

a parting of clouds

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Summary

What do you say, after all of that?

Subz and Zam's first conversation after the sign room.

Notes

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“Good morning,” Zam chirps to the villagers, who chatter back to him. He walks through the blackstone room, ready to get to work - today is the day for him to finally regear after losing it all, *again*, after death. He’s got a shulker full of emeralds and iron ready to be traded.

He sets his box down and gets to work: he pulls out his offerings, counts them out one by one, and finds the villagers who’ll share with him. They’re all busy at their workstations - the sound of clanging metal and pages turning and bubbling potions is almost overwhelming, but Zam’s used to it. He’s managed a lot of villagers before.

He's so busy sweet-talking an armorer into a discount on a pair of plain diamond leggings that look promising that he might have missed Subz' arrival in the room. Zam's voice falters, for just a second, at the sound of light footsteps; the shape of purple (dark) in the corner of his vision lets him know it's one of his teammates. It's reassuring, but his heart still races nonetheless. (You're gonna screw up again, Zam!)

He doesn't say anything to Subz. (What could he say? What do you say, to all of *that*?) He doesn't get the discount, either - the armorer scolds him for not being better at haggling, and Zam apologizes sheepishly. He pays full price, but the armorer slips him a diamond with the leggings, anyway.

A pickaxe drives into deepslate, a sharp metallic noise that makes Zam jump, and he peeks up to see Subz, pick in hand, peeling the wall away to expand the room. A nervousness crawls under his skin; he might be sick. The armorer gives him a Look, and it leaves Zam feeling so affronted that he skitters away. Subz doesn't matter right now. These leggings need enchanting. Books! He can do books.

He gathers up what books he has - not many, not like what he used to have - and sets about to enchanting the pants. He reads the familiar text, murmurs the incantations, carves sigils into each plate of the armor; he smears lapis lazuli into the cracks between. Energy thrums through his body and he shakes with it.

He peeks up at Subz again, over the top of the book (Feather Falling IV). He's reinforcing the ceiling with basalt pillars, matching Zam's own design. He walks backward as he goes. Zam studies his face in profile - no corruption on this side, just an eye and a nose and a mouth, yessir, the way his horns curl around his ears - Zam misspeaks and nearly loses the enchantment. Stupid.

Subz hasn't said anything. Why hasn't Subz said anything? Zam recalls the signs, and it makes his stomach squirm and his heart pound, and it feels like he's afraid but it's *Subz*. He could never be afraid of Subz. Would never. Subz doesn't want him to be.

Subz installs another basalt pillar. It's not quite aligned with the tile on the floor - Zam can tell, even from the distance. Subz studies it, tries shifting it exactly where he wants it, but the thing is so well-stuck in place that it'll hardly move. It seems to frustrate him because he cusses and kicks it. Unfortunately, it doesn't help any more than using his arms did. (Zam realizes there's a little smile on his face; it strains his cheeks in a way he's almost unfamiliar with.) Maybe Zam *does* need to say something.

"Hey man," Zam says, finally, breaking the silent air between them. Subz' head snaps upward.

“Hello?” he calls back. “Can - should I come over there?”

Zam looks at all the villagers around him. “Do you want to?”

Subz shrugs. “Maybe, maybe not,” he answers. (Zam doesn’t know what Subz wants, he never really has, and that’s *scary*. But Subz and Vitalasy have left all these little decisions up to Zam, over and over, put that trust in him, the way he put trust into them in return. Maybe he was desperate. Maybe he needed - *something*, from them. Attention. Permission. Zam wasn’t sure.)

Zam breathes in, slowly. “I’ll just come to you.”

He sets down his books carefully and leaves the half-enchanted leggings on the anvil, strides over to the other side of the room. Subz waits patiently, watching Zam as he goes, and something in Zam’s gut does a flip. Subz’ attention feels heavy, intense; analytical. Subz is hard to read sometimes. Makes Zam feel like he’s being studied.

“What’s up?” Zam plays cool. He leans against the wall with one arm, legs exaggeratedly crossed. He tries smiling. It doesn’t work. Subz mirrors him, leans a shoulder against the basalt pillar.

“Just workin’ on the base.” Subz shrugs again, nonchalant. He looks down at his hands, picks at basalt dust under his fingernails. Zam isn’t sure what to say, so he waits. “Zam, did you - you saw it, right?”

Zam’s heart clenches and he loses his balance, almost falling over - which is impressive, given the fact he wasn’t moving to begin with. There’s sweat on the back of his neck; the twisting nausea is back, lighter, lower. Subz has filled his heart with bugs and they’re crawling inside him, oh *god*.

“Yea,” Zam answers, way too late. “You saw I left another sign, right?”

Subz nods. “I did. Just making sure.”

“That’s... good, I think.” Zam recalls the scrawlings, purple text illuminated by glowing ink. An apple, hidden away, waiting for him. As much as he tries not to be, Zam is afraid - but hey, even if he’s got nothing left, he could at least find a stone sword. “Hey Subz - did you mean it?”

“Mean what? What d’you mean?” He crosses his arms, hunches over a little more. It’s almost defensive. Prickly.

“That you love me,” Zam says, voice hardly over a whisper. His heart pounds and he can’t quite look at Subz anymore, so instead he looks down at his feet - oh god, why didn’t he make boots first, he’s barefoot! Right now! For *this* conversation!

“Oh. Yeah, I did.” Subz says it so straightforwardly that it makes Zam choke. “I do. Love you, that is. I mean.” The toe of his boot runs along the back of his other leg. Zam looks up to see hands fidgeting, twisting and untwisting, tugging at the cuffs of his sleeves. “It’s fucking stupid. My bad.” His ears are pink (lol, white boy). “I - did it help? The messages, or - whatever.”

Zam nods slowly. His heart is still racing, but he isn’t scared, because it’s Subz. This is just Subz. “It did, thank you. I didn’t - I don’t know what I expected, when I left those signs. I’m sorry if they scared you.”

Subz shakes his head. “No, I *want* to be scared,” he chokes and rephrases - “Shit, I mean. I don’t want - I said you don’t have to bear it alone, and you don’t. You can tell me this shit, man.”

“Because you love me?” Zam prompts. He finds himself gravitating closer to Subz.

“No, because I secretly hate you and think you’re the worst. I’m planning a betrayal at 2 PM tomorrow. I’m going to run off into the sunset with fucking PangiLive and I’m ditching your ass and abandoning everything I’ve worked for.” Sarcasm, great.

“Oh no, anyone but PangiLive!” Zam cries, mocking a despaired swoon; “That man has stolen so much from me, and a teammate on top of that? I’d die, I’d just fucking die!” Subz cracks a smile, and Zam looks to him again - oops, eye contact. Subz’ attention is still heavy, but it’s warm. Zam feels - well. *Seen*. “But you *do* love me.”

Subz freezes, looks everywhere except at Zam for a second. He thinks, staring at the ceiling above them; one nail scratches at the basalt, stills. “Yes,” he says, carefully, finally; “I do.”

Zam creeps closer. “How so?”

The redness in Subz’ cheeks crawls back. “However you want it.” He puts on a straight face, but

the bead of sweat on his cheek is kinda betraying him soooo hard right now.

“What about Vitalasy?” Zam asks. Something bad bubbles up in his chest, but Zam pushes it down. He reaches out and takes Subz’ hand in his - there’s basalt under the nail again - and Subz laces their fingers together. (His palm is sweaty.) Subz shrugs.

“I said *we*, didn’t I?” He reconsiders. His free hand finds his forehead, tugs at his hair. “Didn’t I? Wait, did I just fucking forget to say that? Oh my *gooooo*, dude -”

Zam jerks his hand and Subz stops. “No, you said it, I’m just making sure. That it’s okay.”

“Of course it’s okay,” Subz breathes. “Why wouldn’t it be?”

“I don’t know. You’ve got a good thing going. I don’t want to be a - a homewrecker, or anything like that.”

That makes Subz laugh out loud, and the bugs come back. Zam creeps a little closer, until he’s well and truly looking upward to Subz’ face. He likes seeing that lightness on Subz. Makes his chest feel funny, like something slid into place.

“This sort of, uh, *arrangement* - it isn’t unusual for us,” Subz twirls a finger in the air. “We’ve done it before. There’s been - well. The way we like *you*, there’s only been one other.”

“You’re serious.” It clicks in Zam’s brain. “You’re *really* serious.”

“I wouldn’t have invited you in at all if I wasn’t serious,” Subz confesses. “Shit, man.”

“But you’re still keeping things from me?”

“Yeah.” Honest. “It’s just not the right time - not yet. But we trust you, I swear on - I dunno, my grave.” The grave Zam built for Subz, beside the village he built by hand, on the hills they shaped together. Side by side, one by one. The moment Zam knew what he wanted.

Zam nods, slowly. "I believe you." The god apple is warm; he feels that inside his chest, beating alongside his heart. His hearts. "So when do I get to know?"

"Uhhh..." Subz trails off. "I've gotta talk to Vitalasy about that. It's not - I'm not - it's not my thing," he explains, "I can't make the call. But soon. Very soon. You'll know everything."

"I bet it's a really awesome present for me," Zam jokes, and Subz cracks a smile again. "Is it another Jerry?"

"Yeah man, I bred you this absolute god horse, happy birthday," Subz slings back, and Zam giggles. (Giggling - my god, man. Get it together!) Subz' grip where their hands meet tightens briefly, involuntarily. He makes some weird, strained noise in his throat, and then he's leaning forward and leaving a kiss on Zam's cheek.

Zam freezes, stunned. The pressure of Subz' mouth, however light, is gone as quick as it came. There's a second where he and Subz look at each other - Zam in amazement, Subz in some kind of dawning horror - and Zam watches Subz' face flush a deep, blotchy red. He mumbles something about brain worms or black mold - "oh my *god*, dude" (uncharacteristically quiet) - and before Zam can even really say a word, he's slipped his hand from Zam's and walks away, hurried.

"Oh." The dark tail of Subz' coat disappears around the corner. Zam stays a while and listens to his footsteps make a hasty, echoing retreat into the heart of Eclipse. He breathes in slow, leans against the wall. Listens to the sound of the villager's work, thunks his head against the wall. Ow. It's cold.

There's an explosion. He forgot to finish the enchantments properly. *Fuck.*

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