

Something to hold on to when everything else is falling apart

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Something to hold on to when everything else is falling apart

by [Lady_hakunamatata](#)

Summary

After a night both wish they could forget, Robert and Michael haven't seen each other for two weeks. Maybe it's time that changes.

Decisions (Robert's POV)

Chapter Summary

Robert, facing a problem he doesn't seem to find his way around, discovers in Maryse an unusual but much needed help.

Chapter Notes

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

It was getting colder. Robert looked up at the sky, stars shining so brightly he didn't even need a witchlight. He closed his eyes; he didn't care about how bright and beautiful the stars looked that night. He had gone to that spot because he knew he'd be alone. There was much of that lately in Robert's life; he had forgotten how empty and silent it felt. Usually it drove him crazy, but not tonight. Tonight it didn't bother him: he welcomed the silence. Robert had sought that very spot to be alone, but not to think. For once, all he wanted to do was to forget, to pretend the past two weeks had never happened. Had it really been two weeks? It seemed like years, but at the same time it seemed a lot less; *maybe time did pass different when you're alone*. The truth was that Robert didn't want to be alone. Unable to stop the thoughts from flooding his head, he opened his eyes and looked at the night sky again. The stars were so bright and beautiful it almost made him wish he wasn't alone. He thought of Michael. Michael, who could spend hours outside at nights like this just to look at the stars, his eyes wide open, bewildered as if it was the first time he saw them. He envied that. That ability to feel amazed by the simplest things the world had to offer.

He let out a grunt of frustration. This was exactly the place where he didn't want to go. Inevitably, every time he tried not to think about how things had changed in the last two weeks, it was precisely those thoughts that made their way into Robert's already troubled mind. He had spent as much time as possible keeping himself busy: training, walking, reading...Anything that kept him from his mind's betrayal. As soon as he was free, he knew the thoughts would come. Annoyed by his own incapacity to take hold of his mind, he was getting up to go back home, when he heard someone approaching. It was Maryse. "I've been looking for you" she said, as she sat beside him. He felt stupid and awkward and he didn't know why, which made him angry. This was Maryse, there was no need for him to be weird with her. "I just came here to get some fresh air" he said, looking at his knees. It was partly true. He felt suffocated inside the four walls of his room. He hadn't been much outside lately; avoiding all chances of accidentally running into Michael. When he wasn't training, he barely left his room; maybe for a walk every once in a while, but sometimes not even that. He could almost feel sorry for himself, except he didn't think he deserved it. He knew he was being a lousy boyfriend: Maryse had gone through all that trouble to find him, and he was just sitting there, trapped in his thoughts, not even looking at her. She didn't seem to mind though. It was almost as if she understood the turmoil that was going inside his head, and she knew that was something he needed to deal with on his own. He felt so grateful for that.

“I know that if you want me to know what’s going on with you, you’ll tell me”, she whispered suddenly,” but you really shouldn’t keep it to yourself and let whatever it’s bothering you eat you alive”.

Robert let out a sigh, still unable to look at Maryse. “I’m sorry” he said “It’s-” “No, don’t be”, she cut him off “I understand. It was my mistake, coming here when you clearly need to be alone.” She stood up and wiped the grass off her jeans with her hands. Robert looked up at her, his brow furrowed. “Please, don’t get mad at me. I can’t...” he trailed off. “I’m not mad”, she sighed. She held her hand out at Robert and helped him up and pull him close to her. “I am hurt, though. I thought we could talk about everything we were feeling. I thought I’d earned that trust by now. I don’t know what in the Angel’s name is going on with you lately, but we’re worried about you. And-“ “We’?” Robert lifted an eyebrow at Maryse.

“Well”, she said, fidgeting with a loose thread on her jacket “Yes. I mean, I knew something was off with you lately, but I thought maybe I was being paranoid, with everything that’s been going on with everybody, so I decided to let it rest for a while... But then this morning Michael came to me and explained and he said that you weren’t speaking to him and then I thought that maybe that was it, so I decided to come talk to you about it. To see if I could help, you know.” Blood seemed to have drained from Robert’s face. Michael had talked to Maryse. What had he told her, exactly? What if he had *told* her? What if she thought...? He shook his head and struggled to find his voice. This day was only getting worse. “What did Michael tell you?” He asked, at last. He hated that he sounded harsher than he had intended. “I already told you. He said you weren’t speaking, and he was worried about you.” “Did he say why?” “Yes, Robert. He told me absolutely everything there is to know about your relationship- No! What do you think? He was uncomfortable enough by merely having to talk to me, of course he barely told me the basics. I have to hand it to him, if it were me in his position, I would have never find it in me to approach someone I hate so much, no matter how strong the need.” “Did he tell you he hates you?” Robert felt a wave of anger directed at Michael. “You’re not making any sense today. No, he didn’t tell me he hates me, Robert.” Maryse sighed, and Robert could have sworn she sounded amused. He didn’t feel very amused himself. “He doesn’t need to, anyway. I mean, he’s your best friend, your *parabatai*, and he barely acknowledges my existence. It’s obvious that there are some issues there.” Robert fell silent, pondering about her words. It was true that Michael had always behaved in a reserved manner whenever he was around Maryse, but even when Robert now knew the truth, he still wanted to believe it had been due to Michael being, as Robert had called him once “selectively shy”. Robert refused to believe Maryse was right about Michael’s feelings regarding her. That would make everything much more difficult. Still, he felt he needed to say something.

“Michael doesn’t hate you”, he said firmly “. He doesn’t have it in him to hate anyone. He’s just... Weird like that.” Wow. Convincing. If she didn’t think it before, now Maryse would definitely believe Robert was an idiot. A big, weak, cowardly idiot.

However, her expression softened. “Well”, she was smiling now, barely there, but still “I figure you understand him better than I do, so maybe it would be the right thing to do for you to go reassure him yourself?” she shrugged.

Robert shuddered at the idea. He knew the day would have to come for him to face Michael again, but he thought it’d be on his own terms. That didn’t mean he felt Maryse was pushing him, more like she was encouraging him; she was giving him the strength he lacked, so he could do what he must. He finally understood what Michael had said to him about love, maybe not because he was experiencing something as strong and special himself (not yet, at least, he told himself) but because he could feel it coming from her. He wished he could give

her something as special in return, not because he felt he owed her, but because she deserved it; she deserved everything.

Unlikely as it may have seemed just minutes before, Robert found himself smiling. He cupped Maryse's face gently, his big hands somehow fitting perfectly around her delicate frame, and pressed his lips to her forehead.

"Thank you" he whispered, then tilted her head back carefully and kissed her lips.

Before he started thinking too much and his resolve came crashing down, Robert walked away. He knew there was only one thing he could do to fix everything that had gone wrong. He only hoped it wasn't too late for him to set things right.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading, I hope you enjoyed and maybe come back for the next two chapters :)

Also thank you to Sasha and Jen who beta'd it and who supported me throughout the writing process. I've been at this since I finished reading *The Evil We Love* and now, four months later, I finally finished it! Just in time for *Born To Endless Night*. I hope you like it. As usual, comments are always welcome. I feed off your feedback (I'm a fan of bad puns, just in case you want to know!)

Taking action (Michael's POV)

Chapter Summary

Michael is willing to do whatever it takes in order not to lose Robert.

Chapter Notes

This chapter takes place the morning of the previous one's events (the first chapter happened at night). This time, it's Michael's side of the story that's being focused on.

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

Michael ran a hand through his hair. The door to the Trueblood manor before him, as threatening as one of Professor Fell's deepest frowns. He was close to deciding he couldn't do it; no, he couldn't do this. But if he didn't, he would have to live in doubt. He wasn't sure about what he would feel with the answers he was looking for, but even if they meant nothing good, he still needed to know.

Sighing, he leaned towards the door and knocked, mentally preparing himself for the explanation he'd give either of Maryse's parents for his presence. It wasn't exactly like he and Maryse were friends. In truth, Michael could count with one hand the times they had exchanged words, and there would still be about four fingers left. The bitter laugh that thought got from him got cut by a soft voice he knew too well, gasping his name in surprise. "Hi", he said, forcing himself not to look away "I'm... I'm sorry. I need to talk to you".

Maryse kept her fierce blue eyes on him, as if she was trying to make sense of a situation that, if he was honest with himself, didn't completely make sense to Michael either.

After the awkward pause (during which Michael really had to fight his urge to turn around and run away), she moved aside slightly and gestured for him to enter.

She led him into a spacious room with a couch and a little table, where lots of different plants caught his attention.

"My mother says they keep the house alive" she informed him politely, when she caught him staring.

"They are... Nice."

"You didn't come here to admire my mom's taste in plants, though" Well, at least she was straightforward.

Michael inhaled, as if to brace himself, then let the air out slowly. His heart was already driving him mad, pulse bouncing everywhere. "No, that's true" he said at last "I came to talk to you about Robert".

"Naturally" she smiled, but Michael could see she was as uncomfortable as he was with the situation.

Michael tried not to lose the little calm he was keeping at this point. “The thing is” *how could he explain the situation without having to tell her what this was really about?* He had to try, at least. He needed to do this.

“Robert and I have been having... Difficulties lately. Differences. And he refuses to talk to me about it. And he’s been acting weird since-“Michael stopped, not wanting to think about that night with Valentine and the werewolves, or anything else about it. The memories were just too painful. “I know he needs his space, and I know it’s way off-base for me to ask this of you, I just- I just thought... I’m just worried.”

He was forcing himself to speak now. No, he couldn’t do this. He was suddenly feeling a tightness in his chest. He couldn’t do this. It had nothing to do with her, but he couldn’t ask this of her, not when Robert may not be able to face him yet. Robert needed to come back to him on his own.

He wanted Robert to come back because that was what he wanted; he couldn’t be this selfish. “I’m sorry” he said at last “I need to go. Just...” and with that, he finally got up and practically ran out the door.

Michael didn’t stop running until he was back home. At the front door, he waited an instant in order to catch his breath, in case he ran into either of his parents.

Luckily, no one was around when he made it past the threshold, through the living room, up the stairs until he was safe in his room. After securing the door closed, he threw himself on the bed, one arm across his face. *What had he been thinking?* Now Maryse surely would go to Robert, who would only get mad at Michael and, if Robert ever talked to him again, it probably would be to tell Michael to never speak to him (or Maryse) again, to not even come near him. If he didn’t by then, Robert would definitely hate him now.

Michael was starting to hate himself for thinking so much, for not thinking enough back then, for not being able to shut up. It was hard. He had thought... He thought he truly could tell Robert everything and it wouldn’t matter, it wouldn’t change anything. Robert had even reassured him of that once, when he almost confessed, but something made him back off at the last fraction of a second. He should have really listened to what his heart was telling him then. He should have taken that as a sign to never try it again. If he had, then he would not be in this situation. Instead, he could have been out there, enjoying the sun, with Robert.

Swimming, or running, or reading under a tree.

Michael felt so stupid for ruining one of the few good things he had. He had lost Robert forever, he was sure of that. He realized his eyes were filled with tears. Fantastic, he thought bitterly.

Michael got up and dragged his feet to the bathroom, where he thoroughly washed his face without looking in the mirror. He already knew how miserable he must look. Instead of heading back to his room, he went downstairs, and out towards the stables. He fed the horses and, an idea starting in his mind, he went back inside to get his backpack: some food, a blanket and a book or two would do for the rest of the day.

Riding, he decided, would be much better than staying inside his room all day, pining and whining. It would definitely bring him all kinds of memories, from the early days of his and Robert’s friendship. At least those were happy memories, memories he could welcome, instead of the thoughts of what he had lost. Once he was done packing everything he needed, Michael went back into the stables to ready his horse. He didn’t mind if he took long, he decided looking out at the bright day, it would certainly be a lovely night, and he had packed his witchlight anyway, just in case. Once he got everything ready, he hopped on the horse, took hold of the reins, and got on his way.

He had gone that route so many times he thought the horse could even go without him

guiding. He loosened his grip on the reins and closed his eyes, the gentle breeze caressing his face soft as a mother's touch. At a certain point, he felt that his horse was practically leading the way, going at will.

When he found a nice spot in the clear, Michael hopped off his horse and settled to lie down to read. The book at least took his mind off his worries for a while, and he got so lost in the story that, before he knew it, he was actually reaching for the second one inside his backpack. Michael read until his eyes hurt; when he saw he couldn't concentrate hard enough, he just put the book aside and closed his eyes to rest. Surprisingly, he felt considerably relaxed when he woke up. Maybe that was what he was needing: to try to get his normal life back, to learn again to do things he enjoyed doing by himself.

His horse was nowhere near tired, but since the sun was beginning to set, he decided to go back anyway. It had been a long time since he had done this, gone out horseback riding, but that was enough. If he was still in the mood for distraction, he told himself, he'd do it again the next day.

Once back home, he fixed a quick meal, after taking the horse back to the stable, and dined in his room. He crawled early into bed, and fell asleep almost immediately, his body finally catching up with the day's activity. He couldn't say how much he had slept, although he knew it couldn't have been long, when he was startled awake by a loud noise and a curse. When he sat up to see what was happening, Michael almost fell off the bed. Outside his bedroom window, climbing up the ladder he had used so many times (but had remained unused for the past two weeks) was Robert.

He was clutching the ladder, halfway up, but his eyes were towards the floor. He disappeared then, but before Michael could think he was dreaming, Robert reemerged and this time he went all the way up the ladder. Michael couldn't speak, he couldn't move, and after a few seconds he wasn't sure he could even breathe. He felt himself inhale hard when, at last, Robert looked back ahead; and their eyes met. Robert had this miserable look on his face, and Michael thought it mirrored what he had been feeling these past couple weeks. His expression changed, though, and he gave Michael a small smile. Michael was still half sitting on his bed, still not moving. He hoped Robert knew he didn't need to. Apparently, he did. One swift move drew the window open, and Robert was standing in Michael's room. Michael found himself taking in his appearance, looking at Robert as if for the first time. He had shaved since the last time they had seen each other, the incipient beard Robert had been growing was gone; now he did look the same age as Michael. He had grass stains on his jeans, his shirt was crumpled. He had... His stele in his hand?

"Are you hurt?" Michael blurted out before being able to stop himself, thus breaking the awkward silence that had fallen between them. Robert gave him a questioning look, and Michael knew they had been equally surprised to hear what were Michael's first words to Robert in weeks.

"I'm fine" Robert said at last, the curious expression that crossed his eyes at Michael's question gone in seconds. Looking down at his hand, he added: "I had dropped my stele on my way up; I had to go back down to get it".

"Oh".

They stayed in silence, looking awkwardly at each other for a moment.

"So--"

"Listen--"

They started laughing at that, and it felt almost like before. They often did that: speaking at the same time, as if their minds were synchronized, their bond making them work together with ease. To Michael it brought a sense of normalcy he hadn't realized just how much he

had been missing. Once he could stop the laughter, he gestured for Robert to speak first, just like they had always done.

Robert cleared his throat. Michael kept looking at him, patiently. He suddenly felt grateful for not having taken his clothes off before getting into bed; it would not make circumstances any smoother, no matter how many times they had been comfortable being naked around each other in the past; things were different now.

He saw Robert was struggling to find the words, and it pained him to think that this would be how things were between them from now on: the ease that once was between them, the trust and the comfort, was somewhat lost. Michael saw Robert's shoulders go down, like he had given up trying to organize his thoughts. He saw the struggle in his eyes, the determination to still find something to say: he silently thanked Robert for not giving up on him completely.

"You were asleep", Robert said at last, and it was obvious those words weren't what any of them had expected.

Michael shrugged "It's early, but..."

"I'm sorry".

"No, really. It's nothing".

"I mean..."

"Shut up." Michael sounded harsher than he intended to, but Robert didn't even seem to mind. "I don't want to hear it."

He was sure that if he allowed Robert to apologize for what had happened, it would only make it worse for them to go back to how things used to be. What mattered was not the time they had spent unhappy and apart, but that Robert was there now. That was what Michael wanted to focus on: he wanted to look ahead and try to get their relationship back.

"Kay, sure" said Robert at last. He walked towards the chair Michael kept in his room, usually buried under a huge pile of clothes but that currently was surprisingly empty. He dragged the chair carefully near the bed, and he sat looking at Michael.

"This feels like that time when you got sick, remember?" Michael remembered that time.

They were fourteen and Michael had insisted on going to a party. There were a lot of people, Shadowhunters and Downworlders alike, and a lot of weird foods and drinks. They were lucky their parents had been away, because if they had, both he and Robert could have faced being grounded for years. Unfortunately, that had been the end of their luck, because halfway through the night, Michael had started feeling sick. They had to rush back home to get Michael to bed, where he spent the whole week, feverish and nauseous, Robert all the time by his side, feeding him soup and water, talking to him so he wouldn't be bored.

"I'm not sick now, though." Michael said softly.

"No, you're not".

Michael was beginning to get nervous by seeing Robert so tense. Sitting next to Michael's bed, Robert was rubbing his hands against the fabric of his jeans, and even though he was looking in Michael's general direction, he wasn't exactly looking into his eyes.

Michael couldn't stand it any longer. "I went for a ride today" he said, abruptly changing the subject, trying to get them into more neutral, comfortable ground. He gave Robert the tiniest of smiles.

Robert was surely looking at him now.

"We could do that sometime, if you want" Robert offered; he sounded unsure. Unsure about Michael's answer? Not entirely convinced about why he was offering in the first place? It killed Michael not to know anymore.

All of Michael's doubts vanished when Robert said, at last "Tomorrow?"

"That would be nice", Michael whispered, trying hard not to let his heart hope, not too much,

at least.

Robert seemed to relax then.

“Sound like a plan”, Robert nodded. He gave Michael a smile for the briefest of moments, a smile that made his heart fill with joy, regardless of the whole situation being unusual and awkward between them.

Robert started to get up, and Michael felt relief wash over him. He knew the next day they would probably have more time to talk about everything, and that was enough for the time being.

“I’ll be here early” Robert called as he was about to go back down the ladder “don’t eat breakfast. You take forever”.

Michael laughed then, the most heartfelt laugh he’d had in weeks. Robert waved at him before disappearing down the ladder the way he had come.

See you tomorrow” And then he was gone.

Tomorrow, Michael decided, would be a good day

Chapter End Notes

I hope you continue to enjoy this. If you have anything to say (even if you hate this completely, I won't be mad), you are free to drop a line or two in the comments.

Is there still time?

Chapter Summary

Robert wants to try to put back the pieces of the shattered trust between him and Michael. But could things ever go back to the way they once were?

Chapter Notes

So, here we are at last. Writing this fic has been SO MUCH FUN. It was also a shitload of feels, let me tell you. I hope you guys enjoy this. If you do (and even if you don't), please let me know! Thank you for your time. All kinds of feedback will be deeply appreciated.

P.S: I really did try to make it as little angsty and feelsy as possible, but you know how things are with these guys, right?

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

Robert woke up with the annoying feeling that he was late. He hated being late. The clock said it was only 8:40. He had the suspicion that Michael would still be sleeping. His parents, he knew, however, weren't. He got up anyways, took his time in getting ready, nervousness finally catching up with his waking schedule, and made his way downstairs.

The dining room, as usual, was occupied by his parents who were, as usual, having breakfast in silence. Robert tried to hurry into the kitchen, to make his way out as soon as he could. Of course, luck was not on his side this morning.

"Where are you going this early, Robert?" *Good morning to you, too, mother. No, I already made plans to have breakfast out, but thank you.*

His father continued his breakfast, not sparing a glance at Robert. He hoped his mother wouldn't keep pushing, and was relieved when it was obvious that she had run out of energy to attempt to play the role of a mother concerned about her son's life. Robert made his way to the kitchen, where he gathered a variety of goods; he stashed it all in his backpack and left through the back door.

Once out of his house, he made his way to the Wayland manor unhurriedly, giving Michael some extra resting time. Somehow he knew (or hoped to be right) that Michael would not really be bothered anyway.

The Waylands, like the Lightwoods, were early risers. When Robert was near the manor, he saw Michael's mother leaving the house, no doubt going to the stable to tend to the horses. She looked his way as he was approaching, turned around and went to meet him.

Michael's mother was a lovely woman, with the same dark, curly hair her son had, which, unlike him, she kept long and tidy. She received him with a smile, which managed to make

Robert uncomfortable, thinking that if she knew the way Robert had treated her son, she would scorn him, and Robert wouldn't even blame her. However, to know the reason why Robert and Michael had been distant, she would also have to know *the other thing*.

That train of thought only made Robert feel worse: knowing that Michael had trusted him with his most important secret, with a truth so big that could affect his whole life if it was discovered by the wrong people; and Robert had failed him, turning his back to the person who was there when everyone else had abandoned him.

Suddenly, Robert started feeling sick. His mood must have shown in his face, because soon Mrs. Wayland was at his side, a concerned expression on her face, her hand gently touching Robert's arm.

"Robert!" her alarmed exclamation made him sober up immediately. He didn't want to upset her.

"Morning, Mrs. Wayland", he said, trying to smile in a convincing way. "Sorry, I didn't..."

"Ah! No need to apologize, dear," she said, slowly recovering her calm demeanor "it must be this heat. Apparently the sun didn't hear it's barely 9 a.m." she laughed, which managed to turn Robert's smile into a genuine one. She had that effect on people; which, Robert considered, her son seemed to have inherited. "Let's go inside, I'll get you some apple juice while we wait for Michael, yes? Go wake him up and get back downstairs. I'll get that juice ready in the meantime. The horses can wait a little longer."

With a new task at hand, she made her way inside, towards the kitchen, Robert closely following; although he turned right towards the stairs and to Michael's room.

The door, of course, was ajar. Robert pushed it gently and entered silently.

"COME ON, WAYLAND! GET MOVING IF YOU KNOW WHAT'S GOOD FOR YOU!"

"Yes, Professor..." Michael woke with a start, taking a second to realize he was at home in his own bed, in his own room, and not back at the Academy. This was something they did sometimes: Robert did a pretty decent emulation of Ragnor Fell's voice, and Michael (generally awake), would laugh until he was out of breath.

"You asshole!" Michael said now, throwing a pillow that missed Robert's head by an inch. Half a breath after, he was laughing.

"Come on", Robert said, laughter in his voice as well "get ready. I'll wait downstairs". With that, he made his way to the kitchen at once. Michael's mom was already waiting with the glass of apple juice ready. She handed it to him; he thanked her and sat while he drank.

"Is he awake now?" she asked, smiling at him. Robert always felt so welcome with the Waylands; he always felt there the warmth his own household lacked. And Michael's parents didn't seem to be bothered by the time Robert spent there. It was a strange thing, something Robert never seemed to get used to.

"Yes, he's getting ready." Robert put down the now empty glass. "You were going to feed the horses. Why don't you let Michael and I take care of that?"

"What are you engaging us in?" Michael appeared downstairs at last. He walked to his mom, kissed her good-morning and went to sit opposite Robert. "I'm hungry, let's just go". He stifled a yawn.

Robert caught his backpack from where he had left it, beside his chair. "I was thinking we could go have breakfast by the benches?"

The Waylands had a couple benches at the back of the manor, sheltered under the lovely shadow of huge trees. Some summer afternoons, Michael (and often Robert) could be found reading or napping on those benches.

“Go”, Mrs. Wayland was saying now “I’ll take care of the horses. Do you boys want me to get them ready for you?”

Robert was starting to tell her not to worry, but Michael cut him off “Yeah, that’s great. Thanks mom.”

He walked to his mother, kissed her cheek and started to walk out, until he noticed Robert didn’t immediately followed. Without turning around he said “Come on, you promised to feed me!” and he was gone. Mrs. Wayland gave Robert a sympathetic look; he thanked her once again, and left too.

Robert followed Michael silently towards the bench farthest to the house. He thought that it would be better to keep silent if he didn’t want to start the day by saying the wrong thing. Since when did he have to tiptoe around what he said to Michael? Robert didn’t know whether to feel sad or angry; at himself, at the situation... It was all just too frustrating. They sat under a huge tree with long branches that went almost all the way to the floor, building a sort of tent around the bench. They were face to face, straddling the bench, the space in the middle covered by the food that Robert had dug out of his backpack. Fruits, pie, and even a couple cupcakes Robert presumed his mother had bought that morning. If they weren’t on the table earlier, he doubted she’d miss them; although if she did, he would bother with caring about it later.

Michael was looking in amazement at all the food that was now between them. “Jeez, Robert!” he exclaimed happily “don’t you happen to have a slice or two of pizza in there? A burger, perhaps?”

This was good. Joking was good, this was a territory they both could feel comfortable in. “Take it or leave it, but this is all there is, Michael”.

Michael hummed contentedly, while he was already wolfing down a slice of pie. Robert took another for himself, and left the thermos he was carrying on the bench between them too.

“Iced tea”, he announced.

Michael snatched the thermos, uncapped it and drank directly from it, not bothering with the glasses Robert had set beside it. Robert shook his head; There was some things that would always remain the same.

“So- wait, is there anything left for me?” Robert took the thermos from Michael’s hands and drank, before Michael had time to protest. “So, what have you been doing lately? Anything interesting?”

Michael shrugged. “Nah, not really. Training, reading, you know... Stuff.”

Robert didn’t know whether to ask about Michael’s girlfriend. He decided not to, just in case it would be too awkward. Also, he thought, if he asked, Michael would probably feel compelled to ask about Maryse. And *that* would be awkward.

“And you?” Michael asked, at last “What have you been up to?”

“Oh, you know” it was Robert’s turn to shrug. “I’ve been bored out of my mind, not having to keep an eye on you or whatever”.

“Oh, right. Without me around, you no longer have notion of the meaning of ‘fun’. Funny, I would have thought you’d be in good hands with Maryse”.

Okay, we’re going there then.

Robert took a deep breath. “Speaking of: I keep thinking about something she said to me last night. She told me she thinks you hate her.”

There it was.

Michael looked like he was about to choke, but he still shook his head. “I don’t hate her, Robert” he actually sounded offended. “But, I mean, have you seen her? She’s so... intimidating. “

Robert shook his head. "Yeah, maybe a bit, right? But she's good. So, maybe you think- I mean, could you...?"

"Yeah. Okay. I'll-I'll work on it. Listen, I really don't want her to think I hate her, because I don't. I don't want you to think that, either." Michael looked away before Robert could answer.

"Good. Yeah. Okay." Robert was starting to feel nervous again. He busied himself by fixing the mess they had done with breakfast, and Michael immediately imitated him. Five minutes later, after they were done, they made their way (silent once again) towards the stables. Robert followed Michael inside, each taking one side of the isle and feeding the horses, still in silence.

The big brown mare Robert always rode was in the last spot on Michael's side, so once Robert was done, he went to stand next to him, carefully unlocked the door that was keeping the eager creature at bay, and before she had time to move, he was already holding her back, murmuring soothing words to her.

"Hey, girl! I missed you" Robert hugged his mare's neck, speaking as she snuggled closer to him. Out the corner of his eye he saw Michael, who was trying to hide his grin behind his own horse, on the space next to the mare.

"She missed you, too, you know", he said, now looking at Robert in the eyes.

Did *you*? Robert wanted to ask. He didn't. He pondered that, if Robert's own experience could be used as guide to what Michael may have been feeling the time they'd spent apart, the question was unnecessary. Not that he could admit that to Michael, even if it was just so he wouldn't get the wrong idea. The thing was, Robert acknowledged bitterly, once upon a time he would have had no problem at all in openly admitting he'd missed Michael, that he needed him, wanted Michael by his side.

"Well, of course she did", he found himself saying instead. "I'm the only one who knows how to treat her right around here".

The mare neighed as if she agreed with that statement.

Michael scoffed. "Come on, finish with that and let's get going."

Michael had already finished readying his horse and was now starting to take him outside the stable. Robert took the reins of his mare and they slowly made their way out too.

"So", Robert said once they were outside, firmly gripping his mare's reins "race?"

"Sure". He couldn't see Michael from his position, but Robert was sure he was grinning.

"Come on, girl", he gently patted the mare's neck "let's show these two who's the boss.

Ready to beat your brother? You know the way!" As if on cue, both he and Michael got on their horses simultaneously (Michael's stallion was becoming eager too) and took off.

Robert's mare soon took the lead, Robert whispering words of encouragement from time to time, sometimes turning around to taunt Michael too.

Robert heard Michael's horse getting closer, but he didn't bother to push his mare further, allowing Michael to reach his side instead. "Don't think I'm going to let you win" Robert warned, "I just thought it was unfair to leave you so far behind".

"Yeah, sure."

They didn't finish the race, they just continued the rest of the way riding side by side, mostly in silence; a wave of relief washed over Robert every time Michael decided to break it. He felt still too awkward, like he didn't know what to say, to do so himself.

They talked again about what they had done in the two weeks they spent apart, they talked about what they expected to do in the days to come; they spent some words on their friends, their family (Michael was outraged, as always, by the way Robert's parents kept treating him, no matter how many times Robert told him it didn't matter). They even talked a bit about

Eliza and Maryse, and Robert couldn't say who was more uncomfortable. Still, what he could feel was that all the conversation felt shallow, somehow lacking; he was saddened to see that there was a very clear gap between them, a distance that they didn't seem able to close. Looking at Michael, at the way Michael looked back at him, at the way he kept trying to reach him (as if he, too, felt that there was something pulling them more and more apart), Robert wished he could fix things. He hoped there was still a chance to get back what they once had shared.

He hoped there was still time.

Chapter End Notes

Last, but not least, a very special, huge (and I mean HUGE) thank you to my beautiful, sweet darling friend Sasha for walking with me through this process. I really couldn't have done this without you <3 thanks for putting up with me!

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