

The desert was eerily quiet. Iris couldn't hear the usual humming chatter that always came from their city. As they approached, they kept an ear to the air, their gaze searched the surrounding desert for threats.

Iris reached back and grabbed Eiji's shirt collar. Iris dropped their voice to a whisper. "Do you hear anything?"

Eiji shook his head.

"And that doesn't concern you at all?"

Eiji held up his hand, to indicate that Ro'im stop talking and listened for several moments. His back straightened and his shoulders tensed. "It's concerning, but let's not jump to any conclusions yet. Maybe you should stay back Ro'im. In case something happens."

Ro'im pressed his lips together. "I knew this would likely be dangerous going in when I agreed to join you. I want to help."

Iris turned to Eiji. "He'll be able to see if there's magic residue here. He has the sight. If there is danger ahead, his eyes will detect their magic much sooner."

Eiji blinked. "Oh. Then please look away."

Ro'im gave a shy smile. "Well, I'm not quite sure how it works I've always seen things without trying, but I'll try."

"Do you see anything over there?" Iris pointed to shifter city in the distance.

Ro'im squinted off into the distance. "It's faint, but there's a silver and sky blue residue. Any idea what that could mean?"

Iris's hand tightened on Eiji's shirt collar. Eiji pried Iris's hands off him. "Ease up before you cut off circulation."

"Sorry." Iris let go of Eiji, and he staggered back.

Eiji placed his hand on Iris's. "She's going to be okay."

Iris shouted. "You don't know that." Their voice cracked. Iris glanced down at the sand. "What if we're too late to help her. What if she suffers the same fate as..." Iris's voice trailed off.

"Iris. You had no way of knowing."

Tears filled Iris's eyes. "But I did. She warned me of what Opal had threatened them with if they didn't turn me in. If she dies, it will be my fault," The last word came out barely a whisper and tears spilled over. Iris rubbed at their eyes, burying their face into their arm.

Eiji placed a hand on their shoulder. "Hey, it's going to be okay. No matter what we're here for you. I'm here for you. We'll get through this. I'm worried about Enzo too, but we're going to make it through this together okay." He lifted Iris's chin, "So chin up. Don't let Opal get the satisfaction of seeing you cry.

Iris sucked in a few deep breaths to level out their breathing, until their choking sobs turned to tiny hiccup like gasps. Eiji rubbed their back and grabbed onto their hand. "Let's go."

Iris gave a weak nod as their small group crept towards the shifter's town. The scent of smoke filled Iris's nose. A whimper escaped Iris's lips, but they pushed forward. Tendrils of smoke rose from the village, but Iris also smelled Luna.