

the fox's young master

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by [Felix_J](#)

Summary

He finds a fox in the forest, dark fur-broken leg, and it reminds him, as it always does. He takes it home to fix it up, and it doesn't matter if it's just a mindless creature, *if*.

To pass its time, he tells it a story.

roses and smoke week, day 3: **myths** | gods

Notes

uhhhhhhhh the tale of tamamizu's been at the back of my brain like a sleeper agent and when i saw myths as one of the prompts it shot off. now i need you to understand i took the

message of that story and threw it out the window. this is literally just the setting. we're talking swagdoons here. neither of them would be down for the way that went

hi gen genesisfrog im being So very subtle about the arospec red. also the redgi's there Sort Of. for you & dog dogdomesticated & all the other redgi enthusiasts

recommendation to read [the tale of tamamizu](#) before this thing. i promise it's shorter. like three times.

This is a story about a young master. You thought, 'cause I promised it'd resonate with you, it would be about a fox? It's not. Well, it kinda... don't make me get ahead of myself, and stop tapping your paw that much.

Is that better? Good.

This is a story about a young master from a family... wealthy enough to make others envy, not enough for him to have no goal to his life. He's got dreams, alright. He... he's still young enough to be foolish and expect a good title to mean a good life, the sure way to happiness. And he's good at things, so he thinks his life's laid out for him, a soldier, then a higher-up, slowly, or maybe not, but surely.

He doesn't have the... time to, because really the world waits for nobody and has no one in mind when it turns around. You've heard about... this is.

If you were a bit more sentient, you'd know, and could call me out on it, but no, this definitely happened in some country long and long ago that doesn't exist anymore, where the monarch resigned from their throne despite having a child. It's not a rip... it's not a rip-off, I promise. Maybe it didn't just happen long ago and far away, but we don't talk about it. It's only implied, and you can make up for yourself when and where it was. All names and characters are fictitious, and if you remember a guy named Zam who was a prince, you don't. Because you're a fox. Don't make a face like that... You're not gonna bite me, right. I won't... okay, I won't touch your nose again. Did you think I would hurt you?

This is a story about the young master meeting people who didn't share his choices, and so it's a story about him growing up. He didn't stop making bad choices then, not... very much not. But that's all boring. Boring's not good, do you know that?

We'll make the story start when he is...

He meets his best friend when it's maybe two years before he's going to choose to leave, so he's already got his mind set. Red doesn't know loyalty to his *leaders*, his belief is in the good of the people he loves — he wants to lead armies with that in mind, and really, a lot of people would benefit from thinking the same.

So he meets him, right- he doesn't remember how, *really*, doesn't remember the words because he wasn't there physically, wasn't close, just remembers watching. They both end up telling different stories every time they're asked, which isn't often and so that makes it work its magic. Ash's end up closer to the truth, because they're always a little boastful. He knows why, it's 'cause Ash doesn't actually fully *believe* it could have been that way.

He watches a courtyard fight with detached curiosity, stops for a few minutes, that's it. He thinks Ash cheats in it, because one thing he's not is good with a sword, or his fists, most weapons, *and when he says he is... he's kind of right, because he's taking twisting his weaknesses, taking you by surprise. And it makes sense why.*

It ends up a mess in his head because he doesn't yet understand how important it's going to be, and later because Ash is just like that naturally - he just needs space to show his brilliance, and it's no use thinking of what he could do with only what his status gave him.

It was mostly the sheer embarrassment, because Red couldn't make himself fully acknowledge it for a long while, that the person he ended up looking up to was forced to live a low life. He'll become better with time. But he still doesn't remember.

...it goes down in the matter of seconds, you see, the other boy thinks he's down, and, well, he is on the ground, they both are. He sneaks in a swift hit, then, and throws the boy sand in the eyes, or dirt.

When he gets up, what the young master notices, is he gives the other a hand, and he tries to hurt him back, tries to punch him, but he dodges. And the hand's still there, and open.

The young master thinks about it after, for a few days, and it might be the strangeness of the gesture, might be the quick thinking. I mean, I really know what it is.

The thing Red likes to do to most of his peers is avoid. It's many things, it's their naivety, their... he doesn't understand, often, their motifs, and they're either too vain or too profound for the *same* completely vain reasons. Richer or poorer, he figures out they're all the same, and he equally can't recall their faces.

He only remembers that accident slightly, blurry, when a new servant of his replaces the old one, because it's not that they don't perform their duties, but they're utterly useless as any people to explain his thoughts to, and so they end up going. He explains to his parents, what is to care for there if there is no difference between them, and it's not that his father and mother love him enough to let him off, but they humor him.

There, you see, you have to take in account the other part of the story. And I'm not so good of a storyteller, but I think this is where we'll go with... whatever.

On the other side of the story, fresh from the dirt, is that boy, picked up and raised by a poor widow, and let's call him Ash. Maybe that is his name. He lives his life as a simple servant of the same family our young master's the heir of, and the thing is... well, I'm not gonna tell that here. All is revealed in its own time, when you are ready.

Why I say when they meet each other, is really Ash has known our young master for a little longer than he's known him, although they don't ever talk until later on... in the story. It happens a complete accident, just a look thrown in a park, overheard conversation the young master's been trying to have with a lackey, or the sky, or the trees.

He keeps saying... Ah, I don't know. If it can happen so easily, really, he takes a liking to the young master.

Red doesn't believe in love on the first sight. Neither does Ash, his words. Instant is still the only way Ash talks of it, and it should be alright because he never calls it *love*, not at that time, but Red isn't sure it's not just an Ash thing of never speaking fully about his feelings.

For what he did, it may as well be.

Ash manages to be invisible when he's assigned to him, and that's why people often assume it's when they *clicked* — it's not. Red's content with someone by his side who never makes themselves known. He's just curious, too, and that means he has someone to seek out himself. The further it goes, the more invested he is.

The third time Red and Ash meet each other for the first time is when *the young master* catches it his old servant's gone as was requested, and the new one shadows him, except he's not blind. Ash is careful, because he has a reason to care — he doesn't know that. All he remembers is a young man surrounded by dust with his hair messy, and that's all he ever ends up remembering, a trick, and a trick of the light where Ash's eyes look golden in the sun.

Red has to find him himself, and when he does, he sits next to him with a smile on his face.

"Did you expect to serve me without showing your face once, too?"

Ash doesn't flinch, just turns his head very, very slowly.

"I am *servicing* you." He says, and it's flat, an... almost displeased, he would say, kind of flat. "And it's good enough. Unless you say it's not good." He waits a few seconds to add. "Master." And there's still the light in his eyes, and this time it's in crinkles. Red knows he's not actually angry.

Such ends the first day of our f... of, Ash, serving the young master, and it's one of many to go. He's less invisible then, and in the evening he visits his master's chambers to brush his hair and clean his weapons, and... he hates it. If there is... one thing he chose to do willingly, himself, in this life, it's this, and he hates it.

You see, fox kit, I can... Sorry, Ash... ah, shit, he always calls kids like you that. I've caught on. Oh, you... You don't mind.

There's another side to our servant, and it's not one the young master will know for some years, two years? That's not that long, to come, but.

It was important to him, to... Ash, so I'm saying it now.

He himself agreed... happily, maybe, to serve the person who's caught his eye quite a while ago, and... he liked the. Being in the presence of the other, that's right, but he's made a choice like that even before, to be there for our young master, to be able to see him, and... that choice, I'm not going to say anything about that choice in that I don't... I'm not gonna dispute it.

This is the story: Ash... to begin with, Ash wasn't completely human.

Red thinks this is the closest he's had to a friend, just because Ash isn't easy or brainless. It's... he's also aware it's not a good *position* for a friendship, when it's *just* a bit below his abilities to buy Ash's entire self. He thinks Ash understands, and if he tries to apologise, will tell him he'll murder him in his sleep, which's really the only reason he keeps quiet — he jokes to himself Ash's talented enough he *could*.

He never does see Ash spar, even if he tries to drag him out during his own training, but it's... it has to do. He settles for complaining him in the ear at nights after having to talk to someone too insufferable, and listening to him giggle, and letting him push him in the shoulder so he falls on his back on the pillows sometimes when the story's embellished.

Later he laughs at himself at his complete denial, or rather the *blindness*, because he'll only realise

he's in love after he knows Ash himself is, but right now, Ash is someone who understands him as well as his family, and just has the capability to accept him that way, too, which already makes him one of the most important people in the world for Red.

He has plans, to go into the army and take Ash with him, because he knows he'll argue but will go after him, and it... it feels off, not *wrong*, he's doing the same anyone would in taking servants from his homeplace with him, but off, but all he knows it is how it will be. Either this, or growing up into the next head of the household *already*, and it won't happen.

Ash looks at him, and there's something bitter in there, strange kind of bitter, and he says he won't be able to.

"My mom's been..." His voice is low. "They've been sick, if you noticed."

He *has* been disappearing late nights and early mornings, and sometimes he *would* say the reason.

"I have." Red says quietly, stares off the bridge into the water, swings his feet just slightly. Ash's been doing it unconsciously, already.

Ash doesn't really want to let go, and it's... it's wrong to think of his staying to... take care, hah, of his lovely mother- they're not a woman, mind it, like running away. It's... not.

You don't understand? You should, from what I told you just now.

It's an... what it makes for is an easier way out, and he doesn't want a way out from him choosing to stay by the young master's side, but this way he doesn't get a choice anymore. It's as if he never really did, same as if he never was able to turn, never found a family to take him in, gotten a chance to approach the young master's household. Get it now?

Red doesn't get even that. Even being alone, because *useless* servants who can't say a word against him that's not idiotic don't *count*, he doesn't *get*.

It's quiet in the small part of the private park they're in, with the greenery a quiet and dark shroud around them, and it's only been a day or two of Red *knowing* he and Ash might go their separate ways, and he holds his hand in it like a friend, and they share the silence. There's something stuffing his chest, but he's never been a crier.

His sister finds them in there, shouting, with her hair making the wind more than it is there, and Ash jerks his hand away before she's really made her way in. Red's falls down.

"No time for your closed in ways, whatsoever." Delilah's out of breath like she's been running. "Sorry, sorry. The... boys, the Queen's... eh." She shakes her head, and she's already down, hunched over, next to Red, and her look breaks from the almost panicked to laughing just for a second, but then she has her composure regained and concentrates back on Red.

It's where he knows, it's where his life — and it started with Ash, months ago, but he only *notices* it now — has truly taken a sharp turn, because there is no Queen anymore to protect.

It's unknown where the Queen's gone, she's not... we don't actually know, well, it was not known in that country, an unknown time ago, how far she was gone, although you could have asked her son, only if you were close to him. Our young master never was, not quite so, lover of a lover- if you could call any of them that, then yes, at most.

The Trials are an interesting thing to re... to talk about, in general.

Queen Mid, that old cunning... I don't know if she was out of her mind, really. And I can say that, I'm rather, hm, partial to some of the characters. Before leaving her throne for dust, she wrote what would come to be known as the great Trials.

Trial one was... it really was playing safe, and it was counted not just hundreds of people, although of course you can count it in hundreds. It was more like several thousand people who actively were going to participate, though, not even the viewers, and one had to push through the crowds those few days in the capital everywhere they went. So did our young master — close enough to alone. There were all the uncomfortable talks, and no participant to share his thoughts and strategies with, but that was usual, used to be usual.

He'd write to Ash, but he wouldn't have the time with the trip home he would be taking soon.

Hah. You think he lost like that?

So much was spent on the first Trial, purely materialistic thought, and it wasn't even as much as on the second one. All who wanted were to be given a gem at the gates of the city, and so many... accidents happened in the crowds it was sometimes called Trial zero by the casual folk, in the months after.

But you don't care about that, do you?

The young master gets his gem, and it's smooth like a large pebble, purple and black, and he's never seen anything like it before. It looks like a jewel, but nobody calls it one.

It's actually smart, how the Queen plays it, and she's put in check-ups every step of the way — the illusion gem, the speeches of hers Zam has to read, the dungeons that make you *believe* you're going to die, but the real game will only start when you have your crown. ...Kind, of her. Too kind, to some. Red has too many thoughts about the Trials, and he could go on explaining for so long, just one day per month, three days total, and what, still too long.

The second most important meeting of his life comes at the first Trial, after he comes to the two rooms he rented for impossible prices and falls asleep gripping the gem. It's once again them not-really-meeting, because nothing actually happens, and they're both safe in their beds.

It makes it so easy for him to pick up the storyline without having it explained, because he's in the middle of nothing and something that slips his mind at the same time, and the gem's in his pocket, and the objective is to *get it out*, protect it, escape.

He raises his head to the soldier next to him, polishing his shoe, and he smiles back with a familiar smile.

"Look out for others." Ash advises him, and it's *not Ash*, but he presses all the same buttons in his head, and so Red believes him, is careful, and thinks later it's his subconsciousness *knowing* before he does, taking on the easiest form. He doesn't ask anything back, because he's not lucid.

Ash stands up and leans against him to pat on the shoulder and press his mouth lightly against his ear, and when he turns he's already dissolved into the crowd.

Red tells the *thanks*, or something of the sort, to nothing at all. A few people give him a stare that's almost scared.

He steps lightly and makes his look blurry on purpose, and that *does* send him right into the next soldier trying to make his way just to the side, and he doesn't have time to be scared, just surprised, as he almost falls but they both seem to remember there's no time for attention to be a bad thing on

you as now and hold onto each other.

"Careful there." Red mutters and lets him go.

"Hey." He blinks, and he looks so dumbfounded for a second but goes through the motions. "You be careful too, on the... to the side." Makes Red turn to follow the pointed finger with scarred marks.

"Oh?" He doesn't see anything back then, and what Pangi replies with is vague ideas, but the inherent *recognition*, similar to Ash's, helps him trust him then, he thinks, it's what it is.

It's another thing where he... he really didn't meet, or know Pangi in any way better than the biggest part of the country did, before the Trials, just heard of him and seen his face in papers, quite memorable, really, and if he had more of a *presence* the crowd in the dream would make way for him the way Zam told they did for him, which would be a good thing and a bad thing at the same time.

This way, Red watches him in the dream that is their first Trial, and he doesn't remember his name, which is the only reason he doesn't, never ends up calling him *Senator Pangi*, only lets him, this unnamed man, walk him through the enemy camp as they watch each other, careful around the other, but not quite as much as they are of the crowd around them.

Pangi tugs him down at one point, behind a tent, and makes... these strange, big eyes at him, the shushing him kind, at that point. "Lean down." He hisses, and Red decides to follow before asking questions.

They've just ended telling each other what ends up made up, by their minds and themselves on the fly, stories in hushed voices of what they are in this one dream shared by a hundred of people or so, and Red's started to understand that already but the feeling of *knowing* messes with him, because Ash *can't* be there, right, so why can this... he still blanks at the name.

Sounds of legs shuffle right by.

"You know any of these... people, up close?" Red asks calmly, poking over the corner. He himself doesn't, and it's all just one big game of paranoia and luck.

"Those two tried robbing me..." Pangi stumbles — it's a thing that happened in real life, and Red thinks back then it's between that and him being a fragment. "Not long ago. I said... we need to be careful."

It's then Red decides on it, that he is just part of the dream, and keeps going on with it until the end, even as they're stopped a few times by the patrol, as Pangi shifts from foot to foot next to him he just views it as his own nervousness, and that just gives him strength to push on.

It's kinda embarrassing, really.

The camp is mapped out with a thick, red circle over the soil and grass, and by the time they've stepped over it the gem in Red's pocket weighs like a full bag of stones, and he throws both himself and Pangi over the line full-body.

He wakes up turned awkwardly and breathing too heavily, and the fist with the gem is straight on his chest.

The commemoration of the first Trial happens late, late-ish into the next day, and everyone's about as lost as him but like this at least they have enough time to collect themselves and catch word of it

from wherever they could, and it *works* because every piece of the square before the palace is crowded like Trial zero. Red makes his way through it purely through the power of the gem that burns his palm held up high, and the two servants look dead on their feet behind him.

The only participant comfortable on their space is the prince, and he does not look any good mentally, at that.

Red thinks it's worth of a good laugh that *PrinceZam* had to be the one to announce all of the will by the closest person he had to a parent, the will that denies him the throne by bond. And he's sorry for him. He'll be a little more sorry when he knows him closer.

The prince says, everyone who had not passed the Trial and who wishes to stop there can go in peace.

His voice shakes all through the speech.

If the first Trial was only mental, the next ones will grow more and more dangerous, and I... I, the Queen, what was meant was the Queen, of course, Zam just always took it close to his heart. Did I say Zam?

She would only accept anyone willing, so the next week or so everyone who carried their gem out of their dream safely were to be signed in to continue. The young master's... rather lucky, if he has some unfortunate- kind of, awkward mostly, encounters along the way.

He meets Pangi, plus Woogie, right after signing away another day of his life and his name, as well as showing off the gem, and their first words to each other, actual words, are "*wait, you're real?*", in which Woogie stares along with the same pure emotion, even though he's not as in on the subject.

Pangi shuts him up before he can call him *young Senator*, and they end up paying for each other in a tavern before Red decides to depart back home, because he's not staying in a box crawling with people like worms for that long until the next Trial.

It's actually pleasant enough.

His sister avoids him after poking around for the gem, when she has nothing to ask of him anymore, or maybe it's him that avoids her — it's really both, and his parents smile smoothly at him and tell him they're proud in those voices that mean they don't ever think of him getting the crown, and so he's quiet enough about it. Ash's not even there.

He's *not* ashamed, but it's a bit close, that he has to ask around for Ash's house, and he knocks twice on the door carefully, quietly, and... doesn't know who to expect of them.

It *is* Ash, and as much as nothing's really changed he looks different, his *look's* different, heavier somehow.

He lets him in without saying a word, doesn't ask where he knows it from. Maybe thinks he already told him once and he remembered. That would have been nice.

Between the three of them, Ash's mother's the one that likes the gem the most, turns it in their fingers and points at Ash with a slight smile.

Ash hugs the side of their bed, and after mutters as a joke if Red knows it gives any healing effects.

Red tells everyone with a straight face that the competition is easy, and it's not gonna take much at

all to become King. Ash's on the same line in that he understands easily just how much he's bluffing, and yet it feels like there's some kind of wall Red presses his hands against every time he talks to him. It might make a good example that he stares at Ash and just *doesn't* know if he needs to ask if he wants a paid healer for his mother, or he can pay for a visit saying nothing, because he can't stay to the side and can't do anything without Ash snapping at nothing in particular.

It's just the status difference, he reasons with himself. The fucking thing.

He just ends up leaving Ash the money before leaving off for his next Trial and feeling *bad* but relieved he doesn't have to look Ash in the eye at it. Ash never mentions it, so he likes to pretend it means he's forgotten. It might've just pushed him that one more hair to the edge.

The second Trial is a marvel to the eye, and where crowds used to gather there are now dungeons, or, well, they looked like castles, up to the sky, and I have to say if the first Trial was expensive, this one... Well, they counted up everyone who was going to participate for a reason.

The young master isn't paired up with anyone he knows back then, and that might be part of the lesson... the parts of the Trial that could be controlled, the second, and third, and, uh, most likely fourth, they have a lesson in them as much as a test.

His partner is as good with a sword as him, and... they are gonna drift apart quickly after the Trials, and it's hard... ah.

He and Subz clear out the floors of the dungeon like it's cheaper than it actually was, and he finds someone he can communicate with easily *again* and almost laughs at the figure of a woman that looks suspiciously like a younger version of the Queen at the top that maybe she was right with her riddles in some way.

She gives them one more riddle and nothing more, with a smile, tells them something like, here are your two bridges to freedom, and you can pick right or pick right for yourself — Red's heard of tales like that before.

Subz only scoffs at this, and the choice has never been clearer, even if there's always the suspicion with this dungeon at the back of their minds they *might* die if they step the wrong way.

They both get to the top after, uneventfully, and the dungeon folds under them.

Zam crumples on his stand as he reads from the papers, but his voice sounds evenly, the way a would-up string is.

The third Trial, the... and, alright, this one's important. You're falling asleep on me, aren't you? No, well, that's good if it doesn't hurt so much?

The third Trial, the prince says, is to infuse your gem with the most powerful thing of all, and that thing is a dark soul.

The gem already feels different after the dungeons, you know.

Last words of the speech are, the participants need to remember the lessons these Trials have taught them.

Our young master doesn't return to his hometown for the month to follow.

Woogie tells them day ten or so he's not competing anymore. It's a bit like a punch to the gut, because they're oh so motivated, and they think the *lessons* might be about working as a team,

because between Pangi and Red and him... they've really done nothing.

"How many we need, three, and we don't even have one." Woogie mumbles, slouching, almost hugging the table.

"You don't think we can do it?" Red is almost curious. It has... some things to do with his own uncertainties.

"I don't... want to fight you guys for it. And that... when I thought that, I think I realised how *much* I don't want to be at the end there. It's just not for me."

Pangi isn't there, which Red doesn't think would help. It might also be the reason Woogie admits that last part. "I can't tell if we can do it. I just know if anything I'll give the gem to Pangi."

"Not me, sure, sure. I'll keep you to it." They laugh it off.

Pangi looks just that little bit disappointed, when he knows everything except the last thing, and he keeps himself up past midnight, where Red's the only one who could listen to it *again*, because this seems Woogie's first calm night of sleep while they still keep themselves awake.

Pangi hugs himself, and he talks so quietly the crickets almost overshout him, and he can't stop saying he doesn't feel *right* for this, but if he, with his status, and experience, and his *wish*, his vehement desire to build up the country isn't enough, he can't let anyone else on the throne, because they will be wrong more so.

The young master's letters end up something like this, I'm not sayin' you would like Woogie or Pangi, but they're great companions, really, and you know, maybe Queen Mid's thing is working.

Woogie was right too, because we're not findin' demons the kind of which could fuel the gem, which is kind of uncalled for. Who would've thought one of the Queen's final Trials would be hard?

Ash knows why that is without it being said, and that comes, I think... well, obviously from his origins — he writes back, the demon needs to be strong, right?, and as he thinks, itching on the letters that bring much comfort but always leave him feeling heavy, dreaming up plans a human could not for defeating one, he realises one more thing.

He has a few, yet to realise.

He checks up on his mother one last time, and leaves the house first time in days, walk and a run, until his lungs feel like bursting, and... you'd know this feeling, wouldn't you? It must be...

He throws his hands open, and in a ripple of purple, and black, and grey, and colors unperceivable by the human eye, but probably are by yours, all among trees and the earth, he turns.

He doesn't go to any family — he has none but his mother, and the most he does is his few old friends, but he runs, and sometimes that's enough, until he's going to start to miss his human form.

Ah.

What he finds in the mountain forests are herbs and plants that would neither help nor kill, except for the people trying to find them, but he's light and quick, and the paths are easy for him.

When he first picks one up with his teeth, it bursts along the edges, and is almost enough to force him to fall with human palms flat on the stone, and so he knows it's all the ones that he needs. He

just has to be careful, he... had to be so careful. But he's him, and that was enough.

He treads the mountain edges and chooses to turn back human before he makes a mistake and the herbs force him, and it takes long, but he thinks he should have figured out earlier, and that it's on him.

He makes the drink for his mother, and they take it unsuspectingly — he can't afford to tell them anything, and he's... he's scared.

They thank him, and drift to sleep right after.

What he feels like, is as if he's putting a sword up to their throat. And he's not good with those.

His play turns out right, and the herbs summon the being plaguing his mother, a demon, and that demon has ears like him in his first... his real form, and he is a monster of a fox.

Ash sits by his mother's bed and asks the demon to leave them alone, and the demon laughs back, and he has been wronged by this person's parents, he says, and all he's taking is revenge.

Ash doesn't plead. He... I don't know if he can.

He's on his knees already, and he... he just asks. Says it's been enough. That their lineage is long dead, and their only heir is a fox they've taken in themselves.

The demon laughs again, and tells him Ash himself is nothing in pretending to be human, and he doesn't need to involve himself in any quarrels between the human and fox that he doesn't understand. He says many things, and many are the same as what Ash himself told himself before. We... won't talk about it.

Ash's hands go live with ripples again, and his nails are weapons.

It ends up the easiest thing to do.

The demon is more spirit than body, but his heart curling with dark matter is solid enough he can hold it in his sharpened teeth, and it bleeds.

He wraps it in clean white cloth that immediately turns a different color and keeps it safe, and stays by his mother's side until they wake up, and then for one more day.

The demon is right, except these are his affairs.

They figure it out too late. Which isn't much, they *could* probably still have enough... they'll have enough for *one* for sure. They're tangled up in it now, and Red almost can't hear it, Woogie shouting something, and he... he *needs* to take a step away, but he *can't*, because he's their...

It's loud, the fight in the fields where no being lives because if there's one thing the three of them were smart enough for it's this, and it rings in his ears.

Red staggers, foot to foot, and Pangi's already bleeding out quietly in the corner of his vision, in the wheat, and the final blow is *messy*, to the creature, with its eyes burning out almost in his face in a never-ending fire, and he doesn't even bother ducking, so the heat bites his eyebrow before it falls. His head's spinning, and it comes up in puffs of smoke so very *slowly*, and he *stares* if anything's left of it, and they're *right*, they *should be right*.

There is a heart, on the floor, messy and bloody, and he falls and cradles it in his hands, and there

are prints on it so he can curl fingers of one of his hands into them perfectly. The yellow and red jump in his eyes, mixing into one muddy color, and he *thinks* he sees movement but it twists in his eyes, and it ends up... he thinks it ends up Pangi, as in he thinks the obvious, crawling up. There's a spark in his eyes.

Red has a shaky smile on his face, and he puts the heart in his palms.

"This's for you." He rasps out.

Pangi's eyes go wide, and he thinks they always do when he feels hurt, pried open.

It's not been enough, he's not known Pangi enough, but he... he thinks it's right. Pangi is right for this.

Pangi moves his hands like he wants to hug him but the blood and the flesh are just too heavy, so all he does is press into Red's face, and it can't in good mind be counted as a kiss, it's just blood.

Red's had his share of night talks and Pangi's fears, but right then and there he doesn't even have time to think, only push the mess farther into Pangi's hands and fall from his knees all the way down, into the wild grain ears that cut, not tangled but close.

Mom's getting better, *Ash writes to him*. Hope you're fine too, hope you... *There are spots on it that the young master can read, but they're smudged.*

He thinks he's still shaken up, because when the letter's delivered by the time he comes back, beaten and bloody, he's startled by the way the window creaks.

His feelings are muddy. Really, it's one of the... not worst, but hardest, and that doesn't mean it won't be harder but it's hardest it ever was before. It's not because he gave the only thing that the gem could be infused with to Pangi. He could try to buy one more on the black market if anything, although he'll come to know, will figure when Pangi tells him what happens in the last Trial, it wouldn't have worked. He doesn't, which is good in pure theory. And he doesn't want to.

He figures to talk to Woogie about it, one day. Like this, he sits in bed, and rereads the papers leaving prints from water that he only hopes washed out enough blood it won't stain the letter badly, more than what the stupid mailman left over it already.

He'll find him, and talk, and Pangi will be already gone for the final Trial.

Red thinks he finally has it figured out. It's the wrong time, and the *fucking wrong* place, and absolutely not the right thing to be clear on, but he ends up scribbling on a piece of paper for a few minutes before he realises he'll tell him in person almost as fast, and him saying he gave half the chance for the crown away goes into trash. He doesn't even get to writing the actual important thing.

It's a bit absurd.

"It's not that I couldn't." He tells Woogie, who just looks at him understanding and tired, and like he doesn't really want to hear it. And then he can't find words.

A lot of it is that it's Pangi. A lot of it is hidden in scraps of thoughts he didn't have the chance to fully experience in this month, in the month before, the month before the month before.

Red grows up, and he doesn't notice it. Nobody does. Or grows, just grows in a way that's different from looking in the mirror and pointing out he *is* nineteen with scar marks on his face.

Maybe he understands there's no way he's good to handle a piece of the world when he can't handle his life.

Little correction: it's not a tale, so there's no message to be made from it, and he thinks he *mostly* realises it somewhere later, after. Like this, he leaves Woogie without saying a word, just a pat on the shoulder, and knows Pangi will contact him when it's all done with.

It leaves a bitter taste in his stomach, the kind he doesn't know how to live with, because he's... technically he lost the greatest gamble. Willingly.

He runs from it, runs from Pangi too.

Delilah is the only one to meet him at the table late morning, and she has a box in her hands that feels like nothing but trouble. Box and a piece of paper.

I don't care what you do with it, Ash says. It, the. Crown. It doesn't... it doesn't matter, I want to say that I'm proud of you. But I'm not gonna. You'll have all these people doing it to you when you win. Who cares.

Lila admits she had read the letter.

"He said not to open the box until after, though." She says, staring, and her hands never stop moving as always but he doesn't have time for that, doesn't pay attention. "Better just *not* let you open the box, even that." Doesn't add anything. He thinks there's a joke on the tip of her tongue.

He puts the box closer, on his knees, just to have it.

All the letter says you already know, it's only the young master that doesn't. And his sister is right, the box is not to be opened, as Ash says — not while he is content with the life he lives and the status he has.

It's... interesting to end it there, don't you think? Gives the impression it's how it's meant to be, for the young master to live a long life with his loyalty to the new king- Pangi... Pangi's story is one for another time, really, all of it.

Oh.

You're asleep.

Maybe it is the illusion for you, then.

First thing it does is make him spiral, again. Solidifies his thoughts, that it was *good* of him to give the soul to anyone but himself.

He'll think later, theoretically he's not ready to open the box, back then, but that also there's never a right or wrong time. There's the time he had to talk to his *newfound* friends again, of old and new statuses, talk to Delilah, who doesn't *laugh* but shrugs with a "*what do you think I'd say?*".

He admits it to her, that he loves Ash, he thinks.

She just says it. "You do." And they're still not close enough, but when he sobs on her shoulder the way he never does- hates doing after finishing the letter, something... the dam just breaks.

He goes over it with Pangi before anything else, and it's *sorry's* all over the place from Pangi and none from him but he *means* them, does for once. Pangi has a haunted look on his face, and instead

of *Senator Pangi* he calls him *King Pangi* even if he's not *yet*.

Pangi tells him he loves him, and it takes some time to.

Red hugs him, and it takes even more, and he thinks, *thank you*.

He's in here, now, rid of his armor, and it's not the field he got a demon heart in, but it's out there enough it reminds him, and he thinks Ash would like the irony.

He stands on his knees carefully, and he clicks the box open. It goes easy. Takes a breath in, squinting, and it feels hard and his eyelids are heavy, but he takes a look.

It's empty, as he expected.

The box is taken from him, then, right out of his hands, and Ash's voice is light, and he has his head tilted. "You *don't* have everything you want, then?"

Out of everything his letter says, if you opened it, you understand you'd have to leave so much behind is underlined in jerky movements.

Just for this second, Ash looks *welcoming*. Red knows it's a fake in front of a fake.

"I realised something." He says easily, before he nods. "A few things, actually."

Ash stares and squeezes his hands harshly before standing up, and the box falls behind him with a thud.

"If you're here, you still don't." There is something in his eyes. Red is sure enough he knows, and he *does* as it grows, outward burning through the irises.

In this moment between human and something *more* he thinks Ash is most free, and is most himself, with the cloud of air breaking purple, and what he is is also *angry*, and then his teeth look like they'd cut.

"***Was the demonstration*** enough for you?" Ash cringes as he turns back, and his expression relaxes only when he has some of both forms. Red reaches out, doesn't really take his hand but latches onto it, with the sharp nails and black and grey fur on the fingers.

"Hmm? I wanted to say, thanks for that demon heart, Ash."

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