Rockin' Over Yonder

by JustAndrea

Summary

It had always been Hater's dream to be a rockstar, and a summer-long Battle of the Bands competition just may be the big break he and his band have been looking for! With his drummer by his side and fame, fortune and pride on the line, there is no way he's going to let anything stand in his way of being the Greatest Rockstar in the Galaxy! Not an obnoxious glam rock rival, not music critics, and certainly not an infuriating, orange furry weirdo - no matter how talented and annoyingly friendly he may be!

Notes

So, this is a fic I wrote over a couple years ago and posted on Tumblr, and because I still remember having a ton of fun writing this story/universe and I'm still really proud of it, I decided to republish this fic on here even if it is a bit out of date.

One thing to note though: Because I wrote this fic way before season 2 aired, there's not gonna be any S2 characters in here unfortunately. No Dom, no Screwball, no Jeff, no Ripov, none of those. But, there are still plenty of S1 characters, so if you like those as much as the new characters, you may still enjoy this! ...Speaking of S2, I actually ended up accidentally predicting that Wander, Sylvia and Peepers could play the electric guitar, bass guitar and drums respectively months before 'The Show Stopper' even aired. So, that's pretty cool I guess. Anyway, hope you all enjoy the story!
The grey clouds covered up any sign of their sun, but it was still pretty humid. Good thing he wasn’t going to put on all his facepaint until right before the show (he didn’t have skin but he could still sweat… somehow). He was just glad he would be getting off this rock soon, although he supposed leaving did have its downsides.

“I can’t believe you’re actually doing this,” a voice from behind him said. Their tone wasn’t sarcastic, or even disappointed… just, surprised. But then again, he always hated traveling, so it was probably a surprise that he would be driving across the galaxy for the next three months. Then again, this trip would actually be important.

“Yeah,” was all he could really say as he turned to meet his younger sister’s eyes, “You know, you could come with us if you want, I guess.”

She gave him a soft smile. “Thanks Hater, but I’m more than happy to stay home and hang out with friends this summer. Besides, I know you’ve got Peepers looking out for you.”


“I know… What do you think it’ll be like?”

“I doubt we’ll have any real competition.” With each show they would just get more popular, and once they won their final battle, people would practically bowing down to him like he was some sort of rock lord, a heavy metal king. Hater couldn’t help but smile at the thought.

“Do you know who else is competing?” Ember asked curiously.

“Won’t know until tomorrow night,” he answered, not curious about the other bands whatsoever, “I already know none of them will be as great as me. I mean, how could they be?” He had played since he was little, writing his own songs and improving each time he picked up his coal black guitar. Plus, he provided his own special effects during the shows. As long as the rest of his bandmates kept up, there was no doubt in Hater’s mind that they would win.

Ember on the other hand rolled her eyes slightly. “I love your playing just as much as you do, brother, but don’t get too overconfident. And please try to at least make a couple friends. After all, you’re going to be hanging out with these people all summer, so you might as well.”

“Yeah, right.” Maybe if any of them were worth being friends with.

Just then, the two siblings could hear a high pitched noise coming towards them. Of course, they knew this sound well. They also knew the small, gold and red colored ship that landed right behind Hater’s silver ship (which easily overshadowed it). As soon as the door opened up, a small man with a huge eyeball for a head hopped out. “I’m sorry I-”

“You’re late,” Hater stated, crossing his arms.

“Yes, I know but I -”
“Did you at least pick up the things we needed?”

“Yes,” the eyeball said, glaring slightly, “That’s why I was-”

“Peepers I honestly don’t care,” Hater interrupted bluntly, “I’ve already got your drums in the trunk. Just get the rest of the stuff in there and let’s get going! And we’re driving through somewhere on the way there, so I hope you have enough leftover to at least get us a couple burgers.”

Peepers sighed. “I do,” he said, having gotten used to paying a long time ago. Figuring it was the best option, Peepers ran back over to his ship and popped the trunk. Bags full of guitar picks, extra drumsticks, snacks, black facepaint and makeup, Peepers’ clothes and other random yet necessary things filled the space. He was honestly surprised everything fit in there, but at least Hater’s ship was bigger. In fact, it was a lot bigger, even having a fold-out mattress in the back for when they wanted to put the ship on ‘auto-pilot’ and get some rest (though Peepers knew in the back of his mind that Hater would most likely get the bed. At least the ship also had heated seats).

As the two skeletal siblings watched the Watchdog work, Ember gave a small sigh. She was glad her brother was actually doing something and working towards a goal he really wanted instead of just brooding in his room, but she was also going to miss him. She felt his gloved hand squeeze hers slightly - the only affection he would be willing to show while they were in public - and she smiled. “Promise you’ll call, okay?”

“Yeah,” Hater nodded, “And if Mom doesn’t remember to get food for you, you know where my extra credits card is. Just don’t go crazy, alright? I’m gonna need that money too.”

She giggled. “I know… Love you Hater.”

“Love you too, Sis.”

Once the ship was packed, the three shared a couple cans of soda together before heading out. “I guess this is pretty exciting, huh?” Peepers asked as he put on his seatbelt. Truth be told, the first time he heard about Hater’s band idea, he wasn’t a hundred percent sure about it - especially when Hater mentioned what they would be wearing on stage. Of course, with Hater, there was no option. But now that they were actually doing this, Peepers was kind of happy about it. There was a chance they could become famous. Closing his eye, he could almost see the crowds chanting his - er, their name.

“Eh, I’ll be excited once we actually win this thing,” Hater replied as he shifted the ship into ‘drive’. After taking a second to give one last wave to his sister, he stepped on the gas, and they launched into the cloudy sky, almost resembling that of a silver bullet. Once they were out of the planet’s atmosphere - which had a much better view than under it with its starry, greenish gas clouds and a couple really nice views of nearby planets - he slowed down just a bit, just so he could turn on the radio and try to find a good station.

“No...No….talkshow.. static…crap… talkshow…Oh, come on!”

“You know, we do have CDs,” Peepers reminded after about a minute of searching, though honestly he would be okay with any kind of music as long as it wasn’t that cheery, bubblegum pop crap.

Of course, Hater ignored his bandmate, and eventually stumbled upon some actually good music. Screeches of a guitar echoed through the speakers, making the skeleton grin as he turned it up. Perfect music to drive to. He stepped on the gas once again, the stars flying past his windows. Rolling his eye slightly, Peepers reached back into the second row of seats and grabbed his laptop. Despite the volume, he could easily tune it out.
It would be a long trip to their first planet - and their first gig of the summer - but in Hater’s mind, it was worth it in exchange for all the rock and roll fame and fortune he could ask for.

And he was certain that no one could possibly keep him from getting it.

A ship zoomed by, hovering above the ground and blowing a stray piece of trash away from the road. A cool breeze blew past his fur as his fingers skipped around on his guitar strings, not even really forming a melody really. To anyone listening, it would seem like the player of said instrument was trying to find the perfect note, but judging by his content face, it didn’t matter how long that took.

He glanced up at the sky briefly. “Eh, I’ve got a few minutes,” he stated, going back to his guitar. The shine on it had slowly faded away - as did the painted star on the back, the outline of it barely visible now - though it still had a nice sound. Even after Sylvia had offered him a new one once they had their first official pay day, he had refused and let her spend the credits on anything she wanted. Of course, eventually he had to get a show guitar (an emerald green one with an orange neck strap), and it was definitely nice and an instrument he enjoyed playing, but he still kept his old one. Too many memories that he couldn’t just throw away.

Hearing a small chitter, he looked up and smiled at the small, purple uni-squirrel staring at him. “Here ya go, lil’ guy!” he told it, reaching into the bag of peanuts he had bought from the vending machine at the station and placed them on the ground. Bounding over to them, the uni-squirrel sniffed them, and then quickly snatched them up before running away.

Feeling a bit inspired, he strummed a couple notes, closing his eyes as he let the other sounds reach his ears. The melody danced along the wind, almost in tune with the uni-squirrels chitters and the chirping of the birds. He increased the melody as he heard another ship hover by, almost making the song seem like something you could dance to while walking down a road to some unknown destination.

“Don’t ya think we’ve got enough songs we can play for our performances, Wander?” someone joked, causing him to stop playing, yet the smile on his face only grew.

“Aw Syl, I’m just playin’ for fun is all!” Wander replied. Besides, he didn’t exactly have any sheet music with him - something his drummer was always reminding him about after the time they spent all night jamming and came up with a great song - but couldn’t remember more than a few lines of it the next afternoon. He chuckled at the memory.

“Yeah well, you can play on the space coaster,” she told him, lightly smiling. She nodded towards the station. “Come on, I wanna get a good seat.”

“Yessum!” He leapt up, slipping on his backpack in one swift motion, grabbing his guitar and running to catch up with the zbornak.

When they handed their tickets to the conductor, he gave them a bit of a strange look, but they either didn’t notice (Wander) or didn’t care (Sylvia). Then again, even they had to admit they looked a bit strange together.

Most of Sylvia’s magenta mane had been cut off, though the short look definitely worked. She also had several tattoos (the most noticeable ones being the ones on her arm, fists and neck) as well as a couple piercings. Add in a purple top with leather wristbands and a stern look that could make any creep run for the hills, and you had Sylvia.
Wander on the other hand… Well, Wander was different. For one thing, he was about two and a half feet shorter than the Zbornak, covered head to toe in bright orange fur that would remind anyone of a carrot (especially since the guy was so damn skinny). As for his clothes, he tended to go for the more natural and quirky, even if it made no sense fashion wise. At that moment, he was wearing a yellow tie dye shirt - the colors almost forming the shape of a star as they swirled across his chest - along with a faded green backpack with tons of buttons and stickers on it, and a pair of sky blue tennis shoes and white, yellow striped socks.

The conductor had never seen a stranger duo in his life, but - they had money, so he didn’t care. “Enjoy your ride,” he said, handing them their stubbed tickets with as little emotion as possible.

“Why, thank you!” Wander grinned, “Hope you have a nice day too!”

The train wasn’t too fancy, but the seats were comfortable enough for a nap - which they would need since the ride would be at least a day and a night. Making sure to grab a window seat, Wander smiled at his friend sitting across from him. And, seeing him practically bouncing up and down in excitement, made Sylvia smile right back. “Guess you’re pretty excited, huh?”

“You got that right!” Wander exclaimed, “I wonder what the other bands are like? Do ya think they all play the same style we do? Oh! I wonder what planet’s we’ll get ta see while we’re on tour! And I hear there’s gonna be a bunch of parties for just the bands throughout the summer! We’re gonna go to those, right Syl?”

The zbornak chuckled. “Yeah, I enjoy a good party, so we’ll certainly try to catch most of ‘em.” She glanced outside. “And just think, if we actually win this thing - even if we’re in the top five bands - we could be traveling like this all the time.”

“I know! Isn’t it great?!” Wander had always loved traveling, though his family never exactly had the credits available to take many trips. If it weren’t for Sylvia in their band, he probably would’ve never gone too far past his hometown. But, because of how popular their band quickly became, they had traveled all over their planet - and even to a couple of the neighboring planets. Playing at nights, seeing the sights during the day, tons of camping and exploring, and of course playing the music that he loved. For a guy like Wander, it was a pretty good life.

But now, now they would be in a whole new galaxy! It was a whole new adventure, and anything was possible.

The space coaster began to move. Since the station was already in space, there was no turbulence, just a small gentle push into lightspeed.

Unable to help himself, Wander had strapped his old, wooden guitar back on and started to play. After a few seconds, Sylvia recognized the melody. “Seriously Wander?” she said, amused.

Of course, there was only one way the guitarist could answer. Besides, it was time for the song to start.

“Life's like a road that you travel on, When there's one day here and the next day gone, Sometimes you bend, sometimes you stand, Sometimes you turn your back to the wind, There's a world outside ev'ry darkened door, Where blues won't haunt you anymore, Where brave are free and lovers soar, Come ride with me to the distant shore.”

He looked up at her, smiling expectantly, as if saying “You know you want to!”. Sylvia just rolled her eyes, though her friend put her in too good of a mood to make her stop smiling.
“We won’t hesitate, To break down the garden gate, There’s not much time left today, yeah!” He handed her an invisible microphone, making her laugh.

Taking a deep breath, Sylvia sang loud and smooth. “Life is a highway, I wanna ride it all night long!”

“If you're going my way,” Wander sang, joining in, “I wanna drive it all night long!”

The train’s whistle blew, but it failed to interrupt their song. Honestly, with the good mood they were in combined with their excitement for the future, it would take more than that to stop them or their music.

It wasn’t really a planet. In fact, its size and its usual emptiness made it seem more like a moon than a planet. However, the fact that it had a unique orbit (it went around two planets in a sort of figure eight pattern) made it memorable. And, while it was too small for a whole civilization, it was the perfect size for a number of festivities.

Like, say… a battle of the bands competition?

Music was already blasting through the speakers as various ships landed on the violet surface. Some of the people were members of a band, others were music enthusiasts or simply people who had heard of this event and were mildly interested in hearing some of the acts. Surrounding the crowd and the huge stage were a number of vendors, selling various overpriced snacks and souvenirs.

Once the recorded song ended, a decent looking middle-aged alien walked on stage. He was sporting a blue mullet that...mostly worked, as he gave a relaxed pose on the stage (not bothered much that people weren’t really paying attention to him yet) he held a microphone in one of his six arms, and a small collection of notecards in another. Though once he started talking, he didn’t even bother looking at them. “Hey everybody!” His attitude was pretty laid back, but at the same time he was able to put a good amount of enthusiasm in his voice. “You all having a good time?”

Cheers erupted from the crowd, and the host chuckled. “Alright, alright, that’s good to hear. But hey, the party hasn’t even started yet. So, I’d say it’s about time we fixed that. Let’s hear some bands!”

“Okay, now, everyone who’s signed up for the competish gets to play tonight. If you miss your call time, T.S. And trust me, the element of surprise isn’t a good idea in this game, folks. The more people know you, the more attention you’re gonna get at the final battle. Now, there’s no judging tonight, just a chance to see who you’re up against and to try and show us all what you’ve got!” A few random hollers and “Yeahs!” could be heard. “However, at the end of the summer, that’s when it gets serious. You will be judged, so I suggest you all bring your A-Game. Because…” Like a professional host, he gave a dramatic pause. “Whoever wins the Battle of the Bands not only gets a hundred thousand credits, but you’re pretty much guaranteed some attention. This ain’t just some hometown amateurs act, we’ve got record companies from all over the universe coming in to see you all perform. In other words: Don’t choke.

“But of course, that isn’t until three months from now. Until then, perfect your act, save up some dough to get some sweet special effects, learn how to treat an after-performance hangover - trust me, you’re gonna wanna put that one at the top of the list - and above all: ROCK ON!” As a finishing touch, the host pumped three of his fists in the air, making the crowd go wild.

“Alright! Let’s do this! First few bands, head on over and start getting set up! First performance in
five minutes!” With that, another pre-recorded song slipped onto the speakers as the host walked off, and the crowd once again took their attention away from the stage. Though, they were possibly even louder than the last time they waited, simply because everyone had their curiosity peaked. What bands would they see? Was the next big name in music really there that night? Well, there was only one way to find out, and that was one answer most of the people in the crowds - and in the various bands - could hardly wait for.

“Wow, Syl! Have ya ever seen so many people before?!” They were used to playing for thirty, maybe fifty people tops. But instead of getting nervous, the huge crowd just made Wander even more excited. The guy was practically shaking with energy (or maybe that was just the bag of candy he gobbled up in less than ten seconds).

“Ugh, yeah. Grea- hey! Watch it, pal!” Sylvia scowled, watching as a little eyeball person ran off without so much as an apology, making her even more annoyed. It wasn’t the crowd itself she minded - the more people to hear them play, the better - it was just traveling through the crowd that was annoying her. People didn’t care who they bumped into as long as they got where they wanted to go, and her tail had nearly been stepped on not once, not twice, but three floring times! Honestly she didn’t know how Wander could make it through so easi-

Wait. She looked forward, then behind her, then side to side. Where did Wander go. She sighed. “Not again. Wander!” Pushing a couple people to the side, she stretched her neck out to try and spot her furry friend. Of course, with his height, this was easier said than done. “Wander! Hey! Wait up, buddy!”

“Hey babe, if your lookin’ for someone to party with, I’m probably more fun than that Wilbur guy,” said a three-eyed guy who was obviously buzzed, barely holding onto his cup of cheap beer (of what was probably one of several he’d had that night).

“Yeahhh, thanks but no thanks,” Sylvia replied, rolling her eyes.

“Aw, come on sweetheart, I can show ya a pretty good time.” He put his hand on her shoulder in an attempt to pull her back - and one second later he landed face first on the ground, Sylvia smirking slightly as she walked away to continue her search.

“Wander!” she called out again. At that moment, out of the corner of her eye, she saw a head of orange fur and a bright tie dye tee shirt separate from the crowd and run straight towards a stand that was filled to the brim with overpriced accessories and novelties. Of course, by the time she managed to get over to him, she could see Wander handing the vendor a handful of credits.

“Oh, hey Syl! Look what I found over here! Isn’t it great!” Before she had a chance to answer, Wander held his purchase in front of her face. Said purchase was a huge, green hat wrapped with a black ribbon and a shiny, golden star pinned to the front of it. “Pretty nice, huh? And hey, this guy says I bought the last one! Guess luck was on my side!”

While she still wasn’t too happy that her friend had spent money on what she thought was a pretty ridiculous hat, Sylvia couldn’t help but smile as he tried it on, grinning at his reflection in the small mirror clipped to the side of the stand. “I LOVE it! I think I’m gonna wear it durin’ our performance tonight!”

Sylvia’s smile fell. “Seriously?”

“Yeah, why not?” Wander asked with a shrug, his hat bouncing slightly. She could have argued, but
Sylvia knew that once her friend decided on something, it was practically impossible to get him to change his mind. She gave a small laugh. ‘Besides, we don’t exactly match outfits right now, what’s one hat gonna hurt?’ And, she supposed it did sort of suit him.

“Alright… At least it’ll be easier to spot you in a crowd when you run off.” Realizing what she meant, Wander shrunk slightly, giving her a sheepish grin.

“Oh, uh, sorry ‘bout that, Syl.”

“Eh, water under the bridge,” she replied, giving him a small, one-armed hug, “Just do me a favor and stick by me until we perform, you heard what that guy said about missing our time.”

“Yessum!” Wander agreed, tipping his hat slightly and making Sylvia chuckle. Just then, the sound of a microphone made both of them turn their heads towards the stage.

“Oh! Looks like the first band’s about to perform!” Wander grinned before running ahead, “Come on Syl! We need to try and get a good view - and a good listen!”

“Okay okay, I’m comin’!” Back into the mob, but at least they would get a decent show in exchange.

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He narrowed his eyes. Red or black…. Red or black…. Black or red…. He growled slightly.

Hearing this, Peepers - who was already dressed pretty much - poked his head over the front passengers seat and looked at his bandmate. “Are you still trying to choose what jacket you’re going to wear?” he asked incredulously. And when they were only ten minutes away from performing?!

Not liking his tone, Hater shot him a glare. “For your information… yes. But, I’m simply trying to make sure I pick the best option. I mean, geez Peepers, haven’t you ever heard of making a first impression?” Yes, that was totally why he was taking so long to choose what to wear. It wasn’t because he was nervous or anything because this whole competition may or may not shape his entire future as a professional rocker. ...Totally not the reason.

Hopping over the seat, Peepers got a better view of the jackets Hater was trying to decide between. They were pretty much the same, but even the color of your outfit could make a difference to your audience’s opinion. But at the same time, they only had - he glanced at the clock. 8.5 minutes! - until it was performance time, and Hater didn’t even have his facepaint on! He was going to have to choose his words perfectly, especially since Hater didn’t exactly like people telling him what he should do and Peepers knew this lesson well, which is why he didn’t just yell at Hater to just pick one already and get going (which is what the time pressure was making him want to do).

“You know…I really do like the black jacket, buuut…”

Hater raised an eyebrow. “But what? Peepers if you have something to say just spit it out already!”

“I’ve seen some other people around here wearing black for their performances,” Peepers continued, “Ha, they can’t pull it off nearly as good as we can of course.”

“But there’ll probably be idiots in the crowd thinking we’re just copying them or something… And you know, the red jacket really does work for the lights on this stage,” Hater said, picking up the jacket.

“Huh, yeah I think you’re right, Hater,” Peepers quickly agreed, trying to keep the anxiousness out
of his voice.

“Ha, all those other bands, they’ll look so boring and cliched compared to us, by the time the final battle comes around, no one will even remember them,” Hater grinned as he slipped on the dark red jacket, their logo embroidered on the back. “You better be ready to go, Peepers, I’m not gonna wait for you and risk missing our time!”

“No need to worry!” Peepers told him as he unzipped his laptop case, pulling out a pair of yellow and red striped drumsticks, “I’m all ready to go!”

“Good, just give me a minute then.” Once he had his grey gloves on, he quickly applied the black facepaint over his eyes - using a sharp pattern that just really pulled the whole ‘rocker’ look together - and then grabbed his guitar and pick.

“FINALLY!” Peepers whispered as he hopped out of the ship, running behind the skeleton as he pushed his way through the groupies that were trying to get a peek at the behind-the-scenes action as the band before them made their way on stage. ‘Made it with five minutes to spare,’ the eyeball thought with a relieved sigh.

“Wonder who these guys are,” Hater said, asking no one in particular as he found a place to wait and tune his instrument. Glancing to the stage, the skeleton smirked. Whoever these guys were, they were no real competition. ‘I mean,’ he thought, ‘just look at the way that shark guy’s dressed!’

The shark - who looked like the leader of the group - was wearing pink. Honest to Grod pink! Who wears pink to a rock and roll performance?! The belt he was wearing - which was covered in fake spikes - sort of worked, but Hater briefly wondered how in the world he could walk around in the ridiculous, white high heeled boots he was wearing. Though, if there was one thing Hater couldn’t make fun of him for, it was his large muscles (which had already made a couple females - and one male - in the audience cheer). As much as he hated to admit it, he certainly did have muscles. But that wasn’t enough to make him look any less ridiculous (plus, they weren’t that impressive… just stupid piles of flesh). And - was that makeup? Was he actually wearing makeup?

“Wow, guess we should watch our backs, huh?” Peepers said sarcastically once he caught a glimpse of him. Hater chuckled, the smirk remaining on his face.

…. That is, until a small smoke machine started to kick in, the lights lowered slightly with the spotlights going crazy, and they started to play. The shark man let out a long melody of notes using his A-shaped guitar, each of them easing into the other like it was the perfect opening rock chord while his drummer - who was just a giant hand, what were those guys called again, fist fighters? - began to beat out the rhythm of the song.

Their band was bigger than Hater’s, which meant more instruments. While the shark was obviously the lead, there was also back up guitar, drums, keyboard, and even a synthesiser. Which meant they also had a much fuller sound which - as reluctant as Hater wanted to admit it - really sounded good.

“Oh hey!” said a stage hand, grinning as he listened to the music, “I know these guys! These guys are amazing!”

“Yes,” said his friend as he untangled an extension cord for an amp, “I’ve heard they’ve won at least two years, maybe even three!”

“Doesn’t surprise me! No one could beat these guys.”

Hater glared, growling at them and quickly getting their attention. Deciding it would be best to take
their conversation away from the scary looking skeleton who would have no qualms throwing them in a moon crater, they quickly walked to a different part of the backstage area. “Don’t listen to them,” Peepers said quickly, “Probably just a couple of kids who’d like anything if it was popular enough, no matter how terrible it was!”

Hater didn’t bother giving Peepers a reply or agreeing with him, he just turned his attention back to the shark-man, glaring at him as he played on with a huge, sharp-toothed grin on his face.

Their singing wasn’t the best (though Hater wished it could be a lot worse) but the guitar more than made up for it. Half the audience was screaming and cheering during the solo, and most of them didn’t stop even after the song ended.

“Thank you!” he shouted at the crowd, flashing a toothy smile, prompting even more cheers as he and his bandmates walked offstage, the backstage crew quickly removing their equipment and replacing it with Peepers’ drums and Hater’s amp.

Now, normally he would just go find some of his fans both old and new after a performance, and he probably would have done that if not for the skeleton glowering at him. Smirking, he walked over to him and his cyclops drummer. “Huh, so I’m guessin’ you two are into the heavy stuff?”

“If you mean ‘real music’, then yes, we are,” Hater retorted.

“Hey, no need to get all defensive, bro!” he said, putting his hands up slightly, “Everyone’s got their own style… even if some styles are more enjoyable to listen to than others.” Before Hater had a chance to argue, the shark-man grinned at them, sticking his hand out. “Anyway, name’s Awesome, nice to meet you guys.”

“Wait,” Peepers cut in, “Are you saying that your name is awesome, or that your name is Awesome, or-?” Hater slapped the back of his head - good thing he was wearing a helmet - making their semi-aquatic rival chuckle.

“I mean, you dudes can call me Awesome,” he said, flashing another toothy grin.

“Yeaaaah, how about no,” Hater said, “Because, judging by your music - and what you’re wearing - you don’t really live up to your name.”

Awesome’s grin turned into an unimpressed look. “Oh really?” he asked, crossing his arms, “and you think you can do better, bro?”

“Oh, I know I can,” Hater grinned, “Then again, it’s not much of a challenge.”

Awesome laughed slightly. “Ha, well then,” he walked over to a small crate and sat down, smirking again, “Why don’t you show me what you can do, Bones, and put your credits where your mouth is?”

“With pleasure!” Hater said with a glare as he put his guitar on. At that moment, their six armed host walked onto the stage.

“Alright everyone, next band! Hope you guys are ready for it, cause here comes… The Harbingers of Doom!” The crowd cheered, and Peepers was already heading for his drumset, trying to look as serious and professional - or, at least as professional as a heavy metal artist could be.

“Hmph,” Hater said as he turned away, “Watch and learn, fish man.”

“I’m watching!” Awesome yelled back at him, but the skeleton didn’t bother looking back. He
simply took his place on the stage. After a few more moments, the applause started to die down, the people waiting in anticipation. This was it. The first real performance of his career. Taking a deep breath that was just subtle enough for people not to notice, Hater looked straight at the audience - his audience - lifted his pick, and played.

While Peepers tapped on the symbols on his drums, Hater played a long stream of notes rapidly before doing a couple long chords. People were already clapping and cheering, so at least things had started off well. Taking a step towards the microphone, he kept up his guitar playing - making sure to hit every note perfectly - as he opened his mouth and began to sing.

“You push until I break, And the anger turns to rage, Why can’t you just leave me alone? Got your finger on the trigger, You think that you’re the winner, You’re gonna get kicked, off of your throne!”

At that last bit, he purposely glanced back towards the side of the stage where he knew a certain shark-man was sitting, smirking slightly before being serious once more.

You think you’re gonna hurt me, Get ready to get dirty, You created this beast inside! Pull the noose tighter, And lift a little higher, Because you’re killing me slow, I ain’ t ready to die!”

“You push until I break, And the anger turns to rage, Why can’t you just leave me alone? Got your finger on the trigger, You think that you’re the winner, You’re gonna get kicked, off of your throne!”

“Killing me slow but I ain’t ready to die!” Peepers repeated before hitting his cue as the chorus started up.

“Tonight, get ready for a fight! So now you know it’s time, To ride, my circus for a psycho! Round and round we go, look out below, Because I want off this...I want off this-

“Circus for a psycho! ….Circus for a psycho! ….Psycho, here we go!”

He had the crowd in the palm of his gloved hands, Hater just knew it. He bobbed his head as he sang to the second part of song, keeping his voice strong and fierce. However, there was one part coming up that he knew would sway the mind of anyone in the crowd who wasn’t impressed by them. It had taken him a bit of time to perfect this… but he was certain no one else here could pull it off. As soon as he finished the second repeat of the chorus, he lifted his guitar slightly, concentrating as he began to mix up the melody.

Green sparks began to fly from his fingertips as he played his solo. The energy made his black guitar glow brightly, and with each note he played, more sparks began to fly, making it a sight that could only be seen to be believed.
To say the crowd went nuts was a huge understatement. They. Went. INSANE. Most of them were still screaming and cheering in amazement as Hater began to repeat the chorus one last time - and while his face didn’t show it - his happiness at how well the show had gone made him pour his heart and soul into the last few chords.

“Tonight, get ready for a fight, So now you know it's time, To ride, my circus for a psycho! Round and round we go, look out below, It's time to ride my circus for a psycho! Never again, never again! You’re killing me slow but I ain’t ready to die! Round and round we go, look below! Because I want off this, I want off this-

“Circus for a psycho!”

Flashing a rock and roll sign, the crowd just erupted, allowing Hater to give them one small smile in victory. Peepers on the other hand was practically cheering along with them - at least in his mind.

“OhmygrodohmygrodIcan'tbelieveIjustdidthatdidyouhearallthosepeoplecheeringwe’regonnawinthisthingandbecomesOFAMOUSOHMYGROD!”

Of course, once he caught his bandmate’s glance as they walked offstage, he simply gave him a thumbs up and a “Great job!”

Surprisingly, Awesome was actually giving them a small clap as they took their previous spots backstage. “Well well, I have to say, bros… That was pretty awesome.” Hater smirked. About time he recognized true talent. “The song, the attitude, those special effects… At this rate, you may just get 2nd place,” he concluded, flashing another toothy smile.

“Oh, what a coincidence, I was just about to tell you the same thing,” Hater retorted, making Peepers smirk and give their rival a look that just screamed “Yeah, we’re better than you, don’t you forget it!”

But surprisingly, Awesome didn’t get mad, or even annoyed. He actually chuckled. “You know, you dudes are alright. And I guess your music is…pretty impressive. So, guess this means next time we run into each other while we’re playing different gigs, I’ll have to invite you to one of my parties, huh, Hatey?”

The skeleton scoffed. “Ha! Like I’d actually go to- Wait. How did you know my name?! A-AND IT’S HATER, NOT HATEY!”
Awesome laughed. “Dude, your name’s all over your amp,” he said, gesturing to the dolly where it sat. Indeed, the custom, shock-protected amp was covered in writing - stating who it belonged to and the various threats that were awaiting whoever was dumb enough to steal it. “And hey, I’m sure you’ll change your mind. After all, I don’t wanna brag, but I throw some pretty rockin’ parties.”

With that, he started to walk away, either not noticing or not caring about the pair of glares directed squarely at him. “See ya around...Hatey!”

“Grrrrrr!” “Just ignore him, Hater,” Peepers told him, subtly taking a step back just in case his friend was angry enough to make sparks start to fly, “Don’t let him ruin your great night!”

“Hmph,” was his only reply. As Hater leaned against the wall, his drummer stood there, feeling a bit awkward. Their moment in the spotlight was over for now, and he wasn’t really sure what to do. “Um, so, I guess I’ll just grab something to eat and...meet you back at the ship?”

“Yeah, whatever,” Hater answered, not moving from his spot. Maybe seeing a couple more wannabe rockers would cheer him up a bit. Knowing there was no talking to the skeleton whenever he got in a mood like this, Peepers just gave a small sigh and quickly left, his stomach empty from not wanting to eat before the performance.

“Stupid shark-man,” Hater mumbled as he searched through his pocket, “with his stupid smile and his stupid band, his stupid parties and his stupid tight pants… Grah, where’s- There!” He pulled out what he was looking for - a small box of cigarettes. He couldn’t really remember why he’d started in the first place, nor did he really have a reason why - he didn’t really care about the taste, and he couldn’t even get addicted to them anyway - other than it helping the rocker look, as well as usually making people not want to get near him. In that sense, they did their job perfectly.

Not needing a lighter, Hater zapped the end of the cigarette before putting it in his mouth, inhaling and then exhaling. Although, the exhale was a bit rough - though that was more because of getting hit in the side by a guitar than the smoke. “Hey!”

“Oh, sorry ‘bout that, friend!” replied a voice from a guy who’s big floppy hat blocked Hater’s view of their face, since he was at least a good three feet shorter than him. The skeleton blinked. Did ‘friend’ mean ‘complete and total stranger’ in this part of the galaxy or something? “Guess I’m just a bit excited, plus it’s a bit dark in here if ya ask me… Although I see by those bright eyes of yers that you don’t really that you have a problem with that, huh?” he said with a light giggle. Scowling, Hater took the cigarette out and looked down at the smaller man.

“Alright, just who do you-?!” His eyes widened slightly as he got a good look at the man who had bumped into him.

“Oh! Pardon me, I haven’t even introduced myself yet!” he smiled, “Name’s Wander! It’s really nice ta meet ya - Oh! And I must say, you’re really talented! I really liked your song! Did you write it? Did your little eyeball friend help? Oh! How did you do that thing where ya made lightning come out of yer guitar and made it glow like that? I need to learn how to that sometime because that was just amazing! So, think you can show me sometime?”

Hater didn’t get a chance to answer any of these questions, not only because he was still in shock, but because at that moment, a zbornak walked over to them, giving Wander a small push towards the stage. “Come on pal, showtime! Let’s go!”

“You got it, Syl!” He quickly picked up his feet, making sure to shout a quick goodbye over his shoulder. “Guess we’ll just hafta talk afterwards! Hope you enjoy the show!” As the orange guitarist took his spot on stage, Hater’s anger started to rise once again.
It was one thing to be like that Awesome guy and wear something garish and ridiculous. But this guy… Between his oversized hat, and his bead necklace and his tie dye, and that big goofy grin-! Hater clenched his fists. ‘Does he think this is a joke!?’ he thought. And his friendliness, so bright and happy that it almost reached levels of uncomfortableness, it just pissed Hater off even more. Whoever this guy and his zbornak drummer was - or thought they were - Hater just hoped their performance crashed and burned.

They took their places on stage - Sylvia with her slightly worn but still pretty darn good drumset, and Wander with his shiny, emerald green guitar. As soon as the crowd quieted down, he walked up to the microphone. “Howdy there, folks!” he greeted, “How are you all doin’ tonight?”

“..... Just play!” some guy in the back shouted. However, instead of being annoyed - though Sylvia did give a small glare towards them - Wander just smiled even bigger. “You got it! HIT IT!”

Smiling once again, Sylvia started to bang out a beat on her drums while Wander began to strum along, his good mood transferring to not only his music, but the audience as well, making several people clap and cheer. Of course, this just made Wander grin even more. That was what he loved about making music - it wasn’t just fun for him, but it was fun for others to listen to and make them happy. Really, to him, that was one of the best parts of being in a band.

His voice filled with joy, Wander started to sing, closing his eyes as he did - as if trying to feel the music - and tapping his foot along. “Stars are shinin’, the lights are movin, all of space is our stage! How can ya enjoy it, if ya don’t leave your place? Just say the word and I’ll give ya a hand, and maybe you’ll understand, bein’ by a wall can’t make ya smile, but maybe this can-!”

As he did, Sylvia kept the beat steady, occasionally adding in a different beat every few lines just to mix things up and keep things interesting as the song moved into the chorus.

“Stand and sway, movin’ to the beat! Don’t be shy, pick up your feet! It’s time to have some fun, come on everyone! Let’s just - - Get up and dance!”

The crowd cheered again. It was a simple song, no big effects or huge stage production. And yet, its positivity spread through the audience like a tidal wave, making many people bob their heads and dance a little.

“Feel the beat underneath your feet, the music is sure ta help ya see! Guitar’s strummin’ along, drums givin’ you the beat! Leave your worries far behind, take my hand I’ll give ya mine! The night’s still young so let’s just - - Get up and dance!”

With a final few strums and an energetic ending on the drums, the song ended, the audience not hesitating to applaud the duo. “Thanks!” Wander shouted while waving at the crowd. “Yeah, I had fun too! Glad y’all enjoyed it!” Sylvia gave a small wave as well, very pleased with their performance. The only one who wasn’t cheering was a certain skeleton standing by the curtain. In fact, he looked more shocked than anything.

Why? Because… because he actually liked it! He didn’t know what it was, but he actually liked it! Hater scowled. The fact that not only did he like that backwater music, but that he didn’t know why he did, simply aggravated him to no end. Looking back at the orange furred guitarist, he was still standing on the stage, that big, bright, goofy grin still plastered on his face.

“Hmph,” Hater said, dropping the cigarette and crushing it under his shoe before walking away, not wanting to give Wander the chance to bug him. “This was just a fluke,” he mumbled, sticking his hands in his pockets as his guitar rested against his spine, “There’s no way I actually enjoyed that! That - It wasn’t even anything special! Just a dumb song, that’s all!” So, if that’s all it was, why did
the song still play in his head? Why did he still see that friendly face flash by his eyes? “Grrrr!” Because it was so annoying, that’s why!

While maybe he wasn’t as much as a joke as Hater thought he was, it was still obvious he didn’t take this seriously. He was just some kid, playing around and just getting in the way of people with actual talent! “Whatever,” he mumbled as he walked, the lights of the stage starting to melt into the darkness, “He can do whatever he wants… As long as I still win this thing, he can play whatever dumb songs he wants.” Besides, they’d probably never run into each other again. As if some small, country rock band could get the same gigs as him. Despite this though, the fact that Wander and that zbornak drummer were still a factor, still a possible threat to his victory, kept the aggravation from fading.

Peepers was sitting on a foldable lawn chair outside Hater’s ship, the glow of his laptop his only source of light, and eating a small bag of popcorn. Hearing footsteps, he glanced up. “Hey,” he greeted, “So, how-?”

“Terrible,” Hater stated, not even letting him finish as he continued walking towards the silver-plated ship.

The Watchdog blinked. “Um, is everything oka-”

“IT’S NOTHING I’M FINE!” With that, Hater went inside, slamming the door behind him. Peepers sighed. It looked like he was still in his bad mood, unfortunately. “Maybe I’d be better off sleeping outside,” he mumbled. When his bandmate got in the moods, sometimes it was just best to back off and wait until the fires burned out. Still he couldn’t help but wonder, especially since Hater’s anger seemed to have increased in only a few minutes. “What the heck could have happened to make him more upset?”

Chapter End Notes

The songs used were "Life is a Highway" by Rascal Flatts and "Circus for a Psycho" by Skillet, and the art/gif was made by Darkwingsnark on Tumblr
The tech crew agreed amongst themselves that opening night was a huge success.

After the last band had performed their piece, hoping to impress or intimidate or befriend, the noise and excitement of the audience carried on late into the night. Vendors kept the drinks flowing, and the cool nighttime weather was perfect for a scattered outdoors after-party. Fans and music enthusiasts mingled with bands as cleaning crews got a jump on the toil of picking up all the litter left behind.

“So, m’dear.” Demurra approached the sound booth holding two bottles. “What do we think?”

Dracor turned from his conversation with the lighting technician to grin at his girlfriend. “Seems promising this year!” he said cheerfully, and meant it. Some years were sparse on talent. Good thing he wasn’t a judge, because he wasn’t very good at telling people what they were doing wrong (even though he very well knew, being quite the musician himself). He didn’t compete, either – he had a strong case of stage fright, and the music he made with Demurra wouldn’t have fit in well here anyway.

Besides, Demurra’s involvement would give their duo an unfair advantage. Not that the competitors here were supposed to know that.

This was all fine with Dracor, of course. He was just glad to be a fan, and he enjoyed handling the technical side of the show as much as he liked making the music itself.

Demurra stepped up off the violet ground and into the cramped booth, sidestepping the sound board to hand a beer to her boyfriend. “I agree. Though I’ve gotta tell you, Drake, I’m not sure how it’s gonna pan out.”

“But my love,” he said with a smile, “you always predict the winner.” He hooked the point of his tusk under the rim of the bottle cap. With a tug, it was open.

Demurra handed him the other bottle for the same treatment. “Well, this time I can’t!” she said, batting her eyelashes innocently. “There’s a lot of potential here. You know, after a little refinement.”

“Now, now. You should really give them a chance to sort everything out themselves.”

“I will!” she said with a teasing tone that verged on a laugh. “I just think a little helpful guidance wouldn’t be amiss. There’s so much I want to say to them. Like: presentation matters too, you know! Or: dear god please don’t let how ‘hardcore’ you are get in the way of keeping tempo.”

“As long as you’re nice about it,” he said, giving one of the drinks back.
“I always am,” she said, and rested her fingertips, nails painted a delicate pink, on his shoulder.

He smiled at her softly. “Are you cold? Do you want me to get you a sweater?”

She glanced down at her pink short-shorts and white band tank top (emblazoned with the glittering moniker Demurra and the Dragon) and shrugged. “There’s so many people crammed onto this moon I don’t think I could get cold.”

“Well, let me know.” He took a shallow swig. It wasn’t his favorite craft-brewed beer from home, but it would do in a pinch. “Now really, dearest: tell me who you think is up to win this.”

Demurra smirked, lips pursing in a way that made his heart swell all over again. “I wouldn’t know,” she said. “I’m just a humble fan.”

In retrospect, they should have anticipated the morning crowds. The local interplanetary shuttle was overflowing with people who had come out last night for the opening performance, standing smooshed together in the aisleways and jam-packed two to a seat. Wander was piggy-backed on Sylvia’s shoulders for safety, gripping tightly to the railing above them, but Sylvia was starting to think they wouldn’t make it to their destination before the little guy slipped off in a haze of post-concert excitement and got himself trampled.

It was a good thing the two of them traveled light - it was hard enough for Sylvia to keep an eye on their backpacks as it was.

“The crowd was amazing last night, Sylvia!”

“I know. I was there.”

“See, that’s what I love about music: everybody gettin’ together to play their hearts out and enjoy each other’s company. What a party!”

“Uh huh. Hey, have you seen the reservation thingie for the hotel? I swear I had it-”

“I tell ya Sylvia: we are gonna have the perfect summer experience.”

“I know we are, buddy,” she said, rifling through her bag with increasing concern. “I just wanna get us where we need to go first.”

Wander laughed, and a nearby stranger did a double-take. “Hey,” he said, blinking his six eyes. “You’re that newgrass punk group, right?”

“You guys are pretty good!” the guy said with a grin. “Honestly it’s not my style, like, at all, but you make it work somehow. I was dancing like a maniac last night! Really, how do you blend styles so seamlessly? I figured the backwater rhythm alone would be a challenge.”

“Aw, shucks. Really it’s just a matter of heart. Sylvia n’ me are always saying it! You’ve just gotta believe in the music and go where it takes ya.”

At this point Sylvia tuned out to focus on the hunt for the missing reservation. Wander would be fine holding up their end of the conversation on his own; he had a gift for interacting with strangers that
was truly impressive to behold. Sometimes Sylvia thought that he was born to travel. Just moving around their home planet on local tours had energized him in a way she hadn’t previously thought possible. Now that they were on the open road together, anything could happen. Wander really was in for the best summer of his life, that much she knew for sure.

As long as she could keep him safe and focused.

“Sylvia!”

“Hmm?” She tried checking the outer pocket again, just to be sure.

“Wanna stop off on Vectornus for awhile? It’s totally on the way, and we could make a day trip out of it! We don’t have another show ‘til Friday, and Carl here says the window shopping is amazing!”

“Wander, we’re kinda broke, remember?” Which was why, in part, getting into the Battle of the Bands was such a huge deal. A practically guaranteed audience at every little show, and the proceeds (after the program and the venue and the crew took their cut) could go directly to housing them on their travels. If they alternated between hotels and hostels and strategic nights spent wandering the towns, they could support themselves all summer, assuming some very careful budgeting.

Now winning, on the other hand...let’s just say that Sylvia had a lot of tattoo ideas.

“That’s why it’s called window shopping...” With a start Sylvia realized that Wander’s voice was dwindling into the crowd. Panicked, she turned to see that he had transferred himself to Carl’s yellow back. They were moving towards the shuttle doors, which at that moment opened to let everyone out in a rush.

“Wander!”

“C’mon, Sylvia!”

With a rough sigh she resigned herself to muscling her way through the crowd, following the bobbing hat on her best friend’s head.

Their summer would be an adventure. That was for sure.

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Hater and Peepers, on the other hand, traveled in style. “Style” being Hater’s silver ship, a birthday gift from his mom that had stood the test of time. Hater liked finding opportunities to remind Peepers about how much bigger his ship was than the eyeball’s little red/gold one. Peepers was used to it. To be honest, he didn’t think having a pull-out bed in back was such a huge deal, but Hater was pretty proud of the thing regardless.

“Did you reserve the room, Peepers?” Hater growled almost absent-mindedly, flipping through a magazine. Peepers was taking a turn at the wheel - Hater had claimed to be tired, having been up late the night before brooding. Over what, Peepers couldn’t say, but they had certainly gotten a late start that morning compared to the other bands.

“Yes,” he answered promptly, then muttered, “Of course I did.”

“I wanna get there early so we can leave all our stuff at the hotel and then scope out the venue. How long is this gonna take?”

“I dunno. It’d be easier to tell if your GPS weren’t broken.”
“Ugh, we’ve been over this! My GPS is not broken.”

“It nearly sent us to the Andromeda Galaxy on the way here!”

“Well, maybe somebody input the wrong directions.”

Peepers glared at the little cracked screen propped perkily on the dashboard. “It told me to go jump in a lake.”

“Yes. Yes it did. And it was awesome.”

Peepers let the matter drop. Hater seemed to be in a surprisingly good mood, given his tantrum the night before. It was probably the excitement - the guy liked to play it cool, but there was no way he wasn’t pretty pumped about all this. Whatever had been bothering him last night seemed to have taken a backseat to the pre-show fidgeting that he tended to exhibit.

“It’s pretty weird that we have two shows back-to-back like this, isn’t it?” Peepers asked, tapping the GPS screen in vain. It hissed at him.

“Eh. This is one of the really close planets, and I figured we could get a jump on all the dumb other bands.” Hater smirked, propping his feet up on the dash. “Besides, nobody’s gonna get tired of hearing me perform.”

“Of course not,” Peepers said peaceably.

In a moment he was shrieking as sparks shot up from the GPS, accompanied by a static that sounded like cackling.

It only took about forty-five minutes to reach the planet’s surface, but they passed so many other little planets that Peepers almost felt bad for the poor saps on public transportation who had to make stops at every one. (Almost. Really he was delighted by the prospect that they had it so easy in comparison.)

It didn’t take long from there to find the hotel. Hater automatically pulled up the hood of his sweater before getting out of the ship; he tended to prefer navigating the daytime world from behind a cloak of shadows. Or at least that was how he described it to Peepers (who, as expected, ended up carrying most of the luggage into the building).

The place seemed pretty packed, as local music enthusiasts were still milling around. Some of them no doubt had been at the opening ceremonies and would head home today; the moon was small enough that any lodgings to be found on its surface were astronomically expensive and most preferred to room a few planets away. Peepers went back to the ship to get the second load of luggage.

The drum kit was the hardest to carry. He staggered under its weight, nearly stumbling into the hotel wall.

“Whoa, there!” a voice said, and he felt someone reach out to stabilize his load. “Lemme get the door for ya!”

He followed the sound of the door and prayed. Somehow he managed to get inside, vision entirely obscured by what he was carrying. When he dropped it onto the lobby floor, he found himself face-to-face with an orange swiffer-duster.

“You sure are a strong li’l guy, aren’tcha?” Before Peepers had time to be offended, the stranger had
grabbed his hand and was enthusiastically pumping it up and down. “Name’s Wander! You’re with, oh whatst, ‘The Harbingers of Doom,’ right? I loved your song last night! Met your bandmate too, though I never did get his name - oh, is that him over there in the hoodie?”

“WHAT DO YOU MEAN WE DON’T HAVE A RESERVATION?!” Hater thundered from the lobby desk. Peepers winced in horror and began trying to look busy. In effect this meant picking up bags and putting them down again.

“PEEPERS!”

Peepers yelped in response. Wander looked thoughtful, oblivious to Hater’s doom-laden march to where they were standing. “Oooh, Sylvia was warnin’ me about this kinda thing, with the nearby planets all packed with people like this. That’s my bandmate, by the way. She’ll be stopping by soon, you’ll love her!”

Hater came to an imperious stop, towering over the two of them. “Peepers,” he said, voice suddenly filled with less volume and more danger, “Why don’t you explain why the incompetent buffoon at the desk is telling me that we don’t have a room.”

Peepers frantically rummaged through his personal bag until he had found the confirmation printout. “It’s here! It’s right here. There must be a mistake, I definitely paid for a room!”

“THEN WHY-”

“I don’t know, maybe they double booked! See, it says right here: Room 403 in the Axalis branch of the Quality Hotel!”

In one blink of his enormous eye, the paper had been snatched out of his hand - by Wander, who was reading it intensely.

Peepers was so startled that he didn’t notice Hater’s eyes, glowing from under the hood, grow narrow as his rage-induced tunnel vision widened to include the strange orange creature.

“Aw shoot, there’s your problem!” Wander said cheerfully. “We’re on Vectornus, not Axalis. I should know. We’re on our way there too! Don’t worry, you’re not too far off-course.”

“It’s - it’s because of that blasted broken GPS!” Peepers sputtered. Hopefully displaying anger of his own (and shifting the blame to an inanimate object) would be enough to appease Hater. It wasn’t every day that you ended up on the completely wrong planet.

Hater’s next words, however, surprised him with their lack of relevance to the conversation.

“Why are you going to Axalis?” he practically spat at Wander, who blinked up at him curiously.

“Oh! Didja not stick around to see us play last night? We,” he said rather slowly, gesturing to the guitar slung across his back, “Meanin’ my friend Sylvia and I, are in a band.”

“I KNOW YOU’RE IN A BAND! If you can even call it that! I heard you and your so-called ‘music,’ and let me tell you I was not impressed!”

People were staring. Peepers, resigned to this kind of thing, let it happen. “I’ll just go put this stuff back in the…” he trailed off when he realized no one was listening.

“WHY ARE YOU GOING TO AXALIS?”
“To play a show!”

“No. You can’t. Because WE’RE playing a show there.”

With a long-suffering sigh, Peepers scooped up a random pile of luggage and moved outside, bags back in place blocking his view of the world.

“REALLY?! Oh boy, then we can hang out together!” the enthusiastic voice followed him out, dwindling behind him. “We’re gonna be around all week! Hey, maybe Sylvia ‘n I can be guest performers at your show, an’ then you guys can come on and play during ours! ‘Course, we’d have to work a bit on getting our styles to mesh - aw, who am I kiddin,’ it’ll work out just fine as long as we believe in the music! Hey, I’ll bet…”

Peepers couldn’t help but wonder, staggering under the weight of five duffel bags, whether Hater had had a bad experience with Wander last night, or if the guy’s cheerful demeanor was just naturally anathema to him. Both explanations seemed likely. Wander seemed like somebody who would get severely annoying after the first few minutes of knowing him.

“Oh jeez, you okay there?”

Again he felt someone re-balancing his load. “I’m fine,” he snapped. “I know how to carry a bag.”

The stranger snorted. “Okay, fine, I’ll remember not to help next time.” He found his way to the back of the ship and dumped the bags into the still-open trunk.

Turning around, he saw-

Well. He saw something beautiful standing in the hotel’s circle drive.

She was a dusky cerulean blue, her face accentuated by tasteful piercings. A spiral of tattoos led up her neck, graceful in contrast with the solidity of her build. Her no-nonsense expression seemed, for a moment, to pierce him to the core.

“I…I’m, uh…” he heard himself stuttering.

“You’re welcome,” she said smugly, and even her condescension was like the song of a punked-out undercut angel.

There was a long and awkward pause that Peepers didn’t realize was happening until it was over.

“You okay there, pal?” the stranger asked. She sipped on the smoothie in her hand.

“YES!” he shouted, then repeated at a more sane and lucid volume: “Yes. Fine good. Er...who are-”

“SYLVIA!” Wander shouted, somehow launching himself from inside the hotel doors into her arms yards away.

“Gosh, I’m sorry! It’s just everything’s so exciting! And I’ve been makin’ friends with the Harbringers of Doom here!”
“Is that so.” It was more of a statement than a question, and she gave Peepers a wry look that was difficult to interpret.

The doors slammed open as Hater marched outside, rage in his glowing eyes and the set of his shoulders, the entire drum kit in bags under his arm.

“We’re leaving,” he snarled, looking almost disheveled. “Get in the ship.”

“Right,” Peepers said, tearing his eyes away from their rivals. He forced himself not to look back as he clambered into the passenger seat. One of Hater’s strengths had always been dramatic exits, so Peepers did his best to follow his lead on that front.

He was beginning to realize, now that he had had the tiniest amount of time to think about it, that he had made himself look stupid in front of a really hot chick. Better to play it cool on the way out.

They were halfway into the stratosphere, both of them stewing in silence (and really, why was Hater so mad?) before a voice piped up from the back seat.

“So what’s the mileage on this thing?” Wander asked, and both Peepers and Hater made brief, high-pitched noises that definitely were not shrieks.

“What are you doing in my ship!” Hater bellowed, swerving towards the surface in a maneuver that sent Peepers’ stomach careening into his shoes.

“You said to get in,” Sylvia said, a definite sarcastic twist to her tone. In the rearview mirror she was suddenly much less attractive - it probably had to do with the self-satisfied look on her face.

“He was talking to me!”

“I figured,” Wander said casually, the G-Force of the drop pinning him to the seat, “that seein’ as we’re all goin’ to the same place we might as well carpool with you folks!”

“I’LL DIE BEFORE I CARPOOL!” Hater screamed.

The landing was quick and bumpy. Hater nearly smashed them directly into the hotel they had just left. They screeched to a stop, the ship’s nose inches away from the glass doors.

“GET OUT.”

Surprisingly, the two of them did without a fuss. Neither of them even looked upset. Sylvia slurped on her slushy in a manner that Peepers considered imprudent as she clambered out the door.

He found himself shouting after them, swept up in his bandmate’s rage. “We’re gonna annihilate you in competition!!”

Because really, who did that? Who felt so at home just climbing into someone else’s ship?

“That’s right!” Hater crowed, leaning way over Peepers to stick his head out the passenger side window. “You and your backwoods hillbilly country bumpkin yodel-y toe-tapping excuse for rock. You sicken me. You shame creators of real music, you know that?!”

Sylvia sucked on her straw. Wander grinned. “Wow, you folks like a good competition, don’t you? We’ll see you there! And may the best band win!” He dropped his voice to a stage whisper, cupping his hand around his mouth to add: “Except we’re all winners. Every one of us. Winning doesn’t matter.”
“GET OUT OF MY SIGHT.”

Hater gunned the ignition, and the ship rose off the ground again.

Peepers leaned out the window to glare down at the former love of his life, seatbelt alone holding him back. “Have fun riding public transport, you insufferable vixen!”

Wander and Sylvia watched the ship rise into the clouds.

Sylvia sipped at the watery dregs of her slushy. “Vixen. That...sure is a thing you can call someone. I guess.”

“They were nice,” Wander said, waving at the slowly disappearing dot in the sky.

“We’re gonna crush them into powder,” Sylvia answered.

This time they found Alaxis without a hitch. They unloaded quickly at the correct hotel branch, then went straight to the venue they’d be playing; Hater was interested in scouting the place out beforehand (way beforehand). He prepped with a fervor for the show, furiously strumming on his unplugged guitar backstage until people just learned to go around him.

He hadn’t been this angry about someone’s mere existence in a long time.

Well, that probably wasn’t true. Hater ran into a lot of people that he despised on sight, sometimes with great intensity. But there was something about that puny orange thing that set all of his invisible nerves burning.

It had been doomed to go bad from the minute Wander hit him with a guitar. From their very first meeting, he was being antagonistic! And then he had the nerve to get onstage and play gross bluegrass fusion music that people (just people in general, mind you, not Hater) actually enjoyed for some reason. Then to top it all off, Wander had decided to act like they were friends! Hater hadn’t even been able to track the guy’s excited movements in the hotel lobby; one minute he was forcibly shaking his hand, the next he was tugging on his robe. He may actually have been jumping on Hater’s back for a little while, but Hater had been too bewildered and angry at the universe to tell if that was really happening or if it was just his own frayed imagination trying to represent the overload of friendly information in front of him.

It was sickening. It was awful. It was...really confusing that this bothered him so much.

“You know we’re not on for another four hours,” Peepers said, raising his voice over the shallow sounds of Haters’ unplugged guitar.

“Go away,” Hater told him through gritted teeth, pouring his frustrations into an assault on the whammy bar. “I’m busy.”

Peepers shrugged and went to get his laptop.

The show itself went almost smoothly. The venue wasn’t as large as the one on the moon, but the stage was set in a sizeable bar that apparently had a rich history of rock shows behind it, particularly in the heavier subgenres. They had chosen their audience well.

The music dropped to a drone after the chorus, Peepers’ drums only a quiet but insistent bit of timekeeping. “Wings on my back, I got horns on my head,” Hater intoned in a sort of hoarse chant,
and a few voices in the crowd screamed their encouragement. “My fangs are sharp and my eyes are red.” Then the guitar kicked back in with a shower of green sparks and everybody went wild.

The mosh pit was insane. What felt like thousands of hands reached towards the stage, and Hater drank it all in: their worship and attention and revelry. This was definitely his kind of audience; the colors of the evening seemed to be black and purple and red, and a few of them looked performance-ready themselves in the face paint department.

About halfway through their fourth song, Hater saw a familiar hat in the audience. A fuzzy orange face followed, sticking out like a sore thumb in the mosh pit. Wander smiled at him and offered a thumbs up.

Hater choked on his anger, nearly forgetting to sing the next line. It only took a moment to recover, though: his music was angry enough that all he had to do was direct all of his performance-rage at Wander until it was real rage. The rest of the show was easy: he shouted abuse at that gullible face into a microphone, and the crowd ate it up.

Wander didn’t look disturbed by the extended eye contact during the most murderous lyrics. In fact, he seemed to be enjoying the show.

Sylvia showed eventually, her face popping up next to Wander’s through the crush of people. Hater remembered the moment because it was the exact same second Peepers’ rhythm stuttered a bit and they had to re-synch their timing as they went. Which was odd: Peepers had a lot of faults, which Hater loved pointing out to him, but usually timing wasn’t one of them.

They got through the show without a hitch. Hater shoved his way down off the stage, not even condescending to give the audience an encore. Which said a lot, because Hater loved doing encores. Stupid Wander, ruining his performance high.

Peepers rushed to follow him, already babbling again about how great it had gone, but Hater didn’t hear. He ignored everyone, and would have kept on ignoring everyone until he had marched straight out the bar’s back door and back onto his ship if it weren’t for a determined, smiling woman standing in his way.

“Hi!” she said. She was fairly petite, but she stood like she knew how to take up space.

Hater stopped and blinked irritably at her. Peepers ran into the backs of his legs. “What do you want?”

She didn’t look like someone who belonged at this show. Her skinny jeans were pastel pink and frayed tastefully at the knees, and her platform shoes were pure white. She wore a simple fitted tank top: Demurra and the Dragon.

“Just here to congratulate you on an awesome show and invite you to the party I’m throwing tonight!” she said, blinking sweetly up at him. “My boyfriend and I’ve rented out a place on this planet for the summer. He does tech stuff for the competition’s main events.”

“Yeah, no thanks,” Hater replied, trying to sound as dismissively sarcastic as possible. “Like I would want-”

“...tooooooo be late to such an awesome event!” Peepers said, still slightly out of breath from the performance. He shot Hater a look. “We’d love to go.”

“Great!” the woman said with what seemed like a genuine smile. “If you get lost just ask for Demurra and Dracor’s place. Or follow the sounds of excess and debauchery.”
Peepers laughed awkwardly. Once she had given them her address and left, Hater rounded on him.

“What-”

“Look-we-don’t-have-to-go-but-what-if-the-judges-are-there,” Peepers said in one smooshed exhale. “And you know what the MC said last night! There’s probably people from recording companies crawling all over the place.” Hater looked unimpressed, so Peepers kept talking: “I mean, we really don’t have to go, but I think we should. Schmoozing is important in this business, right?”

“I hate schmoozing,” Hater grumbled. “If they know anything about music all they need to do is watch me perform. Who cares if they’re at the party.”

“Aw, but it - you know you might have fun.”

Hater considered this. He’d definitely attended enjoyable afterparties in his life, but more often than not he found himself feeling bored or stifled when the people around him were either uninteresting or loud or clingy. Plus, as little as he wanted to admit it, he was no good at small talk. Ember always told him that he had to work on his people skills. But Ember had also thought he would make friends during this trip, so that showed how much little sisters knew.

“Fine. We’ll go for like fifteen minutes. But I’m not changing or taking off the face paint.”

Peepers’ sigh was buried in the noise of the crowds’ chatter around them; the “backstage area” of the bar was too small for them to really be alone. “Whatever you want, Hater.”

“Thanks a million for this, Demurra,” her newest friend said over the pumping dance music, sitting with his knees tucked to his chest on the sofa. Around them the party was picking up steam, the guests just reaching the level of drunk that allowed them to dance without inhibitions. The next room over was particularly wild, as the large bay windows overlooking the nighttime cityscape definitely contributed to the luxury atmosphere.

Demurra smiled, grabbing a handful of peanuts off the coffee table. “It’s no problem. Really! You and Sylvia were so quick to help us figure out the shuttle routes that it’s the least we can do.”

She had met Wander and Sylvia (of the band “Wander and Sylvia”) on the way to Axalis as she and Dracor were scratching their heads over whether or not they were supposed to make a transfer at the third moon. The two strangers had read the map like experts. Then, as luck would have it, Demurra was still in the area when the two of them realized that they had lost the confirmation printout for their hotel - something that wouldn’t be any problem at all in a normal situation, but with the crowds in the area for the competition, somehow it had meant not being able to contest the fact that the place had double-booked their room.

“Besides,” she said, leaning in conspiratorially, “hotels are an absolute nightmare when this goes down. Way too expensive, too. You don’t wanna be in that mess anyway.”

“Well, we sure appreciate your hospitality,” Wander told her. “But just let us know if we’re bein’ a burden and we’ll be out of your hair.”

“Listen, it’s no big deal. This place is bigger than we thought it’d be. There’s, like, three empty bedrooms.”

This was not an overstatement. Nobody had actually gotten up the nerve to ask how a humble techie and a seemingly unemployed young woman were able to afford all this for the summer. Prime
There was no hot tub or anything crazy, but Demurra knew how to pick her guests. The night wouldn’t be boring.

“Hey, Wander, if you want some advice about stage clothes-”

Sylvia poked her head through the door, grabbing the frame and grinning like a maniac. “WANDER! They’re playing Twister in here!”

Wander let out an excited whoop, and Demurra laughed. “Go, go, go!” she told him; he was already halfway across the room, another flood of thanks trailing behind him.

The two of them disappeared with a wave. Demurra stretched out on the sofa, looking around for her boyfriend. He was probably having a jam session with some group or another. Dracor was very into improvisational music, especially with unique instruments. He would definitely break out the Hang drum at least once before the night was done.

A noise caught her attention; Hater stumbled through the door holding a beer, casting a glance over his shoulder that was half bewildered and half offended by the press of dancing bodies in the more crowded room behind him.

“If it isn’t the man of the hour!” Demurra said, giving the words a cocky flourish that she figured he would appreciate. He was still wearing his jacket and face paint, which could mean a few things in her experience: maybe he thrived on the attention his show persona brought him. Or maybe it gave him an excuse not to act like a normal person when he was in potentially awkward situations.

“Ugh, I don’t feel like dancing either, come sit with me and we’ll talk music.”

Hater looked unenthusiastic about the idea, but he seemed even less comfortable with the thought of going back into the fray. “Like you would know anything about metal,” he snapped, moving towards the sofa anyway. His process of sitting down was the most reluctant and bitter series of motions she had ever seen.

“So I’ve been thinking about the way you approach glottal stops during most of your chorus crescendos,” she said matter-of-factly.

For a moment Hater looked bewildered. Then his eyes narrowed.

Peepers, meanwhile, had caught sight of Sylvia on the dance floor. She wasn’t particularly good, persay, but her motions were simultaneously aggressive and carefree. Almost militantly loopy. Especially after somebody very intoxicated broke out a Twister board and she absolutely dominated.

He was definitely, totally aware that she was the enemy and that she was awful in every conceivable way but he definitely kind of wanted to dance with her really really badly.

He didn’t have the chance to wrestle with that dilemma, however. Maybe it was because he was intimately attuned to Hater’s rants, or maybe Hater was just being that loud. Either way, he could hear his bandmate loud and clear from the next room over: “I DID NOT PUSH THE TEMPO DURING THE BRIDGE!”

What he found there was Hater furiously defending his musical decisions to a bewildered-looking Demurra.

“Look, I’m just giving you some advice.”
“Oh yeah?! And who are you to give advice?”

“I know more than you think!” she said, getting to her feet. Peepers noted the hands planted on her hips and decided to intervene before they got themselves thrown out.

“Hater!” he said (Hater jumped; according to him, Peepers sometimes seemed to apparate at his side). “Let’s go downstairs, they’ve definitely got pizza downstairs.” Hater’s eyes took a moment longer than usual to focus on Peepers’ face. “You like pizza,” Peepers reminded him.

“Fine,” he growled. He pointed at Demurra a bit hazily. “Nobody criticizes my music and lives.”

“He means that metaphorically,” Peepers assured her. “We only slay people metaphorically.”

Demurra looked like she was trying not to laugh, so that was...probably a good sign. “Just don’t cause a ruckus at my party, you hear me?” she said mock-sternly. “Everybody liked your show, so they’ll definitely show you a good time if you give them the chance. You might even consider taking off the makeup. I’m not sure I’d recognize you.”

“IT’S NOT MAKEUP!”

Peepers did his best to steer Hater towards the door, tugging at his sleeve.

Demurra watched them go. She hadn’t decided how she felt about the Harbringers yet. They had a ton of raw potential, that much was obvious from their performances. But if they didn’t learn to take criticism, they would never get any better, and then nobody would want to sign them. She knew that firsthand.

Having already forged all the connections that she had wanted to forge during the party, she decided to go see what Dracor was up to. Moving through the dancefloor room, she heard two of her special interests interacting, voices both carrying over the music:

“HIYA, HATER! Great show tonight!”

“OH MY GROD GET OUT OF HERE!”

“That’s nice,” she said to herself, maneuvering around the DJ’s setup to get to the hallway. She would undoubtedly find Dracor with some new friends in one of the back rooms, enjoying the party the way he liked it: chill, personal, and all about the music.

“I love my job.”

Chapter End Notes

Song used was 'Hardrock Hallelujah' by Lordi
Chapter 3

It seemed like no matter how late he stayed up - whether it was playing a show or attending a party or even watching the stars deep into the evening - Wander always tended to be an early riser. The digital clock sitting on its side in the living room had just struck 7:35 when he awoke.

He glanced around at all the trash that seemed to be thrown around the room (although he had seen messier). “That sure was a fun par-tay,” Wander said to himself as he happily started picking up some of the trash.

It was another half hour or so before someone else woke up. “Wander?”

Turning his head, he smiled. “Oh, good mornin’, Demurra. You sleep well?”

Standing in an oversized pink nightshirt, Demurra looked surprised but happy. “Yeah, I slept great! And, did you do all of this?”

“Uh-huh!” Wander nodded with a huge grin, “Seemed like the least I could do! After all, you and Drake are givin’ me and Syl a place ta’ stay!” Of course, there would still have to be times when they would have to stay in a hotel or go camping if their show destination was too far away. But with most of the planets in this galaxy being about a day away from each other (give or take a few hours), it was nice to know they had a little place they could call home for the summer. Wander was pleased that they were staying with friends, and Sylvia was just happy they could have a little more breathing room in their budget.

“Like I said, no big deal!” Demurra smiled sweetly as she started walking towards the kitchen, “We have more than enough space here anyway. Now, since you didn’t wait for us wake up so we could help you, how about I get you some breakfast? You can’t tell me you aren’t hungry after all that work.”

As if on cue, Wander’s stomach gave a small growl, making him giggle. “Guilty as charged!” he quipped, “But yeah, breakfast sounds great! Whaddaya have?”

“Um…” She looked in her fridge and freezer, “As of right now: Beer, pop, leftover pizza, bacon and some frozen waffles. Hmm, guess we’ll have to go shopping later.”

“Ooh! Waffles sounds good to me!” Wander replied enthusiastically, “Oh, and do ya know where a fella can get some coffee around here? Sylvia usually likes to have a nice cup of joe in the mornin’!”

Demurra smiled. It was always nice to see bandmates as close as those two obviously were. They seemed so different at a first glance - although Demurra knew more than anyone that while first impressions definitely matter, looks weren’t everything - and yet they hardly seemed to leave each other’s side while still being more than willing to interact with others. Two people, two completely different styles, and yet they were able to mix together and create music that not only made others smile, but themselves as well.

“Yeah, I think I saw a machine on the ground floor that dispenses coffee,” she replied over her shoulder as she opened the box, “May not be the best, but it’ll get the job done.”

“Alllllright-y!” With that said, Wander adjusted his hat slightly and ran out the door, nearly forgetting to close the door in his eagerness. Demurra couldn’t help but giggle lightly. ‘Guess we won’t have to worry about things being boring around here with him around,’ she thought as she put the plate in the microwave.
Drifting over to the counter, she located a folded up map that thankfully Wander didn’t throw away. Axalis was almost completely centered on the paper once it was unfolded, which made it an almost perfect temporary home planet. ‘Wander and Sylvia will be performing here in a few days,’ she thought to herself, ‘and then next week they’ll have another show not too far away from here...’ Although, they would maybe end up playing more than that.

“Wander likes to have ‘surprise shows’,” Sylvia had told her earlier. These ‘surprise shows’ had included them playing in parks and playgrounds, parking lots, gazebos, town squares, basically anywhere where they could play music and not get a stern talking to about ‘disturbing the peace’ from the local law enforcement. And all of these shows were completely unscheduled, which also meant without any sort of payment, but even Sylvia didn’t seem to mind that, smiling as she recalled these concerts to Demurra and Dracor.

“Sometimes I just can’t help it!” Wander had added, a sort of nostalgic smile on his face as he thought back, “If I’ve got somethin’ to play with and a song in my heart, and if it looks like the folks around me could use a little music in their day, I just start strummin’ a melody and I give them somethin’ to sing to!”

The blonde smiled to herself. She definitely liked those two. ‘Now, let’s see what other shows we can catch...’ Going back to the map - where she had written down several quick notes - she could see that the Harbingers of Doom had at least three more shows coming up, on three different planets. No doubt they were trying to get as public as possible, wanting to spread their name all throughout the galaxy. Not quite the same reason Wander and Sylvia had for playing so many shows - impromptu or otherwise - but still reasonable.

Another artist she was curious about was a certain shark-man and his band of Fist Fighters - The Party Makers - who already had a tech crew hired to work for them, meaning Dracor could watch the show with her. ‘He definitely has stage presence, I’ll give him that,’ she thought with a small smirk, ‘and there’s no doubt he doesn’t already have his share of fans - although he’s not really my type. Still, I could see him being somewhere in the frontrunners again this year.’ Although, there would definitely be some heavier competition for the ‘Party Makers’ this time around, and no doubt there would be some friction in between the bands. Then again, that’s what made it a ‘battle’, as well as interesting.

Folding the map back up, Demurra headed back over to the microwave, just as the timer was about to go off.

Three months... It seemed like such a long time, but she knew it would go by in a flash. ‘Guess that just means I have to make sure to enjoy myself,’ she smiled, ‘Shouldn’t be too hard.’

“I’m back!” Wander announced, carrying the steaming, styrofoam cup carefully in his hand as he opened the door with the other.

“And just in time too,” Demurra told him, placing the plate on the small table. Almost immediately, his grin grew when he saw his breakfast. But before he even could even walk over there, he heard another door open.

“Grop... Is there a second sun here or somethin’?” the zbornak mumbled as she rubbed her eyes.

“Oh! Mornin’ Syl!” Wander greeted, his voice noticeably softer but still full of joy. He lifted Sylvia’s hand for her and placed the cup in it. “Careful now, it’s still pretty hot, and I’ll get ya some water to drink once you’re finished with that.” She didn’t reply with words, but she did give him a small pat on the shoulder and an appreciative smile. Understanding perfectly, Wander gave her a quick hug in return before walking over to the table and sitting down, more than ready for something to eat and
not even caring if the butter and syrup were absent from his plate.

The clock struck nine am, and - since nobody remembered to turn the alarm off - a calm, cheerful song began to play from its built in radio...

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Axalis was about three times bigger than the moon their journey had started on, and its bright cities - the biggest one being Kabiato, the one they were currently living in - were able to offer plenty of entertainment. The fact that the city was currently housing several bands supported this fact even moreso.

“Where do ya wanna go next, Syl?” Wander asked, glancing over at his friend who had been by his side ever since he announced that morning that he wanted to go explore the wonders of Kabiato. “We’ve already seen the museum, the mall, the local music shop-” as if to remind her, he lifted up the small bag he was holding that was filled with their purchases “-and I think there should be a few other interestin’ things downtown.” He quickly showed her the map of the city. “Which one of these do you wanna go to first, Syl?”

“Anything where you have to sit,” Sylvia answered. They’d been walking all day, and even Sylvia with all her stamina was starting to feel a bit tired.

“...So, movie theater?”

She gave him a small smile. “How about we grab a bite to eat first?”

With all the different restaurants littered throughout Kabiato, it didn’t take long to find a place for lunch - and it looked like it was a popular destination. As soon as they walked inside, they spotted several bands they recognized, all of them sitting at the old red and white checkered tables, chatting and eating. The Baaaaahalians with their mix of the music from their homeplanet and rock and roll, the tiny Fleeling rocker girl band who managed to fill the entire stage with their music despite their small stature and cute demeanor, and a couple others that Wander would of course wave and smile at as he and Sylvia walked passed them.

“Syl, remember when we heard these all these guys play?” Wander asked, “They were amazing!”

“Well, they were certainly interesting,” Sylvia replied, “I mean, who would’a thought bagpipes would work in a rock band?”

“I dunno, but I wouldn’t mind trying to play one sometime. They look like a lot of fun!”

Sylvia gave him a look. “If you say so.” She just hoped he didn’t try adding them to their show.

Once they were up at the counter, it looked like their choices were limited. There were burgers, hotdogs and fries, and that was pretty much it. However, even if there wasn’t anything special on the menu, the smells emitted from the various grills and fryers certainly smelled good. Maybe that was what attracted so many people.

“This place actually wouldn’t be too bad of a permanent home someday,” Wander commented as he sat down, looking around at all the old diner decor like it was the most interesting thing in the universe.

“Yeah, it’d be a nice place to settle down,” Sylvia nodded, “A bit different from Yonderia, but a good kind of different.” Then again, a change of scenery and a different set of people and places was exactly what they were looking for, what they were craving. And as much as she could see that
Wander loved Axalis, she knew he would be just as happy when it was time to leave and see the next new planet. To have another possible adventure and new experiences just by hopping into a shuttle and heading there. Even Sylvia couldn’t help but find it a bit exciting - just as long as they didn’t do anything too crazy.

“Well, wouldja look at that!” Curious, Sylvia looked where Wander was pointing and smirked in amusement.

“So, they’ve got posters now?” “Looks like it.”

Said poster certainly looked… like a poster. Okay, maybe not a particularly good one. Its primary colors were black and red with text that almost made it look more like a threat than an invitation or advertisement. “Wonder how many of those they stuck up around the city.”

“I like them,” Wander smiled, turning back towards the table.

“The band or the poster?”

“Well, I was referin’ to the Harbingers of Doom,” Wander clarified, “But I guess the poster’s pretty cool too.” Sylvia rolled her eyes slightly.

“They’re fun to mess with, maybe, but come on Wander, you actually like them?” She knew that Wander liked pretty much everybody, but sometimes you had to make exceptions. “I mean, did you hear the way Bonehead was yelling at Demurra’s party?”

“Lots of people were bein’ loud,” Wander retorted, “And hey, maybe he wasn’t in a partyin’ mood. After all, it looked like he was concentrating really hard during his show, all that playing and singing and pretendin’ to be all angry.”

“I’m just saying, he seems like kind of a jerk to me,” Sylvia stated, sitting back in her chair. Actually, there was no ‘kinda’ about it, she did think he was a jerk that could honestly look like he needed take a few minutes to relax, for all of their sakes. There was taking something seriously, and then there was just being way too over-the-top about it.

“You know, I think that little eyeball guy likes you,” Wander said suddenly, a small smirk forming on his face.

“What!” Sylvia shouted, sitting up, “I - Oh yeah right, he does not.”

“I don’t knooow,” he replied, his smile growing bigger, “It kinda looked like he wanted ta’ dance with you at the party! He hardly took his eye off’a ya!”

Sylvia gave a small laugh. “I’m pretty sure he was just glaring at me, Wander.” She did get kind of a weird vibe from him, but it looked like the Watchdog took his musical career almost just as seriously as his bandmate did, so he definitely wasn’t the kind of guy Sylvia wanted to be around.

“Whatever you say, Sylvia,” Wander said simply, still smiling, “Maybe next time you see him you can start up a conversation with him or somethin’. I bet you both would enjoy that.”

“Ha, yeah,” the zbornak replied, rolling her eyes again, “Sure, I’ll keep that in mind.”

“I have to agree with the little dude there,” a new voice said suddenly, “If a babe like you started talking to me, I’d certainly enjoy it.”

“Oh hey! I know you!” Wander grinned while Sylvia turned to look at the man, nearly getting
blinded by his shiny, sharp-toothed smile, “You performed before the Harbingers of Doom, and you had all those lights and that fog machine. You guys were great!”

One look at this guy and Sylvia was already annoyed with him. The way he spoke with his voice full of cockiness, and the way his hand was just a little too close to her shoulder as he leaned on her chair. Although, she had to admit, he didn’t look half bad. A little too garish for her tastes, but the midriff he was wearing was definitely doing more help than harm, but she made sure to look away before he caught her staring.

“Thanks bro,” the shark nodded, “Name’s Awesome.” He glanced back over at Sylvia, “Nice to meet you guys.” She frowned, already getting tired of seeing that big grin of his.

“Thanks!” Wander replied while his bandmate continued giving Awesome an unimpressed look, “My name’s Wander and that’s Sylvia, and I must say that it’s nice to meet you too, friend!”

“Not a surprise. So, you dudes playing any shows this week?” he asked, “I have to say, I don’t usually go for your style - mostly because I’ve never really heard it before - but man I heard you perform back on the moon and you guys were just killing it! So yeah, I wouldn’t mind hearing you guys play again…” He gave a smirk, grinning at Sylvia. “and I totes wouldn’t mind keeping you company at the after party.”

After forcing herself not to punch the shark-man in the nose for being too close, Sylvia moved her chair back a bit before replying. “Yeah well, I don’t think we have to worry about being bored at our own party so, thanks but no thanks.”

“But you can still come if ya want!” Wander added. By some miracle Sylvia managed not to facepalm. “We’ve got a show comin’ up in a couple days, Friday night at 8:30!”

For a moment, he actually managed to lose his smile. “Friday? Shoot, I’m not gonna be here, I’m gonna be headin’ towards my own show a couple planets away.” However, it didn’t take long for Awesome to start grinning again. “But I’m sure we’ll run into each other again. In fact, a few weeks from now I’m gonna be havin’ a party over on Tralfar 5. Place has got the sickest beaches, and I can guarantee you that when I’m hosting the party, it’s gonna be awesome.”

“Yeah, I’m sure,” Sylvia replied, still unimpressed. Awesome either didn’t seem to notice or didn’t let it discourage him. Honestly, Sylvia was guessing it was the latter, and it annoyed her.

“Well, sounds like fun! We’ll be sure to keep that in mind!” Wander assured him.

“Cool.” Just then, a small bell rang. “Order up!” someone shouted.

“Oh hey, look at that, guess we’re eating now,” Sylvia said as she stood up to go get the food, “So yeah, guess we’ll see you… whenever.”

“Allright babe,” Awesome replied, stepping out of her way slightly but still blocking the way to the counter enough so that he could say goodbye, “I’ll be waiting.” He flashed another grin before turning to Wander, holding out his hand for a highfive. “See you around, orange dude. Good luck at your show.”

“Why thank you!” Wander replied, taking his hand and shaking it, “Good luck to you as well, and we’ll certainly try to make it to your party, right Sylvia?”

“Oh yeah, sure,” she answered dryly, already walking away. Suddenly hanging out with the eyeball didn’t seem like such a bad idea.
The days seemed to fly by, and before Wander knew it, it was Friday. There were still a few hours until their performance, but Wander didn’t mind. He was enjoying the downtime he had by walking through the city park, enjoying the feel of the soft crimson grass and plucking the occasional multi-colored wildflower as he spotted them (he had already collected several colorful flowers, and he knew just what to do with them).

Once he had made his way around the park a couple times, Wander sat down on a bench near the children’s playground, and went to work. In between working however, he did take a few minutes to move his trusty banjo - it seemed like forever since he’d last played it - from his back to his front, and play a few melodies on it. ‘Nothin’ wrong with a bit more practice,’ he thought to himself, ‘Especially when it’s this enjoyable.’

Because of Axalis’ rotation speed, sundown came a lot quicker than most planets, but there were plenty of streetlights that were already lighting up to help the orange furred guitarist see. And, while he wouldn’t have minded watching the sunset a bit longer, nighttime was always his favorite. All the stars and moons that would show up and their constellations, the cool nightly breezes, the different colors he would sometimes see up in the sky thanks to stardust and gas clouds, all of it was just so relaxing and enjoyable to Wander.

Humming along with the banjo with his eyes closed, his fingers moved swiftly and gracefully across the strings, acting as if he had played this song a hundred times before. And, just like how he had started playing when the moment felt right, he had ended the song a few minutes later when it felt like it was the end. What he didn’t expect however, was a small chorus of clapping.

Opening his eyes, Wander could see a small group of Axalis children looking up at them with their big eyes that were built for the darkness so they could continue playing even after sunset. After a small moment of silence, Wander smiled at them, and the children smiled back. “Well hey there,” he greeted, “Nice night, isn’t it?”

“You play really good!” one of the boys in the group commented, the other kids nodding their heads and vocalizing their agreement.

“Aw, thanks kids,” Wander said, his smile growing, “I’m just glad y’all enjoyed it. Feel like hearing a few more songs? I’ve got a bit of time before I have to get goin’.” Of course, the kids happily sat down, all of them shouting out requests. “Okay okay, hold on now.” He adjusted his banjo slightly, making sure that it was tuned, before he started playing again. He didn’t even have to hush the children, they all just watched in awe and excitement as he started to sing.

“The nighttime’s comin’, sun is fallin’, the stars are twinklin’ now. It’s quite a sight to see, at least it is to me, and I hope y’all can see as well. Lights and worlds as far as we can see, let’s go to them all - just you and me. We’ll make it back before the day, just go up o-ver yonder and we’re on our way. We’ll fly across the sky, a bunch of shooting stars. We’ll light the way, we’ll travel far. The wonders of night are in our reach, just look on up and you will see~...”

They finally made it onto Alaxis’ surface again, after being off it for nearly a week, and after driving several hours. Hater glanced over at Peepers, who was curled up in the passenger’s seat, occasionally sleep drumming and mumbling something about ‘beautiful tattoos’. Hater had no idea what that was about, but he was tempted to wake the eyeball up just so he could take a nap.

Then again, he didn’t want to risk Peepers wrecking his ship because of lack of sleep. But really they
were both pretty exhausted. After three performances, various parties that ranged from okay to a waste of time, practices, and of course - what Hater was already starting to get really tired of - travelling, the skeleton was actually willing to take a few days off and rest. It also helped that he was feeling good about their track record. Three performances that were all successes, three planets they had been on, and hundreds of people (a few of those hopefully being connected to record companies) now knew about the Harbingers of Doom. He smiled slightly. It was only a matter of time before the entire galaxy was asking for his autograph and begging him for shows.

“Mm, huh?” Sitting up slightly, Peepers rubbed his eye and glanced outside, “Oh hey, we’re here, that’s - Um, are we on Alaxis?”

“Yes, this is where our hotel is,” Hater answered, rolling his eyes, “Why else would we come back here?” Just then, he noticed the slight nervousness in his drummer’s face. “...Peepers. We DO still have a hotel room here, right?”

“Uhh, hehe, yeah the thing about that is... No, we don’t.” He gripped his hands tightly on the steering wheel. “ARE YOU KIDDING ME?!”

“It’s not my fault!” Peepers shouted in defense, “Because of all the tourists, the hotel said they couldn’t hold our room any longer if we weren’t going to actually be staying there until the end of the week!”

“And WHEN were you going to tell me this?!” Hater asked, glaring at him.

“I didn’t think it would matter!” And this was true. After all the work Hater had been putting in, making sure they practiced and got to their venue hours - even a whole day on one occasion - before their next show, Peepers had figured they would just head to the next planet. “And I didn’t know we were heading back here, otherwise I would have told you!” Granted he didn’t really give Hater a chance to tell him since he pretty much passed out as soon as he got in the ship, but it was still a valid excuse!

Hater’s eyes narrowed as he turned back to the road. He was still pretty annoyed, but there was nothing he could do about it now, except maybe yell at Peepers some more. That was always a good option. “Okay then, so tell me, since it’s too late to go anywhere else and there’s probably no rooms available, what do you suggest we do?”

“Well...” He gestured to the mattress in the back.

Hater scowled for a moment. “You’re lucky that thing’s comfortable.” Peepers gave a small, silent sigh of relief as his bandmate pulled into a parking lot, one with no rules against loitering - at least they hoped there weren’t. After all, they didn’t see any signs.

“Since this is mostly your fault, you can get us something to eat,” Hater told him as he got out of the car, enjoying the much needed fresh air and the darkness of the night - though he still made sure to put his hood up.

Peepers sighed as he reluctantly slid into the driver’s seat. “Fine. Any requests?”

“I don’t care, just get something good and get a lot of it. I’ll meet you back here.” With that said, Hater slammed the door, staying only to watch Peepers drive out of the parking lot before walking down the street. Maybe if he was lucky he could find a place that would provide dessert for their late supper. Some Sarlacc Swirl ice cream actually sounded pretty good right now.

As he continued walking, he could see that quite a few places were open late at night. Whether it
was because it was a big city and that meant a lot of nightlife or simply because of the planet’s longer nights, Hater wasn’t sure. But it was convenient. The streets were just as quiet as the empty parking lot though, with the few people he passed not even giving him a second glance. Then again, he was just wearing his hoodie and a pair of black jeans, but he still couldn’t help but take a bit of offense to it.

‘Maybe I’m just in the empty part of the city or something,’ he thought. What it lacked in talking and footsteps however, other various noises more than made up for. It sounded like Axalis had an abundance of cicadas, and there was still the occasional ship or person. Adding in the hum of the streetlights, the occasional muffled sounds of conversation whenever he passed businesses that were busy, and the light plucking of a banjo, it all made for decent background noi-

Wait. Banjo? Hater stopped and listened closely, just to make sure he wasn’t hearing things out of fatigue. But no, there was indeed the sound of someone playing a banjo. “Why would anyone just be standing somewhere in the dark, playing a banjo?!” He had heard that big cities were the home to plenty of weirdos, but this didn’t even make sense! Not to mention the more he thought about it, the more creepy the idea got.

Taking his hands out of his pockets, just in case he had to defend himself, Hater headed towards the sound to try and find its origin, and to give this weirdo banjo player a piece of his mind!

It wasn’t too hard of a search though. He only had to walk about half a block before he reached the park, where the playing was a lot louder now. He could also see a small crowd over by a bench, but it was still hard to see just who was playing. Keeping himself confined to the shadows, Hater kept walking towards the music, stopping only when he recognized the floppy green hat sitting on top of the orange-furred, tie dye-wearing guitarist that he had almost forgotten about. Almost. But even after nearly a week of not seeing each other, that same familiar aggravation hit the skeleton hard, as if he had run into the fellow guitarist only a few hours earlier instead of a few days ago.

Scowling, he took a step back and hid himself behind a tall bluebark tree. ‘What is he even doing?’ he thought. The group listening to him seemed like nothing more than a few random kids, and it didn’t look like their parents were around, so Wander probably wasn’t getting paid for this. ‘What, did he just decide to randomly start playing for kids in the park?’ Then again, the idea didn’t really surprise Hater. ‘He seems like the type who would do something pointless like that.’

“Hey!” Wander said suddenly, making Hater jump slightly. When the skeleton realized he wasn’t talking to him, he went back to watching and glaring. “Do any of you know this song?” Wander began strumming a light little ditty, humming along to it to help the kids out. Hater actually managed to recognize the song just as a member of Wander’s audience did.

“Oh! I know!” a girl in braids shouted, “‘Down the Starlight River’, right?”

“Yes! Okay, this one’s a bit tougher!” He switched up the tempo and changed the melody. It took a bit longer for anyone to guess, but a boy that was a bit bigger than the others eventually got it. “Sunlight on the Street?” he guessed.

“You got it!” the boy grinned, and Wander started another song.

As Hater watched, his annoyance started to take a backseat to another emotion, thanks to a memory being recalled…

He scowled slightly, but he didn’t let the note he screwed up throw him off. He played harder, increasing the volume and power on the guitar, letting the screeches echo through his room. Once he finished the song, he placed his guitar on his lap, and looked over the music again - making sure
to keep a grip on it as the old fan slowly spun towards him, fighting the humidity.

“That was pretty good, brother.”

“Hmph, still not good enough,” he replied, frustrated, “It needs to sound exactly like you’d hear it on the CD!” He had the basics down, now he was just trying to learn how to play actual songs, and what could be better than learning the heavy metal songs he actually knew and loved instead of those dumb baby songs they had in the ‘Guitar for Beginners’ books that came with the guitar.

Ember shrugged and went back to reading her book. Hater always let her hang out in his room while he practiced, but despite never telling her so, she knew not to interrupt or talk while he was playing. So she kept quiet, listening to her older brother play and giving the occasional comment in between songs.

Picking up his guitar and pick again, Hater glanced over at his sister. “....” He unplugged the instrument from his amp and started playing a quieter melody, though he had to focus on the speed and his fingering to make it sound right.

After about a minute, Ember looked up from her book, first with a look of surprise, then with a smile. “I thought you said the songs I listened to were dumb, brother?” she asked with a bit of amusement. After all, they’d had plenty of arguments over which radio station to listen to on the way to school.

“They are,” Hater replied bluntly, but he kept playing the song. Still smiling, Ember closed her eyes and quietly sang along, tapping her foot to the beat.

If her eyes had been open, she would’ve seen a small smile form on her brother’s face...

Shaking away the memory, Hater noticed that the kids were standing up, most of them clapping.

“That was really good, mister!” “I wanna learn how to play an instrument just like you!” “Me too!” “Yeah!” “Do you think you’ll come back tomorrow and play for us?”

Wander chuckled. “Well, I’ll certainly try! But hey, I sure did have fun playin’ for you all, so I’m glad you enjoyed it! But you guys should start headin’ back home before your parents start lookin’ for ya.”

Knowing he was right, the kids all said goodbyes and repeated their ‘thank you’s, and one of them even handed him something. “Aw, thanks for your help, Emily!” Taking off his hat, Wander placed the item - a carefully made, multi-colored flower crown - on his head.

Hater could feel his eye twitch at the sight of it.

“Perfect fit!” The kids giggled as they walked away, and Wander waved after them, only looking away when they were all out of view. Once they were, Wander gave a content sigh and leaned his back against the cool, metal bench, resting his hands on his instrument rather than using them to play. He glanced up at the sky as the artificial light of the lamppost shone down on him. Dozens of bugs were buzzing above him, enchanted by the light, and they either weren’t flying near him, or they were and Wander was simply in too good of a mood to care (honestly, Hater would’ve believed either). All in all, it was a pretty peaceful sight. Even Hater couldn’t help but take in the calmness of the night, but of course that didn’t last long.

“Ya know, you could’ve come over here and played along with me if you really wanted to.”

“I - But - How-?” Quickly hiding his surprise, Hater glared at him as he stepped out from behind the tree. “I told you before, I will NEVER do a duet with you. Besides, I don’t even have my guitar.”
“I could’ve let you borrow mine,” Wander replied with a smile, glancing over at his hat for just a split second.

“But you didn’t even bring it!” he shouted back, once again feeling the aggravation, “Whatever, it wouldn’t have made a difference anyway. What are you even doing here?”

“Oh, just passin’ the time before my show,” Wander answered, “Oh, speakin’ of which, Sylvia’s probably wonderin’ where I am, so I guess I should get going.” Just then, an excited grin spread across his face. “Hey! Since you’re here, why don’t you come to our show? We’re playin’ at this nice restaurant that has a built-in stage area, Demurra said that the place can hold about three hundred people - four hundred if they open up the back doors.”

Hater’s jaw dropped (almost literally). How in the world could they manage to get a gig that big?!

“... And don’t worry, I’ll make sure you and your friend get a spot up front! So whaddaya say, Hater?”

His face returned to a scowl. “Oh yeah, because going to one of your shows and listening to whatever that is you dare to call music is EXACTLY what I want to do after staying up the past twelve hours driving here!”

Wander stared at the skeleton for a moment, and then smiled. “Well great! Guess you’re in luck then, huh?” Hater simply facepalmed. “Well, I guess I’ll see ya there!” he added as he started to walk away. Of course, Hater was about to tell him that he wouldn’t be caught dead at one of his concerts, but stopped.

“Wait. You’re going to take that thing off, right?”

A bit confused, Wander turned to look at him. “Take what off?”

“The flowers!”

“Oh!” He adjusted the crown slightly, “Well why would I do that? I think it looks pretty good, and I’m sure they’ll be fine under the stage lights. Besides, it would be a waste to just-”

“ARE YOU SERIOUS?!” The furry guitarist blinked in surprise, his smile faltering as the skeleton continued yelling. “You can’t just wear that on stage!”

“Well, why not?” he asked with a shrug.

Hater clenched his fists. “Because, it looks flarping ridiculous, that’s why! It’s bad enough you go around wearing all that hippie crap, but if you add flowers to the mix, you’re just going to look like even more of a joke! I mean, what don’t you understand?! Get it through that thick skull of yours that this is a serious competition! I’m putting in all this work to try and succeed at the ONE thing I’ve wanted for years, and you’re just treating it as some big joke!”

Even the cicadas seemed silent after his rant. The two stared at each other, but while Hater’s eyes were still full of anger, Wander’s seemed to have simply absorbed all of the words. It didn’t even look like he was upset. After what felt like a lifetime, Wander finally spoke.

“Who says I’m not taking it seriously?” Hater’s spine stiffened as Wander smiled, though this one seemed a lot softer than the huge grin he had earlier. “I mean, music is some pretty powerful stuff. And even though we’re havin’ fun, Syl and I make sure what we’re playin’ is stuff that’s worth playin’.”

“Stuff worth playing, huh? So what, you’re saying that your style is better than mine?” Hater asked,
“Oh not at all! In fact, your songs are some of the most passionate music I’ve ever heard!” For the second time that night, Hater had been shocked into silence. “I’ll admit, it’s a bit different from what I’m used to, but that just makes it even better! And I can tell y’all really put your heart into your craft, and you even said it yourself that you work really hard. Sylvia and I do that too, although we still try to have fun with it, ‘cause that really helps out the process!” He took a second to think back on all those enjoyable moments, all the lyrics they made up together to go with the melodies they created.

“The lyrics, the music, all of that comes straight from the heart, because we want people to enjoy it as much as we enjoy makin’ it. Isn’t that right, Hater?”

He blinked, having it just occur to him that Wander assumed that was the reason why Hater performed too. Well, of course it wasn’t. Yes, he wanted people to praise his talent and to listen to him, to clap and cheer and scream his name. And, of course he enjoyed playing the music. Why wouldn’t he? It was his music and it was great! The rush and power being on stage made him feel great, and - and his audience… Hearing how much they enjoyed his music… That really was what the clapping represented, wasn’t it? Well yeah of course, he wasn’t stupid. And yeah, maybe he was glad that people ‘got’ his music almost as much as he did... But, that certainly didn’t mean that Wander was right…Right?

Hater shook his head. “Gah, whatever! It doesn’t matter, you still look ridiculous! Real rock and roll bands don’t wear stupid things like flower crowns and bead necklaces and tie dye shirts!”

Again, Wander didn’t take offense. He just laughed lightly. “Well then, guess that makes me unique!”

“No! It makes you look a fool!”

“Well, tell ya what,” he started to say, “if there’s some sort’a dress code, or if there’s a rule book on how you’re supposed to perform, I’ll certainly give it a read through!”

Honestly, if it were anyone else saying it, they would have probably said it sarcastically. But not Wander. His tone was completely genuine, enough so to make Hater believe that if there was something ridiculous as a list of rules for what to wear and how to perform, there was no doubt that Wander would sit down and read it (although the jury was still out on whether or not he would actually follow those metaphorical rules).

And that was perhaps the most infuriating thing of all.

“Fine, maybe you do take all of this seriously and you listen to your heart or whatever that crap’s called! But understand this:” His eyes flashed green as he shot a cold glare towards Wander. “I’m winning this competition, and there’s nothing you can do or say to stop me!”

“...Well alright-y, if ya say so!” Wander smiled, not even registering the potential threat, “Nothin’ wrong with a bit of friendly competition, after all, and I certainly wish ya the best of luck.”

“Ha! Like I need it!” Before he could say anymore, Hater watched as Wander looked up at the sky, his face full of thought before it turned to slight worry. “Okay, I’d love to stay and chat but really hafta get goin’ now! Gosh, hope Sylvia’s not to worried about me!” With that, he swiftly moved his banjo to his back, grabbed his hat, and took off in a sprint. “Later Hater!” he shouted over his shoulder, and after only a few seconds, he had disappeared into the night.

“Hmph,” was all Hater could really say as he stuffed his hands back in his pockets, making sure to
lower his head slightly and let his hood slip over his face, hiding his eyes. Like he would ever want to go one of their shows. Although, one had to wonder just how much of that backwater, aggravating music they had up their sleeve, and just how much of it would keep the audience entertained.

That was another thing. ‘Anyone can entertain for a three to four minute song,’ he thought to himself as he walked down the dull, cracking sidewalk, keeping his head low, ‘But I highly doubt they could do it for a two hour show!’

What would they even do for a show? Did all their songs sound alike? Probably. Although, if Wander played multiple instruments, that meant the zbornak probably did too. And what about special effects? They didn’t seem like the type of band who did anything special, but then again - as much as Hater hated to admit it - the hairy spoon guitarist had surprised him before.

If he could just see one of their shows, it would put his mind at ease, knowing that they weren’t any real competition (not that they ever were in the first place). Just a minor annoyance.

But the more stubborn part of Hater still absolutely refused to attend one of their concerts. ‘Besides,’ he thought, ‘if he spotted me there, he’d never stop bugging me about it!’ The guy would probably stick to him like glue the rest of the night, babbling about music and heart and all that crap. ‘No thank you!’

Still, Hater needed to see what they had up their sleeves. There had to be some way to figure it out! But unfortunately, all that thinking combined with the frustration and anger he had ended up just giving him a headache.

And to make matters worse, it wasn’t until he made it back to the parking lot that he realized he had forgotten to pick up his Sarlacc Swirl.

Peepers had just opened up his second box of kung pow chicken when he heard the back door open and then slam shut again. ‘I was wondering what was taking him so long,’ he thought, though he didn’t dare say out loud, simply because it sounded like Hater was in one of his moods again judging by the way he slammed the door, and the fact that he was currently lying face down on the fold-out mattress.

“So, it turns out there was a late night Asian food place open,” Peepers said, trying to get him to cheer up a bit, “And I made sure to get your favorites! Eggrolls, pork, some shrimp, and I made sure to get plenty of soy-” A hand reached up from the back, grabbing the bag and taking it without even a muffled ‘thank you’. Then again, Peepers was used to this.

So the Watchdog simply faced forward, took another bite of his own food, and turned on his laptop. Really, that was the only thing he could do when his bandmate was in a bad mood, just sit and wait. As the machine booted up, making a small yet noticeable noise, Hater suddenly got an idea.

Leaving his food in the ship, he got out and headed towards the trunk. “Hater?” Peepers asked curiously as he turned back around, “What are you doing?” Of course, he didn’t get an answer.

“Come on, where is it?!!” He tore through the trunk, tossing most of their luggage on the ground until- “Aha! Yes! This’ll be perfect!”

“Wait, what is it? What’ll be perfect?” Peepers asked, setting his food to the side. He couldn’t tell what it was at first until Hater came back towards the side of the ship. Even then, however, it just looked a small, dusty old bag. But once he realized what was in that dusty old bag, he just became even more curious. They hadn’t attempted to make another music video in months - not after the first
one was such a disaster - so why did he need their old video camera?

“Here!” he tossed it to Peepers, who by some miracle managed to catch it without spilling rice all over his laptop, “Eat fast.”

“Why? Where are we going?”

Hater simply smirked. “Just checking out the competition,” he replied before taking a huge bite of his eggroll, “Oh, an’ buh de way, you’ll be doing de ac’ual checking out.”

Peepers gave his bandmate a deadpanned look. “...Yeah, totally didn’t see that one coming.”
While on average he wasn’t as fast as Sylvia was, Wander could be pretty quick when he wanted to be. Unfortunately, their concert venue was still all the way on the outskirts of town, so even running just barely got him there in time.

But of course, not even that could wipe the smile off Wander’s face. “Wow, Demurra was right, this place is pretty packed!” But that wasn’t the only thing that caught Wander’s attention.

With a giant stage attached to the restaurant, the place was pretty big - its wooden walls painted a dark green with golden-yellow windows. On top of the building was a large spotlight that switched between yellow, blue and green, mostly likely put there to catch the attention of ships who were even flying to or from Kabiato. A large sign stood tall in the parking lot:

**The Emerald Tavern - Food, Drinks and Music Galore!**

“Ooh, nice name,” he commented as he walked into the restaurant, wide eyed and already looking around. As he did, a familiar ship parked in a space just a few feet behind him, though remained un-noticed.

“Guess this is the place,” Peepers mumbled, “And it only took me two times to find it.”

‘Turn left in fifteen miles’ “Quiet you!” The GPS let out another small spark, just barely missing the Watchdog’s hand as he dialed his phone. “Hater, I’m here. Do you have everything set up on my la-?”

“Yes! Grod, just turn on the camera so we know that works too!” Peepers rolled his eye slightly, but obeyed, getting the video camera out of its small carrying bag and taking off the lens cap. It wasn’t the latest model, but it was fairly new - and it actually worked unlike the GPS. Turning it on, Peepers moved the camera slightly. “Can you see everything alright?”

“For the most part yeah, and it sounds like the audio’s working too. Excellent.” He could almost see the skeleton grinning. “Now get in there and get a good spot! I want to be able to see and hear every moment of their pathetic little show! Ha, let’s just see how great they are when they have to give a real performance!”

Peepers smirked slightly. “Right!” Putting the camera into sleep-mode and putting the lens cap back on, he hopped out of the ship and ran into the building.

“Oh no Ma’am, I’m actually with the band!” Wander told her, managing to pull his gaze away from all the decor - a mix of typical Western props that were painted green and of things that were a bit more modern like pictures of Kabiato and small television sets - that aligned the walls, “Although, I’ve gotta say you guys have got a great place here! I’ll have to remember to eat here before we leave Axalis for a while!” The red haired, five legged hostess gave him a small smile before leading him towards the bigger, second half of the building, where his musical partner was most likely anxiously waiting for him backstage.

Peepers on the other hand, didn’t wait to be greeted. Trying to look as inconspicuous as possible -
which was fairly easy to do because of his height, and the fact that he had traded in his helmet and rock and roll outfit for a simple black sweater and dark brown pants - he was able to slip past the front of the restaurant, keeping the camera bag hidden behind him the best he could as he walked past the various aliens sitting at their tables.

“Hey!” One of the waitress’s shouted suddenly, making Peepers freeze, “Tonight’s show - featuring the new band, ‘Wander and Sylvia’ - will starting in five minutes!”

Almost instantly, the small eyeball found himself right in the center of what felt like a stampede. “Move it or lose it, little guy!” “Oof! Hey, I’m not that lit- Ow! Hey! Watch the bag!” He then felt something cold pour onto his head as yet another person bumped into him. “Really?!” Unfortunately, as he tried to wipe the sticky soda off his head, he felt another person run into him, giving him a hard kick forward and making him land face-first on the hardwood floor. “Okay, that one was on purpose, wasn’t it?!”

Leaving as quickly as they had appeared, the restaurant patrons had exited the room, and were now standing in front of the wide stage, chatting and eagerly awaiting the performance. Peepers on the other hand was still laying on the restaurant floor, shivering slightly as he felt the soda make its way down his head and under his sweater. Just then, his phone buzzed.

“Peepers! Are u in position yet?!” the text read. Glancing up, the Watchdog groaned when he saw just how many people were packed in there… and how tall most of them were.

“I’m getting there,” he texted back before stuffing his phone back in his pocket, and running towards the performing area - making sure to grab an abandoned barstool on the way there.

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Her tail twitched in agitation. Where was he?! “I told him that if he was gonna meet me here, he needed to keep track of the time!” She paused for a moment, hearing the sounds of their audience, and groaned. “Wander… Where-”

“Sylvia!” The zbornak nearly jumped a foot in the air when her hairy spoon of a bandmate suddenly appeared in front of her.

“Wander! Where have you -?! Where did you even - ?!” Her eyes fell upon the flower crown resting on his orange furry head. “Aaand you’re wearing a flower crown.” While it definitely couldn’t ever be considered to be part of a rock and roll get-up, seeing him wearing one wasn’t too surprising. Sylvia gave him a look that was somewhere between amused and annoyed, and Wander gave her a small, apologetic smile, holding up his guitar as if to say - “I’m sorry I’m late, but I’m ready to play now!”

“... You know what, nevermind. I’ll ask you later.” Although if she knew her best friend as well as she thought she did, Sylvia had a pretty good guess that the words ‘surprise show’ would be a part of the explanation - and if that was the case, she couldn’t be too mad at him. “Just please remember to be on time next time, startin’ off a concert late isn’t exactly the best way to begin our summer career.”

“I know,” Wander nodded, “But don’t worry! Next time, I’ll even be here early! After all, someone has to help get everything on stage!”

“I think that’s what the stage hands are for, Wander.”

“Well there’s nothin’ that says I can’t give them an extra hand ‘ta work with!”
Sylvia smiled. “How about we just work on being here on time first, okay?” Wander smiled back at her, nodding. They could hear someone testing the microphone, and the curtains began to shake slightly. “You ready for this, buddy?” she asked as she walked towards her drumset.

“You know it! Any recommendations for our first song of the night?”

“Nah.” She enjoyed playing all their songs - though she did have a small preference for their songs that were a bit more her style - and besides, Wander always seemed to know what song to play for their opening number. “You just start strummin’ something, and I’ll be right behind you with the beat to go along with it!”

“As always,” Wander grinned. He started to shake with excitement, as he always did right before a performance. ‘I sure hope they like it!’ he thought, tilting his head slightly as he tried to peek through the curtains and look at his audience. Honestly, at least in Wander’s opinion, almost nothing was better than making people smile and dance with music - especially if it was something you had written or performed yourself.

His mind buzzed with thoughts coming and going like quick-flying cicadas as his fingers fiddled with the guitar, able to tune it without really thinking about it. What songs should they play first? Which songs should they wait to play, or save for a different show? His throat wasn’t too dry, was it? He sang a quick note just to make sure, and smiled at the results. Nope, nowhere near dry and ready to sing!

But as he stood there, waiting eagerly for the curtains to open and the show to begin, one thought kept echoing in the back of his mind.

‘I sure hope Hater decided to come...’

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It took a few minutes, but Peepers finally found the perfect place to stand - or rather, a place for his barstool to stand without getting pushed over. Once he did, he climbed up onto it - pleased to see that he didn’t have to worry about his view of the stage being blocked - and got out his video camera, turning it on. And just in time too, as he was able to see the hostess walk onto the stage and taking the microphone.

“Alright,” Peepers smiled, “Time to see what that vixen and her weirdo guitarist have up their sleeve! Right, Hater?” Just then, his phone buzzed, making his smile falter as he got out his cell phone. “I thought you said everything was working.”

“Maybe I could see a lot better if you toOK THE STuPID LENS CAP OFF!!”

“...” Facepalming, he took the cap off the lens and tossed it over his shoulder, making sure to keep the camera steady so he didn’t get any more texts from his bandmate.

“Alright everyone, we’ve got a new band playin’ here tonight! So, give a warm welcome to Wander and Sylvia!” He could almost hear Hater giving a disapproving ‘hmph’ at the uncreative name.

The faded red curtains opened, and applause filled the room as Wander took a step forward towards the mic, a huge grin spread across his face. While not as excited as Wander, Sylvia did look pretty happy, even giving a small wave to the crowd (which Peepers did NOT notice, nor did it make his heart skip a beat when it looked like she spotted him and gave him a small smile. ...Yeah, he totally didn’t do that).

Despite most bands just starting the opening song, Wander once again decided to greet his audience.
“We sure are happy to play here tonight, you guys have got a really great place here!” The restaurant employees, as well as a handful of the locals, gave a small yet loud cheer at that. “Well, with that said, hope ya’ll enjoy the show!” And without saying another word, Wander began strumming on his guitar, playing a very energetic beat. The spotlights changed color, going from yellow to blue and green and moving around the stage as Sylvia joined the song, keeping the tempo steady while still adding a bit of her own energy. The crowd cheered some more and watched as they played.

Meanwhile, a certain skeleton was sitting in an empty parking lot under a streetlight, with Peepers’ laptop propped against his knees and a half-eaten container of sweet and sour pork in his hands, doing anything but cheering.

After about five minutes of watching, Hater was starting to get annoyed. “All he’s doing is playing a random melody, he’s not even singing anything!” He supposed he could say it was a pretty good melody, and there was definitely a reason why people started clapping along, but it was still just a melody! “I mean, he can’t just expect to entertain anyone with just one melody and no lyrics! He’s not even trying to-

Just then, he noticed the zbornak - or at least he could assume it was her since she was behind the drums, wherever Peepers was standing had HORRIBLE lighting! - stand up and grab something that had been laying hidden beside her while her tail gripped a drumstick, still keeping the melody. The audience cheered as both they and Hater saw what it was. A deep blue guitar with some neon purple and black swirls on it, matching its owner’s tattoos almost perfectly. And as she did this, Wander stopped playing, instantly making Hater focus on him again. But even if that hadn’t caught the skeleton’s attention, the bright yellow spotlight now shining directly on the furry musician would have.

In his hand was the floppy green hat he usually wore (previously just sitting on the stage like the cyan guitar, almost in hiding), and after putting his guitar into it, he then pulled out a banjo - the same banjo he saw Wander playing earlier in the park. How both instruments could fit in there, Hater had no idea. “Just a dumb magic trick, that’s all.”

But of course, now that he had his banjo, Wander was of course going to play it. And play it he did. While Sylvia kept the tempo and strummed a light melody, Wander let himself slip into his own energetic, free-spirited banjo solo that made the audience clap and cheer for more. As the solo got faster, his fingers became little more than blurs, and yet he was still able to keep up with the song playing in his head. All the while he grinned and danced lightly around the stage. Somehow the silly flower crown managed to stay on his head despite all the dancing, much to Hater’s annoyance. He did this for a couple minutes more before ending his solo, the crowd now even more energetic than before because of it.

“...Well…Whatever! Banjos aren’t that impressive!” But at least they were mixing it up a little. Wait, no! He wanted their audience to get bored! And what did he care what Wander and his stupid little excuse for a rock band did?! Facepalming, Hater growled in frustration, trying to ignore the peppy music, only bringing his gaze back to the screen when the song ended.

Still keeping with simple stage effects, the lights changed their color to purple - save for one light blue spotlight that had centered itself on Sylvia - still slowly moving around the stage as the duo began their next song. This one also had a simple tempo, as evidenced by the fact that the zbornak was still using just her tail to keep the beat, but there was also a bit of a bite to it as she took over the main melody while Wander harmonized with his own guitar.

From what Hater could see (and hear), Sylvia pretty much provided the ‘rock’ part of their folk rock band. She grinned as she amped up her playing as her tail hit whipped against the drums, giving as
much energy and emotion as her musical partner had, but still being able to provide stability.

She never just played random notes, but instead knew just what to play and how to play it, making every note always seemed balanced and strong with her at the song’s lead. She also didn’t dance around - how could she when she was playing two instruments at the same time, a feat that even Hater had to admit was just a little impressive - but she did bob her head to the beat, her pink mane bouncing slightly and her grin growing whenever the song allowed her to really play out on her guitar.

“Wow~...” said a voice suddenly, almost sighing as they spoke. Recognizing the voice, Hater scowled. It looked like he would have to have a little talk with his drummer about admiring the enemy.

As for Wander, even when the spotlight was no longer on him he still acted as if it was, but at the same time he never tried to steal Sylvia’s thunder. He simply smiled and played along with her melody. “But, he’s the lead, isn’t he?” Hater questioned, “So how can he be so happy being forced to play back-up for his own band?!” Then again, this was Wander, the guy who could probably be happy doing anything. And honestly, Hater wouldn’t have been surprised if he was the one who had suggested letting Sylvia take the lead for a few songs. But still, it was hard for Hater to imagine. Giving up his lead position on the songs he had wrote, to give up his well-deserved spotlight? “Ha, as if I’d ever let Peepers take the lead for one of our performances,” he mumbled before stuffing the last of his take-out meal in his mouth.

Of course this song ended eventually as well, and once again the audience applauded, still as entertained and as energized as they had been at the beginning of the show - maybe even more so. Of course, Hater scowled at this, and his scowl only deepened as the little orange furball walked up to the microphone. It looked like he decided to finally play a song with lyrics.

Once again, Wander’s fingers started to naturally dance along the strings of his guitar, playing a melody that almost instantly got people to smile along with him. As for Sylvia, she stuck to lightly tapping her cymbals, at least for the song’s intro.

He tapped his feet to her tempo, swaying his hips slightly and making the flowers on his head jump and sway along with him. “Alright, feel free to start singin’ along once you get the words!” Wander told his audience, “And here we go!”

The zbornak nodded slightly, moving away from the cymbals and playing a short yet still entertaining solo on her drums before playing the tempo once again, a single second before Wander starting singing. The two were so in-sync, they didn’t even need to cue or even look at each other. It was all so natural to them, like they had been playing together for years.

“The universe above us ‘s as wide as we can see, got a road o’er the horizon and a pair of shoes beneath my feet. But even with all there is, to meet and greet and see, there’s plenty to enjoy right here - just as long as you’re with me.”
Hater scowled, those lyrics were just way too happy. They were just so peppy and cheerful...and easy to get stuck in one’s head. “...Oh great, just great!”

Wander continued strumming along, grinning as he sang. “A big loud city filled with lights, a porch with buzzing fireflies, a tiny little lake or a big blue sea - as long as I’m with ya, anywhere’s a treat to be! Grabbin’ a ship and travellin’ far, or even just goin’ a little ways by car. Havin’ a party or just tea for two, anything’s great as long as I’m with you!”

There was a small break in between the stanzas as both Wander and Sylvia got their own mini solos, playing out in their own respective styles.

“I’d travel all throughout space, everything would be so neat! But without you beside me, it just wouldn’t be my scene! I’d take your hand and we’d take off, and then we’d both be free! Cause whether its a small town, a forest or a shore; A faraway moon, an amazing world, or a nearby grocery store.

Anywhere can be great, anywhere can make me grin, just as long as you’re beside me, it’s always a win-win. Cause what’s a trip without friends beside ya, I wouldn’t want to know! But as long as we’re together, it don’t matter if we stay or if we go!” The chorus came up again, and quite a few people sang along this time.

“A big loud city filled with lights, a porch with buzzing fireflies, a tiny little lake or a big blue sea - as long as I’m with ya, anywhere’s a treat to be! Grabbin’ a ship and travellin’ far, or even just goin’ a little ways by car. Havin’ a party or just tea for two, anything’s great as long as I’m with you!”

Hater rolled his eyes, almost tempted to turn off the laptop right then and there. When was this dumb song going to be over?!

Just then, Wander’s guitar playing slowed, and Sylvia’s beats began to fade, until they were out of the song all together. Curious, the skeleton watched the screen. Wander’s smile was still spread across his face, but it was a bit smaller now. A bit softer, and a definite change from the almost manic grin he had been wearing for the show since the beginning of it. Even his tone changed a bit as sang along with the slow chords.

“They said we couldn’t travel, they tried to stop our show. They said ‘we’re just a bunch of kids,
what did we think we know’? About the universe and its workings, about real life in the world, and
to that I’d have to say ‘no’. Cause there’s still so much to learn, mistakes to face and things to do.”
He paused, just for a second. “But what better way to live my life, then to live with a friend that’s
true?”

His playing sped up again, and Sylvia slipped back into the song, pouring even more energy into it
as the audience came back with it. And surprisingly, Hater actually found himself continuing to listen
to the lyrics, almost focusing on them for reasons he wasn’t quite sure of.

“Trials to face, and problems I’m sure, obstacles more trouble than they’re worth. People with too
much to say, tryin’ to stop our sunny day. I’d face it all, this is true, I’d never let them affect my
mood. ‘Cause I’d feel your hand, you’d make me see, the universe is just waiting for us to take that
leap!”

A familiar chord led back to the chorus for the final time. “A big loud city filled with lights, a porch
with buzzing fireflies, a tiny little lake or a big blue sea - as long as I’m with ya, anywhere’s a treat to
be! Grabbin’ a ship and travellin’ far, or even just goin’ a little ways by car. Havin’ a party or just tea
for two, anything’s great as long as I’m with you!”

As soon as the last word left his lips, Wander finished the song out with a light little diddy, ending
with one final chord. The people cheered, and the furry guitarist’s grin returned full force. He even
looked back at his Sylvia, who simply smiled gave him a thumbs up.

Even though the song had stopped, a certain skeleton still had the lyrics buzzing around in his mind.
“Hmph, what a dumb song,” Hater mumbled. Just a dumb song with dumb happy lyrics that
somehow managed to drill their way into his skull. That was all.

For a moment, he once again considered turning off the connection the camera. He had seen enough
to know that there would be no big special effects, no game changing surprises, absolutely nothing to
worry about competition-wise.

And yet, he still found himself only minimizing the video feed rather than cutting it completely as he
turned on the internet, hoping to find something to distract him from the future annoying tunes that
they would no doubt be playing. ‘Because that’s all they are,’ Hater thought to himself, ‘not even
real rock music...’

Just dumb little songs...

Wander almost couldn’t believe their show was over already. He remembered every moment of it,
but at the same time it almost seemed like a blur. ‘Guess that’s the power of performin’,” he thought
with a shrug as he finished up his song. Besides, as much as he didn’t want this show to end, there
would be plenty of other performances.

“Thanks everyone!” he shouted over the crowds cheers, “Have a nice night!” And with that, the
curtains began to close once again, the spotlights turned off while the main lights came back on, and
Wander rushed into Sylvia’s arms.

“That was great!” he grinned, “There were so many people! And I even heard them clappin’ and
singin’ along with some songs! Wasn’t that great?! Oh! Did ya hear all the cheerin’? And you, you
were amazing, Sylvia! Oh, do ya think they’ll let us do a quick encore?”

Sylvia chuckled. “Maybe, but first do ya think we can grab one of those complimentary drinks they
were offering us earlier?” It didn’t affect her stamina too much, but those stage lights were still pretty warm.

Wander opened his mouth to answer, but a different voice replied. “Way ahead of you, Sylvie.” Turning his head, he saw a familiar duo, and didn’t hesitate to run over and pull both of them into a hug. “Hey guys!” he greeted, “Hope ya enjoyed the show! Oh, and thanks again for helpin’ with all the tech stuff, Drake!”

“No problem,” Dracor nodded, giving him a small smile as Demurra handed Wander one of the cold bottles of pop she was holding, “It’s a pretty fun job after all.”

“And it also doesn’t hurt when you get a pretty good view out of the deal,” Demurra added, “I have to say guys, not many bands can do shows that are mostly instrumental, but you guys definitely pulled it off! Though I have to say, that last song is going to be stuck in my head for days!” Though she really didn’t look too upset about this.

Sylvia chuckled. “Yeah well, you can blame Wander for that one. He has a knack for coming up with catchy lyrics that can make anyone crack a smile.”

“Aw, Syl, you’re gonna make me blush!” Wander replied, grinning widely her, “They really aren’t anything that special!”

“I dunno, I know several ‘friends’ who would say otherwise,” Demurra commented, shooting her boyfriend a small, knowing look. The dragon gave a small nod, knowing exactly which ‘friends’ she was talking about.

“Well, I hope yer friends enjoyed the show too!” Finding himself thirstier than he thought, and knowing he was running out of time, Wander quickly downed the rest of his pop, giving a refreshed sigh once he finished. “Thanks for the drink, Demurra! Now, if you’ll all excuse me, I’ve got a friend of my own that I need to meet up with!” With that, he quickly ran towards the small set of stairs at the side of the stage.

“A friend?” The couple glanced at Sylvia, curiously.

She blinked. “Hey don’t look at me, I don’t know who he’s talking about.” Although she had a pretty good idea.

“Well, after my quick survey, it seems most were quick to say that they enjoyed the show…” Although a majority of people he asked just told him to get lost. “Aaand would gladly pay to see Wander and Sylvia again.” Setting his camera down, Peepers only had to wait a couple seconds for his phone to buzz.

“really, u think so? Cause I TOTALLY didn’t get that from all from all the cheering and clapping I heard! It doesn’t matter!! No matter how many great shows they have, we’ll still kick their smalltown butts at the show that REALLY MATTERS! By this time three months from now, I’LL b the one getting all the cheering! Btw, we r practicing extra 2morrow, so start heading back so we can get an early start.”

“Whatsoever you say, Hater,” Peepers mumbled as he shut his phone, not even bothering to correct his bandmate on the fact that they both be getting the fame and glory (hopefully). But no sooner had he glanced up from his cell phone, it seemed like his entire field of vision had been swallowed up by a face that was way too happy to be anywhere near normal and the color orange. “GAH!”

“I knew I saw you in the crowd!” Wander greeted, his voice full of excitement, “Sorry I didn’t say hi
to ya, I didn’t spot you until after I started the first song. But hey, at least we can say hi to each other now!” Pulling himself up onto the small drink counter that was behind Peepers, he looked down at the little eyeball. “So, did you enjoy the show?”

Before Peepers could even answer, or figure out just how Wander had managed to find him so quickly, the phone sitting in his lap began to ring with a light melody. “...You know what, I think this call’s for you,” he said, holding it out for Wander to take.

And of course, he accepted. “Y’ello?” he greeted after flipping the phone back open.

**“OF COURSE HE DIDN’T ENJOY THE SHOW! AND BEFORE YOU ASK, NEITHER DID I!”**

“Hater!” Wander brightened, “Glad ‘ta hear from you again!” He looked around wildly, trying to find a red hoodie or a skeleton face covered with black make-up in the crowd, “Are ya outside, or are you just waitin’ in line for the bathroom, cause I’d sure love to-” It was then he spotted the video camera, right at the exact same moment Peepers remembered it. Of course, Wander was quicker, making the watchdog fall to the floor after trying to grab it first.

“Oh yeah! I thought I saw Peepers recording!” he said, practically shoving his face into the camera lens, “Hater! Can ya see me alright?!”

Hater’s hands and eyes were glowing a furious bright green as he saw the furry nuisance take up most of the computer screen. It was a wonder his cell phone didn’t break - either from all the electric energy, or by just how hard Hater was holding it.

“**It’s kind of hard NOT to see you when you’re standing two inches away from the camera! Which is exactly my problem! NOW PUT IT DOWN AND GET LOST!”**

“Whoops! Sorry!” Wander said as he pulled the camera back, indicating that he at least heard the first bit of the skeleton’s rant, “Guess I got a little over excited. But hey, I sure do appreciate your support, friend! You must’ve really wanted to see our show if you had Peepers record it for ya!”

**“THAT ISN’T THE REASON AT ALL!”** Hater yelled, his voice so loud that even Wander had to pull the phone away from him a bit.

“Oh! Well, whatever the reason, I still appreciate it!” Wander replied, still managing to smile, “And you know, I may not have anything to record it with, but I’ll still try to make it to all of your shows! You guys play some really great music after all, and then afterwards we can all hang out together, maybe get some drinks or go to a party, don’t you think that would be fun, Hate-”

“STOP!” And surprisingly, Wander did, looking at the camera curiously now. “**Just, stop acting like we’re friends or that this is all just some ‘friendly competition’! I want nothing to do with you, or your pathetic excuse for a band! All I want, is to play my own music - NOT doing a duet with you, EVER - and win the Battle of the Bands! That’s all! SO JUST LEAVE ME ALONE!”** Not having anything else to say, he slammed his phone shut, holding back the urge to throw it, just for the satisfaction of watching it break. His only real annoyance left was that Wander - still having a way to communicate with him, would get the last word.

As he kept his grip on the camera, the orange guitarist’s smile didn’t come back right away. “Wow... This is really important to you, isn’t Hater?” He gave a light smile. It wasn’t mocking or humoring, or even amused. It was one hundred percent genuine. “I mean, I already knew that, but still...” It actually sounded like there was admiration in his voice, something that made Hater angry and confused at the same time. “Well, I’m still gonna try to see your shows, but I’ll make sure not to get in your way too much - at least not during those times.”
His eyes narrowed. He should’ve known Wander wouldn’t leave him alone completely, no matter how much he insulted and screamed. He was either an idiot, or he was just that friendly and optimistic.

Hater thought for a moment. ...No, definitely an idiot.

Wander gave a light chuckle, making Hater briefly wonder if he could somehow hear his thoughts. “Still, it’s good to remember to stop and see the comets every once in a while. After all, there are a lot of great places to see and things to do - and even if it is a lot of fun practicing and performing, it shouldn’t be the only thing you do on the road. Am I right, Hater?” The skeleton just grumbled as he glared at the screen. “Well, I guess I’ll see ya around! Later Hater!”

With that said, the camera’s view shifted as he handed it back to its owner, a blur of orange passing into a blur of black, white and red. Of course by this point, Hater had slammed the laptop shut.

He was annoyed, and angry, and tired. Tired of dealing with annoying people with their dumb comments and their dumb optimism, already feeling tired of traveling, and - after feeling it for what felt like several hours - he was actually starting to feel tired of feeling angry.

Knowing he should do something to try and calm down as well as the urge to burn or destroy something - and obviously Peepers’ laptop wasn’t an option, they didn’t have the money to replace it and he certainly wasn’t going to listen to the Watchdog’s complaining the rest of the summer - he reached into his pocket and pulled out the small box of cigarettes for the first time since their opening show on the moon.

The first cigarette he didn’t even bother smoking, he just let his electricity loose and watching the white stick burn bright green before turning into a pile of ash. Almost therapeutic in a sense, he watched ashes fall out between his boney fingers and land onto the concrete, where he kicked them away before grabbing another cigarette (this time only lighting the end of it).

Placing it in his mouth, Hater laid himself down on the pavement, staring up at the sky. The light from the streetlight burned his eyes, annoying him further. Looking at the dark sky wasn’t much better, though it didn’t annoy him as much. Still, despite his best efforts, his thoughts still rang with the cheerful words of his competition, his smiling face still staying clear in his memory. He just didn’t get it. He didn’t get his music or his positive attitude. He didn’t get him. And that was what annoyed him, what confused him the most.

Hater removed the cigarette, blowing a large cloud of smoke into the air above him, as if trying to block the image in his mind with it. “Stupid Wander…”
The night was still young. A country cd had been put on, and most people had abandoned their tables once again to go into the other room and dance. Others - like Wander - were sitting with friends and strangers alike, chatting about whatever came to mind and enjoying themselves.

Peepers did neither of those things. Instead, he simply sat on his barstool, keeping a steady watch on his camera bag and drinking his tall glass of pop. After traveling practically the entire week, as well as the hardly enjoyable night he’d had, he desperately needed a real drink. But as desperate as he was, even he wasn’t dumb enough to get drink before driving. Paying a ticket or a fine would definitely put a dent in their budget. Besides, he only planned on staying at the tavern until he was sure Hater had cooled down a bit. He wasn’t really wanting to listen to a long rant or deal with his brooding, but Peepers also wanted to get at least a few hours of sleep too.

‘Just about ten more minutes, then I’ll leave,’ he thought, certain that would be enough time for Hater. And really, Peepers couldn’t wait to get out of there. ‘Is it me, or do all these country songs sound the same?!’

“Hey, is this seat taken?”

“Yeah, sure, knock yourself out,” Peepers said, not even bothering to look up from his carbonated beverage. Once they sat down however, he had to do a double take.

“Go ahead and give me a Blue Hawaii,” Sylvia told the bartender, “and easy on the pineapple juice.” She tossed a few credits on the table.

As the bartender went to work, Sylvia glanced over at the Watchdog - who was apparently staring at her before quickly turning away, suddenly becoming very interested in the countertop. “So… Figured you would’ve left after the show.” Unlike Wander, she knew exactly why he had come, and while she was a bit annoyed - it wasn’t enough to anger her. “Needed a break from your bandmate?”

“Well, yes and no,” Peepers replied, still not looking up, “I just, you know, thought it would be a good idea to just, give him some time to himself. After all, we have been in the same car for the past
“Yeah, travelling together with someone does get a bit claustrophobic sometimes,” she nodded. After traveling all over their home planet, even she had to admit that, though she still found herself not leaving Wander’s side too often. “And when you’re travelling with someone like Bonehead - no offense, but I don’t blame ya for wanting to get away for a bit.”

“He’s really not that bad,” Peepers mumbled, “I mean yeah he can be loud, and easily aggravated, and anti social, and childish, and-” He paused. “...Okay yeah he sounds pretty bad but he’s still tolerable.” Even if they didn’t say it outloud, they were pretty much each other’s only friend. Hater was nowhere near a perfect person, but Peepers still cared about him despite it all.

“If you say so.” The conversation dropped, and once Sylvia got her drink, the only sound between them was her sipping.

While the zbornak didn’t look too bothered by the silence, Peepers was starting to feel pressured by it. It was a horrible idea, but he still couldn’t help but want to jump at the chance to have a conversation with her. A talented, punk-rock, really attractive looking Zbornak woman. Having her sitting right next to him, completely free from interrupting bandmates, was both a blessing and a curse.

‘Come on!’ he told himself, ‘Just say something! Anything! Compliment her, talk about her show, JUST DO SOMETHING, YOU FOOL!’

“That was really cool!” he shouted suddenly, getting Sylvia’s attention. He clammed up for a moment before continuing. “Y-You know, when you started playing two instruments at once? Yeah, that was pretty cool... Using your tail for the drums and playing the guitar with your hands. But then again, what else would you use to play the guitar? I mean, you’d have to be pretty talented to play with your tail or feet or... or something.”

He briefly wondered if there was a limit to how many times you could mentally slap yourself for being so stupid.

Sylvia however, smirked a little at him. Yep, definitely a dork, but at least he wasn’t acting like a jerk. “Thanks,” she replied, giving him a small nod, “Took some time to master but I guess it helps when you’ve got an extra limb. And you play the drums too, right?”

“Yeah!” Realizing that was probably a bit too loud, he gave a small awkward laugh. “I mean, yeah, I do.”

Trying to play it cool, he leaned back against the counter as he looked up at her. “I play other instruments but uh, yeah the drums are my main one. I’m pretty good at them, and, well, I guess you’re pretty good at them too! But I guess some of those beats were pretty simple, and probably easy to learn, so it’s not too surprising that you’re good at playing them, but-” He quickly noticed she was no longer smiling. His pupil shrunk slightly as he tried to correct himself.

“B-But a lot of your drumming was still pretty good! And hey, simple is fine! I mean, y-you did a good job keeping the song together, which is totally an impressive feat, especially considering when your guitarist just decides to start playing random notes. I mean, what kind of-” The zbornak’s frown turned into an unimpressed, definitely unamused glare.

Crap! “O-Oh but of course everyone has their own style! And if he can make random notes sound good, then good for him! Uh, right?” When she didn’t reply, he gave another awkward laugh. “Ummm, did I tell you yet that I really liked your guitar playing in the second song?”
“Yeah, thanks,” Sylvia replied, not sounding thankful in the least, “speaking of Wander, I think I’m just gonna go find him.” Without even muttering a goodbye, she sat her empty glass on the counter, and walked away, leaving the Watchdog to wonder where he had gone wrong.

‘Oh yeah, when I started talking,’ he thought before slamming his head against the counter, sighing. Yep, he was hopeless. ‘Maybe I’m better off just thinking of her as the competition, a musical enemy.’ After all, yelling insults seemed easier than trying to babble out coherent compliments (while at the same time making sure NOT to accidentally insult them).

Peepers lifted his head up slightly. He could see Sylvia sitting with Wander and the couple that hosted that party a few days ago, easily slipping into the conversation. Demurra said something, and after a quick comment from Wander, all four of them were holding their stomachs in laughter. The Watchdog slouched. No doubt Sylvia had forgotten all about him, and probably wouldn’t even bother trying to start up another conversation that would most likely end in just as much as a disaster as the first one.

Suddenly listening to another one of Hater’s rants and dealing with his bad mood didn’t seem so bad.

He glared at the group. Well fine, whatever! He had signed up for this trip for the same reason Hater did: to play the genre he loved, to be taken seriously in his musical career, and - probably the most important reason - the fame and respect that would come out of it. He didn’t care about summer romances and hanging out and parties, they probably weren’t that great anyway no matter what people said.

Paying for his drink, Peepers grabbed his camera bag and hopped down from his barstool, silently walking out of the restaurant, unaware that there was someone watching him out of the corner of her eye.

And apparently she had been watching for too long, because Sylvia started to hear a small, familiar noise. “eeeeeeEEEEEE!”

“What?” she asked, turning to her friend.

“You know, you never said how your talk with Peepers went,” Wander replied, grinning at her, “Soooo?”

Sylvia rolled her eyes. “It was hardly a conversation. I just talked to him a bit while I got my drink, no big deal.” She could see him silently asking for details, but managed to ignore him long enough for him to eventually turn his focus back to Demurra and Dracor.

As they all talked, she still couldn’t help but think back to the eyeball. He didn’t seem like a jerk - at least not intentionally. And definitely not as arrogant as Bonehead, though she could see a bit of it in him. Still, at least he tried to be civil with her. She wouldn’t exactly call him a friend...but she wouldn’t say she hated him either.

‘I doubt we’ll ever talk again,’ Sylvia thought to herself, swirling her pop bottle slightly and watching the bubble go around in it, ‘But...I guess it wouldn’t be too terrible if I had to see him or talk to him again.’ She smirked.

‘Besides, I still have to show him what I can really do with my drumming.’

Chapter End Notes
The first picture was drawn by me, the second picture was drawn by Darkwingsnark on Tumblr
*Beep* “7.50.” He handed the cashier a handful of crumbled up bills and grabbed the box, giving a small mumble of “Keep the change.”

“Uh, hey, you need any help carryin’ that, pal?” The eyeball turned his head sharply to glare at the employee.

“I think I can handle carrying a few donuts and some cof-EEK!” He nearly tripped, spilling their breakfast/lunch for the day, but managed to catch himself just in time.

The three eyed, brown haired alien rolled his eyes. “Whatever man.” Seeing that he was much more interested in his magazine, Peepers just scowled and continued walking outside. He could see his bandmate’s legs hanging over the bumper of the ship as he laid on the mattress. Of course, it didn’t take long for him to sit up once he smelt the steaming cups of coffee.

“All right!” Hater snatched one of the cups, sniffing it. No cream, tons of sugar, and just a tiny bit of foam. A ghost of a smile formed on his lips. Just the way he liked it.

“You’re welcome,” Peepers mumbled as he took a sip of his own coffee, twitching slightly as the caffeine started to flow through his veins - which was good because he had a feeling he’d definitely need today.

“Okay, grab a donut out of the box-” the skeleton gave him a silent glare as a warning to not touch any of the chocolate ones unless he wanted to risk immediate electrocution - “And let’s get going! The sooner we get off this rock the better!” He slammed the trunk door down and headed over to the passenger side.

Peepers rolled his eye. “We’ve only been back on Axalis for two days.”

“Two days too long!” Really, other than sleeping in a van it hadn’t been that bad. The two had spend most of the previous day practicing and eating fast food. But still, the thought of being on the same planet as Wander aggravated him to no end, almost making him paranoid - as if the little furball would pop out at any moment.

As for Peepers, while he didn’t think it was worth driving thirteen hours straight and eating breakfast food for a late lunch to get away from the folksong duo, he too was glad to be leaving. They had another show coming up, plus he was certain that they had a nice hotel room waiting for them. He smiled at that thought, his back begging to sleep on something other than a carseat.

As soon as Peepers turned the key, the ship roared to life and the GPS flickered and came on (though half the screen was covered in static - which Peepers could swear sounded like mocking laughter). The Watchdog sighed. “You know, it wouldn’t take me very long to go inside and grab a map. Or, hey, it turns out my laptop can go to this great site called ‘Mapquest’, and I really think-”

“There is nothing wrong with my GPS!” Hater argued, “and it would just be a waste of money to buy a map when we have it! Now just type in the stupid planet’s name and let’s GO!”

“But-“
“Ugh, fine! I’ll do it! And I bet it’ll tell me exactly where we need to go too!” Ignoring Peepers’ glare, Hater smacked the screen of the GPS, instantly making all the static go away. A smug smile forming on his face, Hater then typed in the name of their next venue.


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“Ronus, huh?”

“Yep! Brightest planet in the galaxy!” Demurra unfolded her map and pointed at one of the farthest planets away from Axalis, almost looking more like a sun than a planet. “And, home to plenty of hotels.”

“Yeah. Somethin’ tells me we wouldn’t have the easiest time sleepin’ outside with all those lights around us,” Wander replied, “Although, they would be neat to see.”

“First hotel, then sightseeing,” Sylvia reminded him. Although, if this trip was taking 15 plus hours (including rest stops and meal breaks), Wander would probably be too tired to even suggest sightseeing when they finally arrived. ‘…Then again, this is Wander we’re talking about,’ Sylvia thought, smiling slightly.

“I should warn you, you guys are gonna have a lot of competition here,” Demurra said as she folded the map back up, “With all the tourists and entertainment places on Ronus, it’s gonna be a lot tougher to get people to notice you - especially when they’re gonna have literally dozens of other show choices to go to.”

“And not just bands,” Dracor added, sitting down next to his girlfriend with a bag of chips in his clawed hand, “There’s also magic acts, single singers, light shows, comedians - oh, and the casinos.”

“Not exactly what I’d call ‘entertainment’,” Demurra commented, “but they do bring in big crowds.”

Wander didn’t really look worried though. In fact, he looked pretty excited. “Sounds like Ronus has a lot of neat things ta do and see!” he grinned, “I-” No, wait. That wasn’t all they were there for. They also wanted to try and play a couple shows while they were there. Remembering this, Wander adjusted his hat and put on his ‘serious face’. “Now, how do we get people to come see us before seeing everything else? Hmmm…”

“It may sound like a cliche, but maybe we should try advertising,” Sylvia suggested. Her face grimaced slightly as she remembered the Harbingers of Doom’s ‘attempt’ at advertising. But then again, she was sure they could make a poster better than theirs, probably.

“It definitely couldn’t hurt.” Demurra paused, taking one of her boyfriend’s chips (not that he minded sharing). “Though most people don’t pay a lot of attention to posters unless the band’s already started to make a name for themselves. And since Ronus is so far from Axalis, you probably won’t have much - if any - name recognition there.” She gave a smile. “But while ‘Wander and Sylvia’ may not have intergalactic fans yet, the ‘Battle of the Bands’ does.”

The couple smiled. They’d been going to the Battle for years now, and what started out as just a fun event to try and get a few bands on their feet became not only a legitimate competition, but a popular one as well - with plenty of fans in high places. “Like I said, this is one of the big stops for bands. If you mention that you’re in the competition, that’ll automatically turn some heads. Still, you may want to consider partnering up with another band for this planet, simply because the revenues are gonna fill up fast.”
Wander’s seriousness quickly changed to excitement once again. “Play with another band?! That sounds great! We could try mixin’ up the styles or maybe even try writing a song together! Oh, but there are so many great bands to choose from! How are we gonna pick!”

“Well, I’d say which ever bands are actually willing to share the stage would be a good place to start,” Sylvia told him. Guess that meant Bonehead and Cyclops were out of the running - not that she really minded.

“Hmm… Oh, Drake! You said that you were checkin’ the time. How long till the bus leaves?”

“Oh! Uhh…” He turned to look at the bus station clock. “About twenty minutes from now.”

“Perfect! Plenty of time to see who we can find - and maybe make some new friends while we’re at it!” With that said, he leapt from the bench and started jogging towards the center of the bus station where most people were standing with their luggage, shouting a quick “Thanks!” to his dragon friend as he did so.

“Guess I should stick with him,” Sylvia said, standing up as well, knowing fully well how easy it was for Wander to lose track of time - especially when socializing - and the last thing they wanted to do was miss their bus. “Hey, if we’re not back in twenty minutes, think you can try and stall the bus driver?”

“We’ll do our best,” Demurra replied with a casual yet confident smile.

“Great, thanks!” And with that, the zbornak left too. Since there was more room on the bench, Demurra slipped her heels off and placed her legs on the bench, leaning against her boyfriend as he folded one of his wings around her.

“Do you really think they’ll be able to find another band to perform with?” Dracor asked.

“It’s worth a shot,” she shrugged, though she knew as well as her boyfriend that even the friendliest bands had trouble sharing the spotlight. “Maybe they can get the Harbingers of Doom to perform with them.”

“….Dear, you know I love you, right?”

The blonde smirked. “You tell me so everyday sooo, I’m pretty sure I do.”

“Good, keep that in mind when I tell you how unlikely that is. And by ‘unlikely’ I mean, probably will never ever happen. Ever.”

Demurra just giggled. “Well, you never know.” She took another one of his chips. “Stranger things had happened. And hey, a heavy metal-alternative-folk rock combination act? I’d listen to it at least once just for the idea.”

“That is if they even manage to make it to the stage, or could even write a song together. I mean, what would that even sound like?”

She glared at him playfully. “Are you saying you don’t trust my judgement, Drake?”

He smirked and pulled her closer. “Never in a million years, love.” His mind flashed back to a certain skeleton he’d barely met at their party. “But it’s not you I’m talking about…”
It was times like this that Hater remembered why he never traveled. He was completely and utterly bored out of his skull. Peepers was still at the wheel, most of their donuts and coffee had been consumed, and he was pretty sure he had read every single word of every single magazine they had (including the words in the ads). “Remind me to buy a game or something on Ronus,” he told Peepers. A GameToy would at least kill a couple hours.

“Yes,” the Watchdog nodded, barely moving his head. When all he could do was drive and listen to Hater’s silence and/or complaining, it was a lot easier to just let his mind wander as he gripped the steering wheel, only waking from this state when he heard a direction from the GPS (which had actually been working pretty well so far, as Hater had pointed out several times).

A few seconds later, Hater gave another frustrated sigh. Grod, how did people STAND this?! ‘Maybe it’d be better just to sleep,’ he thought as he reached over the seat and grabbed his MP3 player from the back. Turning it on, he scrolled through his playlists.

“My songs’... ‘Midnight Boredom’...’I Hate Everything’... Hmm, ‘Mega Mix #7’ might be good...” He selected the playlist, and the last few chords of one of the songs played before moving onto the next song. As soon as he heard the guitars start to play, he started to mimic the chords with his fingers.

“Don’t say if I were you (say if I were you), Or tell me what you’d do, How things would be if You were in my shoes, Cuz you're not me!”

Closing his eyes, he continued to mimic the chords while at the same time turning the volume up to ‘MAX’. “You know what I need, And it's not another serenade! I get so tired of all the things you say! Give me what I want, if you only would, I'd gladly throw this all away.”

As soon as the song entered the chorus again, he started to quietly sing along, knowing that Peepers either wouldn’t notice or wouldn’t say anything. In fact, both bandmates were so busy in their own worlds, neither of them noticed when a small light on the dashboard started to blink...

“Don’t say if I were you (say if I were you), Or tell me what you’d do, Or things would be if You were in my shoes (cuz you're not me)! ... I know you think you’re bein’ nice, But spare me all your lame advice. Time to play my hand and roll the dice, Everybody's got their price, For far too long I've been denied, I'm makin' my move so just step aside, No one can say I never tried, To do everything to get back my pride!

“Don’t say if I were you (say if I were you), Or tell me what you’d do (tell me what you'd do), Or how things would be if, You were in my shoes (cuz you're not me!)”

Just then, the engine sputtered and made ship jerk forward, making both of them let out a small yelp. “What the-?!” Hater shouted, pulling his headphones off, “PEEPERS! What did you do?!”

“I didn’t do anything!” Peepers shouted back, “I-” The engine sputtered again, and a stream of smoke started to come up from the front of the ship. A tiny alarm went off on the dashboard, and Hater’s eyes widened. “No no nonononononoNO!”

“Don’t worry, Hater!” Peepers said quickly, turning off their ‘path’ and heading towards a flat, floating piece of earth that wasn’t too far away, “There’s a small asteroid we can land on right over there! I’m sure it’s nothing too serious... hopefully.”

Hater just growled, trying to keep his anger from exploding. Okay, maybe driving several hours at their max speed wasn’t the best idea, but seriously?! This had to happen NOW?! “You better be able to fix this, Peepers, that’s all I can say.”
“Like I said, I’m sure it’s fi-” The engine coughed and sputtered, and a small sparks came out of one of the headlights until it finally formed a tiny flame. “... Uhhh-”

“Just shut up and park the ship,” Hater stated. Peepers obeyed - silent this time. It was a bit hard with all the smoke, but they did eventually manage to land on the rock without getting injured or getting blown up, so at least that was a good sign. Unfortunately, the good omens seemed to come to a screeching halt once Peepers popped the trunk open and got a good look at the engine (as well as a face full of smoke).

“W-Well,” he coughed, blinking his now blood-shot eye, “It’s still salvageable, thank Grod, but several pieces are pretty much shot. We can do without most of them but the important ones maay take a while to fix, plus there’s a few screws loose and some other things-” Another flame sparked to life. “Also we should probably do something about that.” He mentally put ‘stop ship from catching fire’ on top of the list.

The skeletal guitarist threw his hands up in the air. “We don’t HAVE ‘a while’, Peepers! You’re the one who’s always squawking about staying on schedule! If we don’t get to Ronus by tomorrow afternoon, we’ll have to deal with all those other lame bands getting all the best gigs!”

“You don’t think I know that?!” Peepers yelled, getting just as frustrated, “Look, unless I get a couple extra hands and a set of new parts, it’s gonna just have to be a while!” He almost added a “So just deal with it!” but decided not to. He was frustrated, but not stupid.

Gritting his teeth, Hater turned around and threw a lightning bolt into the sky - a classic move for when he couldn’t do anything else to release his anger. But before he could continue throwing a fit, he noticed just what was flying near where he had thrown his attack.

“Peepers!”

The watchdog sighed. “What now, Hate-”

“A bus!” “A, wait, a bus?!” “Buses have tools and extra parts right?!” “Y-Yes! Yes they do!” Peepers climbed onto the roof of the ship and started jumping up and down. “HEY! Over here!”

“I swear if they drive past us - HEY!” Hater threw another lightning bolt, this time straight up above him, acting almost like a signal or a flare. And before he needed to fire another one, he noticed that bus was starting to turn and was now heading right towards them! “YES!” the skeleton cheered.

“Thank you Universe!” Peepers added with a grin. When the bus neared the flat, dusty surface of the asteroid, Hater ran to try and meet it while Peepers stayed by their ship (mostly just to man the fire-extinguisher).

The bus screeched to a halt, it’s engines turning off. They were staying to help! They’d have the right tools, or they would take them to Ronus and call a tow-truck for their ship. However they would help, it didn’t matter. All that mattered to Hater was that they would make it around the same time as the other bands (which wasn’t as nice as being there early, but it was a lot better than being too late) and that for once, things were actually going right.

He watched the bus doors, waiting for his chance to speak to the driver - when he heard one of the windows open instead.

“Hey, Hater! Is that you? Wow! That sure is a coincidence! We were just stoppin’ here for a lunch break ourselves and here you are! What are the odds, huh?”
Hater could only hide his eyes under his hoodie and sigh. Yep, it was official. The universe hated him.

Wander kicked at the dirt under his feet, drawing a little picture with his foot before folding his legs back up and wrapping his arms around them. Now, Wander certainly didn’t mind a little quiet time every once in a while, but Hater had been sitting next to him (or rather, Wander had walked over and sat down next to him since he was so far away from the others, figuring that he would need some company) in silence, glaring straight ahead for quite a while. Honestly, Wander was starting to worry about him.

“Hey Hater, ya know, I think they should have some sandwiches leftover from lunch time. I can go get ya one if you want! They may not have many choices to choose from, but you can decide if you want mustard or may-

“Stop,” Hater said firmly, his voice surprisingly softer than usual (maybe that was because Wander never seemed to respond to his yelling, no matter how loud he got), “I just want to sit here - in silence - until my ship’s repaired, okay?”

If the skeleton had gotten his way, Wander wouldn’t have even be there. But of course, before Hater could tell him and the rest of the bus to go away, Peepers had rushed over to him and stopped him while at the same time explaining their predicament. ‘Hmph, traitor.’

Of course, Wander had insisted they’d help, and so there he was. Sitting in the dirt of an asteroid, next to his musical enemy - plus a bunch of other annoying tourists - waiting for his ship to be repaired. Which was STILL taking forever.

“Well ya know,” Wander started to say, not noticing the small groan from Hater as soon as he started talking, “A conversation always makes the time go by a lot faster! And, I’ve actually got something I wanna-

Hater’s head turned towards Wander so sharply, the furry guitarist nearly asked him if he had hurt himself. “I don’t, feel like talking. AT ALL.” And with that, Hater turned away from him, silent once again.

“Hmm…” Well, as much as Wander wanted to, it looked like he wasn’t going to change Hater’s mind about talking. Still, there had to be something he could do to make the time go faster for the skeleton - and maybe put him in a better mood too. He glanced up at Hater, then at his feet, the sky, the ship where Sylvia and Peepers were working, the other people standing by the- Wander gave a sharp gasp before grinning.

“Ding!” With one swift motion, he pulled off his hat and reached inside it until he found what he was looking for: a stunning, emerald green guitar with a bright orange strap. “Huh.” Usually when he wasn’t on stage, he played his old acoustic guitar. Then again, the hat had always given him just what he wanted (or maybe needed) before. A soft smile fell on his lips. “Best twenty-five credits I’ve ever spent.” Who would’ve guessed such a great looking hat would be so handy?

Placing his hat back on his head, Wander began to tune his instrument, not noticing the small flinch that came from Hater when he heard it. Slowly, the skeleton turned to look at Wander, his face
quickly going from annoyed to angry.

“Hope ya don’t mind,” Wander said casually, eyes still on his guitar, “You said you didn’t wanna talk - and I respect that - but you didn’t say anything about practicing. Besides, music always puts folks in a good mood!”

Hater gritted his teeth. No. No no no! Hater wasn’t going to listen to another one of his dumb songs with their dumb, weird feeling lyrics! No way! He was about to start screaming when he stopped. Of course, Wander would never listen. One way or another, the furball would find a way to keep playing.

And that’s when realization hit him. Slowly, a grin started to form on his boney face. ‘If I can’t get him to shut up,’ he thought, ‘then I’ll just fight fire with fire! And fight lame chords and lyrics with REAL music!’

Wander gave a small chuckle. “Actually Hater, this reminded me of what I was gonna try and ask ya. See, my friend Demurra said-” Before he could finish, a hand grabbed his guitar strap and yanked him forward and into the face of the man sitting next to him. Though really, he was more surprised than anything else, so much so that he almost didn’t notice the smile on Hater’s face.

“Don’t move,” he said, “I’ll be right back.” With that, Hater dropped him and started to walk away.

“...Well alright-y then! See ya when you get back!” Wander waved. Hater just kept walking, rolling his eyes as he made his way over to the ship and opened the back trunk. At the same time, his bandmate (along with the only person who had volunteered - or rather, Wander convinced her - to help) was still working on the front of the vehicle.

“Well, I think I’ve got everything that needed to be tightened,” Sylvia told him, lifting her head up. A long neck definitely worked for a job like that.

“Good for you,” Peepers said with as little sincerity as possible, not even looking at her.

“...You know, I don’t have to help you,” Sylvia told him, scowling. Little ungrateful flarfnarbeler, what was his problem?

“Yeah well, you’re free to leave whenever you want, Salvia.” Peepers snapped back, only looking at her long enough to glare before turning away again to work on the fried wires of the engine.

Sylvia blinked. “Salvia? Really? I don’t even get it. What, you can’t think of a better insult than that, Squinty?”

“I don’t squint!” he yelled, looking at her again, “It’s, it’s just all the smoke!”

“Which stopped about half an hour ago.”

“So?! The air’s still dry!”

Sylvia just rolled her eyes. “Whatever you say, Cyclops.”

That time, Peepers gave a humorless laugh. “And you say I can’t come up with good insults? That’s not even an insult, it’s a type. ...Specist.”

“Who said I was trying to insult you?” Sylvia said casually, “by the way, you’ve got a little oil spill there.”

“Huh?” He looked back down at where he was working, and sure enough, oil was pooling near the
wires. “Oh damn it!” He hopped down from the bumper and grabbed the wrag from the bus’ tool box before quickly climbing back up and trying to clean it before it could spread even further - as well as trying to figure out where it came from. “Great. Probably coming from under the engine somewhere…”

“Unless you’ve got one of those oil ran engines,” Sylvia told him, lowering her head and trying to get a better look- did her hair look softer? ‘Ugh, come on Peepers!’ The Watchdog mentally slapped himself. ‘Get ahold of yourself!’

“As a matter of fact, no, it’s not,” Peepers told her, “Even though it would probably be more effective - but also more likely to explode at high speeds.” Which was Hater’s (and on some occasions, Peepers’) favorite speed.

“Right right,” Sylvia agreed, taking her head out of the trunk, “Well, I didn’t see any huge problems. Maybe you just have a busted oil cap.”

“I wouldn’t think someone who takes public transportation would know a lot about ships,” he commented.

“Hey, just cause I don’t have a ship of my own don’t mean I’m completely clueless about them. My brother bought his own ship at sixteen, and I was the one who helped him repair it when he crashed it within the first week. We just take the bus because it’s cheaper than maintaining a ship.” She smiled slightly. “Although, I wouldn’t exactly object to having my own ride. Maybe after the Battle…” Right after a couple new tattoos and some new shoes for Wander, of course.

The battle. Competition. Right. “Yeah well, don’t count your eggs before they hatch, Zbornak. You don’t even know how close the final Battle will be.”

“Calling me by my species name? Ha, now who’s being a specist?”

Peepers growled. “Fine, how about horse-face? Or, or no-rhythm drummer?!”

Sylvia gave him a flat look. ‘Please, ‘no rhythm’ my tail. I could probably outdrum you any day of the week, pal.”

“Ha!” he spat, “Yeah, I’d like to see you try, Zbornak!”

She gave an annoyed sigh. “You know, I think I liked it better when you were calling me ‘Vixen’.” Peepers froze, his pupil shrinking. The wires sparking slightly as they were roughly connected. “I mean, it was weird, but at least it wasn’t annoying.” The Watchdog said nothing, and the air became tense and awkward, with the only sound being Hater tuning his guitar in the back.

“...Look just, why are you even talking to me?”

She shrugged. “Honestly, I have no idea because frankly, you’re kinda being an ass. But hey, I just figured since we’re both here, we might as well.” She blinked at her own answer. Guess Wander’s friendliness was starting to affect her, because she usually had no problem working in silence. Especially when the only other person to talk to was a high-pitch voiced, annoying eyeball.

“No, I mean…” Keeping one hand still in the car, he pinched his eyelid in frustration. “Look, I know that furball of yours is all about friendly competition and sappy stuff like that, but don’t pretend that you don’t hate me or want anything to do with me for my sake. I don’t need it.”

“I - Hey, wait a minute-!”
“Oh don’t try to say it isn’t true!” he shouted, turning towards her with a scowl, “I mean, it’s not like I care if you find me annoying or think I’m an idiot. We’re competition, we’re supposed to hate each other! So don’t-”

“Hey!”

“No, save it! I don’t need pity or friendship or whatever! I’ve got my drums, I’ve got Hater, and we’re gonna win this thing without any help from you or your little friend! I mean, it’s not like I actually like you or any-”

“Grop, will ya just shut up for a sec?!”

“I- … Fine.” He lowered himself slightly (he always seemed to subconsciously stand on his tiptoes when he was yelling at someone taller… So, basically whenever he yelled at someone) and stared at her. “What do you have to say?”

“Jacket’s on fire.”

“Wait, what?” Peepers removed his hand from the trunk, and sure enough there was a small flame on the cuff of his jacket sleeve. But apparently him looking at it triggered something, because in a blink the fire grew to the rest of his sleeve. “SWEET BETSY!” he screamed, nearly falling off the ship. Before he could even attempt ‘Stop-Drop-Roll’ however, the fire was extinguished, leaving a faint stain and his arm feeling wet and sticky. ‘Better than feeling burnt or nothing at all,’ he thought before looking back up at the Zbornak - who now had an empty bottle in her hand.

Sylvia didn’t say anything at first. She just sat the empty bottle down and went back to work. Not knowing what else to do (other than maybe crawling into a hole somewhere and never leaving), Peepers did the same. It wasn’t until he was nearly lost in his thoughts again when she spoke.

“Just so you know, I don’t sacrifice my Thunderblazz for just anyone.” There was a faint smirk - or, maybe it was a smile? - on her face. “So, if I used it on you, then I guess I don’t completely hate you, huh?”

The Watchdog didn’t reply, though his eye did turn a faint shade of pink (and he was smart enough to know that, unfortunately, it wasn’t because of the dry air). “I”
The back trunk was slammed shut, causing Peepers to jump, lose his footing and land face first on the ground. But of course, either Hater didn’t care, or he was too focused on the task at hand to care.

In one hand was his guitar, coal black with tiny patterns for his electricity to travel through carved across it and shining in the sunlight. In his other hand, he was dragging behind him two amps. One was the one he usually used. Big, powerful and covered in writing, as well as reliable. The other was his spare, smaller and not nearly as high of a quality.

Slamming both amps on the ground immediately got Wander’s attention. “Oh! I was wonderin’ when you were gonna come back!” He turned to face Hater, and his eyes widened. “Wait! Are you gonna play a couple songs too? Ooh this is gonna be so great! Oh, you can go first if you wa-”

“No.” Wander stopped, and looked at the skeleton, curious now. With one kick, Hater pushed the smaller amp over to the furry guitarist. “We play at the same time, we play until we can’t play anymore, and whoever can’t top the other’s performance, loses.” He jammed the plug into his own amp, and played a chord, it’s sound echoing throughout the asteroid.

He could almost see the wheels turning in Wander’s mind as he figured it out, and once he did, Hater was only rewarded with one of those infuriating smiles of his. “Ohhhh I get what you wanna do now! Well, if you’re up for it, then so am I!” In fact, Wander was probably more excited for this little impromptu guitar battle.

‘Not that he’ll be that happy for long,’ Hater thought as he made sure his own guitar was in perfect tune while Wander plugged in his.

“Huh, how ‘bout that,” he mumbled, first looking at the amp, then glancing up at his hat. After playing a few practice chords, he was ready. “After you, friend!”

“Hmph,” Hater scowled, raising his pick in the air, “Gladly!”

The plastic met the strings, and a burst of sound came forth. First one long chord, and then Hater let his fingers skip across the neck of the guitar, producing several short notes in what resulted in a very impressive guitar solo. Hater couldn’t help but smile. Every note was perfect, every sound, every screech, every pitch, it was all his best.

Finally, when he thought Wander had had enough, he ended his piece with one final chord. “Hmph, think you can top that?”

“Wowww,” Wander said in awe, ignoring Hater’s question, “That was really somethin’! Now, let’s see if I can do somethin’ like that!” Sticking his tongue out of the corner of his mouth, the furry alien played a few odd notes, just to get the feeling of playing, before letting out a long chord of his own. It was a bit higher in pitch than Hater’s, like a soprano singing right after an alto, but the heavy metal tone was still the same. And it only seemed to stay that way as Wander continued playing notes. First slowly switching to each one, then increasing speed until the notes were practically one after the other, but not completely on top of each other resulting in one giant musical mess. Oh no, far from it. Every note was loud and clear, and played just as well as Hater’s solo.

The skeleton’s jaw dropped (not literally, this time) as he watched. This was unbelievable. This, this guy in the tie dye shirt, hippie beads and big floppy hat was playing heavy metal. And what was worse, he was playing good heavy metal.

Glaring now, Hater didn’t even bother waiting for Wander to finish. He just started to play again, his deeper tone clashing with Wander’s higher one. But the furball didn’t seem to mind in the slightest. In fact, he even started to try and harmonize with Hater’s playing. Of course, this only infuriated
Hater more, and he quickly tried switching up his playing style, if only to try and make the other guitarist stumble.

But of course, it only took a moment for Wander to hear the new style and match it. Every rhythm, every speed, every chord, it was like they were equally matched.

And Hater absolutely hated it. ‘Damn it all!’ he gritted his teeth, releasing his frustration as electricity and causing his instrument to glow a dangerous green. ‘I - I don’t - Just WHO IS THIS GUY?!’

But before Hater could try to figure out an answer to the question, Wander surprised him yet again (which seemed to be becoming commonplace at this point). “They call it a solo, and that’s just fine, to take a piece and make it mine! But frankly I’d rather sing with you, and make it a solo built for two!” He was actually singing!

“There’s no singing in a guitar battle, you idiot!” Hater yelled, though he didn’t dare stop playing.

Wander raised an eyebrow in amusement. “I’m pretty sure there’s no rule that says ya can’t!”

“You-! … Alright, fine! You want singing?! Oh I’ll give you singing!” Ramping up his playing, Hater began tapping his foot, making the music a lot more melodic than just awesome chords and shredding.

“You think you’re so great, you think everything’s fine! That everyone loves you, but guess what? That opinion’s not mine! I’ll take you down, you’ll barely be able to stand! I’m going to completely destroy you with my better-than-yours band!”

Wander still smiled despite the threat. “But don’t you want to have some fun? To play a little one-on-one? Just listen what we can do, the two of us, me and you! I could listen to you all day, and Hater, I wouldn’t want it any other way! You’re the one who’s great! Let’s make it a date! I’d love to hear all the songs you can play!”

“You’d think I’d let you, you think I care? Don’t make me laugh, now listen here!” He took a step forward, not taking his eyes off his rival. “My chords will break you, my songs will shock and awe! This isn’t a dumb sing-a-long, you’re just a wall and I’m the wrecking ball!”

“Ooh, that was a good line!” Wander nodded, “Really great analogy there!”

“SHUT UP!” Hater started to simply play hard and rough chords again while Wander took over the melody. As he played, he couldn’t help but grin. All this musical energy was making his fur stand up slightly, his excitement almost overwhelming.

“My skin is tingling, my fingers are stinging, but I’ve never felt more alive! Your energy is amazing, our music is reachin’ the stars! I just gotta say it, we’re raising the bar!” Wander took a step forward as well, his grin growing. “The music’s goin’ through my soul, I hope you can feel it too! I’ve never felt more alive, who would’a thought it would be because of you? Our guitars intertwine, like the melodies they play, they grow closer and louder, they’re heard universes away!”

His bones shivered, but that just made him angrier. “Don’t act like this is a joke-!” “Oh, never!” “-I won’t stop playing until my fingers catch fire! I’ll strike you down like lightning, so you best start running! I live without mercy, so don’t expect any from me! You speak nothing but nonsense! Start making sense! Or I guess it doesn’t matter, I’ll drown you out until there’s nothing left!” He took another step forward, increasing his volume as loud as he could make it.

“Then I guess I’ll be just as loud, though I don’t mind!” Wander sang as he hopped forward, his guitar screeching as loud as Hater’s now, “This song can be as big and loud as we’d like, just don’t
They didn’t dare take their eyes off each other, their hands and fingers moving without even having to think about it. “Stop speaking of hearts, you’re being foolish! Let your guitar do the talking! Just try to keep up with my chords, you’re out of your league! This song, this battle, this universe is mine! And I won’t stop until you’re on your knees! Nothing can stop me, so don’t even try!”

“I don’t want to stop!”

“I won’t stop until you’re done!”

“We’ll keep playing to the stars-”

“I’ll be a superstar-”

“We can do it together-”

“Just stay out of my way-!”

“Let our music merge, our hearts play out-!”

“You think you can change me-”

“You don’t have to go on being a solo-”

“Just take your grins and go away-”

“Let’s just play out, we can go all day-”

“I’ll never like you, understand-?!?”

“It’s a simple as I say, like taking someone’s hand-

“You won’t beat me!”

“Let the energy pulsate through us-”

“I’ll beat you into dust!”

“Hater!”

“Wander!”

“I’M NOT GOING TO STOP/I PROMISE NOT TO STOP!” they both shouted at the same time, squeezing their eyes shut. But unfortunately, their words were more of what they wanted rather than what they could do. Hater’s gloves were starting to tear at the tips, and Wander was grimacing at the thought of just looking at his fingers after all this playing. Their hands were throbbing, and while they didn’t want to stop, to give into the pain, they didn’t have a choice.

They each let out one final long chord, the exact same note in fact, so in sync that it almost sounded like one solid note instead of two. And with that, they dropped their hands, letting their guitars hanging loosely from their necks. They were breathing pretty heavily, but the energy and adrenaline of the guitar battle was still running through their veins.
“Wow… That… That was amazin’!” Wander panted. Hater said nothing, though he did lift his head up to look at his rival, and without warning, their eyes met. The skeleton felt a breath hitch in his throat, his gaze never breaking away. For a moment, it was like time froze.

Then, like an explosion, applause surrounded them. “Huh, wha-?” He managed to look away, only to see about two dozen people staring at him and cheering.

“Oh!” Wander gave a small giggle, “Guess we attracted an audience, huh Hater?” He quickly bowed before waving at the people. “Thanks! Glad you enjoyed it!”

“That was incredible!” “Never seen anything like it! Or heard anything like it, for that matter!” “You guys were amazing!”

“Aw, shucks! You’re too kind!” Wander told them, “Although, you really should be thanking Hater! He’s the one who started it, right Hate-?” As he turned to look at him, he only saw thin air. “Hater?”

“Eh, I don’t know. I think their third album was the best.” “Yeah, because half the songs on it were old songs that everyone liked. Pretty easy to sell a cd when you do that.” “But every new song on the album was just as good - if not better - than their classics, so-” Peepers stopped when he noticed his bandmate walking towards them. “Oh, hey-”

“Is the ship ready yet?” Peepers held back a frown. Guess he should’ve expected that.

“Yes, it’s completely repaired, so-”

“Good.” He opened up the side door and tossed his guitar and amp inside, the black instrument still surrounded by a faint, green aura. “We’re leaving.”

“I- Yes, right. Guess we’ve wasted enough time here.” As Peepers climbed down, Hater walked back to the front of the ship and glared at Sylvia. “Beat it!”

Of course, Sylvia didn’t hesitate to glare right back at him. “Sure thing, Bonehead.” With her tail she grabbed the toolbox and started to walk away. The Watchdog watched her for only a moment before sighing and getting into the front seat. Hater was already buckled in, but before he could even tell Peepers to stop driving, a shout stopped him.

“Hey! Hater!” The skeleton groaned, turning to look out the window. Maybe if he was still far away
they could leave before- “GAH!” The little furball was hanging off his open window, looking at him curiously. Well, at least he wasn’t smiling. “Get off my ship!”

“Yeah, I guess you would want to start gettin’ back on the road to Ronus. I hear the bus was about to leave pretty soon too. So, guess I’ll meet you there.” There was a hint of… something in his voice. “Oh, hey! Do ya want your amp back? I thought maybe you forgot about it so I-”

“Just keep it. It’s a crappy amp anyway.” And with nothing more, Hater pressed a button, making his window roll up - as well as making Wander let go of the door. Peepers gave a small sigh of relief when he heard the engine start up smoothly, and with no smoke to be seen.

“Come on, pal,” Sylvia said, gently taking Wander’s shoulder and making him back up, “Don’t wanna get hit or anything.” The ship hovered off the ground slightly before shooting up into the sky, barely staying in sight for more than a minute or two before being too far to see.

The Zbornak scoffed. ‘Good riddance,’ she thought. Even if talking with Peepers hadn’t been too bad - well, at least once he stopped acting like a jerk - the farther Skeleton Face could get from her, the better. She then glanced at her friend, who was definitely being more quiet than usual. “Hey, everything okay, buddy?”

It took a moment for Wander to answer, but when he did, he gave Sylvia a huge smile. “Yep! Right as rain! C’mon, we should probably start headin’ back to the bus.”

“Oh, right. The driver probably wants his tools back too.” The two started walking, but only Wander glanced behind him, looking up at the sky where the silver ship once was. ‘I sure hope I get a chance to ask him next time,’ he thought to himself, his smile smaller but still genuine and happy.

Because frankly, after playing like that, Wander couldn’t wait to do it again.

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Just as its reputation had claimed, Ronus was definitely a bright planet. There were neon signs as far as the eye could see, spotlights, streetlights, lights from buildings and skyscrapers, headlights from ships, and even small pulses of electricity under the crust that gave the planet a faint blue aura (as well as all the power it needed to power all these things).

The place was so bright, Peepers almost thought about picking up sunglasses in the hotel gift shop (not that they would really do him any good, but still, it’d be nice to have some relief).

“Alright, you’re all set,” the woman at the front desk said, handing him the two keycards, “One two bedroom suite with king-sized beds and two tvs.”

Peepers nearly cried. “Thank you!” He turned back towards Hater, but it seemed like he was still in the restaurant connected to the hotel, angrily eating. Peepers probably would’ve joined him if sleeping didn’t seem more important to him right now than eating. So, the Watchdog just left his bandmate alone, loaded up the luggage gurney, and headed towards the elevator.

His burger was actually cooked to perfection, but it still felt like Hater couldn’t enjoy it. “It’s like he’s taking over my life,” he mumbled, and the worse part was, it was getting harder for Hater to feel legitimately angry about it. He was still annoyed by Wander, no doubt about that, but… But why didn’t he-? The skeleton groaned, slamming his skull onto the table.

“Geez bro,” said a voice suddenly, “I don’t know what’s got you in such a sucky mood, but it must’ve been pretty bad.”
“Oh who asked you?!” Hater snapped, turning his head to glare at the stranger, and was surprised to see who it was.

The shark-man smirked. “Nice to see you remember me, Hatey.”

Hater scowled. “Oh yes, how could I forget? Garish clothing, lame music, less than adequate singing… Actually you know what, I don’t think I remember you. But hey, not much of a surprise there.”

Awesome gave him a flat look. “Hilarious. And I see you take the make-up off when you go casual. Not too bad I guess, though I gotta say, the make-up don’t look half bad, dude.”

“IT’S NOT MAKE-UP! IT’S FACE PAINT! THERE’S A DIFFERENCE!” Awesome just rolled his eyes.

“Whatever you say, bro. So, you playin’ a show on the Planet of Lights?”

“Not that it’s any of your business but yes, I am. And I’m suppose you’re playing here too?”

“Once I find a venue, which is what I came here to do before I spotted your grumpy, boney butt.” He smirked. “Although, I did just finish a show on Tralfar 5. That place is just totes amazing, the most awesome beaches you’ve ever seen. And of course, when there’s amazing beaches, there’s also rockin’ beach concerts and completely sick beach parties!”

“I’m just going to pretend that I care so that you leave sooner,” Hater replied, “Here, let me try: Wow! That sounds soooo cool and not dumb or a waste of time at all!”

“Ha. And here I was thinking you didn’t have a sense of humor,” Awesome quipped, “But you know, judging by how south your mood has gone since the last time I saw you - and that’s saying a lot - I think a party is just what you need, bro. I could easily set one up, and Tralfar 5 is literally right next door.”

Hater tapped his chin with his index finger, pretending to think. “Hmm, you know what? I think I’m gonna have to saaaaaay… No. No flopping way. I’ve got better things to do than to listen to your annoying voice combined with bad EDM!”

The shark-man stared at him, and then shrugged. “Okay.”

“I… Wait, okay?”

“Yeah.” He leaned back in his chair, crossing his legs. “Honestly, I’m not too surprised. It didn’t really seem like your scene anyway. B’ sides, I doubt you could handle one of my parties.”

Hater glared. “And just what is that supposed to mean?”

“Oh, nothing,” Awesome smirked, “Just sayin’ my opinion, bro… which so happens to also be fact.”

“The only reason why I would ever be able to not handle one of your lame parties is if my brain was close to exploding because of how boring it was!”

“Dude,” Awesome said, his voice getting a bit serious, “I can guarantee that my parties are never boring.” The smirk made its return. “But you know, there is only one way for you to find out~”

“Grrr FINE! I’ll just go to this dumb party of yours, but I doubt I’ll stay for more than an hour!”

“Hey, a lot can happen in an hour,” he grinned, his teeth sparkling in the bright restaurant lights. He
then stood up. “Speaking of which, I’ve gotta grab a bite to eat so I’m not late. So, guess I’ll see you at the party!”

“Hmph,” Hater crossed his arms, “This better not be a waste of my time.”

He stopped, and turned to look back at Hater, his attitude never faltering. “Oh babe, I’ve been having parties for years, and they are always - in a word - awesome.”

Chapter End Notes

The song Hater was listening to was "You're Not Me" by Marty Bags. The first picture was drawn by me, the second one was drawn by bullshipsheep on Tumblr.
Chapter 6

“I regret everything. I hate everything.”

“I know,” Peepers said casually as he typed on his laptop while his bandmate paced around the room.

Spending most of the day either complaining or taking out his frustrations on his guitar, Hater had let Peepers (as well as the poor people who had reserved the rooms near them) know well in advance about the party. The eyeball had been a bit miffed about having to leave Ronus so soon after getting there - not to mention the fact that they still hadn’t managed to get a single gig on the electric blue planet, and spaces would no doubt start filling up fast - but there wasn’t really anything he could do about it. So, Peepers decided to try and make the best of a bad situation, and hopefully the sooner they dealt with this party, the sooner they could leave and get back to their own business.

Unfortunately, Hater was a lot more vocal and a lot less passive about having to go to the party.

“And it’s going to be so stupid too! It’s just going to be annoying music blasting in a room full of Awesome and a bunch of other annoying people!” And knowing his luck, the furball would probably show up again. And yet, as he had told Peepers several times before, he couldn’t ditch. The shark-man would never shut up about it, and would probably still invite him to every other party. But, if Hater did show up and (hopefully) didn’t fit the ‘party vibe’, maybe Awesome would decide to leave him alone and their interaction would be reduced to an occasional glance when passing by each other and maybe an insult here and there.

Even so, it still seemed like a lot of work, even for a big payoff.

“You know, you might enjoy yourself,” Peepers spoke up, “I mean, hey, free food. That’s something.”

“Yeah I guess.” Plus, there was also the chance that for every annoying non-important person, there was someone from a record company or a potential judge that he could try to impress. Then again, Hater impressed people with his music, he didn’t bother with the awkward small talk. Peepers was the one who did that. He was the one who could recite all the facts about the band while still managing to be somewhat polite, and he was also the one with most patience out of the two of them. With that said, Hater had a feeling that he would spend most of - if not all - of the one hour minimum he had to stay at the party just standing or sitting somewhere and glaring at everyone else.

“All I’m saying is, you could try to have some fun.” Hater gave him a glare. “I mean, if we have to go, we might as well,” he reasoned. Anything to try and get his bandmate out of this bad mood.

“Whatever.” Peepers heard the door slam, and then heard it open back up a couple seconds later. “Uh-”

“The hotel shuttle bus to Tralfar 5 leaves in fifteen minutes,” Peepers stated, only getting a small grunt and another door slam as a reply.

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With the exception of just a few small cities built on metal platforms that rose slightly above the sand,
Tralfar 5 was pretty much just one giant beach planet. Pinkish sand stretched out across it like a neverending desert, only being stopped by the teal waves of the ocean. And where there was a beach, there were beach houses.

Standing like his own personal party castle, was a dark brown, three-floored, private beach house. It had cost Awesome a pretty credit, but it was more than worth it. He still grinned whenever he saw it, his own personal crib-away-from-crib. And what better way to celebrate seeing it again - as well as the beginning of the summer and the start of another successful tour for ‘The Party Makers’ - than with a rockin’ party? Honestly, Awesome couldn’t think of anything better.

“Hey dudes? A little help, here?” Two of his bandmates quickly ran out the door and helped him lift the large keg he had bought for ‘special occasions’ over the stairs and sat it on a small table on the porch. “Thanks! I think this should be about enough, don’t ya think?” The fistfighters gave him a couple of sideways thumbs up.

“Good, good,” Awesome nodded. It always sucked when parties ran out of drinks halfway through the night, and if it happened at one of his parties, it would definitely be a blow to his reputation.

Going back inside the house, Awesome looked over the snack table. There were plenty of things to eat, plus bottles of pop for those who didn’t want to drink from the keg or have any of the canned or mixed drinks. Looking around the rest of the floor, he could see that the place was clean, the furniture had been moved so that there would be plenty of room for dancing and games later, and there were already trashbags and trashcans strategically placed around the first or second floors. He grinned to himself. “Perfect.”

Deciding he deserved a moment to chill before things started to get rolling, Awesome sat down on the old, plaid couch and laid down on his stomach with a pillow under his chin, fishing his phone out of his pocket to check his usual social media sites. But no sooner had he turned the device on, there was a knock at the door. First it was small and light, but when Awesome didn’t answer it right away, a second knock - louder and heavier than the first - pounded the door.

“Alright, chill.” Tossing his phone onto the nearby chair, Awesome stood up and answered the door. “…Um, you guys do know the party isn’t gonna happen for another ten minutes, right? And, even then people probably won’t start showing up until-”

“Are you going to let us in or what?” Hater snapped. The bus had dropped them off early, and Hater sure wasn’t going to just sit in the itchy sand to wait to go to a party he wasn’t even interested in.

But of course, Awesome just smirked. “Sure thing, Hatey. You dudes can just chill with me until other people start showing up.”

“Fantastic.” Not saying another word, Hater and Peepers walked inside the house.

‘I see the make-up’s back,’ Awesome thought to himself as he closed the door. In fact, Hater was dressed in full concert attire, with the only difference being that he was wearing a black jacket with red pants. As for Peepers, he decided to be a bit more casual, wearing the black tee shirt with a red lightning bolt on it that he wore on stage - minus the jacket and helmet - along with a pair of dark brown pants and a pair of red chucks.

As for Awesome, while it wasn’t too different from what he wore on stage, and it definitely wasn’t ‘lazy, drunk fratboy’, it was still pretty casual. A bright blue tank top stretched across his chest with the words ‘Party Maker’ printed on it, being short enough to reveal just a bit of his abs. He was also wearing tight black jeans and two pink and blue armbands tied around each of his arms. Surprisingly, he wasn’t wearing any shoes, revealing two black feet that almost looked more like flippers, but he
obviously wasn’t too ashamed of them.

“So,” he said as he grabbed a couple of cans of beer for them to drink, “Are you dudes ready to party?”

“Yeah, can’t wait,” Peepers replied, trying and failing to sound somewhat enthusiastic, while Hater just scowled some more, snatching the can from Awesome’s hand. He sniffed it a bit. Honestly, he enjoyed pop a bit more than beer, but at least this stuff didn’t seem too cheap. Besides, he had a feeling he would need a couple drinks tonight.

But obviously, their sarcasm and dislike wasn’t enough to dampen Awesome’s party mood, that or he was just ignoring them. “I think I managed to get nearly everyone who’s gonna be at the Battle to come.” He took a swig of his drink and sat back on the couch, just as relaxed as before.

“Great,” Hater mumbled. Just as he thought.

Awesome raised an eyebrow. “What? Did you make yourself an enemy already, bro? Cause I’ve competed in this thing a few years now, kinda an old pro, and there are just some bands you do not want to get on their bad side.” One example that came to mind was that one band with flower-alien percussionist. Boy, they definitely had some teeth.

“I don’t think this guy has a ‘bad side’,” Hater replied before angrily chugging his drink. He only managed to drink about a third of it.

“...Sooo, the problem’s that he’s super friendly?”

“YES!”

Awesome gave an amused smirk. “Aw, and here I was thinking I was the only one you hated. I gotta say, Hatey, I’m feelin’ a bit jealous now.”

“Oh shut up! And STOP CALLING ME HATEY!”

“Whatever you say, bro.” There was a bit of a silence as Awesome took another sip of his beer, and Peepers excused himself to use the restroom (really he just wanted to kill some time by looking around the house, while at the same time avoiding having to listen to another one of Hater’s ‘Wander Rants’). “So, who is this guy anyway?”

“The orange furball with the big stupid hat,” Hater replied, figuring that Awesome didn’t know his name.

“Oh! Lil’ orange dude!” The shark-man grinned, “He’s in the newgrass folkpunk band with the hottie Zbornak.” Across the room, a certain Watchdog flinched, and decided he hated Awesome just a bit more now. ‘That guy’s awesome, and he doesn’t play half-bad either!”

“Oh please!” Hater retorted as he rolled his eyes, “It’s hardly music! Even when he tries to match my style it can hardly compare!”

“Match your style?” Awesome repeated, raising an eyebrow, “Wait, so he’s trying to ripoff your act?”

“I - Well, no. We just, had this dumb guitar battle,” he replied, looking down at his drink, and while he wasn’t exactly smiling, Awesome did notice that his anger had faded a bit. “It was so dumb. There wasn’t even a winner, and, and he started singing about…”
Awesome leaned forward in his seat. “About… what?”

Hater flinched slightly. “Just, about stupid stuff, okay?!” He took another angry sip of his drink before continuing. “And now I’ll probably run into him here again and he’ll just bother me all night!”

“Hmm.” The shark-man smirked, leaning back again, “Hey, didn’t you say you were only staying for like an hour, bro?”

Hater blinked. “I - I MEANT TO SAY AN HOUR! He’ll just bother me the entire hour I’m here!” But he was sure that with the little annoyance rambling next to him, that hour would probably feel like an entire night.

He chuckled. “Might not be such a bad thing,” he mumbled before finishing off his beer.

“What was that?!”

“Oh, nothing.” He crushed the can in his hand as he stood up, stretching slightly. “Welp, I’ve got other things I need to do before this thing can get started properly, so I’ll see you around in a bit, kay Hatey?” Ignoring the skeleton’s glare, he started to walk away when he stopped. “Oh, hey I know what you can do instead of just sitting on your butt.”

Reaching into his pocket, he fished out a smartphone with a pink casing. On the back, the same symbol Awesome had as a tattoo on his chest - which was just an A but written like you were drawing a star - had been drawn on in pen. “Here.” He tossed the phone at Hater. “I’ve already got it set on shuffle, but you get to pick the first song of the night. Pretty big honor, bro. Just make sure you make it a good one.” Giving him a wink and one last toothy grin, Awesome then left to attend to his pre-party duties.

“Whatever,” Hater mumbled, activating the ‘Music’ app and scrolling through the song list, “Probably doesn’t even have anything good.” As he went through it, he was a bit relieved to learn that only about a third of it was EDM, while another good chunk was rock - which wasn’t too surprising really considering Awesome was actually in a rock band - and another chunk was pop and recent chart toppers. ‘Eh,’ he thought, ‘Guess it could be worse.’

Locating the stereo, Hater plugged in the phone and selected a random song, not really caring what it was, before heading back to the couch. A guitar riff echoed through the house, followed by a steady beat on the drums.

“I’ve got the new style, uh oh
And I’m walking right down your street
I’m on your speed dial, you know
The one everyone wants to meet”

Standing in the kitchen, Awesome had grinned when he heard the song’s opening. “Oh-ho-ho! NICE!” Maybe a bit too early for this song, but it still put him in a good mood. He didn’t hear a reply, so he just assumed the skeleton was just rolling his eyes, but that wasn’t too surprising. “Dude definitely needs to let loose a bit,” he said as he stocked the fridge with more drinks and - by some miracle - an entire gallon of ice cream.

He thought back to what Hater told him. The little orange dude. Always smiling, always in a good mood, apparently had ran into the skeleton several times, and even had an awesome guitar battle with him - which included singing about ‘stupid stuff’.

Awesome smirked. Now, his parties were always fun, but he had a feeling that by the end of the
night, this one was bound to get a bit more ‘interesting’ than he expected. But Awesome didn’t mind.

In fact, he was going to make sure of it.

“I’m a leader, I’m a winner, and I’m cleaner
’Cause I’m awesome
I don’t need you ’cause I’m neato and I beat you
’Cause I’m awesome
That’s right!”

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By sunset, the beach house was filled with people of all shapes, sizes and species. There were a couple of old video games set up in one room, beer pong in another, and nearly everyone was either talking while they ate simple yet delicious snacks or dancing to the loud music. But no matter what they were doing, it seem like everyone was having a good time.

“Well, I gotta say,” Sylvia said as she stood in the doorway, “If there’s one thing Fish-Face knows how to do, it’s how to throw a party.”

“Yeah!” Wander agreed, grinning as he looked around, bouncing slightly.

Honestly, the two had nearly forgotten about Awesome’s party, but thanks to a text - it turned out Wander and Awesome had exchanged phone numbers when Sylvia wasn’t looking - they had been reminded, and Wander insisted they go. “It would be rude to refuse an invitation!” he had told her when he got the shark-man’s message.

“Yeah, yeah, I know. But, Wander, we just got here. I’m not really in a partying mood.” She had been more in a ‘lay in bed and eat junk food and just relax after traveling for several hours’ mood. “Besides, you can just go by yourself, ya know.”

Wander pouted slightly. “But it won’t be as fun with you there, Syl. You’re always the life of the party!”

The Zbornak smirked. “That’s true. But still…”

“And Awesome said that he was gonna have plenty of snacks and drinks.” She pursed her lips. Free food was definitely tempting… “And we’ll get to talk ‘ta other bands, and ya know, there’s gonna be plenty of dancin’.”

Wander definitely knew his friend well. She could never resist a chance to have a good time on the dance floor. “Well,” she started to say with a small smile, “I guess going to a party for a couple hours couldn’t hurt…”

A loud squee echoed through their hotel room, and within seconds she had a pair of furry arms wrapped around her head. “EEEEE THANK YOU SYLVIA!”

Sylvia just rolled her eyes, though the smile remained on her face. “Yeah, yeah.”

Knowing fully well how much more fun parties could be if you went in a group - as well as how much life those two could add to the party - they had asked Demurra and Dracor to come with them, but the two politely declined, saying they had ‘errands’ to run. ‘If they’re the kind of ‘errands’ I’m thinking of, I just hope they’re done by the time we get back,’ she thought with a smallgrimace.

Still, despite the small bit of reluctance, she had to say that now that she was actually at the party, she
wasn’t regretting her decision. It actually looked like a pretty fun time. Sylvia glanced down at her bandmate. “I’m guessin’ the first thing you’re gonna do is mingle?”

“Yep!” Wander didn’t waste time diving head first (metaphorically speaking, thankfully) into the crowd, eager to meet new faces and greet familiar ones. “Have fun! I’ll meet up with ya later on the dance floor!” he said over his shoulder.

“Have fun!” Sylvia called back. Now by herself, she decided to check out the snack table. “Let’s see... Chips, popcorn, candy - sushi? Ooh, shrimp! Now that’s what I’m talkin’ about!”

“Oh, you like shrimp too? A girl after my own heart~”

“Well, at least you’ve got good tastes,” Sylvia commented, not turning around since she recognized the voice. Maybe if she ignored him he would go away.

But of course, Awesome didn’t mind the lack of eye contact. “Do you mean when it comes to food or music? Cause I think I’ve got pretty good tastes in both.”

She took a moment to listen to the song that was playing - some early-2000s song about, what else, partying. “Well, it’s easy to listen to, I’ll give ya that.”

“Thanks,” he nodded, “Your name’s Sylvia, right?”

“Yep.” She tossed a shrimp puff in her mouth, “That’s me.”

“Haven’t seen you since Axalis, so I just wanted to make sure.” He flashed her a toothy grin. “Then again, you’re pretty hard to forget.”

She rolled her eyes. “Oh please. You’re gonna have to do better than that, shark-boy.”

Awesome chuckled. “Okay yeah, I guess that one was pretty lame.” Sylvia raised an eyebrow at him.

“’Pretty lame’? I’ve heard better lines from my brother practicing in front of a mirror.” He chuckled again.

“Oh, I get it. But hey, while I try to think of something better - How about you and I go dance? I bet you’ve got some pretty wicked moves.”

She smirked, finally looking over at him. “Do you think you would be able to handle them, skinny jeans?”

“I think so,” he leaned closer to her, “Think you can handle mine?”

“Oh, I know I can. And you know, I think I’m gonna take a rain check on that. But who knows, maybe you’ll be lucky enough to see some of my ‘wicked moves’ later tonight. But until then~” She picked up another shrimp puff, one of several she had piled onto a paper plate. “-Just make sure you don’t run out of shrimp. Got that, Fish-head?”

He smirked back at her. “Whatever you say, babe.” Not bothering with a goodbye, Sylvia popped the shrimp puff in her mouth and walked off in search of something to wash it down with, her tail swaying slightly to the music as she moved. “Heh.” Yep. He definitely liked her, and he would have to try and make sure they met up again before she left.

The rock song’s chorus started up, and Awesome’s thoughts quickly shifted. ‘But not right now,’ he
thought as he moved back towards the center of the party. This song was one of his favorite jams, and he never missed the opportunity to dance to one of his jams.

After all, what were parties for? You know, besides the drinking and the hook-ups?

“I feel like dancing tonight,
I’m gonna party like it’s my civil right,
(everybody get kinda awesome).
It doesn’t matter where, I don’t care if people stare, (Woah!)
’cause I feel like dancing tonight.”

His mood had managed to stay neutral since the party started surprisingly. Sure, he wasn’t exactly having fun or enjoying himself, but no one had bothered him and he hadn’t seen Awesome since he left him in the living room. Even he couldn’t deny that was a good thing. Still, he couldn’t help but scowl at the other party-goers as he leaned against the wall, occasionally sipping his drink - root beer, but it was in a plastic cup so no one could tell. ‘Just a few more minutes,’ he told himself. Hopefully Peepers hadn’t gotten lost in the house, because as soon as his one hour minimum had been realized, they were out of there! ‘Just a few, more, min-’

“HEY!” Hater jumped at the familiar voice, spilling a bit of his drink. No! He was so close to going the entire time without running into that annoying little-

Wait.

He looked left. Then right. Then left again. Where was he? “I could have sworn…” Maybe it was just the music. But still, he had been so sure that was his voice… Great. Now he was going crazy. ‘Just a few more minutes,’ he repeated to himself, leaning back against the wall.

Still, his neutralness had been disturbed and was now replaced with paranoia. Somewhere in the beach house, the little orange guitarist was looking for him, just waiting to bother him or drag him into doing something stupid. Or maybe that yell was just a trick to make him look foolish. He growled. “Yeah well, I’ll show him,” Hater mumbled, “I’ll show him, and maybe I’ll finally get him to stop-”

The skeleton froze. It was hard with all the people, but he managed to spot a familiar green hat. “....Bothering me.” So he was here! Well, Hater knew what he would do now! He would just find Wander before Wander found him, and ruin his little ‘surprise plan’. Maybe he could even manage to ruin his good mood just a bit before he left. Wouldn’t that be a feat?

Abandoning his drink on some random table, Hater followed the hat the best he could, pushing people out of the way so he didn’t lose sight of it.

As he continued following, it was almost like Wander had noticed and was purposefully trying to make it difficult. He went through the most crowded areas in the house, and yet he never seemed to slow down. Even the music seemed to reflect this as the song was now fast paced, and Hater was barely able to hear the lyrics. All he could really do was concentrate on catching his little pest.

Finally, the hat stopped in front of a window at the end of the hall, just before the staircase. ‘Yes!’ he thought, quickening his pace and pushing whoever was in front of him out of the way, ‘I’ve finally got him!’

When he was close enough, Hater extended his hand through the crowd and grabbed his arm. “You! Just who do you think you are, just yelling at someone and then disappearing?! What, do you think you’re funny or some-” His rant died in his throat when he saw who he was grabbing.
For one thing, now that he had a clear view, the hat wasn’t even the same. Still green, but no star and it was a bit of a different style. Another difference that was pretty big was the fact that he wasn’t fluffy at all, and definitely not orange, but instead bright pink.

“Um, can I help you with something?” the bingleborp asked, pulling his arm back and giving him an annoyed glare.

Hater took a step back. “Oh, uh, no. I just, thought you were… someone else.”

“Hmph. Whatever.” With that said, the bingleborp started to hop up the staircase.

Hater furrowed his brow, now looking at the wooden floor. “I don’t get it… I could’ve sworn that was Wander!” Maybe he really was just going crazy.

“Oh? You were lookin’ for me?”

Letting out a scream, Hater turned back around and found himself staring right at the orange furball he thought he had been chasing, standing on one of the steps so that it seemed like he was Hater’s height. “But, you weren’t-I didn’t! How did you even-?!?”

Wander smiled at him, holding up a small paper bowl. “Chip?”

Hater looked down at the bowl of potato chips, and glared at them before knocking them out of his hands.

Wander blinked, and then frowned. “Now Hater, I know parties are usually messy, but ya shouldn’t go makin’ an extra mess. Besides, if you didn’t want any chips, you could’a just said so.”

He could feel his eye twitch. He just knocked his food right out of his hands, and all he got was a small scolding?! “You’re unbelievable.”

“Aw, thanks Hater!”

“That wasn’t meant to be a compliment.”

“Well, I still appreciate the comment!” Wander sat down on the step, wrapping his arms around his knees and tapping his foot slightly to the muffled music. “So, how are ya enjoyin’ the party, Hater?”

“I’m not,” he replied bluntly, “In fact, I should be leaving soon.”

Wander gave a small gasp. “Oh, Hater! No one should leave a party without at least enjoyin’ some of it! Tell ya what, how about I just-”

“No.” Hater didn’t want to hear it.

“But I didn’t even-”

“Look, I know just what you’re going to say, if you think I’m gonna let you drag me into dancing like a fool, you’ve got another thing coming, pal!” He poked him hard in the chest as if to emphasise this. “I hate parties, I hate crowds, I hate being here, and there’s nothing you can do to change my mind! So just leave me alone and hopefully I can make the last few minutes I’m trapped here go by quickly!”

Wander stared at him, rubbing his chest slightly. “Well, if you had let me finished, you would’ve known that I wasn’t going to suggest dancin’.” But even this he didn’t say with a hint of annoyance. He just continued to give that smile of his. “I was just gonna say that maybe I could show you to the
snack table upstairs. They’ve got some pretty good stuff up there that’s sure ‘ta put a smile on your face!”

“I doubt it.” Thank goodness for all the noise though, because at that moment, Hater could feel his stomach growl. He’d barely had a supper, and he was paying for it now. He glanced back up at the guitarist, who was looking at him curiously, as if to say “Sooo?”

“Grrr, there better not just be stale chips up there.” Grinning, Wander grabbed his hand and took him upstairs.

Ironically, almost everyone else was heading downstairs. Someone had mentioned something about ice cream floats, and besides, Awesome had been known to get out his guitar and wrangle up his bandmates to play a few songs during his parties. Knowing some of his past performances, no one wanted to miss that.

One person though could care less. He had managed to be a bit more sociable than his bandmate, but that wasn’t saying much. Still, Peepers wasn’t desperate enough to go listen to Awesome play, no matter how bored he was. Nope, the only company he needed was a plastic cup cocktail and a plate filled with various party snacks.

‘Where is Hater anyway?’ he thought, glancing over at the clock on the stereo. Unless it had been set wrong, they had been allowed to go five minutes ago. ‘Maybe he actually manage to find something here he enjoyed. Now THAT I’d like to see.’

Well, if Hater wasn’t going to be ready to go anytime soon, he wasn’t going to just sit there and wait. ...He wasn’t quite sure what else he was going to do, but he was going to do something! Keeping a tight grip on his food and drink, the watchdog leapt down from his kitchen chair, and headed down the hall. Maybe he could join that one game of beer pong that was going on… Wherever that was.

“Watch it, little man!” Peepers was shoved forward, nearly dropping his food.

“Hey!” he shouted, but of course the party-goer didn’t even look back at him, clearly not caring. “Hmph, jerk. Doesn’t anyone have manners anymore, or at least the common sense to say sorry? ...Oh what am I saying, like he would care any-WAY!” Not paying attention to where he was going, he ended up tripping over someone’s limb - most likely a tail judging by how thin it was - falling face first and spilling his drink in the process.

‘Great,’ he thought with a sigh, ‘Just great. And who the flarp just leaves their tail lying on the floor during a party?!” But before he could start to pick himself up, said tail wrapped around his waist and placed him back on his feet. “What the-?”

“Hey, sorry about that, bud. I wasn’t paying attention and I didn’t realize-” She lifted an eyebrow and smirked. “Huh. Didn’t think I’d run into you here, Cyclops.”

Peepers’ eye widened. “Sylvia?”

“Nice to see you too. Oh and, sorry about your drink.”

“Oh, it’s fine, I can just get another,” he told her, “and hey, at least you apologized.”

“Why wouldn’t I?” Then again, she knew how absentminded people could be once they got a few drinks in them. “So, I assume Bonehead’s around here too.”

“Yeah, and I can probably say the same about Wander, right?” “Yep.”
There was a small moment of silence between them. Peepers squeezed the now-empty plastic cup between his hands, suddenly having more interest in it than her. “Kind of a coincidence, huh? …Yep. You and me, and our bandmates, at the same party. …Yeah.”

After another few seconds of very awkward silence, Sylvia gave him a look. “Okay seriously, do you want to hang out or not?”

“…Yes please.” She gave him a small smile.

“Well come on then, Eyeball.” Her tail wasn’t as wrapped as tightly around his waist as it once was, but it did still hang there loosely - much to Peepers’ surprise and happiness. “Besides, I owe you a drink.”

He gave a small, only slightly awkward laugh. “Yeah well, I could use someone to drink with too since my guitarist has apparently gone MIA.” He would still have to go search for him eventually, just to avoid from being left behind on the beach planet. …Right after his drink.

“What a coincidence,” she glanced back at him, giving him a genuine smile, “So could I.”

And in that moment, Peepers could swear the music blaring in the room somehow got a bit better.

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He had strung some old festival lights above the back porch, their colors alternating between sunset red, yellow and orange to ocean party blue, purple and pink. Definitely made for nice decor.

Some people were still inside, but most of the party guests had went outside when they saw Awesome with his guitar case and amp. With some people standing and others sitting on the sand in groups, it truly looked like a beach concert. He couldn’t help but smile at the sight.

“What do you say, dudes,” he asked his fist fighters, “Shall we give them an awesome show?” He received several thumbs up and rock and roll signs as a reply. “Glad we agree.”

He strapped on his blue and yellow A-shaped, and strummed a chord to get everyone’s attention. Once he had it though, it would’ve taken an asteroid falling for him to lose it.

“’Sup everyone? You guys havin’ a good time?” Awesome shouted into his microphone, his voice full of charm and charisma. While he didn’t mind blending into the background of a rave or a party, he couldn’t deny that he loved being the center of attention, especially when it was on a stage.

His audience screamed and cheered. “Awesome, glad to hear it! Now, this party wouldn’t even be happening right now if it weren’t for the competition goin’ on right now. And I know that some of us are ‘rivals’ or whatever, but that doesn’t mean we still can’t have a good time together, am I right?!” More cheers. “So, since this is a competition, and me and my bros just happen to have our instruments here with us, I just figured we’d play a song for your guys. After all, nothin’ like some live music to really make a party. I don’t think anyone has any objections?”

The crowd screamed even louder than before, and some people even started to fist pump and chant, “Awesome! Awesome! Awesome!”

The shark-man grinned. He really loved being a rockstar. Above him, two multi-colored spotlights turned on and started to swirl around, and Awesome took that as his cue to begin the show. He nodded towards his keyboardist, and he quickly started playing a melody, followed by his drummer, and finally Awesome with a great guitar riff. He tapped his foot to the beat, swaying his hips slightly as he started to sing.
“I ain't got a fever got a permanent disease, it'll take more than a doctor to prescribe a remedy! I got lots of money but it isn't what I need, gonna take more than a shot to get this poison out of me! I got all the symptoms count 'em 1,2,3!”

He started to move around the stage, but he didn’t dare take his eyes off his audience. In fact, he even crouched down slightly to look a few of them in the eyes - both men and women - and give them a grin, which of course drove the people crazy.

“First you need- That's what you get for falling in love! Then you bleed- You get a little but it's never enough! On your knees- That's what you get for falling in love! And now this boy's addicted cause your kiss is the drug!”

With the chorus coming up, the other members of his band started to sing along with him. Surprisingly, for being pretty quiet dudes most of the time, they definitely knew how to sing and - when they need to pump up the crowd - chant.

“Your love is like bad medicine
Bad medicine is what I need
Shake it up, just like bad medicine
There ain't no doctor that can
Cure my disease!”

The lights swirled as Awesome started to take a couple steps down, still standing on the porch but now playing right next to his audience and grinning all the while.

“I don't need no needle to be giving me a thrill! And I don't need no anesthesia, or a nurse to bring a pill I got a dirty down addiction, it doesn't leave a track! I got a jone for your affection, like a monkey on my back! There ain't no paramedic gonna save this heart attack! Okay come on dudes, sing it with me!” he shouted before moving on to the next stanza.

“When you need-”

His audience took over, singing as loud as they could. “That's what you get for falling in love!”

He smirked. “Then you bleed-”

“You get a little but it's never enough!”

“On your knees-”

“That's what you get for falling in love!”

“Now I'm addicted and your kiss is the drug” He ran back up the stairs, taking his place on the stage and not missing a beat.

“Your love is like bad medicine! Bad medicine is what I need Shake it up, just like bad medicine, so let's play doctor, baby~! Cure my disease!”

“Bad, bad medicine,” his bandmates sang behind him, “Bad, bad medicine!” Now it was time for Awesome’s favorite part of the song. The solo.

Leaning back and closing his eyes, Awesome let himself rock out, his fingers hopping along the strings as he let out several chords, one after the other and in perfect rock and roll harmony, making for a solo that was - in a word - awesome.
Once he finished, he let his guitar hang from his neck as he started to clap his hands, quickly getting his audience to do the same.

“I need a respirator cause I'm running out of breath! You're an all night generator wrapped in stockings and a dress! When you find your medicine you take what you can get, cause if there's something better baby well they haven't found it yet!”

He grabbed his guitar and began to play with all the energy and swagger that he had started the song with, maybe even more.

“Your love is like bad medicine
Bad medicine is what I need
Shake it up, just like bad medicine
There ain't no doctor that can
Cure my disease!

“Your love is like bad medicine
Bad medicine is what I need
Shake it up, just like bad medicine
Your love's the potion that
Can cure my disease!”

He gave one final chord before letting the song fade out, and the people didn’t hesitate to praise him, clapping and cheering and chanting with all their hearts. “Awesome! Awesome! Awesome!”

“Yeah!” Awesome shouted, pumping his own fist in the air, “Alright!” The spotlight slowed before turning off, and slowly but surely the applause began to die as well. With his performance over for now. “Alright, great job bros, you guys were on fire tonight!” The compliments weren’t returned, but he was offered a high five from each of his bandmates, and that was enough for him.

He shook slightly from all the adrenaline as he put his guitar away. “Yeah, we are definitely playing one more song tonight.” Maybe around midnight, that was when most parties tended to slow down anyway, so everyone would need a bit of a pick-me-up.

But for now, Awesome had other plans. He needed to find a certain skeleton, and hopefully a certain
orange, furry guitarist wouldn’t be too far behind.

Chapter End Notes

Songs used (In Order of Appearance): "Because I’m Awesome" by Dollyrots, "I Feel Like Dancin’" by All Time Low, and "Bad Medicine" by Bon Jovi. The picture was drawn by Darkwingsnark on Tumblr.
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Hater had to admit, if he had to give any credit it was that it seemed like the shark didn’t try to be cheap when it came to his parties and it definitely showed. The food table upstairs was longer and even more full than the one in the living room. Several different kinds of chips and popcorn, candy, chicken wings, some sort of fancy looking tuna, pizza, onion rings, and even more dishes that made for quite a spread.

“Ooh, looks like there’s one piece of veggie pizza left!” Wander grinned while Hater continued to stare at the food, trying not to drool. He reached out for the slice, but then pulled out. “Oh, do you want it, Hater?”

Blinking out of his trance, Hater went back to scowling. “Take it,” he told him before grabbing his own plate and piling on the popcorn and chicken.

“Alright, if ya say so!” Wander took the slice, as well as some more chips. Once both of them had their plates full, they sat over by the window on the small bench since all of the other chairs were taken.

Even if he wanted to, Hater couldn’t stop himself from immediately digging in, not caring about showing any manners. The chicken was still warm, and the popcorn was perfectly buttered and salted. And, what made the meal even better was that Wander didn’t interrupt him, since he was busy with his own food. ‘Guess he was hungry too,’ Hater thought, ‘Good. At least I don’t have to listen to his ramblings.’

And so, the two of them continued eating in silence, with the only noise being the sound of chewing and the muffled music from downstairs. Of course, Wander couldn’t stay quiet forever.

“Mmm, that was mighty delect-icious if I do say so myself!”

Hater gave him a curious look. “Delect-icious?”

“A combination of delectable and delicious!” Hater rolled his eyes. Of course.

“It was okay, I guess.” Although, while he wouldn’t admit it, the skeleton certainly wouldn’t mind going back to get more, especially since he was hardly full.

Kicking his feet back and forth, Wander looked around the dimly lit room. Of course, the other rooms were a lot brighter, and more full. There were a couple rooms that were more ‘private’, while others were filled with people either playing various games like cards or air hockey or the ever popular drinking games, or just talking to one another. Although, one room caught Wander’s eye. “Huh, how ‘bout that. Looks like that game’s free.”

“Huh?” Hater glanced across the hall at the room. There were several beanbags and pillows placed in front of an old tv connected to a Super Nebulo-system. “Hmph, you’d think he’d have something made from this decade. I beat all those games years ago.”

“Really?” Wander said, genuinely impressed, “Wow! That’s amazing! I’ve never played one.”

This time, Hater was surprised. “Seriously? Not one? Not even Super Zambini Bros.? Come on,
everyone’s played that one!”

Wander shook his head. “Not me. But hey, it looks like I’ve got the chance to play it now!” Standing up, he grabbed Hater’s hand to try and pull him out of his seat. “Come on, let’s go!”

Scowling again, Hater pulled his hand away. “And why would I want to?” he asked, although he already knew the answer. Because what else did he have to do?

“Because it’ll be fun!” Wander retorted, grinning excitedly now, “And, if I’ve got a pro playin’ with me, I’ll be able to get the hang of it a lot faster!”

‘Like I care about that,’ the skeleton thought. Still… at least he wasn’t suggesting something stupid like dancing. And he was still hungry… “Fine.” He stood up, walking over to the food table. “But don’t expect me to take it easy on you just because you’ve never played a video game before,” he told him as he grabbed more chicken.

“Wouldn’t think of it!” Wander chimed, tossing his own plate into the trash (though he did grab a can of pop to go). Once Hater’s plate was filled once more, the two walked across the hall. Wander jumped into one of the beanbags, his body sinking deeply into it - though it didn’t really bother him much - while Hater opted to just sitting on the aqua colored carpeted floor with his back propped up against a couple pillows.

“Now, what game should we play first…?” He looked through all the games, the titles and cover pictures unfamiliar yet still interesting. Although, when he spotted a title with the words ‘Zambini Bros.’ in it, he immediately grabbed it, placing the cartridge into the machine and pressing the ‘ON’ button with a happy “Boop!”.

The game system hummed to life, and a pixelated background replaced the static on the tv. Once the title screen passed, a short man with a blue shirt and hat and red overalls appeared at the beginning of the level. “Huh, looks like I’m playin’ as this little guy, huh.”

“Yep,” Hater replied, hardly paying attention as Wander started to move his character across the screen, experimenting with the buttons on the controller. Of course, like most new players, he got the first power-up, but immediately lost it once he ran into his first enemy. “You’re supposed to hop on top of those guys to kill them,” he stated.

“Huh? Why would I wanna kill ‘em?”

“...Because they’re ENEMIES! That’s what you’re supposed to do!”

“Or-!” He hopped over the next enemy. “I could just do that!” Hater rolled his eyes again. ‘Fine, go ahead and do whatever you want,’ he thought as he stuffed more popcorn into his mouth, ‘Just don’t start complaining to me when there’s too many on screen to dodge.’

But for the most part, Wander’s strategy of jump and run seemed to work. There were a couple times he got hit, but it was after he received a power-up or after he passed the half-way point in the level, so there wasn’t a lot of damage done. Not only that, but he made it through the first level, as well as the second and third ones. …Not that Hater really cared, he was just watching because he had nothing else to do. Yes, totally the reason.

“Ooh, never seen this guy before!” Wander commented as a small, dragon-like creature appeared on the screen.

“That’s because he’s a boss,” Hater told him, “and this guy you’re gonna have to fight.”
“Hmm…” There was no exit in the level, and from what he could see his character didn’t have the ability to talk (that or there wasn’t a button for it). “Well, if that’s what I gotta do!”

Unfortunately, because of his previous strategy, Wander didn’t exactly have experience in fighting enemies. Even with his two power-ups, most of his attacks missed. Of course, he could still dodge pretty well, but even that ability started to fail after the dragon started to increase his attack. He was hit once, and within a few seconds, he was hit again, his character flashing.

“Oh come on!” Hater shouted, his eyes glued to the screen, “Just wait until his back is turned and then hop on him!”

“Got it!” He managed to do that a couple times, but then was nearly caught in the crossfire coming the edges of the level. Cannons had appeared, and were now launching fireballs.

“...Well, that makes this a bit more difficult, huh?”

“Oh just give it to me!” Yanking the controller out of the furry guitarist’s hands, Hater started to concentrate on the game. Already knowing the pattern of the cannons, he spent most of his time attacking the dragon, knowing just when to back off to avoid an attack or a fireball. And, after a few minutes more, the dragon was stunned and a rope descended from the ceiling. He smirked. “Later, lizard.” Jumping up, he pulled the rope, and a trapdoor opened from underneath the dragon, sending him falling into a lava pit. “And that’s how you do it!”

“Wow, that was amazing, Hater!” Wander said, eyes wide, “You really are a pro at this!”

“Oh, that was just a stage one boss,” Hater told him, still keeping ahold of the controller and smiling slightly, “Almost too easy. But the other bosses are pretty easy too, for me at least. But you’re right, I am pretty great.”

“Well then, if you’re so good then maybe we should co-op sometime, huh Hatey?”

The skeleton’s smile immediately fell. ‘Right,’ he thought, ‘I almost forgot whose party this was.’

“Oh, hiya Awesome!” Wander greeted, waving at the shark-man, “Hey, thanks again for inviting us. We’re having a blast, aren’t we, Hater?”

“Oh yeah,” Hater replied sarcastically, “All of the fun.”

“You said it, friend!” Wander turned back to face Awesome, missing Hater’s facepalm. “So, what brings you up here?”

“I’m glad you asked, orange dude,” he grinned, “Just finished playing a rockin’ show downstairs and since I was about to have even more fun, I just thought I would ask you two to join in.”

“No.”

“Aww, come on Hater!” “Yeah, Hatey! It’ll be fuuuuuun~!”

“I SAID NO!” Hater shouted, glaring at the both of them.

“But you don’t even know what we’re doing,” Awesome replied, crossing his arms, “Who knows, this might even be a game you’ll enjoy.”

“I’ve got a game right here.”

“One that you’ve said that you beat already.” The glam-rocker then gave a small smirk. “What’s the
matter, Bones? You afraid of a little party game?”

Hater’s scowl deepened. “I am not afraid of anything, fish-man. I just don’t want to waste my time with something so stupid.”

“Aw, pleeeeeease Hater!” Wander pleaded, clasping his hands, “I’m sure the game will be fun, and it’ll be a heck of a lot funner with you there with us!”

The skeleton growled, looking away. “No way.” He was not going to let the furball and this piece of sushi persuade him into playing some dumb game…

“Okay. How ‘bout this, dude,” Awesome started to say, determined to get Hater to play, “You’re allowed to leave the game - and the party - at any time and I won’t give ya crap for it. And, I’ll get out the good stuff to drink while we play. So, whadaya say, Hatey?”

Hater continued to scowl, though he did glance back at his fellow guitarists. Awesome had a sort of smug look on his face while Wander continued to give him space puppy-dog eyes. “Grrrr…”

Despite this, part of him was a bit curious to what this ‘game’ of Awesome’s was. Whatever it was, he doubted that Awesome would let him forget about it if he chickened out of playing it. Plus, the idea of not only getting a free pass from the party, but also getting decent drinks to hopefully make whatever time he had to spend with his rivals pass quickly, was almost too good to pass up. “If the two of you promise to shut up… I’ll come see what this stupid game of yours is.”

Awesome fist-pumped while Wander squee’d and gave Hater a tight hug - though he was pulled off about a second later. “Let’s just get this over with,” he said, standing up from his seat and tossing the controller on the beanbag.

“Trust me, Hatey,” Awesome grinned as he led the way, “You won’t regret this, dude.”

Hater just slumped, still scowling slightly. ‘Too late for that,’ he thought.

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An old rap song played out from the speakers, and most people were taking a break from dancing to either get some refreshments or go outside to check out the bonfire that had been started - a necessity for beach side parties.

And in the midst of it all, their conversation hadn’t even faltered.

“Seriously, you were planning on going into your planet’s military?” Sylvia asked, though not in a tone that would suggest she was making fun of him, but a genuinely curious one.

“Yep,” Peepers nodded, “One of my uncles was a commander. I just figured, why not? Seemed like a good choice, and I didn’t really have any other ideas at the time.”

She took a small sip of her drink - still barely touched and nowhere near needing a refill - before continuing. “Fair enough. So, what made you decide to pursue the life of a rock star then, Peeps?”

“Well, I can give you three guesses on who came up with the crazy idea.” Sylvia just chuckled. Who would’ve thought Bonehead was a dreamer? “It just seemed so ridiculous at first. I mean, yeah we both played but, could we really make it as a band? Hater apparently thought so since he didn’t just forget about the idea after a week. He would spend study halls trying to come up with band names and stagewear, and then he’d drag me to his place after school to practice.” The Watchdog could remember many nights he spent practically falling asleep in his bandmate’s garage, trying to come up
with the perfect song and only managing to stay awake thanks to the cans of pop and energy drinks Ember brought them.

He glanced down into his plastic cup with a sort of nostalgic look. “And, as weird as it is to say… The crazier it got, the more excited I became. It became a passion, a goal, and we were both willing to try and reach for it.”

Sylvia gave a genuine smile. “That’s actually pretty cool…”

“What about you and Wander?” Peepers asked, glancing back up at her, “How the heck did you two even meet, let alone become bandmates?”

She chuckled. “Would you believe me if I said we met in a soup kitchen?”

“Seriously?”

“Yep.” She leaned against the counter in a relaxed position, clearly more than comfortable with revealing this story. “My brothers and I got busted for hot wiring a car - don’t ask, it’s a long story - and I had to go volunteer at the soup kitchen as part of my community service punishment.”

A girl with a criminal record? It certainly didn’t bother Peepers. In fact, it sort of did the opposite. “And I doubt Wander was there for the same reason.” Unless the furry spoon had a dark side hidden underneath that grin of his, Peepers doubted that he had a criminal record as well.

“Of course he was just down there to help out, but he wasn’t servin’ food. He was providin’ the entertainment.” The Zbornak smiled as she remembered the first time she saw him. Fresh out of high school, sort of scruffy looking and strumming away at an old acoustic guitar like there was no tomorrow. “He said hello and we talked a bit, but we didn’t really start knowing each other until my third or fourth night there. That’s when he asked me to play along with him.”

The rapping faded away, leading into a steady beat from a classic rock song. The easy-to-listen to melody definitely made it seem like the party was in ‘half-time’ mode - though they were both sure that once another must-dance song came up on Awesome’s playlist, the party would get going again.

Bobbing her head slightly as she listened, Sylvia started to tap out the rhythm on the counter using her tail. Smiling a bit, Peepers did the same, tapping his hands on his knees. “You know, I was being serious when I said how impressive it was that you can use your tail to play the drums,” he said after a few moments.

Sylvia smirked. “Even if some of the rhythms are simple?” she joked, “Speaking of which, remind me sometime that we need to jam sometime so I can show you what I can really do.” Peepers felt his heart skip a beat, so he just simply gave a nod. “Hey, didn’t you say that you played multiple instruments too?”

“Yeah,” he replied, taking another small sip of his drink. Being in a band with only two people could be difficult at times, but being able to play more than just one instrument definitely helped. “My main instrument is the drums but, I can pretty much play whatever we need for the song. Guitar, bass, keyboard, vi-” He cut himself off, eye widening slightly.

She raised an eyebrow. “What was that last one?”

“…Violin.” He quickly caught the amused look she was giving him. “Shut up!”

“Hey, I’m not sayin’ anything,” she smirked, “Don’t get your underwear in a bunch. Although, I am gonna say that I’m not too surprised.”
Peepers rolled his eye. “I choose to take that as a compliment. And you know, there have been some pretty great violin bits in rock songs!”

“Alright, alright, I’ll give ya that one. ...It’s still pretty dorky though.”

“...Yeah.” He gave a small smirk of his own. “But I can make it sound cool.”

Sylvia chuckled. “Well then, Squinty, it looks like you’ll have something to show me later too.” And she had to admit, she would be looking forward to it. ‘The guy’s really not that bad,’ she thought to herself, although part of her hoped Wander wouldn’t find out about this - even if the guy was too polite for the old ‘I told you so’ routine, that little knowing smile he was sure to give her would be more than enough.

“Heh, yeah…” He kept his eye on her, finding it once again hard to look away. The light orange hue coming from the window mixed well with the dark colors in the room’s lighting. And, as - well, dorky - as it sounded, Peepers could’ve sworn he saw her eyes sparkle a bit when she laughed. Glom she was beautiful.

“You see somethin’ you like, eyeball?”

Peepers blinked before blushing slightly, quickly looking away. “Hey, it’s fine,” she said quickly, moving a bit closer to him, “You were lookin’ at my face so it’s all good.” He gave a small awkward laugh as he looked back up at her. Grop, she was so much closer now. He felt his spine straighten so he could get even closer. His hand was on the counter, and he slowly pushed himself even closer, until finally -

He closed his eye, and pressed his eyelids against her lips, staying there for just a couple seconds before he realized what he was doing, his knees going weak and making him sit down back in his chair.

“Hehe, uh, w-well, that happened,” he sputtered out, rubbing the back of his head and not being daring enough to look at her, “But, uh, you don’t have to worry about me being dumb enough to try that aga-”

The words died in his throat, his pupil shrinking when he felt her lips again on the top of his head. He pulled back for a second, just enough to close his eye, before touching her lips again, hardly noticing her lip piercings and kissing back the best he could. He felt her tail wrap around his waist again, her hand grabbing his and pulling him closer. Acting only on instinct, Peepers used his other hand to reach up and lightly touch her snout.

It wasn’t long before they had to break the kiss so they could take a breath, but even so, Peepers could feel the heat now on his face. Opening his eye, he could see Sylvia smiling back at him. “Heh, not bad, Peeps~” she said, still holding his hand, “Not bad at all.” Though she had to say, it was a bit weird kissing an eyeball. Weird, but enjoyable.

“Uh, heh, y-yeah well,” he tried to reply while at the same time trying to compose himself, “Thanks. You aren’t too bad yourself, Zbornak.”

Sylvia nodded. “Thanks, Watchdog.” As it turned out, it looked like he wasn’t too bad either, and she wasn’t just talking about the kissing. Although, she certainly wouldn’t mind again. The two drummers leaned towards each other again as another, more peppier song, blasted out of the speakers.

“Temptation, temptation
Temptation, sweet temptation
I feel the flame burnin’ within me
I smell the smoke from the fire below
I feel the lust growing inside me
And people who eat flesh consuming my soul

I start to shake, hooked on desire
I need the rush of the magic inside
I feel the kiss, sweat on my body
I burn with the breath from the heat of the night

I’ve tasted sin
Can’t help giving in

Sweet temptation, sweet temptation
Can’t resist temptation
Sweet temptation, oh no
Won’t let me go”

As if the beach house didn’t have enough rooms already, Awesome pulled down a chain from the ceiling, revealing an attic that was completely furnished with a great view of the coast. “Up here, bros,” he told them, as he climbed up the ladder, cradling a bottle of Smirnoff Ice (watermelon flavored) in his arm - though he promised that if their game went on long enough, he would bring out the jello shots which, as much as he hated to admit it, was one of Hater’s favorite drinks. Wander went up next, followed by Hater - who was still less than thrilled about this little game.

Poking his head up through the small opening, along with all the shag carpeting and slightly tacky furniture, he could see that he wasn’t the only one there. The group was a mix of males and females, and some of them he even recognized as his competitors. There was a purple pig-woman with thick eyeliner who looked even more threatening with a smile than a snarl. Next to her was a Baaaaahalian, and while he wasn’t the band’s leader, his on-stage performance with the rest of his band back at the moon had proven he was a decent bagpipes player. Next to him was a small, bug-like woman - Balzarian 7? Or, was it Balzarian 8? Something like that - who already had a drink in her hands and was sitting pretty casually, though she drank it as if it were tea instead of alcohol.

“S’up guys!” Awesome greeted, setting the white and silver bottle down in the middle of the floor like a gavel in a courtroom, letting his guests know that the wait was nearly over. He looked around at all the people playing. Definitely a good mix, which was always a good thing for this kind of game.

“About time you got here,” the pig woman said, grinning, “I’ve been waiting for this game allll night.”

“You and me both, brah! But first, glasses up everyone!” He picked up the bottle again and opened it, pouring an equal amount in everyone’s glass. While most of them took a sip right away, Hater just stared at the drink.

“Mmmmm, you should try this!” Wander told him after he took a long sip of his own drink, “It’s all fruity and it goes down pretty easily and it’s just so great!”

“I’ll drink when I feel like it!” Hater snapped, “Although I wouldn’t exactly take you for the type who gets really drunk at parties.”
“Oh, well, I’m not really,” the furry guitarist replied, swirling his drink around a bit but being careful not to spill a single drop, “In fact, this is my first drink of the night. Although, I do like tryin’ new things!” Hater just rolled his eyes. Of course he would say something like that.

Awesome sat the bottle down again and took a quick swig of his own drink. “Awesome,” he smiled, satisfied as he licked his lips.

“So are we going to start this thing or not?” Hater asked, getting impatient. The sooner the game started, the sooner he could confirm his suspicions on how much of a waste of time it was and he could leave.

“Chillax, Hatey, we’re gettin’ there,” the shark-man replied as he took another sip of his drink, clearly not in too much of a hurry.

“Say, what game are we playin’ anyway?” Wander asked, his smile just as bright and eager as ever, “‘Have I Never’? Cards Against the Universe? …” He picked up the half-empty bottle of Smirnoff and gave a playful smirk. “Spin the Bottle~?”

While everyone else laughed, Hater gave a look of shock before glaring at the furball, snatching the bottle away. “Don’t give him any ideas!”

“Calm down, Hatey. I always save that game for last,” Awesome told him with a smirk, initiating more laughs from the group and another glare from the heavy metal player, “But seriously though, Dudes and Dudettes, Bros and Brahs: The name of this little classic is none other than Truth or Dare.”

Hater blinked. “That’s it? Truth or Dare?” He rolled his eyes. “What is this, middle school?!?”

“Hey, you can’t beat the classics, man,” Awesome told him simply, “And besides, these games are supposed to be quick and fun bonding exercises - and trust me dude, they do the job well. Plus, they make for some great stories. So, with that said-” He flashed a toothy grin. “Let’s get started, shall we~?”

Hater felt his spine stiffen. He wanted to run, or punch Awesome in the face, or both. Yeah, both sounded good. But he still felt trapped, with the threat of being branded a coward still hung above his head. He knew this was a horrible idea, he just knew-

He felt someone touching him, lifting his arm slightly. Looking down, he could see Wander, holding his right arm and lifting his hand - as well as his drink - upwards. Like a child caught with his hand in the cookie jar, he took his hands off Hater’s boney arm as soon as he noticed the skeleton looking at him. However, instead of looking away or pretending it didn’t happen, Wander met his eyes and gave a reassuring smile. They stared at each other for a moment before Wander looked away, taking another sip of his drink.

Hater stared for a few moments longer, still not quite sure what had just happened, but he eventually looked away as well, glancing down at his drink and taking a sip. He managed to hold back a satisfied “Mmm”.

“We’ll go around in a circle and, as is customary, the host will go first.” Awesome crossed his arms, giving them all a look that said simply ‘Bring it on’.

“I’ve got a question for you if you pick truth,” the pig-woman told him.

“Okay Roni, go for it, brah.”
“You already know what I’m gonna ask, shark breath.”

Awesome pursed his lips. “Okay fine. Yes, the rumors about the infamous ‘Awesome Twins’ are true.” He rolled his eyes slightly as he took another sip. “If I got a credit for every time someone asked…”

Rongruffle just simply grinned, satisfied with his answer. “Wait, Awesome twins?” Hater asked, raising a brow, “I don’t get it. You have a twin?”

Everyone in the group stared at him for a moment before they all started snickering. “It looks-a like not everyone has heeard the ruumors,” the Baaaahalian mumbled.

“Wait, what rumors? And just what is so funny?!”

“Geez, if you’re that curious, Hatey, I guess I could show you later,” Awesome replied, causing the laughs to grow louder.

Not liking the look he was giving him, Hater just gave him a scowl. “I think I’ll pass.”

“Suit yourself, bro,” he said with a shrug, “Alright, who’s next?”

The game continued quickly, and the laughs kept coming. The truth questions revealed some pretty interesting facts - as it turned out, the Balzarian had a pretty interesting history despite her cute appearance, but she didn’t seem too bothered by sharing. Rongruffle had to mix ketchup into her drink and chug it, the Baaaaahalian in the group was dared to sing some Celine Dion (though Wander joined in towards the end of the song, making everyone cheer. Even Hater had to give a small, amused smile at it), and Awesome revealed that he had indeed gone skinny dipping several times before - “And I’ve only been busted for it twice!” - though it wasn’t too surprising. All in all, Hater was glad that at least things weren’t boring. Still, he couldn’t allow himself to put his guard completely down yet. After all, he still had his turn to go.

“Okay, almost, got it!” Wander slowly lifted his hands and smiled in victory as he managed to balance on his head for a few seconds before promptly falling flat on his face but still being able to chuckle along with the rest of the group. Sitting in an upright position, Wander clapped his hands together. “Well, looks like it’s my turn! Now, who hasn’t gone yet… Hmmmmm….”

Hater squeezed his glass. ‘Grop. Okay, maybe he’ll pick someone-’ “Hater!” ‘…else.’

The orange guitarist grinned. “Okay, truth or dare!” Hater took his time picking. On one hand, Wander probably couldn’t be that cruel when it came to dares, but at the same time, it could still be embarrassing no matter what he picked.

“…Truth,” he said finally.

“Okay then.” Sitting up straighter - which in turn caused Hater to lean back a bit. They stared each other down, and the skeleton waited in anticipation for his question, praying that it wouldn’t be too bad. “Have, you, everrrrrrr…. ate a hundred hotdogs?”

“…..” Hater blinked, then blinked again. He looked over at Awesome. “Well, answer the question, Hatey.”

“Uh, no. I haven’t.” He glanced back over at Wander. “Wait, have you ate a hundred hotdogs before?”

“Well, it’s not really my turn but I guess there’s no harm in answerin’,” Wander replied, “As a matter
of fact, I have!"

“But, how?! That’s impossible for most people, and you’re practically a twig! There’s no way you
could have!”

Wander shrugged. “I guess I just have a high metabolism. But they sure were tasty!” With that
settled, the game continued, but Hater found it hard to concentrate. So, while Beeza completed her
dare of telling an embarrassing story - something about her dog? Hater didn’t care enough to listen -
he leaned over and whispered “Why’d you ask me that?” When Wander gave him a curious look,
not understanding what he meant, Hater explained.

“The point of this game is to embarrass people, right? So, why did you ask me a question like that?”

Wander just gave him a small smile. “Well,” he whispered back, “In my opinion, these games are a
lot more fun when everyone’s enjoyin’ them.” He smiled at the skeleton a bit longer before looking
away, catching the end of Beeza’s story and being able to laugh along with her. Hater didn’t say
anything, but he did relax a bit more, taking another sip of his Smirnoff.

Awesome’s turn soon came around again, and when he asked for questions or dares, Hater was
actually willing to call attention to himself. “I’ve got one,” he said, smirking.

“Well well, look who decided to finally speak up again,” Awesome said, nodding in approval, “So,
what’cha got for me, Bonehead?”

“Okay...Do a stupid dance.” The group ‘Ohh’d and snickered, and Rongruffle suggested the
Chicken Dance. “Yeah! What she said! Do the Chicken Dance!”

“Oh man,” Awesome chuckled, shaking his head, “When you decide to play, you go big, don’t ya,
Hatey?”

“Less talk, more dancing!”

“Woo!” Wander hollered, raising his glass, “Chicken dance!” A round of chanting started, which
was enough to make Awesome finally stand up and get his dare over with. Of course, no matter how
embarrassing it was, the shark-man wasn’t too shy about it. He did all the moves with pride, and
even threw in a couple ‘clucks’ towards the end. Hater was still laughing by the time he was
finished. ‘Okay,’ he thought, ‘That might just be enough to make this whole thing worth it.’ He
brought his drink to his lips once again, but found that it was empty.

“Refill!” Wander was already by his side with the white and silver bottle. Not even getting annoyed,
Hater gave a small smile and held out his glass.

The game played on, with the questions and dares getting even crazier. Awesome was dared to lick
someone’s cheek (thankfully, he didn’t pick Hater, though the small look he gave the skeleton before
he chose was enough for him to threaten immediate electrocution if he even thought about it),
Wander had to sit on the Baaaaahalian’s lap for two turns, Beeza had to make a prank phone call -
that one was pretty hilarious - and Rongruffle had to eat a raw egg. Even Hater picked dare once,
and was forced to take one of his arms off and do a trick with it. Hater wasn’t sure why they were so
impressed, after all this was something his entire species could do, but whatever. The game was still
turning out better than he thought. In fact, as much as he hated to admit it, he was sort of having fun
with it - though he still tried to make it seem like he wasn’t. After all, he had a reputation to keep.

Once Hater sat back down and put his arm back on, Awesome looked over at Wander. “Okay,
orange dude, I think it’s your turn again. So, truth or-”
“Dare!” Wander said eagerly.

“Okay okay, hmm…” The shark gave another one of his looks that made Hater just a bit uncomfortable, as if something horrible was about to happen and it was all his idea. But Hater kept his composure, while Awesome just continued smirking - though this time it was directed at Wander. “I dare you, to kiss the most attractive person in the room - to you. Cause, if I just said ‘most attractive in general’, heh, well…”

Hater rolled his eyes. “Ha! Yeah, keep dreaming, Awesome. Don’t-”

“Hater.”

A bit annoyed at getting interrupted, Hater turned his head. “What-?” His eyes widened slightly as he saw Wander move towards him, and as he got closer, his skeletal body became completely frozen, unable to push the furball away or even back away from him. What was Wander doing? But even with his mind a complete blank, one thought did manage to get through:

Wander was completing his dare.

A furry hand cupped Hater’s chin, and he watched as Wander closed his eyes, and kissed him right on the cheek. Time stopped, Hater didn’t even breathe. He just sat there in shock, and the only thing he could seem to concentrate on, was the feel of soft fur and the small bit of warmth he now felt on the side of his face. ...No, correction, all over his face. Blushing a bright green now, Hater honestly didn’t know what to do. But before he could even try to do anything, it ended.

Wander pulled back, and smiled, whispering a quick “Thank you”. And Hater only stared back in silence, his mind still trying to comprehend what had just happened. Wander did his dare. Wander kissed the person he was most attracted to in the room. Wander kissed him. “I…”

His neon green eyes shot back over to the rest of the group. No one was laughing, but they were all smiling - with Awesome smiling the biggest. Almost as if, as if he wanted this to happen. Hater’s eyes widened. This… This was his plan! This had been his plan all along!

His boney face contorted, and shock was quickly replaced with anger. “I should’ve guessed this was all just some big joke at my expense,” he growled, setting his glass on the floor and resisting the urge to throw it at the shark, “Well guess what?! Your little joke is over now! So find someone else to laugh at!”

Surprisingly, Awesome didn’t start laughing. In fact, he wasn’t even smiling anymore. “Hatey, dude, what are you talking about? I wasn’t-”

“Oh yeah right! And, and you!” He pointed at Wander, who quickly backed up. “Just, just stay away from me, you got that?!” Furious now, Hater turned to leave. “I’m outta here, so have fun laughing behind my back!”

“Bro, wait!” Awesome shouted, “You’ve got it all wrong! No one’s even laughing! Hater!” His words fell on deaf ears as Hater made his way down the ladder and made his way through the house as fast as possible, pushing people to the side and not caring if they thought he was rude. He just had to get out of there. The music was muffled, even when he got to the first floor, and the cool night air did nothing to cool his face off. But he didn’t care, he just kept moving, not looking back and not stopping until he reached the bus stop.

Sparks were prickling along his fingertips, but Hater didn’t bother pulling out his cigarettes to try and calm him down, knowing he would probably turn the entire pack into ashes within seconds. All he
wanted to do was to get on the hotel shuttle bus - ‘Hurry UP ALREADY!’ his mind screamed - and get back to his room so he could try and forget about…

He felt his heart skip a beat when he remembered, and with a growl, he rubbed his boney cheek, trying to get rid of the feeling, to get rid of the melody.

“Stupid party, stupid Awesome, stupid… Stupid Wander!” It was always Wander! Ever since that first night on the moon the little freak had been popping up everywhere! With his positivity and his music and that stupid flarping smile of his!

At this point, his mind was a jumbled mess of emotions and memories. Anger, the kiss, embarrassment, their guitar battle on the asteroid, confusion, when Wander hit him in the side with a guitar, the first time he heard him play, that night in the park on Axalis, that reassuring smile of his, that kiss-!

“RAAAAAH!” Unable to take it anymore, Hater threw a bolt of lightning into the nighttime sky, aiming for the stars themselves in an attempt to take his anger out on something, to destroy something, to try and focus on something else so he could possibly get rid of all this damn confusion and emotion. But before he could fire another one, he heard something.

“Hater!” A voice, someone calling his name. It was faint at first, but it quickly got louder, and he immediately recognized it.

“I thought I told you to leave me alone!” Hater shouted, turning on his heel and glaring at Wander, his eyes glowing a bright, dangerous green. But surprisingly - or, perhaps it wasn’t too surprising - Wander didn’t flinch at his rage, nor did he run away.

“Hater, ya gotta believe us!” Wander said, a bit out of breath from all the running he had done to try and catch the skeleton in time, “No one’s laughin’ at ya or tryin’ to make fun of ya! Honest!”

“Like I would believe anything you say after pulling something like that!” Hater snapped back.

“Look, if you’re talking about the kiss-”

“WHAT ELSE WOULD I BE TALKING ABOUT?!” Hater screamed, his hands sparking again, “You, you and Awesome probably planned that! He would give the dare and you would kiss me, just so you all could embarrass me and get a big laugh at the results! Or maybe it was all your idea! After all, you were the one who kept me from leaving the party when I planned to in the first place! You probably wanted to get me all flustered, to see me make a complete fool of myself!”

“I would never!”

“Then why else would you kiss me?!”

Wander opened his mouth to speak again, but nothing came out. He just looked at Hater with surprise and just a hint of hurt. Finally, he spoke. “Hater...Don’t you remember what the dare told me to do?”

Hater’s anger melted away, once again replaced with shock. “You... You didn’t mean it. I mean, come on, you don’t actually think-”

“I’d never do somethin’ like that if I didn’t mean it, Hater,” Wander replied, his face serious, “Even if it was part of the game... I did exactly what the dare told me to do. And I swear, I wasn’t trying to embarrass you. I just...” Guilt was now all over his furry face, and he even lowered his head slightly, no longer looking at Hater. “I’m sorry...”
Hater watched him for a moment before looking away. “Whatever. It doesn’t matter. I’m not going back.”

“Hater…”

“No! Just shut up!” he shouted, glaring at him again, “Okay, fine, you think I’m attractive or whatever, but that doesn’t change anything!” He narrowed his eyes. “Because I don’t think the same, and I never will. I’ve told before why I’m even hear, and it’s not to make friends! So do or say or sing whatever you want because I don’t care! I don’t need you!” With that, he looked away again, repeating his last words under his breath. “I don’t need you…”

Wander swallowed. “…Okay. I’ll leave ya alone then…” Hater just needed some space, that was all. Even so, he still felt the sting from the skeleton’s words as he walked away.

After a few moments, Hater looked over his shoulder, stealing one last look at the furball as he walked back to the beach house. He felt something, but quickly ignored it. “I don’t need you,” he repeated to himself, concentrating on the dark, empty street and rubbing at his cheek again, “I don’t need you…”

He took his phone out of his pocket and sent a text to Peepers, but by the time he started to see a pair of yellow headlights coming towards him, the eyeball still hadn’t replied. “Whatever,” he mumbled, shoving the device back in his pocket. The hotel buses ran every other hour, Peepers could find his own way back. And with that, Hater climbed into the bus and practically collapsed into his seat, his anger numb and leaving his body and mind exhausted.

When it became apparent that Hater was the only one, the driver shut the door and turned off the inside lights as he drove into the sky and towards the faint blue glow of planet Ronus, with the only sound being the small hum of the engines…

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The clock on the small table struck 3:30 am, and Peepers was wide awake. He was lying in some bed - he hoped it wasn’t awesome - with just his tee shirt on, and next to him was Sylvia, who was most likely just as awake.

His pupil was dilated, and his mind was racing. ‘Did…Did that just happen?’ he thought. The whole thing was a blur, and yet he could remember certain scenes as if they were still happening. The way she felt, the way she looked at him, the sight of her completely uncovered tattoos in the moonlight, the noises she made when he found out about her tail and he-

Peepers had to hold back a small squeak, shaking slightly from his excitement as he recalled everything. That… That had been amazing! He still couldn’t believe his luck! That was unbelievable, but it was fantastic! But-

But she still hadn’t said anything. Holding his breath, he glanced over at her. They had about the same facial expression - tired and still surprised. She was still glancing up at the ceiling, not bothering to meet his gaze.

Because of this, Peepers quickly looked away. “So…”

“Yeah…” Sylvia mumbled. This wasn’t just a dream, and they couldn’t even blame it on the alcohol considering that they hadn’t even finished their drinks. That had just happened, she could remember all of it, and… and she wasn’t sure what to think. She couldn’t… She needed to find something familiar, and maybe get her mind a chance to get over the shock.
So, sitting up, Sylvia grabbed her purple shirt and slipped it on. Seeing this, Peepers reached over to his side of the bed and grabbed his own discarded clothes. “Oh, uh, here.” He handed her her black jacket.

“Oh, thanks…” She slipped it on, and got out of bed, though she didn’t move towards the door right away. Part of her didn’t want to leave, but another part - the one still a bit confused and shocked by all this - wanted to get as far away as possible. ‘Just concentrate on finding Wander,’ she told herself, ‘Then we can get back to our hotel and you can try to sort this out.’ That’s all she had to do.

But, as she started to leave, she was stopped again. “Sylvia?” She glanced back at the now fully-clothed Watchdog. “I… Uh, I don’t… Just, this was…” He looked at her, and gave a small smile. “Thanks for… this. I, I enjoyed it.” And even if it never happened again, he could maybe live with that.

Sylvia gave a small smile in return. “Yeah, same here…” That seemed to be the only thing she was somewhat sure of. And with that, she left the room, shutting the door behind her. Once she was gone, Peepers sighed and laid back down on the bed, his arms spread out like he was making a snow angel in the sheets, with only one question running through his mind.

What now?

They were still technically rivals, after all they were in the same competition. But… Were they also friends, or was she wanting to start dating him? Did he want to date her? Was this really just a one time thing, or would this happen again? It was no surprise that he hoped for the latter. But… Did she really enjoy it, or was she just saying that? Did she actually like him? Were they ever going to talk about this, would she bring it up the next time they ran into each other? And what about Wander, was she going to tell him about-?

His eye widened as he felt a pinch of panic. Hater. What would Hater say if he found out about all this? …Where even was Hater? Peepers pinched his eye, the last few bits of pleasure he felt quickly being replaced with fatigue. “Zrebdank…”

The sky started to turn pink as Tralfar’s sun started to rise over the planet’s horizon, and a brand new day had officially begun. As for what it would bring, Peepers didn’t have a clue.

Chapter End Notes

The song used was "Sweet Temptation" by Autograph
Chapter 8

The coffee machine beeped, and Hater didn’t waste any time pouring himself a cup since apparently sleep wasn’t going to happen no matter how hard he tried. So, the skeleton just sat there in a black tank-top and red pants, sipping his drink and only half listening to the news. It was only when the door started to open did he show any signs of being fully awake.

After a moment, a small eyeball head peeked in the room, and Hater only scowled at it. “Nice of you to finally show up!” he growled.

“Yeah, sorry about that,” Peepers replied as he walked into their hotel room, a small box of donuts in his hands. Hater’s glare softened a bit, and the thought of breakfast almost made him forget about being angry with his drummer. Almost.

“Whatever.” Taking the box from Peepers, he opened it up and grabbed the first chocolate donut he spotted. “Where the hell were you anyway?” he asked before taking a huge bite.

“I stayed at the party and… sorta lost track of time.” Hater paused. Peepers didn’t usually just ‘lose track of time’. The skeleton glanced down at him.

“Oh yeah? Doing what?”

Peepers’ pupil darted around, looking at everything but Hater. “Well, I mean, you know how parties are! You have a few drinks, listen to a few songs and before you know it it’s three AM! Heh, am I right?”

Hater’s glare deepened as he stared the eyeball down, making him take a small step back. “And, it’s not like you had to stay any longer because of me! So, no harm done!”

“That doesn’t answer my question, Peepers.” Hater replied, not breaking the eye contact, “You’re hiding something.”

His eye widened slightly despite Peepers trying to keep calm and casual about all this. “What?! Psssh, nooo! I mean, come on Hater, buddy, I would never hide anything from you! What kind of guy do you think I am?”

“…”

“…”He sighed. “Fine, I was… I was spending time with a girl, and that’s what made me lose track of time.”

Hater raised an eyebrow. “Seriously?”

Peepers gave him a small look. “Yes.”

“Huh.” His surprise shifted back to annoyance. “Well, whatever. Just don’t let making out with girls get you distracted.” Not that they would be going to another party anyway. “Because if you ditch me again and I’m your only ride back, I’m not waiting for you!”

“Fine.” He paused for a moment. “But, just for the record, it wasn’t making out. Or rather, just making out.”

Now that nearly made Hater drop his donut. “Wait. You mean… You and, and a girl?! You guys…”
“Seriously?!”

“Yes!” Peepers shouted indignantly, glaring at his bandmate now. Geez, it wasn’t that hard to believe, was it?

“Wow…” Hater then scowled slightly. “Great, looks like I owe Ember twenty credits when we get home.”

“... So, how did you enjoy the party, Hater?” Peepers asked flatly, trying to pretend he didn’t hear that last bit.

As soon as he heard that question, Hater clenched his fist, turning the rest of the donut into crumbs and even burning it slightly with a few sparks. The Watchdog gulped. “Okay, change of subject. Let’s just concentrate on what we need to do today - and for the next few days.”

“And what’s that?”

“Trying to find a venue!”

“Oh, right.” Although, after searching for a few days already, Hater was starting to think it was hopeless. Most places either said they were filled up, or just sent them on their way without giving them a straight answer, leaving them with a quick ‘Don’t call us, we’ll call you’.

“Don’t worry, Hater, I’m sure there’s somewhere that has an opening! Though, we may have to leave and come back later.” After all, all the places they had went to, they had said that they were free for the next week. And, as much as it would suck to wait a month or two to give a performance at one of the biggest and influential planets on their summer tour, it might also be their best option.

“So what, we wasted all this time and money just to have to wait another month or so to maybe perform here?” Hater asked, his frustration starting to show. He was starting to hate Ronus as much as he hated Axalis.

Peepers gave a small sigh. “Look… I know things aren’t exactly going ‘according to plan’, but it’s all gonna be worth it, trust me. Just keep focusing on the end goal here, Hater: Fame, fortune, and everything the Harbingers of Doom have been striving for finally becoming a reality!”

Hater slowly glanced up at him, and Peepers gave him a firm, determined look. Their end goal… No annoying furballs or jerky shark-men to worry about. Instead, they would have screaming fans and all the money and shows they could ever want! The Harbingers of Doom would become rock star legends with nothing to stand in their way! Yes...Yes...Yes! It didn’t matter how they did it, and they didn’t even need a lousy show on stupid Ronus! His music was awesome, and in a little more than two months, his music would be all he needed to win! “Right!” Hater shouted, sitting up straighter now.

Peepers grinned, glad to see Hater already getting back into a good mood. “So, let’s just keep focusing on that, and go out there and find us a show to play!”

“Yeah! ...Wait.”

“What?”

Hater picked up another donut. “We’ll go after breakfast.” Peepers would’ve tried arguing with him if not for the fact that his stomach was already starting to growl. Besides, that coffee sure did smell good.
“Okay, fine,” he said, sitting down and grabbing a glazed donut, “Right after breakfast.” Hater just gave a stiff nod as a reply. This was what he needed. No more distractions. Just him, his band, and his goal. That was all he needed.

Their hotel room was pretty quiet, and with Drake out for the day at a pre-show run through, Demurra had taken it upon herself to relax and do a bit of work of her own. Switching between demo tracks and Word App, she laid on her bed with her tablet, lightly kicking her feet as she worked.

“Hmm, not bad,” she muttered, stopping the demo and going back to Word to type some notes. However, once she took out her earbuds, another sound caught her attention. It was the light, somewhat sour plucking of the strings of a banjo. ‘I thought he was practicing his guitar,’ she thought, since she had seen Wander get out his guitar case as she was heading to her room. Well, either way, it definitely didn’t sound like the same, cheery tunes she usually heard from him.

Sitting up, Demurra turned off her tablet, and headed towards the living room, hoping she could get him to explain why he was playing the blues.

“Wait, no that doesn’t sound right,” Wander mumbled, grimacing slightly as he tried the chord again. But even if he played it perfectly, it still didn’t sound right. Frowning, Wander set his guitar down and glanced back at the mostly blank sheet music, erasing the few notes he had just written down.

Seeing this, Demurra made herself known. “Having a bit of Musician’s Block?” she asked.

Wander shrugged. “I guess…”

Demurra frowned. No, this wasn’t just a mental block. She glanced over her shoulder at the bathroom door. Sylvia was still in the shower - which wasn’t too surprising, as Demurra quickly learned how much the Zbornak liked long showers. Thank goodness the hotel didn’t charge for water use - so it looked like Demurra was the only one he could talk to at the moment. But of course, the blonde didn’t mind at all.

So, she sat down next to him, giving him a small smile. “Do you have any idea what caused this ‘block’?”

“...Maybe.”

Demurra thought for a moment. They did go to a party last night, and surprisingly Wander had still woken up at the same time as her and Drake, but even with the smile he forced onto his face, she could still tell that he wasn’t in his usual ‘Good Morning’ mood. “Did something happen at Awesome’s last night?”

Wander flinched slightly. “Uh, yeah, I guess you could say that. ...Actually, it was a pretty big something.”

Now the blonde’s interest had peaked. “What happened?”

He didn’t answer right away, wringing his hands as he tried to think of a way to explain it. “Well… Okay so, this friend and I, we were just playin’ a game. And we were all having fun, and then I did something…Technically I was just followin’ the rules of the game, and I didn’t think it would bother him so much. In fact I was kinda hopin’ it would do the opposite. But then he got mad and…” he slouched in his seat. “And now I don’t know what I can do to fix this.”

“Hmm,” Demurra hummed, pursing her lips, “Well… What exactly did you do to him, Wander?”
The furry guitarist’s eyes widened slightly, a small blush forming on his cheeks as he gave her a sheepish smile. “Heh, well, I sorta… kissed him.” After a moment, he quickly added, “On the cheek!”

“Ah,” she nodded, “And I take it the game was Truth or Dare?” Even if she had never personally been to one of the shark’s party, she knew the man well enough that it didn’t surprise her if that game was pretty common at his get-togethers.

“Yeahhh.” Wander gave a small sigh. “What am I gonna do, Demurra? I already told ‘em that I meant it, and that I wasn’t trying to make fun of him or anything, but I don’t think it did any good.”

“...Actually, I think saying that you meant it might have made things worse, at least in Hater’s mind.”

“Huh?” Wander asked, clearly not understanding.

Demurra leaned back in her chair, thinking back to the skeleton. Almost always in his stage clothes, almost always scowling. He was determined, focused, and definitely talented, but he also didn’t take to criticism well. And, from what she could tell, when something different entered the picture - something he wasn’t prepared for or something he didn’t want - it turned his world upside down. ‘But,’ she thought with a small smile, ‘Hopefully he can realize that’s not a bad thing.’

Knowing Wander was still wanting an explanation, she continued to speak. “I think he was just a bit surprised by it, and the fact that it wasn’t just a joke or a prank was even more surprising to him, so he reacted in a negative way.”

“I guess that makes sense...” The kiss was a bit unexpected, even if Hater had heard the dare. Even so, Wander still felt the guilt. “So, what can I do to make it right?”

She placed a gentle hand on his shoulder. “I think you’ve already done all that you can do, Wander,” Demurra told him, “Just give him a bit of space and some time to cool off, and then you can try talking to him again. Okay?”

“Yeah, okay,” he nodded, giving her a small smile, “Thanks for the advice, Demurra.” She sure was good at giving it - both musical and normal advice. He briefly wondered if she would be able to give romantic advice… ‘Whoa, slow down there, Wander,’ he mentally told himself. First, he had to give Hater some space and become friends with him again before pursuing any of that stuff. And besides, really he just wanted to be on good terms with the skeleton, even if it never got any farther than that.

“No problem, it’s what I do,” Demurra said proudly.

“Yeah well, ya do your job well!” He then gave her a quick hug. “I’m feelin’ a bit better about it now, so - Hey. Wait a sec.” He pulled back, raising an eyebrow. “How did you know I was talking about Hater?”

The blonde simply gave an innocent smile and shrugged her shoulders. “Lucky guess.”

Just then, the bathroom door opened, a small wall of steam coming out followed by Sylvia. “Ah, nothin’ like a hot shower to make you feel like it was worth gettin’ out of bed.” With a smile, she dried her mane before hanging the towel on the towel rack and grabbing her piercings from the sink countertop. “Hey bud, are we ready to get back to pounding the pavement?”

Wander gave a genuine smile. “Yep! Ready when you are!” After all, they still had a show to find, and a band to possibly team up with. Maybe if Awesome and his band were on Ronus now, they would be willing to play along with them. But really, the thought of doing a team up with any band - writing new songs and mixing styles and playing together on stage - was enough to make him grin.
“Great!” Sylvia replied with the same amount of enthusiasm as her bandmate, “Let’s get going then before all the spots are filled.”

“Right!” Hopping out of his seat, Wander started putting his stuff away. First his sheet music, then his banjo, followed by his guitar - all of them going into his hat with ease while Sylvia and Demurra watched in awe.

“I still don’t get how that thing works,” Sylvia said, “I mean, it’s not even stretching! At least, not on the outside! So, how the grog is it so big on the inside?!” And as if that wasn’t enough of a mystery, Sylvia could swear that there have been times where he’d pulled things out of his hat that she had never even seen in his possession before, let alone something Wander had actually put in his hat.

But Wander just shrugged casually as he placed it back on his head. “Who knows?” he said with a smile, “But it sure is handy!” With that said, he started heading towards the door, not bothered by these questions in the slightest.

Rolling her eyes, Sylvia glanced over at Demurra and gave her a small wave goodbye. “See you guys tonight,” she said as she grabbed one of their hotel keycards off the coffee table, “Hopefully with good news. Wish us luck.”

“Good luck!” Demurra replied. Though really, music-wise, they didn’t need it. Their talent and charisma was enough to get an act, or at least an audition, even at the most exclusive places on Ronus. Unfortunately, first they needed to find an opening, and that was where they would need luck.

‘But if anyone can get luck on their side,’ she thought as she headed back to her room and back to work, ‘It’s those two.’ And perhaps said luck wouldn’t just apply to getting shows. ‘After all, if he could kiss the lead singer of a band called the Harbingers of Doom and not get a single scratch or bruise - or volt of electricity - I’d say his chances are pretty good.’

Though, like everything else related to the competition, Demurra wouldn’t know whether or not it would really work out until the summer was through. But Demurra was a pretty patient woman, ‘And after all,’ she thought with a slight smirk as she turned her tablet back on, ‘it will still be interesting to watch.’

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“Keep going straight on Bluelight Boulevard for the next 15 miles.”

“Fifteen miles?!” Peepers repeated, glancing at the machine like it was crazy, or malfunctioning - which was pretty likely - “That can’t be right!”

Hater rolled his eyes. “Really Peepers, this again?”

“Yes, ‘this again’, because you refuse to get a new GPS!”

“Because there is nothing wrong with my GPS! Besides, you’re the one who keeps using it so much despite the fact that you won’t shut up about it!”

Peepers looked at him in disbelief. “I - I use it because YOU’RE the one who’s forcing me to use it!” he screeched, “Ugh, I swear Hater, sometimes you are just such a-!”

“Turn left now.”

“What?!”
“Peepers, turn!” Hater shouted, grabbing the steering wheel and moving them into the turning lane, nearly hitting a motorcyclist and causing several cars behind them to start honking. “Turn or we’re gonna miss it!”

Trying to ignore the sudden heart attack he had gotten thanks to his bandmate, Peepers quickly took a sharp turn, the tires of the van screeching under the pavement as they drove into the vast, mostly empty parking lot. Once the wheels grinded to a halt, and after they made sure no cops were now after them, Hater and Peepers both let out a sigh of relief.

“You have arrived.” “Oh be quiet,” the Watchdog muttered, turning the machine off and shifting the van into park. As soon as the vehicle was parked, Hater stepped outside and couldn’t help but be a bit impressed by what he saw.

The stadium was a pure white, with a sapphire blue glass dome acting as its roof. And the place was big, very big. After all, it was big enough to lay down turf for a baseball or football game, and still have enough room for fans once it expanded its upper levels for more seating. Hater could only imagine how many people they could fit in there if there was only a stage taking up room. Speaking of which, with all the room and money the stadium had, there would not only be room for all the spotlights, lasers and pyrotechnics his heart could desire, but also a giant screen tv! His face, on a giant tv, with giant speakers blasting his music, and every single person paying attention to him - praising and cheering for him!

“...Peepers.”

“Yeah, Hater?”

“Why didn’t we just come here when we first got to Ronus?! If they could just get an open spot to perform, it would be their best show yet! And with an audience that bit, the entire planet would know their names!

The Watchdog rolled his eye as he shut the van’s door. “Because, this is a very popular stadium, where professional and universally famous bands have performed. And, no offense but, we’re nowhere near that level of popularity.” Hater gave him a look. “...Yet,” the drummer added, “We’re not that famous yet.”

“Well then why are we bothering to come here now if it’s so unlikely that they’ll even let us play here?”

The eyeball shrugged. “Might as well give it a shot. We’ve tried everywhere else, and they’ve had musical competitions here before. So, maybe once we explain about the competition we’re in, they’ll let us play here.” And even if they couldn’t get a show there, maybe they could at least get their information out to someone who mattered. After all, in these types of cities, all the important people knew each other and connections were everything.

“They better,” Hater mumbled. Even with his renewed determination, it was still hard for the man to wait for things, and his patience had already been running thin before they even started having trouble finding a show. He didn’t understand why this competition had to be the whole summer long when he could’ve easily obliterated the other bands by now and already have a record contract. Then again, all of this was going to result in people already knowing his name before he even got a record deal, so he supposed it was sort of a good thing. Nevertheless, it still annoyed him.

Crossing their fingers, the duo started to cross the parking lot and head towards the front door. Unfortunately, they didn’t get too far.
“Why the hell is it locked?!” Hater yelled, grunting as he pulled at the doors, “It’s the middle of the day! Don’t the people who work here have stuff to do?!”

“Calm down,” Peepers told him, “Maybe there’s a back door or some-” His eye widened when he spotted a figure coming towards them. “Uh, H-Hater! Maybe you should let go of the door.”

“Huh? Why should I?” Peepers pointed, and Hater turned around. He could see a burly figure with a big, bald head looking at them, crossing his arms. He seemed like the classic security guard with a black tee shirt, walkie-talkie, and sunglasses. He had his hand - or rather, tentacle tip - on his pocket already, letting them know that he was more than willing to call for back-up.

Hater scowled. Of course, with his powers and strength, the guard would be no problem - but jail-time would be. So, giving the man a dirty look, Hater let go of the door handles and stomped away. “There’s no way I’m leaving yet,” he told Peepers quietly.

“I figured as much. Now follow my lead.” Looking as casual as possible, Peepers slowly lead them back towards their van. However, as soon as the guard turned his head and was no longer paying attention to them, he darted for the side of the stadium and flattened himself against the white wall, with Hater following.

He waited a moment, and when he didn’t hear any footsteps running towards them, he assumed the coast was clear. “Okay, let’s go find that back door!”

It took a few minutes, but they did eventually find another entrance. And what was better, they found it just as a techie was walking inside, and were able to grab it before it shut them out. “After you,” Peepers said with a pleased smile as he held the door open. Not bothering to thank him, Hater walked inside and started to look for someone important. A manager, a talent agent, heck at this point even a janitor could probably at least try to lead them in the right direction. It was better than what they had now, which was - of course - absolutely nothing.

“See anyone yet?” he asked as he peeked around from behind a curtain, making sure there were no other security guard squids on the look-out for them.

“It depends on who you’re looking for,” Peepers replied, his eye squinting slightly as he looked around, “It looks like most of the people here are stagehands, probably setting up for a pre-rehearsal or something.”

“Well, it’s better than no one.” And maybe if they were lucky, one of these guys were best friends with the owner of the stadium or something. As he continued looking, Hater did spot someone who could maybe help.

They were shorter than most of the stage workers. In fact, at a height even shorter than Peepers and a round, pudgy body, Hater wasn’t sure how exactly he could help. Still, he was obviously a stage worker, judging by the lanyard around his neck and the clipboard checklist in his hand. Like the security guard, he was also wearing a black tee-shirt, along with a pair of grey pants and an old pair of sneakers. On his head was a baseball cap turned backwards - either to make a fashion statement or because it would be impossible for him to see anything taller than him (which was pretty much everything) without tilting his head up - with some sort of logo stitched onto it. From what he could tell, some sort of volunteer baseball team whose mascot was a star.

But what really caught Hater’s eye was, in fact, the young man’s actual eye. One huge, wide eye with a red iris. “There!”

Peepers turned his head quickly. “What, where? Do you see someone?”
“Yes, him!” He pointed at the Watchdog. “Go over and talk to him, see if he has any connections to the manager or whatever and maybe he’ll get us a show!”

Peepers gave him a look. “And why am I the only one talking to him? Just because we’re both Watchdogs doesn’t mean-”

“Sheepishly, Peepers just go talk to him!”

He gave a small sigh. “Fine.” After one more quick guard check, Peepers walked over to him. “Uh, hey.”

“When?” The Watchdog turned to face him. “Oh, hey!” he greeted in a friendly tone. Judging by his voice, he was pretty young, or at least a few years younger than Peepers. “Uh, are you the new guy or something? Nice shirt by the way, I think I recognize the design but I don’t know where. Still pretty cool though.”

“Thanks,” Peepers said with a nod, “Actually, it’s the logo for my band-” He could hear the sound of fake coughing behind him. He rolled his eye. “Our band. Ever heard of the Harbingers of Doom?”

The stagehand’s eye widened, and he nearly dropped his clipboard. “Wait. Y-You’re in the Harbingers of Doom?! Wait! I recognize you now!”

Peepers glanced away, trying to give a cool ‘Yeah, whatever’ stance. “Yeah, I’m mainly the drummer, and co-creator of the band.” He could almost feel Hater glaring at him and mentally shouting at him to get to the point and stop bragging, but hey, he was the one who wanted him to talk.

“Wow! You guys are amazing!” the little Watchdog exclaimed, his eye practically sparkling with excitement and awe, “Hey, is that skeleton guy here too? He’s so awesome!”

“As a matter of fact, yes, he is here. One sec.” Peepers quickly ran back over to the curtain and, with a bit of prompting, he returned a couple minutes later with his bandmate.

“Yeah, hey,” Hater mumbled, giving a lazy wave. But the Watchdog either didn’t notice his lack of enthusiasm or didn’t mind it.

“Wow, I can’t believe this is actually happening!” he all but squealed, “It’s- It’s an honor to meet you, Sir!”

“Don’t call me Sir,” Hater told him bluntly, not in the mood for formalities.

“Right, sorry,” he replied, giving a sheepish look, “Just… Wow! You guys are amazing! And your music is so awesome! I’d love to get a CD of it sometime - when are you guys making one by the way? I’d buy it in a heartbeat! Oh, my name’s Westley by the way, and I watch your performance from the beginning of the summer on Viewtube at least once everyday, I just can’t get enough of it! And now I’m actually meeting you guys! This is just unbelievable! So how exactly do you do that lightning thing with your hands? Like, can you actually create lightning, or did you hook sparklers up to your guitar?”

Throughout all the comments and questions, Hater tried to keep his frustration from showing too much. Now, it wasn’t as if he didn’t like having fans, and he definitely liked getting praised. But fanboys… That was another story. ‘Especially ones that won’t SHUT UP,’ he thought, his scowl deepening.

Seeing this, Peepers immediately took over the conversation. “We’ll release a cd after we win the
Battle of the Bands, yes the lightning’s real, and thanks for watching us, make sure to tell your friends if you have any,” he said quickly, “Now, with that said, Leslie-”

“Uh, it’s Westley.”

“Right, Westley. Look, we’re not just here checking out the backstage area, we came here for a reason. What’s your job here, kid?”

“I’m a stagehand,” he answered, Mostly I just tell the bands when it’s time to get out on stage, and get them food. Oh! But sometimes I get to hang out with them backstage! You know, if they need drinks or whatever...”

“Wow, you must be so proud of yourself,” Hater replied dryly, ignoring the stern glare Peepers was giving him, “Now, do you know anyone important? The owner of this place or the manager or the person in charge of scheduling shows?”

“Well, yeah I know him,” Westley replied with a shrug, “I mean, he is my boss after all. But I, well, I mean we don’t hang out with each other or anything, but-”

“I knew it,” Hater mumbled. He was just some fanboy, no one important. What a waste of time.

Eye widening again and not wanting them to leave, Westley shouted, “Wait! If you guys are wanting to do a show here, I - I could get you a show!”

Even with the benefit of a doubt, the two bandmates didn’t believe the little Watchdog could even get a meeting with his boss, let alone get them a show. “But you just said-”

“I get food for him too!” Westley explained, “And, maybe while I’m in there I can just mention that I just happened to meet one of the greatest bands ever who coincidentally want to do a show here! And, if I really need to grab his attention, I’ll just show him the video of you guys on my phone!”

The two bandmates stared at him, and then glanced at each other. It was still a bit of a stretch, and there was still a ton of doubt… But hey, what did they have to lose?”

“Okay, kid,” Peepers nodded, “You can try.”

’He better do more than try,’ Hater thought with a scowl, knowing just how big of an opportunity this was and how close it was to actually becoming a reality, ‘That’s all I can say.’

“Great!” Westley beamed, “I’m gonna be getting his lunch in a bit anyway, so I can tell him then! Wow, I can’t believe I’m gonna actually see you guys perform live!” This was easily the best day of his life. “Oh, hey, you guys should give me your phone number so I can text you guys once I get everything set up.” He quickly got out his phone - a small, cheap, red flip phone that was at least three or four years old - and held it out to them.

Clearly he had more faith in himself than Hater and Peepers did. Not wanting him to have his phone number, Hater grabbed the phone and typed in Peepers’ number. “Here,” he said, handing it back.

“Thank you, Sir!” Westley chirped, “Uh, I mean, Mr. Hater! Wait, no, that doesn’t sound right ei-”

“Just call me Hater,” the skeleton replied, rolling his eyes.

“Okay! Uh, I’ll text you later then, Hater!” And with that, Westley pocketed his phone and ran off, determined to get the best lunch he could for his boss to try and get him in a good mood - and nearly getting stepped on by one of the bigger stagehands on the way.
“...We’re not getting a show here, are we Peepers?”

“Well, it’s hard to say but… Most likely, no.”

Hater pinched the space on his face where his nose would be if he had one. “Do you think there’s anyone else nearby that would have a better chance of getting us one?”

“Well - Uh, actually Hater I think we should go!” Opening his eyes, he quickly spotted the squid security guard from before, scowling and walking towards them.

“Crap,” he said under his breath before turning on his heel and running towards the exit with Peepers right behind him.

The rest of the day didn’t seem to offer anymore signs of success - or at least, any success on Ronus. Driving all across the glowing planet, they stopped at several clubs - three of which they had already been to - as well as certain restaurants, hotels, theatres, and pretty much anywhere with a stage.

And which each stop, the situation seemed more and more hopeless. A quick conversation and the chance to offer up their band and contact information - which would most likely be lost or forgotten about by the end of the day - was all they got in return for their efforts. “No gig, no audition- heck, I don’t even think that last guy even asked for our names!”

“I know, I know,” Peepers replied, rubbing his forehead. He hoped he remembered to pack aspirin, Glorn knows he was gonna need it after today.

“You know what, screw it,” Hater said, slouching in his seat and crossing his arms, “If they don’t want us, then we don’t need them! It’s like you said, we’ll become famous and win the competition without their help!” Who needs Ronus and their stupid stadium and city full of people with connections and their giant screen tvs… Hater hoped it didn’t look like he was pouting.

“Okay well…” The Watchdog sighed. Unless they got a gig soon, they were just wasting time and money here. That much was true. “But still, can’t we at least try for one more day? I mean, maybe we can try for one more day - see if we can get a gig a month or two from now - and-”

“No Peepers!” Hater shouted, making his drummer flinch. He was tired of feeling like he was slowly failing at his goal, and he was tired of wasting time. “We’re leaving tonight.”

“But, Hater please, can’t you reconsider? This is such a big opportunity for us, and once we leave, we won’t have another chance to get a show here!” By the time they returned to Ronus, there would be no hope for a show, that is, unless they were willing to wait a few years. Or a decade. “Just think about all the people who could see us!”

“Don’t care,” the skeleton replied bluntly, “This is my band, and I say we’re leaving!”

Blinking, Peepers then narrowed his eye. “Oh? And what happened to ‘our band’?”

Hater glared back at him. “It was my idea in the first place.”

“But I’m still a part of the band,” Peepers retorted as he pulled into the hotel parking lot, “So my opinion matter’s just as much as yours, Hater!”

“Fine, I’ll listen to your opinion. ...But I still say we’re leaving.”

“Hater! Come on!”
“Look unless we get a show, what’s the point of staying?!” Hater yelled, sitting up straighter now and throwing his hands up in frustration, “We can’t even get anyone one this Grod-damned planet to listen to remember us a few hours now! So, if that’s the case then tell me, Peepers: What exactly makes you think anyone will hire us to play a show a few weeks from now?!”

The eyeball stared back at him, not quite sure how to defend his point now. A small beep from Peepers’ phone broke the silence.

“Look,” Hater said, leaning back in his seat, “I just want to get out of here and get on with the summer. The sooner I can actually play something and forget about all of this, the better.”

Peepers sighed. “I have to agree with you there.” With all this traveling and searching and kiss-partying - it felt like forever since he’d actually played something. “My drums are probably starting to get covered in dust,” he half-joked. Another beep.

“So, we leave tonight?” Hater asked, “We drive most of the night, and we find a new planet.” Not Tralfar 5, definitely not. But there were still some planets nearby with some pretty big populations. Surely those were just as good as Ronus.

“Right,” Peepers nodded, “And I’ll get on my laptop when we get in our room. I should find us a cheap motel somewhere.” He wasn’t looking at his bandmate, but he still knew he gave a grimace at that. “Unless we want to just sleep in here for the next few nights. But we should probably wait a while before we stay at another hotel.”

“...Fine.” He supposed staying in a motel or his ship with money still in their pockets was better than staying at a hotel but barely scraping by on everything else. Of course, once they played a few more shows, hopefully their wallets would be re-supplied.

“So you was settled. Still… he couldn’t help but feel a bit disa- *Beep*

Hater growled. “Peepers will you just look at your phone already?!”

Peepers rolled his eye. “It’s probably just got low battery or something since I forgot to charge it last night.” Still, he took it out anyway since he knew the beeping would just annoy Hater the entire elevator ride up to their room, so he thought it was probably for the best to just turn it off until he could get to his charger.

You have: One new message

“Huh?” He clicked on the message, and as he read the text, his pupil shrank in disbelief. “...No florping way.”

“What?” Hater asked, leaning so he could try and see the message too, “What is it?”

Peepers held up his phone, and Hater eyes darted as he quickly read it. Of course, once he did so, he immediately read it again while at the same time trying to keep his jaw from falling off in shock. Once, twice, three times, and he still couldn’t believe it! But there it was. The number wasn’t one he recognized, but it wasn’t necessary to know.

“Hey guys! It’s me, Westley! I got you guys a show! :D Told u guys I wouldn’t let u down! Come in Saturday afternoon, around 2 or so. See u then! :)

“...Huh.” Maybe fanboys were good for something after all. He then looked at Peepers, who was still looking pretty shocked.
“...Well. Guess I should dust off my drums, huh?”

There was a ghost of a smile on Hater’s face. “Order a pizza too while you’ve got your phone out. The usual ‘rehearsal order’ should do.”

For what was probably their biggest show since the Battle of the Bands opening, to Hater and Peepers, there was no such thing as too much practice. Only taking breaks to eat, use the restroom and - after being given the threat of being kicked out because of too many noise complaints - taking about ten minutes to move back out to the parking lot.

But even with their small break, it certainly sounded like they had been practicing every day. They would work on stuff individually, as well as together, and when stuff meshed - it really meshed. Both bandmates were clearly putting all their concentration into their instruments. When they had to rest their hands or take a small break, they would spend it talking about possible ‘game plans’.

“Oh, so between those two songs, I think if we put our usual opener in between them, we should have a good finale.”

“But then what do we use for our opening?”

“How about ‘Circus for a Psycho’ again? After all it worked well on the moon.”

“There’s no way I’m repeating the same act line-up twice, Peepers, I’m a professional. ...Although, it would be good to play after our first song.”

“I guess it would help keep the crowd’s energy up.”

“Exactly. Geez, use your head for once, Peepers.”

Even after crashing around three in the morning, the duo woke up about five hours later to continue with their practicing and to make sure they were stage ready. Hater picked out his outfit beforehand - going back to the red jacket/black pants combo - while Peepers shined his helmet and taped his drumsticks.

Finally, when two o’clock started to come near, they packed up their things and headed back to the stadium - probably at least breaking a couple speed and traffic laws on the way there. “I still can’t believe we actually managed to get a show!” Peepers grinned, though he tried to keep his excitement in check.

“See,” Hater replied as he glanced out the window, managing to stay relatively calm as well (though he did let a small smile stay on his face), “I told you we shouldn’t give up so easily.”

“...Right, of course. Whatever you say, Hater.” But even that couldn’t bring down Peepers’ good mood. “There’s probably going to be at least a few talent scouts and possible Final Battle judges in the audience. And even if there aren’t, still - we’re going to be playing for thousands of people!” He would probably need to throw up before the show, but at the moment, he was anything but nervous.

“Yep,” Hater nodded, his smirk widening as the stadium got nearer, “All of those people, clapping and cheering just for -” he stopped.

“Hm?” Glancing over at his guitarist, Peepers noticed that the skeleton’s smirk had been replaced with a deep frown. “What’s wrong?”

“...Peepers, what does that sign say?”
“Hater, if somebody misspelled ‘Harbingers’ again we can just yell at someone to fix it,” Peepers told him. But as he glanced up at the sign, he almost wished it would’ve been just a spelling error.

For tonight only: Performances by various bands competing in this year’s ‘Battle of the Bands’

Performance. Various bands.

As in, this wasn’t just their show. They would have to share it with who knows how many other bands.

“... I’m going to kill that Watchdog.” And if it wasn’t for the fact that he wouldn’t mind joining him, Peepers probably would’ve tried to reason with him.

With no squid security guard blocking the way and the doors unlocked, the two had no problem getting inside and down into the backstage area. Even finding Westley wasn’t too much of a problem despite his size, mostly because he was the only other Watchdog there. “You!”

“Wah!” he jumped in surprise, dropping the sandwich he was holding before turning around. But of course, despite their scowls, Westley’s fear turned to happiness as soon as he saw them. “Oh hey guys! Glad to see you made it! So, do you need me to go get your stuff because I can totally-”

“What is this?” Hater asked, looking down at him with his arms crossed. Peepers stood beside him, copying the pose.

Westley blinked. “Uh, backstage?”

“No. What I mean is, what kind of gig is this,” Hater explained, his frown deepening, “You didn’t say anything about us having to share.”

“Oh. Right. You probably saw the sign, right?”

“How could we not?!?”

Westley winced slightly. “Okay, see, the thing is - of course you guys are good enough to give a show by yourselves - but my boss didn’t want any newbies performing by themselves no matter how good they were - by the way, he loved the performance I showed him - unless they were playing in front of an actually famous band.”

Hater gritted his teeth. He was no ‘opening act’! He was - no, he deserved to be the main event!

“But we didn’t have anyone we could call on such short notice,” Westley continued to explain, “But then I mentioned that you guys were competing in the Battle of the Bands AND, as it turns out, you two weren’t the only band trying to get a show here. So, once we confirmed the other bands could come, we had ourselves a show!” He paused for a moment. “So, we’re good, right?”

Hater continued to scowl, though Peepers looked a bit less angry. ‘I suppose it could be worse,’ he thought. After all, they were still getting a great venue and a huge audience out of the deal. “So how many other bands are here?”

“Just three others,” Westley answered as he glanced over his shoulder, “and two of them are already here.”

Looking over Westley, Hater could see the bands. He recognized them sure, but at the same time he had never met any of them in person, so his feelings about them were pretty neutral. Still, the fact that Hater couldn’t really remember anything about them, not even what style they played, did make him feel a bit better. If these bands were forgettable to him, then maybe they would be to the audience
“Well, if that’s everything, I can still go get your luggage,” Westley offered. “Oh, and help yourself to the snacks.”

“We will,” Peepers nodded, handing over the keys to the ship so he could get in the trunk, “Thanks.”

Westley beamed. “No problem!” With that, he jogged towards the backstage exit.

Hater’s scowl still remained, but at least he had calmed down a bit. “But I still can’t believe we have to be apart of some promotional thing,” he mumbled. It was humiliating! Plus it made him seem like some charity case which, well, maybe on Ronus but certainly not anywhere else!

“I know, but a gig’s a gig, right?” Peepers said, “All we have to do is make sure our part of the concert is better than everyone else’s.” Shouldn’t be too hard.

“Fine.” Glancing over at the snack table, Hater spotted a bag of potato chips that would be a perfect pre-show snack. At least that was something that worked out right.

As he started to walk over to the table, he heard the door open, followed by a small yelp from Westley. “Whoops! Sorry ‘bout that, little guy!”

Hater froze. No. Nonono. This could NOT be happening.

“Oh, it’s fine!” Westley insisted, being pretty much used to nearly being stepped on.

“Well, if you say so!” Wander replied as he gave him a small smile, still making sure to watch his step as he entered the building.

Slowly, Hater turned around, his spine stiff and his face warm with shock written all over it. If it wasn’t for the fact that he could barely moved, he probably would’ve noticed Peepers blushing slightly as well.

“Boy Westley, we sure do appreciate this, don’t we Syl?” Wander said, glancing back at the pudgy Watchdog as he and Sylvia walked inside - though he didn’t notice when Sylvia stopped - “I can’t tell ya how long it took us to manage to get a gig somewhere! And as if this wasn’t enough, we get to hang out with other bands too! So I just know that we’re gonna have-”

He finally turned around, and almost immediately locked eyes with the skeleton that he hadn’t been expecting to see again so soon. “H-Hater?!”

Hater tried to say something, but nothing came out, not even an angry yell or insult. The four aliens just stared at one another, none of them saying a single word. Not sure what was happening, Westley just kept looking back and forth between the two bands.

“...Soooo, I guess you guys know each other then?”

Hater shot him a glare so fierce that it made the Watchdog take a step back. “Heh, guess not,” he said quickly before running outside, slamming the door behind him.
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It seemed even the stagehands who had no idea who these people were didn’t dare speak up. Tension hung in the air, and it felt like ages - though most likely just a minute or so - before Wander finally decided to start talking.

“Heh, well, this is sort of a coincidence, ain’t it?” he said, his usual friendly and care-free smile only faltering just a bit, “Syl and I-” He looked back at his friend, who’s face looked a bit pinkish. Hmm, he would have to try and get her some water later, wouldn’t want her getting sick after all. “‘We were searchin’ for a place to play before we had ‘ta leave Ronus, and I guess now we’ll sorta be playin’ toge-”

Wander looked back at Hater, only to find that he had completely disappeared. “...ther.” His half-smile didn’t hesitate to turn into a full frown.

“Uh…” Peepers looked behind him, and then back at the duo. “I’ll, be right back.” And with that, he ran off. It looked like when confronted with whatever issues he was having with Wander, his mature, professional bandmate did the only thing he could think of… which was run off and go hide somewhere. ‘Of course,’ the Watchdog thought, rolling his eye.

Now… if he was Hater, where would he-? Peepers immediately spotted a one-room restroom. “Bingo.” He walked over to the door and tried to pull on it. When the door refused to open, he knocked on it. “Hater, are you in there?”

There wasn’t an answer. “Hater? Look , if you don’t answer me I’m gonna get someone to unlock the door for me.”

“...What do you want Peepers?”

“I want to know why you’re hiding in a bathroom!”

“Who says I’m hiding?! And hey, maybe I’m just - oh, I don’t know - actually USING the bathroom! Did you ever think of that, Peepers?”

Peepers sighed. “Whatever. Just don’t take too long. We need to try to figure out what we need to play since we’re getting less time on stage than when expected. ...And Hater? Don’t let him psyche you out. I mean, he’s just one guitar and banjo-playing weirdo! What could he do?”

Hater didn’t give an answer to that, although he did glance over at the door. After a few moments, he heard a pair of footsteps leave, and the skeleton let out a sigh - one he wasn’t quite sure if it was completely in relief. He rubbed his cheek again.

“Wonder why he just ran off like that,” Sylvia mumbled before tossing another chip in her mouth as she stood by the door, keeping it open so Westley wouldn’t have to worry about trying to open it while carrying their gear - which he insisted on doing despite how heavy it was.

Wander shrugged, only having a guess at what it could be. The Zbornak glanced over at him. “You okay, buddy?”

Hearing her concern, he forced a small smile. “Oh, yeah I’m fine! Don’t you worry about me,
Syl…” He glanced away again, his smile slipping a bit.

Sylvia frowned. “Look… Do you remember that time we played at that old folks home?”

He looked back up at her, smiling a bit more. “Yeah… That was an interesting audience, huh?”

‘Interesting’ was a polite way of putting it. While there had been a couple people there who liked their music, most of them didn’t. In fact, they couldn’t even finish their show, people just kept leaving or making loud comments over the music. Despite it all, Wander still had nothing but nice things to say - “It was nice of them to offer us refreshments for free. Who would’a thought prune juice would taste so good?” - but even so, Sylvia could tell he had been a bit upset after such a negative reaction to his music.

“Yeah well, remember how I said that not every audience will like our music, and there’s nothing we can really do about it?” she asked him. Wander nodded. “Well, people are like that too. Some people just won’t like ya for no good reason at all and, well, you just gotta accept that and not let it bring you down, okay pal?”

“…” Wander didn’t smile, but he did give another nod.

“Okay… Now come here,” she said, holding out her arms. Wander did smile at that, and quickly ran over to his bandmate, accepting the embrace. “Heh, thought that’d put a smile on your face.”

“Aw, that’s cute.” said a slightly strained voice, “But uh, guys, think you can pause the hug and ma- maybe give me a hand?” Both of them looked down and saw a nearly crushed Watchdog in the doorway.

“Oh, sure thing, Westley!” Wander told him as he grabbed the box on top, followed by Sylvia grabbing the next piece of luggage. As the three of them took the stuff over to their designated corner of the backstage area, Wander noticed a certain door not too far away start to open.

Rubbing the back of his skull, Hater scowled, glancing around and looking for Peepers. But before he spotted his bandmate, his eyes met Wander’s. This time wasn’t quite as jarring, maybe because of the distance. But still, when the shorter man gave him a friendly smile, along with a small wave, he felt a pinch of… something. Giving him the angriest glare he could muster, Hater ignored his second attempt at a greeting and started walking towards his own luggage, not bothering to even look back at Wander’s disappointment.

“You’re not going to psyche me out…” Hater mumbled to himself, keeping his eyes to the floor, “and you’re not going to make a fool out of me…”

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Just like with every concert, excitement was in the air - though the fact that it was in such a big stadium made it even more exciting. The building was abuzz with voices, the audience filling nearly every seat and some even holding up glowsticks or homemade signs. After all, despite only touring for less than a month, the bands performing there still had somewhat of a following thanks to the magic of the internet.

Before too many people could get bored, the stadium was plunged into darkness, and the crowd cheered, waving their light sources and keeping their eyes on the stage.

Of course, Peepers could only hear all of this happening, since he had to stay clear of the area behind the curtain where the first band was preparing. Apparently since this band was the first to try and apply for an act at the stadium, they got to perform first. Honestly, Peepers didn’t really care - after
all, the Harbingers of Doom were no opening act - but still, he didn’t like the waiting. All the anticipation, the nerves, the sinking sensation that something would go wrong. But then again, he was used to these fears - especially during some of their very first performances.

“Just get it together, Peepers,” he told himself, “After all the practice you put in, this’ll be easy as pie!” He just needed to relax...and maybe find something to settle his stomach. Thankfully, Westley had just brought in a cooler of refreshments, including a bottle of Comet Light. As he took a small sip from the bottle, he heard the ice from the cooler shuffle around. Glancing back over to it, he noticed a certain Zbornak reaching into it.

It hadn’t looked like she was trying to sneak past him or try to grab a drink without him noticing. In fact, from the look of surprise Sylvia had on her face, she hadn’t even notice him sitting there on the stepladder.

“Oh,” she said, taking her hand out of the cooler and pulling out a bottle of Thunderblazz, “Uh, hey.”

By this point, Peepers’ pupil had shrunk a bit, and he seemed to be glancing everywhere but her. “Uh, yeah, hey.”

“...” Sylvia swirled the bottle around slightly. “So… Pretty cool you got a show here, Eyeball.”

“Yeah, pretty cool…” He kicked his feet a bit. “And uh, congrats for, for getting a show here too…”

“... Okay, I’m not doing this.”

Peepers blinked, finally looking straight at her. “Not doing what?”

“This whole… awkward thing!” Sylvia said, her voice rising a bit as she threw her hands in the air. When she received a stern look from the stage manager, she quickly quieted. “I mean, it’s just stupid and there’s no need for it just because we spent one night together. So… Let’s just, stop being awkward and beating around the bush and all that crap.”

Peepers stared at her, and then gestured to an unplugged amp. “Well if you wanna talk, this seat’s open.”

Sylvia gave him a small smile, and then sat down. They took a minute or so to take a sip from each of their respective drinks before Peepers finally spoke up. “...I don’t regret it.”

“Who said that I did?” Maybe a bit, but overall... not really. “I mean… We did have fun.” She gave him a smirk. “Who would’a thought such a little guy like you would have so much energy?”

Peepers smirked back proudly. “You shouldn’t underestimate me. ...So, did you tell Wander about it?”

“Nope,” Sylvia said firmly. She loved Wander like a brother, but there was no way she was talking about her… ‘activities’ unless it was absolutely necessary. “Have you told Bonehead?”

The Watchdog gave a loud ‘Ha!’, giving Sylvia all the answers she needed. “Well, that’s a couple questions down at least...” But they still hadn’t answered the biggest one, and for a moment, neither one dared to bring it up. But once again, Sylvia took charge.

“What do we do now?”

Peepers gave a shrug. “I mean... Do you want to-"
“Honestly, I don’t know,” Sylvia replied, taking another swig of her pop, “I mean… It’s not so much the actual ‘relationship’ part I’m iffy about.” In fact, it didn’t sound that bad. Not like she had much experience with relationships but still, she could’ve picked a worse guy (a certain shark-man popped into her mind). “It’s everything else. I mean, we are still in a competition together, and we’re both gonna be traveling.”

“Yeah, but how many times have we ran into each other by complete accident during these few weeks alone?”

“…Point taken. Still, what exactly are we supposed to do after the summer then?”

Peepers was silent, glancing down at his drink. If everything went according to plan, he and Hater would go home for a week or two, and then get to work on recordings and touring and all that other stuff, traveling all over the universe and not having much time to rest. Of course, Sylvia was planning for that exact scenario if she and Wander won. But even if neither one of them won, would they still be able to make it work?

“Look… Why don’t we just try being friends for now and, you know just, see what happens!” Sylvia finally suggested. After all, that’s how their relationship formed in the first place.

Surprisingly, that actually sounded like the best idea to Peepers. “Okay,” he said with a nod, “So, friends?”

She smiled a bit. “Friends.” For now at least. She held up her bottle, and Peepers clinked his against it, the two of them taking another sip.

With that issue cleared up, Peepers posture relaxed a bit. “Well, as your ‘friend’, I feel like I should tell you: I don’t pull any punches when it comes to competition.” He smirked at her. “So, whatever we are, you’re still going down, Zbornak.” Rolling her eyes, Sylvia stretched her tail over and flipped his helmet over his face. “HEY!”

Of course, Sylvia just chuckled. “Wouldn’t have it any other way, Eyesore.”

After about half an hour, the first band left the stage, and the second one prepared themselves. Hater watched them from a corner of the backstage area, tapping his finger on his elbow and starting to get bored with just waiting. Why should they have to wait anyway? If anything, they deserved the entire two and a half hours. But of course, this wasn’t the only thing that was making Hater feel anxious. After all, he was still here.

He was just sitting there a few feet across from Hater - nearly pressed up against the wall despite having plenty of room and nothing crowding him - lightly strumming his guitar and keeping his face mostly hidden under that big hat of his. Every once in a while - not that Hater was paying attention of course but - Wander glanced over at him, and then quickly looked away.

“Hmph,” was all Hater could really say as a comment to him. He didn’t care, and he wasn’t falling for Wander’s tricks again. ‘If he thinks a few glances are going to get me to get anywhere near him after - after THAT, he’s got another thing coming!’ he thought with a scowl before looking down at his own guitar that was sitting in his lap.

He couldn’t really practice since the other band - which seemed to be alternative rock, and were pretty much average as far as Hater could tell - was playing. Not that he had any problem with accidentally messing up their concentration or sound, he just didn’t want to risk getting kicked out.
So, Hater had to settle for fake playing, running through the lyrics in his head as his hands fingered the chords.

Hater glanced up again, but Wander wasn’t looking over at him. ‘Good!’ he thought, ‘Maybe he’s finally starting to get the message.’ He didn’t look away though, because at the position his head was at, Hater could finally see Wander’s face.

He was frowning, but he didn’t look sad or like he was about to burst into tears. He just looked sort of neutral with maybe a hint of… something, but it was still surprising. For one thing, Hater didn’t think it was possible for the cheerful little goofball to keep a frown on his face for more than a few minutes. Besides, with how excited Wander usually got at his performances, Hater figured he would have that annoying grin on his face and be unable to take it off the rest of the night. ‘How can a guy smile so much?’ he thought. Treating everything like it was all fun and games and being cheerful all the time, talk about annoying.

And yet, here he was. No smiling, no humming or singing, no talking or staring or anything similar. Hater should’ve been glad to have the furball silent and stoic, but instead, it just made him feel even more uneasy. Like it was another trick to get him to talk to the little annoyance, or as if at any minute Wander would suddenly snap out of his funk and go back to his old self.

His old self that constantly tried to drag Hater into hanging out and having fun despite all the protests and insults he threw back at him. His old self that was almost always smiling, and who said things that should make no sense - that Hater knew shouldn’t make sense, and yet he kept thinking about them. His old self that sang dumb songs with dumb lyrics that never seemed to leave Hater’s skull, even when he thought he was rid of them for good. Wander’s old self, his usual self… The Wander that Hater hadn’t seen since-

“Sir? Uh, I mean, Hater?”

“GAH!” Hater jumped slightly, shaken out of his thoughts by a voice that - thankfully - wasn’t Wander’s. Looking down, he glared at the short eyeball. “What do you want?” he asked bluntly.

Westley shrunk a bit, taking a step back. “Um, well, I was just wondering when you wanted to go on? I mean, after these guys we have an intermission, so you can either play after them, or you can go last.”

Hater nearly answered, but stopped. His eyes shot back over to Wander, who was looking curiously at him and Westley. If The Harbingers of Doom went first, then Wander’s band would go afterwards. His mind flashed back to the first time he heard Wander play, and that had been just after one of his own performances. And, as much as Hater loathed admit it, Wander and Sylvia were actually one of the few bands in the competition that could actually provide a challenge.

He scowled. “We’ll go last,” he finally answered.

“Aw. Uh, I mean, cool!” Westley said quickly, writing something down on his clipboard, “Okay, got it! Thanks Hater!” He grinned at the skeleton before running just a few feet over to talk to Wander. “Okay, so that means you’re gonna be playing after the intermission. Now, I just need to know what kind of lights you need and if you need any special equipment and stuff like that.”

“Oh! Sure, no problem!” Wander nodded, smiling once more - not too big of a surprise. He took the clipboard from the Watchdog, sticking his tongue out of the corner of his mouth as he concentrated on it. “Let’s see what we have here…”

Hater watched them discuss their performance plans, only looking away and going back to ignoring
when Westley left. Of course, this didn’t last too long. “Gonna be a grand finale, huh?” Hater glanced back at him, and Wander had a small smile on his face. Not an excited grin or a wide smile, but just a light, calm expression. Maybe that’s what made him answer instead of go back to ignoring.

“Might as well,” he said, “After all, the last band that plays is usually going to be the one that people remember the most.” And even if it usually wasn’t, Hater was definitely going to make sure he was remembered.

“Well, I’ll have to stick around and watch you guys then,” Wander replied, “After all, I wouldn’t want to miss another one of your performances, Hater.”

He stared at him, making a face that was a cross between being curious and scowling. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I just like hearin’ ya play, Hater,” Wander said with a shrug. “That’s all. I’ve told ya before that I like watchin’ you perform.”

“...Yeah well, whatever,” Hater mumbled, too proud to tell him thanks, “I still don’t get how you can like it. It’s not exactly your style.”

“Maybe not something I’d play often, but that don’t mean I don’t like hearing it,” Wander answered, holding his guitar to his chest and his posture relaxed, “Really, pretty much any kind of music is fine with me.”

Hater gave him an unimpressed look. “So you’re just one of those people who just likes anything they hear?”

“Well, I may not listen to certain songs or styles over and over again,” he started to say, his smile growing a bit, “But I can still appreciate them. After all, someone worked hard on writin’ and playin’ those songs, so they must mean something to someone. In fact, they probably mean something to a lot of someones.” He looked down at his guitar, still smiling.

Hater just rolled his eyes. Great, he was saying that dumb hippie talk again. And yet, the skeleton didn’t bother trying to tell him that he was wrong or that he was being stupid.

“That’s probably one of my favorite things about music,” Wander continued, “How it can connect a bunch of people, and how it can have different meanings dependin’ on who’s playin’ it and who’s listenin’. It’s pretty neat, huh?”

“Not really,” Hater said almost immediately, “I mean… music is just, well, music! You’re making it sound like this big thing and - like, maybe some songs have meaning or whatever but… It’s just a bunch of songs that people either like or don’t like. It’s as simple as that.”

Surprisingly - or maybe not too surprising - Wander didn’t try to argue, or even try to explain his point forward. He just shrugged again, as if to say “If you say so”, and started to strum his guitar again. It was then that Hater noticed just what kind of guitar it was.

“Where’s your electric guitar?” he asked suddenly, staring at the worn acoustic one in his furry hands, “Don’t tell me you’re going to play that for a performance at a florping stadium! There’s no way you’re that stupid!”

Wander chuckled. “Nope, I’m playin’ my electric one for our performance - which is around here somewhere, I’m sure of that. I just like playin’ this one for fun. In fact, this is what I practice with most of the time.”
“But electric sounds so much better!” Hater argued, “And besides, why not just get a new one if you’re going to keep an acoustic around? That one looks like it’s ancient.”

“No can do,” Wander said, shaking his head firmly, “Way too many memories to just throw ‘em away.”

The skeleton rolled his eyes. Of course. “Yeah well, spare me them.”

“Alright-y. Maybe you can tell me stories about your guitar then,” he suggested, “After all, it must be pretty special. I’ve never seen another one like it!”

“That’s because it’s custom-made,” Hater replied bluntly, “There is no other one like it.”

“Wowwww!” Wander said in genuine amazement, “That just makes it even more special!” He stood up and walked over to Hater - although, he stopped himself and stood about a foot away from the skeleton. “So, those carvings in it helps the electricity travel?”

“Pretty much, yeah,” Hater replied, running his thumb over one of the lines - the top of the coal-black guitar still smooth and shiny despite all its use. Then again, Hater always made sure to take care of it. “They also redirect it, so it doesn’t short out the connection to the speakers or overload them.”

“Ohhh, I see! That’s pretty smart!” he grinned, “So where’d ya get it at?”

“Some guy back on my home planet said he would make it for me.” He scowled a bit. “I still say he overcharged me, but I managed to save up enough credits after a year and a half to pay him, and a couple months later, he dropped it off.” His scowl softened a bit. Truth be told, the first time he played his guitar - plugging it into the amp, strumming a long, loud chord, and letting his electricity pour out of his fingertips as he continued to play… It was something he would never forget. Because in that moment, it didn’t just seem like his goal was just some high schooler’s dream.

It seemed like he was finally taking the first step towards it becoming a reality.

Wander smiled at him, his face calmer and softer than before. There was that spark again, the one Wander had seen back on the asteroid when they were playing together, the one that always seemed to make at least one appearance during each one of the Harbingers of Doom’s performances. And, while he wasn’t sure if Hater even knew about it, Wander certainly admired it.

Glancing up from his guitar, Hater noticed the furry musician staring at him. “What?” he asked, his scowl returning, “What are you looking at?”

“Nothin’,” Wander said casually, “Like I said, that sure is a neat guitar.”

“Whatever,” Hater replied, looking down at it again, lightly running his fingers over the strings. Just then, a thunderous applause made him look up again. The second band was taking a bow. “Finally,” he mumbled. Two down, just an intermission and one more band left to go.

“Oh, guess I should find Syl so we can get ready,” Wander said, “Well, guess we’ll see each other later, huh? Maybe-” Hater noticed that he faltered a bit, as if second guessing himself before deciding to continue. “-Maybe the four of us can grab a drink or somethin’ afterwards. I’m pretty sure there’s a pizza place close by.”

Hater’s jaw clenched up. He was inviting him somewhere again, trying to get him to ‘join in the fun’ or hang out or whatever. “...Not interested.”
Disappointment flashed across his orange face, and for a moment, Hater actually felt... guilty? No, it couldn’t be. It was probably just pity or something. But before he could say or think anything more, Wander went back to smiling.

“Alright-y then. But Syl and I will probably stick around until after the show’s done, so if ya change your mind, we’ll be here.” He didn’t say it in a smug tone, as if he was expecting Hater to change his mind. He only said it as a friendly offer, one that he always seemed to offer no matter who he was talking to, or what the person had said to them.

The two only stared at each other for a moment, and then Wander turned on his heel, walking over to the other side of the stage with his guitar lightly bouncing against his hip. “Later Hater!” he said, giving a small wave and glancing back for just a moment.

Hater gave an annoyed growl. “You know, just because you can rhyme doesn’t mean you should.” Wander just laughed, and soon enough, he was lost in the crowd of fellow musicians and stage crew.

Even so, it took Hater a moment to look away, standing up to see if he could find Peepers.

“Hey everyone, thanks for comin’ out tonight!” The audience cheered, and Wander grinned at them, his fingers itching to get playing. As soon as the clapping died down, he played a small melody.

“Well then, I’d say we start playin’ a song already, whadaya say?” More cheering was their reply, and Wander started to play louder while Sylvia got a beat going. The song was a peppy one, one that could easily get everyone in a good mood and energized for the rest of their performance. In other words, a perfect opening.

The lights spun around the stadium and the stage, and the giant television screen kept switching between shots of Wander and Sylvia, occasionally switching to the audience to keep things interesting. Of course, when Wander started dancing or when Sylvia got to do her drum solo, all attention was focused on them, and the crowd loved it. All of this made for a very entertaining and energetic act that everyone seemed to be enjoying.

Of course, not everyone was paying attention to their performance.

“I thought I told you to keep the beat steady!” “I am!” “Well then what was that extra beat?!” “Maybe it was just an echo? Or maybe it was just my arm shaking a bit, you know, since we’re outside?!”

“Well, where else are we supposed to practice, Peepers?!” Hater asked, throwing his hands up in the air.

The Watchdog gave a sigh, taking the practice drum off his lap and standing up. “Look, we practice all night and all morning,” he said calmly, “I think we’ll be fi-”

“We can’t just be ‘fine’, Peepers!” Hater interrupted, giving him a stern look, “We need to be perfect!”

“And we will be! But if we keep practicing like this, we won’t have any energy left for the performance!” Peepers retorted, “So, let’s just relax and make sure we have a clear head before we go out there.”

A clear head? Hater narrowed his eyes. “And just what is that supposed to mean?”

“N-Nothing!” Peepers raised his hands in defense, “I’m just saying, we shouldn’t be working ourselves up over nothing!” He started to count on his hands. “We know what songs we’re playing,
we practiced, we’re feeling confident, AND we know that we’re easily the best band here! So, we have nothing to worry about! Which means we’re allowed to take a small breather before we play.”

Hater stared at him for a moment, and then let his glare soften. “Fine.” He reached into his pocket. “They probably don’t allow smoking in there, right?”

Peepers gave him a look. “Well, considering all the electrical equipment and smoke alarms, probably not.”

“I don’t need your sarcasm, Peepers.” He carefully leaned his guitar against the wall before lighting one of his cigarettes. Noticing that the eyeball was shivering a bit, he added, “Go ahead and go inside, I’ll meet you in there.”

“Just don’t lose track of time,” Peepers told him, grabbing his practice drum.

Hater rolled his eyes, blowing a small stream of smoke. “I won’t.” Satisfied, Peepers headed inside. When he opened the door, Hater could faintly hear music that had a familiar tone, though the song wasn’t one he’d heard before.

Even when the door was closed, he could still faintly hear it if he concentrated. Not too surprising, after all they were connected to a state of the art sound system that was loud enough to fill a whole stadium. He sighed as he leaned against the wall, listening to the faint yet cheerful melody. ‘...Still pretty annoying,’ he thought to himself, ‘But I guess I could think of things that sounded worse.’

After a couple more minutes passed, Hater flicked the remaining bit of his cigarette to the ground, grabbed his guitar and back-up amp, and went back inside just as Wander and Sylvia began their final song. Because the curtains were still open, Hater was forced to stand to by the side of the stage and couldn’t go across. He didn’t really mind though since he could get a pretty good view of the stage, and of the audience.

The crowd - more like a mob - was nothing more than one giant, faceless blob. No, strike that, there were many faces, all with their own voice. He just couldn’t make out the details on them, with the only light sources being cell phone flashes and glowsticks. ‘Grop,’ he thought, ‘There must be thousands of people here! Maybe even tens of thousands!’

The sound of someone plucking a banjo string made him pull his gaze away from the crowd and look back at Wander, who seemed to be right at home in the spotlight. The song had barely started, and the furball had already started to dance around the stage, grinning at those in the front row and nodding his head. Sylvia kept the melody on the drums with her tail, and while she had her own guitar out, it just hung from her long neck, silent for now.

After a couple more notes, Wander’s banjo fell silent and he finally started to sing.

“I had a dream so big and loud, I jumped so high I touched the clouds! Wo-oh-oh-oh-oh-oh-oh! I stretched my hands out to the sky, we danced with monsters through the night! Wo-oh-oh-oh-oh-oh-oh-oh!”

He looked out at the entire crowd, his face filled with a sort of sense of unbreakable happiness, determined to put his entire heart into this last song.

“I’m never gonna look back, woah, I’m never gonna give it up, noo, please don’t wake me now!”

The crowd cheered as Sylvia stepped up the beat, and Wander began to play his banjo again.

“This is gonna be the best day of my (Oo-o-o-o-o)life
More cheers erupted from the stadium when Sylvia began to play her guitar, and the song only grew from there with a guitar solo in the middle, and Wander’s cheerful singing echoing through the building, getting nearly everyone to sing along with the last chorus reprise - which almost immediately shifted to clapping and applause as the final bits of the melody faded away.

Making sure to wave at his audience - after all, he had to thank them for being such a good one - Wander noticed Hater out of the corner of his eye. The skeleton wasn’t smiling, but he wasn’t scowling either. What’s more, Wander wasn’t sure how long he had been there, but he’d at least listened to some of it, and that was enough for him.

Bouncing on his toes, he grabbed the mic. “Thanks everyone! I hope you all had just as much fun as we did! Now, get ready for the last band of the night - and, one of the best bands I’ve ever heard! - The Harbingers of Doom!”

Hater blinked as the applause grew. He wasn’t exactly expecting an introduction, especially since none of the other bands got one - Seriously, what kind of gig was this? It was like the first time they ever had a concert at the stadium or something! Although, it was that last bit that stuck in his memory.

Speaking of which, as the curtains started to close, Wander turned to smile specifically at the skeleton before running over to Sylvia and hugging her, gushing about how great the show was and how well she played. Although, it didn’t take long for Wander to leave the Zbornak and run over to Hater. Thankfully, there were no hugs (this time, at least).

“Looks like you’re up, Hater!” he told him, taking a moment to wipe the sweat off his face, “I know you’ll do great! Oh, and you might wanna get a quick drink of water before you go out there, those big stadium lights can get pretty warm!”

Hater just stared at him for a moment before finally speaking. “...You know, saying the band you are literally competing against is one of the ‘best things you’ve ever heard’ isn’t exactly the smartest thing to do.”

Wander blinked, and then bursted into laughter, holding his stomach as Hater’s eyes narrowed. “Hehe, maybe not, but hey! It’s the truth!” Hater didn’t reply.

“Hey, Mis- er, Hater?” Both guitarists glanced down at the small stagehand. “Um, you need to get to your mark on the stage,” Westley told him, “We’re gonna be starting in a few min-”

“I know that! Here!” He handed the Watchdog his back-up amp. “Go put this over by my other stuff,” he said as he slipped his guitar strap over his head and around his neck.

“Oh, yeah no problem!” Managing to keep a hold of the amp despite it’s weight, Westley turned and started to run, but then screeched to a hault. “Oh, uh, and Hater? Not that you’ll need it or anything but, uh, g-good luck out there! Heh, can’t believe I’m actually going to hear you play live!” His eye was practically sparkling with excitement as he started to run again.

“ Weird kid,” Hater mumbled as he walked over to the stage. Surprisingly, Wander didn’t stick around or try to follow. In fact, he didn’t even say “Later Hater!” or wish him good luck as well. But Hater couldn’t think about where the hippie was, he needed to concentrate.
Adjusting his helmet, Peepers climbed onto his seat, drumsticks in hand. “You ready for this, Hater?”

“Huh? Oh, yeah! Of course I’m ready, Peepers!” Hater replied, getting out his pick, “What kind of stupid question is that?”

Peepers rolled his eye. “Okay, geez. Sorry for asking.” He then turned his eye to the curtain, where he knew a whole stadium full of people were hiding behind it, just waiting to hear him - them - play. The Watchdog grinned. He was definitely ready for this!

Hater swallowed, keeping his eyes on the curtains, feeling his spine start to stiffen as they began to open. This was it, the big moment, finally here at last.

As per request, the stage lights switched from yellow and green to red, which definitely matched their attire better. The audience cheered - it was probably one of the biggest applauses he’d ever heard just because of the size. He noticed some sort of light flicker above him. ‘That must be the tv,’ he thought. He was on tv, in front of a stadium full of people, and - and he was just standing there!

Nearly dropping his pick in the process, Hater grabbed the neck of his guitar, and brought his fingers to the strings. ‘Should I say anything before I sta- oh, no I never do introductions.’ After all, his music spoke for itself. ‘Okay, so just start playing and - and -’

His eyes widened.

No. He didn’t. He - He couldn’t have! But his mind was a blank, a complete blank! How could he forget his own florping song list?! How long had he been standing there? How long had the audience been quiet? There were sure to start booing any second now, unless he just snapped out of it and played something! But as desperate as he was, he just couldn’t -

“’Scuse me,” someone whispered, just loud enough for the skeleton to hear it, “Pardon me - Ooh, nice hat!”

Hater managed to resist turning his head, but he did out of the corner of his eye at the side of the stage. Wander was now standing there, smiling and waiting in anticipation, even giving a small clap despite having a water bottle in one of his hands.

Of course, Wander had promised he would listen… His eyes narrowed, remembering how casual and calm the furry guitarist was on stage. How could he do it so easily?! Well, it wasn’t like he was anything special! Hater could be calm - no. He couldn’t just be calm, he could also be cool. He could be entertaining. He could be awesome, and he could prove it.

As if his fingers had no control of themselves, he let out a long guitar chord, followed by several smaller ones, making for a sweet guitar solo that made the audience let out a small cheer. He let this solo continue for a couple more seconds before he moved into the melody of their first song, his mind almost numb and not even really thinking about the actual song. No, instead, he was concentrating on the performance.

His fingers danced along the strings as he picked up the tempo once Peepers finally joined in, his bones finally loosening up. He took a couple steps towards the mic, and as he kept up with his playing, he had started to sing with the words just coming out of his mouth as if he had sang this song a hundred times (and judging by how much they had practiced, that probably wasn’t too far off).

“You think they are all dead, but it's all in your head. The zombies never left, they're just a bit faded. There's no way you can win, they're on a mission to sin. They're the rocking dead, shaking the
jaded..." Closing his eyes, he let himself start to really get into the music, putting on the perfect stage scowl.

"Ooh, you never got at the helm of mayhem!
Oh, I've heard the tons of bullshit you talk
Now let's see you walk

Now this is heavy metal!
No matter what you say!
Now this is heavy metal!
The only righteous way!"

His moment of stage fright seemed like ages ago. With the music surrounding him and the crowd’s applause getting louder and louder, Hater felt completely in his element. And he loved it. He began to walk around the stage a bit during the singing pause, ramping up his playing and bobbing his head.

“The horsemen they come, they sling their axes like guns
Apocalypse in neon and spandex!
The ones that you mock deliver audio shock
In the old-school hard rock vortex

Ooh, you never got at the helm of mayhem!
Oh, I've heard the tons of bullshit you talk
Now let's see you walk

Now this is heavy metal!
No matter what you say!
Now this is heavy metal!
The only righteous way!
Yeah yeah yeah!"

With the solo coming up, Hater couldn’t help but grin. The plan was to save the reveal of his powers until their second song, but he was still able to make the solo just as entertaining with just his playing. Leaning back and squeezing his eyes shut, his guitar sang for him, with each chord coming out loud and clear even with all the screaming and cheering. When it was time to start singing again, not only had Peepers joined along with him, but the audience had begun chanting.
“Now this is heavy metal! (HEAVY METAL!)
No matter what you say! (HEAVY METAL!)
Now this is heavy metal! (HEAVY METAL!)
The only righteous way!

Now this is heavy metal!
No matter what you say!
Now this is heavy metal!
The only righteous way!

NOW THIS IS HEAVY METAL!”

There was only about one second of silence before the applause returned louder than before. Hater gave a small sigh, half out of relief and half out of fatigue. ‘Geez, Wander was right, this stage does get pretty hot,’ he thought, but he could easily withstand it for another couple songs if it meant he could continue having this performance high. His horns were practically buzzing, and he could easily listen to that cheering for hours.

And yet somehow, through all the screaming and clapping and cheering of a whole mob of different voices, he could still hear one voice rising above them all, hollering and clapping with all his might. Glancing back over to the side of the stage, he could see Wander (and Sylvia as well, though her applause was a bit more controlled) grinning excitedly. When he noticed his gaze, the furbal quickly gave him a thumbs up. “That was awesome!” he shouted over everything.

And Hater wasn’t exactly sure how or why, but as he started playing again - quickly shifting into ‘Circus for a Psycho’, another song that was sure to get the crowd going all over again - he found
himself smiling, just a little, before shifting back into his stage anger.

After what only seemed like a few minutes, their performance ended and the curtains started to close. Unable to help himself, Peepers fistpumped in the air while Hater just gave a victorious smirk. Now that, was well worth the wait.

“THAT WAS AMAZING!” said two different voices. Turning around, he could see both Wander and Westley looking up at him - Wander’s face full of excitement, and Westley’s full of admiration.

“I can’t believe I actually saw all that!” the Watchdog shouted, “This - This is the best night of my life!”

“Gosh Hater, I knew ya’ll were good, but that was just incredible!” Wander added, jumping up as he yelled.

The skeleton just smirked. “Hmph. Honestly, did you expect any less?”

“No sir!” Westley said quickly while Wander just chuckled.

“Nope, not for a second, Mister Superstar.” Hater scowled a bit at that. Praise was one thing, but dumb nicknames were quite another, but Wander just continued to smile at him.

“I’ve gotta say, Bonehead, that was pretty impressive,” Sylvia added with a smile as she leaned against the drumset slightly. She smirked at Peepers. “And you weren’t too bad yourself, Cyclops.”

“Naturally~” Peepers replied, smirking back. Hater blinked. What the heck was that?

“Oh, hey! We should get you guys out of here,” Westley said, shaking him out of his thoughts, “Traffic’s always terrible after a concert.”

“Oh yeah, guess we should get going,” Wander nodded, “Besides, I don’t know about you guys, but I could use a bite ‘ta eat!” He looked over at Sylvia. “Some veggie lover’s pizza sure sounds good right about now!”

“You can keep your veggies, bud,” Sylvia replied, smiling at him, “But it’s extra cheese for me!”

“Let’s help everyone clean up back here, and then - I’d say we go all you can eat!” The Zbornak let out a small cheer, and quickly went to work getting their things outside, her strength making the job easy.

Hater however stayed in his spot, keeping his eyes on his fellow guitarist. “Um, Hater?” He looked over at his bandmate. “You know, pizza does sound pretty good” Peepers told him, “And besides, it would be cheaper than just getting room service.”

That was definitely true. Besides, all this talk of extra cheese and all you could eat was making his stomach growl. He almost hated himself for doing this. Almost. “HEY!”

Wander stopped in his tracks, turning back around. “That invite of yours - that implies you guys paying for the food, right?”

He blinked, and then slowly grinned, quickly nodding. “Yep! All on us!”

“Good. Then meet us by our van in fifteen minutes - and if you’re late we’re leaving without you!”

“Can do, Hater!” With that, Wander started running, having even more energy than before - if that was even possible. As for Hater, his face stayed neutral as he walked over to his guitar case while
Peepers worked on dismantling his drumset. He still couldn’t believe he just did that, after everything the little annoyance had put him through. Sure, he could always say the excuse was just to get free food but…

He was supposed to hate the guy, to be angry with him, to stay as far away from him as possible. But as he continued trying to convince himself to stay angry, he was finding it pretty hard to do so. And it confused him, it really confused him.

Good thing eating something always helped him think.

Chapter End Notes

The songs used were "Best Day of my Life" by American Authors and "This is Heavy Metal" by Lordi. The picture was drawn by Darkwingsnark on Tumblr.
A mid-2000s chart topper played as they drove down the mostly empty street. Hater was driving while Wander sat beside him in the passenger’s seat - only so he could direct him, nothing else! - while Sylvia and Peepers sat in the back.

“Are you sure this place is even still open?” Hater asked him. After waiting in line to leave the stadium parking lot for what seemed like forever, it was a quarter after eleven at night, which meant most places were either already closed or getting ready to close.


“Hey, don’t get your boxers in a bunch, Bones,” Sylvia told him, “This is Ronus - the place is practically all about the nightlife! We’ll find somewhere to get a bite to eat.”

“Yeah well, in case you haven’t noticed, we’re driving away from all the nightlife,” Hater retorted, glancing up at his rearview mirror where he could see the many streetlights, neon signs, and electrified towers that Ronus was known for get further behind them as they drove into the more empty parts of the city. There were still lights, but most of them weren’t nearly as bright, and all Hater could really only see small businesses (closed) and apartment buildings.

The skeleton’s stomach growled. “Okay, that’s it, I’m turning around,” he said.

Two voices loudly protested while Peepers, who was starting to get just as frustrated and hungry as his bandmate, stayed silent. “Aw, but Hater-!” “Come on, we’re nearly there!”

“Yeah, and it’ll probably end up being a waste!” Hater shouted back at them, “I’m starving, and I’m not gonna wait any-”

“THERE!” A furry arm crossed in front of his vision, causing him to swerve a bit. “See! I knew it was close by!” Wander grinned

“Get out of my way!” Hater shouted, roughly pushing him away and stopping the car, glancing in the direction Wander was pointing.

The place was small, so small it didn’t even have a parking lot. There were lights on - including an ‘Open’ sign - but the building still looked a bit dark thanks to the green paint on it’s interior walls. “We’re eating here?”

“Yep!” Wander chirped before pausing for a moment, “I mean, if that’s alright with you, Hater.”

His stomach growled again. “I don’t really have much of a choice, do I?” he mumbled as he parked in a spot across the street from the restaurant, turning the ship off. The mismatched group then crossed the street and walked inside.

The scent of burning wood and melted cheese immediately hit them like a wave, almost making them drool. There was a counter with already made pizzas set out, and several empty tables around it. There was a sports game playing on a corner television, and there were even a couple people quietly sitting at a table and eating. Hater wasn’t really too impressed, but he was too hungry to complain.

“Hello?” Wander asked, stepping forward. After a few seconds, a teal bird-like alien with a dark blue mohawk-like plumage on his head walked out of the back room. “Uh, yeah, hey,” he greeted, staring at the group for a few moments - specifically Hater and Peepers, who seemed the most out of place
despite Wander looking the most different from the other three. Still, he couldn’t help but wonder what exactly had brought these four together. “Uh… Cool get-up, guys.”

“Aw, thanks!” Wander chimed while Hater crossed his arms, “We just got done with a concert!”

“Ohh,” the bird said, nodding. That explained it…sort of. When he noticed the skeleton’s glaring at him increase, he quickly decided to try and get on his good side, lest he be killed before his shift ended. “Uh, nice makeup, du-”

“IT’S NOT MAKEUP! IT’S CALLED FACE PAINT, GROD!” The entire restaurant fell silent it seemed like, save for the sound of Peepers facepalming.

“… So, uh, do you guys want slices or a whole pizza?”

Wander glanced back at his group of fellow musicians, silently asking them the same question. “Well, getting whole pizzas would probably be cheaper,” Peepers spoke up.

“Plus we could get more to eat,” Sylvia added.

With a nod, Wander looked back at the bird. “Alright, we’ll have one meat lover’s pizza, and one pizza with extra cheese please - and maybe ya’ll could put some green peppers on half of it, if ya don’t mind.”

The bird nodded. “Yeah, sure thing.” Wander paid for the food, and then the employee handed him four glasses. “Go ahead and get your drinks and sit down somewhere, and I’ll bring them out in like fifteen minutes.”

“Sounds good!” Wander smiled, taking the cups, “Thanks!” He started to hand out the cups, but Hater didn’t wait. He just grabbed a cup for himself, and headed towards the pop machine. Luckily - along with several other fountain drinks - they had root beer as a choice, so the skeleton quickly pressed the button and filled his cup before picking a random table to sit down at, the others quickly following. Wander didn’t sit next to him this time, but he did sit across from the skeleton. Hater turned his attention towards the tv, despite not understanding the announcer.

“Well, so far the place looks pretty promising, buddy,” Sylvia commented as she sat down next to him, taking a small sip of her drink, “Better than just fast food, at least.”

“Hmph, says you,” Hater mumbled. Pizza was good, but he couldn’t think of many things that were better than cheeseburgers.

“How did you even find this place anyway?” Peepers asked, genuinely curious, “I can’t really see this place being on the top of any planet guides.”

“Maybe not on any of the well known guys, but it was on a few blogs,” Wander answered, “A lot of people say that this place has great food - one of the few pizza places that still uses old fashioned ovens. It’s also one of the first restaurants that was built in this city, so that’s pretty neat too!” He spoke with all the confidence of a tour guide, but with the excitement of a first time tourist. “And well, after all that, we just had ‘ta check the place out ourselves, right Syl?”

“Yes,” the Zbornak replied with a small smile, taking another sip of her drink.

Hater rolled his eyes again. “I still say it’s a waste of time to come all the way out here just to try one thing.”

Wander didn’t take any offense though. “Well, you might change your tune once ya taste your
“Doubt it. ...Why are you looking at travel sites and blogs anyway?” He knew Peepers sometimes looked at them, but that was just to find a hotel or a venue to play at, not to find obscure restaurants and historical sites.

The furry guitarist shrugged. “Why not? After all, we’re gonna be going to these places, we might as well see what they have to offer.”

Hater scowled. “But you’re not tourists, you’re supposed to be playing shows and getting your name out, not seeing the sights! If you wanted to just take a road trip, then why did you even sign up for the Battle in the first place?!”

“Well, we need some way to pay for it, don’t we,” Sylvia replied coolly, glancing over at the skeleton, “Besides, we’re still playin’ shows and stuff - we wanna win this thing as much as you do, Bonehead.”

“We just figured we could take a few side trips in between shows,” Wander added, “After all, it’s not every summer that you get to travel the universe like this - and get to play music for folks while you’re doin’ it - so ya might as well enjoy it!”

“Whatever,” Hater grumbled. Fine, let them waste their time that they could be using to practice or plan out shows on stupid crap, he didn’t care. It would just make it easier to beat them in the Final Battle.

Peepers held back a sigh, giving his bandmate a look. Of course he was used to Hater’s moods by now, but still… He glanced over at Sylvia. Once she caught his gaze, the eyeball gave her a small apologetic look, but she just gave him a small smile in return. ‘Takes more than a grumpy bag of bones to ruin my night,’ she thought.

Seeing her smile did give Peepers a bit of relief, but he still couldn’t help but wish it was just the two of them. At least then the conversation would be a bit deeper. ...Or rather, they would actually HAVE a conversation going, since it looked like Hater had ended the last one. Thankfully, they didn’t have to deal with awkward silence for too long.

“One meat lover’s, one extra cheese half green peppers,” the bird said, setting the two circular pans down with a smile, “Enjoy guys!”

“Thanks! We will!” Wander replied while Sylvia and Peepers started to grab a couple slices, eager to start eating. Hater on the other hand only stared at the food. The crust was thin, really thin, and the burning smell had returned and was back at full force. He could even see hints of black on the edge and sides of the pizza.

“...It’s burnt,” he said finally, frowning deeply. All this time and effort, for a burnt pizza?! Talk about a great way to end the evening.

“Um, I think it’s supposed to be that way,” Peepers told him.

“Yeah, does the phrase ‘old fashioned pizza ovens’ ring any bells?” Sylvia added, earning herself a glare.

Hater opened his mouth to argue, but a noise interrupted him. “Mmmmmmmmm~!” He looked over and saw Wander smiling widely - or, as wide as he could with a mouth full of pizza - as he munched on his food. Swallowing quickly, Wander looked at him. Oh Hater, you’ve just gotta try this!”
“Oh come on, it can’t be that good,” he replied, though he did pick up a slice of the extra cheese pizza to examine it. The bottom of the pizza looked pretty burnt, causing him to scowl even more.

“But it is! And the burnt spots actually help it!” Wander insisted, “They give it this sorta smoky flavor. And the way it mixes with the sauce and the cheese-!”

“Mmm, you’ve got that right, pal,” Sylvia agreed, her tail wagging slightly as she ate her meat covered slice, “This is florpin’ delicious!”

Hater still wasn’t so sure. Another ‘Mmm’ could be heard, and this time it was from none other than his own drummer. But even Hater’s glare couldn’t get the eyeball to stop smiling as he chewed. His stomach growled again, this time louder than ever.

“Oh fine!” Hater put the slice to his mouth. “But if I think it’s bad, I want a new pizza.” He opened his mouth, and took a bite, chewing quickly at first before pausing. Slowly, he started chewing again and eventually swallowing. “…Good Grop,” he mumbled before taking another bite, practically shoving the rest of the slice in his mouth. Sylvia and Peepers shared a smirk while Wander grinned happily.

The rest of the meal continued swiftly. It was usually Wander and Sylvia who kept the conversation going, with Peepers and occasionally Hater chiming in with comments and additions. During the rare moments where no one was talking and the only noise was the tv in the background and their chewing, it felt like a comfortable silence. And moments like fighting over the last piece of extra cheese that didn’t have green peppers on it - “You know, you could just pick the peppers off.” “I’ll still probably taste them!” - and Wander holding a spoon on his nose and later trying to balance it on his face, it all just seemed… natural.

Of course, Hater still refused to crack a smile or give a chuckle at whatever dumb jokes the duo told. After all, despite not being a completely terrible experience, he still didn’t want to encourage the little hairball and end up getting asked out to dinner every time they saw each other.

Eventually, the pizza had been finished off, and the four musicians just leaned back in their chairs, letting their food settle and relaxing a bit.

“Mmmm, now that hit the spot!” Wander said with a sigh, rubbing his pleased belly. The other three nodded in agreement. Glancing over at the corner of the restaurant, he saw the bird employee turn off the tv. “Guess it’s gettin’ pretty late.”

“I’m actually surprised they haven’t kicked us out yet,” Peepers mumbled. But kicked out or not, he was ready for bed. After all, they probably had a few long days ahead of them.

“I have to say, I’m sure gonna miss this place,” Wander smiled, waving his hands a bit, “All the lights and different places to go and things to see! I actually wouldn’t mind comin’ back here again. Don’t you think so too, Hater?”

“Hmph, yeah,” Hater said, tilting his chair back, “Maybe once I’ve gotten a record deal and can have my own show at the stadium. But until then, I just want to get the heck out of here.” He was more than ready to move on.

“Fair enough. So, where are ya’ll goin’ next?”

Hater’s eyes shot wide open, and his chair nearly tipped over. Thankfully, Sylvia was able to grab one of the chair legs with her tail and pull it back. Although, it did cause Hater to hit the table, which in turn cause his glass to wobble and tip over, spilling the remainder of his drink onto his chest.
“Gah!”

“Whoops! Oh, if we clean it fast it might not leave a stain! Just lemme get that for ya!” Napkins at the ready, Wander leaned over and furiously started rubbing at Hater’s jacket.

“Agh, H-HEY! GET OFF!” Hater shouted, face heating up with embarrassment. He snatched the napkins out of Wander’s hands, “I’ll do it myself!” Wander blinked, and sat back down, discreetly pushing the napkin dispenser towards the skeleton. “And as for where we’re going next, it’s none of your business!”

“Gee, didn’t realize it was so top secret!” Wander commented, though Sylvia just rolled her eyes. “We were gonna start headin’ towards Lagantu next. I heard that a lot of musicians head there during the competition, but I guess it’s not too surprising since that place is full of concert halls and performance bars. People there just love hearin’ new styles - and they like to come up with some new ones too!”

Hater stared at him, mouth agape slightly. Wander had knew all of that, and he had never even been to Lagantu before?! Not to mention the fact that Hater didn’t even realize all those things about the planet. But now that he did know, he made a mental note to maybe think about heading there next as well. ...Once he figured out where Lagantu was. Somewhere East, right?

“After that there’s Proenus, and then ya got it’s moons that have pretty decent populations - and supposedly some of the best diners in the galaxy! There’s also that little asteroid town, and after that we’ll head to Pruater and Golara… Huh, sure are a lot of planets in this galaxy. But definitely good for us, wouldn’t you agree?”

It took all of Hater’s strength to not have his jaw fall off in shock. Even Peepers’ eye was wide in disbelief. “Wait, so you’ve pretty much have your entire summer tour planned?! Have you already booked shows at all these places?!”

Wander looked at the Watchdog, and then chuckled while Sylvia just smirked in amusement.

“And just what is so funny?!” Hater demanded.

“We use the term ‘planned’ pretty loosely,” Sylvia explained, “And no, we haven’t booked all our shows yet. In fact, we haven’t even booked our next venue that - which isn’t as big of a deal as some people would think.” She took another sip of her drink, ignoring the skeleton’s glare.

“Yeah, we just go with the flow,” Wander added, “Although we’ll probably end up goin’ to all those planets I just mentioned, and we’ll certainly try to get a show at all those places, but we’ll also try to see the sights as well!” Hater rolled his eyes. Ugh, this again. “But we’ll have to head back to Axalis before we go anywhere else, of course.”

“Huh?” Hater looked at him curiously. “But you’ve already played a show on that planet - in it’s biggest city! Why would you want to go back?!”

“Well, cause we’re livin’ there for the summer!” the furry guitarist answered cheerfully, “Demurra and Dracor rented a place there, and we’re stayin’ with them!”

Demurra… Why did that name sound so familiar? While Hater tried to recall where he had heard that name before, Peepers remembered the woman right away. “I guess it would make sense to rent a place for the summer, if you could afford it that is.” How the heck were they able to afford it? If he recalled correctly, the apartment they had gotten was pretty big. How could they afford that on a techie’s salary?
“Definitely easier than staying at hotels and hostels all the time,” Sylvia nodded, “Cheaper too. And Demurra and Drake are pretty good roommates.”

“Yeah!” her bandmate agreed, “Demurra’s always giving us good advice, and Dracor’s a really friendly guy once ya get to know him! Plus, it’s just nice to kinda have a ‘home base’ to stay at after concerts if the two planets aren’t that far away from each other.”

“Well… Sounds nice,” Peepers said simply, keeping the conversation civil since he knew Hater certainly wasn’t going to try to (thankfully he was still trying to remember who this Demurra was, too distracted to notice the conversation). Even so, he couldn’t help but feel a bit jealous of the duo, especially since he would most likely be sleeping in the front seat of their ship for the next week.

“Hmm…. You knooooow…” The eyeball glanced back over at Wander, curious. “There is an extra room in their apartment…!”

Hearing this, the Zbornak immediately turned to look at her friend. “Wander,” she started to say in a stern voice.

“Now don’t worry Syl, I ain’t gonna make any promises I can’t keep. After all, they would have to ask Demurra and Dracor if they could since it’s their apartment. But I’m just sayin’, they could at least ask!”

That managed to catch Hater’s attention. “Wait, ask about what now?”

Wander smiled at him, not minding that he had missed the conversation. “I was just sayin’, you guys could ask them if you could stay in the extra room they’ve got! After all, it would be easier than tryin’ to grab hotel rooms all the time.”

There was a moment of silence, and then Wander received two answers at once:

“No way!” “Do you have her phone number?” The two bandmates blinked in surprise, and then turned to glare at each other.

“Uhh, maybe we should talk about this later,” Sylvia suggested, “Besides, we need to be gettin’ back anyway.”

“Oh, that’s right!” Wander said, “The shuttle back to Axalis leaves at seven, so we should try to at least get a few hours of sleep before then.”

Since he had gotten his food and no longer really had any use for them, Hater almost told them to find their own way back to their hotel. But before he could, Peepers had grabbed the keys from Hater’s jacket pocket and hopped out of his seat. “We’re leaving pretty early tomorrow too. Let’s get going then.” The Watchdog could almost feel his bandmate burning holes in the back of his helmet as they walked out the door.

Thankfully, Wander and Sylvia’s hotel was only a block away from theirs, but it didn’t stop Hater from scowling the entire time at the thought of going out of their way again for this wannabe rock band. But of course, that wasn’t the only thing Hater was angry about.

“Thanks again for the ride!” Wander said, waving at them, “And thanks for joining us for supper!”

“Yeah,” Sylvia nodded, giving a smile that made Peepers’ heart beat just a bit faster, “So, see you guys later?”

“Not if I can help it,” Hater mumbled. Peepers gave him a small glare (mostly because the skeleton
wasn’t paying attention to him) before looking back at the duo. “Yeah. Goodnight!” With that, he stepped onto the gas pedal, and the silver ship zoomed down the empty street. The radio was turned down so low that it was pretty much mute, and for a few seconds, neither one of them said anything.

“...Hater-”

“I’m not going to live with those two and Debra or whoever she is!”

“Demurra, and - Really? You can’t even just maybe consider-”

“I said no, Peepers!” Hater shouted, looking his drummer right in the eye, “And that’s final! We don’t need their help, or their dumb apartment!”

Peepers scowled back at him. “Their dumb FREE apartment! Hater, would you really rather stay in the ship until we save up enough money to stay at hotels again - which I should remind you, are STILL pretty expensive! - instead of staying at an apartment with food and beds and probably a laundry room? All of which is FREE!”

“If this is just about the money, then maybe YOU should book us some more shows!” Hater argued, “and I’m perfectly fine with sleeping in the ship! Or a hotel, or a hostel, or grop, I’ll even sleep outside if I have to! But I am not staying at some apartment if HE’S staying there!”

For a moment, Peepers could do nothing but stare. “...Hater. You’re my friend, and I respect you, but seriously... WHAT IS YOUR DEAL-!”

Hater was actually a bit taken aback by that, but Peepers didn’t stop there. “I get it, you don’t like the guy, but come on! We can deal with annoying, and it’s not like he’ll be there all the time! We’re all going to be traveling, and if we are all staying at the apartment at the same time, he’ll probably be too tired to bother us!”

“But I’ll still have to deal with him!” Hater retorted, finding his voice once more.

“But it’s like I said, we can deal with annoying! But I can’t deal just barely keeping our heads above water financially - And I’m pretty sure my back won’t be able to take sleeping in this damn ship more than another night! - at least, not if there’s another option available! Come on, it’s a great offer!”

“Maybe to you! But like I said, I’d rather sleep on the ground for the rest of the summer than live with that little furry freak!”

Peepers grabbed his head in frustration - wait, no. He was pretty sure he was well past frustration. “I just don’t understand why you have such a big problem with this guy! I mean, yeah he’s weird and annoying, and there was that whole thing back on Vectornus, but-”

“I DON’T HAVE A PROBLEM!” Hater screamed, making Peepers flinch and swerve a bit, “Why would I have a problem?! I just don’t want to be near him, is that so weird?!”

“Well, you hid in a bathroom just to get away from him so, yeah, it’s a little weird! I mean, what exactly did he do-?”

Hater visibly flinched before going back to his defensive screaming. “NOTHING! He did nothing! I mean, you said it yourself that he’s annoying, isn’t that reason enough-!”

“Seems like a bit of an overreaction to me,” Peepers replied as he parked the ship, not even caring that he was just digging himself deeper. But now, his frustration had mostly been replaced with
“Nothing happened, Peepers! End of story! And fine if you’re going to be such a big baby about it then just ask to stay in that dumb apartment if it’ll make you shut up and realize that I DON’T HAVE A PROBLEM!”

The two bandmates stared at each other, Peepers wide-eyed while Hater stared him down, panted slightly after his rant. After a moment or so, Hater continued at a quieter but still pretty hostile tone. “So just, call that Delanna girl or whatever and ask about staying at her apartment. But understand this, if I decide that we’re leaving it, then we’re leaving. GOT IT?”

“Fine,” Peepers agreed. That sounded reasonable enough. He just hoped Hater would give living there a chance before wanting to leave it. “I’ll send Sylvia a text and tell her to ask Demurra about it and get back to us.”

“Fine. ... Peepers?”

“Yeah?”

“Why do you have that Zbornak’s phone number?”

“... No reason.”

The bus ride back had been long and tiring, but even so, Demurra couldn’t help but smile once she saw their apartment in view. She even gave their cab driver a tip when they got out. “Home sweet home,” she heard her boyfriend say.

“Yes, at least for the summer.” Glancing over at the dragon, she couldn’t help but shake her head a bit. The techie had piled nearly every suitcase in the trunk in his arms. “Dear, I know you’re strong, but I think I’m fairly capable of carrying my own luggage.” She gave him a playful smirk as she took the bag at the top of the pile.

“Alright, fine,” he agreed, shuffling the luggage he had left in his arms and getting it comfortable before spreading his wings and flying up to the top floor of the building.

“Wander, can you get your stuff?” Sylvia asked as she started to get out her drumset. When she didn’t hear a reply, she looked up. “Wander?” Stretching her neck, she poked her head through the back window, and located her friend. Although, he didn’t seem to notice her, since he was concentrating on typing something on his phone. “Uh, Wander? Don’t know if you’ve noticed but the car’s stopped.”

“Huh?” Wander looked up, and gave a sheepish smile once he realized he was the only one left in the taxi. “Hehe, sorry!” Putting his phone away, he got out of the car, thanking the driver as he did so.

“Did you get caught up in a game again?” Demurra asked, handing him his backpack.

“Nope, just sendin’ a text.” Slipping his backpack on, he quickly took out his phone again to show them what he meant. Honestly, Demurra was surprised it could even fit in his pocket. The green-cased phone had about a dozen plastic phone charms hanging on it - and according to Sylvia, he had a lot more in one of his backpack pockets - each one from a different place he and Sylvia had done a
show at. The phone also had a few colorful stickers stuck to the back of it, as well as (Demurra could only suspect) plenty of pictures, music and apps. It hadn’t yet become garish or cluttered, but it was definitely personalized.

“Let me guess,” Sylvia said with an amused smirk, “Bonehead and Eyesore?”

“Yep! Peepers said that he and Hater will be here in a bit! So I guess we should try to get up there an’ make sure everything’s ready for them!” Without another word, Wander grabbed as much as his noodly arms could carry, and headed for the front door.

Demurra giggled. “Well, someone’s excited.”

“Yeah, though I have no idea why,” Sylvia replied before grabbing the last of the luggage, slamming the trunk with her foot. The driver gave a goodbye honk and drove off. “Speaking of which, I still can’t believe you’re actually letting them stay here.” She and Dracor didn’t even need to discuss it; She had been fine with the idea from the start, and Dracor didn’t really have any objections, so it was settled.

“I’m sure it won’t be too bad,” Demurra told her while Sylvia held the door open using her tail, “Besides, I’m sure I can handle them if they get too rowdy.”

Sylvia smirked. “Yeah, and I’m more than happy to give you a hand with keeping them in line if you need it.”

“I wouldn’t expect any less,” the blonde smiled. Even so, she still believed that they wouldn’t have too much trouble. Hater seemed like he was all bark and little bite anyway, and she knew that Peepers would at least try to keep things calm and probably wouldn’t try to stir up any trouble. Besides, she couldn’t help but feel a little excited as well. She would probably get a chance to hear the heavy metal duo during rehearsal, so she would be able to hear a bit more of their music and maybe offer some advice (if they would take it, that is).

Although, if Demurra was being completely honest, she did also hope that she would able to see just who Hater and Peepers were once they took off their stage clothes and makeup. She had a feeling that there was something pretty special about those two - well, besides the fact that one of them could shoot lightning - and she wondered if this would be her chance to see it. She also wondered if it would come out naturally, or if it would take a small push from a certain orange guitarist and his Zbornak drummer to get it out.

‘No matter what happens,’ she thought, a calm smile still present on her face, ‘It’ll sure to be interesting.’

Not more than fifteen minutes after entering their apartment - which was still relatively clean and it didn’t take too long to unpack everything, though they would go grocery shopping later, especially since they had two more mouths to feed - there was a knock at the door. And, while Wander did look up almost immediately when he heard it, it was Demurra who answered the door since she was closest.

“Hey guys,” she greeted, casual and friendly, “Come on in.”

Hater offered a small grunt as a reply, walking inside the apartment and only carrying his guitar case while Peepers struggled behind him with the luggage. “Erg, t-thanks!” he managed to say.

“No problem,” she told him, “Just set your stuff down anywhere and we’ll organize it later.” The second he heard this, Peepers dropped the suitcases like they were on fire, letting out a sigh of relief.
“We can get the rest of it later,” he panted, “Af-After all, this is all the stuff we need for now.”

“Fine with me,” she said, offering the eyeball a smile before looking over at Hater. The skeleton was dressed pretty casually, wearing an unzipped black jacket (most likely unzipped because of the slightly warmer temperatures on Axalis, though his hood was still up) along with a dark red tee shirt and worn dark blue jeans. ‘Could definitely use a bit more color in his wardrobe,’ Demurra thought to herself.

Noticing that he was being observed, Hater looked at her and was about to ask what exactly she was looking at, when he stopped. She was wearing a different outfit but- ‘Wait,’ he scowled, ‘I know who she is. She’s that girl who was trying to tell me that I was playing my own music wrong!’

Despite his glaring, Demurra only gave him a small, knowing smile. “Nice to see you again, Hater.” She then turned to look at the others. “Well, I don’t know about you guys, but I think after all that traveling, we should just have supper delivered, crack open a few drinks, and just relax the rest of the night.”

“Sounds good to me,” Dracor told her, more than happy to spend an evening in with his girlfriend, even if the apartment would be filled with other people, “And you know, I did see an ad in the paper for a Build Your Own Burger place that delivers.”

“Oooh, sounds delicious!” Hater raised an eyebrow at the woman - who was currently slipping off her pink high-heel. She definitely didn’t seem like the type who would eat burgers over something like a salad. “Okay, so does that sound good to everyone else?”

“Um, Demurra? I really do hate to be a bother, but-”

“Don’t worry, Wander, I’ll make sure yours is a veggie patty.” The furry guitarist grinned, quickly thanking her. ”Alright, everyone chip in five bucks, and Drake and I will cover the rest.”

Five bucks? Scowling as he got out his wallet, Hater looked down at his drummer, as if to say “I thought you said the food here would be free.” Peepers could only offer a small shrug as a reply.

Once the money was collected and everyone gave their orders, Demurra placed it in her own wallet while Dracor wrote everything down. “Well, now that that’s settled, you guys can get settled in and just relax, and we’ll call you guys in when the burgers arrive. Oh, and go ahead and help yourself to whatever’s in the fridge.” With that, their little welcoming meeting had ended, and Hater was both relieved that it ended, but at the same time dreading what was to come afterwards. And sure enough, Wander didn’t waste any time.

“Come on Hater, I’ll help ya move into yours and Peepers room.”

Peepers’ eye widened. “Wait, we’re sharing a room?”

“There was only one spare room left,” Dracor stated, his tone not rude, but not exactly sympathetic either. The Watchdog held back a sigh. Great. He would probably end up sleeping on the floor, so even after all this he would still end up getting a strained back. ‘Maybe I can get them to let me sleep on the couch.’

“I’m sure you guys don’t mind too much though,” Wander said as he picked up one of Hater’s bags, “You are bandmates after all! But ya know, you guys are more than welcome to hang out in mine or Sylvia’s rooms if ya wa-”

“I think we’ll be fine,” Hater told him, eyes narrowed as he snatched the bag out of his furry little hands, “And this is only a place for us to sleep, nothing more. Understand?”
Wander blinked, then chuckled a bit. “Well yeah, of course you’re gonna sleep here! That’s why it’s called a ‘bedroom’, it was made for sleepin’ in! Although, if that was the only thing ya did there, it would be kind of a boring place to be, don’t ya think?” Hater growled. “Heh, hey, I was just jokin’ around, Hater.”

“Yeah, well, don’t,” the skeleton replied as he walked past him. He wasn’t exactly in the mood for ‘jokin’ around’. He just wanted to get his stuff unpacked so he could rest for a night before getting back on track in the morning - which included practices, searching for venues, all the stuff they had been doing before Ronus. ‘I don’t have time for anymore distractions,’ he kept telling himself, ‘even if I’m forced to live under the same roof as one.’

Despite his concentration though, Hater did notice Dracor give him a small look as he walked passed him. Nearly three weeks ago at their party, Hater had barely met the dragon. Now, the guy had his eyes narrowed, almost as if he was glaring at him. Even his earflaps were fanned out, reminding Hater of a defensive lizard, though they did fold back down when Demurra joined him on the couch. “What’s his problem?” Hater mumbled as he continued onto his room.

“Gee, I don’t know,” Sylvia said sarcastically, sliding past him as helped Peepers and Wander carry in the rest of their stuff to their new room, “It might be because you yelled at his girlfriend the last time you were here? Or maybe it’s because he knows he’s going to have to deal with your grumpy, boney butt the rest of the summer.”

“Yeah well, NO ONE ASKED YOU!”

Peepers had to admit, maybe they weren’t free, but these burgers were definitely worth paying for! Taking another bite, he stretched out on the plush chair - which was just barely big enough to be a makeshift bed for him that was sure to be more comfortable than the floor or the front seat of their ship - and continued to scroll through his email. Meanwhile, Hater was lounging on the twin-sized bed, munching on his own food and listening to his MP3 player while trying to ignore the laughter coming from the living room since the other four musicians had decided to watch a movie, something that neither of them were too interested in. But even if they weren’t saying anything and pretty much ignoring each other while they did their own things, it was a comfortable silence.

‘I don’t even know what the point of installing that filter was,’ Peepers thought to himself as he finally finished scrolling through his inbox, ‘I still always end up getting a ton of spam.’ Then again, Hater was known to use his email address sometimes, so that could be the reason. ‘Whatever. At least now I could move onto something else.’

It was always a matter of routine for the Watchdog. He would always check his email first, followed by checking his other social media accounts. Mostly he kept up with them as a way to keep in touch with people and current events, although he did spend many nights chatting away on various music and musicians forums, along with several other forum sites that Hater either didn’t know about or didn’t care enough to state his judgements out loud.

But it was on one of the more popular forums where Peepers found something that he knew would interest both of them. “Hater.” Peepers looked up. “Hater!” he said, his voice a bit louder this time. Of course, the skeleton always loved to play his music at the highest volume. “HATERRRRRR!”

That one caught his attention. Scowling, Hater took his headphones off. “What do you want, Peepers? This better be important.”

“Well, maybe not the most important thing ever, but it is good news.” He turned his laptop towards
the bed. “Someone who was at the concert recorded us and posted it online! And this isn’t just some
dinky camera phone, it looks like they got some pretty good shots and audio!”

“Really?” Hater sat up, looking closer at the screen. Sure enough, someone had posted a video -
Ronus Battle/Bands Concert Pt. 3 of 4 - at the top of the forum, and what followed was a long list of
compliments and praise that Hater couldn’t help but grin at.

“Just look at some of these!” Peepers said, scrolling down, “‘Best concert ever’, ‘amazing!’, ‘one of
the best guitar solos I’ve ever heard’-! … Well, I’m sure they liked both of our solos, I mean-”

“Ha! I knew this concert was going to be great for us!” Hater shouted, continuing to grin
victoriously, “And I bet most of these guys are hearing us for the first time!” That was almost better
than pleasing old fans, because the more fans they earned the more popular they would become, and
the more likely someone would notice them and give them a record deal! “Though I’m not too
surprised, after all I am pretty-”

“Awesome?”

“Yeah!”

“No I mean-!” Peepers’ pupil shrunk slightly as he cut himself off. Of course, this didn’t go
unnoticed.

“…Peepers, what did you read?”

“Oh-ho-ho, Hater!” the Watchdog laughed, trying to act casual, “It’s nothing! Just one of those
random posts that people write that adds nothing to the forum, it’s absolutely nothing to-” He didn’t
get to finish because at that moment, Hater’s patience had worn out and he simply snatched the
laptop out of his drummer’s hands. Of course, it didn’t take the skeleton long to find the post.

“These guys are pretty good, but I still say the Party Makers are gonna win it!!” “Reply: Oh yeah,
no competitions!” “Reply: Yeah! I mean did you SEE their last concert?! It was insane!” “Reply:
There’s no way they’re gonna lose! #MasterAwesome!”

“…Now Hater, before you do anything, I just want to remind you how important and expensive that
laptop is-”

“WHY ARE THEY EVEN TALKING ABOUT HIM?!” he screamed, throwing his hands up in
the air, “He didn’t even PERFORM at the stadium so why are they even-?!” He paused. “Unless…
Peepers! See if there’s any videos of Awesome that have also been uploaded today!”

The Watchdog sighed, knowing this could only end badly but did as he was told. “Let’s see, Party…
Makers… concert… Okayyy… Ah, here’s their most recent one.” Peepers clicked on it, and made it
widescreen before turning it towards Hater.

Cheering filled the small bedroom as soon as he pressed play, deepening Hater’s frown. ‘Whatever,’
he thought, ‘I had just as much applause, maybe more.’ He looked closer at the screen, and his eyes
widened in surprise. This… This wasn’t a stadium, or an auditorium, or - or anything like that! This
was just outside somewhere, just some concert at some lame park or whatever! ‘But his audience
sounds like it was just as big as mine!’ he thought, confusion and anger slipping back into his once-
good mood.

Of course, where it was placed wasn’t the only surprising thing about the stage. From what Hater
could tell, this outdoor stage seemed just as big and had just as many lights - specifically blue, pink
and occasionally yellow - and speakers as the stage at the stadium! There was even a projection screen hanging in the back of the stage that acted as a wide-screen television! “But… But how?!"

“Alright dudes!” Awesome shouted just before the camera panned over to him, a toothy, confident grin already plastered on his face, “I’d say it’s time we get this concert goin’! Now, WHO’S READY TO PARTY?!” The cheering nearly busted the speakers on Peepers’ laptop. And, as if to add insult to injury, as soon as Awesome’s first guitar chord was played, four cannons - two on each corner of the stage - blasted out hot pink fire, making the crowd cheer and scream for more.

“What?!” Hater shouted, not caring if the others could hear him, “Where did he even get those?!” He glared at the screen. “Besides, cool pyrotechnic stuff is MY THING!”

“Calm down,” Peepers told them, setting the laptop to the side of the chair, “Look, it’s nothing to be worried about! They’re just, just fake flames! I mean, yeah they’re exciting the first couple times they’re used, but they don’t make a concert great! I mean, it’s not like-”

Just then, small explosions could be heard over the speakers. A bit hesitantly, he looked back over at the screen, and could see the person who was recording pointing the camera above the stage where a few fireworks had been launched after an admittedly pretty awesome opening number.

“…” Peepers then looked back over at his bandmate, who’s hood had slipped over his eyes - to someone who knew him as well as Peepers did, this could easily be recognized as his ‘silent fury’.

“…Well, you know how people on forums are, Hater! I mean, they’re just interested in the latest thing! Yeah they’re into it now but, but stuff like our music-!”

“Peepers, just shut up before I smash that laptop of yours against the wall.”

“Right, got it.”

Hater was too agitated to sleep. This hadn’t been the first time this had happened, and he was almost certain that it would happen again. Still, it didn’t make it any less annoying.

Staring up at the ceiling, he could hear just about everyone else in the apartment sleeping soundly. Peepers had his usual small sighs and murmurs, and from what he could hear Wander liked to talk in his sleep (‘Great…’) while Dracor snored loud, very loud (‘How can that girl stand it?!’). As for Demurra and Sylvia, Hater didn’t hear any noise from them, so either they didn’t make any or they were awake, but he didn’t hear anyone else moving around so he went with the first theory.

Scowling to himself, Hater threw the covers off and got out of bed, grabbing his MP3 player on the way out. This was how he usually dealt with his insomnia; He would grab something to drink or something light to munch on while he either listened to music or played video games until he fell asleep. It always worked, and he wasn’t about to break tradition now. ‘She said they had food, right?’ he thought as he crept into the kitchen, using his device as a makeshift flashlight.

Light flooded the room when he opened the fridge. “Hmm… Well, at least they’ve got pop,” he said to himself, grabbing a can. It wasn’t root beer, but it would do. Now, if he could just find something to eat. Unfortunately, they seemed to be lacking in that department. “Bologna? Gross. …Huh, they’ve got jam. Guess I could have toast… Gah, I don’t even like eating toast for breakfast half the time! Come on, there has to be something-!”

Just then, he could hear something behind him, something being placed on the table. Looking over his shoulder, he saw a pair of tired yet still pretty blue eyes staring back at him. When he looked
down at the table, he could see that she had put down a small box of graham crackers. When he gave her a curious look, the blonde explained. “Drake and I like to make stovetop smores, though we don’t exactly have marshmallows or chocolate so, this’ll have to do.” She gave a small, playful smile. “That is, unless you’d rather have something else for your midnight snack.”

Hater scowled a bit as he shut the fridge. At the same time, Demurra turned on the small lamp in the kitchen, giving them a bit of light to see by. Once they were both able to see each other, Hater couldn’t help but try to hide himself a bit. After all, he was just wearing a pair of black and red boxers and a dark purple tank top. Then again, Demurra was just wearing an oversized light pink tee shirt and a pair of grey sweats, so he figured it didn’t really matter. “So, you couldn’t sleep either?” he asked.

“Nah,” she smirked, “You just aren’t as quiet as you’d think.” That earned her another small glare, but she didn’t seem to care. And, just as Hater sat down at the small kitchen table, she sat down as well. “So, what’s up?”

“What do you mean ‘What’s up’?”

“I mean, why are you up in the middle of the night?”

Hater scowled. “That’s really none of your business, isn’t it?”

Demurra shrugged. “I was just asking, just in case you needed someone to talk to.”

“Hmph, yeah well, I don’t.” He then took a large bite of his graham cracker, crumbs spilling onto his chin and shirt. “Besides,” he mumbled, “If I did need someone to talk to, it probably wouldn’t be you.”

“Oh?” the blonde said, raising an eyebrow and not looking very amused, “And why is that? Before you answer though, just remember that I’m one of the two people letting you stay here.” It was hard to tell if she was serious or not.

“Well, gee, I don’t know,” Hater started to say, “Maybe it was because the last time I was here you told me I pretty much couldn’t even play my own songs right??”

“I didn’t say that,” Demurra retorted, though her tone was calm and civil, “I just said that you tended to push the tempo a bit during the bridge.”

“Whatever!” Hater snapped, taking another angry bite of his cracker, “I don’t need any of your so-called help.”

Surprisingly, Demurra didn’t start yelling or even glaring at him. Instead, she just sat back in her chair, hands folded daintily in her lap, and looked the skeleton straight in the eyes. “Is this how you talk to everyone who just tries to give you constructive criticism?”

“I don’t need constructive criticism!” he argued, “I know my music! And, it’s not like I’m one of those brats who just picks up a guitar and thinks every note is godlike when really it’s just crap! No, I practice and I make sure that it’s perfect, and I don’t need people like you nitpicking every single thing!”

The kitchen - and for a moment, the whole apartment - was silent as the two musicians stared each other down. The muffled snores of the dragon down the hall was the only thing that broke the semi-tense atmosphere. Finally, after what seemed like forever, Demurra began to speak again. “I hate to tell you this Hater, but no act is perfect. Not a single one.”
Hater broke his eye contact. “Yeah well, mine is,” he insisted, taking another bite.

The blonde gave a small sigh. “I get it,” she started to say, getting him to glance back over to her, “Criticismsucks. It really sucks. You expect to hear nothing but praise on something you put your heart and sweat into, and then you just get people who pick it apart, complaining over the tiniest and seemingly unimportant details. And hey, that’s just if they’re being nice. Sometimes people just downright say you suck and send you on your way without a second thought.”

She had Hater’s undivided attention now. “I’m a musician too, hun,” she told him with a small smile, “and I’ve been in this business for a while, so I know how hard this stuff is to hear. But, as much as criticism hurts to hear sometimes, it’s still necessary. Like I said, there are a lot of great acts - and I would definitely include the Harbingers of Doom in that category - but no act is perfect, and there is always room for improvement.”

The skeleton didn’t exactly look happy to hear this, but at least he wasn’t glaring directly at her anymore, so Demurra took that as a good sign. Covering her mouth, she gave a small yawn. “Well, I think I’m going to head back to bed. You’re allowed to stay out here however long you want, just turn off the lights when you’re done.”

Standing up, she gave him a small pat on the shoulder. “Oh, and one more thing: Special effects may make a show memorable, but they aren’t the only thing that makes a performance great. You’ve got a lot of fans already, Hater, so I wouldn’t really worry too much about Awesome.”

Hater blinked in surprise. “Wait, how did you-?”

“It’s kind of all over the web,” she told him, “Which is usual for one of his shows. Although, this is the first time I’ve ever seen his fans come up with something like ‘#MasterAwesome’.”

Hater rolled his eyes. “Great, now he’s trending. That’s just what I needed.”

Demurra gave a small giggle. “Like I said, I don’t think you have too much you need to worry about, just as long as you keep improving. And - if you want my honest opinion - I don’t think you’ll have too much trouble with that either.” With that, the blonde turned around and headed back towards her room.

As for Hater, he paused for a moment before shoving the rest of the graham cracker into his mouth and then closing up the box. Turning off the kitchen lamp, he grabbed his player and his pop, and laid down on the couch. A quick swig to wash down his snack, and then he started up another one of his playlists before setting his head back on the arm of the couch. One song turned into two, two turned into four, and eventually his body and mind became relaxed enough to allow him to slip into a dreamless sleep.
Chapter 11

No matter how much sleep he had gotten the previous night, in Hater’s opinion the sun always came up too early. The skeleton groaned slightly as he turned over, making his headphones slip off. “Stupid mornings…” he grumbled. What was so good about them anyway? Certainly not the aches in his bones (though maybe that was his own fault for sleeping on the couch), or the sun shining right in his eyes, or the smell of coffee and waffles with maple syr-

Wait.

Coffee and waffles?

Hater sat up and looked over the couch and into the kitchen where he could see Wander, smiling as he pushed down the lever on the toaster. As soon as the waffles started cooking, he then took a step towards the coffee machine, pouring out a mug and even humming a bit as he did it!

“That’s it, it’s official,” Hater mumbled as he got off the couch, “He’s definitely not normal.” No one was that happy in the morning - especially when it was only a little after seven!

“Hm? Oh! Mornin’ Hater!” Wander grinned, “Hope I didn’t wake ya! I tried to be as quiet as possible.” Hater didn’t bother giving a reply. Although, now that he could see Wander completely, he made a face at what he was wearing. Like an old-fashioned diner chef, a white apron with green straps and frills covered the front of his body.

“Seriously?” was all he could really say.

Of course, Wander only chuckled. “Well, I wouldn’t wanna get anythin’ on me! Anyway, I hope ya like waffles!” As if on cue, the three waffles sprung from the toaster, looking golden brown.

Not hesitating for even a second, Wander grabbed the waffles and placed them on a plate before adding butter and syrup, doing the job so quickly and efficiently that Hater probably would’ve missed it if he had blinked.

“Order up!” the furry musician said cheerfully as he handed Hater the plate along with a mug of coffee. The skeleton didn’t give any ‘thank you’s, but for one reason or another - maybe he just wasn’t thinking, or maybe deep down he really was grateful for the food and caffeine - he did give a small nod, which was more than enough for Wander. After putting for more waffles in the toaster, Wander grabbed his own plate and drink, and started to eat.

Hater was actually a bit surprised that Wander didn’t try to make any conversation, but at the same time he wasn’t about to waste this turn of good luck. So, he made it a point to try and eat his breakfast as soon as possible before the furball changed his mind.

“Wow, you must be really hungry!” Wander commented, not noticing the small glare he received when he started to speak, “Well, if I’ve got any waffles left over after I make enough for everyone else, you’re more than welcome to have more!”

Hater swallowed. “Is that why you’re up so early? Just because you wanted to make everyone breakfast?” It sounded like something Wander would do, and it annoyed him.

“Nah, I’ve always been a bit of an early riser,” Wander answered casually, “And since I didn’t want to wake anyone up, and since I was feelin’ kinda hungry myself, I decided to just surprise everyone with breakfast!”
Hater rolled his eyes slightly, but he couldn’t exactly complain. Breakfast made by an annoying weirdo was better than no breakfast at all. And… he had to admit, it was nice to actually have a hot breakfast instead of just donuts and gas station coffee.

Soon enough, more people started waking up. First Demurra, followed by Peepers, Sylvia and finally Dracor. Of course, everyone thanked Wander for breakfast. And, while he didn’t exactly care too much for listening to their conversations, Hater was glad he was able to get extra waffles and coffee (though he tried not to show it).

“Well, Drake and I are probably going to go get groceries in a bit,” Demurra announced, looking around the table, “Anyone wanna come with?”

“Well, we certainly wouldn’t mind goin’ with ya,” Wander started to say, “But Syl and I were plannin’ on taking a trip downtown. Maybe do a bit of practicing outdoors.”

The blonde nodded, a knowing smile on her face. She turned towards Hater and Peepers. “And I bet that’s what you guys are doing too, right?”

“Duh,” Hater replied simply, sipping the last of his coffee.

“But, uh, thanks for the offer,” Peepers added, still trying to keep things civil between them and their new housemates - especially when he noticed Dracor’s earflaps folded out.

“No problem,” Demurra nodded, still smiling as she gently touched her boyfriend’s arm, making his earflaps fold back down, “Just make sure you two lock the door if you do decide to leave.”

“We will,” the Watchdog assured her. With that out of the way, people slowly started to leave the table to go get dressed and get ready for the day.

From what they heard on the radio or saw on their phones’ weather apps, it was supposed to be sorta humid that day, but there was still a bit of a chance for rain. ‘Only about thirty percent though,’ the skeleton thought to himself, disappointed a bit. He always enjoyed rainy weather better than heat and humidity. ‘Whatever,’ he shrugged. They would be sure to get rain sooner or later.

As for everyone else, they seemed pleased that rain was most likely not in the forecast. After all, it meant they could just go out in tees instead of having to drag along a jacket with them. Even Sylvia opted to leave her black jacket at home and just go out in a midnight blue colored tank top.

“We should probably take some water with us,” Sylvia mumbled to herself. Good thing there was a couple pop machines in the lobby of their apartment building. “Hey Wander, you ready to go?”

“Almost!” With his tongue sticking out of the corner of his mouth in concentration, Wander quickly finished tying his shoelaces. “Done!” With a grin, he jumped off the bed and left the bedroom - only to stop short when he heard familiar chords of a guitar. Managing to stay as quiet as he could, he started to creep down the small hall...

Hater’s brow furrowed as he looked down at his guitar, trying to put it in tune. He tried a small melody, but scowled when it still sounded a bit off. “Come on…” He adjusted it a bit more as he gingerly strummed each string and- “There! Finally!”

He played a few more chords just to make sure it really was in tune. Once he was satisfied, he placed his guitar in his lap, ready to be played once Peepers finished his shower - ‘The guy doesn’t even have any hair to wash and he’s only like a foot tall! Why does it always take him so long?!’ - and they would finally be able to start practicing.
...Still, something seemed… ‘off’, though Hater wasn’t sure what. After all, his guitar was tuned, he was in a private place… Maybe it was simply because this was a new environment, one that he had never practiced in. One that was full of people, and two of them were his competition. People who were still just a few feet away, people who could easily listen in on his play- “GAH!”

Speaking of eavesdropping. Hater had looked over his shoulder towards the bedroom door, and he immediately spotted an eye staring at him through the crack.

“Whoops! Sorry! Didn’t mean ‘ta spook ya!” The skeleton scowled. Of course it was Wander, of course he would be listening in on him!

“What are you doing here?!” he demanded, “I thought you were leaving!”

“Oh, we are,” Wander answered, opening the door wider so the two musicians could have a clear view of each other. He gave the skeleton a sorta sheepish smile. “But, heh, I guess I just got sorta distracted when I heard you playing.”

Hater’s scowl deepened. “Hmph.” What a weirdo… “That wasn’t even real playing, it was just tuning.”

“What a weirdo… “That wasn’t even real playing, it was just tuning.”

“Oh. Well, it looks like it still caught my attention,” Wander replied with a playful smile.

“Clearly.” And unfortunately. “Now, since I’ve finished tuning, leave.”

“Oh! Right! Don’t wanna keep Syl waiting, after all.” The furball started to leave, but then stopped and turned to face him again, making Hater groan. What did he want now?! “Ya know, Hater, there are plenty of places around Axalis that are perfect for people who just wanna relax and practice their music. And hey, I bet with your songs, you would attract an audience in no time!”

“I don’t ‘practice’ for an audience,” Hater snapped, “I play for one, and you’re not supposed to play for an audience unless you’re sure you’re perfect. What do you think people will say about your band if they hear your mistakes during practice, huh?”

“Well, I guess they would us some constructive criticism, so that’s always nice,” Wander smiled, “So-”

“NO YOU IDIOT! They’ll think that’s how you play at your shows, and then they won’t be impressed, and then they won’t want to come to any of your shows!” Grod, was he really that stupid, or was he just playing the fool on purpose just to get him riled up? Honestly, Hater wasn’t sure.

“Oh. Well, I guess I can see your point,” Wander started to say, “But ya know, sometimes it’s still fun to hear people play music, even if it’s not perfect - and especially if they’re havin’ fun with it!”

Hater rolled his eyes. “Maybe you think so, but I don’t. So you and your Zbornak friend can just enjoy your little ‘practice session’, but I’m staying right here! Oh, and by the way, enjoy the humidity!” If there was one good thing about Demurra and Dracor’s apartment - one that was almost worth staying there - was the fact that the AC was always keeping the building cool. And after knowing how it could be sleeping in a van in eighty degree weather… Well, Hater wasn’t exactly keen to leaving the cooled apartment any sooner than he had to.

“I’m sure we’ll be able to stay refreshed,” the furry guitarist replied cheerfully, “There’s plenty of shady places at the park! And besides, it might rain today, so maybe we’ll get a lucky break!”

“Like you need one,” Hater mumbled, “Now will you leave?!”

“Oh! Heh, right! Later Hater!” With that, Wander finally left the doorway, nearly knocking over
Peepers as he met Sylvia in the living room. Deciding it would be better not to ask why Wander was there, the Watchdog just continued to their bedroom and headed over to his chair/bed.

“Now before we get started,” he started to say, “I’ve bookmarked a few venues I found that I think will be perfect for us! And I think that you will-”

“Get on with it, Peepers!” Hater shouted, already feeling impatient.

“Right,” he sighed as he signed into his laptop. Within seconds, Peepers had the web pages up. “Now, this first one-”

Not willing to listen to a long explanation of each possible venue, Hater simply grabbed his drummer’s computer and read through them himself. None of them were as big as a stadium, of course, but they still seemed like very good venues. He nodded in approval, making Peepers smile a bit. “Yes… And it should only take us about half a day to get to this first one! This music club on… Uh, where’s this place at again?”

“Lagantu.”

“Right, right. Lagantu…” He blinked. Wait. Lagantu? Why did that sound so familiar? In fact… He looked through the other open pages, and then gave his bandmate a look.

“Peepers…”

“…Yes Hater?”

“Could you please tell me why all the planets that we’re planning on going to are all ones that WANDER AND SYLVIA ARE PLANNING ON GOING TO TOO?!”

The one-eyed musician flinched slightly. “Well, you said it yourself! They’re all good venues! And there are only so many planets that are only take a day or less to get to!”

“I DON’T CARE!” Hater yelled back at him, “Just because I’m willing to live with them doesn’t mean I want to travel with them too!”

“WE DON’T HAVE TO TRAVEL WITH THEM!” Peepers retorted, raising his voice for only a moment just to get his bandmate’s attention, “All we have to do is leave Alaxis before Wander and Sylvia do, and then play shows on all the planets before they do! We don’t even have to go in the same order as them! And when we get back here, they’ll most likely be playing their own shows, so we’ll hardly ever see them! See, perfect plan!”

Hater opened his mouth to argue, but then stopped. “…Actually, that is a pretty good plan.” Peepers gave a silent sigh of relief. Even if part of him was a bit disappointed that he would hardly see Sylvia, possible dating and friendships wasn’t what he left home for. And besides, if it kept Hater in a good mood, it was automatically worth any sacrifices that had to be made.

“So, shall I email the manager of the club and ask him for a show?”

“Fine,” Hater replied, giving a stiff nod, “And then can we FINALLY start practicing?!” He knew for certain the apartment was empty now, and he wanted to get as much playing done as possible before his fellow musicians started returning.

“Of course,” Peepers nodded back as he quickly typed up the email, feeling almost as anxious as his bandmate, “And maybe we could even try coming up with a new song to play.” After all, a new hit song with a new planet was guaranteed almost as much publicity as a huge concert - maybe even
more since people would most likely be sharing said song.

“Hmm…” It had been a while since they wrote a new song. Besides, the more hit songs they had, the better their Final Battle concert would be. “Eh, alright. Shouldn’t be too hard with my talent.”

The Watchdog couldn’t help but roll his eye a bit, but stayed silent as he sent out the email and closed his laptop.

With Peepers getting his drums ready, Hater picked up his guitar - double checking to make sure it was still tuned - and then started to mentally clear his mind and relaxed, wanting to let the creative juices flow. ‘Okay,’ he told himself, ‘Time to write a hit song… No big deal. Easy as pie!’

“Ready to start, Hater?” his bandmate asked him, drumsticks at the ready.

Hater simply smirked, feeling completely confident and more than ready to start playing. “Let’s do this!”

000000000

...Okay, maybe coming up with a hit song wasn’t as easy as Hater thought it would be.

“Okay, well, maybe if we just pick up the tempo here, and-”

“No no no! That just makes it sound like a complete mess, Peepers!”

“Well, at least it actually sounds somewhat original…”

“Oh, and what is that supposed to mean?”

“I’m just saying that I just think all the melodies we’re trying sound really similar to our other songs!”

“It’s called playing a genre, Peepers! Of course they all sound similar! And besides, I don’t see you coming up with any ideas!”

“I JUST CAME UP WITH ONE!”

“Yeah, and it was a terrible idea.”

By this point, the Watchdog was steaming with anger while his bandmate was long past frustration, and was now just plain pissed off and just about done with the situation. Thankfully, Peepers wasn’t one to give up, even when it seemed like the most logical choice.

He took a deep breath, and then looked at Hater. “Okay, obviously this is getting us nowhere. How about we take a break? Then we can try coming back to it, or we could just even practice our other songs for a couple hours. Sound good?”

Hater didn’t reply right away, but after a few seconds, he gave a sigh and placed his guitar on the bed. “Fine.”

“Okay,” he sighed. Good thing too, because Peepers definitely felt like he could use a break (and maybe a drink).

And it looked like Hater needed one too, since he didn’t bother saying anything else to his drummer as he left the room and headed towards the kitchen. It was nearly lunchtime after all and- Wait. The skeleton facepalmed as he remembered. “We don’t have any food,” he mumbled, “and who knows when they’ll be back from shopping.”
“What?” Peepers asked, poking his head out of their bedroom.

Ah, now there was a solution. “Peepers, go get us some lunch,” he casually ordered, earning a glare from his bandmate, though it wasn’t really noticed.

“Actually Hater,” he started to say, trying to keep himself from exploding at the skeleton, “I wasn’t really planning on leaving anytime soon, and I’m actually not that hungry, so maybe you should get your own lunch.”

Now that caught Hater’s attention, and while he did glare back at the eyeball for a moment, he decided that continuing to argue wasn’t worth it - especially if it meant waiting even longer for food. “Fine,” he said as he walked towards the front door, leaving without even saying goodbye.

The weather had shifted a little bit. Clouds covered up the sun, making everything outside a bit darker, but the humidity was still fairly high, making Hater sweat slightly under his hoodie. ‘Not too different from home,’ he thought, face neutral as he began walking down the street. Hopefully there would be some sort of restaurant nearby.

As it turned out, near his temporary summer home were a couple bars that weren’t yet open, as well as a few shops and one or two more apartment buildings. There was even a cafe that Hater was tempted to stop at, but decided against it. He hated cafe food, and surely there had to be a burger place around here somewhere, or maybe that one Asian food place Peepers found that one night. But really, as long as it tasted decent enough, Hater didn’t really care. He just wanted to find somewhere to eat - hopefully somewhere that wasn’t too crowded, despite being in the middle of rush hour.

And, as he turned the corner, it looked like the heavy metal artist’s hopes were answered, although it wasn’t exactly a place.

“A food truck?” Or rather, a ‘food port’ according to the side of the truck, though maybe that was just to try and make the name sound more catchy. The truck was painted a grassy green with teal and purple swirls to add some color, and in the middle of it all was “Fleeblebort’s Food Port” written in big, bold letters.

“...Well, it’s better than nothing, I guess,” he shrugged as he walked across the street, curious as to just what this ‘food port’ was selling. As it turned out, good food was what they were selling. The menu was mostly just fish and chicken choices with plenty of sides like coleslaw, fries and chips (as well as a few dishes that included carrots for some reason). And while they weren’t some of Hater’s favorite foods, the delicious smell from the deep fryers in the truck made him forget that fact for a moment.

“Hey!” Blinking in surprise, he looked away from the menu and up at the window, where a small bird man was looking at him. “Do you want something or not, pal?”

Hater scowled. It was a good thing he was too hungry to snap at the bird. “Just get me a chicken sandwich and some fries,” he grumbled.

“Got it. Hey Marsha! Chicken and fries!” Quickly paying for his food, Hater leaned against the truck and waited, crossing his arms. Of course, no one dared to try and talk to (aka bother) him - though that might have just been because they were just as eager to get their food as he was.

He brought a hand to his brow again, wiping the sweat off. “Geez…” After not having to deal with humidity for the past few weeks, it was hard to get used to again.

“Hey bud.” Hater glanced back up at the window. The tiny bird man was back, though he didn’t
have Hater’s food. Instead, he had a styrofoam cup filled with some sort of soda. “Here kid,” Fleeblebort told him, “And just so you know, on days like this it’s on the house.”

“…” Hater wordlessly took the cup, giving a small nod before taking a long sip of the sugary drink. Taking that as a thanks, Fleeblebort turned his attention back to his line of customers. “Alright, who’s next?”

Drowning out the noise of the people near him, Hater glanced around the rest of the park. Seeing it in the daytime was definitely different from seeing it at night. For one thing, now he could actually see how big the place was, as well as just how many trees it had. It wasn’t too often that a city had a park as large as this one, so it was pretty unique. But even so, it was pretty much the same as the last time Hater saw it. Same red grass with the occasional flower hidden in it, same bluebark trees, same banjo-

Wait, banjo. “Oh you have got to be kidding me.” Then again, at this point, he shouldn’t have even been surprised. But where was it coming from?! Standing up straighter, Hater started to look around. It sounded close, he had to be nearby. And sure enough, after a few moments of searching, he spotted a banjo neck sticking out from behind a tree.

“Ah, there he is,” Hater mumbled, scowling. Maybe if he left once he got his food, Wander wouldn’t notice- No! The banjo started to move, and the skeleton was sure he was going to see that familiar, annoying smile - which was starting to feel like it was impossible to escape. But just as Hater started to open his mouth to yell at him, he stopped.

The banjo player wasn’t smiling an annoying, overly friendly smile. He wasn’t orange or furry. Instead, he was a big eyed, Axalis teenager, letting the banjo hang from their neck as they put on their headphones and started to leave the park.

“Oh… Well, good! At least now I don’t have to deal with him bugging me while I’m trying to eat!” And that was a good thing, of course it was! ...So why did he still feel a bit of unease?

“Deal with who?” Fleeblebort asked, placing the paper plate of food on the window.

“Nothing, no one!” Hater snapped, grabbing his food and heading towards the nearest bench while the bird just mumbled something under his breath before tending to the next customer.

He was just hungry. Yeah, that was it. Just...hungry. Even so, as he ate his food, he couldn’t help but glance around at his surroundings, as if making sure there weren’t any other banjo players waiting behind a bush or hiding nearby.

By the time he had finished, the weather had cooled down a bit. Even the wind had picked up a little. It was still fairly warm, but at least it wasn’t as bad as it was earlier. And because of that, Hater decided to keep walking forward instead of heading back to the apartment, mostly because he still wasn’t in the mood to deal with Peepers - and totally not because he still couldn’t think of anything for their next hit song. No, definitely not.

And so, the skeleton kept walking, hoping for something to catch his attention. A video game or electronics store, a comic book store, a music shop, anything! Unfortunately, most of the stores were filled with stuff that Hater couldn’t be interested in if he tried. ‘Geez, was this place this boring the last time I was here?’ he thought. Then again, he hadn’t really explored last time he was here. Now he was pretty much being forced to.

By the time he started getting towards the center of the downtown area, he was starting to get frustrated. ‘Come on!’ he thought with a groan, ‘There has to be at least a movie theater or a cool
He noticed something out of the corner of his eye as he walked across the street, and noticed an open area with a whole crowd of people standing in it. “...Or a mob?” What were they all looking at? With nothing else left to do and his curiosity peaked, the skeleton made his way over to his crowd. And, as he got closer, he heard the chords of a guitar mixed along with... His eyes widened.

With the familiar, light plucks of banjo strings.

It was hi- them. He knew it was them. There wasn’t a doubt in his mind. And yet, he didn’t turn around. ‘It’s... It’s only because I’m bored! That’s it!’ he told himself as he continued to walk towards the crowd, ‘Like I would actually care about his- THEIR dumb songs or their dumb style of music.’

From what he could tell, it was another one of their instrumental songs - no lyrics required. It also sounded a bit more rock and roll-ish than their usual style, so Hater could conclude that it was Sylvia doing the lead on this song. Still, Wander’s banjo definitely stuck out, but instead of completely ruining the tone, it just added even more energy to the song.

As he got even closer to the open center, Hater was able to actually see the two bandmates playing. Sylvia stood mostly still with a confident smile on her face, though her tail was hitting the concrete pavement, keeping a subtle steady beat as she played her guitar. But as for Wander, it was no surprise that he was practically dancing circles around the Zbornak.

The music was good (or ‘decent’ in Hater’s mind, though he still wouldn’t say it out loud) but it was the dancing Star Nomad that kept the crowd’s attention - that made the music come alive. And as the song picked up its pace, so did Wander’s feet. Twirling, jumping, sliding - with how quickly he was going and how fluid his movements were, Hater was starting to wonder if the little furball had any bones in his body. But even so, the sight was definitely entertaining enough, making the audience laugh and cheer.

‘He always does stuff like this,’ Hater thought, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world - and it pretty much was. Wander put his heart and soul into his performance - he put his entire goofy, friendly, overly-cheerful, annoying self into every song, into every single chord.

This should’ve annoyed Hater to no end. In fact, for the most part, it did annoy him. After all, it still made it seem like Wander just thought the whole competition was just pure fun and games - as if people’s whole careers didn’t depend on it. And of course, each great performance from him just reminded Hater that Wander was the competition. That Wander could very well ruin everything he had worked so hard to achieve. His rockstar hopes and dreams, gone in one performance. And because of that, Hater still felt like - no, he needed to hate him. He couldn’t afford not to. ‘Besides, he’s humiliated me plenty in the last couple weeks alone,’ he thought, a familiar burning sense returning to his cheek.

But even so, another part of Hater - no matter how hard he tried to ignore it, and GLORN did he try! - couldn’t help but be captivated by him. His songs, his notes, his lyrics, his performances, his entire florping personality! Hater wanted to hate it, and even now his body was telling him to turn around and walk away before the little pest noticed that he was there. And yet he didn’t take a single step back.

Because, to put it simply, Wander’s music - and to an extent, Wander himself - was like nothing he had ever seen before. It was distracting, almost impossible to look away or drown out the sound. Just like it had been during his and Sylvia’s first performance on the moon.
Just like their performance at the Emerald Tavern.

Just like their guitar battle.

‘I don’t understand...’ That was the only thought Hater had as he continued to watch. He had no idea why this little musical nobody and his weird music was so distracting to him, why it did these confusing things to him. And part of him absolutely hated it. But the other half of him... well, he had no idea what to feel.

Glancing up from his instrument, Wander made sure to smile at the crowd as he continued to dance and move - but stopped in his tracks when he saw a pair of familiar green eyes staring back at him. But what made him keep staring, was that for a moment, Wander saw something on Hater’s face, and he wasn’t sure if the skeleton had known it was there. Heck, with how quickly it passed as soon as the two made eye contact, there was a chance it hadn’t even been there at all.

But Wander knew he’d seen it. It had been brief and only just noticeable, but it was there. Enjoyment. He could see it in the skeleton’s face - in his wide eyes and his just barely visible smile. Hater had been enjoying his music, at least on some level.

For a moment - though it felt longer than that - Wander just stared at him. But soon, a huge grin spread across his face. Giving a quick ‘squee’, the furball once again got back into the music, dancing even more and playing louder than ever before!

Hater blinked. What was he - What, was he trying to show off or something?! Or maybe he knew it was distracting. Yeah, that was probably it, the little jerk! Hater scowled. ‘He probably wants to get me all distracted and confused!’ It was like Awesome’s party all over again... ‘Well, he can just forget it! I’m not an idiot, and it’ll take more than that to-!’

His silent rant was stopped as soon as Wander turned and met his gaze once again, and Hater saw something that he hadn’t really seen in the Star Nomad’s eyes before. They were looking right at him, and it was almost like he was silently asking for something - hoping for something, like a certain reaction...

And with one little realization, Hater’s whole body went into momentary shock. Wander wasn’t trying to distract or confuse him.

No, Wander had been hoping to impress him.

But before he could even come with a reaction for this (or even a reason why Wander would want to impress him) Sylvia had ended the song with one final chord, making her bandmate stop with her. Although, he didn’t seem to bothered by this. Wander simply waved at the crowd, thanking them for being such a good audience while Sylvia just simply smiled, watching as a few kind people tossed various coins into her open guitar case.

Once the crowd started to quiet down and thin out, the Zbornak slipped the guitar strap off her neck and walked over to her friend. “Alright bud, I think I’m gonna take a break. Give my fingers a bit of a rest.”

“Alright-y!” Wander chirped, not minding at all. Besides, he didn’t mind a bit of solo playing - although Sylvia had different ideas. “Hey! Bonehead!” she called out, not even turning around.

“Wha-?” he blinked. But, how-

“I’m not blind, I could see you there too,” she told him as she glanced back at him with a sort of knowing smirk before stretching out her arm and holding out her guitar. “Now, with that out of the
“I - er, I mean,” Hater started to stutter out, trying to keep his composure - as well as a scowl on his face, “I already told him that I don’t do my practices in public!”

“Then don’t call it a practice,” Sylvia replied simply, rolling her eyes, “Just play how you normally would in front of a crowd.”

“But - well, I’m certainly not going to play any of your songs!”

“Who says we hafta play one of our songs?” Wander asked, finally speaking up, “We could play one’a yours, or we could even just have a jam session - or hey, I know! We could have another guitar contest!” His smile grew slightly. “After all, the last one we did was really fun! Didn’t ya think so, Hater?”

Something flashed across the skeleton’s face before quickly being replaced with an even deeper scowl. “It was a guitar battle, not a contest. And even if I did want to have one with you, you just have your banjo, so it wouldn’t really be much of a battle.”

Wander chuckled. “Yeah, I suppose you’re right. But still…” He looked directly at the skeletal musician, giving a bright, encouraging smile, “it would be great to play with you again, Hater.”

Hater stiffened. “I - You -!”

“Come on, bonehead,” Sylvia said as she took a step towards him, “What would be so bad about it? And I mean, there’s not even a lot of people still here, so what are you afraid of?”

He glared at her. “I’m not afraid of anything.”

“Then here.” She placed the deep blue guitar in his hands, “Start playing. A quick tip, do yourself a favor and just enjoy it.” Thought she had a feeling that he would, at least a little. But even if he didn’t, she knew for certain that Wander would, so that was enough. ‘Besides, like the guy has anything else to do,’ she thought before quickly adding, “Also, this thing’s not electrical proof, so watch the sparks, okay?”

Hater scowled, tempted to just shove the instrument back in her arms and walk away, but that would just be like quitting. So, he slipped the strap over his head, and walked past her, giving her one last glare before looking away. Smirking, Sylvia walked over to the metal bench just a few feet away and sat down, getting out her phone.

Surprisingly, she actually had a text waiting for her. Unfortunately, it was from someone she had a feeling wouldn’t provide that interesting of a conversation.

From Fishface: S’up babe? ;)

“I still can’t believe Wander gave him my number,” she mumbled. To be fair, he wasn’t as bad as Sylvia thought he would be, and he did seem to like Wander (she already knew Wander liked him, just because it was hard to find anyone the guy didn’t like) though she still hadn’t really considered the shark-man someone she would want to talk to often. Besides, she wasn’t exactly in the mood to read about how she ‘owed him a dance’ at the next party, but at the same time she had a feeling that Awesome was one of those people who wouldn’t let themselves be ignored. So, reluctantly, she typed up a quick reply.

“Just hanging out and doing a bit of practicing. So yeah, kinda busy.” After a few seconds, her phone dinged, indicating that Awesome had replied.
“Must not be too busy if u can text. Feel like talking?”

“About what?”

“About whatever. I’m sure a cool gal like you’s got plenty to say~ ;)”

Sylvia rolled her eyes, though surprisingly, not in an annoyed fashion. “That depends: If u can go the rest of the conversation WITHOUT flirting with me every five seconds, I guess we can talk for a couple minutes. Also, cool it with the emoticons.”

A couple more seconds passed, and then another ding. “I think I can do that~”

Meanwhile, Hater was still scowling somewhat, looking down at his temporary instrument. It was weird getting ready to play a guitar that he knew wasn’t his, as well as one that he wasn’t sure how it different it would sound from his own guitar. It was like wearing someone else’s clothes, it just didn’t feel normal.

“So Hater, ready to start playin’?” Wander asked, an eager look on his face, “Lead guitarist gets ‘ta pick!”

“Don’t rush me!” he snapped, “You’re lucky I’m even doing this!”

Wander didn’t even flinch at his outburst. “Sorry Hater, didn’t mean ‘ta try and rush ya. Guess I’m just excited.”

“...Yeah well, don’t be. This isn’t that big of a deal.” No, not a big deal at all. And, as if to try and prove this to himself, he played a chord on his guitar. Practically feeling Wander’s curious stare, he quickly added, “The songs I know don’t have a banjo part, so don’t bother asking for me to help you. So, just play something that sounds like whatever I’m playing, okay?!“ Though Hater was starting to think it would be better if Wander wasn’t playing with him at all, but it was obvious that wasn’t going to happen.

“Alright, if ya say so!” Wander replied, getting his banjo ready. Of course, that just made Hater hesitate even more. Honestly, he wasn’t sure what would be worse - having it sound horrible, or having it sound great.

Wander raised an eyebrow. “‘S everything alright, Hater?”

“I’m fine! Just... still trying to think of a song to play, alright?”

“...Ya know, you don’t have to play a specific song if you don’t want to. Like Syl said, we could just have a jam session!”

“That’s pretty much just practice! And I thought I told you-“

“It’s not really practice,” Wander said, interrupting him, “At least, not to me. You’re not reading sheet music during a jam session, so it’s not really a practice. It’s just playin’ a bunch of random melodies together and tryin’ to see what fits! And, in my opinion, it’s a heck of a lot more fun than just practicing - though that can be pretty fun too!”

Hater just continued to scowl. “Still sounds pretty dumb to me,” he grumbled. He waited a few seconds, expecting a reply or an argument or some lame spiel about ‘playing from the heart’ or whatever. But instead, there was nothing. When he started to turn and look at Wander however, the furball had started to play again, plucking a light tune on his banjo strings and effectively ending the conversation.
“Hmph.” Hater gripped the neck of the guitar, pinching his index finger and thumb together as a makeshift pick since he didn’t have one on him, “I thought you said that I would be the lead.” With that, he played another, much louder chord on the guitar before shifting into a semi familiar melody - the melody he had been working on with Peepers, simply because it was the first thing to pop into his head.

An excited grin formed on Wander’s face, and he decided to pick up the tempo, playing quick short notes while Hater played long ones.

It didn’t take long for the skeleton to notice, and once he did he decided to switch up the melody a bit, making sure that he wouldn’t be shifted to background noise in the song. After all, when he was playing, he refused to be the back-up.

And so, he switched up the different notes he played, and even used the whammy bar a couple of times. Anything to keep his side of the song interesting. However, as the song went on, that became more of a secondary goal. Every note he played stayed in his mind, and all of them quickly became layered on top of each other, forming a melody that… that actually sounded really good!

Wander must’ve sensed his burst of excitement, since he was starting to move and dance again despite the song not really being one that could be danced to (at least not normally). But Hater didn’t care. All he cared was keeping the melody together, making it longer while still keeping it semi-connected to the banjo in the background. And, when it finally felt complete, he let out one final chord before dropping his hand.

For one, long moment, both the instruments and their owners were completely silent.

“...Wow Hater, that was amazin’!” Wander shouted, unable to keep quiet for long.

“I… Well of course it was amazing!” Hater shouted back at him, “I was the one playing it!”

Wander giggled lightly. “So, was that the song you and Peepers were workin’ on earlier?”

“Well, sorta… But it’s a hell of a lot better now.” He was still sort of surprised by that fact, but if it meant that they now had their hit song, he supposed it didn’t really matter. Still, a part of couldn’t help but be annoyed that it was partially thanks to Wander. But even so, the melody in his head played on, and the feeling of accomplishment stuck with him.

“Say, Hater?” Blinking out of his thoughts, Hater looked down at the now very-close furry guitarist (and banjoist). “Feel like playin’ another one?” Wander asked, looking straight up at him with those same bright eyes and encouraging smile, though it turned sheepish for just a moment. “I’ve kinda got a song in mind that we could do together. That is, if you want to.”

The skeleton opened his mouth to reply, and for a moment, nothing came out. He shouldn’t, he knew he shouldn’t but… did he want to? “I, uh…”

*drip*

“Huh?” As he felt it roll down his chin, Hater looked up at the cloudy sky, and nearly got his eye get hit with a second raindrop. A couple more fell, then a few more, and within seconds it was sprinkling.

“Aw grog!” Sylvia groaned, running over to them and snatching her guitar away from Hater, “We gotta get out of here!” There was no way she could afford a new guitar if this one got water damaged.
“Right!” Wander wasted no time and quickly shoved his banjo up into his damp hat. As for Hater, it was almost like he was frozen in place. And, while rain was one of his favorite types of weather, he couldn’t help but feel a pinch of… disappointment?

“Here ya go!” he heard Wander say as another object was shoved into his hands. Looking down, he saw that it was a black umbrella.

“Well,” Wander started to say, holding two more umbrellas in his arms, “At least we got to play one song together.” As he opened the green umbrella up, he tilted it back so he could continue to keep eye contact with Hater. “Come on, we should get goin’. Heh, maybe if we’re lucky we’ll run into a taxi and they’ll give us a lift back!” With that, he turned on his heel and ran towards Sylvia, holding out her umbrella.

With nothing else to really say or do, Hater muttered a simple “Yeah”. Gripping the umbrella tightly, he walked after the duo. And as he did so, the melody in his head still played on.
Chapter 12

Rain lightly tapped on the bedroom windows, not heavy enough to disturb anyone but still able to provide a bit of background noise. The tableside lamp was on, and near it were several crumpled up pieces of notebook paper along with a couple of ice cream sandwich wrappers. After a few seconds, a crushed pop bottle was tossed onto the trash pile without a care.

“Okay… I’ve ate, I’ve drank, I have absolutely no distractions… Now, I just… need… to think of some florping lyrics already?! GAH!” The skeleton tossed the notepad onto the bed and rested his head against the headboard.

Well, at least his ‘new hit song’ problem was halfway done. The moment he got back to the apartment, he dragged his bandmate back to their bedroom for more practice - much to Peepers’ reluctance. That is, until he heard the melody Hater now had. The beat was simple enough that a beat machine could provide it, which meant Peepers could use his own guitar to replace the banjo parts in the song - giving the song a bit of a heavier edge yet still making it enjoyable to listen to and full of passion.

Of course, when asked how he came up with the melody, Hater either gave an answer like “Does it matter how I came up with it? We have a song now and that’s all that matters!” or he would flat out ignore the eyeball. Eventually, Peepers gave up asking and left the skeleton alone to come up with the lyrics - as he usually did. After all, Hater was the lead singer, so he always insisted that he came up with most of the lyrics.

Unfortunately, he always seemed to forget how hard this particular part was.

“What is wrong with me?!” he asked himself. Before he was just coming up with middle school level lyrics - which might’ve sucked but at least they were SOMETHING and could be edited later - but now his mind was an absolute, complete blank.

“At this point I might as well just give up and go-” Hater stopped himself, but he knew how he was going to end that sentence. Demurra and Drakor were out on a date, but that didn’t mean the rest of the apartment was empty. In fact, if he concentrated, he could faintly hear the movie his other three roommates were watching in the living room through the bedroom door.

But, he couldn’t! For one thing, Wander probably wouldn’t leave him alone during it. In fact, he would probably be so distracted by - er, Wander would be so annoying and distracting! - that he wouldn’t be able to even enjoy the movie! Besides, he didn’t have time for watching movies.

As it turned out, the manager of the music club on Lagantu emailed them back, and he wanted them for a Thursday show. That meant that they only had one day to practice and get their new song together and practice it before driving to having to drive several hours the next day to their venue. Not that he would admit it but, the short timeline they had to do all of this was stressing Hater out.

“Which is why I can’t stop!” he told himself. Besides, that would just be like quitting, and Hater was no quitter. So, with a renewed sense of determination, he grabbed the notepad, pressed his pen to the paper, and…

And…

….  

“... Grop damn it,” he mumbled, the determination slipping away and his mind still a total blank. At
that moment, he heard a muffled explosion, followed by a trio of amazed voices. Hater growled, looked back at his wordless notepad, and then stood up from the bed. “Five minutes, tops,” he told himself, exiting the room.

“Wow! That was amazing!”

“Most of the special effects in these movies are all just cgi you know, not really that impress- OW! Hey!”

“Don’t ruin the magic, Cyclops. Also, pass the popcorn.”

Poking his head out into the room, Hater glanced over at the screen. It looked like they were watching some action movie, maybe a spy thriller or a superhero movie? He briefly wondered which one it was before he reminded himself that he didn’t care.

“Well there you are!” a cheerful voice shouted, making Hater jump nearly a foot in the air and alerting everyone in the room to his presence. “I was hopin’ you’d come join us!”

“I - I’m not staying!” Hater quickly replied, giving Wander a stern look, “I’m just taking a break.”

“You’re still working on the song?” Peepers asked. Getting a small glare, he quickly tried to correct himself. “Er, I mean, there’s nothing wrong with that of course! I’m just a bit surprised since you usually don’t take this long. Oh but, inspiration takes time after all so-?”

“I get it,” Hater said, making his drummer stay quiet, “I’ll have the lyrics done in no time. I just… need to get out of that room for a bit.”

“Nothin’ wrong with that!” Wander smiled, “Go ahead and watch a bit of the movie with us!”

“I was already planning on doing that,” the skeleton mumbled as he walked further into the room. Wander was lying on the floor with a pillow under his arms, so with only Sylvia and Peepers sitting on the couch - though he was almost certain that Peepers scooted away from the zbornak just a bit when he noticed his bandmate in the room - there was plenty of room for Hater.

Not saying another word, the skeleton sat down at the end of the couch. But before he even had time to even look back at the screen, the movie had been paused. “Need a quick recap before we continue watching, Hater?” Wander asked, remote in hand, “I wouldn’t want ya to feel out of the loop!”

“No just, just play the dumb movie!” Hater told him, “I just told you that I won’t be staying long, so there would be no point in you wasting time and breath just to tell me what happened!”

Of course, Wander’s smile never faltered. “Well alright then, if you’re sure.” The movie was unpause, and the four of them fell silent save for the munching of popcorn. He glanced over at Sylvia, but before he even had a chance to ask, she had passed it to him. A small nod was given as thanks, and the guitarist immediately grabbed a handful of popcorn and shoved it into his mouth.

‘Hmph, good thing we already ate most of it,’ Sylvia thought, rolling her eyes slightly before looking back at the screen.

The movie was simple enough so Hater wasn’t too confused even with his lack of information. Besides, he had seen enough action movies to make educated guesses about what this one was about and where it was going. But then again, he didn’t exactly watch action movies for their stories. He watched for the action! Well… that and the characters. Good thing he knew that Peepers was smart enough to never bring up the time Hater got a little… excited during the movie with the retired spy trying to find his kidnapped daughter.
Still, old habits died hard. “What is he doing?” Hater muttered, “it’s so obvious that the guy’s not going to be there!”

“Shh, it’s called building suspense!” Sylvia whispered.

“No! It’s called lazy writing! They’re just adding in another action scene - which I would be more than okay with if it actually had a purpose!”

“Well, maybe he’ll find another clue!” Peepers added with a slightly louder whisper, hoping to get their attention, “I mean, he still needs to figure out where the weapons are located!”

“Then make it a stealth mission with a goal he actually knows about instead of ‘pretending’ that the bad guy’s in there, just so you can fool your audience!”

“Well, I’m sure they were just tryin’ to make the movie more exciting!“ Wander whisper-shouted from the floor.

“That or make the movie ten minutes longer,” Sylvia mumbled.

“Exactly!” Hater shouted, no longer caring about whispering, “That’s exactly what I - THAT IDIOT!” The other three looked at the screen and saw just what Hater was talking about, with the character walking into an empty room casually without even trying to hide, and receiving fire from mechanical guards - though luckily there was a convenient desk he could hide behind.

“... Okay yeah, that was a dumb move.” “How did this guy become top agent again?” “Yeahhh, probably should be more careful next time. But how’s he gonna-“

“Shoot the lights!” Hater shouted at the screen, earning a curious look from Wander while the others kept their eyes on the screen.

“Huh? But, Hater I’m pretty sure they can see in the dark! What would shootin’ the lights-?”

“They’ll give off sparks! That or they’ll start smoking and turn on the sprinkler system,” Hater explained, “And even if that doesn’t work, the time it would take the robots to switch to night vision would give him enough time to get out of the room and come up with a better plan.

The Star Nomad smiled, clearly impressed. “Wow Hater! That’s pretty clever! Heck I bet you’ll even guess the ending before we even come close to seein’ it!”

Hater opened his mouth and started to reply, ready to boast about how he was an expert on these kinds of movies, when he stopped. The ending… Hadn’t he said that he was only going to stay for five minutes? The skeleton mentally scolded himself when he realized that he had been watching the movie for much longer than that. ‘Well, no more!’ he told himself. It was time to get back to business!

… That’s what he told himself, and yet his body refused to move. Maybe it was the fact that despite how predictable it would be, he still wanted to see how the final action scene played out. Maybe it was because, for some reason, the couch felt a bit more comfortable than the last time he sat on it. Or… maybe it was the look Wander was giving him. Encouraging, hopeful even? He wasn’t begging Hater to stay, and of course with his passive nature, he wouldn’t force him to stay if he got up right then and there.

But the look… It was a look of not only encouragement, but enjoyment. Wander enjoyed having Hater there watching the movie with him, along with everyone else. It was sort of silly to Hater of course, not being able to fully enjoy something because one of your frie- … because a person you
knew was missing from the activity. In that case it was just his own fault, placing his happiness in the hands of other people. But... at the same time, knowing that he was clearly wanted there, sitting behind him on the couch and making loud comments and just being himself... It sorta felt, well...

“Yo! Bonehead! You hear me?”

“Huh, wha?”

Sylvia didn’t seem to annoyed with having to repeat herself. In fact, she looked sorta amused. “I said, we’ve got another movie lined up after this one, so if you wanna stick around for that one, we’ll make more popcorn. And we’ll probably make supper at some point too.” All three guys perked up at that one.

“Ooh! Since we wanna have enough for everyone, we can make tacos!” Wander suggested, “Perfect dish to go with a popcorn dessert!”

“Does popcorn even count as a dessert?” Peepers wondered aloud, “It’s not exactly sweet.”

“It is if you put chocolate in and/or on it,” Sylvia smirked, “But back on topic, does that sound to you guys?”

“Sounds alright with me.” The eyeball then glanced at his bandmate, along with everyone else, “Hater?”

The skeleton frowned as he thought it over. As much as he hated to admit it, tacos did sound really good. As did another action movie, and - He glanced down at Wander for a fraction of a second before looking away, mentally slapping himself. “I’ll stay until the food’s done,” he said bluntly, “Then I’m going back to my room.”

Peepers and Sylvia both gave him a look, but Wander just smiled. “Good enough for me! Now, I hope ya’ll don’t mind, but I’m gonna rewind the movie just a bit. I think we might’ve missed a scene or two while discussin’ supper plans...”

The rest of the movie went on without any interruptions - if you didn’t count Hater’s comments and yells directed towards the main character, that is. Then again, no one seemed to mind, or if they did they didn’t bother saying (and besides, after several sleepovers, Peepers had gotten used to how his guitarist was around movies). And, while Hater didn’t exactly predict the ending, he had gotten pretty invested in it.

When the spy finally punched out the crime boss, complete with corny one liner, he couldn’t help but smirk while Wander cheered and Peepers and Sylvia chuckled, rolling their eyes at the line. The credits started to roll, and all of them stretched.

“Eh, not too bad I guess,” Sylvia commented, “Could’ve been better but, hey, I’ve seen worse.” “And at least we all had a good time watchin’ it!” Wander added, not surprising anyone.

“Hopefully the next one will be as good. But before we start it, how’s about we get some grub going?” There were definitely no arguments there. Wander even pulled his white and green apron out of his hat - making both Hater and Peepers blink in surprise.

“But... I, wait what?” “How did you-?”

“Don’t ask,” Sylvia interrupted, “Trust me. Now come on, you can help with the meat - and Hater, don’t give me that look. If you want to eat it, you’ll help make it, otherwise you can help yourself to cold cereal.”
With a fully stocked kitchen at their disposal, the four of them went to work. Sylvia added spices to the meat while Hater stirred it, and Wander took care of the salads and black beans while Peepers handled the taco shells. And of course, they didn’t work in silence. Hater didn’t say much, but as always Wander provided most of the chatter, getting the skeleton to chime in every once in a while. As for Sylvia and Peepers, apparently they had already started a conversation movie special effects - specifically CGI vs actual effects - and while the Zbornak couldn’t say she was the most interested in the topic (in fact when it came down to it, she didn’t really care one way or the other), the talk was still nice.

“Geez, you sure weren’t in debate team or something when you were in high school,” she asked him with an amused smirk as she put the sauce in a bowl, “You think quick on your feet, and you take a while to shut up. With those two skills, you could probably be a team captain.”

“Oh haha. I’m just going to choose to take that as a compliment.”

“Heh, fine with me.”

In no time at all, supper was finished, and just the sight and smell alone was enough to make all of their stomachs growl. “You sure you don’t wanna try some of these black beans, Hater? They’re really good!”

“Keep your veggies to yourself,” Hater mumbled, picking up his plate with all three tacos on it covered in meat and cheese with just a tiny bit of lettuce.

Wander chuckled. “Okay then.” Since their friends were still talking, Wander simply headed back into the living room, with Hater following close behind.

Not wanting to wait any longer, the skeleton immediately picked up his taco and took a big bite of it. Wander didn’t mind sitting in silence for a while though, and was already taking bites of his taco salad. But of course the little furball couldn’t stay silent forever.

“So… Got any ideas about your new song? What’s it gonna be about?”

“I don’t know,” Hater mumbled, taking a moment to wipe off his chin, “I’m still trying to-” He stopped. “Wait. How did you know I was working on a new song?!?”

“Peepers told us,” Wander replied, not missing a beat, “Remember?”

“...Oh.” Right. “Well, uh, like I said I’m getting back to work as soon as I’m done eating!”

“Oh, didja come up with an idea for your song?”

“Not yet! That’s why I need to get back to work!” the skeletal rocker shouted, feeling a pinch of frustration now, “So I can finish this stupid song before my show!”

“Oh yeah, Peepers told us about your guys’ show on Lagantu too! Though, I guess he was tryin’ to keep it a surprise, since he looked kinda nervous after he told us.” The furball gave a shrug and smiled. “Oh well! No harm done, right Hater?”

Hater gave an unamused look. “Yeah,” he said dryly, “No harm done at all.” So much for keeping their travel plans a secret. Now that he knew, it would be likely that he would try to come to the show now. Cheer for them in the audience, run over to the backstage area as soon as their performance was over. Probably wouldn’t shut up either, and then afterwards he would probably invite them out for drinks or a meal or whatever…
It was all so predictable at this point. In fact, there was only one thing Hater wasn’t completely sure of, one thing he was questioning: Why didn’t all this sound as bad and annoying as it used to? Of course, it still sounded sorta bad but…

The skeleton shook his head. No! No more distractions! With that, he took another huge bite of his taco, now feeling the need to get out of the room as soon as possible. Unfortunately, when it came to something like tacos, eating as fast as he was wasn’t exactly the best battle plan. Within seconds, Hater was coughing, winching at the shell poking at his throat.

“Oh! Hater! You okay?!” Not wasting any time, Wander grabbed Hater’s drink and handed it to him before starting to rub his back. “You should be careful! I learned the hard way just how painful tacos can be if you don’t!”

“I’m fine!” he shouted in between coughs, batting the Star Nomad’s arm away from him, “Just s-swallowed it wrong or something!” He took a long swig from his drink, and while his throat hurt a bit now, that seemed to do the trick. Scowling slightly, Hater then continued to eat, (reluctantly) going slower this time.

Wander glanced down at his salad bowl, mixing it up a bit with his fork. “...Ya know, you don’t have to try and rush with your new song.”

“Hmph, who says I’m rushing? I’m not rushing!”

“I’m not sayin’ that you are! Well, at least, not on purpose. But, with only a couple days to write it, you kinda have to...”

Hater gave another scowl. “So what, you’re saying that I shouldn’t try to finish it as soon as possible?”

“Not exactly,” Wander replied, tilting his head up to look the skeleton in the eyes, “There’s nothin’ wrong with writin’ a song quickly. Heck, there are times I think of several little ditties in just a few minutes! But I’m just sayin’ that, well, it just seems like you’re forcin’ yourself to write it.”

“Well duh!” Hater replied bluntly, “I am! Because I’ve only got half a song finished with a show in two days! Of course I’m going to force myself to sit down and try to get it done! Music isn’t all fun and games, you know!”

“A’course not, and I ain’t saying that it is,” Wander said calmly, “But, you know, while playin’ a new song for a crowd is always fun, there’s no rule that says you can’t keep working on it and play it at a different show.”

“Hmph, you don’t understand,” Hater mumbled, glancing away.

“What don’t I understand?” There wasn’t even a hint of frustration in his voice, only curiosity. “I mean, you’ll still have an audience hear it eventually, and that’s all that matters, right? Doesn’t really matter who they are or where they’ll hear it. All that matters is that it’s gonna get heard eventually, so why not just take your time with it and wait for the lyrics to come to you?” he asked with a bright smile.

“So I’m just supposed to sit here and just wait for the words to come?” That didn’t make sense! That was pretty much just not trying at all!

“If you think that’ll work,” Wander replied, “And in my experience, it usually does. And it seems better than forcin’ yourself to come up with something you don’t really care about.”
“And what if the words don’t just eventually ‘come to me’?” Hater shouted, turning back towards the Star Nomad, “What then, huh?!”

Wander continued to smile, though it was a bit softer now. “They will, Hater. I know they will.” There was a look in his eyes as his smile grew just a little. “After all, you’ve got quite a lot of talent - more than I’ve seen in a handful of folks.”

Hater’s frustration slipped off his face, only leaving him with mild surprise as he stared at the furball, repeating his words in his head. “Passion too. Yep, if anyone can finish this song, I know it’s you!”

He could feel his boney face heating up, and prayed that it wasn’t visible. Looking away again, Hater picked up another taco, his eyes hidden underneath his hoodie. “Yeah well… Thanks I guess. Not like I didn’t already know that…” Though this was one of the few times he actually heard someone say it.

Wander gave a small nod. “No problem, Hater.” The silence returned for a moment, with only the sounds of their chewing and the muffled conversation being the only background noise. “... Ya know, I think the next movie we’re watching is gonna be action too. One of those superhero movies, the one with the assassin and the robot-suit guy? Sounds like a pretty good time to me.”

“... Is it the second or the third one?”

“Uh, pretty sure it’ll be the second one. Don’t think the third one’s out yet. Though it doesn’t matter I guess, I haven’t seen either of ‘em.”

There was a small pause. “Me neither.”

“Guess it’ll be a surprise for both of us then. That is of course, if ya want to watch it with us.” Hater didn’t say anything, but he didn’t object either. Still smiling lightly, Wander leaned back on the couch as they continued to eat. They were a bit closer now, even having their arms brush by each other a couple times, but neither one of them ever attempted to scoot over.

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“Hmmm…” Had it really only been a couple hours? When was the last time someone changed the batteries in the clock? It had to be going slow!

...Or maybe that was just because he had been pretty much just staring at the wall clock for the past couple of hours. Of course, Wander had been trying to keep himself occupied. Playing random melodies on his instruments, watching tv, even reading one of the newspapers they got every other morning. But no matter how hard he tried, his eyes always seemed to drift back towards the ticking clock.

“Uh, Wander? You okay there, pal?”

“Hm?” he blinked, looking at his drummer and quickly putting on a smile, “I’m fine, Syl! And how are you?”

“Uh, fine. But, are you sure you’re alright? Cause you’ve kinda been staring at that clock for a while now.”

His smile turned sorta sheepish at that. “Heh, well, ya got me there, Syl. Guess I’m just… thinkin’.”

“You know they’ll be back in the morning, right?” Demurra asked as she took out her other earbud, looking up from her tablet. Both she and Dracor had been working on something, using separate
devices but sitting close enough to each other to see what the other was doing, and even they had noticed Wander’s distraction (and apparently figured out the source of it).

“I know I know,” the guitarist replied, slouching slightly, “Hmm, I wonder if they’ve gotten there already.”

“Probably getting close,” Dracor answered, “Lagantu’s only several hours away, and knowing Hater he’ll probably speed a bit.”

“Yeah,” Sylvia added, “You know, Bonehead. Always thinkin’ about the next show.” She was starting to wonder if it was even possible for the skeleton to relax. If it was, she’d only barely seen it.

Wander gave a small chuckle. “Yeah…” A small smile tugged on his lips, one that Demurra noticed right away.

“You know, since it’s a neighboring planet, there’s probably a couple buses going there,” she told him. The Star Nomad immediately perked up, but then quickly tried to shake off his excitement.

“Nah, it’s fine. Really! I mean… I don’t have to go to all of his shows!”

“You don’t… but do you want to?” Wander hesitated for a moment, and then smiled once more, giving the blonde all the answers she needed. “Well then, there you go! There’s nothing stopping you, is there?”

“But Demurra, didn’t you say to try and give Hater some space?” he asked, earning a curious look from Sylvia.

“Giving him space? Look bud,” she started to say, smirking slightly, “I’m not sure when you guys had this talk, or what even caused it to happen, but as of lately, you haven’t exactly been keeping your distance from Hater.” He started to frown for a moment, but what Sylvia said next stopped it right in it’s tracks. “And the weirdest thing is, it didn’t really seem like he minded it.” While she still wouldn’t exactly call him ‘friendly’, she didn’t think he hated them either - at least, not anymore.

“Really?” Wander asked, his eyes wide as he clasped his hands, “Ya think so?!” Demurra and Dracor glanced at each other, and shared a knowing glance.

“Yeah,” the Zbornak nodded, “at least, that’s what I thought anyway.”

His smile grew even bigger. “Wellllll, as long as Hater doesn’t mind, I guess we could take a peek at his show.”

“If you guys are going, you can count me in too,” Demurra told them, curious to see if Hater had actually listened to the small tips she had given him in passing. She then glanced up at her boyfriend. “Drake?”

“Sounds fine to me,” the dragon smiled, “So you can count me in too.” Though, if he was being honest, it wasn’t entirely the music that made him want to go to the show.

“Great! All four of us are going then!” In a flash, Wander got out his cell phone, scrolling through the apps. “Just let me find us a bus schedule, and then we’re on our way!”

“Oh, hold on, I think I grabbed a bus schedule the last time we rode it,” Sylvia told him, getting his attention, “I think I left it in my bag.” Quickly, the two got up and headed towards Sylvia’s room, leaving the couple alone.
“...Hmm, going to a concert just to see a certain someone on stage,” Dracor started to say, a sorta nostalgic look on his face, “Does that sound familiar?”

Demurra giggled lightly. “I should hope so, since it happened more than a few times. You even volunteered to clean the stage afterwards just so you could see me perform from the tech booth. Of course, that was before we started playing music together.”

The dragon hummed, holding her tighter. “And it’s still one of the best things I’ve ever heard.” He started to lightly purr as she kissed his snout.

“You’re too sweet sometimes, Drake.”

“Only for you, my love~”

The blonde gave him another quick kiss. “But those two...” she heard him start to say, “Do you really think the same thing will happen to them?”

She looked back up at her boyfriend, giving him a content yet confident look despite her answer. “I guess we’ll just have to wait and see, won’t we?”

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One word usually used to describe Lagantu was dark. Since it was a small planet usually stuck behind one of its larger neighbors, it was often in the shadows of space. But thankfully, this didn’t make the little planet eerie or uninviting, just unique. Or at least, that’s how Wander described it as their bus drove towards it.

The surface of Lagantu was a dark brown, with several large bonfires placed strategically around the planet for light sources, since its residents couldn’t afford to be like Ronus and have a bunch of electric lights running all the time. Because of this, the planet did have a sort of warm feel to it, sort of like a fireplace in a dark room. But of course, while the little Star Nomad loved exploring new places, that wasn’t the only thing he was there for.

“Hmm, looks like the venue isn’t too far from the Bus Depot,” Sylvia announced, scrolling through the tourist information for Lagantu on her phone, “They’re playin’ at a place called the Crashing Comet, right?”

“Yep,” Demurra nodded, “The only music club there, but even then it’s popularity is deserved.”

Dracor gave a nod. “Most of the heavier rock bands stop there for the competition, plus there’s even been some famous bands that have played there even after they got popular - and I hear the barbeque there isn’t half bad either.”

“Guess they know how to pick their venues,” Sylvia commented, with Demurra giving a small nod.

“Which is a good thing,” she added, “There’s nothing worse than playing for an audience that’s either never heard of your style or just doesn’t care about it.”

The Zbornak chuckled. “Trust me, Wander and I have already learned our lesson about that.”

In no time at all, the bus landed and opened its doors, with the small group of musicians being the first ones off thanks to Wander. “So, down the street, right?” he asked his bandmate while Demurra and Dracor headed towards the small ATM machine to get a few more credits for the night, while checking the schedule hanging on the outer wall of the depot, just to make sure they had the right times for their return ride.
“Yep,” Sylvia nodded with a smile as she put away her phone, “In fact…” She stretched her neck up and squinted a bit. “Yeah, I can see the sign from here!”

“Great!” Not wanting to risk missing the show or not getting a seat, the furball sprinted off towards it.

“Hey! Wander! Wait for us!” Sylvia started to run after him before screeching to a halt and looking back at the couple she was leaving behind. Before she even had a chance to shout at them, Demurra yelled “Don’t worry! We’ll catch up! Just try to save us a seat!” and waved her along.

‘Well, as long as it was okay,’ Sylvia thought before continuing to run, quickly catching up to Wander, who unsurprisingly was already waiting outside the door.

Unlike most clubs that were usually one floor, the Crashing Comet had two. Not only that, but the roof was a dome shape, painted black with small orange lights around it to almost look like a comet. The rest of the building was made of bricks, and while there weren’t really any windows, they still had signs indicating that they were open and had plenty of food and drinks to go around - as well as a bouncer, a necessity for most clubs.

“Huh, not a bad place,” Sylvia commented.

“I know!” Wander agreed, “Hope we’re able to get a show here too!”

“It would probably be a decent gig. But for now, how ‘bout we take a look at the inside?” The furball grinned, and ran towards the entrance, nearly reaching it when he was stopped.

“Whoa there, you two,” the bouncer - a man who looked like a taller, more buff version of Awesome’s bandmates, though he still had a fist for a head - said, crossing his arms, “Hold up. I’m not sure if you two… belong here.”

While Wander simply gave him a curious look, Sylvia put on a defensive scowl. “Oh yeah, and just what’s wrong with us, pal?”

“Nothin’… With the exception of your clothes, that is.”

“Seriously?” she shouted, getting angrier, “That’s what you’re judging us on?!” She could understand if they were at some big, high-class club or one of those night clubs with the long lines and the infamous ‘list’, but this was just some bar with a stage!

“Now now,” Wander said, stepping in front of his bandmate and putting on a friendly smile, “I assure you, we definitely belong here. See, our friends - the Harbingers of Doom? - they’re playing a show tonight and we just can’t wait to see them!”

“Besides, just what is wrong with what I’m wearing, huh?!” she added, gesturing to herself, “Not a fan of piercings or something?”

“No,” the bouncer replied stiffly, “In fact, it’s not you I have a problem with. It’s him.” He pointed down at Wander, specifically at his tie-dyed tee shirt and beads. “Wearin’ things like that would make you stick out like a sore thumb in there, kid.”

Sylvia looked at Wander, and then remembered just what kind of music they played at this club - as well as the fans it had and how they usually dressed. “…Ohhh, I see,” she said finally, “Yeah well, trust me, he’s not- … I won’t let him start any trouble. So just let us in, okay?”
“Look lady, I’m just trying to keep as few fights from starting as possible,” the buff Fist Fighter told her, an agitated tone slipping into his voice, “People can be idiots, ‘specially when they’ve had a few. I don’t really have much of a problem with your friend’s outfit.” Though he would admit he still thought it was a bit strange - “but folks in there might. So just have him go home and change into something else, and I’ll let you two in.”

“But he can’t-!” Sylvia started to say before Wander stopped her, lifting a hand as he took off his hat with the other.

“Aaaactually, Syl, Demurra and I did have a talk some time ago about maybe thinkin’ about a new wardrobe, just so we can match on stage a bit better. Now, I told her I’d think about it, and she says that’s fine - though between you and me, I think I might stick with my usual style - but maybe this is one of those times where we have to match. So-” He stuck his hand inside the floppy hat, feeling around inside it, “Let’s see what we need…”

Meanwhile inside the club, Hater was already preparing for their show, despite knowing it didn’t start for another fifteen minutes or so. He already had his stage clothes and face paint on, and since they had gotten there an hour before their performance, he and Peepers had already tuned and practiced. Now it was only a matter of killing time… and trying to finish up their new song.

Despite working on it off and on, the skeleton failed to come up with any lyrics. The rare times he did think of a line were usually crossed out and thrown away, but most of the time he couldn’t even think of a single word for it. Clearly it pissed him off, but Hater did try to make it seem like a big deal to him. Though it still annoyed him to have a song only half finished, it was like having an itch that you couldn’t scratch.

However, one thing did sorta help him keep his annoyance and frustration in check. Silently now since he didn’t want anyone to hear it before it was done, he fingered the notes on his guitar, softly humming along. He wanted to keep the melody in the back of his mind. If he was supposed to just wait for the words to his sure-to-be-lyrical-genius song to just come to him, then he was going to make sure he was ready for them. Though, possible being able to think of the words sooner than later because of this was was also a plus.

Out of the corner of his eye, Hater could see Peepers coming downstairs. Despite the stage and seating area being small - at least compared to a stadium - there was still plenty of room for everything and everyone simply because the kitchen and refreshments were primarily either outside or upstairs. Still, it worked, and it made for an easy way for the bouncer to tell when someone’s had too much (hence the small scratches and stains on the wooden stairs).

“What were you doing up there for so long?” Hater asked, setting his guitar on his lap, “We have everything we need here backstage.”

Peepers gave him a small look. Unlike his bandmate, he wasn’t satisfied with just chips and cheap bottled drinks for a pre-show meal - though he was almost certain the skeleton would want to try some of the club’s infamous barbecued ribs afterwards. “Just looking at the menu,” he answered simply, “Oh, and by the way, I caught a look at the crowd as I was walking downstairs. Looks pretty good.”

“Hmm.” Setting his instrument to the side, Hater stood up and walked towards the corner of the stage, wanting to see for himself. Moving the black curtain just a little, he looked out at his audience. “Huh, it actually does look like a good one,” he mumbled, glancing around the room.

Nearly all the tables were filled, and all the people who were sitting at them certainly looked like they would be interested in his music - and would no doubt listen to it again. He smirked, already hearing
the applause in his mind. He also heard the front door open, meaning that even more people were coming in to hear him play - not that he really minded, a full house was always welcome.

“Oh! There’s one that’s open! Come on, let’s go get it.” “Got it! I’m right behind you!”

Recognizing the voices instantly, Hater frowned slightly. ‘Yeah, just as I thought,’ he told himself, ‘But maybe if we’re lucky we can just grab some food to go and leave before-’

His thoughts were stopped dead in their tracks once he actually saw them. Sylvia was dressed as her usual self, no surprise there. But Wander… Was that even the same guy?!

Worn, blue sneakers were replaced with black chucks and grey socks. His fur skirt was covered up with dark jeans, and along with that he was wearing a maroon tee shirt with a black star on it, along with a leather jacket. Even his hair was different, now slightly messy and not as bouncy to fit with the rest of the rocker outfit, and even his bright eyes now had black eyeliner around them.

The longer Hater stared, the more he just couldn’t believe it. “Wander?!”

Slapping his hand to his mouth, the skeleton quickly pulled himself back from the curtain just before Wander could see him. Once he was behind the curtain once more, Hater slowly let go of his mouth, though still found himself slackjawed (almost literally). What was wrong with him?! Why was he getting this worked up about it?! It was just a dumb outfit! A dumb, surprising… sort of attractive…

“Hater?”

“GAH!” Flinching in surprise, he quickly switched to his default scowl and glared down at his bandmate. “DON’T DO THAT!”

“S-Sorry Hater!” Peepers said quickly, “I was just, making sure you were alright.”

“Oh, and why wouldn’t I be alright, Peepers?!”

“Well, you are looking a little green…”

“Ugh, it’s nothing! I’m fine! Now just, get to your drums and get ready for the show!” With that, the skeleton stomped away, heading towards the restroom to no doubt try and cool himself off, leaving his drummer with a slightly confused but mostly unamused look on his face.

“I know I should be used to these mood swings by now, but yeesh,” he mumbled as he put on his helmet. Still, he couldn’t help but wonder what had caused this one…

“Are ya sure you didn’t hear someone call my name, Syl? Cause I’m almost certain…”

“Sorry, pal. If they did, I didn’t hear it.”

“Huh.” Wander tilted back in his chair, glancing up at the wooden ceiling. “Well, if someone did yell my name, I hope they didn’t need anything.” Setting his chair back on the floor, he spotted someone (or rather a couple of someones) out of the corner of his eye, and grinned. “Hey!” he waved, “Over here!”

“Don’t worry, we see you!” Quickly making their way across the room, Demurra and Dracor sat down at their table, clearly glad that they didn’t miss the start of the show. “By the way,” the blonde said with a pleased smile, “Nice new outfit, Wander!”

“Aw, thanks!” the Star Nomad grinned, glancing down at himself, “It’s definitely something new,
but that sure don’t mean it’s bad!”

“Nope,” she replied, giggling slightly, “not bad at all.”

Glancing over at the couple, Sylvia noticed the very pink outfit Demurra was wearing, as well as the simple yet not very rocker-ish outfit Dracor was wearing. “So did you guys get stopped at the door too.”

“No,” Demurra answered, giving an innocent look while her boyfriend just sorta smiled, “Why?”

“Well, uh… Nothin’, nevermind.”

After a few minutes, the room lights dimmed while the orange stage lights brightened. The black curtains opened, and the crowd cheered as the Harbingers of Doom took the stage.

Face no longer green, Hater took a subtle deep breath, keeping his nerves steady and trying not to think about a certain someone in the audience - though it was pretty hard when that certain someone tended to cheer louder than the rest. Even so, after a moment he looked out into the audience - his audience - raised his pick, and struck.

As soon as the song began, the energy in the crowd rose through the charts, and Hater made sure to take all that energy in and put it back in his playing, as did Peepers. One song easily shifted into another, and even after their set was nearly done, the duo barely showed any signs of fatigue.

And without fail, with each moment of applause, Hater heard him. He didn’t even really have to listen or try to find his rival’s cheers in the mix, they were just always there. And they didn’t annoy him… Why didn’t they annoy him? In fact, they did the opposite, giving him a sort of burst of energy. But applause always sort of did that to him, that’s what he told himself. And that’s all it was… right?

He didn’t have time for thinking or questioning, because the rocker part of him refused to let himself give a mediocre show. And so, the skeleton played on, putting all of his emotions into his playing. Of course, the crowd loved it, and the cycle began anew.

By the time the show was over, Hater felt tired yet energetic, both pleased with his performance and almost wishing it could’ve gone on longer.

“Well, there we go! Another great show!” he heard Peepers boast as he hopped down from his drumset, “Though of course that’s not too surprising. So, are we gonna grab something to eat before we head back to Axalis?”

“Well duh! I’m starving!” Hater replied. At least that was one good thing about his show ending, he could finally pig out on ribs and work himself into a food coma for the ride back. Quickly, he put his guitar in his case and placed it next to his bandmate’s luggage, silently telling him to put it in the ship for him before heading upstairs.

He could only sort of smell the barbecue from the stage, but now that Hater was upstairs, it was like a wall of delicious smells ramming right into him. Not even feeling annoyed to have to wait in line - the smell alone told him it would be worth it - he quickly ordered a large plate of smoked ribs and a root beer before sitting down with them.

It took all of Hater’s willpower not to just scarf them down right then and there, but he managed to hold himself back. What he couldn’t hold back was the loud “Mmm~” he let out with his first bite.

He stopped mid “Mm” though when he heard a light chuckle. “Heh, guess those are pretty good,
huh?” Opening his eyes, he immediately spotted his… rival? Roommate? He wasn’t sure what to call the little furball anymore. Even annoyance didn’t seem to fit now.

Seeing his new look again made Hater’s face heat up slightly, but at the same time he almost felt sort of calmed once he saw Wander’s face. That same obnoxiously friendly smile, those big bright eyes full of eagerness and excitement. This was definitely Wander - and in his hands was a small basket of onion rings and a bottled drink.

“O-Oh,” Hater started to say, remembering that Wander had asked a question, “Uh, yeah, they’re pretty good. Um, you look… kinda good too. Though, I never thought I’d see you wearing stuff like, well, that.”

Wander laughed again, not taking any offense. “Well thanks, Hater! Yeah, I had to change so the man at the door would let me in, but I didn’t really mind. Besides, what better way to support my friends?”

“Oh, yeah. Support.” Hater glanced away for a moment, then looked back at the furball. “Um, you wanna… sit down or whatever?”

Wander blinked, then grinned. “I was hopin’ you’d ask.” As he sat down, the skeleton briefly wondered where his Zbornak friend was - and hey, where the heck was Peepers? - but quickly decided he didn’t care.

Wander strategically placed the basket of onion rings in the middle of the table before opening his drink - which was clearly marked ‘Fud Light’. Seeing this, Hater couldn’t help but give him a curious look. “Oh, don’t worry, we’re catchin’ a bus back so I don’t have to worry about driving,” he told the skeleton with a smile, “Besides, I’m probably only havin’ one.”

“Hmph, well, if you were going to drink you could’ve at least gotten a better brand,” Hater mumbled, giving a small smirk.

“Hey now!” Wander replied, only looking slightly offended but still chuckling, “I actually like this brand!” Hater just continued to smirk, actually manage to laugh a little with him.

While there were a few moments of slightly awkward silence, the two musicians managed to keep the conversation going. Topics ranged from music and future venues, to hometown restaurants and their first few gigs, to even stuff like families and telling stories about life back in high school. Hater tried to only give short answers, but it seemed like no matter how hard he tried to do so, he would end up doing the complete opposite and talking like there was no tomorrow, without really understanding why.

Of course, Wander would do the same - though that wasn’t too surprising, Hater had known for a while that it was hard for the furball to shut up sometimes - but he was also a pretty good listener. Maybe that was why, because it never really felt like an interrogation. It just felt like a sort of normal conversation. It was casual, relaxing, nice… Part of him still made him feel like this was wrong. That he shouldn’t enjoy this, that he should find Peepers and leave already, and yet his body made no attempts to try and leave the table.

He wasn’t sure how much time had passed. Both their food and drinks were gone, and the conversation had reached a comfortable pause, with the two of them just relaxing in their seats and listening to the music playing from an old speaker in the corner.

Slowly, Wander glanced up at the ceiling, and smiled softly. “Huh, wouldja look at that?”
“Hm? Look at what?” Hater followed his gaze and let himself feel just a little impressed by what he saw. While someone couldn’t tell they were black-tinted windows rather than painted walls from the outside of the building, it was very easy to tell from the inside. And, thanks to the low lighting of the room and the few lights outside, they were able to see thousands of stars just from their table.

“It’s beautiful, huh Hater?” “Yeah…” The Star Nomad gave a small hum, and glanced back at his fellow guitarist. “And hey, thanks for letting me spend time with ya, Hater. This has been a lot of fun.”

Hater met his eyes, and felt his face began to heat up again. The lanterns hanging around the room caused the light and shadows to frame his furry face perfectly. His hair hung low just above his eyes, and he was giving Hater a half-lid smile that made the skeleton feel like he needed to run - yet he didn’t want to leave. “Uh, y-yeah…” Surprisingly, he had to agree with that.

Wander gave another small hum. “Then again, I always have fun when I’m around ya.” The flames around them flickered slightly, and the song on the speakers faded out just in time for a new one to start.

Hater smirked slightly. “Heh, yeah. I’ve noticed, though I’m still not really sure why.”

“…Huh? What do you mean?” the Star Nomad questioned, blinking in surprise as his smile slipped into a frown. Realizing what he had just said, Hater clamped his mouth shut, looking away. “Hater, why wouldn’t I have fun with ya?”

“…” Frown deepening, Wander changed positions in his chair so he could look Hater straight in the eyes. “Who says you aren’t fun?”

“… Well, most people wouldn’t exactly call the guy who yells at them pretty much every time they run into each other ‘fun’,” Hater mumbled, finally speaking, “I mean… I don’t even know what I did to make you like me, and yet… I just, don’t understand.”

“Hey…” Leaning towards him, Wander gave another soft smile, “That’s an easy question to answer.” Hater couldn’t help but look at him, feeling a small shiver go up his spine as they made eye contact, and waited for his answer.

“For one thing, it’s fun watchin’ you play, and hearin’ the music you make. You put a lot of passion into your songs, Hater, I can tell. And you’re pretty unique too, I can definitely say that!” His smile grew slightly as he continued. “Not only that, but you’re pretty interesting too! And cool, and talented and - if tonight’s proven anything - you’re a pretty good conversationalist too, if I do say so myself!”

With each word, Hater only seemed to get warmer. Wander, he… he really thought all those things, just after meeting him a few times. “I… G-geeze, is there anything else you forgot to add?” Honestly though, he didn’t really know what to say or how to feel about all that.

But that didn’t seem to matter to Wander, he just continued to smile at the skeleton as if there was nothing wrong in the universe. “Actually, there are a couple things I left out.” It was pretty hard to see in the low light but, was he blushing? “Heh, but uh, I think I already told ya them back on Tralfar 5.”

Tralfar 5? What- A jolt went through him. The dare, the kiss. “You… You can’t actually think-”

“And why not?” Wander asked innocently.

“B-Because-! Because…” Because, it just didn’t seem possible. This was weird and unfamiliar and
frightening and almost too much for the skeletal musician. Almost…

“Hater,” a gentle voice said, almost soft enough to be drowned out by the music, “If, if I have to be honest with ya… When you’re up on that stage, well…” Wander was blushing deeper now, but still smiling, not willing to let it fall for anything, “You’re not just attractive… You’re amazin’.”

For a moment, Hater could only stare. This guy - this, this annoyingly happy, positive, weird hairy spoon! - he thought all of this about him after only knowing him for a few weeks. The more negative side of him believed that it was just him being nice, but another part of him couldn’t deny how genuine these words sounded. He couldn’t deny that it didn’t just seem like pointless flattery. It felt real, and it felt good. Really good.

“Wander…” His hand resting on the table flinched only slightly. When had they gotten this close to each other? How did this even happen?

“Yeah Hater?” Wander asked quietly, tilting his head slightly.

Hater had no words. He had no thoughts. For a moment, as he moved even closer to the furry guitarist and closed his eyes tightly, he acted only on instinct. Their lips met, and loud guitar chord buzzed through his skull, making his horns twitched slightly.

Slowly, Wander returned the kiss, nearly standing up just so he could get closer. Hater deepened the kiss as well, almost getting drunk off the pleasure he was getting. And, when they finally had to break it in order to breathe, it took a few moments for Hater to realize what had just happened. But once he did, his face was practically glowing like a nuclear reactor as he averted his gaze from Wander.

“I, heh, w-wow,” was all he could hear him say.

“Uh,” Hater cleared his throat, still keeping his eyes glued to the floor, “Sorry about… that.”

“Oh, no it’s fine! In fact…” Hater sensed that he was probably grinning now, “That was… great~” When he didn’t receive a reply - or really any sort of reaction - Wander leaned down to try and see Hater’s face. His face fell slightly. “Hey… If ya didn’t like it, we don’t have to do it again…”

For a few seconds, it seemed as if Hater wanted just that, and with a heavy heart Wander started to leave the table. But then, just barely understandable alongside the music in the background, he heard it.

“I didn’t… hate it.” He glanced back at the skeleton. “And, maybe, it wouldn’t be so bad to, to do that again.”

The furball stared for a moment, and then smiled. “No, not bad at all.”

Hater finally met his eyes and, while there was a bit of uncertainty in his eyes, he certainly didn’t look unhappy. Maybe confused and nervous, but not unhappy.

Wander held out his hand. “Come on, we should probably try to find the others. They’re probably wondering where we are.”

“Oh, yeah. Right.” Hesitantly, he took the smaller man’s hand, squeezing it slightly. Again, this was almost completely unfamiliar to him, but that didn’t necessarily translate into horrible or awful. Hater felt Wander squeeze back before leading them towards the staircase.

There were plenty of thoughts, questions and worries now bouncing around in his head, and while
they would all most likely be in the back of his mind for a while, it seemed like only one of them managed to make it to the front:

Maybe some distractions were good things.
“Okay, we’ll continue with our top twenty countdown later. But for now, I think it’s time we speak to our guest. Here in the station we have the six armed Master of Ceremonies himself, Harec Tintissi! How ya doin’, Harec?”

“Not too bad - though when you’re livin’ it up backstage at rock concerts, you can’t really go wrong!

“True that! Now, I think it’s safe to say that unless our listeners have been hiding in a crater for the past decade or so, they know all about the inter-galactic Battle of the Bands competition, right?!”

“Heh, if I’ve been doing my job right. The battle’s getting more and more popular each year, Tom, and this year’s are biggest one yet!”

“And the talent’s not too bad either from what I’ve heard. Think I could get a couple demo cds to play on the radio, Harec?”

“Nah, most of these bands are far from making cds - though I hope you like whoever does win, ‘cuz their songs are gonna be playing nonstop!”

“And to think I just got The Party Maker’s last hit out of my head. But I still can’t believe that this year’s competition is already a third of the way over!”

“Yeah, you don’t want the public forgetting about you. You wanna have a whole army of fans cheering for you during the Battle.”

“Heh, well, it’s not necessary, but it might as well be! Plus it gets the judges’ attention pretty damn quickly too. But yeah, with the summer a third of the way over, it’s only uphill from here. And besides, this is usually when bands start doing big stunts - which can range from amazing to hilarious - or adjusting their image - again, amazing or hilarious - a bit to try and make a name for themselves before the final battle. In other words... this is when things start to get really interesting~”

“... I think I might’ve missed something here.”

“Hm? What do you mean, eyeball?” Sylvia asked him, raising an eyebrow.

“Well, I mean - Just look at them!” It was their turn to help with dishes - though it wasn’t too hard of
a chore so even Hater didn’t really complain about it - and from their position at the sink, they had a perfect view of Wander and Hater.

“...Yeahhh, what about it?” Hater was playing a game on his portable system (which he spent nearly half of their last gig’s paycheck on getting both the system and a couple of games, but as long as he was no longer bored, he considered it worth it) and Wander was watching him play. What was so weird about that?

“Isn’t it just a bit strange that Hater doesn’t seem to mind Wander being so close?”

“He’s probably just gotten used to being around him.” The Zbornak gave a small smirk. “And he’s probably figured out that when it comes to Wander’s friendliness and friendship, resistance is futile.”

“Ha ha,” Peepers said dryly, “Could you please be serious here?”

“I am being serious! I honestly don’t see anything weird or off between them! Now come on, let’s just finish these up so we can join them and hang out a bit before we have to practice.”

The Watchdog gave a small sigh, but did nothing more as he continued to scrub the plate he was holding. Maybe she didn’t notice anything, but Peepers certainly did. Even when they were still on Lagantu when, for a fraction of a second, it looked like Wander and Hater were holding hands as they walked downstairs. It had happened and then ended so fast that Peepers still wasn’t a hundred percent sure he saw it correctly. After all, the building was pretty dark.

Good thing that wasn’t the only piece of evidence the drummer had.

Ever since that night, there had just been small changes. When Wander sat down next to the skeleton, either on the couch or at the table, his bandmate would look unsure for just a moment before relaxing. No anger, no glares, nothing!

There were also times when Peepers had caught them looking at each other. ...Okay, maybe that didn’t sound bad, but just - it was the way they looked at each other! They would stare when they other wasn’t looking. The one time Peepers pointed this out to Hater, the skeleton’s cheeks had turned a pale green before he told him to shut up and then walked away. Hater, the big, scary looking, heavy metal artist had actually blushed! And, when they did end up catching each other’s gaze, Wander would usually smile and Hater would sort of shyly look away.

But the thing that caught the Watchdog’s attention the most - and this was a big one - was when one of them was just sort of strumming along on their guitar (or occasionally banjo, in Wander’s case), the other would listen. Even if they were doing something else, half their attention would be on the other’s music. Honestly, Peepers wasn’t sure which was more surprising: The fact that Hater would allow Wander to listen in on his practice, or that Hater actually seemed like he wanted to listen to Wander’s!

‘What happened that night at the Crashing Comet?’ he asked himself. What had caused such a drastic change?! And, probably the most important question of all, would these changes lead to something bigger - and whether or not this ‘bigger’ thing was good or bad, he had no idea.

“PEEPERS!” The Watchdog let out a small yelp and nearly dropped the plate he was holding. “Are you guys done in there yet?! You’ve been washing dishes for what feels like forever, it’s not that hard!”

“Do you guys need any help?” Wander added, making Peepers frown as he was once again reminded of his predicament.
“Nah, Eyesore’s just slow.” Taking the dish with her tail, Sylvia quickly dried it off and then sat it on the top of the small pile of plates. “Besides, we’re done.”

“Finally!” Hater then shut off his game and stood up, stretching slightly. “Come on, Peepers,” he directed as he headed towards his room. Wander didn’t seem too bothered by this, since he and Sylvia were planning on doing a bit of practicing too.

“I’m coming…” Hoping down from the chair he was standing on, he held back a sigh. If he was actually going to take a risk and ask Hater what had happened, he was going to have to wait until later. While his attitude around Wander had changed, Hater’s attitude about practicing definitely hadn’t. “So, did you think of any more lyrics for the song-?”

His bandmate turned his head sharply and glared, making the Watchdog laugh nervously. “Hehe, j-just checking!”

“Huh? Wait, so you guys aren’t traveling together?” Both Dracor and Denmurra looked at them in surprise. “But I would’ve thought…” the dragon started to say.

“Nah,” Wander replied with a semi-disappointed smile, “As it turns out, Syl and I couldn’t get a show at Lagantu, but we were able to get one on Proenus. Unfortunately, it’s the same day Hater and Peepers have a show on Cincoalala.”

“Yeah, and those planets are at least five hours away from each other,” Sylvia added, glancing up from her phone, “So we couldn’t even book it to Bonehead and Eyesore’s show if we wanted to - unless the shuttle buses here just happen to go faster than lightspeed.”

“Judging by how long it’s taken us just to get across the galaxy, I doubt it,” Demurra answered, looking a bit disappointed herself since this meant having to choose between shows, “But hey, there’s always drinks afterwards. Most of the moons around that system are dry ones, but I’m pretty sure there’s at least one that’ll have a pretty decent bar to hang out at.”

“Yeah,” Wander nodded, his smile brightening a bit, “There’s always that.”

“And it may be the last chance we get to do something like that for a while,” Sylvia added, “You guys said that this is when it’s important to do as plenty of shows as possible, right?”

“Yes,” the blonde replied, her boyfriend nodding along with her, “You don’t want to forget about you, after all. You have to try and build up as much hype as possible.”

“Hype, huh?” The Zbornak leaned back in her chair slightly, “Got any ideas on how to do that?”

She gave her a sweet smile. “Of course.” She was a professional, after all. “How many do you want to hear?”

Before either of them could answer, the door opened, and Wander sat up in his seat. “Hey guys!” he grinned, waving at them from the kitchen.

Hater just gave a small grunt in reply, kicking the door closed once he was sure Peepers was inside. “You know, I still don’t know why we had to be the ones to get the food. We have more important things to do than run errands!”

Demurra gave him a small, slightly amused look. “Hey, you guys were the ones who wanted Chinese food tonight. You know they don’t deliver.”
“Yeah, and you don’t let anyone besides Peepers drive your ship,” Dracor added, not looking quite as amused as his girlfriend.

“Which you really should,” Sylvia finished dryly, “Because it would make our lives a heck of a lot better.”

“Hmph.” Yeah right, like he would trust any of them with his ship. Without another word, both he and Peepers sat the bags of food on the table while the others started getting out plates and silverware.

“Say Hater,” Wander started to say, looking as cheerful as ever, “We were talkin’, and I think we might’ve figured out a solution to what we can do this Saturday. Though, we still won’t be able to see each other’s shows - which is a bit of a shame, but…” Hater’s eyes widened slightly when the Star Nomad’s voice dropped, giving him a small smirk, “I guess I can always give you a private concert later.” His voice then quickly went back to his normal, cheerful tone. “Oh! And maybe we could even play together! Haven’t done that in a while!”

“… We just played together a week ago,” Hater mumbled, giving him a flat look despite the slight green still on his face, “Or did you just completely forget playing in the street?” Then again, he probably did it so much all his impromptu street performances probably just ran together.

“Well of course I remember! But it certainly feels like forever ago!”

While Hater just rolled his eyes, Peepers just looked at them in shock. Where was the yelling and the threatening?! Granted he didn’t exactly enjoy hearing his bandmate yell and scream and get in a bad mood that was sure to last most of the day (if he was lucky), but it was certainly more normal than what he had just seen! And, playing together in the street? When had that happened?!

Eye narrowed, Peepers went back to grabbing silverware. Yes, he was definitely going to have to get to the bottom of this!

Supper continued normally with casual conversation and a couple small arguments over the condiments and who should get the last egg roll, but thankfully those didn’t last too long. But all the while, Peepers kept glancing over at his bandmate and the furry little weirdo that he still felt like he didn’t know a whole lot about. In fact, other than knowing that he played a few instruments, was in a band and was impossibly friendly to pretty much every breathing thing in the universe, the Watchdog knew nothing about him!

‘Well, I should try to change that,’ he told himself as he picked at his food, ‘But first… I need to find out what he did on Lagantu…’ Well, besides wear a change of clothes - which he thought was a welcomed sight since that tie dyed tee of his definitely looked like it could use a washing, but otherwise he deemed it unimportant.

Once the meal ended, Peepers casually excused himself from the table, and scurried down the hall. And, once he was sure that no one was watching, he walked past his and Hater’s room and headed right towards Wander’s room. Maybe it was in bad taste to go sneaking through someone’s stuff, but he deemed it less dangerous than confronting Hater and more simple than trying to ask Wander what happened so, snooping it was then.

Poking his head inside, his eye darted around the room. ...Surprisingly, it almost looked like no one was even living there. The bed had been neatly made, and there was no dirty clothes in sight. Heck, there wasn’t even a luggage bag or a guitar case! Really the only evidence of anyone staying in the room was the green cellphone with multiple phone charms sitting on the bedside table.
‘Aha! Perfect!’ Carefully and quietly shutting the door behind him, Peepers scurried across the room and snatched up the phone. Flipping it open, he decided to search through pictures first, see if there was any photographic evidence of whatever the little furball was doing with his skeletal bandmate behind closed doors.

**Showing: 1,563 photos for Collection One.**

“Over a thousand?!?” Seriously?! How did the guy not run out of memory? Well, it didn’t matter. He’d search through every single one if he had to!

...Though, thankfully, it didn’t come to that. After about five minutes of scrolling through pictures varying from people and famous landmarks to unisquirrels and interesting looking road signs, it was obvious there wasn’t anything of value there. Searching through his recent texts didn’t provide much information either. Sure he had sent a few texts to Hater, but nothing revealing, just the usual “Hi, how are you doing, what do you want for lunch/supper?”.

Closing the phone and setting it back in its place, Peepers continued his search, still looking determined to find something. But where else could he- aha! The closet! Zipping back across the room, the eyeball opened the closet door and grinned. Perfect! Just what he was looking for!

Inside was Wander’s suitcase, unzipped and wide open, along with a couple guitar cases and one of his speakers, though he left those alone for now. Right now, it seemed like the suitcase was the best bet.

“Let’s see…” He dug through the items inside it, trying to be semi-neat but still quick, “Beads, socks, more socks, shirts, hairbrush, more socks-!” In no time at all, he had completely emptied out the bag, and had a grand total of zero new clues. The Watchdog facepalmed.

“...Maybe I am just being paranoid,” he told himself as he started repacking Wander’s things, “I mean… Yes it was a pretty drastic change but, this wouldn’t be the first time Hater changed his mind about something. Still… How did he go from absolutely hating the guy, to almost looking like he actually wants to be around him?” Or, maybe it wasn’t a matter of going from hatred to like. Maybe it was just Hater trying to be neutral around him so that Wander would provide less of a distraction. But then… what was the blushing? “I mean, it’s not as if Hater-!”

His eye widened. Wait… What if-? He slapped a hand over his mouth to hold in his laughter. Okay, NOW he was being ridiculous. “I mean, come on Peepers! Don’t be a fool! In what crazy universe could he actually fall in love with Wander?!?” He snickered to himself some more. No, definitely not the reason.

With a small sigh, he started to close the lid to the suitcase. “Well… I guess as long as it doesn’t distract him from the competition-” which it certainly didn’t look like it was, given the three hour rehearsal they had earlier that day- “and it’s not too weird… I guess it doesn’t really matter.” Heck, it was probably a good thing. It would certainly cut down on all of Hater’s yelling, and lessen the chance of them getting kicked out.

“Well, you know what they say,” he said as he closed the lid, “Don’t look a gift Nibponian in the-” He froze when he saw the top pocket of the suitcase zipped open. And, just barely poking out enough for Peepers to notice, was an orange notebook.

“...” Slowly, he pulled the rest of it out, and looked at it. Could it be a songbook? Or, maybe it was a journal. A travel diary… One that could possibly explain what happened at the Crashing Comet. Eye wide, Peepers paused for only a moment before he started to slowly open the notebook.
“Whatcha’ got there, Peepers?”

“GAH!” The Watchdog quickly tossed the notebook back onto the suitcase as he turned and saw the owner of said notebook looking right at him. “Nothing! I, I was just, uh-!”

“Well gee, Peepers,” Wander started to say, giving the eyeball an amused smile, “If you wanted to look up the lyrics to one of our songs, you could’a just asked.”

Peepers blinked. Then again, he’d never seen Wander angry before, so why would this time be any different? “Uh, yes well, I think I’m fine, thank you.”

“You sure?” Wander asked, looking at him curiously.

“Yes. I, uh, already found the song I was looking for. So, with that done I’ll just be on my way!”

The furball looked at him for a bit longer, and then smiled. “Well alright-y then! And if you need anything else, just give a holler, alright? Though, not right now since I’m kinda wanting to get changed.”

“Oh. Right, of course.” Giving him a small nod, Peepers quickly walked around him and headed for the door, only staying long enough to give a quick reply when he heard Wander say goodbye to him. ‘Well, that could’ve gone worse,’ he thought to himself as he left the room.

Of course, the universe just loved proving him wrong. No sooner had he entered the hallway, he ended up running into a blue wall. “What the-?! Who-?” Looking up, his eye widened once more, a sheepish smile moving onto his face. “Oh… Uh, heeey Sylvia, hehe.”

For a moment, Sylvia said nothing. She just looked at him with her eyes half-lidded and her arms crossed. “You know… I like you, Cyclops, but I hope you know that doesn’t mean I’m not going to kick your butt for doing dumb grop like harassing my buddy.”

“I’m not harassing anyone!” Peepers quickly argued, “I, I was just-”

“Just sneaking around in his room?”

“... Alright, I’ll admit it. That does sound pretty bad. But, I did have a good reason for it!”

“Does that reason make more sense than just asking them what happened or what’s going on between them?”

“Hey, do you really want to have that conversation with Hater?”

“Not particularly. But hey, you’re the one who wants answers, Eyesore.”

“I know!” He sighed, looking down at the floor and feeling frustrated - as well as kind of foolish, “I know…”

There was a small moment of silence, and Peepers started to walking away from her when he felt something wrap around his waist and lift him off the ground. “Huh?” he looked down at himself, “What-” Oh, right. Tail.

“Look,” Sylvia said as she lifted him up, bring him to eye level with her, “I get that a part of this is just looking out for Hater, while another part is just trying to figure out and get used to… to whatever’s going on between them. You don’t think I feel the same way? I’d figure out of all the things you know about me, you’d at least know that.”
He stared at her for a moment. “So, you think all of this is weird too?”

“Of course I do. I mean, what makes a guy go from hating someone to almost being friends with them?” Though she had a few ideas…

“Exactly!” Peepers exclaimed, “That’s what I thought.”

“And don’t think I’m not keeping an eye on Bonehead. I can guarantee you that one wrong move will get him an invitation to meet the Lady Haymaker and the Duchess of Wailing.” The Watchdog chuckled slightly, only half nervously. Hopefully he wouldn’t have to meet them… “But yeah, I’d say that as long as those two are enjoying themselves and nothing too bad comes out of this, I’d say just leave em’ be.”

“…Yeah,” he nodded. After all, that did seem like the best option. “Great. So, with that out of the way…” Sylvia smirked slightly as she pulled a small game system out of her jacket pocket. “I just so happened to convince a certain skeleton to let me borrow his game. And, since I figured you’d want to actually play for a change instead of listen to him yell at the screen…”

Peepers smirked back at her. “Well, I guess I could play for a couple games.”

“I thought you might say that, Eyeball.” A light smirk still on her face, Sylvia moved him from her tail to her arms as she took them down the hall. And, as his face heated up slightly, Peepers was thankful she couldn’t see it. He’d had enough embarrassing moments tonight, thank you very much.

As the sun started to set over Axalis, clouds began rolling in. Within minutes, thunder could be heard as rain pelted the apartment windows, distorting the city lights and occasional lightning flash that could be seen through it. Though surprisingly, even though it made it hard to concentrate on anything, Hater didn’t really mind.

“Tc’ch, what a joke,” he mumbled, eyes glued to the laptop screen as he watched a random show on GalacticFlix, “No, wait, if it was a joke then it would actually be funny.”

“Well, maybe they’re leading up to an even funnier joke.” Sitting up slightly, Hater looked up at the doorway. Even in the low lighting, he could still see that familiar smile shining through the darkness. …It was sort of odd how that smile both calmed him and freaked him out. “Mind if I come in?”

“Oh, y-yeah, sure,” he nodded, taking off the headphones.

Giving a small nod of thanks, Wander closed the door behind him and walked across the room. Hater quickly noticed that he was just wearing socks and a forest green sweater, though his hat was still resting on his head. “How come you changed? You cold or something?”

“Not really,” Wander shrugged as he climbed up onto the bed, “But it’s always nice to kinda bundle up when the weather changes, ’specially when it gets chilly or rainy.”

“Hmmh, yeah well, hopefully it won’t change back anytime soon,” Hater mumbled, pausing the video and setting Peepers’ laptop to the side.

“I take it you like thunderstorms?”

“Better than humidity.”

The Star Nomad gave a small laugh. “Yeah, plus it sorta makes sense that you’d like em.”
Hater raised an eyebrow. “And just what is that supposed to mean?”

“Well, you can be just as loud as a storm,” he smiled playfully. “Specially when you got your speakers. And you can both light up the sky.”

Hater just rolled his eyes, not looking as amused. “Haha, very funny.”

“Heh… Though, I have to say, they are sorta calming.”

“...Yeah...” There was a quick flash of sharp, white lightning, followed by a short roll of thunder.

“Didn’t you say you didn’t get many storms back home?” he heard Wander asked. After a moment, Hater nodded. “Well then, guess that’s another reason to like ‘em. I mean, you might as well enjoy them when you can, right?”

Silence fell between them as more rain fell. More thunder could be heard in the distance, though it looked like the lightning had stopped for now. “...Everything alright, Hater?”

“Huh, wha?” The skeleton flinched slightly, “Of, of course everything’s fine! Why wouldn’t it be?! ...What kind of stupid question is that...”

Wander just gave a shrug. “Just curious, is all. You seem kinda quiet, and I wanted to make sure…”

“...Wander?” Hater didn’t even have to look at the furry guitarist to know he now had his full attention, “That… that ‘thing’ that, happened between us? Have you… You haven’t, told anyone about it, have you?”

Rather than a look of offense, a look of understanding crossed the Star Nomad’s features. “Now Hater, I’m not sure who you think I am, but I assure you I’m not the type to just kiss and tell,” he joked. When Hater didn’t reply, or even give him an annoyed look, he added, “But no, I haven’t told anyone.” Even if it was just pulling his hand away once they were in front of the others, Wander could take a hint.

“Good…” The skeleton winced after a moment. He hadn’t said that word in a harsh tone but, it certainly felt like he did. Still, he didn’t try to take it back. Not knowing what else to do, Hater just rubbed his arm, staring at the floor and letting his hood hide his eyes.

That kiss… That dumb, weird, confusing, shocking, great kiss! Hater still couldn’t believe he’d let himself get so caught up in it! He was lucky Wander hadn’t turned the whole thing into one big joke! ...No, Wander wouldn’t do that. The guy was too nice for his own good. Still… Once they’d made it downstairs, where they would be seen by people they knew, Hater had quickly came to his senses, and tried to act casual while keeping his distance from the furball, as if he hadn’t been kissing him just a few minutes ago. That night, he promised himself to try and distance himself from Wander. ‘T’ch, good job with that,’ he told himself. Obviously that plan hadn’t exactly worked out since they were currently sitting on the same bed in the same room. And even now, he was running through the kiss in his mind again, probably for the hundredth time, at least. ‘But it was just a one time thing,’ he thought, ‘Just a one time thing...’

“...Say, Hater?”

“...” He tilted his head slightly and glanced over at him. “What?”

“Are you done with your tv show? Cause, I know a few songs that I can look up online that might fit the weather. Good rainy weather songs. And hey, nothing wrong with a playlist to fit the mood and make time pass - and maybe it’ll give ya a bit of inspiration too...”
“Wait… Are you being serious right now?” Hater asked, now fully looking at him in disbelief. THAT’S where he decided to take the conversation, after what Hater had just said? Just… completely drop the subject? And the little furball didn’t even look remotely rejected! Maybe he was just in denial or something...

“Yeah,” Wander smiled, “It’s got some lines about rainy days and everything. So… Would that be alright?”

“I… I guess.” What else could he say? What else could he do but grab the laptop and hand it to him?

“Thanks.” Taking out the headphones so they could both listen, Wander quickly went to ViewTube to search for it. “Sure was nice of Peepers to share his laptop with ya.”

Hater smirked slightly at that. “Yeah, ‘sharing’.” Well, if the Watchdog didn’t want to ‘share’, then he would’ve changed his password to something that wasn’t so easy to guess.

It didn’t take long for a song to start playing from the laptop’s small speakers. A simple yet enjoyable guitar melody and beat began the song, along with some other instrument Hater couldn’t quite place. Soon enough, the artist started singing.

“The rain is falling through the mist
Of sorrow that surrounded me.
The sun could never thaw away
The the bliss that lays around me.

Let it rain, let it rain,
Let your love rain down on me.
Let it rain, let it rain,
Let it rain, rain, rain.”

That time, Hater couldn’t help but give him a flat look. “...Okay I know you said you had some good ‘rainy day’ songs, but this one’s just a little too on the nose, don’t you think?”

Wander just laughed. “Well, maybe so! But it’s still fun to listen to, don’t you think?”

The skeleton smiled slightly. “Well… I can tell it’s something you’d listen to.”

“Her life was like a desert flower
Burning in the sun.
Until I found the way to love,
It's harder said than done.

Let it rain, let it rain,
Let your love rain down on me.
Let it rain, let it rain,
Let it rain, rain, rain.”

“Heh, yeah! And I wouldn’t mind playin’ it too!” His slim, furry fingers had already started to finger out some of the notes, trying to figure out how he would play the melody on his own guitar.

“Just don’t be dumb enough to play it during an actual rainstorm. That is unless you WANT to ruin your guitar and equipment.”

“Nah, our close call last time was enough for me. Although… maybe if we can find one of those gazebos big enough to play in, or maybe get a small tent to put up over us, we might just pull it off
one day! You never know!”

“Hmph, well, good luck with that. Who would even come to a concert in the rain?”

He shrugged again. “Who knows, but I bet they’d be interesting to meet.

“Now I know the secret;
There is nothing that I lack.
If I give my love to you,
You’ll surely give it back.

Let it rain, let it rain,
Let your love rain down on me.
Let it rain, let it rain,
Let it rain, rain, rain.”

After a couple admittedly pretty cool guitar riffs, the song finally started to fade out and Hater took the laptop back. “Okay, I’m picking the next one.” he said bluntly.

“Ooh, do you know some good rainy weather songs too, Hater?” Wander asked as he moved to the head of the bed where Hater was sitting.

“No, but I know some good songs,” he retorted. While it definitely wasn’t that bad, he needed some heavier, actual rock sounding music to listen to. As he searched through various videos, he noticed Wander sitting beside him but, at the same time, not beside him.

In fact, judging by the way Wander had to lean over just to see the screen, he was a good foot or so away from the skeleton. And yet, it didn’t look like the furball minded at all, just as long as he was still somewhat close to Hater.

“...” Keeping one hand on the laptop to keep it from bouncing off - Glorn knows Peepers would never shut up about it if his screen got cracked - Hater scooted towards his fellow guitarist. And while Wander didn’t say anything, he did sort of lean on him, and even giving him a small smile of appreciation when the two caught each other’s glance. As for Hater, he just gave a small nod before turning all his attention back towards the computer screen.

Thunder and rain continued on outside, but over the sounds of the rocking guitars and pounding drums of AC/DC, they were barely noticeable.

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The last few chords sang out of the speakers, and the audience applauded, cheering for more.
“Thanks everyone!” Wander shouted, waving happily while Sylvia just smiled behind him, “You’ve been a great audience, you really have! Thanks for coming! Goodnight everyone!”

The curtains closed, and Wander met Sylvia for their usual post-show hug. “That was great! I don’t think I’ve ever heard an audience that loud before!”

Sylvia chuckled. Honestly, she didn’t think their audience had been any softer or louder than usual but, she decided to just let him have his fun. “Yeah bud, they sure did. Nice show tonight.”

“Thanks Syl, and same to you!” Letting go over her, he started to help pack up their things, trying to go as fast as he could without tripping over wires or dropping anything. After all, he didn’t have time for dilly dallying tonight.
“Need a hand with that?” a deep voiced asked as a pair of clawed hands helped him lift up an amp.

“Oh! Thanks Drake!”

“No problem,” the dragon nodded, holding his end of the amp up with ease. While he did that, Demurra helped Sylvia with her drums.

“I don’t know how since, frankly you guys started off pretty great to begin with,” the blonde started to say, “But I swear you guys just get better and better each time we go to one of your shows. Plus listening to your songs gives Drake and I a chance to practice our dance moves.”

“Heh, thanks Dem,” Sylvia nodded, “Guess the tips you’ve been given us have really helped.”

“Oh, they were just a few small things,” Demurra shrugged, “You and Wander are the ones who are practicing and putting actual work into improving, so don’t sell yourselves short!”

The Zbornak chuckled again. “Okay okay, we won’t.” With a small grunt, she lifted up the base drum and put it in its case. “So, did you guys find a meeting place for everyone?”

“Yep, and I already texted the Harbingers of Doom telling them about it,” she nodded, “So they should meet us there as soon as they’re done with their show. It’s about a twenty minute drive - thirty five minutes by bus - so… Not too far, at least. Although, I wonder if we can convince Hater to just take us all home in the morning, otherwise we’d only be able to stay there for an hour so.”

“Well, I’m sure we can at least convince Peepers,” Sylvia told her, “And once we do that, it should be pretty easy for him to convince ‘im. Although, I’m not sure how either of them would feel about us cramming into their ship to try and sleep in it so, I hope you and Drake don’t mind sleepin’ under the stars.”

The blonde smiled as she briefly thought back to a certain night in one of the hedge mazes back in one of the parks on their home planet. “Well, we’ve done it before so, I think we’ll manage.”

“Alright-y!” Wander said suddenly, getting their attention as he dusted off his hands, “Got all this stuff packed! What about you guys?”

“Just finishing up!” Sylvia told him, quickly closing the last drum case, “So, ready to go when you-”

“Oh my gosh oh my gosh oh my GOSH! Is that, *gasp* IT IS!” Even Wander looked surprised at the outburst, but he became even more surprised when he turned around and ran right into somebody.

“Oh, golly I’m sorry!” he quickly apologized, “I didn’t see-”

“Oh it’s fine, no harm done!” the girl said, smiling brightly and not even looking bothered by it, “Really I’m just so glad I get to meet you, Wander!” The sort of roundish girl had dark brownish-greyish skin and forest green hair with plastic roses braided into it, and she was wearing a light green and pink flowery dress to match along with bright blue socks and hiking boots.

“Oh! Well, I’m glad I get to meet you too, ma’am,” Wander smiled, tipping his hat at the young lady, “Is this the first time you’ve been to one of our shows?”

“Yes! Oh, I hope it wasn’t too obvious!”

“Oh no, not at all!”
“Gosh, I’ve wanted to go to one of your shows since I first heard you!” she told him, clasping her hands together, “And then I saw videos of your concert on the moon, and on Axalis, and at the stadium and, and now I’m finally here meeting you! I love all your songs! Just, you’re such a great musician!”

“D’aww, thanks!” Wander smiled, giving the fan an appreciative nod, “But you know, I wouldn’t sound nearly as good without my best pal Sylvia playin’ with me, and she’s a really great musician!” He quickly pointed his bandmate out to her, who quickly forced a smile and waved at the fan.

“Oh. Right, hey there,” the fan replied, giving a small nod before turning back to Wander, “So, how do you come up with all those great-

“Um, my dear? I believe it is time for us to leave,” a new voice with a thick French accent interrupted, “I don’t think the stage management will be distracted for too much longer.”

“Aww, but I just started talking to him!” The thin, tall man - who despite having white hair and a moustache looked about the same age as she was - gave her a sympathetic pat on the shoulder.

“Aw, hey,” Wander said, giving her a small, “I’m sure we’ll see each other again at another sho-”

“Oh! Do you know where you’re playing next? Just say the word and I’m there!”

“Well, I’m afraid we don’t know where our next show will be, but I’m sure they’ll advertise us once they hire us,” he said as he gave her a hopeful smile, “So yeah, I’m sure ya’ll will see another one of our shows soon.”

“Oh…” She looked a bit disappointed that she had to leave, but still returned the smile, “Okay…”

Sylvia rolled her eyes slightly while Drake and Demurra shared a knowing look. Finally, after a quick goodbye, the couple left. “Well she was certainly nice!” Wander commented, “And it’s always nice to meet a fan!”

“Yeah, sure, nice,” Sylvia mumbled as she started picking up her luggage, “Now let’s get going before we miss our bus.”

“Ooh! Do you know where you’re playing next? Just say the word and I’m there!”

“Yes… Although, your voice is music to me~ And I cannot think of any song that is better, Janet~”

“Ooh you!”

Sylvia rolled her eyes slightly while Drake and Demurra shared a knowing look. Finally, after a quick goodbye, the couple left. “Well she was certainly nice!” Wander commented, “And it’s always nice to meet a fan!”

“Yeah, sure, nice,” Sylvia mumbled as she started picking up her luggage, “Now let’s get going before we miss our bus.”

“Ooh! Do you know where you’re playing next? Just say the word and I’m there!”

But as soon as she had set down her drums on the sidewalk, Sylvia’s phone chimed. “Huh?”

“Oh, is that Peepers?” Wander asked, perching himself up on Sylvia’s shoulder to try and see what the text had to say.

She flipped open her phone, and selected the message, quickly reading it. “…No, but… Hey, you guys don’t mind if another person meets us there, right?”

“Doesn’t matter to me,” Demurra replied while Dracor shrugged.

“Yeah, the more the merrier!” Wander added.
“Heh, yeah, with him around, definitely. Alright, where’d you say this bar was at, Dem?”

“Okay, SERIOUSLY Peepers! I would think you’d be smart enough to at least try to follow directions!”

“For the last time, it is NOT. ME! I’m just doing what your GPS told me to do!” Why did it feel like they were just going around in circles? (Both metaphorically and literally considering he was pretty sure he’d seen that set of stars that was sort of in the shape of a two headed dolphin three times now).

Hater gave an exasperated sigh. “Look Peepers, either pull over somewhere and let me drive, or get it together! And speed up while you’re at it, we’re going to be late!”

“First off, I’m not speeding unless you promise that you’ll be the one to pay for the ticket and two, what’s the big deal if we are? We’re just meeting people for drinks.”

“I, well, it’s just in bad taste to be late when you’re meeting people! Besides, if we don’t get there soon they might leave without us.”

“…Guess you really want to hang out with them,” Peepers mumbled, since he figured Hater wouldn’t care whether or not they left without them since he’d still get his drinks either way.

Hater’s eyes widened slightly as he sat up in his seat. “I - O-Of course I don’t! I mean, I guess hanging out with them wouldn’t be that bad but, but I don’t NEED to hang out with hi- THEM! ’S not like I really want to or anything…”

“…” The Watchdog gave a small sigh. “You know, it’s not… that weird if you do. Besides, Ember did say she wanted you to maybe make some friends on this tri-”

“They aren’t my friends,” Hater interrupted, giving a stern look, “They’re just, just fellow musicians and temporary roommates, that’s all!”

“Right… Sure they are…”

“Oh, and what is that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing…” Peepers turned his head slightly, looking at the skeleton with the corner of his eye, “But like I said… If they were, I’d be okay with it. You know, just as long as they don’t distract you from the competition or anything.”

“Hmph, yeah right, as if!” There was a few moments of slightly awkward silence, but thankfully they were cut short by the digital voice of the GPS.

“*Take a sharp right, now!*”

Peepers did as he was told, and sure enough he could see a small moon in the distance with a single building on it. “See, now was that so hard?” It took all he could not to just snap right then and there.

Though, by the time they reached the lunar tavern - and the promise of alcohol - Peepers had calmed down a bit. Really, the place didn’t look too bad. A bit plain looking and small, but the inside was well lit with energizing colors of purple and blue on the walls. Music was playing too, songs that were sure to keep the customers in a good mood.

“Well, let’s get going then,” Hater said as he opened the passenger-side door.
“Right behind you, Hater,” Peepers mumbled, slipping off his seatbelt and hopping out of the car. But as the duo headed towards the building, the Watchdog couldn’t help but stop and stare at the ship that had caught his eye. “Whoa…”

“Hm?” Hater looked over his shoulder, and then followed his drummer’s gaze, though he wasn’t as impressed. “Okay, who the hell brings a limo to a bar? Don’t those things come with mini fridges or whatever?” Besides, with the purple and pink paint job, it was pretty tacky looking. Definitely not impressive.

Peepers shrugged. “Probably just to get people to notice, or to show the bartender that he’s got the cash to stay as long as he wants…” His eye widened slightly. “Or maybe…”

“What?” Hater looked at him, raising an eyebrow, “Maybe what?”

“Maybe… Maybe it’s a celebrity, or even better, a music producer! Glorn knows they’ve got plenty of money to flash, and if it’s the latter, then we just got ourselves a pretty good opportunity here.”

Hater was starting to get it now. “That’s right…” If there was a music producer in there, a big player in the business, then they could possibly get more publicity than ever before! Heck, even if it was just some celebrity, they would no doubt spread the word if they liked what they saw and heard.

Taking a moment to straighten out his stage clothes a bit, Hater continued walking towards the bar and opened the door wide. Immediately, he started to look around for anyone who looked like they were apart of the business. Of course, once he spotted one certain person - one that he hoped he’d never have to see again - the skeleton’s entire demeanor dropped. “You’ve gotta be kidding me…”

“What? Who is it?” Peepers asked, squeezing past his bandmate and entering the bar, “Where-?!” It didn’t take long for him to spot them either, and his eye narrowed.

Right across the bar, while Demurra and Dracor sat at another table talking and Wander was up by the jukebox dancing along to some techno song, there sat Sylvia with the infamous shark-man glam rocker himself, both of them smiling and laughing.

“Awesome…” How ironic. His name was the exact opposite of what they considered this situation to be.

Chapter End Notes

The song used was "Let It Rain" by Eric Clapton
-and so at that point we pretty much had to bail, buuut all in all it was a pretty good night.”

Sylvia snorted. “So, do all the parties you go to end like that?”

“Eh, not all of them,” the shark-man replied, taking a small sip of his drink, “But some can get pretty crazy. But of course if I was hosting it, the cops never would’ve stopped by and we still would’ve had a loud, rockin’, awesome time. All of the craziness, but none of the morning regrets or fines to pay. ...And probably a lot less melted cheese all over the walls.”

The two of them laughed. “Geez, if you can make that a guarantee, I just might think about coming to your next big shindig.”

“Only a ‘think about it’?” he smirked leaning a bit closer, “Well, what else can I say to convince you?”

Sylvia smirked back. “I dunno, fishface… Whatcha’ got~?”

From across the room, still standing by the entrance, Peepers was glaring at the two of them. ‘Why the heck is she talking to that guy?!’ he thought, trying to keep his emotions under control - though his fists were starting to shake slightly by how hard he was clenching them - ‘And, and why the heck does it look like she’s actually enjoying it?!’

As for Hater, he was just as angry as his drummer, though for a whole other reason. “Of all the people in the galaxy who could be here,” he mumbled, “It’s just HAD to be him!” He could see the glam rocker grinning again, confident and cocky as if nothing could touch him. Hater could feel small sparks in his hands but held back, if only because attacking the shark would make them the center of attention - and possibly arrested. “I am not staying with him here, Peepers!”

“Do you really think I want to be by him either?!” Peepers snapped. Of course he didn’t! He was about twenty feet away from the guy and it still felt like he was too close to Awesome! But Sylvia… He noticed her laughing again, with Awesome nudging her in the arm slightly. The Watchdog could feel his already high anger rise. “Look… If we leave, then - then that would be like retreating! And there is no way that I - er, we - are retreating!”

Hater scowled. “Look,” he started to say, trying to keep his voice low so no one would notice them, “normally I would agree with you, Peepers, but-! But, I mean, i-it’s not like we’re playing a show here or something! We just came here for drinks, and frankly unless they’re free, are the best thing I’ve ever tasted and guarantee no hangovers, it’s just not worth it!”

“Okay I know he’s annoying but-”

“BUT-!” He paused, then started again at a much quieter level, “But NOTHING! Besides, I have my reasons, and you’d be smart not to question them!” It was just because the shark-man was annoying. Hater could deal with annoying - at least for the most part - nor was it because Awesome was a show-off or cocky or any of those things. But he was no doubt a loudmouth…

A certain party flashed before his eyes, and the skeleton’s scowl deepened. Like hell he was going to let Awesome humiliate him again! “No way, Peepers. We’re leaving!”
“Hey! THERE YOU GUYS ARE!” The music screeched to a halt, and the two bandmates watched in horror as everyone in the room turned to look at them - including Awesome, who still had that damn smirk on his face. “I WAS WONDERIN’ WHEN YOU GUYS WOULD SHOW UP!” Wander shouted happily as he waved at them, “Come on in!”

Hater growled. Well… Now it really WOULD look like they were retreating if they just left! So, giving one of his strongest death glares ever and making most of the people in the room quickly look away, he walked inside and headed straight to the bar, deciding to just order a bottle of beer instead of any specific drink. Glorn knows he’d probably need it tonight. As for Peepers, he headed straight over to Sylvia and Awesome’s table, trying to look as calm and cool as possible.

“Hey Eyesore,” Sylvia said with a smile as the music started up again, “What took you guys so long?”

“Oh, just the usual GPS troubles,” Peepers replied as he started the climb up onto the barstool. But before he really had a chance to struggle with it, he felt a tail wrap around his waist and place him on the stool. The Watchdog gave her a quick yet very grateful smile before going back to aloof.

“Heh, well, nice to see you guys got here in one piece then, little dude,” Awesome told him, making his ‘aloof’ attitude falter for just a moment. Standing up, the shark glanced over at Sylvia. “I’m gonna get another drink. You want the usual, Syl?”

Peepers blinked. Her usual? How did he know her usual already?! “Yeah, and tell them easy on the pineapple juice this time.”

“Got it. What about you, bro?”

The drummer almost refused. But, if he was offering to pay for the drink… “I’ll take a Jägerbomb.”

“Tc’ch, seriously?” Awesome raised an eyebrow in amusement, and even Sylvia gave a surprised look. “You sure you can handle that, lil’ man?”

Peepers gave a look of his own, a look that he clearly didn’t care for the shark’s opinion about anything, let alone drinks - or at least, he hoped that was what his look was saying. “Oh, I know I can handle it.”

Awesome stared back at him for a moment before giving a small shrug. “Alright, whatever you say, dude,” he said, smirking as he headed towards the bar.

“Give me another,” Hater told the bartender, handing him his empty bottle and getting out his wallet. The beer brand they served hadn’t exactly tasted great, but staying at the counter would help him stay isolated at least, so it seemed like a good idea. But of course, once he heard the click clack of those familiar high heel boots, Hater scowled at how wrong he was.

“A Blue Hawaii - easy on the pineapple, a Jägerbomb, and a purple kamikaze,” Awesome told the older bartender on duty as he sat down on one of the worn barstools.

Hater blinked, voicing his confusion before he could stop himself. “A purple what?!”

“Heh, it’s vodka, black raspberry and lime, dude.” Awesome replied with a chuckle, “Trust me, it’s sorta heavy, but if you can handle it, the flavor will stick with ya for days!” When he noticed the bartender place the new glass bottle in front of the skeleton, he added, “And I can guarantee it’s better than the cheap, bottled stuff you’re drinking.”
“Hmph, I think I’ll pass.”

“Eh, suit yourself, dude,” Hater blinked. That was it? He wasn’t going to keep trying to convince him to try some wild drink or keep talking to him? That was… unexpected. Opening his bottle, he took a small sip as he kept his gaze on the counter. “So… Heard from Syl that you guys have been doing pretty well.”

“Huh? I-! I don’t know what you’re talking about!” Awesome raised an eyebrow. “So you and the eyeball haven’t been getting good gigs and gettin’ applause.”

“Oh… Well, yes of course we have!”

“Uh, just curious, what did you think I was-?”

“Nothing! Just, just leave me alone!” Hater looked away again, taking an angry gulp from his drink, too annoyed to even notice the below average flavor.

“…Okay look, I’ll admit it’s fun to see you annoyed, and it’s even more fun to tease you, but this isn’t gonna fly with me,” Awesome told him, crossing his arms as he leaned against the counter.

“Oh, and what is that supposed to mean?!”

“You know what I’m talking about Bonehead. ‘Bout three weeks ago? Tralfar 5?” Hater visibly flinched, and it was a good thing he was still turned away from the glam rocker, otherwise there would’ve been no other way to hide his fear - or his blush - at the moment. He didn’t want to talk about that night. That dumb game, that stupid kiss, that - that humiliation! No way!

Gripping his bottle so tightly that he was almost certain it would break, Hater turned around and started to say-

“I’m sorry.”

“…” The bottle indeed broke, but only because Hater dropped it in shock.

“Hey man! You better clean that-” “Yeah yeah! I got it!” he told the bartender, waving him away as he continued to stare at Awesome. “What do you mean you’re sorry?”

“I mean, I’m sorry, dude,” Awesome repeated, looking one hundred percent serious, “I thought the game would be a good way to help you loosen up a bit-” as well as one other reason- “And I was just trying to have some fun, and try to make sure you had some too. And for the record, I was never trying to humiliate you or whatever. Hell, no one was even laughing when you stormed out! But… I guess it was still sorta uncool of me so, yeah, I’m sorry.”

“I…” He almost couldn’t believe it. “Um, okay. I mean, yeah sure, I forgive you or whatever.”

“Really? Huh. I figured even after I apologized you would’ve stayed pissed at me for at least another week or so.”

“Yeah well, like you said it wasn’t that big of a deal! So, yeah, just forget it!”

This time it was Awesome’s turn to be confused. He certainly acted like it was a big deal when he stormed out. What had changed?

“Oh! Hater!” Looking past the skeleton, it seemed like Awesome was about to get his answer.
“Gosh Hater, I’m sorry I couldn’t come over and say hi to ya sooner!” Wander told him, casually placing a can of something - it looked like root beer - in Hater’s hand, “I was just about to when someone started askin’ me about the old jukebox in the corner over there. Apparently it hasn’t worked for nearly a week but I got it workin’ again! Go figure, huh? But anyway, hope you’re havin’ fun!”

“Uh, yeah, I’m fine,” Hater mumbled, glancing away from the Star Nomad, though he didn’t try to return the drink.

“Well good! I’m glad ‘ta hear it!” Wander then glanced over at Awesome, his smile changing slightly, but not at all disappearing or faltering. “...Welp, since it looks like you guys are in the middle of a conversation, I’m just gonna go over there and see how Drake and Demurra are doing. Later Hater!” Before leaving, he smiled at Hater for just a moment more before walking away.

“Hmph, yeah, later,” Hater mumbled after a second or two, staring at the can in his hand before opening it. But as he took a sip, he noticed the familiar sensation of being stared at. “What are you looking at, fish face,” he scowled.

“Oh nothing,” Awesome smirked. Maybe his party did help them after all. “So, how long have you and Furball been buds? Or are you guys beyond that point yet?”

The tin can was crushed slightly under the skeletal rocker’s tense fingers. “Er, n-NONE OF YOUR BUSINESS!”

“Ah, got it.” Oh yeah. They totally kissed.

“Grrrr! Just, just shut up, okay?! And wipe that smirk off your face!”

“Heh, well, I’m not sure about that last bit, Hatey, but I’ll see what I can do~”

“I hate you so much.”

“Hey!” Both musicians looked up. “Really hate to break up the fighting,” the bartender said, his surly tone dripping with sarcasm, “But your drinks are ready.”

“Ah, cool. Thanks bro.” Placing several paper bills on the counter, Awesome took the tray and left, much to Hater’s relief. But as he headed back towards his table, he couldn’t help but chuckle. “Man, I am good,” he mumbled, mentally high fiving himself.

“Wait, you guys exchanged phone numbers?!”

“Yeah,” Sylvia nodded, leaning back in her chair, “But come on, it’s not that weird.” ...Okay maybe it was considering what she thought of the shark-man the first time they ran into each other, but still. “Besides, Wander was the one who actually gave him my number.”

“Still, you could’ve deleted his,” Peepers mumbled while Sylvia gave a slightly amused smile.

“Eh, he’s not someone I’d talk to everyday, but I guess when I do talk to him or text him, it’s pretty enjoyable. The guy has some pretty entertaining stories at least.”

‘Yeah but who knows if they’re even true,’ the drummer thought with an eyeroll. “Entertaining or not, your patience level must be pretty high,” he told her, “Especially if you can stand more than five minutes with the guy! I mean, even if you ignore his ridiculous clothing and that annoying smirk of his, you can’t tell me that his voice doesn’t at least get on your nerves after a while! And of course every time he opens his mouth it’s to either brag or insult someone-’
“Don’t you and Bonehead do that too?” Sylvia asked with a raised eyebrow.

“I, well yeah, but we don’t do it all the time! And we’re not nearly as self absorbed as he is! The guy would probably go insane if he couldn’t talk about himself, and I doubt he couldn’t even go a whole conversation without saying ‘dude’ or ‘bro’ or-” Peepers stopped when he noticed just how Sylvia was looking at him. A completely flat and unamused look. “...Okay, either I went too far... or he’s standing right behind me.”

“Second one.”

“Ah. Got it.” As soon as the drinks were set on the table, Peepers felt a strong hand grab his shoulder and turn him around. Unable to help himself, he gave a small yelp as his pupil shrunk down to the size of a dot. Geez, for a guy all about partying and having a good time, he sure looked scary when he was mad (though, not nearly as frightening as Hater, but a pretty close second).

“You talkin’ trash about me, eyeball?” Awesome asked, crouching down slightly so that he was looking him in the eye.

“...S-So what if I was?!” Peepers retorted.

“Well, if you were, then-” He gripped his shoulder and pulled him even closer. “Not. Cool.”

Peepers winced. Wow he sure did have a lot of shark teeth. But he tried to glare back at him, not wanting to give Awesome the satisfaction of knowing that he was afraid. “I-I’m only saying the truth!”

“Oh, really now? Well-”

“Okay, I’m really not in the mood to watch two idiots fight, so-” Sylvia promptly stood up and pulled the two away from each other, making sure to give them both stern looks. “I mean it, don’t start anything stupid because I can guarantee you I’ll finish it.”

After how easily she pulled him off of Peepers, Awesome definitely didn’t doubt her strength (and was honestly a little turned on by it). But even so, he couldn’t just let some optic nerd badmouth him and get away with. “Alright Syl, then me and Cyclops here will just throw down in a different way.”

“Fine by me!” Peepers shouted before he could stop himself. Hopefully this challenge or fight or whatever it was wouldn’t be entirely physical.

Sitting down at the table, Awesome picked up the drink that was meant for Peepers and drank it instead, his large mouth allowing him to finish it in one gulp. One second later, he slammed the glass upside down on the table and grinned. “If you’re so sure of yourself, Jager-bro, then let’s just see how well you can hold up against a master.”

Peepers blinked, and then smirked. Oh, this was going to be easy. “Fine by me. But uh, when you lose, just make sure you don’t puke anywhere near our ship, alright?”

“Heh, funny, I was just about to say the same thing.”

As the two stared each other down, Sylvia just rolled her eyes. “Okay so, should I just go call an ambulance now and tell them to wait outside or-?”

“YO! Barkeep!” Awesome shouted, quickly getting the attention of the second bartender - one who was younger and definitely not as annoyed with his customers as the main bartender. “Let’s get some shots over here!”
Various people around the room let out a cheer, turning their chairs around so they could see the action clearly. A couple minutes later, a whole tray filled with shot glasses was brought to them, and both Awesome and Peepers instantly took a glass. And after a moment, Sylvia took one as well, surprising both of them.

“What?” she asked with a smirk of her own, “It’s been a while since I’ve done one of these things. Besides, I think I need to help put you two in your place.”

Peepers was stunned, but Awesome just rolled with it. “Fine by me. I’m always up for making things a little more interesting.”

The table - as well as most of the bar - was silent as the three of them stared each other down, gripping their glasses but making sure not to spill a single drop. Finally, Peepers made the first move, closing his eye as he brought the shot glass up to his head and quickly drank it. Not even giving off a shiver, he slammed the glass down on the table, practically beaming with confidence.

Sylvia and Awesome quickly drank their shots as well, and there were a few more small cheers, but most of their audience was silent, knowing that this was just the beginning.

After a couple of shots each, the three started to drink them at the same time with very little hesitation. When they got down to their seventh shot, Awesome finally started to speak again. “I gotta say, bro,” he told Peepers, his voice starting to slur slightly, “I’m impressed. Didn’t think you’d get this far.”

“Well, unlike some people,” Peepers started to say, trying to keep himself still looking impressive by not leaning on the table, “I actually have the skills to back it up when I brag about something.”

“Hey, less talk, more drink,” Sylvia told them. Really she was hoping to get it over with as soon as possible so she could have time to sober up a bit and enjoy the rest of her night. The other two didn’t argue, and soon they were back to drinking.

The little, empty glasses were starting to pile up, hugely outnumbering the number of filled glasses. Sylvia was back to leaning in her chair, looking more tired than drunk while Awesome and Peepers were now both using their arms to prop themselves up on the table, refusing to quit. Ten shots each turned into twelve, then fifteen.
“Glorn…” the shark-man mumbled once he sat down his empty glass, nearly missing the table.

“Heh, g-gettin’ a lil’ light headed there, ‘bro’?” Peepers snickered - though he really wasn’t one to talk since he had nearly fallen off his barstool twice now.

“Tc’ch, n-no way, dude. Eyeball. Eyeball dude. Y-you can handle what ‘m ‘bout to dish out!” He snatched up another drink and tilted his head back, tossing about half of it into his mouth. He opened his eyes and looked at the glass, contemplating whether or not to finish it. ...Right before falling backwards and passing out.

Peepers grinned, cheering for himself while at the same time trying to keep his barstool steady. “H-Ha! I told you, fish! Nev-Never challenge a Watchdog to a drinking contest. EYEBALLS REPRESENT-AH!” Good thing he still had his stage gear and helmet on. But still- “Ow. ...I’m okay!”

“Sure you are,” Sylvia said, rolling her eyes and not even bothering to take another shot.

“Ohhhhhhhhh yep! Toooootally alri-oohhhh…”

“Hey, lady?” the surly bartender said, giving Peepers a disgusted look, “Anyone who pukes in here’s gotta clean up. Just a heads up.”

“Right. Got it.” With little difficulty, Sylvia picked the drummer up, cradling him in her arms as she took him outside and away from the ships and bright lights of the bar to a small patch of dirt that no one cared about. “Okay,” she said, gently setting him down, “Let it rip.”

“I, I d-don’now what you’re talking ab-bout.”

“It’s just gonna feel worse if you don’t.”

“…” Peepers gave her a pitiful look, and then looked away before proceeding to puke his guts out. Sylvia stuck her tongue out, but she kept her comments to herself, knowing that saying them out loud would just make him feel worse. So, she just kept silent as she gently rubbed his back, letting him get it all out of his system.

After nearly five minutes, Peepers finally entered the ‘dry heaves’ stage, and was able to sit down. “I… I think I’m done.”

“Good.” She picked him back up and brought him over to a different patch of dirt so they wouldn’t have to sit next to the smell.

“Grop… May-Maybe that, that wasn’t such a good idea.”

“Gee, ya think? Why’d you even accept it anyway? You don’t seem like the guy who’d get into drinking contests.” And by the way he had talked, it sounded like this wasn’t his first one, which was even more surprising.

“Well, I didn’t really have a-” Even with his vision blurred slightly, he could see the look she was giving him. “Okay yeah I did have a choice, but still, I wasn’t just going to back down.”

“And again I ask, why? I could see Bonehead taking a dumb challenge - believe me, I could definitely see that. But you? You seem like the type who wouldn’t want to get drunk and would just glare at the guy and walk away. You know, the smart type.”

Peepers smiled slightly at being called smart, but it didn’t stay once he remembered he had to give her an explanation. “W-Well, he… He’s a rival. We all are, technically. But I’m pretty sure he
specifically has it out for us.”

“Ha, yeah, says the guy who started insulting him for no reason.”

“…” Deciding that pretending he didn’t hear and/or remember that bit was the best plan he had, Peepers continued. “Besides, I knew for a fact that, that I could handle it. So I took the challenge, knowing that it would m-most likely be a victory.”

“Alright then, soldier. How’s your victory feel?”

“…Hollow. Crappy. Like I’m never gonna want to drink again.”

“How about we go with all of the above?” She shifted him in her arms, trying to get him into a more comfortable position as her face softened slightly. “...You know, I guess I should give credit where it’s due. That was pretty impressive.”

His eye widened slightly. “...Really?”

“Yeah. Don’t get me wrong, it was still pretty flarping stupid. But the way you were able to out last Awesome considering your size and everything was still impressive.”

“Heh, like I said, never challenge a Watchdog to a drinking contest. ...You know, I’m noticing that you’re not getting sick. Heck, I don’t even think you’re drunk!”

“Oh no, I’m at least tipsy,” Sylvia replied, though her words weren’t the least bit slurred, “Just a light buzz. I’d need probably five more shots though if you wanted to see me drunk - which I can guarantee you ain’t happening tonight. But yeah, I’d say Zbornaks can hold their liquor just as well as Watchdogs can.”

“Huh, good to know,” Peepers commented, eye now half-lidded. A cool nightly wind blew across his little body, and he instinctively snuggled up against Sylvia’s chest. Not that she really minded, she knew he was going to be cold and sick for a while. “Good luck gettin’ any decent sleep tonight.”

“Honestly, I’m just hoping Hater takes it easy on me tomorrow.” He had no doubts that he was going to have a hangover in the morning, which made him feel like more of an idiot for accepting the challenge in the first place. “Why did I even…?” The image of Awesome laughing and touching Sylvia flashed before him. Oh. Right.

“...So,” the Zbornak started to say after a minute or two of silence, “I take it you aren’t going to accept any jealousy prompted drinking contests?”

“Hmph, yeah, at least not for a-” He stopped. “W-Wait, what do you mean-? I, I wasn’t jealous!”

“Uh huh, yeah,” Sylvia nodded, “Whatever you say. ...Though, for the record, I’m still gonna talk to Awesome. Like I said, he can be pretty entertaining.” Peepers tried to hide his clenched fists, willing himself not to look at her. Okay, maybe he was jealous, but he still wasn’t going to admit.

“But, you know, I think when I really think about it, he’s the guy you can only talk to for a couple hours. Don’t get me wrong, those are a fun couple of hours, but afterwards you definitely need a shark-free break. But that’s fine. Some people you can only talk to when you’re in the mood. But other people, people who talk about things other than party stories and concerts. Who like to debate stuff, and sometimes go way too into detail… Maaybe a little nerdy. Those people are always pretty interesting, and I can easily talk to for hours. Even if their voice likes to get high-pitched when they get excited.”
His eye was completely pink now, and he tried to discreetly adjust his helmet to hide most of it. Though he could hear her chuckling slightly, so he quickly decided there was no point in trying. But even so, her words managed to stay with him even as he slipped into sleep.

Other than the occasional breeze and the muffled music from the bar (as well as a few small mumbles from Peepers as he slept), the air was silent and content. With a small sigh, Sylvia glanced up at the stars. Of course she didn’t see any of the constellations she was used to seeing in the nighttime sky, but there was still a sense of familiarity that those little balls of light brought her. A sense of calmness. Though, maybe that was simply because of what - or rather, who - the stars reminded her of.

“‘Heh,’” she smiled softly. Wander also wasn’t the type to get himself drunk, so she wasn’t worried about him being alone in there. ‘Besides,’ she thought, her smile becoming more amused, ‘I’m sure him and Bonehead are enjoying their privacy...’

So, you really think Peepers will be alright?”

“Yeah, he’ll be fine, he’s been in contests like these before. Heck, he and his cousins usually have at least one around the holidays. Gonna have a huge hangover though.” But Hater didn’t feel too sorry for him. After all, Peepers was the one who accepted the contest, it was his own fault.

“Well, hopefully it won’t be too bad and he’ll get over it quickly,” Wander said, making a mental note to ask one of the bartenders later if they served coffee in the mornings.

The bar was quiet, with most people heading back to their ships to sleep off their drinks or getting kicked out because they ran out of credits. Awesome was still lying on the floor, though the younger bartender had rolled him onto his stomach. A mellow country song played on the jukebox.

“...This is sorta nice, huh?” Wander said after a moment.

“Nice? ...Wander, we’re just sitting here at some bar counter, not even drinking beer and talking about how my drummer is an idiot. I’m not really seeing ‘nice’.”

“Well, it’s quiet. And we’ve got good music to listen to. And I’m with you.” Hater sat up a bit straighter at that last one. “So yeah, I’d say it’s pretty nice.”

“...If you say so.”

Mechanical noises replaced the music as the jukebox shifted to a different disk. Judging by the bit of static and the decrease in audio quality, it was obvious it was an older cd, but the melody was decent enough that neither one seemed to mind.

Still- “Doesn’t this place have any songs that are actually rock and roll?” Hater asked, frowning slightly. “Seriously, it couldn’t be that hard to find some cds with good music on them!”

“Hey! Watch it Pal!” he could hear the surly bartender shout as he washed off a table across the room, “I’ll have you know that these are from my personal collection!”

“I should’ve guessed...”

“Aw, I think you’re allowed ‘ta change up a genre a bit and still have it be a rock song,” Wander lightly argued, “And even if ya can’t, well, at least you still have a good song to listen to.”
“Whatever.” He leaned back and listened, not really having a choice since there was nothing to drown it out.

*Something in the way she moves*
*Attracts me like no other lover*
*Something in the way she woos me*

*I don't want to leave her now*
*You know I believe and how*

Hater gave a small sigh, closing his eyes slightly and letting himself relax at the calm melody. But, like how senses usually worked, while he heard the music clearer with his eyes closed, he could also smell the lingering scent of alcohol around him, and feel a warm hand grip his own. When did that even happen? Who knows and - since there was really no one else in the bar - who cares?

His hand twitched slightly, but he didn’t pull away. And after a moment, he felt the warm, soft hand give his a squeeze. Hater could almost see the pleased look on Wander’s face.

*Somewhere in her smile she knows*
*That I don't need no other lover*
*Something in her style that shows me*

*Don't want to leave her now*
*You know I believe and how*

“...Say, Hater?”

“Mm? What…?” His eyes remained closed, but he could hear Wander scoot his barstool closer, making sure not to let go of the boney hand as he did so.

“Well, I was just gonna say thanks. For lettin’ me spend time with you, I mean.”

“...Oh.” That was all he could really say.

As Wander paused, Hater could feel his hand tense up slightly. “I gotta say… Well, I mean, seein’ Awesome again got me thinking about the party.” This time, Hater’s hand tensed up. “I really did feel bad about that. And you gotta believe me, I never wanted to get you all upset.”

“I know. You’re way too much of a goody-goody to do something like that to someone.”

Wander chuckled slightly. “Yeah, I guess that’s true, and I’m proud of that. But… When I saw you run off like that, I just felt awful. And after our talk at the bus stop, well…”

*You're asking me will my love grow*
*I don't know, I don't know*
*You stick around now it may show*
*I don't know, I don't know*

Hater finally opened his eyes and glanced over at Wander. His hat was lowered, hiding his eyes from the skeleton, but he could still see that he was frowning. “I… I didn’t think you’d ever wanna be near me again, which is why I tried to sorta stay clear of ya for a while. You know, give you some space.”

‘So that’s why he was so quiet before the stadium show,’ Hater thought to himself, ‘Why he didn’t talk to me until I started talking to him.’ It was such a little thing, yet it was still a sign of respect as
well as an attempt to start mending bad memories and fractured connections. And deep down, Hater appreciated the gesture.

“But, golly, when we were able to talk to each other and you accepted the offer to come live with us, well... It just made me real happy, Hater.” The furball was smiling again as he lifted his head up. “I like bein’ friends with ya.”

Friends. ...Why did that word suddenly hurt him instead of annoy him? “Wander...?”

“Hm? What is it, Hater?”

“I...”

Something in the way she knows
And all I have to do is think of her
Something in the things she shows me

Don't want to leave her now
You know I believe and how

The music was beginning to slow and fade out, and Hater couldn’t help but think of it as mimicking a clock counting down. But he felt another squeeze in his hand, and he relaxed slightly. “I... Y-You’re not so bad to be around okay? I mean, I guess you can be sorta fun and kinda nice and... A-And...”

“Hater?”

He jolted slightly when he noticed how close Wander’s voice was. The Star Nomad was now sitting on his knees as he sat up straighter, now looking like he was at even ground with Hater. He gave the skeleton a soft, non-judging smile as his lips formed the words. “May I?”

It only took a second for him to figure out what Wander was asking permission for (thankfully). And he could tell by the look he was giving that if he said no, the Star Nomad would have no hurt feelings. No arguments. He would have no problems with simply being friends.

...But the more he thought about, the more that Hater decided that while Wander was fine with being friends, he wasn’t.

And so, the skeleton gave a stiff nod, and Wander moved even closer, placing his other hand on Hater’s chest and closing his eyes as their lips met. The last few notes of the song faded out, leaving empty silence in the room, but neither one really noticed. As far as they were concerned, the song was still going.

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By the time the bar finally closed - shortly after Awesome was woken up and stumbled outside towards his ship - the other nearby moons took up most of the sky, like bright spotlights shining down on the assortment of ships and people sleeping outside. Sylvia and Peepers were laying down, still in each others arms, and Demurra and Dracor were cuddling as well. Both pairs were fast asleep, not even bothered by the bright, beautiful orbs in the sky.

Wander gave a long yet quiet yawn - he didn’t want to disturb the others, after all. “Well, guess we should be hittin’ the hay too, huh?”

“Oh, uh, yeah,” Hater nodded, glancing towards his ship.
“You got enough pillows and blankets in there?”

“Of course I do! ...And, uh—”

“Oh don’t worry,” Wander told him as he took off his hat, “I’ll be fine.”

“Oh…” He held himself back from adding a ‘good’, and started walking towards his ship. Before he got too far, he heard a familiar voice whisper, “Nighty night, Hater,” and his chest warmed, just a little.

Unfortunately, by the time he laid down on the old mattress in the back, kicked off his shiny black shoes and shut the trunk door, the warmth was gone. His glowing eyes provided the only light in the dark backseat as he tossed and turned, quickly getting annoyed. Then again, when was the last time he actually had to sleep in his ship? Yes, that was the only reason…

“...Oh flarp it.” Tossing the trunk door back up, Hater slipped on his old pair of sneakers that he found under the mattress and walked over to wear he could see the only sign of the color orange for miles, dragging a red blanket and a pillow behind him.

Wander had just closed his eyes when he heard the footsteps, but didn’t look too bothered by it. “…You sleep in your hat?”

“Yes.”

“And you actually have enough room in there? And it actually keeps you warm and lets you get some sleep?”

“Uh huh, just like a sleeping bag.”

“...You’re so weird.”

Wander said nothing. He only scooted over slightly, leaving a nice sized spot for Hater to lay down. Since he still had his jacket on to protect him from the cold, he decided to simply lay on top of the blanket instead of under it and risk getting stains on his stage clothes. And once he was settled, Hater wordlessly grabbed the rim of Wander’s hat, and pulled him just a little bit closer.

“Warm enough?”

“Mm,” he nodded, already closing his eyes.

“Alrighty then, goodnight Hater. ...Sleep tight, alright? Get a goodnight’s rest and don’t let the moon bugs—”

“Wander.”

“Whoops, heh, right. Sorry.” Scooting back into his hat and laying his head on the soft blanket, the furball closed his eyes, easily slipping into sleep.

And while it would eventually come for him as well, Hater spent the next few minutes just staring at his fellow guitarist, who somehow managed to even smile in his sleep. ‘Then again, should I really be surprised?’ he thought. No, he decided, probably not.

As the moons slowly moved across the sky, his breaths deepened and his horns drooped slightly. Knowing that he most likely wouldn’t be heard by anyone else, not even their fellow bandmates sleeping just a few feet away, Hater said just one word to him before closing his eyes.
“Goodnight.”

Chapter End Notes

The song used was "Something" by The Beatles. The picture was drawn by Darkwingsnark on Tumblr.
Without any walls or curtains to block it, it didn’t take long for Hater to notice the sun and (reluctantly) stir from his slumber. “Ughhhh…” Too early. WAY too early. Although, maybe it was better than sleeping on the hard ground for another couple hours, but not by much.

Cracking his spine as he sat up, the skeleton immediately and almost instinctively glanced over to the other side of the blanket. Nothing. Everyone else around them was still sleeping, or at least hadn’t moved from their spots, but there was no Star Nomad or sleeping bag/hat to be seen. Then again, after living with the guy for a bit, Wander being the first one up was really not a surprise anymore.

Stretching a bit more as he stood up, Hater began walking back towards the bar, figuring that’s where he was. “They better serve breakfast here or somethin’,” he mumbled, his stomach already growling slightly. He licked his dry lips. Coffee would be good too, or a cold can of pop to supply him with the caffeine he needed. But as he started to notice just how thirsty it was - as well as how warm the moon got once it was facing the sun - he decided that any liquid would do at this point, even if it was just plain old-

Just as Hater reached the door, it swung open and a crate with legs and filled with bottles of water practically ran him over. “Comin’ through!”

He stepped to the side and grabbed one of the bottles, quickly cracking it open. “Mornin’ Hater!” Wander greeted with a grin as he adjusted his hold on the crate, making it so he could see him better, “Glad to see you up! Didja sleep well?”

“Mm,” was the only reply Hater gave before practically chugging the bottle of luke-warm water.

“Oh, I was pretty thirsty too. Guess the air up here’s pretty dry or somethin’.” Anyhoo, the guys that owned this place must’a known that, cause when I went inside to use the restroom they offered me a great deal on this!” He tried to lift the crate up higher, but winced slightly and decided against it. “Now everyone can get a drink when they wake up! Pretty great, huh?”

“Yes, sure, great,” Hater mumbled before taking another long sip, nearly drinking the rest of the bottle, “So, do they sell breakfast here too, then?”

“Nah. Technically they aren’t even supposed ‘ta be open till late afternoon.”

The skeleton gave a sigh. “Great. Guess we’ll have to either find a place or wait until we get back to the apartment.”

“Well I’m sure there’s somewhere we can stop at to get a bite to eat!” Wander said optimistically, “Though we should probably let everyone sleep as much as they can before headin’ out.”

“Hmph.” And waste time that he could use practicing for his next show? Not a chance. “Yeah, you can do that, but I think I have a better idea.” Grabbing the case of water from Wander, Hater then trekked back over to the patch of dirt - specifically, to where Peepers and Sylvia were.

Once he got closer, he could see that Peepers had his face hidden by the sun - definitely an easy task considering how big Sylvia was, so she could easily block it out. “Peepers!” Hater said suddenly, not exactly screaming it, but still saying it loud enough to wake the one-eyed drummer.
Peepers moaned, placing a hand on his head. “Haterrrr… Come on, just five more-”

“No.”

The Watchdog managed to open his eye a bit, and glared at his bandmate. “You know, I let you sleep in!”

“Yeah, on the days where we don’t have any plans! Now come on, it’s not like I’m making you drive. Just get up so we can leave already!”

Peepers sighed. “Just, just give me a minute, alright?”

“Yeah bonehead,” Sylvia said as she lifted her head up, yawning slightly, “Considering the night he had, I think you can cut him a bit of a break.”

“Fiiiiine,” Hater replied with a roll of his eyes. Crossing his arms, he could hear quick footsteps coming up from behind him.

“Hey guys! Hope ya slept well!” Reaching into the case, Wander grabbed two bottles and gave one to each of them - though when Peepers didn’t take it, he just placed it beside him.

Sylvia gave a warm smile. “Hey buddy. Not the best sleep of my life but, eh, it could’ve been worse.” She paused for a moment to take a swig of her drink. “Anyone know what time it is?”

“A quarter after seven it looks like,” replied a deep voice. Looking behind them, they could see Demurra and Dracor waking up as well. Of course, Wander immediately gave them both a water bottle, wishing them a good morning.

“Which means it’ll be another two hours before the buses start running,” Demurra added before glancing over at Hater, “So, I guess it’s a good thing we have a friend with a ship.”

Hater scowled slightly. “You’re lucky we all share an apartment together, otherwise I wouldn’t even think of offering you all a ride.” After all, he had better things to do, and having his ship be crammed full of people wasn’t exactly appealing.

But Demurra just gave him a sweet smile. “That’s what I said. Good thing we have a friend with a ship.”

“Tell me about it,” Wander added with a smile of his own, making Hater’s face soften slightly before he turned away.

“Whatever, let’s just get going already so we can get something to eat.”

“Now you’re talkin’,” Sylvia grinned, standing up, “I could definitely use some breakfast right about now.”

“Yeah!” Wander cheered, “I’m sure we can find a Slarnak’s deli or a Meteor Muffins (and Donuts) somewhere around here!”

“And if not, we could always just have brunch back home,” Demurra added. Though like everyone else in the group, she was ready to eat now rather than later.

“Yeah, brunch is pretty good,” said a new voice, “Especially if it’s at one of those all-you-can-eat places.”

On instinct, Hater immediately scowled when he saw the shark-man walking over to them. Whatever
the guy wanted, he just hoped he made it quick - though he was sure that if Awesome rambled on for
too long, he could easily ‘interrupt’ him.

“Heh, I’m surprised to see you up this early, Awesome,” Sylvia smirked, “Figured you would be out
cold the rest of the day.”

“Nah,” Awesome shrugged, “Like I said, I’ve had crazier nights, and I know some quick-fire
remedies to help get rid of hangovers.” Although, if he was being honest, a part of him still felt like
he could easily crawl under the covers of his bed and sleep there for about a week, but he certainly
wasn’t going to show it.

“Oh yeah I’m sure,” Peepers mumbled, still lying on the ground and making no attempts to get up.

Awesome however just smiled, crouching down slightly. “S’up, lil’ dude? Got hangover?” He was
met with a growl, which only made him chuckle. “Yeah, probably won’t challenge you to anymore
drinking contests for a while. Not like I really need to anyway, you definitely put your credits where
your mouth is, and I totes respect that. So yeah, as long as you cool it with the trash talking, I’d say
we’re cool, don’t you?”

After a moment or two, Peepers opened his eye and glanced up at the shark-man, who was now
holding out his hand. He hesitated for only a second more before slapping the hand.

“Nice,” he smiled, satisfied with the high five, “Welp, guess I should get going then. Got a day’s
worth of driving to do if I want to make it to Athoth for my next show, and maybe take a nap before
it.”

“Ooh, Athoth!” Wander repeated, his eyes widening with curiosity and excitement, “I’ve heard of
that one! Syl, you and I should try and get a concert there too!”

“Well, it definitely wouldn’t hurt. We’ll just have to see, okay bud?”

“I could probably put in a good word for you guys, and hey, next time we all see each other we can
party some more.” He glanced over at Demurra and Dracor. “You know, if I remember last year
correctly, you two can be pretty fun at parties - especially you, dragon-bro - so you’re more than
welcome to come too.”

“Weren’t you the guy who threw that boat party last year?” Drake asked, “Over on Neputana?”

His grin increased. “Yep!”

“And didn’t it end up sinking by the end of the party?”

“...Uh, yeah see, we were in pretty shallow water, dude, so I wouldn’t say it ‘sunk’ persay but-”

“We’ll just have to see if we’re available,” Demurra told him, flashing a polite smile. After all,
something interesting always seemed to happen at Awesome’s parties. Besides, despite the fact that
they had been in the Battle for several years, she could always see more performances by the Party
Makers, just to see if they were improving any.

“Sweet,” Awesome grinned, “Then I hope to see you all there!” As he said this, he specifically
looked at Sylvia and Hater. Sylvia just smirked while the skeletal guitarist scowled and rolled his
eyes. Apologies or not, going to another Awesome party was not on the top of his priority list. But
the shark-man either didn’t notice it or didn’t care, since he was still smirking as he walked away,
making sure to grab a couple of bottles from the case before he left.
“Huh, nearly halfway empty already!” Wander commented as he glanced down at the plastic case, “I sure hope there’s enough to go around! Maybe I should gotten more of them…”

“Hey, I’m sure most of these guys will be heading out soon anyway,” Sylvia told him, giving her friend a small smile, “So I’m sure they’ll get something to drink one way or another, okay?”

The Star Nomad quickly smiled back at her. “Yeah! Oh, speaking of which, we should probably get leavin’ too, huh? My belly’s really startin’ to rumble, plus I’m gettin’ kinda thirsty too, but I don’t want to take more than my fair share of water, so-”

“Well then let’s stop talking about it and just go already!” Hater shouted, more than ready to leave, “Peepers, hand me the keys! ...Peepers?” Glancing down at the Watchdog, he could see that he had fallen back asleep. Scowling, Hater took the lid off his bottle and promptly poured the remaining amount of water in it onto his drummer, making him scream in surprise.

“...Okay, was that really necessary?” Sylvia asked with a flat look. Hater simply shrugged. “Hey, I told him to get up. Should’ve listened the first time.”

“-Leave your worries far behind, take my hand I’ll give ya mine! The night’s still young so let’s just - - Get up and dance!”

With one final strum, Wander ended his part of the song while Sylvia let out just a few more beats on her drums before finishing with one last clash of her symbols.

“Heh,” Sylvia smiled, wiping a bit of sweat off her snout, “That one never gets old, huh buddy?”

“Nope! It sure doesn’t!” Wander agreed, sitting down on the concrete. By the time their group had made it back to Axalis - after stopping for coffee, donuts and whatever other sugary and/or caffeine filled treats they could at the first Blimpey’s gas station they spotted - the sun was up but the weather was cool thanks to the light breeze.

Of course, with such a great opportunity, how could the duo pass it up? And with a nearly empty parking lot behind their apartment, it was easy to get all their equipment outside and start practicing.

“So, think we’re ready for that show this Friday?” Sylvia joked, getting out of her seat and sitting down next to her bandmate.

“Well, considering we’ve been practicing ever since we got home, I should hope so!” Wander replied, laughing slightly. Their next venue was an average one - just providing entertainment at some club on a planet several hours away.

Of course, that didn’t matter to them. All that mattered was having fun, after all - though positive word of mouth and a bit more publicity certainly wouldn’t hurt. Speaking of which - “Feel like playin’ a couple more songs? I know we don’t really need to, but-”

“But you know how much fun they’ll be,” Sylvia finished for him, giving a small smirk.

The Star Nomad chuckled. “You read my mind, Syl!”

“-Feel like playin’ a couple more songs? I know we don’t really need to, but-”
sitting around doing nothing.

“Great!” Wander quickly leapt to his feet, his pick pressed between his finger and thumb, more than ready to start playing. “Got any songs in mind?”

“Not really. Although…” Deciding she had played the drums enough for one day, Sylvia walked past them and instead opened up the sleep black case, taking out her own guitar.

“Well, it has been a while,” Wander smiled, watching as she tuned her instrument.

The Zbornak nodded, smiling in satisfaction as she finished tuning, strumming a note that was played a perfect pitch. “Yep, so it’ll make for a fun way to end practice.”

“Heh, you got that right!” They both quickly plugged their guitars in, keeping the volume of their portable speakers at a moderate level (wouldn’t wanna get kicked out of their home because of a noise complaint, after all). “Now, will you do the honors?”

She chuckled, pinching her fingers together above the strings. “Gladly!” Deciding to start off with solo-style shredding since they still didn’t have a song picked out, Sylvia let out a series of long chords followed by quick ones.

Letting her play by herself for a few seconds, Wander jumped into the song once he deemed it appropriate, playing a random melody to try and coordinate and compliment her solo. As they played on, the furball could hardly keep the grin off his face - not only because he loved playing guitar duets with his best friend, but also because he couldn’t help but remember the last time he played a duet (or rather, a duel) with someone.

But of course he wasn’t going to compare the two. Sylvia wasn’t Hater, after all. And besides, he loved playing with his best friend and bandmate, and Wander was sure they’d come up with something just as fun and unique.

Sylvia continued playing her solo, though after a while she started to fall into Wander’s melody. Not necessarily a bad thing though, she certainly didn’t mind. The song was sorta catchy too, and sort of familiar… She raised an eyebrow in amusement. “Wanderrr…”

The Star Nomad only giggled, like a child giddy about the secret they were keeping, and continued to play. As he added in a few chords to the melody and tapped his foot, Sylvia suddenly recognized it. “Aw man! How did it take me this long to recognize- hey wait!” She gave him a semi-stern look. “Sorry pal, but there’s no way you’re gonna get the lead on this one!” Not with one of her favorite songs.

“Well then,” Wander started to say, switching back to a simple, background melody but still continuing to play with just as much energy as before, “Be my guest!”

The Zbornak smirked and increased her own playing, adding just the right amount of heaviness and rock and roll attitude - providing exactly what the song needed. Slapping her tail against the rough concrete to help her keep track of the beat, it wasn’t long before Sylvia started to sing.

“Can't stay at home, can't stay at school. Old folks say, ya poor little fool! Down the street, I'm the girl next door, I'm the fox you've been waiting for! Hello daddy, hello mom, I'm your ch-ch-cherry bomb! Hello world, I'm your wild girl, I'm your ch-ch-cherry bomb!”

She started bobbing her head as she played, grinning and full of energy as her mane bounced. And of course, Wander was playing with just as much enthusiasm, though he was sure not to be TOO enthusiastic. Sylvia was the lead after all, and he was having just as fun playing with her.
“Stone age love and strange sounds too. Come on baby, let me get to you! Bad nights cause'n teenage blues, get down ladies you've got nothing to lose! Hello daddy, hello mom, I'm your ch-ch-cherry bomb! Hello world, I'm your wild girl, I'm your ch-ch-cherry bomb!”

Knowing it was time for the solo, the Zbornak didn’t dare hold back, and let herself shred on her guitar with all her might, not caring who heard her. The solo of this song was always her favorite part - as well as the part she found herself practicing the most - and she was going to enjoy it to the fullest.

“Hey street boy what's your style? Your dead end dreams don't make you smile! I'll give ya something to live for, have ya, grab ya 'til your sore! Hello daddy, hello mom, I'm your ch-ch-cherry bomb! Hello world, I'm your wild girl, I'm your ch-ch-cherry bomb! Cherry bomb!!”

With one final chord, Sylvia ended it, the last note echoing around the parking lot. After a moment, she heard clapping and cheering - and even if it only came from one person, it still kept a smile on her face.

“Woo hoo! Yeah!” Wander shouted, giving a small whistle in between his clapping, “Woo! Awesome! Encore!”

“Heh, maybe later,” she replied, slipping the guitar strap off of her neck and giving him an appreciative smile, “But that was a lot of fun. Thanks Wander.”

He gave her a small nod. “No problem, Syl - though really I should be thanking you! You definitely gave a great show!"

She chuckled. “Yeah well, this ‘show’ wouldn’t have been completely without you backin’ me up, you know.”

“Maybe, but you were still the star for this performance, at least.”

“Eh,” she said as she slipped a hand under Wander’s hat and ruffled his hair a bit, “Bein’ the star’s nice, but I think I’d rather be in a duet.” Her bandmate didn’t give a reply, not a verbal one at least. The hug he gave her - and the one she gave him in return - said everything that needed to be said.

“Well,” he said once the hug ended, “We should probably start gettin’ all this stuff inside before folks start coming home and needin’ a place to park.”

“Yeah, good point.” As they started packing, Sylvia couldn’t help but glance up at the top floor of the building. She didn’t know why but, it felt like someone had been watching… Then again, if she had heard music coming from outside, she would probably be peeking out her window too. Deciding it was nothing to worry about, Sylvia gave a shrug and went back to work, dismantling her drumset.

“...Phew!” He had ducked back in just in time. Though they never exactly said it was a private practice, Peepers didn’t know how Sylvia would react to someone watching her practice. At least it was outside and not behind a nearly closed door, so that made him feel a bit less like a creeper.

But with that thought out of the way, memories of the Zbornak’s energetic performance started flowing through the Watchdog’s mind. He had of course seen her play guitar before, and had even seen her dance before. But, when she combined singing with all of that...

The only way Peepers could describe it was just… “Wow~”

He gave a small sigh, smiling slightly. “Yeah, she definitely needs to go solo sometime.” Or, maybe he could provide the drums while she sang and played lead guitar. It certainly would be nice, hearing
the audience cheer for both of them, maybe playing songs that Hater either didn’t or wouldn’t play, and then, once they finished their show and got backstage...

“PEEPERS!” The drummer flinched, snapping out of his fantasy, “Geez, how long does it take for you to use the bathroom?!”

Peepers gave another sigh, though anyone with a brain could tell it was definitely a lot different than the first. “I’ve already finished, I’ll be there in a second!” he called back.

“Fine, whatever!” As he heard his skeletal bandmate go back to random tuning - his way of passing time when he couldn’t actually play - he couldn’t help but roll his eye slightly. Well, at least the part about having an audience cheer for him was still happening. He just had to survive band practice first.

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“Okay so, who wanted the nachos?”

“Over here, Demi!”

“Kay, and - Oh, gee, I wonder who got the salad?”

“Hehe, thanks Demurra!”

“No problem, Wander.”

“Oh, here’s mine! And it’s nice to see that they took the time to cook it like I like it.”

“Hmph, you mean burn it?”

“Hey, don’t knock it till you try it!”

“It’s actually not as bad as you would think. Oh, here are the hot dogs, and I’m pretty sure this one’s tofu.”

“Well, is there a way to make sure? I don’t want to eat something without knowing what it is - especially if it ends up being something gross like tofu!”

“Aw, Hater! Tofu ain’t that bad! Just put a little ketchup on it, and ya can’t tell the difference between it and a regular hot dog! In fact - no offense to other hot dogs but - I think it tastes even better!”

“Whatever, I still don’t want to eat one!”

“Oh, I think this one’s mine. Um, just, Hater if you could scoot over just a lit- if I could just-!”

“The grilled chicken, right? With a small fry?”

“Oh, yeah. Thanks Sylvia.”

“Heh, no problem, Eyesore.”

“Are you sure this is a regular hot dog?”

“Yes I’m sure, Hater. Besides, you asked for mustard on yours, right? Well, then that makes it a bit easier.”
“Hmm… You better be right…”

“Anyone got any napkins?”

With all the time they had all spent on the road - either traveling to new venues and audiences, or simply looking for a place close by where they could eat before their show - eating fast food wasn’t really too strange for any of them. However, eating fast food in such a big group, and in an actual dining room at a kitchen table, was.

The changes were easy to notice. The fact that there was more food was an easy one, and it seemed like people were always more willing to share when they were in a big group. Another obvious change was that there was a lot more conversation going on. Even when it was just a couple people talking, usually everyone else would be listening, adding in their own comments or questions when they had them.

And, even if they were more used to eating in smaller groups, no one really seemed to mind the changes. Even Hater, who started out refusing to participate in any small talk and would usually try to eat as fast as possible so he could go back to his room, started to open up more and more as the days went on. Of course Hater realized this and still tried to limit his interaction. After all, this was just a temporary thing.

Still… Maybe it wasn’t so bad.

“Everyone’s food good?” Wander asked, half a tofu hot dog and a small amount of fries left on his plate. He was of course met with various nods and replies of approval.

“As far as fast food goes, these guys are pretty good,” Sylvia commented.

“Eh, they’re alright,” Hater shrugged, “But I still say pizza was a better option.”

“We just had pizza last night,” Dracor replied.

“So? I’ve had pizza twice in a row before when there was nothing else available. Besides, it’s pizza. How can you complain about that?”

Sylvia gave him a look. “Really? You’re gonna call someone else out on complaining about something?” Hater just simply glared at her and took another bite of his hot dog.

“Well, maybe we can get pizza tomorrow,” Demurra suggested, “Though after that we should probably cut back on eating out for a while.” Even with everyone pitching in to help pay for it, it was still expensive.

“Oh,” Wander said suddenly, “Do you think there’ll be a pizza place on Zarus?”

The table fell silent for a moment. “Oh yeah,” Peepers said, “I forgot you guys had a show there. And then we’ve got one on Flendor on Saturday.”

Hater scowled slightly. “I still can’t believe that guy, asking all those questions and stuff. We’re a band who wants to play, what more information can you need?!”

“Well, they are pretty exclusive - which isn’t too surprising considering the whole planet is surrounded by a fortress.”

“Guess we’ll just have to get pizza Sunday then,” Demurra suggested, not too disappointed with having to wait. Hater however didn’t feel the same, and the words came out before he could even try to stop them.
“You mean you guys aren’t coming?”

The kitchen/dining room became completely silent, though that silence was quickly filled with Hater’s growling once he noticed the amused smiles. “What are you all smirking about?! It’s not like I care or anything! It’s just that you guys are always blabbering on about how you love going to hear other people play so it just seemed weird to me! Frankly I’ll be glad to get some time away from all of you!”

Of course, no one really took these harsh words to heart, with Dracor, Sylvia and Peepers rolling their eyes while Demurra and Wander continued to smile.

“Well, I’d love to see another one of your shows, Hater,” the Star Nomad started to say, “But I don’t think there are any buses that go out to Flendar, and I wouldn’t want to impose on ridin’ with you two, especially since I know how ya like to get there early to fit in some extra practice, Hater.”

“Same goes for us,” Demurra added, “Plus I’ve got some work to do that night too. But I really do wish I could go. I’ve heard some of your practices, and you guys are getting better!”

Peepers gave a small smile at that, but Hater furrowed his brow. “Oh, and what is that supposed to mean?”

Demurra’s smile dropped. “Uh, I think it means that I was giving you a compliment.”

“But the way you said it made it sound like we were amateurs or something when we entered this competition,” Hater told her, scowling now, “‘Getting better’? We were already great!” Peepers mentally facepalmed while Dracor’s earflaps fanned out - though one gentle touch from his girlfriend made them fold back down.

“I never said that you guys were amateurs,” the blonde said coolly, “I just said that there is always room for improvement - for everyone, no matter how great they are - but I still gave you a compliment.”

“Hmph, whatever,” the skeleton said, crossing his arms, obviously not believing her, “Though I don’t know how you could think you know what my music needs or whether or not it needs ‘improvement’.”

Demurra’s look became a bit more stern. “I’ve told you before that I know more than you think, and I think I’ve been in this business long enough to know about music and bands, and what they need to do to become a success.”

“Yeah, maybe. But you don’t even play heavy metal! You probably don’t even listen to it that often! So how can you know more than me?!”

“Well, I don’t know if I ‘know’ more about heavy metal, but I think I could play it fairly well,” she said, giving a small smile. Dracor smiled as well. After all, they not only played music together, but they knew what was on each other’s MP3 players. If she was going to play what he thought she was going to play, then yes, she could definitely play it well.

“Hmph, yeah,” Hater rolled his eyes, “I’d like to see that.”

“Alright.”

“Wait, huh?”

“You want me to play? Then fine, I’ll play,” Demurra told him, continuing to give a calm yet
confident smile, “Besides, it feels like forever since I’ve actually played a song, so it should be fun.”  

While Hater was still surprised, Wander was grinning. “Ooh, so you and Drake are gonna play for us? Heh, guess we’re gettin’ our own private concert then!”

The blonde giggled. “Yep! Though, Drake probably won’t be playing with me since heavy metal isn’t really his style.” The dragon nodded, though he wasn’t at all bothered by this. Turning her head, Demurra glanced at Sylvia. “Syl, would you want to back me up on drums?”

“Gladly,” she smirked.

Now Sylvia was going to play too? Wander was grinning now, using all his will to just to stay seated. “Oooh, this is so exciting!”

“Hmph, yeah, exciting,” Hater mumbled. Maybe she would do a decent job, but he doubted that it would be anything special. ‘Probably won’t even play a heavy metal song,’ the skeletal rocker thought to himself, ‘Probably just some girly rock song that she just THINKS is heavy metal.’

Their meal was finished quickly, and Demurra and Sylvia quickly headed off to practice while the boys all stayed in the living room and waited. Thankfully, it didn’t take more than fifteen minutes or so for the girls to return - Demurra with a white electric guitar and Sylvia with her drumset - though it took a couple minutes to assemble.

As she tuned her guitar, Hater couldn’t help but smirk. Demurra was wearing a frilly pink top, and an even frillier purple skirt, with pure white high heels on her feet. Even her guitar strap was a shade of pink! Oh yeah, there was no way someone as girly as Demurra could get anywhere close to playing heavy metal - or if she could, it wouldn’t be very good. Not nearly as intense as it should be.

Even Peepers was having his doubts now, though Wander looked just as excited as ever while Dracor just smiled, admiring his girlfriend and looking forward to hearing her performance.

Playing a couple more notes just to make sure it was in tune, Demurra nodded, satisfied. “Alright,” she smiled, “Ready boys?”

“YEAH!” “Hmph, yeah, sure.”

She gave a small giggle. “Alright then.”

Bringing her pick to her strings, Demurra started playing several short, hard notes in a row, repeating this line several times. Even when Sylvia joined in with the beat of her drums, Demurra continued the intense melody. Slowly, Hater’s eyes widened, his mouth opening slightly.

Smirking to herself, Demurra gave a powerful, confident look to her audience - specifically at Hater and Peepers - as she started to sing.

“You drink the wise blood, they're gonna hear about it! You'll be taken down, brick by brick by brick! Burn the orphanage, you're gonna pay for it! They will purify, block by block by block! Demons! Come on! You got a vision, you're on a mission! Demons! Live on! And when I die hang me high!”

Her voice was just the right amount of intensity, though never letting it distract her from her playing, and even throwing in a few mini solos every once in a while, just to mix it up a bit, as if she really were giving a serious performance on a stage instead of just playing in her living room. As the song went on, Sylvia joined in. Surprisingly, despite their different voices, they clashed perfectly.
“They’re gonna bury you,
Theyr’e gonna finish
Theyr’e gonna stand em up,
Six by six by six
You pull the hood back,
I wanna know
Which way will the heavenly go!”

Even as the song continued on, the two never let up, not even once. They were giving the song their all while still focusing on making it sound good, and never going too fast or playing too hard and ruining the song.

“Demons!
Come on!
You got a vision, youre on a mission
Demons
Live on,
And when I die hang me high,
And you will answer to no one else but me,
And you will answer to no one else but me!”

And just like that, the song ended, their audience still in shock somewhat. Of course, after a moment or two, Wander started clapping. “WOO! That was AWESOME! You guys sound great together! And wow, Demurra! You’re a really great guitarist!”

Dracor gave a small sigh. “And that’s why I love her~ ...Well, one of the reasons, anyway.”

Demurra met his gaze, giving him a smile before turning to the Harbingers of Doom. “So boys? What did you think?”

“Well, it was certainly interesting,” Peepers mumbled before glancing up at his bandmate. Hater was silent for a moment. “…It was alright.”

“Oh COME ON!” Sylvia shouted, throwing her hands up in the air, “Are you serious, Bonehead?! You know there’s no point in lying! We could see your face the whole time!”

“ALRIGHT ALRIGHT, FINE!” He huffed. “That was great, okay?! I didn’t think you could pull it off but you did and you totally proved me wrong. THERE! Is that what you wanted to hear?!”

Demurra just continued to smile. “Well, ‘you did a great job’ would’ve been enough, but thanks for the extra.”

“Whatever,” he mumbled, not bothering to look at her.

“Hey, I’ve been wrong a couple of times too, you know,” she told him, “And I’m certainly not saying I’m better than you guys. I just wanted to show you that I could rock just as hard as you guys - and you did sort of challenge me, after all. No point in saying no if I know I can do it. …But I still stand by my words when I say that you guys are improving, and that doesn’t mean you started out badly.” She gave him a friendly smile. “Like I said, just a compliment.”

“…” He finally glanced up at her. “…Fine.”

“Alright.” Eh, maybe not the best ending to all of this, but at least it was something.
“...Well, now that that’s settled - Wander, do you wanna give me a hand with this?” Sylvia asked, picking up one of her drums.

“Oh, yeah sure!”

As Sylvia and Wander took care of the drums, Demurra headed back towards her room, with Dracor following her. Since it seemed like the group was separating for now, Peepers had no problem with going to his and Hater’s room and see if he had missed anything on his forums. And of course, since he didn’t really have anything else to do, Hater soon joined him.

Lying on the bed and still pouting slightly, the skeleton put on his headphones and listened to his MP3 player as he started playing a portable game, the previous few minutes and the words he’d heard from the blonde no longer replaying and echoing in his mind, but not necessarily forgotten either.

Chapter End Notes

Songs used were "Cherrybomb" by The Runaways and "Demons" by Sleigh Bells. The picture at the end was drawn by me (and yes, I know Syl was playing drums in that specific scene, but just think of the pic as representing both of Syl and Demi's awesome guitar-playing scenes in this chapter)
Chapter 16

Despite the yelling down the hall and the familiar soundtrack of a Zambini Bros. racing game, the bedroom itself was quiet. A warm light from her lamp kept the room semi-lit, while her laptop provided more than enough light to see what she was writing. Alternating between jotting down a few quick notes in her notepad and typing sentences on her computer, and she still managed to get a quick sip from her drink without faltering in her worth. Yes, after a few years of doing this, Demurra definitely knew how to multitask.

Although, doing this usually meant she was distracted from most of the outside world - especially once she put in her hot pink earbuds. “Hmm, they’ve definitely improved, although their lyrics could use some more work,” she muttered to herself, writing another quick comment down. A small smirk pulled on her lips. “Then again, at least they aren’t only using a grand total of fourteen words like their last song.” Maybe some songs could get away with being simple, but unless their song was one of those ‘big things in small packages’ deals, it wasn’t going to fly with Demurra. After all, it was her job to be strict.

“But that doesn’t mean I can’t be nice.” Switching back to email, her fingers flew across the keys as she swiftly finished up the message, sending the constructive criticism off with the hopes that it would stick. “Well, that’s four down now.” And about three more to go. Giving a small sigh - not quite annoyed but not content either - she pulled out the flashdrive and plugged her earbuds back into her MP3 player, turning it on to one of her favorite songs.

“Taking a break?”

Demurra gave a small smile. “Maybe a small one, just to clear my head.”

“Wouldn’t want to give them your worst, after all.”

“I never do.” Too tempting to ignore, she scooted over closer to the dragon, taking in his warmth.

“I still say you work too hard sometimes,” he told her, purring slightly as his girlfriend absentmindedly started petting his ears.

“Only because I let things get stacked up,” Demurra replied. After all, going to concerts took a lot out of her schedule. Heck, even just watching performances on her laptop still took time. Plus, the fact that it wasn’t just her and Dracor meant a lot more time being social instead of just working together in silence most of the day. Not that she really minded, of course. In fact, this whole summer was turning out better - and more interesting - than Demurra had expected. She certainly didn’t mind the extra company.

Sylvia was a nice girl friend to have around, and Wander was always a lot of fun. She hadn’t talked to Peepers much, but from what she’d heard from Sylvia, he was interesting at least. As for Hater, while she hadn’t exactly hated him before, she could also feel herself warming up to him. ‘And I’m not the only one,’ she thought with a smile.

“Hm? Something on your mind,” Dracor asked, glancing down at her.

“Oh nothing,” she replied simply, “Just never thought we’d actually be living with a couple of the bands from this year’s battle, though I’d say it was a pretty good surprise.”

“Yeah, I guess so. Wander and Sylvia are pretty nice.”
“Uh huh. ...And what about the Harbingers of Doom?”

The dragon paused for a moment. “...Well, I like the Watchdog. We’ve had a couple conversations about backstage tech.”

“That’s good.” She was happy to hear that her boyfriend had been making friends, as well. She wouldn’t call him anti-social, nowhere near it - and with all the concerts and parties they went to, it would be nearly impossible for him to be - though he was a bit shy. But it was nice to know that she wasn’t the only person Dracor was talking to. Although… “I can’t help but notice that you haven’t mentioned Hater yet.”

Drake didn’t give a reply, but there was a low growl in his throat. Of course, it only made the blonde giggle slightly. “Geez, I know he doesn’t make the best first impressions but-”

“But I don’t think he even tried,” he grumbled, “And besides… I don’t like how he yells at you sometimes.”

Demurra’s face softened, and she didn’t hesitate to move even closer to him, slipping her hand into his. “You’re too sweet, Drake. I know he’s a jerk sometimes, but I can handle him.”

He smiled slightly. “I know you can.” His girlfriend was certainly no pushover, and that was just one of the many things he loved about her. Still… His smile fell. “That doesn’t make it right, though.”

“I know, and usually I’d be the first to kick him out of here. But… I don’t think he does it to be a jerk, you know?”

“Not really.” Then again, he couldn’t really read people like she could. “But, you’re saying it’s like a defense mechanism or something?”

“Yeah, sort of like how you get all protective~” The dragon blushed slightly, his smile returning.

“Yeah well… Do you think he’ll ever get over it? Because I doubt he’ll get many gigs after the Battle whether or not the Harbingers win if he keeps this up.”

“I know.” She flashed an innocent smile. “But if he gets some help, maybe someone that’ll make him a bit more friendly, perhaps it’ll all work out.”

Dracor smirked. “And I think I know just who this ‘help’ is. I just hope you aren’t planning on playing matchmaker, love.”

“I don’t even need to, they’re practically together already. Although, a small push wouldn’t exactly hurt.” She then heard a small chuckle from her boyfriend, making her playfully pout. “And just what is so funny?”

“Nothing,” he replied, squeezing her hand slightly, “You just can’t help it, can you, dear?”

Demurra smirked, squeezing back. “What can I say? It’s in my nature.”

“At least I know your advice-” No matter what the subject- “is always good.”

“Of course, I wouldn’t give it otherwise.”

“In that case-” Dracor sat up slightly, giving her a lovely smile, “What do you think would be the best way to continue the evening?”

Obviously Demurra knew exactly what he was getting at, but she decided to play along. “Well, the
responsible thing to do would be to finish up work. Buuuuut…” Her fingers danced lightly along his ear, causing a pleased purr to echo through his throat. “I suppose, I could just do this tomorrow. After all, we don’t exactly have plans, do we~?”

“Mmm, just a show that night,” he replied, almost in a daze from her touch, “And even that you don’t have to go to if you don’t want to… It’s just me working the soundstage…”

“True, but I wouldn’t want you to get lonely~” She scratched his chin, making the purr grow louder.

“Whatever you want to do, love,” he told her, giving her a loving look, “Although, lonely or not, I wouldn’t mind having you now~” Demurra giggled lightly. As if she couldn’t tell. “Though I guess if you really need to, you can keep working. I wouldn’t want to distract you, after all. Besides, just as long as I have you beside me, where I can see and feel you, I don’t need anything else.”

The blonde’s heart started to melt. “Oh Drake…” No doubt about it. He was still the same sweet, loving dragon she fell in love with. Always have been, and most likely always will be.

His smile grew as she moved even closer to him, their eye contact never breaking until their lips met and their eyes fluttered shut. After nearly a minute, they separated, but their loving looks never faltered. “One more,” she told him, “Just let me finish up one more, and then my night’s free for whatever we want to do.”

Dracor nodded. “Fine with me.” Even if he wanted her now, she was always worth the wait. Still keeping their hands intertwined, Demurra pulled the laptop back onto her lap and scrolled through her email. At least this message was already pretty much written. She had listened to their demo, and written down her notes. She just had to compose and send the email, not too hard at all.

However, before she reached the message she was searching for, another one caught her eye. Or rather, the person who sent it. “No way.”

Dracor gave her a curious look. “What’s wrong?”

“Take a guess.” It only took a moment, but once he realized what she was talking about, his earflaps fanned out in an angry position.

“What does he want now?”

“Let’s see, survey says another demo for me to listen to?” She clicked open the email, and sure enough that was exactly what it was. No sooner had Demurra read the title of his latest ‘hit’ did she let out a tired groan. “Bradley, don’t you ever learn?”

“I think that’s asking a bit too much of him,” Dracor grumbled, scowling as he read the message to himself.

“You’d think after I ignored his first five messages he’d leave me alone,” she muttered as the message disappeared in a flash, forever banished to the digital trashbin (although she had a feeling it wouldn’t be the last email she would receive from him).

“At least he isn’t trying to ‘randomly run into you’ at concerts anymore.”

She smirked. “After last time, he wouldn’t dare.”

Dracor chuckled. “Definitely not.” With that bit of unpleasantness passing, Demurra quickly finished up her work, and before the couple knew it, the laptop was off and they were once again in each other’s arms. Even if her MP3 player was now on the floor as well, she could still hear music - the
music from her memories, combined with the rhythmic purrs he made with each loving moment.

And no matter what attempts at songs her ex-boyfriend sent her, there was no denying that there was no song better than this.

He let one last note echo off his guitar and through the speakers to satisfy his audience before ending the show, earning an eruption of applause. Even Hater couldn’t help but smile a little at that. Just a little though, he didn’t want to ruin his stage persona. The lights dimmed, and the stage crew began moving past them, letting Hater know that (unfortunately) they weren’t getting an encore.

“Hmph.” Fine by him, he didn’t want one anyway.

“So, pretty good show, huh?” Peepers asked him, adjusting his helmet slightly as he hopped down from his drumset.

“Yeah, I guess,” he shrugged. His drummer gave him a curious look. Just a “Yeah, I guess”? That was sort of strange.

Jogging a couple steps ahead of the skeleton, he glanced up at his bandmate. “Everything okay, Hater?”

“I - Of course it is, everything’s fine!” he answered a bit too quickly, “I mean, why wouldn’t it be?!!”

“…” Peepers stared at him for a moment. “Well, uh, if you say so…”

“I do say so,” he muttered, heading over to his guitar case. As he put his instrument away though, he kept glancing over his shoulder, as if he was expecting someone. And of course, his ever-observant eyeball companion noticed this.

‘Why is he acting so strange?’ he thought to himself as he dismantled his drums, ‘Like he’s looking for someone or waiting for someone.’ But why would he do that? Peepers was already with him, and with how anti-social he was at times, most of the time after a show he would just put his guitar away as soon as possible and then go outside to smoke while he waited to leave.

‘So what changed?’ he asked himself. They played the same music, and despite his attitude it still looked like Hater was enjoying himself on stage. In fact, tonight’s solos were some of the best Peepers had ever heard from him. They got their applause, so why was he acting so aggravated with every-

And then, it hit him like an asteroid. ‘Because the last couple shows we’ve had, they’ve been here.’ Or rather, HE’S been here, either right by Hater’s side, bouncing up and down while he excitedly told Hater how much he loved the show, or texting him as soon as the show was over (which had only happened once just because that’s how often Wander was at one of their shows).

‘That’s what has him all upset?!!’ The dinner conversation from a couple nights ago echoed through his head. ‘What, is he expecting Wander to just show up out of the blue?!’ And if he doesn’t, would that just make Hater grumpy and upset the rest of the night? But, but that didn’t make any sense! He figured that even if Hater was starting to enjoy the weird little furball’s company, one concert without him wouldn’t affect him this much! Unless…

His pupil shrunk to the size of a dot. “No way…” Then again, they had been spending a lot of time together. They were almost always sitting next to each other now, talking and hanging out. Hater had even taught him how to play a couple of his video games! And the more the Watchdog thought
about it, the more the feelings of suspicion and unease he had a few weeks ago - back when he first noticed the two hanging out - started to return.

‘Okay, calm down Peeps,’ he told himself, taking a small deep breath as he continued watching his bandmate. Still looking over his shoulder, still waiting for someone. ‘Maybe… Maybe this is just a misunderstanding! Or maybe he just, waiting for the snack guy! …Okay probably not. But, maybe they’re just friends!’ After all, would it even be possible for someone like Hater to fall for someone like Wander?!

There was no possible way!

...Well, maybe there was a slight yet still unlikely chance…

‘...Okay, maybe it’s not THAT strange, given how much they’ve been hanging out together.’ Although it was still pretty florpin’ strange to Peepers. But, maybe not necessarily BAD. ‘I guess if he keeps Hater in a good mood most of the time, it’s a good thing…”

Still, now that he had figured it out, Peepers knew that the next step would be actually letting Hater know that he knew, if nothing else just so the skeleton wouldn’t mope in silence most of the night. ...Well, this should be fun.

Once he finished putting away his drums, Peepers walked over to him. Since he wasn’t noticed, he cleared his throat.

“What is it, Peepers?”

“Oh, well, um…” How do you even start a conversation like this? Hey, how are you, I just figured out that you have a crush on a hairy spoon? Definitely not. “Uh…”

“Oh for crying out loud, spit it out, Peepers!”

The eyeball flinched. “I-I know who you’re waiting for!”

Hater stared at him for a moment, and then rolled his eyes. “Well, glad you FINALLY figured it out.”

This time, it was Peepers turn to stare. “I, huh?” Well, that was unexpected. Usually with things like this, Hater would get embarrassed and flustered and would just flat out deny his crush. Did Wander make him that happy? He felt a pinch of… something in his chest, but ignored it for now. “Well, I must say that I’m happy for you, Hater. I’ll admit it’s a bit unexpected but, well, as long as you’re happy then I’m-”

He stopped mid-sentence when he noticed the look Hater was giving him. “Peepers… What the crap are you talking about?!”

“Me? I - Wait, what are you talking about?!”

“The critic! Who else?!”

“...Critic?” The drummer’s voice was little more than a squeak now.

“Yes! Because apparently even with all those forums and blogs you read, you didn’t know that one of the critics that runs those blogs was going to be at our show tonight! I ran into him in the restroom, and it was a good thing I recognized him!” He scowled slightly. “With all the stage lights and with how dark the rest of the room was, I couldn’t exactly watch him, but I’m pretty sure he’s still here!
So, if he is still here, I don’t want to miss him! And by the way, I hope you were giving it your all out there despite being completely clueless about this.”

“I- I-!” Peepers was nearly flabbergasted. “Of course I was giving it my all! I always do!” How dare he think that he didn’t! “And, and how was I supposed to know he would be here?! They don’t exactly announce it on their blogs until after the show! It’s supposed to be a surprise for the-!”

“Ah, there!” Abandoning Peepers, he started walking towards the edge of the stage, but then stopped, his scowl returning. Curious, Peepers quickly caught up with him, and looked where Hater was staring.

Sure enough, he recognized the music critic almost immediately. Although if he was being honest, the critic certainly looked out of place in the crowd of young adult heavy metal/rock and roll fans dressed mostly in black. The man was small and bald, blue skinned with pointy ears and a bushy, white mustache and was wearing a dark blue dress-shirt, with a small tote bag at his side. From what Peepers knew about him, the critic used to be a composer and symphony director. He even heard a few of his pieces - being a closet violin player had of course exposed him to a whole new genre, whether he liked it or not - and he had to say they were pretty some pretty epic scores. Perfect for a fantasy-adventure movie or something. After he retired though, it seemed like instead of falling out of the times, he embraced them and started up his blog critiquing the newest bands and records that came out.

‘You wouldn’t really know it from looking at him though,’ Peepers couldn’t help but think. In fact, the guy almost looked bored there, though perhaps that was because of who he was talking to. And suddenly he completely understood why his bandmate was scowling.

Of all the people in the room that could be talking to the critic, it just had to be Awesome.

‘Unbelievable…’

“Tell me about it,” Hater agreed, having half a mind to go over there and tell the shark-man to take a hike. But before he could get a chance, the two said goodbye and the critic started to leave while Awesome made his way over to the Harbingers of Doom, having already spotted them. Like usual, he was giving a slightly smug grin, although his wardrobe was a bit different so he could blend in with the rest of the audience - wearing a mix of black and dark purple - although the outfit still had his ‘awesome style’ to it.

“S’up guys?” he asked, “Pretty good show tonight.”

“Hmph, only ‘pretty good’?” Hater asked, “We were GREAT out there, and don’t you try to deny it!”

“Heh, wasn’t tryin’ to,” Awesome replied, his smirk never faltering, “No sarcasm in that statement, bro.”

“Why are you here anyway?” Peepers asked, trying to sound somewhat civil but still nowhere near friendly.

Not that Awesome really cared either way. “I just saw that you dudes were playin’, and I thought I’d check it out. Nice to know you’re not wussin’ out on the competition or anything.”

Both of their eyes narrowed. “And just what is that supposed to mean?!” Hater asked him.

“It means that I’m sort of a veteran of the Battle of the Bands competish’,” he explained, “And this is usually around the time when I see a lot of bros losin’ steam. They stop getting as many gigs, or they
play the same songs over and over.” The skeleton just barely flinched at that. Maybe he wasn’t playing the same songs over and over, and he even added a couple of songs to their playlist, but he still wasn’t any closer to coming up with lyrics for his new song— “Or just becoming lame. But you two, you guys are serious.”

“Of course we are!” Peepers retorted, “We wouldn’t be in this competition if we weren’t!”

Awesome raised an eyebrow at that, but continued smirking nonetheless. “Whatever you say, eyebro. But yeah, I just wanted to congrats you guys on a good show. And Fred seemed to like it too.”

Hater perked up at that. “He did?! Er, I mean, of course he did! It was our band after all, so why wouldn’t he?!”

“Hard to say,” Awesome shrugged, “Dude can be sorta harsh at times, but he does know his stuff. Heh, still remember the first review he gave me. But he really is a cool guy once you get to know him.”

Peepers blinked. “Wait, you know him?”

Awesome quickly gave him a look. “Dude, were you not listening? I’ve been doing the Battle for a few years now, so of course I know ‘im. He’s always going around the galaxy and listening to performances during the summer. I’ve even ran into him at the Final Battle a couple of times.”

“Hmph,” Hater said simply, trying not to seem impressed, “Well gee, thanks for giving us a chance to talk to him.”

“Wasn’t trying to hog him on purpose, bones. The guy doesn’t talk to the bands he reviews until AFTER he reviews them, probably cause he doesn’t want them sucking up to try and get a better review, and I can’t really blame him for that one. But hey Hatey, if you really want me to, I’ll introduce you guys the next time we see him.”

“I can introduce myself, thanks.” Well, at least they hadn’t lost any opportunities. Still, the fact that Awesome was so close to someone in the industry - someone who might end up being a judge in the Final Battle - just seemed like an unfair advantage to him, but no matter. ‘Just wait until I’ve won, fish-man,’ he thought with a determined scowl, ‘then I’LL be the one with all the connections!’

“If you say so,” Awesome said casually, shrugging again with not a hint of taunting - which was actually sort of surprising to the two bandmates. Sure the cocky attitude and swagger was still there, but… maybe he wasn’t that much of a jerk. “Oh, and b-t-dubs, I’ll probably be stopping by Axalis in a week or so, just to take a small break from touring and have a good old fashioned club party there since I couldn’t make it to Drake and Demi’s.” His grin widened. “And of course, I wouldn’t mind getting a chance to party with Syl. From what I’ve heard, girl’s got some wild moves to bring out on the dancefloor.”

Hater rolled his eyes while Peepers shot the shark-man a glare. Jerk or not, that certainly didn’t mean they liked the guy. “Yeah, have fun with that.”

“Believe me, I will. Anyway, see ya later Hatey, Peeps.” He started to walk away, and was nearly gone when Hater had a thought.

“Hey, Awesome!”

He looked over his shoulder. “Hm?”
“That one show you did a few weeks back, the one with all the fireworks and pyrotechnics? Where the heck did you get all of that anyway?”

Awesome stared at him for a moment, and then smirked. “Wouldn’t you like to know~?” He laughed when the skeleton gave him a strong glare. “Sorry Hatey! Professionals never reveal their secrets!” And with that, he left the two alone.

“I really hate that guy sometimes,” Hater muttered, crossing his arms.

“Ha, ‘sometimes’. More like all the time!”

“Yeah, pretty much. ...So what was that thing you were talking about earlier?”

Peepers’ eye widened. “Uh, w-well - You know what? It’s not important. I mean, I’m kinda out of it anyway since we just played a show and I didn’t get a lot of sleep last night, you know how it is! So yeah, just forget about it! Heh…”

For a very tense moment, Hater furrowed his brow and stared at his bandmate, but thankfully his excuse was soon accepted. “Whatever.” Since he didn’t have a reason to stay anymore, he started to walk away from the Watchdog. “Just hurry up and make sure we get our paycheck. I’ll be outside.”

“Okay, got it.” As soon as the skeletal guitarist was out of earshot, Peepers gave a relieved sigh. That could’ve been bad. “What was I thinking?” he asked himself as he headed over to the speakers to start packing them up, “Those two together? No way! Good thing he bought that excuse.” He wasn’t exactly looking forward to getting zapped anytime soon…

The nighttime air was pretty mild, not too warm or chilly. Almost relaxing even. Reaching into his pants pocket, Hater pulled out his cigarettes, as well as his cell phone. Turning it on, he saw that he had already received a message from a few minutes ago, ignoring it despite hearing the alert. Of course, he already knew who it was from.

From Wander: Heya Hater!! Just finished watching the livestream of your concert! :D It was really neat of the club to do that! Anyway, you guys did great! d-(^_^)-b Hope the rest of your night’s going well!!

A small smile made its way onto his boney lips as he typed up a reply:

“Yeah. Thanks. Night’s going okay, I guess.” And after a moment, he added “Thanks for asking wander. Hope yours is going well too” before hitting ‘send’.

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My Concert Experience, this week with Harbingers of Doom:

Interesting name for a band, though given their style it certainly fits. But, let’s move onto the band itself, shall we? …

... Yes, even if they stick to one genre, their songs give a nice variety and have a range of lyrical and instrumental work, with some of the best songs being…

...It may be a cliche, but the guitar solos are some of the best parts of the performance, and remain entertaining throughout, never dragging too long. And the added effects certainly add some appeal and entertainment value…
...Overall, an enjoyable concert with little to no downsides. I highly recommend this act for anyone to see, and I wish them good luck in the annual, universe-wide Battle of the Bands competition, as well as with their futures as professional musicians.

“You see! I told ya you’d get a good review!” Wander grinned while Hater continued to stare at the screen, a smile slowly forming on his face as well. After a stressful week of waiting, the review he was hoping for was finally here! Hearing Wander, he tried to force his surprise and happiness back a bit.

“Yeah well, I knew he was going to like it! They are my songs and my band, after all. Who wouldn’t like it?”

“Who knows? I guess folks that don’t care much for the heavier music. But I can’t say I’m one of those people,” Wander told him - not too much of a surprise there - “And I’ve gotta agree, the music you and Peepers play is definitely great to listen to!”

That time, Hater let himself smile. “Yeah, I know. ...Thanks.”

Wander’s smile softened. “No problem, Hater.” Just then, the door opened. It was Sylvia and Peepers turn to get groceries, but rather than put them away, they quickly sat the bags down on the floor and ran towards the couch once they saw the laptop on Hater’s lap.

“Is that your guys’ review?” Sylvia asked as she lifted Peepers onto the back of the couch so he could see.

“Yep!” her bandmate replied before Hater could, “And it’s a good one! All positive!”

“Really?!” Peepers exclaimed, trying his best to read the text on the screen while still listen to the conversation, “That’s amazing! I didn’t think he’d give us that good of a review, given this is the first time he’s actually heard us.”

Hater gave him a small look. “Are you saying we don’t make a good first impression, Peepers?”

“O-Oh, no! Not at all! I’m just saying-”

“Wow, it’s a pretty long one too,” Sylvia commented.

“Yeah,” Wander nodded, “Longer than ours. Guess he just had more ‘ta-”

Hater and Peepers both immediately looked away from the review in shock. “Yours?!” they said in disbelief.

“Yeah!” the furball answered with a smile, “He came to one of our shows last week!”

“But, but why didn’t you say anything about it?! And you-!” He looked at Peepers. “You’re the one who goes to all these dumb blogs, why didn’t you say anything about it?!”

The Watchdog only gave his bandmate a flat look in return. “Well Hater, when we have such long practices, I usually don’t have time to check all the blogs.”

Gee Hater, if I thought you were that interested in it, I would’ve told ya right away,” Wander told him, rubbing his neck, “Although to be fair, it was just posted a few days ago. Hey, that means if ya want, you can still read it!”

“Nah, that’s fine.” After all, Hater knew first hand what it was like to see and listen to one of Wander
and Sylvia’s performances for the first time, so he didn’t need some review reminding him.

“Well, congrats you two,” Sylvia said with a nod and a smile, “You guys deserved that good review.”

“No doubt,” Demurra added as she walked into the living room and towards the abandoned grocery bags. She had read the review before Hater and Wander had even seen it, so she knew what they were talking about. Hater didn’t give a reply to that, but he did give a small smile.

“We should celebrate!” Wander suggested as he stood up from his seat, “Like throw a party or somethin’!” The skeleton’s smile didn’t stay too long once he heard that, since he still wasn’t a huge fan of parties, even if they were for him.

Sylvia thought for a moment. “Well, didn’t we decide that we were going to Awesome’s party tomorrow? That could kinda be used as a celebration party, I guess.”

“Yeahhhhh no,” Hater said with a flat look, “No way, not interested.”

“And I’m definitely agreeing with him,” Peepers added.

The Zbornak didn’t even look too surprised by this - nor did anyone else in the room. “Well, then I guess we could all do something special Sunday night. Maybe go out to eat or somethin’?”

“But don’t we already eat out pretty often?” Peepers commented, earning a small look from the admirable drummer.

“Well then, you got any other ideas, Eyesore?”

“Look, it doesn’t matter anyway,” Hater said before the Watchdog could even get a word out (much to his annoyance), “We don’t need to ‘celebrate’ or whatever. It’s not THAT big of a deal.”

“Uhh, considering just how many people read his blog, Hater, it sort of is,” Demurra told him. This could potentially earn the duo a ton of new fans. “You guys at least deserve to do something fun, everyone needs a break from work and rehearsals every once in a while.”

“Grrrr, fine, whatever. Just, no dumb parties,” he mumbled. At that moment, he felt something warm and furry leaning on his shoulder.

“Wellllll~ If ya don’t want a party, I did read about somewhere close by that could be a lot of fun,” Wander told him, grinning in excitement once more.

Hater gave him a curious and cautious look. “And what exactly is this place?”

“Aw, don’t you want it to be a surprise?”

“Hmph, I hate surprises.”

“Oh come on, Bonehead, live a little!”

“I LIVE PLENTY!”

“Hater.” He turned his attention back to the Star Nomad, who was giving more of a gentle smile now. “I promise you’ll like it, just trust me.”

“...” Hater glanced away, hoping he was just imagining the warmth on his face. “Fine - but if I hate it, we leave when I say, got it?”
“No problem,” Wander nodded, agreeing.

“Alright, well, that’s settled then,” Sylvia said, “So Wander and I are going to Awesome’s party tomorrow, and then all of us are going to this ‘surprise’ on Sunday.” Even to the Zbornak, it sounded like a fun weekend.

“Um, maybe I’ll go to the party as well,” Peepers said quickly, earning a curious look from nearly everyone in the room, “I mean, I don’t really have anything else to do here.”

“Hey, as long as I don’t have to drag your drunk butt home, I’m fine with it.”

“Trust me, you won’t. No way I’m making that mistake twice in one month…”

“And I think I’m gonna stay home this time,” Wander added, surprising everyone even more, especially given how much Wander enjoyed parties and dancing.

Unable to help himself, Hater asked “Why are you doing that?” But the Star Nomad only gave a smile and a small shrug. But he wasn’t the only one smiling.

“Well, guess you guys will have the place to yourself then,” Demurra told them.

“Yeah… Wait, what?!?”

“Yeah, Drake and I both have things related to work, and then we’re meeting each other for a late night dinner date,” she explained, “So you guys get the apartment all to yourselves.”

“…Oh…” It wasn’t that big of a deal. He had been alone in the their apartment before, after all. ...So why did being alone with Wander make it seem different? And why did he feel nervous and excited just thinking about it?

He mentally smacked himself. ‘You know why, idiot! Don’t try to play dumb because it’s not working!’ Yeah he knew that, but what was the alternative? No, wait, he knew that too. Not just because it was obvious, but because he had been thinking about it for over a week now, maybe even longer than that. ‘Because thinking about it’s the easy part…’ he thought with a silent sigh.

Soon enough, with the excitement of the review passed, Wander and Sylvia ended up heading back to their room to practice (after she and Peepers helped put away groceries, of course), Demurra went back to doing whatever she did, and Hater decided to just watch tv in the living room while Peepers took some time to just relax on the couch with his laptop, typing away on it about who knows what.

Unfortunately since it was the middle of the day, there wasn’t much on tv to provide distraction. Just talk shows and reruns of other shows Hater didn’t care about. Because of this, most of the time he was concentrating more on Peepers’ typing or the faint, happy music coming from the closed door down the hall.

After about half an hour though, the music stopped and the door open. Turning his head as casually as he possibly could, he saw Sylvia leave the bedroom and head into the restroom. Ah, good. She always took a while when she went into the restroom - although that made mornings pretty annoying.

Even so, Hater decided to just take the opportunity handed to him before he decided to chicken out. Taking a small breath, he stood up and headed down the hall. Thankfully, Peepers didn’t seem to notice, or if he did he chose not to comment.

He heard a couple plucks of a guitar as he got closer. Just random notes though, but even those
sounded like a sort of strange little song in the furball’s hands. “Hater?” He jolted. He had reached the doorway without even realizing it. “Well hey buddy!”

“Oh, uh, yeah, hey,” he nodded, looking everywhere but at Wander.

The Star Nomad blinked at this. “Is everything alright, Hater?” he asked, setting his green guitar on the bed.

“Yes!” he answered, a bit too loudly and a bit too quickly, “Er, I mean, y-yeah I’m fine. Everything’s alright.”

“Oh. Well, do ya need somethin’, or did you just stop by to say hi?”

“Well, I guess I sorta needed something but, I mean it’s not that important so, if you’re busy or whatever I can just, come back later…”

“Actually,” Wander started to say with a smile, “I’m all ears. So what is?”

“U-Uh, well…” Come on, spit it out already! “Y-You know how tomorrow, it’s just gonna be the two of us? Here? In the apartment?”

Wander nodded, his hat and hair bouncing a bit as he did this. “Yeah?”

“Well, I mean… It would be pretty dumb just to stay here when everyone else is going out. It’s a Saturday night, we should do something cool! And it’s not like there’s anything to do around here anyway. …I mean, unless there was something you needed to do here like practice or work on a song or-”

“Nope,” Wander replied, smile still on his face - in fact, had it gotten bigger? - “Can’t really think of anything I needed to do.”

“Oh. Good. Well, then yeah, it would be a waste of time just to sit here tomorrow. So, uh… I guess we should, you know, do something tomorrow night.”

“I guess so. What do you think we should do?”

“I don’t know! Just something! This city’s big enough with plenty of stuff in it so surely there’s something around here we can do!” Realizing he was shouting, he took a moment to try and calm himself. “So, uh, yeah. If you want to, you and I can just go ou- g-go and, you know, do something tomorrow night.”

Wander was practically grinning by now. “Yeah, that sounds great! I’d love to!” The skeleton felt his non-existent heart jump a bit at not just the fact that he accepted the invitation, but also at just how florping happy he was again. Then again, overly obnoxious happiness and excitement was nothing new for Wander, but still...

“So,” he said with a small chuckle, “I’ll be seein’ ya tomorrow night then?”

“Oh, y-yeah, I guess so. And we can just decide what we do then.” Hearing the flush of a toilet, Hater then gave a rushed goodbye before swiftly turning on his heel and walked back into the living room, sitting down without a word. Of course, this didn’t stop Peepers from giving him a curious look.

“Hater?”

“Huh? Oh, what is it, Peepers?”
“You okay? What’d you leave the room for?”

“Nothing! Just… Just had to go do something real quick, okay?!” No, not just something. A big thing.

Hater had just asked a cute, weird, guitar playing hairy spoon out on a date, and it was both the best and the worst thing he had ever done. But he couldn’t help but wonder, if this was what it was like just to ask, good Glorn, what would the actual date be like?!
“Come on! Come on! Doh! So close!”

“Need my help again, Eyesore?”

“Hmph, I’d rather continue trying to beat this level myself, thank you very much Za-bornak.”

“Eh, suit yourself. Although you may wanna watch out for that troll just after the pit.”

“What? Where would he even come from? Oh come on! Why is this pit so hard to jump over?!”

Sylvia just chuckled, rolling her eyes slightly while the Watchdog continued growling in frustration. “Instead of double jumping at the beginning of the pit, jump once and then jump again in the middle.”

“But that’s what I’ve been doing!”

“Obviously you haven’t if you still can’t beat it, Peepers!” a voice shouted from down the hall, making Sylvia laugh and Peepers growl some more.

“Oh be quiet! And honestly it’s the game design that’s making it difficult! The game itself isn’t that hard!”

“Ha, wait until the final boss. Now that guy’s a real pain, took me like two hours to be him.”

He blinked. “Wait, you actually beat this game?”

“BEFORE ME?!” Hater added.

The drummer only smirked. “Boys, when you’ve had a lifetime of playing video games and just happened to be the one in the family that your brothers turn to when they can’t beat a level, you’ll find that no game is impossible to beat.”

“I DIDN’T SAY IT WAS IMPOSSIBLE FOR ME TO BEAT! I JUST SAID I HAVEN’T DONE IT YET!” There was a pause. “AND STOP BORROWING MY GAMES WITHOUT ASKING FIRST!”

“Right, got it,” she nodded, turning back to the game, “Geez.”

“Eh, you get used to it,” Peepers shrugged, “But yeah, you really should - Oh! Yes! Got it! See, I told - ZREBDANK!”

Sylvia however didn’t even flinch in surprise. “Yep. There’s the troll I was talking about.” After watching his character die (again), Peepers just sighed and turned the game off.

“Oh well. You said Awesome was going to pick us up in a few minutes anyway, right?”

“Yes. And I still can’t believe you actually wanted to come with me. What, are you a secret party animal or somethin’?”
He quickly averted his gaze. “Ah, well, I-like I said, I don’t have anything else to do here so, why not?”

“Eh, fair enough.” Stretching slightly, Sylvia stood up, walking towards the front door. Awesome’s parties didn’t exactly have a dress code - although he did insist that everyone dress ‘awesomely’, whatever that meant - but she still decided to dress up a bit. Nothing too girly or outside of her comfort zone though, but still something she looked great in.

Her hair had been put into a ponytail, with a couple of silver necklaces around her neck - mixing well with her numerous tattoos. As for the outfit herself, she had decided on a black top and dark purple pants, along with shoes that weren’t too uncomfortable while still looking fashionable (though she still preferred being barefoot). All of her piercings were still there of course, and while she wasn’t wearing any makeup, Peepers still couldn’t help but stare for a moment when he first saw her in her party outfit.

‘As if she would need makeup or fancy accessories to look good,’ he thought to himself. Since he figured casual yet cool was the best way to go, Peepers hadn’t really mixed up his own outfit too much. Just dark blue jeans, a black tee and a red sweatshirt with their band logo on the back, and he considered himself good. Although… He glanced down at his feet. He was wearing his usual red chucks, but he had considered wearing the platform shoes he’d packed as well.

‘They do make me look taller… No, no, forget it,’ he scolded himself. With his luck, Awesome would take one look at his platform shoes and laugh him out of the party. Besides, those things were hard to dance in anyway, and even if he only got one dance with Sylvia, he still wanted it to be good.

“I just hope he’s here soon. ...Why are we letting him pick us up again?”

“Because he offered?” Sylvia replied, stating the obvious, “Unless you want to walk all the way to the club.”

“In the amount of time it took to wait for him, we probably could’ve been at the club by now,” Peepers mumbled, earning a small whack from Sylvia’s tail. “Hey!”

“That’s what happens when you complain. Look, he’ll be here soon, okay?”

“Fine.” He leaned back on the couch, only to jolt back up a moment later. Something heavy fell to the floor - making a loud sound despite being muffled by a closed door - followed by a frustrated groan.

“...What the heck is Bonehead doing in there?”

The Watchdog just sighed and rolled his eye slightly. “I wish I knew.”

...No...No...No! The skeleton growled once more as he dug through his pile of clothes for a third time. As much as he hated to admit it, Hater had never been on a date before, and he just wanted to double check - though at this point it was more like quadruple checking - to make sure he had the right outfit. At least out of all the things that could go wrong tonight, this was actually something he could control.

“Alright… Tee shirts are fine, right? I mean, maybe if they don’t have logos or stains or anything on them, they’re considered ‘nice’. So, this-” he glanced down at himself. He was currently wearing a red tee that wasn’t too loose but not too tight either. “Should be good! I mean, I’m not going to wear a sweater!” That would just make him all sweaty, as if he needed any help with that. “And it’s not
like I have a ton of dress shirts so, yeah, this is good.”

Giving a small sigh, he stood up - and immediately felt a cool wind pass over his boney knees. “...Right.” Speeding over to his suitcase, he looked through his bottoms. “Shorts, jeans, stage pants, more jeans, ki- wait, kilt?” Oh yeah, Ember told him to bring formal clothes, just in case (and kilts were a heck of a lot more comfortable than stiff, itchy dress-pants). Still, he stared at the kilt for a moment before tossing it aside, figuring it'd be too fancy. Or, maybe not fancy enough? Grop, he didn’t even know what Wander was expecting him to wear!

He gripped his head, trying not to let his frustration get the better of him. “Okay, it’s not like we’re planning on going to a fancy restaurant - or, at least I’m pretty sure that’s not what he’s planning - so I shouldn’t need formal. But, but what if he wants to go super casual and I look like the weird one?!?”

Before he could worry any more, there was a knock at the door. “GO AWAY PEEPERS, I’M BUSY!”

“Whoops! Sorry! Didn’t mean ‘ta bother ya, Hater!” His eyes widened. Definitely not Peepers. “WAIT! Wander!”

“Hm? You need somethin’, Hater? I-”

“DON’T COME IN!” he shouted quickly, grabbing a pillow and covering up his boxers just in case, “Just, stay right there!” There was a small moment of awkward silence. “Uh... G-Got any ideas for what we’re doing tonight, yet?”

“Oh, well, I’d just figured that since we have your van tonight, we’d just drive around and see what caught our attention. After all, you said it yourself, there must be tons of fun things to do around here! We just have to look for ‘em!”

“Yeah, okay...” Hater relaxed slightly. So it was going to be pretty casual then. “Okay... Oh, you can go now.”

He heard a small giggle. “Alrighty! Oh, and by the way, Syl and Peepers just left with Awesome, just ‘ta let ya know!”

Of course Wander’s tone wasn’t one of urgency, nor did it make him seem like he wanted Hater to hurry up, but the skeletal rocker still felt the need to do so. “I’ll be out in a few minutes!”

“Okay!” He listened to the footsteps move away from the door, and then he looked back down at his clothes. After a couple more seconds of thinking, he finally decided on a pair of black jeans, along with his band jacket. It felt sort of silly wearing it when he knew he wasn’t going to be performing, but even so it calmed him down slightly - even if it didn’t have a hood to hide under. Looking at himself in the mirror one last time, he took a deep breath and walked out the bedroom door.

Wander was sitting in one of the plush living room chairs as he waited, casually kicking his feet back and forth as he did so. He still wore his yellow, tie-dyed tee and worn, blue shoes, but his hat and multi-colored bead necklace were noticeably missing. It also looked like he’d ran a comb through his hair more than a few times, which surprisingly did make a bit of a difference on his normally wild and bouncy hair, though it still didn’t look too stiff or neat.

As soon as the Star Nomad spotted Hater, he smiled and leapt up from his seat. “So, ready to go?”

“U-Uh.” Hater quickly cleared his throat, forcing himself to at least try to act casual. “Yeah, sure. Let’s go.” He reached into his pocket, and then froze. “...Uh, one sec.” He quickly rushed back to
his room, returning with his car keys in hand and a light, green blush on his face. “Let’s go.”

“Right behind ya,” Wander smiled, making sure to close and lock the door as they left the apartment.

The walk downstairs was silent, making Hater feel even more nervous. ‘Of course he picks the one time I actually WANT him to talk to shut up!’ he thought to himself, still trying his best to stay calm. ‘After all, it’s just a date… Your first date ever… with Wander…’

Wander noticed him clench his hands. “Everything alright, Ha~”

“YES!” The furball blinked. “Uh, I mean, yes! I’m fine! Just, let’s just hurry up, before things start closing!”

He gave a small chuckle. “Okay. Your van’s in the back parking lot, right?”

“Uh, yeah.” So they headed towards the back of the lobby, with Wander rushing ahead to reach the door first, opening it wide. Hater couldn’t help but roll his eyes a bit, but a small smile still formed on his face. “Thanks,” he mumbled.

“You’re very welcome!” Once in the empty parking lot, Hater unlocked his car, and they both got inside. Despite being in it before, Wander still immediately started to look around in awe and excitement at the inside of the van while Hater just adjusted his mirrors. “This must’ve cost a pretty penny, huh?”

“Well, actually my mom gave it to me, and she said it was pretty cheap,” Hater admitted as they both put on their seatbelts, “But the repairs and maintenance sure is expensive.”

“Well, even so I’d say it’s worth it, this van is just so neat!” The skeleton smirked slightly in amusement. Once he turned the key, the engine roared to life and loud rock music burst out of the speakers. Wander winced a bit at the volume, but his smile never faltered. In fact, it probably grew a bit. This was just so exciting.

“So uh, just pick a direction and start driving, right?” Hater asked as he got ready to pull out of his parking space.

“Yep!” Wander chirped, “Although, I’d say findin’ somewhere to eat supper at might be a good place to start, but hey, whatever works for you works for me!”

Of course he wasn’t surprised. “Well, there should be at least one decent restaurant close by.” With that, he looked over his shoulder, backed out slightly, and then turned sharply as he rushed out of the parking lot and out onto the street.

“Whoa!”

“What? I drive this fast all the time.”

“Oh, I don’t mind! I like fast!” He laughed a bit. “Guess it just caught me off guard. But don’t worry, I’m good!”

The skeleton smiled slightly before looking back at the road, keeping his eyes peeled for any restaurants. “Good.”

There were a lot of things Wander loved about traveling. The new sights, the smells and sounds, the
people, you name it! If it was new, strange, unusual or even just simply something he hadn’t seen before, the nomad thought it was amazing. All of that combined with the fact that he was with his best friend and his new friends, along with the fact that he was playing the music he loved for new people every week, and he certainly didn’t regret his decision to travel the universe for the summer.

However, that didn’t mean there wasn’t a bit of a downside to traveling. After all, this was the longest he’d ever been away from home. Of course there were always phone calls and postcards, but sometimes it just wasn’t enough. Despite having fun and enjoying himself, he did occasionally feel the ache of homesickness in the pit of his stomach, though thankfully it never lasted long.

Because of this, when Hater pointed out a restaurant that Wander could easily tell served Yonderian cuisine, he just couldn’t resist eating there. But even so...

“You sure this is alright, Hater?” he asked as they walked inside, “There isn’t gonna be a lot of meat here.”

“Hey, it’s not like meat’s the only thing I eat! I’ll be fine!” Hater insisted, “Besides, I’m sure there’s some good-tasting vegetables and stuff here.” Hopefully. After a couple minutes, the two were sat down at a table and were given menus, dinner rolls and water for their drinks.

After saying thank you, Wander opened his menu with a grin, his eyes darting back and forth quickly as he read. Hater on the other hand was a bit slower, since he was still concentrating on the atmosphere and smells of the restaurant. Most of the decor had stars on it, but at the same time it didn’t look too tacky. In fact, it actually looked pretty nice, with a coat of light blue paint on the walls to pull it all together. As for the smells… Well, he could definitely tell they served a lot of vegetables.

Crinkling his nose, the skeleton opened the menu. As soon as he did, the words ‘chicken’ and ‘fries’ caught his attention right away. Though, once he read the actual description, his excitement dropped a little, but he was still interested simply cause it looked like the best thing on the menu to him.

“Peppellar Chicken platter, with rice and sweet potato fries?”

“Ooh! The sweet potatah’ fries are pretty good!” Wander told him, “I bet you’ll love ‘em! And I’ve heard the chicken’s pretty good too!”

“But I thought you said they didn’t have meat here? ...Oh great, it’s not made out of tofu, is it?”

“Nope, and I said they wouldn’t have a lot of meat here. Yeah, most of us are vegetarians, but there’s still people who eat meat, and Peppellar Chicken’s the most popular one!”

“Hmm.” He thought for a moment before closing his menu. “Well, if you say so.” He just hoped it would be enough for him, given his appetite.

Once their orders were taken, the table fell silent, with Wander just smiling softly as he glanced around the dining room and occasionally out the window while Hater just felt more and more awkward. It was a bit ironic actually… Hater scowled. He hated irony. “...Soooo…”

“Hm?” Wander looked at him curiously, “Yeah?”

“Oh, um.” Come on! Think of something! “Got any shows coming up?”

“A couple,” the Star Nomad replied, “And they should be pretty fun! Gonna head over to Waria next Thursday night and play a show the next day. Then we may stay out the rest of the weekend and explore Vetune a bit, maybe get a show there. Although, we may wanna think about packin’ a coat, Vetune’s pretty cold - even in the summer!”
“Guess that means no outside shows then,” he commented, his voice sounding a bit flatter than he actually felt.

“Hm, I guess not. Although, it’s not impossible. Maybe we could put together an ice stage, or play in the snow - oops, I mean, play our instruments in the snow.” He gave a small laugh. “I think it would be fun!”

“Maybe, but wouldn’t all that snow and ice ruin your equipment?”

Wander’s smile faltered a bit, and Hater immediately felt guilty. But before he could try to correct himself, the furball’s smile returned and was just as big - if not moreso - than before. “Well! Guess we’ll just have to find us a warm and cozy cabin or ski resort to play at! Nothin’ wrong with that!”

Hater blinked, and then smiled a little himself, not even noticing how much he was relaxing now. “Guess not.”

“What about you? Any news to report?”

“Eh, we’ve got a show Saturday, but it sounds like it’s gonna be pretty small,” Hater scowled, “It was the only one we could get. Hmph, like we need those other venues anyway, it’s their loss!” It wasn’t as if he had played a ton of stadium sized shows, but even so, when they were just playing in a small club that didn’t even have a stage, then what was the point of even going?

“Well, I’m sure the people who do show up will enjoy it,” the ever optimistic Wander replied, “And then they might tell their friends, who’ll listen to a recording of you guys and tell their friends, and so on!”

“Hmph, you’re starting to sound like Demurra.”

“Aw, thanks! She sure does give good advice, doesn’t she?”

“I guess… But how does she know all this stuff anyway? I mean, what’s her job even? She’s online about as much as Peepers, but I’m pretty sure she’s not checking dumb forums and chatrooms.” The more he thought about it, the more curious he became. “I think whatever she does, Dracor does it with her. But if he does the tech stuff, then what does she do?”

Wander just simply shrugged. “Dunno! Guess I’ve never really been too curious about it.” Besides it wasn’t any of his business - although he would be lying if he said that he wasn’t curious about her job now. Maybe he would ask sometime.

“It’s still kinda weird,” the skeleton mumbled, picking at a small spot on the table.

“...So, how’s that song of yours going?” His sharp, skeletal finger scratched the shiny brown surface, and after a moment his horns drooped. “Oh. ...Well, don’t worry, Hater! I’m sure you’ll get it soon!”

Hater forced himself to look up, giving the nomad a sharp glare. “Wander, I’ve been working on this song for more than two weeks, and I haven’t been able to come up with a single lyric. Not even a single word!” He glanced away. “At this point, it seems pretty pointless.”

“Aw, don’t say that! Nothin’s pointless! And besides, if you really can’t think of anything, you could always just play it as an instrumental track!”

“You mean like what you do? Yeah, that’s not really my style.” Besides, he couldn’t really explain it, but it felt like the song needed lyrics. Not just any lyrics though, great ones. Ones that fit so well with the melody that you couldn’t imagine one without the other. ...Now if only he could actually
As he gave a small sigh, he could feel something touching his feet. Looking back up at Wander, he saw an expression on his furry face that seemed like a mix of playfulness and understanding. “Don’t worry about it, Hater. Things’ll work out, trust me.”

“Hmph, easy for you to say.” But even so, with that smile of his and the fact that there wasn’t a hint of doubt in his voice, Hater couldn’t help but believe him, just a little. Suddenly, there was another tap on his foot. “Hey!”


“You know what!” Hater shouted, barely even noticing that he was smirking now as he tapped Wander’s foot back.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about!” Wander insisted before tickling the bottom of Hater’s foot, making the skeleton blush slightly as he grinned.

“Oh, you are so going to get it!” With that, he gave a kick, not realizing just how hard it was.

“OW!” His smile quickly fell as he watched Wander reach down and rub his shin. “O-Oh! Sorry! Sorry! Uh, didn’t mean to kick you that hard.” Were people even supposed to kick each other in foosie? Grop, he was such an idiot!

Thankfully, Wander seemed to take it with good humor. “Heh, it’s fine, Hater,” he insisted, “Although I think it’s safe to say that you won this time.”

Hater raised an eyebrow. “‘This time’? If we play again I might end up accidentally breaking your foot.” But Wander just gave a laugh, and Hater soon found his smile returning.

As they waited for their food he casual conversation continued, moving between topics smoothly and being enjoyable, even when one of them hogged the conversation. And between Wander’s love for details and stories and Hater’s numerous opinions on pretty much everything, this happened quite a bit. Thankfully, neither one of them really minded listening to the other.

“I’m just saying, it’s not that weird! In fact, with how cool it looks - especially on me - I don’t understand why more bands don’t wear facepaint! I mean-”

“Excuse me, Sirs?” Hater paused, and looked up at the waitress, sitting back in his seat. She was carrying two trays with their food as well as another basket of bread, and they weren’t exactly getting any lighter.

“Oh! Let me help you with that!” Wander insisted, helping her set one of the trays down, “And I must say, this food looks great! My compliments to the chef - and the waitstaff for bringing it to us!” The woman gave him a smile and an appreciative nod before leaving the two alone once more.

Of course, while Wander almost immediately started to dig into his food, Hater just stared at his plates. Other than the specks of red and purple, the chicken looked pretty plain. Haven’t these people ever heard of flavoring? And she forgot the ketchup! ...Wait, did people put ketchup on sweet potato fries?

“Mmm~,” Wander hummed, closing his eyes for a moment to savor the cool, crunchy flavor of his salad before looking over at Hater. Swallowing, he asked, “Aren’t you gonna eat? If somethin’s wrong, I can go try and get the waitress again.”
“Oh, no, everything’s fine!” He picked up his fork and poked the piece of chicken a couple of times before stabbing it. At least it was tender, and it didn’t seem dry either. Both good signs. Smiling slightly, he started to raise it to his mouth-

“OH! Wait!”

He stopped. “What?”

“It nearly slipped my mind! You should probably try cuttin’ your chicken into itty bitty pieces, it’s pretty spicy, and I wouldn’t want you to get burned.”

Hater gave him a look. “Wander, please, I actually LIKE spicy food. I think I can handle a little piece of chicken.” To prove his point, he once again brought the chicken to his mouth and took a big bite of it.

“Hmm,” he blinked. Not bad. Still sorta tasteless, but there was a bit of something that gave it a bit of a pinch. Though that pinch seemed to become more of a bite as he chewed, but Hater wasn’t a quitter. He wasn’t about to let anyone see him sweat (literally). So, he chewed the piece a couple more times before swallowing.

“See! T-Told you!” His voice became a bit raspy, almost as if he was out of breath as the bit of burning he had felt seemed to increase. “I, I can totally handle spi- spicy - spicy!” Grop, he couldn’t take it anymore! Grabbing his glass of water, Hater chugged it as fast as he could, not caring if he could feel some of it spill out of his jaw and down his chin.

Even when he finished his drink, it still felt like the flames of the chicken were still burning, but at least they were a bit more bearable. “Grop… What kind of spices was that?! I didn’t even see any on the-”

He could feel two sensations at once - the touch of his now partially soaked tee shirt, and the stares coming from a certain furball (and probably a few other people in the restaurant). “U-Uh…” He could feel his face heating up now as he growled. “Stupid chicken…”

Wander chuckled. “You know, if you mix a bit of rice with it, it should make a bit easier ‘ta handle. Bread helps get rid of the burning too.” There wasn’t a hint of teasing or amusement in his voice, but even so Hater couldn’t help but feel just a bit foolish.

“Whatever…” Grabbing a fry, he munched on that as he kept his eye on his food. When he didn’t hear anything from Wander, that just made him feel worse. ‘Nice going,’ he told himself, ‘Way to totally embarrass yourself! Do you know how stupid you just looked right now?! You-!’

A bit of movement from across the table made him jolt slightly and glance up. Curious, he watched as Wander poured some of the water from his glass into Hater’s. “Just in case the waitress doesn’t come back for a while,” he explained with a smile once he was finished. Hater only blinked and stared for a moment before rolling his eyes slightly.

“That was stupid. Now you’re just going to run out of water quicker.”

“Maybe. Good thing we can get refills.” With that, he picked up his fork and continued eating, though he kept his eyes on Hater, that same sweet smile on his face. “So, what were we talking about before?”

He stared for a moment more before picking up his fork and knife, cutting up his chicken. “It doesn’t really matter. But didn’t you say you had a story or something?”
“Oh yeah! I wanted to wait until we had food to eat, just cause this story isn’t really as fun to listen to on an empty stomach. It just ends up makin’ you really hungry! But anyway, Syl and I went to this farmer’s market on Yonderia’s moon, and out of all the things they could’a sold there, you would not believe what we found…”

“Mmm, looks like it’s two for two, cause that was just as delectishious as our supper!”

“Still not a real word. But yeah, I guess it was pretty good.” Who would’ve thought that something called sweet potatoes would be good. Maybe because they were cut like fries? Whatever, the meal was still better than he thought it would be, but even so he was glad they decided to stop at Fleebleport’s food truck and grab a snack. A bit of ice cream and some homemade for dessert was enough to satisfy him after an unusual yet still pretty good meal.

“You said it!” Wander agreed as he took another bite of his ice cream cone, somehow not spilling a single drop as he practically danced down the sidewalk. Of course the skeleton didn’t join him. He just trudged behind the furball, an amused smile on his face.

Though, as he glanced up at the pitch black sky, his smile fell. Despite living there for over a couple weeks now, Hater still wasn’t used to how dark it got. “It’s only seven thirty at night, but it feels like it should be midnight!” It was aggravating, even if it didn’t really affect him - at least, not in a big way.

“It is a bit of a change, yeah,” Wander nodded, slowing so they were walking side by side, “But hey, that just makes the stars come out sooner.” His smile softened as he looked out the windshield, still able to catch glimpses of the stars as they drove. “I always like lookin’ at them.”


Wander laughed while Hater smiled and gave himself a small pat on the back for actually managing to make his date laugh - jokes were never really his forte.

“Well, I don’t just like ‘em because of that!” he told him, walking backwards now so he could face his date, “I like ‘em because stars are neat to look at. They’re beautiful and amazing and they help give light to the universe. And, well, I guess they’re sorta comforting. Somethin’ about them just…”

He trailed off, glancing up at the sky with a soft, appreciative smile.

“...I think I sort of get what you mean.”

“Hm?” Wander looked at him curiously.

“Yeah, like…” Hater rubbed the back of his neck, embarrassed about what he was about reveal. “You know that one day with the huge storm, and we listened to all those songs together on Peepers’ laptop?” Wander smiled, giving an enthusiastic nod. “Well, and, you know how you said it made sense that I would like them? Thunderstorms, I mean? Well, you were sort of right. But, it’s not just that the thunder and rain is relaxing or whatever.”

He paused for a moment while Wander patiently waited. “I guess, it has something to do with my powers too… I can sort of, sort of feel the lightning in the air. Like, I can just feel all this energy, and… and I don’t know! It just feels, nice? Gah, this is so weird-”

“No it’s not!” Wander gave him a smile. “I think I understand what you mean, and I think it’s pretty neat, how you can sorta connect to nature like that.”
“...Hmph, when you say it like that, it almost sounds corny.”

Wander just giggled. “Maybe a little, but it’s still neat.” He started to walk again, but not before giving Hater a half-lidded smile. “You really are amazing, ya know that?”

The skeletal rocker’s bright green blush shone through the dark like a lighthouse. “Er - I - W-Wander…”

The nomad would’ve said more, or even just confirmed his previous words, but something else caught his attention. “Hm?” Tossing the last of his cone in his mouth, he jogged ahead.

“Hey! Wander!” Hater didn’t waste time chasing after him. “What the heck are you-?” And within a few steps, it all became clear.

The park was so huge that it had several paths one could take to get around it, and one of these paths just happened to lead to a good sized gazebo that wasn’t too far from the playground. With several lamps hanging on it, it provided more than enough light for anyone to see - or read notes off a piece of sheet music.

“Oh, the boys all boo!
The ladies hiss!
Everytime, I give my girl a kiss!
Cause they all know, when we go by - when we go by!
My baby’s off the market and so am I!
Yes my baby’s of the market and so am I!”

Grinning ear to ear, Wander clapped and cheered along with the rest of the small crowd of musicians while the two Axalian men bowed, keeping hold of their banjo and bass as they did.

Hater on the other hand just looked at the whole situation curiously. “Are these guys in the Battle?”

“Hmm, I don’t think so!” Wander replied, “Guess they just felt like playin’.” As he looked around, he could see that nearly everyone in the audience had an instrument on them. “And I guess most of these folks felt like playin’ too!”

‘An outdoor concert,’ Hater thought to himself. No planning for it, no advertising, they weren’t even getting paid for it. And yet, they were still playing music and smiling as they did so. ‘Gee, who does that sound like?’

“Aw! It’s too bad we didn’t bring our instruments,” the furry guitarist said suddenly, deflating slightly, “We could’ve played a song too!”

“Well… We can still listen to all of these guys play. I mean, if you want.”

Wander thought for a moment, and then looked up at Hater, grinning once more. “Well of course! I never pass up listening to great music!”

“Yeah, I think I know that by now.” After making sure it was fairly clean, Hater leaned against a nearby trashcan while Wander stood next to him, the two of them watching as a trio of young, Axalian teenage girls took the ‘stage’. Once they were set up, two of them started playing the calm, gentle melody on their guitars while the girl in the center began singing after a few bars.

“Merrily we fall
Out of line, out of line
I’d fall anywhere with you
I’m by your side

Swinging in the rain
Humming melodies
We’re not going anywhere until we freeze.”

Wander smiled as he listen, tapping his foot along with the silent beat and giving the girls his undivided attention. ...Which meant that he didn’t notice a certain skeleton looking over at him.

“I’m not afraid, anymore
I’m not afraid
Forever is a long time
But I wouldn’t mind spending it by your side.”

There was a small amount of applause when the chorus ended and it was only one girl playing guitar. She was certainly good, and even gave a small nod to her audience. Soon, the other two girls joined in once more for the second part of the song.

“Carefully we'll place our destiny
You came and you took this heart, and set it free
Every word you write or sing is so warm to me, so warm to me
I'm torn, I'm torn to be right where you are

I'm not afraid, anymore
I'm not afraid.”

Hater swallowed, unable to take his eyes off Wander. And, after a moment, he reached a hand over and placed it on his shoulder.

“Hm?” Curious, Wander looked up at him, but Hater was looking the opposite way - though as much as he tried to hide it, a glowing blush could still be seen. Smile softening, Wander moved closer to his date. Wanting to let him know that it was okay, he moved Hater’s hand from his shoulder to his hip, and started to sway to the music. And, while Hater didn’t sway, he didn’t dare

“Forever is a long, long time
But I wouldn't mind spending it by your side
Tell me everyday I get to wake up to that smile
I wouldn't mind it at all
I wouldn't mind it at all

You so know me
Pinch me gently
I can hardly breathe.”

Feeling his own heart start to warm, Wander gave a content sigh as he wrapped an arm loosely around Hater’s waist. Of course, this just made the skeleton’s blush even brighter, but at that moment he didn’t really care. He just moved even closer.

“Forever is a long, long time
But I wouldn't mind spending it by your side
Tell me everyday I get to wake up to that smile
I wouldn't mind it at all
I wouldn't mind it at all.”
“You’re getting tired.”

“Aw, no I’m not!”

“You just yawned.”

“A lil’ yawn don’t mean nothin’. Don’t worry, Hater, I’m fine!”

“Fine, but if you fall asleep or whatever, don’t expect me to carry you back up to the apartment.” He paused. “And you better not drool on my seat either!”

Wander chuckled, holding up a hand. “I promise I won’t.”

“Hmph, good.”

“Hmm…” Scooting over a bit and crawling over the armrest, Wander cuddled up next to the skeleton while a nearly muted rock song played on the radio. It was nearly eleven, and it was pretty likely that Demurra and Dracor were home. Even after a wonderful evening, neither one of them really felt like ending it. So, they decided to just sit in the apartment parking lot and enjoy the peace and solitary of the van.

There was an occasional conversation or two, but most of the time there was just comfortable silence. Honestly, Hater didn’t think there was such a thing - especially with such a chatterbox like Wander. But, there they were.

Feeling a brief absence of heat, Hater glanced down at Wander as he adjusted himself. With an armrest in the way, it was hard for the little furball to get comfortable. “You know, there is a bed in the back.”

Wander paused his movement, and looked up at his date. “...What? Did you forget?”

“Oh, no,” he said quickly, smiling slightly, “I just didn’t want to impose. Didn’t know if you wanted anyone layin’ back there besides you and Peepers.”

“Like I care. I haven’t even really been using it much lately anyway, so go ahead. It’s probably more comfortable than the armrest.”

“Heh, yeah, probably. Alright then, I think I will go back there and stretch out a bit.” He moved his hand to the door handle, but didn’t try to open the door. Hater blinked. What was he waiting for?

And in that moment, Wander looked back at him, his face innocent yet his words possibly implying so much: “But only if you join me.”

Hater felt himself stiffen up and his heart start to race. Suddenly he was reminded of all those dumb, teenage rom-com movies that his sister would beg him to take her to or watch with her. Specifically, the scenes that either made him force Ember to fast forward through them - like he was going to let his little sister watch things like that! - or made him awkwardly excuse himself until the scene was over.

“U-Uh, y-yeah! Okay, sure. I, I can do that.”

Wander’s smile fell. “Hater… You know I’m not gonna force ya to do anything right?”

“I know that! I mean, why would I not know that?! And I’m not embarrassed or nervous or, or
anything…”

Taking his hand off the door handle, Wander placed it over Hater’s skeletal one, his smile returning a
bit. “I just want ya to keep me company. We can do a bit of kissin’ or cuddlin’, or we could just lay
back there and talk, or heck, maybe we will end up falling asleep.” He gave a small chuckle.
“Whatever you want to do, Hater, it’s fine with me.”

He felt a breath escape his mouth as he nodded. “Okay…” Making sure to grab the keys and turn off
the car, Hater left the driver’s seat just as Wander left the passenger’s side. Opening the trunk, he let
Wander in before crawling in himself, closing the trunk door behind him.

Giggling slightly, Wander pressed his hand to the mattress. “Wow! Really comfy!”

“Oh, yeah, comfy,” Hater mumbled in agreement, “And, uh, there should be a blanket around here
somewhere.”

“Oh, thanks but I’m plenty warm. And you?”

“Oh, I’m fine.”

“Ah, good.” Wander gave a small sigh as he laid down on the plush mattress, moving his arms so
that they were under his head acting as a makeshift pillow. “Wouldn’t want ya getting chilly.”

“Hmph, it’s not even that cold,” he retorted as he laid down next to the furry guitarist.

“True. But still, just wanted to make sure.”

“Yeah well… Thanks.”

“No problem, Hater.”

After a moment, Hater moved to his side so he could look at his date properly. “You really are too
nice sometimes, you know that?”

“Aw, I don’t know if there is such a thing,” Wander replied, turning to his side as well.

“There probably is. But, I mean, it might not be a completely bad thing. Like… It’s, it’s good that
you’re nice and, I like it and stuff…” His horns folded down slightly. “Even if I don’t get it
sometimes or think it’s weird, it’s still sorta… nice.”

Feeling his heart warm for the second time that night, Wander scooted closer to the skeleton. “Well, I
really appreciate you saying that Hater. It means a lot to me. …Say, you wanna hear a secret?”

Hater thought about it for a moment, feeling just a little suspicious. Then again, this was Wander.

“Oh, I don’t know if there is such a thing,” Wander replied, turning to his side as well.

“There probably is. But, I mean, it might not be a completely bad thing. Like… It’s, it’s good that
you’re nice and, I like it and stuff…” His horns folded down slightly. “Even if I don’t get it
sometimes or think it’s weird, it’s still sorta… nice.”

Feeling his heart warm for the second time that night, Wander scooted closer to the skeleton. “Well, I
really appreciate you saying that Hater. It means a lot to me. …Say, you wanna hear a secret?”

Hater thought about it for a moment, feeling just a little suspicious. Then again, this was Wander.

“Oh, sure. What is it?”

Moving even closer, Wander gently cupped his face and whispered in his ear before kissing him
right where his jaw connected to his head. “I think you’re nice too. Real nice, and pretty sweet when
you wanna be.”

Hater’s eyes widened, barely feeling the shiver that went up his spine. “Uh, w-wow… Wander I, er,
thanks…”

He giggled, giving another half-lidded smile. “You’re very welcome, Hater.”

The skeleton felt himself take a small breath. He was just so close and just so warm and nice and…
Closing his eyes, he closed the distance between them. Of course, Wander didn’t hesitate to kiss back, and soon he felt small, furry hands run over his collarbone and neck, causing more shivers.

He needed to be closer. Grabbing Wander’s arm, he both pushed him away and held him close as they changed positions, not willing to break the kiss for even a second. Opening his eyes a crack, he saw that Wander was now right underneath him. Not that the nomad minded, of course.

He just kept kissing Hater, moving his hand up towards his cheeks now. Occasionally, he brushed past the base of one of Hater’s horns - which caused a couple small sparks and a gasp from the skeletal rocker.

“O-Oh, am I hurtin’ you?”

“N-No, no. Just… Just sorta sensitive there, that’s all.”

“Ohhh, got ya.” Smiling as he kissed Hater again, he made his fingers more gentle, more soft and slow as he started to rub one of the lightning bolt horns.

“Mmmm…” Hater moaned. Who would’ve thought something like that would feel so good.

“Wander…” He started to rub as well, stroking Wander’s fur with his thumb. After a few seconds, noise could be heard and for a moment, Hater thought the engine to the van had somehow started.

“…Wander? Is that you?”

“U-Uh…” The purring faltered only slightly as he gave a sheepish smile. “Yeah…” Hater started at him for a moment before smirking. “Aw hush!”

“Heh…” They met each other’s lips once more, their purrs and moans and hums being the only noise they could hear.

Of course, even with how good all of this felt, he could also feel his arms start to ache or his legs start to fall asleep. Besides, they could always get closer… Moving his hand slightly, Hater ended up accidently nudging Wander’s arm. “Oh, sorry,” he mumbled in between kisses.

Next he tried to make himself more comfortable - and ended up kneeing Wander in the side, making him yelp slightly. “Ah, sorry!”

“It’s fine, it’s fine,” Wander insisted, giving him a sincere smile, “I may be small, but it takes more than a few small bumps to hurt me.”

“Still, it’s not like I want to hurt you-”

“Well, hold on now.” Getting on his elbows and sitting up slightly, Wander moved himself a little, still keeping under Hater’s body but making it so they’d fit a bit better. “And now, maybe if I do this…” He then snaked his skinny noodle arms around Hater’s neck, keeping a firm hold on him. “How’s this?”

“…” Well, they were a lot closer, that’s for sure. “Uh, y-yeah, this is good. Um, but, can we scoot back a bit?”

“Oh, sure!” It took a couple minutes, but they were able to move to the center of the mattress, giving them plenty of room. Hater moved himself down lower, managing to hold himself up with one arm while the other had its hand pressed against Wander’s back. And of course, Wander kept his arms around Hater’s neck. Giving a smirk, the furball looked up at him. “Much better, don’t you think~?”

“Heh, y-yeah,” he nodded, trying to keep his emotions in check. Be cool, be calm, be confident,
don’t get too excited, but don’t be cold either, don’t be too rough, but don’t be distant, we’re not doing anything, at least I hope we’re not, oh grog I want to but I don’t I can’t-!

His thoughts were silenced with a tender kiss to the mouth, and soon his body and mind were once again relaxed. Only one thought came through:

*I’m not afraid anymore, I’m not afraid.*

“Wander…”

“Hater…”

0000000

“I can’t believe it. Just… So uncool! Beyond uncool!”

“Are you really going to complain about this the whole way back?”

“I think I have a right to!”

“Whether or not you do doesn’t matter if you’re still annoying us!”

The shark-man huffed slightly. “Seriously, it sucks when one dude decides to act like a dumbass and ruin it for everyone.”

“Honestly, you should be glad that they have safety rules like that,” Sylvia told him, “I mean, with all the crazy nights you’ve had, I think even you can agree that there’s a line that shouldn’t be crossed. And when it is crossed, you just have to bail.

“…Yeah, I guess.” He supposed a party cut short was better than it being your last party ever. “Still, it sucks.”

“I still can’t believe that guy managed to even do all that,” Peepers said, shaking his head slightly, “How’d he even get all those kegs? Heck, how’d he bring them in with the bouncer at the door? The waterguns he could maybe sneak in, but the kegs?”
“Probably paid him off,” Sylvia shrugged, “Idiots like that always seem to have money to spare.”

“Man, dudes like that need to learn to at least follow the rules at a club,” Awesome scowled, “I mean, if it’s your own party, do whatever crazy thing you want. But when you’re in public, just at least try not to act up so you don’t end up screwing everyone else over.”

Sylvia and Peepers both stopped and gave him a look. “Says the guy who parked in a no parking zone and got his ship towed,” the Watchdog stated.

“Which is why we’re walking in the dark at eleven at night,” Sylvia finished, the two of them now chuckling while Awesome’s scowl deepened.

“Aw shut up, both of you. I still say that was bullcrap, I didn’t see any ‘No Parking’ sign!”

“Hey, at least you can pick your ship up tomorrow.”

“Yeah, at least there’s that.” The shark gave a smirk. “Say Peeps, think Hatey will let me borrow his ride and return it in the morning?”

“HA!” Peepers turn to look at him, “Are you kidding me? I’m lucky he lets me drive it! There’s no way he’d let you drive it!”

Awesome chuckled. “Yeah, I figured. Hatey doesn’t really seem like the sharing type.”

“Eh, you get used to it.” And at least he was willing to share some things - Peepers was still thankful his bandmate didn’t just name the band after himself. Looking back ahead, he saw that parking lot come into view. “Speaking of vans, looks like Hater and Wander are home. Demurra and Dracor are probably back too.”

“Hm, so I can ask him myself then?”

“Yeah sure, if you want him to yell at you or shoot you with lightning. And trust me, you do not want to get hit by the lightning. Even his basic attacks hurt like a-”

“Uh, guys?” The two stopped and looked at Sylvia, who was staring right at the van.

Awesome immediately smirked. “What, did you see it bounce?”

“...Yeah.” His smirk fell and Peepers’ eye widened.

“Wait, what?!” All three of them were looking at the van now, and sure enough after a few moments, it moved. “Oh no.”

“Aw dude,” Awesome grinned, trying to contain his snickering, “Wow, didn’t think Hatey had it in him!”

“There’s no way!” Sylvia argued, “I mean, this is Hater we’re talking about!” It just didn’t seem possible for the dorky, angry, anti-social skeleton. And besides, if he was in there, there was only one person he could be with...

“It’s not Hater,” Peepers spoke up, “And, even if it was... Maybe he’s just looking for something? I know there’s a ton of stuff under the seats.”

Awesome raised an eyebrow at him. “Oh, yeah, because people totally look for stuff and don’t even bother to turn on lights to help them.”
“...Okay, maybe it is a little farfetched, even with Hater’s eyesight.” He narrowed his eye slightly. “But with how he’s been acting lately, forgetting to lock the car seems a bit more likely.” He started to walk towards the van, taking out his own set of keys.

“Careful Eyesore,” Sylvia told him, keeping close by just in case, “You don’t know who’s in there.”

“Or what they’re doing. Or who they’re do- OW! What?!?”

Peepers rolled his eye. Pervert. It was probably just some hobo looking for a place to sleep, or - more likely - some thief. If that was the case, then he definitely needed to stop him. If Hater found out his ship was stolen, it would take more than cheap insurance to fix the destruction he would cause.

Climbing onto the back of the ship and unlocking it, he immediately opened the trunk door. “Okay whoever’s in there you need to-”

“AH!” “GAH!” His pupil shrunk to the size of a dot. “PEEPERS!”

“EEP!” Jumping up, he slammed the trunk door back down, taking a moment to catch his breath before slowly turning to look at the other two. Sylvia was just staring back at him, mouth agape. As for Awesome, well…

3... 2... 1.

“BWAHAHA! Oh- Oh my grop! Woo! Nice one Hatey! Didn’t think you had it in ya, but way to go man! You too, lil’ dude!”

Inside the van, there was a muffled, frustrated yell. “SHUT UP AWESOME! WE’RE NOT DOING ANYTHING!”

“Oh my grop…” Sylvia put a hand to her forehead. Honestly she should’ve been expecting this but- “Please tell me they had most of their clothes on.” There was another yell.

“Well, it looked like they had everything on, although Wander’s shirt was up a little…”

The Zbornak grimaced, holding her hands in front of her face as she clenched her eyes shut, trying not to imagine her best friend in such a ...compromising position. “Okay stop stop stop, tmi, tmi!” She sighed while Awesome’s laughter just got louder. “I just hope you guys weren’t planning on being stupid!”

“GRAAAH! I ALREADY TOLD YOU WE WEREN’T DOING ANYTHING!”

“Honest, Syl! We were just doin’ a bit of kissin’!”

Peepers blinked. “A bit? You had your legs wrapped around his waist!”

“I - Heh, well, I guess I was gettin’ into the moment! But I promise, there’s no funny business goin’ on in here-”

“THAT’S WHAT I’VE BEEN TRYING TO SAY! Now could we please stop talking about it?! AND STOP LAUGHING AWESOME!”

“How did this even happen?!”

Sylvia gave a look of disbelief. “Wait, you seriously hadn’t figured it out yet? Geez, for a guy with an eyeball for a head, you sure are blind.”
“Yeah dude,” Awesome added, “It was pretty easy to see that they had the hots for each other.”

Peepers glared. “Well, I mean - I saw it too! I just didn’t think that they would even… Wait, are you guys boyfriends now?!”

“Well, I haven’t asked yet but-”

“I’M NOT DISCUSSING ANYTHING LIKE THAT JUST AS LONG AS THEY’RE ALL STANDING OUTSIDE LISTENING! ESPECIALLY NOT IF AWESOME’S HERE!”

The shark-man pouted slightly. “Harsh bro.”

“SHUT UP AWESOME! NOW WILL ALL OF YOU JUST-”

“What’s going on down there?!” Looking up, the three could see Demurra looking out one of her apartment windows, “It’s nearly midnight! What’s with all the shouting?”

“Oh! It’s fine!” Peepers started to reply, “Nothing to worry about! Just-”

“Just Hatey and Wander makin’ out in his ship!” Awesome finished. There was yet another muffled yell from the van, and Sylvia could’ve sworn she call a couple of flashes of lightning.

Demurra on the other hand just smiled. “Totally called it,” she said simply.

“Oh, SERIOUSLY, if you all don’t leave right now, I’m gonna come out there and kill all of you! You think I’m joking but I’m really not!”

“Heh, just make sure your pants are on when you come out to kill us, Hatey!”

“YOU WILL BE THE FIRST TO DIE!!”

“Okay okay,” Sylvia said, “I think that’s enough. Awesome get out of here, Eyesore you come with me, and you two - don’t be in there too long! And keep it PG, got it?!”

“Will do, Syl!” Wander cheerfully replied while Hater let himself fall face first on the mattress.

“Un-florping-believable,” he mumbled, his horns low and fists clenched while a blush mixed with his scowl. Of all the things that had to happen that night - and of course it had to happen now.

“Gah!” He punched the mattress once before staying still.

Although, when he heard a small noise, he lifted his head slightly. After listening to it for a moment, his scowl deepened. “Oh yeah, sure Wander. You’re the only one who hasn’t laughed at me tonight, so you might as well join the club!”

“Aw, Hater! I’m not laughin’ at ya!” Crawling over to the skeletal guitarist, Wander let himself lay on his back, casually wrapping his arms around his shoulders in a hug, “And I’m pretty sure the others weren’t either.”

“Hmph, yeah right. But that still doesn’t explain why you’re laughing.”

Like a nervous reflex, the Star Nomad gave another small laugh, though it was a lot softer and gentler than before. “Well… I guess when things like this happen, that’s all you can really do. Just laugh it off.”

Hater didn’t even make a move to smile. Easier said than done. “And besides, I guess I’m still in a pretty good mood after the great night we had.”
“...Great?”

“Well yeah! ...Didn’t you enjoy it?”

“...Yeah, I did actually.”

“So why wouldn’t I?”

Hater thought for a moment before shrugging in silence, and Wander tightened his hug. “In fact, I wouldn’t mind doin’ something like this again sometime - that is, if you want to.”

Again, Hater waited to reply. But when he did: “...I guess we could.” There was suddenly a loud squee in his ear, and the hug got even tighter. It felt like something he’d usually scowl at. But then again, with Wander around nothing was ‘usual’ or normal, and he was starting to get used to that. Enjoy it. Smile at it.

Feeling his lips on his cheek one last time, Hater felt Wander’s arms leave him as he scooted back a bit. And as Hater sat up, he saw the furball yawn. “Guess we should probably hit the hay, huh?”

“Yeah,” he nodded, feeling a yawn of his own coming on, but he scowled through it. “I just hope we don’t get a ton of questions as soon as we walk through the door.” Grop, it was like he was preparing for an interrogation.

“Aw, Sylvia and Peepers mean well. And besides, it’s gettin’ late. If they’ve got any questions, they can wait until morning.”

“More like they will wait until morning.” No way was he dealing with the two of them without a few hours of sleep and some coffee. Pushing the trunk open, Hater slowly got out while Wander practically jumped out. Even when tired, the guy always seemed to have a ton of energy. “Oh uh, you can go ahead and start heading up. I need to lock up anyway.”

“Alright-y, if you say so. Oh, and Hater?”

“*sigh* What no-” The furry arms were once again around him, this time around his waist.

“Thanks again for a great date, Hater.”

“...” His own skeletal hands moved down to return the hug, silent yet just as sincere and appreciative as the nomad’s. “Yeah well... Thanks for saying yes.”

“Heh, anytime Hater. Anytime.”

Chapter End Notes

Songs used were "My Baby's Off The Market" by Two Man Gentleman Band (aka the guys who do the music for WoY) and "I Wouldn't Mind" by He is We. The picture was drawn by me.
Chapter 18

The morning started off so normal that Hater nearly forgot about the previous night. He could smell the breakfast that Wander was making, he could hear the others casually chatting in the kitchen, and of course he was the last one out of bed. Perhaps it was just hopeful thinking, but the morning still felt normal. But of course, he knew that behind this ‘normal’, casual morning was a ton of annoying questions.

And who better to start this off than his bandmate?

“So, uh…” Hater lifted his head slightly. Peepers was over by the closet, putting his dirty clothes away while grabbing a pair of socks from his suitcase. “Um, about last night…”

The Watchdog dared to look up and immediately regretted it when he saw the skeleton’s narrowed eyes. “U-Uh, n-now of course I have no problem with it! Whatever makes you happy! Haha, totally fine in my book. Even if it is a bit surprising…” A growl made him flinch again. “B-But still, I’m happy for you, Hater! Really happy! Hehe. ...So, uh, are you two dating now or-?”

Hater didn’t give him an answer. He simply threw the blankets off him and stomped towards the bathroom, clearly not in the mood to talk. ‘Guess I should’ve expected that,’ the drummer thought with a sigh as he left the bedroom.

“...And then the second time we kissed was at that bar on the moon while Sylvia was takin’ care of Peepers! And then, well, last night was our first date. At least I’m pretty sure it was a date. Anyway, that’s everything!” Demurra and Dracor could only smile, not too surprised by the Star Nomad’s story. Sylvia on the other hand didn’t look too amused.

“So, you guys are just casually dating, I guess?” she asked, “Or, grop, can you even call all of this dating?”

“Hmm, I dunno!” Though Wander didn’t seem too bothered by that. “But whatever it is, I’m having fun! And I think Hater is too.” His smile grew as he said that, his hands gripping the spatula tightly against his chest as his heart warmed and practically melted like butter on pancakes.

Sylvia gave him a flat look. Grop he had it bad, which was exactly the problem.

Hearing tiny footsteps, she looked over her shoulder and saw Peepers walking in. Scooting over slightly, she let him climb into his seat before asking. “So, what did Bonehead have to say?”

“Nothing. Just a couple growls and glares.” He rubbed his head slightly, feeling a headache coming on.

“Typical. Well, you better get him to talk to you soon, otherwise I’m having a talk with him.”

“Hmm, go ahead and do it now if you want. After last night I doubt he’s going to tell me anything. Just make sure not to break any of his bones, okay? Remember, he still needs to be able to play.”

“I’ll try my best.”

The bathroom door, and they both immediately turned to look at him. Hater must’ve been expecting this though. He was already glaring back at them.

“Mornin’ Hater!” Wander called out. He quickly hopped off the stepstool and ran into the hall.
“Your plate’s nearly finished!”

“Actually, I think I’m gonna skip breakfast today.”

“Aw? You sure?”

“Very.” If he had to pick starving over being asked annoying questions, starving won.

Wander didn’t seem too happy about it, but he wasn’t going to push him. “Well alright. But I hope you at least eat somethin’ when we get to your surprise.”

“Yeah yeah, I - Wait.” Surprise?

“Forget already, Bonehead?” Sylvia asked before taking a quick sip of her coffee, “We’re takin’ you guys somewhere to celebrate your good review.”

Oh. That’s right. Hater scowled. Wander though either didn’t notice or didn’t mind it since he simply gave the skeleton an excited hug. “So get ready, cause we’re leavin’ in about half an hour.” He grinned up at him. “And I just know you’re gonna like it!”

Hater bit back a retort and instead said, “Can you at least tell me where we’re going? I pretty much have to know that.”

“Actually, Syl volunteered to drive so-”

“WHAT?!” The Zbornak didn’t even flinch at the outburst. She just took another sip of her drink. “No way! That’s my ship! She’s not allowed to drive it!”

Peepers gave him a flat look. “Hater-”

“Hey, you’re lucky I let you drive it!” he snapped before his bandmate could even get another word out, “She’s not driving.”

“Aw, but if you drive then the surprise will be ruined!” Wander insisted.

“But didn’t I tell you before that I hate surprises?”

“But Hater-!”

“Wander-!”

There was a loud thud - the sound of porcelain hitting wood echoing through the apartment. “Hey! Bonehead! I’m not planning on crashing your precious ship, alright? So stop arguing!” With that, Sylvia picked her mug back up, ready for a refill.

Hater growled, and would’ve yelled back at her if it weren’t for the small hand gripping his. “Don’t worry, Hater. Syl’s a really good driver, and I can guarantee that you’re gonna have fun today.” He gave him a soft smile. “Okay?”

“...Whatever.” That was enough for Wander. The nomad gave his hand another squeeze before letting go and running back to the stove while Hater walked back to his room.

A whole day, going who-knows-where and doing who-knows-what, with Wander (which admittedly didn’t sound too bad), as well as Sylvia and Peepers and their annoying questions. “Yeah,” he mumbled dryly, “This is sure to be the best day ever.”
Even if the ship was a good size, it was still a bit crowded - especially with Dracor and his wings. But when he and Demurra took the mattress in the back, it did make for a bit more room. Still, Hater was thankful this wouldn’t be a long trip. He was used to his only other passenger being Peepers and being able to easily entertain himself with his MP3 player without having to turn it up to the highest volume (and still just barely be able to hear it!).

So to be in the middle seat in a ship full of people and having little to no control of said ship was definitely making the skeleton aggravated, and a bit anxious.

“So I just keep going straight, right Wander?”

“Yes! In fact, you can see the planet from here!”

Hater sat up at that. “Where?! Where is it?!”

The nomad grinned. He knew Hater would be excited about it! “It’s that little pale green one up there! You know, with the roller coasters and the sign?”

The skeleton blinked. Rollercoaster? Sign. “...We’re going to an amusement park?”

“Oh, heh, guess I kinda just gave it away. But yep! Phunulon is said to be one of the best, most fun amusement parks in the universe! And, since it was pretty close by and we needed something fun to do, I thought it would be perfect!”

“Hmph, yeah, perfect,” Hater mumbled, going back to slouching back in his seat.


“Yeah,” Demurra added, “What’s not to like?”

“Maybe the long lines and the annoying mascots?” Hater argued, “Or maybe how much walking you have to do, or how expensive everything is? ...And no, I don’t have anything against fun! I have fun!” He remembered enjoying the small carnivals held on his home planet every once in a while with Ember and Peepers, but those were small and not very crowded.

Just a simple, free carnival with small rides and games that wasn’t too crowded or even really annoying. Besides, carnivals only took up a couple hours in an evening and you could easily leave whenever you wanted to. Amusement park planets just seemed like an annoying waste of time and money - especially when he could’ve be practicing or relaxing back at the apartment right now.

“Have you ever actually been to an amusement park?” Dracor asked.

“...I, I’ve seen a few of them.” ...On tv, or in movies. Everyone in the ship chuckled a little, which only made Hater scowl even more.

“Look, I promise you’ll enjoy yourself,” Demurra told him, “Trust me, there’ll be at least one thing you’ll like. One ride or one game-”

“Or one food,” Sylvia added, smiling as she thought about all the amusement park food just waiting to be eaten.

“And I’ll help ya find it!” Wander volunteered, “I’ll take ya all around the place myself until we find somethin’ that makes your day!” Sylvia’s smile fell.
“Hmph, I don’t need ‘help’. ...But, I guess we can hang out while we walk around the park. But don’t make me go on a bunch of dumb rides!”

“Heh, alrighty Hater. I promise.” Wander seemed satisfied with this plan, but as Peepers glanced over at the driver’s seat to look at her, it seemed more than obvious that Sylvia wasn’t.

Since it was still fairly early, parking wasn’t completely taken and it only took a few minutes to get through the line and into the park.

“Pretty fun looking, huh Hater?” Wander asked, grinning in anticipation.

“...Well, it’s big.”

“Yeah, planet-wide amusement parks usually are big,” Sylvia smirked, earning another small scowl from the skeleton.

“Which means there are plenty of things to do!” Wander added, “Lots of rides and shows and a zoo and a water park and an arcade and—”

“Arcade?” Everyone in the group smirked. Well, no surprise there.

“Yeah! And I know where it is too! Come on!” Without a second thought, Wander grabbed his hand and led him away from the group, not even noticing his Zbornak drummer’s stare or cautious look.

“Well, hopefully that keeps him happy for a while,” Dracor commented, smiling a bit when he felt his girlfriend take his hand.

“Well, hopefully,” Demurra added, giving a small smile as well, “And if the arcade doesn’t work, then I’m sure Wander can find some other way to give him a fun day. Heck, from what I can tell, he’s pretty much an expert on making Hater happy.”

“Hmph, yeah. He’s a miracle worker, alright,” Sylvia mumbled. She noticed Peepers looking at her again, but decided to ignore it.

“So Drake, feel like checking out the Twirl-a-whirl?” “I thought you would never ask.” The blonde giggled slightly before looking over at the two drummers. “You guys wanna come with? It’s a pretty fun ride. I bet you would enjoy it, Sylvia.”

The Zbornak forced a small smile. “Nah. Think I’m gonna just walk around the park by myself for a bit. You two have fun though.”

“...Well, okay. If you say so.”

“I think I’ll probably walk around by myself too,” Peepers added, “I, I’m not really a fan of spinning rides so…”

“Oh sure, no problem,” Demurra nodded, “Maybe we can all meet up in a couple hours for lunch then. Sound good?”

“Yes.” “Yeah, fine with me.” “Cool, see you guys in a bit then!” And with that, the couple was off, leaving behind the two remaining members of their group. And, other than the background noise of rides running and people screaming, they were in complete awkward silence.

“So, uh, you’ve gone here before?”

“Nah,” Sylvia replied, crossing her arms as she glanced away from the Watchdog - though it was
more in an attempt to think than anger, “Just seen commercials for it. Wander’s been here once though. Him and his mom.”

“Oh.” Peepers glanced down at his feet. “Yeah, I’ve never been here either. My family never even considered this place for a vacation spot. Not because I had a terrible childhood or anything. We just figured we would all be too short for the rides.”

“Mm, yeah.”

“…” Peepers gave her a flat look, which she saw out of the corner of her eye. “What?”

“No smartalec comment about my height? Not even a smirk? Either it became too easy, or something’s wrong with you,” he answered, crossing his arms as well.

Sylvia rolled her eyes. “Oh please! Nothing’s wrong with me! I mean, what would I have to be mad or upset about?”

“Maybe Wander and Hater since you keep staring at them?”

“…” She gave a small sigh and glanced over at him, dropping her arms. “Okay, maybe there is something wrong. But I doubt you want to hear about it when there’s literally a hundred better things you could be doing while you’re here.”

“Hey, like I said, I’m probably too short for a lot of these rides anyway. And hanging out with you is better than standing in a line or being around Wander - no offense. So, if you get me a soda and one of those churros, I’d be willing to listen.”

That time, Sylvia gave a small smirk. “Alright Eyesore, you’ve got yourself a deal. But I’m getting a pop too.”

“Fine with me. It’s your money.”

“Yeah, this time. Don’t expect me to buy you a drink everytime we talk, Watchdog.”

Peepers chuckled. “Of course not, Zah-bornak.”

“Okay, how are any of these actual prizes? They look like things you’d get at the Dollar store, even the ones that cost ten thousand tickets.”

“Well, when they got all these games to take care of, Hater, they can’t really spend a ton on prizes.” Wander smiled down at the little plastic toy he was able to get. “Still, I think they’re pretty fun!”

“Hmph, not too surprising. Here, you can have the rest.”

“Huh? You sure, Hater?”

“Yeah, I’m sure.” While he’d had a bit of fun playing the video games, Hater hadn’t thought that any of the arcade prizes were even worth carrying around with him the rest of the day. ‘The giant stuffed animals and pet fish that only lasted like a week were better than these things,’ he thought to himself as he started to walk away.

Frowning slightly, Wander stuffed the rest of the tickets into his hat, and then rushed forward to catch up with him. “Sooo, what should we do now, Hater?”
“Aren’t you supposed to be the expert here?”

“Well, I wouldn’t call myself an expert but - even if I was, I still would ask.”

“Fine. Here’s the short answer: I don’t care. So just pick whatever you want to do.”

Wander’s frown deepened. He just didn’t understand it. He was so sure that Hater would enjoy himself here. And after all the fun they had last night-

...Oh. “Hater.”

“What?”

“You know that no one’s making fun of you, right?”

The skeleton faltered a bit, nearly tripping. “O-Of course I know that! I - After all, no one would dare make fun of me!”

“More like they wouldn’t want to make fun of you,” Wander corrected. Hater made a face. Wasn’t that the same thing? “But what I’m sayin’ is, don’t let what happened last night ruin your fun for today.”

He flinched again. “I’m not!”

“I mean, it wasn’t that embarrassi-”

“STOP TALKING ABOUT IT!” Wander froze, and Hater stopped. The two stared at each other before Hater looked away, scowling. “Okay… Maybe I am a little embarrassed about it.”

There was a small moment of silence, and then Hater felt a pair of furry arms wrap around his waist, making a bit of heat rise up in his chest. “I - I know you’re going to say it’s not a big deal, but-”

“How ‘bout we keep walking?” Hater blinked, glancing down at the nomad - who was just giving him a simple smile. “After all, I promised you that I would find something to make you smile or make your day fun, and I never break a promise. Not if I can help it.”

“…” He thought for a moment, and then gave a small nod. Smiling even bigger now, Wander gave him a squeeze before letting go, their hands brushing past each other as they walked but never connecting. It was noticed, but not commented on. “…Peepers is still probably going to ask us questions. Same with Sylvia, and she’s gave me a couple weird looks already. Hmph, Awesome - the jerk - he’s probably going to remind us of it every time we run into him. And Demurra, she’s practically laughing at me.”

“I think she’s just happy for ya, Hater,” Wander told him with a sincere smile, “After all, she really likes you, so I don’t think she would poke too much fun at ya.”

“…” He blinked. “But, she has a boyfriend already.”

“Likes you platonically, I mean.”

“Oh.” Judging by how their first impressions of each other went, that was a bit of a surprise.

“And as for the others, they’ll forget about it in time, I’m sure of it. In a few years from now, it’ll just be a nice memory, a funny story that we can all laugh at.”

“Hmph, if you say so. But-” He faltered once more. Did Wander just say ‘a few years from now’?
That wasn’t the strangest part though. No, the strangest part was, for a moment, Hater barely noticed. For a moment, it not only sounded possible, but likely that they would all know each other and still hang out with each other, even years later.

“Hm?” Wander stopped and glanced back at the heavy metal guitarist. “Hater? What’s wrong?”

“...Nothing. Hey, where are you taking me anyway? If I wanted to walk around all day I could’ve just gone to the park on Axalis!”
Wander just gave a slightly amused smile and continued walking. “Don’t worry, Hater. We’ll get there soon.”

“We better…” Pushing those thoughts into the back of his mind, Hater willed his feet to start walking again, keeping close to the Star Nomad.

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“Five forty-five please.” “Here, keep the change, Pal.” “Thank you Ma’am.” Able to balance the two drinks and the churro in her arms, Sylvia carried the items back to their outdoors table with ease. “Diet cola, right?”

“Yep.” Peepers took his drink and snack, not hesitating to take a sip. Even if the weather was pretty nice, it was still fairly warm and they had done a lot of walking already, so he definitely needed a refreshment as well. Sylvia took a sip of her drink as well, smiling and giving a satisfied “Ahhh” when the cool liquid touched her tastebuds.

“So,” the Watchdog started to say as he unwrapped his churro, “What did you want to talk about?”
The Zbornak was silent for a moment. “I figured you would’ve figured it out by now.”

“Oh I have. I just wanted to give you the chance to actually say it.”

She gave a small smirk. “How gracious of you. ...I still can’t believe it actually happened. I mean, I knew Wander liked the guy, and he had somehow gotten Hater to like him a little back, but I just-”

“Didn’t think it would get that far?” Peepers finished for her

“Exactly.”
The eyeball gave a small nod, taking another sip. “It is pretty weird.”

“But that’s not the part that’s bothering me. I mean, I can live with weird, especially if it’s something that makes my buddy happy. Heck, I’ve had weirder relationships than whatever’s going on with those two!” Peepers managed to keep himself from flinching and stayed looking fairly casual as she continued. “But... I, I just don’t Wander getting hurt by this.” She paused for a moment before adding, “No offense.”

“It’s fine,” Peepers replied, those his look was a bit more flat now, “Though I don’t think Hater would ever hurt him. I’m pretty sure hurting another contestant is against the rules and would probably get him disqualified.”

“It’s fine,” Peepers replied, those his look was a bit more flat now, “Though I don’t think Hater would ever hurt him. I’m pretty sure hurting another contestant is against the rules and would probably get him disqualified.”

“I’m not talking about Bonehead zappin’ him or anything. I’d punch his head off and into the next solar system before he got a single spark out.” She glanced down at her drink, stirring it a bit with her straw. “I just don’t want him getting heartbroken when all of this is all over. I don’t want him to get too attached to Bonehead or the idea that they’ll be together forever or something like that...”
“Oh…” He took a small bite of his churro, as if it would help cut a bit of the tension. “Well, I mean, wouldn’t he know that by now? Not to get too attached?”

“You’d think but… When Wander cares about someone, it’s nearly impossible for him to just forget about them.” She thought back to the first month of the competition. How Wander would always talk about the infamous, face-paint wearing skeleton. How neat he was, how good he was at guitar, what he had said to him and what Wander had said back to him. Every song he heard Hater play, he played on his own guitar in private. He’d look at every band poster they passed, just in case the Harbingers of Doom were on one of them.

Honestly if it were anyone else, Sylvia would’ve called it creepy and obsessive. But this was Wander, and he wasn’t doing this for any weird ulterior motive. He just wanted to make friends with Hater - to hear him play and hang out with him, maybe even play a song with him - the latter became even more of a goal after their little ‘guitar battle’. What it was about Hater that made Wander so interested, Sylvia had no idea. But whatever it was, Wander had noticed it.

But just a few days later, after Sylvia had gotten back to the hotel after Awesome’s party…

“Wander, buddy, just talk to me.”

“I’m fine, Syl, really! I just…” The furry guitarist sighed. “I, messed up. I thought I was doin’ something good, something that Hater would like and would maybe bring us closer but…”

“…What exactly was this ‘thing’, Wander?”

“…” The Star Nomad turned further away from her, going silent. Obviously he didn’t want to relive his mistake. This time, Sylvia gave a sigh, and placed a comforting hand on his shoulder. “Look, you… you didn’t know. You thought you were doing something right and you just, made a mistake. But, it’ll be okay. …Okay?”

“…Alright.”

To this day, Sylvia still didn’t know what had happened at the Shark-man’s party between those two, but it must’ve been pretty big. And that was just Hater getting mad at Wander, or Wander making a mistake. If he had depressed and upset over that, then…

“What happens if Hater decides he doesn’t want this - whatever’s going on between them - and doesn’t even want to be friends? Or, what happens at the end of the summer?”

“End of the summer…” Peepers repeated quietly. He hadn’t forgotten but… still, it was hard to think that after all this was over, they would no longer be sharing an apartment with people they had only known for a few weeks. He and Hater would either be on the road to rock and roll fame and fortune, or they would be back on their home planet, hoping for another big break. Would Hater want to keep contact with the people they met, or in the end, would it just be easier to just forget about them?

“Yeah… That’s why I’m unsure about all this,” Sylvia told him, taking another small sip of her drink before continuing. “I don’t want Hater hurting him. …I mean, I’m fine with them being fairly close and being friends and all that but… Once there’s an actual relationship and dates and stuff, it just becomes complicated and messy.”

“Right…” Peepers had to agree with her because he thought the same, but a part of him didn’t want to.

“And, technically we’re all still each other’s competition so, I’d hate to imagine what Hater would do or say if his new boyfriend beat him and took away his shot at the big times. That combined with the
whole long distance thing and… It just doesn’t seem worth it, to me.”

“Right.” This time, it was Peepers staring at his drink, swirling with the straw. It didn’t seem worth it… Not if it would most likely end in disaster. At least while being close friends, it wouldn’t hurt as much when they said goodbye.

“...Hey, Eyesore. You okay?”

“Hm?” He blinked, looking back up at her.

“...Yeah, I know you said you were fine with listening but I’ve pretty much talked your ear off by this point. Sorry about that.”

“Oh, no it’s fine! Really!” he assured her, “Just, thinking about stuff. But it’s fine. I’d rather have a long conversation with you then a dumb one with anyone else.”

Sylvia gave another small smirk. “I guess I’ll take that as a compliment. Well, even so, why don’t you take the reins of the conversation for a bit, then when we finish up here we can try to find something both of us can ride.”

“I doubt we’ll find anything but, we can try.” He smiled a bit. “And if you want to hear me talk, I guess I can tell you about this interesting article I found this morning while I was waiting for the bathroom to open up - thanks, by the way.”

The Zbornak shrugged. “Hey, I can’t help it if I like long showers, and it’s not like we ever run out of hot water. But fine, tell me all about this ‘interesting article’, eye-blog.” She scooted a bit over to him. “Is it from that guy who wrote the one about the ‘Evolution of Rock’? For such a dumb title, I’ll admit it was not only interesting, but it made sense.”

“No, not him, though I’m pretty sure they talk to each other a lot, and they have similar writing styles.” Peepers paused for a moment, and then scooted towards her as well. Closer, but not too close. Just right. “Anyway, this article was actually kind of similar to that one, but focused more on the instruments than the styles…”

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“How long has it been now?”

“Weeell, I’m guessin’ about half an hour, but-”

“I’m only staying here for five more minutes, then I’m walking away.” “Aww, Hater!”

He gave the furball a sharp look. “Don’t you ‘aww Hater’ me! What’s the point of standing in such a long time and waiting FOREVER for one ride!” While Hater could admit that he enjoyed hanging out with Wander somewhat - the little guy had a way of making time pass quickly, and making even the stupidest conversations interesting and enjoyable. They had even found a couple small rides like the giant pendulum and the swinging ride that he admitted weren’t too bad, and maybe even a little fun.

But waiting for over half an hour for one ride? That was what made the whole ‘amusement parks are a waste of time’ argument pop back into his head. Even if it did look like a pretty awesome rollercoaster, was it even worth it?

“Just be patient, Hater,” Wander told him, giving his hand a small pat, “And I promise that it’ll be worth it!”
Hater pulled his hand away and crossed his arms. “Hmph.” He would probably die of boredom before he even got to the front of the line.

Smile faltering just for a moment, Wander glanced around at their surroundings. People in front of them, people in back, all kept in line in a huge room with nothing but velvet ropes and gold-painted poles to keep them in line. “Hmmmm…” The smile turned into a grin as he started to lightly sway in line, humming a little ditty. After a few moments, he began tapping the poles.

*Ding! Ding! Ding!*

Of course, Hater - as well as the people around them - started to notice. “What are you doing?” he asked, “Stop that!”

“Oh?” Wander said playfully, “Stop what?”

“That!” “What?” “That tapping!” “Just keeping a rhythm!”

…” Hater’s horns flattened as he gave the furball a “You’ve got to be florping kidding me” look. “Okay, I know you like to have these little impromptu concerts and play and dance in the street and stuff, but this is just ridiculous. You don’t even have either of your instruments!”

“Don’t need one,” he replied, the dinging continuing, “Just makin’ up the song as I go!”

“Because you’re a goof?”

“AND, because music always makes the time go faster!” His swaying became even more noticeable now. “Makes the line go quickly as well! Meet the coaster by the track, we’re more than halfway there, no looking back!”

Hater rolled his eyes. Great, now he was singing again. How the heck was this guy able to come up with lyrics so quickly and without even thinking about it?! And with a lyricless melody still in his mind, he couldn’t help but feel a bit jealous…

An elbow poked him. “Huh?” He found himself face to face with the Star Nomad, who had climbed up his arm like a tree.

“Don’t look so blue, not when there’s a great ride straight up ahead! And the rest of the day to enjoy, to look forward to! Take the time to smile, keep your mind focused, on the wind blowing through your hood, and the big finish!”

Hater smirked slightly. “What big finish?”

“The end of the coaster of course!” Wander answered, hopping off the skeleton’s arm and running ahead, since the line moved a little, “They save all the loops for the end, the last hill too! And it’s definitely worth it, to both me and you!”

He made an exaggerated pose, making a few of the people in line chuckle. “Worth all the waaaaiting! Worth all the bore! I’ll guarantee ya, once you feel the coaster start to roll, it goes right out the door!” Wander then started to balance on one foot, arms spread wide like a bird. “The shakin’ and rockin’, the speed of it all! Why, you’ll be smilin’ through the final fall!”

“But don’t people usually scream on these things?” Hater asked, still smirking a bit as he moved in front of Wander - whether he was going to ride this thing or not was irrelevant. No one cut in front of him. “Scared out of their minds and losing their lunch?”
“But au contraire, my handsome skeleton friend!” Wander replied with a grin, “That’s all part of the fun!”

Hater felt a bit of a blush at the word ‘handsome’, but shook it off. “Hmph, only you would want to scream. Only you would think of being afraid as fun. You’re so florping strange, it makes me wonder why I haven’t started to run.”

Wander giggled, tilting his head back to look at Hater as he once again took the front. “Maybe because you’re having fun too! Or you want to give it a chance! Just in case it’s not as crazy as it seems at first glance!” His smile became softer. “And I’m mighty grateful for that… for giving me a chance.”

Hater’s eyes widened slightly. “I, really?”

“Well, they are pretty great,” Hater agreed, feeling a bit of pride. Though, as Wander kept talking, he couldn’t help but feel a pinch of embarrassment as well.

“The way he plays is just amazing! One of the best guitar players I’ve ever heard! And he always puts so much energy into his music, and I can tell he has a lot of fun playin’.”

“OKAY! That’s enough!” He quickly pulled Wander back a bit, close enough to cover his mouth if he needed to, “We know, I’m a great guitarist, I think he gets it now!”

“Well, if you’re that good, does that mean you’re going to play a show while you’re here?” the man asked.

“Yes!” A five-eyed woman added, “They always have famous bands play here, just before the fireworks show!”

“FOOOOH!” Wander practically squee’d with glee, “We get to play a show, AND we get to watch fireworks afterwards?! Sounds great! We’d love to—”

“Hey! Don’t just sign me up for gigs without even asking me!” Hater snapped, “And-! ...Actually I guess an amusement park gig wouldn’t be too bad.” Wait. Scratch that. Not just ‘not too bad’, but great! Tons of people come to Phunulon every day, and the place probably paid pretty good too! “Hmm, looks like I’ve got a new assignment for Peepers.” He smiled a bit. “I bet Awesome never got a gig here.”

“Oh, you mean that shark guy from The Party Makers?” a man from beside them asked, “He played here last year! Now that was an amazing show! I sure hope he comes back this year!”

“...” He sighed, resisting the urge to zap the guy. Oh well, his show would still be better than
whatever lame performance Awesome gave last year.

“Ooooh this is so exciting!” Wander grinned, clapping his hands together, “I can’t wait to tell Sylvia!” Who would’ve thought a surprise/celebration thing for Hater and Peepers would lead to a show for them? Well, now that the thought was in his mind, he couldn’t wait for it to become a reality.

Just then, the line moved ahead once more, and Hater noticed just how close they were now. “Huh. ...Well, guess you got lucky.”

“Hm?” Wander turned back around. “Oh! Heh, see! I told ya we were almost there!”

“Yeah yeah. ...So, have you ever rode this before?”

“Oh yeah, when I was about twelve! Had to go on it myself since my mama don’t really care for rollercoasters, but it was a blast! All the huge hills and the loop-de-loops and it was just so amazing! And, it’s one of the fastest rollercoasters in the galaxy!”

“Huh. ...And, uh, how long do you hang upside down during the loop part?”

“Well, I don’t know for certain, but judging by how fast it goes, not too long. Although, they are pretty big…”

“They looked small from where we saw them,” Hater mumbled.

“Don’t worry Hater, they aren’t too scary!” “I’m not scared! Why would I be scared of a stupid little-” The coaster pulled in, grinding to a halt. And while one employee let the semi-dazed yet happy riders off, another let them in.

“Let’s go!” Wander shouted as he pulled them forward and towards the front seat, not noticing how tightly Hater was now gripping his hand.

“So, did you find them yet?”

“Nope. They’re not over by the outdoor food court,” Dracor told them as he landed in front of the group, having flew over to the area instead of walking.

“They aren’t over by the arcade either,” Peepers told them.

“And we checked some of the ride lines, but we didn’t see them either,” Demurra added while Sylvia searched the crowd around them, stretching her neck up as high as she could make it.

“Well, they gotta be around here somewhere!” Pulling out her phone, Sylvia scowled when there were still no replies. ‘Hey Eyesore, next time tell your bandmate to take his phone off vibrate!’

Peepers scowled slightly, just as annoyed as she was with the situation. “Fine, just as long as you tell YOURS to actually charge his phone!”

“Okay, okay, calm down, guys,” Demurra told the two drummers, “Maybe we should just head off to lunch without them. I mean, we know Wander wouldn’t let Hater leave the park, and they have to be somewhere! So, we’ll find them eventually.”

“Yeah I know,” Sylvia replied, holding back a sigh, “But still-”

Just then, a chorus of screams pierced the air, coming from the rollercoaster not too far from where they were standing. And out of all of them, two stood above the rest and were heard very clearly: a
very loud, practically terrified scream and a joyful holler.

“...I think we found them,” Dracor said after a moment.

Sylvia just smirked. “Well, come on then,” she told them as she started walking towards the back of the rollercoaster, “Let’s go pick them up - and take Bonehead over to a trash can if he needs it.”

Surprisingly, Hater actually enjoyed the rollercoaster - even if he did throw up afterwards - and the rest of the day seemed to go well. Lunch was satisfying, and the group was able to find several rides for them to go on together, with Hater’s favorite being the bumper cards. By the time the sun started to set, every musician there at least had a smile on their face.

Wander and Hater also shared their idea with everyone, and Demurra had said that she knew people at the park and could pretty much guarantee them a show the following week. In everyone’s opinion, good news like that was a great way to end the day.

But since she still had to get them the show, she and Dracor headed towards the planet’s manager’s office and told the rest of the group to just meet them at the front of the park. So, they had a bit of time to kill, and when the idea of looking at the souvenir shops was abandoned when they remembered that they didn’t really have money to spare, they ended up just sitting on a bench and waiting for their friends to return.

Wander wasn’t one to give up though. “We do have time for one more ride, guys. The Merry-Go-Round’s always fun! Or we could play a couple games at the arcade. Or-” His blue eyes widened when he spotted the giant circle peeking over the small buildings. Of course! “The ferris wheel!”

“Ferris wheel?” Hater repeated, “Oh yeah, guess they have one of those here too. Huh. I would’ve thought they were a carnival only ride since they’re usually sorta small.” Even when he glanced over at Phunulon’s one, it didn’t look too impressive.

“Not this one! Trust me, the view is amazing! Come on, Hater, let’s go-”

“Actually bud,” Sylvia started to say, immediately getting Hater’s attention, “I think I’m gonna take Hater on this ride.”

Both Wander and Peepers exchanged looks with her while Hater tried not to look too worried. “You sure, Syl?”

“Positive.”

“Well, uh, actually I think I’m gonna just stay here and-” His attempt to get out of riding it was ignored as Sylvia pulled him off the bench and nearly dragged him over to the slowly spinning circle. If this were anyone else, Hater would’ve zapped them, or at least fight back. In fact, Hater thought about doing that, but a quick look from the tattoo-covered Zbornak stopped it right in its tracks, and before he knew it they were sitting in one of the old cars and waiting for the ride to start.

“...So, uh…” He rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly, “Um-”

“You can relax a little, skull-boy,” Sylvia told him, “I’m not here to threaten you or anything. I just want to talk.”

“...You mean, you want to talk about what happened last night.”

“Pretty much, yeah.”
He sighed. Great. “Okay look, we started off just talking but, but then he started saying all these nice things and-!”

“Do you want to date him? Be his boyfriend?”

“…” The skeleton was completely silent as his brain not only processed her question, but asked him about a million others as well. “I… I don’t know.”

She raised an eyebrow. “You don’t know?”

He scowled, raising his voice in defense. “Yeah, I don’t know! I mean, it sounds nice but, but I don’t completely know if I’d want to or if-”

“Okay okay. So then, what was the thing last night? Was that a legit date, or was it just hanging out that turned into a make-out session?” The latter she could sort of understand from experience.

Hater’s face was glowing green now as he flexed his hands slightly, trying to keep himself calm. “I, uh, I guess it was, sort of a date? We just, ate supper somewhere and then we listened to some singers in the park, and then we just sat in my ship and talked for a couple hours before-” He glanced down at his lap. “Well, uh, you know what happened at the end.”

“Yeah, and I doubt I’ll forget it anytime soon.” Unfortunately. “And, Wander said that you asked him, not the other way around?”

“...Yes. I asked him.”

“...Huh.”

Again, Hater started to feel a bit defensive. “Is there a problem with that? What, you think I can’t ask people on dates?!”

Sylvia didn’t even flinch at his anger. “Honestly, you’re so anti social most of the time, I didn’t think it was possible. But I guess there’s a first time for everything.”

The wheel was running smoothly now, and their car was slowly heading towards the top - towards the orange and yellow colored sky. “...So, is at all the questions you have?”

“No, but I’ve asked you all the ones that you could answer.” She leaned back in her seat, looking much more relaxed than Hater, but still not exactly content. “...You at least like, him, right? I mean, whether or not you want to be his boyfriend or not, you at least like him.”

“...Yeah.” Grop, he couldn’t even deny it anymore. Any other answer felt like a pathetic lie that even the stupidest people wouldn’t believe. “I like Wander.”

Sylvia was silent for a moment or two, a ghost of a smile on her lips before going back to a serious frown. “Good. Then I hope you care about him enough not to hurt him, at least on purpose.” When she noticed Hater looking confused, she turned to look him straight in the eyes as she explained.

“I don’t know what to call this relationship between you and Wander, and I don’t know what it’ll turn into, but no matter what happens in the end, I want to at least feel like I can trust you not to hurt him. Not to just, abandon him without saying anything or blow up at him and not even try to make up. I know this seems like a lot but… He’s my best friend, and I don’t want him getting hurt.”

Hater didn’t really know what to say, but he did know that - at the moment, at least - he didn’t want to hurt Wander either. “...Well, I’ll try.”
This time, Sylvia’s smile was a lot more visible. “Guess that’s all I can ask for, for now at least. Now relax. I told you that I’m not here to smack you, and besides we’re getting close to that amazing view Wander was talking about, so you should at least try and enjoy it.”

Looking away from Sylvia, Hater gaped a little at just how much he could see at this height. A good portion of the planet, plus the setting sun on the horizon. “…Huh.”

Sylvia looked out on it as well, her face warm and heart and mind settled. ‘Heh, looks like Wander was right again,’ she thought to herself. Not a bad view at all.
Despite still being a bit embarrassed about it, the ‘Van Incident’ (dubbed this by Sylvia, seconded by Peepers) seemed like forever ago. ...In reality, less than a week had passed. But that didn’t matter to Hater. As long as people didn’t bring it up and he wasn’t getting stared at anymore, it was in the past.

‘Besides,’ the skeleton thought to himself as he glanced back down at the paper, still mostly blank with only a couple crossed out lines on it, ‘I have more important things to do.’

Wander and Sylvia were on Waria for their own show - playing at some college campus for a ‘Music in the Quad’ thing. Pay was lousy but apparently there was free food, and Peepers had mentioned that college kids usually give bands quite a bit of publicity online, and even if they didn’t, Wander would still be happy to play for them. Hater rolled his eyes a bit, but smiled just a little.

They had their own show as well on some moon not too far away that Saturday. Honestly, Hater was pretty disappointed in it. A small venue, not a big crowd, very little publicity. It almost seemed like a waste of time. “Every show counts, Hater,” Demurra had told him when he mentioned this. Maybe she was right, but it was still annoying to have to play small shows. Really, if it weren’t for their Friday show, he would’ve considered this week a failure.

Thankfully, Demurra and Dracor’s connections had come through for them once again, and both the Harbingers of Doom and Wander and Sylvia (the band) were able to get shows on Phunulon for Friday night. Now THAT, was worth the effort! The skeleton could only grin as he imagined the huge crowds that would be awaiting him on the amusement planet.

“And with all those people, there has to be AT LEAST one or two people that are talent agents or from record companies or whatever!” he told himself, “There just has to be!” Not to mention they were sure to get a ton of publicity, and even more fans! No doubt about it, this show would definitely give them a huge lead for the Battle.

“Which is why it needs to be perfect…” His horns folded down slightly. And his performance would be perfect… once he could figure out the lyrics to this stupid song, that is! “GAH!” He tossed the notepad onto the bed, glaring at it.

“...Hater?” “What do you want, Peepers?” The door opened and the Watchdog poked his head in, holding up a brown paper bag with a familiar fast-food joint logo on it. “Um, dinner?”

“Oh.” He sat up a bit straighter. “Thanks Peepers.”

Peepers smiled a bit as he walked into the room. “No problem.” ‘And thanks for saying thanks,’ he mentally added. “I got your usual.”

“Just onions and ketchup on my burger?”

“Yep?”

“And you made sure to get extra packets?”

“I’m pretty sure we have a bottle of ketchup in the fridge but- yes, I did.”

The skeleton nodded. “Good.” With that, he opened the bag, digging out one of his burgers and started to take the wrapper off. Peepers took out one of his sandwiches as well and began eating.
“...Feels like we haven’t done this in a while.”

Hater raised an eyebrow. “Done what? Eat?”

“Eat by ourselves without anyone else, and while sitting on a bed instead of at a dinner table.”

“...Huh.” Actually, yeah. Despite planning to alternate between living in a van and staying in random hotels for the entire summer, here they were, staying in an apartment. In fact, it almost felt like they were back on Skulldrion - traveling to shows and occasionally staying in a hotel or camping out, but still having a place to come back to and crash at. “...Geez.” It almost ruined the experience of the whole ‘Road trip to Rock and Roll fame’ vision he’d had for this summer.

“Yeah…” Peepers took another bite of his sandwich, quickly chewing and swallowing. “...Well, we’ve saved up enough money for several hotel stays, and we’re going to have to travel really far away from Axalis eventually.”

“Right…”

“So, I guess we’ll be back on the open road soon, probably by the end of this month.” In fact, there was no question about it - they needed to get back on the road by the end of the month. They had exhausted all nearby venues pretty much, and there were still a few big planets they had yet to play at. If they were truly going to be a galactic sensation, then they need to actually play in all parts of the galaxy.

“Yeah, I guess so.” Even if this was what a part of him wanted, it was still going to feel weird not staying at the apartment they had pretty much called home for the past few weeks. And it was going to be even weirder only having Peepers to talk to in the morning, and no homemade breakfasts either...

“...I’m sure we’ll run into everyone a few more times before the Final Battle,” Peepers told him, “So it’s not like you’re - we’re saying goodbye to them forever.”

The skeleton blushed slightly. “Er, I-I wasn’t thinking about that! I mean, I wasn’t worried about that!”

“Of course not, Hater,” Peepers nodded, not willing to argue with him, “Whatever you say.”

Thankful that he wasn’t going to push the subject, Hater took a huge bite of his burger, stuffing his mouth and keeping the conversation paused for a couple minutes. “...You’d just better figure out where we’re going and get our concerts scheduled BEFORE we go there, got it?”

Peepers scoffed. “Believe me, I was already planning it.” After all, he didn’t want another incident like in Ronus. “And I’ll make sure we hit some of the more popular venues, so by the time we get to the Final Battle, nearly every planet will know our names.”

A pleased smile managed to form on Hater’s face. “Good.” Rock and roll fame and galaxy wide recognition for being the best band in the competition - just as it should be. “Those other bands don’t stand a chance.”

Peepers, unfortunately, didn’t smile back. “Hater, as good as we are… I wouldn’t say-”

He shot a stern look over at Peepers. “What? So you DON’T think we’re the best band in the competition?”

“Of course I do!” the Watchdog said in his defense, “I’m just saying that we can’t just ignore the other bands! Obviously we’re more skilled than a lot of them, but that doesn’t mean the others aren’t...
getting publicity. And even if they aren’t the best band ever, they’ll still be considered ‘good’ and popular if enough people know who they are! Here, look.”

Since his laptop was off and charging, Peepers fished out his smartphone, opening up several blogs with just a few quick swipes and tabs, mumbling a bit to himself as he read through the screens full of text. Hater just rolled his eyes. What a nerd.

“Okay, it looks like this blog was started by either the M.C. from the Battle, or one of the judges - and no, they didn’t say their name. It’s incredibly detailed, and it gives updates on nearly all the bands. For example, it seems like the Baaaahalian band got a bit of a homefield advantage for their last show on Vectune, since that’s one of their sister planets, so they were able to get a big show.”

“Hmph, whatever.” Like that many people listen to bands that use bagpipes anyway.

“And a few of the other bands have been posting free downloadable songs on their blogs and band websites. That’s a pretty smart move…”

Hater scowled. “Then why didn’t YOU think of it?! What, do you just read on your laptop all day?”

Peepers just gave him a flat look. “Of course not. But unfortunately I’ve been having trouble finding a good place to post our songs where it won’t be stolen or ignored. Besides, it’s not just ‘reading’, it’s work!” Especially when a good chunk of music and opinion forums were a slog of misspellings and caps lock to go through. “It still sounds like Awesome’s one of the front-runners, just because he’s a Battle veteran.”

His scowl deepened. Of course. “Any other bands we should wor- er, keep an eye on?” The Harbingers of Doom certainly didn’t worry.

“Well, that one band with the talking plant in it has publicity just because of how unique their group looks, but I don’t think they’re more than a novelty. There’s a few other bands though that seem to be both well-liked, fairly talented, and well known.” He scrolled down. “Let’s see here… There’s The Busters - you know, that Ballzarian group that’s sorta techno-rock? Then there’s that band that mostly does 80’s stuff and they have all the synthesizers and soft rock. What were they called, Lords of Illuminati or something?”

“Who knows, who cares?”

“Good point. They’re mostly here cause they’re catchy, and a lot of the older fans like them. But they shouldn’t be too much of a problem in the end. Then there’s a couple other bands that seem to have their own small fanbases: Prison Planet Riot, Bounty Bash, Kitty Fangs…” He still couldn’t believe a group of cute kitten could some how pull off death metal, but really it was still just another novelty act that would get one of the higher placings, but not take home first. “And, well…”

Hater looked at him, curious and a bit annoyed. “Well what?”

“Well… There’s also Wander and Sylvia.”

“…Yeah? What about them?”

The eyeball blinked. “…Did you seriously forget?”

“Forget wha-” He stopped, as if stunned by the fact that just hit him like a ton of asteroids. They were their competition. Wander was his competition. And he had nearly forgotten, just like how he nearly forgot that when the season was over, they would have to say goodbye, with no idea when they’d see each other again. “...”
Peepers fidgeted slightly. Maybe he shouldn’t have reminded him. Then again, now was probably a better time than reminding him before the Final Battle. “Um, yeah… It’s not too surprising that they’re popular, and their music is… decent. What with Wander’s cheerful lyrics and Sylvia’s amazing drumming—”

“I think I’ve heard them practice enough times to know they’re good, Peepers!” the skeletal rocker snapped, giving his bandmate a sharp glare before looking away, going back to being silent. ...Grop, when was the last time he’d thought of Wander like competition? When he was watching a recording of his and Sylvia’s first Axalian show? Or was it when they were playing at the stadium? He couldn’t remember.

“...Of course we’re still better, and we’ll still beat them at the Final Battle. I mean, come on, Peepers! At least TRY to have a bit more confidence!”

“...Right. Of course,” Peepers said, giving a small nod.

“Yeah,” Hater mumbled, “No one will beat us...” Not even Wander and Sylvia. Though, he did hope they at least got 2nd place in the battle. Heck, even 3rd would be too bad. Besides, he was sure SOMEONE would hire the two of them afterwards, and even if they didn’t, didn’t Wander say he was just doing this for fun or something like that? ‘Of course he did,’ he told himself, ‘and even if he didn’t, it’s not like losing this thing would completely destroy him or anything!’ Practically nothing could make the guy upset!

So yeah, there was no way he was giving up his well-deserved first place win AND possibly his entire career as a rock star! Not even to his boyfr- er, not even to someone he sorta liked!

“At least, we won’t let anyone beat us on purpose,” Peepers corrected him, “We still need to practice and improve a bit more, just to be safe.”

Hater rolled his eyes again. “Well, we’re already great, so improving a bit more shouldn’t be too hard.”

And Peepers agreed with him. “Really we just need to figure out a couple more effects for the show, maybe a couple new songs—” he could feel Hater glare at him for a moment when he mentioned this—“and that should be it!”

A small, confident smile returned to the skeleton’s face. “Good.” They could easily handle that. This win - and however many record deals they would be offered afterwards - were practically theirs already!

Satisfied and feeling relaxed once more, Hater grabbed a handful of fries from the grease-coated bottom of the bag. But as he tossed them in his mouth, he realized something. “...Did you just call Sylvia’s drumming ‘amazing’?”

His pupil shrunk slightly. “Uh, n-no, I don’t think so.”

Hater gave him a flat look. “I’m pretty sure you did.”

“Well I’m pretty sure I didn’t.”

“You totally did.”

“I did not!”

“Ugh, FINE! Whatever, you didn’t say it. But do you think her drumming’s ‘amazing’?” There was
then a moment of silence that seemed to last forever. “Peepers! Answer the question!”

“Maybe!” the drummer finally shouted, “I mean, she’s certainly talented - both on the drums and the guitar! And, well, s-she’s a good performer! Talented and level-headed and entertaining, and her stage look is- er, n-nice I suppose. And, uh-”

“You like her, don’t you?”

“...Yes.”

“I figured.” Honestly if it weren’t for the fact that he had smooched Wander several times, Hater would’ve snapped at Peepers and called him a traitor for getting infatuated with their musical enemies. But even he could see the hypocrisy in doing that. “Have you asked her out yet?”

“Well… Not really.” Peepers scowled a bit when he caught another eye roll from his bandmate. “And I don’t think I ever will.” In fact, he was almost certain of it.

“What? You think she’d reject you or something?” “… The eyeball looked away, and Hater felt a small pinch of guilt. Maybe that was a bit blunt. He tried eating again, but the silence was starting to get to him. “Okay look, you’re… alright. And, seeing as you have manners and stuff and probably won’t be a jerk to her or anything, she’ll at least go out with you once maybe, so-”

His bandmate sighed. “Hater, it’s… It’s complicated, alright?”

Hater raised an eyebrow. “Complicated? Peepers, if it’s because they’re competition-”

“IT’S MORE THAN THAT!” Hater’s eyes widened as he leaned back a bit. This was certainly a rarity. Usually he was the one who snapped and started yelling as loud as he could - or at least he was the one who did it first if a conversation turned into an argument.

Thankfully, Peepers knew how to calm himself down, taking a couple moments to do this before continuing. “Sylvia and I… It’s just, complicated. And not just because of the Battle. There have been, instances and, situations… But I’d say we’re good friends now, and I don’t want to risk ruining that.” Especially not if they only had a month or so left to be around each other. He would rather at least be friends with her than not hang out with her at all.

“Situations…” Hater furrowed his brow. What the heck did that mean? What kind of ‘situations’ could he and Sylvia-… Wait.

Waaaait a minute.

A month ago. At Awesome’s party. When Peepers disappeared and wasn’t answering his phone. He had even told Hater later that he slept with a girl! (He still almost couldn’t believe that). Was the girl…? “Did you…”?

“Hater?” Peepers said after a few moments of silence, “You okay?”

Hater blinked, turning back to look at his bandmate and looking him up and down. “...Nevermind.” He turned back to his food. Yeah, there was no way. Sylvia was WAAAAY out of Peepers’ league. “And if you want to just stay friends with her, then I guess that’s your choice.” Heck, in the long run it would seem like the better option. Peepers would stay focused and he wouldn’t have to risk seeing them make out.
“…” Peepers stared at him for a moment longer before turning back to his own food, taking a smaller and slower bite this time. “Yeah…”

Phunulon was a pretty crowded place, despite having a whole planet to use for space. With all the rides, attractions and people, it was a wonder they even had a place big enough for a stage, a small backstage area, a soundbooth, and an area large enough to fit a huge crowd comfortably.

“Not too bad of a gig really,” Peepers mumbled, panting slightly as he pushed one of their amps across the floor, “But the set-up help is a little lacking.” Then again it WOULD be easier if someone was actually helping him. Thankfully Sylvia had helped with his drum set-up while Wander and Hater were doing their own thing.

“Wowwwww!” Wander said in awe, peeking out from behind the curtain as more and more people continued to show up and unable to look away, “Just look at all of em’, Syl!”

“Bigger crowd than the one at the college campus, that’s for sure,” Sylvia commented, dusting her hands off after finishing the drums, “and maybe as big as the audience we had on Ronus.” And if not, it seemed pretty darn close to it.

“Ooooh this is so exciting!” the Star Nomad squeaked, shaking slightly now. Hater - who was currently using a hand mirror to help him get his face paint just right - just rolled his eyes, a hint of a smile on his face. “Hmph, when are you not excited?”

Wander giggled as he walked up to Hater, wrapping his furry arms around him - and making him blush slightly. “Well, the excitement’s what makes performing fun! That and the music! And besides-” his grin was taking up his whole face now, “Tonight’s a special niiiiiiight~!”

Hater blinked, Peepers gave Wander a curious look, and even Sylvia looked a bit confused. “It is?” they all asked in unison.

“Well, yeah! Cause we’re all playin’ together!”

“But we played in the same show back on Ronus,” Peepers reminded him, “So it’s not like this is the first time we’ve-”

“No no, not just sharin’ a show!” He paused. “…We’re all going to play together, aren’t we?”

Hater jolted as soon as he heard that. “Wait, what?!” Wander smile faltered slightly as he let go of him, not expecting such a negative reaction. In fact, he had expected excitement. Happiness. They were going to be on stage together, making music together and enjoying themselves. They had done this before, after all - on the asteroid where Hater’s van broke down and in the streets and in the apartment. But now... How did being on stage make a difference?

Of course to Hater, it did make a difference, all because of one single fact: They would be on stage.

A stage meant this was supposed to be professional. A stage meant that people would be recording and video taping. A stage meant possible judges and critics and fans. And what did playing with Wander mean to people like that? Would they be confused by the mix of styles? Would they think Hater was dropping his own band and join Wander’s? …Would they think the nomad was better than Hater was, now that people could hear them at the same time?

Glancing over at his bandmate for a moment, Peepers decided to reply for him. “We just signed up to do a show, not a collab. We aren’t interested in those.”
The furry guitarist slowly frowned, shrinking slightly. “Well, I mean, I just assumed…”

“Wander, when did I EVER agree to play with you?!” Hater asked suddenly, even glaring at him slightly.

“Well, you didn’t really, but-” “Exactly. I didn’t.”

“Hey, hey!” Sylvia said suddenly, glaring right back at the skeleton, “It’s no big deal, alright? Just a mistake. As long as we don’t go over our schedule time, I’m sure we can play separately and no one will care.”

“Fine. Then that’s what we’ll do.” Hater turned back to his mirror.

“…” Wander awkwardly rubbed his arm. “…Um, you know, we could still have separate performances but, maybe as a grand finale sort of thing, all four of us could-”

“NO!” Hater snapped, turning back towards him and earning another glare from the Zbornak, “What did I just say?! I don’t want to perform with you! We are NOT playing together!”

“It was just a question!” Sylvia yelled back at him, “You don’t have to be an ass about it! I mean grog, what is your problem?!?” Hater said nothing, and Wander quietly told her it was fine, but Sylvia ignored him. “No, seriously, what is it? Because newsflash, Numbskull: this isn’t exactly the best way to treat your boyfriend!”

“I never said he was my boyfriend!” Hater shouted back almost instantly, and his voice faltered a bit as soon as he said it, as if he’d hurt himself with those words, “A-And it’s like Peepers said, I’m not interested in collabs! I can win this contest on my own!” His drummer gave him a small look when he said that, but Hater didn’t notice.

Wander opened his mouth to say something, but quickly shut it. Sylvia on the other hand just rolled her eyes. “Seriously? You’re worried about that? Look Bonehead, this is supposed to be just a fun thing so just-”

“No! It’s not just ‘a fun thing!’” he yelled at her, standing up now, “You and Wander might not care about getting famous but I DO! This is a performance! We’re in a Battle of the Bands! A competition! And in case you haven’t noticed, it’s important to me!”

“It’s important to all of us!” Sylvia argued, “But importance doesn’t equal jerkiness!”

“Hey, if I’m a jerk then so are you!”

“Oh, and why’s that? Because I really am curious as to what exactly is going on in that thick, electrified head of yours!”

“See! There it is again! What, you’re allowed to insult me and I’m not allowed to fight back?!”

“Okay you two,” Peepers started to say, deciding to finally step in if only to keep a full-fledged fistfight from breaking out, “Let’s just-”

“Shut up, Peepers!” the two rockers shouted in unison, earning a glare from the Watchdog that was promptly ignored.

“All we’re trying to do is enjoy ourselves,” Sylvia told him, stretching her neck out a bit so she’d look a bit taller and a bit more threatening, “And he thought that we should try to include you guys in it, but apparently THAT was a mistake!”
“Yeah, it was!” Hater glared back, a couple sparks leaking out of his clenched fists, “Because I didn’t ASK to be included! All I want to do is to win this battle and to get the chance to do what I’ve wanted to do forever - be a rockstar! I’m not here for anything else! And I’m not going to give that up just because you guys want me to go along with every dumb thing you want me to do! I have a goal, and I’m going to reach it no matter what! So yeah, that being said I think I’m allowed to take things like this seriously and not want to play with some stupid folkpunk group!”

The backstage area was once again in silence. Sylvia still had a hard glare focused directly on Hater while Peepers decided to try fiddle with one of the amps he was next to since obviously he wasn’t supposed to get involved - though even he was scowling a bit at what Hater had said. And as for Wander…

He finally dared to look at him, but couldn’t see anything more than a small frown. The rim of his floppy green hat was covering his eyes but… Guilt slowly filled his boney chest. Even an idiot could tell how upset Wander was. And yet, his lips didn’t move at all to try and form an apology - though one was heard. Part of him didn’t even want to apologize. After all, most of what he did was the truth.

The silence was broken though when Wander started to quietly speak. “‘M sorry, Hater… Guess I wasn’t thinking. But, you’re right. We are technically competing against each other. ...So, I wish you the best of luck on your performance. You’re welcome to go first.” With that, Wander grabbed his guitar and left the stage, heading off to find a place to practice. A place where he wouldn’t bother Hater.

“…” He watched the nomad leave before glancing back at Sylvia. Unsurprisingly, the Zbornak flipped him off before following Wander out. Once they were both gone, Hater gave a small sigh. “...Guess we should, tune or something.”

“Yeah, guess so,” Peepers mumbled, not even looking at him. Hater scowled. He still felt a bit guilty but… But why was everyone mad at him?! Wander was the one who was just going to spring this on them! What right did he have to set up a collab show without even asking? ‘Besides, he should know better,’ he thought to himself as he grabbed his coal-black guitar. Being friends with other bands maybe wasn’t the worst thing in the universe, but it was still dangerous to forget about the competition - or at least it was for those who actually cared about the competition.

Hater did care. He needed to care, otherwise everything they’d done so far would’ve been a waste. He couldn’t allow himself to forget again, not when they were so close to the end of the summer. Every performance counts, after all.

Twenty minutes passed, and soon enough Hater was on-stage, cheers all around him as he prepared to start playing. He briefly looked around the audience, and there was no green hat to be seen. ‘Whatever,’ he told himself, raising his pick, ‘I can do this on my own.’ He played a loud, long chord and the audience cheered again. This was what he needed to focus on.

And that’s what he did. For the next several minutes, Hater focused all of his energy into playing. He played each song perfectly, staying in his ‘angry rocker’ persona the entire time and easily pulling off several applause worthy moments - including a guitar solo that even he would admit in practice that it was difficult. But here, it was simply child’s play. With each ending note, the crowd went wild, drowning out any other thoughts Hater might’ve had - and he certainly appreciated that.

This was his element, this was what he was supposed to be doing with his life, and nothing was going to change that.

Giving off one final chord while Peepers banged out several rapid-fire beats, the crowd cheered and
applauded, making Hater smirk slightly. Yes, this was what he needed! This was what he had been
missing!

Not even waiting for a cue from Peepers, Hater began playing their second song - and while it did
surprise the eyeball and make him stumble a bit in the beginning, it was just as good as their first.
Same with their third, and Hater was getting ready to play a fourth when he heard Peepers take the
mic. “We are the Harbingers of Doom! Go check our site out online if you want to know more!”
Even if the audience cheered at that, Hater scowled as they walked off-stage.

“And just what was that?!”

“Hater, I know you hate getting your concerts cut short,” Peepers started to say, “But this place paid
for two bands, so we had to let Wander and Sylvia on otherwise we’d probably lose part of our-”

“I knew that!” Hater snapped, “What I’m saying is that you could’ve just let me know that so I could
say our name and all that stuff!”

“…” Peepers narrowed his eye. “You know, I’m a part of this band too, so I think I’m allowed to
have a little time on the microphone.”

“Whatever,” Hater mumbled, grabbing his guitar case and quickly putting his instrument in it, “Just
try to sound a bit cooler next time you do it.” Peepers scowled but didn’t say anything more, and
Hater was thankful for that.

After all, this had been a great show, and he didn’t want anything to- “Oof!”

“Oh! Sorry Ha-” “Wander, come on.” The skeleton rocker froze, with only his eyes managing to
move and catch an orange figure being dragged onto the stage. He could only see the back of him,
no idea what his face looked like.

“…” He placed his hand on his side, right where the neck of Wander’s guitar had hit him. Right
where it had the first time Wander accidentally hit him with an instrument…

“…Hater?” He blinked, and continued walking out of the backstage area, not saying another word.
As he maneuvered through the edge of the crowd, he could hear Wander speaking. It was sorta hard
not to when the Star Nomad’s voice was literally all around him, echoing through the speakers.

“Heya folks!” he greeted, sounding just as happy as ever. It surprised Hater just how relieved he was
to hear him like this, with not an ounce of hurt in his voice. “My best pal and I have got a few more
songs for you tonight, and I hope you enjoy ‘em!”

The crowd cheered as Wander started playing. He resisted the urge to glance back at the stage, but
he still couldn’t help but listen to the peppy yet still somehow rock-sounding melody: ‘It must be one
of his favorite songs,’ Hater thought. He’d heard Wander play it at nearly every concert he played -
least, at the ones Hater had went to. …Which was quite a few of them actually when he thought
about it. Another small surprise.

“We’ll have to go back for the rest of our equipment later,” he could hear Peepers tell him, “But,
maybe we could just grab something to eat at one of the food stands here before getting it?”

He thought of running into Wander again, and what that could include. “…You go ahead,” Hater told
him after a moment, “We’ve got snacks in the van, don’t we? I’ll just stay there and eat some of
those.”

“…Suit yourself.”
There were explosions in the distance. Hater did faintly remember Wander saying something about the park having nightly fireworks shows. He didn’t bother turning to look at them though. He just sat in the van, keeping his eyes glued to Peepers’ laptop.

He wouldn’t exactly know what forums to check, and he doubted there was anything new people had to say about their band - even if word traveled fast, it probably didn’t travel that fast. But even if he did know, there wasn’t exactly wi-fi to hook up to in a parking lot. So, he settled for playing one of those pinball games that seemed to come with every computer, even if no one played them.

His stomach growled slightly, not satisfied by the snacks he’d found, but he still refused to leave the vehicle. After all, staying there seemed like the easiest thing to do. ‘Besides, Peepers will be back any minute now.’ That’s what he had been telling himself for the past couple hours, at least.

Once the equipment they had taken with them was in the van, Peepers offered to go get the rest after he got his food. Of course, Hater had been more than willing to let him. Now he was starting to wonder if that had been a mistake, given that his bandmate wasn’t even answering the texts he sent him.

“Whatever,” he mumbled after checking his phone for the eighth time in the past twenty minutes, “He can do whatever he wants…” Probably talking with the others, trying to convince Demurra and Dracor to let them stay at the apartment for one more night and trying to convince Sylvia not to throw their stuff out onto the street. Or maybe he was agreeing with them about how much of a jerk Hater was. He scowled at the thought, and yet it wasn’t at the idea of Peepers saying such things.

“Stupid…” He shut down the laptop, tossing it into the back along with his phone before putting his feet on the dashboard and leaning back. All of this would just be a memory eventually - either in a few days or in a little over a month - so it didn’t matter. Only long term things mattered…

Even so, the more his mind thought back to everything that had happened so far (despite his best efforts not to remember), the more he started to wonder… Just what was ‘long term’, and what was temporary?

“…” He reached back into the seat and got his phone, only this time he wasn’t sending a text to Peepers. Instead, he selected ‘contacts’, scrolled through the short list of names, and called one of them without a single moment of hesitation.

After three or four dial tones, someone finally picked up the phone, yawning slightly as they did. “Hello…?”

“Ember?” Hater asked, his voice quieter than he thought it would be.

“Hater? Grop… Is everything alright? And, why are you calling at two in the morning?”

“Huh? It’s not two, it’s only seven-” He stopped before facepalming. “Right, forgot about stupid timezones, sorry.”

“It’s fine,” she told him, sounding a bit more awake now, “No harm done. So, what’s up?”

“…” Where to start? After a few seconds of silence he simply replied with “It’s nothing. Just… Felt like talking to someone.”

“Really? Huh…”
“Is that really so surprising?”

“Sort of. I mean, in all the years I’ve known you, you’ve never just ‘felt like talking’. So either something’s changed, or you’re really upset about something.”

“…I, I told you, it’s nothing.”

“Hater…” He could hear his sister sigh slightly, but was relieved when she didn’t try to force him to talk about it. Instead she asked “Where’s Peepers?” - which, really, was almost as bad.

“I don’t know… Somewhere on the planet, at least. He said he was getting something to eat and then getting the rest of our equipment, but that was hours ago.”

“Well, I hope he didn’t get stepped on,” Ember joked, hoping to lighten up her brother’s mood a little. “So you just finished up a show, then? How was it?”

“…It was fine. There was a huge crowd and we got paid pretty good so… it was fine.”

“Are you sure?” Hater opened his mouth to reply, but nothing came out. “…If something happened, whether or not it was something you did or something someone else did, then… You should know it’s not the end of your career or anything. You’re still a great musician.”

“…I know…”

“And you’re a good person too.”

“How do you know?” he asked before he could stop himself. In that moment, he could almost see his sister giving him a soft smile.

“Because in the time that I’ve known you, you let me sleep in your bed whenever I got scared by a bad storm or a nightmare, you made sure I wasn’t lonely when Mom was out of the house and I had no one to play with, you’ve always protected me from jerky guys, you let me listen to you and Peepers practice even though most brothers would be annoyed by it, and - as much as you hate to admit it sometimes - you can be pretty sweet and caring when you want to be, Hater. You may not make the best decisions sometimes, and I’ve seen your anger get the best of you, but I still see you as a good person.”

“Ember…” He squeezed the phone slightly, wrapping an arm around himself, “…I screwed up.”

“Then find a way to fix it.”

“But what if it’s not worth fixing, because it may not matter when all of this is over?”

“You’ll still be thinking about it, you know.” That was true, he would be. He could deny it all he wanted, but it wouldn’t change anything. “So I’d say it’s worth fixing, just so you don’t have to live with the guilt.”

“But… What if I shouldn’t fix it? What if it just ends up hurting me instead?”

“…I guess you’ll just have to figure that out yourself.”

He sighed. “I was hoping you wouldn’t say that.”

“I know, but it’s the only way to figure out what you really want to do, and what you want in general.”
“I thought I already knew…”

“Well, just so you know, you can want more than one thing. And, who knows, you may just get both things you want, if you try hard enough. There’s nothing saying that it’s not possible.”

“I guess so…” Though it sort of felt like it at times. But even so… Maybe it would be worth trying, even if imagining the worst case scenario made his non-existent heart heavy.

“…Hater?”

“Yeah?”

“I love you, and I know that something’s going to come out of this summer for you. I don’t know what it is, but it’ll be something, and I hope it keeps you happy for a while. Because frankly, you deserve it.”


There was a small giggle and a quick “Good morning, and good luck” before she hung up. He stared at the phone for a moment or two before putting it in his pocket, the small smile remaining on his face. Grop, he sure did miss her. “Thank Glorn for cell phones…”

*Knock knock*

Hater flinched slightly at the sudden noise. “What the-?” He turned to the drivers side of the van. For a moment he assumed it was Peepers, but two facts hit him: Peepers has the keys to unlock the van, and Peepers doesn’t wear a green hat. Hesitating for just a moment, Hater opened the door on his side and got out.

“Oh! Gee, you didn’t have to get out,” Wander said as he lightly rubbed the back of his neck, his other hand holding a small bag with the Phunulon logo on it.

“…What are you doing here?” He took a moment to be thankful that for once his voice didn’t accidentally sound harsher than he intended.

“Well, Peepers said that there probably weren’t many snacks in there,” he said, gesturing to the ship, “and I just, wanted to make sure you weren’t hungry in case you, you know, decided to take off… I uh, also heard that you guys are gonna be headin’ out towards the opposite side of the galaxy.

“Y-Yeah,” Hater nodded slightly, glancing down at the ground.

“Makes sense,” Wander told him, resentment completely absent in his voice - though there was a bit of disappointment hidden under his kind words. “There’s a lot of folks out that way to perform for, and I guess they aren’t exactly a day’s trip away from Demurra and Dracor’s place. But I’m sure there’s a lot of great hotels out there to stay at. In fact, I was readin’ up on this one on Tumbrana where in each room there’s a-”

He stopped himself, as if worried that he was saying too much or that Hater was getting annoyed by him. “Well, actually I’ll just… let you see for yourself.” Remembering the bag in his hand, he placed it on the hood of the van. Hater could faintly smell a hot dog and some fries within it. “So… Guess I’ll just, head back into the park. Syl’s probably wondering where I am.” He began to turn around, away from the skeleton. “Later Hate-”

“Wait!”
Wander froze, waiting a moment before glancing back at him. Hater still kept his eyes on the ground, but didn’t try to take back his words. In fact, he did the exact opposite. “...I’m sorry. I, I didn’t mean what I said. At least, n-not the part about your band being stupid...” In the echo of his apology, Hater couldn’t help but scowl at himself when it didn’t sound like nearly enough.

“Hater, you… You don’t have to apologize,” Wander told him after a moment, “I was the one who tried to force you into something you obviously didn’t wanna do. And I know that all of this is really important to ya, but-”

“But that still doesn’t make it right!” Hater shouted back at him. Surprisingly, Wander didn’t flinch at his tone this time. “I, I shouldn’t have yelled at you like that, even after what you did! Because I know you weren’t trying to sabotage me or whatever but-!”

“...But what?”

“But I, I don’t know!” He did know. “I just… I’m sorry, okay?!”

There was another small moment of silence between them as Wander walked around to the other side of the ship, eventually taking Hater’s hands. The skeleton felt slight shivers as his cold hands met warm, furry ones.

“I’ve already accept your apology and forgiven you, Hater,” the smaller rocker told him, gently rubbing Hater’s hand with his thumb, “But I still wanna know what’s wrong.”

“Nothing’s-” He stopped himself, knowing there was no point in arguing. “...I want this.”

“Want what?”

“All of this. You and, and the fame and having my own place even if it’s with a bunch of other people and my music being well known and traveling around and being a star! I want all of it but-!” He gritted his teeth, squeezing Wander’s hands hard - though the nomad didn’t make any noises of pain - “But I just feel like I’m gonna have to give up at least SOMETHING in order to get everything else! And even if that’s not the case, I’m still going to lose something!”

A cool wind blew past them, sending more shivers down Hater’s spine. “...I want to be a star, more than anything. I want to know that, everything I did and all the times I practiced, wasn’t just a waste. I want people to remember my name. That’s why I have to win, why I need to win.” If Wander disagreed, he didn’t make an effort to voice his opinion. This made Hater willing to continue.

“When this summer ends, my goal may end up going with it. But it could also end up just beginning. And I just want it so badly… But at the same time, I know that with all the record deals and tours and stuff, it also means that-”

“That we may end up sayin’ goodbye?” Wander finished for him. Hater didn’t bother giving an answer, they both knew he was right. “Well… I’m not gonna lie, that is a big possibility.”

“I know...” It was inevitable really. Even if their lives changed for better or for worse after the summer was over, they still had separate lives on separate planets, and unfortunately nothing could really change that. At least, not in Hater’s mind. Wander’s on the other hand, was a different story.

“We’ll probably have to say goodbye for a little while… but not forever. We could still keep in touch, and try to call each other and write each other emails even if our schedules get a bit busier.”

“And how do you know that we won’t end up being too busy with whatever we’re doing and just forget to call each other?”
Wander simply smiled at him - that same sort of smile that just screamed ‘everything will work out’, no matter how unlikely it seemed. “Well, we’ll just have to remind ourselves, won’t we?”

“…” Hater almost wanted to find a point to argue with, but his mind just wouldn’t give him one.

He started playing with the skeletal man’s fingers, still keeping their hands somewhat intertwined. “I don’t know about most folks, but as for me? I don’t really like worrying too much about the future. Sometimes it’s just easier to roll with the punches, even when things get a little rough. You know what I mean?”

“I guess,” Hater mumbled with a shrug, “I mean, maybe…”

“Even if you think you have things figured out, the universe likes to surprise you - or as Sylvia says, ‘gives you a nice punch in the head that turns your world upside down for a while’,;” he told him with a giggle, “And I agree with her. Life surprises you, with things big and small. After all, I didn’t think I was gonna meet someone as amazing and extraordinary as you during all of this, but here we are.”

The skeleton swallowed as his neon green eyes met soft blue ones. That fact that he knew that Wander wasn’t lying made it all the more stunning. He stayed still as their hands separated, and a new touch was initiated - a warm hug that seemed to envelop his entire body despite only having a pair of thin arms wrapped around his waist.

“And the universe is gonna keep surprising us, with things good and bad. And, even if we may not be able to face them together… We still have a little over a month left before the Final Battle. I’d say we try to make the most of it, don’t you think?”

Hater didn’t reply. He simply crouched down and returned the hug. Wander could feel him nod, and smiled as he tightened his hug.

The two stayed like that for almost a full minute before Hater let go, with Wander following soon after. “…Thanks,” he mumbled.

“No problem, Hater,” Wander smiled.

“…Guess you have to leave now, though. Go find Sylvia and get back to Axalis?”

The Star Nomad’s smile increased slightly. “Actually, Demurra got us a hotel, figuring that no one would wanna head back so late. And you could stay there with us, if you want.”

Hater hesitated with his answer, but the more he thought about it, the more he knew what he wanted. “Yeah, okay.”

Practically grinning now, Wander started to lead the way, reminding Hater to lock his ship up and not forget his hot dog as he ran ahead. It didn’t take long for Hater to catch up with him, and once he did he took Wander’s hand. Of course, Wander didn’t mind at all.

“…Hey, Wander?”

“Yeah Hater?”

“I… I still can’t do collabs during the competition since, you know, we’re supposed to be competing and all that but… Maybe after all of this is done, you and I could just, play a few songs together? I-It doesn’t even have to be a show or anything, just-”
“I’d like that,” Wander said suddenly, his voice full of warmth, “I’d like that a lot.” Unsurprised by the answer, Hater gave a small smile back at him, finding that despite his words earlier, he liked the idea too.
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Homesickness was common on trips, even for those who may not have a lot to go back to, and Hater was no exception. Though, while he would admit to missing his sister and maybe a couple of his favorite restaurants and places back on Skulldrion, he certainly didn’t miss the planet’s almost constant humidity despite its usual overcast. Having to deal with his hood clinging to his skull, or having to roll up his hoodie sleeves when it just became too unbearable. Really the best way to describe it was to use his own words: It sucked.

However, in the face of sharp wind and ice covered roads, Hater couldn’t help but wish for a little humidity. “Grop, is the heat even working?!”

“I have it as high as it’ll go, Hater,” Peepers replied dryly, keeping his eye on the road as their ship continued its battle with the weather.

Hater growled, wrapping the pink blanket he had around him even tighter. “Stupid Vectune… Why did we have to get a show here?! Couldn’t you get us a show somewhere warmer?!”

The Watchdog’s own scowl deepened, his hands tightening on the steering wheel. He wanted so badly to retort back at him, to remind him that after searching for a gig for three days and having no luck Hater had told him “any place will do, just as long as it’s a good one!” And indeed, if they could ever find it, the theatre would be a great gig. Right in the middle of a downtown area with blasting heat and good wifi - which would mean performance livestreams and people spreading the word during the concert. And again, Hater had said it was fine, so they packed their things and got back on the metaphorical starry road.

Even so, the skeleton had (unsurprisingly) started complaining when it had started getting cold, and it only got worse when they reached the icy Vectune planet. ‘Really you should be used to this by now,’ Peepers told himself, and in a way he was.

But at the same time…

“Peepers!” He jolted. “It told you to turn! You just missed our exit!”

His eye darted to the GPS, and sure enough it was flashing the ‘missed turn’ warning. Peepers growled. Of course the time when it actually worked right, he wasn’t paying attention. “Right, sorry,” he mumbled.

Hater rolled his eyes slightly, giving his bandmate a look. “Geez, what is your deal today?” Peepers had been quiet for most of the trip, ever since they landed on Vectune. Usually the guy was squawking about something or nagging him about things he already knew. Of course, Hater didn’t mind that it was missing (who would even want to listen to that?), but it was still noticeable.

“Nothing,” Peepers replied simply, not looking back at Hater - though he did see him shrug out of the corner of his eye, and go back to glaring at the wind. Of course. Holding back a sigh, Peepers tried to ignore the feeling in the back of his mind and decided to just concentrated on finding a place to help turn them back around.

The theatre was eventually found - “It’s about time!” - and once the two dropped off their equipment and instruments, Peepers was more than ready to find their hotel and just be unconscious for a while.
Unfortunately, his bandmate had different ideas.

“What do you mean we’re staying here?!”

Hater ignored his screeching, keeping his eyes on his guitar - trying to tune it after not playing for nearly four days. “I mean, we’re going to stay here and practice.”

“But- But-!”

“Do YOU want to go back out in that weather?!”

“No, but I will if it means sleeping in a bed!”

“Oh don’t be such a baby! It’s not even nighttime yet.” Though you wouldn’t know it from looking at the dark planet - “It’s only like, five thirty or something!”

Peepers clenched his fists. Yeah, sure, it was easy to not be tired when you weren’t the one that had been driving for the past several hours. “But don’t you at least want to get something to eat?!”

“Second hallway on the first floor,” Hater stated before picking up a bag of chips and pouring a few in his mouth before going back to tuning.

Peepers’ eye started to turn bloodshot. Was he serious?! Did he really not care about his opinion at all? “But Hater, I’m talking about having an actual meal, not just snacks! Don’t you-?”

Hater finally looked up from his guitar, giving his bandmate a glare. “Look, the sooner we start practicing and the sooner I make sure that you’re ready for the show, the sooner we can go get supper and find our hotel and all that stuff! So just get your drums out and stop complaining!”

Complaining?! “Oh, you mean what YOU were doing for the past two days?!” He didn’t even care about getting screamed at or zapped anymore - and it looked like it didn’t even matter, because Hater had his attention once again on his guitar, making a face when he heard a note out of tune and waiting for his bandmate to get with program.

Not bothering to hold back his sigh, Peepers walked over to his own instrument. “Fine…” An idea crossed his mind, but it was quickly pushed aside. No, he couldn’t do something like that. After two months of hard work, to waste it and give up his dreams? No, he would just deal… It would all be worth it at the end of the summer. Hopefully.

“Come on, Peepers! Hurry up! I’m already tuned and everything!”

The Watchdog squeezed his fists again, nearly breaking his drumsticks once he did start practicing.

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“Wowwwwww!”

Sylvia rolled her eyes slightly, though she couldn’t help but smile a bit at her furry guitarist’s undying optimism. “Yeah, a rainstorm. Been a while since we’ve seen that, huh buddy?”

Wander laughed. “No Sylvia, I’m goin’ ‘wow’ at the planet!” Though, after the packed bus ride they had, a bit of cool rain was refreshing. Sticking his face out from under the extended roof of the bus station, he smiled even wider when he felt the rain mist his face slightly, giving him a bit of cool air as well.

“Um, I think I may know a better way for you to cool off, Wander,” a familiar, sweet voice said
before a bottle of fruit flavored water was placed in his hand.

“Huh? Oh, binkleberry flavored! My favorite!” He gave her a grin before popping it open. “Thanks Demurra!” The blonde just gave a quick nod before opening up her own drink. Dracor and Sylvia didn’t hesitate with their drinks either.

“So,” Sylvia started to say once she was finished, taking a moment to lick the last few drops of ThunderBlazz off her lips, “Are we gonna head to our hotel first, or try to find our venue for Saturday?”

Demurra and Dracor shared a smile. “Actually,” she started to say, “We know a club here so, we were thinking of taking you guys there.”

“You’ll probably see other bands there,” Drake added, “The DJs pretty good, and the wings aren’t too bad either.”

“Well then, what are we waiting for?! Let’s go!” Wander cheered, tossing his empty bottle in the air - which landed perfectly in the recyclables. “Lead the way, you two!”

“Gladly.” The couple took each other’s hand, Drake holding the umbrella over them as they walked, with Wander and Sylvia behind them - Sylvia with her own umbrella, and Wander just as happy with using his hat as a shield from the sprinkling rain. A roll of thunder was heard in the distance, followed by a flash of lightning a few minutes later. Wander’s smile softened, but he didn’t say a word.

The entire city seemed sort of old fashioned - restaurants shaped like tea kettles, tall buildings with pointed roofs and clock towers gave it a very old city feel. However, there were bits of modernization, like cars and a few newer buildings towards the downtown area. The buildings got a bit smaller and wider, and there were more stores and means of entertainment. And, like every other time he had been to a new planet, Wander just took it all in while Sylvia kept an eye on him, making sure he didn’t get left behind.

“This looks like the place.” “Yep, they got a new hedge, but it looks like the one.”

Sylvia looked in front of her, and blinked. “Uhhh…” This was the club?

“Oooh!” Wander grinned, “I like the flowers outside it. You know, they say music helps plants grow!”

“Right…” Sylvia wasn’t really concentrating on the flowers though. ...Well, okay maybe a little! But there were other issues too. The old bricks that made up the small building, the steel yet still fancy looking doors, the metal fence around it, the quietness of it - there was even a bird bath and a mini garden beside it for Gropp’s sake! “You sure this isn’t some old lady tea club?” she mumbled.

Demurra and Dracor shared another smile before the dragon reached through the rose filled hedge, easily finding the hidden button. A camera on the other side of the building turned towards them (which Wander waved at). Within seconds, the metal doors opened, and party music came blaring out. Peeking inside, they could see a dark, downward slanted hall with pink and purple lights guiding the way to the music’s origin.

Wander squealed in excitement while Sylvia’s confusion was replaced with a grin. Now THIS, was a club! “How did you guys even know about this place?”

“Oh, everyone finds it eventually,” Demurra said casually, “Plus, Awesome’s a bit of a blabbermouth, so whenever he’s in the Battle, the other bands find out about this place eventually.”
Though, that wasn’t how she and Drake learned about it, but that was another story. “Now come on, let’s go have some fun!”

“You don’t have to tell us twice!” Wander exclaimed before running into the building. Sylvia laughed and followed after him, with Demurra and Dracor right behind her.

The club was just as impressive in the inside. For one, the place was huge, able to fit at least a hundred bands within it. And that may have been just how many were there. Some were on the polished, hardwood dance floor under the bright lights, others were hanging over by the bar and sunk-in sitting area in low lighting, talking and sharing their summer experience so far. There was also a wide stage in the back, though no one was on it since the DJ was providing the music.

High quality speakers hung in the corners of the room, and towards the ceiling were small, stained-glass windows, providing a bit of class and atmosphere - though the sound of the rain pelting them was easily ignorable. Hot food and drinks were brought around on mini robot servers, and there was even an electric fireplace in the sitting area with flames that changed colors - from orange, to green, to pink and blue, to purple, and back to orange. Truly, it was a perfect mix of old fashioned and modern.

“Well, I’d say it was worth the trip, huh Wander? ...Wander?” Looking beside her, she could only see air. Of course, this wasn’t too surprising, so she just shrugged it off and figured that she would see him later. Smiling once again, she headed over to the bar, and thankfully there was an open seat.

“I would-a personally recoommend the-a cider,” the person next to her suggested when she started browsing through the drink list, “It is sort oof the club special.”

“Makes sense, this place seems like the type.”

“Yah, plus it is-a reeally good.”

“Really?” She gave the man a smile, and once she got a good look at him, she realized that she had seen him a couple times before. She saw his band’s performance back on the moon - wasn’t it called “Goat Nation” or something like that? - and she had seen a few of his bandmates at Awesome’s party. “You’re from that Baaaahalian band, right?”

The goat-man nodded. “Yah. I am actually their-a lead.” He stuck out his hand. “Cashmere.”

Sylvia shook it. “Sylvia, nice to meet ya.”

“Oh! Sylvia! Froom-a ‘Wander and Sylvia’!”

She chuckled. “Yep, that’s me. How’d you guess?”

Cashmere gave a small chuckle as well. “Yoor music is-a veery good!”

“Aw, thanks. Your band’s pretty good too. Honestly I didn’t think celtic could even work in rock, but I’d say that you guys have it down. And most bands can’t say they have great bagpipe solos in their songs either.”

He smiled, giving a small bow of his head. “Thank youu. And, if yoo’d-a like, my group is perfoorming tomorrow along with a few other-a bands, so yoou could come watch if yoor not-a busy.”

“Heh, I might just take you up on that.” He seemed like a nice guy after all. Made good music, and he seemed smart enough to tell when girl was just interested in hanging out and not hooking up
Meanwhile, Wander had literally danced until he couldn’t anymore - at least for now. Smiling and still bobbing slightly to the music, he found himself a small table to rest and refuel. “Boy, sure are meetin’ a lot of party folks this summer,” he said as he took a chilled, sparkling apple juice from a robot, “Hmm, Syl and I should try and get them all to come to Yonderia. I’m sure Mama wouldn’t mind a big party.”

He took a couple small sips. “Though, somethin’ smaller could work too-” It would maybe have to, since he didn’t exactly have a bunch of bands’ phone numbers. “I bet Awesome knows a lot of ‘em. Demurra and Drake probably do too.” In fact, they seemed to know just about every band they ran into, and even some that weren’t in the competition this year but were in previous years. “Huh…”

“Excuse me?” Wander blinked and looked up, but didn’t see anyone. “Huh?”

“Down here.” He looked down, and could see a very cute looking cat-girl with greyish-purplish fur and big violet eyes. She was wearing a punk rock like outfit - a pink and black dress with ripped socks and a chibi skull hairclip in her fur. But instead of making her look tougher, it only made her look cuter!

“Hello there!” Wander greeted cheerfully, “Oh, need a place to sit?”

She nodded, smiling back at him. “Thanks!” It took her a moment or two, but she did manage to climb into the chair opposite to Wander, and had to stand on her tippy-toes once she got in it so she could see him properly. Wander couldn’t recall seeing her before, even on the moon - then again, she was so small, she was probably easy to miss.

Well, no time like the present to make a good introduction! “It sure is nice to meet ya!” He tipped his hat slightly, making the girl giggle. “My name’s Wander! What’s yours?”

“Well, my name is Bea,” she started to say, “But my fwiends call me Lil’ Bits!” It was hard to tell whether she was speaking in an accent or had a speech impediment.

Either way, Wander could help but give a small squee at her name. So cute! “What a great nickname! So Lil’ Bits, are you in the Battle of the Bands too?”

She nodded again. “My fwiends and I have been twaveling in this part of the galaxy for a while, since no one else would be here until later in the summa’!” Suddenly, she frowned, looking down at the table.

Wander gave her a concerned look. “What’s wrong?”

“Oh, it’s nothing…” Her eyes started getting wet as she hugged herself.

“It sure doesn’t seem like nothin’.” The cat-girl looked up at him, and he gave her a comforting smile. “Now, why don’t you tell me what’s wrong?”

She smiled a little back at him. “Well… We’ve gotten a few shows here but, I’m just afwaid that no one knows who we are, and that no one will care when we pway in the Final Battle.”

“Aw, I’m sure that’s not true!” He insisted, “I bet you have tons of fans!”

Lil’ Bits sniffled slightly. “You… You weally think so?”
“Yeah! ‘Course I do! And I’m sure you and your band’s music is great, and very memorable!”

She was smiling fully now. “Wow… Thanks Wandah! But, there’s another problem too.” She reached into her purse and pulled out a small notebook. “I’ve gotta finish this song before our show tomorrow, but I can’t think of anything!” She started to get teary eyed again. “And, I don’t wanna let them down…”

“Aw, I’m sure if you just give yourself some time and think from the heart, you’ll finish it in time!” Wander insisted, “I know you will!”

“But… I-I…” Wander frowned. Oh no, was she- She was. A large tear rolled down her furry cheeks, and the nomad felt his heart break in two.

“Ohh, don’t cry, sweetie!” Pulling his chair over to the other side of the table, he gave her a comforting hug. “…Tell you what, maybe I can give ya a help with that song of yours, okay?”

The sniffles stopped, and with big, thankful eyes she smiled up at him, nodding before returning the hug. “There you go! Alright so, let’s see what you’ve got here!” He let go of her and began looking over the few lines she had written out. As Wander did this, he didn’t notice Lil’ Bits smile - though this smile was a lot less sweet than before. Now, it was almost more like a victorious smirk. He also didn’t notice when she looked across the room at a different table. Two other cat-girls sat there - one with black fur, the other with fluffy, white fur - both of them dressed in a similar manner as Lil’ Bits, and sharing the same smirk.

Giggling softly, she looked back to Wander and just stood back, watching him work.

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Despite being in a Battle of the Bands competition, when Sylvia thought about it she really hadn’t seen any of her fellow competitors play (with the exception of the Harbingers of Doom, and maybe a couple other bands that she technically heard but didn’t really pay attention to) - making the whole ‘know your enemies’ thing null and void.

But Sylvia didn’t really care about that. They didn’t need to ‘know their enemies’ and know how the other bands were doing to make their music sound better. Even if they didn’t really have a specific genre, they knew what they liked to play and what they had fun doing - and how to make it sound good. Really, that was all that mattered.

Besides, not knowing who the other bands were or what they sounded like made the times when they did hear them all the more exciting.

“Woo! Yeah!” Wander hollered while everyone else clapped and cheered at Goat Nation’s last, echoing chord. Cashmere smiled at the crowd, both he and his bandmates giving a small bow before the curtain moved in front of them.

“Well,” Sylvia started to say as she turned to Demurra (Drake was absent since he was helping with the backstage tech), “I think I may have the sound of bagpipes stuck in my head for the rest of the night, but I’d say those guys were pretty good!”

Demurra nodded in agreement. “They’ve got a unique sound, so that’ll help them stay memorable, and they sound good together. So yeah, even if they don’t win, I have a feeling they won’t disappear from the scene anytime soon.”

Sylvia smirked slightly. “Any other comments, Judge Demi?”
The blonde giggled. “I’ll let you know when I have them.” Sylvia chuckled along with with her. Really, with the way she talked and how she knew so much about music and bands, she really did seem like a judge from some talent show or some-

The Zbornak’s eyes widened. ‘Wait...’ She opened her mouth to ask, but was interrupted. “Syl, look! The next band’s about to start, and I think you’ll like this one!”

“Oh, you know this one, Wander?” Demurra asked him, curious.

“Yes!” Wander nodded excitedly, “I met their lead yesterday at the club! And she is just the sweetest, cutest, most adora-”

There was a loud explosion of pyrotechnics - sharp orange sparks from the corners of the stage that made everyone jump in surprise. The curtains rose, and the lights started to flash as an intense guitar solo began. Loud, banging drums soon joined in, followed by a throbbing bass. But all of those things were pretty commonplace at a rock concert. But what wasn’t normal, was that all of this heavy metal music was being played by three very cute looking kittens - complete with blood red spotlights shining on them. Written on the drums were simply two words: Kitty Fangs

“What the grog...?” was all Sylvia could really say while everyone else either stared in awe or began cheering - with Wander of course doing the latter.

“Woo! You go, Lil’ Bits! Yeah!” he yelled just before the lead, purple-eyed kitten started singing. It was in a different language - most likely from her home planet - but words on the screen behind them provided translation. Her fellow kittens occasionally joined in.

Their voices sounded like they belonged weaved in between the melodies of a bubblegum pop song, and yet they somehow mixed perfectly with the heavy metal they were playing. Even the lyrics matched perfectly, sounding tough like any other rock song, but still with a tiny bit of cuteness so their wasn’t too much of a contrast.

While Wander continued to grin and be happy for the cat-girl’s performance, Sylvia still couldn’t believe she was actually seeing it. “Uh, have you ever heard of this group, Demi?”

“I actually saw them back on the moon,” she replied, still looking at the stage, “They were one of the first groups - which would normally be a big blow to word-of-mouth, since most people are busy getting refreshments or haven’t even gotten there yet. Buuuut, as you can see, the people who saw them would definitely talk about them. It’s a pretty new style, with ‘cute heavy metal’ is the best way to describe it, but-”

“But apparently it works,” Sylvia finished just as their song ended, and the crowd went crazy. The kittens smirked, only taking in the applause for a few moments before Lil’ Bits took the microphone once more.

“Who wants some mo’?” she asked, her accent back in full force. The audience screamed and cheered, giving her an obvious answer. “Awwright!” She played a long chord on her guitar, and once the others had fully joined in, she began to sing (somehow singing made her ‘accent’ disappear), this time in galactic standard so a translation wasn’t needed.

“Moon reflecting in my eyes, the claws come out! I’m on the hunt for the music, I’ve got a beat for you! You think I won’t attack, I’m on the prowl with a pick at my side and my guitar as my net!”

Wander’s cheering faltered. “Huh...”

“Hm, what is it, Wander?” his bandmate asked, giving him a look.
“Oh, uh, it’s nothing, Syl!” he insisted, “I-"

“Stars shine bright, they are my spotlights! I see you run, I see you hide! My music attacks, notes digging deep! No you can’t escape, my fierce melody!”

He frowned, and that in turn made Sylvia more concerned. “What, do you not like what they’re singin’ or somethin’?”

“Oh, no it’s not- ...Well, sort of. I mean - You know what, it’s not a big deal.” He glanced back up on stage, and smiled a little when he saw Lil’ Bits grinning during her big guitar solo. She looked so happy and she was having so much fun...

“Yeah, no big deal, Sylvia!” Wander insisted, his smile returning fully now. And with that, he went back to cheering and clapping for the cat-girl group. Sylvia however was barely listening. No, her mind was busy with something else. Maybe Wander thought it was no big deal, but Sylvia definitely disagreed.

The concert continued, with three more songs - two of which made Wander stop cheering, if only for a few seconds, before continuing it with as much genuine enthusiasm as he could muster. When it did finally end, Sylvia still wasn’t any closer to an answer than she was four songs ago.

“It can’t be the lyrics, he doesn’t care what people sing about,” Sylvia mused while she and Demurra waited for Dracor and Wander (who had needed to use the restroom), “His motto is pretty much ‘play from the heart’ or whatever, so it can’t be that.”

“Or at least, not the lyrics’ meaning.”

“Huh?”

“What if it’s the words themselves?” the blonde asked, “What if he knows they aren’t from their heart, and that’s what he doesn’t like?”

“You mean…” The Zbornak’s expression changed from surprised, to understanding, to anger. “Those little flarf munchers… Why I oughta’-!”

“Hey Syl!” She quickly turned back around and was face to face with Wander. “Guess what? There’s supposed to be a huge after party at the club! How ‘bout we check it out?”

Sylvia raised an eyebrow. “Uh, isn’t it nearly eleven or something? Sort of late for a party, isn’t it, bud?” Especially since they had to wake up early the next day to practice and prepare for their own show on Saturday.

“Oh well, I’m sure it won’t take too long,” her bandmate insisted. Looking at him closely, she could see just a bit of anxiety on his face. “But, uh, if ya want you can leave with Demi and Drake and I’ll just catch up with you later.”

“...Actually, you know what? I could actually use one of those cider comet cocktails right now,” she told him after a moment, earning a wide grin.

“Great! Then let’s get going!” Wander quickly took her head and started to lead her away. Just before they were too far, Sylvia turned her neck around to look at Demurra. Really, her face said it all: Good luck.

Sylvia nodded, and then picked up the pace, not wanting to be dragged for nearly three blocks.
Unlike last time, Sylvia made sure not to lose track of Wander - despite the fact that he always seemed to want to leave her. When he went to the dance floor, so did she. When he decided to go have a quick drink at the bar, she found a seat right next to him - and tried to look in whatever direction he looked in (which was another thing she quickly picked up on, as if he was looking for someone). However, there was one place she couldn’t go.

“I promise Syl, I’ll be right back!” he told her, “Then maybe we can think about headin’ back to the hotel.”

Sylvia held back a relieved sigh, more than ready to hit the hay. “Sounds good to me.” Wander nodded, and jogged towards the restroom. As for Sylvia, she quickly chugged the last of her cocktail - only the second drink she’d had that night, counting the one she had at the concert - and waited.

It was probably a good thing she hadn’t had more than two drinks, because otherwise she might not’ve noticed the small figure following Wander out of the corner of her eyes. Almost immediately, she turned to see who it was - and wasn’t surprised at all by the reveal.

Her face stern, she gave the bartender their tip and followed the kitten. Even with the club music thumping in her ears, she could still catch what they were saying once she got a bit closer, and what she did hear just made her angrier.

“Well, I’m happy you liked my suggestions but, they were meant to be just that. I was just tryin’ to help you get the gears going so you could think of your own lyrics.”

“But your lywics were awweady so good! And you weally did help me, I think a lotta people weally liked us!”

Wander gave a small smile. “Well, I’m glad. I want you three to be successful. But to do that, you should really-”

“Oh, and they wuved all of our songs! I’ve nevah heard that much appwause befow’!”

“Oh, heh, really?”

“Yeah! ...Do you think you could help with our next song?”

“Well, actually, I don’t think I should-” The teary eyes quickly returned, but Wander tried to ignore them. “‘Lil’ Bits… We’re in a competition, and even if we weren’t, writing songs for you and you saying that they’re all yours just seems… dishonest.”

“But it’s not! It’s just a wittle help. And you like helping, don’t you Wandah’?”

“I do… But, you-”

“And I wote a few of those words myself.” More like one or two lines out of a five stanza song “-I just need you to finish them!” Her eyes got bigger. Wander cringed, he could feel himself breaking.

“I… I don’t-”

“Pweaaaaaaase~?” She pursed her paws perfectly, her eyes as wide as they could be. At that moment, she was the definition of cute. And as much as he wanted to, Wander just couldn’t say no to a face like that.
Thankfully, he didn’t have to.

“And just why do you need his help?” Sylvia asked, crossing her arms and ignoring the sudden glare Lil’ Bits was giving her, “What, can’t come up with lyrics by yourself?”

“Syl, be nice…” Wander mumbled.

“Oh, I can come up with lyricics,” Lil’ Bits retorted, “I just thought that maybe you two could help me with a wittle writer’s block. But…” She got teary eyed again, looking specifically at Wander as she said this. “I guess all you onwy care abowt youwself. You just wanna win the Battle, don’t you? And you wanna make sure no one else even has a chance.”

The nomad gave a small gasp. “Nonono! Of course not! Well, I mean, we do want to win but- Oh, we care about you, Lil’ Bits! Just-”

“Just give us a second,” Sylvia interrupted once more, “I think we need to, discuss some things.”

The cat-girl flashed a sugary sweet smile. “Oh, anything you haf to say to him you can say to me.”

“Actually, I wasn’t talking to him.” With that, she grabbed her paw and dragged her over to the bar, leaving Wander behind. Once they were there, she placed her in Wander’s seat, and stared her down. “Okay, I’m only going to say this once, Missy: Leave Wander alone, and go find someone else to mooch song lyrics off of.”

Lil Bits scowled back at her, not being intimidated at all by the drummer’s size or tone. “Oh yeah, and how a’ you gonna make me?” She flashed her cute ‘goo goo’ eyes. “If you hit a wittle girl like me, they’d thwow you in jail for life! Hehe!”

Sylvia rolled her eyes. “You can drop the act, cat. The Battle only allows bands with members that are all at least 18 and older. There’s no way you’re a kitten.”

She dropped the eyes and crossed her arms. “Fine. Maybe I’m not as young as much as my cute face would have you bewieve, but I bet there are still people out there that wouldn’t want you to hit me. This pwanet’s police force, for example.”

“Fair enough, maybe I can’t hit you,” Sylvia said coolly, “But I can get you disqualifed.”

She smirked, giggling lightly. “Oh pwease. You have no pwoof, and there’s no way that nomad will tattle on me. And weally, what’s the big deal? Bands make people wite their songs all the time when they make it big, and with a face like this, who could say no? I’m just using what I have to make sure I win this thing! Besides, we wite our own melodies, so they’re still our songs.”

“Just with someone else’s words. But you know what, fine.” Sylvia moved back a little, showing that she was standing down. “If you’re that bad at coming up with lyrics, fine. Go ahead and make people write them for you, but-”

“Um, excuse me?” Lil’ Bits was glaring at her now, standing on her seat. “Who says that I’m bad at witing lywics?”

“You did,” she retorted, “When you admitted that you use others to write them for you. If you had any real talent, you wouldn’t have to.”

“I’m only doing it because I have better things to do owtha’ then witing lywics! I can still wite great lywics, even bettah’ than you!”

“Then prove it, fuzzball,” Sylvia challenged, “Right here and now. Let’s see who can come up with
the best lyrics.”

“Hmph.” The cat-girl smiled. “Fine. Let’s see how you do without Wandah’s help.”

After asking the bartender about it, they learned about a private room in the back of the club, so that’s where they went. All that was in there was a small table, a couch, and a kitchen timer (provided by Wander’s hat). Speaking of which, Wander as well as the other two members of Kitty Fangs sat on the couch while Lil’ Bits and Sylvia stood facing each other, both of them more than ready to start the challenge.

“Alright…” He was still a bit unsure about it, but it did seem fair (he also knew that neither one of them would back down). So, Wander took the timer, looking at the two of them as he turned it. “Whoever starts first comes up with the first line, the other needs to come up with another line that rhymes, and then say another for the other to try and come up with a rhyme to. You each get thirty seconds, and whoever runs out of time first loses.” With that, he placed the ticking timer down and stood back.

*tick… tick… tick… tick…*

Lil’ Bits smirked. This was going to be too easy. “You hear that, it’s counting down to your defeat.” In one swift motion, she snatched the timer off the table and reset it to thirty seconds.

As soon as it was on the table, Sylvia took her turn. “You think you’re so cute, cute enough to cheat.” Her tail grabbed the timer. “But it takes more than that to win.” She slammed it back down on the table, the timer set back to thirty seconds.

“You’re just old fashioned, a blue hasbeen,” the cat-girl purred, making her bandmates snicker, “I can write rhymes around you all day long.” Another timer reset.

“I’m not afraid of you fuzzball, so just run along. You can’t just take what you want and get away with it.”

“Unless you’re as cute as me. Now leave, unless you want to get bit. I’m the rock princess here, and you’re just a poser.”

“Yeah, sure. I work hard, and you just act cute all over. Seems like you’re the one who’s a fake.” “Well, I don’t care about your opinion, so just go jump into an acid lake.”

Several minutes passed, with neither one of them faltering. They replied to each other’s lyrics quickly and steadily, matching the tiny *tick tick tick* of the kitchen timer. It was really hard to tell who was going to mess up and who was going to win. While he knew he should’ve be rooting for Sylvia, really Wander didn’t care who won. He was just having fun listening to all their creative rhymes!

“Wow! That last round was a good one, huh?” Wander whispered to one of the other kittens - who just hissed at him and went back to watching.

“-So this contest is mine, just quit now.”

“Oh no, I’m not ready for my final bow. Not yet, you little brat.”

“Aw, what a mean thing to call a cute kitty cat. You’re just jealous, being an old lady.”

“If I’m an old lady, then you’re a baby. Stop trying to play in the pros if you’re not going to work.”

“But I do work, I just don’t let myself overwork. Why should I, when others are so willing?”
“Because you’re just hurting yourself, plus it’s annoying. And really, you’re not that cute.”

Lil’ Bits growled slightly at that, and started talking as soon as the timer was set down. “Oh yeah well-” She stopped. No, she had to rhyme, or she’ll lose! And she sure wasn’t losing to her! “Hmph, better than being a brute. A big, blue, ugly mule!”

Wander gasped while the other two kittens giggled like it was the funniest thing they’d ever heard. Sylvia however, didn’t even scowl. “Better make sure you don’t run out of rhyming fuel. Though that would just prove my point.”

“Oh don’t worry, I’ll stay on point. I’m the winner here, and you’re just stalling.”

“Actually I’m not, but I’m getting tired of the name calling. And I think it’s upsetting Wander, so knock it off.”

“Or what?”, I stand and scoff. You just want to trip me up.”

Sylvia’s expression finally changed. “Well, I guess if you want the truth… yup,” she rhymed with a small smirk, “Now just surrender and stop flashing those big purples.”

“I can do what I want so-” She blinked. “I mean, you can’t stop me from- No, uh…” Her eyes darted to the timer that was ticking away. “Um, uh! I- Hey, wait!”

The timer finally went off, making all the cat-girls in the room groan while Sylvia just smirked in victory. “No fair!” Lil’ Bits shouted at her, baring her fangs, “You cheated! There’s no whyme fo’ purple, and you know it!”

“Not too much fun when someone doesn’t play fair, huh?” Sylvia replied, crossing her arms, “Although, there is a Slarnian word that rhymes with purple: Craghlple.”

“It means ‘sock drawer’!” Wander chimed in.

Lil’ Bits just continued to pout. “Whatevah’. I still would’a beaten you if you hadn’t cheated!”

“Maybe,” the Zbornak shrugged, “But I still won.”

“Barely! Come on, girls…” Giving them another quick his, her two bandmates followed her out the door, making sure to slam it behind them.

“Yeah, don’t let the door catch your tail on the way out,” she mumbled before looking at Wander. Unsurprisingly, he wasn’t looking too happy. Rather, he was looking sort of guilty.

“Maybe I should’ve just…” He felt a hand on his shoulder. “…She just wanted a little help, Syl.”

“No, she wanted people to do work for her,” Sylvia reminded him, “She said so herself - in rhyme, no less. But I think it’s obvious that she can write lyrics herself, and pretty easily too.” She put her arm around him in a loose hug. “She’ll be fine, Wander. Okay?”

“…” The nomad slowly smiled. “Yeah, okay. And hey, her songs will probably be better now, since they’ll be more from the heart.”

“See! That’s a good thing, right?” Though a song from that little kitty’s heart may include a bit of anger towards a certain rival band - specifically its drummer - but Sylvia didn’t care. “Come on, bud. Let’s get going.”

Wander gave a small yawn before giving her a nod. “Yeah, let go. I’m ready for bed.”
“Then let’s get out of here, sleepyhead.” She stopped, and then facepalmed. “Please don’t tell me that I’ll be rhyming for the rest of the night.”

And Wander just laughed, patting her shoulder. “I’m sure it’ll stop once you’re out like a light.” “Wander!” “Sorry, couldn’t resist!”

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“Why keep fighting the stone cold facts and still deny? Some fight for what they’re told to, Some fight to get wings that make ‘em fly!

“I’m the best, I’m the best, I’m the best The best at being me! I’m the best, I’m the best, I’m the best I’m the best, I’m the best, I’m the best More than you could ever be! I’m the best, I’m the best, I’m the best!”

With all the energy he could muster, Peepers banged out the final few notes while Hater flashed his signature rock and roll sign. Their audience applauded, and the Harbingers of Doom kept their positions until the curtain finally fell. Once it did, Hater put down his hand and started to take off his guitar.

“Here,” he said, tossing the keys to his bandmate, “You can warm up the ship while you’re taking all our stuff to it.”

He didn’t see Peepers roll his eye, but he did hear him mumble “Gee, thanks.”

Hater gave him a look. “What, is that too hard for you?”

Peepers clenched his fists. “Of course not. I just don’t know why you can’t help me take some of this stuff.”

“I’m busy!” “Doing what?” “None of your business!” The Watchdog rolled his eye at that. Of course it was easy for Peepers to guess, since Hater only did two things after a show (the second being as of lately): smoke, or text Wander.

“I don’t see what the big deal is,” Hater started, with obvious annoyance in his voice, “You always take our stuff to the ship if no one else is doing it!”

“Well, maybe I’m tired of doing it? Did you ever think of that?”

“Hmph, well there’s no one else to take it out there, so stop being lazy and just do it!”

At this point, Peepers was livid. He was fairly sure any audience member caring to listen could hear them fighting, but he didn’t care. He just didn’t care anymore. “I’m being lazy?! You’re the one who barely lifts a finger to help with luggage!”

“Because I have more important things to do!” the skeleton argued, “And if it wasn’t for me, you’d probably skip practicing too!”

“No I wouldn’t! And that has nothing to do with anything!” Peepers retorted, “Oh, but what do you care? Yeah, sure, you don’t even need me. You ‘can win this contest on your own’, right? You’re the main attraction and I’m back up?”
“Yes,” Hater said without hesitation, “Exactly.” Really though, when it came to their performances, wasn’t that much obvious?

He started to turn away, but stopped when he heard Peepers screech. “ARE YOU KIDDING ME?!”

Only caught off for a moment, the skeletal guitarist snapped back at him. “Hey! You were the one who said it!”

“Well I was hoping you wouldn’t agree with me!” His slightly bloodshot eye narrowed. “But I guess I was wrong, and I’ll have to remind you again that I’m just as part of this band as you, Hater!” His bandmate glared back at him, and opened his mouth to argue, but Peepers wouldn’t let him.

“No! You’re going to listen to me! I’m tired of being told what to do like some flunkey when I’m supposed to be half of this band! We’re supposed to be equals! And I’m tired of being criticized for every little thing, never getting any positive feedback from you during our shows or any of our practices - and speaking of which, don’t you think I should get a say in when we practice?”

“No! Because guess what: I’m the leader of the band!” Hater yelled, finally able to get a word in, “So I say when we practice and what songs we play!”

“Yeah, and I decide where we play - or rather I do all the work of finding us a venue while you just lay around!”

“Hey, you do that stuff without me even telling you! So that’s your own fault, and it’s really your own fault that you get bossed around!” “I ONLY DO THAT STUFF BECAUSE YOU EITHER WON’T DO IT, OR WOULDN’T BE ABLE TO FIGURE IT OUT!” “Oh, so now you’re calling me stupid?!” “Well if the hoodie fits!”

“Um, e-excuse me?”

“What?!” Both men practically roared at the backstage worker - a cluckon who cowered slightly.

“Um, i-is there anything you gentlemen need h-help with?”

“No!” That was good enough of an answer for him. The feathered worker quickly ran off, leaving the two bandmates alone once more, glaring at each other and neither one willing to back down.

However, one was willing to do something else.

“Look,” Peepers started to say, trying to keep his voice calm, “I want to be in this band, Hater, and I’ll admit this started out fine.” Maybe even better than fine. More like ‘this idea is just crazy enough to work and oh wow I’m actually enjoying myself’. But he hadn’t felt that in a while. “But I’m tired of being ordered around, having little - if any - say in what we do, being borderline insulted, and just feeling like I’m not even a real member in this band.”

Always being the one to get the food. To find the venues. To make sure to pay any bills or collect any paychecks. Always letting Hater pick the set list, with his suggestions either being taken into consideration or flat out ignored, depending on the skeleton’s mood. Always following orders. Always having to compromise to fit Hater’s practicing schedule. Always letting him take the spotlight. The spotlight that had seemed big enough for the both of them back on the moon, but now…

“...Are you done yet?” Peepers blinked. Hater gave him a look, clearly not really caring about his speech. “Because if you are then, I’m sorry or whatever, okay? There, are you happy now?”
“...” Most of their audience must’ve left, because at that moment, Peepers was pretty sure he had never heard such a thick silence before, and he wasn’t ready to break it.

So, he didn’t. Instead, he turned to his drumset, and started dismantling it. At first, Hater was satisfied, figuring that Peepers had accepted his apology and things were back to normal. But as the silence continued, he couldn’t help but notice the nagging feeling in the back of his skull.

“...Peepers?” There was no reply. Hater furrowed his brow. “Peepers.” Again, no answer. He just continued packing up his drums. Hater was clenching his fists now. “Peepers!”

“What?” The Watchdog’s voice was quiet yet firm.

“You… Are you-”

“Yeah. I’m done.”

He blinked, then scowled again. “And just what does that mean?!”

“It means I’m done with this.” The little eyeball finally looked up at him, and while it wasn’t completely malicious, his face was still angry. Angry and… and another emotion Hater couldn’t quite place. “You think you can win the Battle on your own? Become a rockstar just by being a one-man band? Then fine, go ahead.” He began loading his drums onto a small gurney.

Hater gaped at him slightly, but his surprise very quickly turned to fury. “You can’t quit! We’re a month away from the Final Battle! Are you seriously just quitting now?!?”

“Yes,” Peepers replied simply, earning a growl in return. He could hear the guitarist’s hands start to spark as well. ‘Go ahead and let them,’ was all he thought. No amount of electricity in the universe could make him change his mind now.

“You! You flarping-! I can’t- You’re not allowed to just-! GAH!” Hater finally released a bit of his electricity, charring a nearby wall. Peepers ignored it and started to move outside, making sure his leather jacket was as tight as it could be. “FINE! WHATEVER! LIKE I CARE! BECAUSE YOU’RE RIGHT, I DON’T NEED YOU!”

Hater wanted to insult him, to say the worst things he could think of right to his face, but his mind was just too angry - too stunned, too emotional - to think. So, once he was sure Peepers was gone, he just let himself scream and zap the wall a couple more times for good measure.

Making sure to leave them in the driver’s seat - though he was tempted to toss them into the dark, snow covered field next to the parking lot - Peepers unlocked the ship and got out all of his equipment. His spare drumsticks, his laptop and camera, his guitar, his base, his keyboard and his violin. Really it was a miracle the gurney didn’t tip over with all the things stacked on top of it. But somehow, Peepers managed to get it to the street corner and call for a taxi.

And when a familiar van drove past him as fast as it could, Peepers just stared straight ahead, glaring in the face of the icy wind and telling himself that it was the dry, Vectune atmosphere that was making his eye wet.

Chapter End Notes

The song used was "I’m The Best" by Lordi. Also, (just as a fun fact) Kitty Fangs is
inspired by the Japanese sensation ‘Babymetal’. 
“So yeah, I doubt she’ll stop tryin’ to charm people into working for her, but at least she’s gonna leave Wander alone now.”

“Huh.” Demurra leaned back on the motel couch. “Well, there’s always at least one or two cheaters each year, but usually it’s just bribing judges or tampering with other bands’ equipment before a show.” Sylvia blinked. People actually did that? Demurra must’ve caught her look because she quickly added “Like I said, it’s only one or two people, and they never get away with it, thankfully.”

“Well, that’s one positive.” And she supposed that with all the gropholes she’d met throughout her life, it wasn’t that surprising.

“But this is the first time I’ve heard of someone using other bands to write songs for them, and I bet Wander wasn’t the first considering how late it is in the season.” She got out her pastel pink and purple phone and started scrolling through her email contacts. “I’ll tell the MC about it, and he’ll pass the word along and get some people to investigate. Don’t be too surprised if you don’t see Kitty Fangs at the Final Battle.”

Sylvia smirked, then frowned. “Wait, what about the people who helped her? Is there any chance they’ll be disqualified too?”

Demurra gave her a reassuring smile. “Nah, probably not. From what you told me, it sounds like Wander and anyone else was manipulated into helping, and they had only intended on inspiring her or giving her a little help. She was the one who stole their ideas without asking.”

“Oh good…” Her frown didn’t disappear though.

The blonde gave her a curious look. “Something else on your mind?”

“Well… I mean, it’s not THAT big of a deal, but… I guess I am a little curious.” Despite living with her for two months, she still had no idea what Demurra did for a living - other than the possibility of her and Dracor once being musicians. And after all the help and advice she had given them, well… Sylvia just didn’t want to risk getting disqualified for a different reason. “Just… Are you a ju-”

“Demurra!” The two women looked up to see Dracor standing in the doorway, smiling at them and holding a few manila envelopes in his hands.

Demurra smiled back. “Oh hey, I was wondering when I’d get those. Thanks Drake.”

“No problem,” he nodded, pausing for a moment, “...Uh, am I interrupting something?”

“Nah, it’s fine,” Sylvia answered before his girlfriend could, “I should probably head out anyway. I’m meeting Wander at this sandwich shop on a nearby moon, and then we’re going to practice a bit.” She quickly got back and walked passed the dragon. “So, see ya.”

“Hey, Syl?” The Zbornak paused, glancing back at her. Demurra was smirking slightly, but looked a hundred percent sincere. “Don’t worry, I’m not one of the judges for the Final Battle. Any help and tips I’ve given you guys are just friendly suggestions from someone who’s been in the industry for a while, okay?”
Sylvia slowly smiled back at her. “Heh, okay. Thanks Demi.” And with that, she left their motel room - still a bit curious about what Demurra did do for a living, but decided that it really wasn’t any of her business.

As soon as she was out of the room, Drake turned back to his girlfriend and smiled a bit in amusement as he sat down next to her. “You know, honey, you should tell them eventually.”

“Oh don’t worry, I will,” Demurra replied, mirroring his amusement as she took the first envelope and got out the cd that was in it, “Eventually~”

“I’m sorry, but you’re just not what we’re looking for at this time. But, uh, if you’d like you can try coming back a few months from now and-” The slamming of a door cut him off - though really, he was lucky the skeleton hadn’t completely destroyed the door just by how hard he slammed it.

Growling, Hater stomped away from the manager’s office. “Unbelievable!” This was so stupid! Did these people not know a good act when they saw one?!

It had been a little over a week since Peepers left, and it had also been a little over a week since the last time the Harbingers of Doom (Hater made a note to take off the ‘s’ at some point) had performed. Peepers hadn’t scheduled any performance past Vectune, so Hater was forced to find them himself.

Unfortunately, every place he tried seemed uninterested in a solo act. Even when Hater showed them his best performances on ViewTube and swore on his non-existent heart that he would find back up players in time for the show, no one would listen.

“It’s their loss!” Hater shouted as he made his way outside, kicking a nearby rock in frustration - not caring when it hit a parked ship - “I didn’t want to play here anyway!” Still mumbling in anger under his breath, he fished out a crumpled piece of paper out of his hoodie pocket and crossed off another place. The list wasn’t completely gone yet - he could still try the university that was just a few blocks away (colleges were always desperate for acts, right?), the restaurant just down the street from where he parked his van that offered dinner entertainment, and the karaoke bar on the planet’s third moon.

“...” Hater stopped, and gave a small sigh. Was this what he had been succumbed to? Campuses? Restaurants and tacky karaoke places? The paper turned to ashes in his hands. He was Hater, lead guitarist and singer for the Harbingers of Doom! He was better than this! “I played in a STADIUM, for groip’s sake!” Why didn’t people get that he was the best and that it was an honor just to let him play on their pathetic little stages?!

His mental rant would’ve continued, if not for the sudden bump. There was a scoff. “Get out of the way!”

“Why don’t YOU get out of the way?!” Hater immediately snapped, his hands sparking slightly. They didn’t frighten the white haired stranger. If anything, he just looked annoyed and unimpressed.

“I wasn’t the one just standing in the middle of the sidewalk!” He retorted. Hater wasn’t sure if the guy had some sort of accent, or if he was just trying to sound stuck-up, but either way it annoyed him even more. But at least the guy wasn’t dressed like a snob. He actually looked pretty casual, wearing a red shirt with long, grey sleeves that had a faded picture of a couple stars on it. He was also wearing black pants and shoes, as well as a blue scarf since the planet’s summer season wasn’t nearly as warm as it was on other planets. But really, if he replaced the shirt with a hoodie and lost the scarf, they would’ve been wearing the same outfit.
Hater didn’t think too long on this though. “You could’ve just gone around me! Walking on grass won’t kill you, you know!” he yelled.

“Oh, I don’t have time for this,” the man said, rolling his eyes and turning away, “I have a meeting to attend. Now, why don’t you just go on and head to your goth club.”

“Oh, that’s clever! And what’s your meeting for? Stuck Up Jerks Anonymous?”

The man gave another scoff. “Hardly, you’re the only jerk here, you jerk! And as for myself, I am a very talented musician, and I’m not going to let you make me late!”

Hater blinked. “Seriously? Ha! Like I believe that! If anyone’s the ‘talented musician’ here, it’s me! You probably haven’t heard of my band since the music you listen to is probably super lame, but trust me, I’m MUCH more talented than you! And I would prove it, but I have my own meeting to get to.” Plus he didn’t have his guitar with him, and sidewalks didn’t exactly have good wifi.

“Whatever you say, skeleton,” the man said, rolling his eyes as he started to walk away.

“Hmph, jerk,” Hater mumbled, continuing on his own way - which just happened to be the same way the white haired ‘musician’ was going. They shot glares at each other as they walked side by side, expecting to lose the other at the left turn, but were surprised when they took the same direction.

“I told you that I don’t have time to listen to your baseless claims about your ‘talent’,” he shouted at him, “So stop following me!”

“I’m not!” Hater insisted, “Like I’d care about what you think! I’m just try to go to this meeting with this performance director guy so I can get a gig!”

“So am I!” There was a moment of silence as their eyes widened in realization, and within seconds they were running down the sidewalk, occasionally shoving each other in an attempt to try and reach the campus first.

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“So whadaya say, dude? Do we have a deal?”

“Well, considering how popular your performance was last year,” the restaurant manager started to say, smiling at the shark-man, “I think we’ll be able to fit you in. The latest hit of yours does seem like a crowd pleasure.”

Awesome grinned. Definitely not a surprise there. “Sweetness. Just make sure the buffet has plenty of popcorn shrimp when we’re finished playing.”

“Can do.” Satisfied, Awesome turned towards the door - and was nearly smacked in the face with it. “Gah! Hey!”

“Out of the way!” Hater shouted, pushing past him and putting his hands on the (very surprised) manager’s desk. Taking a brief moment to catch his breath, he panted, “You said, you needed a- a band to play?!!”

“Yeees,” the multi-armed man replied, “But, I’m afraid the position’s already been filled, so-”

Hater groaned, resisting the urge to kick his desk. “Sorry bro,” Awesome started to say, ignoring the glare now directed at him, “I’m sure you and Peeps will be able to find another-” He was cut off once more when a white haired man (also nearly out of breath) ran into the room.
“I-I’m here for the-” “Already filled.” The man groaned, then looked to Hater. “Oh, well done! Thanks to you, we were both too late!”

“No! This is your fault!” Hater yelled back at him, “If you had just stayed out of my way-!”

“Whoa whoa!” Awesome put his hands in the shape of a ‘T’, “Dial it back, guys.”

“Oh shut it, fish face!” “Hey!”

“Excuse me?” All eyes were once again on the manager. “I’m sorry that you two came here for nothing,” he started to say as one of his arms grabbed a binder off the middle shelf while another grabbed a pen, “But if you could take your fighting outside? I’ve got budgets to look over.”

“Fine!” Hater and the other man said in unison, stomping out of the room - pushing at each other to try and get out first. More curious than anything, Awesome followed them. Once they were outside in the restaurant parking lot, he got between them to make sure that no fights broke out - though that would’ve been entertaining, at the very least.

“So, is this guy the newest Harbinger of Doom, Hatey?” he started to ask, getting appalled looks from them both.

“No way!” “Of course not!”
He glanced over at the white haired man and looked him over. “...Yeah, you’re totes not the heavy metal type. In that case, who are you, and where’s Peeps?”

“WHO CARES ABOUT PEEPERS?!” Hater snapped, “I SURE DON’T!”

“...Well, that answers the second question,” Awesome said after a moment.

“I’m sure if he was smart, he simply found a better band to be in,” the man mumbled before clearing his throat and smiling a bit in pride, “My name is Brad Starlight. I’m sure you’ve heard of me.”

“...” Brad’s frown fell when he saw the blank look Awesome was giving him.

“I have at least thirty videos on Viewtube? ...I write and sing my own songs and do covers of others? Surely you’ve seen at least one!”

“Uh, yeah, sure dude, of course,” Awesome nodded, "That uh, one song you did. That was, like, cool. Yeah, cool.” Brad smiled once more while Hater rolled his eyes. “So, you’re a solo act, bro?”

“Yes,” he nodded, “I was once a duet but, well, it was for the best that we parted ways. Besides, I’m much more successful without her.”

Hater scoffed while Awesome just gave a small nod. “Cool, cool. So, you left your band and decided to go solo? Sounds like you and Hatey’ve got something in common.”

“What?!” “We’re nothing alike!”

Awesome rolled his eyes slightly. Yeah, totally not alike. “Whatevs. So-” He turned his attention to Hater now, who had his arms crossed in annoyance, “Give me the deets. What made you quit?”

“I wasn’t the one who quit!” Hater retorted, “Peepers was!”

“Ah. That actually makes more sense.”
“And what’s that supposed to mean?!”

Awesome gave him a flat look. “It means that most of the time you’re a huge annoying prick, and that I’m surprised the little dude didn’t pack up ages ago. ...No offense.”

“Oh yeah, like I’m not going to take offense to that!”

“Or,” Brad started to add, “Perhaps you just weren’t at his skill level and were holding him back.”

“HA! If anything, he was holding ME back!”

Awesome raised an eyebrow. “Uh, dude? Didn’t he play like, five instruments or something?”

“Oh, so you know that too?” Hater blinked. Of course he knew that! Why wouldn’t he? “Because, most people who go solo can either play a ton of instruments and have sweet mixing skills, or they have back up players. And fyi, I don’t see any other eyeball dudes following you around.”

The skeletal guitarist started to growl. “I’ll find back-up players, right after I find a stupid venue to play at!”

There was another eyeroll directed at him, and Hater resisted the urge to have an impromptu fish fry. “Oh yeah, cause that’s what the people you want to hire you wanna hear. ‘Yeah bro, I don’t technically have back up yet, but I’m sure they’ll just appear once you give me a gig’.”

Furious now, Hater got ready to tell him off when he noticed Brad snickering. “And you what are you laughing at?! I don’t see you walking around with anyone else! What, do you just sing to cds when you’re up on stage?”

His smirk fell. “...I still make them myself using music making software! It’s not like I’m just bringing karaoke cds from a thrift store!”

This time, Hater was the one snickering. “Yeah, but you might well be.”

“Well at least I didn’t make my bandmate quit! I went solo because I knew that I could be impressive without anyone else! You were forced to go solo!”

“Well at least I have people who know my name! How many views do your videos have? A couple thousand? Ha! Try to make one that gets twenty thousand, then you can brag about it!”

“Might I remind you that those people only know your band’s name? The band that no longer exists? And judging by just how hard it is for you to get a single show, I’m sure those who do know your name will be forgetting it soon enough!”

“Grrrr! Well, there no one who knows your name!”

“There is so!” “Is not!” “Is too!” “Is not! The only thing memorable about you is the cheap white dye you use!”

Brad gasped. “My hair is this color naturally! And at least I don’t look like a some tacky halloween decoration!”

Scowl deepening, Hater’s hands began to glow green. “Okay, that’s it!”

Finally (and thankfully before a fight actually happened), Awesome gave an exasperated sigh and
spoke up once more. “Alright alright. Girls, you’re both pretty, okay? So can you two just shut up for a sec?” They both glared at him, but didn’t utter a single word.

“Good. Okay.” He turned to Brad. “Starbright, dude?” “It’s Starlight.” “Right right. Look, how about you just walk away, alright? Cause trust me, this guy can yell for hours. You’re not gonna win a screaming match if you’re butting heads with him, ya dig?”

“...Fine. I’m wasting my time here anyway.” And with that, Brad turned and started to leave, ignoring the ‘Good riddance’ he heard from Hater.

“...Welp, that’s that then.” And good thing too, since he was starting to get a headache from their screaming. “So Hatey, feel like grabbing a drink or somethin’?”

“Hmph, yeah, so I can just sit there and get insulted again? Sure, sounds great!” Awesome frowned. “Okay, maybe I was a little harsh. You’re not a TOTAL prick, at least not when you’re around the furball.” Hater felt a twinge of something in his chest, but tried to ignore it. “And hey, you look like you could use a drink.”

“...You do realize it’s only three in the afternoon, right?” “The hotel I’m staying at has room service, and they serve alcohol at all times. Besides, it’s five o’clock somewhere in the galaxy.”

“...” Hater hesitated. Did he really want to hang out with this guy again? On the bright side, it wasn’t like there was anyone around that Awesome could embarrass him in front of, and a drink did sound pretty good. “...Fine.”

Awesome grinned, putting an arm around the skeleton’s shoulders. “Great! This way, bro.” Almost the exact instant he felt it, Hater yanked the beefy arm off him, already regretting his decision. The shark-man just chuckled and continued to lead the way, now keeping at a distance.

The hotel was only a block away, so at least the walk hadn’t been that bad. Awesome (thankfully) didn’t talk too much and Hater didn’t talk at all, so at least it was silent. Once they were in the room - a very messy three bedroom complete with kitchenette and a tv watching area, where the other members of Awesome’s band were playing video games - Awesome grabbed his laptop, using it to quickly order some afternoon cocktails before heading over to Viewtube.

“So...” He glanced up from the screen. “Seriously Hatey, what happened between you and Peeps?”


“Yeah, but there’s gotta be something that made him quit after being with you for so long. The straw that broke the Zbornak’s back.”

“Hmph. He was just being lazy. And stupid.”

“Ah. And is that all you’re gonna give me?”

“Yes.” There was a knock at the door, and one of the Fistfighters got it. Within seconds, both guitarists had a drink in their hands. Hater quickly poured his down his throat, then grimaced at the taste but managed to keep it down.

Awesome smirked. “There’s pop in the fridge if you need more to drink,” he said simply before taking a sip of his own cocktail, smiling at the taste. Hater scowled, silently getting up and grabbing a can of root beer. Once he sat back down, Awesome continued his internet search.
“Now, let’s see if that guy was legit.” “Huh? What are you-?” “Ah. Okay, here he is.” Angling the laptop so Hater could see, he showed him the list of about a dozen different videos. The thumbnail in each one was practically the same, just a picture of Brad Starlight in front of a microphone.

Hater glared at the screen. “Why in the universe would you want to watch one of that guy’s videos?!”

The shark-man just gave a shrug. “Guess I was just curious. Wanted to see if the dude actually had talent and wasn’t just blowing smoke.” He clicked on a random video, keeping the volume at a moderate level so that they could still hear it but it wouldn’t be distracting to everyone else in the room, and let it play.

While Hater’s glare stayed, and he certainly wouldn’t admit this out loud, he was actually sort of surprised. The guy’s voice wasn’t horrible like he was expecting, it was actually pretty decent. Although - “It sounds more like he’s auditioning for some musical or whatever instead of trying to be a rock song.”

“Yeah well, most of his songs aren’t rock covers anyway, dude,” Awesome told him as he scrolled through the related videos, “It mostly just looks like easy listening and- ...Aw no way.”

“Huh?” The skeleton got up from his seat, now looking over Awesome’s shoulder. “What?” He clicked on the video, and unlike the others where it was just Starlight in some room with a microphone, this time it was on a stage - and he wasn’t alone. While he was standing in front, just a foot or so next to him (and a bit behind him) was a blonde girl with an acoustic guitar. As the song started, they could hear piano music and a small beat too, most likely pre-recorded since there wasn’t anyone else on stage, but Hater was hardly focused on that.

No, what he was focused on was the girl. “Is that… Demurra?” She was a bit younger, and had a bit more make-up on than she usually did, but it was definitely her.

“I think so,” Awesome said as he made the video full screen, “I mean, I knew she gave shows at one point, but I only remember her being a solo act or playing with her dragon boyfriend - Drake or, whatever his name is. But I guess she was with Brad at one point. Dude did say he used to be in a duet.”

“Yeah, but I’m pretty sure that part about ‘him being the one to leave her’ was a total lie,” Hater scowled, “She totally left him.”

“Oh?” The shark-man raised an eyebrow. “And what makes you so sure?”

“Well, just look at her!” Demurra was smiling, but just barely, and what was there even he could tell was sort of forced. His mind immediately compared this to the performance she and Sylvia gave a couple weeks earlier. Where she was loud, and confident, and talented, and definitely happy. But here? “She’s pretty much just background noise while Snow White here takes the spotlight.”

This was easy to see as well. Despite claiming he had been in a duet, Brad was the only one singing. The only one in front while everything - and everyone - else was forced to play background. And while it was obvious that his ‘bandmate’ wasn’t really enjoying herself with her quiet melodies and not being able to stand out and make herself memorable, Brad was just in his own little world. Just singing away and smiling, as if he wasn’t forcing Demurra to stay out of the spotlight. “Hmph, jerk…”

“...Well, you know, it’s not that big of a deal.” Blinking in surprise, Hater looked over at Awesome, only to see him examining his knuckles and not even watching the video anymore. “Every band
needs back-up, dude.”

“Well yeah! But Demurra’s not even enjoying it!” Hater argued, “And, what would be the point of her even playing with him if he just tells her what to play and doesn’t give her solos or, hell, even her own spotlight?!”

“Well, it is his band,” Awesome retorted, still keeping his uninterested look, “He should be allowed to stay in the spotlight. Besides, I’m sure she doesn’t mind playing back-up, it’s not that big of a deal. She still gets time on stage.”

“It obviously WAS a big deal if she quit! Probably so people would actually know her name instead of just Starlight’s! Or maybe so she could actually enjoy herself and play the music she wanted!”

“Or so she didn’t have to deal with a primadonna who wanted everything his way and wanted to always stay in the spotlight?”

“Yes! Exactly!” He threw his hands up in the air slightly. “Geez, it took you long enough to get it!”

Awesome just smirked, as if he was thinking the same thing. “...What? What are you smirking about?” He stopped, then scowled. “Hey, I am NOTHING like Starlight?”

“You sure about that, bro?” “Positive!” “Okay then, then answer me this, Bonehead: Why is it wrong for Demurra not to get any time in the spotlight, not get any solos, and being forced to play back-up for some dingus, but for Peepers it’s okay?”

Hater opened his mouth to answer, but nothing came out. “...”

“...Yeah. That’s what I thought.” The skeleton groaned, sitting back down in his chair and crossing his arms. The video had finished, and Awesome simply closed his laptop and took another sip of his cocktail. It was silent for several minutes before he finally spoke up again. “So, you got a game plan?”

“...For what?”

“For getting Peeps back. Cause obviously, you’re not cut out to be a solo act. And you know, if you find him soon, you guys would still be able to compete in the Final Battle. Plus, it’d be sorta sad if you guys broke up for good. I mean, from what I’ve heard, you guys were pretty good. Not as good as me, of course, but still pretty damn good. And I know you probably won’t admit it just cause you’re ‘that guy’, but I bet you miss him too.” Hater didn’t give a reply to that, he just lowered his head slightly, using his hood to hide his eyes.

“...I doubt he even cares about being in the band again.” After all, if he was willing to just abandon everything and throw away all they had worked for, he obviously didn’t care enough.

Awesome however wasn’t so sure. “You still might as well give it a shot, Hatey. An apology can go a long way, just as long as it’s legit. And trust me, he’ll be able to tell if it’s not.”

Again, Hater was silent for a minute or so, but instead of giving a reply, he simply downed the rest of his root beer and headed towards the door, mumbling a “Gotta go”.

“Good luck, man!” Awesome called out just before the door slammed.

“...So, do you really think he’ll join the band again?” his buff, bass player Fistfighter asked, looking away from the tv.

Awesome just smiled confidently. “I’ve got a pretty good feeling. Now scoot, I’ve got next game.”
No sooner had Hater made it outside the hotel, his phone beeped. He immediately took it out and looked at the text, and while he was a bit disappointed it wasn’t Peepers, he wasn’t too annoyed.

“**Heya Hater! :D Syl and I are at this neat little tavern!!! Where r u @? Maybe u and Peepers can stop by.**”

Oh. That’s right. Hater had been so busy looking for gigs that he hadn’t texted Wander at all. The nomad didn’t even know about their fight. “I can’t talk right now,” he texted back, “I need to find Peepers.” He then quickly added, “Don’t ask why”, just so he wouldn’t have to explain it. He wasn’t exactly in the mood to.

A minute or so later, Hater’s phone beeped again, and the reply surprised him a bit.

“**I think I can help u with that. ;) *boink boink***”

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“You sure this is the place, Wander?” “Sure I’m sure!” The orbubble around them popped, and they landed safely on the surface of the asteroid.

After three successful shows in a row on a few nearby planets, they had decided to take a small break, and Dracor suggested a tavern just a little ways away. “No buses or space coasters go out there though,” he had told them, “And taking a taxi round trip is going to cost pretty much your entire profit for your last show. But, if you can find someone with a ship, I’d say it’s worth the trip.”

Thankfully, a search wasn’t necessary, because when he reached into his hat to grab his cell phone to see if Hater was nearby, Wander ended up pulling out a bottle of orbital juice. So, there they were, on a decent sized asteroid standing in front of a semi rundown town.

“What a friendly looking town!” the nomad commented, obviously not sharing his bandmate’s opinion of it. He then started to run ahead. “Come on, Syl! Let’s see if we can find that tavern Drake was talkin’ about!”

“Hey! Wait up!” She quickly caught up with him - not quite comfortable in this town yet, at least not comfortable enough to leave her friend alone - and started to search. When they passed a sign that read ‘Doomstone’, her nerves didn’t exactly settle.

However, the further they got into town, the less shady it seemed. Some buildings were run down, but others either had been or were in the middle of being repaired. There was graffiti, but most of it was pretty tasteful, and there was plenty of light to see by. No dark alleys or hiding places for creeps, and - ...Were those flowers growing next to some of the trashcans (acting as makeshift streetlights and filled with bright green flames)? “Oh! I think it’s down here!” Wander said, turning down the street and heading towards a building that was built out of the hollowed end half of a rocket ship.

“...Well, these guys are resourceful, I’ll give ‘em that,” the Zbornak mumbled. They could hear music now, mostly country rock, along with lots of laughter and chatter. Wander grinned while Sylvia relaxed, and they walked through the wooden double doors.

A few of the people glanced over at them, but most of their gazes stayed firmly on the makeshift stage on the side of the tavern, where a few buff men - and a couple women - played their hearts out. Looking around the room, most of the people she could see Sylvia could’ve easily described at ‘thuggish’, but their personalities seemed like anything but. So, with a comfortable smile on her face, she followed her bandmate to an open table near the dart board.
“Hey, you guys new here?” a small, cactus man who was sitting nearby asked them.

“Sorta. We’re just visiting.” “Dracor said we should try to visit here!”

This immediately earned them a few smiles and chuckles. “You guys know Drake?” “Aw man, haven’t seen him in a while.” “Good ol’ Drake.”

“Hey, do you guys know if he’s proposed to his gal yet?” a bull-man questioned, looking very curious.

“No, I don’t think so!” Wander answered, “But they are still happily dating!”

There were a couple groans. “Geez louise, Drake!” a purple, cyborg looking man said, facepalming, “At this rate, they’re never going to get hitched!”

“Hey, you know Dracor,” a stout, green pig woman (who had been one of the people playing on stage), “Always wants to be a romantic. Probably waiting for the ‘perfect moment’. I think it’s sorta sweet!”

“Well I think it’s annoying!” one of the heads - the lemon one - of the passing bartender added, “They’ve been dating for what, three years now?!”

His other head - an apple - chuckled. “At this rate, she’s gonna be the one proposin’.” Two large, glass mugs of beer were placed on the table. “Here ya go. First drink’s on the house for visitors. Just holler if you need more. Oh, and if either’a you play or sing, the stage is all yours.”

“Thanks!” Wander turned to his drummer with a grin. “Isn’t this place great?! Oh! Maybe we can play a song or two! I’m sure they’d love it!”

Sylvia smirked, taking a sip of her drink. “I thought we were supposed to be taking a break from doing shows?”

“Oh. Heh.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “Right, sorry.”

“Eh, it’s no big deal,” she told him, “I guess playing a song just for fun wouldn’t be too bad.” Her guitarist’s grin quickly returned.

But even so, she still wanted to relax and just sit for a bit. So, that’s what she did, occasionally taking a sip from her drink and enjoying the atmosphere of the tavern. After a few minutes, she noticed Wander take out his cell phone. “Think I’m gonna shoot Hater a text,” he explained, “I bet he would love this place!”

His bandmate chuckled. “Maybe.” Or maybe not, considering the place was so crowded and probably a bit too happy for the skeleton. Then again, it was sorta dark, and the beer was good. “It’s worth a shot, buddy.” She took another sip of her drink. “Heh, who would’ve thought a place called ‘Doomstone’ would actually be nice?

A few people gave her a look. “Huh, what- Aw dang it.” “Did the sign fall down again?” “I keep telling you guys, we should make a new sign! That banner’s just gonna keep falling down! But noooo! No one listens to William!”

Glancing back up at the stage, Sylvia could see a couple of the guys from before walking back onto it. ‘Guess they wanted to play some more,’ she thought. However, instead of staying in the front, they all moved to the back while another person placed a bar stool in the center of the stage. That was strange enough, and she was about to ask Wander what he thought was happening, when she
saw a face (or rather, an eye) that she hadn’t seen in nearly three weeks.

“...Syl? Is that...” “I think so...” He wasn’t wearing his helmet or jacket and tee shirt combo. Rather, he was wearing camo print pants and a black sweater. He also had a guitar in his hand instead of drumsticks, but despite all these differences she could still tell it was him. “What the heck is Eyesore doing here?”

“I dunno. Maybe he and Hater got a show here?” Wander blinked, feeling his phone vibrate. With Sylvia looking over his shoulder, they both quickly read the text. Wander however, was the only one to smile, and quickly returned the text. “Hope Peepers stays here for a while.”

“I could probably get him to stay,” Sylvia mumbled as she watched the Watchdog climb onto the bar stool, “Besides, the guy probably needs someone to talk to.”

Any conversations in the tavern soon ended, and nearly everyone’s eyes were focused on the stage. Gripping his guitar pick tightly, Peepers took a deep breath, and then looked over at the back-up guitar player. He gave them a small nod, and the alien began plucking out a steady melody.

He was allowed to play by himself for a few bars before Peepers and the drummer joined in, giving the song more of a voice and a stronger beat. And, knowing that he was the one leading - that he didn’t have to worry about overpowering the one who was supposed to be in the spotlight - Peepers let himself play out.

His notes were perfectly timed, his skills evident. There were a few small cheers, but most just watched in awe that such a little guy could play so well. Moving into the chorus, Peepers let his guitar screech and sing - though he didn’t sing himself, but the words did echo through his head.

_“I'm bulletproof, nothing to lose_
_Fire away, fire away_
_Ricochet, you take your aim_
_Fire away, fire away_
_You shoot me down but I won't fall_
_I am titanium_
_You shoot me down but I won't fall_
_I am titanium_`

More cheers erupted from the crowd as the song continued and he reached his solo - which he played with all the energy he had from the start, maybe even more - and Sylvia found herself smiling. Not that she expected any less from Peepers, but still... “Not bad, Cyclops. Not bad at all.”

As for Peepers himself, his eye was closed as he nearly got lost in the music, though he still kept an ear open for the other musicians, not wanting to accidentally fall behind or play ahead. But eventually, all songs had to end. So, he played out one final chord, though it was barely heard over all the applause. Finally opening his eye, Peepers smiled at the crowd, giving a small nod at them before hopping off his seat and walking off the stage, followed by his back-up.

“Nice playin’ there, eyeball.” “Yeah, that was great!” “Feel like playing another one later? We’d be more than happy to back you up!”

“...Thanks but... I’ll think about it.” Satisfied, the other musicians went back to their tables while Peepers put away his guitar. “Well, that was fun,” he said to himself, any hint of sarcasm or disappointment completely missing. But at the same time, he couldn’t help but wonder when he would get the chance to play like that again, hopefully in front of a much bigger crowd. “If I get the chance...”
“...Guess you were right when you said that you played the guitar pretty decently, eyesore.”

Nearly jumping a foot in the air, Peepers turned around. “S-Sylvia?! I- What are you doing here?!”

“Yeah, nice to see you too,” the Zbornak smirked, “Wander and I just came here for a drink. Didn’t think we’d run into you here, but that show of yours sure was a nice surprise.”

He couldn’t even try to hold his smile back at that. “Well, only the best from yours truly,” he quipped, “Glad you were here to enjoy it.”

“Yeah, same here. Feels like forever since Phunulon.”

“Tell me about it,” Peepers mumbled, glancing away. It had only been about two and a half weeks since they all parted ways, but after everything that had happened, it seemed like a lifetime ago. “But yeah, I suppose it’s nice to see you again, Zah-bornak.”

Sylvia smirked, giving a small chuckle. “Gee, thanks Cyclops. So, does that mean you would feel like sharing a drink or two before you head off. I’ll even personally make sure you don’t drink yourself stupid again.”

The Watchdog rolled his eyes. “I’m pretty sure there aren’t any shark dudebros here, so you don’t have to worry about that. But, I think I will take you up on that offer.” Closing his guitar case, he propped his guitar case against the wall next to the other instruments (his own spare instruments were back at his motel room downtown, hopefully safe and sound) before following her back to the table. As he sat down, he couldn’t help but notice a certain furball was missing. “Where’s Wander?”

Sylvia shrugged. “Probably went to the restroom, or decided to explore a bit. He’ll be fine.” Well, he certainly wasn’t going to go out and look for him, so Peepers just dropped the subject. The two headed bartender placed a fresh mug in front of Peepers, and he didn’t hesitate to take a couple gulps of it. “...So, guess you quit, huh?”

“...Yeah.” He gave a small sigh.

“Pretty gutsy of you to do that. I’m actually surprised Bonehead didn’t zap ya.”

“I’m almost certain he was thinking about it, but thankfully he just threw a tantrum before driving off.” He picked up his drink again, taking another few sips.

“So what have you been doing?” Sylvia asked him casually, “Are those guys your new band now or-?”

“Nah. From what they told me, they’re just regulars here that are willing to play with anyone who needs back-up. And, well, I guess I took them up on their offer.” He had seen the advertisement for the tavern’s ‘Anyone Can Play’ stage back at the motel lobby, and practically ran to the place, guitar case in tow.

“Ah. Okay. Though that doesn’t answer my first question.”

There was a long pause before Peepers spoke up again. “After going through whatever cash and cards were in my wallet, I figured I had enough to last the summer.”

“Didn’t feel like doing home?”

“No...” Sylvia didn’t comment. She couldn’t really blame him. “I, I know there’s no real point to it but, I guess I have been searching for other bands. Ones who need an extra guy or, or are willing to
add one. We wouldn’t be able to compete in the Battle, of course, but… Well, unsurprisingly I haven’t found any.” Even the forums he searched didn’t have any searching bands. “But it’s fine, really! I think I’m getting tired of the band life anyway. ...Maybe I’ll just, join the militia band at the end of the season. They’re always looking for new players, at least according to my cousins. Boosts morale, you know?”

“Yeah, I can get that… Although-” She looked him straight in the eye. “From what I saw up there, it didn’t exactly look like you’re tired of band life just yet.”

“I…” He wanted to try and deny it, but no words would come out. Maybe because he knew there was no point. She had seen his passion, his excitement and pleasure just from performing. Heck, she knew his entire backstory! The story of how he and Hater started the band, and how it went from being an absurd idea to… He glanced down. ‘To something I wish we had done sooner…’

“...Do you regret it?” He looked back up at her, blinking. “Huh?” “I said, do you regret quitting?”

“...Yes and no.” She leaned back in her chair, letting him know that she was willing to listen to an explanation. “I mean… I pretty much just threw away all our - all my hard work. All that time practicing and finding shows and becoming well known, it ended up being a giant waste… So, in that sense, I guess I do regret it.”

For a moment, she was tempted to put a hand on his shoulders or do something along those lines, but decided against it. “And, what about the other side of it? What makes you not regret it?”

Peepers’ frown turned into a scowl, his hand gripping the handle of his mug so tightly that he was surprised it didn’t shatter. “Well, I sure as grog don’t regret not letting myself continuing to be a doormat. Hater refused to give me respect, even after everything I did and gave up for him. I get it, he started the band, it was his idea, fine. But does that mean that I don’t deserve to lead sometimes? That I get no decision making power, despite being half the florping band?! That my opinion just doesn’t matter?!”

Noticing the looks he was getting, he took a moment to calm himself. “I was just… so tired of it.”

“Yeah, I can get that,” Sylvia nodded, giving him a slightly sympathetic look, “I know Hater was a jerk to you a lot of the time. Honestly I’m surprised you didn’t leave sooner. You didn’t deserve to be treated like a slave or feel belittled just because Bonehead has the ego the size of a planet and the stubbornness of a three headed mule. So, overall I’d say you made the right choice, even if it did mean giving up a lot of things.”

“Yeah…” Sylvia’s frown deepened.

“Sounds like you don’t agree.”

“...Maybe I don’t.” He prepared himself for the yelling - the “Are you serious?! How stupid can you be?!?” - but it never came. Instead, he only felt a three-fingered hand on his shoulder. She moved a bit closer to him. He tried to ignore the heat rising in his face.

“...I remember you saying that you guys were friends in high school. That’s several years of friendship. Not exactly easy to give up.”

“Even when it’s smart to give it up,” he finished for her. He took a long gulp from his drink before speaking again. “...Maybe because it wasn’t all horrible. I mean, heh, I still remember the first time we performed together. Hater was just barely keeping it together, I probably wasn’t much better. Really, the whole thing’s a giant blur. But, what I do remember… The adrenaline, the cheering, the
feeling that we - that I, might be able to be something great and memorable…” He would never forget it.

“And, I guess not all of the late night practices were bad - at least not when we were able to afford a pizza, and when we took video game breaks.” There were other great memories too. Everytime they came up with a song that they were sure would be their number one hit, when they finally figured out their band outfits, when they got said outfits in the mail. Shows, the first night of the Battle of the Bands, and even just hanging out with each other. “…This probably sounds pathetic, but… He’s pretty much my best friend. My only friend - er, at least, before I met you guys.”

“Nice save.” She gave him a smile. “And I don’t think that’s pathetic. Maybe an unfortunate instance, depending on who you ask, but not pathetic.” After all, she had seen both Hater’s bad side, and his not-so-bad side. Of course that didn’t excuse some of the things he did, but it was nice to know that it was there.

The Watchdog gave a small chuckle. “Yeah… Thanks Sylvia.”

“No problem, eyesore.”

“So… What do you think I should do now? And please don’t say ‘go crawling back to Hater and try to work things out’.” Because honestly, he was feeling lonely and regretful enough to do just that.

“Oh grell no! Of course I wouldn’t!” Sylvia practically shouted, making Peepers flinch in surprise. “I mean, I’m saying no to the going back on your hands and knees part. Cause if you did that, I’d probably smack you. But the working things out part, well… Look, I can see it in your eye. You miss him, right?”

“…Yeah.” Despite everything, he did miss him. He didn’t miss some of the things he did or his yelling, but he did miss Hater.

“And that’s understandable. I can also tell that you wanna be a Harbinger of Doom again. And again, that’s understandable. This band of yours has been in the making for, what, three or four years now? Pretty much anybody would be reluctant to let something like that go after putting that much time into it. But, if things don’t change between you and Hater, you guys probably won’t even stay a band long enough to compete in next year’s Battle.”

He nodded. Just because he wanted to be friends and bandmates with Hater again didn’t mean that he wanted to put up with his complaining and ordering and disrespect for another year, even if it did mean fame and fortune.

“Then you need to let him know that,” Sylvia told him sternly, “And remind him, and remind him again, and probably several more times, since the guy’s got a pretty thick skull. Make sure he knows that you’re willing to leave again - and that you’ll stay gone this time. After all, it’s easy to stand up to someone once if you’re angry enough. But to keep standing up for yourself and to keep standing your ground no matter what? Now that, takes some real strength.”

Peepers stared at her for a few moments before glancing back at his drink, looking back at his amber reflection. His hands clenched, forming fists that - for once - weren’t because of anger or frustration. “…I think that’s just what I needed to hear.”

Sylvia smiled. “Well, glad I could help. Really glad.” Peepers smiled back at her. He started to say something else, but was interrupted by the slamming of wooden doors against a wall, so loud that it got the entire tavern to look over at the entrance. And once he did so as well, Peepers nearly fell out of his seat.
Standing in the doorway, looking a bit frantic and like he had just ran a mile, was Hater. Poking his head into the tavern as well, was Wander, smiling once he saw that Sylvia and Peepers were still at the table and of course pointing them out to Hater - something he was both thankful for and wished that he could ignore.

But surprisingly, while Hater’s nerves only grew as he walked towards them, Peepers stayed still and calm. He managed to take one more sip, finishing off his beer before the skeleton got to their table. “Uh… Hey, Peepers.”

“Hello.”

“Um… Didn’t think you’d, be in a place like this. I mean, not that it’s terrible or anything. Just, you… sorta, don’t have a ship…”

“I was able to pick up some cheap orbital juice.” He didn’t bother mentioning that his orbubble popped twice and had to be reformed before he suffocated (or before his instruments floated away) on the way to the asteroid town.

“Ah. Well, that’s… good.”

“Yep.”

“Yeah…” He scowled slightly, aggravated with the way the conversation was going and how Peepers was acting towards him, but he forced himself to keep going. “I, uh…”

“Yes?” Peepers asked him, his tone not exactly impatient, but still wanting him to finish what he had started.

“I… may have been wrong about, some of the stuff I said earlier. I mean… You are pretty good at playing the drums, and guitar, and keyboard, and pretty much every instrument you play. And you’re good at scheduling stuff and… I mean, when you aren’t nagging me or being annoying.” He caught the look his ex-bandmate - as well as Sylvia - was giving him. “Er, forget I said that. Just… I like having you around, okay? And, I need you in the band. So… I’m sorry.”

His body finally relaxed. He had apologized, surely that was the end of it. Or maybe not, since he soon realized that Peepers hadn’t said a word back to him. “Uh… So, yeah. I’m sorry,” he repeated, as if he wasn’t sure if Peepers had heard him or not.

“...Okay.” The Watchdog gave a small nod. “I accept your apology.”

Hater smiled slightly. Ah, good. Just as he thought. “Great. So, you can just go get your stuff, put it in the van, and then we can get back to doing what we were doing before you-”

“I didn’t say I was back in the band.” Hater blinked, clearly confused. Peepers simply stared him down. “I accepted your apology, but I haven’t decided if I’m going to rejoin the band.”

“But-! Well, how long will it take you to decide?” he asked, resisting the urge to remind Peepers that they only had a couple weeks left before the Final Battle.

“I don’t know.” The Watchdog’s gaze turned stern. “Maybe when I know for sure that it won’t be a mistake.”

Hater scowled slightly. “I apologized. I admitted I was wrong! I - You, you want me to say you’re an important part of my - our band? Fine, you’re an important part of our band. ...Isn’t that enough?” What more did he have to do?!
Peepers didn’t reply right away. Hater had seen that look before - a look of deep thought, though usually he only saw it when Peepers was reading a book or on his laptop (or occasionally when he was trying to think of a scheme to get a bigger paycheck from some stage manager). His boney body became tense once more as he waited for an answer. Finally, after what seemed like forever, Peepers looked him in the eyes once more, and replied:

“Let me take the lead in a song.”

“...What?”

“There’s a stage right there,” Peepers told him, even pointing it out to him (which annoyed Hater a bit. What, did he think he was blind or something?), “We play a song, and I take the lead - both with the guitar, and with vocals. I’m sure there’s a guitar you can borrow from someone. I introduce us, and take the solo, and I lead us for the entire song.”

Hater’s scowl deepened more and more as the eyeball went over his list of conditions. This was ridiculous. Why should he have to play back-up?! Did he really think he was going to just hand over his band, his spot in the spotlight, just to get Peepers to-?!

He stopped. “...” And at that moment, he could sort of understand why his apology wasn’t enough.

“...Do we have a deal, Hater?”

“...Fine.” He gave a small nod. “Let’s do it, then.”

Chapter End Notes

The song used was "Titanium" by Sia - though at the time of writing I had found a really good instrumental, electric guitar cover of it on Youtube and it inspired me.
Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

As he tuned the guitar that was lent to him (courtesy of Wander’s hat), Hater glanced back over at Peepers - who was doing the same thing. Though, if he had caught his ex-bandmate’s gaze, he didn’t acknowledge it.

Hater scowled slightly, looking away. ‘The least he could do is tell me what song we’re playing!’ he thought to himself. All the Watchdog had said was “The melody will be easy to play along with. Just follow my lead.”

“Hmph.” Yeah, follow his lead. Really, the little jerk was lucky Hater even LET him take the lead! The skeleton was tempted just to call the whole thing off and tell Peepers to go jump into a black hole, but in a rare victory, common sense won over pride.

He needed Peepers back in the band, and apparently this was the only way to get him back. So, reluctantly, Hater stayed in his spot towards the back of the stage along with all their other temporary bandmates, while Peepers took centerstage.

Before he even put his fingers on the strings, the audience gave a small cheer, remembering his performance from several minutes ago. Peepers smiled a little at this, while Hater just rolled his eyes. He also had a clear view of Sylvia and Wander despite the darkened tavern, and both of them were giving him encouraging smile and thumbs up.

Once the applause died down and the room was silent, Peepers took a deep breath and started to play. The song started out quiet, then was quickly ramped up, with the Watchdog’s guitar playing providing just the right amount of energy. Knowing it was all he really could do, Hater repeated Peepers’ notes at a quieter volume while still keeping an eye on him.

Soon enough, Peepers started to sing, his gaze intense and fixed on his audience.

“Death until the dust, and we’re waiting. Ruined in the rust, of our craving. It feels like, it feels like - Don’t you know the cost, of your betrayal? You're the one that's lost, you're gonna fail. It feels like, it feels like you're gasping with all your might.”

Hater blinked. He had heard Peepers sing before, though never like this. Then again, he was usually just repeating fractions of the lyrics Hater sang.

“You can't take away my strength, Fix these broken veins. There's nothing left to fight (Live free or let me die). You can't take away my pride, I won't be denied. There’s nothing left to fight (Live free or let me die).”

Everyone cheered while Peepers gave a mini guitar solo in between stanzas - Hater made sure to stop playing, though just barely even noticed his solo. Once he did though, he couldn’t help but be a little jealous. ‘I should be playing the solos,’ the skeleton thought to himself, scowling a bit as he returned to playing along with the rest of the band. Though, if there was one thing he could be thankful for, it was that Peepers wasn’t making a fool of himself or his band. In fact, he really wasn’t half bad - not that Hater didn’t already know that, having played with the guy for several years, but still...

“Insects walk below, I'm on a wire. Fire will burn below, but I am higher. It feels like, it feels like -” The passion in his voice increased. “Don't you know the cost, of your betrayal? You're the one that's
lost, you're gonna fail. It feels like, it feels like you're gasping with all your might.”

While he still kept up with the song and didn’t miss any notes, Hater was really just mainly focusing on this point, not the music itself. The crowd soon applauded, some even singing along with the chorus. “You can't take away my strength, Fix these broken veins. There's nothing left to fight (Live free or let me die) You can't take away my pride, I won't be denied. There's nothing left to fight (Live free or let me die)”

Peepers closed his eye now, focusing on just the music. Never faltering, never missing a note. “Do you remember how you became who you are now? Do you remember how it felt to breathe without gasping with all your might?

Everyone stopped playing - and again, Hater was so focused (and so used to always being the last one playing), he almost didn’t stop in time - and sang calmly yet intently. “You can't take away my strength, Fix these broken veins. Nothing left to fight..”

Eye wide open now, Peepers’ guitar came back full force, as did the hard drumbeat. “You can't take away my strength, Fix these broken veins. There's nothing left to fight (Live free or let me die) You can't take away my pride, I won't be denied. There's nothing left to fight, Nothing left to fight (Nothing left to fight)!”

He gave another mini guitar solo, just as good (if not better) than the last one. It was clear to everyone, even his ex-bandmate, that he was putting all of his passion and his emotion into the performance.

As the last few bars and lines of the song were repeated, Hater tried to remember a time where Peepers didn’t put on the best show he could - where he didn’t care how he sounded or was just completely lackluster. And, while it was hard to remember if he showed passion each time (‘Sort of hard to notice if he’s always standing behind me,’ he thought to himself), he couldn’t remember any bad performances from Peepers whatsoever. Not even bad practices, not even when they first started out and Peepers still wasn’t a hundred percent sure.

It was clear, even an idiot could see it. Peepers enjoyed playing and being in a band and wanting to be famous just as much as Hater did. ‘Then, the reason he left really was because of me…’

“Nothing left to fight… There’s nothing left to fight….! Live free or let me die. Live free or let me die. Live free or let me die!”

As soon as the song ended, the tavern exploded with applause. And, just as he did before, Peepers smiled at his audience, gave them a small nod and then hopped off his seat, walking offstage. And, while he and the rest of the backup musicians followed him offstage, Hater couldn’t help but watch Peepers as he did so. And yet, the Watchdog didn’t bother looking back at him. He had another person to meet.

“Well well, who would’ve thought you knew how to sing too?” Sylvia asked him with a small smirk, “I’d ask if you were some sorta music prodigy, but I wouldn’t want you getting a bigger head.” Peepers rolled his eye slightly at that, but wasn’t too offended. “But seriously, nice work out there, Cyclops.”

“Yeah Peepers, you were great!” Wander added with a grin, “All of you were!”

“Thanks,” he nodded, “I-” While he wasn’t exactly interrupted, he did sense that someone was behind him. And sure enough, when Peepers looked behind him, he saw that his intuition was right.
“Oh, uh, yeah. You were pretty good,” Hater said quickly, caught off guard a bit by the sudden glance, “Uh, I mean, good! Yeah, really good.”

“...Thanks,” Peepers nodded, “And, were you okay with playing backup?” He had noticed the small moments where Hater had nearly overshadowed his playing, though even after everything he wasn’t sure if it was because of stage greed.

“Uh, well…” There was a long pause before he finished his sentence, trying to ignore everyone’s expectant stares. “I mean, I guess it wasn’t THAT bad. Not as fun as leading the song but... yeah, not that bad.”

“...Huh,” Sylvia said quietly while Wander just smiled. Peepers’ face, however, stayed neutral as he asked his follow-up question.

“Does that mean that you would be willing to play backup sometimes?” Before he could answer, Peepers added, “Now, I’m not talking about every song, or even an entire show.” He gave a small laugh. “If that was the case, I’d miss playing my drums. But, maybe a few songs a show? Or even just a solo sometimes?”

There was another pause, but Hater eventually nodded. “Yeah, I guess I can do that. And, I guess you can do other stuff too like, introduce us sometimes or pick our song list and stuff like that. You’d probably be really good at that stuff too...” Even if part of Hater still thought all that stuff - all those solos - were his and wanted it to stay that way, another part of him realized just how horrible that was. So, albeit a little reluctantly, he let some of it go.

Peepers finally gave a small smile. It was definitely a start, and he had known Hater long enough to know when he was just saying thing to get his way, and to tell the difference between that and when he was actually being genuine. It would still be a bit of work to get them as bandmate equals, but still, it was a start.

Hater rubbed the back of his neck, glancing around a bit before looking back at Peepers. “So, uh… Does this mean that you are going to rejoin the band?”

“...Well, it would be sort of a waste to quit now, wouldn’t it?” he answered, his smile remaining, “And I think we can at least get a couple more shows in before the Final Battle.”

“Uh, y-yeah! Totally!” Hater nodded, slowly grinning, “At least a couple! I mean, not that we really NEED them, since we’re already the best. Most of these bands just have ONE talented person in them while the rest are average, but we have two! There’s no way any of them can beat us!”

“Oh, of course now,” Peepers agreed, still smiling, “But it never hurts to have a bit more publicity.”

“You got that right. I want everyone to know our names before we even win this thing!”

The Watchdog’s smile grew a bit. “Yeah, our names in practically every forum and news article on the Battle. Or at least, our band name.”

“Yeah, that too.”

After exchanging a pleased look with his own bandmate, Wander suddenly stood up. “Well, after all that, I’d say we have something to celebrate! Say Hater, wanna come and help me order drinks?”

“Huh? Oh, yeah, sure,” he nodded, not minding as much as he usually would about be forced to help.
“You know what I like, buddy.” “Get my usual too, Hater.” The two nodded and headed up to the bartender, leaving their drummers alone with each other.

“...So, looks like things are already starting to turn around for you,” Sylvia told him, looking a bit proud and definitely happy for him.

“Yeah, looks like it,” Peepers nodded, taking a seat next to her, “Then again, it is just the first night. He’s got plenty of time to change back.”

“Wow. You’re Mr. Optimistic, aren’t ya?” They both laughed a little. “Well, I think you can manage to keep him in line. Besides, if Wander’s taught me anything about ol’ Bonehead, it’s that he’s surprisingly not a complete jerk. Still, if he does start treating you like grop again, I’m willing to give him a couple good smacks to get him realize what he’s doing.”

“How noble of you,” Peepers replied dryly, making Sylvia chuckle, “But I don’t think that’ll be necessary.”

“Yeah, probably not. ...Hey, Peepers?”

He glanced up at her. “Yeah?”

She gave him a light punch on the arm, not hurting him at all, and her smile became a bit less playful and a little more warm. A familiar feeling rose up in Peepers’ chest, but he tried to stay calm. “I really am happy for you. You have a lot of passion, and I’d hate for you to have to deal with some egotistical jerk all the time just to express it. You did a pretty good job standing up for yourself, and I don’t think you’ll have any trouble with it in the future.”

“W-Well, of course,” he nodded, glancing away for a moment, “I can fight my own battles, after all.” Though a bit of help and encouragement certainly wasn’t unwelcome.

“Yeah, I know.” She gave a small laugh, continuing to smile at him. Peepers was thankful that the room was sort of dark, because he was pretty sure his eye was turning pink. “Whether or not the audience can see it, you’re definitely not some back-up flunky.”

“...” He finally smiled back at her. “Thanks, Sylvia.” he unconsciously moved a bit closer to her.

“Yeah. No problem.” During a small moment of comfortable silence between the two, an idea prodded his mind. Of course this wasn’t the first time said idea had come up, but this was the strongest it had been, which made it that much harder to ignore. He knew it was stupid. They were competition. There was a chance they would be too busy with their own lives once this was all over to stay together. Relationships were messy, friendship was easier. He had at least a dozen reasons not to ask, the main one being that he knew she probably wouldn’t even say yes. But...

“Alright, enough with the sappy stuff,” Sylvia said suddenly, her smile now back to a smirk as she leaned back in her seat, “This is supposed to be a night for celebrating, after all. Speaking of which, wonder what’s taking them so long?”

“...” Holding back a sigh, the Watchdog glanced away. “Probably just slow service...”

Of course she noticed his change in tone, and gave him a small look, but he ignored it. “Uh, you okay?”

Peepers stiffened slightly. “...Fine.”

“You sure? Cause, you sorta just, changed moods. So- I mean, if it’s something I said then-”
“Will you go out with me?”

She stopped, and looked directly at him, making his heart skip a beat.

There was no big sudden silence like in the cheesy romcom movies and tv shows. People around them still talked, and someone even turned on the old, nearly broke jukebox over by dartboard. The universe didn’t freeze. And yet, as Peepers stared at Sylvia - who looked surprised to say the least, and still hadn’t even replied to him - he wasn’t even sure if he was breathing.

“I-I mean, there are a few planets around here. Perfectly good venues. A-And, I’m sure we’ll meet up again on at least one of them. And, well, Hater and Wander would probably hang out anyway, a-and I do like - er - e-enjoy your company, after all. So, uh-”

“Peepers,” She said firmly, stopping his stammering.

“...Yes?”

“...You wanna go out on a date with me?”

“...” He swallowed before nodding. “Yes.”

“...Huh.” She smiled slightly. It was hard to read what her exact emotions were, but he could at least see they were positive. “Yeah, okay. Sure. Sounds like fun. So, you wanna just text me later once you guys figure out where your next show will be?”

He was so surprised that it took him a moment to realize she was waiting for an answer. “Oh! Yeah, that works!”

“Heh, good.” And, even if it was a bit unexpected, she was definitely looking forward to it. With that, Sylvia looked away again, her amused smile remaining as Wander and Hater finally returned with the drinks. Casual conversation between the four of them began calming his nerves, but one thought still remained in the forefront of Peepers’ mind:

He had asked Sylvia out, and she said yes.

Giving a slightly proud smile to himself, he took a sip of his drink. ‘Easy as pie.’

Oyspara - a maroon shaded planet that was a bit closer to the system’s sun than Vectune, thankfully - didn’t have the size of some of the other planets they had visited, nor did it have the tech of Ronus, but it was still a decent enough planet. There were plenty of venues for traveling bands to play at, as well as plenty of people to listen to said bands. Maybe no one famous or too important, but every fan counts in a competition. And, as luck would have it, the planet also had plenty of nice places to go for a date.

“Any idea what you guys are going to do?”

“Nope.” Sylvia pulled a dark blue cardigan out of her suitcase, stared at it for a few moments, then stuffed it back in. “It’s a first date so, probably just dinner somewhere and a movie.”

“Unless he wants to impress you,” Demurra teased, leaning over the edge of the bed and pulling out a pink dress. “How about this one?”

“No way!” She rolled her eyes and took it from her, “I don’t even know where this one came from.
Probably something Ma got me that got mixed in with my other clothes. If we were the same size, I’d probably offer it to you.”

“Eh, I don’t know, I think you could pull it off. Pink goes with blue and violet pretty well.”

“Maybe, but it’s still not for me. And my hair is magenta, thank you very much,” Sylvia added in an overexaggerated snobbish voice, making the blonde giggle.

“Okay okay... Hmm, you know, you can never go wrong with a classic, and it works for no matter what you guys do - especially since I doubt Peepers is taking you to a Floyd’s Diner or something like that.”

“Good point.” Reaching into the bottom of her suitcase, she pulled out a black dress, and slipped it on. “I just hope this isn’t all awkward and grop. I just want to have a nice time with him, you know? He’s a nice guy. A little dorky, and a bit high strung at times, but still alright to be around.” More than alright, actually.

“Well, I think you guys will have fun,” Demurra insisted, “I mean, I know going from friends to dates can be a little weird but, judging by how well you guys get along, I don’t really see how it can be awkward for you two.”

Sylvia paused. Considering neither of them had told anyone about that night on Tralfar 5, she didn’t blame her for not knowing. But Sylvia still remembered. Very much so. A small blush crept onto her face, but she shook it away, scolding herself for acting like some lovesick freshmen. After all, it wasn’t like she hadn’t slept with someone before, nor was this the first time she dated someone. She wouldn’t exactly call herself a relationship expert, but she certainly wasn’t a beginner either. She had dated a couple guys, as well as a nice girl back on her home planet that she still kept in contact with occasionally.

Still,’ she thought to herself, ‘This time is sort of different.’ For one thing, with her other partners, the sex usually came after the date, not before.

But knowing that Peepers wasn’t the kind of guy to expect that sort of thing just because they were on a date did make her feel a little more relaxed. Sylvia ran a hand through her mane before glancing in the mirror. She smiled. “Hm, not bad. Forgot that this dress actually looks pretty good on me.” If she was more of a dress type of gal, she probably would’ve worn it more often.

“Doesn’t really surprise me,” Demurra agreed, giving a small nod in approval, “Want me to do your makeup for you?”

The Zbornak looked back at her. Demurra was wearing bright pink lipstick with eyeshadow, mascara, blush, foundation, sparkles (was that part of the makeup she bought or did she put it on separately?), the whole nine yards. And, while it certainly wasn’t garish, it certainly stuck out since she was just wearing a tee shirt and light pink sweatpants with it. Sylvia also noticed the new coat of nail polish on her fingernails, which was - unsurprisingly - pink.

“..Don’t take this the wrong way, Demi, but - Grop no.”

The blonde laughed again. “None taken, Syl.”

Meanwhile, a few blocks away at a different hotel, Peepers was getting ready himself. The reservation had been made, and he had checked the movie theater site several times to make sure he remembered the times certain movies started (he was tempted to buy the tickets online just so they wouldn’t risk picking out a movie that was sold out, but decided against it since he still wanted it to
Climbing onto the bathroom counter, he looked at himself in the mirror. He was wearing a black dress shirt, no tie (a tie felt like a bit much, and the shirt looked fine without it), grey pants and his band jacket. “Okay…” He hopped back down and fished out his cell phone, checking the time. “Only about ten minutes left until I have to leave,” he mumbled.

“I still can’t believe you’re actually going on a date with her,” he heard his bandmate mumble. Seeing the glare Peepers was now shooting him, Hater explained. “I didn’t think she would date ANYONE, Peepers! She looks like she would punch out anyone who tried to ask her out! ...That and I thought she was interested in Awesome for whatever reason.”

“Yeah, well, she’s not,” Peepers told him, adjusting his jacket slightly as he walked towards their room’s mini fridge, “She told me that they’re just friends.”

“...So, does that mean that you want to date her for real? Like, be her boyfriend?”

“...” He quickly grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge, taking a couple sips from it before answering. “W-Well… It’s a little early to be thinking about that, don’t you think? We haven’t even finished our first date yet…”

Hater gave a small nod. “Yeah, good point…” Plus, he still didn’t believe it could actually work. Sylvia and Peepers just seemed too different from each other! It would never work! ...Then again, as he glanced down at his phone and at the contact he was currently texting, he remembered that sometimes relationships were just crazy enough to work, no matter how unbelievable they seemed. “What are you guys doing for your date, anyway?”

“Dinner and a movie,” Peepers answered automatically, “and I have everything prepared.” Hater couldn’t help but roll his eyes slightly. “I’m sure I’ll be back by midnight.”

“Whatever.” Hater was just planning on relaxing that night anyway. And by relaxing, he meant text Wander, watching tv and trying to ignore his unfinished song (something he had been doing more often than actually working on it).

Getting out his cell phone again, Peepers decided to quickly text Sylvia, saying that he would be on his way. Being a bit early never hurt anyone, after all. Once he received a reply saying that she was ready to go, Peepers headed out the door and towards her hotel.

Surprisingly, the closer he got, the less nervous Peepers got. Maybe because they had already done everything else together, so a date wasn’t really THAT big of a deal. Or maybe because he knew that they would most likely enjoy themselves, just as they had nearly every other time they had been together. Between the long and enjoyable conversations they had and how comfortable they felt around each other, he didn’t expect any awkward silences.

“And I know what we’re going to do,” Peepers told himself as he entered the lobby of her hotel (noticeably a bit nicer than the one he and Hater were staying at), “So we don’t have to waste time deciding. So, everything should go smoothly.” He took a deep breath before smiling. “Easy as pie, Peepers. Easy as-”

“Hey Eyesore.” He quickly turned around at her voice, and suddenly felt his heart beating a mile a minute.

The black dress she was wearing was definitely flattering, showing off her curves and figure in all the right ways. The lack of sleeves and a tasteful v-neck also made it so he could see all of her tattoos.
swirls of black and pink ink that easily coordinated with the outfit. Her hair was styled a bit, flattened slightly and combed to the side. She wasn’t wearing much makeup - not that she really needed it - just a bit of eyeshadow to make her eyes pop out a bit. Peepers also noticed that she kept her lip piercings and nose ring in, which was strangely comforting - as if she wouldn’t really look like herself without them.

Really though, the more he looked at her, the more he decided that she would probably look beautiful no matter what she wore.

Sylvia smirked slightly. “You see somethin’ you like, eyeball?”

He blinked, realizing what he was doing. “Er, y-you look nice! Yeah…” Glorn, he really needed to learn not to stare at her, if only for the fact that it was embarrassing as grop when he was caught.

But Sylvia obviously didn’t mind too much, being more amused than anything else. “Thanks, Peepers. You look nice too. So, what’s the plan for tonight?”

“Dinner and a movie,” he replied, his blush fading a bit. “You can choose whatever you want for the movie, but I already got us reservations at Marshfleapple’s.”

“Oh,” Sylvia grinned. “Heh, good to know my date isn’t a cheapskate.” Granted, it wasn’t the fanciest restaurant franchise, but it was still a decent sit-down place.

Peepers gave her a sideways look. “I am many things, zah-bornak, but I am certainly not cheap.”

She snorted, smirking back at him. “Like I said, good to know. ...Hm, wonder what movies are playing tonight.”

“Mysterious Beauty is showing at 8:30 and 10:15, but I doubt you’ll want to wait that late just for a slightly below average dra-mance that’s getting a 53% on most movie rating sites. Then there’s Fist of Justice at 9, and Finding Mrs. Wrong at 9:15, and finally-” He stopped, mentally face palming.

But again, Sylvia was more amused that turned off - and really wasn’t surprised by his overpreparedness. “Maybe we can just decide at the theatre. Sound good?”

“Yeah… Sounds fine.” “Good. Then let’s get going to Marshfleapple’s, I’m starving.” She discreetly offered her hand to him.

“…” Smiling a little, Peepers took it. “I just hope I can afford your appetite.”

“Heh, doubt it. But, I did bring my own credits just in case.”

“Good to know,” he replied, even if he was already planning on paying for everything. After all, there was a reason he and Hater were staying at a cheaper hotel this time around. And so, together, they walked out the hotel doors and headed down the street - the beginnings of a no doubt long conversation already starting, and their hands still intertwined.

It was a sort of strange feeling, his five-fingered hand adjusting a bit to fit comfortably in her three-fingered one, but he never pulled away. He never even thought about it.

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“I just don’t believe it. How can a movie be THAT bad?”

Sylvia was still laughing as they left the theatre. “It was so predictable! Some of those lines too, just -
Grop, that was probably the corniest thing I’ve ever seen! Heh, and maybe that’s why I enjoyed it so much.”

Peepers just rolled his eyes. “I didn’t even know they still use the old ‘red wire, blue wire, bomb countdown’ trope in movies anymore! Oh, and the special effects were horrid!”

“Even a kid could tell they were fake!” she agreed, “and pretty much all logic was thrown out the window! I mean, yeah that’s sorta normal by action movies, but still! This one just took the cake!”

“Tell me about it!” The two shared another laugh before calming down a little. Even if the movie had turned out to be horrible, they still had a good time ripping it apart and laughing at the most ridiculous moments. It had been the most fun either of them had at the movies in a while (especially Peepers since he usually had to deal with Hater’s constant talking as they watched).

Standing on the sidewalk outside of the theatre now, Sylvia glanced over at him. “Well,” the Zbornak drummer started to say, “I’d say for as far as first dates go, that wasn’t too bad, Eyesore.”

“Yeah…” He agreed, smiling softly and clearly pleased with himself, “Not too bad at all.” Fishing out his cell phone, he checked the time. Only 10:15. By most standards, the night was still young. Only problem was, Peepers had no other ideas on what they could do.

Thankfully, Sylvia did. “Feel like taking a walk?” she asked.

“I don’t think I would mind,” he answered, and this time he was the one who offered his hand. Smiling a bit bigger when she took it, the two headed off. Since he had no idea where to go, Peepers just let Sylvia lead, staying mostly silent as they went down an unfamiliar path that was the opposite direction of their hotels.

“So, I take it that you’ve explored the planet a bit?” “Yep. Wander always likes to take in the sights, and it’s a nice little break to take before we start practicing for our gig. But that’s probably not what you and Bonehead do, right?”

“Definitely not,” Peepers replied. Neither of them were interested in the planets themselves, just what they were worth - in venues, audiences, supplies, or whatever. “I’d rather just spend my downtime in my hotel room.”

“Or a bar?”

“Yes, I suppose that would work too, as long as it isn’t too noisy or smokey.”

“And you don’t have to deal with shark-men challenging you to drinking contest.” They both gave a small chuckle at the memory, with Peepers’ more in pride than amusement. But with that memory also came another. Him getting sick, her helping him outside, trying not to embarrass him but still letting him know that his idea had been stupid (which it was, he couldn’t argue with that), holding him close…

Feeling his blush start to come back on, Peepers glanced away, hoping that she couldn’t see it in the dark.

“...It’s actually sorta surprising that you went to his party,” Sylvia mumbled, just loud enough for her date to hear.

“...Where did that come from?” he asked after a moment, glancing back over at her.

She gave a small shrug. “Just was reminded of it I guess. But yeah, just... didn’t think you were the
partying type. Or that you would be interested in anything provided by him, since I’m pretty sure you hate the guy.”

Maybe not as much as Hater, but Peepers still didn’t try to argue with her on that fact. “I’m not really. Hater was the one who had been invited, and he wouldn’t have gone at all if it weren’t for Awesome’s insistence and posturing. I was just there for morale support, I guess.” Which ended up being sort of pointless in the end - not that Peepers really minded, considering what happened. Though, he tried not to remember the details, just so he wouldn’t get his hopes up of experiencing it again. “Hey, uh, are we going anywhere specific or-?”

“Oh, I was just walking,” she told him, “But, if you wanna sit somewhere I think there’s a bench coming up soon.”

“Whatsoever you wanna do is fine,” he mumbled, his eye once again focused ahead instead of on her. Sylvia frowned slightly at this, but didn’t say anything as they continued to walk. Just as she had said, they did reach a bench after a couple minutes - sitting right outside some sort of fenced in city garden. Silently, they took a seat. Sylvia glanced up at the stars while Peepers continued to stare at the ground, and unfortunately what once was comfortable was now moving into awkward.

Trying to think of something - anything to say, Peepers glanced over at her. The world around them was nearly silent, save for a few passing cars. There was no crowd of people around them, no loud music in the background, it was a completely different environment from-

“…” He held back a sigh. Not just a different place, but a different situation as well.

Sylvia finally noticed his starring - though really wasn’t too surprised by it. “…Peepers?”

He blinked. “O-Oh, uh- …Nothing.” The Watchdog glanced away again, and this time it was Sylvia who held back a sigh. Then again, she couldn’t really blame him for being hesitant. But, maybe she could help him.

Her tail slowly moved out from behind her back and loosely around him. Of course, this didn’t go unnoticed. “Sylvia? W-What are you-?”

“Do you mind if I give you a lift?”

His look turned even more confused. “A lift?” he repeated, not quite understanding. She didn’t even have a ship, how could she-?

Her tail moved closer to him, though still gave him a bit of space. “Yeah, just for a sec. I have something I want to do.” Her tone was stable, definitely not hesitant or unsure of what she was doing, but still passive enough to give him a way to say no if he wanted to. But when he gave it a moment of thought, Peepers decided that he didn’t want to, and he gave a small nod.

It was sort of strange, being lifted up by a tail and held onto, but not too uncomfortable at least. Keeping his eye on her, he felt familiar urges come as he got closer to her face. Her lips. By this point he knew he was blushing again, but didn’t care in the slightest. And, before he could even have another thought, her lips pressed onto his. There was a small moment of pause, and then he returned the gesture.

It felt just like the last time. ‘No,’ Sylvia thought to herself, smiling a bit as she felt a gentle, tiny hand cup her chin, ‘Different, but still good’. After all, a lot had happened since their last kiss. Conversations, meals and evenings spent together, arguments, advice given, and so much more. And really, that was all she wanted: More.
Her tail kept a steady grip on Peepers’ waist as she deepened the kiss. She soon felt a second hand on her face, his thumb rubbing her cheek slightly. Sylvia’s own hands moved as well, placing one on his shoulder and the other on the back of his head, keeping him close. They separated only for a moment to breathe, and then kissed again.

Neither of them knew how long it went on for, but when Peepers realized that he was taking off her bridle and Sylvia realized her hand was moving a bit too far off his back, they stopped.

The moment had ended, and Peepers was placed back on the bench.

‘’...That was…” ‘’...Yeah…” A car horn blared a couple blocks away, and they could hear a pigeon-bat coo as it flew overhead.

‘’...How long have you been planning on doing that?’’ Peepers finally asked, his voice quiet and curious.

It took a few moments for Sylvia to answer. ‘’...Probably since you first asked me out. At least subconsciously. ...Did you ever think about kissing me?’’

‘’...Ever since you left Awesome’s that morning.” Sylvia gave a short, soft laugh, making her fellow drummer relax a little. “But, I guess you sorta figured out that I probably never would’ve acted on those thoughts.”

“Yeah… Figured you would only do it if you knew I wanted to, and I do kind of appreciate that.” She offered him a smile. “Besides, you were the one who kissed me first last time. So, I decided it was my turn.”

Peepers smiled back at her, giving a small chuckle. “...So, does this mean, what I think it means?”

The Zbornak shrugged. “I dunno. Two months ago, I would’ve thought it was a bad idea, just because of the competition and the whole long distance thing. But now… With Wander and Bonehead already being together, I feel like I’ll definitely be seeing you guys again, so the latter’s kind of a moot point. And, with this whole thing wrapping up soon…”

“You don’t want to say goodbye?” Peepers finished for her.

“Heh…” She nodded, still keeping her eyes locked on his, “As corny as that sounds… No. I don’t.

“And neither do I. And, as corny as this sounds… The times I was just spending time with you were probably some of the best times I had this summer.”

Sylvia was quiet for a moment, then smiled again. “You’re right, that was corny.” She chuckled as he rolled his eye. “But, not exactly wrong. In fact, I’d probably say the same thing.” Leaning forward, she kissed him again, and soon they found themselves in another makeout session - though this one was cut a bit short, since neither of them wanted to get carried away again.

“So… I like you. You like me. And we both like each other enough to willingly go through any grop it takes to at least try to make this work. Looks like we’re a couple now,” Sylvia said simply as they broke apart again, though Peepers remained in her arms.

“Yeah,” he nodded, “Guess it’s official.”

“Really not too surprising when you think about it.” “Well, it sort of is to me but… Yeah, I guess not really.” The Zbornak gave a soft smile, hugging him a little closer.
It was sort of weird to say it out loud, but weird wasn’t always bad. She also doubted that much would change between them - which was a very good thing. ‘He’ll still be a dork,’ she thought to herself, ‘and I’ll still call him nicknames. We’ll still egg each other on and probably spend most of the time talking.’ And that was just fine with her.

Though, as she felt him rest his head on her shoulder, she was reminded that there would still be a few differences, as well as probably a few challenges. No one ever said that long distance relationships were easy. But, if he was willing to try and make it work, then so was she.

“Hey, Peepers?”

He glanced up. “Yeah?”

“Just so you know, whether we’re dating or not, I’m still going to kick your butt at the Final Battle. And before we all go our separate ways, I’m gonna want to play a song with you - I still have to show you what my drumming can really do, after all.”

The Watchdog smirked. “I wouldn’t have it any other way, Zah-bornak.”

“Come on! Come on! Hit! Hit! YES!”

“Oh, you were able to hook up your portable to it?” Hater paused his game and looked over at his bandmate.

“Oh, hey Peepers. And yeah, I figured it out. I know how to do tech stuff too, you know!” The Watchdog rolled his eye slightly, but nodded in agreement, knowing that was the easiest route.

“So… Uh, how was the date?”

“Pretty good actually,” he replied as he took off his jacket, “We enjoyed our meal. The movie was terrible, but we still enjoyed laughing at it. And, we decided to become a couple. So, all in all, it was a pretty enjoyable night.”

“Ah…” The skeleton went to unpause his game but then did a double take. “Wait what?! You, you two are going out now?!”

“Yep,” Peepers nodded, heading towards his suitcase to get out his pajamas, “We decided we wanted to be a couple.”

“…Well, uh… Congratulations?” Honestly Hater couldn’t really believe it. He could understand Peepers wanting Sylvia to be his girlfriend but, did she really want him as a boyfriend?

“…You know, you could at least TRY to act a little less shocked,” he dryly told him, giving him a small look.

“Well, excuse me for being surprised!” Hater retorted, “I mean, I’ve known you for what, several years now? In that time you’ve not cared about dating at all!” And the few rare times he did, he was either rejected or it didn’t work out, but he decided not to mention that. “And now this summer you slept with one girl and now you’re dating another?”

“…Well, when you put it like that, I guess it is sort of surprising.” At least that reasoning wasn’t as insulting. He finally found a pair of pajamas, as well as his eyelash brush, and started heading towards the bathroom. “I guess I just needed to meet the right person. …Though I should mention that Sylvia and the other girl are the same person.” And with that, he shut the bathroom door.
There was a moment of silence before Peepers heard the sound of bone clattering to the floor, followed by muffled yelling. “YOU SLEPT WITH SYLVIA?!” He smirked slightly, and started changing clothes, ignoring his bandmate’s surprised comments.

Chapter End Notes

The song used was "Live Free or Let Me Die" by Skillet
“With only about a week left in the annual intergalactic Battle of the Bands, it would make sense to get one more word from Harec Tintissi!”

“Always a pleasure~”

“So Harec, after three months of listening to these bands play, do any of them have a clear shot?”

“Well… Fan favorites like The Party Makers have the best shot, but they aren’t the only ones in the running this year. There’s also a few others - including Wander and Sylvia, who no one expected to be this popular! I know I sure didn’t, though I did think they had something in them when I heard them play for the first time. But whether or not that ‘something’ is first place worthy or record company material - well, that’s for the judges to decide.”

“And what about the Harbingers of Doom? They seem to be fan favorites as well - though there were rumors going around that the band had broken up just weeks before the Final Battle! Talk about a disappointment for them and their fans!”

“Yeah, if it were true! But according to the people who saw their latest show, the Doom Duo are still together and just as great as ever! So, I don’t think the fans have anything to worry about. I just hope the band’s lead can pull off a great performance. His ace is his electric effects, but those who have seen his shows often enough know that - while it’s still pretty freakin’ cool - it’s sorta lost some of it’s shock value. ...No pun intended.”

“So, do you think he played his trump card too early?”

“No way, dude! He got people to remember him, didn’t he? And even if it’s not AS cool as before, like I said, still freaking cool. I’m just saying that if he wants to impress the judges, he needs to bring some sort of new material for the Final Battle - a new song, some new effects, anything to just put his score over the edge.”

“Sounds like good advice, Harec - and I’m sure other bands can use it too.”

“You got that right, Tom. Honestly, these bands always pull out all the stops for their big finale, and I’m sure this year is no different.”

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“... *tap* … *tap* … *tap*” Hater furrowed his brow at the mocking, blank piece of paper. In the background, he could hear rhythmic tapping on a keyboard. After not hearing it for a couple weeks, it wasn’t nearly as annoying as Hater remembered. But even so, he couldn’t help but think that he would have better concentration without it. At least then he would have something to blame his writer’s block on.

“...You know what?! Forget it!” he said suddenly, getting his bandmate’s attention when he threw the notepad at the wall, “We’ll just… do it as an instrumental! Or, or forget about it all together!”
Peepers definitely didn’t approve of the latter - especially since he enjoyed the melody of the song -
but he had a feeling Hater didn’t either, so he didn’t try to argue. “Well, we have about a week left.
I’m sure you’ll think of something.”

“Hmph, yeah, sure.” Hater crossed his arms. “But we still have to practice it with the lyrics and make
sure it still sounds great with them, otherwise there would be no point in even performing it!” Doing
a song put together at the last minute could be called performance suicide by some, and it just didn’t
seem like a risk Hater could (or was willing to) take.

Growling some more, the skeleton pulled his hoodie down over his face in frustration. Even Peepers
felt a little sorry for him by this point. So, silently, he hopped down from his seat and sat his laptop
on the bedside table next to Hater before patting his arm in an attempt to comfort. “Look, whether or
not we perform it, I’m sure our Final Battle performance will still be the best. So… Just, try to relax.
Okay, Hater? After all, we’ve got a long trip tomorrow.” With the season nearly over, most were
heading back to the moon where it all started, not wanting to risk being late and losing their
performance time just to play an extra show somewhere - and the Harbingers of Doom were no
exception.

“Hmph… fine,” Hater mumbled, letting go of his hoodie. Giving him another small pat on the arm,
Peepers headed towards his bedroom, leaving Hater in the living room with his laptop, still on and
signed into Peepers’ profile.

Of course, the skeletal guitarist raised an eyebrow at this. ‘Why would he leave it out here? It
doesn’t-’ He then remembered the Watchdog’s suggestion, as well as what time it was. Another
suggestion - this time in text instead of a voice - entered his head and, despite everything, it didn’t
seem like such a bad idea. So, he fished out his phone to look up the link, typed it in, and laid back
on the stiff motel couch while balancing the laptop on his chest.

Thankfully, the wifi was a decent speed and connection, so the livestream loaded without too much
of a hassle. According to Wander, it had been Demurra’s idea to do it, since their last venue before
the Final Battle (which was a casual club on some planet that was half covered in jungles) also had a
site where people could watch bands perform live without actually being there. So of course, Wander
had texted Hater about it. “Just in case you’re interested! Though if you’re busy with your own
performance or practice, I certainly understand!”

Maybe it was just a lucky coincidence that Hater literally couldn’t do anything else at the moment but
watch the livestream. Or maybe it was a bit of irony, since he could still remember (albeit barely)
when he hated the idea of watching one of Wander’s performances. When he was only willing to
watch one just to spy on the competition. When Wander’s songs still confused him, and when his
smile still angered him.

Hater gave a humorless laugh. Who would’ve guess so much would change over several weeks?

The picture stuttered for a few moments before becoming clear once more, just as Wander and Sylvia
came on stage. There was no curtain, so they had to tune and hook up their equipment in front of the
audience, but neither they nor the people who were watching seemed to mind. Sylvia was calm and
cool, having done this a hundred times and most likely would a hundred times more, though her
smile still held just a tiny bit of excitement in it.

As for Wander, he was (unsurprisingly) grinning from ear to ear as he tuned his green guitar. He still
had the same floppy hat, the same old and worn tennis shoes, the same hippie beads that swung in
time with him - the only difference was his shirt.

Instead of his normal tie-dye tee, he was wearing a light brown shirt with the club’s name and logo
on it - no doubt a gift of appreciation from the manager for performing there. Hater couldn’t help but roll his eyes at the sight, a small chuckle escaping his throat. Since this coming from the guy who willingly went on stage with a flower crown on, it was really no surprise at all.

Within a few minutes, Wander was all tuned up and ready to go. The outer lights were dimmed while the stage lights turned on, and the furry guitarist immediately greeted his audience. “I’m so glad y’all could make it!” he said cheerfully, not even trying to hide his excitement, “And, for those of you watchin’ at home, I’m happy you’re here too!”

The livestream started to lag again, making Hater scowl slightly, but thankfully it came back not too long after they started playing. By the way Wander practically danced around the stage and stayed clear of the microphone, it looked like they were making their first song instrumental - just to get the audience in the right mood. And it was certainly working, given how Hater could see heads bobbing up and down or swaying side-to-side in the lower half of the screen.

“Pretty sure he’s the only one who does instrumentals,” he mumbled to himself as he continued watching, “Or at least, the only one who can make it work.” That in itself was still sort of a mystery to him. How Wander was somehow able to just start playing a random melody or make up a song as he went along, and still have it not only sound great, but entertain the audience as well. “Guess most people would call it just being a natural.” Or maybe he just didn’t care.

His mind flashed back to a certain conversation in a park. No, that was wrong. Wander did care, but only about certain things. He didn’t care about being popular, but he did care about entertaining his audience, making them dance and sing along and leave his show happier than when they came.

He didn’t care about being the best, but he did care about doing his best. He didn’t care about fame and fortune, he just wanted to have fun. To have adventures while at the same time doing one of the things he loved. And despite being apart of a competition, Hater had a feeling that Wander wouldn’t really mind getting dead last when the Final Battle ended. As long as he could keep playing and keep doing what he loved, he could leave the contracts and the huge record deals.

A small smile stayed on Hater’s face as he thought about all this. Months ago, he would’ve called the Star Nomad’s musical ideology foolish and stupid. But now… Well, while Hater wouldn’t (or maybe couldn’t) ever make it his own, it no longer seemed that stupid. In fact, he was almost thankful for the little furball’s noncompetitive and free spirited nature.

Because if he had been just another band reaching for that first place and caring about it as much as anyone else in the competition, Hater would’ve never even talked to him, much less start dating him. As soon as he was reminded of that little detail, Hater couldn’t help but blush slightly. “I still can’t really believe it…”

The sound of clapping and cheering made him blink. The song was over, but Wander and Sylvia were still on stage. After all, this was just the beginning of their show. “Glad y’all liked that one. Now this next one sorta fits perfectly for these last few months - at least for me.” Hater blinked again, focusing more on the screen now.

“…” Hater felt a small ache in his non-existent heart at the bitter reminder, but Wander either didn’t
feel one in his, or did and just did a better job at ignoring it.

“Besides, goodbyes don’t have to mean forever. And anyways—” He placed his fingers back on his
guitar, “I like to focus on the present anyway.” With that, the nomad began playing once more, his
low yet cheerful music soaring over the sound of clapping and coming through clearly over the
laptop’s speakers. Soon enough, the melody became lighter as the drums joined in.

“Went walking through town just the other day with nothin much to do. As the sun came breakin
down through the clouds, I never seen the sky so blue. I saw a cajun man with a red guitar singing
on the side of the street. I threw a handful of change in his beat up case and said play me a country
beat. And it sounded like—”

Doing another little dance as he did so, Wander played a mini yet still pretty energetic guitar solo
before going back to singing.

“Met up with some friends outside of town, we were headed towards the lake. I hopped into the back
of a jacked up jeep and felt the wind upon my face. We got to the spot and the sun was hot,
everybody was feelin fine. So we jumped on in for a midday swim and then we lost all track of
time.”

Sylvia’s voice soon joined Wander’s just in time for the chorus. “It was the perfect daaay. What I’d
give if I could find a way to staaay. Lost in this moment now. Ain’t worried about tomorrow, when
you’re busy livin in a perfect day.”

Hater rolled his eyes slightly, but his small smile still remained on his face. Leave it to Wander to
sing something so corny. Though he could still (silently) admit, it wasn’t half bad. Not his best, but
still good. Though, Hater did try to ignore the fact that he was lightly tapping his foot along to the
song as they moved into another stanza, followed by a chorus that Wander encouraged everyone to
sing along with.

Just before the end of the song through, their instruments quieted a bit while Wander sang one last bit
before the final chorus. And as he did so, the nomad couldn’t help but grin, a certain look of love in
his eyes that even Hater could see despite the medium quality picture.

“We were sittin in the sand as he grabbed my hand, and then leaned in for a kiss. I couldn’t help but
think with the stars above that it don’t get much better than this!”

Hater felt another blush appear, and he grumbled a little. Grop, did he have to be so embarrassing?!
But even so, he couldn’t stay annoyed for long. Not while he was looking at his furry, embarrassing,
sweet boyfriend play his heart out on that stage.

“It was the perfect daaay. What I’d give if I could find a way to staaay. Lost in this moment now.
Ain’t worried about tomorrow. When you’re busy livin, feels like dreamin’, slowly drifting, through
this perfect day!”

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“Not much farther, right Syl?”

The Zbornak glanced out the window, not seeing too many familiar stars or planets as their bus flew
by them. “Eh, still probably got a half hour left, bud. At least that much.” Then again, the two of
them had fallen asleep for a bit, so who knew how much time they had left until they got there. “Too
bad Demi and Drake had to grab a different bus. They would probably know.”

“Yeah… But at least they’ll arrive soon after we do!” Wander replied, sitting back down in his seat
and placing his hat back on his head (no longer really needing to use it as a makeshift sleeping bag since he was wide awake now).

Sylvia nodded. “Yep. If they don’t get stuck in traffic or anything. Same goes for Bonehead and Eyesore.”

Wander grinned at that. “Yeah! Which means that none of them will miss Awesome’s big party!”

His bandmate snorted slightly, giving a small smirk. “Oh yeah, I’m sure they’re happy about that.” “I know I sure am!”

It really wasn’t that big of a surprise that Awesome was throwing a big party on Geemorra - one of the planets that the moon where the Final Battle was being held on orbited around - the night before their big finale.

What was a bit surprising though was the fact that Awesome hadn’t just rented out a hotel party room and pool, but the ENTIRE hotel. “The guy must’ve spent his entire summer earnings,” she had said when they got the invitation text, “Not to mention the fact that he’s gotta buy food and drinks.” Either he was one hundred percent sure that he was going to win that grand prize, or he didn’t care about the price and just wanted to throw a memorable, end-of-summer party.

Unsurprisingly, Wander decided to believe the latter. “This is going to be so much fun!” he squealed, bouncing a bit now as he sat.

Sylvia chuckled. “Yeah, I guess that’s sort of a guarantee. Just try not to wear yourself out, buddy. We’ve still got a performance to give tomorrow, after all.” And while she wouldn’t cry over a loss, a hundred thousand credits in their pocket did sound pretty nice.

“Aww, don’t worry, Syl!” Wander insisted, “I promise I won’t go overboard. Though I still plan on enjoyin’ myself, and I hope you do too.” He gave a playful smirk. “Especially with Peepers bein’ there~ Boink boink!”

Giving him a light smack on the arm with her tail, the tattoo’d Zbornak laughed. “Wander!” “Aw, you know I’m just teasin’, Syl!” “Yeah yeah, I know.” She then gave a small smirk of her own. “You know, I could be saying the same thing to you since Bonehead’s gonna be there.”

Wander gave a light blush, but laughed and continued to smile nonetheless. Just then, he felt his phone vibrate. “Hm?” He quickly got out his phone.

“Heh, speak of the devil.”

“Uh, actually, it’s not from Hater. It’s from Awesome.”

Sylvia raised an eyebrow at that. “Wonder why he’s texting. Maybe he’s making the party BYOB?”

The nomad quickly read over the message. “Actually, it’s just a reminder of the party. He’s also says that anyone coming should bring swimsuits, your favorite snacks and drinks to share, camera phones for ‘prime photo ops’ and… inner tubes?”

“…” She blinked. “Okay, why the grop would he ask people to bring those? I mean, it’s just a normal hotel pool, right?” Wander shrugged.

About an hour and a half later when they finally reached the hotel, Sylvia saw how wrong she was. “…Okay, HOW can he afford to rent out this place?!”
Surrounded by an arched building that was about five floors high - each floor with about three dozen hotel rooms - there stood a pair of tall waterslides. One that went straight down and was big enough for three people to go on at the same time, the other a bit more narrow and was a lot more twisty. Both went into a giant pool that was connected to a bar that you could just swim up to and get drinks at.

Nearby was a trio of hot tubs for people to use, as well as a snack table (with plenty of room for more food), an open section that was far enough from the pool so that it wouldn’t get wet and therefore perfect for dancing in, a huge boombox and speaker system set up, and - to top it all off - a floating disco ball that shone multi-colored lights into the pool water, making it quite the sight to behold.

“...Sylviaaaaaaa!” Wander was practically shaking now as he grinned widely at the party, “This is AMAZING!”

“Definitely a step up from the beach house party,” Sylvia commented, looking legitimately impressed.

“Well, what can I say?” a voice from behind said, “I like to top myself.” Turning around, she caught Awesome’s proud smirk. “Besides, when it comes to parties, I either go big or go home. And I ALWAYS go big.”

Sylvia rolled her eyes. “And I’m sure your wallet appreciates that.”

“Tc’ch, money’s not that big of a deal,” Awesome retorted, “Not for me anyway. And even if it was, I’d still throw rockin’ parties. Yolo and making summer memorable and all that grop, am I right?”

“If you say so. And I guess I have to admit, fishface, this whole set-up is pretty great. Definitely memorable, and you shouldn’t have to worry about anyone being bored.”

Awesome just grinned. “Like I said, I like to top myself. And what better way to do that then by throwing a hotel-wide party?”

“Well, since you probably won’t be able to ever rent a party boat again, yeah. This is a decent idea.”

He pouted slightly at the boat comment - How was he supposed to know there were such big rocks in that area of the lake? - but went back to smirking soon enough. “Nice to know I’ve got your approval. And fyi, I’ll be turning the music on soon. Can I count on you for a dance sometime tonight? And you know~” He leaned in a bit, giving the best flirtatious look he could muster. “I do have the luxury suite if you feel like spendin’ the night~”

“Yeahhhh, no,” Sylvia replied firmly, poking him in the nose and pushing him back slightly. “Nice try but, not interested. At all.” Even if he was fun to talk to, that was all she saw him as. A fun guy with some great stories, but not necessarily someone she wanted to sleep with. Besides, if she was going to sleep with anyone, she already had someone in mind.

Rubbing his nose slightly, Awesome chuckled. “Heh, ouch. But alright, that’s cool.” He was sure he would be spending the night with someone, so it wasn’t too big of a loss for him. “And, about my first offer~?”

The Zbornak gave a smirk of her own. “We’ll see. In the meantime, I’m sure Wander would be happy to dance with you until Bonehead gets here. Whaddaya say, Wan~” She blinked as she turned around, only finding air where Wander once was. “Uhh, Wander? Wand~?”

“SYLVIA!” She immediately looked upwards and smiled at her bandmate - hatless and shoeless
(though he still wore socks) on the top of the twisty slide. “HI!” he waved, “I CAN SEE YOU!” Seeing her wave, he quickly waved back at her before throwing himself down the slide, cheering and laughing the entire way down.

“Heh, furball definitely knows how to party,” Awesome commented, “Still hard to believe that he wanted to hook up with a stick in the mud like Hater.”

The tattooed drummer gave a shrug. “Who knows? But when he sees a certain something in someone - a certain spark or some other thing that he likes - he’ll make sure to try and get to know that person.” She laughed slightly. “Whether they like it or not.” That’s how it had been with her, and that’s how it had been with Hater. “And sometimes, it’s just crazy enough to work.”

The party started to quickly pick up speed as more and more people began arriving. Demurra and Dracor were among the first, along with several other bands that Wander and Sylvia had met and talked with before. Sylvia got to share another drink with Cashmere, and - while he made sure to politely greet them when he saw them - Wander was a bit relieved (and a tiny bit disappointed) when Lil' Bits and her band just ignored him. Within an hour, it was in full speed.

“Yo, we’ve still got the pizzas coming right?” Awesome asked one of his bandmates - who in turn gave him a thumbs up. “Awesome. Cause seriously bro, you can’t have a party without pizza.”

“Well, you can, but it would suck,” a familiar, gruff voice replied.

The shark chuckled. “Hey Hater. I was hopin’ you guys would show eventually. Actually I’m surprised that you didn’t show up early like last time.”

Peepers started to speak, but Hater shot him a sharp glare, making him stop. “...It was just - We had tech problems, okay?”

Awesome raised an eyebrow. “Uhhh, ‘tech problems’?”

The skeleton growled while Peepers face just screamed ‘I told you this would happen’ (though he didn’t actually give this look to Hater, knowing it would result in most likely more pain than being right was worth). “Look, my stupid GPS gave us directions that were a few lightyears off-” Peepers held back a scoff. Try ‘completely wrong’. “-And then the dumb thing died on us! Can you believe it?!” That thing was supposed to last for at least another decade! And then it took FOREVER for Peepers to look up directions since the place we were at was pretty much a dead zone.”

Snickering a bit, Awesome tried to seem sympathetic. “Sounds like a pretty sucky time. But hey, look on the bright side, Hater! You didn’t miss my party!”

Hater gave him a flat look. “Not really seeing how that’s a good thing.”

Awesome just stared him down, continuing to look amused, “You sure about that, bones? Cause I think a certain, orange furball would change your opinion.”

Ignoring the blush now on his face, Hater mumbled a quick “Shut up” before walking around the shark-man and into the party mob, with Peepers soon following.

“Heh, enjoy the party, dudes!” Awesome told them before heading in his own direction towards the ‘dance floor’. All the work had been done, and now all he had to do was chill and enjoy himself until the sun rose - which he was more than willing to do. Already moving along to the music, he expertly danced any and all problems or worries he had away with no trouble whatsoever.

*I gotta feeling that tonight's gonna be a good night*
That tonight's gonna be a good night
That tonight's gonna be a good, good night!

I gotta feeling, woohoo, that tonight's gonna be a good night
That tonight's gonna be a good night
That tonight's gonna be a good, good night!

“Well gee, Hater, I’m sorry your GPS broke.”

“Eh.” He gave a shrug, stuffing another slice of pizza into his mouth. It had been an annoyance, yeah - plus he hated the idea of having to buy a new one at some point. But even so, just a few minutes of talking to Wander had brought his frustration levels to simply ‘not caring’.

Smiling a little, Wander tossed a couple more potato chips from his plate into his mouth. “I’m just glad you were able to make it at all. Now, I like Awesome’s parties as much as anyone else but, well, I just wouldn’t be able to enjoy myself if I knew you were forced to miss it.”

Hater rolled his eyes. “Honestly I just came here for the free food.” Well, that and one other reason. “So you don’t have to feel too bad about it.”

“...Well, still.” He felt a pair of warm, furry arms wrap now around his chest, too short to connect to each other. “I’m glad you made it, Hater.”

“...Yeah, whatever.” He leaned towards Wander a bit, waiting for his grip to loosen before leaning back. “I didn’t even know you liked swimming and stuff, just cause of all your fur.”

Wander giggled a bit, kicking his still damp feet slightly. “Well, I guess it does sorta take a while to dry, and it isn’t very fun to deal with when you’re out of the water, but a dip now and then is still enjoyable!”

“If you say so. Though I’d rather stay dry than go swimming.” He scowled slightly. “Besides, how is anyone supposed to swim or enjoy the hot tubs with all the people here?!” Swimming itself wasn’t that appealing, but the thought of having no room to properly swim and have to deal with being crowded in the water just made it worse.

Wander on the other hand didn’t really mind. “Well, some people just like to do things in big groups. The more the merrier!” He then gave him a small smile. “Although, for those who don’t really feel like swimmin’, it’s a good thing there’s plenty of other stuff to do here.”

“Yeah...” But with the only other option being dancing to party music and most likely being shown up by Awesome’s dance moves, Hater was content to just sitting near the snack table with Wander, making up for his missed lunch and just talking without having to deal with anyone else. And thankfully, Wander felt the same.

Even so, he could sense that something was still wrong with the skeleton. “...You know, Awesome did say that we could all stay here if we wanted.”

“Yeah, I know. ...Speaking of which, how the hell does he have the money to rent out the whole hotel anyway?!”

The Star Nomad shrugged. “Who knows? But it sure was generous of him.”

“Hmph.” More like just him being a show off.

“In fact, he told me that whenever folks are ready to hit the hay - or just get away from the party for a
little bit - they can just pick out a room and go into it, since all the empty ones are unlocked.”

“Mm.” Wander let the subject dropped as they both took a few more bites of their food, with a new conversation forming soon enough. After several minutes though when Hater was satisfied and his plate was now empty, and a comfortable silence had fallen between the two, he suddenly stood up. “I’m going to go find a room,” he stated, “You can come if you want. Or stay here, I don’t care.”

Wander just smiled and stood up as well, silently following the skeleton.

Since most people were still enjoying the party, their luggage still either in their ship or whatever corner of the hotel they dropped it off in, there were plenty of free rooms to choose from. Even so, Hater ended up choosing a small, single room where the back of the hotel - where the music was now muffled and where he was certain no one would bother him.

“Well this looks nice,” Wander said as he glanced around, “Very cozy! I can see why you would pick it!”

Hater just gave a small grunt in reply, kicking off his shoes and tossing his jacket onto the floor before laying on the bed. After a few moments, he moved over a bit, leaving just enough space on the queen sized bed for another person. It was a silent invitation that Wander was more than happy to accept.

Giving a small hum, Wander laid down, carefully setting his hat onto the floor. He glanced up at his fellow guitarist, who suddenly looked a lot more exhausted. “...Tired?”

“I guess so…” Silence filled the room, but a small sigh from the Star Nomad broke it after a few minutes. “Hater... You know you have nothin’ to worry about, right? I know you’ll give a good performance tomorrow.”

“Of course I will,” Hater said, quietly yet sternly. But a voice in the back of his head couldn’t help but ask ‘Will it be good enough?’

Wander started to gently rub his shoulder, making Hater’s horns flattened slightly, now a bit more relaxed. “And, you know that even after the summer’s over, I’ll always be a phone call or an email or a ship ride away if ya need me, right?”

“…” He swallowed slightly before giving Wander a stern, tired look. “What’s this about?”

Wander met his eyes, giving him a stern gaze in return. The only difference was that his was in concern. “I just wanna make sure you have a good time tomorrow. That you have fun and that, no matter what placing you get, that’s what you remember the most.”

“Wander…” Hater sighed, turning away from him a bit, “I know you think that fun’s the most important thing but... If I can’t even win a dumb Battle of the Bands competition then, then what chance do I have to-?” He clenched his fists slightly. “And, and I STILL haven’t finished that stupid song! So I have no idea what to do that’s new for our performance and, and who knows if we even have a chance then?! I mean-”

“Shh…” Wander continued rubbing Hater’s shoulder, moving even closer to him now, “Hater, you don’t have to worry about any of that.”

“Hmph, easy for you to say!”

“Maybe, but it should be easy for you to say too.”
“And why’s that?!”

Wander didn’t reply right away. Instead he just wrapped his arms around the skeleton’s waist, snuggling up to his chest. Hater’s brow furrowed, but as he continued to hug him and the warmth now surrounding his body continued to grow, Hater eventually returned the hug. He could almost see Wander’s warm smile, despite his face still pressed up to his chest.

“I know you’re talented,” he finally started to say, “And you know it too. You and Peepers. I’ve seen the comments you get. How many people love your songs and your shows. You should feel proud.”

“…Of course I’m proud…” He had went from an idea to having hundreds of fans. Even if it was small, it was an accomplishment he couldn’t ignore.

“Good.” He let go of Hater, but didn’t move too far away. Rather, he moved up so he could cup his boney face. His smile only grew when Hater was able to meet his eyes. “Then you should know that winnin’ a contest doesn’t really matter in the long run. I mean, it certainly helps, but people have gotten famous without winning anything. They have plenty of people downloading their songs and coming to their shows, just because of the band. Not their accomplishments.”

His furry thumb brushed passed a spot of light green on his cheek. “And I know you won’t be the exception. You’ll have people who’ll listen to you, and admire you, and know your name no matter what happens tomorrow. And you know why?”

“…Why?” His voice was practically a whisper.

Wander simply closed his eyes and leaned in, pressing a soft kiss to his lips. The warmth he had already given him practically exploded, and Hater could feel sparks (thankfully not literal ones) of excitement, anxiousness and maybe even happiness run up and down his spine.

When the kiss ended, Wander gave him another warm smile. “Because you’re talented, and passionate, and extraordinary.”

“Y-You…” Hater had no words. He just leaned in, craving those sparks once more, and Wander was more than happy to oblige. Afterwards, Hater kept an arm around him, making sure he stayed close. “…Thanks Wander.”

“No problem, Hater. …And just so you know, I’m sure you’ll finish that song eventually too. And when you do, it’ll be well worth the wait.”

The skeletal rocker still frowned slightly. “Yeah yeah… But it’s still annoying, knowing I have this melody that’s just sitting there and I can’t think of anything for it. And before you say anything, I’m pretty sure the whole ‘listen to your heart’ thing only works for you and—... and whatever kind of genre you play.”

Wander giggled, amused. “Whatever you say, Hater. Hmm… Maybe the words’ll just hit ya when you least suspect it.”

“Maybe.” Honestly that would be the best scenario. “And at least I can still write songs.” He had written a couple others in July that he had been able to think of words for just fine. “It’s just with this one that I can’t think of lyrics.”

“Hmm… Maybe it’s meant to not have them then?”

“If that’s the case, I might as well just give the song to you. You know I don’t do instrumental.”
Wander did know, and he didn’t try to argue. Instrumental wasn’t for everyone, after all. “Well, even so I’m afraid I’m going to have to politely decline the offer. You’ll do somethin’ with it eventually, and it’s still your song. I wouldn’t feel right takin’ it and callin’ it my own.”

“Well, at least my other songs are still great.” Any one of them would be great to play at the Final Battle.

“That’s the spirit!” Glad that Hater was feeling better now, he glanced up at him. “So, wanna head back to the party? Or do you wanna stay here for a while?”

“…” Honestly, if it was a comfortable bed in a private room versus a loud, crowded, obnoxious party, to Hater there was no contest. He knew what he was doing. “You can go if you want. I’m sure Sylvia’s wondering where you went.”

“I’m sure she’s busy with her own fun,” he replied. “And besides, I can party any ol’ time.” Hater didn’t give a reply, though the secret appreciation for his choice was still plainly seen in his face.

“Fine…” His grip tightened around Wander slightly, and Wander moved his hand from his shoulder to his back. His slender fingers gently sliding up and down a small section of his spine. Hater swallowed, his horns twitching slightly in pleasure.

Wander must’ve noticed this, since his smile faltered slightly. “Is this okay?”

“Y-Yeah, it’s fine,” he managed to say, “It, you know, feels good and stuff.”

The furball’s smile returned. “Well good. I want ya to feel good and relax. And, there are plenty of other things we could do to relax.”

“Yeah…” He then smirked slightly. “Heh, since Awesome’s paying for this whole thing anyway, we could get a Pay-Per-View movie to watch.”

Wander giggled. “Yeah, I guess we could! And I’m sure it wouldn’t be too hard to get some popcorn!”

“Or some candy. Or at least some pop. I’m sure Awesome has gallons of it somewhere.” He then frowned. “But that means we have to go out and find it.” And he REALLY didn’t want to leave the warm bed.

“Orrrrrr~” Easily slipping out of Hater’s arms, Wander leaned over the bed, reached into his hat and pulled out a gallon of Hater’s favorite brand of root beer. “Ta da!”

Hater blinked. “You… Okay how the heck does that thing work? For one, I thought that it only gave you musical instruments!”

“Nooope! I think it gives ya anything you need! Though I’m not quite sure HOW it does that, but you know what they say! Don’t look a gift two-beaked slusletogg in the beaks!” He snuggled back into the skeletal guitarist’s chest. “But yeah, it sure is a nifty little thing. And it looks nice too!”

Hater rolled his eyes. Yeah, sure, if ‘nice’ meant goofy-looking on his planet. “Didn’t you say you got that off some random guy selling a bunch of tee shirts and stuff?”

“Yep! And can you believe it was only twenty five credits? Talk about a deal!” Wander then gave a small hum, closing his eyes for a moment. “…This is real nice, you know? Just sittin’ here and talking with you? It’s nice.”
“...Yeah.” It still sorta surprised him, but yeah, it was. However, as nice as just cuddling was, Hater couldn’t help but feel like he should be doing more. That he wanted to do more. And so, after a moment of hesitation, Hater gently tilted Wander’s head up and gave him another kiss. Of course, Wander didn’t mind, and he happily kissed him back.

However, what made him stop - more in surprise than anything else - was when he felt slender, boney fingers start to move under his shirt. “...Hater?”


Wander gently turned his head back towards him, giving him an encouraging smile. “No, not a dumb idea. Just, a little surprising. But, if you’re comfortable with it…”

There was another moment of hesitation - one that Hater didn’t feel too guilty about since Wander didn’t look like he was in any hurry at all, the look on his face saying that he would be just as happy with the original plan of just exploiting Awesome’s money and having a movie night. And maybe that’s why Hater felt so comfortable, why he was so willing despite his nerves.

Closing his eyes, he leaned in, their foreheads touching this time instead of their lips. “Y-Yeah… I’m comfortable with it.” He started to move his fingers again, gently petting Wander’s back, causing a light purr from the nomad.

Wander giggled slightly, closing his eyes as well as he nuzzled his forehead. “I’m comfortable with it too, Hater…” Without even needing to look at each other, they found each other’s lips once more, and Wander soon found himself on top of Hater rather than just beside him.

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“See, told ya we’d find them eventually. Heh, leave it to Hatey to forget to lock his door.”

“Shh, don’t wake them up!”

“Actually, I don’t think we have to worry about that. Hater usually sleeps like a log. If he slept through our knocking, then he’s out cold.”

“Wander’s pretty much the same way. And yet he still gets up before me.”

“Well, he was never normal before. No point in starting now.”

“Watch it, eyesore.”

“Heh. ...Still, we should leave them be.”

“Yeah. Just let them sleep. ...And let them enjoy each other’s company.”

“Who would’a thought Hatey would actually know how to be sweet?”

“Trust me, when you start hanging out with someone like Wander, it happens.”

“Maybe he just needed a little sweetness in his life.”

“...You know, dear, I can’t help but wonder if you knew this was going to happen.”

“Well, I didn’t know for sure, but I did have a bit of a feeling~”

“Not really sure how. I mean, I never would’ve thought the guy I knew for several years would for
“Well, you know what they say. Opposites attract and all that grop. And even if it is sorta weird, I think it works. Besides, there have been weirder, more unlikely couples, I’m sure.”

“Heh, you mean like us?” “If you feel like insulting us, sure.” “Didn’t mean it as insult. But did you honestly expect us to eventually get together?” “Eh, fair enough.”

“If we’re comparing hook-ups, Demi and Dragon Dude are probably the most normal out of all of you guys.”

“Seriously? We’re the most normal?”

“Well, most normal when compared to skeleton and furball or Zbornak and Watchdog hook-ups.”

“Huh. Well, cool. ...I think?” “We should get like a medal or something.”

“I’ll pick one up after the Final Battle tomorrow.” They all gave a quiet chuckle. “Speaking of which, I hope you boys bring your A game tomorrow. I’m looking for a fun challenge, after all.”

“Trust me, we will.” “And I always provide an awesome show.”

“Hmph, good.” Taking one last look at the happy couple in bed (thankfully covered up by a blanket), the group quietly closed the door and headed towards their own room, wanting to get at least a few hours of sleep before their last practice session.

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The digital clock read nearly three A.M., much earlier than Hater usually got up. And yet, his body was still slowly awakening, his horns twitching a bit and his bones stretching. Though, he tried not to stretch too much since he didn’t want to wake the nomad in his arms.

A light green blush came over his face when he remembered, but he certainly didn’t regret it - and the idea of doing it again didn’t sound half bad either. Glancing down at his boyfriend’s, furry, smiling face, he could guess that Wander was thinking the same thing.

The little furball stirred slightly, mumbling under his breath but still sound asleep. Absentmindedly, Hater started petting him again, his only half-awake mind becoming more and more calm at the sound of purring that soon followed.

“Heh…” Hater closed his eyes again as clouds of thought drifted over his mind. Thoughts, memories, opinions, scenes, questions, compliments that he was too embarrassed to say out loud, and even just a few bars of a certain melody. And without even realizing it, all of those thoughts started to turn into just simple words. Lines... lyrics...

The skeleton’s eyes shot open.

Moving Wander off him as gently as possible, he then reached over the side of the bed and started patting around his clothes. “Come on... Come onnn! Gah, where is that stupid - ah ha!” He pulled out a mini notebook from his jacket pocket - along with his box of cigarettes, but he would put those back later.

“Oh, okay, now I just need a pen.” Getting an idea, he reached over Wander’s still body and grabbed his hat. Reaching in, he felt around before bumping the tip of his finger against something thin. “Yes!” Pulling out the pen, he turned on the bedside lamp and started to write.
“Mmmm…” Wander rubbed his eye, opening the other a crack. “Hater…? What are ya doin’... Is it morning already?”

Hater didn’t answer. He couldn’t afford to and risk losing everything. He just continued writing furiously, occasionally crossing out words or even entire lines, but replacing them just as quickly.

Peeking over his bare shoulder, it only took Wander a moment or so to realize what Hater was writing. Smiling, he laid back down and closed his eyes, silently wishing Hater the best of luck.

Chapter End Notes

The songs used were "Perfect Day" by Lady Antebellum and "I Gotta Feeling" by The Black Eyed Peas.
Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The moon was completely packed with people, with ships from all across the galaxy still coming in and hoping to find a spot. After all, the last concert of the season was always the best, and no Battle of the Bands fan could miss it.

“Alright alright, keep the line movin’,” a slime-like alien said as he accepted money with one tentacle and handed out tickets/ballots with the other. On these ballots were spots for a person’s pick for Best Performance as well as a spot for their Favorite Band.

Best performance was the real winner of the competition, the one that would receive the grand prize and (most likely) all the record deals, while Favorite Band was just a nice little title a band could win. It was pretty much the ‘Ms. Congeniality’ of the Battle of the Bands. However, if previous years were anything to go by, whoever won Favorite Band also usually predicted who won Best Performance, since all of these votes would be compared and combined with the judges’ votes and opinions to help decide a winner.

“Come on, next in line!” the man yelled, “We don’t got all night!”

“Here!” a chubby Watchdog shouted, hoping up a bit so he would be noticed, “I’m next!” His credits were quickly taken and replaced with a paper slip. The eyeball smiled in excitement at it before running off into the crowd, hoping to find a good spot to watch. “Maybe I can find the top of a crater somewhere and get a great view! Hmm, or maybe trying to get up front would be better, but-

Unfortunately, being that small usually led to near accidents, even if he was being careful. “Eek!” shouted a surprised voice, just he was suddenly pushed (more like kicked) to the ground. “Oh, grop, sorry! Sorry! I didn’t see you there!”

“Oh, uh, it’s fine! No big deal!” Westley replied, rubbing his head slightly but smiling nonetheless, “I’m okay.”

“Oh, good,” the girl said, a bit relieved she didn’t seriously hurt him. Once he was looking at her, Westley couldn’t help but stare a bit. Her hair - obviously dyed - was colored lava-red, and she was wearing a dress that had been designed to look like flames. Gold colored eyeshadow mixed perfectly with her dark colored skin while earrings that looked like they were made of literal rocks hung from her ears, and the black leggings she was wearing along with the dress just pulled the whole look together.

“Wow,” he said finally, a bit impressed.

The girl giggled, her lava hair bouncing slightly. “I know, right? Not usually something I wear, but I just had to wear something special for tonight! And, well, something intense and fiery just seemed like the way to go!”

“Well, I think it looks great!” Westley complimented, making the girl smile even more, “Wish I could’ve worn something cool like that.” He glanced down at himself. After making sure he had enough money to go to the show (thanks to the small bonus his boss decided to give him), he only had enough leftover to buy a clearly bootleg Harbingers of Doom tee shirt. “But, hey, at least it’s
The girl’s smile faltered a bit. “...So, you’re a fan of that skeleton and eyeball band?”

“Yeah! They’re amazing!” Westley replied, not really noticing her annoyance at this, “I just know they’re gonna win!”

“Hmph, well I’d say they’re nothing compared to Wander’s band,” she quickly retorted, “So if anyone’s gonna win, it’s them!”

“Oh, you mean Wander and Sylvia? Yeah, they’re pretty good too! I like their-”

“Pretty good’?! He’s WONDERFUL! Maybe his music isn’t as hardcore as some of the other bands here, but I still love listening to it! And he’s so sweet, and sooo talented! He deserves to win!”

“Well, I wouldn’t mind if he won,” Westley replied, still not really getting too defensive, “Heck, a lot of the bands here are really great.” He smiled again. “But the Harbingers of Doom are still my favorite!”

“Hmph.” She crossed her arms. “Well, they’re alright I guess. I’m sure they’ll get like fifth place or something. But Wander’s still the best, and I just know he’ll win! He has to!”

The Watchdog gave a small shrug. “Guess we’ll just see when they announce the winners. Really though, I just hope they start playing soon. I heard a rumor online that Hater has a new song that he’s going to play, and I just know it’ll be amazing!” He took a quick moment to calm himself, though his excitement was clear. “I can’t believe I’m going to get to hear them play live again! And I’ll actually be able to watch from the audience this time!”

The fiery woman narrowed her eyes, and was about to argue some more about just how much better her Wander was, when she heard her name being called. “Janet?”

A very happy smile quickly came back onto her face. “Over here, Maurice!” In just a few seconds, a man appeared - looking very out of place with his white hair and mustache, as well as his nice, grey dress shirt and pants. Definitely not the normal look you would see at a rock concert, but he didn’t seem too concerned. He just handed a bucket of popcorn to his fiance.

“Aww, extra butter? You know just what I like, don’t you, Maurice~?”

“Indeed I do, mon monde~”

The woman giggled. “Oh you! Come on, let’s go find a good seat!”

Westley blinked in realization. “Oh, right! I need to do that too!” He gave them both a friendly smile. “Hope you guys enjoy the concert!”

While Maurice gave him a polite nod, Janet just glared at him again. “I will, and I’ll enjoy it when Wander beats every other band here too!” With that, the couple walked away.

“Wow, she must really like Wander and Sylvia’s music,” the Watchdog mumbled, “Okay okay, gotta find a good seat. Gotta find-” He stopped when his eye spotted a stand selling delicious looking (and smelling) chili dogs. “...Riiight after a quick meal.”

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“We’re LAST?!” Hater’s jaw nearly dropped then and there.
“I… I don’t…” Peepers seemed just as shocked - though unlike his bandmate, he wasn’t slowing slipping from shocked to furious. “N-Now, Hater, you know what they say, save the best for-

“WHO THE FLARP PUT US LAST ON THE LIST?! Where’s the manager, or that MC guy?! Or, or SOMEBODY!”

“Geez, calm down, bonehead,” Sylvia said with an eyeroll as she leaned against the backstage wall, “At least you’re not going first. Besides, going last isn’t that big of a deal.”

“Of course it’s a big deal!” Hater shot back at her, “By the time I’ve performed, most of the audience AND judges will already have their vote decided!”

“Aw, you don’t know that, Hater!” Wander replied, hoping to comfort him a little, “I’m sure there’ll be plenty of people who wait until everyone performs before picking a favorite! And besides, even if they do pick a band before you, they don’t collect the votes till after everyone plays. So people can change their vote if they want to!”

“Yeah!” Peepers agreed, “And besides, our fanbase is pretty large already, so I bet they’ll vote for us before we even play!”

“Hmph…” Hater was still angry and annoyed, but at the same time there was nothing he could really do to change it. “Whatever.”

“Well, now that we know when we’re playing,” Peepers started to say, a bit relieved, “I guess we should just head back to the ship to get ready.” Just because they were performing last didn’t mean that they shouldn’t prepare.

“Oh, right! And Syl and I should get ready too!” Wander agreed, despite him and Syl already wearing their usual stage outfits, “Plus, I wanna walk around and see who all’s here! Maybe we’ll run into some familiar faces.”

“Yeah, you do that,” Hater mumbled, as he absentmindedly patted the pocket on his hoodie. Good, it was still there. Just as it had been every single time he checked - which was about twice every hour.

Even after he and Peepers had managed to practice it for about two hours straight - meaning that Hater pretty much knew the lyrics backwards and forwards - he didn’t want to risk losing it, just in case. What if he ended up totally blanking just before he went on stage? Or what if the lyrics fell out of his pocket and some other band found them, and sang his song before he could?! Or-!

His train of thought was halted as he felt furry fingers intertwine around his own boney ones, a soft thumb rubbing his knuckles. Hater didn’t need to look down to know the look Wander was giving him.

A soft smile. Confident. Reassuring. ‘Calm down, you’ll do fine’.

“Of course I’ll do fine,” Hater said quietly, “I’ll be great. WE’LL be great.” He smiled a little, feeling a small pinch of confidence. “I have nothing to worry about! I’m not even worrying right now! And you know why? Because I have nothing to worry about, that’s why!”

Wander chuckled a bit while Peepers and Sylvia smiled as well - though the latter a bit more in amusement. “Couldn’t have said it better myself.”

“And hey, I don’t even care that we’re going last! It doesn’t matter! Because I know we’ll be the best band, so I’m not worried! Nope, toootally calm!” Just then, he felt his phone buzz violently in his pocket, making him jump slightly in surprise.
“...That was just because I wasn’t expecting a call. Still totally calm and not worried at all.”

“Yeah, whatever you say, Skully.” He gave Sylvia a quick glare before letting go of Wander’s hand and getting his phone out. Looking at it, he could see it wasn’t a call, but a text from-

“Ember?” From behind him, Peepers looked up, just as surprised as his bandmate want. “Why is she texting you?” “Well, give me a second to read her message and I’ll tell you!”

Thankfully the message was a short one: **Where are u?**

“I’m on the moon for the final Battle, where else would i be?” Hater quickly texted back. A few seconds later, there was another reply.

**No, I mean where r u specifically?**

Hater raised an eyebrow. This was getting weird. “*Near the right side of the stage. Had to see when we were playing. Why?*”

“...Well, what is it?” Peepers asked after the skeleton’s phone stayed silent for about a minute.

“Ember just wanted to know where we were,” Hater answered still confused, “But she knows tonight’s the Final Battle, so why would she not know where I was?”

“Maybe she wanted to make sure you got here safely?” Wander suggested.

“Or-” said a new voice, “Maybe she wanted to wish you good luck in person.”

Hater immediately turned around to see a smiling, skeleton teenager in front of him. “Ember?! But, but you can’t- How did you even-?!”

She laughed. “Nice to see you too, brother.” She pulled him in for a hug, and while he was still confused, Hater happily returned it.

“Well, we certainly weren’t expecting you here,” Peepers commented, though he was just as happy to see her as Hater was.

“Sort of the point of a surprise, isn’t it?” Ember replied, smiling back at him once the hug ended, “Oh, and to answer your question, Hater - Liz finally got her license and wanted to take us all out on a big end-of-summer road trip, and I just happened to convince everyone to go here. After all, it’s been forever since I’ve heard you guys practicing in the garage back home, so I was really starting to miss you and your playing.”

Hater’s smile softened a bit. “Yeah well, as long as you don’t mind waiting for a couple hours, you’ll be able to hear some of it tonight.”

“And I can’t wait.” With all of that out of the way, Ember’s eyes finally noticed the other people standing beside them. A tattooed covered Zbornak who seemed friendly enough, and a small, furry, grinning Star Nomad. Her smile grew. “So… Is this him?”

The older skeleton blushed slightly. “Yeah, that’s him.”

“Yep! Name’s Wander!” the little furball chirped as he stepped forward, tipping his hat at her, “And it’s nice to finally meet ya, Ember! Hater’s told me a bit about you, and I certainly hope you stay after the show so we can talk for a bit!” After all, he only knew a bit about her. He knew that they were technically step-siblings, so he didn’t try looking for any family resemblance (though he did
notice that she was wearing a black and red outfit with a lightning bolt pattern scarf on her head, most likely to support her brother), as well as the fact that the two siblings were very close. But other than a few other small facts, Wander didn’t know much about her - but he was looking forward to changing that as soon as possible.

The girl giggled. “Well, it depends on what my friends want to do, but I have a feeling I’ll be staying the night. And it’s nice to meet you too, Wander.” While it was still a bit surprising, it was easy to see just why Hater fell for him in the first place. Sweet, nice, friendly, polite - a bit overwhelming maybe at first, but otherwise a great pick for a boyfriend, and Ember couldn’t be happier for her brother.

“Hey, you know, I’m here too,” Sylvia said suddenly, though her tone was anything but annoyed.

“Oh! Right! Heh, sorry!” Wander chuckled before gesturing to the Zbornak, “This is my bandmate and best pal, Sylvia!”

“Nice to meet you,” Ember told her, giving her a small nod. Sylvia simply returned the nod, giving her a quick smile as well. Who would’ve thought Bonehead’s sister would be so nice?

“Hmm, Sylvia… Wait.” She turned to Hater. “Didn’t you say that Peepers was dating someone named Sylvia? Is that her?”

“Yes,” Peepers replied flatly before Hater could, “So please try to hold in your surprise.”

“Oh, I’m not that surprised,” Ember told him, a bit amused, “If I remember correctly, I was the one who bet against Hater when we were wondering whether or not you would ever hook up with anyone.”

“And believe me, I appreciate that.” The others just chuckled while Peepers rolled his eye slightly. “Well, we should probably head back to the van and get ready.”

“Oh, right,” Hater agreed, albeit a bit reluctantly, as he looked at his sister, “So, guess you should head back to your friends.”

“Yeah.” She gave him an encouraging smile. “Make sure you text me when it’s over, and we can hang out afterwards if you want.”

The older skeleton nodded. That definitely sounded nice. “Yeah, I will.”

She quickly gave him another tight hug, and Hater didn’t even hesitate to return it. “Good luck, brother.” “Thanks Em.”

“Whoa, didn’t realize there would be a whole love-fest thing goin’ on back here.” Scowling a bit, Hater let go of his sister and glared at the shark.

“Before you start yelling at me, I’m just here to see when me and my bros perform,” Awesome told him, more out of convenience than intimidation. He then noticed the younger skeleton girl and gave her a quick wink. “Hey there, haven’t seen you around before.”

“Makes sense considering I just got here,” Ember retorted, though she did smile a little back at him.

“She’s Hater’s sister!” Wander chimed in from the back.

Awesome raised an eyebrow. “Sister?” He stared at the pair of siblings for a few moments before grinning again. “Well, I see good looks run in the family.” A green lightning bolt flew past his head,
just barely missing his dorsal fin. “Hey, easy Hatey! I was just playin’ around!”

“Yeah well, stop ‘playing around’ or next time I won’t miss!”

“Alright alright, message received.”

“...Did he just call you ‘Hatey’?” Hater just replied with a growl of annoyance while the others laughed.

Hater held the small mirror out in front of him so he could get a good look at his entire body, and not just his face. He had spent nearly ten minutes putting on his facepaint on, making sure nothing was smudged. He was also wearing the same red jacket and black pants combo he had worn for his previous performance on the moon. Not really a risky move, but still something at least one of the judges would take notice of. But Hater didn’t really care, if only because his black jacket just wouldn’t really work for this performance.

“You ready?” He turned to look at his bandmate. Peepers was wearing his usual performance outfit as well, though Hater couldn’t help but notice that instead of the usual red and yellow tape, the base of his drumsticks were wrapped in blue and purple.

“Yeah, pretty much.” He glanced down at his notebook one last time before stuffing it in his jacket pocket, alongside his spare guitar picks and cigarettes.

“Great,” Peepers nodded, glad that he wouldn’t have to wait for him, “Then let’s just go wait backstage. Make sure we’re not late for our performance-” Even if they still had roughly an hour to go- “and keep an eye on the other bands.”

“Right, right,” the skeleton nodded. There was a small moment of silence before he spoke up once more. They had already agreed on the two songs they were playing but- “Hey, Peepers?”

The Watchdog glanced back at him. “Yeah?”

“...You know, since I’m already planning on doing the solo and all the other cool stuff in the second song, you could lead the first one if you want.”

“...” Peepers blinked, then smiled a bit. “You sure?”

Hater rolled his eyes. “Grop Peepers, of course I’m sure! I mean, what do you take me for, some self-obsessed stage hog?”

His drummer chuckled slightly. “Never. But, as good as that offer is, I think I’m fine with letting you lead both songs. I’ve got a few mini solos planned for my drums anyway. Besides, I think we would lose points for using a drum machine, even if it was just for one song.”

“Oh, right.” “But trust me, I’ll remember the offer for our next concert.” “I figured you would.”

There was another small moment of silence between the two. Muffled rock music and cheering could be heard from outside the van. What had become so common over the previous few months now almost seemed surreal. But surreal didn’t mean unwanted, and anxious didn’t mean afraid.

First place or not, they were ready to become rock and roll superstars. And, once each of them took a silent deep breath, Hater opened the back door and they climbed out, heading towards the bright stage.
As always, the Final Battle started out with a bang. With each band putting their best songs and effects forward, there was no ‘warm-up act’. Basically, it was all or nothing. And that’s what the audience loved about it. Of course, some were still better than others, even if there really were no mediocre acts. Simply put, anyone could win.

However, some people didn’t really mind the challenge.

Smirking confidently as he leaned against the wall, Awesome tuned his guitar, letting the band playing before him act as background noise. As for the rest of his bandmates, they were tuning as well since their two songs had already been decided. He could hear a couple of them wonder if they were going to win again this year, and hoping that was the case.

And, while winning would be great, it was more of a casual want for Awesome. And really, he could think of a few bands that he wouldn’t mind losing too. He caught a bit of red and white out of the corner of his eye, and his smirk grew slightly.

However, that didn’t mean that Awesome still wouldn’t give it his all.

“S’up Hatey?” he greeted, letting go of his guitar and letting it hang loose off his neck, “Come to watch us win everyone over? How sweet.”

“Hmph,” Hater replied simply, rolling his eyes while Peepers left his side to grab a quick backstage refreshment, “Don’t act like you can psych me out.”

The shark-man simply chuckled. “Never said I could. And hey, for the record, I’m looking forward to hearing you two play one more time. Something tells me you dudes are gonna put on one hell of a show.”

“Well duh.” Awesome laughed again, though he was a bit surprised that Hater hadn’t started yelling or throwing out insults. Maybe there was hope for him yet.

The audience suddenly erupted in applause, surprising both guitarists as the previous band made their way off of the stage. “Alright, give it up for the Lords of Illumination!” the MC shouted, grinning at everyone and clearly having the time of his life, “And now, one of your old favorites, here they come! The Party Makers!” The applause grew even louder.

All the Fist Fighters quickly made their way on-stage while Awesome gave Hater one last smirk. Although - much to Hater’s surprised - this one wasn’t cocky or trying to be antagonising. Rather, it was just one of a person that was about to give an absolutely awesome performance, if only because it would fun for him. “Alright then. Showtime~”

Hater just simply watched as Awesome joined his band, not even bothering to introduce himself as he began playing a string of energy-filled chords, the melody rising over the cheers of the crowd while the stage lights lowered slightly, changing from white to purple and pink. With his sharp-tooth grin wide and his band perfectly in sync, Awesome began to sell it to the crowd - putting all the swagger and charm he could into his song while still making it sound good.

“Workin’ like a dog for the boss man (whoa)
Workin’ for de company (whoa yeah!)
I'm bettin' on the dice I'm tossin'
I'm gonna have a fantasy!”
“But where am I gonna look?
They tell me that love is blind
I really need a girl like an open book
to read between the lines!”
“Love in an elevator
Livin’ it up when I'm goin’ down
Love in an elevator
Lovin’ it up ’til I hit the ground!”

The skeleton crossed his arms as he continued to watch and listen, though his usual annoyance with the shark was noticeably missing. “...If I didn’t know any better, I’d think you didn’t hate him anymore,” Peepers said quietly as he rejoined him, now with two bottles of root beer. Really though, with all that had happened in the past few months, was it really that unlikely?

“Oh, yeah right,” Hater retorted, scowling a bit as he snatched one of the bottles away from him, “Trust me, I still hate him. He still annoys the crap out of me, and if we’re lucky we won’t run into him again for a while.”

“...Buuuut?”

“But, in case you can’t tell, we don’t have anything to prove to him.” Taking a small sip of his pop, Hater suddenly gave a smirk of his own. “He can play all the glam-rock and smirk and brag all he wants, but he’s not going to get to me. We’re still the better band, no matter what, and I don’t have to scream that at him to prove it.”

Peepers smirked as well. “Couldn’t have said it any better myself.”

Both of Awesome’s songs had been big hits with the audience, and pretty much anyone who was even half listening could tell that if it wasn’t for the six minute time limit for each band, he definitely would’ve gotten an encore. But he didn’t state this fact aloud as he walked offstage. He simply gave Hater a nod, as if to say “Good luck, bro” before turning his attention to his bandmates and high fiving them, offering to buy the first round of drinks for another Battle well-done.

Several other bands came and went, providing some pretty enjoyable and even memorable performances. But Hater wasn’t going to let this unsettle his nerves. ...At least, not too much.

He was starting to murmur under his breath. Whether it was song lyrics he was trying so hard not to forget, complaints about having to wait so long, or something else entirely, Peepers wasn’t sure. “Um, maybe you should go take a walk or something,” he suggested, “Just to help you rela-”

“I’m plenty relaxed,” Hater snapped, “And I’m fine. I don’t need a walk or whatever.”

“You sure about that?” Both of them looked over to see Sylvia and Wander walking towards them with instruments in hand (or in Sylvia’s case, tail). “Cause you know, a little time out from the backstage area would do you some good,” the Zbornak continued, “Plus I’m sure your sister wouldn’t mind seeing you for a bit.”

Yeah!” Wander agreed, “And there’s lots’a vendors out there too you could check out! Even if you don’t feel like buyin’ anything, they’re still worth lookin’ at!” Though the Star Nomad had definitely done more than just looking, judging by the bag filled with various things that he was leaving behind in a safe corner of the stage. Hater also couldn’t help but notice the homemade necklace hanging from Wander’s neck alongside his multicolored beads.

Connected to a light yet durable chain was a piece of cheap, gold painted metal that someone had attempted to make into the Harbingers of Doom logo. Of course. A ghost of a smile passed over his face before he scowled a bit. “You know, if someone’s out there selling merchandise with our band on it, they better be planning sending us half the profits or something!”
“Oh lighten up, bonehead,” Sylvia told him, “Pretty much every band has some non-official merch. Let the fans have their fun, at least until you guys can actually provide them with a cd and tee shirts.”

“Ooh! Speaking of tee shirts, you should see some of the neat ones they have out there, Hater!” Wander nearly shouted - though brought his voice down a bit at the last moment, not wanting to ruin the currently performing band’s song, “All sorts of fancy designs and colors and fun sayings! You should really go check it out!”

“...Maybe later,” Hater replied after a moment. Even if walking through crowds of people and looking at overpriced knock-offs wasn’t exactly his thing to begin with, the main reason why he didn’t want to leave was so he didn’t miss Wander’s performance - though he didn’t say this out loud of course.

Judging by Wander’s warm smile, he didn’t need to. “Ooooh, this is so exciting! I remember just how big the crowd was the last time we were here! But it looks even BIGGER now!” He turned to his best friend. “Can you believe it, Sylvia?!”

“Well, we are standing here about to go onstage so, yeah, I believe it,” she replied, making Wander chuckle.

“Aww, you know what I mean!”

“Will there be any new songs from you two this time?” Peepers asked, voicing both his and Hater’s curiosity. With how often Wander came up with new songs - sometimes without even trying - they were expecting the answer to be yes. However-

“Nah, we’re just gonna play a couple of our favorites,” Wander replied with a cheerful smile, “Just because they aren’t new don’t mean they aren’t still good!”

“But it still means you have less of a chance to win,” Hater reminded him, unable to stop himself, “I mean, you’ve heard what people have been saying, right? That you’re supposed to do SOMETHING new for your performance or-”

The furry guitarist simply shrugged. “Well, I’m sure there’s some people out there who haven’t heard us play yet, so it’ll be new to them!”

“Yeah yeah,” Hater mumbled. Of course he would say something like that. Of course he would just play whatever he wanted and just let whatever happens happen. “Just - ...” He scowled slightly, but not in anger. “Okay, I know you don’t care that much about winning and just wanna have fun and stuff but still, you should at least try to, alright?”

Wander blinked, then gave a light smile, a sort of sparkle in his eye as he stared back at Hater. “I always try.”

Hater forced himself to keep looking at him, hoping the green on his face wasn’t too visible. “Yeah, I know...”

Soon enough, the MC was announcing Wander and Sylvia’s names, and Peepers went to help Sylvia set up her drums while Wander stayed alongside Hater.

“I tell ya, Hater... I’m actually feeling sorta nervous.”

“...Wait, seriously?!” He looked him in disbelief. “You, the guy who will just randomly start singing and dancing in front of people? You’re nervous?”
Wander laughed. “Hey, I said sorta. After all, this is one of the biggest audiences we’ve played for so far. ...And it’s also our last performance of the summer. I guess I just want it to be good for everyone involved.”

“...Yeah well, it will be. Trust me. I’m pretty sure it’s impossible for you to give a horrible performance.” And to think, a few months ago, Hater would’ve considered that a bad thing.

“Heh, yeah. Maybe.” There was a hanging silence between them, and while Wander was no longer looking at him, there was still a sense of expectation. But for once, Hater didn’t feel intimidated by it.

“And... Maybe this won’t be your last show of the summer. Or at least, the last time you play, if you want to, I mean.”

“Hm?” The nomad glanced back up at him, curious now. “Hater?”

“I, uh, you know…” He scowled slightly once more, but continued on anyway. “I’ll probably stick around in this galaxy for a couple days before heading home - especially if I have to meet with talent agents or whatever - so... I mean, if you and Sylvia are doing the same, we could just take some time to, you know, hang out or something. Go eat somewhere, maybe play some video games... Try playing a couple songs together.”

Wander’s eyes slowly widened. He remembered the idea being suggested before by Hater himself after the incident at Phunulon, but that was quite different from an actual invitation.

However, before he could give an answer, he heard Sylvia thank Peepers for his help. She was already to start, so he needed to get out there too. But, not wanting to be rude, the smaller guitarist smiled as he thought of a way to reply to Hater quickly.

Since he was no longer looking at his boyfriend, the seemingly forever silence made Hater start speaking again. “...So, uh, yeah, that’s what I was think.” A gentle pull on his arm made him crouch down slightly, and a pair of fuzzy lips were gently pressed to his cheek, making his face heat up almost instantly.

“I’d love to,” a sweet voice whispered.

For a moment, Hater found it impossible to speak, so he simply nodded. When he felt the small pair of hands let go of his sleeve, he straightened up, fingers lightly touching the spot where he was kissed. “...You better not have messed up my facepaint.”

Wander giggled. “Nope! Perfect as always!” And with that, he bounded past Peepers and right into the spotlight, waving at their fans as he got ready to play. And as he watched his boyfriend begin to play his little heart out, it took nearly several seconds to notice how much he was smiling. But once he did notice, he didn’t dare try to hide it.

“Feel the beat underneath your feet, the music is sure ta help ya see! Guitar’s strummin’ along, drums givin’ you the beat! Leave your worries far behind, take my hand I’ll give ya mine! The night’s still young so let’s just - - Get up and dance!”

Once Wander’s performance came and went, the rest seemed like a blur. Hater barely listened to the other bands, and before he knew it, it was finally time for him and Peepers to perform. ‘Hmph, about time,’ he thought to himself, even if part of him admittedly would’ve wanted a couple more minutes.

As soon as their band name was announced, Hater took his place on stage while Peepers got behind his drums. The applause was nearly deafening, and while the stage lights turned to red, yellow and green, Hater took a moment to look out into the crowd.
Even with all the people in front of them, it was easy to pick out certain members of the audience. His sister, standing alongside a few other skeleton girls, grinning clearly excited. That one stagehand Watchdog from their stadium show, sitting atop an extinguished fire-lion’s head and cheering as loud as he could. Awesome with a drink in his hand, letting out a holler in between sips. Demurra (without Dracor since he was most likely helping with all the tech stuff), smiling pleasantly and looking forward to Hater’s performance since she knew how much he had improved over the past few months.

And of course, standing beside his faithful Zbornak drummer, was Wander - grinning and unable to take his eyes off the stage.

As he began to lift his guitar pick to strike the beginning chord, someone - he wasn’t sure who - started up a chant. Soft at first, but gaining momentum within seconds. “H. O. D! H. O. D! H. O. D!” It took Hater a moment to realize what these letters stood for (and was relieved that it wasn’t some sort of insult).

The fingers pinching his pick tightened ever so slightly as a small shiver ran up his spine and into the tips of his horns. A smirk crossed his boney features. Yes… The Harbingers of Doom really would be superstars. And this was just the beginning, after all. But for now-

Hater struck his strings with all the power he could muster, sending out a (thankfully harmless yet still) very impressive shockwave into the audience. Their cheers increased tenfold.

Not wasting any time, Hater began to strum out a familiar melody while Peepers came banging in with his drums. It was one of their most popular songs, and the audience definitely made this known.

Throughout their first song, while it was obvious Hater was still leading, he and Peepers seemed to switch off seamlessly with each of them having small moments to shine during the song. At the same time, they stayed in sync with each other while their passion never faltered. And as they finished it off, Peepers couldn’t help but mentally smile to himself. Perhaps all that tiring, extra practice Hater insisted on was worth it in the end.

Taking a moment to catch their breath while the audience made their enjoyment known, the duo prepared for their final song. Peepers let his arms rest for a moment while Hater gulped slightly. This was it, the big moment. The melody had been stuck in his head since he first played it, so there was no worry about losing it there. But the lyrics…

“WOO! HATER! HATER THAT WAS AMAZING! WOO! GO HATER! GO PEEPERS! GO HARBINGERS OF DOOOOOOOOM!”

Wander was now standing on Sylvia’s neck (which it didn’t look like she minded since she just looked amused about the whole thing rather than annoyed), easily making his presence known. And Hater just smirked slightly back at him. His mind was blank, but not because he had forgotten the words, but because he didn’t need to run through them again. He knew he wouldn’t forget.

After all, who could forget something like this?

Once the cheers and applause finally started to fade, Hater raised his pick once more, closed his eyes, and began to play. The notes were intense, yet not too heavy. Loud and passionate, still with a bit of a heavy metal edge. And, after a few bars of this and Peepers keeping a steady beat, he started to sing.

“You crashed into my life, just like a shooting star. You broke my world apart, and you made me fall hard! Burning orange light, nearly blinding me! But all those words you whispered, is just what
Eyes still closed, Hater quickly changed up the melody just as Peepers added a few extra beats to his tempo.

“This light of yours! (Burning bright!) Guiding me! (Putting up a fight!) Keeping me warm, and helping me see! Up against the galaxy, it’s no longer just me!”

There was a small pause, the melody switching back to its original style as Hater began the second stanza. He wasn’t really listening to the audience - if they were clapping or cheering, it was just background noise. Right now, he was just focused on the song.

“I had tried to fight it all, tried to push you away! Throw you back to where you came from, but you always seemed to stay!

“My heart is beating fast, it makes me want to shout! Through all the rain that’s falling fast, it’s still your body that I grasp!”

“That face of yours! (Grinning wide!) Lingering on me! (Won’t leave me behind!) Keeping me warm, and helping me be! Up against the galaxy, it’s no longer just me!”

Small spark began forming on his fingertips and the tips of his horns, but it wasn’t time for the solo yet. Even so, he didn’t try to pull any energy back.

“Spinning fast, shaking hard, Where I look, there you are Glance my way, hear me scream, Grab my hand, I feel free!

“Our eyes meet, look away Pull me back, make me stay! What I want, what I need, You won’t go, I won’t leave!”

The skeleton rocker finally released all his energy into his strings, making them and his guitar glow a bright green while the tips of his horns continued to spark. By the time he was finished with his solo, they were almost like makeshift fireworks, leaving the audience in awe. Peepers gave a drum cue - one beat, two, three - and the melody returned, just as loud as ever.

“This heart of yours! (Beating loud!) Stay by me! (Clearing my doubts!) I’ll keep you warm,
and we’ll make them see!
Us against the galaxy-!”

One final guitar rift. “It’s no longer just me!”

There was only a millisecond of silence, and then the world around him exploded with applause. Hater finally opened his eyes, and allowed himself to take it all in.

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“Oh my goodness, Hater! You were amazing!”

“I’ve never heard you play like that, brother! Ever!”

“Dude, that was pretty freakin’ sweet! Who would’a thought you could put on THAT amazing of a show!”

Honestly, as much as he relished in the praise and the reminders that, yes he was indeed great, it was starting to get a little overwhelming. But even so, he couldn’t bring himself to tell them all to shut up. So, he just sat back in silent agreement and appreciation. Even people who weren’t saying anything and were just smiling at him (i.e. Sylvia, Peepers and Demurra) were at least acknowledged and nodded at.

But eventually, Hater did have to say, “Alright alright, I get it! You know, we can talk about other things!”

Wander giggled. “It really did look like you were really enjoyin’ yourself out there! And, well…” The nomad’s eyes became half-lid. “I really did like those lyrics you came up with, Hater. See, I told ya you’d come up with somethin’ eventually - and you definitely did.”

The skeleton blushed slightly. “Yeah, well… They’re just words, you know! I mean, I know they’re great but-”

“Heh, you sure about that, Hatey?” Awesome asked, waggling his eyebrows, “You sure they didn’t have ANY special meaning~? Cause, if you ask me-”

“Gahhhhh, shut uuuuup!” Hater yelled at him, glaring while the others laughed.

Just then, an announcement was blasted over the stage speakers: “All Battle of the Bands contestants, please come to the stage! Winners will be announced momentarily! Repeat, all Battle of the Bands contestants please come to the stage!”

“Guess that’s your cue to head up there,” Demurra told them all, still giving a content and almost knowing smile.

“Yeah!” Wander agreed, hat flopping slightly as he nodded, “Wouldn’t wanna miss congratulatin’ who won!” With that, he grabbed both Sylvia and Hater’s hands and began dragging them towards the stage, with Peepers and Awesome and his band following.

“Good luck, guys!” Ember shouted over the reawakening crowd, getting excited once more of the thought of finally seeing who won.

“Thanks Em- GAH! Wander, slow down! I nearly tripped back there!” “Sorryyy!”

The two women giggled at that. Once the bands were out of sight, Ember excused herself as well,
wanting to go find her friends and leaving Demurra alone. But the blonde didn’t really mind. After all, with the sound booth just a few feet away, she wasn’t really alone.

Her boyfriend was easy to spot, even in the crowded and slightly dark area - working in-sync with the other techies and not minding the busy work. However, when he did get a moment to rest, it didn’t take long for Dracor to notice who was looking at him. He happily smiled back at his girlfriend for a moment, before giving a small nod towards the stage - as if to say, “So, NOW do you know who’s going to win?”.

Demurra giggled, keeping her lips sealed. She had a few predictions, but at the same time she was no judge - at least, not an official one. If he wanted to know who would win it all, he would just have to watch for himself.

And so, that’s what the two of them did.

It was honestly a wonder all the bands were able to fit on stage, but somehow they managed. And once all the bands were there, waiting anxiously to hear the winners, Harec Tintissi made his big, final appearance of the season.

“Hey everyone! Did you miss me?” The crowds screamed back at him while the six-armed host just chuckled. “Alright alright, I get the message loud and clear. So, let’s see who won this thing!” He held out one of his arms, revealing a sheet of paper and a couple envelopes while the crowd cheered some more.

He started off naming some ‘honorable mentions’ - no prize included, just bands that the judges felt the need to at least mention. Best sound, best effects, most unique group - though these got fewer and fewer claps. And behind him, most of the bands started tensing up, with a few mumbling that he should just hurry up and say the winners already - though veterans like Awesome who were used to all of this, just stood back and waited patiently.

“Okay Battle-Fans, now here comes the awards you’ve all been waiting for!” The bands all instinctively stood up a bit straighter. “First up, Fan Favorite! Remember, this award is only based on fan votes, so this one’s all thanks to you guys!” He started to open the envelope. “And then winner is....

....

...WANDER AND SYLVIA!”

Everyone - including a few bands - cheered while the big spotlights landed right on a surprised Sylvia and a VERY surprised Wander. Although, after a second or two, his surprised was replaced with absolute glee, grinning widely as he and his bandmate stepped up to take their reward.

“Huh…” Hater broke his gaze away from Wander to look over at Awesome. “I’ll be honest. Did not see that one coming.” He didn’t even seem too upset, just surprised.

And, considering how he wasn’t feeling any anger or even disappointment (which was how Peepers and quite a few other bands looked, since the winner of ‘Fan Favorite’ usually won the whole competition), Hater seemed ‘stuck’ in surprised as well.

Oh, he was sure that later he’d feel the somewhat crushing disappointment, and probably even a bit of anger, but just for little while. Then he would probably be distracted by some weird, goofy thing Wander was doing or by Awesome trying to annoy him or by Peepers listing off all statistics involved in successful non-Battle winning bands and that they still had a chance to make it big, and
he’d forget about it sooner or later. He would be fine. That’s what he told himself, and that’s what he knew. And besides…

He looked back up at Wander, who had just given his cheap, five dollar plastic trophy - which he immediately handed to Sylvia before giving the MC a big hug. Hater rolled his eyes, shaking his head slightly as a small smile managed to stay on his face.

“Whoa, heh. I know winning can be sorta emotional but - Eh, I’m open minded.” The audience laughed and cheered as Harec returned the hug. Once it ended, Wander and Sylvia walked back to their spots - with Wander’s grin still just as big, maybe even bigger (if that was possible). They caught each others eyes, and Hater just simply gave him a small, congratulatory nod. Wander resisted the urge to run over to him and give him a big kiss.

“Okay, and now… The big winner…” A drumroll started up somewhere off stage. “The grand prize - one hundred thousand credits and pretty much guaranteed fame, plus the right to say you beat everyone at this year’s Battle of the Bands… Decided by your votes, judges opinions, as well as just looking at how they’ve performed throughout the summer... And hey, from what I heard, it was a really, REALLY close call… The winner of Best Performance and the Battle of the Bands is…”

The drumroll seemed to go on into infinity while the host opened the envelope. Some held their breath, others just waited. The crowd was nearly silent as the spotlights swung back and forth, just waiting to land on the winning band. Harec grinned once he finally opened the envelope. “It’s…

…

…

...The HARBINGERS OF DOOM!”

Chapter End Notes

Awesome's song was "Love in an Elevator".
“...The HARBINGERS OF DOOM!”

Hater’s eyes went wide, his entire body frozen. Did he really just hear that? Did they really just win, or was it some cruel joke (or perhaps an even crueler hallucination)? He could definitely hear the cheering, and feel the hot spotlights of the stage now directly on him. Somewhere he could hear Wander’s excited squeeing and Peepers telling him to walk forward. Eventually, his brain forced him to walk forward and stand next to the MC, who had just been given a giant novelty check.

“Congrats, guys!” Harec told them, handing Hater the check. Peepers had a hold of it as well, making sure to thank him while the skeletal rocker just glanced down at the check. Written in bold ink was their band name: Harbingers of Doom, One hundred thousand credits and zero cents.

This was definitely real.

“Well?” Hater looked back up, a bit confused and still a bit stunned. “Don’t just stand there!” Harec told him, “Give us your big ‘winner’s speech’, man!”

Honestly, Hater didn’t know what to say - and he was pretty sure that any attempt to say something cool would come out a stuttering mess - so, he just mustered up his best ‘confident, tough and totally better than you’ face and held up a ‘Rock on’ symbol. The audience went wild.

“Heh, a skeleton of few words! I like that!” Harec laughed, “Well, congrats guys! And congrats to all the awesome bands we had this year! Thank you for making this year’s Battle one of - if not THE best one yet! And you all better drag your butts back here next year! Same time, same place! And until then, goodnight everybody!”

The audience gave one last hurrah while the bands started making their way off of the stage - and Hater had just barely gotten off the stage when he felt two pairs of arms suddenly wrap around him, making him drop the giant check - though thankfully Peepers was there to catch it.

“Oh my gosh, Hater! You did it! Congratulations!”

“I knew you could win it, brother!”

“Me too! Ooooh, I’m just so proud and happy for you!”

Hater blushed slightly, feeling a bit embarrassed now. “Hey, you won something too, you know!”

“Oh!” Wander giggled. In all his excitement for Hater, he had nearly forgotten about his own award. “Now that, was the real surprise of the night! I wasn’t expecting that at all! But it’s definitely a happy surprise!”

“Yes,” Sylvia agreed, smiling at the small trophy, “It may not be worth a hundred thousand credits, but it still feels nice.”

“Yeah!” Wander nodded, smiling proudly at his bandmate before turning back to Hater - who had managed to get out of his and Ember’s hugs. “So, Mister Superstar, what are you gonna do now that you’ve won?”
“Well duh! Get a record deal!” Hater answered, “And as soon as that’s done, go on tour again!”

“And considering what we just won, it shouldn’t be too hard to find someone who is willing to sign us on for those things,” Peepers added.

“Oh yeah, trust me - Those guys pretty much swarm you. Like, just hours after you’ve won.”

Hater glanced up. Awesome was standing behind them, but he didn’t look angry. If anything, he looked genuinely happy for the two bands.

The skeleton smirked slightly. “Well, that’s how it should be. I -” He took a moment to correct himself, “we ARE the winners after all.” He felt a small nudge from Wander, silently telling him to be a good winner. Though, as his shock and near disbelief was quickly being replaced with pride and excitement, that was hard to do. “It makes sense that people would want to try to sign us on first, since we’re pretty much guaranteed a success. ...But, I’m sure you could still get a record deal too. I mean, you did win a few of these things before us, so I’m sure you can still be somewhat of a success.”

“Tc’ch.” Awesome rolled his eyes. “Dude, who says that I even want a record deal?”

“...” Hater blinked. “Uh, you? I mean, you have a band, don’t you? And the whole point of entering this thing - for most people, at least - is to get people interested in you and to get a record deal.”

“But, some other people also do it just to have fun,” Awesome retorted - earning a small smile from Wander, “And that’s just what I do. We always do the summer shoots in Spring, so I’m left with a ton of free time during this part of the year. So, I just gather up my bros, we grab our instruments, plan a few shows and some parties along the way, and hit the road. Gotta fill those summer days somehow, am I right?”

“...” The group looked back and forth between the two guitarists, silently wondering when literal sparks would start flying. “So you’re telling me… That you’re not even a real band, you’re just some male model. And you don’t care about getting famous, you just do this for fun? And even though you’ve won this thing, like, three or four times, you don’t even accept the record deals?”

“Well, it would sorta cut into my modelling job, dude.”

“And you do all of this work during the summer - all this performing and practicing and touring - pretty much just so your summer isn’t boring?”

“Couldn’t think of any other way to spend my vacation time. That, and the extra cash at the end is pretty sweet.”

“...” Hater just gave him the flattest of looks. “You know what? I’m not even surprised.”

The shark-man just chuckled. “Nice to know I won’t be fried anytime soon… Think maybe you and Eye-bro will be in the Battle next year? Between you two and the Furball and Zbornak Babe duo, this year was actually a challenge for me.”

Hater smirked slightly. “Well, it would be fun to musically kick your butt for a second time.”

“Don’t count on it, Hatey,” Awesome told him, flashing his teeth, “Losing’s not something I do very often.” Hater, along with Sylvia and Peepers, just rolled their eyes while Wander gave him a friendly smile.

“Well, I sure can’t wait to see you again next year, Awesome!”
“Heh, me neither, Little Man. Though, don’t count on saying goodbye just yet. I’m plannin’ on staying here and enjoying the music and the booze a bit longer. Can’t waste a good party when it’s right in front of me, after all, and I feel like you’re just the same. But, in case I don’t see you again until next year,” Awesome’s smile softened a bit. “Good luck, bro. And, make sure you keep looking out for Hatey, kay?”

“But I don’t need anyone ‘looking out for me’! I’m just fine, and I can look out for myself!”

“Fine. Then just give him someone to cuddle with in the back of ships.”

“SHUT UP AWESOME!” “I can do that too!” “GAHHHH!” The group just laughed, and after a few moments, even Hater couldn’t stay too angry.

“…Oh hey, speaking of record companies swarming ya…” Everyone turned to look where Awesome was looking, and saw Demurra walking towards them.

“Oh! Hey Demi!” Wander greeted with an enthusiastic wave.

“Hey guys,” Demurra waved back, “Congrats to all of you.”

“Thanks,” Sylvia nodded, “Heh, talk about a big way to end the summer, huh?”

The blonde giggled. “You never know what’s going to happen at the Final Battle.” She glanced over at Hater - who had been sorta staring at her, though not in an annoyed way. Now, it seemed more like he was looking at a mentor, or an unexpected friend, and wasn’t really sure how to thank her. Her smile grew a bit.

“Well Hater… You guys sure have come a long way.” She smirked slightly. “Not that you two weren’t already good. But, there’s always room for improvement.”

“Yeah yeah, I know.” He was silent for a moment. “Just, uh… Thanks. For letting us stay in your apartment for that one month. And, uh, other stuff too. You know what you’re talking about. So, yeah, thanks.”

“All of that coming from you? I think that was one of the best compliments I’ve ever seen.” She reached into her pocket and got out a card, handing it to him. In dark pink lettering, it stated her name and gave her phone number. And, as Hater looked confused as he continued to stare at it, Demurra handed a card to Wander as well.

“Wait, we already have your phone number!” Hater reminded her.

“You have my personal number,” Demurra corrected him, “That, is my business number.”

Business? Hater turned the card over, and nearly dropped it when he saw the logo on the back. “You, you work for one of the biggest record companies in the galaxy?!”

“No, I work AT one of the biggest record companies in the galaxy,” Demurra replied, still keeping a sweet smile on her face, “Several years of experience usually gets you pretty far in the company. And I just happen to be head of the ‘new artists’ department, which means I listen to the rookies and direct the best ones to the other departments, and usually get them record deals.”

“So THAT’S what you do!” Sylvia exclaimed before she could stop herself, though Demurra just giggled, not taking any offense. “Guess it makes sense you couldn’t tell us.”
“Yeah. Didn’t really want any special treatment from bands who would think just sucking up to someone like me would automatically get them a record deal. But, that doesn’t mean I still can’t offer advice. Plus, it’s a little more fun this way.”

“Good thing you didn’t just have our first impression to go on,” Peepers mumbled while Hater’s eyes widened slightly.

The first time he saw Demurra. He treated her like a nobody. Yelled at her, told her she didn’t know what she was talking about… “Oh grop… Grop, I-”

“Don’t worry about it,” the blonde told him before he could say anymore, “Like I said, you’ve come a long way, and I wouldn’t have given you that card if it wasn’t the truth.”

“…” Hater gave a small nod, mumbling a small thanks.

Demurra nodded back. “As soon as you guys are ready to get to work, make sure to give me a call. And even if you don’t want to sign with us, I can still help you connect with other record companies.”

“Can do, Demi!” Wander told her, “You can be expecting a call from us real soon!”

“Us too,” Peepers added, and Demurra was definitely glad to hear it.

“But before we all have to start doing actual work again-” Awesome started to say, but Sylvia stopped him, obviously knowing.

“Yeah yeah, we know, don’t waste a perfectly good party. And honestly, we could all use a drink to celebrate.”

“Aw yeah!” The shark-man fistpumped. “Now that’s what I’m talking about!”

“Yes!” Wander added, just as excited, “A toast to new beginnings!” The others rolled their eyes a bit at how corny that sounded, but smiled nonetheless.

“Well, what are we waiting for?” Ember asked, “Let’s celebrate!”

“But you’re not getting a drink!” Hater and Peepers both said in unison. The teenager gave them both a slightly amused look.

“I was going to make sure it was non-alcoholic, you know.”

“Good.” “Keep it that way.”

“You guys go ahead,” Demurra said, already walking away, “I have someone else I need to meet. Just drink one for me, okay?”

“Not a problem!” “You sure about that, Awesome?” “If you’re bringing up what I think you’re bringing up-” “I’m just saying, maybe other certain people can handle the extra drink better than others.” “Is that a challenge, Eyeball?” “Weeeell-” “Knock it off, guys or both of you are getting that extra drink poured on your head.”

Demurra giggled, looking at the group for one moment longer before heading towards the sound booth. With no real work to be done since there were no more performances or announcements, the crew had just put in a few mix CDs and let the music play while they relaxed. And her boyfriend was no exception to this.
Seeing her coming, Dracor grabbed an extra bottle, opening it and handing it to her when she got close enough. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.” He took a small sip of his own drink as they sat down next to each other. Despite all the lights, they still had a good view of the stars surrounding the small moon. “Another battle come and gone.”

“Yep,” Demurra nodded, “And with that, a new crop of bands that might just be successful enough to be around for the next one.”

“...Demurra?”

“Yes, love?” his girlfriend asked sweetly, batting her eyes a bit. Dracor chuckled, though the slight swooning he felt in his heart couldn’t be ignored.

“You know what I’m going to ask.”

“You mean, did I know that the Harbingers of Doom were going to win?” The dragon nodded, looking a bit curious now - which just made Demurra smile bigger. “I told you from the beginning that I wasn’t sure who was going to win, this time. There just wasn’t a ‘sure thing’ this year. However, when it came to the Harbingers of Doom...”

She took a small sip from her drink, pausing a moment to enjoy the taste. Her favorite brand. “I didn’t know for sure, but I did feel like they were going to make some sort of impact, and that they would no doubt have plenty of fans by the time the season was over.”

“And it looks like your prediction came true, dear,” Dracor told her, just as a Watchdog in a ‘Harbingers of Doom’ tee walked past them.

Demurra giggled. “Still, I wasn’t sure if they were going to win it in the end. It could’ve easily been Wander and Sylvia, or even the Party Makers. From what I heard, it really was a close race.” There was a slight sparkle in her eyes now. “But that, my love, is what makes it exciting.”

Dracor smiled, giving a small nod in agreement. “True enough.” He stretched his wing out slightly, wrapping it around his girlfriend. The song playing over the speakers faded out, and a new one quickly replaced it. A more easy going song, starting out with a piano, and then adding a guitar and a steady beat after a few bars.

“Oh thinkin’ about all our younger years
There was only you and me
We were young and wild and free
Now nothin’ can take you away from me
We've been down that road before
But that's over now
You keep me comin' back for more”

“...Do you recognize it?” the blonde asked as she glanced up at him, despite already knowing the answer.

“I could never forget it,” Dracor answered, his smile warm and his wing moving even closer around Demurra - who in turn snuggled up to his chest.

“Well, I should hope not. ...After all, it was the first song you ever asked me to dance to.” Their hands found each other, embracing tightly. “And the first song we played together when we became a duet.”
“And the first song we listened to when we moved in together,” Dracor added, a nostalgic sigh caught in his voice. It was years ago, and yet it seemed like only yesterday. “I know I never get tired of hearing it.”

“Neither do I… I could listen to it forever, just as long as you were listening with me.”

“Baby, you’re all that I want
When you’re lyin’ here in my arms
I’m findin’ it hard to believe
We’re in heaven
And love is all that I need
And I found it there in your heart
It isn’t too hard to see
We’re in heaven”

“In fact… That really doesn’t sound like a bad idea.” Her hand left his, and his wing opened up a bit when he felt her sit up.

“Demurra?”

“Dracor…” Eyes and smile never faltering, she reached into her purse, and pulled out a decorative box that the dragon recognized immediately. After all, it was used as part of a tradition from his home planet.

As she opened it up, he could see a silver ring within it. Large enough to fit on a clawed finger, shiny and polished with an old language engraved on the inside of it. “H-How did you…?”

“Just shopped around for it,” she told him, her gaze leaving him for a moment to look down at the ring, “Took the advice of jewelry store owners… I wanted to make sure I got the right one, after all.”

Dracor gave a small laugh, ignoring the tears forming in his eyes. “Trust me, honey, it’s perfect… Heh, and to think, once we got home I was planning on getting your proposal ring. Er, well, I mean, I’m still going to do it obviously but I - Heh, I just, wasn’t expecting-

“Wasn’t expecting me to propose first?” Demurra asked, clearly a bit amused, “Well, what can I say, Drake? I love you, and I felt ready to make the next step. So, since I had no problem being the one asking if you were ready too… It just felt like the perfect moment.”

“Well then…” He took her free hand, “If you made the moment perfect, then I can try to make it even better… And I can’t think of any better way to do it than agreeing to be with the woman I love for the rest of my life.”

Demurra could feel tears and her eyes now, but it couldn’t stop her smile. “Beloved… “ They pressed their heads together, moving as close as they could to each other. And, as Demurra’s other hand took his, the ring still held in her fingers, she whispered, “Will you marry me?”

“Yes,” Dracor whispered back, moving his own hand out so that she could put the ring on his finger, and then holding her hands once it was done, “Yes, yes, yes.”

Their lips eventually met, and even as the song was fading out, not once did they separate.

“Baby, you’re all that I want
When you’re lyin’ here in my arms
I’m findin’ it hard to believe
We’re in heaven
And love is all that I need
And I found it there in your heart
It isn’t too hard to see
We’re in heaven.”

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“...You have got to be kidding me.”

“I dunno, Syl. I think it looks pretty neat!”

“How did something like this even get made…?” Honestly, if she hadn’t been standing right in front of it, she would’ve never believed it.

It was at least twice the size of Hater’s old ship. It had the body of a tour bus, with a huge engine in the back for maximum speed and travel. It was crimson red, with streaks of black painted on the sides, as well as some sprayed on silver lightning bolts (and a few small stars) that looked relatively new while the rest of the ship looked at least a decade old.

But that wasn’t what Sylvia was staring at. What she was staring at was the front of the ship - which had a huge skull head stuck right on top of it. Oh sure, the glass placed in the eye sockets of the skull acted as makeshift windshields, but still. “A florping skull?! Really?!”

“Hey, I think it looks cool!” Hater called out, moving out from the other side of the ship with a spray can in his hand, “And it was only 20 grand! Can you believe some moron actually gave away this cool of a ship for that low of a price! We didn’t even have to spend half our prize money!”

“Oh I can believe it.” Sylvia mumbled as Wander took a closer look.

“Well I think it’s neat!” he told them, “And it’ll be easier to live in if ya ever need to while you’re on the road! Plus, it’s unique!”

“You’ve got that right.” Peepers slammed one of the trunks on it shut, wiping the dust off his hands. “Probably no other ship like it.”

“For good reason.” Hater shot her another glare while Peepers just rolled his eye. “Oh what, don’t tell me that you actually like this thing.” Honestly she had thought Hater had begged him to let him
“Well, there is a certain charm to it,” Peepers replied, “And it does fit our band aesthetic, don’t you think.”

“Eh, fair enough.

“Besides, I’d say it’s more than worth it’s price, especially with all it’s features. Lightspeed, decent gas mileage, a bathroom, two beds-” Sylvia smirked a bit at that. Good thing all of them had someone to share a bed with. “-a tv, AC controls that are up to code, speakers you can plug into for in-ship practice, plenty of luggage space, even a food replicator! Though admittedly it does have quite a few miles on it already, and-” He paused, hearing a faint scraping. “And I can’t figure out where that scraping sound is coming from! I swear I didn’t hear it during the test flight!”

“Ugh, just ignore it, Peepers,” his bandmate told him, tossing the now empty can towards a nearby trashcan, “A scraping sound isn’t that big of a deal.”

“It is if it’s something mechanical and we end up getting blown up because of it!” Not wasting anymore time, Peepers raced to the front of the ship and opened up it’s ‘jaw’. “Maybe it’s something with the engine…”

“So, you’ll get to drive it home?” Wander asked, his attention back on Hater.

“Yep,” the skeleton answered proudly, “It’s all mine.” He then pouted slightly. “Though, we’ll barely get to use it for the rest of the year. Our only big trip before then will just be taking you and Sylvia home and then going home ourselves!”

“Heh, won’t Mama be surprised when we pull up in this thing, huh Syl?” “I just hope we don’t scare away her birds…” “But yeah, puttin’ together a trans-galactic tour just takes time, Hater. I’m sure it’ll pass quickly”

“Yeah yeah, I know... At least getting our CDs out won’t take as long.”

The Star Nomad grinned at that. “Yeah! And that’ll be something to look forward to - both recordin’ it, and seein’ it in stores! But boy, being in a recording booth sure is different from performing live.”

“Wait, you’ve gotten in there already? I wasn’t able to get in there until tomorrow!”

“Well, they are busy.”

“But I won the Battle of the Bands! Shouldn’t that get me first dibs or something?” Wander just shrugged, making Hater scowl slightly. “Whatever. ...Maybe I’ll just hang out with you guys or something. With how big this place is, there’s gotta be SOMETHING on Axalis that we haven’t done yet!”

“Hmm, well, I did hear about this one-” “WAAAAAAAAAH!”

“Peepers?” Sylvia started to run over towards him, but the Watchdog drummer nearly ran into her as he backed away from the ship.

“G-Get away from there! There’s, there’s this giant THING in there! That’s what was making the noise! There was an actual MONSTER living in our ship!” He then looked to Hater, looking a bit more firm but still freaking out. “A-And as soon as it goes back to whatever hiding spot it was in before, we’re returning the ship!”
“What?! No way!” Hater yelled, “I’m not giving up an awesome ship just because of some space raccoon or whatever!”

“Well I’m not living in a ship with something already living in it! And I’m pretty sure it wasn’t a space raccoon, Hater!” Peepers yelled back at him, practically clinging to his girlfriend now.

“Oh stop being such a baby!” “I am not-!”

“Hey, fellas?” Everyone turned to Wander, who was now over by the front of the ship, not looking too concerned. “Could you maybe turn it down a bit? All this yelling is scarin’ the poor little guy.”

“P-Poor little-?!” “Come on, come on out. It’s okay… Peepers didn’t mean to scare ya.” “I scared HIM?!”

A bit of growling could be heard now, as well as the sound of presumably sharp claws on metal. But Wander just kept smiling. “That’s it, there ya go! Come on out, boy…”

As soon as the creature made it’s appearance in the light, Peepers’ grip only tightened while Sylvia’s eyes widened slightly. That definitely wasn’t a space raccoon. “What… What IS that thing?”

“I think it’s a spider!” Wander told them, letting the creature - whose body was about the size of the furry guitarist’s head - crawl onto his hand.

“I’m pretty sure spiders don’t have lips. …Or fangs.”

“Aw, that just makes ‘em unique!” Speaking of fangs, the spider-beast took the opportunity to try and bite Wander’s other hand, but he simply moved it out of the way before beginning to pet the creature. “Gooooood boy! Very good boy!”

Curious, Hater walked towards them and extended his own hand. However, when the spider-beast turned to snap at him, Hater’s hand wasn’t nearly quick enough to get away - though it didn’t really matter. A mouth full of sharp fangs biting down felt like just soft nibbling to the skeleton. “Aww, heh. He is sorta cute.”

“Seriously?!” Peepers exclaimed in disbelief, but the couple ignored him.

“Aww, you’re not that scary. Peepers is just being a wimp, isn’t he? Yes he is, yes he iiiis~” “D’awww! Can you hear him purring when ya pet him? That’s so cute! Aw, who knows how long he’s been in there, or how long it’s been since he’s had a proper meal!” “Oh, I’ve got some beef jerky in one of my bags, I bet he’d love that!” “Perfect! Ya hear that, little guy? You’re gonna get a treat! A big ol’ treat for cute lil’ spider!”

“…Call me crazy, but I don’t think we’re going to get rid of that thing any time soon,” Sylvia dryly told the still slightly cowering Watchdog, “I just hope those two can keep it under control.”

“Hmph, forget keeping it under control. I just don’t want it to eat me in my sleep.”

“Maybe if we’re lucky we can convince them to get it a cage to sleep in.”

*hiiiiiss!*

“Aww, I think he likes us!” “Heh, good boy.”

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Even if the sun had set a while ago, it was still fairly early. Demurra and Dracor had went out to eat
and then go see a movie, while Sylvia and Peepers were off doing their own thing, leaving Wander and Hater by themselves. Of course, that didn’t bother either of them.

The lights in the ship were low, with the heat turned up ever so slightly thanks to the beginning autumn weather just starting to appear on the planet. In between casual conversations were comfortable silences - as well as the sound of their pet spider-beast’s (they were still trying to decide between calling him Tim or Fluffy) growls and purrs as he crawled around the ship, occasionally stopping by their feet for petting.

The sense that this would be the last time (for a while) that they would be able to just hang out and privately enjoy each other’s company was acknowledged, but at the same time ignored. After all, they’d see each other again once their tour started. In fact, once it would, they would be seeing each other all the time, so a little time apart before then was probably a good thing. Besides, there was still email, phone calls and video chat.

But even so, neither of them took their remaining time together for granted. Perhaps that was why they were sitting so close to each other - Hater secretly enjoying the warmth of his boyfriend’s fur, and Wander not minding the coolness of Hater’s bones and instead enjoying the faint sound of electricity running through them.

“Hmm… I hope once we get out on the road and start playin’ for people all over the universe again, that we see lots of new places. I mean, I certainly wouldn’t mind revisitin’ places, but there’s still so much to see!”

“Yeah well, it is going to be a trans-galactic tour, so I’m sure you’ll see at least one new place.”

“Heh, yeah, probably.” He squeezed his hand. “It’s gonna be an adventure…”

“Yeah…” Hater glanced down at him. “But you do know it’s gonna be a lot of work too, right?”

Wander chuckled. “Yeah, I know. And don’t worry, I won’t be missin’ any practices just so I can see the sights.”

“Hmph, good.”

“That is, just as long as you make sure to take plenty of breaks and see the sights with me and Syl - when we’re not busy practicing for a concert, of course.”

“Mm.”

The nomad looked up with big, blue eyes. “Proooomise~?”

“Yeah yeah, I promise! Grod!” Wander laughed again, snuggling back into the skeletal rocker’s side.

And speaking of practicing… “Hey, remember what you told me back at that one hotel?”

Wander looked back up at him. “Hm?”

“You know, it was the day after the start of the competition, when Peepers took us to the wrong hotel and we ran into each other?”

“Oh yeah! I remember that! ...Though, admittedly I said a lot of things to ya then, Hater, so I’m not sure which~”

“When you said that our styles could somehow mix together,” Hater told him, a bit of aggravation
slipping into his tone, “Or that if they didn’t, we could figure out how to make them mix, or something like that.”

“Ohhhh.” He remembered now, and it made him smile. “Yeah, that’s what I said, alright. And I still think it.”

“Well, I still think it’s sorta impossible,” Hater said, albeit a bit reluctantly, “I mean, how can banjos and electric guitars even be in the same song together, let alone sound good?!”

“Hey, you never know!” Wander told him, “And besides, if our two styles really can’t mix - Well, then we’ll just make up our own style!”

“Our own…?” “Yeah! Just the two of us! That is, if that’s what you wanna do, Hater.”

The skeleton thought for a few moments. “... I guess we could try it.” Coming up with a brand new style from scratch wouldn’t be too hard, would it? When Hater caught the excited look Wander had on his face now, he knew that no matter how difficult it was, it would still feel somewhat easy thanks to the Star Nomad’s contributions.

“Ooooh, I’m so happy to hear you say that!” Wander told him, his arms now hugging his boyfriend’s shoulders tightly, “This is gonna be so much fun! And I can’t wait to hear how it all sounds in the end! It’ll definitely be worth the wait!”

“‘Worth the wait’?” Hater repeated.

“Well yeah!” Wander told him as he took off his hat, “Comin’ up with an entire new style and songs to go with it is gonna take some time, after all. And we don’t even have to start on it right away. It can just be our own little side project that we can work together on whenever we feel like it.”

Their own project... Their own style. Something that was just their own, just between them, because they wanted it to be just theirs. Because they wanted to make it together. “Yeah…” Hater gave a small nod, a soft smile now on his face, “That sounds good.”

Wander nodded back. “Yeah, I think so too. And in the meantime...” He pulled out a green, electric guitar and plugged it in. Despite playing it at pretty much every venue he performed at, Hater still recognized it as the guitar Wander used during their little ‘duel’ on the asteroid.

“How about we just play together?”

Before Hater could even give an answer, the furry guitarist began strumming a melody. It took a few moments for Hater to recognize it, and once he did, he couldn’t help but give him a look.

“Seriously?”

Wander just smiled and started to sing.

“There are places I remember, All my life though some have changed. Some forever not for better. Some have gone and some remain. All these places have their moments, With lovers and friends I still can recall. Some are dead and some are living, In my life I've loved them all.”

As he strummed a few extra notes, Wander glanced over at his boyfriend with eyes half-lidded, making him blush slightly. “But of all these friends and lovers, There is no one compares with you.”

The skeleton just rolled his eyes, but smiled nonetheless.

By this point, Hater had already grabbed his black guitar. He hung it around his neck, plugged it in, and began playing as well. His notes were a bit heavier and a bit louder than Wander’s. Even his
voice once he started singing overshadowed Wander’s slightly.

“And these memories lose their meaning. When I think of love as something new, Though I know I'll never lose affection - For people and things that went before, I know I'll often stop and think about them. But-” Their eyes met once more, and Wander had to hold back a happy squee while Hater finished the slightly cheesy but still genuine line, honestly not caring if the whole planet heard him. “In my life, I love you more.”

“In my life, I love you more,” Wander repeated. If anyone nearby heard all of this, they would assume that Hater was taking the lead. But there was no lead, really. Neither one wanted to take the lead, so they didn’t. They just continued to play and sing together for as long as they could.

“Though I know I'll never lose affection
For people and things that went before
I know I'll often stop and think about them
In my life I love you more”

Whether they changed the song or switched up the melody and tone right in the middle of one, the two of them never faltered (though they would pause to comment - or even laugh - at each other if the other did something really ridiculous or even forgot the lyrics). They would just keep their focus and energy in the music, and their eyes on each other.

“In my life, I love you more.”

Chapter End Notes

The songs used were "Heaven" by Bryan Adams and "In My Life" by The Beatles.
The picture was drawn by me. Hope you all enjoyed reading ^v^

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