

[Sometime in the hypothetical future]

The sirens had stopped hours ago. Likely someone had cut them or torn them down altogether, as miraculously, the power was still on. No one had felt the need to target the generators, it seemed.

There were other places to loot and burn.

He stood on the roof of the clinic, packed tightly to the abutting buildings, one after another, metal and duracrete crammed into the asteroid's alleys. Through small slits his eyes scanned the streets, having to look askance over the "skyline" at where fires climbed, too bright for him to stare at directly. A low and discordant noise roared, echoing across Ol'Val's various sectors, the sussurus of many people and species gone mad.

Or rather, perfectly sane. Who wouldn't react like this, when confronted with imminent doom? The gangs roved and stole and destroyed. The addicts got high for the last time. Families huddled in their apartment homes or wailed in the streets. Ships exploded when they tried to jump away. There was nowhere to run.

It was ending.

But it was not over yet.

So Mikhail had stopped trying to treat the constant stream of wounded who did not even want his help; he had donned his armor and gone hunting.

If these people only had hours left, then he would not let them be preyed upon in that sacred time.

His hands ached in his gauntlets. His chest rose and fell quickly. Sweat trickled down his back on top of an already dried layer. He searched for the next enemy. The next muggers or assailants. He would *break* them. He would—

The stairwell door creaked behind him, and the man whirled, arms snapping up, electricity writhing over his fists and forearms as he triggered the glove mechanism.

But it was not a gang of ruffians or drunken cavorters or even another jumper hurrying their fate along.

A tall figure crept out from behind the barrier, a familiar stoop of thin shoulders. The floodlights — some broken now, some not — and the fires lit on a waterfall of metallic locks, burnished as if a flame themselves. Small florets of yellow scales caught it too, as though upon barely-shining jewels, and gingerly came the rest of the lanky body, until finally a brilliant tail tip like a captured sunrise followed.

"...Mikhail?" Rue called, tones soft as ever. He looked about, then stilled when he spotted the man, a flash of terrified prey caught in the gaze of a predator. But that was gone seconds later as recognition followed, and were sinners ran from the armored, unforgiving, unfeeling harbinger of Death, Rue ran *towards* him.

"Rue."

Hearing his own voice seemed strange, now. He hadn't spoken in...hours? It seemed longer. It seemed he had no voice. Belatedly, he immediately lowered his stance, deactivating the gloves as the Saint approached.

"What are you doing here? How did you even...find me."

The hybrid touched the jacket he wore, indicating it, and Mikhail realized he recognized the coat quite well: it was one of his, after all. Rue had ended up with it...a month ago? He'd been cold while they walked, and...

The Arkanian had forgotten about it.

He'd kept it all this time?

"I found you," Rue replied simply, and for all he was taller than Mikhail when they stood close, he still looked *up* at the masked Arkanian now, glimmering lashes framing golden eyes, glimmering brows furrowed in concern. "What's happening...I came to make certain you were alright."

As if anything or anyone could be alright.

But he knew that Rue knew that. Or he suspected as much. Mikhail shook his head, tense, jaw clenching as he turned away back to searching the city.

"There is not much time, Rue. There are others you should be with. Hunyi or Kerissa."

"We've already said goodbye." In his peripheral, he saw the Saint stepping closer, not an ounce of hesitation to him. Nothing but *trust*. For *him*. "Kerissa is...distraught. Hunyi and I share a certain grief. She has peace, as do I, in knowing soon we will be reunited with the litluns we have lost." He was right beside the Arkanian now, and stepped in front of him, partially blocking his view. "But I knew you would be here. Like *this*. With your enemies."

Slowly, Rue reached up. It was Mikhail who nearly flinched, teeth grinding, tremors starting to rack his body that he willed to stop. The hybrid's lavender hand cupped the mask, a vacant pressure, no warmth penetrating the metal and sensor relays.

"Go home, Rue," the Arkanian bit out. "I'm fine. You don't need to be here. You shouldn't be fighting." Such an idea made his blood boil, in fact. That any of the criminals or negligents he beat down would even *breathe* on this pure saint of a man...that the saint would be tainted and burdened by Mikhail's violent works...no.

But Rue just stared at him, still holding his masked face. It was like having a brand held to his cheek, the terrible longing to feel *more*.

The hybrid's gaze was very soft and too knowing, holding a depth of pain and acceptance the Arkanian couldn't stand to gaze upon.

"I've known all my life that every day could be my last, Mikhail. It was always a possibility. An experiment. That is— that was my purpose. I am not afraid of expiring. But I do not want you to be alone. We promised."

"Rue," the single word cracked, and it felt like, finally now, the world really was falling apart under his very feet, his tired feet, his aching, writhing leg, the hungry crystal, every muscle so exhausted. "You— I—. What do you *want*?"

Again the other man didn't flinch at his snap. He just smiled at him. He was beautiful.

"If this is the end of the world, then I want to spend it with you." He took another step closer, nearly chest to chest with the Arkanian, then pausing, obviously looking at the blood on the armor, then out at the city, then back. "However you want to spend the night...I could help, perhaps...with your war. Or..."

Behind the stern, unmoving bronze plate, Mikhail's breath hitched, and he found his mouth dry.

"Or?"

Rue gave a little, sharp inhale, as if to brace. Then his expression grew determined, and his grip changed. He gently pried the mask off, lifting it away to reveal the tear-streaked face beneath.

The cool, smoggy air stung his eyes and cheeks. The trails of salt water went cold quickly. Mikhail gasped, blinking as if struck, harder than any of his opponents had ever hit. He tried to turn his face away, shame flooding in, overhead, crushing, for Rue to see him like this. To see the weakness. The fear.

But Rue just...passed the mask into his tail's grip and set it carefully down on the ledge behind him. He cupped the Arkanian's bare visage, lone thumb stroking gently under his eye, wiping away tears. He was humming, softly. Mikhail realized he was swaying to the music, enchanted and bewitched by the heavenly Saint.

No, that was not fair of him. Not now, of all times. This was...this was Rue. Not just a saint. A free man. And his friend. His *friend*...

With a choked, bitten-off sob, he found himself leaning into the sweet touch, the warmth a bloom, a blazing burn. It was cold. Rue shivered, even under *his* coat.

Bit his lip, and then leaned closer still. His lashes lowered, and the Arkanian felt his stomach drop out to see diamond tears welling in those saffron eyes, to see the flare of heat that simmered across Rue's cheeks and the bridge of his nose, a rose blush. His gaze met Mikhail's with utmost shyness.

"I have...noticed some things. Confusing, at first. Hunyi tried to...and then...And I. Well. I wanted. W-wanted. To ask. Will you... w-will you sh-ow me...*howtokissyou?*"

A thunderbolt could have struck, and he would have been numb to it. The man gaped for a moment, stunned, uncertain, wracked, wanting. As if a dam bursting, a million possibilities suddenly poured forth and unspooled at once; and each one died a sudden, tormented death just as quickly, because *there was no time*.

The world was ending. They didn't have all those possibilities. They only had this moment.

He decided, then, that the city could burn with the rest of the Galaxy. Damn it. Damn *him*.

The answer was not in words, but action. His hands flew up almost of their own accord and grasped the hybrid's face, too sudden, not gentle enough for what he deserved. He made sure to lighten his grip, to cradle, to treasure.

"I..." he swallowed. "I have...no more experience than...you."

Instead of seeming a deterrent, this admission made some of the shyness fade. Rue's blush deepened, scrawling down his throat, scales standing out all the sharper and brighter, beautiful, *beautiful*—

He bit his *damned* lip again and Mikhail *wanted*.

"Then...we can...both try?" Rue whispered, and stretched forward those last scant centimeters to press their lips together.

It was a chaste thing, uncertain, lips dry. Neither knew exactly what to do. And yet it seemed just so, to adjust his hold, and turn slightly, find an angle and attempt a few more brushes. Rue's open eyes widened with a small mewl, and that tiny sound opened his mouth, made way for their lips to slot together.

And *that* drew a *sound* from the hybrid. One Mikhail wanted to play over and over and over until time eternal.

Yet they only had tonight.

Moving by instinct, by the blind want and worship of this saint, the Arkanian took a step forward, gathering his friend up against the building's ledge, pulling him in closer, tighter, searching for *more*. One hand slipped around to cradle the back of Rue's head, carding into magnificent tresses, while the other simply— found its way under his coat, gripping first at a stark, sharp hip bone and then sliding up under roughspun secondhand cloth.

Rue gasped, startling a little in his hold, and the Arkanian froze. But the hybrid just shook his head, gripping on tighter and squirming.

"Your hands are cold," he breathed, and then, "please," and, "it's alright."

He'd started to put on weight recently, and no longer looked so skeletal at all points; but Mikhail could still feel every rib as his shaking, gloved fingers drifted over them, could've lifted him almost like nothing, even with his bad leg. The thought of lifting him then onto the ledge to sit and dropping to his knees in worship consumed his mind, but he tempered it with better judgment. Rue deserved better than this rooftop. Rue deserved better than the cold touch of his gauntleted hands — than *his* hands. Rue deserved everything.

He had so little to give, was so little.

And yet, Rue *wanted him*.

"Come here," the Arkanian rasped, and pulled the clinging man up into his arms, slipping one under the backs of his knees and the other around his shoulders. Rue yelped slightly but his arm immediately slung around Mikhail's neck, gripping tightly, and his tail wound around Mikhail's leg. Their noses brushed.

"Where?" Rue whispered slowly, like he was waking from a daze, spellbound by a few kisses alone.

"Indoors."

The stairwell was at least warm, inside, and the yellowed, cracked light of glowbanks sallow but still blinding to his exposed eyes. Rue squirmed as though he expected the landing to be the end of their journey, literal as ever, and it felt breathless and insane then to still him with another kiss, however clumsy. The hybrid mewled again and melted into him, enthusiastic, inexperienced motions freely returned. Mikhail had to force himself back, to focus on the stairs, and the hybrid gave another slow, pleased blink. He shuddered once more, breath hitching, confusion and wonder warring on his bouquet-stained features.

"I...what is that?" he whispered, quivering. He kicked his lips, bit it *again*, breathed ragged. "I...I f-feel...*I feel.*"

The revelation nearly took Mikhail's legs out, but the agony of knowing Rue, the tragedy of him, was familiar now, even in this new aspect.

"Does it feel...good?"

Rue nodded immediately, fast and hard. His heart shattered in his chest for one of countless times.

"Then I believe...*I hope...* you are feeling...pl-leaseure."

Rue chewed on that, literally, nibbling on that plush and reddening bottom lip, and then loosened his death grip a bit to stroke Mikhail's cheek.

"Do you ...feel that too? Because of...our kissing?" he asked, earnest and fragile.

The Arkanian groaned, pressing their foreheads together.

"Yes."

His companion's smile was beaming. Burning. It lit the stairwell, outshone the stars, turned the world to ash.

An oath left his tongue in his native language, and that seemed invitation, to Rue, to explore said tongue. With his tongue.

It took considerably longer to get down the stairs that way. Longer than they had. Every second slipping through their fingers. But what were those seconds for, if not experiencing this?

Eventually Mikhail had to set Rue down, and eventually they descended together, hand in hand; he discarded his gauntlets on the stairs. He wouldn't need them ever again, and the press of Rue's palm into his was worth an infinity more.

They didn't find peace or privacy below. The clinic was on the ground floor, and the other levels held various other suites, storage, and businesses. People still roved these halls. And it was not as though Mikhail had any sort of office, a volunteer as he was and the clinic was nearly as destitute as the denizens it provided for. He did, though, have working knowledge of handling mechanical locks, and here at the end of everything, it seemed the only fitting thing to ever come out of his family's tutelage. Rue watched with his ever present rapt curiosity as the Arkanian took out his tinkering tools and made quick work of the door to the clinic's meager stock room, quickly ushering them both inside and resealing it behind them.

It was not grand, not the least bit romantic. As the door shut behind them, enclosing them in a cramped closet with tall, metal rail shelves sparse of medical supplies, cleaning materials, and a single spare cot, the depressing reality was crushingly heavy, a weight caving in his chest. The way Rue looked not at all bothered, happy even, only made it so much worse. It should have been the *better*. It wasn't *enough*. Just all they had, just—

"Shhh, *shhh*, chrysanthemum," that soft voice murmured, and Mikhail found himself being tugged gently towards the cot and sitting upon it as it creaked under their weight. "It's alright, love, it's alright..."

He hugged him to his thin, boney chest, petting his one hand through sweat-matted black locks, and pressed kisses to his forehead, his eyes, across the crystal just as fervently as to his mouth. It buzzed, electric and *pleased*, it seemed.

"It isn't," Mikhail gasped, ragged. His bare, bruised hands found the folds of his-Rue's coat and fisted in them. "It is anything but that. You deserve so much greater, Rue, you—"

"*Mikhail*," the hybrid chided with surprisingly tender sternness, and his mouth snapped shut. Heat burned in his face, his stomach, lower, something inside him gone syrup to the simple act of speaking his name that way. Rue cupped his cheek again, and leaned in as easily as anything to kiss him. "May I tell you something?"

"Of course." *Always*. Anything Rue wanted to tell him, no matter the horrific burden of the knowledge.

"I'm happy." He kissed him again. "Tonight. With you."

His tail coiled them together, tugging closer.

"Can we...I'd like...I like...when you hold me, I think. I want. To touch? More of you. If...you would want that too. Just..." he touched the armor's front. "This...is hard." Then, linking their hands, squeezed, soft, skin to skin. "I like this."

And damn him, damn him, but such a sweet request from such humble divinity, he couldn't possibly have rejected it.

Buckles and clasps and mechanisms released. Layer by layer the suit was discarded, leaving him in the suit beneath. Rue smiled at him, then drew them back together, tucking up in that impossibly small ball he did and nuzzling into Mikhail's chest, setting his ear right over the Arkanian's pounding heart. Mikhail swallowed around the lump in his throat and laid back, trying to shut out the muffler sounds of the dying port outside the door, the sense of doom, the inescapable sadness. Trying to focus only on this.

On Rue, having come to find him, wanting him, happy with him, on their final day.

The tears came and spilled again, free without the mask.

"I want more with you," he confessed into the darkness, sinner before the altar. He pet through Rue's impossible hair, chest cavity more and more full every time the hybrid *purred* and nuzzled, trying to crawl into his ribcage, it seemed. "More. Time. And—"

He cut off, the silent sob too great.

Rue only stroked his cheek, shushing, and then started humming again. He sat up just enough to press another kiss, and then began to sing into Mikhail's hair, breath against his forehead, an adoring hymnal.

"Black is the color of my true love's hair...and blue is the color of my true love's eyes...his heart so pure and wondrous fair...his hands so gentle and his words so wise. O' lay me there, beside him true...for with him was happiest I ever knew..."

"Rue."

He had no other words.

Rue dipped down and kissed him again, and took them all away.