

Something about this particular night seemed to fill Jhim with warmth despite the breeze. The field grass swayed on for miles, having been grazed and regrown an infinite amount of times since the last time he tended to the livestock it harboured. Memories of his childhood bubbled to the surface as he looked up to the stars. The sky was bright tonight, far brighter than usual. Moments like this didn't find him often anymore. Jhim savoured the peace; moments like this were short-lived, contrary to his younger days. The long afternoons he'd spent hiding in the plains, the scrapes and bruises riddling his skin every time he failed yet again to mount some cow or goat---those days were gone now. The black and blue, even the scars he'd thought would never fade, had been pulled away from him with time. Wounds ten times deeper followed them.

Whispers of the grass shifting and crunching drew his attention from such nostalgia. The steps had familiar pacing and weight, but Jhim found himself turning his head to check who it was nonetheless. Something about meeting Tea in these fields after both of their maturations had always unsettled him. There was some feeling he couldn't place; It was some kind of emotion adjacent to finding a family photo with a dead relative. Were they still the same kids in that field? What had the two of them become? Jhim had never wanted to be a soldier; he rarely found joy in it, even now. Tea was different, however, so he never mentioned it.

"It's late out now. Are you off the hook from the *triples* tomorrow?" Tea asked as she moved to sit beside him. Both of them knew he rarely spoke first, so neither expected it.

"I don't know. Probably not. I just couldn't sleep."

Tea hummed in acknowledgement. Both of them paused to look out into the never-ending sky, scattered with more stars than either could count.

"It's beautiful out," Jhim commented.

"It is, isn't it? I can't believe we used to spend so much of our time out here. It feels so far away now, like we're not supposed to be here."

"Technically, we're not. But technically, we can be, anyways."

Jhim didn't know what time it was. It might be two hours after sunset, or the sun might break at any second. He couldn't pinpoint why, but everything about him scattered in his room earlier this night. It took time to slowly bring it back together, especially with how fatigued he was.

"Tea, do you remember when it was just us three out here?" he began. "I remember when I didn't even want to fight; I just wanted to care for the livestock for the rest of my life. I remember how quickly my mom and dad shut that down."

Tea gave a half-hearted chuckle, "Well, you were just a kid. We had a great time out here. It's normal to want to keep the good times forever."

"At least it didn't go to hell. When we started training, I was so scared I was going to lose Shiem, or even you. I didn't want to be alone. I'm glad you're still here with me, Tea. Even though we're all different people from back then."

"You were never gonna lose me. Not when we outgrew field work, not when I changed, or you and Shiem changed---nothin'. And now you've got a chance with Costa, too. ...And Nox. Even that Blair kid that comes around sometimes."

As Tea finished speaking, she leaned into Jhim. Her arm wrapped around his shoulder and pulled him close to her. Her warmth seeped into him as he rested his head on her. Jhim just couldn't get the past out of his head. The gaze he'd held on the sky for most of the night tilted downwards to the long stretch of greenery and dark horizon. He knew where this conversation was going.

"Costa's a good kid, y'know," Tea continued. "You should give him a chance. I know his family life's a little weird, and his mom's a total *single*, but he's actually really smart. He's just... not sure who he's supposed to be. We all know that feeling."

She'd been lobbying for Costa for the past few weeks after Nox first introduced him. She'd taken him under her wing pretty much instantly, probably because she knew better than anyone the feeling of being the only person out of place. Everyone knew he was softer, probably because there wasn't any authoritative figure in his household. He'd never done anything wrong to any of them, and sometimes he was even pleasant company. Even so, Costa wasn't supposed to be the topic of the night. Jhim suppressed a groan and shifted slightly. The best he could try to do was shut down the conversation as quick as possible without making Tea aggressive. A simple 'I don't wanna talk about this' wasn't going to cut it.

He looked away from Tea's general direction. He needed an easy way to explain it, something that wasn't going to sound like a deflection.

"Look, we both know this isn't gonna get us anywhere. He's too... what is it."

"Insecure?" she interjected.

Jhim looked back at her briefly, shaking his head. "No, not that. Indecisive. He's too indecisive; I can see it in his face." He looked away again and found it in himself to relax. His words came out in a calm, slow tone, "I can't trust someone who's indecisive. It's not that he's a bad kid---you know that. But one look at him and you know that he's one of those guys who can get his ass tricked. He's got too much sympathy. If a single resourceful alien finds him on field, we're done. He can make solutions strong enough to melt a hole through bone. A little too much sympathy for one of those *things* and we're his next victims, Tea."

"That's why he needs people to show him how to stand up for himself, Jhi'. If he keeps feeling ostracised, the higher the chance gets that he *will* want to turn on us. It's just log---"

"You know I can't. You know it's not just some goal I can just... make, and then power through. I can't trust him, Tea. And if I can't trust him, I'm not gonna get close to him. He's a cool guy, sure. But we're acquaintances until he stops acting like a *NoCo* sympathiser, okay?"

Jhim pulled away from Tea. This conversation had been coming up here and there for the better part of a month, and it wasn't something he wanted to deal with at this hour. Tea was stubborn, and he was well aware of that, but he wished she'd do what he did and agree to ignore something if she knew the other person wasn't going to change their mind on it. Jhim's reaction earned him some sort of look from her. He couldn't quite bridge the gap between telling if she was offended and on the verge of anger or just disappointed. Her anger was far more than he could handle in his current state, so he began to stand. He brushed the dirt, ants, and grasses off himself. Tea did the same.

"I just don't understand why you have such a big deal with Costa," she shrugged. "Nox literally deceives people all the time on field. Nobody even knows where they come from. They live in between borders like an absolute freak, have a crazy ass goal... Hell, they're even on good terms with the southerners. They're barely a *double* and they talk to *triples* like they've got any say. How can you trust someone so fucking weird and not a kid who very obviously needs help?"

The sourness between the two of them stained Jhim's mouth. His eyebrows pulled together, features holding a softly knit annoyance on them. He laid his eyes on Tea's, ignoring the crick it was going to put in his neck. Her skin reflected the cool hues of the night sky as if she was a painting. Her beauty didn't stop her from swallowing up what might've been a good night. Her presence consumed the star-splattered sky and fond childhood memories alike, as if she was a black hole of frustration and determination. Her gravity tugged on every fibre of Jhim's being, begging him to just *give Costa a chance*. The mere thought of doing so made his skin crawl.

"Nox is different. They may be a character, but they know where they stand. They have a goal. I know they're not going to hurt me. I *know* they're not gonna turn, just like how I know you're not and Shiem's not. I don't care if they don't get how they're supposed to be acting; I barely get all the nuances myself. I just play it strict; they don't play it at all. You wouldn't get it because you understand everything fine. And Costa... Costa's not like us. He also gets everything; he's a fucking genius! He could probably get a conclusion off one dissection that takes me five to make. The thing is, he doesn't know where he's at, or where he's going. If I'm gonna be friends with him, I need him to know *where he's going*."

Tea's expression hardened. Jhim didn't have enough energy to return the gesture. Instead, he stood firm in his place. She could kill him in an instant if she wanted to. Tea's strength and height far outmatched his. Even though he knew he was faster than her, it wouldn't counteract the fact they were both so close that either of them could close the gap in a second. When he was younger, he used to be terrified of getting hurt. No such sentiments plagues him now. He stood firm, almost emotionless, as he forced himself to break Tea's silence for the final time.

"*Why the fuck do you hate Nox so much?*"

Slowly, Tea stood straighter, towering over him. She pulled her shoulder blades back, cracking her spine, then turned to head back to the camp. She looked at him over her shoulder.

*"Because I don't think Nox is who they say they are. Especially not in regards to what they tell you."*

"I find *one* person that gets me, one person that makes me feel unconditionally safe, and you fucking hate it!"

The sheer rage Tea's statement invoked ripped through Jhim's exhaustion. His arm jerked forward and snatched Tea's wrist. Tea always avoided talking about Nox, and if he didn't grab her, she'd be walking away from him in a second. Everything he'd wanted to say to her before, all the arguments he rehearsed in his head at night came rushing out of him. Each sentence he spilt only fuelled his own anger further.

"I'm not mad that you're--"

"I get that you like me, Tea! I fucking *get it*, okay? And I'm sorry I don't like you back. We've covered this a million times and over! But that doesn't mean when I finally find someone else that you get to be pissy all the time! Do you even know how many times I've almost lost Nox because of *you*? Yes, Nox is weird as hell. Yes they're an absolute *single* freak! We all know that, okay?! We know it! But they have a vision! They're gonna do something that will get us out of this endless cycle of fighting. They're gonna save the fucking world. We answer to people that might as well be rotting in their skin. I've barely even seen our leader, and I know you haven't either! You might like the hunt, but we're gonna save all the kids now that don't, or the future ones that wouldn't! You have to get over that!"

"The fact you think Nox can do everything they promise is hilarious!" The laugh Tea gave only added more condescension to her tone. "You literally just agreed they're barely a *single*. If Nox becomes the leader, what're they even gonna do? Fight? They're about as useful as a mine kid in close combat! They're *using you* Jhim! They're using me, too, and Costa, and they're going to use that fuckin' Blair guy, too! You go with Nox, you're gonna be another star-scarred soldier face-down in a pit, Jhim! I don't want that for you! This isn't about me liking you; It might've been at first, sure, but it's not now. Nox is *not* who they say they are. And with the amount of trust issues *you* have, it's dick stupid you can't see that!"

*"I swear if you keep talking shit about Nox I'll run your head through a fucking pike."*

*"Do it!"*

Tea yanked her wrist back, breaking Jhim's grip by pulling it out of his reach. Jhim was stupidly unarmed, but he quickly realised he was grateful for it when he went to reach for his knife. Tea scowled as her eyes followed his movements for it. This time, Jhim could clearly read the enraged insult in her expression. She moved close, bending down to his level as best she could. They were barely eye-to-eye. He would've laughed at the height difference if he didn't want to gouge said eyes out.

She pressed a finger to his chest through his sweater, and her next sentences were spoken roughly under her breath.

*"You know where I live. You know what I sound like when I'm dead asleep. I know you could kill me without me even knowing it. You wanna do that, go the fuck ahead, Jhim. But until then, I'm going home. I need to untuck. Have fun walking your sorry four-foot tall ass all the way back to your cab!"*

The firm stare between them lasted for another moment before Tea stepped away, quickly walking back to the camp. A thousand phrases rushed through Jhim's head. He judged back and forth which one to shout for a moment, but didn't. Instead, he groaned, tilting his head up to the sky. Clouds had moved in during the span of their argument without him even noticing. The air had gotten brisker, too. He would've headed back, but he didn't feel like trailing behind Tea like a kicked dog. He sat back down, then laid back.

*'Should I have gotten the last word?' he thought to himself. 'No... that would've made it more than an argument.'*

As Tea moved farther away from him, the sounds of her travel grew quieter. Soon, silence enveloped Jhim once more. The peace of the evening was now tinted with unease and whatever remained of his adrenaline. Tiredness overtook him, but his thoughts ran until the final moment before sleep. At some point, he recognised where he stood in the grand plane of time yet again; childhood bruises followed by deep wounds.

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## Language Context

Single/Double/Triple: Slang derived from power rankings based on earring set amount.

- Single is similar to idiot, double and triple are most likely to actually be referring to a ranking/role

NoCo: Slang for the 'northern colony' (north city).

Cab: Many youth refer to their cabin houses as cabs.