Precarious

by greendragon_templar

Summary

She’ll take him, if it means having something remotely like a sibling, like the other children have. She’ll take him, even if he drives her up the wall.

He didn’t listen to her when she told him that sticking his hand near an open flame was a bad idea, and God knows he won’t listen to her now. Scolding’s got little to no effect on him; he’s made himself immune, employed conscious ignorance like a vaccine. And that’s all well and good, New Zealand admits to herself, when it’s England at the receiving end. It’s far less forgivable when it’s her words being repelled.

“You’re going to cut yourself,” she’s yelling up into the tangled expanse of tree branches over her head, almost obscuring Australia from view. She runs around the base of the tree, going in circles, attempting to get him back in her line of sight. “You’re going to, and then—” Australia, dropping quickly back in view before reaching for the next branch, spreads the fingers of one hand wide, grinning, as if to say – too late. He wipes the offending hand on his shirt and New Zealand knows for certain that he’s bloodied it.

“Why’re you giving me such a hard time? Why won’t you climb?”

“I’m allowed to not feel like it.”

“You’re always bragging about how much better—”

“That hasn’t changed,” she snaps back, praying her voice carries both the appropriate volume and
ire. “I'm still better than you. I'll show you!”

“Show me now.”

“I don’t have to!”

“You do!” comes the reply, muffled by the wall of leaves separating them. “You have to, or why should I believe it?”

“Because that’s what you’re supposed to do. You’re supposed to be nice to me.”

“As if.”

New Zealand knows she’s better than this; she’s better than her frustration, better than the emotions that overcome her whenever Australia’s being difficult - difficult enough, sometimes, to move her to tears. He tries her patience because he wants to, because he can (and perhaps, too, because visiting her is a good enough excuse to abandon his own shores when it’s convenient). Every mirror and stream and unwelcome voice relates the same truth – that she’s a child. She compares herself to her brother and he’s told her that if he looks sixteen, she’s no more than ten. Such is their nature; the older personifications, their predecessors, have that commanding authority New Zealand finds herself yearning for. England can’t compete with that.

(Australia's bloody lucky that she’ll take him any day – that she’ll take him if it means speaking her own language, and knowing that he’ll understand, and respond in kind. She’ll take him, if it means having something remotely like a sibling, like the other children have. She’ll take him, even if he drives her up the wall.)

She kicks at and runs her bare feet over the roots of the tree, constricting her hands into fists, knowing that even if Australia’s going to be held accountable for anything happening to him long before she will, she doesn’t want it on her shoulders, to have to draw the attention of the first human adult she finds and explain what happened. She’s dealt with that exact scenario more than enough times before – four times, in fact (or is it five? Six? It’s escaping her). A broken limb that mends itself in half a week is still a broken limb; a bloody lip in the moment is no prettier than that of a human child.

“You’re only going to hurt yourself.”

“Doesn’t matter,” he shouts down, punctuated with a laugh. “Doesn’t bloody matter.”

“Well, I care. It matters to me.”

“Don’t try to be nice. It doesn’t suit you.”

She frowns, slamming down the palms of her hands against the bark of the tree, ignoring the pinpricks of pain. Ants march past her wrist; a beetle beside the fourth finger of her right hand is brushed away in exasperation. If he’s talking about the time that she almost wrung his neck for eating her dessert, or for leaving her in the forest while he ran ahead, or for going back on his word when he said he’d play with her, he has no idea of how far she’ll go – not yet. Gravity and trees won’t kill him, not while she’s there, and certainly not when she could easily concoct a thousand excellent reasons of her own for putting him through hell.

(But she doesn’t want to see him writhing on the ground, split open like an animal, even if she knows that it’ll all be over soon, if she looks away.)

(She hates it, especially since he makes such an occasion out of everything, too – England says he’ll
grow out of it, but for the time being, it seems like there’s nothing Australia loves more than showing her the indent in his neck and boldly proclaiming a convict did it).

A branch cracks, and her head flies back, eyes searching.

“Jack!”

“Calm down, I’m not dead yet,” Australia says, after a miserable thirty seconds, and New Zealand’s infuriated to find she can just about hear the sigh that comes after; the way he spurns worry is a worry all in itself.

“Anyway, I came all the way to visit you, so you’re not allowed to tell me off.”

“And you sound exactly like England now! Exactly like him.”

Her response has above and beyond the desired effect. The scrambling and scraping over her head ceases entirely. What follows is untainted outrage, entirely at odds with the almost ironic anger he usually presents.

“I do not.”

“You do!”

“I can’t think of anyone less like me.”

“Then don’t say things like that.”

“I thought you were worried about me.”

“I am.”

“Then why’d you say it?”

“Because you won’t listen to me!”

They seem like the only two living souls for miles around; Australia always drags her out far into the forest, whether they’re in her home or his. Nothing is more abominable to him than active supervision, so why does he always make her the fretful exception?

Silence falls, broken by an indignant outcry: “I won’t come down until you say sorry.”

New Zealand grinds her fingers into the bark and now, she’s the one who’s bleeding. Her heart beats harder. “Don’t be stupid—”

“You have to say sorry!” And for all his experience, he sounds no more mature in the moment than any other child New Zealand’s seen or heard. She can picture him in her head, eyes shining, mouth tight, self-righteous and delighting in his own impact.

“Even if I did need to say it, I wouldn’t do it because you told me to. I’d wait until I felt like it.”

“You’re terrible, Zee.”

“And I’m the only sister you’ve got.”

“So what?”
“So you have to be nice!”

“You’re the one saying the unkind things. You’re a hypocrite.”

“I don’t know what that means. You know I don’t know.”

New Zealand crumples at the base of the tree, curling up her legs underneath her and raking her fingers through the wet soil. She scrutinises the branches overhead for any sign of her brother, craning her neck back far enough that it begins to hurt, for her to grow dizzier and dizzier.

“You’re too high!” she shouts up, and it’s not getting any easier to force the words out. Her throat feels like the rivers that join with the sea, but this one is choked with stones and silt, barring regular flow.

“Come and get me then.”

“I won’t,” she replies, softer now. “I won’t.” The quality of her voice and its usual bright clarity shifts, and she has little to no control over the way it leaves her lips, altered. “You have to—” She presses her forehead against the tree; her hair’s in her eyes and she doesn’t have the energy to push it back.

Australia clambers back down eventually, New Zealand figures, and for once he’s unharmed, but for the red and glistening palms that hesitate before her, caught off guard. She’s crying too hard to hear anything he’s got to say (and neither would she spare him a moment of her time, otherwise, even if he turned around and begged). And God damn the fact that neither are supposed to expose themselves like this – not due to any innate resistance to emotion, either, but out of some unfeeling presumption that they ought to know their people are looking up to them and will be somehow demoralised by vulnerable appearances. New Zealand couldn’t care less if any of her people have elected her as a beacon; she only wants her brother.

Jack doesn’t have the slightest clue what to do, other than provide some useless, half-formed apology in the embarrassed tone that suits him so ill. He doesn’t do anything until she pushes herself into his arms and he has no other choice than to hold her, damp and snuffling and clinging on for dear life. Some sort of disgruntled noise works its way out of him and New Zealand pinches the upper side of his forearm harshly.

“You don’t ever listen!”

“It’s not my fault you keep trying to tell me what to do.”

“You’ll kill yourself if I don’t say anything.”

“No, I won’t.”

“You will! If I don’t say anything, who will?”

Together they concede, and the war’s over. It takes far longer than that for New Zealand to detach herself enough from the preoccupying feelings of the present to realise just how right she is. Admonishment and praise alike are astonishingly rare, whether from soldiers or officials or her own people. Acknowledgement from England is the most fleeting of all. She can recall her brother telling her about the time he gashed his leg open and England bade someone else accompany him to the hospital; she recalls cutting herself on tree branches and being the recipient of little more than apathy unless she dared make more of a fuss. Physical affection has been unimaginable.

The fear in her that Australia invokes, and that which he seems to retain (begrudgingly) in return, is
fresh to them both. Maybe it’s more valuable than either have cared to understand.

Australia, for one, walks her back to the settlement, and he lets her hold his hand.

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