

A blank piece of parchment has never seemed fuller to Erastus. The longer he stared, the more his ink decorated it. And yet, after blinking, it was all washed away, leaving nothing behind. The quill rests in his hands, unmoving as it hovers over the unsullied vellum, waiting like those before it to receive some kind of nonsense and inevitably be discarded.

So many attempts, and each felt wrong. How does one put into words the wish for their child to be returned? Especially after so much time has passed? Fifteen agonizing years and with each passing one, his hope dwindled more until he found himself at this moment. He and Jada agreed that this would be the only thing to cause others to stir. Though morale has been at an all-time low, the economy has boomed. Trade flowed, the harvests all fruitful, and every other industry reaped the benefits as it all trickled down.

And he could take credit for none of it. He wasted his days away in a palace whose walls felt like they were closing in and a domicile that disallowed the sun to pierce its walls. Every corner is bland, every wall bleak, and the color depleted. He spends his time sitting in a garden full of life and staring blankly at flowers and creatures that bring him only a modicum of joy.

*To Whom It May Concern*

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No, again far too formal. Should he pour his heart into the letter? Let all those who read know how much it aches to be awake? That fifteen years have torn apart his insides and left only a shadow of a once bright phoenix? The only thing left was hope. Hope was all he could now speak of and know to exist because if that was to vanish, then what? What would this life hold?

Formalities felt exactly like what its name portrays, stiffness and an air that did not feel right. But relaxed and friendly he was not. He is a grieving father who has been forced to bear the title for too many years. But despite how much he grieves, he is not just a father, no matter how much he abhors the thought. If he is seen as

desperate, others may capitalize on this and attack. And then what? What will his child come home to? Who will they be coming home to?

*To Houses and Beyond,*

His hand skirts across the page as the words travel from his mind down to his hand, and finally, they take their first breath against the paper. He suppresses his hope and calls upon the part of him that understands he is still a ruler who must command some sort of power.

Until finally, Erastus finds himself staring blankly at the letter that has taken him all night to write. Completed. Done. Ready to be copied and transferred and then to be sent via phearn to the houses of Treces.

Tears rushed to his eyes as the quill, for the first time since he sat down, came to rest against the desk. If his child was still out there, if by some miracle they had survived all of the injustices that may have befallen them, he had practically sold them. The thought tears at him. It grasps his heart and squeezes as hard as it can. Who knows what could have befallen them, and if they - no, when they did return, this would be the news they would be faced with.

But what more could he do? What more could he offer? His kingdom, perhaps? The lives of all. He selfishly found himself caring little for those under him, not when his child was gone.

He just wanted his little flame back.

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*To Houses and Beyond,*

*I have labored over this letter far too many times for me to count. A bin full of parchment rests beside me, each with different words that all lead to the same conclusion and inquiry.*

*As many as you know, my child, the phoenix heir, has disappeared. All efforts to recover my child have been deemed ineffectual. And so I ask of you, I beg not as a*

*ruler but as a father, as a parent, to aid me in this search. All I wish for lies in my child's return.*

*For their return, House Phoenix offers the house, minor or large, a boon. To whoever brings my child back to me, House Phoenix grants that house the heir's hand in marriage, uniting our house and theirs and securing an alliance. I will further discuss this arrangement, but they must be returned. If found deceased, House Phoenix will still honor their word, and an alliance will nevertheless be formed with the appropriate house.*

*Please. I ask only for my child. Whether information or the physical manifestation of them. House Phoenix, the people who love them, I and my wife, and their extended family only seek closure.*

*Return our heir.*

*House Phoenix. And those who grieve.*