

Shifted Nature

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by [orphan_account](#)

Summary

The tread sounded too heavy for an animal any larger than a fox, and he hadn't heard of bears being sighted around these parts.

He stood quickly, wielding his axe and shield, dropped into a defensive position.

...

Or, minecraft manhunt with shapeshifter Dream, and it's not just fun and games.

Notes

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

Chapter 1

Dream leaned his head back against the tree, the bark scraped against the back of his head slightly. He sat and watched the sky above him through his mask. There were a few clouds in the sky, a bright contrast to the periwinkle blue of the air around them. He sighed, exhaling quietly through his mouth as he dropped his head back down, staring at his hands. They rested in his lap, loosely gripping his axe. He stared down at the axe, allowing the shimmering of the iron blade to mesmerize him. He watched as the enchantments engraved into the handle, etched in clearly to the wood, shifted across the blade, casting a small amount of light over his hands.

The tree he was leaned against was a nice one, stretching high above his head, but with multiple branches he could climb the tree using. The leaves were lush and green, they would cover him well if he decided to perch in the tree branches. His hoodie would blend in nicely with the foliage. He tapped at the mask a few times absentmindedly, listening as the pale wood made a knocking noise that echoed around the clearing. A few birds took flight as it echoed, taking it as a warning.

Dream knew that there would be more people here soon, but he sat in the peace, relishing in it as he relaxed. His inventory was barely half full, the items he had in there were only for basic survival, a bit of beef jerky, a few stacks of blocks and his sword, pickaxe, shield and axe. He looked down at his axe again, taking out his grindstone and running it along the blade. The metal scraped against the stone, the harsh grating noise ringing across the clearing, bouncing off the trees and causing more animals to flee. He hears a twig snap, his head swivelling towards where the noise came from. The tread sounded too heavy for an animal any larger than a fox, and he hadn't heard of bears being sighted around these parts.

He stood quickly, wielding his axe and shield, dropped into a defensive position. He took a few steps away from the tree, not wanting to trap himself. He hears another crack, this time on the opposite of the clearing. There was more than one, and they were trying to be sneaky, but failing miserably. Another crack sounded almost directly between the other two. It was almost as if they wanted him to know they were there. He readied his shield, holding it against his body. He knew he could win against three people, and if they were overly equipped, he was always able to escape. He held his axe by his side, the blade near his ankle as it shimmered ominously, a warning of what the blade could do.

He rubbed his finger along the grain of the wooden handle, it was a dark oak, one of his favourite types of wood, and he held it in a relaxed but strong grip, his fingers rubbing over the worn surface. The enchantments for the blade were further up the handle, scratched in near where the metal began. Most of them were in neat, precise lines, but there were a few messily scrawled ones, ones that had been quickly etched into the dark wood as he was running for his life.

The bushes in front of him rustled and he readjusted his stance, making sure that it was perfectly unbalanced, unwilling to get knocked over. A person emerged from the bushes, a pair of black and white clout goggles rested on the top of their head. They wore iron armour,

enchanted from the looks of it, the surface shimmering with purple, a tell-tale sign of enchanting. They wore simple clothing, nothing fancy, but not shabby either.

Another person emerged, to the left of the first, this one looked extremely different from the first, his skin a dark, ashy grey, his eyes pure white, a demon of some kind from the looks of it, he wore simple clothing, similar to the first, his black and red with a hood pulled over the top of his head. He too wore enchanted iron armour, he held a diamond sword, threateningly pointed towards him.

He watched impassively as a third emerged from the bushes to the right of the first. He had iron armour, enchanted too, a diamond axe hovering by his side, his fingers clenched tightly around it. His boots clunked against the ground, long hair pulled back with a white bandanna. With all three of them stood around him in a semi-circle he felt slightly nervous. He straightened up, fixing his posture into a fighting stance, they looked like three run of the mill hunters. It just meant they should be rather easy to dissuade from following him. He had enjoyed the peace while it lasted, having chased off a similar group of hunters a few days prior. He spread his feet out so that they were at the same width as his shoulder, he brought his axe up.

He leapt to the right first, wanting to move away from a place where they could all converge on him, he saw bandanna as the easiest target, his stance was wide open, leaving himself vulnerable to attack. He stepped back before bringing his axe up to clash with his, he tries to swing his axe, which Dream blocks with his shield. He seems to concentrate on the offensive, continuing to strike at him with his axe despite all of his shots being blocked by either Dream's axe or shield.

He whirls around as he feels a presence approach from behind, facing the middle of where the two parties stood, both staring him down. The demon struck first, bringing his sword up and trying to flick his axe away with it. He goes for the handle, near where his hands are, trying to make him flinch back and drop his axe. He holds on tight, withdrawing a bit further as the blade nicks his skin, causing blood to start to drip from it. He hisses slightly, his mouth curling as he does so. These hunters are bold, which is fun. The most fun hunters to toy with are the ones who think they're above him, that they're better than him because they're the ones hunting him. He always enjoys turning the situation around, the hunter becomes the hunted.

He swaps out his axe for his sword, raising his shield in defence as he does so, blocking a few strikes before pulling out his diamond sword, striking down on the demon's one, pushing down harder and harder until he tries to pull it away. He flicks his blade, catching one of the grooves in the sword and flinging it to the other side of the clearing. It clatters to the ground with a loud sound, distracting goggles for a second. The second is all it takes for Dream to swoop in, disarming the man with a practiced ease. He turns to the final one, withdrawing his axe again and crashing it into bandanna's at full force.

He parries the blow easily, trying and failing to catch the axe just under the blade and fling it away, similar to what he had done to the previous two. He raises his shield above his head, ducking slightly as bandanna strikes down from above, completely leaving his defence open in favour of trying to break his shield. As he ducks, he feels the whistle of air pass over his

head, the same you would get from a blade passing over you at high speed. He rolls to the side, springing back to his feet before he can be pinned down by any of them. He turns around to face all three, goggles has a bow drawn, the arrow loaded pointing straight at him, the demon has another sword, this one iron instead of diamond but still enchanted.

All three of them stand there, weapons pointed towards him, he feels like he's fighting a battle he can no longer win, these hunters seemingly more skilled and better equipped than most of them. They watch him carefully, eyes tracking his movements as he stands, shifting from foot to foot. He turns his head towards goggles, tilting his head slightly, which he knows looks creepy with the mask on, and turns tail. He runs through the trees, putting his shield away to make himself more aerodynamic. He crashes through the undergrowth, not caring that they can follow him through the noise he makes. He knows that they won't be able to follow him where he's about to go.

He emerges from the forest, the hunters a few steps behind him, shouting to one another as they run. He turns to them, standing on the very edge of the cliff he's run to, they stop a few metres in front of him, watching him warily as he teeters on the edge. He grins underneath his mask and salutes them, falling backwards off the cliff. He hears their startled shouts as the wind whistles through his ears. None of them have looked over the edge yet, so he twists mid-air, skin shifting to feathers as he takes flight in the form of a small falcon. He darts underneath the small overhang, hovering there and listening with poorly concealed glee as they shout in confusion.

He can hear their footsteps vibrating through the earth above him, them running back and forth as they hurry to get down to where they seem to think he's flown off to. He watches as they slowly make their way down the cliff face, making sure to hide himself in the shadows as they pass by him, not wanting them to spot him and possibly catch on to what he was. Not one of his hunters had realised yet, just seeing him as an incredibly impossible person to catch and keep caught. He watches as one, bandanna, is lowered down to the ground via rope, then goggles and the demon goes last. They leave their rope dangling from the top of the cliff as they spread out into the taiga below. He watches with interest, coming and landing on a treetop once they're further away from the cliff.

He can hear their frustrated shouts, them talking back and forth as they make their way through the forest, looking for him as he hovers above them, listening to their search. He watches as the sun lowers further and further towards the horizon, staying shifted despite his body protesting his smaller form, wanting to be something larger, something similar in size to his human form. It becomes darker and darker, the hunters giving up their search as the sun disappears, setting up a small camp in a large clearing.

He flies closer to them, dropping to the ground and shifting again. He becomes a fox this time, feathers smoothing into fur, as he prowls along the forest floor. He watches them from a short distance away, wary of getting too close, but rather comfortable as foxes are a known native to the area. He watches as the demon begins to cook food, a luxury Dream hadn't seen in months, unable to light a fire in case it drew unwanted attention to his location. He watched as they laughed, their faces illuminated by the soft, orange glow of the fire. Bandanna grumbled in annoyance a few times, still annoyed over losing him.

Dream scoffs to himself, they really thought they were going to catch him, what a bunch of stuck-up arseholes. No one had managed to even catch him or track him effectively since he had run off, disappearing into the wilds surrounding the country. He watched the demon pull out a small compass, the compass shimmered lightly, as if enchanted. Intrigue nagged at his mind, wanting to know more about it, why would someone even enchant a compass anyway? It had to be near useless.

“Uh, guys,” the demon’s eyes had widened, still watching the compass, Dream didn’t understand about how it could be so interesting, “we might have a problem.” He squeaked, the other two turning to look at him.

“What do you mean?”

“The compass says he’s nearby,” the demon holds the compass up, turning the face towards those at the campfire, and in turn, Dream. He watched as the compass’ needle waved around a few times before fixing in position, pointing straight at him. Anxiety flared to life inside him, roaring for him to run away, to escape. Dream didn’t understand how it could be pointing at him, unaware of any such enchantments. He reasoned they could be non-public enchantments, ones that weren’t available to the general public, which meant Dream was more screwed than he had originally thought.

If he was dealing with people who were able to either gain access to or steal the runes for non-public enchantments, it meant that he was up against some powerful people. He scampered away from the fire, ignoring the way they shouted at the sudden movements. They probably knew that he had seen it now. That made things a lot harder for him. He didn’t know the exact specifications of the enchantment, but he could guess, most likely a tracking one, but more powerful. Similar to how a lodestone functioned, but with a person. He shifted as he ran, going from four paws to two feet, running through the forest on silent footsteps as he tried to get as far away from them as he could.

They most likely wouldn’t move anywhere until the next morning anyway.

...

He had slept in a tree overnight, nestled in the crook of two branches joining. He had eaten a small, sad meal of beef jerky by himself in the dark the previous night, and he ate the same for breakfast the next morning. His sleep had been sparse, the short naps he managed to take few and far in between. The uncomfortable position had made him ache, and the small wound on his hand was scabbed over and sore, making it harder for him to hold his sword or axe. He shifted around as best he could in the small space, wanting to rest for as long as possible before he had to get on the move again.

He heard talking below him, making him instinctually shrink down, trying to make himself smaller than he actually was. He was well hidden, concealed behind a thick cover of leaves.

He hadn't wanted to be shot at by a skeleton during the night or randomly discovered if one of the hunters decided to take a midnight walk.

He peeked out from the leaves, only to see the three hunters stood beneath his tree, the demon holding the compass. All three of them were staring up at him, he pulled his face back from the gap, praying that they couldn't hear his thudding heart. He didn't know what he could do other than run, he knew they had seen him, that much was obvious as excited shouts broke out from below him. He chanced another look, watching in slowly growing horror as one of them began to scale the tree, boosted by the other two until he could reach the lowest branch. Bandanna hauled himself up onto it beginning to swing himself up the tree, using each branch as a step.

Dream stood up, balancing carefully on the branch. He braces himself, tests the branch above him before swinging his weight up onto it, pulling himself up quickly, he runs along its length, using the end as a springboard to the next tree over, flinging himself through the air and catching the next branch in his hands. The bark scrapes against his palms, making him wince slightly as he pulls himself up, running along the branch and launching himself into the next tree.

"Sapnap!" The demon shouts to bandanna, who's name is apparently Sapnap, "Don't you dare! You will fall and break every bone in your body."

"I'll be fine!" Sapnap shouts back, already several trees behind Dream, he takes a running jump and makes it into the next tree over, barely. Dream pauses to look back, tilting his head again, trying to unnerve the other. Sapnap just stares him down as he pulls himself up, already preparing to jump into the tree Dream is in.

Goggles and the demon run along below them, the demon obviously worried for the other hunter's health, goggles cheering him on with a grin on his face. He's pretty sure they're his friends, with the He's pretty sure they're friends with the way one seems almost vindictive in his cheering, the other telling him to knock it off as he begs for Sapnap to come down. The demon runs along, craning his head upwards as Sapnap leaps after him. There is worry evident in his eyes, but Dream nor Sapnap care, playing an extremely dangerous game of chase that will possibly end with one of them dead. Dream hears the branch under him crack, his eyes widening as he plummets, the leaves scraping past him, bouncing off of his mask as he falls.

He manages to grab onto a branch near the bottom, slowing his fall before dropping down onto the forest floor. The demon and goggles aren't far behind him, racing to catch up, already drawing their swords as Sapnap shouts in frustration from the treetops. He has to climb down now, meaning he'll be further behind than the others, needing to catch up to join in on the action.

Dream races across the forest, stirring up leaves as he goes, dodging around trees in an attempt to lose the hunters following him. He jumps over a slightly wide than average stream, bringing the others to a halt as they look at how wide it is. He laughs, a long wheeze that leaves his lungs begging for air as he races further into the forest, disappearing into the shadows and shifting, becoming a small mouse that can hide among the roots of the trees.

He watches as they race by him, both of them shouting in frustration as they realise they've lost him again. He watches as they circle back, waiting on one side of the river for Sapnap to arrive. He hops onto a tree root to gain a better vantage point, watching as Sapnap arrives, crossing the stream in one bound. He looks worse for wear, more tired and a bit battered. There are a few bits of blood smeared on his hands, which the demon seems to notice as well, picking up his hand and inspecting the palm. Dream looks down at the palms of his small mouse paws, thankful that shifting seems to clear up most minor injuries. He reckons without that small bonus he would be long dead in a forest by now.

He watches as they move over to the tree he's sat on the root of, but he's feeling confident, so he doesn't move, sitting there and nibbling a small acorn he had picked up from the forest floor. The demon crouches down, and Dream realises his mistake then and there. The demon coos at him, "Guys, look, there's a cute little mouse," he scoops Dream up easily, holding him in the palm of his hand. Dream feels incredibly small in that moment, watching the demon warily as he holds him, waiting for it to click in his mind, for him realise that he's holding the exact person they're chasing.

The demon doesn't even pull out his compass, which Dream is glad for, not wanting to be killed in the form of a small pathetic mouse. He watches as the other two gather around, pushing their faces closer to his to get a better look at him.

"It's just a regular mouse Bad." Sapnap states, pulling his face away from where it was next to Dream, turning around and watching the forest surrounding them. They seem to have forgotten about the compass, not even using it to try and find where he might have gone. For people that seem to be high up in ranking, they don't seem to be the smartest of the bunch. Bad, the demon apparently, holds him cupped in his hands. Goggles pulls away a few seconds after Sapnap does, turning to the other and beginning to discuss plans with him.

Dream expects for him to be put down at this point, for Bad to leave the small mouse alone. He doesn't, instead keeping Dream cupped in his hands and walking alongside the other two as they discuss ways to catch him. The irony of it is not lost on Dream as he is carried along. He sits down after a while, pulling his tail around himself and putting himself up to having to deal with this for the next few hours or so.

At this point it might as well happen, he sighs, closing his eyes. He might as well take advantage of this whilst he still can.

Chapter 2

It had been a few hours and he had still not been put down. Bad had continued to cart him around, holding him gently cupped in the palm of his hands. He had slept a few times, in short, half an hour spans. He was unable to stay asleep when they were constantly moving, hunting him down, despite him being sat in one of their hunter's hands. Bad had handed him another acorn from the ground once he had finished the one he was eating. He took it from the hunter's hands, making him coo in delight at what he saw as a small mouse.

Both Sapnap and goggles seemed completely over it, ignoring Bad every time he gushes over the mouse. Dream honestly feels embarrassed, both for himself and the demon holding him. He doesn't know what else to do, just watching them as they traverse the forest. He's genuinely surprised that they haven't pulled out the compass, but there seems to be only one brain cell within the group, and none of them seem to keep track of where it wanders off to. He laughs to himself at their slight stupidity, glad that they weren't smart enough to use it, otherwise he would probably be long dead.

He moves from side to side, hopping a little in the demon's palms. He's been nothing but kind to him, but he wants to leave now, itching to run whilst they aren't looking at the compass. The demon looks down at him, face turning into a different expression that he can't decipher. It's harder for him to gauge his feelings without him having any irises. His eyes are just a pure white, clearly displaying his status as a demon, even if the skin colouration didn't already give it away. The demon stared down at him, watching him as he shifted slightly, tapping his feet impatiently on his palm.

He must also be extremely bad at reading body language as well as not seeming to realise he is hunting a fugitive for the country, but he is instead holding a small mouse in his palms, holding it and being affectionate with it. Dream was rather tired of being held, stamping his foot down more firmly. The demon doesn't seem to get his message at all, instead putting Dream in a small shirt pocket. He pokes his head out from the top, feeling more pissed off the longer this went on. The demon's hand reached towards his pocket, and Dream watched nervously as he reached a hand inside, pulling something out.

He peers out, trying to see what the demon is holding. It's a map. An old map, not even one that's stored on a communicator, a real, ink and paper, map. He watches as the hunter spreads it out on the floor in front of him, leaning forward as he bends down to inspect it further. The other two gathered around, watching as Bad began marking things off with a pencil. He tapped the pencil against the paper, lost in thought.

"It seems he's heading north-east; his direction shows us that, which means that we should try and cut him off as he heads down the only path that leads you through the mountain up ahead." The other two hum in agreement. Goggles begins to trace a path with his finger, "That is most likely the path we should take, Dream seems to stick to undergrowth and the shadows, meaning if we take that path, we should arrive before him and have the opportunity to set up a trap and catch him."

“Okay,” Bad begins to fold the map up, tucking it back into his pocket, “it’s settled then, we should begin to head north-east, heading for the mountain path along the most direct route we found.”

Dream honestly cannot believe them, they speak about their plans to catch him, without even checking whether he was nearby. He thinks the worst part was the way Bad literally announced their plan loud enough for anyone to hear.

“You should probably put that mouse down, it looks kinda distressed Bad.” Sapnap speaks up, finally one of them having a coherent thought. Bad looks down at him in his pocket, then looks back up to Sapnap, “But he’s so cute.”

“You are literally kidnapping him, I don’t think him being cute is an excuse for that.”

Bad looks back down at him, frowning before scooping him back out of his pocket. He sets him back down on the ground, looking down at him. Dream looks back up at him before quickly scampering off, hiding himself among the roots of the tree. He watches them as they move away. He watches their backs, and the demon apparently had wings and a tail, both of them rather expressive, making him wonder how he hadn’t noticed them before. He waits until they’re out of sight before he shifts back, almost collapsing at the relief he feels to be back in his normal form.

He makes sure they’re nowhere nearby before scaling a nearby tree, beginning to follow after them jumping silently through the treetops, moving quickly to catch up to them. He jumps off of a branch, landing silently and watching them as they stop, gathered in a circle, staring down at something. As they look over in his general direction, he figures their lost brain cell made its way back to their group. He almost laughs as they begin to hurry over in his direction, checking around the base of the tree, looking for him, as if he’s hiding behind it.

“He’s a goddamn squirrel, I swear. He’s always hiding in trees jumping from one to the other.” He’s pretty sure that’s Sapnap, looking down past the leaves to see them all staring up at him, through the leaves. He waves to them, grinning under his mask despite them being unable to see him.

“Oh my god, you cocky bastard!” Sapnap shouts up to him, watching as he takes a running leap into the next tree over. He watches out of the corner of his eye as the man runs over to a tree a few away from him, beginning to scale it, swinging from branch to branch, up to his height, with ease. Dream turns sharply, away from where he’s stood, running and jumping to another tree.

“You can’t run forever!” The man sounds like he’s enjoying himself, and Dream would be lying if he said he wasn’t either. The run through the treetops was exhilarating, the occasional shouts from Sapnap only boosted this, making him take larger risks, jumping further than he should and glancing over his shoulder to send the occasional quip back. He enjoys himself so much that he leaps for a branch that isn’t there, sliding a bit down the trunk, his hands scrabbling for a hold as his palms are completely sliced open. He digs his fingers in, grabbing at the grooves in the wood, using this temporary hold to boost himself to a branch, running along. His hands feel slick with his own blood, leaving spots of red behind on the branches.

He would normally shift to deal with any wounds like this, not wanting to risk too much blood loss, but he can't, not in full view of the hunters. It's the only thing he has over them, the fact that they don't know he can shift. So he continues to leap through the trees, Sapnap significantly closer to him than he was before, his small fall giving the man some time to catch up to him. He knows he won't be able to grip his axe well with his hands like this. The blood would make his hands slippery, with a bad grip on the handle, and the pain would be a bit too much for him to deal with. His whole hand is basically an open wound at this point, the blood still sluggishly bleeding from them, dripping down onto his trousers, staining them, most likely permanently.

He hisses between his teeth as he's forced to catch a branch with his hand, struggling to pull himself up as his hands protest, his whole body aching from the prolonged shift earlier. He hears a thud above him, looking up and seeing sturdy boots making their slow way along the branch above him. He pulls himself up, ignoring the pain in his hands. He makes his way up just in time, Sapnap jumping onto the same branch as him, axe already drawn, pointed at Dream. He smirks at him, looking down at his hands then back up to his mask.

"Got a splinter there?" Dream doesn't deign him with a response, favouring instead to just watch him, trying to unnerve the man. He doesn't hear any noise from below, assuming the other two hunters are a bit behind them, running to catch up. He has a minute at most, one minute to get out of this situation before he's screwed.

He pulls his own axe out, fumbling slightly before gaining a good grip on the handle, shakily bringing it up to face the other, prepared to knock the other off the branch. Sapnap beats him to the chase, swinging the blunt end of his axe into the side of Dream's head, hitting him hard and knocking him off. He distantly feels himself falling, reaching his hands out to grab a branch. His fingers hook around one, scrabbling for a hold before they loosen, slicked with his own blood. The branches pass him in a blur, a small sticky patch slowly forming on the side of his head, pain blossoming from the same point.

He hits the floor, instantly back on his feet, axe loosely clutched in his hand as two blurry figures approach him. He takes one look at them, clocks the ashy skin and the pair of goggles before booking it in the opposite direction, stumbling over his own feet a few times, but still putting distance between himself and the others. He glances back, not seeing any hunters behind him. He glances up to check the same above him. His vision is swirling at this point, his whole head pounding, black creeping along the edges of his vision. He makes his way over to a fallen log, trying to shove himself inside, he fails, too big for the hole. He sits back for a second before remembering he can shift, curling down into a familiar form, russet coloured fur spreading over him as a bushy tail sweeps along the forest floor behind him.

He makes his way into the log, stumbling and hitting one side, sliding down the tree's inside. He remains where he slides to, sprawled out on the bark of the tree trunk, safely hidden away from prying eyes. The darkness claims his mind, pain still spreading throughout his skull, pulsating with his thundering heartbeat.

He feels himself get pulled under, still struggling to stay on the surface, to stay awake, but he's not sure why. He lets go.

...

He wakes to voices, his mind foggy and confused, his body still in the form of a fox.

“Did you really have to hit him that hard Sapnap?”

“I already said I’m sorry, I didn’t actually expect it to hit, let alone for it to hurt that much.”

“Just, he’s probably really hurt right now, most likely with a concussion. Just because we’re hunting him down doesn’t mean we have to be cruel about it.”

“You say that like you’re unfamiliar with the king we’re taking him back to. That man is one of the worst tyrants I’ve ever heard of, and I took extra history classes at school, trust me, I heard about a lot.”

“You say that like we have any choice in the matter,” another voice chimes in, “it was literally kill or be killed in this situation for Bad. I don’t think either of us could have let that happen to him.”

“I still don’t agree with what we’re doing,” the voice sounded like Sapnap, some of the fog clearing from his mind, allowing him to track down just how close the voices were. They weren’t just nearby, they were literally vibrating through the wood. He shivered, anxiety beginning to kick in. his fur bristles, ears flicking about, trying to determine how close they were, and which end they were stood at. He tried to stand, only achieving standing for a second before he crashes to the side, sprawling out on the inside of the log.

“What was that?” that sounds like Bad. Oh god, he has maybe two seconds before they look in here. He takes those two seconds to look around the space inside the log, determining it large enough. He shifts back, his form filling the space more snugly as it expands outwards, becoming bigger as he resumes his human form. He remains tucked inside the log, laying as if asleep or passed out, he’s not sure which.

He hears a gasp at the end by his feet, a shadow briefly falling over that end before retreating.

“So, uh, good news and bad news. I’ve found Dream, but he is pretty much stuck inside this log. I honestly have no clue how he got himself in there. Dream did, but he wasn’t about to tell them, busy playing dead inside of the log.

“Don’t worry I’ve got this.”

“Wait, Sapnap, no.” Bad’s voice sounds hurried. It comes too late, the wood above him splitting open with a large crack. He remains still, focusing on acting as if he’s passed out.

“Holy shit. That axe really did a number on him,” That was goggles, a shadow passing over him as the man leaned closer, pulling back his hood, and his hair, poking right where all of the pain in his skull was coming from. He remained still, not flinching from the touch or the poking of his wound.

“Yeah, thanks for reminding me George.” Sapnap sighs, “God, I feel bad for the dude. I just straight up hit him over the head with an axe after chasing him for like, an hour, through the treetops. I honestly feel like a massive dick.”

“You should,” Bad’s voice squeaked, another shadow leaning down over him and pulling back his hair, this one didn’t poke at his wound though, “look at it Sapnap, it looks painful, and we’re just supposed to turn him in?”

“Yes, what don’t you get about kill or be killed,” George sounded frustrated, as if they’d had this conversation before.

“Nobody even knows what he’s done! None of the other hunters have ever come back from encountering him, but that doesn’t mean he’s killing them,” his voice drops to a whisper, “you do realise it’s probably the king, right?”

Dream agrees with Bad, he had never killed anyone, and he didn’t plan on doing so, ever. He lived by a moral code, despite what his hunters seemed to think, and one of the rules of that code was no murder. He liked to consider himself a half-decent person.

“Bad’s probably right George. The king has never told any of the hunters what he’s actually done, just sending out group after group of us to try and capture him. Doesn’t that seem suspicious in the slightest to you?”

“It does, incredibly so, but I don’t like my chances of surviving hunters being sent after me constantly. I don’t even know how he does it.”

“Come on,” a shadow leaned over him and stayed there, “it’s going to be dark soon, we haven’t set up a camp and I don’t want to leave him out on his own for the zombies to come eat.”

He feels himself get pulled up, lolling his head to the side as someone hooks their arms under his knees and his back, holding him in a bridal carry. The person smells familiar to Dream, his sensitive nose pinpointing the person as the demon. He had to be pretty strong to be able to lift his six-foot-something ass off the ground, let alone carry him.

His head began to pound again, a need for sleep washing through his brain. He listens to it, reasoning that he needs to be well rested if he’s going to run from their camp the next day. He tips his head back further, watching Bad through the mask as he falls asleep. The man is humming to himself, the sound vibrating through his chest and passing onto Dream, making him feel warm. He closes his eyes, allowing himself to sleep.

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Bad carries the man he’s holding with little to no difficulty, making his way quickly along the path, eyes scanning the surrounding area for a good place to set up their camp and campfire.

He still remembers seeing that fox from the night before, staring at their fire with such longing it's a wonder it didn't come closer. The fox had run away after a while, retreating back into the darkness, and Bad had left it at that.

He also liked the small mouse he had found earlier in the day, the small rodent had happily sat in his palm and slept for a good few hours. He had been sad to put it down, but also didn't want to take it away from its family.

He carried the tall man, carefully setting him down once they reached an ideal clearing, setting up two tents.

"You and Sapnap are sharing tonight." He was met with twin groans, which led to two annoyed looks in turn. George snatched their tent bag up, marching to the opposite side of the clearing to set the tent up.

"You know he's too hot to stay in the same tent as, right?"

"And you're too cold," Sapnap retorted, "it's not my fault that your puny ass came from another dimension, and it happened to be the coldest fucking one around. George responded in the most mature way he knew, which was sticking his tongue out at the other as they continued to squabble over the tent. Bad has his set up within twenty minutes, pulling out his bedroll and sleeping bag, lying them on one side of the tent. He ignores the noise outside, instead focusing on the man in front of him. He had laid Dream out near to his bedroll on a blanket that he carried around with him.

He closed his eyes and focused, drawing on his magic and ignoring the tether it had to the other two with him. He pushed past those, reaching towards the form in front of him. He didn't pry into the other's kind of magic, already able to feel it rolling off the other in waves and reluctant to stick his nose where it doesn't belong. He first checks over the head wound, brushing a hand over it and watching as it becomes coated with a silvery liquid, quickly disappearing into the skin as it stretched over the wound, as if it was never there.

He looked down to his hands, knowing he saw them dripping with blood earlier when he fell from the tree, but looking now, there were no scratches, no scabs, nothing, just plain old skin. He breathes out. Finished with his job.

He ignores the concealing magic that pulls at the corner of his mind, already knowing that it's still functioning, he would feel if either George or Sapnap's concealment enchantments fell, and he wouldn't let that happen. The simple healing charms used on Dream were fading away quickly, almost as if they were never there.

He steps out of the tent, glad to see the other tent is set up, and that Sapnap is starting a fire whilst George prepares the food.

"So," he turns to Sapnap, "you are planning on sleeping in the same tent as the unconfirmed maniac?"

"That's a horrible way to phrase it Sapnap," he tries to smack him on the wrist, but he pulls away, already finished lighting the fire.

“That’s why I said unconfirmed.”

“Still not nice.”

“What are you two arguing about now?” George walks over, handing bad three potatoes ready to go in the fire, “Hold those in there for me, would you?”

Bad obliges, holding his hands in the flames, allowing them to wash over his resistant skin as the potatoes cooked. He pulled them out once they were done, handing them around the circle. They’re taken gratefully and quickly eaten, all wanting to just crash for the night after the exhausting day. Bad bids them both goodnight, resolving to just clean up their fire in the morning. He watches as first Sapnap, then George enter their tent.

A few muffled sounds of argument can be made out, stopping after a few minutes, the two hopefully going to sleep. He heads into his tent, settling himself down where Dream has curled up on his side, face much closer to Bad’s bedroll than before. He tucks himself into his sleeping bag, watching Dream’s face before falling asleep.

He really hopes he doesn’t get stabbed during the night.

Chapter 3

Dream is woken by the hoot of an owl, the loud call of the bird ringing through the otherwise silent night, startling him awake. He shoots up, a thin blanket falling off of his chest as he looks around. His hands come up to his face, tapping against the solid wood, checking that it's still there. At the small echo his knuckles create, he sighs, head drooping in relief and his hands dropping into his lap. He sits there for a moment, staring down at his hands, legs tucked slightly underneath him before he realises.

His head no longer hurts, and he definitely does not have a tent like the one he's currently sat in. He looks around, freezing when he sees the demon less than a metre away, sleeping in a sleeping bag. He seems to be actually asleep as well, seemingly disregarding the danger of sleeping next to a wanted criminal. He almost scoffs at how stupid they are, allowing him free reign near one of their hunters.

He brings a hand up to the side of his head, brushing his fingers over where the wound had been earlier. There are no bandages wrapped there, not that he expected those, but there's no wound either. He pokes at the skin in confusion, pulling his hair back a bit more. It doesn't even hurt when he prods at the skin, despite him knowing that there had been a wound there earlier, he may have been concussed, but he's not stupid. He looks over to the demon beside him, he still sleeps on, unaware that his captive has gained consciousness.

He slowly gets up, careful to not make a single noise. He checks through his inventory, sighing in relief that none of his items had been taken, then almost laughing at the stupidity of his captors. He pulls his axe out, aware that it's night and there may be a few zombies or skeletons wandering around. He carefully steps out of the tent, not making a noise and being sure to close the flap back over. The demon didn't wake up, which he was thankful for.

He turns around and makes eye contact with Sapnap across the fire. The man is stood beside it, his hands practically in the flames as he stares at Dream. Dream stares back, unsure of what to do. He begins to back away, holding his axe at the ready as the other withdraws theirs. He turns on his heel and begins to run, crashing through the silent forest, sending the mice under his feet scurrying and the birds overhead take to the skies.

He can hear footsteps behind him, heavy and pounding, but only one set, so he's safe for now. He twists and turns, attempting to lose the man behind him, he takes a few risks, darting through thorn bushes, hoping the spikes don't catch on him and pull him back. He dives through another hole in a bush, right over the edge of a ravine. He begins to plummet down, falling through the air. He watches as Sapnap does the same, bursting through the bushes in a similar manner to him and falling through the air. Dream catches himself on a ledge, pulling himself up and watching with a slight amusement as Sapnap flails in the air.

As he thinks the man is about to plummet past, he reaches out and grabs Dream by the front of his hoodie, yanking him forward as he's used to stop the other's momentum. He scrabbles for a foothold, trying not to fall off the side and send them both plummeting to their deaths. But he also doesn't pry Sapnap's hands off of him, instead grabbing the other's forearm and

pulling him up, allowing him to lean against the rocky walls of the ravine, trying to catch his breath and slow his thudding heart.

“What the fuck is it with you and falling off of things?” The man sounds incredulous, waving his arms about slightly, almost overbalancing himself and falling further down into the ravine. He rights himself, staring at Dream, as if waiting for an answer.

“Well, I am running for my life, might as well make it more entertaining.” He hopes the other can pick up on the heavy sarcasm dripping from his words, not really in the mood for talking to someone who knocked him in the head the previous day.

“I’m sorry about the whole axe thing, I honestly didn’t think it would land.”

“Yeah, I know, I could hear you.”

“When you were in that log?” Sappnap sounds surprised, he looks it too, “None of us even know how you got in there in the first place.” Dream smirks, taking a small ounce of satisfaction in having something over his hunters, “Magic.”

That doesn’t seem to appease Sappnap, the other sliding down the wall into a sitting position. Dream sits down as well, content to wait until the other falls asleep to shift and leave. It doesn’t take long, the two of them sitting in a slightly awkward silence. He watches as the other’s eyes begin to struggle to stay open, sliding closed, then blinking open rapidly. He watches until they don’t blink back open, Sappnap’s chest slowly rising and falling. He shifts as he jumps from the platform, swooping in a lazy circle as a falcon before shooting up into the sky. The sun is barely rising as he drifts over the treetops, slowly making his way back to the camp.

He sits in a branch and watches as George wakes up, leaving his tent only to find Sappnap missing. He watches with a keen eye as the man walks over to the other tent, finding him gone and Bad still asleep, he chuckles to himself, the sound coming out as a more raspy chirp, as the two quickly begin to pack their stuff up, one pulling out a comms and apparently calling Sappnap. It takes two tries for him to pick up, but when he does, he sounds pissed off. He can’t quite make out what he’s saying, but he’s pretty sure he hears ‘green bastard’ mixed in there, so it doesn’t take much for him to guess.

He flies north east as they leave their camp, knowing that he would reach the path before them, his and Sappnap’s small run through the forest successfully distracting them enough to allow him to get ahead. Once the mountain comes into sight he descends, dropping to the ground as he shifts back. The mask shifts with him, he’s honestly surprised it doesn’t appear on his other forms. He supposes they didn’t know to enchant it for that, assuming that he only had one form, like most other humans. He gives the mask a small tug, checking that the enchantment is still in place. It sticks firm, the smile ever-present on the wood, the paint slightly smeared. It puts a target on him, he knows that much, he’s one of the only people in their country to have one, making him highly recognisable.

He enters the small mountain path, it was a thin, roughly hewn out tunnel, the sides were sharp, threatening to catch and tear if you weren’t careful. Dream walked through the tunnel at a brisk pace, holding a torch out in front of him, the small flame casting a soft glow over

the walls, the light warped the shape of the tunnels as he walked past them, twisting with it as his footsteps echoed off the walls. The echoing allowed him to pinpoint the exact moment the three hunters entered the tunnel behind him. He extinguished his torch, allowing his hands to guide him, silencing his footsteps as he walked faster, eager to leave the confined space, to feel the open sky above him again rather than the thousands of tonnes of rock that hung over his head, threatening to fall at any second.

He put himself into a run, not caring that his footsteps would begin to echo, just wanting to leave the tunnel, to be on the other side at this point. He heard a few shouts behind him, the footsteps quickening as they broke into a jog as well. He ran faster, hurtling around the corners, not caring as his hoodie caught on a small outcrop of rock, tearing a large gash into the material. He moved past it, leaving the piece of green fabric on the stone. He couldn't tell how close the hunters were, his own footsteps echoing around his head, reverberating in his skull. Their footsteps sounded as though they were right behind him, but when he glanced over his shoulder the bobbing pinpricks of light from their torches was far behind him, the light not reaching far enough to even begin to illuminate him. He looked back ahead, ducking his head low as a chunk of rock appeared right where it had been, the rock stuck out of the ceiling, it was basically a concussion waiting to happen. He pushed on, turning another sharp corner and seeing light at the end of the tunnel, literally.

He ran out into it, instantly veering to the side, diving towards the trees. He began to scramble up one, praying that he doesn't fall or get knocked off this time. He hears them as they exit the tunnel behind him, already over halfway up the tree.

"See, I told you, he's a goddamn squirrel, always running to the trees." Dream scooted further up the trunk, reaching out for a branch and pulling himself up with it. He tries not to scrape his hands, promising himself that he'll wrap them the next chance he had, not wanting to split the skin any more than he already had. Despite the shifting healing his wounds it often left scars, meaning that his hands were mostly scar tissue from all the wounds he had healed himself. He ran along the branch, glancing down to see that Sappnap had begun to climb the tree again.

He didn't know why the man always complained about him being a squirrel, he seemed to enjoy their treetop chases just as much as he did, throwing himself after Dream with a reckless kind of enjoyment. Dream jumps into the next tree over, disappearing further up the branches and into the leaves, Sappnap follows him. He jumps over into the next tree, the thick bough bouncing slightly under his feet as he runs along it. He swings through the trees like he was born there, Sappnap not far behind him despite his amateur mistakes, he stumbles a few times, Dream watching as he almost falls, but able to save himself every time.

Dream turns on Sappnap suddenly, pulling his axe and slicing upwards, aiming for the man's arm. He misses, slicing through fabric instead of flesh. Sappnap pulls out his own axe striking down hard, Dream blocks it with his shield, quickly adjusting his stance before leaping over into the next tree. He watches as Sappnap does the same, not giving him a chance to rebalance himself, striking towards his chest. His axe misses again, and it frustrates Dream, he rarely misses, which is why him consistently missing his swings is so infuriating.

He's too focused on his own blade and Sapnap's axe that he doesn't notice the shaking of the branch behind him as someone drops onto it. He doesn't hear the way a blade cuts through the air. He does feel when the sword catches him along his side, sending him toppling off of the branch. He twists mid-air, trying to catch a branch between his fingers, anything to stop him from crashing into the ground and dying, every bone in his body shattered.

He misses all of them, hands clawing at empty air as he tries to slow his fall. He glances up, watching the two faces staring down at him. It was George that had sliced him in the side, both staring down at him in varying degrees of shock. He twists around again, throwing all caution to the wind as his skin melts into feathers, his wings catching a breeze as he skims over the ground. His side still hurts, meaning his shift had been unable to heal it.

Shit. He shot up into the sky, intent on getting as far as possible before landing and looking at his side. He can feel the blood gradually wetting his side, drifting away from the shouts in the trees below him. He banks to the side, wings tilting to allow him to manoeuvre. He thinks he's gotten far enough away, falling into a dive, wings pulled close to his side as the wind rushes past him, only to pull up beside a tree, landing in the crook of a branch. He doesn't bother to shift back, reasoning that he has less of a chance to be seen straight away in his smaller form. He nestles himself down further, tucking himself safely into the hollow created by a branch connecting to the tree trunk. He closes his eyes and tries to ignore the warm wetness of his side.

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"What the fuck." He hears Sapnap shout from the trees above, he just watches from the floor as the small falcon that had previously been Dream shoots away into the sky, disappearing beyond the treetops in a few seconds.

"Language!" He shouts back, not wanting Sapnap to get back into his habit of constant swearing. He kicks the leaves at his feet feeling utterly exhausted. He had been woken up right as the sun was rising by a panicked George, no Dream or Sapnap anywhere nearby. He had assumed the worst, but there was no blood anywhere nearby, nor was there a body. They had packed up quickly, George calling Sapnap as soon as he got reception. Sapnap had taken a few rings to pick up, making Bad assume the worst again.

Sapnap was a bit of an idiot, he would admit that. The man was smart, just like a dog is smart, but dogs will eat grass until they're sick and Bad has difficulty seeing the difference between the animal and his friend sometimes. Sapnap had fallen into a ravine, apparently Dream, or as Sapnap had so affectionately put it, "the green bastard they have the misfortune of chasing" had somehow gotten out whilst he was asleep. They had to find and rescue him, putting them a bit behind wherever Dream had gotten to.

They had run most of the way, cutting their time in half and hopefully catching up to Dream. Bad had to admit that he hated the tunnel though, no matter how many times he went through it, the closed in space would make him worry, the worry growing until he was back in the

open air. They had taken a torch each, making their way into the tunnel, instantly, Bad had realised something was off. First, a light ahead of them was extinguished, putting that part of the tunnel into darkness. Second, he began to hear footsteps, someone running away from them, their footsteps quick and even. Bad had known that they had caught up instantly.

They took off after him, George nearly giving himself a concussion on a low hanging part of the ceiling. They emerged into the open air a few second after Dream did, watching as he pushed himself up a tree to the high up branches. The man was already half the way up when they emerged. Bad could see why Sapnap consistently called him squirrel boy now, the man seemed to be able to scale the trees with ease, leaping from branch to branch. He had watched as Sapnap took off after him, jumping through the treetops. He sent George up after a few minutes, wanting them to come down, worried someone will fall and get hurt again.

He hadn't expected George to leap down from the branch above them and stab Dream in the side, causing him to plummet from the branch, falling like a rock to the ground. The man seemed unable to catch himself, and Bad was almost prepared to catch him himself before he rocketed away from the floor, now a bird. He supposes he knows now what that pulsating mass of concentrated magic was inside the man.

He had watched, unable to do anything, as a person, or bird he suppose, flies away with a gaping wound in their side. He doesn't know how the man is still alive if he gets hurt that often, leaping around trees with that kind of reckless abandon.

He pulls the compass out, tracking the needle's jerky movements as George and Sapnap make their way down from the tree, in a much safer way than Dream had. George landed first, shooting Bad a guilty look as Sapnap jumped down beside him.

"I swear I didn't mean to knock him off that branch, I just wanted to stop him from running."

Bad sighs, "Well, I think we've learnt our lesson. Don't try and confront the shapeshifter whilst he's in the trees, he will fall."

"So, that wasn't just me? That dude is actually a shapeshifter?"

"Yes, Sapnap, he's a shapeshifter, I don't know how powerful, but obviously a pretty good one to be able to shift mid-fall like that."

"I didn't think those existed anymore, I was taught that the kings in the past hunted them all to extinction." Bad froze at his words.

"Say that again," George and Sapnap shot him a worried look, both obviously concerned by the sudden shift in tone. Bad stops walking, fixing Sapnap with a look, "Say that again."

"I, uh, I said I didn't think those existed anymore, because, uh, all the past kings killed them?" He sounds confused, as if he doesn't understand where Bad is going with this.

"And no one knows why the king wants him brought back, and we've just found out he's a shapeshifter, most likely the last of his kind." It seems to click for Sapnap then, eyes widening as he takes the information in, George catching on a few seconds later.

“Oh fuck, Dream is actually completely screwed if we take him back.”

“Exactly. It doesn’t help explain the mask, if the information we’ve been given on him is true, he’s been wearing it for his whole life, only ever appearing in public whilst wearing it.”

Sapnap nods, “I have no clue how it stays on when he’s leaping like a madman through the trees,” they continue to walk, following the compass, “It hasn’t even got a strap that fixes it to his head.”

“That’s weird,” Bad frowns, still watching the compass as they walk, steering them in the direction it’s pointing. It seems to have stilled, Dream most likely having stopped. Bad doesn’t know how it works, just that it’s powerful magic and that it’s expensive.

He follows the compass to a tree, Sapnap and George arguing over who caused him more damage to him in their fights. Sapnap was adamant that George had dealt him more damage.

“You literally opened up a hole in his side!”

“You gave him a concussion!”

The argument was getting too loud for Bad, especially as it seemed that Dream was nearby, “Can you two be quiet,” he hissed, whirling on the two, more than a bit annoyed at the constant bickering from them. He understands the rivalry between netherfolk and endfolk, but this is a bit much for him. He paces around the tree, the compass needle whirling to always point towards the almost-centre of it.

“You two stay on the ground,” he instructs, “you’ve both done enough damage climbing trees.” He pulls himself up onto a low branch, standing up on it and slowly walking along, towards the centre of the tree. He tucks the compass away, assuring himself that he can find Dream now, without its help. He reaches the tree trunk, pulling himself up the bark a few metres. He stops once he reaches a point where the tree met a branch, peering into the hollow created, or more specifically at the bird inside. It’s leaned up against some of the bark, wings not neatly tucked the way birds normally do. The largest giveaway that the bird isn’t actually a bird is the slowly bleeding wound in its side, similar in relative size and placement to where George had stabbed him.

He carefully picks the falcon up, cradling him with one arm as he climbs back down the tree, making sure not to jostle him. He looks at the wound, realising that he wouldn’t be able to heal the bird at all, his speciality is in humans, not animals. So, he would have to do his best with the basic medicine they carry with them.

“Did you find him?” Sapnap’s voice is quiet, peering at the bird in his arms. He gently reaches out, brushing one finger along the top of Dream’s head.

“I’m pretty sure it’s him, yeah. The wound is in about the same place.”

“Where’s his mask gone?” Bad looks over to George, who is looking down at Dream in slight confusion.

“It probably shifted with the rest of his clothes,” Bad sighed, “we should probably set up a camp, I don’t think I should carry him around whilst he’s got a gaping wound in his side.”

There’s no protest to his decision, which Bad is grateful for, he’s much too tired from his rude awakening early that morning, probably only getting a few hours of sleep at most. They pick out a spot, George and Sapnap setting up both tents. They enter one together with no protest, leaving Bad alone with Dream.

He sets him down, hoping the bandages he has will be enough for now. He begins to wrap them around the bird, winding them over the feathers. He makes sure to leave the wings free, not wanting to break one of them, unsure of how it would transfer over.

Chapter 4

Bad had been watching Dream for a while, the human turned bird was still asleep. Bad had tucked him into a small blanket, swaddling it around the bird's small form, allowing him to stay upright whilst staying comfortable. Bad was pretty sure he had done a good job, his bandages hadn't bled through in a while, and he was using way less of them than he would with a human.

He had admired the falcon from afar for around half an hour, reluctant to get too close in case he woke up and panicked, bad had seen how sharp a falcon's beak was, he had seen the damage they can cause up close. He didn't feel like getting blinded. It hadn't lasted long, him slowly inching his way closer until he was right by the bird. He sat and watched the falcon, reassuring himself that Dream was still alive with the slow rise and fall of his chest. The feathers there looked really soft, and before he could stop himself, he had reached out, brushing one finger over the feathers. He was right, they were soft. The feathers were a nice, grey, fading into shades of darker grey and then black. His feathers were slightly speckled with white, dappling the backs of his wings.

He continued stroking the feathers, moving to the head and stroking the feathers along there. He considered the mouse he had picked up the previous day, comparing how soft the two had been. The mouse had definitely had softer fur, but he's not sure whether that's because it was fur instead of feathers or something else. He idly stroked the feathers on Dream's head, flattening them down as he did so. He only stopped when the falcon breathed in sharply, eyes flicking open and glancing around, the yellow gaze coming to land on Bad. He flinches back, withdrawing his hand, wary of being bitten or clawed.

Dream continues to fix him with his gaze, and looking closer, Bad is pretty sure that the pupil is ringed by a circle of green. He was pretty sure this was Dream, but still unsure. He hoped he would shift back soon, the prolonged eye contact making him feel awkward, as if he were a piece of prey the falcon was about to strike down. He flicked his eyes away from Dream's piercing gaze, looking instead to the bandages wrapped around his side. Dream's eyes flicked down their as well, following his gaze. As he sees the bandages he hops up, wobbling awkwardly on one foot as he spreads his wings slightly to regain his balance. Bad watches him, not moving to offer any help, still wary of how sharp the beak was. Dream rights himself, looking down to the bandages on his side, then back up to Bad. His eyes narrowed, as if accusing him of doing it.

"I wrapped the bandages, but if I didn't you would have bled out, and I would have felt bad about it. I don't like watching people die." He huffs out a breath, "This one-sided conversation is kinda awkward, can you maybe shift back? Talk to me?"

Dream stared at him for a second before dropping his head down to the ground. He stays like that for a while, the feathers along his chest and wings ruffling up more the longer the silence stretches on. Dream drops his head further, dropping face first into the blanket Bad had wrapped around him. Bad makes a noise of shock, waiting for him to push himself back up in some way. When he doesn't, he gently wraps his hands around the falcon, lifting him up and

setting him back on his feet, quickly withdrawing his hands at Dream's piercing glare. He doesn't know how he manages to be so expressive without eyebrows, but he does a good job of it.

He watches Dream for a moment longer, wondering if it's some kind of act of defiance against him. He gives up on waiting after another five minutes of staring. He instead closes his eyes, reaching out with his magic to try and see what's going on with Dream. He looks at the mass of magic, more highly concentrated in the small body. He pokes at it mentally, feeling a wave of rebuttal wash over him, it felt angry, writhing inside the small, contained space. It feels trapped, very different to the flowing feeling he had felt the previous evening, it's almost as if something's stopping it. He mentally scans over the rest of Dream's body, stopping and hesitating slightly as he reaches the mind sector. He rarely deals with that part, having been taught how to enter it, but rarely entering it, instead leaving his patients' thoughts to them. He doesn't like to pry, but he doesn't seem to have any other form of communication at the ready currently.

He hesitates, knowing he could easily set up a mental link between them, it would allow Dream to talk, despite seeming to be stuck as a falcon. He hesitates for barely a second before muttering a few incantations under his breath, waving his hand over the sector. He makes sure to keep his intent clear, not wanting to mess it up. He finishes the link, pausing for a moment, really hoping that he hadn't just irreparably damaged Dream's brain.

He opens his eyes, looking down to the falcon beside him, Dream had hopped a bit closer to him as he had his eyes closed, staring up at him with a tilted head, still fixing him with his piercing eyes. He wondered if he looks at them like this, but they just can't see it because of the mask.

"You think really fucking loudly, I hope you know that." He jumps at the quiet voice of Dream, looking down to the bird beside him, he watches with a small amount of interest as Dream steps closer, hopping up onto one of Bad's knees, probably trying to get to eye level with him.

"Sorry," he speaks in his head, not wanting Sapnap or George to overhear him talking to himself.

"No mental barriers at all," he can hear the scoff in Dream's voice, "what do they even teach you in the nether anymore."

He takes offense at that, "They taught me everything I needed to know! I'm still alive, aren't I?"

"Barely."

"What's that supposed to mean."

"It means that you didn't check your compass the whole time you were looking for me, too busy cooing over a mouse and offering it acorns." Bad narrows his eyes at Dream, "Were you watching us?" He would have hoped that he would see Dream if he were watching, he doesn't think he's that oblivious.

“Better,” he can hear the smirk in the man’s voice, making him more annoyed. He’s barely spent five minutes in a mental link with him, and he’s already ready to completely dissolve it. The man is incredibly smug, making him want to shout in frustration at how difficult it was to talk to him.

“You were the one that decided to form the link, you could also shut it down at any time.”

“Shut up, I don’t need to be reminded.” Dream laughed at that, in a long, drawn out wheezy breath. He honestly sounded rather like a tea kettle, just when it’s boiling. The falcon makes a few chittering sounds, which he assumes is the way the bird laughs. He waits for him to calm down, glaring at the falcon the whole time.

“Are you having a staring contest with a falcon?”

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Dream looks over as Sapnap announces his arrival, almost laughing at how confused he looks and sounds. He looks back to Bad, expecting him to answer because he can’t.

“No, uh,” Bad sounds a bit embarrassed, “this is Dream. We were right.”

“Okay? Why’s he not all,” he gestured his arms around, “y’know, human again?” George pokes his head in through the flap that covered the entrance of the tent. Once he sees that everyone else is inside, he steps in too, dropping the flap from where he had it held open, blocking the entrance with the fabric.

Bad sighs, “There seems to be something blocking him shifting back, probably because he used rather volatile magic with a massive hole in his side,” he shoots Dream a look at that, “the magic probably got slightly twisted, but it seems to be fixing itself. Slowly.”

“So, what? We’re stuck with a pet bird for now?”

“Pretty much, yeah.”

Dream protests at that, “I am not a fucking pet!”

“Language,” Bad mutters under his breath, directing a half-hearted glare in Dream’s direction.

“Uh, Bad, no one said anything. There’s no need to language the silence.” Sapnap looks over to Bad, who just sighs.

“It wasn’t you two, it was bird boy over here, I decided it would be nice if he could talk, set up a mental link, and now I’m stuck with him being all smug where only I can hear him.”

“I bet you love that,” Dream smirked, “it’s just us two, I can say what ever I like Bad.” Bad’s cheeks darken, a purple tint falling over them, showing his embarrassment. Sappnap laughs at Bad’s face, and he has to admit, it is pretty funny. The demon looks absolutely scandalised, he didn’t think there was much to read into it, but he’s glad the demon got the message.

“What must he be saying to make you blush like that, Bad?”

Bad just reddens (purples?) more, bringing his hands up to his face and dragging them down. He lets out a groan, “It’s nothing, he’s just being infuriating.”

“It’s what I’m best at.” He snarks back, wanting to grin, but unable to do so with a beak. He squawks as he feels himself get picked up, flailing around in the strong grip of whoever it was. He sends a sharp glare over his shoulder, towards the face of whoever had picked him up. It was George. He stared the man straight in the eye as he opens his mouth, watching George’s eyes widen before he sinks his beak into the soft flesh between his thumb and index finger.

He cries out, releasing his hold and allowing Dream to glide back down, landing himself on Bad’s shoulder, near to his ear. He settles himself there, trusting him the most at that moment in time, he hadn’t done anything to him yet. The other two had both knocked him out of trees.

George was clutching his hand wailing rather pathetically as a small bit of blood ran across the skin. He hadn’t even bitten that hard, he could have broken the bone there if he wanted. His feathers are all ruffled up, sticking up as he fluffs them, trying to make him seem more intimidating despite his small size.

“Okay. George, not really the best idea, he’s still a person. You don’t go picking random people up just because you can.” George nods, still gripping his hand as the blood stops dripping out, the wound already beginning to clot.

Bad gestures for him to step over, he does so, shooting Dream a wary look as he extends his hand, offering it to Bad. Serves him right, he shouldn’t go picking up birds, especially birds of prey, this dude obviously had no common sense. Bad covers his hand with his own, closing his eyes for a few moments. He breathes in deeply once, pulling away after he exhales. The skin is unblemished, not even a scar to show what Dream had done.

“Thanks, Bad.”

“It’s not problem George, just maybe try and have a thought before you do that next time.” George nods, hurrying out of the tent, Sappnap following close behind him, shooting him a small smile as he leaves. Dream doesn’t understand these people, like, at all. One minute they’re hunting him down and knocking him off of trees, the next he’s waking up, swaddled in blankets whilst one of them watches over him.

He steadies himself on Bad’s shoulder, gripping the thick material of his hoodie between his claws to keep his balance. Bad sits there for a moment longer before standing up, Dream remaining firmly on his shoulder as he walks over to his pack. He watches in interest as the whole bag gets dumped out, Bad sorting through the items and collecting them into groups.

He watches with interest from Bad's shoulder as he sorts the piles, arranging them to some kind of organisation, one that he himself is not privy to.

"I put all the medicine in one pile, the medical items in another pile," Bad points to each pile individually, "and before you say anything, there is a difference. I put personal stuff in another pile, and it gets put in a small side pocket of the pack. The stuff I need for survival is placed near to the middle of the pack, I don't want it to get wet, the food is placed near the top, and I place my coat near the bottom. It stops the water from soaking too far into my bag."

Dream understood, he had a similar way of organising his things, but he rarely bothered with a pack, opting instead to carry everything in his inventory, it might tire him out more, but there was a smaller chance of losing all his items. He sat on Bad's shoulder for most of the afternoon and into the evening, watching as the demon reorganised his items, packing them all back away once he was done.

He sat on his shoulder as the man walked outside, heading over towards the fire, a few potatoes and carrots in hand. He didn't even bother with a pan, just sticking his hand into the fire like a heathen. He knew that demon's had fire resistant skin, and he was probably saving himself from having to carry around a bunch of pans, but still. He just watches as he slowly roasts the carrots in one hand, holding the quickly cooking potatoes in another.

He began to preen his feathers, plucking out any loose ones quickly with his beak and tossing them away. He had his head turned almost fully into his side, flattening and straightening the feathers there, so he didn't notice when the other two hunters approached. He only noticed when one of them, obviously not having learnt from earlier, stroked the feathers on his back. He twists back around, snapping at the hand with his beak, barely missing as George pulls his hand away quickly, holding it against his chest as if he had gotten him.

"Did you not fucking learn from earlier? I will break your fingers next time you try something like that, do you want that?" He wishes he could talk to them, relying on Bad to relay his message.

"Language," he turns to George, "he wishes to know whether you want a broken finger next time you do that." George hastily backs away, shaking his head rapidly when Dream fixes him with his gaze. Sarnap seems to find the whole thing funny, laughing at George as he panics, causing him to glare at him. For two people who are friends they don't seem to get along very well.

He watches as Bad hands them a potato each, taking one for himself. He doesn't offer Dream any, which is fair enough, he's a wanted criminal and they're being paid to capture him, not take care of him. That's why it surprises him when Bad offers him a carrot, holding it out gingerly between two fingers. He seems to be the only person actually wary of his beak, he supposes he must have the one brain cell at that moment.

He plucks the carrot from Bad's grasp, holding it awkwardly with his foot as he nibbles on it, sharp beak making short work of the carrot. He's offered another one after he's finished the first. He takes it happily, glad to have food of some kind, even if all three hunters are watching him as he awkwardly balances.

He finishes that one too, declining another and sitting contentedly on Bad's shoulder as the demon washes everything up. He finishes quickly, the fire the only light source in the area, the rest of the forest dark in the night. He can't even see the moon through the thick canopy of leaves. He allows himself to be taken back to Bad's tent, assuming that he would spend the night there, he was right. He watches as Bad seals the tent closed; much more firmly than he had last time he had been there. It would now be impossible for him to leave in the morning if he was still stuck as a bird.

Bad looks to him apologetically, "I just don't want you running off during the night like you did last time."

He scoffs, not bothering to reply, his opinion was probably already clear. He settles himself down into the blanket he had been resting on earlier, tucking his head under one of his wings and trying to fall asleep despite the unease that coursed through his veins at being trapped in the tent.

He would be fine. He's just overreacting.

Chapter 5

Dream woke before Bad, shifting around slightly in the makeshift nest that had been created for him. The coarse material of the bandages rubbed his side, making the feathers there twitch slightly at the annoyance. Other than that, he doesn't move, unsure on whether Bad is actually awake or asleep and not wanting to face the hunters again. He prodded lightly at the mental link the demon had set up, still wondering what class he is and how he's able to do such a wide array of magic. Most other demons he had met only specialised in one type, not bothering with any others.

The mental link remains strong, the part connecting to Bad was incredibly undefended, him able to push past the small mental barrier and enter Bad's mind, being privy to every inner thought the man had. He didn't, unwilling to get sucked into a dream with him, not sure he could bear it. He checked around his own mental link, poking at his well-maintained defences, checking for any gaps. He didn't really want the demon in his head, content to only send the occasional thought over the barrier he had built.

He moves away from the link, satisfied that the defences are up to scratch, they wouldn't be easy to get past and he could block anything when necessary, either from him or Bad. He mentally turned to the source of all his problems, the small, tightly wrapped coil of magic inside him. He was rather frustrated with it, having been unable to get it to comply the whole of the previous day. It was almost as if it had wrapped itself up when he had shifted, leaving him stuck in the mess he had created for himself. He felt rather stupid for not remembering to try and shift back, but he couldn't quite tell whether there had been an intentional block put on his magic or not. It could have been the demon's doing, they had found him when he was passed out, meaning he was easier to harm, especially as a bird.

He shifted again, resettling himself and looking over to Bad, watching the man warily. He poked at his magic again, flinching back slightly as it pushes back. He prods it again, trying to get it to mould into something else. The magic shifts slightly, allowing him the space he needs to shift again. He shifts to a fox, the coils still too tight to allow his magic to twist into a larger shape. He huffs in annoyance, breath rushing out of his nose. It was fine, he reasoned, progress was progress. The bandages had shifted with him, expanding and staying firm against his side. They still itched, and he was met with the temptation to just rip them off. He doesn't, but the temptation remains.

He hears a snuffle beside him, looking over quickly as Bad begins to wake up. In the blink of an eye, he's a falcon again, magic still remaining slightly loose around his form, allowing for the larger shift of a fox, or other small animal. He sits and watches, blinking slowly as Bad rubs his eyes, blinking them a few times as he sits up. He shimmies out of his sleeping bag, pushing it away with his feet and standing up, ducking slightly to avoid the roof of the tent. He's glad the demon did that, not feeling like staying in a damp tent as the dew dripped through from the release of tension.

The man proceeds to get dressed, Dream turning away and ducking under a wing, giving the demon some privacy. Whilst turned around he begins to preen his feathers, straightening

them out and cleaning them, ruffling his feathers and shaking once done, a few loose feathers falling out. He peeks back around after a few minutes, hoping the demon is done. He is, thankfully. He watches as the demon walks over to him, cautiously extending an arm. He hops on, making sure to dig his talons into the material, wary of falling off. He watches as Bad undoes all the complex knots he put into the fabric the previous night to keep it closed. He makes sure to memorise the way he undoes them all, wanting to remember the way it is done for later.

He sits on Bad's forearm as the demon walks outside, the sun barely up and the light barely shining through the thick canopy. The leaves dapple the ground, setting an idyllic scene over the dew-soaked grass. Bad doesn't make any move to push him off, so he sits and watches as the man prepares a breakfast one-handed. He lights a small fire, sparking a flint and steel a few times before the flames catch, roaring over the pitiful pile of logs and twigs. Smoke rises off of the fire, escaping up towards the sky. Dream wanted to do the same, but he felt trapped despite the wings sat on his back. He knew he wouldn't be able to escape, the wound on his side painful, and the stretching of his wings would only aggravate it further. He didn't want to throw away the small freedom he currently had by trying to achieve more.

He hopped from Bad's arm down onto the back of a chair, talons digging into the wood, probably leaving marks. He didn't really care; they weren't his friends so he shouldn't care for their property. He dug his talons in further, relishing in the way the wood creaked, splintering slightly. He released the tight grip he had on the chair, feeling smug at the minor destruction he had caused. He watched as Bad shoved the pot into the fire, not flinching as the flames licked his hands, curling up his wrists. He withdrew his hands, leaving the pot precariously balanced in the centre, cooking whatever was in there.

He moves away as Bad's hand comes towards him, deciding that he no longer fully trusts the demon with the power he holds over him. Bad brings his hand back to his chest, looking slightly hurt, eyes creasing at the corners and mouth turning down. He doesn't care, they're not his friends and he's not obliged to be nice to them. He sits and stares Bad down, daring him to say anything. He doesn't, turning back to the slightly fizzing pot, pulling it from the fire swiftly and setting it down.

He watches him divide it into three bowls, the porridge looking a bit grey and lumpy, not his speciality then. He's glad that he doesn't have to eat it. He freezes as a hand touches the back of his head, a finger brushing over the feathers there. He turns around and snaps at the offending appendage. He catches it in his beak, crushing down with the small amount of strength he has. He hears a small snap and a cry of pain, letting go. He watches as George clutches his hand to his chest eyes wide in shock, the pain most likely not setting in fully yet.

He allows Bad to rush over to George, watching as he sets his hands over the broken finger, pulling away a few seconds, George's finger completely fine, unbroken and skin unblemished. Bad turns on him with a glare. "What on earth was that for? He didn't even do anything?" He sounded outraged, annoyed with him. Dream doesn't flinch back, only ruffling his feathers up and drawing himself up, trying to make himself seem more threatening.

"I warned him. He didn't listen." His reply is short, cold and sharp. Bad doesn't falter, his glare remaining fixed on him, tracking his movements as his feathers continue to ruffle up

more, the further the argument continues.

“You,” Bad seethes, “are impossible to deal with.” He twists on his heel, storming back to where the bowls are sat, shoving one in George’s hands before snatching one for himself before walking over to the opposite side of the fire, sitting down with more force than strictly necessary. He feels the bond shift, Bad’s end freezing over slightly, most likely an attempt to block him out. The defences are pitifully weak, but he doesn’t try to push past them.

George warily sits down next to Bad, shooting them both a hesitant look. Sapnap chooses that moment to leave his tent, sleepily making his way over to the remaining bowl of porridge, picking up the berries as he did so. He sits himself down on the chair beside Dream’s. He watches as Sapnap starts to eat his porridge, holding the berries in one hand but not eating them. He looks up to find three pairs of eyes on him.

“Good morning?” His voice is slightly muffled from the food in his mouth. Bad and George just watch him, Dream eyeing him out of the corner of his eye, slightly wary of him.

“Why are you sat next to Dream?” Sapnap glances from Bad back to Dream, a comedically confused look on his face.

“He looked lonely?”

“You do realise he just broke George’s finger.” Sapnap’s expression hardens, Dream shrinks back into himself slightly, prepared for Sapnap to shout at him. His gaze isn’t directed to him though, he looks over to George, eyes narrowing, “Did you touch him again.” It wasn’t a question. George shrunk into himself slightly, looking over to Bad for help.

“So, let me get this straight. You two are pissed at bird boy because he broke George’s finger after explicitly warning both of you that he would if he was touched again?”

“When you put it like that it sounds worse than it is.” Sapnap redirects his glare to Bad, “That’s exactly how bad it was, Bad.”

“You’re making me out to be the bad guy here!” Bad protested, looking pleadingly to Sapnap, as if that would make him change his mind. Sapnap was officially his favourite person, even more so when he began to hand him some of the sweet berries he had picked up. He didn’t flinch away like Bad did when he plucked them from between his fingers, holding his hand steady and allowing Dream to take the food. He offered him a handful more before Dream stopped taking them, content with how much he had eaten. He stepped onto Sapnap’s shoulder after he was finished, trying not to dig in too hard with his talons, aware of how thin his shirt was. He ignored the way Sapnap tensed up, his shoulders rising slightly before relaxing again.

He stood up slowly, wary of tipping him off his shoulder. He dumps his bowl by George, who had begun to do the washing up. Bad was nowhere to be seen, presumably in his own tent, probably sulking. Sapnap moves back over the camp, towards his and George’s tent, away from Bad’s. He pushes the flap open, letting it fall back into place, but not securing it. The tent is divided into two sections, separated by two sown in pieces of fabric, a flap over each section to allow the person inside some privacy.

Sapnap pushes his way into the one on the left, not moving to seal the flap behind him. He kneels on his bedroll, there is barely any space that isn't covered by it, and pokes Dream in the side, gesturing to the sleeping bag below. He hops off, gliding down the small gap between him and the floor. He lands softly, turning around as Sapnap pulls on a thicker hoodie, pushing his head through the top and grinning at Dream as he pulls it fully over his body, shaking out the sleeves to adjust them.

He turns to rummage through his pack, pulling a small book and quill out. He plops himself down on the bedroll beside Dream, allowing him to step up onto his knee as he lays the book out in his lap. The pages are blank, untouched, no ink smeared over the page. He pulls a small ink bottle out of seemingly nowhere, setting it down onto the small bit of ground not covered by the bedroll. The section of the tent is comfortably warm, making him want to settle down and fall asleep, but his eyes track Sapnap's movements, wary of what he might do.

"Okay, so like, I can't set up a mental link the way Bad can, but! I do have a book and quill." He grins, seemingly satisfied with the explanation that left Dream more confused than before. Sapnap sighs, "Can you write? With like, your talons? Or not?"

Dream shakes his head, turning the other plausible option over in his head. It would probably amuse Sapnap and allow him to write without having to dip his talons into the ink. He decided to go with it, closing his eyes and poking at his magic again. It frustrated how long the shifts were taking him, he could normally shift without a second thought, but he has to poke at his magic now, waiting for it to respond, it's like he's learning to shift again. Just less blood.

His magic finally responds, warping his shape as he shifts. The magic changes colour, to a warm autumn shade, the kind you find on the leaves just before they fall. He opens his eyes again, adjusting to the feeling of the new body. He flicks one ear, twisting in a circle, following the path of his tail. He holds one small paw out for the quill, ignoring Sapnap's laughs.

"My god, you really are squirrel boy, huh." He hands the quill over, watching as he tests it out, scribbling a few words on the page. He watches as Sapnap's face quickly turns to confusion, looking back to him again, "I thought you were stuck as a bird?"

He shakes his head quickly, scribbling a short paragraph onto the page in small handwriting. It's surprisingly neat for a creature without opposable thumbs. "I can only shift to similar sized animals, my magic is slightly twisted, meaning it can't expand enough to allow the change to human form." He looks over to Dream, making sure he read that right. He nods.

"What if you get injured whilst you're human though? Do you get stuck as a human?" he shakes his head again, turning back to the paper, dipping the quill into the ink before writing again. He writes a bit more that time.

"It's like my magic is wrapped around my form, it normally fits around whatever I shift to naturally, keeping me solidly in that form. I can push against it and it expands to whatever form I choose next." He pauses, looking to Dream before continuing, "If I shift whilst really injured, it pushes in around me tighter, trying to fix the damage done before shifting. If it

can't, it keeps itself wrapped around the form I'm in, only gradually allowing me to push it away."

"So, it's like having a box around you, meaning you can't get bigger than the box?" he nods eagerly, glad the man was understanding, tail swishing slowly behind him. He watches as Sapnap fidgets slightly, twisting his fingers together as he thinks. "Why did Bad get so annoyed with you earlier?"

He writes a short sentence this time. "I broke George's finger. Duh."

"No need to get sassy with me squirrel boy, I already know that. Did you do anything before that? He just blew up at you, don't think I've seen him do that in a while." Dream shrugs, turning to the book to better convey the meaning, "I don't know, I was just sat watching him make breakfast, George touched me, and I broke the finger. Not much to it." Sapnap sighs, obviously wanting to know more, but Dream had nothing else to offer.

"Is it that you don't like being touched?" Dream cocks his head to the side, whiskers twitching slightly, "Why you bite, I mean."

He writes slowly this time, unsure of how to phrase it. He decides on a short explanation, "Not used to."

"Not used to us?" Dream shrugs, unsure of the answer himself. He hadn't been touched in any way that wasn't violent since he was young, he stopped leaning into the touches that struck, opting to flinch away pre-emptively, not eager to throw himself into the hurt.

"Not used to touch?" Sapnap hits it right on the head, him figuring the for himself from the way Dream freezes up, not wanting to admit it. He's not weak. He's the strongest person in the empire, he had survived the king's best hunters. He could survive without any human contact, it was unnecessary.

He watches as Sapnap leans over him, towards where his pillow is resting. He reaches under it, pulling something small and round out. He brings it closer to him, holding it gently in his hands, near to his face. Curious as to what it is he steps up, gripping the hoodie material and climbing up to his shoulder, face by his ear and whiskers brushing his cheeks as he leans over to see. It looks like a small rock, he leans closer, reaching a paw out to touch it. Sapnap allows him to, bringing it up closer, allowing him to reach it without stretching too far. It's warm, he realises as his paw makes contact with it. His whiskers twitch in surprise, ears flicking back and forth as his tail sways.

He doesn't know what to make of the rock that's warm, pulling away from it after a second of contact. He sits back on his haunches, still perched on Sapnap's shoulder. Sapnap is watching him, head slightly turned towards him. He cocks his head, wanting to know what is but not wanting to move to the book. Sapnap seems to get the message anyway. "It's a portable heater, it's got a bunch of charms on it. Someone back in my home city made it for me. I use it when I miss home, and when ice boy next door makes it too cold in here."

That makes sense to Dream, he just wonders where the man is from to need something warm to remind him of home. He looks him up and down again, eyes narrowing as he slots a few

pieces of the puzzle together. He reaches a paw out, tapping it against Sapnap's forehead. He hadn't felt it before, but the man was unusually hot, his skin hotter than the average human's should be. His tail swishes back and forth behind him, considering the pieces of evidence that were building up in relation to Sapnap, and George he realises as more things slot together.

Sapnap and George seem to have an intense rivalry, Sapnap only seems to refer to him as either George or ice boy, he uses it when George makes it too cold, but a human shouldn't be able to make their surroundings cold. The final pieces click together as he sees the singed ends of Sapnap's bandanna, the ends laying on his chest.

He springs from Sapnap's shoulder, ignoring the shocked noise the man makes at his sudden movement. He knows that Sapnap had been watching him as he sat and put the pieces together, but he had ignored the man in favour of going over his evidence. He scampered to the book, picking up the quill and dipping it into the ink pot. He draws the quill over the page, outlining one word in the centre of the stained page, his previous responses sprawled in the corners. There's only one word in the centre, but it stands out the most.

Nether?

He makes eye contact with Sapnap, who looks down to the page, eyes darting to meet his as he visibly swallows.

Chapter 6

Dream watches Sapnap, and Sapnap watches him back, not breaking eye contact. As he opens his mouth, a call from outside interrupts him.

“Sapnap! Start packing up! We leave in ten!” Dream shifts back to a bird, not wanting to show Bad and George that he was able to shift more. Before he shifted back, he put a paw on his mouth, keeping it there until he was a falcon again, without any paws. Sapnap seemed to get the memo, nodding and turning to his bedroll. He tucks the heater into his pack, shoving the sleeping bag into a bag. He offers Dream his arm, and he hops up, making his way to Sapnap’s shoulder, settling there as the man rolls up his bedroll, slotting it through some straps on the pack. He slings it on his back, which is unusual for him, he seems to normally dump it on Bad.

Dream steps onto the strap on the shoulder, digging his talons in deeper there, not wanting to hurt Sapnap. The man had been kind to him so far, but he wasn’t willing to push the boundaries, he saw how quickly Bad snapped, he wasn’t willing to try for a repeat experience. Sapnap makes his way outside, George already beginning to collapse the tent outside, Bad doing his. Sapnap stands awkwardly where the fire had been, waiting for his friends to finish what they were doing. Dream sits on his shoulder contentedly the whole time, not missing the way Sapnap is clutching the small leather book to his chest. He doesn’t push, yet, not wanting to start a conversation with him whilst the other two are finishing packing up.

They leave before the ten minutes are up, efficient at packing up camp and leaving. Bad leads the way, shooting him a wary look as he walks past him, George doing the same. They walk ahead of the two of them, Bad using the map to guide himself, he doesn’t try to find out where they’re headed, more focused on Sapnap. The man has opened the book to a fresh page, slightly hesitating as he flicks past the page that has nether written in the middle, the letters large and bold. He rips it out quickly, ripping the paper into smaller pieces, tossing them into a nearby bush.

He begins to write, Dream reading over his shoulder, assuming Sapnap wasn’t going to do it for him this time. ‘I’m from the nether’, he wrote, handwriting slightly shaky and skewed, they were walking along at a brisk pace, ‘I was born there and lived most of my life there, I stayed until they came.’ Dream didn’t have to guess who ‘they’ were, he was pretty sure he knew who it was, they ruined everything after all.

‘Most of my people fled, leaving the fortress we lived in. Only the creatures were left behind, the blazes and withers you find there today. The more widely spread species, like the zombie piglins and magma cube hybrids were fine. Piglins weren’t, they lived in bastions, those were the second to fall, I still remember it.’

He pauses for a moment, drawing in a sharp breath between his teeth before setting the quill back against the paper, ‘I was sheltering there, my whole race was, my family was there. They didn’t even bother to secure the borders, they just doused the whole place in water, they

had enough that it wasn't all evaporated in time. My family died that day, the king killed them.' The feather quill Sapnap was using was bending, threatening to snap in his grip as his knuckles grew white with how harshly he was gripping it. Dream brushed a wing against Sapnap's face, reminding him that he was here, hopefully grounding him at the same time.

It seems to work, his grip loosening as he breathes out. He pauses a second before continuing to write, glancing up to check that Bad and George were still ahead and that he was still following them, 'I was one of the only ones to escape that place, me and two other young ones left, one of them was Bad, I don't know who the other was, he was a piglin hybrid. He disappeared soon after we entered this dimension.'

'Bad knew quite a bit of magic, being older than me by a few years, he gave me my headband, it had a cloaking spell on it. He never bothered with one for himself, I don't know why.'

He looks back over to Dream, making sure he's still reading the words he was writing, still holding an interest in what he's writing on the page. He flicks over, the page before full, 'We met George after a while, we don't know how he ended up in the overworld, it just happened a few days after the king's conquest on the end. A lot of ender hybrids ended up here, George being one of the most sought after. He's an ender dragon hybrid, wings, tails and scales, all the shit.'

He looks over to George in surprise, not really able to see how the person in front of them was a dragon hybrid, he turned back to the page, Sapnap still writing on it, 'Lots of ender hybrids flooded our world, most got caught. George was lucky he didn't, Bad made a protection for him. The goggles that he always has on him.'

He pauses then, writing slowing to a halt before stopping completely. He rips the two pages he had used out, repeating the process he had gone through earlier, quickly ripping them up and tossing them to the sky, allowing the wind to carry them away. Dream watches them go with a small longing, but he doesn't dare leave. He's certain that Bad not George will be sympathetic towards him whilst hunting him, and he can't shift to anything larger than a fox currently. He'll have to wait; he'll have a chance at some point. For now, he's content to sit in the comfortable silence him and Sapnap are walking in.

They walk for hours, Dream admiring the scenery as they pass by. He observes the swamp they pass through, peering into the depths of the murky water, watching as their footsteps through the shallow water stirs up silt and dust, clouding the water further. The lily pads bob on the surface, shifting in the ripples they create as they wade past. They're a deep green, a far stretch from the washed-out colour of the leaves. The trees are sparse, the few they find scraggly and thin, barely any wood and very few leaves. It's a rather sad sight, the swamp looking dead. The reeds are tall, and they slice your hands if you push them aside, the sides sharp. The swamp is a cruel biome he decides, few resources and water that looks like a health hazard.

They pass through an oak forest next, the green of the leaves a bright contrast to the washed-out, near grey colour of the trees in the swamp. A few bees buzz about, flitting between the bright flowers that litter the biome, adding a splash of colour to the otherwise green area. The

forest is small, soon melting into a larger dark oak forest, the trees thick and dark, their leaves arching overhead and blocking the sunlight from the ground below.

The grass is withered from the lack of sunlight and its dark. He can hear the clattering of a skeleton nearby, a few trees away at most. They move away from the sound without ever finding the creature that made it. A few giant mushrooms peak out of the canopy every now and again, the red and white spots screaming danger to Dream. The forest seems to last forever, the gloom stretching on endlessly, sucking all depth perception from their vision, the depths seeming to lead on forever.

It doesn't last, the trees soon opening up to a plains, a small stream running through the lush and life-filled fields. Cows roam about, chewing grass beside the sheep. The pigs scatter as soon as they spot them, a few chickens clucking around their ankles as they walk through, brushing through the tall grass easily.

The plains is small, leading them into a birch forest. He's not sure if Bad is taking them on an express tour of all the biomes, but he seems to be following some kind of path on the map, the jagged line he seems to be constantly tracing with his finger a small clue. The birch trees are tall, the black mottles on the surface making it feel like there are eyes peering back at them as they pass through the empty biome. It unnerves him, the emptiness of it all, it's eerie, and he's pretty sure Sapnap can sense it too, his shoulders inching higher to his ears the longer they're in the creepily empty forest. Just as he feels he can't take it anymore it opens up to a taiga.

He feels a cold wind wash over him, the breeze bringing the smell of snow with it. He shivers, fluffing his feathers up slightly more at the cold. They continue on through the cold taiga, more and more snow littering the ground as they make their way through it. The trees are tall and far in-between, their thin trunks stretching up high above their heads. He doesn't think he would be able to launch himself through the air here, the trees are too far away for him. The trees thin out until they're in a vast tundra.

He can see a large empire in the distance, walls towering up into the sky. Bad lets out a pleased shout, Dream assumes this was where they were headed this whole time. He looks up to Sapnap who seems just as confused as him, watching Bad as he sets out across the snowy white terrain, setting a quick pace towards the empire walls. As they get closer, he begins to see banners flying from the turrets. The blue and white emblem familiar to his mind, but he can't quite place where. He knows they're far out of the territory of the king, the empire in front of them makes that obvious.

They walk up to the blue-ish stone walls, Bad alerting the guard to their presence as they get within range. One of the two guarding the small gate gestures to them to walk over. They comply, standing in a uniform line in front of the man, the woman behind them watches with a close eye, still keeping watch on the surrounding area.

"We're here to see the king."

The guard scoffs, "Everyone is here to see the king, whether they're murderers or not. I need evidence as to why I should let you in."

The man seems actually competent at his job, but he supposes that's the only way an empire out in one of the harshest climates survives. He shivers again, puffing his feathers up more, trying to keep the small bit of warmth he had in.

Bad holds out a small bit of card, showing the guard. He looks down and takes it, eyes scanning over the text. His eyes widen before he opens the gate doors. "Welcome to the Antarctic Empire, we hope you enjoy your stay." The man sounds like he's shitting himself, making Dream wonder what was on that card. They walk through the gates, then slamming behind them after they enter. The streets beyond are bustling with activity.

Bad pushes his way through the crowds, he seems to know where he's heading, cutting a line through the throngs of people, George and Sappnap following closely behind. They make good progress, cutting through the crowds with ease, the people not as annoyed or rowdy as those back home. He sees a wide variety of species in the streets here, many hybrids he had assumed were extinct roaming the streets in large numbers. He's glad they found a safe haven here.

The crowds begin to thin out as they approach the grand castle in the centre. Bad strides up to one of the guards. He looks to be barely an adult but extremely tall, his skin half black and white, hair split in the same way. Bad speaks in a low voice to him, gesturing over his shoulder at them as he talks. He nods once, a small tail swishing behind him as Bad continues to talk. He eventually straightens up, gesturing for them to follow him.

They follow him as he enters the castle, walking briskly through the grand hallways. They're decorated with blue and silver, the colours matching the overall scheme of the empire, matching the banners that hang from the walls. They walk down hallway after hallway until he's no longer sure of where he is in the maze that is the castle.

They reach a set of large doors, their guide only slightly hesitating before knocking on the doors briskly and pushing them open. The doors swing open to reveal a large throne room, five people sat at one end, each on a separate throne. None of them look related, all different species of some kind. The man in the centre stands up, his large grey-purple wings spreading behind him as those slouched around him perk up, watching them from where they sit.

"Welcome to the Antarctic Empire, I'm King Philza, what can I do for you?"

Bad takes a step forward, "We come on business from our empire, the Scarlet Empire." At the blank looks on their faces he sighs, "We may be better known as the Eggpire." He grins, the smile spreading over his face as he scrapes into a bow, lowering his head before the king.

Chapter 7

Dream watched with a keen gaze as the king froze in place, his friendly demeanour shifting slightly before he put it back in place. He exchanges a discreet look with the piglin hybrid to his left. He seems to communicate something as he stands up, sweeping down the hallway towards him. The guard bows to the piglin as he passes by him, watching from his lowered position as he sweeps past towards their small group. The hybrid gestures for them to follow him.

“You can stay here Bad,” his voice is monotonous, with a low tone, “the rest of you can follow me.” He sweeps out of the hallway, George and Sapnap following behind him as his cloak swishes just above the ground, giving him a dramatic air. His hair is swept behind him, gathered in a loose ponytail, it hangs low on his back, the end reaching down past his middle.

The guard is still following behind them, walking to the back of the small party, his eyes dart around, never meeting Dream’s gaze, no matter how long he stares at him. The halls seem to twist on forever, the blue and silvers crashing together and swirling his vision slightly, giving the impression of a stormy sea. The halls are empty but full at the same time, people darting across the piglin’s path, casting wary glances his way as they skitter out of view, almost running down the connecting corridors.

The piglin’s boots thud heavily along the ground, the sound echoing around the tall walkway, echoing off of the curved ceiling. They walk for what is probably about ten minutes, the piglin keeping up his fast pace until he reaches a small pair of double doors, the wood dark oak and thick looking. The piglin doesn’t hesitate before pushing them open, the hinges barely making a noise as they swing open to reveal the room beyond. The room is lavishly decorated, a few plush sofas in the classic blue and silver of the empire were sat in the middle of the room, gathered close to an unlit fireplace.

Two windows sit on either side of the fireplace, the tall panes of glass almost reaching the ceiling, allowing the cold light from outside to spill in, lighting the room up. “There’s no fire lit because we weren’t expecting visitors at this moment.” He didn’t sound anywhere near apologetic, voice remaining in the same tone as before. He moves over to the fireplace, quickly setting logs in the centre, lighting them with an ease that only comes with practice. The fire roars to life, the orange flames licking over the logs, darkening the outer bark and turning it to charcoal.

The piglin doesn’t sit and watch it, striding over to Sapnap and extending a hand, Sapnap takes it hesitantly, shaking it firmly. “Welcome to the empire, I’m Prince Technoblade, but Techno is fine.” He stops shaking Sapnap’s hand, but he doesn’t drop it, watching his face, obviously expecting Sapnap to introduce himself. The man seems to be frozen, so he gives him a small nudge, trying to bring him back to reality.

“Oh, my name’s Sapnap, and that’s George.” He gestures over to where George is stood, his arms crossed, watching as the two exchange pleasantries. Techno’s eyes slide over to him, his eyes stilling on his small form, perched on Sapnap’s shoulder. They stare each other down for

a second before Techno's eyes dart back to Sapnap's, one ear twitches slightly, as if drawn in one direction by a noise.

"A familiar?" Sapnap glances from Techno to Dream, stuttering a bit, "Oh, uh, yeah. Yeah. This is my, uh, familiar. His name's-"

He gets cut off when a loud crash echoes from beyond a door to their left. Techno huffs, striding over to the door and throwing it open, pulling two figures out of the room whilst a third follows behind. It's the other three people from the throne room. The blonde one is being pulled along by Techno's grip on his arm, struggling and protesting as his wings flare out behind him. The other one being pulled is allowing it, antennae drooping forward, and transparent wings tucked behind his back. He doesn't seem to mind being pulled along. The third follows along behind the blonde, arguing loudly with him.

He looks to be more in order than the other two, a long, tattered cape flowing behind him. He glances up, luminescent green eyes meeting his, ivory and midnight-blue leather wings tucked tightly against his back. If the green eyes didn't give it away, the patterns over his face sure did, a phantom hybrid. He doesn't think he's ever met one of those before. His brown hair falls partially over his face, blocking some of it from view. With a grin he melts out of their vision, sending a mock salute their way as he completely disappears.

Dream does not jump as he reappears behind them, but Sapnap does, jolting and almost dislodging Dream as he does so, twisting on his heel and stumbling slightly as his legs get caught on themselves. The man grins at them again, showing off his exceptionally sharp teeth. He sticks a hand out, the skin between his fingers slightly webbed. Dream watches with interest as a bony tail swishes under his long coat. Sapnap takes the hand, shaking it slowly, watching as the man's claws skim over his skin.

"Wilbur, nice to meet you," he peeks around Sapnap to where the blonde is still struggling in Techno's grip, "the blonde is my brother Tommy, the brunette is my other brother Tubbo. Just ignore them," he says, just as Tommy lets out a screech, Dream does not turn around, "he's fine. This is normal behaviour for him."

They ignore the sounds of fighting behind them, listening to Wilbur's advice as the sounds of roughhousing continue behind them. "is this your familiar then?" Dream rolled his eyes, he doesn't know why everyone thinks he's Sapnap's familiar, he glares at Wilbur, making sure every bit of annoyance is put into the look. Sapnap glances down to him again, eyes narrowing in an attempt at communication. He rolls his eyes, looking back to Wilbur just in time to see him reaching for him.

"Oh, uh, Wilbur, I wouldn't do that if I were you." Sapnap hurries out, Dream snaps his beak at him, not going for the skin, just clacking his beak together threateningly as a warning. Wilbur takes it as it is, withdrawing his hand and putting it back down to his side.

"Fair enough. Message received, no touching the falcon." Dream is glad that someone seems to understand this, settling himself back on Sapnap's shoulder comfortably, tucking himself closer to the man's neck, staring at Wilbur, almost daring him to try anything else. He doesn't, instead turning back to where the fighting has subsided, Tubbo standing over near the windows, beside the fire, and Techno pinning Tommy to the ground, foot between his

wings. The boy doesn't give up, despite being completely outmatched, struggling under the foot, wings flailing around.

Dream laughs to himself, chirping a few times in Sapnap's ear, the royal family of this empire is just a family, the siblings seem to not get on, fighting constantly. He watches as Techno gives up, taking his boot off of Tommy, allowing the boy up. He begins to cuss the older out, "Techno, you piece of shit, I thought we fucking agreed no more pinning, you know I can't escape when you do that you bastard." Techno just watches as the blonde rages on, getting more and more agitated, wings flaring out, the red and white feathers catching the firelight.

Tommy is considerably shorter than the other, Techno having a foot or more on him. He continues to shout, even as Techno advances towards him, scooping him up and tucking him under his arm, gently holding him around his middle, wings pinned to his sides, he covers the boy's eyes with one hand, preventing him from seeing anything. Tommy seems to admit defeat then, falling limp in Techno's arms.

"As lovely as this has probably been, we will be taking our leave now, there are three rooms connected to this one, you have one each to stay in whilst you are out guests. We will see you at dinner in three hours. Have fun."

With that last statement he pushes out of the room, Tommy still under his arm and Tubbo trailing behind him. Wilbur just walks straight through a wall, apparently able to do that. The three of them are left alone in the room, George turning towards them after a few seconds.

"Why are you protecting him by saying he's your familiar." His tone is cold, eyes drilling holes into Dream's skull as he stares him down.

"We don't even know why the king wants him anymore, no one knows what he's done. I just don't see why we should turn him in, or even reveal his identity." Sapnap stands up for, which makes him just like the other even more, shuffling closer, almost completely pressed against his neck, feathers ruffling up slightly at the confrontation.

George scoffs, turning away and moving to one of the doors. He pushes it open, closing it firmly behind him, he hears a lock click. Sapnap turns to the remaining two doors, going into the one nearest to the fire. The room is medium-sized, a nice bed pushed against one wall, a small fireplace along one wall and a desk sat underneath the window, a plush chair tucked under it. Sapnap moves there first, lighting the fire after sliding his pack off his shoulders, Dream moving to allow him to do so. He watches as Sapnap begins to light the fire, stacking the logs in a neat pattern, pulling out his own pair of flint and steel, lighting it quickly, tucking the tool back into his pocket.

They both stare into the flames for a moment, caught by the hypnotic movements as they flicker and dance, crawling over the wood and licking at the bark. Sapnap turns away from them after a minute, facing towards Dream, who has sat himself on one of the bed's posts. He looks down to where Sapnap is sat on the rug. He glides down, landing on the other's knee as he pulls his notebook out of his hoodie. The thing has so many pockets that he doesn't even know where he keeps it anymore, seemingly emptying the pockets at random and finding exactly what he needs.

He hops down to the floor as Sapnap stands, moving over to his bag and pulling the ink bottle and quill out. He follows Sapnap as he moves over to the desk, shifting to a squirrel quickly, already sensing what it about to happen. He clambers up the table leg, sitting on the desk in front of the book, tail flicking side to side slightly. He takes the quill when offered it, holding it between his paws and watching Sapnap, waiting for him to ask a question.

“You said you need to push the boundaries of your magic? To allow you to shift back?” Sapnap turned to face him, “Have you done that yet?”

He nods, ‘I’ve already done it once, but that was it.’

“Okay,” Sapnap hums, “do you wanna try it again? If I lock the door?” Dream considers it, there’s no harm in trying, so he nods, placing the quill down on the desk.

“Mind showing me how far you’ve gotten so far?” Sapnap moves away from the door after locking it, but he doesn’t feel trapped in the room, he feels as though he could leave at any moment, which is weird. He knows he can’t.

He pokes at his magic again, it responds quickly, allowing him to shift to a fox, claws scrabbling over the desk slightly as he readjusts his balance. Once he has, he sits back down, curling his tail tight around his paws, sitting neatly, as Sapnap looks over his form, a small look of recognition passing over his face.

“Were you the fox Bad saw that night? By our fire?” He nods slowly, unsure if that was the right thing to respond with, it seems to be, because Sapnap begins to laugh, long drawn-out breaths.

“God, he wouldn’t shut up about the fox for hours afterwards, it’s just funny to think that he was so concerned about the person he was hunting down.” Dream twitches his ears slightly, not really seeing the amusement in that. He jumps from the desk, claws scratching against the wooden surface and clicking against the stone tiles as he lands. He makes his way over to the fire, sitting beside it, watching as Sapnap does the same, settling himself down just beside Dream.

“Are you gonna try to shift again? To like, a bigger form or whatever it was.” Dream nods his head slightly, preparing himself for the poking and coaxing of his magic he was going to have to do. He hated doing this, it had only happened once before, but it was still a pain to deal with, no matter how many times you do it.

He poked at the magic again, which was a dark, earthy brown this time, trying to get it to comply with him. He pokes for a while, pushing the tangled mess back, trying to untangle a few of the interwoven strands as he does so, trying to speed up the process. He doesn’t know how long he does it for, there’s no way to keep track of time when dealing with internal magic. He makes a small hollow around his form, allowing him to move onto larger animals, giving him more space to do so. He looks at the gap, considering his options.

He fixes on an image of the animal, feeling his body begin to grow in size, allowing him to stretch out more, become similar in size to Sapnap, still a foot or two shorter than him

though. He shakes his coat out, the grey fur rippling along his spine as he does so. He opens his eyes again, eye level with the sitting man next to him.

“That was, I was not expecting that.” Sapnap manages, looking over him, taking in the obvious muscle and sharp teeth. He grins at him, showing them off as he chuffs, his way of laughing. He pads in a slow circle, warming up to the new body, making sure he’s comfortable before he leans himself up against Sapnap, pressing all his weight into him.

“Why a wolf?” He shrugs, not really knowing why it had come to his mind, choosing it as the most appealing and similar to being a fox. He doesn’t remember ever shifting to one before, so he wanted to know what it felt like. He tenses up slightly as he feels Sapnap run a gentle hand over the fur on the top of his head, looking at the man out of the corner of his eye. He’s not looking at Dream, but he freezes when Dream tenses up, keeping his hand frozen on the top of his head. He looks Dream in the eyes, the whites slightly showing around the edges.

Dream forces himself to relax, knowing he wasn’t going to bite Sapnap, he didn’t really feel like it. So he relaxed, leaning into Sapnap’s side as he watched the fire, allowing the man to run his fingers through his fur, stroking over the top of his head and around his ears. He found he didn’t really mind, Sapnap’s hands were warm and soft, not harsh and cold like all the other ones that had touched him. He enjoyed it actually, the repetitive movements relaxing, allowing him to zone out slightly, giving his brain a rest from the hyper vigilance.

He startles at a knock on the door, quickly dropping and shifting back to a falcon, staying safely on the rug, away from the door, as Sapnap moves over to it, unlocking and pulling it open. Bad is stood on the other side, looking rather annoyed. He takes it their meeting hadn’t gone well if the sour look on his face was anything to go by, he looked like he had sucked on a particularly bitter lemon.

“We have dinner, I was sent to collect you all.” Sapnap glances back over his shoulder towards him, he hurries to take flight, landing softly on the man’s shoulder, trying not to dig his talons in. He doesn’t miss the annoyed look Bad shoots his way, choosing instead to ignore it as Sapnap brushes past him, heading out into the main room where George is already stood, waiting for them.

They make their way through the corridors, Bad leading them, apparently knowing where he was going. He enters a small hall, a long table down the centre with the family of the empire already seated. Sapnap moves away from Bad and George, opting to sit between Tommy and Wilbur, sending both of them friendly greetings. Bad sits down beside Philza, George sitting on his other side, beside Techno. He shoots the piglin a scared look, barely visible underneath his goggles. Techno saw it, if the menacing grin he shoots his way is any indicator.

A few servers enter the room, carrying plates of food which are lined up neatly down the centre of the table. The food looks delicious, the different dishes some he had never seen before. Sapnap snagged a few pieces of meat, Dream watching as he did so. Tommy only takes a few things, all vegetables, casting a sad look towards the plates of meat. Wilbur catches this look.

“Tommy, I swear if you eat that meat and throw up later and embarrass us in front of our guests, I’ll, I’ll-”

“You’ll do what? Watch me throw up?” Wilbur doesn’t respond, just staring Tommy down from where he’s leaned around Sarnap. “I wasn’t gonna eat it anyway,” he grumbles, “I was just looking.”

He turns back to his plate of vegetables, beginning to eat them, making his way through the roasted vegetables quickly. The rest of them completely ignored their argument, chatting amongst themselves and eating quietly. Sarnap hands him a few pieces from his own meal every now and again, allowing him some food as well. He takes it gratefully, glad the man thought of him. He ignores the weird looks he’s given as he eats it, happily taking it from between his fingers.

Tommy has been staring at him for most of the meal, he had ignored him for most of it, focusing on the small bits of meat he would get, but he had finished eating and there was nothing to distract him from the avian’s stare. He turned towards him, narrowing his eyes at him, ruffling a few feathers up. Tommy responds by ruffling a few feathers on his wings up, the red and white feathers sticking up slightly as he turns to fully face Dream.

Dream takes this as a challenge, both of them staring the other down as they ruffle more and more feathers up, until they’re both fully puffed up, trying to make the other back down. Tommy seems offended that he hasn’t backed down yet, obviously seeing himself as better than Dream. Tubbo is watching them both, eyes flicking between him and Tommy from where he’s sat on the opposite side of the table. He can see a small grin on his face, giving away his amusement at the situation. Dream ignores him, still staring at Tommy.

Tommy breaks eye contact first, making Dream the winner. Tommy nudges Sarnap, who turns to look at him, his conversation with Wilbur interrupted.

“Your budgie is being extremely rude.” Dream drew himself up at that, taking offense at being called a budgie. He was more of a predator than the avian before him, the boy couldn’t even eat meat. Sarnap carefully wraps his hands around Dream, and he allows him to, moving him to his other shoulder where he can no longer see Tommy. He strokes a finger along his back after he’s settled, smoothing the feathers there back down. Wilbur looks at him for a second in amusement before resuming his conversation with Sarnap about phantom hybrids. Sarnap listened in interest, meaning they weren’t leaving for a while.

He settles himself down, prepared to sleep through the whole of the conversation, tucking himself against Sarnap’s neck to make sure he doesn’t topple off mid-sleep. It’s warm pressed up against his neck, lulling him to sleep faster than he had expected

Chapter 8

Dream only woke up when Sapnap began to move again, standing from the table and bidding the others goodnight. He sat nestled on his shoulder as Sapnap walked through the corridor alone, making his way back to their room. As they leave the room, he sees Bad and George corner the king before he can leave, speaking in low tones. The door shuts behind them before he can begin to make out what they're talking about.

Dream still can't get over the elegance of the decked halls, the banners are intricately woven, the individual threads weaving together into the flag, the lining of the hallways silver. The empire is obviously doing well for itself, and it's a place that hybrids can seek shelter in. He wonders how he's never heard of it, not with all the abuse and hatred that linger on the streets of the Scarlet Empire. He still remembers the abuse that would be hurled to any hybrid that cannot hide. He shudders thinking about it, that place was rotten from the start.

Their room is warm, the fire still burning in the corner, admittedly a bit less ferociously than earlier, mainly a pile of embers with the occasional leaping flame. Dream jumps from Sapnap's shoulder, shifting to a fox before he can hit the floor, the smooth fur rippling over the new muscles as he lands carefully. His shifts are coming easier the longer he stays in the forms, the bandages still rubbing over his side. He turns to face the bandages, debating on whether they were actually doing anything for him anymore. He decides no, barely hesitating before ripping them off with his teeth.

The slightly yellowed bandages fall to the floor easily, no longer held in place. He noses them towards Sapnap, who tosses them into the fire, burning them away quickly as the flames caught it. Sapnap stares into the fire, absentmindedly stroking the soft bit of fur between his ears, fingers scratching at his head in a nice way. He purrs quietly, the sound rumbling through his frame as he presses himself up to Sapnap's side, sitting as the moon rises overhead and the sky washes into a deep blue.

Sapnap sits and watches the fire with him for a while, enraptured by the flames dancing over the logs. He stirs after a while, standing and walking to his pack. He pulls a bundle of clothes from it, Dream turning away as the man pulls his shirt off, he's a decent human being after all. He waits until Sapnap sits back beside him, turning to face the man beside him. He still wears the bandanna, tied firmly around his head. He understands, he has a way to hide, so he takes advantage of that, no reason not to.

He looks cosy in nightwear, which consists of a larger hoodie that completely swallows him and a pair of sweatpants. Dream kind of misses the clothes that come with being a human, there's perks to being an animal of course, but there's also downsides. He can't communicate verbally with Sapnap, or any other person, and he can't wear warm clothes. Sapnap holds his arms out for Dream, and he curls up against the man's chest, relishing in the warmth he exudes, curling closer as he stands up, carrying Dream over to the bed and tucking them both in.

His eyes droop close as he pokes a bit more at his magic, making it expand further, the tangled mess almost completely disappearing as his bones begin to ache. His tired and muddled mind makes no sense of what he's just done, eyes drooping further shut in the warmth he bathes in, wrapping his russet tail around himself as he curls up on the soft mattress. He feels weighed down, the weights lifting slowly as he drifts off, Sapnap already asleep beside him, snoring softly, chin resting on top of his head between his ears.

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He wakes up curled around another person, he yawns, face pushing against the top of a head below him as his jaw opens wider, cracking as he does so. He winces slightly at the loud crack, rubbing a hand against hard wood. His hand freezes when he takes in the material under his fist. He knocks against it once, lightly, a small echo going around the room as the sound confirms it. He looks down a bit, his hands still scarred, the gashes on his hands that were quickly healed over by a short shift.

He looks down to his hoodie, groaning a little as he sees the massive hole in it from George's sword slicing through the material a few days earlier. He freezes slightly as he hears someone mumble, arms tightening around his waist. He looks down, raven hair concealing the face of the person holding onto him. He still knows who it is, and he doesn't really know how to deal with waking up like this.

He feels slightly awkward, as it's different when someone expects to wake up next to a fox, they do not expect to wake up next to a straight up person. He wishes he could drag a hand down his face, but he can't reach it because of the mask. The godforsaken mask that had started this whole mess. Sapnap snuffles again, his grip on dream's hoodie tightening before loosening. He feels Sapnap move his head up and he looks down, mask obscuring his whole face and the hood of his hoodie hiding the rest of his head.

Sapnap blinks at him a few times, still staring up at him through a curtain of hair that had fallen from its place behind his bandanna. He smiles down at Sapnap, a small tentative one, before he realises it can't be seen, the mask fitted snugly over the whole of his face, the only holes for air at his eyes. Sapnap's head falls back against his chest, thudding quietly against the skin there.

"This was not what I expected to wake up to, just being clear." His voice is muffled, speaking into the fabric of his hoodie.

"I, uh," his voice is scratchy and quiet from the lack of use in the past few days, "would it make you feel better if I didn't expect to wake up to this either?"

"A bit, yeah." Sapnap still doesn't move from his position, basically lying on Dream, curled close to him. Only just looking now does he realise that Sapnap is almost half a foot shorter than him, only coming up to about his shoulder if they stood side by side. He snickers at that.

“What are you laughing at?” Sapnap’s voice is slurred, as if falling back asleep, despite the sun being over the horizon.

“You.” Sapnap makes an offended noise at that, “You’re short.” Sapnap sits up at that, blinking a few times as the blood rushes from his head, “I am not short! I’m the national average height.” He huffs, looking over to Dream and looking him up and down. He flushes underneath the mask despite knowing that Sapnap is only trying to figure out how tall he is in comparison.

Sapnap stands from the bed, “Get up,” he extends his hands, pulling Dream up when he places his palms in Sapnap’s. He stumbles slightly, unused to his normal, human legs. When stood he is indeed taller than Sapnap, looking down at the other in amusement. “You’re short,” he laughs, “little short man.”

“I am not short, I am average height.”

“Whatever lets you sleep at night.” He turns away from Sapnap, assuming that their conversation is finished.

“I bet you couldn’t pick me up, even if you tried. You’re just a beanpole, no muscle on you.” Dream turns to face Sapnap, watching his face as he advances slowly forward, arms reaching out to grab him under the arms. He picks him up like that, holding him at face height before dropping him back down.

“Bet you can’t pick me up.” He mocks Sapnap, a teasing grin on his face and a laugh in his voice. Sapnap just huffs and looks away, crossing his arms, “Your voice is a lot more annoying than I expected it to be, squirrel boy.”

“You’ve heard it before and you liked it then,” he teased, stepping closer to Sapnap, “you shouted back to me, exchanging quips with me in the treetops, did you not?” He stands almost chest to chest with Sapnap, head lowered to Sapnap’s eye level.

“Yes, I did. Doesn’t mean I liked it.” Sapnap teases back, a grin tugging at the corner of his lips as he stares Dream in the eyes. They both freeze at a knock on the door, eyes darting towards it from where they were stood. In a blink Dream is on Sapnap’s shoulder, once again a falcon.

“Hello? Sapnap?” It’s George, he’s knocking on the door, presumably to try and wake Sapnap up. They both watch the door, Dream’s eyes flicking to the knob that locks it, taking in the way it’s twisted, the lock in place.

“Hello, Sapnap? You still alive in there?” Bad’s voice joins George outside the door, he nudges Sapnap with a wing, trying to get him to respond before his friends busted the door down, convinced he had murdered Sapnap in his sleep.

“No! I’m still alive, I’m just, uh, getting dressed!” Sapnap finally responds, the knocking ceasing to exist.

“Be quick then, we have breakfast in five minutes, I don’t want to be late.” He hears two sets of footsteps move away from the door, Sapnap hurriedly turning to his pack had been discarded the previous day, pulling a pair of trousers on and moving Dream over as he pulls on his shirt and hoodie from the day before on. He quickly tucks his hair back behind his bandanna before scooping Dream up in his arms and making his way from the room. He doesn’t even protest the rough treatment, only letting out a small squawk, Sapnap shoving him up to his shoulder at that.

He digs his talons in, still readjusting to the drastically smaller body. It doesn’t take too long, just about as long as it takes them to make their way to the dining hall and sit down. He watches Tommy from the corner of his eye, wary of what conflict he might start. Sapnap seems to sense this, moving him from the shoulder by Tommy to the shoulder by Wilbur. He manages a half-hearted glare up at him which Sapnap just ignores, continuing on his conversation with Wilbur about different types of hybrids. The man seems very knowledgeable on them, keeping up the conversation between mouthfuls of food as they eat.

Dream only partially listens, not really that bothered about hybrids. He’s probably technically one himself, but from what he can gather from Wilbur’s short history lesson is that shapeshifters are probably the ‘bitches who kicked all this shit off for us’, it’s a rather interesting way of putting it, but he’ll take it nonetheless.

They finish their food but not their conversation, Wilbur inviting Sapnap for a walk around the gardens while Bad and George talk to Philza about whatever they had discussed the previous night. Techno leaves the table silently, heading off somewhere else, he’s not sure where. The two younger, Tubbo and Tommy, trail after Sapnap and Wilbur, both of them shooting him the occasional look.

After five or so minutes of them constantly looking to him Tubbo walks in front of Sapnap, stopping him in his tracks and pausing the conversation.

“Excuse me,” he seems anxious, “your familiar aggravated Tommy yesterday and I was wondering if he would apologise.” Dream almost laughs in his face, letting out a few low chitters that draws a bit of attention to him.

“I, uh,” Sapnap looks down at Tubbo, “I don’t think you’ll be getting an apology out of him. He’s extremely grumpy and rude. He doesn’t really like people.”

“He seems to like you just fine.” Dream snaps his head around to Tommy. The kid is taller than Sapnap by a few inches, leaning over him slightly. He is tempted to put the kid in his place, doesn’t he know it’s rude to threaten other people? Especially using your height. He scoffs, turning his back on Tommy, expecting Sapnap to diffuse the situation or Wilbur to strike up the conversation again.

He does not expect to be yanked from Sapnap’s shoulder, hands firmly around his wings and preventing them from opening. He struggles slightly, trying to escape the firm grip the kid has on him. He shifts, snarling mouth opening wide as he turns on Tommy, who quickly drops him to the ground, not expecting the small falcon he had in his grip to suddenly turn into a snarling, rage-filled fox. He snarls at Tommy once more, retreating behind Sapnap’s legs slightly, hoping that Sapnap would take the lead on the situation.

“Okay, familiars are powerful and can use magic, but they cannot do that.” They turn as a group towards Wilbur, who’s green eyes are focused on him, they seem to pierce him, look through him, and he shrinks back further before just shifting again, form shrinking to one of a squirrel, allowing him to make his way back up to Sapnap’s shoulder. He sits himself there, tail curled protectively around himself, almost daring Tommy to try and grab him again.

They seem to be at a standoff, a guard rounds the corner of the hallway ahead of them, takes one look at the people gathered there and turns back around, walking in the other direction. Dream can’t blame him. Wilbur notices the guard as well, turning back to the others, “This probably isn’t a place we should be having this conversation.”

He turns on his heel, striding back towards the dining hall. His coat flares out behind him, his wings tucked firmly against his back, folded neatly. His tail flicks slightly, glancing over his shoulder every now and again to check they were all following. They are, Tommy trailing beside Tubbo, eyes downcast, sulking. Sapnap walks just ahead of them, casting a few worried looks in Dream’s direction as they walk. He remains unbothered, interested as to where they’re going.

They move through the twisting corridors, heading steadily upwards until they reach a spiral set of stairs. Tommy and Tubbo both seem to know where they’re going, following after him easily. Dream peers around, his whiskers twitching slightly in interest. They make quick work of moving up the staircase, emerging at the top to a locked wooden door. Wilbur slots a key into the keyhole, swiftly unlocking it and allowing them to enter.

The room beyond is dark, curtains drawn over the windows blocking out all the sunlight. Wilbur seems to move through the darkness with ease, the only thing they can see of him are his green eyes.

“You can sit down.” They all sit, following Wilbur’s instruction. Dream can see why phantoms are described as the night terrors now, the only part of Wilbur he can see are his glowing green eyes, creating an eerie presence in the room, his voice completely contradicts this, the tone mostly upbeat and cheerful.

“Are we not going to talk about what just fucking happened?” Tommy bursts out, his voice loud and brash. Wilbur’s eyes flick over to where the noise came from, apparently able to see perfectly well.

“We are, I just thought an extremely public place was probably not the best place to do it.” Wilbur seems like the only person with any sense in this room.

“Sapnap.” He feels Sapnap tense under him at his name, “I have never seen a familiar do that, either, that is not a familiar, or you are much more powerful than expected.” Sapnap shifts slightly, Dream rocking side to side on his haunches with the movement. He seems anxious, the movement from him indicating he turned his head towards him. He can’t see as well as Wilbur can in the dark, but he can see well enough to read the question in Sapnap’s eyes. He just pats his cheek once, giving him the go ahead sign.

Sapnap sighs, turning back to Wilbur, who’s eyes are fixed on them, “No, he’s not a familiar.”

“Then what is he? He’s obviously an intelligent being, you seem to be able to communicate, but not telepathically it seems.” God, Wilbur was way too fucking smart for his own good, he must be one of those kids where their only hobby as a child was reading. It wouldn’t surprise him.

“No, he’s intelligent, but I can’t set up a mental link and neither can he.”

“You seem reluctant to disclose any information about him.”

“This feels like an interrogation.”

“It is, bitch.”

“Thank you, Tommy. Again, you seem reluctant to disclose any information about him, I don’t even know his name. Why?”

“I feel like he should do it himself.” Sapnap really had to throw him under the bus like that didn’t he.

“You said he couldn’t set up any kind of mental links, I don’t see how he can tell me anything.”

“That’s because I don’t need any fucking mental links to talk.” He watches as Wilbur’s eyes widen, probably shocked at the swift shift. He smirks under his mask, pleased that he was able to render the man speechless.

“Who the fuck is that? Did someone break in?” Tommy sounds worried, his voice wavering slightly.

“Not anyone you didn’t already let in.”

“Wilbur, turn the lights on please, I would like to be blessed with vision again.” Wilbur’s eyes roll, a short snapping sound echoing through the room as the lights flash on, causing everybody in the room to blink rapidly at the sudden change in light level, Wilbur included.

He can feel Tommy gaping at him from where he’s sat, he ignores him, letting the information run through their brains. He wants to know if they can come to their own conclusion. Wilbur’s eyes brighten in realisation.

“Holy shit, you’re one of them! You’re a shapeshifter.”

“All of those are fucking dead Wilbur, we all heard the announcement.” Dream looks down at himself, “Sorry, didn’t know I was dead.”

“Okay, that’s cool and all, but why the mask?” he turns to Tubbo, tilting his head at him.

“What do you mean, what’s with the mask?”

“He means, what’s up with that freaky ass mask you’re wearing.”

“It’s...stuck on?” He tugs the bottom of the mask, demonstrating what he meant, the mask firmly stuck to his skin no matter how hard he pulled. “There’s no straps either.” He turns his head slightly to the side, showing the sides off and the veery obviously missing straps that would keep the wood stuck to his face.

“So what? It’s just stuck on there?”

“Pretty much yeah.”

The people in the room lapse into silence, just staring at him. He stares right back.

The silence is broken by the harsh calling tone of a communication device. Dream turns to Sapnap, the noise coming from his direction. Sapnap is fumbling in his pockets, pulling his hands out of a few empty before he finds it, answering the call.

He puts it on speaker, staring down at the contact on it, Bad.

“Hello?” Sapnap speaks first, breaking the silence that had fallen over the room after the ringing cut out.

“Sapnap,” Bad’s voice is cold, “come to the dining hall, bring whoever you are with, with you.” Sapnap goes to respond, shutting his mouth as the call disconnects. He looks in confusion at the rest of the room.

“I guess we’re heading to the dining room?” Sapnap sounds just as confused as he feels, offering an arm before Dream even shifts, he lands easily, perching on the arm and ignoring the gasps the display of power got from the rest of the room. They moved from the room quickly, Sapnap not wanting to keep Bad waited. He gets to the bottom of the stairs and looks around, confused. Wilbur quickly takes the lead.

They pass by multiple guards, more than there had been earlier. He sees the one that had brought them in the castle in the first place, watching as he trembles, standing to attention against a nearby wall. They walk through corridor after corridor, ending up in front of the doors of the dining hall again. They pause before entering, Wilbur pushing the doors open.

He feels his heart drop at the sight of Bad and George. Both of them were stood beside Philza, they were surrounded by guards dressed in red, a sharp contrast to the subtle silver of the Antarctic Empire’s soldiers.

“Phil,” Bad turns to the king with an easy smile on his face, “would you like to know a secret?” The king looks confused, but hesitantly nods anyway. Bad’s smile stretches into a malicious one.

“You’ve been taking care of a wanted criminal from the Scarlet Empire for the past days we’ve been here. You’ve also been harbouring a traitor it seems. His eyes land on Dream and Sapnap, narrowing as he watches them.

“It’s the falcon and the man with it.”

The guards march towards them, spears lowered as they move the other royals of the empire aside. Dream leaps from Sapnap's arm, landing as a snarling wolf, the fur along his spine bristling as he snaps at the guards, warning them to keep away. He's so focused on the ones in front of him he doesn't notice the one grab Sapnap from behind until he hears Sapnap cry out. He turns towards them, which gives the three behind him the opportunity to jump him. He feels his head get pinned to the ground.

He watches through narrowed eyes as a hooded figure emerges from behind the guards. His smile makes his glowing white eyes crinkle.

"Now, now Dream. We all know you can shift back. Do it or I'll make you." He lowers his head down to Dream's staring him in the eye until he shifts back, his fur melting away, turning back into the masked man he had been earlier. He feels as two cuffs are fastened around his wrists, one on each, not binding them together, just fastened onto his wrists.

"Do you want to know what these are Dream?" He just growls, not responding to Bad's sickly sweet tone, facing away from him as he's hauled to his feet. Sapnap is having similar cuffs fitted to him, dragged up beside Dream once they're on.

"These electrocute you if you leave a certain area, or," he pulls a small remote out from behind his back, pressing the button as he grins, "just if I feel like it." He feels the electricity course through his veins, Sapnap letting a cry of pain out next to him. He hears distant shouting, it sounds like Wilbur and Tommy. They sound outraged.

When he looks up he can see them being held back, pushed back by red clothed people as they are dragged from the dining hall, forced to walk behind Bad and George as they lead them from the castle. They are lead outside and shoved into the back of a carriage, a small divider between where they are and where the passengers sit.

Bad leans down and pushes his face towards the mask, "You can try and shift to get out of those, it won't work, but it'll be amusing. They're charmed to expand to fit your wrists." He turns away, pausing mid-step and turning back to them.

"Sapnap?" The man looks up at him, "I'll be taking this." He rips the bandanna from his head, watching in poorly disguised glee as Sapnap's features begin to change, the tips of his fingers taking on a more ashy tint, his eyes changing from coal black to a fearsome orange. They widen in surprise at what Bad did before looking down to his hands, eyes darkening to a burning red as he took in his appearance.

Bad steps back and slams the door in their faces, they can hear his laugh through the wood.

Chapter 9

Dream had curled himself up in the corner, hood falling further over his head as they bumped over the rough patches of the road. He could hear laughter in the carriage beyond them, the clattering of the horses' hooves vibrated through the whole of the carriage, draining out any other noise from outside. He couldn't see the sky; he couldn't see anything but the thick wooden walls of the carriage.

He clutched onto his arms, holding them closely as they wrapped tightly around his torso. His head was lowered, ducked and his neck was beginning to hurt from the awkward angle. The metal burned around his wrists, a crackling reminiscent of a past life springing to his mind. He recognised the bracelets; he would have to be stupid not to. He wished to rip them off, to tear them from his wrists with his own teeth, to watch as the metal clattered to the ground, sparking uselessly. He knew it wouldn't be that easy this time, they wouldn't want him leaving again.

He shook harder, curling further into himself as the carriage rocked from side to side, the constant movement making his head spin, making him want to scream. He felt as though he was all too small and all too big at the same time, the walls pressing in close then drifting further away from him until he was stranded in the middle. He felt his chest constrict, glancing around wildly under his mask as the walls began to press in, began to whisper about him, about all that he had escaped from. He didn't want to go back, he couldn't, he won't survive it. The walls watched him, their eyes remaining steady on his body as he shook, curling into himself.

His eyes snapped up as someone came into view. Their hair is black, the eyes underneath it orange. He stares at them for a second, watching as their mouth moves but no sounds reach his ears. The rushing in his ears reaches a roaring crescendo, dying down suddenly, leaving his head empty of any sound, static filling the silence as words begin to reach his ears, filtering in through the quiet emptiness.

The words begin to match with Sapnap's moving lips, the words collecting together and forming sentences. He feels unable to talk, his tongue too heavy, the back of his throat cold, freezing any sound that tries to make its way past there, leaving the ice to melt on his tongue.

"It's okay, you're here, I'm here. We'll be fine." Sapnap is quiet, his voice barely above a whisper, his eyes darting towards the hunters that sit in front of them. They pay no attention to them, too caught up in whatever joke they've made now. He watches as Sapnap reaches a hand out, palm up, offering it to him. He doesn't demand the affection be returned, it's just a silent invitation. He takes it, pressing his own hand into Sapnap's palm, allowing him to close his fingers around it.

He stares at the hand in interest, spreading his own fingers out against Sapnap's, comparing the way his end in short, blunted claws, the nails black. Sapnap's fingers fade into an ashy grey, the colour looking similar to the air of the nether, the dust constantly hung in the air, coating everything it touches, leaving those that venture in coughing and gagging for air.

The fingers end in nails, normal ones, the keratin pale, the way a normal human's fingernails are. He compares them to his forcefully blunted claws. He never grew out of the habit he was coerced into; he was told that it was safer for everyone around him, less accidental harm. He had bought into it, believing that it was for the better of everyone around him. He didn't want to do it ever again, he would let them grow out. He knew they were deadly, he would need that where they were going.

He looked into Sapnap's eyes, the swirling mixture of red, orange and yellow was wildly different to the almost black colour before. It was as though the fire inside him had roared back to life, burning up any disguise he had. He supposed that it was true, the only hope he had at blending in had been ripped away. He readjusted his hood making sure it was still slightly caught on the edge of his mask. He didn't want it falling down.

Sapnap had shuffled to sit next to him, leaving a small gap between them, wary of Dream's boundaries, which made the man soften. His hands still shook slightly as he pulled on the hood one final time, coming to rest in his lap as he fiddled with his fingers. He looked to Sapnap, the other man's eyes instantly darting to his.

"Can I shift?" his voice was barely above a whisper, voice wavering as he spoke, wary of those beyond the partition. Sapnap looked at him, "You don't have to ask permission, it's your choice." Dream looked to him again, looking for anything that could mean he was being ingenuine, that he was testing him. There was none.

He shifted slowly, watching Sapnap's face for any signs of anger, it remained the same, smiling softly as he shifted from foot to foot, looking up into his eyes. Sapnap opened his arms up slowly, watching dream as he did so, waiting for any sign of hesitance from the fox. He didn't hesitate, quickly moving forward and settling into Sapnap's arms, curling up in his lap, his tail around himself as he rested his chin in the crook of Sapnap's arm. He felt the soft brush of fingers over the top of his head, the fingers ghosting over the fur there. He leaned into the touch, welcoming the warmth it brought.

He leaned into it, trying to relax as he did so, allowing himself to close his eyes. He blocked out the voices from Bad and George, ignoring the way their voices made the fur along his spine bristle. He felt Sapnap scratch at the base of his ear, stroking along the fur there. He doesn't move his hand down the rest of his body, which he's glad for, he's not sure that he could deal with anything more than he is right now.

He settles himself down, closing his eyes as he evened his breathing out. They would be here for a few hours, he might as well take advantage of the relative peace they had.

...

Sapnap stroked along the fur on Dream's back, not missing the way the fox's breaths had deepened, the breathing slow and even. It was a large difference to the ragged breathing from

earlier, his stuttered gasps making Sapnap worried for his health as he trembled in a corner. Bad and George had taken one look at him before turning away and laughing.

He doesn't know when their demeanour shifted, but he can see when he started to notice it, like the morning he broke George's finger, it seemed to set something off in Bad. Sapnap hadn't felt right hunting Dream, not since the start. They had never gotten a concrete answer for why he was being hunted, he only threatened Bad's execution if they came back without him. He wonders if this had been their plan from the start.

He brushes along the fox's head, scratching at the base of his ear, Dream seemed to like that, making a small purring noise, it was quiet enough to not be heard by anyone other than Sapnap. It comforted him, the small rumbling calming his slightly stuttering heart. He was worried, yes, but he also had to think about Dream, who would probably end up worse off than him.

He doesn't know how long he sat there, scratching at Dream's ears and stroking through the fur on his head, but it was a while. He felt a small shift under his hand, watching in a small amount of fascination as his form grew, changing into one of a human.

His form was heavier than that of a fox, but he looked peaceful, head resting on his shoulder, the rest of his six foot three lanky ass fitting in his lap. He lets him sit there, being careful not to be too loud, just in case he woke Dream. The conversation up front stilled, the two going quiet for once. The silence was eerie, they hadn't been silent the whole trip, and now they were.

The carriage jolted to a stop, and Sapnap knew he had to wake Dream up now, beginning to shake his shoulder.

...

Dream woke abruptly, back in his human form and his shoulder being shook roughly. He jolted up, almost falling backwards from where he was sat in Sapnap's lap. He blushed under his mask at the compromising position, getting up as Sapnap gestured for him to, following his lead. The carriage was still, he realised, and he just slightly see towering walls up ahead of him, the blackstone ominous against the blue sky. He watched as the hunters stepped out of the front compartment, greeting some people outside.

He heard footsteps coming around to the back door before it was wrenched open suddenly, bright light from the setting sun spilling in through the doorway, making him blink rapidly. One person roughly grabbed his arm, making him flinch back as they made contact with him. Their cold, harsh grip was like a slap to the face after Sapnap's kind treatment earlier. He watches as another grabs Sapnap, recoiling slightly at the heat of his skin but pushing on.

They both get pulled up the palace steps, they're already in the city he realises, the walls only protecting the castle, not the people who lived in the empire. It looked to be in a worse state

than when he had left, small patrols of red-clad guards pacing through each street, barely any person out on them, hidden away in their homes, quaking and praying that a knock doesn't come to their door.

Him and Sapnap are dragged down the same corridor, into the same room. He gets shoved to the floor, made to kneel before the unfit king. Sapnap landed beside him, head hanging to the ground and hair falling around his face, concealing it as he refused to meet the king's eyes.

He could feel him watching him, the way his eyes raked over his skin, surveying every part of him. He shudders at the thought, not wanting to even admit the man exists in the same room as him. A guard forces his head up, their identity concealed by the thick helmet they wear. They look like every other guard, an asset to the Scarlet Empire. He hated them, he hated this stupid city. He wished he had never been forced to return here.

He feels gloved hands pull at his chin, forcing him to look at the bastard on the throne. His form is lounged over the arms, legs crossed at the ankles as he watches him with a bored look, tossing a large lump of gold between his hands as if it's a simple toy. He meets the mask and grins, swinging his feet down from where they were rested, the heavy black boots hitting the ground with a loud thump.

They make their way over towards him, their long black cape swishing behind them as they step confidently. Their red hair falls over their face as they lean down to inspect the mask, grinning wide, showing off their pure white teeth, as they pull at his mask, jerking his head forwards before letting go, laughing with amusement as he barely misses smashing his face into the ground.

He remains kneeling, the metal cold around his wrists, reminding him that it could change at any second, one press of a button and he'll be writhing on the floor, electricity coursing through his veins as they look on in delight.

The king makes his way back across the hallway, sitting themselves back down into their blackstone throne, the stone perfectly polished to a shine, the dark material reflecting everything around them in the room.

"Take them both to the cell, set up the electricity, I'll be in to see them tomorrow."

With that they're being dragged back out of the throne room, down a hallway and into a well-decorated room, a medium sized cage stood on a podium, raising it above the rest of the room. He gets pushed into the cage, allowing it to happen, watching as the set up the electric field around the bars, keeping them both locked inside.

He watches as the guards leave, the doors banging shut behind them. He flops back, sighing, hitting a fist against his mask.

"Dream?"

"Sapnap."

"We'll get out, you know that, right?"

“We won’t,” he sighs, looking to the side, watching Sapnap, “I was lucky the first time around. I won’t be again.”

He looks back up to the ceiling, watching the unchanging tiles as Sapnap goes over different ways to escape. Dream knows they won’t work. He closes his eyes, sighing as he shifts to a fox, padding over to Sapnap and leaning up against his side.

They were here as a showcase, might as well take the peace while it lasts. He sighs again, ears drooping, it never does, it never will.

He wishes it did.

Chapter 10

The rattling of metal scraping over the ground startled him awake. He looked over to the side, ears twitching, still a fox. He shifted quickly, unwilling to be caught in a form that leaves him weak and vulnerable. He crouched low, spreading his weight out evenly, knowing they would try and get him on the ground before doing anything.

He glanced back to check on Sapnap, making sure he was awake and aware. He was, eyes flicking over the small group at the end of the hall. They were dressed in expensive looking silks, the colours vibrant and drawing all eyes towards them. The bright colours between each individual clashed harshly making his head hurt as he struggled to take in all the colours.

They looked to be a bunch of rich snobs, with sticks too far up their asses to be able to do anything. He hated rich people, there was just something about them, the ways they held the power over everyone else, they flaunted this power, bringing it down on anyone's neck, whenever they wished it to be. They walked forward, the rattling metal sound making more sense as he saw the two chains hanging from the king's grip.

He sat down on the ground, thudding heavily against the bottom of his gilded cage. He watched the man out of the corner of his eye as he approached. They had no guards with them, but taking in the swords most of the nobles held he doubted he could run. The blades shimmered, the dark material one of the rarest in their world. Or not, he supposes, it didn't come from here, it came from the places they tore to shreds, turning the plentiful countries to barren red plains, dust swirling through the air as they force their workers into the hot earth.

The king reaches the cage first, scraping the chains over the bars, rattling the whole cage and making it vibrate, overwhelming him. He subconsciously moved in front of Sapnap. He knew what was coming next, Sapnap didn't, there was no reason for him to. The king withdrew a key from his pocket, twirling it between his fingers before slotting it into the lock. He doesn't move as the door gets swung open, knowing if he does, he'll just be electrocuted, the electricity still up around the bars.

He pretended he couldn't see the two familiar faces in the small crowd, ignoring the way the goggles stood out and the white eyes flicked over him. He didn't meet either of their gazes, keeping his eyes trained on the king. He watched as he entered the cage, knowing that he could attack him if he wanted, but he hadn't missed the small button by his side. He remained still, watching him as he moved closer to him, his boots steps echoing around the hall.

He holds one wrist up as force of habit, watching as the king slots the end of the chain into the specifically designed notch in the metal. He watches as it fits in place, locking itself in so that it can only be removed by whoever put it in. He watches as he does the same to Sapnap, the other not even protesting, just watching Dream as it happened.

He allowed himself to be led from the cage by his wrist, walking beside Sapnap as they get pulled out in front of the guests. Most of them crowded around him, peering closer at his mask and poking at it. He stood still, allowing them to do it, not making a single sound or

protest as they touch the rest of him, picking his arms up and dropping them back down. He forces himself not to flinch away from their touch, knowing it would upset them, and would lead to worse things for him later.

One person hung back from the crowd, watching him warily. His eyes flick over him, the only part of his face that Dream can see, the lower half covered by a blue silk mask, pulled up over his nose. He's dressed in less lavish than the other nobles, a simple blue cloak and black jeans. Even Bad and George are in rich looking clothes, a vast upgrade from their hunter outfits.

He watches the one stood back from the crowd, taking in the way they shift from foot to foot, displaying an unease that he can't quite make sense of. He may be dangerous when unchained, but he can't do anything right now. The man still refuses to look at the mask, opting to fiddle with whatever is in his pocket.

The nobles quickly tire of him, moving onto Sapnap next, poking at him in the same way they had with Dream. Sapnap tries to move out of the way a few times, only being jerked back by the chain on his wrist, stumbling slightly to the side as he gets pulled. He stands still after that, only screwing his face up slightly as they poke at him. Dream is pretty sure that the man's a blaze hybrid, but he can't see any blaze rod markings. He knows each blaze hybrid has them, but the location varies.

He doesn't want to ask, knowing as soon as they find out where they are that part will constantly be on show, chilling the blaze rods further in the open air. He watches as the nobles begin to bore of Sapnap too, turning away into their own small groups. One look at the king shows he is displeased with their lack of interest. He jerks Dream closer to him, pulling his head toward him, "Shift. Now."

He takes one look at the warning on his face before he does so, shifting in a swirl of feathers, landing on the outstretched arm. He sits up straight, the way they had taught him to, no digging in of his talons, no moving at all. Pretend you're not even a living being, that had been the main part of anything he had been taught in these walls. You're only here for entertainment, there is no consideration for your humanity, there never will be.

He doesn't miss the glee in George's eyes as he strokes along the top of his head, grinning wider as he doesn't instantly lunge for his hand, sharp beak snapping at his fingers, threatening to break them. He strokes his finger along the top of his head, Dream forcing his feathers to lay flat and not ruffle up in disgust. He doesn't shudder, despite wanting to, knowing it will only make everything worse for him later.

The masked man still remains at the back, still fiddling with whatever he's holding. Bad walks over to him, whispering something in his ear that makes his eyes widen. That can't be good, for him at least. Any kind of shock when he's there is never good. He was right of course, Bad and George begin to pull the masked man towards the two of them, stopping in front of the king.

Bad bows low, the other two following suit. Bad straightens up, his posture perfect, a small smile on his face, "I was wondering, sir, if my friend would be able to see them, privately. He is uneasy with all the other people here, but he really wants to see them, sir."

Dream watches the king's face, dread slowly pooling into his gut, slowly threatening to overflow, to flood the rest of his body.

"He may. But that means alone, just these two and him. There will be guards outside, they won't be leaving any time soon." Bad nods eagerly, pushing the masked man forward and guiding the rest of the guests outside. They don't seem to mind the abrupt end, filing out chattering and laughing, probably already on their way to another event.

The king pushes them back to their cage, the gold glint mocking him as he's shoved inside, the chain unlatched, dumped unceremoniously on the ground. He locks the door behind him and Sapnap, grinning once before leaving, sauntering from the podium and out the doors. They slam behind him with a thunderous bang.

The masked man turns back to them, eyes filled with worry as he looks at the two of them. Dream shifts back, making his way over to the bars of the cage, leaning up against the, watching the man in front of him.

He is still acting shifty, eyes flicking around the hall as Sapnap comes up beside him, standing just next to him as they both watch the man in front of them. He looks back to them again, sighing before pulling his mask down, revealing the lower half of his face. Dream can say with full honesty that he did not expect there to be a few shards of diamond seemingly embedded in his skin, the chunks making his face gleam under the harsh light from above.

"Good afternoon gents," the man begins, incredibly formal, "I'm Skeppy."

"We don't care." Dream can't help but agree with Sapnap, not understanding why this dude wanted a private meeting with them only to act all shifty and introduce himself.

"I think you will," the man grins at them, a small smile. It's not malicious in any way, just a small, honest smile. Dream doesn't know what to make of this person in front of them. He's obviously a hybrid of some kind unless they've stepped up their surgeries in the capitol. He doesn't think you would hide it if that were the case. The man confuses him.

"I have something you probably want to see," He pulls whatever he's been fiddling with out of his pocket, turning it towards the two of them, allowing them to see it easily. The blue and white hues are incredibly familiar, causing him to glance up to the person in front of them out of surprise. He hadn't expected an apparent noble of the Scarlet Empire to have the crest of the Antarctic Empire with them. He knew there were different crests withing each country for the higher-ups, indicating their tasks.

He had spent time memorising them when he was younger, wanting to be able to judge the person based on their crests. He knew a crest of a spy when he saw one, he just hadn't expected to see the one of the empire they were just forcefully dragged from.

He looked back up at Skeppy, watching his face for any flicker of doubt, a crack in the figurative mask. There was none, hi face remaining impassive as he watched them.

"Dream? What does that mean? I don't understand." He turned to Sapnap, grinning slightly under his mask, allowing himself a small ounce of hope.

“It means we have a chance.”

...

Techno sat on his horse, riding beside Phil as they made their way through the taiga. They walked just off of the official path, wary of anyone that might be waiting along there. His sword hung at his side, his axe slung over his back. They were netherite, the metal of his home, of his world. They shimmered purple, the magic radiating off of it in waves, buffeting the surrounding area, warding any approaching animal away. They could smell the magic, able to judge for their fights based on it.

They moved uninterrupted, their horse making a good pace, bursting from the treeline as they urged them into a steady gallop, tearing across the long rolling plains. Tommy swept down from the sky, twirling slightly as the wind caught his wings, tossing him back up into the air. Tubbo glided just above him, sensibly conserving his energy for later.

“How much longer?” He jumped at the sudden appearance of Wilbur’s voice beside his ear, looking around for where it had come from before giving up.

“Probably another hour or so to reach the gate, a few hours to get into the palace, and I don’t know from there onwards, probably ten minutes will be all we have before we’re seen.” Wilbur hummed, showing that he was still there as they couldn’t otherwise see him, completely invisible to avoid the sun melting his flesh off of his bones.

Techno allowed himself to get lost in his own thoughts as he urged Carl forward, pushing him into a faster gallop. He knew what the Scarlet Empire was capable of, barely escaping from there as a child. He remembers his first time in this world in vivid detail. The cold of it all, the trembling fear he felt as he lost the two kids he had been following, orphans just like him. They had disappeared into the backstreets, leaving him alone.

He had been shivering, the world so much colder than his home, a large expanse above his head threatened him, no comforting roof sitting quietly over his head, protecting him from whatever lurked above. He had run then, ran from all the stares and the grabbing hands as he tore through the streets, looking for an escape. He had found one, diving through and running into the world beyond.

He can’t remember much after that, only a stumbling cold, a darkness and a sky filled with the groans of the dead. Phil had found him not long after, half-dead laying in a field. He would be dead without the king. He would be dead a thousand times over without him.

Phil rode next to him, opting for a horse rather than using his wings, galloping alongside Techno, his armour gleaming in the afternoon light as they raced east, away from the setting sun. It cast a golden glow over the land they were coming up on, the timing perfect, allowing them a cover of darkness.

He pulled up in the forest beside the city, able to easily enter with no one trying to stop. The king only cared for the rich, leaving everyone else to die on the streets, unprotected within their own empire, killed by their own people. It disgusted him.

He tied Carl to a tree, hidden far into the forest to ensure his safety. He waits for the sun to set, his family stood by his shoulder, watching the city beyond as they waited. They had removed their royal clothing, opting instead for simple clothes, ones that would make them harder to recognise.

The sun dipped further below the horizon, casting long shadows over the ground. Wilbur materialised beside him, able to stand in the darkness, his glowing eyes scanning the buildings in front of them.

They entered the city silently.

...

Dream lays up against one side of the cage, rubbing the bruises on his arms and holding himself tightly around the stomach. He was out of practice in what was good behaviour it seemed, receiving his punishment in a few minutes. A few swift kicks to the stomach had probably at least bruised, most likely broken, a few ribs, making it painful to draw in any deep breaths. He had been pulled back by his wrists, the grip tight as they dragged his limp body along the ground. He had been too hurt to protest, unable to do nothing but allow it to happen, feeling the bruises begin to form underneath their iron grip.

He had been thrown back into the cage, the door locking behind him. Sapnap had been in the corner of the cage the entire time, his flaming eyes flicking between Dream's crumpled form and the retreating back of the guard. He doesn't move until the guard leaves, scooting over to where Dream is lying on the floor, against the corner of the cage.

"Dream?" He forces his eyes open, looking up at Sapnap's worried face. His tongue feels heavy in his mouth, preventing him from forming any coherent words. He just hums, showing he's listening.

"Can I touch you?" Dream nods once slowly, "I'm going to need verbal consent Dream."

"Yes," his voice is scratchy, disappearing quickly as he lets out a small wheeze. He feels Sapnap's hands move slowly around him, supporting his back as he pulls him up. He lets out a few wheezy breaths as he does so, trying to breathe around the broken ribs he has. They are definitely broken; bruised ribs don't hurt this much.

Sapnap pulls him towards himself, leaning Dream up against his side. "Is there anything I can do to help?"

He shakes his head, “The only thing that could help would be shifting, it,” he coughs slightly, “it helps speed the process up.”

“Should you be shifting in this condition?”

“Probably not.” He tries for a laugh, but it comes out as more of a choked noise, “Just make sure I shift back instantly.”

He shifts quickly, moving for the familiarity of a fox. He allows himself a few seconds of respite, curling in on himself slightly as he feels a few bones realign. He shifts back after a few seconds, his ribs feeling more intact than before and his arms no longer aching.

He leans up against Sapnap, feeling the other rest his head on his shoulder, both taking comfort in the other as they sit in the darkness.

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

sorry that this is later than usual, i was animating lol

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

Techno crept through the shadows, slipping from one to another, envying Wilbur only slightly for being able to literally melt into them. He's not sure where his brother is, casting his eyes around the hallway as he quickly makes his way along it. He stills as a guard comes into his view, their scarlet armour making them look like they're drenched in blood.

The voices call for the same viscous liquid, chanting in his head as they beg for violence. He considers it for a moment, darting forward and deftly slicing the guard's head clean off of his body. The blood sprays out, hitting his face and dripping down it. The liquid is warm, steam rising off where it lands in the frigid night air. He stands there, allowing the smell to permeate the air around him, satisfying the voices, quietening them down. They're never silent though, always a small whisper in the back of his mind, pointing him towards a more violent goal. It's like a moral compass, but if the moral compass was thousands of voices that screamed for blood.

He moved on down the hallway, away from the body, leaving it for someone else to find and clean up, he wasn't here to do the empire favours. His footsteps were silent, muffled by the carpeted ground. The red of his surroundings is overwhelming, attacking his eyes when compared to the subtle hues of blue and silver that lined their halls. He likes to think that they have better interior decoration than their neighbour and enemy.

None of the lanterns are lit leaving him to navigate by the small slivers of moonlight that shines in through the slitted windows. It's not much, but it's enough, guiding him with the soft silver, it allowed him to think of the halls back home, their silver shining. He follows the directions he had been given by their informant, glad of their speedy response. Skeppy was their most reliable source here, he's unsure on whether he should remain here, the place is getting more and more hostile by the day if his reports are to be believed. He wouldn't want their spy to get killed or turned, on a purely professional basis, of course.

He comes up on the wooden doors he had been told were the ones he was meant to go through, he checks around him, watching as Wilbur comes into view, Tommy quickly making his way around the corner. They walk through the doors as a group, all the people Techno had entered with were by his side. The room was mostly empty, the only thing was a large golden cage, similar to one you would keep a bird in. It was sat on a raised podium in the centre of the room. There was little light in here, making it hard to see far in the dark.

He walked over to the cage, already knowing what he would see before he peered in. Sapnap was curled up against Dream, the other holding him close to his chest, mask resting on his hair. They were both asleep, tucked close to the other. They seemed to be trying to touch as much of the other as they could, holding each other close. It's rather sweet he thinks. He doesn't knock on the bars, not wanting to startle them. He moves around the cage, watching them closely, making sure he doesn't startle them. Dream could be awake for all he knows, the man watching him from under his mask, watching as he moved around them and reached out, going to brush his hand up against Sapnap, trying to wake him carefully.

A hand closes around his wrist, stopping it as it goes to press against Sapnap, he looks up to Dream, not struggling in his hold. The man slowly shakes his head at him. Techno pulls his hand away, stepping back as he watches Dream turn back to Sapnap, beginning to wake him. He looks back to Wilbur and Tommy, both of which are stood watching the two in the cage. He watches as a shudder ripples along Tommy's spine, obvious in the way his feathers ruffled, his wings drawing closer to his spine.

He hears Dream murmur behind him, Sapnap quickly responding. He turns back around to see Sapnap looking more awake, sat up more than leaned against Dream. Techno takes that as permission to move closer to the cage again, circling it once to find the door. He looks at the lock, trying to figure out whether he would be able to pick it. He decides that it looks too complex, breaking it with brute force instead, smashing it open with a small clatter. It falls to the ground, clattering there before lying still.

He pulls the door open, the hinges not even squeaking. He gestures for Dream and Sapnap to leave. Sapnap gets up and makes his way to the open door. Dream grabs his wrist, preventing him from leaving. Sapnap turns and looks at him.

"If you leave, you'll get electrocuted." Techno has no clue what that means, but Sapnap apparently does, glancing down to his wrists. He pulls his hoodie sleeve up, revealing a metal band wrapped tightly around his skin, fitted without any kind of break in the metal. He assumes Dream has the same.

"Give me your wrists." He takes his sword from behind his back, turning back to the two in front of him, not expecting Dream to be that close to his face, as close as he could be without leaving the cage. He takes a step back, barely suppressing the surprised shout that threatened to leave his mouth. Dream's mask just stares back at him before slowly holding out his wrists, volunteering to go first.

He takes a step towards him, watching the masked man for any movement, there is none, allowing him to take another step forward until he is close enough to lift his axe and bring it down on the metal encasing his wrists. It shatters, the pieces clinking as they hit the floor, scattering like more dangerous shards of glass. Techno repeats the gesture with his other wrist, shattering that bracelet too.

He can hear a few shouts in the corridors. They're far off but getting closer. Dream steps out of the cage, watching as Techno shatters the wristbands. After he had shattered the second one, along the small pieces to fall to the ground, Dream pulls Sapnap from the cage, gathering him closer to him, picking him up as he did so. Sapnap was at least half a foot shorter than Dream, but it was still rather comedic to see him held in Dream's arms like a

small child. Sapnap doesn't seem to mind, allowing himself to be carried and just holding on a bit, making sure he doesn't fall.

The doors burst open, hitting the walls with a loud crash. At least fifteen guards storm in, their uniformed bodies moving as one. They unsheathe their swords, pulling them out in front of themselves, forming a human barricade across the door and standing, weapons raised as they stare the six people in front of them down. They do not communicate, moving as if they are one unified being, their thoughts being distributed between all of them.

They advance forward slowly, their boots thudding against the ground in a rhythmic pattern. Techno draws his sword, holding it in his other hand, favouring the axe. He dashes forward, twirling in one direction and slicing a man's armour in half. He twists around, dealing a blow with his axe, readying his sword for another attack. He hears other sounds of fighting break out around him, shouts from his family as they communicate.

He focuses on the voices only he can hear, listening when they tell him to duck, slicing when they demand their thirst for blood be answered. He slices, allowing the blood to coat him, dripping from his armour and skin alike as he storms through the fighting, taking out guards on either side of him.

He stands in the middle of the corpses on the ground, chest heaving as the adrenaline subsides, blood dripping steadily from his axe and sword onto the ground. Tommy and Tubbo are stood beside each other, their blades only slightly bloodied. They look at him with disinterest, long used to the small rampages he would go on. Wilbur is stood a little behind them, watching him from a dark corner, his eyes glowing as he surveys the scene in front of him.

It leaves only two people unaccounted for, Dream and Sapnap. He turns around, expecting them to be on his other side. They are not. He turns around fully, twirling on his heel as he looks around the hall. They aren't anywhere in the room.

...

Dream bolted as soon as the guards entered the room, carrying Sapnap with him as he ducked and weaved between them, dodging their attempts to restrain him. He makes it out into the hallway beyond, only two other guards following them out. He runs faster, bolting down the hallways, following the path that had been engraved into his mind ever since his first escape. The most direct route to leave the castle, apparently unchanged, still sparsely guarded, only one stood by the exit.

He runs straight past them, sprinting out into the cold night air, holding Sapnap closely. The man barely slows down until he's outside the main city, sprinting through the city slums. He pauses then for a second, putting Sapnap down and gasping for breath, trying to recover from his sprint.

He feels a warm hand land on his shoulder causing him to look up. He meets Sapnap's concerned gaze, his mask blocking direct eye contact. "You good there?"

"Yes, yes, I'm fine, just gathering my energy for something." He breathes in and out, once, twice. He breathes in again, and on his next exhale he shifts, growing taller by a fraction as he drops onto all fours, hooves clicking against the cobbles as he shifts slightly. He gestures to Sapnap, lowering onto one knee to allow him to climb up. Sapnap hesitates only for a second, glancing back towards the castle as he does so, watching it.

He hoists himself up quickly, pulling himself up onto his back. He grips the short mane on Dream's neck, holding on tightly, but not enough to hurt. He begins at a slow trot, his hooves clacking over the stones as he eases into the speed, allowing Sapnap to get adjusted to the rocky movement before taking off into a canter, quickly moving up to a gallop as he leaves the slums behind, racing over the fields beyond. He makes it over the distance quickly, hooves thundering over the ground.

He feels exhilarated by the fast pace, pushing him to go faster. Sapnap lets out a small whoop, clearly enjoying the speed as much as he is. The wind rushes past them, whistling past his ears as he leaps over a fallen log, slowing to a stop as they enter the woods. He stops, only slightly out of breath. He allows Sapnap to slide from his back, shifting back and looking towards the place they had just abandoned, the castle is far off in the distance, barely visible against the dark horizon.

He feels slightly light-headed he realises, stumbling to the side slightly as it quickly turns to dizziness. He looks over to Sapnap, watching the other's face as he stumbles into a tree, trying to hold himself up with it. The bark scrapes against his hands, faintly reminiscent of the other time Sapnap had stared at him in shock, watching as he fell from that branch after knocking him off.

Sapnap catches him this time as he falls, allowing him to rest in his arms as spots begin to dance over his vision. He feels a sharp pain flare in his lower leg, pulling at his trousers, trying to pull them up and find the problem. Sapnap looks to where he's clawing, looking away from his mask for a moment to pull the trouser leg up. There's a small puncture wound in his skin, the area around slightly fizzling with some kind of magic. Sapnap looks back up to him, eyes brimming with worry as he watches him.

"Dream, you'll be fine. We can just meet up with the Antarctic Empire, they can heal you again, just don't shift." His voice fades away from Dream as the darkness creeps up on his vision, clouding over his eyes as he feels himself fall away further.

...

Techno ran from the castle, the other three close behind him. They run across the cobbles, no longer trying for stealth, just booking it back to where his horse is. He hears Tommy take to the sky, soon followed by the tell-tale buzzing of Tubbo's wings and the strong downwards

flap of Wilbur's. He runs faster, no longer worried about leaving them behind. He pushes himself further, skidding around corners as the sounds of guards fades behind him.

He bursts into the treeline, making a beeline for where Phil is stood with the horses. He runs and grabs Carls' reins from him, swinging them over his head before mounting from the ground. Phil takes note of his hurry, clambering onto his horses quickly and settling himself into the stirrups. He checks once to make sure Phil is ready before taking off, spurring Carl into a gallop. They fly across the fields, the three people in the sky slightly ahead of them, heading back to their empire.

They enter the forest on the other side of the plains, slowing down slightly to avoid injuries. He doesn't feel like crashing into a tree whilst running from a bunch of guards, so he sticks to a slower pace, opting for a fast trot. His head swings to the side at a small sound, peering into the trees as he watches something move.

He pulls Carl to a halt, Phil stopping beside him as he watches the movement in the shadows of the forest. Sapnap stumbles out of the dark, trying to carry and passed out looking Dream in his arms. One of his legs is hanging from his grip, dragging along the ground, digging a small trench into the ground as Sapnap makes his way towards them. He clings to the lime green hoodie Dream wears, obvious distress on his face as he makes his way over to them, trembling slightly as he stands beside Techno's horse.

He holds Dream up to them slightly, arms shaking as he does so. He looks to Techno, "Help him, please. He got hit by some kind of magic."

His voice sounds pitiful, trembling as he speaks, almost shaking as much as the rest of him. Techno just watches him, unsure on how to respond. He hears Phil sigh on his left, hearing the king dismount his horse. He walks towards Sapnap slowly, holding his hands out in front of him as though approaching a wild animal.

"Do you think you can ride my horse and hold him?" Phil's voice is pitifully soft, kindness dripping from his words as he kindly offers. Techno can't help but roll his eyes at his softness, watching with a slightly fond smile as he helps Sapnap up onto his horse, allowing him to hold onto Dream and grip the reins at the same time. Once he seems settled, he gives Techno a meaningful look, one which he would like to pretend he doesn't know the meaning of, but he's been around Phil for too long.

He watches as Phil takes off, heading into the sky beside the other three. The sun is just beginning to rise, Wilbur disappearing as it does so, preventing himself from getting burned by its rays. He leads Carl along at a brisk trot, making sure that Sapnap is keeping up with him. He seems a little shaken, hands still shaking as he holds the reins in a tight grip. His arms are wrapped around Dream, the green clad man sat in front of him, leaning against Sapnap's chest.

He doesn't know whether the two of them are together or just idiots. He watches the way Sapnap takes comfort in Dream, pulling the man closer when his hands begin to shake more. He pretends he doesn't notice it, looking away whenever Sapnap glances in his direction.

They make good time, entering the tundra by the time the sun is almost at its peak, high above them in the sky, making the snow a dazzling white. He pushes Carl into a faster trot, glancing over to make sure Sapnap is keeping up with him, wanting to get Dream to their medics as soon as he could. He watches as Phil flies ahead, quickly making his way back towards the empire. He hopes he goes to notify a medic, he doesn't feel like doing it himself.

It takes them another few minutes to reach the gates, entering instantly when those on guard see who is riding the horse. He enters with little difficulty, making his way towards their home. He dismounts outside the gates, handing his horse off to a nearby stableman, allowing them to lead Carl away. He watches as Sapnap dismounts, pulling Dream after him carefully once he's on the ground. Techno takes the reins from his hands, handing them off to someone else to deal with.

He ushers Sapnap inside, taking him up a few flights of stairs. He's obviously struggling under the weight of Dream but refuses his help when he offers it. They enter the large medical bay, the air smelling of cleaning supplies and cleanliness. He greets Niki, who comes over to meet them, a few supplies already in her arms as she takes the three of them over to a small room connected to the main one. She shuts the door behind them, "Could you place him on the bed please." She gestures over to a bed pushed against the wall. Sapnap complies, laying Dream down carefully.

"Do you know where any injuries are?" Sapnap nods, apparently having lost the ability to speak. He pulls the leg of Dream's trouser up, revealing a small puncture wound, the skin still slightly fizzing from a potion of some kind.

Niki leans in closer, looking at the small wound. She peers at the skin around the wound, "Looks like a weakness potion, he'll be a bit out of it for a day or so. Any other injuries that I should know of?"

"He has a few bruised ribs, possibly broken. I'm not sure." Sapnap's voice is quiet, his eyes not meeting Niki's despite her soft words. She just nods, smiling at him kindly. She pulls his hoodie up, looking underneath the fitted black shirt Dream wore underneath. There was a nasty mottle of yellow and purple bruises across his torso, painting a very specific image in the shape of boot prints.

Niki winces slightly, her eyes flashing a violent purple before returning to their normal soft pink. She turns to face Sapnap, "His ribs are fine, they're bruised and healing. The only worries I have for him are the weakness effects running through his system, and the burn marks that you both seem to have on your wrists.

Sapnap rubs his wrists quickly, not looking to Niki as she pulls Dream's hoodie back down, covering the bruises up. Techno feels slightly awkward, but doesn't want to disobey Phil, the man had clearly told him to look after both of them, and leaving would probably be the exact opposite of that. He just watched as Niki puts her hands out, allowing Sapnap to show her his wrists.

He tentatively places his wrists in her hands, watching her every move with cautious eyes. She runs her fingers over the raw flesh around the place where the metal bands had been fastened. It didn't take a genius to figure out what had happened there.

“I think you should stay in here for now,” she withdraws her hands, pulling them back in front of her and allowing Sapnap to relax, “would you like to stay in here?” Sapnap doesn’t even hesitating, nodding quickly as he shifts himself over to Dream’s side, standing beside the bed he lies on.

“You can lie down if you want to.” She turns to Techno, leaving Sapnap to settle himself on the bed. He looks over her face for any kind of concern, but she just seems relaxed, a good sign. It meant they would be fine. She turns and leaves the room, the door clicking shut behind her, leaving Techno alone in the room.

He looks back to the bed, taking in the way Sapnap has curled himself around Dream, wrapping his arms around the man’s waist and burying his face into his hoodie. He allows himself a small smile at the cute scene in front of him before turning to the door and leaving. He shuts it behind him, giving the two a bit of privacy.

Chapter End Notes

i wonder if my english language teacher would be proud

Chapter 12

Dream wakes slowly, laying on his back and staring at a plain white ceiling. The tiles are large, his eyes scanning across the grooves as he slowly comes to. He blinks at the tiles, forehead furrowing in confusion at it. He remembers falling asleep, passing out would probably be a better word, in the middle of a forest. Sapnap.

He shoots up, or tries to. Something heavy is holding him down. He looks around to his left, relaxing as he takes in the form of Sapnap, curled up on the edge of the bed he's laying on. The man is clutching onto him, face buried in his side. Dream shifts from side to side, edging away from Sapnap slightly, pushing up against the wall next to his shoulder. He pulls Sapnap after him, pulling him closer, away from the edge of the bed.

Sapnap makes a small noise of protest at the movement, pulling his head up from where he's resting it. He blinks at Dream blearily a few times, looking at the mask.

"Dream? You awake?" Sapnap's voice is slurred, still heavy with sleep as he blinks at Dream.

"Yeah, uh," he coughs, throat dry, "I'm awake." He looks around the small room they're in. There's one window, but it's high up, too small to climb through too. The door on the other side of the room is shut, he's not sure if it's locked. The bed and a chair next to the bed is all there is in the room.

"Where are we?" His voice is scratchier than before, the dryness of his throat making it harder to talk.

"We're back at the Antarctic Empire, we're in their med bay." He's incredibly confused. He doesn't think that Sapnap would be able to carry him more than a few metres, let alone the eight hour walk to the Antarctic Empire.

"How?"

"I saw the small rescue party riding through the woods, I got their attention and they brought us both here." Dream didn't know how to respond, and he was saved from having to by a short woman bustling into the room, pushing the door open with her shoulder as she carried two plates of food. She had shoulder length hair, a curly white mass that was bunched up into a short ponytail. She looked up at them, sheep's ears flicking back and forth as she looked at them.

Dream stared back, watching her as she entered the room further, pulling a table from beneath the bed and setting it up beside. She sets the plates down on there. He watches her carefully through the mask, wary of this new person that he had never met before. She seems to notice this, looking over to him before sticking her hand out in his direction. He flinches back from the sudden movement, pretending he doesn't see the way she frowns.

"Nice to meet you two, wish it were under better circumstances, but I'm Captain Puffy." She smiles at them again, shifting slightly from foot to foot, or, he supposes from hoof to hoof

would be more appropriate, looking down at her lower half.

“Captain?” Sappnap sounds confused, looking the person who had just brought them food up and down, obviously looking for any kind of crest. There was only one, and it was pinned just by her collar. It was not a captain’s one, it was unfamiliar to him, the heart over brain design different from any he had seen before.

“Retired, I just help around with any tasks I’m given now.” That makes more sense, but it still doesn’t explain the crest, he knows what a retired captain’s crest looks like, a heart isn’t in any of them.

“Your crest begs to differ.” His voice cracks halfway through the sentence, him coughing slightly and wincing at the show of weakness. Puffy doesn’t seem to care, handing him a glass of water before speaking.

“You know crests? Tell me then, what does this one mean?” She just sounds curious, so he takes a sip of water before responding.

“I don’t know it, I’ve studied most crests and yours is one I’ve never seen.” Puffy just grins again, lowering herself into the chair beside the bed and leaning on one of the arms as she brings herself closer.

“That’s because it’s the only one of its kind.” She smiles at them, as if sharing a secret, but it only confuses Dream further. His mind moves through all the possibilities of what the crest could mean, none of the results making him feel better about their situation. Puffy seems to sense his rising panic as she leans back.

“It’s nothing bad,” she assures, “I just help people out mentally.” She taps the side of her head, watching them both as she does so. That gives him an answer for why it’s the only crest of its kind, he doesn’t know of any other place helping soldiers mentally, they just send them off to fight and hope they don’t come back. They normally don’t.

He jumps as another person pushes the door open, head swivelling in their direction as they walk in. It’s another woman, her hair slightly longer than Puffy’s, and a bright pink. He honestly doesn’t think he’s seen hair that shade before.

“I do hope you’re not upsetting my patients, Puffy.” Her voice is soft, barely above a whisper as she looks to Puffy reproachfully.

“You wound me. I would never make your job harder, my dear.” Puffy’s tone is joking, leaning over the back of her chair, slightly twisted around to face the person who entered the room. The lady just rolls her eyes, heading over to where him and Sappnap are still sat in bed, their plates of food untouched.

She sits on the edge of their bed, watching them both carefully. She doesn’t attempt to move any closer, just watching them. He watches in interest as her eyes swirl through a different selection of colours, watching her pink eyes change from light blue to dark pink, before shifting back to the light pink colour of before.

She blinks and sits back, turning to Puffy, seemingly communicating with only their eyes. Puffy sighs and stands, leaning down to press a kiss to the side of Niki's head, sauntering out of the room, her hooves making a small clicking sound on the tiled floors. The woman watches her go, turning back to them once she's out of sight.

"I'm Niki," She introduces herself, "and you're Dream right?" He nods, still watching her eyes for any other change.

"Your mask," she begins, already putting him on the defensive despite her soft voice and gentle tone.

"What about it," he pulls back slightly, watching her for any kind of reaction. There is none.

"Are you able to remove it? I want to check underneath for any injuries." He laughs at that, laughs directly in her face at the innocence of her question.

"Take off my mask?" He laughs again, "You say that as if it's easy." He watches as her eyes flash to a dark pink again, a slight difference to the light pink. He notes it down anyway.

"Can you not take it off?" She sounds concerned, which just riles him up more. He doesn't want any kind of pity from some random healer in this med bay.

"No, that's the whole point of a curse of binding, is it not? Stays on till the day you die." He snarls the last bit, watching her face for any kind of anger at his outburst, at how rude he was to her. He already regretted it, unsure on why he had shouted like that. He thought he had accepted the fate long ago.

He feels Sappnap sneak an arm around him, ignoring the pressure it puts against his back as he stares the healer, Niki, down. Her face remains neutral, carefully watching him.

"We have some very powerful mages here, I'm sure one of them knows how to remove a curse of binding." She sighs, and he feels a little bad about his outburst, "Until then, can I see your leg? I want to know how the wound is doing."

He nods, watching as she pulls the thin blanket covering them back, pulling his trouser leg up next and revealing the swathe of bandages around his calf. She slowly unwraps them, pulling the bandages away from the wound, looking at the rather sizeable scab on his leg. She hums, nodding in satisfaction before pulling another roll of bandages out, rewrapping his leg.

"It looks to be fine. Tell me, any pain when you inhale or talk, in your chest?" He breathes in deeply, only slightly wincing as his chest slightly protests, "Only a small bit when I breathe in really deeply." She nods again, seemingly satisfied with that.

"And your wrists? Are they hurting you at all?" His wrists have been stinging slightly ever since he woke up, and looking down at the slightly raw skin, he understands why. His skin turns bumpy there, a few tendrils of raised skin snaking their way up into his sleeves. He had expected it, he already has scars from previous experiences.

“They only sting a small bit.” She nods again, walking out the room, leaving him looking after her. She reappears within a few seconds, a small bottle in her hand and two small shot glasses in the other. She sets them down, measuring the liquid out evenly into each one. The pink potion splashes a little as it enters the glass, the silvery dust within it swirling around as it is displaced. She hands one to each of them, “It’s a health potion, just enough to heal you up.”

Dream drinks it in one go, wincing at the sickly-sweet flavour of watermelon. It’s sticky, coating his tongue even as he feels the warmth of it spread through him, watching in a small bit of fascination as his skin heals over, the flesh instantly regrowing on his wrists. The tissue is bumpy, scarred, small, thin white lines tracing the places the electricity ran over.

Sapnap has similar marks, less concentrated from only being shocked once or twice. His scars speak of several years of wearing the bracelets.

“You’re free to go, but I want you back tomorrow for a check-up on your leg, that potion will have had little effect on it. The weakness negates it.” She leaves them alone in the room with the slightly cold dishes of food that Puffy had brought them.

He eats it, the food filling him despite the rather bland flavours. It’s nice, despite the blandness of it. He finishes it quickly, watching as Sapnap does the same, both sitting leaned against each other, helping to prop the other up. Sapnap finishes his plate, setting it down on the table next to him and swinging his legs over the side of the bed.

He stands up slowly, turning to offer Dream a hand. He takes it, allowing himself to be pulled from the bed. He stumbles slightly as he stands, legs a bit numb underneath him. The sudden pressure causes his leg to twinge, the wound protesting loudly at it. He ignores it, standing up straight, holding Sapnap’s hand as comfort. Sapnap doesn’t drop his hand after he’s pulled Dream from the bed, so he leaves his hand in his grip.

Sapnap makes his way to the door, pulling Dream behind him. They both peek out into the empty med bay, nothing but the empty beds and counters inside. They make their way out into the room and out of the doors, into the rest of the castle. Dream desperately wants to run, but he doesn’t think that anyone here would appreciate that. He allows himself to be pulled along by Sapnap.

“Where are we going?”

“To the gardens. Wilbur promised me I would see them, and I haven’t yet, so I want to now.” Dream smiles slightly amused by his reasoning, walking beside him through the castle halls. They enter a small courtyard, an open gate at the end leading out to a massive garden. They walk to the top of the steps that lead down to it, just looking over the splendour of the area.

The hedges are tall, forming a small maze in the middle and lining the edges. Trees are dotted around, they don’t provide much shade right now in the middle of winter, but he’s sure that they will in the middle of summer, their branches full of leaves.

Sapnap pulls him down the steps, looking around the gardens with wonder in his eyes. His joy makes his eyes bright, rushing from bush to bush, pulling Dream along with him, never

once letting go of his hand as he rushes around. They make their way west, making their way down to the end of the gardens. They stop at the edge of a cliff, a small bench a few metres back from the edge, overlooking the fields beyond. There's a small jukebox tucked beside the bench, surrounded by a few flowers and overshadowed by a tree.

Sapnap pulls him onwards, spotting something in the distance. He sees a wooden shelter begin to come into view, surrounded by a mass of flowers, the red rose bushes and lilacs towering above the smaller flowers that are scattered around the area. There are a lot of lavender plants, lining the edges of the shelter. A sound of buzzing fills the air, small bodies flitting from flower to flower. They push their way through the flowers, avoiding the bees as they enter the shelter.

Dream sits down on the ground, leaning against one of the log pillars keeping the shelter up. He pulls Sapnap down with him, dragging him to the ground and pulling him closer as he leans back. Sapnap leans up against his side, tucked closely against him as they watch the bees in silence for a few minutes.

"Do you want to take the mask off?" Sapnap's question startles him from his thoughts, looking down at the other.

"I do, mostly."

"Why mostly?"

"I," his voice fails him, stuttering out halfway through the sentence, he takes another breath, "I honestly don't remember what I look like anymore."

"Don't you want to find out?" Sapnap's voice is soft, and when he looks back down to the other, he's looking up at him, watching the mask that conceals Dream's face.

"I'm scared of the person I might have become." He says it because it's the truth, he's worried for what he might have become, the person he can barely remember gone forever, stolen away by the mask. They fall silent then, watching as the bees collect pollen from the flowers, slowly flying back to their hives, entering the small holes.

The sun casts a shadow over the gardens, lowering in the sky as it comes closer to setting. They had woken up around noon, he's not sure how long he had slept for, but he doesn't care enough to ask, just watching the sunlight filter through the trees beyond the shelter as they sit in the peace together.

He jumps when Wilbur materialises in front of him, the phantom hybrid couching down to look them both in the eye.

"We were looking for you, wondering if you had ditched us again. I've been looking for you for a while." His green eyes shine in the slight gloom, bony tail slithering over the grass behind him as it swishes from side to side. His tattered cape hangs low, the singed edges nestling among the short grass. He stands, watching them as they stand too.

“We wanted to invite you for dinner.” He turns at that, expecting them to follow him. They do, fingers still interlocked, hands clasped around the others. If Wilbur notices he doesn’t say anything, continuing up the stairs back into the courtyard and then into the castle. They walk through several hallways, the floorplan slowly becoming more familiar to Dream the more times he walked down the hallways. He sees the door to the dining hall come into view, expecting Wilbur to open the doors and enter.

He doesn’t, brushing past it as if it wasn’t there, continuing down the hallway. He looks down to Sapnap, who has a similarly confused look on his face, looking up to him, as if he held any answers. He just shrugs, walking after Wilbur, slightly uneasy as he led them through unfamiliar halls. He stops in front of a single door, the wood slightly battered from years of use. He pushes it open, releasing what sounded like a shouting match. He walks in, long ears barely twitching at the level of noise. Dream pulls back at the noise, the sound too loud for him, he pulls the hood tighter over his head, making sure it’s still secure.

The shouting dies out after a moment, him and Sapnap stood just out of view of the doorway. He peeks around the doorframe, looking into a small room. It looked cosy, a fire lit in the corner, reminding him of how cold his fingers felt. There was a small-ish rectangular table pushed to the side, the whole of the royal family gathered around it as they stared at the two in the doorway.

Techno looks away first, returning to his meal, turning his back on Dream and Sapnap. Phil stand from the table, his large grey wings tucked behind his back, the feathers still creating an imposing figure, even as he smiles softly, walking over to them.

“Do you want to come in?” His voice is soft, as if anything louder would break them, everyone seems to be keeping their voices soft today, it makes Dream want to roll his eyes, even if they’re only doing it to be kind.

“We have plenty of food and two spare seats.” He says it as if it’s a coincidence, allowing them into the cosy room. He sits back at the head of the table, pointing them towards two seats at the other end of the table. Tommy is sat next to one of the seats, Sapnap quickly sits in that chair, forcing Dream to sit in the one next to him, only letting go of his hand to accept the food he’s handed. He ignores the way that Sapnap’s knee presses against his, ignoring the way it comforts him.

He eats quickly, making sure that no one takes his food away from him before he can finish eating. The warm food is appreciated, the dishes of various vegetables sitting on the table are tempting, but he knows he won’t be able to eat anymore. He watches as the other members of the table finish, watching them silently. He ignores the way that Tommy is leaning around Sapnap, staring him down, watching his mask as if it held the answers to the universe.

His gaze is making him uncomfortable, making his fingers twitch in anxiety. He swivels his head towards Tommy suddenly, his mask coming to a stop when he faces Tommy. He watches the other, staring back at him as the prolonged eye contact makes him more and more anxious. The anxiety soon turns to anger, the avian still not averting his gaze, his eyes drilling holes into his mask.

His hands are hidden under the table, hiding the way his hands are shaking, his shoulders only slightly trembling, betraying the way he was feeling. He feels a hand close around one of his shaking ones, making him jump, his eyes snapping away from Tommy, towards Sapnap as the man held his hands, watching his mask carefully. He doesn't know why people look at the mask, they can't see his face through it. Sapnap holds his hands under the table, arms twisting slightly to hold both of them, stilling the shaking.

They sit like that until the dinner ends, watching as two people enter the room, removing the dishes and dismissing themselves as they walk out. Tubbo pulls Tommy from the table, the two of them disappearing through a door, Tommy whispering to Tubbo as he laughs. Techno leaves the table quickly as well, pulling a book off the shelf as he walks past the bookshelf, exiting through another door, shutting it firmly behind him. It leaves the two of them alone with Wilbur and Phil, both of which are watching them closely.

Phil breaks the silence first, standing from his seat and sitting down on one of the plush sofas beside the fire, Wilbur following, the both of them gesturing for Dream and Sapnap to follow. Dream hesitantly stands from the table, pulling Sapnap with him as he makes his way to the sofa facing Phil. He sits down on the edge, not daring to lean back into the cushions, watching Phil. He feels Sapnap sit down behind him, still holding his hand. He squeezes it once, Sapnap squeezing his hand back in response.

"So," Phil starts, "Niki told us that your mask has a curse of binding on it."

He nods, head jerking up and down stiffly, "It does."

"She also said that she told you we had mages that could remove it, correct?"

Dream nods again, squeezing Sapnap's hand as his anxiety rises. The responding pressure helps him focus on the area around him, allowing him to bring his head down from the worried thoughts.

"Well, one of our mages found an enchantment that allows it to be removed, no side effects at all. Would you want to go ahead with this tomorrow?"

Dream looks to Sapnap, the other just watches his mask, eyes scanning over it. He turns back to Phil, "That would be nice."

Phil smiles at his response, standing from his seat on the sofa, "I'm sure you two would like to know where you're spending the night?"

Dream doesn't feel that tired, but Sapnap nods eagerly, pulling him from the sofa easily, following after Phil as he moves over to another door.

The door is pushed open to reveal a room very similar to the one he had stayed in before, a double bed pushed up against one wall, a desk and a fireplace. The only difference between the two is that this one is slightly bigger and has a full bookcase pushed against one wall. Phil leaves them in the room, not even bothering to shut the door behind him as he leaves.

Sapnap shuts the door, locking it after looking back at Dream. He allows himself to fall onto the bed, feeling more tired than he had a few moments ago, the events of today and the days before that hitting him full force. He lays on the soft mattress and stares at the ceiling as everything he had pushed to one side races through his mind, overturning his already chaotic mind.

He feels the bed dip beside him, a hand slowly wrapping around his as Sapnap sits beside him, just holding his hand as he watches the ceiling, allowing everything to process in his mind. He sits up after a minute or two of silent contemplation. He turns to Sapnap.

“I’m getting my mask off tomorrow.” He says it slowly, unable to believe that it’s actually happening.

“You are.” Sapnap grins at him, obviously excited for him.

“I am.” He repeats, staring at Sapnap. “What if you don’t like how I look.” The thought hit him suddenly and before he could stop himself, he blurted it out.

“Why would I dislike how you look?” Sapnap tips his head to the side, hair shifting freely in front of his face without the bandanna holding it back. It looks rather cute if he’s being honest, the way it falls over his face, hiding part of his fiery eyes from view behind a curtain of black.

“If what I remember of my face, it’s pretty startling.” He barely remembers what his face looks like before they forced the wood onto his face, him kicking and screaming the whole way. He does remember the way people would avert their gaze if he ever met their eyes, other recoiling from him as he turned their way. He took to wearing a hood constantly for a reason.

“I don’t think anything can shock me anymore if I’m being honest.” Sapnap falls backwards onto the bed with a sigh, his hand losing its grip on Dream’s as he does so. Dream shuffles further up the bed, toying his shoes off as he makes it further up the bed. Sapnap doesn’t seem bothered about his shoes so Dream pulls them off for him, dumping them on the floor beside his.

He leans up against the pillows, propping himself up with the headboard. He pulls Sapnap closer, pulling him against his side and intertwining their hands again. Sapnap sighs again, propping his chin up on Dream’s shoulder, looking at the side of his mask.

“I never expected Bad to turn on me like that. With George it wouldn’t have been as much of a shock I don’t think, we come from worlds that completely oppose each other, a small amount of hatred is understandable. But I grew up with Bad.” His voice just sounds tired, there’s no sadness behind it, just an empty and echoing disappointment and tiredness.

“I can’t really say anything in response to that, I barely knew the guy.”

“That’s fair,” Sapnap looks back up to him, squinting his eyes as he looks at Dream’s mask, “I understand the mask, but why the hood?”

Dream freezes at that, body tensing as he looks away from Sapnap, eyes darting to the corner of the room. Sapnap obviously feels this tension, because he stops talking, mouth snapping shut with an audible click.

“Sorry, didn’t know it was a sensitive subject.” Dream can’t hold it against Sapnap, it’s not like he knew any better.

“It’s fine, you didn’t know.” He can almost feel Sapnap’s curiosity, and he understands that, he would be curious too if someone constantly wore a hood, obviously hiding something.

He reaches his hand up to his hood, only stopping when Sapnap grabs his wrist, preventing him from moving it any further. He looks to Sapnap, confused about why he’s stopping him when he had wanted to know.

“I don’t want to force you to show me anything you don’t want to.”

“It’s fine, I want to show you anyway. Someone should be allowed to know.” Sapnap releases his wrist at that, allowing him to pull his hood back, dropping it so that it sits on his shoulder, the green material gathering there. Sapnap just stares up at his head, propping himself up further as he looks to the top of Dream’s head. He lowers it down so Sapnap can see easier, revealing a part of himself to the person in front of him.

He’s shaking internally, convinced this would be the moment that Sapnap would just get up and leave, deciding that it was too weird, even for him. He doesn’t, instead reaching his hand up to the top of his head, only pausing slightly to confirm with Dream that it’s alright. He nods in confirmation, allowing Sapnap to brush his fingers against the ears on the top of his head.

He strokes down the ear, reaching the base of it where they connected to the top of his head. He scratches there, similar to the way he would do when Dream was shifted. He allows him to pet the ears a moment longer before pulling his head back up, out of reach.

“Okay, so, fox ears are cool and all, but, like, how?”

Dream shifts slightly, settling himself down more comfortably, “Most shifters, the ones I know of at least, have traits that grow in as they grow. They normally link to the first form you’ll shift to. It’s basically what we’re most comfortable as, and that manifests itself on our human forms.”

“Is that how most hybrids developed?”

He hummed, “Pretty much, they’re just shifters that can’t shift, ones that are stuck with the form they receive, but with more traits than shifters.”

“What about the rest of your face? Is that similar to a fox’s?”

“No, I don’t remember much of it, this mask has been here since I was taken to the kingdom, so about,” he paused to think, “probably since I was four or five. Unless it’s changed more it’s nothing similar to a fox’s.”

“Why would the empire give you a mask?”

“They didn’t like the way my face looked, so they covered it up, permanently.”

“That’s cruel.” Dream nodded, yawning as he did so, feeling too tired to respond verbally. He sunk further into the pillows, Sapnap tucking himself further into his side.

The room had darkened considerably since they entered, the moon faintly shining through the windows. Sapnap rolled over, facing towards Dream’s side, throwing an arm over him and pulling him closer. He sets his head down on the pillow, closing his eyes as he did so, trying to sleep amidst the turning thoughts of his mind.

It takes him a while to sink into the inky darkness, his bones aching with exhaustion when sleep finally claims him, pulling him under.

Chapter 13

He woke to the noise of shouting and screaming, two voices rising in a crescendo right outside their door. His ears flatten back, twitching in annoyance as they lay flat against his skull. He groans as the shouting grows louder, beginning to be able to make out the voices. It's Wilbur and Tommy, the two going at each other at barely sunrise.

Sapnap stirs next to him, grumbling as the shouting wakes him too. They lay in their clothes from yesterday, not having changed before they went to sleep the previous night. Sapnap is wrapped around his middle, holding onto him like a koala. He looks away from the person sleeping next to him at a knock on the door.

"Don't know if you're still asleep, but I doubt it," Phil's voice filters through the wood, "but there's food out here if you want it." Dream watches the door, watching to see if the king was going to try and enter the room. He doesn't, walking away, his footsteps receding as he gets further away.

The shouting lowers, becoming more of a loud conversation than a shouting match. He pokes Sapnap's cheek, laughing when the man only groans in response, holding onto his middle tighter.

"There's food, don't you want some?"

"No. I'm staying here." Dream rolls his eyes, getting up himself, surprised when Sapnap keeps his hold on him firm, going so far as the loop his arms around Dream's neck and swing his legs around his waist. The man remains firmly tucked against Dream, still attempting to sleep. He gets up anyway, Sapnap hanging from his neck like a small child. He walks over to the door.

"Last warning Sapnap, I'm going outside and there are people up."

"I don't care." His voice is muffled, face pressed into Dream's hoodie. Dream stands in front of the door for a moment longer, debating whether he should pull his hood back up, cover the extremely obvious ears sticking from the top of his head. He doesn't bother in the end, not caring enough about their opinions to be worried.

He unlocks the door, pushing it open, with Sapnap still hanging from his neck. He strides out into the room, ignoring the way that Wilbur freezes, food halfway to his mouth and Tommy bursts out laughing next to him. He ignores them both, snagging himself a plate of fruit and sitting beside Techno, Sapnap still clinging to him.

He sits and eats around the man, having a conversation with Techno on the logic of shapeshifting.

"I just don't understand how your clothes and everything just stay with you for when you shift back but don't appear on your animal forms."

Dream sighs, grasping for anything to explain it with, “It’s like, how you perceive yourself. When you picture yourself in your mind you don’t see yourself naked and then start adding the clothes, you picture yourself wearing whatever you were wearing. This identity essentially shifts with you, compacting into your new form, and then that identity is ready for you when you choose to shift back.”

Techno didn’t seem satisfied with his logic, but he dropped the subject anyway, returning to reading his book. Dream flicks an ear, turning around to find Tommy a few centimetres behind his chair, staring at him. He stares back through the mask.

“Are you two dating or something.” Dream looks at him in surprise, glancing down to Sapnap where he’s asleep in his lap then back up to the teen.

“No?” He cocks his head to the side, wondering why Tommy might have thought that. Tommy just stares at him a moment longer, his eyes flicking up to the top of Dream’s head, making him feel self-conscious of the ears there. They flick back and forth, alternating between laying flat and perked upright.

“Tommy, it’s rude to stare.” Tommy looks away at Phil’s reprimand, redirecting his eyes to his feet. “I was just gonna ask when he got those ears, they weren’t there yesterday.”

“He was wearing a hood yesterday, those cover anything you want if you try hard enough.” Dream startles at Tubbo’s voice, not realising the kid had entered the room. The bee hybrid sat down next to him, pulling a plate of sweet pastries towards himself, eating as Tommy tries hard to not stare Dream down, eyes flicking away every time he realises he’s doing it.

“Do you want something?” Tommy’s almost constant gaze is making him uneasy, his eyes are a shocking blue, making his stare all the more piercing, his eyes seeming to bore straight into his skull.

“No.” Tommy turns away at that, plopping himself into the chair beside Tubbo and beginning a conversation with him, completely ignoring Dream. He’s unusual, Dream will give him that. The kid almost always has something to say, always at a louder volume than strictly necessary.

“I think it’s about time we get going,” Dream looks to Phil, confused for a second before he realises what he means. He shakes Sapnap’s shoulder gently, trying to pry the other off of him at the same time.

He groans, “What d’you wan’ Dream?”

“We are going to get this piece of stupid wood removed, either wake up or get left behind.” He wouldn’t actually leave Sapnap behind, but it woke him up, his eyes blinking open as he pulled himself from Dream’s chest, sitting up instead of slouching against Dream’s chest. He looks around, seemingly registering where they are. He turns to the table behind him, grabbing a small croissant from the table before hopping off of Dream, moving to stand by the door, without his shoes.

“Sapnap, you forgetting something?” Sapnap looks at him, walking back before pulling him to the door, “I meant your shoes.”

Sapnap flushes and looks down at his shoes, “You say that like you’re wearing yours.”

“I knew I wasn’t, you were the one that pulled me to the door.”

Dream quickly ducks into their room, snagging his boots and Sapnap’s simple black trainers from where they had been dumped the night before. He tosses the shoes to Sapnap, watching as the other barely catches them, fumbling with them before holding them against his chest. He pulls the boots on quickly, doing the buckles up quickly and watching as Sapnap ties the laces of his trainers.

Phil is waiting by the door by the time they’re done, watching them pull their shoes on with a small smile on his face. It slips off once he notices Dream looking at him, instead turning to the door and pulling it open, guiding them out into the hallways.

The corridors are alive with activity, different people running down hallways, carrying out one task or another. They all send Phil a courteous greeting as they pass, Phil smiling in return as they race past. They head along the east corridor, moving towards one of the castle’s corner turrets. They come to the staircase, Phil leading the way up it, his wings trailing a step or so below him meaning Dream had to be careful to mind out of their way.

The stairs are long, climbing up for a while as they occasionally pass a slit in the wall, sunlight peeking through, allowing light to enter the tower for those who can’t see in the dark to move easily, without any risk of injury.

They reach the top, the spiral staircase coming to an abrupt halt beneath a trapdoor. Phil steps up the ladder that leads up to it, knocking twice on the wood of the trapdoor. They hear a shouted reply, which Phil takes as permission to enter, pushing the trapdoor upwards and climbing into the room above.

Dream and Sapnap follow behind him, emerging in a dim room, the walls covered with silks of varying shades, most of them a dark blue or purple. Thin net curtains cover the windows in here, allowing some of the light to flow in, but blocking part of it. The room smells of magic, the particles floating around in the air and making him sneeze. The walls are lined with bookshelves, apparently not enough with the way there are piles of book littered all over the floor, towering stacks threatening to fall on his head with how tall some of them were.

“I’ll be there in a second!”

Phil turns to them, “This is where our head mage lives, they’re one of the best in the lands. Slightly disorganised,” he chuckles, looking around the room, “but one of the best.”

A tall figure appears from a connecting room, brown curly hair on their head and a pair of sunglasses on their eyes.

“Hi, Eret, any pronouns, nice to meet you.” They don’t offer a hand, which Dream is grateful for, not feeling up to shake any hands, his hands are shaking enough on their own.

“Oh, Dream, uh, he, him.”

“I’m Sapnap, he, him too.”

Eret smiles at them, looking to Dream, “I assume you’re the person with the curse of binding problem.”

He nods, watching as they bustle away again, skirt twirling around their ankles as they weave among the stacks of books, scanning the titles through their sunglasses. They seem to find what they’re looking for, letting out a sound of triumph, pulling a book from a precarious looking stack. It begins to topple onto them, but before anyone can say anything, it’s been stilled by a single flick of their wrist, hanging mid-air for a second before restacking itself.

Eret makes their way back over to them, flicking quickly through the pages coming to stop about halfway through the book. They look back up to him, sunglasses permanent in their position, “It’s a simple counter, it just takes a few minutes. Sit there.” They point with one hand, gesturing towards a small cushion in a ring of candles.

He hesitantly sits down, casting a nervous look to the varying colours of candles around him. The colours are those of the rainbow, circling around him in a gradient. He watches as Eret moves around, lighting them and waving their hands over the flame before moving onto the next. Dream slightly feels like he’s about to get even more cursed, but he sits still. Even if he wanted to try and escape Eret looked to be incredibly powerful, he didn’t fancy his chances.

He sat still as they finished the candle circle, crouching in front of him. Their finger seems to light up with a pale blue glow, allowing them to draw runes with their finger in the air around him. This goes on for a few minutes, the air within the circle slowly filling with runes as they reference the book, filling them out in front of him.

They pause for a moment, looking to him, “I’m going to draw one right in front of you now, okay?” He nods, watching as a rune is drawn right in front of his mask, right where his forehead is. He can’t see what it looks like, not that it would have mattered, he can’t read galactic anyway, he had never been taught.

He watches as they finish the rune, leaning back as they read the bottom of the page. They lean forward again, a fist knocking once, twice and three times against the wood of his mask. On the third knock of the wood, it begins to crumble away, the material dissolving in front of his face and becoming nothing, not even reaching his lap as it fell. He watches the particles dissolve in front of his face, staring at the air in front of him, the space in front of his face that is no longer covered by the godforsaken wood.

He looks up from his lap, towards the three people stood in front of him. Eret smiles at him, offering a hand to help him up. He takes it, allowing himself to be pulled from the circle, only just taking note of the completely blown out candles. He steps over them, out of the circle. He feels slightly light-headed, unsure on whether or not that’s because of their magic or the slight shock of it all.

He walks to Sapnap in a bit of a daze, holding his hand out for him to take, watching the man in front of him, the other looking back at him, actually seeing his face instead of the mocking

smiley face they had drawn on the mask to replace his.

“I think we should be going back now. Thank you for your help Eret.” Phil’s voice is distant, quiet in comparison to the thundering rush of his heart. He allows himself to be led down the spiral staircase, gripping Sapnap’s hand like a lifeline as he feels air brush against the skin of his face for the first time in years.

He doesn’t register where they are until he’s being pulled into their room, the door being shut behind him.

Sapnap turns to face him, still holding his hand, looking him square in the eye. He brings Dream into a crushing hug, holding him close as Dream holds onto him, keeping his grip tight as if Sapnap might suddenly disappear. A few tears slip free, running down his face and dripping off his chin. He snuffles quietly, relishing in the way he can bury his head in Sapnap’s hair, feel the softness of it against his face.

They stand like that for a while, Sapnap pulling away from the hug first. He takes Dream’s hand, leading him over to the desk, towards the small mirror perched on the surface. He pushes Dream into the chair in front of the mirror, holding his hand the whole time.

Dream takes a deep breath and looks at himself for the first time in over a decade.

The face that stares back is wildly different to anything he remembers, the heterochromatic eyes watching him through the reflective surface, the slitted pupils and the bright, almost eye-searingly so purple, and the bright lime green of the other. His slitted eyes expand with the light, going from paper thin to almost filling the whole of his iris.

His cheeks are dappled in black and white splotches, one large black splotch under his left eye, a nice compliment to the purple. They vary in size, some the size of freckles whilst others are almost as large as a coin. It’s spattered across his face, almost as if someone threw black and white paint over his skin.

His teeth are sharp, he realises as he opens his mouth to say something, the canines filing to a small point, the ends just barely covered by his lips. He closes his mouth again, unsure of what to say. Sapnap says something for him.

“I like the way your face looks,” he smiles at him in the reflection of the mirror, “I told you I would.”

Dream grins back, able to show Sapnap his facial expressions, no longer having them hidden under the mask, leaving him to guess based on purely his tone.

He turns to Sapnap, using the hand he’s holding to pull the other into a hug.

“I’m glad you like the way I look.” He whispers it in Sapnap’s ear like it’s a secret. The way he giggles after has him almost convinced it was. He hugs him closer, the removal of his mask freeing him.

...

On the other side of the lands, beyond a large plains biome, a castle stands looming above its city. The halls are filled with the sounds of weaponry being sharpened, armour being equipped and people readying themselves to leave.

The king stands at the head of a fleet of horses, coated in a thick suit of netherite, the surface shimmering purple as he leads his men west, into ice and snow.

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

me: only works on one fic at a time to maintain a good upload schedule

brain: *gives multiple fic ideas*

me: hhhhhhhh

He released Sapnap from the hug after a few minutes, stepping back and pushing the mirror away. He didn't want his eyes to continually get caught on his reflection, he doesn't think he'll be able to stop himself from staring in the mirror for too long. His face fascinated him, the splotches on his face melding into the pale colour of the rest of his body. He still couldn't get over how vibrant his eyes were, he had expected them to be a dull brown or at most and amber, not the purple and lime they were.

He turns away from the mirror, the reflective side face down on the desk, preventing him from staring at himself any longer. Sapnap's eyes raked over his face as he turned back around, scanning up and down his face, eyes tracing along his skin. He allowed him to look for a few moments longer before saying anything.

"Like what you see?" He grinned, showing off his sharp teeth, looking down at Sapnap.

"It's just different," the other protested, "I'm not used to seeing you without that mask."

"Different now that you can see my face?"

"Yes, I never knew how you felt before, not properly."

Dream could understand that, it was pretty difficult to discern any kind of emotion when the main signals were being covered by a piece of wood. He flicked an ear as he heard voices begin to rise again, Tommy shouting with Wilbur again. If the two weren't so different in their traits he would believe that they were blood related brothers.

The shouting voices were playful, almost as if their argument wasn't very serious. He still felt himself tensing up slightly, watching the door warily for any signs of entry, any attempt to enter the room. There was none, the handle remained still, and the voices continued to shout. It seemed more like an overly loud conversation at this point, the people getting carried away with the topic and beginning to raise their voices.

The conversation must have ended because the shouting died down, he allowed himself to relax, not even realising he had tensed up in the first place. He released a breath he hadn't realised he was holding, allowing oxygen back into his body as he breathed properly again. He turns to see Sapnap staring at his face.

“What?” He didn’t know why the other was just watching his face, the stare not uncomfortable but making him wonder why it was trained so intently on his face.

“Your pupils, they got all big, expanded out to fill more of your iris,” Dream brings a hand up to his face, going to cover the eye closest to Sapnap, feeling self-conscious of something he didn’t even realise he did.

Sapnap grabs his hand before he can cover it, wrapping his hand around his and pulling it back down from where it was about to go. He gripped his hand tightly, warmth from his palm seeping through to Dream’s slightly colder skin.

“Don’t cover them up, I was just observing. It’s interesting.” Dream doesn’t understand how something that sets him aside from the rest of the people he knows is interesting, his face was covered up for a reason, the eyes were probably one of those reasons. His ears twitched, flicking to the side slightly as he felt uneasy, wondering why Sapnap was stopping him.

Sapnap seems to sense this unease, squeezing his hand tightly before relaxing it again, “I think it’s nice, there’s no reason for you to cover them up. They’re what makes you different.”

He stands on his tiptoes, leaning closer to Dream’s face, pulling him down slightly so he can look into his eyes better. Dream stands still, allowing the man to look at his eyes, watching as his eyes flick over his. He can slightly feel Sapnap’s breath on his face, the air warm where he breathes out, his internal body temperature hotter than the area around them.

“Your eyes are like a cat’s,” Sapnap pulls away from him, Dream feeling slightly disappointed at the loss of closeness, but unsure why. “Your pupils expand with different things, like fear and shrink back down to the normal slit at other times.”

Dream nods, unsure why Sapnap is so interested in that. He shivers a bit, looking around the room, towards the fireplace, which is unlit. That probably explains the coldness of the room, the winter making it colder in here than is necessary. He strides over to the fireplace, pulling Sapnap along with him, crouching down in front of the fire and beginning to stack the logs onto the fireplace. He lets go of Sapnap’s hand to do this, instead pressing himself closer to where Sapnap is crouched beside him, making sure they stay close.

He finishes stacking the wood, looking around the fireplace for a flint and steel to light the logs with. He doesn’t find one, an obvious absence on the brick. He turns to Sapnap, “There’s no flint and steel here.”

Sapnap frowns before shuffling forward, holding his hands out over the logs. He looks back to Dream, his eyes glowing slightly brighter, which is when Dream realises what he’s going to do, pulling himself a bit further from the fireplace, unwilling to catch on fire.

He watches with interest as Sapnap’s hands slowly catch fire, the flames spreading from underneath his wrists, curling up towards his palms, the flames sitting in the middle once they reach there, the tongues of fire only slightly drifting from side to side as he presses his hands onto the logs. He hears a crackling, smoke curling upwards from where Sapnap’s hands are pressed.

He keeps his hands on the log until it catches alight, drawing his hands back slowly, shaking the excess fire off into the fireplace, the sparks landing on other bits of wood, beginning to catch fire there as well. Sapnap sits and stares at the fire for a moment longer before turning back to face Dream, his eyes less burn-y than earlier, the orange slightly more dimmed.

He laughs, eyes crinkling slightly at the edges, “Your eyes have gone all big, Dreamy.”

“Dreamy?”

Sapnap flushes slightly, but Dream can’t tell if that’s from the sudden increase in height of the flames or what he just said.

“Oh, uh, sorry, just kind slipped out.” He begins to shuffle away from the fire, away from Dream, face more red than it had been before, definitely embarrassment. Dream steps after him.

“Don’t be embarrassed, I think it’s sweet, Sappy.” He smiles at the way Sapnap freezes and looks at him when he says that. Sapnap laughs after a moment of awkward staring, “No, that’s uh, that’s probably fair.” He laughs again, his chuckle slowly trailing off after a second.

He looks back to Dream suddenly, a smile stretching over his face, his eyes significantly brighter than they had been a moment ago. Dream steps back, watching Sapnap’s face curl into a grin, feeling slightly apprehensive but also excited, sensing something coming.

Sapnap leaps towards him, Dream quickly dodging out of the way, grinning at his shout of frustration as he misses Dream by a few inches, crashing to the floor. He gets back up quickly, still grinning as he launches himself after Dream again, hands out in front of him as he laughs.

Dream laughs too, ducking out of the way again, leaping and shifting mid-air, barrelling away from Sapnap and to the top of the bed posts, perching up there as Sapnap glares up at him.

“That is entirely unfair.” Despite his grumpy tone he’s still grinning, making his way over towards where he’s perched. He grabs onto the thick post, bringing his knees up to grip it, as if he were climbing a tree. Dream realises what he’s about to do as he starts to pull himself up, slowly inching his way up the post, grinning at him as he does so.

Dream dives off the post, hitting the floor and rolling as he shifts back, leaping away from Sapnap when the other jumps after him, trying to pin him to the floor before he can get back up. They stand, at a slight stand-off, both watching the other, twin grins on their faces. They’re both breathing rather heavily, Dream’s pupils expanded to fill the majority of his iris, his ears flicking back and forth as he focuses on Sapnap.

Sapnap dives for him again, arms outstretched, and he rolls out of the way.

...

Phil glances over at the locked door, listening to the thumps that echo behind it, debating on whether he should knock and interrupt whatever the two were doing. As he tucks his wings behind him, preparing to stand and walk over to the door Techno speaks up, "Leave them be."

He turns back to his eldest son, who's sat in front of the fire, almost in it, reading a battered and dog-eared book. He doesn't look up from the pages, flicking over one as his eyes scan over the lines, golden glasses perched on his nose as he gazes down at it.

Phil knows he doesn't need to read the words of that book anymore, he's read it enough times to have it completely memorised, the exact events and storyline of the book able to play out in his head.

"I was just going to check on them, make sure they weren't hurt." His wings shift behind him, the feathers ruffling slightly in defence.

"They're fine, I can hear them laughing. Leave them to enjoy themselves, we don't know how long this will last."

Phil sighs, sitting back down on the sofa, wincing slightly as he hears a crash. He glances over to the door again, wondering if he should just knock anyway. He turns away, he would go over there if it became too loud or it sounded like they had broken something important.

Tommy chose then to emerge from his and Tubbo's shared room, looking over to the door that remains shut and locked whenever the inhabitants are in there.

"Are they alright?" Tommy glances between the door and Phil, one eyebrow raised as he listens to the ruckus they're causing.

"I'm sure they're fine, it just sounds like they're running around the room." Techno responds, still not looking up from his book, turning another page as he does so.

Tommy sighs, turning on his heel and marching back into his bedroom, shutting the door softly behind him.

He hears Tubbo say something and Tommy respond, but their voices are muffled by the wooden door. Phil sighs again, glancing over to Sapnap and Dream's room again before returning to his previous activity, picking the ball of wool and knitting needles back up.

...

Dream feels slightly out of breath, leaping over the over-turned chair, shifting to a small mouse as he does so, landing on the other side and scurrying under the desk, pushing himself into a small hole as Sapnap jumps after him, landing heavily as he gasps for breath.

Dream had led him on quite the chase around the room, shifting from creature to creature, always managing to escape his grasp at the last second, slipping away to another nook or cranny.

“Come on Dream,” Sapnap still sounds out of breath, “I’ve got you cornered now.”

Dream may be cornered but he’s not going down without a fight, shooting from his hiding space and shifting once he has enough room to do so, emerging as a human, trying to slip past Sapnap.

The man reacts too quickly, shoving him down to the floor, pinning him there gently, kneeling over the top of him as they both breathed heavily, Sapnap staring down at Dream from above, watching the other for any kind of escape attempt.

Dream relaxes against his hold, knowing he’s lost and that he’s been caught. He laughs, grinning as Sapnap whoops, knowing he’s won the game.

...

Phil looks up at a knocking on the main door, standing and walking to it. Ranboo stands on the other side, fully equipped in his guard outfit, armour clanking slightly as he pushes his helmet up. His eyes are wide, his hand slightly shaking as he reveals his face.

“Ranboo?” He keeps his voice soft, not wanting to upset the enderman hybrid.

“There are troops approaching from the east, red banners flying above each battalion.”

Phil froze at that, knowing exactly who they were, especially if they were approaching from the east. He nods, “Thank you for informing me Ranboo, send word to every soldier you know, find the other captains, Puffy included. Make sure they know we’ll be fighting.”

Ranboo nods, pulling his helmet back down and darting away, presumably to carry out his orders. He sighs, sagging as he closes the door, turning around to see Techno already stood, book discarded on a nearby table.

“You have to tell them Phil, you need to make sure they’re ready.”

“I know Techno, I know.”

He makes his way over to their door, only slightly hesitating as he raises a fist to knock.

...

Dream hears a knock at the door, head swivelling towards it, him and Sapnap both watching the door as Sapnap keeps him firmly pinned to the ground, ensuring he doesn't try to escape again.

"Can I come in?"

It's Phil, his voice sounding tired. Sapnap stands from where he was, extending a hand to help Dream up, pulling the other up as soon as his palm is in his. They make their way over to the door together, Sapnap unlocking it and pulling the door open.

Phi is stood right in front of it, Techno a few metres behind him, watching them both.

"We have some bad news."

That did not fill Dream with a lot of confidence, watching the king's face as his eyes dart away, refusing to meet his. Phil sighs once, eyes moving back up to fix on Dream's face.

"We just received news that the Scarlet Empire is on its way."

Dream takes a step back, eyes widening and breath catching in his throat at that. He takes another step back, watching as Phil's face remains neutral, watching him as he stumbles back, away from the doorway.

Sapnap is stood, in a similar state of shock to him. Dream turns to face him, the other doing the same as their heart quicken.

"They'll be here by evening, prepare yourselves."

The door shuts again, Dream distantly hearing the voices move away.

"Sapnap?" He gasps out, looking towards the man. Sapnap crashes into him, hugging him tightly as he shakes, holding him together as they crumple to the floor.

Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

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

He held onto Sapnap until he couldn't feel the trembling in his fingers anymore. His hands gripped the back of Sapnap's jumper, holding onto it tightly to ground himself, to allow him to stay there. He leaned back after a few moments, looking up to Sapnap's face. The other looked just as distressed as he felt, his eyes flickering from orange to red and back again, the rapid flashes of colours betraying his conflict.

"I want to fight." His declaration came out small, not as big and strong as he expected it to.

"You can't, you'll die. You know they never back down from a fight."

"This will be the first time then." He didn't understand why Sapnap was so reluctant to let him fight, he was sure the other would want to as well. Sapnap sighed heavily, exhaling all the breath he had in him, allowing his forehead to hit Dream's shoulder, resting there.

"I can't lose you," Sapnap's voice was even quieter than his had been, voice barely above a whisper and choked with emotions.

"You won't lose me?"

"But what if I do?" Sapnap brought his face up to face Dream, tears forming in the corners of his eyes as he searched Dream's face, looking for something he couldn't give him. "I just don't understand, why do you need to fight. Why do you want to?"

A few tears slipped from his eyes, trickling down his cheeks, Dream swipes them away with his thumb, not wanting to see him crying.

"I feel like I owe them this at least, they're coming for me and it would be dishonourable for me to run."

"I don't understand," Sapnap repeated, eyes still searching his face, as if looking for any kind of way to convince him otherwise.

"I don't understand why you're so worried, I outran his best hunters for months before you showed up." He says it gently, not wanting to upset Sapnap anymore.

"I can't lose you, I don't know what I would do without you. I just," He sighs, "I really like you, probably more in a love way." He looks down, face burning as he speaks.

Dream sits there for a second, "Oh."

"Oh? Is that all you're going to give me Dreamy?" Sapnap looked back up to him, smiling despite the tears that ran down his face, still leaking from his eyes.

“Oh, as in wow, I just realised that’s a thing that can happen.”

“What do you mean you just realised that’s a thing that can happen.”

“I grew up in a cage Sapnap,” he deadpanned, “I honestly don’t know what you expect from me.”

“That’s fair enough,” he pauses, “Was that a rejection or not?”

Dream looks down at him in shock, “No, not a rejection, just an ‘I’m thinking’.”

“I don’t think we have very long for that, the sun’s setting already, they’ll be here in an hour at most.”

Dream looks down to the man he was clinging to, the person he had been clinging to since Bad turned on him pretty much.

“I think I love you too.” It came out quiet but Sapnap still heard it, head snapping up towards him from where it had lowered.

“Really?” Sapnap blinked at him, a few more tears racing down his cheeks as he stared at Dream.

“Yeah,” Dream grinned, “I think I do.”

He pressed his forehead to Sapnap’s, pressing closer to his face, holding his face in his hands as he pressed their heads together. He closed his eyes as Sapnap did, allowing himself to bathe in the warmth Sapnap emitted.

He pulled back after a second, pulling Sapnap from the ground, basically picking him up as he turned to the door. Sapnap only struggled slightly in his hold before accepting his fate, returning to a similar hold he had been in at breakfast earlier that day, arms around his neck and knees around his waist.

Dream awkwardly walked from the room, holding Sapnap in his arms as he emerged into a battle planning. He stands awkwardly and watches a group of captains, Puffy sat at the head of the table beside Phil, plan out their battle strategy. He wasn’t even acknowledged, most of them remaining focused on their task at hand.

He walked over to the table they were sat at, looking over the battle plans.

“That won’t work.”

All the captains turned to him, staring straight at him, making him slightly uneasy.

“How do you mean it won’t work?” A short male stood from the table, a pair of bright yellow wings tucked behind his back.

“I mean it won’t work; the Scarlet Empire specialises in picking off small groups. You’re sending these small groups out specially prepared for them,” he points to the individual

groups they were moving around.

“You need to have a concentrated attack, most opponents see them as too strong to face head-on, so they send out small groups. Most of their soldiers are either spies, hunters or trained in stealth. There may be one or two soldiers that specialise in head-on attack, but they’ll be few and far between.”

“So, we’re just meant to take advice from the man with a person hanging from his neck.”

“Exactly,” Sapnap decided to show his support, speaking into Dream’s jumper.

“What he’s saying makes sense,” the table turned to a tall captain, his hair split half black and white, his skin in a similar pattern. Dream recognises him, he was the guard that brought them in here in the first place.

“All the fights we’ve heard of about the Scarlet Empire all had small groups sent out against them, therefore, they must be best at taking out smaller groups, not a concentrated attack.”

Puffy nods slowly, looking over to Phil. She gathers all the ‘soldiers’ into a pile, aiming them towards a small red flag. Dream finds it rather fitting.

“Right, captains,” she stands from here seat, “go instruct your men, I want everyone outside in no more than ten minutes, preferably less.”

She turns to him and Sapnap, “You two, with me, presuming you want to fight.” Dream nods, following after the captain as she exits the room. He tries to pry Sapnap off of him, and is partially successful when he begins to walk alongside him, holding his arm as they make their way through the corridors.

They’re mainly empty, the only people moving around guards and soldiers, dressed in the armour, mostly enchanted iron, some with diamond. They run past them, shouting orders to other small groups as they pass by them.

Puffy leads them into what seems to be an armoury. She spreads her arms wide, “Take your pick, we have a bunch of stuff, most of it enchanted.

Dream goes straight for the chainmail, knowing that it’s the easiest to move in, allowing him more fluid shifts and better flexibility. He grabbed a chestplate and legs off the racks, not bothering with a helmet or boots. His leather boots would be enough and he wasn’t planning on letting anyone get close to his head anyway.

He turned around to find Sapnap fitting himself with some iron armour, the surface shimmering in hues of purple, the enchantments racing across the surface. He pulled his own on quickly, wanting to be out there as the fighting starts.

He digs around in his inventory a bit, looking for his axe. He finds it buried in the depths, pulling the shining blade out. He gives it a quick sharpen, watching as the blade thins, the metal becoming sharper as he presses it against the stone.

He hears someone else across the room begin to use another grinding stone, turning and watching as Sapnap sharpens his axe. He steps away after a moment, moving back to Puffy and waiting for Dream to join them.

He makes his way over, axe at his side, ready to move out to the field. Puffy doesn't hesitate, leading them from the room and through the corridors, towards the front of the castle. They exit the palace doors into the empty city. They hurry through the abandoned streets towards the open space outside of the walls.

As they Puffy sends the men in the towers a signal, them beginning to close the gates, winding large wheels to move the mechanisms and make the gates close. They slam shut, the sound echoing across the field, probably reaching the battalions stood across from them.

The red of their armour stands out against the snow, like blood spattered against a white cloth, staining the linen irreparably. Him and Sapnap stand near to the front, watching the troops across the field from them as the wind sweeps snow into their faces.

He slips his hand into Sapnap's, squeezing it and sending him a look, 'stay together' he tells him, dropping his hand back to his side. He sees Sapnap nod as he turns to face the people across from them.

He hears a shout from some captains on their side, the people beginning to surge forward, running across the tundra as the opposition charge to meet them.

The horsemen are struck down first, the archers striking at the animal's feet, causing them to topple, crushing their riders underneath them. Dream shifts as he runs, dropping to the ground as a wolf, his breaths coming out in small clouds as he races beside Sapnap.

He jumps for the first person he sees. He sink his teeth into their arm. His teeth dig deep, crushing bone. Their blood stains the snow. It's not the first.

The pure white around them is muddied, blood staining the snow as people all around them fall, most of them clothed in red. Dream leaps back to Sapnap, shielding his back as he strikes someone down with his axe. The blade cuts through his head cleanly, crushing his skull.

The body crumples to the ground, Dream covering his back, leaping for any soldiers that come too near.

Sapnap turns on his heel suddenly, Dream moving to cover his back again. He glances behind him to Sapnap, watching as the man takes off running.

He sprints across the battlefield, Dream not far behind him, paws pushing through the snow with ease, striding alongside Sapnap in long bounds. He only hesitates when he sees who Sapnap's running towards, the cloaked demon turning to face them.

Sapnap doesn't hesitate, running and launching himself at Bad, hitting him square in the chest with his knee, bringing both of them crashing down to the ground. He kneels on Bad,

keeping him pinned to the ground even as he struggles. Sapnap brings his blade to Bad's neck, holding it against the skin there.

Dream can see the way his neck is pulsing with blood, his heart probably racing. He stalks closer, moving in around Sapnap, fending off any attacks aimed towards them as he pins Bad to the ground. He shifts back after a second, standing over Sapnap, bringing his shield into play, blocking a strike from someone before slicing them across the chest, watching with a slight satisfaction as they stumble backwards.

The area around them is empty, the soldiers nearby moving onto other people, leaving their small group of three alone on the edge of the battlefield.

He turns back to Sapnap, watching as Bad tries to reason with him.

"Come on Sapnap," the demon smiles, "I'm your friend." His voice is sweet, and he sees Sapnap falter for a second. That second is all it takes for Bad to wriggle from his hold, swinging behind Sapnap and holding his blade across his neck.

Sapnap freezes, fingers losing their grip on his axe as it falls to the ground, landing in the snow with a small thump.

"Shifter," he turns to Bad, "Come with me and I won't hurt him."

Dream nods slowly, watching Sapnap from the corner of his eye as the man shakes his head a fraction. He nods, barely noticeable as he drops his axe to the ground, pushing it away from him with his foot. He watches as Bad steps away from Sapnap, removing his blade from his neck, allowing Sapnap to bend down and grab his axe, whirling to stand beside Dream.

Dream doesn't give Bad an opportunity to retaliate, shifting back to a wolf and pinning him down in the snow. His paw is poised over his throat, he can feel his fluttering pulse under his paw.

His eyes trace the red veins under the demon's eyes, the red standing out brightly against his skin. Dream knew as soon as he saw the pattern across his face. He had a feeling they would be there. He didn't say anything to Sapnap, not wanting to give him any hope.

He remains there for a moment longer, watching as Sapnap prises the sword from Bad's grip, chucking it away into the forest.

He pulls out some rope from seemingly nowhere, holding it out for Dream to see. He takes a small step back, allowing Sapnap to bind his wrists and ankles, keeping them tightly net to each other.

He watches, a threatening presence stood over Bad as Sapnap tied them in complex knots he couldn't even begin to decipher.

He picks him up as soon as Sapnap is done, taking off across the tundra, feet pounding against the snow. He stops just outside the gates, pacing around before spotting who he was

looking for. He drops Bad to the ground, shifting back and dragging the man along the ground towards Niki.

He dumps him at her feet, "Possession." Was the only thing he said to her before turning away and shifting, shooting high into the skies as wind swirled underneath his wings.

He scanned the battlefield, much more empty than it had been earlier, eyes zeroing in on Sapnap. He was stood on the inner ring of a circle that had formed.

He shot down from the sky, pulling up at the last second and shifting as he came close to the ground, startling a few people at his sudden appearance. Dream ignored them, focusing on the scene in front of him.

Techno was stood behind Phil, staring down as the king held down a horrible excuse for a man, pressing him into the dirt.

The red king struggled underneath Phil, writhing from side to side. Phil held a netherite blade to his neck, keeping it poised over the pale, exposed skin.

"Give me one good reason not to kill you right now."

The king smiles, his teeth stained red, "They'll all die."

"No, they won't."

Phil plunged his blade into the king's neck, pushing until the man stopped struggling. He stood from the limp body, his normally blue robes stained red. He turned away from the body, not even sparing it a second glance.

The crowd disperses, Dream and Sapnap the only ones remaining. Dream turns away from the king, towards Sapnap. He cups the other's face in his hands, turning his head to look at him.

He smiled softly, "He's gone."

Sapnap nodded, "He is."

Dream led him away from the bloodstained snow, guiding him back to the castle. They left the spatter of blood on the snow.

Their footsteps left imprints as they made their way through it, back towards the castle, back towards their home. Dream squeezed Sapnap's hand.

Chapter End Notes

there will be an epilogue

Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

The Epilogue

Chapter Notes

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

Dream sat high up on the wall, the stone cool beneath where he sat, watching as the sun rose, casting a golden sheen across the snow and ice that covered the land in front of him. He sat still, the wind blowing gently over his cheeks and through his hair, as he watched the sun climb higher into the sky.

He heard some footsteps behind him, not bothering to turn around as the person approaching pressed a kiss to the side of his head and sat down beside him. Sapnap swung his legs over the wall, allowing them to dangle beside Dream's, kicking at the air slightly as he moved them back and forth.

Dream leaned into him, allowing the warmth to soak into his cold body. He had been sat watching the sun for a while, allowing the frost to slowly creep over his bones as he did so.

"How are they?"

"They're recovering, Puffy says they're doing well."

He hummed, "That's good, did you speak to them?"

"Not yet."

He nodded again, bringing his knees up to rest his chin on, leaning more into Sapnap's side as the other put an arm around his shoulders, pulling him closer. They watched the sun rise together, sitting still until it was almost at its peak above them.

Sapnap stood from where he was sat, pulling Dream along with him, "Come one, Tubbo said he wanted to show us something in the gardens."

"That's today?"

"Yeah," Sapnap laughed at him as he pulled him along, moving along the top of the wall towards the staircase that led down from it.

They walked down it together, entering into the halls of the palace. Most of the people they passed recognised them, giving them a small wave or a smile as they passed by, continuing on

with whatever tasks they had.

Dream walked down the halls, towards the gardens, passing by the blue and silver banners, the fabric rustling slightly in the breeze as he swung his and Sapnap's hands back and forth.

They exited out into the courtyard, making their way down the steps towards Tubbo. The bee hybrid was waving at them excitedly, waiting for them to reach him.

"Hello!" He grinned at them, practically bouncing on the balls of his feet, his wings buzzing slightly behind him as he jumped. He bounded away through the gardens, brushing past several snow-laden bushes, causing it to fall to the ground with a soft thump as it became dislodged.

They followed closely behind him, Dream beginning to feel a rising sense of excitement alongside Tubbo, the younger's enthusiasm making him more excited for whatever he was going to show them.

He led them to a small spot near to his and Tommy's bench. The jukebox was empty, not soft melody floating over the surrounding area. Tubbo moves to a nearby copse of trees, beckoning them over as he stood beside the trunk.

Dream went to stand next to him, peering to where he was pointing. There was a small green bud peeking from the trunk, a cluster of small leaves gathered around the stem. He looked to Tubbo, grinning as he realised what he meant. Sapnap seemed less interested, "It's...a small green thing? I don't get why you're so excited about that."

Dream turned to him, grabbing his shoulder and pulling him closer, "It means the thaw will be coming soon, which means spring, which means a bunch of plants growing."

Sapnap still just stared at him, "I still do not get why that's so amazing."

"Because it means it's spring! Which means it will be less cold, and that time of year is always one of hope!"

Sapnap's face seems to light up in understanding at that, leaning closer to the small bud growing from the trunk. He poked softly at the delicate leaves, moving them around as he looked. Tubbo smacked his hand away, not wanting him to damage the small leaves.

Sapnap looked to him, faux hurt in his eyes as he turned back to Dream.

"He hit me Dreamy."

"I saw."

"Aren't you going to do anything? For me? Your favourite person in the world?"

He hums, feigning to think about it for a second, "No, I don't think so. I think it was completely deserved."

Sapnap gasps, pressing his hand against his chest, "I've been betrayed, by my own love at that." He moaned, dramatically flinging his hand against his forehead. Dream laughs and bumps him with his shoulder, causing the man to stumble slightly before righting himself, sending a barely-there glare Dream's way.

He tugged the other back towards him, pulling him in the direction of the castle, bidding goodbye to Tubbo as he went.

"Can we go see them?"

Sapnap looked to him for a second, "Yeah, we can. Don't see why you need to ask permission though."

"Just thought I might, you've already seen them once today."

"I don't mind."

They walk for a bit in silence, their hands swinging back and forth as they take comfort in the other's presence.

They reach a solid door, locked from the inside with a heavy bolt. Dream knocks on the door, knuckles rapping against the wood. He stood back and waited, hearing a pair of hooves click over the ground, hurrying towards the door. He heard the latch sliding and the door was open.

Puffy stood on the other side, smiling at him and Sapnap.

"Come in, come in." She stood back from the door, allowing them to enter what she called the rehabilitation room. It was light and airy, several doors connected to it, all with large windows and lots of sunlight coming in.

She moved over to the door closest on their right, knocking twice on the wood and waiting for a quiet 'come in' before she pushed it open.

The room inside was equally as bright, giving the person inside nowhere to hide. They were slumped back against some cushions on their bed, turning towards them as the door opened.

They leaned forward with a small smile as they saw who was standing there, "Sapnap! Dream! Good to see you again."

Sapnap walked inside the room, Dream following close behind as they approached George.

"How have you been doing?" Sapnap's voice was soft, looking over his friend for any red veins.

"What, since you came and saw me a couple hours ago? I've been doing fine."

"You know he's just worried about you," Dream reprimands, making sure he knew where they stood.

"I know, I know."

“I’ve been doing better,” he admits, “Puffy’s been helping. Bad not so much, it’s why she doesn’t let you visit him as often. He’s getting better,” he blurts, “just not as quickly as I am, he was in that shit longer than I was.”

“He’ll be better eventually.”

“Yeah.”

They chatted about meaningless things, Dream slowly feeling more at ease in the same room as George as they spoke. Puffy came and gestured them out after a while, explaining that George had some things to do.

They said goodbye and moved back down the corridor, back towards where they had been sat that morning.

They sit on the wall again, side by side, Dream leaning against Sapnap and Sapnap leaning against Dream. He watched the snow below him, admiring the peaceful scene around them.

Maybe peace could last, he thought, smiling as he did so. He looked down to Sapnap, pressing a kiss to the side of his head as he did so. He was excited to find out.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you liked it and that I was able to bring it to a datisfying end for everyone :D
Thank you for all the kind comments and kudos, they made my day.

Shameless Self Promo of my next fic!

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End Notes

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