the sensation of eyes, of half formed figures wavering in the fog. Transparent bodies that wisped delicately in the peripherals of Pine's gold eyes. Watching him. Did they judge him with their stares, or pity him from where they gazed like sentries from between the boughs of alien trees?

It didn't matter- the wind, temperamental lover that it was, was a faithful watcher who told no lies. There was nothing and no one there, it was simply figments of Pine's mind. A condition that Pine knew well of course. He'd spent two years in isolation. The first to guide the senseless body of his sister with her wandering death as his only companion. And his thoughts. It hadn't been so bad in that first year; yes, Pine's voice had fallen into silence, his stomach grew just a little more hollow, and he himself became... *lesser*, but he had a responsibility to focus on.

Stay with her, keep her safe. I can't leave, I can't go back; I failed her, she's dead. I have nothing left but this.

The second year however... after Juniper had disappeared, Pine had *nothing*. In those days after she vanished, Pine had contemplated many dark and final things. No one would have missed him, then. The Forest Colony certainly would have forgotten him, for it had been so long since he'd disappeared with Juniper. Other travellers too, would not notice Pine's absence. The russet tom had avoided the well-trodden paths near pathologically. No friends either- it had only been Juniper. She had been everything; his dearest friend, his little sunbeam of life, practically his daughter-

Well. Pine had thought about many things, yet in the end he had done nothing at all. He simply wandered, guideless and homeless, friendless and in the end, almost soulless.

The quiet, and time had eaten much from him. Had Pine been carrion, he would have been nothing but sinew and bone for how little life had been left in him that year.

I've begun to see things in the trees, other cats. I think. They don't call out to me, and they seem to vanish from my sight when I turn to look. I don't smell anything.

Sometimes, I can almost hear voices.

Gradually, Pine had come to the realization that he perhaps was beginning to go mad. It was a soft awareness that lacked surprise. How could he be shocked? Sometimes when Pine did interact with others, he stared at them, unsure if they were real at all even as they talked at him. The conclusion made perfect sense; no mind would remain completely itself when it had nothing to keep it well. Perhaps the figures in the mist, who had begun to solidify to distinct wraiths of his past, were Pine's mind attempting to protect itself against the harsh teeth of *silence and absence*.

I can hear my old mentor's voice sometimes. He chastises me for my weakness, just like he used to when I had just been a kit and his apprentice. The words are different- he speaks of things the real Thunder would know nothing of, but he still says them. I'm not sure whether I should be alarmed, or relieved.

I shouldn't be hearing him at all. I know I am alone.

It wasn't just Pine's old and harsh mentor that ghosted into Pine's awareness. There were others, like his mother Hail, who would whisper kinder things as if to try and sooth the abrasions Thunder's scathing words left. Rarely it would be Morgan, who never spoke but always laughed, perpetually amused to see how far Pine had fallen. Perhaps she was impressed by his tenacity too, just a little, but Pine was never sure.

Scorch, whose pelt was like Pine's own.. Eyes of cold gold. Was he proud, or disappointed? He never spoke...

Thorn... if Pine ducked his head, he would be able to see bone through the gaping wound of the grey kit's throat. He was so small compared to how large Pine was now. Yet Pine remembered how viciously his rival had rattled his head, shaking Pine like a dog.

I thought I heard Juniper's voice earlier. I had nearly thrown myself into a ravine by accident when I tried to follow the sound, but she wasn't there. The fall would have broken my neck, like that raider I had pushed so many years ago.

The voices and visions had become a part of Pine's life, his unseen and unwelcomed companions. It was all in his head after all. *Hallucinations. Madness.* Pine had always thought madness was of the loud sort- screaming and raving and difficult to contain. To think there was a quiet breed; surely if someone looked at him, spoke to him and spent time with him they would be none the wiser. They wouldn't hear the voices or see the ghosts, and Pine would never say he did.

Meeting Nitro however... The ivory cat had swept into Pine's life like an unforgiving storm. He spoke enough for both of them, and filled Pine's starving mind with light, laughter, words and writing- taking so much room within the bone structure of Pine's head that there was no space for anything else but Nitro! It was glorious! It was agony.

The Trials had similar effects, thankfully. There was simply too much too quickly for Pine's brain to wander and conjure, and he felt the most alive he had felt in *months*. Pine had thought maybe he'd left his ghosts behind.

And yet...

Just once, when trying to find those damn stones during that second task in the Trial, Pine had foolishly put himself in the heart of the air where he became overwhelmed by the scale and *new voices* of the wind. The grand spirit of his powers awoke, briefly, the ghosts and Pine saw figures in the mist. Nitro's figure- the first of the living for Pine to hallucinate, though at the time Pine hadn't known Nitro was alive. The stress had only increased in the back of Pine's head, larger and larger... The forest fire... Arcadia's betrayal... Finding Nitro only to nearly lose him again in an instant...

Helena stealing them away to her world of decay had almost been a balm to Pine's mind. It wasn't so saturated with life as the real world, and reminded Pine unerringly of the Wasteland.

It was almost as if the goddess proved that Paradise was only a temporary respite, and that eventually the world would truly, *truly* gasp its last breath and take them with it to its grave. Pine never believed in Paradise, a secret only Nitro was privy to- the red tom could almost thank Helena for the proof. However, she had vanished quickly, and Pine had needed sleep. He'd slumbered so deeply the dreams the others whispered of had not touched him- a fact Pine was grateful for. He didn't want to be given lies- but he did wake with impressions of it, as if he had dreamt and forgotten.

Then new stress; the hellfire *agony* of his tail suddenly becoming broken and iced through had raced through Pine's whole body and left him stunned and laughing. *Laughing*. A normal cat would cry. A normal cat did not hallucinate.

In the end, his tail was amputated, and Pine had healed the wounds with difficulty. Bending the energy inwards was strange to him- healing was not an offensive skill as what clearly came naturally to the tom, but somehow, whether it was his body or powers guiding him, Pine was able to do it, and his tail ceased to bleed and he gained back just a little bit of feeling at the site of injury.

The jubilation of the success wore quickly thin however. Eyes, misty figures and the sound of breathing that Pine did not sense in the air... He had needed to leave before he gave himself away to Muttonchops and Nitro, staring at something that was not there, listening to something imagined... He excused himself as gracefully as he could, citing hunting for the three of them. He needed to quickly adjust to the shortening of his tail after all. No, he didn't need help and he wouldn't take long.

He fled with as much dignity as he could.

He hadn't lied about hunting, nor his reasons for it. Pine *did* need to adjust quickly to the new reality of his tail, and hunger needed to be sated with prey. He just needed privacy, and quietness where none would see just how damaged Pine truly was.

So, Pine had tasted the air and tracked what smelled prey-like to a clearing. There in the center, a bird as large as a crow but... different. It was black, with feathers that flashed with almost oily iridescence in the red light of the world, its break was curved more viciously, and had eyes more seeing than natural.

Against a cat who could control the very air and lighten his own weight to soften his step however, the bird's seeing eyes was not enough, and Pine pounced. A killing bite was not needed as a sickening, popping crunch signalled a delicate spine snapping under the weight of Pine's paws. The bird died before it could cry out.

There, the bird laid crushed. As Pine examined his catch, he noted how the back was crooked, head askew and feathers ruffled. In death it looked very fragile. It inspired something in Pine's chest, something that caused him to slowly crouch and press a gentle paw against the bird's flank. No flutter met the touch, only the dying warmth of a body going cold.

"You mourn it." Pine jerked, eyes snapping up to stare at-

"Juniper..." but it wasn't her. It was her image certainly, but the ghost that stood before the russet tom was wrong. See through as all the wraiths were, the image of Juniper was as red as

the air- red as blood, *red as the plague*. Pine swallowed at the sight of her, unsurprised yet still struggling with the venomous viper of disappointment. He tried to curb the impulse to taste the air for an aching scent he knew would not be there. Faced with the unforgiving sight of his sister's sad yet fond smile, Pine's paw curled just a little bit tighter around the dead bird. Trying to ground himself. Despite his attempt at otherwise, his pained disappointment still strangled Pine's voice as he admitted **"You aren't real."** She felt real. This was the most present hallucination Pine has ever had, but they were *never real*.

The wraith of Juniper smiled sadly, shaking her head **"You always had a strong imagination. I envied the worlds you used to tell me in your stories."**

Strong enough to hallucinate his dead sister. It was only a matter of time until it'd happen. The fact that it happened now was not shocking in the least. Pine closed his eyes, and whispered **"I wish it'd been me, not you."** A private admittance. Pine had told Nitro once that he would trade Paradise to have Juniper back in a heartbeat- he had never told him that he would trade *himself* with equal lack of hesitance.

Again, the red ghost smiled a pained, heartbroken smile, as if Pine's words pained her more than her death did. She was just a hallucination, but seeing that expression on her face *hurt*, and Pine's ears pinned back. **"But it wasn't."** She dipped her head, looking down at the dead creature Pine had thoughtlessly crushed for food. **"Why do you mourn it? It was food for you and your friends. You never regretted killing, why now?"**

Why?

Pine choked on a black, humorless laugh as he looked down at the bird. He realized then that he was cradling it like he would a kit. **"I don't know."** He whispered, petting his paw through the silky feathers. It was true, he had never regretted killing, and he never would, but...

Juniper's image understood of course, because she simply was a ghost of Pine's mind. Every thought rattling in the house of his skull was her's as much as his. She knew, and she gave voice to it instead of allowing it to fester as Pine would have preferred. Just like the real Juniper- she had never been content to leaving anything unvoiced if she thought it would help...

"It's all you seem to do, isn't it? Taking life. Taking blood. Taking time. Are you greedy, or selfish to take so much?"

A breath punched from Pine even as he smiled, bitter and brittle. No one was around to see this weakness; not Nitro or Muttonchops. No enemy or peer. Just Pine's hallucination, and a bird he killed. The dead would sing nothing of it, so Pine was safe in his deplorable display. **"Perhaps it's too much. to ask to give something back."** Pine admitted, the wind stirring in unrest. **"Sometimes, I think all I've ever done was hurt others, or cling too tight. I miss being alone, but I'm-"** he cringed from completely that sentence aloud, even as it rang in his head. *He was afraid to go back.* Back to the silence, back to the walking death. Forgotten and forgettable. A plague cat without the plague. Back to before the time when Nitro had brought intense upheaval to Pine's life.

The red tom curled closer to his kill, and tried to feed that feeling from before- that feeling that had closed the wound of his missing tail. Pine tried to give and *heal*, to reverse the damage he'd done.

The dead couldn't come back to life, even with the power to heal. Despite his straining efforts, the bird remained broken and cold, the eyes beginning to cloud now with death. Pine had known that he couldn't take back what he'd done, even though he tried.

"Sometimes we want to change things," Juniper's ghost whispered, as she knelt before Pine's trembling form "but even with all the power at our paws, it is not our right to do it."

"Then wh.at's the point of po.wer?!" Pine snapped, seething at something *that wasn't there*.

"Oh Pine..." The wraith whispered, her red head of mist slipping closer. Had she been real, her nose would've touched Pine's brow and he would have felt her breath. She was not, and so Pine felt nothing at all. "You know power is only as useful as its user. A tool, and nothing more. What you do with it is your own choice. You now have the choice to take, or to give. " A ghostly paw waved over the bird.

"You took its life to give and share it with others. Perhaps you aren't as selfish as you think."

When Pine looked up, he found only empty air. His hallucination was gone, without a scent to leave evidence that it had been there at all. He had been talking to himself, he knew. A symptom of his reality and madness.

A shuddering breath rattled slowly from Pine as the tom ducked his head, staring down at the bird's glossy feathers. Even twisted grotesquely out of shape, the creature was oddly pretty. It wasn't of any sort of bird Pine had ever seen, but in a way, it reminded Pine of the Blackbirds from home. Songbirds, just like Steller Jays.

Carefully, Pine collected three feathers from the bird's undamaged wings, picking the best and slipping them carefully into his fur. Unconsciously, Pine mirrored how Nitro wore his feathers, all those months ago.

He didn't know why Nitro wore his feathers, but Pine... Pine wanted to wear at least one as a reminder to himself- that it was ok for him to only ever be what he was, if it meant he could do good with the violence he so readily and instinctually wrought.

Collecting the bird carefully in his jaws, Pine resolutely turned his back to the clearing and padded back to the others, ignoring the sensation of sad eyes following his retreating back.

It was only ever his imagination, anyways.





He/Him
Green Soul ♦ Level 4

Interacting With ♦ MC, Nitro
Mentions ♦ Juniper

♦ Notes ♦
Pine offers a gift

When Pine returns to the clearing where he'd left Nitro had Muttonchops, he truthfully feels no better than he had when he left. The words and perceived words he had traded with the air were thought provoking, as well as tentatively hopeful; but it was a hope Pine was hesitant to take as his own.

From kithood he had been trained to kill, not to survive or provide. To kill purely for glory, and to earn scars as badges of pride. A barbaric, blood thirsty creed, and Pine would have happily continued to follow it until he'd fallen in battle if he had not realized that it had only ever been for entertainment. Perhaps, if he'd stayed and finished his vigil instead of deserting with his mother, Pine would have become a proud, essential member of the gang where Thunder would have been gleeful to claim that *he* trained Pine. Where Scorch would have finally explained why he had always watched Pine with an unfathomable stare...

Pine had left that life because he had been offended and impatient, not horrified as a normal cat would have been. Sometimes he still missed the simplicity of it, until he recalls that such a life wouldn't have led him to where he was now. Now, with actual friendships and a chance for something *more*. Something complex, and beyond Pine's birth...

These thoughts race through Pine's head as he places his catch at the feet of his companions, and he looks at them with aged eyes. He wonders if they notice the offness of him, or the new adornments in his fur.

He wants to be better, he wants to *provide*, just as he was doing now with the bird, like that ghost of Juniper said. Swallowing, a little nervous, Pine raises a paw and pats at the feathers in his fur.

A reminder that he can do good.

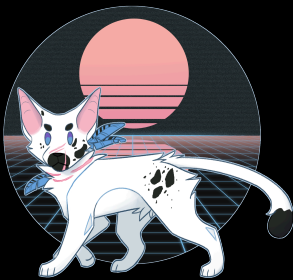
With hesitation clear in his movements, Pine pulls two of the black feathers from his fur and separates them, leaving only one still in the fur of his chest.

He wants to do good.

Voice arrested, Pine offers a feather each to Nitro and Muttonchops. He knows he must say something, to explain *why* this was important to him, but to do it vocally was simply too much. He signs instead, looking to Nitro to translate for Muttonchops, and to *understand*.

:I want..: Pine pauses, gold eyes sliding away to the trees, unsure of himself. There, he notices a wavering figure of mist and Pine finds it in himself again to continue **:I want what betterness Paradise offers:** *Together*, he finishes in his mind, and waits in unpleasant anticipation for their answers.

⌘ DONE ⌘



@TEΔ-IEΔ²

△ NITRO △

Μαύρο άλογο

- male || 5.5 years
- mood:
- interacting with:
- mentions:

RONTU

Soul: Blue
Level: 04



Nitro shifted uncomfortably, kneading the ground with his paws. He was worried and his thoughts weren't being helpful either. They kept running around with worse ideas possible, throwing them in his face every few seconds. Sometimes, the white tom wished he could just turn off his brain, even for just a few seconds.

Nitro's eyes jerked up as soon as Pine's scent hit his nose. A magnet to metal. Well, *now* his thoughts weren't thinking about worse-case scenarios, but they absolutely weren't doing anything helpful either.

He watched with a sense of unease and apprehension that curled deep in his gut. There was something...*off*. But Nitro didn't know what it was, let alone if it was a good or bad thing. So he did what he did best, he waited and watched.

The black feathers immediately caught his eye. It was hard to miss their mirrored position to his old ones. Nitro's brain short-circuited for a moment. He nearly missed Pine's signed words.

With a shaky voice, Nitro relayed the words to Muttonchops, but never took his eyes off of the molten liquid ones in front of him.

He took an ivory paw and placed it on the iridescent feather that seemed to

be made of a dark liquid that made the colors dance like leaves on the wind. His own icy eyes widened infinitesimally, and Nitro was certain that Pine heard the breath snag in his throat.

It came to him softly, but then made his lungs burn like he was chasing something he'd never catch. But that was just it. He would never catch *this*. *And he must never know. That I love you. I loveyouiloveyouiloveyouiloveyou...*

Nitro squeezed his eyes shut, his heart racing. He would survive this. He'd been through things that hurt, and this was no different.

But Nitro was a selfish cat and not one of moderation. He'd steal touches and glances and hope that they would be enough.

They won't be.

With one of his softest smiles, Nitro picked up the feather and mirrored the placement of Pine's, resolutely ignoring the pain in his heart.

Pretending was his forte. He could do this. But the selfish part of Nitro still stepped forward and touched his nose to Pine's, feeling as though he was touching the surface of the sun. It would have to be enough because Pine deserved a cat worthy of paradise, and Nitro was not. But that was ok, Pine would find his one and Nitro would be happy for him.

He will be, but he'll die inside as well.

Pulling slightly away, Nitro moved back in and slotted himself under Pine's chin. **"And you deserve it."**

Actions: N/A. [!!] **N/A** [!!]



INTERACTING

Pine, Nitro

MENTIONS

Helena

SUMMARY:

Muttonchops mopes x2 and accepts the feather, but doesn't really have an idea what to do with it or what it really signifies!

She experiences... emotions that aren't just on the surface and doesn't know what to do about 'em

ACTION:

N/A

◆ MUTTONCHOPS ◆

she/her ◆ purple soul ◆ @fairyleaf



Muttonchops watched Nitro and Pine in silence. It'd been a good while since she'd been completely comfortable; Pine splitting for several minutes for a "hunt" had only intensified the oddness. She had been honestly surprised to see him return with prey to share between the three of them.

After the training session had concluded, she hadn't been able to look at his tufty stump of a tail. His apparent lack of concern over it had started this perpetual befuddlement within her. It was unexpected, and strange, and so it occupied most of her thoughts. *They really didn't have cats like this back in my day*, she'd thought more than once, with only the slightest hint of dry amusement.

She almost missed his offer and jumped a little at being addressed--this didn't at all feel like her moment to be here. For perhaps the millionth time she thought of her daughter. A characteristic desire to wander off alone was ever-present.

But she didn't. She found herself focusing on her red companion who was so desperately trying to convey something she wasn't catching. Even with Nitro translating his peculiar gestures, she wasn't able to grasp his meanings. There was an air now that she felt about him that put her off *just* enough for her to notice it. She felt almost a little too afraid to properly interact with him now. An injured cat desires rest. An injured cat doesn't insist on hunting alone so soon after injury.

An injured cat doesn't provide for the one that injured them.

Muttonchops shook her head, suddenly aware of the silence that was beginning to stretch a hair too long. Then, to clarify that her head-shake wasn't her answer, she nodded at Pine. "Don't we all," she finally replied to his remark, offering him and Nitro a wry smile.

She glanced down at the feather Pine had separated from the bird and tilted her head. She'd noticed the feathers the two of them wore; she'd thought it was a family custom or some fad amongst the younger Trialgoers. In all it seemed extremely impractical, but it also reminded her of successful hunts and hot days in the shade. Its glimmering spines dimly reflected the eerie redness around them and then it reminded her of Helena. But between the

three of them it must signify... something.

Maybe they were a group now. *Or somethin'.*

Could that be possible? Subconsciously she relaxed her shoulders.

Oh, damn it all, if this was a fad she wanted in. What else was this weird world for?

“Alright, you lovebirds,” she teased them lightly, prodding the solitary feather closer to her. **“How do I get this theng t’stay in my fur like y’all? And are we gonna eat this bird er what?”**



Pine

Crowfen

He/Him
Green Soul ♦ Level 4

Interacting With ♦ MC, Nitro
Mentions ♦ --

♦ Notes ♦
Pine begins to hope for betterness.

As Nitro accepted the feather, Pine senses how the air he breathed jerked from his jagged breath but cannot find it in him to focus too much on why the air around Nitro suddenly vibrates with *something*. Instead, a weight is both lifted and crushed upon the tom in a single instant. Nitro’s understanding he hadn’t doubted, not truly. In a way Pine was returning that moment that changed his life, when Nitro had extended his friendship with a blue Steller Jay feather. In the back of Pine’s mind where the doubting lurked, his demons had whispered horrid things. Things that had caused Pine’s paw to shake just slightly, but outwardly he showed no reaction. He had plenty of time to learn not to react to the voices of his head after all.

You just want to leave your mark on them. Claim them as yours. Anyone who looks will see them and see *you*.

It was Muttonchops whom Pine was unsure of. They hardly knew each other in the grand scheme of things, having only met minutes before Helena’s actions when Nitro had been pinned by a tree. Yet Pine had grown quickly attached to the elder she-cat. She had risked

her own *safety* to save Nitro, already a trait that endeared Pine to her greatly, but also her personality itself drew him. Dry and pointed, which the red tom appreciated. It was also the air around her that spoke of something familiar, something Pine felt kinship to- if they spoke of their experiences, the golden eyed tom was sure they would find many similarities and that prospect was... comforting...

The fact that it was Muttonchops that had directly caused Pine's injury hardly touched his mind. It wasn't of consequence because it was an accident. Had it been intentional Pine would have thought and reacted much differently, but it *hadn't*.

As Nitro steals an affectionate and grounding touch, Pine leans close in an effort to ignore the clawing dread as he watched how Muttonchops thinks- the time stretched painfully to the point where the red tom almost wishes that Nitro hadn't tucked his head under Pine's, but over.

For a moment, Muttonchops' initial shake of her head crushes Pine's tentative hope. His thoughts began to darken with bitterness, *Of course I should have known I asked too much. We hardly know each other why would she want-*

But then Muttonchops continues, and takes the last feather.

A breath Pine hadn't realized he'd been holding escapes him, and he slumps just slightly into Nitro's bulk. The tension that had held the tom aloft almost completely deserts him, and Pine latches quickly to the merciful task of helping Muttonchops pin the feather into her fur. Muttonchops' teasing comment slides over Pine's senses, but the flustering it causes is quickly drowned out by a tiny candle of a hopeful *maybe*.

Maybe I can do better. Maybe we can do better, together.

When Muttonchops is successfully adorned, Pine takes a moment to truly take in the sight of his two *friends* wearing his gifts. The black feathers like little markers that spoke to Pine.

This is why you can take things. This is why you can be violent. You are doing it for these cats, so you can help them and provide for them.

This is why you want to be better.

⌘ DONE ⌘