

THE POTHOS PROJECT

HONORS THESIS

Presented to the Honors College of  
Texas State University  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements

for Graduation in the Honors College

by

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San Marcos, Texas  
May 2019

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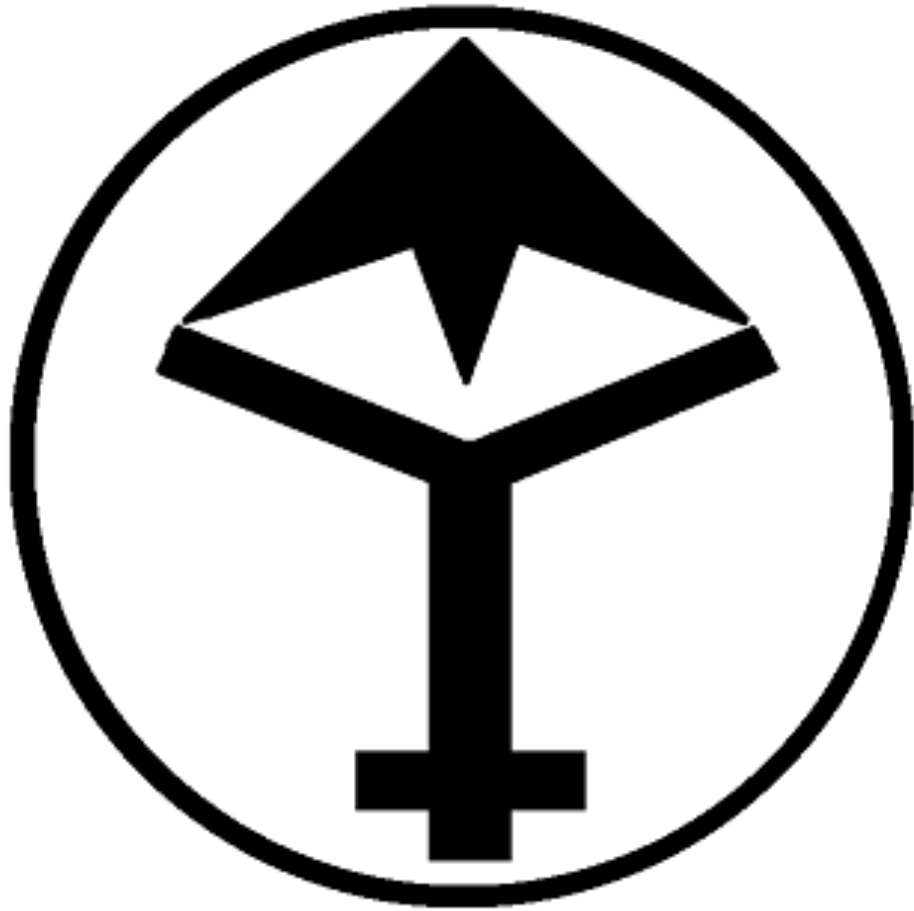
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The Pothos Project

## Chapter I

The low rumbling of a winter storm broke the silence of the frigid night. A small group scrambled across the sand dunes, attempting to reach their ship and get off planet before the storm grounded them. The smallest children were beginning to grow too weary to continue, but there was no time to slow down and rest, those who could not continue on would be swept up by an adult without a step being lost. Long numb fingers scraped across the small, rocky outcropping, atop which lay the ship. Muscles trembling from the exertion, the group slowly managed the climb to the ship. Sharp rocks easily tore through their gloves, leaving scrapes they would not find until they warmed up.

The adults were all carrying children that physically couldn't continue, as it was, the two young adolescents were only barely able to keep pace. Finally, the ship sat a mere thirty meters ahead, and though stumbling and bruising themselves in the rush, they all reached the ship. Tearing off their glove, an adult jabbed at the mechanism to unlock the door before tossing the kid they were holding onto the ship.

The entire group climbed onboard before the ramp had finished descending, and within a minute the engine was starting up. No time was wasted on strapping the five refugees into their seats, if they didn't leave now they would be forced to wait through the storm. The adults not piloting, shoved the children into two bunks built into the ship before crowding them in and holding tight as the ship tore into the air.

Though jolting through turbulence at the edge of the storm, the ship soon broke through the atmosphere and steadied.

Standing from the bunk, the shortest adult, Magnus, unwound the scarf from around his head and tore off his remaining glove, beginning to rub sensation back into his bleeding fingers. "Fuck me!", he hissed, shaking out his hands in before crossing to tear the med kit from the wall.

"Sorry, sweet stuff, you're gonna have to give me at least a shower and a four-hour nap before any fun can happen." Frederick spoke pulling his scarf away from his mouth and attempting to remove the rest of his heavier gear while piloting the ship.

"Fritz, not the time!", Magnus snapped, not bothering to look away from where he was bandaging a scrape along one of the adolescent's arm.

Alan, the youngest of the trio, knelt, rubbing sensation into the refugees' frozen fingers. "Let's just be glad we beat the storm. I don't think we've ever come so close to being stranded before—"

"Like you would know anything. This is what— your fifth mission?" Frederick sneered, fingers tightening on the ship's controls.

Magnus turned to the man, tiredly sighing as he finished wrapping a sprained ankle. "Shut up, Frederick. We wouldn't've cut it so close if you would've listened to me and headed out earlier. We all knew that storm was comin'. Just 'cause you're pissed doesn't mean you can take it out on Alan. If we didn't have him along we would've been stuck in the storm for sure."

"I didn't think the storm would pick up so quickly," he muttered, double checking the ship's coordinates before crossing his arms over his chest in irritation.

Magnus scowled at him. "That's why we plan for the worst."

Reaching out, Alan snagged the small brunet's arm. "C'mon, we all need to focus on the task at hand. We're a day and a half from Pothos, at least. It's not gonna help anyone to argue."

Sighing, Magnus brushed Alan's hand off his arm before turning back to tending what injuries he could. Once finished, he made his way over to the refuse bin. Taking a seat on the ground he stripped off the medical gloves and cleaned away the blood and grit with a disinfectant pad, before bandaging the cuts and scrapes that littered his hands and wrists.

Once cleaned up, Magnus stripped away the rest of his safety gear and tossed it into one of the boxes attached to the wall. Snatching the medkit off the floor, he went to attend to his teammates. Getting a brush-off from Alan, he thumped up to the head of the ship.

"Take your shit off."

Frederick side-eyed him with a smirk. "More forward than usual, guess the rumor that near-death experiences get the naughty bits tingling is true."

Magnus sighed, rubbing tiredly at the bridge of his nose. "I'm not in the mood to play right now, I'm tired and I just want to crawl into my bunk and sleep until we hit Pothos. Can you please, just take your goddamn crap off so I can make sure you're not about to bleed to death?"

Standing from the pilot's chair, Frederick painstakingly began to remove the heavy coat that served to keep the biting winds and sand from scraping his skin raw. Once down to his undersuit he reclaimed his seat. Leaning back he crossed his ankles, offering his second-in-command a look that screamed sheer boredom.

Ignoring the frustration nipping at him, Magnus carefully bandaged the few scratches on Frederick's fingers from the climb. He was preparing to pack away the medkit when his arm bumped against Frederick's and he felt something cool and sticky on the sleeve of the other's uniform. Frowning he grabbed Frederick's wrist and worked the sleeve over his forearm to expose a long wound running up his arm, still slowly oozing blood.

Unzipping the front of Frederick's suit, Magnus helped wiggle it off his torso, freeing his arm to be bandaged. Cleaning the wound, the brunet taped gauze over the injury before firmly wrapping a roll of bandages from his elbow to his wrist. "Get something to eat then go lay down before you kill yourself. I'll watch the controls."

Standing from the seat, Frederick stretched before snagging Magnus' arm as he went to sit down. "Let Alan watch the controls, you need to rest too."

"I'm fine." He stated, pulling his arm free and taking the seat. "Alan's better with the kids anyway."

"The refugees'll be fine. Not to mention the ship'll pilot itself most of the way."

The brunet shook his head, kicking his knees up over the arm of the chair. "Toss me a blanket and an energy pouch wouldja?"

Nodding, Frederick trudged over to one of the storage boxes to pull out a spare blanket and grab an energy pouch from the rations, tossing both to Magnus, before flopping down onto the only empty bunk, leaving Alan to get the refugees settled in.

"We should've taken the PNM," Alan spoke as he was forced to get the three youngest refugees to share a bunk.

"PNM's too big for a mission like this. We only use PNM as a secondary ship and don't take it beneath the atmosphere." Frederick replied threading his fingers behind his head and relaxing as best he could. Not that comfort level ever mattered, once the adrenaline settled he'd fall deep into a post-mission crash and the physical demands would take their toll. It wouldn't be long before he fell asleep to the dull roar of the ship's mechanics.

Once he was finished settling the younger ones in, Alan claimed an empty seat in the rear of the ship and quickly passed out; leaving Magnus to watch the stars and keep an eye on the projected flight path.

Magnus sipped the energy pouch trying to make it last, but before long it was gone. It felt as though hours had passed with him staring at the display or out at the empty space in front of him. Once boredom grew to be too much he opened a channel between the ship and Pothos to report on their condition, at least that was the excuse he used. In all reality, he wanted to check in on his little brother, not content to wait until he reached Pothos.

Even then, that only occupied him for a few minutes before he was again left with nothing to do. The hours felt like an eternity, with the brunet only getting up to rifle through the rations for another energy pouch and something to eat. At some point, without realizing it he fell asleep.

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“Good morning, sweet stuff.”

Groaning Magnus forced his eyes open. Sitting up in the seat he winced, rubbing futilely at the knot in his neck from falling asleep in an awkward position. “Whadaya want, Frederick?”. Standing, he stretched, joints popping pleasantly despite the lingering aches from the previous day.

The other smirked as he watched him stumble over to dig through the rations. “Nothing. Just figured twenty hours was enough for you, I can see now that I was wrong.” He teased.

“Fuck off.” Magnus groaned as he slid back into his seat. Tapping at his wrist comm he pulled up the time; for a few seconds, he stared in disbelief before shaking his head and slouching back. “I’m guessing that means we’re only a few hours out from Pothos?”

“Yeah. It’s lookin’ about four hours from here,” Frederick hummed as he flipped through the ship’s output reports. “We’re doing better than projected.”

“Because the projections are always skewed toward the worst-case. Plan for the worst, hope it doesn’t happen.” Turning in his seat, Magnus looked over the children to ensure they were alright. The two youngest lay napping in a bunk while another had located a book and the last two sat on an empty bunk quietly talking.

At the very back of the ship, strapped into a seat, Alan was sleeping soundly, his arms folded and neck bent at an angle that would surely cause him pain upon waking. Though utterly exhausted both physically and mentally, Magnus couldn't help his amused smirk at the state the adolescent was in. Even with the protection of the heavy on-planet clothing, a thin layer of pale dust covered his flight suit, the ends of his dark dreadlocks nearly white with the fine dust, where they had fallen from beneath his headwrap during their trek.

With a huff of laughter, Magnus settled back in his seat to examine the dust covering his own person. "Fuck, I can't wait to shower off."

"You and me both," Frederick snorted. "I have dust in places where dust shouldn't be. And it all but fucking absorbs into your skin, and itches like fuck!" Hissing, having reminded himself of the discomfort, he tore his nails against the fabric of his undersuit trying desperately to scratch his inner thigh.

Magnus shrugged. "Could be worse, could be Promethean dust. You remember the estival storms? You weren't inside in the next few seconds, it'd bore its way into every bit of skin and leave burns."

"Not like we could never find anything to pass the time while stuck inside," he bantered.

Any further conversation was cut short by Alan chiming in from behind them. "If you guys are gonna flirt at least toss me something I can barf in."

Straightening up in his seat Frederick scowled ahead at the controls. Magnus turned to shoot Alan a half-hearted glare. "What a load of shit, we're not flirting."

"Mhmm, sure."

Rolling his eyes, Magnus turned back around in his seat. "If you're gonna add to the rumors onboard make sure to tell them the last person I caught spreading crap got thrown out an airlock."

"Will do." Alan hummed. "How much further to Pothos?"

"Couple more hours," Frederick icily replied. "We're entering with minimal crew members."



“Just be glad you won’t have to be up for about thirty hours after we land. Make sure you’re ready to go out again within seventy-two hours, watch crew and tech are keeping an eye on Iphis-II. We’re not sure when we’ll have to rush out, watch crew has estimated seventy-two hours. I’d be ready by thirty in case it turns into an emergency. The humans on Iphis-II have started a war with the Istolnes so we may be facing trouble from both sides. We’re taking everyone we have and Cy’s coming back with us. If it weren’t for this war—,” Magnus heavily sighed. “Now we’re gonna have to close down Cy’s safehouse and rely on the offshore one until this ends. So— same shit as always.”

“Contact Pothos and let them know our approximate arrival time,” Frederick spoke, leaning back in his seat. “Take advantage of the time left to try to relax. We’re not leaving again until we know for sure what we’re heading into on Iphis-II.”

Nodding, Magnus pulled up the ship’s comm and sent off the message to the crew handling the port. Settling back, he crossed his arms over his chest, content to stare out the windshield until they reached the station.

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Finally, Pothos came into view. Sitting up, Magnus strapped in, pulling up the ship’s comm to contact the station again. “Alan, get ‘em buckled in,” he called over his shoulder before opening a channel between the ship and Pothos. “Pothos, come in Pothos. This is the Rivera shuttle. Come in Pothos.”

Within an instant, he got a reply. “Rivera, this is Pothos. You’re all set, we’re opening the bay doors now.”

“Thank you, Pothos. See you in a few.” The brunet replied.

“See you in a few, guarddog.”

Taking a calming breath, Magnus stared ahead at the green energy field around the space station that would serve to slow the ship down enough to safely land.

Switching over to manual control of the ship, Frederick gripped the controls tightly and turned on the wing stabilizers just before the ship hit the field and began to slow. The shuttle shook for a moment before settling to smoothly slide into the hangar. After a few minutes of following an engineers’ guidance, the ship was seated in one of the preparation slots so it could be made ready for the next trip.

Unbuckling his safety belt, Magnus stood from the seat and quickly stretched. “Alan, get ‘em down to Cheya, she’s probably in the clinic. If not check the kitchen, think the shifts just rotated and she typically grabs something to drink before she takes over. Rest of your time is your own until we leave for Iphis-II.”

Nodding, Alan helped the youngest refugees unfasten their belts before following after Magnus as he opened the ship’s doors and stepped out into the hangar. Just outside of the ship, they were greeted by one of the younger engineers. “Welcome home, Cerberus.”

Magnus made a beeline for them, rubbing his temple. “Elie, what are you doing up? Where’s Saph? She’s supposed to be enforcing the shifts here.”

The kid shrugged. “She said I could continue working since we need everyone to prepare for Iphis-II. Eli’s down in the lab with Ian.”

“I wish I could argue that with you. Alright, when this shift ends go get your twin. Make sure Ian goes to bed too. We can’t have anyone burning out.” The brunet stated. “If you see Saph send her our way, okay?”

“Will do,” Elie hummed as they slipped past Magnus to join their peers in working on the ship.

Tiredly, Magnus trudged over to where Frederick was waiting for him before the duo left the hangar and made their way down the hallway that led to their respective rooms. Rather than falling into bed as they both would’ve liked to do, they walked past the rooms and entered the communal bathroom.

Alan had already claimed his usual shower stall, as apparent by the gust of steam which greeted the weary duo. Sitting down on the bench, Magnus unfastened his boots before stripping off his flight suit and undergarments. Gathering the boots and clothing, he crossed the room to toss it down the chute to be cleaned before the next mission.

Upon stepping beneath the hot water pouring from the shower, aches he wasn’t aware he had eased. After several minutes of standing beneath the spray, the brunet began to scrub the dust and grime from several days travel from his skin. The water swirling down the drain ran pale grey as he scrubbed his fingers through his short hair, loosing Haljan dust that had collected in the oily strands.

By the time Magnus had worked up the courage to step out of the shower, the only thought he had was for some fresh clothes and then his bed. And upon the sight of his

red-headed teammate, he only felt his exhaustion grow. Crossing over to her, Magnus snagged his towel off the bench. “Nice of you to make an appearance, Saph. I thought for certain I was going to manage to go a night without you bothering me,” he stated, quickly towel-drying his hair before wrapping the towel around himself and walking over to pull a pair of worn pajamas from his locker.

“I didn’t burn the station down—”

“A miracle in and of itself,” he harmlessly jabbed as he dressed, giving Frederick a nod of acknowledgment as the other signaled he was heading out. “Saph, please get to the point. I’m tired and want to go to bed.”

“I wanna have more to handle on Pothos. I think I’ve proved myself enough,” she stated, crossing her arms over her chest.

“There’s nothing to prove. If you want more all you have to do is ask. Track me down later and we’ll work out the specifics. For now, they need help in the hangar, and I’m going to bed.” he hummed, tossing his towel over a hook to dry and excusing himself with a flap of his wrist.

Trudging down the hallway, he entered his small quarters, darkness encompassing him as the door slid shut. Muscle memory kicked in and led him safely to his bed. A soft breathing alerted him that his little brother had chosen not to stay in his own bed, and Magnus didn’t care to try to move him, instead slipping beneath the blankets and scooting over to cuddle the boy to his chest.

The quiet whoosh of the adjoining door opening and shutting was comfortingly familiar, the warm weight that slid in behind him was even more so. Settling down against him, Frederick gently set his chin atop the still damp mess of hair, resting an arm around the other’s waist.

There was no point in talking, they were both too tired, and it seemed that as soon as they both stilled they passed out.

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Magnus woke to a warm puff of breath on his face. Forcing his eyes open, he blearily blinked up at where Mickie sat on his stomach, grinning down at him and lightly shaking his shoulders. Groaning, the elder brunet rubbed his eyes. “‘S it?”

“I’m hungry.” the seven-year-old spoke, the mop of dark curls bouncing in his excitement.

Nodding, Magnus patted the boy’s knee. “Go get dressed, give me a few minutes and I’ll take you to breakfast,” he promised, fighting the urge to roll over and go back to sleep.

With a nod, the seven-year-old scurried off the bed and into his own room, leaving the two adults alone. Sitting up, Magnus stretched, popping the joints in his shoulders before checking the time on his wrist comm. Blaring tauntingly up, the blue numbers told how he could have slept for at least a half hour more.

Sighing, he turned over to wake Frederick before slipping out of bed and quickly dressing. Unfortunately, there wouldn’t be much time for sleeping soon, at least not until after the run to Iphis-II. Clipping his keys to his belt, he turned back to the bed where Frederick still lay asleep.

Stepping back over to the bed, he shook the man harder, “Get up. We’re going to breakfast.” Frederick grumbled, but pulled himself from the bed and disappeared back into his own room.

Once Mickie was ready, Magnus grabbed his comm pad and took the boy’s hand before heading out the door to find Frederick leaning against the wall, waiting for them both as expected. “What’s on your agenda today?” he asked as he stood from his spot against the wall to follow them to the station’s meal hall.

“As always, more than what’s scheduled.” Magnus muttered before continuing on. “Outside of heading down to check up on watch crew and shuttle prep, I’ve got to make sure the kids have settled in for the time being and get on preparation for a shuttle to take them down to Caladrius, have to run through kitchen crew and Cheya to get a list ready for the next Caladrian supply transport, and I’ve gotta call in and check on the current transport. They’re due in three days and I’d rather not have to leave someone else to handle it, if we end up out at Iphis II when it comes in I’ll let Cheya handle it. You’ve got Cy, right?”

Frederick nodded as the trio entered the meal hall and took a place in the quickly moving line. “I’ll get to it after shuttle prep. Any word yet on who’s heading down to Caladrius?”

Shaking his head, Magnus helped his younger brother with his bowl of fruit and grain before taking one himself. “If we head out to Iphis II within twenty hours there’s no point. Best to get it all done with one transport. I’ll check in once Iphis II is over and the

new kids are settled in. Besides, these last kids just got off a shuttle, give ‘em a few days to rest, this is gonna be a big adjustment for them.”

“I’m sure it’s one they’d welcome. Leaving a hell planet for a paradise, I mean come on, I don’t know why anyone stays here,” Frederick replied, accepting the bowl he was offered.

“You’re still here,” Magnus hummed as he slid into an empty table near the back of the room.

“You’ve got me there,” the latter admitted, “—but someone’s gotta keep running back to those shitholes to help these brats. And given the average age here is twelve—”

“It’s seventeen. Twenty if you include everyone running the safe-houses.” Magnus didn’t bother looking up from his food, though raised brows indicated he was listening. “And you were seventeen when Pothos was restarted, I was fourteen. Neither of us had any idea what we were doing and we managed.”

“We’re different. We grew up on Prometheus. Some of these kids joined up from Caladrius—”

Before the brunet could reply Saph appeared from out of nowhere and plopped down beside Frederick, grinning widely as she dug into her breakfast. “So what’s the plan for today?”

Magnus smirked at the redhead’s enthusiasm. “Something tells me you’re more interested in Cy than any task I can give you.”

The girl shrugged her shoulders, suddenly becoming more interested in the meager breakfast before her. Magnus didn’t make her wait as he pushed his empty bowl aside and skimmed through his comm pad setting aside tasks to pass on to Saph. “Right now all focus needs to be on preparing for Iphis-II. Since your responsibilities already keep you around the garage most of the time you can check on the shuttle’s preparations. I’ll also let you take over with the new kids. Just check in on ‘em. Help ‘em find their way around, you know what to do. Once Iphis-II is done you can see who wants to stay and who wants to head to Caladrius and set up the preparations for that. Outside of that and Mickie, that’s all I really have for you.”

The seven-year-old whined, upset. “I don’t wanna go with Saph, I wanna go with you! Please!”

Magnus looked down at the boy for a moment before shrugging. “Alright, it’s gonna be boring though. You’d probably have more fun if you went with Saph to see the kids.”

Dark curls flopped as the young boy vehemently shook his head. “I wanna go with you.”

Sighing, the elder stood and stretched, nodding as he popped his back. “Alright, alright, you can come with me. Here, take our bowls to the kitchen, I need a minute longer to finish grown-up stuff, okay?” Magnus hummed, helping Mickie slip out from the bench and handing him the bowls.

Once Mickie had run off, he grabbed his comm pad and gave a nod to Frederick and Saph before following after his younger brother.

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It had been quiet in the infirmary so far. Since the start of her shift, only a few kids had trickled in for their medication and once gone she had been left to her own devices. The only sound in the room was the clacking of her colored nails as she turned her gaze from the doorway to the cup of pills sitting inches in front of her.

Leaning back in her chair, Cheya once again debated just tracking the boy down, knowing if given the chance he wouldn’t come. Her choice was made for her as her dreaded rival finally stepped into the infirmary.

Smiling, she stood from her seat and slipped out from behind her makeshift desk. “I was getting ready to come find you.”

“That is half your job,” Magnus hummed, shifting Mickie to sit higher on his hip. “Sorry, would’ve come sooner, but I didn’t really want to.”

“Mhmm,” she hummed knowingly, “I know this ship, you can’t hide from me. I’d find you.”

“Thus why I’m here,” he teased, walking over to one of the exam tables and taking a seat before setting Mickie next to him. “Thought I’d save you some trouble.”

“How considerate of you.” she flicked her wrist as she walked over to one of the cabinets and taking down two syringes and bottles. “I know why you’re here.”

“And why’s that?”

“Stupidity,” she retorted as she slipped over beside him. “You’re the only twenty-two year-old I know with joints like a geriatric parasite.”

“S not my fault,” he muttered under his breath as he slipped off his shirt.

“It is your fault. I told you not to carry anything heavy. Mickie counts as something heavy— Hold still.” Cleaning the back of the brunet’s shoulder with an antiseptic pad, she filled a syringe. Bracing a hand on his other shoulder, she slipped the syringe through the tight muscle and into the joint of his shoulder. As always, he flinched but kept quiet outside of an unhappy sigh.

Choosing to ignore it, Cheya filled the second syringe and switched to his opposite shoulder to repeat the injection. Closing his eyes, the brunet looked away, keeping still as the needle entered his flesh.

Setting the empty syringe aside, Cheya gripped his forearm and helped maneuver him onto his side so his blood pressure could stabilize, before standing to clear away the used antiseptic pads and syringes. Best to give the boy a couple minutes to settle after the shots so he wouldn’t end up on his ass. And by the time she was done, the stubborn kid was pulling on his shirt and standing from the table.

“Pills are on the desk,” she called over her shoulder as she cleaned her hands before turning to find Magnus leaning against the edge of her desk, having commandeered the rest of her drink to take his medication.

“Be glad I’m not sick. Last thing you need is to get sick before heading for one of the Iphises. World made of water, terrible place to get sick,” Cheya shook her head before leveling a bright pink fingernail at him. “And don’t lift anything, you need to rest. And I know you’re gonna just walk out that door and not listen to me, but I’m not kiddin’. You need to give your body time to heal. Better listen to me, boy, or you’ll wake up halfway to Caladrius,” By this time she had walked close enough to use her height against him.

Needless to say, it didn’t work. Though she towered above him, Magnus had never particularly cared, intimidation wasn’t suited to her anyway, and she didn’t need the smartass look angled up at her to remind her of this. Instead, she turned to the little one.

Crouching down, she lovingly ruffled Mickie’s messy curls. “You gotta promise me you’re not gonna let your brother pick you up, okay?”

The seven year old nodded. “I won’t,” he promised, lips turning down in a solemn frown, though it came off more pouting than serious.

Returning back to her full height, Cheya turned her attention back to the elder. “Did I hear correctly, that you’re headed for Iphis II?”

Magnus nodded, crossing his arms over his chest. “Should be heading out within the next day or so. Humankind is at it again. I don’t understand why the Istolne put up with them.”

“That’s ‘cause you’re human, hon. None of us are hard-wired for peace like they are.” Cheya shrugged, “If we were we wouldn’t’ve ended up in this mess— messes,” she amended after a second of thought.

“But what about the Pyt’ords, they’re pretty fucking angry, yet nowhere in the library, nowhere can I find even a mention of them fighting. There are centuries, a millennium of documented peace on just about every species on every settled planet—”

“You do recall that those books and logs are over two-hundred years out of date, right? A lot can change in two-hundred years,” Cheya reminded him.

“But even two-hundred years ago the Pyt’ords were furious. Still, nothing, not anywhere.”

The woman shrugged. “You would know better than I would. You grew up Prometheus, you probably saw more of their scales than I ever will.”

Magnus snapped his fingers, hand wagging as he pointed to her. “That’s right. You’re from uhhm—”

Raising an eyebrow at him, Cheya crossed her arms over her chest, shifting her weight to one side. “Dionysus,” she filled in. “Remind me, how long again have you known me?”

“Five years,” he sighed, rolling his eyes. “You’ll have to excuse me, not all of us get to sit around and gossip.”

Slapping a hand over her heart in mock-hurt she glared down at him. “Oomph, that stings.”



“It’s true. I hear what goes on around here. Remember, ears everywhere,” Magnus hummed, amused, as he took Mickie’s hand. “And I hate to cut this short, honestly do, but if we want to continue to eat I have some work to do.”

Nodding, Cheya seated herself in her chair. “I’ll send you my list.”

“I’ll see you in a couple days,” he replied with a bastardized two-fingered salute he’d most likely pulled from one of the library’s books, as he tromped out of the infirmary.

“Come back in one piece or I’m not fixin’ you!” she shouted as an afterthought before leaning back in her seat and propping her feet up on her desk. Sighing softly to herself, she opened up her comm and began typing, might as well make a list of the medical supplies she needed while it was on her mind.

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Tiredly, Frederick trudged down the hallway in the direction of his room, the station was silent around him and the lights lining the top and bottom of the walls were dimmed in an attempt to simulate day and night aboard the station. Apparently, it worked as he hadn’t encountered more than a handful of crew members roaming the ship in the last few hours. Not that it really mattered, the only ones ever awake at this time were either juiced out SciTech and garage crew or the odd nocturnal wanderer.

Pothos never slept, and given the different planets everyone came from, it wasn’t surprising. Even after spending years on Pothos, Frederick wasn’t entirely adjusted to its daily cycles. Right now, on Prometheus, it was a couple hours out from the first sun rising over the horizon, and his body had no issue reminding him of that as he was forced to stop, momentarily confused as he realized he had passed his door. Instead, he found himself standing in the entrance to the station’s library, another area of the ship that was never deserted. Even at what felt to him as a late hour, the lights were up in the library, granted only two of the three people occupying the room were conscious.

Stepping past the unconscious, grease-stained kid covered in data logs and the SciTech boy leafing through a worn science book and occasionally muttering to the station’s alien pet, he slipped to the back of the room. Tucked into an old chair behind the furthest bookcase he found his second-in-command surrounded by books and datalogs, leafing through a book, unaware of his presence. “Shouldn’t you be in bed?”

Though he didn’t show it, Frederick knew he had startled Magnus, having spotted the slight muscle jump in the back of his neck. Regardless, the brunet didn’t look up from the

book he was skimming. “I was always more nocturnal than you were,” he hummed, flipping a page, “And I don’t recall ever actually listening when you wanted something.”

“Fair enough. I’m going to bed, —but it’ll be awfully cold,” he hummed teasingly, hoping to amuse the brunet into following him.

Magnus smirked as he set the book aside and pulled another text from the floor. “I like the cold. And besides, you won’t be cold, Mickie’s already got the bed nice and toasty. Hope you like getting kicked and drooled on.”

“Sounds like paradise,” he muttered under his breath before giving in and taking a seat near the pile of datalogs. “What are you looking for anyway?”

“Iphis II. Istolne. Whatever I can find that might be relevant.”

“I doubt anything there will be relevant,” Frederick sighed, though snatching a datalog off the pile and flipping through it.

“Rather know it and not need it than need it and not know it. Besides, I thought you were tired.” Setting the book in his lap, he looked over to Frederick. “I’m almost done. Might as well grab what sleep you can.”

Frederick responded, barely skimming the text. “You’ll stay here all night if I don’t wear you down and drag you with me.”

“My memory’s bad but it’s not that bad. You could never wear me down.” Chuckling, the brunet set down the book he had been reading and quickly inventoried the materials spread around the chair. “I think this is all I’m gonna get.” Grasping Frederick’s wrist, he turned it to check the title of the log he had grabbed. “Yeah, I don’t think a two-hundred year old account of the Istolne’s economic system will be helpful. Help me shelve everything and you can go to bed.”

Ignoring the last jab, Frederick nodded and stood, grabbing as many datalogs as he could before locating the shelf dedicated solely to Iphis II and its native inhabitants and shelving the logs in no particular order. It seemed that stress and exhaustion had taken its toll on Magnus as well, the kid ensuring the books were in the correct section, but not organizing them any further. Chances were he’d organize the section after the Iphis II mission if someone else hadn’t done so already, but for the moment it’d be fine, and really, Frederick wasn’t complaining if it meant less time wasted getting to bed.

Upon exiting the library, for the first time ever, Frederick appreciated his second-in-command's stubbornness in keeping his room a minute's walk away. While it often meant he could wake up to find Magnus had disappeared, it also meant that it was easier to drag him back to bed. Even with such a short distance, as it was, Frederick was certain he was asleep before he stepped through the door to the room; he was, however, awake enough to enjoy the contrast between the cool sheets and the warm body curled against him for a moment, before he completely passed out.

## Chapter II

Frederick's eyes snapped open as the blaring alarm sounded from his comm device. Well-conditioned from years of the same rude-awakening, he pulled himself away from the comfort of the warm bed. Snagging his comm from where it sat atop an overcrowded side table, he strapped it to his wrist before turning his attention to his lump of a bed-mate, completely cocooned in the blankets as his own comm blared.

Snatching the other comm from its resting place, he turned it off before tearing the covers away. The kid hissed in irritation, glaring at him as he tried to curl in on himself. Having expected the early call, both had slept in their normal clothes to save some time. Frederick was expecting a scuffle to drag his second-in-command up but was saved the trouble as a tired voice spoke from behind him.

“Magnus?” Shuffling out from the small, attached room, Mickie trudged over to his brother's side, tiredly rubbing his dark green eyes. “You're not leaving again are you?”

At the sound of the little one's voice, Magnus swung his legs over the edge of the bed, lifting Mickie into his arms when he drew close enough. Tucking the mop of ash-brown curls beneath his chin, the elder brunet held him close, gently rubbing along his spine. “I am. But this will be a quick trip. I'll be back by the time you're going to bed. And then I'll be able to stay here a bit longer.”

“You always say that,” Mickie sadly muttered, tangling his fingers in his brother's shirt.

Magnus sighed, lips pressed into a tight frown. “I know.” Standing up, he expectantly wiggled his fingers in a grabbing motion until Frederick handed him his own comm. Flicking through it with one hand, he skimmed over the transport schedule.

Setting the device in Mickie's lap, he shifted to support him with both arms. “It looks like after this trip I'll have to go to Caladrius—” At the little one's whine, he gently shushed him. “How about you come with me, hmm? It's a bit of a ride but we could spend some time exploring when I'm done speaking with Tiffikh. You can play in the water. Who knows, maybe you'll get to see some more ceophin,” he spoke, referring to the brightly colored Caladrian fish Mickie liked.

“Promise?” Mickie asked, tiredly laying his head on Magnus' shoulder.

“I promise. But right now I have to go, okay?” the elder spoke as he gently set Mickie down in the recently vacated bed, tucking him in. Once he got Mickie's muttered

assurance, he leaned down and pressed a kiss to his forehead. "It's still early. Sleep a bit longer. If you need anything go to Cheya." Lifting the stuffed ceophin toy from where Mickie had dropped it, he handed it to him, hugging him tightly once more. "I'll be back soon."

Casting one more look to the young boy over his shoulder, Magnus exited the room before he and Frederick turned on their heels and had to run down to the garage, having spent more time than either of them liked getting Mickie settled back down.

It only took them a couple minutes to get down into the hangar where the last preparations were being taken care of before the shuttle could leave. Climbing aboard, the duo found Saph and Alan already in their flight gear, securing the first-aid and ration bins.

"See, I told you they'd only show up once we finished strapping everything down," Saph spoke, gesturing to them animatedly. "And they don't even have their flight suits on."

"Saph, we all know you slept on the ship. There's no point in trying to cover that up," Magnus shot back as he slipped past her and took a seat in the navigator's chair, popping in an earpiece. "I had to get Mickie back to bed. The alarm woke him up."

Shutting the ship's door, Alan slipped into a seat behind them buckling up. "How's the kid doing?"

Magnus sighed as he plugged in the ship's course to Iphis-II. "He's not happy. It's been an eternity since he's had me for more than three days at a time. I'm gonna take him down to Caladrius with me when we get back, I might as well make a longer trip of it. Pothos is great and all but the kid needs to be able to run around and get dirty. He's the youngest one on the ship. And he likes Caladrius, it lets him see another culture for himself instead of looking through the forbidden texts. And let's face it, Pothos isn't exactly the most diverse place." After a second he continued. "But Caladrius has a good mix of native peoples, humankind, and other planetary settlers. Plus they love Mickie there. Anytime I'm in contact with them they want me to bring Mickie down." Sighing, Magnus settled back in his seat. "Is everyone strapped in?" he asked, diverting the conversation in favor of readying for take-off. Beside him, Frederick had already tied back his long black hair and begun flipping switches and setting the ship's stabilizers to a low burn, turning them one-hundred eighty degrees from their starting position. "Pothos, this is the Rivera shuttle, has everyone evacuated the garage?"

Within a second, his earpiece crackled to life. “Rivera, this is Pothos, all personnel have evacuated the hangar and all doors are sealed. You’re lookin good, Rivera. Take off at your count.”

“Take off in five, Pothos,” Magnus replied as Frederick grasped the ship’s controls.

“Noted, Rivera. The hangar doors are open.”

“See you on the other side.”

“On the other side, guarddog.”

Shutting the comm channel the brunet flashed Frederick a thumbs up before settling back in his seat and tightening his belt further as the man easily turned the ship forwards and maneuvered it out of the hangar. Once they were out of the energy field, the primary rockets kicked in and the ship quickly gained speed.

Unbuckling his seatbelt once the ship’s speed leveled out, Magnus trudged over to the gearbox and grabbed his flight suit to quickly change. Frederick followed his lead after turning on the ship’s autopilot and handing off the controls to Saph.

After pulling on his flight suit, Magnus grabbed for his boots, failing to suppress a yawn. Subconsciously, his hand shot up to cover his mouth and he stood for a moment working through several gasps for air before managing to sate the urge. he briefly stretched before walking over to sit on one of the bunks to pull on his boots.

“You should get some rest before we reach Iphis-II, we’ve got some time.” It took effort on Frederick’s part not to scowl at the half-sneer the brunet shot him.

“I’m fine” he hissed, crossing his arms over his chest before defiantly standing and returning to the navigator’s chair to glare at the instruments before him.

Frederick stared at him for a moment before deciding it was better to wait until after the mission to have an argument. Shaking his head, he stalked to the back of the ship to take one of the rear seats, feeling it was best to give his second-in-command a bit of room to cool down. Crossing his arms and slouching back, he stared at the wall across from him relaxing to the dull roar of the rockets.

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There were many, many unpleasant ways Frederick had been awoken. In his own opinion, he considered a sharp nail pressing into his forehead very high up there on the list.

Forcing his eyelids open, he found the same intense, hazel eyes boring into his own, a mere hairsbreadth away. He watched for a moment as the pupils quickly dilated and constricted before settling as the kid above him stepped away with a brief 'we're here'.

Unbuckling from his seat he stood and accepted the rifle Alan held out to him. "Get'chur goggles on. It's a rough one." He warned before turning back to the door. Frederick quickly adjusted the goggles over his head and raised the hood on his flight suit as the ship's doors were opened and the group was lashed by the heavy winds and rain. He shot one last glance to Magnus before following Alan out to ensure the path to the ship was secure.

Outside the protection of the ship, the storm nearly knocked the two off their feet before they managed to dig their boots into the rocky soil and fight to a far enough distance as to see both the ship and safehouse. The comm crackled to life in his ear as Frederick saw Alan raise a hand to indicate his portion of the path was secure. Though he could barely make out what was said over the detonation of thunder, he answered with an all-clear before shouting the confirmation into his comm.

Within a second, Saph emerged from the ship. Fighting her way up, she managed to quickly reach the safehouse before disappearing from Frederick's view. A couple minutes passed before Saph reappeared, her black flight suit contrasting heavily against the brightly colored coats worn by the three refugees and Cy.

The group moved slowly down the path, connected at the waist by a thick cord to keep anyone from slipping into the crashing water that surrounded the small islet. The group was halfway between him and Alan when it occurred. A streak of lightning shrieked down near them, blinding all for a split second before he heard Cy shouting. He turned to run toward them, before having to stop as he was again blinded by lightning.

Gritting his teeth, he waited until he could make out the group's fuzzy forms before he raced towards them. The comms were utterly useless in the deafening storm, but he knew the first priority was getting everyone on the ship.

Though it was pointless, he shouted, gesturing for Alan to get them the rest of the way onto the ship. Cy was still desperately trying to get his attention, waving something in her hand and pointing out toward the beach below them.

It took a long moment before his brain caught up and he desperately recounted, praying to whatever force was out there that he was wrong. He wasn't. Another count confirmed only four people. Someone was missing. Shit.

Shit. There was no point to looking around the area but Frederick did anyway, but the missing refugee wasn't there. He waved for Alan to close the ship, already pounding down toward the beach, squinting as the flashes of lightning would blur the barrier between dark rock and dark ocean.

One misstep found him dazedly staring up at the storm above him, futilely attempting to fill his lungs. Salty air stung his throat as he managed to shake away the spots dancing in his vision. A rough grip on his arm tore him to his feet before a painfully bright weight was thrown into his chest and he was shoved up the steep incline toward the ship.

Peering back, he caught sight of his second-in-command, completely drenched in seawater, shouting at him. His voice was swallowed up by the storm as he roughly shoved him further up the slick rocks. Gritting his teeth, Frederick turned his attention back as another set of arms worked to help him up.

Once he was up, Alan grabbed the kid from his arms and handed him off to Cy, who carried him onto the shuttle. Reaching past him, Alan grabbed Magnus' wrist and hauled him the rest of the way up. Frederick stared for a split second, still in shock from his fall, before his second-in-command grabbed him roughly and began kicking up gravel as they ran for the ship.

He couldn't remember if he had run or not, only coming back to awareness again as he was strapped into a seat, the sound of the storm muting as the door shut. The roar of the ship's engines beside him registered somewhere in the back of his mind as his eyes followed Magnus. The kid had assumed control, the tips of his incisors appearing as he barked orders, stalking the length of the ship to briefly strap into the navigator's seat as they took off.

The second the ship left the planet's atmosphere, Magnus opened the comm. Losing no vigor he unstrapped to pace the ship eyeing the refugees. "Pothos this is Cerberus, respond immediately. I need a respiratory unit on an intercepting path right now. Put Cheya and two med crew on a runner. All med crew needs to be on call, we're coming in with multiple minor injuries, possible concussion, get xenbi up too. One on the runner, rest on call. No foreknowledge of any refugee parentage, repeat no known parentage. We



need the highest level antibiotics and antiseptics on Pothos, possible blood contamination. Get it here within the hour.”

“Affirmative.” The line cut off as Magnus grabbed the medkit off the wall, passing it to Cy to bandage up the refugees. A quick glance over one of the refugees had him stalking over to pull an extra blanket out of the gearbox to wrap around the young boy before he dropped to his knees and tore off his gloves to rub sensation into the child’s frigid hands. “Alan—,” Magnus barked, not turning from the boy in front of him, “Get the heater pouches now, pump him full of fluids. IV if his color doesn’t change in the next five minutes. Twenty gauge. Wide open. He’ll probably start coughing soon, expect blood.”

Once Alan was attending to the young boy, Magnus was on his feet snagging a bottle of antiseptic, a roll of bandages, and tweezers from the med kit before retreating to the back of the ship. Sitting with his back turned to the rest of the ship, he situated himself beneath one of the lights before gingerly peeling the flight suit off his right arm.

Gritting his teeth, he splashed the antiseptic over the wound before going after the larger pieces of sand and rock with the tweezers, hissing curses all the while. A few minutes in and he threw the tweezers aside, again attempting to rinse the wound with antiseptic before wrapping it tightly with the bandages.

By this time, the floor of the ship was covered in muddy footprints and saltwater, Magnus’ trail marked by a slowly browning mixture of blood and black ooze that had dripped down his arm. Standing slowly, he kicked aside what remained of the roll of bandages and the antiseptic, staring down at the mess in distaste.

Passing Frederick’s blurry line of sight, he collapsed into a chair beside him, not bothering to strap in as he tapped at his comm to get the estimated time for the runner to reach the ship. From the hissed curses he heard, Frederick imagined it wasn’t as fast as he had wanted.

Now out of immediate danger, the ship had fallen silent aside from the hum of the engines, which was quickly lulling him into unconsciousness. Not that he was allowed to get that far; anytime he began to drift, Magnus would rap his knuckles against his cheek and urge him back awake.

“You can’t sleep now. Not until Cheya or one of the med crew checks you out. We don’t know how hard you hit your head yet, can’t take the chance that you shook something loose and it starts dripping out your ears. Ship’s already a mess as it is. I’m sure garage crew would rather not clean up brain matter.”

“Wouldn’t be the first time,” Frederick snorted.

“It should be the last,” he retorted, before the ship’s comm crackled to life signaling the arrival of the runner.

Standing from his seat, Magnus opened the comm and began coordinating docking the runner as he manually went about readying the emergency port. After years of experience working together, the process passed quietly and within minutes Cheya was ducking through the port, heels clacking off the floor of the ship as she made a beeline for the small boy who was slowly regaining his color, now hooked up to fluids.

Lifting the boy into her arms, blankets and all, she crossed over to where the two accompanying med crew had pulled out a gurney. Once he was settled on the gurney, she quickly ensured his vitals were stable before ducking back into the runner, leaving the xenbi nurse to quickly begin running through languages to pin down any alien ancestry the boy might have.

Frederick watched the two med crew hovering over the gurney, only pulling his attention away when Magnus flopped down into the seat beside him. Cheya followed him closely, in mid-lecture on the dangers of acting impulsively as she tied her multi-colored hair back before assessing the damage to his arm.

“—next time watch what’s going on around you and you won’t end up in this situation again,” she scolded, holding his arm still as he tried to flinch away from the antibiotic shot.

“You’ll have to excuse me, my night vision, unfortunately, doesn’t function well underwater,” he snapped back. “Hell, I didn’t even get a good look at the damn thing.”

Cheya glowered down at the kid. “I don’t think you could’ve picked a fight with a dirtier creature. Honestly, it’ll be a miracle if you don’t get an infection.”

“I guess I’ll just let the kid drown next time,” the brunet dryly bit back, though both knew it was just to be facetious.

“Don’t put words in my mouth. I said don’t pick a fight with an Istolne, not don’t help a kid. Damn thing’s three times your size anyway,” she muttered the last comment under her breath, beginning to scrape the debris from the wound, much to his displeasure.

Lip turning up in disgust, the brunet looked away, staring defiantly at the wall beside him as though it would distract him from Cheya digging around in his arm. “Doesn’t count if it’s mostly tail,” he muttered, shuddering as she pulled on his skin.

“Stay still.”

Though clearly displeased, Magnus kept quiet and kept pointedly looking away until the dark-skinned woman had finished and wrapped the wound.

“Get your shit together, you’re coming back on the runner with me,” she warned, before turning her attention to Frederick. Holding his head still she peered into his blue eyes, “Follow my finger.”

“Take Frederick back with you. He hit the ground pretty hard, I don’t think he’s in any condition to keep control of the Rivera,” Magnus replied, leaning back against the wall to watch in boredom.

“Fritz isn’t at risk of blood poisoning—”

“Cheya, it’s a fucking scratch!” he snapped, eyes narrowing in irritation.

Done checking over Frederick, the woman turned to him, standing to her full height. “Sit your ass down before I put you down myself. I had to tape your flesh closed. You were on the verge of needing stitches, it was not just a fucking scratch. And even if it was you still got scratched by one of the filthiest creatures—”

“Can you stop calling them creatures.”

Cheya sent the kid a warning look as she crossed her arms over her chest. “Fine, species. My point remains; fuck knows what those beasts have under their claws. Frederick’ll be fine. You, on the other hand, will not if you don’t get your ass on that runner and stop arguing with me.”

Magnus glared her down for another long moment before making a show of rolling his eyes and following the gurney onto the runner. Squeezing past, he took a seat on the far bench to give med crew enough room to move freely around the kid.

Cheya turned her attention back to Frederick. “You’re lookin’ a bit pale, but you’re fine. Take a painkiller and get some fluids in you. I’m sure your head hurts, so take a nap on the way back if you can.”

“Thanks. Good luck,” he muttered, tipping his head back to rest it against the wall behind him. “You’ll need it.”

“Don’t I know it,” she chuckled. “If it comes down to it I can always just pick his ass up. He’s not as big as he thinks he is.”

“He’s a lot denser than he looks, trust me.”

“I’ve had him try to pass out on me, I know he’s dense. I’ll train it out of him,” Cheya hummed, heading back for the runner. “Don’t worry about him, I’ve got him. Just get the ship back to base in one piece, cap’n,” she teased, before ducking back into the runner with a quick wave to the other occupants of the ship.

Given the all clear, Frederick stood from his seat and sealed the emergency port between the runner and the ship before walking to the front to reclaim his spot as pilot. Saph was more than happy to hand it over to him in favor of strapping in beside her blonde girlfriend.

Frederick ignored the dark brown eyes watching him from the navigator’s seat. After a moment passed without being acknowledged, Alan leaned over and set a hand on his arm, skin a dark contrast to Frederick’s own. “I can take over if your head’s still hurting.” He offered, flashing a sympathetic smile.

“Nah, I’ve got it,” Frederick replied, watching as the runner swung around him before disappearing as it shot ahead. “My headache’s gone now.”

“Hope that’s not your pet name for Magnus,” Cy called to the front with a grin, shamelessly eavesdropping on the conversation.

Saph snorted. “If that was his nickname for Magnus, he’d be well acquainted with the outer door of the airlock by now.”

“C’mon now guys—”, Alan broke in, stern facade cracking a moment later. “We all know if Magnus didn’t tolerate him, Fritz would’ve never gotten off Prometheus.”

“Shouldn’t you be navigating or something?” Frederick muttered, watching the path ahead of the ship. They wouldn’t crash into anything; there weren’t any shuttles near them and they weren’t crossing any comet’s paths, but it was always best to at least pretend to be vigilant in ensuring there wouldn’t be any collisions.

Usually even the slightest reminder would have them turning back to their respective tasks, but, unfortunately for Frederick, the rest of Cerberus were just beginning to calm after the sense of emergency from the mission. Convincing them to focus would be near impossible while they were still riding the adrenaline high, he was better off just sitting back and letting them work out their energy; not to mention he found their idle chatter calming.

Peace never lasted long, and opportunities to shoot the shit came few and far between. Though he was the butt of the joke, for the time being, Frederick didn't really want them to stop. As the rest of the team and the refugees chattered, the atmosphere aboard the shuttle relaxed, offering a brief respite from the chaotic efficiency of Pothos. With that in mind, Frederick kept the shuttle on autopilot and leaned back in his seat to enjoy the conversation while he watched the stars pass.

### Chapter III

*Thunk. Thunk. Thunk. Thunk.* Frederick sighed, tiredly running a hand through his hair. He cringed as his fingers caught on the matted knots, stiff from the salty storm. *Thunk. Thunk. Thunk. Thunk.* The sound of his boots thudding against the floor echoed in the hallway, which was, thankfully, empty at the moment save for a few stragglers hurrying toward the mess hall.

The ache from his fall sat behind his eyes, pounding in sync with his pulse. At the moment, he was content to shower and fall into bed earlier than usual. The last couple hours of the trip back had passed quickly, filled with idle chatter, but once the ship was parked in its usual spot and everyone offloaded, the team was quick to scatter. Saph and Cy had disappeared toward the redhead's room and probably wouldn't reemerge until the next morning. Alan had taken sympathy on him and offered to take the remaining refugees down to Cheya.

With nothing else immediately needing his attention, Frederick had headed toward the communal bathroom, eager to clean himself up as quickly as possible. And surprisingly, he was in and out of the bathroom, dressed in clean plainclothes before he realized it.

Wandering out toward the personal quarters, he didn't even bother with his own door, instead going straight for Magnus' knowing his key would work there as well. As the door slid open with a soft hiss, his hopes for getting to sleep soon were destroyed.

All the lights in the room were turned on, an oddity for Magnus as he preferred the dark, and Mickie as he had grown accustomed to his brother's habits. More surprising was to see Mickie bouncing around at the late hour.

Chuckling, Magnus caught him as he jumped from the bed and swung him around before dropping him down to sit as he focused on trying to pack a small bag. "Settle down, keep this up and you'll never get to sleep tonight," he lightly chided, watching the seven year old roll around on the bed, clinging to his stuffed ceophin toy.

Ears flicking back, Magnus turned toward Frederick. "You know, knocking's a thing."

Smirking, he shook his head, still watching the slight movements of his friend's ears. "Thought you'd be asleep already didn't want to wake you."

Following his line of sight, Magnus scowled, pulling his hair over his ears. "Stop staring or you can sleep in your own bed tonight."

“You’re too sensitive about it.”

Magnus turned back to the bag on the bed. “I wasn’t sensitive about it until you mentioned it.”

“You can’t even see it unless you look for it,” the man hummed as he pulled his hair back behind his head. “Do you have a hair tie?”

Closing the bag, the brunet set it aside before scooping Mickie up to carry him into his own room. “Check the floor.”

Quickly locating a hair tie, Frederick secured his hair before shutting off the lights and slipping into the bed. A few moments passed before the quiet hiss of the door sounded, signaling Magnus’ return.

Scooting to the far edge of the bed, Frederick lifted the blanket and within the span of a few seconds Magnus had settled himself against him. Resting his chin on the crown of the brunet’s head, he draped an arm over his waist. “When do you leave for Caladrius?”

“Early tomorrow morning. They overestimated how long the shuttle would take to get here. Caladrius was supposed to see a bad storm but apparently, it wasn’t as bad as originally feared. I’ll only be gone for a week. I don’t think I’ve ever seen Mickie so excited. Two and a half days pent up on a shuttle’ll probably kill him. Since it’s so early I’m hoping he’ll be able to sleep a few hours before wanting to move around,” Magnus muttered, fingers curling in Frederick’s shirt as he settled down.

“I’m sure Cheya could probably give you something to help keep him calm.”

The kid didn’t even bother looking up. “I’m not drugging my brother. He’s picked some books from the library to read on the trip, he’ll be adequately entertained. Even if he’s not, the Caladrian shuttle’s a lot nicer than the ones we use, he’ll have a little place to run around and plenty of people to question.”

“Fair enough,” he murmured, gently combing his fingers through the short hair on the back of his partner’s neck.

Leaning over, Magnus pressed a soft kiss to his lips before curling back up with a pleased hum. “Sleep well.”

“You too,” Frederick murmured, gently smiling as he quickly began to doze off.

“Don’t forget to check up on the refugees while I’m gone. At least for the first couple days. Saph can handle it after that—”

Murmuring, he stilled, hand cupped over the nape of his neck. “I know. I know. Stop working and go to sleep or you’ll never be able to drag yourself up tomorrow.” The kid beneath him huffed before relenting, lulled to sleep by the warm touch.

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Groaning, Magnus clawed his way toward consciousness. Forcing his eyes open, he untangled himself from Frederick and grabbed his comm to shut off the alarm. Lying back, he spent a couple minutes just staring at the device before sighing and pulling himself up to dress.

After finishing and pulling on his shoes he grabbed a jacket and slung the bag over his shoulder, quietly entering Mickie’s room. Stepping up to his bed, Magnus carefully lifted him from his blankets and wrapped him in the jacket.

Adjusting the sleeping boy on his hip, he quietly stepped out of his room, wincing as his eyes adjusted to the lit hallway. It was early enough that most of the station’s occupants were still tucked away, but Pothos never slept. Nearing the garage, activity began to pick up.

Magnus nodded his hellos to the handful of kitchen and maintenance members trolleying supplies from the Caladrian shuttle, before stepping down into the garage. Squinting against the hangar’s bright lights, he made his way toward the ship.

“Shit.” Gritting his teeth, Magnus began to jog toward the ship, trying his best not to jostle Mickie as he pounded up the ship’s ramp. Two steps from the top, he was greeted by one of the shuttle’s crew members.

Smiling brightly, the Caladrian ushered Magnus on board. “You must be our last minute additions.”

Magnus nodded, smiling awkwardly. “Sorry, we’re late—”

Multicolored tentacles twisted around themselves as they shook their head. “No, no, we got in a bit earlier than we thought. You’re right on time. We just finished boarding, we haven’t even switched pilots yet.” Looking down to Mickie, they nodded to him. “Tired?”



“It’s still pretty early for him. For both of us actually,” Magnus chuckled. “He’ll probably sleep for a few more hours.”

“I won’t keep you from your sleeper cell, Subleader—”

Magnus cut them off, shaking his head. “Don’t bother with that. Just call me Magnus.”

The Caladrian froze for a second in obvious confusion, before nodding and offering a nervous smile. “Syglvay. Pilot. O-Of the the Fifth Revival Corps. I-I’ll be handling take off and the first few hours of our trip.”

Magnus nodded, awkwardly trying to end the conversation to spare the pilot some discomfort. “Good luck, Cadet. If you’ll excuse us.” Nodding, the pilot stepped aside to allow Magnus to pass.

Entering their assigned sleeper cell, Magnus set Mickie on the bed before kicking off his shoes and lying down next to him. Pillowing his head on his arm, he stared up at the ceiling until he felt the ship begin to move. Rolling onto his side he tucked Mickie against him better, gently rubbing the boy’s back until the ship leveled out and he managed to drift off.

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Stepping down onto Caladrius, especially after being on a shuttle for two days, never ceased to incite vertigo. While Pothos could simulate day and night, seasons were forgotten in the climate-controlled station. And no matter how much Magnus tried to steal himself, he would always end up caught off guard, this time being no exception, as he winced against the midday sun.

Spotting Tiffikh, he offered a nod of acknowledgment before stopping to dig his sunglasses from his bag. By the time he had located the tinted lenses, the violet Overuemtz stood before them, wings loosely drawn up against their back. “Welcome back, I wasn’t expecting Cerberus for at least a few more months.”

Slinging the bag over his shoulder, Magnus shook his head. “It’s not Cerberus this time around. I’m here for pleasure, not business. Thought it might be nice to let Mickie roll around in the dirt.”

Tiffikh nodded, offering Mickie a sack filled with ixojuv candies and a bag of esukin nuts. “Perhaps you could spare a few minutes first? Caladrius is looking to undergo some

changes and I would prefer to speak directly with Pothos seniority before anything is drafted up and presented.”

“Actually, I had some concerns I wanted to bring up with you as well,” they stated, shifting their weight to one foot. “And it would be nice to get all business out of the way early. Any place in mind you’d like to speak?”

The Overuemtz gave a single nod. “If you would follow me, the Revival has just added an expanded cafeteria to their grounds. It’s quite nice.”

Taking Mickie’s hand, Magnus waved him forward. “After you.”

It only took a few minutes to reach the cafeteria from the airstrip, at the moment Magnus’ focus remained more on the new buildings dotting the campus. “I see you’ve done quite a bit since my last visit.”

Avoiding the statement, Tiffikh led them into the building, attempting to redirect the conversation. “We’ve recently expanded our selection to include more choices for omnivorous and carnivorous species. With the influx over these last few years, we’ve had to solve how to best serve those with dietary needs or restrictions. I believe we’ve cut our dietary related incidents by over seventy percent since the beginning of the cycle.”

Humming in acknowledgment, Magnus lifted Mickie onto his hip so the boy could better see his options for lunch. “How have you solved the language barrier and literacy issues?”

“We issue each resident a meal card which lists their dietary restrictions. All they have to do is pass their card over the meal’s placard and it will alert them if there’s an allergen in the food.”, the Overuemtz answered, handing him a tray. “Of course, we have everything listed in Terran along with a select few other common languages. If you would like, I can have you both issued guest meal cards while you’re here.”

Shaking his head, Magnus reluctantly placed a plate of fresh vegetables on the tray, knowing it would appease their guide. “Thank you, but I believe we’ll just browse the marketplace when we get hungry.”

Bobbing their head, pleased, Tiffikh led them to a small outdoor table. “Of course. Finest in the known universe.”

Setting Mickie down, Magnus placed the tray before him, content to pick off the boy's plate. "But getting down to business, Tiffikh; I noticed a cadet on the shuttle pressed titles. The Caladrian Revival hasn't turned militaristic, have they? If I recall correctly, you yourself agreed to keep Caladrius completely neutral when we first reestablished contact."

"I assure you, there is no military. We have no desire to take on Cerberus' burden." After a moment's pause, they continued on. "We do, however, want to expand the Revival to the degree of that on Pothos. We cannot merely sit here and take on refugees. We want to assist, and in such peaceful times and peaceful places invention can grow. That's what we've been working on. We'd like to establish an arm of Pothos down here. Nothing large, just science and engineering. We'll have our proposal ready by the time the new cycle begins. Would you, perhaps, be able to offer any insight on what decision might be made?"

Magnus sighed, snagging one of the vegetable slices off Mickie's plate. "I couldn't say for certain. It would give us more room to grow and I'm certain some of our SciTech members would love the change in scenery, to a degree I guess. However, we're working with technology over two centuries old bungled together with what we can craft on the go, and all manuals to run Pothos are tucked away in the library, including comm manuals. We can't make any promises until we're absolutely certain we have a reliable, untraceable way to contact Caladrius. If you can get the proposal done by the new cycle and we can keep comm working then I don't think there'll be any issues, I'll run the idea past SciTech and engineering when I get back."

"Your efforts are greatly appreciated. And as you can see the Revival is growing faster than we can expand our campus, something's working out."

Magnus shrugged. "I guess we're just managing the station and on-planet bases well."

"It's more than that. Ever since Pothos started up again and reestablished contact we've had more and more people interested in joining the Revival and Pothos. I doubt there's anyone here who doesn't know someone Pothos brought down. Maybe it's time to expand Pothos further, expand Cerberus; there are plenty of people down here willing and eager to assist you. And if the rumors are correct, Cerberus is still very, very limited."

"I'll talk to Frederick about it. At this point, the biggest issue would be training them. Seems unfair to toss them into it all without them knowing what to expect. Hell, we've been at it for years and we still don't know what to expect," Magnus sighed, leaning back

in the chair. “Gather up anyone interested in Cerberus and start them on a program of some sort. Piloting and navigation, of course, but try to find people trained in other fields; med, SciTech, engineering, whatever. Just find them and start drafting something up. I’ll get a program started up there.”

Nodding, Tiffikh stood to their feet. “Reconvene in a couple months then?”

“Yep. Got somewhere to be?” Magnus asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Of course. Always,” the Overuemtz nodded. “And it seems I have quite a bit to get started on. I’ll transfer the information as I get it.”

“Thanks. I’ll see you in a couple months at the latest.”

“Don’t forget to bring your coat. Pothos’ temperature may not fluctuate with the seasons but ours does, and it’s set to be cold this year.”

“Can’t be any worse than an Aethonian winter,” he muttered under his breath but answered Tiffikh with a nod before they turned and left the table. Turning his attention back to Mickie, he rested his chin in his palm. “Guess we’ll have to get you a coat, huh?”

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Magnus sighed as he stepped through the door to the small A-frame, Mickie tugging at his arm as he bounced around in excitement. “I’m guessing you’re not tired yet?” he knowingly asked, chuckling as Mickie vigorously shook his head. “I need to keep a better eye on you when around Tiffikh, I swear he gives you ixojuv just to keep my hands full.”

Tossing the bag on the bed, he sat down with a tired sigh. “I’m guessing you wanna go run around the beach for a bit?”

“Can we? Can we? Can we? Can we? Pleeeeeeeeeeease?” Mickie jumped up on the bed beside his brother, pulling violently on his sleeve.

“Only until the sun goes down,” the elder conceded. “Take your sneakers off though, we don’t need to get sand in the bed again.”

While the seven-year-old tore off his sneakers and socks, Magnus dug through the backpack to pull out the bag of esukin nuts Tiffikh had given them, a gesture that occurred anytime they managed to make it down. Standing from the bed, Magnus let

Mickie climb onto his back before handing the boy the nuts. “Hold these for me.” Readjusting his grip on Mickie, the elder crossed to the door before nudging his hip against the door’s scanner and stepping out onto the path leading to the small house.

Once the path gave way to sand, Mickie was squirming his way out of his brother’s arms and tossing him the nuts, making a break toward the waves. Shaking his head in fond exasperation, Magnus bent down to take off his shoes and socks; tying the laces together he slung them over his shoulder before turning his attention back to where Mickie was splashing around, soaking the bottoms of his shorts.

Padding down the beach, Magnus stood just outside the reach of the water beginning to pick through the nuts, still hungry from the meal with Tiffikh. Occasionally, he would move down the shoreline if Mickie strayed too far, but otherwise, he didn’t wander, content to keep an eye on the seven-year-old.

Once the sun dipped below the horizon and a fair sized pile of esukin shells lay in the sand beside him, Magnus deemed it time to retire to the A-frame. “Mickie! Come on, you can play more tomorrow!” Water lapping at his ankles, he trudged out to meet the boy who was more than happy to scramble back into his arms.

Chuckling, Magnus pressed a kiss to his forehead before readjusting the child so he could rest his head on his shoulder as he walked. Quietly humming, he nuzzled his cheek against the mop of unruly curls, feeling Mickie settle down.

Caught up in the peace of the night, Magnus didn’t notice anyone else was roaming the beach at the late hour and started as someone spoke. “‘Scuse me?” Turning, he found a couple near them, eyes glowing in the light of the second moon.<sup>1</sup>

“Keht,”<sup>1</sup> the taller of the two repeated, nearly questioning.

Pursing his lips, Magnus shook his head. “Sorry, I’m only fluent in Terran.”

The couple exchanged a look before the taller spoke again. “You are of Teiresian blood, are you not?”

Shifting to his other foot, Magnus shook his head. “No. Well, I don’t know. Why?” Eyes narrowed in suspicion, he tucked Mickie closer against his side, turning to keep himself between the sleeping boy and the newcomers.

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<sup>1</sup> *Young one*

After another moment of the couple looking to each other and speaking quietly, the taller addressed Magnus again. “You— smell Teiresian,” they cautiously replied.

Raising an eyebrow, Magnus snagged the collar of his shirt and sniffed before shrugging. “I don’t smell anything different.”

“You are certain you have no Teiresian blood?”

“I don’t know. Orphan. Grew up in a government home on Prometheus. All I know is I have mixed parentage, and part of that is human,” he replied, beginning to chew his lip as the couple’s ears flicked back in distaste. “You think my other half is Teiresian?”

“It seems highly likely, a swab test could confirm it quickly.” Head cocked to the side, they looked over Magnus, reverting back to their native language as they muttered to themselves.

A huff of amused laughter broke their muttering. “Hkeht<sup>2</sup>, you’re scaring them. Don’t ask people you just meet if you can swab test them.” Stepping forward, the shorter extended a hand. “Excuse them, Aldaz has a fascination with genetics. I am Prylk.”

Nodding, Magnus accepted the offered hand. “I’m Magnus. And there’s nothing to excuse, I’m curious about my parentage as well. I might even take them up on their offer were it not already so late.”

Prylk nodded to Mickie. “If it is the boy you are worried about he may rest on the couch, the test will not take long.”

Considering it for a moment, Magnus nodded. “Alright, lead the way.”

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“Incredible, I’ve heard it theorized that humans would be the best species for hybridization given their adaptability and penchant for mutation, but this is beyond anything I could’ve imagined. Even with the most similar species there tends to be an issue or two when combining genes, but there’s nothing—” Aldaz trailed off incredulously as they scrolled over the test results.

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<sup>2</sup> *Love*

Magnus shrugged, crossing his arms over his chest. “Don’t get too excited. I’ve had joint and muscle problems since I was a kid.”

Aldaz didn’t look up from their tablet. “You have a severe protein deficiency. I would hazard that your joints are fine.”

“You can’t tell that from a spit swab.”

Aldaz nodded. “That is true, but I don’t need to. You’ve been favoring your right arm since you set the boy down. And given that you were not exactly aware of your parentage before now, it’s safe to assume you were following diet plans suited for humans. Your esukin nuts are not going to give the type of protein you need; Teiresians are higher on the list of carnivorous species than humans.”

Pinching the bridge of his nose, Magnus sighed, muttering under his breath. “I don’t even remember the last time I saw an animal, much less actually had time to attend regular meals at the cafeteria.”

“Change your diet and any issues should subside,” Aldaz replied, turning their attention back toward their tablet. “Of course, I could screen for further issues if I were to have a blood sample—”

Prylk chuckled in fond exasperation. “Hkeht<sup>3</sup>, it’s late. We said we would not keep them long. Let them retire for the night if they so desire they may return tomorrow and you may proceed with your ceaseless pestering then.”

Aldaz dismissed their partner with a flap of their hand. “You exaggerate.”

“Not as much as you think.” Prylk playfully replied, standing to see Magnus out the door.

Carefully lifting Mickie into his arms, Magnus followed after Prylk. “What time would be best for you both?”

Holding the door open, Prylk shook their head. “Anytime is fine. Whenever the boy wakes tomorrow will work.”

“I warn you, he doesn’t sleep in. He’ll rise with the sun if given the chance.”

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<sup>3</sup> *Love*

“We try to keep diurnal hours, it will be fine.” Aldaz chuckled, joining their partner at the door. “We don’t keep company often, it’ll be nice.”

Nodding Manus turned toward the beach. “Good night.”

“Heyotzsch dahkah, deht keht<sup>4</sup>. Good night.”

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<sup>4</sup> *Be at peace, little young one*



## Chapter IV

“You remember what I told you, right?” Magnus asked as they crossed the loose sand, holding onto Mickie’s hand to keep him from stumbling.

The seven year-old nodded. “If they offer me something to eat and I don’t like it, I say I have a tummy ache and then we’ll get food later.”

“Good. Remember that they’re a bit different, we’ve never met anyone like them before but they may have some answers that could be really helpful to me, so please try to be good. I don’t think there’ll be any issues, but for my sake, please stay calm and don’t start bouncing around, okay? I don’t know how they’d react to your hyperactivity.”

Sensing his brother’s nervous energy growing, Mickie squeezed his hand, looking up at him. “I’ll try. But you told me not to make promises I can’t keep—”

Chuckling, the elder looked to him. “So you do actually listen to me.”

Sticking his tongue out at his brother in irritation, Mickie stumbled, the soft sand giving way to a stone path. “Do you think they’ll like me?” he shyly asked as they approached the small house.

“Of course, you’re a good kid. I’d be surprised if they liked me and didn’t like you,” Magnus hummed, watching the boy from the corner of his eye.

Coming to a stop outside the door, Mickie scuffed the toe of his sneaker against the ground nervously. “What if they don’t?”

Magnus shrugged. “Then we get something to eat in town, and go back to the house and plan how we want to spend the rest of the trip.” Releasing Mickie’s hand, the brunet ruffled his hair. “Relax kid, I ain’t goin’ anywhere without you.”

“Swear?”

“On my life.” Raising a fist, Magnus knocked on the door before stepping back and taking Mickie’s hand again, a reassurance to them both.

Within a moment, the door swung open and any concern for Mickie’s behavior disappeared. Whether it was a nervous reaction or not Magnus couldn’t tell, but upon

spotting Aldaz, Mickie pulled away and all but latched himself to the Teiresian. Chattering on excitedly as he took in the other's appearance.

“Mickie! What the fuck!” Incredulous, Magnus reached out to pull him back, apologies ready, but Aldaz scooped the child up with a delighted laugh.

“Deht ahkkeht<sup>5</sup>, look at you! You're so small! Are all human children this small?” they chuckled as Mickie ran his fingers through the pale blue fur covering their skin. “He's not malnourished is he?”

Magnus shook his head as he followed Aldaz into the home. “I've seen black holes less voracious than he is. Trust me, he's well-fed.”

“But I'm hungry now though,” Mickie whined, momentarily distracted from his excitement over meeting someone new.

“Then I guess you both got here just in time. Come. Sit, sit. We have plenty.” Beckoning Magnus over to the table, Aldaz set Mickie in one of the seats, the seven year-old's attention swivelling over to Prylk, who was watching their mate in amusement.

“Oh, don't worry about us. That's not necessary—”

Aldaz cut him off with a dismissive noise, flapping a hand at the seat. “It's no trouble. You'd need to have eaten anyways if we're planning on drawing blood. Besides, we have extra—”

“They made extra.” Prylk interjected.

Aldaz pointedly ignored their mate, setting a plate down in front of Mickie. “—and it's better not to waste it. It's a good meal for Teiresian young, helps them grow,” they spoke, setting the other plate before the brunet and persistently nudging it closer.

“Humans stop growing when they reach adulthood.” Magnus turned his attention to the plate, poking curiously at a strip of meat before spearing it and settling back in the chair to chew.

“A shame I didn't find you sooner then. A proper diet could've given you a few more inches,” Aldaz hummed, rubbing their chin in thought.

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<sup>5</sup> *Little not young one*

“I’ve made my peace with it,” Magnus dryly muttered, as he looked over to where Mickie was happily clearing his plate.

Following his line of sight, Aldaz nodded, standing to refill Mickie’s plate when he finished the first off. “There’s still time for this little one,” they hummed, smiling as Mickie thanked them upon receiving the plate.

“Mickie’s human.”

Aldaz huffed, ruffling the seven year-old’s hair. “I know. He’s still young, he needs good food to grow. I’ll make sure he grows.”

“While we both appreciate the sentiment, we’re actually just visiting Caladrius.” Magnus pushed aside his plate, lips pressed thin. “We live on Pothos, the space station a few days travel from here. We’re set to go back the day after tomorrow.”

The Teiresian’s smile fell. “Oh? That’s not a good place for little ones, is it?”

Magnus nervously shrugged. “I mean, it’s not terrible. It’s pretty close knit up there and there’s always someone around to keep an eye on him. But he is the youngest permanent Pothos resident.”

Aldaz rested their mouth in their hand, sitting quietly in thought for a moment before speaking. “Stay here longer then. It wouldn’t hurt.”

Mickie looked from Aldaz to his elder brother before pleading. “Can we stay here longer? Pleeeeease? Just a little bit? We just got here, I don’t wanna go back yet. Pleeeeease?”

Sighing, the brunet leaned back in his seat, crossing his arms over his chest. “There’s another ship heading to Pothos on Friday. I suppose it wouldn’t cause any harm to stay a couple extra days, especially if it’ll mean Mickie has a chance to learn about another culture first hand. That is if you don’t mind.”

“I think we can both agree, it would be our pleasure.” Prylk chuckled, looking to their mate.

“Of course.” Aldaz smiled, nodding. “And to the best of my knowledge you’re the only one with Teiresian blood on this side of Caladrius, and I’m assuming Pothos as well, and

Teiresians are a very social species, it's important for health to form strong bonds. There's over twenty cycles of social bonds to make up for, best to start as soon as possible."

Tapping his fingers off his arm, Magnus looked over to his younger brother to confirm he was alright with the change of plans, before answering. "Well, let's see what we can fit into the next three days."

## Chapter V

.....Eight Years Ago.....

The brick against his back burned as Frederick watched the small marketplace. He waited for the fruit stand's vendor to become distracted enough for him to risk stealing the measly, knobbed apples stacked in the furthest crate. His fingers twitched as he pushed off the wall, preparing to run. He didn't get further than a step out of the alley, when a commotion arose.

The shouting grew louder as he turned to see two kids running down the street toward him. He couldn't hear what was being said over the crowd and the smaller kid's wailing as rocks were flung at him. Ducking back into the alley, he leaned against the building, gritting his teeth in anger. There was no way he'd be able to get anything after this commotion.

It was a desperate, empty hope, and one he didn't think over before acting on. Stepping out of the alley, he grabbed the kid before turning and trying to run toward the maze of back alleys and tight corners that led out of the city.

He had terribly underestimated the kid's weight, causing him to stumble. Catching on quickly, the kid scrambled out of his grip and onto his back, locking on tightly. Frederick left him to support his own weight, as he exited into the back alleys, desperately taking corners in an attempt to remember his way out of town. After a few minutes of stumbling around, he succeeded.

The noise of the town had vanished and it didn't sound like anyone was pursuing them, but Frederick continued running until he reached the small cave he had been camping in for the last week. Dumping the kid unceremoniously on the ground, he collapsed to his knees, lungs burning furiously from the exertion. Lifting his canteen, he took several greedy gulps before sitting back.

In that time, the kid had gotten up and moved past Frederick to curiously poke around the cave. Any hope he had of goading a free meal out of the poor punk's parents, disappeared as he sat down against the cave wall and relaxed, setting his backpack beside him. Groaning, Frederick stood from his spot and ducked into the cave. "Don't get comfortable, I'm taking you home."

"I'm a ward of the state. I don't have a home, I have a government-funded hellhouse," he spoke from behind the scarf covering the lower half of his face.

“Fine, whatever, I’m taking you back to your hellhouse,” he replied, grabbing the kid’s arm and hauling him up. He remained hanging limp, glaring up at him.

“Sure you wanna do that, wasp? You look important, somebody’s gonna be lookin’ for you.”

Growling in irritation, he released his grip and the kid fell. “What do you want?!” he snapped, crossing his arms over his chest and returning the kid’s glare with equal fury.

Standing to his feet, the kid slung his bag over his shoulder. “Nothing from you yet. Once you die I’m sure you’ll attract something I can eat.”

“Are you threatening to kill me?” Frederick asked incredulously. “I just saved your fucking life!”

“One, no, you didn’t, you only saved me from a few bruises and a split lip. Two, no, I’m just going to wait and watch you kill yourself, princess. It’s clear you’ve never set foot outside whatever bubble you grew up in, you won’t last through the night.”

“Oh yeah? I’ve been here all week and I’m fine,” he retorted.

“I can see that.” The kid kicked the core of an apple toward him. “I see you’re also eating the apple’s skin, which is toxic to human beings. That warm tingly feeling? Yep, that’s the toxins. I can smell it on your breath.”

Frederick narrowed his eyes. “You’re lying.”

Shrugging, he looked to the mouth of the cave briefly, eyes drawing up in a smirk. “I guess you’ll find out. Hope it’s before the kursks start feasting on you.”

“Kursks are domesticated, moron.”

That certainly amused him, nearly doubled over in laughter. “Not out here they’re not. They’ll tear your ass to shreds ‘fore you even know what hit’cha.”

Frederick froze, eyes widening slightly as he weighed the risks of passing the kid’s words off as lies. “Y-You’re lying.”

Hearing the uncertainty in his voice, he settled, head cocking as he looked at Frederick in confusion. “No. Do you honestly not know this?”

Unsure of what to say, Frederick shrugged. The kid watched him for a moment longer before turning away and beginning to move around the cave. “I guess we don’t have a choice then.”

“We?” Frederick questioned, watching his back curiously. “What ‘we’? There is no ‘we’.”

“There is, if you don’t want to be kursk shit in the next day or so. You said it yourself, you ‘saved’ my life, therefore I can’t let your stupid, powdered ass die anytime soon,” he turned back to face him for a moment before pointing to the mouth of the cave. “Go get some sticks before it gets dark. And watch out for antuints.”

“What’s an antuint?”

The kid chuckled, waving him out the cave. “You’ll know if you find one, trust me.”

Scowling at the brush off, Frederick decided to just get it over with and scavenge what sticks he could find around the cave, and after a few minutes he heard the kid join in, so at least he wasn’t doing it alone. A little while passed and he had gathered a fair amount of sticks, before he heard the kid again. “What are you doing?” he asked incredulously.

Frederick nearly dropped what was in his arms in surprise, before turning to him, brows furrowing in confusion. “I’m getting sticks.”

“Are you fucking stupid? I didn’t think I had to specify dry sticks.”

“It’s a desert! Everything’s dry!” he snapped, though tossing the stick he had just pulled off aside.

“No it’s not, you— Fuck’s sake, you’re so stupid, it’s not even fair to have just left you for the kursks,” the kid cut off, sighing, before waving Frederick on. “C’mon, let’s go back. I’m sure you’ve got some wood that’s dry enough.”

Too tired to argue, Frederick followed him back to the cave. By that time, it had grown too dark to see clearly and he stumbled trying to step back into the cave, managing to scrape his palm on the wall as he tried to steady himself. “Just sit down already.” Squinting, Frederick inched his way over to the kid and sat down beside him.

In less than a minute, a small fire sat before him and the kid was digging through Frederick's pile, muttering under his breath as he sorted which sticks could be used. Finally satisfied with a small bundle, he stepped past him to sit back down and break the sticks into smaller pieces to feed to the slowly growing fire.

Once it had grown to a good size, he leaned back against the wall. Unwrapping the scarf covering the lower half of his face, he wiped the dust away from his eyes. Reaching into his bag, he pulled out a canteen and took several swallows before offering it to Frederick.

It took a conscious effort for Frederick to accept it, his mind immediately telling him to refuse it for fear of disease, but thirst won out. He quickly drained half the canteen before handing it back, earning a look of displeasure from the kid, though he didn't mention it.

Frederick turned back to the fire, content to watch it when something was thrust into his vision. "Here."

Looking over, he opened his hands and a bundle of dark fruit was passed over. He raised an eyebrow, but accepted it. "What is it?" he asked, looking the bundle over, before plucking one of the small berries off and cautiously eating it, cringing at the sour flavor. "It's not gonna kill me is it?"

"No. They've oova berries. They're not toxic. Just eat them," he muttered picking at his own bundle.

Nodding, he turned back to his meal. After a few minutes, he realized his friend hadn't spoken, and more than that it didn't appear like he were eating. "Are you okay?"

Startling, he looked up to him. "Yeah, I'm fine. Why?"

"You're not eating."

Large hazel eyes blinked owlshly at him, before looking to the fruit. "Oh." Frederick watched as he sat in silence, unmoving for a couple minutes, before steeling himself and plucking a berry from the bundle and popping it into his mouth.

Frederick swallowed hard and sat back against the wall. In the second the kid's lips pulled up to eat, he saw several painfully sharp teeth lining the front his mouth. Given the way the kid was hunched over, staring at his lap, he could only assume that was the reason he was hesitant to eat.



“You’re not human.” Shit. That only made it worse. The kid recoiled as though struck.

“I am human,” he muttered, still not able to tear his eyes from the floor. “Just not, y’know, all human.”

“Then what are you?”

The kid shrugged. “‘S not like they’d tell me. Wouldn’t fit with their dogma.”

“Was that why that kid was yelling at you?”

For the first time during the exchange, the kid looked up at him, brow raised. “Among other things, yes. Kid lives at the same government house I did. He joined their youth program voluntarily, I didn’t have that option.”

“Just so you know, I don’t care about that shit,” Frederick spoke up, feeling the need to make a statement.

“Sure you do. I could offer you kursk shit and call it bread and you’d be kissing my ass. You’re hungry. People will say anything when they’re hungry.”

Wincing, Frederick backtracked, trying to redirect the conversation. “So—” He cleared his throat awkwardly. “Is-is that why you were run out of town?”

Looking back to the fire, he folded his arms over his knees. “I wasn’t run out, I ran off. They wanted to pull my teeth. And I’m kinda attached to them, quite literally.”

Frederick furrowed his brows in confusion. “Why didn’t you just let them do it, get it all over with.”

“Because they only grow back. I’d like to keep my teeth where they belong. And in case that’s not clear to you, princess, their place is firmly rooted in my skull.”

“But they’re just teeth,” Frederick insisted. “And real teeth don’t grow back.”

“Mine do,” he muttered.

“They probably just pulled out your baby teeth. I bet you would’ve been fine if you’d’ve let them take your adult teeth out. Probably would’ve fit you with veneers and let you

join normal society. That's not a bad trade, replacement of your teeth to be allowed to be human."

The kid watched him for a moment before scooting over and seating himself on Frederick's hips, effectively keeping him still as he grabbed for his chin. "You're right. They're just teeth," he hummed.

"What are you doing?" he hissed, trying to remove the kid from his lap, wincing as the grip on his chin only tightened to the point he could feel nubby nails scraping his skin.

"You said they're only teeth, right? So what's it matter if I pull a couple of yours, hmm?"

"Because I'm not a fucking freak!" he spat, managing to elbow the kid in the chest hard enough to knock him free.

Lying on his back, he briefly struggled to regain his breath, before settling there, seemingly comfortable. "That's what it all comes down to isn't it? You're scared of me because I don't look like you. My teeth aren't even that much of a problem, they serve the same purpose as yours do, don't they?"

"I don't know. I don't know what the fuck you are. For all I know you eat people."

The kid snorted. "Why would I do that?" When Frederick remained silent he continued on. "To the best of my knowledge, no, my non-human parentage does not eat humans," he assured. "On top of that you smell bad. So rest easy, I ain't gonna toss ya to the kursks in your sleep. Doubt they'd have the stomach for you either."

"Thanks," he drily muttered.

"S your name?"

Frederick furrowed his brows at him. "Excuse me?"

Sitting up on an elbow, the kid looked to him. "I said what's your name? Heard once you name something you can't get rid of it. So what's your name?"

Frederick crossed his arms over his chest. "I'm not a stray animal."

"More stray than any animal I've seen. So what's your name poochie pooch, hmm?"

“Frederick,” he grit out, glowering at the kid.

After a long pause the kid replied. “Magnus— Not that it’ll do you any good, Fritzie,” he snickered.

Thrown by the nickname, his friend’s reluctance to answer slipped his mind as he scowled at him. “Don’t call me that.”

“And you think you can stop me?” Magnus hummed, head cocking to the side.

“I could kick you out of the cave.”

“Fire’d go out,” he shot back. “I doubt you could rekindle it. And your canteen’s empty, you’re completely unprepared to survive out here. I’m surprised you’ve lasted this long.

“How do I know you won’t steal what I have and run off?”

The kid laughed. “What in fuck’s name do you think I could steal off you? That flimsy canteen? You’ve got nothing useful to me.”

“Then why stay here if I’m so useless to you, huh?” he questioned, eyes narrowed at the kid suspiciously.

He shrugged. “Safety in numbers. And if we find ourselves cornered by a kursk, all I have to do is outrun you, which shouldn’t be hard.”

“Thanks,” he muttered.

Sitting up, the kid moved back to lean against the wall. “Get some rest, I’ll keep watch for now,” he hummed, offering Frederick an awkward, lopsided smile. “I can practically smell the exhaustion wafting off you.”

Weighing his chances for a moment, he decided against arguing and nodded, rubbing his upper arms in a futile attempt to chase away the night’s chill. Hearing the kid rifle with his bag, he looked over to find he had unsnapped a lower compartment and removed a military issued sleeping bag. “Here ya go, blue-blood. Enjoy it,” he spoke, tossing it into his chest.

Frederick raised an eyebrow, but unravelled it and crawled in. “Aren’t you gonna be cold?”

Shaking his head, Magnus laced his fingers behind his neck. "I'm hot-blooded. I'm fine."

"Are you trying to insinuate I'm not?"

The brunet made a big show of sniffing the air before scrunching up his nose. "You stink of politician. Seems the best indicator of cold-blood to me."

Rolling his eyes, Frederick turned away to face the back of the cave as he curled further into the sleeping bag and closed his eyes, attempting to sleep.

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Frederick woke slowly the next morning, feeling more rested than he had in awhile. Sitting up in the sleeping bag, he turned to look to where his friend was seated. He found the kid peacefully dozed off, arms folded over his chest. From the flames still licking the wood, he could assume he hadn't been asleep for long.

Reaching over, he quietly pulled his bag over to him, digging through it in search of the canteen. Hearing a rapid inhale, he looked over to find bleary hazel eyes watching him. "Y'know, there's thiz thing called askin'," he slurred, sitting up straighter against the wall of the cave.

"I was thirsty, I didn't think you'd mind," he shot back, turning back to digging through the bag.

He didn't get much further, as something smacked into his forehead, causing him to drop the bag with a shout. Looking over, he found Magnus grinning, having shut his eyes again. "Oops. Guess my aim's a bit off."

Snatching the canteen from where it had fallen, he scowled, rubbing the sore spot on his head. "Maybe if you opened your fucking eyes your aim would be better."

"I'll keep that 'n mind for nex' time," he hummed, scratching his cheek before settling back down. "Lemme sleep for a coupl' more hourz 'n then 'll find ya some better clothin' 'n shoes."

Frederick brushed him off, going back to digging through the bag, this time in search of something to eat. After a moment, he tossed the bag aside, grasping his prize. Taking a deep breath, he forced back his hesitation and bit into the strip of dried meat. If he were

honest, he'd rather not know what creature it came from. Regardless, it was filling and wasn't too offensive to eat.

Leaning back, he watched as the morning sun projected bright colors along the cave wall across from him. Shivering, he pulled the sleeping bag tighter around him, it seemed winter was coming early this year. Thinking again of his friend, he looked over and found him still resting peacefully, not even shivering though his breath puffed through parted lips.

Keeping the sleeping bag around his shoulders, Frederick resigned himself to at least attempting to keep the small fire alive. Luckily, Magnus had used his time last night to break the sticks into reasonably sized pieces, so all he had to do was poke a stick in wherever he thought necessary. He contented himself with sitting there and enjoying the warmth from the fire, until his friend began to stir.

Frederick watched as the kid sat up, lips pulling back and jaw dropping far enough that he swore he could see his back teeth as he yawned. Stretching, the kid popped his neck before standing and looking over to Frederick. "Your skin's chapping."

Frederick shrugged. "Not much I can do about that."

Rolling his eyes, Magnus crossed over and dug through his bag before producing a small, metal tin. Plopping himself down atop his legs, much to Frederick's displeasure, he opened the tin and dipped a finger inside before rubbing the greasy substance over his nose and cheeks.

Sputtering in discomfort, Frederick attempted to push him off, but the kid stayed firmly seated until he had swiped one last greasy line across his mouth. "What is this shit?" he hissed, attempting to wipe it off his face.

Magnus caught his wrist, frowning. "It's vaseline, leave it alone."

"It's awful," Frederick protested, though dropping his hand back to his side and standing up.

"Your skin cracking and bleeding out here would be worse," he replied, quickly re-packing his bag and pulling the sleeping bag from beneath Frederick. "C'mon. Let's go find you something to wear that won't make it obvious you were born with a silver dildo in your mouth."

Sighing in resignation, Frederick stood and followed the kid out of the cave.

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A couple hours travel found the duo outside a small outpost, crouching behind a dumpster. “What’s the plan?” Frederick asked, eyeing the delivery truck nervously.

“The plan is you throw rocks and run like hell. While they’re after you, I’ll go snatch what I can in your size. Circle the block and then run out of town, they won’t follow you into the desert.”

“That’s not a plan!” he hissed, trying to snag the kid by the back of his shirt.

“Don’t care,” the brunet replied, smacking his hand away and creeping up the alley, getting ready to run.

Frederick hesitated, this was insane. He couldn’t dwell on it long, almost immediately the kid began impatiently gesturing for him to go. Forcing himself forward, Frederick grabbed a handful of stones and ran toward the front of the truck. What little courage he had quickly left him as he found himself in front of the large rig. Freezing in place, he found himself staring at the confused driver. His voice finally freed itself from his chest and he began yelling and flinging stones at the vehicle, startled into action as the driver exited the cab.

Though he had a fair headstart, Frederick knocked over anything he ran past in an attempt to slow his pursuant, and it proved successful as the man’s yells quickly faded into the distance as he sprinted down the street.

Rounding the block, he made for the edge of town, heading for the designated meeting place. As he neared the dead tree, Magnus stood from where he had been seated, bag clutched in his hand. ““Was beginning to worry you’d been caught.”

Rolling his eyes, Frederick snagged the bag from him. “Let’s just find somewhere to camp.”

Magnus shrugged. “Might as well change now. I can’t believe I’m saying this, but I’m starting to get concerned the desert’s getting to ya.”

“Sure, just let me step behind a tree,” he snorted. A long moment passed before he realized the kid was staring at him. “Are you serious? Change out here, where anyone could see?”

The brunet made a show of looking around them, smacking his lips. “Seems we’re the only ones out here. Of course, Your Highness, if you so desire, I can turn away,” he mocked.

“You’re an ass.” Frederick hissed, opening the bag of clothes, as the kid turned his back to him.

“Clench any tighter and you’ll be shittin’ diamonds, princess.”

Cursing under his breath, Frederick checked one more time before changing. He was loathe to admit it, the kid was right, he felt much more comfortable in the new clothes. Packing up his old clothing and shoes in the now empty bag, he slung it over his shoulder before joining Magnus. “Happy?”

The kid looked him over before shrugging. “You need to roll around in the dirt. You’re too clean. If you look like shit people’ll ignore you.”

Frederick scrubbed a hand over his face, sighing. “Can we worry about that later? I don’t think now’s the best time.”

Rolling his eyes, Magnus turned on his heel and headed off away from the outpost. “If it’ll get you to stop whining.”

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Several hours and several painful falls later, Frederick was sufficiently dirtied and they had managed to find an empty cave to stay the night. Entering the cave, Frederick flopped down, groaning at the ache in his feet.

“Get up, princess, we’ve got some time before it’s dark, and we need to refill the canteens and find something that won’t offend your delicate sensibilities.”

Frederick was fully planning to ignore his friend, but the firm grip on his hair convinced him otherwise, and he stood with a groan, trailing after him. “How do you plan on

refilling the canteens when there's no fucking water anywhere?" he hissed, crossing his arms over his chest to ward off the evening's chill.

"I'm not. You are," he replied, traipsing further into the greying desert. "Go find dry wood for a fire. I'm gonna follow you and wait until you find the tree I'm looking for. You seem to stumble across dumb luck."

Huffing, Frederick brushed past him to begin searching. "That's a stupid plan."

"If you find the sticks I'll let you come up with all the plans from here on out." he hummed, allowing his friend to handle the bulk of the work. "Sound like a fair deal?"

Quickening his pace, Frederick began to search more energetically, muttering, "I guess."

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It was dark by the time the duo wandered back to the cave, loaded down with dry sticks, filled canteens, and several smaller reptiles for their dinner. The temperature had plummeted once the sun finished setting, and even in his coat, Frederick was practically vibrating.

Dropping his sticks in a haphazard pile beside Magnus, he was quick to unpack the sleeping bag and slide inside, unhappy to find it still didn't completely protect him from the cold.

"Get your filthy ass shoes out of my sleeping bag! What the fuck is wrong with you? Did you sleep with your shoes on in your cushy bed?" Magnus snapped, glowering at him as he carefully cultivated the fire to a good size before sitting back to tear the scales and claws off the remmuls with his pocketknife.

Mocking him under his breath, Frederick ducked down to kick his shoes off before tossing them out of the bag, one narrowly missing the kid. "Happy?"

"No." Turning his attention back to the half-skinned creature in his hands, Magnus quickly finished, before moving onto the next. Skinning and gutting six more of the small reptiles, the kid skewered and set them over the fire before gathering the inedible bits and intestines and disappearing out of the cave to dispose of them.



Frederick scrunched his nose in disgust, watching his friend wipe his hands clean in the dust of the cave floor. His attention was soon drawn away by an odd popping coming from the fire. He regret looking over, as a grin lit on his friend's face.

"That's the eyeballs popping out of the socket. I hear they're a real delicacy, they're all yours, Fritzie," he teased, reaching out to turn the roasting reptiles.

"Gross! You didn't get rid of the eyeballs?"

Magnus snickered. "What? You don't like your food staring at you?"

"I hate you,"

Pulling one of the remmuls off the stick, he passed it over. "No, you don't."

Reluctantly, Frederick took the food; staring down at the reptile, he cringed, finding that the eyes were still intact. He turned to Magnus to complain only to find the kid watching him, smirking. Expecting a jab, he scowled. "What?"

"I thee you," the kid managed to lisp out, shoulders shaking in silent laughter as he stuck out his tongue, one of the remmul's eyes almost rolling out of his mouth.

"What the fuck! That's disgusting!" Frederick laughed, though revulsed.

"It's not as bad as you'd think," Magnus shrugged, after swallowing. "Just don't think about it."

Frederick stared down at the creature for a long moment before steeling himself and taking a bite out of its abdomen.

The kid watched him closely. "Well?"

After chewing for a long moment, he shrugged. "It's okay."

"Yeah, well, it's called a remmul. And get used to it, we've got a couple days worth," he nodded to the remaining reptiles cooling on the ground.

When they both had finished, Magnus reached past him to drag his backpack over. Retrieving an empty sack, he packed up the remaining remmuls before the bag compressed and he tucked it away.

Placing some larger sticks in the fire, the kid fed it a bit more before kicking off his shoes. “Move over.” Scooting over, he poked adamantly at Frederick. Frowning his brows in confusion, Frederick shifted further toward the back of the cave. “The sleeping bag. Move over in the sleeping bag. It’s cold.”

Frederick shook his head. “There’s not enough room.”

“There is if you stop hogging it. Come on, it’ll be warmer. Shared body heat and all that bullshit.” He tugged at the lip of the sleeping bag. “Come on, now’s not the time to be shy.”

Exasperated, he gave in. “Fine. Hurry up. It’s not gonna work though.”

Ignoring him, Magnus began trying to wiggle in and somehow, miraculously it worked. Frederick swore he felt the magnetic closure straining, but once the kid had settled down it stopped. There was no point in trying to keep any modicum of space between them, they had to both accept being flush, but there was a scuffle when it came to pillowing their heads.

“Ow! Watch it!” Frederick snapped, narrowly avoiding being elbowed in the nose. “There’s not enough room—”

“What am I supposed to do then? Break my fucking neck?” he spat, squeezing his arm back into the sleeping bag.

“Just shut up and go to sleep,” Frederick hissed, embarrassed as he pillowed his head on his wrist and tugged at the kid until he got the idea and lay his head on his arm. Frederick stared back at his friend for several minutes, willing him to go to sleep, before his discomfort grew to be too much and he shut his eyes tightly.

Losing track of time as he waited for his friend to fall asleep, Frederick found he must have dozed off, as the fire, though still burning strong, had grown smaller. Looking to the kid pressed against his chest, he found that he had passed out after tossing an arm over his waist.

Settling down as much as he could in the cramped space, Frederick realized he was oddly hot. Growing comfortable, he had begun to doze again before his mind identified the source of heat. Confused, he maneuvered his free arm far enough to reach around and touch the back of his friend’s neck.

Shit. He tore his hand back in surprise, the kid was burning hotter than a human should. Checking him over he found the kid peacefully sleeping, cheeks not even flushed. Frederick watched him for a bit longer, before settling down, deciding he was fine until the next morning.

## Chapter VI

Frederick nodded along in boredom as a kid from sci-tech pushed her glasses up her nose, nervously rambling on about the odd messages being picked up by the remaining Iphis-II base. In all honesty, Frederick didn't really care about what the kid was saying; he had better things to do than sit there while she went over the report in painstaking detail. And the file had already been uploaded to his comm pad for him to go over; granted, all he'd been using the comm for was to keep track of the Caladrian shuttle's arrival time.

Finally, the bright orange notification popped up and Frederick stood to his feet, cutting the kid off mid-sentence. "Thanks Ian, I think I've got it from here. I'll be sure to come by again if I have any questions."

The fifteen year-old blinked in shock for a moment, stumbling over her words. "I— uhmm— uhmm, okay." Dark curls bouncing as she nodded, she fumbled for her pad, clutching it tightly to her chest as she began backing out of the room, nearly tripping over herself.

Sighing in frustration, Frederick left the room, swearing that he was never sitting through another sci-tech information session again. Thumping down the stairs to the hangar, he tried the door, frowning, as he found it was locked. Snagging his keycard, he slapped it against the scanner and entered to find the hangar empty.

Spotting an engineer buried waist deep in a wall panel, he turned on his heel, making a beeline toward them. "Where's the Caladrian shuttle?"

Sliding out of the wall, the engineer ran a greasy hand through their platinum hair, leaving dark streaks in their wake. "Just missed it. Why? You supposed to be on it?"

"No. And what do you mean it just left? I just got the notification it arrived," Frederick spoke crossing his arms over his chest.

The engineer shrugged, grabbing a grease stained rag from their waistband and wiping their hands. "Yeah, well the comm system's down. Everyone's getting late notifications. Filed a report this morning about it, you should've gotten it."

"Why's the comm system down?"

The blond was not amused, and pushed off the ground to stand up, crossing their arms. "My guess? This equipment is ancient, it's centuries out of date, and we're trying to mesh

it together with cutting edge Caladrian technology. We're trying to work around it right now, but we're just gonna have to gut it all and replace it with current tech, also a report you should have gotten by now, so you know. You'll just have to carry your messages wherever they need to go."

"Have it fixed by day's end, Eli. We can't have the comm systems down or we're crippled here. Pass the message on to the rest of the crew."

"Again, I'm not Eli. Eli works in SciTech. We're twins but it's not that hard, everyone else can tell us apart— And you're just gonna walk away, that's fucking awesome." Shaking their head and huffing, the engineer sat down before sliding back into the wall, muttering curses against him as they began working again.

Pounding up the stairs, Frederick headed for the personal quarters, the hallways clearing the closer he drew to Cerberus' private sector. Stopping outside Magnus' room, he pulled out his keycard and slapped it against the scanner. Door whooshing open, he stepped through to lean against the doorway. "Have a good trip?"

Magnus didn't turn from where he was unpacking. "It wasn't bad. Caladrius is as nice as always. Tiffikh sends his love, along with a hefty proposal for us to decide on before the annual meeting."

The door shut behind him, as Frederick crossed the room to flop down on the bed, effectively halting his efforts to unpack. "He what held you up those extra days?"

Magnus crossed his arms over his chest, raising an eyebrow. When Frederick didn't budge, he sighed; nudging him over so he could down and kick off his shoes. "No, Mickie and I ended up befriending some locals, and I didn't see the harm in us staying a couple extra days."

"You didn't contact me—"

Magnus cut him off. "You're a big boy. You can take care of yourself while I'm gone. And you've got another hand, you can always switch it up if you get bored."

Frederick elbowed him in the side, snorting. "Asshole. I just meant it's not like you to go quiet like that. You doing okay?"

"Me? I'm fine. But apparently, you've been busy pissing everyone off while I was gone," he spoke, attempting to divert the conversation, as he settled back against the wall. "I ran

into Cy in the hallway. She says you've been giving some of the crew members a hard time, well, a harder time than usual. Is there a specific reason for that, or were you just looking to pick a fight with someone?"

Groaning in irritation, Frederick shut his eyes. "It's not my fault. They're all a bunch of stupid kids—"

"If I recall correctly, we were also stupid kids when we found this place. I was only fourteen cycles old when we found Pothos. And when we formed—"

"Don't say it," Frederick cut him off, frowning. "I don't want to hear it."

Magnus heavily sighed. "I was fifteen when *that* mission happened. You were eighteen and Owain was just shy of seventeen. And look where we are now. I get it, they're young, but they're not stupid and they're not doing what we were." He closed his eyes, shoulders slumping in resignation. After a moment of silence, he spoke again, having calmed. "We don't have fourteen and fifteen year-olds running missions, and we haven't since then. Yeah, it fucked us all up, and Owain couldn't even stand Pothos after that. But it's different now. We're more careful. More prepared. We swore it wouldn't happen again and it hasn't, it won't. It's fine now, Fritz; it's okay, everyone's safe here. Nothing's gonna happen."

"They're too young. *That* mission should have never happened—"

"But it did. And we can't change it." Pulling away from Frederick, he stood from the bed. "I'm done with this conversation, and if you don't mind, I'd like some time to myself to go over the reports." When Frederick gave no sign of moving, he gestured to the door. "If you don't mind."

Sighing, Frederick slid off the bed shoving his hands into his pockets. "Don't take too long. I'll let you know once I've set up a team to check out what's going on on Iphis-II."

Magnus didn't look up from his comm pad as he spoke. "Don't bother, I'll handle it."

"Fine, I'll find a pilot—"

"I'll pilot it myself, stop lingering in my doorway. I know you have reports to look over." Dismissing him with a flap of his wrist, he turned toward the bed, continuing the guise of reading through the reports until the door shut behind Frederick.

Setting his comm pad aside, Magnus shut off the lights and laid down on the bed, draping an arm over his eyes. A minute passed in silence before he felt the bed dip and a small weight settle against his side. “What’s wrong?”

Pushing up on his elbow, Magnus offered Mickie a reassuring smile, ruffling his hair. “It’s nothing, hon. I just have some stuff to think about. Could you do me a huge favor though?” At the boy’s nod, he continued on. “Don’t tell anyone about Aldaz and Prylk, okay?”

Mickie frowned in confusion, forehead scrunching up. “Why not?”

“I just need a bit of time to think some things through. Can you keep it a secret?”

The seven year-old chewed his lip nervously for a moment before nodding, not meeting his brother’s eyes. “Okay.”

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Magnus was on his feet before his alarm could finish beeping the next morning, having lain awake all night. He was halfway through getting dressed, when the door to his room slid open with a soft gush of air, the dim light from the hallway streaming in.

Blinking against the light, Magnus shielded his eyes with his hand. “In or out, Frederick. Make up your mind, you’re blinding me.”

A second later the door shut, enclosing them in darkness. “I didn’t think you’d wake so quickly.”

“Yeah? Well I’m full of surprises,” He tiredly muttered, crouching down to tie his boots. “What are you doing up? You’re not piloting.”

“Can’t I see you off?” he asked, blindly stumbling over to Magnus.

Reaching out, he steadied him, keeping a careful grip on his arm. “I won’t stop you.”

“Didn’t think you would. You sure you’re okay to fly this? You just got back yesterday, it won’t kill you to take a day off.”

“Believe it or not, it just might,” Magnus muttered under his breath, before clearing his throat and continuing on. “I’m fine. And Iphis-II’s just a couple hours out, I’ll be back before dinner. I’ll rest then.”

“If you’re sure—”

“I am,” Magnus cut in. “Just do me a favor, and don’t piss anyone else off. Lock yourself in your room if you have to. But cut these kids some slack, they’re working hard.” Snagging his key card off the nightstand, Magnus led Frederick out into the hallway to ensure he didn’t trip over anything.

“Any other orders, or are you done mothering me?” Frederick asked irritated, as he followed his friend down toward the garage.

Magnus was quick to snipe back as he slapped his card against the door’s scanner. “I wouldn’t know, I never had parents.”

“Is this seriously how you want to go? I get you don’t like mornings, but you had the option to skip this trip. You were the one who insisted—”

“Would you stop trying to micromanage me and just go already. I’ve got this. I don’t need you breathing down my neck right now. I’ll talk to you later,” Magnus cut him off, quickly striding across the garage to board the ship, several engineers turning to watch the scene unfold.

Frederick glowered, but didn’t follow after him, aware of the eyes on him. Turning on his heel, he left the garage, likely returning to his room to sulk. Magnus didn’t allow the silence to hang in the garage for long, activity resuming as he thumped up the ship’s steps. “Eli, status on the weather we’re heading into?”

The blond was quick to unlock their comm pad and flip through the pages. “Small chance of mild storms later today, at the moment we’re looking at clear skies and a slight breeze.”

Pulling a jacket over his flightsuit, Magnus crossed the ship, ensuring the supply boxes were secure before grabbing an energy pouch. “As acting communications leader, I’ll need you in the front as my navigator. Where’s your twin?”

The teen bit back a yawn. “Elie ran to grab their toolbox. They should be back any minute now. The ship’s mostly ready, and a secure line has been established through



SciTech's comm sector, Ian's keeping an eye on it now, but we've moved a couple engineers over there for the day in case of a malfunction with Pothos' wiring."

"Coordinates?"

"Already programmed into the ship's nav system."

Holding the nozzle of the pouch between his teeth, Magnus tied his bangs back. "Alright, strap in. Oh— And send Owain our approximate arrival time."

Nodding, the blond moved to the front of the ship and buckled themselves into the navigator's seat as their twin finally thundered aboard the ship, toolbox in hand. "Where do I put this?"

"Take a seat, I got it." Taking the toolbox from the engineer, Magnus stowed it in one of the supply bins before returning to the front of the ship to strap in and secure his headset. "Pothos, this is the SHC, we're closing up and preparing for take off, are we clear to go?"

The comm crackled to life a second later. "Hold on a moment, SHC. You've got a last minute addition coming your way, open your rear door."

"Negative, Pothos. All crew members are boarded and strapped in." Magnus turned to ensure everyone was there.

"Senior Management approved a last minute addition. Sorry, SHC, it's out of our hands. Open your rear door."

Sighing, Magnus jabbed the button. "Tell Senior Management to shove it up his ass, Pothos."

"Will do, SHC."

Turning in his seat, Magnus watched as Saph trudged up the steps looking less than pleased. "Should've told him to cram it up his ass, hon."

"I'll keep that in mind for next time," the redhead muttered, as she strapped herself in beside Elie.

Turning his attention back forward, Magnus shut the doors and double-checked all the gauges. "Get some sleep while you can. We've got a few hours between here and Iphis-

II.” Receiving a tired grunt in response, he opened the channel between the ship and Pothos again. “Pothos, this the SHC, we are loaded up and strapped in. Are we clear for take off.”

“Take off in five, SHC. Hangar doors are opening now. See you on the other side.”

“Likewise, Pothos.” Setting the ship’s stabilizers on a low burn, Magnus carefully maneuvered the ship toward the open hangar doors, before tearing the throttle down, causing the ship to jolt forward and accelerate out into open space.

Once well away from the station, he set the autopilot before unbuckling and standing from his chair to snag something to eat. As he returned to his seat, he noticed the tight grip Eli had on the arms of the chair. “Not a fan of flying?”

“No. I prefer to stay on Pothos,” they muttered, eyes glued to the empty space before him.

“I’m not a fan either. Don’t worry, Iphis-II’s the least hostile planet we have a base on. Worst we’ll be looking at is a storm rolling in off the water. And Thramien base is set far enough out that we shouldn’t be bothered by anyone.”

The blond looked to him, brows scrunching in confusion. “If you hate it then why do you always run missions? Can’t you just work from Pothos?”

Magnus shrugged, as he tore into the rations pouch. “I could. But that’d be one less person onboard to help.”

“But aren’t you scared of leaving Mickie alone should something go wrong?”

“Of course, every time. But we all have reasons for choosing this life over Caladrius. No one was uninformed about the risks.”

Eli chewed their lip for a moment. “That’s fair. But what about Mickie? I mean, he was like four when he was brought onto Pothos. Don’t you think he was a little too young to decide?”

“He was three,” Magnus hummed, “—and he wouldn’t be on Pothos had someone not stepped up to take care of him. He was originally meant to be shuttled down to Caladrius with the other kids, but he was scared and didn’t want to go. He’ll remain on Pothos until

he's old enough to decide for himself whether he wants to join up or not, or if I feel it's become unsafe he'll be shuttled down to Caladrius."

"You don't think he'd be against it?"

The brunet shrugged. "He probably would. But during our visit to Caladrius, we made a couple friends that he could stay with. But like I said, unless I deem Pothos unsafe for him, he'll stay there. And given that we keep a low profile, chances are that won't ever be an issue."

"If you say so," Eli muttered under their breath as they sat back, fingers anxiously tapping off the arms of the seat.

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"Alright, Eli, I need you to wake Saph up and switch places with her. Water landings are a bit tricky for me and I need her help in getting us down without any issues." Nodding, the blond jolted up from their seat, going over to shake the redhead awake before strapping into the open seat beside their twin.

Groaning, Saph stood from her spot and trudged up to buckle into the navigator's chair, less than happy at being woken. "This is bullshit."

Magnus chuckled, as he switched the ship to manual controls. "I'll be sure to pass the message along to our beloved leader. All you have to do is help me with the descent and then you can nap the rest of the time for all I care."

"Nah, nah. More hands means the sooner we can go back to Pothos, and I can sleep in my own bed." She replied connecting her headpiece to the ship's comm system and dialing down to the base. "Thramien, this is shuttle SHC, we're upon your position now and in our descent. Come in Thramien." A moment passed with no response, before she tried again. "Thramien base, this is shuttle SHC, come in Thramien base." When another moment passed without response, Saph frowned and looked over to Magnus.

Not tearing his eyes from the watery landscape below, Magnus spoke. "Patch it to my comm." Tapping the controls, Saph did as requested, shooting him a thumbs up when finished. "Thramien base, you're on the line with Cerberus, respond Thramien base."

The line remained silent and he was about to call down again when it finally crackled to life. "Sorry, I was outside. You're all clear to land SHC."

Magnus shut off the comm. “Touchdown in two minutes. Get ready, this won’t be smooth.”

“Pull up more or we’re gonna submerge,” Saph commented, as she read off the ship’s projected landing speed.

Adjusting as directed, Magnus tightened his grip on the controls. “Should’ve just let you pilot.”

“Yeah, well, neither of us knew I’d be on board today. Was supposed to be a free day for me.”

“At least you’re going back to someone warming your bed. I wouldn’t be surprised if dear old Freddie’s raising hell in my absence. We didn’t part on the best of terms this morning, and hangar crew and a handful of engineers saw it. And you know how they are, half the station will know by breakfast.”

The girl laughed. “Serves him right. He shouldn’t be such a hardass on everyone.”

“Yeah, well, he’s better behaved when he’s not sulking. Flip the stabilizers down ninety, full power.”

“Stabilizers are flipped and burning. When was the last time he was at Thramien? Word is he doesn’t like to talk about the base, what’s the story on that?”

Magnus raised an eyebrow, though not turning to meet her gaze. “Focus on landing, Saph. Look for gossip later. And somewhere else, I’m not contributing to the insanity that spreads around Pothos.”

The redhead rolled her eyes, but turned back to the task at hand. “Lowering stabilizers to half power. A third. And— down we go.”

Once the ship had settled, she unbuckled from her seat and hopped up. “I’ll pilot back.”

“Let’s focus on getting communications fixed before we worry about who’s piloting back,” Magnus spoke, as he unclipped the ship’s supply bins and handed Elie their toolbox.

“Whatever you say, boss,” she chirped, jabbing the door’s release and stepping out onto the floating base.

Eli and Elie very reluctantly poked their heads out of the door, not exiting the ship until Magnus slipped in front of them to thump down the steps and into the afternoon light. “Don’t be nervous, the only base safer than this one is Caladrius. Nothing’s gonna happen here, I promise.”

Steeling themselves, Elie marched down the ramp, their twin glued to their back, both looking around at the dark water that surrounded the base, before deeming it safe enough and planting themselves behind Saph as she entered the small outpost.

Fixing his sunglasses over his eyes, Magnus closed the ship’s rear door, by the time he had turned back around Owain was halfway down the dock. “Jackoff still hiding from me?”

Magnus shrugged, tucking his hands into the pockets of his jacket. “Yeah. ‘S been eight years. Swore he’d die before he forgave you, and you know how he is. But how are you? Doing well since Cheya’s last house call?”

The blond slapped him on the back, leading him toward the small base. “Well as one can be in these times. Gotta say never pegged you for the small talk type, I mean, at least not when there’s serious business on the table.”

“I’m just full of surprises.” he hummed. “So what’s going on with your comm systems?”

“Not a damn thing. It’s working too good for once. I’ve been picking up messages from the mainland all week.”

Entering the base Owain was quick to shoo the twins away from the comm panel. “Don’t know how I’m getting them, but I managed to tag the line and have been collecting them all week. Gotta warn you though, it ain’t pretty.” He spoke before beginning to dig through a nearby drawer.

“On a scale of running into a pack of kursks in the dead of night to the last time you and Fritz were sharing air, how bad is it?”

“Worse.” He replied, pressing a small disk into Magnus’ hand. “Had to go a bit old school to make sure the base couldn’t be found. We’re set on yellow now—”

Opening the slot on his comm device, Magnus pressed the chip in and waited the few seconds it took to translate the data before quickly skimming over several pages, lips pressing thin. “Where’s Eizarel?”

“He ran to Caladrius for a quick visit home.”

Magnus promptly stood. “So you’re missing your shuttle. Call him back now. Go black. Keep your ear on this and send us updates as they occur. As of now this base no longer exists.”

“Got it. How should I update you.”

“I’ll get sci-tech started on an encryption method that works via the comm systems. You’ll be updated once it’s put in place.” he turned to Saph. “Get back to the ship and load up and prepare for lift off, I’ll be right out.” Clenching her teeth, the girl firmly nodded before dragging the twins out of the base and toward the ship.

Once they were out of earshot, Magnus turned back to Owain. Reaching out he grasped his forearm, squeezing briefly. “Stay safe.”

The blond nodded, reciprocating the gesture before following him to the door. “You too.”

Boots heavily thumping off the warm metal, Magnus ran for the ship. Pounding up the stairs, he quickly sealed the door before grabbing one of the rear seats. “Let’s go.”

Giving a single nod, the redhead quickly flipped on the engines and yanked the throttle down, sending them shooting off into the air, ship shuddering in the atmosphere as the stabilizers fought to adjust to the speed.

Ignoring the worried looks aimed his way, Magnus opened his comm again. he paused only to send a message to Frederick to prepare all of Cerberus for a serious update, before bringing up the file and reading through it to be ready to spread it out once they reached Pothos.

## Chapter VII

“Alright! That’s enough! Listen up!” The room fell silent, everyone turning their attention to Frederick as he stood at the head of the table, hands tucked behind his back to hide his fidgeting. “As of earlier today Thramien base has been ordered down. There will be no communication in or out of Thramien until further notice. For all any of you know, Thramien doesn’t exist. Iphis-II has been abandoned for the time being, as have any current attempts to re-open Laex base. I understand that rumors have begun circulating about why you’ve all been called before the annual meeting. A couple days ago we received some communications from Thramien about odd messages they were receiving. A team went down yesterday to fix what we thought was a malfunction with their communications system—”

Cutting himself off, he nervously wet his lips before speaking again. “The odd messages picked up by Thramien were meant for the human settlement on Iphis-II. They detail a program on Prometheus that’s already been underway for many years, one that they are now planning to expand to the other nearby human settlements. It’s not exactly clear what the program is, but the messages mention the manufacturing of spliced organisms—” He paused seeming to expect someone to react, when no one did he continued. “—which we don’t actually have any idea of what these are, but it’s something coming from high up in their governments, and their expansion plans seem to be aimed at the very outskirts of their respective settlements, and we can’t afford to be discovered. SciTech has logged the signal now, and is currently watching to keep us all up to date on their plans. Right now, our main focus is emptying all bases to Caladrius. Begin preparing for evacuation immediately. Once the bases are clear of refugees, their primary purpose will be ensuring other facilities don’t spring up. All supplies will now be coming courtesy of the Caladrian Revival on a bimonthly basis. In addition, we are being joined by several members of the Revival. Each base outside of Thramien, will be joined by one or two of these members. Anyone have any issues with that?” When no one answered, he nodded to himself. “Tonight, our Promethean base is being evacuated. Given it’s position relative to Prometheus and it’s low threat level, we’ll be expanding and repurposing the Aethonian base into our main communications hub. All bases, including Pothos and Caladrius, will be receiving their information via Causyx base. Expect the switch to happen within the next month—”

“Causyx will be running in a week and a half at most.”

Frederick turned away from wall of screens to face his second-in-command. Magnus had his arms crossed over his chest, feet propped up on the table as he leaned back in his chair. “Come again?”

The brunet shrugged. “I said Causyx will be up in a week and a half. We’ll fuel up and head out tonight.”

Frederick shook his head. “Prometheus is our first priority—”

Magnus cut him off again. “I agree. Which is why you’ll take Alan, Saph, and Cy and head out to Prometheus. And I’ll load up and take SciTech and comm down to Aethon. A month’s far too long, and the base needs to be prepared if some of the Revival members are staying there. Plus it’ll save you from having to deal with the Aethonian winter.”

After a moment, Frederick turned back to the waiting heads of the bases. “Causyx will be up in a week and a half. The *Subleader* will keep you informed, until then keep quiet and begin preparations for evacuation. You’ll be notified if your base will be evacuated before Causyx is finished setting up. On the otherside.”

Once the screens shut off, Frederick whirled around. “Give us a minute,” he tightly muttered, shooting a sharp look to Saph, Cybele, and Alan as the three were quick to head for the door. After the door whooshed shut behind the trio, he turned his attention back to Magnus, crossing his arms over his chest in irritation. “Who died and left you in charge?”

“Funny, that was what I was going to say,” he hummed, picking at his nails in boredom. “It’s a better plan and you know it. Run along and lick your wounds, you’ve got a busy day tomorrow.”

“I don’t know what your problem is, but you need to get over it. You’ve been acting weird since you got back from Caladrius—”

“This coming from the one who’s whining because I cut his timeline, on an urgent project, in half,” Magnus cut in, looking to him, unimpressed. “Grow up, Frederick. You’re not the leader, you’re just the oldest. Hate to break it to you, but there is a difference.”

Gritting his teeth, Frederick sighed, closing his eyes momentarily to compose himself. “Whatever. —Just —Just whatever.” Turning on his heel, he stalked out of the room and disappeared down the hall.

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Frederick stared at the dull grey floor of his quarters as he paced, nails digging into his wrists. Tired of the thud of his shoes against the metal, he flopped down on his bed, only to stand up a moment later to straighten his blankets before angrily glaring around the immaculate room. Crossing his arms over his chest, he tapped a finger off his upper arm, impatiently staring at the door before him as though it would open if he watched it long enough.

Huffing, he crossed to the door, stepping into the next room when it hissed open. Greeted by the familiar mess, he felt a good part of his anxious energy drain away. Shoulders slumping, he began trying to tidy the room a bit to keep himself from fidgeting; it was fairly easy as everything tended to accumulate in small piles kicked aside to clear a path to the door. Most of the clutter was just papers and books that needed to be returned to the ship's library, but amongst the mess he always found paraphernalia his second-in-command had weaseled away from the ship's archives. Mostly it was old clothes left behind by Pothos' previous occupants, almost everyone had an article or two from before the station was abandoned, but every once in a while he'd find a dirty plate or the remnants of a late night snack hidden under the debris.

Once the room was tidied to his satisfaction, Frederick turned his attention toward the war zone that was Magnus' bed. Strewn amongst the many blankets, were rations wrappers and empty energy pouches that spoke of too many long nights and early mornings. Completely destroying the nest of loose blankets, he carefully remade the bed, knowing it would return to its previous state within the hour.

As he was placing the trash in a neat pile to be taken out, his attention was drawn by quiet voices coming from the door that adjoined to Mickie's room. Creeping over, he tried to peer through the little sliver between the door frame and the door. Unable to see anything except where the light from the comm pad illuminated the wall, he pressed his ear against the crack to quietly listen in.

*"Tzo ahkeht heyoht?"*<sup>6</sup>

Frowning at the odd voice, Frederick pressed closer, trying to silently slide the door open further.

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<sup>6</sup> *How are you?*

“E-et ah—ahkeht heyoht.”<sup>7</sup> Mickie haltingly spoke, trying to wrap his tongue around the foreign syllables. “Eet—uhmm— Eet—,”<sup>8</sup> Huffing, the little one reverted to Terran. “I miss you.”

A deep chuckle came through the pad, before the voice responded. “*We miss you too, Ahk-ohkeht*<sup>9</sup>. *Hopefully soon you and your ahkeschtzoo*<sup>10</sup> *can come visit again.*”

Bewildered, Frederick pulled back and knocked before opening the door and peering around the doorframe. He found Mickie curled up against his brother’s side holding the comm pad close to his chest and watching him with wide eyes.

Standing from the bed, Magnus placed himself between Frederick and the seven year-old as he tucked him in. “Say ‘goodnight’, Mickie.” Before the boy could even look back to the screen, the comm pad was taken from him and shut off, tucked tightly beneath the elder’s arm.

Crossing the small room, he squeezed past Frederick and shut the door to Mickie’s room. “Is there something you needed?” he asked, hopping onto the bed to kick off his shoes, effectively messing up the neat blankets.

“Yeah.” At the other’s expectant glance, he continued on, sighing through his nose. “You were right, running both trips at the same time is a better plan. You don’t typically speak up during those meetings so I was a bit caught off guard. We okay?”

Magnus watched him for a moment, lips pursed, before nodding. “Happens to the best of us. That all you needed?”

Frederick nodded, tucking his hands behind his back. “Yeah.”

After a moment passed without either of him moving, Magnus spoke again. “Let me guess, your room’s cold?”

Sighing in relief, Frederick nodded, lips twitching up in a lopsided smile. “Always is.”

Shaking his head, Magnus rolled his eyes before scooting over and patting the space he had just vacated. “Just don’t steal all the blankets.”

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<sup>7</sup> *I am good*

<sup>8</sup> *I-I*

<sup>9</sup> *Not-little one*

<sup>10</sup> *Older sibling*

“Pretty sure it’s the other way around” he teased, unlacing his shoes and placing him against the wall.

“Whatever you say,” he snorted, burrowing beneath the blankets and raising the edge of the comforter as Frederick scooted in beside him.

Once he had settled, Magnus curled closer to tuck his head beneath his chin. Pillowing his head on his arm, Frederick reached up to flip off the light before pulling the covers tighter around them and resting his hand at the base of the other’s neck, gently scraping his nails along his nape. “Your roots are growing back, you’ll have to re-dye soon,” he hummed, tangling his fingers in the short hair.

Magnus thought for a moment before lightly shaking his head. “I think I’ll let it grow out a bit further before I dye it again. Wear a hat or something. I’ll touch it up once Causyx is done.”

“You sure? It wouldn’t take but a few minutes.”

Magnus tightened his grip on Frederick’s shirt in an attempt to keep him from pulling away. “I’m sure. I have to head out to Aethon in a couple hours, I’d rather spend my time trying to catch a quick nap.”

“That’s fair.” Humming, he gently combed his fingers through his hair. “Just be careful. Wouldn’t want to see you come back with fewer appendages than you left with.”

“I’m more worried about the crew. Most of them haven’t seen more than a flurry in their lifetime, and an Aethonian winter is a lot for anyone to handle. It’ll be a miracle if we make it out and back without any injuries or serious frostbite. But it looks like the weather won’t be complicating things, so there’s that—” Trailing off for a moment, he fell silent, before sighing and cuddling closer. “I’d be more worried about your mission. Prometheus has always been a high-risk planet, and it’s only gotten worse.”

“It’s nothing we’ve not handled before—”

“But it is,” Magnus cut him off. “This is so much more than we’ve ever had to handle. A few flimsy outposts are nothing compared to a high-security lab facility. The second they find us we’re done. Pothos is done.”

“We’re not gonna have to worry about that. Pothos kept a public presence, they didn’t hide, that’s why they were found out and destroyed. The only people alive now that know

about Pothos and Caladrius, are on Pothos or Caladrius. No one else knows about us. We just keep quiet and we'll be fine."

Magnus relented, shutting his eyes. "If you say so—"

"I do" he insisted. "Stop worrying. We need you fully focused on the task at hand. Aethon's treacherous in winter, those kids you're taking with you are gonna need all the help they can get. Okay?"

After a long moment he nodded. "Okay."

## Chapter VIII

.....Eight Years Ago.....

“So, you never told me why daddy dearest kicked you out.”

Frederick looked up from where he was unrolling the sleeping bag for the night; he had been travelling with Magnus for nearly two weeks, but he still had not gotten used to his level of chatter or the nigh-endless barrage of probing questions. Silently sighing, he watched as the brunet attempted to cover up his interest with a thin mask of indifference from his place seated near the fire, fidgeting hands tucked in his lap. Settling himself on top of the sleeping bag, he crossed his arms over his chest, pursing his lips in thought for a moment before reluctantly beginning. “I guess— I guess I started noticing things I— shouldn’t have when I was fourteen or fifteen. I thought if I ignored it it’d eventually go away. But when I was sixteen, my dad got this new page; he was beautiful— and blond— and he had the greenest eyes I’d ever seen. I— I didn’t really have friends in school, none that I really liked anyways, and he was around my age, and he was always around so we kinda became friends. We never really spoke much outside of pleasantries, because whenever he was around he was running errands for my dad, and I was only there to prepare me to follow in my father’s footsteps, but he was nice. Most of our friendship was just waving and a pleasant smile, but— but it made me— feel weird. And I guess— I guess he felt weird too. Because one day he was taking too long to get something from my dad’s office, so my dad sent me after him and we kinda—,” he trailed off, looking to the ground. Digging his fingers into his upper arms, he weakly continued on. “Kinda— you know— kissed.”

“What happened.”

Glancing over, he found his friend watching in rapt attention, chin cradled in his palms. Licking his lips, he nervously went on. “We got caught by my dad and his bodyguards. Jaxen got the easy way out, one of dad’s bodyguards popped him in the head.” Tapping two fingers off his temple, he swallowed hard. “Dad was furious, I thought he’d kill me too. Rumors would’ve spread fast though, so he was just planning on hiding me away and coming up with some excuse for my absence while everything was cleaned up. Decided I’d rather risk running off than him changing his mind. Sorry if that weirds you out.”

The brunet shrugged. “Not the worst I’ve heard.”

Frederick frowned, eyes narrowing. “It’s fucking weird, I get it. You don’t have to lie to make me feel better.”

Crossing his arms over his chest, unamused, Magnus sighed. “I’ve spent the majority of the last fourteen years locked up alone in a dark room. So not sure I’m the best judge of what is and isn’t weird. And your life’s pathetic enough as it is, no point in me adding to it by lying.”

“Oh, thanks,” he sarcastically retorted.

The kid widely grinned. “My pleasure.”

Rolling his eyes, Frederick settled back. “So what’s your sob story, huh?”

Magnus shrugged, seeming to pull back. “Like I said, fourteen years locked in dark rooms. Most of it was in some lab; I don’t know what they wanted, but I wasn’t it. When they were through with me, they passed me off to some branch of the military, I don’t know. It was a lot of the same. Dark rooms, disappointment, only now with the added bonus of being maimed anytime I displeased them. Eventually, I got tired of being messed with and got in a fight with some little prick. Broke his nose, knocked out some teeth. He had to be rushed to the infirmary for stitches. And tossed back into a dark little room, and left to await my inevitable maiming. Decided I was done and broke out. Wasn’t even hard, fuckers taught me how to get out of a locked room, should’ve expected me to use it.” Shrugging indifferently, he continued on, face impassive. “Ran off, pilfered some clothes, and here I am. No big deal.”

“Kinda sounds like a big deal.”

The kid shrugged, a moment passed before he seemed to come back to himself. “Oh, I almost forgot—” Pulling his backpack over, he began rifling through it.

“Forgot what?” Frederick nervously asked, a bit frightened of whatever he was so determinedly searching for.

“This.” Wrenching a worn book from his backpack, he held it up, excitedly shaking it. “I found this.”

Curious, Frederick scooted over to get a better look. “What is it?”

“I don’t know, but whatever it is it’s sure as fuck not supposed to exist,” he grinned. “Found it buried after that gruesome sandstorm a couple months ago.”

Peering over the brunet's shoulder, he tried to get a better look at the book, squinting as he tried to decipher the text on the worn cover. "What's it say?"

"A lot of stuff, but look—" Flipping rapidly through the yellowed pages, Magnus stopped on a random page, pointing to a ruined photograph.

Pulling the book toward him, Frederick turned to let the light of the fire better illuminate the page. Leaning in close, he cocked his head and closed an eye, trying to make out the blurred orb dominating the image. Shaking his head in defeat, he handed the book back. "What is it?"

"It's an abandoned space station!" Bouncing in excitement, he pointed to the text beneath the picture. "It's got the coordinates!"

Chuckling bitterly, Frederick cocked his head, brows furrowing. "Yeah? So what?"

Rolling his eyes, Magnus turned the book toward him. "Don't you get it, you moron? We can get off this shitstorm planet for good. No one knows this place exists. No more looking over your shoulder; no more scrounging for scraps. No more running."

"Oh, great, we'll just take the next shuttle up there."

Closing his eyes, the brunet pinched the bridge of his nose, releasing a heavy sigh. "Haven't you been wondering where we're headed? Or did you think I just picked a direction at random and thought, 'well, this is as good a direction as any other to wander aimlessly'?"

"Don't be an ass."

Magnus tossed his head back, laughing. "You do hear yourself talk, right?" he asked, looking to him in disbelief.

Frederick rolled his eyes "Fine. Where are we going? Since you seem to want to keep me in the dark on everything. Were you even planning on telling me? Or were you just gonna wait until we stumbled over your genius plan?"

"I was waiting 'til I could trust you. And there's a scrapyard for shuttles about an hour's walk from here. That's where we're headed."

"Why? Do you expect to just walk up and go 'hey there, Mr. Junkman, I was wondering if we could take one of your shuttles so we can travel to some old space station that's

probably not even there anymore. Oh, and by the way, we're a couple of runaway kids who probably have a ransom on our heads'."

"Will you shut up for one minute," Magnus snapped. "I could really do without the constant stream of bullshit negativity that you spit out all the fucking time. Did those knobby apples melt your brain? No, we're not gonna ask to take a shuttle; we're gonna fucking steal one, you idiot." Breathing hard, he crossed his arms over his chest, darkly scowling. "Look, I don't give a fuck what you do. But I'm getting off this dusty fuckwad of a planet, even if only to die in the void of space. I don't give a shit, I'm done. If you wanna stay here, fine."

Glowing at him, a muscle in Frederick's jaw worked as if in silent speech, clenching and unclenching his teeth. After a moment of silence, he spat, "Fine."

Returning the glare, Magnus sat back, scowling. "Good. I'm guessing you have some experience with piloting if you were set up to take daddy's throne."

"I'm not certified."

The kid shrugged. "Worst case, we die. Then it's no longer an issue."

"Go to sleep. I'll keep first watch tonight."

Kicking off his shoes, Magnus shook his head, snickering. "No you won't. You'll fall asleep twenty minutes in, then wake up bitching about the cold." Regardless, he crawled into the sleeping bag to settle down.

"Like you're any different," he retorted, as he sat back to watch the fire, smirking.

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"This isn't gonna work."

"Shut up. Just shut up."

Rolling his eyes, Frederick wrapped his arms tighter around himself to ward off the early morning chill. The sun hadn't even risen yet, he had no idea how his friend could see anything in front of him, muchless see enough to find a dead spot in the fence around the scrapyard.



Sitting back on his heels, Magnus nodded. “Alright, this’ll tingle a bit but it’s the best shot we got.”

Frederick nodded toward the fence. “You first.”

Standing up, he dusted off his hands. “Wiener.” Taking a deep breath, he tightly grabbed onto the fence and began to climb. Reaching the top he rolled over, choosing to fall on his ass instead of climbing down. “Your turn, Fritzie.”

Steeling himself, Frederick grabbed the fence, only to immediately let go with a shriek. “I thought you said it’d tingle,” he hissed, shaking out his hand.

“Shut the fuck up and climb the fence before I leave your ass, it ain’t that bad.”

Taking a deep breath, Frederick grit his teeth and uncoordinatedly scrambled up the fence, throwing himself off the top. Landing painfully, he rolled onto his side with a grunt.

“Come on, let’s go,” Magnus huffed, prodding Frederick with the toe of his shoe. “Come on! All your screamin’ prob’ly woke someone, we have to go!” When Frederick still didn’t get up quickly enough for his liking, he grabbed him by his underarms and began slowly pulling him across the junkyard. “Why are you so heavy, all that ever comes outta ya is hot air.”

“Just let go’a me,” he hissed, still trying to catch his breath as he stumbled to his feet.

“Well come on then, princess. We’ve gotta find one that’s still fueled up. Keep an eye out for any shuttles with closed fuel ports.” Magnus hurried ahead, not waiting for Frederick to catch up.

“Don’t know how you can even see out here. ‘S too dark.” He complained, though running a few steps to keep up with his friend.

“C’mon, our best chance is if we find one before the sun’s up. Less chance of being caught.”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever— Oof!” Frowning, he tried to remove the tight hand from the back of his collar. “What are you—” Frederick’s jaw snapped shut as he spotted the thin beam of light slowly travelling toward them.

He could feel the prickle of his friend's sharp nails through his clothing, as he grabbed him roughly by the arm and hauled him back behind a nearby shuttle. A few minutes passed, as the beam of light grew larger and footsteps approached them. Frederick pressed himself back against the ship behind him, eyes on his friend. The kid didn't make a sound as he crept closer to the end of the shuttle before stilling, not even seeming to breathe as he waited.

The footsteps slowed as they neared the duo's hiding place, hesitating, before starting again. Frederick watched as the brunet prepared himself, eyes locked on the space just before the shuttle. Before he could move, the beam of light whipped around, blinding them both as a firearm's powersource whirred to life. "Don't move."

Magnus raised his hands to shoulder height placatingly. "Don't shoot."

"You're trespassing. I have every right to shoot you."

"Yeah, but don't." Magnus stared unblinking at the person as he slowly reached out for the gun.

"I said don't move." The teenager tightened his grip on the gun, looking between the two fearfully.

"Hey, hey, it's okay. We're not moving," Magnus reassured, though carefully inching closer to the teen. "No one needs to get hurt here. We're not looking to cause any trouble."

The teen was beginning to get riled up. "You're trespassing on private property and will be dealt with as I see fit."

Magnus conceded. "Yes, but counterpoint, do you hear that—?"

"Hear what?"

Magnus nodded toward the horizon. "That."

Frederick was quick to pick up on the lie, straining his ears, he pretended like he could just barely hear the low roar of an encroaching storm. "Sandstorm."

The teen regarded them both skeptically, but the threat of an impending storm far outweighed anything else and he turned to see for himself; the split second he looked

away gave Magnus enough of an opening to lunge forward and toss his full weight onto the gun, tearing it from the teen's grip.

Startled, he quickly backed away, preparing to run for shelter. Before he could get more than a couple steps, Frederick grabbed him roughly by the arm. "Take us to a fueled up shuttle now."

"Or what?" the teen snapped, futilely trying to pull away.

He gestured to Magnus. "You see my friend over there? He may look pretty human, but he's actually a filthy man-eater. Now, if you get us to a fueled up ship, I might just consider talking him out of having you for breakfast. Or you can take your chances with being eaten alive. Your choice."

The teen looked between Magnus and Frederick several times trying to discern whether he was being lied to. After a moment, he sighed. "Fine. There's one on the edge of the lot. Can I go now?"

"Oh no, you're gonna take us there," Frederick mocked, dragging the teen off in the indicated direction, Magnus trailing along just behind them.

He sputtered in surprise, stumbling along. "But the storm's gonna be right on top of me then! There's no way I can get you there and get back to shelter! I'll die!"

"Not my problem," he replied, though picking up the pace to keep the facade of an encroaching storm. "Get us to the ship, and I might be obliged to work something out."

Lower lip trembling, the teen took off full tilt toward the edge of the junkyard taking Frederick with him and leaving Magnus to stumble along behind as he struggled to catch up. Within a couple minutes, the group had reached the small craft. Fumbling frightfully, the teen clumsily punched in the code to open the ship's door to allow them in, shutting the door when they all were onboard.

Releasing his arm, Frederick looked about the small cabin, nodding to himself. "It's a piece a' shit but it'll get the job done."

The teen stood awkwardly where he was left. "Now what?"

Frederick whirled back around and stalked up to him taking his arm again. “Thank you for your help, however we no longer require assistance, so I have to ask you to leave now.”

“Shut up!” Magnus snapped, smacking him upside the head. “The fuck is wrong with you!? You’re not throwin’ anyone out!”

Frederick looked down to him, incredulous. “We’ve got our ship, we don’t need anyone else,” he insisted.

Grabbing him by the collar, Magnus jerked him down to his level. “You are not throwing anyone out,” he slowly enunciated. “You said if we got our ship, that he could stay. He kept his end of the bargain, you’re keepin’ yours.”

After a long moment of the two glaring at each other, Frederick backed off with a sigh. “Whatever,” he spat. “If the little bitch kills you, it’ll be your own damn fault.”

Turning away from Frederick, he approached the still shaking teen. “I’m guessing you know how to pilot these rigs, right?” At the nervous nod he received, he continued on. “Think you can get us outta here before the storm grounds us?”

“I—I guess. You’re not gonna toss me out in space are you?”

“Of course not.” Magnus shot a look over his shoulder to where Frederick had claimed a seat and was sulking, arms crossed over his chest. “Ignore him. He talks tough, but can’t back anything up.” When that did nothing to ease the teen’s look of fear, he sighed and tried again. “Look, we’re just a couple of runaways trying to get off this hellhole. If you can get us there, I swear we’ll never bother you again—”

“So I’m just supposed to show back up with a stolen shuttle and, what? Say I was kidnapped? Forced against my will to pilot the shuttle? How do you think that’ll go over?” he snapped.

“I read about this really nice planet,” the brunet weakly replied. “It’s supposedly a paradise. You could always go there.”

“Let me remind everyone that there’s a sandstorm. If we stay here any longer, we’re all gonna die a slow and painful death. So if you don’t mind, maybe save the arguing for later,” Frederick snapped, glaring at them both.

Though having regained his confidence, the teen didn't argue with Frederick and instead turned on his heel and marched up to the pilot's seat to start the shuttle. "Sit down and buckle up."

Rushing to do as instructed, Magnus flopped down in the seat beside Frederick and strapped in, becoming jittery as the shuttle came to life and roughly took off.

Once they had broken through the atmosphere, the teen turned just far enough to call over his shoulder, "Where're we headed?"

"I've got the coordinates." Unbuckling his seatbelt, Magnus rifled through his bag until he found the book. Approaching the ship's control panel, he found the navigation system and carefully input the coordinates from the book, double-checking to ensure he were correct before returning to his seat.

Briefly glancing at the map, the teen sighed and settled back in the seat, adjusting his grip on the ship's controls. "Better get comfortable. Looks like a bit of a trip."

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Frederick awoke to a sharp pain in his forehead. Groaning, he swatted at the air in front of him before blearily blinking. Magnus stood in front of him, head cocked, watching him for a moment, before reaching out and poking him again.

Scowling, Frederick batted his hand away. "Whadya want?"

"We need someone to go open the hangar doors manually," he answered, bouncing on the balls of his feet, full of nervous energy.

Scrunching his brows in confusion, Frederick turned to look out the windshield, breath catching in his throat as voidal darkness engulfed the view before him. Standing from his seat, he moved to the front of the ship and peered out the windshield tilting his head at every angle he could in an effort to see anything beyond the starless abyss. At the very edge of the window, if he tilted his head just right, he could see sharp silver arcing through the dark metal. "What is that?" he asked, awestruck.

"Given the coordinates, we're assuming its Pothos." Whipping around, Frederick found the teenager from the junkyard buckled into the pilot's seat, eyes still full of wonder at the station before him. Clearing his throat, the teen tore his eyes away from the

windshield. “Unfortunately, the hangar will have to be manually opened, and since you weren’t awake, you lost the draw.”

Frederick moved toward the back of the ship slowly. “You sure you want to be left all alone with the man-eater?”

Magnus crossed his arms over his chest. “Come off it, Fritzie. While you napped, we talked. His name’s Owain, and he knows I’m not a man-eater. Now quit bitchin’ and go already. You were voluntold fairly.”

Irritated, he pulled an artificial skin from the supply bin and clumsily put it on, having only seen them in films. “What now?” he asked, looking to Owain after sealing the suit.

The blond nodded to the ship’s emergency docking port. “Should be able to get in and out with that. I think I remember how to work it.”

“Anything I should know?” Frederick nervously asked, as he stepped inside the small area.

“Once the hangar doors are open just slide your way in. It’s safer than trying to reach the ship again,” he replied, sealing off the docking port behind Frederick before opening the second door and allowing him out.

Taking a deep breath, Frederick cautiously climbed out of the ship before inching his way over to the hulking station. Once he was as close as he could get, he pushed off the shuttle and slowly floated over to the edge of the hangar doors. Luckily, all he had to do was press the emergency button and the hangar doors silently opened.

Crawling carefully over, Frederick slipped inside the hangar, the shuttle entering a moment afterwards. What little light was given off by the stars disappeared as the gaping maw shut, enshrouding the group in utter darkness.

Frederick’s chest tightened fearfully, as he strained to make out anything around him. Luckily, he wasn’t left in the dark for long. After a moment, he heard the shuttle door open and Owain and Magnus emerged, each holding lightsticks from the ship’s supply bin. Pushing off the wall, Frederick slowly floated over to them, accepting the offered lightstick, before kicking off the shuttle in an attempt to catch up with the kid who had already figured his way out of the hangar and was currently bouncing off the hallway walls in excitement.

Entering the small hallway, he found Magnus had tugged the book out of his backpack, skimming through the pages with his lightstick as he determinedly hopped toward his destination. “You think you could slow down for a minute?” he called out, as he and Owain struggled to catch up with the brunet.

Magnus ignored them, almost happily flipping off the walls and ceiling before disappearing down a stairwell. When he and Owain finally caught up to the kid, he found him looking from a page in the book to a panel on the wall and back several times, before he shrugged and pushed a lever down.

After a long second, the trio heavily thudded to the ground, groaning. “Oops, should’ve gone slower,” Magnus sheepishly muttered, as he stood back up and placed the lightstick between his teeth before turning back to the panel in front of him. After a couple more minutes of skimming through the book, he found what he was looking for and flipped the breaker, the electricity humming on a moment later and lighting the hallway.

Holding his throbbing shoulder, Frederick looked around in confusion. “How—?”

“Solar power,” Magnus called over his shoulder, as he shut the book and began walking down the hallway. “Just been sitting here for two hundred years, it’s gonna gather a lot of juice.”

“Where are you going?” Frederick called after him, not yet convinced they should be moving around the foreign station just yet.

The brunet paused just long enough to reply, “People lived here, right? Where there are people there are beds. I’m gonna find myself a bed. You’re free to do whatever you want though.”

Muttering under his breath for a long second, Frederick gave in and sighed, following after him. “We should at least stick together.”

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After a half hour of wandering around, returning to the level they all started out on, they found their way onto a small sub-level. By that time, they were all more tired than interested in exploring and were desperate to find some place to rest. Coming upon a row of closed doors, Magnus made a beeline for the first, poking around the doorway for a minute before figuring out how to open the door. Peering inside, he nodded, before

ducking back out. “This one’s mine. I called it.” He had turned on his heel and had a foot in the door, before he was stopped.

“Where there’s people there’s showers,” Frederick snarked, pulling him away from the room and pointing to a marked door down the hallway before shoving him toward it. “You smell.”

“You smell, he says. You can sleep after you shower, he says,” he mimicked, as he sulkily made his way into the other room. “But no, I don’t smell, even though I’ve been out there way fucking longer than you have.”

“Shut up and stop whining, I’m coming too,” Frederick retorted, following after him.

Turning on a shower, Magnus sat down to untie his shoes while the showerhead whistled, water quickly heating up. “What’s wrong, princess?” he asked, standing with his hands on his hips and watching as Frederick frowned at the opaque dividers between the shower stalls. “Not up to your standards?”

Sighing, he shook his head. “Yeah, well, my standards are gonna have to change or I’m gonna be disappointed for the rest of my life.”

Shrugging, Magnus kicked off his pants, before turning his back to him and stripping off his filthy shirt. Jumping at the sensation of fingers on his back, he whirled around eyes wide. “What the fuck?! What do you want?”

“The fuck’s on your back?” Frederick asked, frowning as he tried to turn the brunet’s shoulder to get a better look at the dark streaks running up his back and sides.

“I don’t fucking know.” He lied trying to knock the other’s hands away. “Can you just leave it alone?”

Ignoring his complaints, Frederick continued. “It’s— fur,” he muttered to himself in awe, as he stroked his fingers along the streak and down the trail of thin blue fur spreading down his spine from his shoulders, before disappearing beneath the waistband of his underwear. “And— is this— this is a tail?” he quietly spoke, eyes glued to the coiled stump seated against his lower back.

“Will you stop touching me and let me shower?” Magnus hissed, eyes narrowed in irritation as he pulled away from Frederick. “I’m tired. Can’t we talk about this later?”



Nodding dumbly, he watched him slip into the shower stall and shut the door before stripping of his underwear and stepping beneath the hot spray. After a long moment, he managed to shake off his curiosity and climb into a shower himself. Beneath the warm water, he felt himself beginning to doze, eyelids growing heavy and reminding him of how long it had been since he'd had a moment of peace, a proper shower. How long it'd been since he'd had the promise of a bed, an actual bed, to sleep in.

By the time he had finally dragged himself out from the glorious warmth he was alone in the bathroom, the only trace of the others being the wet footprints leading out the door. Snagging a folded towel off the bench, he wrapped it around himself before grimacing down at his dirty clothes. Unable to bring himself to redress in the reeking fabric, he left it where it lay and plodded out of the bathroom. Walking down to the room next to the one Magnus had claimed, he opened the door; he felt his chest tighten as he stared into the dark room and, after a moment, he gathered his pride and crossed to the next door, knocking.

A long moment passed, before the door slid open to reveal the small brunet. Hazel eyes tiredly blinked up at him, silently questioning. "Room's too cold," he muttered, nervously stumbling over his words. "Hate the cold."

A small eternity passed, before Magnus stepped aside and waved him into the room. Sagging in relief, Frederick nodded, before quickly crossing to the bed and crawling beneath the blankets as the door closed and engulfed the room in darkness. A second later, he felt the bed dip as the brunet crawled in beside him and curled up, heat radiating off his skin. Curiosity getting the better of him, he held his breath and wrapped an arm around his friend's back, fingers settling in the thin fur. Magnus stiffened momentarily, before settling down with a soft sigh, more interested in sleeping than dealing with his friend's curiosity.

## Chapter IX

Groaning, Frederick readjusted his bag over his shoulder as he trudged toward the hangar. It would be an understatement to say he was looking forward to the annual week-long meeting between Pothos and Caladrius. It had been a good two weeks since he'd had a second to just breathe, and he was desperate for the respite the meeting brought along. Well, that and he always found the fresh air and gentle breezes that accompanied the Caladrian Autumn soothing.

Yawning, he thumped down the stairs and onto the hangar floor, making a beeline for the waiting shuttle. He wanted to spend as much time as possible going over the material for the meeting, but he had only returned from Prometheus a couple hours before and needed to sleep so he would be alert for the meetings. However, that became less likely as he neared the shuttle, growing excited at the prospect of spending some personal time with his second-in-command.

Reaching the ship, he took the steps two at a time. He took a moment to marvel at the sleek interior of the cabin, the brightly colored metallics twisted into every corner a tribute to the planet's diverse population.

"Excuse me, do you need help with something?"

Schooling his expression into a neutral mask, Frederick turned to look to the Caladrian crewmember. "Has the subleader boarded yet?"

Stiffening, the cadet's friendly smile fell and they straightened their posture, nodding. "Yes. The subleader boarded a while ago. I believe they've retreated to their sleeping cell, if you would like me to point you there—"

"No, I know where it is," Frederick cut them off, turning to step around them. "You're dismissed."

Ignoring the eyes on his back, he sauntered over to the cell Magnus always took. Smiling, he resisted the urge to bounce on the balls of his feet as he knocked.

A second later, the door slid open just far enough for the brunet to squeeze out. Smiling sadly, he tucked his hands behind his back, keeping himself between Frederick and the door. "Hey."

Brows furrowing in concern, he frowned. "What's going on? Is everything okay?"

“Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah. Everything’s fine. Mickie’s just feelin’ a bit sick. Prob’ly one of those twenty-four hour things. He’s just resting right now,” Magnus reassured him.

“So— What’s going on with you? ‘S been a while, hasn’t it?”

Frederick shook his head. “Oh, nothing. I was just seeing if you were free for a bit. I wanted to go over some things for the meeting.”

Pursing his lips, Magnus nodded, fidgeting. “Yeah— Uh— Later? He’s—he’s really not feelin’ well and I don’t wanna just leave him alone.”

“Of course. Just stop by whenever he’s feeling better. I’m just one down from you—”

“As always,” Magnus tightly chuckled, shifting from foot to foot.

“You sure everything’s alright?” he pressed again.

“Yeah, I’m sure. I just— I should get back to him. I’ll—I’ll see ya later,” he replied, slipping back through the door.

“Yeah, I’ll see ya,” Frederick muttered, shoulders slumping as he trudged over to the other cell, suddenly feeling his previous exhaustion rushing back.

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Magnus waited a long moment with his back pressed to the door of the cell, pinching the bridge of his nose tiredly. Sighing, he looked over to where Mickie lay on his stomach on the bed coloring.

Setting down the stylus, the seven-year-old turned to him. “Are you lying to Frederick?”

Smiling bitterly, Magnus shook his head and walked over to sit on the bed. “No, no, I’m not lying to Frederick.”

Mickie cocked his head, dark curls bouncing. “But you told him I was sick. I heard you.”

Magnus sighed. “Yes, but—”

“But I’m not sick?” the kid cut him off. “Isn’t that lying?”

“No, no, it’s—” Under the watch of the boy’s soft green eyes, Magnus deflated and nodded, sighing before meeting his eyes. “Yes Mickie, it’s lying. I’m lying to Frederick. But it’s very complicated.”

“But why?”

Pulling the kid into his lap, Magnus settled back against the wall. “Because I’m scared. And sometimes when people get scared and don’t want to face their problems, they lie and hope they go away.”

Turning in his grasp, Mickie looked up at his older sibling. “What are you scared of?”

Tipping his head back against the wall, Magnus thought for a long moment before licking his lips and looking down at the waiting boy. “You know Frederick’s my best friend, and I’ve known him since before you were even born. Well, I’ve always told him everything. But he was— He has different ideas about people who look like your Hyahtet<sup>11</sup>. And I don’t know how to tell him about them. I’m scared how he’d take it. And I know if I’m around him for long enough, I won’t be able to keep it from him.”

The seven year-old sat quietly for a moment before piping up. “Are you ever gonna tell him about Aldaz and Prylk?”

Magnus nodded. “I’m gonna tell him while we’re down for the meeting. I’m gonna tell him after I’ve dropped you off with them for a bit.” he bitterly chuckled, “He was upset enough when you came into the picture. I’m not sure how he’s gonna take our little family growing by two more.”

“What happens if he doesn’t like them?”

Sighing, he shrugged. “I don’t really know.”

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Stepping off the shuttle, Frederick took a deep breath, the gentle breeze blowing across the landing pad a welcome relief after being caged on the ship for three days. Readjusting the strap of his bag, he looked around, making a beeline for the edge of the tarmac where Magnus was bent over his bag, digging around for his sunglasses.

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<sup>11</sup> parents

Catching up with the duo, he reached down, ruffling Mickie's hair. "Good to see you're feeling better."

Clinging tightly to his brother's arm, Mickie looked up at him, frowning. Straightening up, the brunet fastened the dark goggles over his face and shouldered his bag. "Need somethin'?"

"No, no. Not really. But I was thinkin', we've still got a couple hours until it's too dark to really see, why don't we walk around a bit. Maybe the beach— See if the market's still open—"

Shoving his hands in his pockets, Magnus smiled tightly, cutting him off with a sigh. "Frederick—" Abruptly halting, he started again. "That's— I mean, that sounds really nice, but I haven't really gone over the notes for tomorrow's meeting. And I was also kinda hoping to go to bed early—"

"You, go to bed before dawn?" Frederick laughed, shaking his head. "I'd expect Halja to freeze before you'd go to bed early."

Chuckling tightly, the brunet nodded. "I know right? But, hey, that doesn't mean you have to turn in early. I'm pretty sure the market's still open— Ooh, if it is can you grab me a bag of esukin nuts? Bring 'em to me tomorrow at the meeting?"

"Uh, yeah, yeah. Of course." Shoving his hands in his pockets, Frederick shifted his weight to his other foot. "Just check me in when you do."

"I'll leave your key at the front desk." he nodded. "Tomorrow?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'll see you tomorrow." Frederick waited until Magnus had turned and begun walking away in the direction of the Revival's campus, before he headed for the market.

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Frederick stared at the door, knee bouncing nervously as he waited for his second-in-command to arrive. The meeting was meant to start a half hour before, but Tiffikh refused to start until everyone was present and had been fiercely glaring at Frederick for the last twenty minutes. Finally, the door slid open and Magnus slipped in, unkempt hair haphazardly sticking up.

Flopping down in the chair beside Frederick, he ran his fingers through his hair in a futile attempt to force it into some semblance of order. Giving up after a second, he reached down to rifle through the small bag he had with him, producing his comm pad as well as a container of some still-steaming food.

Clearing his throat, Tiffikh narrowed their eyes in disapproval, seeming to visibly flinch in discomfort as Magnus opened the container and began eating. “So nice of you to join us today, Subleader. You would think after seven years you would come on time at least once.”

“Sorry, I had to convince Mickie that he’d have more fun playing with the locals than if he came with me,” he shrugged, between bites of his breakfast. Tiffikh stared him down for another long moment, before turning away to start the meeting.

Tuning out the nasally voice of the Overuemtzt, Frederick uncertainly watched Magnus for a bit longer, noting that his normally well-hidden dark roots were on full display, beginning to dominate the dyed brown locks.

After several minutes passed, he realized Magnus was intentionally not meeting his gaze, instead feigning attention on the Revival’s head. Furrowing his brows in confusion, Frederick gave up and settled back in his seat, crossing his arms over his chest as he watched Tiffikh gesticulate the plans for expansion.

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After what felt like an eternity to Frederick, the meeting finally let out. The first day of the annual meeting, in his opinion, was always the worst as it was solely devoted to the expansion of the Caladrian Revival and its operations. They were only in there for two or three hours before it was, thankfully, cut short by Magnus mentioning the droves of refugees that would soon be shuttled to the planet as the bases were evacuated, effectively ending the tangent on meal cards and starting the Overuemtzt squawking unhappily to themselves about where they would house everyone.

Frederick hurried out of the Revival’s boardroom and down the hallway, trying to catch up to the brunet, who had been packed up and out the door before Tiffikh finished dismissing the meeting. Closing the distance, he reached out and grabbed his arm. “Hey, where’re you off to so quickly?”

Tugging against his grip, he briefly paused mid-step. “I’m going to meet up with Mickie.”

“Can’t you spare a couple minutes? I’ve barely seen you in weeks.”

Looking between Frederick and the street ahead, he huffed. “Frederick, just give me like— an hour and we’ll meet back up with you.”

He chuckled, brows furrowing in confusion. “I can’t come pick up Mickie with you? Meet your friends?”

Magnus looked over his shoulder, shifting from foot to foot impatiently. “I didn’t say that. But—”

“But what?”

Before he could answer, Tiffikh began insistently tapping on his arm. “Excuse me. Excuse me.” Magnus took advantage of the split-second of distraction to wrench his arm free from his grip and disappear down the street. Sighing, Frederick looked between Tiffikh and the mid-day crowd before turning to the Overuementz.

Once they saw they had Frederick’s full attention, the violet alien began again. “Excuse me, but are you okay? You’ve seemed very distracted and not how you usually are. Is there a problem?”

“No, there’s no problem—”

“This isn’t about the housing, is it? I’m certain we can get it up quickly enough.”

“No, it’s not about the housing.” Frederick shook his head. “I just need to talk to the Subleader—”

Interrupting him again, Tiffikh waved him off. “Oh, then why’re you standing here? Go! Go!”

Exasperated, he turned to head off, before pausing. “Hey, I never caught what room the Subleader was in. Is it the door across from me or the door beside me?”

Tiffikh cocked their head in confusion. “The Subleader isn’t staying in the Revival’s housing. It was my understanding they were staying with the Teiresian couple they met during their last visit here. Were you not aware?”

“Teiresian?” Chuckling, he shook his head. “You mean Aethonian?”

After a moment of thought, Tiffikh shook their head. “No, I mean Teiresian.”

“You must be confused. It can’t be Teiresian, we don’t have any bases on Teiresias. There aren’t even any Terran colonies there.”

They nodded. “I know.”

Furrowing his brows, Frederick tried again. “Then they’re not Teiresian,” he slowly enunciated.

“No, they’re Teiresian.”

Sighing, Frederick ran a hand through his hair. “Okay, do you know where they live?”

“Of course.” They nodded. “They’re a house down from the one you stayed in before the Revival’s campus was built. A little ways down from the market. Do you know where that is? Because I can lead you there if—”

“No, I’ve got it. Thanks,” he replied, turning and striding off before the Overuemtz could speak again.



## Chapter X

Standing at the edge of the stone path, Frederick looked down the shoreline, double checking he hadn't missed a closer walkway. Finding none, he shrugged and plod up to the front door, grimacing as he felt warm sand shift about in his shoes. Knocking sharply, he stepped back, hearing muffled conversation and movement toward him.

It took everything he had not to jump back from the creature that answered the door. Towering a good head above him, it was covered in pale blue fur except for a light grey patch stretching from its lower eyelids to its chin. "Hello?"

Shaking off his shock, Frederick took a step back. "Sorry, wrong house."

As he was turning, a head of dark curls popped out from around the doorway. "Frederick!"

"Mickie?" He stiffened, watching as the creature easily lifted the seven year-old onto its hip, a soft rumble echoing from its throat. "Where's your brother?"

The boy didn't seem to pick up on the urgency of his question, content to happily chatter on. "Frederick, this is my *hyaht*!<sup>12</sup> It means parent! Isn't it awesome! I have parents now!—"

"Mickie!" he snapped. "Where's your brother!"

Startled, the boy looked at him with wide eyes, lower lip trembling. Grabbing tightly to the loose clothing, he hid his face in the creature's shoulder.

Frederick's blood froze in his veins as the creature looked away, ears flicking back in the same distinctive movement he had seen whenever his second-in-command became visibly upset. He didn't have long to reflect on it, before the person in question appeared from inside the house. "Aldaz, what's going on?"

The creature turned from the doorframe and said something unintelligible, before stalking off still carrying the young boy. Any confusion disappeared from Magnus' face when he turned and spotted Frederick.

For a long moment they both stood there, silently staring at each other. Finally, Magnus looked away, quietly stepping out of the house and shutting the door behind him. "So,

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<sup>12</sup> *parent*

uh— what’s up?” he tightly chuckled, fidgeting hands clasped behind his back as he refused to meet the other’s gaze.

“‘What’s up?’ What the fuck do you mean ‘what’s up?’! What the fuck is going on!” he hissed.

“I don’t know what you’re talking—”

“Don’t pull that shit, you know damn well what I’m talking about. You’ve been brushing me off for over a month, you’ve refused to actually talk to me, and you lied about staying in the Revival’s housing—”

“Hey! I never said I was staying in the Revival’s housing—,” he cut in.

“You told me you made friends with some Natives—”

“I said locals,” Magnus insisted, crossing his arms over his chest. “And the only reason I didn’t tell you I was staying here, was because I knew you’d react like this.”

“You’re damn right,” Frederick spat. “Tiffikh called them Teiresian! Are they fucking Teiresian?!”

“Does it really matter?”

“Are you fucking kidding me?! No one has ever come back from Teiresias! Ever! And you just happen to find the only Teiresians here—”

“A gross understatement—”

“—The *only* Teiresians here and befriend them?! Are you fucking kidding me?! Mickie called that—that thing his parent!”

“Excuse you! That ‘thing’ has taken Mickie and me into their home. That ‘thing’ was able to answer questions that I didn’t even know I had! I’ve not had this much fuckin’ closure since you and me found Pothos! For the first time in twenty-three years, I have answers—” Swallowing hard, he blinked back tears. “—For the first time in twenty-three years, I know who I am —I know where I come from— For the first time in twenty-three agonizingly long years, I’m not alone. I have a family, Frederick, a family.”

“What about Mickie? What about me? Are we not your family? What about Cerberus? And—and Pothos?”

“You are. But you don’t understand— You can never understand. Years, Frederick, for years I thought I was the only one. You don’t know how lonely that is,” Magnus hissed through hitching breaths, reaching out to him, seeking comfort.

Shaking his head, Frederick ripped his arm away. “Don’t fucking touch me! You wanna stay with that savage and play house, you go right on ahead.”

“Don’t call them that!”

“What? ‘Savage’? Magnus, not once has a shuttle ever returned from Teiresias, not once. And they’ve never found any remains or anything. No cameras have gotten pictures. No satellites have recorded information. Nothing. There is nothing on Teiresias. You need to grow up and face the facts, whatever got those colonists is living in that house, and if you stay here you and Mickie will end up just like those poor fuckers. They’re filthy fucking maneaters,” he spat.

“And what of me, huh? You ever see a fucking human grow blue hair? And what about my pretty pearly whites, huh?” he sneered. “You were pretty hung up on those when we first met.”

“You’re different—”

“Why? Because I’m half-human? Maybe. No one actually knows for sure. Could be a quarter. Or a tenth. What makes you so certain that I don’t have more maneater blood in me than human, huh? Scared you’re gonna get bitten by a filthy maneater, Fritzie?” he bitterly mocked.

“Shut up!”

“Why should I, huh? Because you want me to, Fritzie? Hmm? Well too fucking bad. We don’t always get what we want.”

“Maybe you should take your own advice, before that thing cooks Mickie,” Frederick snapped back.

“Stop calling my parents ‘things!’” Magnus snarled, lip pulling back over his teeth in fury. “You had parents, it’s not my fault they didn’t fucking love you!”

“Shut the fuck up!” Anger clouding his judgment, Frederick stepped forward, getting in his space.

Ears flicking back, the shorter put his hands, palms out, between himself and Frederick. “Get out of my face.”

Laughing scornfully, he leaned in closer. “Or what? You gonna bite me?” he mocked. “You wanna have parents so bad, fine, run along and join the filthy animals!”

A sharp spike of pain flashed through his skull, sending him stumbling back a step, teeth clacking together painfully. Holding his jaw, he looked down in shock, blood trickling down his chin.

Breathing heavily, Magnus stared at him, hazel eyes wide, fists tightly balled at his side. “Screw you, Frederick! I’m so fucking done with your shit! Fuck you! And fuck Pothos! Get the fuck out! Don’t you ever come near me or my family ever again!”

“Fine!” Frederick spat. “But don’t come crawling back to me when this bites you in the ass.”

“I won’t!” Turning on his heel, he stomped back to the small house, slamming the door.

Frederick crossed his arms over his chest, glaring at the door expectantly, waiting for his friend to come thundering back out to sheepishly apologize after taking a few minutes to calm down. When a while had passed without any sign of the kid, Frederick huffed and shook his head, beginning the trek back to the Revival’s base, suddenly exhausted.

## Chapter XI

“Subject 437519. Subject 437519, are you paying attention?”

Ears flicking back, the child sheepishly looked over, pointed teeth worrying his chapped lower lip. “Yes, Doctor.”

The woman raised an eyebrow, frown deepening. “Repeat back what I just said.”

Hunching over, he tucked his hands beneath his underarms, shaking his head. “I—I don’t know,” he muttered, trailing off, eyes firmly glued to the floor.

“You were listening, weren’t you?”

Curling further in on himself, the twelve year-old hid behind his thick, midnight colored bangs. “Yes, ma’am.”

The scientist crossed her arms over her chest. “Perhaps we need to test your hearing again?”

Clapping his hands over his ears, the child desperately shook his head. “No, no! We don’t need to!”

“Tell me why you weren’t listening.”

Squirming in his seat, he fidgeted with the hem of his shirt. “I don’t like it.”

“You need to learn it or bad things are going to happen. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

Whining, he pulled his legs up to his chest and nodded. “Yes, ma’am.”

Pinching the bridge of her nose, the scientist closed her eyes, remaining silent for several seconds before abruptly standing, chair squeaking on the linoleum and startling the child. Grabbing him by the upper arm, she dragged him out of the chair and down the hallway.

Reaching a small, nondescript metal door, she retrieved her keycard from her pocket. Pressing it against the scanner, she gave the kid a shove into the dark room the door whooshing shut behind him.

Enshrouded in darkness, he climbed onto the small cot, pulling the blanket tightly around his shoulders. He sat blindly staring at the opposite wall, listening to the scientists working outside of his small room.

Soon, he heard the dull thud of the lab's supervisor wheezing his way down the hallway. He could almost see the spittle flying, as the man began bellowing. "Unacceptable! The board expects results and what have we given them? This project has been running for fifteen years and all we have to show is that little abomination! And the only thing exceptional is its insubordination. We might've had something to show for all these years if you hadn't coddled it!"

"Sir, our studies have shown that isolation is the only way to deal with Subject 437519's disobedience. The only attempt at physical punishment resulted in a technician losing the better halves of two fingers—"

"Then slap a muzzle on the little freak! The State will be coming to take possession of it any day now! You'd think twelve years would be more than enough for you imbeciles to at least reverse engineer its DNA. But apparently, in a weekend a tweaked out intern can accomplish the breakthrough of the millennium and you can't even control it with over a decade of training."

Closing his eyes, the kid pressed his hands tightly over his ears, doing his best to tune out the arguments on the other side of the door. Curling tightly on his cot, he waited, it wouldn't be too long before he was let back out.

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The next time the door opened, it was to a trio of brown-suited people, staring down at him in disdain. The lab supervisor and the head scientist hung behind their shoulders, watching for the kid to make a wrong move. The leader of the group leered down at him, though not addressing him when he spoke. "This is it? This is the breakthrough of the millennium, this scrawny little abomination?"

The lab supervisor was quick to pipe up. "I assure you, General—"

The man raised a hand, not turning from his position staring into the small room. "I ain't talkin' to you." Clicking his tongue as though calling an animal, he sneered into the room. "C'mere, you little freak."

Pulling his thin blanket tighter around him, the kid pressed himself back into the furthest corner of the room, scrunching down as though if he were small enough, he'd be overlooked. This only served to piss the man off, and after a minute passed without the kid moving, he marched into the room and snagged him by the arm, dragging him off the cot and onto the rough floor.

Still hiding behind the other military officers, the head scientist piped up. "General, I really wouldn't do that. Subject 437519 has been known to be violent—"

"This little freak ain't gonna do nothin'." He jeered down at the kid still cowering on the ground.

Looking back to the group of scientists, the General addressed them again. "If we're done here, I have to get this mistake back to the base. You'd better hope we're able to fix whatever bad programming you wired in. The Prime Minister won't be happy if all that money was wasted on a defective asset."

Nodding, the head scientist stepped aside to allow the group to pass. "Of course."

At the mention of the Prime Minister, the lab supervisor stiffened up. "I trust you'll put in a good word for us, we've been nothing but cooperative with the military—" He cut himself off at the glare the General shot him. "I'll-I'll escort you out," he squeaked, turning abruptly and briskly waddling toward the lab doors.

Still crouched on the ground, the kid looked between the portly form of the retreating scientist and the safety of his room. The General's first few steps pulled him along several feet, before he began fighting, sneakers squealing against the linoleum floor as he kicked, struggling for traction. Letting out an ear-piercing shriek, the kid writhed, tugging at his captive arm. He easily pulled himself back toward his room leaving the General stumbling to regain his footing.

Turning, the man clamped down on the kid's arm with both hands, squeezing tight enough to leave bruises in his flesh. Grunting, he futilely tried to pull him back. The kid dug his sneakers into the floor, refusing to budge. Seemingly unfazed by the grip on his arm, he attempted to rip his arm away, pulling the General to his knees with his efforts. The two officers were quick to rush to his side, each grabbing for the kid's legs. A stray kick earned one a broken nose for his efforts, but after several minutes they had managed to get a grip on the writhing child.

"Will someone shut the little bastard up!" the General snarled, the trio struggling to keep their footing.

Within a moment, there were fingers tangling in the kid's thick hair and pulling his head aside. The prick of the needle was quickly overshadowed by nausea as the sedative almost immediately took effect, courtesy of his quivering heart. His face turned grey and, after a moment of weakly struggling, he fell limp. Helplessly, he half-consciously stared at his door until it disappeared from his sight, as he was dragged out of the lab.

Time seemed to blur as the lab turned into a brightly lit hallway— a dusty, red landscape— the dim interior of a vehicle— and, finally, into brown walls and well-polished floors. Any movement sent shards of pain stabbing behind his eyes and bile into his mouth. Set in a chair, he tipped over dizzily, saved from tumbling to the ground by a stern hand on his collar.

Closing his eyes, he shook off the fuzzy image before him. He tried to flinch away, a pungent odor burning his nostrils, but was held in place as the liquid was sprayed through his hair. Unable to escape, he sat, quietly whimpering as the noxious substance burned his scalp.

Finally, it ended and he was dragged off down the hallways. It seemed the ordeal was over, as he was dumped onto a thin mattress. The sheets beneath him felt like sandpaper, but he couldn't bring himself to care as the room spun around him. All he could do was close his eyes tightly and pray the sedative would wear off before he fell and hurt himself.

.....

Brown. What an ugly color. Muddy, and blurry, and soulless. The kid had never realized just how much he despised the color until he was completely surrounded by it. Brown walls, brown floors, brown beds, brown uniforms; it all blended together into a never-ending headache. Even the briefest glance into a reflective surface had him wanting to tear his hair out, now the same shitty brown as everything else around him.

Weeks had passed, and the kid found himself gaining unwanted attention from the other cadets. Scuffles had already been a daily occurrence, but were becoming physical more frequently as the days passed.



Scowling, the kid tried to skirt his way out of the corner he had found himself trapped in. This was the third time today, and his temper was only growing. "Don't fucking touch me!" he snarled as he was shoved back against the wall.

"Oh yeah? Whatcha gonna do about it, half-breed?" The leader of the group, some twelve year-old boy, John or Jack or something like that, grinned and pushed him back again. "We all know you ain't gonna do shit. You're a good little freak."

Growling, the kid stepped forward, prepared to shoulder his way out. "Move. I'm not gonna be late again 'cuz of you."

Sneering down at him, Jack put all his strength into his next shove. "You'll leave when I say you can." The kid grunted as his head thumped back against the wall, stars exploding behind his eyelids. Gritting his teeth, he lashed out trying to knock the boy in the jaw hard enough to get him to back off. Instead, there was a sickening pop.

The room fell absolutely silent for a moment, all staring in shock. The boy's jaw hung off his face, three deep lacerations shredding his cheek and giving the group full view of his tongue desperately twitching.

Chaos broke out as one of the cadet's fell to his knees, heaving. The bile mixed with the violet-red blood dripping from the boy's chin, creating a sickly orange puddle on the floor.

The kid stared at it in awe, the first color he had seen in weeks. Breath stuttering in his chest, he looked down at his hands; little pieces of flesh clung to his sharp nails, reminiscent of citrus pith. The room around him faded to a sharp pitched ringing as he stared unblinkingly at his hands. He was pulled out of his trance by a bruising grip on his arm that roughly dragged him through the crowd of screaming cadets and down the hallway. Looking up, he found the officer in charge of his room, face twisted in fury.

Coming to a sudden halt, the woman opened a door the kid recognized as the broom closet. Giving him a shove into the small room, she glared down at him before shutting the door.

Alone in the darkness, the kid collapsed, violently retching in the corner of the room. When his body had nothing left to offer up, the kid spat out the cold, sour saliva before squeezing himself into the furthest corner. Wiping his mouth on the back of his hand, he pulled his knees to his chest, shaking.

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It could have been days before the door was opened, he was too sick to tell. There was no relief when light flooded the small room, instead there was the same painful numbness as when he first entered. The kid didn't bother to lift his head, didn't acknowledge anyone was there, staring at the floor in front of him.

Hands gripped his arms hauling him to his feet, but he didn't stand, he couldn't. He didn't react as he was dragged through the hallway and down the stairs into a part of the building he had never seen before. But the floor was white, maybe he was being taken back to his room in the lab. But, no, that wasn't right, hadn't he gone outside when he left the lab?

He was forced to look up as he was dropped into a padded chair. The kid found himself in a white room, surrounded by frowning officers. Outside of the officer in charge of his room and the General he didn't recognize anyone in the group. Cuffs closed tightly around his wrists, locking him to the arms of the chairs. "W-What's going on?" he rasped, unable to raise his voice further from the illness. Ignoring his question, the General nodded to a medic standing off to the side. Stepping forward, the woman grabbed for his hand. Pressing his palm down against the arm of the chair, she pulled a pair of pliers from the pocket of her coat.

Without another word, the woman methodically began tearing out the kid's nails, unheeding as he began to scream and pull against his restraints. Lurching over, he violently retched, each heave sending him jerking forward. Tears and mucus ran down his face as he fell back against the seat, shaking.

Vision greying, he shut his eyes, desperately sucking in air as the medic stepped away. What little relief he had died as he listened to the footsteps round the chair. The kid balled his fist tightly, knuckles turning white. He shook his head frantically, wordlessly begging for it to stop.

Ignoring him, the medic struck his arm a couple inches above his wrist, pinning the hand down when his fingers reflexively uncurled. No amount of tugging at his captive wrist served to take away from the agony ripping through his fingertips. Wishing for an end, the kid futilely banged his head back against the chair as hard as he could.

Head lolling back, he blearily watched the room in front of him. Lips parted, the kid panted for breath, struggling not to fall unconscious. Distantly feeling cold fingers pulling at his chin and the chemically-sweet taste of latex gloves, he snapped his jaw shut. At the

sharp taste of copper, he lunged over the armrest, again attempting to empty his stomach. Distantly, he heard screaming, unable to place it as his hearing faded out.

Pulled back into the chair and held still, the chill of flesh was replaced with the biting cold of metal and the cracking of teeth as his jaw attempted to clamp shut. There was a constant, heavy pressure, and then the taste of copper began rolling down his throat. He weakly gagged, unable to summon the strength to pull away.

After several minutes, the cracking and popping inside his mouth stopped and the metal tool was removed. The kid lay limp in the chair, blankly staring up at the ceiling as the cuffs were unclipped and he was lifted from the seat. Above him, people spoke, voices distorted past anything comprehensible.

The floor beneath him blurred as he was carried away from the room, the white tiles occasionally broken by a red splatter. Coppery spit ran down his chin, drooling onto his shirt as he was laid on his side on the cold floor, and soon pulled into darkness.

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The kid jolted up, feeling like a piece of glass had raked over his gums. Scuttling back, he pressed himself against the wall. Shakily, he reached up, running a tender fingertip over his aching gums. Tears ran down his cheek as he felt the raw flesh, nauseous from the copper tang in his throat. Gently prodding, his finger caught on a sharp point near the back of his jaw.

Releasing a nervous breath, he poked at it with his tongue before running a finger over it again. Left in the dark, he continued to prod, noting that pressing anywhere found him a sharp point. In awe, he silently rubbed his jaw; staring toward the door, he waited, fearing when it would open again.



## Chapter XII

Close. So close. The ship just ahead. They were so close. But so were the kursks. Right behind them, their hunting cries a mockery of agonized screams. Ahead, Magnus could see Owain frantically opening the door to the small ship and shoving several kids on. They could make it, they were so close.

A sharp tug. Shrieking. Magnus' blood froze as the hand that had been desperately clinging to his own fell away. The loose dust nearly pulled his feet from under him as he whipped around, stumbling forward to pull the kid up.

He couldn't make it. Every step felt heavier than the previous. He couldn't move. So close. So close. But not enough. He couldn't shout. Even when he reached the child.

He didn't feel the teeth tearing into his flesh as he beat one of the rusty creatures away only to have another take its place. He didn't notice the warmth splashing his face, the kid desperately holding his shredded organs in place, skin greying.

Arms wrapped around his waist, pulling him back toward the ship. Kicking wildly, he fought against the grip, reaching out in a vain attempt to grab the kid. Mutely shouting, he watched the hope slip from the boy's eyes before they dimmed, every inch of his pale person sprayed with blood.

He blinked, and found himself peering at Mickie. Dead green eyes stared through him, lips moving, silently rasping. *"Why didn't you save me?"*

A ragged scream ripped from his chest, Magnus' toes scraping along the ramp as he struggled to escape and run to Mickie. "There's nothing we can do. He's already gone. We have to leave now or we're all going to die. You have to stop fighting me." Ignoring the distant whispers, he continued to scream and writhe, eyes still locked with the dead gaze, his skin still burning, even after the doors to the shuttle closed, shutting him away from the watching eyes.

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Gasping desperately, Magnus shot up, clawing at his arms as he whipped his head around. The painful numbness was a comfort, even as he threw his legs over the side of the bed and slipped out of his room. The hair was still standing on the back of his neck as he quietly opened the door beside his.

A wave of relief washed over him as he found Mickie peacefully asleep in his bed. Crossing the room, Magnus sat on the edge of the bed watching the boy for a long moment to reassure himself that he was okay. Brushing the wild curls away, he pressed a kiss to his forehead before standing and checking him over one last time.

Silently sighing, Magnus trudged out of the room. He might as well pack his duffel now; there was no way he would be going back to bed after that episode. A quick look at his comm told him there was still a few hours before dawn.

Sitting down on his bed, he tiredly ran his hands through his hair. He stayed that way for several minutes, zoned out, before slowly coming back to himself. Mechanically, he began to dress before preparing a bag for the trip.

Slinging his bag over his shoulder, he quietly slipped out of his room and shut the door behind him. Turning, he jolted, nearly bumping into Aldaz' chest. Looking down at him, Aldaz placed their hands on the younger's shoulders squeezing securely. "Heyotzch kahesch, keht."

Allowing the grip for a moment longer, Magnus nodded before slipping past the Teiresian. "Eet eht," he assured, stubbornly not glancing back over his shoulder as he stepped out of the house. "I'll see you in a few days." Feeling the heavy gaze on his back, he stepped out of view of the doorway, beginning the hike through the cool, wet sand.

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*Fuck.* It was impossible to find a grip as he slid down the rocky slope, the torrent of rain causing him to stumble as the others shouted after him. Landing hard on his hands, he ignored them following the weak cries he first heard up on the ridge. He could hear the tumble of rocks behind him, signalling his teammates following him down, as he found the girl, skin ashen and barely shivering in the freezing rain.

Grabbing her under her arms he tried to pull her over, stopping abruptly as it caused her to scream. Swiping the rain from his eyes he crawled over her, searching for what kept her trapped. Disoriented by the driving rain and the monochromatic area around him he slammed head first into a boulder. Shaking off the shock he braced his shoulder against the stone, boots scrabbling for purchase on the slippery earth beneath him as he strained to shift it off where it trapped the girl's leg at an unnatural angle.

"We gotta go! Any longer down here and we'll be swept away!"

Shaking his head he lifted her torso. “Alan, hold her.” Wide-eyed the young teen cradled the girl close.

“We don’t have time—!”

He shoved away the hand pulling at his arm. “Go start the ship!” Frederick’s face blurred before he turned away and ran back toward the ship. “Hold her tight! Don’t look! Don’t let her look!” He shouted over the wind, bile burning the back of his throat as he stood. Hands shaking, he tightened his grip, a scream ripping from his throat as he brought the blade down.

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Thrashing, Magnus scabbled at the air for several seconds before fully waking, chest heaving as he waved off the concerned glances shot his way before settling back in his seat on the Caladrian supply shuttle. Dropping his head to his hands he pressed his fingertips firmly into his brow, attempting to soothe the headache beginning to form behind his eyes.

“Are you okay?” Magnus looked over to the Ucroeian who sat a seat down from him, the one he would co-pilot the shuttle with on the way back.

“I’m fine. Just need to drop into the medical center once we land.”

They nodded, gently offering. “I can take the kitchen pallet if you want to take the other to medical center.”

Mustering up half a grin he accepted the offer. “Thanks.”

Once the shuttle was settled in the station’s hangar for refueling he was quick to unstrap his safety belt and thump down the steps to begin unloading the containers of medical supplies onto one of the station’s carts. Nodding his thanks to the Ucroeian again he steered the cart toward the garage’s lift.

After the lift’s doors had shut behind him he released a sigh, slumping back against the cool metal as the lift silently ascended. The hallway to the medical center was dim, the ship dead in the early hour. Reaching the door, he found it locked which was unusual for a delivery day. Lips pressing tight he reached into a pocket of his uniform and pulled out his old keycard, letting himself into the dark room.

Flipping on the lights he quickly set to work unpacking the boxes and restocking the supplies, it'd be best if he could get away without running into any of the senior staff. He had just finished putting everything away and was rifling through a cabinet when he heard the door open behind him.

“I don't recall you having permission to help yourself to Pothos' medicine stash any longer.”

“I don't need your permission for anything, Cheya. You seem to forget your 'stash' comes from Caladrius.” Magnus finished filling his two pill bottles before turning to face her.

The woman folded her arms over her chest scowling. “Who let you in here. This area is off-limits without any medical staff here.”

“I let myself in. Still have a masterkey.”, he replied, leaning against the rail of the cart.

“I'm gonna need you to hand that over. Those keys are only for Pothos' senior staff—”

“You can have it when you take it from me,” he snapped, glowering. “Don't you think for a second that you're gonna punish me for leaving. Pothos was my home long before it was yours.”

“It was your home,” she agreed. “But you left. And I'll remind you that only residents of Pothos are allowed to carry a key.”

“You never gave a shit what Fritz ordered before. What's changed? Dealing with him not as easy as you'd thought it'd be? Well, who'da thunk it,” he mocked, straightening up to push the cart. “Now if you'll excuse me, I need to return to the garage to help prepare the shuttle to leave.”

Cheya grabbed his arm as he passed her. “How dare you! You abandoned your post— And you have the audacity to speak to me like that!”

“Babysitting Frederick was never my job,” he hissed ripping his arm away. “Yet I managed for eight years. It's your turn to clean up after him. You said it yourself, I don't work here anymore,” he sneered.

Stalking out the door he turned too quickly and clipped someone. Turning to apologize, he stopped as Cheya rushed to her side, helping her back to her feet. Gritting his teeth he



turned away. “Goodbye, Cheya.” Tightening his grip on the handrail of the cart he strode off down the hallway toward the garage, trying to shake the image of the girl’s prosthetic from his mind.

## Chapter XIII

Frederick stared at the ceiling above him, a headache beginning to form behind his eyes as he strained to see anything in the dark room. It was too quiet, and cold; it had just been a joke, something he could look back on fondly, but after years of sharing a bed he missed the warm weight of another person by his side.

How long had it been? Weeks? Maybe a month since he'd last had a decent night of sleep. Shifting onto his side he bunched the blankets around his body, but the familiar chaos could no longer sooth him. Giving up, he shoved the blankets aside and tossed his legs over the side of the bed. Jamming his feet into his boots he did the bare minimum to fasten them before he thumped out of the room.

It was far too early for anyone to be up but he couldn't bear to sit still any longer, he needed to move. He wandered the station's many levels, most fairly untouched since the station re-opened. An hour. It had to have been an hour by now. He went to check his comm only to remember he had left it in the room.

It didn't matter, he had memorized the shuttle schedule weeks ago. It was close enough, the garage would be awake by now, the shuttle would arrive soon.

He took the stairs two at a time until he reached the hangar, slipping in and crossing to sit in the control room. The garage's morning crew no longer paid him any attention, having grown used to him letting himself in every time a Caladrian shuttle was coming.

It was a few minutes before the hangar doors opened allowing the large craft to glide in. He held his breath as it stopped and the crew began to unload the containers of supplies onto the dollies. Finally. Moving as close as possible to the window Frederick watched as Magnus claimed an empty cart and began loading on his containers. His hair had finally grown back out from the mess it had been angrily hacked into a few weeks prior in an attempt to remove the brown dye. The collar of his jacket was flipped up and the jacket was zipped as high as it could go.

Frederick watched until he disappeared onto the lift before exiting the control room and pounding up the stairs. He waited in the stairwell until Magnus was a good distance down the hall before he slipped out to trail behind him. He knew Magnus knew he was there, but he also knew the other wouldn't engage him. It had been going on this way for months.

Once the dolly rounded the corner that would lead into the kitchen he crept into the meal hall. Hopping over the counter, he watched from the doorway as Magnus unloaded the boxes and put everything away, his eyes would pass over Frederick as he worked but he never gave any indication that he saw him.

The silence was killing him, finally, as Magnus was placing the empty containers back onto the cart he spoke. "Please talk to me."

Magnus briefly stiffened but didn't pause as he finished loading the dolly and pushed it back out the kitchen doors. Frederick followed adamantly behind him. "Cheya at least got a goodbye."

"And you think you deserve one?"

Frederick faltered, the bitterness in his tone feeling like a punch in the chest. "It was a mistake."

"Every part of the last eight years was a mistake."

"I'm sorry —"

Magnus stopped, a huff of bitter laughter escaping his throat. "Good for you."

Closing the distance he grasped the other's shoulder. "Please, five minutes."

Magnus turned shrugging off his hand. "You had eight years. What makes you think five minutes will do anything?"

This close he could see where small tufts of fur had spread up the other's nape peeking out from beneath the neck of his flightsuit. Following his line of sight Magnus pulled the collar of his jacket tighter around him before turning back toward the lift with his cart. "Goodbye, Frederick. Enjoy it, it's more than you deserve."

Startled, he hurried after him. "Wait."

Moving to keep the cart between him and Frederick, Magnus backed into the lift. "We can't always get what we want, Frederick. Remember?"

Pressing his lips tight he stopped, watching as the door shut his hands fisted at his sides. Releasing a heavy sigh he stalked off.

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He didn't know what compelled him to do it. He had been pacing the length of his room and next thing he remembered he was stuffing a duffel and marching down to the garage just as the station's lights were beginning to dim. So desperate to leave the station he had startled the few crew members still hanging around the garage as he barged in.

All eyes were on him as he stood just inside the garage, bag slung over his shoulder. "I—" He froze, voice caught in his throat under the weight of the crew's cautious stares. "— Please, I need a shuttle readied."

The moment stretched out in tense silence before Elie spoke up. "We— haven't received any information about a departure— sir," they added as an afterthought.

"I—I know. But it's important," Frederick pleaded. "Please, can a shuttle be made ready?"

The blond seemed to hesitate for a moment, unnerved by Frederick's odd behavior. "Yeah— uh, we can get one up pretty quick. Just give us uh— half an hour. Is that— Will that work?"

Frederick sighed in relief finding a place to stand that would be out of the crew's way. "Yes. Thank you."

Within the hour he found himself seated in one of the smaller shuttles eagerly staring out as the hangar doors slid open. "You're clear for takeoff."

Readjusting his grip on the controls he guided the ship out of the hangar before responding. "Thank you."

## Chapter XV

“Wake up!” Groaning, Magnus lifted the seven year old off his stomach, before sitting up.

“Mickie, what is it?” he asked tiredly rubbing his face as the child jumped off the bed and began insistently pulling on his arm.

“You have to come see!” Taking a deep breath, he stood and followed the boy out.

“Look at that, the man-eater emerges.” Standing from where he was seated at the table Owain crossed over to greet him. “Something’s different about you, but I can’t quite put my finger on it. You get a haircut?”

Hugging the blond he chuckled. “Something like that. What’re you doing here?”

“Your boy toy came crashing in around midnight yesterday looking like he crawled out of a hole. And you’ll never believe it, he finally managed to get that stick out his ass.” Owain shrugged. “He said it was important and he looked so pitiful I had to let him in.”

Magnus raised an eyebrow. “Yeah? He say what it is?”

“Just something that needs to be taken care of on Prometheus and that it’s an ‘all hands on deck’ sorta situation. And that he needed the best pilot he knew.” Owain grinned.

“Where’s he hidin’?”

“Outside. He wasn’t allowed through the door.” He spoke, nodding to where Aldaz stood in the next room staring at something out the window. “Don’t worry, I cleaned him up for you. Looks better than he has in years if I do say so myself.”

“Easy for you to say. You didn’t see him for seven years.” Magnus rebutted, inching toward the door. “I better go see what he wants.”

“Good luck.”

Stepping out of the house Magnus walked down to the end of the pathway where Frederick was standing, warily watching Aldaz stare at him. “Heard you weren’t allowed in.”

“Couldn’t even get more than a few steps toward the house before—” He nodded toward the window. “—that. So I thought it was better if I just waited here.”

“So what’s so important you’re willing to break an eight year grudge over?”

Frederick sighed heavily, pulling his hands from the pockets of his coat. “Found out what a spliced organism is.” he muttered pulling up a page on his comm before passing it over. “And it seemed eerily familiar.”

Magnus scanned over the page, stiffening. “Fuck—”

“Yeah. Figured you might be homesick and want to join this last one.”

Looking to him Magnus began to question. “They’re not—”

“Nah.” He shook his head. “Seems you’re now the exception. Causyx found it a few hours ago and let us know, apparently Aethon does have an indigenous group. And apparently the human settlement was able to find— something. And— well, you know the rest.”

Pressing his lips together Magnus returned the comm. “I’m surprised you care.”

“Magnus, what do you want from me? I fucked up. I know, okay? I came here because I knew you’d want to burn that hellhole down. So can we fight later?” He pled.

Magnus shook his head. “I don’t have time for this.”

Shoving down the sinking feeling in his stomach Frederick crossed his arms over his chest. “Well, we’re leaving in an hour with or without you—”

“Do not threaten me.” he hissed. “It has never taken me that long to prepare for a mission. You’re not leaving without me.” Turning on his heel he marched back up the path and disappeared into the house to quickly get ready.

## Chapter XV

“This is a terrible plan.” Magnus muttered as he watched the entrance to the laboratory.

“It’s fine. Most of ‘em are gonna run out once the storm alarm’s set off, you just have to run off the stragglers.” Frederick replied.

“You say it like it’ll be easy.”

“Come on, it’ll be fine. You’re like a juggernaut compared to them.”

Magnus chuckled, shooting Frederick a lopsided smile to silently thank him for the reassurance. “Yeah, right up until the point they shoot me.”

“I’ll be right behind you the whole time.” He promised. “Owain’ll take out anyone exiting who looks like a threat, Alan and Cy will get the kids to safety, and Saph’s got the ship running already. In and out. It’ll be easy.”

Sucking his bottom lip for a moment Magnus nodded, getting in position to run. “If you say so.”

Once the alarm began blaring he took off across the red sand toward the lab easily shouldering past the few scientists exiting the back way to reach the underground storm shelter. The duo received a few fearful looks as they ran through the building but no one would be dumb enough to risk the storm to stop them.

Coming to a split in the hallways he paused for a moment before tearing down the left hallway, now sure of where he was heading, and the the double doors he reached after a few more turns only confirmed he had gone the right way. He stopped a few feet away as they swung open, revealing a portly scientist. The two stared at each other for a long moment before the man turned to run.

Frederick felt his stomach drop at the horrifying crack made when the man was slammed the wrong way into the one way doors, a dusty boot print marring his pristine shirt. He was startled back into action as the man wetly wheezed for air, terrified as he was lifted by his collar.

“We don’t have time.” He spoke, grabbing Magnus’ wrist before he could go any further. Grabbing the keycard off his coat, he tossed the man aside and pulled open the door to enter the large room.

“How many?”

“Little over a dozen.” Frederick replied. “Where would they put ‘em if they thought a storm was coming?”

“Here.” Magnus answered singling in on a door placed oddly in the wall of the lab. “It’s the only above ground room strong enough to hold.”

Taking the key from him Frederick attempted to open the door. “It’s stuck.”

“It must be locked down due to the storm alarm.” Muttering to himself he examined the lock for a long moment before stepping back. “Watch out for the lightshow.”

“What?” Frederick regret not listening a moment later, a bright flash blinding him as Magnus jammed a knife right behind the keypad and ripped the door open.

“Alan and Cy are just out the other doors right?” He shouted over the alarm as he tried guide the startled group inside the small room to leave. After a moment the tallest of the group seemed to be swayed, leading them out as they cradling a wailing infant to their chest.

Heading the group, Frederick quickly brought them down the hallway toward the exit. As soon as they broke through the doors the alarms stopped. “Shit, that’s not good.” Waving Alan and Cy forward, he fell back to protect the rear of the group as they quickly made for the shuttle. His instinct was proven correct as hideous shrieks sounded from far behind them. He turned to check on his friend only to find Magnus had stopped and was watching for the pack of beasts to appear.

“What are you doing?!” He shouted running over to him. “We have to go now!”

Magnus shoved him forward. “Just get everyone on the ship.”

“I’m not going anywhere with—” He was cut off by a shrill screech, their comms crackling to life a second later.

“Will you two jackasses get on the ship and trust me to do my damn job. I fucking swear, I miss once and suddenly ya’ll think I’m useless.” Owain grumbled.



Chuckling in relief Frederick grabbed his friend's arm and they ran toward the ship, the pack of kursks temporarily distracted by the fresh blood.

"Told you they'd tear your ass up." Magnus laughed struggling to catch his breath as they climbed aboard the shuttle.

"Yeah, yeah. I never doubted you. Saph, can we get goin' now?" He shouted over the roar of the engines as the red head was already beginning to take off, and they both had to scramble to grab a seat to avoid being pitched around in the turbulent ascent.

"Least the hard part's over with." Magnus grinned.

"Still wish I could've been able to stay on Pothos and do my part from there like Scitech."

"Maybe next time." He laughed, squeezing Frederick's knee.

Frederick raised an eyebrow. "You saying there'll be a next time?"

Magnus paused before shrugging. "Maybe." He quietly muttered, suddenly becoming interested in the dusty prints covering the ship's floor.

Biting back a smile he secured his seatbelt before settling back, elated with even the slight promise of forgiveness.

## Chapter XVI

Damp sand crunched beneath his boots as Frederick crossed the beach, quiet in the grey morning light. Far past the old Caladrian A-frames and scattered huts, beach grass conquered the dunes leaving a narrow walkway that disappeared during high tide. Even now, at its lowest, stray waves would occasionally build enough to lap at the soles of his boots as he pushed his way past the unchecked brush toward where the beach transitioned from sand to cracked stone jutting off into the sea.

Careful of his footing he slowly worked his way around the tide pools until he reached the nearest ridge. Taking a moment he studied the slope, trying to recall the best handholds he'd discovered years ago. The rock was cool beneath his fingers as he scaled the steep outcropping. The climb was easier than he remembered and within a few minutes he was sliding himself onto the level top.

Closing the distance, Frederick seated himself at the edge of the rock. "Figured I might find you here."

"I like the breeze." Magnus shrugged legs crossed beneath him. "Surprised you still remember how to find this place. 'S been years since we last climbed up here."

"It's not too hard to find if you follow the beach." Turning, he watched the waves crash against the stone beneath them working through what he wanted to say. "So what now?"

Leaning back on his palms, he shrugged again. "I stay with the Revival. Mickie should get a chance at a normal life, and here's as close as he can get."

Frederick nodded. "I know. It's so nice here I don't know why anyone stays on Pothos."

"And what's your plan, fearless leader?" he asked, shooting him a lopsided grin.

"Ah, you know, I stay here a couple more days then back to Pothos. Owain's pretty tired of being stuck on Iphis so I thought I'd allow him to take over for a while. I'll give him the overview and let Alan take him through the day to day. Then—" he hummed. "Then I find someplace sunny and take a break."

Magnus raised an eyebrow, smirking. "You finally done yelling at your 'underlings'?"

"Maybe just a bit more." Frederick grinned knocking his shoulder against the other's. "Gotta remind them to stay in line."

“That’s what I thought.” he chuckled. “Well, the Revival will always welcome you.”

Frederick snorted. “Not like I’d take my chances with Aethon, base or not. Real question is will you?”

Laughing, he offered Frederick a toothy grin, teasing. “I’ve put up with you for eight years, I think I can manage a few more.”