

Holding On

Scene 1

The room was quiet except for the rasp of cloth against scale. Koji's hands moved with a care he never showed in battle, sliding ointment across Zhao's molting skin. The faint crackle of electricity rose where his fingers brushed too close to a horn.

"You should take better care of yourself," Koji said. His voice was flat, almost cold. But the way he lingered, fingertips smoothing over each patch, betrayed something softer.

Zhao waited. The silence between them pressed heavy, expectant. He wanted the words—just three of them—to break it.

Koji's mouth tightened. Nothing. Only his hands, steady, finishing the work.

Scene 2

The rain clung to everything, a layer of mist hanging beneath the lamps. Zhao stood beneath the canopy of a store, water still dripping from the curve of his horns. His arms were folded, his tail still. He didn't move when Koji appeared, he never did until the shadow drew too close.

An umbrella snapped open. Koji tilted it over him, sheltering Zhao more than himself. Rain coursed down his jacket, soaking the seams dark.

"You'll catch a chill," Koji said. His voice was low, rough at the edges. He shifted closer. Their sleeves brushed, fabric damp.

Zhao's throat worked. He wanted more—words, plain and small—but Koji's mouth stayed shut. The umbrella tilted farther, leaving Koji's shoulder wet.

The silence pressed hard between them. Zhao leaned in anyway, into the dry space Koji carved out for him. It wasn't enough. Rather it was all he had.

Scene 3

The apartment was dark. Zhao found the paper bag on the table, plain and folded at the top. Inside were his favorite snacks. Ones he never mentioned. Ones only someone who paid too much attention could know.

The paper crackled in his hands, too loud in the quiet.

Koji stood in the doorway. Arms crossed. Half in shadow. His eyes lingered on Zhao, sharp, then softened into something unreadable.

“You should eat,” Koji said.

Zhao’s chest pulled tight. His mouth wanted to move—to laugh, to ask is that all—but nothing came out.

Koji stayed a breath longer, then turned. His steps faded down the hall.

The bag was still warm. Zhao pressed it against his chest. As if holding it close might turn it into the words he was waiting for.

Scene 4

Zhao sat on the floor, legs crossed, his tail curled loose against the rug. Koji stood behind him, comb in hand. He tugged once, twice, then slowed, fingers careful where the strands caught.

“You should cut it,” Koji muttered.

Zhao’s ears twitched. “You like it long.”

Koji didn’t answer. The comb clicked through another tangle. His hand lingered at the nape of Zhao’s neck, calloused fingers brushing bare skin. He braided with more precision than he admitted to, knotting each section tight.

Zhao’s eyes closed. The steady pull, the drag of fingers against his scalp—it felt like something intimate disguised as ordinary.

Koji tied the end with a small band, neat. He didn’t step back. His hand stayed at Zhao’s shoulder, thumb pressed faintly against bone.

Zhao waited. The silence stretched. He wanted to hear it—just once. But Koji only clicked his tongue and said, “Don’t mess it up.”

The ache settled deep, but Zhao smiled anyway.

Scene 5

The arena lights hummed. The crowd’s roar still echoed in Zhao’s head as he sat on the bench, blood drying at the corner of his mouth. His chest heaved, every breath sharp.

Koji crouched in front of him, a bottle of water in one hand, a towel in the other. He pressed the towel to Zhao’s cheek, not asking permission. His eyes were steady, too steady.

“You’re reckless,” Koji said.

Zhao huffed a laugh, low. “You sound worried.”

Koji didn’t rise to it. He opened the bottle, held it out until Zhao drank. Their fingers brushed, lingering too long for an accident.

Zhao watched him, throat tight. The words almost slipped—say it, say it now! But Koji only pressed the towel harder, jaw set.

“You make it hard to watch,” he said.

Zhao’s chest ached. He wanted to answer, to lean forward until the silence broke. Instead, he sat still, letting Koji wipe the blood away.

Finale

The apartment lay in half-darkness, curtains pulled tight to keep the city at bay. Zhao’s steps were soft against the floor, his tail dragging behind him. He didn’t need to look—he knew Koji was there. The air always felt different when he was here, thick with the faint bite of smoke that clung stubbornly to his clothes, as if the walls were holding their breath.

Koji sat on the sofa, head tilted back, eyes closed. He looked asleep, but Zhao didn’t believe it. His shoulders were too tense to be asleep, jaw set like he was waiting for something. He knew.

Zhao stopped in the doorway. His throat felt tight, words lodged where they would not leave. He swallowed them down, as always. “You came back,” he said instead, voice low.

Koji opened his eyes. The look he gave him was steady, unreadable, until it wasn't. “I always come back”

The silence between them thickened, pressing in. Zhao's fingers curled at his sides, tail brushing against his ankle. Every instinct ached to close the distance, to take more. Yet, he didn't. Not until Koji reached forward, fingers curling into his shirt and pulling him down without a word.

Zhao stumbled, knees brushing the sofa, and then Koji's mouth was on his. The kiss was rough, unpracticed, tasting of restraint breaking. Zhao froze, chest tight, then shuddered, leaning in with a soft sound that lodged somewhere deep in his throat. His tail coiled, betraying a nervousness he couldn't hide.

Koji's hand traced the back of his neck, anchoring him there. Their mouths moved—first hard, then gentle, like they were guiding each other in a tango. Teeth scraped, breath mingled, until Koji broke away just enough to press their foreheads together. A silent claim.

Zhao's chest heaved. He could feel Koji's heartbeat through the thrum of his own, steady but racing, as if the air itself had grown heavier. The silence pressed in again, charged and fragile.

Then, rough, almost dragged from him: “I love you.”

The words landed heavy. Zhao's lashes trembled. He didn't answer. Instead, he leaned forward, catching Koji's lips again—gentler this time, desperate in a quieter way. His hands clung to Koji's shirt, holding on like it was the only solid thing in the room.

When they parted, Zhao buried his face against Koji's shoulder. His breath came uneven, but his body softened, tension bleeding away.

Koji's arm came around him, solid, steady. He pressed his lips once to Zhao's temple, no more words left.

And Zhao, for the first time, didn't need them.