

gratitude

*Thank you so much for giving me a chance :) Take care!*

"uglier truths"

It all started with nightmares.

Heavy breathing and rustling of the covers alerted Velio, who started dozing off in his spot near the bed. He sat up, blinking exhaustion out of his eyes, and looked to his side.

Seeing his cousin's face twisted in an awful, eerie expression was nothing new, but it still broke Velio's heart a little. He knew better than to reach out and touch her, so he opted for patiently waiting for her to wake up on her own.

He managed to sit still for two minutes before Daren clenched her teeth to choke back a quiet sob.

"Darenya", he urged desperately, looking at her twitching body. "Wake up. It's just a bad dream. He's not here."

His cousin's icy eyes shot open so suddenly he couldn't suppress a flinch. Surprised, he scrambled to gather his words into a coherent sentence.

"Reni," he repeated, softer this time. "It was just a bad dream, okay? You're in the school attic. It's just you, alright? He's not here."

Daren didn't respond, just staring at him with widened irises. Velio circled through his usual set of reassurances—soothing words he didn't mean and cordial promises he wouldn't keep.

They were aware of each other's façades, masks worn to shelter others from the ugly truth. The breach between him and Daren could only be crossed through verity, and neither of them were willing to shed their armor of lies.

Velio wasn't sure how long he sat there, muttering empty words, but by the time Daren fell asleep again, the sun had already begun to rise. Its warm rays slid through the half-closed blinds, covering the small room in deep orange.

He stood up and stretched. Those nightly shifts next to Daren's bed were draining him quicker than he anticipated, but he didn't trust anyone else to talk his cousin down. He knew Kitt or Izah's presence would probably be enough to calm her, but the thought of leaving Daren alone left a heavy knot in his stomach. He failed her far too many times.

He knew Daren would get suspicious soon. He was at her side every night, always awake whenever nightmares plagued her mind. She'd corner him and demand answers, then get irritated over him sacrificing his sleep and pitying her.

The thing—the ugly truth—was that Velio hadn't slept for a long, long time.

He wasn't sure when it started. Or, if he was aiming to be more accurate, he would've said: he wasn't sure when it ended. His humanity.

It ended with skipping meals and all-nighters. At first, he assumed it was due to the copious amount of stress he was under, but no human could go a week without eating and sleeping. He was neither hungry nor tired. He felt... terrifyingly normal.

His powers changed, too. The winds carried sounds and voices he shouldn't be able to hear. In Daren's breath he sensed exhaustion he shouldn't have noticed. The eerie hum of Betweenshores buzzed beneath his skin.

The answer lingered on the edge of his mind, but he refused to acknowledge it. He'd crumble underneath its weight.

He heard Daren's body shifting under the covers. He rushed to the window, opening it. He didn't waste time looking back. His cousin had to face this morning without him. He would be back at her side once she'd fallen asleep again.

He pretended he didn't hear her confused, broken voice calling out his name when he leapt out the window and disappeared into the golden light.