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Just Breathe

IFRIT KNEW HE'D FUCKED up.

Knowing didn't make it any less irritating though.

See, the main fault lay with him still being slightly too blunt with his words, but it was also the fault of his fucking annoyingly overprotective classmates. It'd been touching, their concern for him after... after everything that'd happened. They'd been so kind when he came back, and he'd been beyond moved that they'd all been willing to literally lay down their lives for him, but it'd been *two months*. He still needed his alone time and his privacy, neither of which he could get with them all buzzing around like he'd drop dead any second of the day. So he'd finally snapped and yelled at everyone to leave him alone for one fucking minute.

They'd taken it well, honestly. Seemed almost as relieved as he did that things were going back to normal. None of them had begrudged him the explosion; even Phoenix had left the floor for a few hours without so much as a pointed comment about his temper. However, the issue was that Kirin still thought "everyone" applied to him.

It was his own damn fault. He knew that Kirin was... self-deprecating at best. Considering he'd been the absolute worst

about hovering, he probably thought that it'd been directed at him specifically, instead of exactly the opposite. But Kirin was usually so good at reading him that Ifrit had naively thought he'd somehow know exactly what Ifrit had meant.

Unfortunately, that meant this was the first time in two months that he was trying to fall asleep alone.

The giant bed that his classmates had made in the common area during his disappearance had remained, and several of them had been sleeping there for the past weeks; Clidna, Adlivun, Invisibitch (*Ness*, Kirin's voice corrected him in his own head), and Yantra had been practically living on their floor most days. Tonight though— tonight he was back in his room for the first time, and he felt like he couldn't breathe.

The window was open all the way, and he knew that Pressure had installed extra air filtration and ventilation in all their rooms. Even so he could barely close his eyes for a few minutes before it felt like the air was settling in his lungs, dense, charcoal-heavy air pressing down, down, down, and his eyes would snap open. He'd sit up feeling like his heart was trying to escape his chest, his mouth dry and head pounding. One time it wouldn't stop until he stuck his whole fucking head out the window and took long, greedy gulps of the cold March air. It was well past midnight and with the first day of classes starting tomorrow, he knew what he needed to do.

Before he could open the door to the hallway, he heard a slight thump outside. With the window open, he knew all too well that it'd been the sound of someone jumping onto his balcony.

Instantly, he rolled out of bed, pulling all the carbon in the air around himself. It wasn't much— see, it *had* all been in his head— but it would be enough should they try to grab him. He breathed out, forcing more into the air, ignoring the way his growing sense of the room made his hands shake. It was odd,

the way he could sense the gas, the way he could *feel* the shape of a space through it. The extra supply he'd just channeled butted up against the door, the sensation of glass and metal as real as if he'd brushed it with his own fingers. More intense, even.

Slowly, careful not to make a sound, he crept forward, toward the table at the end of his bed where he'd left his ignition rings. It was too stupid, he'd told himself, to sleep with them on, such a risk of setting himself on fire if they'd accidentally sparked and set his sheets ablaze. Still, a tiny part of his brain that was stuck deep in a tunnel had whispered that he should do it anyway.

The room flickered out of his awareness, and even though that'd been all he wanted mere minutes before, he frowned. He needed that carbon, needed that poison so he could fight his way out, but it was depleting rapidly, far too quickly for it to just be from the window. It was almost like there was a fire outside, greedily consuming it from the air—

He stormed over to the door and wrenched it open, causing Kirin to fall backward into his room.

Kirin looked guilty as he lay on the floor, his golden hair splayed around his head like a halo, made even more enchanting by the way it seemed to capture the wan moonlight. Or starlight was probably more apt, given the way it glimmered. His eyes were slightly red at the corner, a sure sign he was tired, and his mouth had fallen open into a small "o" at being caught.

"What the fuck are you doing?" It took Ifrit's brain a minute to remember how to form words.

"...leaving you alone?" Kirin didn't move off the floor, eyes roaming Ifrit's face to see if he was angry. Ifrit hated how he could see Kirin realizing he hadn't been asleep, hated the way those dark eyes seemed to see everything all the time. "But I was too anxious; I couldn't sleep."

Maybe Ifrit should've been angry, should've been annoyed that Kirin thought he wouldn't be okay after just a few hours apart. But Ifrit was far too distracted by realizing that Kirin was wearing one of *his* shirts.

It shouldn't have been surprising, since Ifrit had happily lent it to him just a week or so before. Kirin was trying to get over his fear of their friends seeing his scars, starting with changing out the ridiculous tank tops he always wore. However, since Ifrit hadn't wanted to leave campus, Kirin hadn't either. And now Ifrit had to deal with Kirin wearing *his* clothes— which barely brushed the hem of Kirin's shorts— when they were truly alone for the first time since getting back.

Ifrit yanked him to his feet and pulled him inside, closing the door with perhaps more force than was necessary. He just hoped his face wasn't as red as it felt.

"Do you want me to go?" Kirin's voice was gentle, non-judgmental. He didn't even step farther into the room, waiting patiently for Ifrit to tell him what to do. Fuck.

"...no."

"Okay." Kirin smiled one of his blinding smiles, and then, for some reason, started heading for the door.

"I just said you could stay, dumbass." Ifrit was suddenly drowsy, Kirin's presence erasing his headache at once.

"I was just gonna get my—"

"Don't bother." Ifrit *knew* his face was red now. "We've been sleeping in the same bed for a month now."

An emotion flickered across Kirin's face faster than Ifrit could gauge it before fading back into his usual pleasant expression. Ifrit only hoped that his face was giving away just as little, that Kirin couldn't tell how hard his heart was pounding, how pathetically hopeful he was. The silence stretched between them, and try as he might not to, Ifrit read a thousand different things into that pause.

"Okay," Kirin agreed, his eyes never leaving Ifrit's face, "I'll stay."



They *had* been sleeping in the same bed, but Ifrit's was much smaller than the large pile of pillows in the common area. There was still enough space that they didn't touch— East Tech provided much roomier accommodations than most colleges— and Ifrit found himself wishing they were in a shitty twin instead.

Kirin wasn't any farther away than he'd been all the past nights, closer still than when he'd frequently sleep on Ifrit's floor. And yet he still felt too far away, like the thin strip of mattress between them was a whole sea that got wider with each passing second. A chasm of things that Ifrit hadn't dared ask about, had been afraid that he'd dreamed carving a line in the sand. The feeling that Kirin was both there and so far away briefly got lodged in his chest and his breath hitched.

Maybe that was why Kirin rolled over and opened his eyes, or maybe it was the uncanny way he seemed to know everything that Ifrit was thinking. His usual open expression eased some of the tightness in Ifrit's chest, and he found himself wishing, not for the first time, that he could bottle that calm and bring it with him forever.

"Do you want to talk?" He always made the invite sound like just that, something that could be turned down without judgment, without anger. There was never any pressure to be *anything* from him. Just *being* was enough, however unpleasant that might be.

"Don't fucking know what I'd say." Ifrit knew that was a lie, and hated even more that he'd turned away to look at the

ceiling so he couldn't tell if Kirin knew too. Maybe it was the way he'd moved, or maybe Kirin had shifted closer without him knowing, but his shoulder was brushing ever so slightly against Kirin's chest. The tiny amount of contact steadied him, and he let his eyes close for a moment, thinking that this would be enough. Could be enough.

"I didn't plan on sitting outside, you know." Kirin rarely managed to confess anything when Ifrit was looking him in the eye, and this time was no different. If Ifrit hadn't closed his eyes, they likely would've sat there in silence. "But I couldn't stop thinking about you in here alone and having a nightmare and not wanting to come get someone since you'd told everyone to leave and so I just... wanted to be there. In case you needed someone."

"You don't have to fucking apologize dumbass. You were right." Ifrit pressed the heels of his palms to his eyes, for *once* the gesture being in embarrassment and not because his head ached. The only time he didn't have a headache was when Kirin was around, metabolizing the toxic air that Ifrit created, and Ifrit would never fail to appreciate it. Just another reason Kirin was fucking perfect.

"I wasn't apologizing." There was an undercurrent to Kirin's voice that he didn't recognize and opened his eyes. They locked gazes and Ifrit lost his breath *again*. "I was just letting you know that I'm here for you. Always."

"Good." His brain managed to give him a single word, and apparently it was the right one, since Kirin relaxed fully. One of his legs nudged Ifrit's and Ifrit tried not to react as his heart nearly stuttered. It wasn't like they didn't touch all the time, but now, somehow it felt different. More... intimate.

Maybe it was the way Kirin had been looking at him lately. Before... everything happened there had been some uncertainty in his gaze, some worry, but it was gone now. Now Kirin

watched him unabashedly, with... well, if Ifrit had to put a name to it, he would say with longing.

He was terrified to let himself believe it.

"Why weren't you asleep?" Kirin finally came out and asked.

Ifrit ignored him for a minute, instead deciding to study his nails carefully, like there might be a secret hidden in them. Unfortunately, if there was, it was hidden beneath the cracking layer of black nail polish Clidna had painted on a few days before.

Kirin took his hand.

"Hey, talk to me." The *softness* of his voice ran through Ifrit like a knife, the genuine care twisting it in deeper. "I... I don't know how to help if you don't tell me what's wrong."

The fear, that familiar powerlessness, snapped Ifrit back to reality. Kirin's eyes were full of sadness, and it was his fault.

"You are helping. By being here." He wasn't lying, not even a little bit. This was what he needed, all of it. This was enough.

That was a lie, wasn't it? He wanted more.

Kirin was still watching him, still holding his hand so he couldn't use it to hide. Ifrit wished that he wasn't so expressive, that maybe Pressure should've taught him how to *hide* his emotions as well as wear them, but a quiet, secret part of him was glad that Kirin could see right through.

"...it feels like I can't breathe." He gave in under the weight of those eyes.

"When you're going to sleep?"

"Whenever I'm alone." He would've turned away if Kirin wasn't holding him in place forcibly with a single hand. A single gentle touch.

"I was surprised you let us hang onto you for so long."

"Yeah, well, at least you fucking idiots are good for something." He couldn't even muster any heat to his words. Odd how being around Kirin could do that to him.

"I'm here." If it hadn't been exactly what Ifrit needed to hear, he would've scoffed at Kirin for pointing out the obvious. "For however long you need, I'll be right here."

Instead, he just grumbled.

"You fucking better be."

Irritatingly, Kirin smiled at that. Ifrit hated that smile (he didn't).

To hide how much he didn't dislike it, Ifrit started to play with Kirin's fingers. He was always surprised by how rough they were, considering Kirin always moved with such strange grace, like he were a dancer instead of a bulldozer. They were a laborer's hands, calloused in different places than Ifrit's own.

"What did you do, before this?" Ifrit suddenly found himself asking. They weren't supposed to discuss anything about their lives before, but what did it matter now, when Kirin knew everything about Ifrit and Ifrit knew nothing about him?

"Lots of things. But I worked on a farm, mostly, and volunteered with the fire department when they needed it."

That was so fucking like him it was almost laughable.

"Should've known you were from the middle of fucking nowhere."

"You saw me on my first day out in the city, figured that would've given it away." He was quiet for a moment. "Guess you grew up here, then."

"We couldn't find you." The words tumbled out before Ifrit could think if it was a good idea to share. Before he could consider if Kirin wanted to think about when his father had died at all. "I asked Pressure to look for you, but they said you'd already been checked out of the hospital and your family asked the record to be sealed."

Whatever response Kirin had expected, it wasn't that. The surprise on his face was apparent, and when it melted into happiness, he almost seemed to glow.

"You looked for me?"

"You saved my life, dumbass. Of course I did." He couldn't stop himself from moving a little closer. "I never thanked you for that."

"It was hardly saving your life. I was a glorified jack post."

Ifrit closed the gap between them by smashing their foreheads together. Kirin had the fucking audacity to use his mien to not move from the impact, his eyes turning opalescent as he did. It didn't matter how many times Ifrit saw it, he never stopped thinking it was beautiful.

"You stopped a building from crashing down on my head. That's firstly, fucking impressive, and secondly, definitely saving my life."

"I wish I'd stayed awake though." Kirin didn't back away, their noses brushing slightly as he spoke. Ifrit's brain was stuck on the fact that he *didn't move away*. "Maybe if I'd talked to you then we could've... I don't know, kept in touch? Not that my mom would've wanted me to, but I would've tried to find a way."

"I would've beat your ass for talking shit about yourself before you could go and grow a whole ass complex over it."

Kirin laughed at that, and as he did, he wrapped Ifrit in his arms.

Ifrit... Ifrit *melted*.

It wasn't like Kirin didn't hug him, and he was always touching him— an arm around his shoulder, pulling him by the hand— but this was different with no people crowded around, with the moonlight streaming in the window and the pair of them so, so close. And it wasn't like *this* where Kirin was laughing again, and for the first time in months he didn't feel quite so numb inside, where the loss of Pressure was a dull ache instead of a sharp wound, and then suddenly Ifrit was crying.

Kirin didn't let go.

"That's it," he murmured, "let it out."

Ifrit didn't know why he was crying, whether it was happiness or sadness or just *relief*, but he did cry for long enough that Kirin's shirt was damp and his throat felt dry. Kirin was stroking his hair gently, kindly ignoring how much of a wreck Ifrit was, wrapping around him like a shield and creating a tiny space that was just for them.

"Better?" Kirin wiped the remaining tears off Ifrit's face as he looked up, absently running a finger along Ifrit's jaw once the tears were gone. He could've started crying all over again from how *nice* it felt, how *right* it felt.

"Mm."

"You haven't cried once since the funeral." Again, not an ounce of judgment.

"Haven't felt like crying."

"Ifrit, they're your friends; they're not going to be upset with you for grieving."

"It's not that." He struggled to find the words, not because he didn't know what he meant, but because he was ashamed. "When everyone's around... it's hard to even think about it. About her. I've never had friends like that before."

He took a breath.

"Like *this*. Like when we're together there's only here and now and everything's okay."

Kirin, as always, remained quiet, letting him finish his thought. Right now, Ifrit would've loved for him to say something, anything.

"It's just so fucking weird. Everything else feels... perfect. I have friends— though I'll fucking kill you if you tell them I said that— and I have... you."

Kirin didn't react at all, except, maybe, almost imperceptibly, tightening his grip.

"Sometimes I'll... forget that it happened at all. That when we

go to class tomorrow, she'll be there waiting, ready to piss me off in a way that no one else'll notice just because she thinks it's funny. She'll joke saying I should bring you home one of these days and I'll ignore her and come back here." The wave of grief swept over him, but he swallowed it down. "And I *thought* it was fine, that the stupid fucking therapy she made me go to for years was actually good for something and I could deal with it, but then you weren't around to make my stupid fucking mien harmless, and I was back in that room and I was choking and—"

He was silenced by Kirin tilting his chin up and pressing their foreheads together.

"Breathe."

Ifrit breathed.

"Keep going."

"...and it feels awful because most days I'm more upset about that than about losing her." Ifrit finished in a whisper. He knew that it was normal. Every therapist over the years had told him it was. Every therapist had said that it was normal that he, as a child, would've been more upset about his own kidnapping and imprisonment than the hundreds of thousands of people that'd died because of him, that it was human. It stood to reason then, that his second kidnapping and imprisonment would be more traumatizing than his mother's murder. Even then, and especially now, Ifrit was certain of one thing. Being human sucked ass.

"I'm not going to tell you that it's normal, or that you shouldn't feel bad because I know you know that. And it won't stop you from feeling that way. But I will tell you that she of all people would've understood and would've slapped you upside the head for feeling guilty about it." Kirin's hand had moved off Ifrit's chin and was instead carding through his hair. "It's just how trauma works. The physical thing is easier to process than

the emotional, so you're stuck on it. But you're not alone."

"Mm."

"And it just takes time. You need to feel safe again."

"Kind of hard to when *I'm* the fucking danger to be afraid of."

Kirin let out a hiss of breath, his arms tensing involuntarily, pulling Ifrit closer. Pressed chest to chest, Ifrit could feel how rapid Kirin's pulse was.

"Don't talk about yourself like that." Kirin's voice sounded raw, his hands gentle though he was holding on so tightly.

"Don't you dare say that."

"But it's true, isn't it?" The thought had been lurking at the edges of his brain, and finally saying it felt sour. "I fucking destroyed a city *twice* and both times I didn't have to do a fucking thing but *exist*."

"So what, you think you should be dead?"

Ifrit hesitated.

It was the wrong thing to do.

Kirin took the silence as confirmation, and suddenly Ifrit was on his back, Kirin kneeling over him, pulling him up by his chin.

"Don't you *ever* think this world would be better without you." Kirin's eyes were shining, his face set in a mask of desperation. Ifrit desperately wanted to erase the lines of misery that were carved around his eyes and bring back the laughter of just a few minutes before— why, *why* did he always ruin this?— but it was too late. "Do you hear me? My life would be so much worse if you weren't here."

"Your dad would still be alive." He didn't mean to throw it in Kirin's face, the words coming from a dark part of his heart that he thought he'd long since buried. He could tell they'd found their mark from the way Kirin dropped his hand in shock. "Pressure would still be alive. Aether wouldn't even exist—"

Kirin abruptly let go of his chin and walked away.

He didn't go far, just a few steps toward the door, but it was

enough to make the space feel cold. If Ifrit had thought the strip of mattress between them had felt far, this was an infinite void of space between them. Already Ifrit felt like the air was heavy around him, like his next breath would be his last. How pathetic was he? Of course he fucked it up, of course he would ruin the only good thing left in his life, of course—

A strangled sound tore him out of his self-pity spiral, and he was on his feet before he knew he had moved. Kirin was facing away from him, his hand over his mouth, his shoulders shaking as he bit back on a sob.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean—"

"*Stop* apologizing." Kirin turned back to face him with clouded eyes, pushing a hand through his hair as if he didn't know what else to do. "I just hate that you sound like me."

Ifrit didn't know what to say.

"I'm not good at this. You always knew what to do, and I just don't know how to be that for you." Kirin's hand stopped just short of touching Ifrit's face again, so Ifrit moved closer until the palm rested against his cheek. "You deserve so much better than what you've gotten, and it hurts so bad to hear you blame yourself. You were a *victim*. You did everything in your power to stop it, both times, nearly killing yourself *both times*, and if you're guilty then I am too because I *killed people to save you*."

Kirin pressed their foreheads together.

"Because I believe you are worth the world." Kirin spoke so softly, but Ifrit felt like even if his hearing aids had been turned off, he would've heard, just because he knew how every word coming out of that mouth sounded. Because he'd imagined that voice saying a million terrible corny phrases just like it before. "So please don't think I'm better without you."

"Okay." The word took too much effort to say. But how could he not believe it when Kirin looked at him like that?

"Promise?" Kirin was so close that his hair created a curtain

around their faces, making a small space that was just the two of them, cut off from the rest of the world. It'd grown back so quickly, like it'd never been cut in the first place. Long enough that standing there, heads pressed together like this, reminded Ifrit of a dark tunnel, of Kirin's tears on his face, and of something else he wasn't sure had truly happened.

"Promise?" Kirin asked again, his eyes anxiously searching Ifrit's.

"I fucking promise, okay?"

Kirin let out a shaky breath, the slight movement knocking their noses together. For a moment, just a moment, Ifrit's heart lurched as he thought Kirin was going to kiss him. But, just as he knew Kirin would, he pulled back, looking mollified. Because when he said things like that, he meant them, but not... not the way Ifrit wanted him to. Not the way that made Ifrit remember, when he'd been barely half alive, his best friend kissing him.

He turned away before he did something he'd regret, getting back into bed without glancing at Kirin. He knew he'd imagined it, he had to have. Otherwise, Kirin would've brought it up, would've said something, *anything*, in the months since. Maybe Ifrit himself, in his delirium, had kissed Kirin and he was just being polite by not bringing it up. More likely it had been just a product of his fevered brain, considering he was too much of a coward to even *ask* Kirin if it'd been real.

He risked a glance at Kirin to see if maybe *he* seemed upset that nothing more had happened, but Kirin was turned away, heading for the door.

"Where are you going?" Ifrit fought to keep the fear out of his voice, worried that he'd been too obvious, that Kirin had gotten uncomfortable and was going back to his room, leaving Ifrit alone in the dark.

"I'm just going to grab a different shirt, okay? This one's wet and I've already stolen enough of yours." Shit, he'd cried that

much?

"You don't sleep with a shirt on half the time anyways, just fucking take it off." He hadn't *meant* anything else by it, but hearing his own words made him flush.

"I don't have my scars wrapped today; I don't want to cut you."

"You won't."

"I move around a lot in my sleep, there's a good chance I will." Kirin chose just then to take off the shirt in question; Ifrit *tried* to be polite and look away, but failed. Kirin's scars glittered in the low light as he delicately hung it on a chair to dry.

"You can't." Ifrit had to get up and grab Kirin's shoulder to stop him from leaving. If he was lying to himself, he was so determined because he enjoyed the idea of Kirin shirtless next to him. If he was truthful, it was because he was scared that if Kirin left now, he wouldn't be coming back.

"You remember last time—"

Ifrit slashed his hand across the scar that curled over Kirin's collarbone.

Kirin immediately grabbed at his palm, already trying to apply pressure to a wound that wasn't there. His eyes furrowed in confusion as he realized.

"But before?"

"You haven't fucking wondered how I never seem to get cut very much, do you?" With Kirin briefly distracted, Ifrit was able to subtly lead him further into the room. "The doctors always thought it was because I'm a fucking era two mien-user or whatever."

"Era two?"

"The theory we learned about in History of Heroics?" Kirin stared at him blankly. "For fuck's sake, you got a perfect score on that exam!"

"I probably guessed."

"It was short answer."

"Why do you remember that?"

"Because you came and showed it to me? You were fucking—" Ifrit stopped himself before he said cute "—excited that you'd done so well."

Kirin was looking at him with a stupid smile.

"Stop making that face."

"Era two though?"

"The theory of mien evolution. That we'll start seeing fewer and fewer people who get hurt by their own abilities. Like Wings, right? He said that it hurts if he doesn't release his mien every so often, but you don't have that issue. Well, for me, I have way thicker and tougher skin than most people. And a hard fucking head."

"I can believe that." The corner of Kirin's mouth was tilting up.

"Shut up."

"How did I cut you before, then?"

"My fingertips. They're the only place it's not like that."

Ifrit was suddenly very pleased at his decision to start this conversation as Kirin sat down on the bed and started inspecting his hands.

"I thought they were softer." Kirin had his head down and was running this thumb from the tip of Ifrit's pointer finger down to the base. The touch was so gentle it was hard to notice, until Kirin crystalized his finger on the way back up. The sharp edge traced a very clear path, until it hit the final knuckle and pricked the skin. Kirin turned his hand back to flesh to press against the tiny cut. "I've cut you before, though. And not just your hands."

"If you apply enough force, yeah, you will. But just brushing against me isn't going to do shit."

Sometimes Ifrit could pretend he wasn't desperately in love

with his best friend. But when Kirin gave him that wide-eyed look of wonder all his defenses were gone.

Anything that might have remained was obliterated when immediately following such a look he was crushed into a hug.

Ifrit was pulled so far off balance that they toppled onto the bed, one of Kirin's hands in his hair. Pressed together so tightly, Ifrit could feel Kirin's heartbeat in his own chest, the warmth of Kirin's breath on his ear. The worst of Kirin's scarring was on his back, but the one that curled over his shoulder jabbed at Ifrit's shirt, irritating but not threatening.

"You never cease to amaze me."

It was good that Kirin couldn't see his face, because Ifrit was surely glowing from the praise. How he managed to find all the things that Ifrit was ashamed of, was self-conscious of, and adored them, Ifrit would never know.

"Can you... can you put your arms around my neck?" Kirin very rarely asked for anything, and when it was already something Ifrit was inclined to do, he wasn't about to say *no*. They'd fallen backward onto the bed, but Kirin sat up very quickly, knocking Ifrit into his lap. Ifrit didn't hesitate for a moment, pulling Kirin's face into the crook of his neck.

He'd held Kirin like this once before, but he'd been worried that the scars were too raw a subject to dare touch them. Now he wrapped his arms around Kirin's shoulders, letting his bare forearms scrape across the jagged edges. He didn't miss the shaky exhale, didn't miss the way that every muscle tensed and then relaxed, the tremble in Kirin's hands. How long had it been since someone touched him so freely? How long had it been since he'd been held by someone without fear of hurting them?

"...your arms are okay?" Kirin's voice was muffled from where his lips were pressed against skin. Ifrit barely resisted a shiver from the sensation of Kirin's *lips* against his *throat*.

"I fucking said they would be." Ifrit cleared his throat and

shifted so they were both lying down. Kirin moved without complaint, pliant in Ifrit's hands. "It's actually... kind of nice, or whatever."

"Hm?" Kirin's voice had gotten sleepy, his fears for the moment forgotten. Ifrit was sure he'd be dropping off any minute now.

"Like I said. Thick skin. Means I don't feel as much as other people."

"So?"

"Since it's super fucking sharp I can feel it easier. Less dull." Ifrit cleared his throat again. "It's nice."

"Ohhh." It was less a word and more an exhale. Kirin absolutely better fall asleep soon because Ifrit's heart couldn't take much more of this. "We should do this more, then."

"Less fucking crying next time." Ifrit felt himself starting to get drowsy too, the hateful voices in his head suppressed by Kirin's calming presence, and the distraction of Kirin's silken hair. How was it so shiny *and* so smooth? It wasn't fair.

"I don't mind if you cry." The words were being stretched out long now, slurring into one another. "I like... all of you."

With that, Kirin fell asleep. Well, not quite. Ifrit's brain was having trouble processing what might have happened in between, unsure if it was an accident or if he'd just imagined it again, the night having contained so many turns he likely had whiplash. Because *if* his stupid skin wasn't so thick, maybe he could've been certain that Kirin had placed a kiss on his throat.

The thought should've taken away any drowsiness, should've jolted him awake into another round of questions, of doubts. Just ten minutes before he probably would've been panicking, feeling like he didn't deserve it. But as Kirin curled around him, Ifrit couldn't focus on anything other than how happy it made him.

Yeah, he was fucked.