

The Golden Flower of Zada
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A Visit to A New World

The Golden Flower of Zada is a love story between a prince named Aurelio and his personal protector Onyxx. The story begins when they meet at the prince's engagement party. Liking each other very much, they remain in contact through Onyxx's deployment. Even though they very clearly have a connection, the latter is ignored until Onyxx returns to find that Aurelio had attempted to kill himself. King Halen, Aurelio's husband at this point, notes their connection and believes Onyxx's presence can save Aurelio's life. It does a little more than that.

My project starts at the beginning of the story and ends when the characters make a startling realization: Aurelio and Onyxx's affair has created a new life. The rest of the story is currently in the works. This project is just the beginning.

I've had these characters in my head since high school. The current version of them is about their eighth evolution. If my past self looked at them now, I would not have recognized them. In High School, all the characters I had created were very two-dimensional. Aurelio and Onyxx suffered from the same problem. This was also back when I hadn't realized that (very much like Legend of Zelda) the story wasn't about Aurelio: it was about Onyxx. Aurelio had all of the development I could muster back then (which wasn't much). Onyxx was created way later when I needed for there to be a foil to Aurelio's energy. I needed someone to balance him out both physically and emotionally - so I made Onyxx. I don't remember much about how Onyxx

started, but somehow he turned into a gigantic, odd-eyed supersoldier - the perfect balance to Aurelio's girlish charm.

I started writing in eighth grade. My cousin and I were playing with Barbies (she was much younger than I. I kept playing with her until she aged out of it) and didn't stop. I remember sitting down, beginning to write a story, and knowing that writing is what I wanted to do for the rest of my life. (I literally looked down at the page and said "This is what I want to do for the rest of my life." out loud. Quite a moment.) Since then, I knew I wanted to be a writer and my first characters were born - they sucked. Aurelio and Onyx were about the eleventh or twelfth characters I'd made at that point. I've grown a lot since then. Thank goodness.

As a Queer POC, a lot of writing influence comes from my own wishes and desires of what I want the world to be like. I think of something I believe ought to be true and I make it happen in my writing. I got really into science fiction by watching a lot of superhero movies. I'm a huge Marvel fan and I feel that the characters and worldbuilding in those movies is simply spectacular - especially their magic characters. I also noticed that most of Marvel characters are straight and cisgendered. So I took it upon myself to write something new - something different.

What I ended up creating in this story is my ideal world. A world where race, sex, and gender don't matter. A world where sexuality is fluid and understood as such. While I mixed in magical and scientific advancements, I also wanted to make sure there was a story - a queer love triangle between three beings (one gay and genderfluid, one bisexual and healthily masculine, one asexual and nonbinary).

Zada is a double-ringed purple planet that is contained in its own blue-starred galaxy. In my search to create something different, I found planet Earth to be too tainted with rules and

regulations; so I chose somewhere new. On a new planet, anything can work however I want to make it work (within reason. This is sci-fi after all). I started by doing research about our known universe and its rules. From then on, I proceeded to use logic - and tons of sticky notes - to design somewhere habitable. Blue stars are enormous, incredibly bright, and hotter than our very own sun. This means that the goldilocks zone (not too cold, not too hot; just right) for Zada to exist in would be very very far away. I have designed Zada to exist on the outer edge of this zone. This would make the planet a bit on the dim side. Creatures on Zada, very much like creatures that live in dim places under Earth's ocean, need to make their own light. And that's what they do. With slightly longer days and nights, the people that live on Zada have evolved to be bipedal with dark skin and eyes that are good for seeing in the dark. The character of Onyx is a native and he fits this description. Aurelio does *not* fit this description. If he were originally from Zada, he would. That's all I'm going to say about that.

I can't exactly pinpoint what my story is based off. I wanted to write a type of romance triangle that slowly turned into all of this. My imagination runs wild whether or not I want it to. It began with Aurelio, frankly. I wrote him first. His personality was the worst when we began. He was arrogant, and self-centered, and just rude. When I decided that I wanted to make a partner for him, this had to change. Making him likeable, but still avant-garde, flamboyant, and larger-than-life was a bit of a challenge for me, but the creation of Onyx facilitated this. When Onyx came into existence, Aurelio began to make more sense. I molded them around each other, making their personalities a push and pull. One comes equipped with everything the other lacks. Onyx's personality is softer in its own way, but still firm enough to withstand the

constant push he gets from Aurelio whenever they interact. Simply put, they were made to be together. This leaves Halen out of the loop.

Halen was always a character in this story, but he wasn't fleshed out until recently. Previously, Halen had been a girl. I, at some point in my senior year of high school, decided that there were things this story was, and there were things it wasn't. For starters, I wasn't going to turn this into a story about "heteronormativity versus homosexuality," because that's not what it is. I wasn't going to turn this story into one about "denying one's sexuality for the sake of duty," because if Halen were a girl, I do see how it could've been interpreted that way. Frankly, I didn't want this story to address sexuality at all. As I mentioned previously, I wanted this to be a world where gender and sexuality being fluid was accepted and normalized. The story is about many things, but it's not about sexuality or gender identity. Now, to discuss what it's about.

When I started writing this story, I didn't really have an angle for it. I was still living majorly inside my head and wanted to make an LGBTQ story that spoke about queer people in a way that was normalized. Meaning, I wanted it to be gay, but not to make that gayness its main plotpoint - the way I'd seen so many other books do it. I wanted being queer to be more of a sideline. There was a romance going on, yes, and it just so happens to be gay - but none of the characters in the story would pay attention to this because there's nothing to pay attention to. It's normal. A man marrying a man is the same as a man marrying a woman. You marry who you like and that's that - no one's business. One thing I did decide to pay attention to is to make there be a variety of characters who think the same way. To explain my point, I paint a picture: a very feminine prince (Aurelio), his bossy, snarly, stressed, and non-sexual fiance (Halen), and a military veteran who can bench press over 300 pounds (Onyxx) can all say they would date a

man or a woman. They would say so normally and without blinking twice or thinking too much about it. My point by saying this is that I didn't want to make "queer" have a "look." That was one of the most important things I focused on when creating these characters. I focused on their personalities first, and simply played roulette with the sexualities, because they honestly didn't matter too much for the world they're living in. In a lot of ways, the characters are a million times more affected by politics than by gender and sexuality.

My current angle for the story is more of a chase. I want to make it a turbulent science-fiction romance with tons of heart-stopping and heart-crushing moments. While Aurelio is not the main character anymore, I want to make it an adventure that both he and Onyx participate in equally. I want to show that love has a lot of turns and tricks to it. I also want to make every character in the story sympathetic and realistic. As much as some people hate Halen, I've met people who have loved him very much. He's not a villain. He's just a person with a set of rules he needs to follow and a brain capable of coming to its own conclusions. And even though those conclusions don't agree with other people's', he sticks to his guns. I wanted my story to display how different people can use love as a different type of fuel for their actions.

The Golden Flower of Zada

➤ ONE

ONYXX

In my defense, the alcohol snuck up on me. The sweet smell of roses had gone to my head and spun me into a stupor. I was still pretty young and hadn't had much experience with it, so I drank more than I should've. I strayed from the main room.

My next blurry memory of the night involved a golden fairy making its way into the castle gardens. For some reason, it drew my attention away from the tray of flutes and my dancing colleagues. I remember following it into the hedges, down the winding path and into a clearing.

That's when I saw him. He was no fairy, but he might as well have been. Sitting in the center of the clearing, on the border of a very luxurious phoenix fountain, he was dipping his fingers into the water and causing ripples.

He was dressed in a way my drunk mind could only process as 'A Chandelier.' His earrings had jewels hanging from them and the same type of jewels were braided into his hair. His cheeks were shimmering and his eyelids were coated in gold. His eyes, two warm pools of gold, were carefully lined with liquid patterns that drew all the focus to them. His hair. Dear Ent above, his hair. It was pure spun gold waves. So long it went all the way down to his waist. He was wearing a flowing dress that was nearly transparent except for the areas that ought to be covered.

He was, in short, the most beautiful creature I had ever laid eyes on.

Sort of like a little animal, he jumped a bit when he saw me. He quickly stood and everything on him shifted like a ripple.

“Are you... . Can you hear me? Should I call someone?” he asked. His eyebrows creased in concern.

His voice sounded exactly the way I knew it would. Like a warm drop of chocolate on the tongue. Like the first breath of fresh air after coming up from a swim.

“You’re pretty.” I stuttered lamely.

“Yes. Thank you.” He smiled. Clearly only a formality.

I felt myself stumble back. His hands moved to help.

“Here. Come sit.”

Before I realized it, he was helping me to a seat on the edge of the fountain. I realized his wrists were covered in bracelets, and his fingers in rings. One for each mining town of Zada. I recognized my own town, Lazuli, as a flower-shaped ring on his pinkie.

He sat me down and tucked his hair behind his ear. It moved like silk and the ear was once again exposed. Hanging transparent jewels called my attention.

“You don’t like dancing?” I heard myself ask.

He didn’t answer for a moment. He was looking at me strangely.

“I just wanted some air.” he answered softly. I nodded. My head hated that. “So i came out here to sit. And maybe pick some flowers.”

He was lying. My left eye (which was yellow like both of Lukelyn’s told me this).

He was sad. That was what my right eye (the one that was purple) was showing me. I could see the tears that hadn’t fully formed in his eyes. The way his lips were attempting to keep themselves held up because of my presence. He was sitting so straight that it looked painful, and he didn’t want to be.

“I can give you some space if you want that.”

I stood. And my head swam.

“Wait. You’re-”

“I’ll be fine. I just need to find my way back.”

“No, wait-”

“You need some space.”

“I never said-”

“I can see it.” He was taken aback by my answer.

“See it?” he asked. A spark of curiosity took over the corner of his left eye. “How?”

“My eyes tell me. If someone is sad. If someone is happy. If someone is lying. If someone simply needs another slice of cake.”

A slight spark.

“Do you need one?” I asked. “Another slice of cake?”

He giggled. And it went all the way up to his eyes.

“Something like that.”

My head swam again. He steadied me.

“Please take a seat. I won’t be sad anymore if you’ll just sit down.”

So I sat. We sat together near the fountain and listened to the water fall. Over the hedges, the music trickled down into the clearing. Soft violins. I closed my eyes against the sound.

“Everyone tells me I’m pretty.”

His voice broke the music. And it made me jump a bit. I opened my eyes to a concerned face.

“You are.”

“I know.” he rolled his eyes prettily. “Trust me, I *know*. It’s said to me up to three times a day.”

“Oh, must be so awful to be pretty.”

He was a bit taken aback by my comment. Almost shocked.

“What do you mean?” he asked. Slightly annoyed.

“There’s worse things to call someone. For one, they could call you under-dressed.”

Another one of his giggles. He attempted to stifle it at first, but let it go free when I laughed along with him.

“You’re right, that would be pretty bad.”

“The good thing about looking the way you do is that you can never be under-dressed. Not with those eyes.” I shrugged. “But don’t listen to me. I’m drunk.”

“No, you’re absolutely right. You’re right! And you’re fun to talk to! What’s your name?” His cheeks were flushed a light blue. I’d never met someone who blushed in blue.

“Onyx. Like the rock.” My head spun. I suddenly didn’t feel so good.

“You’re a talent!” he exclaimed. “Such beautiful eyes! I’m-”

And then all the alcohol in my system came bubbling up.

I wake up the next morning feeling far from amazing in a room I don’t recognize. It takes me a moment to remember we’re all being hosted in the castle for the three-day celebration of the prince’s engagement.

I lie in the enormous bed and look up at the ceiling for as long as my muscles will allow the laziness. It looks a million miles away. I find myself briefly imagining how the staff manages to get it clean.

I shut my eyes and imagine being on a marshmallow. Against the stark-white sheets, my dark skin probably stands out like a chickpea in a flower marsh.

I got very drunk last night. And I threw up on someone.

The sudden memory sends me into a spiral of shame. I try to remember more but, for some reason, I can’t remember anything about him other than jeweled earrings and a golden dress. Could’ve been anyone, really. And at a celebration this large, I probably wouldn’t see him again. Besides, he probably doesn’t remember last night either.

I take a look at my vitals for the morning. The alcohol seems to have properly made its way out of my system. Good. Everything else is fine. Blood pressure looks normal and my temperature is healthy. The only remainder of last night is this splitting headache. I hydrate my eyes with some quick drops and test them for any impairments. The last thing is my hair. I run a comb to a head of hair so dark it gave me my name.

I do my usual morning routine of one-hundred pushups, fifty sit-ups and eighty crunches. Then, I head over to the bath room. I’d never seen a bath so big. I could fit myself five times in it. Not only was it deep, but it is also gorgeously tiled in silver and blue. I go over to the edge and opened the water, releasing a fragrance knob as well. Lavender.

In the warm water, I lean my head back and focus my thoughts on peaceful things like turtle soup and goat cheese. My stomach growls. I think about my first time seeing a yellow star. It was bright. And warm. And golden.

Hair.

Suddenly, I remember. A head of hair so golden each strand looks hand-made. A set of eyes like warm pools of yellow sunlight. I sit up in the water and strain myself to remember the rest of his face.

But I can't. And trying to remember too hard makes my head hurt. So I give myself a break and sink into the pool.

Breakfast is more than amazing. The table is enormous and constantly shifting. The instant a plate is empty, it's taken away and replaced with a full one. Lukelyn, my closest friend, saves me a seat to her right, which I take right away. I can't keep everything straight. It's a flurry of plates, laughs, conversations, and then-

There's someone standing at the door. He's talking to one of the guards. The second I see him, I know it's him. From last night. I stand, him being all that I can see. Today he's in flowing white robes.

"Onyxx?" someone asks.

I can't pay attention to them. I begin making my way towards the door. My heels follow my progress on the squeaky clean floor. He turns away from the guard and begins heading down the hall. He's faster than he looks.

"W-Wait!" I call, just as he's about to turn another corner. He stops and turns to look at me. "You! It's you! I-"

And I suddenly realize who I'm talking to.

"Here to ruin my outfit again?" he asks. And suddenly, I'm embarrassed all over.

I fold. Directly in half, my eyes looking to the floor.

"I apologize about last night. It was inexcusable."

"Oh! I... I didn't mean it like that!" He taps his toes impatiently. He's wearing a lovely pair of silver slippers with tiny pearls. Around his ankle rests an anklet with silver stars hanging from it. They jingle when he moves his foot. Right now, they're dancing.

"Perhaps there's something I can do to apologize? What I did was-"

"My eyes are up HERE."

He startles me. I look up at him. He looks annoyed with the world in a way he didn't before. I step back.

"I'm sorry."

He sighs.

"Look. Onyxx. It happens. The dress is fine. You didn't stain it."

He's comforting me. I let out a breath I didn't know I'd been holding.

"Just make sure you don't drink that much tonight. Because if you do it again, I'll have to execute you."

He must've seen the color drain from my face because the look on his' is of immediate alarm.

"It was a joke!" his voice squeaks. "I was trying... to joke."

"Oh." My shoulders relax. I crack a smile.

He's wearing his crown today. And it looks like it's worth more than my entire town. Thin spirals of gold, expertly crafted together into flower patterns and encrusted with shiny jewels.. The center piece is designed to look like a rose. He's also standing so straight that it looks almost unnatural; tense. His eyes dart behind me.

"Tea?" he asks.

I blink. He looks nervous. He fiddles with his sleeve.

"Have a cup of tea with me. Onyxx."

It doesn't seem like I can turn it down. So I agree and follow.

The tea room is very salmon. Everything in it is exactly the same shade of the color somehow. We sit on two incredibly plush chairs with a white marble table between them. The maids serve us tea and cookies. I take two sugars. His' is mostly cream. He eats the cookies like they're sustenance. I find myself wondering if he's had breakfast at all.

Finally, he waves the maids away and the door closes behind them. We eat in silence for a moment. Then, I find it in me to speak.

"Is there any particular reason why you invited me to tea, your highness?"

He finishes his cookie and carefully wipes the crumbs away with a perfectly manicured finger. My eyes follow his finger.

“Aurelio.” he states.

Of course that would be his name. It sounds perfect. He licks his finger lightly. His eyes meet mine. “And why would I need a reason? I thought I could do whatever I wanted whenever I wanted?”

I open my mouth. I can’t think of an answer. He looks at me over the rim of his cup for a moment. His sip ends. He sighs.

“You won’t talk to me then.” he states, sounding slightly defeated.

I’m confused. He sees the confusion in my face. He sighs again.

“I see. It was the alcohol. I should’ve known.”

I’m beginning to put two and two together. I place down my cup. He looks small now. Tired.

“I’d never been drunk before, your highness, so I apologize that you got to meet drunk Onyx before I did.”

He blinks. Once. Twice. And then a smile begins creeping his way onto his face. Starting with his eyes and then moving its way down to his cheeks. Finally, his lips.

“I’m Onyx of Lazuli.” I tell him, reaching my hand across the table.

He looks at my hand for a moment.

“I already know that!” he exclaims playfully. He places his hand in mine.

“I’m Aurelio, di Zada. Truly nice to be meeting you for the first time. Onyx.”

He squeezes my hand for a moment. I squeeze back gently. I press a kiss to it and he blushes.

He leans back into the couch for a bit. We fall into a silence. He’s not sure what to say and neither am I. He speaks first.

“What’s your favorite flower?”

No one had ever asked me that before. I purse my lips and let my eyes wander up to the ceiling as I think.

"Lavender, now that I think about it. It's my favorite scent. I was very lucky you had the scent on tap for my morning bath."

His eyes sparkle. He squirms excitedly in his seat.

"That flower means Devotion, you know. Would you say you're devoted to anything in particular?" He places his teacup down. I have his full attention.

"Of course, your highness! I'm devoted to my service and my training!"

His smile seems to fall a slight bit.

"Really?" He cocks his head. "Nothing else? No one else?"

I shake my head. He smiles a secretive smile and grabs his teacup once again.

"How about you?" I ask.

"Golden lily." He answers right away. "It means: Destiny." He chuckles lightly. "Isn't that just funny."

My golden eye sees the question forming on his lips. He wasn't satisfied with my answer. He wonders if he should ask another. He feels he's learned a lot about me. He wants to learn more.

My violet eye immediately breaks down his entire outfit for me. Layers upon layers of clothes unravel before my eyes. A slight peek of something blue under one of the layers on his shoulder. It looks to be a part of his skin. His necklace and all the tiny clasps on it. The slight movement in his chest when he breathes.

He's playing with his tea, swirling it around inside the cup and looking down at the leaves critically. I briefly wonder if he knows how to read tea leaves like my grandmother. He shakes his head. He speaks.

"My first time drinking, they found me under the fondue table. Covered in it."

He looks up at me and smiles.

I don't know what to say. The idea of him, unconscious, under a table is both hilarious and horrifying. I don't answer. I don't know what I'm supposed to say at all. I gape. Then I gape again. And again. He sighs.

"I'm sorry, Onyxx. I forced you to come here. You should head back to the rest of the soldiers. They're probably wondering where you are by now."

“No, it’s-”

Aurelio shakes his head and stands. With that final move, I know the conversation is over.

Fondue. Was that supposed to be some sort of clue? I consider it while I set my tie in place. This time, I wear my favorite green suit and my mother’s favorite tie and pocket square. I’m putting on perfume when I spy Lukelyn at my door dressed fully in black and silver. Her sandy hair is also gelled back in a similar style to mine. She struts into the room.

“Looks nice.” she smiles. “Trying to impress someone, Onyxx?”

I can’t lie to her. I *literally* cannot lie to her. Her eyes are so bright yellow that they almost glow in the dark. And they see through any lie I can conjure. They’ll see my lip twitch, my blink last a second longer than it should, they’ll see my drop of sweat before it’s fully created. Lukelyn knows me too well. So I tell her the truth.

“I threw up on the Prince.”

Lukelyn smirks. “I heard.”

I pause. “You heard? From where?”

“I heard from a tray-bearer who heard from a maid, who saw you two heading out into the garden. You didn’t think you were alone, did you? Or were you too drunk to notice.”

My face is boiling hot. Lukelyn’s face relaxes.

“It’s fine, Onyxx! Markus got badly drunk too! He actually pulled a table cloth straight off and made an enormous mess. The castle staff was aware that none of us had ever had a drink before. Most of us were too tipsy to fully notice.”

I smile to myself. She always knows what to say. She ruffles my hair carefully.

“The suit looks great. He’ll fall head-over-heels. You look good in green.”

I shake my head. Lukelyn rolls her eyes.

“Onyxx, you liked him the second you laid eyes on him. Don’t lie to yourself. And more importantly, don’t lie to *me*. Or at least become better at it.”

Lukelyn pulls me out of the room and we begin walking down the hallway. Behind us, the door to my room seals itself into the wall.

Even though the ballroom is a ways away, the music streams from it and into our ears. The finely-tuned instruments make the air feel festive and thin. As we walk past the large floor-to-ceiling windows of the palace, I look out into the night.

The blue moon is very bright and visible. It's a fourth visible. I stop to stare at it for a moment. A deep breath. Lukelyn is patient. She waits until I've had my fill before pulling me away.

I avoid the drinks completely this time. The glasses tempt me, of course, with their bright pink and bubbling wine; but I refuse to taste a drop until I see him. He's near the window on an elegant loveseat. This time, he's wearing a violently blue suit with specks of silver and gold. The shirt is sheer and I can see his chest through it. More blue swirls. If there's any hair on it, it's so light it's not visible. The bottom layer is a skirt made of the same material as the top, but a little more translucent. I can see his feet this time. And he's wearing a small golden ring on one of his middle toes.

He's talking to someone whose silver circlet immediately identifies him as prince Halen to me. He is less blonde than Aurelio; his hair is infested with silvery streaks. Everything about him is colder; from the diluted eye color to the fact he is wearing all white.

Aurelio sees me and his entire face lights up. He stands and sways, clearly already drunk. He's about to run over to me but is grabbed by prince Halen before he can get far. Something in the back of my throat flares when the prince grabs his waist. Aurelio tries to pry himself away for a moment before giving up.

I'm a couple of steps away when Halen gently lowers Aurelio into the loveseat and picks a flute off a tray. He hands it to Aurelio who gingerly takes it. Then, they both look up at me.

"Onyxx. Nice to finally meet you."

He extends his hand.

"Has his highness mentioned me?"

Prince Halen shrugs. "About once or twice. Believe it or not, there aren't many of you with odd eyes. It was easy to figure out which one you were. His description was *thorough* enough."

He's angry for some reason, he's seething. If it weren't for my talents, this would've been something I'd have missed. Is he angry at me? He would have no reason to be. He smiles through his anger, and it's the strangest thing I've ever seen. For a moment, I find myself questioning if it's really anger what I'm seeing. Then, Aurelio speaks and it's no doubt that it's anger; but not at *me*, it's at Aurelio.

"I want to go for a walk with him." Aurelio states.

"No dear." Halen turns to him. "You'll stay where we can see you."

Where *I* can see you, is what he means. There's something about the way Halen looks at Aurelio. Like he's afraid something will steal him away. Or *someone*.

"It's just the garden. I'll be fine—"

"I won't have you wandering off again. And that's final, Aurelio."

The conversation is over. Prince Halen takes a deep breath. He smiles at me. It doesn't quite reach his eyes.

"I'll be right back."

He walks away curtly. Aurelio has already downed his new flute. He giggles at me. HE pets the spot next to him and I sit. It's extremely plush, just like everything in this castle.

"Are you enjoying your stay at the castle, Onyx?" he asks. Formally. He speaks differently when we're in public. I put on the soldier charm.

"I am, your highness. It's all so beautiful. All of it."

He giggles and there is a gentle shadow of blue on his cheeks.

"Green." he states, looking at my outfit. "It suits you."

He looks up at me and there's something in his eyes I can't place. He looks at all of me in one fell swoop. For some reason, it feels like he's savoring me the way he would a piece of cake. I find myself briefly wondering why a part of me wants him to.

"I was going to invite you for a walk, but it seems you can't go."

Aurelio rolls his eyes and stands. He sways. I move to keep him balanced, but stop within an inch of him, unsure if I'm even allowed to touch him in that way.

"I go where I want." he states.

He begins walking and I follow him, slightly worried he'll trip over his feet and get hurt; he doesn't. I'm careful to avoid stepping on his train.

I follow him out of the ball room and down the grand staircase. Rather than go directly into the garden, Aurelio turns around and takes hold of my hand. He begins leading me down the side of the castle.

Even though I haven't had a single drop to drink, I feel drunk already. His hand is soft and warm. I then realized that I'd been imagining what this moment would've been like; it exceeded my expectations. Aurelio slows down and laces his fingers with mine absentmindedly. We walk for a bit more in silence before we duck into an enormous hedge maze.

The walls are high and covered in beautiful silver roses. It's paved with stones and carefully trimmed in every way. Every couple of feet or so, there's a large lamp that rises high above. Looking up, I can see a lamp that looks to be positioned about two rows down.

That's when Aurelio notices he's still holding my hand. He blushes blue and lets go.

"I want to show you something." he tells me. His eyes are coming in and out of focus.

I'm about to say something when he turns a corner in the maze. Not wanting to be left behind, I follow.

He knows the maze like the back of his hand. Even though he's drunk, he moves with ease and agility.

"Where are we going?" I ask.

The plants around us swallow my voice, not allowing it to go more than a couple of feet. Aurelio doesn't hear me at first. He stops walking and moves towards me shakily.

"I want to talk to you. And I want fruit."

Fruit? "I'm sure you could've asked a servant at the castle for fruit."

He shakes his head, his eyes full of a certain kind of amusement only he could procure.

"This one is special. It's a tree from-"

He pauses and presses his lips together. I feel a disconnect.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said that. Please, forget it."

Impossible to at this point, but I nod just to see him relax. He keeps walking and I follow as closely as I can. We turn to the right and then to the left. We go down an entire row and then to the right again. That's when I see it.

In the center of the maze is a large, circular clearing with a single tree unlike any tree I've ever seen before. It's of a gnarled trunk that is... brown? The leaves are a vibrant green that can be visible even at night. And, most odd of all, is the fruit that grows on it. The fruit seems to be *glowing*.

I pause to take it all in and Aurelio keeps walking. I take a deep breath. The tree... and a small garden around it. I watch Aurelio step forward and take a fruit off one of the low-hanging branches. Without hesitation, he gives it a bite. He then grabs another one and turns around to offer it to me.

My body moves on its own. I walk to him and allow him to hand me it.

It's... pulsating. Almost like it's alive. Very much like a firefly, the light in it dims and strengthens. For a moment, I consider returning it to him and apologizing kindly. But something in me urges me to try it. So I do. I bite down on it and Aurelio watches me as I do.

It's juicy. And has a sweetness that takes over the top of my mouth. As soon as my tongue touches it, it seems to almost melt.

"This tree is the only one of its kind," Aurelio informs me, taking a seat beneath it.

"What kind of fruit is it?" I ask, taking a seat besides him, careful to not take up too much of his personal space.

"Starfruit," he answers, taking another bite of the fruit in his hands.

He scoots closer to me and leans his head on my shoulder. I feel my face heat up. He then bites into the glowing orb he's holding. The shimmering juice slides down his arm. I bite my own fruit again and close my eyes.

It tastes like nothing I've ever eaten before.

I watch him finish the one he's holding and throw it into one of the rose bushes. I have mine follow suit as soon as I'm done with it. His head is still on my shoulder. I lean back onto the tree and look up at the night sky.

I can't hear any music at all. The garden is mostly quiet except for a couple of bugs and small animals. There's a fountain somewhere. He squeezes my arm and it startles me a bit.

"You're nice." he mutters, his voice sleepy.

It comes out before I can stop it. "Is Prince Halen not nice?"

He stiffens and I regret it instantly. I regret opening my mouth. I regret ever coming out here with him.

He doesn't answer at first. In fact, he seems to be hiding his face from me for a bit.

"He's nice." he whispers. He's silent. I can sense his sadness.

I let him lean on my shoulder and we watch the sky in silence. I lift my hand.

"That's the Endo nebula. Shows up around this time of the year."

He raises his eyes and looks.

"Really?"

"Yeah. And that's the first thing we'll pass on our way out of the galaxy. Pretty, isn't it? It's a wispy irregularity."

Silence.

"I could bring you a piece of it if you'd like. Unless... you have one already?"

Aurelio sits up.

"A piece of a galaxy? You- You would do that?"

"Of course. It's not a bother. You like pretty things, right?"

He smiles. I haven't seen this smile before. It's the type of smile one would give when one sees a new baby.

"I *love* pretty things. Pretty things like *you*."

He leans forward and his pupils expand. My heart is in my ears. He pauses, inches from my face.

"You have freckles," he states, almost dumbfounded. I felt my face get hot. I can smell the wine off him. If he were to throw up on me right now, it would be perfectly fair.

"Yes."

"I- I like them."

And he glows. It begins on his cheeks and moves up to his nose and ears. Very much like the starfruit, the color pulses and becomes both brighter and darker.

“I’m s-sorry.” he stutters, “I can’t control it-”

I touch his cheek. It’s warm. He glows like a coral reef lies just beneath his skin. I have questions. Many questions. But none of them will form in my mouth. I turn his chin sideways and he blushes harder. It goes all the way down his neck.

We’re closer than ever now. His lips brush against mine.

And then his suit beeps. He sighs. I snap out of it and notice what I’m doing. I put some space between us. It’s Halen. He wants to know where Aurelio is.

I walk Aurelio back to the main room, where Halen is waiting. He’s calmer, and clearly drunker. He quickly takes hold of Aurelio and pulls him away from me. He takes him away, and I don’t see him for the rest of the night.

It isn’t until I get to my room that I realize that something was slipped into my chest pocket. It’s a small ring I recognize immediately - I’d seen it on Aurelio’s finger. I show it to Lukelyn, who’s face says it all.

“Looks like you need to return it.”

The next night, I find him near the snack table. Because of course I do. He’s attacking the cookies as fast as the bakers can bring in new ones. I pull my ring out of his pocket and offer it to him.

“You dropped this?”

“I did?”

The edges of his lips curl. He takes the ring and slides it back onto his index finger. In one swift motion, he holds onto my wrist and slides my sleeve up. He inputs seven numbers into the gauntlet.

It’s over in an instant. Soon, there is a cookie in my hand and he’s at the other side of the table. I can sense eyes on me. Aurelio’s gaze is weary.

“Save some room for the cake.”

Halen wraps his arms around Aurelio and kisses the latter's cheek. Aurelio smiles politely at the act.

"Onyxx, was it?" He looks up at me. Dare I say, smugly.

"It is."

And just like that, someone walks over to us and he's back to ignoring me. I want to talk to Aurelio again, but Halen and the people around them don't let me get close. As soon as I'm in a position where it's private, I look down at the numbers he input into my gauntlet. His location code.

I spend most of the party with Lukelyn, and we both stay away from the alcohol. We sit with the other soldiers and make jokes while eating all types of different cheeses from platters.

A beep. I look down at my gauntlet. A request with instructions. Gently excusing myself, I follow the instructions. I step out of the main room and go up the stairs. I go down the hall and to the right. Then, I go up two more flights of stairs and walk to the left. Just like the instructions said, there's a large golden door.

Before I can knock, I'm pulled inside. The door locks behind my head.

A big room. A gigantic four-post bed with golden curtains that match the ones on the window. A hand-painted ceiling. I look down at Aurelio. He's wearing something new.

"Glad you found me."

He releases me. I smooth out my shirt and follow him over to his vanity, where he proceeds to continue brushing his hair carefully. My eyes wander. I can sense him looking at me through the mirror as I do. I pause.

"Won't Prince Halen know you're gone?"

"He's being kept busy. I've only been gone for a little bit." He stops brushing. "Do you want him to find you here alone with me?"

I shake my head so quick it rattles. Aurelio giggles and smiles big. He stands from his chair.

"I like you."

I blink. He doesn't say anything else. He reaches over to gently place his crown on his head. He swallows.

“What we did last night... should never have happened. I’m sorry. I was too drunk and I made you uncomfortable.”

“You didn’t make me uncomfortable.”

He’s standing right in front of me now, looking up at me with those big eyes layered in End-knows how many shades of gold. My hands itch to hold him.

“You know what happens tonight.” he says softly.

I nod. He sighs.

“I hate the ring. Too chunky.”

I snicker. “I doubt that's the priority.”

“But it is! I have to wear it! It weighs down my entire hand!”

“Then don’t wear it.” I say. It slips out.

Aurelio purses his lips and looks down at his fingers. He’s fidgeting.

“I have to. I’m sorry.”

He kisses my cheek and leaves the room.

I stand in silence for a bit, looking at the space where he had been. Then, I head back down to join the others.

Prince Halen proposes at exactly a quarter to nine. Aurelio accepts, of course, in a perfectly-rehearsed way.

To: Onyx of Lazuli

From: Aurelio di Zada

Dear Onyx,

I hope this letter finds you in good health. I spoke to father recently and he informed me that your fleet should be halfway past the diamond belt on the edges of the Espec galaxy. He told

me that if I wanted to send you a message, you might not get it after the diamond belt is too far away. So I'm sending it now.

Hello!

I haven't sent many letters before, so I'm not too sure what these are supposed to contain. I asked Halen what to write and he told me to simply tell you what's happening here on Zada, since you might want to know that.

For starters, winter has arrived. The family went up to Zada north in order to kick off the harvest. I had so much apple pie I ended up getting myself sick for the rest of the afternoon. Thankfully, I was fine by dinner and got to eat my favorite angel cake!

The next cycle, I celebrate my birthtime! I'll be 29 blue moons old. Mother promised me that my cake can be full of pinkberry jam and matching icing! My dressmaker is almost done with my special gown. You'd love it if you could see it. I should send you a moment capture of it on my next letter. How old are you, Onyxx? I forgot to ask. I'm sure you can't be much older than me. I also realize I don't know when your birthtime is, so I won't know when to congratulate you.

While I feel old, I'm very aware that I won't be getting any actual responsibilities in the kingdom until I'm at least 40. By then, you'll be back, right?

Please write to me as soon as you can.

Looking forward to hearing from you,

Aurelio di Zada

To: His Royal Highness, the Golden Flower of Zada, Prince Aurelio of Zada Center
From: Onyxx of Lazuli

Dear Prince Aurelio,

This is my first letter to you. By the time you read this, my ship will be way past the edges of the Espec galaxy. Our current destination is a habitable planet a couple of light periods away from our neighboring galaxy of Eurola. While there, we seek to share intelligence with the current beings and form an alliance. Their civilization is relatively new and we hope to help them harness the energy of their planet's core.

I think about you every time I smell lavender, which is more often than you'd think. I happen to be very good with plants and am often in the ship's plant bay and seed conservatory. While we have many flowers here, they're nothing like the flowers you have at the castle. We'll be exchanging seeds with other planets, so when I get back you'll definitely get to see new types of flowers. As soon as we can figure out the exact type of care they need, we can plant them on Zada!

I don't know how long it'll take for you to receive my letter, but I do know it'll get to you eventually. I only hope you can wait that long. I haven't forgotten you, I promise.

My room on the ship is very small and cozy. Sometimes, the silence makes my head ring like crazy and I have to end up playing animal sounds in the background. Does that make sense? A silence so loud that I need noises to not hear it? I usually play crickets or river sounds. I find them the most soothing.

I miss Zada already. I miss the smell of fresh bread. We have a kitchen on board the ship. I might go to make my own. I'm out of practice, but the son of bakers never truly forgets his craft. I'll send a letter to mother to have her send me her recipe. My next letter will definitely contain it just in case you want to make it yourself. Just know that the recipe is a family secret and you should probably keep it to yourself.

I'm 34 blue moons old. I actually celebrated my birthtime six cycles before I was deployed. I was born at the beginning of the autumn season. Three pink moons into the first cycle. Slightly after dawn.

I'm excited to see your gown! You always look lovely in anything you wear. I'll send you captures from the new planet we visit.

I got really happy when I got your letter. I haven't written many letters before this either, but falling into the habit is a good thing to do. I'll be out here for a bit. Who knows; by the time I come home, I might have a beard. I wonder how you'll feel about it.

Until next time,

Onyx of Lazuli

➤ TWO

ONYXX

The port is bustling with energy. As the ship is lowered onto the charger that will re-liquidize the battery, I look down into the crowds below. It's different from how it was when I left. For starters, the port was refurbished. There were more trees and more available shops. When I left, there had been lights on some of the stores. Now, all the stores were lit; as were the sidewalks.

There aren't many things to my possession in this ship. A small bag holds everything I care about and it's already packed; so I head over to pick it up. I hug and exchange information with Lukelyn before I head out. She's planning to head back out into space soon. I might not see her for a while.

I've barely cleared the loading deck when I'm nearly knocked down by my mother. She holds me in her arms as tightly as she can which, to me, doesn't feel like much. I hold her back, careful to not break her.

"Onyx, it's so nice to see you!" She pulls away from the hug and I can see her smile.

Her voice is softer than I remember. All this time of hearing her over moment captures, I'd forgotten what her voice sounded like. Her hair is still considerably black. Her face is slightly wrinkled and kind. Her yellow eyes are slightly dull with age, but filled with joy at seeing me.

"You got so big! What are they feeding you up there?" She pokes at my arms.

"Where's dad?" I ask.

She releases my arm and points towards the crowd. I look through the crowd of soldiers hugging their parents, friends, and fiancées to see him. He looks older in person. His brown-ish hair is streaked with silver and his smiles have etched their way onto the way his skin folds. His violet eyes are still bright and mischievous. The way they've always been. And he's holding a child's hand. A child who is as dark purple and speckled as he is.

I bend down to let my mother kiss every freckle in my face over and over while we wait. When my father arrives, he embraces me. His embrace is definitely stronger. We are the same height at this point.

"This is Opal. Opal, this is your big brother, Onyx.".

Opal, the little girl, has both of our father's violet eyes. Just like I saw in the motion capture, they're bright. I crouch down so she can hug me properly.

"You're big," she states. "Momma is making soup for you. I don't like soup that much, but she says *you* like it."

We arrive at Lazuli as night falls. On the way home, they've filled me up on all the local news. The new Diamond and Dryon mine. Queen Aithe's death. (Something Aurelio had written to me about). The expansion of Lazuli in to the northern mountain. Before the conversation can fully continue, we arrive home.

I'm able to carry most of the groceries in by myself, and I do. The house was recently painted. It looks good. Next to the house, the bakery is all closed and clean. It's also newly-painted, but still has the shingles I helped dad put on before I left.

Mother opens the front door. I walk inside, down into the living room, and up to the kitchen. As soon as I step in, I'm met with a reality.

"It's green." I state, looking around at all the cabinets.

“The old ones started having water damage. We had to replace them when Opal was about three,” Father states. He’s putting the groceries away.

I’ve been gone for a while, is what he doesn’t say.

I don’t know what else to say to him. We haven’t had a face-to-face since I was deployed. That’s nine years ago. A lot changes in nine years.

He seems to read my mind on this.

“You got a lot bigger out there,” he comments. “I’m guessing you can bench press about 300?”

“350. Close.”

Dad chuckles and grabs some cauliflower. He pulls out a knife and rolls up his sleeves.

“If you don’t mind me asking, what are you ever gonna need to lift 350 pounds for?”

I’m not sure what to do, so I just start taking groceries out of the paper bags. “We had to air out the ship’s engine at one point. Got too hot.”

He laughs. And it’s like I never left. I watch as he expertly slices and dices the vegetables in a way that used to amaze me as a child, and still amazes me now. On the stove, I can already smell mother’s turtle soup only just beginning to boil.

I know the question he wants to ask. I can see it in his eyes as he avoids my gaze.

“I’m staying on Zada,” I inform him.

“You are?” he asks, clearly relieved. “Your mother and I weren’t sure. We were honestly nearly convinced they’d take you away again.”

“I’m not sure what I’ll be doing here just yet, but I’ve had enough of the galaxy for a while.”

“Too boring?” he places the diced broccoli into a bowl and grabs for the carrots.

“Too interesting. Too much to see. It makes the head dizzy.”

Mother walks into the kitchen and goes to check on her soup. She points to one of the cabinets behind me.

“The plates are in the one above your head, Onyxx. You can take them to the table if you’d like.”

I turn and grab the plates. And the bowls. And the spoons. I exit the kitchen and carry them to the dining room table right outside.

Everything looks so small.

I carefully put it all down. Four placemats.

There is the sound of feet running over my head. And then, the sound of Opal hopping her way from step to step. We finish setting the table just as she takes a seat on one of the chairs. Her feet almost reach the floor. Almost, but not quite. She swings them the way I used to when I was her age.

She's pushed her jet black hair back into a ponytail and held it down with a green scrunchie. In her hands is what appears to be coursework. I see her eyes attempt to adjust to what's in front of her.

"Dinner will be ready in a bit. When it is, that goes away." mom tells her. I chuckle and take a seat.

I feel warm. Deep in my chest. My suit beeps. A message.

I look down at my wrist gauntlet and see I've just received a letter. Not wanting to upset mom, I stand from the dinner table and make my way down into the living room. I open the message. It floats lightly, revealing a letter.

It's a message from the palace. But this isn't a message from Aurelio. This time, it's from King Halen. And it requests my presence.

So soon? So many questions begin forming in my mind. A part of me isn't surprised I was requested so early. If I've gotten to know anything about Aurelio, it's that he hates to wait. But I also know Aurelio hates to have others speaking for him. So the fact that Halen was the one to send the message makes my mind wander to places where my mind shouldn't wander to.

Maybe Aurelio was busy? No, that couldn't be it. He always makes time to message me. Does he? The last time he sent me a message was a couple of months ago. I guess I was so busy with the preparations to return home that I didn't notice.

I look over the letter again. It just says that my presence is requested in the golden palace in a week's time. And it has a silver seal and Halen's signature. That's how Halen signs his name? My eyes tell me he's left-handed.

Something's wrong. I've learned to trust my gut feeling.

My gut feeling that told me when stepping on a patch of sea grass would result in me getting hurt was now telling me that something was wrong at the golden palace. Something was wrong with Aurelio.

"Dinner!" mom calls. And I snap out of it.

My eyes unfocus and relax. I realize my jaw is clenched. I relax this as well.

I step inside and head to the dining room in time to see mother bringing out the soup bowl. I take a seat and we pray. Mother thanks Ent for the meal and for my safe return home. Then, we eat.

The soup tastes just like I remember it. And father's homemade biscuits, which I just realized had been in the bread box, taste heavenly. One bite and it all comes back to me.

Growing up on Lazuli. The running. The cliff-diving. My first girlfriend. My first time making a sourdough. My first boyfriend. Working at the bakery.

I ask them about the bakery. It seems that while many things have changed, many things remain the same. The bakery is doing well. They still make thirty fresh loaves in the morning and have sold out by the afternoon.

Maybe I can get some fresh bread to Aurelio. He would probably like that. Maybe a doughnut would better suit his taste.

Dinner ends and mom refuses to let me clean the table. So I go upstairs and take my bag with me. My bedroom is still there. My old word processor, untouched, and my old bed. It's a bit small for my new size, but once my body adjusts to this level of constant gravity, I'll lose some of the mass.

I open my closet and realize most of my clothes won't fit me. I grab the loosest shirt I can find and carry it to the bath. As I soak, I briefly find myself wondering what sort of doughnut Aurelio would like. Probably something glazed and filled with jam. With sprinkles. And blue cotton-candy glitter. I should probably make him a dozen before I got to visit. Would they even allow them through the castle gates? I should probably make Halen a doughnut. I chuckle to myself as I imagine Halen eating a doughnut so plain it's indistinguishable from a bagel. He probably thinks himself too refined for doughnuts. Maybe a croissant.

The warmth travels up my body and my muscles relax as I make the realization that tonight, I won't need recordings of animals to lul me to sleep. The real sounds are right outside my window.

For the first time in nine years, I wake up to the smell of fresh bread and cake wafting up to my room. The smell gets into my hair, skin, and eyes. I lie in bed for a moment, taking it in.

The sun's not up yet. It's four-thirty. I can tell that without looking at the clock. My body knows it by heart. Time for my run. If I don't run, my body will hate me. So I get out of bed, put drops into my eyes, and get into my training clothes.

Mom isn't surprised when she sees me coming down the stairs. She's elbow-deep covered in flour and sugar with an amber bandanna on her forehead, she looks happy and rested.. The same way she was my whole childhood. She doesn't notice me at first, her face wrinkled in concentration as she kneads.

"Onyxx!" she exclaims softly, "I was sure you'd sleep in today. After all, you just got back."

I shake my head and she rolls her eyes. She keeps kneading and I move towards the cooler and prop it open for a moment. I make a mental note to buy myself a tub of powdered protein. For now, I grab a banana.

"What do you want for breakfast?" mom asks.

I eat my banana and think. The concept of food is daunting. For nine years, most of what I had was preserved and powdered.

"Does Miss Emerilla still run the fruit and juice shop down to the right of central street?"

Mom nods and pulls her hands out of the dough.

"She now runs it with her wife. They got married three years ago. Your father and I made the plum croissants for the wedding."

I finish my banana. Emerilla? Married? I can't wrap my mind around the concept. Last time I saw Emerilla, there hadn't been anyone special in the picture. I blink. I blink again. I frown.

"It was only nine years," I mutter.

I grab another banana and begin peeling it.

“Nine years is quite a bit of a while,” mom says softly. “A bit of a time that someone might not want to be alone.”

Silence. I eat. She kneads. Then, she applies some almond oil to her hands and pulls out a handful of dough. I watch her gently shape a loaf in the shape of a flower.

“Hand me the cream cheese from the cooler.”

I do so. I watch her shape three more flowers and then center them with the cream. Finally, I kiss her forehead and head out for my morning run.

The morning is brisk, the way it always is on Lazuli. There is a thin layer of lightly frozen dew on everything. In my run, I can feel the mountain altitude in my bones. I run slow, careful to keep my breaths even.

My sargeant would have a heart attack if they knew I didn't take at least one day of rest after returning from the trip. What they didn't know couldn't hurt them. So I run.

I run past recently-painted houses. I run past peeling paint and flower boxes with wet dewdrop flowers. When the star rises, they will open their faces to it. The crickets are slowly going silent as the insects of the morning clock in for their shift.

I turn right into a dirt road and run perpendicular to the main river coming down from the mountain. My mind wanders.

To Emerilla. To my parents. To Opal. To Lukleyn. To Aurelio.

I wonder if he's happy. Last time I saw him, he didn't look that way. From there on, the motion captures and letters he sent me looked like he was hiding something from me. In every one of those images, his eyes closed him off from the rest of the world. Every couple of words, his hand shook uncharacteristically. He tried to hide it. It only made it more obvious.

He married Halen a year after I left. On the solstice. His wedding dress was stunning. And the way it looked on him made a fire begin in my chest. I couldn't stop staring at the image when I recieved it. It was gold. All of it. All twelve feet of its train. His arms dipped in gold; his neck and wrists layered in jewels. His hair was expertly layered and stacked. His entire back is exposed. That's when I see the full extent of the marks on his skin.

When I met Aurelio, I had seen blue swirls peeking from his dress; etched onto his skin. He hadn't mentioned them, and I hadn't asked. In the motion capture, I see that they go diagonally down his back. And they lightly *glow*. I found myself longing to touch them, wondering what they feel like. Wondering how far down his body they go.

It took me a while to realize that Halen was also in the capture. Halen was overshadowed. I barely noticed that he'd been standing next to him. Seeing Halen made me angry. And the fact that the bastard looked relieved only confirmed my suspicions.

It takes me twenty minutes to reach the end of the path and ten minutes more to reach the rocky peak of the Lazuliean hills; the highest point in town. From up here, I can see the town of Lazuli sleepily turning on its side and hitting the snooze button. I stop to take a well-deserved breath.

When the first ray of light hits the skyline, I resume running. I run down to the river and then make my way around the bank. Afterwards, I make my way back to town.

There are more shops open this time around. I run down main street and turn to the left. I find Emerilla's shop in just a couple of minutes. It took some searching, admittedly. I caught her in the middle of raising her shutters. She hopped for joy when she saw me.

Emerilla is a chirpy, short redhead with slightly-murky red eyes. Her dimples are the best part of her face, and the reason I had a crush on her as a teenager. We never dated, no. I found out later that she didn't swing my way at all. So we remained close friends. At least, until I willingly launched myself out into space for nine years.

"It's so nice to see you, Onyxx!"

She hugs me. Well, she hugs my torso. I pat her head the way I always did. She fumbles for her keys and opens up her shop. The bell rings.

"Come in!"

I do so. I try to stand still as I watch her fret and fumble about the shop, lighting up signs and making sure she has everything she needs to start the day. She puts on an apron and gets behind the counter.

"Let me make you some juice, Onyxx. Just for today, it's on the house."

She doesn't wait for me to say anything. She quickly picks out some fruits she knows I like and gets to juicing. We sit in silence for a while.

"Mom told me you're married?" I ask. "You didn't tell me in any of your letters."

She nods and raises her hand so I can see the knot on it.

"I wanted to tell you when you got here. As a sort of surprise. Ki and I were planning on passing by your house today. But you beat me to it." Her eye twinkles, "How about you?"

"Not yet. I haven't had the time to find someone."

"Really? Not even in another planet?" she laughs.

"No, not even on another planet."

Emerilla pours the juice into one of her colorful cups and walks around the counter. She places it on the table in front of me.

"Guava root, Mango, Lime, and passion orange."

I thank her and take a sip of it. It tastes just like home. Emerilla takes a seat across from me and watches me drink the juice.

"So how was it like? Up there, I mean. You look good. So you must've been taken care of alright."

I take another sip from my cup and think for a second. "I liked it, honestly. It was beautiful. Nothing as beautiful as Zada though."

Emerilla snorts, "Really?"

I shrug and take another sip of my drink. Silence. I place down my cup.

"I actually have a question. One of the reasons I came to see you. What do you think about this?"

I open the mail file in my suit's gauntlet and search for the letter I got from the castle. I pull it up and allow her to read it. She does. I let her analyze it for a bit. I watch her eyes light up slightly.

"There is a feeling of dread coming from this letter. Something is wrong."

"Do you think it could be grieving? From Queen Aithne's death?"

She shakes her head. "It's something else. I'm not getting a good feeling from this at all. Are you going?"

“I have to. They requested me.” I swallow. “I think it’s Aurelio. He... wrote to me while I was away. And then he suddenly stopped.”

Emerilla’s eyes twinkle even brighter.

“Yes, you told me about his letters. When did they stop?”

I finish my cup of juice. “Almost two years ago now.”

“Can you think of any reason why he would stop writing to you?”

“I can think of *one* reason. But I don’t want to think about that. He... can’t be.”

“No. Had that been the reason, they would have alerted the kingdom. It must be something else.”

Emerilla takes my empty cup and carries it behind the counter. She seems to be very deep in thought. “When are you to go to the castle?” she asks.

“Two days.”

She nods and gives my cup a wash.

“Then there doesn’t seem to be much we can do. I can try to ask around to see if anyone has more information, but I’ve told you all I know. I’m sure they’ll tell you what’s happening when you arrive at the castle.”

She makes me smile; even if it’s a soft one. “Thank you, Emerilla. I was worried I’d been overreacting.”

Emerilla snorts, “You don’t overreact, Onyx. The whole time I’ve known you, you’ve never overreacted.”

Two days pass. And then it’s my time to go to the castle. As the letter specified, I pack three days of clothes (mother had taken me shopping), and wait outside for the royal carriage. With me, my box of pastries: starcakes stuffed with jam.

It arrives before the blue star rises. Mother squeezes my cheeks and father’s hugs never seem to end. Opal asks me to write to her details of what the castle looks like; I promise her I will. And then I get into the vehicle. It’s white and sleek and absolutely made of windows. I get to see my town as they wake for the morning. And then I don’t see them any longer.

The trip to Zada Center takes about an hour. I spend it looking out the window at the landscape. At the birds, and streams, and flowers. I prepare myself for what I might see.

When I arrive at the castle, it's different from what I remember. It's quieter. And seems to be glowing, separating itself from the sky.

My suit's serial number is confirmed at the gate and the pastries are scanned and accounted for. Then, I'm led straight through the front and escorted directly inside.

Memories flood back to me. The main hall full of light and music; now it's dark and quiet. The castle feels different now. It feels dead. I'm led through the main hall and to a door with a silver flower on it. Then, I am left.

The flower on the door looks hand-carved. I recognize the flower to be one that is rare to the Zada East region. A white Halen. I knock on the door and it opens.

It isn't Halen. It's another talent; this one with one bright yellow eye, and a red one. She looks at me, and it feels like she can see into a deep part of me that I myself cannot access. I swallow. She eyes me down and purses her lips. "Your majesty, he has arrived."

She moves to the side and I enter the room. Halen sits at a desk on the far end with a cup of wine. He's different than I remember him. For starters, every hair on his head has gone silvery. He's older, more prim-looking, and definitely infinitely tired. His silver eyes brighten a bit when he sees me. He seems to size me up for a moment and then look satisfied with what he sees. He points me to a chair and I walk up to it and take a seat. The other talent in the room finds her place at his right side.

"Onyx of Lazuli the Third?" Halen asks. A formality at this point.

"Yes, Your majesty."

He smirks in a way that's almost smug. "I assume you were given every comfort on your trip?"

"I was; yes, your majesty."

He places his cup down on his desk and runs his fingers through his hair. "On my right is my champion CN. You'll always see her at my right hand. If you find yourself wanting to contact me in the future, you can reach out to her and she'll talk to *me*. Never contact me directly."

“Yes, your majesty.”

He seems satisfied with this. He takes a deep breath. I sense nervousness. I spot the little tick at the side of the right eye that happens when someone is hiding something. I also notice the fact that there is malice in his intent. He’s nervous. Finally, he takes a deep breath.

“I have chosen you to be Aurelio’s champion.” Halen begins. “I have made this decision based on your academy and deployment records. Your success hasn’t gone unnoticed.”

He pulls out a file and looks through it. “Top of your class and five stripes? You’ve been busy. And to top it off, you and Aurelio are already acquainted. So you are logically the best person for the job.”

Halen pauses and looks at me to make sure I’m listening. I am. He swallows.

“Your job is to be at his side always. His right to order you away has been waived until further notice. For his own safety, you must be with him at all times.”

I nod slowly. He pauses and swallows again... There’s something eating at him. I can see it from where I’m sitting. Something he doesn’t want to say. And it’s awful. He opens his mouth and I know he’s made the decision to spit it out.

“Aurelio is currently in the medical wing recovering from a suicide attempt.”

I swallow. Halen observes my reaction. I don’t know what I expected, but it wasn’t this. Aurelio? When I think about him, all I can remember is his joy, his laughter, his happiness at the world. He would never. Not with the way he loves his people. What could have possibly-

“As you know, Queen Aithne passed away a couple of years ago. Aurelio loved his mother very much... and he wasn’t able to separate himself from his grief. Thankfully, the worst is over. All that’s occurring right now is recovery.”

Halen relaxes. The worst seems to be over for him. And I’m taking it better than he expected. He takes another unnecessarily deep breath.

“I just have one final question, Onyxx of Lazuli.”

I sense the energy change in the room. Halen swallows. He looks up at me.

“Did you know?” he asks. Flat. His champion who is next to him searches my face. I realize the second reason he brought me here; to interrogate me.

“I didn’t.” I answer. “He never showed any signs of it. I knew he wasn’t as happy as he could be, that showed, but never *this*. If I’d known... I would’ve contacted you right away.”

CN analyzes my face. She squeezes Halen’s shoulder and I see him visibly relax. He leans back into his chair and grabs his wine once more.

“I apologize for that, Onyxx.” CN tells me, “We had to ask.”

King Halen fully relaxes. And I can see he’s exhausted. He places his fingers to his temples and lets out a shuddery breath. He collects himself and then speaks again.

“You’ll be picking out a room today and we can begin your move-in process. We’ll cover everything of your stay here and will pay a stipend to you as well.”

I nod.

“CN, send Onyxx a list of the available rooms so that he can look them over. They all come with their own bath rooms. Any specific requests? Any view or luxuries you prefer? Color preference?”

Only one thing comes out.

“I want to see him. Please.”

It’s the first thing I can think of. The *only* thing I can think of.

“Oh.” King Halen freezes. His face takes a new form. “Of course. You’d want to see him.”

I don’t recognize this look on his face. I never imagined he was capable of looking soft. Yet here he was. Looking soft, and tired, and *vulnerable*. He stands, and it’s as if he’s wearing the heaviest of capes. For a moment, I wonder if he’s slept any since Aurelio was... hurt.

He walks and I follow. CN follows him closely, leaving the to trail behind. We exit the room and head down the hall. Then, we go upwards some large stairs. I’d never gotten to see this section of the castle, but it’s as large and grand as the rest of it. Golden walls and pearly-white floors. Impossibly high ceilings and heavy golden curtains that lead to large windows that allow all the light inside.

It’s quiet. And dim.

It takes a bit for the puzzle to piece itself together for me.

Aurelio and Halen's wedding. The Queen's death. Aurelio's attempt. Through Queen Aithne's death, the kingdom would be run by King Milos. By the looks of the situation, that isn't what's happening. So the next rightful ruler is-

"CN," Halen speaks. He's stopped walking in front of an empty vase of flowers. Looking up, I see an enormous portrait of the Golden family. I recognize the baby right away. He looks just like his mother. "Request fresh flowers here, please."

CN nods and begins placing the order on her gauntlet. We keep walking. It feels like I'm inside one of my worst nightmares. For a moment, I wonder if I'm in space, in my bunker, with a needle in my arm; deep in hibernation. There's a lump in my throat.

Halen's been running everything since Aurelio's suicide attempt. That explains why he looks so exhausted.

"King Milos is currently on mental health leave." CN informs me. "Any castle or Zada questions or concerns are to be brought straight to King Halen."

The small party stops in front of a door. A large, white door. Halen places his hand on it and the door opens for him. Turning to me, Halen places his finger on his lips. I nod, and we step inside the room.

As expected, the hospital wing is very white and very clean.

It takes me a bit to see him. This is also because of the fact that the room is very large and he's at the center of it. He's in a large bed with enormous, fluffy pillows. There's three I.V's hung on the wall behind him holding all sorts of liquids. One looks like a plasma, one is probably vitamins, and one is a green substance I can't place. He's propped up at the waist and at the feet. There's also a small table at the side with a bowl of diced fruits.

He's thin. And Pale. His eyes are closed and his hair is cut short. It barely touches his shoulders. Halen speaks. And it's the softest thing I've heard in a while. The way one would speak to a baby.

"Aurelio? I have someone here to see you, sweetheart."

Aurelio stirs. His eyes open and he looks at Halen. I'm glad I asked to see him. Because what's in those eyes is unmistakable; Halen saw it too. Death. Then, Aurelio looks at me. His face changes. His eyes brighten up.

“Onyxx!” His voice is hoarse and strained. He starts sitting up but flinches. He lowers himself back into bed and looks slightly embarrassed at his failed attempt.

No. This wasn’t how it was supposed to be. I was supposed to come to the castle with the rest of the soldiers to be venerated for our deployment. He was supposed to be there, healthy and glowing. A beautiful king that would look at me with a smile that lit up his whole face. We would talk and laugh. My friend. The man my heart flutters for. Not this.

I reach the bed and fight to keep my composure. I take his hand and kiss it gently. I don’t let it go for fear he’ll disappear right in front of my eyes.

“How was the service?” Aurelio asks, attempting to appear healthy. “Looks like it went well. You look good. More than good, actually.”

“You don’t.” I say.

It was something I couldn’t stop. I sense Halen glaring at me. Aurelio laughs; or tries to.

“I’ve looked better.” He looks down at our hands and grimaces. “I’ll be up and around again in no time.”

Silence. I don’t know what to say. No, that’s not true. I *do* know what I want to say, but such statements wouldn’t be appropriate, considering the severity of the situation.

His eyes are out of focus. He’s barely awake. It’s the drugs. I want to hold him in my arms and never let him go, but I can’t. So I choose to squeeze his hand a little tighter.

“Onyxx is staying here to be your champion.” Halen states softly. He smiles. Aurelio doesn’t.

“I don’t need anyone watching me.” he snaps. I blink. I open my mouth. Halen cuts me off before I can form my first word.

“I’ve been so busy, dear. I hate to have you spend your days all alone.”

That’s a lie. And I can tell the instant it leaves his lips. He’s afraid of a second attempt. But I don’t say anything. I simply nod. Aurelio isn’t impressed. He scrunches up his nose and sighs. Finally, he rolls his eyes.

“Fine. Whatever.”

He grabs a cube of fruit from the side table and pops it in his mouth. Then, he looks up at me and frowns.

“Onyx? You have two different eye colors.”

I force myself to keep smiling. “Yes, Aurelio. I do.”

“Really?” he mumbles. His eyes have begun to close again. He curls into his pillow.

Silence. Prince Halen places his hand on my shoulder and we leave the room.

I make sure the door is closed before I speak.

“Have the outbursts been happening often?”

Halen nods. “The doctors say they’ll keep happening for a couple more months. They say it’s the stress of the rehabilitation process.”

I swallow. My feelings are all over the place. I’m happy he’s alive. Overjoyed, actually; but I’m also scared.

“That last bit.” I swallow. “It that... permanent?”

Halen sighs. I almost regret asking. “The doctors say it isn’t. But only time will tell.”

I’m about to ask another question when there’s a ringing sound coming from CN’s gauntlet. She looks down at the notification.

“Your majesty,” she states, “You’re being requested down in the throne room”

Halen nods. “Of course. Please take Onyx to the office and help him choose his room. Then you can show him around.”

CN nods and I follow her down the hallway, away from the golden room and Aurelio.

I choose a room that looks out into the back gardens.

➤ **THREE**

ONYXX

Feeling clean from my recent bath, I walk into the dining room for breakfast just as Aurelio screams in frustration. He throws his fork at Halen, which the latter barely dodges. I freeze. CN spots me and waves me over.

“Now, Aurelio,” Halen starts, “Be reasonable, dear.”

He’s about to say something else when CN’s gauntlet beeps. She looks down at it and tightens her lip.

“Ten minute reminder to your morning meeting, your highness.” CN informs Halen.

“Of course.” He murmurs. That’s when he looks up and sees that I’ve arrived. “Onyxx! So glad you’re here! Have a seat!”

I’m directed to the chair next to Aurelio. He’s looking down at his lap angrily. Halen ignores him completely.

“Make sure Aurelio eats.” He instructs me. “Then you can go do whatever he wants to do until three. CN will contact you afterwards.”

I nod, and Halen leaves. The maids request my breakfast order. I get chocolate chip pancakes. Peeking over at Aurelio’s plate, I can see why he got upset.

“I’m getting pancakes.” I tell him.

“Yes.” Aurelio snuffles. He looks down at the new fork that was just placed for him.

“Do you still like sweet things?” I ask.

Aurelio looks up at me, his eyes wider than I’d ever seen them.

“Y-Yes.”

My smile is slow. I make sure none of the maids can hear me.

“Then you can have a couple of mine. I don’t have that much of a sweet tooth.”

Aurelio nods so hard it’s like his head is going to fall off. He does a happy little dance in his seat and smiles.

The pancakes arrive and I switch our plates. Aurelio squeals and begins to eat. He looks... like himself. I eat three whole plates of fruit before I’m satisfied. Aurelio eats slow, savoring every single chocolate chip. He’s eaten three whole pancakes before he speaks to me.

“Halen’s crown is on too tight.” he giggles. “And sometimes, it makes me angry.” he swallows and looks up at me with shy eyes. “Sorry I got so angry.”

“I could never be angry at you,” I tell him.

He glimmers. It’s slight, but it brings back the person he was when we met. He slides over his plate over near me and I grab myself a pancake. I’ve had two bites before I remember.

“I brought you a gift,” I tell him.

Aurelio scrunches up his forehead. “Did I ask for one?” He asks. He’s trying to remember if he had.

“You didn’t,” I inform him. His forehead relaxes. “I just thought you’d like something sweet.”

“I always do.”

His smile is different. He swallows.

“Onyxx?”

“Yes?”

“Where... did we meet? The first time, I mean. I have the letters you wrote me. I’ve read them over and over, but I can’t remember where we met.”

I look at him. He’s still thin and pale, but his eyes are bright. He’s only wearing a robe this morning.

“We met during your engagement ball.” I inform him. “We got along really fast.”

“Oh.” he mumbles. “I... I can barely remember that night.”

Silence. I try to come up with something positive.

“We can go walk and I can remind you about it.”

This snaps him out of it. He nods quickly and stuffs his face.

As soon as he’s done, Aurelio hops to his feet. He holds on to my arm and lets me lead him out of the dining room, through the hall, and down the back steps into the garden. He walks a little slower than usual, but I don’t mind. I stroll along with him.

We’re almost about to walk past the hedge maze when he stops. His forehead scrunches up and he looks at it.

“We... we ran in here. Together?”

I nod, keeping an eye on him in case he swoons. “We did.”

I lead him into the maze and we walk in it aimlessly. He's lost and so am I. But I don't bring it up. We simply walk it in silence until we eventually find our way to the center.

The fountain is off this time. And the starfruit tree is bare. I help him lower himself onto the grass and take a seat next to him. The morning air is crisp and clean. I swallow and lean my head back on the starfruit tree trunk.

"They told me I jumped from my balcony." he tells me, after a moment of silence.

I open my eyes to see that he's pointing. To the third floor of the castle. A pair of glass doors with enormous windows that lead out to a beautiful marble balcony.

"It's funny. I can't remember jumping. But I remember falling. And landing. They said the rose bushes saved my life." He finishes.

"Do you remember *why* you jumped?" I ask. He shakes his head.

He's lying.

I sigh and look up at the tree. No fruits, no leaves.

"What did we do here?" he asks me, "The night of the ball?"

"We came here to talk. I don't remember too much about what we talked about. I was drunk."

Silence.

"Halen doesn't like you." Aurelio states. I sit up. "He doesn't *hate* you, but he doesn't like you either."

Aurelio giggles.

"How do you know that?" I ask.

He looks at me with mischievous eyes.

"I was using your letters. To remember you. He didn't like that. He'd always leave the room whenever I wanted to read them."

There's something else he's not sharing. But he stops talking. I find myself wanting to pry further but I don't. Instead, I shrug and lean back on the tree again.

Aurelio loves his gifts. He eats three of them before I can blink properly.

We sit in a tea room on the first floor, sipping ginger and rose tea. I watch him devour the pastries. I wonder how long it's been since he ate anything sweet.

Aurelio eats a final starcake and jam dribbles down to his chin.

"You made these yourself?" he asks.

I nod.

"Did I know before? That you could bake?"

"I mentioned it maybe once." I smirk. "I wanted to surprise you."

Aurelio nods and looks down at the couple of cakes leftover in the box. He squints.

"Starberry is... my favorite flavor, right?"

I nod. And nod again. I lean forward in my seat. I watch him lick every one of his fingers separately.

"If you liked them that much, I can make you new pastries every week."

"Yes!" He squeals. "Please, yes! I'd love you forever!"

He pauses and gives me a bit of a nervous smile. Then, he places the box of pastries next to the tea tray and grabs his cup. I pour him another cup of tea. He puts two sugar cubes in it and takes a cautious sip.

We talk about nothings. The day, cake flavors, and books. He's been reading a lot of books. Mostly love stories about other planets. For a brief moment, we talk politics. He's very passionate about the new direction Zada North is taking. I listen closely. He asks me about the mines. I answer his questions until dinnertime.

It happens at dinner. As usual, I'm standing guarding the door when King Halen steps in with CN. He takes a seat and CN takes her place at the opposite door. Dinner is served and they begin to eat. Aurelio is barely touching his food this time around. It's odd. I try to pay attention to his face, attempting to make a diagnosis, but his back is to me.

"Your father has requested an audience with you." Halen states, after a couple of minutes of silence.

The atmosphere changes. I don't need to see Aurelio's face to imagine the look on it. I see his head move as he swallows. Then, he nods.

The rest of dinner is pretty uneventful. Aurelio picks at the corn and potatoes. Then it ends.

He doesn't say anything as I walk with him to the King's chamber. I can sense his nervousness, but also something else. He looks blue. Literally. A lot more blue than usual. We stop at the King's door. Blue like he isn't breathing.

"Aurelio. Are you feeling okay?"

Aurelio shakes his head and knocks on the door. I'm about to speak again when the door slides open.

King Milos looks more than tired. His beard has grown out and he looks like he hasn't slept in years. His hair is mostly white now, but with slight hints of gold. He's also very dangerously thin. He eyes me sternly and I take a step away from the door. Aurelio steps into the room and the door shuts behind him.

The hall is silent. I stand at attention, my back to the door, and attempt to make it look like I'm not trying to eavesdrop. I can't hear anything from inside. They probably silenced themselves in.

The entire conversation takes a total of seven minutes.

I know it's done when Aurelio storms out of the room, leaving me to practically chase after him. I follow him down the hall, and down a flight of stairs. He then locks himself in his room before I can fully reach him. I knock on the door, but he doesn't answer me.

Silence. For a moment, I start to worry, but I calm myself by recounting the state of the room. The balcony is sealed. The curtains are required, and all sharp objects have been removed. He can't hurt himself in there on his own.

He doesn't silence the room this time. So I can hear his gentle hiccuping. I knock again.

"Aurelio? I'll be outside if you need me."

Silence. I turn my back to the door. The crying goes on for about twenty minutes. Then, it goes quiet. I'm about to knock again when I spot King Halen walking down the hall. He stops in front of Aurelio's door.

"Did he lock himself in?"

I nod. Halen sighs.

“He does that. Always did. At least we know he’s acting the way he always does.”

Halen signals I move away from the door and I do. He then places his hand on the door and inputs an override code. The door slides open silently. Aurelio lays on his bed, fully dressed; flushed.

“Wore himself out.”

Halen rolls his eyes and turns away. He leaves the room. I stand in the middle, unsure of what to do now.

That’s when something calls my attention. Aurelio’s breathing is shallow and strained. I quickly step to the bed and place my hand on his forehead. He’s burning up.

“Aurelio?”

I shake him. He doesn’t stir. I shake him again. His head lols to the side and his eyelids shake.

I pick him up and hold him close. I then take him to the hospital wing as fast as I can. He’s awake by the time we get there.

“I’m okay.” he murmurs. “I’m so tired.”

I place him on the bed and shake my head. The room we’re in is empty. I place a request on my suit while keeping an eye on him. A doctor should be arriving in less than a minute.

“Keep your eyes open, Aurelio. You’re a bit warm, but I can make you feel better, okay?”

I grab some tape and gauze. The fridge contains I.Vs. I hit the blue button on the desk and begin feeling his arm for a vein.

“It’s gonna hurt a bit, okay?”

He doesn’t answer. I put the needle in and tape it down. Then, I put in the heart rate monitor. I press my head to his chest to hear his breathing. His heart is running a marathon.

“Hey. Hey.” I turn his face to look at me.

The doctor steps into the room and quickly assesses the situation. She is a small woman with blond hair that is very carefully tied back. Her name tag says: Inez. She is not a talent; both her eyes are black pools of petrol, but she’s still able to act in seconds. She leaves the room

momentarily and then comes back with an ice pack and places it on Aurelio's forehead. He attempts to remove it, so I end up holding his hand in order to keep him from it.

I answer her questions. He'd been looking sick since dinner. No, he hasn't thrown up.

Doctor Inez takes a blood sample. No, not blood. The liquid she pulls out of Aurelio's arm is a light tint of glowing blue. She doesn't overreact to this, so I assume it's natural. I've never seen anything like it. I bandage his arm while the doctor goes into the other room. Then, I take a seat in the chair next to the bed.

I sit quietly with Aurelio's hand in mine as questions run their way through my head. He glows. His *blood* glows like the starfruit tree. The one he told me was the only one of its kind. I long to ask *any* of the questions that are buzzing around in my head like a nest of angry hornets, but Aurelio isn't in a position to answer them right now. And even if he could, who's to say that he would?

The door to the clinic opens and I snap at attention as King Halen makes his way inside with CN keeping pace behind him. Halen spares Aurelio a quick glance before he looks at me.

"Has one of the doctors seen him?" he asks.

I nod my head and Halen sighs. His forehead scrunches up. He looks like he's about to say something, but he doesn't. Instead, he makes his way to Aurelio's side and takes a seat in the chair I was previously occupying. He sits there for a moment, stroking his slender fingers through Aurelio's hair absentmindedly. Finally, he turns to me again.

"Thank you for bringing him here, Onyxx. It seems we made a right choice in choosing you to care for him."

Halen and Doctor Inez have only recently just gotten on-call when Aurelio wakes up. He stirs suddenly. I can tell because I'm holding his hand close to my chest while I rest my head on the edge of the bed.

"Onyxx?" Aurelio murmurs, attempting to sit up, "How did I get here?"

"You're awake!" I squeeze his hand between both my own "I brought you here because you had a fever. Doctor Inez was very helpful."

Aurelio thinks about this fact for a moment and smiles. "She's very nice."

I release his hand and step over to the food fridge at the end of the room. “She also told me to give you this when you woke up.” I tell him. I pull out an ice cream cup from the freezer and see his eyes instantly light up. “But only,” I continue, “After you take your medicine.”

He frowns. Very quickly, his emotions do a 180 degree tailspin.

“Not you too, Onyxx!”

“Aurelio-”

“Not you too!”

“Aurelio.” I snap. I don’t mean to, but that’s how it comes out. Aurelio freezes. His body begins shaking instantly. I can see I’ve struck a nerve. I step towards him and it breaks my heart to see him flinch. I shake my head. “I won’t hurt you. I’d never hurt you. I just. That was really scary, Aurelio.”

He pauses. “Scary?”

I take a seat in the chair next to the bed and hold the ice cream cup in both my hands to keep them steady.

“You weren’t moving. Your breathing was shallow. If I hadn’t gotten to you then and there, I can’t even think of what could’ve happened.”

“I would’ve died.”

Silence.

“What did your father say?” I ask. He purses his lips.

“That’s not your place to ask, Onyxx.”

Silence. I carefully select a small bottle from the table and pull out two pills. I hold them up to him.

“One way or another, you need to take these pills. I promised I’d have you take them.”

“I’m not taking them.”

“Ent, above, Aurelio you’re being so... so... *difficult!* Do you know how hard it is for the people who care about you to see you sick?”

“No one-”

“Halen cares about you in his own way. Your people care about you! So do I. I care about you very much, Aurelio.”

“Then show me.”

I feel all the heat rise to my face. Silence. I squeeze my eyes shut and feel myself get even redder. Aurelio snickers.

“It’s not hard to get you flustered.”

I feel him snatch the pills from my hand and down them dry. I open my eyes to see he’s started on the ice cream already.

“Do you think I’m pretty?” he asks.

“I-”

“You do. Otherwise you wouldn’t blush so dark.” He eats his ice cream thoughtfully.

“You should see me with makeup.”

“I have. Trust me, you don’t need it.”

He giggles like a schoolgirl. “Don’t let Halen catch you saying that. He’d be angry.”

“Then he won’t catch me.” I shrug. “I’ll make sure to whisper it to you when I say it.”

His turn to blush. He glows.

“That’d be nice.” he whispers, barely audibly. He’s quiet for a moment and then goes back to eating his ice cream.

I lean my head back into my chair and shut my eyes. For a moment, there’s just the sounds of Aurelio enjoying ice cream. Then, there’s silence. I open my eyes.

“Could I have another?” he asks shyly.

I make sure no one else is in the room with us and nod. He waits until the ice cream is in his hands to smile at me.

“You’re spoiling me, Onyx.” He peels off the lid of the ice cream container.

“Someone has to.”

“True.”

He eats two spoonfuls and then stops.

“You want some?” He holds his spoon out to me. I pause, and then nod, slowly leaning forward to come meet the spoon. It tastes like squash.

He goes back to eating.

“Why do you buy it?” I ask him. “I’m sure the castle could make you your own flavor of ice cream if you wanted.”

He shrugs.

“I like the way they make it. So I buy it from them. They get so happy when they see me.” He winks at me. “I buy it at a ten percent increased price too. Just enough to be noteworthy to them, not enough for Halen or my Father to catch the difference. And then, I round up.”

I blink. And then I blink again.

“You little-”

“As soon as I can get moving again, I’m going to show you so many new things.”

That was a promise.

AURELIO

I woke up at around eight and went to take a bath. I was tired. Way tired. But since mother’s death, every day was a tiring one. Halen wasn’t in bed when I got up, but I didn’t have to wonder where he was. Even though we both didn’t have important things to do until eleven, he was already up and about. It didn’t take a stretch of the imagination to know he was probably organizing something somewhere. It wasn’t hard for me to imagine how incredibly *boring* the task probably was.

I opened the faucet and let the tub begin filling up as I brushed my teeth and let my hair down. I remember avoiding looking at myself in the mirror. I looked too much like my mother; my hair being the most painful of it all. I took off my night gown and went over to my tub.

Next to the tub was the wine bottle that had only recently become a staple in my life. I submerged my shaking body into the water and quickly brought the bottle to my lips. This wine tasted like grapes. It quickly soothed over my nerves and the nightmares. The nightmares. I took a deep swig of wine and my head swam.

By the time I finished my bottle, the tub was full. I remember washing my hair in water that smelled like rosemary. My hands weren't shaking anymore, but everything else was.

I called three maids into my room to help me with my clothes and hair. I fell asleep in my chair and came to when my hair was done.

Breakfast was lonely and silent. I had fruit and some quail eggs.

Then the meetings. Taxes for two hours. Castle business: flowers, cleaning. I did my duty through all the meetings. I listened, nodded, signed, shook hands, and gave opinions. Then, Halen and I had lunch together.

We didn't talk much during lunch. He sat across from me and barely directed his attention towards me at all. He was too busy reading through another stack of papers that looked identical to the ones we'd been going through earlier in the day.

I had just finished my lunch and moved on to my second cup of wine when he finally spoke to me.

"I like your hair like that," he stated, lowering his papers to look at me directly for the first time in hours.

I wasn't sure what to say. I froze, wine in hand. By the time I opened my mouth to answer back, he had already moved on to the next item on his list. I shut my mouth again, swallowing my words.

After lunch, I directed myself to the hearing room. As tedious as the task was, this was the one task that was mine and only *mine*. Since I was the one that was royal by plasma, Halen wasn't allowed to take charge of this.

Admittedly, this was the best part of my day; interacting with my people. The smiles in the room made me smile too. It was still work, but there was something different about it; I felt loved -- wanted.

I noted that the Zada East drought was doing much better with the new irrigation system bringing water down from the northern lakes. I was brought three bouquets of lavender and a box of fresh croissants.

I made it a full four hours without thinking about wine.

I was all-smiles when I stepped into dinner. Halen looked up at me. He looked tired, but also relieved. He quickly returned to his paperwork.

“I take it today went well?” he asked, not looking up again.

I nodded, taking a seat for dinner. The food was quickly brought up. We had potatoes and roasted bird, with cake and croissants for dessert. I had three cups of wine.

As soon as dinner ended, I followed Halen to the balcony. There, we finally got to spend some time together. He was able to hold me for a total of twenty minutes before he was needed somewhere else.

I remember going to my room and taking off my makeup. I don't fully remember where the wine came from, but at one point there was a bottle. Then two. Two empty bottles of wine. And tears on my face. Loud sobbing.

Hair on my vanity. Long golden locks. Then pain. I remember pain. A yelp. And warmth dripping down my hand. The sound of metal scissors hitting the floor.

Then there was a knocking at my door. My name being called. All the plasma rushed to my head as I stood and caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror.

The balcony door gave me a bit of trouble, but the fresh air was worth it. I remember gulping it in like it was a saving grace. I held on to the banister to steady myself. My hand burned slightly.

Three stories. I remember looking down and marveling and how far away the gardens seemed to be. Mother's roses. From where I was, I could see the starfruit tree.

Starfruit. I found myself remembering the old story. A distant planet named Alefeim, where millions of trees just like the one in my garden grew. Where the people had pale eyes and pale skin. Where every living being glowed bright blue from the inside out. Just like me.

The gauntlet in my suit beeped. A request. Halen was looking for me.

I was standing on the marble flat top. And then I was falling. Falling. And then horrible pain.

I screamed. Or at least, I tried to. My skin was being ripped apart. And all around me was the smell of roses. My body hurt more than it ever could at first. And suddenly I went numb. Everything was dark. And then the silence. The silence that seemed endless.

The liquid coming from my head was warm. My heart was beating incredibly fast. I don't know for how long the silence lasted. But it ended suddenly. And then I was dreaming.

➤ **FOUR**

ONYXX

Depending on how you're looking at it, what I did could be thought of as a bad thing, or a good thing.

It started one night when I was helping a very drunk Aurelio back to his room. He was lucid, yes, but flushed and stumbling. And he told me something. Something I'd laughed at, dismissing it as nonsensical drunkenness.

"An alien, you say?" I asked, attempting to keep my voice from trembling from amusement. "Would Halen be an alien too?"

"Yes... yes yes yes." he mumbled.

I caught him before he hit the wall and picked him up. He squealed at first, but then laughed and curled up close to me.

"So you're both aliens? Is what you're telling me."

I tried to stay focused, but my mind was wandering.

"Mom too," he muttered. "And father. And Halen's mothers. And his sisters. All of us."

I looked down at Aurelio. He was way too drunk. He wouldn't be able to remember this when he woke up tomorrow. So I pushed it.

"So where are you from?"

"Al-" he paused. Played with his tongue for a moment. "Al- Alef- Alef-"

We reached his room and he opened the door for us. I carried him straight to bed. He lost no time in beginning to take off his clothes.

I flushed instantly and stepped back, screwing my eyes shut.

“Onyx. Look.”

Slowly, I opened my eyes to a light glow. There were markings on his skin. He raised his hair for me to see that they went all the way down his back. The blue swirls I had seen bits and pieces of. A map. It was... a map.

I stepped closer, keeping an eye on the fabric still around his waist. He let me touch the markings. He giggled.

“I have tattoos just like you.”

Like me? I was taken aback by his comment.

“How do you know about those?” I asked, my tone coming off a bit accusatory.

“The same way you already knew about mine. I look.”

He was quiet for a moment. Something in the room had shifted. I should've gone. But I didn't. I stayed. All night.

I wake up the next day in his room. He's holding something close, but it isn't me. It's one of his very stuffed pillows. It's the only thing that's currently between us.

I wake up when my muscles tell me that they want to go for a run. So I get up quietly. My pants are near the couch. We didn't... Do it together. I know because I remember. Besides, I know myself. I could never take advantage of anyone like that.

I remember he was drunk and touchy. It took me forever to get him to bed. He wouldn't sleep until I got into bed with him, so I did. He told me jokes that weren't very funny. A couple of pie recipes. A couple of things I probably have no business knowing. And, as he nodded off into sleep, he told me that he loved me.

I couldn't sleep after that. I remained frozen in place. In sleep, he looked like a child; perfect and soft. And I admitted to myself that I loved him too.

“Onyx?”

He sits up in bed and I very quickly divert my eyes.

“Yes, your highness?”

“You slept here?” I’m not looking at his face, so I can’t see how he means it. I can hear a tone, but I’m not sure what that is either. My eyes are on his collarbones.

“You wouldn’t let me leave.”

He giggles. Then, lies back down. He tightens his fingers on his pillow. My throat tightens.

“I’m going for a run.” I inform him.

“I’m going back to sleep.” he informs me. He’s asleep before I leave the room.

I run to my room. Then, I run down the kitchen stairs. I run around the castle like I’m being chased. And by breakfast, I’ve gotten two laps in. I force myself to stop when my gauntlet informs me that my hydrations levels are getting too low.

In my morning bath, I shake.

Breakfast is a blur. I miss tea time.

“Onyxx?” his voice. He touches me and I flinch. I snap out of it and realize I’ve been staring into thin air. I look around us and find that everyone has left the room. Even the maids.

“What’s wrong?” he asks.

I look at him, for the first time in the day. He’s layered in worry.

“You were really drunk last night.” I hear myself tell him.

“Yes.” he states. I watch his eyes. There is no recognition at all. I swallow.

“I’m just tired. We were up pretty late.”

Silence.

“It was nice to wake up with you there.” he tells me. “I’m so used to waking up on my own. It was nice to see someone.”

Silence. He smiles.

“Onyxx, you’re blushing.”

“You *make me* blush.”

“I know.” he giggles and I roll my eyes.

“Are you angry? Don’t be angry, please. How about we just... walk?”

I check his schedule. We have about two hours before we have to be anywhere. I follow him down into the gardens, past the dented rose bushes, and into the fountain area. There, he

pulls me into a hidden bush and kisses me like the sky's on fire. We never go for the walk. But we use the two hours very well.

I'm careful not to break him.

We are in bed together when he tells me.

I'd stayed in bed with him this morning - held him until he stirred and his eyes opened. The morning starlight glazed his face lightly, and that woke him up. His eyes fixed on me. And he told me.

I don't believe it at first. My hand, which had been resting on the small of his naked back, slides around his waist. His skin is smooth and flat - except for where it isn't. There is a bump there. In a place where there hadn't been a bump before. It's impossible. Yet, there it is.

"How long?" I ask. My voice sounds foreign to me.

"I've known for about a month."

I can't keep my hands off it. I'm gentle, but my hands shake. I love it already. I love it so much. I love it, but I'm terrified. I wish I could take them away from here. Both of them. I wish I could keep them safe. But my mouth doesn't say that.

"I'm sorry," is what comes out. "Aurelio, I didn't know I'd-"

"It's okay. Onyxx, look at me."

He takes hold of both my hands and I look at him. He's... happy. He really means it. But deep inside that joy, there is a horrible pit of fear. A fear he's trying to keep hidden from me. My thoughts are still racing.

"Does Halen know?" I ask.

He shakes his head. "Only you."

He kisses my shaking hands. And suddenly, my eyes are damp. How could this have happened? I've been careful. I've *always* been careful. What's going to happen... to him? I swallow.

"What's Halen going to say?"

Silence.

"I don't know."

He's lying. Straight through his teeth. He knows what Halen will say. That question brings the fear forward. I swallow and force my feelings down into the balls of my feet; the way Lukelyn taught me to. I take a deep breath.

"I'm happy." I tell him, and I hold him to me. I can feel his heart beating fast.

It takes him a moment. At first he's happy. Then, he sinks his nails into my back and starts shaking.

I hold him and I think. Of many things. Of skin colors and hair colors. Of baby names, perhaps. Of losing everything - but gaining something so much more valuable than anything I've ever had.

I force myself to think only about the positives. There would be plenty of time to ruminate on awful things.

"W-what are you thinking about?" he murmurs.

"Names." I respond.

He stops shaking nearly instantly.

"Names?"

He looks up at me. His eyes are still scared, but the glimmer of joy is back.

"Rock names." I inform him.

It takes him a second. Then, he giggles.

"Rock names, of course."

I nod, trying to think up something that will distract him from the deep fear that is floating between us. I stroke his hair as I think.

"We have time to come up with the perfect name." I tell him, "The perfect rock."

I kiss him. And it soothes both of our nerves - at least for a little while.

Aurelio tells Halen at dinner. Halen reacts the way I thought he would. He turns pale. And then slowly, his face turns to anger. He looks straight at me. Then, he looks back at Aurelio.

"You're not keeping it." he hisses. I never thought Halen would be capable of making such a sound.

"I w-want to." Aurelio murmurs.

“You what?” Halen asks. He stands and places both hands on the table. “Say that again, Aurelio. I need to make sure I heard you clearly.”

Aurelio is shaking like a ginkgo tree in the winter time. But he swallows and raises his head.

“I’m *keeping it*, Halen.” Aurelio is fierce. He’s fierce unlike I’ve ever heard.

Silence. Halen takes a deep breath.

“Out,” he states. “All of you. I need to speak to my husband. Alone.”

Two maids quickly place breakfast on the table and hurry their way out towards the kitchen. CN nods and takes the door behind Halen.

“CN, silence the room once you’re outside.”

Should I-

“You can step outside, Onyxx..” Aurelio states. Sure. Steady.

I make eye contact with Aurelio before I make my way towards the door. It shuts behind me - and locks.

He wouldn’t hurt him, would he? Suddenly, I’m not so sure.

HALEN

Halen knew. Of course he did. He’d have to be blind not to see it - what, with the way they looked at each other all the time. He knew Aurelio didn’t love him. It’s a fact. He had accepted the proposal because it had been expected of him.

He also knew that, until Onyxx got here, Aurelio had been simply miserable. He hadn’t been smiling anymore. Or eating. Or dancing. He had been dying. And the suicide attempt only confirmed Halen’s suspicions.

He knew exactly when he realized it.

Previously, he didn’t pay that much attention to the interactions between the two. Having grown up with Aurelio, it wasn’t hard for Halen to know that the latter had a crush on Onyxx -

that was more than fairly obvious. He'd had CN monitor both of them, and until recently, she hadn't found anything out of the normal.

And then there was the night Onyx turned off his tracking gauntlet.

He'd turned it off at around midnight. CN had monitored the occurrence, and noted that he turned it back on in the morning at around seven. At first, she dismissed this as a possible mistake or glitch. But then, the exact same thing happened four days later. That was when she'd started a file on it. One night, she recorded that it was on, but wasn't tracking his vitals.

She'd brought all the information to King Halen, who didn't know what to make of it at all.

He figured it out when he went to visit Aurelio one morning. Halen had decided that he wanted to go for a morning stroll before breakfast - he would surprise Aurelio with this. He opened the door to the bedroom without knocking and heard singing. A singing he hadn't heard since the death of Queen Aithne. Aurelio was happy this morning. His voice sounded like bells. Halen let himself enjoy it for a moment before he stepped into the bathroom.

“OH!”

Aurelio quickly jumped into the water and blushed a deep blue. But Halen had already seen the mark on his waist. And it wasn't just any bruise. It was the mark of someone who'd been having an unfaithful amount of fun.

“I came to see if you wanted to walk this morning.” Halen stated plainly.

“Yes.”

Aurelio was beaming like he hadn't beamed in a long while - and it did something to Halen. To see Aurelio like this... made him happy. So very happy.

The walk was amazing. They pointed out birds together. Aurelio talked and laughed and joked, and stopped to smell the flowers. He was back - and more alive than ever. He was wearing all the rings his mother had given him and wearing Halen's favorite of his hair pins.

They finished their walk and had breakfast together. Onyx and CN were already at the dining room by the time they got there.

Halen never said anything about the bruise.

➤ FIVE

ONYXX

The calm is false. It's my first thought. I don't know where it came from. I try to remember, but my memories are extremely faded. There's something screaming at me. In the back of my mind, there's something important that I'm supposed to remember, but I can't.

The calm is false. I keep repeating it to myself over and over for some reason.

There are bubbles in my head. Somewhere, my arms hurt. It feels like I'm floating somewhere. Floating and repeating the same four words over and over.

And then, I'm pulled out of the water. My eyes snap open and I gasp for breath. All my thoughts come back at once. Aurelio is my first thought. And my second.

And then my eyes fix on Halen.

He looks like a mole rat caught in the daylight. His eyes are wide at seeing me awake.

"Give him some more."

"He's fighting it."

I remember now.

The door opened, but Aurelio didn't come out. I could hear him crying inside the room somewhere. It was the cry of someone in severe physical pain. He'd hurt him. I'd never moved faster in my life. I could see him. But before I could reach him, I was grabbed.

There was a puddle beneath Aurelio. A deep blue puddle that was staining through his clothes. His arms were wrapped around his abdomen weakly, but they were already starting to bruise. He looked at me. And his eyes told me what had happened.

If I weren't being pumped full of drugs, I would've killed Halen. And I can tell that he knows. The mere thought that I could get out of this chair and strangle him keeps him ten feet away from me.

'You hit him,' is what I try to say. But nothing comes out. My breathing is sluggish. My chest is tight. I'm sweating like crazy. I'm fading in and out of consciousness by the time the doctor to my left stands from the chair.

"We're going to have to wait. I can't give him any more."

Halen looks over to me. "Are you sure?"

"I'm sure."

"Thank you."

The doctor leaves, but Halen stays. He steps a little closer, and finally decides to pull out the doctor's chair and sit across from me.

I don't know where I am. I feel my fingers, but my body is being held down by something - probably *strapped* down. The room around me is grey. I shut my eyes to focus - and suddenly I know where I am. A cell.

"He's fine," he tells me. "A little frazzled. I lost my temper."

My head droops. Halen seems lost in his own mind. I focus all my energy on staying awake. I try moving against my restraints again, but it doesn't work.

"He's always had different tastes. Men like you. Not like me."

There are black spots in my vision. I shake my head, but it only makes it worse. I want to shut him up, but my lips don't move. I'm overcome with an unnatural level of calm once again. I remind myself the calm is false.

"You're going to be put to sleep for a while. While I gather the paperwork to erase you."

My chest tightens up. My breathing becomes ragged.

"Aurelio would never speak to me again if I killed you. So be thankful."

I grit my teeth and force my eyes open. Halen looks surprised. He watches me for a moment. I imagine the things I would do to him if I could. And one of those things involves seeing if the royal family have the same innards as us natives.

"I just don't understand. There's nothing special about you."

And I fall back into the calm. My eyes slip shut. I hear Halen stand up and shut the door behind him. And then there's the silence. The silence and my breathing. And then come the dreams.

“Isn’t there anyone else you could marry?”

Aurelio thinks for a bit. He fans himself gently with his hand for a moment. I help him take off his cardigan.

“Halen has a sister. But she won’t be of age for a couple of years.”

I nod and follow Aurelio’s gaze to Halen’s fencing lesson. He watches in silence for a bit. I see that he has more to say, so I wait patiently.

“My father likes him. Always has. Says he knew Halen was the perfect pick the instant he met him.” Silence. “And he cares about me.”

My heart sinks. “You’re settling.”

“So what if I am?”

“There could be someone better for you.”

He laughs. It’s short and dry. Then, he looks at me.

“Don’t give me false illusions, Onyxx. Love is for the commoners.”

“You’ve told me differently before. Maybe your clothes cloud your judgement.”

He blushes deep and turns away from me. On the field. I see Halen’s attention waver from his lesson. His neck tilts slightly to the left. I can’t fully see his eyes, but I imagine they’re fixed on the both of us. His lack of attention gets him knocked down by his instructor.

Aurelio crosses his ankles and smoothes out his silk pants. He attempts to calm down his color. A maid hands him a fan.

“I could have you executed for a comment like that.” he muses.

“Will you?”

He looks at me. I recognize the eyes. “Never.” He smiles our secret smile. The one I’ve noticed he saves just for me.

Out in the field, Halen is helped up. He removes his helmet and takes a deep gulp of air, the heat clearly affecting him.

“What’s on the schedule for today?” Aurelio asks.

I chuckle. "In twenty minutes you meet with the townsfolk. That's from two to four. Then at four-fifteen you have a fitting for that new rainy season coat you requested. After that, you have to meet with King Halen to place your seal on some castle reparations and budgeting."

He giggles. He doesn't look at me.

"And then?"

I pretend to check the schedule over and over.

"Even if King Halen were to keep you for an hour, you would have about forty minutes before dinner."

He chuckles. "Does forty minutes work for you?"

"I can make do with forty minutes. Although I wish we had more."

His eyes soften. He wishes the same, but won't actually say it.

"I want to bake some bread for you."

He snickers. "Is that supposed to woo me, Onyx? The promise of bread?"

"If croissants stuffed with cream cheese and jam woo you, yes."

"Cream cheese and jam?"

"And powdered sugar on top. I want to teach you to make them. So you can do it for yourself."

He pauses and looks down at his fan. Then, he looks up at me.

"I'd like that."

AURELIO

I saw him for one instant. One. And then he was dragged away from me before I could even speak. Lying in a puddle of my own amniotic liquid, I could barely feel my legs. It felt as if I were split in two. It felt like falling from the balcony all over again.

Halen hadn't stopped until my mouth tasted like plasma. And after Onyx was gone, he held me close and stroked my hair.

What had been growing inside me was dead. There was no doubt about that. I tried to say something. Anything. But I couldn't speak. I couldn't move nor cry. I could only be held and shushed gently by the man I could never look up to again. I wanted to get away from him, but I also *needed* him to hold me.

After a couple of minutes, he picked me up and carried me up to my room.

I blinked, and I was suddenly in the bath with maids combing and washing my hair clean. CN was with me this time. She wouldn't look at me at all. And after the maids finished bathing me, they helped me dry myself up and get dressed. CN helped me get to bed and lay down. Then she took my temperature and pulse.

Before she left the room, she checked to make sure the balcony was locked. That was when she dared to look at me. On her face, was a look of guilt.

"I'm sorry."

Then, she left and locked the door behind her. On my bed, I stared up at the ceiling until my eyes blurred with tears.