**The Lovers You Meet**

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**The Lovers You Meet**

by **GoldenEmpire**

**Summary**

SEQUEL TO ALIENS YOU MEET BUT CAN BE READ AS A STAND ALONE!
This story is less galaxy-based and more planet-based, with some medieval vibes.
A Prince is sent to prison where he meets an Alpha who hates him. A Servant is employed at a palace and falls for a King. A Boy is in love with his sister's fiancee, and they're about to be married. A Cyborg is in love with his childhood best friend, but doesn't think he's good enough for him.
I'm shit at summaries. This has sex and angst and if that doesn't persuade you dunno what will XD
Take a peek?
1150EE (5 years later)

Hannibal.

“No, this screw goes here,” Castory Yuú, nicknamed Champagne, laughed as little five year old Dashyan Io Shinin shoved his chubby arm inside the taken-apart engine and tried to shove a screw in the wrong place. His ginger hair, which his father, Viridian, tried so hard to keep neat was currently shoved back and stuck up with engine oil that the little boy was playing in, his aquamarine eyes sparkling with glee. The woman bared her teeth in a grin at her best friend, Gridelin, who was perched on a stack of boxes, watching the two fondly.

The two women loved Dashe, and loved having him on board their ship, even if he did run around and break things a lot of the time. Ever since their engineer, Vega, an old, feisty Beta passed away earlier that year, the ship hasn't been the same so the five year olds constant cheerfulness and bubbliest was much appreciated.

“Oi bitches!” Hothead’s, the ship’s sarcastic AI’s, voice rang through the spacious engine room, “Boss and our lil’ angry fox are incoming.”

“They’re not war missiles, Hottie,” Champagne rolled her eyes. Dashyan turned around from the engine when he heard the door open.

“Daddy!” he called out happily when Thane Shinin walked in. The Vlassain looked mostly human except for his Fox characteristics; over the years his ginger curls had darkened some, and there were faint smile lines around his golden eyes. Right now a tail swung behind his back, showing that he was agitated or excited.

“Dashe, what the hell happened to your hair?” the man demanded.
Next to him was Cylian, the Captain of Hannibal, his auburn hair showing the first signs of grey despite the fact he was only forty. Between them was a little boy, and he was the only reason why Dashe didn’t throw himself into the arms of his father. He stopped mid-step and stared fearfully at the child.

He looked a few years older than Dashyan, his skin was very tanned, his hair a dark brown that looked almost purple, thick eyebrows that were currently frowning above his dark brown eyes. Dash looked at him nervously because he wasn’t used to new people – he grew up only with the crew of Hannibal, with Uncle Ayvo coming to visit sometimes.

“W-Who’s that, daddy?” the little boy squeaked, his chubby fists clutching at his own shirt. The new boy scared him – he was taller, bigger and intimidating. Lin and Champagne came to stand next to the boy, as if wanting to reassure him.

“Dashe,” Cylian knelt on the ground, getting on the five year olds level, “This is Tyeval. He’s going to be your friend and protector.”

Dashe blinked, “Like Greige is yours?” he asked, meaning the big cyborg that had been the first member of the Captain’s crew, years and years ago, and had saved his life numerous times. Cylian smiled.

“Exactly.”

The boy’s eyes shyly slid to Tyeval and he saw that the boy was smiling at him uncertainly, “Is he an Ubloid like Greige?” he lisped, “He doesn’t seem like him.”

“Yes, he is an Ubloid,” Thane said, meaning the species that weren’t considered human in some parts of the galaxy as they were grown in test tubes and many parts of their bodies were artificial, “but he’s a different Ubloid. He is more human than normal cyborgs, he has a real heart and a real body, with extra strength and a super brain. But he still has feelings,” the Fox placed his hand on the boy’s shoulder, “So you have to be nice to Tyeval.”

“You can call me Tye,” the boy said, staring at his shoes shyly. Dashyan felt more confident knowing that this new boy was just as nervous as he was. Hesitantly he broke away from Lin and Champagne and shuffled clumsily across the floor towards Tye.

“Hi,” he said, and the Ubloid looked down at him shyly, “I’m Dashe,” The boy stuck his chubby hand out. Tyeval looked nervously at Thane and the Fox nodded so the Ubloid gently shook Dashyan’s hand.

“I’m going to protect you,” he said firmly.

1152EE (2 years later)

Fayaxiamen.

“All hail King Thrisan Moringathu, the third of his name and the four-hundredth-and-eighth King of Fayaxiamen!” the Herald bellowed, his powerful voice ringing through the great hall of the Briallan Palace. The twenty four year old King rose from his throne as the hall full of his Varsonian subjects. Arién, his youngest brother, only fourteen, stood nearby and smiled warmly at his brother.

Thrisan took a deep breath that he hoped nobody noticed as he looked out over his people. He was finally King, and yet the position came not only with pride but also with the burden of the fact that it took Thrisan’s father’s death for him to be here. He would give up the crown to have the wise man
back in an instant, but alas it was impossible to bring back the dead.

“All hail!” the crowd chanted, raising both their arms to the ceiling in praise. The circlet of gold around Thrisan’s dark hair felt heavier than it should.

“Entering Princess Vallea Typha, the Queen-to-be!” the Herald exclaimed, silencing the crowd who now parted to let through an ethereal looking woman. She was beautiful and her presence lit up a room. All eyes were on her. Her skin was a pale yellow, a purple diamond embedded in her forehead, glowing softly. Her eyes were narrow, almost sultry, her long, red hair flowing down to her waist. Her willowy figure was clad in a deep green dress, plunging to reveal the sides of her voluptuous breasts, and going out at the waist. She was of the Harsonia specie and underneath her large skirt, hidden, were six floating tentacles that gave her an air of grace as she moved soundlessly.

“My King,” her voice was rich and silky and she pressed her gloved hand against her chest before stretching it out towards Thrisan, as if sending him her heart.

“My Queen,” he said back, and outstretched his hand. When the woman placed her own in his and allowed him to help her be seated at his side, Thrisan knew that he would never be able to love her.

1155EE (3 years later)

Tussa.

An Alpha sits in his garden. His Omega wife is upstairs, blankly staring at a wall and wondering how she had wasted her life away. In the kitchen two servants sit on the counter and gossip.

The old, gnarly Alpha man sat in his garden, posters of propaganda spread on the glass table in front of him. Birds sang in the trees surrounding his beautiful home, though he seemed unaware of the world around him, his furious eyes focused only on the papers in front of him.

The man was Vinh Navoy, the old President of Tussa, an Alpha, a murderer, the man who orchestrated the mass murder of Omegas many years previously, the person responsible for funding the slave trade until it grew enough to plague three Galaxies. After the war his crimes had been overlooked and he was allowed to retire to this peaceful mansion where he could live out the rest of his days in the company of his Omega wife, whom he abused, and grind his teeth over the new government on his planet.

An Alpha sits in his garden. His Omega wife is upstairs, blankly staring at a wall and wondering how she had wasted her life away. In the kitchen two servants sit on the counter and gossip. Another man balances on the branch of the tree overhanging the garden, a gun poised in his hands, loaded with poisonous darts that kill you in an agonising instant.

He is Charasean, like the president, an Alpha, like the president, and yet the two are nothing alike. The only resemblance they share is their paper-white skin and their pointed ears and their heritage. The President holds paper in his hands, the Assassin holds a weapon.

There is no hesitation, no second thoughts. The dart leaves the gun with a soft whistle and buries itself in the white, leathery neck of President Vinh.

The Omega wife had fallen asleep, and she hopes never to wake up. The servants had snuck out of the back of the house to share their newest delivery of drugs. President Vinh’s pale corpse spasms and then lays still in the grass of the beautiful garden, and the Assassin steals away long before anybody discovers it.
But don’t be mistaken. He has no illusion that he will ever escape. He will go sit in a bar until they come for him.

1161EE (6 years later)

Fayaxiamen.

Arién was happy he wasn’t king. As the youngest of three brothers and the second youngest of four siblings, he was happy-go-lucky and carefree, not held down by anything. On Fayaxiamen he had enough power to satisfy him and could virtually do whatever he pleased most of the time. Which was why he was currently busy making out with one of his guards in a secluded alcove in the west wing of the Briallan palace.

He couldn’t remember the man’s name, but the twenty year old had already made his way through at least half a dozen of the guards, so this one was just an addition. However as minutes stretched on and the man shoved his tongue down Ari’s throat, the less the young man wanted to have sex with him. The man’s hands were desperate and inexperienced, he was too forceful and Ari just generally wasn’t in the mood anymore. He allowed the Guard have his fun but when he felt him start pulling the boy’s golden shirt from his trousers he pushed the man back.

“I’m not in the mood anymore,” Ari informed him coldly, wiping his mouth on the back of his tanned hand. The guard frowned, and it was clear that he had gotten excited, but whether it was over Ari or because he was doing something with a royal the Prince didn’t know.

“Why? Did I do something wrong Arién?”

“My Lord,” Ari hissed a correction, “I am not your friend, don’t mistake me for one.”

“I don’t want you to be a friend,” the Guard said with a smirk, delving back in to kiss the Prince again. Ari shoved him back angrily.

“Are you deaf or just stupid?”

“I don’t understand,” the Guard said, “You want to a moment ago...”

“Yes, well,” Ari straightened out his shirt, “that was a moment ago.”

“You fucked half the men in my team why not me too?” the Guard asked, getting irritated.

Arién slapped him, hard, “Watch your mouth and know your place,” he said, voice like icicles.

He didn’t expect the Guard to shove him back against the stone wall or to pin his wrists above his head. Arién was not a big man – in fact he was still more of a boy; slim, pretty, with thick eyelashes and a big behind. That’s why so many guards lusted after him. The boy had never had any of them use force with him before, and now he felt a trickle of fear in his stomach. He didn’t know this man, and now he cursed himself for being stupid enough to get himself in this position.

“You sure have a big mouth for someone so weak,” the Guard laughed throatily as Arién struggled in his grip, gritting his teeth and attempting to free his wrists.

“You’ll be sent to Idra if you don’t let me go at once,” he hissed.

“I’ll take my chances,” the Guard smirked, and shoved a hand between Arién’s legs. The boy gasped in horror and tried to kick the man away, but the Guard just turned him around and shoved him face first into the wall, covering the boy’s body with his own. Panic gripped Ari’s heart, “You
“had this coming,” the Guard stated, palming at the boy’s buttocks, “riling me up like that. Who do you think you are? You’re only the prince, and you walk around as if you were a King or something. Well, I’ll teach you a lesson now. You’re a slut, so I’m going to treat you like one. Bet those other Guards weren’t man enough to properly roughen you up, but that’s about to change.”

Ari felt sick as his cheek scraped against the cold stone. He refused to accept what was about to happen. The man’s clammy hands against his body were making him nauseous, as were his words. The boy, feeling a sudden burst of strength, shoved himself off the wall and pushed backwards.

The Guard yelled in surprise, and stumbled back. Ari felt the thud of the impact as they collided with the parallel wall, and a dull, sickening crack was heard. The man let go of him and when Arién turned around he saw him sliding to the floor, eyes like the ones of the dead fish that appeared on the coast every spring. A smear of red blood appeared where the man had just stood, and more oozed out of his skull.

Arién screamed.

Joi 13th Scitli 1161EE (2 months later)

Idra.

The escort ship jolted when it touched the ground and Arién Moringathu felt his stomach drop. The Guard opposite him stood up, her body armour clinking as she did.

“My Lord,” she said, clearly uncomfortable about having to do this to her superior. But then again, she had been uncomfortable all the way from Fayaxiamen, “It’s time,” her voice was grave, and put Ari in an even worse mood. If he wasn’t so afraid he would’ve snapped at her but as it was all he could do was stand up on shaky legs.

His hands were in front of him, tied with a kinetic wire. When they had first put it on him, back on Fayaxiamen, Arién had thrown a fit. How dare they do this to the Prince?! He had only calmed down when his brother, Thrisan, the only person who ever had any control over him, informed him that he wasn’t a Prince anymore. He was a convict. A convict. Accused of murder.

Arién shuddered as the hollow, dead eyes of the Guard he had killed flashed in his mind and fought the wave of nausea that rode over his body. Friock Obbe. That had been his name, and it haunted Ari through all his court sessions.

As much as everyone told him that he was a prisoner Arién still got special privileges. Since the hunt for war criminals began there had been steady transports from almost all planets to Idra, one of the moons of Golbahar, the biggest planet in the Cairn Galaxy, used solely as a prison due to its sandy and inhabitable nature. But the Fayaxiamen government hadn’t just packed Ari onto one of those transports. Instead he was taken to Idra on a private ship, just him, his Guard, and two pilots. He was fed amazing food that he was used to in the Palace, allowed privacy, access to the interwebs. All in all until now it had been more of a cruise than anything else.

Except Arién couldn’t relax because he killed someone, and every time he closed his eyes he saw Friock Obbe’s dead body.

He was lost in thought as his Guard, whose name Ari hadn’t bothered to learn, led him through the ship. She held the kinetic wire in her strong hands as she pulled Arién into the airlock. When the doors opened the Prince expected light and warmth to flood in, but instead he found that his ship had landed at the mouth of a metal tunnel, the harsh fluorescent lights inside hurting his eyes.
The boy squinted and his Guard jerked him forward, so Arién stumbled off the ship. He had nothing with him but the clothes on his back and as his eyes adjusted to the sudden brightness the Guard pulled him along. Ari felt himself stepping over a disabled electromagnetic field and the tunnel widened. Ari found himself in a square room with several guards lounging in chairs.

“Officer,” Arién’s guard said, removing the kinetic wire from the boy’s wrists. He felt incredibly overwhelmed. One of the officers stood up. He was fat and dressed in a dark blue uniform; he was Vlassain, the easiest species to remember from the Cairn galaxy for Arién since they were human apart from their animalistic traits. They finally had Golbahar, their home planet, back and despite the fact that they were a pacifist species they themselves manned Idra and guarded the prisoners, not trusting anybody after getting invaded during the war.

“Thank you for delivering the Prince,” the man said, his voice deep and tinged with an accent. The placard lasered into his uniform read OFFICER BALLIALAN and if Ari had to guess he’d say the man was part walrus because of his loose brown skin that gathered beneath his chin in folds, his impressive moustache, wide apart eyes and protruding front teeth. “The paper work has been transferred. We will take it from here.”

The Guard inclined her head, worried at her bottom lip, gave Arién a wistful glance and then walked back down the tunnel to the ship. At the realisation that that was the only way off this planet Ari felt sick – she was leaving, and he was here, alone, among a species he didn’t know.

“Wait!” he called after her, turning around.

“None of that now,” Officer Ballialan said, “You are no longer a Prince, but simply another convict. Is that understood, inmate?” Arién’s fear was the only thing that kept him from snapping at the Officer. He nodded mutely and Ballialan smiled beneath his moustache, “Officer Xia, Officer Ghrishi, let’s get on with the procedures.”

Two Vlassain guards came up to Arién, one of them was a man and the other a woman. The man, Officer Ghrishi, had bright yellow skin and neon green hair, black tattoos over his slightly sadistic looking eyes. His neck, peeking out from above his uniform, was scaly and his skin glistened with moisture. From the waist down he had a snake’s tail instead of legs and he slithered with surprising, and slightly terrifying speed.

“Hello inmate,” he said coldly, a forked tongue flickering out from his lipless mouth as he seized Arién’s arm in a strong hand.

“Get your hands off me,” the boy growled, attempting to get free. In reply the woman gripped his other hand. Her skin, in turn, was grey and soft, almost fuzzy, her beady eyes full of anger. Her hair, in two ponytails, were a mixture of black and brown. When she opened her mouth Ari saw a row of sharp little teeth, her nose was upturned and there were slits at the back of her uniform for her leathery bat wings. Officer Xia sneered,

“This will go much more smoothly if you cooperate,” she hissed, her voice painfully high pitched.

As they led him into another room, this time smaller, Arién couldn’t help but think that the Vlassain deliberately chose the most terrifying looking people for these guards. The Prince felt anxious being alone in the room with just them.

“Go on pretty boy,” Xia said, “strip.”

“What?” Arién demanded.
“Do you think you can just walk into prison in those clothes?” Ghrishi asked, arching a thin eyebrow. Ari looked down at his silk shirt and expensive cloak swept over one shoulder.

“I’m a prince,” he stated coolly, “I’m not taking my clothes off.”

Ghrishi slithered up to him so they were face to face and Ari could smell his sour breath, “Take them off,” he said softly, unblinking, “or we’ll take them off for you.”

In minutes Arién found himself in the prisoner’s garb, an ugly grey shirt that was too big for his slim frame and bunched up around his arms, sliding all the way down so only his fingers showed. Furthermore the material was scratchy, just like the dark trousers held up by suspenders. Ari felt extremely violated after Xia and Ghrishi patted him down, as if he would sneak anything into the prison! Then they forced him into a chamber that gave him an ‘Idra’ welcoming shower. Meaning he had to stand beneath a freezing cold spray until his lips turned blue and he was shaking.

By the time they were escorting him out of this room, Arién had no hope that he was going to continue getting special treatment. The only thing he now owned were his ugly clothes and spares of them, which he carried in his arms. The Varsen might’ve cared about how he was treated, but the Vlassain didn’t – his hands weren’t tied, but both the Guards had heavy weapons on their shoulders and at their waists and Ari could tell he would never make it far if he tried to run. They roughly shoved him outside, allowing Ari his first look of Idra.

Night had fallen and in the sky hung the large ominous green ball that was Golbahar, looking like it was about to fall from the sky and crush Ari. Three more moons floated alongside it, some closer and some further, all of them silvery. It was hard for Arién to place their names in his head from his history classes. Still, he got an airful of freezing air in his lungs and that was when everything became truly real. *I’m really here. I’m really in prison.* He thought and his heart felt too heavy for his body.

There was sand beneath his feet as Xia and Ghrishi walked him through the darkness, the heavy shoes on his feet uncomfortable. The stars in the sky were completely different from Fayaxiamen as well, so Ari couldn’t even take comfort in them. When he turned to look at the building he had just left his stomach clenched. Instead of the prison being enclosed in some kind of fence it was the landing pod that had a magnetic field around it, glowing light purple gently, so the only way to get on a ship would be through the tunnel that Arién had come in through. Literally the whole planet was the prison, and that was terrifying.

Bunkers loomed out of the darkness suddenly, red lights above the doors creating ghostly, menacing silhouettes in the shadows. Arién shuddered as the Guards led him through. The bunkers were in rows, no windows, just one door, all of them dark. They looked abandoned, the silence around them making Ari’s skin crawl.

“This one’s yours,” Xia broke the heavy silence, suddenly stopping by one of the bunkers and patting it with her long, pointed nails, making a horrible scratching sound that made Ari flinch and Ghrishi smirk, “The empty bunk at the end.”

“What about dinner?” Arién demanded, wrinkling his nose. He was hungry. Xia and Ghrishi both snorted.

“Breakfast’s at dawn, pretty boy,” the snake-man said, turning his back on Ari, “don’t be late or there won’t be any food left.”

“Wait,” Ari snapped, “is this it? You’re just leaving me here? Aren’t you scared that I’ll escape?”
The Guards exchanged amused looks, “You can’t escape Idra, pretty boy, unless you have a ship hidden underneath that shirt.”

They walked back towards the brightly lit building, laughing under their breaths. Ari shivered at the coldness and watched them disappear, clutching his spare clothes to his chest and trying to stop his hammering heart. He looked around, but he was alone. It was just him, the bunkers, the stars and the sand. He suddenly felt hopelessly lost – he contemplated running but he knew that the Guards were right; there was nowhere to go.

Feeling nervous to the point of nausea, Arién pushed at the door. It creaked as it swung inside, revealing more darkness and beds that were illuminated by a faint red light. Ari swallowed and slipped inside, closing the door behind him. He heard the sound of breathing of several people; one was wet as if they had mucus in their lungs, someone else was snoring, someone else’s exhales sounded like whistles.

It was weirdly loud, and Arién doubted he’d be able to sleep through that. The beds were bunks, shoved against the walls, four in total. Ari was appalled that as a Prince he had to share a room – with multiple people on top of that! With disgust his eyes slid over the beds but so far his roommates were only red-rimmed lumps of darkness. Suddenly feeling exhausted Arién dragged himself to the end of the small room and found the last bed. There was nobody on top or on bottom, so the boy slipped into the bottom bunk. He would figure out how to establish his authority tomorrow.

He had no sleeping clothes – they hadn’t given him any. With annoyance he slipped off his trousers, hoping he wasn’t sharing a room with any rapists, and left them in a heap at the bottom of the bed, alongside his spare clothes and shoes. His bed was narrow and the springs of the old fashioned mattress pressed against his bum painfully when he sat down. Trying to make the best of the situation Ari spread his blanket out and fluffed out his flat pillow.

As he lied down he realised how cold it was in the bunker, and the ratty blanket he threw over his body did little to heat him up. The boy regretted taking his trousers off but he was too tired and aching to try and get up and put them back on. He curled in on himself, his shirt big enough that they managed to cover his legs to hid mid-thigh. He didn’t want to sleep, but the stress of getting to Idra was too much and he found his eyes closing by themselves.

_He saw the eyes of Friock Obbe, staring at nothing, never being able to see anything again._

The sound of an obnoxiously loud and terrifying ringing jolted Arién out of his nightmare, and he could’ve sworn he had only closed his eyes for only a moment. And yet the lights were turned on in the room, as harsh as they had been in a tunnel. The horrible ringing was some kind of alarm, echoing in from outside. Ari heard shuffling and voices as he sat up, almost banging his head on the bottom of the top bunk. The boy was disoriented, exhausted and his muscles ached from the horrible mattress.

There was a man in the bottom bunk opposite Arién, and when the boy’s eyes met his, his heart jumped. _Oh my stars it’s a criminal_, he thought wildly, before remembering he was one too. The two of them just stared at each other in surprise and as Ari got over the shock of actually being in the close proximity of a convict he noticed something else. The man didn’t look like a convict. When Ari thought of criminals he thought of men with overgrown hair and wild, cold eyes and bad breaths. This man wasn’t like that.

He was Charasean – Ari knew this because all Charaseans had paper white skin and pointed ears. He also knew that the man must’ve been an Alpha, Beta or Omega but he couldn’t tell which one. His sandy blonde hair was a little overgrown, brushing the tips of his pointed ears. His eyes were a deep aquamarine, there was stubble on his strong jaw and he was wearing the same clothes as Arién,
but they actually fit him, they weren’t too small and the Prince could still see the vague physique of the man; muscular, broad. He was handsome. Ari flushed when he realised he had been staring, but the Charasean hadn’t said anything.

“Oh my stars, it’s the new kid!” someone said, forcing Arién to rip his eyes away from the man opposite him. Thankfully, the alarm shut off. He anxiously leaned out of his bunk and saw that there were two other people in the bunker – the others seemed to have disappeared somewhere. There was a human, a Shif, grinning at him like she was having the time of her life. It took Ari a second to identify her as a female because her clothes were baggy as well, though not as bad as his, and she had a boyish figure despite being middle aged. Her skin was dark brown, her bright ginger hair cropped short to her scalp, “The Prince from that one planet in the Arda Galaxy, isn’t it?”

“Well if you say so,” another person replied, their voice deeper, and Ari almost screamed.

The woman that got up was terrifying, well over six foot with a bald head, all-white, massive eyes and scaly grey skin. She looked like she could snap Ari in half with her bare hands. The Shif woman shrugged.

“Ah, fair point,” she said, shrugging her suspenders on. She turned to Arién, who was still confused, “My name is Ginger. That’s Slaver,” she pointed to the huge woman who snorted, unamused, “and that’s Alpha,” she said, meaning the man, who still hasn’t moved. It answered Ari’s silent question about what kind of Charasean the blonde was.

“Those aren’t your real names,” he said, before he could stop himself.

“Nobody uses their real names here, kid,” Ginger said, “so you better make up a nickname for yourself before someone else does it for you.”

“I’m bored. I’m going to breakfast,” Slaver said, rudely, and walked out of the bunker, Ginger hot on her heels.

Arién scrambled for his trousers, remembering the Guards mentioning that he shouldn’t be late for breakfast. Alpha stood up as well, towering over Ari and silently started doing his bed. The boy cleared his throat, “So what did you do?”

He saw the man’s back tense and he turned to Arién, “What kind of question is that?” he asked, voice gruff and hoarse from sleep. Ari shrugged.

“Just a question. A normal question. Gods, you people are so over-sensitive.”

“You people?” Alpha arched his eyebrow, as if half disbelieving that Arién was saying this. But the boy was never one to keep his mouth shut and speaking his mind got him in trouble multiple times back on Fayaxiamen, “we’re all on the same ship here.”

“No we’re not,” Arién said in disgust, crossing his arms over his chest, “Don’t group me in with them,” he sent a pointed look at the door out of which Slaver and Ginger had just left, “I’m a Prince, I shouldn’t even be here-“

“Oh stars you’re one of those,” Alpha rolled his eyes.

“You’re rude,” Ari stated and he felt Alpha’s angry eyes on him. He knew he was treading on eggshells and was about to get himself in trouble, but he didn’t care. If he didn’t establish authority now he was going to get mixed with dirt later.

“And you’re annoying.”
“Oh, what are you going to do about it?” Ari mocked, enjoying having the upper hand once more. He needed control, and he had lost it with the Guards, “beat me up? You’re a big guy you could probably do it. But what’s the fun in that?”

Things happened very fast after that. One second Arién was standing there, smirking, and the next his back was being painfully shoved against the wall, his legs dangling mid-air, Alpha’s strong hand around his throat keeping him off the ground. Ari gasped, his tanned hands scrambling at the man’s fingers as he felt air escaping him, fast.

“This isn’t fun,” Alpha gritted, “this is prison. What kind of sick joke is this to you?”

“L-Let g-g-go!” Ari gasped, legs kicking out uselessly.

“I could crush your windpipe,” Alpha said coldly, “for being an annoying brat. Don’t get on my nerves. We’re here to serve our sentences in a shit hole, we’re all on edge, but you’ll learn that soon enough,” he must’ve noticed that Ari was about to suffocate so he let him go. The boy crumbled to the floor, spluttering, fear gripping at his insides. He wasn’t used to this, wasn’t used to people being violent or having the upper hand. Being a Prince came with privileges, and now those were being revoked. *You’re not a Prince anymore, you’re a convict, little brother,* Thrisan’s voice rang through his head and he squeezed his eyes shut as he once more saw the dead eyes of the man he killed, “Other people aren’t as lenient as me,” Alpha growled, “people get killed here every day. Don’t piss anyone off. Don’t piss *me* off,” he leaned down to Ari’s level and his eyes were full of cold fury that made Arién tense, “since you’re so curious I’ll tell you. I’m here for murder. And unlike some people, I don’t regret doing what I did,” he straightened up and turned to the door, “so don’t make me do it again.”

When Alpha left Arién curled back on his bed, shoved his face into a pillow and tried his best not to cry. So many emotions went crashing around him: fear, most importantly, but also helplessness and frustration and anger and regret and guilt. He had to keep his head down and follow the rules except he didn’t know how. Ari was used to doing his own thing.

He didn’t go to breakfast that day.

**Ghi 15th Scitli 1161EE (2 days later)**

**Fayaxiamen.**

Wyliam Kiada was honestly, wholly overwhelmed when he entered the Briallan Palace. The Shif boy was nineteen and he had never been to the Arda Galaxy before even though the ban on intergalactic travel was removed when he was a child. Landing on this new planet shocked the boy – Wyl hated changed, which was why he was now questioning why he ever agreed to take this job and left his comfortable and boring life on Earth 6.2.

When he had gotten off the ship with the two dozen other Shifs sent to Fayaxiamen as royal servants in signs of good faith for the upcoming marriage alliance happening on Arossa, the first thing that struck him was how much water there was. They had informed him on the flight that Fayaxiamen was a planet that was ninety nine point nine percent made of water he hadn’t realised they literally meant it.

The landing pods jutted out of sapphire blue sea like ribs, and when Wyliam climbed off, his backpack weighing him down, he was shocked to find that most of the city that surrounded the Briallan Palace was half submerged in the water, just like the planets. The buildings were incredibly tall, as were the trees, so they were half in the water and half out. As the sun set the lights in the buildings started flickering on, looking absolutely beautiful, especially under water. As Wyliam
walked with the others to the palace down the walkway he leaned over the side and saw roads underwater, far, far down, full of traffic, and it made his stomach flip to think that life went on down there as normally as it did here.

The Varsen, the species that predominantly inhabited Fayaxiamen, were semi terrestrial and semi aquatic – they were humanoid in their bodies, but had gills on their necks which allowed them to breathe underwater, and they were extremely graceful and agile. They could generate lights on their bodies which helped them communicate in the dark waters. All that liquid made Wyliam anxious, but he forgot about it when he was led into the Palace.

It was also partly submerged but the servants weren’t taken to the lower parts. Instead the housemistress, who was the head servant, named Guadix, led them through the corridors, droning on about what they are and aren’t allowed to touch. Guadix was a Vlassain, a frog, her old skin bumpy and a dark, ashy green. Her eyes were bulgy, her coarse hair pulled up in a small bun.

“You have now been split into groups,” she said, her voice croaky and unpleasant. Wyl hadn’t even noticed when part of their group had broken off and disappeared somewhere in the gloomy, gothic corridors of the palace, “This is the royal palace so you will do your job and you will do it well or you will find yourself on a ship right to whatever hole you crawled out of.”

Wyliam flinched. He hated angry people because he himself was shy, quiet and sensitive. He liked helping other, and making friends, so anyone negative always made him anxious. Guadix made him anxious. He had taken this job because his mother had passed away a few months back – she had been old, and Wyl had never known his father. He had six siblings, his oldest sister, Akhta, was married and living somewhere in the Eon Galaxy, though she cut off all ties with her family. As second oldest Wyliam had to take care of his siblings, and yet he found it hard – their small apartment cost more than he expected and he could only juggle so many jobs.

This job, as a servant in Fayaxiamen, paid spectacularly, and that was the only reason Wyl took it. He left Ayx, his seventeen year old brother, in charge of the children on Earth 6.2 and he himself came here, not knowing what to expect. Now Guadix was making him regret his choices, her harsh voice making his skin crawl.

“This group will now be known as the Dusts,” Guadix continued harshly, leading them down the corridor. Heavy drapes had been pulled over the floor to ceiling windows, and it was dark save for the dim lights embedded in the cream walls, “you are in charge of cleaning and to an extent you are the most important group since you will be the only ones who will ever have the chance to directly meet the royals. Count yourselves lucky. If by any chance you find yourself in the presence of King Thrisan, Queen Vallea or the King’s sister, Princess Rozene, you must be respectful and not speak unless spoken to. Your duties will include the throughout cleaning of the palace, including the royal chambers,” a gleam appeared in Guadix’s dull, bulgy eyes as she looked at the small group over her broad shoulder, “it has happened with previous Kings and Queens that they had taken on a personal servant. If that is to happen you will abandon all your other duties and simply serve the royal, unless otherwise instructed.” She led them up a set of spiralling stairs, then another set. It was deathly quiet in this part palace, and only Guadix’s voice could be heard, going on and on about the specific duties of the Dusts. They went all the way up to the final floor, where Guadix brushed her hand over a pad. A hole appeared in the ceiling and one by one the servants stood beneath it, getting sucked up to the attic.

Here there were multiple doors, and the ceiling was slanted. Guadix held a bright stone in her hand, which gave her an ominous glow as she looked at the newcomers.

“These are your chambers,” she gestured at the doors disappearing into the darkness, “Alphabetically
so figure it out. And one more thing,” her fat lips curved into a smirk, “as the Dusts, and the people coming in contact with the Royals, you will have to do anything they want you to, like you signed on your contract,” Wyliam felt his stomach twist with nerves, “including sex,” someone gasped, appalled in the back, and Guadix laughed, “That’s right – unless you are married or mated the King or Queen can ask you for sex, and it would be in your best interest to accept. Of course nobody will force you into anything but if the Royals are dissatisfied...well...,” the woman’s smirk grew, “That ship back to Earth will be waiting. Good night.”

As whispers broke out around him, Wyl shuffled down the doors until he found one with his surname engraved in it. He wanted to get away from everyone and figure out if this complicated job was worth it. His chamber was tiny and almost completely taken by a massive bed, piled high with pillows. The other people of Fayaxiamen seemed more welcoming than Guadix. There were some shelves on the walls and the slanted roof added to the cosiness of the room. There was a curtain at the little window and when Wyliam shrugged off his shoes and crawled over his soft bed to push it aside, he saw the beautiful lights, like fairylights, of Fayaxiamen spread below him, disappearing underwater. The calm surface of the sea also reflected the stars and the sliver of a moon hanging in the night sky. It took Wyl’s breath away. His uniform was folded on one of the pillows and he carefully put it on a shelf, thinking about what Guadix told them.

He didn’t fear about that sex thing. Wyliam had never had a boyfriend or a girlfriend, he was an awkward virgin, and the thing was – he wasn’t attractive. *I have nothing to fear*, he told himself as he walked to the little mirror to wash his face in the sink beneath it. Usually he hated his appearance but now it came in handy; he had wild, curly mousy brown hair that always fell into his eyes, which were too big for his face and a weird light green. Wyliam wore glasses, round, cheap ones his mother bought him years ago. He was scrawny and ridiculously short, his skin pale and marred with hundreds of freckles that were *everywhere* – his cheeks, his shoulders, his knuckles, wrists, stomach. His lips were big, like a girls. *Yes,* Wyl thought, looking at his reflection, *nobody will ever be interested in me.*

That thought brought him relief, for the first time in his life.
The Boy and the Cyborg

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Ni 15th Scitli 1161EE (2 days later)

Arossa.

Rian Reo Dali sat underneath an Arnola tree, his back leaning against the ebony black bark that caught against his white shirt every time he shifted. The leaves of the tree were like beautiful dark green feathers, swooping down around the tree like a dome and creating almost a secluded, isolated spot from the rest of the royal gardens. This was a secret place, where the children of the royalty came as children and continued coming here as adults.

Rian watched, grumpily, as his younger sister, Eilo, and her fiancée, Kalorian, splashed around in the shallow end of the river that raced past, laughing, Kal’s trousers were rolled up to his knees and Eilo was just in her underwear. They were enjoying the last few days of the summer, and the last few days of ‘freedom’ they would have before their upcoming wedding.

Looking at them now Rian couldn’t help but think that they were perfect for each other – Eilo with her pale blonde hair and fair skin, and Kal with a much darker complexion and jet black hair. The way they looked at each other, full of warmth, should’ve made Rian happy, but it didn’t, and made him angry. So angry. Why couldn’t he just be happy for them?

“Rian!” Eilo cupped her small hands around her mouth and called out to her older brother, “Come on! The water’s perfect!”

“Pass!” Rian called back. Eilo pouted at him and Kalorian gave him a pointed look. Rian ignored both of them and let them go back to their games in the water as he mused about how miserable his life would become in a few days, watching the sunlight glimmer between the leaves above his head.

Kal and Rian had been best friends since they were eleven years old. It had always been the two of them, getting in trouble, climbing up the jagged Daulaelong Mountains of Arossa, going on visits to other planets together. They had been inseparable. Then Eilo got old enough to play with them and they had become a trio. And now Eilo and Kal were getting married, and Rian was getting left behind.

But that wasn’t why he was upset, not really anyway. He the King of Arossa, and he couldn’t imagine being that every day without Eilo and Kal at his side. But in a few weeks the two of them would be down in their countryside house, trying to get pregnant and having the time of their lives with each other. Their honeymoon. Their life together. Rian couldn’t stand that.
It took him a long time to realise that the reason he couldn’t stand it was because he was in love with Kal.

Rian squeezed his eyes shut, even the thought of it making him feel sick. What kind of disgusting person falls in love with their sibling’s fiancée? Rian hated himself for it, so, so much. He loved his sister more than anything, would give her the galaxy if he could. And yet he loved the man she did.

Eilo’s and Kal’s warm laughter as they splashed each other with the river water just made Rian feel worse. He had to distance himself, because soon he’d be left behind.

“Rian!” Eilo called again, now completely wet, the droplets in her hair glittering in the sun. Kalorian had disappeared beneath the surface earlier, using the fact that he was semi-aquatic, and dragged her under. They both stared at Rian now, bright smiles on their faces, soaking wet, “Come on! Don’t just sit there!”

“I don’t feel like it!” Rian snapped. He didn’t mean to snap, he didn’t want to ruin the couple’s joy, but he couldn’t pretend he was happy when his heart felt like it was being squeezed painfully in his chest by an invisible hand.

Eilo laughed because a fish had leapt from the water and she ran into the deeper end to chase it, but Kalorian didn’t follow her. Instead he climbed out of the water and came underneath the shade provided by the Arnola tree. Silently Rian held a towel out to him.

“Why are you being pissy?” Kal asked, taking the towel and wiping his face before throwing it to the side. There was a tension about his tanned, broad shoulders. Rian started pulling grass from the ground because he didn’t want to look at the other man; didn’t want to look at his dark, damp hair that fell artfully into his equally dark eyes, full of warmth, he didn’t want to look at his carefree smile, or his strong jaw line, or the water beading on his muscled, tanned body. Rian should be used to seeing him like this – they had been half-naked around each other since they were chubby, awkward teenagers. But it was different now. Rian had no right to look at Kal.

“I’m not being pissy,” the King said, “I’m just not in the mood.”

“So...you’re being pissy?” Kal summarised. Rian rolled his eyes.

“Go make sure your bride doesn’t drown trying to catch a fish,” he said, trying to play it off as a joke, hoping the bitterness wasn’t showing in his voice. Kal must’ve not picked up on it, because he just grinned carelessly and grabbed Rian’s arm, hauling the surprised man to his feet.

“Oi, what the-,” Rian started, and then screeched when Kal suddenly threw him over his shoulder and raced back to the water, laughing wildly. Rian’s stomach flipped, his heart started pounding and he desperately tried to squirm out of the grip of Kal’s warm arms.

The next thing he knew was that he was being dunked underwater, the river closing over his head with a roar. The cold that suddenly pierced Rian’s skin caused him to gasp, so he opened his mouth and got a lung-full of water in his lungs, like icicles. Bubbles erupted around him, and Rian felt a stab of pain as he scraped his thigh against the rocks underwater.

Kal grabbed his arm and hauled him up, and Rian started spluttering, “Stars, Rian, did you forget how to bloody swim?”

“Fuck off!” now that Rian was done spitting the water back into the river, he shoved at Kal, who looked surprised at his anger. Rian’s blood was boiling – he was freezing and dripping wet, but he was aware that that wasn’t the reason for his emotions. He was just mad at the world for being so
stardamn unfair. *He* was the oldest, why couldn’t *he* marry Kal?

“Gods, it was just a joke, Ri,” Kalorian said weakly, regret in his eyes.

“What’s happened?” Eilo asked, and Rian heard her running through the river towards them, sloshing water everywhere. He didn’t want to look at her, or at Kal.

“We’re not fucking *children* anymore! Stop acting like we are!” Rian hissed at his soon to be brother-in-law and climbed back onto the bank of the river.

“Rian!” Kalorian shouted after him pleadingly, but Rian ignored him. Angrily he stormed through the gardens, until wild bushes and moss gave way to hedges and flowers and the Tower Palace came into view, pale pink and topped with baby blue towers, like something out of a fairytale.

“Your Grace-,” the gardener wasn’t wearing his gravity shoes, and was floating above a tall tree, clipping at the branches. The Calanthe had the ability to fly or float, depending on their skill, and often had to wear heavy shoes to not be blown away by the winds. Rian’s own shoes slowed him down as he stormed past the gardener, ignoring his worried expression.

The King took the servant staircase up to the fifth floor, because he didn’t feel like seeing anyone now, not when he was in a mood and drenched. At times like this he was glad he had a whole government behind him to rule if he didn’t want to.

Rian was happy when he found himself alone in his chamber. It was a spacious room, with a large bed with a canopy on one wall, multiple sofas and a balcony overgrown with wild flowers. The moment the door closed behind the King he started stripping off his clothes, and just happened to look at himself in the mirror.

Rian was always told that he was a handsome young man, and he had believed it. He always got plenty of attention from his peers, and had numerous secret boyfriends and girlfriends. But now he felt his stomach twist at his reflection. His usually neat light blonde hair was wet and plastered to his forehead, and his dark rose-coloured eyes were brimming with tears of frustration. As he looked at himself a tear slid down his cheek – no matter how good looking he was, Kal would never want him.

That thought made Rian lose the will to be conscious. He dragged himself to his bed, completely naked, and climbed underneath the covers. He rested his head on the square of sunlight on his pillow and wiped his tears hurriedly with a cold hand, even though nobody could see him. He would have to apologise for his outburst to Eilo and Kal at dinner, because they didn’t know why he was mad at them lately. They couldn’t know. Rian would never jeopardise their happiness by telling them. He would hold it in and live with it himself, bury it deep inside of himself. He was good at that.

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Dashyan stared at the Tower Palace rising above him, his mouth open. He had grown up on *Hannibal* and had never seen many big buildings, especially none as impressive as the royal palace on Arossa, its spiralling towers surrounded by clouds at the top, tinged pink by the sunset.

“Woah,” the sixteen year old exhaled, his aquamarine eyes big and impressed, “it sure is something.”

“It’s just a palace,” Tyeval said from next to the boy. The two best friends stood side by side, gripping at the straps of their bags, faces craned up to take in the structure.

“Stars, you always have to ruin the mood,” Dashe teased, poking Tye in the ribs with his elbow.

“And you always have to make everything out better than it is,” Tye interjected, sticking his tongue
out at Dashe, the way the ginger boy taught him when they were kids. The two grinned at each other.

“Oi! You two!” Dashe’s father’s voice reached them, “Stop staring it’s just a palace!”

“See?” Tye said pointedly. Dashyan turned around with an eye roll and saw the Crew of Hannibal unloading a load of boxes. Since the end of the war they became a delivery ship, carrying supplies and bought goods between planets.

Dashyan bounded over to his father, who he had inherited his ginger hair from, though his was neat and straight while his dad’s was curly, “Dad, when do we get to look at the ships?” Dashe asked excitedly, buzzing like a child. Tye hovered behind him. He always followed Dashe wherever he went, but that was okay. The Hybrid was used to having his best friend and protector around and would feel like he was missing an arm if Tyeval suddenly disappeared.

Thane looked up from boxes full of medicine, looking wildly annoyed, “Stars, kid, do you ever just concentrate on one thing or do you always have to think ahead?”

“Always have to think ahead,” Dashe confirmed with a big smile, “Sooo...the ships?”

“Right,” Thane cleared his throat and looked away, “The ships. We’ll talk about them later, when everyone’s settled down.”

Viridian and Thane, Dashyan’s parents, had promised the boy that when he turned sixteen he would be able to do a year of exploring on his own ship. It was crowded on Hannibal, and Tye and Dashe weren’t children anymore. The Ubloit was twenty and old enough that Dashe’s parent’s trusted him to look after the boy on their little ‘adventure.’ Now was a perfect opportunity for Dashyan to buy a ship; Arossa had impressive ships imported from Fayaxiamen. He was so excited to go and do something all by himself. Well, not by himself, but with Tye, and that was even better.

“Let’s help unload the ship,” Tyeval said, grabbing Dashe by the back of his t-shirt and pulling him away from Thane, “Stop bothering your father.”

“Oi!” Dashyan complained. Tyeval dragged him a little way away from the rest of the crew, and the Calanthe guards that were helping them, behind some boxes. His deep brown eyes, which were honestly Dashyan’s favourite thing in the world, now looked down at him with frustration.

“He doesn’t want us to go,” the Ubloit said.

“Huh?” Dashe blinked.

Tyeval sighed, “You’re his little boy. He doesn’t want to let you go for a whole year.”

“But I’ll be with you,” Dashyan said.

“I know,” the Ubloit reached out and ruffled his friend’s hair, messing it up a little. Dashyan pouted at him cutely, “but you know how he is with emotions. He doesn’t know how to let you go, but knows he can’t ask you to stay. So just...give him some time to come to terms with the fact that he won’t see you for a while.”

“Alright,” Dashe said. He didn’t get his dad sometimes, but he loved him nonetheless. He had expected Viridian, his other father, to be the emotional one about his departure. Tyeval, despite the fact he was part machine, was a lot better at reading people that the sixteen year old.

They ventured back out from behind the boxes and started pretending they were doing something.
Well, Dashe was pretending, Tye was actually helping, lifting all the heavy boxes, the muscles in his light brown arms flexing. Suddenly, out of nowhere, there was a girly scream. Everyone’s heads snapped up in shock and they looked around.

A girl was sprinting up from the walkway to the palace, her light blonde hair wet, her crimson dress billowing behind her. She looked a couple of years older than Tye but when Dashe gave him a confused look the Ubloit just shrugged, indicating he didn’t know her.

“Sasha!” the girl screamed, her face bright with a smile. Dashyan was surprised to hear her say her father’s name, even more so when the man stepped forward with open arms that the girl barrelled right into, “Oh my stars!” the girl squealed. Viridian, who his friends called ‘Sasha’ from his surname, Shatashah, was smiling as he hugged her, “I can’t believe you’re here! I’m so happy you accepted my invitation!”

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world,” Viridian said, with such warmth in his voice that it made Dashe a little jealous, “Wow, you’ve gotten so big, let me get a good look at you,” Sasha said, pulling back to look at the girl, his eyes sparkling and full of emotion, “I can’t believe you barely used to reach my knees,” they laughed together, and then the girls’ eyes widened.

“Huambo!” she gushed.

The ship’s cook, a Wurund, a silent giant with scaly grey skin, he set down the boxes he carried in his arms and smiled at her clumsily. Over the years he still hadn’t perfected that gesture. When Eilo hugged him she barely reached his chest.

“Who the hell is that?” Dashe mouthed at Tye. Before his best friend could reply Viridian turned to them,

“Kids,” he said, making Dashyan flush with embarrassment because he was not a kid anymore, “This is Princess Eilo Éssa Dali, it’s her wedding we will be attending in a few days.”

The blonde girl turned to them with a flourish of her skirts and curtsied, but when she looked up all of her regal manner and professionalism evaporated. She gaped, “Oh my stars is that...,” her voice faltered, “You’re Dashyan, aren’t you?”

Dashe looked around himself peevishly, looking for another kid called Dashyan, “Uh...yeah. Hi. That’s me.”

The princess hugged him fiercely and Dashyan barely had time to blush before she was pulling back, “He looks just like you guys,” she said, turning back to Thane and Viridian, “a spitting image!”

She was so all over the place. It was kind of endearing. Dashe found himself smiling as he watched her hug the crew like they were her old friends. Well, they were. Dashyan had heard the story of the mission to Arossa a million times growing up – Eilo had been a little girl then, her brother Rian, who was King now, barely a few years older, and the crew of the Hannibal had been tasked with transporting them to this planet for the engagement between the girl and Prince Kalorian from Fayaxiamen. It was insane to think that Dashe was here to witness the wedding that was caused by the success of that mission sixteen years ago.

After a few more minutes where emotions ran high Eilo escorted the Crew to their rooms, which were on the second floor of the beautiful palace. She explained that her brother wasn’t feeling well and was asleep, and introduced them to her fiancée, a handsome, dark hair man. By the time everyone had dragged their luggage to their rooms night had fallen.
From his room Dashyan could see the beautiful lamps strung through the impressive Arossian gardens. At first he had been ecstatic because he had gotten his own room especially because it was much bigger than what he was used to. But when he settled in the big bed, in the darkness, he started missing Tyeval horribly. Apart from his fathers, Dashe loved his best friend the most and he felt isolated when he was by himself. He and Tyeval had shared a room all their life.

After about an hour of tossing and turning, Dashyan started hearing sounds outside his door. Footsteps. Clicking. Creaking. He knew he was imagining it and that there was nobody outside. As a child Dashyan used to be scared of everything, especially the galaxy, and so Tye covered the windows of their cabin, but then it had gotten horribly dark and Tye found out he was also scared of that. But he always had his best friend in the bed opposite him, and could slip into his bed every time he felt spooked, and Tye would stroke his back and tell him there was nothing in the dark. Now Dashyan was alone.

But he knew which room Tyeval was.

The boy sat up in his bed and shoved his covers to the side. The only light falling into the room came from the dim glow of the garden lights outside. Dashe swallowed, got to his feet and stopped. *I’m not a child, am I actually running to Tye because I’m scared of some night sounds?* The boy flushed and sat back down, embarrassed at being frightened so easily. He laid on his back and started intensely at the darkness, ignoring his pounding heart, until the shadows stopped looking like some warped shapes and dark people waiting in corner, and became a sofa, a cupboard, a bedside table.

Dashyan felt fear seeping out of him as he settled among the pillows. He had persuaded himself not to be scared. But he was still antsy. He kept contemplating leaving the room, slipping across the corridor and climbing into Tyeval’s bed. Whenever he did that the Ubloit didn’t question him, just wrapped his strong arms around Dashe. Sometimes he stroked his hair too. Tye slept shirtless, and Dashyan always enjoyed the warmth of his skin, the strong, steady beating of his heart beneath his cheek when he pressed himself close.

It wasn’t weird, was it? Dashe wasn’t scared anymore, or spooked, he could’ve easily fallen asleep and yet his mind kept straying to Tye in his own bed. What was he doing? Was he asleep? Dashyan would’ve given him a call but they had no signal on Arossa. He bit his lip and stared at the darkness, this time in search for answers.

He found none. *It’s not weird,* he told himself determinedly, pressing his face into his pillow.

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The palace was in full swing of wedding preparations the next day and Dashyan felt like he was getting in the way a lot of the time. His father, Viridian, spent a lot of time with Princess Eilo, catching up on the years apart. Despite their age difference they got along like a house on fire, and the Princess seemed to see some kind of mentor in Viridian. He had a lot of old friends on Arossa, including a brown haired guard who he had introduced as Arch and then spent hours speaking with. Dashe’s other father, Thane, was always busy because he was a medic and medics were always busy. Champagne and Lin amused themselves by repairing *Hannibal* – it was an old ship and it always needed repairing. Uncle Plumpton, the translator, was being used by Prince Rian, the blonde, quiet King, as a person to greet the international guests that flooded in for the wedding. Greige, Cylian, Huambo and Tyeval had been roped into carrying things a lot of the time, but Dashe was just a scrawny sixteen year old so he couldn’t lift much.

Somehow he managed to persuade his fathers to let him and Tye slip away from all the preparatory chaos and go look for a ship since they had nothing better to do anyway. Sohalia, also known as Hickey, Captain Cylian’s best friend and co-pilot, volunteered to assist them. ‘Assist’ was the word
that the Ishait woman used, but it was obvious she was babysitting. Dashe hated that – he was considered an adult by Earthian standards in less than a year and yet the Crew always followed him around as if he was a stupid child. Besides, he had Tye with him, and Tye was older.

Still, Dashyan really wanted his ship and he really liked Hickey, so he agreed to her coming. She borrowed one of the palace’s mini-ships so they could get to the hangars and in less than an hour they had arrived in Talina, an industrial city, where the greenery and pastels of the Palace gave way to short, bulky buildings painted in bright colours, selling all kind of things. There was a festival feel to the explosive streets as Dashyan passed through with his companions.

It was a sunny autumn day but the chill of the oncoming winter was tangible in the air, so Dashyan wrapped his long leather jacket tighter around himself as they ducked into an uneven, door-less entrance with QUILON’S 24 HOUR SHIP HANGAR hand-painted above it. If the shop’s exterior was rough, its interior most definitely wasn’t.

Dashyan’s mouth fell open as he stared at the spacious hangar, feeling his heart jerk up to his throat. The building had a tall ceiling, with a massive, sun-like light at the centre, illuminating the rest of the humongous room. The floor and walls were hard, dusty concrete, and on pedestals there were ships. Hundreds of ships.

“Oh my stars,” Dashe whispered, completely overwhelmed. Tyeval squeezed his shoulder.

“I know,” he murmured.

“Shit these are great!” Hickey exclaimed, already dashing to the closest machine and running around it like an excitable kid, her short aquamarine and purple hair bouncing with each of her springy steps. A robot attendant, of which there were plenty in the hangar, walked up to her. Tye and Dashe exchanged a look and with a knowing grin quickly walked off, so they could explore alone.

They passed by several truly impressive, towering machines. They were bigger than Hannibal and could probably fit several hundred people on board. It was overwhelming to walk in their shadows, because they seemed like living things, like any seconds they could turn their beam throwers on the boys and turn them to dust.

“I feel like I’m going to pass out,” Dashyan told Tyeval, reaching out to squeeze his best friend’s hand. A robot attendant approached them, a perfect smile on its gender-less, bald head. Its eyes were little cameras.

“Good afternoon,” she said in commercial Faso. Dashe was glad she spoke it because despite the fact that there were plenty of species onboard Hannibal the boy had only ever learned the language they all spoke – Faso, the language of the humans, the Shifs. Tye, however, could speak all of the languages of all the galaxies. It was coded in him, “What can I do for such a lovely couple?”

Dashyan felt himself blushing, but before he could say anything, Tye snatched his hand back, “We’re not a couple,” he stated. The Attendant’s face didn’t change.

“Apologies. Is there anything you gentlemen are looking for?”

“A small ship,” Dashyan had shoved his hands into his pockets. As much as he wanted one of these true monsters to belong to him, he knew he had to be realistic about it, “Just for us two. Something we can move across the Galaxy in fast.”

“Ah, a ship good for travel,” the Attendant guessed assessed, inclining its head mechanically, “Follow me.”
It led them between alleys created by the ships themselves, where customers interweaved between the machines. Dashe was a little paranoid that with so many people some else would buy his dream ship. The further they walked the smaller the ships got. But there were all kinds. Dashe, who loved ships, had never seen so many in one place. He recognised some of them from miniature collector statues he got for his birthdays.

Finally they got to the two-crewers. After the massive machines that Dashyan had seen at the start he was a little underwhelmed, but that was to be expected.

“So,” the Attendant strode up to a sleek silver ship with black tinted windows and a crimson warhead, “This is a Plow Ship EE17, designed for space jumping. Newest technology allowed us to build it in a way that it can manoeuvre through black holes.”

“What?!” Dashyan gaped. The Attendant nodded, “Yes. It’s core gravity prevents the time warp inside black holes to affect it, and therefore gives the crew time to find their way and choose where they would like to be teleported to.”

“That’s insane,” Dashe whispered. Tyeval was staring up at the ship with big eyes full of awe. For someone part-machine he was horribly easy to read, “Uh...what’s the price?”

“200 million jejus,” the Attendant said, her slightly-creepy smile still in place. Dashe choked on air.

“Can we look at something more...affordable?” Tyeval asked as Dashyan tried to wrap his head around that number. The Attendant led them on and Tye had to pull Dashe along because the boy was still frozen, staring at the Plow Ship. It didn’t seem so cool anymore, not with a price tag like that.

The ships became less sleek, polished and new-looking as the Attendant continued to take Dashe and Tye along. Several times the boys had to move on from ships they liked because they were too expensive. After a few hours Dashyan started losing hope – his parents warned him that he might not find a machine the first time around. Hickey came to check up on them every so often while on her wild prowl of checking out every vehicle in this place. Eventually Dashe and Tye ended up at the last line of ships before the second hand ones began. Dashyan didn’t want a second hand one, he wanted a ship that was just his and Tye’s, one that didn’t have a history.

Dashe was walking with his hands in his pockets, eyes trained on his shoes. He always did this when he was upset, just looked at the floor. He felt Tye’s hand on his sleeve, tugging, and he looked up at the other boy.

“What about that one?” the Ubloit asked, pointing.

The ship was very small, and bright orange, narrow and long. It had short, stubby wings for balance, and the glass in the navigation cabin at the head was bottle green. In its roof it had a dip, and Dashyan saw rockets nestled in there. After the war almost all ships were weaponized.

“Oh,” the Attendant said, seeming a little less perky, even though a robot couldn’t exactly be perky, “It’s one of a kind. A...defect.”

“But it works?” Tyeval asked, his eyes sparkling as he took in the orange ship. He was smiling. Tye didn’t really smile that much and in that moment Dashe decided they were getting the ship. Because it had made his best friend smile.

“Yes. It works,” the Attendant confirmed, “Ora-Ves 2DE. Built in 1143 Exploration Era, it was meant for the Cairn War but better ships were created, and this one had faulty wiring and had to be
manually powered at times. It contains standard automatic gyro controls, a guidebeam, laser rockets and shooters, it has a hydrogen chamber and a navigation cabin, and one standard living cabin suitable for two persons.”

Dashyan watched as Tyeval reached out and touched the tip of the ship with his fingers. Dashe wanted to make him happy. He wanted Tye to always smile, “What’s the price?” the Ubloit asked.

“12 hundred jejus,” the robot replied. Dashyan’s eyes widened, because somehow he hadn’t expected to be able to afford it.

“We’ll take it,” the words tumbled from his mouth before he could even think twice about them. It was worth it for Tyeval’s smile.

Aje 17th Scitli 1161EE (2 days later)

Arossa.

The cloak billowed behind the figure when it slipped out of the servant’s door of the Tower Palace. There was a bag slung across the person’s shoulder and its footsteps were silent on the soft grass as it dashed across the entryway. The guards who were meant to be there were gone, most likely resting their eyes in a crevice of the wall, where none of their supervisors would see them.

Below the palace the city was full of lights, for Arossa never slept. And yet the cloaked figure didn’t head to the gates that would allow it to slip among the houses. Instead it turned and ran for the darkness of the landing pods, where dozens of ships were resting, arrived for the wedding.

The cloaked figure melted into the shadows, and the night continued, peaceful, as if the person had never been there.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much to everyone who commented/left kudos! You lot are the best. And thank you to everyone who decided to give this story a shot.

If you liked this chapter leave a comment/kudo because you know how much it means!

xx
Lev 18th Scitli 1161EE (1 day later)

Arossa.

Kalorian Moringathu loved mornings, especially mornings on Arossa. The planet was just so vibrant – when it was cold, it was truly cold, when it was hot, it was truly hot. That morning the man awoke in his canopied double bed with light streaming in through the high, arched windows of his bedchamber. It reflected through the textured glasses that were left scattered on the table, half full of amber liquid, and created interesting, golden patterns on the wooden floor.

Kal smiled. He could already tell today was going to be a good day just from the way the sun looked through his window. He loved waking up in the sunshine. The Briallan Palace back at home had always been dark, with heavy curtains in the windows to protect its inhabitants from the violent storms that sometimes took place.

Lazily, Kalorian rolled over onto his other side and yawned, stretching his legs and arms out so he took up as much space as possible. He would have to say goodbye to this bed soon, when he left the palace with Eilo after their wedding. That made him a little sad.

The door banged open, violently and suddenly disturbing his morning awakening. Kalorian sat up, alert and anxious, and Rian barrelled in without so much as a ‘good-morning.’ The King looked wild, which was peculiar for him, because he was usually neat and clean cut. Now his pale hair was in disarray, and his eyes were wide and full of fear.

“What’s wrong?” not many things made Kal afraid, but Rian’s anxiety was one of the things that did. He threw his covers to the side and was out of bed in seconds.

“It’s Eilo!” Rian panicked, “She’s gone!”

“What?” Kalorian demanded, the statement not quite hitting him. He walked up to Rian, who looked ready to fall apart, and grabbed his shoulders, “Stars, Rian are you alright?”

“What?!” Rian laughed hysterically, “Am I alright?!” he demanded, “are you alright?! Stars, Kal, your wedding was meant to be in a week!”

“How do you know she’s gone?” Kal demanded.

“She’s not in her bed or in the palace, some of her clothes are gone and nobody’s seen her and stars Kal what are we going to do-,” Rian was on the verge of panic. Kalorian squeezed his shoulders,
“Hey, shhh,” he said soothingly, wondering why the news of Eilo’s disappearance weren’t hitting him harder than this. He was worried, naturally, but not worried enough, “It’s alright. We’ll find her,” he tried to pull the blonde into a comforting hug but the man shoved him away.

“We need to find her,” he insisted, eyes darting all over the place. He was clearly restless, “She wouldn’t just leave like this! We’re going to have to go to the forest, she might be there, she might be hurt, someone must’ve taken her...”

Kalorian was sure that Eilo wasn’t down in the forest, but he needed to humour Rian, to have him do something until he calmed down. He was King - he couldn’t shut down because his sister went missing. Still, multiple search parties were sent out and Kal got dressed and met Rian at the edge of the royal gardens.

They went to their hiding place first, but it was untouched and Eilo was nowhere to be seen. They crossed the river over a little vine bridge, and found themselves in the wild parts of the forest, that didn’t belong to the palace.

“Eilo!” Rian called, mouths cupped over his mouth as he picked his way over gnarly tree roots, brushing leaves back with anger, “Eilo!”

There was such rawness in his voice, that Kal couldn’t do otherwise but also call out to the girl. He questioned why he didn’t want her to answer. Kalorian loved Eilo, of course he did, she was one of his best friends. But he wasn’t in love with her. Now, the more he and Rian looked the more Kalorian felt a little trickle of relief in his body. If Eilo was gone they couldn’t get married. Immediately, the man felt horrible because something could’ve happened to the princess. Then he would’ve never forgiven himself. His guilt only made him scream her name louder, until both he and Rian were losing their voices.

Kal had no idea how long they searched for, but each time some sky broke through the trees the sun had travelled further across. The leaves in the trees had started changing colours at this time in the year, from their normal multi-coloured vibrancy to silver. Soon the whole forest would be gray and they leaves would start falling.

“Rian, this is pointless,” Kal said finally, out of breath, his muscles aching. Rian was in front of him, still full of energy, “This forest is massive, we’ll never find her-“

“So what?!” Rian whirled around, fury burning up his eyes. He looked like a madman, “You just want to just abandon her?!?”

Kalorian was offended Rian could think that, ”No. But she could not even be in this forest.”

“Or she could,” Rian insisted, “She could be right here somewhere...,” he trailed off and turned around. Kal grabbed his hand.

“We need to get back to the Tower Palace. We need to eat, drink and rest. We’ve been at this for hours,” he could see Rian wavering, the exhaustion clear in his body language, “we need to regroup, get search ships up, maybe another search party found something?”

This made Rian hopeful and he nodded, “Yes. You’re right.”

Kalorian smiled, “Of course I am, idiot.”

It took them another hour to trek back to the palace. By the time they reached the vine bridge over the river again, they both had twigs in their hair and little cuts on their arms from where they walked into bushes. Kal was parched, hungry and exhausted.
When they returned to the palace, a guard ran up to them.

“Any news?” Rian asked immediately. The guard nodded,

“Your cousin wants to see you in her chambers.”

The two boys were mournfully silent as they climbed the white marble staircase inside the palace to the third floor, where Princess Ashia’s, the former regent’s, bedchambers were. They were both silent, both lost in thought, both wondering what Ashia had discovered. *Not a body, stars, anything but a body.* When Rian knocked on the woman’s door Ashia opened almost immediately.

Her hand was resting on her heavily pregnant stomach and there was worry set deep into her eyes. Her usually neat blonde hair was now piled messily on top of her head.

“Rian,” she gushed, surging forward to hug her cousin. She then repeated the motion with Kalorian. He lived in the Tower Palace so long that he was considered family. Ashia insistently ushered the two men into her chambers.

“Are there any news?” Rian asked impatiently as Ashia closed the door behind them, “Ash please, I think I’m going to throw up with worry-“


There was a proud smile tugging at the Princess’s mouth, “Yes. She hacked in and she left a message that the technician only found now.” She performed a specific move with her hand and sudden a holograph of Eilo, flickering from the shoulders up, appeared, suspended, “Listen for yourselves.”

Rian and Kal came around with heavy hearts and the dark haired man was surprised to see his fiancée with her hair up, dressed in space gear.

“Dear family,” the hologram started, and Rian’s shoulders slumped when he heard his sister’s voice, “I am not going to get married, and I am sorry to tell you about it like this,” her words, so blunt and straightforward, made Kal’s heart pound, “I wish I could say I’m not ready, but that isn’t it. I’m just not ready to marry Kalorian, and I never will be. Kal, it’s not you. I do love you, so, so much,” hologram-Eilo’s eyes softened and Kal felt a warmth in his chest. He smiled, despite himself, “But just not like that. And I can’t imagine spending the rest of our lives in a house in a countryside. The galaxy is literally at my fingertips – why shouldn’t I see it? I’m sorry if I disappoint any of you. Ash, I know you won’t mind as much, but Rian,” the Princess’ eyes turned sad now, “I know how much this meant to you. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you in person, and I hope you can understand why I did this and forgive me. Apologise to all the guests for me. I’m so sorry,” she paused, bit her lip and smiled, “Well, except I’m not. If I was sorry I wouldn’t have left,” she glanced to the left as if she had heard a noise, “I love you all and I will see you very, very soon. Yours, always,” the hologram blew them a kiss and then the image flickered out of existence.

The two men stared at where Eilo had been seconds ago, shell-shocked. Kalorian couldn’t tell what Rian was thinking because he didn’t even know what he himself was thinking. He was so lost, all the emotions inside him were trying to find their place, but it was like laying bricks of different shapes on top of each other – they just didn’t fit right. Kal was confused, first and foremost, did Eilo go on vacation? Did she run away? Was she coming back? He was also relieved, because the girl was safe. And he was happy. Because he didn’t have to get married anymore, not to Eilo anyway.

Rian’s anger snapped Kal out of his thoughts, “What is wrong with her?” he whispered, more to
himself than Kal or Ashia, his shoulders shaking with anger. Kal wanted to comfort him but he had a feeling the King would just push him away. He pushed him away a lot lately, and Kal didn’t know why.

“I’d like to say that we can just cancel the wedding and forget about the whole ordeal,” Ashia said, rubbing her stomach in thought, “but unfortunately it doesn’t work like that,” both Rian and Kal were looking at her, “Kal, I had been corresponding with your brother, King Thrisan. He was on the way here for the wedding but turned around when I informed him about Eilo. Fayaxiamen and Arossa still need a marriage alliance, or all the things that happened for the past sixteen years, all the weapons and armies sent over, would’ve been for nothing.”

“Who can I marry?” Kalorian asked, and his eyes turned to Rian as if on instinct. The King wasn’t looking at him, eyes trained on the floor.

“There is an old Calanthe custom,” Ashia worried at her bottom lip, “where, if something is to happen to a groom or bride prior to a royal wedding, the children of six Arossian provinces are called in for a competition of sorts, where the winner gets to marry into the royal family.”

“So you’re saying Kalorian should hold a competition in which he’s the prize?” Rian snapped. Ashia shrugged her shoulders.

“It’s a custom. Currently five of the six provinces have children suited for this – all of them beautiful girls I hear,” she now turned to Kal, “You would have your wife chosen for you, but you are the one who would eliminate a girl each round, and so, to an extent, you could pick the one you like. Of course normally you’d marry the next sibling in line but,” her eyes slid to the blonde King, “Rian’s position on the throne complicates things. The competition could take several weeks, months even.”

A competition. Several weeks. Right now Kalorian was so elated at his freedom that that seemed like a lifetime. He could deal with that obstacle when he got to it, “I’ll do it,” he said, and watched Ashia sag with relief.

“Thank you,” she said, smiling, “Thrisan thought it’d be the best choice too. I will inform the guests about the new circumstances, and ask them to stay for the competition. It will be good fun. Now, excuse me,” she left the room, closing the door behind her softly and leaving Rian and Kal alone.

“Well...this is an interesting turn of events,” Kalorian said, trying to make a joke. Rian didn’t even smile, running a hand down his face as if trying to wipe his problems away.

“What a mess,” he murmured.

“You’re not...mad at me, are you?” Kal asked worriedly. Rian looked at him.

“No. No, of course not. This wasn’t your fault. This was Eilo being selfish.”

“I don’t think she was being selfish. Forcing her into a marriage alliance was selfish,” Kal said it before thinking.

“It was her duty,” Rian’s jaw tensed, “I would’ve done it. For my country.”

“Nothing we can do about it now,” Kal said, trying to remain optimistic as he rested his hand on Rian’s shoulder, squeezing, “Smile, idiot.”

Rian looked at him and grimaced. Kalorian laughed, and the blonde cracked a grin. Looking at him like that, smiling, made Kal realise how much more he would’ve preferred just marrying Rian, there and then.
He’s beautiful. Stars, he’s so beautiful. Tyeval couldn’t stop thinking it. It was like that one thought was just on repeat in his head, looped, set to torment him for the rest of eternity.

Tye watched from the sidelines as Dashyan hugged his fathers goodbye, laughing even though Viridian was crying. Even now, on the verge of tears himself, Dashe was absolutely beautiful. He could’ve easily been the most beautiful thing Tyeval had ever seen with the way he made his heart ache.

Tye could never have something as beautiful as Dashe, not with his twinkling eyes, and his stunning smiles, and fiery hair, and small, delicate, painter’s hands. He had painted their new ship, deep blue, crashing waves over the orange background, the name *Sycamora* intricately etched into the side in white. *Sycamora*. Their ship. It made Tye smile.

“You know you could stay until the new wedding, right?” Thane said, trying to sound casual though his voice was clearly tinged with desperation, “it’s only a few months...”

“Nah, it’s cool dad,” Dashyan smiled, glancing at Tyeval over his shoulder, “I think we’ll be on our way.”

“I can’t believe my l-little b-boy’s going,” Viridian sobbed, wrapping Dashe up in his arms. Dashyan rolled his eyes good-naturedly and patted his father on the back. Thane broke away from them and strode over to Tye, who immediately pushed himself off where he had been leaning against *Sycamora* and straightened up.

“You take care of yourselves boys,” Thane said.

“Yes, sir,” Tyeval replied immediately.

“Don’t get into any trouble,” the Fox continued, “if anything happens, if you run into anything bad, you let us know straight away, yes?”

“Yes.”

Thane lowered his voice, “Take care of him, Tye, would you?”

“It’s my job,” Tyeval smiled. Thane nodded,

“Yes, good man. And make sure he doesn’t create time. You know how much I hate that he drains himself.”

Tyeval nodded, “Of course.”

Thane pulled him into a hug that surprised Tyeval. The Ubloit had known the Fox for years and knew that the medic was *not* usually affectionate. The only person he was affectionate towards was Dashe when he was younger, and Viridian. Still, now he patted Tyeval on the back, clearly dismayed at the fact that the Ubloit was an inch or two taller.

“Right,” the Fox stepped back and cleared his throat, “Viridian, you sap, let go of Dashe and let them get on their way.”

It took a few more minutes of teary goodbyes before Dashe and Tye were really allowed to leave. As they climbed on board *their* ship (it still made Tyeval shiver thinking that it was just, only, completely *theirs*) they grinned at each other. The two boys waved at the Crew of Hannibal,
gathered to see them off, as the trapdoor closed behind them.

“Oh my stars,” Dashyan gushed as he bounded up to the navigation cabin, “I can’t believe we’re actually doing this!” he was buzzing. Beautiful, Tyeval thought distractedly.

The Crew of Hannibal have done their best to deck the small interior of Sycamora out, so that it was more homely. The ship had no corridors, so directly from the main entrance you came into the navigation cabin, which in turn was quite sizeable. There were three seats at the dashboard, and although the front window was bottle green from the outside, from the inside it was clear. Half of this room had been transformed into a kitchen of sorts. It was nothing nearly as impressive as the dining room back on Hannibal, but it would do. There were a few cups on the rack above the stove, ones that the Crew had gifted to Tye and Dashe. The cooler in the corner was decorated by Huambo’s sketched, plastered to the surface.

“Shall we begin?” Dashyan asked with a twinkle in his eye, dumping himself in one of the swivelling chairs. Tyeval smiled,

“Of course,” he sat down next to his best friend and they flicked on all the switches. Sycamora hummed as the engines and generators turned on, bright lights flickering in the back of the navigation cabin, while the front remained relatively dark for better vision purposes.

Tyeval and Dashyan had flown Hannibal multiple times, and Sycamora was a piece of cake compared to the bigger warship. Now its engines thrummed as it took off slowly, guided by both Dashe and Tye, who knew each other’s piloting styles like the back of their hands and communicated without words. The Crew of Hannibal waved at them vigorously from the ground and the boys returned the gesture as the ship rose, higher and higher, until the Crew became dots and Arossa stretched around them in its full, afternoon glory. The sun filtered into the navigation cabin and the two pilots couldn’t keep the smiles off their faces.

Soon they were in the atmosphere, watching the little water that Arossa had, tinged pink for the most part, grow smaller and smaller. And then space was opening around them. Tyeval had missed space, hadn’t even realised how badly. And yet now that the galaxy spread around him again, all the familiar stars and constellations and clouds of coloured dust, the boy’s chest seized up. It was like coming home, and it was a beautiful thing when your home was among the stars.

Dashyan flicked the autopilot button on and stood up, “I’m beat,” he yawned and stretched his arms over his head, “I think I’m gonna nap.”

“Alright,” Tye nodded and the boy walked across the navigation cabin. There were three doors there – one leading to a tiny bathroom, one to an even tinier storage cupboard with the hydropump in it, and the last to the two’s shared bedroom. Dashyan opened that door and Tyeval swivelled around to look outside the window at the galaxy and think. He wasn’t like Dashe, he was part-machine and didn’t get tired easily. He could go up to two weeks without any sleep, but usually he slept every three days. Sometimes he just laid in bed, when Dashe wanted him too, and watched the boy sleep. They had separate beds though, and Tye didn’t like that.

“Uh...Tye.”

Dashyan sounded shocked, so Tyeval turned around. The boy’s narrow back was to him as he looked inside the bedroom. Tye’s instincts kicked in and he was on his feet in seconds, shoving Dashe out of the way of potential danger. He stopped in the same position the boy was in seconds ago, staring in surprise inside their bedroom.

On the little sliver of floor between his and Dashe’s bed, there was a mattress. Sitting on the mattress,
scrolling through the interwebs, dressed in black pants and a loose white shirt, was Princess Eilo Essa Dali.

“What the hell is going on?” Dashe asked faintly.

“P-Princess?” Tyeval spluttered. The girl looked up casually from her holograph.

“Hi,” she smiled, “Sorry, hope you don’t mind giving me a little lift?”

“A-A little lift?” Dashyan asked, shocked, “The closest planet is miles away! What are you doing on our ship?!”

“Princess, everyone’s looking for you on Arossa-,” Tye started.

“I know,” Eilo sighed and stood up, “But I had to get away. You know, arranged marriages and that,” she smiled, “but I was hoping you boys would be kind enough to drop me off wherever you’re heading.”

Tye and Dashe exchanged a look, “We’re not heading anywhere,” the latter said.

Eilo blinked, “So...what exactly are you doing?”

“We’re going hunting for slave traders,” Tyeval said.

It had been a dully kept secret up until now. Hunting for slave traders and other war criminals was common in these times. Many crews self-employed themselves, and gathered ransoms for all the criminals they caught. Head-hunters, mercenaries, it had many names.

Since they were children, Tyeval and Dashyan had been very passionate about slavery. Tye, who had been sold as a child, knew all about it. Although hiring and buying Ubloits wasn’t truly considered slavery since they had no rights and were not considered ‘living’ creatures, Tyeval remembered how scared he had been when he was first bought. Thankfully, he found a true home on Hannibal, but many other Ubloits were mistreated. They were soldiers, but without war their purpose was unclear. Especially now, with the controversy surrounding the new batch of Ubloits that Tye belonged to, it was a tricky subject. Some considered the ‘new’ Ubloits too humane to be sold without a care. Dashe of course knew about all this and how Tyeval felt, so he too was very passionate about cracking down on the slave trade, at least the slave trade that could be cracked down on. They hadn’t told the Crew their plans – they thought the boys were just going exploring.

Eilo glanced between the two of them with interest, “Alright, I’m in.”

“What? No!” Dashe protested, “It was meant to be just me and Tye-“

“Relax,” Eilo smiled, “I’m not going to stick around for long. Just until we stumble upon some planet, I promise,” her eyes got big then, “Please don’t ditch me back on Arossa! I can’t have them marry me off! I’ll die of boredom!”

“So...you’re using us as a way to give yourself a tour?” Dashe guessed. Eilo shrugged,

“Eh, I suppose. You kids seem to know how to have fun,” she smirked, “So let’s have some fun and catch some motherfuckers.”

(The same day)

Idra.
The scorching heat pushed down on Ari like the hand of some unforgiving God. It would be spring now, back on Fayaxiamen, with the violent storms and the beautiful flowers blooming underwater. Not here. Here, on Idra, it was always summer. Dry, airless summer. Five days Arién had been in this hell hole, and each day was exactly like the last.

He woke up to the blaring alarm that jolted him out of nightmares like a bucket of freezing water poured over his head. Half of his bunkmates would already be at breakfast, not wanting to be left with scraps. By the time Arién had dragged himself outside and into the main building’s mess hall, he would only have a few minutes to eat. That was good though, the faster he shoveled the slop they called breakfast into his mouth the less he tasted it. The first time he ate it he threw up in the bathrooms afterwards, then he refused being treated in this way and went on a strike for two days, declining the food. He had hoped someone would bring him something better, that someone would care. Nobody did – they seemed content to let him starve. Apparently several years back there had been a group of Charasean Beta’s that had gone on a three month long strike, refusing the disgusting food. Five people starved to death before the authorities force fed the rest.

After the breakfast everyone was walked out into the desert. They walked for hours, on all their sides simply sand and hard, orange rock, and above them the merciless sun. Arién would sweat, his throat would be parched. He only had a black rag to keep the sun out and wrapping it around his head made him sweat profusely. They walked in silence, if anyone spoke one of the guards, who rode on a hovering board, gun in hand, would smack the person over the head with the weapon.

Until sundown they worked down in the mines. Idra had impressive amexiate reserves and many planets paid good money for the royal jewel. So day after day Ari found himself digging in a little canyon created by previous prisoners, hacking away at the sandy walls and hoping to catch a glimmer of amexiate so he could put it in his bucket – building up his reserves of the small glimmering iridescent green stone. It was barbarous really. The prisoners got lunch – bread and some unidentified things that the guards claimed were ‘vegetables.’ Then, as the sun finally started to set they’d start their long trek back to Base. They’d count up all the amexiate that everyone gathered and the ten people who found the most were given a ‘Kingly’ dinner – real meat, potatoes, salads, and even some liquor to wash it down with. The rest ate slop. Arién always ate slop, mostly because he spent the majority of his days complaining and boycotting instead of looking for amexiate. He noticed that Alpha was always in the top ten.

Arién had no official sentence, not with his brother’s constant meddling. Thrisan was determined to get Ari off Idra since he believed his story that the Prince had killed Friock Obbe in self-defence, but it wasn’t so easy to prove to the rest of the Arossian government. To them, Arién had always been a burden, the one brother who never stood in line. He was careless, reckless, didn’t care about his reputation, all the flaws that came with being the youngest of three and never having much responsibility. Him being on Idra was an easy way to move him out of the way. Until the fight between the government and Thrisan and the authorities on Idra finished, Ari was serving a sentence without end. He had no doubts that Thrisan would free him eventually – but how long would that take?

On Idra everyone kept to themselves – Arién had no friends, nobody to care about him. He wasn’t used to not having anyone. Despite the fact that Ari was still haunted by the man he killed, he thought this punishment was too much. After all it had been self defence!

The boy was in the bathroom after the horrible dinner. The bathrooms here were atrocious. The stalls didn’t have any doors, which meant the people showering lacked privacy. Not that any of the other men cared right now as they stood underneath the cascading waters, their multicoloured, naked bodies on show. Arién didn’t want to look at them as he stood at the sink, wrapping his palms up with some toilet paper. He wasn’t given any bandages for the blisters forming on his delicate skin,
maybe because he had thrown a tantrum about it. So now he had to make do with this toilet paper. At least it was waterproof.

Arién looked at himself in the reflective hologram (it wasn’t a real mirror, that was considered a weapon, but then again everything on Idra was considered a weapon), and shuddered. He was wearing his head rag, and there were dark circles under his eyes. His usually glowing light brown skin seemed ashy, and he looked sickly.

Arién turned to the shower stalls, craving the warm water on his aching muscles. Hard work was definitely not for him and he wanted to rest. He had learned to love his bed – no matter how uncomfortable, at least it was a bed, and at least it was his.

A man wobbled out of the shower, old and flabby, and Arién eagerly walked over, throwing his towel over the railing at the top of the stall for some imitation of privacy. However before he could actually go into the shower, a hand on his shirt jerked him backwards.

“Oi! There’s a queue kid!” someone snapped.

Ari turned around and saw a group of bored looking Alphas behind him. None of them was the Alpha, the one who had threatened Arién on his first morning. They were all big, towering over him, but Ari wasn’t scared. He was rarely scared, and maybe that was his issue.

“I don’t queue,” he said simply, raising his chin with pride. Ari had a lot of pride.

“Oh I see,” One of the Alpha’s, a big, ugly man with one eye, leaned into Arién’s personal space. His breath was sour even though the guards gave each prisoners toothpaste and one of those old fashioned toothbrushes you had to use manually. You only got one every six months and Ginger had told Ari on his third day that some people shoved other people’s toothbrushes up their asses to make them unusable. Apparently toothbrush theft was very common and you had to look after yours. Maybe someone had stolen this Alpha’s toothbrush, “You’re that prince kid, eh?”

“That’s correct,” Ari smirked – finally someone was recognising him, “Prince Arién Moringathu from Fayaxiamen.”

“I couldn’t give a rat’s ass where you’re from,” the Alpha interrupted, earning snickers from his friends. Ari was unbowed, and raised an eyebrow.

“Well, the world doesn’t give a rat’s ass about you. You’re a nobody,” Arién cocked his head to the side, enjoying the way the smile melted off the man’s face, “How does that feel?”

When Arién felt his back painfully slam against the wall inside the cubicle, he decided he should probably stop taunting people. So far it seemed to get him into a lot of trouble.

“Here’s your fucking shower,” the Alpha growled, keeping Arién up against the wall with his hand on the boy’s chest. With no warning he turned on the water and Ari had to fight a scream as he was suddenly enveloped in a wall of freezing water that soaked through his clothes. The Prince wondered if the Alpha was trying to drown him, which would be stupid since he was semi-aquatic. He took a shallow, shocked breath and the Alpha shut the water off again. When Ari blinked the droplets out of his eyes, the cubicle was full of Alphas, crowding in like peasants at a street show, looking for entertainment.

“What the hell are you doing?” Arién wanted his words to come out full of demand, but he was freezing and they tumbled out all shaky and wrong.

“Welcome to prison, little Prince,” the Alpha in front of him, the one eyed one, growled.
“Little Prince, nice nickname,” someone else snickered, “Maybe we should burn it into his skin.”

“Yeah,” another agreed, “Make everyone know he’s our little bitch.”

“Why limit him, boys?” the Alpha at the head smirked, and Arién felt his blood run cold. Why didn’t he just queue up? Why? “Why not let him be the prison bitch? I’m sure everyone would like a piece of a prince,” he leaned into Arién’s face and this time the boy flinched.

“Exactly, after all we have Rassa and Eizul and Ama, we don’t need another bitch.”

“Rassa’s loose now! I want fresh meat, Azus!”

“You’ll have some. We can all have some,” the one-eyed Alpha, clearly nicknamed Azus after the ancient Charasean God of strength, grabbed Arién by the back of the neck and shoved him face-first against the cubicle wall. The boy felt panic bubble up in him like water in a pot – his eyes scanned the floor for a weapon but found nothing. Of course. There would be no weapons in a prison stall, “Let’s see what the Little Prince has to offer.”

Someone roughly shoved Arién’s shirt up, but he couldn’t see who, “Get the fuck off me,” he growled, struggling. Flashses of the Briallan Palace cut behind his eyes – he remembered Friock Obbe’s last moments, his invading hands on his body. Arién felt more hands on him, more bodies pressing into the cubicle, and he knew that this was it, he was about to be taken advantage of and Thrisan couldn’t help him, not this time-

You killed Friock Obbe, a cold, collected voice, one that had never appeared in Arién’s head before, spoke, You can kill them too.

Adrenaline. That’s what gave Ari a sudden rush of strength. He shoved back, the way he had done with Friock, and just like with him Azus went flying backwards into the wall, unfortunately still clinging onto Arién.

“Fucking cunt!” Azus spat in fury, his arms tightening around the Prince’s waist. Another Alpha advanced on Arién from the front, face pissed off. The boy used his leverage of Azus’ arms around his waist to kick up, getting his heavy prison boot right in the Alpha’s face, knocking him backwards and to the floor. Little white objects flew in the air and it took Arién’s mind a few seconds to register that they were teeth. The Alpha roared, blood and spit flying from his injured mouth.

Arién’s arms were free, and although skinny he knew how to fight, he had been trained since he was a child. His fear was gone, his mind running on pure adrenaline. He reached up and punched Azus in the bridge of his nose, driving his knuckles deep. The man cried out and his arms loosened on Arién, so the boy had the chance to twist around. This time he shoved his thumbs into Azus’s eyes and pressed, hard, and the Alpha screamed and crumbled to the ground.

Arién was free and he whirled towards the door, but more Alphas were climbing inside, looking very furious.

“Come here you little shit,” the one at the front growled, and two of them charged him simultaneously. Arién knew when the fight was pointless. Luck had got him this far. Instead of fighting he did the only other thing he could think of – he escaped.

The boy launched himself up, using Azus’s shoulder as a stepping stone and launched himself clean over the wall of the cubicle. He landed right in front of a Wurund man in the next stall over, crouched. The huge giant looked down at him with big, unreadable eyes, but Arién didn’t give him time to react to the sudden intrusion as he got up and ran.
He heard shouts behind him and saw surprised expressions on the creatures queuing up. Clearly they hadn’t expected for Ari to leave that cubicle so early, and that made the boy shudder in disgust as he ran through the main building and out into the cold night. He sprinted through the darkness, his wet feet sinking into the sand, but nobody followed him. The freezing air seeped through his soaked clothes but Ari didn’t give himself time to address that until he got to his bunker. He wretched the door open and slipped inside, shoving it closed against and leaning his wet back against it, breathing hard.

“What the hell happened to you?”

Arién looked up, surprised that someone was in the bunker during shower time. And yet Alpha was sitting on his bed, blinking at the boy. Ari couldn’t help the flinch that he felt at seeing the man.

“Are all you fucking Alpha’s so stardamn violent?” he demanded, furious and breathless. Alpha blinked, surprised at the outburst.

“Only if you piss us off. Who did you piss off?”

“None of your business,” Arién spat, heading for his bed. He was shaking, badly, from a mixture of adrenaline draining out and the cold seeping in. He threw back his blanket in search of his spare clothes and was shocked when he didn’t find them, “Who the fuck stole my stuff?” he demanded, wheeling on Alpha.

The man was leaning against his bed post, arms crossed over his chest, looking vaguely amused, “Nobody. They took it for cleaning.”

“What?!” Arién was feeling worse and worse, and more pissed off. This day couldn’t go more downhill. He looked down at himself, and the puddle of shower water appearing underneath him. He wanted to cry from frustration, “What am I supposed to do now?!”

“Stars, you’re so whiny,” Alpha rolled his eyes and reached under his pillow, pulling out his own spare shirt. He threw it in Ari’s face, “you need to start learning how to make do with the things around you, complaining isn’t going to change anything.”

“I can take it back if you don’t want to, you ungrateful shit,” Alpha offered, taking a step towards Ari.

“No!” the Prince protested, turning his back to the bigger man and cradling the shirt in to his chest protectively. He stopped doing that though, scared to get it wet, “I thought you hated me?”

“I don’t hate you, stars,” Alpha seemed exasperated, “I don’t give a fuck about you. I just don’t want you dying of the cold. Guess that makes me a little bit of an alright person.”

“Hmm, yeah, I guess,” Arién offered.

“Don’t I get a thankyou?” Alpha cocked an eyebrow. Ari snorted.

“I never asked for the shirt,” he said, quickly stripping off his wet one and shoving Alpha’s on, before the man could take it back, “you offered to give it.”

“You’re unbelievable,” Alpha rolled his eyes again.
“If you keep doing that you’ll give yourself a headache,” Arién said smartly, pulling his trousers off and picking his wet clothes up off the floor. He strung them over the empty top bunk of his bed to dry. Alpha didn’t say anything, just started getting ready for bed. His shirt was even bigger than Ari’s original one, practically a dress.

Suddenly the door to the bunker banged open. Arién flinched, expecting the Alphas from before to come pouring in and finish what they started. Instead Ginger ran in, followed closely by Lioness, a younger Vlassain woman who looked like a lion down to her wild sandy hair and black markings on nose and mouth. Ari barely knew her – she didn’t speak much and only came to the bunker to sleep.

“Arién what the hell?” Ginger gasped, her mouth stretched into an excitable smile.

“What?” Ari asked.

“We just heard about what happened in the showers!” Ginger said, “Everyone’s going on about how you single heartedly beat up Azus and his Alphas!”

“You did what?” Alpha demanded.

Ari shrugged and hugged himself. Usually he was the first to brag but right now he didn’t feel like it. Hurting other people wasn’t something to be proud of, Thrisan had always told him. Arién had already killed someone, he didn’t want to be responsible for hurting others. It had been necessary.

“It was self-defence,” he blurted, the way he had in court.

“Either way everyone’s staying clear of you, kid,” Ginger gushed, “they can’t wrap their heads around how someone so small and scrawny managed to take down actual Alphas. They think you have magic – like one of them time makers.”

“Well, I’m dangerous,” Arién said. Next to him Alpha snickered and when the boy looked up he saw that the man didn’t look angry at him hurting other Charaseans. In fact there was something proud about the smirk on Alpha’s face.

“You have a nickname now,” Ginger added.

“Oh. What is it?” Ari pried his eyes away from Alpha.

“Little Prince.”
Joi 19th Scitli 1161EE (1 day later)

Fayaxiamen.

Wyliam had been at Fayaxiamen for eleven days, and he was finally getting adjusted to his new life. He had to say that for the most part he really enjoyed himself – the food given to the servants was amazing and Wyl, who was used to cleaning up after his younger siblings, found the chores easy.

The King and Queen were away, on their way to Arossa for the wedding of the King’s middle brother, Prince Kalorian. They wouldn’t be back for a few months so the atmosphere in the Briallan Palace was more relaxed; even Guadix seemed less agitated and stiff, which was why she was giving each of the Dusts a shot at cleaning the royal chambers, to test their skill while the Royals were away and see who she could trust in the future.

After a morning full of gathering the carpets up with two Shif sisters that Wyl had befriended, Klaipeda and Cesis, from the hallways and dusting them off in the gardens, Guadix came up to Wyliam. Even the pretty spring sunlight didn’t make the frog woman look any nicer or more welcoming.

“Kiada,” she snapped at Wyliam, who turned away from the carpets and let Cess and Kla take care of them. He bowed hurriedly to Guadix to show respect, his heart pounding with anxiety. Literally everything made him anxious.

“Yes Madame Guadix?”

“You’re upstairs today Kiada,” she said. She was quite possible the only person on this planet shorter than Wyliam, “in the Queen’s bedchambers. You will perform the usual – dusting, polishing, changing the sheets and the bulbs, watering her majesty’s flowers, scrubbing the floors and the windows. Understood?”

“Yes Madame Guadix,” Wyliam bowed again, for good measure, his hands clasped in his lap like a good boy.

“Don’t mess this up, Kiada,” Guadix croaked. Wyl nodded and hurried through the gardens. He
climbed up the servant’s staircase in the west wing, which was part of a bigger structure hidden in the walls that allowed the servants to move throughout the palace without being seen. This was especially useful when there were guests at the palace or a dinner party. Nobody wanted to look at servants, but Wyliam was already used to that.

When he was a child he would be the last person chosen on a team in school, he didn’t have any friends because he was too shy and anxious. People didn’t notice him because he wasn’t pretty or interesting looking – he was just plain Wyl. But he was alright with that, Wyliam hated attention, it always made him nervous and clumsy.

Queen Vallea’s chambers were a floor below the King’s, and took up the entire floor. Cleaning all the rooms was a real chore but Wyliam was one of those people that dedicated himself completely to his work so he didn’t mind. He felt comfortable now, alone in the hallway, dressed in his little Dust uniform – a white long sleeved shirt and black trousers, with a bright blue apron tied around his waist. Wyliam also required a matching blue rag to keep his curls out of his face.

He paused halfway down the corridor and pulled two machines out of a little hidden storage space in the wall. One was a duster that Wyl could throw in the air for it to fly around and suck dust off surfaces, and the other was a floor cleaner. Wyliam tucked them underneath his arms and walked up to the main door to the Queen’s quarters. The doors were open so it took a gentle nudge from the Dust for it to swing open. Smiling, the boy walked into the sun-filled parlour.

Several white couches were arranged in a U shape by the huge windows that let in plenty of the summer light. Unlike in the other parts of the palace where the curtains were heavy and dark, here they were airy and white, fluttering in the breeze from the open window. The Queen loved plants, which was why the majority of the parlour was taken up by a Rhoesia – a big tree with crimson leaves that climbed up the walls and ceiling, creating a pretty, flowery look to the room. The eye-catching piece was definitely the vintage piano though, standing in the centre of the room, half overgrown with the Rhoesia leaves. Wyliam held out the duster, which looked like an old fashioned hockey puck, and pressed the big green button on its back. Two wings slid out of the puck and with a soft hum it took to air. Immediately dust started rising off the piano and the table in front of the couches, sliding into the duster in a soft grey trail. Satisfied, Wyliam walked through a second door to the Queen’s bedroom.

He gasped when he saw someone lying in the canopied bed.

“W-Who are y-you?!” Wyliam gasped, the floor cleaner tumbling out of his arms and hitting the floor with an obnoxiously loud smack.

The woman in the bed looked at Wyl lazily and yawned. She was completely naked, her skin a lustrous silver and layered with delicate scales. Her hair was silver too, and long, laying in the gentle curve of her naked hip. The woman’s eyes were the only thing that held colour – a deep crimson. If it weren’t for them she could’ve had been made from stone.

“I could ask you the same question,” the woman said, not bothering to hide her nakedness. The spaces between her toes were webbed and she had a leg thrown over the covers as if she were pretending to hug someone.

“Y-You’re not the Queen!” Wyl stuttered, “and that’s the Queen’s bed!”

“I am aware.” the woman smiled and sat up, “I’d be a bit worried if the bed belonged to anyone but my lover.”

Wyliam frowned, “Your l-lover?” he stuttered over the word, embarrassed.
“My name is Zea Yushania,” the silver woman introduced herself, “I sing in the royal jazz band.”

“Do singers of the royal jazz band u-usually sleep in the Queen’s chambers?” Wyliam asked weakly, not knowing whether he should call the guards. Zea didn’t seem dangerous.

“She’s my girl,” Zea got up off the bed and stretched and Wyl had to avert his eyes from her nakedness, blushing. He didn’t like women – even women so beautiful - but such a display of comfort made him uncomfortable, “We’ve been together for years and yes, before you ask, Thrisan knows this. He approves too.”

“S-So...you’re allowed to be here?”

“Of course,” Zea picked up a night-robe and wrapped it around herself, “ask the guards if you’re unsure. I didn’t realise a new wave of servants had arrived or I would’ve made that old frog inform you about this. Well,” Zea pouted, “On second thought maybe she wouldn’t have told you anyway. That green bitch hates my guts.”

Somehow Zea using such foul language in the royal bedchambers made Wyl smile, “I’m Wyliam. Wyliam Kiada.”

“Lovely to meet you Wyliam,” Zea strode across the room and surprised the Dust by grabbing his shoulders and kissing his forehead. She must’ve noticed his shock because she laughed and stepped back, “It’s simply a way for my species to greet others,” she explained.

“O-Oh,” Wyl nodded hesitantly, “And what species are you exactly? Sorry, I’ve only been in this galaxy for a short time,” he flushed, embarrassed at his ignorance.

“I’m a Karlshaf, from the planet Vizangan,” she walked over to a little table by the window and poured something in a silver jug into two cups, “You probably haven’t heard of it. It’s a shitty small planet with a lot of bigoted old people.”

Wyliam smiled, “Sounds fun.”

“Trust me, it isn’t,” Zea said with an eye roll, she handed Wyliam one of the cups, “What about you? What interesting planet are you from.”

“Earth 6.2. I’m a Shif. I’m afraid that isn’t very interesting,” Wyl admitted. Then he sniffed the contents of the cup, “Oh no. I can’t drink on the job. But thank you.”

“You should come down to the bar during your free night,” Zea said, taking the cup from him and downing the liquor inside, “we could sit and chat in a more...relaxed environment.”

Am I actually making a friend? Wyliam thought distractedly, then blushed harder and smiled, “Yes, I think I’d like that.”

The door in the parlour clicked open and both Zea and Wyl looked up. The boy anxiously gripped his shirt in his hands – was it Guadix, coming to tell him off? He could feel himself tensing. His plan here was to lay low and not get into trouble, he couldn’t afford to lose this job. But befriending the lover of the Queen was definitely not laying low. Subconsciously Wyliam took a step away from Zea, just as Queen Vallea swirled into the room.

“Val,” Zea blinked in surprise, “What the hell are you doing here? You were meant to be gone for months.”

Queen Vallea gracefully opened her arms, “Well, I’m not. Aren’t you happy to see me, darling?”
Zea laughed and threw herself into the arms of the Queen. Wyliam stood there, shocked by the beauty of the Queen, completely mesmerised. He felt horribly inadequate around most people but next to someone as stunning as Queen Vallea he might've as well been the dust on the furniture. That’s what he was – a Dust.

The two women squealed and giggled like little girls, kissing right there and then in front of Wyliam, completely unashamed. The happiness and love in their eyes as they looked at each other made Wyliam’s insides melt and for the first time ever he wondered if it would be possible for someone to look at him that way. He dropped his eyes and flushed with embarrassment. No. Of course not. He wasn’t a beautiful Queen or her beautiful lover. He was too plain for love like that.

“Oh I’m so glad you’re not gone,” Zea showered the Queen’s face in kisses, “I already missed you even though it’s merely been seven days. I felt like someone had ripped my heart out. Actually, no, it felt like something ripped something more important out...like my leg.”

The Queen laughed and pressed her hand over her lover’s breast, where her heart was, “You heart is important,” she said gently, and kissed Zea lovingly. Wyliam felt like he was intruding until the singer turned on him with a bright smile. She grabbed his hand as if they had known each other forever and drew him in front of the anxious Queen.

“Val, this is Wyliam Kiada. I think we’re going to be great friends.”

The Queen’s eyes slid over the Dust and Wyl dropped his eyes in embarrassment, “H-How do you do, your majesty?” he mumbled and bowed clumsily.

“Isn’t he adorable? Like a puppy,” Zea proclaimed, throwing an arm over Wyliam’s shoulders. The Queen smiled.

“It’s very nice to meet you, Wyliam Kiada.”

“P-Please,” the Dust interrupted, not lifting his eyes off his shoes, “just call me W-Wyl.”

“Wyl then,” the Queen nodded, “You can call me Val.”

The boy’s eyes widened, “No, I couldn’t possibly,” he spluttered.

Vallea and Zea laughed, “Oh he’s so precious,” they cooed, “Come you must meet my husband at once.”

“No!” Wyliam protested, sure he was the colour of a tomato right now. Meeting the Queen was already overwhelming enough, but also meeting the King...

“No isn’t an answer!” Zea said cheerfully and seized him by the arm, the Queen doing the same to his other one. Wyliam was shorter than both women, “Thrisan is going to love you! His old personal servant is...well, old, and soon to be retired. He needs a new one.”

The two ignored Wyliam’s protests and dragged him into the hallway, chattering like high school girls. The boy had no idea why they had taken a liking to him, there was nothing particularly interesting about him. That didn’t seem to concern the women, who pulled Wyliam along to the floor above, where the King was residing.

“Thris!” Queen Val yelled, stopping at the head of the staircase.

Wyliam hadn’t seen the King before, since the man had been away in the Under (the underwater part of Fayaxiamen) for the first few days, and then had gone on the journey to Arossa with his Queen,
for the wedding. He was back now though, and looking at him made Wyliam’s legs shake.

Thrisan Moringathu was the kind of person that Wyliam always crushed on in school. Tall, dark and handsome, despite the fact that he was over ten years older than Wyl he still made his heart pound violently. To say that King Thrisan was good looking would be the understatement of the year. He was perfect for the Queen, or for Zea, they were all so beautiful. They were the people who didn’t look at Wyl...ever. The boy didn’t want Thrisan to look at him, he wouldn’t be able to take it.

“Ah, Zea,” King Thrisan looked up from where he had been staring out of the window and smiled, his eyes sliding right over Wyl as if he wasn’t even there, “It’s good to see you old girl,” the Karlshaf dashed to him, laughing, and he kissed her cheek. Wyliam took a step back, freeing his arm from the Queen’s grip, feeling sick. He didn’t belong here.

“Thris, I wanted to introduce you to-,” Queen Val started, but Wyl didn’t let her finish as he turned on his heel and ran downstairs like a little frightened boy. He didn’t care about his position in that moment; he was given an opportunity he couldn’t possibly take. Wyl wasn’t a person that made an impression, he was just a servant, a shy, mousy boy from Earth 6.2, a grey person, a drab person, a Dust. A Dust.

He was just dust.

(The same day)

Idra.

Griff’s eyes fluttered open, and he was alert immediately. There was no grogginess or confusion that used to be linked to waking up for no reason in the middle of the night. Griff couldn’t afford to wake up in confusion, not here, not in prison.

But something was wrong. Griff’s eyes quickly grew adjusted to the darkness of the bunk, only the red light illuminating some parts. Like Little Prince’s bed. Griff woke up every morning and went to bed every night looking at that bunk since it was opposite his. The issue was that currently its occupant was missing.

“Shit,” Griff swore, sitting up, the last touches of sleepiness melting away like cream in coffee. He stared at the blanket, thrown to the side, for a moment more to make sure he wasn’t imagining things, but he wasn’t. The Little Prince was gone.

To make sure, completely sure, Griff walked over and touched the mattress. The faintest trace of warmth – which meant Little Prince hadn’t been gone for long.

“Alpha?” Ginger’s groggy voice made Griff look up at the bunk above his, where the Shif woman looked at him tiredly, “What the fuck are you doing?”

“Little Prince is gone,” Griff whispered, annoyed, “The fucker will get all of us in trouble.”

“Maybe he’s gone to the bathroom,” Ginger murmured, her eyes already closing again.

“No. He wouldn’t risk it, not with Azus’s Alpha’s still mad at him,” Griff said, but Ginger wasn’t listening, already back in the land of dreams. Griff felt his blood boiling – if the guard’s discovered that Little Prince was gone in the morning the whole bunk would get shit for it because they were accountable for each other. They would all be sent to the mines overnight, and it was freezing there, and dangerous when the sand bugs came out after sundown. Griff liked his bed and he wasn’t going to let some newcomer take it from him.
Angry and frustrated, Griff shoved on his shoes and walked outside as quietly as he could. It was cold and the sand was swirling around his feet. The Guards were back in the main building, they didn’t care about actually making sure none of the prisoner’s ran. Because nobody in their right mind would ever run. The six years that he had been here, Griff had seen multiple newcomers get dragged back to Base. Well, not all of them, sometimes just their bodies. Hundreds had ran during the years that Idra existed, and all have died from exposure to the heat, the cold, or lack of food and water. There was just no point running – Idra was a faultless prison, the only way to ever get away was to raise a rebellion. That had happened before twice – once in 1102EE, where the guards had been murdered by a group of mixed prisoners who then took over the ships and escaped. Not all of them, of course, and when backup came the escapees were dragged back and given lifelong sentences. The second time was during the Cairn War, when the Dark Ishait and the Wurund had invaded Golbahar and all four of its moons, including Idra, and used the prisoners as soldiers. But most of those were brought back too.

So really, there was no point in trying to escape Idra, and yet Little Prince was still trying.

Griff stood outside and took a whiff of the air. The Little Prince was almost absurdly easy to smell out, which baffled Griff a little. The prisoner’s all smelled very similar since they use the same soaps and lived in the same spaces, but somehow the Prince’s smell was distinct – dark chocolate, scented candles, spices. Griff didn’t know why his scent was so prominent to his Alpha senses, or why he was so easy to scent out, but the smell made him walk to the edge of the bunks. From there he watched the little dot that he was sure was his bunkmate sprinting through the desert in the moonlight. He growled in frustration and his Alpha instincts kicked in – as much as he might’ve not liked his bunkmates he was still responsible for them. Little Prince was jeopardising their safety.

Angrily, Griff took off. He didn’t care why Little Prince was running, he just knew that he had to drag the stupid kid to the bunker before anyone figured out they were missing. What was that kid thinking anyway?! He knew was the desert was like, knew there was nowhere to run.

Griff sprinted from between the bunkers and into open space. Above him the three other Golbahar moons hung in the sky, the planet itself, massive and green, slid behind Sousnan, so it was a bright dot against it. The three other moons filled Idra with a silvery light and allowed the Alpha to see where he was going.

Little Prince might’ve been small and a fast runner but Griff was an Alpha. Genetically he was supposed to be strong and fast to – the thought disgusted him – be able to catch his mate and keep them down. Normally he would’ve never chased someone, but he wasn’t about to go down to the mines because of this.

Little Prince was slowing down – clearly running so far was taking a toll on him. Griff heard his accelerated heartbeat and harsh breathing from a mile away, but the Prince never heard him approach, not until Griff barrelled into his back, knocking him to the ground.

“What the f-fuck?!” the Varsen yelled, turning around in the sand to glare at Griff. His face was red from running, and pieces of his dark hair had escaped the rag he used to keep it out of his face, “What’s wrong with you?!”

“What’s wrong with *me*?!” Griff demanded, feeling himself boiling with anger, “What’s wrong with you?! Do you know how much shit we’re all going to get into if they find out you’re missing?!”

“I don’t care,” the Little Prince stood up and dusted sand off his clothes. Griff was furious. He lifted his hand and the boy flinched away from him, fear flickering through his eyes before he covered it up with his stupid pride again, “What?” the Little Prince barked, eyes burning, “Are you going to hit me again?”
Griff grabbed him by the shirt and hauled him close, so only the tips of the boy’s toes were touching the ground, “I fucking should,” the Alpha growled, his and the kid’s faces only inches apart. The Little Prince didn’t say anything, just stared intensely at Griff, the tremble of his lower lip the only thing betraying the fact that he was scared.

He’s scared of me, the thought came so suddenly and without warning that Griff dropped the Little Prince, his eyes widening. It had felt like someone had stabbed him, and the man didn’t understand that, didn’t understand why the thought had brought him pain.

The Little Prince stepped away from him, hands in fists, “Stop fucking following me.”

“Don’t be an idiot,” Griff said, all his anger evaporated. He was distracted by why he suddenly wanted to protect the Little Prince instead of hurt him. He had never wanted to protect anyone before, “There’s nowhere for you to go. You’ll be dead in a few hours.”

“It’s better than this,” the Little Prince snapped, hugging himself against the cold.

“Are you doing this because Azus and his lot scared you?”

“They didn’t scare me,” the Little Prince growled, and it was obvious he was lying. Griff arched an eyebrow and the boy opened his mouth, then closed it again, then exhaled, “Forget it. Just forget all about it. Why do you care anyway? If I die then what’s it to you?”

Griff snorted, “Did you forget when I said that we’re all gonna get into shit because of you?”

The Little Prince glanced over his shoulder at the desert stretching for ages behind him. Griff saw that he was beginning to understand that he literally couldn’t go anywhere, “I fucking hate it,” he whispered.

“It’s prison, you’re not meant to like it,” Griff replied, wondering why in the hell he was even bothering to comfort the kid. He was starting to feel a little bad; sure, the Little Prince was a spoiled, annoying brat, but he didn’t deserve the scare that Azus and his Alphas gave him. The boy sniffled, catching Griff off guard, “Are you...are you crying?” he asked in shock.

The Little Prince turned away and wiped his face with his sleeve, “N-No. S-Shut up...”

Griff felt helpless. He had no idea how to deal with people crying, especially people like the Little Prince, “I...uh...I...”

“It’s ‘cause I didn’t get to shower,” the Prince snapped, still not looking at Griff, “Alright?! I’m just frustrated b-because I couldn’t shower. For fuck’s sake it’s a b-basic creature right...”

“Come on,” Griff said, rubbing the back of his neck awkwardly, “Let’s head back and you can shower then.”

“Yeah right,” the Little Prince snorted, turning around, hands shoved into his pockets. There were tears glassing over his dark eyes but he wasn’t allowing them to fall right now, “and Azus or one of his guys are probably waiting there to jump me.”

“I’ll go with you,” Griff offered. Stupid, stupid, what am I even doing here?! All his feelings of anger and frustration were replaced by fondness and the want to look after this mess in front of him, “I’ll stand guard and make sure nobody tries to hurt you.”

The Little Prince narrowed his eyes at him, “Why are you being nice?” he asked with suspicion.
“Why do you question everything?” Griff asked, and the Little Prince rolled his eyes. It made the Alpha feel the need to bite back a smile, “So, you’re coming?”

The kid shrugged, “Yeah. I suppose,” he sniffled and the two dragged themselves back to the bunkers. They bickered for the first half and then were quiet for the second, as they came closer. The Little Prince went back into the bunker to collect his toothbrush and freshly washed clothes and Griff found himself growing a little tired – he should’ve been asleep and yet he found himself following his bunkmate to the showers instead. Normally big men like him charged other inmates for protection, but Griff found himself doing this completely for free.

In the bathroom Griff leaned against a wall, looking away from the cubicle the Little Prince picked to give him some privacy. He heard the water turn on, and then the kid hissed, “Fuck it’s cold."

“You sure do like complaining, huh?” Griff asked with an eye roll.

“Shut up, Alpha,” the Prince grumbled.

He washed in silence and Griff’s thoughts started wandering. He’s in there completely naked, he thought distractedly, and then hurriedly pressed the heels of his palms into his closed eyes to try and wipe that image from his brain. What the fuck was he actually thinking about?! Why was the Little Prince making him feel weird? Griff could smell him perfectly from underneath the water, and although he was adding prison soap to the concoction that was his scent, he wasn’t eliminating anything else. He still smelled like dark chocolate and scented candles and spices. And prison soap.

Stop thinking about his fucking scent!

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to everyone who left a kudo or a comment you guys actually make me smile so much xx
Vo 22\textsuperscript{nd} Sciti 1161EE (3 days later)

Fayaxiamen.

Thrisan glumly looked out of the window in his chambers at the city outside his window, lights flickering on one after the next, like a disease spreading, as the night settled around the Briallan Palace. Thris was the King and in the evenings his brain was always ready to explode with worries.

And tonight Thris had much to worry about. Arién was his first worry, and the thing that had given him a lot of sleepless nights. Thris’ baby brother – a criminal, a murderer. Thrisan had been heartbroken when he found that Ari had killed someone, and even more so that it had been a result of a rape attempt. Thrisan had never approved of Arién’s ways and the fact he slept with so many men, but it had been his business and he was an adult...nobody else had believed that it had been self defence. Arién was known for his sexual exploits and the courts had thought the rape attempt line was a cover up. Thris had launched an investigation into the matter but so far nothing had come up, no evidence that what Ari said was true. Until Thrisan found something to back their claims he was helpless and left to toss and turn in his huge bed at night, thinking about his little brother somewhere in the merciless desert of Idra.

There were other worries, piling on Thrisan so much that he found it hard to get out of bed each day. He had hoped that seeing his middle brother, Kal, would ease some of the stress, but now his and Princess Eilo’s wedding was cancelled. Thrisan was crushed with diplomatic issues – what of the agreement made sixteen years ago? Thankfully Princess Ashia and King Rian on Arossa both figured out a way to find a new, suitable and high-ranked bride for Kalorian. Still, Thris wished he could see his brother and speak with him, see if he was alright.

The least important worry, and the worry Thris chose to focus on, was the fact that his normal servant, Hazur, had officially retired, and he’d have to choose a new personal servant. He had asked his wife to pick a new one for him because he didn’t have the head for it and now as he sat by the window and watched a storm brewing up outside, waiting for the other servants to draw up his bath, he wondered what kind of person his new servant would be. It was a small, insignificant thing to
worry about, but Thris couldn’t deal with the other worries.

Like the worry about what he would have to do later tonight – sleep with Vallea. Early on in their relationship, almost nine years ago, they had established that neither of them was sexually or romantically attracted to each other as they both preferred their own sex. But Vallea and Thrisan loved each other dearly as friends. The first few years of their marriage they could get away with not producing an heir since worst case Thrisan had other siblings that could take the crown after him – but Kalorian would be a Lord on Arossa, and Arién wasn’t even a prince now, not until Thris got him pardoned. Rozene, his only sister, had anger management problems and was volatile and therefore not fitted for the throne. So for the past year, each month, Vallea and Thrisan would have sex to try and get the Queen pregnant.

Thris hated it – it took hours for him to even get aroused because he couldn’t see Val in a sexual way, no matter how much he tried. The sex itself was an awkward, silent, unpleasant matter. Thris hated it, Vallea hated it, and Zea hated it too. Thrisan was starting to suspect the Jazzer was starting to hate him too, because he touched her girl. The King just hoped the Queen would get pregnant soon, so they never had to sleep together again.

“Your Grace,” a servant walked in and bowed, “the bath is ready.”

“Thank you,” Thrisan looked away from the dark night sky, where green lightning had just flashed furiously, followed by a sound like glass smashing. Ah, Fayaxiamen spring storms. The King walked from his bedchambers to the en-suite bathroom.

“Is there anything else I can do for you, my King?” the servant followed Thrisan. He was good looking enough – light hair, light eyes. But Thris wasn’t in the mood to flirt, or take the servant to bed, even though he could tell it was what the man wanted.

“No, thank you. I’d like to be alone,” Thris said dismissively. The servant bowed and scuttled out of the bathroom like a hurt rat, closing the door behind him. Thrisan sighed and dropped his night gown onto the floor. Beneath it he was completely naked, his tanned, muscled body tense with the stress of his life.

The bathroom was all white tile and bright lights, spotless and beautiful. There were floor to ceiling windows instead of one wall, and Thris could appreciate the city and storm outside, though nobody on the other side would be able to see inside the palace. The water that filled most of Fayaxiamen was angry today, waves splashing against buildings as it was bombarded with rain. Nobody was out on the walkways and it made Thrisan feel warm and cozy being inside the palace while the storm raged outside. The King walked over to the large bath settled into the floor in the middle of the room, like a pool, full of bubbles. Singular bubbles broke away from the pink foam and floated around the room, bouncing off walls. The room smelled like lavender.

Thrisan exhaled with relief as he sank into the warm water. His gills opened automatically but he wasn’t about to go under. He leaned back against the soft plush material that surrounded the rim of the bathtub, like a pillow, and closed his eyes, feeling his muscles start to relax at the warmth of the water.

A knock sounded on the door, breaking Thrisan out of his newly acquired relaxation. The King stifled a sigh, “Come in!” he called, wondering who was going to try and bother him at this time.

A servant came in and Thris remembered that Hazur was gone.

“G-Good evening your Grace,” the new servant stuttered nervously, holding a pile of fluffy white towels in his shaking hands, “I-I’m your n-new personal servant...”
The boy was young, very young. He had curly brown hair and eyes that were hidden behind big, heavy, round, old fashioned glasses. He was small and skinny, his red cheeks sprinkled with freckles. There was something awkward about the way he stood close to the door and didn’t look up at Thris. Usually the servants were sickly sweet and always tried to overcomplicate things, attempting to slide into Thrisan’s good graces. That’s why he had liked Hazur so much – the old man had known him since he was a child and never bothered him like the new servants did.

But this one seemed different. He wasn’t showering Thris with compliments, wouldn’t even look at him. He just stood there and held the towels and looked nervous. The King pulled his muscular arms from under the water and rested them on the rim of the bath. The servant’s face seemed familiar.

“Aren’t you that Dust that my wife tried to introduce to me a few days ago?” he asked.

The servant flinched as if someone had hit him in the face, “I-I...I-...,” he swallowed visibly, the flush spreading down his neck, “I...y-yes y-your Grace.”

His anxiousness was a little endearing and Thrisan found himself smiling ever so slightly, “What’s your name?”


Just then green lightning crashed outside the window, reflecting off the sea. Wyliam let out a little squeak and the towels spilled from his hands, landing in a heap on the floor. Thrisan blinked, surprised at the reaction, and the boy blushed even more...if that was even possible.

“S-Sorry!” he exclaimed, sounding like he was about to cry. He got to his knees and frantically started re-folding the towels.

“Don’t worry about it,” Thrisan said, feeling a warmth in his chest. He found the Dust ridiculously adorable, and he hadn’t met anyone without ulterior motives for a while. The kid was clearly just trying to do his job, “Did the lightning scare you?”

“I-It’s so loud,” Wyliam admitted, standing back up, his eyes downcast. He was shy, that was painfully obvious. Suddenly Thris didn’t want to have a bath anymore.

“You’re going to help me get ready for the bedding,” he said. Mutely, Wyliam nodded, biting his plump bottom lip, “Set down the towels and wash my back for me, please.”

“Y-Your back?” Wyliam asked in shock, looking up to meet Thrisan’s eyes before quickly looking away again. The King found that amusing and he grinned,

“Yes. Is that a problem?”

Wyliam shook his head, hard, and set down the towels before hurrying over to the edge of the bath. He still wouldn’t look directly at Thrisan, and the King wondered why. He turned his back to the Dust.

“Press the tile to your left,” he ordered, “there will be a soaker in there and you can wash my back with it.”

Wyliam didn’t reply, but the King heard the familiar click of the tile sliding open, and then the funny sound of the Dust squirting some soaker onto his hand. He also felt the boy pause, as if contemplating what he should do next. Thrisan almost jumped when he felt the servant’s cold fingers on his shoulder.
“You’re freezing,” he said with a laugh.

“S-Sorry,” Wyliam stuttered as he gently spread the soaker across the broad length of Thrisan’s tanned shoulders. He was clearly trying hard not to press too hard.

“No need to apologise,” Thris murmured. He felt Wyliam’s hands slide over his back – they were small, trembling, cold. Thrisan didn’t know why the Dust was so anxious, he just hoped he wasn’t making it worse.

Wyliam pulled a sponge from the floor and started washing the King’s back, gently and helplessly at first, and then with more skill. When he was done Thris thanked him and washed the rest off himself. Some royals made their servants clean their whole bodies but Thrisan didn’t do that. Though he wouldn’t mind Wyliam touching him a little more...no, he didn’t want to scare the boy.

The Dust had retreated back to by the door and stood with his hands clasped in front of him, staring at the floor. Thrisan pressed a button on the floor and the water started draining from the bath. Outside the lightning had stopped, but it still rained ferociously. When the King got out of the bath Wyliam didn’t react.

“Wyliam, could you pass me a towel please?”

“Y-Yes of course your majesty,” Wyliam turned his whole body to the towels and Thrisan closed the storage in the floor. When he looked up Wyliam had turned around again and was staring at him, frozen, his lips parted a little. Thrisan blinked.

He was so comfortable with his body and around servants that he didn’t think about how he might affect Wyliam if he just stepped out without any clothes. He’s probably embarrassed...Thrisan thought as Wyliam continued staring, his eyes sliding down the King’s body almost on their own accord. The boy clutched the towel in his hands tightly when his eyes landed on Thrisan’s crotch. The King almost smirked when the boy blushed vividly.

“Wyliam?” Thris asked, amused.

“Oh stars I’m s-so sorry,” Wyliam squeaked, squeezing his eyes shut. Thris smiled.

“Can I have the towel please?”

Wyliam nodded and walked over, eyes still closed. He stopped in front of Thrisan and the King thought about how small the boy was, a good head and a half shorter than Thris.

“G-Guadix told me I-I should dry you o-off,” Wyliam stuttered faintly, staring squarely at Thrisan’s chest.

“Alright,” Thrisan smiled, wondering how the boy would react. Shakily Wyliam raised the towel to Thris’ chest and pressed it to his wet skin. He was shaking, but the King was sure the boy was always shaking. He was bright red, his glasses a little steamed up from the warmth of the room. He hesitantly rubbed the towel over the top half of Thrisan’s chest, and that’s when the storm returned, lightning turning the bathroom white for a second.

Wyliam tensed, flinched and bit his lip, dropping the towel by accident. He blushed, hard, and looked at it, between his and Thrisan’s feet. If he were to kneel down to get it he’d come face to face with the King’s soft member. His shoulders started trembling and the King decided to take pity on him. He bent down and picked up the towel himself.

“I’ll finish drying off myself,” he said gently, “Thank you.”
“I’m sorry,” Wyliam whispered, head hung low. Thrisan fought the urge to touch his shoulder in comfort. The boy was sweet. Thris rarely met sweet people.

“It’s alright,” he said, “It’s alright to be nervous.”

Wyliam nodded and didn’t say anything. He returned to the door and remained silent as Thrisan finished drying himself off. He then brought the King his pyjamas, and didn’t say a word as Thris dressed himself. He was tempted, oh so tempted, to keep Wyliam around because the boy intrigued him, but he had his duties.

“You’re dismissed for the night,” he told the boy. He had never seen anyone escape a room so fast in his life and he wondered if he had scared the Dust. Sighing, Thrisan turned the light off in the bathroom with a click of his fingers and entered his bedchamber.

Queen Vallea was lying on her side, dressed in a silky night robe, picking petals off a rose in a vase on the bedside table. There was tension in her face and Thris also tensed.

“Is that Zea’s bathrobe?”

“It helps me to have her smell around,” Val said, looking up at Thris. She smiled gently and extended her hand and seeing her, her pale yellow skin glowing, red hair fiery against the pale covers, Thris wished he could be aroused by her.

He laid at her side and she took his face in her hands, kissing him gently. They kissed a lot, because kissing was safe and comforting. As they proceeded to the act neither of them wanted, Thris’ mind wandered to his new Dust servant.

Wyliam had completely distracted him from his worries, and only now the King realised that. He broke away from his Queen’s mouth.

“Wyliam,” he said, “the new servant he-“

“You like him,” Val smiled, clearly pleased. Thrisan mirrored her smile,

“Yes. He is something else. Different from others. I have this...need to protect him.”

“Me too, he’s just so innocent,” Val smirked, “You could change that.”

Thrisan rolled on top of her, “I wouldn’t be opposed to the idea.”

***

Droplets of water travelling down a tanned, hard body, riveting over hard abs, dipping into a navel, dancing down sharp hipbones, disappearing in dark hair surrounding-

Wyliam squeezed his eyes shut, his forehead pressed against a cold stone wall in a random corridor. It was dark here, the wind howling outside the castle, and Wyl was shaking. The image of King Thrisan, naked, was burned into his brain as if someone had branded him. Every time he blinked he saw an image of the man, perfect, like some kind of God, standing naked in the middle of the bathroom.

It made Wyliam blush, and get breathless, and warm. He couldn’t explain the reactions but he assumed it was something to do with being aroused. He knew his pants felt a little tight, but Wyl
didn’t have much sexual experience. Or any, to be fair. He had masturbated a few times, but he shared a room with his siblings so he didn’t have the opportunity to do it often. Besides, he didn’t get turned on much.

But he had now. Because of Thrisan. King Thrisan. Wyliam pushed himself off the wall and turned around, leaning his back against him. He was free for the night and he was wasting his time standing in a dark corridor, trying to calm down. Why, why, did it have to be the King that made Wyl feel like this?! After the embarrassment that the boy made of himself tonight he doubted the King ever wanted to see him again.

“Stars, I’m such an idiot,” Wyl buried his burning face in his hands. He couldn’t go to bed, not now, not with these thoughts circling his head like a load of flies. Wyliam scanned his brain for somewhere to go. His social anxiety stopped him from making friends with the other Dusts – sure he knew their names, and was on a hi, how are you? basis with them, but he didn’t have anyone he could go to.

Except he did.

Wyliam took a deep breath and found the closest servant’s staircase, before thundering down the steps. He had heard people talking about the servant bar a few days back. Apparently it was strictly for the servants and was on the one of the underwater levels – the fourth minus floor. Apparently you could only get there through the servant entrances but Wyl had never gone there before, too anxious.

But Zea could be there, and he really needed to speak to her. The boy tried to remember the directions that Cess and Klai gave him when they cleaned the carpets. Down the stairs by the left wing, take three lefts in the corridor, then a right. By the kitchen go down the next set of stairs, at the crossroads go down the corridor with the clock. The password’s ravens. Wyliam hoped he remembered the instructions correctly as he trailed through the semi-darkness. When he got to the crossroads – five hallways branching off, all going to different parts of the Briallan Palace, at three of them Wyl heard the rush of water – he didn’t even need to locate the clock, since he heard faint jazz music that led him on.

He ventured down the dark corridor and almost screamed when he found a guard at the end. The man was Varsen – dark hair, dark eyes, gills on his neck – and he smiled at Wyl.

“Hello. And who are you?”

“Wyl,” the boy swallowed anxiously, “I’m a Dust.”

“Password?”

“R-Ravens?” Wyliam offered.

“Come on in,” the guard pressed his hand against the wall with a broad smile. The stone shimmered and then an archway appeared. For a second the hallway was filled with laughter and music, but then the guard nudged Wyliam in and the door shimmered closed behind him again. The boy stood there like a plank of wood, mouth open in shock.

In front of him was a real party. The lights were dim, and the oval windows gave the room a ship-like feel, especially since there was all water and no land, with watery, bright lights from the buildings surrounding the castle. The bar itself was dry though, a part of it sectioned off, creating a dance floor where at least forty servants were spinning to the jazz music, changed out of their uniforms. Wyl felt stupid for still being in his, but it was dark so he doubted anyone cared. If it was
light nobody would’ve cared either. It was Wyl after all, and people didn’t even look at him.

Higher than the dance floor, surrounding it, was a half-floor, where the bar was. It was oval too, with beautiful bottles of liquor hanging on string for decoration. There were glasses at the back wall, that the light from the bar filtered through and created pretty patterns over couches and tables strewn over the rest of the club. People lounged here, and sat at the bar, where a Vlassain bartender was preparing drinks. Wyliam had never seen her before, and suspected she wasn’t a proper servant, but solely worked in the bar. She was clearly an owl, so a nocturnal animal, her wide, round eyes black while her sclera were bright yellow. Her hair was in two spiky buns, and had feather-like texture.

But Wyliam wasn’t interested in all that. His eyes landed on the jazz band, who were on a little circular stage, suspended halfway to the ceiling above the dance floor, jamming away on their instruments. At the head was Zea, her silver-iness beautifully matched with a deep blue dress that hugged her curves. She was at the microphone, jamming out to the music as she sang beautifully in a language Wyl didn’t understand. The up-beat, saxophony music was making even Wyl want to dance. Wyl couldn’t dance. He couldn’t do much at all.

He hovered near the door, uncertainly, and then Zea’s eyes landed on him. She grinned and finished her song hurriedly, and then jumped off the stage. There must’ve been anti-grav there because she floated gently to the ground. Her band continued jamming out and people laughed and dance and drank.

Wyliam met Zea at the bar, hoping she wouldn’t pull a who the hell are you? or what the hell are you doing here? like people in school used to say. But of course the woman didn’t do that. Instead she squealed and threw herself at Wyl the second she saw him, smothering him to her, and kissing his forehead.

“You came! You actually came!”

“Your singing is beautiful,” Wyl told her.

“Oh Wyl, come, let’s drink, I need your company. I’m so down,” Zea said, dramatically throwing her arm around Wyl’s shoulders and dragging him to two empty stools at the bar.

“Is it because of the Queen sleeping with the King?” Wyliam guessed. Zea sighed and rested her chin on her silver hand,

“Yes,” she said miserably. The Owl bartender walked over, her movements a little jerky. She raised a bushy, angled eyebrow.

“Who’s this Zea? A new friend?”

“This is Wyl, he’s a Dust,” Zea said, perking up a little, “Wyl, this is Golmehr.”

“Call me Mehchie,” the Owl said, and although her eyes were warm she didn’t smile, “What can I get you?”

“I don’t have any money on me,” Wyliam told Zea, panicking. The woman laughed.

“Servants drink for free,” she told him.

“O-Oh. I don’t...really drink.”

“Well, you’re about to start,” Zea said, and ordered two cocktails. Mehchie walked off to prepare them and the Karlshaf turned to Wyliam.
“So – let’s not talk about Val. I’ll only get upset. Tell me about your first night serving the King!” she said excitedly. Wyliam felt himself blushing again.

“Oh, Zea, it went horribly,” he said miserably. He wanted to cry when he recalled it. Zea frowned.

“Aw, baby! Let’s drink, that’ll make it easier to talk about it.”

Mehhie brought over their cocktails, alongside a whole bottle of sparkling horreum. Zea grabbed Wyliam’s arm and dragged him through the crowd to an empty booth by a wall. There the two sat down, a little away from the music, and Zea had Wyliam finish his cocktail quickly. It was sweet and cold and refreshing and it made Wyl feel weirdly giggly and warm. He didn’t really drink much.

Zea refilled his glass with the horreum, “Alright,” she poured herself a drink, downed it, and poured another, “Tell me how the evening went.”

Wyliam didn’t feel that crippling embarrassment when he thought about it anymore. He felt tingly and took a sip of the horreum. He made a face at the bitterness, but he liked the bubbles that tickled his throat. He decided to recall to Zea the whole night. He mentioned how he dropped the towels twice, and how he couldn’t dry Thrisan off, and that he stared at him when he came out of the bath. Zea was smiling the whole time, and Wyl was almost done with the horreum by the time he finished his little story.

“And then I got turned on and left,” Wyliam concluded, hiccupping, “and I can’t stop thinking about the King. Naked.”

“That’s perfect,” Zea gushed, “Maybe if Thrisan starts fucking you, then Val-“

“No!” Wyl flushed, shivering at just the thought of the King ever touching him, “He would never fuck me! He thinks I’m an idiot after tonight.”

“I’m sure he doesn’t,” Zea said, calmly, “he likes men. Previously he had a few servants he had sex with, but only ever once with each person.”

“Oh,” Wyl looked at him almost empty glass. He didn’t think he could stand that; being used and discarded.

“But hey, don’t get down about it. Maybe try and befriend him!”

“You just want him to not have sex with Val.”

Zea sighed, “Yeah. You saw right through me. I know he doesn’t want it, but still,” she winced, “I hate it so much.”

Wyliam reached for the horreum, “We both need more drink,” he decided, words slurring together. The rest of the evening was dark and blurry and full of laughs and jazz music tethering at the edges of Wyl’s consciousness.

Shal 23rd Scitli 1161EE (1 day later)

Sycamora.

They didn’t know if there were actual slaves on the trader ship, they just knew that the vessel was registered as a slave ship and they had the right to destroy or capture it. It was the first slave ship that Tyeval and Dashyan had stumbled upon, and the boys were buzzing in their seats as Sycamora raced after it. At first they had been sneaky about following the traders, but now they had gone into
“We should shoot,” Dashe said as the galaxy passed on their sides.

“No!” Eilo protested, she sat between the two boys, a big 3D map of the surrounding space in front of her in hologram form, “There could be slaves on board.”

“You’re right,” Dashe nodded, lost in thought, “We need to get closer. Maybe blow out an engine, get on-board and-“

Before he could finish the slave ship flew around so it was facing Sycamora. Clearly the crew had gotten tired of running.

“Fuck,” Eilo hissed, just as a laser shot raced past their ship, too close for comfort.

“Tye, you’re on piloting,” Dashe whirled around in his chair and reached for goggles that would allow him to see the ship closer, “I’ll shoot. Eilo, you navigate.”

“Gotcha,” Eilo moved her hands on the map, spinning it around and zooming in, “They’re got two laser shooters and a rocket launcher on the roof.”

“We need to take that out,” Dashyan said.

Tyeval was honestly impressed that his best friend managed to keep a clear mind in this situation. Personally his heart was pounding and he felt a little scared, which was almost funny since he was supposed to be the one who couldn’t feel anything. The Ubloit wasn’t scared for himself though, but for Dashe and Eilo. But mostly for Dashe – his top priority was protecting the boy.

The cyborg jerked Sycamora to the side, so it was vertical, as lasers shot by its sides. Tye returned the ship back to its original position, his hands fast on the consoles and steering shafts. One of the minuses of this old ship was the fact it didn’t have an AI, but that was alright because Eilo was doing a great job navigating.

“We have a meteor to the left!” the girl said. Dashe aimed with a big retractable gun and their own laser shot past the slave ship. Tyeval gritted his teeth and piloted the ship to the right, managing to avoid the meteor.

“Dashe shoot,” Tye said, heartbeat accelerating. They were coming closer and closer to the enemy ship.

“I’m trying!” Dashe yelled, and just as he said that he managed to get a laser through the roof of the ship, the rocket launcher erupting for a second in a flash of red. In that light Dashe’s hair seemed more fiery than usual, and he looked feisty as fuck and shit, Tye was staring at him again.

The Ubloit turned back to the window and kept his eyes trained on the galaxy. They were somewhere between Arossa and the Morie Asteroid belt. Surrounding them were just stars. Eilo had sent a message to Shoriah, one of the closest planets, three days ago when they had first started following this slave ship, and the crew was expecting back up soon.

“Good shot Dashe!” Eilo grinned. Tye just wanted them out of there, he couldn’t risk Dashyan getting hurt, he would never forgive himself. Thankfully this space battle didn’t last too long because Dashyan was very intense with his shots, and managed to blow out the main power supply, aided by Eilo who got up the plan of the ship and knew where it was, so the lights all died out on the ship.

“Alright,” Dashe pulled his goggles off. He was flushed and his eyes were bright. He clearly liked
this, “We need to know if there’s any slaves on board- and save them.”

“One second, we’re close enough to get the heat sensors to count the bodies on-board.”

“What about if they’re Ishait?” Tye asked, “they have no body heat.”

“I doubt they’d have a ship full of just Ishait,” Dashe said, “that’s never happened before.”

“There’s twelve people on-board,” Eilo said. The ship floated, insensible, looking like a corpse with its dark windows. It almost melted into the galaxy, “so the whole crew, accounted for. Most likely they’re making a run back for more slaves from the Eon Galaxy.”

Dashyan looked disgusted, “Right, let’s get the kinetic net ready.”

One reason why they had chosen to buy Sycamora was because it had a net thrower; a kinetic magnetic field of sorts that enclosed a ship and prevented it from using any of its electricity or machinery. Tyeval wanted to throw it, make sure the slave ship was imprisoned and wouldn’t go anywhere.

Eilo and Dashyan loaded it up while Tye piloted Sycamora in a circle around the slave ship, ensuring nothing was out of order. Then they launched the shimmering golden net and it created a sort of shifting bubble against the other vessel, which remained dark, no signs of life around it. With the net it would be impossible to launch a pod or have the crew escape.

Dashyan exhaled happily and Tye put Sycamora on autopilot, “That wasn’t so hard, was it?” Dashe smiled, and then laughed, the adrenaline oozing out of him. Tyeval smiled at him. He loved seeing Dashe happy, he just wished he could be happy without danger.

“Tye,” Eilo turned to him and smiled gently, “You’ve been awake for five days. I think you need some sleep.”

Tyeval did feel a bit rundown, not exactly exhausted just yet, but the thought of his bed was a comforting one, especially now, after the attack, “I want to make sure everything is fine.”

“The Shoriah Shifs are on their way,” Eilo said, her voice soothing and reminding Tye that she was older than him, “the slave ship is in the net. Nothing will happen. Go sleep. Dashyan, you too. You deserve the rest. I’ll look after Sycamora, and make sure that everything’s okay,” Tyeval opened his mouth to protest but Eilo held up her hand, “I got this, Tye. If anything is off I promise to wake you up.”

Tyeval couldn’t argue with that, “Okay. Thank you.”

Eilo kissed his cheek and Tye smiled. He didn’t really know how to deal with affection from anyone other than Dashyan. The two of them dragged themselves through the navigation cabin and slipped into their small cabin. Here they could see the galaxy through the small window. Tyeval had installed a curtain in it, because he remembered how scared Dashe had been of space when he was younger.

The cabin was cluttered with the trio’s things, and dark since nobody bothered to turn on the light, which you had to do manually unlike on the Hannibal. Dashyan shimmied out of his trousers immediately, unashamed in front of Tye, and stayed in just his t-shirt.

“I’m exhausted,” he said, collapsing face first on his bed. Tyeval got a perfect eye-full of the boy’s ass and looked away guiltily. If Dashe knew about the feelings the Ubloit had for him he wouldn’t have been as comfortable with him.
“Yeah, I could sleep,” Tye agreed, stripping down to his underwear and shoving his covers to the side. He was the only one of the three that even bothered doing his bed when they woke up, “Night, Dashe.”

“Don’t I get a goodnight cuddle?” the boy pouted, pulling himself up on his elbows. His hair was a little mused, his cheeks still flushed from the space fight. Tyeval’s stomach twisted. *Stars I want him, I want him so badly.* He wondered what Dashe would do if Tye kissed him – would he freak out? Or accept it as something platonic?

Either way, Tyeval could never tell Dashe no. So he walked across Eilo’s floor bed (she insisted on taking the floor even though Tye offered to give up his bed) and laid on top of Dashe’s covers with him. The redhead grinned at him adorably, a dimple appearing on his cheek, and threw his arms around Tyeval’s shoulders.

“You did good today,” the Ubloit told him, sliding his own arm around Dashe’s waist. Their size difference wasn’t particularly intense – Tye was a little taller and a little more muscular, but they were similar enough that it was comfortable for them to be face to face without anyone’s feet hanging off the edge of the bed.

“Thanks. So did you,” Dashe replied sweetly, his hands playing with the hair at the nape of Tye’s neck.

“I was scared for a moment,” the Ubloit murmured, “that something could happen to you.”

Dashyan’s smile softened, “It won’t,” he leaned forward and kissed Tye’s cheek. The Ubloit’s heart clenched. At times like this he wished he didn’t have one – a heart, that is – so it didn’t ache as much as it did now. He and Dashe kissed each other on the cheek since they were children, but now it was different. Now it made Tyeval’s insides clench.

“Alright,” he sat up, not trusting himself around his best friend, and ruffled the boy’s hair, “Goodnight, Dashyan.”

Tyeval climbed into his own bed and squeezed his eyes shut. He determinedly faced the wall and refused to turn around.
Ghi 30th Scitli 1161EE (7 days later)

Arossa.

Rian had been in a horrible mood ever since the discovery of Eilo’s disappearance, especially since the girl hadn’t contacted him since. She was his *sister* for fuck’s sake, he deserved to know if she was safe!

Actually, it was a lie – Rian had been in a bad mood since he first started realising his hopeless feelings for Kalorian. The last two weeks the King had avoided his friend, burying himself in work and busying himself with ruling the planet. Autumn was coming to an end and soon winter would come, and with it snow, and Rian had to make sure every area of every city had access to heat and warm water, so there were many things to do and many excuses he could give his friend.

But of course Rian couldn’t avoid Kalorian forever, which was why he was now seated next to him, waiting for the herald to escort the five bride candidates for the Prince in. They must’ve looked funny – two polar opposites sitting next to each other; Kal with his raven hair, overgrown and a little messy, and his dark eyes and light brown skin, and Rian with his neat blonde locks and pale red eyes and white skin.

“Are you angry with me?” Kal asked in a hushed voice, leaning over. The room was lined with Lords and Ladies and Kalorian was being unprofessional, and both the men knew it.

“No,” Rian said, not looking at his friend. Kal sighed in frustration.

“You’ve been avoiding me.”

“I’ve been busy,” Rian retaliated, feeling himself getting annoyed. Kal could see right through him most of the time, like right now, and the blonde was scared the Prince would figure his feelings out sooner or later.

“You’re a liar,” Kal said, but before Rian could snap at him, the large doors of the main hall opened with a groan and the herald entered – a tall, pompous man with hair and face a shocking pink. Kalorian had no choice but to lean away and straighten up. Rian was glad; when Kal was close to him he felt weird.

“Presenting to his majesty, King Rian Reo Dali, and Prince Kalorian Moringathu,” the herald wailed, his voice drifting through the hall, “the first candidate for the Royal Competition, Lady Dashara Folka, the heiress to the province of Ruskicade.”

A girl entered the hall, her chin raised high but her eyes downcast. Despite the fact her skin was pink her blush was still obvious. Her hair was half red and half pale pink, twisted in an intricate braid that
flowed down to her waist. Rian didn’t like women but he supposed Lady Dashara was alright looking, though nothing special. She was dressed in a royal blue gown of her province and behind her rolled in her entourage, a dozen men and women, dressed in capes of blue that matched the Lady, the heavy hoods hiding their faces. They were the Time Makers. The province of Ruskicade was famous for its magic trade; healing potions, love spells, ancient rune books and, most importantly, time. They had the highest count of Time Makers in the whole galaxy and supplied all planets with time itself, bottled up, at a very high price.

As the procession walked music blared in the hall. The Time Makers all raised their hands simultaneously and suddenly fog started spilling from their fingers, enclosing Lady Dashara, who didn’t even blink. The next thing Rian knew was that the girl was right in front of them as if she had teleported.

“Your Grace,” she curtsied as the crowd ooh-ed at the time making. Rian inclined his head at her and she moved over to Kalorian, not looking at him even though he was smiling warmly at her, “My lord,” she curtsied again.

“My lady,” he replied.

Rian felt his blood boil and he could’ve hit himself. He’s just welcoming her, he hissed at himself internally, hoping his anger wasn’t showing on his face. He never thought he would be the jealous type but stars was he mad. His hands clenched on the arms of his throne.

Lady Dashara’s Time Makers disappeared from the hall and the lady herself went and sat in one of the chairs on a podium beneath the rise that Rian and Kal were on, her blue skirts rustling. The crowd quietened down, and the herald cleared his throat. Rian already felt like he was suffocating.

“Presenting the second candidate of the Royal Competition – Lady Kursassarra Kahotim from the province of Castellum.”

The next woman that swirled into the room was much more confident than Lady Dashara, a smirk playing on her purple-painted lips. Her face was tattooed with intricate white swirls that brought out her lilac eyes. Her short hair was a deep green, a streak of it dyed purple. Her pink dress revealed her shoulders and her impressive bosom. Behind her, in two neat lines, marched thirty ship captains, all dressed in pink uniforms, as Castellum was a province that traded in ships.

“Your Majesty, my Lord,” Lady Kursassarra bowed with a flourish and a smirk. She wasn’t looking directly at either of them, instead her eyes sliding from one to the other, as if calculating something.

“Welcome to Arossa, Lady Kursassarra,” Kal said. The girl clicked her fingers and her pilots lined one of the walls, neatly, almost robotically. She herself went and sat on the chair next to Lady Dashara.

Honestly, Rian was already exhausted, but the herald cleared his throat once more, “Presenting the third candidate of the Royal Competition, Lady Asura Maurelie of the Arcoda province.”

Arcoda was a province that traded in perfume, flowers and beauty items and the woman that walked in, although pretty, wasn’t what Rian expected her to be. Her long, kinky hair was two different shades of blue, her entire face dotted with freckles. A golden ring gleamed in her small nose and her deep green eyes seemed...angry. Fifteen girls in purple, all with dark hair and looking scarily similar danced in after Lady Asura, throwing flower petals at the enamoured crowd. They were graceful and airy, but the Lady herself was tense, her gloved hands in fists on either side of her. Realising that he was mirroring her, Rian relaxed his own hands on his throne. Lady Asura bowed, her eyes trained on Rian.
“My King,” she said, and the title seemed passive aggressive coming from her mouth, “My Lord Kalorian. You have my thanks for the welcome.”

Rian inclined his head, his mouth dry, not really knowing how to reply to that. Thankfully he didn’t have to because Lady Asura stalked over to the two other candidates without further ado, her dancers plopping down at the feet of Lady Kursassarra’s pilots, giggling. The three women seized each other up with cold eyes.

“Presenting the fourth candidate of the Royal Competition,” the herald bellowed, and Rian comforted himself by thinking that they were almost done here, “Lady Shefanida Angoli from the Ulokhano Province.”

The Ulokhano Province wasn’t even considered a province by some as it was very new, having been created after the Cairn War less that sixteen years ago to trade in galactic travels, bans and passes, since Arossa was virtually the last planet before the Arda Galaxy began. Lady Shefanida wasn’t as graceful or quite as lovely as the other ladies as she had been born a commoner. Her ashy grey hair had been pulled out of her dark pink face and her amber eyes fleetingly around the room anxiously. There was something endearing about her, but the bags under her eyes and lips bitten from nerves made her seem a little rough around the edges. A murmur went through the crowd and Rian saw the Lady’s shoulders tense. She had no large entourage, only two guards flanking her, dressed in the green of her province. Rian was about to say something, but Kalorian stood up with a smile.

“Lady Shefanida,” he says, “Welcome to Arossa. Thank you for gracing us with your presence.”

The girl flushed, “I-It’s my honour, my Lord,” she curtsied, her eyes glancing at Rian. He smiled at her, and hoped it was a welcoming smile. He could tell that Lady Shefanida felt like an outsider, and Kal felt that too, that’s why he welcomed her personally. It was for things like that that Rian loved him – the compassion he had was unreal.

When Lady Shefanida settled in her chair, getting a glare from Lady Asura and a curious glance from Lady Kursassarra, the herald cleared his throat for the last time, “Presenting the fifth and final candidate of the Royal Competition, Lady Eskilsa Isalis from the province of Bejaita.”

The Lady that walked in was exactly who Rian had been afraid of when Princess Ashia had called this competition. The boy’s heart clenched at Lady Eskilsa because stars the girl was beautiful.

White hair, curled to perfection, pale skin with the slightest tint of pink, deep violet eyes, plump, pink lips. Lady Eskilsa moved with grace, almost like she wasn’t touching the floor. Her crimson dress was just the right amount of sultry and classy. Behind her came ten vastly different people; there was a Shif woman in green and blue representing the people of Earth 6.2, and another Shif man, this time in silver to symbolise the Shifs from Shoriah. A Charasean Beta with bright yellow hair symbolised Tussa, and a man dressed in bottle green with delicate iridescent dragonfly wings and huge eyes was meant to represent the Vlassain from Golbahar. With him was a dove, perched on his shoulder, a lynx, skulking at his ankles, a deer, which gracefully walked at his side, and a baby arctic bear. The four animals undoubtedly symbolised the four moons of Golbahar. Right at Lady Eskilsa’s side walked a tall Ubloit man, his face expressionless, dressed in heavy red armour. He was there for Saarashik. There was a symbolic Omega Charasean for Aghamora, to remember the Omegas who had taken over the moon during the Cairn War. Another Ubloit, this time a female, walked for Jana11, the black hole, a half Calanthe half Charasean boy stood for Rum, the reject planet, a Wurund stuck to the back of the procession for Daliat and at his side walked a Light Ishait from Calliban.

Bejaita was a province that dealt with trade of space – literally selling parts of the galaxy off to certain planets or even singular people. They sold everything from abandoned planets to stars, space
stations and meteors. Rian saw Kalorian shift out of the corner of his eye and his heart clenched. The man wasn’t blind – he could see how breathtaking Lady Eskilsa was, outshining the people around her. And that hurt. Gods that hurt. Rian was selfish, if he could he’d only have Kal look at him. Why couldn’t he marry the man?

“My King,” even Lady Eskilsa’s voice was beautiful, “My Lord Kalorian. I am honoured to be in your presence.”

“We are also honoured,” Kal replied, too quickly, and when Rian looked at him he saw a broad smile on his face. He thought he was going to be sick, right there in front of everyone. The Ten Ambassadors bowed simultaneously as Eskilsa curtsied. The dove broke away from the Vlassain’s shoulder and landed on the Lady’s extended, gloved hand. She smiled, and there was something cold about it. Rian fought off a shudder. He didn’t like the whole situation but he really didn’t like Eskilsa. Something about her made Rian’s skin crawl. But then again, he could just be paranoid and prejudiced and hate her because she was beautiful and Kal was looking at her the way Rian wished he could look at him.

“Ladies,” Kalorian stood up when Lady Eskilsa sat with her competitors, all the girls glaring daggers at one another, “and dear guests, there will be a celebratory ball tonight to welcome all the wonderful candidates to the Tower Palace.”

It had been Princess Ashia’s idea – Rian loved his cousin, mostly because she knew how to move through social situations with grace where he himself was hopeless. He was better at military strategy, training and dealing with the economics and politics. The social side of ruling a planet had always been down to Kal, Eilo and Ash. The Princess had thought a ball would smooth out any remaining animosities over Eilo’s disappearance; everybody loved a party apparently. It would also be a chance to strengthen alliances as the governments of the Cairn Galaxy were getting worried – they mostly had good relations with all the planets in the Arda Galaxy, but even though the intergalactic ban had been taken off, the Eon Galaxy refused to communicate with the other two and had put up a border, making it harder for anyone outside of the galaxy to travel there. They were being hostile and there were whispers of an arousing conflict.

Rian wasn’t one for parties but as he went up to his chambers he decided it would be a prime opportunities to speak to some of the Ishait delegates from Calliban. After the war the Dark Ishait, who had fought against Arossa during the war, had mostly been arrested. Queen Chivhu, who had fought with her brother Major Chegutu over who would rule their planet, had been killed, and the Major and his Light Ishait now had full control over Calliban. Still, Rian wanted to ensure that the alliance was as strong as he hoped.

The sun was setting when Rian came into his bedroom. When he looked out of the window he saw silver leaves sweeping through the courtyard; autumn was coming to a close and soon Arossa would be blanketed in snow. Rian liked snow. The boy’s mind started to wander, his eyes looking at nothing in particular...

“Are you having flashbacks from the war?” a teasing voice asked. Rian whirled around and saw his maid grinning at him, leaning against the doorway. The King rolled his eyes.

“Stars Azzie what did I tell you about sneaking up on me?”

“Sorry, sorry,” Azana Sagra laughed, walking into the room. She was young and a Calanthe, her rose gold hair tucked into two braids right now, “I came to get you ready for the ball.”

“I don’t have time for that-,” Rian started, but Azana interrupted him. She did that a lot, but Rian couldn’t exactly reprimand her; he had known the girl since they were children.
“Look, how else are you going to seduce Kalorian if you don’t try?”

Rian blushed, “For the last t-time I-I’m not trying to seduce him idiot!” he spluttered.

“Oh please,” Azzie rolled her blue eyes, “We’ve been through this. I know about your feelings for Kalorian-“

“I was drunk when I said that,” Rian growled, “I didn’t mean it!”

Azzie cleared her throat and then imitated Rian’s deeper voice, “Oh, Azzie, he’s so gorgeous, I love him, I wish I could marry him instead of Eilo!”

“S-Shut up!” Rian flushed. Azzie rolled her eyes again,

“Now is your chance to get him for yourself!”

“I’m not stealing my sister’s fiancée,” Rian said firmly.

“She didn’t want him! She said herself she didn’t love him.”

Rian’s eyes narrowed, “How do you know that?”

“The whole castle knows – the technicians have big mouths. But that’s besides the point,” Azzie sighed, “Just try tonight.”

“He doesn’t want me, Azzie,” Rian said, shocked at the misery in his own voice. He saw the maid’s expression soften and he turned away. He didn’t need pity, “He’ll never want me,” he mumbled, looking at the wind picking up outside.

“Well...,” Aziza sounded a little sad now, “I got you a new suit so you might as well wear it.”

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Kal liked parties, especially parties like this. Balls were exactly his thing; people dressed nicely, drinking sparkling liquor and speaking to each other in hushed voices as a classy, old fashioned band thrummed away. There were set dances and everyone looked beautiful as they whirled together on the dance floor.

But Kalorian couldn’t enjoy it this time, because his mind was on Rian. He had no idea what he did, but since Eilo’s disappearance the boy had been acting cold towards him. No, that wasn’t quite right. Rian had been acting cold for a while now, Kal just hadn’t really noticed. And now the competition...the man hadn’t really thought this out properly but now that the Ladies were here it all felt too real. Looking at them earlier Kalorian couldn’t imagine himself marrying any of them; sure, they were all very pretty, especially Lady Eskilsa but...it was complicated.

The man weaved in-between the ball guests, stopping to drink and talk to them, but wasn’t really paying attention to their words. His mind was split between Rian and the candidates. He had had the chance to have brief conversations with a few of them and was already forming somewhat shallow opinions of the girls in his mind. Lady Dashara was dreadfully boring, fiddling with her braid all night and avoiding everyone who wasn’t part of her delegation, but Kal had a feeling it was simply because she was shy and he was willing to try and get through that shyness to see if there was something deeper on the inside. Lady Kursassarra was bubbly and sarcastic and her sense of humour reminded Kal a little of Rian. About an hour ago she had gotten very, very drunk and was escorted to her room by one of the servants. Lady Asura seemed unapproachable, glaring at everyone who came near with her dark green eyes. Lady Shefanida was sweet, a little unknowledgeable about the court
life. She also seemed completely uninterested in Kalorian romantically, which was confusing. The only Lady Kal hadn’t had the chance to speak to was Eskilsa. But that was about to change.

“My Lord,” the voice made Kal turn around and he saw the white haired beauty smiling at him brilliantly. She was truly breathtaking as she handed Kal a flute of sparkling liquor, “Will you drink with me?”

“Naturally, my Lady,” Kal smiled his best charming smile and clinked his glass against Eskilsa’s.

“To the competition?” the girl asked, her eyes sparkling. Kal’s smile widened,

“Yes, to the competition,” the two drank together. The liquor burned Kal’s throat pleasantly. He offered his arm to the Lady and put his glass down on the tray of a passing waiter. He had to make an effort to make this work. He didn’t want his brother, Thrisan, to have any more problems, especially not since he was dealing with Arién’s arrest...no, Kal didn’t want to think about that now, “Shall we dance?”

“Yes, yes,” Eskilsa said excitedly, “But first I would like to introduce you to someone.”

She led him through the hordes of guests to a woman who looked like an older version of her. The woman wasn’t smiling, her white hair streaked with grey where it was piled on top of her head. The spectacles perched on the edge of her beak-like nose made her look like she was always disappointed with you. Her eyes were cold.

“Mother!” Eskilsa pulled Kalorian to the woman, who turned around to look at the two, “Mother, let me introduce you to Prince Kalorian of Fayaxiamen.”

“How do you do Lady...?” Kal said.

“Baroness,” the woman stressed out, “Haruna Isalis.”

“It’s my pleasure to meet you, Baroness Haruna,” Kalorian said, unnerved by the woman’s cold eyes on him.

“It’s my honour, my Lord,” the woman replied, “that you have asked my daughter here for the competition. She is a lovely lady as you can see, and beautiful too. She takes that from me. She would make wonderful marriage material.” Her bluntness caught Kalorian off guard.

“Oh mother,” Eskilsa giggled, blushing prettily.

“King Rian of Arossa!” the herald proclaimed suddenly, the music quieting down, “and his cousin, Princess Ashia.”

Kalorian turned around just as the door opened and Rian came in with Ash. The crowd stopped their dancing and socialising in order to bow and curtsy respectfully, but Kal didn’t move as he stared at Rian. The King was dressed in red. Mostly Rian liked neutral colours; whites and blacks and greys, so seeing him in colour threw Kal off guard. He had to say that the doublet, laced with gold, really suited him, as did the cape swept over one shoulder. Kal was wearing his crown, an intricate interweaving of white and red on top of his golden head. Kal smiled.

“Excuse me,” he told Eskilsa and her mother as he broke away with them unceremoniously. The crowd returned to what they were doing previously and the band started playing again. Kal weaved his way through the crowd until he was in front of Rian.

“Hey!” he said cheerfully, happy to see familiar faces in the crowd of delegates. He tapped his two
fingers with Ash’s, and then did the same with Rian’s, a normal custom of the Calanthe. Kal noted that the King didn’t look at him during their greeting.

“Excuse me,” Ashia said, spotting her husband in the crowd and walking off, hand on her pregnant stomach. Kal leaned into Rian.

“What’s wrong with you?” he asked. Rian exhaled.

“Why do you keep asking me that? I already told you I’m fine, just stressed out.”

“You’ve been avoiding me.”

“I’m not having this conversation with you again,” Rian said and started to walk off. On impulse, scared that the man would disappear again and that they were drifting apart, Kal reached out and grabbed his hand, pulling him back, “What are you doing?” Rian hissed, seemingly angry.

“Come dance with me,” Kal said, and then felt his mouth go dry when he realised how weird that request was, “O-Or drink or something.”

“I have to go speak to the Ishait delegate,” Rian said icily, and Kal didn’t understand why he was so cold. He didn’t understand what he did wrong, and Rian was so frustrating. Since they were children he always bottled up his feelings and didn’t tell anyone what was on his mind, and now it made Kalorian want to grab him and shake him until he told him what was bothering him.

“Rian-“

“And you have candidates to deal with,” roughly Rian pulled his hand free. Kal missed his smiles, his hugs, “Go dance with them.”

The Prince exhaled and leaned against the wall as Rian also disappeared. Kal didn’t know what to do with himself, who to talk to. If he asked Ashia about it she’d most likely just outright ask Rian and annoy him more. More than ever, Kal missed Eilo. She knew how to make things better, knew how to get through to her brother. Without her Rian was like a locked door. Kal wished he had the key, wished he could break down those walls. If things continued like that he’d wrap his arms around Rian and hold him tightly and he wouldn’t let go until the man told him what was wrong and how to fix it.

Yeah, real mature. Kalorian sighed again. He didn’t want to be at the ball anymore. He missed Eilo. He wondered what she was doing right now.

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*Sycamora.*

Eilo walked through the smoke in front of Dashyan, looking a little too comfortable with the gun in her hands. The *Sycamora* trio had managed to hook onto a slave ship and get on board. Dashyan had thrown a smoke bomb to knock out the crew and now he, Tye and Eilo walked through the white fog now, masks on their faces to prevent them from inhaling anything. So far they had walked past quite a lot of slavers and now they passed a Wurund and an Ishait, both of them knocked unconscious. They had tied them with kinetic wire and left them in the hallway.

“If the slaves are anywhere they’ll be somewhere at the back,” Eilo said, a pad in her hand showing her the outline of the ship, which was similar to *Hannibal*. That in itself was an insult.

“Alright let’s go,” Dashyan said and took a step forward into the smoke, his breathing obnoxiously
loud in his own ears as it circled the mask. Tyeval grabbed his arm and roughly jerked the boy back, surprising him.

“Stay behind me,” he said, walking in front of Dashe. The boy felt his annoyance spike.

“I’m not a child!”

“I need to protect you,” Tyeval said, not turning around as the trio continued down the corridor, their weapons pointed into the milky air.

“I don’t want you to protect me!” Dashe said, getting irritated. Tye turned on him and grabbed his shoulder. Through the mask his expression was unclear but his touch made Dashyan’s heart skip a beat.

“Dashe, I need to protect you,” Tye repeated, and the desperation in his voice made Dashyan just nod mutely – sometimes he forgot how protective Tyeval got. If it made his friend happy he would stick to the back. Dashe wasn’t the type of person to want to go first and claim any glories. He just wanted to make sure that these slavers got punished, and he could do that from the rear end of the group.

As they walked they passed more and more of the crew, knocked unconscious. Dashyan looked over their faces. Some of them looked menacing and like people who deserved to be thrown onto Idra for their crimes – a Vlassain man with the orange and black striped skin of a tiger or an Ishait with crude, violent tattoos decorating every inch of her dark blue skin. But others looked so harmless and innocent; a tiny boy with stubbly legs and constantly shifting blue hair as if he were underwater or an elderly Shif woman with leathery brown skin who looked more like somebody’s mother than a slaver.

“He looks like a child,” Dashyan said, leaning down to peer at the young boy with the swaying hair with curiosity. Eilo grabbed his shoulder and hauled him back.

“Don’t,” she said sharply, pointing her gun at the boy, though he was completely unconscious from the smoke, “That’s a Nemet. It only looks like a child. Actually it’s a dwarf species from a planet in the Arda Galaxy. Here, look,” she came close to the dwarf and pulled back his lower lip, revealing three rows of tiny, sharp teeth. Dashe shuddered, “They eat only raw meat. And other species.”

“Stars,” the Hybrid choked out, feeling sick suddenly. He imagined this child-looking creature munching on his leg, blood spurting away. With disgust he turned away, clutching his weapon tighter.

“I counted eighteen out there,” Tyeval said as they entered another room, where the smoke was dispersing, “That means two are unaccounted for.”

“Let’s hope we don’t have to account for them before the Shoriah lot get here,” Eilo sighed, peering around the corner of the room for any creatures.

So far the slaver hunt has gone very well; the Shoriah ship which had helped with the previous vessel hadn’t had time to return back to their home planet before the trio from Sycamora had sent them another signal about this ship, which they had paralysed with a magma ball, turning off its engines almost an hour ago. Now the aid ship should be only minutes away and they’d be done here. Walking the hallways with so many bodies – even though they were only knocked out and not dead – unnerved Dashe. It felt like a ghost ship.

“After we’re done here we need to land on some planet,” Tyeval said, his voice making everything a
“The closest planet is Rum,” Eilo said, “but we won’t get there for at least three more weeks.”

“Hey, did you forget?” Dashyan grinned, “We’ve got me!”

“No,” Tye said immediately, “You’re not creating time-“

A furious shout in a language Dashe didn’t understand sounded and the boy’s heart jumped in his chest as his whole body flinched. He saw two distorted, warped figures charging through the fog at him, and his heart somersaulted in his chest. The boy’s adrenaline suddenly spiked and he raised his weapon just as the person at the head revealed himself to be a Vlassain man, a turtle from the looks off it, a giant shell on his back and a mask over his face. When Eilo shot, her laser bounced off his shell and pierced the ceiling.

Tyeval didn’t bother because before Dashyan unfroze from where he was, body paralysed with fear, the older boy had already tackled the Turtle to the ground and was ripping his mask off, punching him in the face. Something crushed sickeningly in the man’s face and blood spurted everywhere. The second person was a Shif woman, older, her face twisted in furious malice as she ran at Eilo with a wild cry muffled by her mask, a hatchet in her hand. Eilo, in cold blood, her face impassive, raised her gun and shot the woman in the leg. Her cry changed from a war-shout to a scream of pain as she toppled onto the ground alongside her now-unconscious friend, wailing and clutching at her injured leg. Eilo kicked her hatchet away.

It had all happened in the space of a few seconds, and Dashyan hadn’t even had time to move, watching the events unfold in fear, heart hammering, brain short-wiring. His reflexes had failed him and his lack of experience got the best of him.

“That was close,” Tyeval wiped his bloody knuckles on his shirt, the Turtle lying limply on the ground, bleeding. Dashe swallowed. He had never seen the Ubloit be violent before, not like that, not physically. It put him in a different light in Dashe’s eyes.

“Dashe check that door,” Eilo pointed with her gun at the door at the end of the corridor as she tied the Shif woman’s hands with kinetic wire. She had stopped screaming and was now spitting swear words at the Princess, “I think the slaves might be in there.”

Dashyan, desperate to be useful in this situation, raced through the room, which was empty save for metal crates shoved up against the walls. He got to the door and was disappointed to find there was a pad outside. When he swiped his hand over it, it blared red and denied him access.

“I need someone’s hand print!” he called. Tyeval roughly grabbed the Shif woman’s arm and literally dragged her across the room. He was clearly angry, but then so was Dashyan. He couldn’t understand how anyone could think the slave trade was acceptable. He watched, a little pleased, as his best friend brought the woman’s hands up and swiped them over the pad, ignoring her protests, spitting and hissing.

The door opened softly and Dashyan heard a few terrified whispers and hisses as Tye pulled the Shif woman away again. When the light flickered on inside the room, Dash’s breath caught in his throat, and not in a good way. Huddled on the floor were at least fifteen people – pressed shoulder to shoulder in the tiny space that was no bigger than a closet. There were all sorts of species; men, women, children, androgynous members. Some of them huddled with their heads between their knees while others looked up fearfully, clinging onto each other with hands that were wrapped in heavy, old-fashioned shackles.
Dashe’s mouth went dry as he saw the eyes turn to him, hollow, dark, full of suffering and hate and confusion. He swallowed and tried to think of something to say. He had no idea what these people had gone through or how to comfort them.

“I-I...,” he started shakily, and saw some of the creatures glance at his gun in unease, “I won’t hurt you. We won’t hurt you,” he forced his voice to steady, lowering his weapon, “we’re here to save you, to help you, you can go home soon...,” he trailed off as the slaves continued looking at him blankly. A little boy started crying and Dashe’s shoulder slumped. Nobody here understood Faso. He was about to call Tye to translate, when Eilo ran up to him.

“The Shoriah ships are here,” she informed him, “They’re going to take care of these people, and send the Slavers to Idra.”

Dashyan nodded, a little relieved and a little worried. His eyes swept over the room once more and his stomach clenched. These people shouldn’t have been here, they shouldn’t have been hurt like this. He exhaled and turned away, knowing nothing he could say was going to fix anything, not while they were still in chains. His words held no meaning.

“Alright,” Dashyan clipped his gun back to his waist, eyes trained on his feet as his heart felt heavy, “Let’s go.”
Shal 2nd Ove 1161EE (1 day later)

Fayxiamen.

Summer was merely days away and the Briallan Palace was buzzing about the upcoming Sun Day Festival. Traditionally it was a street festival where Royals came down to celebrate with the common folk. Dressed in costumes and masks, the people were undistinguishable – anyone could be anyone, and that was the beauty of it.

Queen Vallea was more excited for the festival than most. Her usually calm and collected demeanour had melted away, which was noticeable to Wyliam who had been her personal servant for a week now. Somehow both her and the King wanted Wyl as their own personal servant and he managed to juggle serving them both quite well, though the boy had to admit he did prefer being around the Queen since she made him much more relaxed than the King. However right now the Queen was like a child, so exited she wouldn’t allow Wyliam to finish dressing her for bed.

“I have waited the whole year for this festival,” she told the Dust in a voice full of exhilaration, “The feeling of being able to go out with Zea in public, to dance with her, to kiss her and have nobody know who we are...it is truly something, Wyliam.”

The Dust smiled at her, her happiness infectious, “I’m sure it will be wonderful. And your costume is brilliant.”

Simultaneously the two looked at the wall, where the Queen’s costume hung; a bright blue wig to cover her fiery hair and a long black cape with a round hood, an electric blue mask to match. She would be completely unrecognizable.

“Oh Wyliam,” the Queen said, voice brimming with emotion when she squeezed Wyliam’s hand and turned around to let him do the buttons at the back of her night-dress, “You are such an amazing boy, no wonder Thrisan likes you so much.”

Wyliam felt blood rushing to his face as he looked down to where he was buttoning the Queen’s gown. His pale, freckled hands started shaking, “He-He likes me?” he stuttered.

“He thinks you’re sweet,” Queen Val said cheerfully, “I’m sure he’d like to bed you.”

“N-No. No, he most d-definitely wouldn’t,” Wyl said, rushed, tripping over his words. He remembered the last ten days in the palace, and the service he gave the King; bringing him books and
scrolls, translating papers, running errands, cleaning his chambers, running his baths. Each day Wyliam either said something stupid or dropped something, though the King never reprimanded him or asked for a replacement. Most likely he pitied Wyl and his incompetence, and that upset the Dust. He hated how Queen Val completely ignored how unsuitable Wyliam was to even be in the presence of the King.

“You have to have more faith in yourself, Wyliam,” the Queen sad, turning around, her face soft and beautiful, “you put yourself down too much.”

“It’s true though,” Wyliam mumbled, looking at his feet, “The King he...he would never want somebody like me.”

“What does that mean?” the Queen asked, but before Wyl could reply the door to the bedchamber opened and Zea walked in, naked as the day she was born. She blinked her red eyes at Wyl.

“Oops. I thought you’d be gone by now.”

“S-Sorry,” Wyliam squeaked. He didn’t cover his eyes the way he did the first few times he saw the Queen’s consort naked – now he was slowly getting used to it. Zea walked across the chamber and threw herself onto her lover’s bed. The Queen smiled fondly,

“That will be all, Wyl,” she said gently. The boy bowed and walked to the door, thinking how nice it would be to share a bed with someone he loved. He would return upstairs now, to his tiny bedroom, taken up mostly by his own bed, and bury himself in the blankets. Lately it had stormed almost every night, lightning crashing and green flashes keeping the boy awake. Today, undoubtedly, he would spend the night with his head underneath his pillow, trying to calm his racing heart.

“Wyliam.”

The boy turned around when he heard the Queen’s hesitant voice and flinched when he found that she right behind him, smiling. Zea was on the bed, stretched out like a cat and leaning on her arm.

“Yes, your majesty?”

“Would you be so kind as to do a little run up to Thrisan’s chambers and delivering a little message from me?” she asked sweetly. Too sweetly. Wyl looked at her, suspicious, and then glanced to the window. It was dark outside, clouds gathering in the sky, tinted green. A storm would start soon.

“Now?” Wyl asked faintly. It was late. The Queen nodded.

“It’s a command.”

It was the first time she said that. Wyliam swallowed anxiously and nodded, “Yes. Of course, your majesty. What’s the message?”

Queen Vallea leaned in, cupped Wyliam’s cheek, and kissed him. The boy gasped, his glasses digging into his nose, and felt all his blood rush to his cheeks. His heart skipped a beat in shock, and fear made his fingertips tingle. The kiss lasted merely a second, maybe two, but to Wyl it seemed like he was trapped in the confusion of why is the Queen kissing me? forever. Finally the woman pulled back, smiling proudly. Zea snickered on the bed.

“W-What?” Wyl asked faintly, completely lost.

“It’s my message to the King,” Queen Val said casually, “Deliver it immediately. Exactly like the way I just did it.”
Wyliam nodded mutely and turned to the door. He walked out, not realising that he was putting one foot in front of the other. He was completely out of it, his brain not comprehending what just happened until he found himself in the dark corridor and the Queen closed her bedroom door behind him.

*The Queen kissed me.* Wyliam told himself, over and over until his brain digested the information. The pounding of his heart was so loud it seemed to fill the empty hallway. The kiss didn’t make him feel anything other than apprehension and confusion. However the next thought made him feel other things; excitement, absolute terror, shyness, self-consciousness, happiness, a little trickle of arousal...*The Queen wants me to kiss the King.*

There was nothing Wyl could do; if he went against the Queen’s wishes...well, he liked to think that they were friendly with each other, he and Val and Zea, but in the end Wyliam was still their subordinate. He couldn’t afford to lose this job. *It’s just a stupid kiss!*

Wyliam raced up the stairs to the King’s floor. A part of him was helplessly excited – Thrisan was someone the Dust admired and even desired slightly – but a bigger part of him was terrified. Wyl wasn’t stupid enough to think the King would *want* to kiss him, and he knew that he’d end up getting disappointedly let down.

But he still knocked on King Thrisan’s door. Why did he knock? *Why? Why? Why?* The moment Wyl performed the action he immediately regretted it. His blood run cold and his anxiety kicked in. He was a stupid, young, clumsy servant what did he even *think* coming here?!

The King opened the door after a few seconds of Wyliam’s internal battle. He had clearly been getting ready for bed as he was in a loose white shirt and a night robe. His black hair was slightly damp, as if from a shower, and his dark eyes were kind but confused. He was gorgeous as always.

“Wyliam?” he asked, “Why are you here? It’s late,” the King frowned, “Are you sick? You face is all red.”

“T-The Queen w-wanted me to d-deliver a m-message,” Wyliam stuttered, voice a pitch higher than normal. The King raised an eyebrow in surprise.

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“Val? What could she want at this time?”

Feeling completely detached from his body, Wyliam stood on his tiptoes, his trembling fingers finding Thrisan’s stubble covered cheek the same way the Queen’s had found his. The King’s eyes widened upon Wyl’s touch but it was too late to back out now. Feeling like he was actually going to pass out, the Dust leaned up and pressed his mouth clumsily to King Thrisan’s.

He had never kissed anyone. He was shaking like a leaf in the wind, his heart pounding so hard it felt like it was going to crack Wyl’s ribs. He couldn’t even register the feeling of the King’s mouth on his, because his head was spinning so much. The kiss lasted a few seconds of eternity.

Wyliam lowered himself back to the ground, pulling his hand away from the King’s warm cheek. The man looked shocked and Wyliam wondered if that was what he had looked like when the Queen had kissed him.

“I-I don’t know w-why she asked me t-to do that,” Wyl whispered, horrified when Thrisan just continued to stare at him. He had messed up, he could see as much, “I-I’m sorry!” he squeaked, bowing, hoping to the stars that Thrisan wouldn’t fire him-

The King seized Wyliam by the arm, roughly. For a wild second the Dust thought that he would hit
him for his insolence. But no, instead Thrisan drew Wyliam inside his chambers, slamming the door shut and then pressing the Dust up against it. It all happened in seconds.

“Your majesty-,” Wyl squeaked, but Thrisan silenced him with his mouth.

If Wyliam didn’t remember their previous kiss, there was no way he could forget this one. Thrisan’s lips were hot and impatient, his tongue parting Wyliam’s own lips. The boy had no idea what was happening, only that the King was kissing him with a passion that made the breath escape his lungs. His head was spinning as a fire erupted in his stomach. He wanted to writhe, to press up against the King. He felt stubble rubbing against his chin and cheek as Thrisan claimed his mouth and when Wyl’s hands came up – to push the man away or pull him closer the Dust didn’t know – the King grasped his wrists in his own hands and pressed them to the door on either side of Wyl’s head. His fingers curled all the way around Wyliam’s slim wrists, and the Shif was completely helpless against the larger man.

He felt intoxicated, the same way he had in the bar with Zea. He had no control over his body or his mind. His glasses were askew as Thrisan angled his head, his tongue mapping out the inside of Wyliam’s mouth. *Kiss back you idiot!* A voice inside the boy’s head snapped at him and so the boy sluggishly brushed his tongue against the King’s, trying to mimic his movements. He couldn’t keep up, not when Thrisan was making his legs shake and his knees weak. Wyl’s hands clenched and unclenched in the King’s grip and his eyes closed on their own accord when the man slotted up against the Dust, pressing him into the door.

Lightning crashed outside, so obnoxiously loud that Wyliam felt it through his entire body. He gasped and drew back, his body tensing with fear. It had felt like the lightning had struck right outside the window.

“Hey,” the gentleness in Thrisan’s voice juxtaposed with the almost violent passion of his kiss. It was dark in the chamber, and Wyliam could barely make out the man’s face, “Don’t be scared.”

Wyl didn’t know what to reply. He was red, a little embarrassed, a little aroused, a lot confused. He didn’t quite know what was happening, what he was meant to be doing or what the King was expecting. Thankfully he wasn’t forced to make any kind of decision as Thrisan leaned in and kissed him once more.

This time the kiss was gentle, soft, and slow, a caress more than anything. It still made Wyliam’s legs want to give out. Wyl couldn’t take it; his arms jerked out and he pushed Thrisan away from himself, eyes squeezed shut, face turned away.

“D-Don’t.”

The rain came outside, in a suddenly sheet, a whisper as it collided with the water filling Fayaxiamen, and assaulted the windows. Wyliam wanted to cry but he wasn’t quite sure why.

“Did I do something wrong?” Thrisan asked, voice low and a little hoarse. Wyliam couldn’t bring himself to look at him.

“I-I-,” he swallowed, “W-Why are you kissing m-me?” it seemed like such a childish question but it was the only one Wyl could formulate at the time. His eyes started getting adjusted to the dark and he saw the King frown.

“What do you mean?”

“I...there’s s-so many servants a-and I-,” Wyliam bit his lip, “Why me?”
“I want you,” Thrisan said, as if it was obvious. Wyl swallowed.

“I don’t understand,” he squeaked. Thrisan grabbed his wrist and drew him closer. He was strong and Wyl...well, he wasn’t. The King could move him around like a chess piece. Thrisan pulled Wyliam close, one of his arms wrapping around the boy’s waist. He cupped him around the back of his neck, preventing Wyl from turning away, and kissed him again. If he continued doing that Wyliam was sure he would be unable to stand. The way the King kissed should’ve been illegal. Wyl flushed with embarrassment when Thrisan’s tongue in his mouth elicited a breathy little moan from him.

The King’s response to that was to turn them around and start walking Wyliam backwards, never once stopping his kissing. When the boy felt the back of his legs hit the bed he squeaked and fell back onto the piles of pillows and covers on the royal bed. Before he could even get a grip on his new surroundings, Thrisan climbed on top of him, covering the Dust’s body with his bigger one. Wyliam wasn’t sure if he wanted this, but he wasn’t sure if he didn’t want it either. It was all so complicated.

Lightning flashed green outside, followed by the roar of thunder that made Wyl’s stomach clench. He squeezed his eyes shut again and tensed, though he wished his body wouldn’t do that. He felt Thrisan’s hands when they reached to remove his glasses, placing them somewhere. Wyl’s eyes fluttered open when he felt the King kissing the frown between his eyebrows. He was being so gentle and caring and loving that it was making Wyliam melt. No wonder so many servants wanted to sleep with the King.

Sleep with the King.

Wyliam’s stomach twisted. He couldn’t do that.

“S-Stop,” he whispered shakily.

“Why?” Thrisan asked. In the dark he looked unlike himself; dark, mysterious. A little scary.

“I-c-can’t...I-c-can’t...,” Wyliam couldn’t get words out, “I-d-do...it...with you.”

“Do what?” Thrisan sounded a little amused, “We’re not doing anything. Except kissing.”

“But why?” Wyliam asked helplessly.

“Why aren’t we doing more?” Thrisan asked, leaning down and pressing his mouth to Wyliam’s neck. The small boy shivered but didn’t have the strength (or the will) to push the King away.

“N-No,” Wyliam whispered, “Why are you kissing me?”

“You kissed me first,” Thrisan murmured, his warm lips moving against Wyliam’s neck, his stubble rubbing pleasantly against the skin there. The Dust suddenly had the urge to tangle his hands in the King’s silky black hair but he was scared that this was all some massive joke and his touch would be unwanted.

“I-It was from the Q-Queen...”

“You didn’t push me away.”

“I-I am now,” Wyl lied.

“No you’re not,” the King kissed just below his ear and Wyliam bit his lip because he was sure he
was going to let out an embarrassing sound. Thrisan smelled really nice – it was comforting. Because Wyl wasn’t wearing his glasses everything in the background was blurry, and he could only focus on the man above him, “and to answer your question – I’m kissing you because you’re lovely.”

“W-What?” Wyliam asked faintly.

Thrisan smiled and connected their mouths again, the kiss sparking a little flame in the pit of Wyliam’s stomach, “Yes,” Thrisan pulled back a little, “You’re very lovely.”

“N-No I’m not,” the words spilled from Wyl’s mouth before he could stop them and he blushed in embarrassment – he didn’t need to the King to know how insecure he was.

“Do you want me to stop touching you?” Thrisan asked.

“Yes,” Wyl squeaked, “No. I d-don’t know.”

“Alright,” Thris returned to the boy’s neck, “Tell me when you’ve made up your mind.”

He kissed the boy’s neck, harder than before, more passionate, and Wyliam’s breath started coming out fast and uneven. For a moment his mind went blank – he was aware of Thrisan undoing his shirt, sliding it off his shoulders so it pooled around his elbows. He felt the King’s hot mouth travel from his neck to his freckled collarbones, down his slim chest and stomach. The arousal that exploded in Wyl’s gut prevented him from thinking clearly or making any kinds of decisions.

“You majesty-”

“Thrisan,” the King corrected as he undressed Wyliam. The boy tried to cling on to his clothes, to cover himself, because he was sure Thrisan didn’t want to see him naked, but the man wrestled his trousers off his pale legs and got his shirt the rest of the way off, “Shhh, don’t,” he said when Wyliam crossed his arms over his bare chest. He was embarrassed and self-conscious but at the same time he didn’t want Thrisan to stop touching him. Somewhere in the back of his head he knew that he was just another of the King’s play toys...but right now he couldn’t focus on that thought.

The storm continued somewhere in the distance, but Wyl couldn’t seem to hear it anymore. Thrisan kissed down his chest, leaving a trail of fire everywhere his lips touched. Wyliam felt horribly exposed in his underwear and he wished Thrisan would take his clothes off too, but he didn’t know how to ask him that.

“I want to have sex with you,” the King murmured, surging back upwards, his teeth finding Wyl’s earlobe and biting playfully. The gasp that spilled out of the boy’s mouth turned into a full-fledged moan that the boy had to silence with a hand over his mouth, “and you’re going to tell me if you want me to stop.”

“I-I don’t...I-I don’t k-know...” the thought of having sex with anyone scared Wyliam. But this was the King he was talking about. Thrisan wasn’t pushing him though, his fingers brushing Wyliam’s curls from his face. The boy didn’t want to think about how bad he probably looked right now.

“Do you like me kissing you?” Thrisan asked.

Wyliam looked away, blushing, “Yes,” he admitted in a whisper.

“Do you like me touching you?” the King asked, sliding his fingertips from the hollow of Wyl’s throat down to his belly-button. The Dust shivered and nodded mutely. Thris smiled, “Alright, then just tell me when you stop liking it.”
Wyliam nodded, deciding that was probably the safest option. Thrisan leaned across his large bed and rummaged in the bedside table for something. He was draped over Wyl, not looking at him and, on instinct, the boy reached up and pressed his hand against the man’s clothed chest. Thrisan’s eyes snapped to him, surprised, and Wyliam quickly snatched his hand back.

“No, it’s alright,” the King said quickly, taking his hand. He dropped something onto the pillow next to Wyl’s head and brought his hand back to his chest. Wyliam nervously splayed his fingers over where the King’s heart was, and heard it beating faintly. It calmed him a little, “You can touch me,” Thrisan said softly.

“I-I don’t know how,” Wyliam whispered. He felt so inexperienced around the man.

Thrisan pulled away and for a horrible second Wyl thought he would leave. But instead the King slipped off his night-robe and pulled his shirt over his head, leaving him more naked than Wyliam. The boy’s eyes widened as he gazed up at the man. His body seemed made out of marble; dark, strong, hard, rippling with muscle. He looked like he could crush Wyliam in his arms. He laid back on top of the boy, keeping himself up by his arms, and the Dust caught a glimpse of his member – dark, curved, thick and long. It terrified him and aroused him at once and Wyliam felt his own cock stirring in reply.

“Here,” Thrisan took the Dust’s small hand in his and pulled it down, “Just touch me here.” Wyliam sucked in a sharp breath when his felt his fingers brush against the King’s cock. Thrisan nudged his hand open and the boy closed it again against the member. It was hot and seemed to be pulsating in his grip. The feel of it made Wyl dizzy and suddenly the boy wanted it all over him and inside him, and that embarrassed him. He gave a shy, experimental stroke over Thris’ member and the King hissed, leaning forward and kissing Wyliam’s neck.

“S-Sorry!” the boy exclaimed, scared he did something wrong.

“No, shhh, keep going,” Thrisan murmured, and his voice seemed different somehow, more tense. His hands found Wyl’s hips and gripped them, almost bruisingly. Wyliam had no idea what he was doing, but he repeated the motion. Thris’ hot cock slid through his palm a few times and the boy could feel the King’s breath on his neck, getting faster and faster. When his thumb accidentally slid over the head of the man’s member the King groaned, tensing. Wetness beaded on top of the cock, allowing it to slide through Wyl’s fingers easier. Thrisan bucked forward into his hand, and then suddenly pulled away, throwing Wyliam off and causing him to pull his hand back.

Before he could ask any stupid, stuttered, pointless question, Thrisan reached for the thing he dropped next to Wyl’s head. It was lubricant in a little clear bottle. Fear crept up the boy’s spine as he watched the King pour some over his fingers. Then he grabbed Wyliam’s ankle and without a warning dragged him forward, so he was settled between the boy’s legs. Wyl had no other choice but to look up at him with big eyes. He was scared, and he didn’t know what to do.

Thrisan ripped off his underwear in one swift, angry motion, “No!” Wyliam gasped when Thrisan threw it to the side. The boy crossed his legs, attempting to hide his arousal, but Thris forced them open with a strong hand.

Thrisan realised he had lost a little bit of control and his face softened, “I’m sorry,” he leaned down and kissed the inside of Wyl’s freckled thigh. The boy didn’t realise that the reason his vision was blurry was because there were tears in his eyes, “I’m not going to hurt you, I promise,” Thris murmured. His voice soothed Wyliam and he nodded gently, “Wrap your legs around my waist.”

Wyl did so, albeit slightly clumsily. He felt stupidly exposed but there was nothing he could do about
it now – at least he had the cover of darkness and the storm outside to hide his shame. Thris’ hands slid over his legs, and over his backside. Wyliam was so embarrassed he thought he would die. His eyes kept anxiously glancing at Thrisan’s cock, in case it had gone soft at Wyliam’s nakedness. It hadn’t.

Wyliam tensed when he felt the King’s wet finger circle his hole gently. He had never had anyone touch him there (or anywhere for the matter) and it felt weird and...intrusive. However before he could ask Thris to slow down, the man pushed the tip of the finger in. Wyliam sucked in a mouthful of air at the sudden uncomfortable pressure he felt.

It wasn’t exactly pain he felt as Thrisan sank his digit inside him, more like discomfort. Discomfort that distracted Wyl from his insecurities for the moment. The feeling was alien to the Dust, and he didn’t know how to react. He tensed and clenched up, his hands twisting into the covers below him. Thrisan wasn’t looking at him anymore, instead showering the left side of his chest, neck and shoulder with kisses, his free hand holding Wyl’s hip. He started moving the finger inside the boy and the Dust gritted his teeth, focusing on not letting his discomfort show.

When Thrisan pushed a second slick finger inside Wyliam the boy tensed up further. His hands slid into the man’s hair, just so he had something to hold onto. He pulled the King closer and fought a whimper when the man spread his fingers inside the boy. He wasn’t so sure he wanted this anymore. He couldn’t keep his voice at bay when the third digit slid inside him though, because that hurt. A burning kind of pain. Wyl’s hand tightened in Thris’ hair,

“Ah-,” he gasped, legs clenching around the man’s waist. Thrisan pulled back and looked at Wyliam with soft eyes.

“Don’t cry,” he murmured.

“I-I’m n-not...” Wyliam whispered, his breath coming out harshly. Thrisan wiped his cheek with the back of his free hand, and then kissed the boy gently on the mouth.

“You’re so pretty,” the King said softly. With an exhale Wyliam melted into the pillows, his body relaxing finally. He wasn’t sure if Thrisan meant the words or if he had just said them to get Wyliam to not tense up so much. Either way it successfully got the boy to unwind, “So, so pretty,” Thrisan said, a little distractedly, “Can you turn around for me? It’ll be easier.”

Lightning crashed outside when Wyliam flipped onto his stomach, pressing his face into a pillow. He wasn’t scared of the storm anymore. The pillow smelled like Thrisan, and the King peppered Wyl’s back with kisses, trying to make him as comfortable as possible. It still hurt when he started pushing his cock inside Wyliam.

The boy blanked out again, mostly because of how bad he felt. He tried to breathe normally and not make a noise and not tense up but it was hard, especially with inch after hard inch that was pushed inside him. Wyl wanted to tell Thris to stop, but he didn’t know how. His eyes brimmed with tears and the pillow caught them when they fell.

The rest was a blur. Thrisan started thrusting slowly at first, and the pain changed to discomfort. The King’s pace picked up and his groans and hard breathing indicated his own pleasure as his long, hard, slick cock pierced Wyliam over and over. He didn’t like it, his cock was trapped between him and the bed, soft. It was dark in the room, and he was scared of doing something wrong, and he wished he could see Thrisan’s face, wished he could kiss him to comfort himself. Wyl had no idea how long it lasted. And then it started getting better – the discomfort ebbed away slowly, slowly, and Wyl started to almost feel good.
Then Thrisan pulled out and Wyliam heard him bite back a moan as hot come dripped into the small of his back. The feeling made him gasp.

“Gods,” Thris said breathlessly, rolling over onto his side. Wyliam thought he was going to be sick. The disgust and regret that hit him in a wave almost made him burst out crying. His body ached, his heart felt heavy. He remembered that the King only ever slept with a servant once. Wyl was worth nothing to him, this whole situation was worth nothing. You’re so pretty, the lie made the Dust squeeze his eyes shut.

The boy scrambled off the bed and hurriedly grabbed his clothes, shoving them on, wanting to hide his nakedness and escape before he started crying there and then. He didn’t hear Thrisan questioningly say his name in a soft voice, all he heard was the thunder rolling outside. He should’ve just gone to his room earlier, alone, and hid under the blankets. There were worse things to fear than a little bit of rain and lightning.

Wyliam escaped the room as fast as he could, feeling like he was in a dream. He didn’t belong in his body anymore. He had let a practically stranger have him. And for what? Wyl got to his room, closed the door, hoped he didn’t wake anyone up. He climbed underneath his covers, shaking so badly he was sure he was having some sort of panic attack. Pressing his face into his pillow to muffle his sobs helped.

The storm stopped outside.

***

(The same day)

Sycamora.

Tyeval worriedly watched Dashyan as the fog was sucked out of existence. Seconds ago it had surrounded the boy as he created time, transporting their small ship from the space around the Morie Asteroid Belt to right outside Rum – a neutral dwarf planet known for its extensive black market and its acceptance of everything and everyone – in minutes. From the atmosphere the planet was dark and grey, surrounded by ashy clouds. Rum didn’t have a sun – it’s ‘days’ meant dark blue skies, while the nights were pitch black.

It hadn’t been a long or dangerous jump from Morie to Rum, but Tye was still worried, peering closely at his best friend’s face. Dashyan was in a trance as long as the fog was in the air, but the moment it disappeared his aquamarine eyes fluttered open. He looked a little dazed, but smiled gently at Tyeval.

“Hi,” he said. Eilo sighed in relief and leaned back in her chair, where she had been busy observing the boy’s face as well. Tyeval reached out and took Dashyan’s hand in his, squeezing it.

“Are you alright?” he asked.

“Yeah,” Dashyan’s smile widened when he glanced at the front window in the navigation cabin, “I did it.”

“Of course you did,” Eilo grinned and walked over to the steering dashboard, taking Sycamora off autopilot as the ship entered Rum’s atmosphere. Ships constantly barrelled into the tiny planet, or left it, creating a kind of motorway towards it. There were no rules on Rum, no laws, no government, no authorities. To an extent that was beautiful, but it was also paradise for criminals, who couldn’t get arrested while on the planet. Anything could happen on Rum – you could have the time of your life.
in one of the famous nightclubs, or wake up in an alleyway, bleeding out with you kidney missing.

Tyeval couldn’t help but feel a little anxious knowing how dangerous the streets of Rum were. He hated that he was like this – the mother hen, always thinking about the negatives. But he had to, since Dashyan was so carefree. Even now his face lit up as they approached the planet, his pretty eyes following the ships zooming through the surrounding space.

“Eilo, are you sure this is the planet you want to get off on?” Tyeval asked, swivelling around in his chair to look at the blonde girl. He remembered her a few weeks ago, in her dress and her hair perfectly curled. Now it was scraped back and she was in leather and ragged clothes. She looked a little like a space pirate but despite her steel nerves Tye knew she had a soft heart and didn’t want her to get hurt on Rum.

“It’s alright, I have a friend who lives here,” the girl smiled at Tyeval sweetly, “Besides Rum isn’t scary if you know your way around.”

Tye and Dashe had come to Rum once before with the Crew of Hannibal. Lin and Champagne had needed extra parts for the engines, but Tyeval had been twelve and Dashe eight so neither of them remembered it that well, especially since Viridian didn’t let them off the ship.

“Tye, Tye,” Dashyan launched himself off his chair and ran over to his friend, buzzing, “Can we stay for a bit and look around?”

“I...,” Tyeval started, but seeing the excitement in Dashe’s eyes made him want to do everything the boy wanted, “Yeah. Alright. Just for a bit though.”

“Yes!” Dashyan said happily, quickly kissing Tyeval on the cheek before running back to his chair. If the Ubloit could blush, he would’ve, but instead he marvelled at the fact that although he was part-machine his heart was still pounding from that simple gesture.

Eilo and Dashe were lost in conversation about Eilo’s plans for the next few weeks and whether she would return to Arossa, but Tyeval tuned them out as he piloted the ship alone. They passed through the clouds and descended into the planet until Tye could make out separate parts. Rum was truly a tiny planet and the majority of it was old mining factories, long dried out, and jagged rocks. There were no seas, oceans, lakes or rivers here, a few towns were sprinkled around, each of them worse and more scruffy than the next. But Sycamora was interested in Beor – the main city they were preparing to land in – where the main black market was and all the interesting things happened.

Eilo went to the bedroom to make sure she was completely packed and Dashyan went to help her. Two surprising thoughts went through Tyeval’s head. One – what if Dashe fancied the Princess? He was always following her around and although she was seven years older than him she looked around his age. Tye didn’t know if Dashyan liked girls or boys, they had never talked about that. Tyeval didn’t like boys or girls, he just liked Dashe. Loved him. He couldn’t love anyone but Dashyan, he was sure of it, and now, for the first time, he wondered if his best friend preferred girls. The second thought was only slightly more pleasant than the previous – Tyeval was going to miss Eilo. She had become a key member of Sycamora’s amusingly small crew, and Tye couldn’t imagine being on this ship alone with Dashyan even though once it was all he could think about. For the past two weeks he and Dashe had slept apart because of Eilo on the floor between them and now the Cyborg wondered if Dashyan would come sleep with him when she was gone.

He distracted himself by trying to land Sycamora onto one of the landing pods on Beor, which wasn’t easy. The city was mostly made up of low, two-floor buildings, grey and scruffy like the rest of the planets. Ships were parked in hangars with the roofs half-gone, and some bigger vessels had been grounded forever and transformed into shops or clubs. The sky was a deep blue, and it seemed
like it was almost night, when in fact it was the middle of the day.

**Sycamora** finally landed in an already crowded lot with other ships. Tye, Dashe and Eilo made sure the ship was secure and paid one of the securities walking around, a Charasean with body modifications and his face all in piercings, to guard their ship and make sure it didn’t get stolen. They walked off the pod, down to the main streets of Beor, and then it was time to say goodbye.

“Well,” Eilo smiled at the two boys, shrugging her bag further up her shoulder, “my friend is going to meet me close by and take me to his place. I...I wanted to say thank you. For giving me a lift and for taking care of me.”

“Of course,” Tyeval said. Dashyan stepped forward and hugged the girl tightly. Despite being a lot younger he was taller than the small princess. They squeezed each other fiercely.

“Come on Dashe,” Eilo laughed but her voice was choked up as if she was going to cry, “this isn’t goodbye, we’ll see each other soon kiddo.”

They broke away and Dashe’s mouth was in a thin line, his eyes sad. Tyeval hated to see him sad. Eilo came over and wrapped her thin arms around the Ubloit’s torso.

“Take care of yourself, Tye,” she said softly, rubbing his back. He hugged her back awkwardly. Usually people told him to take care of Dashyan, and the girl’s words warmed his heart.

“I’ll see you soon,” he told the Princess, holding up two fingers. She smiled broadly despite the tears shining in her eyes, and tapped her own fingers against his. Then, to avoid any more teary goodbyes, Eilo waved and walked backwards, disappearing into the steady crowd of people hurrying both ways down the street. It was bordered by buildings, and the sky above them was cut every second by a different ship. Tyeval exhaled and looked around. A dark haired, tanned Ubloit with sad eyes standing next to a teenage Hybrid with fiery hair was nothing here; they blended right in.

“We need to leave before nightfall,” Tye said firmly. Dashyan glanced at him and grinned, “That’s at least two hours!” he proclaimed, “let’s go!”

He hurriedly started walking but thankfully Tyeval had a little longer legs so he could keep up. They easily blended into the crowd. There was someone from each specie from the Cairn Galaxy, and from Arda and Eon too, ones the Ubloit wasn’t programmed to recognise. Everything smelled like smoke, engine oil and a mixture of spices. The crowd was so big that Tye couldn’t see anything but heads.

“Here!” Dashyan yelled, and grabbed Tye’s hand. The Ubloit was surprised but allowed the smaller boy to pull him into a different street. For a second they passed through a smoke filled alley, full of laughter, with slim creatures from all sorts of species hanging alluringly from the top windows, and then they were out in a smaller, less crowded street.

A large sign hovered above the street, reading PLANETARY MARKET. It flashed fourteen times, each time translating it into a different language.

“What’s the planetary market?” Dashe asked.

“Well, let’s go see, that’s the point,” Tyeval said, hand still firmly holding Dashe’s. If the boy questioned it, Tye could always say it was so they didn’t get lost. Hand in hand they walked through the street, completely invisible. At all sides passed fantastical creatures that were much more interesting than the two boys; tall Ubloits with clear replacements that didn’t match the rest of their bodies – mechanical eyes or arms dressed back to nothing but wires and rods, a Charasean-Calanth
Hybrid woman with earrings to the floor hanging from her pink pointed ears sauntered past, some kind of creature with yellow skin, naked from the waist down floated by, tentacles writhing in the air instead of legs.

“What’s that?” Dashyan asked in awe, turning around to follow the creature with his eyes.

“Don’t stare, it’s rude,” Tye said, tugging on Dashe’s hand. You’d think that after years of travelling the galaxy the boy wouldn’t be so amazed by other creatures, but the Hybrid was somehow still so curious. It was something that Tyeval liked about him, but then again, he liked practically everything about the boy.

The Planetary Market turned out to be just that. The bottom floor of each of the buildings was open, the walls and doors gone. All kinds of sellers sold all types of things linked with planets – from actual planets, mostly illegal and in a bad state, to portable stars and suns in jars that could be cracked open to provide a planet with light. From there the two went down to the Ship Market, where all kinds of vessels could be seen, although only their holograms while the real things were safely hidden in hangars outside of the city. There were normal streets, such as fruits and vegetables, though the food sold there was fantastical and so interesting that Tyeval had to wait fifteen minutes while Dashyan stared at peculiar purple, square vegetables that trembled in their pots and let out little high-pitched sighs every few seconds. There was literally everything in this black market – illegal residencies for all the planets in the Cairn and Arda galaxies and for a few in Eon, extra parts for all kinds of ships, body mods, extra parts for Ubloits, suppressants for Omegas and Alphas.

“Tye, look!” Dashyan tugged on his friend’s hand, which he was still holding, and pointed at a little stall. They were in the Magic Market, where hooded Time Makers sold time in bottles and you could buy curses, voodoo dolls, old scrolls and books...and lucky charms. Which was what this particular stall had. Dashe dragged Tye over to it, his eyes bright like the flames that burned in little holders that dotted the market, supplying it with light that Rum didn’t have naturally. Tye wondered why the people living here didn’t just open one of the sun jars to get some natural light, but he came to the conclusion that a lot of these creatures enjoyed the dark.

The woman manning the charms stall was a heavily modified Ishait. Her dark sclera eyes had wrinkles around them, and she was hunched over. Her green skin was bumpy from sand tattoos, and her hair was wrapped up in a bright red scarf. From her nose hung a long, crystal ear-ring and there were piercings on her knuckles and at the sides of her neck.

“Welcome,” she croaked at the two in her home-tongue, Amablilis. Dashyan couldn’t understand but he was too busy looking at the charms hanging from the roof of the stall to care, “What are you gentlemen looking to purchase?” the woman asked, tongue curling around her s’s.

“We’re just looking,” Tyeval replied, apologetically. Being programmed to speak so many languages was useful right now. The seller’s eyes flickered to Dashyan, who was circling the stall, his eyes big with wonder. The charms were relatively cheap and varied from rocks to feathers.

“Tye,” Dashyan returned to his friend, “Should we get some for each other? To bring luck to the journey.”

“Since when do you believe in that?” Tye asked, arching an eyebrow. Dashe shrugged,

“They’re pretty,” he batted his eyelashes at Tyeval, “please?”

Tye was in charge of the money that the two boys had saved up over the years for this adventure, additionally to the funds given to them by Viridian and Thane, mostly because he was way more responsible than Dashe. But Dashe was also his weakness, and Tyeval couldn’t say no to him.
“Fine.”

“Okay, I’ll get one for you and you get one for me!” the boy said, and went back to circling the stall with a look of concentration on his face. Tye watched him with soft eyes and hoped the amazement on Dashe’s face would never disappear.

“Is he your lover?” the Ishait woman asked with a wicked grin. Tye’s heart skipped a beat and he was glad Dashyan couldn’t understand.

“No,” he said sharply, “He’s my friend.”

“You don’t look at him as if he were your friend,” the woman said wisely. Tyeval’s hands clenched into fists. He had to be more careful with how he acted or Dashyan would figure out his feelings.

“Well he is. Just my friend. That’s it.”

The woman nodded and reached to one of the charms. It was a golden leaf, sharp, like the tip of a spear, “Take this charm. It is for friendship,” she said, and sounded like she was mocking him. Feeling angry, Tyeval slapped the sum for two charms onto the counter in front of her. She took the money hastily and put it into a fold of her long skirt.

“I want this one,” Dashyan said, handing the woman a fluffy white ball, glowing light blue and hovering in the air above his hand, turning round and round. The woman’s smile grew wider and she nodded, handing Tyeval his change.

“I wish you a good life,” she said to the Ubloit. Tye turned away without saying anything and when he felt Dashyan starting to reach for his hand, he hurriedly shoved it in his pocket.

“Let’s give the charms to each other,” Dashyan said, stopping underneath a neon sign reading FRUIT OF LOVE. Ironic. Tyeval pulled his charm out of his pocket and presented it to Dashe. He was in a horrible mood but he didn’t want to ruin the day for his friend.

“It represents friendship,” he said as Dashyan took the golden leaf from his hand. He smiled sweetly.

“That’s so cute.”

“Yeah, okay,” Tye said, “What does yours mean?”

Dashyan held out the fluffy white ball and when Tyeval reached for it, it jumped into his hand, “It represents love. Because I love you.”

Dashyan stood there, smiling obliviously, innocently, not understanding the weight his words carried. His ginger hair was shaded neon green by the sign above them, his eyes were dark and beautiful. His hands gripped the golden leaf to his chest and Tyeval wanted to kiss him so, so badly. He reached out and pulled the boy into a hug, his heart hammering, so he didn’t do anything stupid. He squeezed Dashyan to his chest, just marvelling at how perfect the boy was against him. Tye never wanted to let him go.

“Can’t...breathe...,” Dashe wheezed.

“Sorry,” Tyeval stepped back sheepishly. Dashyan was smiling. It hurt to know that he didn’t actually love Tye, at least not the way the Ubloit wanted him to. Tye wasn’t human enough for Dashe, at the end of the day he was still a slave cyborg. He wasn’t meant to be able to feel.

“Should we go down there?” the Hybrid asked, pointing to a small, obscure alleyway flanked by two
men in cloaks. The sign above it was in a different language, in Flynkon, the language of the Wurund. MISHKEIL SMUDD. Tye felt sick.

“No. We better go back to the ship,” he said, taking Dashyan’s hand and turning him away.

“Why? What’s that market?”

“I don’t know,” Tyeval lied. He did know, he understood Flynkon. The sign said CHILD MARKET.

Aje 5th Ove 1161EE (3 days later)

Arossa.

Rian was sitting in the royal gardens, watching the pink clouds above his head glumly. He would’ve gone to his secret place but without Eilo and Kal it felt wrong to be there. It had been their place, and Rian hated to be there alone. So instead he was here, on a marble carved bench, watching the dead flowers. Winter had begun and soon it would start snowing. So far it was just chilly and windy, so Rian wore a cape over his clothes. When night fell he’d have to go inside or risk catching a cold.

Lately he hated being in the Tower Palace. The Ladies had only been in the palace for five days and already Rian desperately wanted them gone. He felt like he was getting invaded, anywhere he went there was a foreign servant or member of one of the Ladies courts. Constantly he was bombarded with requests and complaints, or flattery. He never had a moment of peace, and was forced to eat every meal with the Ladies, watching them flirt and laugh with Kal. It was pitiful how jealous Rian was but there wasn’t much he could do about his feelings.

Kalorian was in his element, entertaining the Ladies, hosting parties. For the most part he and Rian had no time for each other. Normally they would go for walks together, or swimming if it was warm. They’d spar, hunt or sort out paperwork together. They’d go to the city and watch movies or sometimes just read books shoulder-to-shoulder on one of their beds. They were used to each other, and yet now Rian barely saw his friend. It hurt, because Kal seemed content without the King. The blonde tried to bury himself in work but his mind was always plagued with Kalorian – what he was doing, which girl was he wooing, what was he thinking? Rian knew he was a nuisance – he followed Kal around like a dog, hoping to catch him alone and have a simple conversation.

Pathetic, pathetic.

Rian just missed his friend. Terribly. And he missed Eilo too, more and more each day. He didn’t know how much longer he could be alone before he would explode and have a mental breakdown. The man shivered at the cold air sneaking behind the collar of his shirt.

“Your Grace?”

The voice made Rian’s head snap up. Standing a few feet away was the Baroness of Terassa, Haruna Isalis, the mother of one of the contestants. Eskilsa. The beautiful one, Rian thought bitterly. She was dressed in a heavy fur coat, her eyes full of coldness and condescending. Rian didn’t like the woman, and he had no idea why she was here now.

“Baroness,” he said, politely, like he was taught.

“May I sit?” the Baroness asked, her spectacles flashing from the cold sun, sinking down the sky. Rian inclined his head, though more than anything he wanted to run away. He watched with a heavy heart as the woman settled herself on the other end of the bench, her skirt spread around her, “We
have a beautiful day today.”

“Yes,” Rian agreed wearily.

“Yes, quite pleasing,” The Baroness mused, playing with the material of her gloves, “The way the sun tints the clouds pink is something quite wonderful.”

“Baroness...is there something you wanted?” Rian asked, because small talk was the last thing he needed right now. The Baroness looked at Rian with the eyes that made him feel like a little boy about to be scolded.

“Very well, let’s not beat around the bush, shall we?” the woman said, lips in a tight line, “I came here to tell you to stay away from Prince Kalorian.”

Rian’s eyes widened, “What?”

“You have been following him around like some stray, preventing the girls from getting some privacy with him,” the Baroness said coldly, “the competition will begin soon and it’s important for the Ladies to have their time with the Prince. You’re in the way, and it’s clear you are getting on the Prince’s nerves.”

“You are speaking to your King,” Rian hissed, feeling fury bubble in his stomach. He couldn’t believe how insolent the Baroness was being – he could have her thrown into prison for this. But after the whole ordeal with Prince Arién on Fayaxiamen the authority of the monarchs on many planets were being questioned.

The Baroness smirked, “I am aware.”

“I could throw you into prison,” Rian growled.

“Yes, but then I would be inclined to go to Prince Kalorian and inform him that the King is quite in love with him,” the Baroness said calmly. Rian felt his blood run cold and the woman laughed at his shocked facial expression, “What? You thought you weren’t being obvious? Please, the eyes you make at him say everything. The Prince may be too blind to realise but if someone told him the truth he would easily piece it together.”

“You wouldn’t dare,” Rian said weakly.

“Oh, but I would,” the Baroness said, her eyes full of pride, “and what do you think he’d do then? He’d be disgusted by you, the brother of the woman he was meant to marry. You grew up as brothers – you probably changed together and shared beds. How do you think he’d react knowing you had feelings for him the whole time?”

Rian was going to be sick, he was sure of it, “Get out of my sight,” he whispered. The Baroness stood and brushed invisible dirt off her skirts.

“You wouldn’t dare,” she said, “as long as you don’t interfere with the competition your secret will stay between you and I,” she smiled, and curtsied, “Your Grace,” she said, voice dripping with sarcasm, and walked off.

Rian stayed on his bench until night fell, staring at the ground. His feelings were a mess, his stomach in a turmoil. He couldn’t believe he was allowing some woman to blackmail him! If he wasn’t so scared of everything she said being true he would’ve had her arrested. When it got too cold for the man to handle it he hurried back into the palace. Kalorian was throwing another of his parties and the ground floor was full of laughing, drunk guests. Rian stole past them, and nobody paid attention to
him. He didn’t want to dance or drink or party. He wanted to cry. He wanted to scream. He wanted to speak to Eilo. He wanted Kal to hold him and tell him everything would work out.

In the hallway to his chambers, Rian almost ran into Aziza. She was standing with Shefanida, the grey-haired Lady from Ulokhano. The woman looked like she didn’t quite belong in the rich dress she was wearing. The heads of the women were bowed together in conversation, and Rian couldn’t care less what they were gossiping around.

“Your Grace,” Shefanida spotted him and curtsied. He didn’t reply to her, shoving the door to his room open and closing it hurriedly behind himself. He didn’t want to see anyone, only to wallow in his misery alone. However the moment he got to the bed the door opened behind him and Azzie slipped in.

“Rian,” her voice was brimming with worry, “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, leave,” Rian said immediately, his heart aching.

“Don’t do that,” Azzie said pleadingly and when Rian turned around he saw tears in her eyes, “I worry about you. Please just...”

“I’m in love with him, Azzie,” Rian’s voice broke when he said it. He leaned against the bed post and inhaled shakily, “I’m so in love with h-him.”

Aziza’s shoulders slumped helplessly, “You need to tell him.”

Rian shook his head, “He’ll hate me.”

“No, he won’t,” Azzie crossed the room and took Rian’s hands in hers, “Please...it’s killing you.”

“I can’t,” Rian said brokenly, pulling his hand free, “I-I need to learn to live with it.”

Something shone in Aziza’s eyes, determination of some kind, and she stepped away. She clenched her jaw and without another word turned on her heel and stormed from the room. Rian had no idea where she went, and he didn’t care. He threw his covers to the side and buried himself beneath them, hoping to forget.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry about the long ass breaks I’m on holiday and the wifi's shit
The Pretender and the Guard

Joi 8th Ove 1161EE (3 days later)

Fayaxiamen.

Thrisan jerked away from his vivid dream with a gasp, heart pounding, the covers of his bed tangled around his bed. His forehead was beaded with sweat and he was shaking, taking his time to gather his bearings and remember where he was. The window was cracked open and the King could see the sky outside, streaked gold with the setting sun. In the afternoon he had had a headache and decided to take a nap and now awoke violently, having dreamt a peculiar dream. It had started with Arién. Thris had never been to Idra but he had learned in geography about the sandy nothingness that stretched for miles and miles and that had been what he had dreamt. Somehow his brain had decided that that desert was Idra. When Thrisan swallowed and closed his eyes, he could remember it perfectly.

He was standing in the sand and although he couldn’t feel it, he could tell it was blistering hot. Above-head a merciless sun beat down on him, and in front of him was...Arién. His skin was blistered, lips cracked and bleeding, eyes hollow. He was dressed in rags, slowly sinking into the golden sand. In the dream Thris felt a detached sort of panic as he watched the ground swallow his little brother up.

“Thrisan,” Ari croaked, in a voice that wasn’t his own. He extended his hand, and his fingers were missing, only ugly stubs remaining. Thris flinched in disgust. “Help me, brother,” Arién gasped, his eyes staring at nothing at all.

Thrisan jerked forward and grabbed his hand, and the moment he did the boy was angrily sucked into the sand, only his arm sticking up like a flag. Thrisan helplessly scrambled at his palm and tried to haul his brother back up, but the sand enveloped more and more of him, and his finger-less hand was slippery with blood...

Thris gave a hard yank and Arién came tumbling out of the sand. Thrisan lost his balance and toppled backwards, and Ari fell on top of him. Suddenly the sand was gone and Thris was floating on the water of Fayaxiamen, and Arién was gone, replaced instead by Wyliam.

“Wyl,” Thrisan remembered saying. Their positions changed without either of them moving and Thris found himself on top of the boy, who laid gently on the water, not sinking or getting wet. His glasses were gone, green eyes wide and full of fear. Thrisan cupped his face, wanting to comfort him.
“Please don’t hurt me again,” Wyliam whispered faintly, and then the water opened and the boy went under, bubbles escaping from his mouth. He disappeared into the dark green water and Thrisan pounded the surface of the water with his fists, but he couldn’t follow Wyliam.

The King sat on the edge of the bed and thought about the meaning of the dream. Not the first time he had had a nightmare about Ari, so he didn’t dwell on that. Wyliam on the other hand...the memory of their night together filled Thrisan with want and heat. Usually sex was a casual affair for him and he never wanted anyone a second time – he changed lovers like gloves. With Wyliam it was different, Thris was left simultaneously satisfied and craving more. He remembered Wyliam’s naked, pale body beneath his, so tiny that Thrisan was afraid of hurting him.

And he had hurt him. Thrisan had lost control, which almost never happened with him. He was a King, he always had to be sober and aware and alert and think of every possible outcome. But there was something about Wyl that was absolutely intoxicating, and Thris had forgotten himself. He left bruises on the boy’s slim hips, and purple kisses all over his neck. He was sure it had been the boy’s first time because he had been impossibly tight. But with the arousing memories of their intercourse came the guilt – Wyliam had run away after and Thrisan wasn’t stupid enough to think that the tears shining in the boy’s fearful eyes were anything other than pain and regret.

Since that night Wyliam avoided Thrisan completely. He worked solely for Vallea but he must’ve not told her anything because she cheerfully plagued Thris about the details of their steamy night, ones he refused to give. Thris desperately wanted to see Wyl, to apologise, ask what he did wrong, try and make it better. But the boy made sure that Thrisan never bumped into him. But tonight it was different – tonight it was the Sun Day Festival, and the King would go undercover until he found the boy. He knew for a fact that Wyliam was going to the festival because Vallea and Zea were forcing him to come along with them and have a good time. It was Thrisan’s chance to try and straighten things out.

A knock sounded on the door and a Dust slipped into the King’s bedchamber. At the sight of his uniform Thrisan’s heart skipped a beat, and then he felt bitter disappointment when he realised it wasn’t Wyliam. The King had never been so infatuated with someone before. The new Dust was pretty – creamy skin, almond shaped blue eyes, styled blue hair. He was good-looking in a typical kind of way and had been making eyes at the King for the past four days since Wyliam became too ‘busy’ to be his personal servant. Normally that would be enough for the King to invite the servant to bed, but not this time. This time the only person Thrisan was interested in was Wyliam, and everyone who wasn’t him had lost all appeal.

“My King,” the new Dust bowed lowly to the ground. Thrisan stood from his bed, “Would you like me to prepare your costume for the festival?”

“Yes,” Thrisan said, lost in thought as he glanced out of the window. In the dark that was slowly falling the lights floating through the arched streets were starting to become visible, their watery reflections illuminating the Under. He watched with disinterest as the Dust pulled out his clothes – a simple white lace-up shirt and black breeches, paired with a leaf green travelling cloak and a black mask for the top of his face. The hood of his cloak would serve to cover his dark hair. “Thank you,” the King said reluctantly when the Dust laid the garments out, making a show of arching his back and pushing his arse into the air, as if trying to tempt the King.

Thrisan dismissed the Dust, couldn’t bear to stand his flirtations, and dressed himself. The material of the shirt was a little scratchy, the leather shoes he put on a little hot, but it was alright because when Thrisan turned to the mirror he barely recognised himself. All that remained of the King was his impressive body, tanned skin peeking through underneath his mask, and his lips. Everything else was concealed some way or another.
A sudden thought struck Thris – what if he didn’t recognise Wyliam? Those curls and old-fashioned glasses seemed to be everywhere he turned in the Briallan Palace the past few days, but what if he couldn’t find them during the festival? It was a big party after all, and Wyl would be in costume.

The gong sounded out in the hallway – a sign that all the royals, servants and guests could now flood the corridors, mingling together, and head to the festival. Everyone was anonymous by now so when Thris stepped out and joined the steady stream of the laughing, masked crowd, he had no idea who was who. Within a few steps he himself became invisible too – he could’ve been absolutely anyone right now. A smile played on Thrisan’s lips as he realised that he was virtually invisible. It filled him with a sense of freedom. He couldn’t recognise absolutely anyone around him – a Technicolor of masks, capes and dresses prevented him from doing so. Eagerly, as if he were still a child and not a grown man, Thrisan looked out for familiar brown curls and thick glasses, and found none. He tried not to let his disappointment show as the crowd spilled onto the walkway outside the palace.

The way to the Katora, the city outside the Briallan Palace and the capital, located on a floating piece of land, was lit by little flames enclosed in bubbles that bobbed in the air like pretty lanterns. When Thrisan looked over the edge he saw a parade walking between the houses of the Under – which was lighted by glowing jelly-fish and water-proof fire. The people celebrating down there seemed far, far away, their music muted. A dozen people launched themselves off the walkway with carefree laughs, eagerly swimming down to the Under to join the party there. Thrisan was determined to stay Above. Wyliam was a Shif and he wouldn’t be in the Under.

Some of the King’s hope that he might find the boy the moment that he and the rest of the palace people entered the streets of Katora disappeared. They were beautifully decorated – lanterns of pure starlight strung between houses. Little sprites flew between the buildings and giggling girls spilled flower petals from the tops of windows, letting them flutter down onto the dancing crowds below. In the Under the great costume parade was taking place, but up here it was a pure party. Cheerful folk music sounded everywhere Thrisan turned, his nose was assaulted with the smell of perfume and cheap food fried in stalls on either side of the street. The night was warm.

A laughing Varsen girl darted to Thrisan and pulled him into the space in the street cleared for dancers. Her hair was golden, her skin darker than the King’s. Beautiful dark eyes flashed behind the girls silver mask, and her matching skirts swirled when Thrisan turned her around, barely aware that he was doing it. Thris loved to dance, to feel music surge through his body. Right now he wasn’t dancing like he normally did though, there were no co-ordinated movements and specific placements of hands and feet. This dance was wild and untamed. A little way off Thrisan saw two woman spinning around each other like children and despite their disguises he recognised his wife and her lover. He smiled, happy that the two were content.

Thrisan had no idea how long he danced for but he ended up breathless and dizzy and switched partners more times than he cared to remember. He ate some, and drank ale with burly Varsen men, and then danced again. It was as if chance wanted Thrisan to spot him. The King had moved further up the street, where the party was truly explosive, and saw a boy leaning against a wall. He was small, shoulders narrow, hands small where they played with the golden doublet the boy wore over a rich, silk, black shirt. There was a mask over his eyes – golden too, and his brown hair was pulled back, a little braid going through it. Thris couldn’t tell if it was curly or not, but he didn’t have to. The blush on the boy’s freckled cheeks and his nervous hand movements betrayed who he was.

Thrisan surged towards Wyliam, suddenly gripped by pure emotion and unable to think straight. He had the boy’s name on his tongue, ready to spill from his mouth, but at the last moment the King stopped himself from saying it. The whole point of the festival was anonymity – if Thrisan betrayed his identity then he’d just scare the Dust away. Wyl was avoiding him for some reason and undoubtedly he’d run if he knew who Thris really was.
“Hello,” the King said, stopping in front of the small boy, trying to keep his heart at bay. The Dust craned his head up and a nervous, welcoming smile played on his full lips. Thrisan remembered kissing those lips, and he helplessly wanted to kiss them again. He had never felt that way about anyone before.

“Hello,” Wyliam replied, his voice sweet and innocent, unsure why Thrisan was speaking to him.

“My name is Ris,” the King lied, “What’s yours?”

“W-Wyliam,” the Dust replied, anxiously glancing at his feet, his hand coming up to tuck a curl behind his ear, forgetting that his hair had been pulled back.

“Would you like to dance with me, Wyliam?” Thrisan asked, wanting to touch the boy desperately, in any way possible. He was aware that this selfish recklessness was what had caused him to scare Wyl away in the first place, but the King didn’t know how to control it.

“Sorry, I don’t dance,” Wyliam replied.

“Why not?” Thrisan asked, hoping he wasn’t being too pushy. This was the first time in days that he was actually speaking to the boy.

“I...I can’t really do it very well.”

“Dressed as a royal and can’t dance?” Thris asked, mouth inching into a smile of amusement. He offered his hand to the boy, “Come. You don’t have to dance well to enjoy yourself. It’s only a festival after all.”

Wyliam opened his mouth as if to protest, but Thrisan reached down and took his hand, tugging him forward, invitingly but not forcefully. The Dust bit his lip but allowed the King to draw him into the blur of dancing couples. Laughter mingled with the loud music and sound of voices, but Thrisan couldn’t hear any of that as he drew Wyliam close, an arm around the boy’s waist. Hesitantly, unsure, Wyl placed his hand on Thrisan’s shoulder, his other one already firmly placed in the King’s. They started to dance, slowly at first, Wyl a little clumsy and Thris laughing good-naturedly, and then they sped up. Soon enough they were in a dizzying dance of spinning apart and pressing back together, over and over, the music thrumming in Thrisan, sounding like his own blood rushing though his body. It was exhilarating, holding Wyliam in his arms and not having anyone, including the boy, know who he really was. The music changed, again and again, but Thris didn’t let Wyl go even for a second. He was safely enclosed in the King’s arms and he seemed content there, a smile on his lips, breathless laughter bubbling out of his mouth every few moments. He didn’t look at anyone but Thrisan and although his eyes were hidden behind a mask, Thris never wanted him to look away from him.

His view of Wyliam changed then, as they danced in the light-filled street of Katora, two strangers, their shadows tall on the walls. So far Thrisan had thought of the boy in a sexual way – how aroused he had been with Wyliam underneath him and how, peculiarly, he wanted to have sex with him again and again, until he was satisfied. Now it was different, feelings of protectiveness and the will to bring the boy happiness started forming in Thrisan’s heart. It was equally terrifying and amazing.

But as all good things, the dances had to come to an end eventually. Thrisan’s legs were aching after the wild fun and Wyliam looked flushed and barely able to stand. The King was surprised when the Shif pulled him back towards the wall, clearly being anonymous had given Wyl confidence. Thris found himself getting a little jealous. Of himself, that was, because Wyl was giving attention to some man he didn’t know. Thrisan wondered if he’d act the same way if he knew who he really was.
His question was answered faster than he wished as some drunk Calanthe barged into him, spilling their drink all over themselves and knocking Thris’ hood off of his head. Before the King could hurriedly pull it back on, Wyliam turned around and grinning opened his mouth to say something. His smile melted away and his eyes widened, hand falling from Thris’.

“Y-Your majesty,” he stopped walking, his voice faint and barely hearable over the sound of the festival. Thris’ heart skipped a beat.

“Hello, Wyl-,” he started, and was horrified when the Shif turned on his heel and ran away, melting away into the cloud like mist in the morning. Thrisan hadn’t even had time to react – Wyl hadn’t given him any excuses or told him where he was going. He had literally just ran as if he couldn’t bear the sight of the King. Thrisan was confused, didn’t truly understand what just happened. He stood there, shell-shocked, and wondering where in the hell it had all gone wrong. His hand was still warm and tingling where Wyliam had held it.

Vo 9th Ove 1161EE (1 day later)

Idra.

Griff wasn’t quite sure when he had consented to the Little Prince sitting with him during mealtimes. The man was a lone wolf, never had many friends or enemies on Idra. It was safer that way. And yet now the Little Prince, someone who had already made a reputation for himself and had a line of men waiting to catch him alone, had attached himself permanently to Griff’s side, and the Alpha wasn’t quite sure how to feel about that.

In the mornings he woke up and Little Prince would crack his own eyes open, looking tiredly at Griff, his hair looking more like a nest than actual hair. Where before he used to roll over onto his side and get more of his ‘beauty sleep,’ now he’d drag himself out of bed and tiptoe behind Griff to the bathrooms, not saying a word. They’d brush their teeth side by side, wash their faces. It didn’t seem that Little Prince even liked Griff particularly, the man was sure he just didn’t want to be alone. He probably also felt safer with the Alpha, and that made the man a little happy.

They would show up to breakfast together, and get slop on their plates, and sit on one of the tables, opposite each other. They’d eat in silence as Little Prince finally woke up properly. Then they’d collect their buckets and head out through the desert, and then the Little Prince’s mouth would not fucking shut up, but Griff found himself getting used to his droning, complaining voice after a few days. They would eat lunch together too, backs up against a rock, and Griff would speak with his mouth open and Little Prince would reprimand him about manners, and Griff would throw a breadcrumb at him, and it would be almost as if they were friends. At dinner it was different, because Griff got to eat the nice food at the top table because he was always in the ten inmates that gathered the most amexiate, and despite the fact that the Little Prince stopped boycotting and actually got to work most of the days, his hands were soft and delicate and he’d get blisters and was never even near the top ten. Griff would watch him from the head table at dinner, sitting alone at dinner in the corner, staring gloomily at his food. It made him a little sad to see him like that, and Griff even contemplated losing his title as the top Alpha just to keep the kid company.

Today’s lunch time was like every other one – Griff and Little Prince had given themselves a break in order to eat their stale bread. They were both sweaty and dirty with dust and sand, which got between their teeth as they ate. The rock they were leaning against would stain their clothes orange, but neither cared. As always, the Little Prince was blabbering on about something, making sure to chew with his mouth closed though.

“Yeah, all these slavers keep appearing,” the Little Prince said after he had swallowed the last bite of
his food. His eyelashes were coated with sand, “I have no clue where they’re all coming from but the newest batch was complaining about some ship called Synora or something, I couldn’t hear them properly—” he paused as he and Griff finished their food and got up, dusting their hands off from crumbs. Griff immediately picked up his hacker – a blunt, hooked metal instrument used to dig into the crumbly walls of the mines and get at the amexiate inside – and continued working, but the Little Prince was too invested in his story, “but apparently it’s like some Hybrid kid, and a Cyborg—“

“Ubloit,” Griff corrected, almost automatically. Sometimes he forgot that Little Prince was from a different galaxy.

“Yes, that,” the boy said dismissively, “and apparently—“

“Oi! You two!” Ghrishi yelled angrily, slithering though the mines on his grotesque snake tail, his black face tattoos making him look angry, “Shut up or it’ll be a night in the mines for you!”

Guiltily the two turned back to their work. Little Prince picked up his hacker but didn’t even try to pretend he was working, “There’s rumours that with the cyborg and the Hybrid there’s Princess Eilo.”

“The one off Arossa?” Griff asked, brows furrowing. It wasn’t that he actually cared, but at least gossiping was more interesting than staring at the orange rock in front of him for hours.

“Yes, the one that was going to marry my middle brother, Kal,” Little Prince said proudly. Griff opened his mouth to give some sort of sarcastic reply, but before he could the menacing sound of a snake slithering through sand sounded right behind them.

“Did you think I was throwing words to the wind?” Ghrishi seethed, and when the two inmates turned around they saw that the Vlassain’s black eyes were unblinking and staring at them with a sick kind of satisfaction, “You’re here to serve your sentences and not have a fucking tea party. Since you seem to be enjoying yourselves so much down here, you can spend the night in these mines.”

Griff felt his stomach go cold. Ginger, who was working a few steps away, shook her head, “Damn,” she sighed, almost sympathetic.

“I was just asking for him to pass me the bucket,” Little Prince snapped, insolent as ever, and fiery too. Ghrishi leaned close to his face but the boy didn’t even flinch – something Griff admired about him.

“Don’t fucking lie to me, Moringathu,” Ghrishi hissed, “This isn’t high-school. This is prison. You’re supposed to work in fucking silence.”

“Fucking asshole,” Little Prince spat. Griff’s heart clenched at the insult and before he could warn the boy, the Guard lifted his hand and hit him across the face, hard. Little Prince stumbled back against the rocks, his hand clutching at his face automatically. Griff jerked forward, not even knowing why.

“You just lost your blanket for the night,” Ghrishi hissed at Little Prince, “Anything else you’d like to fucking add?”

Little Prince was silent, glaring furiously at the Snake, his eyes so full of passion that Griff shivered. He wouldn’t like to be at the end of Little Prince’s anger. The Snake smirked, clearly pleased at having won this fight, and slithered off. Little Prince followed him with his furious eyes, clutching his cheek.
“Absolute fucking asshole,” he grumbled to himself. Griff shook his head in exasperation. He should’ve been way more angry at the kid for getting him in trouble. Before he showed up Griff never would’ve spent a night in the mines, and now here he was, about to do it because the Prince couldn’t keep his mouth shut. But the Alpha found that he was just mildly irritated, and more angry at the guard for having hit the Prince over a stupid comment.

The Little Prince angrily shoved his hacker into the sandy stone and it crumbled away, revealing the glimmer of amexiate beneath. Griff watched as the boy leaned down and with furious, jerky movements picked the jewels out of the rock now at his feet and threw them carelessly into his half-full bucket. The boy wiped sweat off his forehead and Griff went back to work, thinking about how horrible tonight was going to be, especially with how cold it was going to get. In the heat of the day Griff decided that he would give his blanket to the Little Prince. Sure, the boy’s big mouth was what got his own blanket taken away in the first place, but Griff was bigger and the Alpha blood kept him warm most of the time while the Little Prince...well, he was little, and Griff doubted he could fend off against the cold.

“I’m sorry,” Little Prince said suddenly in a mumble, surprising Griff. When he looked at the boy he saw that he was determinedly looking at the rock in front of him, and not at the Alpha. The man knew it took a lot in him to apologise since his pride would normally prevent him from admitting he was in the wrong, “I should’ve kept my mouth shut. Now you’re in shit because of me.”

Griff smiled and hid it by lifting his arm and wiping sweat off his forehead, “It’s alright, Little Prince. Worse things have happened.”

“I swear when I get off this damn moon I’ll get rid of that snake,” the boy grumbled, punctuating his words with his hacker. Griff looked away, his hand clenching around his own instrument. Little Prince, despite being on Idra for almost a month, remained certain that he would get out soon. It was simultaneously refreshing to see so much hope, and depressing. Griff himself had gotten accustomed to the fact that he wasn’t getting out of the prison for a long, long time – he had fourteen years left. New emotions hit Griff, ones that he hadn’t felt the years he had spent on Idra before: when Little Prince left Griff would be...lonely. It made his heart ache uncomfortably. He hadn’t realised he was getting attached to the kid.

They worked for an hour or two more in silence, until the sun started to dip in the sky. Ghrishi and Dierna, another guard, a proud woman with peacock feathers instead of hair, rounded up the prisoners, all of them holding their heavy buckets full of amexiate. Ghrishi floated over to Griff and Little Prince, who were at the back, on his board. The greasy, pleased smirk on the guard’s face made Griff’s blood boil.

“So, boys,” Ghrishi held out his hands. Sluggishly, glaring, the two handed over their buckets of amexiate. Tonight would be the first time that Griff wouldn’t be eating at the head table. Ghrishi placed the buckets on his board, “I wish you a good night,” he said, voice hissy, forked tongue flicking out of his mouth.

He floated over to the head of the line and Dierna came up to the two. With an impassive look on her face she handed Griff a blanket, and dropped a bag at their feet, “We’ll come collect you in the morning,” she said and without anything else she walked off. The procession of inmates started moving. A few near the back glanced at Griff and Little Prince with curiosity, but soon they turned back around as they climbed out of the canyon. Already there was a chill in the air. Griff sighed.

“What do we do now?” Little Prince asked, hugging himself. He had pulled the rag he usually wore on his head down around his neck, and his black hair was wavy and slightly damp.

“We need to find somewhere to settle for the night, preferably out of the wind,” Griff said, glancing
around. The sun had already sunk past the canyon so inside it was shadowy and cold there, though the desert above them was still sunny. Griff grabbed the bag Dierna had left and opened it – inside there was more bread, two poverty looking apples and a bottle of lyte – a liquid full of vitamins that the prisoners weren’t getting in their food. There was also a metal plate that would hold a fire and make it smokeless and odourless, and one old-fashioned matchstick in the box. There wasn’t a second blanket, unfortunately. Griff sighed again, because this whole situation was inconvenient, and pulled the backpack on, pushing the blanket through the straps, “Come on, Little Prince.”

They trudged further down the mining canyon, where there were bigger holes in the walls from previous inmates hacking away. The more they walked the darker and colder it got and finally the ridges in the walls became full on holes and, finally, caves. They were exactly what Griff had hoped for.

“Here!” he called out to Little Prince, who was walking slower and had fallen behind, exhausted from the day’s work. The sky was darkening fast and already stars were coming out around Golbahar and the remaining three moons hanging in the sky. Griff had found a nice cave with a narrow entrance, but one he could see opened up further inside. He threw his bag into the mouth and then climbed into the darkness after it. The sand underneath his hands gave way to tough rock.

“I can’t see anything!” Little Prince was a silhouette against the entrance as he peered inside, “What if there’s bugs?”

“As long as they’re not sand bugs, we’ll live,” Griff said. Sand bugs were the most common cause of death on Idra – usually they came out at night but sometimes they attacked during the day. The bugs were the size of an average Shif, with hard shells on their backs. Their faces were just mouths, and their bodies were lined with teeth all the way down to their stomach – perfect for devouring stray inmates. Their young were the size of Griff’s hand and even more dangerous than their carnivorous parents. Where the adults searched for meat, the young craved heat. They had a numbing substance in their teeth so if an inmate fell asleep, unaware, they wouldn’t feel a thing, only wake up with a bleeding hole in their stomachs where the bug had burrowed in search of body warmth. Griff had seen corpses of inmates killed by sand bugs get dragged back to bunkers and he really didn’t want to end up like that.

One thing that kept the bugs back was fire. Griff wrestled the metal plate out of his backpack as Little Prince continued complaining from the entrance, seeming anxious. The Alpha tensed when he pulled out a matchstick, praying that he didn’t waste it. If it didn’t light then they’d be royally fucked. The man’s heart soared when the matchstick flared up with fire and in seconds he had touched it to the metal plate and had a bonfire going. He put it in one corner and the fire lit up the cave – it was small and cramped, the ceiling low enough that Griff wouldn’t have been able to stand up straight if he tried. The walls were rough, un-chiselled stone, but the ground was almost smooth, as if people have slept here before. Griff wondered who they were and what they had been doing here.

Hesitantly, Little Prince poked his head into the cave, “Gods,” he looked around in distaste, “I’m a goddamn Royal and I have to sleep in a cave.”

“Stop being so picky, Little Prince,” Griff said tiredly. The fire warmed the cave a little but it was still cold. Clumsily, trying not to touch too much of the walls or floor, Little Prince climbed into the cave and sat next to Griff, stretching his hands out to the fire, “This isn’t so bad,” Griff said, “Cosy.”

Little Prince snorted humourlessly, “You’re funny,” he shivered.

“You cold?” Griff asked, voice softer than he intended. Little Prince glanced at him with eyes full of suspicion as if he didn’t fully trust him.
“No, I’m fine,” he said proudly, raising his chin. He would never admit that he needed help, especially not to Griff. The Alpha rolled his eyes.

“We best sleep,” he said, though he felt super-awake, “the faster we get to it the faster morning will come.”

The Little Prince nodded, “Fine,” he said, and glanced around the cave, “Fuck there really isn’t anything even remotely representing a bed in here, is there?”

“Oh look at you, Little Prince-,” Griff started mocking him but the boy’s dark eyes snapped to him.

“Don’t call me that,” he interrupted sharply, abruptly, “My name is Arién. Ari, if that’s too fucking complicated for you,” he seemed angry, and Griff didn’t want him to be like that.

“Alright Ari,” he rolled his eyes, “Relax.”

“What’s your name anyway?” Little Prince – no, Ari – snapped.

“Why does it matter to you?” Griff asked. He hadn’t told anyone, not on Idra anyway. Not that anyone had cared who Griff really was. Ari shrugged.

“It’s only fair. You know everything about me and I don’t even know your name.”

“I don’t know everything about you,” Griff argued, turning to pull his blanket from the backpack. He felt better when he was doing something, distracting himself from Ari’s prying questions, “All I know is you’re a prince off some planet in Arda, and that you killed someone,” he frowned, “why did you kill him anyway?”

For a moment Arién looked unlike himself – his eyes widened, an expression of melancholy and regret filling them, tinged with fear. His tanned hands clenched and unclenched in his lap. He swallowed visibly, his Adam’s apple bobbing. Griff was sure his reply was going to be vague, snappy and pretentious. But it wasn’t. There was something intimate about sharing this cave, something that made you want to spill all your secrets.

“He tried to rape me,” Arién said, his voice ringing through Griff’s ears. The man’s stomach clenched as he looked at the Prince, now stiff as a board, “He tried to rape me and nobody believed me,” the boy said, looking a little lost and innocent. Griff remembered how young he was. He looked that now – eyes big, skinny shoulders hunched over. The Alpha had never felt such an urge to protect someone. He understood Ari’s reaction to the other Alphas attacking him in the shower; it was a repeat of something that had already happened.

“So you killed him?” Griff asked, trying to mask his worry with curiosity. Ari shrugged and dropped his eyes,

“It was an accident. Nobody believes that either,” he said, and then seemed to snap out of whatever horrible memory he was relieving and got his usual snobby look back on his face, “What about you? Who are you exactly? What’s your name? What did you do?”

“That’s a lot of questions,” Griff cocked an eyebrow.

“We have all night,” Arién said smartly, “Unless the sand bugs eat us.”

Griff had never wanted to share information about himself with anyone. But now he did – he wanted to tell Ari everything that ever happened to him, have the boy understand him completely, understand every particle and atom and ion in his body. Because he wanted the same from Arién –
he wanted to know the boy completely. Stars know why.

The Alpha dropped the blanket next to him and leaned against a sandy wall, resting his arms on his slightly bent knees and looking at Arién, his face dancing with light from the flames of their little fire.

“My name is Griff.”

Arién blinked, clearly processing the information, “Griff,” he said, as if tasting the name. The Alpha had never heard his name said like that, so silkily, “What, just Griff?”

“Griff Enoe,” the man specified.

“So what did you do, Griff?” Ari asked, visibly relaxing as if knowing the man’s name meant that somehow he was safe.

“I killed someone. You know that.”

“Well yes, obviously. But who did you kill?”

Griff nervously licked his lower lip, “I...do you remember the Cairn War?” he asked hesitantly.

“No,” Ari frowned, clearly not expecting the story to turn such a dark turn, “I was what...six? When it first started anyway. Besides, I was in a different Galaxy.”

“Well, I was thirteen,” Griff said, “But that’s besides the point. The point is that horrible stuff happened during the Cairn War. Did you hear about the O massacre?”

“Yes,” Arién looked vaguely uncomfortable now, “though not in great detail. I just know that the Alphas murdered a whole lot of Omegas. I was a bad history student, I’m afraid.”

“Well, my older sister was killed in the O massacre,” Griff said, bluntly. There was no point dressing the fact up in pretty words. His sister was an Omega and she had been dragged away by Alpha police officers at night, like so many others, rounded up and killed when she tried to fight back. Omegas shouldn’t fight back, they should be submissive. At least that’s what they used to have to be before they won their independence.

“I’m...” Ari looked like he was about to say ‘I’m sorry,’ “that’s horrible,” he said instead.

“Yeah, well,” Griff shrugged, “I don’t remember her much. Anyway, when I was twenty one I met this girl. I thought I was in love with her, that she was my mate. She was very passionate about the war and had lost a lot of family members in it. She used to ask me if I’d ever kill the man behind it if I could. Thousands of Omegas were murdered in those years. And sure, some Alphas were punished, but not enough. And the man who masterminded all of it was pardoned at court, of all his crimes. They just let him go free because he wasn’t the one who pulled the trigger,” Griff smiled bitterly, remembering the hollow satisfaction he had felt when he pulled the trigger, the memory of the burning anger he felt then returning as a shadow, “that’s true – he never pulled the trigger, but he gave those murderers the guns.”

“Wait,” Ari’s eyes widened as he started to clearly piece things together, “A few years ago there was an assassination...the papers on Arossa were crazy about it, and my brother Kal sent me a few copies...,” the boy frowned, “President Vinh...the ex-leader of Tussa, after the war he...he was killed I...” his eyes snapped to Griff, “it was you, wasn’t it?”

Griff inclined his head, “Yes. Because one day we were in the same city with him, and the girl I thought was my mate pushed me to do it. He was sitting in his pretty garden in his pretty house, with
his Omega wife and an Omega servant. He didn’t deserve to live like that, he was scum and I...honestly, I’d do it again.”

Arién exhaled, “Honestly?” he laughed, a little breathy laugh that had no real joy in it, “I’m glad you would. He was a prick.”

Griff smiled. Ari always summarised things so nicely, and his words cut the Alpha off from his painful memories immediately, so he didn’t dwell the way he usually did when he remembered, “We should sleep now.”

The Alpha got to his feet and stripped off his trousers, Arién hurriedly mirroring him. The man wasn’t about to take his shirt off because already it was cold in the cave, despite the fire. It gave light and protection but not much warmth. Griff laid down and threw the blanket over himself. It was softer than the blankets back in the bunkers, and bigger. The Alpha settled himself down and Ari hovered above him, looking unsure of what he should do next. Griff pulled the blanket back invitingly.

“C’mere.”

“We’re not sharing,” Arién said with disgust.

“Fine,” Griff dropped the blanket, “Freeze then.”

Ari exhaled in frustration, and then shivered despite himself, glancing around the cave for a source of warmth. He had goose bumps. Looking like he was fighting with himself internally he sat down next to Griff, and then laid down in a huff, as if he was doing the Alpha a favour. Griff didn’t have the strength to deal with the kid’s pride, not right now as a wave of tiredness hit him. Arién was hugging himself, looking somewhere to the side, and Griff threw the blanket over him too. Upon further examination it wasn’t that big at all, and the boys had to shuffle close together in order to share it. The two inmates kept their hands firmly to themselves.

“So...,” Ari cleared his throat, “have you ever thought about appealing to the Charasean court about your case?”

“What?” Griff frowned, not feeling like having a chat about law right now.

“I mean, your trial was in front of a galactic jury, I remember reading that,” Ari said thoughtfully, “But they don’t understand, do they? How many years did you get?”

“Thirty,” Griff said, closing his eyes. The number weighed down on him like invisible hands pressing on his shoulders, driving him into the dirt.

“Ouch,” Arién said, and quickly composed himself, “I think you should appeal. After all it wasn’t an unmotivated murder – the bastard deserved it.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Griff shook his head, “it won’t change anything.”

“But purely Charaseans would understand,” Arién said, passionate, “that girl...,” his voice faltered, “Was she really your mate?”

“No. But she was manipulative and made me think she was,” Griff admitted. Ari exhaled and turned to his side, away from Griff, attempting to get comfortable on the cave floor.

“Alright. Did you tell the court that?”
Griff shook his head, “I was in love. I wanted to protect her.”

“You should appeal,” the Varsen repeated firmly.

“Yeah, okay,” Griff grumbled, “goodnight,” he put an end to the tiring conversation. A part of him thought that he deserved those thirty years. There was nothing waiting for him outside Idra anyway.

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Griff woke up and was alert immediately, the way he always was when suddenly jolted from sleep. Prison did that to you. He became aware of everything at once, thanks to his sharpened Alpha senses – the fire on the metal plate was still burning, shadows dancing on the cave walls, the blanket had slithered from Griff’s body, and Arién’s back was still to him. The boy had cocooned himself up, and with irritation Griff grabbed the edge of the blanket. The cold was what had woken him and now, as he tugged on the blanket, he also made Ari roll over. Griff’s heart jumped in his powerful chest when he was suddenly assaulted by Arién’s smell as the boy snuggled up to his chest, still dead asleep and unaware of what he was doing. He was deliciously warm in comparison to the freezing, lung-biting air of the cave.

Griff had never smelled anyone half so intoxicating as Arién. The girl who he had thought was his mate, the one’s whose name he was determined to forget, she had smelled good, pleasant, attractive. But she had nothing on Ari’s alluring smell that literally made Griff’s skin tingle. His hands reached out before he could stop them and one rested on Ari’s cheek, where a pink welt was from when Ghrishi had hit him. Then Griff’s hand travelled to the gentle dip of the Varsen’s waist while the other nudged his head to the side gently, exposing the graceful curve of his tanned neck, the pulse fluttering in it like the wings of a butterfly. Ari continued to sleep, oblivious. Griff was led purely by his Alpha instincts, which were usually buried somewhere deep inside of him, but now urged him to press his face into the boy’s neck. The man stopped when the tip of his nose touched the Prince’s skin.

Shakily Griff inhaled. Arién’s scent bombarded him and made his head spin. Subconsciously Griff’s hand tightened on the boy’s hip and he couldn’t stop himself from pressing further into him. He would’ve wrapped his whole body around him if he dared. Ari’s smell was the only thing Griff could focus on – the chocolate in his scent was rich and sweet and warm, lavender candles, cinnamon, the underlying scent of the prison soap, and a musk that was strictly Arién. A possessive growl threatened to spill from Griff’s throat and he clenched his jaw to try and keep it back. He couldn’t have Ari wake up now and see what he was doing, but then he also couldn’t stop. He wanted Arién’s beautiful scent to mix with his own, he wanted to rub himself against the boy until everyone in the bunkers knew that the Varsen belonged to him. Griff completely buried his face in the boy’s neck, and his hands trembled with the sudden need to bite the boy. No, no, no, the sane part of Griff’s brain told him, but it had been pushed to the back and the primitive, Alpha part of his mind took control. Griff’s lips parted without his consent and he placed an open-mouthed kiss on Ari’s warm skin. His whole body burned with want. The boy shifted in Griff’s arms and the man just tightened his grip, drawing the boy nearer. He was irresistible. Griff couldn’t hold back – he wanted to bite so badly. If an Alpha bit an Omega or a Beta it meant they were mated forever, joined together.

Griff’s mouth opened, his heart throbbing, but before his jaw could close on Ari’s soft neck the boy sat up abruptly with a gasp, ripping away from the Alpha. He was gone from Griff’s arms so fast that for a second the man was in absolute shock. His eyes snapped to the boy, who was sitting up, eyes wide, gasping for air and shaking. The man’s Alpha senses ebbed away and his common sense returned away and he sat up too, stomach twisting, scared that Arién was disgusted.
“S-Sorry,” the word spilled from the boy’s mouth, and he sounded unlike himself, like a scared little boy, “I...I had a bad dream,” Griff was confused and Ari glanced at him, “I didn’t mean to wake you up. Sorry,” he was visibly calming down as he collapsed backwards against the ground again, pulling the blanket up to his chin, his eyes dark with sleep. Griff stared down at him, and slowly his heart stopped pounding. Arién hadn’t realised what the Alpha was doing, it was a nightmare, not Griff’s touch, that had woken him.

“Don’t worry about it,” Griff mumbled faintly, also lying back down. The two were shoulder to shoulder, tense. The Alpha knew he wouldn’t fall asleep, not now, and tomorrow they had a day full of hard work. The man didn’t want to think about that now, “What was your nightmare about?”

“Doesn’t matter,” Ari said, eyes closed.

Now that Griff’s mind was clear and he was back to the full control over his body, he felt cold again. Desiring Ari had kept him warm and now the freezing air of the night desert sneaked back into the man’s bones. He turned on his side underneath the blankets, which were trembling because Arién was shaking. His lips were blue.

“You’re going to get hypothermia,” Griff said, distractedly. The whole episode of almost biting Ari took a toll on him, and now he was unsure of himself or his own body. He had lost control.

“I-I’m f-fine,” Ari’s teeth were clattering. Griff sat up and pulled the metal plate with the fire closer, but although it provided light it gave off little heat. Alpha lied back down and tried to conserve his body warmth underneath the blanket, but he only got colder and colder. It was just a matter of time before either his or Arién’s pride broke, and, surprisingly, this time it was the boy’s, “F-Fuck this,” the Varsen hissed, turning on his side as well and shuffling close to Griff, pressing into his chest.

“What are you doing?” Griff asked, acting surprise as if it wasn’t exactly what he had wanted.

“Shut up and hug me or we’ll both be ice cubes,” Ari gritted out, clearly angry as he had to get over his pride to admit he needed something from someone. But Griff didn’t think he could do it – he couldn’t just lie there, tangled with Arién, and not do anything, “For fucks sake,” the Prince gritted out and reached out, grabbing Griff’s arm and throwing it over himself. This way he had direct access to the man’s chest, and the boy shamelessly wrapped his arms around Griff’s torso, pressing his face into his shoulder. The Alpha was lost for a second as to how exactly to react to the new position, but honestly Ari was warm against him and already the man felt better. He hesitantly and loosely wrapped his arms around the boy and tried not to inhale his scent. He couldn’t risk mating with the Prince, not when he wasn’t his mate.

Though now Griff wasn’t so sure that Arién wasn’t his mate anymore.
Kalorian was sat in the main hall of the Tower Palace with the most important people in Arossa gathered in front of him. Cold winter sunlight filtered in through the tall, stained glass windows. Snow had fallen the night before and the sill was dusted with it. Kal was anxious, his heart doing little flips in his chest every few beats. Today was the day of the first challenge in the Wedding Competition and although the Ladies had only been on Arossa for ten days, today one of them would return to her province.

Kal sat on a throne at the head of the hall, with Rian to his right and Ashia to his left. The hall was lined with everyone who mattered – the fifteen representatives of the Arossian Government, and delegates from almost every planet in the Cairn and Arda galaxies, waiting to see what the outcome of the alliance between Arossa and Fayaxiamen would be, and who would become the new Queen. The entourages of each of the Ladies lined the back of the hall, eager to begin the first challenge, which the government had spent ten days drawing up.

The Ladies themselves sat at a long table in front of the thrones. Asura of Arcoda was sitting at the edge, slumped, leaning on her arm. Her Lord Father, across the hall, was glaring daggers at his daughter and her posture but the girl didn’t seem to care. Juxtaposing her was Dashara of Ruskicade, who sat stiff as a board, hands placed in front of her on the table. For safety purposes her Time Makers weren’t allowed in the Hall, in case they meddled with the competition. In the middle of the table was Eskilsa, the light falling through the windows painting her a dozen different colours. She was looking right at Kal, smiling beautifully. Next to her Kursassarra paled in commercial looks, but her green hair and mischievous lilac eyes still made Kal consider her as a potential. At the end of the table Lady Shefanida anxiously twisted her fingers beneath the table, something only the trio on the thrones could see, her eyes glancing somewhere to the side.

Kalorian didn’t want to marry any of them.

Princess Ashia rose suddenly, “Before we begin the competition,” she started, voice ringing through the hall, “we would like to introduce a slight change. The Arossian Government had evaluated the
candidates and have come to the conclusion that since Princess Eilo won’t be returning to Arossa in the near future, it only makes sense that her brother, King Rian, should take part in the competition in her place as he is a suitable candidate.”

A murmur of surprised whispers went through the crowd. Kal’s head snapped to Rian, he was both confused and hopeful that this was true. The King’s eyes were wide and shocked – he had clearly not known about the plans. Someone got a chair from the side and placed it at the end of the table, next to Lady Shefanida. Rian didn’t move, his hands trembling in his lap.

“What...,” he whispered faintly. Kal stood up.

“It’s unfair,” he said, voice strong and carrying over the crowd, successfully silencing the gossiping, “Ri...King Rian didn’t know about this and hadn’t had time to prepare. I suggest postponing the-“

“It’s fine,” Rian got up. His shock and shakiness was gone and he was calm and collected once more, “I don’t need to prepare.”

Lady Kursa and Asura looked amused at the outcome of the situation, while Shefanida and Dashara seemed even more nervous. Eskilsa sat there and her expression was...angry. Though in seconds she managed to hide it from everyone behind a sweet smile. Kal reckoned he’d be annoyed at an extra candidate too. He watched as Rian sat on his chair. He wore a black cloak over his shoulders, his blonde hair neat against his forehead. Kalorian’s heart pounded and he couldn’t help his eyes from travelling only to the King, the Ladies fading by comparison.

“Let us begin the first challenge,” Princess Ashia seemed pleased with herself, as if she wanted Rian and Kal to marry. The Prince wasn’t so opposed to the idea either – at least he knew Rian, unlike these Ladies, “Lord Fonti, if you’d please.”

Ash sat down and Lord Fonti, the head of the Law department, stood up. He was an older man with a heavy red moustache and an impressive stomach, “Today’s challenge revolves around war criminals,” he said in a loud, droning voice, “you will all be asked the same question regarding war criminals and will each have two minutes to answer. In this way Prince Kalorian will know if you are educated and knowledgeable about the important aspects of the law,” a servant went around the table and handed each contestant something, “You have just been given sound blocking ear-phones so you won’t be able to take any inspiration from each other’s answers. Everyone except Lady Asura please put yours in.”

Kal watched the contestants as they hesitantly followed the instructions. Rian’s eyes found his and the Prince saw that his friend was nervous. He offered him a smile that he hoped was comforting but Rian hurriedly looked away. Lady Asura stood, arms crossed over her chest, the ring in her freckled nose glimmering.

“Lady Asura,” Lord Fonti spoke, “you have a minute to answer this question: If in a group of slave traders that have been captured there is a seven year old Calanthe child, who has committed as many crimes as any of the captured adults, how do you judge him and what is his punishment?”

“What happens to the other people?” Lady Asura asked, eyebrow cocked, looking unimpressed.

“Arrested and sent to Idra,” Lord Fonti replied calmly.

Lady Asura shrugged, “Then I would send the child there as well. It’s as much of a criminal as any of the others.”

“Spoken like an Ishait,” Lady Ashia interjected. Kalorian himself remained quiet, “Do you believe
that adult lives are equal to the ones of children?"

“I...” Lady Asura paused, “No. I think children should be protected. But if the child committed the same crime as the adults then it should be punished the same way.”

“But what if it was brought up a certain way?” Ashia continued, “what if it was born into the slavers and forced into that lifestyle. What if it was never given an alternative?”

Lady Ashia faltered for a second, but then her mouth stretched into a thin line, “The child’s morals are already tainted,” she said firmly, “it’s ways cannot be changed, not when it’s so immune to the pain around it at such a young age. It will grow up to become a psychopath.”

“Time’s over,” Lord Fonti informed.

“Thank you, Lady Asura,” Kal said, “You may sit.”

The girl collapsed in her chair in a huff and put the ear-phones in, while next to her Lady Dashara took hers out, clenching them in her hand anxiously. The girl stood shakily, looking like a hurt little bird when Lord Fonti repeated the question he had just asked Asura. Kalorian knew he should’ve cared more than he did about the girl’s answer.

“I-I...,” Lady Dashara stuttered, and swallowed, “I...h-how old is the child again?”

“Seven,” Lord Fonti said. All eyes in the hall were on the girl and she flushed.

“W-Well, I would keep the c-child here...um...,” her hands were shaking and she was clearly not good at public speaking, staring at her feet, “On A-Arossa, in one o-of the jails.”

“For how long?” Princess Ashia questioned.

“For...for...u-until it turned eighteen,” Dashara said anxiously.

“And then what?” Lord Fonti questioned, “What if the child returned to its slaver ways after it was released?”

“Then...um...then I would actually like to change my answer!” Dashara said quickly, “I would keep the child in the Calanthe prison for the rest of its life.”

“Your time is up,” Lord Fonti said. Dashara flushed and sat down, shoulders hunched. Her answer was bad, and everyone knew it, including the Lady herself.

Next up was Eskilsa, and her answer was as pretty as her. She said that she would put the child under observation and try and re-teach it its morals in a safe, isolated environment. Lord Fonti and Princess Ashia tried to catch her out, but the girl stood strong by her answer, just like Asura had. Lady Kursassarra and Lady Shefanida both said they would place the child in an institution for troubled children, because of its young age it could possibly still be turned the right way. And then it was Rian’s turn.

“King Rian,” Lord Fonti said, and then repeated the question he had asked the other five contestants, “you have a minute to answer this question: If in a group of slave traders that have been captured there is a seven year old Calanthe child, who has committed as many crimes as any of the captured adults, how do you judge him and what is his punishment?”

Rian looked at Lord Fonti, then at Ashia, then at Kalorian.
“I would place the child with an adoptive family that was aware of the child’s past,” he said calmly.

Lord Fonti frowned, “But the child could be dangerous.”

“The child took part in the slave trade not in a massacre,” Rian said, calmly. He looked completely in his element, “but it’s still a child. A seven year old without the rest of the Slavers behind him is just a child with a bad past. If the child is cut off from the slave trade then it won’t know a way to get back into it. If you place it in an institution or in a prison it will grow up with criminals and make connections. Of course there’s a chance it will become a good citizen that way but if the child is given a loving family and shown a different way of life the percentage of it being re-introduced into society successfully is much higher.”

Kal felt his heart twist when he remembered his little brother. He hadn’t seen Arién for years and in his head the boy was still a child, even though he was twenty now. Sure, he wasn’t in the slave trade but nonetheless he was a criminal. A criminal who grew up with a loving family. Kalorian wasn’t quite sure he believed that his brother killed that man back home in self-defence, but it wasn’t for him to judge. He didn’t know why Rian’s answer made him think of Ari.

“Thankyou, your Grace,” the man said, trying to remain professional. Rian inclined his head and sat. Minutes later everyone from the hall was dismissed except for the fifteen government representatives, Kal and Ashia. They crowded in together around the thrones and dissolved into discussions. The fifteen all gave their opinions of who was best and worst but Kal didn’t care about what they thought – most of the answers given by the competitors made sense, none really stood out to Kal. Well, except Rian’s, but anything that the King said stood out to his friend. The Prince helplessly turned to Ash.

“Who do you think should be eliminated?” he asked, anxious. A big part of him wanted to eliminate all the Ladies and just marry Rian...but he wondered if that was a good idea. The Prince didn’t seem all that happy to take part in the Competition and Kal didn’t want to force him into marriage. He wasn’t like Eilo – if he was unhappy with Kal he wouldn’t run away, just grit his teeth and do his duty.

“I know who I would eliminate,” Ash said, shrugging, her hand on her pregnant stomach, stroking it thoughtfully, “but then again – it’s not my future,” she bit her lip, “Kal...if you don’t want to marry Rian maybe you should...I know that it was spontaneous and we didn’t ask your opinion, we can always just asking him to step down-“

“No,” Kal interrupted, too fast, surprising everyone. He flushed and looked away, “I...I’ll give him a chance. I think Lady Dashara should be eliminated.”

The fifteen governors nodded their heads in agreement, “Yes,” Lord Fonti said thoughtfully, “She changed her answer too fast, she can be easily influenced, your wife...or, err, husband...should stand by what she believes in...”

Kalorian didn’t care about the statistics behind it. He just knew he could never fall in love with the girl. Over the past ten days he had spoke with her some and found that she was dull, at least to him. His decision wouldn’t be made publicly – he’d hate to embarrass the Lady.

That same night Kalorian went to Lady Dashara’s apartments and told her of his decision himself. She and all of her Time Makers returned to Ruskicade the next day, and at breakfast with the remaining Ladies and the King Kal watched Rian closely to see if the boy was glad or not, but he really couldn’t tell from his crestfallen expression.

(That same day)
Sycamora.

As Dashe showered in their ship’s tiny, tiny bathroom, he contemplated how much he missed Eilo. It had been seven days since they have left Rum and Dashe’s little ship was well on its way to circling around Daliat and heading for Kar. For the most part Dashyan had a good time on-board their ship – they sailed the galaxy, listened to music, he and Tye were perfectly content in each other’s company, they cooked, cleaned...generally acted a bit like a married couple. But in moments like these, when Dashe was alone with his thoughts, he couldn’t help but miss the girl and her bubbly presence. He wondered what she was up to. The water cascaded down Dashyan’s body. He yearned for another slave ship to capture, the satisfaction he felt when handing those monsters over to the authorities filled him with exhilaration like none other.

Dashyan stuck out his hands and allowed warm water to pool in his palms before trickling down his wrists. He was skinny, and wished he could put on as much muscle as Tye, and be stronger. He couldn’t forget how he had frozen the last time they went onto a slave ship. If it weren’t for Eilo and Tyeval...the boy sighed and closed his eyes, allowing the warm water to wash over his face. He was going to have to work on his reflexes, and on his muscles too.

The water shut off suddenly, without warning, and the light in the bathroom turned off abruptly. Dashyan blinked in surprise as the last of the water trickled out of his hands and the engines of Sycamora turned off with a low groan. The ship stopped moving and the sound of the air-conditioning and other machines at work died out. Dashyan had to manually open the shower door and he stepped out into the cold bathroom, shivering as cold water droplets raced to his feet.

“Tye?” he called out as he picked up a towel, wrapping it around his waist. He padded out into the corridor, but there the lights were off as well. Tyeval came out of the bathroom, and almost bumped into Dashe.

“Power cut,” he said, and then looked away abruptly, “Stars, Dashe, put some clothes on!”

“You’ve seen me naked a hundred times, relax,” Dashyan rolled his eyes, surveying the ship. Only certain mechanisms were still working, little green lights blinking in the dark, “What do we do?”

“No idea,” Tye sighed, “Give out a distress signal? That’s probably our best shot since we’re basically stranded.” He walked over to the navigation console and pressed something. Outside the galaxy was perfectly still. Dashe wondered if making time would help, but doubted it, “Hopefully there’s a patrol off Daliat or some other planet near and will help us with this old thing.”

“So...we just wait?” Dashyan asked. Tyeval nodded and in the dark he was just a silhouette, his back to the redhead.

“We might as well sleep,” he said. Dashe shivered and agreed, hurriedly walking to the bedroom because the droplets of water on his skin had cooled down and felt like ice particles. He rummaged through the closet, built into the wall, but here the lights were off as well and besides, the closet was a right mess. And it was cold, since the central heating wasn’t on. Dashe found a pair of underwear and clumsily tugged them on as Tyeval walked into the bedroom, closing the door. The Hybrid managed to locate a t-shirt with his cold hands and he pulled it over his damp hair.

“That’s my t-shirt,” Tyeval said.

“Don’t care,” Dashyan was starting to get cold, and he hated being cold. He kicked his towel into the corner of the room and climbed into his bed, pulling his covers up to his chin. Tyeval was standing in the middle of the room, looking worried. He was always worried, “You coming?” the Hybrid asked innocently – recently his best friend hasn’t been sleeping. Tyeval clenched and unclenched his hands
and then hauled his bedding into his arms. He walked over to Dashyan’s bed and dumped the covers
and pillows on top of the boy, so only the boy’s cute little face peeked out.

“I’m going to see if someone will receive the signal,” the Cyborg said impassively, “You sleep.”

Dashyan’s hand shot out and grabbed Tye’s wrist, “Don’t be an idiot. You’ve been up for days. You
have to rest too, you’re not a machine.”

“I am. In part,” Tye said, but his resolve was visibly weakening as Dashyan tugged gently on his
hand, pulling him closer to the bed. Tyeval sighed.

“Stop worrying,” Dashyan teased, “everything will be fine. You can relax for once.”

Tyeval looked like he was fighting internally but eventually he sluggishly allowed Dashe to pull him
into the bed. The boys settled in their little nest together and Dashyan giggled when he found himself
face-to-face with Tyeval. re-arranged the pillows and covers around them, until they were enclosed
in some kind of cocoon, warm where the rest of the ship was cold. Dashyan felt safe and he looked
at his best friend, grinning.

Tyeval was handsome. Dashyan couldn’t remember when he first started thinking that, but right now
as Tye looked at him tiredly with his warm, dark eyes, wavy hair falling into his face, Dashe couldn’t
help but think it again and again. He wondered why Tye had never shown any interest in any girls or
boys. Dashe himself had kissed quite a few while on different planets with the crew of Hannibal, in
secret from his fathers of course, but Tyeval had seemed completely dis-interested in anyone who
ever tried to flirt with him.

Dashyan evaluated all the hints he had been dropping – he kissed Tyeval on the cheek, hugged him
whenever he could, even told him he loved him. All that because the Hybrid desperately wanted to
know if Tye had even an inkling of a feeling for him. It looked like the Ubloit didn’t and that...that
was upsetting. Dashe really fancied him, maybe not loved, because he only started seeing Tyeval as
someone other than a best friend recently. Right now the Ubloit wrapped an arm around the boy’s
waist, but kept a distance between them.

“I’m glad you’re here,” Dashyan admitted, his own hand resting in the warm little space between
Tye’s neck and shoulder. The Ubloit hissed.

“Shit your hand’s cold.”


Tye smiled, “I think I’d be scared too.”

“You’re not scared of anything,” Dashyan whisper. They didn’t have to be quiet – they were alone
in the ship, and yet something urged the redhead boy to keep his voice lowered. Tye reached out and
fondly brushed a piece of Dashe’s wild hair from his forehead. Then his expression changed, he
tensed and snapped his hand back, as if regretting the gesture. Something in their relationship shifted
and neither of the boys could pinpoint when. Their casual touches transformed into ones full of...of
what? Dashyan couldn’t define what it was exactly, “Everything okay?” he asked, in case Tyeval
would explain to him what was happening straight and clear the air. Of course the Ubloit didn’t do
that.

“Yeah, course,” he said, but his arm felt awkward around Dashyan, “Why?”

“Nothing,” Dashe sighed and pressed his face into Tyeval’s chest to try and stop staring at his face.
He laid like that for a few minutes, his head full of thoughts, and finally starting to relax in his best
friend’s embrace. The moment it seemed as if he was going to fall asleep, Tye properly hugged him, arms coming tightly around Dashyan and pressing the boy into his chest.

“You asleep?”

Dashyan said nothing, he didn’t know why. His heart jumped in his chest when Tye kissed his forehead with his soft, soft lips.
The Dancer and the Kidnapper

Shal 11th Ove 1161EE (1 day later)

The galaxy was peaceful, the stars looking like they were miles and miles away. And they were. In the distance shone a ghost outline of Daliat, and further still an inviting darkness – the black hole, Jana 11. Apart from that there were just stars and peace...and a lone ship, suspended in the air, unmoving, its lights turned off. The soft echo of a distress call pierced the bulky ship that now approached it in silence, undetected.

The ship sending off the distress signal looked like a child’s toy, or a ghost ship, there were no signs of life as if it had been abandoned here, in the galaxy. The crew, whoever they were, were stranded and at the mercy of the first crew to stumble upon them. And it was this particular ship, the grey mass of mismatched parts and malicious looking weapons, that found them first.

First come first served.

(The same day)

Arossa.

The party was in full swing – Kalorian threw one almost every night because his guests really liked to drink and dance...especially the Vlassain. It was a welcome distraction from the less than enjoyable aspect of the competition – the eliminations. The absence of Dashara was still fresh and the other competitors were anxious. A party was exactly what everyone needed. Kal had drunk much already, perhaps too much, deliciously sweet liquor, and danced with everyone from Ashia to all the remaining Ladies. Still, there was an itch under the man’s skin that had been there for the past few days, as if things weren’t right. He had hoped eliminating one of the ladies would make it go away, but that wasn’t the case.

Even now Kal’s dark eyes searched the grand hall, beautifully lit by chandeliers hanging from the ceiling. He was subconsciously looking for someone, but everyone who was coming was already here, dressed in bright colours and swirling in the warm hall as the snow fell outside. Currently the Prince was leaning against one of the walls, slowly draining the drink in his hand. As if sensing that his defences were down, the Baroness or Terassa, Eskilsa’s mother, approached him.

“My Lady,” he said. She inclined her head,

“My Prince. How are you enjoying the competition?” the woman asked, standing next to Kal. It seemed that every time the man was alone she was somewhere close by to strike up a conversation.

“It’s...festive,” Kalorian had to pick his words carefully, which was hard because the alcohol was making his thoughts chaotic. The Baroness nodded,
“And the ladies...have you any inclination as to which you’ll pick to be your wife?”

“Or husband,” Kal corrected, hoping to keep his voice neutral, “Unfortunately I can’t discuss that with you, Baroness.”

“Yes naturally,” the Baroness said hastily. Together they watched couples swirl together in a lazy billow of colours. Kalorian yearned to be free of this tiring conversation and join them, “But the King...,” the woman started speaking again, before the Prince could think of an excuse to get away. He desperately tried to spot one of the Ladies, so he could make eye contact with them and plead them with his eyes to pull him away from the overbearing Baroness, “What are your views of him being in the competition?”

“He’s a suitable candidate,” Kal could sense that the Baroness was trying to sniff some information out, some that would give her daughter the upper hand, and so he kept his answers short and clipped.

“Yes but don’t you think he’s a bit...plain?” the Baroness asked. Kalorian’s eyes snapped to her, but she wasn’t looking at him. Instead her eyes were trained across the room, on...Rian, who had just come in. Dressed in black, a scarlet cloak swept over his graceful shoulders he looked anything but plain. His appearance, which the Prince hadn’t been expecting, made Kal’s heart start beating faster, “Compared to the Ladies. Compared to my daughter. She’s a real beauty, you must agree.”

“Yes,” Kal said distractedly, his eyes following the King as people flocked to him. A man Kal didn’t recognise bowed to the blonde, some Shif. He offered Rian his hand and the King took it and allowed the man to pull him into the crowd of dancing, giggling guests. Kalorian felt his stomach twist; Rian rarely danced, and when he did it was either with Eilo or Kal, to not make any potential fiancées hopeful that Rian has any kind of feelings for them.

“I think you should end the nonsense and eliminate the King. Surely he has better things to worry about then marrying you. Besides, you deserve better-“

“Excuse me, Baroness,” Kal interrupted, not even listening to her, and darted across the hall. Rian stood out to him even among all the people around him – his pale hair, almost silver in this light, intense, beautiful eyes, body moving with a languid grace that the other dancers lacked. It was as if there was a spotlight on Rian, putting everyone else in the shadow. Kalorian was drunk, and he didn’t even realise as he stumbled to Rian, tactfully pushing his dancing partner away with his shoulder.

“Rian!” he exclaimed happily, a little obnoxious, “You came!”

Rian’s eyes darted to the side, “I needed to speak to the Shif Delegate. The one you just pushed away.”

“Screw that,” Kalorian was exhilarated that Rian was even at this party since he didn’t usually come, “Dance with me,” he grasped the blonde’s hands. The King’s eyes filled with anger.

“You’re drunk.”

“No,” Kal slurried.

“Yes, you are,” Rian gritted out, ripping his hands out of Kal’s grip. The Prince felt sluggish and the King looked around anxiously before sighing and changing his mind, taking Kal’s hands again, “Come. You need fresh air.”

***
Kal didn’t want to anger Rian more than he already did so he allowed Rian to pull him outside, pouting like a child. The night was freezing though Kalorian didn’t seem to feel it thanks to the liquor he drank. Rian, who was sober, shivered at the change in temperature. His friend was grinning like an idiot, and both their breaths were coming out in little white clouds in front of his face. Warm light that spilled through the windows and open doors of the Tower Palace lit up the snow outside, making it look golden. The white died away into the darkness after a few feet, and outside it was just Rian and Kalorian. The sky was heavy with clouds but the snow had ceased to fall for the moment.

“I hope the fresh air helps you clear your head and stop acting like a fool. You’re a Prince and yet you’re acting like a drunkard,” Rian was starting his lambasting of his friend, when suddenly Kal shoved him up against the stone walls. The King felt a shock of cold as his back hit the iced-over stone and his eyes widened, heart twisting almost painfully in surprise.

Kalorian’s hands were on his shoulders, his grip surprisingly strong for someone so intoxicated. His black hair fell into his eyes, hiding his expression from Rian. Only his mouth was visible, pulled into a thin line, jaw clenched. Kal was mad about something, but Kal almost never got mad.

“What are you doing?” Rian asked, scared at how breathless he sounded. The cold vanished, replaced by the warmth of Kal’s hands, seeping through Rian’s shirt. For a second Kal’s fingers tightened on Rian’s shoulders, and the man leaned down and forward and for a tiny, hopeful heartbeat Rian’s mind told him that the Prince was going to kiss him. The King held his breath, feeling like his heart was going to burst from his chest, but at the last second Kal dropped his head onto the King’s shoulder. Rian exhaled shakily, and the moment the hope left anger crept into his heart – anger at himself, at Kal, at the competition. He roughly shoved the Prince away, “Get a hold of yourself,” he snapped, “You’re a royal, act like one, starsdammit.”

“I’m sorry,” Kal stepped back and brushed his hair clumsily from his hair. His eyes were sad and his anger gone, “I just...I was thinking about Arién and I...and then I just wanted to stop thinking about him and I found the wine...”

Rian felt a twinge of guilt. He forgot that Kalorian’s little brother was in prison. The blonde sighed, “It’s alright. I’m sorry I snapped at you.”

“Now I’m thinking about him again,” the Prince mumbled sadly, slumping against the wall next to Rian. He looked at him tiredly, “Would you be mad if I had one more drink?”

“No. I wouldn’t. It won’t do anymore damage,” Rian said, “but you stay out here and I’ll bring you something and then we’re going upstairs, alright?”

Kal smiled, “Alright.”

Rian slipped back inside the main hall. Now it felt too bright and stuffy and the King’s eyes hurriedly tried to spot some kind of full wine glass. The party was getting a little out of control, guests laughing and stumbling around just like their host. Rian didn’t want to be here, around these people that all blurred together. He didn’t want forced niceties and compliments. He wanted these strangers gone, and for things to go back to the way they were. A commotion was happening near one of the doors, where guards were gathering, but Rian didn’t have the strength to deal with whatever was happening. As if summoned by the King’s chaotic thoughts, a servant appeared with a tray in his hand. A single silver goblet sat on the tray and Rian snatched it up. The servant gave him a startled look but the blonde had already returned outside, before anyone had even noticed his presence.

Kal was right where the King had left him, staring absently into space, “Here,” Rian handed him the goblet.
“Oh bless,” Kalorian’s face relaxed into happiness as he took the cup greedily into his hands. His tanned cheeks were flushed and before he could raise the cup to his mouth, Rian caught his wrist.

“Wait,” he said, “maybe you shouldn’t drink this here. If you pass out...”

“I won’t,” Kal re-assured him, but he slurred his words. He brought the cup to his lips and then paused, before jerking the goblet towards Rian, sloshing the purple wine over the side, “You have some.”

“No, thankyou,” Rian said calmly, though the offer to drink and forget was tempting, “One of us has to keep our head on our shoulders.”

Kal pouted but nodded, lifting the goblet to his lips again.

“Don’t drink that!” the voice came suddenly, out of nowhere. Kal lowered the cup and turned around sluggishly while Rian’s head snapped up. Arch Albrektson, the head of palace security, had just come out of the main hall, his tanned face frowning, cape billowing behind him. Without further ado he snatched the goblet from Kal’s fingers, and the man looked at his now empty hands, a little lost.

“What is it?” Rian demanded, feeling his adrenaline spike at the urgency in Arch’s voice.

“We found an empty vial of Zanxanian in the kitchen rubbish, your majesty,” Arch said, “or rather, the cook did.”


“We don’t know but our first thought was that it was an assassination attempt on Prince Kal,” Arch and Rian both looked at the man, who was still drunkenly glancing between the two, not understanding the situation. Rian’s heart was heavy when he realised that someone was trying to hurt his friend. Subconsciously his hand reached out and he grabbed the Prince’s wrist, needing to touch the man. Arch pulled out a little glass stick from his pocket and slipped it into his goblet. The glass turned black, “Fuck,” the word seemed to slip out of his mouth without his consent. Black meant the wine contained the Zanxanian poison. Rian knew enough of Faso to know that the Shif was swearing.

“End the party. Send everyone to their rooms,” Rian said, getting a hold of himself and letting go of Kal’s wrist, and Arch nodded. He took a step towards the door with the goblet, “Wait!” the blonde said suddenly, and Arch gave him a puzzled look. The King’s head was a mess, “No. Don’t raise a panic, I don’t want to jeopardise the competition and his happiness,” his eyes slid sadly to Kal, who was slumped against the wall, eyes closed, “just make sure everyone is safe in their chambers and launch an investigation. Don’t tell anyone anything about the poison unless it’s necessary.”

“Of course, your majesty,” Arch nodded, “do you have an inkling of who would want to harm Prince Kal?”

The face of the Baroness flashed in Rian’s mind, but he quickly forgot that thought. She would never hurt Kal, not when her precious daughter was meant to marry him. Apart from that there wasn’t anyone that made an enemy of the Prince. This was exactly why Rian was so apprehensive about strangers in his palace, and why he wanted the competition to end.

Except it wasn’t. He wanted it to end because his heart couldn’t take it for much longer.

***
(The same day)

The Reaper

Bottles of swirling mist that Dashe had carefully stacked on the shelves of Sycamora. It had taken him hours, when Tye was resting, and he remembered each bottle, and the ache of his wrists when he was done. Who knew bottled time was so heavy? Every time the boy got tired he remembered that Tyeval needed this – he needed extra time, just in case anything happened to Dashyan, just in case...

Why was he dreaming this? Dashyan knew what he was seeing was a hallucination, a déjà-vu. He had had dreams of things that happened in his day before, but never ones so clear and structured. It was as if he was reliving the moment of bottling up the time he could create, could see his own reflection in the little green bottles. Why was he dreaming it...?

Just in case. Just in case was now.

Dashyan exhaled a bit louder than before and jerked awake. At first he was confused, the thoughts flooding his head not quite fitting together, like puzzle pieces out of different boxes. He was in darkness. Memories flooded his aching head. Doors to Sycamora being pried open. Dark shadows entering the ships. Shouting. Gun shots. Someone hitting him. Darkness. He was in the dark now too. Am I dead? Dashe thought distractedly, feeling like his head was swimming.

But no – there were lights blinking close by. It wasn’t the afterlife, the Hybrid realised after a moment, they were flashing lights of some machine. He could feel a little draft on his neck, ruffling the red hair there, and as his eyes got adjusted to the darkness and his senses came back the boy could make out shapes. There were boxes around him, all shapes and sizes. No...not boxes. Cages. He was in some kind of storage room. And there were bars around him – he himself was in a cage. His heart jerked and fear made his voice die in his throat. Where the hell was he?! The fear only intensified when he saw slumped, dark shapes in the cages closest to him. Who were they? Animals? Monsters? He couldn’t tell.

He and Tye should’ve known sending a distress signal was an invitation for strangers to invade their ship – their weapons weren’t working, they couldn’t defend themselves without power. The thought of Tyeval made Dashyan’s heart ache.

“Tye?” he asked softly, under his breath. He felt around his small cage but he was inside alone, “Tyeval?” he repeated louder.

“Your friend’s not here, kid,” came a gruff answer.

As if triggered by voices, lights suddenly flickered on. Harsh, clinical, too bright. Dashyan squeezed his eyes shut against the sudden assault and backed up against the cold metal bars of his cage. Around him came a few groans and complaints.

“Turn that off!” someone whined next to Dashe and in his confused panic he stumbled away from the voice, only to find that he was looking at a Shif girl laying on the floor in the next cage over. What must’ve normally been pretty strawberry blonde hair was now all in knots, and there were dark circles under her piercing blue eyes. She couldn’t have been older than Dashyan, and now her eyes snapped to him. Beneath her head was her jacket, bundled up to resemble a pillow, “Who the hell are you?” she grumbled, not even sitting up.

“I-I...,” Dashyan couldn’t formulate words. His head was throbbing with a dull pain.

“You’re the kid from that useless ship that sent out a distress signal, aren’t you?” a man was in a cage
opposite Dashyan, looking unimpressed, thick arms hanging between the spaces in the bars. His pointed ears and paper white skin betrayed him as a Charasean. His right eye was sewn shut and Dashe flinched away in disgust.

“W-We needed help...,” he stuttered, disoriented. Most of the cages around him were empty, the last one taken by a small, middle aged woman with fluffy white hair and the features of a sheep. Without warning her face twisted and she started sobbing loudly, her cries pierced by an occasional baa. The Charasean next to her started banging his head against the bars,

“For star’s sake Nagona would you shut up?”

The sheep – Nagona – just sobbed louder, curling on the floor as if she were a child. The young girl next to Dashyan stood up and dusted her hands off, “Who are you?” she questioned, peering at him behind her bars with eyes full of suspicion. She was pretty. Now that Dashe realised there’s no immediate danger his pulse was starting to slow.

“My n-name is Dashyan Io S-Shinin,” he said shakily. The girl nodded in thought as if that told her anything.

“My name’s Sarena. Welcome to the Misery Club.”

“Death Club’s a better name,” the man opposite argued, his voice impassive, “or No Way Out Club. Or We’re Fucked Club.”

Nagona the sheep started wailing louder at this.

Sarena rolled her eyes, “That’s Korom. He’s not very optimistic.”

“Have you seen my friend?” Dashyan asked, suddenly remembering Tye again, panic making it hard to think straight – he might’ve not been in immediate danger, but his best friend was still gone, he could be hurt... the Hybrid gripped the bars in front of him, “His name is Tyeval Alagarr. Tall, dark brown hair, tanned. He’s an Ubloot.”

“They don’t sell Ubloits,” Korom said with disinterest, “They go for too little. They must’ve left him on your ship. Or killed him.”

Dashyan’s stomach twisted, “W-What...,” he whispered, feeling as if someone had just ripped him in half. He didn’t know how to function. Sarena shook her head sadly, confirming her companion’s words.

“Sorry, kid.”

Dashyan didn’t know what to do. He felt like his knees would give out. Before he could drown in the sudden eruption of dark thoughts in his head, a door to the left of Nagona opened with a soft hiss and an armed Ishait walked in. His hair was grey and slicked back, skin a green colour. His black eyes scanned the cages with amusement.

“Good morning,” he said sarcastically, and kicked Nagona’s cage with his heavy boot. The woman whimpered and scuttled to the back, burying her face in her knees. Dashyan followed her example and moved away from the bars, “How’s everyone doing today?”

“Shit,” Sarena spat

“True,” Korom agreed. The Ishait shifted the heavy gun in his gloved hands and his eyes narrowed.
“The only reason you both still have teeth is because they pay extra for those,” he spat, a gross drop of phlegm landing on the dirty floor. Then his attention turned to Dashyan. His smile returned, “And how’s the newest addition doing?” Dashe wouldn’t even know where to start replying to that. He had never been so terrified, “Not very talkative, is he?” the Ishait approached, leaning his gun against empty cages so it made an offensive rattling noise with each of his step.

“Not after seeing your face,” Korom snorted. The Ishait raised his gun,

“Don’t piss me off, old man, or I might just risk losing one of you.”

“Try me,” Korom rolled his eyes. He was clearly getting on the Ishait’s nerved because the man turned back to Dashyan, as if choosing him as his victim.

“What’s your name?”

“Who are you?” Dashe blurted. The Ishait raised an eyebrow,

“He hasn’t figured it out yet?”

“He just woke up,” Sarena snapped, in his defence. It didn’t make Dashe feel any better.

“Where’s Tye? Is he...,” he couldn’t finish his sentence.

“Your friend?” the Ishait asked with curiosity, “The Ubloit?” Dashyan nodded mutely, “don’t worry, he’s not dead. We gave him a bit of a rough handling, especially when he started acting like a maniac after you got knocked out. You two must’ve been pretty close, huh? You boyfriends or something?” Dashyan was too terrified to hear the rest of the story to bother answering the question, “Anyways, we left him passed out on your ship. He won’t move anywhere anyway, not with the engines blown out. He’s left to float through the Galaxy, completely at Qinae’s mercy. He’ll be dead soon enough, but not before he can beat himself up over losing you. An Ubloit’s supposed to be a protector, isn’t it? Well, he’s a failure.”

“And you’re a bastard!” Dashyan yelled.

“Nice,” Sarena nodded in approval.

Dashe was furious on one hand, on the other he still felt paralyzing fear, to the point where it made his fingers numb. The Ishait’s words were too true...Tyeval would blame himself for this kidnap. The only hope was in the bottled time Dashe left him. Just in case is now, the boy remembered his dream suddenly.

“Where are we even?!” he asked, “What is this ship? Where are you taking us?!”

“You really haven’t figure it out yet,” the Ishait man laughed chillingly and approached Dashyan’s cage, looking him closely in the face through the metal bars, “Welcome to the Reaper, kid. We’re on our way to Calliban, to an auction,” Dashyan’s heart twisted, “You’re now officially a slave.”
Ghi 18th Ove 1161EE (7 days later)

Fayaxiamen.

Thrisan stood in the servant’s corridor, hesitating, wringing out his fingers. He hadn’t been this nervous since the first time he had to bed Vallea, before he even knew her, when he had been much younger. The small windows up on the top floor were open, letting in the warm summer breeze from outside. It was dark in her corridor, only the three faraway moons, Elton, Eex and Jina, giving any light. Thris had come here a few minutes ago and now couldn’t bring himself to knock on the door with the surname Kiada engraved into the wood. He was a grown man, a King, and yet he was losing his head over a young servant boy as if he had no life experience.

Thris was running out of time – half the servants had the night off tonight and sooner or later someone would come out or return to their bedrooms, and spot the King just standing there, a bottle of liquor in his hand. He wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t completely necessary. After the Festival Thrisan couldn’t find Wyliam anywhere, no matter how hard he tried. He even sent Zea into the servant club to see if the boy was there any of the nights, but when he was he refused to go meet the King, and Thris wasn’t allowed inside. Thris had no idea what he did wrong, or why Wyliam was so determined to not see him again. It was the first time Thrisan was in this situation, where someone he slept with didn’t want to meet again, and not the other way around.

Tonight was a beautiful summer night, and Zea and Val were making love in the Queen’s chambers and Thrisan felt horribly, heart-wrenchingly lonely. For the first time he yearned for someone to hold and love the way his wife did. And not just anyone – he wanted the boy he was hopelessly enamoured with, the boy who was currently behind this door. He inhaled, calming his nerves, and took one step through the narrow corridor, from the window to the door, and knocked.

“C-Come in?” came the muffled, uncertain response. Wyl’s voice made Thris’ heart pound – clearly the boy wasn’t expecting guests. Thrisan gently pushed the door open and stepped into the small room.

It was cozy, and cute, just like Wyliam. The room was tiny, and the majority, apart from the little part
of the wooden floor by the door, was taken up by a massive bed, piled high with covers, blankets and pillows. A string of lights in little coloured bottles hung above the window, which had a nice curtain on it, though for now pushed to the side so a little summer breeze could fall in through. The shelves on one wall were stacked with little knick-knacks. Wyliam himself was sitting cross-legged in the centre of the bed, an old fashioned paper book open in front of him. The boy looked like a deer caught in headlights, his green eyes wide behind his heavy glasses. His hair was damp, as if the boy had just had a shower, and he was wearing his pyjamas – a pair of adorable shorts with a cupcake print on them and a black t-shirt so big the sleeves reached his elbows.

“Y-Your Majesty!” the boy gasped, and quickly jumped to his feet, bowing clumsily. He was standing on the bed, because there was nowhere else to stand, and so he was taller than Thrisan. However he wobbled dangerously on the soft mattress and with a shocked look on his face he lost his balance and tumbled right into Thrisan’s arms. The King managed to catch him, wrapping an arm around the boy’s waist to stop him from falling to the floor. A squeak was ripped from the boy’s mouth as he clung onto Thris, if only to prevent himself from falling down. He seemed to realise what was happening because he quickly lowered himself to the floor, pulling his arms away from Thrisan. Wyl seemed like he wanted to step away, but there was nowhere to go, “What a-are you doing here?” he asked, staring intently at his shoes instead.

“I wanted to see you,” Thris said truthfully, “I brought drink,” he held up the bottle of expensive liquor he dug out of the cupboard in the wineyard, “Zea tells me you already drank with her. It’s my turn to drink with you now.”

“No...I...I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Wyl said faintly. Thrisan’s shoulders slumped, “Do you hate me that much?”

“No!” Wyliam’s eyes snapped to Thris’, “No, your Majesty, I don’t-“

“Thrisan,” The King said, frustrated. Something was clearly bothering Wyl but he hid it under formal niceties.

“Thrisan,” Wyliam corrected and tucked one of his curls behind his ear, “I don’t hate you.”

“But you’re avoiding me,” Thris said, “Why?”

Wyl decided that moving on the bed was a safer option then remaining in such close proximity with Thris. He climbed back on and sat as far away from Thrisan as possible, up against the headboard. Clearly he felt vulnerable in this position because he grabbed a pillow and hugged it, bringing his knees up to said pillow.

“I’m not,” he said eventually, eyes shifting somewhere to the side. He was a horrible liar.

Thrisan couldn’t have this conversation sober. He pulled the cork out of his bottle and put it in his pocket, before taking a long swing of the drink. Wyliam watched him anxiously. When Thris was done drinking the bitter liquid he perched on the edge of the huge bed and offered Wyliam the bottle, careful not to make the boy feel threatened. Hesitantly, Wyliam took the bottle and drank. He made a face.

“Do you want to talk now?” Thris asked, and Wyl didn’t give him back the bottle, instead cradling it with his hands before drinking again.

“What do you want to talk about?” the boy asked, super interested in the object in his hands. Thris studied him.
“Why did you run away from me? Did I scare you?” he asked, and decided he needed another drink before he got the answer. He shuffled closer to the Shif and plucked the bottle from his hands, eagerly drinking. Wyliam thoughtfully hugged the pillow in his arms, and the alcohol he drank as well as the intimate atmosphere was making his tongue looser.

“Yes. I suppose. A little,” he mumbled, and quickly got the bottle out of Thrisan’s grip, chugging the liquor. The King felt horrible, hearing the boy admit that he had been scared was a blow. He drank too, and as they passed the bottle back and forth and the space between them decreased.

“Do you hate me?” Thrisan asked, breaking the silence that had settled over the two of them. He felt warm and tingly, but he knew from experience he wasn’t drunk...not yet. Wyliam shook his head.

“No. I don’t. I really don’t.”

“Then why do you keep avoiding me?” Thrisan pried. Wyliam exhaled and tried to take another swing of the alcohol, only to find the bottle empty. He sighed.

“I don’t want to talk anymore.”

“Alright, let’s not talk,” Thris said. Somehow over the past half an hour he and Wyliam had migrated towards each other, until they were shoulder to shoulder. Now it was easy for Thris to cup the boy’s face and lean in. Their lips met in an alcohol-tinged kiss. Thrisan had wanted to kiss him so badly that he couldn’t hold back for longer. The King kissed Wyliam slowly, softly, he didn’t want to make the boy afraid. He also expected Wyliam to push him away, but the boy only let out a shaky breath against his lips and allowed his eyes to fall shut. His small hand found Thrisan’s shirt and he gripped it in his fist, as if he needed something to hang onto.

Thrisan pulled him closer, and closer still, and so close that somehow he lifted Wyliam into his lap, the pillow falling from the Shif’s hands, so the boy’s legs were on either side of his thighs. The kiss turned heated, their mouths a frenzy of passion. It was almost as if they thought they’d be ripped apart any moment, their mouths moving sloppily and in desperation. Thrisan’s tongue slid into Wyl’s mouth and only then did the Shif turn his face away, breaking their kiss.

“W-We c-can’t,” he stuttered, and his face was as adorably red as their first time together. Thrisan didn’t know what he liked more – the blush or the freckles hidden beneath it. He reached out and absentely stroked one of Wyl’s flushed cheeks. The boy squeezed his eyes shut behind his glasses as if he couldn’t stand the touch, but when Thris started pulling his hand back guiltily the boy grabbed it and pressed it flat against his cheek. Thris smiled.

“Why are you so shy?” he questioned in a whisper.

“You’re a King,” Wyliam mumbled, “What do you expect?” he looked at Thrisan with his brows furrowed. He looked upset and aroused at once, “Don’t you...you only ever sleep with a person o-once. That’s what everyone says.”

“They’re right,” Thrisan said, and offered no further explanation as he attacked Wyliam’s neck with sudden bites and kisses. The boy’s made a chocked off sound and Thris kissed his neck until he was shivering, the skin deliciously warm and soft. He loved the way Wyl clung onto him.

The creatures Thris usually slept with were loud, obnoxious, moaning so loudly it hurt his head, dirty talk constantly pouring from their lips, as if it were a competition and they were trying to impress him. They offered all kinds of positions and fetishes, and each time after Thrisan had sex he felt hollow. Wyliam wasn’t like that – he didn’t try to pretend he was some kind of sex God, he was just himself, the little whimpers coming from his lips every few minutes so much more arousing than
other people’s screams of pleasure. Thris’ hand weaselled its way beneath the boy’s too-big t-shirt, and his skilful fingers found the boy’s nipple. Wyl jerked in his hands and Thrisan caught the moan spilling from his mouth with his lips. The boy tried to squirm away from his touch but the King wrapped an arm around his waist and continued to caress him.

“Do you like that?” he asked softly, but Wyliam avoided an answer by hiding his face in Thrisan’s neck. When the King looked down at their laps he saw that there were tents in both of their pants. He was happy that Wyl was aroused and without really thinking about it (that could’ve been thanks to the alcohol) he reached down into the Shif’s shorts and pulled out the boy’s cock.

“Thrisan n-no-ah!” Wyliam’s protest ended in a loud, sudden moan when the King wrapped his fingers around his hard cock and gave it a nice, long stroke. Wyl slapped his hand over his mouth to muffle the sounds, his glasses lopsided.

“I want to hear you,” Thris said, because he did, and pried Wyl’s hand away. The boy shook his head and was about to say something, but whatever it was it was lost in another moan as Thrisan started stroking his member.

“T-They’ll h-hear us,” Wyl whimpered, eyes screwed shut. He meant his neighbour servants, undoubtedly.

“I don’t care,” Thris said. One of Wyliam’s hands twisted into Thris’ shirt and the other went the hand that was currently stroking his cock. His pale fingers didn’t even go all the way around the man’s wrist when he grabbed it. He tried to still the King’s movements but Thris could see that the boy was feeling pleasure.

You thought that last time too, his brain reminded him, and his hand ceased its movements. Wyliam’s eyes opened a little bit and his breathing was hard. He swallowed visibly and looked down at the King.

“W-Why...Why did y-you stop?” he asked shakily, and Wyl realised that he wasn’t gripping Thrisan’s wrist to stop him, but just because he needed something to hold onto. When he ran his thumb over the slit at the top of Wyliam’s member he found that it was wet with precum. The boy bit his lip and turned his face away, his fingers tightening on Thris’ wrist. His cheeks were red, as were his shoulders, his plump lips more swollen than usual. In that moment Thrisan came to the conclusion that out of all the beautiful people he had every slept with – willowy Karlshafs and curvy Harsonia and stunning Shifs and exotic Ishaits – Wyliam was by far the most gorgeous. When Thris looked at the boy, perched in his lap, trying to hold himself back, he didn’t see mousy brown hair, too big clothes, freckles and thick glasses. He saw someone so desirable that his cock was throbbing in his pants just from looking.

“I need you to tell me if you like it,” Thrisan said firmly, the thought coming through his brain sluggishly.

“W-Why?” Wyliam asked, his slim shoulders trembling.

“I need to know....” Thrisan lost his thread of thought for a moment, distracted by a delicious looking slither of skin that had been exposed on Wyl’s shoulder when his shirt slid to the side. He couldn’t resist the temptation and leaned in, kissing the skin there, and then making a path up Wyl’s neck until their lips met again. Thris pulled back and both his arms wrapped around Wyl’s back, keeping the boy close, “I need to know if you want it or not. If you like what I’m doing.” Wyl’s blush intensified and his gaze dropped. Hesitantly he nodded. Thris felt light as a feather as he plucked the boy’s glasses off his face, “Did you like it last time?”
“Most of it,” Wyl anxiously ran his hand through his hair, feeling exposed now that his glasses were gone. He was hastily trying to sort out his curls, but Thris grabbed his hand, because he loved the way the boy’s hair fell right now.

“Which part didn’t you like?”

“The actual sex part,” Wyl blurted, words slurring. Thrisan felt as if someone had dropped a rock on him. A big rock. Or like a whole cliff.

“Why?” he asked, mouth dry. Wyliam clearly felt bad about his words but he only said,

“It hurt.”

Thrisan flipped them over, pressing Wyliam down into the pillows, determined to right his wrongs. The boy below him was dishevelled and beautiful and looking at him with wide green eyes, “T-Thrisan-“

“Shh, don’t worry, I’m not going to have sex with you,” Thrisan said hastily, clumsily, leaning down for another passionate kiss. He successfully managed to soothe the Dust, who relaxed into the pillows, “I’ll never hurt you again, I promise,” Thrisan whispered, his lips brushing against Wyl’s with each word. The boy tangled his trembling hands in the covers beneath him as if he didn’t quite believe that Thris was saying the truth.

The man grabbed the hem of the Dust’s shirt and in a swift tug he got it over his head, musing his curls even more than before. Wyliam suddenly clapped twice and the light switched off in the room, the only illumination coming from the bottle lights above their heads. They painted Wyliam with gentle greens, pinks and blue and made him look even prettier than before. The boy turned to the side, to hide his naked chest, the way he had the first time, and just like then Thrisan rolled him back over. He kissed him, then he pressed his mouth to the little dip between his skinny, freckled collarbones.

“Thrisan-,” Wyl started to speak, but then the words seemed to die in his throat as Thrisan continued to kiss a path down his body. The alcohol was making both of them more comfortable around each other, more than they had been during their first time.

Thris enjoyed the warmth of Wyliam’s skin beneath his lips as he brushed it over the boy, over and over. He created a pathway for himself, down the boy’s chest and torso, kissing his little outie belly button, until he reached his two sharp hipbones and the cupcake printed shorts that had ridden dangerously low. Unlike the boy’s t-shirt, Thrisan removed his shorts slowly, kissing every new inch of revealed skin. Wyl’s breath was erratic above him, and when Thris looked up he saw that the boy had buried his blushing face in the crook of his arm, embarrassed, but not making a move to stop the King.

Wyliam’s pretty cock slid out of the shorts, and the second it did Thrisan’s mouth was on it. Wyliam’s hips stuttered up and he let out a helpless whine, which was quickly muffled by his own hand. Thris licked, sucked, teased the member in front of him with his lips and tongue. He hadn’t given much fellatio in his life but he had to admit that out of the times he did, this was definitely the most pleasant. Wyl’s cock fit nicely in his mouth, and when Thrisan hollowed out his cheeks the boy above him made the most delicious sound. Wyl was writhing helplessly against the covers, his toes curling, and the more pleasure he seemed to be in the more Thrisan wanted to give him. He licked at the underside of the boy’s penis, swirled his tongue at the head, and Wyliam’s sounds became more and more desperate, his eyes glazed over. He was more intoxicating than the liquor they had drank.

“T-Thrisan...,” the boy gasped, “Thris,” every time he said the King’s name it made the Varsen
Wyliam came fast, in the space of a few short minutes, but Thrisan had expected that. He was sure the Shif was a virgin, so he didn’t last as long as someone with as much experience as the King. He exploded into Thrisan’s mouth, his come salty and sweet at the same time, his back arcing beautifully, pale body trembling with the aftershock. The King surged back upwards and he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. Wyl looked absolutely fucked, breathing as if he had just ran a marathon, cheeks and shoulders red, eyes closed. The King’s eyes slid all over his body, greedily taking him in, trying to memorise him like this. He reached down and gently brushed a damp curl from the boy’s forehead. Wyliam tensed and opened his eyes, and suddenly he looked the same way he had their first time, when he had ran from Thrisan’s chamber.

“Don’t look at me like that,” Thrisan murmured. When he tried to touch the boy again, Wyliam flinched away. His shoulders started trembling, “You’re so pretty,” the King whispered, because it was true, and because it had calmed Wyl down the first time. This time it didn’t work. Wyliam slid from Thrisan’s arms and scrambled for his t-shirt, pulling it hastily back on. Just in the dark shirt and nothing else he looked so alluring that Thris almost pounced on him again. That is, until Wyl opened his mouth.

“P-Please leave,” he whispered, hugging himself as if wanting to hide. Thris’ heart twisted, “Why?” he asked, feeling like he was back at square one, “Did I hurt you?”

Wyliam shook his head but refused to look at Thrisan. His eyes were glassy with tears, “P-Please. I can’t...I-just...p-please...”

The boy was getting a little hysterical. Thrisan didn’t want to upset him, though he seemed to do that just by his presence. The alcohol seemed to have evaporated from his veins and he was sobering up now. Wyliam had drunk a lot too...what if he only agreed to me touching him because we were drunk? Thris couldn’t handle that thought. He didn’t understand what he was doing wrong – he tried so hard to make sure that Wyl wasn’t scared of uncomfortable. Well, maybe alcohol wasn’t the best way to ensure that.

“I’m sorry,” Thris said, slipping off the bed. Wyliam wouldn’t even look at him. The King was coming to the conclusion that the Dust just didn’t want him, and allowed him to do the things he did because he was scared of the power the King had. That hurt. Thris took the empty bottle of liquor and turned to the door. As if on second thought, hopeful that maybe Wyl changed his mind, he turned to the bed again. The boy was facing the window, lying down, clutching his mind. Heart heavy, Thrisan left the room.

Shal 20th Ove 1161EE (2 days later)

Arossa.

They were gathered in a clearing in the woods by the palace, the snow beneath their feet glimmered from the early morning sun. Only Kalorian, Princess Ashia, Azzie and another servant, the Lady of Defence and the remaining Competitors were present. They were all ready to begin their second challenge and Rian couldn’t help but think how stardamn stupid this whole situation was. There was a murderer somewhere in the Palace, someone trying to kill Kalorian, and instead of trying to locate them and end the danger, they were playing fucking games. Because the second challenge was no more than a game – something the Lady of Defence made clear.

Muine Luric, easily the most dangerous looking Calanthe in the whole galaxy with her half-shaved head and eye patch over her left eyes, looked unimpressed as she explained the rules, “Each
competitor is being given a differently coloured ribbon,” she said in a hoarse voice as Azizla walked through the ankle-deep snow, handing each of the competitors a sash just like Lady Muine said. She stopped by Lady Shefanida, who looked afraid, and tied her ribbon around the girl’s arm herself. She clearly felt protective over the lost girl, just like Kal did. Rian thought it was a stupid joke when he got the last ribbon in the box. It was black – the colour of death. Azizla mouth sorry at him. He could’ve imagined it but when he looked up, he saw Lady Eskilsa smirking a him with superiority, her own ribbon a pure white. Nobody else seemed to notice that and Lady Muine continued speaking, hand resting casually on her sword, “You have to keep the sash somewhere where it will be visible. You will have ten minutes to disperse into the forest, after which our dear Prince Kal,” she gestured at Kalorian who stood at her side, looking incredibly attractive in his white furs, contrasting with his tanned skin and dark hair, “will have two hours to catch you. If the Prince finds you and takes your ribbon, you lose the game. The last person standing will be safe from elimination later tonight. However there is a catch; if the Prince finds you, you can try and persuade him not to take your ribbon,” as she spoke the competitors tied their ribbons to various parts of their bodies. Rian half-heartedly wrapped his around his wrist. He didn’t see much point in this: in the end Kal would choose one of the girls anyway. Still, he had enough pride to not just back down, “There are two aims of the game,” Lady Muine continued, “One – to show your ability to camouflage. You will never know in what situations a Monarch must be able to escape and hide. Additionally your diplomacy and ability of persuasion, both key to being a royal, will be shown,” the Lady’s eye narrowed and her hand tightened on her sword, “I will have no sabotages or cheating. You must keep your heavy shoes on, as no flying is permitted. Are there any questions?”

Lady Asura looked equally as unimpressed as Lady Muine when she raised her freckled hand. Princess Ashia inclined her head, “Yeah. So, what happens if the Prince doesn’t find any of us in the two hours?”

“Not likely,” Lady Muine said, eyes narrowed, “But we will cross that bridge when we get to it,” clearly not wanting to answer any more questions Lady Muine gestured at the second servant. They brought forward a heavy, old fashioned clock. She pressed a button and the arms started ticking, “You now have ten minutes before Prince Kalorian starts hunting you. I suggest you run.”

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Rian trekked through the woods, leaving deep ridges in the snow. He had no idea where he was, and if he cared enough or had even an inkling of hope that Kal would ever choose him, he would’ve made sure he wasn’t leaving any tracks in the snow. As it were, he wanted to get eliminated, so he could go back to more important things. Such as figuring out who was trying to murder the man he was in love with.

A Mohal bird screeched in the trees above Rian and the man flinched. In the past half an hour he had gotten accustomed to the silence the snow provided him with. He hadn’t seen the Ladies, or Kal. Now he craned his head up and looked at the bare tree branches interlinking over his head, the cold sunlight filtering in through the branches. A large Mohal bird sat on one of said branches, peering curiously at Rian. It was a majestic creature, green all over. Its feathers were slick and sharp, and it stood on one thin leg, its prideful icy blue eyes looking at Rian with curiosity and disregard. It opened its beak and let out another screech, the branches around it frosting over. Rian smiled. Then he heard branches breaking, somewhere behind him. The boy tensed and his primal instinct told him to run. Rian knew he wasn’t in any real danger, but his eyes still frantically searched the nearby trees for some kind of hiding spot. He found it the moment his eyes landed on a dead tree with a hollow bark, a dark hole ripped at its base. It was small, but Calanthe were little smaller than average, so with a little trouble Rian climbed inside, smoothing his steps out in the snow behind himself. He laid on his stomach on the damp earth that hadn’t been touched by snow, and waited
with his heart pounding, clutching the ribbon wrapped around his wrist tightly.

He didn’t have to wait long because the next thing he knew was that Lady Asura was walking out from among the trees. She was buried in deep purple furs that made her twice the size she actually was. Despite them she was still shivering – Arcoda was the only province on Arossa that remained relatively warm all year long and the cold was clearly taking a toll on her. The Lady stopped walking, looking angry as always, and glanced around. Her ribbon dangled from her waist – as purple as her furs.

“Where the hell am I?” she grumbled under her breath, turning around in a furious circle. She groaned in frustration and kicked the snow. She hadn’t spotted the Mohal bird, but it had spotted her and when she sent the snow up it took off with a shriek.

“Lady Asura,” Kal slipped from between the trees, undetected until now. Rian pushed himself further into his hiding place, remarking on how ridiculous it was that he was hiding from his friend in a tree.

“Prince Kal!” Asura said when she saw him, and her hand twitched. She took two steps back but before she could run Kal was by her side, his hand gripping the end of her ribbon and smiling at her. Kalorian was a calm, peaceful person who hated violence and therefore rarely killed an animal during hunting. But he did know how to track. Which was how he found Lady Asura, and how he’d find the rest of them.

“So,” Kalorian was still smiling, though Lady Asura looked annoyed, “Persuade me not to take your ribbon.”

“Well, if you want to take anyone’s ribbon I suggest Lady Shefanida,” Lady Asura said venomously, surprising Kal, who blinked at her, “she’s the only one not even interested in you. If you eliminate me you’re one person further from finding your fiancée.”

“Until now I could’ve sworn you weren’t interested in me either,” Kal said, raising an eyebrow.

“I apologise, but I’ve already got a good idea of who I want,” Kal seemed unimpressed by Lady Asura’s advances and in one swift movement he stepped away from the girl, pulling her ribbon from around her waist. The girl’s eye twitched.

“I see.”

“This doesn’t mean you’ll be eliminated tonight,” Kalorian said quickly, apologetically.

“What’s the point?” Lady Asura spat in fury, “if in the end you’ll choose someone else anyway. I reckon it’s going to be Eskilsa. You seem like you like the pretty type.”

The girl turned in the snow and strode off, her shoulders tense with anger. Her reaction might’ve been too dramatic, but Rian couldn’t judge her – he couldn’t tell how he was going to react when he was going to be eliminated. Even though he couldn’t know for sure if that day wasn’t today.

He laid on the ground until Kal also left this part of the woods, looking mournfully at the purple ribbon in his hands, and then the King climbed back out, brushing dirt off of himself. He sighed as he looked around the empty forest. He contemplated leaving his ribbon in the snow, but something stopped him from doing so. Sighing he took two steps in a random direction.
“Rian.”

The man froze when he heard Kalorian’s voice, and then cursed himself in his head for being impatient. He should’ve known Kal wouldn’t go far. Then he cursed himself again, because he really shouldn’t have cared so much. He turned around and looked at Kalorian, grinning at him.

“Gotcha,” the Prince said, clearly pleased with himself.

“Not yet,” Rian’s fingers clenched around the loose black ribbon around his wrist and he turned on his heel again and ran. It was stupid, but since they were children he and Kal competed against each other in games – they were close friends after all. And Rian wasn’t about to lose to the Prince, not in this.

He ran through the snow, dashing around trees and kicking up snow, he heard Kal behind him, branches snapping beneath his feet. Rian’s breath was coming out fast, turning to clouds in front of his face. Soon enough his lungs were burning from the icy winter air, and his legs were aching.

“You can’t run forever!” Kal yelled.

“Go annoy someone else!” Rian yelled back, breathless.

Seconds later Kalorian grabbed his arm and jerked it back, suddenly, startling the King, and both of them tumbled into the snow. Rian landed on top of Kalorian who let out an oof as his back hit the ground. For a second they were both stunned at the sudden change in position, and when Rian’s head stopped spinning he opened his eyes and found that his face was inches away from Kalorian’s. He exhaled sharply, without meaning to, and jerked back. Kal was faster though, he grabbed Rian’s arm again and switched their spots. Rian found himself out of breath, with the snow dampening his cloak from behind, looking up at a grinning Kal. They were so close, and this position made Rian forget everything except how badly he wanted to tug Kal to him, to wrap his legs around the man’s waist and kiss him and do things with him, right here in the snow...

“So,” Kalorian smiled down at Rian and without warning grabbed his wrists and pinned them down in the snow as well, fingers pressing into the King’s ribbon, “Persuade me not to take your ribbon.”

It hurt more than it should that Kal used the same line with Rian as he did with Lady Asura – as if they were strangers, as if they didn’t know each other for years. With annoyance Rian freed one of his wrists shoved at the man’s chest, though Kal didn’t budge. Sometimes Rian forgot the Varsen was bigger than him.

“I don’t hear any sweet words,” Kal teased. Rian wasn’t in the mood. He didn’t want to be like this with Kal, didn’t want to feel these frustrating feelings.

“Get off me,” he gritted.

“Make me,” Kal was clearly enjoying himself. Rian looked at him helplessly. He didn’t know what to do; he wasn’t strong enough to get Kalorian off but he couldn’t stand being this close to him. He swallowed anxiously,

“Please,” he whispered. Kalorian’s eyes widened and he looked stunned, hands tightening around Rian’s wrists for a moment. He leaned down, so there were literal inches between their faces. Rian’s heart was pounding, clenching in his chest. He was sure he was going to have a heart attack if Kal didn’t move.

“Why shouldn’t I take your ribbon?” he whispered again, and there was no playfulness left in his voice or eyes as he looked down at Rian with complete seriousness. The King didn’t know what he
was playing at, and he wondered, distractedly, how they must’ve looked, if anyone was looking at them now.

“You can have it if you want,” Rian said. Kal looked disappointed, as if it wasn’t the response he wanted. He sighed and pulled back, gently untying Rian’s black ribbon from around his wrist. His stomach fell – a part of him believed that Kal would leave it there, that Rian was special to him. Clearly not.

The Prince stood up and placed Rian’s ribbon at his belt, alongside Lady Asura’s. Rian didn’t move.

“Get up. You’ll get hypothermia,” Kal’s voice wasn’t as warm as always.

“You have an hour left. Go look for your future wife,” Rian said, hoping he didn’t sound as bitter as he felt. Without another word, Kal walked off into the trees, the way he had with Lady Asura.

Rian laid in the snow and stared at the sky above. Somehow clouds had gathered without the King realising, turning the sky a pale grey and hiding the sun. So Rian looked at the sky, and let the snow completely soak through his clothes. When fresh petals started tumbling down Rian dried his tears, the ones that had been falling down his face since Kal left, stood up, and started walking towards where the towers of his Palace loomed over the tops of the trees.

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When Rian came back to his chambers, he was completely soaked. Azizla was dusting the parapets by the windows and looked up when she heard the door close. Her blue eyes widened,

“Stars, Rian, what happened?!” she dropped the duster and hurried to the King. He allowed her to pull off his furs and cloaks, “Why are you so wet, is everything alright?”

“He took my ribbon,” Rian said simply.

“What?!” Azzie demanded, stopping in front of the King with an armful of his clothes.

Rian shrugged, “I was being a prick. He took my ribbon. That’s that.”

“But...did you get eliminated?” Azzie asked hurriedly. Rian shrugged,

“I guess. I’ll find out at dinner. Or before.”

He didn’t really say much more despite Aziza’s prying questions. He allowed her to take his drenched clothes, and draw him a bath. He sat in the warm water and brooded and then he came out into his bedroom in just his night robe. As much as he didn’t want to go down for dinner he was starving, and it was his duty as the King. So again he allowed Azizla to pick out some clothes for him and then he went down to the main hall.

A dozen pairs of eyes turned to him when he arrived and the candidates, alongside Ashia, Kal and some of the delegates, all stood to bow and murmur my King under their breaths. He welcomed them with a tense smile and took his place next to his cousin. He tried not to look at Kalorian when he noticed something. He frowned.

The starters were being brought in and Rian leaned into Ash, “Where’s Lady Asura?” he murmured. She blinked,

“You don’t know?” she asked, absentmindedly rubbing her stomach, “Kal eliminated her after the second part of the competition finished. Eskilsa won.”
Rian’s stomach twisted and he felt shock wash over him like a bucket of cold water. He had been sure that Kalorian was getting rid of him, and now...the boy didn’t know whether to be upset or happy. Kal was messing with his head – what was the point of keeping him in the competition?

Rian ate his dinner as if in a trance. He had no idea what was happening – on one hand Kal was holding this competition with these beautiful girls and on the other he was keeping Rian in it as if...as if...no. He would never feel the same way about me. There’s nothing I can hope for.

Afterwards he found himself wandering the dark corridors, alone, trying to sort out his thoughts. Somehow, without meaning to, he found himself right outside Kal’s door. He knew what he had to do – he had to apologise and save this friendship before the Competition ruined it. He could somehow live with Kalorian marrying some girl...at least that’s what he kept telling himself.

He lifted his hand and knocked on the heavy oak door to Kal’s chambers, but there was no answer. Rian knocked again, and again, and finally, annoyed, he just walked right in. The lights flickered on, warm, honey-coloured ones, but the King found that he was by himself. He sighed, feeling his irritation spike, and turned in a circle in the room. He decided to wait for Kal – he probably wouldn’t take long. The King sat down on his friend’s bed, the same bed they’ve had a dozen sleepovers in over the years, and then collapsed on top of it. He stared at the canopy overhead and then turned on his side on the soft covers. Without meaning to he pressed his face into the Prince’s pillow. He inhaled and felt his shoulders relax. It smelled like him.

Rian jumped out of the bed, unable to handle the thought that in less than a month Kalorian would be making love to his wife on this very bed. Completely on accident his eyes landed on the bin in the corner. It had one little piece of paper inside and curiosity got the best of Rian as he stalked over and fished it out. It was a note and without thinking much of it, just trying to pass the time, he started reading it.

Prince Kalorian.

It had come to my attention that your friend, King Rian, is in love with you. I am completely sure of this. Do what you will with this troubling information that threatens the competition.

There was no signature, but the King knew who wrote it – the Baroness. Rian stared at the paper, re-read over the words until his hands started shaking too much for him to make out the letters anymore. Then he dropped the note into the bin. It was in the bin. Kal had thrown it in there. That was enough to make it clear to Rian just how the Prince felt about this information. He was disgusted, that much was obvious.

Rian couldn’t even stand to be in his friend’s bedroom anymore. He slipped out into the hallway. He wanted to leave the Palace, leave Arossa, but he couldn’t because he was the fucking King. Voices down the corridor made Rian stop in his hysteria and take a deep breath. He slid into an alcove, trying to calm his heart, just as two figures came around the corner of the corridor. The people that appeared were Kalorian and Lady Shefanida, the shy misfit girl. Rian frowned.

“I truly am sorry,” Shefanida said, “I tried to have feelings for you but-“

“It’s alright, I understand,” Kalorian smiled warmly at her and squeezed her shoulder.

“I love her,” Shefanida said helplessly, looking close to tears.

“I hope you two are happy together – you deserve it. I will inform the council that you have backed out of the competition.”
“Thankyou,” Shefanida exhaled, and for the first time since she arrived in the palace she didn’t look worried, “and Aziza will she...”

“She’ll be fine. She will keep her job, and you are welcome to stay as long as you want—”

Aziza and Lady Shefanida. Rian would’ve never expected that but now he remembered them whispering in the hallways, the way Azzie had looked at her Lady earlier today, when tying her ribbon. It all made sense. Rian didn’t have the head to think about it now, and he couldn’t look at Kalorian after the note he found in the bin. He didn’t doubt that Kal didn’t want to look at him either. He wanted to speak to Eilo, so, so badly. The King slipped down the corridor, and nobody noticed him.
The Buyer and the Cheater

Tuhi 23rd Ove 1161EE (3 days later)

Calliban.

They had thrown a black cloth over Dashyan’s cage, so he couldn’t see anything as the slave ship landed on what he presumed was Calliban. The crew must’ve had bottled time, or maybe they had a time maker on-board, because it only took nine days to get to the planet. Nine long, long days, full of shouting and questions and one worrying thought pounding in Dashe’s head like an insistent insect – what about Tye?

But now it was all over. Dashe was about to be sold into slavery but he didn’t completely process that information yet. He kept thinking it was some kind of joke, that everything would work itself out. He couldn’t be a slave, he couldn’t imagine being someone else’s property. He kept hoping that when the black cloth was removed from his cage he would see his grinning friend playing a prank on him. Except Tye didn’t play pranks – he would never risk Dashyan’s fear for the sake of a joke. And no joke stretched on for nine days. Nine days in which none of the slaves were allowed to wash, not until right before the auction, and were given stale bread and too-soft vegetables to eat. Now it was different – now Dashyan was dressed in tight pants and a clean white shirt, just like everyone else. He had been scrubbed almost raw to only seem desirable to potential buyers.

“Oi! Are we going to get some food or entertainment or something?” Korom jeered, “It’s boring in here!”

His voice came from somewhere beyond the darkness, though Dashyan had no idea from where exactly. He heard someone’s gun slam against the iron bars of some cage, the sound reverberating. Dashe flinched. For over ten minutes now their cages were being pulled on wheels through somewhere, though nobody told the slaves anything.

“Shut your mouth or you’ll get gagged like your sheep friend, Korom,” one of the slavers snapped.

“We’re almost there,” another snickered, “and then you’ll have plenty of entertainment. What do you lot think will happen to these?” The slavers had no compassion – they had done this a thousand times.

“Korom will go to hard labour, undoubtedly,” someone sneered, “someone will wipe that smirk of his face with lashes and days of sweating out in the forest. His whole life will be in chains.”

“Cute prediction,” Korom said sarcastically, seemingly unmoved by the slavers words.

“The girl, the pretty one, and that little Hybrid boy, they’re going to be sex slaves, no doubt.”
The words made Dashyan’s blood run cold and his eyes widened in the darkness of his cage. While he was inside it he was safe, but what would happen when he was bought...? He felt sick. He couldn’t imagine having sex with anybody. Except maybe Tyeval (that thought wasn’t new but it still made Dashe blush) but if he became a sex slave he would have sex with anyone but Tyeval. The thought made him shudder and tears prick his eyes. Sarena said something back, smart mouthing the slavers, but Dashe didn’t hear her. He stood anxiously, gripping the bars in front of him until they grew warm from his body heat, waiting for his fate.

Slowly sounds started filtering in – footsteps, the murmur of a crowd. The sounds got louder and louder and the slavers stopped speaking among themselves. Dashyan didn’t even realise he was holding his breath until he started feeling light-headed. His grip on the iron bars was white-knuckled and he had trouble swallowing. He had trouble doing anything at all, actually, except praying reverently that someone would save him. He thought about his fathers – how would they react knowing that their only child had been kidnapped and sold into slavery? They’d waste their life away trying to find him. And what of Ty? The thought of the Ubloit was the hardest. Dashyan would’ve made time, but he didn’t want to brood in this cage in his own little time bubble. He was on a strange planet, on his way to an auction, and he had to find his way back to Ty.

Dashe knew exactly when the cages were drawn outside, because the sound of a crowd gathered was suddenly deafening. His heart seized in his chest and despite his earlier promises to be brave, he found himself backing away from the bars. Soon enough the cages came to a stop, still in darkness, and the crowd somewhere on the other side of that darkness quietened. Dashyan yearned for Sarena’s sarcasm or Korom’s baiting, even for Nagoma’s sobs, but his companions were silent.

“Ladies, Gentlemen, noble creatures and everything in between!” a voice Dashyan didn’t recognise from the slave ship rang out somewhere to the left, the echo coming back informing Dashyan that they were in a large room – at least the man spoke commercial Faso, one Dashyan could understand, though in the crowd dozens of whispers indicated that translations were taking place. How did this happen? How did Dashe go from being wrapped up in Ty’s arms, feeling like the safest creature in the universe, to being here? “We have a lovely new shipment of toys for anyone who has the funds to pay for them!” a cruel cheer from the crowd that made Dashyan tense, “Now! Shall we satisfy the curiosity of such a fine gathering as is before me and reveal who is beneath the shroud of mystery?” another cheer, this time louder. Dashe squeezed his eyes shut, willing it all away. It’s a nightmare, it’s a nightmare...

He heard the sound of a cloth being jerked to the side in a dramatic fashion, the fabric fluttering. The crowd erupted in a murmur of voices once more, like wind weaving through a field, making the crops rustle. Dashe remained in darkness, unknowing as to what was happening.

“He here we have a lovely piece!” the auctioneer bellowed, “A Vlassain, thirty-seven years of age. Perfect maid, perfect mistress if you so please. Look at her – she’s as meek as a...well, sheep!” the crowd erupted in laughter at the pun and Dashe winced. He could only imagine how afraid Nagona was, “She won’t make a noise, the ideal slave. She will polish your house clean – and not only! Now – bidding starts at three hundred axos. Who will give me that much? Ah, yes! The Ishait in the blue cape. Going once, going twice – but no! The lady in pink will give three hundred and fifty axos! My dear lady you’re in for a treat!” Dashyan was disoriented, unknowing to where exactly he was. The shouting of prices continued for a few more minutes until Nagona was sold for five hundred axos.

Five hundred – that was the worth of her life. Her soft sheep sobs could be heard only by the people on stage. Dashyan closed his eyes, though it didn’t make much difference in the darkness of his cage, and pressed his forehead against the iron bars, hoping their coolness would help him gather his thoughts. Another cloth was removed from a cage, but it wasn’t his.
“Here we have a beautiful Shif Lady! I promise you she might not look like it now, but she’s a sort!” Dashe opened his eyes – Sarena was getting sold somewhere behind the darkness surrounding him, “a bright, young beauty, aged only nineteen, with a sharp tongue to match! She can be the mistress of the century and accompany to many a-event, or she can be your personal sex doll! Because she is a doll, ain’t she? Come on, slave, say something witty,” the Auctioneer said mockingly. Sarena remained silent and Dashe was proud of her for that, “She’s got nothing to say!” the auctioneer proclaimed, not fazed, and the crowd laughed, “bidding starts at five hundred axos for this Shif beauty! Ah, what a fast one the man in red is! Six hundred, eh, old chap? Perfect, going- ah no! The couple in the dazzling green will give more! Seven hundred-“

Sarena was sold for a thousand three hundred axos, and Korom for nine-hundred. Dashyan too late realised that the next flutter of fabric meant his cage, and his dark cover was roughly removed, the light flooding his eyes making him tense and flinch.

“Our last treat for tonight! This lovely young Hybrid – half Vlassain, half Charasean!” the auctioneer proclaimed. Dashyan’s eyes grew accustomed to the sudden change in lighting and he could see the man now – a fat Ishait with greedy black eyes and slicked back white hair.

Dashe found himself on a stage, like in a theatre. The room was full to the brim with people – all masked, anonymous, so many species packed together, sitting at little tables with dim lamps on them, sipping drinks from flute glasses and watching the stage like hawks from behind their masks. There were so many of them that Dashyan didn’t know where to look. All of them were slavers. He shuddered in disgust and looked at the cages next to him. His three companions were all retreated to the back of their prisons – Nagona was crying softly, while Korom and Sarena glared at the people gathered in front of them.

“Aged sixteen the Hybrid is a true highlight of the night!” the auctioneer continued, and Dashyan had never felt so sick in his life. He was literally being sold, as if he were an object, “Sweet, untouched, still a virgin!” the auctioneer informed the dozens of people, as if that wasn’t some intimate information. Dashe found himself blushing with shame and like his companions retreating to the back of his cage, “He would make a lovely sex doll also! Bidding starts at six-hundred axos!”

A Wurund man in the corner, a huge, scaly giant, raised his hand. Dashyan shuddered – he couldn’t imagine belonging to that monster. He couldn’t imagine belonging to anyone. Except Tye. He wouldn’t mind being completely, utterly Tyeval’s, but it was too late for that now.

“Six hundred axos from the gentleman in black!” the auctioneer said cheerfully, as if selling chickens. Immediately a willowy Charasean woman, who looked like an Alpha, raised her hand. Dashyan’s eyes pricked with new tears but he refused to cry in front of these people. “Seven hundred from the lady in white!”

Several other people raised their hands and with each new creature Dashe was more and more sick. He wondered if he vomited would they still want him. After one thousand two hundred the bidding became stuck between the Wurund man and the Charasean woman, and they bounced back between each other. The price rose higher and higher, and Dashyan didn’t want to be either of theirs.

“One seventy for the lady!”

“Oh, one ninety for the gentleman!”

“Two thousand axos for the lady in white!”

“But no! Two thousand one hundred for the gentleman-“
Dashyan had drowned out the sound of the auction, trying to remember his last moment of freedom, trying to figure out how to get out of the cage. He was distracted, couldn’t concentrate on making time. He was too scared. When the auctioneer mentioned a third slaver the boy’s head snapped up and he frantically searched for the ‘Ishait gentleman.’ There were many people from that species here, and Dashe only spotted the man when he raised his hand to counter the Charasean lady’s bid. Dashyan held his breath, and his hope disappeared. He didn’t recognise the man – his all black eyes and purple skin were stranger to him.

“Two thousand five hundred for the Hybrid from the Ishait gentleman!” the auctioneer bellowed. The Charasean lady’s lip curled back and the Wurund man glared, but neither raised their hand, “Going once! Going twice! Going thrice! The Hybrid is sold to the Ishait gentleman!”

Clapping erupted and the cages were wheeled into the back, to dirty storage rooms. The crew that had captured Dashyan were long gone, back to their hunts. The next few minutes were a blur – the four slaves were roughly pulled from their cages, kinetic wire wrapped around their wrists. The bidders that won each of them came to the back to settle the payments and in the blink of an eye Dashyan found himself standing in front of the Ishait man.

It was impossible to tell his age, though he seemed rather young, maybe around thirty. His dark eyes were stormy, and he seemed vaguely annoyed as he looked at Dashyan with disinterest. He had spent a fortune on him and he didn’t look happy.

“Enjoy!” the auctioneer happily handed the man the end of Dashe’s kinetic wire, tugging him roughly forward in the process, before disappearing somewhere. He didn’t even see Dashyan as human, he had no emotions. The young boy wanted desperately to cry.

“Come on,” the Ishait said, and without another word he pulled Dashyan out through the back door by his wire. The boy felt hollow and lost but stumbled after his new owner, trying to understand what even happened. They exited through a back door and Dashe’s first look of Calliban was of dark streets, full of litter, and wire lines running over the city, like a net, sparking every few seconds with electricity supplied to the rest of the planet. A city rose close by, and ships pierced the air. How many of them were slave ships? The air stank of oil.

“W-What’s going to happen to me?” Dashyan asked, his voice shaky and small as he followed the Ishait man. His owner stopped walking and turned around to look at the boy. Just then screams and gunshots erupted from the warehouse-like building Dashe had just exited. The boy tensed.

“Don’t worry,” his owner approached him, “that’s just the police,” with a swift, practiced movement he pulled the kinetic wire from Dashe’s wrists. The boy stared at him in shock. He was so confused, and scared and-

“What’s h-happening?” he whispered.

“A raid,” the Ishait looked around anxiously and only then Dashe noticed the gun strapped to his waist. He pulled the hood of his cloak over his purple hair as a light rain started falling from the night sky, “the police knew about this auction. Everyone will be arrested, the slaves freed.”

“A-And me?”

“You’re going home,” the Ishait said, and when Dashyan continued looking at him like a lost puppy, he sighed, “My name is Evander. I’m a friend of both your fathers.”
“E-Evander?” Dashe choked, “A-As in the Ishait who tried to sabotage the Arossa Mission and ended up saving the crew?”

Evander shrugged, shoving his hands into his pockets, something that made him seem younger than he was, “The one and the same. Your friend, the one left on your ship, he fixed it and sent a message to your dads. They were furious. You’re lucky I was on Calliban and we managed to track down this warehouse or this could’ve all ended badly.”

“W-Wait...,” Dashyan swallowed, trying not to get his hopes up unless this was all some joke, “Is Tye...is Tye okay?”

“Yeah. Thanks to that bottled time you gave him,” Evander shook his head, “That was smart, I’m not going to lie.”

“Is he here?” Dashe asked, his voice growing fainter and fainter.

“Come,” was all Evander said, and he started walking down the alley. The soft rain falling made Dashe’s hair start going a little curly. The boy struggled to keep up with his saviour, his thoughts an even bigger mess than before. In the space of a few short minutes he had been sold at an auction as a slave, saved, and now...and now what? The wrath of Dashe’s parents at the trouble he and Tye would be when they returned to Hannibal was now welcome. It was a much better fate than what Dashyan had thought his would be just short moments ago.

They walked through damp alleyway, littered with trash, and Dashe kept close to Evander’s side, his heartbeat slowly calming down as he realised that he was safe. His hands trembled uncontrollably at his sides. The rain seeped gently through Dashyan’s thin white shirt as he and Evander entered a cramped, dark parking lot. The fact that none of the ships were taking off was a comfort to Dashyan as to the fact that none of the slavers got out.

Someone shouted as Evander and Dashe approached. Two Ishait guards stood by the entrance to the lot, and raised their weapons, pointing it at the two. Dashyan flinched as they said something to Evander in angry Amablilis. Evander replied calmly and held up his wrist. A hologram of his ID glimmered in green in front of him, informing the guards that he was a detective. The two guards nodded and let them through without further ado and Dashe found himself among shadowy ships. Almost immediately he spotted Sycamora, nestled between other vessels, the lights on, alive again.

“DASHE!”

The shout echoed through the parking lot alongside the footsteps, and his voice made Dashyan’s heart start pounding all over again.

“Tye,” he whispered, faintly, under his breath.

The Ubloit came barrelling through the rainy darkness and seeing him, safe and in one piece, made Dashyan’s legs buckle. He would’ve fallen but Tye got to him first, slamming into him, arms coming up around the boy so tightly the Hybrid felt he couldn’t breathe, but he didn’t care, as he clung onto Tyeval desperately. His warmth, his familiar body, his smell, they were so comforting that Dashe couldn’t do anything but hold onto his friend fiercely.

“Dashyan, Dashe, stars, Dashe,” Tyeval babbled, holding onto his friend like no tomorrow, stroking his back, his head, anywhere he could reach, and then, “I’m sorry, I’m sorry...”

“It wasn’t your fault,” Dashyan pulled away, so he could look at Tyeval’s face, his perfect face. Tye cupped his friend’s cheeks in his hands, and pressed their foreheads together. Feeling the warmth of
his skin against him finally made Dashe’s break. His expression crumbled and fat tears welled in his eyes, a sob ripping from his throat. Tyeval wrapped him up in the safe warmth of his arms once more, holding Dashe firmly against him, a silent promise to never let him go again.

“I-w-was so fucking s-scared,” Dashe sobbed, clinging onto his friend.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry...” Tyeval kept whispering, like his own personal prayer. Evander seemed to have melted into the rain.

(The same day)

Fayaxiamen

The moment Thrisan stopped actively searching for Wyliam in the hallways of the Briallan Palace, the boy seemed to be everywhere, always tethering on the edge of his vision. It took everything in the King to keep away from the Dust, to not touch him or speak to him or bother him. He wanted Wyliam to be happy and he tried to come to terms with the fact that the Shif would never be, not when Thris was around. The King would’ve found the boy a job somewhere else, but working in the palace was the best job there was, and Thris wanted the best for Wyliam.

Which was why he was here. Trying to forget.

The Dust in front of him dropped his night robe off of his creamy shoulders, allowing it to tumble to the rich red carpet, revealing his naked body. Thrisan tried not to let his expression show how distracted he was by something completely different than the naked creature in front of him. He was the same servant that came to dress him for the festival, when Thrisan still had hope that Wyl felt something for him, the one with the blue hair and blue eyes – his name was Kirvo. He smirked at the King now, confidently sauntering over.

“My King,” he said sultrily, placing a hand on Thrisan’s shoulder. He was gorgeous, but the King wasn’t even a little bit attracted to him. He didn’t want him, he wanted Wyl. When Kirvo pressed his mouth to Thris’, kissing him passionately, the King had the urge to push him away. He’s supposed to help you forget about Wyl! He told himself and forced himself to wrap an arm around Kirvo’s waist, roughly pushing him over and into the bed. The servant gave an exhilarated laugh and immediately wrapped his legs around the King’s waist, pulling him down for more and more kisses.

Thris tried to lose himself in his warm body, he really did, but every time he closed his eyes he just saw Wyliam, the way he had been in this very bed, breathless, holding onto Thris as if he were afraid that the King would simultaneously come closer and disappear. The King craved him, badly.

“Take me my lord,” Kirvo whispered eagerly, “I’m yours.”

The words did nothing to Thrisan, but if they were to fall from Wyl’s lips...just the thought of that made the King shiver, which Kirvo mistook as a sign of want because he smirked. Thris was gone by then, buried deep in his thoughts of Wyliam. On one hand he wished he never met him, then he wouldn’t have been going crazy over him. On the other hand Wyliam was everything that the King had unknowingly been looking for. Before their sexual encounters Thris managed to start to get to know him, only breaching the edge of what was hidden inside the boy – he knew a little about his siblings, which he clearly loved dearly. He knew Wyl liked to read old-fashioned books, and go to the movies, and that his favourite season was spring, and that he loved flowers.

It was dark in the room, the flickering light on the walls casting little enough light that when Thrisan pressed his mouth to Kirvo’s neck he could pretend it was Wyl, when he ran his hands down the smooth panes of the boy’s body without looking at him, he could pretend it was Wyl, when he
pressed himself against the warm body beneath him, he could pretend it was Wyl, when his eyes slid upwards to the door, which was open, he could pretend the person standing in it was Wyl.

Except it was.

Thrisan jerked away from Kirvo as if he had been doused in freezing water. The boy sat up also, startled, and they both turned to the door. Wyliam stood there, his eyes wide, mouth open in shock, staring at them. A pile of fluffy white towels tumbled out of his arms and landed on the floor in a messy pile.

“S-Sorry!” only that broke the boy out of his shock. He slid to his knees and started frantically and clumsily trying to gather the towels. His shoulders were shaking. Thrisan felt sick as he pulled away from Kirvo, who sighed dramatically.

“Gods, Kiada, can’t you do that somewhere fucking else? We were busy!”

“Get out,” Thris said softly to Kirvo, surprising the boy, and stood up from the bed.

“No! No!” Wyliam said frantically, his voice almost hysterical as he picked up the towels. Thris took a step towards him, but the Dust got up and started backing away. The King felt as if someone had punched him in the gut when he saw the tears shining in the boy’s eyes, tears he was desperately trying to hide by not looking at Thrisan, “I-I’m s-sorry for interrupting! D-Don’t mind me I...I...”

Kirvo was furiously shoving his night robe back on but Thris didn’t care as he walked towards Wyliam, slowly, as if not to scare him. He didn’t understand why the boy looked like he was about to cry. Wyliam didn’t want Thrisan, so why the hell was he so upset?!

“Wyl-,” the King started, as if speaking to a wounded animal. He reached out but Wyl flinched away – he was almost out in the corridor now.

“No! It’s m-my fault f-for not knocking p-please carry on-“

Kirvo shoved past him in the doorway on his way out, clearly angry, and Wyliam dropped the towels he had just collected again. He looked at them helplessly, piled at his feet, and his breaths sounded sniffly. A tear tumbled down his freckled cheek, then another.

“I-I’m sorry. I-I’m sorry,” he whispered feverishly under his breath. Thrisan couldn’t do this. He couldn’t, just looking at Wyliam was making him crazy. He didn’t know why it was like this, why his mind and heart were so full of the boy, he couldn’t stand to see him like this. The King grabbed his wrist and drew the boy near, and Wyliam was too weak and shaken up to resist. His tears were falling freely now and he himself seemed surprised at them his breaths shallow and coming from between his lips.

“Wyl,” Thrisan whispered tenderly, regretting ever touching anyone else. He wrapped an arm around his waist, his other hand coming to cup the boy’s wet cheek. The King pressed their foreheads together. He didn’t know what to do. Would kissing help? Touching? Wyliam’s crying, so quiet and helpless, was breaking Thris’ heart, “Why are you crying?”

Wyliam shook his head, “I-I’m sorry I-I didn’t mean t-to...”

Thrisan forced him backwards, pushing the door closed behind him. Wyl’s crying wasn’t ceasing. The King needed him to look at him, to say something. He leaned forward and caught the boy’s mouth. It was so soft and warm, and it made Thrisan’s heart melt in his chest. It felt perfect, to have the boy up against him, to kiss him. The last of Kirvo escaped Thris’ mind as he slotted into the Dust, but Wyliam wasn’t having it. He turned his head away.
“No! Don’t k-kiss me a-after y-you kissed him,” he whispered, his small hands coming to push against Thrisan’s shoulders.

“Is that why you’re crying?” Thris demanded, harsher than he intended. He couldn’t make his voice softer, no matter how hard he tried – he was just too riled up, “You always push me away but the moment I touch someone else you act like I broke your heart!”

“L-Let go,” Wyl sobbed softly, trying to free himself from the King’s grip. Thris wouldn’t let him. He had no idea what was going on in the boy’s head, why he was acting the way he did, but he wasn’t allowing him to run away anymore.

The man forced their mouths together again, ignoring Wyliam’s muffled protests. He was the King, it was his right to take what he wanted. Not that he’d ever force Wyl into anything, not if the boy told him no, but right now Thris decided to indulge himself, if only for a moment, to lose himself in the sweetness of the boy’s lips, to just hold his warm, shaking body in his arms and pretend for a second that Wyliam was his. His tanned hands found their way to the boy’s shirt and untucked it from his trousers. Feverishly, desperately the man started undoing the buttons, eager to just get it off Wyliam’s shoulders. His mouth was useful in keeping the boy busy and distracted as Wyl wasn’t fighting, just gasping softly against Thris’ mouth, kissing back shyly, hesitantly, almost involuntarily.

The King tried to pull Wyl’s shirt off the boy, “N-No,” the boy ripped his hands from Thris’ shoulders, where he had been busy clinging onto the King’s blouse, and gripped his own shirt shut. His face was bright red, tears gathered in the corners of his eyes.

“Why?” Thrisan asked softly, “Why won’t you let me look at you?”

Wyliam didn’t reply, just stared squarely at Thrisan’s chest, unable to meet his eyes. Thrisan wanted to touch him gently, coax the boy out of his shell, have him fucking say something that would clean up the mess in the King’s head. But when he reached out his touch wasn’t gentle. He ripped the shirt from Wyl’s body and the boy jerked as if someone had hit him. Up until this point Thrisan hadn’t realised it was possible to want to simultaneously cradle someone in his arms and hurt them. His mouth found Wyl’s neck and with a burning fury he started kissing and licking and biting. Wyliam whimpered but it wasn’t his normal whimper of pleasure trying to be kept at bay – it was a whimper of fear.

Thrisan stumbled away from him immediately, somehow getting a hold of himself in the drunk-like daze that had descended over him. His head pounded, his body felt like it was on fire. He wanted to scream. He couldn’t do this. Wyl was against the wall, looking like a cornered animal, cheeks wet with tears, hugging himself. And Thrisan was in love with him.

But someone who loved Wyliam wouldn’t have scared him like this. Thris always considered himself a patient man, but how wrong he was – he couldn’t bear to give Wyl time to sort out his thoughts. He had I’m sorry at the end of his tongue, but the words were useless, hollow. The King could think of nothing else to do but leave the room.

As if in a trance he found himself out in the deserted hallway, walking like a dead man, legs dragging. He went to the only people he could confide in – he found himself outside of Vallea’s door. Sweet piano music drifted from inside the room and when Thrisan walked in he saw that his Queen was sitting at the instrument in a loose white gown, looking like an angel. Why couldn’t I love her instead of him? Zea sat at the roots of the red Rhoesia tree, watching her lover fondly, wrapped up in the Queen’s bathrobe.

Both the women looked up when Thrisan came inside and Val abruptly stopped playing, “My Love,” she whispered, standing from her stool and hurrying to the King, worry marring her features.
She cradled his face in a gesture more sisterly than anything else. Thris could barely look at her, “You look as if your heart had been shattered.”

“Don’t be dramatic, Val,” Zea walked over and peered at Thris, “It’s Wyl, isn’t it?”

Thrisan flinched at the sound of his name, “I curse you for ever bringing him to me.”

The two women exchanged a look, “What did he do?”

“It’s not what he did. It’s what I did. I scared him, I hurt him...,” Thrisan shook his head hopelessly. Vallea, despite being smaller, gathered him up in her arms and hugged him tightly.

“What did you do?” Zea asked.

“I thought he wanted me...,” Thris said helplessly, his head spinning. Vallea pulled back, her face shocked.

“You didn’t force him into anything, did you?”

Thrisan looked at her helplessly, “I don’t know,” he whispered, and the realisation of his words felt heavy in his chest. He felt nauseous. The edges of his vision were blurry. Vallea said something...or maybe it was Zea...they sounded far away...like they were in the Under, the water muffling their voices...

Thrisan crumbled to the floor and allowed darkness to swallow him up.
The Lover and the Liar

Joi 25th Ove 1161EE (2 days later)

Idra.

It took a few days of Ari’s furious persuading, threats and generally getting on Griff’s nerves until the man finally got up the courage to go to the main building on Idra, and ask to appeal to the Charasean court once more. It was his right as a citizen from the Cairn Galaxy to appeal but Arién was pretty sure the man only agreed to it to get the Varsen off his back, but whatever the reason, the Prince was happy. Somewhere along the way he had started to care for Griff, and he wanted the man to be free – the way he would be when Thrisan finally pulled him out of the hell hole that was Idra. At night he sometimes imagined what freedom would be like...with Griff. Those fantasies were both exhilarating and terrifying.

It took a few days for Griff to fill out the necessary paper work in the semi-darkness of the bunker, since it was the only time that the prisoners had any free time. The Alpha’s handwriting was messy and wonky and Ari wouldn’t stop teasing him about it, until it got on Griff’s nerves and he hit him upside the head, not hard enough to hurt though. Both of them were shocked when Griff’s appeal went through and he was called into a court session – in the end neither the Alpha or the Prince had really expected for the appeal to actually bring any results.

Griff was nervous the day before the appeal. Arién had never seen him like that – he could barely concentrate on work, he became weirdly clumsy as he dug through the scorching sand. When the two were a little way from the other prisoners, working in Idra’s boiling sun, he’d ask Ari question upon question upon question about how to act and what to say. Late at night the two snuck outside into the cold and sat behind the bunkers, wrapped up in blankets, and Arién would train Griff in how to be polite and persuade the Court to back him. Griff absorbed each one of his words greedily, like an eager student, despite being older than Ari.

The day of his appeal the two woke up early and sat in the cold bathroom. Griff showered, changed into a clean prison uniform. He even combed his hair with a hairbrush he got off Lioness (it cost him a whole tube of toothpaste). A ship came for him and when Griff was about to get on he looked like he wanted to hug Ari. The Varsen himself wasn’t sure where they lay in their uneasy friendship, so he just squeezed the Alpha’s hand quickly and wished him luck.

That day Ari felt the familiar, painful pang of loneliness for the first time in weeks. It was as if he was back in the hallways of the Briallan Palace, trying to bury his loneliness by having some stranger fuck him. Arién worked in silence all day, ignoring Ghishi jeering about where’s your boyfriend? The boy felt anxious and scared without Griff – he was afraid of doing something that would make the guards force him to stay out in the desert at night all by himself, and he was afraid that maybe the Alphas that had bothered him on one of his first nights would come for him, but mostly the day passed in peace. And loneliness. At dinner Arién eagerly watched the door, barely even touching his
food, waiting for Griff’s return like a puppy.

When the Alpha finally came back, escorted into the mess hall by two guards, Arién’s heart jumped and a happy, involuntary smile spread on his face. He had never had that reaction to anyone before, but he had missed Griff more than he realised, to the point where he made his heart ache. That was a weird thought...missing Griff. It took everything in the boy not to jerk to his feet and throw himself at the Alpha and shower him in questions. The Alpha’s eyes landed on him, and Arién fought the urge to wave, instead just grinning harder. Griff took a step towards where the boy was sitting, then hesitated, turned on his heel and left the dining room without a word. Arién frowned, his smiling melting off his face. Did something happen? Did the appeal go wrong? They wouldn’t know the new verdict for a few more days at least, maybe weeks...then why was Griff acting weird?

Arién picked up his plastic tray and threw his leftovers it into the disposal, before hurrying out of the hall after his friend. It was already dark out in the desert, and cold, and Griff was just a black silhouette, walking towards the bunkers.

“Griff!” Arién yelled, but the Alpha just started walking faster. Now Ari was getting annoyed. He hurried up his step until he was running, kicking up sand, “Oi! Asshole! Wait up!”

“Piss off, Little Prince!” Griff snapped, whirling on the boy just as he got to the man, a little breathless. The fact that he used that stupid nickname only got on the Varsen’s nerves more.

“What’s wrong with you?” he demanded, catching his breath, “did the appeal go wrong?”

“The appeal went fine,” Griff growled, turning away and staring out into the darkness.

“Then what’s wrong?” Arién reached out to touch his friend (could he even call Griff that?) but the man flinched away. The Prince groaned in frustration, “Why are you being dramatic? Are you mad at me?”

“Just leave off, Ari,” Griff shoved his hands into the pockets of his trousers and started walking again. Arién watched him in disbelief, mouth hanging open. He stayed there until Griff disappeared into their bunker. He had no idea what the fuck had gotten into his friend, but Arién didn’t like it. It made him annoyed that he didn’t know what was going on in Griff’s head. In frustration the boy kicked the ground.

“Relax,” Ginger slid out of the shadows. Arién jolted and his heartbeat escalated. Ginger had only ever been friendly and non-aggressive, but she was still a criminal and being alone with her here, in the dark, made Ari anxious.

“Do you know what’s up with him?” he asked carefully.

“It happens sometimes,” Ginger shrugged, “His heat is near.”

“Heat?” Ari frowned, “I thought only Omegas went into heats.”

“Eh, it’s different,” Ginger shook her head, “When Alphas go into heats they just get really dominant and want to fuck their mate over and over. If their mate isn’t near then usually the Alphas just get a little irritated, but if their mate is close by then ufff,” she puffed out her dark cheeks, “they completely lose it.”

“How do you know all this?” Ari demanded. Ginger shrugged,

“Had an Alpha boyfriend once. Let’s just say, I wasn’t his mate,” she smirked, “but Griff’s more agitated than usual. I reckon his mate is close by – there had been loads of new waves of prisoners
come in lately, it could be one of them.”

Arién’s stomach twisted. He didn’t like that thought – that Griff could have a mate somewhere in the prison. He ignored how uncomfortable he suddenly felt, “So what? How long is he gonna be like that?”

“Dunno. He just needs a good fuck from his mate,” Ginger said. She was clearly growing bored of the conversation, “Just try not to bother him too much. It’ll pass eventually,” she gave a little wave and then started jogging towards the main building, probably to nick some leftovers from dinner. Ari sighed and looked at their bunker. He didn’t really feel like sitting in there with the Alpha when he was being all weird, but he was tired after worrying about him all day. *I worry and he acts like an asshole, Ari pouted, walking towards the bunkers grumpily, what an unthankful little shit.*

Griff was in his bed when Arién walked in, turned to the wall, his back to the boy. He seemed to be asleep and Ari fought the urge to pick a fight with him over his behaviour. He could wait until the man’s heat ended.

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Ari’s mind woke up before he did, and slowly he became aware of the fact that there was a warm weight on top of him, and that his body was thrumming with a sleepy kind of pleasure. There was a hot, wet mouth against his neck, moving sensually and making Arién want to moan. A hand was underneath his shirt, pressing into his skin. A leg slid between his thighs, pressing up against his crotch. He became aware of more things – he wasn’t wearing trousers, someone had taken them off, and he was hard, without even realising it, the leg rubbing against him was only making him harder. The person on top of the Prince was a man – his stubble rubbing against Arién’s chin and neck.

“Nghhh,” the quiet moan slipped from the boy’s mouth and he scrunched up his brows, arching up against the man, subconsciously aching for more. He wasn’t scared. *Why wasn’t he scared?! Slowly Ari’s eyes fluttered open.*

Despite the darkness, Ari could see Griff perfectly above him. The man’s eyes were dark, darker than Arién had ever seen them, and looking down at Arién with a passion so burning that the boy shivered. His sandy blonde hair, which Griff usually pushed back from his face, was now down onto his forehead, falling messily. It made him look younger. One of his big hands was underneath Arién’s shirt, his other one resting on the pillow next to the boy’s head, and he used it to keep himself up. The Alpha must’ve come over from his own bed, and when he did he brought his pillow and blanket with him, and created some kind of nest around Ari, giving them what little privacy they could have with as many bunk-mates as they had. The man had pulled away from Varsen’s neck and was looking down at him now. Arién held his breath for a moment, but Griff didn’t say anything. There was something in his eyes that made him look animalistic, raw, rough.

The man ignored the fact that Arién was awake and delved back down to his neck. Ari’s hand shot out and he pushed at Griff’s rock-hard chest, attempting to stop him. He was way too calm, feeling no fear at all, and he had no idea why. He had been terrified when Friock Obbe touched him without his permission, but something told him that Griff would never hurt him the way that man had intended to.

“What the hell are you doing?” Ari asked softly, under his breath, trying to not wake up the others.

Griff grabbed his hand, the one pressing against his chest, and pulled it to his mouth. Ari was shocked when the Alpha kissed his wrist, then his palm. His heart started pounding and the boy felt breathless, like his lungs weren’t working properly. Nothing about Griff’s demeanour before this implied that he had any feelings for Ari – sexual or not – so Arién had no idea where this was
suddenly coming from. He snatched his hand away from the Alpha’s mouth.

“Get off me,” he growled, and tried to sit up. Griff shoved him backwards – roughly, but directly into the pillows, careful to not hurt him. When Arién tried to push him away, more out of annoyance because Griff was pissing him off before and now thought he could just do this out of nowhere, the man grabbed both of his slim, tanned wrists in one of his big, calloused hands and pinned them above Arién’s head.

The Varsen tried to squirm free as he gritted his teeth, and opened his mouth to call Griff some rude names. The Alpha was faster, swooping down and pressing his mouth against Ari’s demandingly. The boy made a startled sound that was immediately swallowed by Griff’s hot, insistent mouth. Arién knew he should fight the man on top of him – after all Griff had been an ass to him at dinner, and didn’t even ask if he could do this – but instead of shoving the Alpha off, or even making a noise to wake up one of the other bunkmates, Ari felt himself going pliant in the Alpha’s grip, allowing his eyes to flutter shut as Griff licked his way into his mouth like it already belonged to him.

Arién felt like he was in a cage, but in a cage he wanted to be in, wrapped up in Griff’s strong, warm arms. He couldn’t believe how safe he felt while in prison, how protected, despite the fact that murderers were sleeping a few feet away from him, despite the fact that a murderer was kissing him. There were soft vibrations coming from somewhere and Ari was so lost in trying to return Griff’s slow but head-spinningly passionate kiss that it took him a minute to realise that it was coming from the Alpha – he was growling softly, happily, almost like the purr of a cat.

He’s happy because I’m kissing him back, Ari thought distractedly. For some reason he wanted to please Griff, but at the same time he was still annoyed at him and was holding himself back. Arién was no stranger to sex and intimacies, and usually that was nothing more than a game to him. He gave better head but he had a bigger dick and he did this and he did that...like a competition. He was always in control, his lovers were always predictable, and Ari never felt truly satisfied. Not this time though, this time Arién felt himself melting, submitting himself to Griff, at his mercy. He wanted to pull Griff closer and closer until they merged together into one, and he had no idea why.

The man’s kisses turned rougher, more possessive. Ari gasped against his lips and suddenly there were large hands on his hips, forcing him to turn around onto his stomach. Arién tried to struggle up, to tell Griff that he didn’t like that position, but the Alpha shoved him back down, following only his primal instincts. Fear bloomed in Arién’s chest. He could hear his own harsh breathing in his ears, feel Griff’s hands digging into his hips.

“G-Griff,” Ari gritted out as the man covered his body with his own, crushing him into the mattress. Panic was starting to seep into the boy, just like it had when Friock Obbe forced himself onto him, “G-Griff stop.”

Griff didn’t hear him, or he just ignored the boy’s protest. His mouth found the back of his neck and he started biting, nipping at the skin, holding Arién down with his hands. The boy’s breath grew more laboured in anxiety, and he tried to squirm away, but there was nowhere to go.

“You had this coming, riling me up like that. Who do you think you are? You’re only the prince, and you walk around as if you were a King or something. Well, I’ll teach you a lesson now. You’re a slut, so I’m going to treat you like one. Bet those other Guards weren’t man enough to properly roughen you up, but that’s about to change.”

The memory made a soft sound resembling a sob spill from Arién’s mouth and on instinct he reached back and elbowed Griff in the stomach. The man made an annoyed sound though Ari wasn’t anywhere strong enough to really hurt him. It was enough to make him loosen his grip so the Varsen could flip over onto his back. Immediately Griff grabbed his hands and pinned them down again.
“Let go!” Ari hissed. Griff’s eyes were full of anger and an unexplainable hunger. When he leaned down Arién brought his leg up, using it to keep their bodies apart. He was shaking, “I-I said let go!” he tried desperately to free himself, but for some reason he kept his voice down. A tear fell from his eye, a tear he didn’t mean to let fall. He hated showing weakness, he was too proud to cry in front of people...

At the sight of the tears Griff’s anger melted away and his expression softened. Ari angrily wiped his cheek on his shoulder and tried to free his wrists, though the Alpha didn’t budge. He leaned down to the side of Ari’s neck that the boy had exposed when wiping his cheek and gently brushed his nose against his pulse point.

“Mate,” he whispered softly, pressing a gently kiss to the skin there. Ari jolted in shock, his heart stammering, eyes wide. “Mate,” Griff repeated, this time placing a delicate kiss in the corner of Ari’s mouth. The Varsen stopped struggling as feelings of warmth flooded him. If he was Griff’s mate then it would explain why he hadn’t been scared at the beginning, because they were literally meant to be together, “Mine,” the Alpha murmured, thumbs brushing gently over the inside of Ari’s wrists, “Mine, mine, mine...”

“Shhh,” Ari whispered, scared to wake up the others. Griff let go of his wrists and Arién immediately reached up to cradle the Alpha’s face in his hands, “Shhh. Yes. I heard you the first time,” he was smiling.

Griff leaned down and kissed him hungrily, and Ari returned the kiss automatically. They both inhaled sharply, Griff’s hands coming back down to Arién’s hips. The Prince wrapped his arms around the Alpha’s neck, tugging him closer, their breaths mingling together, Griff’s stubble rubbing against Ari’s soft jaw.

“Oh my stars,” Ginger hissed somewhere in the dark, but her voice didn’t stop Griff and Ari from continuing to kiss hungrily, beginning to gently rock against each other, “Griff are you raping him?”

“Shut up Ginger!” Arién snapped, pulling back, giving Griff the opportunity to once again attack his neck with heated kisses. He had to bite back a moan as he felt himself hardening, “He’s not raping me.”

“Fucking hell,” was all Ginger said, she shuffled in her bed and presumably went back to sleep. Ari was starting to not care if anyone heard them. Griff reached for his shirt and tugged it off over Arién’s head, and then they quickly did the same with the Alpha, a little clumsy, like two schoolboys sneaking around. Despite how cold it was in the bunker both the men were burning up.

Ari only had a few seconds to run his hands over the muscled, scarred planes of Griff’s body before the man was leaving hungry kisses all over his now exposed torso. He too Arién’s dusky nipple into his mouth and sucked, hard. The boy slapped a hand over his mouth before he cried out, his hips stuttering upwards and his clothed erection brushing against Griff’s stomach. The Alpha moved back up, bit at Arién’s earlobe. The boy shivered and shimmied out of his underwear. A sudden urgency gripped him – he desired Griff so much that it scared even him.

Arién wrapped his legs around Griff’s waist, pulling the man down. He tried to gather some kind of power, to be the one in control. He pressed his ass back up against Griff’s crotch, pleased when he felt the bulge indicating that the Alpha was hard. Griff growled, nosing harder against Ari’s neck, licking and leaving hickeys everywhere. The dark haired boy tried to stay in control, he really did, but when Griff shifted so that his erection pressed against Ari’s and started thrusting, the boy just melted.

“F-Fuck,” he gasped quietly against Griff’s mouth, his hands sliding into the man’s hair. He panted...
and the Alpha rocked against him, slowly at first, and then hard and fast, driving Ari down into the bed, forcing their cocks to rub together in the most delicious of ways. Arién’s head was spinning, he was out of breath, he thought he was going to pass out. Ari wasn’t sure Griff was even capable of speaking in whatever Alpha state he was in now, but the Prince didn’t mind. He hadn’t been fucked in so long, and he hadn’t been fucked by someone he really, truly wanted...well, ever. Being with someone he desired made him feel intoxicated and out of his depth and a little anxious, but in a good way. He had to bite his lips to stop moans from coming out as Griff continued to rub their straining erections together. The rough material of the man’s trousers caught on Arién’s cock and added additional friction that was making dangerous heat erupt in the boy’s stomach. He squirmed, feeling like he might come soon if Griff continues this.

Thankfully the Alpha pulled away in order to get his trousers off. Ari honestly had no idea how they still hadn’t woken up their bunkmates. He also had no idea what had gotten into Griff. He watched, eyes half-lidded, as the blonde pulled off his underwear, discarding it on the forever growing heap of clothes on the floor. Ari swallowed a little nervously when he saw Griff’s cock, gleaming in the dim red lights in the bunker. It was large, curved, thick, and Arién had never had anything quite so impressive inside himself. Panic gripped him when Griff climbed back on top of him, roughly grabbing Arién’s ankles and pushing his legs up to his chest, exposing his hole. Arién gasped, and then gasped again, louder, when he felt Griff’s cock against his entrance, smearing his hole with precum.

“No!” Arién hissed, freeing his legs and sitting up, pushing Griff away. The Alpha huffed in dissatisfaction and reached for Ari, though the Prince batted his hand away in annoyance. The Alpha pouted, “You’re not going in like that. You’ll hurt me.”

Griff tensed at that, and then hurriedly shoved Ari backwards again. The boy went rigid as well, expecting Griff to just try and stick it in again, but instead the Alpha started showering his cheeks and forehead with kisses, “I’m sorry. I’m sorry,” he whispered feverishly under his breath. Ari smiled gently.

“It’s alright, just...” it was the first time he was planning to have sex without any lube and condoms, but those were sparse in a prison, and he reckoned that he and Griff would just have to make do with what they did have. Ari quickly took three of his own fingers into his mouth and licked around them, coating them in saliva. Griff froze and looked down at him with wide, dark eyes. Subconsciously the blonde’s tongue flickered out to lick his bottom lip. His scrutinizing gaze was intense and it made Ari a little self-conscious, something that never happened. He let his fingers out of his mouth with a pop, “Stop staring at me.”

The Prince reached down between his legs, past his hard cock, and found his hole. He was horrified to find that it was clenching around nothing, as if hungry for Griff’s cock. He bit his lip and slid a finger inside himself. It went in easier than expected, though Ari had gotten tighter due to not having sex for the past month and a bit. He exhaled shakily and moved the finger inside himself slowly, Griffin froze and looked down at him with wide, dark eyes. Subconsciously the blonde’s tongue flickered out to lick his bottom lip. His scrutinizing gaze was intense and it made Ari a little self-conscious, something that never happened. He let his fingers out of his mouth with a pop, “Stop staring at me.”

“Enough,” Griff muttered, pulling Arién’s hand away. The Prince wasn’t about to protest, his legs coming back around the Alpha’s waist. Griff’s skin was hot to touch. If they were truly mates then it would explain all the heightened things that Ari was feeling. His breathing became harsh as Griff connected their mouths again in a passionate, sloppy kiss. It soon became clear he did that to keep Ari quiet, as he lined his cock with the boy’s hole and started pushing without a warning. He did everything without a warning.
Ari let out a muffled sound halfway between a moan and a whimper, his legs tightening around Griff’s waist further to give himself some purchase as he felt pulsing heat begin to fill him up. Griff was not gentle by any means, and Arién liked that. He liked the obscurity and the roughness of having sex in a narrow prison bed. It was unlike anything Ari had ever experienced, and it made his blood boil with want. His body trembled as he was assaulted by pleasure mixed with pain as Griff sheathed himself completely in the boy, filling him up. He gave the Prince a mere second of messy kisses before he withdrew only to thrust back in with strength that drove Arién into the bed.

“G-Griff,” the boy gasped, a warning, a question, a plea. It was dark, they had to be quiet, and Griff wasn’t himself. He gripped Ari’s hands above his head again, trapping him. Ari wanted to be trapped. He moaned again as he felt Griff set up a rhythm, thrusting into the boy at a pace that was faster than what Ari was used to. He swore his insides would be bruised by the time they were done.

The room filled with their erratic breaths and the soft sound of skin slapping skin but if any of their bunkmates heard anything they ignored it. Every second Arién felt more and more bliss. This wasn’t just sex – he felt connected to Griff in a way he thought impossible. His heart pounded with each of the Alpha’s precise thrusts, and even in his dazed state the blonde knew exactly what he was doing, finding Ari’s prostate in no time.

“F-Fuck,” the dark haired boy moaned, biting his lip until it bled, pressing his head back against the pillows. Griff leaned down and licked at the blood off the boy’s split lip, his thrusts not faltering, only speeding up.

Griff was getting rougher and rougher, his grip on Ari’s wrists bruising. Ari wanted bruises. Bruises and bites and hickeys and marks. And that was exactly what the Alpha was giving him, his free hand gripping the boy’s slim, dark hip. His cock slid in and out of the Prince’s greedy hole easily, aided by the precum that had gathered on Griff’s cock. Every time he was impaled, Ari found himself a step closer to pure ecstasy. His whole body was convulsing, hole clenching as an unbelievable heat enveloped him.

“Mine,” Griff growled possessively, his mouth returning to Ari’s neck, “Mine.” the Prince knew what he wanted to do, but somehow the rational part of Griff’s brain was holding him back from doing so. But nothing was holding Arién back.

“Bite me,” he whispered, his voice dripping with desire. Something shifted in Griff’s eyes, his hands tightened on Ari’s wrists. He was hesitating, but Arién wanted the bite. He had no idea why, he had never wanted to be mated before, or tied down to one particular person. Except for now. Without hesitation the Prince now bared his neck to Griff, turning his face to the side, in a sign of submission. Griff started his low murmur again and he leaned into the boy’s neck.

His mouth was warm, and his other movements stilled, though he remained inside Ari, rocking into him slowly and keeping up a steady thrum of pleasure inside the boy. His lips moved gently over Ari’s neck, making him tremble and his toes curl. He pressed a gentle kiss to the warm, slightly sweaty skin there, loving almost, and then he bit Arién. Hard. His teeth sunk into the boy’s skin, ripping a sharp gasp from him. His whole body tensed and a shot of hot-white pain went through him followed immediately by a pleasure so intense that the tips of his fingers went numb.

And then Ari came. It was unexpected, and made the Prince’s entire body shake. A moan built up in his chest but never came out of his open mouth. Griff removed his teeth and licked the wound gently as Arién rode though his aftershock, his whole body tingling. Griff continued kissing his neck, his body on top of Ari a comfortable warmth. The Prince felt a wave of sleepiness wash over him and he turned onto his side, pressing his face into the scratchy prison pillow. Right now it was the most comfortable thing that Ari ever laid on. He exhaled, and his body started feeling like a pool of
warmth.

Arién was pleased when Griff rolled off and he felt the man’s muscular arm slide around his waist, the Alpha pressing the boy’s back against his warm, strong chest. He was less pleased when Griff, without even bothering to ask, slid his cock right back inside Ari. The boy let out a surprised moan, his body tensing.

“Shhh,” Griff murmured soothingly, nipping at the back of Ari’s shoulder, “Good boy.”

“S-Shut up,” Ari gritted out, chocking on a moan. Griff’s free arm slipped underneath the Prince and came up to grip the boy’s chin as he started thrusting shallowly into the boy. Arién whimpered, couldn’t hold the sounds at bay, and Griff forced his head back, exposing his neck. The bite he had given the boy was hot and throbbing gently, not as much as the cock inside of him though. Arién felt himself getting hard again, and Griff’s thrusts got harder, “S-Stop.”

“Amate, my mate,” Griff murmured, kissing the back of Ari’s neck and continuing to fuck him.

Ari bit the pillow as he felt the pleasure return to his body, even more fiery than before. His cock twitched against his stomach and with each of Griff’s thrusts, that hit exactly the right spot, Arién felt himself approaching a second climax. He couldn’t keep himself under control, his heavy breathing and moans were only muffled thanks to the pillow. He couldn’t remember ever feeling this good, and in that moment he was sure he would never sleep with anyone but Griff again. He shook, his insides clenched, and Griff’s movements sped up, faster and faster, knocking the breath and the last of Ari’s sanity out of him. It was too much – he was going to explode.

“G-Griff,” he whimpered, turning his head to press into the man’s neck, clawing at his chest, “S-Stop...I-I can’t I-I’m gonna-”

Griff silenced him with a passionate kiss, holding Arién close as he claimed him, over and over, and Ari came again. The Alpha didn’t stop, he shifted, so Ari was on his knees, the front part of his body slumped against the bed as he was unable to keep himself up. Griff pounded the boy, muscles glistening with sweat, eyes dark with possessiveness. The pleasure was too much, Arién just couldn’t take it. He passed out.

When he came to everyone was already waking up and moving around the bunk, complaining, arguing, throwing shit, getting ready for breakfast. Arién felt groggy, as if he had a hangover, his whole body aching. The boy lifted his blanket and looked at his body, still naked. There were finger-shaped bruises on both his hips, his torso was a puzzle of hickeys and bite-marks. There was dry come on his stomach – his own – and more come between his thighs – Griff’s. That wasn’t important though. What was important was that Ari was alone in his bed.

Feeling uneasy the boy rolled over to the side and looked at Griff’s bed. It was done up and neat, the blanket and pillow put back in place, and the Alpha was nowhere to be seen. Arién was hurt.

(The same day)

Shoriah

Dashyan and Tyeval stepped off of Sycamora, both looked like the Galaxy had swallowed them, chewed them up, and spat them back out. Dashe’s red hair was sticking up in weird directions, while Tye’s was too long, curling around his ears. He also had a stubble on his tanned jaw, and Dashe had dark circles beneath his usually bright aquamarine eyes.

The last of Sycamora’s time supply – which there had been jars and jars of – had been used earlier
that day, to get them here – to Shoriah. In only five days the duo had made it across half of the Cairn galaxy, eager to return to Arossa, where the crew of Hannibal was due to meet them since another wedding would take place soon enough, when the Competition finally came to a close. The boys both knew they were in big trouble but after the whole slavery ordeal on Calliban, and being apart for those few stressful days, they were eager to return home.

After getting back on their ship, the boys were inseparable. Tyeval spent a lot of time fretting over Dashe the first few days, like a mother hen. He made Dashyan shower, got him dressed in his own clothes (honestly, Tye just liked Dashe in his clothes, there was no other reason for that), made him food and tea, wrapped him up in blankets and didn’t let him do anything around Sycamora. At night Tye didn’t sleep, instead sitting up in his bed, with Dashe curled up against him, or even in his lap. Because sometimes he got nightmares about being on that slave ship, and Tye just wanted him near, needed him near. Having Dashyan warm and asleep in his arms, his eyelashes casting a shadow on his creamy cheeks, mouth a little open, chest rising and falling, delicate fist curled against Tye’s chest...that was what happiness was to Tye. He wouldn’t survive losing his best friend again.

The further away they got from Calliban, the safer and better Tyeval felt, though he insisted on practically never leaving Dashyan alone. He blamed himself for what happened, of course he blamed himself. Thane and Viridian had bought him when he was a child not only to be Dashyan’s companion and friend on Hannibal, but also to protect him. And Tye had failed at that. It ate away at him, he felt useless. How could he love Dashe and hope that if he tried hard enough the boy would maybe feel something for him too in the future, if he couldn’t even protect him? He wasn’t worthy of Dashyan.

Tyeval looked at Dashyan now, in the lights coming from the bright lights of the metropolitan, skyscraping buildings of Shoriah. Down below the ground died away in a layer of heavy clouds, but up above the city was booming with lights, even in the middle of the night, lines of air traffic cutting the dark sky.

The two boys left Sycamora on a landing pod, and paid a parking man to refuel the ship while they walked to the lobby of the pod, where a few pilots were standing about. Yes, they came to Sycamora to refuel before the last stretch of space between here and Arossa, but they also came for another thing. Not a thing, a someone.

“You okay?” Tye asked, looking at Dashe. In the harsh, bright lights of the lobby he looked exhausted. The boy glanced at him,

“Stop asking that,” he mumbled, and reached out to squeeze Tye’s hand, “I’m okay now. Thanks to you taking care of me.”

Tye smiled. Just then a squeal sounded.

“Tye! Dashe!”

The boy’s grinned and looked up, in time to see Eilo shoving her way through the door, dropping her bag and barrelling straight at the boys. She jumped into their arms and they all wrapped themselves up in a massive hug, laughing and clinging onto each other. It felt like forever since they were the trio hunting slaver ships. Now as Tye held his two best friends in his arms it felt like it would almost be okay. Almost.

“You two look like shit,” Eilo said cheerfully, pulling back to look at the two with happily flushed cheeks, “What happened?”

“Long story, we’ll tell you on the ship,” Dashe shoved his hands into the pockets of a blue sweatshirt
he borrowed from Tyeval.

“Are you sure you want to come back to Arossa with us?” Tye asked, “Wasn’t the whole point of you running away to stay away?”

Eilo shrugged and picked her bag back up, slinging it over her shoulder, “The point was to give Rian and Kal time to figure...things...out. The Competition is almost over, I’m going to lie low and return for the new wedding. How long until we get to Arossa?”

“Something like seven days. So, I’m curious,” Dashyan slipped an arm through Eilo’s as the three started walking back out into the night, “How did you get all the way here from Rum?”

Eilo smiled mysteriously, “It’s a long story. Rum was good though. They opened up an exotic dancers club on Neon Alley. It’s called Thirteen Fragments or something.”

**Aje 2nd Neríí 1161EE (7 days later)**

**Arossa.**

Kalorian didn’t let on that he knew anything about the note that Rian found in his bin. He treated the King exactly the same way he usually did, though they only saw each other during meals. Rian made sure of that. Distancing himself from Kal was the best option in this situation. He didn’t appear at any of his friend’s parties, allowing the man to grow closer with Lady Eskilsa and Lady Kursassarra, the remaining competitors. Each day the Competition went on, Rian felt like he was losing his mind, piece by piece. He tried busying himself with trying to figure out who was trying to kill Kal, but it wasn’t working.

Rian was in his office, adjacent to his bedroom, reading alarming reports from the Salvagan Fleet about a new Shapeshifting species coming into the Cairn Galaxy, when there was a soft knock on the door.

“Come in,” Rian said without looking up. It was early evening but because it was winter outside the window it was already dark. The boy heard the door open as he signed off a hologramic document hanging in the air in front of him, only then looking up. He was a little disappointed when instead of Kalorian he saw Aziza standing in front of him. Some part of the King had hoped that maybe Kal would come after him. But that was just a stupid fantasy, “Azzie. What can I help you with?” Rian asked, hoping not to let his dismay show as he swiped his hand over the hologram in front of him, making it dissolve.

“Someone wants to see you,” Azzie said mysteriously, walking over to Rian’s desk and dropping a piece of paper onto the wood. Rian arched an eyebrow in a silent question because nobody left actual paper notes anymore. Aziza smiled mysteriously, tapped her nose and walked back out of the room. Rian sighed, remembering the note in Kal’s bin with a pang as he himself opened up his own note.

*Dear Rian.*

*The pub on Skyline Street. Tonight.*

*Love,*

*Your sister.*

Rian’s heart literally jumped in his chest when his eyes ran over the last two words. *Your sister. Your sister. Your sister.* His heart pounded and hands started shaking. Eilo. Eilo was back. Eilo would
figure all of it out and it would all be okay. Feeling like he was in a daze, scrambling, Rian burst into his chambers. He pulled off his cardigan, and his brooch and his crown, and dumped them all on his bed. He pulled out a black cloak and threw it over his shoulder, pulling his hood over his head to hide his recognizable blonde hair.

He was barely aware of sprinting down the staircase to the ground floor. He heard someone shout his name, and maybe it was Kal, or maybe it was his imagination, but at that moment Rian was too eager to finally see his sister and get some answers to stop. He made his way outside, got into one of the royal transport ships, and told the driver to take him to Skyline Street. The whole ride his leg was jigging and his hands were twisting and untwisting into the material at the bottom of his cloak until it was crumpled.

The pub on Skyline Street was small, squashed between a dodgy looking hotel and a Vlassain cuisine stall. There was a steady flow of people entering and coming out of the four story pub, their windows bright. Rian inhaled and slipped among the people, undetected. Inside it was warm, loud and atmospheric. Waitresses slithered among round tables full of poker playing creatures, with their arms high above their heads, glasses balancing on trays. Alcohol was pouring, people were laughing, and in the corner, alone at a table, was Eilo.

Dressed in leather with her hair tied up she was almost unrecognizable. The gun at her side was the only thing keeping men away from her, as they leered across the pub. There was a big glass of golden in front of her. Seeing his sister made Rian want to burst out crying. Despite being older than her he felt like a child.

"Eilo," he came to a stop in front of her table. Her eyes widened,

"Rian?" she asked, a smile blooming on her face. She jumped to her feet and threw her arms around her brother, and in that moment it felt like she had never left. The last time they had embraced they were both dressed in expensive clothing, standing outside the Tower Palace. Now they were two undetectable strangers in a pub, "I missed you!" Eilo slipped back onto her chair, and Rian sat opposite. They held hands over the table, unable to let go of each other now that they were reunited.

"Screw you for leaving," Rian said, though there was no bite in his voice. Eilo grinned,

"Since when do you say screw?"

Rian shrugged and sighed, "Things happened while you were gone."

"I heard. The Competition. Big things."

"Where were you anyway?" Rian questioned.

"Here. There. I went slaver hunting with Thane’s and Viridian’s kid for a bit."

"You what?" Rian demanded. Eilo shrugged,

"Story for another time," she said. Rian bit his lip, trying to collect his thoughts. It seemed a weight had been taken off his shoulders now that he was back with Eilo. But he needed answers.

"Why did you leave, Eilo?"

She let out a breath, "I thought you would’ve figured it out by now. You and Kal. You were always oblivious but...,” she paused, "The Competition complicated things."

"What? I don’t understand,” Rian pulled his hands back. Eilo sighed, like she was getting frustrated.
“I left because you and Kal are in love with each other.”

Her words felt like a stab to Rian’s gut. The Baroness knew, Eilo knew, even fucking Kal knew. Was it that obvious? The King hid his trembling hands beneath the table to try and cover up his nerves.

“It’s not true.”

“Don’t lie to me, Rian,” Eilo said softly, looking at him sadly, “I’m your sister. I know you. I know you have feelings for him.”

Rian gritted his teeth and crossed his arms over his chest, leaning back in his chair, “So what if I do? Why does it matter? It doesn’t change anything-“

“Of course it changes everything. Kal is in love with you.”

“No he’s not,” Rian blurted immediately.

“Yes, he is,” Eilo said stubbornly, “Stars, how blind are you two? Why did you think I ran away before our wedding? Even though I don’t love Kal being married to him wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world. At least we like each other. But I couldn’t marry him, not when a few days before I ran he told me that he was in love with you.”

“He didn’t say that,” Rian looked down at his hands.

“Ask him yourself then,” Eilo said smartly, “He’d confess if he had the slightest inkling that you might return his feelings. And you do so-“

“If he loved me he wouldn’t have agreed to the Competition,” Rian said bluntly. Eilo sighed.

“Just talk to him.”

“No.”

“He won’t eliminate you from the Competition,” Eilo was getting annoyed now, “trust me, he’ll choose you in the end.”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Rian reached across the table and grabbed his sister’s hands, needing to hold onto something, “Come back home.”

Eilo shook her head, “No, I won’t. Not until you two get your heads out of your assess and face the truth and get happily engaged.”

“That won’t happen, Eilo,” Rian said bitterly. Eilo pulled her hands back.

“Guess I’m never coming back then.”
Aje 2nd Nerii 1161EE (The same day)

Fayaxiamen.

Wyliam couldn’t fall asleep even if he tried. He sat at the window of his bedroom, letting the breeze ruffle his curls and trying to keep his tears at bay. The more days passed on Fayaxiamen the more Wyl just wanted to return to Earth 6.2 It wasn’t the planet itself that he hated – Fayaxiamen was beautiful and the Varsen were beautiful and everything was beautiful. But Wyl wasn’t beautiful and he didn’t belong here, that became clear each passing day. Today was just another bad day that piled up on a mountain of bad days.

Not only did the previous night, after Wyliam’s heart broke over the fact that the man he was in love with was in bed with another person, did Thrisan pass out and get everyone panicking, but Wyl also bumped into the very same boy that had been in bed with the King this morning. Their conversation haunted Wyliam all day, to the point where he could barely concentrate on his duties and Guadix shouted at him. Even now, in the window, looking down at the palace courtyard far, far, far down, Wyliam could hear the conversation in his head.

Kirvo was waiting at the corner of the hallway. He was beautiful. Wyliam found a lot of people beautiful, maybe because he himself wasn’t. This boy had blue hair and piercing eyes and the sight of him made Wyl sick, because the night before he had looked perfect in Thrisan’s arm, he had looked the way Wyliam never could. The Dust couldn’t meet his eyes, he tried to hurry past with his duster, but was startled when the boy blocked the corridor with his body. He was a Rose, his work revolved around the gardens, he wasn’t supposed to be here.

“Kiada,” his voice was icy.

“K-Kirvo,” Wyliam said shakily, still unable to look up, “Hello.”

“Don’t hello me, Kiada, you little snake,” Kirvo hissed, eyes narrowing. Wyl swallowed nervously, “So...for some reason the King has a thing for you, huh?”

“N-No he really d-doesn’t,” Wyliam stuttered.

Kirvo sneered and then laughed mockingly, “You think he loves you or something? Just because he kept you around a few more times than everyone else?”

“N-No!” Wyl flushed, “No, that’s not-“

“Did he tell you he loves you?” Kirvo asked, eyebrow raised. Wyliam’s hands were shaking.
“No.”

“Aww,” Kirvo pouted, voice dripping with false pity and amusement, “you know he’s just using you for sex right? He probably only likes you because he took your virginity. Or he feels bad for taking it, because you probably couldn’t take it, could you?” Wyliam felt sick now. Sick and guilty and his eyes started prickling with tears. He stared at his shoes, “That’s the only explanation – because you’re a virgin – that’s rare these days. There’s no other explanation as to why he would want someone as ugly as you. You know that right?”

“I know,” Wyliam said softly. Kirvo was startled by his response, and the fact that Wyl was just accepting his words. The Dust used his shock to brush past the other servant.

He cried a lot that day, and he hated himself for crying. Now that exhausting day was over – King Thrisan was still in his room, down with a fever, and Wyliam had a decision to make. He wanted to go home, but he didn’t know if he had it in him to leave. Besides when he called his siblings they were all telling him how much good stuff they could get because of the money he earned – school supplies, better food, they didn’t have to worry about the bills. Wyl didn’t want to take that away from them because no job on Earth paid as well as this.

Wyl’s brooding was interrupted when a hesitant knock sounded on his door. He turned away from his window and in a soft voice asked whoever was outside to come in. Queen Vallea appeared in the doorway. She looked exhausted, her red hair piled on top of her head. She was dressed in just her night robe.

“Wyliam,” she said.

“How is he?” Wyl asked, sliding off the windowsill and hurriedly climbing over his large bed. Val looked at him tiredly and reached out to squeeze his hand when he stood on the floor in front of her.

“He’ll be alright but...he’s asking for you,” the Queen said.

Normally Wyliam wouldn’t go, because he was trying to stay away from Thrisan and trying not to get his heart absolutely broken, but he was so worried about the King he thought he might actually die. He wanted to see him, to apologise, maybe to say goodbye. So he allowed Val to lead him through the familiar, dark corridors of the Briallan Palace, down the stairs to Thrisan’s chambers. Wyl hoped, before tonight, that he’d never have to come back here again. Right now he didn’t mind though as he reached for the doorknob. Vallea stepped back.

“Where are you going?” Wyliam asked, his voice tense with nerves as he looked at the Queen.

“I need to rest,” she said softly, her hands trembling, “And I trust that Thris will be safe with you.”

Wyliam swallowed and nodded and watched the Queen disappear down the dark corridor. Wyl himself hurried inside the chambers, walking through the little living room and into the bedroom. He wasn’t hesitating, all day his heart and stomach had been twisting with nerves and worry because although Vallea and Zea both assured him that Thrisan had just gotten sick because of nerves and stress, mostly over fighting with the government about getting Prince Ari back from Idra, it still made Wyl wonder what would happen if Thris died. The thought made Wyl want to burst out crying.

He forgot to even knock on the bedroom door, just walked right in. The curtains were pulled closed over the windows, and the only light came from a small liquid bedside lamp – a swirling golden glowing circle that shifted and changed shape, filling the room with a dim, intimate illumination. Thrisan’s canopied bed was piled high with covers and pillows, and the King was laying in the middle, wrapped up in blankets. Thanks to the light it looked like a different bed to the one that
Thrisan had been fucking Kirvo in. The King’s hair, usually neat, was now a black mop on top of
his head, though somehow the messiness suited him. His eyes were closed, his mouth parted. For a
moment he looked dead.

“Thris!” his name slipped from Wyliam’s mouth before he could stop it, hysterical and irrational, the
boy stumbled to the bed. Thrisan’s eyes fluttered open and relief flooded Wyl. He slumped against
one of the canopy pillars, “Oh thank stars you’re alive.”

Thrisan smiled weakly. He looked pale, only his cheeks flushed. He appeared so much younger than
normal, “Wyliam,” he looked happy, his dark eyes soft. Wyl swallowed again, to try and get past his
nerves, “I’m so happy to see you.”

“I’m so happy that you’re alright,” Wyliam said truthfully, returning the smile softly. Thris’ hand
weaselled from underneath his covers and he reached for Wyl. The Dust couldn’t say no to him, not
right now, not when he was so fucking happy to see the man. Just give in this once. Just tonight. The
boy took Thrisan’s hand, and squeezed his fingers, “You’re burning up.”

“It’s just a fever,” Thrisan said hoarsely, closing his eyes but not letting go of Wyl’s hand, “I’m sorry
I called for you. I know you hate me.”

“I don’t-,” Wyl started desperately.

“Shhh,” Thris murmured, tugging Wyl forward so the boy had to sit on the edge of the bed. The
Varsen brought their joined hands to his cheek and nuzzled into them, “I know you do. I know you
don’t want to see me again,” the King opened his eyes and his pupils were like pools of swirling
warm darkness and Wyliam wanted to drown in them. Subconsciously he shifted closer, “but I
wanted you here. I wanted to hold you. Nothing feels quite real.”

“That’s the fever,” Wyl said comfortingly. Thris’ thumb was stroking the back of his hand.

“I’m really selfish, aren’t I?” he asked, pulling back their joint hands and looking at them – the
King’s big, tanned one, holding Wyl’s pale, delicate, freckled one in his in a way that made Wyl feel
like he was made of glass.

“You’re not selfish,” Wyl murmured. He wanted to say more, he wanted to say that he was the
selfish one, for not thinking about how Thrisan felt in this complicated situation they were in, but he
couldn’t find the right words.

“Can you come lie down next to me?” Thrisan asked, his voice soft, “I won’t do anything, I promise.
I just…it’s hard to focus on anything,” he shivered, “and it’s really fucking cold.”

It wasn’t cold, it was just the fever, but Wyliam didn’t tell Thrisan that as he pulled back the covers
and climbed underneath them. Immediately Thris’ arms were around him and he pulled Wyliam right
into his chest, forcing the boy’s face into his shoulder as he exhaled and held onto him. His body felt
burning hot against Wyliam but the boy wasn’t protesting because it felt wonderful to be back in
Thris’ arms. Tears pricked the corners of the boy’s green eyes when he realised that although this
felt absolutely perfect he would never be able to have this. Thrisan was sick, and that’s why he
needed Wyl. You think he loves you or something? Kirvo’s voice echoing through his head made
Wyliam squeeze his eyes shut and want to lose himself in the warmth of the King.

“Thank you for this,” Thrisan whispered, loosening his grip on Wyliam a little so he could pull back.
Wyl’s heart stuttered in his chest when he felt the man press his forehead against his. His skin was
boiling, as were his hands when he cupped Wyl’s cheeks. It was almost like he wanted to be as close
to the boy as possible, “I...I needed it. You keep me grounded,” his thick, dark brows furrowed
suddenly, “You’re...you’re here aren’t you?”

The uncertainty and fear in his voice made Wyliam feel like he needed to reassure him. For once, their roles have reversed. For once, Wyl wasn’t questioning Thrisan’s actions. He gently took the King’s hands from his face and brought them underneath the covers, placing them on his hips. Then he placed his own hands on Thrisan’s stubbled jaw, mirroring his position from the moment before.

“I’m real,” he whispered. Thrisan’s eyes softened impossibly and he closed the few inches between his and Wyl’s faces and pressed their mouths together. The Dust’s heart filled with warmth and this time there was no shock, as if he expected the fact that Thris was going to kiss him. It still made his heart pound.

Thrisan violently pulled back, his cheeks were red and eyes bright with fever, “I’m sorry,” he blurted, “I-I’m sorry I know I said I wouldn’t do that-“

“It’s alright,” Wyliam looked away. A silence settled over the two, slightly tense, and they remained in their position. Thrisan’s arm were loose but warm around Wyl’s waist, while the boy’s hands slid from his cheeks so he could wrap his arms around the man’s neck. He shuffled closer and Thrisan pressed their foreheads together again. For a moment it felt like they belonged together, here, in this bed. But it was just an illusion.

“Hey,” Thrisan said after a while, one of his hands slipping underneath Wyl’s shirt and just resting in the dip of his back. It felt so warm, “I told you that you were pretty before, didn’t I?” Wyliam looked away. Thrisan brushed his nose playfully against Wyliam’s, “I never told you how beautiful you are,” Wyliam inhaled sharply and started to pull away but Thris held him close, “Don’t,” he said, voice desperate, “Don’t do that. I want you to know that you’re absolutely gorgeous-“

“Thris just...shhh,” Wyliam mumbled, feeling that he was as red as Thrisan, though he himself didn’t have a fever. Thrisan’s eyes searched his face, and he looked like he wanted to say more. Instead he just squeezed his eyes shut and opened them again.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered, opening his eyes again, and leaned in again. He kissed Wyliam, harder than before, his lips hot, skin burning up. Wyl tried to protest, to pull back, but even when he was sick Thris was still stronger. His tongue slid into Wyliam’s mouth, and he rolled the two of them partly over so Wyl was laying on his back and Thrisan was hovering over him, pressing their chests together. Wyliam let Thrisan kiss him for a bit. He mostly did this because the feeling of the man on top of him, touching him, was ecstatic and made Wyliam want to never stop. But he had to – Thrisan wasn’t thinking straight, he was ill. He was ill because of stress, probably because of Wyliam being so selfish.

You think he loves you or something?

Wyliam pulled away, pressed a hand against the King’s chest and pushed him away gently, “Thris,” he said softly, apologetically, “We can’t do this.”

Thrisan rolled off of him immediately, “I’m sorry,” he breathed and he looked mournfully at the canopy overhead. Wyl hated seeing him like that. The King turned his head to the side to look at Wyl, “Can you still stay?” he asked, looking like a kicked puppy, “I promise I won’t touch you I just...I want you close.” Wyliam nodded hesitantly and Thrisan exhaled with relief, “My head feels like it’s being hit with a hammer,” he muttered as he wrapped his arms around the Dust’s waist again. Wyl smiled,

“Don’t worry, it’ll pass,” he whispered and settled into Thris’ arms. They didn’t say anything more to each other, just remained wrapped up in one another. For once Wyliam shut off his brain and
doubts and just let Thrisan hold him. The man stroked his curls for a bit and although the boy didn’t know why he did it, he let him. After a while of being enveloped in Thrisan’s amazing warmth the King’s movements started getting slower and more sluggish, until eventually they stopped completely. His chest rose slowly, peacefully and Wyliam realised the King was asleep.

The Dust pulled away and looked at the man he was in love with. He looked so gorgeous and Wyliam wanted to stay with him forever. Why can’t I have him? He thought sadly, his heart aching. He couldn’t stay in the man’s arms, because if he did he would never leave. Carefully the boy untangled himself from the King, who thankfully didn’t wake up, and walked to the door. He felt hopelessly cold and alone when he touched the doorknob. He looked at Thrisan for a moment, sleeping serenely in his bed. And then he just left.

Ghi 5th Neríí 1161EE (3 days later)

Idra.

Arién expected a lot of things from Griff after they slept together, but this was not one of those things. He expected Griff to be apologetic, to be protective, possessive even. He had bit Ari after all, mated with him. He didn’t expect Griff to just ignore the whole situation.

After waking up the morning after Arién had to fight the urge to automatically go and look for Griff. The boy felt a tugging in his core, an urge to see the man, to be held by him. It was a primal need and Ari knew it was because he and Griff were mates now. But Ari knew how tiring and annoying it was when some of the men he slept with found him in the morning and followed him around like lost puppies. So Arién forced himself to control himself as he got dressed and went to the bathroom as usual. Griff wasn’t in the queue for the sinks and stalls either, but Ari noticed that all the Charaseans in the room kept giving him sly looks. Arién didn’t know why until he finally made it to the front of the queue and looked at himself in the hologramic mirror.

He didn’t look like himself, and that shocked him so much that he couldn’t do more than just stare at himself. His black hair was tousled, but that was normal after a night’s sleep on a hard prison bed. Apart from that Arién’s skin was a little paler than normal, and there were dark circles under his eyes from not getting any rest at night. But that wasn’t what was shocking. What was shocking was the puzzle of hickeys, bites and bruises on every part of Ari’s skin that was showing. The mating bite on the side of his neck, over his pulse, was red, a gentle bruise around it. The rest of Ari’s tanned neck had smudges of red and purple everywhere, there was even a fucking hickey on his jaw and behind his ears. His lips were red and swollen.

“Oh, pretty boy!” Slaver was leaning against the wall, impatient, her big Wurund self intimidating, “get the fuck on with it and stop taking up the sinks.”

Ari was so shaken up by the fact that Griff had marked him like this, that everyone could see that the man had marked him like this, that he just walked away from the sink without doing anything. He didn’t go to breakfast, and so he didn’t see Griff there. To his surprise, relief and frustration, when they were all being led out into the desert for the day’s work Griff wasn’t among the prisoners. When Ari asked Ghrishi about the other man the Snake told him to keep his mouth shut. Ari felt lonely the whole day. Lonely and confused.

Griff wasn’t at dinner either, but he couldn’t hide from Ari forever. By nightfall Arién was getting shaky and upset, especially when he saw that the Alpha wasn’t in his bed. He laid in the darkness, waiting for him to come back as the other prisoners fell asleep, but Griff never came to sleep. Arién thought himself pathetic when he found that he couldn’t keep himself from creeping across the narrow strip of floor between the two bunk beds and crawling into Griff’s bed, wrapping himself up
in the blanket that smelled like the man. In the morning Ari woke up late and missed breakfast completely, but this time Griff was among the prisoners going to work out into the desert.

“Griff!” Ari couldn’t keep himself from shouting the man’s name when he saw him, feeling like his heart might explode. Griff’s face was impassive, his hair pushed back. There was no trace of that raw passion in his eyes that had been there the moment he was fucking Ari. He didn’t say hello, just turned away from Ari as the boy joined the group, “Hey, where were you all of yesterday?”

“Called into court again,” Griff said quietly, not looking at the boy. Ari frowned but ignored the man’s coldness, trying not to be hurt by it.

“What did they say?”

“Nothing. Don’t worry about it,” the Alpha’s answers were clipped. Arién exhaled dramatically, “Am I getting the silent treatment?” he asked, and Griff didn’t reply. It was almost funny. Almost, “Cute,” the boy said sarcastically.

“Oi! Shut it!” Ghrishi yelled at them, “Let’s get going bitches!” he commanded, and the group of tired, annoyed prisoners started walking out into the desert. Griff started walking faster, clearly trying to put space between him and the Prince, but Arién wasn’t about to let him do that. His temper was getting the better of him again and he grabbed Griff’s sleeve.

“Stop being a prick,” Ari hissed, “We never have to mention last night if that’s what you want-” Griff pulled his sleeve out of Arién’s grip, “Fuck off,” he snapped. That hurt but before Ari could say anything Ghrishi’s head snapped to them and his eyes narrowed.

“You two shut your stardammed mouths or you’re spending another night in the desert. Separately.”

That was how all the conversations that Ari tried to have with his mate went. The man was completely ignoring him and whatever happened between them. He was completely unaffected by the whole thing, unlike Arién, who wore the evidence of their night on his skin in the form of fading bruises. He had nothing to cover them with so he started wearing the rag that was usually keeping his hair back around his neck now.

He was so invested in Griff and trying to figure out what the mess they had gotten themselves into even was that he didn’t notice other things happening on Idra. Overpopulation. The Hunt – the arresting of war criminals and headhunting from all and any ship that wanted to, no licenses needed – was bringing in more people than the planet could handle. There weren’t enough bunkers for the people, and they were now sleeping on the floors. This annoyed Ari who couldn’t speak to Griff at night, not when there were so many people in their bunker and on the floor between them. But he didn’t pay attention to the water bubbling in the pot, not until it spilled over.

Ari was in the bunker, alone for once since it was dinner, brooding in his bed because the moment he had walked into the mess hall, Griff had glared at him so intensely that Arién turned on his heel and walked out, losing his appetite. He was exhausted, depressed and confused. And his heart hurt, a lot. He needed Thrisan to get him out of the prison more than ever, but his brother was silent and Ari had no idea if he even wanted him back.

Ari was sure he wasn’t going to fall asleep. The sun had just set and it was still early and Arién was too troubled to rest. So he just sat in bed and looked at the red tinged darkness and tried to come up with some kind of plan. He always had a plan, he was always in control, and now he was out of his depth. The Prince was pulled out of his own depressing thoughts by sudden, far away shouting. He
frowned as the noise increased - he heard voices, angry yells and screams, the pandemonium growing, sounds of slamming and metal on metal increasing. A group of people ran past Ari’s bunker, but their angry voices muddled with the sound of their footsteps, and they were so fast the boy had no idea if they were speaking a different language or not. The boy tensed and slipped out of bed, looking around the bunker for a weapon even though he knew he wouldn’t find one.

A few weeks ago he would’ve probably hid and ignored the curiosity pulling him towards potential danger, but recent events made him...careless. So now the Prince walked out into the cold desert and looked among the bunkers, but they were abandoned. The main building was bright with lights, and that was where all the ruckus was coming from. Arién, being the curious idiot he was, started walking right towards it, hands shoved in his pockets. As he came closer and closer, the noises got louder. Laughter mingled among the shouting and slamming, and Ari wandered what the fuck was going on. As he approached the door it burst open and a skinny Charasean Omega sprinted out. Arién opened his mouth to ask him about what was happening inside but before he could the boy, who looked terrified, took off running into the desert.

“Hey!” Ari yelled after him, but the Omega didn’t even look back, running right past the bunkers and into the darkness. Arién was pretty sure he was one of the Omegas that Azus’ Alpha’s used as one of their personal sex slaves. He didn’t know why the kid was running though, but he was about to find out.

Arién shoved open the door to the main building and turned towards the mess hall, where most of the noise was coming from. Then he paused, turned on his heel, and crept down the hallway, to the guard room. He was startled to see it empty, and when he walked out, into the long corridor that he had first come down a few months ago, where the gravity nets were, he saw that there was nobody standing there either. For a moment he was hit with a wave of something so intense that his legs started shaking. Freedom suddenly felt so close that Ari could almost taste it. But the gravity net was still up, and Ari wasn’t brave enough to run anyway. He was a lousy Prince, a mediocre prisoner, but he would make a horrible fugitive.

Ari turned back around and walked towards the mess hall. He slipped in, undetected, and pressed himself up against the wall, taking in what was happening. The room was packed, but not in the way it usually was. The normal order of things was gone and everything was chaos. Creatures lined the walls, crowding around in a circle as if about to watch a show. There was jeering, shouting, bits of food flying through the air. People were moving around so much that Arién had trouble seeing what was in the centre of the room, but eventually he managed to slide forward some. He was absolutely stunned to see all the guards from Idra tied up together in the heart of the room, glaring at the prisoners surrounding them. A chant stared from a group of Ishait in Amablilis but Ari couldn’t understand what they were cheering about. The atmosphere in the mess hall was tumultuous with a violent edge – Ari didn’t know what had happened but he was pretty sure it was a coup of some kind, and he had just walked right into the middle of it.

“What the fuck...,” he whispered to himself.

“Yeah, I know,” Ginger popped out from nowhere next to Ari, herself seeming unaffected by the sudden change in prison politics. She had a toothpick in her mouth and hands in the pockets of a leather jacket that had belonged to Guard Xia. The bat girl sat in just her tank top, tied to her boyfriend Ghrishi and Captain Ballialan.

“What happened?” Ari asked, bending his head to Ginger’s so he could hear her over the hubbub filling the hall.

“Started at dinner,” Ginger explained, watching lazily as a few prisoners circled the guards, taunting
them. They were all armed in various appliances from the kitchen and makeshift weapons from scraps of metal they could find. A few had guns they had taken off the guards and Ari decided to stay clear of those, “Some new Vlassain tried to sit at the Charasean Beta table and they started fighting over the territory. One of the Vlassain’s slammed one of the Beta’s in the face with the bowl and next thing you know that Vlassain is dead on the floor – strangled. Nasty stuff. Anyway, there wasn’t enough space at all the tables and the fight got everyone going – you know how it is. So old conflicts came up and people started fighting. The guards rushed in, absolute idiots, and tried to calm the fights. So everyone ganged up and turned against them, took all their shit. Mostly they’re all protesting the overpopulation, but some of the Wurund’s are also complaining about the food. The Shifs and Calanthe wired to Shoriah and are listing our demands – we want ships and safe passage to the Arda Galaxy, and our sentences taken off, otherwise we kill the guards and take over Idra. Prison’s on lockdown, it’s only a matter of time before we figure out how to get the magnetic field down – the Ishait are on it already – but first we need to stop the incoming authority ships.”

“We?”

Ginger shrugged, “We’re all gonna get an extra ten years for this anyway. Might as well enjoy it while we can.”

Arién shook his head, “I’m not getting involved.”

“Whatever you want, Little Prince,” Ginger shrugged again and dived right into the heart of the chaos. Nobody was paying attention to Ari and he decided it was probably time to return to the bunker and stay out of trouble. His adrenaline was spiking as he slipped back out into the corridor. He really did want to go straight to his bunker but sudden muffled voices led him back through the guard room. He hesitantly peeked around the corner, into the corridor leading to freedom, and saw that ships have landed. Guard ships. Soldiers were at the magnetic field, pounding at it with their fists. Ari didn’t want to get involved. He slipped away, undetected, and was glad to be back out in the cold night desert.

Some creatures that weren’t in the mess hall were running around out here, laughing and stealing each other’s shit. Nobody bothered Ari, nobody cared. It was pure pandemonium, no man’s land, there were no laws. The boy decided being surrounded by murderers, rapists and Gods know what under those circumstances was a very bad idea so he was glad to get back into his bunker, which had become a port in the storm for him.

Or so Ari thought. He quickly realised his mistake about coming here the moment the door of the bunker closed behind him. He had foolishly assumed that everyone would be in the hall, but he had been wrong. Out of Arién’s normal bunkmates the only one present was Griff, another half a dozen Alphas around him – all of them Azus’. Their leader was their too. All of them turned to look at Arién when he walked in and the boy felt his blood run cold.

“Ah!” a cold, calculating smile appeared on Azus’ face and he spread his arms, “now it’s a party!”

“Arién, get out of here,” Griff growled.

“No, no, no,” Azus was by Ari’s side in second, his hand on the boy’s shoulder, squeezing painfully. He forced him forward, among the other Alphas. Arién tried not to let his fear show. Now that he came closer he could see in the dim read light that Griff’s mouth and nose was wet with fresh blood, and a bruise was already appearing around his eye, “It’s perfect. Little Prince can watch while you finally got what’s coming for you.”

“What the fuck are you doing?” Ari growled, not scared anymore. Now he was just angry. He tried to shove off Azus’ hand off but another one of his Alphas seized his arm.
“None of your business,” Griff snapped, voice hoarse with anger.

“Oh!” Azus laughed, and his Alphas followed suit, “you guys having a little domestic? How cute!”

“Fuck off,” Arién snarled. His mate was hurting him with his words, “Griff could kill all of you with his bare hands.”

“Well that’s interesting.” Azus slung his arms around Ari’s shoulders and the Prince saw Griff tense, though the Alphas flanking him prevented him from going anywhere. His blood dripped slowly onto his shirt, “because your mate over here isn’t fighting back at all. He just...takes the hits. Like a pussy.” Griff smiled as if he knew something they didn’t and the smile fell off Azus’ face, “Why don’t you fight back you piece of shit?” Griff didn’t react, just looked at Azus’ face with eyes full of insolence, “alright big man. If you won’t react to the hits, then maybe you’ll react to this.”

He grabbed Ari by the throat and shoved him up against the closest wall, and forced their mouths together. Arién was so stunned for a second that he froze up for a moment. A growl came from somewhere and it took the boy a few sluggish seconds to indentify it as coming from Griff. Azus’ lips were sloppy and rough against Arién’s and they felt wrong. The boy shoved him back just as Griff jerked forward, kept back only with the arms of the Alphas. Azus laughed.

“So now you’re fighting!” he said, and Griff glared at him with dark eyes burning with fury, “Perfect! Let’s see how you’ll react when I fuck that cute little mate of yours right in front of you.”

Griff growled again, fierce, but Azus’ Alphas kept him from going anywhere. Arién was too awake to be scared and when Azus turned to him again he didn’t hesitate. The boy danced forward, light on his feet, and hit the a special spot at the back of the man’s neck with the side of his hand. Thrisan had taught him about that spot, as children. It worked – Azus’ eyes rolled backwards in his head and he crumpled to the ground. His Alphas stumbled back.

“What the fuck?!” one exclaimed. Griff wrestled himself free, a consisted growl coming from his chest. The Alphas stared at Arién in shock and the boy, feeling calm and collected, cocked his head to the side.

“Which one’s next?” he asked innocently, smiling.

“Fuck this,” an Alpha dashed from Griff’s side and out of the bunker. In seconds the other Alphas were gone, clearly spooked, pulling the passed out body of their leader out into the desert. Then it was just Griff and Ari left, in stunned silence. The Prince exhaled shakily as the adrenaline seeped out of him.

“Did you kill him?” Griff asked quietly, and when Arién glanced at him he saw that the primal fury was gone from his face. Now he was just bloody and disoriented.

“No,” Ari said, “He’ll wake up in a few minutes. It’s an old trick.” Griff nodded and wiped his nose and lips at the back of his hand. Arién couldn’t take it anymore, “What the fuck was that?!” he exploded suddenly, whirling on Griff, “Why did you just let them beat you up?! Why didn’t you fight back?!” Griff dropped his head, as if he was ashamed, but didn’t say anything. Ari came up to him and pushed at his chest angrily, “Why didn’t you fight back?!”

“I’m getting out, Ari,” Griff said, in the softest voice.

Everything went quiet for a moment, as if nothing existed outside this bunker. The sounds of the coup disappeared and Arién just stared at Griff.

“W-What?” he asked after a second, voice trembling.
“The appeal went through,” Griff shrugged, “the Charasean court accepted the circumstances and shortened my sentence. I’m getting out in two days.”

“I...I...,” Arién swallowed. He felt weirdly hollow, “That’s...you won’t get out if the authorities slap another ten years on your sentence for this bullshit,” Arién gestured at the bunker, but he meant the coup.

“What else am I supposed to do?”

“I have an idea, come on,” Arién didn’t wait to see if Griff would follow. He had to move, to do something, he couldn’t stand still and think about what Griff just told him. His emotions were in too much of a mess.

He led Griff outside and together they jogged through the short stretch of desert between the bunkers and the main building. Inside it was even more chaotic than before, it that was possible. There were so many people running around, shouting, that Griff and Arién easily got into the guard room without getting noticed. From there Ari tried to run to the main corridor, but Griff grabbed his hand.

“What the hell are you doing?!” he demanded, stopping Arién.

“We need to get the magnetic field down,” Ari explained, flushed and eager, “if the authorities see that we’re not part of the coup then maybe they’ll let us go.”

Griff bit his lip, clearly hesitating, but Arién tugged on his hand and pulled him into the main corridor. Immediately the police gathered at the field started shouting and calling out to Griff and Arién. The Alpha shoved close the door behind them, to prevent any other prisoners from following them.

“Take the field down, kid!” one of the officers yelled.

“Let us in! We need to get this under control!”

The officers were all in navy, heavy non-fatal guns at their shoulders. Arién looked at the complicated screens and blinking buttons on a desk on his side. He ghosted his hands over them but he had no idea how to take down the invisible magnetic field.

“How do I take it down?” he called to the officers. A young girl shoved her way to the front,

“Listen,” she said, voice full of authority, “you need to find a yellow button and on one of the screens a box should appear...”

As she talked Ari through the complicated procedures, the tension ran high. Arién’s heart was pounding, every second he was scared the doors would burst open and they’d get killed by murderous prisoners. Griff came to stand behind him, his hand gently resting at the dip of Ari’s back. His presence comforted the Prince.

In a few minutes the magnetic field shimmered purple and its steady hum disappeared. Ari barely registered that it was down, his head spinning. Immediately the officers were ready and they charged in, many, many of them. They shoved through the door to the guard room and past into the midst of the rebellion. The young girl who knew how to take down the field came over to Ari and Griff, flanked by two more guards. Up close she looked older.

“I’m going to know your names,” she said, “so I know o keep you off the list of fuckers who are going to get punished for this stardammn mess.”
Arién was facing the wall, wrapped up in his blanket, just staring into the red tinged darkness and trying to fall asleep. Tonight was the last time Griff would sleep in the bed opposite his. He was getting out tomorrow. Just the thought made Ari’s heart twist in despair and despite the fact that the man was only a few feet away it felt like Arién was all alone already.

Since the end of the coup it had been almost eerily quiet on Idra. All the prisoners had been rounded up and given the Olia drug, so they couldn’t lie when they were questioned about the rebellion. The ones who had started it or took any part in the violence were taken onto ships and transported fuck knows where, but the others were allowed back in the bunkers, trickling back in steadily over the past few days after their harrowing questioning by the authorities. Everyone was dejected and exhausted – some of the prisoners got no extra time added onto their sentences, but some got months, years even.

Lioness let out a muffled little noise in her sleep and Slaver replied by grumbling and rolling over in her bunk, making it squeak. Ari wondered how much longer he would fall asleep with those sounds. The memory of his own room, quiet and peaceful in the Briallan Palace, seemed far-away and not quite real, as if Arién had spent his whole life on this deserted, burned out planet.

The Prince sniffled and pressed his face into the pillow, feeling like crying. If somebody had told him a few weeks ago that he’d want to choose this prison life with Griff at his side over being alone and free he would’ve laughed in their face. He had never thought it was possible to simultaneously be so goddamn happy and sad. Arién couldn’t imagine being alone, even though once it was the only way he knew how to be. But at the same time he was happy for Griff – the man was good, he deserved his freedom.

The Prince heard rustling behind him but he didn’t pay it any mind because the bunker was always full of soft sounds. He flinched and tensed when he suddenly felt his blanket getting peeled away from his back and he turned around partially, eyes wide, ready to fight whoever was bothering him. Griff, his hair down again, slid into the bed behind Ari.

“No,” the boy whispered firmly, pressing his hand against his mate’s chest in an attempt to throw him out. He couldn’t do this again. Not when he knew that Griff was going away tomorrow.

“Relax,” the Alpha grumbled. There was none of that primal hunger or lust in his eyes, not the way it had been the last time. Ari turned back to the wall, hugging himself like a grumpy child, unable to find the strength to tell Griff to fuck off to his own bed. Or maybe he just didn’t want the man to leave.
The two squeezed together on the narrow mattress, Ari’s back to Griff’s chest, and the Alpha slid his arms around the boy’s waist, hugging him tightly. He offered no explanation to the sudden affectionate behaviour, but Arién wasn’t about to complain. Griff’s arms were folded over the younger boy’s, and his fingers gently stroked the Prince’s tanned skin. They laid like that for a while, neither speaking or falling asleep, completely conscious of each other’s every move. Their bodies slotted together perfectly, as if made for each other. Which they were.

“I can’t believe I’m getting out,” Griff whispered, his breath brushing gently against the back of Arién’s neck. In that instance the boy knew he had to look at the Alpha, to memorise every little bit of his face. He twisted in the man’s muscular arms. His breath caught in his throat when he saw that Griff was looking at him with impossible softness, as if he wanted to treasure Ari forever. His arms tightened around the boy. Griff smiled. He didn’t smile much but when he did it was absolutely breathtaking, “I’m going to be free,” he whispered.

“I’m so glad,” Ari murmured. And then he started crying. He didn’t mean to. He really didn’t mean to. Arién never cried, he was just never the emotional type, none of his brothers were. All of the madness and emotionality went to the youngest Moringathu, Rozene. But right now the Prince couldn’t keep his tears at bay. He snuffled and ducked his head, trying to hurriedly wipe the tears before Griff saw. But the man seemed to sense that Arién was upset because he cupped his face in his hands and then leaned forward, tucking the boy into his chest and resting his chin on top of the Prince’s head. Ari sniffled again and tears slid down his face silently. He pressed his face into Griff’s shoulder to muffle any sounds that might spill from his mouth.

“Don’t cry,” Griff whispered, as if his words would make Ari’s tears dry out. The Alpha’s arms tightened around the boy around and he stroked his back.

No other words were exchanged, because there was nothing left to say. No amount of comfort from Griff would make the horrible sense of loneliness stop creeping up on the Prince, and no amount of denial would make Griff believe that Ari was going to be alright without him. He wasn’t. Actually, no. That was something more to say. Three words that would maybe change things, would maybe make Arién believe that maybe, maybe just maybe...

Maybe Griff would wait for him. On the outside. No. Fayaxiamen was far away and Ari knew better than that. When Griff left in the morning, Arién would never see him again. He fell asleep with that thought, in the arms of the man he loved, though he’d never say it out loud, or even admit it to himself.

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Arién and Griff stood next to each other on the prison side of the magnetic field. The escort ship which would take Griff to any planet he wished in express time had already landed but the guards were waiting outside, giving Ari and Griff some privacy, time to say their goodbyes. It was nice of them, and it would’ve been nicer if Ari knew what to say to his mate.

“So...,” he started after a moment of awkward silence. Griff was still in his prison clothes – he would change on the plane – but there was a duffel bag slung over his shoulder, “Um...have fun on the outside?”

Griff exhaled. He looked anxious when he nodded, not looking at Ari, “Yeah. Thanks. You...will you be alright?”

Arién snorted, “Of course. I can take care of myself. Unlike you,” he meant the fading bruises on Griff’s face from where Azus’ Alphas attacked him. The man didn’t say anything and Ari nodded, bit his lip, put his hands in his pockets, “So...goodbye? I guess?”
“Yeah,” Griff said awkwardly, pushing his hair from his forehead, “Yeah. Bye.”

He nodded at Guard Dierna, who was at the controls that Arién had disabled a few days ago. The peacock Vlassain inclined her head and pressed a button. The magnetic field flickered and disappeared. Ari heard Griff let out a shaky breath. He shifted and turned to Ari, but the Prince couldn’t look at him, his throat felt too tight.

“Goodbye,” the Alpha said softly. Ari nodded and allowed the man to draw him into his arms. The hug felt tense and uncomfortable compared to what they shared the previous night, when they were wrapped up in each other’s arms, almost moulded into one. The hug was also too short. Ari didn’t want Griff to let him go, ever, and he almost said that, but before he could find his voice the Alpha was already half-way to the door. Ari felt cold and empty without the man holding him.

Arién watched his back as Griff walked to the door, powerless, his hands trembling. He felt helpless suddenly, unsure of what to do with himself.

“Griff-,” the man’s name spilled from his mouth before he could stop it. Griff didn’t hesitate – he turned on his heel and strode back to Arién, ignoring the fact that Guard Dierna was watching them, and took the boy’s face in his hands. Ari’s eyes widened and then Griff was kissing him, fiery, passionate, tinted with desperation. Arién clung onto the man’s shirt, kissed him back furiously because he knew this would be the last time.

“Alright, enough,” Dierna said after a few seconds, clearly uncomfortable. Mournfully the two boys pulled away from each other. Arién felt like crying, his eyes looking at Griff, full of hopelessness. The Alpha didn’t look like a man who just got his freedom back – he looked heartbroken.

“I love you,” the Alpha whispered. Arién’s heart clenched.

“Oi Enoe!” Dierna snapped, “they aren’t going to wait forever.”

Griff’s eyes searched Ari’s face, he was clearly waiting for the boy to say it back, but Arién couldn’t get the words out. His heart was pounding, he thought he was going to die. Griff let go off his face and in his head Arién was screaming I love you I love you I love you over and over, but the words never made it out. Griff walked back to where he dropped his bag and Ari stayed silent and hopeless and shaking and watched his mate walk out of the door, disappear, as if he were never there.

The electromagnetic field shimmered purple and with a soft hum came back.

“The same day”

Arossa.

“Your fathers are going to get here soon. Couple days maybe,” Tyeval said, brushing the curtain back over the little oval window. He and Dashyan were staying in this tiny room in an Arossian pub for the past few days with Eilo. The first night the King had come to see his sister but the girl insisted that she wouldn’t go back to the palace until the Competition ended, and the two boys wanted to stay with her and wait for the crew of the Hannibal in the pub.

Dashyan was scared about how his fathers would react when they finally came back to Arossa. He knew he was in big trouble for going slave-hunting and lying to his parents, and in even bigger trouble for almost getting auctioned off. Now that the fear had worn off completely Dashe started getting more and more anxious for that meeting. He liked it here, in this pub room, just him and Tye.
They ate meals with Eilo in the nice bar area downstairs, and spent the days exploring the planet. The nights the two would sit together in their cozy room, where they only had one bed. They were used to one bed. Dashyan was sure the personnel of the pub thought they were a couple. The thought made him a little happy. He didn’t want to leave – he knew that back on *Hannibal* it would be cramped, and his fathers wouldn’t let him off the ship for at least the next two years.

“I don’t want to see them,” Dashyan grumbled. He was laying on his stomach on their bed, arms tucked under a pillow, resting so he could watch Tyeval at the window. The bed was a mess, pillows and covers and blankets everywhere because neither Dashe nor Tye cared much about cleaning. Honestly, Dashe just liked how the bed looked as if they had sex in it. The thought made him blush and he pressed his face into the pillow to try and get rid of those thoughts.

“Well you’re going to have to,” Tyeval said softly.

Dashyan pulled his head up, red hair sticking up in all directions, “You mean we. You’re going to hold my hand while we speak to them.”

“I...” Tyeval shifted at the window and pushed the curtain to the side again, “I won’t be seeing them.”

“What?” Dashe whined, “What do you mean?”

“I’m going to Saarashik.”

Dashyan sat up abruptly and looked at the Ubloit in shock. Never over the many years the two had been friends did the older boy express a desire to return to his home planet, “What do you mean Saarashik? Why?”

“I...” Tye bit his lip, looked away, ran a hand through his hair. He was anxious, nervous, agitated. His usual calm demeanour had disappeared ever since Dashyan got taken by the slave traders, “I can’t...I can’t tell you. I just need to go.”

Dashe frowned and slid off of the bed and padded over in his socks to the window. He came to stand in front of his friend and gently took his hand, “What’s wrong?” he asked softly. Tyeval shook his head.

“I can’t say I...” he reached out with his free hand, almost like he was going to touch Dashyan’s face, but then dropped it. His eyes were so full of misery that Dashyan’s heart twisted, “I just need to go, okay? Only for a little bit.” Dashyan opened his mouth to question the boy but Tyeval just squeezed his hand before letting go, “Don’t ask questions. Please.”

Dashyan sighed, “Alright. If we leave tonight we can still make it back for the wedding.”

“No,” Tyeval shook his head and stepped away from the window, away from Dashe, “No. I have to go. Alone.”

“You’re hilarious,” Dashyan snorted and Tyeval looked at him hopelessly with his dark eyes, “We’ve always done everything together, and now you think you can go off on some mystery mission alone and just-”

“Dashe,” Tyeval sighed in exasperation.

“No,” the boy growled, following his friend and stopping in front of him again, arms crossed over his chest, “We do everything together. I’m your best friend. You know I’m always here for you, and although I don’t know what’s going on in that head of yours I’m...I’m still here,” he smiled gently,
Tyeval ruffled his hair, “I love you,” he said softly. Dashyan grinned brightly, ignoring how those three words, usually said so casually, made his heart pound.

“Love you too,” he said, trying to keep his voice steady, “We’ll buy time from the market and I can make some too. I’m sure Eilo can help. And then we can still make it back for the wedding.”

(The same day)

Saarashik.

Dashyan looked at the jars of bottled time that Eilo bought with her royalty money, stacked on the floor of the bathroom, taking up the entire chamber. Tyeval stood next to him and they both regarded the jars. It was more than needed – it would take them across the galaxy and back again.

“What would happen if we opened them all at the same time?” Dashe asked. It was an innocent question. He didn’t mean anything by it.

Tye shrugged, “Dunno. You’re the time expert.”

Dashe shrugged too, “Let’s just try it.”

“I’m going to be sick,” the redhead whispered when Sycamora finally stopped zooming through time-space and came to a standstill. A few seconds ago the boys had been in the space by Arossa and now they were here, Saarashik looming in front of them. They had made a two month journey in a few blinks of their eyes, and the effects of that were showing. Tyeval was fine – he was Ubloit after all, he didn’t get sick. But Dashyan was pale, tinged green even, his head spinning and throbbing, hands shaking, hair sticking up in all directions.

“Do you want a bucket?” Tye asked, already typing in coordinates to where they were landing. Dashyan’s head stopped spinning when he forced his eyes to focus on the grey globe floating right outside Sycamora.

“No, I’m good,” the boy mumbled.

He still had no idea why they were here. Dashyan kept checking the call logs but so far he didn’t get any messages from either of his fathers, which meant that Hannibal hadn’t landed on Arossa yet, which meant that Thane and Viridian didn’t know that Dashe and Tyeval had gone against them and done exactly what they hadn’t been meant to do – travelling across the galaxy again, alone. Somehow the boys found themselves closer to Calliban than they were to Arossa, and although the slave planet was miles and miles away Dashyan still felt anxious. The air around here was riddled with slave ships just waiting to hunt.

“Right,” Tyeval put the ship on autopilot and stood up. His shoulders were tense and with anxiety - he walked over to the little kitchen area and pulled out two mugs, his hands trembling, “Do you...uh...do you want tea?”

“Nope,” Dashyan said, popping the ‘p’ and turning around his chair around. He crossed his arms over his chest and looked pointedly at Tye, “I didn’t ask any questions. I probably double pissed off my dads by following you without hesitation,” he sighed and looked at Tye, “When did you stop telling me things? When did you start keeping secrets? I feel like...I don’t know you anymore.”

Tyeval dropped his head, as if he understood, but didn’t say anything. He looked so sad that it was heartbreaking. Dashyan got up from the pilot chair and walked up to his friend, who was leaning on

softly.
He stood facing him, but Tye wouldn’t meet his eyes. He brushed his dark hair from his forehead in
distress.

“You know...,” he started, then paused, cleared his throat, “You know how...when I was created...it
was the experimental bunch of Ubloits. The ‘human’ bunch. Before my generation Ubloits didn’t
have human hearts or...uh...,” a light blush dusted the young man’s face when he gestured to his
lower regions, “but then they wanted us to be more than humanoid cyborgs. They wanted us to be
human super-soldiers. Super strong, super smart,” Tye sighed, “they gave us emotions.”

“I know,” Dashe frowned, “Why are you telling me this?”

“Because they made a mistake,” there was some kind of raw passion creeping into Tye’s voice. He
pushed himself off the counter and circled the room, agitated, “after my generation they went back to
the old Ubloits because the new batch – my batch – was too emotional and reckless. Normal Ubloits
feel...protectiveness, a sense of survival, bravery. Things needed to be a good soldier. But we – I...I
feel things like normal creatures do.”

“I know,” Dashyan was getting impatient. Honestly, Tye’s behaviour was scaring him a little. He
had never seen the other boy so...scared.

Tyeval inhaled and rubbed a hand down his face, “I got a message from the Central a few days ago.
It was to all Ubloits from my generation. They’re giving us an option, if you will,” he let out a bitter
laugh, “if our humanity is getting in the way of us doing our jobs as protectors then we can get
it...removed.”

Dashe felt his blood run cold, “W-What?” he asked, faintly aware that his knees were shaking and he
was leaning back against the counter.

“It’s just an operation,” Tyeval said quickly, “A quick one. We’d be out in a day.”

“So...so...,” Dashyan was stuttering, “so what would t-they...um...what would they d-do?”

Tyeval shrugged, “Remove my heart, human parts of my brain. Some other parts as well. Replace
them with artificial stuff that will make me stronger, more able to protect you-“

“You’re going to give up your humanity.” Dashe summarised bitterly, “Because you blame yourself
for what happened on Calliban.” He knew it was that. It was always that. Tyeval always blamed
himself for anything bad that ever happened to Dashyan, “It wasn’t your fault.”

“I should’ve protected you,” Tyeval said, stopping his pacing, his hand curling into a fist, “It was my
job. I failed at my job.”

“I’m not going to let you do this,” Dashyan said determinedly, approaching his friend and grabbing
his hand, “You’re my best friend and I love you the way you are now-“

“Not the way I way I want you to,” Tyeval snapped, sudden anger flaring up in his eyes as he ripped
his hand out of Dashyan’s grip. The boy’s eyes widened, his heart stuttered in his chest.

“What do...,” his mouth was dry, “What do you m-mean?”

“Nothing. Nothing at all,” Tye whirled around and sat down in the pilot’s chair. He took Sycamora
off autopilot and started furiously flicking switches and pressing buttons. The ship hummed and sped
up, approaching Saarashik. Dashe stared at Tyeval, stunned.

“You can’t do this,” he whispered.
“Enough,” Tyeval barked. He had never been angry at Dashyan, not like this. He wouldn’t even face the boy. The Hybrid felt sick, “We’re not talking about this anymore. I’m going through with this.”
Almost done guys! Thankyou for your wonderful comments xx

Tuhi 10th Neríí 1161EE (3 days later)

Arossa.

It had been eighteen days since the second challenge, and Kal thought he was losing his mind. He tried so hard to find a fiancée among the remaining girls but his options were dwindling and the only person Kalorian could imagine spending the rest of his life with was the fucking King.

At least today Kal could distract himself with the third challenge of the Competition – and this time he was hosting. Once again he and the remaining three candidates – Lady Eskilsa, Lady Kursassarra and Rian – were gathered in the snowy forest nearby the Tower Palace. Kal stood in front of the trio, with Ash and a few Lords and Ladies at his side, including Lady Shefanida who was no longer in the Competition but happily at the side of Rian’s servant, Aziza. Today it was his turn to host the challenge, to introduce it to the candidates. More than anything he wanted Rian to win this challenge, but right now the King was digging a hole in the snow with the heel of his boot and not even looking at Kalorian. Clearly he wasn’t bothered about winning the Competition, and Kal knew this, which was why when he had found an anonymous note on his desk telling him that the King was in love with him he knew it was a joke, a misunderstanding.

“Alright, today is challenge three,” Kalorian said, giving the trio a smile. Lady Kursassarra gave him a smirk, Eskilsa smiled endearingly, and Rian didn’t even look up. The quicker the Competition ended the better, “the aim of this challenge is to find a hidden treasure. Three items made of gold had been concealed around the forest and each of you has to find one.”

“Nobody can take more than one treasure or you will be automatically disqualified,” Princess Ashia put in, her gloved hands clasped on her swollen belly. Any day now the baby was due, “The first candidate to find their treasure will be immune to elimination,” her eyes scanned the trio.

“This isn’t all, however,” Kal smiled, “in order to test your skill regarding making friends and alliances, and see how able you are to win loyalty, you can ask one person to help you in your task,” he held his hand up when Lady Kursassarra took a step forward, “Just a moment. You can only ask one person and if they say no then you are alone and you can’t ask a second one. The person can’t
give you any clues as to where the treasures may be but can help you in, for example, hoisting you up if the treasure is somewhere high up.”

“We can always just take off our shoes,” Rian interjected sarcastically. His cold tone hurt Kal.

“No. As before, flying isn’t allowed as it would be easy to spot the treasures from the air. So now,” Kal turned to Lady Kursassarra, “would you like to choose your helper, My Lady?”

The girl scanned the crowd and pursed her lips in thought, “Hmmm...,” she hummed to herself, and then took a step backwards, “Actually, no. I think I can do this alone.”

Kalorian smiled, “And that is your right. Lady Eskilsa? Who will you choose?”

The white-haired beauty smiled prettily, “My mother, naturally,” she extended her hand to the Baroness who smirked, as if already sure of her daughter’s success, and clasped her fingers. Kalorian nodded and turned to Rian, who was looking anxiously among the small crowd gathered. He most likely wanted to choose Ashia, but in her heavy pregnancy she was of no use to him.

“Are we allowed to choose anybody we like?” he asked, “Anyone at all?”

Kalorian smiled, “Uh...yes.”

Rian looked at him, his deep eyes carrying an intensity that made Kal want to touch him. He hadn’t touched him in so long, “Then I choose Prince Kalorian.”

“No!” Lady Eskilsa exploded suddenly, while her mother looked appalled, “That is surely unfair!”

Lady Kursassarra shook her head fondly and smirked. Ashia looked slightly troubled, “Actually, I believe it is fair, as long as Prince Kalorian doesn’t break the rules...”

Lady Eskilsa looked like she wanted to argue further, her mouth in a thin line and eyes flashing with anger, but her mother’s hand on her shoulder prevented her from saying more. She turned away in a huff and Kal tried futilely to catch Rian’s eye. What was the boy thinking making such a controversial decision?! More importantly why did he want Kal on his team? It wasn’t as if they were exactly on speaking terms...

“If everybody is ready I’d like to allow the third challenge to commence,” Princess Ashia said after a moment of heavy silence in which she was giving Kal a pointed look, though the man was too focused on Rian to notice.

It took a mere few minutes for the contestants to disperse into the snowy forest. Rian trudged off, dressed in his heavy furs, without a word to the Prince and Kal struggled to keep up with the fiery King despite his longer legs. When they were far away from the Lords and Ladies and Ashia, Kal asked the question that was bothering him since Rian chose him for this.

“Why did you choose me?” The King didn’t slow his step, ploughing through the trees with purpose. He didn’t answer, “Hey! Rian, I’m serious-,” Kal was exasperated and out of breath the cold winter air prickling at his exposed cheeks, “You don’t care about the competition why are you in such a hurry?!“

Rian stopped then, “You’re right,” he said, his back still to Kal, “I don’t care.”

The Prince tried not to let his sadness show in his voice, “So why did you employ me then? You could’ve gone off alone and-“
“I’m trying to protect you, dammit,” Rian snapped, turning on Kal. His cheeks were red from the cold and his eyes were stormy. Kalorian blinked in surprise.

“Huh?” he said intelligently. Rian looked up at the trees and let out a loud breath.

“Someone in the castle is trying to murder you and you’re completely ignoring it.”

Kal frowned, “Nobody’s trying to kill me. I mean...that wine could’ve been for anyone.”

“Stars you’re so naive,” Rian laughed bitterly. Kal hated being treated like a child, especially by someone his own age.

“What’s the motive, Rian?” he asked angrily, “why would they want to kill me?”

“I don’t know, Kal,” Rian said in annoyance, “I’m not a detective. I just know that the further away you are from the castle, the better.”

“So what? You think I’m safer here alone with you then with all those people back there?” Kal asked, gesturing at the shadowy, leafless trees surrounding them. Rian’s jaw clenched, “You know what? I changed my mind. I do care. I want to find that stupid treasure and you shut your mouth,” his eyes narrowed, “you might accidentally tell me something that goes against the rules.”

Kalorian trekked after Rian through the snow in angry silence. He felt like their relationship came to a standstill – there was all this tension between them, all these unsaid things and unasked questions, and nothing seemed to be changing. Kal had to choose a spouse soon, and he would not force Rian to marry him, not if the man didn’t want it.

The two slipped out of the woods, and ironically found themselves at the place by the river that once used to belong to the two of them, and Eilo. Kal hadn’t come here since she ran away, and he was sure Rian hadn’t either. Now the two of them stood in the snow and looked at the tree that they had laid beneath a hundred times, now leafless and dead-looking. The river continued rushing past, the only thing preventing it from freezing over was its constant movement. Melancholy settled over the two – the memories of what they used to be.

“Do you know where the treasure is?” Rian asked, and the anger was gone from his voice, leaving it dull and emotionless.

“I can’t tell you.”

Rian sighed, his breath changing into a cloud in front of his face, “I didn’t want to know anyway.”

He turned as if to walk back into the forest, and then stopped suddenly. Kalorian saw the same thing as the King – a glimmer of gold in the deeper end of the river, where the current was calmer, creating a sort of lake. A thin layer of ice was already forming over the water.

“They did not throw the treasure into the river,” Rian hissed.

“No,” Kal felt uncomfortable, and he glanced around the woods, “They didn’t. One of the other contestants must’ve dropped it in there as sabotage.”

“Brilliant. There’s three of us. Which one was it?” Rian asked. Kal sighed,

“It doesn’t matter,” he shook his head, “we need to cancel this contest and start again–“
“Are you kidding me?” Rian snorted, and reached down to undo the laces on his boots, “there’s no way in the stars I’m letting this go on for longer then necessary.”

Kal’s eyes widened, “What are you doing?”

“Getting my treasure,” Rian said simply. He was so confusing – one moment he was making it clear he wanted no part of the Competition, and the next he was actively participating in it.

“You’re not getting into that freezing river,” Kal said in disbelief.

“I’m your King,” Rian straightened up, “don’t presume to tell me what I can and can’t do.” Kalorian sighed, even though both of them knew that Rian didn’t have any power over him. Without another word the Prince also reached for his own boots. The blonde’s eyes widened, “What are you doing?”

“I’m a Varsen,” Kal shrugged and started unbuttoning his furs. When they slipped off his shoulders he felt a chill seep through his shirt, “I can breathe underwater. I’m going to get that treasure.”

“No,” Rian said, crossing his arm over his chest, “It’s my treasure. I’m not having you get it for me like some damsel in distress. Besides, the rest of the Ladies could consider that unfair.”

Kal smiled, despite himself, “I thought you didn’t care.”

Rian glared, “I don’t,” he grumbled and slipped his fur off his shoulders, stepping out of his boots. He walked over to the edge of the river in his socks and Kal followed him. In the dark green depths the two of them could see glimmering gold. The King sighed and slipped off his socks. His feet were only a few shades darker than the snow and he hissed from the cold when he dipped his toes in the water.

“Are you going to be alright?”

“Yes. Fine,” Rian grumbled, his mouth in a thin line. Kal watched hopelessly as the boy slowly entered the water, gasping with each inch that he submerged into the lake. His hands were trembling, hands in fists on either side of him. Then, when the water crept up to the King’s knees, the man suddenly squeezed his eyes shut, clenched his jaw and launched himself into the depths. Kal gasped when the blonde disappeared under the green surface with a splash.

The Prince climbed to the edge of the lake, where the snow melted into the water, and anxiously waited for the surface to smooth out. His heart was pounding when he saw a blurry Rian swimming down to the dark bottom of the lake, where the gold glimmered. The clouds climbed across the sky and the wind picked up and every second that Rian was under was excruciating. Kal’s heartbeat was obnoxiously loud in his ears. Then the King suddenly reappeared, as unexpectedly as before. He was gasping for air, blonde hair plastered to his face, water droplets beading on his cheeks. He was trembling as he tried to catch his breath, his lips blue.

“That’s it, come out,” Kal commanded, sticking his hand out to pull Rian out of the lake. Despite his violent shivering Rian shook his head.

“I-It’s t-too d-deep,” he whispered, “I-I need t-to go a-again. I-I ran o-out of a-air-“

“No, you’re going to get hypothermia,” Kal said, “Get out now.”

“N-No. S-Stop telling m-me what to d-do,” Rian growled and pushed himself away from the edge when Kal tried to grab him. The Varsen growled in annoyance and then threw off his own fur. Because he was semi-aquatic he didn’t feel the cold quite as intensely as Rian, “W-What are y-you doing?” Rian demanded.
“You can’t hold your breath underwater for that long,” Kal said, shoving his boots off, “but I can breathe down there.”

“I’m n-not letting y-you g-get the treasure f-for m-me,” Rian interrupted.

“I know, I won’t,” Kal now stood at the edge of the lake in just his shirt and breeches, “I’m going to give you the air.”

Before Rian could argue with that, Kal jumped into the water. Iciness pierced his body as a shock suddenly went through him, but it quickly gave way to a cool kind of comfort when the lake closed over his head. The Prince swam to the surface, bobbing in the water next to Rian. Without asking for permission he wrapped his arm around the man’s waist under the water.

“You ready?” Kal asked.

“For what?” Rian asked suspiciously, making sure he wasn’t directly facing the Prince. Kal drew him close and ducked his head, so his and Rian’s noses brushed against one another, and then he pressed their mouths together, simultaneously pulling Rian under the water. The King gasped, bubbled escaping his mouth in the watery depths, his hands found Kal’s shoulders and his fingers dug into them. Kal, who was naturally comfortable in water, gently brought them down to the lake floor. The gills on his tanned neck opened up but Rian’s mouth was sealed shut, preventing the Prince from giving him air.

The water around them grew darker and Kal gently licked the blonde’s lips to get them to part. When Rian’s mouth opened a little, Kal carefully blew air into the his mouth. The blonde’s hands relaxed on Kalorian’s shoulders and to the Prince’s surprise his eyes fluttered shut. Kal could see clearly in the lake, but Rian couldn’t.

When Kalorian felt his feet touch the sandy floor of the lake, his clothes and hair fluttering in the water, he let go of Rian’s waist. The King pulled back and looked around, his eyes unfocused underwater. He looked ethereal then – the green water casting light onto his pale face, making his blonde hair look white. The man held onto Kal’s hand as he looked around but thankfully the glimmer of the treasure was clear enough even to him and his weak eyes.

They had landed right next to the golden crown – Eilo’s golden crown, which she had left behind when she ran away. It was one of the treasures. Rian scrambled clumsily as he crouched down in the water, a hard feat, and clutched at the sand before his fingers finally closed around the crown. The moment it was in his hand he threw himself at Kal, his movements slowed by the water, and pressed his mouth to Kal’s, eager for more air. The Prince’s heart stuttered and for a moment he forgot himself. He pulled Rian close and kissed the King properly, for a second, before he started blowing air into the man’s mouth and attempted to play the whole thing off, his heart pounding. They swam back up to the surface, and Kal’s gracefulness and knowledge of water got them up there in seconds. They broke through the surface and Rian started breathing hard, clutching onto Kal’s shoulder, before pushing himself away and swimming to the edge of the lake. His hands sunk into the snow, shoving the crown against the white fluff. Kal smiled at him as he swam over, watched the water trickle from the boy’s hair and down his face, his cheeks flushed from the cold.

*Stars, I want to marry him.*

“Thankyou,” Rian said, not even looking at Kal. His lips weren’t blue anymore.

***

A few hours later everybody was dancing in the main hall, warm and dry. The icy lake was far
behind Kalorian and he had almost forgotten about it – it was easy to when the hall was warm and full of comforting light from the chandeliers and the darkness and coldness of the winter coming to an end was kept at bay behind the gothic windows of the palace.

Kalorian had thrown another party for all the Lords and Ladies and any royals in the Palace, because he needed time to think. Earlier a servant had reported to Princess Ashia that he had seen Lady Eskilsa and the Baroness throw the crown into the lake, and Kal knew what he had to do with the information. He always thought there was something off about Lady Eskilsa – too pretty, too dainty, too graceful, too perfect – she should’ve made a perfectly desirable wife and yet for some reason Kal couldn’t quite bring himself to like her. She made his skin crawl and now he finally knew why – she was a cheater. Now he had an excuse to eliminate her from the Competition, and after that he’d just have to get rid of Lady Kursassarra and then...he smiled to himself as he whirled one of Rian’s younger cousins in a dance. He would be finally able to marry Rian, sooner than anticipated. Kal wondered what it would be like, how the blonde would react. Would the King let Kalorian touch him during their wedding night? Or would he treat their marriage strictly platonically?

The cheerful folk song ended and everyone clapped, laughter fluttering across the room like a delicate bird. Kal smiled warmly at the little girl in his arms and let her go, moving to one of the little floating trays by the walls and picking up a glass of sparkling bourbon. His eyes surveyed the large room – creatures were dancing, laughing, drinking, talking in little congregations. The Baroness of Terassa was by the door, her eyes cold behind her spectacles as she also took in the room. Her daughter was nowhere in sight but she wouldn’t be – Kal sent a servant to her room earlier to inform her that she was disqualified from the Competition.

Princess Ashia sat nearby with her husband, smiling at him joyfully and stroking her huge belly. Kal couldn’t stop smiling – this was what he wanted. He wanted to be this happy, but he wanted Rian at his side. Like most of the Prince’s parties, the King hadn’t shown to this one. Upon their return to the palace after the third challenge, which Lady Kursassarra had surprisingly won, Rian had immediately disappeared in his chambers, probably to take a bath and warm up after the escapade in the lake. Kalorian hadn’t seen him since, though he yearned for him desperately. If it was politically correct Kal would call the whole Competition off right here and now and announce that he was in love with Rian and was going to marry him.

The door to the hall opened and without hope Kal looked up. His heart stammered in his chest and warmth filled his body when he saw that it was the King who was joining the party, the last person the Prince expected. However the smile melted from his face when he saw the state of the King – his hair was dishevelled and he was only in a loose white top and some pants, not his usual ‘partying’ attire, something he attempted to hide under a black cloak. His expression was full of fear and anxiety and he bee-lined straight to Kalorian, ignoring the people who turned to him to try and speak with him.

“Rian-,” Kal started warmly when Rian was close enough, but stopped talking when the King grabbed his arm.

“You eliminated Eskilsa?” he hissed. Kalorian blinked.

“Yes. She cheated during the contest-“

“So what you planning to marry Lady Kursassarra now?” the blonde demanded, and both the men looked over to where the green-haired girl was dancing with two Lords simultaneously, “You’ve barely spoken to her!”

“I...,” Kal didn’t know what to say. He couldn’t admit to Rian that he was planning to marry him. He was terrified of the boy running away like Eilo did, “I...”
The door to the hall banged open so violently that the band stopped playing abruptly and everyone glanced up. A murmur of gossip slid through the crowd as people stopped dancing to look at a furious Lady Eskilsa, who walked into the hall like a whirl storm. Kalorian felt his anxiety spike – the girl should’ve been getting ready to return to her province, not coming down here. Besides, the wrath in her eyes was unnatural.

“Lady Eskilsa,” Princess Ashia started, breaking the tense, menacing silence that settled over the room, rising from her chair and stepping forward.

“Don’t,” the Lady snapped, and suddenly there was a laser gun in her hand. She must’ve hidden it behind her back because nobody saw it until she was pointing it at the pregnant Princess. A horrified gasp went through the room and people took a few stuttering steps back. A Charasean Lady fainted and Ashia’s husband stopped in front of her, placing a hand on her stomach protectively. Kalorian had to get this under control. He pushed his fear to the side and stepped towards the girl,

“Lady Eskilsa if this is about the elimination then this violent act is unnecessary-“

“Shut your mouth,” the Lady pointed her gun at Kal now, and he stopped in his tracks. The girl’s weapon snapped to just over the Prince’s shoulder, “You don’t even try moving, King Rian, or this will end in more deaths than necessary.”

“My Lady,” Kalorian raised his hands in a gesture of surrender. His head was pulsing, his heart pounding viciously in his chest. He tried not to show his shakiness, “Please. There is no need for any deaths at all.”

“Oh but there is,” Eskilsa’s eyes narrowed.

“My Lady truly this is-“

“I’m not Lady Eskilsa,” the girl barked, her gun steady in her hands, “for fuck’s sake you dumb fucks I would’ve thought you’d figure it out by now.”

“What?” Rian asked, his voice faint. He was closer to Kal now, the Prince felt his warmth against one of his shoulders. To everyone’s shock – and Kalorian wasn’t sure how many more surprises he could handle – the Baroness came to stand next to her daughter.

“Eskilsa was a charming girl, and pretty,” she said, and her smile was cold, “but she was never strong enough for this task. Never strong enough for murder.”

And then both the Baroness and her daughter started changing. Their skin glimmered a multitude of colours and then there were two women clad all in black standing there, ebony masks covering their faces. Kalorian didn’t know what the hell was happening, but Rian did. He stepped forward.

“You’re Zalians,” he stated, “the new Shapeshifting species from the Eon Galaxy.”

One of the Zalians cocked their head, “We’re not all that new. We have been around for thousands of years. And we can become anyone we want,” as she said that her form shifted again and then she was Rian, an exact replica of the boy standing at Kalorian’s side, smiling coldly. Someone screamed, someone else fainted. The guests of the party were pressed up against walls, some crying, some looking terrified. Kal reached out and grabbed Rian’s wrists, dragging him behind himself as the Zalian returned to her masked form. Her companion’s gun was still firmly trained on Kal.

“What do you want?” the King demanded.

“Expansion,” the Zalian without the weapon who wore the Baroness’ face before said, “Our planet,
Fealo, isn’t large enough to hold all of our species. But this planet,” she looked around the great hall though her expression was hidden beneath her mask, “will do well for a move.”

“And how do you plan on taking over?” Kalorian demanded, though he already knew the answer.

“By killing the King,” the Zalian with the weapon said, shifting the gun so it pointed at Rian. Kal automatically stepped in front of him and the Zalian laughed, “move, or you’ll both end up dead.”

“You’re the ones who tried to kill Kal,” Rian said shakily.

“Not me,” Kalorian’s mouth was in a thin line, “You. The poisoned wine...it was meant for you.”

“ Anyone could’ve drank that!” Rian yelled at the two Zalians, his voice heavy with passion. He was always too righteous for his own good and now seemed outraged at the cruelty of the Zalians.

“We were prepared for casualties,” the Zalian without the gun said impassively, “However we wanted this to be a quiet affair. Remove the King and take over the planet. We hoped you would be foolish enough to stay down in the lake tonight, and drown hopefully. But you survived and eliminated Eskilsa – or rather my friend here, wearing her face - which unfortunately altered our plans. We attempted to isolate the King from you, Prince Kal, but that didn’t work.”

“Enough talking,” the Zalian with the weapon growled, “Time for the execution.”

“No-“ Kal said immediately.

“Wait-“ Rian tried to step in front of Kalorian but the Prince shoved him back.

Then things happened lightning fast. The door to the kitchens burst open angrily and the Zalian’s finger slid to the trigger, but before she could pull it a laser shot through the air and a shock of electricity went through her body. The Zalian crumbled to the ground and the second one joined the first when she lurched for her fallen comrade’s gun. They weren’t dead – just unconscious. An eerie silence settled over the room full of people as everyone tried to comprehend what just happened.

At the door to the kitchen stood the crew of Hannibal, Captain Cylian at the head of his people, all of them holding shock guns. Hickey looked vaguely amused while Thane looked absolutely furious.

“Hi,” it was Champagne who spoke, standing next to Lin. She swung her gun around and rested it on her shoulder, “We’re here for the wedding.”

“That’s it,” Lady Kursassarra held up her hands in surrender, “Queen life isn’t for me. I back out of the Competition.”

Ashia let out a loud gasp and all eyes turned to her. The woman’s face was pale and she was gripping her husband’s shoulder tightly, “I think the baby’s coming,” she whispered faintly.

All hell broke loose then as chaos descended onto the hall. The creatures in the room started shouting, screaming, reviving the people who fainted. Guards rushed in to escort people back to their rooms, to get the two Zalians into arrest and to take Lady Ashia to the hospital wing. It all seemed distant to Kalorian as he tried to wrap his head around the last few minutes, which had been the most stressful of his life. He turned to face Rian, and found that the King was already looking at him with wide, confused eyes. Happiness bloomed in Kal like a flower, unfurling slowly as the man realised what he and Rian were now.

Engaged.
(The same day)

Saarashik

It took three days for Tyeval’s request to get processed through the central. They were given two separate rooms in one of the bunkers for the cyborgs and spent their days walking around the compound. There wasn’t much to see – mechanic joints, part shops. There were no houses on Saarashik, everything was commercial. The planet itself was grey and industrial, and the Ubloits living on it professional with no ounce of warmth in them.

That’s what I’m going to become, Tyeval thought as he met with the leaders of the compound and told him about his decision to remove his emotions. The thought gave him some comfort. At least when he became a true cyborg he wouldn’t feel this impossible, uncontrollable love for Dashyan that would never be reciprocated. The thought that one day Tye would see the redhead with a girl or a boy, happy, together, filled him with happiness. Soon he wouldn’t desire the boy anymore and no words from Dashe could sway his decision to remove his humanity. Honestly the Hybrid was too busy trying to explain to his fathers, who finally arrived on Arossa and were calling him furiously, why they weren’t there, and had no time to waste bothering Tyeval about what he knew was inevitable.

On the actual day of the operation Dashyan didn’t speak to Tye the whole morning. When the Ubloit saw him at dawn the boy was in his pyjamas, staring at the steely grey sky outside his window and ignoring Tyeval. His eyes were red and puffy as if he had been crying.

“You know...,” Tyeval had hovered in the doorway of the boy’s room, sensing he was unwanted, “I’m still going to be me. Just...more capable of protecting you.”

Dashyan didn’t even look at him when Tyeval walked out

Now Tye was having regrets pile up as he laid down on the cold slab of metal in one of the medical chambers. An Ubloit stood at the door but above Tyeval there were half a dozen pointed, menacing-looking machines, ready to operate on the boy as soon as he was sent under. Tyeval wished Dashyan was with him, just so he could look at him as they took away all of his humanity. No, not took. He was willingly giving it away.

I should’ve kissed him, Tye thought bitterly, while I still had the chance. He had no idea who he’d be when he woke up. He kept telling Dashyan that nothing would change but that was a lie. Tyeval didn’t know what parts the central would take and which he would get to keep. What would it be like to not feel anything? The thought scared him, but soon he wouldn’t be able to feel fear. That was even scarier.

“Are you ready?” the Ubloit at the door asked. No, No I’m not. Tyeval inhaled shakily.

“J-Just...,” he cleared his throat, “Just give me a moment please.”

Tye wondered what the Ubloit at the door thought of how emotional Tyeval was. It would end soon, but not just yet. How long had the boy been laying on this metal slab? Ten minutes? Fifteen? He was trying to gather up his courage to go under and with each passing minute he knew that his chances of going through this were decreasing.

Shouting down the corridor, past the sliding door that closed Tyeval in this room, he heard an argument erupt. The Ubloit jerked into a sitting position and the man at the door turned to it, surprised. Several voices were shouting at each other and Tye’s heartbeat escalated. He opened his mouth to ask his guard what was happening, but before he could the door to the hospital chamber
burst open.

Dashyan stormed in, looking furious, still wearing his pyjama top and a pair of sweatpants. Clearly he hadn’t brushed his hair because it was sticking up in different directions. His eyes were stormy.

“Dashe, what the hell are you doing in here?” Tye demanded, swinging his legs over the side of the slab.

“You can’t be in here,” the Ubloit at the door grabbed Dashyan’s arm. The Hybrid attempted to free his arm but he was too skinny.

“Fuck off,” he spat at the man and, to everyone’s surprise, the Ubloit let go. Dashyan closed the space between him and Tyeval and stood in front of the man, looking equally furious and upset, “You can’t do this.”

Tye sighed and rubbed a hand down his face, “Dashe...”

“No. No. I don’t care,” Dashyan snapped, grabbing the Ubloit’s hands, “Y-You’re not...I-L...,” his eyes filled with tears and his breathing grew harsher, “I-I can’t let you d-do this...”

“Dashyan, hey,” Tye took the boy’s face in his hands and tried to comfort him by stroking his cheeks, “It’s alright-“

The redhead leaned forward and crashed his mouth against Tye’s. Both the boy’s gasped simultaneously, Tye because he was shocked, and Dashyan because...Tye didn’t think the boy really realised what he was doing. The peculiar thing was that neither of the two pulled away, they kept their lips glued together, both their eyes’ wide.

And then Dashyan suddenly melted into Tyeval, pressed himself up against the older boy, his arms sliding around the Ubloit’s neck. A passion erupted in Tye’s heart and he drew Dashe impossibly near, their kiss turning fiery and desperate. They clung onto each other and kissed for what seemed like an eternity and it was absolutely perfect. Tye always fantasised that maybe Dashyan was the one for him, the one and only, maybe like the Charasean idea of mates, but now he suddenly believed that it was true. Their mouths slotted together flawlessly, their bodies fit against each other without fault.

“Oi,” the Ubloit at the door sounded disinterested, “Are you ready?”

With some difficulty Tyeval pulled away from Dashyan, keeping their foreheads pressed together. They breathed into each other’s mouths for a few seconds and then Tyeval turned to the Ubloit.

“No. No I’m not.”

***

*Sycamora* hovered in the space surrounding Saarashik, slowly making its way back to Arossa on autopilot. Neither of the boys were much concerned about making it back right now, they were too busy getting lost in each other. Ironic – there was a whole galaxy outside the walls of their vessel and instead of being mesmerised by it, the boys were mesmerised by each other.

Tyeval didn’t believe that he would ever be here – cradling Dashyan in his arms. They were lying on the boy’s bed, both of them naked. Somehow languid kissing had turned into passionate kissing, into wandering hands, and now...and now Tye was slowly fucking Dashe into the mattress.

“F-Fuck,” the redhead panted, hands scrambling against Tye’s back. The Ubloit was completely
entranced by the Hybrid beneath him – his pale skin, now deliciously flushed, dark eyelashes, half-shut aquamarine eyes, a few shades darker than normal, brimming with lust, swollen red lips from all of Tyeval’s kisses. His gaze was one of desperation and need, and he bit his lip to muffle a moan as Tye slid inside him, over and over, “O-Oh fuck...”

“You’re so beautiful,” Tyeval whispered, and kissed Dashyan before the boy could reply. They were in no hurry, but the Ubloit was slowly but steadily increasing his pace. He had to take it slow with Dashe – he would never forgive himself if he caused the boy any pain or discomfort. But it was hard to hold back – Dashyan’s passage clenched around Tye’s cock every second, enveloping it in an impossible heat that was driving the Ubloit a little insane. If I had gone through with the operation I would’ve never experienced doing this in the same way, the boy thought distractedly. The feeling of their joint bodies rocking together paired with the intense, sweet love that Tye felt for the boy beneath him made him so intensely happy that he forgot how to breathe at times.

“T-Tye,” Dashyan whimpered, gasping into the Ubloit’s mouth. Not knowing why, Tyeval suddenly drew back, pulling his member out of Dashe, and then slammed back in forcefully. The Hybrid cried out and his back arched gorgeously in Tye’s hands. The man felt like he was getting drunk on his body, “Oh m-my stars...D-Do that again.”

So Tyeval did. He set up a faster pace, still on the gentle side, plunging into Dashe repeatedly, eliciting the sweetest moans from the boy. It was absolutely perfect – the dim light of the small bedroom, the gentle creak of the bed and the soft hum of Sycamora’s engine in the background. Tyeval could’ve cried with the amount of emotions he was bombarded with.

“I-I love you,” he whispered, his thrusts growing sloppier by the second. There was a heat inside him, a hunger, and it grew with every second that he remained like this with Dashe.

“Nghhh,” the redhead moaned, pressing his face into the pillow. Sweat beaded on his forehead, his arms fell from around Tye’s shoulders and the boy clutched the pillows on either side of his head, “A-Ah..T-Tye...o-oh stars...fuck you’re a-amazing. I l-love you, I love you, IloveyouIloveyouIloveyou...,” he was blabbering, lost in his pleasure.

Tyeval’s hand wrapped around Dashe’s cock, hard against the boy’s lean stomach. The Ubloit buried his face in the boy’s neck, trying to get a hold of himself, trying to hold onto his sanity and not explode quite yet. He stroked Dashyan, pulled back to observe as the boy fell apart. Tye didn’t think he could ever get tired of that view. He wanted to last, he really did, but all of this was too much.

“I-I’m going t-to...,” Tyeval panted, he couldn’t finish the sentence. Ecstasy had built up inside him for the past half an hour and now it was going to spill over. Dashyan gripped his face suddenly and drew Tyeval down for a furious kiss, knocking the Ubloit’s breath out of him.

“Do it,” Dashyan whispered feverishly, his legs coming up to wrap around Tye’s waist, “Do it. C-Come.”

Tyeval had to forcefully pull out of the boy. Shakily he wrapped his hand around both his and Dashyan’s members and started stroking them together. Their cocks slid against each other, wet with lube and precum. The boys moaned into each other’s mouths, clung onto each other’s bodies, worked themselves into a frenzy of pleasure. The room was warm from their body heat, the windows fogging up. Tyeval choked on a moan and Dashyan threw his head back and cried out so loudly everyone on Saarashik probably heard, and the boys came together, their pearly come mixing and splattering down onto Dashyan’s stomach. Tye’s come was the same as a normal humans, since his generation was often used for sexual purposes, but he could never get anybody pregnant. Not that he even knew if Dashyan inherited the ability to carry children from Viridian.
Tyeval rolled over almost immediately, after his orgasm ended, not wanting to crush Dashe. They laid side by side, shoulders touching, trying to catch their breaths. The air in the room started to cool.

“I can’t believe we just did that,” Dashyan mumbled. Tyeval grinned and glanced at his friend, and Dashe was grinning too, and then they both snorted and started laughing as if they had some kind of inside joke. They both rolled onto their sides and Tyeval wrapped an arm around his best friend’s – no, lover’s - waist and kissed Dashe on the mouth quickly. It seemed such a natural thing now.


“I know. I love you too.”

“No,” Tye shook his head, frowning as he searched Dashe’s face, “I love you, Dashe. So much that I think I might die sometimes.”

Dashyan smiled sweetly, “Yeah. I know. I love you too. So much that I don’t really know the words for it.”

Tye didn’t know if he quite believed him. It felt like a fairytale, but for now he thought that he would allow himself to live in his fantasy and accept Dashyan’s love. He didn’t know what the future would hold or if Dashe would want him after tonight but for now Tyeval was so happy that he didn’t know what to do with himself. Thankfully Dashe knew.

“Let’s go take a shower. Together. Saving water, you know.”

With a mischievous smile he redhead rolled off the bed. He was still naked, come drying on his stomach as he walked over to the closet, pulling out two towels. Tyeval just laid in the bed for a moment, his eyes sliding over the boy’s body – his narrow shoulders, the gentle curve of his ass. He used to have to look at him out of the corner of his eye, afraid to be caught staring, but now...now he could look as much as he wanted. Because he had just had sex with Dashyan. Because Dashyan loved him.

“You coming or not?” the boy asked, looking over his shoulder. Tyeval practically jumped out of bed and strode right over to the Hybrid. He pushed him up against the closet and kissed him fiercely, sliding their naked bodies together. Dashe let out a quiet moan, his hands tangling in Tyeval’s hair. They kissed in the dark, basking in the afterglow of their orgasms. When they pulled apart Dashyan stroked Tye’s face, “You're perfect.”

Tyeval looked away, his heart clenching. It wasn’t right for Dashyan to think that. The Ubloit was flawed and he didn’t deserve the boy’s love, and yet somehow he got it, “No. You’re the one who’s perfect.”

“No. Shut up. Listen,” Dashyan said, a little frustrated. Tyeval found it hard to focus when the boy was so close to him, naked, “The fact that you almost went through the operation...it kills me. It kills me you even thought about that. You’re so amazing and I’m so in love with you and you’re the only person I ever loved and I don’t want you to ever change-“

Tyeval kissed him, because if he heard one more word he thought his heart wouldn’t be able to take it, “Shhh. Okay. I get it.”

“Okay,” Dashyan exhaled, “So...shower?”

(The same day)

Fayaxiamen.
Thrisan was glad the sickness passed. The only thing he could remember from his illness was Wyliam, lying in his bed, and the man didn’t even know if that had been real or a feverish dream. It had been several days since then and Wyl hadn’t shown his face back in the King’s chambers. Not that Thris expected him too.

But he did get an unexpected visitor. As it happened he was sitting by the window in his study, feeling quite well and looking through reports, when there was a gentle knock on the door and the head servant, Guadix, walked in. The Frog woman bowed.

“My King, there is someone here to see you.”

“Who?” Thrisan asked, swiping his hand over the hologram of the reports and dispersing them.

“A man. A stranger,” Guadix huffed in dismay, “He says he knows your brother?”

“Kalorian?” Wyliam frowned and rose from his seat.

“No. The other one,” the edge of disgust in the woman’s voice made Thris’ annoyance spike. His heart skipped a beat.

“Arién,” he whispered to himself. His baby brother. He didn’t hesitate, “Let the man in.”

Guadix didn’t seem happy with that but she wasn’t going to argue with the King. She left the office in a huff and returned a moment later, followed by a man. He was tall, and clearly a Charasean Alpha. His skin was white, his ears pointed. There were dark circles under his almond-shaped eyes and his sandy blonde hair had been scraped back. He looked strong, but exhausted.

“King Thrisan,” the man said, quietly, softly, voice full of disbelief, “You look like him. But...bigger.”

“Look like who?”

“Ari.”

The familiarity in the Alpha’s voice when he spoke the boy’s name made Thris take a step forward, “Who are you?”

“My name is Griff,” the Alpha said slowly, seeming anxious, “I...I’m Arién’s mate.”

Thris’ eyes widened. He looked over the man – was he lying? He didn’t seem to be. His eyes were full of sincerity and pain. The King nodded slowly and cleared his throat, “Uh...I see. So how exactly do you know my brother?”

“Three days ago I was a prisoner on Idra,” Griff explained, “But my sentence was reduced.”

“So my brother’s mate is a criminal,” Thrisan said, ready to fight the Alpha if he tried anything. It didn’t seem like he would though, “And what do you want here? Money? Because you’re my brother’s mate?”

“No!” Griff snarled, surprising Thris, “I’m here because you’ve been sitting on your ass while Ari waits on that stardamn planet, hoping that his brother will save him!”

“Excuse me,” Thrisan growled, “but I’ve been trying my hardest-“

“You haven’t tried hard enough!” Griff snapped, “he’s still in there, isn’t he??”
“He killed someone,” Thrisan yelled, feeling like he was betraying his brother by saying that.

“He killed someone because he tried to rape him,” Griff hissed and stepped forward. Anger radiated off him, “Listen to me. You need to get him out.”

The worry in his voice made Thrisan’s anger evaporate. It was clear that Griff cared for Ari. And he was right – Thris didn’t try hard enough. He was so smitten with Wylian that he forgot about his brother. He looked away guiltily and Griff’s muscular shoulders slumped.

“I love him,” Griff’s voice was broken when he said those three words.

The door to the office opened and Guadix returned to the room. It was peculiar because the servant usually followed instructions perfectly, and wouldn’t have come into the room unannounced. It was clear she had been eavesdropping. Her face was different than before – she looked almost scared. It looked weird on her green, wrinkled face.

“Guadix,” Thrisan frowned, “What is it?”

“I have failed you, my King,” the woman said mournfully. Thris exchanged a puzzled look with Griff, as if they were old friends, “I have held the truth from you my lord for my own selfish purposes. But now I see,” her gaze turned to Griff personally, “That my silence does more harm than good.”

“Tell me what you know Guadix,” Thrisan demanded, scared at the desperation in his voice. He could tell that they were at a vital turning point in all their lives.

“Promise me you will not send me away,” the old woman croaked. Thris’ hands curled into fists but he knew that she knew something valuable. Right now he didn’t have the time to negotiate with her. Slowly he inclined his head. The woman looked skittish as she spoke again, “It’s regarding your brother, and the night he killed the guard.”

“What do you know?” Griff demanded, jerking forward and grabbing the Frog’s arm.

“Sir,” Thrisan barked, though he himself wanted to shake the woman too. The Alpha mournfully let go of the woman and stepped back. Guadix glared at Griff but continued to speak,

“What the Charasean says is true,” she admitted, “The young Prince killed that man in self defence,” the words were like honey to Thrisan and he leaned against his desk as relief flooded him. Months of worrying about how to save his brother, wondering if he was guilty or not, all came down to this, “I saw the two of them, dirty, up against a wall. The Prince was frolicking with yet another man like some whore-“

“Watch your mouth,” Griff had murder in his eyes.

“Pardon, your Grace,” Guadix directed the words at the King, “when the Prince attempted to push the guard away the man forced himself upon the Prince. He almost succeeded in his filthy act but then the Prince managed to shove him off. The guard fell against the wall and cracked his head and died. It was an accident of self defence.”

Griff was fuming, his hands clenched in fists, veins pressing up against his skin. But all Thrisan felt was relief, “Why didn’t you come forward before?”

“I was ashamed of witnessing such a thing, your Grace.”

“I’m going to need you to testify. Will you do that for me?”

Guadix’s bulging frog eyes glanced between the two men. Slowly, she nodded.

***

Thrisan needed to see Wyliam. He felt like he was floating, like all his troubles have melted away. Of course, they haven’t. He called Kal earlier, and then tried the Tower Palace, but they informed him that his brother was busy and couldn’t answer his calls. They also told him that a new wedding would take place soon – between his brother and King Rian, something that made Thris incredibly glad. All of the King’s other troubles seemed to dim; even Rozene’s, his little sister’s, another wrath attack in which she almost destroyed her chambers couldn’t get Thrisan’s mood down. He had also put Griff in Ari’s old chambers, made sure he was taken care of, and called for a court session the next day.

He needed to share his joy with the boy he loved though. And he needed to tell him the truth – needed to confess his feelings. Which was why he found himself outside the door to the servant’s club.

“’I’m sorry my Lord,’” the guard in the gloomy hallway looked apologetic, “’but you can’t go in. Servant’s strictly. Queen Vallea’s orders.’”

“Alright, can I at least know if Wyliam’s in there?” the King asked, and upon seeing the guard’s puzzled look he quickly added, “Wyliam Kiada. Small, curly brown hair, freckles, big glasses?”

“Oh!” the guard seemed to remember, “The Dust? Yes, he was here. He’s been here a lot lately. But he left a few minutes ago and went upstairs. Didn’t say where he was heading though.”

Thrisan nodded and then walked back down the corridor and up the stairs. There were a limited amount of places Wyl could be – in the mess hall, or in his room or in the shared servant’s bathroom. As the King climbed up to the top floors he hesitated. He was well on his way to the servant’s floor to go into Wyliam’s room (he just couldn’t seem to forget about the boy) but something made him pause on the floor that belonged to the King himself. He gazed down the corridor leading to his chambers, the dark red walls illuminated by dim wall-lamps. Thris took his hand off the railing by the staircase and turned to his own room. In moments he passed through his little parlour and found himself in the bedroom.

Wyliam had been circling the room, a hand trailing over the top of the fireplace, and he turned when he heard Thrisan come in, looking like a scared animal or a criminal caught in the act. The two stared at each other for a moment, frozen. Wyliam looked like some kind of angel, illuminated by the fire at his back, hair curling beautiful, eyes wide behind his glasses.

“What are you doing here?” the King asked gently. Wyliam looked down, and then hugged himself. He was in his own clothes – a baggy black jumper and a pair of leggings.

“I came to say goodbye,” he whispered. Thrisan’s throat felt dry all of a sudden.

“No.”

Wyliam exhaled, “I can’t do this anymore. I can’t work here.”

“Why? What’s wrong?” Thrisan walked over to the boy. He wanted them to be happy together, “Did something happen?”

“You happened,” Wyl whispered brokenly, “I-I can’t pretend that...that...,” he trailed off and sniffled.
“I love you,” Thris blurted.

Wyliam’s head snapped up so he could look at Thrisan. His tears started to fall, “N-No you don’t.”

“I love you,” Thrisan repeated, slowly, but it was too late. Wyliam crumbled into a panic attack. Thris’ heart throbbed with pain when the boy he was in love with slid to the floor, shaking uncontrollably. He just wanted Wyliam in his arms, happy, just fucking happy.

***

Wyliam’s breathing was hard. He felt like someone was pressing down on his lungs. His stomach was twisting with a hundred knots, his head throbbed with pain. Tears streamed down his cheeks and he didn’t even know why he was crying. Everything just hurt, and Thris’ words most of all. How could he lie to Wyl like that? Nobody could love the boy, nobody had loved him his entire life, not even his siblings.

The panic attack made Wyl unaware of his surroundings. He vaguely clung onto bits of information – Thrisan’s warm, deep voice, whispering words that Wyliam couldn’t make out to him, his hands touching the boy’s cheeks. The fire in the fireplace passed by in a blur of light. Then his clothes were being pulled over his head and a horrible thought ‘is he really going to have sex with me right now?’ crossed Wyl’s head. He started crying harder – not because he didn’t want to sleep with Thris, but because he didn’t want to be used as simply a warm body, especially not now. He was vaguely aware that he was sat on the bed and he waited for Thrisan’s intruding hands...

They never came. Instead Wyliam found himself in the bathroom. He was still crying, and the light in here was dim enough that they didn’t hurt the boy’s eyes. He felt Thrisan’s warm arms around him and the next thing he knew was that there was warm water enclosing his body. He gasped, and felt himself start to relax. The water soothed his muscles and Thrisan held him in his arms. After a few shaky breaths his vision cleared and his attack passed.

He was sitting in the large bathtub in the bathroom, in Thrisan’s lap. The King’s naked arms were around the boy’s waist and Wyl was tucked right underneath his chin. He felt safe. Tears welled up in his eyes and he could feel Thris’ heart beating from where the man’s chest was pressed against Wyliam’s back. The bathroom was dark safe for a few candles sprinkled around the room. Thris had clearly placed them there to calm Wyl down, and they were working. The boy turned around partially in the King’s arms and pressed his face into his wet, warm shoulder.

“Are you alright?” Thrisan asked softly, brushing Wyl’s damp curls from his forehead and kissing it, as if they were a couple. The boy nodded slowly and sniffled.

“I’m sorry.”

“No. I’m sorry. What I said – it’s tr-“

“No,” Wyliam pressed his trembling hand over Thris’ mouth. It was easier to look at him in the dim light, or maybe the Dust was just getting used to being in the older man’s presence, “No talking.”

The fact that he and Thrisan were naked together in the bath finally dawned onto the Dust and he twisted the rest of the way in the man’s arms. The water sloshed gently in the bath, which was like a
small pool, embedded in the floor. Wyliam’s thighs were on either side of the King’s hips and the boy nervously buried his face in the man’s neck. He was hard, completely aroused. He didn’t mean to be – he had truly only come here to say goodbye. But he was in love with Thrisan, and he remembered that all their sexual encounters – apart from the time they actually had proper sex - was all delicious pleasure that made Wyl’s skin tingle. His body reacted by itself – the Shif wanted that again, if only for the last time before he left.

“I-I know w-we said no sex b-but...” Wyl swallowed, pulling back and looking anxiously at the King, who’s eyes were dark and smouldering. His big hands dipped under the water and lightly rested on the curve of the boy’s ass. The Dust shivered, “But I w-want you to.”

Thrisan shook his head, “I promised I wouldn’t hurt you again.”

Wyliam cradled the man’s face – he couldn’t be shy now, “You’re not going to hurt me,” he whispered, and pressed their mouths together gently.

Thrisan’s wet hands slid up Wyliam’s back. Steam curled off the water, adding to the intimate feeling of the bathroom. It was like they were in their own personal bubble, Wyliam’s anxiety attack already forgotten. They kissed, slowly at first and then more insistently, their mouths wet. Wyl’s heart started pounding when he felt Thris start to get hard, his cock pressing up against the back of Wyliam’s ass. Arousal curled in the boy’s stomach and he kissed Thris more hopelessly, trying to get the desperation he was feeling out.

Neither of them really realised what was happening. One moment they were kissing innocently, and the next the Dust was just gently raising himself and then sliding down onto the King’s hard cock. He was so relaxed that the member entered him easily, aided by the water. The initial feeling of being penetrated by the King once more made Wyliam’s thighs tremble and, unable to keep himself up, he sat in Thrisan’s lap, completely taking the man inside himself. The Shif cried out, back arching, his voice echoing off the walls of the bathroom.

“Gods I wanted this so much,” Thrisan whispered, looking up at Wyliam in awe. Shakily the Dust raised himself and slid back down over the cock that had just slipped partially out of him. He repeated the motion, ignoring the familiar burn that accompanied that, the water slowing his movements but also adding to the stimulation. He started breathing harder, as did Thrisan who suddenly attacked Wyliam’s pale neck with kisses and bites.

Wyliam didn’t know it could be like this. Their sex before had been rough and unexpected, but this time it was slow, sensual and breathtaking, and Wyl was able to control the pace. The water surrounding them made their intimacy so much more arousing, every sense was heightened. Wyl had missed Thrisan touching him so much, and he could feel himself start to get lost in Thrisan’s cock, deep inside of him.

“S-Stars,” the boy whispered, choked on a moan. The bathroom was full of the sound of water slapping against skin and the combined harsh breaths of the two lovers. Thris’ cock inside Wyl felt good, almost too good, hot and throbbing. The heat of the water made Wyliam feel like he was burning.

Thris placed his hands on Wyl’s hips suddenly, stilling his movements. He looked at the boy with eyes full of emotion that the boy couldn’t identify, “Wyl.”


“Listen to me~“

“Promise me you won’t leave,” the King whispered, dragging his lips over Wyl’s freckled shoulder. The boy was shaking.

“I p-promise.”
The Bride and the Mother

Chapter Notes

Almost done guys! Thank you for your wonderful comments xx

Rae 12th Neríí 1161EE (2 days later)

Arossa.

The Tower Palace was full of a positive kind of chaos in the days following the end of the Competition. Delegates and guests started landing on Arossa once more, returning for the long-awaited wedding solidifying the long-standing alliance between the planet and Fayaxiamen. The palace was once more brimming with life, different languages melding together as creatures filled up the rooms and the nearby inns and pubs. Ashia’s baby, a beautiful little girl with her father’s chocolate brown hair and her mother’s pale blue eyes, filled the halls with her soft wails. With her mother resting in bed it was down to Rian and Kalorian to plan their wedding and organise sleeping arrangements for the guests. Because of that Kalorian didn’t really have time to come to terms with how the competition ended, or even have time to speak to his fiancée. The two Zalians that had attempted to kill the King were currently on Shoriah, where the intergalactic officers attempted to make contact with Fealo in the Eon Galaxy to try and send them back. So far there had been no response, but it wasn’t Kalorian’s problem anymore. Or Rian’s.

It took two days for everything to settle. People were finally in the right rooms, everyone was happily awaiting the wedding. Rian had given the preparation for the celebration to a design team, so neither of the men had to worry about the decoration of the hall or the picking out of their outfits. So tonight was the first night that Kal actually went to sleep at a normal time, the first time he wasn’t so exhausted that he passed out the second his head touched the pillow. Instead he sat on the edge of his bed in a loose white shirt and a pair of underwear, staring at the fireplace and the dancing shadows on the walls. He wanted to see Rian, to speak to him. Somewhere deep inside himself he needed to finally hold Rian, to kiss him. They were each other’s now, or they would be soon enough...

A soft knock on the door jerked Kal out of his desperate yearnings, “Come in!” he called out softly, standing up. He didn’t know who it could be at this time of night and his eyes searched the room for some trousers. Before he could finds some though, the door opened and Rian walked in. Of course it would’ve been Rian. Kalorian’s heart skipped a beat, “Your Grace.”

“Since when do you call me that?” Rian asked gently, closing the door behind him and pressing his
back against it. His golden hair fell onto his forehead, his pink eyes were soft, the anger and frustration of the past days seemingly melted away. The man was wearing only a long black shirt that fell to the middle of his milky thighs, and it bunched around his elbows. He wore just that, and the heavy boots that prevented him from floating away. Kal felt his pulse escalate.

“What are you doing here?” he asked, voice faint. He couldn’t stop himself from looking at the exposed skin on Rian’s legs.

“We’re going to be married soon,” Rian shrugged, “Eighteen days.”

“Yes. I know,” Kal confirmed. The space of the room between the two of them felt like the whole galaxy. Kalorian bit his lip, clenched his hand into a fist, “Rian-,” he started, not quite sure what he was going to say. Thankfully he didn’t have to say anything because the blonde crossed the room hurriedly and came to a stop in front of Kalorian, his hand jerking up to the man’s chest but stopping inches away. He hesitated, didn’t look up at the man’s face.

Kalorian swallowed, “Rian?”

“We’re going to have to have sex you know that right?” Rian blurted on one breath. Kal’s heart twisted.

“We don’t have to...”

“I know you don’t want to,” Rian said abruptly, “I know that if you could’ve you would’ve chosen Eilo, or even Lady Eskilsa or Kursassarra but the circumstances-,” he paused, “It happened. I know-“

“No! No,” Kal reached out and grabbed Rian’s hand, “No, it’s not-“

The King pulled his hand out of Kalorian’s and hugged himself, “Look, I found the note in your bin.”

“What note?” Kal frowned.

“The one saying t-that I...,” the boy paused and squeezed his eyes shut for a second to compose himself, “Saying that I love you.”

“It was just a stupid note-“ Kal started

“That you threw out,” Rian said bitterly, “It’s pretty clear how you feel about me.”

“No, I thought it was a lie, a joke-,” Kalorian said desperately, and then paused. His eyes widened, “Wait...don’t tell me it was true,” he whispered. Rian hugged himself tighter and didn’t say anything. Kal’s heart started pounding, “Rian is it true?”

“I came here because we’re going to have to have sex and we might as well just do it now,” Rian snapped, his anger returning. Kalorian opened his mouth, ready to bombard the King with questions, but the man didn’t let him as he suddenly stood on his tiptoes, threw his arms around Kal’s shoulders, and kissed him.

It was a harsh, rough, angry kiss, unlike the one in the lake, and it was too fast. Rian pulled away almost immediately, glaring at Kal. The Prince gazed at him, and he was so fucking in love. Kal reached out and carefully took Rian’s face in his hands. The King stared at him directly and his jaw clenched, his eyes were so furious that it seemed that he wanted the prince to let go. Kal didn’t kiss him, not yet, his thumbs stroking the man’s cheeks gently. Eventually Rian’s gaze faltered and he
“Let’s do it now,” he murmured and leaned down. His and Rian’s mouths were inches apart, and the Prince brushed their noses together lovingly. The King looked at him hesitantly, and Kalorian kissed him. Immediately the blonde’s eyes fluttered shut. Their mouths slid together gently, hesitantly, lips mapping out one another. Rian’s hands rested on top of Kal’s, which were still on his face, and his brows furrowed as their kiss deepened, tongues sliding against each other shyly. After a moment of this, Kal’s heart warmed and he grew more confident in the fact that they both wanted this – as harsh as Rian’s words were his grip on Kal’s hands was strong, and his mouth urgent.

The King turned them around, walking until the backs of his knees hit Kal’s bed. He slid down onto the covers, pulling Kalorian on top of him smoothly. The kiss was passionate by then, almost like a fight, and Kalorian’s hands were wandering – they slipped beneath Rian’s shirt and ran over the smooth planes of his stomach, gripped the King’s face, rested in the dip of his waist or squeezed his hips. Rian, on the other hand, kept his arms firmly wrapped around Kalorian’s shoulders. He was a lot more calm and collected in comparison to the Prince, who was kissing him like no tomorrow. When it got too intense the blonde nudged him back gently.

“Kal,” his eyes were half lidded, mouth parted to let out erratic breaths, “slow down.”

Kalorian nodded, staring at his fiancée. Then he leaned down and feverishly kissed Rian’s forehead, then both his cheeks, the tip of his nose, the corner of his mouth. The blonde exhaled and guided the Prince back to his mouth. This time the kiss was slower. Kalorian’s hands were wandering – they slipped beneath Rian’s shirt and ran over the smooth planes of his stomach, gripped the King’s face, rested in the dip of his waist or squeezed his hips. Rian, on the other hand, kept his arms firmly wrapped around Kalorian’s shoulders. He was a lot more calm and collected in comparison to the Prince, who was kissing him like no tomorrow. When it got too intense the blonde nudged him back gently.

“So is this our wedding night then?” Kal asked. Rian looked fascinated by Kal’s hair. When he sat in the Prince’s lap he was a few inches taller where normally he was shorter. This allowed him to gently card his fingers through the man’s hair.

“Yes,” he breathed, “yes, I suppose.”

Kalorian smiled, feeling so unbelievably happy, and wrapped his arms around the blonde’s waist. He kissed his shoulder, and Rian reached for the Prince’s shirt. They undressed in silence, pausing every few seconds to exchange little kisses. Soon they were both naked and panting into each other’s mouths. They had seen each other naked a thousand times, but this time it was different.

“This feels weirdly right,” Kalorian murmured, running his hands up Rian’s naked back.

“Let’s not talk,” the blonde whispered, and wrapped his hand around Kal’s cock. It had been semi-hard, pressed against the Prince’s stomach. The man gasped at the feeling of the King’s warm fingers on him. Blood rushed south to his member and he felt a shiver go through him. His hands found Rian’s face and he kissed him furiously as the man started slowly stroking him. Kal’s breathing grew more laboured, and he dragged Rian closer. He was suddenly dizzy, drunk on the person in his arms. He wanted to say I love you, but his mouth was too busy.

***

Rian slid himself down onto Kal’s cock. He was losing his mind and slowly falling apart under the Prince’s mouth and touches, and trying his best not to let it show. Over the past minutes his breathing had gotten harsher and he was shaking, and he was sure that if he hesitated any longer he would completely fall apart. So now he slowly lowered himself onto Kal. He had had sex before, a few
years ago, twice, but he had almost forgotten what it felt like. Besides, it was different with Kal.

“Nghh...” the sound slipped from Rian involuntarily. Kalorian was staring at him, eyes wide, and he looked like he was holding his breath. His dark eyes were full of wonder and lust, and his fingers clutched the man’s hips. Rian bit his lip, enveloping inch after inch of the man inside himself. The air in the room was hot, pain and pleasure meddled together inside Rian, threatening to spill over.

When he was completely seated in Kal’s lap he let out a gasp and closed his eyes. He fell forward, pressing his forehead against the man’s shoulder and Kal kissed the side of his head and held him.

“Y-You okay?” he asked shakily. Rian nodded, took a moment to adjust to the feeling of being stuffed full, and leaned back to press his forehead against the King’s. “Your eyelashes are brown.”

“What?” Rian frowned.

“Y-Your eyelashes...they’re brown,” Kal mumbled, “I never noticed.”

“Is this really a good moment for this conversation?” Rian asked, but he smiled, because he knew that his friend was trying to get him to relax. Kal kissed him and the boy broke away to slowly lift himself up and then slide back onto the Prince. He started riding Kal slowly, but the pace quickly increased. Kal started swearing under his breath as Rian fucked himself on the man’s cock.

“F-Fuck...Oh fuck that good. Y-You’re so good...” Kal kissed Rian’s neck, his shoulder, anything he could reach. Rian clung onto him, overpowered by the pleasure. His thighs trembled, his stomach twisted, his heart pounded and head span. He had never felt like this.

“K-Kal...,” he whimpered. Somewhere through the fog of pleasure he felt the man’s hand vigorously stroking him off, while the boy’s movements turned clumsier and more erratic as he climbed up to his climax. Their bodies slid together, hands scrambled at skin, moans mingled with breaths.

Rian came, his mind going white with ecstasy, and not a minute later so did Kal. For a few minutes it was perfect bliss, their sweaty bodies pressed together, the fire crackling in the fireplace. They were both isolated from each other, their eyes closed, soaring in the afterglow, lost.

Rian didn’t want to talk, he couldn’t talk. He didn’t want the lies that Kal would give him in order to try and make the best of the situation, to try and persuade both of them that this was what they wanted. Well, it was what Rian wanted.

The King climbed off his blissed-out fiancée and picked up his shirt from the floor. His limbs felt heavy, as did his eyes. He wanted to sleep, preferably next to Kal, but that wouldn’t happen. The King shrugged his shirt back on and turned to the door.

“Where are you going?” Kal, who had been reclining lazily in the bed, sat up now.

“To my chambers,” Rian said. Kalorian climbed out of the bed but the King held up his hand, “No. Don’t.”

“Rian, you can’t be serious,” Kalorian whispered, looking at Rian helplessly.

“We’re not talking,” the King said, “Not now. I’m sorry.”

Kal grabbed his hand and forced him to turn around and then he slid to one knee in front of the King without trying to argue any more. Rian’s heart pounded and his mouth went dry and his hand started trembling in Kalorian’s hand.
“King Rian Reo Dali,” Kal said, eyes intense on Rian’s, “I love you. Will you marry me?”

“O-Oh,” Rian exhaled, the sound slipping out. He started tearing up, a million thoughts racing through his head. He pulled Kalorian to his feet, trying to calm himself down. Kal saw that the boy was clearly emotional.

“Eilo told you, didn’t she? She must’ve,” the Prince mumbled, “why I didn’t want to marry her, why I wanted to marry you?”

“Then why the Competition?” Rian asked shakily.

“I didn’t know how you felt,” Kal whispered, “I still don’t.”

“I love you,” Rian mumbled.

“Are you saying yes?”

“I’m saying yes. Even though my ‘yes’ doesn’t matter.”

“It matters to me,” Kal kissed him.

Vo 24th Neríí 1161EE (12 days later)

Space around Arossa.

Arién stared at the planet that his ship was approaching with a heart lighter than it had ever been. Ari might’ve as well been a Calanthe – he felt like he could float in that moment. He was free. It felt insane to think that ten days ago he had been sweating in the desert of Idra, dressed in the scratchy uniform, in shackles. Now he was free and the only reminder of his unjust suffering were the calluses on his palms, the dark circles underneath his eyes and his overgrown hair.

No, that wasn’t quite true. There were other reminders of the time Ari spent on Idra – reminders that couldn’t be seen. Ari was quieter, less cocky and arrogant, less confident. He didn’t mindlessly flirt with anyone with a pulse, hadn’t even thought about having sex with anyone since Griff had first touched him. The thought of the man made Ari looked away from Arossa, looming closer and closer. He didn’t know if he would ever see his mate again.

When they told him a witness had come forward and there had been a re-trial on Fayaxiamen, Ari hadn’t believed them. Ghrishi was known to lie, especially after the end of the riots, when he walked around furious all the time. But after he got his paper, they forced him to shower, and change to the clothes he had first arrived in, he finally realised that it was true. Somehow Thrisan had managed to pull him out of Idra.

“Please strap down in your seats, as the ship is preparing for landing,” the AI said, calmly and emotionlessly. Ari closed his eyes and settled into a seat. There was a guard with him in the ship, an escort, but this time her gun was strapped to her back and not pointed at Arién. The boy closed his eyes as the ship shuddered gently as it entered the atmosphere of Arossa. The gentle hum of the engines lulled Ari into a long-awaited sleep. So far the boy had been too tense to rest, but now, as he neared the place where both his brothers were waiting for him, where he was going to attend a wedding once more as a Prince of Fayaxiamen, he allowed himself to slip into unconsciousness.

When he woke up it was because the guard was rousing him. In sleepy confusion Arién was ushered out of the ship, out into the cool night of Arossa. The stars were bright in the sky and it was crazy to think that only a moment ago Ari had been up among them. The disgruntled Prince was led down the long walkway by an escort of Calanthe guards. He had never been to Arossa before, but apart
from the burning braziers lining the cobbled walkway toward the pretty pink Palace, he couldn’t see much.

As he approached the Palace with the group of guards, he saw that a small crowd had gathered to welcome him. Ari smiled. He wanted to see Thrisan, his big brother who had always been there for him, and Kal, the brother he hadn’t seen in years. As he came closer and closer he spotted the two of them – they were taller and more muscular than the last time Ari had seen them, but their smile and dark eyes were the same. Arién found himself grinning as he approached, his step speeding up. And then his eyes slid to the man standing a little way behind the two royals.

Sandy blonde hair, warm, almond shaped eyes, a shadow of a smile. Arién’s heart skipped a beat and he stopped walking, his eyes widening. His heart started pounding so loud that he couldn’t hear anything at all but the blood rushing to his brain. Griff looked at him, and it was clear that he had aimed to stay calm and collected, but the moment his eyes landed on Arién’s his expression melted into one of exhilaration and he broke into a run.

Arién met him halfway and they fell into each other’s arms. For a second Ari was absolutely shell-shocked as his whole body was bombarded by feelings of such intensity he thought he was going to pass out. Their mouths collided together and they kissed bitterly, once again in each other’s arms.

“I d-didn’t think you’d wait for me,” the Prince whispered sincerely, between feverish kisses.

“You’re my mate,” Griff pressed their foreheads together and they both closed their eyes, just enjoying each other’s presence, “I love you.”

“I love you too,” Ari smiled and opened his eyes, “I should’ve said it before-“

“It’s alright-“

“Arién!” Kalorian was making his way towards the embracing two. Griff released Ari and the boy turned to his brother. They were grinning when they hugged each other, slapping each other heartily on the backs and laughing. Thrisan walked over, placing his big hand on Arién’s narrow shoulder and squeezing.

All was well.

Shal 25th Neríí 1161EE (1 day later)

Arossa.

Gentle spring light filtered in through the window. It was beautiful, Wyliam regarded, unlike the golden light of Autumn back on Fayaxiamen here the light seemed almost blue. Wyl smiled, his cheek pressed into the pillow. He was in the royal chambers, and although he was nothing more than a servant, he was accompanying Thrisan and Vallea and Zea to the wedding. Last night had been spent on lovemaking with his King, and now Wyl was deliciously sore as he woke up.

Thrisan’s arm slid around Wyliam’s waist, almost as if the King could sense that his lover was conscious. The brunet smiled when he felt Thris’ chest against his back, and the gentle scrape of stubble when the man kissed his shoulder.

“Good morning,” the King murmured, and Wyliam twisted around in his arms. Thrisan’s dark eyes were sleepy but full of warmth, his mouth a gentle curve. There was stubble on his jaw – he’d have to shave soon. His arms were warm around Wyl, the covers pulled around his waist. He was
completely naked, as was Wyl.

“Morning,” Wyliam murmured, pressing himself closer and staring at Thris’ chest. He was slowly getting used to the fact that the man was in love with him, and that they were together. It was still unbelievable sometimes though, and it made Wyl shy to think the King of Fayaxiamen wanted him out of all people.

Thris cupped the boy’s chin and raised his head, so he could lean down and kiss him sweetly. Wyliam found himself smiling into the kiss. He was happy, content. Thrisan pulled back and kissed the top of his head.

“I love waking up with you,” he admitted. Wyliam looked up at him through his eyelashes and smiled too. He couldn’t stop smiling ever since they came to Arossa. Everything at the Tower Palace was so bright and cheerful, and here the two could pretend that they were a perfect couple, that Thris wasn’t married and that Wyl wasn’t a servant.

The door burst open suddenly and on instinct Wyliam tensed, ready for someone to ruin his happiness. He squeezed his eyes shut as Thrisan sat up abruptly, his lover pressing his face into his hip.

“Val?” Thris asked. Wyliam opened his eyes and blinked. He heard a squeal and then a body landed on top of him. The boy let out a breathless oooof and when he looked he saw that Queen Vallea was lying on top of him and Thris, beaming, “Someone’s in a good mood,” Thris grinned and Wyliam let out a relieved sigh. Vallea sat back. She was in her nightgown, her red hair a mess, and she looked like she was about to cry happy tears.

“We did it,” she whispered, breathless, unlike herself. Thris and Wyl exchanged a look as the latter sat up.

“Did what?” Thris asked.

“I’m pregnant,” Val whispered, and then her face broke into the most beautiful smile. They all knew what it meant – Vallea and Thrisan didn’t have to have sex again. Wyliam looked at the King and thought oh stars he’s all mine now. The trio exhaled a breath that they seemed to have been holding for weeks and fell into each other’s arms, laughing and hugging, and having the most perfect morning.
The Consort and the Husband

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Lev 1st Duagharrd 1161EE (6 days later)

Arossa.

The man stood at the altar, decorated with beautiful pink flowers. The Calanthe elder that was going to orchestrate the wedding was waiting behind it, her wrinkled hands clasped in front of her, face hidden by a silver hood. It was cold in the hall, but outside the spring sun was shining. Kalorian was too excited to care. He was dressed all in black, nervously awaiting his fiancée. Behind him stood Ari, smiling beautiful, there to support his brother.

The door at the side of the hall opened and a girl stole into the room, trying to remain undetected but failing. Kal’s heart skipped a beat when he saw her, blonde hair curled, pink dress swirling. Princess Eilo perched at the end of the fire bench and smiled brilliantly at Kalorian, giving him a little wave. The man grinned as a whisper went through the delegates that were gathered – nobody expected Eilo to come back for the actual wedding.

However everyone fell silent the moment the front door opened and six little Calanthe girls floated out, throwing pink flower petals out in front of them. After them came Rian, and he looked perfectly calm and collected, but Kal could see the nerves in his eyes. He was so beautiful that the Prince’s breath caught in his throat – he was dressed all in white, and it made him look young and innocent. His blonde hair was pushed out of his face, his hands trembling at his sides. He was being led in by Ashia, who was smiling prettily. She walked Rian towards the altar and all eyes were on the man, because he was so goddamn stunning. When he came to stand in front of Kal the man couldn’t help but whisper,

“You look gorgeous.”

Rian rolled his eyes but smiled, “I love you,” he mouthed. Kal reached out and took his husband’s-to-be hand and squeezed his fingers. He wanted to kiss him already.

“We have gathered here today....” the elder began.

***

Liquor and joyful folk music put all the wedding guests in the perfect mood. A bubble had been created in the garden so the guests were enveloped in warmth but could still dance in the fresh air of a spring night. Everyone’s mood was perfect and the dance-floor was packed. Tyeval and Dashyan were in the middle of the spinning couples, laughing. Tye was insanely happy. They had landed on Arossa a few days ago and had a massive talking to from Thane and Viridian, but the two were just mostly glad that their son and his friend were still alive. Since then the two had been sneaking around
the Tower Palace, kissing whenever they could and having sex quietly in their rooms at night, and it was perfect, just like this dance. Dashyan looked adorable in a new green suit that made his hair even more fiery than usual, and he felt amazing in Tyeval’s arms when the Ubloit spun him around.

“Tye,” Dashe said, stopping dancing when the song, played by a band led by an all-silver woman, ended and pulling Tye down. His eyes were full of love, “I don’t want to hide our relationship anymore.”

“But your parents—“ Tyeval started. Dashe shook his head, “I don’t care. I want to kiss you right now.”

Tye smiled and leaned down and did just that. Dashyan smiled into the kiss and pulled away, only to kiss Tye quickly again, “I’m going to go get us some drinks,” he said gently. Tyeval nodded and the two of them exited the crowd and went their separate ways. Dashe practically skipped towards the refreshments table and Tye walked over to one of the tents where people were congregating, and watched the love of his life from a distance. He smiled, still unable to believe that the boy was his.

“So,” Thane appeared seemingly out of nowhere, startling Tyeval, “When I told you to take care of my son I didn’t quite mean like that.”

Tye’s heart started pounding with nerves but the Fox didn’t look angry. He looked at Tyeval and his expression softened. He placed his hand on the Ubloit’s shoulder and squeezed, “If I had to give him to anyone it would be you, Tyeval. I have to say that both me and Sasha are happy with how this turned out.”

Tyeval exhaled, “Thank you. I...I love him.”

“I know,” Thane let go of Tye’s shoulder and rubbed the back of his own neck, looking uncomfortable, “he...uh...he loves you too,” he cleared his throat and straightened up, “Well, I better go find my husband. I’ll see you later, son.”

Tyeval was left with his heart filled with warmth.

***

Arién gasped into his mate’s mouth, his hands clutching at the back of Griff’s tuxedo. The Alpha’s tongue slid past the boy’s lips, muffling the moan that slipped out of Ari.

“G-Gods Griff,” the Prince whimpered when the Alpha pulled away to start kissing down his neck. The boy panted, “W-We should g-get back to the wedding.”

“I can’t,” the man growled, “Not when you’re looking so delicious in that tux.”

“Griff,” Ari whimpered, and he was starting to get hard, which could be a problem. They were just around the corner from the party and anyone could catch them at any moment, “W-We’ll do this later.”

Griff huffed out a breath of annoyance and pulled back. He pressed his forehead against Ari’s and kissed him, “Mate,” he whispered. Ari smiled and cupped his lover’s face.

“Yes. I’m yours. You know that,” he said, and Griff nodded.

“I’m sorry if I hurt you our first night together.”
“You didn’t,” Arién murmured, “you hurt me when you ignored me the next day.”

Griff’s eyes saddened and he wrapped his arms around the Prince, “I’m sorry. Stars...that place was hell.”

“It wasn’t that bad,” Ari leaned into Griff. The Alpha placed a kiss on top of his mate’s head, and they just held each other until a very drunk Eilo found them to introduce herself.

***

Wyl finished twirling his Queen in his arms and the song ended. The crowd erupted into applause, and Vallea grinned up at Zea, who was on a little podium with her band. The silver woman bowed. They had just played the final song of the first day of the wedding, and the sun was coming up, illuminating the pretty garden.

Thris’ eyes slid to Wyliam, who was standing by the refreshments table with a tray full of empty glasses. The adorable boy offered Thrisan a shy smile and the King fought the urge to walk over and claim him in front of everyone. But on Arossa they were a King and a servant, at least here, in public.

King Rian and the new-King Kalorian exchanged a final beautiful kiss and the crowd cheered. Then creatures started retiring to their guest rooms, ready to sleep the whole day to celebrate the next night too. Vallea’s arm slid through Kal’s and she smiled at him sweetly, her other hand resting on her still-flat stomach.

“Let’s go to bed,” she said softly. Thrisan nodded and together he and Val entered the Tower Palace with the other royal guests. The climbed up to the floor given completely to them, where there were two bedrooms, just in case the King and Queen didn’t want to sleep together. And they didn’t. They pecked quickly, in a friendly manner, outside the door.

“Goodnight, Val,” Thrisan said.

“Goodnight, Thris,” the Queen smiled sweetly. They entered the first bedroom together and found Zea was by the window, still wearing the crimson dress she had performed in. She smiled at her Queen, who walked right into her arms. Thrisan smiled at Zea and continued on into the second bedroom.

Wyliam was curled up in bed, his naked, freckled shoulder poking out from the covers. His glasses were on the bedside table, his green eyes full of tiredness. He smiled sleepily at Thris.

“Hey beautiful,” Thrisan walked over and kissed his lover, “I missed you.”

“You saw me like ten minutes ago,” Wyliam teased. Thrisan sat on the bed and pulled the Shif into his arms, covers and all, attacking him with kisses until the boy was giggling. Then the King nuzzled his shoulder.

“I wish I could touch you out there. I wish I could dance with you.”

“You can, on Fayaxiamen,” Wyliam said softly. He was so tiny in Thrisan’s arms that the King couldn’t help but smile.

“I know. I love you.”

“I love you too.”
Rian and Kalorian were in the bed, buried underneath the covers in their new, beautiful, shared bedroom. It was their wedding night, they should’ve been fucking like rabbits, the way they had been for the past few nights. Instead they laid facing each other, eyes half-lidded with sleep.

“I’m exhausted,” Rian mumbled.

“Me too,” Kal admitted. His hand was resting on his husband’s shoulder, and he stroked the skin there. Rian closed his eyes,

“Is it alright if we don’t have sex right now?”

“Of course,” Kal swooped down to peck him on the lips, “I’m tired too. Who knew weddings were so exhausting?”

“Alright,” Rian smiled and turned around, pressing his back against Kal’s chest and grabbing his husband’s arm to wrap it around his own waist. Kal smiled and kissed Rian’s shoulder from behind,

“But I’m fucking you in the morning.”

“Whatever you want.”

~Fin.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for everyone who read this story you guys are amazing!
Massive thanks to the people who left the lovely comments:
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