

Pax

and the

night

a short story by ais

Author's notes:

Read this if you'd like ahead of time, but there are minor spoilers. Otherwise, you can return to this later if you like reading notes.

I thought it would be fun for July 2018 in my Patreon (patreon.com/ais) to make some polls for my patrons to vote on. I gave them some options, and whatever they chose would be integrated into what I would do.

The initial idea for below (started 7/2/2018) came from finishing Westworld season 2 and imagining the first line being spoken between two people, either both not human or one who is and one who isn't, and a simulation being involved. This story is what grew from that vague idea.

Initially, my goal was around 5,000 words max. Obviously, I failed on that point. But it was still fun to write :) I also wasn't sure on a title at first but I like what I went with, and then I made a quick cover to match. Unsplash was invaluable for the images. This is a draft story – not fully edited, just released for fun and to keep it in July 2018 timing :)

Thank you for your interest and happy reading!

Patron polls and their votes:

- Theme: unrelated to anything else (0), Wildwood Rising-related (3), wildcard (8)
- Content: preferred couple m/m (6), preferred couple f/f or anything LGBTQIA+ or no couple (0)
- Format: short story (4), paint comic or art or something else (0)
- Deep undercover - 9 (vs held captive 2, memory loss 1)
- Outer space, deep sea, and mountain cave were tied at 5 - but now Mt Cave is 6
- Something supernatural / a little alive and a little dead - 6 (vs dead 1, alive 1)

Pax and the Night – a short story by Ais

"Do you know what it means to be alive?"

Blaise turned Evard's hand over, revealing the swatch of patchy skin on his inner wrist. Callous met scar in Blaise's thumb running gently over the geography.

Evard's gaze shifted over that meeting of dark and darker, and slid away. Their heartbeats were a quiet melody in the night.

"Evard. Evard." Blaise' fingertips slid against Evard's cheek and gently but surely pulled him back.

Centered, centered, on warm brown eyes.

"Evard." Thumb sliding down to Evard's lips. Catching slightly, ever so gently, on the edge. "Look at me."

The rise on the end of the request, the pensive hope, the quake of love—

They were all there, all right, all perfect.

Perfect.

Evard caught Blaise's hand, fingers curling around and between Blaise's. His gaze fell on the plains and plateaus of that hand he knew so well. It was beautiful. Warm in tone and form; loving in every touch.

And it was...

"Do I know?" Evard kissed Blaise's knuckles, and rested his cheek against the back of Blaise's hand. It was *his* thumb, now, that traveled a short circuit back and forth on an endless journey.

He closed his eyes and breathed. Blaise was there in scent, in weight.

"We remain alive so long as someone remembers us," Evard whispered.

Blaise was quiet, and so was Evard.

They remained, locked and loving, until finally Blaise spoke.

"You still remember me."

Evard smiled sadly and opened his eyes. The idyllic fields and mountains in the distance, the rush of a heated summer wind at his cheek. The creaking of Blaise's wooden rocker beneath him; always searching for the chair that still let him fidget. The rays of the sun, slowly falling, turning mundane into gold, and dark into fiery light.

It glowed, this moment, with something deep inside.

Something yearning and wanting and wishing and hoping and reaching, reaching—

"How long will you do this?" Blaise asked.

"As long as I need to." Evard released a low breath and straightened. He felt Blaise's dark eyes centered on him, that love and light as bright as ever, but he didn't return the gaze.

He stared, instead, at empty air.

"End simulation."

The pastoral scene glitched and sped away, pixels vanishing in blocky horizontal lines until there was nothing left. Blaise, as always, was the last to go: frozen in time, until time itself removed him from this story.

Evard was left alone in a grey-screened room, on a wooden stool making no sound.

He slouched forward, hands lifting to temples that had so recently been touched. He felt the trembling in the ends of his fingers but, precisely as he had trained himself to do after so long, he ignored it.

A hissing noise filled the room shortly before the door slid open. The echo of heeled boots.

"Are you done, General?"

She always had a twist in her voice — not mocking, but not understanding.

Weakness, she thought this.

Weak will in the midst of a mission.

The answer she had arrived at after years of losses, herself.

"Yes." Evard pushed himself to a stand and straightened his jacket.

"What's our status?"

She ticked up an eyebrow.

He sighed and scrubbed at the short patches of hair on his head, a design cut into the black that showed his rank, regiment, and assignment. She had the same, under her colorful scarf. Outside this ship, she had the designs free to the world for everyone to know her status.

He didn't have to ask what she was thinking - it was clearly: *I'm* the Commander here. What makes you believe you can demand *I* give *you* any updates?

And it was true. She captained this ship, not him. Not that he wanted to.

It was just easy, sometimes, to fall into old habits of treating her more familiarly.

"Sorry." He dropped his hand and looked away, gaze angling as always for the wall of windows that, from the simdeck, was blocked.

She turned and strode out, not waiting for him to fall in line behind her. As they walked through the hallways, they received a variety of responses from the staff who passed them.

Evard was never more aware of the difference between their personalities and disciplinary measures as when they walked together. Evame got all manner of startled snaps to attention, salutes, and respectful nods from her position in front. As her view passed them, the same people slumped and flashed Evard a grin or cheerful gestures before turning and scampering off.

Evard smiled to himself.

The healer's deck was full to the brim when they entered. To be expected, he supposed, with a conference going on right now. Still not ideal.

Evame swam through the crowd as effortlessly as a fish through water, somehow not touching a single person. Evard kept bumping shoulders on accident and muttered awkward sorries he knew the healers wouldn't understand, with so many hundreds of languages represented in one space. The white noise of so many conversations flipping between so many dialects and alphabets was enchanting, and might have been relaxing if he had less on his mind.

It took some time before Evard finally got to the back room where Evame had disappeared. As the door slid open at his approach, he heard the others already mid-discussion.

"—carefully or we'll go down in a ball of flames."

"Why would you ever assume we would—?"

"—an't believe it's come to this—"

"—wouldn't have if you'd taken my advice from the start—"

"Zetch, the last thing anyone wants right now is your I told you so—"

"Ah!" The most cheerful of voices was Dr. Edyn, who perked up at Evard's entrance. Their warm brown eyes took in Evard, even as they continued to type complicated calculations into the table's interface. "If it isn't the youngest triplet. Come in, come in!"

Evame got a sour look on her face while Evard rubbed the back of his head again.

"Thank you, doctor."

"Now, now, don't be so formal! Were you held up in the lobby?"

"How did you even manage to fit so many—?"

"An act of god, isn't it?" Zetch popped a bubble of glass candy, the crunch mingling with the tink of the knife they flipped over and over in one hand.

As always, Zetch wore a lot of supple leather, chains, gears, and way too many layers for how warm it was in the room. They flicked a nearly-white gaze up to Evard and gestured with their chin for him to sit across from them at the table. When he did, even with him leaning back he sat much more properly than Zetch, who sprawled out with one elbow propped on the table at a wide angle and their body positioned the opposite direction. Then again, having wings would do that.

"I don't believe in god," Conna said. Beside her where she couldn't see, Zetch mouthed the words perfectly in sync.

Evard tried to stop a smile but Conna saw it. She whipped around and glared at Zetch, her golden eyes flashing.

"You little fucker, I know what you did there!"

"Well," Zetch crunched another glass candy, "if you weren't so predictable maybe I wouldn't be able to."

Conna threw her hands into the air. "Augh! You drive me nuts."

"It's a short trip, honey. Hardly a few steps down the corridor."

Conna shoved Zetch on the shoulder. Zetch's wings were folded at their back but they still flicked them; although whether in warning or impatience, Evard didn't know.

Conna's hooves made a racket clacking against the metal floor as she kicked them out in front of her. "Bird," she muttered under her breath, crossing her arms.

Zetch narrowed their eyes and looked over. The designs tattooed into the sides of their shaved head were more visible at this angle; a stark contrast to the light grey and blue hair down the center in a long braid wolf-tail. "Pack mule."

Conna glowered.

"Now, now," Dr. Edyn said with a smile. "No need to argue."

"There's actually *very* good reason to argue," Conna said heatedly, several of her colorful braids falling over one shoulder as she leaned forward. Her white peasant off-the-shoulder dress gapped alarmingly for a moment and then righted itself. "We haven't yet cleared Pax 925 for arrival—"

Evard wasn't the only one to wince around the table; Ala and Willow,

who had been staying quiet to the side, couldn't stop reactions as well. Willow's was a graceful shifting of her weight. Since Ala was so small, her reaction was practically full-bodied. Her skin tone shifted dramatically, reflecting her inner turmoil: the dark blue-black of the sea, the green of violently churned waves tinged white. Her hair flashed to lightning from the sun. Only Zetch and Dr. Edyn were unaffected as Evame straightened herself to her full statuesque height.

Before his sister could get started on one of her rants about reading all the damned internal memos, he spoke up.

"We got preliminary clearance, and right now that's all that matters. It'll be another week before we're even in range of their satellites. By then, we should hear a final say."

"Maybe," Conna allowed, "but I still say we should be more cautious, considering—"

Her heated rise of voice cut off abruptly. Her eyes widened, guilt flashing through them as her gaze snapped to Evard. He let out a low breath, trying to ignore the pain that clenched his heart. The others were very quiet, except for Willow who rustled her leaves comfortingly.

Zetch flicked Conna's back with the tip of one sharp wing.

Idiot, they said without words.

Conna looked even guiltier and dropped her gaze. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean—"

"It's okay," Evard said. "You can say it. Considering we already lost our best infiltrator there on the first probe."

"We don't know if we lost—"

"He's been gone for over a year, with no word. It's so unlike him that I think we can safely say..." Evard thought he could get through the sentence properly, but his heart wasn't on board with his mind. His throat choked up, and the words twisted and fell to bitter quiet.

Conna wrapped her fingers in her braids.

Willow stretched a vine across the table, warm browns and greens rustling in an unfelt wind. She touched his hand gently, and at that he looked up. She smiled, tipping her head to the side. Her tree-branch hair was rolled into waves of blooming flowers and long tendrils of leaves down her back, and swayed at the movement.

"If there's anything my kind knows, it's that the cycle brings life back to even the most dismal of soil." Her voice was the soothing whisper of wind through a forest, and the vine wrapped comfortingly around his wrist was

warm at the beating of his pulse. "Do not despair until we know for certain."

"Thank you, Willow," Evard said quietly.

"He may be waiting for you." Ala's tiny voice was hopeful and sweet. Evard wished he could feel her same optimism.

"We'll know soon," Dr. Edyn said. "The Community should respond before we arrive."

"And if they don't?" asked Ala.

All eyes shifted to Evard and then, carefully, away.

"We'll decide then."

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The thing about space travel, Evard had learned after leaving his home of Besel, was that time didn't make sense in deep space the way it did on land or sea. There was no rotating sun to designate day versus night, nor wind nor clouds to denote the weather. There were no seasons to tell him a year had passed since he'd last touched Blaise's hand, a rushed goodbye without as much affection as they would have liked because Blaise had to get in his pod. They thought they would see each other soon - two months at the most - but they had been wrong.

Evard rested his arm across his knee, drawn up to his stomach. The window would have been cool to the touch on his home planet, but here with the regulated temperatures and the forcefields protecting the ship from debris, the tempered glass felt the same as the cushions beneath him.

Somewhere in the distance, he heard the rustling of recyclable silverware and plates being used; of people sitting down at their tables and discussing a wide variety of topics. He heard the healers in particular in some sort of spirited debate on the subject of rehabilitating lost nerves.

But though those conversations were physically near Evard, mentally and emotionally they were light years away from him.

He felt a tickle on his fingers and looked down to see Ala balanced on one tiptoe, her hands out to her sides. She looked up at him with her wide eyes and tiny mouth. Her clothing this moment was a fitted dress with an attached hood covering her pointed ears and sunlight hair. A faint glow still showed from the shadows of the hood. Her skin was a grey-blue highlighted with silver; telling Evard at a glance her mood. Melancholy, but still wanting to be hopeful.

He smiled faintly at her, no heart in it at all, and she returned the same. She climbed the mountain that was his knuckles, and settled on the plain of his wrist. He was careful, now, to keep his arm still so as not to unbalance her. She stretched her legs in front of her and leaned back on her palms, looking out at the same starfield that surrounded them.

They didn't speak, but they didn't have to.

They both understood, having each lost a love they might never retrieve.

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Pax 925 was a swath of brilliant blue set against the black. Evame hadn't stopped once in the past two days, substituting sleep with energy capsules and the occasional bout in the everlife pool. Even so, she was so keyed up that her muscles could be seen bunching and tightening beneath her skin.

"Have we heard yet?"

Evame turned a sharp glare on Conna, bringing a rush of adrenaline to Conna's veins.

Her hooves clicked quietly on the floor as she stepped back. She held up her hands. "Okay. Okay. We haven't." Her tail whipped behind her nervously.

Zetch expertly crouched on the back of a chair, somehow keeping it from falling over despite their weight. They cracked a glass candy bubble in their teeth, saying nothing. Not needing to.

Evame glared at them, too.

Zetch simply raised their eyebrows and flicked the edge of their lips in a smirk.

Evame began to pace.

Willow stood nearby, her arms crossed at her stomach, her peaceful features aimed outward and downward, to that blue planet that had stolen so much.

"Anything?" Conna asked Willow instead, quietly this time.

"I feel life," Willow whispered. "But as for which..."

A flash of impatience ran through Conna. "What is taking them so long? The Community has had more than enough time..."

"Do you suppose they don't care?" Zetch asked offhandedly, cracking more candy. Their wings flicked at their back.

"Of course they do," Conna said right away, but then stopped and

quieted.

Did they?

Maybe they didn't.

She certainly couldn't feel the truth of that in her heart.

The Community cared about expansion, and theoretically cared about preservation and protection of the undesignated Pax planets. They cared about meeting the inhabitants, evaluating the worth and stability of the world overall, including the peacefulness and whether or not they could be folded safely into The Community. They cared about a lot, but because they cared about the end goal more than anything else, the timing didn't matter to them as much.

No need to rush, they felt, so long as they did everything right.

But their version of 'right' didn't give weight to the life of a single person sent on a mission to make contact with the planet a year ago, who had since gone missing. All they saw in that loss of life or contact was one tick in a box for the planet's assessment: possibly a native people who were aggressive to outsiders, or possibly a planet so arduous that unsuspecting travelers could lose their way or life. Neither of these were enough to know what their final say on the planet would be.

Neither of these were enough to rush to enter the planet's domain again without clearance.

Neither of these were enough for a rescue, or a burial.

Zetch seemed to have understood the thoughts going through Conna's mind, because they looked down at her with a knowing arch of their eyebrows. Their lips pinched on the edges. Conna had to look away from the weight of that knowledge.

They remembered their own homeworlds; Paxes as well, until they were folded into The Community and identified by a name used by the natives. It had taken decades for her planet, and centuries for Zetch's. A year was hardly a star in the universe of time and possibilities for Pax 925's future.

Evame circled the room again, gaze as sharp as knives on the planet below.

Willow turned her head; merely a brush of her cheek against her flowering hair. It was subtle, but Conna caught it. She focused fully on Willow now; noting the rustling of her woven-branch dress, and the fluctuation of her flowers from bright and open to wilting on the ends.

"What's wrong?" Conna whispered.

Willow's warm leaf-green eyes shifted to Conna. She watched her a long

moment and then looked away. "We need not worry."

That wasn't an answer, and Conna and Willow both knew it. Zetch stretched and hopped down from their perch, their wings folding and hooking in front of them like a cloak. Their tail swept around behind, curling around their right leg. They moved closer to Conna and Willow, watching until Evame was distracted peering out the door to the hallway as if expecting a messenger to barrel toward them.

"What's up?"

Willow's vine lips fluctuated.

Conna touched her on the back of her shoulder. "Willow?"

Willow wouldn't answer at first, but it was Zetch who asked the question no one had thought to voice yet:

"Where's Evard?"

+ + + +

The pod's lights screamed at Evard from every angle as he barreled through the atmosphere. The seat-belts cracked into his shoulders, his torso, his stomach and his legs. His head jacked back and forth in spurts - thrown forward from the resistance in the atmosphere, crashed back when he hit a bump in the air currents and was rocketed to the side.

He tried to keep the pod even-keeled, tried to keep it from spiraling downward in a blazing mess, but the pod wasn't built for this sort of entry. It was supposed to be released once past the outer atmosphere and in the height of the clouds, not from a spaceship hovering above it. It may have technically been rated for safety at that level of pressure, but it certainly wasn't built for the comfort of the pilot in those circumstances.

The pod's stabilizers overran their battery, and fizzed out. The entire ship instantly snapped into a free-falling corkscrew, rolling faster and faster; a hurricane spin so intense that the sky and land lost all meaning and blurred into a single, dizzying color.

Evard was going to be sick.

The proximity warnings blared to life, shrieking so loud his ears pounded. He couldn't even respond to it before he was nearly thrown from his seat even with the seat-belts.

The air in his body jettisoned out at once.

The world around him went fuzzy, and then black.

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Flickering light blurred on the edge of his consciousness.

He heard a voice, echoing.

Evard.

Evard.

Evard.

+ + + +

Movement caught his bruised shoulder against something hard.

He groaned.

His voice caught in his throat and died, buried beneath the weight of his pain.

+ + + +

The light of a campfire crackled nearby, but he didn't hear a sound. He felt it on his eyelids; saw that fuzzy orange-red that jumped and flitted like flames dancing through its fuel. There was no warmth like he expected.

Like a moth, it drew him.

Light, and light, and light. A contrast to the dark that surrounded his medicine head. It was like cotton tied like wool around him over and over, blurring the clarity that should be his surroundings.

Light, and light, and light.

Flickering, jumping, inviting.

He groaned.

Slowly, like anchors tried to keep them down, he opened his eyes.

At first, he saw only the contours of shadows above him. Darkness on his periphery, and shapes brought to life only through the flickering campfire.

Slowly, slowly, his understanding of the world expanded.

He was in pain.

His body felt like it had been bludgeoned all over. It felt like there wasn't a stretch of him that wasn't bruised or maybe broken.

His eyes throbbed with the beating of his head; the blood pumping through his veins in a resounding, sickening drumbeat.

Ba-dum. Ba-dum. Ba-dum.

He felt that cacophony down to the tips of his fingers and toes; back up through every crevice and peak, to his temples where it pounded out any thoughts.

Ba-dum. Ba-dum. Ba-dum.

Somewhere, his voice released in another moan.

Somewhere, the light flickered faster.

Somewhere, he thought he heard movement but his eyes were already falling shut once more.

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When he came to again, the pain had lessened slightly. His head was a little clearer.

This time, it wasn't campfire that flickered against the walls and ceiling, but moonlight shimmering off a tumultuous sea. It rose and fell in waves across the edges of the ceiling, casting unpredictable silver-blue on the walls and down, down to the floor.

He turned his head slowly, testing his muscles.

Two moments of understanding converged:

This was a cave.

The moonlight was too bright for the depths of it.

Before he could turn those into a cohesive thought, the question he was too fuzzy to ask was answered.

Ala phased into existence in front of him, her huge eyes worried, her skin the deepest shadows cast blue from a turbulent sea. Her hair was the moonlight, ebbing and flowing with worry, until she saw him awake. It burned bright, then, as if the moon burst clear from the clouds and shone silver-white down to the world below. Her skin shifted, the deep brown of trees: confident, steady, and powerful.

"You're awake!" Her voice was so small, as was the rest of her. Her hood was back off her moonlight hair, and her eyes searched every part of him

she could see. Her small hands followed, gentle tickling touches that should have bothered him but only made him feel comforted.

"What?" he tried to ask, but his voice was rocks tumbling down a hillside.

"I can't heal you. I couldn't get Willow. I didn't know what to do."

He groaned and looked around as best he could. As he'd thought, he was deep in a cave of some sort. But how...?

"How did you move me?"

"I phased you."

He groaned more deeply, his head pounding violently as he slowly tried to sit up. She jumped up to his shoulder, and balanced as he righted himself.

For a moment, the edges of his vision went black, and what he could see before him became a starkly tightening tunnel. His hearing went distant, fuzzing out as if he fell underwater. He thought it was just the cave, but then he realized he was passing out.

Ala was there, her tiny hand strong but gentle on his cheek, her voice a calming balm in his ear.

"Please stay awake. I can't move you again."

He drew in a deep breath through his nose, held it until his head pounded, and released it through his mouth. He tipped forward carefully, so as not to upset her, and dropped his head between his knees. There, he breathed evenly, in and out, in and out, to remain awake.

Slowly, his vision crept back out to his periphery.

Slowly, his hearing returned.

Slowly, he regained full consciousness.

He ran a shaky hand back over his head, feeling for wounds, finding only bruises and his ranking shaved in the designs of his hair.

He assessed the rest of himself slowly, carefully, taking the time he needed to feel every inch of himself by focusing on it, and by running his hand over skin and feeling gently for breaks in the bones.

Miraculously, he didn't think he had broken anything.

It seemed he may have escaped with only sprains and bruises.

The pod's safety features were incredible, considering he had used it far outside its norm.

As much pain as he was in, the fact that he was alive and felt he could probably walk was more than he should have been able to expect.

It made him even more hopeful that Blaise was okay, as he had come to

Pax 925 in an upgraded version of the same pod. If Evard survived that fall in his version, surely Blaise had as well.

When he was finally able to move, he looked down at Ala, who now stood on his knee.

So many questions ran through his mind - how had she been able to phase him when he was so much bigger than she was? Wasn't she exhausted? How had she survived that pod crash? Where had she been?

But mostly--

"Why are you here?"

She crossed her legs and sat down, quirking her eyebrows up at him.

"Why wouldn't I be?"

"It's not safe."

"If it's not safe for me, it's not safe for you."

"Yeah, but—"

"I wanted to." Her hands curled into fists at her side, a tiny pressure on his knee. "I couldn't help when Clara didn't return, so..."

So if Blaise could be rescued, maybe there was hope for Clara too.

So if Blaise could be rescued, maybe even if Clara was dead, Ala could feel like she saved someone instead.

So if Blaise could be rescued, at least someone would be reunited with their love.

Evard sighed lowly, and held out his hand. She climbed up onto his palm, and balanced herself with outspread arms as he raised her up on level with his face.

"After this, should we go to Pax 880?"

Ala's skin and hair flickered into a stormy sky. Her hands caught and twisted against each other at her stomach. "The Community deemed them uninhabitable by our standards."

Evard met her eyes evenly. "After this," he repeated more strongly, "should we go to Pax 880?"

The storm in her features turned to lightning and thunderclouds. Her breath sped. "If—if we did—"

"I'm aware of what The Community will do for disobeying their orders. But they would have left Blaise and Clara both to death for their cataloging of planets. I don't know if I—"

She stopped him with a hand on his lower lip. He realized his heart was speeding, and his limbs were tingling. The idea of disobeying the organization that had been his entire adult life was terrifying.

And yet...

"We'll focus on this first," Ala said, but the warming of her skin tone and the calming of her lightning-hair told him all he needed to know about her appreciation.

"Thank you," he whispered.

Thank you, said her sunlight hair and sky-blue skin.

"Do you know where we are?" He looked around, but all he could see was the light cast by her, and the darkness it fed.

"Somewhere in a mountain, near a sea. I don't know more without Willow."

Or Zetch, who could fly or mold the stone around them, or Conna, who could scale the mountains easily or commune with animals. Ala didn't say this, but they both knew it.

Evard was only human. He had no extra powers to help in this rescue. If he'd wanted to give himself his best chance to succeed, he should have brought the others. But to do so was to endanger their standing with The Community, and he couldn't do that.

Worry set in; a seed taking root in his heart.

"Are you sure you're okay with this?"

She understood what he was really asking.

"I no longer represent my kind to The Community. Others have joined since me."

Translation: my homeworld is not endangered by my standing as a representative of my species.

In other words, even if she was excommunicated, her homeworld would not lose its place among The Community, and so her people would remain safe.

He let out a low breath.

She smiled, and her hair and skin became the light between the shadows cast by leaves in the wind. She stood up, and he understood her request. He moved her to his left shoulder, which hurt the least, and he oh-so-carefully wobbled to a stand. The world felt too big and too small all at once, and he had to brace himself with a hand on the rough rock. It was cool to the touch. Familiar, like any time he had touched a cave on his homeworld.

He drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly.

He could do this.

Together, with Ala, they would win.

"So. Where next, do you think?"

"Deeper," she said, "into the mountain."

"Not out?" he asked in surprise.

"This is the safest land I could find. It's more mountain than island. If we try the sea..."

They had no boat, no ship, no nothing. Too much water would kill her as much as it would him.

"The cave, then," he said, and began walking.

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How long they spent in a slow descent deeper and deeper into the mountain, he would never know. He felt the pressure changing on his chest, and the strength of his lungs. He felt the walls grow cooler, and dampen until moisture became a constant condensation. He felt the floor grow slick at times, and even as careful as he tried to be, more than once he fell. It hurt worse each time, and nearly knocked him unconscious once. Ala's light brought him back each time, with her voice the guiding touch.

Stay with me. Stay with me. Stay with me.

Together, we will make it.

Together, we will succeed.

They didn't know which direction to take; didn't know even if they were finding themselves a burial deep beneath the mountain. Evard tried to take only right turns, as if this were a maze that would swallow them whole. It worked at first, letting them backtrack when they ran into dead-ends, and choose the next right instead. But eventually he grew weary and tired; his vision blurred, his body ached, and Ala's light was dimming as her energy lowered.

She needed sleep, and so did he.

They rested fitfully. Sounds seemed so loud in the dim ever-night. Eyes felt ready to peer at them from any corner. Claws that likely didn't exist seemed ready to snatch them from the dark.

Sleep. Sleep.

They tried, but it was hard.

When they woke, Evard walked anew.

At first, Evard thought it was the change in elevation that was making

him dizzy, but he realized after several more missteps it was hunger.

When had he last eaten?

How long had he been unconscious?

How long had he slept since?

Ala didn't need food, not the same way he did. But they had no access to anything down here, and even if he spent all his time trying to find the exit they would only be met with the same problem. The sea may have fish, if he could figure out how to catch it, but for all that Ala's hair brought light, it was not fire. It would have taken too long to try to figure out how to eat anything, and whether it was poisonous. They could have drawn attention to themselves. And they didn't know yet what sort of inhabitants were on this planet, or whether they would survive an encounter.

They only knew that, as it was a Pax world, and due to its initial assessment before Blaise left, the air was breathable for Evard, and the gravity was close enough to his norm for him to function.

But what could he trust to eat here, even if he found something so deep within this cave?

He couldn't trust anything, so he pressed on.

Dizzy, dizzier, the cave at times tilting and whirling around him. His breath felt like a tickle at the base of his throat. His lungs wouldn't fully expand the way he felt they usually did.

Deep breath in, low release out.

Walk, and walk, and walk, with lead-heavy legs and wibbly-wobbly arms. Walk, and walk, and walk, even when he felt it was impossible to continue. Lean against a wall when needed, be unable to stop from sipping water that fell from the walls. Walk until he could walk no more, and then walk further.

Continue, continue, because there was no back.

The future was all they could aim for now. No past could regain them, with the choices they had made.

This is stupid, he thought at one point. *Blaise wouldn't want me to endanger everything for him.*

This is crazy, he told himself.

But he had known the second he had lain eyes on Pax 925 through the tempered windows that there was no way he could ever fly away from this place and leave his lover to the unknown. It didn't matter what happened down here. If he left without even trying, he would die inside as permanently as he would die if he fell and broke down here.

He could no longer live with the digital recreation of his love.

"Do you know what it means to be alive?"

The haunting question his simulation had asked, as if aware of Blaise's purgatory.

"We remain alive so long as someone remembers us."

His own reply, confident to a computer, but heartbroken inside.

He would never forget Blaise, he believed.

He believed.

But already he was losing the exact contour of Blaise's real hand in his memory. Was it exactly as the simulation, or did he only tell himself that because he had lost the comparison in touch and in reach? At what point would the simulation have completely overtaken Blaise's reality? At what point would Evard have remembered the caricature of his love only, skewed and warped over time in the hands of a computer mimicking his life? At what point would the real Blaise have died in his memory, while he justified to himself clinging to the shadow of what he had been? At what point would he have let himself give up on Blaise, because he had a replacement he could simulate any time he needed?

He would lose him, Evard had realized with panicked certainty upon seeing the blue of Pax 925. He would lose Blaise forever, if he turned his back to this world.

He would lose him, if he didn't persist.

Continue, continue, continue, because there was no past.

Only forward, forward, down into the deep.

Further and further into the black.

+ + + +

The cold was what brought him back first, but his consciousness slipped and slid along rocky terrain. It lost its footing and fell back into the shadows.

Darkness overcame.

+ + + +

A flicker of light, far away.

And the endless cold.

He shivered deeply.

Evard.

Evard!

WAKE UP

He startled awake; eyes snapping open, body coming back into knowledge.

He was lying on his back.

The surface was hard, uneven, uncomfortable.

He was freezing.

His feet.

His feet...

He sat up abruptly, his back shrieking in the process.

Why were they wet—

Spears stopped moments from impaling his throat. His heart leapt and thundered in his chest.

He froze, limbs snapping taut and as unmoving as stone.

He darted his gaze around, following the line of the wickedly sharp blades down their coral shafts, to the webbed hands holding them. Down to the arms, down to the bare torsos, down to the... fins...?

Mermen? Mermaids?

What?

His mind tried to compute.

He was in a cave in a mountain, so how...?

But there they were, surrounding him on three sides. Multiple merpeople, rising out of the water. Spears staying a lethal threat against him. From what he could tell without turning his head, he had walked blindly so far into the darkness that somehow he had arrived at a water access deep in the cave. Somehow, stupidly, he had walked down an embankment of rock, and nearly went into the water itself before he must have passed out. His lower half floated in the edge of the pool, nearly losing feeling from the cold.

The merpeople were colors he couldn't distinguish in the low light, but their features were easier to understand. Or rather, far too confusing to comprehend. Their heads were transparent. He could see right inside, to their massive, glowing eyeballs and their skulls beneath. Even as he

watched, their massive eyeballs flicked around beneath their clear skin. Rolling all the way to the side and back, as if they could see even through their own brains.

How the fuck—

Was he dreaming—?

"Evard!"

Ala's muffled cry caught his attention. He snapped fully awake, surprised to see he hadn't been dreaming. The merpeople truly had bizarre heads, their spears were on him, and they had Ala gathered in some sort of shell that she couldn't seem to escape. She pounded on an invisible barrier at the opening of it. One of the merpeople tucked the shell under their arm, and dove down into the water.

"Evard, I can't—"

She was gone under a rush of bubbles. The water swallowed her and the merperson, as if they had never been there.

She would have phased out if she could.

Evard felt his heart sink.

Whatever that shell was made of, she had lost her only chance to escape unless he could rescue her. But how could he, when he was so weak, and already in danger himself?

Part of him panicked, so lost and confused after everything that had happened that he couldn't focus well enough to understand any of this. This part of him was overwhelmed, and froze with fear and exhaustion. This part of him could hardly think beyond his hunger and pain. This part of him wanted to throw himself against the spears in a desperate attempt to dive into the water, to rush after Ala and somehow grab that shell, somehow save her.

The larger part of him had been trained as an officer of The Community. It knew that the panicked side of him would only get him killed, and maybe Ala too. It knew that right now, the safest thing for all of them was for him to remain calm, cool, and collected. It knew the only chance was negotiation, and to definitely not seem a threat to them until he could determine how to parley.

Which would prove difficult, when he didn't know their language.

He realized only then that the sound he'd been hearing in the background, a low-level hissing that ebbed and flowed that he had taken as water lapping, seemed instead to be emanating from their mouths.

They were talking to each other, and he couldn't even begin to

understand what they were saying.

What had prompted him to come here without Conna? Without Willow?

Why had he passed out, where he couldn't even help Ala escape before she was taken?

This was a disaster.

And he was still nowhere closer to finding Blaise.

He stayed still, his tired mind trying its best to run through all the scenarios. He tried focusing on the body language of the people around him; doing his best to learn the gestures and guess at their meanings. Would gestures of his people or those he had met from The Community be interpreted the same way among these people? Would they see his peace signals as that, or would it be something so alien here it would only confuse them? Worse, could his gesture for peace be a gesture for war here?

Think, he said to himself, over and over in the hopes it would kick his mind into gear. *Think. Think.*

They aren't killing you right now. They aren't hurting you. They aren't taking you.

Why?

Think.

Pay attention to their eyes, as well as you can. Where are they looking? Can you tell?

At me. They're looking at me.

Not my face. Further down.

My throat?

Not my throat. Further down.

They're looking...

And then it hit him: he was wearing a Community uniform.

Ala had been in her normal clothing, but Evard... he was a ranking officer. He had automatically worn the uniform down here, because it was the sturdiest clothing he owned. It was designed to weather all levels of stress, temperature, and more. Even some weapons. It was probably one large reason he had gotten away with nothing more than bruises, now that he thought about it further.

And right now, what seemed to gather the merpeople's attention more than anything was the Community emblem embroidered on his chest.

He stayed very, very still.

The only person from The Community who had been on this world was

supposed to have been Blaise. Who had come in Community uniform as well.

If they were looking at the emblem, if it wasn't purely coincidence, did that mean they had seen Blaise...?

One of them said something to another, and without warning the spears all flicked back from him and away. It was too fast for him to do anything other than to note they were no longer a threat. Before he could speak, hands grasped his clothing, and he was yanked down into the water.

He automatically shouted, releasing the precious air he needed before he was dragged under.

Icy water surrounded him. Hands grasped him harder, and pulled him down into the deep.

He was too weak to break free, even though he fought.

He watched his chance for life speed away from him, in rows of air bubbles streaking to the surface.

Those bubbles went smaller and smaller as the cave was thrown far from his reach.

Pressure built on his chest, his head.

The little air he'd managed to retain compacted and released in a burst of shock.

Sound became a blur, became vibrations against his ears.

He nearly passed out.

Just as the world around him flickered and nearly fell into oblivion, he felt a rush of warmth. Air suddenly surrounded him. He sucked in great gasps, gulping down oxygen so quickly he choked and coughed. Woozy, he looked around trying to understand what had happened.

Did they let him go..?

But the water was still there in sight, undulating around his face - not touching.

One of the merpeople near him turned to him with their glowing eyes burning through their transparent head. The light cast against the merperson's skull and organs, but it was so dark down here that the light barely made it the short distance to Evard's eyes. The water was deep as night; a black shard compressing everything. It felt like he was caught out in endless space - untethered to a ship; floating, until his oxygen starved and his body imploded.

He shuddered.

The vibrations returned, tickling his inner ear, and he realized after a

moment that this was the merperson talking. To him directly, it seemed.

But it sounded like a spacewhale's song - more music and melody than words. Something he didn't know how to translate, let alone how to respond.

The merperson continued, though, and as Evard focused on that, he was able to slowly, slowly, focus his panic into something useful. He realized that, yes, he could breathe, and now that he thought about it, the pressure on his body was gone as well. He wasn't freezing anymore. The spears were gone. The hands holding him weren't claws dragging him to his death like he'd thought at first - they were firm holds twisted into his clothing to keep him with them.

How could he breathe? Why wasn't he cold and under pressure anymore?

He carefully tried moving his hands, his legs, and when that worked and nothing terrible happened, he slowly looked down. The undulating air moved with his face, and pushed in and out as he breathed. He couldn't see even his own body, it was so dark, but the glow of the merpeople eyes dotted the landscape around him. It was like being stuck in the middle of a debris storm but knowing other spaceships were out there by their lights reflecting faintly from the gloom, or like being on a planet when fog rolled in as thick as clouds, obscuring all vision except the ghostly appearances of lights bright enough to break through the cover.

He had no concept of up or down anymore, but he knew they were all headed the same direction.

And he realized they had somehow enveloped him in an expandable air bubble, which somehow allowed him to breathe, and somehow protected him from the elements.

Was this, again, because of his Community uniform?

Were they friend, perhaps, or foe? Or something in between - mere spectators curious about the oddity that washed upon their shore?

He worried that he couldn't see Ala, but he was hopeful that if they were keeping him alive so far then surely... surely, they would do the same for her.

The merperson holding him continued to talk, and he didn't know a word being said. But he realized the intonation and melody of the sounds were changing subtly. Reforming and tumbling into something a little closer to words the way he knew them from most languages he had learned.

Just as he came to that realization, the syllables aligned in that deep-sea song, into something so familiar that Evard's heart nearly stopped.

Blaise's name.

Not the name 'Blaise' which was the name he had taken for himself upon joining The Community.

No, Blaise's *real* name which came from his native language; a melodic dialect closer to the merpeople's song than anything Evard knew. His real name was a collection of sounds almost hummed like a memory of music, and it was beautiful and something Evard hadn't heard in years.

Down in this deep sea reflective of deep space, with otherworldly eyes glowing at him from a transparent skull, it was haunting.

"What did you say?" he tried to ask the merperson.

But his words were garbled in the tankless air, and he felt he could hardly form the syllables.

The merperson stopped talking, even so, and tilted their head slightly. He felt their grip harden on him.

They repeated the sounds, perfectly aligned to Blaise's name.

This time, Evard said the same back. Breathlessly. Hopefully.

The merperson tipped their head the other way, and sped off with him into the night.

+ + + +

Memories rushed through Evard's mind feverishly as they flew through the dark.

"I don't think you know me," Blaise murmured, hunched over near a window out to endless, empty space. They were on the edge of a galaxy filled with Paxes, as of yet unknown, undesignated. An adventure in the making.

Evard sat next to him and kicked his feet out before him. "Why would you say that? I feel like I know you pretty well."

Blaise's lips tipped down, and his shoulders folded in on himself. His dark eyes slid sideways to Evard and back. "No."

Evard snorted. "Okay."

"I mean it."

"So do I, you idiot."

"But you don't know who I really am. What I really am."

"That's pretty stupid to say. I know who you are just fine."

"But you don't know what—"

Evard squeezed Blaise's arm. Blaise's attention snapped to him almost desperately. They searched each other's eyes, seeking solace on one, and information on another.

"Then tell me."

Blaise sucked in a deep breath and let it out slowly. It trembled lightly on the end.

"My name—my real name—is..."

That was the first moment Evard had heard those sounds, so fluidly and fluently sung into the silence. It was the most beautiful thing he had ever heard.

"Well," Evard said in surprise. "That's fucking gorgeous."

Blaise eyed him warily. "You aren't commenting on the language it is."

"That's because I don't know it?"

Blaise's fingers twitched into fists. His jaw set. His gaze slid away again, back, back to the deep. "I should have known."

"Known what?" Now, impatience was forming hot spikes in Evard's chest. "Would you stop being so damn cryptic? Just tell me what's bothering you."

"I should have known," Blaise said more loudly, "because you're human."

That drew Evard up short. "Uh... so are you?"

Blaise scoffed to himself, his eyes narrowed and very firmly not looking at Evard at all now. But Evard could see his reflection in the window.

"No, I'm not, Evard. I wondered why you weren't wary of me like everyone else. I knew you wouldn't know. We never should have—"

Evard smacked a hand over Blaise's lips, silencing him. "Shut up. I don't need you spiraling yourself into fatalism on this. Just talk to me. So you're not human. Okay. That's a surprise. So what? What does that have to do with anything?"

Blaise swallowed heavily, and lifted one hand in front of him. Although he didn't look Evard's way directly, Evard could feel him watching carefully through the reflection and his periphery. When his arm was clearly in view of both of them, he paused, frozen, for a moment. His chest rose and fell a hair quicker than normal, and where Evard's hand still lingered on Blaise's lips he felt the pounding of his boyfriend's heart. Blaise froze one moment longer, and then it happened.

The hand Evard knew so well, that he had gripped and grabbed in so many ways, from playful to innocent to desperate to intimate, broke apart before his eyes and reformed into something entirely new. The dark of Blaise's skin tone shifted, lifted, into something blue and white with accents of purple. It took Evard a heart-stopping moment to realize it was becoming the hand of a native from a land they had searched together, a people who had yet to settle on their own name but whose form was completely separate from his own. But just as Evard was struggling with that internally, coming to the realization that Blaise must be one of those people as well and somehow never mentioned it in the weeks they were on that planet — his hand changed again. The brown and green of Willow's bark, and then the hard grey of Zetch in their stone form, and then a blown up version of Ala's hand shifting quickly between colors. Turning, again, again, into other forms altogether. No longer a humanoid hand, it was now a fin, a pincer, a wing, a—

Evard's hand dropped from Blaise's mouth without him fully noticing. Blaise froze, and his hand snapped back to normal.

Normal?

Was what Evard knew of Blaise anything close Blaise's actual normal? Or only the normal he presented as a reflection of Evard?

Blaise nearly crouched in on himself.

"I'm a changeling," he whispered. And then: "I'm sorry."

Evard was struck speechless, captivated by Blaise's hand. Trying to understand how something so fluid could be captured so easily in one format this long.

Blaise's hand twitched into a fist, and he began to rise. "I'm sorry," he said again, more thickly. "I'll leave you alo—"

Evard snatched Blaise's hand before he could leave, and dragged him back down. Blaise sucked in a startled breath. Blaise tried to pull away but Evard wouldn't let him; he was utterly fascinated and dragged Blaise's arm in front of him so he could hold Blaise's hand up within his own, turning it around, studying it closely. Feeling the weight and warmth of it; the tendons shifting underneath, the fluttering of his heartbeat, the heat of his skin.

They stayed in that unknowing silence longer than Evard meant to, but the curiosity that drove him as a person had gone into overdrive with this amazing discovery and stole the words from his voice to overrun instead his buzzing thoughts.

He had never heard of changelings before. Well, that wasn't true - he'd heard mention once or twice in books, but the human worlds were considered to be largely pretty ignorant of the rest of the universe, because humans tended to gravitate to their own more than even most other species did so. Humans called it self-sufficiency, but other species called it fear.

What he'd seen had been mere mentions of changelings, with no explanation of how they worked, or where they could be found, or, really, even if they existed at all. There were plenty of fairy tales in human stories that had creatures similar to changelings or other species later found in the universe, but there also were creatures from stories that hadn't yet existed elsewhere.

Evard had completely forgotten about it until now.

And to think, he'd been dating one for months!

"This is incredible!" Evard enthused, grinning widely up at Blaise. "How cool is it that you—"

He stopped at the look on Blaise's face. Irises widened and ringed in white. Trembling mouth.

Shocked.

With wet eyes running over into tears.

Evard dropped Blaise's hand immediately, turning completely to Blaise. He cupped Blaise's face in his palms and leaned forward. "Oh. Oh no. I'm sorry, Blaise. I got so excited that I didn't—"

Blaise jerked Evard into a hug, so hard and desperately loving that it knocked the air from Evard's lungs. He breathed in deeply, startled, and felt Blaise gripping him in an even firmer embrace.

"Thank you," Blaise whispered shakily into Evard's ear.

Evard let out his breath, and hugged Blaise back. "Thank you, you big dummy," Evard whispered back, "for telling me."

He buried his face in Blaise's neck, and let Blaise hold him long into that night. He ran his hands comfortingly along Blaise's back every time he felt him start to cry.

It wasn't until later that he learned what most species thought of changelings.

It wasn't until later that he understood the significance of his bumbling human ignorance, so easily accepting and loving someone for themselves, and not for the thing everyone else saw them to be.

He had so many questions: How did it work? Were there limits? What

were the rules?

But those questions would wait a long time, because loving Blaise was far more important than learning the quirks of his power.

Blaise's mind and heart would always matter more to Evard than his body ever could.

+ + + +

Evard's rushing, hopeful mind was right, in the end. The merperson flew him fast through the water, down and down and down, until suddenly the black opened up into light beaming from around a canyon-like corner. He was dragged around it, and nearly blinded by the light.

He winced and threw a hand up to block the intensity, and slowly, ever so slowly, squinted his eyes open to peer between his fingers until his eyes could adjust. It took time, but eventually he was able to focus.

His heart stopped, and for the first time in a year it truly beat again.

Frozen seemingly in stasis, in what was some sort of transparent rock attached to the side of this deep sea canyon, was Blaise.

He was changed into the form of one of the merpeople and might have been utterly unrecognizable to anyone else, but Evard knew it in his soul the second he saw him.

He shuddered out a trembling breath, and jacketed it back in too fast. His heart thundered hard within him, throwing molten lava into veins that had turned stone from loss of love.

He could breathe again for the first time.

He could see again for the first time.

He could truly feel in a way he hadn't since the last time they'd touched.

Blaise.

Blaise.

Thank every deity that ever existed, he was *alive!*

The merperson said something again but Evard hardly heard it, and didn't need to ask anything because he was brought closer and closer, until he could touch with trembling fingertips the glowing rock. This close, he could see Blaise's merpeople eyes were closed, but also he knew he lived because he saw the movement of blood and pulsing in his transparent head. He could see the faint rise and fall of his chest.

One of the other merpeople came closer, and held up a shell. Evard could hardly focus at first, so mesmerized by seeing Blaise living and breathing before him. But then he heard the faint warble of a familiar voice, and he snapped his gaze over.

Ala stood at the edge of her shell, still caught, still alive.

"Ala!" Evard tried to say, but the words were taken from him in this deep.

She understood, though, and dropped in relief to her knees.

They were all okay.

She looked at Blaise, and didn't even try to talk where neither of them could hear. She turned back to Evard questioningly.

The other merpeople came down and surrounded them in a half-circle. Where before, that had felt like a threat in the cave, Evard now felt it was protection. The merperson holding Ala gestured from her to Blaise to Evard, and then up presumably to the surface. The merperson holding Evard knocked on the rock, then gestured to Ala, Blaise, then Evard. They made another gesture Evard translated as being a question, but then they also pointed to the water around them and made the questioning gesture again.

Evard knew what they were asking, but was mystified as to how they knew of her powers. Had they seen her helping him when they first landed? Had they swam ahead into the water entrances of that cave, waiting for them to appear? But if so, why had they threatened them with spears first?

And why was Blaise in there? And why did these people seemingly want to help?

Evard met Ala's eyes. Could she do it? Could she phase Blaise out of that rock, and phase Evard along with them back to the surface?

It was a lot to ask, he knew. Too much, in all honesty. She probably shouldn't—

Her eyes narrowed. She stood up and nodded, her hands turning to fists.

He pointed to the shell and gestured questioningly. She hit the side of it with a palm and shook her head.

So, it was as he thought. That shell had some sort of property that stopped her from phasing.

He pointed to the water surrounding them, and then the shell. But how could she phase them once out of that shell, without drowning or being crushed by the pressure of the water herself?

Her jaw set.

Don't worry about it, she was telling him without words.

I will worry, he told her silently in return.

She pointed at Blaise. *We have him. We can save him.*

He pointed at her. *Not at your expense.*

She quirked an eyebrow and gestured a bit rudely to him. She looked at the merperson holding her shell, and before Evard could stop them, the forcefield on the end of her shell dissolved and she was sucked out into the sea.

"Ala—!" he tried to scream.

The world jumped around him; a flicker of change.

The merperson holding him let go and swam back quickly along with the rest. He started to fall deeper into the water, watching the golden light surrounding Blaise disappear into the distance, with a tiny shadow in front in the form of Ala. Just as he felt the air bubble protecting him start to falter and fall, the edges of the black water fizzed white like static. He saw a flash of sky between those breaks in the sea, and then it flipped back to the dark water. Greater breaks in his surroundings jumped in like the simdeck malfunctioning, showing white caps of waves and a hint of mountainous rocks, then back, back, to the sucking deep with the gold growing ever further away.

He felt his air growing thin. His hearing trembled and tightened into a whine that wouldn't end.

He closed his eyes.

And felt rock crack into his shins.

He snapped his eyes open, his equilibrium completely off. He fell forward, palms scratching painfully into harsh angles, and the wind—

The wind!

He sucked in a deep breath, twisting around in shock.

He was on the edge of one of the mountainous islands - probably the one they had landed on. He was surrounded by a jewel-blue sea, with waves peaked white in the distance, and birds calling overhead as they elegantly banked in the air currents and landed on sheer cliffs. The sky was blue-violet, the clouds were stretched-fluff high in the air, and the sun—*the sun*, it was the most beautiful, warming, comforting, incredible thing he had seen since finding Blaise.

He was out.

He was safe.

He was alive.

He was no longer drowning in the deep.

Ala had done it! And Blaise—

Evard twisted again, searching nearby for either of them. When he didn't see them immediately, panic jolted in. Had she only managed to save him? Were the two of them still caught—

He scrambled to his feet, sliding and falling in his rush to run around the edge of the island. All he could see was a small piece of rocky beach in his area, with the crags and angles of the mountain blocking his view of the rest of the island - or even if it existed at all. For all he knew, what he stood on was all that existed.

He made his way as carefully but quickly as he could around the corner, having to flatten himself along the wall of sheer stone and edge around a tiny precipice of flat land that dropped right into the ocean. With the currents around him, he didn't know if he would be able to get back on the island if he fell in. He may be swept right back out to sea; this time, without any saviors.

Around that corner was another empty rocky beach and another blind corner.

By the time he made it to the third rocky beach around the fourth sheer wall, his heart was on overtime and his too-hot hands could barely hold anything. He ran through every possibility in his mind - how he could save them if they were still down there, what he could even do alone on a planet, as a human with no special powers—

He found them, then, unconscious on the rocks.

His breath guttered out, and pulled back in too quick. What was meant to be a tide of breath became a tsunami.

He stumbled over the loose rocks, and fell to his knees at their sides.

Blaise was still in his merperson form, but it was already starting to flicker and flow back to the default human he had chosen since joining The Community. He was out completely, but he was breathing, and he was alive.

Evard hardly had a moment to rejoice in that before turning to Ala.

She wasn't moving.

He quickly picked her up, careful not to move her neck or spine from their position. He lifted her closer to his eyes, his ears, to try to detect faint movement in her tiny body. To see her breathe.

But she wasn't.

And, more disturbingly than anything, the color was slowly leeching away from her hair and skin, like paint left in the rain. Turning her slowly, slowly, into stone-white.

"No, no, *Ala*—"

He was too big to be able to pump the water from her. No matter how much he may try to temper his strength, no matter how little air he may try to get into her lungs, it would be too much. He would crush her in his attempt to save her.

What do I do

What do I do what do I do

He looked around, searching for anything, *anything*, that may be able to help him. But for all that he was trained in emergency medicine like all officers of The Community, everyone knew her kind and other species like her were too tiny to be helped by conventional means. He needed a Community ship, or—

He heard the skittering of rocks falling down the cliff behind him, and then a sudden crunch of stone.

"Oh, for fuck's sake," came the long-suffering comment, and then a yelled: "Found them!"

Startled, Evard looked up even as he instinctively pulled *Ala* closer to his chest in protection.

Conna easily strode across the rocky terrain with her hooves as casually and gracefully as Evard would a flat floor.

"You're a real idiot, you know that, Evard? What was your plan to escape this place?"

"*Conna*?" he asked in disbelief.

She rolled her eyes.

The sound of the birds flying came closer; great wings flapping against the wind. But it wasn't a small bird that flew around the corner; *Zetch* curved out of the air, and came down to an easy land on the beach. When their wings folded onto their back, *Willow* unraveled herself from branched armor on *Zetch*'s chest and molded back into her more humanoid form.

"Well, wouldja look at that?" *Zetch* pulled a piece of glass candy from their bag and crunched it in the side of their mouth, gesturing with the tip of one wing to *Blaise*. "It actually worked."

Willow was upon Evard in no time, prying his hands away from *Ala* and pulling them out so she could see. Her leaf-green eyes were intense on *Ala*, and then flicked up to Evard. "May I?"

He nodded blankly, letting her take Ala into the fold of her body, where her small form completely disappeared into the branches. Flowers bloomed and died in waves around where Ala had gone. Willow turned and settled herself onto the edge of the rock, so her roots could flow deep into the water and suck up nutrients while she worked.

Conna leaned forward with her hands braced on her thighs. The wind lifted and fluttered her dress and her braids along with it. "How much longer do you think it will take?"

"Wh—what?" Evard managed.

She looked up at Evard from beneath her brows. "For him to reset into this form and wake."

"I don't... know..." He looked around blankly, still trying to process this. Part of him began to wonder if he was hallucinating, or if perhaps he'd never survived the initial fall.

"Nah," Zetch said lazily, as if they could read Evard's thoughts. "You made it. You're just predictable."

"When we couldn't find you, we knew what you must've done." Conna knelt next to Blaise, and placed a hand on his shoulder as if to reassure herself he was there. "Willow felt you both come down. We wanted to come sooner, but—"

"Your sister," Zetch said dryly.

Evard nodded automatically, but then the severity of the situation finally, fully sank in as his adrenaline slowed. He turned to them, eyes widening.

"What are you doing here? If they find out—"

"Relax," Zetch said easily, and crunched another candy. "They won't."

"Not right away, anyway. We need to get back as soon as Ala's stable." Conna peered up at the sky, her hand shading her from the sun. "Our medishop will be visible to them in about twenty minutes if we don't move."

"It'll be fine. Once Willow has enough water, we can—"

"We aren't going back."

Zetch and Conna both looked in surprise at Evard's announcement.

"*What?* Are you kidding me? You got Blaise!" Conna shook Blaise lightly on his arm. "Why would you ever—"

"Ala helped me, so I promised her we'd find Clara."

That made them all go silent. Conna looked intensely uncomfortable and looked to Zetch, who quirked an eyebrow.

"Pax 880 is—"

"Forbidden," Evard said impatiently, "I know. But she risked herself—"

"Missing," Zetch finished firmly.

Evard stared at them. "What?" Zetch met his eyes evenly, so he turned to Conna. She got a sad look on her face and looked away. "*What?*" Evard demanded. "It's a fucking planet! How could it go missing?"

Zetch shrugged.

"Yeah," Conna said, "we don't know, either. It was the reason The Community was so slow to respond regarding Pax 925. Apparently, a whole swath of similar planets have disappeared."

"*What?*"

"They don't know why yet, so they're telling all the ships to return from missions on any planets anywhere in the same range of demographics." Zetch pointed around them with an empty candy stick. "Like this one."

"Wait. Wait, wait." Evard rubbed at his temples and held the other hand out to stop them. "You're saying 'disappeared' and 'missing'... not destroyed?"

"Yep."

"But... when?"

"They've been flipping out of existence one by one lately, apparently." Zetch flicked one wing out and then back in, and settled onto their haunches more easily.

"Would've been nice to tell people entire fucking civilizations and species are disappearing," Conna muttered under her breath.

"Guess it was too much of a bother to tell anyone about it," Zetch said with a one-shouldered shrug.

"Are any of them your planets?" Evard asked, aghast.

"Nah, mine's probably fine," Zetch said.

Conna looked away. "Mine's okay so far, but..."

But it met the demographics.

And, Evard realized with slowly dawning horror as he looked around Pax 925, so too would many of the human worlds. After all, the fact that he could stand here and breathe without any apparatus meant this world already on its own was close enough to his native planet to compare. And the fact that water, wind, sky, stone, it all behaved similarly here as it did on his homeworld...

"What are they doing about it?" Evard turned back to the others with sharp eyes. "What's the plan?"

"Ice everyone out and do nothing, seems like." Zetch stood up and stretched, their wings straightening behind them. They yawned. "You know, the usual."

Evard looked at Conna. "And you're all okay with that?"

"Of course not," Conna snapped. "But what can we do?"

"I'm not going back to do nothing," Evard said sharply. "I promised Ala we'd find Clara. I thought it was a question of finding her on the planet, but now apparently we need to find the entire goddamn *world* she was on, too."

"Yeah?" Conna challenged. "And how do you plan to do that, with no ship, no crew, no idea of what's happening?"

"Blaise, Ala, and I can handle a ship, if we find one. Everything else, we'll figure out. The only thing we need..."

"Is for us to get you off this rock." Zetch tipped their head back and forth, cracking their spine. "Which we already planned to do."

"But I can't ask you to come with."

"Ha!" Zetch grinned, showing off all their razor-sharp teeth. It felt like a mild threat. "You couldn't make me if you tried, human. I'm going back to the ship."

"Sorry, Evard, me too." Conna stood up and crossed her arms. "I have to be somewhere that will give me updates on my world. I need to know if I can press for evacuation, or help..."

"And Willow?" Evard ventured.

Conna looked heavy-eyed at Willow. "I think of all of us she would want to come the most, but I don't know if she can. They will look for her. The healing skills of her kind..."

Were unmatched in any other species. He knew. They were the only species that knew how to heal any other species, and wouldn't find themselves helpless and hopeless like he had only minutes earlier.

Evard felt a restless mix of emotions at that; relief that he wouldn't be dragging anyone else into potential excommunication, but also a bit of sadness and frustration that they weren't even going to try. He swallowed.

Was this a stupid idea?

Should he bring Ala and Blaise back to The Community right away?

He looked down at Blaise, his form nearly back to normal.

But he couldn't.

The Community had already abandoned Blaise once. They were open to changelings, because the changeling world was part of The Community,

but no one was fully comfortable around changelings there. They could be anyone and anything. There was a question in most species' minds when confronted with them — wondering if they could be trusted. Wondering if they ever, fully, knew their true form, or true intentions.

Would The Community question the fact that Blaise had shifted into a merperson for some length of time? Would they ask too many questions about why he had been in stasis — an answer even Evard didn't know? Had Blaise helped with the plans to roll Pax 925 into the fold, or had he hindered it? Without being able to understand the merpeople's language or anything they had said, Evard didn't have nearly enough information about what had happened down here to know if Blaise would be safe back on the ship once he awoke.

And Ala... She had deliberately left to help Evard. Willow, Zetch, Conna — they may be able to get away with the excuse that they came down to save a Community officer by helping Evard. But Ala would have a harder time arguing that. If Clara wasn't a goal, she may have tried. But the fact was, Ala wanted to find Clara, and Evard had promised to help.

What would Ala do when she was saved by Willow, and learned Clara was gone, and so too was the world she had been on?

What would happen to *this* world if it, too, disappeared?

Would the merpeople who helped them be safe, or was everyone killed on the missing planets?

There was no way he could go back. He didn't hate The Community; they had saved his family and his planet. But they moved too slowly, and didn't communicate enough.

Maybe he wouldn't be able to achieve anything on his own with Ala and Blaise, but he didn't think it would be a worse waste of his efforts than going back to the ship and pretending he didn't know or care about any of this.

"You must leave."

It was Willow with her gentle rustling-leaves voice. Her roots retracted from the water and formed her flowing skirt once more. She stood, and approached Evard. She held one hand out, and from her upturned palm, a beautiful flower grew as a bud, and then bloomed. In the center was Ala, curled in a tiny ball on her side.

She was breathing, and color was back in her form: the pale green of leaves and grass, now, fluttering in the wind.

Evard let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding.

Gently, he held out his hands, intending to take Ala from her, but she shook her head and let Ala disappear once more into the flower.

"Will she be alright?" Evard asked worriedly.

Willow nodded, and then pulled a rope of flowering vine from her hair. She held it out to Evard and he took it without question. The moment it touched his hand, it snaked up his arm and wound around his wrist and forearm into a wide bracelet, or maybe a wooden armor plate. He jumped, startled, holding his arm up to look at it from different angles.

"If you need help healing others or yourself, please use this." Willow gestured to the vine. "It will last as long as the flowers bloom. If you give it water and love, that will be a long time. Longer, perhaps, than you."

Evard quirked an eyebrow. "Are you saying you think this is a suicide quest?"

Willow smiled slightly. "No. I am saying the lifespan of a human is but a blink for my kind. If you treat that well, it will live as long as one such as I, which is a very long time indeed to your kind."

"Oh... Thank you, Willow." Evard held the vine up to the light, and could see the flowers blooming and closing lazily. "Why have I never seen or heard of this before?"

This time, her smile was full. "Because we do not give pieces of ourselves out to just anyone."

Evard felt his heart twist. He looked down. "Thank you," he said again, quietly this time. The relief at knowing he could help next time Ala or Blaise were hurt was overwhelming. "But how do I use...?"

She tipped the end of one vined finger to his lips and then back to her mouth with a quirk. "You will know, when the time is right." She folded her hands in front of herself where they formed one line, like a dress with sleeves so long it hid her fingers. "We must return. Soon, they will notice our absence."

"You're gonna need a ship," Conna told Evard.

"I know."

Conna smirked. "Good thing we brought one for you."

Evard snapped his eyes to her and then the others. "How—"

"Like I said—" Zetch flashed their sharp teeth again, more playful this time. "Predictable."

Evard looked up at the sky. "Then, how—?"

Zetch scoffed and came up behind Evard. "Humans," they said dismissively, and grabbed Evard around the middle.

Before Evard could speak, he was yanked up into the air to the beating of Zetch's great wings. He screamed as the land swept away beneath him; as the massive, mountainous island and the endless deep sea that had held him captive were both turned miniature from his new vantage. His feet dangled into the violet sky, and kicked into the misty dampness of the clouds. He gripped Zetch's arms like a lifeline, and felt both giddy and terrified at once. It came out in some sort of half-shout, half-laughter.

From the corner of his eye, he saw Zetch smile.

Almost before he could comprehend the changes, Zetch banked hard and the laughter became another scream. Evard squeezed his eyes shut, felt too nauseated from the ebb and pull on his body, and snapped his eyes open again just in time to scream once more when he saw the mediship coming in too fast. He had a full-body flinch, shrinking back against Zetch and gripping his arm like claws.

A massive *thunk* rattled Evard's bones, and he squinted.

Zetch casually had Evard in one arm, and clambered up the side of the mediship with his remaining hand and feet, crawling along as easily as Evard would have the floor. This, despite the fact they were fighting gravity, and the currents of the wind.

Zetch got to the top of the ship, leaned forward to open a hatch, and dumped Evard down inside. Evard landed with a startled wince onto a padded chair in the mediship, and looked up. Zetch flashed their wicked teeth, and then was gone in the closing of the hatch.

Evard's mind wheeled with all the changes that happened so fast, but his training took over. He got out of the chair, and went to the nearby console to search for other ships on this one. He learned they had docked one of the collection pods on this ship.

He felt a smile stretch his lips. "Clever bastards."

He left the console and headed back toward the hangar where he found the pod fully stocked once he got inside. It was a collection pod; one of the most rudimentary and ubiquitous small ships out there. It was made to be manned and lived in by multiple people for long periods of time, and was designed primarily for trash and debris collection and recovery. It had all the things a ship would need — capability of space travel, a bathroom, a kitchen, a storage area, a sleeping area, collapsible mechanical arms they could use to pull things from space without having to leave the pod... it was even built to the highest level of protection and strength, since collection pods were more likely than any other ship to be hit by debris or

battered around in the course of its daily work.

What it *didn't* have, and what made it therefore generally not a threat to others and very easy to look past, was any sort of weapon system, and any sort of naming or numbering designation like larger ships would have. Collection pods only had internal numbering in their coding that could be found when linked up to a larger system, but when floating around space it wasn't possible to easily designate between them. And no one ever needed to bother, because the main ships that collected the collectors were fully automated, and roamed space pulling in collection ships only when they needed repair or when they needed to dump their load to return to their job.

Which meant if he, Ala, and Blaise were in this, they would be all but invisible to others even if they were right in their view. After all, no one really paid much attention to the garbage cans around them, unless there was something wrong with it.

And Evard would make sure nothing would ever seem wrong.

He heard movement and sounds distantly, and crawled back out of the pod in time to see Willow approaching. She had Blaise in one arm, and Ala in the flower in her other. She handed Ala over to Evard, and carried Blaise with her up onto the ship. They got both of them settled into their beds, and then he followed Willow back down off the pod back onto the mediship.

"Were you able to assess Blaise?"

She nodded. "He will be fine, physically. I healed what I could along the way, but have no time to finish. You may need to finalize his care, yourself."

"I will." He touched the flowering vine on his arm. "Thank you again."

"It is the least I could do. I'm sorry only I can't join you."

"No, Willow, you've already done more than enough. They're going to need you on the main ship."

She tilted her head forward with a demure smile. "I will do my best."

"And—" Here, he had to pause, because his voice choked in his throat. He had been trying not to think about this too much, because once he took this step he didn't know what the future would hold for them. "And, Evame—"

Willow touched Evard's cheek. He felt the rustling of her leaves as a balm against his tattered heart. "I will be there with her. We all will. She will be safe."

Evard nodded, and lifted his hand to hers, holding her there a moment to find solace in her stable and comforting form. For the first time, he realized that her flowers that seemed to quietly bloom and close were doing so to the beating of an old and genial heart.

"Thank you," he whispered, once more.

She smiled and gently pulled her hand from his. She stepped back, and rested her hands at her lower stomach.

"Be safe."

"We will," he promised her. "You all too."

"We will."

Evard looked up and past her, to the empty hangar. Conna and Zetch were no doubt operating the mediship, probably already coming up with the best flight back to avoid detection and give Evard a chance to leave in the pod at the best trajectory.

"Tell them goodbye for me?"

Willow smiled. "You will see them again. Perhaps you can save that energy to tell them hello at that time, instead."

He couldn't stop a smile in return, and chuckled lowly. "Alright. I will."

Evard moved back into the pod, watching Willow until he could no longer see her, and then he turned his back on her and The Community while he focused on the future instead. He closed the pod doors, double-checked everything was ready, then settled himself into the captain's chair.

He had never wanted to be a commander of a ship, like his sister. From the moment their planet had joined The Community, the triplets had quickly learned they had different goals. Evat hadn't been interested in joining The Community as an officer at all and so hadn't, but Evard and Evame had. Evame wanted to raise ranks, get to the top, become the best. Evard just wanted to enjoy himself, and meet new people.

Evame was the commander of their ship, and had always outranked him.

For the first time, Evard was going to call the shots all on his own.

For the first time, he alone was going to make the decisions.

For the first time, the universe was at his beck and call.

Sitting there in the captain's seat, he got a thrill at that knowledge. It started in his stomach, and fluttered up to his heart, stuttering it into a new beat.

This would be the melody of his new life.

No rules, no laws, no restrictions.

Just him and the stars.

At least until Blaise and Ala both awoke.

Then, at that point, they would be their own family, flying through space under the nose of everyone, searching for that which was missing.

But just because it disappeared didn't mean it was gone for good.

If they could rescue Blaise on Pax 925, surely they could find a way to rescue entire worlds.

He felt the mediship around them shift and then hum. He flipped the pod into higher power mode for their initial escape, planning to turn it back to low power once they could drift with their own momentum. He lowered the metal shields that worked as an extra layer of protection on the glass, and revealed the mediship hangar surrounding them so he could see more easily to pilot.

In moments, the pressure on his ears changed and popped. He knew they were rising quickly, up out of the atmosphere of this planet held deep in the grip of the sea, up past the clouds and breathable air, up, up into space where they would swim as quickly and freely as the merpeople had below.

He would find the equivalent of the glowing rock out here in the universe wherever it may be, and together with Blaise and Ala, they would free the people and worlds from the stasis that held them captive.

They could do it, he knew.

In that moment, he believed.

The mediship rattled as it broke free from Pax 925 and arced back to the main ship. The hangar doors opened at just the right time, perfectly placed to block them from view and give them the best momentum for their tiny pod to escape.

Evard pushed the controls forward, and in seconds they were racing away from the mediship, from the main ship, from The Community itself.

Behind them was everything they had known all their lives; a past both comforting and familiar.

Before them was the future; wide, seemingly endless, and as unknown as what lay at the deepest depths of Pax 925's seas.

There, in the pod, was the present: hope, recovery, and love.

And, more than anything, an unyielding belief that they were doing the right thing.

That, someday, they would look back on this as the moment their lives truly began.