

Holland clutched the letter in his paws, trying his best not to poke his claws into the several sheets of paper despite the strength with which he held them. Fifteen minutes, he'd been sitting here, and yet that felt like it had been at least two and a half hours. Because of that time and the pounding of his heart in his chest, he'd had to focus all his energy into gripping this letter as tightly as he could, or else his legs would get up and force him to leave the dorm before Beauxmont got back.

That was his brother. This letter, a good six or seven handwritten pages long, had been written by Holland himself after being prompted to release his thoughts by a certain... *event* from his twin. Beaux went into class before Holland did, and got back after; that was just the way the schedule worked out for someone like him, interested in teaching. Extra sessions, a couple four-hour sections that counted toward his credits as being one hour each.

Beaux had complained about that many times before, and even if Holland was bent over his desk with his nose in his own studies while he did so, he always kept one ear cocked to listen.

Every time the wolf-bear hybrid heard footsteps from outside the closed door, his entire body froze up of its own accord, and his heart couldn't decide whether it wanted to quicken further or stop entirely. Every time, though, those footsteps just passed on by, and left him to release a shuddering breath he hadn't known he was holding.

When that doorknob finally *did* jiggle, rattle, click with being unlocked... Holland slid down to the floor off his bunk and came forward a little, holding his letter in front of him. If he didn't do this as soon as he could, what little confidence he had would leave him, and then he might never do it. That was how it always went in the past. This time, though, he had his thoughts written down on paper, as they were while he'd been on his own. This would hopefully be a lot more coherent than if he were to make this confession verbally.

Just like usual, Holland's heartbeat picked up again upon seeing his brother's face and muzzle, though Beaux apparently had something else on his mind and took a full two steps into the dorm before he noticed the wolf-bear in front of him. Then, the surprise on his face turned to confusion turned to something like concern. Before he knew what he was doing, Holland had pushed the letter against his brother's chest.

"B-Beauxmont, I... there's this, um... I want you to..."

His twin, more bear than wolf unlike the opposite in himself, looked down at the papers under his thick paw. He lifted them away from his chest and peered at them, lifting them to the light. "This for me, Holl?"

So simple, so... easy. Holland cleared his throat. "Yeah. It is. Will you, um... sit down with me?" As he back up towards the kitchen, he bumped the back of his bare foot against the wall, and briefly stumbled along the tile floor.

Beauxmont followed at first, but slowed down after opening the letter. Holland could see his eyes, scanning side to side, looking over his handwriting with his lips silently forming those words.

"Holland..." he said after a while. "What is this?"

The wolf-bear couldn't find an answer for him. Instead, he just beckoned to the seat across the dinner table.

"Just... just read it," he managed. *Before I lose my nerve.* "Please." Those first few sentences remained in his head, after so many days of looking over them and trying to decide this was the right thing to do, and if this was the right way to word things.

Thankfully, though, Beauxmont did as asked. The chair creaked beneath his weight, and he settled his elbows on the surface of the table...

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There's something to be said about that brother-brother relationship, isn't there? You're aware of it as a kid since it's always there, since you're always there, and then as a young teen that relationship strains and wanes, from a teenager's natural want to rebel against everything... and then afterwards, like a kind of glue, it solidifies into something stronger, something you don't have to test to know. Maybe it's because we're twins, but I've always felt that what you and I have is a bit different from our other siblings. I've always thought of you as - Beaux squinted; Holland had tripped over his thoughts and words right there, and had taken up the rest of the line writing something down and then crossing it out - closer to me, more approachable, more likable. More lovable.

Is that weird?

I was always there for you, and for the longest time, you were always there for me. Right from the start. I felt like I could tell you almost everything, and I also feel like you DID tell me almost everything. Almost. I was there behind you the whole way, up until where we are now. After all, I AM the reason you got caught way back in sixth grade with that one fennec from gym. More words crossed out, this time an entire sentence. Feels weird to write it down. You know what you were doing. That's one of those things that I'm sure you'd wish would just fall out of everyone's memory, right? I hope so, too. Our parents never mentioned it again, so... hopefully.

I know I was pushing you in that. I've always tried to push you for one thing or another, but I've never just come out and said what I really, truly desire to. Instead I just end up frustrating you, angering you, hurting you... but, hell, you'd be as much a liar as me if you said I didn't try my best.

It's not like the opportunities haven't come up. By God, they most certainly have. I've just never had the balls to take those opportunities.

There was that time we were younger, when you were chopping vegetables for the soup that night - I remember it was a kind of albondigas, and you had a neat pile of carrots beside you and a fresh stalk of celery under your paws. You looked up after I'd said something, still cutting, and you missed, and... honestly, I think it was the look on my face rather than the pain that let you know something had happened. You looked at me with confusion at how quickly I made my way over to you, and then you realized. You realized when I wrapped the towel around your paw, and I could feel the jolt of pain shoot up your back.

You leaned on me, Beaux. That's all I've ever wanted from you: I want you to lean on me and to squeeze my paw tight, just like you did that day you almost chopped your damn thumb off. That

time, though, I felt conflicted for a totally different reason: that time, I didn't care about you finding out how I felt, I didn't care about how you might respond. I just cared that you were going to be okay.

All of that happened right in the middle of worrying about grades, and about getting a job, and a thousand other things, but... I hadn't felt an emotion so strong as in that moment, holding you tight, feeling you shake against me. Papa and Dad heard your shout and burst in, and took you from me to get you fixed up. Don't get me wrong, I'm glad they did, but - God, did I ever want to be the one to help you. They told me to finish up the soup and to get everything ready, but... when I went back over, a little bit of your blood had seeped into the wood of the cutting board, and remained along the blade of the knife. I went and waited outside the bathroom instead, every sob of yours of each little "oh, calm down, it's going to be okay" from them tugging at my heart.

And when you came out, you kind of jumped a little, like you were surprised to see me there. On any other day, I'd be scared to do what I did then, but my heart overpowered my mind, and next thing I knew I had my arms around you and was squeezing you against me. I remember you hugged me back, holding that wounded paw away so as not to cause any more pain, and then - within a few seconds, we were done.

But, from you, that was just a brother's hug, wasn't it?

And then some time later during an assembly in the gym, I remember Kieran made fun of you in front of everyone else in our year. You'd just gone up to get your award, so I don't think you heard the first part of it, but he made sure to speak loud enough for everyone to hear. (You know how he always was. Not surprising he ended up where he did.) He said you were a freak for loving math as much as you did (and still do!), called you a teacher's pet... and said some less-than-okay things about Mr. Hannity, too, but I don't really care as much about that.

I was sitting three rows down from him, and he knew as well as I did that I could hit him square in the jaw with my own math textbook, "Understanding Algebra 2" as opposed to your "Introductory Precalculus" at the time. He met my eyes as he said it, and I'm sure he could see my knuckles whitening on it. This was another different fire burning in my heart, different from when you'd hurt yourself.

To this day, I'm still not sure whether I made the right choice in staying quiet. That fire burned down and turned to cold, painful ice, watching you lurch your way back up the stairs after getting your award. I could tell you were trying to hold back tears, especially with everyone snickering and looking at you. We both got detention for standing up and leaving right then, but I don't care. At least they let us sit next to each other, and I think that's all you needed at that time. Someone to be with you.

In detention, we weren't allowed to talk. You had your head down on your desk and eyes closed... and I reached over and patted your shoulder, and gave you a little smile. It hurt that you didn't return it, but it was only after we got home that I found out it wasn't your fault for that.

You tried to get away from me, to go and sulk on your own, but by God, this time I wouldn't let you. You just kind of looked at me, and I didn't know what to do other than hug you. So I did. And I felt you hug tightly back, still with a little bit less pressure on that one paw. That had become a habit while you were waiting for it to heal - you still do it.

The words just kind of fell out of my mouth, fast and awkward, since I hadn't prepared them in advance and was just saying what I truly, honestly felt. I told you that what you liked wasn't up for anyone to ridicule, and that none of that would matter in a few years - or, hell, in a few weeks. I told you that nobody can make you feel bad if you don't let them.

You leaned back a little bit and looked at me, and you tried not to cry. You tried so hard. You'd been holding it back all day, and here we were alone, just you and I... you held me tighter than I'd ever felt before, you shook harder than anything else, you sobbed into my shoulder.

I didn't know that those tears were for more than just Kieran's jokes and mockery that one day. I didn't know about the bullying you'd been through, about the bruised ribs you hid from me and Papa, about how you saved up your allowance for two months so you could replace a textbook of yours that someone tore apart, right in front of you. I didn't know that that time you locked yourself in your room for two days while "sick" was actually to hide how your nose just wouldn't stop bleeding after someone had held you up after school.

And I still held you just as tight as you did me, and rubbed your back the way you like, and tried to keep myself from nuzzling you like Dad used to do to us when we were cubs. I wanted to grab your paws and hold them tight, and kiss your cheek and really let you know that it was going to be okay, but... that's where the fear came in and stopped me. Whether my heart was pounding from the worry, from the fear, or from the stark exhilaration of being so close to you, I couldn't tell. I still don't know.

Then fast forward. You and I are both in college now, at the same school. You're becoming more and more like Papa, with his eyes and his laugh and his body ("I'll make it to the gym one day," you know he always says, "but that day shall not be today"). You're going to be a teacher! You remember the look on his face when you told him? "Just like me, son!" He was so excited. There was no way he hadn't known already, but it still meant a lot to him, to hear it in your voice and your words. Dad was ecstatic, too, both of them so proud of you. Can't forget our other siblings, our younger brothers and sisters, but - first things first, right? I mean, technically, you ARE his firstborn. By about two and a half minutes on me, sure, but it still counts.

It was kind of rocky, getting there. Money was of course an issue, so after some considering, you decided to go to the local community college first, get your general requirements out of the way. I followed. That done, you went and picked your university, somewhere reputable and close-by to start off... and I followed. I annoyed you a little bit, asking what you were planning, where you were going, when you think you'd go there. For some time, I could feel that bond between us start to stretch and weaken. You started to think of me less as your inseparable twin brother, and more as your annoying little sibling. You growled, you sighed, you rolled your eyes, and asked why the hell I want to be close to you all the time.

To be honest, I didn't have an answer for that. I still don't. That's just what I want. But I told you it was because I wanted to be close to the action. It was an answer, and you took it.

You'd cooled down a bit once the actual enrollment period came around, enough to consider and then accept trying to get me as your roommate, all through that first semester. We hadn't shared a room since we were cubs, back when we lived at the old house. I was excited to have some time alone with you, to be able to sit and work in the same room. I still don't fully vibe with your taste in music, but I have to say, there was something... soothing, almost, in hearing it

quiet from that little desk speaker of yours, while you leaned over your desk across the room and studied.

I was excited to get time alone with you... and then I hardly ever got any. I know I'm not justified or right in it, but it hurt me deep that first time you brought a girl back with you. You kind of looked at me, and I kind of looked back, and I know you expected me to understand that brotherly signal. You probably expected a sly, successful grin like the one you gave me in return, probably expected that upward nod, that eyebrow-raised. Instead, I had to make sure that the pain in my chest didn't make its way up to my muzzle.

Some of the girls you brought back didn't even know you had a roommate, I don't think. I'd climb into bed early, and tug the blankets up - and when I heard the door and two sets of footsteps, I'd just pull my pillow over my head and squeeze myself tighter together. I'd pretend that I didn't hear the thumping of your bed across the room, or her panting gasps and your terse grunts. Some of the ones that stayed for longer than a night, for a week, or a month, or two... I saw how you looked at them. And each of those felt like an unrighteous knife in my heart, a shiv of jealousy always reminding me that I can't have you.

That's the way it works, though. By now you know as well as I do that love is selfish.

I knew those feelings for what they were at that point. I'd been scared of them at first, I'd thought it wasn't right. Emotions don't follow logic, though, and God, did those emotions feel right. Every time I thought about you, every time I saw you smile and heard your laugh, every time I got back to the dorm and picked up your scent on the air, a little ray of sunshine warming my scared little heart.

More than once, you asked why I never brought anyone back. "You're plenty good-looking," you told me, sincerely so. I could see it in your eyes. "Y'oughtta have at least as many girls on ya as I do." I'd brought some friends over once or twice, Crayton from chemistry, Kyle from calculus, Alira and Justin from history.

But I knew what you meant. It'd be hard not to. You wondered why I never brought over anyone that meant something to me.

Well, thing is, I always DID have someone nearby, someone who meant more than anyone else. You just never knew.

Never once have I felt this way with anyone else, this way I feel about you. You were the first in my mind and the first in my heart. Believe me - I've never lied to you, except that one time I told you I got detention in middle school, just because I wanted to wait for you to finish your after-school club and make sure I could walk you home safe - I'd tried to funnel that interest and desire to someone else. I looked, I tried to find someone that burned as brightly in my eyes as you, but... it's hard to find a substitute when all you could ever want is right there next to you, every day.

I told myself what I'd told you when you didn't get into your first choice of college. "Don't lose hope". It's that simple, and that easy. It took a while, but over time, I started to notice something about the girls you brought back... and for a while, I'm not sure if you yourself noticed it. They all had dark fur, dark like mine.

Green eyes. Guess who.

And, something that really could just be marked off as a matter of taste: they were a bit brusque, a bit rough, traditionally somewhat “masculine”. They picked up from you the jokes and slang that you’d picked up from me.

Of course I thought I was looking too deeply into it, that this was all just silly coincidence, that my damn jealous heart and my “there’s still hope” mind were trying to find something, anything to keep me balanced. All of that worry fell apart, then, when you brought HIM back to the dorm.

Him. That was the important part. At first I thought he was just another friend of yours, another one of your soccer teammates... but then I saw him look down the hall before coming in, that same look that your girls always had. That kind of quick, nervous “I hope I don’t get caught doing this” look, the kind that instantly gave away just what they’re trying to hide.

I don’t think I can put into words how seeing that look made me feel. I was over on my bunk trying to study for history when you got back with him, and once I got over my surprise at seeing him - he nodded a hello at me but said nothing, and I couldn’t get myself to wave - a sort of bubbling rage filled my chest. Were I petty, I’d have stayed in the dorm all night and stay up late, just so he couldn’t do to you what I’d wanted to for so long.

But I DID have things to do, and as such left maybe twenty minutes later. By the time I got back, he was gone, and you were spraying air freshener around the room. We both have some wolf in us, Beaux, where I got the greater portion; if that bear nose of yours could pick it up, you should’ve known that I could still smell it too. That kind of rich, heavy musk, mixed masculine arousal, your familiar scent on top of his unfamiliar one. Smelling yours, it was tough for me to hide my own interest.

Over time, that anger at this other guy for getting a chance with you that I’d never had turned instead to a brighter hope, more powerful than anything before. Here you were, interested in another male. You hadn’t shown that side to me yet. That had been just another barrier between myself and what I wanted, and then - hell, you tumbled into that barrier and tore it right down, and came that much closer to me.

You had your shirt off when I got back, so all I saw upon coming back into the dorm was you half-bent over your bed, jeans a little bit tight on you, the lines of your back visible beneath your fur. Thank God you weren’t looking at me, then, or else you would have seen me eyeing you and the unkempt bed, and lifting my nose to the air to drink deeper of your rich scent, the same one I’d smelled so many times after you’d had your girls over.

You know, last semester, I was quite glad your first period always started before mine. That gave me a little extra time to stay in bed and deal with some... Here, it had taken Holland a while to find the right word. He’d kept the pen pressed to the paper throughout the entire thought process, leaving a thick, sticky black ink blot between the lines. ...distractions, brought on by that lingering scent of yours.

I didn’t do anything about it. I didn’t say anything about it, though maybe I should have. Instead, I just sat at my desk and read the same one paragraph of my textbook, over and over again, and still couldn’t remember what it was I’d just read. I finally had as good a chance as ever to

confess things to you, especially knowing you liked guys too, but... like I said, I've never had the balls to take those opportunities.

There I was, feeling stronger for you than ever before, and I still could do nothing. You had no idea, I think. You didn't even happen to look at me until it was time for dinner. Honestly, I'm kind of glad; I don't know what you would've seen on my muzzle and in my eyes if you had.

You might have noticed me taking my dinner back to my desk, then, to start working on something. You probably thought it was just more homework. Well... let me just say that it took a week and a half for me to finish writing this letter, starting on that night. I just could no longer stand the thought of you doing something like that with someone else again, without knowing just how I feel, and how I've felt about you.

I still don't know what you'll say or do. A thousand outcomes have entered and left my mind, and I don't know what to think or expect. That's always the hardest part about something like this, and has always been what's held me back after all of those opportunities. The fear and the worry. What if you push me away, what if you shut me out? What if you're disgusted, and freaked out, and hate me? I don't know if you'll love me the same, or if you'll love me back. If you'll love me at all anymore.

So, here you go. It's time I tell you.

*By your side
Forever and Always,
Holland*

~ ~ ~

He couldn't quite tell when Beauxmont finished reading the letter. The bear-wolf remained sitting where he was, eyes half-lidded in reading, focused in a few places and flicking back and forth between them. His ears, his face, his whiskers told Holland nothing about his thoughts or went on in his head, and his body language provided no help, either.

That is, until he abruptly stood up, causing the chair to scrape back across the tile floor, and folded the several pages back into thirds. He avoided eye contact, and then seemed to have trouble figuring out the right words.

"I..." Beaux had to clear his throat. "Holl, this... I mean, I..."

God. Back in high school, opening the letter to figure out whether he'd made it into this college or not; coming out to his parents (which really brought him far more stress than it should have, looking at their living situation); when him passing precalculus last semester depended on him getting a solid 85 on the final... none of those times could even compare to the powerful, thrumming stress he felt now, squeezing a cold hand around his throat and heart. If he'd felt this after gym class, there would also be a legitimate concern in his mind that he was about to pass out.

Felt at least fifteen degrees hotter in here, though neither of them had touched the thermostat since they'd set it for the week on Monday.

"I'll be back," he said over his shoulder, already making his way to the door. Holland's heart plummeted a hundred miles, down into a colder pit than he knew he had in his chest. "You, um... stay here, okay, Holland? I just need to... need to..."

No conclusion. The door clicked, creaked open, then shut behind him. And Holland was again alone in the dorm, just as he'd been for most of the day leading up to this. His letter, each page picked through and standing slightly off from the one before it, rested on the edge of the table with the corners fluttering gently under the air conditioning.

Stay here, Beaux had said. So he did. He remained where he sat, claws digging steadily deeper ruts in the wood of the table, tail curled tightly around the back of the chair. At this rate he'd have to schedule a dentist's appointment, with how hard he clenched and ground his teeth... and was he dehydrated? Or did this sudden pounding headache just come from - well, from Beaux's response?

Might as well pack up and move out right now, Holland told himself. But still he sat still for a while, and when his restless legs finally did force him up, all he could make himself do was pace back and forth, back and forth along the slightly-larger joint bedroom of theirs that made up the bulk of the dorm. Holland stayed here because Beauxmont had told him to, and there was no way in hell that he'd disobey his brother. If anything, he could give him that.

Just like when he'd been waiting for Beaux to get home the first time, these few minutes felt like several hours instead. In reality it probably took less than ten minutes, but Holland was still halfway towards a full-on anxiety attack once he head the doorknob again.

Hey, maybe there's still time to pitch myself out the window and run off. This IS only the second floor, after all.

Classic train wreck scenario: don't want to look for fear of what he might see, couldn't resist looking out of curiosity. And Beauxmont's expression went against his expectations, and just left him with his heart and head confused all over again.

The bear-wolf had his arms around himself, fingers drumming along the thick fur near the opposite elbow; his whiskers and tail continued twitching and flicking, never staying in the same place, never still; his mouth tensed, pursed, pressed, relaxed, as if he had a thousand words running through his mind and couldn't decide on a single one to give voice to. And his eyes - misty, cloudy, reddish at the corners like he'd been crying, or was just about to open up.

When he spoke, his voice cracked: "Holland? Can you - can you come here, please?"

This time, it was a lot easier to step forward towards him... and Beaux closed the distance between them, throwing his arms around his brother and yanking him into a deep, warm hug, both of their heartbeats and shivering bodies echoing through the other. Beauxmont's breath, inhaled sharply, hissed in Holland's ear... and then he let it back out, a shuddering sigh halfway between a sob and a turn of nervous laughter.

Holland's voice failed him at first, and then he didn't get a chance to try again to ask what was wrong. He didn't get a chance simply because, once he pulled out of the hug, Beaux's paws found their way to either side of his muzzle - and held him in place to receive a kiss, firm and warm against his lips.

Talk about a fire in his chest, talk about powerful electricity jolting through him. Talk about sudden, near-irresistible desire and arousal, enough that he couldn't resist squeezing his arm around his twin's lower back and tugging him towards him, this sudden *energy* thrumming through him and revitalizing his confidence to a point greater than it had ever before been.

Holland hadn't kissed someone before. Not like *this*. This... *God*, he almost went ahead and fainted anyway right afterwards, the slightly-salty taste of Beaux's saliva clinging to his tongue and upper lip.

The wolf-bear's heart told him what to say, once he found his voice.

"So - so you... *do* you love me, Beaux? Like I love you?"

His twin's sudden laugh caught him by surprise, and made him jump in his arms. Then, Beaux closed that distance again with another few kisses, one to his forehead, one to his nose, another to his lips.

"What do you think?" he cooed, and drew his nose up along Holland's cheek. "You spent all that time building up the confidence to say it yourself, so - mind if I borrow some of that confidence? Of course I love you."

From there, their lips met again, and again, and again.