

nobody told me it ended

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nobody told me it ended

by [weareallstardustfallen](#)

Summary

They came to a balcony, and the figure stopped, whirling to face him. Sure enough, he wasn't someone Scott had ever invited, or a member of the crew.

Scott took in his appearance- surprisingly small, dark coat that looked out of place against the bright colors of the lobby, asymmetrical white mask- and felt his heartbeat stutter as the realizations hit him.

This was a *kid*. And he was *terrified*.

Or: Mythro, fresh from the Abyss and terrified of being caught again, finds himself on the MCC world. Scott just wants to help.

Notes

hello everyone, welcome to the past month or so's work! bit of a longer notes section today, but i'll try to keep it relevant

i am playing fast and loose with timelines and canon here, in a variety of ways. primarily:

-there are dsmp characters in here, but i am *not* using the majority of dsmp lore. the only thing i have taken is that sam created pandora's vault; otherwise, i don't know what they're doing but it is not whatever is going on in the dsmp

-mythro-wise, this story takes place entirely past where we've seen in canon. he has been trapped in and then escaped from the abyss.

-for scott, this is entirely *after* third life and entirely *before* last life. there are brief mentions of empires storylines, and it occurs roughly between the end of the xornoth plotline and the beginning of the crown plotline. empires is only slightly relevant, and scott's primary server is mcc.

there are also some **trigger warnings** which you should be aware of. generally, anything that occurs in mythro's lore will be mentioned; for those unaware, that is the manipulation and abuse of a teenager, specifically in him being continually imprisoned, manipulated by trusted authority figures, and his pet being murdered. there are also mentions of grief and the loss of loved ones, discussion of malnutrition, descriptions of panic attacks, and mild physical injury. in general: this is inherently a story about trauma and healing from it.

this fic would not exist without the help of the wonderful eros and theo, who were both super helpful with brainstorming, troubleshooting, and the like. they can be found at bananasofthorns and pine-storm-season respectively, thank you both <3

title is from a pearl by mitski

this fic is fully written and will update daily!

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

Chapter 1

Barely minutes after Scott had arrived, Noxite was waving him over to the side, mouth pressed in a thin line in that way of his that said something had not gone to plan. Scott stifled a sigh, and went.

“We’ve got an uninvited guest,” Noxite told him, quietly enough that no one around them could hear. “No one’s actually managed to lay eyes on him yet, but he’s been around- stealing a bit, mostly food, but he doesn’t seem to have tampered with anything. The crew’s taken to calling him the local ghost, with how good he is at keeping hidden.”

Scott crossed his arms, tapping out an idle pattern on his arm. “But he hasn’t been causing any problems?”

“Not that we can tell,” Noxite confirmed. “Still, I figured you should know.”

“Thank you,” Scott said, only a bit reluctantly. “Do you need me to do something about it during the tournament, or...”

“Not unless *he* does something,” Noxite said, and waved him off. “Just keep an eye out- we don’t know much about him.”

“I will,” Scott said, tapping his shoulder in a quick acknowledgement before he ran back to his team.

He almost forgot about it through the rest of the day- the ghost, apparently, didn’t want to be seen, and so he wasn’t. By the end of the first day, when things had quieted, he’d almost forgotten about it- really, it made more sense for the guy to stay as far from the tournament as he could, if he didn’t want to be seen.

They were all lingering in one of the lobbies after the fourth game, most of them not quite willing to leave just yet, when he abruptly remembered- Sam, across the room, shouted something audible over the noise, and somewhere behind him Scott could just hear the sound of someone running.

Something about it wasn’t right.

With a quick murmured excuse, he slipped away from the crowd, and followed.

He didn’t chase whoever it was- if they were already spooked, which he thought they were, it was probably the worst thing he could do. Instead, he just followed quietly- their footsteps were loud enough to track.

They came to a balcony, and the figure stopped, whirling to face him. Sure enough, he wasn’t someone Scott had ever invited, or a member of the crew.

Scott took in his appearance- surprisingly small, dark coat that looked out of place against the bright colors of the lobby, asymmetrical white mask- and felt his heartbeat stutter as the realizations hit him.

This was a *kid*. And he was *terrified*.

He had backed himself up against the railing, clinging to it desperately as he tried to find a way to get further away from Scott. There wasn’t really anywhere else for him to go, but-

But he kept sneaking glances back over the edge, at the ground far below. And based on how panicky he seemed, Scott didn't doubt he would go for it.

"Wait-" he started, taking half a step forwards, and then the kid was gone, more quickly than Scott had expected. He ran to the balcony just in time to see him land, rolling to his feet and vanishing into the shadows.

"Shit," Scott hissed to himself, but there was nothing for him to do- he couldn't follow, and with how well he'd been avoiding the crew Scott doubted he could find the kid again.

He probably wasn't in danger, at least- none of the crew would hurt him, and he was well able to keep out of the way of the contestants until the end of the tournament. In the lobby, he couldn't get into much trouble- even if Scott would have liked to be able to make sure he was okay, there wasn't much way he could get hurt.

He sighed, taking one last look over the ground below. There was no sign of the kid, and eventually he turned away.

There was nothing he could do now- he'd let Noxite know to leave him alone, and he'd keep an eye out. For now, though, he had to focus on the next day of the tournament.

Even as he went back to the dorms, he couldn't shake the worry.

And the kid didn't show up during the games the following day, either, though several times Scott thought he heard footsteps. Still, he wasn't sure if he was imagining things until it ended, when he was sitting in the lobby with his friends- he could feel the pressure of eyes watching him, and he looked up to see a faint oddness to a patch of shadow high up on the Dome itself, that same distinctive white mask and tiny bright flash of color.

How did he even get up there?

He could see the kid starting to get up, moving away, but he didn't run, just stared down at Scott with fear clear in his posture even from so far away.

Scott looked away.

H, beside him, knocked their elbows together. "You alright? You look like you've seen a ghost."

Scott laughed. "Maybe I have."

Mythro dropped from his hiding spot as soon as he was sure no one would see him, hurrying back to the little hole he'd been using as a base for the past few days- he'd have to move soon, before anyone figured out where he was. For now, though, he just wanted to get there, get away from the crushing crowds, finally *sleep*.

He hadn't been able to properly settle since the... *tournament*, apparently, had started, and the world had filled with *people*. He'd been expecting the server to stay relatively empty the way it had been- he'd been too disoriented by the rush of color and sound to realize they were preparing for something.

He stumbled into the tiny room he'd been using- probably a storage closet, but he didn't really care so long as it was quiet and mostly-secure- and confirmed again that the few things he'd managed to steal were there. It was nothing more than a bit of non-perishable food, just enough to last him a

few days if he couldn't manage to get anything more, and a half-empty water bottle, but it was enough to keep him alive.

Once he'd jammed the door as much as he could, just enough to give him warning if someone tried to open it, he curled into a ball in the corner, muffling the noises of celebration from the outside with his hands. Even more than a week after he'd escaped, the color and cacophony of this server was still so much.

All of it was. The jack-o-lanterns littered around, the man in a panda costume that had made him think too much of Sven when everything he felt about him was tangled and messy, the *legendary prison warden* sitting beside him, the fact that the man with blue hair had *seen him*, all of it was too much.

It was only a matter of time, now. He'd been seen, and he was an uninvited aberration in what seemed like an otherwise-perfect system. Soon enough, he'd be hunted, since it was nothing more than luck he hadn't been noticed before now anyway. And he was well aware of what happened as soon as flaws became visible.

He just had to hope they wouldn't recognize him. If they didn't, he could get away, find someplace else to go while he kept planning, and even if they tried just killing him he could figure something out. If they recognized him, and someone decided to send him back where he came from-

He couldn't do that. He couldn't.

For now, he curled up under his coat as much as he could, and didn't sleep.

Chapter 2

Mythro wasn't really surprised when most of the people were gone in the morning- it had seemed like some sort of ending, after all. He *was* surprised when nothing else seemed to have changed- the people were still going about their business, and though the warden- not a warden, since this wasn't a prison- though the person in charge still had a sharp push of command in his tone that made Mythro go cold, they... didn't seem to be looking for him.

It felt like a trap. Still, he couldn't afford to hide for another day- the longer he spent in one place, the easier it'd be for them to find him, and the worse it would be when they did.

The main area with the dome probably wasn't the *safest* option he had, but nothing was really safe, and it had enough places that he could climb up to mostly unseen that it wasn't a surefire way to be caught. He ended up on the outside of the dome itself, and left his things there as he went to scavenge- with as much as had been left behind from all the people, he'd be foolish not to take advantage of it.

In the end, he collected a few more bits of prepackaged food, a sealed bottle of what he thought was some kind of juice, and a threadbare blanket he'd found draped across one of the counters before he scurried back to his hiding spot. He arranged his things so they were all tucked out of sight, the food stowed in a place where it wouldn't fall, and allowed himself the single indulgence of spreading out the blanket to make it slightly softer to sit on.

Nesting like a parrot, he almost thought, and then tried not to think of anything at all.

He almost flinched at the sound of voices in the area below, too far away to make out the words, and he peeked over the edge.

It was the person in charge, and the man with blue hair. He froze.

They weren't shouting, so he couldn't quite hear what they were saying, but from the angle they were at he could almost read their lips, though from so far above it was hard.

The warden- leader?- said something that made the blue-haired man wave a hand, saying something that looked like *not dangerous*.

He couldn't see the brief exchange that followed, but he could see the leader ask, *Are you sure?* and the firm nod from the blue-haired man.

Mythro ducked back out of sight, deciding he'd risked it long enough, and rested his head against the smooth surface of the building. The lack of sleep from the previous night was catching up to him, and much as he was still scared to settle he couldn't quite keep his eyes open.

Somehow, despite the sound of other people around the server, the world faded into a haze of quiet grey.

Scott hadn't consciously decided to come to the MCC server more often, but he found himself there anyway half the time. There wasn't much for him to do as an organizer- he could do all of his work from anywhere, and as much as the crew were happy just to have an extra pair of hands there wasn't much he could do in the actual *games*, so long as he wanted to participate. Instead, he spent most of his time doing random odd jobs for whoever called him over, and brushed off the

comments about them being below his pay grade.

Noxite kept giving him Looks, and those he pointedly ignored. He knew perfectly well what he was thinking, and he didn't need to hear it.

It was, technically, the truth. And Scott didn't need Noxite to raise his eyebrows over it, because it *worked*, after all. He was seeing the ghost around more.

Usually, it was just the quiet sound of footsteps somewhere out of view, quiet enough that he would have thought he was imagining it if he wasn't paying attention. Every so often he'd see a glimpse of him, from afar or in the moments before he hid again, though he still seemed wary of coming too close or letting Scott actually speak to him.

Still, with how spooked he'd been Scott was quietly marveling over the fact that he had relaxed even that much. Particularly because no one else on the crew had seen him at all, somehow, despite how much he'd been trailing Scott.

It was odd- he hadn't really *done* anything, other than seeing him the first time, and not telling people he was there. Somehow, that had been enough for the kid to decide he was safe.

He didn't push his luck, but somehow the kid crept closer and closer anyway. He still wasn't *talking* to Scott, but he no longer seemed to run as soon as he was noticed- though he was never within reach, he would sometimes sit and watch, and only flinch a little when Scott waved.

He was getting bolder about stealing, too.

It was unnaturally cold for the server, the pressure of a winter trying to *be* despite the artificial non-weather, and even Scott was shivering- it was odd, how much colder he got here than Empires. It was enough that he'd taken an old event jacket that someone had left behind ages ago- Jimmy's, he thought, he recognized the way his clothes fit on Scott, the precise too-large way it sat on his shoulders and fell past his wrists- and ignored the giggling of the crew.

It was enough to make him worry about the kid, too- he knew he had a coat of some kind, and gloves, but he didn't know if they were warm and if he was so skinny he *had* to be cold. He'd been trying to figure out a way to get something to him that he'd actually accept, but he was still too likely to startle, even if he was more relaxed. The most he could do was turn a blind eye to the way he saw him creeping close to the food storage, let him take what he wanted.

He'd paused to eat lunch with Noxite, something hot and filling for once because of the cold, and had pretended like he didn't see the kid sneaking glances at them from one of the many hidden corners.

Scott was pretty sure he *realized* that he'd sat deliberately close to a place where the kid could watch from nearby, but Noxite hadn't, and that was enough. Especially because Noxite got called away, leaving his barely-touched food behind.

Pointedly, Scott looked away.

There was the quiet sound of footsteps, and then white-gloved hands snatched it out of his peripheral vision, retreating quickly. Scott kept from smiling as best he could, a task made harder by the fact that the kid had actually gotten *close* to him.

And a task made easier by the fact that Scott had no way of knowing if it was trust or desperation. Or how long it'd been since he'd eaten actual hot food.

“Scott,” Noxite said as he returned, bafflement clear in his voice. “Did you throw out my food?”

“I didn’t touch your food.”

“But I left it right here.”

“Did you?” Scott asked, and resisted a laugh at Noxite’s confused look. “Someone must have done something with it, then. I didn’t see.”

“You were sitting right here, weren’t you?” Noxite asked. Scott shrugged.

“Maybe it was the ghost,” he suggested dryly. “You probably just put it somewhere else and forgot about it, or someone moved it when I wasn’t looking. Just go get more.”

Noxite hesitated, but eventually he shrugged and walked off the way he’d come. Scott hid a smile in the collar of Jimmy’s jacket.

Somewhere behind him, footsteps faded.

Chapter 3

Mythro snuck back to the Dome as soon as it was quiet enough, making quick work of the climb back to his base. The concrete was freezing cold even through his gloves and coat, and he wrapped himself in as much of the blanket as he could, though it did little to keep out the chill.

The container was warm in his hands, and he just cradled it to his chest for a while, savoring the heat. It smelled good, too, enough to remind him that he was *starving*.

He was regretting, a little bit, taking it. He hadn't really been *thinking*- he'd just been so cold, and so hungry, and just because he probably had enough food to keep himself alive didn't mean he didn't *want* it.

And it had been so *easy*, with the warden-leader gone, and Scott's hands too full to grab him if he went for it. He knew he'd been seen, but Scott hadn't sold him out yet and Mythro was desperate enough to risk the chance of him doing it now. He didn't really have a reason to when he'd been leaving Mythro to steal as he needed, except-

Except this time he'd stolen something from the *leader*, and left Scott to deal with the fallout. He wouldn't blame him for giving Mythro up if the warden wanted to hurt him for it.

But he hadn't. And Scott hadn't said anything, and he'd made the risk worth it after all.

Or, worth the risk of *stealing* it, at least. Eating it... that was another story altogether. Just because Scott hadn't exposed him didn't mean he'd have any qualms about poisoning him, or *drugging* him.

He'd seen the leader eat it, though. Not a lot, but surely he wouldn't poison or drug himself just to catch Mythro- unless he *would*.

It was worth the risk. It had to be. If it was poison, anything mild enough for the leader to risk eating was something he could probably bear- if it was drugs, he could wait it out. He was confident his hiding spot still hadn't been discovered, and he'd know not to steal food like this again if it was. It made him tremble to think about, but-

He was *so* hungry. And the food was good- warm and filling and flavorful.

Mythro hadn't eaten something like this in... as long as he could remember, really. Far before his world ended, far before even Gaia, far before Ares- before he started being afraid of the haziness, and Kay had taken even that away from him. Even then, he'd only been able to eat anything more than bread when he was free, and he wasn't much for cooking.

He ate every last bit of it, scraping the sides of the container, savoring it for as long as he could.

Once he was finished, he curled up in the blanket, already missing the warmth. He'd always fared better with heat than with cold- even Glacier's Orb had lava in the cell, despite how the halls and vents never really seemed to get warm.

At least the food he'd stolen from the leader-warden didn't seem to have hurt him. He was tired, but not unnaturally so- just the feeling of actually having *eaten* for the first time in a while. It was getting dark, so he'd have to either figure out a warmer solution or be prepared to bear the cold soon, and there was someone moving around in the courtyard-

There was someone moving around in the courtyard.

There was *never* someone in the courtyard, not this late and not this *loud*. All of the guards should have stopped their work or gone somewhere else for the night, and anyone still there wouldn't have been so conspicuous.

He peered over the edge to see Scott down far below, something bulky in his arms. He set it down, hands flitting over it for a moment, and then he walked away, leaving it where it was.

...*What?*

Mythro watched him disappear back towards the rest of the server, hands tucked casually into the pockets of his too-big coat, and blinked uncomprehendingly at his retreating figure.

He'd just. Left something there. Right in Mythro's view, though he was still sure he didn't know where he was any more precisely than he was vaguely in this area. And then he'd just walked away.

If it was a trap, it wasn't a very good one. Surely he couldn't be expecting him to fall for that.

It would be sensible to assume it was a trap anyway. If he was smart, he'd stay as far away from it as he could. He'd just curl up and go to sleep and wait for him to realize his ploy had failed.

Mythro wasn't feeling particularly sensible, and he found himself once again slinking down to the courtyard, towards the thing Scott had left.

It was... a blanket?

That's what it looked like- a big, thick blanket patterned with the MCC logo. Mythro picked it up, scanning carefully for anything that looked like a sign of tampering. He didn't find any.

A paper fluttered to the ground, though, followed by a pen. Mythro folded the blanket over his arm and picked it up, squinting to read the words in the dim lighting.

It was just a quick note, one line: *I thought you could use something warm*. And signed in looping script, *Scott*.

Mythro swallowed.

It was just a blanket. And somewhere above him, it was starting to snow, just a bit.

He flipped over the note and grabbed the pen. Before he could overthink it, he wrote, *Thank you*.

What had Scott called him earlier?

He signed it *Ghost*, and tucked the note back where it had been. The blanket, he took back up to his perch and wrapped around his shoulders, heavy and warm.

It was enough to keep out the snow, and he allowed himself to be grateful for it.

Scott and the kid- Ghost, as he'd apparently decided to call himself- had been exchanging notes, and supplies, for a few weeks. It was difficult to figure out what he'd actually *take*- thus far, the answer was still no food or water, but he was taking blankets and warmer clothing, although Scott had never seen him wear it, and a chain for the pocket watch which was missing one. Potions,

apparently, were even worse than the food- he'd found the bottle he left broken on the ground, and everything else untouched. The bandages he left the next day, though, Ghost took.

He still wouldn't come anywhere near Scott, and he wouldn't let him see where it was that he was staying- not that Scott had looked very hard- but he'd stopped flinching every time Scott looked at him, and occasionally he'd even wave back. It was about as much as Scott could hope for, and leagues less skittish than he'd been before.

Ghost had still been avoiding the crew astonishingly well- they'd picked up on the missing things, and Noxite knew Scott too well to fall for his deflections, but he'd stayed mostly out of sight, and they didn't try to make Scott say anything.

He wasn't sure if that was about to change- Noxite was approaching with a paper rolled up in his hands, uncharacteristic worry creasing his brow. Scott stilled, hands curling around the ends of the sleeves of Jimmy's jacket to try and stave off the rising anxiety.

It wasn't quite as cold as it had been, but suddenly he was grateful for the comfort.

"What is it?" he asked quietly.

Noxite shoved the paper into Scott's hands and set a hand on his shoulder, stepping close enough to hide it from anyone else's view. "Fugitive call," he said shortly. "Thought you might want to see it yourself."

Scott frowned. They *rejected* most fugitive notices- there were simply too many servers with flawed justice systems, too many people chasing innocents, and the MCC world was a place for the desperate. If there was a problem, they would deal with it themselves. The only calls for punishment that were actually noted were those that were personal, or unfathomably dangerous.

Based on the look on Noxite's face, this could be either.

Scott scanned the flyer. There was no picture, but there was a description- black coat, white hat, asymmetrical mask, orange rose-

"Is it-" Noxite started, then fell silent. Scott kept reading.

Prison escapist. Murderer. Worldkiller.

"Scott," Noxite said.

Futilely, Scott searched for an age. Of course there was none.

Worldkiller, of all things. Ghost was tiny, and young, and terrified. He ran from *Scott*, let alone anyone else- he hadn't done a single thing to hurt someone in the entire time Scott had known him.

In Rivendell, there was a necklace tucked away in his ender chest- heavy gold chain, too-warm pendant the color of fresh blood. He couldn't bring it between servers, nor did he particularly *want* to give his brother any more of his life than he already had. Still, he remembered the way it felt to wear, making his very bones ache and burn. Still, he remembered how heavy and dark it had felt, corruption clinging to his boots like something half-alive, trying to drag him down under.

Scott knew worldkillers, and he was starting to know Ghost.

"*Scott*," Noxite said again.

“It doesn’t matter,” he said, crumpling the paper up as small as he could. “That isn’t what this server is about.”

“You don’t know if he’s dangerous,” Noxite pointed out. “I trust your judgement, but...”

“Clearly you don’t,” Scott snapped, harsher than he meant. “I know what I’m doing.”

“How much do you know about him?” Noxite pressed.

“Enough,” Scott said, crushing the flyer between his hands with enough ferocity to tear it. “I know what I’m doing.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes!” Scott said, and it was loud enough that some of the nearby crew members sent them looks of concern.

“Yes,” he said, lowering his voice. “I’m sure, Noxite.”

“Just tell me one thing,” Noxite said quietly. “If he is what that calls him, what will you do?”

“I don’t... know.”

Noxite nodded, and they both fell silent.

“Why is it so important to you?” Noxite asked, more curiosity than accusation. “He’s a stranger.”

Scott breathed in, out. Buried his face in the collar of Jimmy’s coat.

“It’s- it’s like- he’s...” He breathed. “He’s... it’s just- I’m- there’s-”

He breathed. He stuttered. He breathed.

Noxite’s expression shifted, and he set his free hand on Scott’s shoulder.

He breathed.

“He has nothing,” Scott said. “And he shouldn’t.”

After he’d come back, Noxite had been the one to sit with him and handle the fallout- the anger, the grief, the shaking hands. He’d changed the winners’ crowns, had the crew plant poppies in tucked-away gardens but take them out of the lobby, combed through and modified the arenas to take away any risk of bloodstains in sand.

“He’s not you,” Noxite said, in the not-quite-gentle way of his.

“I know,” Scott said. “He’s nothing like me.”

Noxite straightened Scott’s collar, hands warm at his throat, and said, “I trust you.”

“Thank you.”

“Tell me if I can do anything.”

“I will.”

Noxite pulled the flyer from his hands, smoothed it out, and tore it in half, quarters, eighths. Scott

watched him walk away, paper vanishing from view.

Ghost was a *child*. Scott wasn't going to sell him out, and neither was Noxite.

He breathed, and he breathed, and he breathed.

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

warning in this one for description of a panic attack and some mentions of drugged food!

Though Scott was mostly preoccupied by trying to get Ghost to trust him, the server continued on, and the tournaments came again. He knew he was distracted, and he knew his team could tell, but he found himself looking for Ghost anyway, and found him more than he was expecting- he didn't seem *comfortable* but he was sticking as close to Scott as he really could with everyone else there.

They ended up in one of the common rooms at the end of the tournament, and Scott let himself tune out most of the conversation, sprawled bonelessly across the floor. It had been a good tournament- tiring, but fun, and he was satisfied.

"-mask sort of like yours, Dream," Sam said, and Scott jolted back to awareness.

"I haven't been breaking out of any prisons," Dream said, amusement clear in his voice, and Scott turned to face them without getting up. Sam's friends were half-piled on top of him, Dream's ever moving hands tracing patterns on Sam's paws, and yet he looked serious enough to make Scott nervous despite the mask hiding most of his expression.

"Obviously not," Sam said, rolling his eyes. "I didn't say he *is* you, just that it looks similar."

Dream hummed vaguely. "So why's he matter anyway?"

"Because no one's come close to catching him!" Sam's tail thumped irritably against the ground. "He's broken out of everywhere they tried to put him- I don't know *that* much, but people keep making better prisons and it *doesn't matter*."

"Are you offended?" Bad teased, draping himself across Sam's back. "Did he break out of your prison?"

"He broke out of prisons *better* than mine," Sam grumbled. "Really it's just worrying. I've heard..."

"Tell us," Dream said absently, seemingly more invested in tracing the circles on Sam's fur than actually listening. Sam sighed, enough to make Bad shift.

"Apparently he blew up a prison from the inside," he said bluntly. "The warden was kind of an asshole, sure, but that's *brutal*."

"Language," Bad said sleepily, and then, "Wow."

Scott stopped listening. It was nothing the fugitive call hadn't already implied, and he was honestly more worried about what Sam had said about the warden.

Someone tapped against his hair, and he tipped his head up to see Jimmy, smiling down at him with a quiet worry in his eyes. "You alright?"

“Yeah,” Scott said, and closed his eyes as Jimmy pulled the tie out of his braid, letting it fall free. Sam had fallen quiet, and Scott’s hands felt cold and shaky.

“You look worried,” Jimmy observed.

“Kind of,” Scott admitted. “It’s okay.”

Jimmy hummed, ruffling Scott’s hair out of the braid and twisting it loosely around his fingers, and asked. “Are you sure?”

“I’m handling it,” Scott assured him, and tangled their fingers together for a moment before he stood. “I’ll see you later.”

“Okay,” Jimmy said, though he still sounded concerned, and Scott slipped silently away, out of the dormitories and down into the open lobbies.

He didn’t really have a destination in mind, just a discontented jumpiness that led him to wander aimlessly through the staff areas. It was quieter now, with the games over and nothing really happening, and Scott wasn’t sure whether or not it was a relief as he walked through the narrow alleys between storage sheds.

There was a soft noise, and Scott slowed, grateful suddenly for the silence.

He heard it again, some kind of muffled cry, and he turned. It was hard to figure out where it was coming from, in the maze of buildings, and he turned in slow circles, struggling to pinpoint it.

One of the sheds had a thin arc cut out of the leaf litter in front of the door, and he frowned. Any crew member wouldn’t have just opened it a tiny bit if they were trying to get in or out, but it had clearly been disturbed.

He set his hand on the door. “Hello?” he called, and the noise abruptly cut off.

“I’m gonna come in,” Scott said. “I just want to make sure everything’s alright.”

There was no response, and he eased the door open.

Ghost was curled up in one of the corners, arms hugging his knees and gaze seemingly fixed on the jack o’lanterns across the room. He looked over at Scott when he entered and drew even further back into the wall, visibly shaking, unwilling to let him out of his sight.

“Hey,” Scott said softly, carefully edging along the wall so as not to block Ghost’s path to the door. “It’s just me, don’t worry.”

Ghost whined, barely audible, and Scott sat, leaving him as much room as he could. He couldn’t see Ghost’s eyes through the mask, but as close as he could tell he was looking between Scott and the jack o’lanterns.

He didn’t seem entirely present, his breathing audible, shallow and fast. Scott wished he could reach out to him, but he was scared enough with Scott on the opposite side of the room. It wouldn’t help anything for him to get closer.

“You need to breathe,” Scott said, as gently as he could. “Can you match my breathing?”

He inhaled and exhaled, steady and measured, counting out beats in his head, and to his credit it seemed like Ghost was *trying*, though he kept panicking, frantic and uncontrollable. His gloves

were missing, and Scott could see blood on his hands where he'd been digging his nails into his palms.

They sat there for a while, until finally Ghost's breathing slowed marginally, enough that he didn't seem like he was about to pass out. He was still shivering uncontrollably, curled into himself, disheveled and small.

"You're safe," Scott promised. "Nothing can get to you here."

Ghost shook his head minutely, still frozen, and Scott tried to think. Ghost clearly wasn't going to trust him, and he couldn't change that right now. But he couldn't just *leave*.

So he started to talk.

He stayed quiet, and even, and talked about nothing important- he stuck to little, harmless things, funny things from his friends, interesting moments from the games. It was enough, eventually, for Ghost to bury his face in his knees, rather than staring at Scott.

Scott's voice slowly grew hoarser, and Ghost slowly uncurled. Eventually, he started creeping along the wall, working his way towards the door. Scott let him, careful not to move and spook him.

Ghost hesitated at the door. "Thank you," he said, and his voice was quiet and young.

And then he was gone, disappearing just as skillfully as he always did, and Scott got slowly to his feet.

When he looked out the door, Ghost was nowhere to be seen.

Mythro hurried back to his base, sacrificing a bit of speed in favor of not being seen- just because the events were over didn't mean that he could depend on no one being around, as Scott had so clearly demonstrated.

His breathing was still a little shaky, but he was surprisingly calm for how badly he'd been panicking earlier. Scott's voice had, somehow, been soothing- he knew it shouldn't have been, should have sent him running the minute he had a path to the door, should have terrified him.

Mythro climbed up to his perch and opened the box of medical supplies Scott had given him. Inside, there was a roll of bandages, and he did his best to patch up his hands without sacrificing too much mobility.

He wasn't cold, but he drew the blanket around his shoulders anyway, fiddling at the hem with shaking fingers. It was too dark to make out the pattern, but he knew it by now, the colors and the designs and the loose threads. He picked at them, trying not to think.

He should've been scared.

He *was* scared, now, but he should've been scared then. It didn't matter how quiet and nonthreatening Scott had been, how still and calm- it didn't make him trustworthy.

Mythro wasn't *stupid*. He knew how the world worked- Plumpkin had shown him that.

And yet he hadn't wanted to leave.

That was the worst part- for all that he knew better, he'd still wanted to stay, let Scott talk until he wasn't scared of anything anymore. He'd wanted to stay there, just like he wanted to take the things that Scott offered, just like he wanted to actually speak to him instead of exchanging notes. It was naive, and he couldn't *afford* to be naive, but he'd still wanted it.

For once in his life, he was too tired to be smart. He'd been too startled by the pumpkins, the sharp reminder of what he was running from, and he'd stayed.

Just a little bit, he wished he could have stayed longer. Because Scott wasn't there, and the panic was creeping in again the longer he thought, because there had just been *too* many reminders.

The warden, the one who would tear this all away if he was seen. And the pumpkins. And the rustling of birds' wings- chickens, not parrots, but close enough that Mythro had felt something raw clawing at the back of his throat. All the people, and he'd known they would be coming but Mythro had never been on a world with so many *people*.

It was just... too much. And Scott had been... kind. In a way that was different from Plumpkin's towards the beginning. He hadn't asked Mythro to do anything, given him any tasks to fulfill, hadn't even pushed past what *Mythro* was willing to do. He'd just... waited, and kept giving him things, and always looked happy when Mythro waved at him, and never even hurt him.

There was a noise from below him, and he peeked over the edge. Scott was standing over the place where they'd been exchanging notes, and there was something in his hands.

Mythro waited until he was gone, and climbed down to look.

There was a box like the one he'd stolen from the leader before sitting next to a simple, sealed bottle of water, and on top of them there was a note.

Ghost- you don't have to accept this, but I thought I'd offer it anyway. And we're getting rid of the jack o'lanterns.

It should have scared him. It *should* have. Scott knowing what got to him was way too dangerous, and food that could be tampered with, and, and-

Mythro hurried back up to his hidey hole and opened the lid before he could think about it too hard.

Surely if Scott wanted to hurt him, there were easier ways than this, he decided, and reminded himself of that over and over as he ate. Surely he wouldn't keep trying to drug him when he knew it wasn't working. Surely, he would just *hurt him*. He had enough power to.

He felt faintly sick once he'd finished, but he could recognize the feeling of eating after starving, and he wasn't fuzzy, wasn't falling out of his body, wasn't *drugged*.

Mythro stayed awake waiting for something to happen, for the other shoe to drop.

It never did.

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

another warning for explicit panic attacks!

Scott left food more often, after that. For some reason, Mythro kept taking it.

He noticed after a few weeks that it made him feel startlingly more human- he could function on little food, of course, he wouldn't have made it this long if he couldn't, but he didn't actually remember the last time he'd had a consistent source of food. It had to have been years ago, before the first prison. If at all.

Still, he found himself with more energy than before, and he was almost bored.

It was an odd sensation. Not unfamiliar, he'd spent plenty of time bored as he sat biding his time in various prison cells, or cell-less prisons- he tried not to think about infinite nothing, nothing, *nothing*- but since he'd arrived at MCC, he had spent too much time sleeping or hiding to really get bored. The itchy feeling of inaction came second to exhaustion and fear.

But he felt brighter now that he was eating more, and he'd been scared for long enough that it was starting to fade into the background, a steady drum of anxiety that was more like static, or the feeling of a half-healed bruise, the kind that were light enough that they were only really noticeable when they were touched.

The fear, now, was like standing waist-deep in water- at first, the waves were unbalancing, but it was impossible not to learn to adjust for them.

And so, Mythro was *bored*. Enough that hiding on the Dome for hours every day was driving him a bit stir-crazy.

Going out more than absolutely necessary was a risk, sure, but it was less of a risk than it would have been at the beginning, now that he knew how to avoid the crew and get around unseen. Everything had a routine of some kind, and MCC was no different.

Staying in his base unless he needed to steal food was just another kind of imprisonment, anyway. And Mythro was *done* with feeling trapped.

He started by exploring the areas around the Dome more thoroughly than he had, and managed to find a way down into the areas where the games were. Most of the games were barricaded or behind inactive portals, but he managed to catch a glimpse of some room with a white square in the middle. It, and the four identical copies beside it, were locked off, but he could see the name emblazoned across the wall- Battle Box- and matched it to one of the ones that he'd seen in the Dome.

There was another arena nearby, this one filled with various things to jump and climb off of, and he idly mapped out a path across the arena in his head. He almost wanted to jump in and try running it, but caught himself with a faint disappointment- in a game made to be watched, there was absolutely no way to guarantee he wouldn't be seen.

He stumbled upon a big room with a rectangular area in the center, framed by bleachers, and snuck in briefly to look around. There wasn't much around, and it was surprisingly bare compared to the rest of the event. It was probably more decorated during the tournament, or something.

Most of the other games seemed like they were in places he couldn't access, so he moved on. There was an area near the event lobby with a tall building with lots of windows, and he found himself briefly at a loss as to what it was before he finally located a sign. The *event hotel*, apparently, although that didn't tell him much of anything.

He could see, in the distance, another building with a similar design, and there was a thin path leading towards it. He followed it down to a sign that read *Crew Housing*, and looked up.

This one, even from the outside, looked more lived in- there were little balconies outside the windows, and some of them had furniture on them, or bright spots of green and color that he thought might be plants. There were benches outside, and some kind of sign next to the door that he couldn't read from the distance, and he slipped into a shadowy corner to watch as the door opened and two people in red uniform hoodies came out, talking quietly to each other.

It looked... domestic, weirdly enough. This was the kind of place where people *lived*. Most likely, the leader he'd seen around lived here, all of the people he'd started recognizing lived here, Scott probably lived here.

He stared up at the building for longer than he meant to before he slipped away, back past the event hotel- that must be where the players stayed, he realized- and cut through the lobby behind the Dome to get to the district on the other side. There was a barrier between the two, but that was hardly an obstacle, and he made his way in quickly.

He was careful to stay out of sight from the open streets. These ones had *people*, people who didn't look like crew, running around and in and out of buildings and laughing. Mythro watched in silence as they ducked in and out of what he thought were miniature versions of the games, stepping on boost pads that made them look like they were gliding as they ran from place to place, usually in groups, only occasionally alone.

He moved away and headed back towards the event itself, detouring to one of the food counters on his way- he knew the routines, and though there was no real day or night on the server he was used to keeping time without. There would be about twenty minutes where the stall was empty, and the person who ran it wouldn't notice if some things were missing. He had the food to go without, of course, but it was warm and he wouldn't be caught.

Mythro grabbed one of the boxes sitting on the counter and paused.

There was a knife lying out on the counter- not a big one, but enough to do some damage if he tried. It was discarded carelessly, like it had been forgotten about, left unattended.

He hadn't had a weapon since he joined this world. It hadn't really bothered him most of the time- it wasn't as if he usually had weapons, unless he'd stolen them from a guard on the way out. Still...

He couldn't stay here undisturbed forever. The wardens would be looking for him, and he had been broken of thinking other people would shelter him years ago. Scott wouldn't do anything if they came.

And if they did, if they found him- Mythro was not going back to the Abyss, and he refused to go to whatever prison they thought could hold him when it hadn't. He'd make them leave him alone or he'd die trying.

He took the knife.

Mythro kept the knife with him, tucked away neatly where he couldn't cut himself on accident, within easy reach if he needed to be fast. It was light enough that he mostly forgot about it, but it was reassuring to have it.

However falsely, it gave him the confidence to creep back to the other area- the practice district, he'd learned- more often than he probably should have. There was nothing for him there other than the opportunity to be caught, no resources or information that he couldn't get some safer way, and yet he kept returning, watching for hours on end as people fought each other playfully or ran through a long course with tridents and elytra or ran through a miniature version of the course he'd seen, tackling each other off of high places and helping each other up like nothing had happened.

It wasn't *important*. He shouldn't have spent so much time listening to the distant crash of laughter, the shouting that never seemed to fall into anger- more the way he and Sven would shout, at the beginning. The sound was... nice, somehow, but it shouldn't have drawn him in so utterly.

Some insistent itch kept driving him back, and it was the same thing that drove him down from his perch during the games.

It was so, so stupid of him, so foolish to even try, but he couldn't help wanting to *see*, get just a glimpse instead of the half-muffled laughter he'd heard before. It wasn't as if he was doing anything openly dangerous, either- just slipping into the rafters rather than on top of the Dome. It let him watch from above as the players shouted at each other from across the Dome, leaning half-out of their little pods to talk or to throw the... model eggs?

Sure enough, each one burst in a shower of their team's colors and deposited a fully-grown chicken, and they fell to the ground, wandering around vaguely in a mass of white-grey feathers.

Suddenly he couldn't breathe.

They weren't even that similar. He'd seen chickens thousands of times, knew just how little they shared with parrots, with Shiratori, no matter how similar the color was at first glance. He *knew*. He wasn't stupid or naive- any naivete had died just as sudden and brutal a death as Shiratori had.

Still. There had been just a moment when there had been a soft rustle of wings and he'd felt a phantom weight on his shoulder, and the grief in his throat was ragged-edged and agonizing.

There was the bright sound of a bell, and then the players started to move down into the tunnels but Mythro wasn't paying attention because there was the sharp squawk of dozens of birds in pain, and suddenly Shiratori was falling limp and silent and bloody-breasted-

He curled his hands into too-tight fists and breathed. He wasn't there. He couldn't think about Shiratori now, not when he was still barely surviving himself.

Revenge had waited this long, and would continue to wait, and Mythro could not afford to panic when he was sitting above the people who were controlling his fate.

He waited for the tunnels to clear and the admins to rush off to the games before he climbed back down and went to look for someplace else to hide. The lobby was eerily quiet, though there was a dull roar of activity somewhere below him.

He ended up in an isolated hallway hidden far from the Dome, and he curled into a little ball, knife

in one hand, the other pulling his coat tighter. Below him, the ebb and flow of the tournament's noise was almost soothing. He'd have to move before the game ended, of course, but it was good enough to let him catch his breath.

He was... tired.

He was tired, and then there was someone at the other end of the hallway, footsteps startling against the floor, and Mythro jolted upright, knocking his head against the wall with the force of his movement and trying to hold the knife out without dropping it or falling despite the spots in his vision.

"Whoa," the guy said, raising his hands and taking a half-step back, eyes going wide in surprise. "Didn't, uh- didn't mean to startle you."

Mythro pushed off of the corner, sliding along the wall towards the exit. The stranger was taller than he was, and stronger- if he really wanted to, he could hurt Mythro *easily*, and his knife would mean nothing.

He didn't. Just watched as Mythro crept by, knife shaking in the air too much to be dangerous, hands held up in surrender.

Mythro paused, taking a shaking breath. "Don't- d- do- don't-"

He was shaking, uncontrollable and insistent, and the stranger took a step forward, quickly aborted when Mythro held out the knife again.

"Should I call someone for you?" he asked gently.

His vision went fuzzy at the edges with panic, and he lunged forwards, forcing the stranger to back against the wall or have the knife hit his skin. He didn't really resist, just loosely grabbed Mythro's wrist.

"Don't tell anyone I'm here," Mythro hissed. "Don't- don't- you can't, you can't, you *can't*-"

"Okay," he agreed. "Okay, I won't tell anyone."

Carefully, he pushed Mythro's hand away, just enough to get the knife off of his throat. Mythro took a step back.

His hands felt cold, and he could hear his own heartbeat in his ears, almost deafening. He couldn't hear anything else.

"Kid," the stranger said. "Will you be okay on your own?"

Mythro jumped. He'd- he'd forgotten he was there.

He couldn't afford to start slipping. It was *too dangerous* to get complacent, and he just- he needed-

He needed *out*.

"Leave me *alone*," he spat, and ran.

He didn't know where, didn't know how to fix this. He couldn't think, he couldn't do anything, he couldn't breathe-

He couldn't *breathe*-

He came back to himself in a place he didn't recognize, hidden in a tiny corner small enough that his shoulders pressed uncomfortably against the sides, knees folded against his chest. It was faintly reminiscent of all the times he had crawled through too-small prison vents, down to the way all he could hear was his own too-loud breath.

But there was no *goal*, nowhere to go, so he stayed paralyzed where he was, trying not to shake apart. The noise rose and fell, intercoms calling out the game numbers, and he stayed where he was, trying to breathe.

Eventually, the first day of games ended, and Mythro risked the run back to his base, taking more care not to be seen than he had since he'd first arrived. No one had come for him in the hours he'd been waiting, so he tentatively decided to assume they wouldn't for now.

He had been so *stupid*. Getting caught was one thing. *Threatening* someone was another.

As much as Scott seemed inexplicably not to mind him, he was just as protective as the leader was over the server and its people. Mythro was far too easy to toss aside for him to get away with threatening someone.

Most people had cleared out, but he saw Scott's distinctive figure still standing in the lobby below, and some unidentifiable emotion rose in his throat. And then it turned sharply to anxiety, because there was someone approaching him and he recognized him.

No.

He was going to tell Scott. He was going to tell Scott, and then all of this was going to come toppling down.

Mythro was hearing static again, but he ignored it, grabbing the knife again- he needed a better weapon, he needed to be able to protect himself, he needed to be able to *get out* and he didn't even have time to prepare this time, he couldn't smuggle anything in or even know the layout- and dropped off of the Dome faster than was strictly safe. It didn't matter. None of it mattered anymore.

He didn't even know how to get off the world, or where to *go* once he did. He'd been blind with panic when he arrived, and he scarcely remembered where the lobby even was. And once he left, what was out there for him? What was there, other than more prisons and more running and more things to be taken away?

He blinked, and his gloves were torn to show bloody palms where he'd caught himself on something. He blinked, and he didn't recognize his surroundings. He blinked, and he was curled up in a patch of grass and his hands were bleeding and his mouth tasted dry and ashy. He blinked, and he couldn't breathe.

The world was fuzzy and indistinct around him, and he couldn't see through the blurriness and the thick tangle of shrubbery and the corner he'd hidden in, and he couldn't *breathe*, couldn't stop crying quietly, muffling it with a mouthful of his sleeve.

He faded between awareness and distance, the world coming in flares and vague impressions, terror eating away at him from the inside. Somewhere he was screaming, trying to get up, actually get himself a fighting chance.

Instead, he laid in the grass and waited to be punished.

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

as you probably expected, this chapter also features panic attacks

Scott was getting nervous.

H had pulled him aside after the fourth game to tell him about a kid who he'd immediately known was Ghost- Ghost, seen by someone else and clearly terrified. Ghost, who had *threatened* H, although it had been obvious from how H had explained it and the worried crease of his brow that he'd just been panicking.

Scott needed to find him. Ghost was a scared kid, and he was *alone*, and even if there was nothing he could do he needed to at least confirm he was safe.

It was both more and less difficult than he'd anticipated to find him. He'd known already just how good he was at hiding when he didn't want to be found, but it seemed impossible that he could have vanished so completely. Scott tried not to panic, and resisted the urge to call out for him.

He froze as he walked past the entrance to one of the hidden gardens. Inside, there was a small, terrified whimper.

Scott rested a hand against the gate. It was one of the gardens he and Noxite had designed after the end of Third Life, hidden away and always with a patch of poppies amongst the rest of the plants. No one was allowed in, other than them and a few select crew members, and though it wasn't like it was hard to jump the gate everyone else had politely stayed out.

Really, this could only *be* Ghost. It was just a question of whether Scott would help or hurt.

But he couldn't possibly walk away now.

The gate swung open silently, but Scott made sure to step on the grass loud enough to be noticed, and the noise cut off abruptly with a thin, scared whine. He stepped further in, carefully, looking around for anything out of the ordinary.

"Ghost?" he called, as gently as he could manage. "It's Scott. Are you alright?"

There was a tiny sound of movement, and he turned to see Ghost half-hidden behind one of the bushes, tucked into a spot in the corner that Scott wouldn't have even thought he could fit in if he didn't know just how tiny he was. There were red smudges against his mask that made his breath stutter with concern, and he had his arms over his head, knees tucked to his chest, unmoving but for a constant tremble.

"Hey," Scott said softly, sitting out of arm's reach. "Breathe, please? Just follow me. In and out."

Ghost whined again, shaking his head, though it looked less like a negative and more like he was trying to shake away a stray thought. Scott picked nervously at the grass, trying to think of what he could even *do*.

“Breathe,” he said again, uselessly. “Just breathe, Ghost, it’s gonna be alright.”

He shook his head again, more emphatically, and this time the sound he made formed into indistinct words. “Please, please, *please, please d- don’t-*”

“I’m not going to do anything,” Scott promised. “I’m not going to hurt you, Ghost.”

“No,” Ghost whispered. “I di- I didn’t *mean* it.”

“I know you didn’t,” Scott said. “I’m not upset with you, and neither is H, I *promise*. I just need to know why you had to do it so you aren’t put in that position again.”

Ghost finally turned to look at him, expression still hidden behind the mask, and grabbed at his hair. His palms were stained red, dragging blood across his mask and hair from where his hands were scraped, but he didn’t react though it must have hurt.

Scott resisted the urge to reach out to him.

“What game looks the most fun to you?” he asked instead.

Ghost jumped, posture softening in surprise before he curled back into the corner again. He didn’t answer for a long time.

“It’s not a trick,” Scott promised. “And you don’t have to say if you don’t want to.”

“...dunno,” Ghost whispered eventually. “I haven’t s- seen them all.”

“Of the ones you have,” Scott suggested.

“Um. Parkour Tag?” Ghost’s voice was tentative and unsure and still so *scared*, but he was breathing and he was talking and that was the best he could hope for.

“Yeah?” Scott asked. “What about it?”

“It- um,” Ghost said. “It’s, it’s, I’m good at running? And it s- seems like an interesting map...”

“Yeah, the crew’s worked hard on it,” Scott said with a smile. “It’s not one of my favorites, but it can be fun. And I think you’d be good at it.”

Ghost shuffled where he was sitting, and bit down on a mouthful of his sleeve. Scott noted it absently- he’d have to remember to get him something else to chew on if it was a common response to stress.

He seemed a little more settled, so Scott said quietly, “I hear H scared you.”

Ghost stiffened, but he didn’t run or panic again- at least not quite as badly. He nodded timidly, the hand that wasn’t in his mouth tapping anxiously against his mask.

“He’s sorry for that, by the way,” Scott added. “We both get that you were just scared, so he’s not mad and neither am I.”

Ghost made a little noise in the back of his throat, the distressed motion of his hands growing more pronounced, and didn’t look at Scott, hands leaving faint bloody smears when he tugged at his collar. Scott wished again that he could go to him, help with his hands, stop him panicking, but instead he stayed where he was, quiet and still.

“Can you tell me why you had to?” he asked, softly. “I just want to understand.”

“He saw me,” Ghost mumbled. “He- he- I don’t want to go back. Please don’t make me go back.”

“I’m not making you go anywhere,” Scott started, but Ghost didn’t stop talking, free hand waving anxiously.

“I don’t wanna leave,” he whispered. “I d- don’t want them to find me, he can’t find me, he *can’t find me*- Scott-”

“Breathe,” Scott said, and shifted closer instinctively, holding out his hands. Ghost froze.

“Just breathe,” Scott said again, trying not to overthink it. “He won’t, Ghost. You don’t have to leave if you don’t want to.”

“Please don’t hurt me,” he breathed.

“Never.”

Hesitantly, Ghost touched his hands with his fingertips, barely there, but enough to make Scott hold his breath, enough that Ghost crumpled in on himself with a shaky, half-sobbed breath.

For a while, they just sat, and Scott breathed, and Ghost mimicked him.

“Are the chickens okay?” Ghost asked suddenly, and Scott blinked, startled.

“The- oh, the chickens from the Dome?” he asked. “They’re fine, they’re used to that. We just teleport them back to their coop when the voting’s done, it doesn’t hurt them.”

“Oh,” Ghost murmured. “Okay.”

“Would you like to see them?” Scott asked.

Ghost froze again, then shook his head mutely.

“Okay,” Scott agreed. “We’ll just sit. As long as you need.”

Ghost sat in silence for a while, fingertips a light pressure against Scott’s palms, until he tried to bend his hands and hissed sharply, apparently remembering the scrapes on his hands.

Scott nudged him to turn them palm-up, and he did so without protest. Scott hissed when he saw them- they were torn like he’d tried to grab something sharp, ripped through his gloves and drying rusty against his skin.

“Ouch,” Scott murmured, inspecting them. “Do you still have medical supplies?”

Ghost nodded, and Scott took the opportunity to surreptitiously inspect his gloves- they looked fairly simple, and it wouldn’t be hard to find replacements. They were probably ruined.

“You can get back to where you’re staying?” Scott checked, and Ghost nodded again. He withdrew his hands and got unsteadily to his feet, not quite flinching when Scott offered a hand to steady him.

He jumped the gate again, apparently not caring about the way grabbing it with his bloody hands *must* have hurt, and Scott watched as he darted out of sight.

“Well,” he said quietly, to no one in particular.

Ghost was, at least, safe. And he would *stay* safe, if Scott had anything to say about it- someone had clearly hurt him, and he was running from someone.

There was nothing at all that would make Scott abandon him now- Ghost still didn't trust him, maybe, but he'd still take care of him as best he could. He was part of MCC now as much as the crew or Scott himself.

Scott stayed there for a while, until finally he got to his feet, brushing the grass off his pants. He'd find another pair of white gloves- if they didn't have some already, they wouldn't be hard to get- and then he'd go back to his team for the night.

The gate swung silently shut behind him.

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

i told myself that even though it's the weekend i wasn't going to forget to post a chapter. i was So Certain,

anyway this was supposed to be up 5 hours ago

Mythro fell asleep almost immediately when he got back to the Dome, which was probably a bad idea but he was just so *tired*, and naive relief had left him limp and exhausted.

When he woke up, the sky was a dusty grey and he could hear the early-morning movements of the crew and the players as they shuffled around the lobby, talking quietly. For a few seconds, he could almost forget what had happened, curled under his blanket and watching as the server woke up.

And then he saw Scott saying something to the leader, strained smile on his face, and though the other laughed loud enough to be audible his chest went cold.

Scott had said they weren't going to hurt him. He had *promised* he wouldn't be hunted. He'd promised-

No. He hadn't. He had promised *Scott* wouldn't hurt him, not any of the others. He hadn't said anything with enough weight behind it to mean anything real, and like a fool Mythro had fallen for it. It didn't guarantee anything, and now that he was more able to think he should run, find another server and keep *running*, it was the smartest thing to do-

Except maybe it *wasn't*. Mythro didn't really have anywhere else to *go*, if he was honest- if he ran, he'd just be caught again by someone else. He'd just be running and running and *running* and never able to stop. It wasn't like it would be *better* than on MCC.

And somehow, foolishly, Mythro trusted him.

It wasn't as if Scott couldn't break his promises, turn around and call whichever of the wardens was after him. But Mythro still *trusted* him, desperately, helplessly. He didn't think Scott *would* hurt him.

He curled his blanket around his shoulders, running a restless thumb over the bandage on his palm, and watched as Scott took a paper cup from someone nearby and surreptitiously tucked a small package into the place he'd been leaving things for Mythro before he ran back to his team. Mythro squinted down at it curiously.

It wasn't food- it was too small to be food, and Scott had left him enough to last through most of the tournament for the times when it would be too risky to go down and collect it. And there wasn't anything else he really needed, and he couldn't think of anything that Scott would think to give him.

Before too long, the Dome lit up to signal the beginning of the second day, and everyone started to run inside, leaving the lobby emptier than before. Mythro waited for the crew to leave before he climbed down, more carefully than he would've without the insistent ache of his hands.

He found the package and ripped open the paper, to see-

“My gloves?” he muttered to himself. They weren’t quite the same- a slightly different material, seams placed differently, a faint pattern on the wrists that wasn’t there on the originals- but they were a good replication, and they were free of the blood and rips that had left his old ones ruined.

They were *his gloves*. Cleaner and finer than anything he could ever remember owning before.

He put them on, slightly ill-fitting over the bandages, and scribbled a smiley face on the packaging before he darted back up to the Dome and settled back in to wait.

The gloves were nice, he decided. Not so thick that they’d get in the way of his movement, but not thin enough that they’d be too delicate to do anything with.

And they were a *gift*.

He watched as the crew started to filter back into the lobby, a few minutes before the first game ended and the players spilled out of the tunnels. Scott went straight to where he’d left the gloves, and folded the paper packaging neatly, tucking it into a pocket.

He seemed satisfied, and Mythro wasn’t sure if it was over the game or his acceptance of the gloves but it felt warm anyway.

Somehow, subtly, Mythro had started wanting his approval, in a way he hadn’t wanted from anyone since-

But Scott hadn’t asked anything of him. He hadn’t expected Mythro to kill for him, or perform for him, or do anything at all, really. Unless he called in the debt that Mythro had been accumulating, he didn’t seem interested in anything he could do or anything he’d done.

Scott didn’t seem like the type of person who would ask him to kill countless mobs just to show what he could do. Before, Mythro had been naive enough to follow along with the tests without realizing Plumpkin was looking for evidence of a worldkiller. Even if Scott turned on him like he did, he’d know enough to run.

For now, Mythro...

Mythro *wanted* this. The pleasing Scott, the gifts, the way that Scott had said he’d be good at Parkour Tag. The way that he couldn’t remember the last time he’d been touched without the intent to hurt but Scott had just held his hands, so *gently*.

He wanted this *server*. The crew were so happy, and Scott always looked at home, and even the leader who he’d been so scared of- still was, really- laughed often. The games looked like more fun than he’d had in ages, and all of it worked as smoothly as a well-organized prison but without the ominous, heavy atmosphere.

All of them were happy.

And Mythro sort of wanted to be happy too.

He found himself climbing down the Dome before he’d consciously decided to, and drifting closer to where Scott was standing, bottle of water in his hand and hair drifting out of its bun. He didn’t seem to notice Mythro, and he swallowed, trying not to think too hard about what he was doing.

“Scott,” he hissed, and he turned, looking faintly surprised.

“Ghost,” he murmured, shifting so that it didn’t look like he was talking to the shadows and keeping his voice quiet. “What is it?”

Mythro bit his lip. “Can I watch one of the games?”

Scott’s eyebrows raised, the only surprise he showed, and whispered, “You want to?”

Mythro nodded, before he remembered that Scott wasn’t looking at him and stuttered, “Y- yeah. If...”

“Sure,” Scott said. “Depends on the game, though- some of them I don’t think you can stay hidden for. If it’s not through a portal, go ahead, and I think you could probably watch Survival Games and Build Mart too- Build Mart won’t be very interesting, though.”

“Okay,” Mythro whispered. “Um- thank you.”

Scott nodded, a tiny movement, and muttered back, “Be careful you don’t stray too far, or you won’t get teleported back. Actually- make sure I see you, after the game? If I don’t I’ll assume you’re stuck and get you out.”

Mythro swallowed back a rising bit of nausea at the idea of being trapped, and murmured, “Okay.”

There was a bright sound from the Dome, and Scott flashed him a quick smile before he jogged back towards his team. Mythro watched him go until he was nothing more than a bright spot of color amongst the crowd, then went to find a place to hide in the tunnels.

He listened to the chatter and the sound effects above him as he waited, curled into a corner where he could see all of the entrances, and tried not to flinch as the platforms started to descend, ten colored ones and another for the admins. As soon as they hit the floor- and even before, in a few cases- the competitors headed for the entrance to Parkour Tag, and Mythro hurried to keep up.

There were five identical arenas side by side, and Mythro found a settled place to wait above them, watching as they started up the games.

It was messy and chaotic, shouts echoing off the walls and sound effects going off as people were tagged, and almost too bright and loud, but Mythro found himself watching intently, tracking the routes they took, the way they moved, the leap from platform to platform, the dash to another corner, the frantic scramble up away from a pursuer.

It looked *fun*.

Mythro had spent plenty of time being chased, but not like this- he’d always been hopelessly outgated, and more concerned with getting away before he could even get into this kind of close-quarters scramble. And there had always been far, far more consequences for losing. Here, the tagged players were sent above the arenas, staring down at their teammates, still laughing.

Scott was tagged and reappeared above the arena, concentrated and intent as he watched his team below him, but then the round ended and he glanced up towards where Mythro was hiding. He grinned, but then someone shouted his name and he turned away again, back to his friends.

Mythro suddenly felt very cold.

He watched the rest of that MCC, and the way that people stood or sat together in the lobby before

they headed for the hotel, and the people who returned to the practice areas mere days later. He still didn't dare go into any of the courses, no matter how much he was starting to want to, but he watched as often as he could.

Sometimes he'd go closer to Scott, too- not often, and not without an escape route, but more than he had been. Sometimes he'd sit and eat with him, quietly, and Scott would talk about what they'd been working on, seemingly pleased by Mythro's little noises of affirmation. He didn't really talk, but it was... nice.

Mythro couldn't really remember doing anything like that, at least not in years. Plumpkin certainly hadn't eaten with him, and it wasn't like any of the wardens had bothered with it, even Sven.

"There's not as many really high places to go in this map," Scott explained to him, waving vaguely with his fork. "Which is by design, we want to make people use the ice-"

"Can't you climb onto the roof?" Mythro blurted out, and Scott frowned.

"I... don't think so," he said slowly. "You *shouldn't* be able to, at least."

"It looked like you could," he murmured, picking at his food. Scott hummed thoughtfully.

"Want to show me?" he suggested. "That's the kind of thing that it's good to know about."

Mythro blinked. It was... probably not the best idea, but... Scott would make the crew clear out beforehand, surely.

He nodded, and Scott stood, tossing his empty container into the nearest trash. Mythro did the same, and looked around carefully for anyone watching before he followed. There was no one in the arena when they arrived, and Scott unlocked one of the doors.

Mythro hesitated, unable to quite convince himself to walk through it. Scott's expression did something unreadable, and he held out his keys.

Before he could overthink it, Mythro took them, and breathed a little easier. Scott followed him in, and they stood in one of the starting areas as Mythro fussed with his coat and plotted how he was going to run. From the ground, the jump looked a bit harder than he'd thought, but still doable.

"Whenever you're ready," Scott offered.

Mythro started to run, jumping to the places he'd already picked, and prepared himself. It was a jump there, push off the wall in precisely the right spot, up to a narrow decorative ridge and go, reaching for the edge of the next place to go-

He caught it with just the tips of his fingers and bit down on a wheeze as the breath was knocked from his body, immediately readjusting his grip and pulling himself up onto the narrow ledge. From there, it was simple enough to leap across the gap and grab the roof- more securely, this time- and climb up.

Scott whistled as he caught his breath. "I didn't think that could be done. Thanks for pointing that out."

Mythro hunched his shoulders at Scott's impressed smile, and dropped silently back to the ground, almost jumping at the startled noise Scott made. It wasn't enough to foul his landing, and he rose back to his feet with only the usual discomfort of falling that far.

“Are you okay?” Scott asked. “That was a pretty long fall.”

Mythro shrugged a little self-consciously, and almost succumbed to the temptation to run through the rest of the course. Instead, he walked back over to Scott.

“I’m fine,” he said quietly, when he realized Scott was still waiting for an answer. Scott nodded, and Mythro shuffled awkwardly for a moment, waiting for Scott to wave him towards the door.

“Want to give the rest of it a go?” he asked. “See if there’s anything else we’re missing?”

Mythro nodded eagerly, and Scott laughed quietly as he ran again, darting from platform to platform, taking some of the more challenging jumps. He ran through the ice jumps until he could do them consistently, found a couple more ways to get onto the roof, tried getting from one side of the arena to the other as fast as he could, did the same thing going up and down despite Scott’s startled sounds every time he dropped back to the ground.

Eventually, though, Scott called, “Ghost, the crew’s probably going to be coming soon, so we’d better go.”

He stifled his disappointment and ran back, slipping past Scott out the door before he returned the keys. Scott locked the door behind them, then checked his communicator when it buzzed insistently.

“I have to go,” he admitted. “But- if you want to play around in any of the games, I’m happy to let you in. There’s nothing wrong with it, and honestly if you catch any more of those little glitches it’ll only be helpful.”

Mythro blinked, then nodded. Scott smiled, and set a gentle hand on his shoulder for a moment, telegraphing his movements, and he went still, almost shocked by the warmth.

It only lasted a matter of seconds before Scott let go and walked away, but Mythro stayed where he was for longer than that, hand rising to cover where Scott’s had been.

It was... odd. Mythro hadn’t been touched without it being a guard who wanted to hurt him in years.

Eventually, he managed to come back to his senses and headed back to the Dome, curling up in his blanket. Scott’s offer was tempting- all of the games that he’d gotten the chance to see looked fun, and he’d enjoyed running around Parkour Tag more than much of anything else lately, even if he’d collected more bruises and sore muscles than he had in months. It was still less than he’d done to get out of one prison or another- on at least one occasion, he’d broken bones if it was the most foolproof way to get where he needed to be- and he hadn’t gotten to run like that in *ages*. It was a lot more fun when he was just running for the sake of running.

Maybe he’d take Scott up on it. None of the PVP games, because he didn’t really have anyone to play them against but Scott and he didn’t really want to fight him, but... the movement-based games looked fun.

And maybe if he did well, Scott would be happy. He liked when Scott was happy.

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

this is where that "mentions of animal death" tag is coming into play!

After he'd made it, Ghost frequently took advantage of Scott's offer to let him into whichever of the games he wanted. Never without looking nervous about it, or checking just a little too much if it was still okay, but he was actually *asking* for something. It was enough for Scott to drop whatever he was doing every time to watch him brighten as soon as he was in the arena.

He was good at the games, too- it took him a few tries to get used to them, but he always seemed to manage to find a way to do something that Scott didn't realize existed, and was usually more efficient than anything he'd thought of. A lot of the time it was a glitch or exploit of some kind, but it was far more impressive than infuriating, and it *was* good to know about them before someone like Fundy found them in a tournament. He wouldn't lie and say it wasn't worrying when he did something that looked like it *hurt*, but Ghost seemed more excited than he'd ever seen him.

If he didn't think it'd spook him, he'd invite Ghost to be one of the play testers- he'd do fantastically at it, even if he wasn't comfortable enough to play with a team yet. He always seemed calmer, happier, when he was in the games, and Scott wished he could show him the ones it was harder to sneak someone into or that he wasn't allowed to see before the next tournaments.

He didn't say anything about it. Ghost was more comfortable, sure, but he still didn't seem even willing to let the crew or Noxite see him, and some days Scott wouldn't even see him at all. He slept somewhere that Scott didn't know about, hoarded food and supplies as much as he could, and he ate in quick, harried bites, like someone would take it from him if he took too long. And he still tensed up when Scott touched him, though he couldn't seem to decide whether to move closer or away.

So Scott didn't try to suggest that he join the crew. He just kept letting Ghost into the games when he asked, giving him food every day and eating with him when he found the time, trying to prove to him that Scott wasn't going to do anything to him. Because Scott didn't know where he'd come from or what he was running from, but he seemed quietly desperate for that reassurance.

Ghost was somehow unlike anyone else he'd met before. He almost seemed like a speedrunner, with how deliberate his movement was, how precise he seemed to be, but he didn't act quite the same, more inclined towards secure but slower paths, and most of the speedrunners weren't quite so hyper-aware of the people around them. He reminded Scott a bit of PVPers, too, and some of them had the same way of moving, but even though there ones who were as skittish as Ghost- mostly, the ones who had grown up on bigger worlds, lost to the underbelly of the fighting rings rather than just being visitors- they didn't act like he did. Most of the time they were brash and argumentative, inclined with attacking more than obeying. Ghost, for all that he'd lash out if cornered, was more likely to run, and he was more unused to crowds than he would've been if he grew up on Hypixel or someplace similar.

At the end of it, it didn't really matter where Ghost had come from or what, exactly, had hurt him. He was on MCC now, and Scott was learning what he needed as he grew more and more comfortable.

They were eating dinner when Scott noticed that the artificially-climatized sky nonetheless looked ominous and dark, in a way that threatened rain. Ghost seemed to have realized it too, with the way he was glancing up at the clouds in between bites snuck under his mask.

“You know,” Scott offered, slowly. “If you don’t want to I’ll leave you something to keep out of the rain a bit better, but- it’d be fine if you came into the hotel, to avoid the weather. You could stay in the event hotel to make sure you wouldn’t be seen, or... there’s plenty of space in the crew housing, if you’d want something more permanent.”

Ghost paused, going still and somehow even *more* silent, and considered it for a moment. Scott waited, focusing on his food rather than on the kid- he always seemed more comfortable when he wasn’t being looked at directly.

“Are the chickens inside?”

Scott blinked, turning back to him. Ghost wasn’t quite looking at his face, but he’d turned towards him just a bit, shoulders hunched in the nervous way he always had when he asked questions.

“They are, they’ll be fine,” he confirmed. “Do you... want to see them?”

Ghost nodded, hesitantly, and Scott smiled, gesturing for him to follow. He did, footsteps quiet as he trailed in Scott’s shadow, and it was only a short walk to the chicken coop, where the Dome chickens were kept.

Scott let himself and Ghost into the pen, latching the gate behind them but not properly locking it, and sat, careful not to step on any of the birds. Ghost did the same a half-second late, and one of the friendlier chickens climbed into his lap with a coo.

Scott watched out of the corner of his eye as Ghost tentatively brushed his fingers over its back, seemingly transfixed. He didn’t look *relaxed*, per se, but... happy, at least.

He turned his gaze back to the chickens demanding his attention, leaving Ghost to it. There was a faint shuffle of noise from Ghost, but he didn’t turn to look, more focused on the insistent birds pecking at his clothing.

“Um,” Ghost said. Scott hummed an acknowledgement.

“Have you ever- uh,” Ghost said, then took an audible breath. “Have you ever- lost something?”

Scott turned to face him, and blinked in surprise. He’d taken his mask off.

Ghost was staring down at the bird in his lap, biting at his lower lip and dark eyes heavy with something between exhaustion and grief and fear, and it took Scott’s breath away, because-

He was so *young*. He’d known that, of course, from the way he acted to the way his voice sounded, but he’d never seen his face before. Ghost had never taken his mask off when he was around.

Ghost looked up at him for the briefest of moments before he looked away again, back down at the chicken in his lap. He looked oddly... melancholy, staring down at it, tracing grey feathers gently.

And he’d asked Scott a question, he remembered belatedly. “What kind of something?”

“Like something important,” Ghost said. “Like- the most important thing, and someone took it away from you.”

Scott's breath caught in his throat, and for a moment he was in limbo again, his husband both alive and dead, his grief like a physical thing, and his hands were full of poppy petals like bloodstains.

Then he blinked, and Ghost was watching him from the corner of his eye, looking somehow soft from the overlong hair in his eyes and the uncertain set of his jaw.

"Yeah," Scott said, voice somehow still even. "Yeah, I have."

"What-" Ghost swallowed. "Can I... what-"

"Happened?" Scott guessed, and he nodded. "It's... well, some friends and I were playing on a modified hardcore server- like a game, really, except it got kind of out of hand. Basically we split into different... teams, kind of, and someone I cared about was killed. He's fine now that it's over, and I don't blame the people who did it since it was just how the game was structured, but it was still... It still hurt."

"You're not- angry?" Ghost asked.

"They're my friends," Scott pointed out. "I know they didn't want to, and they wouldn't've if they had another choice."

"So if someone hurts you, but they didn't want to... you forgive them," Ghost said, slowly. Scott frowned.

"That was just how it worked for me," he said. "In a different situation maybe I wouldn't have."

Ghost hugged his arms to his chest and hunched his shoulders, like he would've curled into a ball if it wasn't for the chicken in his lap. "How do you know?"

"I think..." Scott sighed. "I'd say that it depends on if you *want* to forgive them, not if you think you should. I wanted to."

"Oh," Ghost said, and for a while it was quiet except for the chickens.

Scott watched him fold into himself, and wished he could reach out a hand.

"What if they did?" he asked suddenly. "Want to?"

"Then I don't think I would forgive them," Scott said. "Unless I knew for certain that they didn't want to anymore, and they hurt me in a way that I *could* forgive doing on purpose. But I don't think I would."

"Oh," Ghost said again, even more quietly.

He looked down at the chicken in his lap, and bit down on his lower lip again, sharply enough that Scott had to stifle a sympathetic wince. Maskless and upset, he looked vulnerable, *childish*, in a way that twisted Scott's breath in some bittersweet way.

It wasn't fair that he looked like this, that he had to ask questions with too much weight behind them. So much better than it had been that he even could.

"Come in for the night," Scott suggested, softly. "You can sleep in a real bed, stay out of the rain. No one will bother you."

No one will hurt you, he didn't say. Ghost took a breath that made his whole body shudder, and nodded.

Gently, Ghost nudged the chicken from his lap, and Scott followed suit, getting to his feet. He didn't put his mask back on, but he held it against his chest with both hands as Scott unlatched the gate and stepped aside.

The walk to the event hotel was short, made shorter by how they were hurrying to get out of the rain. Most of the crew seemed to have retreated for the night, tarps stretched across anything delicate and the lights of their housing shining against the dark sky. Scott ushered him towards the door and unlocked it, glancing back over his shoulder to make sure that there really was no one watching.

Ghost stood awkwardly in the entranceway, hair and coat damp with water, and Scott waved for him to follow as he headed towards the stairs, ignoring the elevator beside them. Ghost followed obediently when he led the way to one of the empty rooms.

"There's towels in the bathroom, and there's usually spare clothes in the dresser if you want something dry, but you don't have to," Scott said. "I can go across the hall or I can go someplace else entirely, whichever you prefer."

Ghost made a little noise in the back of his throat and sat heavily on the bed, not paying attention to his damp clothes. He looked lost, and Scott paused at the door.

"I'll go across the hall," Scott said. "And if you want me to leave, come tap on the door twice."

He turned, and stopped when Ghost rasped, "I had a- a bird."

Ghost was curled into himself on the bed, barely visible over how he'd tucked his face into his knees. Hesitantly, Scott came to sit on the bed beside him.

"They killed him," he mumbled. "In front of me. 'Cause I didn't listen. He wanted me to listen."

"I'm sorry," Scott said, quietly. "You didn't deserve that."

Ghost wrinkled his nose at that, but didn't say anything. Scott set a careful hand on his back.

"You didn't deserve it," he said again. "And they shouldn't have done it."

Ghost made an indistinct noise and shifted just enough that he could rest his head against Scott's shoulder.

They stayed there for a while, Ghost's hair slowly dampening his shirt, in silence.

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

this chapter has both panic attacks and some mentions of animal death!

Mythro was almost asleep from exhaustion when Scott left, murmuring something that he couldn't quite process and letting Mythro curl up on the bed, without leaning on his shoulder to keep him upright.

The door opened and shut softly, and Mythro listened halfheartedly for the clicking of a lock. It never came.

The room felt too still and silent with only one person in it, and Mythro sat up, blinking away some of the grogginess and shuffling over to the dresser. He didn't *like* the idea of wearing the MCC clothes, but he liked being wet even less- it felt a little too much like all the times he'd spent sitting in waterlogged cells, waiting for an opportunity, for something to change so he could just get *out*.

It was almost painfully unfamiliar, lying on a proper bed in a real building where the rain was just a noise outside, where it was warm and, however slightly, safer than he'd been. Scott was across the hall, apparently, and he found that he didn't really mind. He'd almost *fallen asleep on his shoulder*- it wouldn't really make sense to be more scared of sleeping with him in a different room.

And Scott at least *acted* like he didn't want to hurt Mythro. He'd told him-

He'd said that he wouldn't forgive someone who did what Plumpkin did. And he'd said that he didn't deserve it, and he still wasn't sure whether or not that was right but maybe he'd still keep thinking it even when he found out what Mythro was. Maybe he'd still want him in this warm room or holding birds that were almost nothing like Shiratori.

It was a nice daydream, at least. Scott liked Ghost, not Mythrodak.

He got abruptly to his feet. The bed was too soft, and he couldn't settle.

Idly, he went through the drawers and closets, not really looking for anything in particular. There was a stack of blankets the same of his, and he grabbed one, grateful for the familiarity.

There was something else behind it. A dark blue jacket with bright accents- someone must have worn it in an event.

Against his common sense, he pulled it out, and there was an odd crinkling noise as he did. Something in the pocket, he realized.

It was a photograph of Scott and someone else, dressed in bright teal. He didn't recognize the other person- a guy with blond hair, a headband holding it out of his face- but Scott was leaning against him, caught mid-laugh, bright and content.

Mythro put the picture back in the jacket pocket and put it back in the closet.

The bed was too soft, so Mythro took the blanket to the floor and curled up there, between the bed

and the wall. The rain kept falling, quieter than elder guardians but louder than the Abyss, and it was sort of soothing.

He fell asleep, and he dreamed of the Abyss.

There was nothing around for as far as he could see except for the chest in front of him, the chest with a body in it, the chest that had blood staining the corners, and this was a dream. This was a dream. This *had* to be a dream.

But hadn't he told himself it was a dream so many uncountable times before? He'd dreamed of escaping only to find himself still lost in the neverending dark. He'd thought he was awake only to realize it was just another helpless wish. Maybe this was waking up. Maybe this was the part that was forever.

He opened the chest, and Shiratori was torn apart inside, and then Shiratori was the chicken he'd held and Sven was staring at him like he was a monster again and he said *some things were necessary* except he turned into Scott halfway through, and he said *don't play the victim game* in Plumpkin's voice and he said *worldkiller, worldkiller, worldkiller* and there was no care in his eyes, gentle hands turned choking as they reached for him.

Ghost, Scott said. *Ghost, wake up.*

He cringed away from his hands, and Scott said, "Ghost!"

He opened his eyes to find Scott crouching near him, braid mussed from sleep and tired concern on his face, and Mythro screamed, slamming against the wall from how quickly he backed up and covering his head with his arms.

"Hey, hey, no, it's okay," Scott said quickly. "It's okay, kid, just breathe-"

He whimpered, tugging at his hair despite the sting and the way it felt far too much like the way Kay had used it to yank him around through the drugged haze, and squeezed his eyes shut so he wouldn't have to watch.

"Please don't hurt me," he begged, voice thin and cracking.

"Oh, *Ghost*," Scott said, soft and heartbroken, and Mythro flinched. "I'm not going to hurt you."

He opened his eyes, and Scott was sitting far enough away that he wasn't trapping him, hands folded in his lap and something heavy in his expression.

"I'm not going to hurt you," he repeated. "Never, okay? I won't."

"You d- d- d-" Mythro swallowed, hands shaking and fingers numb. "You don't kn- know- I'm, I'm, I'm not-"

Scott didn't say anything, didn't reach for him, didn't even move. He just watched him, that same unreadable expression on his face, softened by the dim lighting.

"I'm *bad*," Mythro said helplessly, tears scratching at the back of his throat. "I'm just *bad*-"

"No," Scott said quietly. "You're good."

"I'm *not*," Mythro sobbed. "You're going to hurt me, please don't hurt me-"

"I won't," Scott said. "Ghost- *Mythrodak*. I've seen the fugitive call, okay?"

The world stuttered.

“What?” he whispered.

“I’ve seen what they’re saying about you,” Scott said. “And I don’t think that’s you. You *don’t* deserve what’s happened to you, Ghost. You’re a kid, and even if you think you’re- *bad*- I’m not going to hurt you. Neither is anyone here.”

Mythro whined, burying his face in his knees, and smacked his hands against his head helplessly.

“Hey, no, it’s okay,” Scott said, and then he was shifting forwards and Mythro tensed but he just took his hands. “Squeeze my hands instead, okay? You don’t need to hit yourself.”

He squeezed his hands obediently, and Scott did the same to his, and they stayed like that for a while, going back and forth until Mythro could breathe again.

“I’m not going to hurt you,” Scott said. “You can stay with us as long as you like- forever, if you want- and no one here will ever hurt you. Or let you be hurt.”

Mythro choked on a whimper, and pitched forwards, but Scott caught him, let him curl up against him and muffle his noises into his shirt. Scott tapped idle fingers against his back, cupped the back of his head with a hand but moved it away when he flinched, whispered words that Mythro couldn’t quite make out.

“It’s okay,” he murmured. “It’s gonna be okay.”

And it was.

Chapter 10

Things got easier after that, in some ways.

It was a little easier to tell himself that Scott wasn't going to change his mind, even though he couldn't shake the terror that seized him every time he thought about Scott *knowing*, knowing what he'd done, what he could do, what he'd wanted to do once. Still sometimes wanted to, on bad days, when the memory of Shiratori was like a half-healed wound struck just a bit too hard.

And he'd said that he wouldn't hurt Mythro, but he still wasn't quite sure what he counted as hurt, and just because he hadn't hit him yet didn't mean he wouldn't. But he probably wouldn't send him away or turn him in, and that was good enough.

Things changed, ever so slightly. Scott still brought him food and let him play the games when the arenas were empty, but he kept offering for Mythro to pick a room in the crew housing, someplace inside with a real bed. He kept touching Mythro, just lightly on his shoulders or back, let him sit close enough to lean against his shoulder, sometimes put an arm around him. It was *weird*, almost tingly, and he wasn't used to it. Much less to not being scared of it.

He didn't move into the proper housing, but he did figure out how to climb up to Scott's balcony even in the rain, and waited it out there. Scott let him curl up on his couch while he worked, and rifle through his cabinets if he was hungry even if he didn't *need* food. He didn't ask for Mythro to do anything, and he didn't even force him to come inside if he didn't come of his own accord. Eventually, he gave Mythro a key to the window, and told him to come inside whenever he wanted.

Mythro didn't really know what to do with himself. It was unusual not to have a *task*- he'd always had someone to tell him what to do, or a prison to plan an escape for or get out of, or even just a constant push to keep *running*.

On MCC, there was nothing to complete. He'd been exploring before, but Scott was happy to show him anything he wanted to see, and even going through the games didn't really have a purpose.

He didn't mention it to Scott- it felt ungrateful. Instead, he kept taking quick naps in Scott's apartment, playing in the games whenever he was around to let him in, and watching the practice server or the crew working when he wasn't. He still didn't dare go in, not when it was still too visible.

He snuck through the event areas, wandering without any real destination in mind, and headed to the Parkour Tag arena when he heard voices. It wasn't hard to sneak into the rafters to look in, and it turned out to be a handful of the Noxcrew, including the leader.

Mythro sat to watch, though he couldn't quite hear what they were saying. One of them was standing up on one of the ice platforms, and as he watched they tried to make a jump, missed, and came back down to land on the ground.

And then the leader looked straight up at Mythro and called, "Hey, kid."

He froze.

"Noxite," someone muttered, but he waved them off and looked back up at Mythro.

"Ghost, right?" he asked.

He nodded, though he couldn't resist the urge to creep a bit further back into the shadows, away from his gaze. The leader- Noxite- looked back at the jump the crew member had been trying to make.

“You found a way to get onto the roof, didn't you?” Noxite asked. “Scott said he found it, but I'm guessing that was you.”

He looked back up, just long enough to see Mythro nod again, and called, “Want to show us what you did? No one else can figure it out.”

He considered it. It felt too easy for it to be a trap, but- but Noxite already knew he was here, and he seemed like he *had* known, and surely there were easier ways to hurt him. If he'd already known Scott was lying, then he must have decided he wasn't worth grabbing. Coming a little bit closer wasn't going to change that, unless he did something wrong, and he didn't *think* that just doing the parkour counted as doing something wrong-

He dropped down to the ground, careful not to come within arm's reach of Noxite or any of the others, and edged his way to the starting platform. After a moment's hesitation, they moved out of his way, far enough that they couldn't interfere with his path without moving back.

Mythro took a deep breath and ran, following the same path he'd taken when he was showing Scott, bracing for the impact as he slammed against the wall and the breath was knocked from his chest with a cough, and scrambled up to the roof quick enough that they had no chance to grab him. If they'd tried, which he didn't think they had.

“I see,” Noxite muttered, walking closer to look at the steps, and Mythro shifted away. “So if we just make that taller?”

“He's kinda short, though,” one of the others said. “Someone taller could manage it.”

One of the other crew members rolled their eyes and looked up at him. “You found a couple ways, right?”

He nodded, and they waved him over. He jumped off the roof, and ran his way up the other paths he'd found. The crew member wrote something on the notepad in their hands, glancing between the jumps and the paper.

“So if that was flat, do you think you could do it?” they asked, indicating one of the things he'd jumped off of. “Without breaking anything on the course.”

He considered it. After a moment, he jumped down and sized it up again, judging the distance.

He tried it again, pushing off of the ridge instead of grabbing it, and went for the edge of the roof. There was a crunching noise and he squeaked at the sharp pain as his wrist smashed against the lip, but he managed to catch it with his other hand and haul himself up enough to jump up to the roof.

When he was there, he held his wrist to his chest. It wasn't broken, or at least not badly- he'd have to be careful with it, but it'd heal fine so long as no one tried to grab it or break it more.

The Noxcrew member was staring at him, and when he looked over Noxite and the others were too. He rose back to a crouch, backing towards the wall and plotting out a path out if they tried to get up-

Except they weren't. They were just staring at him, with the same expression Scott sometimes got around him.

“Um,” Noxite said. “So you can get up even if it’s flat. That’s good to know.”

He nodded, and the other crew member opened their mouth like they were going to say something but shut it again.

“Thank you for your help,” Noxite said, and Mythro bobbed his head nervously. “You can go if you’d like, we’re just going to fix those spots.”

He ran as soon as he was dismissed, and made a beeline for Scott’s apartment. It was a bit more complicated to get up to his balcony with his wrist partially unusable, but he managed, and found the first aid kit in his bathroom had bandages that he could wrap his wrist with.

Someone cleared their throat, and Mythro jumped, looking up to find Scott standing in the doorway.

“You want help with that?” he asked, and Mythro shook his head, tucking in the end and testing it. Painful, sure, but he’d had worse.

“Okay,” Scott said. “Do you want a potion?”

He frowned. He didn’t *think* Scott would drug him, but he still didn’t trust potions, and if he’d upset Noxite and the others-

“I’ll go get the ingredients and you can watch me make it,” Scott offered, and Mythro nodded. “Alright, I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

Mythro watched him walk out and leaned back against the cabinets, closing his eyes. His wrist was hurting, and it made his head pulse with distant pain, still possible to work through if he needed but enough to make him feel small and tired and vulnerable.

He jerked awake to the sound of someone knocking against the wall, and Scott raised a bag, rattling it around enough to hear the glass clink. Mythro blinked away the fuzzy sleepy feeling and struggled to his feet, and Scott draped an arm around his shoulders, letting him lean close enough to stay upright.

Scott set up a brewing stand on the kitchen counter, and Mythro balanced on his shoulder to jump up to sit next to it. Scott set the bottles into the stand and measured out a scoop of nether wart, focused and quiet.

Mythro shifted uncomfortably. Something about the silence felt heavier than normal.

“Healing or regen?” Scott asked, as it started to bubble. Mythro shrugged. He didn’t really know the difference- anything he’d had was usually stolen and he’d take what he could get.

“Regen hurts less, but it takes longer,” Scott said. Mythro shrugged again, propping his chin on his other hand and closing his eyes.

Scott sighed. “I’ll give you regen.”

It was quiet for a while, except for the hissing and bubbling of the potion, and Mythro watched carefully as Scott added each of the ingredients- he didn’t *really* think Scott was going to drug him, but it was better safe than sorry.

Eventually Scott closed up the vials and dusted off his hands, and Mythro closed his eyes, waiting for it to finish.

The potion quieted, and he heard Scott slide it off the stand a moment before he tapped it against Mythro's knee. "Drink this."

He took it, kicking lightly at Scott's leg when he tried to help him lift it, and choked down half the bottle in a few swallows, coughing at the weird, tooth-tingling coolness of it.

"Whoa there," Scott murmured, but didn't stop him as he drank the rest.

He only realized he was swaying when Scott set his hands against his shoulders, and he couldn't help slumping to rest his forehead on his shoulder, the fabric of his shirt soft against his eyes.

"C'mon," Scott said, and suddenly the world tilted as Scott lifted him, careful and steady. It was a short walk to the couch, and then Scott was setting him down and flicking a blanket over him.

"Are you mad?" Mythro whispered hoarsely, and Scott fussed with the blanket, making sure it laid flat under his broken wrist.

"No," Scott said. "I'm not mad at you, Ghost. We can talk more in the morning."

"Promise?"

For a moment, he could see Scott's expression, pained, sad. Then he failed to keep his eyes open.

"I promise," Scott said. Mythro slept.

Chapter 11

Scott was cooking when he heard Ghost waking up, a shuffle of fabric and bare feet on the floor as he padded around the couch, bleary-eyed and hair sticking up in hopelessly tangled tufts. He'd fallen asleep still in his coat and ruffled shirt, which were wrinkled and hanging awkwardly off his shoulders, the right sleeve trapped under the halfhearted bandages he'd wrapped around his wrist. For a moment, he looked like any other teenager woken by the smell of food, and Scott had to stifle the urge to straighten his hair and ask how he'd slept.

He didn't. This was Ghost, and he was still too scared for that sort of thing, no matter how much progress he'd made.

"How's your wrist feel?" Scott asked instead, and split the food in half, pushing one plate across the table towards Ghost. He flashed a thumbs up, and sat, dragging his plate towards himself and taking small, quick bites.

"I'd like to look at it, if you're willing," he said. "Just to make sure that it's healing alright. And you probably won't be able to use it much for a while."

Ghost paused, raising a skeptical eyebrow at that. Scott shook his head.

"It'll heal faster and cleaner if you let it heal without using it," he explained. "Especially since you shouldn't take too many potions for it. I'm not going to tie you to the couch or anything, but it'd be best to wrap it properly and stay off it as much as possible."

Ghost huffed in distaste, kicking at the legs of his chair, but nodded, and Scott allowed himself a single silent breath of relief. He hadn't been lying about not forcing Ghost to take care of himself, but he hadn't wanted to try and figure out how best to make sure he didn't damage his wrist without scaring him.

When they'd finished eating, Scott unwound the bandages to peer at his arm. It looked better, probably mostly healed, but still tender and fragile. Still, he'd at least stayed down long enough for the potion to work.

"I think it'd be better for you to wear something with short sleeves, if you're comfortable, and wrap this," Scott decided. Ghost hesitated, but nodded, and stood.

"There's clothes that'll fit you on the table in my room," Scott said. Ghost padded away and shut the door.

Scott watched him go for a moment, then headed to clean up the kitchen.

It was sort of odd- his life had gotten a lot more complicated when Ghost arrived, but it had gotten more domestic, too. He hadn't made breakfast for anyone since Third Life.

The door opened to reveal Ghost, wearing one of the merchandise shirts in one of the smallest sizes Scott could find, the bright orange making him look shockingly pale. He still hadn't picked up his mask from where he'd left it on the bathroom counter, and again he looked like... a teenager.

Scott took his arm, gently, and Ghost was tense but allowed it. It didn't take long to wrap his wrist, crossing it across his palm to keep his hand partially immobile. Ghost tried and failed to flex his hand, and frowned.

“Yeah, that’s what you’re not supposed to do,” Scott said lightly. “It won’t be forever.”

Ghost hummed in the back of his throat, clearly irritated, but nodded obediently. Scott took a quiet breath, and tried to think about how to approach the subject.

“The place you’ve been staying is high up, right?” he asked. Ghost stiffened, pulling his arm out of Scott’s grip, and he let him. “I don’t need to know where, don’t worry, just- that’ll be tough until your arm heals.”

Ghost shrugged, hugging his arms to his chest.

“Stay here,” Scott suggested. “You can take the couch, and if you’d like I can give you a Noxcrew hoodie, and no one will bother you when you’re coming in. You can take anything you like from the kitchen, and I’ve got enough of the spare merch stashed that some of it’ll fit you.”

Ghost bit his lip, looking conflicted, until he nodded, tiny and hesitant. “I’ll- get my things.”

Scott watched him climb out of the window- he did seem to be holding his wrist carefully, working his way down more slowly than he’d seen him doing it before using only one hand, but it still made him nervous to watch.

Ghost returned after only minutes, tightly-knotted bag in hand, and glanced briefly between Scott, the bag, and the open window for a moment.

“Anything else?” Scott asked, and Ghost nodded.

“Blanket,” he said, quietly. “Down in the bushes.”

“Want me to go get it?”

Ghost nodded again, and Scott went to collect the blanket- the same one he’d given him, what must have been months ago now.

Had Ghost really been around for that long? He must have been- he’d been around for multiple MCCs. He’d been around long enough to settle just a bit, to feel comfortable even sleeping in the same building as the rest of them.

Ghost was sitting on the counter when he returned, bag nowhere to be seen- evidently, it had been squirreled away someplace Scott didn’t know about for security. He brightened when he saw the blanket, and set it on his lap, tapping idle patterns on the surface and tracing the seams with his fingertips.

“The counter, huh?” he asked, and Ghost nodded, kicking idly against the cupboards.

“Tall,” he said simply. Scott chuckled.

“Want anything from the kitchen, while we’re in here?” he asked. “I think I have everything for hot chocolate, if you want.”

“Hot chocolate?” Ghost asked.

“Yeah.”

He hunched his shoulders, not quite looking at Scott in... embarrassment? “What’s...”

“You don’t know what hot chocolate is?” Scott asked. Ghost shook his head.

“It’s like... a hot drink that’s kind of sweet and chocolate-flavored, it’s made from milk,” Scott said. “It’s good.”

“Oh,” Ghost said. “I’ve... never had it.”

Impulsively, Scott patted his knee under the blanket. “We’ll make some. Why don’t you go put your blanket on the couch so it’s not in the way?”

“Kay,” Ghost said, and hopped down, moving out of Scott’s vision. He returned as Scott was setting a saucepan on the stove, and peered over his shoulder as he worked.

“I use like four parts milk to one part cream,” he explained. “Chocolate chips are in the cabinet above you, if you’d grab those.”

Ghost had to stand on tiptoe to reach the jar, and Scott dropped in two handfuls, careful not to splash the milk. Ghost watched intently, and snuck a hand in to grab a few. Scott pretended not to notice.

“When you put that back, there should be brown sugar on the shelf below it,” he said. “And vanilla extract near that. Can you get them both for me?”

Ghost did so, and Scott shifted so he could watch as he added two spoonfuls of the brown sugar and a splash of the vanilla. Ghost took them back without asking, and sniffed at a smudge of vanilla on his fingers.

Scott turned away to turn on the stove, and heard a quiet noise of disgust from behind him. When he turned, Ghost was wrinkling his nose at the bottle of vanilla extract. Scott stifled a laugh.

“It’s very concentrated,” Scott explained. “So it’s kind of gross on its own. When it’s mixed into things it tastes more like it smells.”

Ghost nodded, apparently satisfied with the explanation, and closed the cupboard. Scott held carefully still as he used his good hand to balance on his shoulder and jump up to the counter, watching as he stirred it around, waiting for the chocolate chips to melt.

He made a tiny annoyed sound, and Scott looked up to see him tugging at a tangle in his hair. “Do you have scissors?”

“Wouldn’t you rather have a comb?” he asked.

Ghost let go of his hair and propped his chin on one hand. “Long hair is- it’s too easy to grab.”

Scott flicked his braid over his shoulder, where Ghost could see it. “I have long hair, and no one’s ever grabbed mine.”

Ghost blinked, head tilting curiously. “Really?”

Scott bit down on a comment that was most certainly *not* what he’d been asking about, and nodded. “Even on harsher servers no one’s ever tried to go for my hair.”

“Oh,” Ghost said, and looked down. “Huh.”

“How about this,” Scott said, softer. “Let’s have hot chocolate. And then I can either find you some scissors, or I can help you get the tangles out and you can decide from there if you’d rather cut it or

leave it as is. It's your choice."

"...Okay," Ghost said, and nodded. Scott smiled, and tapped the cabinet behind his head to encourage him to pull a pair of mugs out.

When Scott turned off the burner and jumped up to sit beside him, Ghost shuffled over until their shoulders were pressed together, and took a quick sip of his hot chocolate. Scott smiled at the pleased noise he made.

"It's good," he mumbled against the lip of the cup.

"Yeah?"

Ghost nodded, and rested his head against Scott's shoulder. They sat in silence, warm in the dim light, and Ghost's broken wrist rested on Scott's knee, still and relaxed despite their proximity.

Eventually, it had to end, and Scott put the mugs next to the sink, making a note to wash them later. Ghost slid off the counter, landing quietly on his tiptoes.

"What do you want to do?" Scott asked.

"Um," Ghost said, quietly, and raised a hand to his hair, twisting a chunk around his fingers. "Um-can you help?"

Scott smiled. "Go sit down, I'll be there in a sec."

He returned to find Ghost slumped over the table, barely visible over the mess of his hair, and knocked lightly on the table to get his attention. He sat up, and Scott stood behind him.

"If you need me to stop, just tell me and I will," he said. "You're in charge here, okay?"

"Okay," Ghost said, tensely, and Scott began.

It was slow work, working the tangles out of his hair without hurting him or pulling too hard, but his hair was silky and mostly straight and though there was a lot of it, most of the knots didn't take too much persuasion. Ghost was stiff and silent, not complaining at the tiny tugs.

"Stop," he whispered, and Scott let go immediately. Ghost was out of his chair as soon as he did, and Scott almost couldn't track him until he realized he'd gone under the table.

Scott crouched, far away enough that he wasn't crowding him. Ghost was breathing, shuddery but strictly measured inhales and exhales, and Scott waited for him to calm.

Eventually, he got back into the chair, lifting his head. "Keep going."

"Are you sure?" Scott asked.

Ghost nodded, and he moved back, picking up where he left off. Ghost didn't ask him to stop again, and soon enough his hair was smooth and tangle-free. It was longer than it'd looked, snarled and messy, falling to about his collarbones.

"I think that's done," Scott said, running his fingers through it to make sure. "I can help you cut it short, or I can just even this out a bit and leave it long, or you can just not cut it at all. Up to you."

Ghost shifted. "Can I see it?"

Scott went to get a mirror, and Ghost hummed under his breath as he thought about it.

“I’d just trim it to about here,” Scott said, holding a bit in his fingers. “So that it’s the same length all around, if you wanted that.”

“...Okay,” Ghost said, and nodded. “Y- yeah. Okay.”

“You sure?” he checked, and Ghost nodded again. “Alright, starting now.”

He trimmed away the ragged uneven edges, evened out the shorter chunks in the front, and fluffed it with his hands, checking that it looked alright. “I think that’s good.”

Ghost picked up the mirror and nodded, looking slightly transfixed by his own reflection. “Thank you.”

“No problem,” Scott said, and stepped away to put away the things he’d used. When he looked back, Ghost was still sitting at the table, looking into the mirror. His hair and the bright shirt softened him, a bit, accentuated the way that he wasn’t nearly as scrawny as he had been. With the fascinated, calm expression on his face, it made him look just as young and just as ordinary as any of the kids who played in MCC, or the younger crew members.

He smiled up at Scott through the mess of dark hair that was already falling in his face. “Thanks, Scott.”

Scott laughed. “Let me get you a hair tie, and then you can thank me.”

Ghost’s sheepish grin and tiny laugh followed him, and Scott smiled to himself as he went.

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Mythro stayed in Scott's apartment a bit longer than he'd intended.

It wasn't like he'd moved in or anything- he was still planning on going back to his perch on the Dome once he was able, even if what Scott counted as able and what he usually counted as able were different, and realistically he *could've* just stayed away even with his wrist messed up, and realistically he could've left after the first night, and realistically he didn't have to let Scott keep convincing him to stay, and *realistically*-

Realistically, Mythro could've done a lot of things, but he didn't. And now he'd been sleeping on Scott's couch for far too many days in a row, enough that he had a favored mug sitting next to Scott's and a red Noxcrew hoodie hanging by the door and a bin for his things that was being gradually covered in more and more ghost stickers, because Scott had seen him laugh at it.

So maybe things felt a bit more permanent than he'd planned on. And maybe he hadn't said anything when Scott started clearing out the extra room in his apartment, and it was hard to say that he *hadn't* moved in when he had his own room- a *room*, a place that was his even if it was technically still Scott's, a room instead of a cell.

It was admittedly still boring to sit in the apartment all day, so he'd taken to shadowing Scott while he worked sometimes, or following the crew the way he'd done before. He wasn't sure if Noxite knew he was there, or if he'd just messed up the time he'd been acknowledged- either way, no one said anything.

Noxite was weird, he decided quickly. He was strict in a way that Mythro associated with prison wardens, and he had the same unforgiving distaste for anything not planned for. Mythro wasn't *planning* on messing with MCC the way that he'd always done with prisons, but it still made him anxious to think that he might.

But Noxite also *wasn't* like a warden. He didn't seem to mind being teased by his crew, and he took criticism better than any warden Mythro had met, except for maybe Sven. He joked around, and most of the time when he was acting angry it seemed almost joking. It was at least not the kind of angry that was followed by a punishment.

And as Mythro spent more time watching him, it got clearer and clearer that he knew he was there. Noxite just didn't *care*.

Which was weird. But he didn't seem to be setting a trap or anything, and Scott trusted him, so Mythro didn't stop doing it.

He was watching them from above as they worked through a model of a short parkour course, one that he didn't recognize from any of the games he'd gotten a chance to look at. It looked interesting- not *easy*, but doable, if he could just look at it closer...

And then Noxite called, "Hey, Ghost. Want to test this?"

He froze. Then, impulsively, he dropped to the ground near them. At least one of the crew members jumped at his sudden appearance.

“How do you do that without hurting yourself?” someone asked.

“Practice,” he said quietly, and looked up at the tower. It took a few moments for him to decide on a path, and he glanced up at Noxite, waiting.

“Whenever you’re ready,” he invited, and Mythro took off.

It wasn’t too difficult towards the beginning, before it grew abruptly harder and Mythro had to pause, looking up at the next few jumps.

“By the way,” Noxite called. “We’re testing if it can be done without hurting yourself, not just if it can be done.”

Mythro thought about his options again. That eliminated a few of the more brute force options, but-

He rose out of his crouch and jumped, landing on a narrow ledge and grabbing onto a thin seam in the bricks, managing to stand on a thin strip of wooden material. Someone whistled, but he ignored it, and hauled himself up to the next step. The rest of the jumps looked about the same, so he got into the rhythm of it, and it wasn’t long before he was sitting at the top, catching his breath while the Noxcrew burst into conversation.

“Seems like a good difficulty,” someone said, and Noxite nodded.

“Thank you, Ghost,” he called up. “That’s the only thing I needed you to do.”

“I could do it faster,” Mythro offered.

“Let’s see it, then.”

He jumped back down to the bottom and took a quick breath before he ran again, and this time it took half as long to reach the top. There was a smattering of applause, and he was surprised how pleased it made him.

“That’s impressive,” Noxite said. “And very helpful.”

Mythro nodded, and jumped back up to the rafters, out of their view. He hesitated for a moment before he left, back to Scott’s apartment.

He didn’t really *trust* Noxite or the crew or anyone other than Scott, but- he didn’t seem interested in hurting Mythro unless he was given a reason, and though he did *want* things from Mythro he wasn’t asking for things that were more than he could give- nothing like Plumpkin had ever wanted from him. He’d even *said* Mythro didn’t need to get hurt for it. He’d seemed happy with what he’d done, as little as it was.

He wanted, in a halfhearted sort of way, to not find it as interesting as he did- to just leave it alone, stay in the apartment where it was safe and he knew that it wouldn’t stop being safe.

But he didn’t do well with idleness. And he wanted to be safe, but he wanted the approval of the Noxcrew and the way that he’d *helped*.

He curled up on the couch as he watched Scott in the kitchen, quiet and content. Sensing his attention, Scott looked over and smiled.

“Good day?” he asked.

“Yeah,” Mythro said quietly. “It’s- yeah. It was.”

Scott looked faintly surprised, but he grinned, and it was warm. “Good, I’m glad.”

“Me too.”

Ghost was spending more and more time outside of the apartment, and Scott had half a mind to be worried if it wasn’t for how Noxite mentioned whenever he’d asked Ghost to test something for him. Which was growing more and more frequent.

It was sort of surprising that Ghost seemed happy to be seen by and interact with Noxite, but Scott certainly wasn’t objecting if he wasn’t. It was good for him, getting out of the apartment, and if it got him excited he was happy.

And Noxite had mentioned something about making it official, and Scott agreed. Now he just had to figure out how to propose it.

“Hey, Ghost,” he said, drumming his fingers against the back of the couch to get his attention. “You up to hear an idea? You can say no to it if you like.”

Ghost blinked up at him. “Sure.”

“So I hear you’ve been doing a lot of testing for Noxite,” he said, and counted it as a tiny victory that Ghost didn’t flinch or stiffen, and just nodded. “Do you know how our official playtesters work?”

Ghost’s eyes widened. “I, um- no?”

“So we’ve got a big pool of them, since we need to be able to run test MCCs,” he said. “And ordinarily, we just pull one of them if we need something small tested. But we’ve been considering having some testers who don’t play in the games, so that those who do can come in more fresh.”

“Scott,” Ghost said. “What are you offering?”

“You know that nothing will change if you decide not to,” Scott said. “But Noxite said, and I agree, that if you want an official place on the crew then it’s yours.”

“...Really?”

“It’d mean being a little bit more visible,” Scott warned. “Just to the crew, but I wasn’t sure if you’d want an official presence.”

Ghost bit his lip, and went quiet.

“Ghost,” he said, gently. “If anyone has a problem with you, or if you have a problem with anyone, then I’ll stick up for you. At *absolute* least, I won’t let anyone do anything without getting your side of the story. Just because you’re officially part of the team doesn’t mean I, or Noxite, will let you be hurt.”

“I’d have... a place,” he said.

“You’ve already got a place,” Scott said, and allowed himself to ruffle Ghost’s hair, telegraphing his movements. “But you’d be officially part of the team.”

“I- yeah,” Ghost said, breathlessly. “Yeah, yeah, I- yes.”

“Glad to know that you can have that Noxcrow jacket officially,” Scott said. Ghost nodded, and smiled, small and shy but bright.

“I’ve never... had a place before,” Ghost said. “Not like this.”

Scott sat down beside him, and Ghost rested his head against his shoulder, plucking nervously at his sleeve.

“I like it here,” he confessed.

“We’re glad to have you here,” Scott said, and Ghost curled against him, a small weight against his side.

“Thank you,” he said, quietly.

“Any time.”

“Ready?” Noxite asked.

Mythro took a deep breath. Above them, the sounds of the crowd roared, underneath the sounds of the timer, making the whole room they were in vibrate, below the Dome.

“Ready,” he confirmed.

Noxite counted out seconds under his breath, and Mythro rested his hand against the button, waiting for his signal.

“Fireworks now,” Noxite said, and he pressed it.

Above them, the sky exploded in a riot of color, like a second set of stars, and Mythro found himself entranced, watching as the show began.

“The crew did well with this one,” Noxite said, and Mythro nodded without looking away.

He felt Noxite’s hand on his shoulder, and he jumped but didn’t pull away as he straightened his collar and brushed an invisible bit of dust from his clothes.

“Bridge in ten,” Noxite said. “Want to do it?”

Mythro nodded, and rested his fingertips against the lever, waiting for his signal.

“Two,” Noxite said. “One-”

Mythro pulled the lever as he reached zero and the bridge stretched above them, casting a shadow over the compartment they were standing in. Footsteps thundered above him as the starting sound rang out, and Noxite got moving immediately, climbing out of the control chamber and gesturing for Mythro to follow.

“Ready for your first official MCC?” Noxite asked. Mythro nodded eagerly.

It was the first tournament since he’d become a playtester, and maskless in his Noxcrow jacket he was safe to watch with the rest of the crew for the first time, officially and properly. And it was...

He was *excited*. For once in his life, he wasn't scared.

"I'm ready," he said, and Noxite offered a hand to lift him up into the Dome.

Mythro took it.

Chapter End Notes

thank you all so much for reading this fic in its entirety, it's been a lovely journey with you all <3 i am so glad for the support i've gotten on this fic, and it makes me so happy that other people seem to love this fic as much as i do!

this fic ends here because i feel i've told a complete story, but i also don't want to be done with this au just yet! i have a couple of things in mind/in progress to continue it through oneshots, so rest assured that this universe is not going away forever. i cannot make any promises as to when those will be done, but in the meantime you can always come talk to me about the fic on tumblr!

End Notes

thank you so much for reading! if you liked it, please leave a comment or kudos, and feel free to come say hi @weareallstardustfallen on tumblr!

Works inspired by this [one](#), [outstanding questions in the field of quantum mechanics](#) by [underoriginal](#), [hollfron](#) by [akiriix](#), [PJ_AXE](#)

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