**Sold to the Highest Bidder**

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**Sold to the Highest Bidder**

by [Sara Generis (kanadka)](http://archiveofourown.org/characters/kanadka)

**Summary**

Sci-fi/steampunky AU where sexual slavery is legal. Nobody's really moral or immoral in this here space opera: England's a pirate stealing freefolk to sell them; the Nordics are gentleman thieves working to free them; Turkey and Greece are buddy cops *Federal Agents* hot on both trails. France, Spain, the Italies, and Rome are slave *bondsperson* trainers of varying ethics; Hungary's the legislative power who somehow has to keep them in line. The East Slavics are high-society slave-owners struggling to maintain a nascent empire; the Baltics (plus Poland) are revolutionaries struggling to try and bring it down.

Includes all your favourite sci-fi tropes such as screwy alien biology! Multiple habitable worlds in the same solar system! Not explaining ever how their space travel works!

(Characters and pairs tagged are only those who had highest proportions of wordcount in POVs; there are yet more. Kinkmeme deanon.)
You must either make a tool of the creature, or a man of him. You cannot make both. Men were not intended to work with the accuracy of tools, to be precise and perfect in all their actions. If you will have that precision out of them, and make their fingers measure degrees like cog-wheels, and their arms strike curves like compasses, you must unhumanise them...

On the other hand, if you will make a man of the working creature, you cannot make him a tool.

-- John Ruskin
America

Chapter Notes

This story was originally written for the hetalia kink meme between end of 2011 and finished sometime in 2012/2013 or so (it hiatused for a long time there). It's been heavily edited since then and I think is much better than it was. tbh I keep finding things I might change, but I can't edit this anymore without my brain turning to mush so I called it a day :')

Warning for off-screen non-con, and on-screen + explicit dubcon sex, in a universe where sexual slavery is legal. Not every chapter has smut (some are pretty short!) and the emphasis in the fic is on the characters and the universe, but for those chapters that do, this is your warning!

(america)

He didn't remember very clearly the night he was Taken. If he had, it would've meant he had the ability to fight, so he wouldn't've been Taken.

Before they came, it had been in-and-out of sleep for what seemed like eons, but was probably only a half hour. Maybe three hours. One and a half? Time was meaningless to the feverish, and Alfred had had that, badly. That was why his parents left him alone, when normally he might tag along. It was Tuesday, and they'd all had plans for the symphony together.

To be living with one's parents at the age of twenty-seven wasn't so bad anymore. It had been, once, he was told, but New Joplin was a busy, fast-paced, city-life-filled planet, more advanced than some others, and he and his parents had been there so long he hadn't really known anything else. For a first-generation immigrant, he was pretty well rooted.

Besides, rent was expensive in Lawton City! You couldn't get a shoebox apartment for less than a grand a month, and he made only just that with his job. But he had been working hard as a pharmacist's aide these days, these past few years, after his bachelor's and master's and his two diplomas. That had to count for something, right? His boss'd promote him for all that hard work, and then he could pay his student debts, move out, and have his own place - because god was it ever embarrassing to bring girlfriends over and have to tell them to be quiet 'cause geez, you're gonna wake Mom and Dad - and, and he'd save up, and maybe get a better job to finance a better place - like, like a house or something - and a dog, he loved dogs, and a wife maybe, and a motorcar. Gee, a motorcar'd be nice. Alfred had dreams.

It turned out they were pipe dreams, because for once in - well, in a long time, farther back than anybody could remember, and Alfred recalled fourth grade history, they said something about 'centuries ago'...

Well anyway, the pirates came.

And he was sick, and home alone.
And the door wasn't locked (why would it be, in this day and age?).

Pretty boy. Too sick to struggle. Easiest few hundred thou they'd ever make.

The attack would later cause the entire amalgamation of Lawton and Grand Cove - some 60 million people, no small feat! - to put locks upon locks on their doors, to be home before 6 PM, to jump at shadows.

But that wouldn't matter to Mr. and Mrs. Jones of New Joplin because Alfred was gone, and he was the only son they had left.

--

The first thing he remembered when he came to, which wasn't vague snippets of *Yo, Tony, over here!* and *Easy, luv, easy, swallow it nice now, there's a lad* was a whisper from across the room. "Psst! Hey!"

The room ... was cold. Didn't he close the window? He would have, he was sick - and gee it's dark, even at 4 AM, Lawton's never like this -

Alfred sat upright on cold dank stone. "What the-

"Hey! You're up! 'Bout time, I'm bored," hissed a voice - accented, not from around here - to his left. Two bright eyes stared at him through a tiny rectangular peep hole. It was too dark to see their colour but it was comforting to see another person.

"Where the hell am I?" he asked. "Is this like, the drunk tank or something?"

"Ho boy, you're old enough to drink? You don't look it!" the voice whispered, and the eyes through the peep hole grew wide. "Wait a sec, you don't remember? Aw, shit."

"What?" Alfred asked. "What'd I say?"

"Nothing, nothing, just - come here, okay? I'll tell you what's up, but come closer."

The voice seemed trustworthy, and friendly, but more to the point it was another human being so Alfred crawled over as close as he could until he found he could go no further. "My ankle, it's chained." What was going on? Where were his folks?

"'Kay, I'll see if I can reach... Ah! There." And he saw a few pale fingers extend through the bars of the peep hole, and more of the other guy's face. It was hard to tell in the low light but his hair was palest white, and his eyes dark brown. He looked Vitim, but from his Extra Biology courses, his accent didn't sound it. Norda? No, not really...

Alfred wasn't sure what it was that made him reach over himself and grasp them. Probably the same thing that gave him a feeling of dread when he'd woken. Something was wrong.

"Look, kid, I'm really sorry to tell you this. I really am. But you got Taken."

And it was a testament as to how fucking ignorant Alfred was then because he said, "What d'you mean?"
The other boy's eyes - reddish brown? - widened further. "You don't even know?"

But it was at that very moment a sound like clanging came from outside. "I'll tell you later, okay? They're coming to check on you. Say, what's your name?"

"Alfred," he replied.


"What's yours?" Alfred asked, though the clanging was getting louder and he felt a strange feeling in the pit of his belly, like maybe he should stop talking so loudly.

"I dunno," the other boy said. "Maybe Gil. Maybe Ludwig. I don't know. They made me forget it."

"How could -"

"Shh," the boy replied. He gripped Alfred's fingers harder through the bars. "They're coming for you. Listen -" and the boy's eyes appeared wider through the peephole somehow, his voice quavering - "listen. Just stay calm. Be nice to them, and they'll be nice back. Most of 'em don't wanna hurt us, but some of 'em do, and some others ... some of 'em want more than just to hurt us, okay? If that happens, just ... take everything that you know is you, take Alfred, and put him in a box. And lock that box up, you hear? You're not a person to them anymore, you're a thing -" oh god, then it was as he feared - by taken, the other boy had meant Taken taken, like in the stories...

Alfred began to panic.

"No, don't. Don't do that. Calm down. Lock it up. Don't let them in. Don't you let them in, Alfred."

The door to his cell opened and horrifyingly bright light rushed in.
"You are a fucking. Moron," Katya spat.

"Aagh, stop talking so loudly! Please, you are murdering my ears."

Katya paced restlessly and ignored her brother. She hoped it hurt, watching as every step of her heavy riding boots made him cringe. He was the fool that had gotten them into this mess, his sensitivity was his own fault! "I don't know what your motivations were, and I don't care. You nearly single-handedly brought down the Empire out of your own sheer stubbornness! Do you have any idea what would have happened if you'd waited any longer? It's not just you in this household, idiot! And Mother, and Father, after all they did for us. Have you no thought to spare for them?"

Ivan moaned. "Please, do not remind me!" he whined pathetically.

"You know, it took me awhile to put it all together. At first I thought we were being robbed by the servants. No more vodka, never any vodka, but nobody admits to it under questioning, all gone, never found the bottles. And then I notice you. You disappear at ten at night like clockwork to lock yourself away in your room. Three locks, Arisha tells me. Then you install a fourth. Then a fifth.

"You're distracted more often. Your eyes are hazy, you can't concentrate, claim it's the boredom of the annual municipal budget. So I take over your work in running this devil-overrun ice ball so that you can rest. But do you get better? Of course not. You don't eat, you hardly sleep. You take more hot showers than our allocation of heating oil can stand, so Natashka and I have to sponge-bath with tea kettles!

"Last but not least, you, with your long sleeves and your long coat and your long scarf. Even in summer. You claim you're freezing, it's so cold here, need to wear such clothing. Oh yes, Vanya, it is cold here, but you're Vitim and you're used to this. And sure enough! Sure enough I look through your laundry before Arisha gets to it and what do I find?"

Ivan didn't dare answer.

"Sweat stains, everywhere! On your shirts, your vests, your trousers, inside your gloves - Mister I'm so frozen solid! You're boiling up! So what is it you're trying to hide, hmm? On your arms, show me your arms."

"Sister, Katya, Katyushka, please -"

"Don't you Katyushka me. You roll up your goddamn sleeves right now or I swear by the General's
hand I shall rip them off myself."

Glumly Ivan rolled them up, and as she had suspected - covered in little criss-cross marks, some deeper than others.

"They're all over your body, aren't they, you fool," Katya muttered, and Ivan didn't dare answer that, either.

"Trying to bleed yourself of the itch in the shower. It doesn't work that way, you can take it from me. You were supposed to clear yourself of your Time by age sixteen, and how long ago was that, hmm?"

Silence.

"I asked you a question, brother."

"Eight years ago," Ivan answered timidly.

"And now you're the first Vitim male to have surpassed twenty-two without having cleared his Time. I simply don't understand why. What was going through your mind? Was this some absurd test of strength, did Samarin bet you you couldn't do it or something? Why would you torture yourself like this, why would you go against nature?"

"Sister, it's not, it's not natural, God says -"

"That nonsense! The devil cares what Brother Toris and his stupid priests say! May the devil take them all! They're not even Vitim! And the ones that are, they claim, they claim that they've managed to excise the Time from their lives, I don't believe it for a second. They're getting theirs too, they're just not telling anybody, and then they pass it off as some kind of miracle in order to wring more money out of idiots. Idiots like you!"

"Please, I did what I could. The first few years, I - I ignored it because I had been too busy at the time, and it wasn't even all that bad, really it was very easy to ignore. The next few, well - one thing led to another, and - and I just didn't mean for it to - oh, sister, I really am sorry," Ivan said, in a tone of voice so distraught it nearly made Katya stop and have pity.

But not for nothing was Katya the head of the Empire Union of Free Vityaz States. Times had changed! She had changed. And she could no longer afford to be the little girl who cried at the drop of a hat, not when it had been almost twenty years since her parents had been assassinated and the rights to the Empire Union fell to the eldest son. Ivan might be the figurehead - there was precious little Katya could do about changing those views - but he couldn't do everything. So there was a very strong skeleton behind him, and half of its vertebrae were Yekaterina of Olyokin. The other half were Natalya of Olyokin, Katya and Ivan's youngest sister. Nearly sixteen herself, headstrong, a natural leader, quite capable and intelligent ... and almost ready for her own Time. If Katya didn't clear Ivan of his one way or another soon, Natasha's would have her know instantly, and it would force her to seek out her own brother like an unthinking madwoman and slake herself with him -

Katya didn't even want to consider it. It would be a nightmare. It would be catastrophic. It would bring about the ruin of their Empire, and Katya knew well of other families - the Dyerovs, the Rubetskis, by means of example - waiting in the wings for the least amount of scandal on the
Bragins.

And wouldn't the Democratic Republic of Kilnus just love to hear of family infighting amongst the Vitim!

They could not lose face. They could not lose face.

If Ivan had to be forced into it, so be it. There had been a time when he could have done this voluntarily, and that time was long past. "Something must be done of this," Katya told her brother.

Ivan blanched whiter than he already was. "Katyushka, no, please! You have made mistakes, haven't you? I helped you with them, didn't I? Didn't I fix it? When you made mistakes?"

"For the greater good," Katya spoke loudly over him, unhearing of his pleas, "you will remain here, as you have stayed in your own quarters for the previous five months, because your body no longer allows you to be in the presence of others."

"What are you going to do?" Ivan whispered fearfully, as though he already knew.

"I," Katya said, "am going to go get you your first bondservant."

In fear, Ivan whimpered and trembled, and his eyes grew very wide. Like most Vitim, he had the whitest hair, the palest skin - and the deepest, most vivid colour eyes. He knew how to use them - he knew damn well - and he directed the full doleful pleading gaze in all its powers at Katya from the floor where he knelt, begging wordlessly for her to reconsider.

He might as well have looked to the sky for all the good it did. Katya spun on her heel and walked out the door, resolutely paying him no mind.
Netherlands

It had only been some three years. (Felt like thirty.) About three years before, he'd wandered into a blind trap - obvious once you'd seen it done, and he'd never, ever do it again now that he'd seen how it worked on the unsuspecting (learnt his lesson very well, thanks). This left his sister, the only other member of his family remaining, to pay bail charges lest he be shipped off to the fucking dark side of Luna Halleri.

Only that's not quite the way it had worked out. He was struck every time he tried to speak so he couldn't warn her of the horrid leers present in the men's faces when she entered the room with the requested money. (He didn't know she'd had that much. Didn't know if she had had to borrow, or if she'd just been squirrelling it away for things like this, because really, they happened all the time in the Dordlands.)

Couldn't warn her what they meant. They did not leer with lust for her body. (She didn't often wear flattering clothing anyway.) They leered with lust of money.

And so, they took the credits (a whole big bag full of 'em, and the credit-dollar exchange rate was particularly good then), and barred her exit and knocked her out with thetralorazine.

Two slaves. Two slaves, one of whom had brought cold, hard, unmarked cash, even. Too irresistible to pass up.

He'd like to say he didn't blame them, everyone's got bills to pay (and maybe that's exactly what he would've said, if it hadn't been him and his sister) but after three years of constant ra- - of constant "training", it didn't matter what their excuses were.

He'd find them, he thought bitterly. First he'd find his sister - they'd been separated when she was purchased by another dealer - and then he would find the goddamn pirates that took a freeman (a poor freeman, sure, but still a freeman, and he'd had rights once) and sold him away.

This had been the one thought keeping him from doing like Theodore had. Theodore, and Liesl, and Geraint, and god, so many. He had had those inclinations himself more than once, and he only didn't finish the job because of the haunting image of his sister. (What if she too had killed herself? What if she'd already gone through with it, and he didn't know? But she was stronger than he was. She wouldn't. Would she? Would she leave him all alone?)

But the thought vanished quickly on days like these, when he was announced up (by number - 2339, stitched on his heart practically, after they beat it into him) to the front of the building, told to strip, and line up with the others against the yellow line. There were buyers today - some more trustworthy than others, from the looks of it. A fat man to the left (watery red eyes), an older gentleman smartly-dressed (wizened in the face but standing ramrod straight) a lady with a pearl-studded embroidered gown (rich, far richer than someone as poor as him could even imagine).

May luck be on my side, he thought, not sure if that meant, may I be completely ignored, or, may I be purchased by someone kind. Kindness was in short supply these days. Better hedge bets on the first. The devil you knew versus the devil you didn't.
Over an hour later a tall and imperious man was in front of him and number 9238 (another acquisition from the Dordlands, he'd never met her before). The man paid significantly more attention to him than 9238. He gulped. The man was broad, imposing, frowning in a serious and detached, business-like sort of way, with the coldest, cruelest blue eyes he'd ever seen. The glasses didn't diminish the terror, not by half. "Mouth," he stated.

He opened his mouth obediently. It did not do to be disobedient in front of buyers. The man who'd bought them from the pirates - a trader, though he didn't observe many of the rules of Council (that was for fucking sure) - was unafraid of getting his nasty little misbehaving items a little dirty with blood. And you didn't want the buyer that got excited by putting a smart-assed cocksure slave in line.

The man did only the barest cursory check, holding his mouth open and down with a hand around the chin, the thumb on his tongue. His thumb tasted faintly of leather - good quality gloves. He's a rich one, but that didn't say anything about his kindness. Then, the man peered into his eyes, prying the eyelids back. He tried not to blink. Rough hands. Strong, rough hands. He had a bad feeling about this.

Then the man spoke three words that terrified him. "I'll take 'm."

"R-really?" The trader overseeing the show this time was not the man he was used to but rather his grandson, an idiot of a boy. "Are you sure you don't want to take a look around more?"

"Nope. Want this 'n."

"Oh! No, no Signore, I meant, take a closer look at this model."

"Seen all I need."

"Ah... ve, we're pleased to offer private rooms, if, a-heh, if that is Signore's concern - for you to better inspect his hindquarters -"

"I only want h's mouth," the man sneered coldly, and the trader boy cowered and rushed away to prepare paperwork. "C'mon," the man told him, taking the ends of the thick wool rope around his neck, leading him over like a dog. (Just as well the man did most of the work; his feet felt like cinderblocks.)

He watched with dread as the trader boy discussed in rapid common Halleri with his brother about the paperwork, while the man - his new owner (oh, oh no, oh god) tapped his foot impatiently, drummed his fingers on the desk, and fiddled with his credit card. After three minutes (felt like ninety) the papers were signed and he was sold - purchased. Owned. For seventy-five thousand credits.

The man - "Y'c'n call me Sir," - gave him a rough robe so that he was not paraded around nude in the market streets, but he was still shoe-less, so it was with care that he followed the man - Sir - out of the store and down the road.

They walked for some time. People looked at them - more Sir than him. People who wore brocade waistcoats and had pocket chains and expensive ivory walking sticks and fancy hats and pleated trousers and clicky shoes - they looked at Sir, who by contrast wore nothing out of the ordinary, simple pressed trousers and a light linen shirt. But they looked at him with pride, like he was a man of substance. 'That one has a bondsman,' he felt he could hear them think. 'Who is that man,
what is his status? He must be exceedingly rich to afford it.' (Ah, but the discounts you can get at
dear Avo Romae's! Long as you don't mind damaged goods.)

Finally, Sir led him down the stairs at the train station, and they waited there a spell until, Number
6 blue line to Vargas International Spaceport and Trusca Central Border Control, that's number 6
blue line was called, and Sir stood up. Oh, even better, he thought, as his heart sank - he's an off-
worlder. He would spend the rest of his life on some rock he'd never been before with a strange
man who cared little more for him besides a daily blowjob. (No, he would never see his sister
again.)

Sir showed the conductor his own pass, and the new bondservant papers - he didn't need a pass at
all for the train, because of course you didn't pay extra for your luggage - and received a key in
return. Without a word, they embarked, and Sir led him through car after car until they reached an
empty cabin. Sir unlocked it, ushered him in, closed the door behind them, locked it again, and
drew all the curtains.

He means to do this here? he wondered. But Sir did not say or do anything until the train began to
move ten minutes later.

Then, Sir pulled something from his pocket - an Eavesdropper. He'd had a tiny one once, as a
child, and he fought the pained, crooked smile that threatened to grace his lips. The tiny brass
device whirred, extended its legs, and directed its pupil around twice. It chirped three times at three
o'clock.

"Hm," said Sir, and then, "Stay here. Back soon." He left the cabin, locking it behind him.

A few short minutes later he returned. "Sorry."

He said nothing. (Slaves don't speak unless they are asked a question.)

"Vid feed on th' door, no audio. Don' look. Don' think't c'n read yer lips, though, too old. Poor
res'lution. Here," Sir held out an envelope. "Don' op'n it, eith'r. Yer bondspap'rs."

He took the envelope, but was very puzzled about it. "Oh," Sir realised, "an' y' c'n speak."

"What. What... is this?" His heart began to pound.

"Told you, yer papers. Shred 'm, burn 'm, frame 'm, I don't care. Yer free."

He was silent a moment. "I'm what?" he asked, in a hushed tone.

"You. Are free," Sir said slowly, enunciating his words properly for once, and extended a hand
across the table. "An' call me Sverige. Whuts yer name?"

It took him ten seconds of looking at the hand before he realised he should do something. He
extended his own forth, and shook Sir's - Sverige's - weakly. "Um. I -"

"I know they tell ya thatcha di'nt have one. I know y'do. Yer not ... y' were taken. I could tell. 'S not
right. So. Whu's yer name?"

What was his name? "I -" Tim? Lars, Jos, Morgen? Abel? Or were these people he'd known in
servitude before they became numbers? "I don't remember," he said honestly.
"Then pick one."

"Why?"

"Yer a freem'n 'gain, y'll need a name. Plus's paperwork we gotta do. At base. When w'get there. Be there soon."

"I - I... I don't know what to say," he replied, fighting tears. "This is. Um. Th-thank you. Thank you so much. I - I think I might hug you, if there weren't a vid watching us."

"Smart," Sverige grinned, "I like that."

--

Sverige led them back to Nunat, cold planet on the outskirts of the system, four days' jaunt by airship after getting out of Hallar airspace. It was then a few days' travel around Nunat to throw their trackers off the scent. Sverige explained he noticed they were being followed, starting just past the dross surrounding Veshna. They stopped taking the airship around in Arga, Norge and abandoned it for a taxi and driver to the nearby village of Hasterik. They reached Hasterik just before dawn and found the two horses outside a tavern located at specific coordinates. They mounted, and rode east in the snow, away from the new sunrise, about 8 AM on a clear Norge winter's day.

Finally, they reached a temporary safe house. Sverige found the wire, hooked it up to the Eavesdropper, and tapped out a message; not long after, one came back, saying they'd be picked up in a day. A day came and went and in the dead of night they stole away like thieves when the stealthship arrived to take them across the ocean to Ísland.

It was pretty obvious Sverige did this a lot.

During that time he found out much about the other man - the airship they had taken was his own and would later be recovered (as was the stealthship, so he no longer felt concerned about the man's loss of 75 thousand credits - though even at that, the money was somehow later recovered). He was free to ask all the questions he liked, since ownership meant it wasn't bugged with anything. (But just because Sverige was nice and friendly once you got past how downright creepy he could be, he proved it with the Eavesdropper again. That might also have had something to do with the way it lit up his face. He couldn't help it. The stupid little gadget just reminded him so much of childhood.)

Sverige was from Arjeda, Sverige - he mentioned, Sverige was clearly not his real name, but that he couldn't give that to a stranger just yet - and worked with a team of associates doing pretty much just what he'd experienced: buying slaves who had clearly been kidnapped and sold into slavery against their volition, and freeing them.

When they arrived at the main base not far from Kroksvellir, Ísland, he was introduced to the crew. There was Danmark, appropriately enough from that same Nunat country, a friendly if ostentatious sort of fellow. And a bit loud. ... A lot loud, really.

There was Norge, named again for the country in question, who appeared quieter. Norge, according to Sverige, also did off-world purchasing. Something about Norge and Sverige gave traders an eerie sort of feeling, and despite sometimes returning to the same trader, again, and
again, without any particular disguise, their constant purchases were never questioned. This was very useful.

Danmark's function in the group was as a quick-thinking distractor. Sometimes he was the bait, sometimes he came up with the idea that was 'just crazy enough to work' - and most of the time it did. He once very narrowly escaped a similar fate at the hands of the pirates but through some cleverness managed to scam not only himself, but also his friend, Ísland, with him.

Ísland was another associate, who was very quiet, quieter than Norge. There was a story with Ísland and Danmark, he could feel it ...

Then he got to Suomi, the final member of their motley crew, a chatty, jovial fellow who happily explained the whole story later over aquavit.

Suomi was a former Republic of Kilnus citizen on Olyokin, but despite having been born there he wasn't Kala, he was Vitim. Through a series of unfortunate circumstances, he'd lost a significant amount of money, and this, in addition to politics being what they were on Olyokin, meant he was something of a social pariah. By the time age 15 rolled around, and his Time came upon him (Suomi told him he'd explain that too, "but in a bit, I need more aquavit first"), he couldn't find anybody in the nearest five hundred klicks who would be willing to help him clear it.

Along came Sverige - Nunat exchange student with an acquaintance's brother - who conjured up an ingenious plan to market Suomi as a slave by selling him into servitude as a high-class bondservant, one with proper training, because upon one's Time, you didn't need anything, not draughts, not a snap of the fingers, not training, nothing, in order to get painfully, achingly hard. (He remembered the Vitim training. The fumes were noxious.) Then, later, they'd find him and liberate him. Enter Ísland, the talented forger, who fabricated a whole false lifetime of a bondsperson in meticulous, painstaking detail.

It had worked like a charm - and bonus, Sverige had ensured Suomi was bought by someone kind, sweet and caring, so he cleared his Time very peacefully and enjoyably with no trouble at all. ("Very kind and sweet! Perhaps it was a bit mean of us to have stolen five million dollars from him," Suomi added.)

Except that Suomi had met other bondservants in Antonio of Marigon's Emporium ("Well, slaves, really, let's call them what they are," Suomi admitted, and he felt very torn at that), people who weren't trained, people like him. People who'd been taken. People who were beaten and raped into submission because they were free once and this was not their destined life and they knew it and they were not so keen to give up all their rights to become the sexual possession of another! - unlike the trained bondservants, who were blissfully unaware that such rights were even a possibility.

Inadvertently Suomi had uncovered a whole mess of kidnapping, piracy, illegal trading and illegal selling of freemen and freewomen that was going on right under the Council's noses.

Suomi had wanted to bring the issue to Council. Sverige agreed with one modification - they all adopt pseudonyms. Enter again Ísland, who forged their travel documentation and passport and traveller's cards - and while he was at it, forged the airship tickets too, because hey, go big or go home, right? (Sverige was not impressed, Suomi said. But then again, he added, Sverige had money to burn.)

And of course, the story was pretty straightforward to follow from there on. Council turned a blind
eye to wrongdoings because the right people were giving them the right amount of money. Suomi didn't really like that. Council tried to jail Suomi. Sverige didn't really like that. Council attempted to jail both Suomi and Sverige. And then Island came in and swept them all away in the nick of time with a stealthship that he'd somehow convinced the Vehicle Service Distribution Centre at Caput Halleri that he owned.

New plan, fuck the system. And fuck it hard.

"You gotta let me join," he gushed. "I'll help. I'll do anything you need."

And Suomi beamed widely. "You're smart. I like that."
England

(england)

His first thought was that the boy looked dirty. Shame, for they'd wasted water bathing him to keep
his fever down, and water was a valuable resource they'd not get back. But the boy was certainly
ill, and if he needed another bath, Kirkland'd try his best to get him one.

Now the aspirin he'd procured, on the other hand. Those he'd coughed up from Desmond, whose
dumb idea it'd been to capture a sickly boy (pretty though he may be).

Desmond thought he'd net himself a little prize. "Get me own bondsboy, be like the high-classies,
and this here's a beaut, innit!" he'd crowed.

Desmond was thereafter swiftly introduced to the airlock. And Kirkland had taken over the care of
the young, sick, pretty Lawtonite.

Not to think there's no honour amongst thieves! (Though, that was also true, but this was not the
reason why.) Only where's the fun, the sport in catching the infirm? And you've got to nurse 'em
back to a full bill of health yourself, traders don't accept anything weakly. Can't sell a diseased
slave. And it took money in playing nursemaid - like money for water. And what did a pirate need
with a bondsboy? No, Desmond was a complete idiot and this wasn't his first infraction, so
Kirkland had deemed keelhauling with an airsuit for a second time in a month too nice a
punishment. And now he floated amongst other rubble around Marigon.

Let that be a lesson to the rest of you, he'd told his crew - among whom there had been more than
one who liked Desmond. Don't be daft and don't do daft things.

He reflected thus-like, as he mopped the brow of the swooned pretty, very caringly, his hair soft
plastered to his front with fever sweat, save one stubborn cowlick - and he bet that was
metaphorical, he bet this one would spell trouble. Kirkland could feel it in his bones. But for all his
premonitions, and the loss of water, Kirkland hadn't minded bathing the boy. Really hadn't minded.
Perhaps they might pick him up some sort of robe 'round Fasciemi Anchorage when they passed;
all that fit him was the clothes he was taken in, which were a bit scruffy looking by now. Perhaps
he'd have to wear nothing til then.

His second thought was for the image of the boy's terrified face, which, as it was for the case of
many they took, became indelibly inked onto his brain. He was not a good man, but he was not
inhuman. And their suffering left him feeling cold. Starkly lit by the light outside the brig, he saw
what he needed to well enough: the boy's wide blue eyes, his parted lips, his chest heaving - a sick
part of Kirkland wished it were arousal. Very beautiful boy. Desmond did have an eye for taste.

"Come now, luv," he cooed. "Don't be 'fraid. I want to help, is all."

The boy made no movement, frozen and panicking silently. Kirkland entered the brig cell as
quietly as possibly, though his boots tapped on the flagstone and his pommel the cutlass fastened to
his hip clinked against the pistol in his holster.

Kirkland knelt, and drew the key that fixed the boy to the wall through his little ankle jewellery.
The boy didn't move, not even when the fingers poking through Kirkland's shoddy old gloves
touched his flesh. "If you don't come with me willingly, I'm not beyond dragging you." Only he couldn't manage to get a tone more threatening than 'scolding mother hen', so the threat of his words was probably lost in translation.

The boy reluctantly stood up and, kicking off the chain, followed him out the cell.

Kirkland took him down the hall to the makeshift interrogation room - an old bunk room in the bilge, so it had locks on the door. But he did not dare turn his back on the boy to engage them. The kid might still be sick; if he tried anything stupid Kirkland would ultimately be faster. All the same. Paranoia was half the reason Arthur Kirkland was alive and kicking after all that had been said and done. (The other half was sheer dumb luck, and a smidge of cunning.)

"Now then," Kirkland said, "why don't you have yourself a seat and let's us two get started."

The boy did, sitting across from Kirkland on the other side of the ratty old table. Good taste for authority, at least when you were reasonably kind to him. That wouldn't help him at all in the trading shops, where slaves were a goodly amount cheaper and lacked about that much proper training to boot. A buyer would expect to dole out harsher punishments for minor misdemeanours, and kindness would be difficult to find. But maybe they would reward his obedience. It wasn't Kirkland's business. "Who are you?" asked the boy.


"Where's that?"

Kirkland smiled. "No, luv, the Great Delivery's the ship. The ship you're on."

"So, Kirkland of Banningham?"

"No," he snapped. "I'm not of a planet anymore, like you landfolk, so you'd do well to be calling me Kirkland of the Delivery, thanks." The boy looked chastened, so he cooled his tone. "Anyway, I 'spect you know what's happened to you. 'Twas a bit of a mistake, to be honest, ah, usually we don't pick up those who're on the mend. Or in your case, right in the thick of it and needing to be set upon the mend."

"Then you'll take me home?" the boy said brightly.

Kirkland moistened his lips. "Ah. Well, no."

"But if this is a mistake I shouldn't be here -"

"It's a mistake alright, but it's bank error in our favour," Kirkland interrupted. "And we've gone and taken you in now and rested you and fed you up nicely - that costs money! I'm afraid someone like you, with your looks, you'll fetch us quite a sum, and really," Kirkland rocked the rickety table, by means of example, "you can see we jolly well need it. Besides, we're almost at Hallar now, ought to be in her airspace in another day. We've brought you too far to turn back 'round."

The boy sat stock still for a second. Too still. The next, like lightning, he jumped back, his chair falling to the ground, and bolted.

Boy was fast, for certain. He approved. And he liked the kid's style. But Kirkland was faster, and as the boy hit the door Kirkland knocked him into it from behind, slamming his chest up against it.
The boy may have been the taller and broader between them, but Kirkland was the more experienced - and plenty more experienced - and the boy found it difficult to move with his body so effectively and properly hindered. To add insult to injury Kirkland took out his flint-lock, cocked it and put it against the boy's temple.

"This," he hissed in his ear, "is not the kind of behaviour they'll tolerate at the traders, mind -"

"Get off me!" the boy growled, still struggling.

"- unless it's some kind of **fantasy** of theirs," Kirkland continued, sneering, and then the boy stopped moving against him. "And I don't think you fancy going to someone like that."

"What if we made a deal," the boy asked.

"Pirates like deals," Kirkland replied, "but you've nothing to offer, lad."

The boy turned around - no easy feat with Kirkland's body pressed against his - and faced him. "That's where you're wrong. I think you've made it pretty obvious I myself am worth a good amount." He slowly raised his hand to Kirkland's pistol pointed to his forehead, and instead of turning the pistol away by the barrel, he grasped Kirkland's wrist. The boy tilted it away, and the firearm fell to the ground with a clatter where it fired uselessly. (It was a feint from the start. Kirkland didn't often keep it loaded.) Now that Kirkland's hand was free, the boy smoothed the centre of the palm with his thumb and asked, "How about that kind of deal?"

And that shocked the hell out of Kirkland. Slaves had tried to get out of their new situation, and it had never worked. Kirkland was a very good enforcer, impartial and unswayable. They ... hadn't tried anything like this, to be certain, but Kirkland suspected that if they had, it too would have been about as effective, wouldn't it?

Besides, taking a bondsman for one's self without paying for him was illegal.

But then again, so were half the things Kirkland did...

No, preposterous, this was preposterous. What did a pirate need with a bondsboy?

But his lips ran away from him, it seemed. "I'm listening," Kirkland murmured.

"I, uh, I can cook. And I can clean. You could even teach me some of whatever happens on this ship, I could help out with that -"

"Lad," Kirkland interrupted, "**do you know** what bondsboys are for? You warm a bed, is what you do."

The boy swallowed thickly and nodded. Kirkland's eyes followed the bob of the lump in his throat greedily, and he suddenly felt the urge to follow it up with lips and tongue, too. It wasn't supposed to be like this. "I'm supposed to sell you and fetch upwards of two million for you," he clarified. For an untrained bondsperson, that was insane amounts of money. "I need that money. I want that money."

"But maybe you also want something else," the boy said, hooking his other hand - the one that wasn't entwined with Kirkland's own - around Kirkland's cloth belt about his breeches, drawing him nearer. Kirkland's breaths grew short. "You - you seem like you know what happens to people
you sell to the traders. Don't, don't do that to me. You're not a bad man -"

That really was it. Enough of this nonsense, the boy would not sweet-talk him out of this. If he didn't put an end to this nonsense charade, well... there wouldn't be an end to it, and either Kirkland'd bed him the once or take him as keeps. Either way, he'd lose the sell and gain, what? An extra mouth to feed, a crimp? At best, a warm and somewhat unwilling body in his bed? He couldn't trust his back to the boy awake, let alone while sleeping.

Kirkland was a man who airlocked people who thought solely with their pricks. He was not one of them himself. And, pretty and clever though the boy was - just his type - he would not be so easily swayed.

Without warning Kirkland slammed his hand and the boy's back against the door, and the boy gasped, and Kirkland had no right to let that sound travel so abruptly to his groin - no, the money! He snapped, "Nor am I a good one. Best learn that."

He yanked the boy off the door by his wrist, then threw it open and stormed back down the halls like a bat out of hell, all the while dragging the poor pretty behind him. "Hey, quit it!" the boy cried. I'll have to deal with you later, he thought. And perhaps in another room, where the boy couldn't try and tempt him.

When he reached the brig doors he threw open the boy's cell and launched him in at the wrist. "That hurt!" he growled petulantly.

"I'll have you know," he shouted by way of parting gift, "it could really be worse. I put you in the brig with Chatty Charlie here, so you won't even want for company. I could've put you in with the rest in the cargo hold."

Kirkland slammed the cell door shut without bothering to lock him up at the ankle first. For good reason: "And you're welcome for that set of keys you stole off my belt!" he yelled through the door, as he locked the padlock on the other side. "I hope you enjoy the music they make, because they won't do you any good in there!"

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Kirkland did not particularly enjoy meeting with the traders, because he was usually the one with the most one-on-one time with the slaves. But today was shaping up to be a rather special exception on all fronts.

"Why, Captain Kirkland," Avo Romae himself greeted him at the station entrance when they docked the Great Delivery at Fasciemi Anchorage. Romae led him down the hall and he followed obediently. They must have made a hilarious pair - giant Avo Romae, in his triple-breasted suit and silk ascot cravat, with tiny Captain Kirkland, in his too-big overcoat and cuffed boots. "This is a surprise. But a pleasant one! I confess we do not speak as often as I would like."

"Our usual trader contact is indisposed at the moment, I'm afraid."

"Ah," Romae said, pushing open a door and ushering him in. "You must please give my regards to Bosun Desmond."

"I'll do that," he muttered.
"Please, Captain, be seated." So Kirkland sat opposite Avo Romae, a rickety wooden table between them. This was starting to look painfully familiar.

"I hear the recent raids in Nova sector were most successful," Romae began.

"Yes, extremely," Kirkland replied, "We got about thirty off New Joplin and New Sainte Dolitte. Decent ones, in excellent condition. We're also carrying Unsinkable back from Hallar."

"Oh, that one. He's still around?" Kirkland nodded. "I thought Hallar would have found someplace to sell him."

"There's no place on Hallar what would take him. They've all heard the stories - mostly worse than the truth, but people don't care. He's nigh on infamous. I don't think he'll ever be properly sellable."

"Hmm," Romae said, stroking his chin thoughtfully. Romae was a big man, with a big chin and big fingers. Curly, thick brown hair, and a gutly, boisterous, obnoxious laugh. He didn't often dress not in armour, so Kirkland suspected that beneath the suit and shirt was the golden chestplate Kirkland recalled best about the man. "That's a shame. He's very cute, but as you say, his nickname is well-deserved. Unsinkable indeed! Why, I myself had a turn at him and I couldn't get him under. If you want, I can find someone who enjoys that kind of thing. Finally take him off your hands. The Delivery always seems to be carrying him here and there."

"With respect, if Antonio of Marigon and the rest of Hallar can't find a buyer, I don't know that you can.""

"You misunderstand me, Kirkland," Romae said, smiling gently, and Kirkland felt unsettled. "I meant more someone who enjoys the chase, the pursuit, the hunt of such game ... and the eventual kill."

A *snuff buy*. Bloody fantastic. Kirkland didn't like Unsinkable any more than anyone else did on his crew, but the boy was amusing, clever, and incredibly witty, in addition to being exceedingly attractive. He'd be the last to admit it but he'd grown on him. Kirkland forced his mouth to smile and his head to nod. "I'll think about it." Absolutely not. Under no circumstances.


"Returning to business," Romae said, when he reentered, but he did not sit down, and instead folded his massive forearms over his broad chest. "I have just heard some very interesting news from my grandson. Lovino's sources tell him you left Bosun Desmond back at Marigon."

What was this, a cross-examination? "That's internal ship business, that is," Kirkland said defensively, "I'm not obliged to report that."

"Of course not, of course not. The really interesting thing isn't what you did, it's *why* you did what you did, as I can deduce for myself." Romae grinned very widely. "Your bosun for an untrained bondservant? It must be awfully pretty."

"He's not bad," Kirkland said, shrugging.

Romae grinned wider still, if that were possible. Kirkland felt like prey against a shark and shifted
uncomfortably in his seat. "That's how I know he must be pretty. I want first dibs on the purchase."

"You've not seen him yet!"

"I've no doubt I can get an easy million, perhaps two. One who makes you blush so hard must be beautiful indeed, so I'm not concerned about the temperament. I'd take a personal interest in his training."

Before having spoken to the boy he would have felt only slightly guilty at pawning him off onto Avo Romae, who was ... not the nicest trader out there. Now, he was convinced he didn't want to see the boy sold. If anybody, he should go to Francis, who would bed him, yes, but would also probably coddle him like a pet until his dying days. A far cry from freedom, perhaps. But a better treatment than at the hands of Romae.

"You'd sell him in store?"

"Do you have a better idea?" Romae asked.

Actually... yes. Kirkland made a show of looking left and right. "You got an Eavesdropper on you?"

"No, but this place is friendly to me."

"Since when?" Traders and sellers of all kinds passed through here, in addition to pirates, privateers, and the Council.

"Since I gutted it for vids and feeds and gave the Councillors who put them there a free vacation orbiting outside Tenickson," Romae replied coolly.

Pride goeth before a fall. That kind of jinxy talk on a ship could get one's mouth washed out with a bar half made of lye. But Kirkland didn't care about being observed. The point was to act paranoid enough to get Avo Romae hooked so that he'd do what Kirkland wanted him to, and acting the part well was crucial. "Look, I'm confident you can get up to three, maybe four mil for the boy on his own. But, here's the thing. The Decennial Auction's coming up. If you sell him there I've no doubt you can triple, maybe quadruple the initial value."

The image of the boy's wide eyes, so close to his - bright, clearest blue, like zenith sky on Banningham - haunted him as he thought this plan, and speaking the words was betrayal. But as Romae laughed and shook his hand, breaking half the fingers in the process, Kirkland consoled himself. Having the boy at auction - which was quite soon, what harm could befall him in a few weeks? - would increase his chances of finding some way to rescue him.

Whether he wanted to buy the boy to free him, or keep him, now, that was the next question.
"Where are we going, Gospozha Katya?"

"We are on an adventure, my darling."

She did not often question Gospozha Katya. Katya had provided for her for a long time now, but not so long that she had forgotten what it was like before. She was younger then, when she first met Katya. When Katya came to Francis' place and requested someone small, someone young, someone to nurture. Someone kind and caring and sweet.

She was all of those things. And she was pretty, with bright green eyes that weren't common on Olyokin and short blonde hair.

Her style of hair was her last remaining vestige of her brother, whose picture was taken away from her at primary. She clutched to it like a security blanket and was willing to fight for her right - as though she had any rights - to keep her last memory of him.

Katya let her keep it without a single word of protest. She had liked Katya instantly.

But occasionally, there were times when her curiosity got the better of her. And she wanted to know, to be free to question. She wondered about Ivan - Katya's younger brother. Normally friendly! When she arrived at the Duma so many years ago, Ivan had taught her basic science and math. He taught her astronomy. He taught her Zvanie so that she could read Vitim poetry and literature, although for conversation, they always used Common Standard.

She had not seen Ivan for over three years now, and it was only through speaking with Gospozha Katya that she even knew he was still on Olyokin. She missed Ivan dearly. He was kind and sweet.

She had her quarters, however, and she did not venture outside them without Gospozha Katya. Today was one such rare occasion. The airship was clean and quiet and small. It could contain perhaps four other people. The driver was a large man, dark, and covered in thick, wiry hair; probably not Vitim, but not Kala either. Maybe an off-worlder, maybe one of the smaller countries that had been taken over. He was pleasant enough, a hoarse, deep-voiced man, and smelled of smoke. His pants and shoes were clean.

She did not see his face. As befitting her position she kept her eyes on the ground.

When they arrived safely in Hallar airspace a day later, and then a few hours after that, upon Hallar itself, in the city of Caput Halleri, Katya took her hand. "I will warn you, my darling, that we are returning to the same market which you may remember from fifteen years ago. This may be painful for you," Gospozha Katya warned.

"I go where you go," she replied simply.

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She did remember it, in the end. The market was unfamiliar but she had never strayed outside of
Francis' Emporium to begin with. She saw dust on dirt roads. Hooves of horses and their droppings, too. Her good shoes clicking on the roadstone - Katya had dressed her decently for this trip, in her nice calico skirt, Darlington blouse and one of the Devushka Natalya's old black belts.

Once they entered the Emporium doors, however, she was assaulted by her memories. Really, Gospozha Katya was too good to her, because she gasped aloud - a bondsperson was to be seen and not heard - tightened her hold on Katya's hand and raised her eyes to look around.

Katya did not strike her. Instead Katya squeezed her hand lightly in return. Strength, she thought, and lowered her gaze.

"Gospozha Yekaterina of Olyokin! You are a delight to my skies, as always," came a voice she hadn't heard in well over a decade. Half a lifetime ago.

"Francis of Bast, now Hallar," Katya greeted him. "And you to mine. You received my message?"

"I did," he replied, "and we should talk in a more private setting. You can leave your bondswoman -"

"Bondsmaiden," Katya corrected. In fact, she was twenty-six this past month, but she still looked fourteen. It had been like that since the day Katya had purchased her. Katya liked her young, so she was young.

"Yes. Well, you may leave her here." Francis rose his voice in command, "Ici!" and spoke a few words in his language to the servant - probably an unbought bondsperson - but 'ici' was the only one she recognised. Come here at once.

Her left foot moved, itching to step forward in acknowledgement of the command. She felt a strange buzzing in her temples - I am disobeying a direct order! -

But then Katya's hand left hers, and she returned to herself. She felt the presence of her dorogaya Gospozha leave the room to ascend the staircase that she recalled was concealed behind curtains, and she was left alone with this new fellow.

"They're gone now," he said, his voice very quiet, and she looked up and around.

The shop was not quite as she remembered, but enough was unchanged. "I am amazed he hasn't left this old place and set up shop elsewhere," she commented.

He smiled, this - boy? man? difficult to tell. Young male person, at any rate, in better garb than a bondservant's - and he lacked the tell-tale belt - with wavy blonde hair, like Francis', and eyes the colour of Ivan's, only brighter. Skin very pale, like Ivan's, shorter, and less strong. She liked him instantly. "Francis wouldn't," he replied, "he does too much business out of this location. He's tied down now. It would be more trouble to relocate and he'd lose customers. This isn't the time to lose customers."

She felt a bit freer now. There were no other bondspeople with them in the Duma. Occasionally a duke brought his newest plaything. Then she could have a proper conversation, where she could speak with liberty, could ask the questions one might be struck for, that she would ask too were she not so well trained. The past three years had been very quiet without Ivan. "Business isn't good?" she asked.
"It isn't terrific," the unbought bondsman began. "The pirates have become more successful in dodging legislators. Cheaper bondservants. So now the middle class can purchase one for perhaps a hundred thousand dollars."

Katya had paid an even three million for her - and that was 15 years ago - accounting for inflation it simply couldn't compare. "They can't be nearly the same quality!" she protested.

"They aren't," he said. "But the buyers don't know that until the money's gone. And then they get angry and upset and speak poorly of the sellers in the market, and someone overhears and thinks they mean people like Francis, and then the rumours start flying, and Francis has to quell the rumours himself."

"I see," she said.

"I can't say anything about it - what right has someone like me to warn a freeman that his purchase is inferior quality? Even if I could prove it, how rude! And they don't treat the bondservants nicely, when they prepare them for sale. Meanwhile, you've people like Francis, who have been doing this for years, and it isn't cheap to raise bondservants like he does." She agreed. She had been treated excellently, before and after her purchase. Francis's Emporium only got larger and larger, and yet he never wanted for money. Strange. Well, she didn't question these things. "But you'll remember Francis' ambition. Give love to the world, and be repaid in kisses and affection."

"A man like that being cheated by lawless people stealing and selling freefolk. It isn't fair. But," she reflected, "that's life."

The unbought bondsman grinned widely. "Someone very wise taught you that," he said. "Do you remember who it was?"

She gave him greater scrutiny, and realised her comfort hadn't had anything to do with his resemblance to Ivan. In fact, her comfort with Ivan was because Ivan resembled this man. Man, certainly, because he must be twenty-seven now. "Oh my goodness," she breathed, "Matthieu, it's you."
"I would record this session for quality purposes," he said, "but I suspect you do not want recording devices." The Gospozha Bragina was a beautiful woman, and it was a shame for her to have hidden her beauty in this way. She wore gloves and had dressed in a heavy overcoat that masked her magnificent curves, revealing only a long skirt jacket over several petticoats. She had looped a dark scarf about her head, neck and face in such a way that it concealed everything but her eyes. As for her eyes, she still wore her winter glasses, thick frosted white lenses set in ornate silver frames, covering the darker colour of her irises.

It was a full 30 degrees above freezing in Caput Halleri today. The woman was either insane, or incognito.

"You are correct," she replied, removing the scarf and glasses and exposing her face, likely for the first time since having landed on Hallar. She removed from her overcoat pocket a small round brass object and set it on Francis' desk. It whirred, then suddenly two arms sprung out of either side, unfurled like ferns, and it stood on these tiny, spindly limbs. The top half of the sphere opened like a telescope dome, then again like a camera lens, revealing underneath a whitish substance, bearing a red dot - far too like an eyeball with two eyelids for Francis' tastes. It scanned the room quietly. Two revolutions later it chirped once.

"Was the Eavesdropper really necessary, Gospozha Bragina?"

"You're not the one I distrust, Francis. And I have told you time and again, you may call me Katya." She tapped the tiny automaton on the head and it chirped once before curling back into its original form. "Certainly you deserve it for the excellent services you provide me."

"One sale fifteen years ago and we are on first name terms! Ah, my lady. I wish all my customers were so easy to please. Well then. I take it the secrecy means you're not here for yourself."

"In fact, I'm not. This is for my brother."

"He was in the news last year, but I haven't seen anything of him since."

"I keep him out of the media," Katya replied grimly. "No doubt you sell to Vitim often, despite the off-worlding restrictions. Ivan is six years my junior. My Time was fifteen years ago."

Francis did the math in his head. "Then his Time ought to have been no more than six years after you. I had hoped I would see you again for another sale. Of course I don't know who it is that you purchased from for him, but I trust - there were no problems? The seller was covered under the Council?"

"That is the problem," said Katya. "I see no point in shopping around for these kinds of things. You find a good dealer and you stick with them. And you, Francis, are an excellent dealer. Qualified, proficient and best of all, discreet." The compliment brought a smile to his face. "We did not buy anything for him. I thought he had made his own arrangements. He did not. I have not ordered any medical testing, but I think he has artificially postponed his Time."
"I didn't know you could do that."

"You can't. Not forever, anyway. He's been cutting, I think, to stave off the blood-itch. That seems to have worked for awhile. He has been drinking to stave off the priapism. Plenty of hot showers. Probably masturbating himself into a coma nightly in order to sleep - it is a wonder his right forearm is not the size of my face."

Francis couldn't help it, he outright laughed. "I'm so sorry, my dear! You have a way with words." Katya was graceful enough to permit a smile on her own part, despite the gravity of the matter.

"I think it is mostly fear on his part. Fear of what he may become. You don't ... you don't know what it is like, you have heard stories but it doesn't compare. You lose control of your thoughts and your mind, you become impulsive... Need is the only thing you know, your only master. And this is just the psychological half. I understand his fear, to a point. If I could eliminate the Time from the Vitim, I would. But there is no other alternative and frankly, he's being a baby."

"It's strange," Francis commented, "nobody else experiences anything of the like. Just the Vitim."

"Yes, well, I can't explain that. I studied politics, not evolutionary biology. At any rate, I think this is what caused him to turn to religion for some kind of salvation. But the religious sect he chose is Priegyl, Order of Vynas - mostly Kala ascribe to it - and they do not have our biology. They don't understand it, they don't wish to. So they see the Time as some sort of absurd pagan ritual as opposed to what it really is: a messy rite of puberty that your body chemistry forces you to undergo regardless of how much you pray to a god you are told loves you as long as you just don't succumb."

"You could ban the religion."

"Ah, I am sorely tempted to ban all religion. But the Empire already controls much of the way of life. I am not certain how much more interference will be tolerated before revolution becomes inevitable."

"I confess I don't understand such regimes. If it works, it works, I suppose."

Katya sighed. "I should think sustainability, think of future generations. But more and more these days, I only care whether it will work as long as I am alive. If I can get us through the next fifty years without war, I'll call myself successful." She clapped her hands. "But. The matter at stake?"

Francis smiled and nodded like the good capitalist businessman he was.

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Katya's needs had been so simple. She had wanted someone who was youthful, meek. Gentle, and "attractive, too, if you have it". Someone who would stay small. Having had her childhood ripped from her, Katya had wanted more than someone to fuck. She wanted someone to take care of, someone to coddle, a doll. She wanted a perpetual daughter who could never leave her.

Francis, of course, knew just the bondsgirl in question - eleven years, looked nine - and judging from the girl's happy outward appearance in the entrance hall of the Emporium, Francis had selected wisely.

What Francis didn't know about the Vitim still took up a library, but Katya was happy to fill in
"Ivan is tall for a male," she mentioned, "and strong, almost absurdly so. I suspect prolonging the Time will increase his violent side."

"You'll want someone hardy," he replied.

"More than just hardy. More than one that's seen a bit of snow, one that can withstand the temperatures and blizzards. You know the weather on Olyokin. But we must remember Ivan is not himself these days and that is ultimately the deciding factor."

"Can he be appeased somehow? Does he prefer men?" How violent did Katya mean? Francis had been given a lovely young woman recently, exceedingly feisty, very hardy. He didn't often take strays, and had been obliged through a series of unfortunate events - oh, it was a sordid tale! - to take her on from another seller. It would certainly be convenient to find her a home with the Bragins of Olyokin because properly training her for service was almost impossible at this late stage.

"I have seen him express absolutely no preference one way or the other," Katya said, shaking her head, "but at this point it is irrelevant. A male will have to do. And a strong male. Any other, there is a chance he may inadvertently kill it. I want to spare my brother that suffering."

"I understand completely," lied Francis, who did not. He could not deny his affection for his charges, before he sold them. He would be a monster to do otherwise, he reared them all from very, very young ages! To think of any one of his beauties meeting such an end - simply unthinkable. And now he would have to sell one to a possible death.

"One that isn't terribly young," Katya continued.

"You want experience?"

She smirked. "Francis, I have no doubt that you rear your charges just like every other seller in this city. You have undoubtedly sampled the wares."

Francis flushed. Katya did indeed have a way with words. "Th-that's how you train them," he replied. "I would never take such illegal liberties." There was a difference between training bondspeople to be sold, and enjoying the pleasures of a harem that, when you got bored of it, you could simply trade away. Naturally, the difference was the exorbitant sales tax on the purchases owed to the Halleri government.

"My dear Francis. You do not question the way I do my business and so I do not question the way you do yours. It was only an observation. I want one that's experienced and worldly enough not to be horrified by Ivan's state. It has to know what it's getting into. It has to be Vitim-trained."

"All of my available people are," Francis replied, which was a half-truth; his latest acquisition, the wild-caught from Antonio of Marigon had no such training. But he did not really consider her available. "I believe I have just the candidate."

He whistled for Matthieu before Katya had a chance to re-do her scarf. "Fetch Eduard," he told him in Frankish. Matthieu nodded and disappeared.

"Should I be worried about that one?" Katya asked. "The only people who know of my being here are my bondswoman and yourself."
"Ah, that is not a bondsperson. That is my son, Matthieu. My eyes and ears. Most people do not pay him any mind so I doubt you have anything to fear." Katya looked unconvinced. "He was there the entire day you bought your own bondsperson, and you didn't notice his presence at all." Again, half-truths.

There came a jingle of the bells behind the curtain. "Enter," Francis called, and Matthieu brought forth the unbought soul in question, a plain, young-looking thing with blond hair and expressive face, now hidden behind a mask of impassivity. But looks were deceiving. Despite being as old as Matthieu - no more lines than his favourite, his skin no less tight - Eduard appeared more mature. For Matthieu, his invisibility helped to keep him at Francis' side. For Eduard, it had been the air of wisdom, of cleverness and wit, that had thrown many potential buyers off during the years. Nobody wanted a slave that was smarter than they were.

Francis had never let that bother him. He knew very well Eduard's talents. He had spent over a decade honing them carefully. He would miss them.

"Matthieu, thank you. Please be seated." Matthieu nodded and took a chair behind Francis' large desk - a wise move.

Eduard wore typical slave garb, a faded black vest hung open over a simple white cotton shirt. Drawstring trousers of soft grey linen, tucked into knee-high lace-up boots, with a canvas belt about his hips containing the necessary essentials as befitting a bondsperson. He looked perfectly unassuming, and yet his gaze betrayed a certain unmistakeable fire, saying, yes, it's true, he was a servant - he had always been a servant, and he would always be a servant - but he was a damn good one.

Francis didn't miss the look of approval that only briefly flitted through Katya's eyes. This would be an easy sell.
"...and she's being really really awful but I'm not allowed to tell you why and Brother I think she'll actually make me go through with, with - with \it, but it's a sin, and - oh, what do I \do?"

"Calm down!" Toris scolded. "Calm down, there, it's okay. It's okay. Have another drink," he said, and poured Ivan of Olyokin another glass of the vodka he'd brought.

Half of that bottle was now in Ivan's belly. Ordinarily, Ivan was hard to hear in the tavern. The tavern was on a nightly basis filled with the loud and brass, and Ivan had a shy, quiet, almost childlike voice, higher in pitch than one would expect for a man of his stature. Possibly because he hadn't cleared his Time yet, for which Toris was mostly to blame. But it fit his personality like a glove. Ivan was sweet, kind, gentle.

And about to become a complete monster.

Ivan gulped down the vodka gratefully. "I am so thankful God does not look askance towards alcoholism," he said. "Oh, praise Him."

"Praise him," Toris - Brother Toris - replied in kind, with a smile, and clinked his glass with Ivan's. "Now, as to what you should do - simply tell her how you feel. It is a sin to lie with one in servitude for it is a sin to commit human beings to servitude. All human beings are first under servitude to god."

"I tried to tell her, i-it didn't work. I didn't get another chance to talk to her before she left this morning." Getting closer to the moment of truth. Toris poured Ivan another glass and bade him drink. \textit{And tell me, oh liquored one, where is it your sister went.}

"But this is your chosen faith. She must respect that, as your sister. You are the head of this family, she must answer to you. And is not the will of god your chosen path?"

"It is," Ivan said quietly, sincerely, placing a hand over his heart, "oh, it \is. If He can love me ... perhaps someday I can trust in Him to love myself."

"God loves you very much," Toris affirmed, but it didn't appear to soothe Ivan too greatly. He added more vodka to Ivan's glass. "You are beloved of him. I assure you, he speaketh through me, and I tell you now, pilgrim, continue to accept him in your heart, and he will help you remedy this cancer in yourself. I understand - perhaps not quite as you do - the way that sexual lust can quietly eat up a person on the inside. But lust is not of god. God is always with you. Keep your heart with all diligence, my young one. That is all you have to do."

"But what about the - no, no I cannot say."

\textit{Oh? What about the what?} "Let me help you," Toris cooed, placing a hand over Ivan's.

Wrong move. Ivan tore his hand away like it burned. "Don't, you mustn't," he growled.

"I apologise," Toris said, and put his gloves back on, "You know I'm not Vitim. I don't know what
"Your sister is about to do. How can I help?"

"She's -" Ivan cut himself off again. "No, I cannot. I cannot."

"I understand," Toris said, with a placating smile. "Remember: 'For this is the will of god, of sanctification - that you should abstain.'"

"'Abstain from the fleshly lust which is against the soul,'" Ivan completed, "oh, God," and began to weep.

"But god is compassionate," Toris continued, moving closer, wiping away Ivan's tears with his gloved hand, "he is a loving father. Replace those desires with a desire after the word of god. Prayerfully resist your urges."

"God will hear me, even if my thoughts are so muddled and, and ruined, won't He?" Ivan whispered. "I can - I can no longer meditate as deeply as I could, once." He finished his drink, slamming the glass back onto the table, and didn't notice Toris pour him yet another. His voice grew louder, more frenzied. "What if He can't hear me? What then? What if Katya manages to find me, and- and- and she traps me where I am and brings them inside, and what if I kill it?" And Ivan burst into tears on Toris' shoulder, sobbing. "Oh, God!"

"Shh," Toris breathed, into his ears very softly, "you have no cause to regret as long as you are learning how to yield to the leading of the spirit of god within you." But more importantly, tell me, Ivan, who is this 'them'? Who is 'it'?"

"You - you don't understand!" Ivan said, his face red, his eyes wild, and pulled back, gripping the throat of the hood on Toris' fraternal cloak. "I am not being overdramatic. My - my urges have become more than simply sinful, I want - I want," and he leaned in and croaked it hoarsely against the flesh of Toris' neck, where it was exposed. "The lust has somehow turned into something else entirely, I do not merely want to slake some silly physical lust, I need to crush bone, I need to render flesh from limb, I want to rip arms off and use them as clubs to bash its stupid face in, want to paint its brains on the floor, want to make a coat of the skin of the stupid bondservant my sister is buying me -"

Toris was, very suddenly, no longer the least bit drunk. He fought to keep his voice straight and calm despite the fear that turned his insides to mush. "My brother," he interrupted, "my brother in god. Peace. Let the peace of god, which transcends all understanding, guard your heart and mind in blessed, sacred unity. Remember god in your heart and mind, and you will not sin, nor succumb to lust nor murder. These are sins, my brother. But let the love of god make you strong. Rely on him."

He let Ivan cry on his shoulder, murmuring about peace and love and you are sacred and all sorts of other bullshit for another fifteen minutes. Then he called for a taxi and helped Ivan into the horse-driven carriage when it pulled up outside the tavern.

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"That witch is about to ruin ten long years of hard work!" Toris shouted angrily, pulling his Order of Vynas cloak off and throwing it in a corner.

"Yeah, so hello to you too," Feliks replied, looking up from where he sat performing ship repairs. "What's up?"
"I just told you what's up! Ivan is close, dangerously close. And now I hear Bragina's gone off-world! I don't know where, but it's what we thought it was for, it must be - she's getting him a bonds person."

"A few years too late, he'll kill it, and probably himself," Feliks said with a snort. "Did he say where she went? Like what planet? Any way we can prove it? If there's no actual proof -"

"No," Toris replied dully, "he didn't know. Bragina didn't tell him."

"Huh. She usually tells him everything. Think she might, like, suspect something?"

"Maybe. Hard to say. Too early to tell." Toris brought forth the small brass Eavesdropper from the pocket of his breeches and handed it over to Feliks. "See what you can do with that. At one point he sobbed into my robes and then tipped over a glass of vodka into my lap, so I think it might've gotten wet but it should be okay."

Just then Raivis returned. "Toris. You're back."

"Did you get anything?"

"Why, I've been very well, thanks for asking," Raivis replied tartly. "Depends. What'd you get?"

"Something about going off-world. I'm thinking bonds servant," Toris admitted, "it isn't much."

But Raivis laughed. "No no, that's great! You'll never guess what the driver said." And he didn't wait for Toris to ask him before he replied, "Bragina and her bondsgirl left for Hallar."

"Where do you think they went?"

"Knowing Bragina?" Raivis guessed. "The exact same place they went the first time. She hardly ever leaves, she definitely never leaves for Hallar."

Francis Soderne's Emporium. Bragina was a creature of habit most times. If she were buying a bonds servant she wouldn't go anywhere else. She didn't trust anyone else. "If we can prove she was there -"

"Then it's proof her darling brother's close - maybe even on the edge of breakdown -"

"And the family's vulnerable as all hell -"

"Which means the other Vitim families will totally want to know about this. I'll get the Rubetskis' forces ship-shape," Feliks said. "They should've known about this yesterday!"

"Well I'm sorry," Raivis complained, not sounding very apologetic, "I couldn't meet with the driver until this morning!"

Toris gave him a wan smile. This meant work - a lot of it, and probably none of them would sleep tonight. But almost a decade of careful work was at long last coming to a head. It would be one final nail in the coffin of this godforsaken corrupt empire, for the glory of the Democratic Republic of Kilnus.

And Toris couldn't wait for the dawn of a better tomorrow.
The woman circled him, studying. When he saw her boots make two full revolutions around him, he heard her ask, "It speaks Common Standard?"

"He does."

There was some silence. "What is your name?" she asked, this time to Eduard.

Francis got funny with his pronouns; she could tell. Most people considered bondservants as items. But perhaps it was impossible to foster 'items' for so long, fuck them at least once a week for over ten years, and not develop some sort of strange attachment to them. "I do not have one, Madame," Eduard replied.

"Gospozha. You will address me as Gospozha."

"Yes, Gospozha."

She turned her attention back to Francis. "Did you give it a name?"

"Of course I didn't," Francis lied.

Eduard kept his expression fixed, wondering whether Francis was also thinking of three days prior, when he had taken Eduard from behind over the desk where Matthieu was seated, and chanted his name like a litany.

"When was this one brought to you?" the woman asked.

"He was five at the time. Like yours. In fact he is of the same crop as she was, so he has the same origins, same community. This is the last one remaining, it has been years since I have sold all the others." Born on Veshna, to Subscript families who donated their children for adoption to the Legislative Council of Bondservice People. He had been told he was a beautiful boy. He probably won his biological parents some decent money. And of course, Francis paid even more for him five years later. "He and your bondsmaid attended the same nursery, the same primary."

So did Matthieu.

"His skills and intelligence?"

"Top-notch in every way." In fact they were superlative. His intelligence levels through the years had consistently outranked everybody on Veshna except for a select few individuals; those children were later kept behind and given up to adoption clinics for families, and they became daughters and sons instead of service people. He was not one of them, and he could never quite figure out why. Maybe it was the same thing that made him unsellable as a bondsman. But it didn't really matter. His life with Francis had been decent and he couldn't complain.

"Undress," the woman said, and he began to do so without a word. "But leave the spectacles in place," she added.
Matthieu and Eduard shared stories when the others were asleep. Stories that Matthieu had overheard Francis telling his associates, stories in Frankish (that might have been the prime reason for Matthieu having learned the language - it wasn't anything like the language of Veshna). Stories about how other bondspeople were taken, how they were free once and then taken much later, sometimes in the night when they couldn't do anything, sometimes by force and submission. Eduard thought that would be much worse than having never really known freedom. After all, he was created for this purpose. He was _made_ for this.

And not all keepers were nearly as kind about everything as Francis was. The training wasn't gruelling, they were well-fed, clothed and bathed, Eduard was permitted activities like exercise and reading and making friends. He was given glasses when he tested poorly for eyesight and Francis didn't strike him hard when he was belligerent - Francis hadn't struck him in longer than he could remember. Life with Francis was very good.

But at the end of the day he knew he would be bought and paid for and sent home with someone. Hopefully it would be someone nice. Someone who he could please readily for the rest of his days and who would keep him as well as Francis did.

Perhaps the problem with him, he thought, as he unlaced his boots efficiently and tugged the linen drawstring pants out of them, was that he had somehow deduced, somewhere along the line, that there was more to this life than what awaited him. And that just because he didn't dare _ask_ for anything more than a well-kept servant's life, didn't mean he didn't desire it.

He stood nude in front of a stranger's scrutinious eye, his gaze on the floor.

The woman came closer this time and took his arm, twisting it, following the response of the muscles. He passively let her direct his body however she liked. "Is it used to heavy lifting?" she asked.

"Some," Francis admitted. "He is not frail, as you see."

"No, that's true," and she pinched the muscles of his waistline firmly. "Though the musculature is not very well-developed either."

"Perhaps, but his control over his muscles is magnificent, and he is far stronger than he looks, I assure you," Francis said, and it was then that Eduard suspected something was different. He had been inspected before, and subsequently turned down. These were not the kinds of questions that usually got asked. They were not the kind of remarks usually made.

Why would they want me to be strong? he wondered.

"The standard response method hasn't changed?" she asked.

"Of course not. Same as it always has been. Allow me?"

"No," she replied. There came the sound of shifting cloth - she was removing her gloves. "I'll do it myself," she said. She brought her fingers up, level with his chin, and snapped them loudly.

Eduard was instantly erect, and the other symptoms followed as usual - the gooseflesh on his arms, on his calves, the tingling crawling anticipation just beneath his skin. He forced his breathing back to normal but his pulse kept racing up. She didn't touch him and he wouldn't be hers either, but it
didn't matter to his brain. Conditioned for that response, he had to fight to keep from swaying near her, seeking out her warmth, of which he was now keenly aware.

Behind him, he heard the smallest breathy exhalation from Matthieu. Francis trained all his slaves impeccably and it had after all been twenty years of training. For each of them.

"Torch?" the woman asked, and Francis handed her a flashlight.

She brought forth a magnifying glass on a chain from the pocket of her overcoat and began her inspection with the mouth. He let his jaw fall lax at her touch so that she didn't have to direct him. She opened his mouth, cupping his jaw, and did a cursory sweep with the light and eyeglass. Satisfied, she closed it, and tilted his head back. He closed his eyes as she directed the bright beam into his nostrils. "Hm," she said finally, and tilted his head forward again to inspect the eyes.

He didn't like having his eyelids held open, but he liked much less the bright light she shone in them. She was blessedly quick about it, and about the cursory check she did on his torso. When she arrived at his penis she said, "You didn't have it cut," to Francis.

"I don't believe in cutting," Francis replied smoothly. "Some say it's easier to keep clean, but I believe you lose sensitivity in the region if you do. Not a trade-off I am fond of."

The woman didn't reply. She took hold of the organ just below the head, pushing towards the base, which slowly dragged the foreskin over the swollen head - he couldn't help how good it felt but he couldn't lean into it - she released him after what felt like simultaneously a full five minutes and a split second. He hoped she saw something she liked.

"Soft skin," she said.

"All of my stock self-moisturises religiously," Francis supplied.

"Good. My brother likes soft things. Turn around. Hands on the desk, lean forward." Francis handed her a pair of plastic medic's gloves in exchange for the flashlight.

Eduard did as she asked. Something must have betrayed him in his expression - maybe Matthieu just knew him that well - because the other man mouthed, strength, and gave him a quick thumbs-up. Easy for him to say; nobody had ever asked to inspect Matthieu before. As she entered a finger into him he found it helpful to concentrate on Matthieu's eyes.

Thankfully she did not lubricate the gloves, and his erection fell a bit. But only a bit, so that when she reached the section he knew she was looking for, and stroked a sly finger over it, it was still so horribly blissful it nearly hurt. Somehow he managed to keep his body from jerking around. How's that for muscle control, he thought, as she did it again, and again, and he kept himself so still he didn't even twitch. Matthieu looked impressed and was trying not to grin outright, but his eyes were glimmering with pride and amusement.

Finally she removed her finger and he heard the glove snap off from behind him. "I like its restraint. Still, a bit thin. It will have to do. What do you want for this one?"

"Generally, for him? I would start at three million. But times being as they are - and the situation being what it is, I'll let him go for two for you, Gospozha."

"One and a half."
"Two."

"One and sixty, then."

"Hmm...."

"Very well. One and seventy."

"I'll accept that."

They are *haggling* over me, Eduard thought. But then again, as he caught Matthieu's wide smile as he redressed - which didn't entirely crinkle the sides of his eyes - and as Francis told the Gospozha it was a pleasure like always to do business with her, he reflected that he was supposed to think this sort of thing was natural, because he was after all not quite a human being, but an object. A living object, yes, but still an object.

And you wouldn't care what a horse felt. So why a bondservant?
Until the surprise visit from the Councillor, the day was going well. Matthieu had woken up feeling better rested than he had in awhile, to a bright beautiful day on Hallar, next to Eduard. Eduard and he were close - the only two left from their own set so long ago. Together they'd seen everybody else in their group grow up and leave, and wave after wave of new adepts did the same. They dined together, they slept together. They weren't Francis' first group and they would not be his last.

But at twenty-seven - who would buy a bondservant this old? - Matthieu and Eduard were nearing a premature end of their service if they didn't get sold soon. Matthieu would never admit it aloud but he hoped they wouldn't be.

And now Eduard was gone. His purchase that day would be difficult to take - Matthieu was trying not to think about it too much. But the Bragins of Olyokin were exceedingly well off. Even if Eduard wasn't particularly well-liked he would be very well-cared for. Maybe someday their paths would cross again. Unlikely. But Matthieu could dream, and dream he did. The world he created within his head was a much more pleasant one.

Bragina's bondswoman had entirely forgotten Matthieu until he reminded her. It had been lovely to see her again, but she wasn't anybody he knew anymore, not the Eva that Francis had dubbed her, who he grew up with. Only the exterior bore any resemblance to the girl he'd known. Everybody changed in the end. Would Eduard would be like that too?

Francis seemed inexplicably relieved. Maybe Francis would be happy to see him go, too, someday? Francis could focus on the younger adepts... but Matthieu doubted it. He would not likely be sold - he was old for it, although he looked years younger - and he should, he took his tonic religiously. And he wondered if Francis wanted him sold in the first place. There was always something about the man's actions, something that seemed telling, that implied Francis wanted to keep him around.

He and Eduard had lain awake talking about it one night, and Eduard had said, running his fingers through Matthieu's hair, *I think you're Francis' favourite for sure*. Matthieu had denied it, but there were signs. Matthieu was called into Francis' office and bedroom far more often than Eduard was. Matthieu had the same hairstyle, was better dressed. Matthieu, come help me with this and that, Matthieu come clean the back room. Matthieu, would you like to learn to cook?

Matthieu neglected to tell Eduard of the downfalls of being 'the favourite'. Always the go-to for taking out any stress relief, always heaped with responsibility he had never assumed, significant slip-ups by others were tolerated while any minor mistake he made was the *end of the world*.

So when there came the sound of the little bell on the front door, Francis had told Matthieu to go and fetch the weekly groceries, which is what Francis, and Matthieu by association, had been expecting.

Instead Matthieu had found a woman, a bit older than he was - though with tonics, you just couldn't tell people's ages anymore - with mouse-brown hair, pinned up neatly under a smart cap. She wore a white blouse, jacquard vest and floor length bustled skirt. Expensive clothing. She looked like a
professional, not a delivery girl. And there was no crate of foodstuffs nearby, that was for sure. "Do you have an appointment with Francis of Hallar?" he asked.

He was very quiet; it took a moment for the woman to hear him. She narrowed her eyes. "Are you his secretary?"

"Um, no, I -" wasn't sure what to introduce himself as. If she were a client, Francis might want him to reply with "Francis' son" like he had acted as for Bragina and all the other clients. But most clients did not drop in on a shopkeeper unannounced - certainly none of Francis' did - and Bragina had been the only person pencilled in today. Who was this woman? If she were no client, and didn't want to buy, perhaps she would not want to be lied to by someone of his class. She would find that incredibly offensive.

"I'll just go get him for you," he said, in a hushed tone, and tore off before she could say anything.

When he told Francis there was a woman here for him, and gave a brief description, Francis' interest was piqued enough to descend from the office. Matthieu only knew the subtle signs of panic from years of living with the man - an expert businessman with an immaculate poker face - but all were present the second Francis spotted the woman, and remained behind the Emporium front room curtains, Matthieu on his heels.

"Why don't I go check on Belle," Matthieu offered meekly in Frankish, trying to hide behind his master.

"An excellent idea. Return immediately once you have done so," Francis ordered tightly under his breath, also in Frankish. "Be sure to give her the Medication."

"But she didn't do anything - ouch!" Francis whirled around and slapped him across the mouth. That wasn't something you usually did with your son, was it? It couldn't be. Not many families came by the Emporium. But on the nicer days when Francis wanted him in his bed for a luxury of an afternoon nap, or the nights where Francis wanted someone to hold as he fell asleep, Matthieu always felt cared for, and almost - dare he say it - loved. He knew Francis would never truly love him - you don't love possessions - but maybe it was a sort of strange, sick parenting method of his own?

At any rate, Matthieu retreated into subservient bondsman mode, since evidently that was what Francis wanted today, nodded stiffly once and disappeared, leaving Francis to deal with the woman.

Francis did not take on those who had been mistreated before, and this was clearly the situation with Belle. He didn't share his reasoning with Matthieu or Eduard for why, nor did he share with them what it was that had befallen Belle - Francis had taken to calling her that, after the first night. (Matthieu didn't think there was anything beautiful about the way she had screamed and cried herself to sleep.) Antonio of Marigon had been the one who had had her before Francis, and before him, a slew of other traders until Avo Romae. So far, the stick hadn't worked, so Francis was trying the carrot.

Did the carrot mean a shock collar? wondered Matthieu. Because that was "the Medication".

In her three months with Francis, Belle hardly ever spoke to Matthieu, though he always tried talking to her. He knew she could talk - he heard her voice when she spoke to Francis - but she didn't appear to see Matthieu at all. She talked to Eduard a bit, and Francis the most, but hardly
ever Matthieu, like he didn't exist.

That didn't mean he didn't try. "How are you doing?" he asked, when he stood at the threshold of her door. Belle remained on the bed, turned away. She didn't reply.

"Are you hungry? I notice you haven't eaten your lunch," he told her. "I'll get you more, if you want something else?" Silence. "You've got to eat sometime," he pleaded, but she ignored that too.

"Listen, I know you'd prefer it if Eduard were here. But, um. He was sold today, so... it's gonna have to be me from now on," Matthieu said. Belle said, as usual, nothing at all. Well, he supposed this couldn't get any worse, he might as well do it now. He slipped inside the room, quietly, gliding over the spots in the floor that he knew creaked, and before she could do anything snapped the bracelet on her ankle. He leaned over to take a look at her face, make sure she wasn't too upset -

She was fast asleep.

Sometimes Matthieu wondered why he bothered talking.

When he returned to the front room, he lingered around the curtain. Francis and the woman sat on opposite sides of the tiny writing desk in the corner left of the front doors; the woman was busy writing something in her notebook but Francis noticed him immediately, with a sharp and authoritative, "Ici!"

"He's all yours," Francis said to the woman. To Matthieu, he said - in Frankish - "This is the Councillor Hédervár. She has some questions for you, so please, treat the matter with the proper levity." Which usually meant for the love of god and all that is holy, don't lie.

Then Francis got up and breezed out of the room, leaving Matthieu alone with the woman.

"Good afternoon," she said icily, "won't you please have a seat." He did. "State your name for the record."

"Matthieu, madame." Council shouldn't care if he had a name or not, it wasn't illegal to give a bondsperson one. Just weird. But Francis was weird.

"And how long have you lived with Francis of Hallar?" she asked.

"A little over twenty years now, madame."

"You are how old?"

"Twenty-seven this July, madame."

"Then you have not lived with him your entire life?"

"No, madame."

She was silent. "Where were you born?"

"Veshna, madame," he said.

"I'm guessing you were sold?"
"That is correct. Uh, madame."

And Councillor Héderváry sort of looked upwards, to the heavens, as though they were constantly testing her patience and if they would stop that behaviour, it would be fantastic. "So you're saying you're a bondsman."

"...Yes?"

"Are you asking me or telling me?" she snapped.

"Telling you?" he said, cringing a little, in his very best 'please don't hurt me' voice. "Um, madame?"

It never worked on Francis so he didn't know why it would work on her. "You were bought by him twenty years ago. You have been in his legal servitude ever since?"

"Yes, madame."

"Please understand what it is I mean by servitude, bondsman. I do not mean you were purchased for training purposes and a later re-sell at higher value, having completed your training. What I mean by 'bought by him' is that you were bought to be his bondsman. At the age of - what would you have been, seven?"

"Yes, madame," he corrected her.

"Then please clarify. Were you purchased as a bondsman or were you purchased for training as a future bondsman?"

"For training, madame."

"Which means you have currently not been purchased as a bondsman."

"No, madame," he said, then realising that it might sound ambiguous, "not yet purchased."

She closed her notebook with a slam and capped her pen. "Francis!" she hollered, and Francis descended the staircase in ungainly thumps. "How much do you want for him?"

"For - whom, madame?"

"For Matthieu the bondsman," she said evenly, and Francis went bright red.

"Matthieu is not for sale," he insisted. Since when? Matthieu thought. Every now and again when Francis got really mad, he certainly threatened to sell him. It had the nasty habit of causing Matthieu to break down in tears and was very effective in cutting off any delinquency.

"Matthieu is a prospective bondsman," the Councillor retorted, "and you told me he was your son -"

Francis threw up his arms in defence, protesting, "I never said anything of the sort, you made the inferences, madame -"
"It was an outright implication, and I have this on record you know -"

"And I will remind you that the Council requires a warrant to search my books thank you ever so kindly -"

At the same time as an annoying beep signal in Councillor Héderváry's pocket went off - that sounded like an Eavesdropper - there came a horrible screeching wail from the back wing where Belle's room was. Something must have triggered the Medication around her ankle and she was certainly awake now. "Oh, for the love of -" Francis groaned.

"I can go if you want -" he offered but Francis' eyes were livid when they turned on him.

"No, here, you will stay right here!" Francis hissed in Frankish, with such vehemence that it made his knees grow weak with the impulse to fall to them in apology and deference. Francis hadn't looked at him like that since he was twelve.

"Madame," he said to Councillor Héderváry, "you must permit me to attend to my charge, as you can hear she is in great pain and you must leave the store at once."

"Not so fast. Ordinarily, I would present you with two choices," said the Councillor, fiddling with her Eavesdropper to make it shut up. "Buy your bondsperson to keep as your own, or sell him as you wish. The latter requires you to pay the newly required annual tax amount as per subsubsection 39.2.4 of the Criminal Code, while the former requires you to pay that, and the required sales taxes. However," she continued, and Belle's cries grew fainter, which didn't really mean anything good, Matthieu was familiar with the shock collar himself - "if my instincts are correct, this is not the only such case you have."

"That is where you are incorrect, Madame," sneered Francis, which technically was true since Eduard had just been sold, so officially, Matthieu was the only such case left -

"I am certain I could ascertain that myself with a warrant. Would you like me to procure one, Francis?" the Councillor said smoothly. And Francis paled and shook his head.

Belle let out a long, low moan. What the hell kind of setting did Francis put that thing on, anyway? And what did the girl do to deserve this? "Councillor," Francis urged, "please leave the store immediately, my charge is in great distress."

"I'm not fooled. You've pulled that trick before, I seem to recall Jensen Mawkris of Hallar having the same complaint during his last three visits."

"Fine, fine, I'll buy him myself, just let me go."

"Ah, but that's the problem, see, you can't, and that's illegal. Now let me summarise. Not only have you been withholding goods from the trade - odd as the goods are -" and Matthieu wasn't fond of the critical and unimpressed sweep of her eyes on his body - "but you now also owe the Council probably an absurd amount of money, a figure that just might make you flinch. In addition to enough paperwork to keep me working late nights for the next year, so thank you. Thank you so much. And most of all it's bad for the economy, which is why we have laws against it!"

"Bad for the economy, pah! You just want to make an example of me!" Francis blurted. "You only want to discourage those traders who act like the people they haven't sold are members of their personal harem!"
"Is that not exactly what you've done, Francis?"

"I- I will not have you slander me in my own store like this. You will remove yourself from the
premises immediately, Councillor."

Belle screamed again, high-pitched and hoarse-throated. Probably because she'd been doing it for
the past two minutes now, and why wouldn't Francis let him go attend to her? "Tell you what. I'll
make you a deal. You can't simply sell the boy to yourself and buy him back, nor can you sell him
to a friend and buy him back instantly. Those are both illegal under subsubsection 39.1.12.

"But I'll be lenient. Why don't you sell the boy at auction at the Decennial, end of this month?
I'll assume he'll fetch a better price there. This way, the Council will get a higher sales tax cut, plus
your auction fee, plus the per-head auction bondsperson entry fee. In exchange, I'll ignore this
transgression and the others I'm certain I can prove easily with nothing more than a quick look in
your accounts."

"How is this in any way fair to me? I don't see where you're giving anything up!"

"Did I say it was a compromise?" sneered the Councillor. "You're the one who's been breaking the
law." As she turned on her heel to walk out the door, she added, "I'll expect you to forward your
files for your prospective auction entries' into my mailbox by tomorrow noon. I shall particularly
look forward to inspecting the file of this ... this ..."

"Matthieu," Francis said icily. "His name is Matthieu."

"Name it whatever you want once it's yours," she sneered again, and slammed the door shut on the
way out.

"God damn it all to hell," Francis screeched, somehow louder than Belle's cries, if it were possible,
"that bitch! That terrible bitch!"

"F-Fr-ancis, u-um, please, Belle -"

"And YOU!" he rounded on Matthieu, though he did retrieve something from his pocket - some
kind of black rectangular device with a single red-tipped lever. He flipped the lever and Belle's
cries softened immediately. Some kind of remote? He'd asked Matthieu to fasten it to her the
moment the Councillor had walked through the door. Some kind of alarm to get the Councillor to
piss off?

He trusted Francis, he really did, but was it really necessary to have Belle be subjected to two
sustained minutes of intermittent shocks varying in intensity which she didn't deserve, solely to get
a nuisance of a Councillor to leave the storefront? The strongest shock was incredibly mild, and
Belle might've been exaggerating the pain - she liked disturbing the peace for any reason - but mild
as the strongest might be, Matthieu had been the victim of them more than once. The worst part of
the collar wasn't the physical pain, it was the humiliation, it was feeling like a bad dog who barked
too often.

Which was, incidentally, precisely how he felt now.

"Francis, really, I'm, I'm sorry, I-I didn't know, I thought -"
"Silence," Francis said, eerily calm, and slapped him across the mouth again. It didn't hurt as much some other things Francis had done to him, not even as much as the shock collar - besides, with all his training he could take quite a bit of pain - but the jerky, sudden movement and the heaping, heavy shame felt orders of magnitude more terrible than the roughest training Francis had ever put him through, easily. Breathing hard, he felt his eyes well up with tears and begged them silently not to spill over.

Francis had turned his back to him anyway. "Not once in fifteen years have I dishonoured her in any way," he said to himself, angrily, "even with those telegrams from those Kilnus people asking for information on her - fifteen long years and she rats me out to Héderváry."

What? "Who?" he asked, as unobtrusively as he could while still being audible, before he remembered Francis had told him to be quiet.

But Francis appeared to have calmed down a bit, enough to tolerate his speaking. "Yekaterina Bragina, naturally! Moments after she leaves the Council walks through my doors? And that comment she made of sampling the wares? Why, I suppose she must think me a complete fool."

"T-that, that's not possible," he pleaded. "It can't be."

"Well who else, then?"

"I don't know! Maybe, m-maybe just a random check, I don't know. But it couldn't have been her, eh, she just left the premises, she wouldn't have had time to get to the Council -" not that he knew exactly where it was, the last time he'd been outside he was twelve, and for all he knew they had an office right across the street - "and she spent almost two million dollars with you! Two million on someone you, you didn't even want."

"It doesn't matter anyway," Francis said angrily, more to himself than to Matthieu, or so he thought, and as he complained he began walking in the direction of his office, up the staircase behind the curtains. "It doesn't matter, for now I shall have to sell you no matter what! What ridiculousness, what stupidity, and - and these laws, I can't imagine what moron thought them up - thinks it's good for the economy -"

But Matthieu had stopped listening. I shall have to sell you. He would be sold. His heart pounded in his chest, filling his veins with dread - sold, he thought. Sold? After all this time? He - would he know what to do? And what would Francis do without him?

"Matthieu," Francis' voice said angrily, from the hallway, "I asked you if you were coming or not. But it was not a request." He snapped his fingers, and everything went for a split second bright white as Matthieu's body responded to the sound. What, this, now? he thought, almost contemptuously, how could Francis think of sex at a time like this? "I will require some stress relief, then I can think more clearly," Francis told him, explaining the answer to the question he didn't ask.

Moments, on the way up the stairs to the bedroom, he came to the same conclusion - it was a good idea after all. (Perhaps his body, conditioned to respond, was making that decision for him and his mind was simply following-through.) They would get the hot air cleared between them first before deciding what to do.

By the time he got to the top of the stairs all he could think of was Francis, and the thought drove him headlong into his master's bedroom, despite how livid Francis was, how painful Francis might
make this, how disappointed Francis was in him. He needed him anyway.

Francis flung the curtains that separated his office from his bedroom so hard he nearly knocked them off the rod when he entered - no small feat for heavy velvet. Matthieu hadn't seen him so angry in over a year, that time there had been a particularly bad day in the shop, all those nasty things the other marketgoers were saying about Francis of Hallar, and then Matthieu had drawn attention to himself when he burnt dinner.

It was like this then: his clothing nearly torn off, with such force it wrenched his elbow when Francis tugged at the sleeve; his boots pulled off before being unzipped - almost sprained his ankle; the knot in the drawstring on his pants loosened only enough to yank the material down past his hips. Until Matthieu was nude except for the belts they were all given, his containing a fine-grade rose-scented lubricant (Francis' favourite, naturally) and condoms (which Francis always ignored).

The lubricant was the only thing that would make this not hurt more than it had to, because it did have to hurt. Matthieu screwed up again, and this was his fault, really. He was the one who got himself into this, he ought to have a hand in helping to pick up the pieces. Francis gave him a minute to prepare himself - hardly enough time to prepare at all - while he hastily removed his own boots and trousers.

He kept the long-sleeved shirt and the vest, although he unbuttoned that. Matthieu gulped and tried for a third finger; Francis not being naked meant seriously angry.

And when Francis joined him on the mattress he was pushed backwards, scooting up the bed, and into the headboard, the border detail digging painfully into the blades of his shoulders. Francis threw his legs up, bent them, until Matthieu found himself crumpled up and quite well sandwiched between angry, upset Francis and the firm wood of the headboard; both sides equally unyielding.

Francis entered him swiftly and did not give him any time to adjust, and oh, it hurt, it hurt like bliss, because how many times had Francis done this to him, not as angrily, but just as strong, just as hard? "For your - hah, own good," Francis hissed, into his mussed hair, "not that, ungh, not that you appreciate it, insolent brat -"

"Yes," Matthieu replied, "yes, yes -" (Enough times to teach him that it was pleasurable, that he needed it, that he wanted it. That was certain.) "oh, yes -"

"- I feel I ought to strap you sometimes, teach you. Teach you lessons." Francis grasped his knee with one hand, his fingers underneath in the crook, digging into the soft skin behind Matthieu's knee with his nails. He steadied himself on the headboard with the other, and used both to pull himself closer to Matthieu. Matthieu's whole life was lessons, just one right after the other, and he never got them right, it was just a whole string of lessons he always failed, twenty years of failure, twenty years a let-down, never sold, this is the least I could do for you is cook your meals, balance your books, help out any way I can because nobody will take me but you, Francis - oh god, Francis, I'm sorry I'm sorry, oh please, I'm so sorry -

When he returned to himself, his body sated, his mind a little sluggish, his heart still feeling as though it had been thrown around and played dodgeball with, Francis was pounding into him relentlessly. "Francis," he whispered, quietly, panting.

And Francis answered, with, "I can't lose you, I can't lose you," his eyes clenched shut, his face pained.
Stupid Matthieu. This time he did not bother to stop the tears from falling, because now he'd ruined everything. He would be sold, he would be shipped off, and he would never see Francis again and what would become of his master?

Matthieu laid back and let Francis climax - watching with desolation his beautiful face contort and twist, he should take pride in this but there was just sick despair - and slip out of him, resting his front on Matthieu's shoulder, nestling in his neck, before he said, "Francis, I'm sorry. I really, I'm so sorry, for everything."

"It's alright, mon chou," Francis murmured, much more calmly, his former frenzy nearly completely abated. "I must admit, now that I think on it, from before, I -" perhaps was a bit hasty for the slap to the face? "I forget that you do not have the knowledge gained through schooling and universities. I give you too much credit sometimes." Oh. Oh. "To be simple as you are, it is natural for someone like you in your position."

He didn't think it was possible for his heart to plummet any further but there it was, almost in the pit of his belly.

"But as to the auction... hmm. I shall have to think about it. But I will think of something," Francis assured him, "you will have to be sold, yes, but ... perhaps I can have another purchase you, one whom I know, and sell you back to me. We must ensure you are not too presentable at the auction, so that nobody else will bid and mine will be the lowest."

And somehow that felt like another slap in the face.

Francis must have misinterpreted his disappointment, disappointment that he should have kept his facial muscles from registering (but Eduard was always the one who was like marble, impenetrable and steadfast). "Not that I believe anybody else will buy you! Do not worry, mon beau. You are completely uninteresting to everybody except for me."

Oh.

What could he say to that?

"My love. My little love. Don't fret. I will speak to Antonio. Perhaps he will aid me in your purchasing."

"I-isn't that illegal?" he asked timidly.

Francis thought a moment, "The Councillor will find herself very busy suddenly," Francis said cryptically, "with running most of the auction on her own. I do not think she will pay someone as invisible as you much attention."

"R-right," Matthieu whispered in reply.

"We should go now and take care of Belle, but trust me. This will work out perfectly fine, trust in your master. Do you trust me, Matthieu?"

And like the well-trained dog he was, at the words 'trust me' the feeling of gloom about him abated a little, like light peeking through the clouds. "Yes, Francis, I do."
Alfred was back not long after, and from the sounds of it, Kirkland was some pissed, alright! Last time Kirkland was that mad, it was Unsinkable's doing. He was impressed. And maybe a little jealous.

"What kinda magic did you do to him?" he asked, his eyes and smile wide, through the bars that separated their cells.

Alfred rubbed his wrist petulantly. "Jerk hurt my wrist. Oh, I dunno," he shrugged, "one minute we were talking perfectly fine and the next he got all up in my face about things."

"He didn't - he didn't, like, do anything, did he?" He didn't think Kirkland had had time for any funny business, it was a short meeting... and Kirkland had never, ever seemed like the type, not in the five years he'd known the man, but maybe he didn't know the Captain after all. Alfred was gorgeous alright, maybe the Captain just couldn't resist.

"Do something? Like what?" And the tone, that guileless tone. It'd been awhile since he heard something that innocent! That was priceless, and terrifying.

He breathed a sigh of relief; no, if Alfred was still that naive there was no way Kirkland touched him. That made him feel better about things. Of the pirates out there, Kirkland was one of the more moral. Which wasn't saying much. But it was nice to know his own judgment of character hadn't become so impaired. It was only a short stop after that to fuckin' Stockholm City and actually sympathising with people like Romae or some shit.

"Forget I said anything," he said. "So what happened?"

"Well," Alfred replied, "he sat me down at a table, told me I got taken by mistake, and then told me he wasn't gonna let me go home, that they were gonna sell me anyway. Apparently I'm really valuable or something."

"Look. You got Kirkland almost as angry as I get him on a regular basis. Pretty good work, approaching the awesome me like that, but so far I ain't heard anything that'd get him so riled. What else didja do?"

Alfred looked a little ashamed. "I asked him if maybe we could make our own deal. He wouldn't sell me to the traders and instead... he could just, y'know, keep me and I'd like cook and clean and stuff."

Cook. And clean. And stuff. "Do you know what you were taken for? I mean I know I was vague but seriously, do you?"

"Yes, I fuckin' know, alright? I fucking know what bondservants are for. Mayor of Lawton's got one. Man, you and Kirkland, acting like I'm a complete idiot here."

"You kinda are! Scheisse, you have no idea - you don't even know what kind of a man Kirkland is!" Kirkland mentioned something about a meeting with Avo Romae - Unsinkable's
faavoutrite trader, yippee - so he wasn't outside listening in or anything to Unsinkable destroying his character. But no matter if he was, he wouldn't give a fuck, let Kirkland hear, let him get angry. Unsinkable would be the one who got his goat for real (like it should be!). "And you went and offered him your body for free *forever*?"

"You've talked to him, you know what he's like, he's a decent kinda guy -"

"No, he ain't," he insisted to Alfred, "he, he really isn't."

"- well he's probably nicer than the others," Alfred mumbled, and he had to hand it to the kid, he was right about that. Staying with Kirkland might be one of the nicest scenarios. "Okay, so it wasn't exactly a brilliant plan."

"Got that fuckin' right," he snorted.

"But what else was I supposed to do?"

"Did he accept your offer?" Alfred was starting to sound pretty convinced about Kirkland. "Shit, kid. Did he accept?"

"'Course not," Alfred said. "He can't stop thinking about how much money I'm gonna make him. Which ... that means I go to the traders, doesn't it?" And Alfred began to blink furiously and tremble.

In theory, yes. That was exactly what it meant. But if anyone could figure out how to get this stupid kid back home - and he should be nicer to him, it wasn't Alfred's fault he was here - it would be himself. Not for nothing did they call him Unsinkable - a damn cute name too! Much better than cumbucket or painslut - he set the standard on not being fit to sell. Not darling Avo Romae, not Antonio of Marigon, not even the renowned Francis of Bast. Or Hallar. Wherever the fuck the sleazeball lived now anyway. If the top three couldn't do it, then the awesome him could not be fuckin' tamed.

That didn't mean they didn't all try their hardest.

Anyway. If he could manage to avoid getting his ass sold for five long years and keep his sanity (he was pretty sure it was still mostly there) then he could figure out how to get this kid home. The least he could do was try.

"Listen, kid," he said, through the bars. "Lemme think of something, okay? You're really lucky I'm here. Somehow, Kirkland's got sick of staring at my face all the time - poor Captain don't know beauty when he sees it! But he's talking to me when he gets back from Romae's. Maybe I can swing something, okay? Something to get you back home."

Maybe he could, like, offer himself to someone finally and then figure out some way to tear off. Kirkland would get cash for him - a decent bit, he could play nice and docile bondsperson for an afternoon while buyers inspected his ass. And he'd never see Avo Romae again. Yeah, he'd get himself raped once or twice before he managed to clear away from whatever dummkopf bought him. But what made *that* any different from the past five years?

Alfred sniffled. "You'd - you'd do that for me?"

"I can't promise anything," he said, and that was true enough, "besides that I'll try."
Alfred nodded. "Th-that's enough. Enough for me. Even if you just try that'll be - well you know Kirkland better than I do. Gosh, I - thank you. Thank you so much."

"Don't mention it," he said. How in the world he'd manage to convince "What About The Money" Kirkland and remind the man about the morals that were buried deep within him, he had no clue. "Say, suppose those keys of yours unlock my ankle chain here?"

The more they talked, the more he became convinced it was the only thing to do. It was true that he didn't stick his neck out for many people. He'd done it once or twice when he was fresh-caught and that got him into some serious trouble.

But. It wasn't really right. What he remembered from Schlessen was using broken bottles to fend off the wild dogs and crows who wanted to tear off pieces of Old Fritz' dead body, the day the crazy hobo finally passed away. What this kid remembered from New Joplin wasn't five cars and a mansion, but it was a happy if small home with parents who loved him dearly and were probably worrying themselves sick.

Unsinkable could handle himself. Alfred, on the other hand, might've shown balls with that stupid dealmaking nonsense, but ultimately had no clue what he was doing.

Something about the kid's vulnerability grabbed him and shook him; made him want to step up to the plate.

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When Arthur Kirkland appeared on the other side of the door several hours later, he and Alfred were still chatting away about everything and nothing. Alfred told him about his favourite movie stars, his favourite comic books, told him tales about the villain being defeated and the hero saving the day and winning the hand of the beautiful lady. You know. Shit you learn when you're five.

Priceless, and terrifying. This kid would not last a day. They'd break him so easy he'd be gone forever in, like, hours, and they'd enjoy every minute of it.

"Come on, you," Kirkland said, "up you - I thought you were chained at the ankle."

"Magic!" he proclaimed, wiggling his fingers in Kirkland's face. Kirkland batted them away and grabbed his wrist, dragging him out the door and down the hall to the usual interrogation room.

"None of your nonsense now," Kirkland said as he let him sit down at the old table. Fair enough, he had a legitimate topic of his own to discuss.

"Before you say anything," he said, because Kirkland already had his mouth open, "I have a totally awesome deal for you that you really definitely wanna hear."

"I thought I said none of your nonsense."

"It's not nonsense, I swear! Totally serious."

And then Kirkland gave one of those heavy sighs, and looked upwards as though there were some god constantly testing him and his patience and he was asking it why, why must you put me through these things. Naturally, he grinned back with the brightest, toothiest grin he could muster,
because that sigh usually meant Kirkland was caving. It was getting easier and easier to make that man cave. "I have a curious feeling that I shall regret this but alright. You go for it, because this will no doubt provide me my quota of one laugh a day which so far I very sorely need."

"Okay, so -" he began, already gesturing wildly with his hands - "here's the idea. You don't wanna sell the kid. I don't want you to sell the kid. The kid definitely does not want you to sell the kid. But you want money, and I get that. I totally get that. You also probably want to get me off your chest 'cause I've noticed something around here - I go from trader to trader to trader through you. It's basically the strangest cruise of the solar system ever. And you've been offering it to me for no charge besides the company of the awesome me! Which I gotta say, I appreciate. But that ain't businesslike.

"So why not kill two birds with one stone? You get rid of your problem - namely, yours truly - and finally drown the awesome myth that is Unsinkable. Sell me again to Avo Romae, he's real big on the taming of the shrew deal, we'll get you a nice price for it, I'll be good and kind and well-behaved and fuckin' everything, an' he'll sell me off to someone, no prob.

"But in exchange, we gotta go back to the Nova sector first and take Alfred home 'cause fish is so far out of water it's stupid."

Kirkland's face was pale, shocked, and more than a little horrified. He panicked a little - shit, he's not buying it - "Listen Captain. I know you can get more money for Alfred, way more - you dress us both up nicelike and they'll pick baby blues and blond hair over, over someone like me anyday. But you - you just can't. You made a mistake in the raid and you picked up someone you weren't supposed to.

"Now I know you. 'S been five years now, I know you. I know your patterns and I'm a victim of your patterns, you remember Schlessen like I do. Well you don't ever pick up people in nice areas. You know the type, three-floor apartment buildings, well-lit streets, parks where people walk their dogs, reliable streetcars? This is where that kid comes from. You know what kinda up-in-arms is gonna come after you for taking one of those? Council doesn't mind you taking pieces of shit like me, street vermin low-lives with no prospects - oh hell, I don't know, maybe they pay you for cleaning up the streets. Turn 'em into courtesans for the high-class, it's a win-win god-damn modest fucking proposal.

"So you may have the money on the pros to this but the cons include the endless shit you're gonna get from the New Joplin bee-spah and another few more trips at least of dealing with me. And you just know I'm gonna make your life hell. Not that you'll need it with the guilty fucking conscience that I know you've got somewhere buried deep inside that wallet of yours."

Kirkland sighed again, this time sadly. "Wow," he said, "you've gone and proved me completely wrong, again. This may actually be the saddest part of today."

"Yeah? So do the right thing, Captain. Send Alfred home."

"Of all the complete bollocks you retched up, that wasn't the worst of it," Kirkland replied with a strange, warning tone in his voice. "For you to even suggest my selling you to Romae ..." the Captain faltered and fell silent.

He let Kirkland think about it in peace instead of clown around like usual. Finally Kirkland began.

"I've just been at Romae's, as you well know. Does the name of Frederick Plinton of Tenickson
mean anything to you?" He shook his head; he'd never before heard the name. "Frederick Plinton is a man who owns quite the large estate on the Luna Halleri Secondary Colony. Suppose we ought to call him Frederick of Luna Halleri but he's only after setting up. Anyway I'm getting sidetracked...

"In his daily life he's the Deputy Manager of Security Affairs for Agriculture and Resources on Luna Halleri. His interests include playing the violin, collecting coins and buying bondspeople. He has bought three so far and continues to buy more."

_Three_. Wow, rich guy. "So ... what, this is the guy you're gonna sell Alfred to?"

"Absolutely not," Kirkland said, aghast. "No. Unthinkable. In fact the story went rather that - well, Romae wanted to try selling _you_ to him. The - look. The reason this man continues to buy more is because his interests may be completely banal but his pleasures are rather perverse. He's what we might call the limits of deviance. He, ah. He's into snuff."

He didn't get it. "The hell is that, some kinda drug?"

Kirkland shook his head. "Snuff is getting off on the act of murder. Killing someone. This is why he can continue to buy bondspeople. He hunts them, and kills them."

It very slowly dawned on him, and as it did his brain fogged with a vague sense of _what_? "You -" his voice was now so, so quiet - "you want to kill me?" He couldn't, he _couldn't_.

"Apparently Romae will pay up to ten million for me to hand you over - I'm sure Plinton will pay him even more but that's the way business works for you. And if you run the numbers, ten mil is more money than I'll get for selling - Alfred, was his name?"

Oh my god. He _could_.

"You, oh, you can't," he whispered, because somehow he was incapable of saying anything aloud, "oh god, Ki- Captain, _Arthur_, please. Please, you can't."

Kirkland was merely quiet. "It's a lot of money. And as you yourself say. It's within my interests as well to get rid of you. Isn't it?"

"I didn't mean _that_. Oh, _Arthur_. Please, please don't - don't do it, I'll do anything -"

And Kirkland's eyebrow quirked up just so. "Anything?" he asked.

Anything ... could mean _anything_. Tread these waters lightly, Unsinkable. But on the other hand there was someone out there who wanted to kill him! His heart pounding, he said, "Yes. I'll do anything you want if you just _don't sell me to that one_."

"Here's the deal I want to make with you," Kirkland said, leaning in, and without thinking, he leaned in as well, until they were very close, inches apart, and he could see very clearly the bright green irises of Kirkland's eyes. He let them bore holes into his own. Frankly, it helped him steady himself, get his breath back from that minor heart attack he might've had. "I'm not the one that took the kid. Alfred. I didn't take him. I didn't order it, we weren't even supposed to be there. It's exactly as you say; we don't hit those areas of town and we were expected in downtown Grand Cove, not the suburbs. The one that took him was Desmond, and Desmond paid very dearly for that mistake already. So now I'm down a crewmate."
"Avo Romae tells me he has already told Frederick of Tenickson that there's a potential candidate, which means Frederick is pushing hard for it, which means Avo Romae isn't likely to leave me alone. That doesn't bode well for you as a slave.

"So I propose we upgrade you from slave... to boatswain. Because nobody except me touches a member of my crew." And leaning in so close like that, he didn't miss the crazy smile that slowly graced Kirkland's face, the one that said this plan is magnificent on so many levels. "What do you say?"

His mouth ran away from him, like always. "You... you mean it?" He didn't want to give Kirkland the chance to reconsider an offer like that! Being a pirate meant a sort of steady income, though not always a legal one, and actual rights as a freeman. No more brig, no more trading, no more being beaten, no more rape -

No more rape. Goddamn.

"Of course I mean it," Kirkland said softly. "You've been here so long. You're practically an institution yourself. And ... and I couldn't do it. Not even for ten million. Not to you."

Those words, those words - they raised goosebumps on his arms with the way Kirkland said them, and before he knew it he'd grabbed the man's cheeks in both his hands in bright, euphoric glee and planted one on him, directly on his lips, in between his murmurs of, "Thank you, thank you thank you, oh god, thank you.

"There's, there's just one thing," Kirkland spluttered, when he'd released him, and hah, what an awesome shade of eggplant the Captain - his Captain! - was turning. "Well, two."

"What's that?"

"First, never do that again," and though he kind of resembled a strange piratey lobster right now, Kirkland looked more amused than anything else.

"Done," he replied enthusiastically, too relieved to showboat by saying something about how he'd now have to content himself with a kiss that bad.

"And second. I don't fully trust you yet. Before I can, you've got to prove your loyalty to me, and you did tell me you'd do anything. So I'll have to hold you to that."

"Anything," he said, nodding almost spastically. Anything was better than certain death. Hell, Kirkland could take him right here and now if he wanted to. (Which he mostly thought because he knew Kirkland would never, ever do that.)

"Here's my plan about how to solve a problem like Alfred." In his shock from dealing with the prospect of being murdered to becoming a freeman, he'd completely forgotten about the boy. It was lucky his Captain hadn't. "Avo Romae is just as interested in Alfred as he is in you for different reasons. For Alfred's case it's because Romae heard about Desmond and worked it out that the boy I killed him over is incredibly beautiful. Which, I'll admit, he is.

"Now Romae thinks he can get a good amount of money for him, more than he usually gets for an untrained bondsman, which is why he's willing to buy him off me for more than I would usually ask. I think I've managed to convince him, however, that if he auctions the boy at the Decennial
coming up, he'll get double, maybe triple. Perhaps upwards of ten million. Or at least he'll get a lot more."

"He probably will," he agreed. "Then, you're gonna sell him anyway?" After all that?

"Sell him ... and then buy him back," Kirkland said. "I know someone who can make the three million I'll make off Alfred's sale to Romae turn into thirty, which ought to be more than enough to buy him at Auction and pay for the fuel back to New Joplin. We'll have to keep Alfred notified of this so that he behaves properly. I'll sell him to Avo Romae tomorrow. But here's where you come in. In about a week they'll have the numbers ready for the auction - everything's all organised in advance. You'll have to go into Avo Romae's place on Hallar - we're on our way there as we speak - and find out what number Alfred'll be in the auction."

"I can do that. No problem."

"The catch is, if you're seen, well. Avo Romae knows who you are, what you look like. Everybody does, with looks like yours. If you're seen, he won't bother using me as a go-between. He'll simply kidnap you to satisfy his client, which makes him even more money as he doesn't have to waste any, buying you off of me."

"But I'm your bosun now, you said nobody could touch me but you!"

Kirkland coughed. "But you don't get your papers until after we figure out what number Alfred will be in the auction, so that we can rig it, and buy him back. You savvy? This is how I'm going to find you're loyal to me. If you do this for me, I'll give you your freedom. Have we got a deal?" he asked, holding his hand out.

And really, how could he refuse? A chance to help Alfred, and a new life.
Six was a good, round number. Five was a little mystical. Danmark wasn't all that superstitious but there was something about it. They were whole with a sixth.

But they didn't have six beds yet. In fact, they still only had four, Norge usually slept in a ship. So when twilight drew to a close in Kroksvellir base, and everybody headed back to their own tiny room (or ship) Danmark offered the new guy - who hadn't yet picked a name, so in Danmark's head, he was 'New Guy' - his own bed. It wasn't all that clean - he took his midnight snacks there, but he brushed the crumbs off and it was good as new.

"Are you sure?" New Guy said, and Danmark brushed that off too.

"Sure I'm sure! We oughta be hospitable and you're one of us now. And you're probably dead tired, after the hoops you jumped through yesterday with Sverige. You toured the system in a week!"

He was careful not to mention other reasons the man might be tired.

New Guy offered a wan half-smile of his own, thanked him, and went to bed, so Danmark crashed on the floor outside with a few pillows and an old comforter, and the draft wasn't too bad.

In fact he was surprised when the next morning, New Guy seemed to be worse for wear than he was. Must've been more tired than he thought.

He didn't mind at all, New Guy could have his bed as long as he needed it. He could sleep in a ship, like Norge. New Guy was real nice, friendly and moreover, unlike anybody they'd rescued to date, he seemed to have some fight still in him, you could just see it in his eyes. It was downright inspiring ... not that he could figure out a way to tactfully say hey, you may have spent the past three years being tortured but the fact that you want to kick ass and take names is so goddamn awesome I kind of want your autograph.

There was a little bit of cleanup work to do from the recent job, and New Guy was helpful with that. Norge and Sverige took the stealthship to recover the airship, and Suomi and Danmark helped New Guy fill out all the paperwork. Once he picked a name, Norge would file it with the Olyokin government in the next few days and lickety split, just like that, New Guy'd have his life back.

Danmark got New Guy to help him with location work, and the two of them spent most of what little natural light they got in the afternoon poring over maps of Nunat. Mostly this was to interest New Guy, who'd never before been to the planet - but it also served a purpose in plotting out decent locations for new bases and safehouses. The Nunat Bonds Service Protection Agency were a pretty slow bunch but the Halleri counterpart were hopping mad at them, and Nunat signed an extradition treaty with Hallar a couple of years back so there was nothing stopping the old bee-spah from coming to find them.

Ísland - the quiet one - took New Guy when he went to Kroksvellir that evening to buy groceries and do a load of laundry. Danmark would've liked to go with. He'd been to Kroksvellir all of once through the past year they'd been stationed here. It was a small village where his voice echoed easily, and people had a magnificent tendency to remember him, even when he was trying his best
to be quiet.

Basically, Danmark was the perfect distraction and bait weapon, but a terrible spy otherwise. There wasn't much that could be done about it, and he had an important role to do so it wasn't like he was useless here.

He felt nervous letting New Guy out of his sight, but he trusted Ísland. None of them got very far in an endeavour like this without trust.

They weren't back until ten, by which time Norge was in the airship and Sverige and Suomi were in their respective rooms. He tried to fall asleep for about an hour himself, tossing and turning before he realised he was anxious that New Guy would return okay. Before retiring to his own bunk, Ísland wordlessly took a quick nightcap of the braendevin that Danmark was slowly nursing in his chair where he read by oil lamp, wrapped up in a quilt. Electricity was too precious a commodity. They couldn't give away location by wire, or by hearth, so oil lamps and blankets upon blankets it was.

"Rich meal for dinner?" Danmark asked, and New Guy nodded.

"I haven't seen that much food in awhile," he admitted. "There was smoked lamb and fish, and some kinda bird he called lundar, plus bread and jam, and yogurt, and cheese - and then we had dessert!"

"See? I told you before long we'd have you ten pounds heavier. No more skin and bones for you! Do you want some?" he asked, referring to the braendevin. "It's not flavoured."

"I'm alright," he said, "I think I might just turn in."

"Oh. Well, okay. I'm gonna read for a bit, but, g'night." When New Guy sort of fidgeted awkwardly it took him a bit to figure out why. "Oh, uh, you can - you can take the bed again. Long as you need, okay? We'll get another bed soon, Norge can bring one back from Olyokin or something so... you know. Don't worry about it."

"That... wasn't what I was going to ask," New Guy said, almost meekly, "I kind of. Um. I have pretty bad nightmares, for awhile now. It's not so bad if there's someone else right there, usually 2304 was willing, and I got used to it, I guess. And. The bed's big enough, and I feel like I can trust all of you guys, maybe that's crazy? But it's kinda cold out here anyway, so, uh. If - would you mind?"

Oh. "Yeah, I - sure. Sure," he replied quickly, caught off-guard and feeling awkward. He dog-earned the page and picked up the oil-lamp.

"You don't - you don't have to right away, I just -"

"It's okay," Danmark said, getting to his feet, "the book's just something to do. Not that important. Really."

They lay there in the dark for about half an hour, side by side, in a bed that actually wasn't all that big, not for two tall guys like them. It was nice, feeling someone next to him. He hoped he was as comforting to New Guy as the New Guy was to him. Danmark had never slept with anyone before. But he wasn't tired enough to sleep.
"You're not tired?" he asked, and he heard and felt the rustle of New Guy shaking his head. So Danmark propped himself up on his side, to look at New Guy, even if he couldn't make out his face. "Wanna talk?"

"...About what?" New Guy replied uncertainly.

Not that, never that. "What's the Dordlands like? That's New Sainte-Dolitte, right?" And he heard and felt the rustle of New Guy nodding.

"It's nice," he replied, slowly, quietly, "the Dordlands. The rest of it, I've never been."

"Tell me about it," Danmark prompted. "If, if you want to, that is."

"I don't mind. Well. It's a, uh, a set of states, that you just sorta lump together under the umbrella of Dordlands. Some of them were settled a long, long time ago, like centuries, when the Franks were still around before they left for Bast and Schlessen. Um. Those parts are pretty, the old parts, the ones with canals, and castles and really old buildings. The kind they keep in good condition. It's kinda hard, you know, with the atmosphere on Nieuw Sint-Dolitte, so there's a lot of money constantly spent on reconditioning. We. We didn't grow up in those parts, obviously, but every school trip took us there in history class."

"Who's we?"

"Ah, my sister," New Guy said, "older. But not by much. She's the one who took all care of me, made me go to school though my neighbours never did, and they always seemed to have a lot more fun than I did with my math homework! We, uh. We lived in the projects just outside the older buildings from the industrialisation period of Nieuw Sint-Dolitte, and those were just outside the city centres. Kinda like giant target signs.

"On the fringes it was less nice. We had an apartment on the twelfth floor, but the elevators never worked. Which was fine, when they did they smelled like piss. We didn't pay for the place. I didn't find out about that until I was like fifteen and finally put it together, but my parents - I never knew them, my father died before I was born and my mother not long after - anyway they were squatters. Years and years. That's why my sister was able to go to school too, otherwise - we could never have afforded it.

"We both slept on a mattress on the floor. Shared a blanket in the colder months - it never gets cold like this but it's humid on Nieuw Sint-Dolitte, and a wet cold somehow gets you in the bone so much more than a dry cold does. The door wouldn't lock, so ... we never had much at home, a little food but what didn't get eaten by us got eaten by the mice. We were almost never there, I had an after-school job at a sandwich shop that didn't mind when a loaf went missing. My sister had a job cleaning offices downtown. Home was a place to sleep."

"You were a Subscript family," Danmark said - the nicer term for poor as dirt.

"Yeah," New Guy said. "Me and her, that's - that's kinda what we were."

He wanted to ask whether his parents, like many Subscript families, had ever considered selling their children to the trade for money. Maybe if they'd lived longer they would have. You could get a lot of money for an infant - a couple hundred thousand. Children reared in bondservice seemed happier, more well adjusted. Danmark wasn't convinced; brainwashing can do cruel, terrifying things to you. But he wouldn't ask that, not when New Guy had nightmares. Instead he asked,
"Does she look like you, your sister?"

"A little," New Guy replied, and there was a smile in his voice that hadn't been there before. "She's tall, like me, though not as tall. We're both of us skinny as sticks, both blonde, but her eyes are greener than mine. Her hair sorta - well the last time I saw her anyway, her hair fell to her jaw, slightly wavy. I don't know if they cut it for her like they did mine."

"They?"

"Yeah. They," New Guy murmured. "Good old Sis. She, um. She always looked after me. And when I didn't come home ... she went and played detective and figured out where I was. Somehow she got in contact with the pirates that took me and asked for me back. 'Cause you know, they weren't going to get much for me anyway - seventeen, and I looked it, already too old for the sickos, and I had bad acne then too, we could barely afford soap and I was no good at thieving it -"

"You don't have to tell me this part of the story," Danmark reassured him. New Guy was pretty easy to read. Whenever he got uncomfortable, he spoke in this rushed whisper, about tangentially related things, hovering around the point instead of getting to it.

"I'm okay," said New Guy, and sighed. "Anyway, she came after me, to get me back. She brought money. And they took her, and me, and the money, and made off like - well, like pirates. It's what pirates do."

"Doesn't make it right."

"Why? Are you a pirate? You don't think like they do."

"It was pretty obvious, wasn't it? And all this time because of me she's been in servitude."

Danmark grinned, although New Guy wouldn't be able to see it in the pitch dark. "Then let's get her back."

"How? I don't know where she's gone. We got separated a month after we were taken off Nieuw Sint-Dolitte. She could be anywhere by now. She might not even be alive."

"We'll think of something. But why not let's try, huh?" There were plenty of people taken left and right, so many that they never needed to search hard to find someone who wanted freedom so badly they could taste it. They'd never tried finding a particular someone before. But pirates didn't often take sibling pairs, either - Danmark had never heard of it. It didn't do good things for morale amongst the slaves, which the traders wanted to keep as high as possible in order to make enough sales (whether the slaves were as happy once you brought them home, that was not a trader's problem).

But if the group could take a thousand dollars and make it look like a million to the banks, and steal stealthships and airships from right under a dealership's nose, and buy people only to set them free and somehow reclaim the money 'spent', and consistently avoid the threat of the planetary BSPAs... they could find a lost girl in a solar system.

"I won't get my hopes up," New Guy admitted, "but if you can do anything. I'd love it you could try," and trying at least, that Danmark could promise him.
It was still dark when he woke. New Guy was curled up in a ball on his side, his hands squeezed tightly in fists, his arms drawn into his chest. But his expression seemed peaceful and unbothered - maybe he was just cold. So Danmark felt alright about leaving him to start the coffee, although he kept the door cracked open.

Norge came down from the airship next. "Going out today?" he asked him, and Norge nodded.

"I should be off shortly after sunrise. Anything we need on Olyokin?"

"A few specialty items. Coffee, tea, maybe some buckwheat honey, but we got groceries yesterday. Ísland took New Guy out to the village while you were gone."

"His name's Tim, now," came a voice from the left. Suomi stretched as he entered the living room. "He'll probably still let you call him New Guy though. We finished the paperwork yesterday, so Norge, if you don't mind stopping by the government tomorrow on your way back from Olyokin, be nice to file it."

"That's a pretty plain name," Danmark said. "If I could pick my own name I'd pick something sexy, like Magnus."

"Yeah, well I doubt he cares about people finding him sexy ever again," Suomi snapped, and Danmark, duly shamed, shut his big trap already.

"Did'n mean anythin' by 't," and that mumble could only come from one of their group. Sverige took a seat across from Suomi. "Yer not too nice 'thout yer coffee in th' mornin'."

"Sorry," Suomi said, "just, you seem to have latched on to him a little. You should really be more careful."

"No, uh, I should watch what I say," Danmark admitted, though after years of being told things like this - mostly by Suomi - he wasn't likely to start now. "In any case, he said something last night that I thought was interesting. We could take on a new project."

Sverige seemed intrigued. "'N whussat?" he asked.

"He's got a sister - oh, hey, there's coffee on the stove -" Ísland grunted in reply, too early for him for real words - "and they took her too. Think maybe we can track her down?"

"They don't usually take pairs," Norge mused. "That's weird. Unique."

"Yeah. Went something like, they tried holding him for ransom and she turned up with the cash. I guess they weren't expecting her to actually turn up but when she did they just took the whole kit and caboodle. Split 'em up later."

"Who's this, Tim?" asked Ísland, and dammit, had everybody known his name before Danmark?

"Uh, sorry, were you talking to me?" murmured a sleepy voice from Danmark's bunk. "I'm still kind of getting used to the name."
"Hey! I'll get you some coffee," Danmark said brightly, and leapt up from his seat.

"Do you like coffee?" Suomi asked sarcastically, and New Guy - Tim - must've nodded because he accepted the mug with a tired but gracious smile, so Suomi could just piss off.

Danmark threw New Guy an apologetic look. "I didn't mean to tell them your story, but I thought. I mean Norge's going to Olyokin today so we could get some information."

"I have a contact, yes," Norge replied, "but she may not have any information. The more you can tell me, the better I can do," he prompted, and so New Guy told them the same stuff he told Danmark last night - what she looked like, who they were taken by and when, to which traders they were sold. He didn't remember the pirates - only a big ship and a lot of crates in the cargo hold - but Norge said that wouldn't be a problem. Norge seemed positive about it, as did Sverige and Ísland said he'd see what he could do from his side of things.

Things were looking up until Sverige made some eggs, and a few sausages for them all, and the stove gave out halfway through. They drew straws for who was the lucky guy to go to Kroksvellir for more gas for the stove and he lost. But that wasn't so bad because when New Guy asked if he could come with, and Danmark said he'd be grateful for the help, New Guy gave this shining smile that seemed to evaporate all of the worry his handsome face had previously shown.

And dammit, if New Guy weren't so damaged, he'd be so beautiful ...

But things being as they were, he was, and Danmark had no right to even think of him like that, not after what had happened to him.

No right at all.
Norway

(norway)

It was a different restaurant every time, for reasons that were never clear, but Norge didn't mind. He waited patiently at the table reserved for Lukas Bondevik. A different name every time, too, and never his own. The Halleri Bonds Service Protection Agency had been keeping an eye out for their little group of five, but not because they freed slaves. Once you bought a slave - well, 'bondsperson' - Norge couldn't fathom calling them anything but people in the end, no matter how they viewed themselves - they were yours to do with as you pleased, and that included handing them their papers in legal freedom.

No, the Halleri BSPA cared about them because somehow, Norge and Sverige - the buyers - managed to recover what they paid for their purchases, and the traders made such a fuss when the money they made off of selling people vanished. When they didn't do that, they managed instead to turn a mad profit at the banks. Either way, it smelled like fishy business.

Which, it was. But they needed money to do these things, to support themselves, to buy fuel vials for the airship and stealthship. It was a necessary evil.

Ísland was a very useful contact for most such necessary evils. Helping Norge and Sverige manage to recover funds that had been paid to traders for illegally caught slaves was one of them. Creating aliases was another, so tonight, Lukas Bondevik sat, waiting for his date, in the corner table of Golis' Restaurant that was reserved for 7 PM.

It was now 7:42.

Agnieszka was not that punctual, and this was probably the only constant in their relationship. He always brought a book.

"Sorry, my hair was taking like forever today," he heard from above. He looked up, grinned, and pursed his lips for a kiss, which Agnieszka, gigglingly, obliged. She wore a neat walking suit in deep red and trimmed in black lace at the sleeves and neckline, high-cut but fitted to her curves, with a single cameo pin at the throat. Her hair - blonde and shorter than the style of the times - did look very nice, she had done ringlets around the face today. But if you asked Norge, Agnieszka was always worth the wait. "You didn't order yet?"

"You're not that late," he told her as she took the seat in front of him. "How was your day?"

"Oh, not bad, but like really long. Olga has a function to go to tonight, some sort of charity ball, so I helped her and her handservant pick out something nice to wear, we did her makeup, you know the drill. By the time I got home I was running like a half hour behind schedule, but I totally needed the shower -"

"Agnieszka," he interrupted, covering her dainty hand with his, "I don't mind. I really don't."

She blushed and smiled. "It's so nice to see you - what is it tonight?"

"Lukas, please," he replied.
"Lukas it is. Well, a rose by any other name. I'm glad you were able to stop by Olyokin. Are you on your way out again?"

Nunat and Olyokin were on the outskirts of the system, Nunat's orbit nested within Olyokin's. Both cold - both far from the sun. This meant that when the planets were closest to each other, there was a good long while (longer than his lifespan, luckily) when the planets would stay close enough to make travel feasible for someone strapped for time. Far into the distant future, Nunat would race ahead, and then later still be at quadrature with Olyokin, then conjunction. With Nunat alone half a week away from the inner planets, Olyokin at conjunction would make travel between the two exceedingly difficult.

Not impossible - he could afford it, and what he couldn't afford Island merely convinced the banks otherwise, but Norge couldn't simply jet off whenever he pleased. A two week journey for one night? Impractical. But Nunat and Olyokin so close - Sverige didn't mind a few more fuel vials used up, a day here and there spent off-world.

If they'd been born two hundred years before... It was surreal to think of her being so far away she was on the other side of the sun, to imagine them never having met.

"No," he replied, "we just got back from Hallar two days ago. Shouldn't be heading out for another week."

"Your usual?" He nodded. "Went well?"

"Oh, without a hitch," he replied.

"I worry about you," she admitted. "I always worry when one of you goes off and - well, you know."

"Do you ever hear much about it from the dinner table?" At the Rubetskis', he meant, although he was careful not to say it aloud.

She nodded. "When it gets publicised, we do. Yesterday night was like all about the Nova sector raids. It's been awhile since the Delivery was in the news so the media went with that instead."

"The Delivery?"

"The Great Delivery's the ship that did it. Well - that's what they're saying, anyway, there's no, like, actual proof yet, but that'll come up in a day or two. Between that and the Dordlands job they're totally not getting their clemency back."

"The Dordlands job?" he asked. A-ha.

"The Dordlands was raided about nine years ago, then again about three years back. Kirkland's the one who did it, and though I don't know who, like, ordered it, I have my theories. You probably have yours. Anyway, it was a fight to regain clemency from the Council for safe passage through Hallar airspace - they only got it about six months ago. Puts the Delivery in like a really bad place to be implicated with Nova."

"You're right," Norge agreed, "they probably won't be granted clemency again."

"Which means they're gonna get a little desperate. Like a lot desperate. Now you see why I totally
worry about you and your jobs?"

But the conversation topic switched abruptly as the waiter came to take their orders. They talked of other, safer things throughout the duration of their evening.

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Norge appreciated the time he spent with Agnieszka very greatly, but there was a mutual benefit to their relationship that went beyond enjoying good food and good company. Agnieszka required money, which he gave willingly. (It wasn't his to give, but it was untraceable; Ísland saw to that.) And often, Norge required information: aside from raids, the team's activities were the favourite topic at the Rubetski court. If the Halleri BSPA - or the Olyokin BSPA, for that matter - happened to be paying particular attention to their infamous team, knowing about it was half the battle. The stealthship was very useful for times like these.

There had been an extremely close call a year ago when they moved their base to Kroksvellir; before that it had been outside of Veriborg, Danmark. Of all their sources - and they had many - it had been Agnieszka's information which had given them a day to pack up shop. Agents Adnan and Karpusi were hot on the trail, but by the time they arrived all that was left at the Veriborg fort was a desk with balloons taped on it and a bright yellow sticky note of Sorry we missed your call! Please call again!, courtesy of Danmark.

This did not endear them to the pair, who didn't like Nunat to begin with and had been assigned the case as punishment for having failed some other and ultimately much less important case back on Hallar. But Norge agreed with Danmark - privately, in his mind, where nobody could hear him - support such things - it was really kinda worth it. The papers loved it. And so did Agnieszka. Very much worth it.

(Perhaps he enjoyed his job as a wanted criminal a little too much.)

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Dessert came, and over an indecent chocolate cake, she returned the conversation to slightly more dangerous topics. "I was wondering - mm, god, this is totally fantastic, are you sure you don't want to try any?" Norge shook his head, his throat dry. "I was thinking." She licked the fork clean, several times, laving the tines up and down with her little pink tongue. "Could I have the contact information of the friend who ... sets you all up with different personas?"

He should have stopped her there - he didn't have an Eavesdropper with him to check, they shouldn't be talking about these things here - but in his defence, he was a little distracted. "What do you need him for?" Ísland, like all of them, wouldn't do anything that contributed towards the slave trade.

She twirled a lock of golden hair playfully. "Nothing like bad or anything. Just - well, you know my friends. One of them needs a little assistance."

"We should talk about it later," he said, not realising how husky his voice had become until he spoke the words.

"Later?" she asked, grinning, and licked chocolate off her lips. She leaned forward, pressing her chest against her forearm where it rested on the table. "Tell me, what comes later?"
He swallowed. "I can get a room if you want. But I brought the airship this time," he said, "not the stealthship, so ... we can have space, and privacy."

She nibbled at the last morsel on the fork. "Ah, I like privacy," she mused. "We'll take the airship."

No auds or vids.

Neither of them could trust many people, but they could trust each other.

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There were a lot of things he knew about Agnieszka Janowska.

It had started at a Rubetski function when he spotted her from across the room. They had gotten along instantly. She was one of the few women or men he'd spoken to that event who hadn't mentioned money, not so much as a hint of the thought of it, not all night, and this was why he slipped her quite a bit.

He didn't know what she used it for. He didn't give a damn, only that he had her word it wasn't for slaving or contributing in any way to that trade. She wasn't nearly as opposed to it as he was - very few people were, in fact - and a few of her friends among the Rubetskis indeed owned bondspeople. But not Agnieszka, and she didn't particularly want one, she said, and as he found out later, she required the money for something completely different.

They had carried on a successful friendship that had along the way blossomed into something more, a lot more. She may have dinner with the high-classies on Olyokin regularly, but he knew probably the most about Agnieszka Janowska than the "friends" that she mentioned now and again.

He knew that Agnieszka Janowska wasn't her real name. He knew that she wasn't Vitim. He knew that she dyed her hair a much lighter shade of blonde in order to fit in.

He also knew that she wasn't actually a she.

But he didn't really give a damn about that either, because she - well, he. Whoever he was and whyever he required his cover, it didn't matter to Norge. He was kind, he was friendly, he was good in bed, he looked great in a corset - oh dear sweet heavens did he ever look brilliant in a corset - and he made Norge smile. And after some four years of meetings - not all of which included business on either of their ends, sometimes they just met up for a good old fashioned date night - he knew the man at least liked him back decently enough. Perhaps it wasn't love. But Norge wasn't sure he could ever let all his defences down enough for that.

To Norge, he was someone who shone like a glimmer of light in the bleak. Norge thought, that's really enough for me.
"Holy mother of god, she takes forever," Adnan grumbled.

"Patience is a virtue," Karpusi reminded his partner, his eyes still closed.

"Easy for you to say. You ever been stood up by a chick?" But Adnan answered his own question with a derisive laugh. "Probably not, I bet you're the one who did the standing up by sleeping through all your dates."

"The sleeping didn't happen during the dates, since you're apparently so interested," Karpusi snapped back.

"Fuck off and die in a fire."

"A fire would be nice right now."

Both federal Bonds Service Protection Agents were shaking like mad in the carriage outside Golis' restaurant in the affluent Osava courtyard of Staria - the old section of Skuratchky. Capital city of the Empire Union of Free Vityaz States, some three million people, and it still managed to be colder than hell!

This planet certainly was no Hallar, which featured temperatures ranging from balmy to arid, and most importantly always on the positive side of the temperature scale. Agent Karpusi was significantly less than impressed.

The cold might have had something to do with why they were so irritable with each other, but Karpusi and Adnan both knew the real reason: some cruel twist of Fate was playing a horrid practical joke on them, because buddy cops they were not, and they had been assigned to this case over two years ago.

They weren't even cops, they were Federal Agents, which meant whatever uniform they had typically consisted of a black blazer, dress pants and a cotton shirt. At least the police force usually got some sort of shielding vest or armour to wear under their clothing. But Adnan had had to go take Karapoulos’ bet on trying to bed that pretty Council girl, which Karpusi was already on, and both of them struck out when she figured it out and dumped champagne on their heads...

Long story short, they had made total asses of themselves, and then one-upped it all by making further asses out of each other. In retrospect, Karpusi was willing to concede they might've deserved this case as their punishment, if the case had ended when it should have, which was a year ago.

"Ugh, finally," Adnan said, as the Eavesdropper he held began to whirr and vibrate. It extended its two little limbs and perched on his knee. It then sucked in and inverted the top third of the sphere, making a concave depression to serve as a tiny speaker.

Karpusi couldn't make out much. "I can barely hear what they're saying, you fool. You sure you put it close enough?"
"It's fine. Beta's just fuckin' quiet, that's all. There, here's his little girlfriend, you can hear her just fine."

"We're not interested in the girl, you ass!"

"Actually," Adnan bit back, "we are. She's the one who's more likely to slip up and say something she shouldn't."

There came a knock at their carriage on the other side. "If you two plan on bein' quiet like, yer doin' a miserable job," their cabbie called, and as one voice, Adnan and Karpusi told him to shaddup, then glared at the other for doing it.

It was a good thing the aud and vid feed was being permanently recorded, because Adnan and Karpusi never got much done in the here-and-now. Paying attention would only be beneficial if Beta - or his date - managed to say something incriminating enough to warrant arrest. But Beta had a history of being tight-lipped - they all did except for Alpha, which was why they called him Alpha, he was least good at being subtle - so he wasn't likely to say anything good tonight.

But it was enough to know he was here. They'd tracked his airship in from outside - but they couldn't judge from the trajectory from which planet. Karpusi suspected Nunat, the second last planet before Olyokin's (and another godforsaken ice ball, if you asked Karpusi or Adnan, not that they'd admit to being in agreement).

What did that tell them? They're stationed on Nunat. Big fucking whoop, they'd known that since last year. They weren't likely to pick up and move to a different planet, but Nunat wasn't so tiny that they could search the entire thing. And someone in their group - Alpha through Epsilon, they'd named them all - had managed to pick up being really good at hide and seek.

What they knew of the group was at the same time a lot and nothing at all. Alpha wasn't the leader but he was the loudest, the one they'd heard first. Beta was the one they were listening to now, who was talking with his little date about some kinda pirate jobs, one on the Dordlands - wherever that was - and another in the Nova sector, which Karpusi had heard of recently.

Gamma, Karpusi thought he saw once at an auction, and then he turned around and looked Karpusi in the eyes with this creepy, awful, hypnotising stare... The next thing Karpusi knew he was looking at empty space where the man had been. (Adnan had had a field day with that one. "Falling asleep standing up!" Hah.)

Delta was the super quiet one. Adnan claimed he heard his voice through an aud feed once but Karpusi was pretty sure he was lying about that to make himself look better to their supervisor (who saw through it anyway, so take that, Adnan). Wherever Delta was implicated, there was legislative trouble around.

And then there was Epsilon, whose identity they had traced back to a man on Olyokin named Tino Väinämöinen. He had a decent record until about age fifteen and then simply disappeared. It was infuriating.

Karpusi listened in silence to the feed with Adnan for the remainder of the date. More than once he fell asleep and had to be shaken awake by Adnan. Olyokin had no coffee, just tea, tea and more tea, what did Adnan expect?
Suddenly - "There, hear, did you hear that?" Karpusi said. Adnan mumbled a reply and this time, Karpusi shook him awake. "Get your ears out!" he said.

The Eavesdropper kept blaring on. "...need him for?" 'Nothing like bad or anything. Just - well, you know my friends. One of them needs a little assistance."' Her friends? What kind of friends?

"'We should talk about it later.' 'Later?' 'I can ...get a room, if you want. But I brought the airship this time, not the stealthship, so. We can have privacy...""

"Should we follow them?" Adnan asked.

"For what? To spy on this guy's booty call? We'll only get as far as the outside of the airship anyhow," Karpusi muttered, "and they keep changing the exterior of the damn thing, it probably looks nothing like it did five months ago."

"She said she's got friends who need 'assistance'," Adnan replied. "How much do we know about Beta's little girlfriend?"


Had 'friends' who required Delta's 'assistance'. Nobody high-class would never require that kind of assistance.

Who were her real friends?

"Obviously," Karpusi concluded, "not nearly enough."
She could not speak during the trip back home. Gospozha Katya had wanted silence and so she read the book Katya had given her - an anthology of Vitim romantic poetry translated from the original Zvanie - and spent the rest of the time sleeping. Eduard slept on the floor; she slept in the screened-off section in the bed with Katya.

...If Katya had wanted her that night she would have gladly obliged - the screen was thin but it wasn't like the new bondsman didn't know what she had been bought for, after all. But Gospozha Katya made no moves and so she too rolled over and slept.

But the second they landed and got the new bondsman settled - Eduard, Matthieu had reminded her, his name was Eduard - which did not take very long, as he did not bring any luggage, the first question she asked was to go and see him in his quarters.

Katya said *no, I need your help*, and she was sad, but followed her Gospozha to the library.

They spent a few hours there, until she looked up and it was well past dinner. She had hardly even paid attention to the protests from her stomach; there had been sustenance on the airship and she'd had something before they began researching, but the topic was interesting and absorbed her attention fully.

Katya had given her a set of some five books and asked her to look through them for anything useful in regards to a Vitim youth who had aged without having cleared his or her Time.

It was the third book, *Speculative Theories on Evolutionary Extra Biology*, that had yielded the most information. Halfway through, it suddenly hit her as to why she hadn't seen Ivan in three years.

*...the problem having cropped up sometime after the introduction of the drug phinleratin, a corticosteroid containing the biogenic amine khadaranin, which was originally used as a performance enhancer among tribal dancers. Khadaranin is now integral to the Vitim brain and biological function (see: Federova's syndrome, Endocrine diseases among the Vitim). Therefore, it is impossible to get rid of the process now known among the Vitim as the Time. This implies directly that abstinence as a sexual practice is biologically inadvisable among the Vitim; unsurprisingly they have adopted the practice of chestnost' or honesty, and are generally very open about speaking on such issues where other cultures instead may adopt a taboo (see: New Joplin).*

*There are certain drugs that may cause the Time to be prolonged or abstained for a period but for reasons that will become apparent, these have become illegal to procure, sell, or fabricate on Olyokin. Prolonging the Time has the tendency to cause, in addition to the usual rise in body temperature as per any mammalian oestrous cycle (hence the common term, 'heat'), predatory and savage instincts in both the male and female, chiefly due to the tissues' prolonged exposure to khadaranin. The Vitim individual becomes violent, unruly and petulant, as a toddler might if his favourite toy were taken away, but bearing the strength of a near-adult. Attentional control becomes scattered, due to the abundance of khadaranin in the frontal areas of the brain. These symptoms may be abated with frequent use of bloodthinners. The amplitude of the spike also decreases momentarily through orgasm achieved manually.*
But it is important to note that these are temporary solutions. If not sated by penetrative sex resulting in orgasm (which is prolonged, and on the order of a minute or at the very least tens of seconds - such results typically achieved in most sexual encounters with a partner among the Vitim), the spike in khadaranin will eventually erode the brain tissues and a comatose-like state is achieved; the patient is locked-in, and at worst may persist in a vegetative state.

It is theorised that the Time returns in the event that the adult Vitim in question becomes celibate or otherwise abstains from sexual contact, but no conclusive studies have been undertaken.

The motivations for prolonging one’s Time in a society as sexually liberal as the Vitim are ill-understood by the author. However, it is well-known that the Zhar-ptitsy, a Vitim tribe living on reserves in the south of the Vityaz state Zhennylakin, have practiced abstinence until the age of twenty-one as a way of life for some hundreds of years. Being that this topic is beyond the scope of the current work, for a further discussion on this from a vitropological standpoint, please see Q.I. Prenticiorna’s treatise on the tribe entitled Firebirds: Religion and Sex among the Primitive Society Vitim.

Origins

It has been shown (see: Walsh et al.) that there is a point mutation in the base pairs present in the Vitim genome, not present in the human genome. This causes a stop marker to be transformed into arginine, and formerly two proteins become one, causing natural production of a material that was found not to be khadaranin but an enzyme compatible with khadaranin. The most likely time of first occurrence is thought to be sometime during the Lyodyrov Dynasty of the Empire, wherein individuals just below the age of puberty began taking phinleratin as a performance enhancer.

It is perhaps the function of the drug, combined with the timing of abusing it directly before puberty, that allows for the mutation to have occurred over several generations of tribal dancers. For example, the McCall experiments on rhesus monkeys proved that abuse of phinleratin in pre-pubescent monkeys encouraged the hypothalamus uptake in khadaranin and re-regulation of the endocrine system to take into account the foreign substance, though it is the rhesus pancreas that secretes and regulates the substance in question. Both groups of monkeys who were given phinleratin, however, were thereafter permanently dependent on the drug.

The differences between what would later become the Vitim race and the human race became known fifty years after the fall of Regnant Empress Feodora Lyodyrova, wherein during an operating theatre surgery performing a routine gallbladder removal, it was discovered that a human - now considered one of the first Vitim - carried within her an engulfed purplish-coloured organ precisely at the location of the human spleen. When asked about this, the tribal members present at the surgery replied that this was the zandra, and that it was the location of both Hunger and Thirst.

It has long thought to be the case that the spleen was ‘kickstarted’ into functioning in this way by the adoption of this substance among the Vitim; however, this cannot be the only difference as Vitim and humans are still incompatible for procreation. Experiments on rhesus monkeys are ongoing in the pursuit of this hypothesis. (see: McCall et al., McCall, Zubra and Firova)

Plate 12.7. A human spleen side-by-side a Vitim zandra. Note the similarities along the top lobe of the zandra and the upper part of the spleen. Also note the differences in red pulp to white pulp ratio on the human spleen to the Vitim zandra.
Figure 12.2. Endocrine hormones khadaranin, LH, testosterone and estradiol versus age of 123493 Vitim males and females (results averaged). Note the spike in khadaranin beginning around age 15. What is interesting to note is the temporal shift in the spike; one ordinarily expects the onset of puberty around 10-12 for human girls and 12-14 for human boys. Among the Vitim, however, it is common to see 15-17 for both girls and boys.

Plate 12.8. A dissected rhesus monkey brain with a sublethal dose of khadaranin sustained over the period of three years. Note the dramatic shrinkage in the frontal lobe.

The author wishes to thank Q.I. Prenticiorna for valuable discussions and theories.

"I need this book," she told Gospozha Katya, who looked over her shoulder at the reference where she was pointing.

"Yes you do," Katya replied. "Let me see if we have that here."

They did. Half an hour later she had a small list:

- violent, does not realise his own strength, childlike, impatient, irritable
- mental faculties: unexplained attention deficit
- visual abilities: vision decreased by as much as 50% in males who wait until 21
- physically: stronger than usual, less able to feel pain, epinephrine increase
- tactition supersensitive due to inflamed tissues pressing against the parietal lobe
- lack of ability to feel pain causes lack of empathy
- impaired brain functions due to excess khadaranin, some irreversible tissue degeneration, brain shrinkage and irreversible damage

- and she had to stop there, because her tears began to smudge the ink. Katya held her as she cried, let her climb into her Gospozha's lap, and they took a fifteen minute break while she calmed down and Katya rocked her softly.

She first met Ivan when she was eleven - Katya was fifteen then, and there were six years between them so he would have been nine. He began teaching her what he learned at school when he was eleven himself. They were good friends, very close - as close as a freeman could be with a bondsgirl he didn't own, that is - and she shared everything with him, and he her.

The last time she'd seen him he was twenty-one. That meant he had at least four years of being in the hormonal thick of things and at most six years, during which he still spent time with her.

He was sweet, he was kind. He was probably her best friend. She was familiar enough with their younger sister to be able to call her Natasha but Natasha - who was seventeen now, and was two when she had arrived at the Duma so many years ago - had always preferred the company of boys over girls. Her big brother was her undisputed favourite sibling; she remembered feeling threatened by Natasha because obviously, who would pick the bondsgirl over the Vitim freegirl?

Ivan did. Ivan had never seemed to know the difference between someone who was free and someone whose entire existence lived to serve another human being. He always treated her with the same respect he gave both his sisters. But had he had another reason?

Was it because he had been under the influence of the Time? Was it just because he wanted to take her, was everything she'd known about her best and only friend outside of Gospozha Katya - who was her entire world, her existence, her reason for breathing - a lie, fabricated by a crazy
biological quirk that came about because a pagan society placed too much importance on sacred dances?

But it couldn't have been, because not once with Ivan - not once - had she ever felt the pull in the pit of her belly that she'd felt with Katya. The moment she stepped into the examining room with Gospozha Katya, she'd known. Her entire biology was reset with the tonic Francis made her took; it made her look younger, yes, but it also made her more attuned to hormones. And Katya had been expelling them then in waves.

"Alcohol," she was told when she asked Katya. "It's a decent enough bloodthinner. Between that and the hot showers, I think he was probably able to stave off the hormonal effects as long as he has."

"That's why I haven't seen him in so long."

"That's exactly why," Katya said, murmuring it in her hair, rubbing her back. "My darling, my love. You know he is your friend, you mustn't doubt his friendship. But he couldn't be around you then. He still cannot."

Why would Ivan do this to himself?

"Is he -" she almost couldn't say it, she had to force the words out, because they stuck in her throat - "is he going to be a vegetable?"

Katya was silent. "Not if we work quickly," she said finally. "We have to clear him of his Time so that this episode may pass, chemically speaking. Then he can return to normal. You must remember for the past six, possibly eight years, he has not been normal."

And she sobbed harder. "But what if - what if he - he might kill Eduard!"

"Shh, my love," cooed Katya. "He won't. Edu- that man knows what to do. He will be prepared."

"How can he possibly be prepared for this?"

"I will make sure of it," Katya replied, and the steel behind Katya's voice silenced any further queries she might have had.

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They left for the kitchens after that, because Natalya and the others had already had dinner (Ivan of course had taken his in his quarters, like he had done for the past year now), and she ate a little soup and cheese while Katya checked her mail, although she still felt miserable.

Eduard won't die, she kept telling herself. Katya wouldn't do that. For me, she wouldn't do that."

"If you wish," Katya said, "you may go and visit the new bondsman in his room." She took her leave of Gospozha Katya and was almost outside the kitchen when she heard, "But I want you to return to my chambers tonight."

"Yes, Gospozha," she replied, although how she could even make her body think of sex would be difficult at a time like this. It was fortunate for her she could rely on her training. Katya did not often have to require the Signal, not after fifteen years of being so gloriously in love it still made
her melt. But in those times that she was simply not capable, it was good as a fallback.

She could not stop thinking of the research earlier today. The twenty-one year old she read about broke all four of his mate's limbs. He had only been in the grip of the Time some five years. Ivan had had eight.

Was Katya permitting her visit to Eduard's quarters in order to say hello, or goodbye?

She had to knock twice - two sets of three - on his door. The first time had come out more as a tremble and she'd hardly made contact with the wood.

"Yes? Oh, hello," Eduard said, when he opened the door, "come in."

"Were you expecting me?" she asked.

"Not until the handmaiden brought around the books," he replied, "then, I was." He referred to the handwritten notes and set of six books she had helped Katya assemble as useful for someone about to bed a Vitim that could snap you in half.

Not that that would happen. That would not happen. Katya would not let that happen. He was doing this research so that it would not happen.

"I was wondering," Eduard asked, "if it's not too much trouble. Do you remember what the Gospozha's Time had been like?"

"Most of it," she said. The parts she remembered, how she would ever be able to forget them, she didn't know.

"Are you allowed to discuss the experience?"

"Not ... not usually," she admitted, "Gospozha has never said not to, but it's private. But. If it may be useful to you..."

"It would. It certainly would. You remember Mishek," and yes, she did remember Mikhail, the lovely boy from university that Francis had procured to help teach their set of adepts about the Vitim Time. Katya's had been nothing like his, but then again, Katya was like no other on this planet, in this solar system. "Will it be like that?"

"I don't know," she said. "With Gospozha Katya... from the moment she stepped into the room she was all I could concentrate on. I had to be told later what happened in the Emporium because I do not remember any of it. Apparently I made a fool of myself during the cavity exam and showed no restraint."

"You'd have to ask Matthieu," Eduard laughed, "he would have been the one who was there." Matthieu, who was present at almost all of Francis' sales. "What happened when you got home?"

"She asked me to come to her quarters after she washed up, so the maid led me there about fifteen minutes later. She was - how much detail do you want, really?"

"As much as you're allowed," Eduard admitted. "I have the feeling the more prepared I am, the better this will go."
How could she feel awkward or uncomfortable when this man may be led to his certain death in a matter of days, or hours? "You're right," she said. "I'm sorry. It took place in her bedroom, as I said. She was on the bed, reclined. She wore only a plain snap-front robe, and she had me undress. I was still wearing what Francis had me wear, so there was no corset to deal with.

"That was probably for the better. The second I was in the room I - well, she snapped her fingers but there was no need.

"I joined her, on the bed, I wasn't sure if she wanted to start with kissing or anything. She- she touched me, held me, ran her fingers through my hair, she liked playing with my hair -" and as she spoke it felt like the words came more easily to her mouth, fell gently off her tongue - "she let me open the front of her robe, push it off her shoulders. Let me kiss her on the neck, expose her chest, tear the robe open -" the sound of snaps so thrillingly loud in her ears even now... beautiful great globes framed by the garment... perhaps it was better she came to see Eduard first before Katya. Now she would be properly ready for her Gospozha. "I suppose I was teasing her too much so she took my hand and simply directed me down."

"Did you use your fingers?" he asked.

"At first. She complained they were too small." And reflecting upon the research they'd done earlier she felt she understood the reason for that now. "She had a toy, somehow powered, probably the same way Eavesdroppers are. She preferred me to use that, and that plus my tongue -" She remembered, the desperate, gorgeous way Gospozha had pushed her down, she couldn't utter the order anymore, too busy breathlessly panting. She'd buried her mouth between Katya's legs, her tongue at first gentle, but it seemed Katya needed more than gentle, more than playful, it was just getting her impatient and unsatisfied and she was never all that good at waiting herself. So she put a little muscle behind it and that - that, Katya liked - she screamed, gripped her hair, and arched back - the memory was just as divine and even now she could practically feel the nails on her scalp and Katya's thighs on her shoulders -

And like a good bondsgirl she didn't stop either her tongue or her grip on the toy, deep, substantive thrusts, up and forward, until Katya finally batted her hands away, pulled her up, and clung like glue until her chest stopped heaving and she finally fell asleep.

She slept also, not long after, her forehead nestled against the side of Katya's warm neck; she could feel the pulse hammering behind it, slowing, drifting off.

"- well, you were trained for women too. You know the general process after that. It felt like an hour but it was only fifteen minutes."

"Felt like an -? Goodness. That bad?"

"No," she clarified, "oh, no, you misunderstand. That good. Everything she felt, it - it resonated, somehow? I could feel it, what I did to her, what I did for her. I kept at it, between her legs, it made me so excited I came before she did, then again when she came, it was so hard she couldn't stand, and the next day I had trouble walking myself. We're attuned chemically to these things, you remember. We search them out - all of us, not just the service trade - these chemicals are insidious and pervasive but completely invisible. But to us, because of our training, they're so powerful. And I was bought for her, so - it made it all the more profound."
Eduard smiled. "You really like her, don't you."

She snorted. Liking! What ridiculousness! You didn't devote your very existence for the rest of your days to someone you liked!

"She is my soul," she said, hotly, "I don't just - you just don't understand. I like chocolate, I like poetry. What I feel for her, liking isn't even a fraction of that." The clock struck nine, then, and she realised how much time she'd been spending chatting. "I should be leaving," she said.

"I have a lot of work to do," Eduard replied. "I'm glad you stopped by."

"Me too. Oh, Eduard. I - I really hope, that - that he doesn't kill you - that what I have with Katya, you find with Ivan."

Eduard didn't say anything, merely smiled thinly. "Good night."
It had only been a day that he had physically set foot on Olyokin - two days' trek from Hallar, another half-day on each end to get into the airspace of the planets in question - that was what, four days? And already he was in love.

This planet was beautiful. There was snow, everywhere, beautiful brilliant sparkling white. It blanketed the rooftops. It dusted the branches of trees, with their strange little needle-leaves. The days were shorter than they were on Hallar; twilight came at 5 or 6 o'clock, with hints of purple and pink in the clouds above the buildings.

It made him wish he could paint, though how it could ever be possible to commit the true beauty of what he saw to something as mundane as a canvas, he didn't know. Eduard was not permitted outside yet - Gospozha Yekaterina said they couldn't find him any outerwear in his size (and she had a tone of and you have a job to do inside anyway so do that first). But he could see it all from the window of his tiny room in the Duma, and so far he was smitten with the skies, the mountains, the trees, the landscapes, the architecture, the city, everything.

To his great surprise and joy, Eduard was permitted free reign of the library, so he made good use of this the first afternoon he was there, to find out why it was that you could have a "summer" on a planet that was frozen (he learnt, because of the tilt of the planet's axis; sometimes it was pointed towards the sun and got more hours of more direct light).

He didn't quite understand the politics at play. There were little hints here and there of something underhanded, that told him that the Empire Union was not all it claimed to be.

For one, there was not one single book he had found in the library so far that hadn't been printed in the Empire Union. Nothing printed in Kilnus and transported over. There were translations from Common Standard into Zvanie of well-known Kilnus stories, like folktales, or old adventure novels from sixty years ago. But there was nothing new.

The same was said of poetry, films, when he asked about them, and the radio, when he found it. It only picked up some five channels, which he thought was normal until it took him another trip to the library to ask how it worked, and the library implied that you could easily fit five channels into a frequency range of a hundred kilohertz. By that logic, the radio he found - which went from 600 to 1500 - should be picking up a lot more.

For two, nothing was ever delivered into the Duma that wasn't heavily inspected by fifteen different employees. Eduard wasn't sure what they were looking for - Gospozha Yekaterina's bondsgirl didn't know either - but all three crates he saw delivered were a blend of foodstuffs, airship fuel vials, grain and feed for the horses, and the odd book and clothing item. Unless somewhere in there, there was something contraband, it all looked perfectly pedestrian.

He later wished he hadn't spent all day in the library, because that first evening, Gospozha Yekaterina had a maid deliver a set of books to his quarters - he was for the moment permitted his own away from his master, who he had yet to meet - and some hand-written notes of her own. The first of them was a letter addressed to him, saying that since he could read competently, he ought to brush up on his extra biology and recall whatever training Francis had given him in the case of a
Vitim master. Read the texts first, the letter instructed, then read these notes.

That made sense. He had been told he had been purchased for that reason: like most people living in the Empire, his prospective master, Gospodin Ivan (Yekaterina's little brother) was Vitim.

He had also been told that Ivan's Time was late. Judging from the books he was sent, this was bad. So he spent the remainder of his evening - minus a visit from Gospozha Yekaterina's bondsgirl - and the better part of the next day - minus travelling to the kitchen for meals - reading the texts. They did not inspire confidence. He was concerned, mostly for his own safety (ripped his mate's limbs off. Ripped. His mate's. Limbs. Off.) but also for Ivan's, as it seemed that Ivan was slowly losing his mind and might not get it all back.

But he should remember, he told himself, like the bondsgirl said, that it was not always like this, most of the time it was just a particularly good orgasm. This was nothing more than one of the worst case scenarios. How had it come to this? Why couldn't the Gospodin have just gotten laid at sixteen like every other Vitim?

The more he read, the more concerned he became. He hadn't had a choice in his purchase. Even if she had told him what she was buying him for, he wouldn't have been able to turn her down, he didn't have the right. But by the description Gospozha Yekaterina had given him of his task, he inferred that it would simply be minor damage if any, at most a broken bone, nothing nearly as drastic as what he read.

A knock on the door interrupted his studies mid-afternoon on the second day, by which time he had read everything important twice and had become very worried about his safety. "Come in," he said distractedly, expecting Gospozha Yekaterina's bondsgirl again.

Instead it was Gospozha Yekaterina herself. He stood to receive her presence. She wore heavy clothing which was in shambles, as though she'd prepared for hunting a fox and had met a wolverine instead. Her thick leather vest was torn at the shoulders, and she carried the belt with her holster and pistol on it, because the buckle was missing.

"You may speak freely. I suspect you have many questions to ask me. First let me inform you that I have just now been to see my brother," she said quietly, and that made him apprehensive, given her clothing. "The tranquiliser he received should last for another hour or so."

"Tranquiliser?"

"I had to ... restrain him several times today, to move him. Not due to violence, not at first. He has become a deeply faithful man, my brother, and ... he does not want to give in to the Time, so he had himself a bit of a tantrum when I confronted him this morning. And then he put up a fight. For the Time to clear he must be free of any other substances. Fortunately the hormones in his body will rid the blood of pretty much anything in half the time it usually takes, so we have less time to wait. Less time to wait, as you have no doubt read, means less brain damage done."

"Do - do you think he is indeed impaired?"

"We will have to see once the Time clears. At this point, I am really not sure. I am not an expert in these matters. Nor can I call one in." She made herself comfortable on the chair by the desk and he sat up on the bed.
"Only four people know of the fact that Ivan's Time has not yet been cleared; myself, my bondsgirl - who only just found this out yesterday - Ivan himself, and now you. As I said in my letter, we must keep it this way. For this matter to have prolonged so is quite ridiculous. And, moreover, as you've probably read... one is not really oneself, during the Time. I believe the people would suspect that the whole past eight years of his work at the Duma would be called into question. And they may call into question the suitability of their future Emperor, should Ivan be permanently damaged by this - this nonsense. They are right to question.

"I have placed Ivan in the dungeons. The Duma building is nearly a thousand years old; of course it contains dungeons. We... do not often use them. I have secured one with a set of chains low on the floor to allow for a seated position, I thought this would probably be best for you to do your work."

"You want me to be seated?"

"No, that is for Ivan. He is there now, currently sleeping off the effects of the thetralorazine. Given the dose, and the fact that I removed all alcohol from the residence wings, and Ivan's office, and he was prohibited taking his shower without the presence of a servant this morning, so that we could make sure he did not attempt bleeding himself... I would give him perhaps forty-five minutes. Then he will wake up, and by nightfall, in about an hour, he will be in full grip of his hormones.

"You have no doubt read of, or otherwise experienced, some sort of Time - I suspect Francis of Hallar probably found someone on Hallar who required assistance, and let his adepts assist them." That was exactly what Francis had done. "Then you know that ordinarily it is not a particularly violent act. You're not really you, during it, but it does not change you into a sex-crazed lunatic. Since there is no basis, no precedent for this, I cannot tell you what to expect.

"It must be penetrative, obviously, for the Time to be cleared. At this point that really only means that you take the submissive role."

"There was another option?" That was oddly surprising.

Gospozha Yekaterina nodded. "Of course, it could have easily been the other way. Anything that results in a particularly strong completion, enough to rid the blood of the high concentration of this khadaranin hormone. But not now, what with Ivan quite completely out of his mind. Some advice, I should think you should start with your mouth and try and complete him once that way. I doubt that alone will be enough to sate the hormone spike, but it will take the edge off. As a result the main act should be simply very rough but not fatal. You may come out of it with a few bruises, but with Ivan chained up like this, you may be lucky enough to come out of it alive."

"You're saying... You're saying he might kill me."

"Yes," Gospozha Yekaterina said, "he very well might. And because this has to be kept completely secret, if he does, there will be nobody around to hear your last breath."

"There's no security feed, no vid or aud for the dungeons?"

"Why would there be? The sort of thing that takes place in a dungeon is not be something we would ever want Eavesdropped in any way. I cannot prevent anything that happens to you, if something should. If things get particularly bad, try and scratch him somewhere. The act of bleeding will not fuel his anger, it will calm him a bit. But you must dig your nails in deep, and you must do it right the first time, because anything less than actually drawing blood he will perceive as
asking for it or worse, fighting back. That, I suspect - based on today's encounter - will make him much angrier."

Eduard committed this all to memory, feeling worse and worse. Scratch him to draw blood if you need to calm him down, don't do it halfway. Suck him first, then the sex. Try not to die. Die. Going to die. He was going to die. This was. This was unthinkable. Impossible. He'd wake up any minute now, just a bad dream.

"You must forgive me," Gospozha Yekaterina said, softly, "I know I come off as short and cold. But I only tell you this to prepare you for the worst possible scenario. I do not want that. Believe me, I want what's best for my brother, and that is to keep you alive. If he manages to kill you, he will never forgive himself. It will probably drive him mad, and he will be just as unfit for the Empire as he would have been if he became seriously damaged from postponing his Time. We would have to sequester him or give him to the brotherhood." She sighed. "Some days I'm not convinced that wouldn't be better for everybody, anyway."

He nodded, feeling numb, his stomach in knots, his fingers trembling, clutching the coverlet of the bed in order not to betray his anxiety. He was going to die. They were going to kill him.

"I will come and fetch you myself in an hour," Gospozha Yekaterina stated, standing. "Do whatever you must to make yourself ready."

And he nodded again, his mind a perfect terrified blank.

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After being physically ill in the washroom with fear, Eduard managed to calm himself only enough to not spend the next hour panicking.

Instead, he spent it reading like a madman, flipping through the pages of the books so fast he tore one or two out with his clumsy, quivering grip, looking for something, anything, that might be useful in his position.

It was useless. There was nothing. Anything good had already been distilled out of them and collected on Gospozha Yekaterina's notes, and those he'd read now so many times he could tell where he kept holding the papers up from the stains of skin oil and sweat.

The knock came suddenly. The shock, the pure shock from the sound after a period of perfectly dead silence made him jump and gasp, and his insides seized in dread. He clenched his fists, the icy fingertips a horrifying feeling on his clammy palms.

Gospozha Yekaterina did not wait for him to answer before she opened the door this time. "It is time," she said softly, and he took some solace in her expression. Though she had been critical and judging in Francis' office, she was now warmer, doting and kind. She wants to help, she only wants to help, he thought.

But she was leading him on a march to the scaffold. Through this room and that room, behind that curtain, this hidden hallway behind the bookshelf and potted plant, down these stairs. They took a twisted path throughout the Duma deep into its murky bowels.

The more they descended, the colder it became. This part of the building was entirely
stonemasonry, in sharp contrast to the beautiful dark wood panelled walls everywhere else in the Duma, and stone did not appear to keep the cold out very well. Gospozha Yekaterina removed a handtorch for the dark passage from her pockets - she still wore the same thing she wore before, her leather vest and thick woolen trousers, stuffed into heavy boots that clicked loudly on the stone steps.

As for Eduard and his old, faded boots, he was silent behind her with every dizzying step down.

It was ominous and foreboding, like he had already begun to cease to exist.

Some time later he began to hear the sounds, and his heart palpitations doubled.

A low, keening moan, like a beaten animal. The clink of chains, the scraping screech of metal against stone, like nails on chalkboard.

Eduard had to force himself to keep going, despite the dank feeling in his bones, the shortness of breath.

It's an echo, it's just an echo, we're not there yet, he told himself.

And they weren't, because they were still walking when they first heard the first high-pitched laugh, a cackle followed by a particularly loud jingle of chains. "You are coming for me, then!" a voice called. "I can heeeear you."

"He lies." The Gospozha turned to him. "There is another fifteen minutes' walk that remains. Don't listen to him, he - he isn't himself."

But that meant nearly nothing. The symphony of terror continued, growing louder and louder as they approached, and he felt his face alternate between flushing and freezing, especially when Ivan called out in a sing-song voice, "Ohhh, who is that with you, sister? He smells delicious."

Shortly before they reached the dungeon where Ivan was, he began to feel even worse, if that had been possible. His stomach, still clenched, seemed to bear a low weight in the pit, as though he'd made the stupid mistake of eating a lump of pure lead. (Lead poisoning would be a kinder death than the one where he was heading now.) It was a cold, dead weight (like he would be soon), and choking the feeling down, visualising it being suppressed, did not a single bit of good.

And the feeling only grew as they approached, the heavy cold spreading like a disease throughout his torso, along his spine, to his knees.

By the time they were steps away he could hardly breathe, it was in his lungs, it permeated his flesh, it ricocheted against his ribcage and he realised, he could smell Ivan from outside the door.

His senses - the tonic. That's what the bondsgirl had said, they were attuned to these chemicals, they picked them up like radio signals. His body certainly was busy doing that; he was already hard (inexplicably!) and shaking, though no part of his active mind really wanted sex anymore. Eduard felt like he'd trade a lifetime of sex away happily if he could just survive this, please.

"This is it," the Gospozha said, and the sounds inside grew to a crescendo - he knows we're here. "Remember what you studied. Be clear and focus. Can you focus?"

"Yes," he whispered, because he found he could. Though the Gospozha's bondsgirl couldn't
remember what happened in Francis' office, no part of his mind felt in any way subdued. It must be the difference in Times, he thought, remembering something like that which he had read. As a sort of preservation strategy, the chemistry had changed, the pheromones wouldn't dull his senses.

Wouldn't it be more merciful if they did?

"He is chained, as you can hear -" Ivan punctuated this with a particularly loud crash of chain, like cymbals, and an enraged half-snarl half-giggle. "If you succeed, he will probably pass out. There is food and drink at the other end of the dungeon and a chamber pot should you require it. I will return in the morning."

"It will take that long?" he asked, his voice high and taut with stress.

"I do not know how long it will take," Yekaterina said. "These are the limits of research. Anything beyond the threshold of this door is uncharted territory." She pulled hard, heaved it open by just enough for the width of a human being, and Ivan's voice seemed louder still. "Go now."

He slipped through, weak-kneed and shaking, and she shoved the heavy door shut behind him, and locked him in.

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The air was fuzzy with the smoke from the torches - the old-fashioned kind, some sort of fuel, perhaps gas, which burned and gave off a strange smell. Probably did, anyway. As for himself, he couldn't smell much, besides Ivan, who filled his senses.

The second the door had been slammed shut behind him, his mind appeared to clarify on several points; he supposed this was the effect of the pheromones in the air, making him feel more acute, more analytic.

Point one, Ivan looked miserable. He seemed as though he would be an exceptionally beautiful man - it was a shame Eduard hadn't seen a better picture beforehand - and that surprised him. But that might also be the pheromones talking.

Now, though, he was dressed in an old robe, snap-front, sitting propped up against the dungeon wall with his arms outstretched. He looked ill, in the face - his skin glowing in the warm light of the torches with a sheen, his hair dark grey with sweat and plastered to his forehead. His legs weren't bound but his hands were. His wrists were cuffed with strong, hard iron, and the chains linking the cuffs to the wall were very short and did not allow much in the way of freedom of movement, judging from the red blisters around his wrists that were already forming.

This was good, this was somewhat reassuring. He was still terrified - there was a lot one could do with magnificent legs like that, peeking out from beneath the robe; they were incredibly muscular.

Point two, his entire body seemed to have taken over the rational part of his mind that only wanted to flee. Without the say-so from his brain, Eduard's hands had already removed his vest and were now working on the fastenings of his shirt. He actually had to make a conscious effort to slow them and not rip the material or buttons.

It was very strange, the disconnect from his senses and his logical thought processes. His body wanted this badly enough that he salivated, but it was difficult to swallow saliva from the fear.
Just do this, he thought, trying to calm himself down, you're in it now, just - keep going, get it over with.

Point three, Ivan had noticed him the second he was in the room. He hadn't yet said anything in Common Standard, just moaned and gripped the chains. But his eyes, bright purple, followed his form everywhere, and judging from the reaction under the robe some part of him wasn't displeased.

As Eduard approached him, now nude (he'd taken his belt off and placed it near Ivan's bare foot, close at hand for him, but out of kicking reach), Ivan thrashed harder and tried to back up closer to the wall. He heard him mutter, "No, no no, please no, God," in Common Standard.

The Gospozha was wrong. Somewhere in there, Ivan was still very much present.

"It's alright," he said, "this'll be over soon." Ivan's whimpering gave him strength, because one of them had to be strong for this, and if it wouldn't be Ivan perhaps it could be him. He decided to try being comforting, try smoothing the man's hair back, reaching a shaking hand out slowly, like attempting to pet a feral animal.

Ivan snapped, snarling, and tried to bite his hands (nearly succeeded, too). Seconds later he calmed down, the beastly side having mysteriously disappeared to reveal a pained victim. He groaned, and complained, "It hurts. My God, it hurts."

Correction. Somewhere in there, Ivan was still present, but fading fast.

Get to work, he thought, and he undid the snaps of Ivan's robe. "Don't," Ivan whispered, and tried to keep his legs together.

Eduard pried his thighs apart and knelt between them. "I have to," he said. "I'm sorry." He took the thick, large head into his mouth, still sort of terrified but also planning: if this part all went well, he would need at least three fingers because Ivan was tall, and broad, and certainly proportionate.

"Please," Ivan whined from above, but it wasn't clear whether he meant please stop, or please more. It could have been either: he thrashed the chains again, Eduard could hear, but the muscles in his legs quivered once before the limbs fell entirely lax.

He took more in, and Ivan moaned something that wasn't Common Standard, some sort of beautiful rustling murmur. It wasn't his imagination when he felt Ivan push back, try and insert more of his erection into Eduard's mouth needily. It reassured Eduard, told him he was doing something right at least, and keep it up and this'll all be over soon, right?

But it didn't last. The sounds Ivan began making kept Eduard's fear steady and present. He was slowly trading actual vocabulary for grunts and incoherent sounds, had stopped saying anything now in Common Standard, and nothing in that strange sibilant mumble that Eduard thought must have been Zvanie. (This was a shame, because the throaty way he said anything in Zvanie, lost in lust, was incredibly arousing, in spite of the situation.)

What he lost in words, however, he gained in aggression, and before long his thrusts into Eduard's mouth were tough, vehement, punitive, and Eduard had to pry his legs apart to keep them from surrounding his shoulders and forcing him to give what Ivan's body wanted.

The look Ivan gave him, when Eduard peeked up, was horrifying. The man was gone, replaced by something savage, something wild. A legitimate monster, and he was locked inside its cage and
teasing it. He snarled and gnashed his teeth as though to say *what are you waiting for, imbecile? Do what you came here to do!*

Eduard redoubled his efforts, tried moaning around Ivan's erection, hoping the vibrations would be intense enough for completion. Stimulated the base with his hand, because there was no way he would be able to take it all in. With his other, he clenched into a fist and pressed on the cuticle of his thumbnail - a trick to try and fool the gag reflex. A wise choice, because no sooner had he done that than Ivan's left leg managed to escape his grasp, and wormed its sly way around Eduard's shoulder. In one fierce movement, he *pulled*, shoving himself practically down Eduard's throat.

It took all of that, and what seemed like minutes. But finally, *finally*, Ivan's cries grew louder, longer, and with a final shout, he slammed his head back on the stone and came.

Eduard spat it out - didn't think the monster would care overmuch - and quietly counted how long it took before Ivan could open his eyes again.

Three seconds. Not enough for the Time. Not even close.

So, plan B. With Ivan currently distracted, he moved quickly, grabbing the belt where he'd put it, and flipping the pocket open to retrieve the tiny refillable bottle. Unscented, but excellent quality. He tilted it, poured a good amount out - more than he'd need, but he wasn't concerned about not being messy, he was concerned with living through this experience to tell the tale. (Not that he would ever actually tell it. Funnily enough, it just didn't seem like anything to brag about.)

Eduard leaned back, exposing himself, but at this point fear had obliterated any shyness or shame he might have had. As he inserted two fingers - not bothering to start off with one, didn't think he had enough time - the monster in chains took note. There's practically no refractory period with this condition, he remembered, and sure enough Ivan was hard again, breathing loudly as he leered, his hands still cuffed in chains, straining in their bonds off the walls. Like he was reaching for him.

He added another finger, tried spreading them, tried relaxing (and *that* was damned impossible), and finally decided to give up there. He climbed into Ivan's lap, bending his knees and leaning them up on the wall on either side of Ivan's chest - Ivan moved his own legs out of the way, really rather considerate for a *total savage* though Eduard thought he could do without the feral, hungry look in Ivan's eyes - and directed him in.

Ivan did not appear to like that. He made a sound somewhere between a yell and a war cry, and glowered. From his vantage point, Eduard was probably still teasing the poor monster by only allowing the head, scooting quickly out of the way when his pelvis shifted up to force more in. "Easy," he said, "just, a little slowly." He descended more, and he really hadn't prepared enough but that didn't matter, he could take a little pain.

Once Ivan was fully inside, Eduard shut his eyes and took a moment for himself, breathing deeply through his nose. The dungeon no longer seemed freezing cold, despite being constructed of stone and buried underground on a frozen wintry planet. Eduard felt flushed, pleasantly tingling and warm. There was a heady, thrilling sensation that accompanied this that he hadn't counted on, that hadn't been discussed in any of the books or notes he'd read. It made his heart thump loudly and strongly in his chest, not with fear or adrenaline, but a kind of curious, dark anticipation.

It was intoxicating. Slowly, very slowly, the fear melted away, and all that was left was pressing arousal, the strongest he'd felt in awhile. This must be the resonance the bondsgirl had mentioned.
A clash of chains from above reminded him he wasn't here to enjoy the scenery. "You're right," he told the poor brute, his voice low, and raised himself up the length of Ivan's erection, only to shove himself back down on it.

Both of them gasped, and he didn't think it fair to deprive them of what they obviously both wanted. He began moving more quickly now, his downward thrusts a little faster, a little more regular.

"Ah," Ivan moaned, "ah, - ah," in time to his rhythm, it was practically musical. The fingers he'd used to stretch himself were still slick with oil, so he took his own erection in hand, hoping the other hand on the ground would be sufficient to keep his balance, because he needed, so badly, to touch himself. Why had he been afraid of this? he wondered, as he stroked. This was glorious, so glorious.

The world had just condensed into a single point of need when Eduard heard the tiny clink of rock on stone. His eyes fluttered open.

Then again. And then a few more times, heavier clink, larger rocks. What the -

The mortar holding the stones together, where someone had drilled a hole for the peg to attach a chain, where Ivan was bound, was loose. As though he'd seen it too, Ivan threw him a sudden, terrifying half-smirk, and the monster yanked on his bindings on both sides. With a rain of dry mortar crumble, scattered across the ground, the peg came loose and Ivan was free. He reached over to his other side and tore the other peg out too, though it took a bit more force.

It had happened so fast Eduard was amazed, and a little stunned.

He recovered pretty quickly from the shock when he found himself winded on his back, on the cold ground, looking up at Ivan, who grinned down at him with the triumphant leer of a predator.

Oh shit.

Ivan thrust into him, brutally hard, without warning, setting a furious pace. And that hurt; Eduard yelped.

It did not deter Ivan. With a snarl, he clawed the sides of Eduard's chest with his nails and then dug his teeth into Eduard's neck. It almost, almost felt good, and again Eduard screamed - just a little too hard, a shade too rough, but he could still come from this eventually, thanks to his training. Ivan buried his hands below, one forearm beneath Eduard's arched back, the other gripping his hip hard enough to bruise, holding him in place to get better purchase to rut into him.

No escape, no escape from the relentless pounding and the blood -

Blood... That reminded him.

Eduard gathered the presence of mind, despite Ivan's hammering, to draw his own arms up and around Ivan, settling them on his back. Then, before Ivan could do anything about a pair of wandering hands, he dug the nails in and with a grunt, scraped them down as hard as he could on the skin. Ivan howled in his ear but calmed a fraction - did he get him? - but didn't stop the pace or the teeth at his neck, digging in, tearing the flesh.

He might be able to withstand this, he thought. Ivan wasn't paying any attention to his legs, in the
air on either side of the man's body. Probably for the better, maybe that meant he might get to keep them. Similarly, he moved his arms back to the stone, keeping them out of the way. This could work. It hurt like hell but it would work.

And then, Ivan took one of his hands and, with a grunt, slammed Eduard's forehead down in order to force his chin up, granting him more access to his throat. The rough, violent motion whacked the back of his head on the stone painfully, he heard a crack ... and very suddenly, his vision dimmed and darkened.

The last thing he remembered before he closed his eyes (it was all so sudden, he didn't have time for his life to flash before them) was the feel of the cold ground below him, the cold chain against his side where he bled, the cold air where he was exposed, and how everything else in contact with Ivan - his chest, his throat, his ass, his forehead, the back of his head where the blood pooled - was boiling, scalding hot... and then he was gone.
Ivan woke up feeling groggy, with a sour taste in his mouth and one of the biggest migraines he'd had in awhile (and he had been having those a lot lately, booze only helped to move pain from one side of his head to another). Really, all he wanted was to drift off again and sleep some more, but it was impossible to sleep in this cold... It was winter now, he really ought to shut the windows when going to bed...

And his bed was rock hard for some reason!

Then he realised how long it had been since he'd felt cold. For the past five years now it had been nothing but constant overheating, always dehydrated from perspiration.

Also he was fairly sure he was actually sleeping on rocks.

He opened his eyes, and the sight he saw made him gasp and recoil in fear.

He was in the dungeons, in a stained and dirty robe, open at the front (which he quickly fastened closed) - that explained the cold and the rocks -

Do you remember why?

Yes, yes he did. If that hadn't been enough to remind him, the bloody, beaten body he had wrapped himself around was more than sufficient. It did not move.

Shamefully his first thought wasn't about God, about praying for forgiveness for his transgression, because what a transgression.

The first thing he thought was, he's dead, he's dead, I've killed him!

"No," he whispered, "no, no, I can't have, no, please..." He was in the midst of reaching over to feel for the poor man's pulse, when he noticed the lacerations all over his neck - mostly scabbed, some still wet and shiny.

Had he done that? His nails weren't sharp, bit them to the quick most days -

That sour, strange taste in his mouth.

Oh, God.

"Oh God," said Ivan, backing up, scooting on his hands. He kept going until he reached the wall. "Oh God, oh my God. No," he whispered, and kept murmuring something along those lines as though incapable of speaking anything else in abject horror. He found himself strangely short of breath and panting in a few quick seconds. His hands, when he clasped them over his mouth to try and keep the air in his lungs - it seemed so quick to race out of them! - were ice-cold and shaking.

Breathe, he told himself, breathe, and he forced himself to calm down, to breathe more slowly and deeply, before dizziness took over. Ten minutes later his mind was clearer, more logical - but
no less terrified. He had clenched his eyes shut to try and quell the nausea, and as he opened them again, he hoped the man would be gone. Nothing more than a really vivid nightmare.

He'd had nightmares like this before, but if it wasn't some faceless being then it was always a face he knew, the face of the person he assaulted, murdered and - and destroyed while not himself. It was someone who made it so much worse, like his sisters or Brother Toris.

Toris. Oh, God, he thought, what will Brother Toris think of this.

He came to the conclusion too willingly: I'll just not tell him. Nope. Can't tell Toris. Toris would think he was dirty and sinful and disgusting, for having succumbed during this illness, for his lapse of faith and fall to such evil spirits. After all, hadn't he put his trust and love in God?

There was a small part of his mind that - that sounded a lot like Toris, actually - told him thou shalt not profane thy speech, by outright falsehood or omission...

He didn't even want to think about Toris right now, he felt so sick to his stomach. What he'd done to this man, this man he didn't know - this man who was bought and paid for like cattle because of a stupid family tradition that made no sense to Ivan, that he never wanted a part of, because it was just so very wrong, to own a human being!

What had he done to him? He supposed it was only right that he do a cursory examination; he was no medic and couldn't reset bones or anything (and if he'd ripped a limb off - oh, God help him if he had).

But he needed to make sure, to know - was he alive? Was there anything he could do to help? If there was, then surely it was his duty to help, having been the horrible, sinful, filthy cause.

Ivan forced his disgust down and carefully, very carefully inspected the man's throat. He couldn't check for a pulse there, not with those wounds still open, Ivan hadn't washed his hands and - God only knew where he'd put them last. (Plus, oh God, supposing his spine had been broken? He mustn't move him.)

His wrist - take his wrist, there would be a pulse point there...Oh, the poor - his wrist was sprained, perhaps fractured. Swollen, the skin was too warm for normal, and the muscle shouldn't've been doing that. Probably sprained.

I really did a number on him, Ivan thought fretfully, guiltily. He took the other wrist. The man's skin was still warm; either Ivan had only blacked out for a few short minutes or - or just maybe - Yes! Thank the blessed, ever-loving God there was a pulse. And strong, too.

He didn't realise he was weeping with frantic relief until he felt the wet on his cheeks.

He did not kill someone! Yes, maybe he succumbed to the lust part of the equation but not the killing. It might be okay!

The rest of him, he should check the rest of him.

Maybe another sprain on his elbow, he felt swollen and overwarm there too - looked like a dislocated shoulder (but not impinged, hopefully). One hip was looking very red but it wasn't clear whether it was sprained or bruised. Bruises in the shape of fingerprints speckled his skin.
He wasn't ... torn, down there. Oh, thank God. Ivan would never have forgiven himself if he had caused that much pain in such a way.

And the rest, blessedly, thankfully, looked worse than it was. There were lacerations, everywhere - only the skin and subcutaneous tissues though. He would need stitches but none of them were deep enough to affect the tendons, not even the ones on the ribcage. All his bruises must have been recent, nothing was too darkly coloured yet. Only red, not purple. They must not have been here long. News to Ivan; he had very literally lost all sense of time, and the dungeons had no clock.

The last thing he remembered was Katya coming to talk to him after breakfast before he could go out to see Brother Toris and apologise for his absence at the pub the previous night, when Katya had stopped him from going out. She had returned from Hallar, and he hadn't wanted to speak a word to her - the nerve of her, getting him a bondsperson, didn't she know he didn't want one, that he'd deal with this in his own way as per his own faith? Meddlesome sister!

He hardly remembered the night before that; perhaps it was better Katya had kept him in. He could find nothing to drink, not in his bedroom, not by his desk, nor in the safe behind the walls and he didn't think Katya had known about that one. With no vodka, there was nothing to ease the itch in his veins or stop the pain in his head from reappearing and it had truly been an awful night... at some point he recalled locking himself into the bedroom, using the last of his faculties, and after that it was hazy and foggy. He remembered only scraps: trying to read and failing to be able to sit still for one second, tearing the pages out when his vision failed him, scratching at the doors, pawing uselessly at their locks, screaming into his pillow, ripping it to feathers.

There came a voice at the door. "Eduard?" It was Katya.

"Sister?" he asked, "sister, it's me."

"Vanya!" she said, surprised. "You're awake? Are you alright?"

"I'm, I'm fine," he said, struggling to get to his feet, then staggering over to the door - it took a bit more effort than he'd imagined. And, because he knew she'd want to know, he told her, "It's done."

"Oh, Vanushka, good, by the good of the General, give thanks!" It was relieving to hear her voice so clearly, good to hear she was so happy she was actually cursing. "And - the bondsman, he's alright?"

"He's -" Ivan turned back to look, "I think he's okay. In pain, probably. He's not - he's not awake yet. I'm not too sure what happened to him, but. He's alive, and in one piece."

"Give thanks, give thanks!" she murmured. "Wonderful news, Vanya. Brother, I- I'm so sorry you had to go through this, but -"

"It's fine, Katya," he replied flatly. It was his own damned fault anyway. Couldn't control the sick temptation inside him. So much for those mind over matter meditation exercises Brother Toris had taught him! His useless, stupid brain. "Don't talk about it anymore. Get me out of here. I'd rather sleep in my own bed." Yes, for the next week.

"What about the bondsman?"

What about him? "We'll wait until he wakes, mend him, let him rest. And then I'll give him his
"Vanya!" his sister scolded.

"What do you expect me to do? He shouldn't be enslaved, it's wrong. I think this whole thing is wrong and I don't want him."

"Did you expect me to go against tradition so that you could persist in your ridiculous quest of religious self-immolation? You're keeping him and that's final. I don't care if you don't fuck him but freemen speak freely, so until he can be trusted not to talk about last night, he has to stick around. Bad enough there are any witnesses. Now I'm sorry you don't agree with that, but you can disagree all you like now that your mind is no longer the slave to your body. Which, by the way, you've yet to thank me for."

"Thank you -! I'm to thank you for this? I assaulted a man in a dungeon - I nearly killed him - and you want me to thank you!?"

"How bad is he, anyway? If you're awake and kicking and bickering with me, you obviously haven't driven yourself mad with grief, so he must not be that worse for wear. Brother, make yourself decent, I'm coming in," she said, and he heard a heavy clink and screech as she unbolted and pulled the door open. It would stay open under its own weight, which was probably for the better - Katya could pull it open but not hold it open for long, and he should tend to - Eduard, his name was?

Eduard. It fit him, somehow. He looked like an Eduard. Blond, messy hair, covering a high forehead; refined, handsome features. A slender torso, a narrow waist. Scholarly. He belonged, not on a dungeon floor, battered and bruised, but at a university, maybe, or a library.

Though it seemed like something was missing. Ah, over there by his clothing, a pair of spectacles. Of course he wears spectacles.

"What are you doing standing up?" Katya asked, holding some bedsheets and a tiny key. "Oh," she said, answering her own question, looking at the mess on the floor where the pegs holding the chains attached had been torn out of the walls. As she unlocked the cuffs around his wrists, they fell loudly to the ground. It didn't stir Eduard. "That wasn't supposed to happen."

"I surmised," he said acidly, rubbing his sore wrists. "There's bread, cheese and water in the corner; if you can get that, the servant can get his clothes and I'll get this Eduard."

"I'll get the clothes. Leave the food for the rats. There is no servant," Katya told him, "bad enough four people know you didn't clear your Time until fucking twenty-four."

He didn't answer, he felt too miserable already. Instead he concentrated on Eduard - no strangeness at the neck (bone-wise, he wasn't talking about the man's ripped flesh), everything looked okay - not too warm, no swelling.

True, better safe than sorry, better not to move him at all, but they should also get him out of the freezing dungeons. He sat the man up, one hand under his knees, and another around his back, bearing most of the weight for the neck and head on his own shoulder. "Here," Katya said. She unfolded a sheet and as Ivan lifted him up, she wrapped it around Eduard's skinny, abused body.

He was heavier than Ivan thought he'd be from the mere look of it, and it took some strength to get
to his own feet, though that might have also been an after-effect from last night. Ivan followed his sister out of the dungeon and shakily began the long path up to ground level.

"Is there much work to do?" he asked her, and she nodded as she fished out a torch from her pocket for the dark passage.

"Plenty for us both. I've things to do, mail needs answering."

"Mail?"

"Yes," she said, "mail - a lot of which is yours, and now that you're better perhaps you can start answering some of your own letters. I've got enough on my plate thinking about how we're going to deal with Aharon Poda and Spiridon Marinin of Olyokin after Yao Wang of Veshna."

"What do they all want?"

"To marry me," Katya said simply, and it struck him how little attention he'd been paying his sisters.

"You're only thirty!" he blurted out, "you can't just go off and get married!"

And naturally, that was when Eduard finally stirred with a faint moan, in Ivan's arms, and Ivan's stomach flipped. Maybe he shouldn't be the one to carry him, not when he was the reason for this. Suppose Eduard woke and panicked? But Katya couldn't carry a full-grown man.

Eduard sort of exhaled deeply and, without opening his eyes, appeared to fall back asleep on his chest. Hopefully, if he roused entirely during this trip, Katya could calm him down.

"I'm supposed to be married by thirty," she reminded him, "we all are. Yao has just recently made his offer. It's probably the best one I'll get, certainly better than Aharon or Spiridon, so I think I'll accept. Bizhi is the richest country on Veshna, still a monarchy, and Yao is its king."

"Do you even know any of these men?" Ivan hissed. "How can you marry someone you don't know? That you don't love?"

"Don't be foolish. Marriage isn't ever about love, for people like us."

"You'll be very lonely and sad if you marry the Veshnan."

"No I won't," she said. "My darling comes with me. I'll have her. Yao is ... an interesting man, intelligent, a firm ruler. His viewpoints politically are compatible with mine. He likes art, I like art. We'll get along. For everything else I need, I'll have her."

Her, thought Ivan, the girl she bought and kept with her. Toris was always so critical of their relationship, when Ivan told him of his old friend, but for something that began in servitude it had always looked to Ivan like it grew into something completely different. He hardly thought of her as a bondswoman anymore. She may not have had a name but they all gave her different ones. His, for her, was rodnaya - kinswoman, like a sister. In a way, she was. Screw this Yao person, she was more Ivan's in-law than he would ever be!

"I should go see her, now that I can," he said quietly, "I haven't spoken to her in some time now."
"You should," Katya agreed, "she misses you very much." *You made her worry, you brat*, he heard.

Ivan let the silence hang, feeling like he deserved the awkwardness and judgment.

He made the mistake of allowing Katya to lead him on, not really paying much attention to where he was going. He was still tired, groggy, and the dead weight (no not dead, just sleeping, only sleeping!) in his arms wasn't exactly being helpful, so it wasn't until they were outside his quarters and Katya was unlocking all five of his locks that he put it together. "I thought I told you I didn't want him."

"So?"

"So, doesn't he have his own room?" Ivan didn't think he wanted to sleep with anybody ever again after a night like that.

"Don't be ridiculous. He's your bondsman, he'll live with you. I put another bed in your quarters. That is what you do with bondservants, Vanya." Ivan would have protested further but Katya continued, "And I doubt you'll be anywhere else but here today, and someone needs to be with him when he wakes. Might as well be you."

"Are you sure that's wise? I don't think he wants to see me."

"He's bought and paid for, and you're his master. Of course he'll want to see you. Besides, there's no choice. My dorogaya doesn't have medic training. I've got work. No one else knows." His sister glared. "And no one else will know." She held the door open for Ivan as he passed through, and led him into the east room, the one that was decorated with thick cream-coloured wallpaper. It normally served as a drawing room, but for the bed now in the middle.

Katya pulled the covers back, and he laid the man in, as gently as he could. "I don't think his neck is broken," he said.

"No," Katya replied, pulling the cover back over him, "he's probably fine." And the bed wasn't even that big but Eduard seemed so small in it, so feeble and weak, his eyes closed, his throat a mess of red. I did that, Ivan thought guiltily. So sinful.

"Hey," Katya said, and he looked up at her smiling face. "Cheer up. It's not so bad, it could have been a lot worse. I know it's not what you wanted. But it really could have been a lot worse. And on the bright side, you never have to do that again in your life."

"I won't use him for service," Ivan said firmly. "He will find himself very bored very quickly."

"He’s bought and paid for no matter what. Why not put him to work doing something else?"

"Like what?"

"His scores were absurdly high," Katya said. "On his papers, I mean. His intelligence scores are there. He's 99th percentile compared to other prospectives. 95th compared to freefolk, 93rd compared to freefolk who had already done a minor degree. Get him to help you with all the work you've got to catch up on."

That still didn't feel right, still felt like taking advantage. But as he looked over at his desk in the adjoining room that served as his office, he noticed the drawers were full to bursting. And those
were the forms that required being under lock and key. The rest of it was in neat piles around the desk, and about as tall.

He felt his headache grow. "That's a good idea."

Katya grinned. "I'll have Arisha bring you some coffee."

"That is also a good idea."

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Eduard remained unconscious during setting his wrist, stitching and dressing his wounds, and, amazingly, re-setting of his shoulder - Ivan didn't know how anybody could manage sleeping through something like that, though he stirred a bit and moaned faintly. He considered waking him to check on more wounds - suppose he was concussed? - but thought better of it and let him sleep. The restful peace upon the bondsman's face made Ivan feel somehow less burdened, less guilty, and if Ivan looked at just such an angle, he couldn't see the gauze on his neck.

Ivan attacked the mail first, because he didn't get much these days that wasn't mostly fielded by Katya (that would probably change, now). A small task would make him feel productive. Two from Major Vmalkhina, one from the official designate to Zapreschniy State, those were probably about Posyolok Aritsevskiy, and - oh, dear, one from Brother Toris dated this morning. That's right, Ivan remembered, he had been on his way out the door to meet Toris when he'd been locked in his room. He opened that letter first with dread.

My brother, in the heavenly peace of God, he read, in Toris' elegant script,

I received word from your sister the Gospozha Yekaterina that you had taken grievous ill yesternight and could not join me as you so often do at the Kapriz Gosudarstva. I very regretfully missed your company and I hope, in my sincerest soul, that you are not still aggrieved. I will call again tomorrow morning, but please, if you will not drink, I beseech you to meet me at the Kapriz tonight, even for just a minute. I must be assured of your health, and if that is in such shambles that you cannot muster the strength to walk the block and a half from the Duma to the tavern, I will truly be beside myself with worry.

Beloved God salute you,
Your faithful Br. Toris Laurinaitis of Olyokin

Toris must have come along sometime earlier that day, while Ivan was still fast asleep in the dungeon. Fantastic. Well, he'd buy the man a drink tonight - Toris didn't like dealing with Katya, who had no doubt told him to fuck off when he had come by that morning. (She might have actually used those words, too.)

Only one of the three other letters was relevant; the other two were puerile stuff - the Major and the official designate pointing fingers at each other and saying he disrespected my rightful rank and she made me look bad in front of the citizens and Gospodin won't you please punish him/her.

Major Teresya Vmalkhina had not much to report from her end. Affairs with the settlement were decent and the people - mostly Sprus, some Kala - seemed to like the Vitim Major more than they liked the official designate.

Unsurprising that they should dislike the designate. Most far settlements from recently annexed
territories disliked the embodiment of the Empire Union, though Ivan had made sure, three years ago, that he sent someone decent. This was in spite of Katya's complaints; Savva Yozhin of Olyokin was indeed more lenient than the usual people Katya sent, but he was also competent.

Surprising that they should like the military more. Perhaps he would start his work with the Zapreschniy files.

He had drunk an entire pot of coffee and was halfway through the second when he heard rustling sheets and a faint groan of pain from the other room. Well, Ivan thought, that's as good a time as any, as the paperwork was only getting more and more obnoxious. He was up in an instant and at the threshold before he realised perhaps he should not be so hasty. This man, this Eduard - he might remember his face and his first thought may be panic.

But there was very little fear in Eduard's eyes, when he finally opened them. "Are you alright?" Ivan asked him, handing him his glasses from the bedside table. "Can you speak?"

Eduard put them on and cleared his throat. "I believe so," he said, a bit raspy, but that may have been from sleeping so long. "Are you alright?"

"Ah, I'm - I'm fine, don't, don't worry about me," Ivan stammered. "I would give you laudanum for the pain, but I'm not so sure about your head. You have a nasty bump on the back of it, and. Well. Do you mind if I ask you some questions?"

"Um. Sure," Eduard said, uncertainly.

Ivan pulled the cover back to expose Eduard's chest. He was still cocooned in the bedsheets Katya had brought; good, because Eduard probably didn't want him touching his bare skin ever again. "Breathe deeply and slowly," Ivan instructed, his hands on Eduard's chest only lightly pressing. Eduard did as he asked; didn't look like he hurt. Didn't feel like broken ribs. That was outright miraculous, truly a holy gift, considering how heavy Ivan was in comparison, and he'd probably just collapsed on the poor man after... that whole mess.

"And -" oh, this would be awkward... "and how is, ah, there? Do you think you can sit up?"

Eduard gave him an arch look. "Well I'm sore, yes, but I can manage a little pain -"

"No, I didn't - I meant, agh -" he huffed, face warm, feeling impatient with his own verbal clumsiness. He settled for being blunt, and gritted out through his teeth, "Do you think your pelvis is broken?"

"Oh," Eduard said, moving around a bit, as he struggled to sit up. "I ... don't think so. It feels fine. Well not fine but -"

"That, that's enough," Ivan replied. "How's your head?"

"Bad headache. Nothing more."

"Do you remember? How much?"


He felt his face inflame again. "As ... as much as you can give me." Unfortunately.
"You tore the chains from the walls, then you pounced. I remember you on top of me, and then - nothing, until I woke up maybe a little while later. You had passed out, but I couldn't move - my shoulder, I think - and I was so tired... I woke up a few times, I'm pretty sure, but I fell back asleep."

"Dislocated," he explained, "your shoulder. And your wrist is sprained. Are you left-handed?" Eduard shook his head. "Good, because you can't use that entire arm for the next week, at least. Let me know if any of this hurts." Ivan prodded him lightly around the skull, and to his credit, Eduard didn't flinch when he drew near. Brave man. Not much swelling, faint warmth. No serious injuries, he prayed, please no serious injuries.

"That hurts a little," Eduard said, at the back of the skull where much of the swelling was.

"Is your neck stiff? Are you numb anywhere? Any drowsiness?"

"I'm still tired," he replied.

Ivan nodded absently, leaning in to check his pupils. Same size; normal reaction. Ah, praise God, praise Him! "I'm very, very sorry," because the closeness seemed to require some sort of apology for all of this. "You don't know how sorry."

"I'm not dead. I'm in one piece. As long as that's not a usual occurrence -"

"Of course not," Ivan said, aghast.

"Then I have nothing to worry about."

"I don't know how you can be so calm about all of this," he whispered. "What I did was - was unforgivable."

"It's what I was bought for," Eduard said simply, with a pragmatic, flat tone. That seemed to break the spell - Ivan sat back, instantly uncomfortable. Nothing like a conversation like this to spark a sudden interest in work.

"Rest a bit more if you can," he advised, "I'll check on you hourly," and Eduard drifted off again, propped up on pillows.

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When he made his rounds the third time, Eduard seemed more alert and upbeat. He looked incredibly bored, but said he didn't feel up to reading, and told Ivan he was getting sick of being in bed all day (it was well past three in the afternoon). Eduard as a person, now that Ivan was actually talking to him, was spirited, wry, polite and very matter-of-fact, in addition to being obviously courageous, if last night was any measure.

He was also terrifyingly intelligent. Ivan had intended a brief look through his papers while he slept, but brief became forty-five minutes. What was this guy doing as a bondsman?

Well. It wasn't for Ivan to judge the reasons his parents had given him up. Or, for that matter, the reasons any parent might give up their child to - to slavery. Sell them off for money. Ivan couldn't understand it.
Couldn't give him his papers; freemen speak freely. Katya was right about that. Not until well after Ivan's installation as Emperor, and with luck that wouldn't happen for another six years. It was a better life - a life of servitude - than at the hands of a firing squad. It had been up to Katya, there would be no witnesses. She'd done that before.

But Ivan wouldn't sleep with him. Wouldn't - wouldn't use another human being like that. Not in six years, not in a million. Lust was unnatural to begin with, although he felt he might be able to moralise a way around that; he wasn't so diligent about not quenching that thirst. However, it was one thing to abuse himself; sleeping with someone who had been bought and paid for? Absolutely not. Unthinkable. It made his stomach churn unpleasantly.

He hoped Eduard liked politics. Perhaps then there might be a bright side to all of this, he could have someone to discuss elements of state and government, someone who didn't have the Bragin background, because their history made them all a little bit cutthroat. Perhaps Ivan might even make a decent friend who was neither related to him nor Brother Toris. He'd suspected, from time to time, that Brother Toris was such a good friend particularly because of the financial help Ivan was so willing to donate - the monk had taken vows, sure, but the Order wasn't rich and Ivan was certain the money did significant good.

(Then again, it wasn't as though money played no role here, with Eduard, either.)

Ah yes, he thought in reply, there's that little voice I typically silence with vodka.

But there was none to be found in the house, and until the next shipment arrived, none would magically appear. And so, to the tavern, to meet with Brother Toris. It was getting late in the day anyway. He called Arisha for some soup and tea first, woke Eduard when it arrived, and noted that Eduard re-dressed himself in the clothes Katya had brought up from the dungeon. Perhaps he doesn't have others, Ivan thought, and made a mental note to call upon the tailor (or at the very least, find something he no longer wore that was closer to Eduard's size).

"I would ordinarily give you your papers," Ivan told him, as they ate at twilight. The shocked and almost appalled look on Eduard's face gave him pause, and he doubled back hastily to explain himself (so hastily that he forgot to ask why this would be appalling). "I mean of course that I'd free you! You could go anywhere you like and study what you wished. It's just, I can't have this episode get out, for several reasons. It - it makes me upset, I hope you know, it truly does, that you are in such servitude but I assure you, this is not forever. And please, feel free to explore any part of the Duma while you are here - I hear from Katya the library is a popular destination. I can get you any book you could ever want - well, almost any book. Anything you'd like is yours."

Eduard swallowed his mouthful of soup, took a big gulp of tea, and finally said, "I don't think I understand."

So Ivan attempted to make himself clearer. "I realise this industry has come about for several reasons. I understand why, I simply do not think it is right. I cannot change it, and it would make me exceedingly unpopular to try, and though it's true, there are no elections here, and people wouldn't have a choice... I think it's best to allow people to do as they will within the freedoms we give them.

"I have my reasons for not thinking this is right. Some of them are religious, and not everybody subscribes to my personal beliefs, and so I recognise, it is not fair to insist that all the families within the Vitim Court simply stop owning bondspeople. That would be a lot of people mad at me!
But, I want you to know, I never wanted to own another living soul. Truly, I can think of nothing more wicked. This silly little family tradition - your parents buy you one when you turn of age - it's really outdated, and three hundred years of it is, for me, no point in its favour.

"I've told people this. I've told many this; they know I'm against it, that I think it's inhumane, that I allow it to happen anyway, and none of this will change when - when I must become Emperor. At the very least it would be hypocritical and scandalous for me now to own and - and indulge in a bondsperson - indulge in, I can't even imagine! But the Court will think that I do. At the worst, I might jeopardise the stability of this Empire, which is already still in some danger. No doubt people suspect we own them. We are after all the ruling family; we're rich enough, we're expected to own them. Well, that's fine for Katya. But not for me! And the second I can, you're getting your papers."

Eduard was silent a moment, and then asked, "May I ask - what would you have done? If you'd had the ability to decide? How would you have cleared your Time?"

"I was ... weak," Ivan said, feeling dirty thinking how he'd been, shortly before yesterday. "I allowed myself to think dangerous, sinful -" borderline homicidal - "terrifying thoughts... my monk friend tells me that I let the devil into my heart in a brief moment of frenzy, and once there, he - oh, he is a cancer, he is a disease. I should not have allowed myself this lapse, I should have been faithful and strong. Weakness isn't becoming of someone who is supposed to someday be Emperor!"

"So, you would have done nothing?"

"Not nothing!" Ivan protested. "I would have meditated, I would have prayed. The healing power of faith is a marvellous thing. To have relied instead on something immoral, so ... exploitative as a person in a position that... humans should not be for sale! It's simply inhumane." He'd never forgive himself. Corrupt creature though he may be at times, there were lines he'd never wanted to cross and that was one of them. Ivan felt disgusting, sick, twisted, depraved.

Eduard was silent again - too silent. Was Eduard judging him too? "Say something," Ivan said softly.

"Do you really believe all that?" he asked.

Ivan studied him seriously before his quiet, miserable reply, directed more to his desk and cold tea than to Eduard, "I suppose, to you - it must not matter to you whether I do or do not, since I own you no matter what."

Eduard was quiet. "I'll leave you to your work," he said finally. "I'll be in the library."

"But yes," Ivan murmured, before he could turn away, "I do actually believe that."

Briefly, a look of annoyance and irritation crossed Eduard's face. It disappeared as soon as it had come, and he said instead, in a measured and calm voice, "I will take my leave."

"Not yet! What was that? Why the look? Don't you, too, feel it's wrong to enslave people for, for these lustful, impure purposes?"

"My entire -" Eduard cut himself off. When he spoke again his tone had once more diminished in heat, in ire, and he was calm. "Permission to speak freely," he said evenly.
Good God willing! "After what I did to you, you shouldn't even have to ask," Ivan hissed. But Eduard didn't reply until he affirmed it. "Yes, absolutely, always. You can always speak freely to me. I never want you to do anything but!"

"Then no," Eduard all but snapped, "I don't feel it's wrong. You - what you needed, needed to be done by someone like me. Someone who could take it. So you see, people like me aren't wrong, we're necessary."

"Necessary!" Ivan spluttered. "There is nothing necessary about this! I could have handled it on my own!"

"I really don't think you could have," Eduard replied icily. "You'd managed to drive yourself mad by the time I got to you. So you're being more than a bit ungrateful because now you're in a better state, a better mind - and I sincerely hope, for the sake of this empire, that you didn't manage to do any permanent damage."

"You expect me to thank you for this." First Katya, now Eduard. What was it with people in this Duma? He could handle problems himself, thank you kindly!

"Thank your sister, I wasn't cheap! And now you've gained a status upgrade just by having me around. So you're welcome."

"What the - what nonsense they've fed you! Owning a human being, a status upgrade. I can't believe you're actually saying this to me. The rich, they spout this kind of senseless crap all the time but to hear it from you, this makes me sad. Do they pervert your kind into contributing to your own subjection? That's, that's senseless, it's wrong, it's - how can you believe in this?"

"So, so you're saying, you're saying that my entire kind, my whole life until now, has been senseless and wrong?"

"Well - yes! Isn't it?" Ivan blurted, and perhaps that was a bad choice of words because Eduard only looked angrier, and it wasn't his intention to have a spitting contest but couldn't the man see reason? Ivan's way was the moral way here! "You talk like you could have won scholarships but instead you've wasted valuable brain cells on indoctrination!"

"Don't talk to me about wasting brain cells!" Eduard thundered, panting and enraged. He calmed down only a fraction and said, bitingly, "Obviously I'm a painful reminder for you. Perhaps I ought to leave."

And Ivan retorted, "Yes, that's a brilliant idea, you do that," not caring that the stupid man slammed his door on the way out, rattling its hinges and its five locks.

Honestly! How could someone so brilliant be so dumb? Ivan needed the alcohol sorely after this. He fetched his scarf, told Arisha where he was going and stormed off to meet with Brother Toris.
"Now. Are you perfectly sure you've got it, lad? Parrot it back to me."

"Fine. Rule one, don't speak unless spoken to or asked a question. Eyes on the ground until they say otherwise. Rule two, be nice."

"Not just regular nice, obsequious. And smile!"

"Yes okay, and smile. Got it. Rule three, nudity is allowed, because I'm basically a thing to them, and they're allowed to touch me to move me around and stuff but they won't do any funny business if I stay in line."

"I shall tell Romae you hardly need any training at all. If my suspicions are correct, he'll put you in with the more experienced crew."

"Right."

"Aren't you forgetting something?" asked his white-haired cellmate, who, for lack of a better thing to call him, had adopted the name 'Unsinkable' in Alfred's mind.

"I... don't think so?"

"Rule four," Unsinkable prompted, with a knowing grin, "this is temporary."

Alfred laughed. "Gotcha."

There were just under three weeks left to the auction. Twenty days. He could make through twenty days eating slop, not talking to anybody, and being treated like an object. And then the Captain would take him home and he'd catch up with Unsinkable and by this time next year he'd be laughing about the whole thing, having completely forgotten the feeling of mortal peril.

Avo Romae had agreed to meet them again on Fasciemi Anchorage. It was no longer safe for the Delivery to be in Hallar airspace anymore, the Captain said there was a prickle in his thighs that meant nothing good (for a man who claimed not to believe in God he sure was a holy kinda guy). That, and he said he'd heard things. Rumours. Something about Border Control.

Alfred had never been to an anchorage before. (Alfred had never been off-world before.) He'd read about all these places and studied them but never, ever did he dream he'd have the chance to go. True that circumstances were less than ideal. But every cloud had a silver lining, right?
Besides, Unsinkable wouldn't let the Captain go back on his word. Alfred could trust him.

And as the day wore on, the more he needed to rely on that trust, feigned or real, because the worse he felt, growing steadily more anxious, until no amount of excitement about Hallar could abate his dread.

"... but at least y'get decent food here right?" Unsinkable chattered across the bars, over dinner in their cells. Alfred didn't reply. "Sure they're gonna feed you so much better at Romae's - can't sell a sack of ribs! That's not the fashion - but like, if this were the Flying Star with Cap'n Spriggs, you'd be lucky for a dirty loaf of bread, be honest... Hey, you ain't said nothing for a bit. You okay?"

"I'm fine," Alfred replied, poking at his gruel - the only bit of Kirkland's food that looked in any way edible. Gosh, if Unsinkable thought this was decent... "Just being quiet."

"Oh," said Unsinkable. Then he volunteered brightly, "I can let you be quiet for awhile!" The disbelief must have registered on his face loud and clear because Unsinkable continued, "Really! I can go a long spell without talking."

There was silence for a minute. Alfred finished as much gruel as he could - limp, oversalted oats, not like Mom made 'em - and set the bowl down with a clink on the flagstone.

And at the end of the minute came, "See? Toldja," from the other side of the bars.

Alfred gave a weak laugh. "Well, thanks. Maybe you're not so good at shutting up, but you're not half bad at cheering up."

"You're nervous," Unsinkable observed.

"Guess'm obvious," he muttered, staring at his feet.

"You shouldn't be." Another clink as Unsinkable put his bowl down and some shifting as he crawled closer to the bars. "Look, I make it sound pretty bad but a lot of it is me talking out my ass. That's just how I deal with it, y'know?" He coughed. "It wasn't ... it wasn't all that bad, I guess."

"Then ... those awful things didn't really happen to you? On the Rover with - with that horrible quartermaster, or at that Carson lady's place?"

"We-ell," Unsinkable began, avoiding his eyes. Finally he sighed. "But they won't happen to you!" he said. "I know it sounds hard to believe but the Cap'n can be convincing. Remember, that's how he makes his living: sales pitches to guys like Romae for as much money as he can get. He'll do a good job at selling you as all trained up. No need for lessons."

"Lessons or not, you said they could touch me if they wanted. Doesn't that mean they might ... that they'd ... you know!"

"No, go on, say it," said Unsinkable flatly. "Say the words."

"That they'd ... fuck me," he squeaked.

"See? Not so hard. You can say it. Make it taboo to talk about and you give it all this power. You have to take that power back."
Easier said than done. Alfred wouldn't forget all of New Joplin's customs overnight. How much effort this would be for him! If he were someone like Unsinkable - so used to putting up a front that it was second nature - he'd be a better actor, but what if Romae found out? What if Romae could tell?

"They only do it if they think you need training," Unsinkable continued. "That's why it's so important that you act the part, okay? Perfect bondsman. Act like a robot servant and do everything you're told without a word and you'll be left alone, simple as that."

"They didn't leave you alone," Alfred said.

"I wasn't a perfect bondsman. I wasn't a perfect little robot servant. I misbehaved and - and I got what came to me," Unsinkable said darkly. "They thought they had to train me."

"What if they do touch me," Alfred asked. "And not to move me around. What if they just ... want to do it anyway?" He'd always been told he was good-looking.

"Then... you're gonna hafta let 'em," Unsinkable murmured. "But don't think about that, okay? Don't get so worked up over it that you lose your cool and your cover. Besides, they won't make it so you don't want it."

Alfred snorted. "I'm serious," Unsinkable said, no-nonsense for a change. "They'll - they got tricks, Alfred. If they wanna touch you, they'll do it - but you'll want 'em to."

"That's a mockery of consent," Alfred hissed.

"Yeah. It is."

"And you expect me to do what, sit there and - and take it?"

"Well, yeah!" Alfred glared at him through the bars. "What do you expect? You're a thing! You're an object to them! That's exactly what you're gonna do. Don't take charge, don't tell them off, don't fight them off, be passive and wait for it to end."

"This is disgusting," he said bitterly.

"Hey. At least it's not gonna be rough like the pirates would've been - you have any idea what Desmond wanted with you? Those guys you're gonna be with, they have no reason to hurt you, they just wanna have some fun."

Some fun. Sickening!

"Imagine ... Imagine it's someone else. Someone you like, maybe!"

Alfred shook his head. "No. No, nobody I like would ever do something like that to me!"

"Well you should be so lucky 'cause gee, I guess that's where you an' I are different, ain't we?" Unsinkable snapped.

He shut up, and there was silence again between them.

A sigh, and then, "Look, Alfred," Unsinkable began. "I know it's a lot to take, this is sudden and
you've never even imagined something like this. I was there once, too. It won't be long. For you, it won't be long. Twenty days, that's it. Put your acting face on and keep with it and - and keep yourself sane. I know it's dangerous to you but this is the best we can do."

No, the best they could do was have Kirkland bring him home directly. No Romae, no Hallar, no ... no funny business with people he hardly knew. This was the best that Kirkland would do, and while he didn't doubt it when Unsinkable told him to be grateful for the scrap of mercy the pirate had given them - because it came at his own expense - it wasn't fair. It wasn't fair to a guy like him, to be in the wrong place and wrong time, and to have to pay for the bad hand he'd been dealt with his innocence.

But how could he complain with Unsinkable there? If Alfred was unlucky, then Unsinkable was a walking pile of curses. So he kept his mouth shut and tried not to dwell on it.

Unsinkable murmured the same stuff into his hair the next day, rubbing his back gently like his mom used to do, when he embraced him goodbye. "It'll be okay, kiddo," Unsinkable said, holding him close. "Kirkland won't let me go with you, today, so I'll see you on the other side. Twenty days, just twenty days! Stay out of the way and keep your head down an' they'll ignore you. Trust me."

"I do," Alfred whispered back.

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For a guy who hardly acknowledged Alfred's presence, Avo Romae was pleasant enough. When he wasn't looking, Alfred stole snippets of glimpses out of the corner of his eyes, and he was reminded of his boss back on New Joplin - same big broad chest, same big grin, although the dark swarthy complexion and sparkling happy eyes were unfamiliar.

Romae seemed like the kind of guy who enjoyed what he did and thought it was tops. Alfred wasn't sure what to make of that.

"As you can see," the Captain said, "he's been exceedingly well-behaved for us. I've reason to believe it'll be more of the same for you and any other handler."

"He's really cute," Romae said, lifting Alfred's chin this way and that to inspect his face, "you weren't kidding. Eyes at me," he commanded, and Alfred did so, forcing his stare level and even. Romae came closer then, confusingly, until all Alfred could see was Romae's large face. "Good response. The pupils, I mean. You didn't drug him."

"Of course I didn't," the Captain said, flustered. "Why would I do that?"

"He's got a bit of a glazed look on his face. Dropped on the head as a kid?"

"Perhaps. How should I know? He's pretty and will fetch a goodly penny at auction. If a buyer wants smart, they won't find much at the Bonds Service Decennial. You can expect him under the well-trained price bracket. Start him at three mil, be prepared to get about twelve."

"Well-trained, hm?" murmured Romae. He curled a lock of hair behind Alfred's ears with big, thick, rough fingers - Alfred tried not to shiver - and suddenly snapped his fingers with a loud crack.
The noise so close to his ears took him aback, and he blinked. 

Romae let out a low rumble, developed it into a chuckle, and finally a big-bellied laugh. "Oh, Kirkland. You bring me such joy. You know they'll do that at the auction, right?"

"Do... what?"

"If he were really trained," Romae said greasily, "he'd have the biggest hard-on right now. It'll be the first thing the auctioneer'll do when he's presented on stage."

"Ah," said the Captain, "it's - some kind of conditional response?"

"He's so cute, and naive, isn't he?" asked Romae, with a sick grin. "He doesn't know what I'm talking about! Hasn't got the foggiest."

Did... did that mean training? He felt his pulse shoot up and struggled to keep calm. Didn't he do it right?

"I assure you, despite his looks, the boy is remarkably quick-witted -"

"No, I was talking about you, Kirkland," Romae said aloud. He leaned down to Alfred's ear where he whispered, "Between you and me, boy, our darling Captain sure makes it obvious he doesn't sell the real deal." He smiled and winked as he leaned back. "Well, let's see what we can do with you, then. Captain, I'll give you four million for him."

"Five," snapped the Captain.

Romae let out a bark of a laugh. "Four and thirty."

"And eighty."

"Four and sixty, that's my final."

"Four and eighty it shall be, and that's my final," the Captain said, standing ground.

Romae pretended to think about it for a minute. "Yes, I suppose that'll do," he said, and heavily clapped an arm around Alfred's shoulders. It was only years and years of football spent with overbearing coaches and friendly teammates that kept Alfred from collapsing. "Go talk to Lovino, he'll set you up with the books. We ought to meet again next week, Kirkland, for the remainder."

"The... remainder?"

Romae turned back with a grin. "Yes, Kirkland. The remainder of the people you collected on New Joplin. Have you so easily forgotten in the wake of this beautiful boy that you picked up the others I wanted?"

The Captain threw Alfred a final look, then returned his gaze to Romae. "I didn't forget," he snapped. "You'll have your others."

"And you'll have your money," Romae finished smoothly, walking away with Alfred.

--
Most things about Romae were big, Alfred came to discover. His body was big. His ship was big. And his house, when they returned to it, was very big.

Two brown-haired boys had accompanied Romae to the Anchorage, and before they left Romae took each aside individually and spoke in private for a few moments. But the one who led Alfred everywhere was lighter-haired - almost reddish - Avo Romae, of course, did not say a word to Alfred after they left the Anchorage, or even when they landed on Hallar, and 'Lovino', whoever he was, was busy settling accounts with the Captain and would presumably take a shuttle home later.

(And geez, but was it ever difficult to keep his eyes on the ground once they'd landed.

HALLAR. He'd only ever heard about the place, never thought he'd ever, ever get to go.

That was probably the only positive thing about the whole situation, he thought, as the brown-haired boy grabbed him by the biceps and frog-marched him into the servants' quarters.)

"There!" the boy said triumphantly, as he closed the door behind him. "Now we can talk, no?"

Um... no?

"It's okay," the boy said, "you can talk. I don't mind! It's only us, here. Oh, I mean, of course, there are others, but they - they have their own rooms. This one is for you and me alone. That's nice, right? Isn't that nice? What do you think of it?"

How was he supposed to stay out of the way and ignored if it was just him and this guy? And was he for real?

Rule one, said Unsinkable in his head, a voice of blessed reason, don't speak unless spoken to or asked a question. Rule two, be nice. And smile!

"It's, um. It is nice," he said quietly. "I like it very much," and the boy's smile was so wide, open and honest it pulled a genuine grin out of Alfred in response.

"Oh, I'm so glad! My name is Feliciano. Let me introduce you around, come here, come here. Ve, Ludwig!" he called, and a tall man entered the room at the back. He was blond, broad and, and sculpted - geez, Alfred thought, his mouth dry, I hope they don't expect me to look like that.

Ludwig bowed deeply. "You called, Signore?"

"Oh, don't, don't do that!" Feliciano was waving him off, fluttering his hands almost helplessly. "We're among friends here, yes? Yes! Ludwig, Ludwig - come and meet - what's your name?"

"Alfred," he said, more quickly this time. Feliciano was an easy character to be easy around.

"That's a lovely name, Alfred! Oh, we're going to be very good friends!" And Feliciano threw his arms around Alfred's shoulders and clung, his warmth a pleasant reminder of normalcy. Yes, this was a bit more familiar. No more pirates, no more talk of slaves and - and abuse. Just twenty days of strange friendship, then he could go home. What had he had to worry about again?

Ludwig smiled an enigmatic, tight smile, his eyes careful.
Toris looked at the clock anxiously. He'd stick around another half hour and then head back downstairs via the backroom, and through the tunnels to home. If Ivan didn't show tonight...

Had Bragina gotten to him after all? Gone to Hallar, returned as quickly as possible, that couldn't have meant good news. If Ivan'd cleared it, that was eight years down the drain, they'd have to move more quickly on schmoozing that rat Spiridon with Bragina, to cripple at least one of the family.

But that wouldn't do much good! A patriarchal society like Olyokin, the first-born male becomes the emperor... and Toris had been so close! If Ivan were unable, his sister would have been appointed Regnant Empress, and only then controllable through her husband. Hence Spiridon of Kala, who was weak-willed and frankly pathetic, but would appoint advisors sympathetic to the Kilnus cause.

Perhaps he could start talking to Natalya instead...

No, that wouldn't do, Toris actually liked her. He could just start talking with her under the pretense of helping her with her Time - and that was a very, very tempting idea, because by helping, he didn't mean religiously - but he'd blow his cover.

Perhaps Raivis could talk to the driver again, there was an affair at the Duma tomorrow evening -

"My brother," interrupted a voice to his left, making him jump. "Greetings and grace be with you."

"Ivan!" he said happily. "Grace be with you, brother. You look -"

"Terrible, I know," Ivan said, taking the free chair opposite Toris with a heavy sigh. "It was a rough night." He signalled the bartender for two bottles. Rough night indeed.

"Are you feeling better?" Toris asked, extending both (gloved) hands to grasp one of Ivan's.

"A bit," Ivan admitted, as the barkeep brought over two bottles and two short glasses. Ivan handed the man some coins from a small bag with a nod of thanks, and then handed the rest of the bag to Toris. "My apologies for not coming to see you yesterday," Ivan explained, "please accept this as atonement."

"My brother," murmured Toris, "you truly are too kind. God shall reward your generosity tenfold." Hel-lo, new airship sail panels and thermal pump. "Tell me, what happened with the Gospozha yesterday?"

"Well, as I told you, a few days ago," Ivan said heavily, uncapping a bottle and pouring Toris a drink, "it didn't matter what I told her, she went anyway. She went to Hallar, she bought a bondsman. I've spoken to him; he's ..."

"Nice? Attractive?"
"N-neither!" Ivan said hastily. "I don't... I couldn't possibly find someone in servitude attractive, it's ...

"I understand," Toris interrupted. "It's a terrible thing. But look at it this way, this man will never have to give his body up again in his life. Because you will not have him, and one doesn't share a bondsman with a friend or sibling."

"Th-that's true," Ivan agreed.

"So, in that way, you've saved him," Toris suggested, but that didn't seem to appease Ivan much, and he finished his drink to pour another. "Now another person will abstain from the pleasures of the flesh."

"Right," Ivan murmured quietly. A bit too quietly.

"Ivan," Toris asked, "you - you didn't, did you?"

"Of course not!" Ivan said, and the aghast, terrified look on his face told Toris all he needed. Plan A, incapacitate Ivan, still in the running! He resisted the urge to fist-pump.

He would tell the team later. With proof that Ivan was still down for the count and, by this time, no doubt becoming worse by the minute, Kilnus Central Intelligence would send out the specialist troops, and they could get into the Duma perhaps by the end of the month. Commander Zielska would be happy, as would Toris - it was so nice, succeeding at something, for once!

He managed to tone his thrilled smile down to something more benevolent, more fraternal. "Ah, Ivan, that's magnificent! I'm so proud of you - well, within spiritual bounds of pride, of course! Was it the meditation that helped? The prayers?"

"Oh, all of it," Ivan replied.

"Rejoice, my brother," he murmured, and Ivan nodded faintly. "You've had to suffer, and you will have to suffer still, but don't grieve. This suffering, it is a test of your faith, and that faith's worth more than any amount of coin. Let your strength develop in the high current of the world."

"If I may ask," Ivan began.

"Anything," Toris replied.

"I know you do not approve of my sister Yekaterina's relationship to her bondsgirl. We've spoken about that before. And the reason you don't agree is because ultimately she, too, was purchased."

"I can't condone the purchase of people, Ivan, you know that," Toris reminded him gently.

"She just," Ivan said, under his breath, so softly that Toris had to lean in and strain to hear him, "she seems so well-adjusted and - and normal. It's easy to forget she was once for sale. To me, she's just - rodnaya moya, you know?"

Rodnaya. Kinswoman. Well, whatever floats your boat, Toris thought, ambivalent, though Brother Toris wouldn't approve of their curious little family. "Yes, the ones that are trained are often told not to expect anything more in life. There's a significant amount of conditioning that they undergo, when trained."
"What kind of conditioning?"

"I read up about it once. I thought it wise to understand the wicked ways of the devil," said Toris knowingly. "I read about their abuses of tonic to make the body more youthful. I read about how they warp the mind into responding sexually at a particular sound - a snap of the fingers is the most common. Can you imagine, your body's processes taken over completely at someone else's behest?"

"The Time is never one's own behest, either," muttered Ivan.

"That's different, that's biology. God's plan is inscrutable, divine. It need not make sense to our feeble minds. In bondservice, you have people controlling other people - psychologically, chemically, emotionally, and physically. That kind of domination on a person, on a trainee, you can't deny it's wrong."

"Then, it's not the trainee's fault," Ivan remarked distantly. "At the end of the day, it's not their fault they think the way they do, they can't help it. No matter how intelligent they might be."

"I'd hope a really intelligent bondsperson could throw off training like a shabby coat. But the devil is truly insidious. He has ensnared the strong and smart with little effort."

Ivan was quiet a minute. Finally he said, "Perhaps I was too harsh with the bondsman."

Toris raised an eyebrow. Ivan explained. "When we spoke, earlier today, we ... it derailed. Into a shouting match. I was not particularly nice. I didn't understand why he would ever think that his position was in any way right. Brother, he acted like it was nothing more than his lot in life! As though some people grew up to be engineers, some grew up to be medics, and still more grew up to sexually service others!"

"The conditioning," Toris supplied.

"Exactly," Ivan replied. "I...didn't realise, to what extent..."

"The bondsman may not see himself as a person, but he still is in god's eyes." Ivan nodded and poured them both more vodka. "He always will be. Convince him slowly, of his own personhood, of his existence, his humanity. Show him he's loved, wanted in this world, as more than just a slave. Make him realise there is more to his life than serving others."

"Should I introduce him to the Order? To God?"

"Not necessarily. I don't think outright proselytising would be helpful." Bondsman might find a hidden agenda distracting. The point would be rather to undo the conditioning to the point that the issue of consent could return - then Ivan wouldn't be able to simply take what he wanted, in case his own momentary lapse of reasons should repeat themselves. Brilliant!

"So... I should apologise," Ivan concluded.

"Yes," Toris agreed, "you should apologise," and he clinked their glasses together. "Besides," he said, pausing to first take a great gulp of vodka, "wrath is as much a sin in the eyes of god as lust. You should not indulge in either with this bondsman."
"I- I would never," Ivan assured.

Toris smiled. "I know, my brother."
Raivis did not expect the Bragins' airship driver at the Duma Gala, but was overjoyed when they spoke. They were friends, though the two of them must've made a silly pair: Raivis so small, pale and shaky, with his funny curls, in his proper black tailcoat and double-breasted vest, and the driver so tall, big and dark and solid, with his strange, ropey hairstyle, in a shirt so loud you'd have to scream to be heard over it.

The driver was also sympathetic to Kilnus, as his country - Artevana - had been annexed swiftly by the Empire Union some twelve years prior, and was now known as the Vityaz state of the same name. No, this man was no friend of Yekaterina Bragina, that was certain.

"Enjoying the party?" Raivis asked.

"At least there's enough to drink," and there certainly was, Raivis had had four vodkas already, enough to get a good buzz going. "Could use a smoke though. Wanna come outside?"

"Ass cold out there, isn't it?"

"It's ass cold everywhere, these days," the man muttered darkly. "C'mon, cariño," and that was his little code name for Raivis. More than just a smoke, then.

"Lead the way, dārgais," Raivis replied in kind.

They stood outside the Duma for a few minutes, sharing one of the driver's fat cigars (well, Raivis tried it, and then needed the rest of his vodka to chase away the burn), until the guards decided they weren't doing anything but smoking or drinking and had walked out of earshot.

"So?" he asked, his voice low.

"So," the driver replied, "you got the letter I sent you, just after we left."

"Yes. Bragina took them to Hallar. Her and her bondsgirl, right?"

"That's right. Well, they came back with a third," which Raivis had expected, given Toris' information from talking to a pathetically inebriated Ivan, and Toris' reports from yesterday night.

"And he's here tonight," the driver continued, which Raivis had not expected.

"Can you point him out to me? I think I'd like to talk to him."
"Naturally. Lemme finish this cigar," said the driver, and Raivis put himself to the task of finishing his drink.

As they'd discussed, Feliks - Agnieszka - would be off playing pretty princess all night, and Toris would be with Ivan, glued to his side like the fraternal court advisor he pretended to be. That left Raivis to float. And unless the bondsman was as close to Ivan as Bragina and her little pet for Toris to get close, it'd be up to Raivis to chat up the bondsboy.

He doubted Ivan could latch onto a bondsman after Toris' years of blather about lustful sin and immorality of enslaving the human race in the eyes of God. Especially since Ivan himself had gone on public record expressing his disapproval regarding bondservants, which hadn't endeared him to the high-classies. But the Bragins had money, and power, and a great deal of both. For now.

If he could talk to this boy, try and convince him how dangerous it was to be around Ivan - who, according to Toris, could snap at any moment if not properly soused and rip you to shreds - he'd be helping Toris' cause. And maybe saving a life.

"That one there," the driver said, when they returned to the pleasant warmth of the main hall, "by the third column, near the painting of General Lyodyrov. Blue waistcoat, grey trousers, blondie with the glasses. Alone."

Raivis spotted him instantly. "Thanks," he said, and before he took his leave, added, "I'll thank you properly later."

The driver chuckled. "See that you do."

Raivis wandered over and gave the bondsboy a quick nod, which he nervously returned. "That's a fantastic vest," Raivis said, by way of introducing himself. "It brings out your eyes really nicely."

"Um. It's not mine," he replied. "It's kind of big on me, I think."

"Well, it suits you. That and the shirt, though I don't know why you've got it tied so tight up around the neck."

"That was the style ten years ago. When it fit the guy I borrowed it from."

Oh come on, bondsman, Raivis thought, grumbling, work with me here! "And who's that?"

"The Gospodin," the bondsman said, and Raivis couldn't help a giggle.

"Yeah, Ivan hasn't been your size in a long while." Wait, too far. "Not that he's fat! Just big. Not big like fat! Um. I'm Juris Silins of Olyokin, by the way," and he extended a hand. "I, uh, I study biology at the University."

The bondsboy looked at it, deciding, before he shook it. "Eduard of Hallar. Presently of Olyokin."

Raivis grinned, very widely. "Oh, I see," he said, "you're the new one?"

"Ah," Eduard replied, nervously. "I don't, I'm not sure what you -"

"Bondsman, right? Ivan's?" Eduard nodded. "It's okay," Raivis told him, "we're all used to Yekaterina's little one. I'm surprised, though! I thought Ivan was all anti-service."
"He is," Eduard confirmed.

"I'm impressed you were able to get under his skin enough that they bought you! That's talent!" Wait, that was kinda insulting. "Uh, but, of course, I'm sure a bondsman like you is talented enough for anything!" Smooth recovery. Not.

Eduard looked embarrassed. "Thanks," he said, "I think."

"Sorry! I mean, I uh, I don't really talk to, to guys like you too often," Raivis said, feeling his jitters return. He needed more booze. "I mean, I study biology. Major degree. My second, actually, though I know I don't look it! So a student like me doesn't know anybody else with the money to buy - well, besides Ivan, who's loaded. Maybe I come off a little strange, a little bit gabby."

"You definitely do."

"If I say something totally weird, it's just - y'know."

"Right."

"So how do you manage to get Ivan to let loose and indulge a little? He's usually so uptight."

"What are you implying?" asked Eduard.

"Well, you know..." Eduard said nothing. Oh for fuck's sake. Raivis would have to spell it out after all. "Mister 'it's inhumane to assign to certain human beings the label of servitude', now with his own bondsman to enjoy. He didn't seem like the hypocritical sort."

"How do you know I've slept with him?"

"You're his bondsman. That's what you were bought for, wasn't it? Though maybe it's better if you don't. He's kinda big."

Eduard gave him a strange look. Wait, definitely too far - "I mean not that kind of big! I wouldn't know. But he's strong! And kinda scary when he's angry. To tell you the truth I don't envy you at all, with someone like that, getting more and more dangerous by the day."

"Oh?" Eduard said.

Raivis nodded with jerky, nervous motions.

"Do you," Eduard began softly. He seemed to find it difficult to articulate. "Do you think he's a good man?"

Victory! Raivis was right: the bondsman already doubted his master. "He isn't his sister," Raivis said under his breath, leaning in, "but that doesn't mean anything good. That entire family is messed up, after what happened to their parents, and aunt, when the old Empire crumbled. That was only twenty, thirty years ago. The same people who were with their parents were the ones who raised Yekaterina and her siblings."

"What happened twenty years ago?"
Raivis chuckled darkly, "That's a long story. I could get into trouble for telling you." Which only made Eduard perk up more. "All I'll say here, with eyes and ears, is that it's a good thing you haven't slept with Ivan yet. He can get pretty nasty just on his own, and then you bring in the hormones, and that's a potent concoction right there! You should stay away. I would worry, if I were you; he might snap you in half since he's so late on his Time."

Eduard gave him another strange, deciding look.

"Well, he hasn't. You know. He hasn't cleared it, yet?" The silence was uncomfortable. Had Toris misread the atmosphere last night at the tavern?

"I'm... not sure I should really discuss this..." Eduard looked at Raivis’ glass thoughtfully. "Are there drinks available?" he asked.

"Of course. It's a Duma party, it's open bar." On the backs of the peasants, no doubt. "Wanna go get some?"

"Sure," he replied, "after you," and Raivis led him over to the drinks table.

But as they walked along the wall, he felt a sharp tug on his wrist halfway across the room, and suddenly - darkness. He found himself in the foot of space between the wall and a tapestry facing off against an expressionless Eduard.

"I will ask you once and only once," Eduard hissed, pointing a finger in Raivis' face, "because I know exactly four people are privy to the information that Ivan Bragin did not clear his Time. And you are none of them. Who are you really?"

Shit. Shit!

But this wasn't the first time this had happened. Raivis had a big mouth and this happened more often than not. So plan B, use the force. (Which was to force yourself to calm down, Raivis.)

Raivis gave him a cool, steely, judging look. And then - less smoothly than he'd done it before, in front of the mirror - he pulled out the sidearm tucked behind his vest into his pants, secure in the small of his back. Eduard recognised it immediately as a weapon, and put his hands up in defence.

He hadn't kept it armed, but a trained bondservant, one of Francis of Hallar's - sheltered, nice life, naive - wouldn't know that.

"You're smart," Raivis said.

"No, you just talk a lot," Eduard snapped.

"Are you really a bondsman?"

"Are you really a biology major?"

"I have associates," Raivis said, quietly, "we're working with Kilnus intelligence. This is strictly a diplomatic mission." And that was the truth. Just a little bit bent. "It's... complicated, the political situation between Kilnus and the Empire Union."

"Tell me about it," Eduard said.
"Glad you agree."

"I meant it," he clarified. "I don't know what's going on besides widespread censorship. And secrecy, from what I've seen working on Ivan's files."

Working - on Ivan's files? Jackpot. Feliks and Toris wouldn't like that he'd given himself away, again, but what an asset this kid would be!

Trained by Francis of Hallar - sheltered and naive - but a taste for knowledge, a natural curiosity... New game plan.

"You asked me if he was a good man," Raivis began. "Why? Do you have a reason to doubt it?"

"No reason either way," Eduard admitted. "He goes back and forth. When I first met him he was - violent. The next time I saw him it was a total reversal and he was this placid, calm, gentle character. Then we got to talking and he's opinionated, and we disagreed, and got angry at each other. He was insulting, a little intimidating. Then he apologised. -"

"Ivan Bragin of Olyokin. Apologised." To a bondsman.

Eduard nodded. "He had me work on some trivial matter for some far-off state in the morning. Then we went for a short walk and discussed a few things, but nothing deep or interesting, no politics - just small talk. Then he loaned me some clothes for tonight's affair and that's as far as it's gotten. He goes so far as to claim he'll free me, but then says it won't be anytime soon."

Was Raivis ever glad not to be Vitim. These Time mood swings were ridiculous!

"I don't know what to think about him," said Eduard, almost dejectedly. "I don't know what to think about this entire planet. It's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen, and at the same time there's this undertone of something not right. If I weren't what I am, I'd do some investigating."
There was a wistful tone in the bondsman's voice that Raivis suspected shouldn't be there, for someone who was properly trained. Well-crafted property was supposed to not mind being property.

"I can help you with that," Raivis offered, with a friendly smile. "You'll find the Empire Union side of the story in the library, but it won't satisfy you much. I can show you the other side, take you to my superior officers. We'll show you what Kilnus has to say about all of this. Then you get both halves and you can decide for yourself what Olyokin has become under Bragin rule."

Eduard took his hands down. "That ... that would be nice," he said, nervously looking at the tapestry, as though people could see them. "I... I won't say anything. About your mission. Um. I would have evenings free, when Ivan goes to the tavern."

"You don't go with him?" Eduard shook his head. "We can do evenings," said Raivis. "In fact, we can do now, if you want." He'd been at the party long enough, and he could stand to drag Feliks away.

"Now sounds good," Eduard replied, and Raivis ushered him forward, pistol pointed at his sides. "I'll - I'll go quietly, I won't go anywhere," he assured, and so Raivis put the pistol away, hiding it behind his tailcoat.
They reappeared at the other end of the tapestry. Nobody seemed to have noticed their disappearances. He spotted Agnieszka Janowska talking to a man he didn't recognise, but from her body language, she wanted out. The timing was right. "Stay right here," he told Eduard, leaving him behind a nearby column.

Agnieszka spotted him approaching and beamed her patented million-watt smile. "Oh, hey! Juris, right?"

"There's been a small incident outside, Lady Janowska," he told her. The threatening man with whom she was speaking grumbled low in his throat. Raivis put him on ignore to try and quell his nervous trembling, and tugged a little at her sleeve.

"As if! Please excuse me, Lord Konev," Agnieszka said, "I'm sure it's totally nothing, but I gotta check. Call for me at Lady Rubetska's tomorrow, 'kay?" She threw him a peace sign and chirped, "Toodles!"

Raivis didn't wait for an answer from the brute before pulling her away. "Stop dragging me! What the hell is your problem?" Feliks hissed.

"That guy was scary, that's my problem," Raivis said. "And we need to get going." He returned to Eduard and dispensed introductions. "Eduard of Ha- of Olyokin, Agnieszka Janowska of Olyokin. Now you know each other; let's go," he said, and took off before anybody could notice the celebrated Agnieszka Janowska was making a hasty exit.

"Whoa, whoa, wait up," Feliks said, having dropped the higher-pitched voice he usually affected as 'Agnieszka'. "Can we be, like, totally clear on this, Juris? By 'out of here', you mean -"

"Yes, I mean that kind of out of here. It's okay, he's with us," Raivis said, referring to Eduard. "Toris'll be home later."

Feliks looked from Raivis to Eduard and back again uncertainly. "Okay," he agreed, "just lemme get my coat from the front room." He returned a moment later swathed in furs and a lace scarf and said, "Now we can go."

They weren't going far, but it was already ten below and Eduard had no coat. He brightened when they reached the back door of the Kapriz. Feliks went first to escape any casual observers - high-class lady in a tavern like this? Maybe if you were Yekaterina Bragina and could get away with it - followed by Eduard and then Raivis. The back door led to the kitchens, and there everybody was Kilnus-friendly, so nobody looked at the 'Vitim' Agnieszka Janowska or her two friends as they ducked in behind the iceboxes and scrambled down the staircase hidden by an empty foodcrate.

"Dammit," Feliks whispered, "someone took my torch again." He took Toris' instead, flicked it on, and they were off.

The walk was a short and quiet one - they were passing by the basements of more than one Vitim household - and not fifteen minutes later they arrived back at camp.

"Welcome to chez Kala," Raivis announced proudly, when they could talk again.

"And Sprus," Feliks snapped, putting the furs away.

"And Sprus," Raivis admitted. "Well? What do you think of it?"
He watched as Eduard walked slowly around the large underground high-bay they'd taken over as their airship hangar and workspace. He first looked at everything on the walls - lots of pinned papers and files, a few sillier things here and there like Toris' rock posters - then on the desks. There were many desks, and not one of them had an inch of clear space: some had more papers and files, and ink (some of it spilled), and the odd empty vodka bottle. The one against the wall next to the fumehood showed a chemistry setup where it looked like Toris was trying to distill something - maybe more vodka, but that didn't explain the orange colour. The one in the corner had half of Feliks' Agnieszka wardrobe in an unstable pile (not folded, of course, because why would we fold our clothing, thought Raivis acidly, that would make sense and we can't have that). It went on and on, and as Eduard kept looking around Raivis felt more and more self-conscious about what a mess this place was.

Finally, Eduard craned his neck upwards, but not at the hanging lamps overhead - at the airship, where Feliks had been doing repairs. There was still oil everywhere, and empty fuel vials, along with tools scattered about the floor by the lower engine panel, propped open with some of Raivis' books (thankfully, not his favourites).

"Feliks, you really gotta clean up your station," Raivis admonished.

"Okay, in my defence, I totally didn't know we'd be having guests!" Feliks said. "Now help me with this frickin' corset."

While unlacing enough of the corset for Feliks to slip out of it, he heard Eduard's soft hush, "This place is amazing."

"It's really messy," Raivis said, "I'm sorry."

"Don't be," Eduard replied in quiet awe, reaching out to touch the airship and peer into the lower engine.

Feliks shimmied out of the corset entirely, standing only in the crinoline cage and bustle. "God, that feels way better. Like I can breathe again."

"Oh," Eduard said, with a flat, almost unsurprised tone, "you're not a woman."

"Hey, I'll have you know I totally make a better woman than most women," Feliks retorted.

"I didn't mean to be insulting," Eduard replied quickly. "It makes sense if you're all going undercover."

Feliks frowned. "What makes you think we're going undercover?"

Eduard laughed derisively. "Oh, I don't know, the back door entrance to the tunnels to this magic underground workshop? The quick and secret getaway? The sidearm your friend pulled on me?"

"You're quick," Feliks said suspiciously.

"High scores," Eduard murmured, still distracted by the airship.

There was a tense moment as Feliks studied Eduard. Raivis watched nervously - Feliks would chew him out for this later, he hated being chewed out...
But then Feliks stalked over to his workbench and grabbed something. He grinned and called out, "Hey bondsman, heads up!" and tossed him the broken Eavesdropper he'd been wrestling with recently. "You like gadgets? See if you can fix that little guy. Use any tools you need, they're on that bench over there."

This was an opportune moment for Feliks to take Raivis aside. "So like, what's this guy's deal, anyway?" he hissed.

"Works close with Ivan - really close - isn't sure whether to trust him or not, doesn't know if he buys all the propaganda the Empire Union craps out. He barely needed convincing to come, and look how happy he is to sit and tinker with gadgets. Says he won't say a thing about us being at the Duma if he can get information the Empire censors. Which isn't hard for us to provide," Raivis said, looking pointedly at the books propping up the engine panel. "He'd be an amazing asset."

"Raivis, that's - that's perfect," Feliks said.

"I know, it's almost like I'm smart or something," he replied.

Eduard, seated over at the table, busy at work, paid them both no attention. They watched him work for about fifteen minutes until he said, "Have you got some sort of feed I can test it on?"

"As if he's already got it working. Wait 'til Toris gets a load of this one," Feliks murmured. Raivis grinned.
Iceland

Norge returned the next day. "Letter for you," he said, "and a job."

The job wound up being a fairly straightforward request from Norge's 'information associate' to provide full documents for 'Anistas Kudrins of Olyokin', a handservant with references. (Wow, dream big, Anistas, he thought dully, but then admitted a handservant would be easier to impersonate.) Norge gave him a description to fill in but no picture, which he said they'd include before filing with Olyokin legislature.

It sounded fishy, but fishy was Ísland's business. He wouldn't do this for just anybody, but Norge wasn't just anybody.

The letter on the other hand was much less welcome. When the first words he saw were "DON'T RIP THIS UP, PLEASE" it had two effects upon Ísland:

-It made him really want to rip it up
-It made him immediately look at the signature to see who the sender could be

When he saw the sender, he really, really wanted to rip it up. But for some reason - morbid curiosity? slow day? felt like needing a reason to drink or whack his head on the desk? - he kept reading.

_"I understand we are not friends, and are indeed on opposite sides of ideologies. I doubt you can say you respect my work and equally, I cannot say I respect yours. But I admit you are, hands down, the best at what you do within this entire system. Just this once I require your assistance in helping to return someone home, a freeman who's in danger of being bought at the Decennial. So it appears that for once we're on the same side."

_"I sincerely hope I've at least piqued your interest. Please send your reply with a meeting place to Postal Box 592, Fasciemi Anchorage. I'd like us to meet and discuss this in person; I think it's fair to say both of us feel poorly towards paper trails. (Burn the letter after reading.)"

Arthur Kirkland, Captain of the Great Delivery of Banningham

Ísland ripped it up anyway. "Asshole," he said, "thinks I'm still at his beck and call." Maybe he wouldn't burn it, just to be a jerk.

Norge padded back over from the stove. "What was it?" he asked, picking up the two pieces of ripped parchment.

"'Captain Kirkland, requesting my assistance'," Ísland said acidly. "He can go fuck himself, the dingy pirate."

"Don't be vulgar," said Norge. "You should go."

"What? Are you joking?"
"His ship did the Dordlands job three years ago with our friend Tim. It's convenient." Ísland's face remained firmly fixed in perplexion. "I'm serious," Norge insisted. "Look, if you won't go alone, I'll go with you. But he wants something from you, so we've got a bargaining chip to force more information about Dordlands out of him. You said it yourself yesterday morning, we have no clue where Tim's sister is. This gives us a head start. And if he doesn't have what we want, then he doesn't get what he wants. Simple as that."

Which, though it irked Ísland, was actually a great idea.

"Fine," he said, grumbling, finding some parchment and ink, "but you're coming with me. And Sverige."

"Hell, let's all go," Norge said. "Make us a trip out of it."

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Ísland sent back the following message:

*Much as it pains me to do anything remotely associated to you - besides undoing your miserable work - I'm feeling generous.*

*Meet me in two days. Brattefjell Anchorage in the Cloud at 6 PM System Standardised Time sharp. I know the Great Delivery has speed when she wants so don't even think about being late. I will be in the Lower Service Meeting room. When you knock, give the password: 'Kirkland is a filthy pirate who steals people for money'. Nice and loud.*

He didn't bother signing it.

Six people in a tiny stealthship were not a great idea, but it would have to be the stealthship. Brattefjell Anchorage was ancient and nobody took care of it anymore. Its weight limits for docking ships were two centuries out of date, and Ísland didn't feel lucky testing the strength of the dilapidated beams on their airship, which was overweight and bulky. (Danmark had been saying for three years now that he'd apply for a minor degree in engineering at Langholt University to fix it, but nobody believed him anymore; Danmark's only consistency was being *all talk.*)

But Brattefjell was deserted. And Norge reported having spotted a tracker on the airship when he left Olyokin. That meant they couldn't use it until the façade changed, and that required three to four days.

(It would have been a mere two days if they had an engineer on the team. Ísland was just saying.)

--

They arrived in the stealthship at 5 PM to get ready. The anchorage was small and didn't have much in the way of defence. They'd been there nearly an hour when they finally heard voices.

"Wow," said one - not Kirkland - "you sure pick the best place for your dates. A creaky old shack. This is awesome. Not."

"I swear to the god I don't believe in," and that was Kirkland, "you get more insufferable with every day."

"The sooner you admit to yourself you secretly love my awesome company, the happier we'll all
be, Captain," the other voice said cheerily. "How 'bout before this thing falls apart, and we all get spaced?"

"Do you think you could kindly shut your mouth and perhaps keep it closed for the duration of the meeting?" Kirkland asked sweetly. "I only ask because this is a little bit important."

"I know it's important, you don't have to remind me! I'll be good, okay?" the other snapped. "I wouldn't do anything to risk Al."

There was a knock at the door. "Password?" Ísland called mockingly.

"For chrissake -"

"You don't get in without the password!" Ísland sing-songed.

Some grumbling, and then, "Kirkland is a dirty pirate who sells people for money. There. Now let me in." Amidst his snickering, Ísland gave the go-ahead to Sverige, standing behind the door to throw open the deadbolt and swing the door open.

"It was actually filthy pirate, who steals people for money, but I'll let that slide," said Ísland, slouching against a gunpowder crate and propping his feet up on another one.

Kirkland looked more ruffled than the fraying cuffs of his shabby frock coat. His companion was new to Ísland. He was a white-haired red-eyed pale man, wearing an over-sized shirt that long ago might have been white, which he had tied with a faded cloth belt and left to hang over loose pants. The only reason he didn't trip all over his pant legs was the criss-crossing twine that held the material tied tightly to his calves. He should've done the same with his shirt; his rolled-up cuffs kept sliding down past his skinny wrists. It'd be almost charming if he weren't a pirate.

"Look," Kirkland said. "I'm not happy about this either. Let me explain and it'll be clearer. Then we'll both be on our ways, nice-like, and we never have to see each other's faces again, aye?"

"The sooner that happens," Ísland hissed, "the better."

"Alright. Here's the matter. We need your services doing two things. Part one, we need you to make four million look like forty million."

A fairly simple job with check forging, as Kirkland knew. But Ísland wasn't willing to do anything for them just yet. "And why's that? Cap'n wants a new set of knives?"

"S got nothing to do with me. I need the money to purchase back a slave at the Decennial coming up. If it weren't for one of my stupid ex-crewmates, I wouldn't have to be anywhere near Hallar the day of the auction, but he went and picked up a boy from New Joplin that he shouldn't've. That's the boy I want to free. So far I've managed to sell him to someone who will put him up at auction - that makes it easier for a guy like me to buy him."

"But you can't get anywhere near Hallar these days." Ísland had read the news that morning; Kirkland and friends were officially persona non grata at Hallar airspace (and a few others).

"Precisely. They're going to be watching the hell out of every planet involved in the service trade to detain and question a mercenary frigate like mine. And it's the one time I need to get to Caput Halleri surface and back without getting shot at. How I'll manage to buy back the boy from the
auction is my next problem to tackle, but the first is to ensure I've got funds. I sold him for four million. If you can inflate that an order of magnitude - enough to buy him and travel back to New Joplin - I'll take him home.

"Part two, we need you to forge documentation and file it for us for this one here," he said, pointing to his white-haired associate.

Huh. So, not a pirate then. "Explain," Ísland said.

"I want to free him, too," Kirkland said. "He's been going from place to place since he's not sellable - none of the other traders've had much luck - so it's the end of the line. As it turns out, I need a boatswain, so he's even got a job, just needs the documentation."

"A job!" Ísland laughed. "He's even got a job', he says! You want me to help you hire another dirty bugger to help you do your shit work so you can continue stealing freefolk and making your money off their broken backs? You disgust me. No deal."

"Hey, hey hey!" said the white-haired one, "let's not get so hasty, huh? Captain's doing a bad job of explaining the real situation here. Lemme break it down for you instead." Kirkland was flushed and gaping, but the white-haired man just patted him on his hand, stage-whispering, "It's okay, I got this," which only made Kirkland more apoplectic.

For a prospective pirate, Ísland liked him immediately. "I'm listening."

"You must not know who I am, so here's the story since you've been under a rock. I'm the guy that goes from trader to trader to trader because none of them can figure out a way to tame the awesome me into being sold. I am Unsinkable and I can't be trained! Most of them have just decided to stop trying. Case in point, Romae. You know Avo Romae?"

Oh yes, Ísland knew Avo Romae. "Where is this going?"

"The traders, they figure, if they can't sell me to someone who wants my living body, they'll sell me to someone who wants my dead body. There are some real sickos out there, man," the white-haired man said, "real fuckin' sick. Do you know how much a sicko would pay for that kind of perversion?"

Ísland shrugged. "Maybe a million?" Kinky shit - more expensive - but an untrained slave, after all. They generally never asked more than a few hundred thousand for those.

"Try ten." Ten?! For an untrained slave? "Ten million they offered him to sell me to Avo Romae, so Romae could sell me to a pervert who wanted to hunt and kill me. Captain's never even seen that much money. And do you know what he said?"

"I'm sure you'll tell me," Ísland replied, trying to keep his face perfectly expressionless.

"He said no deal. For me. So you see what this is? And there's - there's no love here. In fact, Kirkland doesn't even like me. In fact, he probably hates my guts with how much I annoy him."

"That's not untrue," Kirkland piped up.

"And despite being offered ten million to get rid of me permanently, he wouldn't do it. I mean, Kirkland's not a good man -"
"I'm really not," Kirkland agreed.

"- but if he can manage this, for me, someone he doesn't like, imagine what he can do for someone he does like."

"I told you, I don't like him!" Kirkland said, flustered.

"Oh, you do too," white-haired guy said softly, "you must, I've never seen you bend over backwards like this for anybody." Not for me, Ísland heard, unspoken.

"Well this little love-in is simply adorable," Ísland snapped, "really, it is. But you're wasting my time so we'll cut to the chase. I've got a question, why would your little pirate-to-be here need proper documentation? Most pirates, when asked to present their documents, pull out a sword and say 'I got your documents right here'."

The white-haired guy cackled. "Oh man, I am so ready to do that it's not even funny."

"If I don't get him papers," Kirkland said, struggling to speak over his louder companion, "then he's still essentially a slave. He still can't go anywhere on his own. He still could be spotted, captured, and sold off to that same bidder who wants his head. And - well look at him, will you? You'll never forget that face. White hair and red eyes. Everyone knows who he is from the look of him, and ... and if anybody should ever get the word out that he's free for the taking, or if Romae should put a wanted sign out for his capture, he'd be gone in a flash."

"You can't protect him if they kidnap him in the dead of night and strip him of clothes and documents. Like a certain pirate I know does," Ísland sneered.

"No," Kirkland admitted, not rising to the bait, "but I'd do my best to get him back."

"Aw, captain," the white-haired prospective pirate said warmly, clasping his hands to his chest like an absurd swooning lover, "I'm touched!"

"Yes, in the head. Anyway. Will you do it?"

"Let me see if I've got this straight," Ísland said. "You're going to give me money - just pile it in my arms - and trust that I will inflate it for you, as a personal favour, because I'm that nice and the history between us is that important to me, instead of taking it and running, like you'd deserve?"

"We're, ah, not exactly spending it on a new ship," Kirkland said weakly, "it's for a good cause."

"And you'd like me to - while I'm at it, being so nice - forge some papers and file them for you so this guy can join your little piracy team."

"Yes, please!" said the white-haired one enthusiastically.

"And I guess I'm just to assume you will do exactly as you've said, instead of, oh, take the money and run, and leave the boy at auction. That'd be the most profitable route."

"I'd never," Kirkland swore.

Oh, really? Ísland thought drily.
"Then -" he made a show of clearing his throat - "what are you willing to give up?" Ísland said. "How do you want to pay for all this?"

And that was the cue for all the others to pop out of their hiding places - behind crates, behind the door, behind the desk - with pistols drawn and cocked. Kirkland's hand instantly leapt to the holster at his waist, but all too quickly, he was surrounded, and the horrified look on his face when he realised it was picture-perfect.

Ísland let his grin slowly shift from pleased to shit-eating. Some parts of his job were simply delectable and merited savouring.

"Toldja you should've given me a gun," the white-haired one hissed.

"You don't know how to fire a pistol!"

"I coulda learned!"

"Fat lot of good it'd've done anyway, we're still outnumbered," Kirkland muttered. He said aloud, "Ah, we can offer money -"

"What I don't have, I can create the illusion of having," Ísland said smugly. "I don't need your ill-gotten gains."

"Then, erm..." Kirkland seemed lost for words. It was a nice change of pace.

"We'll stop slaving," the white-haired one stated. "How about that? That helps your agenda."

"What?" Kirkland erupted. "That is - completely - absolutely not! Don't listen to him, he's mad -"

"I think I like that idea," and this time, it wasn't Ísland talking, it was Tim from the corner, approaching Kirkland and his associate slowly, Danmark not far behind him. "I think I like that idea a lot." He came about a metre away from Kirkland and stopped. Then he raised his pistol to Kirkland's face and pressed the barrel into Kirkland's forehead. The white-haired guy looked set to lunge, prepared to knock Kirkland out of the way, but Danmark stopped any more such motions with a gun pointed at his face.

"Do you remember me, Captain?" Tim asked softly, dangerously.

Kirkland swallowed, looking intimidated. "I'm afraid I don't," he admitted.

"I guess too many slip through your greasy hands for you to recall any fine details," Tim spat. "Allow me to jog your memory. Do you remember the Dordlands run?"

"Which one?" asked Kirkland quietly.

"Three years ago you took a pair of siblings. That was kinda weird, wasn't it? You'd never done that before. Remember it now? One of them had come to give you money to let the other one go, which you'd said you'd do, because you were just so nice. Do you remember what you did after?"

Kirkland nodded.
"Maybe now you recognise one of them, huh? Maybe it was hard to tell who I was because I didn't have this terrified, betrayed look, you know, the one that's now on your ugly mug? I'd give you a mirror for you to check it out and compare, but I don't know if you could stand to look yourself in the face after what you did - you took the money my sister brought, you took it all for Cap'n Kirkland, and then you took your pretty pair of slaves and sold us both to Romae. You remember now?" And Tim's voice cracked and wavered in his anger. "You remember how much money we made you, you filthy pig?"

"Wow, Captain," his associate said.

"I am not a good man," Kirkland murmured.

"No. You're not," the white-haired guy replied flatly.

"Yes, I remember you," Kirkland said, to Tim. "But I don't remember where you went afterwards. I only brought you to Romae. That's all I know."

Tim glared. "Well, guess we can't do anything for you, then."

"I remember Margot," the white-haired guy piped up, and Tim went rigid. "That's who you're asking for, isn't it? Your sister."

Tim nodded tightly, his eyes hard.

"Yeah, I remember Margot well," he said. "Desmond threw her in the brig when she didn't behave too nicely for him and she stayed there until we got to Hallar. She was neat."

"He tried to violate her," Tim growled.

"Keyword, tried. Didn't succeed. Also he's dead now. But yeah, Margot was awesome," the white-haired guy noted, with some pride. "The Delivery took her a few times around actually. Like they did with me, here and there."

"You think you can find her?" Ísland asked the white-haired guy. He nodded. "If you can get whoever's got her now to put her up at the Decennial, or to sell her to someone who will put her up at the Decennial, we'll buy."

"Heyy, uh, there was a reason Margot went around with us for a bit," he replied. "She's a real riot. About as sellable as I am."

"You will tell them there will be a buyer, and it's not someone who wants to kill her," Ísland clarified, his voice thin. "You do this for us, and help us buy our 'slave'; we'll forge you your papers and help you buy yours."

"Have I got your word on that?" Kirkland asked.

"You have. I'd ask for yours, but my friend here -" Ísland pointed to Tim - "can vouch for precisely how much that's worth." He stuck his hand out and let Kirkland defile it with a firm shake. Well, he didn't like these gloves anyway. "I trust you want to free this boy of yours badly enough that you don't screw this up. Once you've got what we want, you'll send me another note - since I know you know where to send it - and we'll meet again."
Kirkland said nothing. Good. There was nothing the foul pig *could* say.
The signal came in their hotel room on Olyokin. "Hey, we're hot," Agent Adnan said, shaking his partner awake. "Didja hear me? I said we're hot! Get moving, dumbass!"

"Whah," mumbled Karpusi. "God, it's what, four AM?"

"One in the afternoon, Rip Van fucking Winkle. I can't believe you can sleep through that," Adnan spat, referring to the Eavesdropper practically pissing itself with excited chirps. "Now get a move on. They're taking to the skies, we gotta follow her."

"Little Wing or Big Bird?"

"Dunno if they've made any changes to Big Bird," Adnan said. But it was the stealthship - Little Wing - the Eavesdropper had picked up on, from the vid feed placed at Nunat airspace outskirts. And that was dangerous, because Little Wing was fast, about as fast as the agency viper, and if they didn't move now, they'd lose her before they'd begun.

And Karpusi was still half-fucking-asleep. Goddammit. "We'll grab a coffee on the way back at an anchorage but we really gotta go," Adnan reminded.

"Fine," Karpusi said, climbing into the cockpit of the viper and belting himself in. "You're driving."

"Yeah no shit I'm driving. There's no way I'm letting you do it," Adnan replied. "Fuckin' narcoleptic," he said, as Karpusi leaned against the side window and dozed off again.

Although he remembered clearly - and fondly - being a young boy who was fascinated by the white smoke trails in the sky from Halleri sea-level, the feeling of piercing the clouds and atmosphere was, by now, completely lost on Agent Adnan. All in a day's work, so he thought nothing of ripping the throttle back, nosing the viper up, keeping her steady so that her fragile wings didn't get clipped by the speedy currents of Olyokin's atmosphere. There was not much joy in it anymore, for him, and neither was there much joy as the blue slowly gave way to indigo, navy, and finally black, dotted with far-off points of light.

He flipped the switch for the anti-glare. One would think the view would be amazing, from space, but truth was, they were still so close to the Sun - and an ice ball like Olyokin gave off one hell of a nasty reflection - that even with the anti-glare, all he could really see were a few particularly bright stars and the tiny specks of the other planets in the system.

And, off in the distance, a tiny, twinkling, fading light, which he couldn't see (but his controls could) which was their target - the group of five's stealthship, rapidly escaping.

He gave some thanks to the god of celestial mechanics that Olyokin was so close to Nunat these days. If Olyokin had been on the other side of the sun - or slightly more than an eighth of an orbit away - he could've done nothing. An eighth of an orbit apart was a massive headstart.

He kept a careful distance behind, with the lights off. Karpusi would be happy; no nightlights to
keep him awake (not like that ever stopped the guy from napping anywhere, anywhen). They travelled about four hours radially outward from the sun, into the Cloud, until the stealthship showed a sharp speed decrease on the controls.

They were spotted! But then he remembered. There was an old anchorage that hardly anybody used anymore. Glorified space junk with the bare necessities in the way of biosystems; pressure monitor and oxygen feed and a little bit of warmth, and that was about it. The pirates weren't dumb enough to go near it, it was a damn death trap waiting to happen.

*Of course*, that's where the stealthship headed. He pulled up in plain view and watched as they docked, clicking all engine systems off, retracting the shiny reflective panels and floating dead in the water. As good as cloaked as you could get.

Karpusi chose that time to wake up. "Mmh, we there yet?"

"Yeah, we're here," Adnan replied. "Ever been here before?"

Karpusi looked around. "What the hell is *that*?"

"That's an anchorage, believe it or not. At least two centuries old, maybe older."

"The hell are our boys doing wandering around these parts?"

"That is a very good question," Adnan mused. They watched in silence for about thirty minutes until - "hey, check *that* out. Over there."

To their right, by Karpusi's side, there was a much larger ship approaching - so large and near that they could just make out its overall shape visually. Karpusi took out his telescopic spyglass from his inner coat pocket and expanded it. "That's a frigate," he said. "Mercenary, judging from the flag and figurehead."

"Do you recognise her?"

"Not quite..." he expanded the spyglass more and fiddled with the focus a bit. "Yeah. That's the Great Delivery. The shape is familiar. And the pattern of lights on the side; Kirkland has a thing for chevrons," he decided. Karpusi collapsed the glass confidently and put it back in his pocket, removing something else - yesterday's newspaper. "I knew the shape looked familiar. That's her there, too," he said, pointing to the inset pictures in the article. Adnan took the paper to read it more closely.

**INFORMATION REQUEST IN NOVA RAIDS**

*Constables and federal agents from the New Joplin Security Control, as well as the Bonds Service Protection Agency, are looking for any information in regards to identification of the above pirate vessel which appears to be a frigate. The pictures are being released with extended thanks to the Nova sector Border Control, whose video feeds captured the images below from the recent raids on the Nova dwarves. If any individual should have information, please contact Major Constable Hassan of the New Joplin 118th Police Squadron.*

*Until further notice, all mercenary vessels class schooner and above are not permitted in any of the following airspaces: Hallar, New Joplin, New Sainte-Dolitte, Tenickson, Marigon and Bast. No comment yet from sources on Veshna, Schlessen, Nunat or Olyokin. Any vessels with these*
qualities found in these spaces will be detained for questioning.

"Oh for fuck's sake," he said. "So our little group is in talks with the pirates."

"I don't know what they're doing together," Karpusi said. "I'm willing to bet quality naptime it's not legal, though."

"Betting quality naptime!" Adnan snarked. "Watch out, we got a bad ass over here."

"Oh what, you want money on this? I can do money," Karpusi retorted, "since I'm the one Foster gave the promotion to."

"I'll get mine in three months, then we'll see who's laughing. In fact, I bet you the Qualla case Kirkland's helping our group of five."

"They'd never do it. I bet you the group of five is actually part of Kirkland's crew."

"You bet me what, your quality fuckin' beauty sleep?"

"No, ass-breath! The fucking Qualla case." The Qualla case, which had been promised to one of them, and only one of them, if they didn't manage to get any headway on the Nunat money launderers in the next month. The other would have to complete the damn Nunat money laundering case with Agent Metzger (who was a prick, something Karpusi and Adnan actually agreed about).

Adnan glared. "You're on," and they shook on it.

They watched on the controls as the Delivery's light spawned a second - probably a shuttle - which attached itself onto the ancient anchorage, and sat in stony silence for about fifteen minutes thereafter. "Are there any auds or vids on that thing?" asked Karpusi.

"Are you kidding me? That thing predates aud technology."

A short time thereafter both ships left. "Okay, they're definitely in cahoots," Karpusi said.

"We should split up," Adnan decided. "You go back and track the group, see what's up with the Janowska girl, I'll take the pirates."

"We only have one viper! What if I have to trail them back to Nunat from Olyokin?"

"You can get one with your clearance from the Vehicle Service DC in downtown Skuratchky."

"Really? Since when?"

"Uh, since always?"

"You mean I've been able to get my own ship for over two years now and instead I've been trekking around with you?"

"Hey, I'm not the one who slept through the debrief."

"You do realise with two vipers we might've stood a chance at, oh say, maybe surrounding our
friends here?"

Oh, shit. That was true. "Frankly I think you'd be better off with something a little tougher to crash, Sandman, like an armoured heavy raider or something," Adnan bit back.

"Tease the guy with the sleeping disorder, sure. That's imaginative as fuck as usual, asshole. Lemme know when you think up something legitimately decent, if that's even possible."

And their bickering continued along that manner for the majority of the ride back to Olyokin. By the time they'd gotten back to their motel and cold cups of tea, Adnan was fully convinced it was better they spend some time away from each other, so that they didn't wind up with a double homicide on top of money laundering.

There was just something about Karpusi's face that made him want to punch it really hard. They'd have to keep in contact obviously, but they could do that through mail. The mailers took stealthships these days, and made the trek much faster - Hallar to Olyokin in about a day, compared to a new airship (a day and a half to two days) or an old airship (four days best case scenario). It'd cost them a pretty penny in stamps but the Agency'd reimburse them, and he suspected they'd both work a lot better with more space.

Well, there was nothing like a solar system full of planets to get some space.
"Do you really think you can figure out where this girl is?" Kirkland asked him, as they shuttled back to the Delivery.

He nodded but didn't say anything. Too ... angry? confused? betrayed? He wasn't sure.

"If you can't, we're down four million and we won't be able to get Alfred back."

_Scheisse_, Alfred this and Alfred that! "The last time I saw Margot we were taking her back to Hallar from Marigon," he snapped, interrupting Kirkland and really not giving two shits about rudeness. Any favours he could get from this man depended more on whether Kirkland didn't suddenly about-face and screw him over. "I don't know who she went to on Hallar but the last guy who was keeping her was Antonio. Antonio keeps decent records. He'll know where she went after him."

"How long ago was this?"

"Few months back. She can't have gotten far. So as long as she went to big name dealers who keep better records, the paper trail is straightforward. Your only issue will be making sure you don't spend too long playing hide and seek, 'cause we only got two weeks."

"What if we run into a dealer who doesn't keep good records?"

"There's a reason I started out with the shits and worked my way up," he muttered. "Those who have been in the business longest, those who made names for themselves, they hear the rumours of slaves that can't be tamed and get excited. It's become a competition. One that Romae's winning, by the way. That's probably why he's so eager to get rid of me." The one that got away, the one that Romae couldn't fix. Romae didn't like failures.

"How do you know all this?"

"Because all of them are real easy to piss off when they're balls deep in you!" he spat. "And then they taunt you with a whole heap of shit, okay?"

"Christ, I'm sor-"

"You aren't," he retorted petulantly, "so don't even bother."

Kirkland looked like he would have said something more, but the shuttle had arrived at the ship, so instead there was tense silence as Kirkland walked him back to the brig.

"I am sorry, for what it's worth," Kirkland said softly, before he left the cell. He didn't answer, didn't move, he just sat stonily on the cot and stared at the ground with eyes so angry he felt like they could burn a hole through the floor. "I'm sorry for a lot of things."

Again, he said nothing. Kirkland murmured, "I'll come by 'round tea," and left, locking him in by himself.
He didn't do much but sit there in the dark, stewing and thinking. Sometimes when he was angry he threw things, like after someone had had their way with him, and he'd been foolish enough to let them get under his skin. Better something else break than him. That time that Val, Desmond and Fletcher all thought they'd be funny guys, all at the same time, and two held him down while the other went at it... When he was returned to his cell, he'd destroyed the pillow and scattered the feathers everywhere in his rage. But there was nothing to break anymore.

He was told, two months back when they picked him up from Spannagel of Luna Halleri (who, like all the rest, had thought he could make an honest slave out of the wild Unsinkable - hah, fat chance), that he was lucky to have a mattress. Desmond had sneered that the only reason they'd given it to him was so it'd be more comfortable for the pirates' knees when they came by to do their rounds.

Desmond hadn't had the chance in the time inbetween, what with the Nova sector raid and the subsequent fallout over Alfred. He was only sorry the man hadn't died more slowly. Floating in a sea of black among old space junk and rocks seemed somehow too poetic a death for someone so vile.

Was it because he'd fought so hard the last time? Did that make Desmond think twice about acting as guard on his cell, make him desperate enough to play stupid and take what wasn't his on New Joplin? Was Alfred's predicament somehow his fault?

No, he thought, Desmond was a disgusting beast, but there had been very little logic or prediction to his actions. He was more of the 'do what feels good' sect, with a side helping of 'and damn the consequences if you should get caught'. There were a fair number of those serving on the Delivery under Kirkland's captaincy - not the majority, but enough. He couldn't figure out how Kirkland hadn't ejected them all immediately. Did they really do any decent work around here? Was Kirkland starved for crew members? If that were the problem ... hell, Unsinkable knew enough potential crewmates back on Luna Halleri, or on Marigon with Yannick. Of course, these people would be much, much less easy to coerce into contributing to the trade. Maybe that'd mean Kirkland would have to stop slaving after all.

He'd meant what he'd said, to that fellow Kirkland met with. If he managed to survive this whole thing and get papers, he'd make the captain see reason, he'd make him stop somehow. How he'd do that was another problem for another time. First he had to get the papers. He could worry about changing Kirkland later.

If changing Kirkland was at all possible.

Probably, this whole thing was for the better, he reflected, because it would be a wake-up call for poor old Unsinkable. Finding out that Arthur Kirkland had said once before he'd free someone for money - and then turned right back round and sold them anyway. That was only three years ago. How much had changed in that time? Had anything changed?

He would have liked to think something had. It'd been five years for him, since Schlessen, and most of that time he'd spent on the Delivery in one way or another.

Sometimes with pirates like Desmond or Val or Fletcher or any of the other grunting fat lumps of sluggish moving swineflesh.
But just because some of Kirkland's crew were shit-folk didn't mean they all were, and the ones who weren't, were consistently shocked by the amount of fight-and-fuck-you-too attitude of the frankly legendary Unsinkable.

They all talked, the pirates. The only difference was the ones who were impressed with his antics talked it up the chain to Kirkland, and that had made a world of good because that's what had caused the good Captain to deign spending some time near the brig mates. Incidents with the ape-brains had sharply decreased - no nonsense while Cap'n's around! - and bonus, he had found Kirkland was an interesting man to talk to. He was vivacious, intelligent. And so much fun to pick at!

He'd thought for awhile, maybe Kirkland took his baits on purpose. Kirkland let him win, he let him slip by his defences, past that frock coat and under his skin, so that it'd ease his own tension on himself from all those people who were trying so hard to get him down (and more than once, he thought he'd snap like an elastic band any moment and they would have him then).

But that was foolish, because Kirkland never did anything for anybody.

Still, he thought ... he thought he'd at least known the pirate captain decently. Hadn't he spent some three-quarters of the past few years, going from one trader to the next? Hadn't the majority of those trips been with the Delivery? Hadn't the majority of his time on the Delivery been spent in that interrogation room, verbally sparring with Kirkland until their insults derailed into pleasant absurdity? Kirkland was predictable, to an extent, just like any other man.

A very, very small part of him ... kinda liked Arthur Kirkland. Maybe just a little. Felt some kind of respect for the man despite his profession. Maybe that part wouldn't be there if it'd been the Great Delivery who had gone to Schlessen five years back. If, like that angry man they'd met, it had been Kirkland himself who'd spotted him - his snow-white hair, his blood-red eyes - if Kirkland had seen a boy who, once properly fed and trussed up all nice, would sell real well at the markets (if only he weren't so damn feral).

Did Kirkland have the wool over his eyes all this time? Had he been pretending to be decent?

All this second-guessing was starting to turn his freakin' stomach. Time to get practical before he needed the chamber pot and filled his cell with the stench of sick.

From a purely fiscal standpoint, sure, it made sense! If you had a slave that you didn't care for or particularly like, and you stood to make ten million off his sale, and you sold people all the time, and (he'd done the math) you never took home more than about twenty grand a year, much of which you had to spend on constant ship repairs - would you do it?

He'd thought there was some part of Kirkland that had liked him, that had cared for him. Some small part that Kirkland himself didn't acknowledge. Wasn't there?

And Alfred! God, if he didn't rescue Alfred - but, of course Kirkland would want to rescue Alfred. He'd had an eye out for that one from the moment he came aboard. Not like Alfred was in danger of losing his life!

...But that wasn't fair either, he admitted. Alfred was in danger of losing something else, losing his name, losing his mind, losing himself. That boy couldn't take it. That boy had to be taken home. (But did it have to happen at his expense? Couldn't Kirkland be satisfied with doing two good
deeds that he might not get paid for?)

He thought about the six people they'd met, most notably the tall angry one, and the short one with the cool, unimpressed look, who'd done most of the talking. Supposing that guy didn't follow through with his end of the deal. Pulled a Kirkland and poof, the money just vanished.

No, he wouldn't do that. The guy he knew, the angry guy, Margot was his sister, and he wanted to find her. Surely that went deeper than money. Besides, quiet guy had said it best - what money he didn't have, he could make himself. Unlike Kirkland, money was no issue to these guys. Their goal was making sure Margot'd be at auction. They'd get that information, come hell or high water (or helping Kirkland).

What if he couldn't find Margot?

It was total bluster, on his part, back at the shabby old anchorage. He didn't know where she was. In fact he had no clue. He assumed she was still back at Antonio's but that was almost a half year ago. Maybe she was taken somewhere else, by another ship that didn't talk to Kirkland's crew, like the Queen's Corsair or the Wanderlust. If she was still anything like Unsinkable then he could almost guarantee that had been the case. Maybe Antonio didn't know where she was. Maybe the BSPA had been checking on Antonio recently and he had had to get rid of a few files.

Hell, Antonio didn't even know her name. Like most, Antonio numbered his charges. He'd have to make sure Kirkland knew exactly who to ask about - blonde, about as tall as he was, tall and thin, would be about 25 now, maybe 26 (but all the tonic they fed you, that meant nothing). Bright green eyes, freckles on her bony shoulders, thick eyebrows for a girl. Oh, scar on her neck from an idiot trader who wasn't too careful about observing the no permanent marks rule. They kept her hair longer as a result to hide it. Margot had told him she liked keeping her hair short back home, but they knew better than to have a knife around her.

Romae had written two numbers on her, once. So many passed through Romae's clutches that he had to mark them all, somehow. Couldn't be permanent; the well-trained slaves were always pristine, and the goal of a slave was to look as much like a well-trained as possible to get the highest price for the trader. That meant no permanent marks.

The first number - well that was four years ago. He didn't remember the number. When Margot had shown him her forearm, what they'd gloated about together was how many little scratches she'd gotten on it and the blood under her own fingernails, 'cause that girl gave as good as she got. (It was hard to give a high-five through the bars of the Delivery but they'd managed it!)

The second time was more recent, but all he remembered was 23-something. "How old I was when they took me, incidentally," Margot had said. That was the only reason he remembered. He didn't remember anything from what the traders did, but he remembered personal details about those who were taken. Someone had to.

That was it. That was literally all he had to go on. Kirkland would have to somehow be able to take these little scraps of information and string them together. He almost felt like praying, for Alfred's sake. (Not that praying had done any use at all in his entire life.)

Of course, if he were already at Romae's, looking for Alfred's auction records ... couldn't he just swing by, grab Alfred, and steal him back? Then they could escape together, and find some way to get an airship ticket back to New Joplin - they'd need money, not for the airship tickets but for the people they'd need to bribe in order to keep prying eyes off two young men with no documents.
And maybe Alfred could help him. Gotta thank the hero properly, right? He'd get set up there, someplace where the pirates didn't come too often - they always did random raids to make it look like isolated incidents, after the New Joplin raid they probably wouldn't be back for another decade ... this could work, couldn't it?

No, he thought, sobering, it really couldn't. Supposing Alfred wasn't kept under lock and key. That wasn't likely, all of Romae's slaves were. Three locks on the main door, six inches of steel and broad wooden beams, no windows that weren't barred from the outside. He remembered this part clearly.

Supposing he somehow managed to get himself and Alfred as far as the spaceport without running into Romae's people (doubtful). Supposing they managed to pick enough pockets to buy tickets, or a single ticket if he posed as Alfred's bondsman, and supposing nobody recognised him (despite his unique looks) and told Romae where to find them. They'd be stopped at the spaceport when Alfred couldn't present identification documents. A request for Alfred's papers, filed back on New Joplin, would take three days for the mailships to bring a copy back to Hallar. And in the three days that passed, Alfred and he would be detained by Border Control and interrogated, and if they managed not to crack during those three days, they'd be found out when the papers came in and showed that Alfred did not have a bondsman.

Oh, hell. In the three days' time between their capture and the arrival of the papers from New Joplin, he'd bet the good money he didn't have that Romae'd catch wind of it somehow - the man practically owned Caput Halleri - and grab the two of them back. Alfred would never see the light of day again, and as for him - off to Tenickson to play a most dangerous game. Their only chance would be if the Caput Halleri Security cells were easier to break out of than the Delivery brig. That was a big if. And it still meant he'd need to conjure up an exit plan on the fly with very little time or preparation before Romae caught wind of their capture.

He wanted to believe, so badly, that Kirkland wouldn't do it. Wouldn't sell him out. More than just the validation, because it meant he was a good judge of character after all. Kirkland had some good in him, Alfred was right about that. There wasn't a lot, but there was some.

Couldn't Kirkland spend it on him?

His best bet - his only bet - was to trust Kirkland. Trust the man that they together could find out where Margot was, and that Kirkland was honest about his vow to do what it took to free Alfred (which ultimately wouldn't even cost him that much). If he could buy himself some time with his ability to sneak into Romae's and nab Alfred's auction records, he'd make sure Kirkland gave him his papers first, before Alfred's info was handed over. Didn't have the papers, didn't get Alfred's info, and Unsinkable would just scamper off.

It was a dirty trick. If Kirkland pulled a Kirkland, it'd mean Alfred would also suffer. Well, he admitted, Unsinkable didn't get this far by playing Mister Nice Guy and sticking his neck out for people 'cause nobody had ever stuck theirs out for him. Alfred was a sweet kid and all but he wasn't the one who was gonna die.

Besides, there was no real worry. Kirkland was so smitten that if he didn't have the papers ready, he'd get them ready, lickety split. Anything for Alfred.

It gave him some amount of leverage over the captain, at any rate. That made him feel better, a lot better. If the man's conscience wouldn't make him do right, he could force him into it.
So when Kirkland knocked sheepishly for tea, he managed to smile.
Spain

Antonio of Marigon sat in the lobby of the Caput Halleri Deversorium - comfortable beds, good service, complimentary wine and all the fresh fruit one could eat at the buffet (his favourite part). He had a coffee - also complimentary - and was reading the morning news when Francis of Hallar, formerly of Bast, walked in through the front doors.

"I thought I'd find you here," he said, sounding insulted. "You dog! You thought you'd come to Hallar for a few days and not see your old friend?"

"I had business," Antonio replied.

"Yes, I heard. If I hadn't run into Lovino Vargas in the market stalls the other day, I would never have even known you were on the planet."

Antonio sighed. "So he is planet-side after all. I enquired after him during talks with Romae, who he said he was off at an anchorage and wouldn't be back for a few days."

"Antonio," Francis explained patiently, "how in the world could one spend a few days on an anchorage? They're not exactly tourist material." Come to think of it, that made a lot of sense. "I'm afraid he lied to you."

"He probably just came home early," Antonio replied evenly, swilling his coffee around. He wasn't going to drink any more, but it gave his hands something to do. "Anyway. It is good to see you. How're things?"

This was proof Antonio was much more used to the way of life on Marigon. On Marigon, one could ask a question like how are you and expect to get a one-word answer, usually positive or fairly neutral, regardless of the truth. One could be dying of cancer, and if asked "how's life been treating you?", a Marigonian would reply not much more than "oh, been better".

Francis launched into a twenty-minute tirade.

"...So then I told her, she could show herself out, and she had the gall to threaten me by way of parting."

"You didn't do anything hasty, did you?"

"Of course not! But after some careful thought, I was still insulted. So I did some research. Turned out Kaisa Tillen of Hallar is her employer, the very same to whom I sold mon petit Claude awhile back. Called upon Tillen, had her over for dinner, gave her a bit of a nudge where Héderváry is concerned, implied Héderváry wasn't doing her job all too efficiently. What? Do not look at me so. She isn't. If she has time to come bother people like me then she's got too much time on her hands. She's evidently looking for something to do.

"Well anyway, Héderváry and Tillen hate each other so this fans the flames. Last I heard from Tillen, Councillor Héderváry had not left the office earlier than 9 PM for a week with all the paper sludge. Perfect timing on Héderváry's part, because Wiebe Lennart has returned to Marigon for
parental leave, so they needed to give all his work to someone. Héderváry was simply the lucky recipient. And if you ask me there's nobody more deserving. What a horrid excuse for a human being. I feel little sympathy or guilt," Francis finished.

"Aren't you at all worried about retaliation? This Héderváry character sounds like serious business." Antonio was wary of pissing off the Hallar BSPA, having done it once before. (Marigon was easily appeased with a bit of money thrown here and there. One of the reasons he'd relocated.)

"Yes but what you forget, my friend, is that so am I. I should think this little episode will be more than enough to show her she mustn't interfere in my affairs."

"But surely -" and here Antonio leant forward and lowered his voice, because it was illegal, what Francis had been doing, but he didn't want to play a role in convicting his friend. "Surely you must be anxious she'll return with a proper search warrant?"

Francis appeared dismissive. "I've been stalling that paper trail where I can. Even if she could get a warrant - and now that I've seen to it she has no security clearance, she can't - she couldn't get it until well after the auction. The red tape makes anything difficult to get, and she isn't very good friends with anybody at work via Tillen who outranks her so she can't grease any wheels. It buys me at least two and a half weeks until after the auction."

"By which time?"

"By which time, I'll have bought Matthieu and everything will be fixed. If she tries anything I shall claim barratry, which if you ask me, I think this entire thing reeks of anyway. They can smell money off you, you see. They smell it on me; they want some. I shouldn't take it personally but when a character like Héderváry comes into your shop and insults your business... I don't think I can be blamed for my anger!"

"Francis, you can't deny you weren't supposed to be doing what you were doing. Those trainers fees the BSPA gives you - what is it, sixty grand per head per year for a prospective? That's quite the hefty sum. Supplies are cheap here on Hallar, you can't possibly spend more than 30% of that money on supplies. And rent is inexpensive for you. Adepts are to be sold, not used as one's personal harem, and especially not when the state gives compensation for your enjoyment of them. I can't blame them for coming after you. You owe them taxes in backpayment and you've been surcharging them for years. The interest on both matters must be egregious."

"Bah!" Francis scoffed. "They only care about the money. I could care less about it! There are more important issues at stake for which money is but a tool. Which reminds me. It is indeed serendipitous that I ran into you."

That sounded like... "You want a favour," Antonio guessed.

"Hear me out first," Francis said, and offered, "I can pay you in advance." So far, so good. Antonio didn't stop him. "Due to Héderváry's scrutiny, I can't purchase Matthieu at auction. Someone must buy him for me, and then sell him to me afterwards."

"Isn't that also illegal?" Antonio backed up. "I want no hand in illegalities." Any more than he already had a hand in! "It's bad enough I'm even here, typically Romae and I conduct all our talks on the anchorage -"

"I think you and your talks with Romae are worse than what it is I propose." Antonio agreed, albeit
reluctantly. "This is nothing more than a minor misdemeanour offence and if I should be prosecuted for it - which I won't! - I'd take all the blame and absolve you fully."

Antonio sighed. "What is it you want me to do," he asked flatly, already knowing the answer.

"Buy Matthieu, and sell him to me afterwards. In fact, I can simply give you all the money now - we can go back to the Emporium, I can give it to you, or present you with a cheque, it doesn't matter to me. I expect he'll go for about 4 million."

Only 4 million? At an auction, where the bidders got caught up in the heat, thrill and competition of the purchase, any trained slave of Francis of Hallar's could expect to go for at least ten. "It's not like you to be so taken with one so plain," Antonio said.

Francis flushed. "It's not because he's plain that he'll only go for 4 million! He isn't plain at all. It's - Matthieu is a quiet sort. Not the kind most people want. Of course, I don't mind it."

"Why do you want him then? 4 million could get you more than someone you 'don't mind'."

"W-well," Francis said, a bit nervously, "he's become incredibly necessary around the Emporium. Everything runs so much more smoothly with him there. He balances the books, does the filing, I dictate him the client letters, he scripts them out, he knows all my habits and my schedule, he - he's my accountant, secretary and day planner. There's not a single issue with business I don't at least run by him first. What he lacks in formal education he more than makes up for in experience. And he's enthusiastic about learning."

"That's a very expensive executive assistant," Antonio said.

"He's more than that too!" Francis quickly covered. "He's also an excellent chef, he's nice to talk to -"

Antonio stopped him there. "Francis. I'm an excellent chef. I'm nice to talk to. The only difference I'm hearing so far is that this boy is your assistant in business and your best friend, all rolled into one, who you also fuck. Well, you have friends. You don't want for money - you could hire an actual assistant, with actual credentials. And you don't want for lovers! Do you know, Helena Carson of Luna Halleri still asks about you, as does Aled Jones of Marigon?"

"Oh for the sake of - I don't want any of them! It's - It's Matthieu whom I - who means something to me! You understand what I mean, don't you? Can't you see?"

See that Francis was being irrational and getting overly anxious, yes. Honestly, the laws for keeping service people like this were made precisely to prevent situations like these, so that a responsible trainer would be that much more driven to sell their wares. "It sounds like any other old expired bondservant who's outlived his service and couldn't manage to be bought - you've merely gotten creative in finding uses for him."

Francis became indignant. "He's not just some old expired bondservant! My Matthieu -" Yours? thought Antonio. You haven't bought him yet - "Matthieu is my life! He is everything to me, I need him, and if other people can't appreciate his beauty, his being - it is their fault and my profit. Antonio, please, you must, you must do this for me -"

"You're really fixated on this silly thing," Antonio murmured worriedly.
"Antonio, I can't. I can't live without him. I love him." and Francis ceased speaking immediately and clapped his hands over his mouth, his eyes wide with shock.

The silence hung between them like static noise.

Antonio laughed. Nervously. "How, how can you possibly be in love with a possession?" Francis couldn't meet his gaze, his face red. "Francis, that's." Disgusting, he wanted to say. "That's - how incredibly perverse!"

"Yes, yes, I know," Francis moaned softly, "I'm sick and twisted. Make fun of me all you like. I don't care anymore. Everything will be entirely meaningless if I do not have him. I can't lose him. I would be lost myself. Will you help out a poor soul?"

"You're sick and twisted, alright," Antonio murmured. "Look, this isn't healthy. I hate to be the one to tell you, but it'd be better for you to let him go. He's a bondsman, you can't love him, you can't marry him -"

"My friend," Francis said, "I did you a favour when I took in your little unspeakable. The blonde one, with the green eyes, the one who gave you those nasty scars?" Yes, Antonio remembered her. The Marigon BSPA still wanted her put down. He pursed his lips, not liking where this was going. "Please my friend. Antonio. I did you a favour then. I'm calling in that favour now."

"You're still not listening to me. You need help," he said bluntly. Francis' face fell. "But - you're a friend. Yes, I'll help you out. What number will he be?"

"Thirty," Francis said, looking better already. "I'm going on right before Romae; my set is numbers 18 through 30."

Twelve of them? "That's a fair few for someone who does the business the way you do, I wasn't expecting more than five. Have you begun sourcing from Schlessen?"

"No, the Veshnan numbers are growing. No thanks to Romae," Francis grumbled.

"But that's good for you! More work!" If Francis kept busy, there'd be no time to fall in love with objects.

"The only benefit I can see is that there are more Veshnan service children with every year, in response to the injection of the untrained servants. Nobody profits from Romae's activities except Romae."

"I profit just fine," Antonio mused.

"And how is a mystery to me. I will never understand why you have a mix of trained and wild. The trained are so much easier to work with. The wild ones - you have to subdue them! You have to keep them in line. No amount of niceness will calm them down, you have to be rough, quite rough. The only person who could possibly enjoy that is - is a sadist."

"Hey now," Antonio warned, "there may be feeds about. Don't slander Romae in his own town. Besides, that man's a genius. A visionary! He's got it all worked out." Francis glared, and Antonio said quickly, "No, really! Allow me to explain. The drawback to starting service people so young is having to rely on the Veshnans and their ability to network with the Subscripts. But the Subscripts are unreliable - they say they'll sign up and contribute a child, then pull out at the last minute. And
Veshnan legislation is entirely broken, gives too many rights to the Subscripts. A few years back there were fewer and fewer available service people, and more and more trainers which meant less work for us all - and the BSPA didn't make things easy on us with a recession-worthy per-head fee -"

"I know this story," Francis muttered, "you and I braved these waters together."

"Just setting the scene. It hit Romae pretty hard. It seems that when he's threatened, he gets his best ideas. So he got in touch with a few ... independent consultants -"

"Privateers."

"Yes, them - and started looking for available people from other places than just Veshna. New Sainte-Dolitte had wonderful crops of adepts just waiting for it, especially in Nipitouache, Cache-Douze and the Dordlands - kids who were starving, parents who couldn't make ends meet. What an obvious solution! Gives the parents money, gives the kids a chance at a better life - full stomachs, education, clothing -"

"That doesn't explain the sadistic training."

"But that's the beauty of it, Francis!" Antonio beamed. "When you have a Veshnan group that went through Service Primary Education, and young enough subscribing children - no older than, let's say twelve - they feed off each other. The groups grow together, they befriend one another, they teach each other. It calms the wilder ones, it smooths out rough edges. At the end of the day, you yield more sellable items of similar quality."

"You can't possibly sell them all for the same price?" Francis asked. Trust Francis to smoke out a potential commercial threat.

"Of course not. But a well-trained subscribing girl from Schlessen can fetch between 20% and 80% the cost of a Primary graduate from Veshna. I'd say it more than works out."

"Fat lot of good this did for Belle," he remarked. At Antonio cocked head he clarified, "Your little unspeakable. I named her Belle."

Strange Francis and his strange ways of naming his adepts. No wonder he fell in love with them, he was too deeply immersed. "Yes, well, there's counter examples for every theory. I suppose, if you get them too late, it ... causes some strife, sometimes. But generally they calm down within a few years of dedicated attention."

"Just like Unsinkable?"

"Don't remind me about that one." Unsinkable was a nightmare and a half. He'd never had to be so brutal in his life to an adept, and as for strife, the boy spread it like a brushfire.

A man arrived - a doorman, possibly? That would make sense, though his uniform didn't fit him well - an ill-fitting vest and shirt that hung off his frame like a rag. It was clean and tucked in, but could not the average Deversorium employee afford a tailor's services? He said quietly, by Antonio's shoulder, "Mr. Fernandez Carriedo, call for you."

Antonio wasn't expecting a call. "Have they left a card?"
"They did not, sir. A man, sir. He did however stress it was urgent."

"That could be Romae," Francis suggested. Or - maybe Lovino? Ah, Lovino!

"It could be. Francis, I'm very sorry - I should attend to this."

Francis brushed it away with a casual hand. "It is not a problem, my friend. If you will do for me as we agreed, I'd be more than happy to take you out for dinner tonight. We may talk at greater length there."

"I -" he looked nervously around, to the walls, to the door, to the doorman - "yes. Alright. I'll do it." Francis smile was large and toothy and he murmured his thanks like a litany. "We'll discuss the finer points around 6."

"I'll pick you up," Francis said, "and thank you again, my friend."

Antonio bade him good day and left with the doorman, a short, thin man with black hair and green eyes, and rather thick eyebrows to match his rather thick moustache. They met up with another man by the Deversorium entrance - a cab driver judging from the dress. He was taller and somehow thinner still, with pale skin, tinted spectacles and black hair stuffed under a cap.

"Is this man not waiting in my room?" Antonio asked as the doorman and his cabbie friend led him outside to, appropriately enough, a cab. Though the cab already had a driver sitting at the helm with reigns in hand and an impatient horse.

"He is not, no," the doorman replied, opening the door and ushering his friend and Antonio inside. "Only a short ride away."

The second the cab began moving the two men, flanking Antonio, drew both sets of curtains on the cabin closed, and the doorman locked the door. "What's the meaning of this?" Antonio asked. An elaborate ruse? Perhaps he shouldn't have come so willingly. But how was he to know it was a trap?

"I said there was a man calling on you. That would be me," the doorman said, and removed his hair - it was a wig - and a nose-piece, which extended his own nose to a more bulbous size and added a moustache.

Karpusi,

Checking in from Hallar. Spotted our pretty little bird in the sky, dropping onto the surface. Tried to ask around, about her and her shuttle, and of course they all acted like there wasn't anything there and I was mad.

Now I remember why I dislike Hallar. Or maybe just the Border Control checkpoints.

Don't suppose we have a bribery fund or something in the department? It's that or intimidation, because charm doesn't seem to work on them.

Going to tell Hassan what we saw. I don't know if it'll smoke out the foxes on the Delivery, but it'll make them get the hell out of dodge and I don't think I have enough patience for Hallar Border Control. Shit's all run by that dog Avo Romae anyway. Maybe working with Hassan will give me a few more clues what the hell Kirkland's up to and how it relates to our case. Lastly, if the pictures from the paper are any clue, I think Hassan's got some serious connections where planetary Border Control checkpoints are concerned. This is good, because apparently I don't.

-Adnan

(ps, I picked these pills up at the chemist's, supposed to help with staying awake so you can concentrate on the group of five, since I'm not there to wake your ass up every two minutes.)

--

Major Constable Hassan,

I wish to inform you that the Great Delivery was spotted by my partner and me during our travels. It matches perfectly the pictures in the article on the Nova raids in the paper a few days ago. I offer no other conclusive proof, but advise you to concentrate your efforts on the frigate Great Delivery of Banningham under the captaincy of Arthur Kirkland, formerly of Banningham.

I will be in the area within a few days; my ship is slower than the mailships. Will check in to see if you're around for lunch.

Sincerely,
Sadik Adnan, Field Department, Hallar BSPA
"I thought no vessels of class larger than schooner were to dock at Hallar airspace!" Antonio asked.

"Yes, well -"

"You own a frigate. Which is much larger than a schooner!"

"It's a rather exceptional set of circumstances, it appears."

"How did you know I'd be on Hallar?"

"Lovino mentioned it about a week ago, during one of my sells to Romae. He's been preparing double time for the auction since he doesn't plan to attend this year," and Antonio calmed down upon hearing 'Lovino', though he wasn't pleased to hear he wouldn't be at the auction. And he didn't unfreeze any towards Kirkland.

"So that's why you're here," he sneered.

"Romae wanted the remainder of the shipment from the Nova Sector. He was graceful enough to persuade the right people to look the other way when we cleared the airspace with a shuttle," Kirkland explained.

"I'm surprised you have friends in such high places. I'm surprised you have friends at all," Antonio parried, and next to him, Unsinkable gave a derisive snort. Kirkland ignored both of them.

"Listen, I didn't kidnap you for idle chit-chat," Kirkland said. "We need you to do something for us. You're right, we're not to be planet-side, and ... we won't receive dispensation for the auction, either. We need you to buy a bondsperson for us there."

"Why should I do anything for you without a little incentive?" Antonio sneered, and Kirkland's first thought was in Unsinkable's voice, saying, 'I've got your incentive right here!' and miming the drawing of his cutlass. It made him blush and almost smile, until he remembered how angry the man was with him. Bloody Island.

"We cover the costs entirely, and we pay you back - with change for you - after all's said and done." Hell, Kirkland would offer up the eight hundred thousand - a great deal more than Antonio made in a year - as 'just take it and forget this happened' money.

"Even if I wanted to do something for you, which I don't particularly, I couldn't," Antonio snapped. "I'm already buying one for a friend. Hallar BSPA will be all over the auction to make sure nobody steps a toe out of line, and I can't purchase more than one due to my income bracket, which Marigon so delightfully makes public."

Kirkland narrowed his eyes. "Who's the friend?"

"Mister None of Your Business. Now can I leave?"
"Not just yet. We need information about someone you had once -"

"Twice," Unsinkable interrupted.

"Twice. Blonde haired, green-eyed, thin and perhaps a few inches shorter than you are. She was picked up off the Nova dwarves about three years ago."

"Doesn't ring a bell."

"Extremely feisty," added Unsinkable, who was supposed to be remaining silent! Of course, it was silly for Kirkland to expect him to keep his mouth shut for more than a moment. "She sprained your wrist and nearly took one of your eyes out. In return, you pulled her hair and bruised her ribs."

Antonio glowered. "Yes, I know her. That's Francis' little Belle."

"Her name is Margot."

"I don't name them. And she isn't mine anymore. Go talk to Francis, he said he'd have better luck selling her but he's been no more successful than I am. She's probably still there." Antonio paused. "Your voice... I know that voice -" and before Unsinkable (or Kirkland) could put the guns up again he'd torn the dark shades off the other man's face. "Yes, I do know you!" he exclaimed, and then he spoke words that made Kirkland's blood run cold. "Do you have any idea how much money is out there for you?"

"Fuck the money, my life is priceless!" Unsinkable spat.

"Not to me, it's not. Why, I could place a call and have Romae here within minutes. The price he's asking, I'd never want for anything again in my life. I could split the proceeds with you, Kirkland -"

"He isn't for sale," Kirkland insisted.

"Why, did you do something so foolish as buy him? I didn't take you for the daredevil type."

"Nobody bought me! And nobody's gonna tell Romae I was even planet-side." Antonio looked unconvinced. "You're going to conveniently ignore this fact. In return, we'll convince your little friend Lovino to be at the auction so you don't get sad." Not another errand! thought Kirkland. This bloody Alfred plan was so much more trouble than it was worth.

Antonio practically simpered. "You would do that? You have those connections?"

"Kirkland doesn't, I do," he said. "We got a deal?" Antonio nodded enthusiastically.

Kirkland put a stop to it before he let Unsinkable get them into any more trouble. "Then that's all, and this concludes our business." He put on his wig again, adjusted it and rapped on the side of the door to let the driver know to slow and stop driving in circles.

The second Antonio was out of earshot, Kirkland yanked on his stupid associate's arm. "You are an imbecile!" he hissed. "I told you not to say a bloody word, not one word, and now you've gone and landed us something else to do."

"Relax," was the calm reply, and it had its usual effect on Kirkland - it sparked a minor fit of
"I'm impressed," Kirkland said, and Unsinkable preened behind his lenses. "I suppose I needn't worry about your skills anymore, you'll make a fantastic pirate with these kind of tricks."

"Yeah, well," he snapped darkly, "I learn from the best, don't I," and he threw Kirkland a dirty look.

Kirkland ignored it, though he flushed with shame. "A suggestion? Don't do it with Francis, he's not nearly as naive, and I don't want to lose - to lose focus. So just as we agreed, aye? I go in first, and if he's there, you wait for me to catch his attention. Once I've got that secured, you can creep in. Scope out the place to get a feel for what Romae's Emporium interior looks like - all these old buildings have the same floor plans - and for the love of the god I don't believe in, get out before anyone notices you're there."

"Right."

--

Kirkland walked through the door of the Emporium. As he entered, he heard the chime of a bell on the glass. There wasn't a single person in the Emporium front room, however, so he held the door open long enough for Unsinkable to slip by and hide behind a desk before he let the door shut.

"As we agreed!" Kirkland whispered, and Unsinkable waved him off. Kirkland could practically hear, Yeah, yeah, don't nag.

"Who's there?" called a timid voice. A thin man - not Francis - stood at the end of the front room, next to the heavy curtains. He wore slave garb, but it seemed newer, somehow. Must be Francis' bondsman, though he acted more like a secretary. He gave Kirkland a judging look, noting the ill-fitting Deversorium clothes.

Kirkland refused to feel self-conscious about something he stole. "I'm looking for Francis of Hallar," he stated.

"Have you got an appointment?"

"He'll want to see me. I have important information for him."

"So..." the bondsman replied, "you haven't got an appointment."

This man was either dull as a doorknob or giving him lip for looking shabby. Kirkland glared. "Go get your master," he sneered, "and if you'd like to give him a name it's Captain Arthur Kirkland of the Great Delivery. Please and thank you." The bondsman rolled his eyes and disappeared back up the curtain.

Seconds later, the curtain jiggled again. "Kirkland," Francis growled, and strode over to him with angry, heavy thumps.
"Yes, Francis, delighted to see you too -" but before he could finish that sentence, like lightning Francis had raised his fist and introduced it to Kirkland's jaw with a loud smack. As he stumbled, he swore he could hear Unsinkable's low cackle. Laugh louder, why don't you, he thought, rubbing his cheek. "Bloody mother of -"

"You have more gall than I thought," Francis spat, his fist still raised. "To call upon my store like this! You think we wouldn't find out, hein?"

"About what?"

"That you ratted Antonio of Hallar out to the Caput Halleri Border Control Checkpoint in exchange for a two-year clemency deal! You're the reason he has languished upon Marigon for over a decade!"

"I-it's not nearly as bad as you're making it out to be!"

"Typical pirate. You only ever think of yourself!"

"If I didn't do what I did, I wouldn't've been able to get to Romae's place for deliveries and he has to come out to the Anchorage. That costs him a great deal. Romae loses money, Romae gets angry. Did you want that instead?"

"Obviously not, but did it have to come at the expense of my oldest friend, fleeing with nothing but the clothes on his back?"

"Well he's perfectly fine now, no damage! I saw him less than an hour ago, he's healthy and safe and far enough away that the two of you can be friends without destroying each other's business."

"I- you! Infuriating little man!" Francis spluttered. "You talk as though you did me a favour!"

"I did do you a favour," Kirkland shouted. "You were losing money, he was losing money, and Romae's people were feeding the boss information about Antonio's spending habits in order to try and lure him into bankruptcy, because there's not nearly as much love between Romae and Antonio as there is between you and Antonio. The way I picked was a win-win-win-win situation for all four parties, it just took a bit of time for some of us to realise that. Apparently some of us still haven't! Yes, Francis. I did you one hell of a favour, and now I need to call that favour in."

"You're disgusting," replied Francis, "and I shall do nothing for you."

"All you have to do is buy someone at auction. You'll get money up front, and -" oh, but Kirkland had really wanted those new solar sails. Ah well, maybe next year - "there's an extra eight hundred thou just for doing this. We have no association so it's not even illegal, you merely act as my proxy to buy the right boy for me."

"Why would a pirate want to buy a bondsman when you can simply pilfer your cargo anytime you like?"

"I wouldn't - it's not, I'm not - I won't be using him!" Kirkland stammered, though perhaps he was protesting a bit too much because Francis didn't buy it either, his arms folded in and a dirty disbelieving look of really, I was not born yesterday. "I won't!" he insisted. "I simply - it's a long story. He's far from home. We're taking him back."
"Since when do you do good deeds?" Francis sneered. "Since when did you develop a conscience?"

Since Alfred, he thought. "It's none of your business why I want this," he told Francis. "If you won't do it for the money, I also have vital information you want to hear."

"And what's that?" Francis asked, suspicious.

But Kirkland shook his head with the stubborness of a toddler. "Not 'til we have an accord." He shot his hand out and Francis looked at it as though it were infected. "Are we agreed?"

Francis grimaced, then shook his hand. "I suppose," he said, sniffing distastefully. "You know who this boy is that I need to purchase?"

"I won't have his number for another few days. He's one of Romae's, but that doesn't exactly narrow it down. As for the information, well - allow me to make sure of something first. Let me have a look at your files."

"Those are private," Francis contested.

"Not the private ones! The basic information you keep on all your charges," Francis still seemed unconvinced. "Your bloody catalogues! The ones you publish every month? I need to confirm that you've got who it is I think you've got."

Finally Francis relented and pulled out a thick tome from a bookcase by the desk. He threw it down with a heavy thunk. "There you are," Francis said, "and be quick about it. We don't have all day to babysit you."

Babysit! Couldn't they just leave him alone? - But he was a pirate. His job was stealing things. He admitted it wouldn't be the most prudent decision.

"Ah, Matthieu," he heard him say to the bondsman he'd seen before, who, having reappeared at the curtain, looked a little more nervous now. They conversed in Frankish - Kirkland didn't understand a word of it so he tuned them out and got to work.

Francis had organised his slaves alphabetically by their nicknames in his catalogues, which featured pictures, basic information profiles, and a recommended price. Kirkland went to the most recently dated ones for M. Madeleine, Marcel, Maxime - no Margot. (No Matthieu, either.)

But Antonio had mentioned another name... he flipped to the B's and found a 'Belle'. Her picture matched the description Unsinkable had given. Under Additional notes Francis had even written Belle as she is beautiful, but will only respond to Margot. Then why call her Belle? Trainers! He'd never understand their ways.

And then an idea struck him. The last time they'd picked up their little white-haired terror from Francis', would that not have been last year? What did Francis have on him?

Kirkland flipped to last year's catalogue. He didn't have to search for long; under "Albert" he found Unsinkable's picture staring up at him with a "fuck you" look in his eyes. It was unmistakably him - hair and eyes aside, he knew the character of that look all too well. But there was nothing under additional notes.
He flipped to the year before. No Albert.

The year before that. No Albert. It wasn't until the fifth year back that he found "Albert" again, and this time there was something more written down in the notes: *Wanted to name him Alban, but says his name is Gilbert. As a compromise he may be called Albert. Extremely unfriendly, no matter what you call him.*

So, it was Gilbert! *Gilbert* the Unsinkable. He couldn't stop himself from grinning; it had a ring to it.

Kirkland ripped out Unsinkable's pages and stuffed them in his pocket. Then he flipped back to Belle's and called Francis over. "This one, here," he pointed. "Sell her at auction."

"Are you mad? She isn't ready! I only got her a few months back and she's hostile!"

"Sell her anyway." Kirkland leaned in, with his 'I've got a secret' smile. It worked on everyone, it certainly worked on Francis; he leaned in too, curiosity piqued. "You won't be able to train that one. You know her kind. She's in cahoots with the legendary Uns-"

"Do not even speak the name," Francis muttered. "I told myself after that one, I would never be interested in taming the wild ones again. A silly game among traders. I do not like to play it."

"And yet watch you, saddled with - Belle, is it? I bet she refuses to come when called, since she insists her name is Margot," Kirkland replied sweetly. "You can't get her to behave. She'll just make rounds until someone figures out what to do with her."

"They were going to put her down, you know?" Francis said. "On Marigon, they were prepared to make it a quick injection of aqueous sylvite and that would be it. It's barbaric."

"I know someone who wants her, and her alone. Someone who will buy her back. Someone who doesn't want her dead! You don't have to worry about her anymore, she goes to someone... familiar, and nobody puts anybody down."

*Please, Francis!* The harder he made this, the more Kirkland began to reconsider the whole thing. Wouldn't it be so much easier to let Alfred be bought? To take Romae's hefty sum of silver for Unsinkable's life?

"It will be a late cost to enter her into the auction at this stage," argued Francis.

His mouth, the only part of him that didn't care about coin, ran away from him. "I'll cover the late fee."

Francis thought about it a minute and then said, accepting, "Very well, I shall do it."
Belgium

Margot really wished she had a goddamn window. It was clear that she'd never get one, even if it couldn't be opened. They didn't want her taking something heavy and crashing through it, then diving through the window to the ground. As if she'd ever do something so ridiculous, so melodramatic! That was the coward's way out, or the nut's way out. She wasn't nearly insane enough, not yet, and she'd never give any of them the satisfaction of being the former.

But a window would help on days like these, and there were many, when Francis left her alone and she had nobody to talk to. Just the automatons, the little machine-men, like Matthieu, or Eduard, or any of the others in Francis' groups. (Francis didn't like her talking to them. She had a nasty tendency to teach them things like *critical thinking* and *logic*.)

This languishing was different from what the other traders had done. Instead of toys, or pain, or strapping her down, forcing her to kneel for hours, the loud music, the waterboarding, Francis left her alone to go fuck his little Matthieu. He fed her. He kept her clothed. She had her own washroom. Now and then he spoke to her, which was nice (as nice as one's jailer could be, she thought sullenly). But in three months, he'd only really touched her once. She wouldn't complain but it was curious.

She wished she'd paid more attention to Unsinkable when he ranted on and on about Francis. From what he'd said, Francis was a tough nut to crack. But he wasn't doing anything with Margot! Why would he take her from Antonio's if he wasn't prepared to try and train her?

(Not like she minded getting off of Marigon, after that episode with the market girl. Margot had never heard Antonio scream at her so loud, and she'd gotten a day in the Agency cells for that while he duked it out with the Marigon BSPA. And then *poof*, off to Francis'.)

Maybe isolation was Francis' strategy, though that hadn't worked for that cow Carson; she'd sat in the Dark Room alone for weeks and still wouldn't behave nice for the customers. Was Francis waiting until she got her guard down? She felt like laughing. Margot never had her guard down.

She'd considered using his little bondsboy against him. It was obvious Francis was quite literally crazy about Matthieu, who kept trying to make friends with her. She ignored him most of the time. Both him and the other one - Eduard. The eldest of all of Francis' groups. That made them the most fucked up of the bunch. Brainwashed, and they seemed to like it. They *liked* what Francis did to them, including Matthieu, and arguably his relationship with Francis was one of the most fucked up things she'd ever seen in her life.

No, there was no way to use Matthieu against him. Matthieu fucking loved everything Francis did and wouldn't give up his life for the world, indentured sexual servant or not. Ridiculous and pathetic. Couldn't use him as a weapon when he didn't possess anything resembling a backbone (and no, Francis' hard cock up his ass didn't count as a spine).

It took a certain kind of person to be a bondservant. Someone who grew up with the idea of servitude, someone who knew from the start that servitude would be their life... Someone who was encouraged to be the best slave possible, to take pride in it. Someone who hadn't once *not* been a bondservant. You couldn't just steal someone and voila, instant sexual slave. It didn't work that
way, and Margot was living proof of it.

Where was Willem? Was Willem still alive?

But Margot ceased thinking of her brother when the doorknob turned. This scared her once, but she wasn't scared anymore, only angry. She prepared for battle: armour up, guards ready, claws out, teeth bared. This was a mask and costume she donned, carefully crafted to keep everybody else out and her in. It didn't matter if it was Francis, or Yannick, or goddamn Romae, should he ever hear there was another untrainable out there and take interest in attempting the impossible. Like this, they could not touch her.

They wanted to take her, touch her? No, she would give them no reaction - they would touch a corpse. Or she would fight. But Margot herself was untouched and she would stay that way.

But the person who walked in was neither Francis not Matthieu. Margot dropped her shields, too ecstatic to see an old friend - hallucination or not - to worry about whether she'd finally gone insane. "You!" she said, grinning.

"Me, baby!" Unsinkable crowed, and moon-walked into the room.

She held the tears back easily - second-nature by now - but it gave her shivers down her spine to stand and embrace him. "How, how did you manage this? I thought Francis would never take you again after last time."

"I'm not here 'cause of that -"

"Did you get sold?"

"Not ... exactly. It's a long story. I'm not supposed to be here. Anyone finds out, I'm a dead man."

"No shit," said Margot. "Nobody's supposed to be in to see me except Francis or his little cronies. The door -"

"Is cracked open by my shitty wig. Don't worry, I didn't forget it auto-locks behind you. I was in here once before, 'member?" He breathed in deeply, taking a look around. "Man, this shit takes me back!"

"Fond memories?" she teased.

He cackled. "Yeah, of pissed-off Francis! But seriously," and he grew slightly more somber, "speaking of. How're you holding up?"

Margot smirked and flicked him on the chest near his nipple, laughing when he jumped. "Please. Don't give me that crap. I'm older than you, I can handle his shit. Besides, he hasn't done anything."

"Nothing?"

"Hardly anything," she said. "I think he's still trying to figure out what to do with me. Guess he takes a long time to think about these things."

"That's priceless! Maybe I broke him after all."
"I think you did. One of the *machines* said he celebrated with champagne when the ship came to pick you up. He vowed never to train another wild-caught again."

Unsinkable grinned. "Awesome! But I came here for a reason. Can you stick it out for another two weeks or so?"

"You came all this way for a social visit?" Margot accused with a cool smile, although she wouldn't take any bullets for Unsinkable. Or anybody else who wasn't Willem. Couldn't blame him. "What a good thing Francis has done sweet fuck-all to me."

"Hey, hey! Hear me out," he said. "I'd spring you free right now, but we can't do that yet. Not with that thing," he pointed to her anklet, a nasty shock device if she went outside of range of the source hammered to her wall. Francis' idea of a sophisticated leash for an untrained mutt. It wouldn't come off without a blow torch. (Oh, the fun they could have with a blow torch!)

"Fair. So what happens in two weeks?"

He grinned wider, if that were possible. "Auction in two weeks. The guy I'm travelling with - you remember Kirkland?"


"Yeah, that guy," and his mocking smile faded, "Look, I know what he did - to you. And I don't condone it. But he's not so bad sometimes. He's down there right now setting grounds for your sell to the auction -"

Oh, *really!* "I see how it is," she hissed. "Of all the slave traders and sellers from Marigon to Luna Halleri, it was the goddamn pirate who managed to change you."

"Dude, no fuckin' *way*. If anyone's doing the changing here it's me. Of him. Changing *him*." Unsinkable was not very convincing. "Dammit Margot, I am *not* his bitch!"

"I dunno, travelling around with him, helping him with his little *jobs* -"

"Hey, *I'm* the one who convinced him we needed to take Alfred home!" he protested.

"Who the hell is Alfred?"

He sighed. "Lemme explain you the story first. Then if you want, you can chew me out. Kirkland's not always ... I mean he's ... okay, *somewhere* inside there, he's good. One of his crew took this kid Alfred off the Nova dwarves recently. Wrong area of town, way too nice, middle class. Parents're probably going nuts looking for him."

"So Kirkland has to take him home before he attracts attention," Margot concluded.

"And *I'm* the one who convinced him!"

"Then what're you doing on Hallar?" Why not go directly back to the Nova dwarves and plop the brat back on the surface?
Unsinkable rolled his eyes. "'Cause fuckin' *Romae* found out about it an' wouldn't let up on Kirkland until he'd sold him Alfred. He wants to sell the boy off at the auction. We figured out a way to buy him back, although we're persona very non grata for the next like ever in Hallar's airspace, let alone landing on the damn planet. But here's the thing.

"Through the course of our travels we met up with this group of kids. They 'buy' people to free 'em. People like us, who weren't born to this life like the robots, who had something before, even if it wasn't much. Well, guess who they freed."

"Santa Claus. I don't know, who?"

"I didn't catch his name, but - real tall guy, blonde hair, sticks straight up. Scar right about here," and Unsinkable traced out a vertical scar above his right eye. "Looks a lot like you. You'll see him in two weeks 'cause he wants to buy himself a sister."

Willem. Willem! "He's alive?" said Margot, beaming with relief. "Are you serious?"

"Dead serious," he said, smiling. "We met him at this old clunker of an anchorage way out in the Cloud. He, uh, was less than thrilled to see Kirkland, that's for damn sure," and that didn't surprise Margot, in fact she kinda hoped Willem got a good few punches in - she knew she'd like to - "but him and his group, they're not leaving Hallar without you. So. Two weeks. Start counting 'em down." He looked at her with a strange expression. "Kinda thought you'd be jumping for joy some more."

"I'm -" in shock! - "trying to process it. I mean - three years of this. And now, two weeks. A punishment I never deserved." An involuntary, shaky giggle escaped her. "Guess I'm a little unimpressed at having to be rescued like some kind of helpless victim."

Unsinkable scoffed. "Please. It'd be one thing if you took the whole shebang lying down. But you didn't. And the way I heard it, the last time you tried to do the rescuing, it got you into this mess. 'Sides, if you could escape, where would you go? Couldn't get off-planet. And if you did, nowhere else would take you - the entire solar system sees us as non-humans and drafts its laws accordingly. That's not your fault."

"I'll spend the two weeks figuring out how to deal, I'm sure," she said, with a smile so large it felt like it broke her face.

"That's the spirit! Technically Kirkland's rescuing *me*. No shame in it."

Margot would have teased him further, then - the great Unsinkable, damsel in distress! - but she caught behind him a flash of blonde waves with one impossible-to-tame corkscrew curl.

"Oh shit," she breathed, "shit -"

Like lightning, Unsinkable turned around, whipping out a pistol from the back of his shabby pants. What a dumb place to keep a gun! But even if there *had* been ammunition in the barrels, there was no flint in the cock.

But Matthieu didn't know that.

"You," he told Matthieu, "get in here right now or I'll give you a new hole for Francis to fuck. And
don't you dare dream of closing that door behind you."

Matthieu did as he asked, moving slowly and shaking. "Please, don't shoot," he whispered, his hands up.

"I don't wanna have to," he replied with the cool calm of a professional (or a really good actor, she thought), "and you don't wanna make me have to. So play nice with me and we'll all laugh about this in an hour."

"You, sir, are an optimist," Matthieu muttered.

"Don't you sass me!" Unsinkable yelled.

Damsel or not, he hadn't changed at all. Or if he had, he and Kirkland were more alike than she'd thought. But without Margot's intervention he'd only get louder and louder, and that would attract the attention of the adepts down the hall or worse, Francis.

"Look," she said to the both of them, "be quiet or Francis is going to show up. And he will be some pissed when he discovers you've gone and interrupted his meeting, Matthieu. He's already been on edge for the last - as long as I've been here."

Matthieu nodded and gulped.

"Do you really want to poke the polar bear?"

Matthieu shook his head.

"I didn't think so. Here's the deal. I'm not going anywhere -" and Margot pointed to her lovely little ankle jewellery - "and he's leaving, so as far as you know, nothing happened and nothing changed. Why don't you just be a good little machine, and head back to your room without telling Francis anything mean or nasty that would give him more work or stress him out?" She pursed her lips and said coyly, "You know nothing good happens when Francis is stressed out."

"I'll leave," Matthieu promised, but she could see the lie in his eyes. He was gonna go straight to Francis. Well, if Unsinkable could be as quick about his escape as he was on the draw, it wouldn't matter.

Unsinkable caught it too. "Nice try," he said, "I'm going to get the hell out of here, and you're going to find me an exit. Once I'm out, you can blab to Francis all you like, if he doesn't mind you talking with your mouth full of cock. Now march, bondsman," and they left Margot's cell.

The room and the adjoining bathroom were the only walls Margot had seen for the past three months. She itched to get outside the door but bad dogs don't get treats. She wanted to go with them, if only to tag along with Unsinkable and walk out of Francis' with her head held high.

But Margot could be patient. As he left, Unsinkable blew her a kiss and mouthed, two weeks. You can do it.
"Right," said Kirkland - and then announced loudly, "I'd best be off."

"Not so fast, mon ami," Francis countered, pulling out the sidearm from the holster on his waist, obscured by his jacket. Kirkland made a motion for behind his back - perhaps for his own pistol - but Francis shook his head. "Do not bother. I am quicker, and unlike yours, mine has a charge readied. Hands up."

Kirkland huffed. Francis cocked the pistol, and Kirkland reluctantly did as he was told.

"Now I must ask you a question or two. Who is the man who accompanied you in?"

"I don't know who you're talking about." Trying to protect him? A crewman, then.

"Do not play these games. Did you think I would not have a vid feed above the door, there?" he asked, motioning to the front door.

In reality, it had only been there a week, installed after her High Moral Sanctitude Councillor Héderváry, Abbess of Toffee-Nose, trotted through his doors and shat all over his plans. He wanted to be warned if she tried again. But it was Matthieu who had come in while Kirkland was busy with his catalogues, and who had told him all about the strange fellow working with Kirkland.

"So, who is he?" Francis asked, and then said it louder, "come out, if you are listening!"

"I hear you just fine," said a new voice. With the barrel of the pistol still aimed squarely at Kirkland's face, Francis turned around - to find Matthieu, held as a shield by another, with his gun at Matthieu's temple! -

He'd seen that fellow's face more than once, recently.

"Of all people!" Francis exclaimed.

"You do remember me," said that annoying wild-caught trainee, better known as Unsinkable, better left alone as untrainable, in a sugary tone. "So glad to hear it, Francis."

"You are working with this man? I expected better," Francis remarked.

"From me or him?" asked Kirkland.

"I'm really not sure," Francis replied drily. It applied equally well to both. His eyes fell on Matthieu, who was calmer than he'd expected. If Unsinkable had hurt Matthieu, Francis wouldn't be nearly as lenient, even if this infuriating man needed his help. Because he would need Francis' help! "Have you any idea," he said to Unsinkable, "how much money is on that pretty little head of yours?"

"Yeah, I've been told," he snapped. "Now -"
"Then why did you come to the surface, you buffoon?" he scolded.

"We had decent disguises," muttered Kirkland, "before we had to rip them off -"

"And you!" Francis rounded on Kirkland next. "If you brought him here of your own volition then you are as bad as you always were. You haven't changed, not one minute bit!"

"What have I done now?" Kirkland protested.

"You sold him out," Francis spat. "You have as good as signed his death warrant yourself!"

"What?" Everyone except Francis in the room said it; Matthieu uncertainly, Kirkland defensively, Unsinkable tremulously. The quaver in that man's voice ... Francis didn't like him, not one bit, especially didn't like the pistol he pointed at his beloved cher Matthieu, but Francis couldn't bear to see any trainee dead.

Oh, the nerve of Kirkland! To sway Unsinkable's trust and then turn on him for the reward - unbelievable. It was one thing for the filthy pirate to do these kinds of things to Antonio. Antonio wouldn't be put down. But Unsinkable had no such rights protecting him. Had no rights at all.

Francis was not the greatest man in the solar system, but he wouldn't abide it! Couldn't stomach the thought of - of extermination, like they were pests! Or defective. It was why he'd taken in Belle. He had no clue what to do with her but better she remain with him while he worked it out than to have her executed on Marigon.

And now this, when Avo Romae had his picture posted with the traders, all over Hallar, Luna Halleri, and Border Control. Avo Romae, who dearly wanted this man sold to someone Francis knew wanted to kill him -

No, Francis was not the greatest man in the solar system but he was better than Kirkland.

"You heard me," Francis growled, "by bringing him to the surface you've ensured he will never leave it but in Romae's possession. Romae knows all that goes on in this city. I guarantee he knows about this."

"That's - that's preposterous," Kirkland spluttered, "he's not got eyes everywhere -"

Francis silenced him with a wave of his hand and held up three fingers. Then two. Then one.

There was a knock at the door. "Francis of Hallar!" they heard. "This is Field Agent Sadik Adnan, Hallar Bonds Service Protection Agency. Open up."

Kirkland froze. Unsinkable lowered the gun at Matthieu's temple. In kind, Francis lowered the one at Kirkland's stunned face. Shock, panic, and despair on Kirkland's face was a better sight than greed at the thought of the bounty on Unsinkable's head. Kirkland hadn't done it on purpose. But a terrible mistake to underestimate Avo Romae.

"You are a very proud man, Arthur," he murmured. "But I am glad to see, not an evil one."

"Francis of Hallar. This is the Hallar BSPA. We have knowledge that upon your premises is an unbought bondsperson, property of Seller Avo Romae of Hallar. It is to be returned to him
immediately. As per subsection 10.1 under the Criminal Code, all bondspersons, prospective and sold, being items of great expense, this is a matter of high larceny and we therefore do not require a warrant to break down the door and conduct a search, so open up!"

"You've got to help us!" Kirkland hissed desperately.

"It is illegal. You heard the man, they need no warrant to search this entire place. And I have already committed recent crimes in the eyes of this planet's BSPA, sheltering you endangers everyone under this roof." What more could he do? But it didn't sound like more than one agent, and that meant he couldn't have the place surrounded...

He turned to Matthieu. "Stall him at the door," he said. To Kirkland and Unsinkable, he instructed, "Follow me."

They swept past the curtain, by the stairs to the office and Francis' bedroom, through the hallway into the drawing room, then the dining room, and then the salon, the one with the fireplace.

Branching off the left corridor from the dining room were his adepts ages nine through thirteen in one set of rooms, and the younger five to eight group in another. He heard peals of laughter as they passed the doors. Francis would admit he played favourites but he knew every adept. To think of any one of them brought to the Agency for service termination - it turned his stomach.

Those who were awake were in the playrooms and wouldn't see the events in the salon.

Everybody knew the fireplace had never worked, but only Francis knew why. He heard the jingle of the bell as Matthieu opened to admit the agent, who was one voice but stomped loudly enough for four. "Quickly now," Francis said, pushing the left light fixture above the mantle in. It depressed, then returned, and the fireplace swung open to admit a very thin, poorly lit corridor with few doors.

"Whoa," Unsinkable murmured in awe. "Does every Emporium have one of these?"

"Probably, it came with the place. Quickly!" he insisted, beckoning them in.

The passage gave way to the pergola on the side of the Emporium. A push of the door and they were outside.

"Through there," Francis pointed away from the main street, "is a set of alley-ways that leads to the drop pad to Border Control. Don't use the main roads, they have feeds. Once you're past the gates at Checkpoint B, there are feeds everywhere and you will have to run. Claim you're late for something. Your only advantage is that they've only so far passed your picture to the traders, and not Control Security."

"Francis, thank you," Kirkland told him, in a hushed, awed tone.

"I didn't do it for you," he replied primly. "I don't believe in capital punishment. If the Agency feels the need to rely on it, they're doing something wrong."

"They're doing a lot more wrong than just that," Unsinkable muttered darkly. "But. Uh. Thanks."

Francis nodded stiffly and they disappeared.
When he returned to the front room, he found Matthieu and the agent engaged in a shouting match. The agent was tall and swarthy - tanned skin, dark eyes and hair, persistent five o'clock shadow on the lower half of his face, which would be otherwise decently attractive were he not screaming it off.

"- now either you go find your father or you stand your ass down and let me find him!" the agent yelled.

"Hey, you can't talk to me like that in my own home!" Matthieu shrieked. "Warrant or no warrant!"

"I told you, I don't frickin' need one - now shove it, kid -"

"You're not going anywhere without me seeing some ID first. And have you bothered wiping those shoes once since you barged in? You have any idea how much horseshit there is on the streets of Hallar, spacecop? This is a genuine Bastian organic blend rug."

"Good lord," Francis said loudly, making his presence known in the room. Instantly Matthieu and the agent clammed up. "I expected better from a trained agent." (From both of them. Organic rugs? How much money did Matthieu think he had?)

"Papa! I told him you were off checking on everything but he wouldn't listen to me -"

"What - hey! You can't confer with each other right in front of me! God, you are ruining the hell out of my interrogation, you little runt!"

"It's fine, Matthieu," Francis said, and Matthieu quieted.

"This is your first offence?" the agent asked Francis.

"I? I have committed no crime," Francis said smoothly, "you said there was larceny of a being inside my house. I wasn't aware of this being, I was not certain if they intended to rob me or shoot me or perhaps kidnap my charges. I left immediately to check on the most valuable items I own, my adepts!"

"And you couldn't've stopped to tell me this before?"

"I did not want any acts of heroism! My adepts are expensive items that could be damaged in a fight, either with fists or pistols. Besides, mon petit Matthieu is well competent and I thought he could entertain you for a brief two minutes while I secured my possessions."

Matthieu smirked and stuck his nose up in the air, perfectly acting his part as a spoiled son.

The agent sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. "This place is giving me the mother of all headaches. You know what, I don't even care where you were. Just let me find the fucker and I'll be on my way."

"You have your identification?" The agent nodded and rooted around in his satchel. He pulled out a wad of documents, held together with a thick metal clip, and found the Agency ID card to hand over to Francis.

Francis took a careful look at it. He wasn't concerned about a forgery, simply wanted to rattle the man a little. "Well, Agent Adnan, be my guest," he said finally, handing the plastic card back. He
bowed deeply (no part of which looked anything less than totally sarcastic). "I hope you will not mind my following you around for the safety of my charges."

Adnan rolled his eyes. "Come on, then," he grumbled, and strode off through the front room to the curtain.

*Good work,* he mouthed to Matthieu, and winked, receiving one of Matthieu's loveliest smiles in reward.
(england --> iceland)

My end of the bargain is finished. More details for you when we meet.

Enclosed are relevant particulars for my associate's papers. His first name is Gilbert, but I've not been able to obtain a last name. He's from Schlessen; pick something that sounds vaguely from there and doesn't make him sound too foolish. Anything missing, feel free to fill it in.

Can we please meet sometime soon so that I may obtain a copy of the papers for him to carry on his person? He will require them in perhaps a week's time, possibly less. We will be out that way within days if you wish to meet again at the same place.

AK

(ps. I highly recommend Formation B.)

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(turkey --> greece)

Got stopped on my way off this rock by Border Security. Turns out Kirkland and some other guy were spotted on Hallar surface. Romae wanted the other guy - offered a massive reward for his capture - and was too tickled for words when he found out there was an agent already nearby on the scene...

So long story short, back down to Hallar I went, to Francis' Emporium. Nothing there. Francis said he knows Kirkland, but hasn't seen him in three years, and apparently hates his guts. Highly doubt either Kirkland or his associate were hiding in the emporium. Checked it anyway; nothing.

And by the time I got back the Delivery shuttle was long gone.

How does a pirate manage to slip through an entire city stuffed with feeds? It's shit like this that makes me wonder if Border Security is actively trying to piss me off by helping Kirkland.

-Adnan

(ps Romae's real bitchy when he doesn't get his way. I hate this fucking planet.)

(pps turns out other guy is a bondsman. No wonder Romae's furious. I'd be pretty pissed if someone stole something that expensive from me.)
Ludwig had been bought years ago for Feliciano. And it was true that not once in all of those years had Feliciano ever touched him like that, but he was a good master and he allowed Ludwig to do as he pleased when he was alone, so Ludwig didn't mind. It wasn't Feliciano's fault. He was simple. Somehow, despite being around bondservants all his life, he didn't understand that one buys them to have sex with them. Ludwig wound up making absurd amounts of pasta and sauces and homemade cheeses. That was fine. Six-and-a-bit years had elapsed and it had all been fine. Whatever Feliciano wanted, Ludwig wanted.

Perhaps Feliciano's grandfather had been wrong when he brought Ludwig home as a birthday present. Perhaps Feliciano didn't feel the same kind of urges as everybody else. At least Feliciano had a sort-of friend - neither Vargas brother got out much or socialised with anybody who wasn't a prospective or related. Maybe all Feliciano ever wanted in life was pasta.

Besides, Feliciano was affectionate in other ways. He was a charming, touchy fellow. He practically radiated warmth. He took Ludwig all around Hallar, for business or pleasure, and whenever he went off-world. Ludwig existed for companionship. Ludwig had been taught patience, and he had so much that he never thought about how strange it was he wasn't being used, but sometimes Feliciano tried the hell out of it.

For now that Alfred had arrived, something had changed. Feliciano didn't touch Ludwig as much. Didn't hang off his arm, lean into his back when he got bored or tired, didn't crawl into his personal space unannounced. If Ludwig had been asked, prior to Alfred's arrival, he might have almost thought it a reprieve.

They listened to music together. Played games together. Went on long walks together. All with Alfred sandwiched between Feliciano and Ludwig like some ... some inadvertent cock-block. They took their meals around a small table. And at night, they would all fall into bed together - one large bed that Feliciano had gotten moved into their new room down the hidden hallway. Alfred in the middle separating Feliciano and Ludwig.

He could not be jealous, because well-mannered bondspeople didn't get jealous, but it was pissing Ludwig off, and he couldn't explain why.

Presently, Alfred had gone to their washroom to take a bath. Feliciano looked as though he were close to asking if he could join in but thought better of it, and instead called after him to remind him where to find soap.

Ludwig tried not to let his annoyance show, but not very hard. His patience had expired a few days ago, and Feliciano probably wouldn't notice. He had hardly noticed Ludwig at all in the time that Alfred had been to stay with them. So Ludwig was looking forward to the auction. Sulking had failed, so he tried to be more direct. Feliciano was kind, he was simple - surely he didn't know what he was doing, whatever it was he was doing. "Signore, I must ask you," he said, when they were alone at last, "is there anything I've done?"
Feliciano gave him a beatific, innocent smile. "Ve, I don't know what you're talking about, Ludwig!" And then he returned to set the table for dinner.

Ludwig felt something within him ... not snap, but give a little, and he raised his voice higher than his training had taught him to. "You know precisely what I'm talking about! It's like you've - you've got a new toy and you've forgotten the old one! And you never touched me like you touch him -"

Feliciano silenced him with a glare. Too far! How easily that slipped out of him! Where was his restraint? "I - I'm deeply sorry, Signore, I spoke out of turn," he murmured to the ground.

"If I were a bad man, I might punish you," Feliciano said, quietly but firmly, and he agreed. If Feliciano were any other sort of master, Ludwig would have been slapped. He felt ashamed. His training was good, why was he acting out? "But I don't believe in punishments. I don't think it does any good." Feliciano sighed, looking pensive. "Perhaps I should have taken you aside to explain, explain what I'm doing, before you got angry with me. Oh, I don't like it when you're angry with me, Ludwig!"

"I couldn't be angry with you, Signore, but -"

"I sincerely hope you don't hate Alfred?"

"I-I don't!" Ludwig insisted. And it was true; he didn't hate the boy. It was as impossible to hate Alfred as it was impossible to dislike Feliciano. There was an ever-present disarming magic about the both of them. Of course he liked Alfred ... but he loved Feliciano, and he had been there first, and the way Feliciano looked at Alfred, it - it wasn't fair -

"Ve, well... he thinks you might, just a little bit." Ludwig shook his head. "You should convince him otherwise, then!"

He must have looked apprehensive, because Feliciano gave him a hug and prattled on. "What you feel now, that's what Alfred feels, all the time, you know? He's sad, he's lonely, he's been apart from his friends for awhile. He's not sure what to feel. I only want to make him feel welcome, make him feel loved." His signore leaned back and looked him squarely in the eyes, an open, honest gaze. Ludwig felt even worse about his actions. "Can you do that for me? Can you help me with that?"

"Of course I can," he said, and Feliciano kissed him chastely on the mouth.

It was his usual reward, but something about it sent sparks through Ludwig, made him tingle where he'd been touched and he wanted more - but before he could get it, Feliciano pulled away.

"I'm glad! Thank you Ludwig, I would appreciate your help very, very greatly! I have to prepare the tonics but he should be in the washroom." When Ludwig didn't move, he added, "Go on. Right through that door."

At the threshold of that door was Alfred. He seemed to have been standing there for awhile and knocked lamely on the doorframe. His shirt was off. "I - uh, geez. I just - where're the towels? There're none left in the cupboard."

Feliciano looked him up and down, brazenly, then gave Ludwig a weak smile. "Ludwig can show you," he said, an order masked by a pleasant sunshine tone of voice. Ludwig nodded and followed
Alfred to the washroom.

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When he'd returned with towels, Alfred had drawn the bath and was sitting in hot water, his face pink. "Ah, thanks," he said. Ludwig had set them on the chair and was prepared to walk away when he heard Alfred ask, "Hey, if you don't mind, you could - y'know, stick around. Or something."

Ludwig turned. Alfred was perched on the edge of the tub, draped over the edge to reach for the soap on a small table. "Was hopin' to talk with you," he admitted. Ludwig nodded and sat stiffly on the chair, holding the towels on his lap. "Only if you want to."

What Ludwig wanted was what Feliciano wanted. Feliciano wanted Alfred to feel at home. Ludwig tried to relax. He slouched on the back of the chair, let his legs fall open a fraction. It was a harder position to be in than sitting ramrod straight had been. "Is this better?" he asked.

"A little," Alfred said. "Guess they train you in great posture."

"Yes." Signore Romae was a stickler for details.

"You're uh... properly trained, then?"

"Yes."

"What was that like?"

Ludwig thought about it a minute. "As one expects," he said, having collected his thoughts, "I went to primary. My earliest memories are from there. We learnt how to read and write, anatomy, music, art. Sports. Languages - Standard, Halleri - common and high - a smattering of others. But mostly we just played."

Alfred grinned. "Kids will be kids?"

"Something like that." The play of real children and the erotic play of bondservant adepts were not one and the same. Ludwig remembered it wouldn't kill him to smile back. "When I graduated at five, Signore Romae bought me for the remainder of my training.

"Right," said Alfred. "What's he like?"

"Very nice. Kind. But he can be strict when it's required. He's a marvellous disciplinarian. I never gave him any cause to complain - no primary graduate ever did. It's different, now that there are prospectives who are sold to trainers without having gone through primary. I was never permitted contact with them. I imagine Signore must take a firmer hand with them to compensate for their lack of education."

Alfred was quiet. He sat back in the bath. "You're one of them, aren't you," Ludwig asked him softly, and Alfred nodded. "You never went through primary, so you ask me about it to mimic it?"

"No! I wouldn't -"

"It's fine, I don't mind," Ludwig said, "I'm rather glad! This will help Signore Romae. He'll get
more money for your sale as a result."

"And... that's a good thing," Alfred said.

"Of course it is," he replied. For a moment Alfred held his gaze, but then blushed and drew his knees to his chest.

"So um," began Alfred, "I guess you and Feliciano are kind of." He blushed even redder. "Uh, I mean, earlier there ...

Ludwig supplied the rest. "I'm his bondsman, yes."

"Right," Alfred whispered. "So ... what does that mean, exactly?"

He narrowed his eyes. "You... understand the basics?"

"The whole um ... slave, thing, right?"

"The term is bondservant," said Ludwig flatly. He was starting to wonder whether Alfred had only become a prospective bondservant yesterday. But he was far too old for that. Maybe all prospectives who never did primary were like Alfred. "What it is you think a bondsman does?"

"Oh, uhh... but -"

"Be precise." Ludwig folded his arms across his chest, waiting patiently.

"So. Bondsmen - er, people," began Alfred. "It - it can be guys or girls. Anyway. They get, y'know, like... bought, and go live with their owners. And. Their owners. You know." Ludwig waited longer, until in a voice barely above a whisper Alfred said, "Have sex with them."

Peculiar. "Are you a virgin?"

"No!" Alfred said, suddenly so loud that he almost knocked Ludwig off the chair in surprise.

"Because Signore Romae could get more for your sale if you are," he clarified. "But you must sign a declaration."

"No no no," Alfred waved his hands back and forth, splashing water everywhere. "Of course not! I've gone out on dates and stuff. I've had four girlfriends! Molly Pitcher, Phyllis Wheatley, Marian Anderson, and Lucretia Mott." He seemed inordinately proud of himself.

"Only girlfriends?"

"Well, yeah." Alfred looked uncomfortable. "It's... where I come from that's kinda. I mean you'd only do it if you have a bondservant."

"Have you considered what will happen if you get bought by a male?"

"Yeah," Alfred replied, his voice cracking, "course."

Ludwig ignored the lie. Perhaps Alfred would think more about it after their conversation. "A bondservant does what they're told," he explained. "There's a specific use in mind. Of course, it's
uncommon for you to be asked to clean gutters or wash dishes, but that's your owner's right if they really wanted you to. You do what you're told. Whatever you're told." He paused to let that message sink in. "You want to be sold to a buyer who's compatible, sexually, with you. So you must become compatible with them. You have to read people without asking; you don't speak unless you're spoken to."

"Feli said I could say whatever, whenever," Alfred interjected.

"Feliciano makes different rules. At the moment he is your trainer. Romae wanted one of his grandsons to take you on and Feliciano volunteered. So everything he asks you to do, you do it."

"I've done everything he's asked me to," Alfred protested.

He wasn't getting the point. "He could ask you to pleasure him, he could have you dress in skirts! He could strip you naked and tie you to a desk and take you dry. And if you denied him he could beat you! He doesn't have to ask. He could just do it. And if you denied him, he would beat you. He could beat you for no reason!"

Alfred had shrunk back into the water, terrified. "The point I'm trying to make is not that Feliciano wouldn't do that," he sighed. "He doesn't believe in punishment, and he's not unreasonable -"

"The point is that I'm somewhere between a dog and a sex toy, and I don't have the same rights as Feliciano does," Alfred muttered.

Prospectives who hadn't gone through primary were weird, Ludwig decided. Alfred was acting like this was a punishment. But there wasn't anything wrong with bondservice. It was natural! Why would someone like Ludwig, with all his training, ever want anything other than what his master wanted?

If a bondsperson stopped working, you threw it out. If a bondsperson became violent, you threw it out. If a prospective couldn't be trained within an adequate amount of time, you threw it out. (Being thrown out was the punishment, not being a bondservant!) But... that had never happened. Not to Ludwig's recollection. There was a system, and it worked. It was proven to work.

"If you're well-behaved and well-trained, your owner will care for you. They'll be good to you, they'll feed you, love you, no harm will ever befall you," he said, trying to be consoling. "There's no shame in being a bondservant. You're someone's beloved companion. You should be proud."

"Sounds like you give this speech a lot," Alfred said.

"Feliciano has trained a few before you. He's never asked for my assistance, but you're the first one who's been nearly fully-trained," Ludwig confessed. Fully-trained indeed! Alfred lacked help on some of the most obvious and important parts of being a bondsman, but Ludwig neglected to say this in the hopes it would keep Alfred's spirits up. He didn't want to scare him with the fear of being thrown out.

"I suppose what I say comes from years and years of classes," he said. Though in no actual class were these sorts of axioms ever learned or discussed. Ludwig and other primary students had simply ... come about them naturally. As easily as sleeping.

"I'm glad I can benefit from your experience," Alfred said pleasantly, blandly.
Ludwig really had to get this temper of his back under control. "You shouldn't stay in there too long, you'll get all pruny," he advised. "It's not good for the skin."

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Some people, Ludwig knew, said some sort of prayer before dinner. Instead, Alfred whispered, "Holy mother of God, this shit's terrible," when Feliciano set their doses down first, then left the room to fetch his own health tonic. Ludwig didn't know much about the tonics except that Alfred's and Ludwig's were a different composition than Feliciano's. But they all smelled like rotten meat and were the colour (and consistency) of mucous.

"It gets easier, over time," Ludwig murmured.

"Yeah, I've noticed," he replied. "First night I was here I almost spat it out. Had to work my way up to the full quarter cup. Now it's ... still disgusting but somehow manageable."

"Well!" Feliciano said, as he returned, his own glass of tonic. He sat down happily and raised his glass. "Salute!" They clinked and downed them, chased with a half a glass of wine. Dinner was fried crabs with a rich risotto and grilled vegetables, fresh bread and more wine.

Lots of wine.

Too much wine, he reflected, when they all collapsed on the couch together, and the room spun Alfred into the middle between Feliciano and Ludwig, the music from the gramophone floating around them, some famous Halleri pianist Feliciano was enamoured with.

Wine made Ludwig pliable and fuzzy, but he'd thought he'd gotten used to it after six years of drinking it in Feliciano's service. It appeared to do similar things to Feliciano and Alfred. Ludwig had gotten drunk with Feliciano before, but not like this. Before it was platonic. Now, there was a magic around them, a sort of heady scent in the air that softened his gaze, made his chest ache with infatuation and his pulse thrum in his ears. The air seemed thicker, somehow. Humid. More difficult to breathe. There was wine on Feliciano's lips and he ached to kiss them clean -

This wine would be better watered down, what was in it that messed with his restraint and reordered his training?

"There's dessert," Feliciano offered.

"Oh god, I couldn't eat another bite," Alfred half-said, half-drawled, "I'm kinda stuffed."

Feliciano lifted the thin shirt Alfred wore and poked his stomach, teasing and testing the verity of his words. "Ve, you could fit more in," he decided. Alfred knocked his hand away playfully. Feliciano smiled; he didn't remove his hand but instead let it rest there, where it disappeared under the soft cream colour of combed cotton, tracing circles on Alfred's belly.

Six years Ludwig had been with touchy-feely Feliciano, six years of touches that culminated in nothing. Not once had his master wished for anything more lurid than Ludwig's physical presence and the odd request for pasta. But with Alfred... little brushes of fingertips on his forehead, lingering on his neck, trailing down his jaw - nearly everywhere - holding hands, constantly being in Alfred's personal space. Hugs, kisses on the cheek became kisses on the neck, a tongue at his collarbone.
He had always been so chaste with Ludwig. So Feliciano couldn't know what he was doing. He didn't understand the second connotation behind his actions, the potential to be interpreted as flirting. He didn't.

But there was touchy, and then there was this - Feliciano nestled up close to Alfred, no part of Alfred's side left exposed to air (this might explain why the boy felt so warm) - his eyes drowsy but openly, obviously passionate...

If Ludwig did not know any better, he could swear Feliciano wanted Alfred.

"Maybe if it's ice cream?" Alfred guessed. He snuggled deeper into the crevice between couch pillows, propping his head up with the hand closest to Ludwig.

Feliciano shook his head, his hand still resting on Alfred's stomach. "Tiramisu. It's like pudding but with cookies and alcohol."

"No more alcohol!" Alfred laughed, "I think I've had more than I should already. It's so warm in here."

"It is really warm in here!" Feliciano agreed. Ludwig shot him a look and he explained: "I asked Grandfather to see about the stove. It's been working really weirdly lately, don't you find?"

He didn't recall any such problems with the stove, but that seemed plausible. "I'm sure Signore Romae will get it fixed," he told Alfred. "In the meantime we'll have to manage."

"We'll fix everything," said Feliciano.

"Mmm," Alfred said, agreeably. He moistened his mouth with his tongue and loosened the collar of his shirt, undoing the first few buttons. Watching him made thunder in Ludwig's ears. "Y'know," he began softly, "you guys've been really great. I thought. I totally thought this would be weird or somethin' but it hasn't, not at all."

Ludwig couldn't help a sleepy, satisfied smile, and Feliciano outright giggled. "I'm glad!" he cooed. "I - I really don't want to leave," Alfred confessed. He turned his face into the direction of Feliciano's, letting the hand propping his head up slip subtly down Ludwig's chest to rest in the centre. It looked like an accident, but Alfred didn't move his hand, and Ludwig didn't move at all.

"Ah! No, don't - don't speak of such things! You mustn't," Feliciano told him, but any scolding message there could have been was lost in his merry slurring. "Besides," he giggled into the side of Alfred's jaw, and it was only that Ludwig was so close in proximity to the both of them that he could even hear what Feliciano said, "if tomorrow we part, then we must make the most of tonight. And nights like these. The most of what we've got. Yes? Isn't that so?"

Any decent bondservant would know what the master wanted before the master did. And just because Feliciano had never asked him for sex, either directly or through his actions (not before now), didn't mean Ludwig had become less fluent in reading him.

Unabashedly, Feliciano was asking for sex judging by his body language alone, squirming on the couch as he was, curled into Alfred's side - asking for sex, but not with Ludwig. With Alfred. It was the way, when he wasn't playing eye tag between Ludwig's cautious stare and Alfred's sleepy one, that he burrowed his face into Alfred's neck, nuzzling the side of it. This had changed from touchy
to flirtatious.

And whatever Feliciano wanted, Ludwig wanted.

It all made sense, he reflected, sidling closer to Alfred. Alfred had seemed so naive from their conversation earlier, in the bath. He had evidently never had sex with men before. Well, what if the person who bought him at auction - the boy was beautiful, someone would, Ludwig thought - were male?

It had been part of his training that Signore Romae had taught him the ropes. That was what decent trainers did. Now that Feliciano had elected to assist with training a few prospectives, he too should begin the active portion of training. That had been Romae's work, for the prospectives Feliciano had trained before. Feliciano had never slept with them. Instead he helped with more of the cognitive, behavioural side of things. He was gifted in that area, Ludwig had heard Romae say, and Romae, the disciplinarian, was an excellent judge of such ability.

But someone had to show Alfred what to do.

He should have worked it out earlier. As Feliciano's companion, Ludwig could help him train others. Feliciano must not have wanted him alone. He must have wanted him with someone else. Judging from Feliciano's body language, he overtly wanted that. Wanted Alfred and Ludwig. Finally wanted Ludwig. Wanted him to do something. Alfred. He was useful! He could have cried with joy.

"I agree completely," Ludwig murmured, moving closer, cozying up to Alfred's other side, taking Alfred's other hand from his chest where it lay and holding it in his lap instead.

"Oh," Alfred said quietly, exhaling. Ludwig weaved his fingers through Alfred's, slowly and certainly. "I thought, I thought you didn't."

"Didn't what?" he asked.

"I told you!" Feliciano chirped. "I said you were being silly, didn't I say that?"

"You did," Alfred sighed. He shifted against Ludwig, letting Feliciano have more access by leaning back against Ludwig's chest.

"About what?" Ludwig asked.

"He said you didn't like him," Feliciano said with a pout, "isn't that sad?" He traced out the path of a frown on Alfred's lips.

"I didn't say it like that! I just said -"

"That isn't true," Ludwig told him. That wasn't true at all.

"I told you so. So silly." Alfred shifted again, turning to face their master and letting Ludwig support the full weight of his upper body, shifting in Ludwig's lap. Feliciano crawled happily between his splayed legs. "Silly Alfred!" he said, and kissed Alfred's neck. Ludwig more felt than heard the gasp as Alfred tensed against him, gripping his fingers.

"Ahn - I just said that it seemed like - mmm, - seemed like you were mad at me or something."
"I'm not mad," Ludwig said, to the nape of his neck. He moved to Alfred's exposed shoulder, where he could better see Alfred's profile. Alfred seemed sceptical. "I'm not!" he insisted softly. "I like you."

"We both like you," Feliciano corrected between kisses. His gaze darted from Alfred's to Ludwig's and back again.

"Uh-huh," he whispered. He relaxed fully against Ludwig and closed his eyes.

"Let us show you how much," Feliciano said, helping himself to the drawstring on Alfred's pants, tugging it carefully.

"Aah -"

"Unless you mind?" Feliciano paused.

"M-mind? Of course I don't mind -" and Feliciano grinned and continued his drawn-out, lazy unknotting. "Feels like I've been simmering in my skin for days, something about the way the air smells here, 's been driving me insane."

"Oh? Only the air? Then we've had nothing to do with this?" Feliciano caught Ludwig's eyes over Alfred's shoulder, and pointed to his hand, then down the loosened waistline of Alfred's pants.

"I didn't mean it like -" he broke off completely in a shallow hiss when Ludwig slid a hand down and wrapped a hand around his erection, prominent and firm, the head already damp - "th-aah, oh gosh yes, please."

It was the first real action Ludwig had gotten in six years. He felt no need to dawdle or drag it out. If anything the way that Alfred panted and ground up against him spurned him on faster, gripping more firmly, giving the boy what he wanted.

"Perfect," Feliciano whispered, smoothing Alfred's hair back. "You're both perfect." He leaned in and kissed Alfred on the mouth soundly. Ludwig countered with a rough kiss at the junction between his neck and shoulder, sucking at the skin. He felt Alfred's moan against his lips where he'd latched onto the side of his neck and held him a little closer, a little more tightly.

Feliciano broke the kiss to watch Alfred's face as Ludwig worked, licking a trail up the muscles on Alfred's neck, nipping at his jaw, twisting his wrist just so until - "ah, yes yes, there," Alfred panted desperately, "just a little more -!"

"Yes, perfect, come on, that's it exactly," Feliciano said encouragingly, and reached up to ruffle Alfred's hair, directing his head backwards to rest against Ludwig's shoulder. "A little more. Such a good boy!" He let his hand fall to the side of Alfred's face and hover next to his ear when out of nowhere -

"Ah, fuck -"

SNAP

"- yes!"
Ludwig found himself abruptly, painfully erect, harder than he already was, as Alfred came, grinding his shoulder blades against Ludwig's chest and shoving himself through the tight circle of Ludwig's grip. It wasn't possible for his pants to be tight - as a bondsman all his casual wear was fairly loose - but as Alfred squirmed, he rubbed against him deliciously, and Alfred's weight made him feel constricted and tense.

Feliciano took advantage of both their distraction, swooped in and kissed Alfred deeply. And then, with a victorious grin, he wormed a hand around Alfred's trembling body and past the waistband of Ludwig's pants. As he grasped Ludwig's erection and pumped (which was distraction enough) he kissed his gasp away. Not a chaste, reward-kiss, not with his usual style, but open-mouthed, hot, wet, blissfully intimate and oh yes, perfect indeed, Ludwig thought, feeling goose-pimpled and hot-blooded at the same time.

Distantly, he felt Alfred clench his fingers - they were still intertwined with his own - as he too came, minutes later, sighing into Alfred's skin and clutching his body close.

"That was lovely," Feliciano said, when Ludwig could think again, "wasn't that lovely?" Ludwig was too exhausted to worry about how messy they both were, or to do anything but agree.

Feliciano kissed them both again. "You're both so good," he praised, and with those words, the post-orgasm exhaustion Ludwig felt melted away completely into a different kind of euphoria, which sang brightly in mad jubilation. "So good."
Estonia

Ivan and Eduard had fallen into a pleasant routine.

They got up at nine and took breakfast in their chambers. Breakfast was a porridge that Ivan called kasha which was not always made of the same grain but was consistently tasteless.

They answered the daily mail until lunch. Lunch became a later and later affair as Ivan began to get more mail. Occasionally Ivan would dictate the rough contents of a letter for Eduard to practice his script and formal letter-writing skills. His first drafts sounded poor but as Ivan had him restart, he bade Eduard not to worry, they had plenty of supplies.

There were many things one used a bondservant for. Dictation was not among them. When he told Ivan this, Ivan shrugged and said, "You may require better penmanship than that Francis taught you, someday."

Lunch was more substantial and far more tasty. A cup of soup to start, then a platter of smoked fish, dumplings and flavoured butter, stuffed mushrooms, sausages and cheese, and a dark sour-tasting, moist bread with roe. Eduard and Ivan would pick at it platter for over an hour while reading files.

Thereafter there was more work. And when that was finished, still more work. Eduard had no idea how Ivan had managed without him, especially since before, he couldn't work. "Most of these files were Katya's," Ivan explained. "I have simply reappropriated them."

"There are so many," Eduard remarked. "She did all of this plus her own work?"

Ivan looked ashamed of himself. "I have not been easy on my sister," he admitted quietly.

"I'm glad you've taken them back, then," Eduard added, hoping to keep the conversation up. Ivan became silent whenever contentious topics came up, like something related to his Time, or how Eduard's wounds were doing. Eduard couldn't understand why; wasn't everything well in the end?

Ivan nodded. "My sister ... how should I say, has a different style of governing than I do. She is very... fierce." Lessons in diplomacy from Ivan Bragin of Olyokin. Fierce was a kind word for Gospozha Yekaterina. She was downright ruthless, and had been uncaring to Eduard's plight. If he hadn't seen how worried she became for her brother, he might have deduced she had no capacity for mercy within her.

"Why is she like that and you're not?" Eduard asked. But this was the wrong question to ask, because Ivan became quiet, murmuring that he'd tell the story 'perhaps some other time', and their small conversation died.

They often broke for a cup of tea mid-afternoon. By this time, it was twilight, and Ivan would suggest a walk before supper while it was still light. They went behind the Duma grounds, Eduard dressed in Ivan's old greatcoat, where there was a well-kept path that cut through a ravine, a forest, and an open clearing.
They returned to the Duma an hour later, after dark, and took a larger meal for dinner, beginning with a heavy stew and followed up by a main course - often fish, sometimes chicken, sometimes ground meat minced and rolled and served with potatoes. Eduard stopped at the stew while Ivan, he was amazed to learn, could pack away a significant amount of food.

Then, they went their separate ways - Ivan to the tavern to meet with his curious monk friend, and Eduard to the library.

And then also the tavern, to meet with Feliks and Raivis.

Ivan said he could go anywhere he wanted. Eduard didn't need permission, though if Eduard in bed with a book when Ivan came home, Ivan would wonder. Eduard could lie and say he was in the library, or out for a walk, or any manner of things, but if he were caught, it could get Feliks and Raivis in trouble.

He liked Feliks and Raivis a lot, though he liked more tinkering with the gadgets Feliks called Eavesdroppers, or reading the blueprints of the airship. Working in the Kilnus base was better than dealing with Olyokin politics. It was easier to understand, linear and logical.

So Eduard didn't think it was wise to tell Ivan about this. He would have to explain that he didn't like the work Ivan made him do.

He wasn't sure how to feel about keeping this secret, but Raivis and Feliks never acted like it was a big deal. Why not have his fun where he could take it?

Because at no point was there any kind of fun involved between Ivan and him. This was nice... at first. Eduard was still recuperating. It was kind of Ivan to give him a reprieve. He was grateful he'd been bought by a kind master.

But after a week, when the bandages had come off, it was getting on his nerves. Francis had had him at least twice a week, in some manner or another, for twenty years. Or if Francis were busy, he and Matthieu would amuse themselves. Or Francis would ask one of them to help train the adepts.

It was true that his master - Gospodin was the term on Olyokin (but he only called him Gospodin Ivan in front of other people; alone, Ivan insisted upon Vanya and nothing else) - had warmed up to him appreciably. But there were still his mores to deal with. Ivan was fixated on these beliefs; he clung to them. When he said he wouldn't use Eduard for service, he apparently meant every word.

That left Eduard - who wasn't to touch himself without his master's permission (which Ivan had not explicitly given), who had been raised with a lifetime of constant sex and orgasms (usually good ones) - without a single outlet, not one. This was despite the best case scenario having happened: he had been sold to a kind master, who was certainly attractive. Eduard imagined he wouldn't mind serving Ivan in any such capacity, whatever the man's tastes were (though he didn't imagine this long because it became awkward and uncomfortable to do any political work with an erection, while sitting at the same desk).

While he'd prefer never to repeat the dungeon experience, he was also hoping that wasn't going to be the last time he ever had sex.

It was certainly looking that way. Eduard was not pleased.
He finished with the Driybin file shortly before three. A 'routine matter', said Ivan. It involved a black market ring in the state. "How is this routine?" Eduard asked.

Ivan shrugged. "Well, you know."

"I don't know. I want you to explain it."

Ivan leaned back in his chair, slouching, and rested his hands behind his head before he began. "Things are... difficult, in that area," he said. "The people who live in that region are mostly peasants. Small villages - posadi. Fairly religious, many General's altars. When that state was annexed, a few years ago - not the term Katya would have you use, she would prefer you say instead amalgamated, but when you are with me, you may call it what it was - well, there was some turbulence in that area. Things haven't calmed down, though it's getting better. Fifteen days since the last bomb!"

"When you say annexed, you mean...?"

"Katya sent in four divisions of infantry and they decided pretty quickly that the state would become property of the Empire Union. Anybody with complaints could take it up with the Chief Commandant and his favourite machine guns."

That sounded more like invasion than annexation. "Is that legal?"

Ivan shook his head. "Not really," he said grimly, "and Kilnus does not recognise our governance upon that territory, they believe we are occupying it. But I am digressing. The villagers do not like us, but they like the richer villagers because they're from the same place. Now, a black market may be illegal, but it does some good. Those rich villagers in charge of it become vocal about Driybin's affairs at court. And if some poor villager direly requires food or medicine, they are given a discount that scales the price down to what they can pay. Heartless to deny basic needs to one's neighbour! And dead people don't make good customers.

"We can't justify spending resources to bring down something that works well enough when other regions need these resources more. And the closest Empire-run place to find the same goods is too far away. Those goods would have to be driven in using paths subject to banditry. Then nobody gets what they want! This way, we may not exert much control, but we can subtly influence it and monitor it all we like. Anyway, that's the internal position within the Empire."

"And the official position?" Eduard asked.

"The official position is that the black market of Driybin does not exist, nor has it ever, because that's illegal and we don't have illegal things in the Empire Union," Ivan parroted smoothly, "and if someone should ask you your opinion upon these things, it is best to play dumb until you are sure whose side they are on."

"Do you... get that a lot, here? People whose side you're not sure of?"

"Sure, all the time," Ivan murmured. "I have only a few acquaintances whose loyalties I trust, and then, only one real friend I'm not related to." He seemed wistful. "Someday you'll meet him. When I'm ready. Anyway, back to work. Still an hour before tea."

So Eduard picked up the next folder in the piles, marked Zapreschniy State - Western Region -
Aritsevskiy. He read in silence, feeling like he'd read this kind of thing before, until it finally clicked fifteen minutes later with a name. "How rare is a name like Savva, anyway?" he asked.

"Pretty rare," murmured Ivan, too distracted by work to look up. "Why?"

"Just that there's probably only one Savva Yozhin in the Empire at legislative level clearance 5. I thought I'd seen the name before, from the file on Pren."

Ivan paused. "That officer is only working on two cases at the moment. On vacation next year. Where did you get that folder?"

"It ... was the next one down in the pile," he said uncertainly. "Is there some kind of trouble?"

"No - well, there's probably nothing in there, but - Zapreschniy State is a classified matter. I should have picked that one out." He held out his hand for the folder.

Eduard didn't move very quickly in packing it up. "What's the problem with this state?"

Ivan gave him a long, searching look. "I suppose I do trust you," he admitted, lowering his hand when Eduard didn't give him the folder, "so I might as well tell you now that you've read half of it. But be warned! That's at least three hours' worth of work. You still want to know?"

He'd have to work through dinner if he wanted to see Feliks and Raivis at all tonight! But stubbornly, he held onto it. "You sort folders by classified information but not by workload?"

"You're welcome," Ivan chuckled, but became more serious. "Curious Barbara got her nose cut off in the market, as they say. Anyway, here's the situation," and Eduard prepared himself for another long and complicated explanation that would ultimately leave him with more questions than he'd begun.

"Savva needs that vacation, because nobody likes him. Not here in Skuratchky, and not in Zapreschnyi, where his two cases are the settlements Aritsevskiy and Pren. Of those two, Aritsevskiy is doing better. By now you've had an idea of what a settlement is like."

A posyolok or settlement - small villages. A city had buildings for the General, a posad had altars built to the General, and a posyolok had little more than totems. It was the lowest administrative level of rural village life in the Empire Union. A posyolok might be under the jurisdiction of a state council formed by the official designate and a small section of military officers, like Aritsevskiy. If it was large enough, the posyolok might have its own governance. Eduard nodded.

"Life is difficult in the posyolok," Ivan explained. "There is enough money to keep one's head afloat: to keep the taxman happy, to keep bread and meat on your table, to keep hot water in your teapot. No money for frivolities like horses, parchment, ink. Some are too poor for a schoolhouse, so the children are taught at home. There is a great importance placed on money, you see. Money is necessary to get out. But most have none so most stay put, bear their children there, raise them, teach them the same job they know that their fathers and mothers taught them, and their fathers and mothers before that ..."

"The village, by construction, keeps the status quo," Eduard guessed, and Ivan gave him a grim smile.

"Unless a miracle happens and you find gold. Now recently, over the past year and a half, there's
been some stolen money. Here and there, little bits disappear - less available to pay the doctor when he makes his rounds, less available to repair the schoolhouse, less available for the general store to stock postage stamps. It adds up. Someone is stealing.

"Well, Savva did some legwork to try and isolate the cause. It didn't make him any more liked among the villagers of Aritsevskiy. Care to hazard a guess as to who's behind it?"

The villagers? No, though it would explain the hostility towards Savva for having cracked their case. But who else would require that kind of money? If it were a thieving issue, surely the thieves would steal as much as possible once and then get out before anyone knew, rather than have someone present, someone who would have to be stationed at least semi-permanently, constantly siphoning...

"It's the military," he decided. Ivan smiled again.

"Savva found funds being redirected at Major level. He tried to call Vmalkhina out on it. She tried to buy his silence. When that didn't work - Savva is a principled fellow - it got public and... people backed Vmalkhina."

"Why would Vmalkhina steal? In the military, everything is provided for her, food, drink - she must be ten times as rich as any of the villagers. Besides, the file said they liked her. They still like her, even now that they know?"

"That's the problem. I can't figure out why they would prefer a corrupt Major over the official state designate who takes initiative in deconstructing corruption, which he did on his own time. It is an ultimately small affair - nobody has died of hunger yet. But I can't remove Vmalkhina by firing or re-stationing her without increasingly uncooperative villagers, who have made it quite clear to Savva that they won't listen to him in her absence."

Eduard scowled. "I don't think I want to work on this file anymore."

Ivan grinned. "Too late! It's yours now." He grinned harder when Eduard stuck his tongue out at him, like a child would. But with Ivan's great smile across from him, Eduard could only hold that face for so long and when he finally cracked up, they each collapsed into a fit of laughter.

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Three and a half hours later (he wanted to work through tea, but Ivan coaxed and cajoled until he agreed to accompany him on a short walk), when Ivan had disappeared off to the tavern, Eduard donned his overcoat, laced up his outerwear boots and made as mad a dash as possible for the tavern back door and the tunnel. He didn't want to move so quickly he broke the contents of his pack but dammit, he was already so late!

He pounded on the door to the warehouse. "Raivis, it's me," he yelled.

"Oh! Hello, me. And who might you be?" Feliks' voice. Must've been closer to the door.

"It's Eduard - Feliks, let me in already!"

He heard a loud clank behind the giant door and it swung open slowly, Feliks tugging on the other side. "I know it's only been a week, but you'd think you'd be able to recognise my voice by now?" he asked, annoyed.
"Could've been a recorded feed. You can't trust anybody these days." And Eduard couldn't fault that logic, which annoyed him more. "Besides, you're usually totally punctual."

"Don't remind me," Eduard muttered, stepping over the threshold and entering the warehouse.

"Man, what's got your panties in a twist?" Feliks asked, throwing his weight against the door to slam it closed. It didn't fully wake Raivis, who was off in the corner at his desk, sleeping on folded forearms, but he sort of made a mumbling sound.

"Should we... be quiet?" Eduard asked Feliks, in a hush.

"Nah," Feliks said aloud, "He can sleep through warfare. And he should totally wake up and get back to work. So, like, don't bother being too quiet. I'll be over here if you need anything."

"What are you up to?"

"Toris bought us a new thermal pump!" Feliks said. "Doesn't fit though, so I have to figure out what to move around so I can install it. This thing might actually fly before December rolls around."

"Do you need it to?"

"Oh, not particularly. We're not, like, going anywhere, or anything. All the business we do is on planet." Eduard wasn't completely clear yet on what their business was (or who the mythical Toris was, he'd yet to meet him) - Raivis seemed like he wanted to talk about it but Feliks had quickly interrupted, saying the less he knew about it, the better. Eduard would have protested but recalled in his mind an image of curious Barbara and the unfortunate fate of her nose. Eduard liked his nose. He liked it on his face.

All he knew is they weren't murderers. They weren't the kind of spies who went around with sniper rifles or camouflage or sacks of explosives for public places. And anything after that, well, so long as they did no harm, what was the problem with it, really?

"Heyyy," Feliks added, "once I'm done with the old pump ... you want to like take it apart?"

"Yes," he gushed. "You'd really let me do that?"

Feliks shrugged with a smile. "Sure, why not. It's like a two-person job to pry off the casing alone, and you seem to be totally into this kinda thing. Speaking of, you gonna show me what you've been doing with those Eavesdroppers?"

"In a bit, I'm almost done. Then I'll show you what I've got." Wiser not to get engrossed in something he didn't have time for tonight, anyway.

He made his way over to the workdesk he'd unofficially claimed as his own and emptied his pack. Eduard hadn't asked them if he could remove the tools he did from the base, but he had had a suspicion something might work and had wanted to try it out. Nobody was using that old radio in the Duma library. Nobody would notice if it didn't work anymore because it lacked an interior.

Raivis stirred and mumbled something that sounded like 'sophisticated brain can', so Eduard walked over and shook his shoulder. "C'mon, sleeping beauty," he teased, "you have work to do and sleep's not until ten." Raivis batted at the air and readjusted his position on his forearms,
falling back asleep. Eduard let him.

He worked steadily for awhile. Eavesdroppers, when linking to an aud feed stationed elsewhere, used the same principles of transmitting and receiving that radios did, with a particular frequency keyed to a narrow bandwidth. Like a lock and key. You could only receive the message if you were tuned close enough to the right frequency; anything else was static. Different Eavesdroppers used different wavelengths, and so in theory, it allowed for an infinite number of Eavesdroppers anywhere. In practice, there was overlap chatter on frequency windows, but improvements in technology brought greater precision so that a user with 101.501 kHz didn't accidentally overhear information from 101.505 kHz.

Secrecy was preserved by keeping the frequencies private. One wasn't supposed to open up the back of the Eavesdropper to figure them out, but once one did, ignoring the threat of voiding warranty, it was a pretty quick examination of the varistor settings kept under a glass casing. Lifting open the casing would let you toggle the varistors and set a new frequency. Eduard had spent much of the past week's time at the Kilnus base calibrating and cataloguing their Eavesdroppers in this way.

When seeking for feeds, the Eavesdropper mechanism was simpler: just check for the radiation signal of an aud feed's power source. An aud feed could generally detect clear voice from steps away. Any farther than that took greater amplifier power to transmit a decent quality sound back to the receiving Eavesdropper, and any radiation signal became weaker the farther away you were from it, in equal proportion. If a power source signal were too weak for a monitoring Eavesdropper to pick up, the feed that used that power source would be too far to pick up your voice, too.

So Eduard had wondered, if an Eavesdropper could be linked to an aud feed, could a pair of Eavesdroppers and a pair of aud feeds be combined to "talk" to one another over long distances?

The most obvious solution he found was to fish out the roll of magnetic tape in the body of the Eavesdropper, which gave him some room to place the aud feed of another Eavesdropper inside the body of the first and close it up. But with both Eavesdropper and aud feeds tuned to the same operating frequency, it meant you'd hear yourself talk in the same device. Yelling to be heard on the other end would be unpleasant.

He considered initially using the two original frequencies, so that the transmitter and receiver worked on different channels, but he wanted a more elegant solution. And this was where he found the switches on the radio at the Duma library. A switch enabled him to push the transmitter on when you wanted to talk, and then you flipped it back to the receiver to be able to hear the other side speaking.

It hadn't felt like three hours, but he was so excited when it actually worked that he practically ignored Raivis saying something about going for a walk, and forgot entirely about checking the clock, in favour of further testing. Then someone stood near him - there was a shadow, blocking his light - and cleared their throat. He looked up.

There stood a youngish looking man, perhaps late-twenties, with jaw-length wavy brown hair and bright green eyes, dressed in a plain white shirt and trousers held up by black braces. For Eduard, now quite used to the Vitim, it was a shock - the pale skin was the only thing that seemed familiar. He stared.

"The hell are you?" the man asked. Despite his breath smelling faintly of vodka, his voice was
steady and deadly clear.

"Um," Eduard replied. Eloquent, he thought dully. "You must be Toris." The one he'd heard about but not seen.

"Who," said Toris, very clearly and firmly, "are you."

"Oh... hey, Toris..." saved by Feliks, Eduard thought triumphantly. "You're home, like ... really early."

"I have returned at the same time I always do. Feliks, who the hell is he. I will not ask again," Toris stated, his tone of voice dangerous.

"Uh," Feliks began, about as eloquent as Eduard, "so. We, um. We, like ... weren't too sure how to tell you, but, um. This is Ivan's bondsman."

And Toris took one look at Eduard and whipped out a pistol from the back of his trousers.

"Whoa!" Feliks cried, "whoa whoa whoa. We ask questions first, then shoot."

"We don't shoot at all!" Eduard protested, his hands raised in defence.

"I will decide what we do and do not do, thank you so very kindly," Toris said evenly, and cocked the weapon.

"C'mon," Feliks insisted, tugging on Toris' sleeve, "lemme explain the situation. It'll make like tons more sense once I do, okay?" He took Toris aside and though they were close enough that an aud feed at Eduard's desk could pick up what they were saying decently, Eduard lacked a sophisticated receiver. And he'd have to route the signal into an Eavesdropper anyway, which would project the sound outward, and Feliks and Toris - mostly Toris - wouldn't appreciate being overheard. (Though that gave him an idea for an earpiece, to make things more private.)

All these things are probably available at any high technology store, Eduard thought, frustrated. There was no way what he had done was novel. This was just rediscovering the wheel, or perhaps doing it a little more cheaply.

"- don't you go ask him and see for yourself, there's totally no attachment to Vityaz!" he overheard Feliks say before he stormed off towards the airship, leaving Toris alone.

Toris sighed and returned to Eduard. "Supposing I believe what Feliks says, which is that you're friendly, for now," he began, pulling up a chair and sitting next to him. "Why are you here?"

It was pretty obvious from his behaviour that Toris was an actual spy. Eduard had not met actual spies before, it was true, but there was something in the way the other carried himself and took what he did so much more seriously than Feliks (who most of the time was just dressing up and playing socialite) and Raivis (who was the reason someone like Eduard, so closely linked to Ivan, knew about their entire base of operations). Toris, meanwhile, came off as someone who did the kinds of things that wound up in Ivan's files.

He hadn't been lying when he told Raivis and Feliks he was interested in learning more about the Kilnus side of things. He certainly hadn't been lying when he'd expressed interest in the gadgets - and if anything good or useful came of it that they could use, all the better. But it was easier to
rationalise when his friends were harmless.

Was Toris harmless? Harm to the Empire aside, perhaps Toris was the kind of guy who might take Eduard out the back of the tavern and have him simply disappear! In fact, the only thing likely stopping Toris from doing that was his proximity to Ivan (which was also his greatest bargaining chip). Nobody knew where he was right now - he had told no one, and no one used the library - but Ivan would know if he didn't return. Any outsider would think he would have to be back at the Duma to service his master at some point, and the Bragins were not so well off that a prized possession like a trained bondsman could simply go missing without warning.

But Raivis knew Ivan wasn't thrilled about having a bondsman. And Raivis had known (somehow!) that Ivan hadn't cleared his Time. Which meant Feliks and Toris knew.

He would be careful.

"Because I like tinkering with these gadgets, and Feliks and Raivis didn't mind my doing it," he said honestly. He gestured to the workdesk. "This is a pair of Eavesdroppers and a pair of feeds linked together. It won't record what you say, but you can talk to someone else in real time over a distance." He handed Toris one. "Try it. Go walk over there and flip the switch to talk, then flip back to listen."

He waited until Toris was just out of earshot, past the airship, and flipped the switch on his end. "Can you hear me?" he spoke.

A crackle, and then a chirp. "Holy mother of - yes. Can - can you hear me?"

He let some time elapse for Toris to flip the switch back before he flipped his own. "Loud and clear," he said into the device.

Toris came trotting back to the workdesk. "These are brilliant!" he exclaimed breathlessly. "Do you think you can make them work on farther distances?"

"I think so." It'd need a stronger amplifier - or a smarter amplifier. Perhaps three days' work if he could do some research at the library back at the Duma and find something good.

"And - you've got plans for what you did?"

He shook his head. "I didn't bother writing them down," he said, "but if you want more I can make more. I've done it once, I can do it again." Just needed more supplies.

"That would be amazing," Toris said, grinning. "I can't believe you managed to - and you're a bondsman, you don't have any engineering training! They have nothing like this up at the Duma? Some kind of laboratory for you?"

Eduard laughed, a little bitterly. "Like you said, that's... not my job."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Toris said, and he looked it, "I know, why would anyone give a bondsman laboratory access, but - this is really something. You're very talented." He set the Eavesdropper back down on the worktable. "You know, I'm amazed Ivan has a bondsman. I know him well," he explained. "He's always parroting on about evil this and immoral that."

"I'm a particularly unwanted gift," Eduard replied, trying not to feel too hurt or sorry for himself.
"He doesn't ... use me as you should use a bondservant. I thought, I might as well make myself useful."

"You'll hear no complaints from me! So you're here for this?"

"That. And also because you guys can tell me things I can't read about. Things you read in books they don't allow us to obtain."

Toris' interest seemed piqued. At least, he didn't ask any more about Eduard's motivations. "Like what? What do you want to know?"

Many things, but first and foremost... "Why do the villagers of posyolok Aritsevskiy prefer the military to the Imperial designate, when the military is stealing from them and the designate is trying to stop it?"

Toris blinked, his expression a perfect blank. "How do you know anything about this matter? Does - does Ivan let you work on those files?"

"Not all of them," Eduard replied. "Anything that isn't too sensitive, I can work on."

"Zapreschniy state, not sensitive! That's ridiculous!" he laughed. And mental note made to speak with Toris more often if Eduard could get the chance. How strange that they'd never crossed paths before. Toris seemed privileged to more sensitive information than Raivis or Feliks had been able to obtain. Must be higher up in the ranks. That would certainly explain his earlier paranoia. "The official state designate is an Empire patsy," continued Toris. "He never does a single thing that's any different from the law. Upholds it to the letter."

"Isn't that good?" Judging from the nature of Toris' mirth, it evidently wasn't, but Ivan's words had floated back to him: if someone should ask you your opinion upon these things, it is best to play dumb until you are sure whose side they are on.

(But then again, he thought, what is my side? There was Ivan - for whom he was bought, who was attractive and kind. And who insulted him. But then apologised for it. And who still didn't use him for service because of morals. But who let him go wherever he wished. And yet didn't give him any directions about what to do, sexually, for himself. Was he allowed to masturbate? Could he take other lovers? (That seemed outright preposterous, he wasn't a freeman!)

And although they'd formed a strange friendship between sharing meals and tea and going on walks, Ivan also had him working on files he didn't understand. He had no training in politics! but apparently Eduard was intelligent. Well, it didn't make him feel intelligent to have Ivan dumb it down every five minutes.

Then there was Feliks, and Raivis, who were a hundred times easier to understand and didn't blow hot and cold. Raivis was chatty, jovial and friendly; Feliks was bubbly once he warmed up and a decent engineer despite lacking formal training. He liked them a lot. Their clarity and frankness was appreciated. Even Toris - a spy with hidden agendas - so far made more sense than Ivan.)

Toris shook his head. "The villagers don't like it. To them, they see... They see a guy who's too good. They think he does it because he thinks he's better than they are. He thinks he's superior."

"But the Major is stealing from them," Eduard countered.
"Many Kala would prefer someone who is unafraid to get their hands dirty, someone who can be swayed this way and that with the right motivations - it tells them there's always a plan B. Aritsevskiy is no different. Besides. She is and isn't stealing."

"How do you mean?"

"The military has been as kind as a military can be for this particular village," Toris explained with a weak grin. "They mediate conflicts without taking sides, they're fair in their dealings between villagers, they do reliable work for the village. Over time the villagers have come to expect a certain treatment from them. They aren't saints but they are consistent, and the villagers like that. And they try to create jobs, which is good for the local economy and enables people to save some money."

Toris was quiet for a moment. When he spoke again his voice was strained and emotional, and he didn't look up from the worktable. "Do you know what Teresya Vmalkhina does with the money she takes? She scouts out to find pieces in the rubble in the nearby ruins. She brings them back. She rebuilds parts of their town that ... fell into ruin, shall we say. That doesn't contribute anything to the value of the town, but it does a lot for the souls of the people who knew those who - well. Anyway. She's a saint. And Savva hasn't done anything except get in her way."

"I didn't think about it from that angle," Eduard said softly. "Ivan didn't either."

Toris snorted. "Ivan. He ... sometimes sees only what's in front of him. It's a narrow field of view. He doesn't often get an idea of the big picture. His sister does, but. I don't like what she does with the big picture. Bragina's dangerous. All of them have made difficult decisions. But at least Bragina's difficult decisions are consistent. Ivan is like a pendulum. I never know what he'll do."

There wasn't much Eduard could add to that, because from what he'd seen at the Duma so far, none of it was untrue.

"You said you knew him," he asked. "Ivan, I mean."

Toris took a deep breath first. "Yeah," he said, "I know him."

"You're not friends?"

"We're ... how could I put this. Acquaintances? Ivan doesn't let a lot of people in. He's distant. But that's good. He gets angry easily, he's short-tempered, he can be rude, sometimes violent. He can't accept criticism, he deflects or avoids issues he doesn't like. It's his way or the highway, and his way doesn't always make sense. Even us - we go through stages where we'll not speak, because I've said or done something that shows I disagree with him. It used to come to blows between us, but that doesn't work with me anymore. So he retreats. But everytime we speak, it's like walking on eggshells. That's stressful."

That mostly sounded like the Ivan he knew. "Why is he like that?"

"Maybe if you've got four hours. It's a long story, better saved for next time. It's getting pretty late."

"Why, what time is - oh, shit," Eduard finished. That clock couldn't possibly be right? Ivan would have been home for over half an hour by this point! "I have to get going."
"Cinderella's gotta be home before midnight, hasn't she?" Toris teased. But he sobered and said, "If your master's waiting for you, you'd better get going, you're right."

"He isn't waiting for me," Eduard reminded. Or if he was, he wasn't waiting for sex. Just the once, and then apparently nothing for the rest of his life.

He didn't tell Toris about that, either. For some reason Raivis was operating under the happy assumption Ivan hadn't cleared his Time. Eduard didn't like lying but he couldn't figure out how to let him down gently, either. (Besides. None of these men were supposed to know that about Ivan. Until Eduard could figure out why they cared, he wouldn't divulge his own information.)

Toris nodded sagely. "That's wise. He'd hurt you if he were," he said, and Eduard wanted to tell him, oh, you have no idea. "Ivan is - forgive me. I understand while you feel no great allegiance towards him, perhaps you may respect him, but that man's got blood on his hands. They all do. They are all of them guilty."

Eduard leaned in as he buttoned up his overcoat. "I want to hear those stories next time," he said under his breath.

Toris winked. "We'll see what we can do."

--

Eduard ran back down the length of the tunnel, out the doors of the tavern, nearly upsetting a kitchen servant and his armful of empty bottles, and down the path back to the Duma. It took fifteen minutes to walk; he ran it in four. He stopped outside the doors, breathing heavily, and waited for his heart to stop racing and lungs to stop heaving. He didn't want to be too obvious; he was already late and subject to scrutiny!

"Where were you?" Ivan asked suspiciously, when he got back to their quarters.

"Outside," he said, which was true, and then, "I was looking to see the phases of the planets," which was not.

"And?"

"Can't quite see them from the ground, without a telescope. Maybe it was my imagination but I thought Schlessen seemed dimmer."

It was lucky for him he had double-checked to see that this was accurate, and had been looking outside the windows in nights previous when he returned before Ivan. He had observed, from the west-facing window, the front of the grounds, where Ivan would come up the path to reenter the Duma. He'd also observed, from the east-facing window, the back of the grounds, where the telescope was set up and pointed. There, he could see the planets, dangled amidst the foggy stretch of galactic plane. (Unlike Hallar, Olyokin had no moon. Clear nights were ... simply fantastic.)

His astronomy was correct. Yesterday he'd seen Schlessen at about quarter phase, a few days before that at half.

"I see," Ivan said. Then he pointed to a tray on the side table, on which stood his glassful of tonic. "Arisha brought that in for you, three-quarters an hour ago. Are you feeling ill?"
He gritted his teeth and swallowed the nasty mucous-coloured tincture as quickly as he could - disgusting flavour and all. "No," he said, pulling a face, "that's my tonic." Ivan seemed curious. To be fair, until now, Eduard had already taken his nightly tonic and was in bed with a book before Ivan even returned. "You know, for bondspeople? Gospozha Yekaterina's girl takes it too, every night before evening ablutions." And probably after she got laid, he thought, grumbling, because the taste was terrible and only barely masked by toothpaste and mouthwash.

"What is in it?"

"Among a multitude of others, lavimudine base, oil of isotretinoin, amloidine tricyclisate and sugar."

"What are they all for?"

"Lavimudine for strength of metabolism. Keeps you thin. Oil of isotretinoin to counteract the lavimudine's side-effects and for anti-aging, amloidine tricyclisate for stamina and libido enhancement. And sugar to make the whole thing water soluble, and for taste. Not that that does any good whatsoever," he snorted, "two hundred years of developments in bondservant tonics and they still can't get the taste anything remotely close to decent."

"Isn't isotretinoin an addictive substance?"

"Yes," he replied, not sure where Ivan was heading with this, "it is."

"And doesn't lavimudine cause sterility?" he asked, confused.

"Yes," Eduard said slowly, "that's also rather the point."

"They want you to be sterile. And drug-addicted." Ivan looked equal parts shocked and horrified.

"Ivan," Eduard sighed. "this is what I do. This is my life. Besides, it's not like it kills me." Two hundred years earlier, that might've been the case with some tonics whose ingredients included slow-acting poisons. By comparison lavimudine was worlds better.

"Well you're going to stop taking that shit immediately!"

Ridiculous man! Yes, Eduard, please cease all sexual activity and also quit the tonic. Didn't he understand the demands he was making? "I can't just do that!" he protested. "You can't just cold-turkey the isotretinoin, even in small doses!"

"Then we will ease you off of it," Ivan returned, his voice stern, "but come hell or high water that nonsense ceases tonight."

Fat lot of nerve you've got, talking about nonsense! "You don't control what I do or don't put inside my body," he shouted. Then he stopped. "On second thought, you do."

His time with Toris, Feliks and Raivis was starting to take a hold of him, spoil him. He kept being treated like someone's friend, talked to like he had a real name besides whatever Francis had conjured up. It made it suddenly difficult to take the reality that, if Ivan wanted, he could control every facet of his bondsman's existence.

Ivan gaped at him, aghast, then shut his mouth, and looked firmly at the floor, his face bright red.
"Go to bed, Eduard," he said tiredly.

"Yes, Gospodin," he replied, giving a slight bow, because he was still angry and lashing out, and he knew the formality would set Ivan's teeth on edge. As he moved to draw the curtain that separated their rooms, he turned, saying, "Suppose Major Vmalkhina is using the money she steals to help the villagers somehow."

"That's ridiculous," Ivan countered. Evidently also still angry and lashing out. "What could she do to help them, that involves taking something they need so badly?"

"I don't know!" Eduard said. "You know that area better than I do."

Ivan was silent a moment, thinking. "It's a theory," he replied blandly. "Go get some rest."

Eduard nodded and disappeared to his room.
"It was seven hundred grams of the smoked ham?" asked the shopkeeper, an older plump woman with a kind face.

"Yes please," said Suomi. "And also the two loaves of rye -"

"I didn't forget that," she smiled. "Just double-checking the amounts."

"Sorry," he said.

"Have you got somewhere to be?" she asked him. "You're always in such a rush when you come in. Your friends are never so busy."

Suomi froze. That wasn't good, they weren't supposed to be regulars in Kroksvellir. "Just more errands," he said cheerily. "Gotta get them done before the sunset!"

In fact, he'd been at the butchery for a half hour now, and he was running late, but that wasn't why he wanted to get out quickly. The real reason he wanted to get out quickly was the prickle tingle at the nape of his neck, the tightness in his shoulderblades, the eerie feeling in his bones that accompanied an unwanted flush of adrenaline.

Someone had been watching him. Someone had followed him.

The shopkeep rang through his purchases and wished him godspeed with the rest of his errands. Good speed, he would require, he thought, exiting the butchery.

He walked over to the general store by way of the main road. There was no use in being dodgy or hiding - not yet.

Olvirsson's, the general store, was a small two-room wooden warehouse, painted red and white. It sold all manner of edible things - coffee, tea, other food staples - along with hardware basics like nails, screws or wire. It had a small post office too, so he requested the mail for 'Hjörtur Hilmarsson' - Ísland's pseudonym - while he shopped.

Prickle-tingle. Whoever it was was following him again, waiting outside the store on the porch.

Suomi would take his time. There was no crime in doing Sunday shopping, and unless this fellow had ample evidence to arrest he couldn't touch him by Nunat law. And he didn't have any such evidence. If he had any, he would have either come directly to the base (if he knew where it was) or approached Suomi instead of stalking him like prey.

He wondered if it was the same pair of agents who'd managed to find their Veriborg base a year ago.

If that were the case, that was very, very bad.

"Say, how much coffee have you got?" he asked Olvirsson, when the man returned from the
backroom with a single letter for 'Hilmarsson'.

"About four kilos out front, more in the back. There's a sale on the vacuum-packed bricks, good price too."

Suomi spotted the sign atop the pyramid of bricks arranged along the wall. "I'll take nine."

"Nine bricks?"

"Nine kilos," he clarified, watching Olvirsson's eyes go wide.

"That's a lot of coffee."

Suomi shrugged with a smile. "I really like coffee!" he chirped. "It's not like it goes bad." They'd use it eventually. But Suomi needed it now. He handed Olvirsson an empty bag. They would need to have Norge pick up on Olyokin all the other supplies Suomi wouldn't be getting today.

Too dangerous to stay in Kroksvellir now, too dangerous to return later.

He paid for the coffee - nine kilos of 250g bricks made thirty six bricks of coffee in a burlap bag, a good weight - smiled politely, and left.

Prickle-tingle... an overheard crunch of snow under boots that weren't his...

Suomi was still being followed.

He crossed the road and took a left down Brattholt, a wide sidelane. There, he continued along about 100 metres to Akurholt, the first right. At the junction of Brattholt and Akurholt, someone had opened a pub out of their own home, and on the Akurholt side next to the door there was a corridor to their garden and a nice, big awning that cast a nice, big shadow.

He moved quickly, walking faster. When he reached the corner of Akurholt and Brattholt he reacted, and the second he was out of view from the Brattholt side, he ran to the corridor, ducked, and hid.

It wasn't a very good hiding place, not by far. But strategically it worked, because it would give him a clear view of his tracker. Once Suomi disappeared, it would panic the tracker, and they'd run down Akurholt.

Suomi waited.

He didn't have to wait long. A plainclothes man appeared, looking worried. Dark, messy, almost bedhead hair with bright green eyes and olive skin. Not a local. Not Norda. He filed the picture away mentally.

Meanwhile, the corridor to the garden led to Skeljatangi, parallel with Brattholt for a time until it ended and backed onto someone's stable. Suomi made the trek as quietly as he could, so as not to alert the agent. From there, it was a simple matter to vault over a small fence and re-take his position at the intersection of Brattholt and Akurholt.

This time, he carried on Brattholt past Akurholt. He knew the man had seen him, but acted innocent, like nothing had happened. Perhaps Suomi had stooped to tie his shoe in a doorway and it
merely looked like he'd gone down Akurholt. Residential doorways were deep. It was plausible.

He continued along a maze of streets. He wouldn't lose the man, and he didn't want to, but he did want to confuse him. Suomi had spent about a year going back and forth to Kroksvellir from their base, just outside the treeline of the forest where, buried deep within, was their base. He knew this place well.

Unfortunately for Suomi, there was about a kilometre's distance of open, snow-covered field between the edge of Kroksvellir and the treeline. If he ran for it, whoever this man was, he would spot Suomi clearly, running off into the distance.

He did not want to lure this fellow to the treeline.

Instead, Suomi led him to Baugshlið and disappeared around the corner of Baugshlið and an unmarked, seldom-used road with no houses and few windows looking on.

He crouched behind a lone wagon. There, Suomi dropped the bag of meat and alcohol behind a snowbank and kept his heavy bag of coffee with him behind the wagon.

The man took the bait, walked on further, and further, looking this way and that, probably thinking, where did that slippery bastard go?

Right behind you, thought Suomi.

He sprung out silently from behind the wagon, and swung the bag of coffee around and over his shoulders to bring it across the back of the man's head.

The man fell in the snow face-first with barely a cry.

Suomi needed to work quickly. First, plan escape route - he'd go around those two houses and through the backyard; with luck the man wouldn't notice his tracks.

Next, the body - he left the body as it was, because though it was cold out, it wasn't that cold, and this fellow was properly dressed, after all. The snow that had cushioned his fall was soft, and as big as he was, he couldn't have broken anything. He could stand fifteen minutes outside perfectly fine. Suomi needed about that time to run to the treeline, if he were fast.

And then, seconds before darting away, Suomi had a brilliant, marvellous idea, having noticed the bulge in his pants.

That was a rather large wallet.

"You are a fucking. Moron," Danmark yelled.

"Oh, please, louder, I don't think the people on Hallar heard you," he retorted. "Do you think I asked to be followed?"

"Suom's right," said Sverige, "did whut he could, giv'n th' situation." Suomi beamed. "Dunno if y'needed to mug 'im, though."
"Actually, that was a nice touch," added Norge. "What other reason could he have for being knocked out in a place like Kroksvellir?"

"How can you both be supporting this? Do you have any idea whose wallet he wiffled off with? Because it is right here in plain sight. Look. ID, right here." Danmark waved the ID around too quickly to be examined, but they'd all seen earlier whose picture it was: Heracles Karpusi, Senior Agent Field Department, Hallar BSPA.

"M not sayin' I s'pport it wholly. Matt'r a fact I do agree we should move," said Sverige. "But I think's time 'nough t' wait 'til aft'r the auction."

"He knows we're near," Danmark insisted, "we need to leave now!"

Norge didn't seem so convinced. "But did he did recognise you? Perhaps some of us should be wearing disguises every time we go to the village. Some of us actually have files on record to missing persons, which is a little on the shady side."

"You all have files too," Suomi protested.

"Not anymore," Ísland chimed in.

"How... did you manage to do that?" asked Tim.

"He's talented," Danmark supplied proudly.

Suomi pouted. "You deleted all of theirs but not mine?"

"I did delete yours," Ísland said. "That was a year ago when we found out they were closing in. They must've gotten a copy of your Olyokin file before I deleted it."

Danmark huffed. "Then we'd really better go. We've left tangled, confusing trails during business in Kroksvellir over the past year but that'll only occupy Karpusi's afternoons with interrogation so long before he wanders outside the village to try and find the base."

"We don't hafta leave jus' yet. He's gonna have t' make his way back to Arst'holm t' pick up more docs. Can't leg'ly arrest any 'f us w'thout 'em, or obtain a warr'nt, or basic'ly do any part of 'is job."

"So we've got time," agreed Norge, "Arsterholm's like 400 km away."

Danmark caught the slip and mocked it. "Which is like totally not a problem for people with like vipers, which these guys like totally have."

"Quit being such a dick," Suomi scolded.

Norge shrugged it off. "He's just angry I've got a hot date tonight and he doesn't."

"Oh fuck you -"

Tim put an end to it. "You know, we're really not getting anywhere with this."

"No, w're really not. 'Kay, so, new plan, get Margot, get outta Kroksvell'r. Where are we on th' first?"
"Awful Cockland wants us to meet him at the anchorage," said Ísland, mocking his mail. "Says he's got what we need, has sent files for his little friend." He held up the papers that had come with the letter.

"Everything in order?" Suomi asked.

"Yeah, except for this 'Formation B'. And the meat juice spilling on the parchment of his letter."

"That was me. I was kinda running too fast to account for that. Sorry."

"Don't be, it's Kirkland. I could not give less of a fuck. I hope he gets meat juice all over his face."

"What's F'rmation B?" Sverige asked.

"I have no idea. He apparently 'advises it'."

"Actually," murmured Tim, mostly to himself, "that would make a lot of sense..."

"What would?" asked Danmark.

"I think I know what that is," Tim explained. "On the ship I remember them talking about plan B and having to program decoy signals."

"Signals like ship signals?" Norge asked.

"Right. So that when you drop them, they dart off in different directions and from a distance of 300 km they all look like nothing, so nobody can tell which one is the actual ship." Actually, that was a brilliant idea. Agency vehicles didn't come with telescopes and only picked up broadcast signals from other ships.

Then Danmark shot his mouth off. Guess it was only a matter of time for that. "Wait, you can remember this kinda shit but you can't remember your own name?"

"God, what the hell is your problem? Do you not think before you speak?" Suomi spat. Danmark paled as the implications of what he'd said slowly dawned.

But Tim shrugged it off. "He doesn't mean it that way." Danmark shook his head. "He just has a big mouth." Danmark nodded.

"How do you tolerate him? How do you stay so cool?" Suomi certainly wished he could keep his temper in check as easily.

Tim just smiled. "It's okay. Humour kinda helps." Turning to Danmark, he continued, softly, "And I'm glad you never went through what I did. No one should know what that's like."

"Aw, shit, I- I'm sorry," stammered Danmark, and Suomi thought, you should be, you fucking tool.

Sverige interrupted them. "If w're done h're?" All three of them became silent. "Thanks."

Ísland thought aloud. "If they're tracking Kirkland too... then they must have split up, or their team's gotten larger. At any rate, their team - however many people they are - have split up for one
part Kirkland, one part us."

"Which means we need to move," Danmark reminded.

"Not 'til after the auction," Suomi said. "In the meantime I think we'd better make a bunch of these decoy signals with the stealthship broadcast code."

Norge agreed. "I can figure something out. Janowska says she knows a guy who's good with engineery type stuff."

"What about the rest of this?" asked Ísland, holding up the wallet.

"There's cash. That's something," Tim noted. "HALLAR is pretty well run by Romae. It'll be useful to have money to be able to grease the wheels, should we get into trouble."

Danmark narrowed his eyes. "Is there a lot of trouble? Feeds?"

"If he lined the streets of Hallar with feeds, it would explain how Romae always seemed to know everything," said Tim.

"That can't be good to bug the entire city," Suomi added.

"Nobody ever said Romae was good," replied Tim tightly. Danmark smirked at Suomi in a 'now who's the big mouthed tool' kind of way.

Oh fuck you right back, Suomi thought, glaring.

Meanwhile, Ísland plucked the ID from the wallet. "Does anybody mind if I pilfer this?" he asked, holding it up. "I have an Idea."
Letters

(iceland --> england)

We'll meet you at the same place day after tomorrow at 6.

--

(greece --> turkey)

Adnan -

Couldn't find anything decent on the group so far. Getting close though. Kroksvelli - tiny ass village in the middle of butt-fuck nowhere, Island - they're fond of tiny ass villages, have you noticed that? - seems to be where at least one of them is hiding. Had to head back to the capital for more documents because I fucking got mugged. Go on, laugh, I know you want to. I can practically hear you doing it from across the system.

Caught one blasting off today. Didn't follow him but I suspect I know where. Going to head to Olyokin immed. & will check in with you from there.

Have you managed to meet with Hassan yet?

- Karpusi

(ps. Got the pills. Thank you.)

--

(turkey --> greece)

Met with Hassan. Not much to say about it, though. I think it helps his case more than ours (see the news article I've clipped, if you didn't get a chance to read it hopping from Nunat to Olyokin). Well, whatever. Now I've met my good deed quota for the decade.

However - I did manage to get this from him (see also attached). He gave me two copies of a special dispensation from New Joplin Police for questioning purposes. So we now have the ability to interrogate anybody at Border Control indefinitely, without a warrant or a lawyer. Hassan says not to abuse it (obvious warning is obvious) and the caveat is we can't use what we get in court. So if we find something good, we have to backtrack later and follow it up with a serious inquiry and warrants and all that jazz.

I'd use it on people who are obviously innocent and just know something as opposed to, say, Avo Romae. But this cuts a little bit of the red tape since we may be running on the fly here and we won't exactly have time to play papertag back and forth with Hallar's dumbass warrant request system. It should also go a long way to trailing the group of five - and Kirkland - as they progress through the airspaces because frankly, everybody at any planetary Border Control (New Joplin's hassled me too) is so goddamn tight-lipped it's ludicrous. There's freedom of movement and then there's this nonsense. I mean, if we can just nab 'em and detain them in a cell, this case can be wrapped up in a matter of hours. It's just a question of catching the slippery buggers.
(ps, sorry to hear you got mugged. I promise I only laughed a little bit. Don't forget your sidearm next time, eh?)

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Caput Halleri Daily Gazette

GREAT DELIVERY IMPLICATED IN DREADFUL RAID ON NOVA SECTOR

Protected Source Helpful in Identifying Pirate Ship for Confirmation

Major-Constable Gupta Mohammad Hassan of the New Joplin 118th Police Squadron confirmed yesterday evening in a media statement that the Frigate Great Delivery of Banningham was responsible for the raid two weeks ago on the Nova sector, for which thirty freemen and women are still unaccounted.

"In working with the Border Patrol of Nova airspace, we had secured audio and video feeds from Addison Point Control near Grandcove, New Joplin, as well as from Jernsey Anchorage outside the Nova airspace. The images obtained from Jernsey Anchorage in orbit about the Nova dwarves have conclusively shown the shape of the vessel as being a pirate frigate but were ultimately unsuccessful in identifying her flag or figurehead. Audio and video feeds from Point Control have allowed us to identify persons entering and exiting the heavy shuttle that descended to the New Joplin surface," Maj-Cst. Hassan said. "From this we have been able to identify Captain Arthur Kirkland."

Kirkland is a human male of unknown age, likely early thirties, diminutive height and build, blonde hair and green eyes (see picture inset). His most notable feature are the dark, thick eyebrows. He is considered armed and relatively dangerous and wanted in connection for the Nova sector raids. Anyone possessing information leading to Captain Kirkland's whereabouts is requested to contact Major Constable Hassan with the 118th Squadron.

The Great Delivery of Banningham, under the captaincy of Arthur Kirkland, was granted clemency by Hallar Airship Security last May (System Standard calendar) after a long period of suspension following the raids on New Sainte-Dolitte nearly three years prior. No comment from Hallar Airship Security about the lapse in judgment.

Senator of Caput Halleri Signore Avo Romae has contributed $3.2 million in spending for patrolling of Border points. "I echo the sentiment of security that the Nova sector has wisely expressed," Romae said yesterday. "I extend my deepest sympathies to the families involved in the raids and am contributing funds for Halleri Border patrol."

The restriction upon all vessels class schooner and above has now been lifted. Vessels class frigate alone will be detained momentarily throughout all airspaces until Border Control has satisfied inspection; pirate vessel Great Delivery is no longer permitted within airspaces Halleri, Tenicksonite, Marigonian, Bastian, or of the Nova sector. No word yet on airspaces Veshnan, Schlessen, Norda, or Olyokin.

There is as yet no word from Marigon whether the body found among the Dross Belt of Marigon is a former resident of New Joplin or New Sainte-Dolitte. The man, bearing no documentation or
clothing upon his person, was brought in by the Marigon Spaceliner Santa Naranja in her voyage last Wednesday to Chivippe, Bast.

Any information as to the whereabouts of Alfred F Jones, Jr., son of Alfred F Jones and Thelma L Jones (Sayles-Clifton), the renowned authoress, is much welcomed. Small reward posted for information leading to young Jones' return.
Only when you're late, thought Agnieszka, are there like no taxis. She was waiting outside the Rubetski's Skuratchky manor with Olga's servant, who wasn't very good at flagging down cabs. Totally lame.

"If you want, madam, you can wait inside the foyer," the servant told her, and it was tempting 'cause her fingers were starting to tingle when -

"That coat must not do much," said another voice. Agnieszka looked up. A dark-haired, tanned man with green eyes - he looked neither Vitim nor Kala - taller than her by a head - stood near with a friendly grin and his overcoat held open for her. "Allow me," he said, and dropped it on her shoulders.

It was surprisingly warm. "You're so kind! Thank you, Mister -"

"Dimitriou," he replied. "But please, call me Spiro."

He was handsome in a way that Lukas Bondevik - aka Otto Årud, aka Georg Steensen, aka Egil Lange, aka all those other silly names he adopted - wasn't. 'Lukas' - so not his real name - was slight-built, her height, and there was a certain something about him that felt otherworldly, mysterious, enchanting. These were what had most attracted her (and Feliks, who didn't ordinarily go for guys) to him. By comparison, Spiro Dimitriou seemed perfectly banal and very boring. He had a certain boyish charm, and he was striking. But he wasn't her Norda gentleman thief.

Still, she'd flirt. She gave Mister Spiro Dimitriou her prettiest smile. Besides, you didn't just go up to a woman like Agnieszka Janowska without an introduction by someone else. This man was either unfamiliar with the way things were on Olyokin (in which case she ought to be friendly) or he wanted something badly enough to ignore social convention (in which case she wanted to know what that could possibly be, because Agnieszka Janowska was perfectly innocent).

"Gospozha?" Olga's servant inquired.

"Please keep trying for that cab," she instructed. An unmarried woman with a strange man - better keep the servant there.

"A cab?" Dimitriou asked, and pulled out a pocketwatch. "I can help with that."

No sooner had he spoken and one appeared, coming their way. "As if!" she exclaimed. "How did you do that?"

"It's mine," he told her, "I'd called for one at quarter to seven precisely for right here." He put his fingers between his lips and whistled loudly. The cabbie saw him and stopped. "I'll catch another. You shouldn't be out in this weather, miss..."
"Janowska," she supplied, as the wagon pulled up. She allowed him to kiss her gloved hand before she slipped the jacket from her shoulders and handed it back. "I totally can't thank you enough! It was nice to meet you."

"The pleasure was mine," replied Dimitriou smoothly.

--

"Oh thank god," Agnieszka cried, when she reentered the warehouse and surprised a quietly working Eduard.

"You could warn me!" he yelled from the worktable.

"If I could warn people that I would be late, I wouldn't be late," she retorted. The first thing she did was unbutton her ladies' winter coat and fling it onto the clothing pile. "I would just tell them -" she continued, unbuttoning the blouse - "that I was constantly running behind schedule and to expect me in like ten minutes." She didn't bother taking off her boots (too many laces, not enough time!) but she pulled at the fastenings on the skirt and hoop underskirt, undoing them only enough to wriggle out.

In Agnieszka's stead (and her undergarments) stood Feliks, hands on his hips. "Where the hell is Raivis?"

"I dunno," Eduard shrugged, returning to the scattered pieces of Eavesdropper on the worktable. Super helpful, thought Feliks. "He went for a walk, or something."

"You weren't paying any attention when he told you where he was going, were you."

"No, not exactly."

And you're not paying any attention to me, either, are you, he wondered. "'Kay well. I need your help, and he's not here, and I have no time and need to head out again, and I guess we're good enough friends now. So stop what you're doing and do me like a giant favour and unlace my damn corset."

Eduard dropped the damn screwdriver, finally, and threw him a strange look.

"What?!" he cried. "That is what all friends do for each other."

"In a really weird way, I suppose I'm honoured," he said, leaving the worktable to walk over to Feliks, "but why do you need me to undo this one if you're only going to go out again in a bit?"

"I need to put on a different one," and he breathed deeply for the first time all day as Eduard tugged the tight knot at the small of his back free. Air was amazing. "Which you will also help me with," Feliks added.

"Does this one not fit under evening wear?"

More like the boyfriend's in town and he likes the green one best. "Yeah, exactly. Also, kinda pressed for time. So like ... let's get going here, shall we? Chop-chop."

Eduard shrugged and continued loosening the cords enough to allow some give to the heavy stays.
"Where were you?" he asked.

"Olga's," he replied. "She's gonna go back to school to avoid her dad marrying her off to this bucket of filth we know."

"Why would he do that to her?"

"He doesn't act that way to her dad. Obviously."

"Alright," and that was enough for Feliks to slip out of the garment and the under-chemise entirely. Finally! Totally never wearing an overbust again. "What can she do about it?"

"Besides go back to school? Nothing. Olga's not allowed to get a job, she's too high-society." Feliks rifled through the clothing pile until he found the green corset and shimmied into it. "She's applied here and there. Got accepted at Bast Polytechnique but nothing's come back on Olyokin. Start at the top," Feliks instructed.

Eduard did. "You don't sound sad about her leaving."

"Well -" he sucked in a deep breath - "it's only my cover. Agnieszka's her friend, not Feliks."

Eduard pulled roughly and he gasped. "No, keep going, that's fine. If Olga moves to Bast then Agnieszka hasn't got much to do. So it'll look weird the longer - mmph, careful there - that's better - the longer Agnieszka goes without being married. Agnieszka's not as close to 30 as Olga is, so there's no hurry. But it'll look super weird. More work for Feliks," he said.

"I see," Eduard grunted, with a good tug on the last bit of slack on the cords at the middle.

"Besides," Feliks said, feeling light-headed, "the alternative is that Olga Rubetska marries Spiridon Marinin instead, which Agnieszka wouldn't care about, but we want him shacked up nice 'n' close to Yekaterina Bragina." He bent over the table with the clothing pile, letting Eduard push him down with the side of his hand firmly pressed on the knot. It kept the first hitch of the knot tight while he tied the second.

"Done," he told him, and about time, Feliks thought, straightening up and struggling a little to breathe - it was tighter than he usually liked it, but not much. He'd get used to it in a half hour. "Does it ever confuse you to talk like this? Like you're two people?"

"Honestly? It's way easier to keep everything separated. As long as I'm consistent. And so far, there's like only one person who knows me both as Feliks and Agnieszka and mixes the two. With everybody else, I'm either one, or the other."

"I'm impressed," Eduard murmured. "I find two lives confusing enough even under the same name."

"You get used to it," Feliks said. He turned his attention to the clothing pile again to find the bottom half of Agnieszka's walking suit. Dresses would go better with an evening excursion, but at the same time, dresses would be harder to remove. At some point tonight, he was hoping these clothes would come off. Mostly off. "Alright, now makeup and hair, and I'm gone for the night. Probably back tomorrow. Tell Raivis if he comes back in?"

"Sure."
He smiled. "Thanks, by the way."

"Um. Anytime," Eduard said awkwardly.

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"Ohmigod, I am so. Sorry -"

Lukas just smiled and put his book away. That smile! For someone she was mostly just playing for cash and not at all supposed to be totally head-over-heels for, he had a nice smile. Soft lips - a strong jawline - it made her weak in the knees. "It's fine," he said. "It's always fine."

"Were you waiting long, uh -"

"Eirik, today."

Eirik it was. Maybe someday he'd tell her (or Feliks) his real name. "Gotcha. But, were you waiting long?"

"Not so long," he replied, and she smiled, relieved, and took the seat opposite him. He slid an envelope across the table. "For you," he explained with a wink, which meant 'for you to file'. Wisely, she didn't open it and tucked the envelope instead into her handbag.

"Thank you," she said, in case feeds were about.

"No, allow me to thank you," he countered. "I was thinking maybe we could get out of here and head to somewhere nicer?"

Nicer than Papessa Krasnaya's? She pouted. After all that trouble to get here, Agnieszka had wanted a good sit-down meal.

"Trust me on this," he said huskily, and even though he smiled easily and casually, the intensity of his gaze gave her pause. She returned volley, staring back, curious, until a slight flicker of his glance to the left gave him away.

She didn't follow it. Better if she didn't. We're being watched, was the message, and we should leave.

"Lead the way," she cooed, playing up the sultry tone.

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Eirik took her back to the stealthship and unsealed the cockpit's passenger side glass panel first, holding it open and offering his hand for her to get in. Already? she thought, but then he asked, "I thought I'd take us around the planet. You okay with a quick jaunt?"

Agnieszka - and Feliks - had never actually been off-planet. "I am so okay with that. This is shaping up to be the most interesting date you've ever taken me on," she replied, taking his hand to support herself. The cockpit of the stealthship was tiny - just two seats for the driver and one passenger. Behind them, there was a small open space where three, maybe four people could sit (unsafely, without seatbelts) if they folded themselves up and were very small about it. "I can't believe you managed to fit all six of you in here."
"It wasn't fun," he said, vaulting over the nose of the stealthship to climb in the driver side. "Strap yourself in, we won't be cruising yet."

Agnieszka waited until they were in the atmosphere. She didn't want to upset his concentration while piloting, although Feliks was going nuts thinking a billion questions about the stealthship. How was the propulsion? Did they have heat sinks for the thermal pump discharge? Otherwise, wouldn't they be pretty easy to catch signals off? (Once an engineer, always an engineer.) She asked something else instead, once they'd reached the stratosphere, far above the clouds. "Who was tracking us?"

"This guy who's been following our team for some time now," Eirik said, fiddling with a few of the controls. He must have put on some kind of autopilot because he finally took his hands off the throttle and cracked his knuckles in relief. "There's two of 'em, and they've only recently split up. This one is tracking us more closely, more brazenly."

"Why?"

"I think he's trying to zero in," he replied. "He's hunting - waiting until the prey is mostly unaware of his actions and then he'll pounce. But he's not so good at making sure we're unaware of him. And he's definitely not so good at pouncing. As to why they split, I have a few theories but none are certain."

Agnieszka frowned. "Is he getting near?"

He smirked. "Not even close."

"You sound sure of yourself," she remarked. It would be helpful if she could convince this guy to follow her on Olyokin instead of Eirik. Agnieszka Janowska, after all, didn't do anything out of the ordinary. Suppose he was following them even now. "He'll have seen us blast-off," she said."

"This ship's much faster than his," Eirik said, shaking his head, "and we had a head start. He would've had to retrieve the viper the agency provides him with before he could pursue us. He has slim chances of catching up to us."

"Agency?"

"BSPA. Hallar's. He and his partner have been on our tail for awhile. S'why I'm not exactly broken-hearted when we go to a different place every time we meet up."

"Halar BSPA, huh," Agnieszka mused. Federal Agent sounded dangerous, but that he came all the way from Hallar sounded worse.

Eirik turned to her with a worried expression. "I've asked you this before, but - you don't - whatever it is you do, you don't involve the service trade at all, do you?"

"Of course not." It'd be hard for Eirik to rationalise giving money to someone like Janowska if that's what Feliks were involved in.

He smiled. "Then he won't follow you. If that's what you're concerned about."

I only do illegal things, thought Feliks. I don't, thought Agnieszka. And only Toris was officially
working for Kilnus Central Intelligence - Feliks and Raivis, well... weren't. But if Hallar BSPA got too interested in Agnieszka, she could ward them off pretty easily. And it would help out Eirik. "It won't be a problem. What's the guy look like?"

"Tall, fairly muscular. Tanned - or, tanned-ish. Tanned compared to a Vitim or Norda, certainly; he's a dead giveaway on Olyokin. Green eyes and curly brown hair, cut fairly short. We got hold of his ID - I'll give him this, he's got a nice smile." That sounded a lot like Spiro Dimitriou. But perhaps it was just a coincidence. But on Olyokin? An unlikely coincidence. "Oh, I meant to ask you," he continued. "You said you knew a guy who could do decent engineering work?"

Feliks nodded. "Yeah, that's the new guy. Need him for something?"

"Maybe. We need to make decoys that give off signals like a regular airship would. I have a feeling this guy'll follow us on our next rendezvous and we want to cut him off at the pass. Supposing we had some way to scatter the signal in different directions, we'd be able to zip off in a final direction and it'd look like several identical ships were leaving."

That sounded straightforward. A signal generator hooked up to an amplifier and an antenna; chuck that into a metal canister, add a drop line and fuse hooked up to a tank of propellant, once ignited, would boost the canister in the opposite direction. Fairly simple stuff. "If that's like all you need, I can do that." Eirik gave him a funny look. "What?"

"You're not ... exactly ... dressed for engineering," Eirik said.

Feliks tried not to be too offended, but it came out pretty tartly anyway. "I didn't realise there was a uniform," he snapped. It was true, he was still wearing his Agnieszka getup and still half in character, but what part of her getup would seriously interfere with sitting down at a worktable and tinkering with tools, anyway? Besides maybe the corset. (But even that was easy to ignore; he wore corsets so often he'd permanently altered his physique.)

"I didn't know you did other stuff besides undercover work."

"Yeah, there's like a lot you don't know about me."

There was silence, until finally Eirik admitted, "You're right. There isn't much I know about you." He looked over and smiled sheepishly. "I'm sorry."

He returned the slight smile. "It's okay. Me too."

"You know," he continued, "if you are hungry, I can put us in orbit anytime. I had a feeling I'd be followed from Nunat so I packed a small basket in the back. It's not five-diamond but it'll do."

A picnic in the stratosphere. That was totally more romantic than Papessa Krasnaya's. "Agnieszka has expensive tastes," Feliks said, quietly thrumming with excitement, "I don't."

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Personal information documents were a big thing in the system. They contained everything from who you and your immediate family were to your school grades. You could be stopped and asked to present them at any time - and if you didn't have them, you could be fined - so most people just carried them around in their wallets or purses. Losing them was a pretty common occurrence, especially in a city with its share of pickpockets, and so Agnieszka was often in the Olyokin
Federal Services Bureau to recover papers (and file others).

So then like did there really have to be like seventy steps up to the Unionisation Building? A girl could die with this kind of exercise and that kind of tight-lacing, thought Agnieszka. There had been little chance last night to change out of the green corset into something more comfortable when she’d checked in at the warehouse this morning to make decoy signals. She blamed Eduard.

But it was important that she go immediately. She'd taken a nice twisty path from the tavern through the town to the downtown core, so that whoever it was following 'Eirik' would follow her instead. Then Raivis could make contact with Eirik on the other side of the city to drop off the decoys they'd made this morning.

As she made her way through the Unionisation Building's front doors, she caught a glimpse of a figure sitting on the steps - curly, dark brown hair, tanned skin. She recognised him from yesterday. But who the hell just sits there on the steps of a government building like it's a cafe? she wondered. 'Spiro Dimitriou' wasn't a very good tracker.

She wasn't out of the running yet. Agnieszka had Feliks' files to submit - and some of Eirik's - and they were all forgeries. The second she entered, Dimitriou stood up. There wasn't much of a line at the FSB, and it took her perhaps a minute to progress through it.

When she saw the clerk's face, she could have jumped for joy. "What can I do for you, Gospozha?" the clerk asked.

"Hi, I was -" and she stopped and acted shocked. "Oh heyyy, I know you! Anfisa, right? Anfisa Matvyeva, we totally took Interplanetary Trade Relations together last year."

Anfisa - quintessentially Vitim, generous curves, pale skin, pale hair and dark brown eyes - beamed. "Oh, you remember me! Wow, this is crazy!" She giggled. "Of course, like everybody knows you, Agnieszka. What are you here for?"

The usual. Walking the dog. A tea party. Honestly, why else did people come to the FSB? "I just have like two things to file," Agnieszka said sweetly, handing the folders over.

"That's fine! I can work and chat." Anfisa leaned over her desk to peer outside. "It's not like super busy or anything."

A few more minutes of chatting and Feliks' papers would be filed away into oblivion. "So when did you start working for the government?"

"Oh, you know how it is," Anfisa said, stamping the papers and shoving them in separate canisters without even looking at them. "Someone goes on pat leave, they need a contract temp to fill in the gap. I still have another year to go at Skuratchky State so this is just an in-the-meantime. I couldn't resist the opportunity though."

Anfisa shoved the canisters - Agnieszka's two, and a bunch more - up the pneumatic tube, closed it, flipped a switch to pressure-lock it and pressed a button. As the canisters zipped away under compressed air, Feliks smiled. If he knew the Empire Union like he knew the Empire Union, the canisters would be dropped off in a filing room in a giant, disorganised pile to be dealt with later. The longer she tied Anfisa up, the larger the pile would be. Enjoy, Hallerl Agent. "You want to work here permanently?"
Anfisa giggled again. "Oh god, no. Of course not! No, I just meant to get some money. 'Couple of friends and I were thinking of trying to go away for a weekend, maybe Nunat or something..."

And their conversation continued more or less along those lines for about an hour.

There were other clerks with open stations right next to Anfisa's. Agnieszka held up no lines, they moved quite easily around her. But she caught, out of the corner of her eye, Spiro Dimitriou patiently queued, who wandered up to the teller next to her, did some business in a quiet murmur, and then exited stage right. Once he had departed, she waited a few moments before she cut off conversation with Anfisa, telling the girl to give her a call sometime at Olga's, and that they should all do tea.

"Hey, you see that guy? What's with him?" Anfisa asked, referring to Dimitriou. "He was looking your way pretty close."

Agnieszka shrugged. "Dunno. I've seen him around like recently, though."

"Maybe an admirer? You have so many." And there was something about Anfisa's wistful tone that gave Agnieszka a brilliant idea.

"He checked you out more," she replied, and winked playfully. "Bet he totally comes back to chat you up. He's probably ticked I've taken up all your time."

Anfisa seemed excited. "You think?"

"Oh, totally! Bet he tries out the 'I'm real important' act to impress you and gives you some kinda silly story about how he's like a cop or federal agent."

"He's cute," Anfisa said coyly, "I'll be sure to look impressed."

The second Agnieszka left, she caught the blur of Dimitriou's jacket as he zipped back inside the building. Nice try figuring out what she'd filed, Agnieszka thought. With any luck, Anfisa would keep him there long enough for her to get away to Olga's.

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Agnieszka returned at sunset without running into Spiro Dimitriou again. Raivis was at the distilling station behind a cloud of smoke, and Toris had his legs crossed, propped up on the desk, with his nose in a book.

"I think I'm being followed," she announced, throwing her muff on her clothing pile and following it up with the fur-lined capelet.


"No, but Feliks does," she said. Feliks, the guy who was technically dead. Agnieszka pulled off her hat and tugged at the buttons on her sleeves and added, "I'm worried the guy might get too close."

"He won't," Toris said, absent-mindedly. He didn't even look up from his book.

"Federal Agent. From Hallar, though, so he might do a good enough job that he doesn't like what he sees on Olyokin." With the shirt and skirt finally off, Agnieszka once more became a pile of
cloth by the door. "Hey Brother, aren't you, like, supposed to be out at a tavern with a certain Bragin?" Feliks asked.

"Not tonight, there's a Duma affair. Spiridon Marinin's being introduced to the family," he replied brightly.

"And Brother Toris didn't get an invitation?"

"Oh, Brother Toris did, but Regular Toris didn't think it'd be a good idea since Spiridon isn't so good at poker face and would give us both away. Anyway, about that guy, Feliks, you'll have to point him out sometime."

"Is that really safe for your covers, for Brother Toris and Agnieszka Janowska to be in such close contact?" asked Raivis, and Feliks admitted it was a good point. "I mean, what business would a Gospozha like Janowska have with a monk?"

Feliks grinned. "Why, I'm oh so glad you asked, Anistas Kudrins."

Beat. "What," said Raivis, and looked to Toris, who mirrored Feliks' grin and tried (but failed) to hide it behind his book. "Yeah, I really don't like where this is going," Raivis decided.

Feliks rifled through Agnieszka's purse for the documents to hand them over. "Congrats on the new job, by the way."

Raivis took them and flipped through. "Oh for - handservant?" he asked angrily. "I couldn't be something fun like political aide? Why can't I just be Juris Silins the student again?"

"Handservant would be easier to impersonate," Toris chimed in.

Raivis huffed. "Okay seriously guys. You get to be a monk. You get to be a princess. I have to be the damn handservant. Can't I get a break?"

"Pfft. Maybe if you stopped like failing intelligence forever," Feliks retorted. "You let the bondsman of the future emperor of the Union follow you home like a puppy and asked if we could keep him!"

"But he wound up being a good guy for us! And Toris doesn't mind!"

"No, Toris doesn't," Toris said, "but I side with Feliks on this one, that wasn't the brightest."

Raivis pouted. "You always side with Feliks."

"Listen," Feliks said, "I like the guy as much as you both do. And you know what, this totally doesn't have anything to do with how bad you are at intelligence. I just think it'd be a good idea to keep a close watch on Eduard."

"Then you don't trust him!"

"It's true, I don't."

"I don't either," added Toris.
"What?!"

Toris shrugged. "He isn't Kala."

"He isn't Vitim, either!" Raivis countered.

"Guys! It totally doesn't matter what he is or isn't. He's here once a day for like two hours and then has to go home. He can't come any more frequently without Ivan figuring it out. Now Eduard's done a really fantastic job so far with keeping things quiet from Ivan, but if we want to be able to help him in case crazy Ivan goes for him, or like, keep communication lines open with him, we should also be in his neck of the woods. So, we need to get into the Duma."

"It's just a good idea to have one of us at the Duma, period," Toris said.

"Right. And I can't be there because people will recognise Agnieszka. Neither can Brother Toris."

"Which means I have to play housemaid," supplied Raivis.

Toris sat up and put the book down. "Raivis, you can't treat this like it's nothing! You need to do a good job, okay? You're going to be our man on the inside of the Duma. This is important. I can't convey how important this is."

"Besides," Feliks added, "one advantage of being a servant is you basically are a pair of ears that people ignore."

"Oh, fantastic! So the only class lower than me are bondservants."

"Well, would you rather do that?" Toris asked, an eyebrow raised.

"NO THAT'S FINE."

Toris grinned. "Didn't think so."

"Augh! I'm so sick of you two deciding things for me like you're my big brothers!" spat Raivis.

"We're sort of like family," Toris insisted.

"My family is dead," Raivis yelled. "And so am I!"

Immediately the conversation ceased. Feliks bit his lip, wanting to fill the stony silence with something - anything.

But what could he really say?

"I'm going for a walk," Raivis muttered, in a pained, cracking voice, and turned to leave.

"Aw, Raivis -"

Toris hushed him. "No no, let him go." He threw Feliks a sideways glance.

"By the way," Raivis called, shoving his arms through his coat in his haste to get it on, "if it were physically possible for me to slam this door, I would." Instead, the door closed with a screech of
un-oiled hinges and a feeble grunt from a technically dead nineteen-year-old.

"I'm glad you gave him the papers," Toris began, warning. "The sooner we have someone inside the Duma, the better. I got a letter today from Commander Zielska," he announced.

Fucking bingo. Something in Feliks' eyes must have betrayed him because Toris huffed and shouted, "Oh now what? Not you too!"

"Toris, he's like a kid. I can't say I disagree with him," said Feliks darkly.

"After all this time? Look, things are finally coming to a head. Plans now being drawn together, this -" Toris reached out and gripped his shoulders - "this is really happening, Feliks! We are this close!"

"I hope you made sure the ends justify the means," he retorted, and Toris rolled his eyes.

"Do you, or don't you remember Astrauckas House?" Feliks was silent. "Hmm?"

Two weeks of hell spent in a tiny basement room with only a small window that hadn't gotten smashed when the house caved in. Two weeks in the presence of a hundred and thirty of his fellow citizens - that number rapidly dwindling - the stench of urine masked only by the smell of decaying human - and Vitim - flesh...

Raivis had been ten; Feliks, thirteen.

Yes, he remembered.

"I'm sorry," Toris said gently, and he pulled Feliks into a hug, "I just want to make sure I know where your focus is." With one arm around Feliks' shoulders he rubbed his back with the other, but it wasn't very comforting. "We all have to be focussed!"

This was standard Toris, Feliks knew. He wasn't born yesterday, and he wasn't in any way oblivious to Toris' ways. It's not my fault, you're the one who's made me do this, was the implication. And he didn't have to bring up Astrauckas House, but he did anyway. Make sure you don't screw this entire operation up, was what Toris was saying, he just masked it under gentleness and concern.

But Feliks didn't need to be scolded into flying right. Feliks did not care if Toris had been playing him - him and Raivis both - like this from the beginning, holding Astrauckas House over them like an axe. Well, let him. If it really made Toris feel that much better to play his little mind games and get his cheap thrills where he could take them and sit happily on his throne of passive aggressive power, then fucking let him.

Because after what Bragin and Bragina, Vitim wonder siblings, had done to the village of Darinys... Oh, hell. Maybe the ends did justify the means.

He extricated himself from Toris' embrace. "What's Zielska got to say?" he asked, and Toris beamed.

"Good and bad news. Bad news is the campaign in South Petryavka is failing and support for our side is dwindling at an alarming rate."
That was no surprise. "We shouldn't have been there in the first place. We don't have the troops to combat Vityaz's." Tactically, it was destined to fail.

"Yeah, well ... there have been mistakes made, that's for sure. Zielska's not impressed either. But the good news is, she's agreed to the request I put in when I wrote her last week, telling her to send an intelligence team here."

That sounded like a totally bad idea. "On whose advice was that?"

"On yours, and Eduard's," Toris confirmed. Feliks remained sceptical. "You're the one who mentioned getting Raivis in, weren't you? Now that he's in, I think we should act more quickly. And Eduard who's working on certain files gave me an idea."

"Why would we care about the files he works on? We have bigger issues to deal with."

"Ivan let him have Zapreschniy State."

Again with Darinys. Feliks was once more struck silent.

How very aptly timed was Raivis' little tantrum. Now, it was only his respect for Toris and a well-crafted poker face that kept Feliks from doing the same. "I see," he said tightly. "Ivan really, really trusts him, I take it."

"Sure seems that way," Toris said, with pride.

"So you want Eduard to get that file out for us?"

"No! He's not a spy. One wrong move could expose him, and us. Raivis will help us get it instead."

Feliks had envisioned Raivis in the Duma doing not-much. "Raivis. Raivis, who, bless his little heart, could fail a course on basic recce."

"He's better than you think he is. Plus he's got someone to watch his back."

"Who, Eduard?"

"No, the Bragins' airship driver." Feliks knew he looked unimpressed. "Look," said Toris, switching tactics. "Before we take any file, we need to make sure there's something incriminating inside, or we lose our only chance - Bragina will tighten up security if her suspicions are raised. We need enough evidence to call into question similar circumstances that the Bragins have been behind. Then we can bring the evidence back to Kilnus and set up a war crime tribunal."

In the meantime, the Rubetski's - especially Olga, under Agnieszka's careful handling - would be happy to assume command where they could, and set up an interim government where they couldn't. The Rubetskis might be a silly, flighty bunch, but at least they didn't have their fingers on the kill switch while being several cards short of a full deck. At this point, anything would be better for the Empire Union (and Kilnus - mostly Kilnus) than crazy Katya Bragina ruling the largest nation on Olyokin with an iron fist. (Or even better, equally crazy Ivan Bragin.)

Toris continued. "My money's on the fact that there's something in that file - maybe a few more files if we can pull that kind of information out of Eduard, see what Ivan Bragin is working on. There's gotta be something. With Ivan increasingly sicker, Bragina will probably take him with
them to Hallar for the auction so she can keep an eye on him, and that's our way in with all three Bragins out of the Duma."

"Auction?" This was new.

He nodded. "The Decennial. Ivan said yesterday night that Natalya - the youngest - her Time is coming up, maybe another few weeks or so. And Francis of Hallar won't return their letters anymore so they're going to find someone at auction."

"And Natalya doesn't mind?"

"Natalya is probably the only normal one in that entire family." Then again, Feliks thought, Natalya would have been too young to remember the Counterstrike. "Ivan, of course, was blue in the face screaming about how unfair this is for Yekaterina to just foist her beliefs onto their little sister. Anyway, Zielska's sending in troops now by wagon, should be here by next week so that we're ready to storm the Duma by the end of the month. And if we're not ready, well - it won't hurt to have extra intelligence members around."

There came a minor explosion from the table where Raivis had been and smoke billowed out through their makeshift fumehood.

"Oh good," Toris said cheerfully, "the vodka's done."

Troops. From Central Intelligence. In a week. "You know ... we might want to think about cleaning up," Feliks suggested.

Toris looked around. "We might want to do that, yes."

Chapter End Notes

man, half these scenes are so unnecessary
Fishy bizness with Janowska. She and Beta managed to get away in Little Wing and left me behind but I know who she is now. Moving to intercept tomorrow at Olyokin FSB. Eavesdropper suggests she's the one who files things for the group of five.

(ps, I NEVER FORGET MY SIDEARM. I was caught off-guard, that's all.)

--

Caught letter out-going from group of 5. Don't recognise recipient PB - probably Kirkland. PB-592 Fasciemi fyi. Pls monitor this box.

Meeting tomorrow at 6 in Cloud same place. Be there. Bring Hassan, variable Dropper, and signal back-up from HQ. Will req back-up from Olyokin BSPA HQ bc Nunat BSPA HQ is bunch of morons and also they hate me.

Anchorage is now bugged. Key in Agency frequency #30 when you're close.

--

Janowska's better than she looks. She sat there chatting away with the teller - apparently they are old friends, is there anybody who doesn't get along with this goddamn character? - for an hour. Meanwhile teller keeps working and chatting away.

By the time I get to the teller she's like "ummm I have no clue which files were hers, we were chatting, could have been any one of these" and then gave me a list of over 100 files (and her
number for some reason).

Did I mention there is no coffee on this planet, unless you are filthy rich like the Bragins. Not being a Bragin, I gave up at file 27 and headed to the nearest anchorage for coffee. Which is where I found out that those pills you got me advise not consuming caffeine. At this rate I'm going to fall asleep in my food.

(ps, will see you later today)
Another day, another endless set of files, though they were making good headway in the Northeastern region of the Union, thought Ivan. With any luck - and a lot of help from Eduard - they could finish the entire Northern region in a few weeks.

Three-quarters of the work would then be remaining. If they put in extra effort now, then once all was done, his chief role would be maintenance. Hopefully, they'd finish before Katya's wedding.

Katya's wedding! It upset him enough to go bother Arisha for an early tea.

When he'd returned, Eduard had picked up a few of the files tagged in green. "What are you doing working on those?" Ivan scolded.

"They weren't locked up," Eduard said. "And I finished with my pile, and this was the next one closer, and they didn't seem classified." He returned to flipping through the pages. "In fact, I can't work out what these have men done that you're trying to keep tabs on them. They seem about as normal as anyone else on this planet."

"They are ..." oh, how to explain... "well, they have not done anything, really, they're just - Katya's fucking suitors," he gritted. Eduard looked taken aback. "What?"

He shrugged. "You don't usually swear, that's all."

"I seldom have reason to," Ivan said. And then, upon reflection, corrected himself: "That is an outright lie. I usually have reason to, but vulgarity is not something I enjoy indulging in. I have better manners than that normally."

Eduard lowered his gaze back to the folders with a slow, easy smile.

"What?!" Ivan asked.

"So you are getting used to me!" he said triumphantly.

"Oh, for - get back to work!" Ivan admonished. He picked up the first folder he saw and tossed it across the table at Eduard, who caught it with a laugh. Ivan couldn't fight a smile returned. "I meant real work," he said, yanking the files on Katya's suitors out of Eduard's hands, and handing him another.

"You don't like any of them?" Eduard asked.

"An understatement! I dislike them all."

"The one on the bottom seemed okay."

Ivan checked through the set to see the name. "Poda? No, he is quite slimy. He has a habit of paying his taxes very late and he's also a drunkard."
"Says the man who goes out once a day for three hours to the tavern like clockwork," Eduard reminded with a smirk and a raised eyebrow.

"Hey, I deserve my three-hour break when the rest of my time is spent working! Poda is lazy," Ivan protested. "Besides, that is a religious meeting. I do not have time to go to church, and the rest of the Empire Union would prefer it if I didn't so flagrantly deny mainstream beliefs. So church comes to me." Church also brought him vodka. Best church ever.

"What about this one?" Eduard asked, and reached over the desk to tug at one of the middle files from Ivan's hands.

"If that is Spiridon Marinin, don't even get me started. For five years, he embezzled away his mother's veteran fortune - who, by the way, fought valiantly in the Revolution - until there was nothing left for her, leaving him a millionaire. His own mother! And he was involved in a moonshine vodka scandal ten years ago that caused an entire village to go blind. And I am pretty sure he's a con man. And also he is ugly and fat."

Eduard was giving him that raised-eyebrow look again. "Okay, I admit it, that last bit has nothing to do with anything and I am just being petty." He didn't stop the look. "Oh, what now?!

"That's a neat trick," Eduard said. "You see, on purpose, I said nothing, so that I wouldn't get you started, but you went and told me the story anyway."

Ivan gave him a glare, which Eduard ignored in favour of the file.

"And it wasn't even Marinin! Do you like any of your sister's suitors?"

"No," Ivan pouted. "They all suck."

There came a knock on the door, and Arisha entered with fixings for tea and a plate of sweets stacked on a tray. Honeycakes and marshmallows and dark chocolate! Ivan beamed. "Arishka moya, you are far too good to me," he told her happily, while helping himself to a piece of zefir.

"Dinner at seven," Arisha reminded him as she left, "don't eat too much."

Which reminded Ivan. "And that is another thing I hate about Marinin, he is a glutton." He didn't need to look up from his desk to see the judging look on Eduard's face; somehow, that look - those eyes, that smile - could be felt through the air alone. "I am a growing boy, I am allowed to have these things. You always get a metabolism shift after your Time, so it's okay for me. Spiridon on the other hand is sixty-two."

Eduard whistled. "Is it common for someone so old to pursue someone as young as your sister?"

"Mmmph -" Ivan swallowed the bite of marshmallow quickly - "and that's another thing I hate about Marinin, he is a creepy old man!"

"By that logic, you must love the Veshnan," Eduard decided.

The Veshnan. Ivan took a minute to have some tea and reflect first. "I do not know much about Yao Wang. What I do know, I do not like," he said darkly.

"Oh, come on. The man's practically a saint! No wars in - where does he come from, Bizhi - hasn't
been a war there in decades. Responsible governor. Perhaps a little autocratic - well, then he and the Gospozha will be compatible. *Not* a creepy old man, doesn't drink, decently attractive -"

Ivan set his teacup down on the saucer with a heavy clink. "He owns *five* bondspeople."

The cool politeness of Eduard's forced smile was somehow lost in his twitch of his lower lips, his excessive blinking, and his fingers anxiously drumming on the desk.

"The system is *not* right," Ivan insisted. "What gives anybody the power to decide who is going to do what with their lives? A person should choose that for themselves."

"Oh, so if people gave themselves willingly, you could accept it?"

To the devil with smart bondsmen, Ivan thought, frowning.

He wanted to say no. In no way did the economics of taking advantage of people seem right to him, but if a person - hypothetically speaking! - desired to give themselves up as a sexual slave to another - well, it was their life, wasn't it? Wasn't it their choice? It never happened that way - children were given by their parents for their parents' monetary gains, and the children were too young to choose for themselves - but that wasn't part of this question.

If the system could be changed so that instead, people of age elected to sell themselves into slavery, could he support that?

Unthinkable, of course he couldn't, no human being could be the legal property of another, it was inhumane, immoral. All men and women were made free in God's image, partakers of the Heavenly Gift. As though certain men and women were reduced to chattel, without much distinction but who offered the best price for their worth.

Besides, it was unrealistic. And that was a common fallacy, using unrealistic, hypothetical scenarios to draw a conclusion that was then extrapolated to the real world.

But was it really so unrealistic a scenario, he thought, when there were people who volunteered their own children for sexual slavery? Or better yet, for other things, indenturing them in a position regardless of their own teleological motivations - innate or decided - selected for them a lifelong job years prior to their birth -

"I know you don't like these questions," Eduard murmured with a soft smile and friendly eyes. He leaned forward on the desk, propping his head on his hand, fanning himself with the folder Ivan had given him, held in his other. He gave Ivan a wondering, searching gaze. "I'll tell you what," he decided at last. "Answer either that question, or this one: What really happened in Zapreschniy state?"

Ivan took up his teacup again to wash down the displeasure at having to answer either. "This is a bit of a thorn stuck in your side, I see."

Eduard slid the folder-turned-fan across the desk smoothly and tapped its label. Ivan thought, I really ought to keep Zapreschniy material under lock and key.

"It's an unsolved mystery for me," Eduard admitted, a little nervously. "Why wouldn't I be curious?"
"Remember what I've told you about the curious," he warned. Although, Ivan enjoyed that Eduard asked him these questions, loved that he got to discuss them. If it weren't for the fact that this man were held here against his will, Ivan would have been so happy.

(And really, he wished he could forget that part, too. But he couldn't, it wasn't right.)

"You are free to ask me anything you want, you know that," said Ivan.

"It's just this stupid file. And all the others, too! I don't understand half of why anybody does anything -"

"It is alright." He patted Eduard's hand, trying to be comforting, but it backfired when the man's entire body jerked in surprise. I mustn't touch him, he thought glumly. "I understand," he said, feeling awkward, "I grew impatient fast when - during the - but of course you remember what those symptoms were like." More awkward! How did he keep stumbling in conversation with Eduard? He felt so dumb talking to this man. "Anyway. A lot of it has to do with protocol and bureaucracy - things are the way they are because that is the way they have always been. And things are the way they have been because before they were, they were like this!"

Eduard said nothing, his eyebrows raised.

He sighed. "I know. I wish I had a better answer for you."

"At least explain the story behind Zapreschniy, then," Eduard suggested, "I know there is one." And then he asked, softly, "Please?"

He felt his cheeks grow warm and couldn't make himself return Eduard's earnest, demure gaze. Magic word indeed.

"This is a very, very long story," he began, and Eduard's face fell momentarily. "But I shall tell you. Let's go take a walk."

--

It was much colder than it looked outside. The snow squeaked underfoot and there was a violent wind that every so often would strike Ivan in the face and steal his breath. "Will that coat be warm enough for you?" he asked as they walked. It was the warmest one he owned in a size that could fit Eduard. "I expect the shipment from the tailor to arrive tomorrow."

"I'm fine," Eduard said. "We might walk a little briskly. So - Zapreschniy?"

Ivan began. "Zapreschniy state lies west of here, near the Democratic Republic of Kilnus' most eastern lands. The border is formed by a mountain range - four are dormant volcanos. There is decent mining and farming possible, and it has a good-sized lake. The state itself is an historic region of both Kilnus and the Union, so the boundaries have always been hotly disputed. That there should be strife in that area is not wholly surprising."

They came to one of the benches along the path and sat down. "Why can't they come to some agreement once and for all?"

"Both Vitim and ethnic Kala live there, and I should think, they would have completely ignored each other. I should think there would be no problem if them could marry, but it is too easy to
divide the two, and biologically impossible to unite. And seven hundred years of military exploits
on either side and the borders of the exact state get very fuzzy. While there has been what passes
for peace between the Empire and Kilnus for about fifty years, Zapreschnyi conflicts are on-going.
Both Kilnus and Vityaz enjoy pretending nothing is happening. There are too many reasons for
both sides to want the land."

"So parts of what is now Vityaz-ruled Zapreschnyi were formerly Kilnus territory."

"And you can imagine how happy this makes the Kala of Zapreschnyi. Likewise, portions of
Kilnus land was once Vityaz, and it enrages the Vitim. Now, about ten years ago we signed the
treaty for the mountain range to be used as the border. Kilnus has their part, we have ours - so, we
are done, yes?"

"Theoretically," Eduard said dryly.

"Following the Counterstrike, my sister and I divided many of the states up in terms of rule.
Among those I received as acting regnant co-power was Zapreschnyi."

"Ten years ago you would have been fourteen." Ivan nodded. "Fourteen and people wanted you to
rule over states you'd never seen or been to in your life?"

"You must remember, the Counterstrike left Katya and I in complete power. The house of Bragin
needed to put on a strong face for the Empire and I was young. But not that young! We had the
help of advisors and governesses. I admit I made some mistakes I would not have made now. With
Zapreschnyi ... strategically speaking, I had always been taught to prevent uprisings before they
occurred. I thought having Kala in Vityaz territory would only increase conflict." He shifted
uncomfortably on the bench, feeling restless, and then simply decided to get up and pace
around. "So I deported the Kala of Zapreschnyi across the mountains to Radem, the nearest Kilnus
village," he said, looking at his feet.

Eduard remained silent. "Eduard, I thought it would be safer for them, and in the case of another
conflict, Kilnus would have intervened anyway on behalf of their citizenry, either legal or by fiat of
being Kala."

But he merely held up a hand, interrupting Ivan. Instead of anything critical, he said, "And how
was that received?"

Not well, Ivan recalled. "Kilnus didn't like it. But worse, some of the trains never made it to
Radem, and those aboard them were never found. Kilnus was angry. They believe, as we do, that
they perished in the mountains - the range itself is large. There is danger from the weather and
wind and many technical climbing challenges."

"And this was ten years ago," Eduard confirmed. Ivan nodded again. "Okay, so what happened
after that?"

"I disliked administrating from such a long distance - it is difficult to tell what exactly is going on.
To me, it feels like chess, like a game, you are just moving pieces on a board and it is so easy not
to consider a knight's feelings when you sacrifice him so that the king may live. But people are not
pawns... The loss of those trains - over a hundred people, they told me - was difficult for me to
take. Katya hushed it up for me in exchange for control over the region. And she had more
experience than I did. So she swapped me two of her 'easier' files closer to home, and I felt a little
better.
"Seven months later, Katya sent troops to invade Darinys - Zapreschniy state, Vityaz side. A small city at the foothills of the mountains, perhaps a hundred thousand people. She did it on the grounds that there were Kilnus operatives in the area."

"She just guessed this, or what?"

Ivan shook his head. "Our intelligence showed Kilnus had crossed the mountains and was providing aid and humanitarian goods - which, to me, was not a great problem - and arms - which was."

"But Darinys was a Vityaz town?"

"Vityaz-governed. Minority Vitim, mostly ethnic Kala and Sprus."

He could see the cogs working in Eduard's head. "So this was where your train passengers were hiding?"

"Not quite..." He wasn't sure how to begin. "It gets worse." Ivan felt even more nervous and awkward. "I - I don't want you to - no doubt you will think of me as some sort of uncaring tyrant!"

Eduard leaned forward on the bench, sincere and inquisitive. "I don't think of you like that." Wait until I'm done, Ivan thought. "So. The Gospozha sent troops."

"Yes. The Kilnus operatives in Darinys were intelligence from the capital of the Republic; they had crossed borders in a time when we were closed-off. Katya's troops revealed that they were coordinating plans with Kilnus to take back a few strategic points in the state for Kilnus. The first would be Darinys, and after that, two towns to the north, one north east, a few more. It led a path back to Kilnus through the mountain range."

"With what army?" Eduard asked.

"Unclear. Kilnus Central claimed they knew nothing, so besides their own spies, we don't know who had weapons training. I thought they presented little threat - we had no solid evidence that all this was any more than talk - but Katya was not so convinced. She thought perhaps the operatives were training civilians, raising an army, and I agreed that was dangerous. She sent twenty marines to take down the spies.

"The marines were supposed to penetrate the town and take down the operatives stealthily. Not a mission for spies, but neither going in with guns blazing. But they failed and were found out. When the smoke cleared, the fifteen left alive were held and questioned by the Kilnus operatives in Darinys. Katya was told that they would be kept hostage until such time that Katya allowed the city to be declared federal Kilnus territory. Only Darinys, they didn't negotiate for the other towns."

"I can't see her liking an ultimatum like that," Eduard murmured, "faced with an act of sedition."

"Ah. No. She did not. Instead of capitulating, Katya sent more marines. Many more. We still don't know who fired the first shot in the resultant standoff but it quickly spiralled into a much larger battle between the Vityaz marines and the Kilnus intelligence operatives, who were hiding behind Darinys civilians, who were armed."
"What happened then?"

"Then, I heard of it, what Katya was doing, and I told her to stop it immediately at any cost."

"And?"

The wind picked up and ruffled his hair, pricking his ears. He could have done with a hat, he supposed. Ivan took a seat next to Eduard and folded his arms across his chest. He took a deep breath, and said, "The next reports came in saying all of Darinys was razed and nearly everybody was dead."

Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed Eduard shivering. "I'm sorry!" he said, and turned to rub Eduard's upper arms and shoulders, to give him some warmth, "this is such a long story and you must be getting cold, your cheeks are bright red -"

"No, no it's fine," said Eduard weakly, "really. Go on?"

He sighed. "After the fall I took the case back. Katya wanted to search for survivors and deport any back to Klnus but I was not sure this would be a good idea, after what had happened. Supposing they too died in the mountains! Besides, to have people with this information back in Klnus would be a terrible idea. Better that nobody knows what actually happened. So I initiated construction of a new village not far where this city was. Anybody who was not in Darinys at the time later came back to a story of deportation and bandits and was redirected there. And this is Aritsevskiy posyolok as we now know it."

"What exactly do Savva Yozhin and Major Teresya Vmalkhina have to do with all of this?"

"I'm still not sure," Ivan muttered, "but that is a good point. Perhaps a background check on both will give us some answers."

They sat in silence for a moment. "Does that clear things up a bit?" Ivan asked.

Eduard laughed derisively, a short, hollow, almost bitter sound. "Hardly!" he said.

"Well I don't know what else to tell you!" Ivan threw his hands up in frustration. "This is all I know."

"So things were left, just like that? A city of a hundred thousand people, completely gone, reduced to rubble? You never found out what precisely happened?"

"You don't think I tried?" Ivan shouted. "Don't you think I tried at all? There were a hundred thousand men, women and children who could write you books on farming and fishing and who knew not one single thing about war and did not deserve to die!"

"I'm sorry -"

"No, I am sorry," Ivan muttered, feeling stupid and clumsy. He tried to calm down, because it wasn't Eduard's fault at all, it was his own - he should never have let Katya take something so sensitive, not with her disposition and her history; Zapreschniy really needed someone like Ivan, or maybe Natalya. Something about Eduard patiently listening had an annoying tendency to throw him off-guard and uncover holes in his logic, and make him want to do right. Often in his tenure as acting regnant co-power, Ivan had been forced to do the best thing possible. It wasn't always the
right thing. "The only thing I could think of that would reduce such a distance to rubble is perhaps
the explosion of an airship," he said. "You attach a fuse and the correct explosive to the fuel vials,
you could get up to some ten kilometres blast radius with that. Detonated in the air, you could
destroy a city."

"Is there any evidence?"

"Sure enough, when I checked later, Katya had flown in the troops via several ships. Four ships
flew in, none were ever accounted for."

"What did she think happened to the ships?"

Ivan shrugged. "Probably the same thing that happened to the trains in the mountains - rusting
away and abandoned, picked over for parts. Maybe a hobo has found himself a nice home. I don't
know."

"You regret it," Eduard observed. "You regret what happened in Darinys."

And instead of picking the defensive route, Ivan went with another. "I have their last census,
hidden away like all my mistakes. A list of a hundred thousand names. Thereafter, whenever Katya
picked up my files, because of - of my condition, I let her. I tried to intervene when she went too
far. When I was unsuccessful, I read a few pages of names to remind myself of accidents and
difficult decisions. To remind myself that the bishops, rooks and knights of the state might have
families of their own."

What a miserable, awkward conversation. But it made him look marginally better than a hypocrite,
he didn't know how to answer Eduard's other question about the bondsperson trade. "We had better
get back to the Duma," Ivan mentioned, pulling out his pocketwatch and giving it a few half-
hearted winds. It let his hands have something to do and eased his discomfort. "There is an
important dinner tonight."

"Why are you doing that?"

"I'm winding the watch."

"What for?"

Ivan looked up at Eduard's curious expression. "You... don't know how it works?"

Eduard shook his head. "What does a bondsman need a timepiece for?"

"It is an old design," Ivan admitted. "These days they function with a power source, same as an
Eavesdropper, but this one you have to provide power to it. When I wind this bit here -" he showed
him - "it tightens the mainspring inside. The spring uses that energy to move the balance wheel
back and forth, and the periodic motion of the wheel is what adds up to seconds, minutes, hours,
and the like." He noticed Eduard hadn't stopped looking at the watch once and asked, "You want to
try winding it?"

"Yes - I won't break it, will I?"

"Of course not," Ivan said with a light laugh, and plunked the timepiece in Eduard's palms. The
gentle way Eduard held it - reverently, like it was some fragile egg of an item - made him smile.
"Pull out the crown one stop - that is one click. Yes, like that. Now just spin it clockwise with your fingertips and keep going until you meet some resistance. Then you are done."

Eduard did as he instructed. "This is amazing," he said, still transfixed. "With no radiation source?"

"No need. Anyway, I can show you how it works, but later. For now, we had better get back and finish some work before dinner." Which reminded him. "It will be boring, but you may come if you like. It might help you with some insight into politics."

"Not more Zapreschniy?" Eduard said distastefully.

He laughed. "Ah, haha... no. Not quite. One of Katya's suitors will be joining us for dinner. A private affair, just family and close friends."

"I'm neither," Eduard replied neutrally, and placed the wound pocketwatch carefully back in Ivan's hand.

I wouldn't be so sure, Ivan thought. Even Brother Toris didn't know about Darinys (and, God willing, never would). And all Eduard had had to do was ask. But he didn't want to embarrass Eduard - or himself - any further, and simply said, "You may suit yourself. It is only a small function. Either you take your dinner alone in our rooms or you take it with me as we tolerate Katya's fat bloated louse of a suitor for two and a half hours."

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And so, at quarter to seven, instead of donning his coat and scarf and high-tailing it merrily to the Kapriz Gosudartvsa, Ivan unhappily pulled on his finer dress trousers, the ones with the silver braid on the seams, thinking, had they always been so form-fitting? Well, no time to have them taken out by Arisha.

Eduard had said he would join him tonight, and for reasons he couldn't describe, it cheered him immensely. When he reflected on it, the best he could do was joy that there would be one more person there on his side, in his corner of the ring, because Katya's rodnaya always wanted whatever Katya wanted, and he wasn't sure whether Natasha would see how grotesque Katya's suitor was. But now, he could whisper petty and mean things about Marinin to Eduard and they'd laugh quietly together. It might almost be fun!

He heard a noise like clearing a throat - probably Eduard at the doorway, he thought - and turned around. "Are you already finished?" he asked. Mostly finished, he corrected himself - Eduard's waistcoat was undone but everything else - suspenders, shirt, trousers - was in order except the tie.

"Uh," Eduard said eloquently, and blushed bright red.

"You're quicker than I thought; I'm impressed. I think it takes me five minutes to get into these pants and, ah, the less said about the style the better. I wish we would adopt a looser fit like the Veshnans." He sighed, grabbing the stiff shirt where it hung over the door of his wardrobe, and ungracefully shrugged into it. "You don't agree?"

"I agree completely. Tight pants are ... tight. And that's unfortunate. Um."

Preoccupied, Ivan thought this outfit of his really didn't look any better with the buttons done up and the shirt tucked in. That metabolism shift might also have something to do with these things.
He prodded his belly, gave his reflection in the mirror a sad expression, and then reminded himself to *suck it in*. There, that made him look a little trimmer. "Anyway. Did you need something?"

Eduard nodded jerkily, nervously. "Um. Yes, I'm not sure what to do with this part of the outfit." He held up a long, thin strip of silk material - a necktie. That, at least, Ivan had been able to give him new; Ascot ties were one size fits most.

"Ah. Here." He stepped closer, lifted the collar of Eduard's shirt, and hooked the fabric around his neck, tugging gently. "One side slightly longer than the other," he noted, demonstrating. "You cross the longer over shorter like so - loop it around the shorter end, and back again underneath - then loop again over - bring this end through the neck here -"

- and here, his fingers accidentally grazed the soft skin of Eduard's throat. Eduard jerked, looking shocked. "Apologies," he mumbled. I mustn't touch him! he thought. He'd *nearly* forgotten the time he almost killed this man.

"And now you just adjust and tighten as you like." He left to dig through the open armoire for the tea-chest where he kept his tie pins.

"Am I done yet?" asked Eduard.

"Not quite - ah, here." An enamelled coat of arms of Vityaz, that looked stately. "You secure it like so -" Ivan stuck the pin through the top flap and then the second, and then through the shirt to keep the tie in place, before he secured the pin with the clutch. He smoothed it down a little and made final adjustments. "There, that looks good," he decided.

"Uh-huh," Eduard breathed.

"Now, the lower half of the tie is covered up by the waistcoat," he said, and demonstrated this by doing up the buttons. "Like so," he said, finishing and smoothing the soft, cool satin free of wrinkles. Really, this waistcoat looked far better on Eduard than it ever had on Ivan, he thought, it nipped at the waist perfectly, it looked good over the trousers and came to a nice length at Eduard's hips; even the pockets sat right and neatly, a trick of the eye that Ivan had relied on to make himself look impressive, but Eduard didn't need impeccable stitchwork to show how graceful and slender his figure was -

He realised he was staring, broke himself out of his self-made spell. This man is not a doll to be dressed, Ivan reminded himself scornfully.

"Anyway. That. That looks quite nice."

"Thank you," Eduard whispered. "You're not wearing one?"

"Hmm," he replied, putting on his own waistcoat - lower-cut than Eduard's, and plain off-white, didn't look nearly as nice as the dove grey satin - over his uncomfortably stiff-fronted shirt. "I have to wear a slightly different outfit," he explained, once he'd finished with the buttons, and grabbed his black bow tie and looping it around his neck to fasten it. "You're allowed to be in more comfortable clothing but apparently as the head of this empire I need to be respectful even when my dinner guests are perverted tasteless barbarians who wouldn't know the difference between morning dress and black tie if it were presented to them in a fifty-page spiral-bound report in the simplest Standard." He adjusted the bow. "With footnotes."
Eduard grinned, albeit a bit nervously. "This will be a fun night," he said.

Lastly he took the tailcoat off the hanger. It too didn't fit quite perfectly, but that was evening dress for you, not terribly comfortable to begin with. At least one of them looked perfectly lovely. "That's not the word I would use. Oh! Before we leave -" he'd nearly forgotten. He pulled open the door to his armoire again, and this time grabbed the tea-tin stuffed at the back. He opened it and drew out an old silver pocketwatch on a chain.

"For you," Ivan told him simply. "If you like, I can have Arisha polish it a little, I know it is tarnished but not badly. And it needs to be wound - I have not used it in over a year - but now you know how to do that, too! After that it will work."

"I - Vanya, thank you. This is astounding," he said. It was a good thing he was so transfixed by the watch; he completely missed Ivan's deep blush.

"It is not a very expensive watch, it tends to lose time and needs to be wound daily," he admitted, putting the tin back in the wardrobe.

"It's the nicest thing anybody's ever given me," Eduard insisted, putting it in the waistcoat pocket and tucking the other end of the chain through a buttonhole, as Ivan tended to do. "Thank you. I mean it."

Ivan turned, and there was a moment where their gazes aligned, connected and held. Eduard's gratefulness had been evident through his words but his eyes, heartfelt and solemn, conveyed perhaps a nuance he'd overlooked in his voice. He felt his pulse thrum distantly in his ears, watched Eduard wet his lips, his feet seemed frozen to the spot -

The chimes of the Duma clocktower jarred him out of it, like a snap of a hypnotist's fingers from a trance. Seven on the dot, he counted.

Thank God for that, Ivan thought, ashamed of himself.

"We should get to the dining room," he said quietly, forcing himself to look away.
"Devushka Natasha, you can't wear that one."

"Why not? It's pretty and I like it and it's just sitting here in my closet doing nothing but collecting dust." She took it off the hanger anyway and held it to her body, whirling around to make the skirt spin out and flutter around her ankles. "Do you think Vanya will like it?"

It was a low-cut v-neck coloured gold with fringed sleeves that floated to her elbows. The skirt was fastened down to mid-thigh, and below, left open where it showed a silk panel the colour of pearl that felt like liquid and moved as gracefully. How anybody could not like it was a mystery to Natalya.

Natalya's handservant, Grusha, sighed and explained, "That is your debutante dress, Devushka, you can't wear it tonight because you have to wear it when you're presented at court. It's unfit for a formal dinner."

Natalya glared. Sure, the sleeves were a little longer than they should be but who would really care? With a plunging neckline like that, they'd all be distracted by her decolletage. "I'm wearing this one and that's final."

"Devushka -"

"I can't wear any of the others, anyway. They're all dirty." She was already undoing the buttons along the back of the dress - there were so many! - to be able to slip it on.

"They can't possibly all - oh," Grusha ran through the closet. "You're right. How can that be?"

"No clue," Natalya replied, shoving the pretty dress on. "Buttons?"

Grusha grumbled but moved to her back to start with the fastening. "Gospozha Yekaterina will not like this," she grumbled.

"Who cares?" Natalya asked impulsively.

"Your sister cares! And now that someone has seen you in it we'll have to have the tailor make you another one!" Grusha ground out.

"Oh, please," Natalya waved. "Why does it matter what I wear? I am not the most important person at this event, I don't have to be in black tie, I can wear what I want! And Vanya says that spending all that money on fancy clothes isn't good for the Empire anyway. If someone really gets offended because I wore the same dress twice, I will ask them why it matters so much that I spend some four hundred dollars of Empire money to play real-life dolls."

"I suppose you can always suggest that Spiridon Marinin of Olyokin lied," Grusha admitted, "and wear it again for your court appearance." Lying about what a young girl wore to a dinner party with family and friends. What a terrible scandal. "Come on then," Grusha said, smoothing the fabric flat over her bulky corset, "hair and makeup next." She picked up the brush.
Natalya was first in the drawing room, so she took a seat on the lounge and waited, toying with the cuff of her gloves. ("Don't do that, Devushka," she heard in her mind, "it's not polite to fiddle.") A few minutes later Katya showed up with her bondsgirl.

In dresses. Both of them.

Katya. Wore a dress. Tyen'ka - Katya's little shadow - wore them often but Katya, never, claiming it was easier to move around in trousers.

Natalya sat up straighter and tried not to look disturbed.

Her sister's dress was plain but pretty - a striped, high-cut, dark blue twill thing, with a double-breasted jacket and a bustle so large it made her chest look proportionate for once. Natalya had never seen her wear it before. It was nice enough on Katya, but it was certainly foreign, and Katya seemed to realise it herself. She walked differently, held herself differently. Katya seemed like a statue now, posed instead of natural. She gave her sister a half-grin in support which Katya didn't return.

"What are you doing in that?" Katya scolded. "That's your debutante gown!"

Natalya shrugged. "All the others were dirty."

"You wear dresses every day, no wonder they're all dirty." Katya groaned and checked the time. "It'll have to do. Where the General's tits is Vanya? He's supposed to be here before you, he's the host."

"I'm sure he'll be here soon," said Tyen'ka. Part of Natalya wanted to snap at her but only because the girl had beaten her to the punch in defending Vanya. Of course he would be here. Vanya didn't like Marinin but her big brother was polite and graceful, a paragon of virtue and social grace.

They waited another fifteen minutes. Six-fifty-two and she stood when their guest showed up. Spiridon Marinin of Olyokin was a portly man of medium height, dark-eyed, pale-skinned, with long white hair tied back with ribbon. It suited him. He carried himself with that certain commanding presence and dignity that she found attractive and welcoming in men. He was courteous and welcoming. She liked him immediately.

Spiridon made his greetings to Katya, who apologised for Vanya's absence. "He'll be here soon, I'm sure of it," Natalya spoke up, and her sister briefly shot her a look. (She was tempted to shoot one back but she remembered, "No, Devushka, do not manifest impatience," and Spiridon was studying her face too closely for her to do it anyway.)

"And this must be the lovely Natalya!" Spiridon exclaimed, and bowed, taking her hand to kiss it. She blushed. "I know I must not have met you before. Such a pretty face, I should remember clearly!"

"She hasn't been presented at court yet," Katya said, "Natalya has been exceedingly busy with her studies."

"I can -" speak for myself! she wanted to say. ("No, bad Devushka. Do not engage in arguments."
So many damned rules. How by the General's hand did Vanya manage all of this?) "I can't wait for court life," she said instead, with a pleasant smile.

They waited and spoke lightly some more, keeping the subject off the missing member of their party.

Finally - at five-past the hour - Vanya found them in the drawing room. They could hear his footsteps from rooms away but not those of his bondsman - Eduard, a blonde and bright-eyed reedy thing of about Vanya's age, with a permanent snobby expression that was perhaps accidental but nevertheless insulting. She'd been introduced only the once and then Vanya had retreated to his rooms, dragging Eduard with him, for more work.

Surprise; they would be six for dinner. Katya wouldn't like that.

"Good!" Katya said, "now that we're all here, we can begin. Spiridon, please follow me -" and she led him away. Natalya could hear the iciness in her sister's voice even if Spiridon couldn't; Katya was pissed. Vanya would have to figure out some way later to make it up to her. She gave her brother a questioning look but he returned it with only a smile and a wink.

Ivan Bragin was so rarely late she felt she could count the times on one hand. And ungracefully loud, bounding into the drawing room like an ungainly animal? He must be working too hard, she thought.

They were seated - the honoured guest at the head of the table with Vanya and Katya on his right and left-hand sides respectively. With Katya's Tyen'ka at Katya's other side and Vanya's Eduard on his, it left the opposite head of the table to her. Normally it'd be an honour if she weren't surrounded by bondspeople. At least Eduard was decently competent, as she found out.

"Gloves," he said under his breath, while Spiridon sparked an enthralling conversation about the weather at the other end of the table, "your gloves -" and mimed taking them off. She blushed and covertly removed them. ("Gloves are worn to the table but not at it, and only kept on at the table should there be some special reason the hands ought not to be shown," she remembered.)

"Thanks," she muttered flippantly, annoyed that the bondsman knew these things better than she did. ("Devushka. Be kind, even to servants. Come, now.") She sighed. "Sorry."

He explained himself under his breath. "Our courses of instruction are complementary. For years I learnt only social manners and graces. And now I'm plunged headlong into politics. I know how it feels to be thrown off the deep end."

She gave him a weak, sheepish half-smile and felt guiltier for losing her temper.

The soup course was first; mushroom creme, her favourite, her only delight as conversation shifted, as she expected, from boring topic - weather - to another boring topic - mining operations in the southern regions of the union. ("Idle chit-chat only at a dinner party, so as not to offend.") It was kind of Spiridon to ask her opinion, but she didn't know much about mining. Thankfully Vanya leapt to pick up the slack.

And then steered the conversation towards contentious politics. Spiridon the guest didn't want to argue with his host, so the task then fell to Katya to somehow intervene without looking like she was intervening.
"This is like a snowball fight," she murmured in confusion, and while Tyen'ka didn't react, Eduard cracked a grin.

"I don't think my brother means that your support would be unwanted," Katya said, trying to be diplomatic.

Spiridon gave her a grateful smile. "Thank you, Katya -"

"Oh no, I most certainly do," Vanya insisted.

"Ah -"

"At any rate, Spiridon, my brother and you are alike in that neither of you support the business in Rezhivsk -"

**SLURRP**

"- with the oil fields," Katya finished, breathing deeply and over-enunciating her words.

Vanya just grinned around a spoonful of soup.

Next to her, Eduard was practically shaking with mirth. He coughed lightly, excused himself to her and Katya's bondsgirl, and sipped some more sherry. "Good sherry," he said.

"Indeed," Natalya replied, her eyes narrowed.

Another *slurrp* from the other end of the table - right as Spiridon spoke - and Eduard took a larger sip of sherry. "Very good sherry!" he whispered, gritting his teeth.

What the hell was Vanya doing?! Was he not feeling well? He must not be feeling well, she thought. After all, he knew these social rules better than she did.

So many things to remember - don't do this or that, and General forbid you do this, et cetera - playing princess was very difficult (except for the dresses) and she found it so difficult to concentrate these days. On anything at all!

Natalya did not enjoy her classwork. Her lessons were full of politics; she didn't need more at the dinner table. *Yes,* it was for her own good, it was what Mom and Dad would have wanted, she knew. But after ten years of lectures, they couldn't teach her to *like* it. The Empire was her first priority. She couldn't learn anything fun until she took on a few administrative cases. Good experience, Katya had said, for a girl who would one day share in the ruling of the entire empire (no pressure, or anything). She'd rather leave it to Vanya. Vanya would be a better emperor for certain - Vanya always knew best! - and Olyokin preferred men in power.

But leagues of advisors to help them govern a country or not, it was difficult. And although Katya and Vanya had been so young, their parents had consigned the name and line and devoted it to the ruling of the entire country. For the Empire not to dissolve into anarchy, it had needed a brash act of leadership following the triple assassination of her mother, father and aunt ... So the history books said, anyway; it wasn't like Natalya had been old enough to remember.

All three of them had had their lives planned out since birth. Natalya just wished it hadn't been so very soon -
"Claret?" Eduard asked, and she remembered two rules then - one, the men offered to pour the drinks for the women, and two, it was most commonly done to revive a silent member at the table. ("You're being too quiet, Devushka," she heard in her head. "Stop spacing out.")

"Please," she accepted, so he re-filled her glass.

Claret meant meat. She watched a servant carve a large roast bird at the sideboard and placed it carefully on a platter. The servant passed it to Katya first, who took a modest slice and passed it counterclockwise to Spiridon, who took some and passed it forward to Vanya.

Vanya took half the plate and had hardly off-loaded the platter to Eduard before he dove in. Had he always chewed so loudly?

Natalya was so preoccupied with Vanya's strange antics, she almost missed the twitch in Eduard's lips as he received the platter. Eduard was smart, he saw things Tyen'ka tended not to, that's why Vanya had him cooped up in his rooms trying to fix half the problems in the Empire - he knew something -

Oh, by the General, she realised - Vanya dislikes Spiridon. Vanya's doing this on purpose to offend Spiridon. And suddenly everything Vanya did became hilarious.

Almost on cue, Vanya began - his mouth still partially full of fowl, and spitting it everywhere, honestly, Vanya! - "So! I hear you're interested in my sister's huge tracts of land!"

Spiridon went bright red. The table was silent. Vanya kept gobbling.

"Dark or light meat, Devushka Natalya?" asked Eduard, shakily, sounding like he'd break out into laughter if he said anything more.

There was a piece of light meat hanging out the corner of Vanya's mouth. He seemed insistent on keeping it there. "Dark, please," Natalya said tightly, and bit her lip in an effort to keep it out of a grin. She let him fork a few slices onto her plate before she took the platter and passed it to Katya's bondsgirl, breathing deeply to quell the giddy bubbles of laughter that she prayed would stick in her chest and not escape. Devil take you, Vanya!

Katya's Tyen'ka, red-faced, did not seem nearly as impressed, and neither did Spiridon or Katya who tried to resuscitate the conversation (although Vanya claimed he was just talking about the Southern regions rich in minerals that Katya had overseen since she was a little girl, and what did Spiridon think he'd meant).

The conversation proceeded - a little tightly. But at least there was less room for destruction here with no soup-slurping -

**SCREECH**

"My apologies," Eduard said, "my knife slipped, I'm so clumsy. Please, Gospodin Marinin, you were saying?"

This time it was Vanya who was bright red, hiding a smile.

Eduard gave her a sly wink and she nearly lost composure. She coughed into a napkin to hide her
laughter. Had they planned this? Or did they just happen to be like-minded enough to pull off something so devilish?

Natalya wasn't entirely certain how, but she managed to get through the next three hours and five courses without erupting into hysteric[s. Eduard kept a straighter face than she did, but anybody who knew Vanya and saw how he was acting couldn't sit through three hours of the same without it getting funnier.

She came dangerously close to losing it at dessert. Vanya had made such a fuss of going for seconds and prolonging each course as a result, no doubt tripling the work of the kitchens to keep things timely. So it surprised her when he passed on dessert - Arisha's chocolate-pecan cake, which he adored. Shouldn't he be helping himself to, like, half the cake?

"I cannot tolerate the nuts, I am afraid. Gives me quite the upset stomach, lots of gas!" She barely contained a snort. A blatant lie, and not something Vanya would ever say to another person who wasn't his medic, let alone at the dinner table.

"Vanya..." Katya began warningly.

"It's true," Eduard piped up, "as his bondsman, I can attest to this."

"Yes thank you for sharing moving on now -"

"I thought you said he didn't employ your services," Spiridon said, with a suspicious look.

"Oh, I don't!" Vanya laughed. "That would be uncouth." And then he belched.

Natalya covered up her giggles with a dainty cough and a sip of dessert wine, pretending a dry throat.

"I share his chambers," Eduard commented, with the dry levity of someone speaking about the weather, sipping his tea with his pinky finger extended. "The smell is really enough."

"I could not agree more," ground out Katya tersely.

Natalya tried not to cry.

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Natalya and Eduard barely held it together for Katya, Vanya and Spiridon Marinin to walk out of the dining room before they both doubled over in hysterical wheezes.

"This is not funny!" hissed Katya's bondsgirl, taking her napkin off her lap and throwing it on the table in anger, which only made Natalya laugh harder still. "Your brother embarrassed himself and the Gospozha! That man will never come back here again!"

"What a pity," Eduard joked, and Natalya bit back a loud cackle.

"I expected better from you," Tyen'ka said to Eduard, and got up from the table in a huff.

"Worth it," he said, breathing deeply to try and calm down, and taking a long drink of his wine.
"You won't get in trouble with Katya, will you?" asked Natalya.

He shrugged. "Maybe. I don't think I'll get in much trouble with Vanya, though, and he's my master, so he's got the last say."

Katya and Vanya began arguing. They heard it from rooms away - Spiridon must have left because between Katya's screeching and Vanya's shouting, the foot of steel in the Duma's outside walls was the only way their guest wouldn't hear their row.

"What the fuck is your problem, you boor?!" she heard Katya yell.

"My problem?! You're the one deluding yourself into being courted by that - that - snivelling insect!" Insect was harsh. Spiridon hadn't been that bad!

"It would be an agreeable match for the Empire. Marinin is one of the few Vitim with very strong Kilnus connections that I could exploit for the sake of the Union."

"He's disgusting," Vanya countered, "I can't believe you would seriously consider debasing yourself with such a turkey. If Father knew -"

"Ohh, don't go there, brother," warned Natalya to herself. "He always goes there."

Katya's voice became dangerous. "If Father knew," Natalya heard, and now she really did feel awful for listening in because despite how loudly they were both speaking she knew Katya's trigger was any mention of their parents, "then we would not have this problem because it would mean that he were here, and that he would be the head of the Empire instead of my immature little brother, and I wouldn't have to deal with upstart rodents with businesses over the border because Father wouldn't've minded if I never got married at all!"

"Then don't," Ivan spat icily. "Stay unwed and honour his memory appropriately instead of tarting yourself out to his would-be usurpers -" Too far. Far too far.

The slap she heard was so loud both her and Eduard jumped in their seats. "Do not talk to me of honour. And do not. EVER. Speak to me of our parents again. Do you hear me?"

And then there were the sounds of stomping footsteps and slammed doors, just like a couple weeks ago when Vanya had gotten all weird.

Eduard drained his glass to the sound of don't you walk away from me! "Well. I need more wine. More wine?" he offered.

"Yes please," she said.

"And another thing!" she heard, paired with another doorslam. Natalya tried not to listen - "that little brat of yours, I didn't buy that thing for you so you could train it to help you be the biggest troll in the Empire -" but not very hard - "Don't you dare bring him into this! Katya where in God's name are you going get back here -"

"What ... happened, during the Counterstrike?" Eduard asked. "All I know is - there was some giant assassination."

Natalya shrugged. "I only know what they teach in my classes," she lied.
Vanya reentered the dining room, followed closely by Katya. Katya's bondsgirl waited at the threshold of the door, wringing her hands (with good reason, thought Natalya, because both Vanya and Katya were angry enough to start *throwing things* and Vanya had amusingly bad aim). "What do you plan to do about that anyway?" Katya cried.

"Give him extra homework. I don't know. He hasn't done *anything*," Vanya sneered.

"By the General -!" Katya looked over to Eduard and shrieked, "If you were mine you would be *so fucked right now.*" She turned back to Vanya, "It doesn't even do *that* for you, it's *useless!*" And then she stormed out the way she came in, followed by her little shadow.

"*See?*" thundered Vanya. "Seeee, Tashka? *This* is why it's wrong to own a bondsman. They are *Real People with Real Feelings!*"

"Oh please do not drag me into this," Eduard muttered.

Vanya slammed the dining room door so hard it rattled the hinges. At first Natalya thought he'd go chase after Katya and yell at her some more but he cried instead, "I am going to the tavern. *Well done,* sister, you've driven me to drink, again!"

Not the only one, Vanya, she thought, gulping her wine.

"Enjoy it you fool *I hope your liver falls out!*"

Eduard and Natalya sat in silence until the doors stopped slamming and there was finally some measure of silence.

At long last, Natalya said softly, "I would claim that they are not always like this, but that would be a lie."

"It's the first time I've heard anything so terrible between them," he admitted, "although I haven't been here very long. It doesn't surprise me. That their difference of opinion on governance should bleed over like this... no, that doesn't surprise me." But his hands still trembled when he picked up his wine, and his nails were white from gripping the bowl of the glass so hard.

She felt bad for him. Though she was relieved to hear Vanya didn't use him, Katya had called him *useless* to his face. "It's ... you have to understand, Katya has had different experiences than Vanya has. Or I. In fact my childhood was - was almost normal, if you forget about what happened to my parents."

"Yes, well."

"It's worse because Vanya and Katya knew them. Katya particularly. The stress of this job gets to both of them, they just deal with it in different ways." She drained her wineglass before continuing. "Part of the problems the old Empire had was inconsistency. When the ruling power reigned for decades it was easy to take - things don't change too often. But there was two hundred years where the longest rule was a little over fifteen years, that's too unstable for so big a place.

"During the Revolution, our family dedicated themselves and all generations to come to the protection and governance of this country. I guess to some it looks like a fantastic opportunity - what says status upgrade like forever being the ruling family. But it's really not. My life - and
Katya's, and Vanya's - all our lives were permanently decided for us the moment our family took power. Same with those of our sons and daughters. And their sons and daughters. Everyone with the last name Bragin will have this predestined occupation. Everyone. There are no exceptions."

"I see," Eduard murmured with a feeble nod.

"That's why he's won't use you, isn't it?" she realised. "You're just like him. Your parents decided for you what you would be, and so you became it. It's the same with us! Our parents decided we would serve the Empire. That we do so in the top office doesn't matter. They picked our professions for us before we were born and we had no choice. Maybe Vanya's just upset because you accept so readily what you are and he still struggles."

"Do you accept what you are?" he asked.

Natalya didn't hesitate. "I have to," she said. "Someone has to do this job, and I have the training." It might as well be someone like her, and her brother, and her sister. And for all her family's failings, corruption was not one of them. Yes, it might as well be them.

He smiled. "That's how I feel too, Devushka."

"You can call me Natasha, I don't mind." Not when Tyen'ka went and called her Natasha and she liked Eduard a hell of a lot more than she liked Tyen'ka. She raised her glass, and clinked it softly with his. "To making the best of one's life that one can, with exceedingly unpleasant jobs," she offered.

And to unexpectedly kindred spirits.
"Message for ya, Mo," called Constable Ray Mehta.

Major-Constable Gupta Mohammad Hassan - Mo to his colleagues - hadn't been expecting a message. "Who's it from?" he asked. "Protected source?"

"No, it's Border Control. Some guy named Adnan?" Mehta shrugged. "Seemed important. You want it in the comms room?"

Him again. What could he want now? Maybe in trouble with Border Control. Adnan had been nice enough - for a Halleri Federal Agent, that wasn't saying too much - but he didn't know how to sweet-talk the bordermen and women to get what you wanted.

"Get Skylar to pipe it through here, if you can," Hassan advised.

The message came through on his Eavesdropper in a series of dits and dahs, and Hassan sat patiently through it, translating it mentally. It read, Addison Point Control. Will pick you up. ETA 11am today. In fifteen minutes. Scratch that, he realised, Adnan plain doesn't know how to sweet-talk, period.

He swung by Constable Yvonne Vel's office to give her the message before he picked up his jacket. Vel had been working with him on the Nova Sector and a few other cases. "What's it mean?" she asked.

"Dunno. Probably nothing serious, nothing that'll lead to an arrest, but better go find out anyway. You want to come with?"

"Nah. Got legwork to do on the Kristolls case. In between media outrage from the Nova raid - which, by the way, we can thank Mrs Jones for, real helpful in nattering on about getting her kid back, like nobody else has kids or something. We've been neglecting everything else. A day without me won't kill you, will it?"

He smirked. "You're not that integral."

"Don't jinx it," Vel taunted. "You wait and see, you'll wish I was there. Just don't forget to check back when you get in."

"I'll be real sure to bring you a full report of the nothing that went on," he called back.

--

Adnan met him at Addison Point's border gate terminal. "C'mon," he said roughly.

"What's the hurry?"
"I'll explain on the way. Let's go!"

Minutes later they were docked in Adnan's viper, a tiny two-seater with a mean motor (it almost made Hassan want to be a Federal Agent, if it meant he'd get to jetset around the system in a toy like that on a regular basis). It took about fifteen minutes to get undocked from Addison Point and then another three as the ship pierced the atmosphere.

It was somewhere between harrowing and amazing. On one hand, Hassan had been off-planet perhaps three times, and never for very long, only to meet with representatives at Jernsey, the nearest anchorage. This was exciting stuff. But with that in mind, and his job description, it meant he had had only the most rudimentary of space training and so was still mostly unprepared for the acceleration out. "You okay?" Adnan asked. "You look a little green."

"I'll be fine," he gritted out, his hands clenched on the armrest.

"'Kay." He picked up the Eavesdropper from the hook on the dashboard and switched it on. "Message begins: Systems check, this is group A, this is group A to systems check, report back. Message ends," he said into it, and put it back on the hook. The tiny brass device dangled there, staring at them with its beady red eye.

"Are... they gonna reply?" Hassan asked, after two full minutes of radio silence.

"In about fifteen minutes," Adnan said.

"Got better things to do?"

"No," Adnan scoffed, "they're a little over eight light-minutes away. That's the chief backup back on Hallar. He'll relay the message to the others. I didn't want them any closer; they're not stealth machines and they'd give away our position."

"So what is our position?" Hassan asked, and Adnan gave him the details.

"Yesterday afternoon I got a coded telegram from Karpusi on Olyokin. He'd intercepted one of the out-going letters from the group of five to a postal box that we believe is being monitored by Kirkland. We let Kirkland have the letter but the basic contents mentioned a meeting at the same old anchorage in the Cloud today at 6. So that's where we're headed. Whatever business Kirkland has with the group of five, we're gonna let 'em do. But after, we tail Kirkland - Karpusi tails the other group, they're each in one ship - until we hit a safe enough distance to close in with backup. There we'll flank him, and stop him. My thoughts are they'll head radially inwards. With their picture on every front page in the system, I really don't think they'll be hitting any other major stops along the way. I'll radio in to backup around Hallar and keep them updated on our position as it changes."

"You're saying you might actually apprehend?"

"If we play our cards right, we will apprehend."

So much for probably nothing serious! Wait 'til Vonnie heard about this. "Why am I here? Won't I just get in your way?"

"That was just good timing. The Nova dwarves were nicely in the middle of a straight course from
Hollar to the rendezvous point. And anything said during the meeting, if it helps your case, might be useful to you. You get the evidence first without waiting for Hollar to make a copy of our bugs on the anchorage."

"I see," he said, and the conversation fell silent. It allowed him to look out the window where he saw a few small points of light far off. It was frankly a lot less amazing than he thought it would be - many fewer stars than expected. But the closest body to them was New Sainte-Dolitte, at 20,000 km away, and even then he couldn't see any details, just a small greyish miserable blob of constant overcast. Every other planet in the system was at least hundreds of millions of km away (to say nothing of the distant stars which were trillions of km away and farther still).

Space was big, and mostly empty, so he wasn't surprised at how boring the ride was - about six hours from New Joplin, Adnan had said. In fact, Hassan spent the better part of it napping until Adnan woke him up with a rough shake on the shoulder. "Hm?"

Adnan tapped the radar screen which was lit up with two red dots. "I've programmed in their signals but that's the Delivery there and the group of five."

He strained to see outside the window, but Adnan laughed. "Give it up! We're way too far for visual contact - anything beyond a klick you won't see without a spyglass. There's one in the glove compartment if you really want. But according to the viper, the Delivery is 400,000 km away."

"How the hell are we going to get Eavesdropper contact with that distance?" Hassan asked. "Do you guys have like infinite range on your feeds or something?"

Adnan gave a loud bark of a laugh. "Hah! God, you're so cute! I keep forgetting how naive you surfacers are!" Hassan glared. Cute was not what a policeman usually went for. "This is space, right? It's a vacuum. No atmospheric interference or signal attenuation. You have any idea how easy it is to send any light-wave around - any distance, anywhere?"

Good point. But astronomy had never been his strong suit. "Wait a minute. If we can see them, can't they see us?"

"Nope. The viper has better specs. It can read farther, and it keeps in the heat radiation so that we're nigh on undetectable even at close range. Costs a nasty amount of fuel to do it. But this is why we have scientists and engineers who spend careers on making ships lighter, so that we can carry more fuel vials. Dunno about the Delivery but the group of five have never been able to spot us at the distances we keep."

They watched as the Delivery and the stealthship owned by the group of five pulled up on the radar to a blinking yellow light. "The anchorage," Adnan explained.

"So we're in the Cloud now?" The Cloud, which was supposedly chock full of rocks and ice and other random crap left over from the formation of the solar system. "There's nothing around us!"

"Silly! It only looks like a cloud if you zoom out. Where we are now, everything's so small and far apart that it's less like bumper cars and a lot more like a desert. Like the Dross belt around Marigon. Speaking of, you get an ID on your John Doe?"

Hassan shook his head. "No docs, and nobody's reported anyone of his description in missing persons. My guess is he was one of Kirkland's."
Adnan whistled. "Nasty way to go. Well, no honour among thieves."

Indeed. "Is Karpusi in position yet?"

"He should be. We won't see him on screen or through visuals. If I know the group of five, they'll have come from Nunat and will probably be on the opposite side dock to Kirkland. I expect Karpusi will be waiting for them at a safe distance there."

They settled in and Adnan fiddled with the Eavesdropper. It crackled with white noise - nobody home in the anchorage yet. The Delivery must be still orbiting around it and sending their shuttle. Difficult to picture an anchorage so old, so he just envisioned Jernsey instead: two floors of cramped conference rooms, connected by a bulky elevator shaft.

"Oh, here we go," Adnan muttered, "'bout time," and they listened.

"You got everything?" said one voice. ("That's Alpha, the loudmouth," Adnan told him.)

"As much fun as it'd be to fuck him over, yeah. We're good." ("Delta," Adnan said, "their resident forger.")

"Get th'door b'hind ya. Thanks." ("Gamma. Their resident speech impediment," Adnan explained, turning up the volume.)

Other, quieter voices joined them, easier to hear with the volume raised. "I don't have the highest of hopes, but if you could be silent this time, it would be legitimately fantastic." (Adnan narrowed his eyes. "Kirkland, I think," he said. "Sounds like a regional Banningham accent, maybe York.")

"I won't do anything if you do as we planned. So long as you don't dick anybody around - and by anybody I mean me - we're good." ("Another pirate? Don't know him," said Adnan. "Can't place the accent.")

"I wouldn't do that to you."

"I'll believe that when I see some papers."

"Just keep quiet. For me?"

Hassan strained to hear the whispers of 'positions!' before there was a louder knock on a door. "Password?" hollered Delta.

"Oh, for pity's sake -"

"Kirkland is a filthy pirate who steals people for money!" cried Kirkland's associate. "... What? That was the password."

"I'm ever so glad you remember," Kirkland said drily.

There were some more whispers. "Alright, let the dick in on three." He glanced at Adnan who shrugged while turning up the volume; probably couldn't tell who it was who'd said it. They both leaned into the Eavesdropper to strain to hear...

The loud screech of an old, rusted deadbolt moving in a casing. "Ah, fuck!" Adnan shouted, which
didn't help Hassan's growing headache.


"Cut the chit-chat!" sneered Delta.

"We hear you've got something for us?" (A new voice. "Beta," said Adnan, "the snooty one with the high-class girlfriend." )

There was a rustle of papers. "You've got what we need?" Kirkland said, and someone must have nodded because he continued. "Margot's one of Francis'. I spoke to him and he agrees to put her up. He took some convincing - he thinks she can't be sold."

"Damn straight," said the associate, sounding proud.

Kirkland kept on. "I don't yet know what number she'll be in the auction. When we left Hallar, Francis hadn't made contact with the Council."

"You think you can recognise her?" (Another voice. This must be the last one - "Epsilon," Adnan said. "That's all of 'em.")

"I think so," and Hassan didn't recognise this voice from the previous five plus the pair of pirates. He looked over at Adnan, who was frowning and looked confused. Neither did he, evidently.

"Whaddya mean? She's your sister, isn't she?" Alpha again.

"It's been years. Before Whitey here piped up I'd forgotten her name." Whitey? he thought. Kirkland was supposedly a blonde. ("That's not someone I recognise," Adnan said, alarmed. "Shit, now there's six of them. What are they, recruiting?")

Alpha continued. "Geez, they really did a number!"

- and was interrupted by Epsilon - "oh, yes, please. Do cram your foot into your mouth even more. Let me know how your ankle tastes." Someone laughed.

"Quittit! Th'both 'f ya, sheesh." That was Gamma again.

"What about what we needed?" asked Kirkland's associate.

"Everything's in that envelope," Delta explained. "The money is in that account, which will automatically close once the money's taken out of it."

Gamma added, "Hope y'need all'f it for th' fellow y'wanna buy. Y'cert'nly don't deserve t'take any home." So Kirkland and his friend were buying someone. Why would a pirate buy a bondsman? Didn't that defeat the purpose of raids? Supposing the Nova sector raid had been a distraction.

"And the papers?" Kirkland asked.

"They're there too," replied Beta. There was some rustling - possibly Kirkland checking to see that everything was in order. Hassan admitted it was what he'd do. "You're welcome, by the way," Beta added snottily.
"Right," Kirkland said stiffly, "so they are. Well. I can't say it's been a pleasure -"

"Excuse me?! You got everything you wanted - money and papers - and all we wanted from you was information so we could reunite a family," Alpha shouted. "You got off pretty easy, dontcha think?"

"I am also trying to reunite a family!"

"Nobody b'liesves you, ya dirty airsh'p rat! Actin' like y'do."

"How d'you expect me to act? The reception's bit a been frosty, hasn't it?"

"What did you think we were going to do? You're a goddamn pirate." Epsilon again - "You did the Dordlands job, you did the New Joplin job!"

Oh, really! he thought, as Kirkland tried to defend himself. This was an interesting development. Both the Nova sector raids from the past few years were Delivery. Hassan smiled. Kirkland was a cornered man for sure.

He certainly acted like one. "Maybe you don't realise that perhaps my hands are tied too and I'm doing the best I can!"

There was a silence. Somehow, awkwardness and the sense of a line having been crossed transmitted decently over a few hundred kilometres of vacuum.

The next voice who spoke was the new guy's, a slow, cutting, deeply offended tone. "Your hands are - did they put a gun to your head? Did they?" His voice cracked with strain and grew louder, "Because they put one to mine! And they pulled the trigger and when they did it I was sad they hadn't put a bullet in the barrel!"

"Look," Kirkland began, pacifyingly, "I know what happened to you wasn't fair - we've been over this -"

"You don't know the meaning of injustice until you've been an indentured servant," said the new guy, almost eerily calm despite the tremors in his voice. And then he cried, "For three years I was an object!"

More silence. As through transfixed by the scene himself, Hassan held his breath.

"Walk away, Cap'n," instructed Gamma.

"While you still can," Epsilon growled.

Advice Kirkland took, evidently, since the next loudest sounds were foosteps walking away. "Well," Adnan said, "that was interesting. Glad we've got this recorded."

There was a soft sound - murmuring, a voice speaking quietly. "You gonna be okay?" That almost sounded like Alpha.

"I'm fine," the new guy said bitterly. He didn't sound fine.

"Y'know... none of this was your fault -"
"I didn't say it was!" he yelled, and as Hassan closed his eyes to better envision the scene he swore he could picture the new guy shaking in anger.

"You didn't have to," whispered Alpha, and there was the sound of a choked sob -

"Are you hearing this?" Hassan asked Adnan.

Adnan shrugged and shook his head. "I was trying to catch what Kirkland was saying to his little friend. Why?"

"Listen to it more closely when you get a chance. It sounds like your little group of five does more than just steal money."

"Hmph. Yeah, they also steal airships."

"No, I mean, they might actually be doing some good."

"Don't make me pull rank on you, man," Adnan warned.

No thank you, Hassan thought flatly. "Just give it a listen."

"Whatever," Adnan said, spinning up the engines of the viper. "We got a Delivery to catch!"

"Wait, I'm going with you? I thought you'd drop me back at Addison Point now that the meeting's done."

"No time for that," Adnan told him. "It'll only be like an extra few hours outta your way, you'll be home by like four."

Four AM?! "Maybe I got a family waiting or something! You ever thought of that?"

Adnan gave him a sarcastic look. "You're the type that wants to make Senior Constable next year. You don't have a family waiting."

It was sad but true. "I could have like a cat to feed," he said, sulking.

"There's no hair on your clothing," Adnan observed, "and on a policeman's salary you can't afford the hairless ones."

Aren't you just a regular Sherlock, Hassan thought. "Fine. What's the game plan?"

"We wait for them to move and then track 'em back to wherever at a safe but easy distance away," Adnan told him. "Ah - here we go!" He fiddled with a few of the controls and the screen on the dashboard - formerly darkened like the rest of the ship when in stealth mode - illuminated and showed blinking lights - green for friendlies, red for the Delivery and Karpusi's targets.

Adnan waited for the Delivery's shuttle to pull away from the anchorage and dock in the mainship, and slowly begin accelerating away from the scene before he spun the viper around. Hassan watched out the window where he imagined Karpusi speeding away on the other side, chasing the group of five (apparently now six) in a similar fashion.
"Whoa, what the -" Hassan looked at the radar. Where there were now fifteen red dots flying away at top speed in different directions.

"What happened?"

"The Delivery just broke up into like a billion tiny pieces!" Adnan tapped a few buttons. "I'll try retrieving the signal -" but the radar remained the same. "Oh for fuck's sake," he finally said.

"What?"

"They're beacons. Fucking beacon decoys! And we're too far away for visual contact." Adnan's fingers were white on the throttle. He shook with anger and slammed his hand on the radar screen. "Dammit!" he cried.

"You've lost them," Hassan stated, and Adnan grew furious.

"I haven't lost squat," he spat. "This just means I have to go to the auction."

"Okay, so no big deal, no need to freak out."

"But I hate the auctions!" he yelled, nearly breaking the throttle in his clenched grip, and Hassan thought perhaps it'd be better to let Adnan have his little hissy fit silently.

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Hassan got back late; Adnan's viper was fast but New Joplin from far past Olyokin wasn't nothing. By the time he touched down back at Addison Point it was already quarter past eleven.

It was mostly why he was surprised to find a light still on. "That you, Vonnie?" he called. "What're you doing here, it's almost tomorrow."

"Burning the midnight oil, I guess," replied Vel. He came to find her in her office, poring over papers and looking pensive. "God, this gives me a headache. You're right, I should go home. How was the trip?"

"Burning the midnight oil, I guess," replied Vel. He came to find her in her office, poring over papers and looking pensive. "God, this gives me a headache. You're right, I should go home. How was the trip?"

"Weird," he said, drumming his fingers on the doorframe as he tried to think about what to say. "Real weird. Hey, d'you know anybody who owns a, like a ... y'know, bondservant?"

Vel laughed derisively. "Do you think I'm some kind of social climber? I don't have the time or the money for that. Nobody I know does. Why?"

"Adnan had an Eavesdropper on him - Karpusi bugged the old anchorage so we could listen in. There was a trade - Kirkland wanted money and false documents. The circle Karpusi's been tailing wanted information about a bondsgirl being sold at the auction on Hallar in a week and a bit."

"They involved in the trade?"

"I... didn't think so? I dunno. Didn't press Adnan for details about that side of the case."

Like most constables, Hassan had been trained - and well - not to give away emotions. But like most constables, Vel had been equally well trained to read people. "You think something's off," she stated, and kicked out the other chair in her office from underneath her desk. "Take a seat." He
Vel pulled out a bottle and two glasses from one of her drawers. "Nightcap? This'll be off the record, I take it."

"Course," he said, "always is when there's bourbon."

Vel poured it quickly. "What's on your mind?"

He drank deeply before replying. "I think the group Karpusi is chasing now is some kinda Robin Hood-like vigilante justice sect."

"Outside the law is still outside the law," Vel defended, but he shook his head with a grimace.

"No, no. This is more complicated than that. They had a guy with them - a new guy. Adnan said there were five of them but we heard a sixth, in addition to Kirkland and the associate."

"And what'd the new guy have to say?"

"Nothing really. Some information; he called Kirkland's associate 'whitey' - but that's the only real piece of info. You'll hear for yourself when the tapes come in from Hallar. No, the more important part was how he said what he said. Kirkland tried to defend himself - probably against the raids, saying he didn't have a choice - and New Guy got all up in his face about it. Started shouting that it's not like they put a gun to Kirkland's head or anything."

"Probably didn't," Vel muttered. "Pirates. You know how they are. Don't make any sense, create their own rules."

"Apparently 'they' put a gun to New Guy's head. Did him a false execution."

"Okay, so New Guy has a checkered past. That fits right in with a vigilante group - got nothing to lose."

He drained his bourbon and set the glass on Vel's desk with a heavy clunk. She held up the bottle to ask if he wanted more, but he shook his head. "He said he was a servant."

"Bondspeople don't get mock-executed. That doesn't fit." When he didn't reply - just raised his eyebrow and stayed silent - she digressed. "You got your kids from Subscript families - well, whoever, but I can't think of anybody else who would sell off their progeny like that, you've gotta be pretty desperate. Kids go to a nice Primary, they learn a few things and between ages five and nine get picked up by re-sellers. The good sellers are decent trainers, take the kids in and pump out well-trained bondservants ready for resale. They're well-behaved."

"How can you be so sure?"

Vel helped herself to another swallow or two before she capped the bottle. "Where's the torture chamber in all of that? C'mon, Mo. What else is there?"

"New Guy on the tapes didn't quite sound like it's so cookie cutter. Between his tone of voice and his treatment, I think ... I think he's a victim of some kind of abuse."

"You think it might be the sellers?"

He shrugged.
She swirled the alcohol before finishing it. "That can't be right."

"There's something missing," he agreed. "But we better see to this tomorrow. Last streetcar's in ten." He got up and pushed his chair in.

He had made it to the door when he heard, "Mo," said softly. He turned. Vel fixed him with a very serious look. "If it is the sellers..."

"Then it's out of our jurisdiction," he replied. "I know."

Chapter End Notes

(He'll have more of a role in the auction upcoming, but Vel is Seychelles, btw. Hassan, being her coworker, doesn't describe her too much. I've used Yvonne for her first name in this fic. Ray Mehta was intended to be India but I never wound up doing anything with his character. The pitfalls of creating plot on the fly!)
Letters

(greece -> turkey)

So. Let us not talk about what happened today.

Back on Olyokin; you'll probably get this tomorrow. I managed to grab the last mailship going out to Hallar.

Any ideas on that bank account they mentioned? It'd have to be something both Hallar and Nunat/Olyokin has branches for. That only leaves two banks. Lemme know what turns up.

I'm up to file 83 from Olyokin FSB now. Still have no idea which ones are the forgeries. At this point I don't even care anymore. Part of me wants to recruit Delta for a goddamn job.

At least I'm finally getting a decent night's sleep. Thanks for that, by the way.

(ps what the hell there are six of them now?!)
A day in the life of Avo Romae:
(woke up, fell out of bed, dragged a comb across my head)

Avo Romae woke up slowly, like surfacing from underwater, to a calm, still morning in Caput Halleri. The sun streamed through his window, casting intricate lace shadows from the curtains on his bedspread. Blue skies, a faint breeze through the open window.

His bondsman was still sleeping, next to him. High cheekbones, chiselled jaw. Handsome profile, strong arms and broad chest. Decently muscled, kept his blonde hair long, looked like a valiant warlord (acted like one too, where it counted).

He was not what Romae usually went for. Romae liked people - men and women - he liked the casualness of flirting but also the simplicity of singledom.

There were three reasons he'd taken a bondsman. One, he wanted to show off his trade. He was proud of what he did, Romae was. It was Romae who'd made this city, really put it on the map. Among numerous other things, he'd improved infrastructure, made better roads, ensured a higher quality of running water. You could actually drink Halleri water these days, and although many still preferred wine for the taste, you were no longer obliged to use alcohol in everything because the water wasn't potable. Almost all of the money he'd used to do this was through the trade. He was an excellent trader with fantastic wares and what better way to show them off but leading by example?

Two, the status. You became someone with a bondservant. You became something that a rich man, a fat man, a powerful man wasn't. Owning a bondservant was more than that, you were all three and then some. Owning a bondservant said: this man is wealthy and powerful, but look what he does with it. His bondspeople are well-mannered and well-trained. He's a real leader, we can trust him. And that was something that Senator Avo Romae had really required, the trust and influence that a bondsperson owner had.

Last but not least, the man was beautiful. And he'd wanted him. And that was reason enough to do what he wanted.

Better still that the man had once hated his guts, and that carefully, slowly, over a period of some two years, Romae had managed to tame him. Not-so-secretly, Romae enjoyed the challenge of the tame. It helped his business, it helped his influence and it helped his own morale. The fire in his bondsman had not died - Romae witnessed it with great pleasure first-hand, every evening - it had simply moved. There was a fine art to quelling the righteous embers of freedom and tilting the bellows to inflame the spark elsewhere. Romae was an artist.

His bondsman might not have been what Romae had envisioned, when he thought of taking a bondservant. But you could make a list of things you wanted from someone else and be just as happy - sometimes happier - when not all your expectations were met. In turn, Romae supposed someone like him - a master, a ruler - wasn't on his bondsman's list. This was why it was the sweetest form of surrender, so powerful he could drown in it, when he got the other to come before he did, when his bondsman didn't require the signal anymore, when he could fall asleep next to the
man and wake up without any fear of being stabbed in the night.

It had, after all, been over twenty years. He could give the man a blade, tell him to use it and how, and still not worry about his throat being slit.

--

He smiled when he saw the news article in the paper. *New Leads On Nova Sector Case*, the headline had said, with a by-line of *Sellers of Marigon questioned after body found in Dross belt*.

Lovino grunted his greeting as he came down the stairs from the East Wing. "Good morning to you too," Romae said cheerfully. "There's apples, fresh in from the market," he offered.

"M'fine, thanks," Lovino said sullenly. "Is there any coffee? Got a lotta work to do today, tax season coming up and I gotta prepare the end-of-quarter earnings for Feli and me."

Feliciano came in from the salon, with his little Ludwig in tow. "It's a beautiful day, Feli," he said, "will you spend it outside instead of cooped up?"

"Grandpa, hello! Yes, I was thinking we might go to the park today and take a walk. Is that alright? I'd like Alfred to see the fountains! I think he likes water. He must have had water growing up, he certainly takes a lot of baths!"

"On second thought," Lovino muttered darkly, "I'll take coffee in my room."

Romae gave him a beatific smile. "Good idea, precious. I'll have my bondsman bring some up for you."

"Th-that's fine," Lovino said, "don't bother, please."

"It's no trouble, signorino Lovino," his bondsman replied. "I live to serve."

Lovino turned red and stumbled out of the dining room.

His bondsman raised his eyebrows while Feliciano prattled on about the park in the background, evidently asking Romae whether he should bring coffee after all. Romae nodded; poor Lovino was probably very tired and as Romae knew himself, it was exhausting to keep up with Feliciano all the time.

--

The remainder of the shipment from the Delivery were decent stock. Kirkland - or whoever it was in Kirkland's crew who was in charge of selections - certainly had an eye for taste. The boys and girls were between the ages of thirteen and twenty, at the adorable age when awkwardness met eagerness. They were each very pretty in their own way, once properly cleaned, bathed and perfumed, hair cut and styled.

Before Romae, some of them looked like they hadn't eaten in weeks.

They had been separated into groups immediately, which was where Romae was now, with the girls, group one. Group class one was the most unskilled. With more training they advanced to class two, then three, and all the way to five. At class five, he was generally satisfied with selling
them, though sometimes a buyer requested a lower level class and he was happy to oblige.

(Those who didn't submit to training very well left the numeric groups to the alpha groups. He disliked his meetings with group class A but they were necessary. Similarly, class B was a bit more subservient until class E, who were roughly equivalent to a class two trained. Class E he would sell at a discount. It was always his goal to keep them in the numeric classes, but you couldn't always get what you wanted.)

A week of good, hot food and stimulation - cards and board games, physical activity outside in Romae's spacious backyard, all the books they could possibly want - and all the girls seemed very happy. They smiled when he entered the room and he grinned widely and waved.

A few of them had fallen onto the makeup kits he sent them yesterday and had given each other makeovers. It seemed this had spread like wildfire, because now, dozens of differently-painted eyes looked up with long, dark lashes.

He spent until eleven doing training exercises with them - easy matters, like practicing how to lace up a corset, put it on, and tighten it, both on someone else and themselves. Even if she didn't get sold to a woman, it was useful knowledge for a young bondsgirl. Lacing a corset was always much easier to do on someone else, but a bondswoman didn't have handservants. The girls would begin tightlacing next week for a pleasant, womanly figure. The remainder of the time was spent with group three added to group one, where he had the threes teach the ones all about tea ceremonies on different planets. It was well to be mannered.

By the afternoon, the thirteen group one girls sat prim, proper and ramrod straight with dignified tea-enjoying expressions on their faces. When he applauded their efforts, they blushed and smiled prettily.

"If only they could all be so obedient, eh?" he said to his bondsman, as they walked back to the dining room.

"Indeed, signore," his bondsman replied with a sage, relaxed expression.

--

He took a short break with his bondsman around one for lunch, a small meal of cooked meat and vegetables. Anything larger would probably make him fall asleep, and unlike Feliciano, Avo Romae was too busy a man for afternoon naps.

He was at work peeling an egg when the doorman for the Emporium front room came by.

"Signore, a man here to see you."

His bondsman made to get up so that Romae's meal might not be disturbed, but Romae held up a hand. "I'll go." Some things, one needed to see to oneself. And anybody bothering him at lunch must have good reason.

"Would you like me to accompany you?" his bondsman asked, and Romae reflected briefly before nodding.

The man waiting for them in the Emporium front room introduced himself as Cornelius Wilkie, a reporter for the Daily Gazette. "I'm afraid I don't give personal interviews without due notice," Romae said, but the man stopped him before he could turn away.
"No interview! Actually, Signore, I was wondering if you might have some information on the Nova raids recently."

Romae shrugged and grinned. "I'm sorry to tell you I don't know much about them, besides what's been written in your wonderful journal!"

"No? I heard you might have an inkling as to who initiated the raids, who ordered them."

Romae shook his head. "All I know is the Great Delivery of Banningham seems to be the culprit who executed the raid. But I really don't have any other information for you there. I'm not implicated."

"Oh really? I have a few sources who would like to suggest otherwise," the man said dangerously. Romae exchanged a quick glance with his bondsman.

He could take this man out, and it wouldn't be too hard. If anybody had seen him coming, Romae would simply ... alter the footage on the feeds wherever he had been on the streets. If he had told anybody his whereabouts before leaving, that he planned to call on the good Senator, Romae would simply find these people and convince them it hadn't happened. It wasn't very difficult. But it was so messy, and the man hadn't done anything, really, besides make a general nuisance of himself. In what city was that a crime?

Besides, this allowed him to kill two birds with one stone. Fewer competitors at the auction if he could just keep Antonio away.

He gave Cornelius a pleasant smile and said, "I told you already, I've no information for you. But! I suspect Antonio of Marigon does. I know him, you see, and ... but I'd better not comment on the business strategies of my competitors! It's terribly impolite. You, ah -" he paused for effect, pretending to think seriously, "may want to be a bit more subtle with him. He's a wily one, like a fox. And with foxes, I hear smoking them out of their holes works much better than shoving a rifle in. If you understand me."

Cornelius grinned and nodded. "Thank you, Signore!"

"Anything I can do to help," Romae murmured.

--

New stock meant new supplies for the stock, and so instead of training, they spent a few hours at the market after dealing with Cornelius Wilkie of the Daily Gazette. Romae could have sent Lovino, but Lovino was busy with taxes. (He could also have sent Feliciano, but Feliciano was busy with his own job, and a very important one it was, too! No, Feliciano was better used elsewhere.)

But it was such a nice day for a walk, and it'd been a long while since his bondsman had been outside. He might appreciate some exercise. Judging by the way the man's face lit up when Romae suggested it, he was correct.

Supplies were cheap in Caput Halleri (not that he had to worry about money). Romae had a few preferred sellers to whom he paid visits. He was certain that he was his clients' preferred seller, and that there were others who bought bondservants and preferred, say, Francis of Hallar. He
understood; it was merely business.

(Unlike Francis of Hallar, though, Avo Romae did not discriminate among his clients. The bondsperson trade allowed people of all walks of life and all ways of sexual paraphilia to enjoy things they could not normally get because they were illegal. Francis was terrified of these people, he knew, and this was why Francis judged his clientele so, only accepting clients he himself interviewed. Hand-picked.

Avo Romae made no such judgments. Avo Romae did not discriminate. He was liberal-minded, accepting and welcoming, even if he did not share your pleasures, and if you had a problem, he was willing to work to help you fix it.)

He usually went to Salvai's of Hallar for clothing. They liked him there, and he liked them, too. Angelica Salvai of Hallar, the main seamstress, was teaching all three of her daughters her trade. Between the four of them they'd practically patented the casual robe for bondservants, good for young or new adepts who hadn't yet merited fancier, prettier garments. Romae himself had helped to bring them to popularity.

Angelica was also the genius behind fascia, cleverly-sewn garments for young bondsgirls that supported the breast without being overly restrictive. (Despite the simple fastening mechanism, the young bondsboys still found them difficult to remove. What can you do, some things never changed.)

"A pleasure," said Angelica, with the calm grace and serene disposition of a goddess, when he entered her shop, "always a pleasure, Signore."

"My sweet Angelica, you look especially lovely today," he greeted her, bowing deeply. His bondsman beside him did the same. An honour few received to meet with the queen ant herself. Both he and his bondsman were then mobbed by the youngest girl, Petra, a sweet and slightly hyperactive seven-year-old who wrapped her tiny arms around Romae's muscular calves. An equally high honour! Though less dignified.

"Are you here to buy more, Grandpa Romae?" she asked, and he nodded. She beckoned him closer; he knelt and she got up on tiptoes, balancing with a tiny hand on his massive shoulder to whisper in his ear. "Mama says I'm going to learn how to make shoes. When I do, will you buy them?"

"Of course I will, my dear," he exclaimed softly, playing along, "nothing you make could ever be less than the highest quality!" He spent the majority of his time playing with Petra while his bondsman took care of business with Angelica. Petra didn't seem to mind, and judging by the laughter in Angelica's eyes - there wasn't much of that after her husband passed away - neither did her mother.

The next stop was groceries. A simple matter for a family of five; a much more difficult task for a family of five and an extended family of roughly a hundred in-training adepts. His favourite grocers were the ones he knew from experience had better food, but also the grocers that didn't mind giving him discounts by volume. Like buying eight crates of tomatoes and getting a ninth for free, at the price of a little friendliness extended to one's local shopkeep.

An hour of wandering around the markets had lightened his wallet and given him a list of foodstuffs to be delivered later that evening around sixish. With over a hundred mouths to feed, carrying that amount of food home would be ludicrous and besides, Romae didn't mind paying for (and subsequently tipping) the delivery. And the delivery girls were cute.
The last and most expensive stop was the apothecary. Herbs were pricey and could be fragile; a quarter of the ingredients that went into their typical bondsperson tonic formulation were preserved in oils and sold in small glass vials instead of powdered and boxed. This was one of the reasons he was glad to have his bondsman along.

"If you wish, Signore, I can take the heavier items and you can carry the herbs," he offered, but Romae shook his head with a smile and told him not to trouble himself. Just because you could use bondspeople as a prettier version of oxen didn't mean you should, and a bondsman as handsome as the one he owned merited a little showing off.

Gregor Adriatico of Hallar, the chemist, greeted them with a loud laugh and an ungainly wave of his arms, nearly tipping over half the containers on the nearest shelves. (Clumsy the man might be, he was an excellent herbalist and chemist in addition to the price being right.) "Oh, Signore Romae!" Gregor exclaimed. "It's so lovely to see you!"

"Why my dear, I was only in here last week," Romae reminded with a wry grin.

"But it's always lovely to see you. Ah. Your usual? Can I interest you in anything new? Oh! Something new, there's a decent formulation I prepared for health and virility - but of course, you wouldn't need much of the latter," Gregor said, blushing.

Romae smiled broadly, chuckled and leaned on the counter. "Is that a fact!"

"W-well, I, ah..." Gregor swept an appreciative eye over Romae's bondsman. "L-let me show you our stocks!"

Romae wound up getting his usual requirements for tonics for about a week's worth of supply, four vials of Gregor's latest health tonic, in addition to a thirty percent discount. Not too shabby, but next time he'd try for a kiss, too.

"A whole box of bovine aliphatis powder?" asked his bondsman, as they left the apothecary.

"At the rate Feliciano is using it, we're almost out," Romae reminded him.

"I agree, signore. Isn't he is doing a good job? He didn't have much time to get that youth into form for the auction for the well-trained bracket."

This was true. It had been a gamble for Romae to give to his youngest, most precious Feliciano instead of taking the pretty boy Kirkland had gotten himself all infatuated about under his own wing, with his own experience and track record. But Feliciano would handle it. Angelica Salvai would not be the only one in town with a family business. "I've no reason to believe he is doing anything less than a fantastic job. I'll have to check in with him later."

--

When they returned from the markets, Lovino found him. "Telegram for you," he said, "from Border Control. Just came in. Doesn't make any damn sense."

It took a single look at the paper Lovino had copied the letters on to realise it was encrypted with the code he'd asked his Border Control contacts to use whenever one of the pirates came by. "It's a code," he told Lovino, "for my eyes only."
"S-sorry," Lovino said, like a guilty child with hand in cookie jar, "I didn't mean to - well I was the only one at home anyway, who else was gonna take it? Feli's off gallivanting in the fountains with his two goddamn idiot servants."

Romae swore that tone of voice sounded more and more like jealousy every day. Perhaps Lovino was coming around after all. "Don't worry about it, precious, it's fine. Thank you for bringing it to me, I'll take it from here."

"Kirkland?" asked his bondsman, once Lovino was thoroughly out of earshot. Better that way. Should anything ever come of the media knowing of Romae's activities - that he was a fence who'd connected with privateers years ago and assigned them jobs in finding him cheaper alternatives to Primary graduates - the scandal would be enormous and probably ruin his personal livelihood. He didn't want Lovino or Feliciano to share any part of the fallout. The less they knew, the better for them.

"Kirkland," he confirmed. "Requests a covert stopover for his shuttle. Has business in Caput Halleri that - oh, this is interesting, he says it's unrelated to me. Guess the Captain wants some vacation time in my fair city." They exchanged a grin. "Just the shuttle, not the Delivery."

"It must take quite a lot of fuel for a shuttle to get from where the Delivery would be waiting in interplanetary space, outside of Hallar's airspace, to Border Control," his bondsman mused. "That would cost Kirkland quite the pretty penny."

"I agree," Romae said, knowing that for Arthur Kirkland, the p in pirate stood for parsimonious. "This business of his had better be lucrative, for his sake. But it's his own fault for getting himself seen. If he'd done as I asked him - Grand Cove, nice and quietly in the dead of night - he wouldn't have these problems. Never has them on Schlessen or New Sainte-Dolitte."

"Will you let him in?"

Romae thought about it. "I will," he said, "but I'll be watching the feeds." He left to his office to tap out a reply to his Border Control agents and made a note to bring them something special next time his activities brought him off-planet.

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Romae sent his bondsman for Feliciano around four. When the man brought his grandson in, Romae turned around in his office, and said to Feliciano, "Ah! Good. I'm glad you could join us." To his bondsman, he said, "Leave us."

His bondsman gave a short bow before he did. "Signore."

"You called for me, grandfather?" Feliciano asked.

Romae smiled widely. "I did. I wanted to inquire about your charge's progress so far."

Feliciano shrugged. "Everything's been going well, as I told you! I don't understand, have you heard anything else? I mean, it's not like you would have, Lovino doesn't come by and see me anymore - not that I'm complaining, I know he's very very busy with taxes and monies and those things - and I am very very busy too with mio adorato Alfredo, maybe that's for the better because Lovino doesn't have the nicest of attitudes these days towards me with Alfred around."

"It's fine, my boy. I just like hearing good news, that's all! Here's the hormone you requested."
Romae held up the tiny packet.

"Ah. Thank you, grandfather. I'm sorry again for depleting your stores, I know it's expensive! But,
but it's for a good cause, right? Selling this one at well-trained instead of moderate temperament
should get you an extra million at the very least! And the hormone isn't a million dollars or
anything. I guess you'd better keep it, and give it to - to your Ludwig. That way he can dissolve it
through the water tanks and humidifier for the hidden wing ventilation system, right?"

"Yes, you're correct. I forgot you're taking this one alone without even the benefit of your
bondsman's assistance. He can't help you out if he doesn't realise the scope of your task with this
youth. Things aren't - they aren't too much for you, are they?"

Feliciano looked blank. "I don't understand."

"I don't want to hear of you overworked and getting sick!" he warned. It would alarm him to hear
of his grandson - either grandson, but especially Feliciano - taking ill.

"Oh. Oh! I see. No, I'm - I'm fine. A little - well. I'm fine."

Romae remained quiet, like a medic. The tips of Feliciano's ears were red, and a faint blush
crept across his cheeks. Romae waited for the silence to press awkwardly enough onto his
grandson to provoke him.

"Really! It's fine."

Very well, thought Romae, we can play hardball. "I understand the effects the hormone has, on
everybody. I'm certain you're feeling ... stressed. This is why it's a good idea for you to have
Ludwig in the first place. Are you getting much use out of him?"

"He - ah, he's very good with the youth we're training... very good -"

He shook his head sternly. "I meant you. Are you getting much use out of him."

Feliciano wrung his hands, bit his lower lip. Quietly, and without looking at his grandfather he
said, "I have indulged, yes."

And it was as though Romae's heart filled with light and joy and pumped its relief through that
massive body. "Ah, Feli, I'm so glad to hear it! It certainly took you awhile though, didn't it! I
thought you'd have him making you pasta forever and just completely neglecting his real use."

"Mm-hmm," Feliciano said, a bit awkwardly.

"Don't worry, my dear! That's what bondsmen are for. For your benefit." Thank God, Romae
thought. He was worried the bondsman he'd bought Feliciano - Ludwig, Feli had named him,
strange, silly Schlessen name - would go to waste. It had after all been six years and Ludwig hadn't
once been touched. He'd had conversations about it with Feliciano - my silly darling boy, you
realise that by sleep with him I don't mean shut your eyes and dream - and they had all led
nowhere. Feliciano would parrot something sweet like 'okay I love you bye' and flutter away and
the subject wouldn't be brought up again for months until the next time he found Ludwig in the
kitchen, patiently running a sheet of dough through the rollers in the machine.
It was excellent lasagne, but that was besides the point entirely. "Watch you don't rub yourself raw. You wanted us to increase the concentration." Romae shook the box of powder as reminder. "It will be very strong."

Feliciano shrank in embarrassment. "I really should get back to them," he admitted.

Romae felt like embracing him out of sheer joy but restrained himself to a smile that lit up the room instead. "In a moment," he said, "you must tell me about him! The boy, the pretty one. Do you suspect he will be ready in a week?"

Feliciano nodded. "He'll be ready for the auction, yes."

"Wonderful!" Romae was so excited. After Lovino - well, Lovino wasn't particularly enthused about anything but that may just have been his way - he had placed the remainder of his faith in Feliciano to take up the reins of the family business. At least Lovino was decent with the books, which was good, Feliciano couldn't hack numbers if his life depended on it. Between the two of them the company was secure. "I'll evaluate him a day before."

"I - that's not necessary! Really. It isn't."

Not that he didn't want to praise his grandson for his confidence, but... "Feliciano, this is the company reputation at stake here -"

"Well, it... it may take me more time," Feliciano interrupted, his voice taut. "I might need the extra day! Besides, don't you trust me? And my handiwork? You should trust me!"

He reflected. "You're right. Lovino can handle the financial aspect of things but you're the one with the real talent where it counts. I will want to see that the mechanism works, but everything else, I'll take your report. Okay?"

Feliciano exhaled a soft sigh, relieved. "Yes, grandpa. I - I won't let you down!"

The tremulous voice as he said it warmed Romae's heart. "Oh, Feliciano! You mustn't be so worried!" he cried, and this time he actually did embrace the boy, in a clutching bear hug of a gesture. "I don't like your troubled face, my darling, it's not nearly as cute as your regular one. This isn't a big scary exam after all. I only want to offer a little guidance."

"Of course," Feliciano said, muffled into his chest.

"Since this is your first time training mentally and physically."

Feliciano squirmed enough for Romae to back off and said sincerely, "I know what you've asked of me, grandfather. I understand how important this is, believe me. I won't let you down."

He smiled and let his grandson get back to work. "That's my boy! I'm so very proud of you, Feli."

Feliciano's eyes were moist. "Thank you, grandpa. Oh, thank you."

--

True to their word, the grocery shipment came by around six. Romae and his bondsman stood by
the loading dock in the back of the Emporium where the men unloaded crates from the wagons - a bit dusty from the Hallar roads, but that was nothing a good hosing-down couldn't take care of for the fruits and vegetables.

Luckily for him, Lovino had finished with the books for the moment. "If I see another goddamn decimal point, I think I'm gonna puke," he grumbled, digging his toe into the dirt floor of the warehouse.

"Stop that, darling. Well, if you want a short reprieve, you could help me with the unloading," and Lovino seemed to agree because he too began directing the crates of oats and lentils to the proper locations.

Romae was grateful for the help. It allowed him to flirt with the delivery girls. "Where d'you want the wines?" the small, stocky one with a blonde ponytail and dark eyebrows asked.

"Oh, I'll take those here," he said, and gently lifted the bulky crate from her arms, making sure to slide his fingertips along the backs of her hands. He winked; she blushed but didn't drop the crate. They were all sort of used to Romae in this city, and he never really meant any harm, he was just having a spot of fun. "You sure are strong!" he noted. "All the glass in here makes this one very heavy."

She flexed her arms and showed him the width of her biceps through the thin shirt. "Not a problem for me."

Romae cracked the crate open and picked out two bottles at random. "And are you as proficient at wine selection as you are in your other endeavours?" He showed her the labels. "Supposing the kitchens are making goat tonight, which should I pick?"

"This one here goes well," she told him.

"Signore, dinner is ready," his bondsman called, from the warehouse door.

He made his excuses with the delivery girl, the wine she'd selected in hand. "Are you joining us for dinner?" he asked Lovino. "Meat is fresh from the butcher in the market, the one I know you like - he says hello, by the way -"

"No," Lovino replied uncomfortably, "I'll just... take something small in my rooms later."

"I'll send my bondsman up with your portion," Romae offered, but Lovino shook his head quickly.

"Don't. Really, don't bother him, it's - it's fine, okay? I'll probably be awhile."

He caught Lovino's shy glances to the delivery girls. "You like wines, yes? That one likes to talk about them, if you're interested," Romae confided with a sly grin, pointing out the stocky blonde, and nearly giggled at Lovino's flush - as deep red as macerated grape. For all that Lovino claimed not to want a bondsman of his own - he'd positively screamed when Romae had inquired whether Lovino's antics after Feliciano received Ludwig stemmed from mere jealousy - perhaps one might do him well.

--

Without Lovino - who was overseeing the delivery - or Feliciano - who now took his dinners in the
locked-down section of the Emporium with his bondsman and his charge - dinner was a more romantic affair. The food was as impeccable as it always was; Romae was fond of goat though it wasn't something they had often.

His bondsman had said once, that before he had become Romae's, he'd never tried anything like it before. Then again, on Schlessen, he'd had trouble sometimes finding food and water. There was no trouble finding food on Hallar, and the water in Caput Halleri was excellent quality.

"Do you miss ale?" Romae asked. "It is more popular on certain planets."

His bondsman nodded. "It is. But I prefer wine now," he admitted, "and not only because it's more easily available."

"Because it tastes good," Romae supplied cheekily.

"More than that," the man replied, sincerely, and Romae felt a warmth suffusing his body that had little to do with alcohol.

He smiled, picked up his goblet and held it aloft. "To you, my dear," he said, and connected it with his bondsman's before drinking deeply.

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Later, as he felt the intoxication of good wine, good food, and good company pull him under, drowning in it, Romae suggested in a low voice that they retire to bed early. His bondsman, of course, agreed.

With a symphony of sighs and the sight, below him, of his bondsman's blonde eyelashes clenched shut, cheeks flushed, legs firm around Romae's waist and hand firm around himself - certain signs, you couldn't fake, and his bondsman wanted this, he could tell by the hammering pulse that met his lips when he bit the man's throat - Romae let himself float away on a sea of euphoria.

Life was very good.

*never could see any other way*
Fun fact, he thought to himself, as his legs and ass slowly went numb, tomato crates were tiny, and it was a bad idea to hide in them if you were taller than a metre, which most people were.

But a tomato crate wasn't airtight, and he could hear everything going on outside. He had to hand it to Kirkland, it was a brilliant idea.

"Ah, excuse me sir -" In fact, there was Kirkland now, though the higher-pitched voice he was affecting made him tough to pick out, and it was only that he was near Unsinkable's crate that made him audible. "What're you doing with that?"

"Just gonna hose 'em down, tomatoes're probably dusty from the trek in." Not a voice he recognised.

"Well, don't," Kirkland explained, "we apply a thin water-soluble wax to the fruits to preserve them and increase the shelf life."

"You - what? That's disgusting. Tomatoes coated in wax? You telling me I've been eating wax all this time?"

"Water-soluble, Mr Vargas." The use of that name meant this was either the silent twin or Feliciano's balls had finally dropped. "That means it washes off. In water."


"You've probably not noticed it since the kitchens must take care of these things for you."

"God! Get back to fuckin' work."

Man, thought Unsinkable, Feliciano's become a real jerk lately. But Kirkland had skin thick enough to take a little verbal nastiness and besides, it kept him safe and dry inside the tomato crate.

He heard a creak and felt the shift as the nails holding the crate together were lifted out of the wood and sweet air and light rushed in. He spotted the tail end of a crowbar as well as Kirkland's coveralls.

"Hey - what're you doing with that, huh, chickie? Thought I told you to get the fuck back to work!"

"Starting you off on the crates, it'll be easier for the kitchen staff to pry them off. 'Sides, rest of 'em are off the back of the wagon already. Just finishing up here."

"Well fuckin' don't, dumbass. Kitchen staff takes care of these things, don't they? If you're done, then clear out, there's a dinner upstairs with my name on it getting colder the longer you sit here flapping your gums at me."

"What, no tip?" Cheapass Kirkland, he smirked.
"Your tip is to piss off. Now scram!"

"Bloody cheap prick," and then he heard footsteps away and a slam, as Vargas re-entered the house and the remainder of the delivery girls boarded the wagon. "Can you hear alright in there?"
Kirkland whispered to him, close by. He must be kneeling at the crate, he realised.

"Not bad. Better now with the lid open. Thanks for that."

"Nobody's looking at me, so ... as we agreed, and stick to the letter, please and thank you," Kirkland insisted - then louder, and higher-pitched, he said, "Yes alright, I'll be there in a minute!"
He lowered his voice again and finished, "I've got to catch Francis, nearly sevenish now, but I'll meet you on the pergola after nightfall. I 'spect you want to begin sometime around midnight, perhaps one. Whatever's best, I don't know how lightly everybody sleeps. Use your judgement. Take as much time as you need, I'll wait for you 'til sun-up, but if I hear any alarms or funny business, you've got fifteen minutes to get out before I take off and scarper back to Caput Halleri Border Control. I won't be coming back for you."

"Got it," he said, and nodded even though Kirkland couldn't possibly see it. Captain had a decent voice of authority on him.

"And listen. Erm. Good luck, alright?"

"Yeah, yeah, Al's depending on us. I haven't forgotten."

"Right." He heard Kirkland stand. "I'll see you on the other side."
At half past five, when he would ordinarily start preparing dinner, Matthieu wandered into Francis' office to ask what he'd like. Francis told him he would be busy tonight, and that Matthieu should fix a meal for one.

Business sometimes meant business meals, but these were rare. In all the years Matthieu had known him, Francis had almost always managed to find time during the day to schedule his work outside the Emporium. In the past three weeks, Francis had hardly been around. Just training adepts and going about his business, like an airship autopilot.

Matthieu wanted to ask but thought better of it. Francis had withdrawn and looked tired.

Instead Matthieu had some of the kitchen's stew - what all the other adepts were having - rather than bother to fix himself something. Belle ignored him when he entered her room to put a bowl down on the table. And he didn't know any of the adepts well. Nor did he care to. Nothing personal, he just felt apathetic, and finished. So he took a quiet meal in the front room, where he sat waiting for Francis and reading a book.

No Francis. No Eduard. Just Matthieu. Nothing like a dinner for one to feel properly lonely.

He found the meal bland. He realised he'd re-read the same page four times with still no clue what the plot was about.

It might be really nice if Francis took him along. Nobody would notice him there at all anyway!

As like a punishment, Francis wasn't letting him touch any of the filing for the auction. All that extra work made Francis very busy, and very tense.

Suppose it was what he deserved, really. Francis knew best, and if the goal was to make Matthieu feel bad by keeping him from helping out, it had worked. Matthieu was wasting Francis' time and resources. If it weren't for the fact that Francis hadn't once been outright hostile, he might have thought himself entirely unwanted.

It wasn't fair. It wasn't like he knew Héderváry would react like she did! There had been no further word from the Councillor, so Matthieu assumed that Francis had indeed filed everything for the auction well in order.

Things had mostly cooled down, hadn't they? Then why was Francis constantly on edge around him?

When sex had become not all that much fun anymore, Matthieu was left with this feeling of failure. This constantly letting Francis down. That wasn't new. Francis didn't even intend to make him feel that way, he just ... had an innate need to apologise for everything, like everything could be fixed with it.

The fear of being potentially sold to another person - that was new. Presented onstage, paraded around nude for everybody's eyes, on display, like all the rest of them.
Matthieu was different. Matthieu wasn't like the rest of them. Matthieu was supposed to be special to Francis, and until Héderváry had fucked everything up, it was less like a bondservant relationship and more like lovers!

It was a shock of cold water to the face, the way Francis treated him, now. Distantly, like any other trainee. It kicked up his old training like dust on the road. But it hurt, because every part of his training had become confused with being Francis' favourite, and this had come with a completely new set of rules. He couldn't switch them out. To go from being owned - whoever is your owner you must please, that is your job, your duty - to his nearly exclusive relationship with Francis, whom he loved and who loved him.

No, it wasn't fair, what had transpired after Councillor Héderváry. But that was essentially his motto in life. Life's not fair. Some things outside your control, outside your own power, couldn't be changed. You just had to let them be.

It was a shitty motto. It left him unappreciated, overwhelmed and thoroughly helpless to do anything about his crappy situations.

He simmered.

There came a chime at the door. It was only half past seven, but his heart leapt and his stomach plummeted and he said, "Francis, you're early."

When Francis didn't answer he looked up from the book. It was a grocery delivery girl, one of Marciano's, in coveralls and a plain white t-shirt, her head capped and bowed, with a folded sheet of paper in hand. But they hadn't ordered anything today, or yesterday. "I think you've got the wrong address," he told her.

The girl - the man, in fact - looked up and everything became clear. "Not what I'm here for," said Kirkland. "Where's your master?"

"Oh," he said drily, shutting his book with a snap. "He's busy. Maybe there's something I can help you with?"

Kirkland narrowed his eyes. "No. I really do need to speak with Francis. So why'n't you go get him for me, eh?"

Kirkland sure as hell wasn't going to buy anything, and with Francis' backing he had little reason to fear the man - and Kirkland didn't want to piss Francis off unnecessarily, not when Francis was doing him a favour - so Matthieu sneered, "Maybe he's not in at the moment."

Kirkland threw up his hands. "Well where the bloody hell is he? I can't see him leaving to frolic in other pastures with you all alone here and no direction. Too hard on that pretty little head to think of things to do without being told."

"Spare me," he said icily. "Just state your business and leave, or I'll tap out a message to the BSPA for your arrest."

"I'll not give this to you," Kirkland warned, waving the paper in his face. "This account has twenty million dollars in it, and I've a blank sign-over for that account to whoever signs it."

Despite Kirkland's vile profession, it looked legitimate, from the second or two of stillness he got to interpret the writing before Kirkland whipped it away. "Yes, it's real," he added, before Matthieu could question its integrity. "It's twenty million dollars. What you could do with that money is incredible."
As though Matthieu could ever leave Francis for something like money. (But wasn't that what a sale meant?) "Yes," he drawled, "thank you so kindly for your donation to the Francis fund."

"You don't even know what it's for."

"Enlighten me," he said tightly. Maybe this would be an entertaining story. And as much as it pained him to admit, Matthieu was curious. How had the filthy space rat come up with that much cash so soon, anyhow?

"He doesn't tell you anything, does he?" Kirkland taunted. "You're quite useless as a secretary. That money's to be used to buy a certain bondsperson at auction," he continued primly.

Well, there was a first time for everything. "Congrats. You know what the number is?" Matthieu asked blandly, with an eyebrow raised.

"Not yet," the pirate admitted, looking sheepish. He glanced at his watch. "I will in about four hours' time."

Four hours from now was close to midnight. "Does something magical happen in four hours? Maybe you turn back into a pumpkin or something?"

"No," Kirkland snapped. "He's one of Romae's. Romae already knows I want him so he can't know I plan on buying him, lest he ups the price to the limits of what I can pay."

Kirkland was starting to sound more and more like a regular old client. "Why are you buying from Romae? Don't you steal for him? Don't you steal, period? Why are you now suddenly bound by the laws?"

"It's not your business, so nose out."

He took a stab at it anyway. "Might it have anything to do with the fact that you're not supposed to be here at all?"

Kirkland's glare was more telling than any verbal reply. Matthieu smirked.

"It's a long story," Kirkland retorted, "and the audience isn't exactly a worthy one."

Matthieu rolled his eyes. If anything, a disgusting spaceship rat like Kirkland shouldn't be speaking to someone like him. Matthieu had his background and training. Kirkland had stolen goods. "Whether you blow your vocal cords out on a long story doesn't matter to me. But tell me you won't stick around for the whole four hours?"

"Of course not," Kirkland muttered. Good.

"Then if the information you need is at Romae's, what are you doing wasting both our time?"

"I have my people working on it," Kirkland said. "I'd offer to switch places but you like them far less than me. One in particular."

Then it was him again. Capture by Romae would suit him. Nasty little creature, Unsinkable was, the kind that bit off the hand that fed you.
It was perhaps cruel. Matthieu was not often intentionally cruel. But he could be snide, and after everything that had transpired recently - much of it because of this man - he was a little tired of taking orders. Taking abuse. From a pirate! A bondservant like him? He should have kept his tongue and been patient - he should have ignored him - but Francis wasn't around to keep him in line and Matthieu had had enough. Where the hell was Francis, anyway?

Besides. He knew Unsinkable far, far better than Kirkland did. You only needed three solid months with the guy to get a good feel for him: pure evil. Chaos in a can. Insulting, and mean-spirited. And he was cruel, the kind of person who pulled the legs off insects one by one to watch them twitch. He'd bullied Matthieu for months. And for what? For fun. What other sport was there in tormenting someone who was trained to take it?

"Your people!" Matthieu laughed. "If you really believe that, you're stupider than you look. He manipulates everybody he doesn't fight. You really think he'll do anything for you? Out of the -" he snorted - "goodness of his heart?"

Kirkland ignored him and smiled, a thin, predatory, sick curve of the lips. Matthieu wanted to punch them so hard they bled. "Well, what the fuck do you think Unsinkable's doing hanging around with you so much, eh?" he exploded. "He's using you, you idiot! You give that one an inch, he takes five metres and only comes back to laugh in your face when you're down. And frankly? If you buy his act, you'll deserve it. It'll serve you right for Unsinkable to airlock your dirty ass and make off with the Delivery."

Kirkland grinned. "Unsinkable's right, you know, you're every one of you automatons, I doubt you can think at all for yourself. Does Francis bother teaching you rationality? No, why would he? You're just a set of holes and that's a waste of his precious fucking time."

"I'm serious -"

"In fact, if you hate Unsinkable at all it's probably because he pissed Francis off when he was here, and Francis took it out on you."

Which was exactly what had happened, but that wasn't the point - "You're not listening -"

"Or maybe!" Kirkland crowed. "Just maybe, you hate him because he has a voice and you don't. He makes himself heard and you don't. He's the sort of person you can't help but notice and you're the sort of person you can't help but ignore. Why, Unsinkable demands things from life that you tell yourself don't exist. Things Francis will never give you because you're an object who's perfectly happy being inanimate, things you'll never demand because Francis has you so brainwashed you can't fathom demanding them."

Kirkland's voice became low and poisonous as he continued, and try as he might Matthieu couldn't make his ears not listen, could only sit there and take it, immobile with shock and horror. "Because nobody cares about anybody else in this system. You got that? Nobody cares about you. Not even Francis. And why should they, hm? You're a meek, pathetic excuse of a doormat like every other bondsman and your only weapon is to try to lash out and poison my mind against my crewmate. You want to command respect? Earn it. Unsinkable does that. You don't."

Damn Kirkland. Damn him to hell, because somehow he'd managed to pick up Francis' little trick of making words sting more deeply than a slap in the face. Matthieu felt his throat tighten, his eyes prickle. But he would not cry, he would not cry.
"You'll see," he told Kirkland in a low whisper, blinking furiously. It wiped the smirk off Kirkland's mug. "I tried to warn you, and you ignored it to throw stones instead. But you'll see. He'll get you jailed. And he'll get you killed. And he'll leave you hanging alone at the gallows."

He heard another chime at the door.

Matthieu had never been so glad to see Francis in his entire life.

"Kirkland," said Francis, his voice icy. "I see you've helped yourself to my store."

"Door was open," Kirkland shrugged.

"Hmph," Francis replied, but it was true, hours were until 8 on the dot, and Matthieu never locked up any sooner. "Well, what's your business?"

Kirkland gave him the papers. Francis took a few moments to skim them and said finally, "Supposing he's more than twenty million?"

"I highly doubt that'll be the case."

"So do I, but nevertheless," Francis said oilly, "let us make arrangements. Matthieu, prepare a contract."

Matthieu fetched one of the forms that was mostly finished and began filling in the remaining fields. Under "Name" he was seriously tempted to put 'Dirty rotten space rat' but before he'd touched his pen to parchment Francis asked, "I trust, my good Captain, you have a pseudonym you may use? You understand your own personal moniker is a curse word upon Hallar these days."

"Gilbert, last name Beilschmidt," Kirkland replied, "that's B-E-I-"

"I know how to spell," Matthieu spat.

Francis gave him a cold, flinty glare and a moment of silence. Stupid pirate tried his patience too! Why the hell was Matthieu supposed to keep his temper in check when Francis thought nothing of socking the man across the jaw and holding him at gunpoint?

Because you're an object who's perfectly happy being inanimate, he thought glumly, not special. Swallowing what little pride he had, he murmured, "Sorry, Francis."

"Let it not happen again," Francis replied, in Frankish, "I trained you to have manners. You don't talk back to freemen." At least Kirkland couldn't understand them, but Francis' tone gave it away, because the stupid pirate threw him a self-satisfied smile and folded his arms across his chest, the ugly prick.

"The terms of which being," Francis dictated for the 'Reason' section, as Matthieu's pen flew across the parchment, "that I, Francis of Hallar, have been instructed to purchase for Mister Gilbert Beilschmidt, of Undisclosed, a bondsperson at the Decennial Auction this upcoming November 30th, 1884 as per System Standard Calendar; and that I been given twenty million towards said purchase."

"Twenty million and a further eight hundred thousand."
"That was paid as late fee for Belle," Francis reminded.

"I refuse to believe the council wanted eight hundred thou per late head," Kirkland remarked.

"They didn't," Francis replied smoothly, "the rest was my cut for doing you this favour." Kirkland looked as though he might protest further but Francis continued dictating before he could. "And that if the purchase price of said purchase should be above twenty million, that Mister Gilbert Beilschmidt will owe me the remainder of the sell; and that I have authority to retain his purchase as collateral until such time as he will pay his debt."

"There won't be a debt," Kirkland insisted, "because he won't be above twenty million."

"Be that as it may," Francis said. He took the pen from Matthieu's hand to sign on the dotted line. Then he handed it - Matthieu's pen, one of the nicer things he owned - to Kirkland and let the man defile it with his filthy, grubby hands as he dated it the 23rd November and signed.

Kirkland gave it a loud and unnecessary flourish. When he crossed the final 't' Matthieu heard a snap, and felt even worse.

Filthy pirate. He handed a broken pen back to Matthieu. "Awfully sorry about that," he said, his voice dripping in mocking regret, "another broken object," and the slimy way in which he said it made Matthieu want to throttle his greasy neck.

But bondsmen don't talk back, and Francis was watching. "It's fine," he replied tersely.

Francis let Matthieu use his own fountain pen to sign the contract as witness. "Is that all?" Francis asked.

"One more thing," Kirkland said. "I'm not certain of the number the fellow will be but I'll forward you the coordinates. Should I send correspondence here?"

"Please do not," Francis replied, "there are those who'd like to detain you permanently and have words. I myself would like not to be involved with such a process. I have a post box on Fasciemi you may use, number 783."

"Expect something from 592 within a few days," Kirkland said, and showed himself out.

The instant the door shut behind him, Matthieu breathed a sigh of relief. So did Francis. "That man is not conducive to my health," he said. "I hope we never see him again."

"Me too," murmured Matthieu. "Did you get a chance to eat?"

"Yes, obviously. Oh, I didn't tell you," Francis explained. "Helena Carson - the one from Luna Hallerl - invited me to dinner to discuss some matters of the Auction. At least that was the pretence, I feel like it was more a date than anything else."

A date?! "W-what?" Matthieu asked. "But you don't like her, right?"

"She's perfectly alright," Francis shrugged. "There is nothing wrong with her. I should like her. Attractive, powerful. Societally speaking, she would be the better choice." He yawned. "I may turn in early. It was a heavy meal and we're getting up early tomorrow," he explained, and swept past the curtain up the stairs.
That wasn't a yes or no answer. That wasn't even an answer! He felt like chasing Francis to his office and demanding something more clear and had almost taken a step forward to do that very thing before remembering that he was robbed of that. No more special Matthieu. No more favourite!

"Do you want me to come with you?" Matthieu asked, trying to keep the panic out of his words.

"Oh, cheri," Francis replied, with a soft smile - cheri, yes! Cheri was good, that was progress - "I'm afraid I am far too exhausted to entertain the notion."

Plunge my heart deeper into my belly, why don't you, he thought. But instead of complaining, he walked off to his own quarters to sulk, filing what he had wanted to say aloud under things he'd never ask for, because Francis had him so well-trained he couldn't fathom asking for them.

At least, wasn't supposed to.
He watched, peering from inside the tomato crate, as the beam of light escaping from underneath the warehouse garage door slowly faded, darkened, and disappeared altogether. He tried to make as little noise as possible - he wasn't very good at being quiet - but every time he shifted in the crate, rustling around, nobody came from inside the house. If they had heard, maybe they chalked it up to scuffling from mice and rats in the warehouse and ignored it.

Finally, he heard the tenth bong of the grandfather clock inside Romae's place and began pushing slowly on the lid. He gave it too much strength, and the nails squealed. He waited - nobody came. Nobody can hear it, he told himself, it's only so loud 'cause you're near it, but that was little comfort to the madcap hammering in his chest, which he swore was also audible from a distance.

Slowly - so that he didn't completely ruin his chances by toppling over and making a damn racket - he pushed himself out of the crate. The blood finally draining into his legs hurt like a bitch, and he had to wait another ten minutes for the pins and needles to clear before he shakily took a step forward. Feeling fine, he continued groping his way through the darkness. Slowly. So Slowly. Only thing worse than ruining his chances by toppling over would be ruining them by stubbing his goddamn toe.

The door to the house was clearly outlined in light - someone was on the other side. He wasn't sure where it led. Francis hadn't taken them through the kitchens, and when he'd been with Romae, Romae had rarely unlocked him at the ankle, let alone taking him out of his cell. It couldn't be the dining room, he reasoned. That would be silly for a pantry garage door to lead directly onto the dining room in a place this large. Surely the architects would have thought of some sort of way for the servants to have servant-like quarters.

He pressed an ear to the door and listened for signs of movement, speech, anything. When he didn't hear anything, he carefully pushed, praying it didn't creak (it didn't) and peered inside.

Nobody around. The main kitchens, deserted. He slipped in and helped himself to an apron and servant cap. It barely covered his hair, but he'd hunch forward and keep his eyes low and with luck, people'd think he was just old.

Though his disgusting clothing might still attract attention. Surely Romae paid his servants better! He wore Desmond's old thin shirt, so long it might've been a dress, covered in sweat-stains, ratty and torn, tied at the waist over his loose pants. The clothing they'd pilfered before they'd airlocked him, because they kept everything they could on ship and there was a hierarchy - he couldn't keep the uniform he nicked off the Deversorium employee when he wasn't even a crewmate.

Shame. It'd be real super not to wander around in the same garments his rapist had worn while violating him. Real fuckin' super.

It was ten-twenty once he'd gotten in. Romae would be turning in around now, if he recalled correctly. And if the Emporium was anything like Francis' - he peered out the kitchen to the salon,
past which he saw similar doors in similar locations - so far, it seemed to be exactly the same layout - then Romae's office was just off the front room. At the top of the spiral staircase. And next to his bedroom.

Either he'd need some better servant garb and a decent excuse to visit Romae's quarters at this hour, or he'd be wiser to wait properly, until everyone was much more deeply asleep. He elected to wait for sleep and hid in a pantry cupboard, grabbing a few apples to tide him over. Even unwashed and covered in wax they still tasted better than anything he'd had in a very long time. He ate them core and all.

A harrowing three hours after that - despite darkness and silence, not once did he himself feel tired, not with the looming threat of being discovered and shipped off to his death on Tenickson, nosirree he was wide awake - he left the pantry for the front room and began his way up the stairs in darkness.

The first one creaked underfoot.

He froze. Held his breath.

Waited.

Nothing but snores.

He exhaled slowly, cautiously, feeling the air slip out of his mouth, his chest deflate, before he continued on.

Very carefully, he climbed with his steps at the inner-most part of the stairs, closest to the centre pole. Creaks were caused by shitty flooring, too few nails in the floorboards because they built it cheaply, and crappy wooden boards that warped over time if not properly secured - to minimise creaks, step closest to where you know the nails will be.

By the time he ascended the stairs completely, he heard two chimes in succession from the clock, much more loudly now that he was in the house. He waited to make sure nobody had woken up (they shouldn't, they were probably used to a noisy clock and slept on through) before he moved closer to the heavy curtain separating the upstairs walkway from the office ... and bedroom.

Next question, how to get beyond the heavy curtain, he wondered. If he crept under it, he might risk noise from the rail - the fabric was heavy enough that any lifting from the bottom might actually lift the entire thing in one piece and jiggle the hooks off the rail. If one should fall, it'd be a heavy thunk, and that would wake anyone. If he moved it to the side to creep around, the hooks would screech on the metal.

It took him a moment to realise there was a third and much better option - pull the curtain up from its hem on the floor like a flap, and crawl underneath. If he did it right, it wouldn't affect the weight on the hooks.

But if only he could do these things quickly.

An agonising ten minutes later, he was in, his pulse so loud in his ears he worried someone might hear it. At this rate, if he walked out of here, it was gonna be with a newfound heart condition. He wondered whether Kirkland had a medic aboard the Delivery for that.
He could hear Romae snoring from the other room, behind another curtain. As long as he kept snoring and that brainwashed blondie automaton of his didn't wake up and figure out what was going on. Unless Romae didn't sleep with his bondsman. You never knew with Romae. He treated his grandsons perfectly well and the slaves he liked, but the ones he didn't - he really didn't. Maybe he made the man sleep on a doggy bed or something degrading. More was the reason to get the hell out of there soon.

Nothing on Romae's desk. Must be inside, he thought, and tried the drawers.

Locked. Shit.

But that wasn't a problem, not really; unlike Alfred he hadn't always had the luxury of keys as a youth and this was no different than moving pins in a cupboard latch to get at some food. He nicked one of the paperclips off Romae's desk and opened it up. A safety pin helped to secure his left sleeve to the rest of his shirt, so he took it off now to fumble both the pin and the paperclip in the lock housing.

The things I do for you, Alfred, he thought. Putting himself in danger by sneaking into his former trainer's house, picking his locks and rifling through his documents, separated by nothing more than a veil of upholstery. (Why, oh why, did Caput Halleri have such a hard-on for curtains as a decorating option? Seriously, what was wrong with doors. Nice and thick, they blocked out a lot of sound, he didn't see why it wasn't the better option all things considered.) And if he were caught, he'd be executed. He'd die slowly, that man would hunt him down, he'd hide where he could but what if he got shot in the leg or something? Did that Tenickson creep like sex with the dead or with the dying? Would he be granted the mercy of oblivion or would he be fucked into it -

He only clued in to how badly his hands were shaking when his makeshift lock-pick clinked in the housing. He took a moment to breathe, to calm down, then to continue.

A click, and the drawer came free. He slid it open slowly, in case it squeaked, and re-pinned his shirt.

Papers and folders were the prize here. He didn't spot anything of more value to steal - no fountain pens or golden seals or anything, but that was fine, if he got in and out without a trace that might even be better. He checked the labels carefully and found one three folders down marked "Decennial". This one, he shuffled out from underneath the pile as quietly as he could.

He froze and checked again; Romae slept on. Pleasant snores. He breathed deeply and opened it on the desk. A few papers in, he found a letter from the Council, marking the official list and that Romae's numbers were 31-53. That's just ducky, he thought, but he really needed to find out who would be who.

He caught the header on the official letter. "In re: your correspondence November 15th SSCal -" perfect. The papers so far seemed to be in chronological order. In order for Council to have sent him this, Romae would have had to have planned it all out himself, who went where, so that he could sync up with the auction. He flipped back a few more to the right time bracket.

About a week prior, he found the letter Romae had sent to the Council enclosing a packet of attachments from Romae's own records with details on the prospective bondspeople. No pictures. This would have been after they'd sold Alfred to Romae, so the timestamp was correct - oh shit, shit shit shitty fuck, he thought, as he saw the first of them and caught what was in the 'name' field.
They were all numbers. Of course. Because Romae didn't give his prospectives names like silly Francis did.

He panicked briefly, trying to stay as quiet as possible while flipping through paper after paper - 1532, 3512, 9235, oh, shitting fuckety, he thought as his pulse raced, which one is Alfred - before the last one in the file, 1242.

His heart sank. Romae snored on behind him but not even that was really helping his mood.

And then, by some small miracle, he noticed - his gaze happened to fall there, maybe there is a god - where it said in the footnote of the top-most file, "Feliciano's Alfred".

Feliciano had him.

His heart plummeted.

That was when he really began to panic.

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As quietly as he could he shuffled the pages back in order and closed the file, then replaced it where it had been. He didn't bother re-locking the drawer once it had shut - didn't matter if Romae would notice, better to get out of here now. Nothing would happen to Alfred if Romae found his drawer unlocked and suspected anything because Alfred was apparently Feliciano's case -

There came a snort from the other room, and a rustle. He exhaled silently; he wasn't just here to sit around and freak out, he had to get out somehow, get to the pergola past the salon's crazy hidden passage, go find Kirkland and get the hell out of dodge.

Feliciano, he thought, as he ducked under the curtain to the hallway and staircase once the snores had resumed. Was that better or worse? Feliciano wouldn't touch Alfred. The last time he himself'd been with Romae, it had been with Feliciano and the young man had literally recoiled from touching anybody he trained. (He wondered whether this was the boy's whole plan to begin with. Wouldn't be the first to try a form of isolation as a torture technique.) Romae himself had done the dirty jobs.

But that nasty piece of work, hidden under a steaming pile of cute had a bad habit of getting under your skin without you realising it. He remembered that much - all too vividly! - as he carefully descended the way he'd come up (he wanted to run!) on tiptoes at the corner of the stairs. The calm voice, the nice-boy attitude - Feliciano caught you offguard with sweetness, you wanted to do things for him without him having to ask, and before you knew it, you were inches away from being wrapped tight around his little finger, ready to do anything for your master because all you wanted was what he wanted and his happy smile would make you come in ecstasy.

Feliciano'd almost gotten him. Taken his fingers and SNAP, right at his temple - and even now, just thinking about it, years later, he felt the rush of endorphins beyond his control outside his control gotten breathy gotten hard -

- No. Stop panicking.

- You are Unsinkable and nothing can stop you, nothing can get you under.
He took the last step, forced himself to breathe deeply and leaned his clammy forehead on pedestal of the staircase banister for a second.

That jackass. That goddamn jackass Feliciano had almost got him. Almost, but not quite.

Grubby little paws, touching him where he didn't want to be touched, he could deal with. A cock in his ass he didn't ask for, he could deal with. He just hated the people they belonged to, that's all.

But when they entered his mind and made his body like it, they made him hate himself.

Was that where Alfred was now? he wondered, creeping silently along the hallway through the salon, navigating by the feeble light from the windows.

That's probably why you want to help Alfred, an insidious little voice in his head taunted, you just think he's real cute, you can't help wanting to help the pretty face. Guess Feliciano did get you after all, 'cause look at you, Alfred needs you to jump and you just ask him how high.

But Alfred couldn't help the way he looked. The difference between Alfred and Feliciano was that Alfred was mostly naive. Feliciano only looked it. Alfred didn't use his charming good looks as a weapon, except for that one time he tried to let Kirkland have him, and that was more a silly amusing ruse than anything else. Foolish Alfred! Poor, foolish Alfred!

With a surge of worry, he wondered: had he warned Alfred of Romae's grandsons? He'd told Alfred there were dangers, but never had he suspected Al would go to Feliciano, Kirkland was supposed to have sold him as already trained! Kirkland fucked up, and Alfred was paying for it.

Kirkland had better have those morals, he thought, as he reached the salon. And those papers -

Light was faster than sound, but he heard the deafening click of the hand-torch first.

"You're gonna turn around right now," commanded a low voice, growly with sleep. "Right this instant."

He froze. He stopped breathing. So close. He was so close. He could just - push the right wall sconce and be out of here in a jiffy, was this man fast enough for that?

Another click behind him, and that one was the cocking of a pistol. "I'm armed. So no sudden movements, hands in the air, and turn. Around. Now."

With every word the voice became clearer, and he recognised it as the one he'd heard before, speaking to Kirkland. Think of the devil and he arrives - it's fucking Feliciano. He raised his hands above his head, and turned, his stomach in knots with the prospect of being caught, being caught and dying when -

When he put his face into the beam of light and squinted, and the light immediately moved to the side and down, not to blind him. In the illumination he saw the man's face more clearly - this wasn't Feliciano. It was the other twin, Lovino. The one he'd never heard before, the one who handled the money.

Lovino seemed as shocked to see him as he was to see Lovino. "You," he said softly. "Of all people. 'S gotta be you." He clicked his tongue and continued, "What, you got a fuckin' death wish or something? Are you insane?"
He didn't know what to say. What could he possibly say to buy him more time, to guarantee him his freedom? He'd never spoken to Lovino once! If Feliciano stayed out of the thick of things and only took on select few cases, Lovino was way pickier and seemed to take none. Bookkeeper. That was it. Not having been sold successfully, Unsinkable had seen Lovino maybe twice in five years, glowering away in the shadow of his more alert, upbeat brother.

Lovino took a step closer, and said words that made him feel even worse. "Do you have any idea. Any. Idea. How much money there is on your pretty little head right now?"

"Whoever it is you think I am," he whispered desperately, "it's not me. I'm completely worthless. You wouldn't get any money for me."

"Ohh, no, that's where you're wrong," Lovino said. "You're the one they call Unsinkable. Or a close enough fake. Bad guy to impersonate, though, with the bounty on his head. Well, on his body." He swallowed, his mouth and throat feeling strangely dry, as Lovino continued. "Y'know there's a fifty million dollar offer for that body? Fifty. Not fifteen. Fifty."

Five times the amount that was originally offered.

The longer they waited, the more this guy would offer. He had money to blow. Or he must really, really, really want it bad.

...Was that what Kirkland was doing all along? Waiting 'til that sicko on Tenickson got desperate enough to up the ante?

Oh god. Maybe it was.

"You know what the man who'll pay that insane amount of money wants to do to your body?" Lovino asked darkly. "He doesn't just wanna fuck it."

"Yeah, I got an idea or two," he muttered.

"That's a lot of money, Unsinkable. If- if I sold you to that man, I'd get that money. And if I had that kinda cash, I'd never have to work again in my life. I wouldn't have to take over the family business like they expect me to. I'd be free. I could get away from here, from all of this."

He didn't move.

Then suddenly, Lovino sighed. "I'm gonna look the other way for a sec, and when I turn back, you're gonna be gone. Capisce?"

"... You - you won't -"

"I couldn't do it even if I wanted to. And I don't. That's ... that's my grandpa, not me. So get the hell outta here."

And then Lovino flicked the handtorch off.

And then he heard him walk away.
The Great Unsinkable didn't need to be told twice. Like someone had lit a fire under his ass he *moved*, pressed the right wall sconce, watched as the fireplace swung forward, just like at Francis'. He crept through the narrow corridor in a straight line til he reached the end of the line, barely outlined in a faint light the colour of streetlamp orange.

Then he was outside.

"There you are," said Kirkland softly to his left, waiting on the bench. He was still in his grocer delivery disguise but had donned his frock coat again. Fair enough, the air on Hallar was a little chilly in the dead of night; Desmond's thin linen shirt didn't exactly do much, either. "I got a bit worried there."

"Uh-huh," he replied warily. "Where're the papers?"

Kirkland eyed him back. "First you tell me what number Alfred is. Then the papers."

"No deal. Papers first."

"What?" Kirkland whispered angrily. "You bloody selfish *turncoat* of a bastard -"

"Papers. Then Alfred." He stood firm.

"That's non-negotiable! What the hell's gotten into you?"

"Fifty million is how much there is, out for *my ass,*" he growled under his breath. "You gonna wait until they make it a hundred? Five hundred? What's your price, Kirkland?"

The second he'd said the figure, Kirkland gasped, grew silent, left his mouth agape in shock. And even though his eyes were hard and angry there was still some small shred of hope within him, he thought, please, don't let that have been your plan all along. Don't do it. I know there's a decent side of you in there. *I know there is.*

"That's a lot of money," Kirkland said finally. "Is that the current offer?"

Oh, Arthur, *no,* don't... He nodded. But he refused to beg aloud. "Would you do it?" he spat.

They stood there, their gazes tensely locked, neither faltering.

At last, Kirkland backed down. Without breaking eye contact, he said, "If I can't trust my crew, they might as well not be my crew. I will give you your papers first. Then you will tell me what number Alfred'll be. I've given you my word. Please give me yours."

He nodded. "Fine."

Kirkland pulled an envelope out of the cargo pocket on the delivery coveralls. "Here you are."

His fingers tingled on the first touch of manila, and he tried not to salivate. (This shit wasn't *food,* for fuck's sake.) He was about to rip into it, to check everything was okay -

*I'm gonna look the other way for a sec, and when I turn back, you're gonna be gone. Capisce?*
Like for like.

He sighed, and trusted Kirkland that he was holding his papers.

"Romae's numbers are 31 through 53. Alfred's the first. Makes him number 31."

Kirkland breathed a heavy sigh of relief and his shoulders slumped for what seemed like the first time in all the time they'd sold Alfred. "Thank you," he said. "Thank you so much."

He mumbled some kind of 'you're welcome' - honestly, couldn't the man pay him a little attention for a change instead of adorable cute naive Alfred? Unsinkable just got his life back here, thank you so kindly. But first, the papers. He ripped open the envelope with gusto to find -

A really ugly picture of him taken from Francis' files. Ugly and outdated. But if nobody looked too close at the personal ID, it wouldn't be a problem. And they were filed now, at least, anything he wanted to change later would be easier than filing from scratch for this persona, this -

"Gilbert Beilschmidt."

His heart skipped a beat. I don't know. They made me forget it. How... could he have ever forgotten?

"Oh come, don't look so shocked, the mugshot's not that awful," Kirkland chuckled. "Best we could do at late notice without a better likeness of you. And I don't know about the birthdate or birthplace, those were just - guesses. You can correct 'em later if you like."

"The name," he murmured, in awe.

"Yes, well. I just had him pick a surname, I don't know if you ever remembered your own - or if you ever had one, really -"

"How did you know my name?" he asked, in a faint hush.

Kirkland shifted uncomfortably. "Francis had a few files on you from a few years ago. There was some mention of that name, I just assumed, I mean it was a lucky guess, I didn't really -"

Gilbert cut the man off with a strong, firm embrace, one arm about Kirkland's tiny shoulders, one threaded through his blonde hair, at the back of his head, cradling it. "Thank you," he murmured into Kirkland's neck, hoping he wasn't also crying into it, because damn, that would be embarrassing.

"I - erm. Well." It took a moment, but Kirkland returned the hug eventually, and patted him awkwardly on the back. "You, er. You can let go of me now. We'd best get back to the shuttle."

The sudden lack of body heat reminded him how cool the Halleri air could be at night, and he shivered. "Does this mean I can get some better clothes now?" he asked, as they walked off the pergola.

"What's wrong with those ones? No good for this desert land, but we don't stop much on Hallar. Not these days, anyway," he grumbled. "But you know what the Delivery's like. Temperate to fairly warm for an airship."
"I'd prefer my own, if it's all the same," he said, "these fit Desmond, not me."

Kirkland stopped, dead in the sand. "I didn't - bollocks, I didn't realise you were wearing the clothes of your - his clothing - and he probably -" Not one of those sentences was finished but the gist came through loud and clear. He smiled grimly and looked away; Kirkland might be a cheapass but at least he was a *swift* cheapass.

Suddenly there was a soft thunk on his shoulders and an incredible warmth on his back. Kirkland stood beside him, coat-less.

"For now," he explained, "it'll do for now but yes, we'll pick you up something better, certainly we will, that's just - anyway," and he laughed a little, blushing. "You know, I rather think that fits you better than it did me!"

He shrugged into it, too grateful for the warmth to second-guess or give Kirkland a chance to renege (so warm, and it even *smelled* like Kirkland).

"I'm proud to call you my captain," he said, with the most conviction he could manage, and shoved his hands inside the pockets of the frock coat. "I'll never leave your side."

Kirkland smiled. "Glad to have you with us on board the Delivery, Bosun Gilbert the Unsinkable."

"No, I mean it. You're gonna have to pay me to get away, now."

"Oh, fantastic. The old 'hidden fee' treatment, I see?"

And they walked off side by side in the alleys back to Border Control.

Chapter End Notes

I'm sorry I kind of forgot about updating again! DX This is roughly the half-point of the story.
Previously on Sold, and Letters

Chapter Notes

The excerpt 'Previously' is enclosed mostly because it's been awhile that I haven't been updating this fic here on AO3. To people in the future who are reading this whole thing through after I have posted it all, please skip it!! To people who have already read the first bit and want a refresher of where the plotlines all stand at this point in the fic, read on.

Previously, on Sold

Alfred Jones is kidnapped by the Great Delivery of Banningham, a pirate ship led by Captain Arthur Kirkland, to be sold as a bondsman - a sexual servant. Bondspeople are considered something like status symbols, items of high worth, and are given extensive training. Their sale is viable and legal, but kidnapping freemen from their homes on New Joplin isn't.

Kirkland, hired by bondsperson trainer Avo Romae of Hallar, has second thoughts about selling Alfred. His doubt is compounded when he discusses the matter with the legendary Unsinkable, a prospective bondsman that nobody has been able to train. Romae wants to sell him to a man whose perversions include Unsinkable's untimely death.

Kirkland persuades Romae to sell Alfred at auction in the upcoming, highly publicised Decennial Auction. He then strikes a deal with Unsinkable to buy Alfred back, if Unsinkable can break into Romae's house and obtain Alfred's auction information. In so doing, Unsinkable is caught - but Romae's grandson, Lovino, who finds the bondsperson system repugnant, lets him go, even though his grandfather has offered fifty thousand dollars for Unsinkable, knowing that the man who wants to buy him will pay even more to satisfy his paraphilia.

Meanwhile, Alfred is put to training with Romae's other grandson, Feliciano, and his bondsman, Ludwig. The problem? Feliciano - unlike Lovino - is not as convinced of the wrongness of the bondsperson system, and is a very good trainer. Some - Unsinkable most notably - compare his methods to brainwashing, but as time goes by, Feliciano's influence grows stronger and Alfred slowly forgets every one of Unsinkable's warnings.

Like all Vitim, Ivan of Olyokin, Emperor Regent to the Union Empire of Free Vityaz States (and generally unsuited for the job) is supposed to lose his virginity as part of a biological demand, or face disastrous consequences. However, his faith demands ultimate celibacy. His monk and fellow worshiper, Brother Toris Laurinaitis, is in fact a Kilnus spy looking to overthrow the kingdom by causing him massive, permanent cognitive damage as promised by Ivan's abstinence.

Katya, Ivan's older sister, travels to Hallar to purchase a bondsman from Francis of Hallar, another bondsperson trainer, for Ivan's use before he drives himself truly mad, even though Ivan is morally opposed to the use of bondservants. Eduard - the unlucky bondsman purchased - meets with an insane and violent Ivan in the dungeons and does what's required of him, although he is severely injured and blacks out during the act. Ivan recovers, but since he can't free Eduard as he'd like, puts him to work as his assistant.
Eduard, not understanding the inherent chaos of the Empire's rule, meets with Raivis and Feliks - two other Kilnus spies in league with Toris - to get a different perspective as well as help with small items' repair in their base, fueling his interest as well as his desire to be useful since Ivan won't use him as he believes he should be used. However, he doesn't tell any of them that Ivan has in fact made use of him, so Toris, Raivis and Feliks think their plan is still in motion. Meanwhile, Ivan continues to meet with Brother Toris, as unaware that Toris is a spy as Toris is that Ivan is no longer dangerous.

Feliks' boyfriend, who visits him often and has adopted the codename Norge, is part of a five-man operation (including also Danmark, Ísland, Sverige and Suomi) patrolling the bondsperson shops looking for bondsmen like Alfred, who have been wrongfully kidnapped, enslaved, subdued and trained, and made presentable for lower sale than a Subscript-born bondsperson. They find one such bondsman, who can't remember his own name but adopts the moniker 'Tim' after they free him.

Tim and Danmark form a friendship which quickly grows into romance, although unacknowledged by Tim. The rest of the group, aware of Tim's history, disapproves.

Tim reveals that his sister was also kidnapped. The group's goal now is to find his sister Margot, who, like Unsinkable, cannot be trained or broken. Unsinkable knows where to find Margot, and Kirkland needs one of the group's help in forging funds to pay for an auctioned-off Alfred as well as legitimate documentation for Unsinkable, so they agree to meet and exchange information. Kirkland, however, is the very pirate who kidnapped Margot and her brother 'Tim' in the first place, and who continues to illegally kidnap people for later resale. The two parties don't get along.

Francis of Hallar and Kirkland also don't get along. (Kirkland doesn't get along with most people.) Margot - who was taken in by Francis of Hallar when Antonio of Marigon couldn't keep her - remains at Francis' emporium, where Unsinkable meets up with her. Francis agrees to put Margot up at auction.

In addition to the bondspeople he wishes to sell, he is also selling Matthieu, his eldest bondsman who acts more like his personal valet with benefits, at the behest of the Councillor Héderváry from the Halleri Legislative Council. Héderváry, having done some research, has realised that Francis has been profiting off bondsperson training fees for Matthieu even though his training ended years ago. Although Francis does love Matthieu, he does not treat Matthieu very well, compensating for his guilt over stealing council money by taking it out on Matthieu, who is not in a position to escape or refuse his unfair treatment.

On the trail of the five-man band are Adnan and Karpusi, two Halleri BSPA field operatives who want to crack the case of the five-man band's trail of forgeries and larcenies, without realising that they use the money they steal to free bondspeople like 'Tim' who were kidnapped. When the operation meets up with the Delivery, the heat is then on the pirate ship, already in trouble from the kidnapping of Alfred Jones.

And when Kirkland touches base with both Antonio of Marigon and Francis of Hallar looking for Margot, he brings the heat with him.

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(turkey --> greece)

Karpusi,
Pro tip, banks hate it when you demand their records. Banks really, really hate it when you're a Federal Agent demanding records with the added authority of a constabulary on another planet who has magical powers of jurisdiction where he shouldn't. (Dunno about you out past the frost line but these papers have been super useful on Hallar. Think Hassan likes wine? chocolate?)

The only thing banks are better at than keeping your cash firmly sequestered away is doing just that and then not telling anybody about it. It's almost like they want people to launder money. Enablers, all of them...

Anyway, both Interplanetary Fiscal Services and Business Development Tenickson Offshore now hate me. They went so far as to claim they have taken my name down and will never offer me their lowest interest rates. I'll have to try real hard not to cry myself to sleep nightly.

Also, there are over six hundred accounts that have recently deposited large sums of money in the millions, where by recently, I mean in the two-odd weeks that elapsed between that time the group of five first met Kirkland and that time we could have caught them but were foiled by dinky trashcans with jetpacks and decent radio transmitters.

You know what this means, by the way. Now that they know we know their signal pattern, they're gonna change it up and the Eavesdroppers monitoring their ship movements are fucked. Get the intel back up and running at Nunat Border Control. Try the nearest one to Kroksvellir - I think that's Rauthar-something-unpronounceable? Aw hell, you're the one in that neck of the woods, you look it up.

--

(england --> france)

First of all - Rather corking to see you again. On occasion I find myself missing our conversations, but then I remember how much we hate each other and how it all derails into unpleasantries. Mostly we didn't do that this time - I like to think it's a sign of improvement.

All the best. Even to you.

-I trust you know who this is.

--

(greece --> turkey)

Adnan,

Still waiting on Big Bird, but Little Wing shot out this morning (guess Beta needed a booty call): morse 4F7-KL on frequency 24.983551 GHz.

But this really proves nothing more than the fact that Khatava Station in Skuratchky has better personnel than Rautharkrokur, out by Kroksvellir. At least, nicer personnel. Also, don't tell me what to do. I don't think we'll be able to catch them using the airship before the auction. I doubt there's going to be any business that takes them all off-world. I'll keep my eyes peeled anyway, but we need to coordinate BB's new signals at the auction to get a hook on their airship flying out
afterwards. If they don't move until the very last minute, I might be late to the festivities. Don't go nuts without me.

(ps You're a jerk. I have been way more helpful to you over the past few years and you never get me wine or chocolate.)
So it didn't go well with Spiridon, then?"

Ivan shook his head. "Well. I think it went perfectly wonderfully. But my Brother, you know how I feel about that... devil-cursed filthy worm."

Toris put on Brother Toris' bland, pleasant, happy face in spite of his turmoil. Marinin had been the best Kilnus-sympathetic suitors making advances towards the Gospozha Bragina, on Toris' advice. Toris didn't like the feeling of control, slipping inexorably from between his fingers.

At least there was still Ivan. From what Marinin had said about the dinner, Ivan was getting worse by the day. Thank god something had gone right.

"Surely it's better Spiridon than the Veshnan?" he offered.

"Oh, the Veshnan," Ivan muttered, and poured himself another glass of vodka. "It mustn't be him. Katya would either move, or bring him here. I don't want him here. But I cannot process the thought of her leaving Olyokin."

"Then someone from Olyokin it must be," Toris supplied.

Ivan huffed, staring up at the ceiling. "This should not have to be so difficult," he lamented. "It's not my marriage. I should just let her pick who she wants. She does not actually want any of them, you know. I don't think she likes men."

"There haven't been any offers from women," he noted.

"This is true."

He needed Ivan back on track - the track of hating the Veshnan. If she married the Veshnan, Bragina would move off-world, but a match with someone Toris controlled would be better for Kilnus.

Such a shame about Marinin! He would have been perfect, but after going on and on about what a fool Ivan made of him, Toris doubted he could stand any more time around Ivan. Toris understood too well. It took a patient person to maintain friendship with Ivan.

The Time was a trump card to be played last. If all else failed, they could expose that fact to rally more support both within the Union and across borders for a quick coup. It would be effective; a crazed lunatic for Emperor? Not so soon after the reign of the three mad brothers fifty years ago, still close in collective memory.

"Besides," he said, "you are her brother. She should at least consider how you feel about your new brother-in-law. And someone who spends all his money on bondspeople - how morally repugnant!"

"Exactly why I dislike the Veshnan!" Ivan said, slamming his hand down on the table and rattling
their glasses. "He may be pretty, he may even be a decent ruler but it does not excuse his purchasing people to fuck."

"You seem stressed," Toris observed. "Is there something else the matter? Anything else bothering you?"

Ivan sighed again, heavily, and ran his fingers through his hair. "It's - it's the bondsman," he whispered.

Toris sucked in a breath sharply. "You're not - you didn't -"

"No! I would not, ever," Ivan swore, but his voice wavered and Toris had a hunch.

"You want to," he realised, his stomach in knots.

Ivan shook his head and said quickly, tightly, "I don't. Oh God, I don't. I absolutely do not."

He did, it was evident! Toris forced his panic back. "You can't, you really can't. It's not just because it's evil, either, not only because god wants you to abstain. Ivan, you have to promise me, my brother, you have to, please! -" It sounded feeble and pleading even to his ears.

But Ivan seemed not to notice. "I know it's wrong, you do not need to remind me, I feel sick enough looking myself in the face in the mirror - Brother, can we talk of something else? Anything else?"

No, they couldn't! Not until Toris could make sure Ivan wouldn't do anything drastic. It'd be one thing if this bondsman were just some poor man Toris had never known. A terrible shame. Sorry for his loss.

But Eduard, having spoken with him, getting to know him - the man was sweet, clever (brilliant!), and funny. A wonderful asset, yes. But - whatever Feliks and Raivis might say about him, however correct about it they might be, Toris was not so cold to forget Eduard was also a human being. There was something about him that made it impossible for Toris to think of him as a servant. He was a person, he was their friend, he was too smart for servitude, he trusted them and Toris too, and to have him beaten into the stones, ripped apart, pounded to death, by a crazed brute like Ivan because of Toris' own plan -!

Toris - supernaturally calm, professional security agent, over ten years' experience under the same legend Toris - began to tremble. "I mean it, brother. Don't be alone with him if you cannot trust yourself. Not even in the same room! The very second you feel these unnatural urges again, you must come to me. Anytime. You can overcome this, Vanya. You must pass it."

"I too have faith, and it hasn't done me any good!" Ivan growled.

"Shh," he said, trying to be comforting. He brought an arm around Ivan's shoulders to hold them close. "Believe in god. God will help you through this. But you mustn't touch him. Your strength and biology has made a devil of you, truly, and this is a test of wills. I know you can pass it, Vanya. You must pass it."

Because if he didn't, he might kill Eduard. He might literally rip him in two. Oh god, he prayed (and Toris wasn't religious), whatever happens don't let anything happen to Eduard. Eduard didn't deserve a death like that.
Nobody did. But especially not Eduard.

"It's difficult," Ivan moaned pathetically, "you don't understand what it's like. You are so lucky, not to be Vitim, this - these feelings, I can barely - do you know, I think of him all the time now, sometimes it's like I can sense him when he is not there, conjure up the way he smells -"

"Calm yourself, brother," Toris warned, and Ivan whimpered.

"I'm sorry," he said. "You are right, I am stronger than this." And he picked up his little glass of vodka - still half-full - and drained it in one swallow. He seemed more stable for it afterwards. If Ivan's alcoholism managed to keep Eduard alive, Toris would be elated.

"What brought this on?" Toris asked. Ivan didn't often speak to Toris of his bondsman like this. Was this a recent development?

"We had a little discussion, we two, today," Ivan began dryly, pouring himself another glass, and topping up Toris'. That sounded more like the interactions he'd heard about. Picking fights and squabbles and going to bed (separate beds!) angry with each other. "Inspired by yesterday's madness after Spiridon. Katya and I - we had words. I left the Duma to come here -"

"I apologise, my brother," Toris interrupted, "if I'd known I would have joined you -"

"No, it's fine. I told you I would be busy. I just came to drink and be alone. But today during work, we got onto the topic of usefulness. He complained that it was as Katya had said, he was not very useful to me. I asked him what he meant by that, was he seriously implying his only worth was -" Ivan coughed, uncomfortable - "to be able to satisfy, um. My desires."

"Which he doesn't do," Toris reminded.

"Of course not. I told him I had firsthand experience of his intelligence, and if anything was a good use for him, it would be applying himself in a place devoted to learning. He has free reign of the library - God knows he uses it more than I - and more and more these days he is getting better at this political drudgery." He sipped some vodka, reflecting. "I must get him papers and perhaps an aptitude test. Someone with his skills should be in university, getting a major degree. Or three."

University would be a wonderful place for Eduard. Particularly one far, far away from mad, lusty Ivan. "What a wonderful idea!" Toris chirped.

"I suggested it to him," Ivan said sadly, swilling the vodka, "and he didn't like the idea. He said what if that is not what I want, maybe I want to be a servant."

"What?"

"Yes, Brother! My thoughts exactly. Who could possibly want to be a servant? That man doesn't know anything else. He has lived no alternative. How does he know he doesn't prefer some other profession? Where he might get paid and have his own life!"

"He doesn't consider it an option," Toris mused.

"So I suspected. I told him he had been trained not to want things of his own and that he needed to stop."
"Couldn't have said it better myself," Toris praised. "What did he say?"

"He got angry. Said I might be his master but he can't just throw off twenty years of training like it was nothing, all because I happened to think differently. And that he was trying and doing the best he could."

"Is he?"

Ivan nodded. "I think so. I told him to stop taking that stupid tonic and every night he drinks less and less of it. I suspect its hold is slowly weakening upon him."

"That's something."

"I agree. So he is *trying* to see it from my point of view. I told him that, and I thanked him, but he still seemed worried. He said he had misgivings, like he should not be doing this, like it was undoing Francis' work."

"It is!" Toris said. That would be fantastic! Eduard's intelligence was wasted on bondservitude anyway, and no more would Eduard feel obliged to stick around Ivan. Toris might be able to pry him away permanently, for his own safety and maybe even happiness. If Eduard would only think of himself as a human being, nobody in their right mind would voluntarily stay so close to someone as dangerous as Ivan.

"And when I told him how glad I was to hear it, he said that it was what I wanted."

"Right!" Toris agreed. Ivan was silent. "So... then what?" he prompted.

"Don't you see?" Ivan asked him. "I am still forcing him to do my bidding! He's only doing this because I want him to!"

"But it's for his own good -"

"But it's still *not his volition*. I told him that, and he says to me - he tells me, why would I ever do anything you didn't want." As though reenacting his frustration, Ivan threw up his hands. "I don't know, maybe because you wanted it for *yourself*?!"

Toris' heart sank. "And to that, he said ...?"

"He said, what I want is what he wanted. His only desires were to fulfill mine. That like this - that was the way it was supposed to be." Ivan grinned. "But his voice *cracked*, fractured when he said it. And I thought, a-ha, I'm finally getting somewhere. So I tell him it's not. I tell him this is not the way it's supposed to be. I tell him he should have his own desires. Individual. And that he should take appropriate steps to fulfill them. And that he should not have to ask my permission first!"

"Ivan, that's - praise god. That's marvellous," Toris murmured, truly proud of Ivan for once. Delighted beyond all reasonable measure, he kept his voice quiet for the relief he felt. This was looking better and better for Eduard. "You are a paragon of honour and morality. I mean it, brother." And he did.

"I really wish *that* were true," Ivan muttered. "But anyway, there's more. He keeps ... going somewhere, in the evenings. When I'm away speaking with you, he is out. Doing something. Not in
the Duma, or if he is in the Duma nobody must see him doing whatever it is he's doing."

Oh, shit. Toris pretended total ignorance. "What could he possibly be doing?"

Ivan shrugged. "No idea. He's always back by the time I'm back. Arisha has mentioned seeing him exit the Duma once. That's why I think it's outside. The one time he came back after I did, he said he had been stargazing."

"Was he? Did he seem cold?"

"I wouldn't touch him," Ivan growled, and then calmed down. "I didn't. Think of that, actually. But it doesn't matter! I am glad he doesn't mind helping me with governance issues but he doesn't enjoy it. So when he spends his entire day on my affairs, and I go and tell him outright he can do what he likes, is it not terribly hypocritical to demand answers for his nightly activities? And I'm busy myself, and if it doesn't hurt anybody, who should care?"

"But you're still concerned," Toris filled in the blanks.

"I have a bad feeling about it. I don't know why," Ivan said. "Suppose he's... meeting someone."

Toris held his breath. "Who would he meet?" he countered.

"I don't know! Maybe he's -" Ivan became quiet, morose. "Maybe he has a lover," he finished, sadly.

Meeting a lover was better than meeting three Kilnus spies. Neither did Toris want Ivan to grow jealous, however. His voice grew soft as he argued, "Would that really be so bad? You must be true to your convictions, hold steadfast to them. Since he certainly won't find anything with you, better he doesn't waste your time and his own. And, you did say... he is his own person, with his own desires." Which didn't include Ivan.

"That's true," Ivan nodded, "you're right." He checked the time. "I should get back. I will see you tomorrow, Brother?"

"Unless there are more dinner parties with your sister's suitors," Toris joked.

"No doubt you would hear about them and my terrible behaviour in the society pages," Ivan said darkly. "Dear God in Heaven, I pray the Veshnan doesn't even come near us."

"I too," replied Toris. "The grace of god be with you, my brother."

--

Toris was surprised (but extremely relieved) to find Eduard still sitting in the warehouse when he returned from drinks with Ivan.

"I thought you'd've left by now," he said, pulling off the monk's robe.

"Usually I'm gone before you get in," Eduard agreed. "I was just working on something."

"I'm glad to see you here!" Very glad. The more time Eduard spent away from that demented castle, the better. Eduard blushed, and smiled. "Did you manage to finish the two-ways?"
"I did," and he pulled out a shoebox full of little brass balls - combined Eavesdropper speaker and aud feed microphone. "Thanks for the button switches, they work a lot better. Press and hold to talk, release to listen. Simple mechanism."

"And they all talk to each other?"

"They're on the same frequency, yes. If you gave one to Raivis, Feliks, and me, anything said in yours comes through on all of ours, more or less simultaneously. In the unlikely event that two people should press the button at the exact same time, I suspect it'll garble the messages, but I couldn't test for it - the very second that one of them picks anything up on the frequency from another source, it triggers receive mode. Faster than me on a button."

Toris picked one up and hefted it. "It feels heavier," he noticed.

Eduard nodded with a grin. "That's the extended range. Needed three extra power sources on the amplifier, but you can get a klick away without concrete in the middle. A foot of concrete will cut the signal to about a quarter power. Still retrievable by another unit for about two hundred metres."

"Eduard, that's - that's incredible." The expensive, high-end Eavesdroppers were useless at two hundred metres of air. "Do you have any idea what you've done? In stores, this would cost a hundred times the materials and labour you've put in. And that goes above and beyond the current market specifications! I - I don't know if the military has anything like this yet." These would be so useful to Zielska for the Duma operation. The radiation within any one device would trigger an Eavesdropper, but the Duma was crawling with auds and vids already - Big Brother was always watching - and there was no way to differentiate one set of auds and vids from an enemy's. That was the one main drawback of any feeds: impossible to make undetectable. "Really. I ought to pay you for this. Let me do something for you!"

Eduard smiled and shrugged. "You don't have to. I'm just. Glad to help. Glad to be useful."

Oh, Eduard... "You're always useful! You don't have to be doing anything to be useful, you just are," he finished lamely. Eduard still looked sad. "Was Ivan Bragin being his usual contentious self?" Toris asked, pulling up a chair and sitting close enough to speak quietly.

"You know me that well, do you," Eduard replied. "Yeah, we ... fought, earlier today."

"What about?" Toris asked, pretending he didn't already know.

"You weren't kidding when you said he was a difficult man to get along with. It's his way or the highway - everyone has to cater to his beliefs, his system. I've tried to explain it to him and he doesn't get that I'm used to this treatment, it doesn't bother me!"

"But it does bother you," Toris said softly.

"It doesn't!" Eduard insisted.

"If it really didn't, you wouldn't be here now. You'd be back there, in bed, waiting for Ivan to come home, where he would say goodnight and not sleep with you and wake up and do the exact same thing all over again. How does that make you feel?"

Eduard didn't reply.
"It's good that it bothers you. You're meant for more than this, Eduard. A life of being used, that's not you."

"But it's okay for other people? Who determines who gets to be a bondservant and who becomes a freeman, anyway?"

Toris grinned. If Ivan only knew the extent of the impact he'd had upon Eduard! "Now you're starting to sound like a certain Bragin," he teased.

"Maybe he's right about some things," Eduard said. The petulant tone only made him sound more like a miniature Ivan.

"He's right about you," Toris replied. "Someone with your skills and talents is wasting away in the service trade."

Eduard straightened, blushing bright red. "He - he doesn't talk to you about me, does he?" he stammered. "You - you said you were friends, what does he say? D-does he talk about me often?"

"Not a word," Toris lied, placing the tiny two-way radio back in the shoebox, "just my observations with these." He pretended not to notice Eduard's deflation. "Anyway! Don't let it slip I might actually agree with Ivan about something. It'll make me look bad," he joked.

"Your secret's safe with me," Eduard said, "on one condition."

"Anything," he replied.

"You mentioned, last time we talked, something about Zapreschniy State. How the Major goes to find rubble and brings parts back. And Savva gets in her way." When Toris nodded, he continued. "So tell me about Darinys."

The shock on his face must have been obvious because Eduard backpedalled fast. "I - I guessed that's the town, the rubble that used to be a town, wasn't it? The one near Aritsevsky posyolok. Wasn't that it?"

"Yeah, that was it," he confirmed. "It's... a long story."

"I have time," insisted Eduard. "I'll make time."

"Isn't Ivan waiting for you?" he reminded coyly.

"If he gets any action these days, it's with his own hand, not me," Eduard muttered sourly. "You know that."

Raivis hadn't been in the warehouse at all that day. It'd make the most sense for a servant working at the Duma to stay in the servants' residences. Feliks wasn't around either. Agnieszka was needed at the Rubetskis' for a ball that would last until well after midnight. Nobody would hear them... but it felt like betrayal, spilling the beans to Eduard, when not even Feliks and Raivis knew the whole story. "How could you know about Darinys?" he asked quietly, hiding from people who weren't even around.

"Ivan told me his side of things," Eduard explained, "but I don't think that's all there is. He's got a
lot of gaps in his story."

Naturally, Ivan hadn't been there. He sighed. Might as well. Perhaps it would serve Eduard to think twice about Ivan.

"You come from there, don't you?" Eduard guessed. "That's why you don't want to tell me."

Toris shook his head. "Not quite. Let me explain.

"I was born in Pren, when it was part of the Democratic Republic of Kilnus. Pren, like most of Zapreschniy - then its own country - received some protection from Kilnus - funds, humanitarian aid and the like. It straddles a mountain range; the ground is fertile but the weather can be unpredictable, the roads are in poor condition, the river has a tendency to flood unexpectedly, there was never any money for anything... It's not an easy place for people to live. It needs the help.

"When I was about five, the Empire Union began an invasion of a few independent countries, among them Zapreschniy. They won it over a period of three years. Mostly underhanded dealings. Vityaz infiltrated, based on made-up talk of Kilnus giving Zapreschniy extensive military aid that would be used to strategically attack Vityaz, during a time when Kilnus and Vityaz barely spoke on good terms."

"Was that what Kilnus was doing?"

"Of course it wasn't," Toris said. Well. It was never clear what Kilnus was doing. But little came from Kilnus until Vityaz had begun paying attention to the region. Then Kilnus had really started to care. "Three years later we had a puppet government, and nobody was surprised when the final blow came, the country capitulated, and our 'leader' petitioned for admittance to the Empire with a rigged vote."


"It sure is," said Toris, with a derisive half-smile. "And the citizens complained, and protested, and all we ever got for our troubles was being ignored at the very least, and mysteriously disappearing in the night at the very worst. Best to keep one's head down and become a good Union citizen, no matter whether you were Kala or Vitim, or if you felt any allegiance to either side."

"But you're not very good at being a good citizen," Eduard noted, and Toris grinned.

"No, I'm not. But I was young then, and when you're five you don't do much spying or political anything. I cared about train sets and atlases and poppyseed milk rolls for dessert. I didn't know how poor we were. My sister, on the other hand," he said. "Our father was very proud of her. If she hadn't died, our mother would have been too."

"I'm sorry -"

"Don't be. There was one medic in all of Pren and even if we could have gotten him in time, even if he took pity and didn't charge, he still wouldn't have been able to save her. Neither I nor my sister really understood what her loss meant, but my father took it hard. Blamed Vityaz, blamed Kilnus, blamed me, blamed whatever he could. So my sister did the same. Cut her reading teeth with underground literature - whatever Dad was reading."

"Younger?"
"Older, by four years," Toris said. "I idolised her." He smiled sadly. "Anyway, Zapreschniy became ... unsatisfied with Vityaz's governance. The Revolution in Skuratchky had hardly touched countries outside the Union - all anyone could do was watch from a distance as the old Empire collapsed and was replaced by the house of Bragin."

"Ivan's parents and aunt?"

"Yes. It was before either of us were born. It happened pretty quickly - most coups usually do. Nobody had sent much news or information. Those journalists who survived the Revolution made sure to report only good things about the glorious new Empire. Skuratchky itself gave us soldiers and secret service agents - not the type of people who like to talk to the Kala.

"So the Revolution hardly mattered to us. The Counterstrike, on the other hand ... parts of it originated in Zapreschniy, a hotbed of people who preferred someone other than the totalitarian rule of Bragin and their contemporaries and supporters. Dyerov, perhaps, was their ideal choice. It didn't matter! To me, they're all the same, they treat anyone not-Vitim with the same contempt. And when everything that's anything happens in Skuratchky, nobody sees farther than three hundred kilometres and things outside the capital region matter less and less. Well! You can imagine how greatly we preferred the prospective Dyerovs to the Bragins."

"Not much of a difference," Eduard murmured.

Not much indeed. But that didn't really explain what happened... "In Pren, it began one morning, I was almost nine - we woke to the sound of gunfire and explosions. My sister acted quick; locked me in the bathroom and told me to shut up. I heard banging and a scream before someone stomping around and then silence. I never saw her or my father again."

"Do you know what happened to them?" Eduard asked.

They had been lined up against a wall and shot. But Toris didn't say this, and instead shrugged. "I tried bribing one of the soldiers for the information. When I told him who I was, who my sister and father were, asked after them, he told me I was pretty enough to get into trouble, and that I should hide because things were going to get hot in Skuratchky and nowhere would be safe. He asked if I knew anybody anywhere else, outside Pren. I told him there's family in Darinys, and then he gave me some food, a little money and his horse. He told me to follow the road southwest out of the mountains which would lead more or less to Darinys in a day."

"Then he was Kala?"

"Vitim."

"But he saved your life!"

Perhaps the soldier thought it made up for executing his family. Toris glowered. "Anyway, I arrived without any trouble - whatever bandits there were must have spotted the smoke from the fires of Pren and realised there was better looting there than on the roads. I met my great grandmother in Darinys. She had never met me before, and she was blind, half deaf and increasingly immobile, but I was helpful around the house for the roughly eight years I stayed there. She appreciated that much."

"Eight years after the Counterstrike," Eduard murmured. "That would have made it around the time
- you would have been sixteen? Ivan would have been fourteen - you were one of the ones they deported," he realised.

"You're good at this," said Toris wryly.

"I just pay attention," Eduard replied. "But regurgitating history is pretty pointless. I still don't know why any of this has to happen."

That made two of them. "They rounded up all the Kala - anybody who didn't either have Vitim documentation or couldn't forge it fast enough, or pay off the right people - and planned on chucking us into trains. But there weren't enough trains. They said there should have been twelve, only half came.

"Well, the conductors were as confused as we were, and they didn't want to overload the trains for fear of running out of fuel halfway up a mountain side, so they only took those who had Kilnus passports. Still more people than seats, so we stood in the aisles. By this point, they could have strapped me to the top of the carriage car and I wouldn't have particularly cared; any way out of the Union was fantastic. Vityaz had dicked us around and I had had enough. My old Kilnus passport was still valid and it'd get me into the country, and from there I could travel, perhaps leave and go to the capital city. Find work of some sort."

"What about your great grandmother?"

"Getting there," he muttered darkly. "About halfway through the mountains on a steep slope downwards, the train began picking up speed far too fast. The derailment was fast - someone screamed and there was a screech of metal, glass everywhere - I was knocked off balance. But there were few deaths - mostly the train personnel, very few passengers. My great-grandmother was one of them; she was far too frail for travel but I couldn't leave her behind when I left. Whiplash on brittle old bones. A snapped neck. A quick death.

"There was no explosion - at first we thought, we must have run out of fuel. Brake fluid. Something. Skuratchky commonly sent us half of what we needed. I was thin enough to crawl through the wreckage into the front carriage. Tried to radio in for help, discovered the radio didn't work. I thought it might have an outlet for a power source, so I pulled it out of the controls board to see if I could do anything with it. And that's where I spotted the explosives."

"Explosives?!!" asked Eduard, alarmed.

"Explosives, and guns. Stuffed up behind the controls board, all throughout the bottom floor of the first three carriages. Far enough away from the engines at the rear. All unarmed, no charges prepared, just - crates and crates of them."

"It was a delivery."

"Exactly. Somewhere between Skuratchky and Darinys, someone had detained the trains long enough to store a fortune's worth of armaments in the train itself. The derailment was entirely planned, all down to the fatalities of the train personnel."

"And you know this how?"

"Because once I realised what was going on, I put the radio back and waited until whoever was transporting the armaments came back to the scene of the crime. It couldn't have been Vityaz; the
fact that the bulk of the dead were Vitim was my first clue, because the Empire wouldn't have cared about fatalities to Kala and moreover would have stationed more intelligent operatives as conductors. It must have been Kilnus, working from the inside. Sure enough, three days later, precisely when all the food on the train had run out, I met Commander Zielska of Kilnus Central Intelligence, and she was at the forefront of the operation that had planned all of this. She liked me well enough to give me a job."

Eduard narrowed his eyes. "She can't have just given you a job."

"I may have helped myself to a few of the guns. In case she said no." Which she had, at first. It was a good thing Zielska admired that kind of recklessness.

"So why was the federal government of Kilnus trying to smuggle arms across the border?"

Toris leaned in closer. "All of it was new technology from Vityaz, which - naturally - they didn't intend to share with Kilnus."

"So they stole it," Eduard pointed out.

"They must have based it off the technology we'd begun. According to our engineers there's no way they could have gone from what they had, fifteen years ago, to what we brought back on the trains, without knowledge of our plans. It was proof there were Vityaz spies on the Kilnus side of things. After all that, why not station Kilnus spies in the Empire Union? Why not smuggle arms from Vityaz to Kilnus? They started it!"


"We split the passengers. Part of the team Zielska brought travelled back to Darinys and set up camp within the newly-minted Vityaz town. Those from the trains who could, who were able to, joined. It was over ninety percent! The remaining ten could pick; either come back to Darinys or carry on to Kilnus with the other half of Zielska's team. I never heard from them again, but Zielska received word they made it safely through.

"Darinys was the largest. Most of us went there, some to other towns. Wherever we were, we began training. Before, I had hardly any idea how to use a pistol. Zielska herself taught us unarmed combat, first aid, how to build and defuse explosives, all sorts of things. Fascinating work! What's more, the citizens of Darinys, everyone the trains had left behind - and some of the Vitim - they joined up with us, knowing we were with Kilnus."

"They would so easily desert their country?"

Toris scoffed. "Remember, that city - like Pren - had been receiving aid from Kilnus not a few years back. And then Vityaz storms in, doesn't care about anything except mining resources and freshwater for the capital, removes a good number of people and tells them we don't like your face, get the hell out. Then Kilnus comes back in with Zielska who gave us food, pens and pencils, books, medicine and vaccines, even sets up emergency services? Kilnus had done more for that town in two months than Vityaz had in years."

"And you were helping."

Toris scoffed. "Of course I was helping, why wouldn't I? I saw finally why my sister had joined up, it made me feel -"
"Useful," Eduard finished, and Toris snapped his mouth shut. He watched as Eduard took a moment to think before he shrugged and nodded. "Why didn't you tell me this, when I asked you about Zapreschniy earlier?"

There was nobody but them in the warehouse. There had been nobody but them in the warehouse all evening. And yet, Toris still looked around, over his shoulder. Like Feliks' eyes and Raivis' unhappy pout were still there. But Eduard had asked, and Toris had already gone and told him so much - and they were alike, them two, needing a function in the world coherent with their abilities. Toris would tell him. Toris would tell him much more. "I'm not done yet. There was... there were things that happened to Feliks and Raivis. Things I don't know if they want you to know, and it isn't my story to tell, but I don't think they will tell you."

"They don't trust me?" Eduard sounded hurt.

"It's not that!" Toris assured him. "It's a very sensitive matter. I'll explain it. Besides. What if I tell you everything, and you go and tell Ivan? He would know you had some way of getting Kilnus information. In a time when the Empire Union is closed and you can't get anything across the border without suspicion. What would he think about that?"

"Probably nothing good," he admitted.

"You see my point, then," Toris said, and steeled himself for the rest. "As you can imagine we got a lot of trainees very quickly. Once my own training was complete, Zielska put me and other graduates in charge of new recruits. That's where I met Feliks - equally pissed off about Vityaz's antics, and he's neither Vitim nor Kala! Theoretically, he's neutral."

"I can't picture Feliks ever being neutral. What about Raivis?"

"Ah... we met him later. During his training Feliks came across - perfectly by accident - a Vityaz intelligence officer in Darinys, 'training' for Kilnus. An infiltrator. Being friendly, eating our food, drinking our water, sending pictures back to Skuratchky. Feliks told me. I told Zielska. Zielska suspected this agent wasn't working alone. She asked me to organise a movement to smoke out the rest."

"And how'd that go?"

"For my first operation, rather well. We managed to find five of them. Except they all committed suicide."

"What!?"

"Yeah. Zielska was not impressed. That's supposed to be the first thing you do, strip them of their clothing and give them bondsperson robes or something cheap like that - ah, no offence - while you check their garments for pills sewn into the hems." Toris, then unaccustomed to the idea of people killing themselves not to be found out, had forgotten. "Zielska telegraphed Skuratchky before she found out about, ah, the five dead spies, asking them to explain themselves. A day later we spotted a troop of marines outside getting into gear."

"But Darinys is over a thousand kilometres away," Eduard pointed out. "A day's trek wouldn't put you anywhere near Darinys from Skuratchky if they hadn't taken airships - and you would have spotted airships - they must have been closing in all along."
Precisely. "Zielska thought them the intelligence team's reinforcements, and when they hadn't received a regular update, moved in. But we'd seen them with enough distance and were adequately prepared to meet them head on. They fired first -"

"Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure," said Toris. "Their captain ordered the first shot. I heard him clearly." He wouldn't soon forget it. "We retaliated and brought in most of them. Zielska sent out a second message to Skuratchky, saying we know what's up, your boys have spilled. She asked for Darinys, and in exchange they'd get the captain and the remainder of their marines back, and their intelligence operatives too."

"But the intelligence operatives were dead."

"Yes, well." That was filed under Things Vityaz Didn't Need To Know. "When Bragina didn't reply for days, we thought it didn't look good. Zielska prepared to shoot the marines -"

"Were they marines or hostages?! Toris, this sounds more like an act of terrorism!"

"I'm not saying I agree completely with Zielska's methods." And he didn't, not always. "But I can't think of anything else we could've done with the marines, could you? Leave them to rot in jails? Let them attempt the long trek back to the nearest train stop to the Empire capital? Besides. I don't think Zielska had ever expected Bragina to reply with actual words, and she didn't."

"The airships came," Eduard guessed.

Toris nodded grimly. "All hell broke loose after that. It was several days of fighting and we'd lost a fair few people, almost all of our ammunitions, so we were set on retreating into the mountains with the recruits that were left when suddenly -"

When suddenly, nothing. It was common with head injuries, not to remember the accident. He didn't remember the explosion or being flung into a treetrunk headfirst.

"The next thing I knew I woke up in an emergency hospital, it was three days later, and the entire town was gone. Flattened. Over a hundred thousand people, dead. Everyone I knew. I only made it out alive because I hadn't been close enough to the blast."

"What happened then?"

"Search and rescue, two weeks of it. The second I could get on my feet I joined the crew of people - some Vityaz, some Kala, some Sprus - none of Yozhina's marines or Bragina's airship personnel, naturally. Looked for survivors. There were twenty of us to start; gradually our numbers grew to about fifty."

He began to feel queasy again; telling the story was nowhere as bad as living it, but he'd never scrape those images out of his mind. "It... started to look bad around week two. Because we stopped finding people alive. About ten days after the blast, I... I hadn't found Feliks yet, and it was body after body under the rubble. We were only on the outer rim of the town, we didn't bother with anything closer to the epicentre... I was convinced he was dead. Meanwhile, we caught radio snippets that Bragin - Ivan, not Yekaterina - was making some statements in regards to the tragedy, would be looking into it with aid and benefits, et cetera."
"Did he?" asked Eduard.

"Yes, he did, but by that time, I was gone," Toris told him, "we all headed straight for Skuratchky. We didn't have much of a choice, we needed medics. The last house where we found anybody alive in Darinys was the old Astrauckas manor. The roof and walls had collapsed in such a way that the basement was mostly preserved, but the people in the basement had been trapped there for some time."

"For two weeks? How did they manage to avoid dehydration?"

"The basement windows at the tops were broken, people had tried to escape." Tried and failed, and there their bodies lay rotting, falling apart on the window frame, their flesh torn and twisted on jagged glass and wood. "There was only the smallest space where an arm could reach to grab snow ..." Raivis' forearm, scratched to hell by broken glass, lucky he didn't contract blood poisoning. skinny as a rail it would've done him in - he said he'd always been skinny but you could count every rib - Feliks could hardly swallow anything, couldn't keep food or water down, every single one of them inside afflicted with the flu or cholera or both - pity those who'd brought it into Astrauckas House hadn't perished when the roof caved in, they might have had more survivors instead of sixty cadavers piled inside the bedroom, a sick cesspool of what was once human -

- oh god the smell -

This is Raivis, Feliks had introduced him, you need to get him out of here, he's sicker than I am - Raivis had weighed less than thirty kilos, Toris had lifted him with a single arm - smelled terrible, moaned in pain whenever you went near him - cried all day and shrieked all night -

Two straight weeks of that -

"Toris?" Eduard asked softly.

"Hmm?"

"You ... you just got quiet there for a second."

Toris thought a moment before he replied quietly, shakily, "I can't put into words, what we found. There had been over a hundred people in the basement, crammed there ... we rescued only forty-three, the rest of them perished and ... they lay there, putrefying ... and two weeks' worth of sick and rot and death smells like, it's - it's etched into my brain ..."

"That's where you found Raivis and Feliks," Eduard guessed.

"Yes," he whispered.

"You don't have to tell me," Eduard offered. Good, Toris thought gratefully, because Toris wasn't sure he could translate those images coherently enough. "You got them out, that's the important part. Then you said headed to the capital for medics."

"Right. That's when I started my first infiltration operation. It began mostly as necessity - the second people found out you were from Darinys, you'd start disappearing. I couldn't have that happen to Raivis, or Feliks, not after everything. Some idiot had put up their old Revolutionary bunker for sale and foolishly hadn't done the background check on me when I purchased it. And
the rest is history."

Slow, painful, recovery-process history. He shouldn't've said what he had to Feliks about Astrauckas, that was wrong. For a moment, he felt deeply ashamed.

"Did you ever find out what happened to the town?"

Toris nodded. "A day's travel away, Zielska got a radio message. We finally put it all together on the road. Orders were given to the marine captain who came in with the airships: stop it immediately at any cost. The captain told all of her people to get out, then got a hold of the explosives we'd been keeping. Took them up in airships, and detonated them there above the town. That levelled the buildings, incinerated ninety percent of Darinys. We found out everyone who didn't come with us - or who didn't go underground - died slowly, painfully, of injury and illness."

Eduard was quiet. "Toris, I'm so sorry."

"Don't you realise?" Toris hissed. "'Stop it'? 'At any cost'? Bragina did it all on purpose. She relayed instructions for a suicide mission for the marine captain, someone she knew, someone close to her, to martyr herself in order to pinch off a sticky situation that Vityaz themselves caused before it escalated further!"

"How do you know that?"

"Because Captain Domka Yozhina was the older sister of a spineless Empire puppet who's paying for his sister's crimes. Doesn't that sound awfully familiar to you?" He took a deep breath and tried to calm himself. "I'm sorry, I - this is hard for me. Some of this is stuff the Major Vmalkhina of 'Aritsevskiy' has discovered herself. After Darinys - it all got hushed up, nobody was left to speak of it. Vmalkhina's on the wrong side but as you can see, her actions speak louder than words. Yozhina was close to Bragina, too close. No, Vmalkhina's never found the body in the rubble, there's no proof there, but she's the only one who could have piloted the airship, detonated the explosives at the appropriate time."

"She would have killed herself."

"Exactly. And just look at her track record within the military. Posthumously, awards upon orders upon medals. What do you think they were all for?"

Eduard sighed and let the silence hang over them for a minute while he processed. "Why didn't you yourself ever return to Darinys? To do what Vmalkhina does? You seem - it might be a good idea for you. To get over it."

"That nightmare of a town? Hah," Toris laughed. "No thanks. Ivan sent people who went there afterwards. He sent people to clean up his sister's mess and leave no witnesses. Why would I bother going back? Besides, I found more permanent work here, in Skuratchky."

"Doing an operation?" Eduard asked.

Toris smiled. "I couldn't tell you even if I wanted to."

"Then it must be still on-go-"

Dead silence. Toris looked up. Eduard had grown unnaturally pale. "Are you okay?" he asked,
alarmed.

"I-I'm fine," he said, his voice strangely taut.

"You don't look fine," Toris murmured. He held out a hand and pressed it to Eduard's brow; Eduard tried to jerk away. Clammy skin... "I can get you some tea, or maybe - actually all we have is tea here. Tea or vodka."

"Really," Eduard said. "I'll be okay. I just - realised the time. It's so late, I should - I should go. Ivan'll be waiting."

He looked nervous. "About him," Toris began uncertainly. "Eduard, listen, please. If you ever need to stay here, we can protect you. And - if you ever want something more. If you ever wanted to get away permanently, I can do that too. I can make people disappear." Papers for Kilnus, but it would be a start, and from there they could get Eduard off-planet in case Ivan got crazy. Crazier.

"I'm not in any danger," Eduard protested, sounding over-confident.

At least Toris had extended the olive branch. "Keep it in mind," he advised, and gave Eduard a genuine smile. "If anyone can tell you Ivan is difficult, I can. I only want to help you. You're one of us now, and I -" Toris bit his lip, his pulse fluttering like mad in his throat. "I would do anything for you, I want you to know that."

Eduard looked away and blinked furiously. "I know."
Don't think. Passageway, tavern, outside, got to get outside, get away, get back to the Duma (should he? Would he be wanted there?) -

No time. Don't think. Just run.

Don't think?! Don't THINK?! Not thinking was what had gotten him into this mess -

"Watch it, kid!" yelled the cook, and he leapt, narrowly avoiding a spill on the floor that would've taken him out.

"Thanks," Eduard called back, and sprinted out the back door of the tavern.

- oh god. The monk's habit - clearly not a monk! - the vodka breath - clearly not drunk - the absences at the same time, why he'd never run into Toris unless he stayed out later than Ivan, the fucking spy hideaway, the constant hate on Vityaz, demonisation of an entire country and its people - how? How hadn't he put it all together? All those clues, and for what? Eduard had a better grasp of what resistor went where! (But books helped, amplifier design was easy when the plans were laid out on a page, ready for you to paint by number - when had the inner machinations of spy mentality been committed to print as accessibly!?)

Just ... until now, it hadn't seemed likely! Hadn't seemed like - and, and Ivan had never mentioned the name of his friend, had never told Eduard who the fellow's name was, that one lone friend of Ivan's - the only friend he had apparently! -

That friend who was out to kill him -

No. Not kill him. Worse than kill him. Could Toris be classified as an assassin if it didn't result in a body count?

How could Toris still hate them so much? Eduard had spent the past two weeks with Ivan, had already become fond of him. Toris had spent the past eight years. And Eduard, Eduard was helping the man who wanted Ivan worse than dead. After all Ivan had done for him...

- but what had Ivan done for him really, had him work on shit that made no sense with little reprieve, the man wouldn't even fuck him! - but how could he think like that anymore, while wearing the clothes Ivan had purchased for him, felt new, felt foreign, weren't soft with wear, didn't smell faintly like him, Vanya had literally given him the shirt off his back - and, and Toris, Toris wanted him dead! No, not dead, worse than dead, because what kind of life was it, Vanya's eyes wide open unfocussed staring at the ceiling with no spark of life left

- what was he going to do? Francis had not prepared him for this!

Eduard gave in to the nausea gurgling and twisting in his stomach. He fell to his knees in the snow.
and retched up the soup and rye he'd had earlier.

"You okay?" he heard distantly, a voice he didn't recognise above him.

"'M fine," Eduard mumbled breathlessly to the nearby boots. He waited until they walked away before getting to his feet slowly and hobbling back to the Duma, his insides too fragile for anything faster.

Whatever happened to him, he thought, Ivan should know about what he'd done. Would Ivan beat him? Whip him? It didn't seem like his style but what if Eduard had really deserved it? This could be considered treason - but bondspeople weren't really people - but Ivan thought they were - but it still wasn't apparent what Toris wanted with those bloody Eavesdroppers and if - if it helped Raivis and Feliks, if it helped his friends, would that be so bad?

And wasn't Toris a friend? He was kind and respectful to Eduard, knowledgeable, forthcoming, supportive. He'd had his own ordeals and was angry. He rebelled against an Empire that took by force what wasn't theirs and gave no quarter to those it branded enemies. Eduard could not - did not - blame him for what he did.

And if it weren't for the fact that Toris had intended on doing serious harm to Ivan, would Eduard really care? Eduard had no loyalty to this strange, whacko Empire, only its future emperor!

Assuming Ivan had not lied to Eduard ... what if Ivan himself was ignorant of the gaps in his stories, of what his sister had done? He'd said it himself, he wasn't always clear-minded... Maybe the Gospozha Yekaterina thought ignorance was bliss for her brother. It'd fit. She didn't treat him like he knew what he was doing. She treated him like a child and was reluctant to relinquish control. Maybe that was for Ivan's benefit, to protect him and not overload him. But Ivan was twenty-four, he wasn't her little baby brother anymore. He could handle it, especially with Eduard there.

Between Toris and the Gospozha, Toris had been a lot nicer to Eduard. Toris cared for him. The Gospozha did not. Toris told him he'd save him. The Gospozha had tried to lead him to his death. She had only done what she could to prevent it because waking up to a dead body would hurt Ivan, Ivan would've gone ballistic, but she didn't do it for Eduard's sake. Not at all. To Gospozha Yekaterina, he was expendable - an expensive one-time-use only fuck toy.

And wouldn't it have been better if there had been no witnesses!

Perhaps his training was slipping after all, he thought glumly. He should have been okay with death. Whatever his master wanted. Was it so bad that he had some shred of self-preservation?

Besides, Toris couldn't hurt Ivan anymore. Ivan must not have told his very best friend - frankly, Eduard thought this biology business was nobody's but Ivan's own. Rather smart of Ivan not to have told Toris who surely would be laughed at, if he elected to spread the truth. What self-respecting civilised city-dwelling Vitim would bother waiting? There was nothing taboo about sex in Skuratchky!

(Well, in all parts of Skuratchky that weren't Ivan's quarters, Eduard thought, grumbling.)

No, Ivan was safe, regardless. Though the notes Eduard had read did mention the possibility of the khadaranin spike returning - perhaps Eduard should stick around for that, he could be useful yet.
Probably just wishful thinking.

All had gone better than expected, hadn't it? Ivan was still alive, still mostly sane, still prepared to lead this country, the Gospozha's permission or not. Whether the country's origins were moral - and what he'd read from the files it spanned a coup d'etat to the tragic raze of an entire city to cover up a mistake - this was all debateable. And in a way, none of that mattered to Eduard. It was in the past, and it was unfortunate. But there was nothing he or Ivan could do about these things now but make reparations. Today's job would be to help with the current state of affairs, not atone for the mistakes of ghosts.

But it really was the perfect crime, the perfect horrible crime. An assassination that didn't result in an actual death, just brain death. If Olyokin's laws were anything like Hallar's, as long as Ivan continued to breathe, Toris couldn't be tried or prosecuted. Could even remain in character and hide behind the religion.

Toris was the one who had convinced Ivan he shouldn't succumb to his Time. Toris was the one who had indoctrinated him. Toris was Ivan's "only one real friend".

At least there was one trick left - everyone working in the base thought the game was still on -

No. Two tricks left. Eduard realised, against the protestations of his stomach, he'd been walking briskly. He stopped to catch his breath, and smiled. Allowed his nerves push it into a giggle. Red-faced and panting, he considered this something worth giggling over.

He'd finished what Toris had asked of him early on in the evening, after Feliks had left for the Rubetskis' ball. He had the idea to fix the mainspring in the watch Ivan had given him.

And then he had had another idea.

The pocketwatch didn't use a power source.

The power source in an aud or vid feed was what made it easily detectable.

His amplifier was strong enough to boost the tiny amount of power the mainspring could give into something enough for close-range.

It was brilliant and moreover it was something that nobody had ever bothered to do. Nothing he'd read about gave any clue to an unidentifiable aud feed - mechanical watches had fallen out of fashion so long ago, Eavesdroppers came about later, nobody had bothered with it, you got more power with a battery. How could he not try it?

The whole thing smacked of betrayal, though, when he pried open the back of Ivan's pocketwatch to pilfer it for parts. Forgive me, he'd thought, though he had been careful to only take what he absolutely needed and kept the housing perfectly clean and untouched. He couldn't use the metal or glass housing for anything. And mainspring or not, he wanted to keep the watch. The nicest thing anybody had ever given him. Vanya hadn't had to do that. It was just - it was just something he'd done after he'd seen how intrigued Eduard was about how the watch worked. It didn't make Eduard any more useful to Ivan at all, it didn't help Ivan in any way.

(And he'd gone and taken it apart. What a travesty. How could he do that to Vanya?)

But he'd had a hunch. And now it worked - he had an aud feed that couldn't be detected - he wound
it up and let it record -

That was when Toris had come in. And though he knew Toris usually came in around the time that he was supposed to be leaving to go home, Eduard wasn't often late to bed. Ivan would hopefully understand -

That's it then, he decided. He wouldn't tell Ivan about what he'd done - not yet. See first if Toris had anything else planned to harm Ivan, then retrieve the Eavesdropper. Proof of their actions. If they kept themselves out of Ivan's hair directly, well, they were his friends, he'd let them go.

Yekaterina, on the other hand. If Toris' main goal were to attack the Empire as Eduard suspected, Eduard wasn't sure he would stand in Toris' way, not when a very large part of him believed it wasn't working well. Between what Ivan and Toris had each said ... well, Eduard wanted to believe she didn't order the deaths of a hundred thousand mostly innocent people. But she could so easily order his own! And she'd spoken to him, she'd touched him, she'd had her finger up his ass, and was still prepared to have him slaughtered to get rid of a problem the Empire faced.

How much easier could it be to get rid of a problem the Empire faced caused by a hundred thousand people she never knew?

Child rulers weren't so strange. They'd had loads of advisors, and Natalya was normal. Why not her sister?

Perhaps she was born insane, psychotic. Or perhaps she'd just lost perspective, lost her judgment, her reason and rationale. Which was it, and what caused that?

There was still something they weren't telling him.

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Eduard pushed open the door to the Duma. Not locked yet - must be before midnight (so he guessed; wasn't like his watch worked anymore). The front room and parlour were both deserted and darkened. He reached out to touch one of the bulbs. Cold. Ivan must have been home for over an hour. He'd have to think up a clever excuse.

"You're home late," said a quiet voice from the left hallway. Yekaterina's bondsgirl stood there, dressed in her evening streetwear with a book.

"What, is there a curfew now?"

"Just making conversation. I was in the library. Heard your boots click," she said. "Your tonic is waiting for you in the kitchens. Doesn't Arisha bring it to your chambers for you anymore?"

"I'm not taking it," Eduard replied. When she threw him a surprised look, he told her, "Ivan didn't want me to."

She shrugged. "Whatever Gospodin Ivan wishes. Goodnight."

"Wait!" he called, before she could ascend the stairs to the Gospozha's quarters. She turned, and maybe he was reading too much into this because her expression seemed imperious and judgmental, like she already knew what a traitor he was.
"What - happened, during the Counterstrike?" Darinys, he knew; the Revolution, he knew; but there was something that had turned Katya into the Gospozha Yekaterina, something that had happened. Arisha had known nothing, Natalya had known nothing but Ivan - Ivan was holding out. If anybody knew the Gospozha, this girl would.

"There's a library full of books on that," she said tiredly, "you can help yourself -"

"I don't want what's published in books," Eduard clarified. He'd read them all already; tales of how in one evening the Bragin family went gentle into the good night. How some brilliant and valorous servants had secured the children and hidden them away at the expense of their own lives. How the court had moved swiftly to crown an eleven-year-old as Regnant Empress in order to keep the conveniently-timed threat of Kilnus conflicts from sparking into full-scale war. "I mean the story that didn't make it to the books. The story that's kept out of them. There is one, isn't there? I can tell by the way Natalya tells it, she knows that's not all there is."

"It's not my tale to tell."

"Please! I need to know. It means something, there's something missing - tell me, please. For Vanya -"

"You dare call him that!" she exclaimed. "How can you be so insolent?"

"He lets me," Eduard protested, "he would rather!"

"Then he can tell you himself, since you two are obviously so close," she snapped, and as infuriatingly tight-lipped as Vanya had been and would no doubt continue to be, she had a point. Hadn't he betrayed Vanya's trust enough today? Any more slinking around behind his back, Eduard might as well be like Toris and make a job out of it.

"But -"

"You're already late," she said. "What more do you want me to say?" She came closer to him, stood as tall as possible against him and said quietly, "If you want to ask him, then ask him. Ask him what it is his sister did for him that night. For Natasha. But don't go behind his back!"

"I didn't mean to -" he tried to say. "I don't want to ... I just don't understand."

"Gospodin Ivan doesn't like lies," she explained, warning him. "He doesn't like liars. He particularly dislikes having to remain silent himself because of something that was covered up, some mistake Gospozha Katya has made. Or that he has made. He makes mistakes too, he isn't perfect. Something that would make the Empire look really bad, he will shut up about but he hates it. If it were up to him alone, he'd implement a policy of total openness. But Gospozha Katya would never have it."

"That's really too bad," he stated.

"Is it?" the Gospozha's bonds girl asked. "I agree with the Gospozha." Of course you do, Eduard thought, resisting the urge to roll his eyes. "Some things people are better off simply not knowing. Politics is like making sausage. Everybody likes the outcome when it's done right. But nobody wants to see it being made. Those who think they do are wrong. They need concealment more than they think." She paused. "Incidentally that also explains why I refuse to eat ground meats." And then she danced away up the stairs before he could badger her any further.
His nerves shot, his calm completely blown, and still no decent excuse about him - his head still swimming with frenzy - Eduard headed to the kitchens to drink some tonic anyway. It would calm him enough to get through the next discussion with Ivan, who would no doubt still be awake, and awaiting an explanation he didn't really have.

By the time he had finished the tonic, drunk some water, and brushed his teeth to try and rid himself of the lingering aftertaste (he knew full well how terrible that tonic was, but how blissful it felt going down! Well, they wouldn't call it falling off the wagon if it were difficult to do), the clock had struck midnight. He spotted the shaft of feeble light from underneath the door to Ivan's quarters where he slept, sighed, braced himself, and entered.

Ivan looked over from his bed where he sat against the headboard. He was already dressed in bedclothes, but had evidently remained awake to read.

The gaze hit him like a sharp wind and at once Eduard felt like a disappointment. Yekaterina has no reason to doubt her brother, he thought, swallowing with difficulty and feeling his face heat up and his pulse race. Not when he manages to make a simple stare of his eyes more hurtful than a whip could ever possibly be. This must have been what poor Matthieu went through daily.

Ivan marked his place in the book and put it down in his lap. "Should I bother inquiring where you were?" he asked, his voice quietly disdainful and dripping with defeat.

"I - um. I was speaking to the Gospozha's bondsgirl."

"Oh really," Ivan mused silkily. "Because I spoke with her too, and she said she hadn't seen you all day. She asked after you, your health. She said she hoped you weren't ill. But you don't look ill."

"B-but I just saw her now," he protested, "you can go ask -"

Ivan shut him up with a quick, polite nod of his head. "Perhaps what you say is true. I did speak with her the moment I got in. That was over an hour ago. If what you say is true, you must have spoken to her more recently and therefore you were elsewhere for the majority of that hour until you met with her. So where were you before?"

He bit his lip. He had nothing to say, nothing but the awful truth and he couldn't, just couldn't -

"Don't lie to me, Eduard," Ivan said, pitifully. "For God's sake." And he couldn't lie to Ivan, either, not with his eyes imploring at him like that, the graceful set of his lips in a frown.

So what could he say?

He said nothing at all and merely stood there. Incredibly ashamed and feeling like a gigantic failure despite everything he'd achieved tonight. Part of him wanted to be angry at Ivan for that. The other part felt sorry for himself and wanted to get this over with as quickly as possible, so he could go lick his wounds in private.

Finally Ivan sighed, looked away and muttered, "I know you have your own life. I do not control you. I don't ... monitor you with - you're not on some kind of leash. But lies, I cannot abide them."

"Is it because of the Counterstrike?" he asked in a small voice, improbably worried of Ivan's reaction despite him not having displayed an iota of real anger so far.
Instead, he seemed shocked. "Rodnaya moya must have told you," he deduced. "I see. There are truly no secrets anymore. Perhaps that is for the best. I assume she, ah. Told you everything?"

Eduard shook his head. Implying that she had might fish more answers out of Ivan but he just didn't have it in him anymore to lie to someone so gentle. How Toris did this kind of thing on a regular basis he'd never know. "She told me only the barest. That the Gospozha did something. For you, for Natalya. And that it's why she's so - the way she is."

Again he felt Ivan's gaze as keenly as if it had an actual force behind it, searching his face, evaluating. He waited patiently, knowing he was blushing and breathing a little harder than normal. Hopefully Ivan would chalk it up to nerves.

After some time, Ivan reached over, patted the coverlet of the bed, next to where he sat. "Sit," he instructed, and while it was phrased like an order - probably one of the first Ivan had ever given him - he didn't mistake the undertone of invitation. Almost greedily, Eduard clambered onto the bed.

"I say that I do not remember much from that night," Ivan began, awkwardly fiddling with the back cover of the book he'd been reading - *Amplitude Modulation in the Low Power Regime*, one of the engineering books Eduard had taken out a few nights ago. (What was Ivan doing with it? It crossed his mind briefly that Ivan might figure out what it was he'd been doing... but this book he'd hardly needed more than a page or two for reference. He was surely safe.)

"The night people broke into the Duma, managed to penetrate the residential side, and killed my mother, my father and my aunt. This you know. What is left out of the history books is that I heard everything that happened, from my father's quick death outside, to my mother's slow, painful one, in the wing that's now the library. And that Katya witnessed it. I was young. Katya believes I have blocked it out of my memory permanently. Of course, I have not."

"You ... you remember -"

"Every detail," Ivan said quietly. "Every last one. I can see the question already on your lips - yes, there is a story here. But not one I am willing to share. Do you understand? Is this enough to satisfy your unreasonable curiosity?"

That wasn't much of an answer. Eduard might ordinarily feel resentful, but not with the night he'd had. Enough of tales of bloodshed already. "That's why she protects you," he said instead, shuffling closer.

"Yes," replied Ivan, "and Natasha, and nasha rodnaya, and - well, everyone she can. Once she warms up to you a little more, she'll probably mother you too. In her own strident way."

"Is that really so bad?" he joked.

"She can never replace our mother," Ivan said, with a grim smile, and a shrug, "our parents. She can't replace them. She will go mad trying. Some say she already has. Besides, she is someone different! She should be different, should be her own person." Eduard watched Ivan toy with the pages, two long fingers gracefully stroking the sides. Careful there, papercuts, he thought -

- a split second before Ivan jerked, and lifted his fingers to his mouth. Eduard tried not to stare too hard. Mouth dry, he licked his lips.
It's just the tonic, he told himself. It makes you desperately crave what you already know you can't have. Your fault for taking it.

"Ah, if she knew I had been listening that evening," Ivan continued, "I think she would have had me institutionalised or put into therapy or something. But you can see, neither of us came out unscathed. As though she can handle something far worse without adverse effects and I cannot handle what happened to me."

"She doesn't mean to be so condescending," Eduard countered.

"But this is what I mean! It's not nurture, it's not warmth, it's overprotection and codependency issues and taking things too seriously." Ivan sighed and slouched against the headboard. "I can try to change her, I have tried, but it goes nowhere. All I can do is fix her mistakes when she makes them and try not to take too much of the fire, in case she decides she should pick up where she left off and go right back to how she was. Attempting to manage the entire Empire on her own, making mistakes, spreading herself far too thin and making more. Like how she was doing before you came to us."

Ivan was so near to him, like this - Eduard could just reach over and grab him around the shoulders, embrace him closely. Tempting. But he didn't move. Stupid bondsman, doesn't remember his training! If his master doesn't want it then neither do you!

"I'm sorry I lied to you," he breathed, "I won't do it anymore."

When Ivan didn't reply and stayed rigid and immobile he became concerned. "I mean it Vanya, I am, I am sorry, it won't happen again!" he beseeched -

"Oh, no, dusha moya, I didn't mean this!" Ivan blurted quickly. He moved to rest his hand on Eduard's own, squeezing it lightly. The heat of Ivan's skin, tingling all the way up to his elbow, felt better than he envisioned a hug would anyway. His face and neck warm, his chest aching, Eduard forced himself to hold Ivan's gaze, wondering if this meant what he thought it meant, because it looked like it really did! - he leaned in and pursed his lips enough to draw attention to them, his pulse thundering in his ears -

- when suddenly Ivan pulled away and became rigid again. He turned his face and looked away. Dammit, Eduard thought, they'd been so close that this infuriating space between them felt like an insult. "It's quite late. We should sleep."

Yes, big day tomorrow, full of the same nothing they did yesterday. "Very well," he said, pushing himself off Ivan's bed, away from his warmth, with regret.

He stopped at the threshold to his room. "Is it always 'moya', even if the subject is masculine?" Eduard asked. He received a blank look and a blink so he clarified. "You said - your maid, Arina, becomes Arisha moya or Arishka; Natalya becomes Natasha or Natashka, rodnaya takes moya too - it must mean 'my', obviously. But is it still moya when Eduard becomes 'Dusha' as you said?"

"Ah," Ivan said, sounding nervous. "I said that? Yes. With ...dusha, it would be moya."

Uh-huh. Perhaps the main reason Ivan hated liars so much was because he wasn't a very good one himself, Eduard conjectured. But he refrained from taunting Ivan further for finally admitting possession. Mine, he'd said it - mine. "Goodnight," Eduard said smoothly, and left before he could
break out into laughter at how silly ruddy cheeks looked against Ivan's pale hair.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry about the delayed update! (A more appropriate diminutive for Eduard is 'Edik'; 'dusha' means something else entirely.)
When Ludwig came in from his bath, he asked, "Where's Feliciano?"


"Ah," Ludwig replied, picked up a book of his own and sat down beside him. They sat in silence for about twenty minutes on the couch, both reading.

Alfred had no problem with Ludwig, not really. Ludwig was in many ways Feliciano's opposite. Feliciano was familiar - soft, round features, touchy and friendly, talkative, loud. On the other hand there was Ludwig - quiet, bookish, serene, and incredibly, intimidatingly masculine, no part of him soft or round. There were benefits to each. Soft, pretty Feli and ultra-male Ludwig. But obviously he didn't mind that, he thought sarcastically, not with the way he'd reacted last night. And the night before that, and the night before that. The snap of fingers echoed in his mind. He felt his face and neck warm and was thankful Ludwig was so engrossed in his own novel.

That one time, a week after he'd gotten here, had opened the floodgates. To progress from touches straight to sex... he wasn't complaining (or hell, maybe he was) but it was real weird. Add that to the fact that he'd never had so much sex so frequently in his life - Alfred couldn't admit he wasn't enjoying that either. It wasn't anything he didn't want himself.

So it wasn't home, but he'd be home soon. This'd all be over. And when life gives you lemons, right? All he was doing was making the best of a sticky situation.

But he wasn't sure he wasn't making it stickier. It had taken him two full days to admit he liked Ludwig, more than just 'I appreciate your physique in a purely aesthetic way of saying'. It took him another three to admit he wanted Ludwig. It still felt weird, strange somehow, to think about. About... gosh, about fucking a guy and being fucked by one and enjoying it -

His face was practically on fire. He felt short of breath. The snap of fingers echoed in his mind. He had a book in his hand, wasn't sure what he was doing with it.

Feliciano, on the other hand, Alfred had liked immediately. It was easier to like Feliciano, Feliciano was beautiful, it felt as natural as opening his eyes, and wanting him had been as intense as wanting Ludwig but so much easier on the mind. But Feli didn't touch him and for every stroke of Ludwig's fingers on his body it made him crave Feli's more -

He felt screwed up and sideways and he wanted to please Feli for all that Feli had done for him and Feli wouldn't touch him at all.

But he'd be home soon. He'd be home and safe and though he was torn between wanting to stay and needing to leave, a few more days and it'd all be over, Captain Kirkland and Unsinkable'd be buying him at the auction and taking him home. That was where he belonged, wasn't it? Of course it was! He wasn't like Ludwig.

What would he do then? He hadn't been in a relationship before he was taken. Would he date
another girl? Would he date a guy, would his boss look at him funny and think *queer*? And what his mother would say!

- Actually, Mom probably wouldn't care if he painted himself orange and ran naked throughout the streets of Lawton. Mom was kind of a libertine on New Joplin. Dad, maybe not so much.

Maybe his parents couldn't tell. Maybe if he just ... never brought a boy home, he'd be in the clear and Dad would never need to know. Alfred wasn't sure what his friends would think of it, either. But he probably couldn't avoid bringing a ... *boyfriend* around to meet friends. After all, all his friends had known his girlfriends. (And what would he *tell* his friends? 'I spent three weeks screwing men'? He couldn't!) No, better if he just stuck to women. had done for him and Feli wouldn't touch him at all. But he'd be home soon. He'd be home and safe and though he was torn between wanting to stay and needing to leave, a few more days and it'd all be over, Captain Kirkland and Unsinkable'd be buying him at the auction and taking him home. That was where he belonged.

Could he do that anymore? It was one thing before when he was ignorant but knowing the option was there was kinda eye-opening. It wasn't surprising that he liked - blowjobs, that he liked ... *y'know, fucking*, didn't everybody? So he'd thought. But he hadn't ever considered what it would be like to be with a guy. Hadn't ever put himself in his girlfriends' positions, thought, what if I was on bottom, that hadn't occurred to him as a possibility. Didn't know why not.

Maybe that's why he sort of liked it, just a little bit, he concluded, breathing hard and trying (and failing) to concentrate on his book. The novelty hadn't worn off yet, that was all. The snap of fingers echoed in his mind.

When the clock struck four, Ludwig told him, "We should probably think about dinner," and Alfred tried to get his heart rate back to normal. *You're not even reading a romance novel*, he thought, and despite how boring the book was - hardly glanced at a word the whole time Ludwig was beside him - he was acting like he held the hottest piece of smut fiction he'd ever seen.

"Y-yeah," he said shakily; cleared his throat and tried again. "You're right. Um. Pasta? Feli likes pasta."

"I think there is dough left," Ludwig agreed. "If not, I'll make more." He turned and caught Alfred's glance, gave him a slow, easy half-smile. The memory of those lips, how they'd made him feel, was way too vivid, and just like that, Alfred's cheeks were warm again. "If Feliciano returns, please tell him that's where I've gone," he said, leaving for the kitchen.

"Will do," Alfred murmured, watching him leave.

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It was much, much easier to focus on the book without Ludwig distracting him on the couch (by being perfectly still and calm and handsome and not actually doing anything, which only irked Alfred further; you can't tell someone to *stop it* when they haven't been doing anything). He re-read the page he'd spent the last fifteen minutes skimming and actually got the gist of it this time, and moved on.

Alfred had about ten minutes of silent reading when Feliciano walked in. He didn't have to look up; he knew it was Feliciano. It smelled like him, it sounded like his footsteps. He tried to keep his breathing regular and closed the book. He wouldn't get any good reading done now, not when
every fibre of his being felt hyperfocused on Feliciano.

"Back! Where's Ludwig? Still in the bath?" asked Feliciano.

"He's off making dinner. Pasta."

"Oh, yay!" Feliciano exclaimed, plunking himself down on the couch next to Alfred. Close enough that Alfred could feel the thin linen on his pants rubbing back and forth on the side of his thigh as Feliciano settled in beside him, could sense the heat there, seeping in. Much closer than a friend would sit. "Ludwig's a fantastic cook! No matter what he makes I'm certain it'll be delicious. I love food!"

Alfred smiled. "How was your meeting?"

"Meetings," Feliciano corrected, helping himself to Alfred's shoulder and leaning his head upon it. "And good! Thank you for asking. Ah, that is. Sort of good, anyway."

"Hm? Tell me," he prompted. Just keep talking, he hoped. Feliciano leaning on him like that sent pleasant vibrations thrumming throughout his chest whenever he spoke.

"Lovino seemed stressed. He's always so angry these days," Feliciano worried.

"He woke up early, didn't he?"

"Mmm. That federal agent who came by at three am. Random checks in the dead of night with some slip of paper saying he can detain whoever he wants to chat without need of a warrant - what ridiculousness! But Lovino's so good with words and strangers that he wants to piss off, he managed to make that man go away before he decided he wanted to search the house."

"He couldn't have found anything if he had searched the house, though."

"No," Feliciano agreed, "but it wouldn't've stopped him trying. And Grandpa doesn't like people trampling in whenever they please to poke their fat noses in our business! And I don't like it when Grandpa's unhappy. So close to the auction, it isn't good news, so tomorrow Grandpa's heading out to the Anchorage to do business there for a few days. He, ah. He wants me to oversee things while he's away." Feliciano looked glum. "I've never been the boss man before."

"Then - you won't be around? You'll be too busy to see us?" All the more reason for Alfred to take advantage of the time he had with Feliciano now. He buried his nose in Feliciano's soft hair, inhaling deeply. It made his head spin.

"That's not true, I'd never be too busy to see you! I'd make the time," Feliciano protested. Alfred smiled and kissed the top of his head. "But if Grandpa won't be around, and he didn't say when he'd return, just that he'd be gone for a few days, what if he doesn't come back in time - things like this have happened before - oh, not that we're a shady place or anything! - but sometimes he doesn't come back for three weeks!"

"That's not good," Alfred said, trying to sound supportive.

"I don't want to have to manage the entire auction all by myself," Feliciano complained. "I'll have Ludwig's help but, but there's so much to do -"
"You won't be there when I'm onstage," he realised, "and you won't be there to ... to see me off!"

"No," Feli said, "that's true."

"B-but what about Lovino, couldn't he help out with the auction?"

Feliciano tilted his head up, burrowed his face into Alfred's neck. "He's already helping out. Behind the scenes, the transactions happen quickly, someone needs to make sure the people bidding actually come forward - you know, there are always silly people who don't go to the auction to buy, they don't have money, they're just there for the excitement but they place bids anyway -"

"- ...there's a lot to do," Alfred finished for him, distracted by Feliciano who was lazily nuzzling his jawline. He tilted his jaw sideways, exposing more of his neck, hoping Feliciano'd take the hint and kiss him already.

But, like most of the time Feliciano hung off him, it was so-close-but-way-off teasing and besides the odd tinges of his lips on Alfred's skin, there was no real contact. "Between the two of us we have five days to get up to speed with everything. That will be hard enough."

"I see why he's so stressed."

"Mmm, we're all stressed," Feliciano murmured behind his ear. Then he straightened, away from Alfred, and looked at the ground. "Everybody except for my grandfather, that is. He has control of things. At least someone does."

The shock to his neck was unpleasantly cool. They'd been so close! Alfred leaned in, following Feli's retreat. "Is this something you want?" he asked.

"Ah... What?" Feliciano looked adorably confused.

"To take over the business." He turned his body to face Feliciano and propped his head up on his hand, balancing against the couch with his elbow.

"I -" Feliciano seemed momentarily speechless. "Do you really think he trusts me with it? Me?"


He looked away. "I don't really have much of a choice," he mumbled to Alfred's lap.

"Aw, sure you do," Alfred argued, "you always have a choice."

"No, I don't, I really don't - I don't have any training in anything else, nothing, I dropped out of art school, and these days, it's like you need a minor degree in food handling to be a simple grocer!"

"So go get one," he suggested softly.

"It isn't that simple," Feli protested. "I don't have that much money! It's hard enough to support Ludwig. With this, this way, I can make sure he's taken care of."

"Is it really that expensive?"
Feliciano gave him a wry grin. "The Council offsets our production costs by paying us to train servants. But they don't pay us for our own! There's the initial cost amount - Ludwig was four million, I don't know where Grandpa got that kind of money - then there's a food cost. Also the supplies. Tonic is expensive! Lubricant and condoms, those are cheap! But the tonic is a hundred dollars a dose. And you need to keep them clothed and cleaned - but I guess compared to the tonic it's not so bad."

Geez, that tonic. Alfred had never prepared it himself but his boss - seemed like so long ago back on New Joplin, he had to dig back real deep into the fog - his boss would prepare the formulation sometimes for the mayor. Only guy in town with a bondsperson. Good money when the mayor stopped in. Doing the math ... a hundred a day, times the number of days in a System Standard Calendar year - that was three times what Alfred had made per year. "What if someone loses all their money or something? Maybe they gamble, maybe they become bankrupt?"

"But that's why you're not allowed to have more than your income bracket can account for, or the Council comes after you and gets really angry! If you lose everything, Council interacts with the repossession people. They take any servants you've got and sell them off, usually internally. It all happens so seldom that it doesn't come up much, and there's always somebody inside the Council who wants a cheap bondsperson! So it's not like there's a giant flea market every Saturday afternoon or anything."

The mental image of people like him and Unsinkable hanging around a bunch of tables with signs on their heads, saying 'we're gently used! but in good condition, we promise!' like they were patched articles of clothing or reupholstered furniture somehow seemed so absurd that he giggled aloud.

It wasn't funny. It wasn't funny at all. That was reality for some people out there. (Well, bondspeople.) And Feliciano and his grandfather wanted to turn Alfred into one of them. But it seemed so dumb, and he couldn't stop himself giggling, which made Feliciano grin in return, sort of abashedly, and Feliciano's smile was what finally calmed Alfred down. "Don't be so worried," he said, and then blurted out, "You have a really lovely smile."

"Ah..." Feliciano sighed.

"Everything'll turn out okay. I promise!"

"Oh, you promise?" Feliciano grinned. "I hope so."

"I know so," Alfred told him. "You can take it from me."

"I wish I had your confidence. I wish like you, I had nothing to worry about. An easy life, you live! We won't even have to worry about your sale!"

"Right," he agreed, jarred. He'd be sold. But the Captain and Unsinkable would be on the other side. But a large part of him didn't want to leave Feliciano or Ludwig yet. The part in his mind where the fog lay told him how much more fun it would be to stay here...

There was an awful lot of unfinished business between them. Feli couldn't just drape himself all over Alfred like that and honestly expect Alfred not to feel something for him.

"I don't mean to bring that up," Feli said quickly, consolingly. "I don't want to worry you ... or remind myself - but Grandpa, when I met him earlier, I give him good reports, that's all! It makes
him happy to hear you're doing so well. I need to make him happy. We didn't have a lot of time with you."

"You tell him good things?"

"About you? I tell him the truth and that is only ever good things!" he replied, with a warm sunny smile.

"Do I get a treat for such good behaviour?" Alfred asked, grinning slyly, feeling a little silly and coquettish. Flirting worked with his girlfriends. It might work with Feliciano.

It wasn't just the proximity. It couldn't be. Whenever Feliciano was around him there was this growing heat, this dull roar, the snap of fingers that echoed in his mind. He could smell him better, sense him, his mouth watered.

Sure, it happened with Ludwig too, and the prime example was Ludwig having sat near him earlier, a foot's distance between them. No problem concentrating on the book before Ludwig showed up. And after, all he could think about was how glorious it was the night before: the smooth slick hot burn in his ass as Ludwig pressed in, his hands gripping Alfred's hips tightly enough to bruise, the solid wall of muscle at his back possessing him.

He liked it, he liked it so much it made his hands shake. But he really liked Feli, who watched Alfred being fucked into the headboard, from a safe distance away, from the armchair at the side of the bed with his knees pressed tightly to his chest biting his fingernails, nervous and shaking - Ludwig was the one doing all the work but Feliciano was all he could look at. And Alfred usually got what he wanted.

"That ... depends," Feliciano replied with caution. "What did you have in mind? There's a really nice cake for dessert, and gelato freshly-made -"

Why wasn't it ever Feliciano who touched him? Feliciano who took him? He understood perfectly, they could switch it up between him and Ludwig, that was fine. Unsinkable had warned him that was pretty common, they didn't know who you'd be bought by, a man, a woman. But it surprised him that not once had Feliciano asked for so much as a blowjob. Didn't he want to evaluate Alfred's progress? He watched Alfred and Ludwig, he directed their movements, and he would on occasion touch Ludwig - but never Alfred. Alfred had never once liked being told he couldn't have something. It only made him want it more.

So he leaned in closer and whispered against Feliciano's lips, "Haven't I been better than that?"

Feliciano stiffened and pulled away immediately. "Maybe not so good after all," Alfred decided, not bothering to keep the pleading out of his voice.

"No, it isn't - this is - but we shouldn't. We should wait for Ludwig," insisted Feliciano. He tried to smile casually, but Alfred didn't once take his eyes off Feliciano's and could see clearly it extend no further than the lips. He wasn't happy. "It's always the three of us, right?" Why would Feliciano be nervous? It was only Alfred - silly, awkward Alfred.

"No," he corrected, "it's always me and Ludwig, or sometimes you and Ludwig. It's never you and me."

"We should still wait for Ludwig -"
"Feliciano." Alfred tried a different angle and grabbed him around the waist, where Feliciano had twisted in preparation to get up and leave the couch, break whatever spell had fallen upon them there. Feli's hand flew instantly to where Alfred held him, like he was going to throw him off.

But he didn't. He kept his hand there, over Alfred's, where Alfred could feel everything from its warmth to its slightest trembles. He spread his fingers to trap Feliciano's between them. Interlaced like that, he said, "I'm going to be gone in a matter of days. I know it'll just be you and Ludwig after that, so ... what's so wrong with this, here like this, now? Do you think you'd regret it? Don't you wanna make sure I'm good enough?"

"Yes," Feliciano puffed out in a rushed whisper, to which question, he didn't know. His face must have fallen because Feliciano faltered, "N-not because I don't like you! I shouldn't - I like you, Alfred, you know I do, you know how dear you are to me, you're too dear, you must know, but I can't, not like this, I shouldn't because you're dear to me and this -"

He'd never heard Feliciano talk so quickly in the two weeks he'd been there, tripping over his sentences like this. "How is this different from you and Ludwig, is it because he's already trained? How is it different from me and Ludwig?"

"But those, those are different lessons," Feliciano argued, "I just, I just get him to - that's - that's not what I teach..." He snaked the hand that wasn't entangled with Alfred's up to Alfred's jaw, traced the little kiss curls of sideburns and then suddenly (the snap of fingers echoed in his mind)

- the snap of fingers echoed in his mind -

Everything sort of went bright white for a second.

"Ah," he gasped, and turned his head towards Feliciano's hand to graze his cheek along it.

There was no hiding what he felt now, his cock nearly leapt to attention and ached like he hadn't touched himself in months, although that wasn't true. The snap of fingers echoed in his mind.

Feliciano swallowed hard and grimaced. "Shouldn't. I shouldn't -"

Alfred shut him up with his mouth. It was a bold move; too forward for someone who was supposed to be playing an object, but he'd been really good at all of that up until now. So Feliciano probably wouldn't notice the slip-up.

...And, fuck it, Alfred just wanted, so damn badly!

Feliciano groaned against his mouth, opened his lips and let him in. It had been spine-tingling in a way he'd never conceived when Ludwig had kissed him but this, this was mind-bending, dizzyingly brilliant. It was a very good thing he was already seated because his legs felt weak, and all he wanted was to lean back and spread them, take Feliciano in. Like the way he opened his mouth wider for more, more wet, more tongue, more everything, angling his face to better fit with Feliciano's like some perfect goddamn jigsaw puzzle.

He slipped his hand, along with Feliciano's, up Feliciano's shirt, far enough until Feli let go and let his hand drop back down, where it landed on Alfred's thigh. His hand on Alfred's thigh! - yes, finally, he thought, and also, higher, move higher, because his tongue was too busy with Feliciano's for speech, and leaned back on the couch.
Feliciano followed, laid on top of him gently, and answered his wordless pleas, slowly dragging his hand up to his hip, where Ludwig's had been yesterday. *Touch me*, he imagined, *please, I'm yours, whatever you want, take it from me, make me come -*

Without warning Feliciano recoiled again, gasping, "No - no we really, we really should wait for Ludwig to return, that way he can - and then I won't."

It was filthy and slutty to writhe underneath him like he was doing. Alfred paid that voice - the one that sounded a lot like everybody he knew back home - absolutely no attention. Instead, he ignored the shame as best he could (because *fuck shame*) and canted his hips up, seeking as much friction as he could possibly get, with those goddamn loose pants like a cloth cocktease and Feliciano's weight and warmth a lot more enticing.

"Ludwig left me thirty minutes ago to go make dinner," he panted. "He'll be there at least another thirty. In fact he's probably cleaning the kitchen like the adorable neat freak he is while waiting for dough to relax. *Oh, Feli, I can't hold out that long, I'll promise you that.*"

Alfred pressed the hand at the small of Feliciano's back gently down, straightened his legs out beneath Feli and entangled those too. Come on, you stubborn beautiful creature, he thought, give in to this, I can tell you want it - and felt triumphant when Feli clenched his eyes shut and gasped.

"You have to stop me," Feliciano panted helplessly, but he still lowered his mouth to Alfred's neck and sucked, hard.

"Why would I ever want you to stop?" he asked, still rocking against him.

"B-because, this room - if, ah! - if you don't stop me, I won't be a-able ... mmmph, I won't be able to stop myself."

"Good!" Alfred crowed, and wove his fingers through Feliciano's hair, so to keep him there where he was, kissing and sucking and - he withheld a loud, needy moan - biting at the sensitive skin on his neck.

"But -"

"Oh God, what can I possibly say that'll make you stop second-guessing this, huh? Because whatever it is, I'll say it, I'll tell you anything, anything in the system! Just, oh, please don't stop, please, Feli - ngh, this is cruel, you're torturing me with this -""

And finally, Feliciano relented and gave in, their mouths meeting with enough desperate force their teeth clacked together. It should have felt awkward. It should have felt painful but pain had gotten real confused somewhere along the line during his stay in this place, and all he felt was pure bliss.

That was what Unsinkable must have meant, Alfred realised, when he said they'd make it so he wanted it. Right now, he wanted nothing else! He wanted to be kept and locked away and bound captive and saved for a rainy day for Feli's use, like a gift, for Feli to do exactly what he wanted with him - he moaned, so sensitive that he felt the vibrations of his lips pressed to Feliciano's, sent shivers down his spine.

Alfred suddenly understood why Ludwig acted the way he did. A few years of this training, and
thoughts like that would be more than merely fantasy. A little longer with Feliciano and thoughts like that, he'd mean with all his heart.

One of Feliciano's hands was trapped between the couch and Alfred's head, but the other fumbled and tugged at the drawstrings on his pants, and pulled the bow undone. It was the most infuriating kind of soothing balm when Feliciano slid it beneath the fabric to touch his overheated skin, like sparks because finally, finally contact... But that wasn't where he wanted Feliciano to touch. That was his hip, then his waist, then brushing over his nipple.

And even when Feliciano got the picture, and slid his hand between Alfred's legs to wrap around his cock, he whined against Feliciano's mouth. This was not enough, Ludwig did this for him, he did this for Ludwig - and he wasn't totally inexperienced! He knew how unsatisfying something like a handjob or rubbing against each other became, in the wake of everything else they had done. Please more, he begged silently, if I've been so good, then reward me!

Alfred wasn't sure how to make more clear what he wanted without saying it. So he gave up, and outright said it anyway, between rushed kisses. "Come on, I need - I, more than that, Feliciano -"

"Mmph, but -"

No, that's what you do for Ludwig. Well not me, he thought, reluctantly letting go of the smooth hot skin of Feliciano's back to unclip the pocket on his belt that a sold bondsperson wore. The one Ludwig wore all the time. Alfred had begun wearing one too, because that was part of the uniform. He pressed the small bottle into Feliciano's hand, still inside his pants. "I need this," he pleaded, as Feliciano got the picture and took the item from his hands.

Alfred didn't really need it, he knew that. He needed air and he needed water and food, but he wanted it so badly that it was mixing up the hierarchy of actual needs here, and psychology classes were so long ago anyway and God it smelled fantastic in here and he wanted to come from Feli inside him and couldn't Feli get on with it already?

Feliciano sighed and bit his lip, looking conflicted. "Okay," he said finally, "but you should -"

"No, you should," Alfred corrected, shimmying his pants down as much as he could with Feliciano on top of him like that. He wound up getting one leg out of them entirely, the fabric still tangled around his other knee, but that was enough for him. Bondspople didn't exactly need underwear, and so he revelled in the feeling of being half-naked underneath Feli, pinned down, helpless and exposed. It made him throb. "If - if I let you take your hands off me for one second you're gonna split, I know it, and, maybe I don't get this chance before the auction, huh?"

That was one way Alfred could keep him here. It'd be hard for Feliciano to get cold feet and just take off, with his fingers buried inside him like that, wouldn't it?

Which was a little bit manipulative. Maybe a lot bit manipulative. He shouldn't forget his place so readily. His place, beneath someone, quiet, obedient - like Ludwig.

"Ah, heh, sorry," he said, pushing up for gentler kisses, nothing deeper than a peck or a simple brush of their lips back and forth. "I don't mean to be - mm, so bossy." Another kiss. "And I wouldn't take charge, y'know, with a permanent..." He kissed him again, avoiding having to finish his thought. "Normally I wouldn't. I promise."

"I don't mind," Feliciano replied, his voice low, and kissed him back. "I really don't mind."
The first time Ludwig had done this it was a little strange. Alfred hadn't been as worried about being embarrassed as he should've been. But then again, everything he ate just seemed to pass right through him these days, which he'd suspected was the tonic's fault. But it was still like, okay, strange, *didn't know I had nerve endings back there*, and then Ludwig had gone further upwards and reduced him to a heavily breathing, moaning mess, he couldn't think straight.

This was better. This was different, because Ludwig was confident and experienced and despite the intensity with which Feliciano had been watching him, Feli wasn't nearly as expert level. His eyes screwed shut in concentration above him, he used a little too much lube and was hasty about where exactly he put those fingers.

So Alfred would need a bath after, whatever. That didn't matter. Awkward it might feel, he knew what was coming and tensed in anticipation of it - "*Oh, yes, yes, fuck - there, right there, touch me, please, gosh, don't stop,*" he begged.

As Feliciano removed his hand from Alfred's body completely, he said, "*I can't,*" broken and defeated. He stopped contact in order to unzip his own trousers, push them past his hips far enough to free his own cock, hard, straining and - curiously, Alfred thought, uncut.

But the burn, hot and slick - not enough to be slimy, just enough for some decent friction - as Feliciano pushed himself in was familiar enough. "*God in Heaven,*" he cursed, arched his back to press his chest closer to Feliciano's, and spread his legs wide (like a *cheap whore*, called out the New Joplin voice, making him blush but that didn't stop him - in fact it really made him want to do it again and spread 'em wider).

Feliciano withdrew nearly completely, then thrust in again, slowly but not leisurely, like a calculated move. His eyes were squeezed shut, his jaw clenched. "*Hey,*" Alfred said. He was trying for a comforting tone, but it came out a strangled moan instead, because he couldn't stop himself from begging for more even now. "*You - you okay?*

"*Fine,*" Feliciano replied, interspersing the regular thrusts with short shallow gasps, "*I'm fine. Oh, - oh! more than fine, this is - hah - I'm just - concentrating.*"

Alfred looped his free leg, the one not trapped between couch cushions, around Feliciano's waist. He pressed it down, pressing Feliciano's body onto his, to push him in and coax him deeper inside. Feliciano still held back, just a little -

But then something snapped, and he moaned, surprised-loud, and slammed himself in, with the right angle, and the right force and - the snap of fingers echoed inside his mind!

Alfred cried out and stopped thinking. He brought his hand down between them to his own cock, to work it furiously and frantically.

This was what he wanted, this exactly. Feliciano above him, no shame anymore on his face now, just pleasure, just his brows furrowed, his eyes shut tight, long lashes pressed against rosy cheeks and sweat on his brow with the strained effort of driving Alfred into the couch.

And if Ludwig wanted this too, he could have it, now that Alfred had trailblazed a little, he thought, his leg tightening around Feliciano's waist desperately. Alfred just wanted it *first*. Besides, Ludwig had the rest of his life for this, Alfred was going home in a few days.
Home ... yes, he couldn't wait to get home, get back to real life, where he worked hard to eke out a meagre living and pay taxes, instead of this crazy, wonderful, beautiful sexy dreamworld where he was cared for and owned and had amazing orgasms with gorgeous men every day.

He wasn't even sure if that was sarcasm or not. It was kinda hard to think with Feliciano taking him hard.

But while Ludwig and Feliciano'd have each other, he'd never see them again. It made him want to take something for them to remember him by, and he'd noticed how little Feliciano touched either of them. Judging by Feliciano's shuddering breaths and jerky thrusts - he looked completely unprepared for how good it must feel - he'd guessed correctly.

The friction from Feliciano's smooth, flat stomach as he thrust in, shared with the friction from his hand, barely enough room to move - Feli slamming him into the couch, driving him wild, wilder still - it wouldn't take him long. He was so close, and greedily he raced towards it.

It was like he imagined falling from a great height and hitting the ground would be - a short, breathless, dizzying rush, before the slam knocked the air out of him. There was a snap of fingers that echoed and he spun out of control, gave himself over to it. Helplessly, he couldn't make himself be quiet, and neither could Feliciano, who Alfred thought he heard through the powerful haze, this was too good, this was too good - he couldn't think -

Somewhere around the scattered pieces of his poor fried brain cells, he imagined he heard the ghost-echo of fingers snapping and sighed against an incoherent, panting Feliciano. Feliciano, who'd slumped on his body and who radiated heat through the thin fabric of his own shirt and Alfred's.

They hadn't even taken the time to undress. They'd need to change before dinner. And a bath might be nice too. Alfred could feel the hammering of his heart against his own chest, on-beat with the pulse thundering through his skull, and a distant snap-snap-snap that made him flush with already-rekindled arousal.

"Thank you," he gasped, "I - hah, I really needed that, I really needed you."

Feliciano seemed distressed. "I shouldn't have let, you should have stopped me," he said sadly. He fit his head under Alfred's chin and looked away.

"What? No - why?"

"Because," Feliciano trailed off, "because you're, because I ... oh, I can't explain it!"

"I wanted you," Alfred told him, persisting. He slipped a hand up Feli's shirt, tracing along the pattern of lean muscles of his back. "Hell, I still want you," he admitted. "You're nice, and pretty - you have an amazing smile - uh, and amazing pretty much everything else. I like that you talk to me so openly. And I meant it when I said I didn't want to leave." He would anyway, he had to go home. But he didn't want to leave all the parts of this experience behind, kicked up in the dust, like nothing had happened.

Feliciano propped himself up on his elbows and looked at him for a moment, his eyes heavy-lidded and sleepy, without smiling. Then he gently pushed Alfred's glasses up onto his forehead, and leaned down to brush their lips together. Another thing about Feli he should mention, as his eyes slid closed and he shifted his head for a more intimate angle, he was a brilliant kisser. He yielded,
let Feliciano in with his tongue and responded in kind, imagining that the desire he felt managed to permeate the foggy haze that existed whenever there was anybody else with him in the room.

Embarrassingly, his stomach grumbled, and Feliciano broke it off, smiling with spit-shined reddened lips that made Alfred want to chase him down and force them both to ignore needy protestations from annoying organs like stomachs. "Sorry," he said.

"It's fine!" Feliciano murmured. "It is -" he whipped his head up to check the clock, a fuzzy blob on the wall until Alfred readjusted his glasses - "nearly five. Ludwig's probably done with our dinner." He sat upright gracefully and extended a hand to Alfred, who let himself be pulled up.

"When you kiss me like that, I - I really don't want to leave," Alfred confessed in a low, quiet voice as Feliciano tucked himself back into his pants and made himself proper.

"But... you will," Feliciano finished. He shifted off the couch for Alfred to collect his pants and shove the other leg back into them.

Once Alfred had re-tied the drawstring and was sitting up again, Feliciano handed him his glass of tonic. "Aren't you going to have yours?" Alfred asked.

"Actually, that one is Ludwig's," Feliciano explained. "Mine has to be prepared no more than two minutes in advance. The strength of the amomum seeds decreases too quickly. It's why we keep them in pods until the last second."

"Mine doesn't have any of that?" Alfred asked. He drained the glass and pulled a face. He'd gotten used to it, but it was still pretty gross stuff. He needed to make use of the washroom anyway, he might as well brush his teeth for, like, a half hour.

"No, yours is a completely different composition entirely! That is, a different base - anyway." Feliciano seemed grateful for the distraction in conversation topic, so Alfred let him parrot on about it without interruption. Besides, it was kind of interesting, and maybe this way - Feli volunteering information instead of Alfred requesting it - it wouldn't be too suspicious.

"Active ingredients in yours are aminidine tricyclisate and amlopidine biphenylin," Feliciano told him. "Mine has several kinds of benzodiazepines instead. The base on mine is alcohol and rhodanine while yours is a blend of acrolein oil, amygdalin and lavimudine. But they all have lysyl hydrophase, which is what makes them all so smelly, good thing you don't drink much of it ..."

Lavimudine.

Alfred kept his face very, very still. He tried to say something, then shut his mouth.

"Sorry, that's probably - a lot of big boring chemistry words, right?"

He tried to say something. He couldn't. He gave Feliciano a quick, nervous nod instead.

Saved by the bell, the clock in their rooms chimed five. "I'd better go get Ludwig," Feliciano said, the last glass of that evil concoction in his hand (the other one in Alfred's belly wreaking havoc - lavimudine, good God! and he just put it all down the hatch without thinking every day for two weeks!).

"Yeah - I'm just -" his voice actually cracked - he cleared his throat. "I'm just gonna go use the
washroom, if that's okay."

Feliciano nodded and left.

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It took Alfred two minutes to gather the strength to get to his feet. It took less than thirty seconds for him to get to the washroom because once he was up, he ran. Any slower and he might have been sick all over the floor.

He retched painfully into the toilet for a moment. That disgusting tonic shit tasted worse coming back up, he thought - and then kicked himself, of course it would, what moron would expect amygdalin and acrolein oil to ever taste good in any way, shape or form?

He'd studied all of that in college. He got great grades in chemistry. That's why he was working as a pharmacist's aide. That's why he knew what every single one of those drugs Feli had mentioned did. Every single one.

Oh my God, Alfred thought, red-faced and panting (and still feeling kind of slimy between his legs because he hadn't had a chance to clean up after having sex with Feliciano between all this panic). Mom wanted grandkids. Mom was constantly asking him about grandkids. Dear God in Heaven.

How the hell was he going to explain to her that he was probably infertile? How could he explain any of this to her?

Alfred bent lower, touching his clammy forehead to the cold tile of the floor. And half those drugs Feli talked about, there were withdrawal risks and possible rebound syndrome, and - and okay, as much as he liked this type of sex, come sliding out of him was kinda gross.

He let himself go on autopilot for a minute to take care of that with a sponge bath, where he proceeded to clear his mind, force everything out, and calm down. The hot water helped.

When he stepped out of the bathtub, he took a careful look at himself, bared, in the mirror. Thinner, he suspected. That might be a combination of things, the - ah, extra exercise might do it, but so would something that boosted his metabolism. The tricyclisate would do that. Alfred had been requested to prepare vials of those for some of the patients who came in for weight-loss regimens. It certainly worked, that spare tire of his (really, more like a spare bike tire) was completely gone and he looked trim and fit. At the expense of having his own children one day. Yeah, he'd never really considered it, he was only twenty-seven, so that - that wasn't really ... but some of his old lab instructors were married with kids now and it was just kind of expected!

He'd also expected it himself. Kind of. Y'know, in the way that it was on the backburner, like in the way he expected to grow old and at some point be put in a nursing home and whittle away the rest of his days hopefully with dignity and if not dignity then at least with flirting with the nurses who changed his bedpans, and then eventually die. He didn't anticipate this, didn't look forward to it, that was for damn sure, but of all things, who the hell would put him in a nursing home if he didn't have kids?! Who would take care of the funeral arrangements, and who would he leave what little money he had to, to make them happy (despite his death) like Christmas in July?

He was gonna be the only one, he'd be all alone in this, everyone would just pass him by and try and say cutey little things like oh you're so lucky, you don't really want one, this thing shits everywhere - but lucky, they wouldn't know what lucky meant -
Alfred was panicking again. He heard voices and the door opening - Ludwig was back. But not Feliciano, from the sounds of it.

Inhale. Exhale. Deeply. Again. He turned on the cold water tap and splashed some on his face and neck, let it drip off.

It was almost funny - almost - he might as well date a guy, then adopting kids wouldn't seem so strange -

He didn't need to deal with this right now. What's done was done. There was nothing he could do about it, pretending to be a bondsman, and he really had to get a hold of himself in order to survive these next five days. Possibly without Feliciano. Hopefully Ludwig would be down for some distraction. Alfred sure as hell needed it now.

Just as well he took what he took from Feliciano. Apparently Feliciano took something from him, that *dick* - but that wasn't fair, not to Feliciano.

After all, Feli had no way of knowing that he was going back home to New Joplin after this whole charade to lead a normal life, and that this was really just for one very strange, very fuzzy month. Feli thought it was forever, that Alfred was actually gonna be sold to someone, and that said someone would probably want them with the tonic, just like *every other bondsperson* in the entire solar system, wouldn't want any chance of anything if he were bought by a woman.

It was fine for bondspeople, but Alfred wasn't a bondsperson, Alfred was free, and freemen got to do what they wanted, and this wasn't what he wanted at all.

Maybe there were benzodiazepines in his tonic too, though Feli didn't say anything about 'em. But he was entirely too complacent and okay with all of this. Shouldn't he be freaking out more? Or maybe that was shock. Even now, it was hard to push through, and the panic having mostly left him made him feel lax, tired, sleepy. All he wanted now was to crawl into bed and orgasm hadn't helped.

But the drugs would have to be present in significant quantities to cause that level of muddiness in his mind. Was it the wine? He hadn't had anything to drink today...

Well. Whatever it was.

He wondered whether he actually had feelings for Feliciano, or if it was just the tonic or whatever it was causing this sluggishness -

Alfred heard Feliciano's voice in the room; he must have returned after Ludwig. He didn't sound quite so chirpy as usual. Dammit, it still made his heart beat faster.  

He probably did. Feliciano was kind, sweet, a nice person. A good person. Who, yeah, sold people, but so long as they were in the service trade already and weren't kidnapped by pirates like he was, that was still perfectly legal. Bondspeople were a thing. Bondspeople had to be sold. There needed to be someone who did that job! And Feli didn't know anything about the pirates!

He didn't know. Nobody could know what the pirates were doing to people and still be such a nice guy.
In solemn silence he redressed, gave himself one final look in the mirror, tried not to feel like everything had changed, when it well and truly had, and left for dinner.
North Italy

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

(north italy)

Feliciano kept his watch firmly on his feet as they moved him past the door into the salon. He closed the false fireplace behind him and watched his feet turn left, take him through the dining room and the drawing room, and then ascend the staircase that led upstairs to the wing with his former room. Why were there mirrors - glass, windows - reflective surfaces everywhere?! He couldn't stand to look at himself right now, couldn't think about it, about what he'd done - hard enough to train these people for this job, he had never wanted - not once - this was -

"The hell are you doing here?" asked Lovino. Feliciano must have knocked at his brother's door.

"I -" needed to speak to someone who already hates me more than I hate myself because that's what I deserve! "Are you busy?"

"Tch. Duh. You wanna get paid this month, you'll leave me alone."

He began to shut the door in his brother's face but Feliciano stopped it with his foot. "Please," he grunted, trying to push the door back open against Lovino's weight. "I - I need to speak to you. I need to speak to someone!"

Lovino glared, scrutinised him, and must have then put it together, because he did the little sighing routine and the looking to the heavens and the heavily put-upon face, which meant yes. Try as Lovino might, Feliciano was less easy to fool than his brother thought. "Something's happened," he concluded.

Feliciano nodded, a series of spastic, jerky, nervous motions. "Yes, you could say that."

His brother didn't invite him in with actual words, but he did tilt his head back as a gesture of what might be invitation and moved away so that Feliciano could enter. Lovino closed the door behind them before asking, "Okay Feli, seriously, the fuck? Is it something with Grandpa? What's he want you to do now?"

"Nothing like that," he muttered, helping himself to Lovino's bed. It was still unmade, but Feli didn't really care and sat on tangled sheets. All along his desk and chair were papers, tax forms, receipts, ink blotches everywhere, a broken pen. Simple things. Feliciano had never felt so envious of his brother's job before.

"I had to get away," he explained in a bitter tone, as Lovino pushed some of the papers aside to lean on the edge of his desk. His brother gave him a stern look, his arms crossed across his chest. "Just for a bit. Just for a minute, I'll stay, and then I'll go. I know you don't want me here, I know you're busy."

"Whoa, I'm busy, okay, but you're my brother. You can come hang out here anytime you want, don't you know that?"
Oh, Lovino... There was no way he'd be nearly as supportive - and dismissive tone aside, this was about as supportive as Lovino got - but once he found out what his disgusting, depraved brother had done -

Feliciano stared angrily at the floor, trying to will away the prickle behind his eyeballs, the seized feeling of his throat and the hopeless ache in his heart.

"It's the hormone, huh?" Lovino asked. "That shit's too much for you guys with that concentration, breathing it in like that - I'm amazed your lungs haven't collapsed. Y'know, I told you that was a bad idea. I don't wanna have to tell you I told you so, but I did -"

Helplessly, Feliciano began to sniffle, and his eyes welled up. Lovino was never comforting but he didn't come here to be comforted. "Just breathe, okay?" his brother said. "I'll get you some water, you can -"

"Water won't help," he choked out. "Air won't help. I'm - ah, this is totally fucked, Lovino, I'm serious here -"

"I know you're serious, you fool!" Lovino shot back. "You cry all the time but not like this!"

"- unless you have some kind of magic device that can send me back in time there's nothing you can do for me, I'm - I'm just -"

But on second thought ... there might be. There might be something Lovino could do. Lovino didn't own anybody - he wouldn't own anybody, ever (Feliciano had said the same once, although with slightly less conviction). So maybe, maybe if he could convince his brother that he felt strongly about it, his brother might just overlook Feliciano's gross act of misconduct.

Not because it wasn't what Grandfather wanted. It was exactly what Grandfather wanted! That was the problem. But what problem was there when he'd made Grandpa proud of him? Just because Lovino didn't care for it. Why, when Lovino had been requested to help out around with Grandfather and the business - he was twelve, Lovino fifteen, having just finished his schooling - and Lovino had signed up for a minor degree, which he could get in two years working part time at the Emporium, helping out with the bondspeople's training... But that wasn't Lovino's major issue. I don't think this is right, Lovino had told him. I just can't shake the feeling something's weird about this whole goddamn system. I don't like it.

Lovino was his brother, Lovino knew best. And sure, sometimes he hid behind Feli when there were scary people who came to buy their grandfather's bondservants. Grandpa knew best too. And he was his grandfather. But those scary people... Feliciano didn't know how his grandfather could stand them. Lovino's head was screwed on correctly and that's what counted. I don't think it's right either. But if you're helping out, I want to, too.

Neither of us should be in this business! Lovino had protested. This entire trade is wrong. I dunno how yet, it just is. I can only speak for myself. Don't lemme put words into your mouth here - do you want to do this?

No. It is kinda weird, you're right. Lovino smiled then, and that was how Feli knew he'd given the right answer.

And then, a few years later - Lovino was mostly quiet about his protests - Grandfather had brought home Ludwig. Ludwig hadn't come from those creepy dirty men Grandfather met with sometimes,
Ludwig was clean and he smiled and he smelled good and he seemed so nice! And it was just so hard to say no to Grandfather, and how happy he'd seemed, how proud, when he'd presented the shy and quiet but friendly Ludwig. Feli couldn't say no to a gift like that. So expensive! And you couldn't return him, how absurd.

Worst of all, Feli didn't want to say no. Because Ludwig was really nice - he wouldn't hurt a fly - and they got along well, they were good friends.

Feliciano didn't have any friends besides Lovino. (Who, for his part, just tutted off to the side and, with respect to Ludwig, made his displeasure known very clearly.)

He still vowed never to *use* Ludwig, made sure he'd never touch him, ever. His brother said he'd never speak to him again if he didn't promise that he'd never touch Ludwig the way Grandpa wanted him to. And Feliciano stood for very few things with strength but that, Lovino said *that* was too far, and Lovino was probably right about these things...

Grandpa hadn't even bothered to ask him if he wanted a bonds servant.

Well. Look at how faithfully Feliciano had been to his promises. Not that Ludwig minded. In fact, Feliciano didn't know if he'd seen Ludwig so happy ever, and that made *him* happy. But that wasn't the point, was it?

Alfred was different. Feliciano didn't want Alfred going to just anybody! A well-trained servant usually went to the richer ones and usually richer meant nicer but nobody would be as nice to Alfred as Feli could be. And Alfred was cute, and nice, and - and Feli really wanted him. And Alfred liked Ludwig, and judging from how happy Ludwig had been recently, Ludwig really, *really* liked Alfred - so couldn't they all be together and happy? Was it like dogs, did you get two of them so they could be friends?

"Hey - Feli - Border Control to Feliciano, you at home?" He snapped his head up to look at his brother, who came close to check his pupils. "You're still a *little* drugged, I think," decided Lovino. "Are you feeling a bit better now?"

He could be feeling a lot better. "Do you think - ah, Lovino. Brother. Do you think you could do me a favour? A huge favour, I will owe you so, so, so much -"

Lovino backed up almost instantly. Feliciano might as well have told him he had contracted leprosy. "That ... depends. What kind of favour? I don't want to - to take your job. Look, I really can't do that kinda thing, I won't do it, okay? I don't even know how you stand to look at yourself in the mirror -"

"I don't," he snapped, and Lovino looked shocked for a second. "Don't want you to take my job," he added. The job he'd taken so that Lovino wouldn't have to do it, so Lovino could immerse himself in numbers instead. The job he'd taken that had Grandfather beaming at him with pride and damned he was if that didn't feel like a golden medal.

Lovino looked relieved.

"This is - this is going to sound weird at first."

Lovino waited as patiently as he could manage, frowning and tapping his foot.
"I need you to buy the bondsman I'm training now at the auction for me."

Beat. "Holy shit, that drug has fucked you up retarded."

"No!! No, no, brother, it's not like that - just hear me out! You know that sketchy guy that Grandpa's been dealing with? So obviously rich doesn't always mean nicer -"

His brother laughed derisively. "I coulda told you that."

Feliciano momentarily saw red. "Alfred can't go to someone like that. Alfred can't ... I can't let him." The mere thought of someone else touching Alfred! "I'd take better care of him!"

"You don't exactly have the money to be able to be a bleeding heart for every soul that wanders through here, that Grandpa gets you to train!"

"It's not all of them! It's just Alfred -"

Lovino's jaw dropped. "Oh my god you think you're in love with him."

"I am in love with him!" Feliciano cried, which only made him feel worse about what he'd done.

"Are you in love with him as a person?" Lovino spat. "Or as an object?" Ah, brother, Feliciano thought viciously, you really know how to go for the eyes!

"I-he isn't an object to me. Don't give me that! Don't make me out to be just like Grandpa because I'm not, which you'd know if you spent any time around me anymore -"

"Well, you're always dragging that Ludwig of yours around! Speaking of whom, what's he think of this, hm? You already have Ludwig, what the hell do you need another fucking bondsperson for?"

"It isn't like that! Ludwig and Alfred, they're different people. They complement each other. It's like - like chocolate versus candy. I love them both, I just -" As much as Feliciano wanted him, Alfred could never replace Ludwig, his oldest dearest friend who wasn't his brother. And Feliciano couldn't be told to be satisfied with what he already had, not now after what happened between him and Alfred. He said desolately, "I - I think I'm starting to see why people would take a bondsperson even if they already had a lover."

"Ohh, you're terrible," Lovino accused. "Look at what you've become. Look at what Grandpa has made you. You said you never wanted Ludwig to begin with and now you want another? He must really be proud of you! Does that make you happy?"

"I know, I know!" he wailed. "I feel sick, I feel deranged, I'm disgusting, I'm pathetic and hopeless and perverted and you don't need to tell me what I already know, just keep it to yourself! But I can't help it, if I don't have them I feel like I'll die, and I can't just - let Alfred go to someone who might be too rich for morals. Maybe I'm crazy but at least I'm crazy for him. Lovino, doesn't that matter at all?"

"You don't have the money for two bond servants," he reminded.

"Yes. Exactly. That's why you have to buy him and I'll pay you back and he can be listed under you so that the Council doesn't get all angry. Please, Lovino. Pretty please! I'll never ask you for anything else again ever!"
"What if I wanted a bonds servant of my own, eh?" Lovino snapped.

Now Feliciano knew his brother was just being confrontational. "But you wouldn't. You wouldn't ever because unlike me, you're strong and you have the ability to say no to everything Grandpa does and you don't cave in like I do, you stick by your principles instead of forgetting them all in the wake of a pretty face - ah, god!"

And then he burst into tears and curled up into a miserable sobbing ball on his brother's bed. Whenever they had words it was like this, a heated exchange before Feliciano faltered, crumpling like paper. Not because he wanted to get his way but because Lovino had a nasty tongue on him and went for blood when the topic came up.

*He doesn't know*, Feliciano reminded himself, *he doesn't know anything about the system. What Grandpa does, how he buys them. He has no clue how hurtful he is.* And unfortunately for him it had felt so mind-meltingly good, being with Alfred. Actually being with him instead of watching him. Better than he'd thought. Maybe better than taking the moral high ground all the time felt. How good it had felt to *just give in*...

But he knew that drug, that hormone, the one he put in the air. Powdered and dissolved in water, then run through the humidifier that connected to the hidden wing behind the fireplace in the salon. He knew that.

Feliciano was the one who'd set it up so that Alfred's ability to respond to the usual conditioning signal - snapping one's fingers - would be secure enough in time for the auction. It was why they were in that room, because it was closed off and its ventilation wouldn't affect the rest of the Emporium. He knew that, too!

He knew the drug was there, he knew its function and he knew how it worked and he knew how much of it was in every lungful. A lot of it. Too much of it. A gamble, it'd been a gamble to compensate for the fact that they only had Alfred for *three weeks*.

And still he couldn't control himself! Still things got heavy, things got heated between them and it'd felt brilliant and every touch, every kiss made his head spin and his blood sing. And he hadn't wanted to stop. Feliciano had wanted to push Alfred back and take everything he offered, over and over, had wanted it like a man dying of thirst begged for water and was given a lake.

He tried to put some distance there, because Ludwig wasn't around to take the fall, but Alfred had pushed, and pushed and pushed, and it wasn't like he hadn't enjoyed giving in, because he really had... But he shouldn't have enjoyed it like he did. Lovino would hate him if he knew any of this. Lovino couldn't know!

Alfred was - Alfred was drugged. Feliciano was drugged too but he knew it, he knew his bounds, and he overstepped them. This was a violation, a perversion of what he must really have felt for Alfred - didn't he? Unless Feli had turned into one of the people they sold to, who could get it up for someone whose entire existence was devoted to your sake. And they couldn't go back. There was no going back. The worst part was that he wanted to do it again. That he'd give anything to do it again.

What must Alfred think of him?

His brother would hate him forever.
He was so miserable he didn't hear Lovino or see him coming, so that when Lovino clasped a hand on his shoulder - mostly gently - Feliciano jumped and cringed. "Don't touch me, I'm - you must think I'm revolting."

"Sorry," muttered Lovino. "I just - you weren't listening to me so I had to try and get your attention. What if - what if we bought him to free him?"

"Free him? But he's a bonds servant, how could we free him? I really don't understand."

"Idiot, you give him his papers and tell him he can go anywhere he likes! Then, if he comes back to stay with you, well ... obviously he feels as strongly about you as you do about him. Then you win."

Silly Lovino. "It doesn't work that way," Feliciano told him. If only it were so simple! "Don't you think I tried it with Ludwig, the first time Grandpa brought him home? I told him listen, if you want, you can just ... you know, do whatever you like, and I really don't care. And he didn't get it. He sat there and looked at me like he needed extra direction. So I told him if he wanted to go for a walk for example, well, he could do that! Only be home for dinner! And do you know what he said to me? He looked me in the face and said, 'If that's what you want me to do'. There's no part of his life that revolves around anybody else but me."

That was what Grandpa did to him. That was what Feli was supposed to do to Alfred. What Feli had already, for the most part, done to Alfred. Because that's what bondspeople were for!

"Oh," Lovino said, frowning. "Well. Maybe this would work for Alfred where it didn't work for Ludwig? They're different, aren't they? You said so yourself that they're different."

"That's - " true enough - "but it has to do with the primary. Where they were first educated." Lessons that would follow them for the rest of their lives; taped messages played at night, subliminal messages in the gramophone records. *Whatever master wants is what I want. There's no shame in being a bonds person; you're someone's beloved companion and you should be proud.*

"Okay, so where the hell was your special snowflake educated?"

"That's the thing, I don't know! Grandpa said some of them are less well trained than others, sometimes they don't go through primary - Grandpa said he didn't know where he came from."

*Didn't he, though?*

Lovino considered it for a moment. "Well ... okay. Lemme do this for you on one condition. I'll buy him, but you gotta figure out a way to make him understand that he's not supposed to be a bondservant, that he's not gonna take the tonic anymore and - it'll just be like a regular relationship between you two, because honestly you can't afford this shit."

"Grandpa won't like it," Feliciano said. Grandpa would be disappointed. And not only because he was expecting a decent amount of cash for Alfred. He'd be disappointed in Feliciano, too.

"Grandpa doesn't like much," Lovino muttered. "Let's cross that bridge when we get there. Now go on. It's dinner time for your pets."

"Be nice!" he complained. Calling them pets, that stung. Even if he deserved it, Alfred and Ludwig
didn't.

His brother sighed. "For your charges, then."

Chapter End Notes

I've rewritten this chapter probably ten times. I think it's as good as it's going to get! Anyway, onward.
He woke with a jerk and a sharp intake of breath. Whatever the dream had been, it hadn't been pleasant, but he didn't remember details. The grogginess of sleep continued to plague his eyes and it ached to keep them open, so he only did it long enough to verify that next to him, Danmark still lay on his back with his mouth open, snoring softly. It was mostly dark outside. The tiny porthole-style window Danmark had in his room faced west, and if he squinted, he could see the barest hint of sunrise on the horizon.

It would be light soon enough. And as much as his eyes wanted nothing more than to glue themselves back together at the lashes, his pulse was too fast and his breath too quick to relax himself in time to catch another wink of sleep. Gradually, the fatigue in his eyelids lessened and wore off.

When it had, he rolled onto his side, facing Danmark. Danmark did not stir as he moved (that's how you know a heavy sleeper). His jaw lax, with parted lips, his expression peaceful... his hair all over the place. Literally; he spat out a strand of blonde a little too golden to be his own.

He envied Danmark a little. A lot, actually. Danmark slept soundly, unperturbed. If he didn't know better he'd think him naive, simplistic. But soon, he'd be like Danmark, easy and carefree. As soon as they got Margot and found a way home to Nieuw Sint-Dolitte. And from there, he and Margot could figure out together what to do with their days on the long, slow, painful road to recovery.

Danmark had dealt with the pirates twice before, he'd said, and once had almost been taken. He was lucky. Would they have extinguished that fire, that ego? Seemed impossible. (But he'd forgotten himself, who he was, what his name was. 2339 was a bland, blank, shell of a person. Slowly he was easing out of it, but the person who'd been there before, the person who had lived in his body before all of this happened? That person was gone.)

Danmark snorted suddenly, turned onto the side facing him, and flopped an arm heavily over his body. Progress! That would've shocked the hell out of him once, because when he and 2304 used to sleep together at Romae's, it was curled up in a ball with what felt like oceans of space between them. Inches at most, but there was a divide nonetheless and it was a line you didn't cross. Danmark didn't just cross it, he sprawled over it, and not accidentally, either.

But with Danmark, he didn't flinch. He almost expected it. It's not like Danmark intended harm; he didn't. And you couldn't be mad for long with a guy like Danmark. Constantly cheerful, always supportive... smarter than he let on. One of the nicer people he'd ever met, and they were all nice, really, all of them from plotty Suomi through to quiet Sverige. There was simply something about Danmark in particular that reeled him in, in a way that didn't make him feel like he'd taken the bait, hook line and sinker. Nice for the sake of it. No trace of hidden agenda. He didn't have to be on guard. Slowly, he brought his hand to Danmark's, where it was flung across his chest. Warm, alive.

He didn't think he'd ever met anybody like Danmark, from before; he hadn't met anybody like him at Romae's. Danmark was like opening a small window in a very large room. Slowly but surely the stale air crept out.

(Even in slumber, snoring softly, Danmark managed to be loud enough to mask the dead ringing
between his ears. And maybe that was like a band-aid covering a deeper wound, but it'd work for now.)

He gave a grin somewhere between wry, sleepy and happy, and waited for Danmark to wake up.

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(sweden)

Sussing out a plan was the real challenge. It was already noon, and four coffees hadn't given Sverige any good ideas. They had a great way in - Ísland had had the brilliant idea of copying Karpusi's ID several times over (it's just magnetic tape on a little piece of plastic. Why can't we iron on magnetic tape from an Eavesdropper onto our own little piece of plastic?) and that was solid enough for Norge to run the idea by his girlfriend on Olyokin. Sverige would find out how successful that was tonight, when Norge returned in the stealthship.

But getting in was easy. Once they were there, they had to lay low until Francis of Hallar took the platform and marched his creepy little sexbots out one by one. (How strange that Francis decided to start up with the pirate deals. Didn't he insist on primary imports only?) That meant they had to get into the auction arena and stay put until Tim and Norge could identify and purchase Tim's sister, Margot.

Norge should do it, decided Sverige, in case the Vargas kids recognised him from three weeks ago when he purchased Tim. Unlikely - how many clients did Romae's emporium have? Too many! - but he had a bad feeling in the pit of his stomach about this. They couldn't take chances.

The waiting game, that was the dangerous part, because it meant being stuck in the arena for the whole show, since the order of the sellers wasn't published beforehand. Suomi had his suspicions that the more well-known names - Romae, Soderne, Carson - would be first in order to heighten excitement for the crowd, but Danmark had disagreed, because it was the reverse in many arena shows - a boring opening act followed by the main attraction, wasn't that what you did with entertainment. At which point Suomi had had to remind Danmark that this was not exactly Roderich Edelstein Live in Concert, and Danmark had gone bright red and opened his mouth, prepared to start something - when Sverige had put a stop to it, told Danmark to get back to work and told Suomi to take a walk to cool off.

(And mental note to tell those two to quit it. They did this all the time and mostly it was ignorable but it was getting worse and worse, and on occasion they really needed everybody together, like anytime they all went off-planet, or anytime they moved bases, or in this case both.)

He heard a loud noise and a yelp from the other room. How were they going to last even a minute with Danmark in a closed space? Everybody would hear him!

Danmark could be stationed as bait, he mused, chewing a fingernail. No, not bait, distraction - maybe he could stay outside the arena entirely -

"That's a terrible habit," Suomi told him, when he entered the kitchen.

"'M thinkin'," Sverige mumbled around the digit, "'s what I do wh'n I'm thinkin'."

Suomi helped himself to the last cup of coffee and sat down. "What are you thinking about?"
"Three guesses. First two don't count."

"Hm. Have you heard from Norge?"

Sverige shook his head. "Nothing. Don't expect 'im 'til three at least. Where's Ísl'nd?"

"He's at Tullejärvi to do some basic organisation and shopping. You know, I think it'll make a great base! Good size warehouse. But it doesn't have a heater, so we bought a few stoves to put in... what? Why are you looking at me like that?"

"'Y' left him alone there? In this weather?"

Suomi shrugged. "It's summer on that side. Well! Summer-ish. Nothing he can't handle. And we needed someone there to set up the new base." He must not have looked terribly convinced (Suomi wasn't exactly being terribly convincing) so Suomi put a hand on his forearm and tried to reassure him. "It's fine. He'll be alright. We'll go get him in an hour or so."

"Danmark started workin' on th' airship th' second y' got in. 'S now in pieces all over th' floor."


"'Xactly. Y' think he'll be done in 'n hour?" Danmark didn't work too fast on his own, and especially not with Tim the New Guy distracting him, not that Danmark appeared to mind. With the airship out of commission and the stealthship with Norge on Olyokin, that left them without any means to get their forger back, who was currently over four thousand kilometres away on a whole other continent halfway around the planet, where nobody knew where he was, underground, and - unless he set up the stoves lickety split - without any decent heat supply. Sverige didn't often get upset but summer-ish or not, this planet was no tropical paradise anywhere!

Suomi had the grace to look decently apologetic, even if he didn't actually apologise. "Norge'll be back in a few hours, we'll take the stealthship."

"We shouldn't use th' stealthship for anythin' other'n Norge seein' 'is little girlfriend. Not now, not if we're bein' watched. So we keep th' stealthship more'r less below th' radar 'til after th' auction. 'Til we have a chance t' retrofit its signals again. 'Sides, there's technically only room f'r two in there."

"That didn't stop us from piling in to head out to the anchorage in the Cloud," Suomi pointed out.

"Mm, 'cause Danmark managed t' make good friends at Border Control who looked th' other way to our blatant violation of seatbelt r'gulations." Greasing palms at the Norda Border Controls wasn't difficult. People tolerating Danmark's abrasiveness for extended periods of time was.

"Well... as long as we fly under the atmospheric limits, we won't need to go through Border Control. We'll be okay." Suomi pouted. "I didn't even think about the airship. Sorry."

Sverige grumbled. But Suomi did apologise in the end, so no fair in keeping a grudge. "Anyway. 'Bout plans... I think we should arrive on Hallar sepr'ritly. Four in th' airship, two in th' stealthship. We'll need four 'f us under Heracles Karpusi's ID, then Tim'll have 'is own proper ID, and Norge'll need t' dig up one of th' IDs he uses on Olyokin."

"That gets us in okay," Suomi noted.
"Gets us in, an' removes Karpusi from serv'ce, 'cause he won't be allowed in. After that, we split off. Tim's gotta be in th' arena - nobody else can rec'gnise Margot - and I'm thinkin' Norge with him. I might be more use outside. 'Sides, they might rec'gnise me."

"Right," Suomi agreed. "So - you want, what, to create a distraction?"

He nodded. "That's th' idea. While Tim an' Norge deal with the auction in th' arena, us four cause d'straction by stealin' another airship th' same way Ísland did it years ago. Tim meets us back at Border Control t' travel back in th' new airship, and Norge goes with Margot, 'cause there's no way Caput Halleri Border Control'll let 'em sit three in th' stealthship with only two seatbelts. We blast off an' somehow try to avoid bein' followed."

"Okay," Suomi approved.

Sverige let it sink in a minute. "So y'vee seen my pr'dicament," he replied.

"Too many moving parts. Ninety places where this plan could go drastically, horrifically wrong," Suomi said.

"'Xactly," he sighed.

But Suomi didn't appear to have any better ideas. They continued brainstorming for the next thirty minutes, without getting anywhere, until Suomi offered to put on another pot of coffee (because thanks to him, they weren't going to run out anytime soon) and Sverige gladly accepted.

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(netherlands)

After a little breakfast and some coffee, Danmark had asked him if he wouldn't mind helping him out with the airship once Suomi had returned. He'd never seen an airship up close before. They left dark streaks of smoke in the sky, striping the dull grey daily, and he was used to that. But there was nothing that came near standing next to the behemoth machine that towered over them. The body, about the size of a living room, was circular and tapered at the nose, with four great wings that extended from panels along the side. Mostly for decoration, Danmark had said, though there was a use for them whenever they were on a planet and they were helpful in getting out of the atmosphere. They folded out and in telescopically and were tucked behind the side panels now.

The entire thing reminded him of a really big, really ugly, metal chicken.

"So what're we doing here?" he asked, as Danmark began prying off one of the outer panels with a crowbar. It took considerable effort, and as Danmark gave a heave, he heard a snap and a ping as one of the rivets flew off and hit the warehouse roof. Then a loud crash as the panel itself fell to the floor and narrowly missed landing on Danmark's toes.

"Ah, coupla things," Danmark grunted. "We need to change the outer facade a bit for visual contact. We'll paint the outer panels, and add things here and there, but the overall form of the ship is harder to change. So it'll still look like a cruiser class. And some people are lookin' for this particular cruiser class."

"Like Adnan and Karpusi."
"Exactly. So, we also change the lights. See this pattern here?" Danmark asked, pointing to the de-panelled side, where he'd exposed the wiring and circuitry. With all the bulbs turned off, it only looked like a plain matrix, but Danmark tapped in succession, drawing his attention, that seemed less dirty. "The pattern, I can change with dummy bulbs. There are other ways I could wire it up so that those sockets don't draw power, but, uh - this thing ain't exactly one of the fastest airships around - I mean, she works, but she's kinda old -" Danmark demonstrated this by kicking the ship at the panel nearest him; it lurched to the side with a metallic groan and though Danmark didn't move, he himself took a step back, just in case. "So it takes like four days to get to Hallar, and the auction in five means I need to get this done today so we can blast off tomorrow."

"If you had more time, I'm sure you could've done a smarter job of it," he offered.

"Coulda done it yesterday if it weren't for Suomi's little stunt needin' us a new base," grumbled Danmark. Then he straightened and clapped his hands brightly. "Anyway! That takes care of visuals. But, you remember, space is damn big, and nobody sees anything new or different at the distances you're usually looking at. So we gotta fiddle around with the signals processing unit in the trunk - the one that sends out identification and receives coordinates."

"Couldn't you just take it out entirely? Wouldn't it make more sense, to fly completely under the radar?"

"Oh, sure! But no Border Control'll ever let us in without a sig ID. Besides, this thing's regular operation is taxing, gives off a lot of heat. An' heat's a signal itself. We can't fly completely undetectable. Even the stealthship isn't perfect invisibility."

Good point. "You mentioned you studied at university," he asked, picking up a screwdriver and a wrench. He set to work loosening a few of the rivets on the panels for Danmark. "I'm surprised you didn't finish your engineering degree."

Danmark laughed as he pried off another panel. "Never took a single class. That's the experience talking, not formal education. Experience and a lotta library books. No, my major degree was political science - I thought I told you? I tell you so many things I forget what I've said! I didn't finish it, though."

"Got bored?"

"No, I - wow, I guess I didn't tell you! And you didn't hear it from Suomi?" He shook his head. "As if I missed a chance to talk about myself! Did I tell you I studied on Schlessen?"

"You told me that much." Lucky to be a young Danmark; only child of well-off middle-class parents. Father was a merchant, mother ran a bakery. Danmark had enjoyed an easy life with a happy family who didn't mind him letting him offworld for boarding school. (Which was why - obviously, naturally - when he turned thirteen and was alone for the first time in ever, he discovered how much fun rebelling could be. The wrong side of town became the cool side of town.)

"There was this girl, y'know..." Danmark grinned as he tore off the last panel. "That's usually how these stories start, isn't it? She worked at a bank," Danmark said, looking at the lightbulb matrix. "Oh! Before I get distracted again - here's the sprayer, then you push and hold it like this. Goin' for red this time. Red ships go faster, right?" Danmark handed him the sprayer, clapped him on the shoulder and let him get to work on the panels resting on the warehouse floor.
"So, right, where was I ... she got fired 'cause this little runt kept givin' her fake cheques. Bank needed to scapegoat someone, she was least senior. I took up arms and vowed to clear her name."

"And they say chivalry is dead," he teased.

"Yeah, laugh it up. I told her I'd take a stab at it. So I followed the guy she described, some short, skinny, white-haired guy in a poufy-bow shirt with a shifty look to him." Danmark twisted out a few of the bulbs and lay them on a workbench.

"Ísland?" he asked, kneeling on the floor over the wet, freshly-red panels.

"That's the one! ... Hmm. I think squares'd be nice."

"What were you planning on doing with Ísland?"

Danmark shrugged. "Hadn't actually thought that far ahead. Figured I'd cross that bridge when I got there." The lightbulbs squeaked as Danmark twisted them in. It should've been more jarring but to him it felt reassuring and comforting; his hand didn't even waver with the spraypaint. He'd have to find some job that involved loud noises. Maybe Margot would feel the same. "But I never had to - I found him, spotted up against a wall cornered by a buncha ugly hulks in shabby rags, wanting money."

"So you jumped in the fray and white knighted for him?"

"Hah! Hardly," Danmark said, now fiddling around with a screwdriver underneath, in the belly of the ship. He slowly lowered a small cage as the screws fell around his shoulders with a plink, plink on the cold cement floor.

"Only for girls, then," he concluded. It hadn't sounded so sad when he'd thought it in his mind, but Danmark pratfell over his words like a circus clown.

"No! No no no, I mean - it was 'cause, well, Ísland, I'm not attracted to him, n-not that he - y'see, I knew him a thief, I thought, it wasn't his money anyway." He brought the cage over to the workbench and bent over it with the screwdriver, attacking it at the corners. When he'd finished and dropped the nuts and bolts on the table, he withdrew a set of three green boards with funny little coloured chips on them and set them down on the table. "I didn't realise they were pirates at the time," he murmured. "They knocked him around a bit when he wouldn't give up the dough, and then one of 'em said how pretty he was and how much they could get for him." He left to the toolbox to get a set of pliers and the soldering iron. The iron, he stuck into the furnace to warm up and in the meanwhile, began jimmying off some of the parts on the green boards.

Three more panels to go. "And then what happened?"

"Ísland really started to put up a fight. But five giant guys against one tiny little guy, he stood no chance - wasn't fair - and then I heard 'em call out for reinforcements. I decided I'd seen enough and pelted them with rocks."

"That's ballsy," he said.

"And stupid," Danmark had the grace to admit. "But Ísland was unconscious and about to be carted away like a sack of flour - you'd've done the same!"
Would he? He probably would've minded his own business. ...Maybe. Once upon a time, anyway. Knowing what he'd known about the past three years, he wasn't sure he could stand idly by while anybody was in danger of the same treatment. (But many people had stood idly by for him and Margot. Maybe it would serve them right? No, three years of - what he'd gone through, nobody deserved that ...) He re-doubled his efforts on the mindless act of spraying panels to forget his thoughts.

"Anyway," Danmark prattled on - bless that wonderful man for not noticing his silence - "they took bait an' tore after me. So I gave chase. You should've seen it, it was awesome - they tried to flank me; there was more of 'em, right? They had a number advantage, I had the energy of youth and longer legs, and I knew the area well - they almost caught up - I skidded to a halt, pivoted and took off in the other direction - vaulted over a car, ducked into an alleyway -"

"What about Ísland?"

"Oh, right, right. I loop around the place to find the kid. He was still unconscious and I thought, better to bring him to a hospital. I sat with him until he woke up - I'd thought to get some answers about those fake cheques. When he woke, he said I'd better come with him, they weren't going to let me go so easy. I asked him why not -"

"- and he explained that 'they' were pirates," he guessed. "The pirates saw you'd seen them, they weren't supposed to be there, weren't supposed to be taking people off the streets -" even if they were street rats "and selling them off into servitude."

"Right. We heard gunfire, Ísland jumped up immediately and took off like a bat out of hell to Border Control, rockin' the bloodstained hospital pyjamas look - at which point Ísland - that fink - pulls out all the stops in faking a domestic abuse relationship. The cringing, the terrified kicked-puppy eyes, the 'I walked into a door, really, it's okay', he's all bruised, beaten face, gives uneasy grin towards 'the boyfriend' and more cringing. Border Control guards looked at me like I was scum of the planet. They disperse to go get their bosses to deal with big mean abuser type while I try to defend my honour. Once the backs're turned, Ísland vaults the security gate, because surprise of all surprises, Sverige's waiting in the loading bay with a cloaked stealthship."

Quick thinking. "What next?"

"Well, it was pretty difficult to press any kind of charges without a beaten boyfriend, so they let me go. Fastforward a little bit. I told you I was in political sciences, so I tried to do a little research of my own about the pirate story Ísland sold me. I never found anything in the library, nothing talking to professors, nothing at all. I chalked it down to a really weird conspiracy theory."

"If that's the case," he said, taking a seat at the workbench, "why are you here?"

"'Cause the pirates returned - ow, ya fuckin' stupid iron..." Danmark muttered. He began placing the parts he'd jimmyed off in new locations and attaching them with molten metal.

"How did they find you? Why would they have bothered?"

"I wondered the same, though I didn't get the chance to ask when they were beating the crap out of me. One behind holding me still, another two railing punches - and one of them shouts out to leave the face, that's the money right there. That's when I realised it wasn't just some gang member and his buddies I'd pissed off months ago. Sure I'd told someone where I'd be, and when I didn't show in a matter of hours they'd start looking. But a few hours is enough time to disappear a person.
He grinned. "Island came back!"

"Actually, that was Suomi." His surprise must have registered on his face because Danmark grinned (then burned himself, and swore again). "I know what you're thinking," he said, his fingertip in his mouth to soothe the burn, "but usually we do get along! Even if he's moody sometimes. It's like a pendulum. He got me out - advantage of surprise, and some legitimate skills, kid was like on fire! He took out the two guys in front of me in five seconds, one by wrenching his arm back to the ground and the other using his elbows and a sharp kick to the knee - think he actually knocked it backwards - the one behind holding my arms back tried to run; Suomi tripped him an’ he went face-first flying - the last took off before Suomi could do anything, so he beaned him with a stick - it took ten seconds for all of this to happen. I thought, whoever the hell this guy is, I don't even care."

"What then?"

"Suomi brought me back to Sverige and Ísland at Border Control with the airship and explained the situation. They suspected all along the pirates'd return for me, because get this - Suomi was the one who'd put it all together -" And before Danmark could say a thing, he supplied the rest. "That the Council knew," he said.

"Not only knew, but supported. Advocated it," and as Danmark said it, his heart sunk. No wonder. No wonder he'd been showed off in front of the highest Councillors at Romae's, stripped nude, made to kneel, and they didn't even blink an eye - those bastards had known all along and this was all planned. "Not openly! But it makes some small amount of sense, when you think about it in terms of the market, 'cause it all started with the last interplanetary recession. What better way to revitalise the economy?"

Why bother getting angry, he thought, feeling enraged anyway. One group of people getting fat and rich off another. Didn't make any difference whether they made the laws or paid for them.

"And obvious that they'd want to somehow exert control behind the curtains like this," Danmark continued. "Starts out with a balanced job system, then you get class divisions - and those at the top of the Council were all for controlling the trade. Romae's idea. And who should be at the head of the Council but one of Romae's oldest friends. Makes sense, don't it?" Danmark finished his work on the green board and set it aside to let it cool. When he looked up he quickly clarified: "I don't think it's right. I'm just saying. From a theoretical standpoint. I- I wrote an essay on this once."

Sure. It made loads of sense when you abstracted out far enough to forget that these were human beings you were playing little financial games of supply and demand with. Could lawmakers really so easily forget about that?! "I see why you joined up with Suomi and them," he said instead.

"That was one of the reasons, yeah," Danmark replied. "They found me once. They could find me again. But the - the - treatment, of innocent people - that's wrong. I wanted to do something. And my parents are rich enough that they can support me, and there's no time limit on pursuing a major degree. I wasn't always good to my folks but they raised me to tell right from wrong and I couldn't - I couldn't stand by and let it happen, y'know? You would've done the same."
He wouldn't've. His reply was a grim smile. "I'm flattered you should think so highly of me," he said bitterly.

"I wish you thought more highly of yourself," Danmark said softly - seriously for once. "You're worth it."

Somehow Danmark flopping all over him in bed was innocent, meant nothing. But this, this embarrassed him, and he felt his cheeks grow warm as he fidgeted on the workbench, uncomfortable and flustered. He tried changing the topic. "So your parents know and don't mind that you're here, then?"

"They have no idea! They think I'm back on Schlessen studying anarchy with some professor, instead of causing it. It's been a few years but Ísland keeps sending postcards back for me. I, uh - I don't know how to tell them what I've really been doing these past few years. And that I don't really want to settle down with a regular life because... well, this beats regular life any day! S'more exciting."

But excitement and righteousness made for a dangerously short life. "The Council knows who you are, you'd have to create a new identity - why do you stay?"

Danmark sighed. "I can't really go back. Not now. Not knowing what I know, not even if Ísland can fabricate me a good enough persona with an airtight history. It's exciting, doing this, but I know excitement only goes so far when you're constantly being pursued by cops and agents and you used to have a 'normal life' where you did 'normal things'. I won't lie to your face - I don't think I could lie to you - I won't sit here and pretend like I don't sometimes want to go back. Because ignorance is bliss, ain't it? And... and maybe I should've looked before I leapt, and I didn't, and I'm paying for it now. Maybe I didn't really get it that the decision I made to join up with Suomi and the group would have long-lasting implications. But, y'know, maybe that's all water under the bridge, because everything's changed now and it's what I make of it in the present." Danmark fitted the green boards back into their slots in the metal cage and said quietly, "This needs doing, an' I need doing it."

"What about Norge?"

"What about Norge?" asked Danmark. He began screwing the cage back together.

"I know why everybody else is here - Sverige, Suomi, Ísland, you - even if you wanted to go back you can't; they're looking for you. Someone is, anyway. Karpusi and Adnan must not know about who you were before, or they would have found you more easily."

"Seems that's restricted to the upper echelons of the Council, not the bee-spah. Guess they don't talk enough to realise the two cases are linked. Or they don't want Karpusi and Adnan to stumble over the Council's dirty work by accident. Y'know, I don't know how much they know. But if Council does have people looking for me, I've never heard from them. Let's hope Ísland can continue eluding them."

"He's good at what he does, all of you are," he agreed. "But Norge's the only one missing from your stories. Why?"

"That's the best part," Danmark said with a grin. "One day this crazy guy walks into our base, easy-as-you-please, like it's a shop, waits for us all to get back and says he's joining up. Actually, what he said was, it appears we are of similar opinions. I believe we can assist each other - you know
that funky half-sarcastic half-honest way he's got. Dunno who he was before - maybe Ísland does, who knows. All I know is his rationale, same as ours: smelled something rotten and couldn't forget the stink of it. But where we had passion, Norge had an obscene amount of money and balls. Basically... *Norge found us.*

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*(sweden)*

"Those two've been awful quiet for awhile," Suomi huffed.

That much was true, thought Sverige, and quiet around Danmark never meant anything but shenanigans, but he didn't like Suomi's tone of voice. "They left. 'While ago, t' get a few more s'plies at Kr'ksvell'r," he said.

"You let Danmark take them to Kroksvellir? I thought the general consensus was he wasn't to go unless it were absolutely necessary, because he'd give us away!"

Not like Karpusi didn't already know where they were. "Relax. 'S fine. We're only gonna be here anoth'r day anyway, then w' come straight on back t' Tullejärvi." Let Karpusi and Adnan knock on their door, nobody'd be home.

"He should've told us."

"He told me."

Suomi threw up his hands. "Oh so what, now you're our glorious leader and overseer?"

Sverige answered with a glare tough enough for Suomi to shrink under the force of it, but he didn't back down. This wasn't about Sverige, anyway. "Th' hell's yer probl'm with Danm'rk, anyway?"

"It ... it pisses me off!" Suomi hissed across the table.

"Why? Wh't's yer opinion got t' do with it?"

"It doesn't," he admitted, drumming his fingers on the table. "But I think. Well. Don't you find that what he's doing is wrong?"

"M not entirely sure what yer talkin' about," Sverige lied. He knew very well what Suomi was talking about. Forcing him to admit what bugged him might make Suomi realise what his big problem was.

"Danmark should exercise some caution. That's all."

"With what?"

Suomi grew impatient. "Come on, don't play dumb with me. It doesn't work! How he's carrying on with Tim. That's unfair."

"Tim's not a *child,*" he began warningly.

"I know that - believe me," Suomi said. "We shouldn't be treating him with kid gloves either, but
it's unfair of Danmark to place this burden on him."

"What burd'n?"

Suomi tried to explain it a little better. "Look. You see a guy who's wounded from the past few years and on the mend. I see something different. Sverige, you didn't spend time with these guys like I did, the ones who were with the worse trainers. Some of them are really -" Suomi broke off. "They get inside your head," he decided finally. "They screw you up so hard that a scratch here and there would be welcome, because then you'd have something to point at, to identify an injustice, but like it is, all in the mind... they make you think you're crazy, that you made it all up. That's how they break you. And then when you can no longer trust yourself, they get you to trust them. They make you like what they do to you. They make you think they're doing you favours. It's mindgames, Sverige!"

"Y' think Tim's brainwashed," Sverige whispered. Nobody but Suomi would hear him, but this wasn't a pleasant conversation to be having and it felt like talking behind people's backs. Sverige was not a gossip.

"No, I - I don't know, to be honest with you. I don't think that's... what happened. To Tim. But I do think that, for Danmark to just... latch on to him, like he's available or something. That pisses me off, it grosses me out. And it's not because he doesn't deserve something like normal, it - it's because it makes a mockery of it, like it's a bandage to cover what happened to him, like it laughs in the face of everything he's gone through in the past three years."

"Maybe s'what Tim needs, laughter t' ignore it all." It'd explain why Tim liked hanging around Danmark so much, 'cause Suomi could only advance this Danmark-as-evil theory so far. There was also Tim's own actions to try and explain and Danmark hadn't controlled those.

"Laughter, maybe. What's Tim going to do when he has to realise Danmark wants...more than that? When he realises Danmark needs to be told to lay off because Tim can't so easily - do these things like you and me."

Hmph. "Like you an' me, huh?"

"Well!" Suomi laughed, flustered. "Not like - like, y'know, not like us, but closer. Like lovers. If Danmark tries to pursue anything more than friendship with Tim, the onus is on Tim to reject Danmark. I'm telling you Sverige, the people I knew - he won't find that so easy to do. In the past three years, rejection wasn't an option!"

"Danmark could wait."

"Since when has he ever been patient? Besides, if he chooses instead to wait, hovering, skulking around in the shadows until Tim's better, how is that fair, either?"

Suomi had a point. (Although, the day Danmark successfully managed waiting around, creeping in shadows, and being stealthy, Sverige'd pay big money - that was nothing but a silly analogy, it wasn't a joke, it wasn't funny.) He shook his head. "S'pose Tim wants what Danm'rk's offerin'?"

"Maybe in a year. I told you, I knew guys like Tim, and those who were there the longest had been there half as long as Tim was. He's been with us three weeks and for fuck's sake, Sverige, they already sleep together. So soon?! You can't think that's healthy. He needs time. Can Danmark give him time?"
Sverige said nothing. Didn't have to, because lucky for him, Norge entered from the hangar side of
the warehouse. "Such pleasant, happy faces," he said sarcastically, by way of greeting.

"You're early. Fight with the girlfriend?" Suomi snapped.

"Ignore 'im," Sverige said.

"I'm fully prepared to. So. What's the plan?"

"Ísland's at the new base. We need you to go pick him up."

"Oh. What's he doing there all by himself?"

Suomi ignored Sverige's look of disapproval (a shame; it was one of his better ones). "Housekeeping. Installing the stoves. You know, the usual."

"Huh. Well, I'll go now before the engines cool- wait, why me?" Norge asked suspiciously. "Not that I mind, because you guys are in stellar moods."

"We need to finish up some things here," Suomi told him curtly. "Organisational things. Actually, before you leave I should give you a few boxes to take on your way over."

Beat. "Okay so, what I'm hearing is, you still don't have a plan yet," Norge decided.

"Augh!" Suomi said, and stormed out of the room.

"What the hell is up with him?" Norge asked.

"Unimpressed with Danm'rk," Sverige muttered.

"That makes two of us."

All of this nonsense was enough to make Sverige actively root for Danmark, if only because
nobdy else would! "Whut, you also think he should lay off, that Tim's some poor kicked puppy an' can't take care'f himself?"

Unlike Suomi, who would've immediately become either defensive or tempestuous or a strange
dstawise mix of both, Norge - classy, frozen Norge - ignored him and instead calmly shook his head,
adjusted his cuffs at his wrists and explained, "Danmark comes on too strong - for anybody, but
especially for someone like Tim. And, to be honest, I don't think Tim's going to stay very long. I
think he an' his sister will go back to New Sainte-Dolitte and try to have some sort of regular life
for awhile."

"But he said he wanted t' join up!"

"But that was before we started working on Margot. Now the game plan has changed, he'll want
some sort of semblance of stability, since now it's more likely he could get it. Can you blame him?
You didn't choose to be here -"

"I did, kinda," Sverige admitted.
Norge again shook his head. "You found yourself mired in quandary and decided to be proactive. You could've left better off alone with Suomi once you'd fetched him back. Now, I agree it would've been hard -"

Now wait just a minute. "Mebbe I didn't stroll into th' base unannounced, an' off'r help like you. Doesn't mean my morals're any less fix'd. 'S wrong. I'll do somethin' 'bout it."

"Didn't mean anything," Norge said, holding his hands up in innocence. "Anyway, about Tim? I can't blame him for wanting a little peace and quiet, so if anything, I think Danmark should back off. For his own sake. Tim won't be around much longer and here's Danmark, setting himself up for heartbreak, and doesn't even realise it."

The best part was, even if Danmark didn't know what he was doing, you could warn him about this shit 'til you were blue in the face, and he might agree and give you lip service. And then he'd turn around and do the same old thing. "Didn't realise ya cared so much fer someone you keep bickerin' with."

Norge shrugged. "He may be a loudmouth idiot, sure. But he's our loudmouth idiot." He turned to leave for the hangar bay, and called out behind, "For the record, Suomi feels the same way."

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(netherlands)

When he caught Danmark making a third lap around the workbench, he realised something was up. "What's the problem?" he asked.

"Think I might've lost the duct tape," Danmark replied, pawing through the contents of the box. "Hm. Yeah. Definitely lost the duct tape. That's annoying!"

"Is there any place we can get some more?"

Danmark nodded. "Downtown. Just as well, there's all my engineering books to take back."

"If we're going downtown, why not get something sturdier than tape?" he offered, looking at the shambles of the airship with some concern. "Not that I doubt your skills. But, uh ... should we really be using duct tape for something we're going to be taking on an interplanetary journey?"


"Then... suppose we keep some of those books?" Just in case.

"But they'll expire."

"Danmark, they don't even know your real name."

"But it's a library!" he protested. "We can't swindle a library!"

And that was how an hour later found them with a large shallow crate full of heavy textbooks. It was a twisted path through bramble and messy underbrush until they got to the main path in the forest. It grew easier without twigs everywhere hitting them in the face, though the weight of the books still left something to be desired. "It was smart," he said, "to put the wagon on skis."
"Quick job too. It was originally for Suomi, Norge and Ísland, whenever they go to town for supplies. I don't go much and Sverige's big enough. But it doesn't get used too often as what it was meant for - Ísland goes sledding in it, Norge does any shopping on Olyokin and brings it back in the ship, and Suomi thinks he can carry everything on his own with burlap sacks. Then he bitches for a week when he's pulled a muscle."

They began talking of other, inconsequential things when they rounded a curve and spotted a man with his dog, coming their way along the path.

"What a good thing we're leaving tomorrow," Danmark said quietly, once they'd walked far enough past. "He can't give us away."

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They made it to Kroksvellir in an hour that felt much longer with the weight of books in their arms. The town was sleepy; then again, the last time he'd been here was at night for dinner in a popular pub. By comparison, the afternoon seemed practically dead.

The library was a tiny brick building with feeble insulation off the main street in Kroksvellir, and the woman who greeted them (the only person in the place, in fact) was a pleasant, round-faced fifty-something dressed in two cardigans and a scarf. She didn't look at her hands while she knitted - which, to him, looked a little like magic on sticks, but also like a neat task to occupy one's hands. And you got things at the end of it, which was a bonus. (Maybe they could raise sheep, he thought idly, get Margot to take care of them and he could card their wool into blankets. Would sheep make much noise?) Danmark's books were overdue, for which he apologised profusely and handed the librarian the funds in cash - the real, unlaundered kind. (Danmark had told him earlier it wasn't nice and the librarian sent Ísland home with cookies when he dropped by. She had seemed so sweet, she'd smiled at both of them with crinkly, genuine eyes and called him 'dear' and patted the back of his hand. She even looked like a cookie lady.)

Next was the general store. The boy behind the counter - sixteen, maybe - couldn't possibly be Olvirsson himself, must have been his son. Danmark requested mail and the boy disappeared into the backroom.

"Is anything planned for dinner tonight?" he asked Danmark, eyeing the potatoes.

"Hmm, not yet," Danmark replied, resting a chin on his shoulder and pressing gently into his side. "But I could make us a stew? There isn't much left back home, we could get more." Danmark clapped him on the shoulder and grinned. "I'll be in the next room getting hardware supplies if you can pick up some fixings. Gotta make something for the trip."

Then he left briefly, the cold at his shoulder somehow more noticeable. Guess no place in Kroksvellir really has decent insulation, he thought, and he noticed, when Olvirsson's boy returned empty-handed from the makeshift post-office in the backroom, that even the kid wore a thick wool sweater. "No mail today for Hj- oh. Where'd your boyfriend go?"

Boyfriend?

Boyfriend?

"How do you figure that?" he asked, his throat tight and his face red.
The boy shrugged and explained, "It was a guess. You were either brothers or lovers. You don't look enough alike to be brothers. But you walk too closely together to be just friends. I didn't mean any offence."

"Uh. None. None taken," he murmured.

It wasn't an offensive idea, but... he hadn't realised...

The boy sort of gave him a sheepish half-grin. He had blushed - the kid must have thought there was something there, still too early to be anything more than formless nebula, the whisperings of infatuation.

Now the librarian's great, toothy smiles made sense.

He wasn't sure what to say - he was hardly sure what to think - so he said nothing. Danmark returned from the other room with duct tape, a spool of copper wire, a box of nails and a few more things. Danmark, who, come to think of it, gave his stomach a bit of a turn (not unpleasantly but not easily, either).

As they left the store, Danmark continued his usual chatter and for once, he found himself glossing over the words, passively listening and murmuring enough assents to keep the onesided conversation existent.

They were close. Their shoulders and arms brushed constantly whenever they walked abreast. He found himself trailing Danmark's heels whenever they walked single file. It required extra thought to put distance between them, it felt natural to glue himself next to Danmark. He didn't think he did this with any of the others. In fact, he knew he didn't.

Well, so Danmark had managed to find some way to connect them, it wasn't so surprising, was it? His stomach was strangely unsettled. They slept together, they ate together, he helped Danmark with work - the only thing they didn't do was take baths together. (Thank god - sometimes he felt like there were marks, or he felt like making some, like rubbing his skin raw. Danmark couldn't see that.)

On one hand having Danmark so close, so near was kind of soothing in its disorder. In a very real way, he craved the proximity. On the other hand, he couldn't possibly offer the man anything more. Could he? Was he leading him on?

Maybe... maybe if they were slow about it. Very slow. He tried to envision it -

His head spun. His hands grew clammy and he fought to keep his breathing under control as he began to panic. No, he couldn't. He couldn't.

But it wouldn't be like that, Danmark was nothing like his captors, nothing like Romae. Danmark was good and kind and yeah, loud and a little rough around the edges, but innocent about it! He couldn't help the way he was! (Like the dog they'd met on their way in. He hadn't minded the dog's affectionate kisses on his hand... would he mind Danmark's?)

His stomachache grew.

He wasn't Danmark. He couldn't forget about lasting consequences and serious obstacles and to tell
oneself instead, *we'll cross that bridge when we get there*. For him, the bridge was always kind of *there* and it wasn't in him to ignore it. Didn't it make more sense to consider these things from a strategic point of view?

Maybe in a year it would all be inadmissible and he'd be laughing about it and Danmark and he would do more in that bed than just sleep (his stomachache grew more, and his head began to spin again) - or maybe in a year he'd be exactly where he was now without having moved an inch. He couldn't promise anything.

And even as tempting as it was to prove to himself he could do it right (and show Romae he hadn't broken *jack squat*, dammit), he'd need practice first. If he would ever be close to someone (because he had never had anyone, he'd been seventeen, had thought himself too young) he'd need something insignificant to screw up, because he didn't want to screw it up with Danmark -

What if he couldn't even hack insignificant? Maybe he'd never get to the point where he could be close to someone, even temporarily. Maybe thinking about this a moot point, because everything had changed and mentally discussing it did nothing.

How exactly like Danmark to stumble over something he didn't intend.

What a fool he'd been to think that he could ever do something like this for very long. It was one thing to wonder, to look at Danmark and think *what if*, because *maybe* he'd get better and there were the foundations of something there. (Danmark wasn't touchy with anyone else like this, but more to the point, the things he said and the way he said them -!)

However, it was an entirely different thing to get to that point and then realise you couldn't go back. Because he couldn't, because everything for him had kind of changed forever and -

- and if he needed anything right now it was time.

It was a disquieting, sobering walk back to the base.

--

(sweden)

"Aft'r some thought, I've got a more solid plan," announced Sverige, once they had all gathered around the main table. Suomi sat on his left and a partly chilled and deeply annoyed Ísland sat on his right, with Norge across from him, on Ísland's other side.

Sitting between Norge and Suomi were Danmark, leaning backwards with the chair on two legs, and Tim, leaning forwards with his hands clasped loosely on the table. With those postures, it wasn't instantly clear how they'd scooted their chairs closer together. They must've thought he wouldn't notice, and before all that nonsense with Suomi and Norge, he might not have. Now, he did.

"Here're th' problems facin' us. K'pusi'll follow us. Anchorage was prob'ly bugged, which Kirkland musta figured out and managed t' tell us in time to escape th' tail -"

"That was decent of him," Suomi interrupted.

Ísland didn't appear as moved. "I'm not convinced he didn't do it because he might need help again
in the future," he bit out.

Suomi conceded the point with a shrug.

"At any rate," he continued, "it means K'rpusi an' Adnan'll know we'll be at the auction. If K'rpusi's still on Olyok'n -"

Norge shook his head. "Agnieszka hasn't reported being tailed anywhere recently."

"Wh'ever he is, he'll have a track on our sign'ls."

"The airship's been retrofitted," Danmark pointed out. "Signals're new."

"An' th' stealthsh'p?"

"Oh. I, uh. Didn't get a chance to do that. Aren't we just taking the airship though?"

Sverige shook his head. "There're probl'ms with that. Mebbe in our best interests t' take both ships, an' leave one on Hallar to return in th' airship."

Norge was aghast. "But - but my stealthship!"

"It's not yours," Danmark muttered.

"We shouldn't ditch either ship," Suomi added, "and they don't belong to any one person, because we stole both of them!" Norge pouted so childishly it was almost comical, coming from someone typically unruffled. "Won't one less ship limit our avenues of escape in case Karpusi and Adnan show up and bring friends?"

Ísland agreed. "And I'd like to know how they found out about us being on the anchorage. Or tracking our movements. We've been so careful."

"Not rec'ntly. K'rpusi might've intercepted our mail. Or he's got someone on the inside of th' border control stations at Sk'ratchky or Kr'ksvell'r, or both."

"I thought you said you had Rautharkrokur in the bag," Suomi said to Danmark.

Danmark gave a helpless shrug. "So did I."

"Wh'chever one," Sverige continued. "Now he's got a tag on our sign'ls. Working on this second assumption, Norge got a new set earlier t'day and was okay goin' off - but I 'spect you were tracked comin' back, wern't cha?"

"Maybe not," Norge replied, "Agnieszka does a good job with a signals box. I'd've bounced around the planet to keep attention off the town, but you told me not to bother."

"Didn't want t'waste yer time. But that's why I told you t' stay under the radar t' Tullejärvi."

"So. Where are we in the plan?" Suomi asked.

"Here's my gamble," Sverige began. "Fer starts, Tim's completely unscript'd reaction in th' Cloud might've bought us some time an' some intrigue. K'rpusi an' Adnan're clever. Maybe clever enough
t' wanna know more 'bout why a form'r bondsm'n should be so treated. Might be their ticket into exposin' th' corruption of th' council -"

"Then again -" Suomi interrupted him again - "the council works with the Agency so often that the Agency might know of, or condone, the practice. Karpusi and Adnan might know everything. We'd have to keep a close eye on things."

"Glad y' brought that up," though it'd be great if Suomi could wait his turn in talking, "that leads me t' my next point. Our entrance's solid with four'f us takin' K'rpusi's identity. Tim, you could take yer own identity - 's nothing damaging on it so far - but take one as K'rpusi t'be safe. An' Norge, try pickin' up one of yer old names, one'f th' classier ones."

"Then you must want me to do the buying."

"'Xactly. Rest'f us'll be stationed as d'straction t' try an' pull fire off the arena. If K'rpusi doesn't buy that there's funny bizness with the auction an' stolen goods, he'll wond'r why we're on Hall'r t' begin with, an' I 'spect he'll wager we're prof'ting off the auction business t' do some heavy thiev'ry."

"And if he does buy the funny business with the auction?" Suomi asked.

"That's where th' math comes in. Four'f us as 'Heracles K'rpusi', an' Norge with somethin' else, adds t' five. Th' sixth -"

And Suomi must've caught on to what he intended to say before he actually said it, because he sat up, ramrod straight, and gave Sverige an outraged look. With dread, he muttered, "Oh no. No, no. This is not a good idea."

"'S not an awf'l one -" Sverige tried to reason.

"You're right. It's horrendous," Suomi spat, looking angrier and angrier.

"Uh, guys?" Ísland snapped. "Maybe you could translate for the rest of us, who don't speak telepathically and can't finish each other's sentences?"

Suomi growled it out, his face red: "He wants me to go as Tino Väinämöinen."

Ísland let out a bark of a laugh. "But I did all that work covering you up! No way!"

"Say, that's a decent distraction," Danmark admitted. "You don't do any buying, you hardly ever go off-planet. You mainly go to town but not often enough to be spotted and you're always covert about it."

"Unlike some people I could mention," Suomi retorted.

But Danmark prattled on, ignoring the nasty tone of voice (and thank god, because Sverige had no desire to play peacekeeper in addition to pacifier). "So then, how'd he find you? He must've tracked you down somehow. Tino Väinämöinen's file is the only way he could've recognised you. Then you're - that is, Tino's gotta be flagged in all the systems. Once you go through Caput Halleri Border Control he'll get the alert. That'll excite him enough to pursue you."

"And y' did a good 'nough job of avoidin' a tail once b'fore."
"So you expect me to do the same? I hope you'll give me money to fill a bag with coffee."

"No, you should get a proper weapon," Norge added. "Bootknife, maybe, something threatening that means business."

"You know," Danmark thought aloud, "there's no way Karpusi won't follow you."

"Agreed. K'rpusi'll take th' bait."

"I'm so glad the bait is okay with being bait!" Suomi yelled.

"Oh, c'mon!" wheedled Danmark. "I've seen you in action! There's no way Karpusi stands a chance." And stop the presses, it turned out Danmark possessed a sweet-talk ability after all. Suomi, momentarily placated, appeared to appreciate the compliment, or at least the fact that it came from someone as unexpected as Danmark. "This is an awesome plan!"

"I still think you're pronouncing 'stupid' wrong," Suomi grumbled.

"We'll d'scuss it later. We need t' think 'bout wheth'r we've got one 'r two d'stractions." He looked Danmark's way and raised an eyebrow.

"Hey, wait -"

"Why break th' syst'm that works?" Next to him, Suomi smirked; Sverige didn't even have to look at him to know he was doing it.

Danmark sulked. "I was kinda hoping to see the auction."

"It's not supposed to be entertaining," Suomi muttered, as Norge asked slowly, "... Why? Whatever for?" Norge's eyes were narrowed, and Suomi sat on the edge of his seat.

"To cause havoc!" Danmark explained brightly, and both Suomi and Norge relaxed a fraction. His outburst hadn't affected Tim's composure one bit. Why couldn't Suomi and Norge get so easily used to Danmark's personality? How was it someone as loud and blathery as Danmark managed to be so easy to misread? (Though the auction was entertainment, for about ninety-seven percent of the entire solar system.)

"You'd be thrown out faster'n y'could bid two bits," said Sverige dryly.

"But we should have someone inside the arena," Danmark argued. "If it's like you say, Karpusi and company will have all-access passes to get in. We'll need a distraction inside, and one outside!"

Hmph. Not only might it be helpful for Tim to have Danmark nearby (or maybe helpful for Danmark to have Tim nearby - who knew), but that was also a good point.

Ísland brought up an equally good point. "But won't that be difficult to coordinate? We'll need precise access points and synchronised watches and stuff. Splitting up means we need a way to get back together."

There came a chuckle from Norge's side of the table. "And that," he said, with exultant glee, "is where I come in." He picked up a bag he'd brought to the meeting that he'd evidently stashed
underneath the table, unfastened the flap and upended it. Out spilled six brass spheres, only about the size of a tennis ball, with heavy thunks. They rolled around, eventually settling in a wide crack that split the table. Eavesdroppers, Sverige thought, although - not quite, because Eavesdroppers were perfectly spherical until in use, whereas these had little black buttons on the side.

"These," Norge exclaimed - and he picked one up and proceeded to wave it around proudly, peppering the rest of his speech with gesture - "are two-way radios. You press the button to talk and it sends out the sound to all of the above listening in on the same frequency. Good to a klick if there are no walls, about two hundred metres if there are. Since the auction arena's not that big, we should be okay."

Sverige picked one up to judge the weight. Much heavier than a regular Eavesdropper. "Did ... didja spend yer own money on these?"

"No, actually, they were free," Norge explained.

Ísland physically turned in his seat to look at him. "What," he deadpanned.

Norge gave a dismissive shrug. "Perks of a spy girlfriend. Spy gadgets."

"So okay," Danmark said, "we all take one, we can talk to each other. That's freedom in improvising if we need. And it gets rid of our need for super precision, although I think we still oughta synch up watches. But if we're caught, what'll they think?"

"Well, evidently, we don't get caught. It'll have to be only if strictly necessary; with a range like that, these machines are easily detectable."

"Ah. But nobody will bother using Eavesdroppers to detect aud feed power sources, not when the streets of Caput Halleri are lined with Romae's feeds anyway," added Tim.

"Oh." Norge was chuffed. "Well. Excellent!"

"Solves that probl'm. So this tells us where Danm'rk is, where Tim an' Norge'll be -"

"Wait, where're we?" Tim asked, leaning Norge's way.

"In the arena, buying Margot," he supplied.

"Oh, right."

"- an' also Suomi -"

"But we haven't agreed on where I am, I'm just sort of around, leading Karpusi in a circle and trying to slowly lose him."

True. Perhaps better they didn't agree on anything, to let Suomi improvise a trail instead. "Keep 'im chasing his tail fer about an hour 'til it's probable that Margot's been bought -"

"Remember," Norge reminded, "with these gadgets, I can ring it in and tell you."

"Kay. Suomi, try an' keep him 'til we get th' go-ahead. Then you meet up w'th us."
"Us being you and I?" Ísland asked.

"Pr'cisely. While Suomi's off playin' hide 'n' seek, Danmark's off playin' damage control - or damage create, wh'chever, don't care - an' Tim 'n' Norge are playin' Av'rage Consumer, you an' I are gonna steal anoth'r ship."

There was an unhealthy gleam in Norge's eyes. "A stealthship?"

"No," he insisted. "We need somethin' that'll get through Bord'r Control's safety measures. Tim'll be with us on th' way home, Norge 'n' Margot in th' stealthsh'p. So we need something' big enough fer five."

"What about the airship we've already got?" Danmark asked.

"That one, we'll hafta ditch." Too cumbersome to rewire signals on the fly, too big to be aerodynamic. It could easily be overtaken.

"But... not the stealthship, right?"

"No. You can keep th' damn stealthsh'p." Norge looked inordinately happy. "Yer welcome."

"Whoa, hold on," Danmark interjected. "We're gonna ditch that thing right after all that time we spent on it today?"

"You know..." Ísland said, with a growing smile, "why don't we just steal two?"

"We shouldn't steal more'n we have to!" Honestly. Was Sverige the only one not thinking of the legalities? The more crimes they committed the more obvious they'd be!

"No no!" Ísland tried to clarify, "I could steal two more stealthships. Then all we have are stealthships and we never have to deal with the big-ship problem ever again, and we get more freedom in selecting our bases without worrying about space and noise requirements."

Which made a sick amount of sense, as much as unnecessary amounts of grand larceny annoyed him. "Danm'rk? Yer th' one'd be operatin' on 'em all th' time t' change frequency boxes."

Danmark considered it. "It's not insanely more complex. It's manageable for me. Maybe a little more expensive for more of the right parts -"

"If we're stealing stealthships, I think it's safe to say that expense is no issue," Ísland decided.

"Oh hell," and now Suomi took up the reins, "Once I'm done playing cops and robbers with Karpusi, why don't I come back and we can steal three stealthships, one for each of us." Suomi, he thought, you are not helping.

Norge positively beamed. "Yes, I like this plan."

Sverige considered reminding them all of their obligation to stay mostly legal, although more ships wasn't such a bad idea. Nevertheless - "Let's - not count th' chickens 'fore they hatch, 'mmkay? One thing at a time. So while Danm'rk, Norge an' Tim're busy in th' arena, we three'll attempt to steal more'n one stealthsh'p."
"Something that seats three or has seats you can fold down," Norge advised. "And lots of windows. And if it could be a little bit sexy-looking, that would be splendid."

"What," Suomi snapped, "you already planning to take this thing to see your girlfriend?"

And either Norge missed the tone completely or was ignoring it. "Exactly!"

"Hm," said Tim. "Suppose you get caught stealing."

They all turned to Ísland.

"If I could steal an airship on my own no problem a few years ago," he began, "then I don't see why this would be hard. I'll grant they might have changed things since I've been to Hallar. Possibly because they don't want repeat incidents. I think it's safe to say we can for sure steal one ship. The others, maybe not so much."

"Then hadn't you better steal a ship that's as big as possible, in case you don't get the chance to steal others?" Danmark asked.

Norge agreed. "Worse comes to worse, get Sverige to make away with a single ship, and you take the fall."

"Hey!"

"Sverige, they might recognise later as a buyer," Norge explained. "Puts a serious crimp in our future plans, doesn't it? You on the other hand - you can sit there in a jail cell for a few hours. They'll never see you again and you can retouch any police records later, once I come bail you out."

Ísland hmphed. "You'd damn well better!"

"We wouldn't leave you behind!" Suomi insisted. Sverige coughed, reminding him of earlier this afternoon. "I mean, again."

"Alright," Ísland said uncertainly.

"'Kay. So... settled? We have a plan we more'r less agree on?"

Suomi nodded once, firmly. He wasn't happy about it, clearly, but it'd do, and over the next few days Suomi would warm up to it a little more. Tim and Danmark next to Suomi looked happier - Tim especially. Norge was thinking about the new stealthship (Sverige could tell because he looked fractions happier than his usual imperturbability). Even if he were a very little bit motivated by material goods, Norge's being here at all demonstrated his ultimate altruism - he'd do his job, and he'd do a damn fine job. Ísland remained uneasy, brushing it off only when Sverige turned his way by nodding with an impression of decisiveness that none of them, least of all Sverige, felt.

But they'd settle in to this plan over the next few days in the airship. "Good. We start t'morrow."
(greece -> turkey)

Adnan,

Sending this from Kleve Anchorage outside Schlessen. The buggers left this morning and holy mother of god, they are slow. For some reason they decided that taking the stealthship was a bad idea or something and they've all piled into the airship instead. I guess it must seat five - or, well, six now - because they didn't have a problem getting off Nunat but that thing does not move fast. At all.

At this point I'm working on trust that they've planned to get there in time. But you don't organise meetings with pirates in a rusty old piece of space junk to show up to something like this fashionably late, right?

Didn't actually measure the frequency they've got in my haste to get out so now I'm flying blind with the viper's autosig function. In retrospect, I could have moved about as fast as a mob of turtles and I would still be ahead. Oh well, what's done is done so you be on the lookout for them coming in to Caput Halleri BC. We'll get the airship signals then.

We ought to meet closer to if there's time - I want an update of the Delivery's activities. When I get into Halleri airspace watch for me on Agency frequency #30 again (if Petros is hogging it again, tell him to quit and shove off). If there's no time before we start, well ... have your Eavesdropper on you and we'll meet up in the arena.

(PS heard the Delivery was caught near Hallar again with the implication that a shuttle might've been sent down. Know anything about this?)

(PPS actually scratch that. It's probably kind of hard to send a letter to a viper. Just remind me to ask you later.)

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(china -> ukraine)

Dear Yekaterina,

It's some time now I haven't heard from you. Of course, it is possible you have been busy, or the mailships have gone on strike or there has been upon Olyokin a tragic paper shortage or the postman actually is an arsonist or indeed any manner of similar, waste-of-my-time thought scenarios. Perhaps even the incomprehensible and downright absurd has happened - no more do you want to write me.

But that's ridiculous!

I hope you have given more thought to my offer. Unlike the weight of sands in hourglasses I do not mean to press upon you, though it's clear I am not growing younger and at this rate you will marry a wizened, decrepit Veshnan king. You must forgive my haste as I bear no wish to crawl to the altar with a cane or walker; the squeaks of the wheels and the creaks of my bones fill my ears with
utmost dread.

But Yao, I hear you cry, you will not be alone for we are nearly the same age. And so time you too will render lame, your skin no longer supple and smooth but wrinkle-rippled and scented with a clinical formaldehyde aroma, your breasts at your hips and your hips at your knees! (There is a proverb we have here: Good luck seldom comes in pairs but bad things never walk alone.)

Even then I do not rescind my offer, because with you I imagine that there is a kind of peace in merely sitting together in front of a large window (for the outside world will grow too harsh for us feeble and weak relics of past) as the rest of the city passes us by and time slips yet more inexorably out of our hands. I think you would enjoy watching the sun from Veshna with her thicker atmosphere (and directly above my home, the lines of her magnetic field bend inwards, and they present some fantastic nighttime views - imagine dancing curtains of brilliant light in skies that could be yours).

As for myself, having been raised on this planet, I find the image mundane; I cherish instead your appreciation and stupefaction. (After a long life of governance, I'm sure looking forward to peace and quiet is something you understand!)

This too can come in pairs.

In all seriousness, Katya, please think further on my offer and think of me with kindness, as I fondly think of you.

Yours,
Yao Wang of Veshna

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(ukraine -> china)

Yao - greetings;

I have given your offer some thought, though I will neither encourage nor discourage you by quantifying precisely how much.

I am not sure what you mean with your last letter. I feel certain that all it really tells me is that you have a very strange sense of humour. But it is a nice change and welcome departure from the remainder of my heretofore suitors who felt the need to compose page-long odes on the size and shape of my breasts, sometimes even extrapolating to other senses in hasty anticipation of introducing themselves to this flesh of mine with organs other than their eyes.

Those parts of your letter that describe me do so without unnecessary prose or glorification. Indeed, they are downright insulting. Perhaps I should be offended, but instead, I find it a pleasant change of pace, so you may insult me at will.

I understand you make a ritual of attending the annual auctions at Caput Halleri so I don't doubt you will be present for the Decennial. As chance would have it I will also be in attendance as my sister's Time is hastening and our usual trader contact has been indisposed of late. I hope you will accompany me for dinner at the Osteria Antica with my sister, my brother and my bondsmaiden. Send word at the Caput Halleri Deversorium and I will make proper arrangements.
I apologise in advance for my brother's unorthodox behavior. He thinks himself a libertine. Please allow him to continue thinking that. It is simpler for us all.

Yours,
Yekaterina Bragina of Olyokin

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(latvia -> china)

Yao,

Whatever I may have sent you before in a fit of accidental kindness you may disregard completely, and let this letter serve as a final summary of my feelings toward you:

In all my life I have never received such distasteful letters, and I would rather you had kept the parchment on which they were written for washroom tissue where they would no doubt be put to better use. In fact, judging from your handwriting this may have been exactly what you have done and you've simply made the mistake of sending the final product across space. If this is your idea of a new approach to sanitation procedures then consider me well and truly baffled at how you have managed to elude usurpment upon Veshna when your post offices are filled with manure.

Indeed, I ask that all your correspondences to me should cease immediately, because I haven't the time to waste on someone bearing the mental depth of a gnat and a physical description that makes me sick to my stomach.

It is genuinely pathetic that you think yourself a suitable match for me or anyone of Bragin of Olyokin! If you yourself have siblings then I pity them for suffering your company, even if they are doubtless as disgusting as you; and if you have none then it's evident your parents were sickened adequately with a single monster and felt no need to make more.

This assumes perhaps hastily that your parents are not mutant animals themselves - if they are your real parents, then that can be the only explanation I can divine; and if they are not then I don't dispute a creature as filthy as you being cast into adoption in the first place.

You have no soul. Never contact me again.
Yekaterina Bragina of Olyokin

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(china -> ukraine)

My dear Yekaterina,

Ah! the more I read, the happier I am made. Your letters nearly made me cry with mirth! I do not intend presumption but please allow me to express my barely-containable joy.

If this is you responding in kind to my 'strange sense of humour', then I am glad to possess the ability to induce works of such hilarity. If instead this is you responding with your own, I am gladder still to find a kindred spirit.

But consider this a warning: letters such as these will only make this helpless suitor redouble his
efforts in winning your hand.

Ever yours,
Yao Wang of Veshna

PS - if I have read the recent society papers correctly your brother has an equally excellent sense of humour. Therefore I look forward to seeing it, and him, in action. We will meet upon Hallar in four days.
"Nice digs!" the driver teased, when they met outside in the freezing cold, and that only made Raivis' mood darker. "When they told me you were here playing handmaiden I almost couldn't believe it. But lookit you!"

Raivis gave him his best scowl. It didn't help, because the Bragins' airship driver and head coachman laughed harder, not less.

"That's enough," he muttered. "Don't you think I hate this? You're not helping! But Toris says jump and I say how high, and so here I am, getting down on my hands and knees to scrub the floors for people I despise. Give me a break, at least?" If anything, this job was only intensifying his hatred towards the Empire Union.

The driver mimed wiping a tear from his eye. "I'm sorry, but - this getup," he gestured to Raivis' uniform, "it's too much! Guess they had nothing in your size for a valet. Lucky they had housemaid dresses that fit you! With the little apron, too!"

Raivis glared. "The tailor's gonna be back with my real uniform tomorrow. It was either wait for it and be a handmaid, or work in the stables!"

"Oh man." The driver had calmed, a fraction - Raivis was still Raivis, and there was business to be done between them - "but, y'know, it's really pretty smart - this way nobody notices you and your behind-the-scenes shenanigans and if they do, they'll look for a girl first."

"Nobody notices me anyway!" Raivis whined. "This is the same as regular except now I work too hard with too few breaks and for too little money! And there's no vodka! Only a bottle apiece! And I think the rats eat better than I do. And all the other servants treat me like I'm incompetent, o-or slow, and I'm only new here, I'm not a moron -"

"You are so cute when you're complaining," the driver said with a grin, which made Raivis madder still. "Like a bright red blowfish, all puffed up! Anyway. Didja get the keys?"

Red-faced, Raivis dug into the pocket of his dress (honestly, his dress, this place was such a humiliating nightmare) and fished out a copy of the ring of keys he'd been given.

"Had them cut yesterday. On my only break, I might add. This one," he pointed out the heaviest, "is the key to the inside domestic residences. It works on the outside doors, from the courtyard and from the front side entrance. The rest are for personal offices and living spaces. I don't have any keys for their desks so you'd better tell Toris to stock up on lockpick sets. Do they need a map?" he asked, pulling out a roll of paper, secured with string. "I have a rough one I've drawn so far -"

"You been busy," the driver approved, impressed.

"Y-yeah, well... I'm so tiny I could get lost in all the secret passages. A-and nobody notices a servant, anyway."

"And?"
"See for yourself." He handed over the paper. The driver slipped the string off, unrolled it and held it flat against the wall. "The most logical path," Raivis explained, tracing it with his finger over the driver's shoulder. "Then this one -" he traced it out too - "is where the guards patrol. I made friends with one of 'em, s-so I know their habits. For most of the guard we can spike drinks b-but there's one who doesn't get along with the others. And here's the schedule," Raivis pulled out a second piece of rolled-up paper. "Don't bother opening it. Of course it has to be that Mister Loner's working that day."

"Just our luck," the driver agreed.

"Anything else?" Raivis asked.

The driver shook his head. "Not right now. Oh - Toris and Feliks say hello."

Toris and Feliks who got him into this mess into the first place. Raivis twisted his lips in a grimace. "Yeah, th-thanks. What about Eduard?" When the driver gave him a blank expression he clarified, "The bondsman?"

"Oh, him. He hasn't been back in days."

But Eduard was like clockwork! "What do you mean?"

"Yeah, he just. Stopped showing up. Maybe you seen him around here?"

He hadn't. "N-not recently."

"Huh." The driver shrugged. "Maybe you might wanna go check that he's okay."

"Y-you think - you think s-something might've happened to him?!" Raivis felt his heart pound as he began to panic. After all that work they'd been doing, did Crazy Ivan the Terrible get to him anyway?! Not Eduard...

"Hey man, I dunno," the driver said in a tone so casual it made Raivis flinch. Wasn't the driver's fault; he thought Eduard was a mere asset. An item. He didn't know him. "But he hasn't been in the base."

"You think it might be serious?" It sounded serious. What if it was serious? Oh god, it was serious!

"Dunno. Maybe he's been busy. But Toris wants to talk to him. Feliks gave away a bunch of the little spy toys the bondsboy made, they were hoping he could come by and make some more." He laughed, "Feliks says he'll make Toris pay him for them, so your little friend could earn a little dough, eh? That'd be nice! Says it wasn't fair that they didn't pay him the first time." And it wasn't. Work done was work paid. Even Raivis' servant job was compensated, although not much. Feliks' dogmatic boyfriend must've been rubbing off on him again, with his Opinions on bondspeople. "Anyway cariño. I gotta go look busy. Thanks for this though!"

"Y-yeah," Raivis replied, distracted.

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Once inside the Duma, Raivis was still cold, a chill in his bones and clammy skin, his anxiety
accompanying him as he ran through the halls. He was probably making a giant racket but he didn’t care!

Arina, he thought, as he turned the corner into the domestic wings, past the library. That was Ivan's personal servant, the one he called Arisha, wasn't it? Then she'd know, she'd have heard something, wouldn't she? If anything - if anything bad happened - in Ivan's bed-chambers (he felt sick to his stomach!), she'd know! - Or instead, would she remain faithful to her master and not say a word about the cleanup job they'd all have to do if it were the case that Eduard - that Eduard were - oh, Toris would kill him -

"Raivis?!" he heard behind him. "Is that you?"

He stopped in his tracks, skidding on the floor. With the taste of metal in his throat, Raivis turned to find - "Eduard?"

Perfectly alive and safe, though confused. Raivis resisted the urge to hug him. "What the hell are you doing here?" Eduard said, his voice very low. "This place is dangerous for someone like you!"

Hah! Eduard didn't know what danger was. "N-never mind me! At least you're okay," he blurted out shakily. Eduard didn't look hurt.

"Last I checked," Eduard said.

Very well, if Eduard didn't obviously understand what sort of danger he was in, Raivis would make him understand. "Where have you been? Apparently these past few nights you haven't been by the base!"

Eduard held a finger to his lips before Raivis completely forgot he was supposed to be undercover and a little bit covert. They ducked to the side of the hall behind a column. "How are you here? Do you go back and forth or something?" Eduard asked.

Not with his schedule. Fat chance getting any more than a few minutes' rest here and there. "No," he replied. "I get information from the driver. He meets with Toris daily in the church."

"Oh," said Eduard brightly. "Then that's why Toris dresses like a monk?"

"No no," Raivis clarified, "that's his cover story. He calls it his legend. Some spy-term. Anyway. He's a 'monk'," and he punctuated that with the air-quotes, because if Toris believed in anything it sure as hell wasn't religion. "That's how he's been getting so close to -"

He cut himself off before he gave Toris' entire story away. Who knew how friendly Eduard and Ivan were these days? Eduard was still alive but - maybe not for much longer, because Ivan was still sick. And if he knew that, he wouldn't be thrilled that it had been Toris' work that had put Eduard in such a dangerous place. Right next to Ivan, all the time. Walking temptation. A grisly murder waiting to happen!

Why, if he were in Eduard's position, he'd be pretty pissed too. And if Eduard were upset with them, he'd never come back to the warehouse and they couldn't protect him.

"Anyway," he concluded, trying to be vague. "Toris has his ways of finding out."

"Okay, that, I buy," Eduard said, "but how would Toris know I hadn't been back? He's never there
when I'm around and Feliks has been away more and more lately."

"Feliks has his little boyfriend. And we have feeds at the base, we can tell if you've been by -" here he put his hands on his hips and tried to look cross - "and Feliks says you haven't been in at all! And anyway, don't distract me! Why haven't you been by? Ivan hasn't forbidden you from outside contact, has he?"

Eduard shook his head vehemently. "No, he'd never do that -"

"Because he's had people imprisoned before, you know," Raivis supplied darkly.

"I - really?"

"Or maybe it was the Gospozha. I met her for the first time the other day; she's terrifying! Is she always like that?"

Eduard grinned. "Pretty much."

"I had to clean one of her rooms where she'd dropped a mug." And then pilfer her mail, and answer her letters.

"She's not so bad," Eduard reflected. "I don't have to deal with her much, I belong to Ivan - I, that is, I mean, he's the master, where I'm concerned."

"Right," he replied. "Anyway. Feliks was asking after you too. And me! I was worried too, I was worried sick, y'know, because of, uh..." such an embarrassing topic. "That, kinda. We were worried that you and Ivan were... that he had maybe...well you know."

It shouldn't have been so weird to talk about! Eduard was matter-of-fact about it. Bondspeople were a fact of life; talking about this was like talking about taking an umbrella outside when it rained, it wasn't supposed to be weird. The right tool for the right job. Especially on Olyokin with all the Vitim and Times forcing you to be straight about such matters. Wasn't that what you used bondspeople for? That's what they were for!

But he couldn't make himself think of Eduard as a tool. "I only wanted to make sure you were alright," he finished, feeling stupid.

"Oh, Raivis, I... I'm fine, I've just been busy lately," Eduard said finally.

"With what?" he asked. "You were never busy before."

"That's, that's different. Things just got busier, I guess."

Raivis put on his best pout. "You could come and see me in the kitchens sometime, after work. I don't have any friends here besides you so I get lonely. And none of the other kitchen staff speak Standard. It's all Zvanie. And I hate Zvanie!"

Eduard raised an eyebrow. "It's more common to speak, here. Didn't you learn it growing up?"

He shook his head. "Didn't bother. Nobody likes you back home if you know any. I knew a word or two, once, but it got beaten out of me on the schoolyard. In Kilnus you speak only Standard. Like every other progressive planet in the system! Like normal people. "B-but anyway! I'm glad to
see you're okay. I want you to check in with Toris if you can, alright? Even if you're busy. Please try. We worry about you, a-and Toris has connections! He can get you places in Kilnus if you ever need."

"Ah... Thanks," Eduard muttered. "I'll keep it in mind."

"Toris was also kind of hoping you'd come by to make more of those little Eavesdroppery things," he admitted.

"What happened to the ones I made?"

"Th-they kind of ... well Feliks gave them away," he mumbled sheepishly. "Toris says he'll pay you for more of them though! I mean, s-something that high quality, you should have been paid for them to begin with."

Flattery put a radiant smile on Eduard's face. "And you're sure that Feliks didn't do that on purpose to try and get me to come back?" he teased.

"He'd never!" He might.

But Eduard didn't look offended. "Tell Feliks I say hi, and Toris - pass on my good wishes to everybody, okay?"

"Alright," he told him. "And you'll come back to the base?"

"Not tonight. I'll come back - tomorrow, how's that?"

"That's good," Raivis said. "I better get back to work."

"Me too," Eduard agreed, "take care of yourself, okay? And don't be seen."

Part of Raivis wanted to follow Eduard. What kind of work Eduard was doing? It had Toris and Feliks very interested. Maybe it'd make their job at the Duma easier to do later, if they knew exactly where to start looking. But the other part of Raivis knew that if he screwed up any more at being a servant, they'd fire him, and out the window would go all of Toris' nice plans. So with reluctance he went back to the kitchen to fetch a mop bucket.
Ivan's first clue that there was something wrong came when, a week after Eduard arrived, he began to go missing at night, precisely during Ivan's tavern meetings with Brother Toris.

Stargazing, Eduard had said. Stargazing my ass, Ivan had thought. But Eduard had no reason to lie to him. And perhaps Ivan had no reason to be overly suspicious. Maybe he really did like stargazing.

All the same. He intended to cut short his visits with Toris to try and catch Eduard in the act red-handed. He was curious, he couldn't deny it! What was it Eduard felt he had to hide from Ivan, was it someone else? and, and who? But Toris kept plying him with drink. And who was Ivan to say no to free vodka?

The second clue was his rodnaya, who a few days ago asked him, "Have you seen my book?"

"Is that the one Katya gave you?" The one she'd had for ten years, the one that she'd covered with notes as Ivan helped her through the translation? The one she treasured?

She nodded. "I can't tell Gospozha it's missing," she confessed. "She'll be upset."

She didn't usually lose things, and if she did, they weren't things like that - but these things happened! Maybe she'd left it in the library. Or perhaps in the study. The book would turn up eventually. Unless it was no accident. But who would have stolen a book of seventh-century love poetry covered in writing? Had Eduard taken it for whoever he was seeing? Eduard didn't seem like the poetry type. Ah, but maybe Ivan didn't know him as he'd believed. Maybe Ivan didn't even know him at all. What a sad thought.

The third clue was Eduard's behaviour: acting shifty, lying to him in his bedchambers, coming home late with no excuse, not even stargazing! Ivan became guarded and edgy where he had once been forthcoming. Before, Eduard's daily questions while they worked had seemed like nothing more than idle curiosity. Now, he wondered if Eduard was slyly fishing for information.

And given how Eduard had blushed and stammered - it made his gut clench with panic and dread...

So it was a lover. Well. So much the better for Eduard. Besides, it was good this way; Ivan wouldn't be so tempted because bad enough he lusted but cheating was too far.

Now, he told himself, he felt nothing.

That didn't stop him when, after having returned from a merry evening at the tavern with Brother Toris, he spotted a shadow lurking outside the library.

So he didn't carry on to his rooms, and instead he trailed Eduard - who evidently hadn't left the Duma to meet with whoever he was seeing tonight. This wasn't the first time he'd followed Eduard around in secret. A few times now, after Ivan had come home from the tavern and found Eduard missing - often enough that Ivan could recognise him from a good distance away.
Ivan felt a little ashamed, but he only wanted to know who! Then he'd leave Eduard alone, really he would. It'd have to be someone good. Someone decent, and kind, someone who would show Eduard the value of freedom. That's all he asked!

Eduard continued to wander with Ivan on his heels until there came the sound of loud, stomping footsteps, racing through the halls.

They both stopped. Ivan slipped past the closest corner, behind a pillar, and prepared to leave when he overheard Eduard exclaim, "Raivis? Is that you?"

Finally, a name! Was it a servant? It would have to be; who else would it be in the Duma at this hour? Not a name he recognised. Must be a servant.

Raivis was a loud servant, it seemed. His ungainly stomps ceased with a squeak and he breathlessly asked, "Eduard?"

(A servant, he thought with a scowl, as he waited and listened - really now, a servant. Eduard had picked a servant over Ivan? Bad choice!)

He chanced a quick peek around the corner. A little guy, this Raivis: short and skinny, with mussy, curly hair and really kind of adorable, objectively speaking. Nothing like Ivan. Naturally. His heart sank.

And wearing a handmaid's uniform instead of a valet's? Not my cup of tea, Ivan thought in perplexion, but whatever made one happy. Someone who looked cute in a frilly apron, well, if that's what Eduard liked then big-boned, broad Ivan sure as hell wouldn't look as fetching.

He heard Raivis shout, "Where have you been?" and nearly giggled aloud. Brilliant, mature, sophisticated Eduard, receiving a dressing-down from his tiny nagging boyfriend wearing a frilly apron! Where was a vid feed when you needed one?

But Eduard - a little too brilliant - must have realised they could be heard, for he moved them to the side of the hall where they spoke quietly. If Ivan breathed silently and kept very still, he could barely make out what they were saying from where he stood.

"Do you go back and forth or something?" he heard Eduard ask.

"No," the servant replied, "I get information from the driver. He meets with Toris daily in the church."

Toris? Brother Toris? But there were maybe ten churches in Skuratchky, and none of them Priegyl, and didn't the Order of Vynas prefer worship outside rather than in the houses of infidels?

Brother Toris had told him that so many times. It couldn't be Brother Toris.

But Toris wasn't a very common name.

"That's why Toris dresses like a monk?" Eduard said happily.

"That's his cover story. He calls it his legend. Some spy-term. Anyway. He's a ... monk. That's how he's been getting so close to ..."
It couldn't be Brother Toris.

But how many Torises could there possibly be in Skuratchky who were monks -

- or worse, merely dressing like them, pretending to be them?

Insidious thoughts! It couldn't be Brother Toris! It just couldn't! His palms grew clammy where he'd plastered them to the wall-face. No, it couldn't be. There had to be some mistake. A coincidence. Some horrible mix-up. Brother Toris was the very image of virtue and heavenly peace in God.

He would never engage in such - such - why, he'd told Ivan time and again, *thou shalt not profane thy speech, by outright falsehood or omission*. And Brother Toris practised what he preached! Not once did he tell Ivan to give up the desires of flesh without a detailed account of how he himself had known no one but God as long as he'd lived. Not once had he gone on and on about fleeing youthful passions without an impassioned sermon to walk by the Spirit. Because wasn't that exactly what Toris had done himself? Devoted his entire life to God - and a handsome man like Toris living as a bachelor because *for to set the mind on the flesh begot death, but to set the mind on the Spirit was life and peace* -

"Anyway, Toris has his ways of finding out," the servant continued, and Ivan was utterly unprepared for the pang of hurt that wrenched his chest apart.

It couldn't be. Oh, please, God, he begged, a lump in his throat and a prickle behind his eyes, tell me it isn't so -?

There was no answer, only silence as he listened.

"... Ivan hasn't forbidden you from outside contact, has he?" asked the servant, this 'Raivis'.

"No," Eduard urged, "he'd never do that."

"Because he's had people imprisoned before, you know."

"I - really?" said Eduard, and never had Ivan wanted to defend himself more! Maybe it was so, but there were extenuating circumstances! You couldn't take it out of context like that, that was unfair! Vicious, cruel little beast of a thing, this servant was.

"Or maybe it was the Gospozha. I met her for the first time the other day; she's terrifying! Is she always like that?"

"Pretty much," Eduard admitted.

"I had to clean one of her rooms where she'd dropped a mug." Raivis was most certainly a servant. Nobody else could be granted access to Katya's chambers without a serious background check. But they would have interviewed him, there would have been an extensive process - Ivan made a mental note to look up recent hires under the register later. The rest of this conversation would dictate the severity of his punishment. He smiled with glee - perhaps he could fire him? Serve him right for sneaking into the Duma.

...Ah, but then Eduard might be sad ... but Eduard could easily sneak *out*, like he'd been doing, to
see his lover anytime he wished. Not like this really hampered much of their relationship, it would only get this loathsome worm out from underfoot, out where Ivan wouldn't have to listen to or watch their vile courtship. Let them take it outside.

"She's not so bad. I don't have to deal with her much, I belong to Ivan."

Ivan's heart picked up the pace again, the tips of his ears and his cheeks burning hot. The way he said it, oh, the way he said his name -!

"I, that is, I mean, he's the master, where I'm concerned."

And he swallowed, feeling worse than before. The master. Of all the titles in the Empire he had collected in his young life, that one suited him least. The master, of another human being - of all people, of Eduard. What Brother Toris would say about that.

Brother Toris. 'Brother' Toris. He glowered.

"Right. Anyway. Feliks was asking after you too. And me! I was kinda worried too, y'know, because of, uh... That, kinda." Oh? What was that, little Raivis? Please, do clarify... "We were worried that you and Ivan were... that he had maybe...well you know." No, I don't know, spell it out!

It couldn't possibly be that - that this creature knew about his abstinence until only a few weeks ago. Only four people knew about that, Katya said, himself included, plus Katya, plus his rodnaya and then lastly Eduard -

And Brother Toris. With horror, he remembered he'd never told Katya, he'd let her think it was only four of them but of course, Brother Toris still thought he hadn't cleared his Time. Why, Brother Toris knew nearly everything about him.

It... it couldn't be.

It had to be.

"...see me in the kitchens sometime, after work. I don't have any friends here besides you so I get lonely." Friends? "And none of the other kitchen staff speak Standard, it's all Zvanie. And I hate Zvanie!"

"It's more common to speak, here," Eduard argued. "Didn't you learn it growing up?"

"Didn't bother. Nobody likes you back home if you know any. I knew a word or two, once, but it got beaten out of me on the schoolyard. In Kilnus you only speak Standard."

A-ha! Ivan thought, his eyes narrowed - that's not a servant at all, as he'd suspected. Raivis, he said his name was.

"... and check in with Toris if you can, alright? Even if you're busy. Please try. We worry about you, a-and Toris has connections! He can get you places in Kilnus if you ever need."

Places in Kilnus. In Kilnus you only speak Standard. Brother Toris! With Kilnus connections! All along, he'd been played. How they all must have laughed! His face aflame with rage, Ivan only realised he was clenching his fists when he heard the sound of his knuckles crack.
"Ah... Thanks," Eduard muttered. "I'll keep it in mind."

"Toris was also kind of hoping you'd come by to make more of those little Eavesdroppery things."

"What happened to the ones I made?"

"Th-they kind of...well, Feliks gave them away. Toris says he'll pay you for more of them though! I mean, s-something that high quality, you should have been paid for them to begin with." So Eduard was working with them?

"And you're sure that Feliks didn't do that on purpose to try and get me to come back?" That wasn't mistrust he heard in Eduard's voice, but it wasn't sarcasm either. Mild amusement? Oh, who knew. If he didn't know how to read his oldest, dearest friend ('Brother' Toris!) then how could he possibly expect to figure out the subtlest nuances in Eduard's voice, when he'd only known the man a few weeks?

However their conversation continued, Ivan barely noticed. Then there was the sound of their footsteps as Eduard and his servant-friend parted and walked away, and then silence. Ivan sank to the ground with his back against the wall, feeling angry, betrayed and stupid.

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Just like before, when he had woken up next to a heavily beaten Eduard, it took some time for his mood to dissipate. When it finally did, he focused his mind on a few points in a systematic, bullet-point manner. First things first - a visit with his oldest, truest friend.

"Vodka," he rasped, when he got to the kitchens and found Arisha there, folding aprons. "I know you have some somewhere. I will give you double what you paid for it!"

Arisha gave him a long-suffering look. "Talk like that, you're going to make me regret restocking your room with tomorrow's delivery. A girl could make a decent living this way." But she handed him the bottle he asked for and he forked over enough for a paycheque.

He held the bottle by its neck as he stormed through the Duma and headed to one of a seldom-used study. Eduard would have returned to their chambers, or possibly the library. But Ivan needed somewhere he wouldn't be disturbed, someplace quiet to think. Free from distractions. And so he plunked down into an old armchair with faded leather and got to work both on the drink and his thoughts.

Toris wasn't a common name. It wasn't Vitim, it was Kala (but that had always been fine by him, Ivan was no racist! And a Priegyl monk wouldn't be Vitim, anyway). It wasn't common among Kala, either. What were the chances that there was another Toris? Unthinkable, surely. Had Ivan ever been so fortunate?

And Eduard met with people at night (but! it wasn't a lover! small victories), and went to some kind of base, Raivis had said, when this Toris wasn't there. It coincided perfectly with his own meetings with Brother Toris in the tavern. And that boy, Raivis, had mentioned Toris' connections. The chances were better that it was indeed he, than that there were two people wandering about Skuratchky, both named Toris, one a monk and one - a Kilnus spy.

No, it had to be. One person, this, this 'Brother' Toris. Ivan had been meeting with a Kilnus spy, all
He never gave away state secrets! But there was much Toris knew about him, personally - including that nasty business with the Time. Ivan could lie about it all, but everybody had seen them in the tavern: Toris' quiet disposition against Ivan's agitated state, every night for years. It looked damning.

Was it still treason? He wanted to argue it wasn't ... But Katya had had three people tried and executed in the past year alone for the very same thing he'd done - accidentally helping Kilnus intelligence. Hypocritical of him not to suffer the same! It would be less hypocritical if he slept with Eduard nightly after years of talk of morality and righteousness!

If Toris was a spy, and certainly this Raivis was one too, was Eduard? Was it of his own volition? Suppose Eduard's questions during their work together had led to answers he didn't like, perhaps he made the decision consciously, or had come to it beforehand - perhaps he had been planted at Francis' by Kilnus?! Now that was foolishness talking. Ivan took the time to swallow slowly, savouring the vodka instead of gulping it down like a horse. Vanya, be serious! If there was anything he could rely on with certainty, it was Katya's paranoia. After their parents she'd never let anything catch her unawares again.

Then Toris had recruited Eduard out from under his nose. Why? Why would Toris do such a thing?! Could he not have picked anybody else? (Ivan would grudgingly admit it was nice work, but of all people, Eduard, did it have to be Eduard? Anybody but Eduard!) Eduard couldn't possibly have been planted. So it must have been a last-minute change.

But if Toris hadn't seen Eduard coming then why would he have spent so long converting the emperor? Was it some secret plot to increase the number of Priegyl sects over the Empire Union? That was ridiculous, everybody knew Ivan was no General's Attendant. Though they thought little of it in terms of his ability to govern, his religion wasn't something people took seriously. Ivan had his ways and they had theirs and that was that. Had he done it to get to Katya? No, she was impenetrable! It couldn't have been money. Ivan never gave as much as he could have to Toris, and though he accepted gifts graciously, Toris never insisted on it. Nor could it have been the ability to manipulate him like a political tool when they only ever spoke of his personal life, spiritual guidance and advice - especially about the Time. If he didn't intend on converting the Empire Union, or manipulating Ivan politically or financially... what was left? Because if he wasn't a real monk then the baptism had been for show and -

In despair, he poured himself another glass.

He'd sacrificed his faith to the General for Toris. The General wouldn't have him now, the General disliked converts and de-converts both, which meant he wasn't anything. He walked alone. Nobody was with him, nobody looked out for him or helped him - the General didn't, maybe Saint Vynas wouldn't either - and there was a word for people like that, he called them areligious.

(This revelation was accompanied neither by a bolt of lightning striking him down, nor the Heavens opening and the Voice of God on High speaking to him in comfort.)

Shakily, Ivan drank another glass. It helped calm his muscles but his insides still felt liquid.

But - surely God would see the attempts of his servant who tried, despite a baptism by charlatan, to live his life the way God had intended, as free of sin as possible and with honesty and purity in his heart and soul? And if he should slip up - as he had - he could meditate extra to make up - as he
had! - and God would know that he hadn't really meant it and it was an accident and he was really very sorry!

Everything Toris had ever told him was a lie. Eight years of lies.

(But it had felt so real! He'd thought he'd felt His divine presence, His heavenly peace but not once had God intervened and told him he was being led astray by a fraud in a friar's cloak!)

Lies, and years of them! All that talk about 'the Devil is within you' and 'you must not give in, remain chaste and your sanctity will help you prevail, with God's help you can endure anything without going mad' - lies! What did this possibly accomplish?

He came upon it almost accidentally: Toris had never wanted any sort of prevailing or enduring. Toris had never wanted any measure of success. He'd wanted Ivan to fail. It must have been - and this was a truly troubling thought - that Toris simply wanted him gone, out of the picture, and had opted to kill him slowly by denying him his Time. It might not kill him, it might simply have ruined his brain, but it fit: something objective, that any medic could verify. Crazy Ivan went so batshit insane he couldn't even hack puberty.

If he were out of the picture, it'd all fall to Katya. Not like his sister would be so terribly unhappy about that. But it meant her suitor would have to be very precisely chosen. And her suitors were all horrible men! Matches with businessmen with Kilnus ties! And if she went with the Veshnan (as it seemed like she wanted) she'd move off-planet, and then who else would rule, if not Katya or Ivan? Would the task fall to Natalya?

And the scandal such news would cause! The Bragins might as well hand over the keys to the Duma to the Dyerovs and their defense spend-happy ways. Or worse, the Rubetskis, whose political ties led to bad business deals with Kilnus. They were a noble Vitim family of old blood - usually those went the racist route, why in God's name would they consider such extensive alliances with non-Vitim? Unless there were a double agent within. And come to think of it, that explained Spiridon Marinin and his motivations, too. How far deep did the net go?

The family name ruined forever. And the monk got away scot-free and clean. Of course.

That's why he'd needed a monk's disguise, in that particular religion! Most Kilnus religions made concessions for Vitim members - but not this one. Toris had given him many reasons why the Order of Vynas was more godly, how it was closer to God and why he should consecrate his soul in the name of the Holy Spirit of Vynas Survila, heavenly peace. Because He was the first of them who'd given up every part of His being, who'd encountered His own seemingly-insurmountable problems and had, with the help of God, done the impossible and become more than the sum of His own parts. Why Ivan should, like all subscripts to the Order, aspire to be exactly like Saint Vynas Himself - heavenly peace - in his meagre, mundane, everyday life.

Was that all lies too? Ivan had read the books once Toris had gotten copies for him. But it was Toris' intervention! He hadn't been baptised, had he even read the right books?

Would God have not seen His son on Olyokin attempting to do right, attempting to follow His Way and being misled and misguided, wouldn't God see his intentions were pure? He'd meant to do well! Wouldn't He have interfered somehow, given him some sign, something to show him the way? Wouldn't God have told him before he went through all that pain and suffering that Toris was only out to cause him harm? Did God want to help Toris cause him harm? Did Ivan deserve that, for all his terrible thoughts that he couldn't always control? He'd sinned in his mind, perhaps,
but rarely, so rarely in his actions. Only the once, with Eduard (and he had barely been himself that night, it was really all the Devil's fault!).

God helped the believers. Vynas' own sacred words - and blessed were the words spoken through a humble servant of God!

Wasn't Ivan a believer?

An unhappy train of thought. Ivan poured himself another glass of vodka and drank it with an admixture of sadness and shame.

And what of Eduard, anyway? Eduard, upon whom he half wanted to place all blame for that night. Eduard, who met with spies, but said nothing about that night to them. Perhaps Toris didn't know about it. Perhaps he could yet trust Eduard?

What to do... Fire Raivis? Though he said he was around Katya's chambers, and Katya had told him how strange Yao had been at the anchorage, mentioning the text of letters she knew she hadn't written. Raivis could have been sending letters in her name to throw the prospective Veshnan suitor off. If that were the case, have him stick around - better that Raivis intervene in their sick affair, so that Katya wouldn't marry the Veshnan after all!

As for Toris... When else would Ivan go to the tavern, if not while Toris would be there? Morning was too early to drink vodka, and afternoon got in the way of tea. He could combine tea and vodka... no, that would be disgusting.

He could also stop drinking, he considered, looking at the bottle. The bottle stared back. "You're right," he told it, and took another swig. "I don't want to stop drinking."

No. Keep Raivis on staff, and continue to show up at the tavern to meet with Toris - friends close, and enemies closer.

Which was Eduard? A genuine bondservant of Hallar, not planted by Kilnus if Katya's paranoia could be trusted - and it could - then God was playing a cruel joke indeed on him, sending someone as divine as Eduard to tempt Ivan and force him to look but not touch. What kind of God was that? Of course, it couldn't have been that Katya found any old bondservant. Couldn't have been someone Ivan felt nothing for, someone Ivan wasn't attracted to, someone who didn't annoyingly inspire in Ivan the ardour of infatuation and irrationality.

No. Couldn't have been someone normal. Had to have been uniquely Eduard. When Katya had gone to Hallar, God had sent her that damned clever blonde instead.

This Eduard, Ivan could either completely hate him or passionately, thoroughly love him, but the platonic middle ground, or outright ignoring him, was unavailable. His fire and strength were respectable and admirable, though it meant Ivan couldn't have his own way all the time. But that was for the better. Ivan was already surrounded by sycophants and he was the kind of person who, given his druthers, shouldn't receive every last thing he wanted. He suspected it would turn out to be too much of a good thing.

Ah, this mess, this giant mess.
Only once he'd partly finished the bottle and stashed the remainder away in his office did he return to his chambers.

As he'd suspected, Eduard waited for him in the office. He got up at the sound of Ivan closing the door and greeted him, leaning on the threshold to the main sitting room. He held a book, closed but with a finger sandwiched between pages, marking the place (not poetry, Ivan noticed, but a treatise on airship design and mechanics).

"No stargazing for you tonight?" he snapped. He hadn't meant to sound so affronted. It might have been equal parts vodka and painful revelations.

"Didn't you notice? When you walked home? It's overcast." Oh. He briefly checked the window. So it was. "Long meeting at the tavern," Eduard noted.

"Yes," Ivan said curtly.

Eduard gave him a funny look. "You drank more than you usually do."

"Hm?"

"I can smell it on your breath from a few paces away," he explained.

"Why should that be a problem?" Ivan erupted. "It's my life, I can drink if I like!"

"I didn't mean - I only thought -" It was nice to see brilliant Eduard lost for words and fumbling his speech for a change. "Do what you like, yes, I thought - perhaps something's wrong. I know I don't - but if there's anything I can do for you."

So stupid to get angry and lose his temper. If Eduard was a spy then Ivan shouldn't be reacting the way he was - defensive and caged. Doing that would only expose how he knew about everything, and who knew what Eduard had planned for that case. He'd have to act natural. (But Ivan was so bad at lying!)

And if he wasn't a spy then Eduard didn't deserve being lashed out at. But why, why why why would he voluntarily help out a Kilnus agent? Was he manipulated, blackmailed? It didn't seem so; he and Raivis had been friendly with one another.

In either case, he thought with a small sigh, there was no need for the third degree, but -

Oh. A third possibility, one he hadn't yet considered. Suppose it was retribution for the night in the dungeons, after Ivan beat him within an inch of his life and then made him stick around against his will to poke about in messy, unpleasant politics. Grimly, Ivan agreed - something like that might make him freely choose to assist Kilnus in this strange not-war scenario they had with the Empire Union. Eduard must really hate him to be inspired to commit acts of treason. How sad. Ah, but it served Ivan right.

"It has been such a long day," he complained. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to - forgive me."

Eduard blushed, grinned, and looked at his feet. "That's twice now," he murmured, "I must be special."

"Hm?"
"Oh - ah, nothing. If it's been a long day, perhaps you should call it a night." He poured a glass of water from the pitcher on the desk and handed it to Ivan. "It seems you're not the only one who's had a long day. Arisha brought that in a quarter of an hour ago. Said you'd probably need it. She seemed to think you'd had a falling-out with the Gospožha again."

"Katya?" Ivan shook his head. "No, she has been out of town. Diplomatic meetings with the Dyerovs, then the official designate from Kilnus Central, then an off-world meeting with Yao Wang of Veshna on Zheina Anchorage."

"I didn't get the impression that she goes off-world very often," Eduard said.

Ivan shook his head. "She doesn't. It is things like this which make me suspect that she will accept the Veshnan's proposal."

Eduard left his book on the table and poured himself a glass of water. A fine idea, Ivan thought, and sipped at his own thoughtfully; it gave his hands something to do instead of hang awkwardly at his sides. "Is this good or bad, do you think?"

He shrugged. "Probably good," he told him, "though I do not personally approve, Katya may choose whoever she wishes. She won't be able to have children by him, he isn't Vitim - but of course, she's not the one who has to have children for future succession," he finished darkly. No, that job fell to the Empire's figurehead. Such joy.

Eduard was silent, his mouth gaping and his eyes wide. "I know what you are going to ask," Ivan said dangerously, "and before you do it, don't you bother. They haven't found me anybody. Not yet. No doubt they will find me some high-ranking lady so the society papers can send themselves into hysterics talking about our every facial expression. But nobody yet."

Something like satisfaction passed through Eduard's face then, only briefly, and Ivan wondered why - why would he care at all what happened to Ivan, after what he'd put him through? "You're not looking forward to it?" Eduard asked.

"You cannot possibly be serious," Ivan replied, disgusted. "Do I look as though I am?"

"Then," Eduard continued quietly, "is it because you don't want children, or you don't like women?"

"It's neither," he said. "I don't mind children, and I'm fond of women." How could he not be, surrounded by them as he was between Natasha, Katya, and Katya's bondswoman? But something like dissatisfaction passed through Eduard's face, as briefly, and Ivan thought to himself that enough was enough. "What had you thought?"

Eduard opened his mouth, then shook his head, perhaps thinking better of it, and closed it. "No, none of that now," Ivan admonished. "I told you, you can speak freely in front of me."

"I was just wondering," Eduard said softly, "if the reason you didn't like me was because I was male, and you had been hoping for a bondswoman."

Ivan nearly choked on his water. "It isn't - it isn't because of that!" he spluttered.

"Because aside from the politics, there isn't much I can offer you, it's not like I could actually be
any sort of - and if everybody expects you to marry someone Vitim so you can raise loads of little Vitim babies and the Empire can be super happy then it won't be easy to get that with me here, wives never like concubines in the tales, one you don't even use, what's it good for, and perhaps I ought to leave better off alone!"

Shocked, and not knowing what to say, Ivan opted to remain silent.

Eduard calmed, slightly, ran a hand through his hair and heaved a sigh. "I'm sorry, that was - forgive me, I didn't mean that, to talk so out of turn."

"Don't be," Ivan replied quietly. "I'd prefer honesty." (It was more than he'd get out of Eduard, unless Eduard decided to be open about his Kilnus activities.) "I did not realise this was how you felt. It isn't like that, though. It isn't anything like that."

"Oh," Eduard muttered, "then you ignore me simply for fun, is that it."

"I didn't mean to!" But he had, sort of. For which he felt guilty. Sort of. He didn't intend on ignoring Eduard out of spite, but Eduard was easier to deal with if he did, because - as Ivan suspected, and a trip to the library earlier that week had confirmed things in his mind - having now reached sexual maturity, his body wanted things that he didn't feel prepared to give it on a regular basis.

Certainly, it was easier, less difficult, less complicated to keep Eduard at bay and simply indulge himself in an attempt not to take advantage of his bondsman. Easier if he thought of Eduard as little as possible because he didn't really want to bother him anymore. Hadn't he already done enough damage?

(And yet at the same time, the post-climax feeling, lonely and pathetic, with a messy hand and an empty heart, was so unsatisfying. And he'd catch glimpses of Eduard over the table where they worked, out of the corners of his eye. How he longed...)

More calmly, Eduard proposed, "We should perhaps be honest with each other, then."

Momentarily Ivan felt enraged. Yes, they should perhaps be honest with each other! Starting with Eduard being forthcoming about his shifty dealings! He fully intended to confront Eduard, to demand answers, to ask what the hell he thought he was doing with Toris, mucking about in Kilnus affairs.

But something in Eduard's manner stopped him and he let it calm him down. The way the light caught his hair, the length of his eyelashes, the shadows on his face. The way he held himself - straight, rigid posture, with his eyes to the side, some sort of compromise between the trained obedience and the rebellious streak.

The reason Ivan bothered noticing all these things.

It was annoying but endearing, which summed up Eduard pretty accurately when he stopped to think of it, and it was the entire reason he felt so much for him. And that made Ivan stop sharply, because he shouldn't be attracted to this man. This man that he owned. He shouldn't like him.

So, instead of doing something hasty like accusing Eduard outright of treason, he asked, "How would you feel, if you'd been lied to for years?"
"What... do you mean?" Eduard had paled where he stood and looked very nervous. Ivan recalled that cornered, frightened look from when Eduard had returned late. It was true, then. He was doing something he knew he shouldn't.

"I mean," he said slowly, feeling the words in his mouth in order to be perfectly sure of them before he let them fly, "philosophically. Spiritually."

Eduard relaxed and cracked a grin that went from amused to embarrassed. "Ah, I'm... not a priest, if that's what you need."

No, indeed not, the very opposite. And that reminded him, because it occurred to him that he had never asked Eduard. "Do you believe?"

"Do I - in what?"

"In God. In a god. In many gods, in anything?"

"No," Eduard replied, quickly and easily, like it rolled off the tongue without the slightest afterthought or concern for his immortal soul. "I don't think so." Oh, perfect. How exactly like Eduard. Couldn't be satisfied with corrupting Ivan's mind and body, had to try for the soul too! "Why, are you trying to convert me?"


"That's not true!" he protested. "I can at least listen."

He sounded so honest and sincere, it was impossible to think he wasn't being genuine. Maybe he was, in his strange ways of thinking and acting. Maybe with Kilnus, he had only been doing what he thought was right. "Someone gives you a book, and tells you it's morals, tells you how you're supposed to live, and they're lying to you."

"Is... is that what this is all about?" Eduard barely masked his incredulity or relief. "Well, is the book full of lies, or are they?" Ivan perked up. "Did they write the book, or did they just give it to you? Were you told, or did you read? It seems to me," and here Eduard set down his glass of water and drew nearer, slowly lifting his hand to Ivan's face, "that unless you let it, their influence doesn't extend as far as here."

"Or don't you think for yourself?"

"Of course I do!" he replied, embarrassed and so easily flustered by Eduard's proximity. "Like any man does!"

Eduard dropped his gaze, and his face fell with it. "Free men," he added, looking at the floor. He folded his arms across his chest.

"All men," Ivan insisted.

"If you say so."

"I'm not getting into another fight with you at this time of the day," said Ivan.

Eduard smiled tightly, an ambiguous look in his sparkling eyes.
And so Ivan thought about it: owning bondsmen, Toris had said, and the scriptures had said, that was wrong. Obviously! Why, the prospect disgusted him so badly he could hardly imagine it, if it weren't for Eduard standing in front of him. How could you ever own another human being? Regardless of who said what, it didn't seem just. (And yet, Eduard accepted it so clearly, so easily, as though it were natural. It was the strangest thing.)

But what else had Toris said? All that nonsense about abstaining from lust - Toris the virtuous, how he liked to go on and on! Naturally, Toris would've wanted him to wallow like that in his own body's poisons as long as possible. It would weaken the figurehead of the state, and it was a trump card to be played if a medic could prove the biology.

But the Scriptures... Saint Vynas, heavenly peace, had had His own reasons to make no provision for the flesh, to gratify not its desires, to commit no sin nor to be a slave to sin - to let not sin reign in the mortal body where it would make one obey its passions. That text didn't distinguish between dealing with an annoying problem himself versus with anybody else. And the Scriptures had elaborated further about giving honour to marriages and coming together with one's beloved, some beautiful prose about becoming one, in the chapters Toris hadn't assigned to read, because - so he'd claimed - scholars were still bickering back and forth about the original translation. It sounded now like Toris trying to further his own ends. Their influence doesn't extend as far as here... or don't you think for yourself?

"Does that make any sense?" Eduard asked gently. "You've been quiet a while."

"Only thinking," he reassured him. He no longer felt like it was all a big pack of lies he'd been fed. He would need another careful re-read of the Scriptures. Maybe a serious reflection on God. But it justified his own feelings and he was less ...lost, for lack of a better word. Ivan smiled and gave a relieved sigh. "Thank you."

"I'm glad I could help with something," muttered Eduard.

"You did. More than you know."

"Then... do you need me for anything else?" he asked, with bright eyes and a hopeful grin. And then he leaned back on his shoulder, tilting his body in a way that made him seem graceful and even more slender and swan-like than normal, his waist well-defined and the hip that wasn't balanced on the doorframe jutting out just so, provocatively. Alluringly. Subtly seductive and sly. Did he even realise what he was doing? But it worked, because Ivan looked him up and down once before he made his eyes behave.

"No," Ivan told his feet, his face too hot to look up. "I'm - long day. I should. Head to bed." So clumsy, so unimpressive! Why couldn't he be half as graceful?

"I understand," he heard Eduard say, and chanced a quick look up to watch him disappear into his side of the chambers where he slept (only metres away from Ivan's bed, nothing but a few body lengths!). At the doorway, he turned, his handsome face in profile, and wished Ivan a goodnight that sounded more like an invitation. And for a moment it was so easy to believe... Eduard couldn't possibly hate him, or resent him, not with an act like that. Eduard couldn't possibly have betrayed him.

But years of lies was enough. What to believe? What did he believe?
NEW DEVELOPMENT IN NOVA SECTOR CASE

Fernandez Carriedo implicated in raids

An anonymous protected source has identified bondsperson seller Antonio Fernandez Carriedo as the impetus behind the Nova sector raids nearly three weeks ago.

Allegations say the Nova sector raids were executed by Fernandez Carriedo's privateer fleet, which includes the ship the Great Delivery of Banningham under the captaincy of Arthur Kirkland.

Further remarks claim a special working relationship between the pirate captain and Fernandez Carriedo. "I know it's not the first time they've done this," said the source, who cannot be named under the Interplanetary Press Secrets Act of 1834.

The Nova sector raids, carried out upon New Joplin and targeting Lawton and Grandcove, spirited away some thirty unfortunate souls. "We don't know for certainty what the pirates want with them," said Major-Constable Gupta Mohammad Hassan of the New Joplin 118th Police Squadron in a press statement conducted at Jernsey Anchorage last Wednesday. "We have some theories, but all I can say for now is that we don't suspect they are well-intentioned. I'm sure that comes as no surprise."

Hassan could not be reached for comment in time in regards to this new development in the highly-publicised case, but his partner, Constable Yvonne Vel, was present on Hallar and took the time to make an appearance with Hallar public service authorities.

"We are as always delighted to hear from sources, though we enforce a policy of verifying the information before any warrants for arrests may be sought," she was quoted as saying. "But I know this news greatly gratifies the people at home on New Joplin who have been worried sick about their loved ones."

There have been no reported cases besides one, although the Delivery crew were spotted carrying multiple people. The sole reported case is the disappearance of young Alfred F Jones, Jr., son of the renowned authoress Thelma Lucille Sayles-Clifton. Like the nameless others, Alfred was snatched from the family home in Lawton during the Nova raids and has not been seen since.

"I have the highest of faiths he's okay," his mother said tearfully at the press statement last Wednesday when she appeared with Maj-Cst. Hassan. "But even so, I can't stress how badly I yearn to hold my darling son in my arms again. This has been a nightmare of a time and I haven't stopped crying since. Alfred, honey, if by some miraculous chance you're reading this, your parents love you. So much. And we always will. I won't rest until I know where you are."

As per Sayles-Clifton's contract with Addison Press, no pictures of young master Jones may be obtained or distributed. Sayles-Clifton was reported to have inserted the clause years ago into the twenty-year contract in an attempt to waylay prospective paparazzi photographers. "All I wanted was for him to have a normal life. It kills me that this might be holding back my Alfred from me. Someone may already have spotted him without knowing."
Antonio Fernandez Carriedo has lived on Marigon for over a decade, having moved there following a scandal upon Hallar where he was suspected of tax evasion. The allegations were never proven.

All attempts to contact the seller at his villa in Las Colinas, Castola, upon Marigon, or otherwise by telegraph message, have proven mysteriously unsuccessful. If anyone has seen Antonio Fernandez Carriedo (see inset photo), they are requested to call the local authorities immediately in order to detain this individual, who may be considered armed and dangerous.

Cornelius Wilkie, Daily Gazette
"Whaddaya mean, we can't get to the auction?"

Kirkland had expected this reaction. He would have liked to say that it was a recent development in his newest crewmember, but there was no mistaking that attitude as Unsinkable's trademark and namesake. No doubt the clever little dick'd been born with the horrid incurable disease of back-talk. And though it spelled trouble catching as the other members saw how their captain could be talked to without repercussion, at least Gilbert was getting along with them all famously. After Desmond, Kirkland had been ... concerned.

Rather than waste his breath replying - he'd learnt by now this would only encourage Gilbert - Kirkland merely flipped him the copy of the newspaper that his lead engineer had obtained when she'd returned from Fasciemi. He waited for Gilbert to read the front-page article, its headline clearly emblazoned in thick face. Gilbert was a surprisingly fast reader for a former street rat, turned slave, turned prisoner, turned pirate; it took him no more than a few short moments. Finally, some brains on this crew. Maybe that would catch, too.

When Unsinkable had finished, he looked back up to Kirkland, who had prepared himself with an arch look of you see what I mean?

After years spent haunting the Delivery’s brig, Unsinkable had become a fixture in his mind; reading him was no difficult task for Kirkland. Kirkland was pleased - though would die before admitting it - that it went both ways. "No, I don't," Gilbert said flatly, answering the unasked question. He pushed the paper to the centre of the table between them, around which they sat on rickety chairs. "That doesn't fly. You explain that to me straight up."

"What, can't you perform the most basic of reading comprehension?" he snapped. "The second we landed on Hallar, we'd get snapped up at Border Control. Don't bother asking if Romae'd help. He's off at Fasciemi - we can possibly make contact with him there, but no closer."

"Romae's got a knack for getting people onto Hallar when they shouldn't be there, Cap'n," Gilbert reminded drily.

"Yes, well... while ordinarily I'd think his reach could extend as far as our protection, I think this article and those like it have placed us quite firmly out of the possibility of clemency. And it's last minute notice. That's my hunch -"

"Oh, a hunch!" Gilbert trilled, in a screech of a falsetto, "why, goodness gracious, stop the presses! Such elements spell certainty!"

"That's enough. You shut your mouth before I shut it for you," Kirkland snapped.

Gilbert rolled his eyes but obeyed and growled instead, "No way they're gonna look for something as small as the shuttle."

"Romae's pet project is the Decennial Auction! He'd be there, come hell or high water. Whatever's keeping him off-planet must be worse than both. I'd wager someone's on to his ... procurement
"methods," he finished.

"Yeah?" Gilbert scorned, and folded his arms over his chest. "Well I say, couldn't happen to a nicer person."

"Like it or not, that man's my livelihood. And yours too, now!"

"Awesome," Gilbert ground out through gritted teeth.

"Don't be such a child. Francis will handle the auction. We'll have to listen in via radio like the rest of the system does."

"Can we even trust Francis?"

Gilbert made an excellent point. "Haven't got much choice, we can't get onto Hallar," Kirkland replied. "But he owes me one, and if he wants the rest of the money he's been promised, he'll do it."

"Not everybody is all about the money!" contested Gilbert.

"Certainly Francis, and Romae too." Kirkland barked a laugh, "Romae's entire business line is built around buy-low-sell-high."

Gilbert outright snarled at him. "Don't you think I know that? Spare me the crash course in economics, I don't need your patronising!"

"That's not what I meant and you know it!" What was wrong with him today? Gilbert kept lashing out. Not even a permanent job tamed the reckless Unsinkable into maturity!

"Listen, put the money aside for a goddamn second and get this, okay?" Gilbert began. "It's been three weeks now that Alfred's spent in the company of a dangerously talented brainwasher. And you won't even venture to the surface to pick him the fuck up? Kid's gonna need a friendly face!"

A-ha! "Is that what this is about?" Kirkland cried. "You're worried about your 'best friend' Alfred, so you're sore at me? You'll get us all caught and killed! No, it's too dangerous, I can't have you out there. And don't you look at me like that." for Gilbert had gone wild-eyed and angry, eager to bicker - "I told you already I didn't know that Romae was going to give him away to Feliciano! Romae never tells me anything anyway. Why would he? We meet on Fasciemi, he tells me when and where and how much I can expect to get per head and then I deliver. The only rules I get are don't muck it up and don't get caught and we've already bollocksed it up once! Blokes like Romae don't give second chances."

"Who's the one who rifled through Romae's house at midnight, huh?" shouted Gilbert. "Didn't get caught then! Wouldn't get caught now! Maybe you don't wanna go, well that's fine, send me. Gimme a shuttle if you're scared of big bogeyman police, I'll fuckin' go and get him on my own. Alfred needs us. If you won't be there for him, I will."

Oh no he wouldn't! Sure, Gilbert had papers, but they'd still box him about the ears on the way to the jail. And then Kirkland would have to go to Caput Halleri anyway to bail him out, assuming Romae didn't still have signs up with Unsinkable's face and description. The second he walked about the streets of Hallar without any protection, he'd be snapped up and sold off! No, Gilbert
needed him. "I-I'm *not* letting you go down to the surface alone!" he said.

"Then I guess you're coming with me, aintcha," Gilbert said, sitting back in the chair with triumph.

Kirkland gave him his best glare.

Gilbert didn't budge.

Neither did Kirkland.

Finally, after a staring contest too puerile to describe, but about a matter too sensitive to gloss over, Gilbert relented. "Alright, I know there's nothing you can do about Border Control being dickasses," he mumbled, running a hand through his hair. "But c'mon, you can't tell me that just *trusting* that Francis'll do everything is the greatest idea you've ever had. Aren't you Mister Paranoid?"

"*Captain* Paranoid to you," Kirkland interjected, hoping for levity, and it won him a reflexive twitch of pretty lips before Gilbert remembered how angry he was.

"*I* don't like Francis. *You* don't like Francis. Francis hates both of us. It would make his day to see ours ruined. And he doesn't even care about Alfred! What's more ... if Feliciano is as good as I remember, Al might recognise Francis as anything from his saviour to his new master. Maybe you don't care about being there for him but I do."

Kirkland opened his mouth to defend himself. He ought not to bother! Gilbert and he could discuss this for ages, but he'd rather discuss anything else. Besides, Gilbert made it so difficult to get a word in edgewise with all his noise traffic -

Traffic ...

Come to think of it ...

"Hang on, I've had a thought," he stated.

"Will you accept a penny for it, Mister Moneybags?" Gilbert mocked. "Sorry, *Captain* Moneybags."

He ignored the obvious bait. "Suppose we both go in the shuttle right after the auction's closed. Everybody trying to get out will tie up most of the Border Control. They'll have one person on the arrivals gates at most. At top speed, our shuttle gets from the outskirts of Halleri airspace to Caput Halleri Border Control in about an hour, so if we leave at shortly past four, they'll think we're late-comers trying to make the last bit of the auction. If they notice we're in a transport shuttle, they won't care.

"Meanwhile, the majority of people begin leaving Hallar via Caput Halleri Border Control starting at five sharp. The arena's steps from Border Control, so it should be maybe five minutes before a giant influx of people looking to check out come barging through. Border Control will then put all four gates on exit duties, since nobody would bother coming in at such a time. They'll free up a single entrance only at request, and any entrances will be processed as quickly as possible to continue logging exits."

Understanding dawned quickly. "Meaning we can slip by."
"Precisely," Kirkland said. "They'll be overwhelmed, dealing with the leaving crowd - you know the type that buy bondspeople - greedy, entitled, snobbish bunch, they don't like being put in a line, they'll raise a fuss - Border Control won't hardly bother with either of our IDs."

"Then you're coming with me?" Gilbert asked, smiling a half-grin so dimpled it made him look boyish and - and downright beautiful, if Kirkland could be honest with himself, a strange term for someone with snow-white hair, red eyes, and skin so pale it was practically translucent. It dawned on Kirkland why Gilbert must have been taken in the first place. True that Gilbert was no blonde-hair-blue-eyed Alfred (and distantly it irked him that Gilbert smiled so prettily not for him but for the prospect of saving Alfred), but he didn't need to be. He was something different, and people would pay for different.

Kirkland would have to go with him to the surface, much as it'd pain him, much as it put him in his own jeopardy. But he'd no choice. Let someone spot that face and snap him up again? Never.

Of course, he did not say this. What he said instead was, "Don't be stupid, obviously I'm coming with you, you fool. Someone rational has to keep the likes of you in line, after all."

Unfortunately for him, Gilbert's handsome smile only grew wider.
Germany

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

(germany)

"Ludwig - hey, you in there? Ludwig?"

Alfred stood in front of him, his hands on his slender hips. Ludwig shook his head to dissipate the haze. "Forgive me, that was impolite. I shall listen this time. You were saying something?"

"I sure was," and then it was last night again and Alfred was saying it below him, moaning it in bed, on the sheets, his hair mussed in every direction and Feliciano was watching his progress as he rocked into him - ah, it felt so good, Alfred was so tight, where had they found him? and could they make more?

"- be okay with some music? I was thinkin' I'd put on a record," Alfred continued. He walked over to the table.

Ludwig rubbed his temples and tried to muster the concentration to remain composed.

Before Alfred, Ludwig had only thought of Feliciano as a friend. (A good friend. His best!) Ludwig had not thought of sex in six years. Ludwig hadn't needed to touch himself. Whatever my master wants is what I want, and it'd seemed like Feliciano had only wanted Ludwig around as platonic company. He didn't lament the lack of sex - no properly trained bondsperson would. It was just different, as though something in his mind had shut off and the part of him that housed everything that he knew for his master's pleasure had been excised.

He didn't even notice it was missing until Alfred had come to them, and there was a certain change, a heavy pressing feel in the air, that thereafter made it difficult - impossible! - for him to ignore his libido. Where had it gone those six years, he didn't know, but now that it had returned he felt himself unhinge, yearning for touch, making up for lost time.

And Alfred was right there. Alfred was bending over to find a record in the box and his ass was up in the air and Ludwig couldn't take his eyes off it or his long legs wrapped in bondsperson-brand threadbare linen or the belt about his hips with everything they needed.

It must have been Alfred's influence. Feliciano had never wanted sex before; therefore, Ludwig had not wanted sex. But Feliciano wanted Alfred and that made Ludwig's mouth water. Whatever my master wants is what I want, and since Feliciano wanted Alfred so badly, Ludwig could feel it in the atmosphere. And today, Feliciano was not even present, having left them for auction preparation with his brother, and Ludwig was alone with Alfred, trying to think of anything else but sex, and failing miserably. How well he was trained.

There were four songs on the record Alfred had selected - one of his master's favourite artists, a local pianist Feliciano was mad for - and the one they listened to now was entitled Homesickness, a nocturne. It was supposed to represent the artist's longing for the place where he grew up, its pebbles and stones, its wild creeks and ravines, its mountains and wide open skies.
Ludwig heard exactly none of this in his present mind. Every note felt like Alfred, close by him, Alfred's bare skin on his. Every turn of phrase, the way it arched up and fell back down gracefully was Alfred beneath him last night sighing against the pillows, his cock in Alfred's ass pushing in, pulling out. They'd done it face to face, with Feliciano watching them. Feliciano was too tired to protest, a male master would more likely take his bondsman from behind - deeper, closer, easier access. Ludwig agreed, but what was a bondsman for but for anticipating his master's desires? It was obvious what Feliciano wanted, Feliciano's every action felt like Ludwig was doing something right until finally he won and Feliciano with a broken sob gave in, unfastened his pants and touched himself. Alfred moaned shakily when he'd spotted their master and didn't take his eyes off him -

Distantly, he realised he was half-hard. He tried to calm himself down, but the piece played on.

When it finally ended, after a minute and a half that felt like an hour, Alfred noted, "That one's nice," breaking the silence and jarring Ludwig out of his reverie.

"Yes," he sighed, "it is." He watched Alfred as he got up from the couch again and flipped the record for the next song, a faster, upbeat, fivestep volta.

"Hey, that's new!" When Ludwig gave Alfred a perplexed look he explained, "This one's faster, like you could dance to it or something. He doesn't often do that."

"No, and that's what Feliciano likes about Edelstein," Ludwig told him. "Light on the popular dance music, heavy on the introspective, personal pieces. He thinks it makes Edelstein less a performer and more an artist."

"Does Feliciano not dance?" he asked.

"I've never seen him dance," Ludwig said, with a small shrug. "It isn't difficult. With a tune like this, you just follow the beat. One, two-and-three, four, five; one, two-and-three, four, five."

Alfred blinked. "That sounds unnecessarily complicated."

"It's really not," he protested, and then, because his mouth decided to run away with him, "I, ah, could show you, if you'd like."

Subtle persuasion. He would never do such a thing to Feliciano - whatever the master wants, it governed his own desires - but here, between two bondsmen, he could be a little freer. A little manipulative. A volta was a close embrace. Alfred would be in his arms, clinging to his body. He wanted. "You should probably know how to anyway," he said. It was a half-truth. "Here, let me get this, it's less distracting if you do it without music," he said, and moved the needle off the record. The gramophone went silent.

"Now," he began, "hands up and out." Alfred made a T with his body, holding his arms out and waiting for further instruction. "There, this goes here -" Ludwig joined his left hand with Alfred's right - "and this here -" he put his right arm around Alfred's shoulders - "and... this, here." He placed Alfred's left hand at the small of his back, and stepped closely.

Ludwig was a few centimetres taller than Alfred. Most of the time it wasn't very noticeable but here, where Alfred already seemed nervous and had slumped his shoulders, it was apparent. He drew himself up, making his back straight under Alfred's touch; Alfred took the hint and stood up a little more. It brought their faces close together, close enough to kiss, and Ludwig was pleased to see the blush this brought to Alfred's face. About time, Alfred had only been teasing him all
afternoon. "First position leads," said Ludwig, "second follows. Once you know how to lead, following is easy, you simply mirror the motions."

He walked them through the pattern slowly. With a look of mild puzzlement, Alfred did as directed, not once taking his eyes off his feet. Once he had both feet firmly placed back on the ground, his hand tightly gripping Ludwig's, he asked, "Then what?"

"Twist - pivot here, and -" he brought his left leg around and in front - "- there," he finished, landing his left foot between Alfred's.

Their legs were intermeshed with each other, their bodies nearly fully in contact.

"Um," Alfred breathed, his face bright red, "this is a little ... intimate for dancing, isn't it?"

Ludwig smiled, pretending this had not all been perfectly intentioned. "That's precisely the point."

It took about three tries before the pattern flowed smoothly and Alfred didn't have to count beats under his breath anymore. It took three tries after that until Alfred felt confident enough to add a little grace into the movements. "You take instruction very well," Ludwig noted with sincere approval.

"I'm a quick learner, I guess. What's next?"

Ludwig broke their embrace to attend to the gramophone. "We try it with the music," he announced, replacing the needle on the record. At Alfred's immediate apprehension, he said, "It's not too fast. Don't worry, trust me."

They danced through the song without mistake, so Ludwig restarted it. "There's some fancier things," he offered. "But these are the basics. We can do something else if you like?"

"No - no, this is nice. I like this! Go on, teach me the fancy stuff."

So Ludwig explained the twist-on-four, chaining the steps and the lift. The lift appeared to be Alfred's favourite; somewhere between holding Ludwig up by the sides and setting him back down again on the next beat, their chests brushing against each other, Alfred developed a high flush and his breath was shorter as Ludwig descended, pressing himself to Alfred as closely as he could.

"You learn a lot of these things in training?" Alfred asked, dipping him on the fifth beat.

"And then some," he lied. Basic training really only covered one thing. This was extra. But a bondsperson with extra would be priced higher. "I know we didn't have much time with you - it's too bad, I could've taught you something else. We had only enough time to cover the important parts."

"R-right," Alfred replied in a breathless rush, "those. I oughta thank you," he noted, tightening his hold around Ludwig's waist.

"It's what I was trained for," Ludwig said. "It's not difficult to learn. The most essential service of a bondsperson is clear from the premise. The rest is manners and finer points. Sell a service, not just the goods."

"My dancing skills aside, you think I do a good job of faking?"
Another lift. Ludwig let himself settle down into Alfred's arms and then whirled him into a
dizzying double spin in order to buy himself a little thinking time.

In front of Signore Romae, when the three of them made an appearance in the house outside their
miniature oasis, Alfred was a model bondsperson. Eyes downcast at the floor; submissive. A
knowing, calm smile gracing his pretty face. His shoulders square - excellent posture - and hands
clapsed loosely behind his back. He'd come a long way from the boy Ludwig had met nearly three
weeks ago, primary or no primary. Servitude suited him, and Alfred took instruction extremely
well, Ludwig thought approvingly.

Even that one time in front of Signore Lovino, Feliciano's brother, who had a nasty mouth on him,
Alfred didn't let his temper get the better of him. Lovino had said some very insulting things, both
under his breath and aloud, but Alfred had hardly twitched. He sulked after they'd returned to their
quarters, and while Feliciano had managed to brighten him up again, Alfred had been rougher that
night with Ludwig, as though proving a point that he hadn't had the chance to make hours before.
In front of Ludwig, Alfred changed - he wasn't submissive, he was an overexcited puppy, all
energy and vigour and eagerness to please. It was close enough to servile for auction purposes, and
it served him well in bed, where Alfred wasn't particularly selfish or particularly giving. But, that
was with Ludwig, and they were on par with each other, at equal levels of power.

With Feliciano there too, Alfred was slightly subdued and acted almost in awe. But he was no less
eager to please and mostly as enthusiastic. That might come as a surprise for the person who won
him at the Auction. It would have been better if Feliciano had trained Alfred personally, without
Ludwig there! Then Alfred could have some experience with someone who wasn't another
bondsperson, someone he was supposed to serve. But any bondsperson owner would put Alfred in
his place if they didn't appreciate his spirit. A slap upside the head now and again, nothing
dramatic. Just enough to remind who was the servant and who the master.

As for the rest, there were certain things you couldn't fake. The most important ones were the parts
that couldn't be acted away.

"You do an excellent job," Ludwig murmured at last. "Would you mind if we put what training
you do have to a short test?"

"It'll have to be a short one, Feliciano could be back soon -" 

Ludwig ignored the rest of the sentence and snapped his fingers beside Alfred's ears,
commandingly and loudly.

The effect was brilliantly instantaneous: Alfred gave a shocked gasp, tightened his grip around
Ludwig's waist and fumbled his step in the dance. Ludwig knew the feeling; Alfred's knees had
probably given out. He wrapped his arms around Alfred, catching him before he fell to the ground,
as the music played on.

But pressed against his entire body, Alfred - wide-eyed, flushed and panting - was unmistakably
rock-hard. The training had worked. (Of course it had! Ludwig should never have doubted
Feliciano's technique to begin with.)

"Holy shit," he whispered, "holy shit -"

"Yes, you do an excellent job indeed," Ludwig growled with a slow smile.
Awkwardly, they made it to the couch, where Alfred threw himself on top of Ludwig in a clumsy sprawl and kissed him hastily but deeply before moving to his neck. Kisses were nice, thought Ludwig, sliding a hand up the back of Alfred's shirt to press him closer. Kisses weren't something Alfred and he did very often, because of course, kisses weren't something you really had to train for, so Feliciano never insisted on it, and it made no sense to do things Feliciano didn't ask for.

Wasting no time, Alfred drove his hand past the drawstring waistband of Ludwig's pants and wrapped it around his erection. "Hah," Alfred half-panted, half-drawled, "thought it was impossible to respond to snapping your own fingers. Or is that something else they teach you in Primary?"

"It's - it's not," he gasped out, and it wasn't, "that's just -"

"Just for me?" Alfred taunted. He shifted, moving his legs to Ludwig's sides to straddle him.

"Some are trained never to respond unless there is a signal," Ludwig explained in a single exhale. "It's not my place to judge instructional styles, but I'm grateful Signore Romae never went that far." If he had, Ludwig couldn't enjoy other bondspeople, or have them enjoy him, and would have had to restrict himself to other activities. Certain masters, he was taught, were more protective and selfish than others; Ludwig was glad that Feliciano had never been one of these.

"Yeah. Me too," Alfred decided. He kissed him again and ground his hips down as Ludwig thrust his up.

Neither Ludwig nor Alfred bothered with shirts or vests, but the pants would have to go, Ludwig reflected, pinching one end of the bow on Alfred's drawstring waist and pulling the bow free with a graceful flick of his wrist. Briefly Alfred climbed off him and stood to drop them; one-size-fits-all went a long way, so on Alfred they were fairly loose and fell to the floor with little effort. He kept the belt on.

Once, three weeks ago, Alfred had been shy about nudity, but now, he stood proud and erect in front of Ludwig - unabashedly aroused. That ought to be rewarded. After shoving his own pants past his ankles and kicking them off the arm of the couch, Ludwig retrieved the bottle of lubricant in his belt. He held it up and asked, "Do you want to do the honours or shall I?"

"Oh, I'll do it," Alfred volunteered as he resumed position between Ludwig's spread, bent legs. He made quick work of the bottle and stuck two fingers inside him without much preamble.

"I should thank you," Ludwig gasped, jerking his hips to fuck himself on Alfred's fingers, greedy for touch after three hours without it, "you've brought me closer to Feliciano than I'd ever - ah! -" Alfred grinned above him and continued on, prodding him there again, and again, and once more with conviction. It reduced Ludwig to snippets of speech that fled him breathlessly. "Than I'd ever thought possible," he babbled, "I feel - aaah, yes - I feel useful now, finally, this, this is exactly what I had always -" wanted -

He stopped himself with a jolt. If his hands weren't busy propping himself up behind his back to get more purchase in movement, he might have clapped them over his mouth.

"What?" Alfred asked, and curled his fingers inside Ludwig to make him tremble and cry out, before removing them completely and positioning himself. "You had always what?"

Ludwig shook his head madly - there were bees in it, it seemed, and a haze, and his head suddenly
felt very heavy and strange. He tried to mask his mental dissonance by concentrating on the far
cleverer feeling of Alfred entering him instead. "I only want what my master wants," he repeated as he
was fucked. Yes, good. That made him feel better.

"You're, mmph, you're allowed to want things of your own," Alfred insisted. He drew out and
thrust in again.

He wasn't. Not really. But it didn't matter anymore, because Ludwig had been provided with what
he'd yearned for all along. How had that happened? Some magic twist of fate? No, he didn't believe
in fate. Feliciano had probably planned it all. Feliciano was so very good to him!

In fact, if Ludwig's training hadn't been quite so thorough, perhaps he might have felt some sort of
lacking, some feeling of sadness that, despite having been bought for Feliciano, Feliciano appeared
to prefer Alfred, who was an inexperienced, young whip of a thing by comparison. Alfred, who
was more goods than services. Alfred who had a nice cock, thought Ludwig as he rode it as best he
could from his position underneath. Heavy and thick enough for some good friction and after three
weeks of lessons, Alfred had finally learned how to use it properly. Alfred this, Alfred that.
Alfred's arrival spelled Feliciano's lust. Feliciano didn't want Ludwig, he wanted Alfred!

(But Ludwig's training had been immaculate, and therefore had no concept of the words 'second
fiddle' unless it related to Roderich Edelstein and his favourite string quartet.)

With Alfred's soft hands on his cock, like Feliciano's, that one time Feliciano had touched him
(with Alfred there, only with Alfred there, only because Alfred needed training! - no, whatever
Feliciano wanted. Ludwig didn't matter) - Ludwig gasped his way to orgasm, tightened his legs
around Alfred's waist and felt satisfied - very satisfied - in more ways than one, when the fireworks
hit him and his mind melted. Every time he came, it reaffirmed the ideology they gave him! He
could hear the distant signal of fingers snapping, saying, *this is what you are meant for*, as his cock
spurted. *You are a tool for this end*, as he tightened around Alfred. *This is what you were made to
do.* (Meanwhile, above him, Alfred gave a few final shuddering thrusts and came, his eyes
clenched shut.) Every time he came (and recently, it had been so many times!), it strengthened the
ties that bound him to his station. It felt better than his cock did, and he sighed happily, his mind
rebuilt, reset. Yes. Yes, this was right!

Whatever Feliciano wanted, he wanted. And Ludwig didn't care *how* he was useful for Feliciano,
he only cared about being useful. So Feliciano had never been good at using tools for their
intended purpose! So what? Sometimes they functioned every bit as well doing other things.
Ludwig had long since rationalised himself as exactly this: a multi-purpose tool. Feliciano would
never give Ludwig away - you couldn't do that with a bondsman! - but maybe he might buy Alfred.
Then it'd be all three of them. And it wouldn't matter if Feliciano never fucked him.

He hoped Alfred would stick around, and not only because it felt nice with him collapsed on
Ludwig's chest, still breathing hard, his heart racing. He would look forward to having someone
else at his level around the house, someone he could play with. If having Alfred there
meant Feliciano would use him - both of them - more as the training dictated, in the right way a
bondsman was meant to be used, instead of having him make pasta or help with chores, all the
better.)

Whatever Feliciano wanted, he wanted. *That* was what he had been trained for.
I still kind of hate this chapter. Oh well!
Letters

(france --> spain)

24-11-1884 - SSCal - 09:23HST-3 - Caput Halleri Border Control Station, Caput Halleri, Hallar

[Message sent via telegraphy]

My friend -

Have you seen the news on Hallar -

Perhaps you ought not to come - I can have someone else purchase mon beau petit amour. It may be more prudent for you to remain on Marigon at this time.

Wishing you luck in clearing your name - I know this is not your doing.

Yours -

Francis

--

(france --> england)

Message received. Meet me after all is said and done. I trust that won't be a problem for you, given the circumstances.

And if it is, well, we shall find out how greatly you value the item under consideration.

--

(spain --> france)

24-11-1884 - SSCal - 10:01HST-3 - Santa Clara Border Control Station, Castola, Marigon

[Message returned; recipient unavailable]
"This is absolute nonsense!" Antonio yelled.

"Mr. Carriedo, be calm."

"It's Fernandez Carriedo, they are both my last names!"

"Alright," the councillor said. She held up her hands appeasingly. "We're - shh, please, we're using our indoor voices -"

"What the hell do I need that for, nobody can hear me in this underground jail cell!"

"Indoor! Voices!"

Antonio sulked, infuriated. He crossed his arms over his chest and ground out, "This kind of treatment is the sort you give misbehaving children, not wronged members of society."

"Mister Car- Fernandez Carriedo, if we don't get the story straight between you and me, I can't get it straight for the rest of the solar system." It made some iota of sense. "This is for your own good."

That might be so but he failed to see how it necessitated the scene that was made at Caput Halleri Border Control when he landed, when the turnstile agent took one look at his documents and asked him to wait in line, then shut down her booth. As he waited and waited, people kept staring. He didn't know what was going on. Was there a problem with his luggage? Had his driver parked the airship in the wrong spot? Well, he wouldn't whine about it. No sense in making a scene.

When the BSPA had turned up in full official regalia, the dread was instant and nearly insurmountable! They'd asked him to come with them and no amount of do-you-know-who-I-am had gotten them to stop. But he wasn't some two-bit seller, he was a licenced trainer and bondsperson operative. In any town - anywhere on Hallar, and especially in Caput Halleri! - that would have counted for something significant. There were those who had planned on attending the auction specifically for his wares! He wouldn't be detained at the border like a criminal and give up that much business!

But to his credit, he hadn't had the opportunity to catch that day's Daily Gazette. And so much for not making a scene. "There's precisely two days' trek by airship from Marigon to Hallar," he said to the councillor, still protesting. "Someone knew that, and someone decided to run a story implying that I'm behind the Nova raids in the interim, so that when I landed and they scanned my ID, it sent up flags automatically, and you just picked me up and took me here like some - some - nefarious peddler!" Wherever here was, it was a small, grey, windowless room dimly lit by old gas-torches, the smell of burning oil pungent and bright in his nostrils. He hadn't seen much on the way in, when they'd frogmarched him unceremoniously through the Caput Halleri BSPA campus. He continued, "There is absolutely no foundation for these accusations and if I weren't already stripped of my rights not to be detained without due cause, I'd demand a lawyer's assistance for slander and -"
"That's enough, please," the councillor replied. She gestured to the folders on the desk in front of her. "I have your files here, I just need to look through them. Then, if you've done nothing as I suspect, you'll be on your way and out of my hair. The sooner you cooperate, the quicker this'll be for both of us. Got it?" That much wasn't illegal. Any Legislative Council with due clearance was permitted to request files, but the key word was request! He'd thought that meant ask nicely, and not the interpretation the Halleri BSPA (practically the Council's police-for-hire these days) had taken instead.

"If you could only put through word for me to Signore Romae he'll tell you -"

"Signore Romae has been on Fasciemi Anchorage conducting business there for the past week," she interrupted. "He may have received anything you might have sent him yesterday since he's got a forwarding system in place, but he has almost certainly not made contact with you. I've been in contact with the mailships for your records with them, and with Signore Romae himself."

Of course, Antonio thought. Of course he hadn't been around. Of course he was on Fasciemi. It figured that he left precisely when Antonio needed him to be there, when it'd be useful for him. Not like the man really had to stick his neck out or anything either, he could simply do Antonio this one little favour and help him out!

All that horrible press - the councillor had at least let him see the newspaper, ridiculous little article with its unfounded conspiracy theories, honestly, he knew nothing of the Nova sector raids! - he'd be lucky if he broke even this year. Which meant he wouldn't be able to afford the Schlessen class graduating next May, and he'd liaised with the school such a nice price for the lot. He'd have to resort to the subscripts again. Less money per sale for about as much training and upkeep!

"Where have you been holding my wares, anyway?" Antonio said. "Have you fed them, watered them? Seventy-two would have told you what they all needed and when they needed it, that's the quiet one with the dark hair. Twenty-seven is on iron supplements!"

The councillor gave a heavy sigh. "Your prospectives are fine! It's only been an hour. Besides, don't you think we have people for that kind of thing?"

"If they're in any way harmed -"

"You'll huff and you'll puff and you'll blow our house down, yes, I know. Calm down and let me think." And with that, she turned back to his files, flipping through them this way and that. Now and then she stopped on a page to peer at it more closely, but either she didn't find what she was looking for, or she became tired of it, and moved on.

Her working quietly left Antonio to his own devices, not that he had much to do. He was locked into a room with this woman and an armed guard posted outside. It was in his best interests for her to help him clear his name, though. The papers would report the mistake and it would give him a chance to interview about it - that meant publicity, which meant business. Verily, whoever had conjured up this stunt in an attempt to keep him out of the auction hadn't counted on Councillor Héderváry's intervention, or his timely arrival, leaving Marigon just before and landing on Hallar just after the sparks flew.

But it was a damn shame. These few days had been planned for him to reacquaint himself with the city that had once been his home, before a certain pirate. There were friends he hadn't seen in forever. He hadn't been to the fountains of Bernini in seven years. He hadn't taken the time to wander around in the Pia la Spezia market - it had the best bread rolls and piadina! - since he was
Antonio of Hallar. A little me-time for a hard-working individual such as him! Was that too much to ask? What better time to do this than right before the auction, when once in ten years, there would be people paid by Caput Halleri to look after his charges? Unlike Avo Romae, Antonio didn't have helpers, he couldn't afford to jet off to anchorages at the leastest whim!

He had hoped to take a trip to Luna Halleri to see Helena and visit his clients. It could mean more business! Last but never, ever least, his best friend Lovino, someone he really cared about, someone he hardly ever had the chance to be with in person! He should probably also see Francis personally, but he wasn't certain he'd have time for it before. Francis also would be busy with his shops and wares and preparing for his set in the auction. Besides, he'd have to meet with Francis afterwards, when he delivered that ... boy Francis had become besotted with. There was no use in thinking of him as a servant. How insulting to Francis! Even if that was exactly this Matthieu's description. But the cognitive dissonance!

In any case, whoever this Matthieu person was, he was almost certainly not good for Francis. But who was Antonio to tell his friend what to do or not to do? Francis was an adult, Francis could make his own decisions, even if they were poor. That didn't mean Antonio could easily stand by and watch it all unfold.

Was he enabling Francis with this bad idea? If Francis couldn't see how far down the path of perversion the choices he made were leading him, and if Antonio could, did that mean that Antonio was obliged to step in and intervene? Francis wouldn't like it. But maybe it was like quitting smoking - initial pain and suffering was the price you paid to be ultimately healthier. Besides, suppose Francis' clientele found out about him and his ways! Everyone who'd ever purchased anything from Francis would be disgusted, they'd think Francis enjoyed their bondspeople and sold off sloppy seconds. He'd be ruined! They'd call him a pervert! Well, maybe he was -

"So many requisition forms for deliveries!" the councillor said, interrupting his thoughts. "Where are your B-2203 forms?"

"My what?"

"Your fuel expenditures. The ones you submit to the council so we can reimburse you your travel costs off-planet in sourcing out trainees. Where are your fuel expenditures? That's the B-2203 form! You're legally required to keep copies for tax auditing purposes."

"I'm not sure you understand. I don't require fuel expenditure papers. Go look in your own records, you'll find no filing of them."

"I'll wait," he said primly.

The councillor blushed. "I no longer have access to those files at my security clearance," she admitted through gritted teeth. "Most of your trainees are Veshnan. Have you been taking public transit airships all the way to Veshna? And you don't claim the tax benefits on the tickets?"

"I don't take any sort of transit to Veshna," he replied. "I've been twice in the past fifteen years." He could only afford Primary-trained prospectives once a decade. The rest were all subscripts. But she didn't have to know that. "I rent the airship and its driver's services for auctions and my other Halleri business. Whatever I cannot find on Marigon - like prospectives - is shipped in. That's why there are so many delivery requisition forms."

"Then... you haven't been off Marigon in the past three years."

He shook his head. "Two trips to Hallar and two to Fasciemi Anchorage, that's it. And if you want
to find out about those," he sneered, "it's above your security clearance."

Well, there it was! He couldn't possibly have been near the Nova sector during the time of the raids because he was never near the Nova sector whatsoever. For the past fifteen Standard months, Marigon and the common centre of mass that was 'Nova' were on opposite sides of the sun. He'd never been to see either of the dwarves, but if ever did, wouldn't it make more sense to wait until Marigon and Nova were on the same side of their orbit? It would minimise distance and cost! How else could he manage a trip like that financially and be back in time for his charges' feedings?

She wouldn't find a single thing coming from either Nova dwarf. Not from New Joplin, because Antonio didn't know of anybody who attempted finding prospectives through the privateers on that planet, and not from New Sainte-Dolitte either. Antonio made very certain to go through Avo Romae for all those needs. Then there would be absolutely no requisition forms filed under his name at the Council, unless Romae were listed as deliverer. But Romae would put a stop to any inquiry from the Council! He would do it because it'd serve his own purposes to cover up that sort of business. Why, if Romae were implicated as having any link to the Nova sector raids he'd...

Wait a minute.

If Romae were implicated as having any link to the Nova sector raids ... he'd act exactly as he'd done. He'd distract people with a substantial donation - check. He'd take his business off Hallar for a few days - check. He'd create a distraction or try to pin the blame on another seller by using a paper whose editors were entirely in his pocket. Check.

Of all people, Avo Romae! Antonio had thought that the working relationship they had between each other was fonder, more cultivated than that between Romae and, say, Francis of Hallar - Romae disliked Francis but never admitted it openly, and Francis detested Romae as vocally as he could get away with, while still living in comfort in Romae's fair city.

But he'd thought the man had liked him decently enough! Less like business cohorts and more like friends, wasn't it? Didn't Romae allow Antonio's foolish friendship with his eldest grandson? And Lovino and he were such terribly good friends, weren't they? Antonio understood business but this sort of backstabbing dealing didn't offer any substantial profit to Romae! Unless he needed a distraction.

Romae must have been behind the Nova raids.

It couldn't be helped, he thought angrily, not once it was said and done. But neither would he back away from the Decennial Auction. One did not simply back away from something like the Decennial Auction! Not when he'd advertised and worked hard and planned, and he had so many to sell! Being on Hallar for the auction had required capital. Antonio wasn't walking away from the auction without a significant amount of money, enough for his business affairs for the next four years.

Well! Then let them detain him at Border Control, as they'd done. And let them bring over a frazzled councillor to interview him, as they'd done. He refused to let it get him down and sully his name and reputation as a seller, and he refused to retreat back to Marigon with his tail between his legs. Romae would not get the upper hand this time! All Antonio had wanted was to sell off some property at an auction! It wasn't like he was breaking any laws here.

Some time later, the councillor finished with the file and slammed it shut with a certain triumph. "We're done," she sighed.
"You’re done, you mean," Antonio grumbled, "for me the work has only begun. I get to spend all the time I’d booked off for myself dealing with the press and explaining to fifteen different journalists why it is the Hallar Bonds Service Protection Agency felt the need to detain me, take me away kicking and screaming, and call upon the Legislative Council to question me for something that I didn’t do!"

"Yes, well, now that there's hard proof you didn't do it, you can tell the people who care," the councillor snapped, as she led him out of the cell.

--

It was only later, after he'd gotten a cab and finally checked in to the Deversorium, that he checked up on his property. The prospectives were downstairs in the lobby of the hotel, in the Back Wing where the capsule beds stretched on for a good three hundred metres. Of the wares he had intended to sell, numbers seventy-two and forty-nine had been with him the longest. (There were also ninety-three and ninety-seven still remaining from that crop, but they had remained upon Marigon to take care of the youngest charges.) Forty-nine was a capable sort - far sturdier than a girl but less stocky than your average male bondsperson - with blue eyes and light brown-blond hair that sprung into a single thick curl at the temple on either side. Seventy-two was shorter. He was dark-haired and pale-skinned, with beautiful narrow eyes the colour of rich mahogany.

Neither forty-nine nor seventy-two looked particularly masculine or feminine, which is what Antonio preferred: specialising in androgyynes helped him fill a niche, and that was good for business. Both of them were exquisite creatures with impeccable training and a feline grace at once haunting and magnetic. But they hadn't been sold in the seven years Antonio had had them. There was rampant interest, and they'd each sat their fair share of examinations, but there was never anybody who took them home. It was surprising, but Antonio was grateful for the assistance at times like these, when the Council decided to dick him over.

"Forty-nine organised placing the others in their capsules," said seventy-two, in his calm, quiet way of speaking, as he walked Antonio to his room on the fourth floor of the Deversorium. "They have all been fed and watered."

"And you too, I hope?" Antonio asked.

"Naturally," seventy-two replied. "Adequate supplies were located. In the meanwhile, you may wish to partake in the festivities and conferences for the auction. As for us and your other prospective bondspeople, you need not worry; I have procured for forty-nine and myself a map of the city and together - upon your permission - we will replenish your foodstocks for the remainder of the prospectives with goods from the local market. You have but to ask it of us. We will also ensure adequate exercise and facilities access as required."

"Fantastic, that all sounds great." They entered Antonio's chambers and he brightened immediately upon seeing the bed. What a sight for sore eyes after a long trip!

"Do you have need of me for anything?" seventy-two asked. "Forty-nine is looking after the others but I am free for your use for the night. As always, I am available for your every service. You have but to ask it of me and I would happily oblige. Anything at all, Master."

Seventy-two stood at the door, his gentle shoulders squared underneath the white linen shirt, his back straight and his posture fixed but welcoming. This was an inviting pose; Antonio had trained
it into him. Seventy-two always kept his uniform so clean, even when handling the younger charges, and though it was only simple bondsperson dress - boring grey pants, black vest, white shirt - it stood out against his hair like a crisp image in sharp, vivid contrast. He made it look incredibly classy.

Simply gorgeous specimen. He'd no idea why seventy-two had never been purchased. Oh well, that was what auctions were for. There would be no doubt, seventy-two would be sold in a matter of days, and he thought about it. Tempting, to take some entertainment for the night...

Then he thought of Francis, and his strange little fixation upon his own prospective. He couldn't afford the potential hit to business. And it threw him off his dinner to think about such perversion!

"Thank you, but no," Antonio said. "Maybe some wine." It would add to his headache, but he might sleep easier.

"Whatever you want is what I want. If wine is all you desire tonight," seventy-two replied evenly, "then it shall be wine that you have." And then he left Antonio to his own devices.

Perhaps a shower first, he reflected. Then the wine, then bed.
It was a long walk back from the train station. If she could only convince the trains to drop her off directly in front of her house, she grumbled, trudging through the puddles in the miserable rain without an umbrella.

Her awful walk was preceded by an awful day. With no time to pack a lunch, even if she worked through it daily, she was cranky with hunger. That department meeting had free muffins, but nobody told her about that until twenty minutes after it was over and there was nothing left to eat.

Was it paranoid to want to blame Kaisa Tillen for having put everybody up to that? It wasn't a bad life Elizaveta led, not by far, and she knew it, so she felt bad hating every last second when she could've had it worse. She was fortunate to live on Hallar where there was plenty of money and easy jobs that she could excel at with minimal effort. But nothing came easily when your boss hated your guts, hated your guts' guts, and did everything in her power to impede your every action.

If only Kaisa were paid for sabotage! She'd make a killing, Elizaveta thought grimly.

So it was par for the course when 6:30 rolled around and finally she was free ... when the call came in from Border Control, saying they needed someone with Legislative authority and clearance level 5 immediately.

She didn't have clearance level 5. She'd had clearance 3 before Kaisa had taken it away but she ignored that, grabbed her coworker Wiebe's copy of his clearance card, and took off. It was true that whatever Border Control wanted, it could wait until tomorrow, when someone with the proper clearance could do it. But that someone would shift their existing work onto her (nothing gave Kaisa more satisfaction than telling others to give it to Héderváry, she sure looks bored), and tomorrow was the first day of week-long prep work for the auction. The first of the sellers were arriving - she needed to meet them herself or arrange for a helper, and transportation, and be on call at the Deversorium in case there were problems with hotel room bookings, and other minor physical errands she needed to be present for, and there was still so much paperwork to do for the auction that wouldn't get done unless she had literally every single minute of tomorrow available...

- and it would be simpler and easier to bluster her way through the Halleri BSPA. Nobody would care if it wasn't her ID, and neither did she. Wiebe was on Marigon for the next year and she could have them log his ID without concern that it could deny him access on grounds of duplicated cards.

So she had jetted across town to Border Control, its high tower illuminated sharply against a backdrop of sunset, hoping it wouldn't take too long. But luck was not with her and meeting with Antonio Fernandez Carriedo - stubborn and haughty - had been like pulling teeth. Look for anything that might have to do with the Nova raids or the Great Delivery of Banningham, she was instructed.

Nothing! There was nothing there. Carriedo hardly ventured off-planet to begin with - no idea why not, she grumbled, given her druthers she'd be off-planet every second week, but only a Senior Councillor got special dispensations for that, and then, only to the Anchorage or Luna Halleri. To
each his own. Carriedo wasted his chances on seeing the system on the Council's pocket, and it was his life, his choice to do that. The stupid fuck!

Carriedo was why she walked home at the criminal hour of quarter to ten. She'd been coming home later and later. Hopefully Roderich had dinner prepared. Hopefully it was something more interesting than sausage and bread. (Somewhere in there, in that pretty little head of his, there must be some instruction for making food that wasn't a remnant of his bachelor days.)

In her exhaustion she nearly tripped on a tennis ball, having only noticed the vibrant splash of green at the last second.

"Hey! Lady!" she heard from Hannie, their neighbour's bratty seven-year-old. "Throw it over here?"

Stupid child couldn't keep her toys in her yard! Spoiled little princess had fifteen billion toys too many anyway. She picked up the ball and lobbed it without much thought, overshooting Hannie easily by a few feet.

"Your aim sucks!" Hannie cried.

"You shouldn't be playing so close to the road in this weather!" Elizaveta yelled back. She'd never been a kid person, Elizaveta reflected, her steps a bit louder and squishier on the muddy cobblestone. Quarter to ten, what was the brat doing awake?

The sight of their house was like some sort of absurd divine mirage, and she half-expected shafts of light to come from the opening heavens directly overhead with trumpeting fat-faced cherubs flying amidst the thick, puffy clouds. It wasn't much - a two bedroom townhouse, modestly-sized, designed and painted like every single other house on the street - but it was home and it beckoned her aching bones with siren song.

The second bedroom they'd turned into Elizaveta's study and the basement into Roderich's, since the house was too small to accommodate moving the piano into any other room but the front living room. In fact, from the sounds of it, that was where he was now, like most days. The window must be open; she could hear the sound of him banging away on the keys a couple houses away. She tried to pinpoint the piece. It was nothing he was working on recently, and instead was a selection of pieces from his first album which she hadn't heard in some time. An old hymn he'd arranged a theme and variations for, which broke into a volta he wrote for her back when they were dating.

Well, everybody needs days off, maybe he had grown frustrated again and wanted to rekindle inspiration.

It was only as she drew nearer that she spotted the girl sitting on the couch. She was youthful and pretty - prettier than Elizaveta, she realised, with a lurch in her chest - with dark skin and black hair tied with red ribbons into two pigtails that lay on her shoulders.

She looked like she was enjoying herself.

Elizaveta frowned.

Roderich, of course, was standard Roderich when he had an audience - he threw himself into the music like a prima donna, his eyes shut tight like the music physically pained him, moving his torso back and forth as he ascended and descended the keyboard from lower register to upper and
back again. But the girl on the couch wasn't watching him: her eyes were closed, relaxed, and she seemed to be completely ignoring Roderich's antics (unlike most concertgoers, who lapped up every last twitch of his muscles greedily) in favour of enjoying the music.

Okay, so she just liked the sound, small point in her favour, but still, who the hell was this girl?

Red-faced with anger, Elizaveta barged into her house as loudly as she could. "I'm home," she called from the front room, toeing off her shoes in haste without untying the laces, "how was your- oh!" She feigned surprise, though the icy tone was no act. "Why, I didn't realise we were having company!"

The girl on the couch sat up, ramrod straight. She didn't look like the usual 'caught-in-the-act' type she'd imagined - small breasts, small hips, not the hourglass-type Roderich had always preferred. With her plain buttoned shirt and trousers, didn't dress like an adulteress. But even plain and small (while Elizaveta looked like something a cat would drag in, her hair dishevelled and frizzy with the humidity, her shirt soaked and her shoes an outright muddy mess), this was the last thing she needed today.

Roderich recognised her simmering anger and had the grace to look decently ashamed of himself. "I - Eliza," he said, looking pale and stumbling over his words, "I didn't - you're home very late!"

"So I am," she replied curtly. "A bit late for guests. Aren't you going to introduce me?"

He bit his lip and darted his eyes from her to the girl on the couch, saying nothing.

Finally the girl sighed. "I can introduce myself," she began, sounding older than she looked. "My name is Constable Yvonne Vel; I'm from the 118th New Joplin Police Squadron."

The name seemed familiar, but Elizaveta couldn't quite place it. "Isn't this a little outside your jurisdiction, Constable?" she sneered instead.

"I'm here on business," she explained coolly. "I had hoped to meet with you after work. If I'd known you might be late I would've called ahead, but as it was, I wound up running into Roderich here." At the mention of Roderich, Vel practically glowed. "I'm such a fan of his work!"

"Uh-huh," Elizaveta droned. "Where'd you say it is you come from again?"

"New Joplin," Roderich supplied.

"Thank you, Constable," she snapped. "Last I checked, New Joplin isn't exactly a hotbed of popular music. It's news to me that you get so much cross-pollination in the culture. We certainly don't hear much of New Joplin on Hallar."

"Oh, that's the thing!" Roderich chirped excitedly. "I've been following the music scene there as much as I can. It's simply booming with things we don't do here. The more culture swap there can be, the more we can all benefit!"

Elizaveta mostly ignored him, too angry to dignify his outburst with words. "So, what," she asked Vel, "you're here as some kinda interplanetary musical ambassador?"

"Ah. No. Not exactly," Vel replied. "You might've read in the news about the Nova raids."
A bit, she thought, but not much. Before this afternoon's episode with Carriedo she hadn't heard much about them at all. Keeping your head down in the office was default for not getting picked on for extra work, and she had too much on her plate to keep up with the day's news in any more detail than hearing the paperboys scream it out for crowds. "Does the Nova sector not have its own Council offices? They handle their cases out there. Why the need to come to Hallar?"

"Mmm," Vel said mysteriously. "That's exactly what I came here to find out."

"It's been a long, miserable day, it's almost ten, and you want to play Twenty Questions?"

Vel shook her head. It bounced her pigtails where they lay on her chest, which made Elizaveta want to yank them off her beautiful head. "Not exactly. But I'm curious as to how much you know about the raids." She looked between Elizaveta and Roderich cautiously. "We can talk privately if you prefer."

"Why would I need to? There were raids. I hear they were bad," Elizaveta retorted. Then she threw up her hands and said, "What gives, there's raids on New Sainte-Dolitte all the damn time, why should this be special? What's with all the hype?"

"It's mostly because of the nature of who was taken," Vel explained. "The son of a prominent New Joplin authoress was kidnapped. In the dead of night. Something like that sure doesn't happen too often. You have to admit it's weird, don't you? All these raids, in the Nova sector, on Schlessen?"

No, she didn't. "What's so weird about them? They're pirates, it's what pirates do."

"Oh!" Vel said with a wide grin and a little light laugh. "I guess they just... do this kind of thing of their volition?"

So far, Vel had been doing a decent job of not taking the bait. Elizaveta knew she wasn't entirely being hostly, and now that it was obvious Vel wasn't here for anything concerning Roderich, her anger had cooled. But this conspiracy theory tone was getting on her nerves.

"Pirates," Elizaveta deadpanned; and then, to drive it home, "pi-rates. They don't follow laws and they create their own rules. Who knows why they do what they do!"

"You don't think people might've put them up to it?"

"Whyn't you tell me," Vel asked, her eyes narrowed. "We don't have to talk in front of him."

"... Other pirates?!" Elizaveta sighed. "Look, like I said. It's been a really long day. If you came to see me, I'm sorry I was so late. But you're talking paranoid nonsense." And then she reflected. "Why couldn't we just have had this conversation at work? Why did you have to come here? If you came to the council offices tomorrow maybe you could find Kaisa Tillen -"

"It's alright," Vel said cryptically. "I think I got the answers I was looking for. I'll see you around the auction with my partner." Not during the auction, Elizaveta hoped. She'd be too busy keeping an eye on everything while handling MC and auctioneer duties. Speaking of, that reminded her...

"But we'll talk later about festivals?" Roderich asked.
"Oh, absolutely! You have my information, mail me when you get a chance. We'd love to have you on New Joplin."

With a wave, Vel left. Elizaveta waited patiently until she was far away down the road - at least past Hannie, who waved cheerily from the lawn - that stupid brat - so that she couldn't hear any of their conversation.

Then she rounded in on her husband. "What the hell was that all about?!"

Roderich held his hands up in defence. "I know it looked bad, but it's really about nothing!"

"Looks bad? Looks bad?! Do you have any idea, the kind of day I've had, and to come home to you pianistically chatting up some floozy -"

"She's not some floozy!" he countered. "She's a police officer!"

"Constable Floozy is still a floozy!" Elizaveta ground out.

"She just sort of appeared at the door and -"

"And you thought you'd play her the piece you wrote for me?"

"It was her favourite song on the first album. She's heard all my records, she says she's a big fan! Do you know what that means to someone like me? Someone who's been trying to break off of Hallar and expand out for years now?! Eliza, I really want to pursue this -"

"You can pursue your expansion without me then," Elizaveta spat. "After all the work I did supporting you while you wander around following your dream of making it big in the music world, you repay me like this?!"

It must have been the last straw because Roderich lost it and, with his face nearly the same shade of purple as his eyes, he thundered, "It's got nothing to do with her! And everything to do with you! That woman might be a constable by day but she knows people who are big agents on New Joplin! The music scene there is thriving, creative, fertile territory!" He paused, and then grumbled, "Which'll mean nothing to you, I'm certain, since you barely follow what I talk about, you're barely interested in my dreams and what's important to me."

She sucked in a short breath, feeling stung. He noticed it and said, more calmly, "After all that you've done for me, I thought I could try and get us to New Joplin. Or anywhere. And from New Joplin, maybe Bast, maybe Veshna. Places you've only ever imagined. I know you want to go. That's what you wanted, to travel, wasn't it? I wanted to be the one to take you."

"You just wanted to go because it'd further your own career," she sulked.

"Ah, let's not pretend we don't both veil helping ourselves under helping each other," Roderich replied with an easy grin. "You're as guilty of it as I am." That gave her a horrifically wonderful idea. "Do you think you can forgive me for it this time?"

"Of course," she told him, and he smiled widely. "On one condition. I need a small favour."

"Anyth-" His expression turned suspicious and instantly apprehensive. "Wait. What is it?"
"Well... the auction's in three days," she began.

"You've been talking of little else. It's why you've been so late, so tired. But I don't see what there is that I can do."

She should say it simply instead of beating around the bush. He'd notice that sort of thing and it'd piss him off. "I need an auctioneer."

"But you're supposed to be the auctioneer."

"And master of ceremonies. And organising everything behind the scenes, and making sure everything is set up for the bondspeople to get from point A to point B, and making sure the sales go through, and are legitimate instead of fancy IOUs in dollars or credits or, hell, even a barter system, and trying to ward off dummy bids or collusion, and all the while keeping an eye on Francis of Hallar, and looking out for funny business with Antonio Fernandez Carriedo and Avo Romae -"

"But Avo Romae isn't going to be at the auction," Roderich pointed out.

"Exactly," she said, "he's staying away for some very specific reason and I need to figure out what that is. I can't do all of that and be the auctioneer!"

"So ..."

Dammit, Roderich, wasn't it obvious? "So I need you to be the auctioneer."

"How - would - but I - that's not possible!" he spluttered.

"Why not? You're not busy that day."

"But I don't know the first thing about auctions!"

"What's to know? If they were prepared to get me to do it, they're not exactly expecting a major degree in economic theory as a prerequisite, here. I'll give you a list of start-prices, and you let the crowd take it from there!"

Roderich continued to shake his head. "This is a terrible idea -"

"I'll sweeten the deal," she offered, thinking of his music and the constable's obvious enjoyment. "We have a break halfway through, between class one list sellers and classes two and three. Why not serenade the crowd with a musical number?"

"I asked you over a month ago if I could have that spot. You said no - and you'll forgive me for paraphrasing but you said it was because 'it'd be a conflict of interest since in case I hadn't noticed lately we were married.'"

"That was then. When they assigned me auctioneer I applied for an assistant with my duties and they turned me down."

"Kaisa?" he guessed.

"Who else?" It must've been Kaisa - and probably at Francis' request, those two were in each
other's pockets so often it was a miracle Kaisa hadn't proposed marriage.

"Why can't you get anybody else to do it? Someone internal?"

"Don't you think I tried that when I sent in the assistant clerk application form?" she said. "You know they're using this auction as a test for me to get the promotion that I've been fighting for for over a year. If I screw anything up - anything! - it's not just bumped back to start. They'll never consider me for any position higher than where I am now and I can kiss my thoughts of a better salary and less grunt work away. Roderich, I can't do this anymore. The job that I want, I'm good at it and I know it and they know it. And unless Kaisa leaves the service - and she won't! - I won't have an easy time of handling things. She's purposely overwhelming me to try and catch me off-guard. She wants to see me fail! I can't let that happen."

"What about the conflict of interest?" he asked.

"I can backlog the forms I sent in for my assistant clerk. Find out who denied it and where. I'm positive it was Kaisa who did it - it's got to be her, and I have detailed records of every correspondence with her and the tasks she's given to me for the past month. I can prove she gave me extra work when I was already at capacity and they don't like hearing that in HR. The point is, if it comes up, I have a case. But it won't come up. I have orders from above telling me I can go-ahead."

"You mean -"

"The one and only." Elizaveta agreed with the sceptical look Roderich threw her. It was certainly weird that Romae sent anybody in the Council anything at all, from a hello on the street to a personalised letter. Except maybe the very highest of members, on whom he spent a goodly amount for lavish gifts on holidays. "He sent me full authority to appoint any Caput Halleri citizen as auctioneer at my discretion without needing an interview or any bother with the union's job-hunting queue. That means I pick who gets to tell people things are going once, twice, three times and sold. Whether the bids go through or not gets verified behind the scenes with the action out in front. All you have to do is say the final number loud and clear for the record-takers, and alert security in case you spot skirmishes in the crowd."

"Skirmishes?" he goggled. "That happens?! It's an auction!"

"Yes, but it's the Decennial." She took a deep breath. "Anyway. Will you do it?"

And it was true, Roderich didn't really have much of a choice. It'd be extremely good publicity for him, because all of the system would be paying attention to the auction. Whoever wouldn't be in attendance would listen in by radio, and Roderich shone on radio. An easier workload on her helped him in the long run. He had no reason not to accept, and he must've known that. "Of course," he replied. "Of course I'll do it. You can have a piano there onstage?"

She laughed. "Honey, if you need a knife-juggling chimpanzee, I can get it for you. You just need to let me know."

"Theatrics are not my main department," he grinned. She would have to agree to disagree with Mister Super-pained Music Face on that one. "Okay. I'll do it."

"About time," she told him with a hug.
It was classic for them, to use each other to advance each other. Someone comes over to talk to Elizaveta, Roderich manages to hoodwink an interplanetary tour. In exchange, she gets an auctioneer and he gets the publicity stunt to end all publicity stunts.

If she only had a dollar for every time that had happened. She’d be professionally manipulative, instead of pro-bono. But despite their unconventional system, they really worked. And what was a silly little bit of in-fighting when most days it felt like them against the world anyway?
Estonia

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Eduard returned from a disconcerting meeting at the base to find Ivan packing a large suitcase. He'd left a few hours ago to head out. He had expected friction, but when he'd told Ivan he was leaving for a bit, Ivan only gave him a searching look and told him okay, be safe and see you later.

Once he'd gotten there, he hadn't much enjoyed his time, and the unsettling feeling he got that Ivan knew more than he let on didn't help. He had an hour of working quietly assembling Eavesdroppers, while Feliks tinkered around with the airship's fuel vials. "An old model," Feliks had explained, "a total clunker, but it still works okayish so we keep it around. I think Toris needs it for something or, like, whatever."

It was uncommon that the fuel vials had to be manually inserted; there was no automated dropchute like most airships. So he watched out of the corner of his eye as Feliks swung open the panel and dove inside, and then waited until he heard the tell-tale clink that the book he had been reading described. He imagined that, inside the ship's hull, Feliks would have grasped the vial, given a quarter turn to the left (lefty-loosey, righty-tighty, went the convention in screwing anything in, threads or no threads - a convenient mnemonic) and then lifted it up to release the lower part of the vial housing. Then the bottom hinge would let that part fall back and the fuel vial could easily slide out of the top stationary casing and Feliks could pocket the empty vial. Eduard wanted to help, but it was a one-person job, and he had his own work with the two-way Eavesdroppers.

Then a crew of perhaps ten people had burst in the heavy door, with Toris at the forefront of them, chatting animatedly with a stoic, dour-looking woman of about sixty to seventy years. Both Feliks and Eduard dropped what they'd been doing - Feliks climbed out of the airship, his face and coveralls spotted with filthy black grease - and Toris introduced them all with a gigantic smile on his face to the woman: Commander Zielska of Kilnus Central Intelligence.

She didn't bat an eye when she shook Feliks' grease-marked hand. "See, the Commander isn't afraid to get her hands dirty," Toris had said, practically glowing. There must have been some truth to his tale growing up in Zapreschniy, because he worshipped the ground she walked on - not like a lover, but like the mother figure he hadn't had - and appeared to crave every approving twitch of her lips like it was the benevolent smile of gods. It had been the Commander who scanned for auds and vids. She didn't want any sort of bugs, she said, but not because she didn't trust Toris. Eduard felt she looked at him a little pointedly when she said it, but she didn't say anything more, and promptly got to work.

Against his better judgment - or perhaps with it - he wound up the undetectable Eavesdropper while nobody was looking and set it aside. When they asked him about it, he lied, and said that it was broken, that he'd try fixing it once he'd finished making the two-ways. When Zielska ran her device over the casing, he held his breath. Sure enough, not a sound, not one single chirp. A broken Eavesdropper, they'd agreed. Fix it later.
It took great muscle control to keep from beaming in sheer triumph.

The rest of the Eavesdroppers he was working on, she scanned quickly. Her device chirped on each. Eduard explained they physically couldn't record anything but she had ignored him, and requested that he take them and leave for at least a half hour. Toris shrugged, unhelpfully, and asked him in an excited hush, with big pleading eyes, "If you wouldn't mind? Oh, please? You can finish the others when you return. And of course I'll pay you handsomely!"

Eduard agreed, and left Toris to deal with Zielska who was wondering why they were paying a bondsman.

He also left the undetectable Eavesdropper still sitting on the desk, where it watched and listened.

He didn't do much as he wandered, the shoebox closed and held against his hip with one hand. Skuratchky was a nice city, though. Pretty houses, wide streets. The roads had been cleared after that afternoon's snowstorm, so the click of his heels on the cobblestone echoed loud. The street was lit with electric streetlamps. Very modern for what some might call a backwards planet. Even the crisp scent of burning wood in his nostrils made the sting of breathing in frozen night air not too bad.

Whenever he'd left Francis' Emporium - and he could count on one hand the number of times he'd done that - he hadn't liked the dust of Caput Halleri's roads, or the hot press of the air, arid on dry days, unbearable humidity on the wet ones. It was true, Olyokin was cold, but there was a nice weight to the overcoat Ivan had bought him. It didn't seem like the dismal heaviness of perpetual winter he had once imagined.

When he returned, he finished his work as quickly as possible, while Zielska badgered him with questions about Hallar. Eduard was grateful for Toris' intervention - Toris didn't leave Zielska's side for a second, and so when her questions became overly prying and impolite, Toris interjected and attempted to steer the conversation somewhere else. Nevertheless, she managed to ask him about his master and said that she was sorry for someone who had to be the bondsman of someone who didn't use bondsmen; sorrier still for someone who had to be so close to someone so dangerous who hadn't cleared his Time.

Eduard did not flinch, and answered her questions without betraying anything. The only person he felt sorry for lying to was Toris.

When he'd finished his work, some clever sleight-of-hand won him the undetectable Eavesdropper when he set down the shoebox. Eduard passed his arm over it and up it went his sleeve, like a vacuum. A lifetime of being skilled at giving handjobs would give you that kind of hand and wrist dexterity, he thought with a sly grin. Finally, he was using his powers for evil and not for good!

He didn't like what he heard on the Eavesdropper, as he walked back to the Duma, listening.

So all things considered, Eduard tried - and likely failed - to keep the alarm out of his voice when he asked, "Where are you going?"

"Halar," Ivan replied, not looking up from the open suitcase on the armchair. "For the auction. All of us are going."

"How long will you be away?" It wouldn't be prudent for everybody to leave the Duma. But perhaps Ivan would return in the nick of time?
"We," Ivan corrected him, and turned his back to Eduard to rifle through his wardrobe for clothing. "You're coming with me."

That complicated things. "Ah... I am?"

"Of course!" Ivan straightened and dropped three shirts and a pair of pants on the bed, then set on folding them more neatly. "If you want to, that is," he continued as he worked. "Perhaps it is difficult to return to a place you've spent your entire life after all this time away, but I thought you might prefer a reprieve from all this snow."

Eduard shrugged and shook his head. "The snow doesn't bother me."

Ivan grinned. "You say that now, but the length of time for this planet to go around the sun far exceeds the average lifespan. Yours or mine. That's why we measure time by Hallar. You know, Skuratchky was fertile once, but its produce now grows only in the southern regions of the Empire Union. And the fruits look nothing like they did some two hundred years ago."

"I - wow," he said, equal parts amazed and distracted. Ivan had removed his shirt to try on one of the others and the momentary glimpse Eduard had gotten of his chest, then his back as he'd turned away, made him briefly lose his train of thought.

"That's plants for you. It's the same everywhere at this latitude. Kilnus has a province with the same features. Anyway, the point I'm trying to make? Home will look like this, for the rest of my life."

And his own life, too, Eduard reflected, if Ivan wouldn't free him as he said he'd planned. Eduard had given such little thought to what he would do that it took him aback. If Ivan wouldn't have him, where else would he go? He might take Toris up on his offer of assistance and relocate. Perhaps to the Kilnus province that was most like here? It would be very easy for Toris and Zielska to get him there. He could remain in Skuratchky, if it weren't for the chance he might run into Ivan around town, as a newly freed man. He wasn't too sure what he'd do. Freeze up, probably. And watch from a safe distance away. He could leave Olyokin entirely. But... that seemed impossible. He had felt no homesickness for Hallar; leaving had been so easy!

If only he could somehow make Ivan see how it would be better to keep him around. Eduard would rather not leave at all.

"That bad?" asked Ivan. "Really?"

"Hm? Oh, no no!" Ivan must have misinterpreted his silence while Ivan changed his pants. Presently, Eduard watched as Ivan yanked them about in his struggle to button them up, making them tighter around his hips, thighs and ass, and blushed. "Not at all, I was just thinking."

"That's okay. I was thinking too, but about less nice things than leaving." Ivan turned around, looking himself in the mirror. Sadly, he said, "I think I've put on weight since the - since That Night."

"Everybody gets a metabolism shift. It's normal!" Eduard argued. Although if it resulted in Ivan taking off more clothing Eduard wouldn't mind so much. "All your clothes are probably the same. You could try them all on to be certain."
"Hm," Ivan replied, poking his belly. "Perhaps you're right."

The past seventy-two hours had been strange. From Ivan's curious discussion with him about faith, to Natalya hitting on him in the library, to meeting the illustrious Commander Zielska of Kilnus Central Intelligence, Eduard felt downright unnerved.

In regards to Natalya, Ivan was saying as little as possible about the whole thing. That didn't help explain why his legs felt like jelly and the hair on his forearms stood on end when she'd plunked herself in his lap and nuzzled his neck, saying, I'm not like Katya, I'm more like big brother. I like men. I really, reeeally like men. Hey, you're a man, aren't you, Eduard? Can't you do something for me? Aren't we friends?

"Natalya's Time is drawing nearer, isn't it?" he asked.

Ivan looked extremely uncomfortable. "I. Well. Yes. I think it's likely it will be upon her in the fullest extent to clear in about five days - at most a week."

"Just after she'll get back from the auction," Eduard guessed.

"Yes. Perfectly synchronised." Ivan looked at his shirts, neatly folded and placed in the suitcase. Quietly he remarked, "I guess this makes her a lucky girl."

"Was yours like this?" At Ivan's curt glare he clarified, "I mean in the beginning! Did it coincide as nicely with an auction?"

"No, but that wasn't an issue, we would have simply gone to see Francis. Like our governess did with Katya. In fact, many of the well-off families here tend to do this: they find a seller they trust, stick with him, and as a strange tradition, the parents buy the bondsperson for the youth when appropriate. Our parents before us had done the same thing. So did our aunt. After our uncle died, Aunt Dasha never went anywhere without Nikita."

"Were you as obvious as Natalya is now? About the signs?"

Ivan shook his head. "For my own, I caught on to the symptoms quicker than Katya did - she was busy, she didn't notice and eventually forgot or assumed I'd found someone - very early on, I was vehement against having a bondsperson. And so I ... began to force myself not to act that way."

"It was your biology," said Eduard, trying for sympathetic, "you couldn't help it -"

"I could, and I did," he insisted. Then he gave it more thought and said, "Well. As long as I was able to, that is. It took three to four years before it was too much and I needed the vodka. For a while, meditation helped, going for long walks in the cold weather without a scarf." Eduard supposed that at that time, Ivan would've worn the overcoat he had loaned Eduard to wear around, before the tailor's delivery. No wonder it smelled so damn fantastic; he'd managed to lock the heady scent of hormones into the cloth weave. "And lastly I would often talk with - with my monk friend. He was very supportive of my decision to abstain."

Yeah, I'll bet he was, alright, Eduard thought drily. "Why did you do it? Your faith can't have been the only reason."

Ivan sighed and left the bed and the open suitcase to pace around the room. "I was ... uncomfortable with the directions in which my own body wanted to proceed," he began. "I felt like
it was taking control of me without my knowledge, chemically removing any power I had. At times, it made my brain hurt, made me irrational and temperamental beyond my control - I felt like this stupid process was robbing me of myself. So when Brother Toris told me that there were sects of Priegyl faith that agreed with me, that promised to give me my sanity back, that put everything in easy black-and-white terms like the devil taking over my body, it helped! He made me feel better about myself and less stolen." Ivan seemed sad, but brightened and said, "Anyway. That's why I didn't want a bondservant at the time and why I'm kind of hesitant to force one on Natalya."

Suddently, it impressed upon Eduard the fullest extent of what he'd done.

"I-I didn't," he stammered, "I didn't think of it like that. I just - I didn't mean to, I - that night when you were down there, maybe you don't remember - I don't remember much either - but you told me no, you - you told me to stop! And I didn't, I didn't, I'm so sorry -"

"I'm not," Ivan told him with a tired smile. "If you hadn't done what you did, I would have gone mad." He grinned widely, "Madder than I already am! So. What's done is done. And looking back on it, it was the right thing to do, I just wish it had not been so ... violent. I wish I could have redone that part. And I wish you hadn't been coerced. No - don't protest," he said - it was true, Eduard had been about to protest - "you were bought and paid for, you cannot tell me there was much free will on your part. Having thought about it, I think se- ah, that ... this act, for biological imperative purposes or not, should be between two people who love each other. Or who really want to get off. Well, whatever, consenting adults. But buying and selling and power and subjugation and ... and hegemony should not have anything to do with it.

"I want Natalya not to regret her Time like I did," he said unhappily. "I want for her to have it like any other Vitim whose family lacks the money to pay for a bondsperson, and they find someone in the town, a friend, someone they might actually feel something for. Would that not be more meaningful? I want her to have that."

"So, then," Eduard said slowly, "your faith... so then you have nothing against sex?"

It was Ivan's turn to stammer. "S-sex, it's ... w-well, ah, my faith says it is unpleasant and sinful and should occur for procreative purposes alone, so obviously the only respectable relationship between two people of the same gender is one that's perfectly chaste, or perhaps if they are married, but the understanding is that some sort of divine vow should be taken first."

That's what Ivan believed?! His god made him with urges and then asked him to ignore them? This foolish business made no sense to Eduard...

But, from the way Ivan acted, he didn't sound as though he was entirely convinced either... might he be overcompensating?

Eduard hesitated the once and then blurted out (before he could re-think his words or allow his shame to bury this strange impulse he had in speaking up), "I could clear up the mystery for you."

There was shocked silence. Ivan's face went bright red.

"I m-meant," he said, feeling trapped and beginning to panic, "w-we could do it over. Do it right this time." Ivan made to say something but Eduard cut him off before he could.

"Don't, don't consider me as, as a servant. Consider it instead, I'm basically an expert at this! If anyone can make you feel good - feel great - I can."
"That isn't the ultimate problem," Ivan replied.

"Then what is?" Surely - surely it wasn't that he'd misread - wasn't because he didn't like Eduard? Wasn't attracted to him? (If that were the case, may the ground open up beneath his feet and swallow him whole because Eduard didn't think he could withstand that kind of embarrassment...)

"I - I shouldn't - I should not even indulge myself," Ivan said darkly, wringing his hands, "but, hah, well, I do that, too, so... so it would really be hypocritical to ignore the fact that - that my body wants these things." He stopped pacing and stood in front of the bed, rocking back and forth on his feet. "That I want these things," he whispered, almost ashamed. "So. The problem isn't - isn't -"

"Sex?" he asked.

"Yes that," Ivan said, scandalised. "The problem... is that you're not doing this of your own free will. That's wrong. And I know how you see it, you see it as your job, but you're - you're not being paid for this! I give you room and board, sure, but - and to pay someone for sex, that seems every bit as immoral -"

"Would it help if I told you I wanted it?"

His interruption was met with more stunned silence.

Eduard stepped closer, leaving the safety of the wall to approach Ivan very slowly, very cautiously. His hands were clammy and his face felt like it'd drained of blood, because if Ivan rejected him here, it'd be unthinkable, and how, how had he found the courage to do this? To bring up this topic, to keep plundering on despite feeling like he might have better chances jumping out the window? But there was a hope, a dizzy shocking hope that Ivan was actually starting to come around to the idea. And maybe saintly, pure Ivan might be selfish just this once and keep Eduard a little longer after all. If only he would! "Would it help if I told you I wanted you?"

"How could you possibly?" Ivan whispered. "After what I did to you?"

There were several reasons. The most basic was that Francis had him at least once a week and sometimes more. A sudden three weeks' dry spell had hit him hard, tonic or no tonic. But that wasn't it.

He couldn't deny he'd been curious about Ivan - who Ivan really was, because the monster Eduard first met, the one Toris and Raivis kept insisting he still was, bore very little resemblance to the man standing in front of him now.

The man standing in front of him now didn't frighten him (well, maybe a bit, but not much). He had a firm sense of right and wrong and, even though he was incredibly stubborn with it, his moral compass pointed unfailingly in the correct direction. He took a job he'd never asked for and wasn't very good at, and did it anyway because someone had to, and if that someone was him, he could do it without falling victim to corruption. He did his honest best not to make mistakes, and though he often did, at least he accepted his punishments. In the face of murmurs of popular opposition, his own discouragement, and the threat of shame and scandal this man stood against it and was too bull-headed to let it get him down.
Besides, confronted like this, Ivan was meek and vulnerable, unsure and exposed, and the most frightening thing about him was how badly Eduard wanted him.

"I think," he began, stepping forward, "I think you fascinate me. I've never met anybody like you. I'm attracted to you, yes, but that's ultimately peripheral. I think you're kind, and extremely compassionate. I don't understand how someone like you can rule an Empire like this the way you do, I simply don't know how you do it. It's a mystery - you're a mystery. And..."

Another cautious step closer had put him in Ivan's personal space. Eduard forced himself to keep eye contact and, with some residual difficulty - but far less than he had once had because if Ivan could be brave then so could he - said, "And I shouldn't want that you treat me like a human being, because I shouldn't want to be one, but now I do, and that you treat me like that, it - it makes me feel real, somehow. You make me feel free."

"Even though you're not?" Ivan whispered. He raised an unstable hand to Eduard's face, and when he couldn't commit to the last little distance, Eduard moved until he felt Ivan's cool palm on his cheek.

"Let me show you what I mean," Eduard asked. "Let me show you how I feel about you. Please."

He leaned in more, closer, until he could feel the puffs of breath from Ivan's mouth on his lips, and for once Ivan didn't back away. Slowly, so slowly, it was difficult, but he couldn't afford scaring Ivan off. Once close enough, it was second nature, a well-rehearsed sketch: Eduard shut his eyes and ghosted his lips over Ivan's and ghosted his lips over Ivan's, pliant and parted.

Years of training had his brow furrowed as though this act hurt him (and yet, he belatedly realised, it almost did). He let his body melt against Ivan's, wrapped one arm around the small of his back, and the other about his shoulders. Ivan followed suit and for a moment, they stood like that, in the middle of the room, at the foot of the bed, interwoven and liplocked. Nice. But not enough. Greedily, Eduard touched the flat of his tongue against Ivan's closed mouth.

Ivan gasped and jerked in alarm, and while caught off-guard Eduard snuck himself closer and slid his tongue inside. Now, it was a hot and wet kiss - the kind he had been fantasising about, oh, for weeks - and bit by bit Ivan thawed, taking initiative by tilting his head to better fit their mouths together around their noses, holding Eduard impossibly close, crushing him breathless against his broad chest. There was a shy, curious hesitance in his actions.

The shivers ran through Eduard's body like an electric current, an ice-water shock down his spine that he wanted to blame for his clinging stubbornly to Ivan. There came a warmth suffusing through his body, spreading to his fingertips, then to his toes in his boots, and his groin. Eduard held back a groan. He'd never felt so warm and yet so cold. Everywhere they were in contact with each other, it tingled, and his heart raced -

What nonsense! Eduard regained hold of his senses. This was dumb. He was a goddamn bondsman. He had kissed people before. He'd had erections before! This was nothing new.

He extricated himself gently from the kiss, and then the embrace. "What?" Ivan asked, puzzled and perturbed. "Did I do something wrong?"

"Not at all," Eduard replied. He took a seat on the bed and reached out to the belt loops on Ivan's pants to draw him closer until Ivan was left with no choice to follow him.
"Ah... This, now?" Ivan asked. "We don't have to, right now..."

"I'm taking advantage of your current open-minded disposition," he stated. Another tug forward and Ivan was on his hands and knees on top of him, his lips spit-shined red. Eduard untucked Ivan's shirt from the pants and slipped his hands up. (It felt so good to touch him like this, Ivan's warm, soft, bare-naked skin - he trembled. Had dry spells always hit him so hard?) "If we did it later, you might have spoken to your monk friend and maybe he'd tell you things for you to second guess yourself and reject me."

"I wouldn't," Ivan swore.

Eduard pulled him down for another feverish kiss.

Gradually, Ivan became more confident. With little prompting he became enthusiastic in making out and readily followed Eduard's lead. He grew bolder, placed a hand on Eduard's arm, and splayed his fingers to map out as much as possible through Eduard's shirt, then slid it down to his waist. All the same, Ivan was completely taken aback and gave an alarmed, muffled cry when Eduard lifted his leg to rub between both of Ivan's. Once he was assured Ivan had gotten used to the feeling, Eduard moved lower to his chin and jaw, mouthing a line traced to behind his ear.

For all of the differences in biologies, Vitim skin tasted and smelt no different than a human's - a bit like salt and faintly masculine. What a good thing he was already horizontal, he felt weak-kneed and hot, tonguing the side of Ivan's neck. He found Ivan was particularly sensitive on his neck where it met his shoulder, and in no time at all Ivan was panting heavily and shifting against Eduard's thigh in an absent-minded, distracted way, like he had no idea he was even doing it. That Eduard had this effect on him... the knowledge made Eduard's blood rush to his erection, which he pushed up into Ivan's hip.

Ivan thrust down, pressing him into the mattress with his weight by frotting against him, writhing and panting.

(Ordinarily, as a bondsman, Eduard would remove his own clothing in anticipation of sex, unless his master preferred to do that task. Then his master would either prepare him or have him prepare himself - as pertaining to his master's wishes - and his options would be face-to-face or back-to-back - again, to his master's wishes.

But Ivan was so different, he was a master who didn't want to be one, who thought it was wrong, who considered his own libido his mortal enemy. Surely penetrative sex would be too taxing. They'd have to pause, Eduard would have to find some sort of lubricant - he didn't keep it around his waist anymore - that was a lot of time in which Ivan might wholly reconsider being here and lying with him.

Eduard wouldn't have that.

Besides, Eduard probably wouldn't last that long anyway.

It was equally as tempting to hold his legs together tightly and have Ivan fuck his thighs. The
thought of Ivan behind him, delivering hard, nearly punitive thrusts and pinning him to the headboard with his arms excited him more than a little, and Eduard felt like he deserved it for helping Toris and Kilnus.

But wouldn't it be more fitting that they continue the way they were, at least for the first time?

He could be the equal Ivan thought he was.)

Eduard reached down and tugged Ivan's hand off his hip to bring it up between them. He placed it on the first button near his throat and instructed, "Undress me," as he undulated against Ivan's hip and drove his thigh up between Ivan's legs (where Ivan was warm and firm and hard and oh his mouth watered for this).

"Like you're some sort of gift to be unwrapped?" Ivan scoffed, though Eduard heard the whine in his voice and felt the twitch of his fingers on his clothed body. Protest he might, Ivan wanted to.

"Lovers do this kind of thing for each other too," Eduard reminded him breathlessly.

"Is that what we are?" Ivan whispered.

"Not yet," he replied. He reached up to undo the buttons on Ivan's shirt. When he peeled the garment off, one arm at a time, he could see the lines of scars along Ivan's forearms where he must have cut himself to ward off the Time, but Ivan's chest was still mostly soft and smooth, and sensitive enough that merely brushing a light touch over his nipples made Ivan startle. In return, Ivan inexpertly unfastened the buttons on his garments, one by torturous one, taking his time. When he'd gotten them all undone, he opened the garment to expose Eduard's chest and slid his hand over it. It was both maddening and calming; it soothed an itch and made Eduard want more. He shifted underneath Ivan and pushed his torso up; Ivan didn't quite get the message but he did wrap an arm under the small of Eduard's back, rocked his hips forward, and kissed him soundly.

He unfastened Ivan's pants - trickier; they were tight - and wormed his hand inside, past Ivan's underwear. Then he timed it so that he rubbed his knee between Ivan's legs at the same time that he grabbed Ivan's erection.

Ivan outright moaned - there was no other word for the beautifully begging sound of it. He crashed their lips together again, sloppily but enthusiastically. This time, Ivan was the one to open his mouth first, to tilt his head to the side to better fit them together, and to slide his tongue in against Eduard's. And to be perfectly truthful, his responsiveness drove Eduard a little bit mad. He rewarded Ivan with a surer grip and moved his own hips upward to rub himself desperately on any part of Ivan he could physically reach. He was so hard, he thought he'd never wanted anything quite like this.

When Ivan pulled away for air, he panted, "These trousers are far too tight."

"Then you don't need them!" Eduard insisted, feeling exasperated and frustrated. "Take them off."

Ivan looked to the side furtively. But there was nobody here and it was silly to be worried of nobody's reaction. "It's alright," Eduard added, trying for encouraging, "it's only me."

It got him a mostly disbelieving half-grin in return, but Ivan backed up off the bed and, after a few false starts, shimmied out of the pants. It looked difficult to work them over his hips, they were so tight they dragged his underwear along. Bashfully, Ivan stepped out of the clothes, completely
nude, holding his hands in front of his groin in an attempt to cover himself up. "I told you," he said, his face redder than Arisha's beet soup, "I've probably gained weight."

If he had gained anything, it was muscle - his thighs were thicker, his pectorals were slightly better defined (although Eduard might have been imagining things; it wasn't as though he was paying particular attention to detail in the dungeon and his memory of it was hazy). The distribution in fat had changed and his waist was a little rounder. But Eduard suspected telling Ivan any of this would not put him at ease, even though he'd follow it up with the heartbreaking truth, that he'd never seen anybody so beautiful, that he'd never wanted anybody so badly just at the sight of them. Uncertain what else to tell him, Eduard decided to say nothing about it at all.

"This is one-sided, a bit," suggested Ivan. True enough - from his vantage point, Ivan must have seen Eduard laid out in front of him with his shirt open and only his chest bare, while Ivan stood completely naked. So Eduard shrugged out of the shirt and threw it to the side hastily, then unzipped his trousers and lifted his hips up to push everything down his legs and off his body.

None of this was intended to be done in a particularly seductive manner, so the hungry way Ivan looked at him was unexpected. "Come here," Eduard beckoned. He moved farther up on the bed and leaned back on the headboard.

Ivan settled between his legs, looming over him like he wasn't sure what to do. Actually, Eduard considered, that might be the case exactly. He reached around to Ivan's back to ease him down gently until their groins met and their erections were pressed flush together. Ivan lowered his head to Eduard's neck where he exhaled shakily, one hand behind him on the bed for support, and the other carefully stroking Eduard's arm, his chest - wherever was easy to touch.

For a moment, they just lay there, like that, breathing and touching each other. It was far more intimate than anything Eduard had ever done. Never with Francis. Not even with Matthieu, who had been one of his oldest, dearest friends. Pleasurable, yes - how could Ivan's warm skin around him, Ivan's fingers softly touching his waist, Ivan's hips between Eduard's legs, the thick, heavy and hard cock against his own be anything else? - but mildly terrifying. Uncomfortable, he shifted against Ivan, who either interpreted the action the wrong way or reacted the way his body wanted him to. "Ah," Ivan sighed into his neck, and he rocked against Eduard in return, shoving their groins together.

"Oh fuck," he exclaimed, wholly astounded by how sensitive he had become.

"Yes," Ivan whined, "God, yes," and all at once he bucked his hips more firmly, cupped Eduard's cheek, and kissed him sweetly.

Too much, he thought in a panic, as he groaned into Ivan's mouth, this was too much, too close, too profound. He couldn't do this. He was floundering, he couldn't breathe right - it was as he imagined drowning might be. Red-faced from embarrassment, exertion and intense arousal, he pushed himself out of the kiss with a shocked gasp and buried his face in the crook of Ivan's neck. Panting and terrified, he held Ivan tightly like a life-preserver. In a last-ditch attempt to return them to familiar waters, he managed to remove one of his hands from Ivan's bicep where it clutched at him for dear life and wormed it between their legs to hold them both. There, he thought, now it was nothing to be afraid about, now it was just a really cozy handjob!

Only it wasn't, because Ivan fucked his hand with a lazy, sensual detachment and mimicked the gentle motions with his hands, softly stroking up Eduard's arm, on his shoulder, trailing cool little pads of fingertips wherever he liked. He caressed Eduard's neck on one side and planted kisses on
It's obvious he loves you, Eduard thought to himself, because nobody would treat anybody else like this otherwise.

And analysing the situation didn't even help anymore! Ivan still sent shivers through him that he couldn't control, his pulse hammering against his skin everywhere there were pulse points. His head spun, he wanted to faint!

Ivan murmured something in Zvanie he couldn't make out (maybe he should do what the Gospozha's bondsgirl did and give in and learn the damn language already), except for snippets he recognised, like "dusha moya" and "Eduard" - and that shouldn't be so sexy, it was just a stupid name Francis gave him, it meant nothing, this meant nothing! - but said in Ivan's accent, it only served to unravel Eduard further. He arched helplessly, spread his legs wider and canted his hips up into his own grip, shoving his erection against Ivan's - all without actually thinking about it, because it was easier not to think about what stupid handsome Vanya managed to do to him.

When Ivan brought his hand down to link with Eduard's around them, it stole a loud, astonished moan from him. "Wonderful," Ivan told him, "oh, you're so perfect -" and then kissed him again, so deeply that Eduard didn't have a chance to protest it.

He held on as long as he could, thrusting into their joined hands, until it became impossible. He screwed his eyes shut and tried to break the kiss again, but Ivan wouldn't allow him to pull away and held him tighter, making him moan against his lips instead, and there wasn't enough air and his chest felt like it was constricted and he'd explode - it wasn't just Ivan's weight pressing on top of him, Ivan wasn't quite that heavy.

Eduard gave in and embraced Ivan fully as he came, threading his fingers of his free hand through Ivan's soft hair. He gave up pushing Ivan away entirely, gave up keeping himself at bay, gave up the foolish notion that he wasn't in over his head, because it was undeniably clear even to someone like him, someone who found it so much easier to be aloof and analyse and engineer instead of deal with irrational and impractical things like emotions.

And then it really did feel like drowning.

(Orgasm, he found, had completely changed in the way it used to feel. He blamed Ivan for that too, though it was mostly the fault of the hormones in the tonic.)

Ivan tore away from the kiss seconds before he climaxed and pressed his hot cheek against Eduard's neck. He coax ed Ivan through it, his fingers rubbing Ivan's scalp comfortably, while Ivan thrust into their slicker grip. It took a moment of Ivan gasping and shaking in his arms, his cock pulsating but dry in his hands, before Eduard remembered what he'd studied about the Vitim. Then he recalled the night in the dungeon and, comparing the two, felt slightly proud.

At last, Ivan stilled, ejaculated, and slumped forward on Eduard's body. Whatever he muttered in Zvanie, Eduard didn't understand - it seemed Ivan used his first language mostly to hide things that one part of him wanted to say and another part felt he shouldn't - but the meaning was fairly simple to deduce from his tone of voice and the slow happy kisses with which Ivan marked his neck and cheek. The contour of Ivan's lips every time they pressed against his skin was unmistakable.

Eduard wished he could smile back, but instead he dreaded the next few days that much more.

He gave himself a few minutes, and then with difficulty and reluctance, pried Ivan off him. "What? Where are you going?" Ivan asked.
"Just to the washroom," he replied, as he moved off the bed, his limbs still feeling like jelly. "We should clean up. Stay here, I'll bring you a cloth."

Besides, he needed to think.

Before, when he'd listened to what Zielska was planning on his wind-up Eavesdropper, Eduard wasn't sure what to do. Zielska was up to no good from the Empire's vantage point, that was certain. However, Eduard didn't care about the Empire (parts of which he agreed were no good) - he cared about Ivan, and he cared about Toris, Raivis and Feliks. (And yet, he hesitated to dismiss it completely - what would Kilnus replace it with? Could he rest easily knowing how slim the chances were that the new regime would be any better? There was something to be said for the devil you knew.)

Toris must have told her earlier that Eduard knew about the Zapreschniy state file and had been working on it. If Eduard had only known how Toris saw Zielska - as a mentor, a mother figure - he wouldn't have asked Toris so much about Darinys. It must have tipped Toris off: Eduard having been permitted access to that file meant it had been returned to Ivan and was out of the Gospozha Yekaterina's possession, and she evidently no longer had first control of the region.

Toris probably didn't realise it - because Toris didn't yet know about Ivan's Time - but a great many more regions would be gradually returned to a now relatively sound-minded Ivan, who would reprise administrative control over them during the next few years. This would lighten the Gospozha's load and prepare Ivan for empororship. (And what a terrifying prospect that must be, he considered, washing the mess off his hands under running water. No pressure or anything!)

On the wind-up Eavesdropper, Toris told Zielska of Raivis' reports. One, Bragina's desks and offices were locked in triplicate with heavy, military-grade technology. Two, the Gospozha employed safes and locked boxes, rooms full of them. Zielska suggested using a blowtorch, or even blowing them up, but Toris advised against it, saying that Raivis didn't think it was the kind of metal that would be easily blown up without harming the contents inside. Meanwhile, Toris argued, Ivan put locks on his doors alone, which were necessary to hold him inside on more difficult nights with the Time. Any files of importance might be locked in a desk whose locks could be picked with a nail file and a hairpin.

So it was the contents of the Zapreschniy file that they required, easily accessed in Ivan's quarters. But for what?

It would be a magnificent strategic advantage, Zielska had said, if Kilnus could retake Zapreschniy. Geologically-blessed land, inhabited by people angry at the Empire Union? That meant war resources and manpower. The intelligence the Empire Union had accumulated on the region - located in Ivan's files - would be incredibly helpful to this end, as well as building a criminal case against Bragina.

And that, Toris said, was where they stood presently, because all three Bragins would be leaving for Hallar in a few short days for the Decennial Auction. Hallar was far enough away from Olyokin that it didn't matter what side of the sun it was on - it would be a long trip there and back. Five days at least where the Duma was free, relying only on the Gospozha's paranoid security schemes used in her absence.

And these, Toris said, Raivis had helpfully pilfered from her chambers.
"And you're sure you can trust what he says?" the commander asked. "You're sure he's going to be too ill to rule?"

"I'm positive," Toris had confirmed. "Why, do you have reason to doubt it?"

The commander had been silent a moment and then said cryptically, "I don't trust the bondsman. But it's fine, I have a plan for the worst-case scenario. So, the Duma?"

Toris outlined his plan to penetrate the Duma while all three Bragins (and, he presumed, Eduard) were away: blow Ivan's door off, pick any locks inside, retrieve what intelligence could be used for Kilnus, and expose the Bragins.

Eduard wasn't sure if he could let that happen. Toris had said Bragins instead of Bragina, which would have identified the eldest sister alone, and that worried Eduard. If the Gospozha had made mistakes and poor decisions during her administration, it was her life. But as much as Toris was his friend, if he let Zielska or Kilnus do anything to Ivan ... well ... he wasn't sure how to complete that sentence but it wasn't with anything good. (Then again, what the hell could a bondsman do?)

On the other hand, Eduard had already thrown a massive wrench into Toris' plans by fucking Ivan three weeks ago. Did he need to throw another one? Toris had had such a shit life - then again, the choices he made were his own. He couldn't just be given carte blanche to take anybody else down in his grief.

It wouldn't hurt to have Ivan stay at home. He wouldn't like the auction anyway. In fact, he was only going to convince the Gospozha that the Devushka Natasha didn't need to get a bondsperson if she didn't want one. If he stayed home, Ivan and Toris could duke it out and they could leave Eduard out of it.

Which still didn't strike him as a fantastic plan. What to do?

He returned to Ivan, who had helped himself to the safe concealment of thick bedcovers, and wordlessly handed him a warm, damp washcloth.

Ivan accepted it with a worried expression. "Is ... are you -"

"Hm?" he asked. "What?"

"Never mind," Ivan muttered, looking away and wiping off his hand and belly. "Obviously this has changed everything."

Oh. "It isn't that," Eduard clarified hastily, and, ducking under the covers himself, leaned against Ivan's side. As terrified as he was of the next few days - or perhaps because of them - he wouldn't deny himself the simple comfort of nothing more than the touch of Ivan's skin on his. "If you're asking whether I regret that, I don't."

"Hmm," Ivan replied, which wasn't really an answer. He toyed with the washcloth in silence, and waited a moment. At last he said quietly, "I told you, you mustn't lie to me."
It was either tell him now or never tell him. Never tell him, and possibly lose him forever. He pictured Ivan, strung up with his sister in a court tribunal, sentenced to death for war crimes, crimes he might not even have committed, crimes he was tried for anyway because Kilnus had more intelligence on what had happened and the Empire hadn't had a chance to retaliate and accumulate their own side of the story because doubtless Kilnus wasn't innocent in these matters either and they'd given as good as they'd gotten but it'd be the perfect chance to dismantle the current reign - it'd be a giant smear campaign and if Ivan were lucky they'd only imprison him, but if he were unlucky and Kilnus managed to spin something truly incriminating -!

He couldn't let that happen to Ivan.

It became clear to him what he had to do.

Eduard lay back on the bed, on his side and waited for Ivan to follow suit. Then he inched forward slowly until nearly the entire length of their bodies from chest to knee was in warm contact and burrowed his face in Ivan's shoulder. When Ivan, his head propped up on his hand, slyly wrapped an arm around his waist, Eduard steeled himself and mumbled, "You shouldn't go to Hallar."

"Pardon?"

"I said," he repeated, feeling miserable, "you shouldn't go to Hallar. Don't go."

More silence again. "I see," Ivan said, brushing his fingers softly back and forth over Eduard's lower back. "And would this have anything to do with that Raivis fellow you spoke with in the halls?"

He froze and felt the contents of his stomach practically turn to lead.

"There is not a single person hired here named Raivis. Our last hires included someone by that same description named Anistas Kudrins. Hmm. I wonder why he would have to use a fake name!"

Ivan's tone of voice was light, almost mocking. He already knew. He already knew everything.

Eduard took a deep breath.

"Your monk friend intends to infiltrate the Duma while everyone's away in order to retrieve information that will help Kilnus prosecute your sister and you as war criminals," he hissed. "I can tell you exactly how they plan to do this. And I have tangible proof. In exchange for it," and he knew above him, though he wasn't looking, Ivan was probably enraged - how dare Eduard attempt to leverage now, after all his double-crossing! But Eduard had to try - "I need you to guarantee the safety of three people. Deport them, banish them, whatever. But you can't execute them."

"I see," Ivan said again. Perhaps that was Ivan for I don't like this one bit but I'm not sure what to say. "And this was your plan all along? Or did you only recently realise what they planned after some time assisting them in their efforts?"

"I see," Ivan said again. Perhaps that was Ivan for I don't like this one bit but I'm not sure what to say. "And this was your plan all along? Or did you only recently realise what they planned after some time assisting them in their efforts?"

"I didn't -" oh why bother. "Alright. I did. I won't lie to you. My reasons -" in retrospect weren't even very good. But however he had begun his strange activities in the Kilnus base, he didn't regret them as much as he should. "I didn't understand this place. I still don't. I can't trust what I don't understand."

Ivan glared at him. "So you, too, think my Empire is corrupt and needs to be taken down?"
"I think the only thing I like about this Empire is you!" he retorted. "But they're my friends. I can't let you hurt them."

"And me?" inquired Ivan.

He sighed. "I can't let them hurt you, either," Eduard muttered dangerously. "I won't let them."

Ivan was silent a moment, running his fingers over the small of Eduard's back. He shifted, lowered his head to Eduard's and murmured through his hair, "Tomorrow I will give you your bondspapers. And you will leave this planet."

"What?!" After all that, after all of tonight, Ivan would still kick him out? He'd admit, it wasn't like he didn't deserve it but - he'd thought - maybe - what Ivan had said, how he'd said it - didn't that count for anything?!

"You have left me no choice," Ivan said, and held him tighter. "Katya will not like it much but there isn't any other option. And to be truthful I don't like it either but better I be a complete hypocrite than -"

"You'll, you'll just force me out, like that? After tonight?" After all that, after the way Ivan had held him, didn't he love him after all?

"Eduard," Ivan interrupted, quietly but flatly. He pulled back enough to cup Eduard's cheek in his hand, running a thumb over the skin lightly, watching his eyes very carefully.

Then, he asked, "Do you know what they do to traitors of the state?"

Eduard felt like he'd had the wind knocked out of him.

"Do you know what Katya will do to you? What I must do to you?"

When he'd first set foot upon Olyokin - not as a freeman, in those days he'd never considered being one (and now he really never would) - he was reminded of what he'd been taught in Francis' training: bondspersons bore compatible citizenships with their owners. They had to, it wouldn't make much sense otherwise. And that had made him Eduard of Olyokin, as he had begun introducing himself, citizen of the Empire Union of Free Vityaz States under the rule of House of Bragin and therefore he had not only betrayed his lover but also...

It would be execution by firing squad.

Ivan would have to be present in the room.

Ivan would have to give the signal to fire.

"Bad enough I've been so hypocritical to sleep with a bondsman - my bondsman - after all my talk of immorality," Ivan continued darkly, and hearing Ivan call him his barely penetrated the thick haze of panic around his head. "Bad enough I have traitors tried and executed on a yearly basis for feeble crimes than the one you've committed! But to take you from me forever, like that - ah, you must forgive me my hypocrisy for it appears it is related to my self-preservation."

He understood, then, what it was Ivan attempted to do. If they killed you, they would kill off a part
of myself, he was saying. That's why Eduard needed to leave. Eduard of Olyokin couldn't be tried for crimes if he was mysteriously missing. Especially not if he had escaped to a planet having no extradition treaty with Olyokin. Bast would do nicely.

In shock, he replied, "I understand."

"I can do what you've asked. I'll tell Katya I'm staying home - I suppose your friends will suspect it's because I'm ill. I don't know why you didn't tell them about ... about the night in the dungeon but I'm glad you didn't. Even so... letting those people stay alive may mean you can never return here, because if my suspicions are correct, they know what you've done."

He nodded, feeling numb, his cheek still encased in Ivan's warm hand.

Ivan kissed him lightly on the forehead, then on the nose, and then once, softly, on the lips. "So. Tomorrow you are free. And I will arrange for safe passage for you and immigration to wherever you'd like that Kilnus cannot touch." He kissed him again and then said, his mouth still near enough that Eduard could feel the movements of Ivan's lips on his own, "But, ah, for now, for tonight - I hope you will not mind ... indulging me in my silly fantasy that just this once, everything will be perfectly fine."

"Keep me as long as you can," he implored.

Chapter End Notes

My favourite chapter for obvious reasons. ‘:') Welp! That's it for a few days. I plan for this all to be finished before Valentine's Day. Wish me luck! : D Thank you all for kudoses, comments, reading, everything!!!!
China

Chapter Notes

It's been. SO LONG. And I am so profoundly sorry ;n; please forgive me. It has been a rotten year but prepare yourselves for updates every 2-3 days because I just want to finish this and get it off my plate at last. I spend too long agonising over things like these.

TO CATCH UP: Antonio is held up with Councillor Héderváry, who is still suspicious about Francis and funny business. Héderváry, meanwhile, managed to convince her husband to be the auctioneer at the Decennial. Both Hassan (Egypt) and Vel (Seychelles) are hanging around Hallar for the auction for reasons we don't yet know. Even though Alfred's training is complete, Ludwig slept with Alfred again anyway, because Alfred likes making Bad Decisions and Lutz is drugged up and brainwashed. Alfred has just about forgotten every good piece of advice Unsinkable gave him. Eduard's undetectable Eavesdropper recorded all of the Commander Zielska's Sinister Plans for Eduard to listen to, so now he's in on just about everything, minus a few missing pieces. Adnan is stationed on/around Hallar, and Karpusi is stationed on/around Olyokin - they are still separated but will reunite for auction hijinks since Karpusi is tailing the Nordics, who are en route to Hallar for auction hijinks. They're going to purchase Margot for 'Tim', though they have no information on her - not a recent picture, not her order in the auction - only that she will appear in Francis' set. Unsinkable - now Gilbert - managed to convince Captain Kirkland to return to the surface of Hallar as the auction ends to pick up Alfred immediately instead of having him crash at Francis'. Francis agreed to purchase Alfred for Kirkland, and Antonio agreed to purchase Matthieu for Francis. But Lovino also agreed to purchase Alfred for Feliciano. Natalya, Katya, and Katya's bondsmaiden leave for Hallar to participate in auction hijinks; Ivan and Eduard don't. And last but not least, during the afterglow of finally sleeping with Ivan (consensually this time), Eduard shows us how phenomenally bad he is at pillow talk by betraying his only friends outside the Duma and getting himself a one way ticket to exile from the planet he's come to love, to say nothing of how he feels about Ivan. Slow clap it out, guys.

(china)

Of all his bondservants, Yao thought, he liked her the best. Calm-and-Elegant had long hair tied back - he liked long hair on women, though he really wasn't all that choosy about it - and she had small breasts, adorable and perky; plus, smaller breasts tended to be more sensitive. She reacted so beautifully to the stimulation, much more than Flower-in-Hair.

...then again, he reconsidered, he usually thought that kind of thing in the thick of it, no matter who he'd taken to his quarters, and just swapped out the names as convenience dictated. (Well. Descriptions, really, bondservants didn't quite have names.) And now, he was reclined on the bed, his shirt still on, and she was above him, bouncing up and down on his cock, naked from the waist down. She had kept her shirt and vest, but they were both open down the front and framed her slender torso splendidly.
So of course he thought Calm-and-Elegant was his favourite when it was her long legs clenched around his waist, her back arching gracefully with each shift of her slim hips as she rose and fell, her flawless tan skin gleaming pearlescent in the moonlight of Luna Halleri, streaming through the window of his hotel room. (And ah! what that did for her, she was visual unmarred perfection - say what one would about Flower-in-Hair's more overt, feminine beauty, it was this sort of rarity that Yao treasured.) Absolutely, his favourite! How could anybody think otherwise?

Calm-and-Elegant - he hadn't had her long enough to think up anything better, but this would probably stick - wasn't used to him yet, and must have found it easier to handle herself instead of relying on the deep structure implanted inside every Veshnan bondservant who didn't naturally respond enough to stimulation. Therefore he laid back and relaxed on the bed while she moved, her hand between her legs, rubbing herself with her fingers almost furiously. Her cheeks were stained with what must be a bright red blush, but in the feeble light of the moon looked only like a faint dark shadow. She was beautiful by day, but radiant and glistening by moonlight like some ethereal opal. What a shame Veshna had no satellites.

He was instantly reminded why he'd coveted her so greatly in the first place, when he already had four bondservants. He wasn't so virile that he

He wanted her; he always got what he wanted.

Yao climaxed sooner than he would have liked, laying back and letting someone else do all the work. Well, there was always time to demand a round two.

Once she had cleaned herself up in his personal washroom, she snuggled up beside him in the bed and asked, running her fingers over the smooth, flat planes of his chest, "Tell me a story, your Lordship?"

He grinned. "I can do that.

--

Excitable - this is what I call him when I'm feeling generous; when I'm not and he's being annoying, I call him Attention Whore. Anyway, Excitable is only ever calm in the morning. You'd never know this, because you never see me with him when he's not hyperactive and all over the place. But hardly anybody's ever awake when he's calm except me. After 5 AM sun-greetings, I often request that he comes to my bed.

Despite how attached he is to me, nothing of note happens between us at this time. He crawls into my embrace and I hold him close and we feel each other breathe for about a half hour while slowly drifting back to sleep.

"So then, he's like a giant teddy bear."

It's true! I did this the morning we left, yesterday. It's a shame you don't greet the sun with me. I know you normally can't stand him.

"It surprises me that he can be anything other than what he usually is. Naturally, he's always polite, but he's ... I find him a little overbearing. Just my personal tastes! I would never intend to speak ill of the others -"
Oh no. Never worry about that. We have no constraints here, no fear to talk, no censorship of any sort. Don't ever be afraid to gossip. It makes things more fun!

"Well ... in that case... I will admit I have the least patience for him. He has none for anything else! To him, it's like the world exists as a giant game for him to play. If he isn't being perpetually entertained, he isn't interested and won't sit for it. He's immature."

I won't tell him you said so. I find him similarly overbearing at other times of the day. Granted, it's difficult to tolerate someone long when they're clutching at your chest. But now I'm rambling...

So, this is my morning ritual on the mornings that I like to be slightly spoiled. My little Excitable is my treat to myself.

Anyway, the trip over is always much lovelier than the trip home, you will find. Especially since you've never been off-planet before - I expect all of this is thrillingly new to you.

"Not the ship, though."

There's not much to see on the ship. It's bigger than most cruiser classes - more than one room, and we have staff aboard. Flower-in-Hair and Dark-Eyed share a room, there is someone with me always; therefore, this leaves three sleeping rooms, along with the sitting area and the dining quarters. About the size of a house. Not my house! But we must think of the physics behind it all. An airship as large as my castle would be impractical and very slow.

That first night I took Tall-with-Glasses - I like him - and the morning after, Excitable joined us until ten. We spent the morning in bed - mid-morning, I had Tall-with-Glasses take Excitable; I enjoy watching Excitable being taken, it reminds him of his place, that he's a bondsman - and some time after breakfast but before noon, we landed on Hallar. Having gotten through Border Control we found ourselves with an empty day until our dinner engagement. I noticed you, Flower-in-Hair and Dark-Eyed left to the museums - how were they?

"Passable. Beautiful but nothing like the art on Veshna. ...Just my personal tastes."

What a shame it wasn't up to par with expectations. I admit that comes to me as a something of a surprise.

"It wouldn't have been so terrible if I didn't feel like I was constantly intruding! ...I'm sorry, I don't intend - I like them individually. I dislike them together. Must they be so ...

The way they carry on. As though they're lovers between themselves. Yes, I know. They probably are.

"But why would your Lordship allow that?"

Ah! there are advantages to taking them together. You must try it sometime. Now, it is true that I let Flower-in-Hair get away with more than she should. Dark-Eyed helps to fix problems between us.

As for Excitable, Tall-with-Glasses and I, we did a fair bit more than I had expected, which was less than I had hoped. I blame Excitable. We toured a small vineyard in-town; much of what is grown locally in Caput Halleri and its surrounding villas cannot be grown anywhere else. It's the
climate of Caput Halleri which varies so widely in its heat from arid to humid. Nothing can be transplanted. And most plants from outside don’t survive the city. Therefore, they have developed variants on ploughs and employ other tools to make things easier. We simply don't have the like on Veshna, or anywhere else in the system. I find it rather fascinating.

At any rate, the vineyard is set up completely differently than our wineries in addition to using different products and tools. They don’t add any mould, either! Which surprises me, because they have all this wonderful humidity, I should think they could triple their production levels if they did.

Then we saw the aqueducts - these, too, are nothing like ours, the engineering is completely different. But this is as much due to the geniuses behind the differing technologies as it is due to the change in climates, and the varying purpose for which irrigation is necessary; why, there was a fellow about fifty years who ...

Ah. I see I'm losing you. You find my story boring?

"No, no! It's interesting! Really."

It is good that you have no appreciation for these things. It shows that you take them wholly for granted, which means they work so well you have no concept of their working. That makes me happy to hear.

At any rate, I don't have much of a chance to play tourist anymore, since I'm usually so busy, so I take my time in the city. I have seen the marketplace before, so we don't spend much time in it, even if it is the system's oldest operational market. Just enough time to buy Excitable a drink when he whines hard enough for it, and Tall-with-Glasses a drink since he whines once Excitable gets one.

"Doesn't his bad behavior reflect poorly? Isn't your Lordship concerned?"

It's true that every time he acts out someone else is similarly inspired. And I'm sure there are wagging tongues that notice. It's the same with the relationship between Flower-in-Hair and Dark-Eyed. It doesn't matter, I ignore it, until I can't. For me, you are particularly expensive accessories and it's the price that matters. It's not for others to judge the extent of maintenance required!

Besides, I like a wake of idle chatter, of chirping little birdies, as I pass. The more you all act out, the more they talk, the more I am noticed. Without wind, waves do not rise. You five are so very useful to me for this.

Anyway. After a brief tour of the Council - I had a meeting with one of the head Councillors - we all met back for the dinner party.

Ah! the dinner party! My every second minute spent in the razor-sharp feeling of excited zeal! But tell me, what did you think of it?

"Um... Well..."

Be honest!

"She was cold and confrontational whenever she spoke, and the way she acts with her bondsgirl is too close. Closer than your Lordship is with any of us. Closer than Flower-in-Hair and Dark-Eyed! It's disturbing. I think she is a pervert. No one should be that close with a bondsperson. And I don't
think the Gospozha Bragina likes your Lordship very much. In fact I'm not entirely certain why
your Lordship likes her, or why your Lordship might wish to marry her."

Hm! These are good questions if you don't understand the politics at play. I don't expect you to be
aware of those.

"There is not even a need to get married. The next ruler is chosen in competition, by the head
priest. So why bother?"

Olyokin is an interesting planet. Most of it's cold - one must expect it so far from the sun - and the
Empire Union is no exception. But that's not what I find interesting. The Empire itself has its own
murky beginnings. This neither intrigues nor displeases me. I'm sure the other superpower on
Olyokin - the Democratic Republic of Kilnus - won't appreciate my intervention in their business.
They make Katya's marriage their business - Veshna's relative equality gives Katya freedom to
continue governing Olyokin, even if she has married and moved off-world. By contrast, if her
brother married an off-worlder, especially a woman, they'd never allow her regency.

Not that Olyokin really relishes any woman's rule! Such a silly planet. It takes a particularly strong
character in order for them to look past the mammaries.

And that - speaking of strong characters - leads me back to Katya, my graceful Amazon, my
perfected marvel of ultimate fluorescence. Katya, who, at the tender age of eleven, was named de
jure ruler and became de facto ruler at fifteen. Fifteen! She stopped needing advisors at fifteen! Do
you know what I was doing at fifteen? I cared about little other than completing my homework on
time so my governesses wouldn't strap me. That, and sex! Why, when I was that age I was ... a lot
like Excitable, honestly. Hm.

"That was only twelve years ago. Your Lordship is not yet thirty."

Which is my point exactly! Yekaterina Bragina is such a formidable, wonderful creature that her
looks - though enchanting! - hardly matter. A woman of that calibre - why, she could have purple
hair and a single eye and she'd be as devastating. I admire her work greatly, although I recognise
that we have vastly differing strategies to governance, mostly stemming from our wildly divergent
ideologies.

Oh, I can't wait to have giant spats over it! I hope they last for days and make everybody extremely
uncomfortable!

I'm digressing again. Katya is actually the icing on the cake. While I couldn't have wished for a
better option, I'd still want to forge an alliance with Olyokin. Veshna's primary contribution to the
system is well-known.

"Bondservant production."

Precisely. Between Veshna - practically a single commercial entity the planet itself, and we may
thank my advisors for their gracious assistance on that - and Schlesen - rapidly going the same
way - this trade is a duopoly. Any competition, we ignore. After all, the most competition that
Veshna must deal with is Schlesen, and we don't make a single decision in regards to prices and
demand without informing them. They are the friendliest of rivals.

But now, the upper echelons of government on New Sainte-Dolitte make contracts with a company
called the Pruem Group, supposedly based out of Trevelacher. Well, I did some research. The
company is actually based off of Fasciemi Anchorage, but you can't have headquarters on an anchorage, so they have a secondary location unknown to shareholders on Hallar. More specifically, in Caput Halleri.

At that point I stopped guessing. They list as CEO someone named Svorli Gavano, but I can find only stitches of him in Hallar's records system. I'm willing to bet that Svorli Gavano doesn't exist.

"I don't see what this has to do with Veshna and Schlessen."

Neither Schlessen nor Veshna are happy about sharing the market, but we tolerate each other. Privately, we have agreed on a minimum price, and we don't go lower than it. That allows us to continue splitting the market so evenly. But now there's a third contender, this Svorli Gavano fellow and his mysterious not-Nova-based 'Pruem Group'.

Oh, let us be frank, shall we, it's obviously Avo Romae! There isn't a thing that happens in Caput Halleri that he doesn't know about. And Romae's prices are lower still! His quality is inferior but if properly trained, it's difficult for the layman to tell our products apart, I shall concede that. Except that mine cost several million and his a hundred thousand at most.

"How can they possibly be so cheap?"

Because he poaches. And then he fences what he's taken without asking, once he's gussied it up. But the material goods are inferior, don't get me wrong - he doesn't spend the money on cosmetic surgery, he doesn't even bother with the cheapest neural implants! Wherever he can cut corners, he does. I imagine he makes about the same amount of profit per sale but a lower price means more sales and more profit in the long run. And that threatens trade on Veshna and Schlessen. Which I don't like.

So, anyway. Back to Katya - with Olyokin on our side, it becomes Schlessen, Veshna and the superpower of the Empire Union united against this force. If we threatened and rallied, together we would be enough to shut his business down - or at least force him to stop the poaching; to quit dealing with privateers and to purchase solely primary graduates. This would make his product cost about the same as ours and he'd have no choice but to raise his prices.

"Hm. I see..."

You don't sound particularly enthused.

"Oh, no, your Lordship! I didn't mean... this is all very interesting, but when I asked your Lordship to tell me a story, I was secretly hoping it would be an actual story, and not a play-by-play of what happened earlier today, nor a short discourse on economic theory - I'm not as educated as your Lordship in those matters."

Not everybody saw what happened today through your eyes! We have to account for those people. But, you have a point. I could make this a little more interesting, if you'll allow me to talk about one of my favourite topics...

Once upon a time there was a young girl - perhaps as young as ten, perhaps as old as eleven. Young enough to beg for sweets off the servants, old enough to know better, but not old enough to understand the world. She lived in a fortress of a castle with her family.

Her mother was a beautiful woman of grace and poise, but strict, demanding conformity to rules
and regulations. Authoritarian, strident, confident - a woman after my own heart! Her father was less the disciplinarian, but a handsome man, the figurehead of an Empire, an upstanding individual with a good head upon his shoulders. Honourable. Upper class, but still fought in the rebellion that won them the kingdom; indeed, he was a heavily scarred man and had lost a leg. Lastly there was her father's sister - happier than either, and often more carefree although occasionally less responsible.

This princess - for any young girl living in a castle about whom they tell bedtime stories is usually a princess - had a younger brother, the young prince, and a baby sister just newborn. Her little brother idolised his sister, and although our princess didn't always appreciate a faithful follower, her little brother played tea party just fine if it meant hanging around with big sister. As for the baby, our princess wasn't at the age to understand babies, but she enjoyed playing dressup and playing pretend. She took her baby sister everywhere, dolled up in fine laces and silks, and coddled her as though she were her own child.

A real doll, of her very own!

For a time, they lived in blissful peace. Their mother and father took care of the problematic issues in their kingdom - and there were plenty - but the princess knew nothing but happiness.

That's often the case with the young, they don't notice these things. Children are blind, they are ignorant - they are innocent.

But there are things you can do to children to change them forever.

One night, the peace was shattered irrevocably. Her parents' kingdom was more fraught with tension than either young princess or prince knew. Perhaps a particularly cold snap in the frozen winter empire had inspired a renewed sense of rebellion. Perhaps the ruling family had recently been more authoritarian than was advisable. Perhaps, and this is an interesting theory, their father had made a misstep, had chosen to trust one he could not.

The exact causes don't matter now.

At midnight there came the sound of a break-in. Loud noises, like a thunderclap, that echoed. That wasn't normal, you don't have thunderstorms in winter, and so our princess slipped into her brother's room in the same wing to wake him. Together they made their way to the nursery to find their baby sister still asleep.

The princess felt they should go find their parents in their main bedroom in the same wing. When they arrived, their parents were not there, and the room was cold - the window wide open. Our princess spotted a rope ladder leading from the window down to the ground, three stories below. Her brother didn't know what it meant, but her father had explained to her the safeguards in place, in the unlikely event the castle was ever broken into. He would slip out covertly, pick up forces from a hidden weapons stockpile, and once there wake the remainder of the servants with fireworks. It might also wake the town, but no matter. The townspeople would probably believe it to be late-night hunters in the woods, shooting at moose. Perhaps some hooligan with too much gunpowder and not enough common sense.

In the meantime, her father had explained, her mother would fetch her aunt, and the women would hold the fort with the armaments kept in hidden spaces littered across the castle - a loose floorboard here, an old closet with a false back there, a hidden compartment next to a dumbwaiter that never worked - that kind of thing.
They were paranoid people, our princess' family. I think it may be genetic.

The point is, the second they entered the room, the princess knew immediately that something had gone dreadfully wrong. She knew their mother would be in their aunt's bedroom in the adjoining wing and had just placed her hand on the doorknob when she heard a scream.

Her brother began to whimper, so she gave him the baby to hold onto, to try and maintain his composure. Attracted by the small noise, one of the servants found them, a young man of some twenty years. He told them they needed to be separated, that way they couldn't get all of them.

Who are they, asked the princess, and the servant explained there were people who had entered in the night, dressed in black - he hadn't seen their faces - and all the lights were out.

Surely, the princess argued, you must have seen their faces lit by the fireworks.

The servant appeared puzzled and asked her, what fireworks?

It was then the princess realised. She had not been awoken by her father's raised alarm, nor by a thunderclap. The only thing as loud would have been a pistol, and she concluded that she had been awoken by the sound of the gun that had taken her father's life. At this, she began to cry, and then her brother began to cry, and the baby in her brother's arms finally stirred.

The servant reacted fast and told them to run down the halls to the north wing upper ballroom, where the west balcony doors remained unlocked. They could hide out there; if outside, they would be safe and surely nobody would look for them on the tiny balconies. But they would freeze, the princess pointed out, and the servant bade her angrily not to argue, just to go and be as still and silent as possible.

Despite her age, our princess was no fool, and that didn't make any sense to her. The castle's defences were good and not easily penetrated; they must have had someone working on the inside. How had the servant known that they'd be in their parents' bedroom anyway? Was it an easy way to get rid of pesky children, to make it look like an accident, without having to shoot their tiny faces?

In retrospect, that's not how due process works, but it made sense to her at the time.

And so, with the baby in her brother's arms, our princess kicked the servant in the shins and then in the groin. And then they ran for it.

The three children got to the end of the hall and turned down it just as they heard the door open and the stomping coming after them, thundering behind. They ducked into the first room that opened. Our princess threw her brother into a wardrobe, told him to lock it from the inside and shoved a chair against it. With seconds to spare she crawled underneath one of the chaise longues - the kind that don't have skirts or trains - she could have been spotted at any moment, one had only to look down, and she knew this, but when the doorknob turned, and she'd run out of time, she held her breath and froze -

She was expecting the servant they'd spoken to, but it wasn't he who entered. It was three masked gentlemen, all dressed in black. And her mother, limping and bleeding.

They'd managed to kill the father easily, the aunt less easily - so they gloated loudly - but the mother didn't give up without a fight. They attempted to question and interrogate her; she resisted.
They made her kneel, they demanded information; she was mute. Whatever they wanted from her she wouldn't yield.

...To this day, I simply can't imagine the sang-froid that woman had. She had seen her sister-in-law murdered in cold blood, yes; she was afraid, yes. But she believed as strongly in that empire as any of them, and she was prepared to die for it with as much dignity as she possibly could. One of the men took it too far and though she screamed at the terrible fatal blow, and groaned in pain as she slowly died - humans do that, the Vitim are no different - she didn't tell them a thing.

Let us not forget our princess, hiding in the same room, and watching. Did she see, as her mother fell to the ground? Did her mother's lifeless eyes spot her, hiding beneath the furniture?

Now, our princess - for I'm sure by this time you've pieced it together - has never told me this story in words, but she doesn't have to. She unknowingly broadcasts the message through her body language and that I can read far too easily. I knew something traumatic had happened to Katya the moment I'd met her years ago, but I had to wait for the story, which I bought off one of the old servants in a tavern a few years ago. Indeed, that servant left the Duma not long after this incident, and I can see why she did.

But it makes sense, doesn't it? Who my lovely Katya is, why she's latched on so hard to her bondsgirl - terror would have etched that night into one's brain. Katya shelters and raises the woman that she herself ceased to be when her mother was brutally murdered in front of her eyes. That sort of pain is the stuff of legend and it's forged her character so skillfully - I feel a little bad for admiring such tragedy. And now she has her little doll, and she has her family back, they're all there once again, legends reborn.

Still, it happened so long ago - what's done is done - and it's the very kind of thing one could write novels about! And you know how I feel about a good drama. While living it instead of passively watching will be new to me, I've never been so excited, I'm breathless with anticipation.

Who will I be, in the story, do you think?

Nobody in that family is normal, mind! The brother - soon to be the Emperor of the Union - has the strangest opinions about philosophy and ethics. He's like that silly Bondsperson Edification For Rights, Equality, Emancipation movement from fifty years ago - maybe he read their manifesto and became convinced. I'm not sure. I was hoping to pick his brain about it a lot more earlier.

And then he didn't even come with the family to Hallar! Such a shame. We could have had a proper dinner row.

The youngest sister intrigues me. She was quiet tonight. Too quiet. It seems like she's the least crazy of the bunch - she never knew her parents well enough to miss them - but she was raised by Katya and Ivan. That spells unbalanced. And the aunt gave a good fight.

At any rate, you see how Katya's ideal for yet another reason - her brother so vehemently opposed to the trade entirely, her sister may share some of those opinions! Olyokin being what it is gives Ivan more power and say. On Veshna, one's little brother would hardly make a drop in the pond. That must irk Katya so! Can you imagine the fights we'll have, with Ivan's brother-in-law being the head of the trade on one of the two main planetary corporations for bondservants?

I've gone and timed it perfectly. Katya knows I'm the best suitor she's got - she detests all of her others, but hasn't yet formed a solid opinion of me. So far I think she mildly dislikes me, and I was
rather going for a passionate hatred. There's always the honeymoon for that. Mmmph, I shouldn't get ahead of myself so!

Submitting an offer just at this time, right before she turns thirty - Veshna might not have any rules but Olyokin most certainly does - guarantees her desperation. It'd be stupid not to pick me! Katya is many things - complex, difficult, stubborn, iron-willed - but stupid isn't one of them. I am in luck.

--

The story finished, he looked down at his captive audience, whose eyes were closed and whose chest rose and fell with the regularity of deep sleep.

That's not a bad idea, he thought. He leaned down and brushed a lock of hair almost affectionately from her forehead - things he wouldn't indulge in while she was awake. He did what he liked, but didn't enjoy being misunderstood, and a gesture such as that, people might think he was like Katya and felt something deep for his bondservants!

How silly! Dolls don't think.

(Sometimes Yao felt like one of a very few people in the entire solar system who used bondservants *morally*, the way they were intended to be used. They were possessions and objects, yes, but he respected them and took care of them in a way he wanted everything around him to be beautiful and in excellent condition. And in turn, their happiness and well-being reflected his social status, which was extremely elevated after one bondservant; after having purchased a further four, he was the undisputed top dog. He didn't mistreat them - there was no purpose to that. Nor did he allow them to overstep their bounds beyond reason - they all knew their place.)

Content, Yao rolled over and soon thereafter fell asleep.
Day broke on Olyokin somewhere above their base, mostly unnoticed by the crew inside. There were only a few windows in the high bay, and from both, Feliks was able to deduce that the weather was decent - well-lit and not blizzarding, skies like bluebells. A total lack of pathetic fallacy. It was entirely unlike the feeling he had about today - something murky, something waiting in the wings for them to act so that it could go horribly wrong. He just knew it.

Rather than wake up late, roll out of bed, find something that seemed clean enough to wear and grab a few pieces of bread to stuff in his mouth before beginning work (on the days he wasn't Agnieszka, he relished the freedom to be a slob), Feliks awoke uncharacteristically early without the help of sunlight or an alarm. Instead, he spent over an hour in the washroom feeling sick and sorry for himself before he shakily made his way to the eating area to boil water for weak tea.

He spent the morning in a daze, moving as though he were in a dream. Nobody joined him until quarter to nine, when a scruffy-looking Toris sleepily staggered in to start breakfast and make awkward small talk.

Super weird that it was him this time, Feliks thought, and not Toris. This time it was his worries and apprehension when usually it was the other way around - Toris not being able to rest until three am, waking up with nightmares an hour later and spending the rest of the night in the kitchen puttering, and Feliks sleeping like a baby and shrugging everything off. Maybe he was making up for lost time.

As the rest of the crew joined, lured into the eating area by the scent of the breakfast that turned Feliks' stomach, he steeled himself. Think of something nice, he thought. Think of ponies. Ponies are nice. Think of ponies.

"This operation," Zielska announced, when they had all convened at ten-thirty to recap the day's plans, "begins in two hours. No doubt every Duma employee will take the afternoon off to catch the auction on the radio, or they'll gather around the radios there. This goes for both the business side -" Zielska gave Feliks a pointed look - "and the residential side -" she gestured to Toris. "Most importantly, the three people we do not want in the Duma are now safely away on Hallar, where the mailships take a day to get to, bearing yesterday's news.

"Our goal is to penetrated the residential portion of the Duma at the exact time when the radio signals from Hallar reach Olyokin and captivate everybody's attention. In this effort we're guided by Raivis Galante, alias Anistas Kudrins, stationed as a servant in the residential portion of the Duma. He reports only one means of accessing the residential side when Yekaterina Bragina is away due to her security schemes. Access via the main entrance is monitored by heavy guard. All other outside doors are triple-locked - except the courtyard guard tower doors, which must remain open for the sake of courtyard security. The courtyard is used also by the agents on the business side, regardless of whether the Bragins are at home."

Here, Zielska pointed to the rough map pinned to the board behind her at the head of the table.
"The internal square courtyard separates the east-facing residential portions of the Duma from the west-facing official portions. When Bragina is away, all four defensive walls surrounding the courtyard are heavily patrolled with walking guards along the top path, plus the four guard towers at the corners. The two tenailles on either side of the north and south walls also house guards.

"Even if we had three hundred people and the element of surprise, to charge the Duma would be insane. Luckily we have a convenient route via the business side. Feliks - " here Zielska gestured to Feliks, "alias Agnieszka Janowska, can easily enter the official side for anything, no matter how small and insignificant, such as a visit to a friend."

Feliks knew the rest of the team were looking at him in disbelief. Unlike Toris, who looked dapper in his black wool trousers, braces and a somewhat wrinkled white shirt, Feliks was grubby looking whenever he went around as Feliks. He didn't put much effort into his appearance, and he wore plain clothes without any colour scheme or intelligence in their selection, like he wanted to be overlooked. (He did, but more appropriately, why dress up for tinkering around with oil and grease? Why do one's nails when one worked with one's hands? That made like no sense!)

Becoming Agnieszka would take him the better part of an hour, but he'd show them all how water-tight the legend was and give them something to really look at.

It wouldn't be hard to get them in. Feliks - rather, Agnieszka - had a marvellous ability to make people listen to her. All she had to do was say she wanted to talk to Pavel Rubetski - Olga's elder brother - about Olga's upcoming birthday party in a week. Plausible. It even fit her character. The others with her? Well, you can't plan a totally amazing super fantastic birthday party alone! If they gave her crap she'd whine and demand entrance with a 'do you know who I am' - because they certainly ought to. And Pavel conveniently worked in the same section as the vid-free office occupied by a fool who had entrusted his keys briefly to Raivis and who was attending the auction on Hallar.

For all the times Feliks as Agnieszka had envied the right to be anonymous in a crowd, he had to admit this was convenient, but it would almost certainly mark the last time he could use Agnieszka as a persona. After this, she would have to disappear, and so he had prepared a letter to hand deliver to Pavel to give to his little sister, saying I'm sorry for everything, don't come and find me. If the operation didn't go totally belly-up, and it were never found that Agnieszka and a crew of 'party planners' were poking around where they shouldn't have been, Agnieszka would simply ask for the letter back and sweet darling Pasha would oblige.

He had sent a similar but more detailed letter to the base at Kroksvellir. Just in case.

"From there on in, we can get to where we need with relative ease. Feliks, your team will remain in the business side to scout out Ivan's public office." Yeah, Ivan's public office, which he like never used. He found Zielska's obvious lack of trust in him super insulting. "If you find anything, let us know, remove it, and get out. If you find nothing, let us know, remove yourselves and get out, as quickly and as silently as possible.

"I cannot stress this enough. Do not attempt acts of heroism. Simply get out. If you are captured..."

Feliks looked at Toris for a better explanation when Zielska trailed off, but he merely lowered his eyes in an effort not to meet Feliks'. Toris, he thought angrily, you are so not inspiring a lot of faith over here.

"The rest of us head to the courtyard, where we will meet Raivis near the south-west tower. Any single side of the courtyard takes about two minutes to dash across; keep under the guardrail to
avoid being seen by the tenailles. One can see over the guardrail from the towers, which are typically well-monitored, but Raivis has managed to get rid of some of the guards. The watch sentries on the south side are out sick with food poisoning. With the auction, and Bragina not around to boss people about, the staff are unlikely to bother finding last-minute replacements.

"The patrol along the path at the top of the south wall still continues. Of the four guards that remain on that route, three of them are close friends and coordinate patrols. The loner is therefore easier to pick off first, with the remaining three to be assaulted and eliminated when they reach the tower and we have the advantage of surprise, enclosure, and also number. This leaves the south wall free for our passage as the guards keep to their own walls during shifts. The north wall guards won't leave their post, even if they notice that the south wall is unmanned, which they are unlikely to do unless they examine it. They are unlikely to notice anything, in fact, until the changing of the guard at 3pm.

"Keys for the residential entrance via the guard towers come courtesy of Raivis, who after accompanying us across the wall will then return to his supposed duties. He's already equipped with one of these," Zielska said, holding up one of Eduard's two-way Eavesdroppers.

"Meanwhile, Toris' team and my team infiltrate the Duma residential side - mostly empty aside from servants that we must avoid or risk eliminating - to Bragin's office. We take this path here." Zielska traced her finger on the map. "Bragin is more likely to have used the one in his chambers. He's ill, he wants to stay away from everybody, keep distractions out, and minimise the risk of harm to other people."

"If he snapped and killed someone, it'd be the last straw for the House of Bragin," remarked one of Zielska's agents - one of the group that gave Feliks funny looks anytime Agnieszka was mentioned.

Feliks restrained himself from saying anything. Less chance of Ivan snapping and killing someone? Sequestering himself in his quarters meant he spent all his time with Eduard! And they knew that, the agents had all been told about Eduard's whereabouts! The guy who provided them with the technology they would be using! What, did he not count 'cause he was a bondsman? Maybe Lukas - Eirik - whatever his real name - had a point.

But Eduard was perfectly fine, Raivis had seen him just a few days ago ... still. The sooner they extracted him, the better! Maybe Eduard had considered Toris' offer. Feliks hoped he had.

"Keep in mind," Zielska stressed, "we are here to get only one thing: information. In particular, incriminating information. If you see something expensive and priceless - no doubt you will - you must ignore it. In order to expose the information about Zapreschniy state as a mysterious leak to the press we must endeavour for it to have come from nowhere. Perhaps a servant snuck it out. Perhaps the missing guards took them and vanished to live off the pot of cash that selling that information would have awarded them. Perhaps Ivan Bragin carelessly left it behind in a tavern. If there is any possible suspicion on Kilnus, the protection afforded from the Interplanetary Press Secrets Act will be voided, and stealing anything of material worth - though immediately gratifying - could allow the Bragins to uncover this operation's having taken place."

"Once we're in, we need as few interactions with the servants as possible," Toris began. "Luckily, it's a simple path to Ivan's chambers."

"And also Yekaterina's," Zielska noted.

"Ah... right," Toris replied. "We did talk about that ... while there may be fewer guards internally -
since the entrance security is so stiff - Bragina's doors are a problem. One lock in particular triggers an Eavesdropper alarm if tampered with - those of you on the Commander's team will need to be briefed about them all. But if you've got the technology -"

"Bragina must keep the most important files somewhere," Zielska reasoned, "and my guess is the place where she spends most of her time. Toris, I'm confident you can handle Ivan's on your own. I'll see what there is to see in Bragina's personal offices. If there's anything good, we take it; if not, we get out the same way we got in. Once back, across the courtyard, exiting the Duma is much simpler and nobody is likely to raise a fuss."

"Nobody will even be around," pointed out Toris. "As long as it's before 5pm, everybody we'll be glued to the radio."

"And Raivis?" Feliks asked. You know, the guy you keep totally forgetting about?

"As I said," Zielska explained slowly - like Feliks was five - "he stays in the kitchens out of the way."

Feliks narrowed his eyes. "But what's Raivis' exit strategy, if like every single exit on the residential side of the Duma is locked in triplicate? We're instructed to get the hell out the second we're done," he explained, referring to himself and the team of two agents that had been assigned to his operation poking about in Ivan's business office. "What about Raivis?"

There was more silence. "Toris, he is being extracted, isn't he?"

"Raivis volunteered to remain in the kitchens and cause enough distraction to keep most people there for at least an hour," Toris said. "A spilled bucket of milk will do the trick."

"Okay, so like, what if that doesn't work?"

"He's plotted us other ways out. They all involve, uh ... the sewers... but we'll take showers later, don't worry."

"This is a messy job," Zielska said simply, and a few of her agents cracked grins.

How amusing, the dainty aristocrat coming out with shit on her ballgown! Patronising witch with her little warts, he wanted to punch them all; Feliks wasn't afraid of getting dirty! He hated this regime as much as any of them - maybe more! Wasn't he the one up-close and personal with the elite all the time? "I didn't mean that," he snapped. "I meant, we're taking Raivis with us, right?"

There was silence.

"Toris!" he admonished. Toris had the grace to look decently ashamed of himself.

"It was my idea," Zielska stated. "We may require that he stays in the employ of the Duma if we can't find enough evidence of the Darinys cover-up, or if something goes wrong. It would be convenient to have a way back in." Feliks wasn't sure how they'd manage getting back into the Duma's official side - or any side - if Agnieszka were retired.

"They'll suspect any new hires!" Feliks protested.

"At any rate, I don't think that'll be necessary," Toris remarked. "Raivis has the assistance of the
"Bragins' airship driver."

"But he's like not even gonna be here for all of this," Feliks reminded him.

"Yes," Toris nodded, "he's off driving the airship."

"Uh-huh, that's kinda my point exactly. The only guy who can help Raivis is also on another planet two days away by like the fastest airship there is in the system!"

"But so are all three Bragins," Toris protested. "Raivis is fine! Remember, he's a better spy than you give him credit for."

And that much was true, so why was Feliks worrying so irrationally?

He chalked it up to his sinking feeling about today's imminent failures and blushed. "Sorry," he muttered uncomfortably - mostly to Toris, but also to the rest of the table, which had fallen silent and was staring directly at him. He shifted and slouched in his chair.

Zielska cleared her throat. "If we're through with debating the resourcefulness of our intelligence officers, perhaps we could get back to business?" she asked, and without waiting for an answer continued with the meeting.

Amazing. Now he felt totally stupid for having spoken up at all.
Denmark

Danmark could count the number of times he'd been to Hallar on no fingers. There were two very
good reasons for this - one, he was too loud to do any buying; and two, he and Suomi in a tiny ship
less than twenty square metres large traversing the vast ocean of space with no escape from each
other for days - that just spelled trouble.

They didn't even own a single spacesuit between the bunch of them (a crying shame) so nobody
could do anything fun like escape and tether out for a walk around, or go see Norge in the
stealthship, being towed by the airship. Danmark's idea, of course! Ingenious, he'd thought - what
better way to bring the stealthship without alerting anybody through signals? Keep it turned off
and tow it! Karpusi would follow from a far distance and knew the stealthship's old signals and the
airship's new signals, but not the stealthship's new signals - the ones Danmark had fixed up the
night before they left. Then the stealthship could get off Hallar undetected.

Norge's little girlfriend had done a damn good job. He'd been up until dawn trying to undo and redo
her work. But it was worth it in the end, he could sleep on the ship, and besides, he'd had company.
While the rest of them were asleep, Tim had stayed up with him, and they'd made coffee and
midnight snacks and chit-chatted about everything and nothing.

Alright, that was a lie. Danmark had chit-chatted about everything and nothing, and Tim had
smiled and listened with the patience of a saint. Danmark couldn't blame Tim. It was natural to
appreciate the sound of Danmark's voice! He should know, he was an expert on it.

(Now, as for what Caput Halleri Border Control would think about their unorthodox towing system
and the makeshift hitch tacked on with rope and tape, dragging it all the way to Hallar instead of
getting the stealthship fixed up planet-side or, hell, even at any of the other anchorages in the outer
system that might have a decent engineering dock - well ... they'd cross that bridge when they came
to it.)

Lucky Norge, to stuff himself away in the stealthship. Or maybe smart Norge. Either way, by the
end of the fourth day, Ísland and Sverige looked like they wished they had joined him. Now, credit
given where credit was due - with Tim's intervention, Danmark and Suomi had yet to draw first
blood. That was progress, wasn't it?

But when the comms unit finally came to life with a crackle and a snap, a pleasantly bland voice
asking, "Caput Halleri Border Control to vessel 97T-PFL, cruiser class 9D, come in," they all
breathed a collective sigh of relief.

Sverige hit talk on the comms and replied, "Vessel 97T-PFL requesting entrance to Halleri airspace."

"Purpose of visit?"

Sverige did that little hand to forehead act that he did so often with Danmark around. As though
there were any other purpose of visit on a day like today. "Th' D'cennial, a'course," Sverige told
them, in his best patient-but-patronising tone.

There was a lull, followed by a beep, and then the comms unit crackled again. "Enter and proceed
to Caput Halleri Border Control for further security measures," the voice said again, and then there was silence.

"Does that always happen?" Danmark asked.

"Hm," Sverige grunted. "Typical Caput Halleri. Paranoid on s'curity an' worse on the auctions. Th' staff catch a bitta flack fer it - worse at the auctions - so's high turnov'r. Works in our favour. Slim chance one of th' turnstile agents'll r'member me, even'f I was here, not a month ago."

"Huh," Danmark said, and Sverige shrugged and said no more about it.

The closer they got to Caput Halleri Border Control, the more often Tim began to check the time. Two hours later, Danmark asked for him, "Does it always take so long?" He suspected Tim would be too polite to complain about their speed. Danmark, obviously, lacked such verbal filter.

"Pretty sure we can't go any faster because someone decided we should tow two tonnes of stealthship," Suomi muttered.

"Pretty sure I didn't ask you," Danmark snapped.

"Enough," Sverige barked, at both of them. "Suomi's right," he said, and Suomi did that little satisfied cocky stance that made Danmark really wanna punch his lights out. "We can make th' trip usually in und'r two hours at topspeed, but with th' weight we're reduced to 80% capability. 'S what the autopilot tells me, anyway."

"But we'll be there soon, right?" This from Tim.

"With time t'spare," Sverige replied, and when that didn't appear to wholly assure Tim, Danmark felt compelled to take Tim's clammy hand in his own and squeeze it briefly.

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Thirty minutes after they had arrived in the spaceport, but were denied access to parking levels, even Danmark had grown nervous. What the hell were they waiting for?

"Time to spare, huh?" he grumbled to Sverige, who pursed his lips in reply.

Still, it was a valid point, so Sverige picked up the comms unit to buzz in again. "Caput Halleri Border Control," began the voice on the other side.

"There some kinda probl'm with parkin'?" Sverige asked.

"Just a minute, sir," it replied.

And then they were put on hold for another ten minutes.

"Alright, I've had it up to here," said Suomi finally, and strode over to the comms unit before any of them - least of all Sverige or Tim who were the most likely candidates to keep Suomi in line - knew what was happening. Then he punched the comms unit talk button, leaving a mark on the casing, and waited a second for it to beep to life.

"Caput Halle-"
"Either you find us a spot to park and park us or I will gatecrash and park this goddamn vehicle myself," Suomi ground out, and then Sverige leapt to action and tackled him to the ground.

"... Is that a threat?!"

"Don't listen t' him!" shouted Sverige. "He's not th' cap'n, he's - he's my crazy broth'r. Mad's a march hare! Shoulda never brought 'im along!"

"We have been waiting almost an hour now in the spaceport!" Suomi grunted from beneath Sverige, "That is the crazy part!"

Everyone was so busy watching the drama unfold between Suomi and Sverige that nobody caught Ísland creeping up to the comms until he spoke.

"If my suspicions are correct," he began. Everybody froze and whirled to face him - Sverige and Suomi got to their feet and rushed to pull him off the comms, but Ísland held up a single hand and like magic they both stopped. "You're stalling us because we're towing a stealthship?"

"Uh, yeah, kinda. We got orders."

"But that's never been a problem before. Why the increased scrutiny?" Ísland asked, calm as you please and inspecting his nails.

"Didn't you see the papers? Oh, right. Off-worlders. Well ... there's been these raids. We're on the lookout for pirates. Any tag-alongs get pushed to the back of the line."

Ísland laughed, a light chuckle. "I assure you, we're no criminals!" he lied. "And pirates, why, that's nonsense. We'd never even go near them. I think you'll find the fellow in the stealthship is a quiet, respectable chap. In fact, does the name Einar Steinsvik ring any bells?"

Denmark snorted. What a blatant lie. Casting Norge as a rich boy mining heir! Sure, Ísland, pull the other one.

But they ate it up! There came an awed hush over the comms and they asked excitedly, "Einar Steinsvik? Of Tenickson?"

Ísland played coy. "Mmm, maybe. If we could get a parking spot, we could get him out of the stealthship and you guys could talk to him proper-like. The comms unit in there isn't on."

"What's the deal with the stealthship anyway? Why are you towing it?"

"Oh, that," Danmark piped up, because it was his idea, and then he realised he didn't have an excuse prepared. "Uh. Uhhhm. We, uh... we needed to check in with the shipyards on account of. Um. Well the -' shit ... shit shit, he thought, gotta figure somethin' out here - "the stealthship's broken and can't fly! And we didn't have a good enough garage where we were. So, y'know. Two birds, an' one stone, kinda thing."

"But Steinsvik's okay in there?"

"Yeah, sure!" Danmark reassured them. "He wouldn't be in there if he weren't."
"A-hem," Ísland interrupted. "What I think he means to say is that it's fine. The life support systems in the stealthship aren't connected to the main power draw. Einar just didn't want to ride with my loudmouthed associate here."

"Are you the engineer?" asked the Border Control agent.

But before Danmark could interject and tell them obviously not, it was obviously Danmark, couldn't they hear brilliance when it broadcast loud an' clear over the radio, Ísland said, "Yeah, that'd be me."

Danmark threw him the filthiest of dirty looks. Ísland put a sly finger to his lips in a 'shh' motion and winked.

Lies or not, Ísland delivered it smoothly enough to gain them clearance to land. Once past the gates and in a parking spot big enough to house the airship and the towed stealthship (the lot was nearly full - what else could one expect from an event like the Decennial) Denmark finally turned to Ísland and shouted, "What gives?!"

"What do you mean?"

"I do one useful thing for this group that isn't being loud and that's engineering and you won't even let me take credit for it?"

"Maybe if you actually got off your ass and did a degree in it," Ísland grumbled. "Anyway, you've got it all wrong. I have an Idea."

Norge hopped out of the stealthship happily the second he could, once Ísland had them parked. But before he could say anything or do much besides stretch his legs, Ísland confessed, "You're not gonna like this," and explained him the story.

Norge listened patiently and then finally asked, "Are we going to jail?"

"Well, no -"

"Then I don't see what the problem is," he decided, and took his wallet from his pants. "If it doesn't go well, I'll never use this identity again. That's all."

"But - it's - you - and the money -"

"Ísland, it doesn't matter," Norge said, patronisingly and exasperatedly, in the manner of someone chastising a silly little brother, and Danmark noticed the quick flush on Ísland's cheeks. But neither said anything more about it. Norge walked on with Sverige and Suomi in the direction of Border Control, and, after a moment spent silently fuming, Ísland followed.

"Never use this identity again," Danmark echoed, a little in awe.

"What was that all about?" Tim asked.

"Steinsvik of Tenickson," Danmark explained, "is an actual person. He's the heir to millions and -" and he was Norge all along and he'd been travelling around with them for years, which also meant - "if we don't get this right, he can never assume his real identity." And he'd give up all rights to a name like that! It'd be the scandal of the century for a Steinsvik to be implicated in some sort of
ship-stealing deal.

"I thought most of you gave those up."

"Sorta. Suomi definitely did, Suomi had no choice. Ducking under pseudonyms lets the rest of us put ourselves on hold. But for Ísland to just help himself to ... that's presumptuous." To think that Norge - Steinsvik! - didn't care. And Ísland, that fink, he'd known and never said a thing!

Tim's shoulders hunched and he sighed. "You guys are giving up too much for me, for this."

"It's the right thing to do," Danmark argued. And when Tim didn't act like he believed him he repeated it. "It is! Don't give me that! Nobody deserves to have been treated the way they treated you and your sister."

"I don't dispute that," Tim muttered. "But I wish it were easier."

But it wasn't and that didn't matter anyway. "It's a sacrifice we'd all make. I'd make it in a heartbeat for you," Danmark blurted out, and when Tim went silent and bright red he took a moment to reflect on what he said.

It had come as a shock for someone like Steinsvik - Norge - to take it so flippantly, but when Danmark stopped to think about it, he wasn't lying - he really would do it, and his only regret would be never talking to his family again. He assumed Norge had less to permanently lose, but obviously that wasn't so.

"I would do it, though," he said in conclusion, softly and with more conviction than spontaneity this time.

The lines to the turnstiles extended into the shipyard parking lot. There must be four gates, given the four long, long lines. Well, there were four of them with Karpusi's IDs; it was simple enough. They each took a line - Suomi and Norge used their own IDs and doubled up on Tim's line - and waited.

Traffic was quick, but not so fast that the snippets of conversation from the excited crowd around them could be ignored. "I don't have the cash myself," he heard, "but I want to see how pretty they are!"

"I might buy one if I can snag a sale."

"Maybe there'll be a nice one mixed in with the more beautiful ones and nobody'll notice it?"

"I'm not going to buy anything. But it's a nice day, and it's fun, and I can tell everybody back home I was there!"

"It'll be fun to place fake bids. I wanna see how high these people'll go!" - "Isn't that illegal?" - "Maybe a little, but I don't plan on winning one. Just wanna make it more dramatic."

Most distressingly, "They have some of the discount ones at the end." - "I'd bet they sell about as well as the full-priced on a day like today, though. You decorate 'em up nice and nobody realises until later that they act so funny." Acting funny. Discounted. Talking like they were pieces of meat. It made Danmark see red and he
couldn't say anything without blowing their cover. He looked over at Tim behind Norge, in front of Suomi. His face was hard, stoic; the sculpted cheekbones seemingly more angular now that his jaw was set so firm, and his eyes narrowed but not squinting at anything in particular. The scar above his eye made him look even more dangerous and people appeared to realise it, giving him a wider berth. Tim, however, stood still as a statue as he stepped with the moving line.

He might've heard. Or it might've just been regular standoffish Tim.

Norge, in front of Tim and Suomi in the second line, got to the turnstiles first (perfect, just on time) where true to his word to Ísland, he submitted his Tenickson identity.

The agent, a young woman in a smart uniform and too much makeup, fawned and fell over him. "Oh, Mister Steinsvik!" she crooned coquettishly, without realising she was butchering the name, "we're so happy to have you here with us today! Do you plan on purchasing?"

On the other side, Ísland had reached his agent and was flirting about as ostentatiously. (And being successful. What was with today? Had Danmark accidentally taken crazy pills?)

"If I see something I like," Norge replied. In the line next to him, Sverige rolled his eyes and stepped up to the agent to present his documents.

"Well I'm sure you'll find plenty for someone of your tastes," she said, resting her forearms on the counter and leaning over them, to push her breasts up. Norge didn't blush or flinch but remained poker face frozen. "We've really tried to broaden our horizons this year -"

But Danmark didn't catch the rest of the conversation because the agent in his line barked, "NEXT IN LINE!" and he realised he had completely stopped moving and the few paces in front of him were embarrassingly empty. The people behind him seemed disgruntled. He gave them a sheepish grin and walked up to the gate.

"Documents," the agent said sourly, with her hand outstretched. She was a young girl, about twenty, who might be pretty if she weren't brooding so hard about having to deal with stupid people all day and not getting paid enough for it. She took a quick look at the plastic ID card once Danmark forked it over and scribbled something down. "You have yourself a fantastic day, Mister Karpusi. NEXT IN-"

"Hold on a sec," said the busty, flirty one, and Danmark noticed Norge on the other side of the turnstiles, with Tim up at bat. Tim's agent took a look at his ID and exclaimed, "You're also Mister Karpusi!"

"We're brothers," chirped a grinning Ísland from the left in between being a horrid flirt. "We thought it'd be a nice day for an excursion."

"Why didn't you all go in one line?" Danmark's agent asked, her eyes narrowed. "Like a normal family?"

"Have you seen these lines? Besides!" Ísland turned to his agent and remarked, "This way I got you all to myself," throwing her a wink as he passed through the turnstiles. She giggled and blushed.

Danmark's agent glared at them both, then turned around and glared at Danmark. "If it's any consolation," he tried.
"Just leave," the agent interrupted, and he elected to pluck the ID out of her hand before he caused any more trouble.

Of course, it would be impolite to help themselves to anybody's first name, so it'd be all Mister Karpusi this and Mister Karpusi that. And of course, four copies of the same ID, easier to generate than four different names. There was no way to tell that they weren't, in fact, all related. Every agent thought the others saw another first name. And four brothers attending the Decennial Auction was just a nice outing, it wasn't criminal. Of course! Clever Ísland! Danmark was impressed.

What else should he expect from Ísland, though. When he wasn't busy forging, he was busy being many kinds of devious.

"We good?" he murmured to Ísland once the four of them had regrouped on the other side (Norge a few steps ahead, pretending he didn't know them).

"Not just yet," Ísland said, "so let's walk a little more slowly. Stage one, cast net."

Behind them, Danmark overheard, rising above the din of excited chatter, "No, it's Väinämöinen."

"Vay-na-moy-nil?"

"No, Väinämöinen. Väin-ä-möi-nen!"

"Vine-ah-moy-nen."

"Haha, would you look at the time. I think that'll have to do. Have a good day!" Danmark heard a clang and suspected Suomi - too used to calling him Suomi to start with Tino now - had cheerily continued through the turnstiles without much say-so from the agent -

"Don't look back," Ísland reminded them all, "just keep facing forward. Remember, we're not with him." Danmark pouted but did as asked. "Stage two, set bait," he explained with an eerie grin, still looking dead ahead.

There came the sound of stomping feet. "Stop right there, Vein-a-main-en!" shouted someone - probably Actual Karpusi -

"It's Väinämöinen," he heard Suomi say, more to himself than anybody else.

"Danm'rk, quit yer dawdlin'," whispered Sverige, "Suomi c'n take care'f h'mself."

"Stage three," Ísland murmured cryptically, "catch the fish."

Danmark couldn't help a quick look back. Karpusi, from what he recognised of the man's ID, was making such a scene that everybody was watching. He was yelling and wrestling with the turnstile while the flirty agent with his ID in hand looked on, extremely shocked. Then she signalled the others and the one on the end left her post to call for security.

Meanwhile, Suomi was just blithely walking away. "Keep going!" he hissed at Danmark as he passed.

"Come on," Ísland whispered at his side, taking Danmark by the arm to forcibly walk him away.
"That - wait, *that* was your plan all along!" Danmark exclaimed.

"Yes," Ísland said, as they caught up to Sverige and Tim in the crowd and filed slowly through the terminal to ground level. "Using Karpusi's ID lets us buy Suomi some time because every one of those agents has just seen a Heracles Karpusi ID with a different picture. Access is denied for a duplicated card; therefore, they assume his is the copy. So no matter which gate he picked, he gets caught."

"But that won't last for long," Tim realised, "they'll figure out pretty quickly who's the right one."

"Which is why we need to get past this bottleneck," Ísland said. He took a look at the crowd and shoved Sverige to the front, and Sverige was scary looking enough that people stepped aside at a glance. He doubled their pace through the terminal. About fifty metres before street level it forked, and Suomi took the left while the rest of them took the right. Vids everywhere on Caput Halleri meant Karpusi would still be able to track Suomi easily.

Danmark's first glimpse of Caput Halleri was astonishing. A city was a city anywhere in the system, sure, but Hallar wasn't like walled-off Wäterschrodt on Schlessen or anyplace in Danmark on Nunat, full of snow and the odd bit of rain. The sun was bigger, it took up a lot more of the sky, and the climate was completely different. They had strange plants here, he noticed - everything from thick, fleshy leaves to the broad flat dark green ones he remembered from picture books. As big as one's head! And the colours of the flowers in the gardens, taller than winter crocuses and every shape imaginable.

The houses were different, architecturally speaking. On Nunat it had been easiest to heat a house that was small and box-shaped, with roofs made of the lightest material possible and sloped only shallowly enough for the snow to slip off when it fell. But no snow fell on Hallar, and so there was a wide variety in house size and shape. Some were veritable towers, others had roofs so steep the house was half roof, others still with domes and tiled mosaics.

But the Emporiums! Gems of the city, behemoths that rose up like mountains out of Caput Halleri's cobbled roads and gleaming piazzas and dwarfed her shiny new electric lampposts. Marvellously decorated they were, with pillars cut of brilliant marble, every colour under the sun you could imagine. Danmark began to see why the bondsperson shops insisted on doing business there - half the fun of buying a bondsperson would be being in a palace like that and waited on by people dressed in the finest livery.

"Danm'r!" he heard, and looked around to find Sverige, along with Ísland, Tim and Norge off to the side, out of the way of the crowds and partially concealed behind the threshold of the Caput Halleri Border Control terminal. "Daydream all ya want later. Fer now, git over here." He hurried over.

"Alright," Norge said. "The auction takes place just over there at Tolino Downs. Tim, Danmark, with me - Tim and I will be in the crowd bidding; Danmark, you float around. If you see Karpusi getting close to us -" and here Norge held up the two-way Eavesdropper - "tell us. Your mission is to find Adnan and figure out what he looks like before he finds you and books you. Once you do, keep an eye on him and if you see him getting close to us, again, tell us."

"I don't even know what Adnan is supposed to look like," he said.

"True. But Karpusi should be with Suomi," Ísland said. "If Suomi can manage to keep one of them
away from the arena, we'll be good. And if not, well, you know what he looks like because you
couldn't stop staring at the turnstiles." Danmark soured, but Ísland ignored him and soldiered on. "I
think even you can manage finding a single BSPA agent. Look for someone too busy poking
around in the affairs of everybody else to enjoy the festivities."

"S'pose they got friends t'help 'em?" Sverige conjectured.

"Hm, good point. Danmark, keep an ear out for that sort of thing too."

"But don't make so much an ass of yourself that you get thrown out," Norge added.

"Thanks for the vote of confidence," Danmark muttered.

"Meanwhile, Sverige and I will head back to Border Control and find the shipyards. The Vehicle
Distribution Service Centre and the parking lot are near each other for obvious reasons - anytime
someone buys or rents an airship to go off-planet, it needs to be fairly close to the launch pads. And
now, they think I'm the 'engineer' on our airship."

"A-ha! that explains your stunt earlier," Tim said, and Ísland grinned. "How're you gonna get in,
though? Won't they require some sort of proof of credentials?"

Ísland took out his wallet to flip through. He extracted one card and presented it to Tim, who
 glanced at it before holding it up to Danmark. *Egil Kristinsson, Maj.Eng - Lead Engineer, GNA-Pro
Technologies*, it said, with his photo and everything. "When the hell did you make this?"

Danmark asked, passing it back.

"Oh, this was easy. Didn't need references - it'll take a few days for them to even figure out this
Nunat company doesn't exist. See, I always have ID. It's just never mine. I even have business
cards for this one. Way easier to fake," Ísland explained. "I'll admit the engineer trick is one I've
been planning for a while. Had to think creatively about how to get to the shipyards, since they
don't allow laymen in certain areas anymore - not after our stunt a few years ago. But a professional
engineer would be allowed access."

"Fancy. If I'm comin' with, y'got one fer me too?" asked Sverige, and Ísland forked over another
card from his wallet.

"Good," Norge decided. "Then you two get to work. We've got an auction to attend."

"We'll keep you updated," Ísland added, removing his Eavesdropper to wave it about in the air,
when it clicked and buzzed.

"Okay guys, Suomi here," they heard from Ísland's Eavesdropper - Danmark quickly fished his
own out of his pocket to better hear Suomi's voice.

"And?" Ísland asked. "How goes?"

"*Hook, line and sinker, just like you said! He's about fifty metres behind me now. I'll be in and out
of range - krrrrrkt -n't expect that I can always be heard."

"Just do yer best," Sverige advised. "Keepin' Karpusi away'll be a big help fer us."

"Will do what I can. Suomi out."
"Karpusi being so desperate to catch Suomi - especially after he's lost him before - will probably make him more prone to stupid errors," Ísland noted. "It'll make Suomi's job easier. Ours on the other hand, not quite so easy. We'd better get moving if we want to have a decent chance - the first half of this is gonna be spent acting the part so they don't suspect anything and feel okay to leave me alone with their records." He smirked. "Which is a dangerous thing to do."

"Pride goeth before a fall," Norge warned.

"I know what I'm doing," Ísland snapped.
They had three days.

At least he had experienced this before dying - at least he hadn't waited that long - but part of Ivan couldn't believe now that he had waited as long as he had, that he had once vowed to remain pure until his dying day, his personal oath to God and Saint Vynas the holiest and most pure, that he would be like the people he had read about who loved romantically but not sexually (ah, how he'd envied them!).

But it made sense. This wasn't a distraction he used to ignore the rawness of the wound dealt by a betraying friend (one mustn't cheapen it like that!), it was something altogether metaphysical, his soul the spirit bird of the heart, ascending thermals to the heavens, his wingspan locked in inertial perpetuum. How amazing that, even before knowing the concept of what it lacked, his soul sought this, sought this other one, like him, found him out in the black night! Like magnets, like instinct. Instead of having stumbled across him by happy accident, as passing trains, their windows barred, a momentary tunnel, Eduard felt like a part of him he had recovered, unearthed, within himself. He had been there all along, and Ivan never knew! He mined his soul expecting coal and finding diamonds.

So Ivan opened up, laid himself bare, let his soul be subsumed by a passion too deep to dwell on and too profound to question, for if he did that, it would be like driest tinder in the hot sun - all it would take was a single spark and he'd erupt in thick smoke, but how it hurt. How it burned.

Could he possibly express his feelings with words? with tears? Neither, it was incomprehensible! And so instead his spirit laughed maniacally within him as they renewed their messy, disgraceful, addicting and undeniable union; it sang inside, in a manner without tune or lyrics, in a manner that could only be abated with the touch, the scent, the warmth of someone so cherished.

(Ivan felt like he finally understood the couplet in his rodnaya's old poetry book, which, loosely translated, wrote, *This is the true religion; all others are thrown-away bandages beside it.*)

He marvelled in the anticipation, in emptiness, now full now empty now full now empty again and again and again - don't stop, he said, don't ever stop - because there was a place inside that Eduard touched, whose embers were stoked, and the craving began in Ivan's body and spiral-accelerated upwards to the crown of him, where he ceased to crave only carnally. The best Ivan could do was to press them together, and despite a physical reality in the way he came to understand why so many lovers would do these absurd, crazy things with each other, with each other's bodies, especially when the ecstasy overcame Eduard. His senses heightened but not overwhelmed, Ivan methodically categorised each and every twitch and reaction and engraved it on his heart ... and then in turn allowed Eduard to quite totally obliterate the last of his logical faculties with unstoppable, irrational passion.

The joy of submission, he found, suited him well - after all the power Ivan had been handed, how happy it made him to hand it off again! To let someone else take the reins and steer him as they
liked, and at this, he would admit Eduard's expertise was astonishing. To sell his innocent confusion and buy with it a satisfied bewilderment. The pupil drank from the fountain of the master, prostrated at his base, became the well full of water so drunk on his spring and swallowed the echo of his voice in a place where only Ivan could hear it. He was the itch and he was the soothing balm. He was pain, and he was what cured pain. What a fool was he, that he thought he knew peace.

Why bother with sleeping when he knew he would lose consciousness for months to come at the thought of this perfect silence? No, Ivan could not sleep like this. He staved it off as much as he could and lay awake to watch and listen, silent at the artistry moving through him. He immersed himself as much as possible in the other and in kind, allowed Eduard to leave the deepest imprint he could on his own body, on his own soul (for his heart had already been claimed), until at the end, they were like well-steeped tea, diffused into each other, and had completely ceased to be two different substances.

_To complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love_, his blessed scriptures read _- set me as a seal upon your heart, for love is strong as death. I would drown in you._ He held Eduard closer; Eduard mumbled sleepily into his chest.

Ivan would swear he had never been so happy in his entire young life.

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They had three days before the day of the auction and Toris' planned attack. It still felt like only hours had passed when Arisha knocked on the door to his chambers and asked for him, instead of letting herself in discreetly, setting down food and water, and leaving once more like she had recently done.

He donned a robe and reluctantly left Eduard's side in the bed to answer his handmaid.

"I didn't want to disturb you," Arisha said, when he cracked the door open. "I know you're ... well. It's not my place. But it's nearly noon. Your time is almost up." She handed him a single manila envelope and told him, "Here. For the bondsman."

Ivan opened it to check that everything was in order. It was. "For the freeman, now," he corrected.

"Yours to do with what you want," Arisha replied. "I don't pretend to understand it."

"Haven't you ever been in love?" he cajoled, and became sad when she shook her head.

"How you could love an object, love it like ... like that, it's beyond me," she explained. "But you asked me not to tell. So I haven't told, and I won't tell."

"He's not an object!"

"Don't try and explain it," she advised, "I don't understand. I guess you're more like your sister after all." And then she laughed lightly, "But it's a strange joke that you choose to do this on the same day of the Decennial Auction!"

Ivan looked at the papers with a sad finality. A joke. Hah.

Then he told her, "Thanks for your silence. I appreciate it. If it does not make sense to you - you
who have been my housemaid so long that it's difficult to think of anybody not related to me who
knows me better - then I doubt I could explain what I feel for him to enough people to show them
that it isn't hypocrisy for me to attack the bonds service trade and then take and - and use a
bondsman. But it isn't using a bondsman. There's no bondsman here. There has never been."

Arisha shrugged. "Whatever you say," she replied, and closed his door as she left.

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There had been a few last-minute cancellations on two of the flights out to Bast, so Ivan had
reserved a seat on the first, which went to Vonnat. Taking one of their own airships would be
suspicious. Vonnat upon Bast was a nice place - certainly warmer than Skuratchky, or most of the
Empire Union - with temperate weather and a bland landscape, where nothing of note really
happened.

Ivan hoped Eduard would enjoy it.

Nevertheless he walked Eduard to the front exit of the Duma's residential side, the one he had keys
to, with regret and disappointment. "Krasimir of Bast is your contact when you land. He will be
expecting you sometime in the next two days," he told him. "Short, pale, skinny fellow with messy
dark hair; you can cab it from Iolac'h Border Control. There's some money set up in an account for
you - he'll help you find a place to stay. I ... I do recommend you enroll in the local university. At
least to keep yourself from becoming bored. But of course I did not take such liberties as signing
you up for classes or anything."

And now he was rambling! "Anyway," Ivan finished awkwardly. He thrust the envelope forward.
"Everything's explained inside this, with ... your papers."

Eduard stared at the envelope and didn't move.

"No, take them, please!" Ivan insisted, "You must. You'll ... you'll need them at the Border
Controls."

"Maybe I could stay if you just hid me away like the past few days all the time?" Eduard asked
hopefully.

"How would that possibly satisfy you? Or me?"

"Hah, I could think of a couple of ways -" 

"Don't be so crude!" Ivan interrupted, but caught the sly smile playing at the corner of Eduard's lips
and realised the misplaced levity was just nerves.

"Vanya ..." Eduard began, his voice soft, and his eyes sad. He set the light suitcase Ivan had
insisted he bring on the ground. (It wasn't the largest suitcase Ivan had, but Eduard owned so very
little and only asked for a few books, even though Ivan wanted to give him as much as possible to
remember him by.)

How sad that the two inches between them seemed already like the vast space between Bast and
Olyokin, which light took minutes to travel. (Ah, to be a beam of light. Completely ignorant of time
and energy.) He wanted to tell Eduard to write him, but that would welcome suspicion; this mess
would have to be properly covered up first, and how long that would take all depended on
what happened today. Whether Toris would make a mess of his plans once he realised they'd all been discovered or if he kept his wits about him and did something awful like go into hiding and safeguard the terrible secrets he knew about Eduard and Ivan, waiting in the wings for blackmailers and extortionists.

It could be a year before Eduard could return. It could be five. Perhaps after five years Eduard would have moved on.

And yet, the way Eduard looked at him ... unlike Ivan, Eduard held his hand close to his chest and let nobody see the cards he played with. Perhaps Eduard loved him. Perhaps Eduard didn't even know.

"You had better leave," Ivan said, "I am sure the cab driver is getting impatient in the courtyard -"

"Damn the cab driver," Eduard retorted, and then he flung his arms about Ivan's shoulders and kissed him deeply. Try as he might, Ivan could not force his heart not to flutter out of control and even though it was doomed, even though this was an end, he wrapped his arms around Eduard anyway and held him close.

When Eduard pulled back, he sighed, looked at the envelope again and sadly plucked it out of Ivan's hand. "Thank you. For everything."

Ivan kissed him once on the forehead, murmured against it, "Go with God," and embraced him a final time.

With that, Eduard departed the Duma.

Ivan did not watch him as he left, scared that he might do something foolish like cry or break down while re-locking the door, but he did watch the airship a half hour later, when it took off. He watched it rise above Skuratchky, ascend to the heavens and continued watching until it faded into Olyokin's skies and became a tiny fleck of black that faded as it grew more and more distant until he saw nothing more at all.

And then, in the privacy of his own room where he could secure himself and keep the world out with five locks that only his handmaid had keys to, he cried.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter never fails to kill me :'}
Austria

Chapter Notes

featuring cameo by Australia!

(austria)

The day of the auction began calm, wet and slightly foggy. It bore the kind of dampness that permeated Roderich's morning coat, waistcoat and white pleated shirt, but the auction proper wasn't due to start - the main event, anyway - until half past one, and by that time, it would have warmed up considerably.

Nevertheless, as he got to the arena fairgrounds, he found that Eliza was taking no chances: the pavilion spikes were set up around the perimeter for the tents, although the canvas roof was missing. Whether it would rain didn't much matter; the auction would be outside. When it came to rain, there was very little Eliza - or the Council - or even Avo Romae himself - could do.

(Well. Insofar as Roderich knew, anyway. Maybe that man's power overreached beyond what was physically possible. Romae was surprisingly meddlesome for one who would not even be at the Auction itself. But Roderich had met him in the course of his own work only twice and therefore had yet to formulate a fixed opinion. Didn't like him, didn't hate him. Didn't know.)

Please be at the fairgrounds by one were Eliza's instructions, and so he had awoken early and assembled himself by ten in the morning. He had run through some scales and practice etudes to warm himself up and donned a warm pair of chamois gloves. Stylish, yes, but wholly unnecessary for Standard Calendar November weather, which, on Hallar, felt like mid-June by afternoon. He would not need to warm up later. And they looked proper. People wanted properness, in an auctioneer, didn't they?

When he arrived a half hour later at Tolino Downs, across the road from Caput Halleri Border Control and the central BSPA offices as well as the main Council Building and Avo Romae's own immense homestead, crammed with people like he'd never seen it before, he was surprised to find his own face staring back at him through posters. Decennial Auction! they proclaimed, this way! Featuring Roderich Edelstein in Concert! A once-in-a-lifetime event! Included was a long list of radio stations that promised live, non-stop coverage.

There were at least five from every planet. He felt his pulse race and, for the first time since he was very young and playing his first recitals, he began to get nervous. How many people would be listening?

He was impressed at Eliza's ability to hustle - on every single tent spike (and there must have been nearly a hundred) there were advertisements for him and his music. At the north end of the rectangular field, he spotted the twenty metres of stage stretching the width of the field in front of a row of tent huts. It was set up for him already, and he imagined he'd better make his way towards it through the thick crowd.
On the left side of the stage, there stood a podium with a portable microphone - not like the ones he recorded his records with, but rather like the desktop models the radio announcers used, looking like a giant metal capsule. He imagined the wires were probably tucked away behind the podium.

On the right side, there was a step-up dais with a full concert grand piano atop that. A beautiful model, he thought approvingly, not the shiny black he expected but an immaculate ivory white.

He approached the instrument and tested it out with a simple scale. Again, he marvelled at Eliza's ability to get things done so quickly on such short notice - whoever owned the instrument, it must have been expensive to move, and with the jarring motion of the wagon on Caput Halleri roads, it would have required extensive tuning. But here it was, in mint condition, sounding perfect, with quick response and a positively charming sound.

"Oh, thank god!" he heard from behind him out of the huts. He whirled around to see Eliza, looking harried. "You're here, I just have to - wait where are you going with that? - sorry, Roderich, I'll just be right back -" And then she was gone again, chasing after someone else.

Roderich took the opportunity to familiarise himself with the backstage. Behind where Eliza had stood before flitting off was a hive of people buzzing back and forth running errands and moving boxes and equipment, ducking in and out of a maze of tents. Some he easily deduced the purpose for - private cavity exam rooms, for the new owners to test the response; three rooms for transactions; and a large, wide lounge for the sellers - he recognised none of them except Francis of Hallar who was by the entrance, fiddling with the cuffs of his shirtsleeves, tapping his foot impatiently and searching the crowd. Waiting for someone who had evidently stood him up.

There was a final tent off to the side, where he spotted a line of figures swathed in flowing off-white linen robes. Not people, then, but bondspeople, all dressed in casual bondsperson robes, in the same style so no decorations could detract from their natural beauty.

Roderich ducked in to steal a quick peek at the goods. He couldn't even begin to afford one - especially not one that would be sold at auction, the sellers always reserved the best of the best for any regular auction, let alone the Decennial. But one could always dream, and there was no harm in looking.

On a chair inside the tent slouched a tanned, dark-haired, messy fellow, with not one but two cowlicks and a bandage on the bridge of his nose. Evidently the keeper, judging by the cargo shorts and tee he wore, instead of linen robes, and the fact that he was granted the privilege of sitting. When he saw Roderich, he leapt to his feet and cried, "Hey, hey hey! Yer not allowed to be in here, this is a strictly no sneak-previews event -"

"Relax," Roderich told him, "I'm with the show - I'm the auctioneer and entertainment. I'm not buying one anyway. I'm just curious."

The youth gave him an uncertain look so Roderich introduced himself properly, name-dropped Elizaveta, and offered to bring her over. That got a reaction. "Please don't," he begged in consternation. "I've already had to run into her four times today and each time she only gets angrier and angrier."

"She's a lot nicer when she's not overworked," Roderich confided.

"Think I'll be takin' your word on it. Well, if you're the auctioneer, you might want this," he explained, handing Roderich a thick folder filled with identification slips. "They're all in order. Starts with Helena Carson of Luna Halleri, then Francis of Hallar, then the famous Avo Romae,
and then Antonio of Marigon. Then there's a break, then the next four, then the musical number - you have thirty minutes of entertainment, and then it's the class two and three sales which should take less time. Watch the clock to ensure that you end before 5 PM on the class three - they're the least important."

Roderich flipped through the files briefly, only enough to catch a few glimpses of faces. He whistled. "It'll be difficult to keep things punctual," he observed, and looked up at the sea of white linen, their heads bowed in subservience.

The young man shrugged unhelpfully and said, "Do what you can. Better the class three sales run late than the class ones. But if it's not done on time, it's Héderváry's head on the line."

With dismay, he remembered Eliza's promotion. There was no choice, he decided grimly. Either get it perfectly timed, or have one tiny little error screw things up for Eliza at work for the next forever. Put that way, there was a lot more riding on Eliza than there was on Roderich and his performance. Even if a thousand radio stations listened in, he was old hat at it. He didn't feel so bad about the musical number anymore. Now, he had a different kind of responsibility - the kind where you risked letting someone else down, instead of yourself - and that kind was far worse. Did he really have to do this alone?

"Do I get a helper?" he asked the kid. "Someone who can deliver me water or relay a signal for security?"

The boy checked his files. "There's no one listed," he found; then decided, "but tell ya what. You act as a buffer from me having to deal with Héderváry, and I'll happily sit by the side and get you what you need."

"Done," Roderich told him. He noticed one of the bondsmen - its head still bowed - sneak a glance up at the two of them talking. The second it spotted Roderich's careful eye, it put its head firmly to the ground, its gaze lowered, but not before Roderich had had a chance to see its full pink lips, the clear vivid blue of its irises, and the flawless, soft-looking skin of its cheeks. "I'm grateful for your help already," Roderich told the young man, "I can see the merchandise is excellent quality this year. I imagine the schedule'll be tight."

The youth shrugged again. "It is a Decennial. If you want to examine any of them, go on ahead - the prices that are in your files aren't rules, just suggestions - guidelines, really! - so if you think that they might need adjusting, by all means. I'm gonna take advantage of your being here to watch them to go get myself something to drink. Back in five."

"I'll take a water now, if you don't mind," Roderich called out, without looking back, his gaze on the bondsman. He stopped in front of the pretty thing and placed two fingers below its jaw, lifting the head up to examine the face more closely.

Very pretty. Which one was this, he wondered, and returned to his files to flip through them until he found the matching picture. The first of Avo Romae's - oh, indeed. Romae would start things off with a bang with this one. Behind it stood another - red-haired and female, that looked to be Romae's second; good, then they were standing in order already - and before it stood a bondsman with similar features. Very similar.

Too similar.

He turned to the file before and spent a moment flipping back and forth, comparing the faces.
Same colour hair. Same styled length (though the pictures had Romae's first with shorter hair, and this other bondsman - Francis' last - with longer hair. Out-dated pictures, perhaps). Both bondsmen wore spectacles. Same height, even! The eyes were a little different in colour, but for everything else, it was like the same picture on two different files.

Both from Veshna, according to the synopsis. Roderich tutted. For a place that dominated most of the pre-trained bondsperson product, it sure didn't exhibit a lot of genetic variation. That wouldn't be good for business in the long run. He'd mention it to Eliza later that night.

He returned to the bondsman he'd singled out, Romae's first. It was marked two million to start in the file, which seemed a little low to Roderich. He traced its lower lip with his thumb in meditation - fleshy, soft and warm - and suppressed a shiver. The kind you might more likely get on a bondsman, but here was this bondsman with such beautiful features instead! No, it'd have to be starting at four million at least. Two million bought you a piano, but this creature was a finer instrument than that.

Though he might have to do something about that stubborn cowlick. Roderich tried pressing it down with no success. He tucked the file under his arm, licked a finger and tried smoothing it down with some moisture - still no luck -

"It won't stay down," the bondsman said quietly, startling Roderich out of his skin. "I've tried, believe me."

"If I wanted you to bark, I'd pull your chain!" Roderich snapped, and the bondsman seemed a little taken aback. It blushed, ducked its head down and bit its lip, its shoulders slumped.

Roderich felt a little sorry for it; he hadn't had to be so mean. "I see why they wanted to start at two million," he said, and the bondsman looked further disgraced. "Well, really!" he told it, "seen and not heard, isn't that what's ingrained into all of you by age five?"

"Sorry," it muttered, that lower lip trembling.

"Shocked the hell out of me for you to speak up without prompting." Roderich calmed, and sighed. "As long as you don't do that again, you'll be fine," he reassured. "With those looks, I can't imagine not starting high. You'll fetch a lot if you keep quiet and behave."

And the bondsman almost looked worse! "Listen," Roderich told it, "you've got a job to do. It's like chairs. People sit on chairs. That is what they're for. That's it. That's all you have to do. So act like what you are!"

"What are you saying?" it asked.

Hadn't it heard him the first time? Really, now! But before Roderich could snap at it any more, the one in front of it - the one that looked exactly the same but with slightly different eyes - said icily, "He's saying you're furniture. Now shut up."

"Good grief," said the voice of the keeper behind him. "I turn my back for not three minutes and all the gums start flapping about." He cleared his throat and barked out, "Heads down, post-haste!" and all class one bondspeople went silent, their eyes at the ground.

The boy laughed as he handed Roderich his bottle of water. "How d'you expect to handle a crowd of thousands if you can't hack a crowd of ninety-some bondspeople?"
His feathers ruffled, Roderich took the bottle and replied indignantly, "I know my audience. This isn't it, this is just a collection of objects." After all, who would expect a bondsperson to understand fine arts and music?

But then the clock struck one-thirty and Eliza found them in the tent to lead him to the stage and introduce their auctioneer, so no more was said.
Where the hell was Antonio? He was on Hallar somewhere - he had to be - although Francis had sent him messages telling him, begging him not to come, it was dangerous, he'd be snapped up by the Hallar BSPA and interrogated.

According to the interviews Antonio had given to the papers, this was exactly what had happened. Well, cold comfort in I told you so.

'No truth to these allegations', Antonio had said, 'I would never deal with pirates!' Francis hmphed - it was true in the most literal, exact sense of the words only, because Antonio used Romae as a go-between.

While Antonio could not have had prospectives originating from New Joplin - according to the papers, it was the first time the pirates had raided the dwarf planet since 1403 - he had prospectives from New Sainte-Dolitte all the time. Most notably Belle, who would tell anybody who would listen how unfairly she was seized from her home. (Nonsense. The street was not a home. But Belle wouldn't see reason and didn't respond to Antonio's care, no matter how gentle.)

Antonio Fernandez Carriedo was most certainly involved in Nova sector raids ... just not that particular one. And it seemed the only reason they cared anymore was because of this Jones Jr character! Francis hoped they found him soon so that the heat could be off Antonio for awhile. At least he seemed to be recouping his financial losses through interviews. Maybe any publicity was good publicity, in the end.

The question remained whether Antonio would show up today. If only for his own sales, Antonio should be here! And he was missing for those too; according to the bondsperson attendant, two of Antonio's prospectives had led the rest from the Deversorium to the fairgrounds with Antonio himself out of action all morning.

There was also Matthieu. If Antonio wouldn't purchase Matthieu, how could Francis ensure his protection? With the new hold on his accounts at the Legislative level, thanks to Councillor Héderváry, Francis had been blocked from registering as a bidder, and therefore was barred from placing bids on any item, especially his own. With all his paperwork catalogued, the Council had eyes and ears on every single prospective sellable item - including Matthieu - and would monitor their trip from stage to sale with precision. No, it was Antonio or bust.

But all Francis' hard work these past few weeks had put his own house in order, and that lifted scrutiny on his own accounts. (Although tell that to Héderváry, who kept rifling through them incessantly. If Antonio did not show, he'd wait until the auction began and she was too busy calling out numbers before attempting to register himself as a bidder.) It also let him entrust the majority of the care of his prospectives to the Council.

He didn't trust the Council in the literal way of saying. But after the fourth time he checked in on Matthieu, the attendant - an uncouth, belligerent fellow! - had forced him out and told him not to come back or face the BSPA, and so he waited at the corner of the seller's lounge, ignoring Helena Carson's advances by scouring the crowd impatiently.
He didn't want to say it - he hated even to think it - but he wished the pirate were here. Kirkland could buy Matthieu, Francis could buy his "Romae I" - whoever the first of Romae's bondspeople would be - and they'd swap at the end. It would be simple. It would have been so simple.

Why could he not ever have things be simple?

There came a tap at the microphone and a squeal of feedback from the speakers.

Still no Antonio! Had he forgotten? No, Antonio was inattentive to things like subtext, but that didn't necessarily mean he was stupid, or forgetful ...

"Ladies and gentlemen of Hallar!" boomed Héderváry's amplified voice to the crowd. "Good folk from out of town! If I may have your attention please?"

They were starting the auction and a major seller was nowhere to be found! Was he busy giving interviews at the moment? What fool would request an interview so close to the auction itself?

"I'm Councillor Elizaveta Héderváry, and on behalf of the Legislative Council of Bonds Service People, and as Master of Ceremonies today, I'd like to welcome all present to the ninety-fifth Decennial Auction!"

A roar of applause.

What if - and this was a truly horrifying thought if it were true - what if Antonio were detained again? He'd read the first few interviews Antonio had given after he was detained upon arriving on Hallar; apparently they had locked him in a cell and kept him under guard - what if they wouldn't let him out this time?

Of course, Francis would go and find him and pay his bail gladly - what were friends for - but it would be some time before he could find Antonio and where he was being kept, and meanwhile, in less than an hour, Matthieu would be sold!

Héderváry prattled on. "For those of you by the radio, thank you for joining us today - it's a lovely day on Caput Halleri, Tolino Downs is packed full of people, and we sincerely wish you could be here with us. But the next best thing is listening in the comfort and privacy of your own home! Allow me to walk you briefly through the process ...

"Everyone who intends on bidding on any one of our fine products today has to have registered at the head table and procured a bidding number to identify you as a bidder. You must have a bidding number to place bids!"

Francis overheard the rustle in the crowd as people who hadn't yet registered slowly made their way to the head table at the east side of the field.

"We will bring out the items one by one, as according to the program, also available at the head table. Our lovely auctioneer here will present the lots with a short description - if male, we will administer the signal to show proof of operation to the crowd - and bidding will commence at the auctioneer's starting price." Why was Héderváry referring to herself in the third person? It was listed on the pamphlets that the auctioneer would be her... Francis double-checked his program to make sure. Indeed - Master of Ceremonies: Elizaveta Héderváry. Auctioneer: Elizaveta Héderváry. Strange woman.
"If there are bids, the price will work up incrementally until a high bid is reached and there are no further bidders. The highest bidder wins the item and purchases it for their bid's worth. If there are no bids, the price will decrease incrementally until there are bids received.

"Please hold your bidding signs high so that we may see your number! The clerk and staff at the stage are equipped with binoculars and live vid feed footage, so don't worry that we can't see you, because we can!" Francis rolled his eyes. Yes, he was certain Héderváry could see everything, alright. She didn't need to remind him.

"If you win your item, you have fifteen minutes thereafter to come to the stage and claim your prize before it goes to the next highest bidder. Winning bidders may examine the items further and opt to discard - though, in my five years of running auctions, I have never seen anybody discard the merchandise. In fact, in my experience, given the chance for closer examination, winning bidders never want to let their items go!" A roar of applause.

"Last but not least, you must pay for your item before leaving the backstage area. Are there any questions?" No objections from the crowd. "No? Then we'll move on. Allow me to introduce to you our fine auctioneer today, Mr. Roderich Edelstein of Hallar! Let's give him a very warm welcome!"

Wait.

What?

Francis triple-checked the program.

There was massive applause, catcalls and whoops from the crowd - well-warranted, Edelstein was a fine musician - before Héderváry continued. "Oh, Roderich," she simpered, "they like you! They really like you!"

Again he read: Program Credits* - Head Manager: Kaisa Tillen. Master of Ceremonies: Elizaveta Héderváry. Auctioneer: Elizaveta Héderváry. On-site Auction Manager: Elizaveta Héderváry. Head Clerk: Elizaveta Héderváry. Head Ringman: Elizaveta Héderváry - the list went on and on to the next page, most of it Héderváry ... but the asterisk...

There, at the bottom, in smallest print: *Program subject to change without notice.

Francis paled.

Subject to change without notice.

No.

No, it couldn't be, he'd told Kaisa to ensure Héderváry was properly tied up! That was why her name was next to every single position on this list! With assisting committees, yes, but - if Héderváry could walk about between announcements -

"For those of you listening at home on other worlds," Héderváry continued, "Roderich Edelstein is a well-known artist and musician here in Caput Halleri, who has graciously offered to be the voice of the Decennial today, both literally and figuratively - in addition to acting as auctioneer, he will also be conducting the entertainment during the break between class one, and classes two and three
later this afternoon. Everybody at home, you'll want to listen, take it from me!"

He'd better go find Kaisa now and try and get her to explain - and also avoid the hell out of Héderváry, now that she was evidently free to roam around while this Edelstein handled the crowd. Doing that would give Francis something to do while Antonio hauled himself to the auction fairgrounds - hopefully in time for Matthieu.

Supposing he wouldn't be able to register himself? But who else would be available to purchase a bondsman at such late notice?! Anybody looking to buy would be buying for themselves, the likelihood of the ability to purchase two would be at best slim and at worst nonexistent with Héderváry now free to check, double-check and triple-check every single sale -

"Well, we've got a great show for you today, I hope you'll all enjoy the fine products we have for sale. We'll start with the first number on our program - allow me to introduce to you a superlative bondsperson trainer and seller with a solid record of sales for the past seven years. She's a forward-thinking businesswoman with quality product, and in my opinion a true asset to the bondsperson trade community. Ladies and gentlemen, may I present the fine wares of Ms Helena Carson of Luna Halleri!"

Deafening applause. And that meant Héderváry would be on the move soon. Francis gulped, whirled on his heel off the post he'd been leaning on while waiting for his friend and -

- and ran straight into Lovino Vargas of Hallar.
It was the fifth time he hit talk on his Eavesdropper, set to frequency #30, that Karpusi finally got through.

"Sadiq Adnan, come in -"

"Finally," Karpusi interrupted. He ducked behind the building - Epsilon a few paces past it - and peered out intermittently. Just walking around like nothing was up! "Adnan, what the hell was going on over there?"

"Petros being a dick, the usual. Anyway, I take it those anti-sleep pills're working if you're this torqued outta shape. What's got your panties in a knot?"

"Oh I dunno," he shot back, "nearly being apprehended at the Border Control might do the trick." Slyly he watched Epsilon continue down the lane and take a left on vicolo Giallo at the corner. So he abandoned his post behind the house and followed down the lane, slowing as he approached to tiptoe up to the corner.

Took a peek around it. Epsilon fifteen paces down. He'd stay here for now.

"Say what? What'd you do to deserve that?"

"I got mugged, remember? Somehow the group of five - six - whatever - got my ID." Maybe they even were the muggers. "Guess what Delta's been having himself a lark of a time forging?"

There was silence on the connection and then Adnan broke out into chuckles.

"Hey! It isn't funny!"

"No," Adnan agreed, still chuckling away, "it's not. I mean, the ease with which someone can duplicate our IDs to the point that they'll log in OK is terrifying. But I've been saying that for years. And would anybody listen to me? Nooo. Anyway, I didn't see you dragged in by here for jail, so you must've managed okay?"

Karpusi sighed. "Yeah." He poked his head around the corner. Epsilon out of sight, but there was only one route out - via Verda about midway down the crescent.

He stepped quickly, and as he moved, replied, "The girl wasn't too happy with me once I got through. Called over security, who tried checking the BSPA registrar where I am obviously there with only my name, didn't help without a picture. Then one of 'em had the brain cells required to say the full name aloud and it turned out all four gates saw the same name, same ID, and different pictures all in a row. Brothers they claimed. Brothers my ass. But that's not everything."

Karpusi vaulted over the gate at the house on the corner of Giallo and Verda and took a quick detour through the backyard.

"Oh?"
"Yeah," Karpusi grinned, even if Adnan couldn't see it. "You'll never guess who I'm tailing right now."

"You're joking," was the flat reply. Karpusi heard a low rustle - hopefully the sounds of Adnan getting off his ass and preparing to leave.

"Tino Vey-na-whatever - Epsilon. He's been moving about like he's up to no good since he landed."

"Is he alone?"

Karpusi peered over the fence to spot Epsilon in the middle of the road, looking around - for him, possibly? Karpusi must be a louder tracker than he thought. He'd work on it.

Then Epsilon went back the way he came - yes, sure enough, he was looking for Karpusi.

"Think so," he murmured quietly into the Eavesdropper, "which makes me think the rest of them are probably up to the official side of no good. I'm sure they didn't come all this way to have him fart about in Caput Halleri like it's a hedge maze so that means Alpha through Delta and Zeta are off doing something untoward."

"Oh my, not something untoward. Perish the thought!"

"Just shut your face and get down here."

"I'm pretty sure you can be assured there won't be muggers today when everybody's gonna be at the auction. You won't need me watching your back while you corner Epsilon."

"I meant get off your duff and come downtown, you idiot!"

"Cause that takes so long for me to do being so far away from the action!" Adnan snapped back. "Where d'you think the others are?"

"My guess? They're at the 'Downs," he said.

He caught the hem of Epsilon's jacket seconds before he appeared. Karpusi zipped behind the closest garden shed. He peeked out to find Epsilon walking right past the house and its backyard, unaware of him hiding out.

With Epsilon now in front, he could strike.

"Sounds about right for their MO. Either one. Purchase a bondsperson with fake money, or purchase with real money and steal it back. Why they've selected the Decennial's beyond me - are they hunting bigger game? Maybe they were dared?"

"No, you're right. And normally they're covert. But recently they've done the bare minimum in hiding themselves - oh, and set your Eavesdropper to monitor op frequency - you got a pen? 134 gigs, Morse callsign niner-seven-Tenickson dash Pioneer Fish Lazuli."

Scritching as Adnan wrote it down. "Just Big Bird?" he asked. "That's a code for a cruiser class."
"I told you already. They didn't bring the stealthship this time. If they fly off, I want us both to know about it."

"Gotcha."

"Didn't you get my letter?" he asked. He chanced a quick look over the gate - Epsilon had turned back to the main road.

He waited.

Epsilon searched around and then returned the way he'd come, looking concerned. Karpusi ducked back behind the gate, obscured by the ivy.

Another minute before he'd have to shut off the Eavesdropper.

"Hey, I only just got back here like an hour ago. There was rumour of the Delivery hovering outside Halleri airspace so I went to check it out."

"And?"

"Same old - they're sitting just outside it in interplanetary space so there's no touchin' em. The second they come inside, though, I swear ..."

"So you say." Karpusi took a last look. Perhaps thirty seconds.

"Look, do you want my fuckin' help or not?"

"What I want is for you to do your damn job, Sadiq," he replied sternly.

"Sheesh, I think I liked you better before when you were half asleep all the time, you were way more easy-going."

He had a job to do, he could sleep later. "I didn't put up with your shit then, and I'm not putting up with it now. We'll dance it out later. Get the hell downtown," he growled, "and that is an order from a superior ranking agent, Adnan."

"Okay! God. Listen, I'm just walking out of BSPA HQ right now. I'll be at Tolino in five."

"You'd better," Karpusi muttered, and shut off the device.

Five more seconds. He counted them down slowly in his head, his pulse thrumming in his ears.

And then, as Epsilon passed the gate, he leapt to his feet behind it, grabbed the man by the front of his shirt and pulled him over the gate, throwing him to the ground back-first.

Epsilon gulped for air, winded, and while he was distracted trying to make his chest work right again, Karpusi unclipped the handcuffs from his belt and clapped them around Epsilon's wrists in front. He hauled a coughing, spitting Epsilon to his feet, and marched him back to the main road, yanking him around with the handcuff chain tightly held in his left hand and his right hand free for Epsilon's funny business.

"You let me go!" Epsilon cried once he'd recovered the use of his respiratory system, and began to
thrash his legs and arms.

Karpusi put a stop to that by removing his sidearm and cocking it. He pointed it at Epsilon's groin and instantly Epsilon stopped thrashing. "I need you alive for questioning, but I don't need you kicking," he warned. "Don't give me incentive to make this as ball-bustingly awful as you've made my life these past two years."

"Oh, bitch and moan about it, why don't you," Epsilon spat. "Your life has been so truly horrendous! If you had any clue what I'd been doing the past two years you wouldn't dare complain -" 

"Please, do go on! Nothing would make me happier than to book you for what you've done. Tell me all about it." He grabbed a hold of Epsilon's belt and held the pistol in the same hand, so the muzzle dug into the small of Epsilon's back while he patted him down.

Nothing on the arms or chest, but there was an Eavesdropper in his pocket and strapped to Epsilon's right ankle was a handy and sharp little six-inch. "Nice toys. Think I'll confiscate them," Karpusi said, getting to his feet and deftly tucking the blade into the back of his belt. "Your days of taking what's not yours for taking and fencing it out to turn a spot of change are over."

"That's what - you idiot, that's exactly what the people we're trying to stop do! They're the thieves, why'n't you go and book them?! We fight the good fight, we're the ones liberating the stolen, helping them reclaim what was taken from them -"

What nonsense! Well, if it were a job for the psych ward, they could settle that later. "You're deluded. Tino Vayna-"

"Oh, don't," Epsilon snarled.

"Whatever the hell your name is," Karpusi continued coolly, "you're under arrest for suspicion of grand larceny and fraud as well as being accomplice to many accounts of the aforementioned. You've got the right to remain silent because anything your flappy gums say, you can bet I'll hold against you as evidence in court of law."

"Screw you and the high horse you rode in on, you ignorant pig. You don't even know what you don't know. We're not done yet, and we never will be, because good always triumphs."

"You know what I think? I think that sounds like terrorist talk. I think maybe we'll add some charges to that happy little list of yours." But Epsilon would say no more than that and was quiet the long trek back to Hallar BSPA HQ.

It was so nice when hard work paid off, Karpusi thought, smirking to himself in triumph and practically vibrating with energy. Because the desperation of recent misses made him a better agent, not a shittier one.
Of all the things Raivis was expecting to find on his way patrolling the residential part of the Duma - on a day like today, when that part of the building was locked up tight as a drum - Ivan was not one of them.

Eduard was a more welcome sight, though Raivis didn't like how closely they walked. Crazy Ivan probably insisted upon it. Ah, how brave Eduard was to just hang out with him all the time!

But Ivan was supposed to be on Hallar, which was the really troublesome part.

But there was a cab driver he'd spotted in the window. It must have been the case that Ivan was detained and would be joining them later. And Eduard carried a suitcase. Carrying Ivan's things around for him, yes, that's what a servant would do. Even if Eduard didn't dress like one, in worsted trousers and a handsome green double-breasted waistcoat over a crisply pressed shirt, instead of the usual linen drawstring bondservant attire. Or even the kind of thing a valet might wear, like Raivis' more modest trousers and plain shirt. Well, whatever, crazy Ivan could play dress-up so long as it didn't hurt Eduard.

That didn't explain what Raivis overheard, when he crept closer to try and figure out what the hell was going on. "Krasimir of Bast is your contact when you land," said Ivan, and then some muttering Raivis didn't catch, and then, "... recommend you enroll in the local university. At least to keep yourself from becoming bored. But of course I did not take such liberties as signing you up for classes or anything." A sigh. "Anyway ..." Ivan thrust the envelope forward and said, glumly, "Everything's explained inside this, with ... your papers."

Papers? Bondsperson papers? Then that would mean Eduard was free.

Free!

Raivis' spirits rose, and then fell.

Eduard was free, and ... leaving?

Raivis could slip out - he had keys, he could manage to worm his way back in. Eduard would have told them if he were leaving, wouldn't he? If he were being granted freedom? It didn't matter that he hadn't accepted Toris' offer - either way this got him out of crazy Ivan's psycho clutches.

The least Eduard could have done was say goodbye!

"Vanya," Eduard murmured. Vanya? Raivis thought. What did Eduard think he was doing? Since when would a bondsperson take such liberties!?

They weren't close. They couldn't be. Toris had said so!

Raivis watched, horrified, as they ... grew closer.

This was a dangerous game. Suppose Ivan did something really awful - unless he were drunk
enough? But it wasn't even tea time yet, he couldn't be - and he didn't seem drunk. Then he was dangerous! Raivis reached around to touch the pistol tucked into the waistband of his trousers, to remind himself it was still there, just in case.

"You had better leave," Ivan advised. He sounded so sad, so distraught ... but not like he was going to snap at any minute. Something didn't add up. "I am sure the cab driver is getting impatient in the courtyard -"

"Damn the cab driver," Eduard replied, and then Eduard flung his arms around Ivan's shoulders - and kissed him full on the mouth.

Raivis' jaw dropped. He nearly knocked the pistol down his pants entirely.

Then he pinched himself. No, not a dream. Yes, that really happened.

Eduard what the hell! God, but he sure had a thing for mortal peril! What in the system did he think he was doing?!

Only ... Ivan wasn't reacting how he'd expected, there was no pulling Eduard to the floor and tearing his clothes off or ripping of skin or limbs with teeth and blood and guts, nothing like what Toris said - in fact ...

Raivis was reminded more of the text he'd come across in the Gospozha's chambers, an old book of poetry lying around that he'd stumbled over and idly flipped through. (He'd become quickly absorbed and had made off with it, intending to put it back later once the Gospozha had left for Hallar.) The look on Ivan's face brought up the page whose margin notes translated a candle, not extinguished with the force of a gale, but snuffed out, silently and quietly, a last painful rake of coals. A lingering curlicue of smoke, the intangibility of memory.

No, he was clearly broken-hearted, but not crazy. Perfectly normal.

Had Toris been wrong all along?

Ivan reacted like any normal person would! And it was surreal to see him do so, after having been told time and again from Toris how insane Ivan was and to stay the hell away from him at all costs - going on about rendering flesh from bone and such, a barely-contained monster. Ivan looked ... well, human.

"Thank you. For everything," Eduard said, taking the envelope. He picked up the suitcase - his suitcase.

In reply, Ivan kissed him on the forehead sweetly, whispered something Raivis couldn't make out, and held him close.

And this was when Raivis remembered having overheard Toris' complaining from so long ago - that bitch is about to ruin eight long years' hard work - the Gospozha who had gone to Hallar to pick up a bondsperson for her brother.

Ivan was, obviously, perfectly sound of mind after Eduard's intervention.

Eduard had betrayed them.
Raivis glared, watching as Ivan locked the doors behind Eduard. That bastard couldn't leave without at least an explanation.

--

He waited only until Ivan had left the premises and then, so angry his hands shook with the keys, undid the triple locks on the door.

Then he exited to find -

The cab gone.

Eduard still near the door on the residential side of the courtyard, the suitcase propped up against the wall metres from Raivis, and ajar. "Raivis!" he exclaimed. "I thought you were - never mind."

Raivis felt his ire return in full force. "What do you think you're doing?!"

"What am I doing? What the hell are you doing? You shouldn't be here."

"Pretty sure I work here," Raivis snapped.

"No, Anistas Kudrins works here, you don't -"

"And how'd you find out about that, anyway?" Eduard flushed. "When were you going to tell me? Or were you just going to let me find out on my own?"

"About what?"

"About HIM!" Raivis thundered, feeling angrier than he'd been in awhile. "About the fact that you've been lying to me all this time, lying to all of us. Playing up this poor unused bondsperson act when all along you'd helped him out with his Time!"

"T-that's different! I didn't know any of you then!"

"Sure, but when you did, you didn't say anything about it, did you? You lied to me, you let - you let me think you were still in danger, I was s-so - oh, you idiot, I was so worried about you, I thought he would kill you - don't you know how scared we were?"

"I'm sorry -" and he really did look it, but Raivis wasn't through with him yet.

"You didn't trust me!" he complained.

"I didn't know!"

"And, and all this time, you've b-been - and with him - him, of all people! Eduard, do you know the things he's done?!"

"He is not a bad man!"

"Oh my god," because between Vanya and that kiss, it had finally clicked, "You actually love him."

"No!"
His lips curled, Raivis sneered, "You're deluded."

"I'm not! I don't -" Eduard huffed impatiently, "I don't know, okay? All I know is that you'd better get out of here. I don't want to see you in jail! Or worse -"

"I'm not going anywhere. This is my job and I can handle it."

"No, the plan's changed now. Ivan is still inside - things could get messy -"

"They already are!"

Eduard sighed. "Just, leave, please, Raivis? Find Toris and Feliks and get them to leave, all three of you. I told him not to - but I don't trust Zielska, and I - just get out of here and be safe!"

Raivis didn't move.

"You stubborn goat, get going!"

He didn't.

"I didn't want it to come to this," Eduard muttered.

And then he pulled out a revolver from his pocket, pulled back the hammer, and pointed it at him. "Raivis, you have to leave."

Raivis raised an eyebrow. This is kind of amusing, he thought. Minus one tapestry this time, however.

"Please," Eduard continued, "I couldn't -" Raivis took a step closer, and Eduard's hand wavered. "I couldn't take it if you got caught up in this and it went south, and ..."

Another step. He looked at Eduard, directly in the eyes, then at the butt of the revolver, then back at Eduard. Difficult to tell whether it was loaded, but rounds or not, he wasn't scared at all.

"Zielska's planning s-something but I can't figure out what it is," Eduard's voice grew shakier and shakier, like he'd erupt into tears at any point. Raivis knew that feeling well. But he wasn't crying...

He stepped close enough, into the weapon, where Eduard had it aimed. Perhaps Eduard had been aiming in the general direction of his chest but having come closer, Raivis was just tall enough for it to be pointed at his face.

"But it's big and it's wrong and -" Eduard shook so badly - "and if anything, anything were to happen to you..."

"Shoot me," Raivis whispered. "I won't leave. You'll have to shoot me."

He wouldn't.

"I," Eduard began, "I ..."
"You can't do it," Raivis supplied, and gently took the gun from Eduard's hand.

Eduard threw Raivis an angry look, but his shoulders slumped and he deflated with obvious relief.

"You need to mean something like that," he said darkly, gently setting the hammer back and handing it to Eduard, now mostly harmless, "you need to intend to shoot me. It's not like in stories where this is a feint, it's more like an ultimatum. You have to be prepared to follow through either avenue, and that includes pulling the trigger."

"You once ... on me," Eduard whispered, his fingers trembling around the revolver's handle.

Raivis nodded. "And I was prepared to shoot you."

"Then how can you act so angry when I didn't trust you!" Eduard exploded. "You very obviously didn't trust me!"

"That's ... that's true," he realised. "Where did you get something like that? I certainly hope it's not standard issue to everybody working closely with Ivan?"

Eduard let out a short, nervous bark of a laugh. "Hah, no, this, I lifted from his office. I don't know why he keeps it. It's not exactly the most recent model. I just wanted - oh, I don't even know what I wanted, Raivis. I wanted to prevent whatever is going to happen today from happening. I don't want you hurt. I don't want Feliks or Toris hurt. But I don't want Ivan hurt, either, and ..."

"Getting all three is going to be difficult?" he guessed. Eduard sadly nodded.

"I think," Raivis said slowly, trying not to offend, "if there's anybody who shouldn't be here, it's the guy that has no training in weapons, security or intelligence." Eduard blinked. "I mean, you're not wrong. With Ivan ... this will change things. I don't know what Toris or Feliks will say. Or Zielska. But things will get heated - and people do dumb things when things get heated - hell, Zielska might just blow up outright. She has such a temper! I don't know if I trust her much, so I don't blame you. Anyway, it's safest with you farther away from the action."

Eduard had fallen silent. "Right," he said finally, in a distracted, far-away manner, "right. Of course. Oh my god, of course ... it all makes sense."

However, there was no time to ask him about it because the Eavesdropper in his pocket crackled. "Raivis, where the hell are you?" came Toris' voice. "Feliks is already in position and we're waiting at the gates!"

Already?! He hadn't figured out what to tell Toris yet! "I'll be there soon!"

"We can't move forward without your initiative!" Toris hadn't sounded this panicked in awhile. Telling him about Ivan wasn't going to be easy.

"I know! I know! Just - give me two minutes, I'll be right there!" he told the device, and jammed it back into his pocket. "Eduard, you should -"

But when he looked up, Eduard and the suitcase were gone.
Toris had many things planned for when Raivis came rushing down the corridor, jogging and out of breath, and skidded to a stop in front of him, but the second he heard the clink of keys and the stomping of shoes, most of them flew out of his head.

Instead he blurted out, "Raivis you jackass, what if someone had caught you and I never saw you again, god if you make me worry like that one more time - where the hell have you been?!"

"Doesn't matter," Raivis panted, "have information - plan's changed!"

"It's the bondsman, isn't it," Zielska guessed. Toris pretended he didn't see the nasty look Raivis threw her.

"Eduard wouldn't do that to us!" Toris protested. Raivis stayed quiet. "Look, if it were anything related to him, it'd be something out of his control. And there'd be no use blaming him for something like that. But he's got nothing to do with it, hasn't he?"

Raivis shook his head. "It's Ivan," he clarified, "he didn't go to Hallar after all. He's still in the building."

That might be worse. Toris looked to Zielska, who spent a quiet moment in thought. "Is he the only one who didn't go?" she asked finally. Raivis nodded. Then she asked, "Is there a way to lure him out of his room for a period of time?"

"Maybe. I can try," Raivis offered.

"Good. Do so. Only let us know if you're unsuccessful and he's still there - in that case, Toris, you'll come to Bragina's room with me. If we hear nothing, then we carry on as normal."

Toris gaped. "You can't be serious!"

Zielska snorted. "No covert operation has ever run on schedule. That's why we have failsafes and backups. Two out of three isn't bad - we can compensate for Bragin."

"We might not get the Zapreschniy file."

"We'll have to deal and hope for other assets equally as valuable. Oh, come on, Toris," she said. "You can't tell me you think Darinys is the only cover-up they've ever done." To her agent - Zielska and Toris had been accompanied by an agent apiece - she instructed, "Head back to the base in preparation to execute Operation Check - that's our back-up," she explained to Toris, "and as for the rest of us, we continue forward."

The agent who had been with her turned around to retrace steps. As for Zielska and the agent assigned to Toris, they pressed on. When all their backs were turned, Toris mouthed, 'You okay?' to Raivis.

Raivis shrugged and refused to meet his gaze.
The way to the south-east tower went smoothly. They lurked in the south-west tower for the solitary member of the guard to come by, and then the remaining three. All were relatively easy to knock out with thetralorazine, and then displace in separate rooms in the tower. All guards would wake from their drugged sleep alone, with nobody around to guarantee them an easy alibi.

Two minutes to get across. Not a single shot fired from the tenailles or from the other walls or towers.

So far, so good, thought Toris, once they were all safely in the residential side of the Duma.

Toris had never been in this side of the building but didn't tarry long to take in the sights. Not much to look at. It all looked about the same as the business side - sterile walls on which hung the glory of the Empire Union; a coat of arms, a liveried armour statue with a battered shield. He rolled his eyes.

*This way*, Raivis gestured with his head, down the hall, pointing out the first stop - the Gospozha Bragina's quarters, armed and locked up tight. He took a quick glance around the corner. He returned and nodded. Nobody there.

Zielska and the two agents with Toris slipped by and began moving down the corridor.

Toris took him aside before they followed suit and whispered, "Listen, seriously, be careful, okay? If they've left Ivan behind ... it must be fairly bad with him. It wouldn't have been that difficult for them to bring him along. He must be *quite* ill. And it's too early in the day to be drunk. The Gospozha might have bound him to the bed ... don't tempt fate and try something like letting him loose just so you can get him out of his room. The second something goes wrong - don't you listen to what Zielska says, you get right on that thing and you *tell me* and I will drop everything at once. You understand?"

"I'll be *fine,*" Raivis whispered back, sounding more and more like a sullen teenager that Toris was mothering. He slipped out of Toris' grasp and darted around the corner, his keyring clutched tight in his fist, to Ivan's quarters.

Toris peered around the hall to watch Raivis disappear at the end of it. Nobody around - Zielska and the other agent had gone on ahead.

He took a second to shoulder-check.

Nobody behind him, either.

He walked, soft-footed and gingerly, across the marble floor. A light touch came easily to him after becoming accustomed to the weight of heavy clogs that 'Brother' Toris wore. For once, he found himself delighted with lavish decorations - exorbitant and a waste of money marble floors might be, no hardwood meant no creaks, and Toris could be as ghostly as he wished.

It also had the nasty tendency to echo. Toris overheard two servants talking when he approached the end of the corridor and instantly panicked - but when he peeked around, he found they were far away and facing the other direction.
He understood now why Zielska had requested no news for good news - they didn't want a relayed message from another party to give them away.

Didn't matter. If something went wrong with Raivis, he needed to know about it more than he needed to keep Zielska's agents safe.

He found Zielska and the other agent in the stairwell down the two flights of stairs to the level that had the easiest access to the Gospozha's chambers (only a few locks instead of, like, twenty and a further ten booby traps).

"Raivis?" asked Zielska under her breath when he caught up to them.

"Haven't heard from him yet," he murmured.

"Neither have we. We're fairly close; stairwell is concrete, might block sound -"

"Eduard said the signals should transmit well at this distance," Toris said. When Zielska didn't seem appeased by that, he insisted, "Eduard would never do anything to compromise Raivis."

"Perhaps not on purpose," Zielska replied tightly. Toris didn't feel like bickering and overheard voices in the distance, so he shut up.

The Gospozha's chambers were the doors on the left hall exiting the stairwell; the middle of these the easiest to open (some of the others didn't even have doorknobs on the corridor side, suggesting egress only). When they reached it, Toris pointed to the other agent and then to Zielska and himself, asking as silently as possible whether she wanted him with her, or if he would go with Toris as planned.

Of the ten men who had followed Zielska to Skuratchky, one was with Feliks and one with Toris - the one she had sent back joined the seven waiting at the base. To Toris, it had seemed a little silly to have come all that way for nothing, but better to be overprepared than underprepared, Zielska had warned, and too many cooks spoiled the broth. If secrecy and stealth were the key to the mission's success, Toris agreed they wouldn't get that with twice as many people puttering around the Duma.

Zielska shoulder-checked before whispering, "You take Szweda."

"It's a two-person job on Bragina's locks," he argued.

"I'll manage. If I need help, I'll contact you via radio."

"Should you maybe not have instructed your officer back?"

She shook her head. "His is a worthwhile operation. There is still Gorski with Feliks if we are in dire need."

So Toris and the other agent continued. A flight of stairs and a short but nerve-wracking walk later - wisely, someone had stationed more servants near Ivan's chambers than Bragina's, Toris noted wryly - he managed to steal a quick moment where nobody was walking along the hall to steal his way towards Ivan's door and set himself upon the locks.

Still no word from Raivis, or Feliks. He began at the top and working down with the copied keys.
He'd have to assume that Feliks' portion was still on-going and that Raivis had been successful.

Szweda, who had started at the bottom and worked up, made it to the third lock before Toris finished, so he stood patrol instead. He listened carefully for footsteps, or any signs of activity from either end of the corridor, but there was nothing.

Finally he held his breath, and they pulled the door open ...

Nobody in the room.

He hoped Raivis was back in the kitchens, where he'd be more or less safe. But he idly toyed with the Eavesdropper in his pocket, debating ignoring Zielska's orders to contact him anyway, just to be certain ...

Nonsense. Raivis was probably fine, and it was time for Toris to get to work.
"The \textit{FUCK} is your problem, bastard?" Lovino exploded. "Can't you watch where you're fuckin' going?"

"I could say the same for you!" shouted a livid-looking Francis of Hallar.

They were close enough to the stage that behind Francis, Lovino could overhear, "Three point six three for the lot! Do I hear an offer of point six four, is there a point six four -"

He did not have time for this. "Ugh, whatever, just - get out of my way, I got places to be," he grumbled, and pushed past Francis when he felt an arm tug him back by the bicep.

"Point six nine! Thank you kindly, Miss 6934! Have we a further offer? Do I hear point seven? Point seven to the crowd? No?"

"Not so fast!" Francis said, and Lovino didn't like the sound of that voice. "Vargas, yes? Feliciano's brother?"

"Then I therefore declare the lot SOLD! Bidder 6934, please come to the stage!" A round of applause and cheers from the crowd.

Lovino nearly snapped. He hated it when people called him something in relation to Feliciano - like he wasn't his own person! - but then again, how would he have ever expected Francis to know his name? Lovino shunned any and all attempts at the trade trying to befriend him and welcome him into the fold. Case in point, Antonio Fernandez Carriedo, who seemed to think they were bestest besties and wouldn't leave Lovino alone like he wanted. "What if I am?" Lovino asked.

"The next item on sale, a beautiful specimen we have here. Four-foot-nine - that's 145 cm for those of us joining us from the outer planets - dark blonde hair, fairly thick eyebrows. Bright sparkling blue eyes - lovely! - and freckles, how charming! Quite young, however; perhaps twelve. Allow me to demonstrate -" a snap, and then a hush from the crowd - "\textit{very} good reaction as you can see!" Cheers and applause. "We'll start the bidding at two million. Have I got two million?"

"I must speak with Feliciano," Francis insisted.

"He's \textit{busy}," sneered Lovino. "Maybe you hadn't noticed there's an auction on! An' I gotta get to work."

Coincidentally enough the auctioneer - who sounded to Lovino like he was having way too much freakin' fun out there - chose that moment to bellow, "Ah! I see three million from bidder 0299! Thank you, 0299! How about three point one, have we three point one in the crowd - yes, bidder 3446, I see you there! That's three point one, is there three point two, three point two in the crowd -"

"Yes, I was rather aware! I don't need to occupy much of his time, I merely -" Francis deflated and harrumphed. "Anyway. Direct me to his tent, would you? Or the tent you two have set up for Avo Romae's purchases?"
With eyes narrowed, Lovino asked, "And why'd I want to do a thing like that?"

"Then three point nine it shall be! SOLD! Mister Bidder 0989, please come to the stage!" Applause and cheers.

"You want incentive?" Francis offered. "That I can provide -"

"The last item and - oh, what a beautiful one! Jet black waist-length hair, brown eyes and excellent posture - good bone structure - chest fairly large, about midsize to fullsize in fascia. Five-foot-seven or 170 cm. This is an exquisite model, here, folks. Five million, have we five to start?"

"You don't have anything I want so just shove off an' lemme go."

"Four point five, is there four point five - yes there we have it, 6772, four point five from Bidder 6772 -"

"Supposing I lure Antonio away so that you can do your work efficiently, that would help, would it not? I need to speak with Antonio anyway. He has a favour to do for me. I can ensure that he is nowhere in the arena when you are."

Lovino glowered. "I can handle him myself, I don't need you."

"Four point six, Bidder 0278 - please hold your card up nice and high - thank you, bidder 0278!"

"Oh!" Francis said lightly, "In that case, you won't mind my telling him, if - when I see him - that you are indeed at the auction, as he believed - like most of us - that you would not be present today. He was so very distraught. I imagine he will be ever so pleased to see you."

"Four point seven, is there four point seven - bidder 6772 again! Four point eight, have we four point eight -"

Lovino glowered even harder. How Francis knew not only his name but also how Antonio pestered the shit out of him, and managed to use it against him - well not all of Antonio's friends were mindless dolts, apparently!

It would be useful to have someone keeping Antonio at bay so that Lovino could do his goddamn work well enough to stop thinking about it. "Suppose I'm considering your offer," he began.

"Four point eight from 0278! I think we have a bidding war going on here, ladies and gentlemen -"

Francis smirked. "I shall suppose it, yes."

"Four point nine from 6772 - have we five, will you give us five, 0278? Yes, there we have five million from 0278!"

"That's what you want, where Feliciano is?" Lovino shrugged. "Fine, we gotta deal then. He's back over there, in the main stall with the books. I asked him to keep an eye on them until I got back, but his bondsman can't do Feli's job all by his own for long so I need to get going."

"Bondsman, eh," Francis echoed, looking sour. "That complicates things. You have a bondsman as well?"
"Psst, of c-course not!" Lovino muttered. Wouldn't see him caught dead with ... with one of those ... people. People, they should be, not objects, it was so weird. Disgusting. And they were all so brainwashed! He didn't understand how he was the only one who saw how creepy this whole trade was! Just imagining him having his own 'Ludwig' made him shudder.

"Five point two from 0278! Have I got five point three, 6772? Do I see - oh! Oh this is interesting, ladies and gentlemen, there is a third contender now, Miss 1233! A round of applause for Bidder 1233 and her bid of five point three!" A round of applause.

"Then you won't mind purchasing one for me? I know for a fact you have the required income bracket."

Lovino gaped. "You can't be serious."

"Do I see five point five? Yes, Bidder 0278! An excellent choice, this lot is a positively lovely specimen -"

"I can indeed be serious and I most certainly am. Now! My good man, since you have already agreed, I shall hold up my end of the bargain and you shall hold up yours. The bondsman I am in need of purchasing is the first of Romae's wares - you will no doubt be familiar with this set of items -"

"Five point six five from 1233! Five point seven? Five point seven from 0278! Have I five point seven five?"

Lovino reddened. How dare Francis even assume! And how dare he force Lovino into this nonsense - well, maybe Lovino should've considered all of what the hell it was Francis wanted before he'd agreed, but even so, that was a dick move!

Already he began thinking of the mechanics of the money tents. How would this play out to ensure discretion? The transaction from Lovino to Francis would have to be processed swiftly so Lovino's account could be cleared, before anybody could figure out he bought a second bondsman, as well as Feli's Alfred. Lovino was barely in the one-person range!

"Sold to our latecomer, the lovely Miss Bidder 1233, for five point seven five!" Thunderous applause. "Miss 1233, please come to the stage to meet your new bondswoman!"

"I of course will pay you," Francis offered. "You have my word."

"You better," Lovino warned. "Like I'd just give you a few million."

"Thank you, Roderich! I think you're having more fun than the audience here." A roar of laughter and applause from the audience. "But it went well for a first act, don't you think?" The response: nearly deafening hoots and hollers. "Let's make things more interesting. Ladies and gentlemen -"

"I had better leave to attend to my station," Francis replied. "You will do as I asked?"

"- allow me to introduce to you a most enigmatic and mysterious man -"

"Yeah, yeah," Lovino muttered, since he had already signed up for a bidder number for Feliciano - and then realised quickly - the first of Romae's - wasn't Feliciano's Alfred going first? - "Wait -"
"- a man whose wares have consistently outperformed every one of their classes according to Smith's Weekly and The Caput Halleri Daily Gazette -"

"There is no time," Francis hissed, "I must make myself scarce! I will meet you after the purchase where Feliciano is, before the transaction goes through. That way you should not even have to pay any money as I will be there to pay for the bondsman myself."

"- Francis of Hallar!"

The crowd went wild, and Francis darted off into it, leaving Lovino confused and concerned.
Iceland

With Norge, Tim and Danmark on their way, and Suomi on his, Sverige and Ísland doubled back to the parking lot to drive the airship and stealthship to the shipyards. The shipyards and Vehicle Service Distribution Centre weren't far enough to take off - plus it was a covered facility - so Sverige kept the landing gear down, and both ships rolled their lumbering way through the hangar. Surprising amount of potholes in here, Ísland thought.

Once he hopped out of the vehicle, past the gates (oh, they were still so trusting! Nobody had even asked to see his ID yet) Ísland introduced both Egil Kristinsson and Valter Lindquist to the fellow in charge at the shipyards, a middle-aged tired looking soul with flat hair and a small potbelly.

"You didn't bring Einar Steinsvik of Tenickson with you," said the shipyard manager, sounding sad.

"I'm the squad engineer, not Einar," Ísland reminded him, "he has better things to do," and the shipyard manager shrugged.

"True, but ... still, I was hoping. Our company very much appreciates its shareholders. The Steinsvik family owns nearly 10% of the entire company, I would have liked to shake his hand!"

"He'll probably be back later," Ísland reassured. "He's off at Tolino Downs, enjoying the festivities."

"Oh, of course," the manager replied. "Why, if I didn't have to work today, I'd probably be there myself." And his eyes glanced over at the radio with a certain wistfulness.

Ísland gave him a grin and a wink. "Hah, me too. You know, it's going to be a straightforward job of fixing the secondary up. I can let you know if I need anything, in case you want to hang out by the radio."

"Hm..."

"I know how you mean, a day like today isn't the best day for work. Are you at least getting time and a half?"

The shipyard manager admitted, "Well, no -"

"That's just criminal!" Ísland protested. "I realise it's not an official public holiday but you really would expect it to get the same sort of treatment. Practically everyone who's anyone is at the Downs right now!"

"The boss is there for sure," the shipyard manager noted unhappily. "Maybe ... maybe I'll just listen for a bit," he decided. "If you're sure you're alright on your own."

Like taking candy from a baby. "I'll be fine," Ísland said, trying not to look too triumphant, and tugged Sverige over to the gates where their ships were, near the toolboxes and also the main office.
"Hey wait, that other guy can't -"

"Oh, don't worry!" Ísland called back. "Anything he does, I supervise like a hawk. The rest is all my work."

The shipyard manager seemed unsure.

"Between us two, shouldn't be more than a half hour," Ísland guessed, and that appeased the manager enough for them to get on with it.

--

With so few people watching them, he had Sverige station himself in front of the stealthship and look busy removing panels while Ísland would hunt for tools. But he did not go to the tool box and instead made his way to the main office.

Stealing a ship wasn't difficult if you knew how the system of buying a vehicle worked in the first place. A purchaser showed up to the shipyards, selected the vehicle, paid for it - or set up a payment plan - and left. Simple as that. They had forms for the purchase that you had to fill out which came in three copies, one for the buyer, one for the seller, and one for Border Control. Those, Ísland had already taken the pleasure of filling out on the way over, and he was pleased to find in the office that little had changed on the forms except for the serial numbers at the bottom. Nobody would look too closely at those.

Ísland had spotted a few likely candidates in the sellable portion of the shipyards on their way in - the little blue three-seat speedster and the black two-seater viper were far enough from the careful watch of the shipyards' men and the manager, and close enough to the Border Control launchpad. They would both do nicely, in addition to their own two-seat stealthship. And that made seven, which was enough to get them past Caput Halleri Border Control without a problem.

It might not, however, be enough to get them home. Sverige preferred keeping a 'spare' airship to temporarily stash in order to cover their tracks while bouncing around Nunat - not doing that risked leading anybody following them back to the new base at Tullejärvi. That meant two options. One, steal a secondary, or two, make sure they weren't followed. Ideally, Ísland would have been happy with both conditions satisfied, but that depended entirely on too many variables at the moment, like whether Suomi managed to waylay Karpusi enough and whether Danmark didn't blow all their covers before Norge's purchase of Tim's sister.

With the exact candidates in mind, he'd catalogued their license plates, makes and models and began picking the lock for the office drawer. Not too difficult. After getting it open, he rifled through it briefly until he found the viper class folder and tugged that out. Organised by date obtained, it seemed. Shit, he had no idea what time of year they'd obtained those two vipers...

"Isl'nd?" he heard Sverige call softly.

"Yeah, what's up?"

"'M done with th' pan'ls. Ya done with th' fold'rs?"

"Almost. Need another few minutes. Try screwing something elementary up for show."
He left the files open in the drawer and exited the office, leaving the door a crack ajar, as he heard the bang of a panel being bent backwards, ripping the pin out of the hinges. Not too difficult to fix; even they could do it. Ísland, as the supervising engineer, played it up to look worse than the 'problem' really was, and Sverige the junior trainee acted duly shamed.

The shipyard manager over at the radio hardly moved beyond a quick look back at them. Ísland overheard something about Francis of Hallar and felt a little frantic. Margot was one of his.

"Okay, you take it from here," he whispered to Sverige, once he was assured the manager's attention was diverted.

Back to the files. He continued - how was it there were so many black and blue painted vipers? - until about three-quarters of the way down he found the black one, and soon thereafter the blue one, with the right license plates, makes and models, and an offered price on each. They'd have to check on the signals later but knowing them they would probably rework them the second they got home anyway.

He tugged both of them out and quickly scribbled out two cheques to the shipyards, one made in the name of Trygve Gran - another of Norge's pseudonyms - and the other for Pekka Talvela - one of Suomi's - and stapled the cheques to the right forms. Then he found the completed sales folder, stashed them in different places of the pile, and put everything back where it came from.

They could later retrieve the ships by hot-wiring (not hard for Danmark - or Ísland - to do) and when Border Control would stop them and claim the ship hadn't checked in, Ísland would take it from there. Of course they hadn't checked in. They'd bought two vipers awhile ago, and caught a ride with someone else to Hallar, and then planned on taking their own vipers off Hallar. Why? You couldn't buy a viper on Nunat, that's why. Lack of selection! Unpleasant salespeople! Prefer to do business with Caput Halleri! A multitude of plausible reasons. And that was also why the cheques hadn't been cashed yet. Held as deposit until Trygve and Pekka came to pick up their vehicles. As to why the Border Control didn't yet have copies of the transaction, it wasn't their problem Caput Halleri was disorganised (and Ísland began mentally preparing a 'why, in my day' type speech).

He hadn't noticed the shadow behind him growing larger and larger, and so he turned around, without thinking about it, and ran right into someone.

"Calm down," Sverige told him, when he'd jumped a mile, "'S just me!"

"Yeah, you could announce your presence," Ísland muttered. "I'm done with the first two. I'll point 'em out to everybody later."

"Who's takin' 'em?"

"One for Norge, one for Suomi." Sverige grunted something that might've been dissatisfaction. "I can't assign one to you or to me - I'd need a pseudonym and we've already given the shipyards two different ones. They've seen our face, they've met us - we're probably the only people who've passed in here all day. If anybody stopped us at Border Control and called in Shipyards, it'd be pretty tough to explain!"

"Wasn't arguin'," Sverige said with a shrug, but before he could explain anything more the Eavesdroppers in both their pockets crackled.
"Hi, yeah - we need backup," said the device in Norge's voice. "Can you get Ísland here?"

"We've only got two of three so far," Ísland replied, "I can't go anywhere at the moment. Why do you need me?"

"Sverige, then. I have to overshoot. Our target has ... changed position."

"By a lil'?" Sverige asked.

"By a lot. Significantly." A quick code - Danmark's idea, so as not to worry Tim too much. It meant they'd need more than they imagined and that for someone who was supposedly discount worth - something on the order of single-digits - Margot was beginning to become expensive. It wasn't their money to begin with (Ísland saw to that), so it wasn't anything to worry about, but not having the money when it came time to buy would complicate things.

"I c'n go," Sverige said, "better I go'n you anyway. You've got th' credentials, pr'tend t' send me back fer supplies'r somethin'."

"Then Sverige's on it," Ísland said.

"Make it quick," Norge replied.

"Let's hope it isn't Romae's lil' terrors workin' th' cash, then," Sverige grumbled.

"It's Francis' shop," they heard Danmark point out.

"If he's understaffed, he would rely first on Romae. But he's got his own secretary. Some skinny kid with blonde hair, purple eyes and glasses," Norge told them.

"Oh good," Sverige said. "Don't think I met 'im b'fore. Okay then, should be fine," He gave Ísland a quick nod and a thumbs up before they resumed character and Egil scolded Valter for not having brought the proper tools. Exeunt Valter.

The shipyard manager from the radio heard it, but thought nothing of it and turned back.

Good that he was distracted. "Hey, Suomi," Ísland said into the Eavesdropper. There was no reply. "Su-oooo-mi... the hell are you?"

Again, no reply.

"Suomi did say he wouldn't always be 'n contact," Sverige mumbled over the radiowaves, evidently on his way already.

"Someone keep trying for him, then," Ísland advised. "I have to tell him he's got a ship waiting for him before we leave."

"Plenty'a time fer that," Sverige said.

Yeah, that's exactly what you said about getting into Border Control, Ísland thought with a grimace.
Chapter Notes

Norway

My favourite chapter in the whole fic :D sorry it took so long to get us here! WOW Sara, how about we stop forgetting about Sold.

(norway)

"Is that one her?"

"The height's right... I think, maybe ... no. I don't think so."

"Are you positively sure?"

Another silence as Tim thought about it. "No. Not her. I'm fairly sure."

But not positively sure, Norge thought sullenly. Still, he kept his bidder sign placard low and instead listened to the bids begin.

How had Francis accumulated so many blondes? Did he sell anybody who was not a blonde anymore? Is this how he selected his prospectives? It was becoming more and more worrisome, especially since Tim couldn't recognise any of them as his sister with any great accuracy. It was never 'no' or 'yes'. It was always 'probably no', and Norge didn't like the sound of probably when it came with the chance it was her and they'd let her go forever.

It was ridiculous to think he was alone in these concerns. Tim was her brother. Obviously, this meant something to him; obviously, he didn't intend his ambiguity. She could have grown and changed in the three years that had elapsed since they'd last seen each other. And if Tim didn't even remember his own name, what were the chances he'd spot her immediately on the stage?

Still - as the bondsgirl by the auctioneer re-donned the robe, hopped off the block and exited stage right, having been bought for a princely sum of 9.72 million (not one of Francis' bondspeople had yet to be sold for less than four million) - Norge was filled with dread from what if.

They watched in silence as another bondsperson took the stage - a male. Obviously not her. Sold a few moments later for 12.5 million.

"How about this one?" Norge asked. A thin girl with blond hair pulled back into a ponytail.

"Hair's too long," Tim decided. "But it could have grown in three years. Six inches a year, that's a possible eighteen inches."

'You sound certain," Norge approved.

Tim looked another moment, studying the girl on the stage - the auctioneer had pushed her robe off her small shoulders and she stood, unashamedly nude, in front of a crowd of thousands - and he
flushed crimson. "Ah... this'll sound awful, but the breasts are too small. I don't think it's her."

"Doesn't sound awful at all. She's your sister, you're identifying her by body type, that's helpful."
And again, Norge didn't budge an inch and kept the placard at his side. But it was concerning, because according to the program Francis of Hallar held lot numbers 18 to 30 and this girl was number 25.

26 was another male. They heard a yell of, 'security!' off to the sides but couldn't see the source in the thick throng of people. "Where's Danmark?" Tim asked warily.

Norge was about to call him in when speak of the devil and he arrived. Danmark bumped into them - almost literally - and exclaimed, as 26 was sold, "There you both are! God, there's a lot of people here today."

Thanks, Captain Obvious, Norge thought, but let it go and asked instead, "Was that you? For security?" 27, another male.

"Yeah," he confessed, "that was me. They didn't like me skulking around the complementary coffee table at registration and told me to scram. I don't know why, I mean, it's free. Don'tcha kind of expect people to hover around free stuff? But I think I found our Agent Adnan. Dark skin, dark eyes, dark hair."

That didn't narrow it down much. "What was he wearing? What style of hair, was he tall? short? Disposition?"

"Oh, right -" (yeah, 'oh', Norge thought) - "uh, close-cropped hair. Clean shaven. And he was kinda short - for a federal agent I mean - maybe... about 170 cm? 'Bout half a head shorter than me, came up to my chin. Quiet kinda guy. Sulky fellow, didn't seem too happy to be here. He wore a security outfit, so I guess the two of them are playing at being security today. His tag says 'Bakhoum', but everybody's paired up in security so far while he wanders around alone."

Security outfits made the most amount of sense. Easy in and out access to the arena, and people would part the crowd easily for a man in an official looking uniform. They could throw anybody out, too. "We'll have to make sure not to run into security," Norge advised. "Try to keep your coffee runs to a minimum."

28 and 29 were both males, and it was starting to look grim when 30 showed up. Female! If this wasn't her... He looked over at Tim, who squinted at the girl onstage. "That... might actually be Margot," he said.

"Short blond hair," the auctioneer was calling out. Check. "Green eyes, five-foot-four, or 163 cm." Check.

"Are you certain?"

The moment of truth. Tim squinted again. "No," he said sadly. "I don't know. I think so. I'm pretty sure."

"Be very sure," Norge warned. If she'd been sold...

"A lovely model as you can see! Excellent musculature - there's a little extra skin on the bones as well, perhaps a midsize in fascia -" the auctioneer said as he stepped around her to tug the robe off
her shoulders.

Instantly the girl bristled and snapped in the direction of the auctioneer's hand. If he hadn't moved it out of the way so quickly she might've bitten a good chunk of leather glove.

Tim positively beamed. "That's her. It's got to be her."

"Quite the temperament, unfortunately," said the auctioneer tartly. "For this spirited number, we'll start the bidding a little lower. One million?" Norge put up his placard. "Thank you, Bidder 6752!" Some half-hearted applause from the crowd. "Do I hear one point five? Ah, yes! Bidder 9232!"

Some more applause from the crowd. "Have we two?"

"Who's that?" Tim asked warily, as Norge put up the placard again.

"Probably some idiot. They'll back down first, though, I'll make sure of it." After all, Norge had effectively no limit. (Well. He had a limit, but it wouldn't be reached. Ten million for a bondservant? Twenty million if he counted Sverige's contributions? Unheard-of!)

Sure enough, 9232 - along with 3214 and 8554 and the other bidders who had jumped in around three million, quit placing bids by the time Norge held up his placard for twelve point five. The remaining bidder in their war - 0143 - kept up the game.

Around thirteen million, Norge began to worry.

"Do I hear fourteen point seven?" 0143 bid. "Fourteen point eight?" Norge bid. The crowd had, by now, increased in energy from hushed murmurs to frenzied chatter, and this did not help Norge's mood. (It was a strange day when he felt thankful for Danmark, who couldn't be pried from Tim's side with a crowbar and who was being generally loud and obnoxious - and a helpful distraction.) 0143 offered fourteen point nine. Norge offered fifteen.

Fifteen million. Surely the other bidder wouldn't go above this?

"This is quite the show, ladies and gentlemen!" Margot onstage looked less than impressed, Tim appeared concerned, Danmark had resorted to jittery laughter at stale jokes, and Norge was very silently freaking out.

He stood up on tiptoes and peeked over the crowd to try and spot 0143 when they bid next.

"Fifteen point one?" the auctioneer asked, and as 0143 put up the placard, the crowd went mad and the auctioneer cried victoriously, "Fifteen point one!"

Norge's eyes followed from the placard down the arm to the face of the person who bid such outrageous nonsense.

And then he gasped aloud and really began to panic. Without thinking, he shot his placard up the second the auctioneer screamed for fifteen point two. He felt chills down his spine despite balmy weather and lack of breeze; his breath grew short and shallow without having done a shred of physical exertion.

"What?" Danmark asked, as 0143 bid fifteen point three. "What is it?"

"I-it's nothing!" Norge blurted out, bidding fifteen point four, struggling to maintain composure and act as though everything were fine, when it really, really wasn't. "This jerk's just matching me."
"Maybe some asshole who thought it'd be fun to shadow your bids to push up the price higher for shits 'n' giggles?" Danmark suggested.

"I'm sure that's all it is," Norge said, and then went on to say words he normally would have rather eaten, "you're probably right."

That would have been preferable to Frederick Plinton of Tenickson, who - as bidder 0143 - bid fifteen and a half million for Tim's sister.

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Einar Steinsvik and Frederick Plinton - both of rich, monied families from Tenickson - had known each other once, some time ago. They were schoolboys together, who ran with different crowds, but the school itself was small and private. Cliques be damned, you couldn't avoid knowing everybody's name, and at some point during their scholastic careers, Einar and Frederick had come across one another in a small number of endeavours - the same football team in Physical Education; assigned group projects in History.

Einar had never really liked many people in his school, and Frederick Plinton was no exception to his general rule. Einar was quiet and unobtrusive, but Frederick was quiet in a way that Einar wasn't, in a way that made Einar's teeth grind and his nose wrinkle and his lips curl. Once or twice when he was walking home he'd find Frederick off the path, coming out of the bushes and smelling of some vile blend of wet wood and rust. Frederick said he'd come across a dead squirrel, that it was well cool and Einar should come see (no, thank you). But besides his intuition and a few strange behaviours, Einar couldn't put a finger on it exactly. Besides, Frederick was pleasant enough to his face. He knew how to behave and was more social and better liked than Einar.

For Frederick's sixteenth birthday his parents had gotten him a bondsperson. Many sixteen year olds in Einar's classes had been the recipient of such an extravagant gift. And like all of them, Frederick had paraded it around for the few weeks before school let out for summer. It had been three months into the next school year before conversation had meandered its slow way around the old topics and someone had inquired about Frederick's bondsperson.

Well, I used it, Frederick said simply, and it took two more boastings about new bondspersons from Frederick before Einar had pieced together what was happening.

The worst thing was, nobody else had seemed to think it strange, or creepy. (Either that, or nobody else had figured out what Frederick really meant.) It wasn't homicide, it was getting sick of an old toy, and finding one last good use for it, and everybody was so calm about it that at first Einar had thought the problem lay with him - you could do anything with a bondsperson once it was yours, and the scope of the meaning of anything alarmed Einar, but it didn't seem to bother anyone else.

When he figured out the link between the pirates' increased visits to the outer planets (a side-note on page 8 in the Tenickson Times, if that) and Frederick's ability to continually afford bondspersons on a modest net annual income of a quarter million, Einar realised why it bothered him. Bondspersons could be claimed, harvested, pulled off the streets, and all you had to do was be in the wrong place in the wrong time. The pirates decided haphazardly who went where and the sales dictated the rest. And who decided the most expensive bondspersons? Who decided who became one? How were the Subscript families any more different than the pirates?

Whether pirates or parents, it didn't matter in the end. For Einar, bondspeople had ceased to be a
different species. They were not any less human than he was, and to think of himself - or worse, someone he loved - being snatched and bought by someone, someone like Frederick, for the sake of destroying, just because Frederick could afford it...

It made him sick.

People like Frederick were the real reason he had become Norge, when Einar Steinsvik finished his studies and permanently left Tenickson and high society and its outrageously cavalier attitude to murder behind.

Worse still, Frederick of Tenickson made quite a bit more money these days. Not only could he match Norge, he could easily outbid him.

"You, take this and keep bidding," he said, handing his placard to Tim; "and you," he said to Danmark, "get into the crowd and disappear. When I call you over the radio, be nice and loud and distracting."

The perplexion on both their faces was obvious and almost comical were it not for the ultimate severity of the situation. "Uh," Danmark said in his usual eloquence, "By distracting, you mean -"

"I mean you have carte blanche to be as loud as humanly possible, half-wit," Norge snapped. "And I expect you to use it."

Danmark and Tim looked at each other and then, cautiously, back to Norge. "What are you going to do?" Tim asked.

I'm going to go win an auction, he thought. But aloud, he said instead, "Never you mind. Just both of you, do as I've asked," before he turned to infiltrate the crowd.

He fished the Eavesdropper out of his pocket as he ran. "Hi, yeah, we need backup. Can you get Ísland here?"

There was a moment before Ísland replied. "We only have two out of three so far. I can't go anywhere at the moment. Why do you need me?"

Damn it! "Sverige, then. I have to overshoot. Our target has ..." he scrambled to find words vague enough not to alert Tim. "Changed position."

"By a lil'?" asked Sverige.

Norge took a moment to listen to the crowd. Eighteen point three - eighteen point four - "By a lot. Significantly."

Some more silence, and then Sverige replied, "I c'n go. Better I go'n you anyway, you've got th' credentials. Pr'tend t' send me back fer supplies'r somethin'."

"Then Sverige's on it," Ísland confirmed.

"Make it quick," Norge urged. Nineteen point seven - oh please, make it quick.

"Let's hope it isn't Romae's lil' terrors workin' th' cash, then."
Danmark tuned in, from wherever he was in the crowd. "It's Francis' shop," he rationalised.

"If he's understaffed," Norge said, narrowly missing a lady with opera glasses who was so busy paying attention to the stage that she didn't even notice him, "he would rely first on Romae. But he's got his own secretary. Some skinny kid with blonde hair, purple eyes and glasses."

"Oh good. Don't think I met 'im b'fore. Okay then, should be fine."

"Nineteen point nine!" cried the auctioneer. "Thank you, 0143! Will you raise the stakes to twenty million, 6752? Yes! Twenty million! Have you an answer 0143?"

Norge spotted Frederick's 0143 sign hovering in the air and set off again.

That was it, then. Twenty million. Norge's Einar Steinsvik had easy access to ten and Sverige's Mikael Sjöberg identity had ten as insurance.

"Twenty-one point five! Twenty-one point six!"

They couldn't afford to lose. But what would they do if they won?

His Eavesdropper crackled. "Norge, this is getting pretty high," said Tim. "What's our limit?"

"There is no limit," he growled into the device. "Just keep bidding!"

He kept running through the crowd. "Twenty-four point seven!" he heard. "Twenty-four point eight!" - just a little more, he could nearly spot Frederick now ... "Twenty-four point nine! Twenty-five! My goodness, ladies and gentlemen, twenty-five million!"

"There you are," he grumbled under his breath when he found him, and hit talk on the Eavesdropper. "Danmark, now." The crowd roared far too loudly for Frederick to hear him, so Norge approached from behind and tapped Frederick on the shoulder before he had the chance to raise his placard again.

Frederick turned around and fixed him with a cool stare. "Yes, can I help you?" he asked. "Do I know you from somewhere?"


With his fist clenched in rage around the heavy brass Eavesdropper, he punched Frederick hard across the jaw.

The people around them figured out what was happening pretty quickly from the sound of the first blow, and by the second, had stepped aside to grant them a wider berth. But nobody called security and most people just stood and stared when Norge knocked Frederick to the ground and landed a final swing in his gut to dissuade him from fighting back - or breathing. Norge bent close to his ear and snarled quietly, so that only Frederick could hear him, "Listen up. I know what you are and what you do. I know what you wanted with her, and I won't let that happen."

"Y-you can't st-stop me!" Frederick wheezed.

"Don't give me incentive to try," Norge hissed. "This is your only warning."
Norge got up off him - the urge to burn his clothing for having been in such proximity to Frederick was strong - and sped away through the crowd, as he heard the auctioneer, "No? Nothing more from 0143? Going once, going twice - now's your chance, 0143!"

But 0143 did not respond and instead the auctioneer cried, "Then I declare the lot SOLD to Bidder 6752 for twenty-five million dollars!"

The masses flew into a frenzy.

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It took him twice as long to get back to Tim, who was waiting with Danmark. "How far out did you go?" Danmark asked. "I tried to get a hold of you but nothing came in!"

"Must've lost my Eavesdropper in the crowd," Norge said quietly, shoving his right hand into his pocket, where it held his Eavesdropper - not lost, perfectly fine; brass stood up very well against Frederick's jaw. But his hand was bruised and bloodied and he didn't feel up to explaining what happened, not until they had Margot safe.

He relaxed, feeling suddenly drained and exhausted of energy, and unwilling to tackle the crowd in a slow, stage-ward diffusion. "So, uh, what did you mean by the target?" asked Danmark nervously, at the same time that Tim asked, "You going to tell us what that was all about?"

"Later," he said, answering them both. "First, let's go get your sister."

"We, um... we might wanna hurry," Danmark warned, looking sheepish. "Security's already on us."

Shit! "You didn't lead them here, did you?"

"I didn't try to!" he protested. "You didn't exactly give me much on instructions! I threw down one tiny little table and next thing I know this lady is by my side claiming she'll help clean up but really trying to book me -"

"Adnan?"

"No - well not unless Adnan got darker, grew pigtails and became female. Must've been some other security hand. Maybe another BSPA agent! But Adnan was close behind and - anyway, I don't know how security got there so soon but I booked it once I heard the sale end. If the two of them can push through a crowd of slack-jawed gawkers in ten seconds, I'd think they can get pretty much anywhere fast."

"Should we split up?" asked Tim.

"No," Norge decided. "We deal with it after the sale. But if they catch up to us, I will let them throw you out of the arena." Danmark had already opened his mouth in preparation for argument but Norge cut him off. "You're not a registered bidder, so the sale's still valid. And we need to proceed, with or without you. Our priority is Margot. Get Margot, get off Hallar. Anyone else left behind lays low until picked up later, that's what we agreed. So let's just get our bearings and get the accounts settled so that we can get out of here."

They headed towards the stage.
How would they pay for this?! he thought frantically.
Adnan only got to the arena after the auction had begun, and so the doors were shut tight. He banged on them loudly until they opened and argued a moment with the gatekeeper, a pint-sized security agent with a sassy attitude. She gave him lip for not having arrived earlier until he explained that he wasn't here to buy, he was here on Federal BSPA business, and if she could kindly step aside before he had to take her into custody, that would be grand. She grimaced but let him in.

And then he spotted her seconds later letting in another guy late with a lot less fuss! Annoying - why go to all that trouble just for him? Must've been his face. Well, he might not have been tall, blond and handsome like Specs over there but at least Adnan could manage a decent grin once in awhile and not look super creepy.

Whatever, time to get to work. He pressed talk on his Eavesdropper to ring in Karpusi. "Okay, so you said you thought you saw Gamma once, right?"

A few seconds before Karpusi replied. "Thought so. And?"

"What'd he look like?"

"Dunno..." came the answer, trailing off, so Adnan didn't expect the detail that followed. "Tall. I guess about six-two? Fairly built. Close-cropped blond hair. Not really styled. Glasses. Creepy vibe to him - doesn't smile if his life depends on it."

"That's... a pretty good description." And come to think of it...

Adnan heard Karpusi's huff loud and clear over the radio waves. "I know. It's almost like I have training or something. Why, what's up?"

"You'll never guess who I just caught heading into the auction!" Adnan replied giddily. "I think, anyway." He waited for a reaction, but there was silence on the line. "Hey, you didn't fall asleep on me, didja?"

"No, you idiot - message came in. It's from Border Control... something about an emergency background check on an engineer. They have him in the shipyards. Happened about an hour ago." Karpusi paused. "Why would they ask the BSPA? We're not cops."

"Personal favour to me," Adnan explained. He did a quick search on the crowd around him for the other late entry, the one that might be Gamma. Easy to find; his head popped up higher than the rest. Couldn't quite see his face... "I wanted them to tell HQ the second something was fishy at Border Control. Idea was to avoid the police entirely so that all information comes into us. Otherwise we lose valuable time. You can just ignore it."

"Hm," Karpusi said, which sounded neither like approval nor disapproval. "In that case... maybe you'd better head to the shipyards instead."

"But I have Gamma right in view here!" The one that did half the purchasing. The one who
was maybe a few people away. They might never get a chance like that again!

"How are you even sure it's him? You've never seen him before! Meanwhile, there's Delta at the shipyards trying to make off with a bunch of ships."

"You're joking," he said flatly. Karpusi didn't reply. "You really think so? Is that what Border Control said?"

"It smells like shoplifting to me. Makos is due in at three, so I can leave then but the office is deserted for now, and someone has to sit here and babysit Epsilon. There's something more - Epsilon had a two-way on him. No idea how he got it - probably stolen - but I've kept my ears open. The rest of them are definitely at the auction."

Then it probably was Gamma! Adnan was about to complain that he couldn't believe Karpusi was giving that up on the chance that there was something at the shipyards, when someone ran into him from behind.

"Hey, watch it!" they said, and he turned to found Lovino Vargas, spitting mad -

But then spotted a sight for sore eyes: Major-Constable Hassan of New Joplin. Whatever he was doing in Caput Halleri, no matter - possibly undercover, because he was dressed as security.

Well, Gamma - if it was him - might help lead him back to Kirkland, which would solve Hassan's case...

Let Hassan do it, then!

"Okay, I'll be there in two minutes," he told Karpusi, while giving Vargas the cold shoulder and sweeping past him to Hassan. (Vargas could just fuck right off.)

It didn't make sense, thought Adnan. Normally their MO was bondspeople, not ... petty thievery?

Then again, how else did they wind up with airships? Maybe the auction was a distraction and their main heist was the shipyards. If the rest of them were at Tolino Downs, maybe this way, Karpusi and Adnan could pick them off one by one.

"Hey!" he called. Hassan turned around and fixed him with a cautious glance. "Oh man, am I ever glad to see you!"

"You sound like you want something," Hassan noted dryly. He folded his arms across his chest, nearly knocking off a nametag that read 'Bakhoun'. Adnan wondered what unlucky sap Hassan had pilfered the uniform from and then remembered he had more pressing matters.

Quickly, he pointed out the man who resembled Gamma in the crowd. "There, that's the one who slurs his speech a lot. We see him doing a lot of the buying. Will you keep an eye on him? He could lead you back to Kirkland."

"Wait, where are you going?"

"I gotta go catch up with one of the others," he explained.

Hassan glared. "At least give me something to keep in touch? You must have Eavesdroppers
Adnan fished out the Eavesdropper in his pocket and handed it to Hassan. "Here. Keep it on #30. I'll pick another up in a couple of minutes back at HQ, but for now you can talk to Karpusi on that if you need."

Hassan nodded, so Adnan figured all was well and left the arena with full intention of coming back soon. This time, he had no problem besides a glare at the lady working the gates, who crossed her arms across her chest and grimaced, but let him through with nothing more than a quick flick of her head that shook her pigtails off her shoulders.

He jogged the hundred metres from the entrance at Tolino Downs to Caput Halleri Border Control in no time. The place - like most of Caput Halleri excluding the 'Downs - was deserted. The only people he saw on his way to the shipyards were four very bored looking agents sitting at the empty turnstiles, glued to the radio.

The shipyards were connected to Caput Halleri Border Control via a short through-way tunnel big enough for the largest domestic airships sold in the system, about twenty metres across. The gates were open and unmanned except for one person, but he was off listening to the radio as well, and like the turnstile agents, hardly looked up.

"We're just past twenty-two million now," he heard from the announcer, "this is a record sale even for a Decennial, ladies and gentlemen!"

Adnan slipped by and walked through the parking lot (empty of people, full of sleeping machines) to get to the main offices.

There, he found a man - not much taller than a boy, to be honest - slender and with white hair, crouched down in one office, rifling through folders, his back turned to the door.

Adnan crept up slowly behind him and caught what he was doing over his shoulder - signing cheques and attaching them to different forms.

Not inherently illegal if it were your job... but who would be doing this kind of paperwork on a day like today, when Caput Halleri was a ghost town outside of the main arena?

Credit given where due to Karpusi's instincts! It was Delta alright.

"That you, Sverige?" he heard, and realised his shadow had preceded him. "Did you happen to spot anything large enough for three on your way in?"

Adnan smirked and retorted, "Yeah, there's a cute little number I had my eye on."

In an instant Delta was on his feet, whirling around.

Adnan thrust his right hand out, to wind him and catch him unaware.

But Delta was quick with good reflexes and sucked it in; Adnan hit air. Then he blocked Adnan's hand to the side with his left.

Dangerous move. This was the strategy of someone desperate who had never really been taught hand-to-hand combat. Adnan, still in Delta's personal space, had a good six inches and at least
thirty pounds on the guy. He felt a little sorry for the kid.

Delta tried to dart around him. He grabbed Delta by the waist as he ducked below Adnan's arm, and with his other hand, caught one of Delta's wrists. A quick trip put him off-balance, and as Delta fell, Adnan caught him and pinned his back to Adnan's chest. He kept him there with his arm wrapped tight around Delta's stomach, Delta's slim wrist trapped in his clenched fist.

"There," he whispered gruffly over Delta's shoulder. Delta fidgeted against his chest and tried to break out, ultimately unsuccessfully. He might be inflicting bruises. "You're good, but I'm better. Everything's a lot easier when you come willingly, you know -"

"I'm not going anywhere with you!" Delta yelled, and stomped on the top of Adnan's foot, hard. Then he used the distraction and Adnan's momentary laxness on the grip of his wrists to elbow him in the gut with both elbows.

A little breathless, Adnan hurled his leg out as Delta made his escape, and he went flying forward and hit the ground in a sprawl. Adnan pounced - Delta would stop moving if there were a massive weight on his back - and pressed him into the ground.

And then he got cocky.

"You are really beginning to try my patience, kiddo," Adnan told him, leaning down to growl it in his ear.

"I'm not a kid," Delta muttered, "and I have yet to begin to try."

He jerked his head up sharply and hit Adnan's nose with the back of it. Adnan grunted in pain and among that, felt something loosen and moisten - if that stupid jerk broke his nose, oh, he'd have hell to pay!

He felt Delta trying to wriggle out from beneath him.

Screw his nose, he could deal with that later. If Delta got away now -!

But Delta couldn't do much more than roll out from underneath before Adnan scrambled up and caught him, pinning him again using his full weight. Face to face on top, he brought his elbows down into Delta's biceps and dug his knees into Delta's thighs.

It brought their faces close and he hissed, "S all good, kid. We can do this the hard way. But like it or not you're coming to the BSPA offices with me."

Delta spat in his face.

Adnan hauled him to his feet and Delta fought him the entire way - spitting, kicking, trying to throw his grip off - but Adnan held strong and spun him around to slam him down, bent over the nose of the stealthship.

With Delta's arms behind his back (where Adnan could see them), Adnan cuffed him at the wrists and only then relaxed enough to wipe his face. He smeared his red hand on Delta's jacket.

"You're under arrest," he grunted, as he patted Delta down for weapons. "Grand larceny, forgery. Probably multiple counts. And resisting arrest. And maybe breaking my nose. Anything you say
can and will be held against you." Nothing on the ankles or in the waistband. Couldn't find anything in the pockets, either, so he straightened Delta back up again.

Delta sagged back against his chest, finally defeated. "Well, I tried," he panted.

They got back to the detainment cells in HQ with no more of Delta's antics, where he found Makos on guard in front of an occupied cell, his feet propped up on another chair, his head down and snoozing.

"Wake up," Adnan said, kicking the chair out from under his feet.

Makos jumped a mile and blinked the sleep out of his eyes. "Wasn't sleeping," he grumbled. On one side of his head he kept a single shoulder-length lock of dark hair; he curled this around his ear while fighting a blush. "You're not Karpusi."

"Clearly not. I'm way prettier."

Makos gave a short derisive laugh. "Not with that nose." He got up and swiped his pass to unlock the cell beside the one he guarded, which held a fair-haired, chubby-cheeked man - more like boy, he hardly looked older than Delta. But he matched the picture they had of Tino Väinämöinen. His pretty face might have been almost angelic without the grimace that split it whenever Adnan made eye contact with him.

(Adnan caught the look that flew between Epsilon and Delta, however. They recognised and knew each other. Brothers? friends? Karpusi and he would find out in due time.)

He shoved Delta into the cell and let Makos lock it behind him. "I need to go pick up another Eavesdropper before you can reach me," Adnan told him, "but Karpusi and I'll be back later." He grinned at them both as he continued, taunting through the bars, "Probably with more of them. I'll start with that - Sverige fellow you mentioned, was it?"

Just on time, the two-way Eavesdropper Karpusi had confiscated from Epsilon, lying on the table near Makos, sparked to life. "Sverige here. Been here fer five minutes now, can't find you guys. Where're you?"

"We're on our way to the registration table. We need you there pronto!" Sounded like Alpha.

"And Ísland, you can chime on in any time now," said another - Beta, perhaps? "Finish up with those ships and get down here. We'll need you too."

How useful! Adnan wondered why Delta hadn't gotten one - it hadn't been on him when he'd patted the man down, and he'd done a thorough job of that. Maybe Delta had lost it.

With a cackle, he said, "Guess I'd better not miss your appointment!" and received a particularly filthy glare from Delta for it. "What," Adnan asked, "you got a problem with that? Tough tits."

Delta opened his mouth to respond but Epsilon cut him off first. "It's okay," he said, sweet as honey, "everything'll be alright. We'll get out somehow and get back to the rest." His voice had the same cheery tone as he leveled his gaze at Adnan. "And then you'll never see us again! I don't screw up twice."

"Neither of you are going anywhere, or doing anything but hard time," Adnan snapped, as he left
them with the guard. "I'll be back with Karpusi."
Spain

Antonio got in late after having been detained by security - a fellow who introduced himself first as Bakhoum but later confessed his name was really Hassan (yes, he'd said, that Hassan, from those articles in the paper). Though they initially started off on the wrong foot, Hassan appeared convinced by the end that Antonio had absolutely nothing to do with anything.

Antonio felt that for this, he could credit his marvellous poker face. Nobody thought a thing of big eyes and a wide, innocent grin except 'this idiot's too simple to participate in something so intricate'. Which, unfortunately for Hassan, wasn't the case entirely.

But Hassan was on-planet solely to investigate the New Joplin raid, nothing else. And Antonio truly wasn't involved in that! He could have told Hassan that he'd spotted the dreaded Captain Kirland of the Great Delivery recently - very recently, in fact - but he didn't. Why incriminate himself further? Besides, from the looks of it, when Hassan personally walked him into Tolino Downs, the auction had already begun and Antonio had much work to do overseeing his wares. Why waste his time? A man of his stature was busy! Too busy to help the police do their own damn jobs.

He said a polite farewell to the major constable, hiding in a Caput Halleri officer's uniform and pretending to be part of security, and was quickly making his way to the stage when he overheard the Master of Ceremonies introduce the next set of bondspeople: "...a seller whose wares have consistently outperformed every one of their classes according to Smith's Weekly and The Caput Halleri Daily Gazette -"

His stomach flipflopped as he listened. He just walked in, it couldn't be his turn already? could it? The name she cried out wasn't his, it was - "Francis of Hallar!"

It was worse. He could nearly feel the blood drain from his face as he paled and panicked. Shit, Francis! That was what he'd forgotten! Antonio had been supposed to meet with Francis before all this nonsense with Hassan and the press had happened. He couldn't let his friend down!

After a quick moment of being frozen in place with anxiety, he ran for the stage and the tents behind it to find a longish-haired blond man making off in the other direction. "Francis!" he cried. "Where are you going so fast? I'm over here!"

Francis whirled around and, upon seeing him, immediately reversed course. "There's not much time," Francis told him once they were close enough to speak in quieter tones (this was not difficult over the roar of applause from the audience). He looked left and right, like a man hunted. "Have you a bidder number?"

"Not yet," Antonio admitted, "I only just got here. That's my next stop."

Francis looked unhappy about it but didn't make a remark other than, "Very well."

"The order hasn't changed?"
"No," Francis said, "well, not precisely, Matthieu is still the last one that I'm selling. Which you
know. However, my numbers -"

But whatever Francis had been about to say was eclipsed by a snide, cutting female voice that
interrupted. "Why, Francis of Hallar and Antonio of Marigon! Just the people I wanted to see."

Francis' face immediately fell. "Councillor Héderváry," he grumbled, "how good of you to join us."

A woman with mouse-brown hair, pinned up in a twisted bun that was probably neat and elegant
when it had began the day but presently looked as disheveled and harried as the rest of her did,
strode up to them and clapped her hands firmly on Francis' and Antonio's shoulders. She was far
prettier than Francis had implied. "You men look like you've got places to be! But that can't
possibly be the case. Where else would you be, Francis, but glued to the stage watching your wares
disappear and the money flow? A businessman like you should be thrilled!"

"Is there a point to this?" Antonio asked.

Héderváry grinned a crocodile-like leer. "Oh, I'm just here to remind you both that during this
auction there will be no shenanigans!" Her voice dropped in pitch and darkened in tone. "None,
you hear me?"

"I have told you time and again, Councillor, you've no right to go about poking in my affairs -"

"If you had nothing to hide, you'd not bother hiding, Francis!"

"If you're so concerned about it," Antonio interrupted, before they got too excited, "why don't you
keep Francis with you during his set? He'll sit by the stage, and you can sit by him."

The very notion horrified Francis. His eyes bugged out in equal parts distaste and shock.

"Though I'm sure your friend appreciates that you think he's so important I must devote every
second to keeping both eyes on him," Héderváry began, sounding affronted, "I have more
necessary activities with which to occupy my time. This auction doesn't run itself!"

Antonio scoffed. "Francis has maybe twelve to fifteen bondspeople. The auction will hardly fall
into shambles in that time! Besides - not to say a woman as pretty as you looks tired! - but you do
look like you might like a break. Héderváry seemed about to say something in retaliation but
thought better of it. "You're overworked! A ten minute rest won't kill you, and you can then be
assured Francis won't try anything silly!"

He ignored the look of ire that Francis threw him at his perceived betrayal. True, not where he
would rather be. But not to worry, Matthieu would be perfectly fine!

"I am not sure my patience can withstand that sort of test," Francis sniffed.

"I am not sure I can be tied down by the auction's side for all of that time," Héderváry exclaimed.
"In fact I know I can't - I need to be free to move about. Have you seen how much I'm responsible
for or did you just ignore the programs on the way in like everybody else?"

"Bring Francis about with you," Antonio countered. "He doesn't need to be by the side of the stage
for all his part, just an appearance or two at most. Even that's not necessary! For if it were the case
that each vendor had to accompany their act onstage or by the stage, our darling Avo Romae
wouldn't be working from abroad today, now would he?"

Héderváry considered that for a minute. "But Romae has assistants that can help," she remarked.

"Assistants? Then - Lovino's here?" He allowed himself a brief moment of triumph and hope. As if that dratted Unsinkable had succeeded in getting his best friend to the arena! What luck!

"Ah, no," Francis explained hastily, "the elder Vargas is not one of them, and the younger is likely to be far too busy for any of that since he is helping me with my sales and bondspeople. Since I lack an assistant," he finished, with a pointed glare at Héderváry.

"You're the idiot who had the nonsensical idea of making an assistant out of a prospective bondserson you were too lazy to sell," she snapped.

"And I might have gotten away with it if it weren't for you meddling kids," Francis mumbled.

"But there you have it! If Romae is permitted total absence from the stage during his set then it seems the real thing is you ensuring Francis is within your reach," Antonio said. "So why not bring him along wherever you need go?"

Both of them still looked seriously displeased, Francis especially. Antonio put on his best wide, face-splitting, naive grin. "Oh, come on! It's only for some fifteen minutes! You're adults. You can stand each other's company that long. You might even begin to like each other."

But more importantly, Héderváry being tied to Francis meant that Antonio could go off and register safely as a bidder without Héderváry's knowledge. Once he had a bidder number, it would be too time-consuming to track down the owner of one bidder number among thousands, and the next question would be to appropriately distract Héderváry during Matthieu's sale. Francis would find that easy.

"Come on," Héderváry muttered, grabbing Francis by the upper arm and leading him away. Francis fought her with every step (so much for adults) but off they went in the end, and so off Antonio went in the other direction to the registration table.

They were not pleasant to him at the table. First, they said he was late; but others had registered later still in last year's annual auction! He claimed that he wasn't buying anything until the second half and just wanted to avoid the lineups during intermission, and that he'd heard an awful lot about the entertainment and would have rather enjoyed it instead of having to wait in line.

Then, they told him to submit documentation and proof that his income was in the correct bracket - which it was, for any bondserson up to about ten million. (He hoped sincerely that Matthieu would not exceed that price. In actual fact, he could go higher, but not without alerting them to the fact that he had extra funding from the man who he would be buying this bondserson from and to whom he would later gift it.) This was not a problem for Antonio to submit, but they did not take his word that he wouldn't bid more than his allowed amount, even after he told them how ridiculous it would be for him to spend money that wasn't his, and how easy a mistake it would be for the sales assistants at auction to catch.

Finally he gave up, and, throwing his hands into the air, angrily asked, "Don't you know who I am?!"

To which they argued that yes, they did, they had seen him in the papers recently and they were
therefore reluctant to issue him anything.

He spotted Hassan nearby, in conversation with a man whose back was turned. Antonio debated calling Hassan over and having the man vouch for him when the nearby coffee table staff began an altercation with a shifty looking fellow who had been skulking about. Hassan probably had better things to do.

Fortunately for Antonio, so did the registration crew, who along with the coffee table staff had grown exasperated with difficult customers. They finally told him to take the damn number and get out of their sight.

Which he was more than pleased to do. At last! Now all he had to do was wait, and this would be simple and straightforward.

And so Antonio waited, patiently counting in his head until he got to the last five bondspeople. Francis had told him he was numbers 18 through 30 and so he kept a running mental count. At twenty-eight, he began paying more attention. He had seen Matthieu once or twice before, a long time ago - blond hair, light eyes, light skin. A pretty boy, but not someone Antonio would go mad over.

The point was, he knew who to look for. Francis had told him how many he had. Antonio had counted and this was number 30. And Francis had said Matthieu was the last.

But the person that took the stage when he expected him to was blond-haired and light-skinned and most certainly not Matthieu.

The girl stared out into the crowd with a defiance that had apparently not waned in the three months' absence from Antonio that she had spent at Francis'. No part of her physical form was any different either; Francis had kept her hair relatively the same length and colour and had not done anything to its style. That one.

He watched the auctioneer move forward to strip her of her robe and she made a quick motion to snap at his hands like a badly behaved animal. The auctioneer scowled. Antonio scowled.

Francis' Belle, onstage, curled her lips unpleasantly.
Lovino spent a scant three seconds being very confused when Francis ran away from him before he heard, "Francis! where are you going so fast, I'm over here -" from a voice he'd preferred not to have heard at all that day.

He snapped out of it, and, panicking, ducked back into the tent before he could be spotted.

"What is it?" Feliciano asked innocently. Lovino flapped his hands in an effort to shut him up, which never worked when he didn't need it to, so he didn't know why it'd work now, when he needed it badly. "Did you forget som- mmph!"

"Shhh, shut up!" he hissed, a hand over Feliciano's mouth. "Jesus, I don't want everybody hearing you!"

Feliciano kept silent held against him, while Lovino kept an ear peeled for Antonio Fernandez Carriedo. Shit, if Antonio knew he was here, he'd follow him everywhere like a lost puppy, and then how the hell would he manage to buy Feliciano's little Alfred? Not that Antonio would report him for purchasing his own wares - he wouldn't, and anyway, Lovino was only loosely related to his grandfather's company, employed on a contractual basis as an accountant. (A contract that just kept getting renewed. But one day he'd cut ties!)

But what a tough time he'd have, convincing Antonio of how much he didn't want to be in this business when he bought a bondsperson at the Decennial Auction like every other creepy pervert out there. And how he'd explain lack of bondsperson later, he didn't know. Maybe he'd tell the truth, for once - Feli's special snowflake needed deprogramming. See what Antonio would make of that.

Feliciano waited until they couldn't hear any more talking from outside. Francis, Antonio and Héderváry must have finished their conversation but even so, he kept his voice low. "Antonio?" he asked.

"Antonio," Lovino grumbled, "and Francis. I wish they'd leave me alone."

"It's not so awful," his brother replied, "being friends with them. Well, not friends! Perhaps associates for business."

"I don't want them to be anywhere near me," he sneered. "The way they talk about business like these people are meat - I have no clue how you stand them!"

"They don't mean it like that!" Feliciano protested. Lovino gave him a hard stare. "They don't! Francis and Antonio are both good men and - just because you don't understand it doesn't mean others don't, a-and don't talk about them behind their backs like that, and, and it's not their fault they're a product of the society! Everybody does it," he finished finally, and then he pouted. "Everybody. You can't be mad at everybody." Lovino did not reply. "Anyway, what was that all about?"

"Nothing," he lied.
"Ve, then nothing looks a little different than I remember!"

"I just didn't want Antonio to come in here and start bugging the crap outta me, okay?" Lovino spat. "You an' I both know that if he knows I'm here he won't leave me alone for two seconds."

"He's not so bad," Feliciano murmured.

"Then you deal with him, if you like him so much!" Antonio would probably love sweet, happy Feliciano more anyway, but he didn't fancy the idea of Antonio getting chummy with his brother. Bad enough either of them were in this business.

He heard a rustle from behind them as the rear tent curtain was drawn open and briefly fretted Antonio had figured out another way in to bother him. Instead, Lovino had never been so happy to see Feliciano's creepy bondsman before. "Everything's going well with the sales," Ludwig said. "This one appears to be taking some time. I will have to get back in a moment."

Feliciano smiled in obvious relief. "Good, we're almost done!"

"Ah... not quite. This is almost the end of Francis', he has one more. You - forgive me for reminding you, it is not my place, but you know Alfred will be on soon, yes? And Signore Lovino is still here."

"Not you too!" Lovino said.

Ludwig straightened and began to declare, "Whatever my master wants -"

"Shut up, shut up! Stupid bastard," Lovino grumbled. "I don't care."

Great, so both Feli and Ludwig were mad for this Alfred character! Why should that surprise him, given what a good fuckin' job his grandpa had done on that creepy blond bondsman.

He grabbed the placard he'd been issued by the registration table an hour earlier and said, "Fine. I get the picture. I'll go make myself scarce and buy him for you since he means so freakin' much to you jerks."

They both instantly looked happier. As Ludwig left, Feli promised, "I'll cover for the purchases in Grandpa's set until you return. Even the second classes after intermission if you want! And in case Antonio or Francis come by."

"You better," Lovino grunted, "I don't need jerks like them slowing me down."

He exited the tent from the front facing the stage, still angry. It was a good thing he loved his stupid baby brother 'cause sheesh, the kid really made him jump through the hoops sometimes. This Alfred guy had better be worth it.

At least it was at the auction, where he'd be a face in the crowd that nobody would recognise (not even Francis or Antonio, if Feli held his part of the bargain okay). If anybody he knew saw him here - not that he had many friends - or any - he'd be mortified! To think of grumpy Lovi, a total hypocrite, buying a bondsman!

Because he would buy this Alfred.
And then he'd dangle him over Francis' head until he figured out what it was Francis wanted with him!

While Feliciano and his weirdo creepy bondsman made it pretty damn clear what interests were vested where, Francis shouldn't even have known, because Feliciano had kept Alfred tucked away in the secret room most of the time. The kid wasn't in their catalogue. How had Francis found out?

From the sounds of the conversation he'd overheard earlier ... Antonio was buying someone too? Francis had instructed Antonio to purchase the last one he was selling. But if Antonio was buying one of Francis', why wouldn't he just waltz right in to Francis' shop one day? Or wire him a message? Weren't they close friends? Antonio was always parroting on about that like it might make Lovino like him more. Why need to resort to the auction?

But it did explain why Francis wanted Lovino to buy someone for him. Francis couldn't buy two bondspeople, but he could task Antonio to buy one and buy the other himself. Then that shrill Councillor had made Francis unable to buy anything.

Now what was Francis doing buying bondspeople?

From what Lovino'd heard, Francis' personal assistant was one. At least Francis recognised that bondspeople weren't just fucktoys after all. The assistant couldn't be Alfred though.

Could it? Alfred had had seriously mysterious origins. But why would Francis plant someone inside their grandfather's shop as an untrained bondsperson, get Feli to train him, and then buy him again? What a waste of money, just to spy - Francis must know any Romae bondsman would be buy-low-sell-high.

Unless Francis were buying Alfred for someone who couldn't be here or do the buying themselves.

And who could it possibly be that couldn't make an appearance themselves?

There was one bright side to all this: the Councillor's intervention. Feliciano had more connection to the bondspeople than he did, but Lovino spoke more to the Council. He knew of Héderváry; he worked with others, but he did know her name. This nonsense with Antonio and Francis gave him a bargaining chip: one wrong move from either of them and he'd spill the beans to the Council.

Once he figured out which beans were what, of course!

Lovino was so deep in these thoughts while wandering through the crowd that he nearly ran into someone.

"Hey, watch it!" Lovino cried, though it had been completely his fault.

To his surprise and dismay, the man who turned around glared was none other than Agent Adnan of the Halleri BSPA, who was obviously in conversation with someone on a super-shiny two-way Eavesdropper (and wouldja get a load of Mister Fancy Pants Expensive Gadgets over here, Lovino thought tetchily). Adnan sneered, made a vulgar hand gesture, and then looked past Lovino to someone he obviously recognised. "Okay, I'll be there in two minutes," he told the Eavesdropper, and pressed the black button on it to end his chat.

Much later, Lovino would profusely thank whatever deity existed that he did what he did that day.
It wasn't particularly uncharacteristic for him - he minded his own business but fishy was fishy and it piqued his curiosity easily. But he didn't do danger, and it was dangerous to involve himself in police or BSPA affairs by eavesdropping.

Which was exactly what he did.

Adnan approached a security agent - shorter than him, clean-shaven and thin, with dark skin and eyes. "Hey! Oh man am I ever glad to see you!"

The other fellow turned around and said in a flat tone, "You sound like you want something."

Adnan pointed to a third man - tall, with close-cropped blond hair, about thirty paces away and walking towards the crowd. "There," he said, "that's the one who slurs his speech a lot. We see him doing a lot of the buying. Will you keep an eye on him? He could lead you back to Kirkland."

Kirkland! Of course! Kirkland would certainly be unavailable to do buying, what with all that media attention on his ship!

In fact, the last time Lovino had seen Adnan, he tried to search Lovino's house late at night after hearing rumours that Kirkland's crewmates were hiding out there.

Which was obviously bull.

Except that Lovino caught Unsinkable breaking and entering.

Adnan had been after Unsinkable himself - and his grandpa sure was angry to hear that fifty million dollars was near their house - but Lovino had taken care of that. Wasn't that all Adnan cared about? And speaking of caring, why would Kirkland want that bondsman? A pirate couldn't afford that kind of luxury. But it was on his ship that Alfred arrived on Hallar.

Had Kirkland fallen instantly, irrationally in love with the guy just in two short days? Could one even fall in love in that time? Lovino couldn't believe in love at first sight. Ridiculous! Besides, Kirkland's only true love was money, it was all he ever talked about when he spoke to Lovino.

Maybe it was someone else on the Delivery, so smitten that they'd convinced their captain to plot this wacky scheme to get magical Alfred back. Was that this blond man?

"Wait, where are you going?" the agent asked.

"I gotta go catch up with one of the others," Adnan told him.

"At least give me something to keep in touch?" he replied, his arms folded across his chest, and Lovino could see quite clearly he was not as small and thin as he'd first suspected. A cop? "You must have two-ways aplenty with the budget the BSPA gets."

Adnan handed him the Eavesdropper, instructing, "Keep it on number 30. I'll pick another up in a couple of minutes back at HQ, but for now you can talk to Karpusi on that if you need."

The other guy nodded and left to tail the tall blond guy - with Lovino close behind him.

"Hey," he said, to grab his attention once they were far enough away from Adnan, and the guy turned around so Lovino could get a better look at his face.
Good thing he did. This wasn't just some security agent, he realised. "Hey, you're that guy, from the paper!" Lovino exclaimed.

"There are lots of guys in the paper," Major-Constable Hassan replied, looking back and forth from Lovino to the blond guy he was after.

"You're the cop heading the pirates case! Everyone's been reading all about it, makes for great journalism. Pirates, in this day and age!"

"Yeah, well... It's not nearly as fun for those involved. If you've been following the work then you don't need to be told how much it could interfere if the media knew we were here. We don't need that kind of exposure."

That sounded like a warning to keep his fool mouth shut. Was the cop threatening him? Could cops do that? Hastily he stammered out, "I don't - interfering's not my business! But I also don't see what the Halleri BSPA would have to do with a pirate raid. Unless -"

Well ... there was one obvious connection between bondspeople and pirates. Items - items could be stolen - shipped around, faked -

No, that was preposterous.

Surely.

No Council in the system would permit that.

Hassan narrowed his eyes. "Are you a journalist?"

Lovino wondered which would get him clearer answers, telling the truth or lying. He shook his head. "Is the guy the BSPA agent wanted you to follow a pirate? Is he with Kirkland?"

"I wouldn't assume he is a pirate," Hassan said slowly, "we don't want a witch hunt, here."

That didn't answer his second question. "So he might be with Kirkland?" Was he the one buying Alfred?

"Listen," Hassan began in a frank but gradually becoming more incensed tone of voice, "I'll tell you what I tell the media, Mr Not-A-Journalist: I am not at liberty to judge one way or the other, we're still gathering evidence, and we'll make any statements once we know enough to pursue action. But no comment at this time."

"If he's a pirate then he's part of your case," Lovino argued; "if he's not and he's unrelated then I don't see why you can't talk about it."

"Did you not just hear me? I said -"

"Frankly," he interrupted, "I'm a little surprised the constabulary are personally at the beck and call of the Halleri BSPA when I'm sure you've better things to do! I guess I'd be angry too if I were Adnan's errand boy."

Frankly, Lovino was a little surprised he had these kinds of balls.
Hassan glared, but before he could say anything, they were interrupted. "Security! Get over here, wouldja?"

"Hey, hey hey, no need for that -"

"You've had enough free coffee, we already saw you earlier and told you to scram - so either get in line for registration or we'll kick you out of the arena this time!"

Lovino turned to look and saw a lanky klutzy dude with messy blonde hair in discussion with one of the staff. The blond pouted, knocked over a stand of paper cups in his frustration. "Security!" the man behind the table called again, and the klutz slyly tripped the folding legs of a table, which brought the whole thing crashing down.

"Oh for god's sake," Hassan muttered, next to him.

Hassan's attention momentarily diverted, Lovino took the opportunity to leave. Better get the hell out of there before Hassan noticed he'd completely lost the guy Adnan had wanted him to track in the crowd.

Which was when he noticed the very guy Hassan was trying to follow, off in the distance. Watching Lovino, very closely.

Lovino stopped and stared back. (He wasn't terrified, he just couldn't move, that was all!)

The man was tall with blond hair and glasses, and he glared at Lovino from a distance away, but didn't move.

As through a fog of breathless dread, Lovino overheard the mess from the coffee table behind him - Hassan saying something to another officer, the table staff complaining - but he remained frozen. He should get back to the auction. Wouldn't Feli's little Alfred be on soon?

A wave of people passed in front of them and when it had cleared, the man was gone, but his gaze remained.

I've seen him before, Lovino realised with dismay, and remembered where.
Spain

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Horrifying! What would happen if Francis' Belle managed to get to the crowd? That one time he had tried taking her out in public - she'd been so good for an entire month, he thought she had finally seen reason - she'd broken away from him and snapped a child's arm when she'd knocked him to the ground and put another young woman in hospital. Animal! He had had to cover up the resultant scandal with the Marigon BSPA. Bad for his business and moreover they had wanted her put down.

Why, if it hadn't been for Francis utter disgust at the BSPA's termination policy (but what can you do, thought Antonio, some things just don't take to training, it's a pity), she wouldn't be around at all anymore.

But what was she doing here?! Antonio had had nearly a year with her over the past three years, and he'd gotten nowhere, she was as unruly and ill-behaved as the day they took her! There was no way Francis was selling her in this state. Francis could not have trained her in three months! That would be miracle working.

In fact, if she were to be sold at all, it should be in the very last half-hour of the auction, along with the other less well-trained bondspeople. The pirate-bought. (Never how they publicised it. 'For those who preferred completing the training of their own bondspeople,' they said instead. A personalisation thing. Well, half the popularity of bondspeople was clever marketing, after all.)

Was it because of the raids? he wondered. Was this why Romae wasn't here, because they had begun blatantly trying to sell pirate-bought merchandise at regular prices? That would be a significant crime!

Now he understood why Héderváry was so hopping mad with Francis. He was a little enraged as well. You'd think Francis would have bothered to mention something! And as the auctioneer opened the bidding very low and people took it up like dangled bait, he really began to worry.

Suppose Héderváry should find out about this. Worse still, suppose Héderváry should cross-check these files with the councillors on Marigon and found out that this bondsgirl was to be put down months ago? She would want to speak with Antonio again. The Hallar BSPA would want words. The Marigon BSPA would want words. And probably those two New Joplin plainclothes policemen, too - Hassan and the partner he mentioned - who were here investigating Romae's raids.

What if they took their time with the paperwork? What if they interrogated him more thoroughly? What if they couldn't be bought this time?

Oh, what a dreadful mess this was! And what was Francis thinking?! If she did anything to someone in the crowd - well, the Hallar BSPA were a more severe bunch than their Marigon friends. They'd report Francis to the Council and Héderváry might personally run Francis' entire business into the ground.

There was only one thing to be done. With the auction now tied up - Antonio overheard, it had
become a bidding war and he was surprised when it pushed past five million - for her? really?? - he had some time to react. Not much, but perhaps enough.

It had to be a mistake. He fled to the tents behind the stage as fast as he could, moving through the crowds and pushing past people -

He caught a quick glimpse of dark, chestnut hair and a grumpy gait that stormed away from the registration table when he passed it. Antonio stopped instantly. Lovino? That looked like Lovino... Antonio twisted to try and see the other's face before it disappeared into the crowd, but was unsuccessful. But it looked like him!

Antonio was tempted to go after him. There could be no harm in asking the person to turn around, surely? Even if it wasn't Lovino -

"Antonio of Marigon!" he heard behind him. "How have you been? I haven't seen you off planet for - well, ever! I've never seen you off-planet! What do you think of Hallar, do you like it? Is it nice? Grandfather made some changes, did you notice? Did you have time to see the piazza, they don't have anything like that on the Anchorage where you always go and the Anchorage is so boring -"

"Feliciano," he said, a little disappointed, and turned around to find the younger Vargas brother. "How've you been?"

Antonio had to remember not to ask questions that a Marigonian would reply briefly to. Antonio had to remember that he was no longer on Marigon, and that on Hallar, people were a little more talkative. A lot more talkative.

Feliciano dragged him back to Romae's tent and immediately began a long, loud, and frenzied spiel, complete with extravagant hand-gestures and a multitude of facial expressions. "Oh! ve, I've been so busy! You wouldn't believe what work this auction is to run! I really wish that I had other people to help me but unfortunately my grandfather is away and this causes such complications, you know?"

"I -"

"Ah, but don't worry about me, I'll be okay all on my own! I want to make him proud - I'm sure he is proud! - and when he comes home everything will be nice and in order and regular and it'll be good, no?"

"Yes that's interesting," Antonio remarked, feeling overwhelmed, "but what about Lov-"

"Of course, of course!" Feliciano interrupted, looking past Antonio's shoulder in the distance and back again. Nervous, twitchy fellow, this Feliciano. But then he grinned very wide and toothily and batted his eyelashes, and Antonio had to admit Feliciano was terribly, distractingly cute when he did that. "Of course there's Ludwig! Have you met Ludwig? You must have met Ludwig. You're perfectly right, I have him to help me out! He's over in another tent at the moment. I'd have him with me to assist with other things too, but it's so strange, some people just see right through him like he's not even there! I think that's so weird! I know nobody looks at other people's assistants when they're also bondspeople so maybe that's it, but I always feel like bondspeople are supposed to be something to look at so it doesn't make a lot of sense to me! Do you look at them? Don't you? I just never know!"
All this blather made Antonio feel dizzy and lost. There was a nagging in the back of his mind about the auction, although all the auction goings-on behind him in the Downs were pretty well covered up by Feliciano's incessant blathering. Time was running out. There was no way he'd catch up now to that fellow - Lovino or not - but he really had to get going about Francis' Matthieu. Francis had done him a favour in purchasing the unruly horror that was Belle, if he didn't manage to purchase Matthieu for Francis ... well, he wasn't sure what Francis might do.

Maybe a more direct approach would work. "Listen, I should really be working," Antonio began firmly.

"But you just got here! I thought you had come to visit me, hadn't you? Or did you come for something else, perhaps there was something you were looking for? I can get it for you! I know where everything is back here but even if I didn't the program says your set isn't for another little bit, not until after we go, and by we of course I mean grandfather only he isn't here but we're going to be taking care of everything for him - oh I said that already - and also by we I definitely mean Ludwig and I! -" Feliciano took a short moment here to breathe - "And anyway I can get you anything you need. What did you need?"

"Information," Antonio told him, grateful for a word in edgewise. "Do you have the list of Francis' lots for today? The one he would have filed with the Council?"

"Yes, absolutely!" Feliciano looked overjoyed to talk about it. "Well - actually - no, I don't. Here, this is the one he filed originally -" and Feliciano thrust a folder of bondsperson papers at him. "It's in order except for the last page, a letter from the Council to my grandfather. I don't know who Francis managed to pay off because I am almost positive they do not allow late entries, it must have been expensive! But Francis always does such good business, and I bet he has the money for it, and anyway as you can see there was one more before us. So really he goes until 31, not 30."

Then - then it was alright that Belle was there, because Matthieu would be next! "This is fantastic news," he exclaimed breathlessly. "Thank you for telling me. I really must run though."

"I thought you knew?" Feliciano continued, "After all Francis pushing his numbers one more pushed everybody else down the line and Grandpa told me he got notification of the changes, and you're after him which means sequentially speaking they should have mailed you!"

"I must have left Marigon by that point," Antonio supposed. In fact, he had received something in the mail but hadn't bothered opening it before he departed for Border Control. Well, at least he knew before Matthieu took the stage.

Speaking of which, he really ought to be getting back.

Antonio took a fraction of a second to strain to hear the auction behind him - there was just applause, 'Belle' must have been sold (to whom, Antonio didn't catch, and may God have mercy on their soul, they'd just bought a handful) - and said, "Feliciano, it's been nice, really! But I have work to do."

"But we've only just been talking for -" Feliciano pulled out a pocket watch - "a few minutes! You hardly ever come to Hallar and when you do, you never see me! In fact I -"

But whatever Feliciano had been about to say was eclipsed by a rustle from the back of the tent. A blonde man - bondsman, judging from the way he kept his eyes at the ground once he realised Feliciano was not alone - had entered. "Forgive me, Signori," he said. "Signore Feliciano, I've been
instructed to tell you that you're needed in the tent behind the sales booth."

Briefly a look of irritation crossed Feliciano's pretty face, but it vanished as soon as it had arrived. "Of course, of course!" Feliciano said instead, smiling widely and hastily, "but just let me check something quickly first." He darted around Antonio and poked his head outside the door flaps of the tent, looking left and right; apparently satisfied, he returned with a bright, innocent smile. (Part of him wanted to know what or who he had been looking for but Antonio didn't want to rile him up any further. It might cost him ten minutes of one-sided nonstop conversation.)

"Okay," he said, to the bondsman, "let's go. Antonio, we should really catch up when all this is over!" and before Antonio had a chance to reply one way or the other, Feliciano had fled the tent.

By the time he'd returned to the crowd of onlookers, he found bidding for the next lot had already begun. A blond-haired, pale-skinned, blue-eyed boy with spectacles. Looked exactly like Matthieu from Francis' files. Perfect! he thought, exhaling in relief, then he hadn't been too late.

"Thank you, bidder 4333! Do I hear three point six million?" Antonio put up his placard. "Ah, excellent! Three point six million from bidder 9947!"

The crowd around him cheered although one fellow next to him said quietly, "There was just one that looked like that who went for much more."

"This one's prettier," Antonio said, as 5231 bid three point seven million. And far, far better behaved, he thought dully. He raised his placard for three point eight million.

"If you say so," the fellow replied. "I guess it's true what they say of beauty being in the eye of the beholder. But the eye colour he announced was nicer on the one before. More of a rarity. A shame you weren't around!"

"Three point nine million, thank you bidder 4333! Have I got a total of four? Is there four million?"

Antonio triumphantly bid four million with his placard. "Not so rare as all that. It's been nearly ten years in the business for me and the rarest I've seen was purple. Or perhaps grey. Green just doesn't compare."

"Four point one? Bidders 4333, 5231, are you willing to contest our late-coming friend 9947? No? Last chance!"

"I don't dispute it, sir, but the last -"

"Sold! I declare the lot sold to 9947! Dear bidder 9947, please come to the stage!"

Antonio didn't hear what the gentleman next to him had to say through the applause, and when it died down, gave him a small apologetic smile. "If you'll excuse me, I've an item to collect," he said, and left the crowd.

It was about time something went right today, he thought. That had been awfully easy!

Chapter End Notes
who saw that coming?! The answer is probably everybody. ︰') oh well~
Halfway to the stage, Lovino realised: the creepy blond guy couldn't possibly be trying to buy Alfred for Kirkland.

He'd recognised him as the guy who bought one of the cheaper ones from his grandpa a few weeks ago - all of the perverts freaked him the hell out but this one took the cake on being fucking weird. People musta been saving for the auction, 'cause there hadn't been many sales since then and the incident was fresh in his mind. But even if the Emporium had been busy, he would've remembered his face - if Lovino had never met Frederick of Tenickson, then this guy would've got gold medal for creeping. He'd said nothing and just stared at all the bondspeople for an hour before he made his decision in less than a minute. Then when he paid he stared at Lovino, unsmiling, for three minutes that felt like hours, while he finished the paperwork. After he'd left, Feli had said something impartial like, "really silent guy, wasn't he!" but it had been Lovino who was the recipient of the final, horrifying leer of a grin as Creepo waved the brothers goodbye.

So when he stared at Lovino, of course he remembered, how the hell would he ever forget?

This guy even being here set his nerves on edge. Not a pirate, said Hassan, but not entirely unrelated to Kirkland. Not buying Alfred. If that was true, then what was he doing here when he already had a bondsperson? Was he shopping for another for himself or like Francis for someone who couldn't attend?

He couldn't possibly afford another. Lovino had handled finances and had seen his files. This guy had been in the solid one-bondsperson bracket. And he already had one! But if Adnan wanted Hassan to track him, and he did 'all of the buying', then he must be buying bondspeople on a regular basis!

Who else on the Delivery could it be? Another creepy bastard? Lovino found it tough to believe that any of the pirates could afford a single bondsperson, unless they'd stolen the money to begin with. Maybe someone who couldn't be here -

- because they were avoiding a creepy bastard who would be here! And there was indeed someone who flew around on the Delivery all the freakin' time who was in that position. Exactly one person.

However Unsinkable got the money wasn't clear (stolen? maybe...). But once he'd considered the idle possibility, Lovino felt like he had struck gold. Especially after how that whacko Tenicksonite had put their grandfather up to buying his pasty red-eyed ass at any goddamn cost.

But why would Unsinkable buy Alfred?

They must have become friends on the Delivery. Unsinkable might've wanted to buy his freedom.

...all that trouble, for just a friend? Had this magical Alfred managed to tame the most untrainable of bondspeople?

Man, this stupid kid better be worth it, Lovino thought again, and that if he didn't have a face pretty enough to launch a thousand airships he would laugh himself into the hospital.
Which wasn't good - it'd be crazy expensive to buy someone so beautiful, and he doubted that Feli had that kind of cash.

"Twenty-five million!" he overheard from the crowd. "I think that's a new record for the Decennial!"

"I've never seen anything like it," someone agreed.

"If that's the case for Francis of Hallar, I can't wait to see what Avo Romae will bring out!"

"Natasha, I must insist you don't buy one quite that expensive."

"I didn't like her face anyway! And I want a boy!"

"I am standing right next to you, darling, you don't have to yell -"

An expensive sale for Francis, Lovino thought, that'd make mister Moneybags happy. But twenty-five million for Francis' last girl? Hard to believe! From the files, she was pretty, sure, but she wasn't twenty-five million pretty!

People are maybe so desperate for it, he wondered angrily, they'll pay any amount to attempt to get the real thing.

Why someone would use bondspeople, he'd never know. Not that Lovino had ever had a girlfriend, but ... some part of it all struck him as wrong, as false. A poor substitute.

He recalled what Antonio had told him, all those years ago, what had initially made him rethink their then-budding friendship: *People need contact, Lovi. Even you. Maybe you just haven't found the right bondsperson yet!*

Antonio hadn't understood. Had made fun of him - made fun of his opinions. Screw Antonio in the end, there was no 'right bondsperson' when they were all wrong, all wrong!

Well, here goes nothing, he thought, as they led out the next one - Alfred, he assumed, if that was indeed his real name or just a moniker Feli gave him -

- and his breath stuck in his throat.

The pictures he'd seen did not do justice. Perhaps that girl of Francis' - blonde haired and willowy, acid green eyes - was also prettier in person, because the pictures he'd seen of Alfred were nothing compared to the vision onstage, his hair like wavy spun gold, a single ringlet falling gracefully down his forehead, his complexion a flawless pale peach, his eyes larger under the glasses, his cheeks - not too round to be chubby, not so thin he was gaunt - dusted with the slightest rose...

Lovino felt himself blush, his face warm and on fire. He ducked and quickly looked around but while it felt like a hundred fingers were pointing at him in judgment, nobody was studying him. Nobody had noticed anything.

He'd expected Alfred to be beautiful, sure. You couldn't drink that horrible tonic concoction without feeling its effects, and the formulation was precise and time-tested, and Feliciano had certainly implied there was something peculiar and different about Alfred.
Peculiar, different? This was ridiculous! He was unearthly, the kind of beauty they wrote literature about. How could such a person exist?

He couldn't judge Feliciano. Not when Alfred looked like this. Why, he might have had a hard time resisting himself, and he made a mental reminder to thank his brother - or at least be extra special nice to him - for taking the job of training bondspeople. It meant being around them more often, and every time Lovino had imagined himself in that role, he felt physically sick.

It wasn't the beauty that took him by force. A pretty face, pah! There were many of those. It wasn't his posture, as the auctioneer led him forward onto the dais and introduced him, and it wasn't even the way the linen robe slid off his shoulders (not thin, but not broad either, perfect arcs, he could imagine his hands curved around them) and sluiced down his body, pooled liquid about his feet.

No, what took Lovino was the defiant look in this Alfred's eyes: a spark, a fire that he'd never before caught on Ludwig - or even his grandfather's bondsperson - whenever Lovino had had the misfortune to run into them in the house. He would have known this if he had ever seen anything like it before. It was (not arousing! Certainly not arousing!!) entrancing. There was something about this bondsman that was genuinely different from the rest of them, and it gave Lovino both chills and a heat-rush. He wasn't sure if he liked it or not.

It was most present when the auctioneer snapped his fingers and Alfred moved not one single muscle besides the reflexive, ingrained action that had the audience in whoops and hollers. Just as well Lovino was so absorbed by his face. It was disturbing, the thought of ogling this poor man's body. Beautiful as it was. He kept his gaze firmly up, to keep the image of the obvious erection from intruding on his peripheral vision.

This had to be Alfred. One, it fit the description to a T. Two, that face matched the picture in their files, and three - surely no normal bondsman would pull his brother in like that? His brother was a silly goose sometimes, yeah, but Feli wasn't dumb. Feli was like Lovino! Feli didn't like the system. This one was special, it would take someone special to get Feli so worked up.

Lovino was close enough to the stage that he could see Alfred's expression clearly, and his eyes said, 'I know what I am. I know what my purpose is here.'

But the tight-set line of his pale lips said, 'I am not thrilled about it.' Different, special.

Lovino was hooked.

"We'll start the bidding at four million for this fine specimen," the auctioneer announced, and Lovino's heart plummeted. He had to pretend to be like everybody else and treat this wonderful person - like meat.

The placards went up like mad. Quickly, the price became four point seven, five point two, five point nine. Lovino waited until they calmed a little more - no sense in fanning the flames. At six point seven they began to dwindle, and he put his placard up finally at seven point one.

"Seven point two?" the auctioneer asked. "Thank you, 8283! Have I got seven point three, is there seven point -" Lovino raised his placard again - "ah, yes, Bidder 7330, I see you there, thank you! Seven point four? 8283, thank you! Seven point five?" The other guy'd stop soon, for sure. "Thank you, 7330! Seven point six? Is there seven point six? Bidder 8283, will you answer?"
There was no placard - or perhaps 8283 made eye contact with the auctioneer and shook their head - so the auctioneer continued, "Thank you for your participation! The lot is therefore sold to bidder 7330!" The crowd around Lovino dissolved into cheers and applause, and a few in his nearest vicinity congratulated him openly, though he didn't pay any of this much attention.

Tunnel-visioned, Lovino concentrated on getting to the stage, glad to have this over with. Just one more bit now. He'd keep his head down, collect the stupid beautiful kid, give him to Feli and then get the hell out of here and take four baths to wash the weirdness off him. Yes, that's what he'd do.

When he got to the sale table to identify himself as the winning bidder, the two clerks behind it, seated among empty chairs - he assumed the others had gone off for lunch - requested his placard and personal documents. Lovino tossed them on the table for them to pore over, and waited impatiently while they checked his registration.

A minute stretched into two, then three. "What's the hold up, ya morons?" he barked. "I haven't got all day!" The longer he waited here, the longer he was a sitting duck for Antonio to come by, buying whoever Francis wanted him to get.

"Just a minute, sir," a clerk said. He looked up from his work to check the tent behind him. "We need to check another few things."

Lovino waited. And waited. And of all the things Lovino was good at, waiting was not one of them. "Look," he said - and he did feel a little sorry for the guys behind the table, it wasn't their fault there was a holdup, or that the other clerks had ditched them with all the work to gallivant around the 'Downs - "can't we speed up the process a little? I'm in a hurry and there're gonna be others coming after me. Before too long you guys're gonna get a line going."

The other clerk threw him a dirty look, when he thought Lovino wasn't looking, probably thinking, these high-society types are all the same...

"I get it," Lovino continued, "I don't wanna be here either, this is a favour I'm doing somebody. I wanna get out of your hair as badly as you want me out of it. Mebbe you can tell me the reason for the holdup? I'm the accountant at Romae's, I bet I can help."

"It's that twenty-five million sale," the first clerk explained, "we're almost positive the people who won don't have the cash to pay for it."

What a goddamn surprise. It wasn't just any old person that could afford to blow twenty-five mil on sextoys. "There's more than one of them?" he asked. "So they're pooling their money together."

"Or they're having us on," the clerk muttered darkly.

Lovino pushed past the table - the clerk and his partner made a half-hearted attempt to stop him. "If I can't help, I'll just go back and wait in line," he told them curtly, and they both sort of shrugged.

The clerk he had been speaking to stood up to accompany him in. Together, they pushed past the canvas doorflap into the tent where they found a tableau so strange Lovino had never even stopped to consider it.

Tall, Blond and Scary (and what the fuck was he doing here?!) couldn't be vocal because he was too busy glaring at two clerks who must have been sitting at the table before the legendary record-breaking sale. His pants-shittingly frightening expression managed to scream volumes anyway.
Next to him there was an angry-looking young man - also blond, and also creepy looking, though
in a completely different way from the taller man with spectacles, although like him, he also
seemed to agree that smiling or otherwise appearing pleasant in any form was for chumps. Of the
four men, he was the shortest - Lovino's height - but he managed to look stocky in a no-nonsense
sort of way.

People that freaky, decided Lovino, should really stop wearing cutesy things like barrettes in their
hair.

Then there was the klutz he'd spotted earlier who had overturned the registration table's
complimentary coffee station, what the hell was his connection, Lovino wondered. Luckily for
him, none of the sale table staff had been there and therefore didn't recognise him. Another man
stood beside the klutz, with spiked ash-blond hair and a long, straight nose, a scar on his forehead.
The other two, the creeps, were mostly silent and piped up only now and again, but the klutz and
this one argued loudly and at great length with the clerks.

As Lovino entered, he spotted movement from the other side of the tent and wasn't surprised when
the flap opened to admit two more people. (Mouthy and Spikey over there were making enough
noise to raise the dead, after all.) He was a little surprised at who it was, however.

"What in god's name is going on here?!" the councillor Héderváry cried, her hair having almost
completely fallen out of its bun. By her side, Francis of Hallar stood with his arms folded across his
chest, neither impressed or dissatisfied.

"I'm as close to a manager as you're going to get," Héderváry replied acidly. "What's the problem?"

"They think we're thieves!" he yelled. "Why, never in all my years have I been treated so poorly -"

The one with the straight nose and the scar nodded, his hands on his hips. "It's true. We've been
faithful patrons of all the Auctions. Every single one! Never seen anything so disorganised!
In my day, everything ran shipshape!"

"Look, the lot they bought - it wasn't even all of them, it was just this guy here -" one clerk pointed
to the short man.

"Says nowhere in the rules you can't combine your money for the initial purchase," the tiny creep
shrugged.

"- we just need some proof you can handle the funds! It was twenty-five million -"

Héderváry sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose. "Sir, can you supply us with this proof?"

The short man drew himself up and held his nose in the air. "I am Einar Steinsvik of Tenickson.
That ought to be proof enough," he said snottily.

Lovino stiffened immediately, as did Héderváry. They knew what that meant even if the clerks
didn't. "I'm so sorry, Mr Steinsvik," Héderváry said, in a quiet hush, at the same time that Lovino
murmured, "No one knew you'd been planning on purchasing."
"It's quite alright," Steinsvik replied. "But if it's all the same, I'd much appreciate it if we could have this wrapped up sooner rather than later."

"Of course, of course," Lovino coaxed, feeling at once awed and impressed with a side of sycophantic. (But really, who didn't know about the money in the Steinsvik family after they'd made billions in the quartz mining industry on Nunat and packed up to Tenickson? Einar, as the only child, must have been sitting on piles upon piles of cash. Freak or no freak, that meant something, in this world.) "I can take this," he told Héderváry.

Héderváry said nothing and gave him a filthy look.

Perhaps there was another key piece of information missing. "We've never met in person before, Councillor, but we've corresponded many times. My name is Lovino Vargas," he said, and extended his hand. When they shook hands, Héderváry seemed more at ease (next to her, Francis, of course, looked like the cat who got the cream, with an expression of unbridled delight at Héderváry's obvious discomfort).

And then Ludwig, of all people, poked his head in. He took in the scene in a second and whatever he would've said died in his throat. Just before he ducked his head back down out of subservience, however, Lovino caught his eye and mouthed, over Héderváry's shoulder, go get Feliciano.

Ludwig hastily left the tent.

"Oh no you don't," the mouthy one said. For a second Lovino thought he might've noticed Ludwig's rapid appearance and disappearance, but the guy hadn't seen him on account of being too busy up in Héderváry's face. "We have no idea who this random is, you can't just leave such an important case with some guy! I'm making a statement! I'm filing a complaint! I'm -"

"He isn't just some guy," Héderváry interrupted, fighting impatience. "As part of Avo Romae's delegation, Mr Vargas is in charge of Francis of Hallar's shop."

"- when I filed notice for clerical and personal assistance for the auction, yes," Francis piped up. "I am certain I do not know why that would be." Héderváry ignored him.

"Can't we just deal wit' Francis's secretary?" asked the taller creep, eyeing Lovino with a certain distaste and apprehension. (Right back at you, creepo, Lovino thought.) "Y' still got one, dontcha? Th' one wit' th' purpley eyes an' th' blond hair?"

"Who?" Héderváry asked.

"Matthieu!" Francis retorted, blushing. "No, you said I needed to accompany you for my entire set, and now my set is done, the last lot is sold, so I am leaving." Héderváry opened her mouth to reply but Francis cut her off. "I even stuck around for you to introduce our darling absentee Avo Romae." That had entirely escaped Lovino; he must have been so busy thinking. "You cannot keep me here any longer!"

Héderváry and the rest of them watched him exit the tent the way Ludwig had gone, throwing the canvas behind him in a huff. Torn between the rich snob Steinsvik and the loopy prima donna Francis, Héderváry directed a stern look Lovino's way and snapped, "You said you can take care of this? Then you take care of this. I'll be back in five and if we don't get things moving, heads will roll! That also means you three," she told the clerks.
Before she left the tent, she turned and frowned. "And, Vargas? Thank you," she managed stiffly, like she wasn't used to asking for help. Then she disappeared to follow Francis.

The curtain hadn't stopped swinging before it moved again to admit his brother, who said brightly, "Lovino! You wanted to ... see ... me ..."

Feliciano trailed off as he laid eyes on each of the blond men, and then the three clerks. "Lovino, my dear brother," he said, sounding calmer than he looked, "what is going on. Did - you did as I asked, yes?"

"Yes," Lovino replied. With that, his mouth returned to him - he had been struck mostly silent for the previous scene - and the words spilled out of him in a rush, falling over themselves in haste. "Of - of course I did! - This - this, this whatever it is, it has nothing to do with that. Well. It sort of does. D-don't interrupt me, let me explain!"

He took Feliciano aside and recounted the story from his perspective in a low tone, while the three clerks looked on in confusion and the other four - Steinsvik and his compatriots - grew steadily more nervous.

"So now we need to get these guys out of here so that the sales can continue in succession. I haven't yet paid for Alfred - and I really need to do that - so we still can't take the bastard home until I clear this sale!"

"I see," Feliciano said. "Then ... there's just one problem."

"What's that?"

"I recognise one of those men," he whispered.

"So do I," Lovino whispered back, "the tall creepy one, but he's fine, he hasn't done anything yet, just sat there and been a total groucher with his glaring and his menacing but I don't think he'll do anything too weird if his friend wants that goddamn bondsperson - which, if he's paying 25 mil for, he must want real bad!"

"No, not that one! Though, now that you mention it... No, I meant the one with the spikey hair."

Lovino looked over at him with a more careful, scrutinising eye. Nothing came to mind.

"He used to be one of ours," Feliciano supplied. "We sold him."

... Sold him?

Impossible!

"... There's no way," Lovino said, shaking his head. "There's no fucking way."

"I was the one who helped Grandpa," Feliciano countered. "I remember his face. I remember that scar. It's not usual that we sell them with facial disfigurements! You're right though, now that I recall the creepy one - oh, he was so creepy! - I thought it was real weird that someone would buy the one with the scar when all the others we sold were in better condition and hey that reminds me, wasn't that why you gave him that discount -"
But Lovino was hardly paying attention to his brother.

There was no way that man had once been a bondsperson. He was tempted to snap his fingers - that'd be the ultimate test - but there was so much evidence to the contrary that Lovino felt it wouldn't be necessary. This man, he walked with his head straight up. His eye contact was firm and mostly unwavering. Bondspersons held their heads down, their eyes at the ground. Always. Six years and Lovino had seen Ludwig's eyes twice.

And the spikey haired guy squared his shoulders and had good posture. A bondsman would keep them tucked in to minimise his own importance and highlight his subservience. A bondsman wouldn't speak unless spoken to, much less talk out of turn. Talk out of turn was all the spikey haired guy had done, he'd been loud, he'd projected his voice nice and loud and clear - in fact, he was much louder than the tall creepy one who had bought him ...

If this man had been bought as a bondsman, there was none of it left in his body language or his actions.

Finally, it explained the role of the tall, creepy man!

He wasn't buying bondspersons to own them.

He was buying them to reform them!

Lovino felt the stupid grin split his face before he got control of it again. "I can't believe it," he exclaimed softly.

"- and anyway I - you can't believe what?"

"Feli," he said impatiently, "Feli, do you know what these guys do? They can help us with Alfred!" When Feliciano didn't appear to understand he clarified, "They reform bondspersons. Don't you see it? The spikey haired one doesn't look a thing like something you've trained!"

"Or Grandpa," Feliciano agreed.

"Exactly! And that was only three weeks ago. I said I'd buy your Alfred for you if you figured out how to make him understand not to be a bondservant. Well? These guys can help you with that!"

Feliciano didn't seem convinced. "I don't know, Lovino, you and your jumping to conclusions ... ve, they're really creepy!"

"Then figure it out, and quick, for fuck's sake!" he said. "I have to get back and pay for your stupid not-bondsperson before Antonio runs into me and never lets me forget how awful today's been."

"What do you expect me to do with these?!" Feliciano cried. "A twenty-five million dollar sale, you're the one that handles the money things! Lo-vi-nooo," he whined.

"Just pull it together and act tough. For the love of god. You won't die in the five minutes I'm gone," Lovino snapped. "And I'll be right back with your precious Alfred, maybe that will knock some sense into you. You three -" he commanded the clerks, "with me."

With that, Lovino stormed back out of the tent to the sale table, taking the clerks with him.
Which was when he remembered that he hadn't told Feliciano about the fact that the men who would help the Alfred problem were being hunted by Adnan and his off-worlder security cronies.
Lithuania

Once Toris and Zielska's agent Szweda got out of the hallway and out of view, things began to be easier.

Toris found that Ivan's chambers - since Brother Toris had never gone near them - consisted of four separate rooms. There was a sitting room that served as an entrance way and led into the main office area. Here was the desk - an enormous piece of furniture with two chairs nearby, one on either side. Wise of Ivan to keep temptation at bay and in your sights at all times. Having Eduard at arm's length would make it harder to give in to chasing him around the table. Toris was pleased to find, for Eduard's sake, that Brother Toris' teachings had not been wholly ignored.

There was a bed in the office itself up against the wall, its sheets neat and proper, the pillows fluffed, one corner turned down. That must be Eduard's, he deduced. Ivan had told him something about having to keep his bondsman in his chambers (and in the very next breath, recounted how vividly he could smell him even from a room away, making Toris feel incredibly uncomfortable).

Beyond, there was the bedroom, the curtain to it drawn shut. He peered past to find the giant bed in disarray, all rumpled sheets and pillows everywhere - one on the floor near the bathroom. He wrinkled his nose. Place reeked of sex.

Better he masturbate himself crazy, than force himself on Eduard. Toris shuddered; yes, far better.

Just a curtain between them. Just one piece of cloth. How horrifying. How unnerving it must have been for Eduard, he lamented, returning to the office. No wonder he came to the base at every opportunity.

Best not to think of that now. He removed the roll-up lock pick set from Szweda's messenger bag and instructed him to get started.

The compartments and drawers below the desk were locked with the most basic of fastenings. The hinges, easy to unscrew! The drawers, held together with dowels! These defences were completely ineffectual against simple tools, and to be frank, it alarmed Toris at how easy this was for them to put together. Like shooting fish in a barrel!

Then again, when the front door had five locks on it, and deep scratches in the paint that still hadn't been filled in, like the room had once held a caged animal, Toris supposed that any normal trespasser would be too freaked out to care about a desk.

Toris began with the drawers, Szweda with the cabinets. There were many folders, unsorted, but within the folders they were organised and neat and best of all, well-labelled. He fished through them quickly with a glance at the title. Ildutsk, no; wasn't relevant. Karakol', no - the Skuratchky local news had already covered that topic and anyway it wasn't anything that was secret - everything inside was common knowledge.

After a half hour of searching for anything Zapreschniy and not finding it, Toris began to grow anxious.
Nothing from Raivis or Feliks - which didn't mean bad, but put him on edge. Szweda, who turned up nothing in the cabinetry. Nothing in the bedroom - the bedside table did not lock, but all it held was a lonely copy of the Priegyl Scriptures, bookmarked with a slip of paper on which was written morning meditations in Toris' hand. Nothing either in Eduard's bedside table, except for a specifications manual on telecommunications standards in the Empire. (He pocketed this; it could be useful.) Once or twice, he thought he heard the Eavesdropper crackle. Only his imagination.

Toris began to toy with the Eavesdropper nervously. Fiddling with something helped to take his mind off things. Why weren't Raivis and Feliks checking in?

He did not like last-minute changes to plans, and Ivan remaining on Olyokin was one hell of a last-minute change.

It was gutsy of the commander to pursue the mission when there was a variable like that not properly taken care of, but Toris agreed about the importance of what was at stake. If they could be assured of Zapreschniy's participation and allegiance to Kilnus, what an ally! It would shift the balance of power in that region. It was one more leg for Kilnus to stand on, against an ideologically doomed empire with power-mad lunatics at the wheel. And it was impossible to get another chance like this - Bragina left the planet often enough but Bragin, hardly ever (not once in the last eight years that Toris could recall, and he knew why that was). No, they were unlikely to get the same chances again, and it wasn't Zielska's fault that the stars were serendipitously aligned for this.

And, in the end, all spies were expendable.

Well. He was. Raivis and Feliks - not so much.

Finally, so worried his head pounded to think of it, Toris gave in, and held the device up to his lips and pressed talk -

"What are you doing?" asked Szweda.

Caught red-handed. Toris flipped it back off immediately. "Just checking in with Feliks." Or Raivis, whoever would answer first.

"Well, don't!" Szweda snapped. "You're not supposed to. These things can't contact an individual person, they broadcast to everyone! You're not to ring in unless there are problems! What if you give away the commander's position?"

"But there are problems," Toris argued, "we can't find what we're fucking looking for! It's not here!"

Szweda looked obviously unhappy about it, but nodded despite his sour expression, and let Toris do what he wanted.

"Commander," he said. He waited a few seconds and then said again, "Commander, this is Laurinaitis, please respond."

There was no answer from Zielska. Toris exchanged a brief, uncertain look with Szweda and hit talk again. "Raivis," he said, asking for Raivis this time, "Raivis, please respond!"

Nothing.
The kitchens - where Raivis was ostensibly supposed to be - were less than two hundred metres away. Even if the Duma walls were made of concrete, this should reach him!

"Feliks?" he tried. "Can you hear me? Can - can anybody hear me?"

Szweda got out his and pressed talk the second Toris was done. "All listeners, code one-nine-nine-Golf-Olyokin. Execute Check. Reply immediately."

Silence in the room.

"Wait a minute," Toris said. "Call that out again?" Szweda did, and Toris noticed that there was no other sound produced in that room besides the sound of Szweda's voice as he spoke. "If that's to go to every two-way... shouldn't that include mine?"

Beat.

"That cheat," Szweda growled. "That filthy little jezebel of a bondsman!"

"Ex-cuse me," Toris retorted hotly, "I fail to see why Eduard's to blame!"

Szweda cried, "He sold us out! The commander was right!"

"He wouldn't," Toris insisted, and they really should be keeping their voices down - both of them - but he had, for the moment, completely forgotten about that, and was surprised at how angry he could be. "He would never. He had no allegiance to Bragin!"

"He was bought by him, wasn't he? Of course he has allegiance to that - that awful monster!"

"That doesn't mean anything," Toris swore.

"You don't know bondspeople," Szweda continued. "They're programmed to do anything their master wants. Whatever he wants is what they want! That doesn't change. How do you know he didn't sabotage these?!" And he shook his two-way Eavesdropper in Toris' face.

Toris knocked it out of his hand with a blow more vicious than he'd intended and the Eavesdropper clattered to the ground. "You don't know Eduard. He's not like the rest of them. He isn't like any of them, he's my friend!"

"Oh, and he's been your bosom buddy for so very long, has he? Known him all your life, eh?"

Toris was struck silent. Of course, he hadn't. In fact he'd only known Eduard three weeks, but ... but there was something about Eduard. He wouldn't do that kind of thing. Sabotage? That wasn't his way.

Was double-crossing?

After all, didn't he go behind Ivan's back to join them in the base?

What was to stop him from going behind Toris'?

No! No, this line of thought was poisonous, he didn't need to consider it!
He watched as Szweda made to leave the chambers and asked, "Where do you think you're going?"

"To go find the commander," he replied angrily.

"But we have a separate exit strategy!"

"Not anymore," he muttered, and slammed the door as he left. Dangerous, Toris thought at first - but, then again, any maids around would simply assume Ivan was in one of his moods and wouldn't interfere. If anything, slamming a door so hard that the papers fluttered to the ground would distance the help. By now they surely would know to stay away...

Hang on a second.

There were papers on the desk, in the office, next to the empty messenger bag. The sitting room didn't contain any folders. Szweda hadn't taken anything with him when he'd stormed out.

And yet there were about thirty pages strewn around the entrance to Ivan's chambers, a full room away.

Toris examined the door more closely and finally noticed the hollowed-out compartment above it, in the lintel space above the doorframe, which had been jiggled open by the force of slamming a door.

And then he examined the pages that had fallen - and he grinned.

On the matters regarding Aritsevskiy posyolok within Zapreshniy State - letters to Ivan Bragin and Yekaterina Bragina from the Major Vmalkhina and Imperial State Agent Savva Yozhin among others. Many others. It was all here.

"Jackpot," he breathed.

He gathered up all thirty pages and then stood on tiptoes to examine the compartment, where he found four other folders, each as suspect as the last. Toris took them all and was putting them in the messenger bag when the clock struck three-thirty.

Auction intermission soon, and although the radio coverage wouldn't reach Olyokin until fifteen minutes later, he had better get the hell out of here. A hackneyed musical number, usually. Nothing to write home about and people might pay less attention to the radio.

He quickly straightened Ivan's chambers and exited them -

- to find Ivan, a terrifying spectre, facing him in the halls and looming over comparatively tiny Raivis, helpless in Ivan's arms and frozen, Ivan's gun pointed at his temple.

His heart filled with terror. Raivis was not expendable.

"How good of you to join us," Ivan said sweetly, smiling a crocodile's grin. He cocked the weapon and Toris couldn't hold back his loud gasp. He dropped the messenger bag in horror. "I have been expecting you, my Brother."
"You don't seem to like any of these," Katya grumbled.

Natalya folded her arms across her chest and put on an angry pout. She couldn't have looked more like a five year old if she'd tried, and Katya found it difficult to be angry with someone acting so ridiculous. "So far you've only asked me about the girls!"

"Well, what about the boys then?"

"I don't like any of them either," she sulked. "This auction's not what I thought it would be!"

As difficult as it was to be angry with her, Katya managed. Supposing Natalya didn't find anybody at all? She couldn't afford to be picky!

"Don't worry," said her darling beside her, in a meek and unobtrusive tone so as not to enrage Natalya further. "I have faith she'll find one she likes."

Faith! Fat lot of good faith had ever done them! "But supposing she likes one that's discount quality and we have to pay a crowd-inflated price?" Katya hissed back. "I don't trust the second-class sales... Or the second-class sales people." Why couldn't Francis have simply answered her letter?

Her darling merely smiled. "If my gospozha is asking my opinion, I believe whatever makes the Devushka Natasha happy should be considered a success. That one, she likes things just so, I have noticed. Maybe she will pick one that you don't -"

"Oh!" Natalya interrupted.

They both looked over.

"That one," Natalya said, pointing to the bondsman on the stage. "That one is nice."

Strange looking creature, Katya thought. They'd managed to secure enough of a position at the auction to get a good view, and Katya didn't understand what precisely Natalya thought was nice about it. Not to mention that nice wasn't the reaction Katya had been hoping for. "But do you like it enough to buy it, or are you just saying that to make me happy?"

"When have I ever done things to make you happy?" Natalya snarled. "That's tyen'ka's job, not mine. No, I like that one. I like him very much."

The bondsman stared out at the crowd, a vapid look in its eyes. Thin, almond-shaped. Dark eyes, probably brown, although they were too far away to see the precise colour of the iris. It had decent posture, at least, but its body was small and thin, and didn't appear to have much in the way of muscle. (Then again, neither had Vanya's Eduard, and that one had managed to survive a night locked in a dungeon with a monster.) Whatever one might say about the frame, Katya agreed with...
her sister about the skin tone. The bondsman's complexion was pale but in a way that the Vitim weren't. The hair was black and flat, laying on its forehead and framing the face in straight lines. Its mouth was thin-lipped and set firmly.

Very rigid, military and orderly, and it was on these aspects that she approved her sister's taste. Nevertheless, to Katya, the bondsman was kind of bland. Frankly, there had been others that were plenty more attractive.

"But it is sort of ... well ... really? That one? I would have thought you might want something a little closer to home. Maybe one that looked like Vanya. You two used to be so close."

"That's why I like him," Natalya guessed. "Because he doesn't look a thing like Vanya or - or anyone I've ever met. Maybe that way Vanya won't judge me so much for having him. But you said I have to have one."

Somehow she doubted that, but kept her opinions to herself. As long as she's happy, who cares what it looks like? Let it have four arms and call it bonus features! "Then you've decided?"

Natalya gave her a happy smile.

Well, whatever you want, little sister, Katya thought, and at two million, jumped in. "Thank you, 0212!" the auctioneer bellowed in reply. "Is there two point one? Two point one? Yes, perhaps? Ah - there we are, thank you 4442! How about two point two? Thank you, 5420! Two point three? 0212 again! Thank you, 0212!"

"Two point four? Is there a two point four? Perhaps not? I await the bid ..." A moment's silence passed during which Katya thought for certain she had won, but then the auctioneer cried instead, "There we are! Two point four bid by Bidder number 4442!"

Drat. That one again! When the call for two point five came she held her placard high into the air. But 4442 matched her, again, and again, until three point eight.

She bid three point nine, and then turned to her sister. "Are you absolutely certain about this one?" she asked. "We can wait and see." Though Katya wasn't sure about her chances - there had only been one that Natalya had liked enough to bid for earlier, and once the stakes had gotten high, she had thereafter lost all interest.

But this time, Natalya insisted. "Yes! I like him ... it is very expensive though," she admitted, as the auctioneer cried for four million and got it again from 4442.

"You mustn't worry about that. That's typical." Hell, the planned budget for each of her siblings was around four million and Eduard had been surprisingly cheap, so money was not the deciding factor. Making sure Natalya was happy was.

"Why, Katya!" she heard behind her. She made a face and tightened her hold on her darling's hand; she knew that voice. "It's strange meeting my lady here, it is!"

"Good afternoon, your Lordship," Natalya said, and curtseyed.

"My dear young lady," Yao Wang replied.

"Not that strange," Katya grumbled, as the Veshnan monarch, along with two of his bondspeople,
joined her. Today, he had brought the pretty girl with a pink flower in her hair, and the young man with deep, dark eyes and heavy-set eyebrows. "I did come to Hallar for the express purpose of attending this auction. Which you knew."

"I meant, how we meet here, even in this large crowd of people," Yao continued.

"That's also not so strange," Katya muttered.

"- how about it, Miss 0212, will you bid four point one?" Katya thrust her placard into the air like a knife into a body. "Thank you, 0212! Ah, what emphasis! Mister 4442, you'll really have to push hard against this one .-" The crowd tittered and giggled.

Idly, Yao held up his placard at chest level and toyed with it, flipping it about this way and that. "No? Perhaps you are not easy to surprise. I understand not much foolishness gets past you."

Precisely why he gave off so many red flags! But in what system was it a crime to be annoying, to hover, without aim or purpose except to be noticed? Yao hadn't done anything worthy of punishment, but neither could Katya explain why she didn't want to give in so easily. Perhaps because everything appeared to come easily to him. It would be good for him to have to work for something in his life.

And then she noticed his placard number. "You - you -"

"- are so eloquent in describing me," Yao - bidder 4442 - prattled merrily, balancing the placard on a slender finger. "Yes, I understand the feeling. Is it my handsomeness? It has rendered many speechless!"

"Oh, I possess the vocabulary that properly describes you," she gritted out, "but also the tact not to use it in public or in front of my baby sister."

"I'm not a baby!" protested Natalya.

Not for much longer, no, Katya thought, as the auctioneer attempted to loudly cajole 4442 into a bid of four point two million, and Yao obliged, right in front of her.

"How about it, Miss 0212? Will you give me four point three?" Angrily, Katya shoved her placard into the air. Yao grinned.

"Four point four? Thank you, 4442!" Katya growled.

"Is there four point five? Will Miss 0212 repl- ah, yes! She has responded, we have four point five!"

"Katya, if I didn't know better, I might guess you are flirting with me!" Yao chirped beside her, even as he - the bastard - bid four point six for her sister's bondsman.

"I am not convinced you do know better," Katya retorted, and bid four point seven.

Beside her, Natalya tugged her shirt sleeve. "What?" she demanded. "What is it?"

"Don't get angry with me!" Natalya said. "I just wanted to say it's okay if he wins. I won't be upset."

"Don't get angry with me!" Natalya said. "I just wanted to say it's okay if he wins. I won't be upset."
"He's not winning anything," she spat.

But he would, she realised, because that was entirely why he had come. He knew Katya would be here, and the event itself was entertaining, but Yao himself was not especially looking for a new bondsperson. He had five already, and he could buy as many as he liked (well, perhaps no more than fifty - they were expensive). And he had been known to buy them for his highest ranking officers.

However, she also knew he didn't particularly covet them. Not if he let them walk all over him the way they did, and if the dinner the previous night had been any consideration this was exactly what he allowed happen. No, to Yao, it was more like adornments, prizes, valuables - or even pawns in chess. And what do you do with a pawn in chess? You sacrifice it to be able to take a greater blow later, at the queen. Perhaps he intended to use this against her. Why else would he have sidled up right next to her in the crowd? Surely, she was playing right into his hand like this...

Then there was one way she could reclaim some dignity and save face, by showing him that she'd figured him out. By showing him that she could play games too and was more than enough match as an opponent.

(And besides, she had intended this eventually. Might as well do it with style.)

Katya continued the farce until it was high enough to make a point, before she made her offer. "Five point three? Five point three, have I five point three? Thank you, 4442, five point three! Five point four?"

"I have a proposition for you," Katya began. "You appear to be particularly interested in this one."

"Mmm, yes, I appear to be," Yao replied.

"Supposing I let you buy it."

Yao smiled. "Supposing you let me buy it. Then ...?"

"I let you buy it, and ... I let you gift it to Natalya. As a wedding present for me." She did not look at him when she said it, but she didn't have to to know he was grinning his fool face off.

"Five point three five? Miss 0212, we're waiting ..."

"You would let me do this?" he murmured.

"I have been known to be that generous," she replied cryptically.

"Going once ... going twice ... Miss 0212, have you lost interest?"

"I'm very happy to hear it, my lady, I am. Then I accept your proposition!"

"I declare the item sold, to 4442, for five point three million!"

When Yao wasn't looking, Katya allowed herself her own secret smile.

Chapter End Notes
I've changed the order of the chapters a bit from the way it was on the kink meme. I think this reflects suspense a bit better!
The one with the lighter brown hair who had stayed with them - the one that talked more, Sverige remembered *that* much - snapped, "Well, do you have the money or not?"

He caught Norge's eye. We need to stall, he thought at him, trying desperately to convey it by his eyes alone. As per usual, Norge didn't flinch or move or indeed betray any sort of emotion that might tell Sverige he'd gotten the picture.

If the Vargas kid thought they didn't have the cash, he'd throw the case out, no matter what his brother thought! (And 'bondsperson reformers'? Well, *that* was a new one.)

"D'ya think we woulda bid so high'f we didn't?" he began.

"I didn't ask *you*," Vargas chirped. "I am asking the rich one. You have the money?" Norge nodded. A lie. "Then I don't care why you paid so much for this as long as you have the funds. Prove it!"

"I- ah." Sverige never thought he'd see the day when Norge was lost for words. "We - er, we have - there's twenty million here. The rest is in escrow -"

"Ah," Vargas pointed out oilly, "but escrow is not *here*. And besides, I've heard that one before!"

"C'mon, man!" Danmark interjected. "Do you really expect people to just walk around with access to that much money? On Hallar?!"

Vargas gave him an uncomfortable glare. "Why not? It's not like you hold the cash physically in hand. You think you'll get held up and the people will ask for your banking information and account numbers? That's not how it works!"

"Oh, I see," Sverige muttered, "y'don't trust us, y'gott'n held up y'self b'fore."

"It's okay to feel angry about it," Norge said in a tone more patronising than comforting.

"I got held up once," Tim added, "it happens to everybody."

"Don't be ridiculous! It has *nothing* to do with being held up!" Vargas shrieked, "and *everything* to do with the fact that - that - *why* would I trust you to give me twenty-five million?! That's patently absurd!"

"Only five million," Norge corrected. "The twenty we have here."

"It - *stop* arguing about the exact amount! I'm not letting you walk away with it and that's final. You don't have the money, you don't get the bondsperson, it's that simple!"
"Suppose we make a deal," offered Danmark.

Vargas looked nearly apoplectic. "No! No deals! I'm sick of deals, we do enough deals with you pir- - with unlikable people like you. If you do not have the money then the lot goes to the next highest bidder and that is the end of the story -"

And of all times, now was when Ísland elected to ring in. "Sverige, you there?" the two-way Eavesdropper crackled out.

Sverige nearly dropped it in his haste to fish it out of his pocket. "Ísland!" he exclaimed. "Th' hell've y'been?!

"Ah, well... I don't really know how to tell you this..."

"What is it?" Norge asked. "Is everything alright?"

Vargas looked from one of them to the next, all speaking into little brass balls. "What's going on?"

"Never you mind," snapped Danmark.

"Ve, don't talk to me like that!" Vargas retorted.

"Ísland's with me," and that sounded like Suomi. "We're kind of in jail!"

"What," he said.

"You're joking," Norge said flatly.

"I'm not," Suomi replied.

"Th'hell happen'd, didja let K'rpusi sink's claws into ya?

"We should've given him the bag of coffee," Danmark muttered.

"I HEARD THAT."

"Okay, what happened with Ísland?" asked Norge, getting more impatient.

"Same sorta thing," Ísland replied. The other Vargas kid - the bitchy one with the darker hair, Lovino apparently - came back into the tent and joined his brother, pointing at the Eavesdroppers in their hands. There was some susurrus from that end of the tent while Talky Vargas explained the story so far to Bitchy Vargas, and then they both sat there spazzing at each other for a bit, which Sverige found surprisingly difficult to ignore. "There I was," Ísland went on, "minding my own business when all of a sudden in comes Adnan up in my face about things. I'm lucky I had the forethought to shove this stupid Eavesdropper down my pants -"

"Which let me tell you was not fun to fish out," Suomi muttered, "Mister Got Handcuffed Behind the Back -"

"- hey, it worked, didn't it? Anyway Adnan went ballistic and booked me the second he figured out
what it was I was doing there. And long story short, I got hauled in."

"Did he explain you the charges?" Norge asked. "You know that unless he tells you the charges he can't keep you."

"Apparently the charges were stealing airships, forging and resisting arrest," Suomi pointed out. "And all of that, he kinda did."

"And breaking his nose!" Ísland crowed. "I broke his nose!"

"Anyway," Suomi continued, "we're grounded here until you come and get us. The guard's helpfully been in and out of sleep and we got five minutes when he left to use the washroom. He's been drinking so much coffee for the past half hour to stop himself passing out from sheer boredom. I think everybody else buggered off to the auction so there's nobody to relieve him. But unfortunately for us, these bars are actually pretty strong."

"We'll be there as soon as w'can," Sverige promised, 'but there's jus' one thing -"

"And also, Sverige, your last transmission got overheard. Adnan's on his way back right now."

"You're joking," Norge said again.

"He's not," Suomi replied.

"Anyway yeah," Ísland went on, "if you could come bust us out real soon, that'd be great."

"See... not sure w'can do. Not'n th' next while. We're kind'f in th' middle of somethin' here -"

"No they're not!" And this came not from their group, but Lovino. "They'll be there."

"Who's that?" Suomi asked.

"Nobody important," Lovino replied, "You two sit tight."

"Suomi, the guard's coming back, can you at least do up my jeans -" And nothing more was heard from the Eavesdropper.

They all looked at the elder Vargas - his brother included. "Whaddaya mean, we're not in the middle of something?" Danmark asked suspiciously.

"I don't know why it is you four - five? six? - however many there are of you! I don't know why it is Adnan wants you. But I know that guy, and he's a real dick, and he usually operates on half the information he's got. So maybe it's the case that he's mistaken, and you guys're innocent," Lovino explained. His brother opened his mouth to speak, but Lovino cut him off. "And maybe it's the case he's not mistaken, and you guys are not innocent," he continued, and his brother shut his gaping piehole already. "And you know what, I almost don't care. Adnan's a self-righteous power-hungry idiot, in my opinion, but even if I did like him ... You people seem to do something with bondspeople. Maybe you convert them back into regular human beings, you make the training go away. I like the sound of that very much -"

"Signore Lovino - Feliciano - whoever is there, my apologies for speaking out of turn but may I please suggest the purchased servants be let in?" they heard from outside the tent.
"Ludwig!" said the talky one - Feliciano, evidently. "What's the problem?"

"They are - they are acting up and at this rate, we are going to have a line! - And some dummkopf just crashed the coffee table again! This auction could not be less efficient..."

They all looked at Danmark. "Wasn't me," he said, unhelpfully shrugging, "I've been in here."

"Anyway," Lovino continued, "we'll call it a draw. Twenty million for the one you bought."

"That's not the price they won with!" Feliciano spat.

"That's the price Francis is getting, and if Francis really wants to fiddle around for the extra five million - and he probably will - he can just come to me about it, and I'll give him a heaping load of not giving a fuck in return," Lovino said darkly. "Or maybe I'll rat him out to the Council, I'll decide later. I overheard him earlier boasting to the kid helping out in the products tent, he didn't think this one would go for anything more than two mil. He's already made enough profit to last anyone a century."

"But what if the losing bidder finds out? Do you know who he is?"

"The losing bidder doesn't need to know, now does he, Feli?"

"But what if -" Feliciano lowered his voice, but Sverige had better hearing than he'd like to sometimes. "What if they're pirates?! Do you know what would happen to us if we were seen helping them? Bad enough to do business -"

"They're not with the pirates," Lovino explained. "There was another guy, a friend of Adnan's - anyway, don't ask me how I know! But if you don't trust them, at least trust me. I'll vouch for them - they couldn't possibly be pirates." His brother didn't seem happy about it. "Well, think, idiot! How would pirates afford twenty-five million?"

"Twenty million," Feliciano corrected sullenly, "and they could steal it. I still think they're pirates."

"We're not pirates," Tim shot back hotly.

"We're clean, for one," Norge noted.

"In a manner'f speakin'," Sverige added.

"I still have coffee spilled all up my pants," Danmark admitted.

"They're not pirates," insisted a voice from outside - this time, a woman. There was the sound of a brief struggle and then three people, a woman and two men, clambered through the tent flaps. The men, both blond, kept their eyes firmly on the ground. Lovino walked over to the one with glasses and said something to the one with the slicked-back hair, who looked up only to shuffle over to Feliciano and appear really apologetic without saying anything, as though he had tried and failed at keeping people back. The other blond bondsman, the one with glasses, stayed near Lovino and tried to hide behind him.

The last was the woman, who had blond hair and green eyes and who, come to think of it, did closely resemble a smaller, female version of their good friend Tim. "At least, he isn't," she said,
pointing to Tim. "He's my brother."

"Margot," Tim exclaimed, his face pale and his voice very quiet.

"Willem," she replied, and her brother clapped his hands over his mouth in shock.

Margot grinned, then tittered, a nervous, high-pitched tremolo that rushed from her like she'd hyperventilated it out through her ear-to-ear wide grin. Sverige recognised the sound better as shock and disbelief. "What? Did - did you forget?"

Tim - Willem, Sverige supposed his name was - just stood there, pale and shaking his head in wide-eyed horror, his gaze unfocused and dim.

"It's okay, you big lug," Margot giggled, "y'know, I forgot a lot of things too! Stupid things! The lady who ran the deli down the street. Our apartment number! Haha!"

Margot laughed, like it was a funny joke, until she was breathless, when there was really not much humour to be had, until the merriment deteriorated and she looked lost and sad.

Then, she calmed a little more and approached Willem with shaking hands. "I forgot what the old place looked like," she continued, as she pulled his hands from his face and wrapped his arms around her body. As though Tim - Willem - had forgotten not to be a statue. "Probably been rented out by now. We'll have to rent one properly when we go home!"

And as she fully embraced her brother for the first time in years, he rested his head on the top of hers and his eyes began to water. "I," he gasped, "I- f-forgot -"

"Because we are going home," she murmured, with more conviction than she seemed to have. Margot's eyes hardened as she asked, "Tell me you didn't forget about home?"

"We'll really -? I - I did -"

"Don't you cry on me now," Margot warned, and Sverige could not honestly tell if this was a joke. "Do you have any idea what I went through for you? Don't you dare make me cry."

"I'd - I had - I never -"

"It's okay. I know. It seemed hopeless. It was a bad dream. But this is real. We'll go home. Okay? It'll be okay," she said, rubbing his back.

Willem said nothing, and the tears ran silently down his long straight nose, until he whispered quietly in a miserable sobbing gush, "I forgot it all. I forgot your name. I forgot how you smelled. L-like beer, how could I forget?"

And as Willem began to cry in earnest he sobbed, "I lost everything, Margot. I lost us everything. You're the only one I've ever had in the whole world and I forgot you."

Margot's beautiful green eyes finally brimmed with water but her voice stayed brittle. "Aw, what are you, kidding me?" she said, too acidly, as the tears spilled over and streamed down her face. She trembled. "You're an old nutcase, you know I haven't had a decent drink in forever. And all they have here is shitty beer! Haha!"
"Everything - everything - I lost it, everything that happened to us, I'm so sorry -"

Margot continued as if she hadn't heard, but she held him tighter. "You know me, if it's under six percent, that's not beer, it's pop ..." until she too croaked out a weak sob of a laugh. "C'mon! Stop crying. You'll make me cry. This isn't funny anymore. It was all a bad dream."

"God, she's just like you," he heard beside him. Danmark, softly whispering to himself. "In her own way." Sverige watched his friend pull himself together, and then announce loudly, "We'll, uh - we'll be right outside. Just - for some privacy. For you."

Willem did not appear to be capable of hearing but Margot caught Sverige's eye over her brother's shoulder, and nodded. "Just a bad dream," she said quietly. "Time to wake up, 'Pim. It's time to go home."

As everybody but Margot and Willem filed out of the tent, Sverige decided it was one of the brightest ideas Danmark had ever had, showing a level of concern Sverige hadn't thought possible. Surely, he must have seen it too: Willem would not want to stay, not after this.

Poor, poor Danmark. He was going to get his heart ripped in half.

When they reconvened outside the tent, Sverige found the two blond bondsmen obediently following the Vargas brothers, who looked more shaken than anybody else. Perhaps that wasn't so surprising, Norge was by definition unrufflable and Danmark was good at putting on a brave face no matter how he really felt. "Shouldn't've taken siblings," Feliciano kept muttering, "they weren't supposed to."

"Maybe they can help out with Alfred," Lovino offered. "That's what I was going to say, before - before all that. If that's what these guys do, they reform bondspeople, then they can help with Alfred, maybe even Ludwig!"

"That's not likely," Feliciano replied sadly.

"Who knows," Lovino argued. "I mean, you guys reunited a pair of siblings, maybe you really are miracle workers."

Feliciano didn't reply but quietly took the hand of the blond bondsman nearest him, the taller one with the slicked-back hair.

"S'not really th' job w'do though," Sverige told him. "What we do -"

Here, Feliciano reacted. From where Sverige stood, he saw both brothers, Lovino in front of Feliciano, and Feliciano looked up, met Sverige's glance and shook his head viciously, where Lovino couldn't see. Then he pointed to Lovino and then to his head, mouthing, he doesn't know.

"We'll, uh, we'll do what w'can," Sverige lied.

Lovino brightened and smiled. "See?" he said to Feliciano, "this is why this system is wrong! Look at what it does to families -"

"Bondspeople aren't supposed to - in primary, they don't have families!" Feliciano argued. "Or if they do, they'd never know about it!" Which fit what Suomi had said about how the whole trade
was supposed to work, way back when before they figured out what the pirates did.

"Well, I bet you didn't bother ever askin' your little prince here whether he did!" Lovino argued. "What if he has a brother or sister out there, hm?"

Feliciano rolled his eyes. "You would have told me that, wouldn't you?" he asked the other blond bondsman with them, the one with the glasses whose eyes were downcast and subservient. And then Feliciano stopped, and stared. "Wait a minute," he said, and stretched out a hand to tilt the bondsman's face this way and that. Passively, the bondsman let him.

"What?" asked Lovino. "What is it?"

"This is not Alfred," Feliciano stated.

Chapter End Notes

If Margot's reaction seems a bit underwhelming it was because I was going for three different things with her: 1) she had advance notice that she was getting helped out of this situation - see chapter 25 or something ludicrously long ago, 2) she's actually way stronger mentally than Willem to begin with, and 3) she doesn't deal with these dramatic situations in the way most people would. I kinda feel like Belgium is the off-colour-jokes and laughs-at-a-funeral type. : D

Anyway, I feel like this scene was not as good the first time around, so I hope it's improved in the deanon version.
"You let go of him," Toris said, very low and dangerous. "You let go of him right this instant."

"Mmm, no, I do not think I will," Ivan replied smoothly. "You see, little Raivis here is one of the precious few keys I have. As long as I keep him like this, the way he is, I can keep you like that, the way you are - terrified and pinned, immobile. You will not move. You do not dare move. Because this pistol is armed, Toris. Or do you want to call my bluff? Do you want to tempt me?"

As predicted, Toris didn't move.

Ivan grinned. "You see, I have some questions I would like to ask you first - my dear Brother in the heavenly peace of God! - then maybe once we have cleared the air, I shall give Raivis back. If you are lucky, perhaps I shall even return him in one piece!"

"You..." Toris breathed, like a curse. "You despicable, evil -"

"Ah, there is a word for evil in my language, but it sounds like Laurinaitis," Ivan spat, so angry the nose of the barrel wiggled against Raivis' temple where he pressed it into the soft skin. Toris ceased speaking immediately.

"We can discuss this rationally," Toris muttered. "As rationally as possible when one of us has a gun."

"I am so glad to see you understand reason," Ivan hissed. "Now, put down that bag. Kick it towards me." Toris obeyed. "What in God's name were you thinking? Did you expect me never to figure it out?"

"Well, it seemed to work for some time!" he retorted.

"And to use religion and God, that's just -" Ivan couldn't find the words! "You're a pathetic waste of a human being! But you didn't get away with it, did you, because I figured you out. I figured it out, what it is you wanted, and by the way! By the way, I cleared my Time long ago so you can't even have that!"

"He's lying!" yelled the boy in his grasp, struggling against it, "it only happened when Eduard came! It was Eduard!"

"Shut up, idiot," Ivan scolded, and shoved the butt of the pistol harder into Raivis' temple. He stopped moving and lay more or less complacent in Ivan's arms, panting from exertion. "Perhaps you forget who it is who has the gun, hmm?"

"I haven't forgotten," Raivis mumbled, "this is just how I deal with abject terror."

"So," Toris said softly. "So that's what they meant by 'Eduard sold us out'. He's truly your man, then?"

Ivan spluttered angrily, "He's not mine - he doesn't belong to anybody. Don't insult him like that! I
"At least we agree on that much," he replied. Which was strange, because now, Toris seemed sadder than he had when he realised he'd been found out. Surely - surely Toris wasn't upset because he had wanted Eduard?

If that were the case ... Ivan wouldn't hold back.

"Do you even feel any sort of remorse for what you did?" he cried hysterically, angrier than he thought possible but God help him if Toris had ever attempted laying one hand, one single finger on Eduard! "Do you feel any sadness at all, you horrible monster?"

"Remorse? And sadness? For what I did?" Toris exploded. "Why, I'd do it again in a heartbeat! I won't let you vilify me while I just sit here and take it! I don't care what you think I did but let us be perfectly just about this, and bring up the fact that you are no innocent! Not since before you assumed power have you been innocent -"

"My parents died, I didn't control that," Ivan said, "and you mean to insinuate that their death immediately ushers in my corruption?!"

"This entire empire is corrupt, it always has been, and you are not helping it! You never have! Not you, you lunatic, and certainly not your maniac of a sister! This place is crumbling, it's dying, there's nothing you can do to stop it! Do you think it's right to cover up the truth of what happened in places like Darinys? What about the gunrunning, is that fair? The black markets? The ones you claim you don't know about but actually control? How about the persecution of anybody who seems like they're from Kilnus because the Vitiim are so easily identifiable, and the political repression of any entity that doesn't support this, this, glorious Duma, shining with embezzlement and bribery - you find it so many levels of this government I'm surprised you don't consider bottling it for retail!"

"I'd dearly love to see some proof on all these allegations of what you say," he sneered with a cool smile. Unfortunately, not all of what Toris said was dishonest. Unfortunately, much of what Toris said was completely and totally true.

But bluster might get him farther in this game, and moreover, he was just so angry he wanted to skewer Toris any way he could. Let him do it with words, if Eduard wouldn't allow it with arms!

"Really," Toris continued, "it's surprising you don't have more incidents like what happened in Oru, or the hostage-taking in Mennik. I'm surprised there aren't more people blown to pieces in markets daily, because frankly you're asking for it! You're delusional if you think you can do anything to help this place. The only thing that can help is rebuilding from scratch!"

Ivan outright snarled in reply, his grip tightening on Raivis, who squirmed it loose again. "Toris..." Raivis pleaded.

"Oh yes, get angry with me," he taunted, appearing to ignore Raivis entirely, "with me, Ivan, you hear? Because if there's anybody here you should be angry with, it's me. Aren't you pissed off at how effortlessly I infiltrated your trust? How I almost had you drive yourself mad? How easy it was for me to string you along? And now, how I've come for what it is I needed, how simple it was to get everybody away for the auction and how simple it is to find myself here! Yes, Ivan, you
"I will kill you," Ivan vowed in a low murmur. Perhaps he could find some way Toris could conveniently disappear, some way that wouldn't connect back to him, Toris could just drop off the face of the planet and nobody would ever know it had been by his command. "As God is my witness, what I promised to him, I will kill you somehow -"

"Exactly, you wretched fool," Toris said. "Your quarrel's with me, not with Raivis."

"Toris!" cried Raivis, "wait -"

Toris ignored him again. "I'm the one you're angry with, aren't you? Aren't you? So you want to point that thing at someone, point it at somebody who deserves it." He folded his arms across his chest. "I deserve it. Leave him out of it, and shoot me. Or are you too much the fool for it? Come on!"

There was a part of Ivan's mind which lingered from his time spent abstaining (uselessly, in hindsight). This part was the immature, prepubescent brat that did as he pleased and that part wanted so badly to pull the trigger that his finger physically ached. It wanted to paint the wall with Toris' brains and blood. It wanted people like Raivis to watch, because this is what happened when children didn't play nice, and it didn't care! He suspected this part would likely be with him forever.

But the rational part of Ivan's mind, the part that wouldn't be there if it hadn't been for Eduard's intervention weeks ago, the part that would have died off completely - that part held him back, arguing that there was no point in getting angry with anybody. There was no point in shooting anything or anyone. It wouldn't improve anything. It wouldn't solve any problems. And in the end it wouldn't even make him feel better.

Ivan hadn't intended shooting Raivis in the first place, he'd promised Eduard he wouldn't harm a hair on Raivis' stupid cute head. And he meant that much.

And as much as he wanted to kill Toris - wanted to scalp him slowly and make him pay for what he did to Ivan because obviously that swindler had enjoyed every last minute of it! - he wouldn't harm Toris either. Not if he was Eduard's friend.

Why, if he so much as touched Toris, he'd lose Eduard forever.

But it was so tempting! It would be so satisfying! Toris had been so cruel - people so cruel should be punished! - this sort of justice would feel so right! - and he already had lost Eduard forever, which was obviously all Toris' fault too! -

It was now that he realised they weren't alone. Toris and he had been loud and screaming at each other, and while the help had probably disappeared long ago, they had been joined by two others, attracted by the racket. One was an elderly woman who didn't seem in any way old and who pulled out a revolver and aimed it at him. The other was a younger man with chin-length blond hair (who Ivan could have sworn he'd seen before) who pulled out a revolver and looked first at Toris before he aimed it at Ivan, his eyes darting between Ivan and the small shaking form in Ivan's arms with no small measure of worry.

Then came a third, a man he'd recognise anywhere, a man he saw on the back of his lids when he closed his eyes, who pulled out a revolver and aimed it at the woman.
Ivan's gun fell from Raivis' temple and he gasped. He could have leapt for joy - and he thought perhaps his heart did. Whatever Eduard was doing here, he didn't know - he was supposed to be en route to Bast! - but it didn't matter, Ivan was so happy to see him, and to see that despite making Ivan promise not to touch his awful friends even when they really deserved it, Eduard was still on his side.

But he still can't stay. He'll die if he stays.

How was it possible for his spirits to lift so high and crash so hard in the same breath?

"You drop your weapon, madam," Eduard stated coldly. "You drop it now."

The woman narrowed her eyes, her lips curled unpleasantly, her sour face a mess of wrinkles - and then she grinned. "I don't think so, bondsman," she said, as she took her gun off of Ivan, and pointed it at Eduard.

A single shot rang out in the hall.
He and number forty-nine went last, as they had been with Antonio so long, and one of them would remain as caretaker if Antonio's sales didn't go well. But seventy-two had been paying close attention, and so far everything had been sold to high prices. Not as high as some - it was hard to believe anybody would pay twenty-five million for something of Francis'! - but higher than Antonio would have been expecting. Good; less pressure on Antonio.

"Lot seventy-three. Yer next," said the keeper, taking forty-nine by the arm to lead him to the stage.

He wouldn't talk in front of the keeper, and neither would forty-nine - both knew better than to speak aloud in front of freemen without permission - but he wished in his mind, good luck, and then, goodbye.

Seventy-two waited for his turn at the head of the line and overheard. Forty-nine was sold for a respectable three-point-nine-two after some debate back and forth between three bidders, and as the audience cheered, and seventy-two himself felt gladdened, he sensed someone draw near him. "Last one - fuckin' finally, could use a goddamn break," said the keeper's rough voice, and ushered him through the curtains to the stage.

The skies were bright blue, wide open and cloudless. A good omen, he thought, and his heart fluttered. He had a good feeling about this.

The auctioneer was much younger than he'd imagined. Handsome, too, and seventy-two, now allowed to look up for the first time since he'd arrived at the arena, caught the auctioneer watching him carefully. Dark haired with glasses, and the auctioneer gave him a brief but warm smile as he was introduced.

"Lot number seventy-four," the auctioneer said. Another number, which seventy-two would not wear for long. "About 5'4" high - that's 165 cm for those joining us from out of town - brown eyes, black hair." The auctioneer walked around him, inspecting him as much as the crowd was. Seventy-two stood up straighter, preening.

"Slight waist and shoulders; olive-toned," the auctioneer announced, and gently lifted the linen robe off his shoulders and dropped it at his feet. "Elegant is the word of the day here, folks," he continued, reprising his position at the podium. "A unique number procured from Schlessen, I'm told! And so, let me entice you ..." and he snapped his fingers loudly by seventy-two's ear.

Seventy-two did not budge an inch besides those inches that were programmed to. He remained calm while the crowd hushed and applauded. "We'll start with two million! Two million?"

A sign went up immediately. Of course; he was worth more than two. "Two million! Thank you, 0212!"

The crowd's applause seemed deafening from the stage, just like how looking out over the daunting ocean of bodies made it impossible to pick out a face on its own. Couldn't even pick out 0212's placard despite being held above the heads. He gathered the clerks assisting with auction bids must
be keen-eyed.

"Is there two point one? Two point one? Yes, perhaps? Ah - there we are, thank you 4442! How about two point two? Thank you, 5420! Two point three? 0212 again! Thank you, Miss 0212! Two point four?"

It all happened faster than he knew, and before he knew it the price was three million. Then four, and that surprised him; he'd always thought forty-nine was prettier. Then five, where it appeared to level out.

"Five point four? Five point four, have I five point four? Five point three five, then! Five point three five? Miss 0212, we're waiting ... Going once ... going twice ... Miss 0212, have you lost interest? ... I declare the item sold, to 4442, for five point three million!"

He fought a smile while inside he was so happy he could laugh. Although he had been with Antonio for some time, he remembered the pirates had let him go for two hundred thousand. He'd been so young, and so frail and hungry, that he couldn't even fathom such a number could be applied to currency. Two hundred thousand was the number of items of garbage on the streets of the city of his birth. The tiny boy had asked Antonio with big brown eyes, could someone really have that much money? Antonio had laughed, clasped his hand warmly and called him cute.

The work he had done in sitting the others, combined with that, as he'd finished his training five years ago, made a bit of profit for Antonio. And he was appraised at three and a half million! He had been good for Antonio. That was what you got when you were good. Good things in return.

So between that and the blue skies, the relative smoothness of his sale, how effortlessly everything had gone for them today - seventy-two was convinced of the goodness of his new master. Four-four-four-two, he thought. My new lucky number.

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When he hopped off the stage, the keeper was there to direct him along. "Follow the path," he instructed, pointing to the stakes in the ground strung up with bright ribbons. "Takes you to inspections. Sales is next, but there's someone in inspections'll show you the way. G'wan, now."

He waited patiently about three minutes while the person manning his inspections tent read her book. As he heard the sound of her flipping the page, his head bowed, the movement of the paper wafted something towards him.

Faintly in the air, a note of - was it floral, was it musk or spice, he couldn't tell, but it was enchanting. The more he noticed the scent, the more it seemed to hang in the air, growing heavier and heavier, until it was so strong his mouth was watering. Like a first bite of real food, again a starving seven-year old sitting at Antonio's with legs too skinny and short to reach the floor. He couldn't take his eyes off Antonio's carefully set table and now it was the same, he couldn't make himself focus on anything else, he imagined a thick cloud and wanted to shove his face into the middle of it, roll around in it, bathe himself in it.

Seventy-two had forgotten that there might be Vitim in the crowd, and that some of them might be ...hormonal. It should be illegal to go around in that state! But bondspeople were the only ones really affected, and they had specialized training to deal with high concentrations of pheromones.

He struggled to calm himself. The feeling would pass when the Vitim in question walked away.
Hopefully soon, he didn't want to greet his new master with an erection. (In public? Unseemly! That would come later.)

But the feeling did not pass and at no point did his erection flag. Please, seventy-two thought angrily at it, I don't ask you many favours but this is one of them!

Maybe they would think him eager, he hoped, adjusting the folds of his robe to conceal it better. Really, really eager.

It showed his lack of control. Lack of restraint, lack of training. He hadn't gone to primary, true, but you didn't get Vitim training until thirteen anyway, so why would attending a primary have mattered at all? He was no less valuable than they! He was just sold for over five million!

The scent grew stronger still, and he began to shake with the aching throb of priapism. Food, he thought, the cloud of hormone headying his thoughts. He could hardly think, and fighting tears of frustration he thought that he had only wanted to be good. Good for Antonio, who had saved him from Schlessen, and good for his new master. It was all he wanted. Suppose he was returned - how humiliating!

The canvas flaps of the tent shifted, and the sales person stood. "Gospozha!" she said, "y-your Lordship - goodness -"

"We prefer privacy," a female voice stated coldly. "You will please wait outside."

"Of course - of course," and there was again the sound of the canvas moving against itself.

Seventy-two knew his face was red by the spreading warmth on his cheeks. His thoughts came slowly like walking through water.

"Ohhh, he's perfect," said another voice, also female.

"Not very well-trained," said the first.

"Didn't tyen'ka say she made a worse fool of herself? And you weren't even as far into your Time!"

A cough, and then meekly, a third voice said, "That is true, Gospozha."

"I would still suggest you search it," the cold voice insisted.

"What for? His papers said he had implants, I trust they work. Besides, I'm not going to be the one doing the penetrating! I'm going to lie back and relax and let him do all the work. What else are servants for?" A flippant laugh, and then footsteps. The scent was overwhelming and he swayed - for the moment he let go of other worries since it took him all his mental resources simply to keep upright.

The young girl stepped in front of him, and cupped his cheek with a soft hand, and all of seventy-two's senses rebelled at once in the strangest kind of ecstasy. His vision dimmed, his limbs suddenly felt very light, his hearing tinned and then he crumpled altogether to the ground.

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When he came to, he was reclined, propped up by a warm body behind him, with a handkerchief
held in front of his face. "Breathe," the meek voice said. He did, deeply, and something in the cloth made him feel stronger and lessened the sensation of padding in his head.

"What," seventy-two said, before remembering he wasn't to speak until spoken to.

"What happened, you mean? You fainted. And terrified your Devushka." He didn't reply until the voice behind him said, "It's alright, I'm the Gospozha's bondsgirl. They're waiting outside. You can talk to me."

Seventy-two turned around and found himself in the lap of the meek-voiced girl. She looked years younger than him, with a short bob of blond hair accented at the side with a ribbon. She wore not the usual bondsperson clothes but rather a paisley top buttoned to the neck, fastened with a cameo pin and tucked at her waist into a long dark skirt upon which he was resting.

"The Gospozha?" he asked.

"Is the Empress Regent of the Empire Union," the bondsgirl replied. "And soon to be the Lord Consort of Bizhi," she added, keeping carefully neutral. "You are a wedding gift for her."

"For her?" he repeated, and gulped. Whenever the bondsgirl had said 'Gospozha', it had been in reference to the cold, commanding voice that wasn't very impressed with poor old seventy-two.

"For her," the bondsgirl affirmed, "but not her own. You'll be a gift through the Gospozha to her sister, the Devushka Natalya. She was the other one."

The one who had called him perfect, the one whose voice had made him tremble and whose scent made his head spin. He would belong, body and mind, to her. How wonderful!

"Do you think you can see her now? You should rest - and maybe not take the tonic for a few days, you won't be needing it - but the Devushka is worried and insists on seeing you at once."

He was her property, after all. "Please," he said. "I would gladly attend her presence, but perhaps seated."

The gospozha's bondsgirl assisted him to the chair the sales attendant had used and then exited the tent, leaving him with the handkerchief to hold in his lap.

The next person to enter was a girl in her late teens, trying to look stern and not really succeeding. Seventy-two knew it was her by the smell alone. She had long white-blond hair that fell to her waist, fastened in the back with a large bow, and deep blue eyes - trademark Vitim characteristics. Her face was heart-shaped and delicate, with the high cheekbones of aristocracy and the still-fleshy cheeks of girlish youth, and her lips were thin and painted bright pink. He licked his own at the sight before he remembered his gaze shouldn't linger on someone so much higher than him.

She wore a green and brown walking suit whose dark hue brought out the soft snow complexion of her skin. It was expertly tailored to press along her body, highlighting her slight curves, and try as he might, seventy-two couldn't stop thinking about all the ways it could come off to display her like the work of art she was. A goddess. A young goddess but a goddess, and he felt the urge to fall to his knees in soulful devotion. (She hadn't even said a word to him yet!)

"Can - you are alright if I approach?" she asked.
"Mistr-ah, Devushka," he replied, with the best bow he could manage from a seated position. "I sincerely apologise for my actions earlier. It was a momentary lapse of control, I assure you it shall not happen again."

"You just dropped!" she exclaimed. "I thought you were ill. I thought maybe I made you sick."

"Never!" seventy-two vowed. "Your predicament is not one I am unfamiliar with."

"I couldn't take it if you couldn't be around me," she grimaced. "To know you find me so gross."

Seventy-two left the safety of the chair to kneel at her feet. "Please," he promised to her dainty buckled shoes, his head bowed so low he could kiss them in reverence. "I was simply overwhelmed, you must believe me! Even now I grow stronger with you here. Soon it will pain me more to be apart from you. My Devushka, I am your humble and ever-present servant!"

She did not reply. Instead she did something that shocked him - she drew her skirts out and in a poof of material sat down on the grass in front of him. And then she asked plainly, "Well. Could you also be my friend?"

He sat back on his heels, his gaze on the ground - or more honestly, because he physically couldn't take his eyes off his mistress, on her gloved hands, resting on the yards of beautiful expensive material encircling her waist and legs, and strewn on the grass like a blanket. "Ah... Devushka?"

"My brother has these opinions," she began. "I don't entirely disagree with them. I confess, I have a job that needs doing. But after that - I'm so lonely! You can't imagine it - there aren't many people to talk to who aren't governesses, or, or my sister. Just tyen'ka - I don't really like her! - and Eduard. Another bondservant."

"And are you in the habit of befriending bondspeople?" he asked.

The Devushka huffed. "I haven't got much choice," she mumbled in a petulant sulk of a voice. "You'll - you'll see what I mean, Vanya says our sister is overprotective. But I do think Vanya is right that you're people like them all."

Not knowing what else to say, and not wanting to contradict her, seventy-two murmured, "Devushka."

"You'll call me Natasha!" she insisted. "I'm not devushka much longer. And formalities are for my sister, and she's crazy. Although so is Vanya... I guess you can't help going mad around mad people. What's your name?"

Did that not depend on the Dev- on Natasha? "You are to give me one," seventy-two prompted.

"I can't do that!" she said, aghast. "Vanya says that - well! You must have something. Your own name. Tyen'ka, she's the exception in our house. But Eduard had his own, and he was like you! What did your trainer call you?"

Seventy-two, he thought, he called them all by number. But he supposed she wouldn't want to hear that. "I did have a name," he confessed, and he gave her that, although it wasn't one Antonio had given him.

He wasn't supposed to remember it (but he was seven, how do you forget something like that so
easily?) and truly, he didn't really care for it anyway - that name was a reminder of poverty and sickness and constant hunger.

But if it pleased his Devushka...

What harm could it do? He would deny her nothing, he was far too well-trained. Anything he could give her was hers to take, his name, his body, his very life, all hers.
When he had been bought, Matthieu had no way of knowing that this darker haired man - this, 'Lovino' fellow (pretty name if ever Matthieu had heard one) that he met in the sales tent once he had redressed in his regular bondsperson wear - wasn't Francis' friend, so he'd gone willingly. As a result he had not expected things to go the way they did.

Whoever Alfred was, it was true that Matthieu was not him. And so, it had quickly proven clear to Matthieu that he was the one they were looking for, not Matthieu, which meant that Lovino wasn't Francis' friend, and that Francis' plan to buy him had failed, and he had in fact been sold.

Silently, he began to panic. What would Francis do?! Without him? ... Francis would be fine, probably. He got on fine before Matthieu, he would do okay after him - but Francis needed him, Francis couldn't cope without him - hell, Francis hadn't been the one to balance the books in ages! - but why would Francis need anybody as lowly as someone like him, just a thing, a bondsman, who always screwed everything up anyway?

The turning point when the panic gave way to reason was while the brothers watched the scene in the tent unfold between Belle (Margot?) and her brother, and Matthieu watched Lovino.

Lovino had wept. When nobody was looking (or so he thought), he brushed the tears from his red cheeks and wiped his hand on his shirt, and then pulled himself together. And when they were all ushered out of the tent to give the reunited siblings privacy, Matthieu listened to what he said, things like this system is wrong and reforming. The way he spoke, he was convinced of it.

Matthieu didn't know him well enough to judge fully, but it was enough to deduce that Lovino was distinctly unlike other bondsman owners, and completely different from Francis.

This ... might not be so bad.

While Lovino and Feliciano bickered about siblings and reunions, Matthieu considered his own humble beginnings. What if they were right and he had had a family? In Primary, all you really had was the other trainees. They were gone now. The Gospozha Bragina's bondsgirl wasn't the girl Matthieu had known. Even Eduard had been bought. Who knew whether he bore any resemblance to the boy Matthieu had grown up with! He'd never see either of them ever again, likely, and if he did, they would not be like he remembered them. Wasn't it his time? To change? To grow into something else? To grow into someone else? He'd been so lonely, lately.

The subscripts who would have sold him to the Primaries, who were they? Did they have other children, were there others out there in other Primaries like him? Maybe he could find them too. Maybe -

Maybe Lovino might even help him find them? He seemed the type.

He remained perfectly still, telling himself not to yet dare to get his hopes up, and kept his eyes on the ground. Maybe if he were really, really good, Lovino might keep him anyway. Lovino was very handsome. Matthieu could be good.
Francis ...

Well, Francis would be fine without him, wouldn't he?

Francis was always going on about what a mess he kept making of everything. This could be good for both of them!

There was just one problem that remained.

"What do you mean, that's not Alfred?" Lovino asked.

"I mean exactly that," his brother replied, his voice high and anxious, "it isn't him!"

"You said blond hair, blue eyes, and specs, and that he was the first of ours. That was this guy. I don't understand how I could've possibly gotten that wrong."

"Neither do I!"

Lovino came nearer to take a closer look at him. Barely, Matthieu resisted risking a glance up. He could still feel Lovino's eyes on him, watching his expression, analysing. He licked his lips; gave him something to look at. Lovino coughed and Matthieu fought a triumphant smile. "Uh, are you sure he isn't -"

"Yes I'm sure!" his brother interrupted frantically.

"Because he fits the description and it looks exactly like him from the files."

And his brother, Feliciano - less afraid to touch him - spent a moment peering closely into Matthieu's eyes, then tilting his face this way and that. He remained perfectly still but for Feliciano's directions. "Not quite the right shade of blue," Feliciano decided ("Paid that much attention, did you?" Lovino snapped, and Matthieu watched as Feliciano flushed but said nothing), "but he is the same height. And same hair colour, and same body type, same - same everything else. I could look at the teeth -"

"Lookit you, talking about him like he's not even here," Lovino muttered. "Look, your name isn't Alfred, is it?"

Matthieu made no response.

"Yes, I mean you," Lovino clarified, and Matthieu no longer resisted the impulse to look him in the face. Risky, though, so Matthieu moved nothing except for his eyes, darting back and forth from Lovino to Feliciano (when Feliciano wasn't looking). For what it was worth, Lovino - who caught him doing it - didn't seem to mind. Matthieu fought a smile.

"My name ... my name is whatever you'd like it to be," he replied evenly. "Th-that's the way it works."

Lovino sighed. "Well, did you have a name? Before?" he asked.

He kept his face down. "Before doesn't matter. This is the start of a new life now. You're the one who bought me, so I'm yours to name." Please keep me!
"That's what they're supposed to say," he heard Feliciano say sadly, "but it's not him. I can't explain it to you how I know -" Lovino hmphed - "but it isn't him! And besides, I'm good but I'm not that good, really -"

"Right," Lovino interrupted. "And you didn't think to have some kinda secret handshake or codeword or something?"

"I didn't expect this!" Feliciano whined pathetically. "I expected him to - oh, I don't know, fall into my arms! Of course he knows me!"

Lovino tried for calming. "Okay, just relax here, calm down -"

"How can I possibly calm down," and now Feliciano sounded nearly hysterical, "when you've spent a ridiculous amount of money on this imposter -" Matthieu flinched - "and Alfred is probably somewhere out there nervous and lost and worried and who even has him and -"

"Quit it," Lovino ground out through gritted teeth. "You'd think this was the end of the freakin' world or something! Money hasn't even changed hands yet."

"But -"

"But nothing. I rerouted the tents so we could deal with the nonsense that was that twenty-five million dollar thing, and this, in private."

Feliciano gasped. "You're not allowed to do that!"

"Yeah, well ... I didn't want anybody to see me in the usual purchase places. Anyway. We haven't paid for anything yet, so look. You stay here, I'll take him back to the sales tent and fix this," he promised his little brother.

Feliciano nearly sobbed with relief, and - Matthieu risked darting his eyes up in quick flashes - wrapped his arms around his brother's neck and clung there. Over his brother's shoulder, Lovino caught his glance, but didn't punish Matthieu for looking up. Instead he shrugged and rolled his eyes. Matthieu's cheeks felt absurdly warm and he lowered his gaze to hide the grin that wouldn't leave his face.

"Oh! you're the best, Lovino," Feliciano cried, "thank you thank you thank you! I don't know how this happened but thank you -"

"Yeah, yeah," Lovino muttered. He pried Feliciano off his neck and pawned him off on the other blond bondsman that had accompanied him and Belle into the tent, who had been standing nearby and looking awkwardly around for something to do. "How could the order have gotten switched? Helena from 1-17, Francis from 18-30, and we're from 31-53 -"

"But we're not, we're 32 through 54 - oh, of course ..." his brother said, as the realisation evidently dawned, "Francis' late entry."

"That was an option?"

"You pay enough money, you grease the right hands," replied Feliciano.

"No wonder Héderváry's so damn pissy with Francis," - well. There were other reasons, Matthieu
knew - "but that still doesn't explain why he looks exactly like your precious little Alfred," Lovino murmured, more to himself than anybody else. His next words were soft and spoken directly to Matthieu. "If you were one of Francis', you must've had a name. He's notorious for that personalisation kind of thing."

Caught. He replied, "I did. He called me Matthieu," but didn't look up. A trade-off. He'd keep his eyes down and subservient but he'd acknowledge his previous home and his previous life. Would that be okay? Did Lovino want to name him, or - well, really, how could he even begin to predict what it was Lovino would want when Lovino didn't act like anybody else?

"That sounds like Francis alright. C'mon, Matthieu," Lovino muttered roughly. "Let's you an' me go back and clear some stuff up, okay?" Lovino, with Matthieu following, left Feliciano behind to return to the maze of tents.

Go back? Lovino would fix this, yes, but he wasn't - he wasn't going to return him, was he? There were no refunds permitted in regular sales, wasn't it the same at auctions? "You're exchanging me," Matthieu realised, and while he could have kept the horror out of his voice, he didn't want to. Let Lovino know what he was doing! "Y-you don't want me. I know I'm not the one you wanted but I thought I'd done it well, acted the part of a new bondsman. Hadn't I?"

Lovino actually stopped in his tracks, turned around and fixed Matthieu with an expression Matthieu couldn't begin to identify.

"I'm sorry," he blurted out. He was talking out of turn completely, and different or not, Lovino would be justified in hitting him even if he hadn't been yet paid for. He should be looking at the ground, but he wasn't.

But Lovino didn't raise a hand and Matthieu rambled on. The more he spoke, the less sense he made. "I shouldn't - I should be happy, you're taking me back, Francis will be - must be so worried - n-not that I'm really anything to him, but I am a bit, I thought - but I also thought - I thought maybe this would finally change something!"

Silence. And then Lovino said, in an ineloquent breathless rush, "What?"

"It's just that," Matthieu began, trying to explain in a way that would neither insult nor make his new master (not-master?) feel like Matthieu's training had been shoddy quality. But when he couldn't find the words between the cognitive dissonance and his own frustration, he shook his head, feeling angry with himself for sounding like such a loon, and abandoned that train of thought entirely.

"You seemed different," he said instead. "You cried when they were reunited, did you think I wasn't watching? I was. And what you say about the system - you weren't like Francis. You weren't like everybody else."

"I'm - I'm not," Lovino stammered, his voice soft. He put a hand over his chest and insisted, "Please don't think that I'm - I never wanted to own anybody."

The fragile flame that had been Matthieu's hopes snuffed itself out inside of him, and he felt deflated. Not even me?

How stupid of him, to assume things might be okay after all. Stupid Matthieu. Not even someone unorthodox like Lovino would want him.
He had to stop getting his hopes up like this. Life wasn't fair, he knew that, he said it all the time, but still he had this stupid urge to rush headlong into a beautiful perfect dream and just the thought of it being dangled in front of him kickstarted his spirits, and suddenly he had great plans and ideas before anything actually got finalised. What was wrong with him?

"It isn't you!" Lovino backpedalled hastily. "It isn't because I don't want you! N-not that I do because I wouldn't! - but I'm not - I'm not saying one way or another! My brother asked me to buy someone for him. And I'm the one who made the mistake. I'm just trying to make things right."

"So sorry that I got in your way," he sulked.

"That's not - ugh, I give up!"

"I wondered sometimes? If I had a family,' Matthieu continued, dejected. He might as well talk nonsense, Lovino was going to give him back anyway. "And I don't mean the people I grew up with in Primary - they're - not the same anymore. But people who would be constant, maybe, people who would stick around even if I was what I am -"

He broke off before he told Lovino what he really thought of himself.

"Well, it was obvious you weren't Francis' friend, the one he told me about. But I started to think, after I stopped worrying, that this might turn out for the better. Maybe it was my turn now too, to become - and all I'd ever been was Francis' - I thought I could serve you."

Lovino's face turned beet red and he sputtered, "That, you, I don't -"

"I would've been happier serving you," Matthieu murmured. "A lot happier."

"You don't wanna go back," Lovino realised.

"I don't know," Matthieu answered honestly. "I should want to. What if Francis is like your Feliciano, what if he's worried sick about where I am right now? ... But I guess I shouldn't assume I'm as special or as wonderful as your brother's little Alfred, eh?"

"To Feliciano, yeah, Alfred is special and wonderful," Lovino argued. "But obviously, to me, he's not, since I think he looks exactly the same as someone else."

He shook his head. "You don't get it. I always got it all wrong, I never did anything right."

The silence hung between them for a moment before Lovino spoke next. "That, I understand," he said quietly.

"Okay, listen," Lovino began slowly, as though he were first hefting the weight of the words he'd planned to speak, "I made a promise to my brother, to buy this special kid that he's basically fallen head over heels in love with, and now I gotta keep it because I bought the wrong guy. So first things first, I have to go track down this kid. But!" he interjected. "But. It doesn't mean I want to take you back because you're, like, defective or anything. I don't think anything of the sort. For now, I just wanna keep my word."

Probably, it was a good thing that Feliciano picked that moment to interrupt them because his presence made Matthieu immediately look to the ground and shut up.
Because on the tip of his tongue were the words, *for now? and what about later?* And that was pretty pushy for someone of his status, no matter how liberal Lovino was where bondspeople were concerned.

"What are you doing, idiot!" Lovino screamed.

"Coming with you, obviously!" Feliciano answered, falling into step beside them. "Well, let's get going!"

Lovino didn't reply; he seemed enraged and struck dumb when Matthieu snuck glances at him. "It's okay," he heard Feliciano explain, "I have Ludwig to keep an eye on things. He can manage for the moment!"

"I thought I told you to stay back there," Lovino complained.

"And I ignored you! I would've come earlier but needed to show Ludwig what to do first."

"Feli, listen -"

"No, you listen," Feliciano snapped. "You don't know who you're looking for. I do. So you need my help." He huffed and then said, more merrily, "Besides! Two heads are better than one, yes?"

"Yeah, but too many cooks make the soup salty," his brother grunted sullenly.

"What a good thing we're not cooking anything!" And Feliciano skipped off in the direction of the tents.

Matthieu looked up only until Lovino realised he was being watched. "You still thinking about family?" Lovino asked, misinterpreting the quickly re-directed gaze. "If they're anything like mine they're more trouble than they're worth!"

Privately, Matthieu thought that if he could have it, he might take the chance.

Francis' hissy fit was audible clear as a bell from several paces outside the tent when they arrived. Matthieu felt his stomach fill with dread and didn't realise he'd stopped moving until Lovino discovered he'd lost him, looked back, and demanded, "What? What is it?"

"I, I d-don't, I dunno, I don't know," he stammered, because he didn't. Maybe this one might hurt because Francis seemed so pissed off. But Francis had never beat him before - not really - so why start now? Maybe Francis would be elated at his return. Judging from the discussion with the other fellow inside the tent, an 'Antonio' (probably Antonio of Marigon, a good friend of Francis), Francis seemed more upset than Feliciano had been at a missing bondsman.

It could go either way.

Lovino drew near; Matthieu tried not to flinch when he set a hand on his shoulder. "We'll figure something out," Lovino promised him. Promised him! Like he was something worth making promises to. "Are you - are you afraid he'll hurt you? I- I won't let him, I won't let him do it -"

"Come on!" Feliciano cried.
"Sh-shut up, Feli!" Lovino shouted, his face red. He shoved both his hands in his pockets.

"If you're taking me back, then he can hurt me all he wants, and you won't have a choice," Matthieu muttered darkly. Time to face the music, he thought, and after readying himself with a deep breath, followed Feliciano into the tent.

The screaming stopped.

Three pairs of eyes looked directly at them. One belonged to Francis, another to a fellow he assumed was Antonio. And the last looked very suspiciously like his own.

"Alfred!" Feliciano exclaimed, at the exact second Francis cried, "Matthieu!" and rushed to his side immediately. He found himself swept up in Francis' embrace and squeezed so tightly he felt short of breath, but it didn't matter, it didn't matter at all, because the weirdness and vague headache he'd had since meeting Lovino had finally lifted. Francis was nearly sobbing with relief and he could have cried himself. From the way he was murmuring into Matthieu's hair, over and over - *I don't know how this happened but never again, you will not part from my side, my darling* - Francis didn't seem in the least bit angry with him. Thank god, he thought, and relaxed.

Whatever else was said by everybody else in the tent in the following two minutes that elapsed was mostly muffled by Francis' chest, but neither did Matthieu make any special effort to pay it attention. He found he couldn't care. There was a pleasant, numbing fog around his head ... not a thought flitted by. This was so nice. To be held and cared for and cuddled, like this, and cherished. That was the way bondspeople were supposed to be used, wasn't it? He relaxed into Francis and let himself be held tightly. Whatever Francis wanted, he wanted. Francis would take care of him now. Francis would make sure nobody would ever try and take Matthieu from him again and nothing else mattered -

"I'm sorry, Antonio, you were saying something?" rumbled Francis' voice in his ears.

"That all's well that ends well," Antonio replied happily. "Feliciano has his bondsman, you've got yours. And that this one was four million, by the way, and that one was - how much did you say, Lovi?"

"I didn't," Lovino grumbled.

"Well, I want my four million. But I suppose you can settle up later!"

"That we can," Francis murmured, into Matthieu's hair. "It doesn't matter now. I am just so glad to have what belongs to me back in my arms."

"Excuse me!" Lovino exclaimed. "Have I been taking the crazy tonic, here?! How am I the only one who realises how fuckin' weird this whole thing is?"

They all stopped to stare at him - Matthieu and Alfred included, despite whatever training each might have had.

"You," he pointed to Matthieu, "look exactly like you. There's - there's no way this can be a coincidence. What's your birthday?" Matthieu told him. "And you?" he asked Alfred next.

"Same day," Alfred said. "Say, that is pretty strange!" He stood beside Feliciano with a confidence Matthieu knew he lacked.
"God, you even sound the same, just one of you's louder," Lovino remarked with a grimace. "Where were you born?"

"Veshna," said Francis. "Thipur province, Sai Van Lake. Excellent pedigree."

"Wasn't asking you," Lovino snapped.

"That's what my papers say," said Matthieu. "The records are from Primary. But Primary was halfway across the planet."

"And you?"

"The - the same," Alfred whispered. "The exact same. Before we - before I moved."

"What are the chances?" Lovino said, awed and mystified. "What are the possibilities that you look exactly the fuckin' same, were born the same day, in the same year, in the same place, and you're not even related?"
When the tension of the scene had loosed its grip on him, Feliks found Zielska on the floor, clutching her leg, which bled freely; and Eduard, still standing but ashen, the smoking gun in his shaking hand.

"That was easier than I'd imagined," Eduard whispered. He let the revolver slip through his fingers to clatter on the ground, next to his suitcase.

Toris recovered first. "What are you doing?!" he cried. "What did you do?"

"I promise, this will all make sense in a second," Eduard urged, "hear me out. I promise. First things first, though -" and he crossed the scene to Zielska's gun that she had dropped when she was shot, and kicked it down the hall, out of range of them all.

Toris made to dive for it, a motion that Feliks understood was more to do with him having been the only unarmed person in the hall but before he could lunge, Eduard said, "Please, Toris, don't. I don't want to have to threaten you to listen to me."

"What would you have me do?" Toris asked. "Look at - the way this all looks, Eduard, I trusted you -!"

"Then trust me a little longer," he begged. "Please!"

Toris caught Feliks' eye over Eduard's shoulder. Yes, or no?

On one hand, Eduard had blasted their commander in the shin. That was, like, textbook definition of bondsman gone bad. What in the system could make Eduard react like this? Feliks didn't know, and curiosity might've killed the cat but this was unorthodox and totally out of character for him. Even if Zielska was supposed to be with them. And speaking of with them ...

"I guess what I wanna know first is," Feliks decided, his weapon still pointed at crazy Ivan Brgin, "what the hell is this guy doing here, and why are we not totally freaking out about it?"

"I happen to reside here," Ivan muttered, "it is not so strange I should be wandering these halls. You three, on the other hand -"

"Can speak for themselves," Raivis continued, "I'm employed."

"Not after today, you're not."

"You can't fire me if I quit first!"

"Yes. You do that. We have not exactly lost the best employee, little Raivis."
"Okay whatever," Feliks interrupted. "Bickering aside, Raivis, you might wanna like, come this way a bit? Because he has a gun and unless he's been drinking -"

Raivis practically laughed at him. "I haven't got anything to worry about. Eduard already took care of that a few weeks ago."

Eduard didn't make eye contact with him. Neither did Toris. "As if. Eduard. That's totally - tell me that's not true."

"I don't want to lie to you," Eduard told the ground.

"That's a lie right there," Raivis snapped.

"I told you, I didn't know you then!"

"Wow," Feliks said flatly. "That's -"

"What I was bought for," Eduard ground out.

Feliks looked at Ivan (who glared), then at Toris (who nodded sadly), then at Eduard (who blushed and tried not to look at him at all).

And then he pointed his gun at the bondsman.

"Feliks, no," Eduard begged.

Feliks ignored him and asked, angrier than he'd expected to be, "Do you always do what your master tells you? What he orders you to do? What you were bought for?"

"Haven't the past three weeks convinced you of anything?" he asked.

"This is a little bigger than, like, three weeks of hanging out in a base building stuff -"

"I agree! You three tried to kill him!"

"Technically, that was only me," Toris pointed out, "not that you have any proof of that."

"Actually, I do," Eduard replied, and slowly, he put his hand in his pocket and drew out an Eavesdropper. It lacked the black button of the two-way but otherwise looked exactly the same as any other Eavesdropper, an innocuous brass sphere a little bigger than a golf ball. "This recorded everything you discussed with the Commander, that night you told me to leave and come back in an hour."

Toris' eyes grew wide.

"I knew it," muttered Zielska.

And then Eduard bent down, put the Eavesdropper on the ground, rolled it across the floor to Toris, where it stopped at his feet. Toris' eyes grew wider still.

"Trust me," Eduard said. "Please."
"Okay," Toris whispered, as he picked up and pocketed the device. "Okay. Start at the beginning."

Ivan pouted, and in that moment reminded Feliks very much of the petulant brat Toris said he often was. "I thought you were on my side."

"I'm on nobody's side," Eduard declared. "I'm the one who told Ivan about this whole plan. I admit it. I don't regret it, though, and nor do I regret stopping you from almost - from your other plan."

"But with him, in his state? He could have seriously hurt you!" Toris argued.

"He did," he replied coolly. All three of them - Feliks, Raivis, and Toris - gave Ivan their worst glare. Ivan at least looked very, very sorry about it. "I got better," Eduard continued. "Anyway, fast forward a few weeks. You all know what I've been doing in that time anyway. I was supposed to leave this morning for Bast. I didn't. That much is obvious."

"You ran into me instead," Raivis said.

"Yes, but I had never intended to leave on that flight. There's a later one that I had intended -"

"Then... you are leaving?" he whined.

Eduard sighed. "I don't have much choice. It's what he wanted! But I couldn't figure out for the longest time what it was Zielska was planning. In fact, it was something you said earlier that clued me in. Do you remember what it was?"

"I said a lot of things to you," Raivis answered guiltily. "Not all of them were nice."

Eduard smiled. "No hard feelings. You said Zielska would probably explode when she found out, and that's how I realized what she wanted to do, why you had an airship but didn't use it to fly, why half the things were in that base -"

"That - Eduard, I swear, that was a last-case scenario only," Toris promised. "It wouldn't have gone into effect unless half the city had been evacuated - I could kill one person I really hated, perhaps - which... yes, I tried to do, I don't dispute that, I shouldn't have - but I know what he's done. Thousands of faceless others, even if they were Vitim, I couldn't - I'm not -"

"A terrorist?" Eduard supplied. "No? I'm glad to hear it. Because she is. That's exactly what she had planned."

Everybody looked at Zielska. "It was a last-case scenario," she said dismissively.

Toris looked frantic. "In case of what, exactly?!"

"In case we were double-crossed, as I suspected! Toris, goodness, child, I thought I'd taught you better. Bragin's bondsman comes to help tinker around once a day? Sounds a little too convenient. It would've been more believable if you were screwing him!"

"I would literally kill you if you were," Ivan pointed out.

"Your story didn't fit! Until I came to see for myself - and honestly, even then, not all of it checked out. I kept the last-case scenario in play for that eventuality."
"That's why... that's why you brought so many agents," Toris realised, horrified. "To help out with... but nothing happened, until now, and we can't use the Eavesdroppers anymore. So they must be back at the base, twiddling their thumbs, right?"

"Exactly!" Zielska smiled.

"Except that they're not," Eduard snapped, "because I was just there and the base is empty."

Toris narrowed his eyes. "Commander..." he began dangerously.

"As the last ones left, I snuck in - the door's too heavy and you never gave me a keyset. One of the agents mentioned execution of some sort of Operation Check and I heard them dividing up the city into sections."

"There was Gorski with me," Feliks realised. "He left when I did to go back to the base."

Eduard shook his head. "Gorski was assigned evacuation of the market district. I overheard. I can almost guarantee he didn't go to the base."

"But you can't prove anything," Zielska added triumphantly.

"That's true," he said with a glare. "I can't."

"How lucky for us that this conversation is being monitored by the aud feeds all over the Duma then, isn't it!" Ivan said. Zielska shot him a glare, and he leveled a steely grin her way in reply. "Keep talking, Edik, please. You tell a fascinating story."

"Keep talking?!" Feliks asked. "Shouldn't we be, like, heading back to disable a giant bomb or something?!"

"There's no need," Eduard said. "While I was there, I took the fuel vials out of the ship. Sure enough there was something strange attached to them, a pile of wires - something that wasn't standard airship issue."

"That's insane," he replied. "I totally repaired the crap out of that thing just yesterday, they would have had to..." Actually - it wouldn't be too difficult to do, with the casings and the protective cover, which wasn't even riveted on all that solidly. Because it had never really been meant to fly! "They could've done it in like an hour," Feliks decided.

With sad and horrified realisation, Toris whispered, "The hour that we've been here."

It was almost too terrible to be true. But as he watched Zielska's reaction - and Toris', heartbroken and crushed - he knew somehow in the pit of his belly that it wasn't a lie, and that truth was stranger and worse than fiction any day. "Oh my god, no," Feliks breathed. "As if."

"You could have taken out this entire city!" Ivan yelled. "And for what, for revenge? Did you really manage to find anything so illuminating in my sister's chambers that you felt it warranted the city's destruction?"

"Gets rid of a messy situation, doesn't it?" Zielska snapped back. "Isn't that exactly what you did with Darinys?"
"What happened in Darinys is nothing like this!"

"You're right," she said. "Here, I at least evacuated the parts of the city that would be harmed with the threat of a terrorist attack. It minimises the casualties while blowing this building - and all the evidence against Kilnus inside it - to pieces."

"And everyone inside!" Toris protested. "What about Raivis and Feliks?!"

"Darinys was a mistake!" Eduard shouted. "And so is this!"

Zielska heard neither; she was too busy gloating in Ivan's face. "Don't you wish you'd gone to Hallar now, you foolish child?" she cried.

"But there isn't any threat!" Eduard insisted. "I removed the explosives and clamped the fuel vial casings shut - they won't hold anything now, they'll have to be replaced. So the ship is grounded permanently. Uh. Sorry about that, Feliks."

"S'okay," Feliks said, "I totally would've done the same."

"Then you can call off your dogs," Toris snapped. "The agents going around the city, evacuating it? You can tell them to stop."

"I would happily," said Zielska, "if it weren't for the fact that the bondsman sabotaged the Eavesdroppers. They no longer work."

"They work perfectly fine," Eduard said. "When I overheard the agent talking about what the signal was, I realised you had a code you were using, hiding in plain sight in conversation. Toris and Feliks must not have known. The Duma radio gave me the idea - all that bandwidth and nothing? No! Any channels that aren't permitted, the Empire blocks with white noise. So the easiest solution was to do exactly that, have another Eavesdropper transmitting silence, to flood your only operating frequency with it, and that's what I did the second I returned here. As long as my Eavesdropper is in the Duma, it's in range with the others and forces everything else on that frequency into receive mode. You can't use them to talk."

"Ah! but then outside the Duma, they all work with each other?"

"But your agents can't contact you for further instructions."

Zielska winced through a grim smile. Her leg must've hurt pretty bad as she kept clutching it at the ankle. "Then I've already won," she said.

"Won?! Won what, you crazy witch? You haven't obtained any of the files you said you wanted, all your agents are spread out over Skuratchky spreading lies and panic about evacuation and can't make contact with you and your last case-scenario is broken! You can't possibly hope to walk out of here!"

"Not quite so broken if you didn't find the failsafe. Stupid bondsman thinks it's people - I'm not afraid of you! But you're right that I don't hope to walk out of here. Then again... I had never intended this mission to be two-way for some of us. You probably expected that, didn't you, Toris?"

Quick as lightning - way faster than Feliks thought any ornery old lady could move - Zielska
plucked a weapon strapped to her ankle. Feliks only had the presence of mind to register the sound of a pistol being cocked before he reacted.

_Eduard_, he thought frantically, she'd sounded so pissed, she probably meant to take him down with her! In a panic, he shoved Eduard to the ground, out of the way, to the sound of a _BANG._

Then dead silence amid the rustle of clothes as a body fell.

When he turned back, he found Toris white as a sheet, Ivan hunched over Raivis, and Zielska toppled over backwards, her head swimming in blood.

Instantly, Feliks felt like his insides had liquefied. He turned his eyes away to try and quell the nausea. "Don't even listen to - to her," he whispered to Eduard, extending a hand to bring him to his feet again. "You're so much more than a bondsman."

"She's dead," Toris said, staring at the body like he couldn't tear his eyes away.

Ivan hunched further around tiny Raivis, if that were possible. "Do not look, please."

"I've seen worse," Raivis muttered, but he didn't turn around.

"Part of me - part of me wishes..." Eduard trailed off. He made the mistake of looking past Feliks' shoulder to Zielska's body and shuddered. "What if. What if I hadn't aimed for her leg," he said. "What if I'd ..."

"Better you didn't take the shot," Toris said quietly. All his previous shock appeared to be slowly wearing off; Toris looked exhausted. Exhausted and wrecked. "That does something to a person, and you're never the same again. Trust me on that."

"I hated her," said Eduard.

"Even so. You wouldn't be our friend if you had. And - maybe this won't mean much to you, but ... knowing her as I did, I think this is the way she wanted to end, anyway."

"Then she did win," he realised.

"Not really," Toris replied. "And yet, sort of. I don't know if there was anything in her life she hadn't planned."

"I should hope Darinys was one," Eduard said grimly to the floor.

Toris let a moment of silence elapse before he asked, "What do you mean by that?"

"Unless she's the one who told Yozhina - but surely she wouldn't have - well, I mean exactly that, it was a mistake." Eduard made the dumb move of looking up at Toris. Then he began stumbling over his speech; Toris looked angrier than Feliks had ever seen him before. "That - that's what - it's what you said the orders were, and he said, he gave the orders to stop it at any cost."

"That's true, I did," Ivan said, "but -" 

Toris interrupted him. "Then you're the murderer," he growled.
"But he didn't mean it like it sounded," Eduard said. "The Empire's Captain in Command for the state, Yozhina, she was used to orders from the Gospozha. And the message sent to Darinys was unsigned and so - she thought it came from, she thought the file was still - she misinterpreted. The message was from Ivan, and it didn't mean what the Captain thought it meant. I'm not saying a kill switch code didn't exist, but that wasn't it. If that's what the Gospozha had intended, she would have snuck explosives into the city herself."

"But the only ones who did that were Kilnus," Ivan muttered.

"Yozhina wasn't given access to bombs, but she did have the airships," said Eduard. "When the message came in, supposedly from the Gospozha, she assumed it meant something it didn't and prepared an attack accordingly. The explosives, she stole from Kilnus, and she improvised, and the rest - well, is history. Toris, you must believe me," he pleaded. "What a hell of a mistake, that misinterpretation cost an entire village their lives, yes, but a mistake. It wasn't Ivan's fault. It wasn't even the Gospozha's. It was nobody's fault."

Silence. Toris blinked very slowly, betraying nothing except through the subtle movements of his jaw, which told Feliks he was grinding his teeth.

"You take my family," said Toris to Ivan, "you take my home, you take the meaning of the past eight years of my life away and now you take my friend from me too?"

"Well, you did it first," Ivan retorted mulishly.

"Nobody took me!" Eduard shouted over them both. "I figured it out alone, I put it together! I can think, can't I? Can't I reason? Well between what you both told me, that's what I concluded. It's right there in the files if you don't believe me! Now I'm sorry if you may not like it, but stop blaming each other for every little thing! You can't control truth just because of what you want!"

"Then you deny you acted on his orders?" Toris demanded.

"I acted on my own!" Eduard yelled back.

And then he paled and blinked, as in shock of some serious paradigm shift. "On... on my own," he repeated weakly. "My own."

"Eduard," began Ivan, advancing towards him, "dusha -"

Eduard appeared not to hear him. "What you want ... i-it was three days, we were - you can't, can't control," he mumbled, shaking his head and squinting, "but you should, you should - I was finally yours - whatever you want is, is what I want, that's - I'm supposed to - to be your, and I was, but - I don't -"

He tried to take a step backwards and crumpled, fell to his knees, and sat back heavily on his heels. And then he put his head in his hands and began to shake. His breath thinned into panicky rasps.

Toris, Feliks noted, had stopped grinding his teeth, his mouth agape and his expression alarmed, completely distracted from his own turmoil by Eduard's.

"You are right," Ivan said kindly, "I can't control it. I would not want to."
"What have you done to me?" Eduard whispered. He lifted his head and wailed, "What have you done to me?!

"Nothing," Ivan replied in a calm hush. "You did it all yourself." Gently, Ivan knelt, took Eduard's hand and lifted it to his lips. He kissed it gently and as he murmured against it, "I'm so proud of you," Eduard began to cry.

To Feliks, there was something very scary about seeing someone so normally logical, efficient, reserved and almost mechanical, so caught in the grip of emotion that he lost control and was reduced to near incoherence.

Maybe that was why he didn't hate Ivan in a moment like this, because tyrant or not, he was capable of bestowing the comfort Eduard evidently needed, while Feliks - and Toris and Raivis - were too stricken to move.

"I-I still c-can't stay, can I," Eduard croaked out, gasping.

"Sadly, you are right about that too. Come, where did you leave your suitcase? There is time to make that next flight to Bast."

Raivis cleared his throat awkwardly. "Um, I really hate to be the mood-killer, but as tragically romantic as this is," he said, "a-am I the only one who wanted to know about the failsafe?"

He had scarcely uttered these words before the explosion wracked the castle walls, the floors began to shake, and smoke obscured the wing.

Chapter End Notes

Next update should be the last! FINALLY.
There was one surprise Yao had left. As they walked away from the sales tent - Natalya busy parading her new bondsman around ("he says Antonio called him '72', but he was called Kiku before he was taken to Antonio's so we will all call him that too! - oh, he's so handsome! *When* do we get back to the Deversorium?" "Yes, that's nice, Natasha.") - Yao took her aside and said, his voice low and his expression serious for a change, "If this is to work out, I must insist upon some honesty."

Katya narrowed her eyes. "I agree. Are you saying you have misunderstood my intentions?"

"It is not that at all. Rather, though I wish you would remain upon Hallar for at least another day while your sister, ah, while her health improves, may we say ... I could not let what I know go unknown without feeling guilt. I admit to not knowing you well, but if I were in your position, I would want to know."

What in the General's name was the fool talking about?

"I received word of an explosion in Skuratchky," Yao confessed.

She felt sucker-punched; to think that she was here at an event like this when home was burning! "I have a high ranking officer who is completing his studies in the university," he continued. "He tells me that parts of the Duma are quite decimated, though your brother lives and has begun making public statements that this is all a horrible accident, caused by an imbecile's experimentation with dangerous chemicals while attempting to brew moonshine in the local pub."

"And is it?" she hissed.

Yao darted his eyes this way and that, and then leaned closer to whisper it in her ear. "My officer also tells me he was approached by someone in plainclothes who warned him of an attack and told him to move to the north end of the city as fast as he could. He says there were wagons organised to assist in mobilisation - this fellow offered my officer a seat upon one of them, but he did not take it."

"Was the plainclothesman Vitim?"

"Appeared to be. For all that's worth. My officers cannot easily tell you apart."

"Then I must leave immediately," she stated.

"There's one more thing. Your airship driver, the fellow who came with you, yes? How very convenient that he has disappeared."

Oh, fantastic! she thought acidly. And no autopilot on her ship, because it had been deemed unnecessary heavy machinery! Best case scenario, that driver was drinking his ass off in a tavern; worst, he was a spy who had planned this. Either way, good riddance, but how would they manage to find a replacement on a day like this, when everybody had booked a driver's services months in advance?
"That is why I humbly offer you the use of my own ship," Yao finished.

"You would do that?" she asked.

"It allows me more time to spend with you. Don't say it, I already know, I am an opportunist! But my ship is also large, it is, large enough to offer your sister and her bondsman a private room. One less thing to worry about when you return to Olyokin. As for where you will sleep -" Yao chuckled in a low voice - "we can discuss the finer points of that agreement later."

She could slap him. "Don't be so forward!"

"I am joking, Katya, I am. Well, mostly."

"How can I know you didn't sabotage my driver to gain so much?" And supposing Yao were secretly planning something himself - a high-ranking officer in her city her left tit, that sounded like a planted spy to her! - suppose there had been no explosion and Yao merely wanted to get the two thirds of the ruling family up in the skies alone!

"You can try and find your driver yourself. You can wait for the evening edition of the paper to be printed and cried out by the paper boys. I am certain news of Olyokin will be somewhere in the paper, though I am also certain the first few pages will be taken up by the details of the auction. Or, my dear Katya," Yao went on, "you might trust me."

Rotten Yao. Trust was not one of her strong suits. But if this were to work out, they would both need to insist upon it, and ... he had been forthcoming with the information.

"I accept your proposition," Katya said. "We'll leave at intermission."
In the few seconds after Lovino's pseudo-detective outburst, there reigned an awkward and heavy silence.

Finally, Feliciano said uncertainly, "Th-they could be related. It... certainly seems possible."

"Sure does," Alfred echoed, just as uncertain. They exchanged a look.

"We can check whether anything was registered at the primaries where you both were," Francis offered.

His bondsman nearly gasped. "You'd - would you really let me do that?"

"Of course, mon chou," he murmured. "You have been so good today, and I am pleased."

For a moment, Feliciano was jealous of their innocence to the point of ire. He was like that once, when all that mattered to him was simple things and evenings consisted of bland entertainment with Ludwig. But nothing had been simple since Alfred had joined them.

"Then let's get going!" Lovino urged impatiently. "All we need is to locate your records - Francis must have these, I guess?"

"It- well," Alfred confessed. "It may not be so simple."

"No offence, but I don't see how it could be more simple."

And there was the elephant in the room. Antonio must know. Francis knew because Feliciano had heard him rant and rave about it before - though nothing was ever said specifically. That meant Francis' Matthieu must know. And Feliciano knew because he'd put it together himself.

There was, however, one remaining unaware, at least consciously.

"Ve, you know, I think we're nearly finished our set," Feliciano said merrily. "Grandfather didn't sell as many as he could have and today it seems they go so fast! Isn't it about time for yours, Antonio? Ah, but you don't have anybody to help you!"

Antonio checked his wristwatch. "Oh! you're right," he exclaimed.

"And Lovino, I notice you're not doing anything at the moment," Feliciano continued. "Why don't you accompany him?"

Lovino almost laughed aloud at him. "Like hell I will!"

"Go on! I will be fine here. Antonio might need your assistance though!"
"You turncoat!" Lovino whispered. "I'll get you back for this, Feli!"

But Antonio had already grabbed Lovino around the bicep to frogmarch him out of the tent. "That's true! Besides, you can find your new friend Matthieu later at Francis'," he said as they walked away, making something that might've passed for pleasant conversation, "and maybe if you're really nice to Francis - for a change - he might let you over for a playdate!"

He heard Lovino's retort of "I'm not a child, you stupid bastard asshole ..." as their footsteps faded away.

"We are alone," Francis said finally. "You'll tell me what that was about?"

"Lovino doesn't know why our grandfather keeps talking with the pirates," Feliciano said. "He thinks they supply us with cheap tonic drugs. But that's not what they do. Maybe at some level, he's put it together the way I did - he's always been the brighter of us! - but it hasn't surfaced. From the way he deduces things, I think he will figure it out! But - ve, I don't want to be around him when he does. I think it would hurt him to know the truth. No, he shouldn't know." He coughed. "The truth is, Alfred was brought to us by the pirates. They took him off the streets." Alfred looked surprised, and a little hurt. "I did my best. Training you, I mean. I did the best I could! They don't usually take anybody so old. It's kids, normally!"

"I don't know if that's better or worse," Alfred murmured.

"It's not so bad!" he explained, though Alfred continued to look disgusted. "The pirates aren't merciless! They have a system! They take those who are obviously hungry, those who are dirty, those whose parents can't care for them. Just like the subscript families, but a different origin! But a registered primary institution would never take that sort of student. The Council ... we-ell the official stance if you dig deep enough is that they know this is happening and keep an eye on things so that it's controlled."

And between that, and the recent Nova raids, and the missing Alfred Jones still being discussed in the first few pages of that day's Caput Halleri Daily Gazette, and Lovino asking where his special Alfred had been educated ... it had made too much sense. Feliciano had done the barest minimum of training, only enough to get the boy through the auction, and then ensure he'd be whisked away again. No, best that he didn't get sold to anyone else. If he had, what would happen to Alfred? What would happen to Romae's name?

"Your grandfather told you all this?" asked Francis.

"No," Feliciano scoffed. "My grandfather shouldn't be doing what he's doing. I put it together in training. Some of the bondspeople would say things."

"Things like being mistreated?" Alfred muttered.

"Of course not! They'd say how much better it was now, with direction and a full belly and a warm place to sleep at night. Their entire life had become pleasure, they never would have to want for anything ever again, and if they were given the chance to go back they said they wouldn't take it. My grandfather would never mistreat any of his servants."

Alfred didn't reply for a moment, and then said quietly, "I didn't mean - I wasn't trying to imply that, honest."
"Would you return, if you could?" asked Francis' bondsman, the one Francis called Matthieu.

The moment of truth. Feliciano held his breath but needed to be honest with himself - he knew the answer, and as Alfred looked slowly between him and the bondsman and back again, Feliciano gave him a sad smile and a nod. "I would," Alfred said. "It's - I guess old dogs don't really learn new tricks. And twenty-six years doesn't come easily undone, y'know? And ... I wasn't, exactly -" he coughed uncomfortably, "- all that poor."

Feliciano could feel it, as his heart sank. If only he had had more time, instead of barely enough for the conditioned response that would make him look the part. But Alfred could have been his, forever!

"What... what's it like? Back home?" asked Matthieu. "I don't even remember, it's before my time -" Next to him, Francis coughed. "I'm just curious!" the bondsman promised him. "Y-you said I'd been good."

"Very well," Francis said stiffly.

"Home? It's huge - cities, y'know?" Alfred told him. "They don't sleep and such."

The bondsman was taken aback. "Veshna? Really? I thought it was mostly rural. Sai Van Lake was poor, I read, a population of maybe fifty thousand - I guess it's really changed, eh?"

"Oh no no, I meant - we moved," he explained. "My parents, and I. We moved to New Joplin. Not too long after I was born, actually! Heh, I know what you're thinking, how could we possibly have afforded that sorta thing, but they'd always said -"

Alfred cut himself off and took a second look at Francis' bondsman.

"Y'know - maybe we're not related after all," Alfred decided. "'Cause, if we were, it would have to be that - well, the only explanation was that ..."

"Your parents sold one child to be able to move to a better life with the other," Matthieu finished. Alfred looked uncomfortable. "I ... yeah."

"But that's preposterous," Matthieu replied, his voice taut. "It's gotta be just a coincidence, how alike we look, eh?"

"Yeah," Alfred said.

"I mean, fifty thou, that's still a lot of people!" he remarked.

"Uh, e-exactly," Alfred replied.

"So you know, we're probably not even related, eh?"

"Oh God, Matt, I'm so sorry," Alfred breathed.

"For what?" Matthieu snapped angrily. "It wasn't your decision! You didn't sell me! What are you sorry for?"
Alfred shook his head, and cried, his voice strained, "But - it isn't fair!"

"Life is not fair," Matthieu shot back, "it never has been for people like me!"

"Matthieu," said Francis sternly, "quiet." The bondsman became quieter, but did not calm down, and only seemed more upset for it. He shook with obvious rage until Francis put a stop to it by placing a firm hand on his shoulder, and then he stopped moving altogether and reprised his mute obedience of before, staring at the ground.

Truly, Feliciano admired Francis. That kind of control! Francis was unlikely to let his bondsman go anywhere, not now that he had him again.

...But if you loved something, you set it free, didn't you? And if it had been stolen to begin with, didn't you put it back where it belonged? No matter how pretty it was! No matter how much you liked it. No matter how much you needed it, or deserved it. No matter how much you wanted it for your own.

"Let me figure out what to tell Lovino," Feliciano said. "I'll tell him - I'll tell him you were taken to those men, the ones he thinks help bondspeople."

"And Ludwig?" Alfred asked. "What about him?"

"What about him?"

"What're you gonna say? Won't he wonder where I've gone?" Alfred pouted. "Feli, I'll really miss him. I really liked him. He never did anything wrong, he just did what you told him to do."

Alfred, darling Alfred, looked so hopeful with his big blue eyes. Feliciano couldn't crush him. "I'll handle that," promised Feliciano. "Don't worry, he'll never know."

"Wh-what? No, no! You have to tell him, Feli!"

"He's a bondsman," explained Feliciano patiently, "he doesn't need to know everything, he knows his place." And if Feliciano were anything like Francis, so would Alfred.

"His place?" Alfred began to grow agitated. "You knew all along where I came from and - and you - you did what you did to me anyway."

"I didn't know who you were! How was I to know you came from money? How was I to know your pirates messed up? Why is that my fault?"

"You read the papers!"

"I had a job to do!"

"You had -" Alfred gaped. "A job, is that what I was?"

Feliciano frowned. "Come now, you know you were more than that."

"I felt what I felt for you," said Alfred quietly, seething with anger, "because I thought you couldn't know, about what happened, when it turned out you knew all the time. You owe me. You owe me that much, so you can tell him."
"I can't tell him! Don't you understand? There's a difference, between you and him," Feliciano began.

"There is no difference!" exploded Alfred, pointing to Matthieu. "None! Between either of us!"

Okay - okay, ve, calm down, I'll tell him," Feliciano lied. "I'll tell him what happened to you."

No, what he'd tell him would be nothing more than carefully constructed axioms to help excise Alfred neatly from Ludwig's mind, that it was all part of Feliciano's plan for training, that Ludwig of course had performed beautifully. It would be horrifyingly easy to do. Feliciano was a good trainer, but Ludwig was a better bondsman. Sometimes too good. No wonder Alfred hadn't turned out nearly as well. Grandpa should've trained him.

His own fault, he reflected. He shouldn't have gotten so close.

"Do you even have a way back home?" he asked.

"Of course I do," Alfred spat. "They said they'd pick me up."

"Who is 'they'?"

"Captain Kirkland, and Unsinkable. From the Delivery," Alfred said. Feliciano gave him a funny look. "What? It's the ship I came in on! And you knew that too, 'cause you were there when I landed on Hallar."

"But how would they get in? With the media coverage lately, the Delivery is not permitted, not even inside Halleri airspace, much less landing here!"

"That pirate has ways of getting around that. He has before," Francis interjected. "I wouldn't worry about it. If he is indeed coming to get you, that is. You may have a higher opinion of his honour than I do."

Indignantly, Alfred said, "He'll come!"

"Perhaps. After all, he did give me the money to buy you," Francis replied smoothly. "He'll come ... for that."

"You're all the same," Alfred sneered. "Money. Jobs! I used to be like you, I said it all too," he muttered, and stormed out of the tent.

"Get back here!" Feliciano cried. He made to follow him.

"What makes you even think he wants to speak to you?" hissed Matthieu.

Francis slapped him upside the head. "Non!" he scolded. Matthieu did not move further and kept his eyes on the ground. "But where are you going?" asked Francis.

"He's still dressed in bondsperson robes, wandering around at an auction like this," Feliciano replied. "Where do you think I am going? My property is on the loose! Wait for me here, Lovino or I will be back soon enough."

Chapter End Notes
man don't you really hate when you're editing a thing that wasn't very good the first time around, and you're doing a better job this time, but then it turns out your computer was completely lying to you about how much charge it had
Prussia

(Prussia)

Maybe he was having more of an effect on ol' Artie than he'd previously thought possible - or maybe he'd finally cracked and begun the hallucinations, it coulda been that too - but it took surprisingly little effort to nag the captain into coming to the surface at intermission instead of at the end of the auction.

"I'm not doing this for you, you know," Kirkland kept saying, as they walked on the walkway through the ship to the tiny docking bay that housed the Delivery's one lonely shuttle. "Just so we're clear."

"You keep telling yourself that," he replied, "the Awesome Me knows the truth! Now c'mon, we're gonna be late since someone spent so long primping for Alfred."

"I was doing nothing of the sort!" said the captain indignantly. "If you must know - and your incessant prying leads me to believe that you really must - I had a few things to take care of in the event of unfortunate and unforeseen circumstances. If this operation should go horribly and drastically awry."

"Captain," he interrupted, and when the captain neither stopped walking nor turned around he said instead, "Arthur. Nothing's gonna happen. I toldja, we'll get by on account of my amazing ability to bee-ess my way around town. If you can't trust me, at least put your trust in that. It's a time-tested talent!"

Kirkland looked sour and replied, "Nevertheless, it doesn't do to be ill-prepared. Chalk it up to my old paranoia, if you're looking for something to pin the blame on."

Crazy old bat, he thought, but followed him anyway down the walkway. In the end, he supposed there were worse ways to be crazy.

As they had discussed, Gilbert did the talking with Border Control. Kirkland was unlikely to be identified by voice alone but try telling the anxious captain that, and it wasn't like Gilbert didn't love the sound of his own voice anyway. So Gilbert did what Gilbert did best: acted like an idiot, annoying but clearly innocent, so that people would rather let him bypass security than have to deal with him any longer. He made his voice extra grating, just to be sure. "Hello?" Gil pushed the comms button again to signal, when Border Control hung up first. "Hell-o-o-oo..." He pushed it a few more times for good measure.

"I think you've made your point," Kirkland said, removing his hand from the comms. "Well done all the same!" He threw Kirkland a rakish wink in reply.

It wasn't until after they'd landed and parked - and after he'd blustered a way through the busy terminal gates with their faked IDs, and after they exited Border Control completely, and after he'd tied up the lady security agent letting people through at the gates at Tolino Downs by hamming it up and flirting (he mighta laid it on too thick when he tugged a red ribbon free from her pretty pigtails, but it worked because Kirkland slipped in successfully when she was busy retying her hair) - that the captain sighed and gave him a funny, searching look.
"It strikes me as odd," he said, quieter than the crowd around him, in order to avoid the feeds of the city picking up his accent. "I can't figure out why you keep up the charade of being -" Kirkland blushed, which looked strange against the paste-on fire-red eyebrows he wore to match the wig under his hat. "Well," he finished stiffly.

"No, what's up?"

"You've adopted this persona of a complete dolt, a ridiculous clown, when you're actually quite intelligent. You've an excellent mind for strategy." Now he blushed, flattered despite the source of the compliment, or perhaps because of it. "Nobody takes you seriously," Kirkland continued. "But they could, if you wanted them to."

Gilbert scratched his ugly, itchy, brown wig and said, "You can't underestimate the power of underestimation! If there's one thing I learnt on the streets, it's that no one ever suspects the simpleton."

The captain laughed derisively. "Wish I'd figured that out before all this," he muttered. "People quite like hanging a mastermind. Well! I'm not sure how much time you've bought us, but I suspect it's finite, and we'd better get to work."

They listened to the final items of the set being sold and then the first few words of the introduction for the next seller. Gil picked up a program someone had dropped on the ground but before he had a chance to flip through it to figure out where they were, Kirkland decided, "That's Aled Jones of Luna Halleri."

Sure enough, the lady introducing the sellers screamed out that very name to a burst of applause in a matter of seconds. That put them at one act after intermission and the time was roughly quarter to four in the afternoon. The best way to handle their business would be to find Alfred and get him out before the crowd left in droves at five, which gave them less than an hour. "You know him that well?" asked Gilbert.

"Worked with him before," Kirkland replied. "There isn't one among them presenting here that I've not. Except Francis - but Francis I knew. What Romae's started has quickly spiralled into a full-blown subsystem. I meet with all of these people, regularly."

"Then there's no way to stop it," he realised with dismay, "not if everybody uses it -"

He was cut off sharply when Kirkland grabbed his hand, whirled him around, dragged him through the closest tent and shoved him up against one of the more solid tent beams. Kirkland slammed a hand over his mouth and hissed, with a wild look in his eye, "Be quiet, and no buts!" before he could say anything like the but of the, but this tent isn't empty that had indeed been on the tip of his tongue.

"They gotta be around here somewhere," he heard. A familiar voice; husky, deep, and displeased. He thought he'd heard it before somewhere?

"Just keep quiet and cool it," another rebuked. Not a familiar voice this time, but obviously a friend to the first. A superior officer? Couldn't say ... "We'll track them down."

"Not everybody can be as zen as you, Rip Van Karpusi!" the first one barked, and with that tone, now Gil could put a name to it - the BSPA man who'd tracked the captain and him down to Francis' the last time he'd talked to Margot.
"You shut that mouth before I shut it for you," the second, Karpusi, replied. "Where's that Hassan fellow gone, he seemed to know something -"

"Know something? Pah! Hassan. He also let Gamma escape!"

"He said he didn't mean it! There was that Vargas kid -"

The two voices died down as the people walked away. "That's the guy who was at Francis'," he whispered to the captain. "The familiar one."

"Adnan. And his partner - Karpusi, I take it," Kirkland noted. "Which is why we'd better not let them see you, lest they cart you away. Or me, and they'd likely do the same only on different charges ... Working with Hassan, eh?"

"The guy from the paper," Gil supplied.

"Exactly." Kirkland exhaled a long and trembling breath, leaning against him. "That was entirely too close."

"At least now you know what they look like," Gil tried, "even if it's only from the back."

"Are you volunteering to go catch their eyes?" Kirkland hissed back.

Really, anything to get them out of this tent, because Kirkland couldn't see but he could - it was already occupied by familiar and unfriendly faces. "We could stalk 'em a bit, see if they might lead us to Hassan. We ambush Hassan an' take him out, we got one less thing to worry about."

"Looking for trouble? I don't think so. It finds us easy enough. No, love, you're staying with me, and we'll get nice and lost in the crowd, we two, else people'll put it together."

"But then how will we find Al?"

Kirkland considered it a moment. "Good point. Alright, we'll get nice and lost in the crowd around the tents. As long as we don't run into those two again - I imagine for similar reasons they've been keeping to this part of the field. But nobody will notice us in here. Alfred can't have gone far. Think those Vargas brothers ought to be around here somewhere."

"Both of them?" Gil asked anxiously.

"I've never seen one without the other," Kirkland figured. "I rather assume they're attached at the hips. Why do you ask?"

"Because," Gil replied, "one of them is right behind you."

Kirkland whirled around to find the same scene he'd been looking at from the moment they'd stepped into this particular tent. Lovino Vargas (the weird one, but better him than his brother for sure), four of the six unhappy people they'd met before at the shabby anchorage, and behind one of them -

"Hiya, Margot!" he said happily.
"What the fuck are you doing?" Margot asked in an even, level tone that reminded Gilbert of dangerous predators.

With the captain so near, pressed close to him, up against a wall - "I-it's not what it looks like!" Gilbert promised hastily.

"Yeah, it's startin' to look like you, here again where you shouldn't be, with a pirate, who definitely shouldn't be here," snapped Lovino. "You got exactly ten seconds to spill before I take you both to that constable from New Joplin."

Despite the thought of being turned making him literally weak at the knees, Gilbert retorted, "You wouldn't," and then remembered he had something to hide behind after all: "Hassan is working with Adnan, who're after your little friends here. You take me to Hassan, I tell him about your buddies."

Lovino glared back.

"My friends are not like your friends, Unsinkable," Margot said. "My friends are good; yours are criminals."

"Actually, they are also criminals," the captain pointed out.

"Of course, the famous Kirkland sliding morality scale!" she mocked. "I forgot about that! Everything measured in units of cash, isn't it?"

Kirkland pouted and ignored her. "Speaking of, you don't really think they paid for her with real money, do you?" he asked Lovino.

Lovino looked to the gang Gil had met on the anchorage - mostly the tall one with the glasses, and the shorter one with the hairpin - and for a moment kept them in suspense before he replied, "Do you think that matters to me? You think I don't already know? Who d'you think's the one who arranged it to bypass the circuit and get us out of the payment tents? And the one keeping everyone's numbers in the air? That wasn't easy, either - took a lot of push to get them to agree to my handling of it.

"But if I play my cards right, and I'm a damn decent player, then I can swing us all out of this, whether they got all twenty five million or nothing but bupkis. So long as it looks good on paper, Francis is happy - hell, he'll never run out of business again after this - and nobody else has to know."

"Except Francis' secretary," Margot's brother supplied. "Kid with the glasses and the purple eyes."

"Secretary, accountant, assistant - always around Francis and loyal as hell," Margot sneered, "that little machine."

Lovino stared at them both and for a moment was perfectly still. Then he blinked and his face split into a wide grin. "Accountant, huh?" he said, chuckling. "Accountant, that's rich... I even have that covered."

"Y' sound pretty sure'f yerself," the tall blond with the glasses said. "S'not jus' th' conf'dence talkin'? Will it work?"
"I know him. Well, not know, like, like he's my friend or anything," Lovino blushed. "But I think I can talk him outta caring pretty easily. Anyway, it doesn't matter how they've paid so long as I can cover it up okay. To be honest she shouldn't have been sold in the first place. None of them should. It makes me sick and finally, finally I've met people that understand that."

The loud one crowed, "Scratch what I said about you behind your back, you are fucking awesome, kiddo."

From outside, Gil could swear he heard someone saying, "Say, that sounded like Alpha."

"We have to get out of here," said the short one with the hairpin. "We still haven't figured out ... certain other things, and I don't like the idea of staying too long in one place."

Lovino frowned. "One way or another, we do still need to put it on paper -"

"Great!" Gilbert replied. "Then you can lead us to Francis." Nobody looked especially happy about it. "What? That's the key, isn't it? We need to see him. You guys need to see him. He's the one who was selling Margot, and the one who bought Alfred, wasn't he?"

"Alfred?" asked Lovino.

"Yeah. What, you don't think that's a nice name?"

"I didn't mean that," Lovino muttered. "Fine, you lead the way, since you're so smart."

Hmph. Too easy. "Doesn't mean I know where Francis' tent is. You go first!"

Tall and Bespectacled lost patience before either he or Lovino. "Fer th' love of - I'll go frst," and he disappeared out the back end of the tent, opposite the way Gilbert and Kirkland had come in. Then he ducked back in a second later. "But not that way," he said. "Th' little one's jus' outside. Hassan an' his lady friend."

Margot's brother checked the opposite side of the tent. "That's Karpusi out there," he found, when he peeked out. "Matches the ID that Suomi grabbed. I assume Tall Dark and Handsome's his partner?"

"You assume right," Lovino grunted. "Fine. We follow me."

--

Lovino led them all through the tents in a twisty, seemingly random pattern. All the tents looked exactly the same to him but it must have made sense to Lovino, because fifteen tents later, they entered one with three occupants: Antonio (whose eyes lit up with dollar signs at the sight of Unsinkable), Francis, and one of Francis' creepy brainwashed bots - 'Matthieu', the one Francis liked a lot, the one who had snuck up on Margot and him the last time Kirkland and he had both been at Francis'. The bondsman did nothing but eye him until Gil removed the itchy wig from his head and gave him a good scowl. He dropped the wig on the ground and smushed it into the mud with his toe, threatening Matthieu and driving home a point.

The bondsman's lip curled and he cringed behind Francis.

"About time!" Francis said indignantly, when Lovino appeared. "I was beginning to think I would
have to search you out." He grimaced when he noticed the rest of them - particularly Kirkland and Unsinkable.

"I brought company," Lovino said. "Where'd Feli and Alfred go?"

"Whoa, whoa - we didn't say anything about Feli," Gilbert retorted. "Why's he gotta be a part of this?"

"Alfred left, Feliciano went after him," Francis replied. "If you want him, you'll want to find Feliciano."

"That stupid gormless git, could he not simply have stayed put -" Kirkland muttered. He cut himself off before he went any further. "Where did they go?"

"Me, I don't care," Antonio piped up, "I just want what I paid for him back, as we agreed."

"But you bought Matthieu," Francis replied.

"I don't think so," Lovino said.

"Whatever, whoever bought who, I demand that compensation! I can't just spend four million for nothing," Antonio said, throwing up his hands. "Do you think I'm made of money, here?"

Rich men arguing over millions! Gil tuned the majority of them out, hoping Kirkland would finish things and Alfred would get back already.

He wondered whether Feliciano were trying to get Al to stay. But why? He'd been bought. However unorthodox to personally walk your charges around the place, the sale had gone through and if Antonio was the one who had bought Alfred for Francis (in turn for Kirkland? What a ridiculous scheme!) then Al had to come back at some point. Hopefully soon, so they could leave as the auction ended in a giant line of other people.

In his haste to fix his money, Francis wasn't saying anything to Margot - who he still probably called Belle - and was completely blowing off the people who bought her - who he didn't seem to recognise. Knowing Francis as Gil did, he probably didn't want to let slip something about how difficult she was, for fear that she'd be returned, but it came off as impolite and haughty not to make small talk.

Not that any of them minded. The buyers were civil despite how much they must have hated Francis, and as for Margot, she stuck close to her brother and practically hid behind the angry looking tall blond guy with the glasses. From time to time she shot Gil looks that varied in the intensity of their accusation. Sometimes they said *I guess you do what you have to, but I don't like it* and other times they said *you are a turncoat and a hypocrite and any respect I once felt for you has flown out the window.*

When it became apparent through the conversation that Kirkland would be the one taking Alfred home, Margot turned murderous and sent a furious expression his way, but said nothing.

He tried to ignore it, much as he could feel the daggers because if looks could kill, he'd've been skewered, but that only worked for so long until Margot got fed up with his antics and sidled up next to him. Here it comes, he thought.
"Tell me this is a horrible prank," she whispered venomously. "Tell me you don't really buy into this."

He said nothing.

"You think he's for real, that he'll bring this - what's-his-name -" 

"Alfred," Gil supplied.

"Whatever! You think Kirkland will really keep his word? How can you be so unbelievably dense?!"

"Look, I know you have no reason to trust him," he began.

"No, I don't, and neither do you! He's waiting until this kid comes back and Francis coughs up the cash, and then he's gonna split!"

"He already gave Francis the money!" Gilbert shot back. Though if it were true what Antonio had said about the prices, then Kirkland had overpaid by a few mil. Gil admitted the captain could be waiting around for change. "Besides, that's why I'm here, so that he doesn't get any funny ideas."

Margot brightened. "So then, you don't plan on hanging around him after Alfred's been dropped off?"

"We-ell, I don't - I mean, as for plans - you know I haven't really got too many of those," he trailed off helplessly. "It's kinda, uh, nebulous really, up in the air a little..."

The look on her face went from hopeful, to disbelieving, to disgusted. "You're a fool," she said softly, and the anger in her voice was the resolved kind that was so much scarier than the yelling kind. He wished she would yell - he wished she would fight him and pummel him with her tiny little girlish fists and get all adorably red-faced like she used to do with the pirates - that would be familiar, that would be welcome!

But she didn't. The cops that knocked him around way back when on Schlessen, the security guards who screamed at him to scram and get lost, the people who ignored the wasted lump of flesh on the sidewalk with the outstretched palm and the request to spare some change, like he didn't exist... they never made him feel like he felt now: pathetic, loathsome, ashamed and about two feet tall. And Margot managed it all with three words and a grave look.

So he did what he ordinarily did when he felt guilty, on the rare occasion he admitted his faults, and got defensive. Maybe it'd provoke her into yelling a little, make her feel better to let out some steam. Then she'd forgive him and they could still be friends.

"Listen!" he said, "I'm not sayin' he's changed." Though surely Kirkland had, maybe just a little bit? "But he's not gonna do the same thing to Al that he did to you."

"And that makes it okay?" she exploded. Half the people in the tent turned to look at them; embarrassed, she continued in a quieter voice no less pissed off, "Even if you're right -"

He puffed out his chest. "Course I'm right!"

"- it doesn't mean Kirkland is any less willing to sell you out later!"
"He won't," Gil growled, "he can't. I can make him think again."

"So you say! So you've always said! Who is this kid, anyway, who manages to get behind Kirkland's legendary grey morality, hmm? Must be some special snowflake! Think about it, why does Kirkland wanna take him home so bad? You really think you're gonna go bring him back all nice-like? Why does he get off scot-free and I didn't?! Think about it, idiot!"

"Fucked if I know!" Questions, so many questions! Gil couldn't understand why she always had to go and turn it into this! Why couldn't she just be like him and accept that the system and the worlds that occupied it were shit, they were made shit and when the sun died out they'd still be shit, and that there was no hidden meaning or underlying message except that people were selfish pigs no matter where you went? "You gotta make your own way - I do, I always have, I don't owe nothin' to nobody! - and I'm not sticking by him because he's worthy or nice!"

"Then why are you?" she gritted out from between her teeth, seething with rage.

"Well, you said it yourself. Sounds like Kirkland likes the boy," although it made Gilbert more than a little uncomfortable to say it. He'd better not like Al too much. "So someone's gotta make sure Alfred makes it home in one piece."

"Alfred oughta learn something about the world instead of being babied," Margot shot back. "And after that, what're you gonna do, stick by him some more?"

"It'll take me places," he replied. Not the whole truth, but a damn good part of it.

"Oh, bullshit," she scoffed. "We could take you places. Nova first because - 'cause Willem's not really right. Or you could just hop freights like you did around planet, couldn't you?"

She kept pressing! "Maybe I wanna see Alfred's place and hang out there," he spat back, his cheeks uncomfortably warm. That was a shit excuse and he knew it, so he tried talking himself out of the lie. "You know it's tough getting onto New Joplin -"

"We're heading to Nova! Whereas the Delivery's dangerous and wanted," Margot interrupted. "That's a much better strategy!"

"I-I didn't say it'd be the Delivery!"

"Then why not go with us? Why Kirkland?"

"Because I like him!" Gil whispered angrily.

She'd gone and done it again, she'd forced him into it and she'd backed him into a corner and he didn't like that in any situation, but far less did he like it than when the secret he was trying to hide was wrong and shameful and he knew it and it was something he never should have felt to begin with. Not for Kirkland.

And not because he was a pirate.

Not entirely.

The shock on her face was palpable, and the disgust quickly followed. Instantly she turned away.
"I don't," he began. He tried to reach out a hand to her shoulder, even though he knew it was a dumb move.

"Don't touch me," she said, flinching away. "I don't even know what precisely it is that you mean by that -" and neither did Gil - "and - and it doesn't matter."

He tried to say something more but only croaked the beginnings of an utterance - an apology? Not likely, not from him! - and in the end shuffled back to Kirkland's side, looking defeated and feeling worse.

Alfred (and Feli) had returned, which must've happened when he had been busy talking to Margot. Alfred seemed significantly less chipper than usual. (Couldn't be that Alfred had sensed the tension in the air. Kid was kinda oblivious to shit like that.) Gil would quiz him about it when they got back to the Delivery, make sure Feliciano hadn't pulled any stunts.

Kirkland, on the other hand, looked pensive and gave him a supportive half-grin. "Don't ask," Gil said, cutting Kirkland off before he had a chance to begin.

"I wasn't going to," Kirkland murmured the reply, and patted his shoulder. "I'll be here when you need me."

He snorted derisively. Like he would need someone like Kirkland!

Like the legendary Unsinkable ever needed anybody!

The tears pricked his eyes.

He didn't say anything else and glumly dug his toe into the dirt, studied his feet, tried to quell the lump in his throat and the uncomfortable feeling of feeling.

When it seemed to have passed, he asked, "So everythin's okay, we can leave now?"

If Kirkland registered the cracking of his voice, he didn't remark on it. "I settled affairs with them, if that's what you're asking."

"The money?"

"Is going to be paid by way of the Vargas brats, of all people," Kirkland said, sulking. "Only Francis refuses to issue a return for what's left until the elder Vargas coughs up the final print papers."

"An' he can't do that now - why?"

Kirkland shrugged. "He's being evasive, that one. Hiding something, lying. I'm not too sure what that's about. And his brother looks about as suspicious. Between the two of them, and that talk about Francis' accountant - well. Not my business. I'll deal with Francis later. At least we have a contract, of sorts. The most important thing is Romae. He'll get what was expecting, with no policemen involved. In any case, for the sake of all our hides, now that you're finished here - if you are finished here?"

Kirkland gave him a questioning look.
He glanced over to Margot, and caught the sight of her back as she left with her brother and the short blond guy. Even if the short one was the one who paid, they must have figured something out between Lovino and Francis, because neither of them batted an eye as the three left the tent.

Fucking Margot, he thought, his throat tight again, she wouldn't even say goodbye to him. It stung more deeply than he'd like. "Yeah," Gil muttered. "Guess we are."

Kirkland spoke aloud to the group as he announced, "Then I'm afraid we'd best be off - all of us, before anybody notices anything amiss -"

"Actually, someone already has," said a sharp voice from behind. And they turned to find the pretty security officer with the red ribbon-tied pigtails - not quite so pretty now that she was looking down at them all over the barrel of a pistol. She had brought with her another armed officer, a male about her height, and behind them both were the two agents, Federal BSPA badges extended and all - Adnan and Karpusi.

Did that creepo bastard from Tenickson still have Unsinkable's face around Hallar? Gil felt his face drain of blood and wished he hadn't wrecked his stupid wig. Antonio was right there - Antonio might sell him out!

The guy was the one who came forward. "Which one of you is Kirkland?" he asked.

"Short blond fellow?" Kirkland pointed to where Margot had exited. "He just left."

"No!" cried the messy-haired loudmouth, and pointed to Kirkland. "That's him there!"

No! he thought, and felt his heart beat faster. "Liar," threw in Gilbert, "it's the guy with the glasses!"

The guy with the glasses said nothing.

"Whatcha thinking?" Gil whispered. It wasn't fair to implicate Lovino's new friends - although tough titties, life wasn't fair - but Gil owed Lovino, and he hated that more than he liked sticking by his rule of every man for himself.

"Listen," Kirkland hissed, "take Alfred back to the Delivery. Go now, and go fast, I'll hold them off. Talk to Kells, I've given her instructions on the ship, she assumes command until I'm back. In the meantime, just get off Hallar and get Alfred to Nova."

"This was your backup plan. This?!" Gil hissed back. Pretty poor one! Though it wasn't as though Gil could suss out a better one on the spot with the cops in his face.

Francis finally grew impatient and stepped in. "Enough nonsense," he said clearly, "the pirate is there," and pointed out Kirkland.

"Get going," Kirkland urged.

Gilbert didn't. "What about you?" he asked. Power in numbers, wasn't it? If they tried to take Kirkland, wouldn't it be easier if he went with? And he'd rather spend time in jail for resisting arrest than be sent off to that Tenickson creep!
Maybe if he just kept telling himself more lies he would never have to address the part where he actually felt something like loyalty for the captain!

"Never you mind about me," Kirkland muttered.

Never he mind?! What if this were the last time he saw him?

They all watched as Karpusi and Adnan advanced towards the two blond guys from the anchorage instead of the captain. "What are you doing?" Francis demanded.

"These men are wanted for an insane amount of crimes," Karpusi explained calmly. "Do you know them?"

"They're not your clients, are they?" asked Adnan. Francis froze in place.

He should run. He should grab Alfred and run. But it was like that time Lovino had caught him - he couldn't make his feet move!

It was Matthieu who spoke up. "Of course not," he said. "This is a respectable establishment we run, we do not associate with reprobates." He gave a wary look to Francis, and then Antonio, Lovino and Feliciano. "None of us would."

"Yes, we were just leaving," Feliciano confirmed.

Lovino looked shocked. "But -"

"But nothing," Antonio stressed, and clamped a hand around Lovino's upper arm to lead him out of the tent.

In the minor commotion as they filed out of the tent and left, Kirkland whispered to him:

"Go. Now!"

Amazingly, it released him from his trance.

Gil ducked behind Kirkland and grabbed the front of Alfred's shirt. He yanked him past the canvas flaps and nearly mowed down the Vargas brats in his haste to get away. Antonio, Francis and Francis' little Matthieu must have gone the other direction.

Cleverer than he thought a robot would be, Gil admitted, as they raced away.

"The accomplice, get the accomplice!" shrieked the lady officer.

He got them two tents' distance before he ducked behind another to get out of the line of sight.

Just in time. There was a rustling behind them that he caught over the sound of Alfred trying to get his bearings - the thumps of her partner as he stomped outside.

For a second Gil panicked that they might be found. He put a finger to his lips and glared at Alfred in case he got foolish ideas.

"Don't. Even. Budge," he breathed. "We wait until the coast's clear."
Alfred nodded, his eyes wide and terrified, and was silent.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

Alfred frowned and whispered, "You know, you're the first person to actually ask me?"

"They were just here," the officer yelled. Gil clapped a hand over Alfred's mouth. "They ran out this way!"

"Ve, I don't know what you're talking about," he overheard. "I didn't see anybody leave! Didn't you get your pirate? That was the one you wanted, wasn't it?"

"No, the white-haired man," the officer explained in an angry rush, "the one who broke off with the bondsman, the little blond one with the glasses. He stole a bondsman! Stolen? Taken hostage? I don't even know -"

"I'm sorry!" Feliciano chirped, "I really don't recall anybody like that coming by here. Are you sure there was a bondsman there? Maybe -"

"- there was a blond, with glasses. Handsome, like a bondsman would be," Lovino interrupted, "but he's not for sale, he's Francis' accountant -"

"- ah, yes!" Feliciano agreed happily. "Wait, accountant? Are you sure, Lovi?"

"Yes I'm sure," Lovino grunted. "He's an accountant, okay? Sheesh!"

"Accountant. I thought he was a bondsman."

"Well he's not, dumbass!"

"Anyway! Such a sweet boy! But blond hair is common with all of Francis’ products, so I think maybe you got them mixed up? It's a very common mistake! That's probably why I thought he was a bondsman! If you want we can go talk to Francis, you can talk to him - he's a very nice man, Francis is! -"

And it was as Feliciano chattered on that Gil realised they'd be okay, because luck was obviously on their side. Not one, but two Vargases covered for him. Two Vargases, and he didn't like either of them and neither of them liked him. Maybe Feli was doin' it for Alfred, search him, he'd no clue, but it didn't matter.

Whatever the rationale, instead of pointing the officer to them - which would've given Alfred back to Antonio or whoever bought him, and given Unsinkable to the jails before Romae found him to ship off to Tenickson - Feliciano provided excellent distraction, and with the cop thrown off the scent, they could make it to Border Control in a little under four minutes of jogging.

He hoped the Captain would be as lucky.
Francis noticed Lovino first, although Antonio seemed just as tickled to see him. "About time! I was beginning to think I would have to search you out." When he spotted Kirkland, he glared. Kirkland glared back.

"I brought company," Lovino grunted sullenly. "Where'd Feli and Alfred go?"

"Whoa, whoa!" interjected Gilbert. "We didn't say anything about Feli!" Kirkland recalled how upset the boy had been when he had found that Romae's youngest grandson was training Alfred. Wasn't sure why he cared so. The younger one was less brusque, calmer, happier, kinder and all around -er than his brother, if you asked Kirkland, but Gilbert didn't ask and Kirkland didn't volunteer. "Why's he gotta be a part of this?"

Francis watched them both carefully with a level gaze. "Alfred left, Feliciano went after him. If you want him, you'll want to find Feliciano."

What on earth could have possessed him! Would it have really been too much to ask for him to stand still for an hour? That stupid gormless git, could he not simply have stayed put - Kirkland didn't realise he was speaking aloud until people's attention swivelled his way. "Where did they go?" he quickly demanded.

Antonio smiled and shrugged. "Me, I don't care, I just want what I paid for him back, as we agreed."

"But you bought Matthieu," Francis said.

"I don't think so," Lovino snapped.

"Whatever, whoever bought who, I demand that compensation!" Antonio said. "I can't just spend four million for nothing. Do you think I'm made of money, here?"

Francis tilted his head Kirkland's way. "Kirkland's got money set aside, he'll cover it."

"The hell I will!"

"That will do," Antonio agreed. "Pirate, I hope you know I expect full reimbursement!"

Francis explained it to Kirkland. "Close your mouth, you'll catch flies. Well, weren't you the one who wanted to buy him in the first place? Now he has been bought and you must pay the person who bought him!"

"In fact," Antonio added, "you're lucky I'm not asking for a higher resell!"

"You showed up late and bought the wrong man," Francis remarked acidly. "Don't push your luck."

The men from the anchorage had mostly been silent, but the quiet one with the hairpin spoke up. "Speaking of higher resell, are we finished here? Some of us have other problems to tackle.
and should get going."

Lovino frowned.

"Some of us can stay," offered the loudmouthed one.

"Are you sure?" asked Margot's brother in a hush.

"Sure I'm sure! You kids take off," he replied.

"I don't want to leave you," Margot's brother protested.

The loudmouth sobered and became serious. "You're more important, remember?" he said. "Get Margot, get off Hallar.' That was the deal. So we'll handle the rest and meet up later."

"It won't take long," Lovino said. "I can mail out receipts with the final numbers later. But everything else is just about finished up."

"Is that so!" Francis contested. "I believe I heard from Feliciano that they didn't have all the money, perhaps you might explain that?"

"I'm handling it and I say it's settled." Lovino folded his arms across his chest. "Besides, they already paid most, they certainly got collateral."

"I'm not satisfied," Francis returned. "It is still suspicious. Besides, it's now the big money sale! Things have to be quite set - don't you know Héderváry will be looking into my books? Especially for this one!"

Here, Lovino grinned. Having not seen him do it often, Kirkland did not know whether it was genuine. He assumed it wasn't. "If there are problems," he said sweetly, "just have your accountant talk to me. Anytime."

Francis narrowed his eyes at the mention. Matthieu chanced a look up from the ground and it was only Kirkland's careful powers of observation that caught the curious look that flew between the bondsman and Lovino. "What about Héderváry?" Francis asked.

"Eh. Her too. Fuck, bring popcorn, we'll make it a party. If there are any problems we'll get it sorted."

"There won't be any problems," the blond man replied. "My family pulls in tens of millions a year before taxes."

Francis laughed. "And you didn't think to bring more money with you, why?"

The man with the hairpin sneered, and there seemed to blow a curious chill through the tent, though the canvas flaps didn't move. As the man drew himself up to his full height - nowhere near the tallest present, but it lent him a menacing air - he said crossly, "I rather thought the name Steinsvik would be enough to stop people in their tracks. Or doesn't a good name count for anything anymore?"

Francis sniffed, feigning indifference.
"Of course," the man - Steinsvik? really?!! continued smoothly, "it's easiest to keep money in different accounts for different purposes. I'll admit I wasn't expecting the price I paid but that's an auction for you. Mister Vargas is aware that I will cover it with my ...personal account, if need be."

"Wait," interjected the loudmouth. "Y'mean - not ... one of the ones we have set up?"

"Absolutely," Steinsvik replied. He dropped the rich-boy act and said warmly, "The price is nothing to me. Really, Danmark."

A Steinsvik working with them. Kirkland was surprised only to hear that the group had access to money that wasn't either dirty or made up. If Francis - who was completely unimpressed - believed it, it must be so ...

And yet it couldn't be. The heir to a fortune, embroiled in the kinds of things this group did? If those BSPA fools managed to find them, why, it'd be the scandal of a century! Ísland disappeared easily enough, he could do it again for his friends, but this man would come out penniless with no inheritance, none of that lovely Steinsvik money! Kirkland couldn't fathom anything stupider -

"And that makes it okay?!!"

Gilbert's increasingly loud conversation with his friend broke Kirkland's train of thought, as well as most of the tent's. He looked over to the pair and caught Gilbert's eye over her shoulder. Gilbert reddened at the girl's outburst and threw him a dirty look in reply, but they both piped down.

"As for your other sale," Lovino said, taking advantage of the distraction, "you'll get the money more promptly."

"Ah yes," Francis remembered. "I was tied up with Héderváry at the time and couldn't be in the crowd. You understand, Matthieu. How much were you?"

Matthieu opened his mouth to speak but Lovino cut him off. "2.6 mil," Lovino said brusquely. A blatant lie if ever Kirkland had seen one.

But Francis believed it and beamed. "Ah! you see my dear, you had nothing to worry about!" he told the bondsman, who didn't look much reassured. "All that anxiety for nothing, and everything is settled!" Francis turned back to Lovino. "Everything is settled, isn't it?"

"Ve, of course it is!" said a bright, cheery voice.

The tent flaps drew apart to admit the younger Vargas, Feliciano, with Alfred in tow. The boy looked sullen and unhappy and trudged his feet as he walked but otherwise was hale and in fit health. Gilbert had had no cause for concern.

Given Gilbert's prior misgivings, Kirkland had expected him to bristle at Feli's entrance, but he had taken no notice. When Kirkland looked over, he found Gilbert mired in a quiet but heated conversation with Margot, both of them unhappy.

"2.6, wasn't it?" Feliciano said. "Then the five from the other sale from Lovino - that is insurance, I understand the money will be repaid, Lovino, yes? Yes! And the four for Alfred here, that gives us - ve, how is my math, 11.6, isn't it?"

"It is," Lovino agreed, almost smiling. Almost.
Feliciano clapped his hands in exuberant joy. "Good! Then we shall post the price for Alfred at 11.6 and call it a day!"

"That's the return on investment Romae's expecting," Kirkland noted.

"Exactly! And that will make him a very happy man! I don't think I need to tell you all that a happy Avo Romae is a good thing. In fact I don't think anybody here would want my grandfather to be unhappy!"

Francis and Antonio both shook their heads.

"That's excellent," said Kirkland, and it really was, since his own business with Romae would suffer if Romae weren't satisfied, or felt that he'd been swindled by a pirate during his own project.

"But where does the 11.6 mil come from?"

Feliciano blinked, the face of innocence itself. "Why, you, of course! You have a fund for this, yes? Forty million! Alfred told me so!"

"Now wait just a minute!" Kirkland exploded. "I'm paying three times here? Once to you," he pointed to Antonio, "once to you," he pointed to Lovino, "and once to you!" he pointed to Francis.

Lovino glared. "Call it my service charge for fixing this nonsense - and not turning your ass in."

"If yer angry, y'c'n take it up with us," offered the tall scary fellow. Kirkland glowered; no thanks.

To Alfred, Kirkland continued, "That money was only to go towards your freedom. You though," he spat, to Matthieu, "why, you're not a freeman, and you never will be, so I'm spending my money for what, a gift for Francis? I hardly think that's fair!"

"But the thing is, it's not your money," Alfred interrupted. The other men from the anchorage - everybody except the girl, still in hot debate with Gilbert - agreed and smirked. "And besides, I don't want anyone here to go broke 'cause of me," he continued, "and - and you watch what you say about Matt! That's my brother."

This bleeding heart business of Alfred's was worrisome, as well as expensive - brothers! What was next, twins separated at birth? "Be that as it may," Kirkland argued, "this wasn't part of our deal!"

"Oh I had a deal," Francis conceded, "but not with you."

"You double-faced money-making ..." He knew there was no love between him and Francis but didn't a contract exist for anything anymore? "You no longer honour signatures on paper, is that it?"

"Untrue; I shall honour it to the letter. And that contract was signed in the name of one Gilbert Beilschmidt, not your own," Francis explained. "Unless you want to bring that poor hapless crewman down, and proceed to endanger his life also. But you yourself are in no position to bargain."

He was tempted to pull Unsinkable off his conversation with his friend, but neither of them looked particularly ready to quit hissing at each other. And besides, Francis hadn't thought much of him the last time he brought Unsinkable to the surface of Hallar. Being seen to have done it again for
this purpose instead wouldn't win him any awards. "But - but it was understood that, that - that's just because I couldn't be found on Hallar safely!" Kirkland protested.

"Then you're really not in the position to bargain," Francis sneered, and Kirkland shut up at last.

While he sulked it off, Lovino summarised, "So we're agreed? The 4 mil repaid to Antonio from Kirkland, the 2.6 mil for Matthieu, the 5 mil for the girl, the 20 mil remaining is paid. That leaves us at Antonio broken even, us on the positive side, and Francis ridiculously on the positive side."

"I have good product," Francis sniffed. "Nevertheless, I shall keep updated on this little... situation, Vargas."

"Yeah, you do that," Lovino muttered.

"Keep updated without me," added Steinsvik. "We've got to go. Willem, please get your sister."

The spiky haired one - Willem, evidently - cast a wary look at his loudmouthed friend. "Danmark?" he asked.

"We'll take care of - of the other issue," Danmark promised. "You guys're just getting a head start."

"Jus' get offa here b'fore Dumb an' Dumber get a clue fer a change," the tall one with glasses mumbled. "We'll meetcha back with the oth'rs later."

Whatever Willem said under his breath to his sister was lost to Kirkland as Gilbert picked then to shuffle back to his side, looking more miserable than he himself felt. Momentarily, Kirkland forgot the woes about money that wasn't his anyway. "Don't ask," said the boy.

"I wasn't going to," Kirkland murmured. He raised his hand - and then instantly felt foolish. Raised it for what, for an embrace? His hand hovered in the air for a full second, while his cheeks warmed uncontrollably, and he quickly discovered he didn't have it in him to follow through with an action like that. Maybe if he weren't so guarded, maybe if he were more like Alfred. But he wasn't and it was out of character to start now.

In the end, he wound up awkwardly patting Gilbert's shoulder. "I'll be here when you need me," Kirkland said in a stiff and halting manner. It felt and sounded trite, and Gil dismissed his pathetic attempt at comfort with a careless shrug, looking at his feet.

If only Kirkland been born with the ability to be smooth and without his horrendous ineptitude at social situations! Out of rage at himself, he almost lashed out at Gil when he was interrupted. "So everythin's okay, we can leave now?" Gilbert asked, his voice taut and hopeful.

"I settled affairs with them, if that's what you're asking," he said curtly.

"The money?"

"Is going to be paid by way of the Vargas brats, of all people," Kirkland replied, with no small measure of distaste. "Only Francis refuses to issue a return for what's left until the elder Vargas coughs up the final print papers."

"An' he can't do that now - why?"
He shrugged. "He's being evasive, that one. Hiding something, lying. I'm not too sure what that's about. And his brother looks about as suspicious. Between the two of them, and that talk about Francis' accountant - well. Not my business. I'll deal with Francis later, at least we have a contract. Of sorts. The most important thing is Romae. He'll get what was expecting, with no policemen involved."

It could have been much easier, if Arthur had wanted. He could have sent a letter to the press, reassured his anonymity through the media protection, and told them where they could find that famous writer's son. And it would have ruined Romae's business, and Romae would have gotten angry, and he would have plunged Kirkland's name into the mud, because nobody else knew where Alfred was but Kirkland, and Kirkland would never be able to get the smallest of cargo jobs thereafter. This way was messier - much, much messier! - but it preserved the status quo and kept his head afloat. Kirkland had to protect his ship, he had to protect his crew, and he had to protect himself.

"In any case, for the sake of all of our hides, now that you're finished here -" if that were even the case - "if you are finished here?" Kirkland asked.

Gilbert looked back to his friend but didn't say anything as she exited the tent with her brother and the Steinsvik fellow, leaving the tall one with the glasses and the one named Danmark behind.

"Yeah," Gil said bitterly. "Guess we are."

Kirkland finished his thought and announced it aloud to the group. "Then I'm afraid we'd best be off - all of us, before anybody notices anything amiss."

"Actually, someone already has," said a sharp voice from behind. It was the security officer with the pigtails who had been manning the doors to the Downs. There was another security fellow behind her, whose name tag read Bakhoum.

But that didn't fool Kirkland. Now that Kirkland could see both their faces, he could identify them properly: Constable Vel and Major-Constable Hassan, judging from the photos from the Daily Gazette. Each with their weapons drawn and raised.

More distressingly, behind them both were the two plainclothes agents, Federal BSPA badges extended and all, Adnan and Karpusi. Precisely the people who had tracked the legendary Unsinkable to Francis' house and attempted to spirit him away.

And while Kirkland still had his wig on, that dratted stupid Gilbert had thrown his away before they'd even seen Francis!

Gilbert was a walking pile of money without any disguise.

Any of them could hand him over to Romae for a take in fifty million. That is... if they caught the bugger.

He had to protect his crew.

"Which one of you is Kirkland?" asked Hassan.

He needed time - time to do a little bit of thinking, and perhaps exercise the last small amount of luck he had left at his disposal, but this might yet work. Kirkland said the first thing that came to
his panicky brain: "Short blond fellow? He just left," and pointed where Steinsvik and the others had exited. Surely Steinsvik could handle some nosy cops from New Joplin.

Danmark disagreed. "No!" he cried, and barked angrily, "that's him there," pointing to Kirkland.

"Liar!" Gilbert shouted. "It's the guy with the glasses!"

The man with the glasses grunted, unwilling to stoop to the level of playing games.

Meanwhile, Kirkland tugged Gilbert's sleeve.

"Whatcha thinking?" Gil whispered.

"Listen," Kirkland hissed, "take Alfred - you take him back to the Delivery." He might conjure something up later for himself, but if they found Alfred, they'd send him home and that'd be the case for Romae. Which meant either way, Kirkland's line of business was over. "Go now, and go fast. I'll hold them off. Talk to Kells, I've given her instructions on the ship, she assumes command until I'm back. In the meantime, just get off Hallar and get Alfred to Nova."

"This was your backup plan. This?!" Gil hissed back.

Kirkland fought the urge to slap him. Stupid boy, wasting time questioning orders!

"Enough nonsense! The pirate is there," said Francis, pointing to Kirkland.

"Get going," he urged Gilbert under his breath.

"What about you?"

"Never you mind about me," he said.

If Gilbert would only get the bloody hell out of the tent he could at least save himself and Alfred!

But instead of Hassan and Vel descending upon him as he expected, it was Karpusi and Adnan who advanced, and they approached instead Danmark and his tall bespectacled friend. "What are you doing?" Francis demanded.

"These men are wanted for an insane amount of crimes," Karpusi explained calmly, as he took out a pair of handcuffs and attached the wrists of the tall blond with glasses behind his back. The man didn't look happy about it, but he didn't protest. "Do you know them?"

"They're not your clients, are they?" asked Adnan from behind Danmark.

Francis didn't move.

Nobody moved.

There had been some time, when the agents were busy fastening the wrists of Ísland the forger's compatriots, that only Vel and Hassan were armed and prepared to strike.

Gilbert could have run then. He could have grabbed Alfred and run for both their lives, and the long-legged slender bugger could've done it before a shot were even fired, but he hadn't! And now
the scene had them all frozen in place, and it was too quiet for such a bold move of so many strides...

Why wouldn't Gilbert leave?

"Of course not," said a quiet voice near his side. It was Matthieu; the more he spoke, the louder and firmer he became. "This is a respectable establishment we run, we do not associate with reprobates." He gestured to Francis, and then Antonio, Lovino and Feliciano. "None of us would."

Feliciano nodded. "Yes, we were just leaving."

"But -" Lovino began.

"But nothing," Antonio finished. He clamped a hand around Lovino's upper arm to lead him out of the tent.

And silly Gilbert still hadn't moved an inch. If he didn't get a move on it, it'd be both of them gone!

There was a time for valour and honour, if Kirkland dared to divine that it was truly that which kept Gilbert at his side (and part of him sorely wished it so), but now wasn't that time. Gilbert would leave, and find some way to carry on, but as for Kirkland...

They wanted Kirkland. It would be too hard to get them both out now. Better one of them get out, and if it had to be only one of them -

He had to protect his crew. He said he'd protect Gilbert. He'd looked him in the eyes when he'd said it, and Gilbert's arms around him, solid and warm and, dare he think it, trusting, loving -

- it was the right thing to do.

"Go," he hissed brokenly to Gilbert, fighting the urge to scream with rage. "Now!"

He felt the hair on the back of his neck stand on end as Gilbert raced around him, then flew past Alfred and stole him away. There was the sound of canvas rubbing up on canvas and then the tent flaps swung in the still air, the only physical sign of Gilbert or Alfred's presence.

Vel blinked; it took a second for the shock to wear off. Once it had she screamed, "The accomplice, get the accomplice!"

Hassan nearly jumped into action out the tent flaps, as did Adnan.

"Not you, idiot!" Karpusi snapped, as Hassan left alone.

Adnan scowled, angry with being chastised. "But we should find the others, the ones that just left," he snapped.

"If you're so ready for action," said Vel, "you can both go track 'em down."

Both Adnan and Karpusi looked at her, sizing her up. She was small and slight and looked to be a better candidate for a desk job than a cop. "You sure you'll be okay?" Karpusi asked.

Vel rolled her eyes. "Mo'll be back in a minute, and I can take care of these," she explained as she
pulled out her own set of handcuffs. She yanked Kirkland's arms back, nearly separating his
shoulder from its socket in the process, and clapped them around his wrists tightly. He glowered;
she ignored him. So much for small and slight, he thought. "There," she said, "now they're all
bound."

"What if they try to ... roll away?" Adnan asked.

"Are you kidding me," Vel said.

"Normally I'd laugh too," declared Karpusi, "but both of us have seen first hand how resourceful
these guys can be."

"You're losing time talking," Vel muttered. "I have a gun. If they move, I shoot 'em in the leg.
They'll stop moving."

Hassan returned. "Gone!" he exclaimed. "Stupid Vargas brats - said they haven't seen them."

"Covering?" guessed Vel.

He shook his head. "Don't see why they would, they got nothing to gain from that." To Adnan and
Karpusi he said, "What are you two still doing here?"

"We were just leaving!" Adnan retorted. He grabbed Karpusi by the arm; Karpusi wrenched it
back and shot Adnan a filthy look.

"Don't touch me," he said defensively.

"And Ísland said you almost caught him once?" Kirkland muttered. "What, did you two oafs trip
over him?"

The tall man with the glasses ignored him resolutely, but Danmark snorted.

"Hey, you shut your fuckin' mouth," Adnan said, at the same time Karpusi said, "This isn't funny."

Despite the incredulous look he gave the two agents, Hassan remarked, "You shouldn't laugh,
pirate. Considering the charges against you, there's a list of places queued up for you, some for
your head."

"Oh, for what, for kidnap?" he retorted.

"For piracy, obviously, theft, kidnap, transportation of stolen goods, malicious acts upon other
ships - apparently you stripped the Pride of Euskadi of her fuel vials and left her for dead in space -
"

"In my defence," he protested, "I needed them more. But I don't see how those are hanging
crimes!"

"Okay," Hassan went on, "try collusion with known pirates, and thieves - Henry Spriggs for one
name-dropped you at his execution last May; all Schlessen raids from the past six years they've
blamed on you with evidence, and a few in Nova; tax evasion on Banningham along with the
Nunat bank forgery about a decade ago -"
"Forg'ry?" asked the tall spectacled blond man, surprised.

"I was young and foolhardy," Kirkland explained. "Weren't you wondering how I met Ísland?"

"- but the one you'd hang for is the murder," said Hassan, and an awkward silence fell in the tent.

Danmark next to him broke it when he sucked in a breath. "I- I beg your pardon!" Kirkland sputtered.

"Marigon ID'ed your former bosun, Desmond of Bast, this morning," Hassan finished. "We just got the telegram. We'll have the evidence within a day."

Of all the other crimes, he wasn't much perturbed, but this one bothered him. To hang for that waste of flesh! After what he'd done to people like Gilbert. Kirkland grew angry and, keeping his temper barely in check, spat, "He was an idiot, and a rapist, he deserved what he got."

"Maybe so," Karpusi replied impassively, "but that's not how justice works."

"It ought to be," he muttered. "Cold comfort, isn't it, remaining incorruptible in defence of one's own conscience? I know I did the right thing, in the end."

Hassan gave him a queer look and cleared his throat. "Anyway, I give it two days for the mailships to get word around and start the bidding war for you, unless there's anybody foolish enough to try paying the Halleri bail."

"Which I'm sure Romae will want set nice and high since he can't sell to that fellow," Adnan added.

"Yeah, about that," Hassan continued, "don't you think that's fishy? Same guy keeps buying bondspeople. Bit like your money laundering case, isn't it? He filed a complaint with me about a guy who hit him, and - he's kinda strange."

Karpusi and Adnan exchanged glances. "I'm sure he would never," Adnan replied, "he's a very well-respected member of society! He even comes to the public BSPA meetings."

"But... that's not a bad lead," decided Karpusi. "He came to talk to me earlier too. Got in a fight in the crowd and thought I was security."

"Oh, so that's why you sent him my way," Hassan muttered.

Adnan laughed in his face. "He can brawl all he wants, that's not got anything to do with money laundering!"

"No, you big moron," Karpusi said, "that's our excuse! And then we get to find out about his spending habits!"

"Oh come on! You've had some kooky theories but this one's new. You really think he's a launderer?"

Karpusi glared. "I think saying that he's too rich for dirty money is far less logical than saying that brawling leads to crime!" he exclaimed, offended.
"Guys, this is dumb," Hassan tried.

"T-that's not what I said!" Adnan yelled. "Ooh, you're putting words in my mouth, I hate it when you do that!"

Tempting to run for it, Kirkland thought, even with his arms pinned. Like his mind had been read, Vel moved closer to him.

"Seriously," pleaded Hassan.

He was interrupted by Karpusi, who acted like he hadn't heard Hassan speak. "Maybe if you talked some sense once in awhile on your own I wouldn't have to insert it myself into what you said!"

"Well you can just insert yourself out of this tent before I insert my foot in your ass!"

"See, that, that right there, that is what I'm talking about - and this blatant lack of respect for a superior officer -"

"SHUT UP!" shrieked Vel, blasting Kirkland's eardrums in the process.

There was silence.

"Thank you," she replied tersely. "Now. We're going to go bring these three here down to the station. You can decide who to go after next - if you can make it out of here without getting sidetracked again - but we're on a tighter schedule and we don't have the time for this nonsense."

Karpusi and Adnan looked abashed.

"What do you say to the nice lady?" prompted Hassan.

"Thanks," mumbled Adnan.

"Yes that's very helpful, thank you," Karpusi said.

"That's more like it," grumbled Vel, and if the agents heard her through their stumbling out of the tent, they didn't let on.

--

It was an awkward procession back to the BSPA, Kirkland being led by Vel and Hassan with the other two members from the anchorage.

"If you try anything, I will shoot you, and you can choose a slow death by infection rather than jail," Hassan warned the two men.

"That goes double for you," Vel told him.

"I'm going nowhere," he replied stiffly.

Of the people in the road who saw them, Kirkland recognised none; though judging from the whispers and murmurs that followed in their wake, they certainly recognised him. "Isn't that -" "- the pirate, from the papers -!" "- glad they caught him, scary-looking creature -" "- not as fearsome
as I imagined -" " - what a stupid wig -" " - wonder what Nova sector'll say -" " - wait 'til the Gazette gets wind of this!"

He kept his head down as best he could. So much for his plan of not being seen and detained.

At least Gilbert made it out.

They arrived at a large, ugly looking building whose concrete steps were in various states of disrepair and littered with cigarette butts. The interior was cleaner but no less utilitarian; Kirkland admitted he had been expecting something more impressive than a single staff member behind a check-in desk. "Guess they spend that budget entirely on vipers and two-ways," muttered Hassan next to him.

They were directed to the wing with detainment cells for serious infractions. He found conditions no worse than the bondsperson holdings on the Delivery - ivory-coloured bars with cheap peeling paint, cold concrete, hard to dig one's way out of - a bench dug out of the wall and an uncovered chamber pot in the corner, silently smelling up the room.

There was a curious box covering the entire outside handle of the cell doors that Kirkland assumed was some form of locking mechanism. It didn't look pickable.

What did come as a surprise was the fact that the cells were not unoccupied.

"You again," Ísland said. He looked up at Kirkland, scowled, and decided, "At least this time we're not in the same cell."

"Yes, I rather treasure those memories myself," Kirkland replied sarcastically.

"Sverige, no!" said the missing member of the crew, the one whose bright and cheerful face had been replaced with one of worry.

Hassan and Vel exchanged a glance, and Hassan nodded. "Makos, we'll need your help with the doors," he said to the lone staff member who had accompanied them.

Makos quickly jumped into action and unlocked the cell adjacent to Ísland's with a swipe of his ID card. A clunk sound and Makos yanked the door open. Vel and Hassan exchanged glances again; perhaps another budget oversight? Makos took it for impression, though, and said proudly, "It's the latest technology."

"Is that so," Vel replied. Hassan shoved the bespectacled man inside the cell and shut the door behind him.

"It is!" Makos puffed himself up in front of the lady and announced, "Uses the magnetic stripes on our ID cards. All of the BSPA high-level clearance agents here have them."

"Why, that's fascinating," Vel said. Makos opened another cell and Hassan directed Danmark inside.

"And it's much more secure than keys, and it automatically locks once you close it," Makos continued, eager to impress.

"I'm sure we'd implement it if we had the funds," Vel said neutrally. "All we have are rudimentary
vid feeds, and those are expensive to maintain."

"But that's the best part!" Makos said. "It's not all that expensive. I mean, the cost breakdown per cell was enough that we did have to let the vid feeds go for a month - don't tell the Council! - but don't worry! These babies are proven impenetrable."

He turned to a final cell. When it too was unlocked, Vel shoved Kirkland through the door. Unused to not having arms for balance, Kirkland narrowly avoided tumbling to the ground by instead spilling himself onto the lone, hard bench and smashing his shoulder blades into the concrete wall. Less than dignified. He huffed his displeasure; Hassan took no note and Vel was busy speaking to Makos about the vid feeds.

Kirkland noticed that Hassan wasn't exactly catching up to them. In fact he lingered around the tallest man's cell. "Sverige, is it?" he murmured.

The man looked up, uncertain.

"I believe your friend left something behind when he took a swing at that Tenicksonite. Naturally, security confiscated it. It has all his IDs in it, and some of yours, including one with Karpusi's face," Hassan said. Slyly, he removed a small wallet from his pocket, dropped it on the ground, and kicked it past the bars. "Be a damn shame if it never made it back to him."

Sverige recognised it immediately. Though he quickly hid it from view, he remained suspicious. "What're y'doin' this for?" he asked. "Y'must know what we c'n do with this. What we will do."

Hassan smiled. "We have a theory, Vel and I," he explained, while Makos continued discussing the particulars of security systems with Vel, who was doing a rather good job of acting impressed. "And if it's right - and I have reason to believe it is - then you being on this side of the bars isn't justice. Adnan and Karpusi'll be back soon, so be quick, but make it nice and quiet, when you leave. Keep 'em guessing. Leave me out of it."

"Sure, sure. You saw nothing. Some cop you are," said Danmark from the cell next to Sverige's.

"Watch yer mouth," Sverige chastised..

"Not saying it's bad, I like this kinda cop!"

"I don't know who you are, but I'm pretty sure you're our guardian angel," said Ísland. "We can't thank you enough."

Hassan replied, "Pretty sure I know what it is you guys do, and how you do it, and why. And my precinct accepted the shut-up money the Council gave us on my behalf, so ... my hands're tied. But I refuse to be at the beck and call of the Halleri BSPA. No, if anyone's the angels, it's you folks. This is the least I can do."

And then he fixed Kirkland with a cool stare. "At least I know I did the right thing, in the end," he sneered.

He spun on his heel and left; Makos had yet to look back, or, indeed, at anything besides Vel.
The second all of them left the room, the cells that contained Ísland's group became a flurry of activity. Sverige stood and kicked the wallet through the bars to Ísland, who kicked it along to the fellow in the end cell, whose hands were the only pair tied in front. Immediately he set upon rifling through the wallet; what he was looking for, Kirkland wasn't sure.

"Suomi?" asked Sverige.

"Just as a precaution, I can't believe," Ísland muttered to himself, "another copy, but if he took it out I - ah!"

For the fellow with the wallet, Suomi, held aloft a single piece of plastic that shone in the light, about the size of a business card, with a black stripe along one side. Kirkland couldn't make out the picture but if Ísland had something to do with it, he was willing to bet it wasn't any of theirs.

Suomi got to his feet and carefully manoeuvred his hands through the bars to the outside of the cell where the box was near the door handle. He kept a careful, solid grip on the card and brought it up and through the slot.

A 'clunk'. A moment passed. Nothing happened, until Suomi pushed at the door - and it gave way.

"Yes!" Danmark cried. "Now do mine!"

Suomi clucked at him. "You're last, and if you don't pipe down, I'll leave you here," he said. An empty threat; he quickly swiped the pass on the door for Ísland, then Sverige, and then even Danmark.

"What about the cuffs?" Ísland asked. "Border Control would stop us on sight."

Suomi returned to the wallet and searched it for the change purse. "A guy like Norge doesn't need pennies," he said, "but he does need a place to put spare hairpins."

Ísland laughed. "Tell me you know how to use those things on handcuffs," he said, and Suomi answered him with a 'clink' as the jaws on his wrists broke free. In quick succession he freed the rest of them and in no time at all there were four pairs of handcuffs lying on the floor, jaws open and useless.

Kirkland couldn't stop himself from asking. "What about me?" he said.

They all turned. "What about you," Ísland replied coolly.

He wet his lips with his tongue. "Suppose... s'pose I - I tell them who it was who let you out, eh?"

Sverige's glower was frightening. "Are y'trying t' threaten us?"

"I can't help it, I'm desperate!" he begged. "I know I don't deserve it -"

"You don't," Suomi interjected.

"- but they really will kill me. If you've any pity whatsoever, please, I ask you to exercise it now."

The others looked to Ísland - ostensibly the one who knew him the most. How well they knew each other, the exact details of their acquaintance, Kirkland suspected the group didn't know. That
Kirkland considered making himself look pitiful, attempting to play on Ísland's heartstrings. He knew Ísland had some - he had direct experience with them - but he also knew that a brilliant actor (you had to be, to be that big a fraud) could see right through such an act effortlessly.

And Ísland wouldn't appreciate it.

"You think me a criminal. I don't deny it," he said. "But I could've left that boy, Alfred - I could've left him with Romae. I could've sold him off and told nobody."

"Don't think a single right makes up for years of wrongs," Suomi wondered.

"I- I could've sold Gilbert for fifty million and disappeared and nobody would have found me again," he continued. "I didn't. They both live now, because of me."

"Yeah, but was that shit you did because you had to?" Danmark asked. "Or did you actually do good deeds out of the wholly pure goodness of your heart? What about the murder they said you committed?"

"Murder?" Ísland said, genuinely shocked. "Arthur, you - you said he was dead, but ..."

He sighed and grimly said, "You asked me once to take Desmond off the ship. Well, I took him off the ship, alright."

Ísland stood still, quiet and contemplative. "So you did," he murmured at last. "I didn't mean it like that."

"I know, love. It got to the point where it was the only course of action," Kirkland explained. "But I kept my word to you, I wanted you to know that, no matter if you do leave me here. Let me make at least that much clear!"

Actually, Desmond's ceremonious booting from the Delivery had had nothing to do with Ísland. Kirkland had forgotten most of what had transpired between them until precisely now, when it benefitted him.

But that wasn't necessary to Ísland's knowledge. If this would get him out of jail ...

Ísland's fingers twitched; he glared and said, "That's - that's all in the past. I know exactly what your word's worth, now."

"I know," he said again. "I don't deserve it, I - didn't deserve you. If you won't free me, at least find the Delivery and - and tell Gilbert that he'd better take bloody good care of himself and my ship! Because nobody else will! And tell him to watch out for those who might do him harm because if I see him in whatever afterlife there exists before he turns grey of proper age, I swear I'll smack him so hard it'll smart for a week -"

"Yeah, yeah, we'll tell th' critter y'said hi," Sverige said, rolling his eyes.

"You'd miss him," Ísland filled in.

"I - er. Yes. I might. Just a little." Kirkland finished, his face hot.
"I'll let him know," Ísland said softly.

"But - please, tell him - not so much he needs to hasten the journey to me," Kirkland urged. "Don't tell him anything that wouldn't keep him safe."

Kirkland would admit to using Gilbert to soften up Ísland. Given his murky history with Ísland it was the only weapon he had. But it didn't alter the truth - he would miss Gilbert.

If he thought about it, he'd miss him a lot.

If his execution were public, would Gilbert sit by the radio? Would he remember him, would he think of him with kindness?

The thought made his heart ache.

Ísland worried his lip with his teeth, thinking carefully and considering. Probably, he wasn't used to having someone else's life in his hands, and he might've hated Kirkland for what Kirkland did to him years ago - tried to seduce him into a life of piracy and then when that failed deplorably just simply try and seduce him!

But there was a difference between spitting at someone across the inky ocean of space because you had a complicated history and deciding whether you'd personally deliver them to the executioner.

Ísland's hand gripped the false ID card ... he brought it up, slowly ...

And then there came footsteps and voices from the hallway.

"I'm sorry, Arthur," Ísland breathed, and he looked it, "but there's no time."

Without another word to Kirkland, the group disappeared down the other wing and were gone, and his hopes were dashed.
(denmark)

Through some blissful benevolent coincidence, they managed to get back to the Border Control turnstiles while Margot, Tim - well, Willem - and Norge were at the gates. Norge was patting himself down, holding up a giant line of angry outbound auction-goers. The line only got angrier when Danmark, Sverige, Íslan and Suomi cut in.

"I swear it's in my back pocket," Norge was telling himself. He seemed the slightest bit distressed, which probably meant that inside, he was terrified and panicked.

"Looking for this?" asked Suomi, and shoved his wallet under his nose. "Apparently it fell out at the auction."

"Suo-ah, hey. You're - here," Norge said. "Of course you're here. You're all ... here." Norge pulled out the information he needed from the wallet. "And I expected that. And here's my information," he told the turnstile guard, handing over the relevant papers with a decent stab at a poker face.

It seemed all of the turnstile guards had changed shifts somewhere between. This one was a young man with wide eyes and a forehead of acne that he tried to hide with long bangs. "Mister... Gran?" he asked. Norge nodded.

"Listen, I'm afraid we're in a bit of a hurry," Suomi prompted.

"Of course," said the guard, "these lines are mad. Do you have a parking pass?"

"We used the valet parking," spoke up Íslan. "Under Trygve Gran and Pekka Talvela. Both of Olyokin." Suomi handed over his own ID, the copy having been squirrelled away in Norge's wallet. (Clever Íslan, Danmark thought.) "There's also a ship in service under the name of Jónsson of Nunat."

"And which one of those are you?"

All three of them, knowing Íslan. But Íslan did his disarming act and managed to convince the guard who was who in the party, why Border Control didn't yet have a copy of the lease agreement for two vipers, and where all vehicles were stashed.

It helped immensely that the people in the giant line behind them were screaming impatiently.

They waited another minute before the turnstile agent gave up and let them through. They were told to wait past the gates while everything could be checked out.

Danmark didn't think that the five minutes they spent waiting could seem more like an hour. Although there was such a thick crowd of people that it would take Karpusi and Adnan eagle eyes to be able to spot them - only Suomi really stuck out, but neither was he the only Vitim in the crowd - and although the ensuing media frenzy would probably go after the story of the capture of
the pirate captain more than their own (which had, so far, been kept unpublicised; Karpus and
Adnan probably preferred it that way and to be honest, so did they) - there was an element of
chance that Danmark didn't like.

What if Íslan's story didn't check out? What if they found out he'd stolen the two vehicles? What
if they brought 'round the airship instead of the stealthship?

It wasn't until Tim- no, Willem - nudged him in the shoulder and directed his gaze out to the
airfield, where he spotted their bright red stealthship and two other vipers.

"Oh thank god," he breathed. "Which one're we taking?"

Willem looked at him, then at his sister, and began, "Uh, well about that ..."

Danmark didn't understand and anxiously said, "They are letting us go, aren't they?"

"Yeah - yeah no, they are, but, uh - well. Margot," and he gestured to his sister, who was as stony
faced as she was when she left the tent with Norge and Willem.

"Do what you want, I don't care," Margot snarled. "But I'm going home." She turned and walked
towards the window of the spaceport.

"Margot!" he scolded.

"S'okay," Danmark told him, "I understand, I'll wait here." Willem stalked off after his sullen
sister. "Lady problems," he joked to Norge, who came up next to him.

"That's not lady problems," Norge replied. "Listen, I think you better prepare yourself for the plan
having changed."

He frowned. "Whaddaya mean?"

True to form, Norge didn't simplify it or euphemise his words. "Danmark, he's not coming home
with us," he said flatly.

Danmark blinked.

"I'm - well, I'm taking them directly to New Sainte-Dolitte."

Danmark stood there, his mouth open, prepared to speak, but found he couldn't quite push the 'oh'
out of his throat.

"And he's going with her," Norge continued.

"But, but she'll be okay in a bit, right?" he asked. "I mean she seemed -"

"Yeah, she 'seemed'. And he 'seemed'."

"And the same thing happened to him and he's -"

"Y'know what, shut up. Don't say anything that presumes you know how they feel when you really
don't." Norge sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "Alright, look. He's coming back this way.
Say your goodbyes and don't screw things up, okay?"

"That's easier said than done," he told Norge's retreating back, as Willem returned. He was so bad with words! He was gonna fuck this up so hard Suomi'd laugh him into outer space and - and Willem'd never talk to him again.

Willem caught his expression. "So. I guess he told you," he said.

"I - uh, yeah," Danmark said. How eloquent! Why, this was already going swimmingly.

"Listen, I'm - I don't know how to say this," Willem began. That makes two of us, Danmark thought. "I know I said that I would stick around and I'm sorry to go back on that but she's - she's not well -"

"It's okay," Danmark lied. "She's family, I get it. I mean it's - really, long day. Long year." He patted Willem's shoulder awkwardly. "Hey, y'know, we can always write each other!"

"I-I'll write you every day!" Willem blurted.

"Well not every day, can you imagine the postage!" Danmark laughed nervously. Postage, oh my god, he doesn't even care about that shut up ... "But, often, yeah, I'd - tell me how you're doing, and keep me updated on her progress." On your progress.

"She doesn't exactly," Willem started, wringing his hands, "I mean, she really isn't so good at letting on, y'know, she never did. Let on." He was doing that thing again, where he danced around the real issue. Danmark tried to be patient. It wasn't his strong suit. "And she's real stubborn about things, dunno where she gets that -"

"Hey, I understand!" he said brightly, with a smile that he wanted to throw on the ground and stomp on. "It's okay. You do what you have to."

Willem nodded. "She does, and - even though - I need, too - this all was so - for me," He shut his eyes and looked away, and then blurted, "What you've done for us, for me, I can't begin to repay, and, Danmark, I'm so sorry. But I can't do this. I'm sorry."

"Don't be," he murmured, "you did nothing wrong."

He couldn't figure out what else to say, so ... he just left it there.

So much for the beauty of Hallar; ruined forever. Fucking idyllic breakup place!

(But they hadn't been dating, or anything like it. He really had gotten ahead of himself, hadn't he?)

"Thank you, for everything," Willem sighed. "I mean it. You saved my life."

Danmark shrugged. "Oh, hey, anytime." Uh, wait. "I mean, not, not, anytime, 'cause I don't wanna see you like that again!" That sounded - "I mean, in that position, I mean -" oh, fuck it. He cut himself off.

"I'm not so good at words," he concluded miserably.

And they had a moment, where they sort of looked into each other's eyes, and he felt his pulse shoot up, and Willem's smile faded naturally to a relaxed line of his full, pink lips, parted - and he still had no right to think this! he thought -

But before he could pull away, Willem grabbed his hand and whispered, "You saved my life," before he yanked him forward and kissed him full on the mouth.

It was not like a mistake or an accident. This felt intended, and Danmark felt excited, his head spun and the part of him that was elated that Willem would ever consider returning the feelings Danmark liked to pretend didn't exist (because they really shouldn't) - well, that part of him shut his eyes and leaned into it, uncaring of any kind of consequences.

No consequences, no goodbyes, no horrible history, just an innocent moment with his feelings being reciprocated for once. His mouth was so sweet. And he was so happy.

He let himself enjoy it before he forced himself back to reality.

"Write me," he said, pulling himself away, "when you get home, when you get set up. Send something to Tullejärvi, care of Heikki Himanen. I'll let you know if it ever changes."

"Okay," Willem nodded. "I'll do that."

"Go, now," whispered Danmark, "please," and as he shut his eyes again he felt Willem's hand slip from his grasp.

--

As though his luck couldn't get any worse, he got paired with Suomi in the viper. Couldn't be Sverige or Ísland, no, had to be Suomi. Then again with Sverige or Ísland it probably would have been awkward - Ísland had been especially morose since they left the BSPA jail. Whatever, he'd let Suomi pilot and snore half the way back. He was too upset to argue about seating arrangements.

At least they were vipers. These speedy little things would get them all home in half the time it took to get there in the first place.

They said nothing as they took off, as they ascended through the atmosphere and the blue skies of Hallar became darker and darker blue until the brighter stars and the other planets of the system could be seen in the distance, speckled on black. They said nothing until they got to Fasciemi for a rest stop four hours later. And they said nothing when they took off again.

Danmark would be honest, he was expecting I told you so and nyah nyah, what with the way Suomi'd been acting recently. But not only did Suomi not do that, Suomi put a hand on his shoulder when staring out at the inky blackness became too pressing and Danmark curled in on himself, his arms wrapped around his chest protectively. Suomi didn't release him then, not even when Danmark finally capitulated to the shakes and gave in to dry heaving sobs of a long-winded complaint because it wasn't fair, goddammit, not when everybody else seemed so fake and plastic and black-and-white compared to Tim - Willem - whatever his name was, it didn't matter! because he was real and technicolour and perfect -

- and goddammit, Danmark had really, really liked him, and had wanted him to stay forever - just once, couldn't things have gone Danmark's way? Why'd that awful pirate have to go and kidnap
him anyway! Why did Danmark's dumbass heart have to go and jump the gun!

They could've been so good together, Danmark would've been patient, Danmark wouldn't ever have minded if he had never wanted to go farther than a kiss on the cheek! It was nice just to be around him. It wasn't within Danmark to push for something like that, he couldn't do it! But maybe, Willem coulda gotten better, could've felt more at ease with himself, because he always seemed so much happier around Danmark -

But it would be as bad as slavery to keep Willem with them when he didn't wanna be there.

And wasn't it right that he had his own life back?

Suomi flipped the autopilot on and held him close as he ranted.

Through the undignified chokes, he coughed out, feeling pathetic and sorry for himself, "Oh sure, you're a total jerk when things are peachy and now, now you wanna be all friendly, when I'm down an' out and bein' like this."

And, with the patience of a saint, Suomi replied, "Exactly. Right when you need it most."

"Y-you're a fucking sap, man," Danmark muttered, and walloped him in the gut. But instead of the retort Danmark knew he was capable of, Suomi chose to hug him harder, and Danmark burrowed his face deeper into his chest.

Chapter End Notes

so many people were so mad at me for this on the kink meme, but I'm not changing it
He couldn't blame them, he knew, he'd've done no less ... all the same he felt certain that if it were the guard, that he'd tell him what Hassan had done. It wouldn't harm Ísland and his group. It would only harm Hassan. It was petty to drag someone else down with him but he'd been so close to freedom again and he was angry and now he wouldn't get out alive!

However, it wasn't Makos the guard who opened the door, it was Karpusi and Adnan, with of all people Francis. They took one look at the empty cells across from Kirkland's and their jaws dropped.

"The fuck is this shit?" Adnan exploded, and turned around immediately. "Makos! Makos get the fuck out here and explain me this!" He stormed out to harass the guard.

"Have you come to gloat?" Kirkland asked him. Francis ignored it.

Karpusi looked at the cells, and then at Kirkland. "Three of you came in. One of you is remaining. How did they do it?"

He decided to tell them anyway. "Ask Hassan," Kirkland replied. "He's the one who let them out."

"That's impossible," Karpusi said.

"Why," Kirkland asked, "you don't believe there's no honour among thieves?"

Karpusi, unreacting, explained, "No, it's impossible because to unlock the doors you need -" He fell silent as he put together what must have happened. "You need my ID. Which they copied," he said finally. "Even the mag stripe! Those bastards, those clever bastards... but how did they get another copy? We searched them before we left!"

"It is the mysteries of the universe," Francis said primly. "If I may make a suggestion?"

"Oh, what?" Karpusi asked, exasperated.

"Set a bail for this man," replied Francis.

Karpusi looked dumbfounded. "How does that help with my case?"

"Can't hurt!" Kirkland offered.

Francis said coolly, "Are you so very sure your constabulary friends aren't working with your criminals?"

"Dirty cops?" Karpusi wondered. He thought about it a moment, disturbed. "Could be," he concluded. "Adnan knows them better..."

"Then you must speak the language of the corrupt," Francis continued. "This sends a message - don't free mine or I'll free yours."
"I will actually have to set a bail," Karpusi said.

Francis smiled. "Name the price."

"Twenty mil. At least. No - twenty five! Romae'll ride my ass else."

"What a lovely number," Francis said. "That's perfectly fine. I shall pay it," and with that, Karpusi left to fetch papers.


"Francis," Kirkland began, "I - I can't thank you enough."

"Don't thank me just yet," he sniffed, "I am taking the money from your account."

Of course. "Of course you are," Kirkland finished flatly. "Why did I expect anything else. But - but I only gave you twenty million."

"But you have another twenty. In exchange for your freedom you will need to grant me it. Don't let it enter your mind that you might leave the planet without that squared away. Not that I expect you to have left it on your ship in your absence."

Kirkland rolled his eyes and stuck out his left boot through the bars of his cell.

Francis looked down. "I do not understand," he said, "are you looking for advice? I think you could have selected nicer footwear, but perhaps you preferred dying with your boots on?"

"No, you idiot!" Kirkland said. "It's a false sole." Francis knelt and, slightly disgusted, examined the heel of Kirkland's boot. He pried it apart easily, and sandwiched between the rubber cap and the rest of the heel there was a small folded-up piece of paper. Francis tugged it free. "That's the account with the remaining twenty million," Kirkland said.

Francis unfolded it. "So it is," he noted.

"I wouldn't have had a problem leaving it with my crew!" Poor Gilbert probably hadn't ever seen that much money spread out through his entire life. "I needed it more for the fuel vials. The shuttle goes through them like mad, she's not made for long distances. But the shuttle doesn't have the Delivery's signals. And since they pulled the restriction on schooner vehicles at Halleri Border Control, I could get her in without alarm." It was foolproof as long as he himself wasn't spotted. Which he was.

"It is good that I brought these, then," Francis said, holding up the briefcase. "The transfer papers will require your signature once you're free, but you can do that here; Karpusi can witness. This way you need not darken my doorstep, and we can part ways much sooner."

"Why Francis," he grumbled, "you shouldn't have."

"I really didn't have to, did I?" Francis snapped. "I could just leave you to your own devices, have Unsinkable sail away captain-less and broken-hearted. But I did some thinking and some quick math after we left the tent, and I still make profit because what you owe, plus the bail, is just under your forty million. Therefore I pay nothing."
"How very perfect!" he retorted. "Then again what else do I expect from a business man but quick maths about profit done on the fly."

"What else do I expect from a pirate but complaints about the person paying his bail?" Francis countered.

"I don't like owing people!"

"Ah, but you do it so often!"

"Only twice!" Kirkland argued. "It's twice now you've helped me out of a bind despite hating my guts. But that's twice too much!"

"I shall not disagree with that," Francis said. "It is a habit I need to break." He sighed and grew bleak. "If I am to be honest, not the only one. My bad habits number too many. I even give some of them names."

Karpusi returned with the papers and Francis brightened, though falsely. "But, that is between you and me," he said quickly, and then wisecracked, "perhaps I ought to take up chain smoking, hm? It might be healthier."

--

They spoke of nothing more than small talk until Kirkland was freed and escorted to Border Control to be ejected from the planet. Karpusi went with him; Adnan elected to stay behind to lecture Makos. "You should be on your way back to Marigon now for hanging," Karpusi told him. "Instead you've been issued a no-travel advisory for Hallar. It's a slap on the wrist. You are a very lucky pirate."

Kirkland looked over at the crowd on the other side of the Border Control gates. Among it, he caught Alfred, waving exuberantly, and Gilbert, easy to spot from any distance with that hair, smiling more genuinely than he'd ever seen him before.

His heart fluttered. "I'm well aware," Kirkland replied.

"And you don't deserve this kind of luck," Karpusi added with a scowl.

Kirkland threw him a wild grin. "Yes, but I've got it and it's mine anyway," he said, before he skipped off through the open terminals. To freedom, sweet freedom, and his ship, and his crew - and Gilbert.
Caput Halleri Daily Gazette: All the News That's Fit to Print!

CAPTURE AND RELEASE OF NOTORIOUS PIRATE!

The Great Delivery and her Captain -- innocent?

EVIDENCE AGAINST HIM INSUFFICIENT TO MERIT ARREST, CLAIMS HALLERI BSPA

Bail paid by Unknown Agent

Special Cable to the Daily Gazette. News of the capture of the pirate Arthur Kirkland was eclipsed yesterday only by the later news of his release from prison. Kirkland captains the Great Delivery of Banningham, recently blacklisted due to her suspected involvement in the Nova raids, and was brought in after a short investigation led by Major-Constable Gupta Mohammad Hassan of the New Joplin 118th Police Squadron which concluded during the Decennial Auction yesterday afternoon.

The bail, a lofty sum of twenty-five million dollars, was set and paid within the span of about ten minutes by an agent who cannot be named under the Interplanetary Press Secrets Act of 1834. This source, however, told the Daily Gazette with utmost certainty that Kirkland has not done the things that were claimed of him and though well-known is not notorious or even all that intimidating really and that indeed the reports that the Delivery was sighted in execution of the New Joplin raids are themselves suspect as the Delivery lacks the expensive fuel vial modifications that would make her nimble enough to avoid visual contact by Border Control vid feeds upon entry to Nova airspace.

The source added that there is no known connection between the bondsperson seller Antonio Fernandez Carriedo and Kirkland, adding that "people like Carriedo know better, or at any rate, they ought to."

Maj-Cst. Hassan could not be reached for comment, though Fernandez Carriedo was heard to express himself to the authorities that he had affirmed to them many times the Captain had nothing to do with the raids, and that neither did he.

Cornelius Wilkie, Daily Gazette

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LEGENDARY TWENTY-FIVE MILLION SALE A RECORD-BREAKER

Trend-setting, novel Development in bondsperson Training

COUNCIL ANTICIPATES SUCH QUALITIES OF NEXT SEASON'S MUST-HAVE ITEM

Angry, Savage, Wild -- Positively Thrilling
A record-setting sale was had yesterday at the exciting Decennial Auction at Tolino Downs. The system-renowned Francis of Hallar sold a bondswoman of medium height and girth, with fair complexion and hair for a grand total sum of twenty-five million dollars after a tense bidding war between the winner and Frederick Plinton of Tenickson.

Unespecial were the bondswoman's looks; the salient part of this particular sale was its attitude. "I thought it was going to snap at the auctioneer's hand," said one Errol Dalman of Caput Halleri. "It looked so angry, savage - wild - my heart fluttered and I saw the expression of anxiety on the auctioneer's face. It was positively thrilling, I want one just like it."

Said the auctioneer, Roderich Edelstein of Caput Halleri, of the item in question, "It wasn't something I was expecting. You hear of bondspeople being refined and mannered, educated, selling services as much as goods. So this was new."

Elizaveta Héderváry, Council representative, added, "I'm not surprised it's from Francis of Hallar. I expect many other bondsperson trainers will quickly adjust their strategies to include a wild streak. I think it'll be next season's latest gotta-have-it thing."

The winner departed too quickly to be available for comment but Frederick of Tenickson noted that "I've been saying it for years, you always want one with some fight, with a little game. All of mine have that spark in them - you can't snuff it out until it's yours. And I'd like to remind some of my oldest friends of that, for those who disagree."

--

**NOVA SECTOR CASE KIDNAPPEE RETURNED TO PARENTS**

*Mother relieved; Son unharmed but bewildered*

**WAS ON HALLAR ALL ALONG**

*News on Raid one month prior still sought*

According to the merry dispatch by the mother early this afternoon on radio, Alfred Jones of New Joplin strolled into their uptown Lawton townhouse and asked what was for lunch, saying he hoped it was burgers, which he had not had in a month.

Present with his mother at the dispatch, marking his first media appearance, the young master Jones was unable to divulge the whereabouts of his captivity. "I don't know where I was, exactly," he claimed. "When I woke up, I found myself in a windowless room with two others, whose names I didn't know. We didn't leave the house. We weren't asked to do anything - I read a bunch. Man, I didn't even know I was on Hallar until I was led out to the Border Control and met up with someone going back this way from the auction. They were nice enough to give me a lift!"

According to Sayles-Clifton, it is exceedingly suspect. At her son's insistence, all charges against Kirkland have been dropped and the matter will not be investigated further. "I know there's something my boy's not telling me," the authoress said. "But he seems okay and the doc says he's fit. And he's safe and home and thank the gods, that's all I care about right now."

None of the other thirty souls spirited away a month ago by an unknown group have turned up. Jones maintains unaware that there were others and doesn't have names. In the absence of names of the kidnapping victims, any news about the raid is sought.
A possible sighting of the Delivery was reported yesterday near a Nova Sector outpost but reports are inconsistent. Nova airspace declared increased activity yesterday and this morning due to people returning home from the Decennial Auction in time for the next workday. According to the source about the Delivery (see page 1), the Delivery, with few fuel vial upgrades, is unlikely to make the run from Hallar to New Joplin in a day without expending many vials at great cost.

"I'm not scared the group that did it'll return," Jones said. "They know better than to return when people still suspect them. They won't have the fortune of getting away with it twice."

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EXPLOSION IN DOWNTOWN SKURATCHKY, OLYOKIN

Distillation of Illicit Substances turns Perilous

TWENTY PERISH - PROPERTY DAMAGE EXTENSIVE

Young Emperor Regent Stricken but Strong

Special Cable to the Daily Gazette -- Reports heard of a large explosion in downtown Skuratchky, one of the more populous cities of the Empire Union of Free Vityaz States on Olyokin. The explosion detonated in a tavern, the Kapriz Gosudartsva, affecting an immediate radius of 2 km. Twenty so far have perished with a further seventy two in hospital.

Initial reports declared a terrorist attack; further addresses from Emperor Regent Ivan Bragin claim a moonshine operation for drink not commonly found in the Empire Union and highly valued. As a result, the young Regent is considering propositions to relax the import of food and beverage goods from outside with hints that importing from Kilnus is an option, marking the first time in over fifteen years that the Empire has relaxed import laws.

In regards to the possible terrorist origins, Bragin claims it is 'nonsensical' and that there remains no factual basis for this besides rumour. Bragin's dispatch follows:

Like many others, I am grieving today. I grieve with you. A short time ago I was gifted a bondsperson - I need not remind you my opinions about the human use of human beings. That has not changed; I continue to hold them. But for some time I spoke to him and I considered him my friend. My very good friend. We were in my office in the wing which was destroyed when the blast hit ... and he is no longer with us. I pray to God to keep him safe.

We have been through this too many times for combative reasons; it is all the more hurtful when the tragedy comes for no reason besides hapless accident. So let us all take our time to grieve - it may be a moment, it may be a month. And then, my comrades, together we shall rebuild this city and ourselves.

--

Francis took home Matthieu as a bondsman, and was very happy with his purchase.

He managed to ignore his problems for about two and a half years, during which he tried to reorganise everything to how it was before the auction. But ultimately it failed, for this was good for neither of them. What a shame that Francis can be honest with himself, if no one else.
With Héderváry's grudging assistance in legislation implementation, servant trainees now have a Council-mandated expiration date of ten years.

No one has yet figured out what to do with servants that go beyond the best-before.

--

Antonio Fernandez Carriedo left Hallar, vowing never to return again to "that blasted place, something always happens to me here".

His speciality in bondspeople became for those a little like Margot and Unsinkable, in that they heed orders, but only partly, and have feisty tempers. He was so successful in this that demand for his products funded his move back to Hallar after two years.

However, he is thought (by himself, of course) to be instrumental in convincing Francis to release Matthieu, which Fernandez Carriedo still thinks is a strange, unnatural relationship, almost made worse that Matthieu were now properly owned, for how does one love an object? To Antonio, Matthieu is an object still, even though he heeds orders, but only partly, and has grown a temper.

But that's just how you train objects these days.

--

Avo Romae continued doing the exact same thing he'd always done, which goes to show that there are some terrible things in this world that will always persist.

--

Danmark, Sverige, Suomi, Norge and Ísland also continued doing the exact same thing they'd always done, which goes to show that there are also some amazing things in this world that will always persist.

--

Margot and Willem lived happily ever after in a small house in rural New Sainte-Dolitte as dairy farmers.

Well, sort of happily ever after. They were not exceedingly rich, and their days were long and hard as is often the case with farmers. And though Danmark and Willem continued their correspondence, so far, neither brother nor sister has felt safe enough to quite tackle relationships.

Not yet, but soon, for Margot talks too often about "that damned white-haired asshole" with what Willem suspects is partly fondness, and as Willem is fond of reminding himself, their lives are young and not having tried is no indication of incapability.

--

Gilbert the Unsinkable, former bosun, now first mate of the Great Delivery, is the most awesome pirate in this goddamn solar system and he will make damn sure you know it. But he does not steal humans, nor could he ever.

He's still sort of growing on Arthur Kirkland, day by day. It doesn't go to his head. Anything can grow on you if you let it.
Arthur finally realised he was maybe sort of kind of in love with Gilbert when the boy petitioned him to stop slaving and steal other things instead and he actually relented and agreed, despite the fact that the entire crew of the Delivery now makes significantly less money this way.

It turns out Arthur Kirkland has no ability to say no to Gilbert.

He has on occasion considered attempting to steal his heart back from Gilbert's clutches, which Gilbert doesn't even realise he stole. But never for very long. Whether Arthur likes it or not, Gilbert has become an indispensible part of him.

Someday Arthur will tell him all of this. Not yet, but soon.

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Agents Adnan and Karpusi were both taken off the Nunat money laundering case and each given a month's suspension, after which they were reassigned new partners. Surprisingly, they were far less efficient with new partners than they were with each other, so the Halleri BSPA re-paired them up and made the wise decision to never do that to them again.

They both enjoy bickering like it's going out of style.

More than one person has conjectured that certain ladies doth protest too much.

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Alfred Jones returned to New Joplin with a completely different outlook on life. He got a better job, moved out of his parents' place for a decent but cheap apartment in downtown Grand Cove, fell in and out of love a few times, got a motorcar, considered getting a dog, realised he couldn't deal with the parallels between training a dog and training anything else, and got a cat.

Once he had everything he was taught to want, he realised that nothing was really the same anymore when it all kind of left him a little cold and confused. (Except the cat. The cat is awesome.)

He writes his brother often, and from his brother he could keep updated about Feliciano and Ludwig if he wanted. He doesn't want, because Feliciano knew about the pirates and Feliciano knew where Alfred had come from and Feliciano continues to do what he does and his time with Alfred had not changed anything. Why, if it hadn't been for Unsinkable...

The relationship between him and his brother improves daily. Although for every seven letters he sends he receives one, and every one of those seems infused with a guilt trip, he knows Matthieu can't help how his history affects him. His three weeks at Romae's has taught him that his brother's sensitivity has nothing to do with Al himself, and that Matt needs him more than he lets on. He must, because over the time they've been corresponding, Mattie has gotten so much better. One can't undo a lifetime of training overnight.

At Matthieu's behest, Alfred has yet to tell his parents of his brother's existence and whereabouts.
True to his word, Ivan saw to it that Toris, Raivis and Feliks all 'perished' in the explosion.

They are on Nunat now, even though Nunat has an extradition treaty with Olyokin and if found, they could be returned to Kilnus or the Empire Union at any time. But the coverup was successful and almost nobody knows it was an act of war. Those who do know are very few and now in positions that make them perfectly unwilling to risk exposing themselves to share the information, even anonymously.

Olyokin is not yet prepared for war. This is about the only thing on which Toris and Ivan agree.

---

Unfortunately for Agnieszka Janowska, the letter she sent to Kroksvellir arrived after the group left for Hallar, and upon their return to the planet they went directly to Tullejärvi.

Fortunately for Feliks, Ísland was wise enough to set up a secure version of mail forwarding. It took some time, but the group is now eight in number.

Still sore from his own betrayal, and in Eduard's memory, Toris was the first to volunteer to work for them, and with Toris' years of experience in espionage, no one even comes close to tracking them down.

---

Say what one would about Feliciano's apparent simplicity, it was very easy for him to distract Ludwig and stop him from asking about Alfred. He realised all he had to do was stop pining after Alfred himself and Ludwig would follow (and that wasn't difficult, because walking outside around the tents with Alfred made it very clear that Alfred hated him for what he had done, hated him almost as much as Feliciano hates himself).

Because anything Feliciano wanted, Ludwig wanted, and unfortunately, Feliciano is good at his job.

His grandfather is so proud of him, as given recent events, Feliciano must seem to him to be taking more of the family business seriously. Feliciano tells Lovino less and less of what he learns from his grandfather, for if he knew, Lovino would hate him more and more, and in many ways, Lovino is his only true friend.

Ludwig thinks it's oddly charming that Feliciano still does not quite understand what to do with a bondservant. For Ludwig, life goes on, business as usual. He has no idea how jealous Feliciano is of how simple Ludwig is.

And if Ludwig has strange dreams, which feel more real than some of his afternoons, about a lust that he no longer feels, about three weeks spent with a fellow named Alfred, who exists only in his own memories, he doesn't share them. They're only dreams, and Alfred doesn't exist.

Only Feliciano exists.

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Elizaveta Héderváry got the promotion and fired the supervisor that was holding her back.
Well, that wasn't exactly how it went. It turns out you can't really fire people from public service too easily, so Kaisa Tillen was reassigned to the Corrections Department of Luna Halleri's penal colony, less glamorous but far cushier. But it's petty to care about that when once every three months, Roderich gives concerts on another planet and takes her with him.

Unfortunately for Elizaveta, the promotion means she has to deal with Francis a lot more often and no matter how peaceful their interactions start, they always end in shouting and snarking.

More than one person has conjectured that certain ladies doth protest too much.

--

Matthieu became a freeman after just a month shy of three years of legal bonds service. During his three years, he spent almost his entire time with Francis doing exactly the same thing he had done before the Decennial, except when Francis had an abundance of work or a meeting with the Chief Councillor Héderváry, or when Antonio Fernandez Carriedo was around, or at lunch, when Lovino would stop by the shop and share coffee and snacks and sometimes also insults.

Matthieu is very glad Francis left him alone during those lunch hours. He suspects that's why Francis later freed him, after many months of asking for something that Francis thought he was too well-trained to consider, because if you loved something you set it free and if it came back to you it was always yours to begin with.

Matthieu did not come back.

He lives outside of Caput Halleri and, for now, works at a cafe where they pay him in cash and don't know what he used to be. It's enough, even though Lovino, whenever he drops by, continually criticises the quality of coffee. But he still comes back for more, so he mustn't hate it all that much.

--

Lovino is not in love with Matthieu because stupid brainwashed pretty Matthieu is still dumb as fuck. So before anything can happen between them, he definitely has to get smarter first, and also, Lovino needs to find a new career. He may have the hots for Matthieu but he's the voice of fucking reason and he knows damaged goods and a lost cause when he sees 'em.

This does not stop him from torturing himself, by having lunch at Francis' more often in order to see Matthieu, and then, when he is freed, having coffee at Matthieu's cafe, appropriately timed to wander in just as he's starting his breaks, because, y'know, maybe he's not entirely stupid and a lost cause. Maybe.

(Apparently the voice of fucking reason can be really dumb as fuck sometimes, too.)

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Yao still owns five slaves. He always will. They are treated kindly and they appear happy, for worldly possessions.

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Katya spent a year helping her brother clean up the fallout from the attempt on the Duma. After
accepting Yao's proposal and marrying him, she lives with him on Veshna for four months of the year. Next year, she will spend five months there; the following year, six.

Slowly she is learning that Ivan is a better leader than she gave him credit, now that he is more level-headed. Slowly, she is weaning herself off her firm hold on Empire politics. Slowly, she grows to like Yao as much as he likes her.

Katya's bondsgirl has not been freed and likely will never be. She still considers herself to be brilliantly, magnificently in love, and - as Ivan has found - if you try to tell her that it's wrong in any way, she will ignore all your arguments and then not talk to you for a week.

She does not much like Gospodin Yao, because Gospodin Yao is always hovering and around and there, and Gospozha Katya spends less time with her when Gospodin Yao is around. But whatever Gospozha Katya wants is what her bondsgirl wants.

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Natalya cleared her Time successfully, with no problems. She eventually agreed with her brother about slaving, less that it is inhumane, and more that it is unfair, which may have been less of her own conclusions and more due to guilt from Ivan. And so Kiku was freed from servitude. After about a year of service.

Not really knowing what else to do, and not understanding what was meant by freedom, Kiku remained at the Duma for several years, first as a secretary, then as an apprentice, and finally was hired as Natalya's full-time advisor (which she found she sorely needed) for the sole reason that they could not figure out what to do with him, but he would not leave Natalya's side, and Ivan insisted he be paid.

Kiku agrees with Natalya that, despite any rumours that fly about the Devushka's advisor, despite the lust-filled weekend that was Natalya's Time, despite the months that followed it, where he was proven very useful, they do not have much chemistry in the way of romance - of course not, he is an object, how preposterous! They have however remained very close friends. Who sometimes sleep with each other.

In his new job as advisor, he goes wherever Natalya goes, and does whatever Natalya wants, so if you asked him whether he was happy, he would quietly reply in the affirmative with the faintest hint of a smile, as he has given her his life, and she accepted, and that is what he was taught was the way of things. He does not listen to Ivan or pay him much attention. Ivan does not make any sense.

--

Ivan missed Eduard very, very deeply, daily, nonstop, for about five years.

He wrote letters he never sent. He stopped taking walks after tea. After about a month of that and other histrionics, he threw himself headlong into his work as a distraction, in order not to think about how badly his heart ached after Eduard's departure.

Though he became one of the most productive workers the planet had ever seen, it didn't help the heartache one bit.

--
Eduard spent some time on Bast learning the things one learns when one goes to university. He enjoyed the material greatly but felt rather like a fish out of water and didn't make many friends.

In his second year he was offered a prestigious scholarship to study on Olyokin. This he turned down.

In his fourth and final year - about six months before he took a free elective on Olyokin politics and law where he discovered the loopholes that he could exploit - he was offered an exceedingly lucrative if monotonous job with an engineering company that operated outside of Skuratchky, in the Empire Union on Olyokin. This he turned down.

When his doctoral thesis advisor told him, a year into his degree, she would be relocating permanently to Olyokin, he finally gave in, because there are always loopholes, and apparently Fate and his heart were like-minded, and not even he could stop a salmon from swimming upstream.

Ivan's arms had felt like home.

--

*(the end)*

Chapter End Notes

**IT'S DONE I CAN SLEEP NOW**

many many many thanks to whoever was editing the [TVTropes page](http://www.tvtropes.org) for this place and helpfully mentioned that hey wow I totally forgot about Antonio! Poor guy. Gets like 4 POV chapters and I don't even include him in the epilogue. *rude.*

thanks for reading!

Please [drop by the archive and comment](http://www.fanfiction.net) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!