

"W-wait!" Myu cried out quite suddenly. She shuffled on her front paws, left then right in a bout of nerves. Hitori would already be gone if she hesitated anymore! She lifted herself onto the railing, a feat she had done a number of times.

*It's just this time, it felt **too** real.*

*As if she had forgotten how to do even something as basic as breathing, she looked down to the garden. She was so used to taking that glide down, but this time, she needed to lift her muzzle. The sky. The same sky that Hitori had invited her countless times to come see with him, the same sky that she knew only in story books and fairy tales. The same daunting sky that seemed to stretch on for miles. No more walls, no more monotonous view. The urge to travel was strong, something so hard to deny for this one event. Arianrhod. Myu had heard of it from her caretakers. It was something **outside**, and outside was a big no in her life. She had been denied countless times, but this time? After having spent a lifetime, an age, and far too long listening- she wanted to live her own life!*

*Myu practically leapt into the air, letting out a shrill squeak as she furiously flapped her wings to not just let her flutter down- but **soar** upward. It was strange, weird, and so unbelievably different. "H-hitori, wait- wait for me!" She puffed into the cold air, shaking as the winds blew through her white coat like a leaf. Her ears flattened against her head, and with a bit of loud flapping and awkward wobbling, she was able to lift and propel herself towards her partner. "I'm coming too; In- Hitori, I want to go **with** you." She looked back to the balcony, worry plain on her face and guilt threatening to set in. "I just- I've **never** gone beyond the garden. I don't know... what it's like out there. If I get in trouble is one thing, but..." Maybe she was fretting too much? Hitori **always** came back. Surely it wasn't so dangerous.*

*Hitori soared gracefully through the air around Myu as she climbed higher in the sky to meet him, careful to correct her course or cut through the air drafts to stabilize her shaky wings. His laughter filled the crisp night air - joyous, warm, **fond** - as he wove around her in a memorizing dance of feathers and constellations. "I'm here for you, Myu," he spoke in a voice so gentle it could have been mistaken for the rushing wind. "The world is full of dangers, but it is in equal parts filled with beauty. Regardless of what's to come, you will always be safe with me." Hitori knew the trek ahead of them would be a daunting one for her, but he took care to brush against her during the long flight to try to settle her nerves and remind her she'd never be alone, not so long as he's around.*

*It wasn't long before the imposing silhouette of the mountain cut through the horizon ahead of them. Arianrhod. The Wishcalling Shrine was only one long trek away, and despite Hitori's usual reserved demeanor, he was positively bristling with excitement having his partner by his side - Myu did always have a way of drawing out the most in him, even when she wasn't trying. As they landed smoothly at the base of Mount Arianrhod, Myu's nerves got the best of her again and she cast worried glances backwards as if expecting her guards or her nanny to manifest out of the cold, powdery snow being kicked up by the wind. Secure in the knowledge that she was here - finally **here** and not gazing dreamily out her bedroom window - alone with*

Hitori, Myu turned her gaze back toward the mountain with the resolve that she would be as independent and capable as Hitori was - or, at the very least, not dead weight.

A frigid gust of winter wind blew across Myu's face as if to laugh at her newfound boldness, and she shut her eyes tightly against the snowflakes attempting to blind her. Once the sudden squall passed, she reopened her eyes and focused in on a soft glow dancing through the heavy snowfall a few yards ahead of them.

"Hitori, look!" she let out in a gasp.

Eyeing the light warily, Hitori stepped subtly but deliberately between Myu and their new visitor. Myu shot an anxious glance to Hitori as if waiting for the much more well-traveled snare to give a logical explanation for what they were seeing, but none came forth from him. He gently brushed his tail against her side as he stepped forward and she courageously followed suit, but in a flash the light was gone, only to blink back into view a few yards ahead yet again as if to taunt the couple. A melodic chime carried back to them on the wind as the light hovered up and back down. If one were to listen closely, one could swear it sounded like the mischievous, yet high pitched troll and giggle of a child, but Hitori reassured that it was only their nerves making them think this way.

With one final, almost frenzied display, their mysterious glowing companion disappeared from sight, and Hitori lifted his head toward the mountain's summit, where the Wishcalling Shrine stood triumphant and shining through the near blinding snow. Its luminance almost seemed to mock them, but they gathered their courage all the same and set forward through the bitter cold.

It's Hitori who took the courageous first step forward, waiting patiently for Myu but clearly so entranced by her. She meekly padded over to follow, huddled close and low to the ground. Her ears lurched forward, alert to all the new sounds around her, scared that anything or everything could be a rogue phantom waiting to whisk her away. Hitori chuckled warmly and pressed his body against hers as they walked for both warmth and security. "I'm here," he reassured Myu gently. "Regardless of what comes our way, I'm here."

They began their ascent slowly, Myu huddled close and nigh tucked right against Hitori's side. Hitori kept alert as they climbed up the mountainside and wove between the forest trees, only sometimes following the well-trodden paths through the fairly barren winter landscape. "This forest is usually thick with leaves," Hitori spoke lightly, "And sometimes, those leaves are painted in a multitude of different colours. There are times where they cover this entire pathway and make the whole area seem as if it's paved with gold. It is beautiful; I should take you sometime." Hitori had a habit of launching into story when he was around Myu, and this occasion was no different. Myu had to admit it was comforting to her, and as they climbed the cold, dark mountain, it gave her something else to think of, especially when the thought was always in the back of her mind that they were being watched or followed on their long hike to the top.

The peaceful moment they shared was cut abruptly short by the sounds of the dead brush crackling and rustling around them, like something was running through the dead foliage just out of sight. A relatively loud CRACK made Myu freeze, her ears going from relaxed to immediately alert. Her eyes widened and her breath caught in her throat. She didn't dare to move a muscle, and even less comforting...

Hitori stopped too.

Hitori pressed himself closer to the ground as he scanned the surroundings. "What was that?" Hitori's voice was low and cautious; he didn't dare speak louder in case it was a predator.

"I don't know," Myu responded, her voice laden with anxiety, "but I think we should go."

*Hitori, making sure Myu was safe by his side, kept a watchful eye out for the source of the disturbances as they continued forward. He started to relax when it became apparent nothing - and more importantly, no **one** - was following them. Just as he raised to his full height, another loud crackling noise resounded around them and a tree branch snapped across the path they passed by scarcely a few seconds before. Myu practically jumped out of her fur at the close encounter and hurried behind Hitori, whose own fur was bristling. He was all tense muscles and adrenaline, though his fight or flight slowly settled down once he fully took in the scene.*

The fallen tree had scattered black fur stuck in some branches, some glistening stardust spilling across the twigs, and an object rested across the path ahead. Hitori took a closer look out of curiosity. It was ... a lantern? He called Myu over once he was sure they were safe, and she complied after steeling her nerves once more.

"The light from before," Hitori started, "I believe came from this lantern. Our mystery 'haunting' was another starsnare on the path to the Wishing Shrine, it seems."

Relief washed over Myu, but it was clear she still was anxious to get to their destination. Hitori picked up the lantern for safe-keeping in hopes they might return it to its owner at the summit and readily agreed to move on. They would need to set up camp soon, but, for now, they could finally continue their ascent without interruption.